Delacroix’s *Sardanapalus*: The Life and Death of the Royal Body

*Elisabeth A. Fraser*

Wallowing in sensory pandemonium, the “Sardanapalian” cardinal [Mazarin] squandered royal revenues, extorted from overtaxed and oppressed subjects, on expensive perfumes, exquisite sauces and exotic pets.

Jeffrey Merrick, paraphrasing *La Mazarinade*, 1651

*Antonomase*: Trope ou figure de rhétorique par laquelle on substitue le nom appellatif au nom propre, ou celui-ci au nom appellatif. Par exemple, Sardanapale était un roi voluptueux, Néron un empereur cruel; on donne à un débauché le nom de *Sardanapale*; à un prince barbare le nom de *Néron*.

Encyclopédie de Diderot et d’Alembert, 1751–80

*Sardanapale IV, roi d’Assyrie*: L’histoire reproche à Sardanapale une vie et des habitudes efféminées, une grande magnificence et un goût excessif pour les plaisirs de la table. Sur son tombeau, on lui aurait élevé une statue dans l’attitude d’un danseur à moitié ivre, avec cette inscription qu’il avait, dit-on, composée lui-même: “Passant, mange, bois, divertis-toi; tout le reste n’est rien.”

*Larousse, Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle, 1875*

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_Le Robert, Dictionnaire de la langue française_, 1986

Sardanapale. Roi légendaire d’Assyrie que mentionnent les Grecs, le présentant comme un tyran efféminé, possesseur d’immenses richesses et menant une vie de débauche; le mot a le sens de “débauché” en bas latin. Sorti d’usage, le mot désignait un homme fortuné qui mène une vie de débauche.

_Le Robert, Dictionnaire historique de la langue française_, 1993

On 8 February 1828, Eugène Delacroix’s _Death of Sardanapalus_ (fig. 1) appeared in the final segment of the Salon exhibition that had first opened in early November 1827. On 11 March, the vicomte de La Rochefoucauld, director of fine arts within the Maison du Roi, fired off a letter to the director of royal museums, the comte de Forbin, about the painting. Protest ing the privileged placement of both Delacroix’s work and another painting in the Grand Salon of the Louvre, a “distinction usually accorded only on the basis of merit,” La Rochefoucauld continued, “You are aware that M. de la Croix’s painting, specifically, when it was submitted to the jury’s scrutiny, was admitted only despite a division among the votes. The public has rightly complained of the distinction accorded these two paintings.” He suggested that the two paintings be replaced by others, and added, in an unusual intervention in the workings of the exhibition, “I admit that I consider it my duty not to encourage a manner whose imitation would be so dangerous.”

In the weeks following the exhibition, La Rochefoucauld reprimanded the artist in person, a conversation recorded by Delacroix in a letter to his friend Soulier: “The upshot is that I can expect nothing from these quarters unless I change my ways. Fortunately, I was able to keep my head during this interview, whereas that imbecile, who has neither common sense nor aplomb of any kind, did not.”

1 Paris, Archives nationales, Maison du Roi, O/3/1423. La Rochefoucauld’s letter also complains of Champmartin’s _Massacre of the Janissaries_ in the Grand Salon. Surprisingly, no mention of this document exists in the literature on Delacroix. I could not ascertain from archival documents whether the painting was indeed moved after this reprimand was sent, and no mention is made of the incident by Delacroix himself. _The Death of Sardanapalus_ was accepted by the jury on 14 Jan. 1828 by a majority of only one vote. See Lee Johnson, “Eugène Delacroix et les salons: Documents inédits au Louvre,” _La revue du Louvre et des musées de France_ 16(4–5) (1966): 217, 227. For informative treatments of the _Death of Sardanapalus_, for which there is an extensive bibliography, see in particular Jack Spector, _Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus_ (New York, 1974); Lee Johnson, _The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix: A Critical Catalogue_, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1981), 114–21; Frank Anderson Trapp, _The Attainment of Delacroix_ (Baltimore, 1971), 83–92.

matters worse, the critical reviews of the painting were unusually terse and negative. The artist’s detractors were more categorical and damning than ever; his supporters abandoned him: Ludovic Vitet wrote a searing review, Augustin Jal mocked the work. In another missive to Soulier, Delacroix worried that this critical treatment of his painting would compromise his “material interests,” adding pithily, “c’est-à-dire le cash.”

Indeed, of the artist’s early history paintings, Sardanapalus was the only one not purchased by the state. So severe was the proscription against this work that it disappeared from view after the close of the Salon, returning to the artist’s studio until 1845, and not reentering a public institution until the Louvre bought it in 1921.

What was the “danger” of Delacroix’s painting that La Roche-foucauld feared? What aspects of this painting condemned it to an obscure hanging in the Salon exhibition? The treatment of his Death of Sardanapalus is not the only sign of the artist’s official eclipse in

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this period. His Massacres of Chios, hung in the Musée du Luxembourg in 1825 after its purchase from the Salon of 1824–25, was apparently removed from display at about this same time. In an art world defined as much by the politics of concealment as by those of exhibition, these acts of sequestration should be looked at closely, for they portend larger issues.

**Post-Revolutionary Views of Monarchy**

When the *Death of Sardanapalus* arrived at the Salon, Delacroix meant it to be the culmination of a long series of works he showed that year and the consolidation of his reputation after his great succès de scande-la of the previous exhibition. His depiction of a ruler’s demise, following the real death of the reigning king of France, Louis XVIII, was outflanked, however, by an image commemorating the birth of a king, Eugène Devéria’s *Birth of Henri IV* (fig. 2). Art critics declared Devéria the leader of a new school, and Delacroix was deposed.

Royal birth and death cannot be considered neutral themes in the post-Revolutionary society of Restoration France. The language of rule and the rituals that demonstrate its authority permeate the dialogue between these two paintings of birth and death—source and termination of the right to rule. They are rich and meaningful references in a society governed by a monarchy grappling with the hiatus in its reign produced by the execution of Louis XVI during the Revolution.

Furthermore, the subjects of royal birth and death were commonly used to legitimize royal authority during the period, to bridge the historical discontinuity of Bourbon rule. For the modern Bourbons, the notion of dynasty militated against the loss of prestige and of transcendent meaning of the royal body. Yet in Restoration France, the royal body was scrutinized, policed, and distrusted. I will argue that Delacroix’s painting of the legendary last king of Assyria figured the disorderly ruling body in such a way as to engage concepts of monarchy that were in dispute in the period.

On the face of it, Delacroix’s depiction of Sardanapalus’s imminent death, with its disclosure of the ancient ruler’s decadence and cowardice (or is it philosophical meditation?), would seem to be a straightforward and proleptic celebration of the end of royal autocracy. Jack

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4 There is no scholarly record of this fact, but information drawn from the Luxembourg catalogs suggests that the painting was taken off display, probably in 1828. Delacroix’s *Dante and Virgil* seems to have been shown continuously since 1822; in 1825 his Massacres joined it. In the 1828 catalog of the Luxembourg, however, only the *Dante* is listed. Other artists were represented by as many as three and four paintings, so the expurgation of the Massacres was probably pointed and significant.
Figure 2  Eugène Devéria, *The Birth of Henri IV*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 484 × 392 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Copyright © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y.
Spector has argued that the very subject of death, so prevalent in the 1820s, signals a Romantic rebellion against the restored social order. As justified as this view may be, I wish to explore here two further amplifications of it. It is not the theme of royal death alone, but the manner of depiction of this death that defined the painting’s particularity and challenged royalist conceptions. The subject of royal death corresponds to a visual discourse of the period concerned with defining dynasty, royalty’s way of plumbing the past to ground the source of royal authority. This authority, located in the body of the king, proved an unstable referent and became a fundamental source of anxiety for the Restoration monarchy. How to manage representations of the physiological body of the king? Furthermore, the symbolic challenges of coping with revolutionary regicide, and the recent death of Louis XVIII in 1824, were compounded by a growing crisis of royal authority under the new king, the Ultra-supported Charles X. This crisis sharpened around his flamboyant revival of ancien régime tradition in his coronation of 1825, an event that took place not long before Delacroix’s painting was begun, and whose symbolic repercussions extended well beyond 1825. Debate about the *sacre* centered on the tension between constitutionalism and divine right, an issue striking at the heart of Bourbon identity during the Restoration. Knowledge of Charles X’s prerevolutionary profligacy as the infamous comte d’Artois shaded perceptions of a corrupt and overly indulgent royal body. On these counts, Delacroix’s painting offered no reassurances. His fleshy king Sardanapalus was rooted in a materialist conception of the royal body, not in the language of symbolic transcendence central to royal practices. Instead, his image drew on traditional tropes of royal protest evoking a disordered, irrational, perverse, and gender-confused royal body, tropes that were revived in the Restoration. These notions relied on traditional definitions of royal authority, according to which subjects do not have to obey a ruler corrupted by his passions because “passions made kings forget their divine, natural, and constitutional obligations.”

The most frequent approach to Delacroix’s painting has focused on its relationship to Byron’s play of 1821, *Sardanapalus*. Scholars initially thought that the painter, because of his ongoing interest in Byron and his repeated and explicit use of Byronic themes, had made his work under the direct influence of the play. More recently, however,

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art historians have increasingly cast doubt upon the exclusivity and immediacy of the connection. Jack Spector has persuasively linked the mood of Delacroix’s work to a more general appreciation of the person and panache of the English writer, rather than to a specific literary reference. Scholars have also highlighted Delacroix’s divergence from Byron’s treatment of the death (offstage and a rather solitary suicide), and the painter’s description of the scene in the Salon livret, which alludes to characters without known literary or historical textual precedent. Beatrice Farwell, in particular, pointed out that this passage includes an unattributed citation—not one from Byron—and she suggested that Delacroix referred here to a text still unidentified by researchers. Most recently, Frederick Bohrer stressed the plurality of references behind Delacroix’s work, and the impossibility of connecting it to any single source. I take a cue from these last interpreters and depart from the reading of this painting in terms of Byronic literature. Well summarized elsewhere, the predominance of this reading in the scholarly literature has foreclosed other views; I hope that what follows will open new avenues of interpretation.7

More directly germane to my analysis is a recent approach that connects Delacroix’s Sardanapalus to orientalism and the French colonial project. As Linda Nochlin and then Todd Porterfield argued, the image drew on French notions of Oriental cruelty and sloth that powered the French colonial consciousness. Yet, they show, these notions cannot be separated from a French post-Revolutionary self-conception. Porterfield states, invoking Tocqueville, “The allure of empire... derived from its function as surrogate, mask and displacement of Revolution. . . . France could destroy itself by continuing the struggle over the Revolution or divert its attention to intervention in the East. The revolutionary passion and the nationalistic passion were . . . the two major currents in French society. Only the nationalistic passion, expressed through intervention in the East, would bring order at home.”8 Ori-
entalism could divert attention away from French politics, but it also pointed back to France. In the end, as I will argue, it was indeed the disorder of Delacroix’s *Sardanapalus*, and its evocation of a corresponding disarray in the French royal household, that proved so incendiary and so hard on the artist’s “cash.”

My argument is concerned with the symbolic resonance Delacroix’s painting had in a particular historical juncture, with or without the conscious desire of the artist. The notion of the “political imaginary,” well accepted by historians but less commonly used by art historians, works well to explain the accretion of meanings and implicit understandings a work of art may acquire in a highly unprogrammatic way. This broader form of interpretation allows a novel approach to Delacroix’s *Sardanapalus* that engages historical problems of the Restoration period in which it was produced.

**Flesh and Excess: Sardanapalus’s Moral Ambiguity**

In Delacroix’s painting, Sardanapalus, the legendary last king of Assyria, is presented on a large funeral pyre, surrounded by a horse, a scattered chaos of luxury objects, odalisques, servants, and slaves. Although the title indicates the death of the main actor, the scene in fact depicts the demise of his attendants: two acts of suicide (Aïscheh and a slave), one assassination (the central foreground passage of odalisque and guardsman), another murder about to occur (the odalisque and slave on the far side of the bed), various stages of human expiration, and the stabbing of one horse. The narrative, such as it is, revolves around a defining event in the fate of a monarchy and its subjects. To that extent, the subject can be allied with any number of images made during the Restoration depicting royalty of the past, with the crucial distinction that this ruler is an “Asiatic despot” (to use the term of the period) succumbing to an insurrection. With his enemies about to overtake his palace in Nineveh, the ruler prepares himself for a spectacular suicide instead of facing his enemies honorably. The end of a rule, the death of a king under pressure from a popular revolt: such subjects hardly seem calculated to curry favor with a tenuously restored monarchy! Not only did Delacroix choose a figure whose very history suggested a mixed royal message, he chose one whose great rarity as a subject for painting made the selection seem deliberate and meaningful, rather than random and conventional.

Delacroix’s work invites comparison with examples from the

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French tradition of history painting, having many of the basic ingredients of the genre: a focus on a singular event involving a famed historical figure, whose acts and life were discussed in classical history and modern literature. Delacroix’s brooding Sardanapalus closely recalls Jacques-Louis David’s repeated study of heroic men, including, for instance, his Socrates of 1787 (fig. 3) or his Brutus of 1789. Although Delacroix similarly isolates his main figure, he does so without endowing him with the sense of weighing potential moral positions. Like David’s Socrates, Delacroix’s painting is an antique subject, but Eastern, not Western; a death scene, but one that explores fantastical excess rather than philosophic constraint.

Rather than depicting the body as an expressive vessel steered by mesmeric will, as Dorothy Johnson has described David’s figural painting in the 1780s, Delacroix makes his bodies the locus of pain and pleasure: the body is not a container of will to be psychologically dominated and denied.9 The mind/body tensions that are so much a part of the

basic structuring vocabulary of Davidian work are absent here. In fact, in Delacroix’s painting, the body is no longer vessel at all: it verges on surface. The moment of sensual self-denial in Socrates’ reaching toward the beautiful cupbearer while gesturing heavenward, as Thomas Crow has seen it, sets David’s painting in a tensile balance between mind and body, where bodily desire is a repressed undercurrent. In Delacroix’s painting, the surface container of rationality is ruptured, the sensual element spills over. The boundaries and ground of the room and the relationship of bodies and objects to the room are too vague and illegible to be made sense of through the rationalized model of space-as-rectilinear-container seen in David’s work of the 1780s. Whereas David isolates the body, Delacroix intermeshes objects, slaves, odalisques; figure and ground collapse in a unifying surface. Gone is the notion of pictorial space as a stage setting for significant human action. The picture is built up and out rather than receding back: the body is not perspectivally contained in an abstract, overlaid grid. Viewing entails the scanning of a pictorial surface rather than a self-projection into pictorial space.

*Sardanapalus* dislodges the association of history painting with public and, particularly, patriotic events and heroic acts. Shown in the privacy of his inner chambers, Sardanapalus abandons his role as symbol of the body politic and passively accepts the invasion of the enemy, retreating to the private rituals of death and sexuality. The painting’s subject is an inversion of both David’s representation of patriotic stoicism and Antoine-Jean Gros’s Napoleonic imagery, which emphasize self-denial, adherence to the nation, and masculine assertion. In Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, ambiguity about allegiance to the public realm is underscored by the ambiguity of gender identity associated with the image of Sardanapalus. Formerly a militaristic conqueror in his own right, Sardanapalus becomes a defeatist voluptuary. This royal image contrasts with representations of “good government” in the form of David’s ideal of stoic self-discipline (as in his *Brutus*), or of the king as good, generous father (as in Louis Hersent’s *Louis XVI Giving Alms to the Poor*, 1817). The painting itself is irrational, transgressive, “feminine” to David’s “masculine,” flouting the royal and artistic fathers of the Restoration. Overall, the painting is more ambiguous than David’s work of the 1780s, with its dichotomous moral logic: Sardanapalus is not simply condemned; his pleasures are shared by the viewer.

Moral ambiguity also inheres in the legend of Sardanapalus. The first historical references to Sardanapalus establish a duality: he represented both brutal warrior qualities and a cowardly or effeminate
debauchery. The notion of his dissipation was apparently derived from Alexander the Great, who saw an epitaph on Sardanapalus’s tomb: “I have eaten, drunk and amused myself, and I have always considered everything worth no more than a fillip.” A historical figure whose spotty image is based on bits of accumulated legends, Sardanapalus was mentioned in several ancient texts, among the most detailed being Diodorus Siculus’s. The last Assyrian king, living presumably in the seventh century B.C.E., was known through Ktesias in the Persika at the beginning of the fourth century B.C.E. as a “passive voluptuary, responsible for his own downfall.” Greek historical accounts moralistically condemned his hedonism. Roman and Christian sources perpetuated this attitude, as did modern literary texts from the Renaissance on.

Visual representations associated Sardanapalus with the “voluptuous and effeminate” features of Bacchus. Accounts of Sardanapalus consistently mentioned the voluptuary (sensually indulgent, materialist, luxurious) aspect of his life and the fantastical, incendiary quality of his death. Delacroix’s painting effectively combines these two sensational components of the Sardanapalus myth. On the brink of death, Sardanapalus reclines on a bed, not the conventional throne of previous visual iconography. (Indeed, Jack Spector points out that Sardanapalus’s literary attribute gradually became the featherbed, an index of his voluptuous life.)

The artist’s divergence from the play Sardanapalus, which Byron published in 1821, suggests that he exploited the old duality even more than his literary predecessor. Byron’s play undermines the universal condemnation of Sardanapalus by endowing him with meditative qualities rather than emphasizing his depravity. Delacroix returned instead to the greater ambiguity of the traditional judgment. In Byron’s play, the scene of death occurs offstage, a joint suicide involving only Sardanapalus and Myrrha, the Ionian slave. The massacre of slaves and odaliskes was apparently Delacroix’s own invention (or, possibly, as Beatrice Farwell believes, a reference to an unidentified text). His departure from Byron makes the painting not an image of self-sacrifice

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10 The information here on the history of perceptions of Sardanapalus derives primarily from Spector, Delacroix, especially 47–58; Johnson, Paintings of Eugène Delacroix, 117–18; and Bohrer, “Inventing Assyria.” Johnson suggests that his legendary traits were probably derived from the character of the god Sandon, worshiped in Asia both as heroic and female divinity.

11 Spector, Delacroix, 47.

12 These are the words of the nineteenth-century French architect Visconti, as cited by Spector, ibid.

13 Jack Spector sees the haughty isolation of Sardanapalus in the works of both Byron and Delacroix as an expression of Romantic individualism: in other words, the poet and the painter would have identified with the Assyrian king.
(as in David’s rulers), but instead an exposition of the cruel murder of others under the ruler’s orders. The more complicated scene, with several additional figures and props, also emphasizes disorder and chaos, brought to full expression, as Spector perceptively points out, by the contrast between the frenzied action in the foreground and a passive Sardanapalus in the background. That Delacroix places the funeral pyre in a bedchamber, rather than a throne room (the symbolic seat of reign), emphasizes a forbidden, secretive element of a king’s private life, and allows him the felicitous merging of deathbed and banquet imagery. The reclining posture of Sardanapalus evokes Etruscan sculpture, both sarcophagi and banquet sofas.\footnote{See Spector, Delacroix, 69–70; Spector refers here to earlier research by Lee Johnson on the relationship of the painting to Etruscan example.}

Given the conventional moral condemnation of the historical Sardanapalus, Delacroix’s painting would initially seem to expose only to denigrate his sybaritism. The neat fit of the painting with Orientalist notions of eastern rulers’ effeminacy, sloth, and tyranny invites the viewer to begin examining the painting with moral consternation. Yet as with moralizing images condemning fleshy excess, represented sensuousness can visually overpower and dislodge the moralizing lesson, reversing it. Although the body of Delacroix’s ruler Sardanapalus remains an incorporeal abstraction, removed from and subordinated by the foreground excess, he is associated metonymically with fleshiness. The lack of tension, the absence of a sense that something morally important is at stake in this painting, is built into the progression toward the final painting. Preparatory works, both the Bayonne ink drawing (fig. 4) and Louvre oil sketch (fig. 5), contain more direct action in the process of being realized. The vitality of action unfolding resonates more fully with human moral presence; depicted action invokes the notion of the body as container of will. By contrast, the final oil painting places greater emphasis on the results of these fatal actions and, hence, on the body emptied of animating psychic presence: the swooning women; the flopped-over figure on the bed; the expiring woman seen in the middle foreground, with half-closed eyes; the veiled figure to the left of the bed. The stilled groupings in the final painting and the theatrical feel of the postures are staged vignettes and, as such, are more redolent of melodrama than of moral tragedy.\footnote{The theatrical quality of rhetorical gesturing and posing is mentioned by Spector, Delacroix, 17–18; Vincent Pomarède makes some interesting comparisons with contemporary opera in his Eugène Delacroix, La mort de Sardanapale (Paris, 1998), 42–43.}

Within the spectrum of his own work, Delacroix’s Death of Sardanapalus was markedly sensual. In contrast to the somber and bland hues of
the Massacres of Chios, the Sardanapalus is suffused with golden and rosy tones. The hard, volumetric, and muscular figures of 1824 are replaced with bodies composed of soft, frothy flesh tones. The dominance of naked female flesh rendered in textured strokes emphasizes surface rather than sculpted mass in a way that recalls rococo painting. The open-air dryness of Delacroix’s fragmented Chios landscape becomes here a glowing, intimate chamber, the richness of the reds, golds, and pinks brought forward and intensified by the surrounding darkness. Though both images represent kinds of defeat, Delacroix configured his Massacres as an empty and almost motionless scene of aftermath, whereas his depiction of Nineveh ripples with incidents and abounds with objects and textures. The already thick impasto of Chios becomes jewel-like, the surface of the painting studded with crusty patches of brilliant color.

If Delacroix’s tale of Sardanapalus set out as a moral one, this sensual quality undermines a moralizing response to the picture. Both narrative and construction emphasize spectacular bodily excess and empty the event of its potential psychological and moral tensions. Almost all the preparatory studies for the work are focused on the
bodies of women and slaves, and the painting’s skewed perspective and scale subordinate Sardanapalus to the foreground figures. Together these aspects emphasize physicality, more than the potential emotional response or moral presence of the king. Abandoning the moral authority of the singular individual depicted in history painting, Delacroix’s Sardanapalus leaves the viewer with a vision of a king’s death and a king’s physical pleasures that offers no symbolic transcendence. The king’s body is a physical endpoint; the king is neither moral exemplar nor martyr.

**Antiroyal Protest and the Disorderly Body of Sardanapalus**

Character weaknesses long attributed to Sardanapalus corresponded with an old French tradition of antiroyal protest that identified royal misrule with effeminacy, sexual perversity or excess, and unbridled sensual passions and appetite. Derived from a traditional equation of the body of the king with the body politic, the metaphors of physical defor-
mation and prodigious appetite were components of antiroyal rhetoric, particularly virulent under the Fronde but not unique to that period. As historian Jeffrey Merrick writes, “Royal ideology itself, which connected order in the royal body with order in the body politic, supplied much of the raw material for gendered accusations about the disruptive effects of royal sexuality on royal rationality and, by extension, the welfare of the French people.”

Louis XIV was attacked as “debauched, diseased, deflated, and despotic”; Louis XV had an “unruly libido”; Louis XVI was impotent, with an “unruly wife”; and both Louis XV and Louis XVI were “dominated by women.”

In the history of French perceptions of him, Sardanapalus was more than a historical oddity and fascinating legend: he was often specifically named as a figure of political disorder, of royal corruption and misrule, and he was particularly a rhetorical tool cited at moments of political crisis in the French monarchy. Adjectives such as *sardanapalien*, *sardanapaliste*, and so on were used to identify princely depravity. Especially telling for an analysis of Delacroix’s painting, the name of Sardanapalus figured in debates about royal authority and its limits, both as defense and as contestation of that authority. In the famous Mazarinades copiously produced during the seventeenth-century Fronde, for example, Mazarin’s passions were called “Sardanapalian” transgressions of gender boundaries, indulgences in feminine pleasures (the feminine here serving as a figure for disorder, irrationality, lack of discipline of body and desires). A century before, the theorist of absolutism, Jean Bodin, defined good royal rule as selfless and just, and misrule as visible in the example of Sardanapalus, who spent more time “among women than among men,” defined by irrationality and the self-indulgence of a despotic ruler unable to tame his “despotic passions.” In the same period, a prolonged crisis of

18 This information and phrasing comes from ibid. More significant than the invocation of physical mortality is unregulated corporeality: the corporeal and divine could go together, so long as it is a regulated corporeality. As Abby Zanger argues, in a revision of the common usage of Kantorowicz’s explanation of the king’s two bodies, the suppression of the mortal body became important only in the crisis of funerals, but otherwise the mortal, physical body was not a problem. In fact, sexual potency was important to ideas of kingship. See Zanger, “Making Sweat: Sex and the Gender of National Reproduction in the Marriage of Louis XIII,” *Yale French Studies* 86 (1994): 187–205.
19 See Merrick, “Body Politics,” 26–27, citing *La Mazarinade* (Brussels, 1651), 10. The “Mazarinades” are pamphlets written from 1648 to 1653, during the Fronde, against Cardinal Jules Mazarin and the regent, Anne d’Autriche. They are estimated to total about five thousand.
20 “[J]ean Bodin scorned unmanly husbands dominated by their wives and effeminate mon-
French royal authority plagued the Valois family, as it failed to produce an heir. Satirical poems attacking Henri III’s reputedly dubious sexuality compared him to Sardanapalus (“Sardanapale n’eust de masle qu’une image, Et de femme l’esprit, le vouloir et les faict: Ce Roy, homme de nom, en ses plaisirs infects, Devient putain de coeur, de geste et d’usage”). By the time Delacroix made his painting, the name of Sardanapalus may have had an almost exclusively figurative value. In the eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie*, “Sardanapalus” is mentioned several times as a rhetorical figure, but the historical Sardanapalus, king of Assyria, is given scant attention and receives no separate entry. In the later, nineteenth-century Larousse, mentions of Byron’s play and Delacroix’s painting precede discussion of the historical king.

As in these examples that link Sardanapalus to the history of French antiroyal protest, Delacroix’s painting clearly casts the Assyrian king as a figure of debauch, irrationality, self-indulgence, despotism, and femininity. The work reopens and reaffirms the traditional perception of Sardanapalus as ambiguously gendered: his passivity contrasts with imagery of rulers in near contemporaneous history paintings that emphasize controlling activeness (as in Napoleonic works). Delacroix’s painting is in fact organized around the central oddity of his ruler’s passivity. (The pose he takes is unusual as well: both melancholy and birthing pose in traditional iconography.) Delacroix transforms the domination of the public hero into a form of perverse sexual mastery: Napoléon on the battlefield becomes Sardanapalus among his slaves. How different is this image of royal power from that which emphasized the king’s virility and sexual health!

Other themes of antiroyal protest can be seen in Delacroix’s work. The idea of the king’s irrational, uncontrolled passions is figured in the very construction of the painting itself, with its qualities of illogic, as emphasized by critics and art historians. The scale, proportions, perspective, and space have long been considered problematic: why is the figure of Sardanapalus so small, and those of guardsmen and odalisques so large? What is the shape of this room, where does ground end and archs dominated by their passions (like Sardanapalus who spent more time among women than among men) because they betrayed the standard of reason and degraded the authority entrusted to them.” Jean Bodin is discussed by Merrick, “Body Politics,” 21–22; the mention of Sardanapalus is in Bodin, *Les six livres de la république* (1593; rpt., Paris, 1986), 4:17.


22 By contrast, see Abby Zanger’s discussion of representations of Louis XIV in “Limb(b)inal Images.”
pyre begin, and what are the boundaries of this space? Why does the diagonal of the bed so clearly violate perspective?

Evidence for linking Delacroix’s painting to the discourse of anti-royal protest comes as well from the reception of the work. It is not a coincidence, I believe, that art critics constantly referred to irrationality, lack of constraint, and perversity when commenting on his Sardanapalus, all tropes of attacks on royal authority. Criticism emphasized Delacroix’s own disorder and chaos, his unbridled, undisciplined passion, in effect transferring those qualities from the painting to the artist. Delécluze, for instance, complained that it was “disjointed” and that the “eye cannot untangle the confusion of lines and colors, . . . where the basic rules of art appear to have been rejected.”23 Because of the viewer’s inability to discern the painter’s intention, according to Delécluze, a judgment of the work could not even be made. Another writer called the painting “un cauchemar.” The usually mildly sympathetic Jal struck a harsh note in his description of Delacroix: “He has given himself to [his Sardanapalus] with passion, with feeling, and unfortunately, in the delirium of his creation, he has been carried away beyond all limits. . . . It is impossible for a rational mind to extricate itself from the chaos amidst which his idea is confined.”24 Critics condemned Delacroix for crossing the boundary of reason into a terrain of artistic insanity.25 It is as though the artist had become a sardanapalien himself.

Attacks on Sardanapalus’s and Bourbon sexual perversity use the royal body in a powerful, figurative way. As literary scholar Lewis Seifert has argued, “Satire that attacks public figures through sexual descriptions situates social disorder in the bodies of its victims.”26 Gender “indifferentiation” and insatiable sexuality become indices of social disorder. Delacroix’s handling of his subject, with its suggestive intermingling of sexuality and death, voyeurism and erotic pleasure, brings out Sardanapalus’s reputation for perverse eroticism. This is achieved in part through the display of the female body as the object of violence as well as pleasure. The artist renders the pearly, feathery flesh of the women differently from the rest of the painting: while the brush strokes

25 Other critics who treat Delacroix as a kind of lawless provocateur include Chauvin, Vitet, the anonymous critic for the Gazette de France, and the writer Merimée.
melt together to form a mysterious and undefinable layering of luminous color tones, elsewhere in the image paint remains aggressively unintegrated into form. Red wound-like streaks appear throughout the painting as highlight and underpaint, a visual analogue to the subject of violence. In handling and form, the painting juxtaposes and combines references to violence and female sexuality.

The transgressions of Sardanapalus as an effeminate ruler are part of a tradition of antimonarchical criticism; they are at odds with the images of *exemplum virtutis* of David’s stoic leaders. As Jeffrey Merrick has shown, “[Critics of the monarchy] challenged royal authority, or at least abuses of royal authority, in polemical literature by linking personal disorder in the feminized and animalized self with public disorder in the lawless state, which was reduced to slavery or even savagery.” 27 The idea of misrule as related to Mazarin’s inability to govern and control his passions and physical desires recurs in Restoration caricatures of disorder: fleshy transgression is a cipher for despotism in images that display the body of the king deformed by excessive appetite and perverse sexual pleasure. One such caricature linked the corpulent body of the gourmandish king with the prime emblem of antiroyal protest and object of material destruction: the guillotine (fig. 6).

This brings us back to Delacroix’s painting, which is above all about the lack of discipline of the ruling body, a corruption of the body that spreads to the state, an example of gendered disorder. Delacroix’s choice of the figure of Sardanapalus is striking: the figure of royal despotism, the favored example of the father-king gone astray, falling into irrational and excessive physical pleasures. Given the persistence and multifaceted nature of this perception of royalty and royal imagery, I believe that it powerfully illuminates Delacroix’s painting, even if in a manner unintended by the artist. In the context of the Restoration, where the royal body was a volatile and changeable signifier, Sardanapalus’s inherent dualities were particularly meaningful.

**Embodying Dynasty**

Representation of the ruling body was more troubled and perhaps more charged in the Restoration period than it previously had been. Delacroix’s painting of the Assyrian king appeared in a culture of doubt about the symbolic meaning of royalty. The impasse presented by Delacroix’s work might not have pleased any monarchy under any circumstances. Yet the challenge to royalty was precise and specific to the

situation of the Restoration, and can be understood by considering the painting in the context of contemporaneous representations of royalty. In general, these representations had to come to terms with past and contemporary visual conventions and, most especially, with shifting ideologies surrounding the very nature of monarchy. How could a king be pictured after a twenty-five-year hiatus in royal rule? How could monarchy be visualized after the very concept of royal rule and its attendant beliefs had been programmatically eradicated?

When the Bourbons returned to the throne of France in 1814, they attempted to restore, if not exactly divinity, then certainly symbolic authority to the royal visage.28 Reviving defunct practices of thought

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28 Although it does seem that some notion of the sacral state of the king united monarchist parties, the emphasis on his divine authority varied across a spectrum. Sheryl Kroen argues that it was more the Catholic missionaries who laid claim to the divinity of the king, and less the monarchy itself. She also notes that the regime circumnavigated the most menacing aspect of the king’s physical body in avoiding direct commemoration of the revolutionary regicide. See her “Revolutionizing Religious Politics during the Restoration,” *French Historical Studies* 21 (1998): 27–54, esp. 43.
and perception would have been hard enough, but the greater difficulty
was in overcoming the legacy of the Revolution’s regicide. In killing
the king, the revolutionaries had hoped to demonstrate, once and for
all, that the king was as mortal as any human being: his body was not
the body of France, not the incorporation of the holy spirit, but simply
an earthly combination of flesh and blood. For the restored Bourbons,
the finality of that death had to be overcome, and aura returned to the
king’s person.

Roger Chartier has argued that the sacralization of the Old Regime
monarch had been a less important feature of his prestige and authority
than a broader, more generalized sense of affection for and identifi-
cation with the private person of the sovereign, the common citizen’s
belief that his own destiny was intertwined with that of his king.29
Chartier’s analysis sheds light on many royal practices of the Restoration. To
retrieve the people’s identification with its monarchy, the Restoration
kings, Louis XVIII and Charles X, were made visible to their people,
a strategy that placed particular emphasis on the ideological function
of representation. Vast numbers of contemporary prints depicted the
king and his family: they showed a birth (the duke of Bordeaux) and
deaths, ceremonial entries and departures, baptisms, an assassination
(the duke of Berry), marriages, a coronation (Charles X), and royal
family trees. Salon livrets show dozens of similar subjects, usually cast in
the historical past, for every exhibition of the Restoration.

But if representations of all kinds celebrated the royal body, they
also submitted it to intense public scrutiny in this period. The specific
demands of the reestablishment of monarchical sovereignty created an
odd emphasis in royal imagery. One result, paradoxically, was to sever
notions of symbolic transcendence from the royal body. To forge iden-
tification between the king and his people, he had to be made present
to the nation. But presentness itself undermined the prestige, and cer-
tainly the sacrality and symbolism, of the royal body. Above all, rep-
resentation of the royal body was highly susceptible to attacks, slan-
derous interpretations, and seditious acts. In a well-known argument,
Louis Marin showed that under the ancien régime, representations of
the king bore the residue of sacredness transferred from the king’s body
to its representation. The image itself becomes sacred. In the Resto-
ration, however, the process always threatened to move in the reverse
direction: corporeality could potentially pull the image away from its

29 Roger Chartier, The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution, trans. L. Cochrane (Durham,
intended purpose of elevation. It is this aspect of royal imagery that most closely pertains to a reading of Delacroix’s painting.

At the Salon of 1827–28, critics frequently compared Delacroix’s Death of Sardanapalus with Devéria’s Birth of Henri IV under the guise of discussing new trends in romanticism. Yet the frequency of the contrast, the repeated negative assessments of Delacroix in relation to the highly laudatory treatment of a relative newcomer, and the universality of this judgment lead one to suspect that more was at stake in the comparison than defining romanticism. Indeed, death and birth held crucial significance in the symbolic definition of royalty because blood lines had a central function in legitimating royal rule. Devéria’s work corresponded to efforts to support royal succession, attaching the contemporary Bourbons to Henri IV. Indeed, when the duchess of Berry finally produced an heir to the Restoration Bourbons in 1820, many equated the event to the birth of Henri IV, depicted by Devéria. Christened Henri, duke of Bordeaux, the child was dubbed the “new Henri” and his mother was celebrated as the “new Jeanne d’Albret.” He was anointed at birth, as was Henri IV, with Jurançon wine and a bulb of garlic, a ritual referred to in Devéria’s painting. The meaning of the critical comparison of Devéria’s and Delacroix’s paintings can best be understood in the context of the representation of royal birth and death in the Restoration.

Royal iconography had long emphasized dynastic legitimacy. Dynastic relations are, for example, emphasized in Jean Nocret’s formal Allegorical Portrait of the Family of Louis XIV of 1670 (Musée Historique, Versailles), which cloaks the assembled royal family in mythological and allegorical guise. What distinguishes representations of the 1820s


31 Henri IV, king of France from 1589 to 1610, was a particularly popular royal figure and the first in the Bourbon line; the Restoration Bourbons made much of their connection to him. On the comparison of the duchess of Berry to Jeanne d’Albret, Henri IV’s mother, see Jo Burr Margadant, “The Duchesse de Berry and Royalist Political Culture in Postrevolutionary France,” History Workshop Journal 43 (1997): 34. As Margadant mentions, the duchess of Berry was reported to have sung the same song that, according to legend, Jeanne d’Albret had been ordered to sing at the birth of Henri IV. The comparison between the two women was elaborated upon again at the moment of the duke’s baptism, 1 May 1821: a panel was placed at the foot of the equestrian statue of Henri IV on the Pont Neuf, on which one could read, “Français, aimez mon petit-fils comme j’ai aimé vos pères.—Jeanne d’Albret, 1553; Caroline, 1820.” At the Théâtre Français, a play titled Jeanne d’Albret ou le Berceau was performed to commemorate the event. See Anne-Marie Rosset, Un siècle d’histoire de France par l’estampe, 1770–1871; La Restauration et les Cent-Jours, vol. 5 of Collection de Vinch, inventaire analytique (Paris, 1938), 554–55.

32 Nocret’s portrait hangs in the Musée national du Château at Versailles. See Simon Schama’s discussion of this painting in his “The Domestication of Majesty: Royal Family Por-
from pre-Revolutionary depictions is their physical literalness about dynasty’s definition, locating dynasty in the body itself. Images of birth and death asserted dynasty but they also produced an emphasis on the royal body. The casting of monarchy in terms that evoke the physical made the monarchy particularly vulnerable to attack.

Royal death was traditionally brought under control by ritualized funerary practices. Because of the potential political crisis caused by the monarch’s death, an elaborate theory of the king’s two bodies evolved, according to which the monarch had both an earthly, mortal body and a divine body that lived beyond his death. As Ernst Kantorowicz and other historians have shown, in France and England a mystic fiction contrasted the mortal body with the ideal, everlasting authority of the king. The notion of the divine unity of kingship was meant to overshadow the conceptual difficulty of one king’s body being substituted as successor for the other, deceased one.33

A description of Louis XVIII’s final days in the published memoirs of his minister La Rochefoucauld illustrates the way this crisis of a monarch’s death might be perceived in the context of post-Revolutionary France. His account makes visible how the royal body in death uncontrollably slips between public and private significance. According to La Rochefoucauld, Louis stops being king before his death: the moment he succumbs to pain, he gives up his public self-display, he withdraws from public and symbolic sight, taking farewells and final vows: “Henceforth this monarch forgot that he was King, and wanted now only to be a humble Christian, submissive and resigned. He consented to being put in bed; he asked to receive his last rites, he blessed his entire family, and he died as a submissive and sincere son of the Catholic Church, after having lived as King of France.”34

Recent interest in the idea of the king’s “two bodies” and in his gradual desacralization during the eighteenth century has produced a vast bibliography. Works of particular importance for my reading include Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology (Princeton, N.J., 1957); Lynn Hunt, “The Bad Mother,” in The Family Romance of the French Revolution (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), 89–123; Jeffrey Merrick, The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century (Baton Rouge, La., 1990); and Roger Chartier, Cultural Origins of the French Revolution, esp. 111–35. For a recent summary of the literature on the king’s two bodies, see Kroen, Politics and Theater, 23–38.

33 La Rochefoucauld, Mémoires secrets de M. le Vicomte de Larochefoucauld, écrits par lui-même (Paris, 1839), 1:414–15. This contradicts ancien régime practice, as summarized by Roger Chartier, according to which the dignities of kingship were retained until burial; the man remains king at burial, as witnessed by the expression of royal continuity between departure and induction: “Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!“ (See Chartier, Cultural Origins of the French Revolution, 125.) Although La Rochefoucauld would certainly have been very aware of ancien régime protocol, his account of the king’s death shows the way that physical pain might overshadow the symbolic and transcendent meaning of the king’s body, overshadowing, hence, the second, divine body. Within the
courtiers struggled during the last weeks of the king’s life to convince him to take the last sacrament, a step the king postponed because of his “devoirs de roi,” going so far as to refuse to take to bed. Other accounts of the king’s final days expose the general perception that when the king acknowledges his impending death through taking his final sacrament, he loses his symbolic capacity to be king.\^35 This charged conflict between corporeality and public symbolism links the depiction of death in Delacroix’s \textit{Sardanapalus} to this most sensitive aspect of royal ideology.

The transformation of the king’s private life into spectacle with public meaning is especially vivid in the royal rituals of childbirth. Birth prints explicitly show how the strategy of “making present” could backfire in the Restoration. This strategy introduced a new kind of literalness in this type of royal iconography, particularly vivid in prints depicting the “miraculous” birth of the duke of Bordeaux to the duchess of Berry in 1820, as in this example of a popular print (fig. 7). On 13 February 1820, the duke of Berry, the youngest heir to the throne, was assassinated, and hopes for the continuation of the Bourbon line seemed dashed. This bleak picture was immediately altered, however, by the news, improbably announced by the dying duke himself, that the duchess of Berry was in fact pregnant. She gave birth seven and a half months later.

Unlike Old Regime prints of birthroom scenes, there was an explicitly defensive posture to the depictions of the duchess’s birthing.\^36 The purpose of these latter images was not simply to make the royal family visible and close to its subjects, but more explicitly to emphasize blood ties and familial bonds, and often to dispel rumors of their falsification.\^37 The birth of the duke of Bordeaux was amply “documented,”

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\(^36\) Most of the surviving ancien régime prints representing important royal births are allegorical. Although there are some pre-Revolutionary images depicting the birthroom, they are distinct, nonetheless, from the Restoration prints in their emphasis on \textit{presentation, celebration, and announcement}, rather than on \textit{witnessing}. Above all, the prints depict court ritual, without the presence of verifying, authenticating nonnobles or outsiders.

\(^37\) Strictly speaking, the print shows a confinement room scene, not a birth scene. There are some dozen variations on the theme: some highlight the birth and witnessing with the duchess in the foreground, the king in the background; another emphasizes the more traditional theme of the king receiving the child with the duchess in bed in the background; and a most traditional, quasi-allegorical scene shows the duke of Berry peering down from an opening in the heavens as the king is presented with the baby. Most of the prints of the birth include a band of extensive text below the image, detailed accounts of the birth, arrival of witnesses, and the presentation of the baby to the king.
including bedroom scenes depicting the moments after birth when the baby was presented to the king and family and, significantly, to officers and members of the National and Royal Guards. These images served as witness “birth certificates” authenticating the event, and were meant to counter the charge that the birth was fraudulent, either because a boy had been substituted for the girl who had actually been born to the duchess, or because the duchess had never been pregnant at all. The very repetition of this theme, with variations as to the number and identity of the witnesses present and the exact timing of the birth, indicates how susceptible to doubt was this type of imagery. Rather than banishing rumor through hard, physical evidence, the very emphasis on physicality itself raised questions that might otherwise have been irrelevant, or passed over.

In the example (fig. 7), the birthing room is depicted in surprising proximity to the viewer. Both the bed and the witnesses present are given visual emphasis through the composition of the print. The bed in which the duchess lies defines the boundaries of the image, also reinforced by the heraldic placement of witnesses on the left and the
king and the immediate royal family on the right. The image itself is bounded by text: above, the exact place and date of the birth appear (“The Palais des Tuileries, Marsan Pavilion in Paris, Friday, 29 September, 2:02 in the morning”), below the image the text narrates the scene and identifies the figures present.

The near “miraculous” circumstances of the birth of the duke of Bordeaux after his father’s death, his male sex, and the earlier childlessness of the royal family meant that the event mattered more than the usual royal birth. Since the child’s birth ensured the future existence of the Bourbon dynasty, it was open to closer scrutiny. Even more suspicious, though, was that no doctor attended the actual birth, requiring the duchess to call in witnesses to verify the intactness of the umbilical cord. In trying to forestall doubt about the birth’s authenticity, pro-royal images and accounts took the dangerous route of emphasizing physical evidence.

In a post-Revolutionary culture lacking blind faith in royalty, the political and symbolic import of this birth, combined with the unusual circumstances of its unfolding, made it particularly susceptible to doubt. The numerous attacks on the authenticity of the birth focused on the physical evidence. A letter, believed at the time to have been written by the duke of Orléans, appeared in the London newspapers five days after the birth. Claiming that the duchess had never in fact been pregnant, it tellingly discussed in detail the physical signs of the pregnancy and birth so as to foster suspicion.

The royalist strategy of presenting physical “evidence”—as in the

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38 The fact of the witnessing of a royal birth itself was not a unique feature of the duchess’s experience. We know from pre-Revolutionary accounts of various royal midwives and doctors of the ritualized presence of legitimating witnesses during the actual moment of birth itself. The umbilical cord was cut only after the sex of the child had been determined by the people present, and most particularly by the king. Jo Burr Margadant provides an account of the birth in her “Duchesse de Berry,” 31–34, arguing that the physical explicitness of official accounts of the birth and its witnessing disgusted many aristocrats, as out of keeping with current mores: while the ancien régime notion of royal motherhood saw her reproductive parts as public property, a new patriarchal notion (embodied in Napoléon’s Civil Code) saw them as the private property of husbands, to be shielded from public scrutiny. Nonetheless, even by the standards of ancien régime publicness, the scrutiny of physical evidence in the case of the duchess’s delivery went well beyond pre-Revolutionary examples.

39 Reportedly, the duchess, lying in a pool of blood and amniotic fluid with her newborn between her legs, refused to let the umbilical cord be cut until several witnesses could be gathered, mostly commoners and outsiders to the court (including one marchand épiciер and a pharmacist). According to her doctor, with each arrival she lifted her clothing so as to expose her naked body entirely, parting her legs so that each witness could verify the intactness of the umbilical cord. For the extraordinary memoir of the duchess’s obstetrician, Docteur Deneux, see Gustave Witkowski, Les accouchements à la cour (Paris, 1890). Significantly, the memoir was not actually published within Deneux’s lifetime: creating visibility of the royal body, even in these circumstances, clearly could go only so far.

40 See Witkowski on these protests, Les accouchements à la cour, 340–45.
print of the birth of the duke of Bordeaux—had not succeeded in securing symbolic meaning for the royal body; to the contrary, the opposition used this evidence to foment doubt. In general, the emphasis on the material body of the king and his family was intended to strengthen the bond between him and the royal dynasty of the ancien régime, a demonstrable link between present and past. Yet the belief that dynastic right had to be visible and embodied actually detracted from the suprahistorical claim to power upon which the Bourbons based their rule. Above all, the very existence of the proroyal prints I have been discussing paradoxically and emphatically underscored the existence of a pervasive doubt in postrevolutionary society about absolute right.

The question of physical authenticity implicitly structured the critical comparison of Delacroix’s *Sardanapalus* to Devéria’s *Henri IV* in 1828. Condemnation of Delacroix, celebration of Devéria: it is as though Delacroix’s physical endpoint threatened to destroy the delicate fiction of Devéria’s painting, which echoed so clearly the birthing prints of the duchess of Bordeaux. Did royal birth and death demonstrate symbolic continuity or physical impasse, divinity or mere mortality? Side by side, the two paintings could elicit these kinds of questions, Delacroix’s reversing the symbolic configuration that Devéria’s was supposed to underscore.

**The King’s Ambiguous Body**

The potential reversibility of royal images, their politically uncontrollable nature, imbued royal representation in this period with extreme tension. The idea that public representations of kings are in some way their “surrogates” made even the restoration of royal monuments a fraught business, all the more so as legislation regulated emblems of earlier regimes (cockades, flags, effigies of Napoléon) as “seditious cries and provocations to revolt,” automatically lending them, if unintentionally, a subversive charge. The very restoration of royal monuments, intended to revitalize their authority, paradoxically invoked their former destruction, succeeding thus in actually relativizing rather than naturalizing Bourbon rule. The elimination, proscription...
tion, hiding, or restoration of images of rulers past and present, Bourbon and not, all potentially raised the specter of doubt about Bourbon legitimacy as based on notions of continuity, tradition, divinity, naturalness, or, simply, inherent Frenchness.42

Restoration-era caricaturists fully exploited this potential for infinite reversibility. If proroyal images depicted the king as a benevolent father who loves his subjects, the caricaturist upended this love in a grotesque image emphasizing the king’s ample posterior (fig. 8), transforming the abstract into the physical. The visual language of inversion—where what is meant to be sacred is profaned—was repeated often in caricatures of Louis XVIII. In keeping with the legend of Sardanapalus’s excessive eating and drinking, Louis’s appetite received much caricatural attention, and even his sexual behavior was depicted as unseemly.43

Indeed, visual satires of the king focused almost exclusively on his purportedly grotesque physical excess or exaggerated corpulence. Of course, Louis’s heftiness was his feature most vulnerable to caricatural exaggeration; nonetheless, the grotesqueness not only functions as an identifiable reference to the king, it also feeds directly into an ideological weakness of the Restoration monarchy.44 The ideological nature of Louis’s appetite was underscored in two pendant caricatures dating from the Hundred Days, showing, on the left, Louis gorging himself as he steps on the liberty of the press, while on the right, Napoléon consumes a spartan meal and signs decrees guaranteeing various freedoms of a democratic, civil society: abolition of black slavery, liberty of press and commerce, and so forth (fig. 9).


42 The Bourbon policy equating representations with the person of the king created rich opportunities for those who contested royal authority. See Merrick, “Body Politics,” 30–31. This explains the Bourbon regime’s extremely careful handling of images of the king and other rulers, of which there is ample evidence in the papers of the Maison du Roi, series O3 in the Archives Nationales. The arts administration closely supervised the production and dissemination throughout France of royal portraits. Further, the destruction and concealment of works of art reveal the power that was attributed to them and the corresponding need to police them. In the complicated and ongoing negotiations concerning the presence of the Napoleonic paintings, for instance, the main reason for some being withheld from public view seems to have been whether Napoléon was bodily present in them.

43 Other good examples are the Twenty-Year Reign, 1815, hand-colored etching by Jacquin; and Louis XVIII et Mme du Cayla: Mon cul était sa tabatière... ah faut-il qu’un homme soit cochon!, anonymous lithograph. Both are in the collection of the Département des Estampes et de la Photographie, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF).

44 This follows the logic of royal caricature in the period leading up to and including the French Revolution. See Annie Duprat, “Du ‘roi-père’ au ‘roi-cochon,’” and Antoine de Baecque, “La défaite du corps du roi; la satire et l’image de Louis XVI pendant la Révolution,” both in Saint-Denis, ou le Jugement dernier des rois (La Garenne-Colombes, 1992), 81–90 and 75–80, respectively.
Figure 8  My Dear Children, I Hold All of You in My Heart. Anonymous lithograph. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France
The problem of the physical body constantly threatened to resurge. Familiarity with the caricatures of Louis makes it hard to perceive the dignity of “positive” portraits intended to be celebratory or commemorative: the belittling effect of the caricatures of fat Louis potentially “bleeds” into perceptions of the portraits that were meant to be flattering, undermining their serious effect. As historian of caricature Robert Goldstein points out, during the course of the Restoration it became virtually impossible to depict gout-sufferers of any kind, as they were always assumed to refer to the king.45

A more considered awareness of the royal body’s problematic state is demonstrated in the Charter adopted in 1814, in which Article 13

45 See Robert J. Goldstein, The Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth-Century France (Kent, 1989), 111; on caricature under the Restoration, see also Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, Eugène Delacroix, Prints, Politics, and Satire, 1814–1822 (New Haven, Conn., 1991), especially 1–10. Censorship of caricature specifically was instituted only in 1820. The viewer’s expectations, of course, have something to do with how images like these would be read; it cannot be assumed that they would have universally been seen as comical during the Restoration. The point remains, however, that the existence of caricatures in the period could alter how the more celebratory portraits would have been perceived.
clearly states: “The person of the king is sacred and inviolable.” When
the sacrality of the ruling body needs to be declared by constitutional law, one suspects that the case has already been lost. The suspicion this article paradoxically suggests about royal divinity was immediately underscored in the next article: “There is no authority in France above the law. The king reigns only by law, and it is only in the name of the law that he can demand obedience.”

In summary, the prohibitions against certain images of rulers and other related symbols themselves invoked the power of the forbidden images; restorations of effigies evoked the previous destructions and suggest the destructibility of that which has been restored. Furthermore, the dissemination and display of images of the reigning Bourbons paradoxically invited seditious acts: busts were smashed, disfigured, and decorated with the tricolor cockade; portraits of the king intended to be flattering could be tainted by caricatural depictions and could be read insultingly; images of dynastic birthright reminded the viewer of the material instead of the religious body. It is in this condition of volatile meanings, infinite possibilities of reversal, that the potency of Delacroix’s Sardanapalus must be seen.

Charles X: A Sweetly Rotting Cadaver

As I have shown, the unregulated body and disorder of Delacroix’s Sardanapalus can be connected to an old discourse of antiroyal protest invoking excessive royal passion, sensuousness, and the gendered disorder of the king’s body. In other words, the painting adopts tropes of royal protest that were generalized in France, beginning at least in early modern times, and that capitalized on moments of crisis in royal sovereignty. Even more specifically, the protagonist of Delacroix’s painting was explicitly invoked in literary and political texts defining misrule as “sardanapalien.” What made the Sardanapalus discourse particularly disturbing for the Restoration Bourbons, however, was the royal family’s literal vulnerability to charges of gender disorder. Aged,
impotent, and mostly childless, the Bourbons tried but failed to project a familial image in keeping with modern notions, as Jo Burr Margadant has argued. Louis XVIII left no heir to the throne; the dauphin, the duke of Angoulême (son of Charles X), had no children. The shadow of Sardanapalian disorder is visible in the constant gendered attacks on the royal family, which cast the duchess of Angoulême as a shrew, and her husband and Charles X as impotent cowards.48

The timing of Delacroix’s Sardanapalian production seems significant to the interpretation that I am proposing: his work was shown at a crucial moment in Charles X’s rule, as the Ultra party backing him pushed for increases in royal authority and undermined freedoms of the press. With the death of Louis XVIII in 1824, the Ultras’ ascendancy had led to stricter censorship, more rigid protocol, increases in concern about royal authority, and a general tightening of the reins, all of which were manifested in the direction of the arts administration as well as elsewhere. By 1827, however, the liberals had obtained a majority in Parliament, and the Ultra government was in full-fledged political crisis.49

To renew the traditions of grandeur, awe, and sacred aura surrounding royalty, Charles had been formally crowned in 1825 following the ages-old religious ceremony of the sacre. Louis XVIII had dispensed with the rite, possibly recognizing its unsuitability to the political climate and economic state of post-Waterloo France.50 Charles X’s coronation, which the monarch called an “act of rectification” (“oeuvre de réparation”), was meant to reinstate royalty fully and to reconnect the modern Bourbons to sacred traditions of the monarchy—in his words, to “heal the last wounds of the Revolution” (“fermer les dernières plaies de la Révolution”).51 References to divine right therefore abounded, for

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48 Two examples are the Le seul homme de la famille (Rosset, Un siècle d’histoire de France, 83–84); and “Si j’avois ce qui te manque!” (ibid., 85). Unsurprisingly, royalists invoked the young duchess of Berry, mother of the heir to the throne, as a kind of counterweight to the gendered disorder and infertility of the royal family. Jo Burr Margadant shows, however, that the duchess’s symbolic status as mother was inexpertly and insufficiently exploited by the monarchy. See Margadant, “The Duchesse de Berry,” 31.


example, in the use of holy oil to anoint the king (supposedly some of
the original oil miraculously brought from heaven to Clovis in the fifth
century), and in the ensuing royal visit to the sick. The day after the
Sacre, the king visited the scrofulous in the hospital, pronouncing the
old formula, “Le Roi te touche, Dieu te guérisse.”

Charles X’s revival of the ritual of holy consecration of the sacre
in conspicuously lavish and traditional form, however, automatically
made it available as a medium of protest. Debate focused on the tension
between constitutionalism and divine right that the sacre evoked. The
event was therefore both indicative and provoking of a political crisis
for the monarchy. The ceremony’s traditional references and expense,
combined with Charles X’s Ultra politics, were bound to incur the ire
of the opposition. Indeed, in the months before and in years after the
sacre, the event became a screen for the projection and articulation of
all sorts of political opinions.

The royal body in spectacle, casting the king’s body as the body
politic, is a dangerous tactic in times of crisis, making that body the
easy target of attack. As Sheryl Kroen has demonstrated, increasing
attacks on royal imagery demonstrated popular rejection of the notion
of the king’s divinity, from the defacement of royal effigies on coins,
to etchings in trees and cookies in the shape of Charles X’s head.
Oppositional response can also be perceived in Augustin Jal’s pamphlet
satirizing Gérard’s painting of the sacre, a treatment that makes good
again the conflation of the king and images of the king: lampooning
Gérard’s pretentious painting meant attacking under cover of aesthetic
concerns an overbearing, Jesuitic, and costly king. Indeed, the oppor-
tunity for such reversal of intended effect was so rich that it continued
to be exploited well beyond the historical moment, as in this astonish-
ing passage written in 1927: “The monarchy, the old absolute monarchy,
appeared that day like a dressed-up and galvanized cadaver. The lily

52 Ibid., 103.
53 The Chambers voted a budget of 6 million francs for Charles’s sacre. Significantly, there
was a concurrent revival of interest in the Fronde among liberal historians, as in Augustin Thierry’s
Histoire de la Fronde, published in 1827. See Stanley Mellon, The Political Uses of History; A Study of
54 See Kroen, Politics and Theater, 221–27. Kroen notes that popular protest began in the-
aters throughout France in 1825, the year of both the sacre and the controversial Sacrele Law,
which covered crimes against God and king.
55 Gérard’s work, a highly publicized production by the famed first painter to the king, had
originally been anticipated at the Salon of 1827–28, where Delacroix unveiled his Sardanapalus.
See A. Jal, Le peuple au sacre. Critiques, observations, causeries, faites devant le tableau de M. le Baron
famous verses satirizing the coronation, entitled “Coronation of Charles the Simple,” are reprinted
in English translation in John Hall Stewart, The Restoration Era in France: 1814–1830 (Princeton,
in its final splendor exhaled its last perfume, like a cut flower plunged into a Sèvres vase filled with holy water; superb, it was already dead.”  

The ritualized sacred body becomes a sweetly rotting cadaver in times of crisis.

The lavish “overcoding” (to borrow Christopher Prendergast’s term) of Charles X’s 

sacre conjured up earlier images of him as the infamous young comte d’Artois, flagrant libertine and profligate. That his debauched past retained political currency in the Restoration was made clear in a popular print that appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution of 1830 (fig. 10). Three panels depict the king’s three faces “before, during, after” the Restoration, exposing the turncoat nature of Charles’s new Jesuitical image, as contrasted with his older voluptuary self.

56 Garnier, 

Le sacre de Charles X, 134.  

57 Since censorship was at its strictest at this point, and in general Charles’s reign brought tight, centralized control over anything having to do with the king’s person and authority, there were fewer published caricatures of Charles X than of Louis XVIII. Most of the caricatures of Charles X date to right after the July Revolution of 1830. The difference may also be accounted for by the late introduction of censorship of caricatures. According to Robert Goldstein, caricature was completely free of censorship from 1814 to 1820, as drawings were not included in censorship laws until 1820. Furthermore, until 1817, there was no required licensing of lithographic printers (although all other printers were), and no required dépôt légal of lithographic prints (although all other types of prints had been required to be legally deposited since 1793)! Of course, outlawed prints were also smuggled in from England after 1820. See Goldstein, 

Censorship of Political Caricature, 99–118.
Death Knell

Indeed (notes a witness), romantics, classics, colorists, draftsmen, young scribblers of caricatures and sketches, old artists coiffed in extravagant ancien régime fashion [à l’oiseau royal], all bow respectfully before M. Devéria’s composition.

Anon.

It is nonetheless unanimously agreed that the worst painting is M. de Lacroix’s Sardanapalus.

D. L.

The painting is a mistake.

Etienne-Jean Delécluze

In the end, it is not surprising that the Restoration regime would seek to revive the Old Regime’s trappings and systems of belief. What is interesting in this attempt at “resacralization” is the contrast between the fiction of continuity and the actuality of transformation, a transformation implicitly embraced by Delacroix’s Sardanapalus. If, as Jeffrey Merrick has shown, the seventeenth century had given rise to the notion that subjects do not have to obey a ruler corrupted by his passions, then Delacroix’s flamboyant display of such passions could rightly be interpreted as a challenge to royal authority, particularly in the problematic context of the Restoration.58

Yet the delicate balance of acceptability might have been maintained had not a crowd-pleasing painting, Devéria’s Birth of Henri IV, made explicit the subtexts of the Sardanapalus. The contrast is far more than one of life and death, though: the ambiguity of Delacroix’s painting, its clear suggestion of the problematic royal body, gave the lie to Devéria’s more celebratory image of a royal birthing scene. Devéria’s painting also presents the symbiotic relationship between monarchy and the people that royalists so desired. As Jeanne and Henri d’Albret rejoice over the birth, crowds of common folk invade the room, mixing with members of the court in the background. This mixing of popular and elite, of high art and popular pictorial effects, is vastly different from the depressing subject of a king committing suicide because his subjects are rebelling against his tyranny. With its kneeling shepherd, prominently displayed in the center foreground amid a multitude of other genuflecting admirers, Devéria’s painting furthermore drew on the iconography of the most sacred of births, echoing scenes of the adoration of the Christ child.

In its image of failed masculine authority, Delacroix’s painting re-

fers by inversion to the revived concept of the king as the père des Français, and to related popular images that take up issues of paternity and dynasty. As Lynn Hunt has shown, the family romance of state authority is connected to a broader political imaginary, one clearly and visibly active in Delacroix’s painting. No wonder that the state arts administration and savvy art critics preferred a painting that shows the birth of another ruler, Henri IV, the founder of the Bourbon dynasty: first Bourbon king, unifier of the French after long civil wars, a popular king, and, by the nineteenth century, famed for his virility. Henri contrasted well with Sardanapalus, last Assyrian king, immoral coward, perverted and effeminate voluptuary. In Devéria’s work, the baby Henri is held high as his mother falls back with fatigue; yet what seemed to be the origins of something grand for the Bourbons, might have been, in the end, its death knell: the literal representation of the physical origins of monarchy. Delacroix’s celebration of fleshy excess worked in concert with caricatures of the French monarch, which featured the king’s gout and gourmandise, to invoke a shadowy after-image of the guillotine, the ultimate symbol of the king’s earthly body and the end of dynasty (see fig. 6). Far better to choose the symbol of the Bourbons’ origins and self-defense than he who potentially figured its misrule. Small wonder, too, that the Sardanapalus was passed over for official purchase in 1828, that Charles’s minister asked for it to be removed from prominent exhibition, and that the critics marginalized it as a singular error that could not, and should not, have offspring.

59 For Henri IV’s special status during the Restoration, see Waquet, Les fêtes royales, 136–37.