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renaissance drama, c.1590–c.1640**

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**Staging the Medici:  
The Medici Family in English Renaissance Drama, c. 1590 – c. 1640**

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In 1974, T. S. R. Boase published an article entitled “The Medici in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama” in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, which argued that representation of the family was widespread in the drama of the period. Starting from the appearance of Catherine de’ Medici in Marlowe’s *Massacre at Paris*, he traced the appearance of members of the Medici family in a number of Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline plays spanning half a century or so. Boase’s valuable study did not, however, take account of the fact that a number of plays by the Caroline dramatist John Ford register a debt to some of the more overtly Medici plays which he identified and also show other, independent signs of Medici influence. I want to start with two of the plays which Boase did consider, and then move on to the Caroline dramatist John Ford, whom he did not, to argue that representation of the Medici family is a concern of a number of plays, sometimes but not always in ways which are in tune with the family’s own agenda, and that plays which represent the Medici are often particularly interested in contrasts between blackness and whiteness and in the question of appropriate female behaviour. First, though, I want to contextualise the representation of the Medici on the stage within what we can glean of the period’s overall cultural awareness of them.

It is hard to know how much awareness English Renaissance dramatists might have had of particulars of Medici history, though the Medici were certainly an important cultural influence in general: both the Earl of Leicester’s garden at Kenilworth and Lord Burghley’s at Theobalds, for instance, were heavily influenced by Medici gardens (Martyn 2008: 104, 169, and 179). Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610) also registers a general awareness of the importance of the family, when Mammon says to Doll

The house of Valois, just, had such a nose.  
And such a forehead, yet, the Medici  
Of Florence boast.

(IV.i.58-60)

More specifically, Boase suggests that “Something perhaps was known of Cosimo’s upbringing in the country by his pious mother, Maria Salviati, of his grief for his duchess, Eleonora of Toledo, and the fears of his court, in the end justified, that he might marry some unworthy mistress” (Boase 1974: 376), for the plot of Philip Massinger’s *The Great Duke of Florence* (1636) centres on Giovanni, whose mother was Duke Cosimo’s sister, and who will be his heir, and although Giovanni himself is all nobility he is led into lying when he supposes that the Duke desires his own beloved, Lidia, which might glance at the later career of Cosimo.

Perhaps most intriguingly, one important element of a number of plays featuring the Medici is a prevailing concern with blackness and whiteness. John Mason’s *The Turke* (1609), set in Florence though bearing little relation to any identifiable episode from the actual history of the city, features a eunuch and the Turkish lover of the Duchess, who is planning to offer the Turks a way into Christendom. I.iii opens with “a funerall in White, and bearers in white,” purporting to

be that of the good and beautiful Julia, to set against the blackness of the villains. Later, Mulleasses says

Be pleas'd ye powers of might, and bout me skip  
Your anticke measures: like to cole black moores,  
Dauncing their igh Lauoltos to the Sun  
Circle me round: and in the midst Ile stand  
And cracke my sides with laughter at your sports.

(sig. G1v)

Borgias develops the motif:

Ferrara, ha? true true, clap clap ye furies  
Dance your blacke rounds, and with your yron whips,  
Fetching eternall lashes as ye skip,  
Strike a loud sounding musicke through the aire  
And make the nights Queene pale to heare your noise.

(sigs H4r-v)

Finally, Borgias declares

But yet Timoclea liues, and may perhaps  
Escape her false loues hate: which if she do,  
This blacke nights horror falls like thunder on me:  
She must not liue till day: be euer darke.  
Stand night vpon the noonestead: and attend  
My fates security: if euer blacknes pleasd  
Or deedes to which men may resemble thee,  
Turne then thy sooty horse, and with their feete,  
Beate at the rising morne: & force the Sunne,  
Forbeare his lustre till this black deed's done.

(sig. H4v)

The same phenomenon can be observed in two plays which I shall be discussing at great length later: in Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), we have both a real and a pretend Moor, as Francesco, the Duke of Florence, blacks up, and in Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* (1633) we have a character named Bianca (the name in Ford's source was Maria), around whom the familiar oppositions of whiteness / blackness and chastity / foulness circulate. In James Shirley's 1635 play *The Traitor*, which tells the story of the assassination of Alessandro, the first Medici duke, the word "black" is used eight times in the text, invariably as a synonym for evil: "blacke and fatall omen" (sig. C1v), "blacke minute" (sig. C2v), "blacke intent" (sig. F2v), "black thoughts" (sig. F3v), "blacke a divell" (sig. G1r), "blacke fiends" (sig. G2v), "blacke deed" (sig. I5v), and "The Duke, whose soule is blacke agen" (sig. K1r). Finally in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, to which I shall be returning later, Livia says "Nay, nay, the black king's mine" (II.ii.299) and later tells the widow

I hold two ducats  
I give you check and mate to your white king,  
Simplicity itself, your saintish king there.

(II.ii.304-6)

Later, the Mother says "The miller's daughter brings forth as white boys, / As she that bathes herself with milk and bean-flour" (III.i.37-8) and Leantio declares "that soul's black indeed / That cannot commend virtue" (III.iii.167-8). This emphasis is, in fact, something which might find its

origins in Medici history. Caroline P. Murphy observes of Alessandro de' Medici, who became Duke of Florence in 1513 and is the subject of Shirley's *The Traitor*, that "Alessandro's mother was a Moroccan slave girl, and portraits of him show he was unquestionably black" (Murphy 2008: 9). Attention might also have been attracted by the fact that after the murder of Cosimo's daughter Isabella de' Medici her body was displayed and was said to be "black in its upper half, but completely white below" (326).

Of the plays which Boase identified, Webster's *The White Devil* seems most clearly to suggest at least some level of acquaintance with the actual history of the family. The sources of *The White Devil* have been extensively examined by Gunnar Boklund, who argues that "one conclusion is inevitable: the dramatist had a very poor knowledge of the life and character of the first Duchess of Bracciano," that is Isabella de' Medici: "He knew her name – although how he learnt it remains an open question – he knew the names of her husband and eldest brother and he knew – he must have known – that Paolo Giordano had had her murdered" (Boklund 1966: 118). Boklund does however suggest that Webster would probably have known rather more about Isabella's son, Virginio Orsini, who had visited London some years previously. A century or so ago, discussing Webster's deviation from his Italian sources in *The White Devil*, C. E. Vaughan in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* went rather further, and speculated that

It is perfectly possible that an oral statement, for which either an English traveller or an Italian visitor was ultimately responsible, may have reached Webster and that some, at least, of his inaccuracies may be due to the natural negligence of his informant ... We know, for instance, that Vittoria's own stepson, Virginio Orsini, the Giovanni of the play, had been sent as an envoy to England by his uncle Ferdinand, successor to Francesco, at the close of Elizabeth's reign. We know that the same Virginio was reputed lover to Marie de' Medici and that the attention of English dramatists was at this time keenly directed to the doings of the French court, and not least to the love affairs of the royal house.

(Vaughan 1907-21)

In *The First Night of Twelfth Night*, Leslie Hotson gave an account of this visit and linked it closely to the circumstances of the performance of another play, *Twelfth Night* (Hotson 1961: 202-3). Don Virginio came to England after escorting Marie de' Medici to her wedding in Lyons (93), and was very graciously received by the queen, who apparently told him that the Orsini badge of the rose and the Tudor rose were proof that they were of common descent (40). Hotson finds *Twelfth Night* so closely related to the Duke that he suspects that it may have been written in response to the news of Don Virginio's imminent arrival: Don Virginio had twins, a boy and a girl, and had been wounded in a sea-battle (42). One might also savour the fortuitous quasi-twinning which brought a man named Virginio to the side of the virgin queen of England, after whom Virginia was named.

In his Revels edition of *The White Devil*, John Russell Brown takes up the idea that Webster may well have had access to some source which we cannot now identify. After listing all the known written accounts available, Russell Brown concludes that

Not one of these accounts could have given Webster all the details found in *The White Devil*; either an all-sufficient source is yet to be found, or else Webster used two or more sources which bore some resemblance to extant accounts. The latter is the more likely ... but the possibility of a lost, eccentric account cannot be discounted.

(Webster 1977: xxviii)

It is, perhaps, just conceivable that Webster had access to some information which emerged from this visit: as Boklund suggests, “That the visit of Virginio Orsini to Elizabeth’s court had something to do with the origin of *The White Devil* seems probable – it must at least have aroused Webster’s curiosity” (Boklund 1966: 133).

I want to suggest that, whether or not Webster had actually talked to Don Virginio or anyone who remembered him, the changes that he made to the story he found in his sources would not have been displeasing to that nobleman. For instance, Caroline P. Murphy notes in her recent biography of Isabella de’ Medici, Don Virginio’s mother, that “Regardless of both Paolo’s and Isabella’s adultery, Isabella had lived separately and autonomously, beyond Paolo’s command and control, thus demeaning his masculinity” (Murphy 2008: 331). In Webster’s play, however, Paolo is a much more impressive figure, who sweeps from a courtroom with superb defiance, leaving behind an expensive cloak on the grounds that “’twas my stool .../ Bracciano / Was ne’er so beggarly, to take a stool / Out of another’s lodging” (III.ii.172-6). Don Virginio had little reason to love his father, who tried his best to disinherit him and may have believed he was not his son, and Don Virginio was himself “always more Medici than Orsini, spending, by choice, as much time in Florence as Rome” (Murphy 2008: 346 and 348); nevertheless he was fiercely proud of his Orsini ancestry and would have doubtless found any reference to its greatness congenial. He might too have been pleased to see his uncle Francesco presented on stage as the outraged revenger of a sister in whose death the historical Francesco had almost certainly colluded (Murphy 2008: 330-1). There are also some other suggestive touches. The devotion of Lodovico to Isabella seems comparable to that of Isabella’s real-life lover Troilo Orsini, and while the real Vittoria’s husband was called Francesco (Hibbert 1974: 277), the name Camillo in Webster’s play could conceivably have been suggested by the fact that Francesco de’ Medici sent his father’s second wife Camilla Martelli to a convent immediately after Cosimo’s death, much to her fury (Murphy 2008: 257), and relegation to a convent, or at least to a house of convertites, is of course the fate with which the Vittoria of the play is threatened. Finally, the fact that the Isabella of the play dies after kissing a poisoned portrait might conceivably glance at the fact that the historical Isabella painted a double portrait of her son Virginio and her daughter Eleonora (Murphy 2008: 243).

Elements of the story of Isabella de’ Medici may also have leached into Webster’s later play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), since Isabella, like the Duchess, was rumoured to retreat to the country to hide pregnancies by her lover Troilo Orsini (Murphy 2008: 312-3). There may also be a more oblique Medici connection with *The Duchess of Malfi*: Sara Jayne Steen, in her article on “The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and *The Duchess of Malfi*,” has influentially read the play as a sustained reflection on the clandestine marriage of Arbella Stuart, niece of Mary Queen of Scots and granddaughter of Bess of Hardwick (Steen 1991: 64-6), and Mary S. Lovell notes that one of Bess’s pieces of embroidery bears words in Latin which translate as “Tears witness that the quenched flames live”: “This motto had been used by the widowed Catherine de Medici, and may have been suggested to Bess by Mary” (Lovell 2005: 220), who was of course the former daughter-in-law of Catherine de’ Medici.

I want briefly to divert at this point to suggest there is also a connection between *The Duchess of Malfi* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1609). At a number of points in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the language of *The Tempest* is found. The word “tempest” itself recurs obsessively in Webster’s

play. The Duchess says of her brothers “should they know it, time will easily / Scatter the tempest” (I.i.471-2); the Cardinal asks Ferdinand “Why do you make yourself / So wild a tempest?” (II.v.16-17), and says of the Duchess

Doth she make religion her riding-hood  
To keep her from the sun and tempest?  
(III.iii.60-1)

Antonio says of the Duchess’s brother Ferdinand “He is so quiet, that he seems to sleep / The tempest out, as dormice do in winter” (III.i.21-2), and finally the Duchess herself observes,

see, see, like to calm weather  
At sea, before a tempest, false hearts speak fair  
To those they intend most mischief.  
(III.v.25-7)

Both plays focus on the situation and legacy of the Aragonese in Italy, and the genesis of *The Tempest* in the shipwreck of *The Sea Venture* off the coast of Bermuda seems clearly gestured at in *The Duchess of Malfi* when Bosola says

I would sooner swim to the Bermudas on  
Two politicians’ rotten bladders, tied  
Together with an intelligencer’s heart-string,  
Than depend on so changeable a prince’s favour.  
(III.ii.266-90)

*The Tempest* seems to be remembered too when the Duchess says

Methought I wore my coronet of state,  
And on a sudden all the diamonds  
Were chang’d to pearls.  
(III.v.13-15)

Change and pearls find a similar collocation in *The Tempest*, in Ariel’s song. Perhaps most suggestively, the Duchess says of her children

I intend, since they were born accurs’d,  
Curses shall be their first language.  
(III.v.115-6)

So, too, Caliban finds language acquisition and cursing to be inextricably interlinked. It is therefore worth noting that Richard Wilson has recently suggested that the original context of *The Tempest* was the proposal for a Medici marriage which did not ultimately materialise, “the proposed marriage of the Protestant prodigy, Prince Henry, to Caterina, the daughter of the Catholic Grand Duke Ferdinand of Tuscany” (Wilson 2004: 213). It has long been known that Webster broke off writing *The Duchess of Malfi* to write an elegy on Prince Henry (Bradbrook 1980: 147 and 163), and Michael Neill further suggests that the wax models of Antonio and the children might have been made by the person responsible for the effigy of Prince Henry used for his funeral procession (Neill 1982: 76-7 and 85, n. 11). Perhaps, then, not only *The White Devil* but also *The Duchess of Malfi*, with its recollections of *The Tempest* and of Prince Henry, is laced with indirect memories of the Medici.

Another Medici-influenced play is Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (1623), which tells the story of one Medici woman, Bianca Cappello, wife of Duke Francesco de’ Medici, and perhaps nods at that of another in its use of a character named Isabella who is, like Francesco’s sister Isabella de’ Medici, first adulterous and then subsequently killed. It might also conceivably

glance in the direction of Catherine de' Medici: its blighted banquet is one of the most spectacular in Renaissance drama, and Frank Ardolino has recently observed that

Catherine was a polished practitioner of the Medicean art of lavish festivals designed to reconcile warring religious factions by having them participate in peaceful masquerades and stately dances. However, as Frances Yates has pointed out, Catherine's fêtes were often marred by political and religious acrimony, which came to a horrible fruition in the festivities marking the marriage of her daughter Margaret to Henry.

(Ardolino 1990: 405)

In *Women Beware Women*, though, we are invited to think not only of Italy and maybe of France but of England too, for at one point we are specifically told that the Duke is "About some fifty-five" (I.iii.91), the age of James I at the time. This little note of comparison serves as a salutary reminder that the Medici were not as remote from seventeenth-century England as we might think. To some extent this was true even in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, as first Catherine de' Medici and then Marie de' Medici shared the throne of France, just across the Channel. It became even more the case after 1628, when Charles I married the French princess Henrietta Maria, the daughter of Henri of Navarre and Marie de' Medici (who herself arrived in England on an extended visit in October 1638), and it is, I think, Henrietta Maria who lies behind the Medici-related events and references in the plays of John Ford, which also hark back to other Medici-related plays.

Ford shows signs throughout his career of responding to Medici-influenced plays. *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633), for instance, owes a clear debt to *Women Beware Women*. This is seen both at the level of plot, with both sharing a triad of incestuous couple and foolish suitor, and also at the level of verbal echo, when Isabella in *Women Beware Women* asks her uncle how long he has been unhappy:

*Hipp.* Since I first saw you, niece, and left Bologna.

*Isab.* And could you deal so unkindly with my heart

To keep it up so long hid from my pity?

(I.ii.194-6)

Giovanni too has been in Bologna, returning from it to fall in love with Annabella, and the close conjunction of that name with the words "heart" and "pity," both so important in *'Tis Pity*, here is remarkable.

Another Ford tragedy, *Love's Sacrifice* (1633), opens with the banishment of Roseilli, clearly recalling the similar opening of *The White Devil*; later, D'Avolos says of Roseilli

My lord, in a sudden discontent I hear he departed towards Benevento, determining, as I am given to understand, to pass to Seville, minding to visit his cousin Don Pedro de Toledo in the Spanish court.

(1.2.249-252)

This too evokes the story of *The White Devil*, since the historical Isabella de' Medici was very attached to her cousin Leonora de Toledo, whose murder directly preceded her own, and Isabella's brothers did indeed have close contacts with their de Toledo cousins in Spain. Finally, the Duke's sister Fiormonda demands of him,

Art thou Caraffa? Is there in thy veins

One drop of blood that issued from the loins

Of Pavy's ancient dukes? Or dost thou sit

On great Lorenzo's seat, our glorious father,  
And canst not blush to be so far beneath  
The spirit of heroic ancestors?

(4.1.1-6)

Historically, Pavia was under the domination of the Visconti family, with whom the name Lorenzo was not associated, and nor was it with the family of Gesualdo, from which Ford seems to have drawn the main plot of his play (Hopkins 1998); as the note in the Revels edition observes, the name seems to be chosen "Perhaps with a glance at Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-92)".

Ford's sole chronicle history play, *Perkin Warbeck* (1634), seems to respond more obliquely to a Medici-related issue. Karen Britland points out that "On 16 November 1633, the court watched Shakespeare's *Richard III*, performed by the King's company in celebration of Henrietta Maria's twenty-fourth birthday" (Britland 2008: 59). Britland suggests that

this performance had a political agenda ... The early months of 1633 had seen the uncovering of the infamous Châteauneuf plot which implicated Henrietta Maria in international intrigue and which was reputed to have aspired so far as to set [her younger brother] Gaston d'Orléans on his [older] brother's throne. *Richard III* famously dramatizes the results of a usurping brother's tyranny and might well have served as a warning to the English queen not to become embroiled in her family's problems.

(60)

Britland also notes that one of Gaston's emissaries to his sister seems to have been "a certain 'Monsieur Gourdon,' possibly a relation of the elderly George Gordon, first Marquis of Huntly" (60). The Gordons of Huntly are prominent in Ford's play of the same year *Perkin Warbeck*, which could be said effectively to offer a sequel to *Richard III*.

Ford might conceivably have been prompted to return to the Medici in his later plays because other dramatists were also paying attention to them, and not in a flattering way: both Thomas May's *The Tragedy of Julia Agrippina* (1639) and Nathaniel Richards' *Messalina* (published in 1640, but likely to have been acted between 1634 and 1636) can be seen as thinly veiled attacks on Henrietta Maria (Hopkins 2008: 136-7), while in Kenelm Digby's *Private Memoirs. Loose Fantasies*, the lustful queen of Attica is, as Digby makes clear, based on Marie de' Medici (Digby 1968: 44). *Private Memoirs* seems to have been known to Ford, despite the fact that it was not published: its modern editor Vittorio Gabrieli suggests an echo of it in *The Lover's Melancholy* (Digby 1968: 10), and it certainly foreshadows the plot of *The Broken Heart*, since Stelliana initially refuses Theagenes on the grounds that she had agreed to marry Mardontius and "she would never suffer that one man should possess her, and another such a gage of a former, though half-constrained, affection" (121), just as Penthea says she will never marry Orgilus even if Bassanes should die. Moreover, Stelliana's father is called Nearchus (11), like the prince in *The Broken Heart*, Theagenes' mother Arete sends him to Athens to separate him from Stelliana (41) just as Orgilus ostensibly travels there to forget Penthea, and Theagenes leaves Athens because of plague (43) just as Orgilus says he has had to do. It is perhaps also suggestive that the play gives much prominence to the oracle of Apollo, and that Sir Kenelm had actually visited Delphi (Bligh 1932: 150). Ford's reading, then, seems certainly to have included Medici-related matter, and the fact that he apparently had access to Digby's text in manuscript may mean that he had been talking to Digby himself.



Whatever the reasons and conduits for it, there can be no doubt of Ford's interest in the Medici in general and in Medici-related plays in particular. *The Fancies, Chaste and Noble* (1638), in particular, clearly draws on the plot of *Women Beware Women*, to which it owes a character called Livio who is, as he thinks, offered a promotion at court in exchange for pandering the honour of a female member of his family, as Livio in *Women Beware Women* is. It also closely echoes some lines from Massinger's *The Great Duke of Florence* (1636), for which Ford wrote commendatory verses, and it may well owe the character name Morosa to James Shirley's 1635 play *The Traitor*, which tells the story of the assassination of Alessandro, the first Medici duke. *The Fancies'* marquis of Siena might perhaps be influenced by Fynes Moryson's account of Duke Francesco de' Medici, husband of Bianca Cappello: Moryson says that Duke Francesco was "giuen much to his studdyes, hauing invented the melting of Cristall of the mountayne, and delighting to make Porcellana d'India which wee call China dishes, and to Cutt Jewells, and sett the false to make them appeare true" (Hughes 1903: 95). In Ford's play, the marquis commends knowledge of jewels, saying that "'Tis a proper quality / For any Gentleman" (5.3.45-6). Finally, in Ford's last play, *The Lady's Trial* (1639), the phrase "*Beso las manos*" (2.1.14) echoes Massinger's *The Great Duke of Florence* (III.i, sig. Gv), and Castanna is detained to see pictures while an attempt is made on Spinella's chastity, in another obvious echo of *Women Beware Women*.

What then might be the purpose of Ford's recurrent allusions to the Medici? I think it is well worth noting the titles of the two plays on which he draws most consistently, *The White Devil* and *Women Beware Women*, both of which incriminate women, and perhaps it is no coincidence that the face of the Medici in England was entirely female, in the shape of Henrietta Maria and her mother Marie de' Medici. Many years ago, G. F. Sensabaugh suggested that we should see Ford as glorifying the cult of Platonic love associated with Henrietta Maria, but even in the play which most strongly seems to suggest that, *Love's Sacrifice*, women both come to grief themselves and cause the downfall of those they love. Ford is ambivalent at best about the public sphere, in which few of his characters can survive; for women, he portrays it as fatal, and in allusions to the history of the Medici he finds a very useful paradigm for his purposes, not least since he might well see them in terms of a warning to a Medici queen. In Ford's plays, then, we see the last flowering of a sustained interest in translating the dramatic lives of the Medici into actual drama.

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