

THE MEDICI FAMILY

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The Medici stiletto heels; poisoned gloves; donkey urine, The Flying Squadron, a dead goat, a giant music box and getting pointers on how to conceive a child from your husband's mistress,

I chose Catherine de Medici as the subject for this paper.

First, I want to thank Chris Bandemer for sharing his book on the House of Medici, Liz Toole, Joan Goldner and Adie Baach for being helpful on so many levels and surely, my wife for letting me spend so much time with a woman like Catherine and all those who made suggestions on pronouncing Medici or Meedeeche. I chose to pronounce it Medici....

The Medici dynasty started in the 13th century and became one of the most powerful of all European dynasties. They ruled Florence for more than 300 years. Their influence in banking and art was enormous

and their influence can be seen everywhere in Florence and throughout the region. The streets of Florence are named after family members.

Catherine was born in Italy but became the 16th century Queen of France. Her story is one of being born a woman at a time when only crafty, backdoor ways to power would work. But she crushed the challenges the only way she knew how: by manipulating everyone in her sight in whatever way necessary to bend to her will and to do her bidding. She watched and waited and absorbed as much knowledge as she could. The history of women and of Catherine, is a history of oppression, but also one of resilience and determination and one could say of her: "Nevertheless she persisted,"

She was described as a dark, sinister figure, nourished on the subtle, political philosophy of Machiavelli, surrounded by her scheming Italian courtiers, her magicians and seers: her secret cabinets filled with poisoned daggers, poisoned rings, and poisoned goblets; her castles replete with hidden staircases and terrible dungeons... and everywhere the heavy smell of evil." She was called an atheist, a murderer of

Huguenots. She was said to employ magicians and sorcerers; and was accused of defying the Pope; and selling France to her Italian hangerson. Her daughter-in-law, Mary Queen of Scots contemptuously referred to her as a "shop-keeper's daughter." It is said that her maternal skills were just as lacking as her wifely ones in rearing and loving her children. Those that survived into adulthood were all harmed by her manipulation, favoritism, neglect and downright abuse. Some accounts of Catherine are a bit kinder, but she was thought of as the ultimate climber and conniver.

She was born in 1519 to Duke Lorenzo de Medici, the ruler of Florence. Her mother, Madeline was described as pretty, gracious, virtuous, and wise. She seemed destined for a life of ease and luxury but three weeks after her birth, her father was dead from consumption, Her mother died just 10 days later. She was then an orphan and was raised in one convent after another but found the experience a happy one. She was fluent in Latin, Greek, and French, and she was accomplished in mathematics.

With her father gone Catherine became nobility. She was the daughter of a duke, but without an official princess title. She was also the niece of a Pope who had sufficient assets for an impressive dowry. But the pope died. His successor refused to pay Catherine's dowry, leaving King Francis, her future father-in-law, with a semi-noble daughter-in-law who couldn't deliver the gold. "She came to me naked," he said. A marriage was arranged by her uncle, Pope Clement VII, looking to establish the Medici power in France. Catherine was no beauty according to Renaissance standards. She had bulgy eyes and facial puffiness, her mouth was too big and she was short and thin. In spite of her lack of beauty, the marriage took place in October of 1533.

Catherine insisted on wearing stilettos at her wedding to make her appear taller. They were both only 14 years old, but Henry had a mistress. his thirty-five-year-old mistress, Diane de Poitiers, who had met Henry when he was seven years old. This was just the beginning of Catherine's lifelong challenge to hold on to power. Diane, in sharp contrast to Catherine was

considered beautiful. She thought so too and often sat for naked or topless paintings.

All Catherine needed to do was to produce an heir. That effort began immediately. On the wedding night, Henry's father stayed in the bedroom until the marriage was fully consummated. He described the wedding night activities as "impressive jousting." The pope visited the couple the next morning to bless the proceedings of the night before. It didn't help. Catherine tried multiple ways to conceive a child, including rest and exercise and even drinking donkey urine, and using antler horns and cow dung in ways that are best left to the imagination. Catherine even spied on her husband as he entertained his lover by cutting holes in the floor of her bedroom so she could observe their activities below. Eventually they realized the problem wasn't Catherine's but Henry's who was diagnosed with a condition which made insemination difficult.

In desperation Catherine sought advice from Diane on ways of producing an heir. Diane was totally cooperative and became a kind of

sexual midwife for the couple, offering suggestions including certain positions that might be helpful. Diane knew lots of ways. It worked so well that by 1544, they had a son, Francis. At last she had performed the miracle that had been expected of her; she had given birth not only to a child but to a male child, a fact of unparalleled importance in a country where the law prohibited women from the throne. Francis was the first of 10 children, three of whom died in infancy. The others were notoriously sickly.

Her children's ill health would provide Catherine with endless opportunities to meddle in the country's affairs when they came to power.

By 1547, Catherine's husband was crowned King Henry II, King of France and she was his Queen, but for 12 more years she endured the pervasive power of Diane. Diane wasn't just an imposing political influence on Henry; she wrote his official correspondence and sometimes signed their names together as "Henry Diane." She was with the King in

all his triumphs, keeping her place yet claiming power far beyond what Catherine could boast. Diane acted as his closest adviser. She was provided subsidies the treasury could ill afford. If Catherine had a social event, Diane got to be co-hostess. If Catherine wanted a fancy chateau, he gave it to Diane. Henry gave Diane the crown jewels which she wore, not in defiance, but as her right. Diane got the gold mine; Catherine got the shaft.

Diane, however, was shrewd enough to recognize that such love is rarely lasting and set about to make herself indispensable in more practical ways. She busied herself to an extraordinary degree with the royal children. It was Diane who attended their births, supervised their nurses, concerned herself with their illnesses. For Catherine, the ubiquitous presence of her husband's mistress must have bit deeply into her pride. In moments of reflection she too had to be thinking: "There are three of us in this marriage, so it is a bit crowded." But Henry, in his infatuation, saw nothing but the limitless goodness of the woman he

adored. He gave her an outright gift of more than 5,000 pounds in "gratitude for the good and commendable services which she was performing for 'our dear and well-beloved Queen.' When Catherine fell ill with scarlet fever, which was often fatal, and becoming perilously close to death, Diane never left her. When she recovered the doctors assured her it was Diane's unflagging intelligence and constant care that saved her life. For Catherine it was a burden of gratitude that weighed on her like lead.

With Diane taking care of business, Catherine had free time to indulge her own passions. She collected art and became an active patron of the arts, introducing ballet, music and other theatrical performances to the court.

She brought her perfumer with her from Italy and kicked off a perfumed Florentine leather gloves trend that caught on immediately. She invented underpants for horseback riding so that when being helped from a side saddle, a lady's modesty would not be compromised. She

cultivated a 300 woman team of spies called "The Flying Squadron," sometimes referred to as her "stable of whores," and deployed them to seduce men, extract intelligence from them, report on all the inside gossip heard at parties and report back to her. One of her favorite techniques was throwing parties where food was served on topless women. Keeping abreast of one of the most common causes of death in France, she had a room built with hundreds of secret compartments where she was said to keep poisons and devices and methods for dispensing them to do away with those she felt threatened by or those she simply disliked. She had arranged for her daughter Margaret to be kidnapped while attending a family banquet and had her imprisoned for more than 17 years. She disowned her and withdrew her inheritance as punishment for her extramarital escapades that embarrassed the court and especially Catherine and her brother who later became King Henry III. When she and her lover were caught in one of those escapades, they were pulled from Margaret's bed, her hair was torn from her head and

she was brutally beaten. Then they murdered her lover. At the same time Catherine is said to have ignored an incestuous relationship among her children.

The wedding of the eldest daughter, Elizabeth to Phillip II of Spain was an elaborate affair during a week devoted to celebrations of every kind. During the celebrations, King Henry II, received a massive brain infection from a gruesome accident. During a jousting contest his opponents lance, by freak timing, pierced the king's helmet and penetrated his brain. Diane paced the corridors, knowing that when he died her place and glory would perish with him. As he lay dying, he begged to see Diane, the only woman he had ever loved, but Catherine denied his final request. He died, ten days later and Catherine immediately took possession of the crown jewels and the chateau which had been given to Diane and banished Diane and her friends from the courts. Then she ordered her husband's jousting partner murdered. She began viewing thrones and crowns as if they were merchandise to be bargained

for. That is when her Machiavellian personality came more evidently into view.

Finally, Catherine could rule more directly by dominating her sickly children. With the death of the King, her 16 year old son Francis II, was crowned and her long reign of power, control and manipulation would begin in earnest. Francis came into power the day after his father's death, quickly mobilizing with his bride of 15 months, Mary Queen of Scots, who was said to easily dominate and manipulate him. The thought of assuming the crown threw him into literal terror, Nothing had prepared him for the kingship thrust on him so suddenly. But mother always held the reins unofficially, and young Francis relied on her heavily and began every official act with the phrase, "This being the good pleasure of the Queen, my lady- mother." His reign was shortened by his death from an ear infection that had gone to his brain just 16 months after becoming King. Catherine acted quickly and assumed the governorship of France on the same day. She needed to

clear a path for her next son, Charles IX, to ascend the throne. Charles at nine years of age was still young enough to cry at his own coronation. At that age he was fairly indifferent to ruling which gave Catherine yet another opportunity to assume control.

Between 1560 to 1570 Catherine witnessed the first of three civil wars but she worked tirelessly in her desperate struggle against the Catholic extremists for the independence of the crown, and to attempt peace between Catholics and Protestants,

But France had become increasingly divided between Catholics and Protestants. Catherine believed that a marriage between her daughter Margaret, a Catholic, and Henry, a Protestant, who would later become King Henry IV, would cement peace between the two religions. The marriage was encouraged by Catholic preachers, but the Protestants were horrified at the thought of a marriage of a Catholic princess to a Protestant. Jeanne de Albert, the mother of the groom, resisted the match, insulting Catherine's bloodthirsty history and remarking that Catherine

"eats little children." In spite of the opposition to the marriage, and without having received permission from the Pope, or the approval of Margaret, the marriage took place on August 18, 1572.

Many of the most wealthy and prominent Protestants including Admiral Coligny, the Protestant leader, had gathered in the largely Catholic Paris to witness the wedding. A few days after the wedding, a failed attempt on Coligny's life put the city in a state of apprehension, as both visiting Protestant Huguenots and Parisian Catholics feared an attack by the other. On August 24th, the Duke of Guise, the Catholic leader, moved to avenge his father, Francis, who was assassinated by the Admiral. In revenge Admiral Coligny was murdered in his palace lodgings. His body was thrown through a window into the streets where Parisians mutilated the corpse and threw it into the Seine. The mob action then erupted into a systematic slaughter of Huguenots.

Over the next few weeks, the disorder spread to more cities and across France where it continued purge-like into the autumn months.

Finally, an exhausted Paris had grown quiet, although sporadic killing and looting continued. As the still evening air finally settled over the city, the stench of dead bodies became unbearable. The signs of destruction were everywhere. Looted shops stood empty, windows were broken, doors were swinging useless on their hinges. The Seine was murky with blood and was dotted with bodies of men, women and children. Dozens lay grotesquely naked across its banks, Thieves had stripped the bodies as soon as they fell. Paris was a morgue. Deaths across France varied in numbers from five thousand to thirty thousand. It was the work of a people gone mad, from which France would not recover for years.

Shortly after the wedding, King Henry IV's mother, Jeanne de Albert was found dead. Rumors circulated that her death was caused by poisoned Florentine leather gloves. Gloves given her by none other than Catherine.

If the marriage was intended to reduce tensions between the two religions, it did little for the unity of the marriage. Henry and

Margaret were repeatedly unfaithful to each other and the collapse of their marriage led to their estrangement and living apart.

The Bartholomew Day Massacre became arguably the largest stain on Catherine's reputation. Catherine had become a portrait of a cruel and treacherous Florentine.

In the aftermath of the massacre, King Charles's, fragile mental and physical health weakened dramatically. His moods swung from boasting about the massacre to exclaiming that the screams of the murdered Huguenots kept ringing in his ears. Frantically he alternately blamed himself or his mother: "Who but you are the cause of all of this. God's blood, you are the cause of it all." Catherine responded by declaring that she had a lunatic for a son. Charles IX died from pleurisy at 24. Rumors circulated that Catherine had a hand in his demise because she wanted her favorite son, Henry, to ascend to the throne. Henry III was described as a hard-working administrator and a strong

proponent of a centralized state. He was thought of as a refined and cultivated Renaissance prince but in a crude and brutal society.

Catherine proudly proclaimed when he took the throne; " I am sure that there has never been nor will there ever be so wise a king as my son, Henry." In fact, the "wise" king had already begun to play the fool.

Henry was facing considerable opposition, being denounced for tyranny, heresy, and sexual depravity. Many of his contemporaries expressed disgust with his personal conduct, especially his love of wearing excessive jewelry, and by occasionally dressing in feminine apparel. His behavior often supported their opposition. Catherine had planned an extravagant celebration for Henry to proclaim his successes as King.

Actually, there were no successes to proclaim. For the celebration, Henry arrived dressed in a pink and silver damask gown, his throat covered with strings of pearls, the enormous sleeves of his gown embroidered with emeralds and pearls. His emerald and diamond earrings were so heavy his earlobes distended almost to his shoulders.

His hair was powdered violet so that in the dusk it seemed as though fireflies had been caught and imprisoned there. He dazzled even more than he knew, for as he walked through the ballroom the gold and silver chains ornamenting his dress jangled until the King seemed like some giant music box that someone had set playing and released to the room, but that in short time would wear itself out. Attending to business didn't interest him; his time was given to his collection of monkeys, his miniature dogs and his wild ass. He was especially intrigued by a dwarf, no bigger than a child of three, which had been sent to him as a gift from Poland. By comparison with these things, he found the affairs of his kingdom to be of little interest. He was more attentive to the trappings of power than to its substance, and he lost the sympathies of powerful elements by his aloofness and by the favors he conferred on a group of handsome young men with whom he indulged in questionable excesses. Above all, he was so extravagant that his Kingdom was virtually bankrupt. He came to be the most despised King of France. He was

described as ruthless and as mean as his mother. Public opinion was so against him, that when he was murdered by a subject who stabbed him, France was overjoyed, calling his murder a grateful act of God.

Upon Henry's death, the dynasty that had occupied the French throne since 1328 came to an end. At the end, Catherine lost, and having staked everything, she lost everything. None of her children ruled Europe. Five of her children were dead. Margaret was still imprisoned. Henry III, alone wore a crown, yet it could hardly be said that he was even capable of ruling, None of her children had produced a male heir. What, she asked would happen to France? Her son-in-law, Henry IV, in spite of being estranged from Margaret became King of France. As a Protestant King, relations between Catholics and Protestants were somewhat improved but Catherines's culpability in the St. Bartholemew's Day Massacre was not forgotten and will be long debated, The Massacre, has not been relegated to the dustbin of history,

On the 23rd of August 1997, Pope John Paul II, issued a statement

on the massacre while he was in Paris. He made the following comments to a group of young people attending a World Youth

Celebration: "On the eve of August 24, 1572 we cannot forget the sad massacre of St. Bartholemew's Day, an event of every obscure causes in the political and religious history of France. Christians did things which the Gospel condemns. I am convinced that only forgiveness offered and received, leads little by little to a fruitful dialogue, which will in turn ensure a fully Christian reconciliation. Belonging to different religious traditions must not constitute a source of opposition and tension. On the contrary, our common love for Christ compels us to seek tirelessly the path of full unity." He proposed no travel ban.

Catherine de Medici died in 1589 virtually alone. She was only sixty- nine years old. It is a bitter fact of history, that sometimes the harsh outlines of persons and events are softened, but history has not been kind to Catherine, attributing to her more evils than any single person could possibly have caused.

Catherine died without anyone concerning themselves with either her sickness or her death, any more than if she were the most worthless person in the kingdom. She was not spoken of any more than if she were a dead goat. In Paris the news of her death was received with elation. The citizens marched through the streets, waving lighted torches. The Huguenots were equally triumphant, lighting bonfires and "adoring the judgment of God" against the wicked Queen, There were cries that her body be thrown into the common sewers. She was buried in a temporary tomb.

The cultivated Florentine, the faithful wife, the persistent negotiator disappeared behind the legend of the Sinister Queen. Catherine's official cause of death was pleurisy but the word on the street and throughout the royal court was that the real cause was maternal disappointment.

Is it wrong to cast Catherine de Medici as a Machiavellian matriarch whose ambition eclipsed her children's happiness? But is it equally wrong

to paint her as a passive pawn of circumstance? She went from an orphaned Italian prisoner of war to a fertility-challenged Queen Mother to her three sons, who successively became Kings of France. Two of her daughters married Kings and another married a Duke, Whatever Catherine may have done, whatever scandal she may have caused, and however she may have done it, of her it can surely be said: "Nevertheless she persisted."