

*Medici Women. The Making of a Dynasty in Grand Ducal Tuscany.* Edited by Giovanna Benadusi and Judith C. Brown. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2015

With ten richly documented essays and a contextual introduction by Judith C. Brown, *Medici Women: The Making of a Dynasty in Grand Ducal Tuscany*, edited by Giovanna Benadusi and Judith C. Brown, highlights the central role of women in the dynastic ambitions of the Medici and in the creation and consolidation of Medici power after the decline of the Florentine republic. If the formidable women of the Medici – wives and daughters moving between their natal and marital families, navigating the complex nuances of power – were long dismissed as footnotes to the “real story” of politics, military strategy, and diplomacy, this volume repositions them at the heart of a multidimensional courtly network that stretched throughout early modern Europe. The Medici women (some depicted in starkly negative terms in the influential but biased studies of the historians Jacopo Riguccio Galluzzi and Gaetano Pieraccini) are thoroughly reassessed in Benadusi and Brown’s volume, which in turn builds on recent work by scholars such as Konrad Eisenbichler (*The Cultural World of Eleonora of Toledo*, 2004), and Giulia Calvi and Riccardo Spinelli (*Le donne Medici nel sistema europeo delle corti, XVI–XVIII secolo*, 2008).

The volume opens with Brown’s introduction, which offers an overview both of the historiographical tradition regarding Medici women and the political circumstances leading to the establishment of the Medici dukes in the mid-1530s. Setting the tone for the essays that follow, Brown argues that the women born or married into the Medici family wielded their influence in myriad ways, both direct and indirect: they gave political counsel to their spouses and children, they acted as regents, they were patrons of the arts and of charitable and religious institutions. These women were not peripheral to the powerful courtly networks of early modern Europe, but vital to them. As the essays in the volume show, they operated at the very intersection of gender and power, securing through their bodies – that is, through marriage and motherhood – the Medici position within the “interlocking system” of courts that knitted dynasties together throughout Europe, providing much-needed financial stability, prestige, and protection – all while balancing the often competing interests of their marital and natal families. In many ways, therefore, despite its organization into chapters focused on specific figures, *Medici Women* is as much a study of early modern courtly networks and female sociability as it is of the individual Medici women themselves. The volume focuses closely on the movement and exchange of women within these networks, while also attending to the alienation they experienced upon being separated not only from their families of origin, but from their native countries, languages, and customs. How did they adapt to their new lives?

How did they bridge these cultural divides? Such questions, together with the examination of the ways in which the Medici women sought out and exercised power, are at the heart of this volume.

Organized chronologically, the ten essays focus on nine women who either married into the Medici family or were born into it, beginning with Eleonora of Toledo (1522–1562), consort of the first Medici Grand Duke, Cosimo I, and ending with Anna Maria Luisa, the last Medici princess (1667–1743). Each essay is preceded by a reproduction of an iconic image of the subject, offering an immediate window on to the unspoken language of power in which each woman was well-versed, communicating through her clothing, her jewels, and her bearing a message of status and power. While some of the essays are more tightly argued than others, all are thought-provoking and offer valuable new archival evidence in support of their reassessments.

The first essay, by Natalie Tomas, draws on letters written during Eleonora's years as regent for her husband to show that she engaged actively in political affairs as well as in other more traditionally female patronage activities. Brought up in Spanish Naples, Eleonora was familiar with female consorts who took active roles and thus she offered a new model to Florence, which was traditionally suspicious of women in positions of power. While Eleonora had to contend with anti-Spanish as well as anti-woman sentiment, her excellent financial skills, political acumen, and ties to Spain made her an important asset to Cosimo and to the Medici more generally. Eleonora's daughter, Isabella (1542–1576), is the subject of the second essay, by Elisabetta Mori. This compelling study explores the interplay between gender and power as it debunks long-standing claims about Isabella's infidelity to her husband, Paolo Giordano Orsi. Arguing that Isabella, like many Medici women, has gained immortality through such characterizations while simultaneously "disappearing from history," Mori stresses the need to mine archival sources to uncover the full story. Indeed, the correspondence of Isabella and her husband undermines the theory that she was murdered as a result of her extramarital affairs (or indeed, that the murder occurred at all). Instead, Mori argues, hundreds of letters contained at the Archivio Capitolino in Rome show Isabella to have been a complex, educated figure (she wrote verse in Latin) with a genuine attachment to her husband (in one letter she complains while he is away that she has "slept alone in her big bed"), and the gossip about Isabella and her lover to have been fueled by anti-Medici sentiment. Isabella assumed an increasingly public role after the death of her mother, Eleonora – welcoming her brother's bride, Joanna of Austria, to Florence, for example, and corresponding with Catherine de' Medici and Marguerite de Valois; while her husband, on the other hand, struggled to maintain favor with his Medici in-laws. Isabella struggled with illness, perhaps dropsy, and, in Mori's view, this was the more likely (if mundane) cause of her death. Mori does a good job analyzing the stylistic aspects of Isabella's letters and offers plenty of fascinating excerpts from the correspondence.

Sarah Bercusson's essay on Joanna of Austria turns instead to women's networking practices, one of the core interests of the volume as a whole. Bercusson examines how Joanna (1547–1578), the bride of Cosimo's son, Francesco I, relied on indirect influence and intercession, rather than overt intervention, to promote the interests of the Medici; later, as her power waned (while that of Francesco's mistress, Bianca Cappello, grew), she began seeking to advance the interests of her natal family. Bercusson's essay includes a discussion of Joanna's use of gift giving as a supplemental and gendered tool, and includes a table listing fourteen marriages arranged by Joanna, a further indication of the paths by which she sought to exert influence.

With Sheila Barker's essay on Christine of Lorraine (1565–1637) the volume shifts its focus to a new area of female patronage: medicine. Barker's essay – building on a wave of scholarship that has begun to examine women's medical and scientific activities in a variety of early modern contexts – offers fresh perspective on Christine of Lorraine, wife of Ferdinando I, showing her to have been far more multi-faceted than the traditional view of her as a rigidly orthodox woman. Indeed, Christine was deeply interested in both Paracelsian and learned medicine, kept an iatrochemist as her personal physician, and was drawn to astrological medicine. However, as Barker is careful to point out, these interests did not place her at odds with her religious devotion; rather, medicine and religion served as “parallel strategies” for her duties as a caregiver to her family and her subjects. Interestingly, as Barker notes, Christine's interest in medicine had a distinctly public face: she is the dedicatee of Laurent Joubert's popular *Prima parte degli errori popolari...* (1592), a medical treatise seemingly “designed [...] for the education of a young noblewoman”; the original French edition was dedicated to the daughter of Catherine de' Medici, Margaret of France.

Maria Pia Paoli's essay on education at court under Christine of Lorraine and Maria Maddelena of Austria (1589–1631) takes a broader look at learning, examining the instruction of the Medici princesses and arguing that, as the model of the Italian courts declined, a more active international model emerged. Paoli identifies a “first generation” of women at the Medici court in Florence – beginning with Maria Salviati – whose education, rooted in the attitudes toward women of Republican Florence, was more circumscribed, but notes that by Christine of Lorraine's time, the maternal role in education had expanded and an increased attention to specialized education was in evidence. Adelina Modesti's essay shifts the focus to Christine of Lorraine's granddaughter, Margherita de' Medici Farnese (1612–1679), who became regent of Parma after the death of her husband, and uses the concept of matronage – women's cultural and religious patronage – to show how Margherita navigated the transition from natal to marital family, advancing the interests of both.

With Giovanna Benadusi's piece on Vittoria della Rovere (1622–1694), our attention is turned to the sole Medici Grand Duchess to come “from

within.” As Benadusi shows, Vittoria’s great familiarity with Florence and her deep connections to the Medici court – combined with the wealth of the della Rovere – allowed her a kind of autonomy and influence that “surpassed that of most rulers consorts in early modern Europe.” As in many of the essays, Benadusi, too, shows how our understanding of Vittoria as a multi-faceted, independent player on the early modern stage has suffered from the negative portrayal offered of her by Galluzzi and others. Rather, Vittoria was a learned woman with a fascinatingly far-flung epistolary network: hundreds of her letters regarding political as well as cultural matters survive, addressed to correspondents from a wide range of social strata. Vittoria’s correspondence, Benadusi argues, thus “undermines the traditional scholarly divide between the realms of the familial, the social, and the affective... and the realm of politics.”

Giulia Calvi’s stimulating essay on Violante Beatrice of Bavaria (1673–1731), married at the age of fifteen to Ferdinando de’ Medici, returns our focus to the forms of power that arose in a transnational court system structured around the exchange of women. Taking a microhistorical approach to examine the female court of Violante, Calvi argues that we must look at early modern princely courts and dynasties as a “polycentric” system of power in which women, like men, wield influence. The volume concludes fittingly with two essays regarding Anna Maria Luisa (1667–1743), the last Medici princess, by Stefano Casciu and Marcello Verga. The only daughter of Cosimo III and Marguerite Luise d’Orleans, Anna Maria Luisa became Electress Palatine upon her marriage to Johann Wilhelm II, but the union produced no children. Anna Maria Luisa, as these essays show, was a patron of the arts and a collector, but her interests in these areas went beyond identifying the Medici name with a cultural legacy. Instead, she took measures to ensure that these artistic treasures would remain in Florence as part of the patrimony of its people, an act which, as Verga notes, “played a central role in making Florence the city of the Uffizi and the Palatine Gallery.”

Taken together, these ten essays provide a broad and well-balanced picture of female experience at the Medici court, reconstructing not only the contributions and activities of each of these figures, but contextualizing them against the experiences of their female relatives – thereby throwing into relief the rich and interconnected veins that linked them together. The value of these essays lies not only in the re-visionings they offer of familiar (and less familiar) figures, but also in their use of a wide variety of archival sources, from letters and chronicles to inventories, account books, and ambassadorial correspondence. They thus present a call for increased archival research, pointing the way to new avenues of research. Well-organized and accessible, *Medici Women* will be useful to scholars working in Renaissance studies, women and gender studies, and Italian studies; it also makes a valuable tool for both undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

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