

Queen of the Fork

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It is a presumptuous thing to attempt a paper on any historical topic before a membership so generously populated with distinguished - one might say, renowned - academicians as a club like ours. But papers on the Medicis were called for by the evening's host... and that means a choice between history and art. I chose history.

I have focused upon a member of this storied clan whom I find particularly fascinating, not so much because of her role in history, which was indeed an important one, but more because of the sensational life she lived. I will seek the safer high ground of colorful incident and anecdotes about her life, and do her the injustice of sidestepping her significant role in the politics, diplomacy, wars and intrigue of her day.

Learned Scholars of History, and there are many of you out there, bear with me... It is already apparent to you that I am writing about Catherine Maria Romula de Medici, born on April 13, 1519, and destined to be one of the most remarkable queens in a century that also boasts of Elizabeth I of England, Mary Tudor, Mary Queen of Scots, and assorted female monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire.

Catherine was born into a relatively minor branch of the Medicis, at a time when the Medici fortunes were in decline. Her father Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, and her mother, the French Countess Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, both died within weeks of her birth, leaving the infant girl unprotected in a tempestuous time during which the Medicis were exiled from their Florence base of power and struggling to make a comeback. As a young child, she was in very real physical danger during riots in Florence led by anti-Medici interests, and she spent her early years hidden in the protection of a succession of convents before her uncle Pope Clement VII took an interest in her and moved her to his court in Rome.

Contemporary reporters agree that Catherine was no great beauty. The Medicis all had too-strong, almost ugly features... and Catherine's bulging eyes and aquiline nose were common to the Medici clan. But she was tall, graceful, and in her youth she had a very fine figure, which never hurts!

Clement saw Catherine as a bargaining chip in the great international game of noble and royal matchmaking, and a likely prospect for advancing his interests. She was considered for Henry VIII's illegitimate son the Duke of Richmond, for King James V of Scotland, and for various

noble prospects proposed by Holy Roman Emperor Charles. And then an illustrious deal was struck with Francis I, King of France, for Catherine to marry his second son Henry, Duke of Orleans. Catherine would bring with her a massive dowry made up of inherited Medici wealth, as well as papal gifts of jewels, money, and various duchies such as Pisa, Parma, Genoa and Milan.

Catherine's future husband had led an even more troubled childhood than she. When his father King Francis I was taken captive while fighting the Spanish Imperial army in the Battle of Pavia, he offered as ransom for his release his two young royal sons, the Dauphin and his younger brother Henry as hostages. They were held in severe prison-like conditions in a succession of bleak Spanish castles for four and a half years before being redeemed and released back to their royal family and France. Inevitably, it left a mark on the boys.

In an age of spectacle and grandeur, Catherine and Henry's wedding in Marseilles was simply fabulous. Catherine was brought to Marseilles by Clement in a fleet of eighteen galleys. A papal visit alone would have occasioned a full-blown state extravaganza... but when combined with a royal wedding, there were no limits to the exorbitant magnificence. There were costumes, jewelry, jousting, balls, mock naval battles and grandeur that beggared description. Prized among the jewels were enormous pear shaped pearls which Catherine later gave to Mary Queen of Scots... and which subsequently became - through a painful turn of events - the prized property of Elizabeth I who wore them "without a blush." They are now among the Crown Jewels.

The festivities were often raucous and at one point became an orgy with noble women dipping their breasts in goblets of wine and presenting them to the eager gentlemen. And when the appointed time came for the consummation, the couple - both fourteen years old - was attended at the bridal bed by King Francis who reported with satisfaction that "each had shown valour in the joust."

But Catherine would be beset with troubles throughout her life in France. In the first place she was Italian... known to the French as an inferior people of conspirators, assassins and poisoners. Second, she was not of royal blood and in the eyes of many, no better than the merchant class. Third, it soon became clear that Clement was going to have real difficulty honoring his dowry commitments (he eventually defaulted on most of them). Fourth, there was Henry's lifelong preference for his mistress Diane de Poitiers. Fifth and most of all, Catherine was apparently barren - unable to produce a royal heir.

This combination of problems made Catherine an easy target in an extremely political royal court. Her strategy was to endear herself to the King as an attentive and devoted daughter-in-law, and thereby establish herself as a royal favorite. They had many shared interests, particularly, art. Catherine came from a family that was perhaps the Renaissance's greatest patron of the arts. And Francis was no slouch in this regard. Among the many artists he supported was Leonardo whom he brought to France for a number of years... and Leonardo brought with him his Mona Lisa which stayed behind in France when he returned to Italy.

At this juncture, Henry's older brother, the Dauphin, died suddenly after a particularly vigorous game of tennis on a hot day. While there was no evidence of wrongdoing, the royal prince had died and someone had to pay. Suspicion focused on his aide, an Italian nobleman (and therefore likely a poisoner). The poor man was lashed by his arms and legs to four horses and, before the entire court, torn to shreds as they galloped off in different directions. And now Henry was Dauphin, Catherine the Dauphine, and the lack of an heir became a critical matter.

There was an active campaign to repudiate Catherine's marriage, but this was resisted by Francis who seems to have genuinely responded to his Medici daughter-in-law's attentiveness and many gestures of friendship. But when Henry fathered a child in a casual encounter (not with Diane de Poitiers), proving it was not his problem, the pressures on Catherine doubled and redoubled. Every known cure was tried. Catherine drank vast quantities of mule urine. Alchemists concocted a poultice of ground stag's antlers and cow dung applied liberally to her vagina (it is a tribute to Henry that he could stand to the task at all). She cut a hole in the floor of her chamber at Fontainebleau through which she could study Henry and Diane at play in the bedroom below - apparently this was a revelation in technique for her.

At long last a doctor named Jean Fernel was consulted: he found abnormalities in both Henry's and Catherine's sexual organs and counseled a new technique to overcome the problem. History is silent on what specifically he recommended, and this is a great loss to medical science, for after ten years barren, Catherine conceived almost immediately and went on to bear the first of ten children.

But there was always Diane de Poitiers, Henry's lifelong obsession, though nineteen years his senior. The relationship was completely open. Diane was at all times present at court, she sat beside Henry and Catherine on state occasions, Henry wore her colours at grand public events, and showered jewels, gifts, and chateaux upon her (most notably, Chenonceaux). During the

controversy over repudiating Catherine's marriage to Henry, Diane actually took Catherine's side, fearing that a new bride for Henry might undermine her position as his favorite.

Catherine, who truly loved her husband, chose for years to look straight ahead and bear the indignity: there is no record of open disagreement with Henry on the matter. Years later, however, she wrote to a confidante, "If I made good cheer for Madame de Valentinois (Diane) it was the King that I was really entertaining, and besides I always let him know that I was acting against the grain, for never did a woman who loved her husband love his whore."

Her father in law King Francis was of no help to Catherine: he had a lifelong mistress of his own at court, Madame d'Etampe, to whom he was as devoted as Henry was to Diane. Neither Francis nor Henry could refuse their mistresses anything as the two women jockeyed for influence. Father and son showered gifts of jewels, properties, and place at court upon them. They loathed one another. Catherine floated between the two, maintaining relations with both as best she could. A crushing indignity came when Diane assumed responsibility for the care of Catherine and Henry's steadily growing brood of royal children.

And then in 1547 Francis I, King of France, died. Henry, the Dauphin since his brother's death, became Henry II, King of France, and his Dauphine Catherine, daughter of a Florentine merchant family, was Queen. She was ever a loyal queen to her king, and it is gratifying that she grew steadily in his regard throughout their reign, often serving as regent for him when he was off at war... though she never replaced Diane as his favorite.

Perhaps her greatest triumph was the marriage of her daughter Elizabeth to Philip, King of Spain and pride of the Hapsburgs... a splendid catch! This was another royal marriage of the greatest conceivable splendour, though Philip declined to come to Paris for the wedding, sending instead the Duke of Alba as his proxy. "Custom demands that the kings of Spain should not go to fetch their wives but that these should be brought to them," Philip remarked. Nevertheless, France displayed every possible grandeur, ritual, elegance and extravagance at its command.

The consummation was curious: After the marriage ceremony at Notre Dame, Elizabeth and Alba climbed into a huge state bed, each with one leg naked. Their bare limbs touched, they rubbed their feet together, and consummation was declared.

There followed five days of celebratory jousting, which Henry loved above all else, and at which he excelled, always wearing Diane's colours. The night preceding the third day of jousts,

Catherine was seized with foreboding and implored her King not to tilt that day... a caution he waved off. But with the whole court watching from the stands, Henry was critically wounded in his eye by a large splinter from a shattered lance. He was borne away to the Chateau de Tournelles, where every medical expert was brought to treat him. But they really did not know how to proceed. They brought the heads of four convicts who had been beheaded that day to the King's chamber, and experimented with these at the foot of the King's bed, but to no avail. Catherine was disconsolate and grieved miserably as her King declined over the next two days and finally succumbed. In a very human act of vengeance, she did not permit Diane de Poitiers to visit her dying lover.

So, Catherine's royal life entered a new phase, as Queen Mother rather than Queen, and as regent for her son, King Francis II... who would be followed to the throne by two more of her sons - three kings of France in all – not a bad achievement for the daughter of Florentine merchants! And now we leave Catherine and her royal responsibilities, and we will gracefully sidestep the controversy surrounding her role in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of the Huguenots. For she left other important marks on French culture which are well worth noting...

True to her Medici heritage, Catherine brought with her to France an Italianate love of nice things... art, architecture, and (especially) cuisine. Those of us who love French cuisine have much for which to thank her!

Dismayed at the poor quality of French cooking, eating and table service, she declared that her personal well-being absolutely demanded significant gastronomic improvement. She brought from Florence a retinue of cooks and pastrymen who were well schooled in the subtleties of Renaissance cooking. At that time French meals - even at Court - were largely stew-like mixtures of ingredients drawn from a limited assortment of meats - mostly game and fowl - and root vegetables... all cooked together, and often eaten with the fingers, or slurped directly from a bowl.

This would not do for Catherine. Her staff of chefs introduced the French to such varied items as Parmesan cheese, aspics, sweetbreads, artichokes, truffles, liver creinettes, quenelles of poultry, duck l'orange, onion soup, pasta, macarons, ice cream, and zabagliones. Some hold that her most important contribution was establishing veal in its many glorious variations as a basic ingredient of French cuisine.

She required that salty foods be served separately from sweet foods - the French had formerly mixed them together - and insisted that the sweets should follow salted foods, at the end of the meal.

She not only wanted better food... she required better service. She brought from Italy beautiful glazed dishes... Venetian crystal glassware... lovely silver ornaments for the table by Cellini... and - most revolutionary of all - the fork as a preferred instrument for bringing these wonderful foodstuffs to one's mouth. The fork was not an instantaneous success, however, and there was widespread resistance to its use for a full century before it was generally accepted by the French. The Church was particularly outspoken in its disapproval of this heathenish device from Italy, and a number of prelates railed against it from their pulpits.

Among her more controversial innovations, Catherine wanted ladies to dine with gentlemen, and before she was through, women were seen as particularly gratifying ornaments and highly desirable companions at the table.

Catherine was committed to fine banqueting. At a dinner in 1549 for fifty guests, she served thirty peacocks, thirty three pheasants, twenty-one swans, twenty cranes, sixty-six guinea fowl, thirty capons, ninety-nine quail, an assortment of hares, rabbits and pork, accompanied by sixty salads and twenty-six sweet courses.

She made other lasting improvements in French life, beyond the table. She was a dedicated horsewoman who rode bravely, taking her falls and remounting like a man. But she scorned the chair-like contrivance on which French ladies awkwardly rode, and she brought from Italy a radical innovation, the sidesaddle.

She was an innovator in ladies' fashion, too... introducing to the Court the concept of corseted small waists (for which centuries of suffering hour-glass-waisted women would curse her)... as well as heeled ladies' footwear - perhaps the first high heels. And under the skirts, she introduced a version of pantaloons... the very first ladies' underwear to conceal the nether regions.

She was a true Medici in her devotion to the arts and architecture: among her finest accomplishments was her work designing and decorating her palace of the Tuileries. And she is credited with mounting in 1581 the first performance of ballet.

It seems mean-spirited to suggest that a woman who overcame so many challenges and obstacles, who rose from merchant's daughter to queen, who mothered three kings of France, who may have played a pivotal role in the massacre of thousands of Huguenots (this is not clear) should be best remembered for her contributions to the pleasures of the table. But some would say she created the pleasures of the table which many of us hold dear to this day. Some of us, a little too dear. Surely, this was a form of artistic expression worthy of her Medici heritage. And so, Queen of the Fork, we salute you!

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In preparing this paper I have drawn heavily upon the biography Catherine de Medici by Leonie Frieda, April Blood by Lauro Martines, Encyclopedia Britannica, Le Cuisinier Francois by La Varenne (1652), Caterina de Medici by Annamaria Volpi and various unnamed Wikipedia sources.

