

The Demonization of Sidney's Cecropia: Erasing a Legal Identity

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IN OCTOBER OF 1533, fourteen-year-old Catherine de' Medici married Henri, duc d'Orléans in a union meant to secure a favorable political alliance between Francis I, the King of France and Pope Clement VII, her uncle and legal guardian. When, however, the Pope unexpectedly died less than a year later, Catherine's symbolic worth virtually died as well: leaving a less than enamored France to bear the burden of one whose status, as R. J. Knecht has noted, "was immediately reduced to that of a foreigner of relatively modest origins."¹ When Henri unexpectedly died following a ceremonial jousting match in 1559, Catherine became positively reviled. By the time she died in 1589, she had been thoroughly vilified by virtually all of sixteenth-century Europe. Not only was she blamed for masterminding the massacre of thousands of Huguenots at Paris in 1572, but she was held at least partially accountable for the political unrest regarding the marriage question which unsettled England during much of Elizabeth's reign.

To what degree Catherine was responsible for the atrocities long attributed to her continues as a subject of debate among sixteenth-century French historians. What interests me, however, is the steady deterioration of this early modern widow's reputation once she emerged from her relatively contained status under coverture into a much more conspicuous role as regent to the minor Charles IX.² For whatever her degree of complicity during the tumultuous years following Henri's sudden death, demonization became a means by which to combat the threat her unveiled legal status unleashed upon a vulnerable early modern world.

By the time Sir Philip Sidney began revisions on his politicized pastoral romance, *The New Arcadia*, Catherine de' Medici had hosted the infamous massacre of the French Huguenots and had embarked upon the second of two unpopular series of marriage negotiations with Elizabeth I

¹R. J. Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 28.

²See Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*. Francis II, who succeeded his father in 1559 at the age of fifteen, was deemed old enough to rule under Salic law. A year later, on his death, Catherine became the official regent to the ten-year-old Charles IX.

on behalf of her sons, Henri, duc d'Anjou and François, duc d'Alençon. It is, perhaps, no surprise then that Sidney's Cecropia, one who unleashes escalating terror upon an Arcadian community after her husband's unexpected death and her son's displacement as heir to Basilius's throne, strikingly resembles this widowed "Jezebel" of early modern France.³ Indeed, not unlike the vilified Catherine de' Medici, Cecropia's emergence from coverture is marked by an escalating tyranny which will not finally be contained until the moment of her death. Even before she takes Pamela and Philoclea captive to force a royal marriage and a place within the Arcadian social and political structure, she is represented as evil personified, as one who thrives on staging terror against those around her. This stylized demonization, I would argue, becomes a means by which to nullify the horrifying legal identity the state of widowhood has created, thereby paving a return to a patriarchally constructed normality.

Under English common law, an early modern woman possessed one of two legal identities. As *feme covert*, a woman's legal identity was subsumed under that of her husband: her right to sue, contract, or bequeath linked to a patriarchal privilege supported by biblical authority.⁴ Indeed, a wife in early modern England could not, for the most part, be said to possess a legal identity outside that of her husband.⁵ The state of widowhood, however, abruptly altered this legal anonymity, tearing aside the veil obscuring the *feme covert's* identity: revealing in her place a *feme sole* in all her wonderful, frightening potentiality.⁶ Indeed, as B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol have noted, "if she [the married woman] became a widow her legal personality revived and she was once more able to hold property and enter into contracts in her own name, and to earn money and keep it."⁷ Importantly, widowhood also allowed the widow virtually unlimited control over

³In Sidney's "A Letter to Queen Elizabeth" (1579), he refers to Catherine de' Medici as "the Jezebel of our age," *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 48.

⁴See 1 Corinthians 7. Paul decrees that within marriage husband and wife are one.

⁵There were exceptions to this general rule. See Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiar: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550–1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Dolan notes that a wife could also emerge from coverture if deserted by her husband or if she committed a criminal act on her own (27). See also Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 30. Erickson notes the incidence of the *feme sole trader*. Married women engaged in business apart from their husbands had been recognized as separate individuals using this legal distinction, which had been in practice since the middle ages.

⁶Theoretically, any single woman in early modern England could be considered *feme sole*. The term, however, was most often applied to widows as opposed to never married women. Single, unmarried women of the minority age typically remained under the control of their fathers. Single, never married women past majority age were legally referred to as spinsters. And as Erickson, *Women and Property*, has noted, women who never married were the least visible of any within early modern England (47).

⁷B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare's Legal Language* (London and New Brunswick, N.J.: The Athlone Press, 2000), 89.

the interests of any minor children born within the marriage, enabling her to make financial and matrimonial decisions on their behalf. It may well be, as Amy Louise Erickson concludes, that the widow “was a loose, free electron in a society of coupled atoms, with all its potential—and all its danger.”⁸

Widowhood in early modern England indeed constituted a confused social category, one which beguiled, tested, and ultimately threatened a patriarchal state struggling to assert its authority in a rapidly changing social, political and religious world. Widowhood by its very nature created a legally androgynous being that eluded the control of a society eager to fix the gender categories which would preserve patriarchal privilege. The abrupt division of the ideological oneness that coverture had fused, widowhood inevitably impacted political, social, and familial order in early modern England. From a biological perspective, widows were women, subject to the same limitations imposed on other members of their sex. Yet, having emerged from coverture, widows likewise possessed a legal identity denied their married counterparts. Widowhood was at once an idealized state, envisioned as a perpetually grieving widow piously mourning the loss of her mate *and* an uncontrolled, indeed, uncontrollable state of being, capable of altering if not destroying political, social, and familial order.⁹

One of the greatest threats Cecropia represents to the Arcadian community is in her heightened role as widowed mother to Amphialus. For arguably herein lies Cecropia's most ambiguous, most contestable function within Arcadia. Susan Frye has argued that the maternal role has historically been an “unstable” one, that the struggle to “imagine a ‘self’” within domestic space ultimately rendered motherhood a confused, anxiety-producing state in early modern England.¹⁰ While a delegated domesticity conceivably served to contain the threat of the feminine, when coupled with maternity it conversely operated as a site of patriarchal exclusion. Many social historians, including David Cressy, have noted, for example, the virtual exclusion of men from the early modern birthing room. Cressy suggests that “from the viewpoint of ministers and physicians, and perhaps too for many husbands, the gathering of women at

⁸Erickson, *Women and Property*, 153. Sokol and Sokol, *Shakespeare's Legal Language*, have, however, challenged a common critical assumption that an early modern widow's life was an enviable one, since many remarried (91).

⁹Catherine de' Medici and Sidney employ both of these conflicting cultural representations of widowhood to further their respective narrative aims. While Catherine uses the black-draped figure of the idealized widow to lend legitimacy to her prolonged role as regent to her sons, Sidney represents his widow as a Machiavellian mother, one whose emergence from coverture makes possible widespread social and political terror.

¹⁰Susan Frye, “Maternal Textualities,” in *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 229.

childbirth was exclusive, mysterious and potentially unruly.”¹¹ Not only did such an exclusion conceivably empower midwives, solely entrusted with bringing new life into the world, but perhaps more importantly, it established an exclusive, even propriety link between mother and child.

That the bond between mother and child was both an ideal and a source of concern is evident in lactation literature from the early modern period. On the one hand, behaviorists such as Juan Luis Vives praise those mothers who breast-feed their infants, citing the health benefits accruing from this decidedly maternal function.¹² As Vives notes, “the wise and generous parent of all things that supplied blood for the formation of the fetus in the womb transfers it after birth into the white milk of the breasts, which are like a reservoir of abundant and wholesome nourishment for the sustenance of the child.”¹³

The affective maternal bond nurtured at birth and through the lactation period, however, also created the potential for corruption within the child, according to early modern behaviorists. For while the bond between mother and child was actively cultivated, it could likewise pose a threat as far as perceived ownership of offspring was concerned. Certainly, this was one of the driving forces behind the move to limit the use of wet nurses. Vives suggests that because “it is not uncommon that the wet nurse suckles the child reluctantly and with some feeling of annoyance,” the child suffers at the hands of a figure meant to nurture it.¹⁴ If we apply this same logic to a bad mother, then a close maternal relationship is potentially more damaging than no relationship at all.

The early modern belief in prenatal imprinting sheds further light on a mother’s innate potential to corrupt her child. According to early modern behaviorists and medical authorities, a mother could inflict monstrous deformities upon her unborn child simply by gazing upon an unpleasant site while pregnant. Vives notes that

since the power of the imagination is incalculable in the human body, pregnant mothers should take care not to entertain violent thoughts of anything monstrous, foul, or obscene. Let them avoid any dangerous occasions in which some ugly sight may come before their eyes. And if they are exposed to such dangers, let them think beforehand of what they may encounter so that no

¹¹David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55.

¹²Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth Century Manual* (1523), ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000). See also Robert Cleaver and John Dod, *A Godly Form of Household Government: For the Ordering of Private Families, according to the Direction of God’s Word* (London, 1621); and William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties. Eight Treatises* (London, 1621).

¹³Vives, *Education*, 269.

¹⁴Vives, *Education*, 269–70.

harm may befall the child in their womb from some unexpected sight.¹⁵

When Agnes Bowker purportedly gave birth to a cat in January of 1569, the women attending the birth fled in horror, reportedly lest their own wombs be contaminated. Despite a long investigation, ecclesiastical court officials failed to determine the cause of this monstrous event, or whether, indeed, she had given birth to a cat at all. What such an event did, however, was feed the imaginations of a culture only too ready to believe in the potential harm a mother could inflict upon her child, for whatever conclusion was finally drawn in the Bowker case, it necessarily went against the mother. Agnes had surely been guilty of some crime or indiscretion which had led to the deliverance of a virtual monstrosity.¹⁶

If a mother was viewed as capable of inflicting such unspeakable physical harm on a fetus, her perceived impact on a child's moral development was perhaps even greater. As Vives notes, "much more depends on the mother in the formation of the children's character than one would think. She can make them either very good or very bad."¹⁷ Importantly, the early modern mother was entrusted with the initial education of her child in moral virtues. Vives continues:

At this age, high moral principles and pure Christian ideals must be infused: to despise the vain foolishness of wealth, power, worldly honors, fame, nobility, and beauty; to hold as beautiful and worthy of admiration and imitation and as the only true and substantial good justice, piety, fortitude, temperance, learning, clemency, mercy, and love of humankind.¹⁸

A mother's responsibility in the instruction of her child would, however, seem fraught with difficulty given an early modern cultural concern over a woman's inherently unstable nature. Despite this concern, a mother was held responsible should her child fail to receive proper moral and spiritual instruction.

Elizabeth Jocelyn's, *The mother's legacy to her unborn child* (1624), expresses one early modern woman's concern over the moral fate of a child she has not yet delivered. In a preface written to her husband shortly before the birth of their child, Elizabeth agonizes over a mother's responsibility to educate a son or a daughter in proper moral virtues:

¹⁵Vives, *Education*, 268.

¹⁶Discussed in David Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9–27.

¹⁷Vives, *Education*, 270.

¹⁸Vives, *Education*, 272.

Mine own dear love, I no sooner conceived an hope that I should be made a mother by thee, but with it entered the consideration of a mother's duty, and shortly after followed the apprehension of danger that might prevent me from executing that care I so exceedingly desired, I mean in religious training our child.¹⁹

The *Legacy* which follows becomes a means by which she can fulfill her maternal responsibility in light of the dangerous uncertainties of child-birth. That one or both of them may not survive the passage only seems to intensify Elizabeth's perceived obligation to nurture her child properly.

Just how fostering figured into assessments of mothering must be considered as well, for this established practice of parental exchange undoubtedly impacted relationships between mothers and their children in early modern England. Lawrence Stone has argued that the primary reason for fostering, a practice whereby aristocratic and middle-class families exchanged infants and small children during the first few years of life, was the high mortality rate, "which made it folly to invest too much emotional capital in such ephemeral beings.... The longer a child lived, the more likely it was that an affective bond would develop between it and its parents."²⁰ Sending one's child off to another family during these dangerous years conceivably eased the pain should the infant or young child not survive. While I find Stone's explanation inherently unsatisfying, even unfathomable, denying early modern mothers *and* fathers fundamental, instinctual emotions, it does raise important questions concerning the bond which eventually developed between mother and child.²¹ Given the fact that mothers were held responsible for the primary nurturing of their young children, what impact did early separation through fostering have upon their overall assessment as parents? Were they, as Stone seems to suggest, accounted sensible for refusing the emotional trauma routinely associated with childbirth and childhood? Were they deemed judicious for sacrificing their own possible attachments in the best interests of their (hopefully) developing children? Most importantly, to what degree could a mother be held accountable for the moral development of a child in

¹⁹Elizabeth Jocelyn, *The mother's legacy to her unborn child*, cited in *Renaissance Woman: Constructions of Femininity in England*, ed. Kate Aughterson (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 183.

²⁰Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 – 1800* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1979), 82–83.

²¹Stone's conclusions have, in fact, been challenged by a number of social historians who argue that early modern parents experienced love for their children and grief at their passing. See, for example, Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*; Ann Laurence, "Godly Grief: Individual Responses to Death in Seventeenth-Century Britain," in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450–1700* (London and New York: Longman, 1984); and Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

another's keeping during the most formative years of life? The issue of fostering proves crucial to a consideration of Cecropia as a mother figure, who fosters out the young Amphialus during the first years of his life following his father's death.

In many respects, Amphialus's stint as foster son to Timotheus seems a fortuitous one, given Cecropia's studied propensity for social and political mischief. According to Helen, queen of Corinth, fostering has made Amphialus the supremely virtuous individual he is. As she notes,

a happy resolution for Amphialus, whose excellent nature was by this means trained on with as good education as any prince's son in the world could have (which otherwise, it is thought, his mother, far unworthy of such a son, would not have given him), the good Timotheus no less loving him than his own son. (1.61)²²

This decidedly biased assessment of Amphialus's moral development is troubling in many respects. Not only does it ignore the decision (some might call it a sacrifice) that Cecropia makes on her son's behalf, but it presents conflicting claims regarding the ultimate source of virtue. As Helen further notes,

his mother (a woman of a haughty heart, being daughter to the King of Argos) either disdain[ing] or fear[ing] that her son should live under the power of Basilius, sent him to that lord Timotheus (between whom and her dead husband there had passed strait bands of mutual hospitality) to be brought up in company with his son Philoxenus. (1.61)

Cecropia's "haughtiness" aside, one may well argue that this mother acts responsibly in removing her son from a potentially hostile environment to one known for its hospitality. How would the politically irresponsible Basilius have treated Amphialus had the latter remained under his tutelage? If Gynecia views Amphialus as a threat to her daughters' succession claims, how would this nephew's innate excellence have been handled in a politically unstable Arcadia? Helen's assertion that Amphialus's excellence comes not from his mother also proves complicated. On the one hand, the text seems to argue the ultimate importance of nurture to the development of moral integrity. And, indeed, this assessment would be borne out by the fact that it is Cecropia who corrupts Artesia, the young woman she fosters: training her in deceit and entrapment only to execute her as part of a larger political scheme.

²²All *New Arcadia* citations are from Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (*The New Arcadia*), ed. Victor Skretkovicz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

At the same time, however, Amphialus's excellence clearly seems inborn; he is the biological as well as political progeny of a carefully arranged alliance between the daughter of the king of Argos and a duke who would be king. It's safe to say that such innate nobility will not be found as a distinguishing character trait in any of Sidney's rustics, who like the supremely inept Dametas, exhibit behavior "beyond the degree of ridiculous" (1.18). This becomes even more interesting given the fact that it is Dametas and his equally inept wife Miso, whose "splay-foot have made her accused for a witch" (1.18) who essentially foster the innately perfect Pamela during Basilius's sojourn in the forest, an arrangement thought strange by Kalander. While Pamela survives her questionable fostering with nobility firmly in tact—Gynecia never relinquishes total control over her daughter during this enforced retreat—Artesia does not. Her stay within Cecropia's household is marked by a progressive decline, which ends, not unexpectedly, with her death. That the royally born Cecropia may nonetheless harm what is by nature supremely excellent is clear. Indeed, what ultimately emerges from the text is the idea that innate virtue may readily be corrupted through bad maternal nurturing.

A widowed mother's assumed role as regent could further challenge her at times questionable ability to nurture her minor child properly. This is immediately evident in the case of Catherine de' Medici, who assumed the role of regent during the reigns of two of her three sons. As official and unofficial regent to the ten-year-old Charles IX and later, unofficially, to the twenty-four-year-old, Henri III, Catherine literally ruled France, dictating governmental policy during much of the politically contentious sixteenth century. While Catherine's overall political acumen remains open to critical debate, what is certain is that the infamous Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day took place during her tenure as unofficial regent to the twenty-two-year-old Charles.

The event was, in many respects, as spectacular as it was sudden. Just before dawn on 24 August 1572 forces loyal to Catherine began killing Protestants in town for the wedding of her daughter Marguerite de Valois and the Protestant Henri de Navarre. The Massacre, which lasted almost a week and spilled well beyond Paris's boundaries, ultimately claimed an estimated 5,000 lives. Whether Catherine personally ordered the slaughter of thousands of French Huguenots is perhaps less important to this discussion than her purported penchant for political ruthlessness. Accounts which emerged from this postnuptial event would take on mythic proportions. That Catherine never publicly condemned the massacre and, in fact, as R. J. Knecht notes, "seems to have thoroughly enjoyed its results,"²³ merely fueled suspicions about her capacity for cruelty. Not only was she

²³Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 162.

declared “a disciple of Machiavelli,” one who would “commit all necessary cruelties in a single blow,”²⁴ but her name would subsequently be associated with murder, poisoning, and political intrigue. Catherine’s contested regency during the politically unstable years following her husband’s death, in fact, demonstrates well how conflicted the roles as widow and mother were in the early modern period.

At the time of his father’s death, Amphialus would not have been of legal age and thus a protector would have been appointed to address his needs and responsibilities. And as guardian to the designated heir of Basilius, who at the time of his brother’s death is yet unmarried and childless, Amphialus’s guardian would have been enormously important. That the widowed Cecropia steps forward to serve her minor son’s interests would not have been unusual in the early modern period. Widows were frequently appointed as executrixes and/or protectors for their minor children’s estates until they reached the age of majority. As well as her own one-third portion, Lady Fitzhugh was to be warden of the rest of her husband’s lands, “during the minority of Richard, his son and heir.”²⁵ Joel T. Rosenthal observes that as “guardian of minor child-heirs, the widow’s temporary portion of her late husband’s estates often was even healthier than what she would realize for herself from her dower share.”²⁶ As was the case with Catherine de’ Medici, Cecropia’s role as mother to one earmarked to be king proves chilling to an increasingly unstable political state long disturbed by her political ambition. It is bad enough that had her husband outlived Basilius, Cecropia would have been Arcadia’s queen. If, however, the aging king had failed to produce heirs after her husband’s death, Cecropia would, like the reviled Catherine de’ Medici, have reigned in her son’s stead. A chilling thought, indeed.

Yet, perhaps Cecropia’s greatest present threat as widow and protector remains in her unyielding, increasingly criminal role as would-be political matchmaker on behalf of her son and one of the Arcadian princesses. Not only would such a marriage secure her son’s political future, but, as it did for Catherine de’ Medici, it would guarantee Cecropia a place in Arcadia’s political structure as well. One need only examine the strife surrounding Catherine’s repeated attempts to marry either of her sons to an aging Elizabeth I to understand how contentious royal marital negotiations of the early modern period could be. Although Elizabeth was strongly encouraged to wed to end succession uncertainties, a marriage to

²⁴Knecht, *Catherine de’ Medici*, 164.

²⁵Cited in Joel T. Rosenthal, “Aristocratic Widows in Fifteenth Century England,” in *Women and the Structure of Society: Selected Research from the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*, ed. Barbara J. Harris and Jo Ann McNamara (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), 42.

²⁶Rosenthal, “Aristocratic Widows,” 42.

any son of the notorious Catherine de' Medici ultimately proved untenable to an England horrified by this French widow's purported appetite for political violence. John Stubbs's inflammatory 1579 pamphlet, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf whereinto England is like to be swallowed*, whose publication cost Stubbs his right hand, gauges at least one early modern response to the horrendous prospect of a Medici alliance. Such an alliance would result, Stubbs suggests, in Elizabeth being "led blindfold as a poor lamb to the slaughter."²⁷

That Catherine would use her children as virtual pawns in political marriage schemes is perhaps not unusual given the period's propensity for political matchmaking. At the same time, however, the cataclysmic lengths to which she purportedly went to secure alliances favorable to France marked this widow as dangerous to English national interests. Marriage negotiations between Elizabeth and Catherine's sons began in earnest in 1572. When her eldest son, Henri, duc d'Anjou, refused to consider a match, Catherine attempted to arrange a marriage between Elizabeth, who was nearly forty and her younger son, François, duc d'Alençon, who was only sixteen. An even more horrendous outcome of Catherine's matchmaking would occur only a few months later. To secure an alliance between her daughter, Marguerite de Valois and Henri de Navarre, Catherine purportedly poisoned Navarre's mother, Jeanne d'Albret. Jeanne, who had long opposed the match, died suddenly after reluctantly agreeing to the marriage. Reports which surfaced after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day linked Catherine to the death. Although an autopsy cited tuberculosis and a breast abscess as the cause, Jeanne's death would be popularly attributed to poisoned gloves supplied by Catherine's Florentine perfumier.²⁸

Sidney's Cecropia likewise attempts to force marriage negotiations between Amphialus and both Philoclea and Pamela to secure a favorable position for herself within the Arcadian political structure. When the abduction fails to convince the two princesses to yield to Cecropia's matrimonial scheme, this Machiavellian widow systematically employs increasingly harsh inducements to achieve her goal. When gentle coercion fails to break down either Philoclea or Pamela's resistance, Cecropia commits bizarre acts of physical and psychological terrorism against those who have stymied her political plans. Failing to "prevail with girls" (3.419), Cecropia systematically removes "servants and service" (3.419) from her prisoners, frightening them with horrible noises in the night and other tactics, in an effort to convince at least one of the girls to agree to her matrimonial

²⁷John Stubbs, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf whereinto England is like to be swallowed* (1579), cited in Carole Levin, "The Heart and Stomach of a King": *Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 61.

²⁸See Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 151.

plan. When none of this works, Cecropia violently attacks first Philoclea, then Pamela with words, and when that fails to move, with a rod:

She [Cecropia], resolving all extremities rather than fail of conquest, pursued on her rugged way, letting no day pass without new and new perplexing the poor ladies' minds and troubling their bodies: and still swelling the more she was stopped, and growing hot with her own doings, at length abominable rage carried her to absolute tyrannies; so that taking with her certain old women (of wicked dispositions, and apt for envy's sake to be cruel to youth and beauty) with a countenance empoisoned with malice, flew to the sweet Philoclea, as if so many kites should come about a white dove; and matching violent gestures with mischievous threatenings, she having a rod in her hand...fell to scourge that most beautiful body. (3.419–20)

The high point of her cruelty comes when she ritually executes Artesia. Disguising her as Pamela in a “crimson velvet” (3.425) gown, Cecropia parades the unfortunate Artesia past Zelmane and Philoclea, hoping finally to break them with this unspeakable image of terror. This horrendous episode is followed by yet another, where Zelmane is made to witness his beloved's apparently severed head resting in a blood-coated basin. The visual impact is devastating: “The horribleness of the mischief was such, as Pyrocles could not at first believe his own senses, but bent his woeful eyes to discern it better; where too well he might see it was Philoclea's self, having no veil but beauty over the face” (3.431). Only Amphialus's last minute intervention prevents the secret poisoning Cecropia plans “thinking since they [the princesses] were not to be won, her son's love would no otherwise be mitigated” (3.440). In many respects, the increasingly vicious measures this widow undertakes to wrest back the crown perceivably stolen from her represents the quintessence of a stylized Medici cruelty.

Cecropia's role as widow is, in many respects, exacerbated by her foreign status. Indeed, from the moment she first enters Arcadia, until the terrifying moments before her fall, Sidney's Cecropia faces increasingly critical, public scrutiny. Although she is initially received as a princess, her husband's death, followed by the unexpected marriage of Basilius and the births of Pamela and Philoclea reveals the growing contempt of the Arcadians for the now politically useless Cecropia. As she reflects:

And though I had been a saint I could not choose finding the change this change in fortune bred unto me—for now from the multitude of followers, silence grew to be at my gate, and absence in my presence; the guess of my mind could prevail more before than, now, many of my earnest requests; and thou, my dear son,

by the fickle multitude, no more than an ordinary person born of the mud of the people, regarded. (3.319)

As did the historical Catherine de' Medici, this foreign princess ends up in a suddenly xenophobic land as part of a political arrangement that too rapidly falls apart. Although Cecropia argues that her arrival was a welcome one, "their eyes admired my majesty; and happy was he or she on whom I would suffer the beams thereof to fall" (3.318), it becomes readily apparent that her presence is more tolerated than embraced. While it is true that in the beginning her favor is fastidiously courted, her husband's death and her son's displacement as heir decimate Cecropia's cultural net worth. She becomes, in short, non-negotiable foreign tender.

In his study of the dynastic union, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that "it treats the woman as a political instrument, a sort of pledge or liquid asset, capable of earning symbolic profits."²⁹ This is readily apparent in the case of Catherine de' Medici, whose carefully negotiated marriage promised important political capital to a France struggling with Spanish domination. Indeed, a marital alliance between Catherine, the niece of Pope Clement VII, and Henri, the second son of Francis I, appeared an advantageous union in light of repeated Spanish encroachments on French interests. The Pope's death less than a year later, however, drained Catherine of her symbolic worth. Without her papal connections, she became little more than the obscure daughter of a suddenly insignificant Medici. As her father-in-law, Francis I, reportedly concluded, "the girl has been given to me stark naked."³⁰

Worse yet, her family connections now actually worked against her, for Catherine subsequently came to represent the worst that Florence had to offer, including an association with Machiavelli and a familiarity with poison. When the Dauphin, François died unexpectedly in 1536 after drinking a glass of ice cold water following a tennis match, rumors circulated that he had been poisoned and that both Henri and Catherine were involved. That her husband reviled her, openly preferring his mistress Diane Poitiers, and that she failed to bear children during the first tumultuous years of their marriage did little to endear this Florentine nobody to a France no longer in need of her.³¹

Cecropia's symbolic capital is likewise from the beginning measured in terms of what she can bring to Arcadia. For the Arcadians, her chief value lies in her status as daughter of the king of Argos, an important royal

²⁹Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 54.

³⁰Cited in Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 28.

³¹See Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 30. While Catherine ultimately bore Henri eleven children, seven of whom survived to adulthood, it was not until she took medicines prescribed by French physicians that she conceived.

affiliation given the fact that her proposed husband is brother and heir apparent to an aging bachelor king. As Cecropia notes of her late husband, “so that he, holding place and estimation as heir of Arcadia, obtained me of my father, the king of Argos” (3.318). With her husband’s unexpected death and Amphialus’s equally unanticipated displacement, Cecropia’s symbolic worth within the Arcadian community virtually dies as well. This loss of status is evident when, at Basilius’s postnuptial feasts, a much younger Gynecia visibly displaces Cecropia. As she notes, “this beast (whom I can never name with patience) falsely and foolishly married this Gynecia, then a young girl, and brought her to sit above me in all feasts—to turn her shoulder to me-ward in all our solemnities” (3.318). Cecropia has been demoted to a virtual nonentity.

Not only is her continued presence a liability to a state no longer in need of this foreign princess to ensure its future, but Cecropia begins to exhibit behavior decidedly antithetical to Arcadian social and political well being. This is immediately evident in her unnatural affinity for wild beasts, which she occasionally loosens for the apparent purpose of inciting communal panic. That the beasts are not native to Arcadia is clear. As Basilius notes, “the like had never been seen” (1.117) in these pastoral woods, at least not prior to Cecropia’s arrival. Indeed, the savagery of these strange beasts seems to mirror that of Cecropia herself, a being (ill) bred to do whatever it takes to survive in a world hostile to her continued presence.

Thus, when her husband unexpectedly dies, quashing her political aspirations, she looks to her son, the yet proclaimed heir of Basilius to realize her dreams of monarchy. As she repeatedly reminds Amphialus, “yet did not thy orphanage or my widowhood deprive us of the delightful prospect which the hill of honour doth yield, while expectation of thy succession did bind dependencies unto us” (3.318). Gynecia, as mother of the heir apparent, expresses deep distrust of her sister-in-law’s motives. Although Basilius initially dismisses the threat Cecropia represents, Gynecia instinctively recognizes the danger this widow poses to the lawful heir of the Arcadian throne. Indeed, Gynecia “had heard much of the devilish wickedness of her heart, and that, particularly, she did her best to bring up her son Amphialus, being brother’s son to Basilius; to aspire to the crown as next heir male after Basilius” (1.117). This displaced widow, in short, comes to threaten the patrilineal order.

If Cecropia is thus viewed with suspicion at the time of her marriage, she becomes openly reviled following her emergence from coverture. Amphialus’s momentary stint as designated heir to the childless Basilius does little to endear Cecropia to the Arcadians. If anything, she becomes even more suspect with the births of Pamela and Philoclea, when, in other words, the last excuse for her continued presence in Arcadia is finally removed. While there can be little doubt that Cecropia acts criminally

when she kidnaps Pamela and Philoclea and wages terrorism against the Arcadian state, it is ultimately her unveiled legal identity that goes on trial. For as Lynne Dickson observes, “Cecropia [is] a nightmarish image of feminine power.”³² Michael McCanles has noted, “wrapped in her smug evil, she becomes at once threateningly sinister and oddly petty.”³³ Martin Raitière declares her “unrelievedly wicked,”³⁴ one who could well engage in psychological terrorism in the name of personal and political gain. As Katherine Roberts concludes, “Cecropia is responsible for all of the major disruptions in Arcadia.”³⁵ Indeed, even before Cecropia abducts Pamela and Philoclea and wages war against the Arcadian state, the process of demonization is complete. This “unrelievedly wicked” widow has been reduced to one whose manufactured evil negates any legal privilege her unveiled status enables. Once exposed in all its terrifying magnificence, Cecropia’s unveiled identity is swiftly demonized, before it is finally erased.

Why Sidney would choose to represent Machiavellian villainy in the guise of a widowed mother is in some respects difficult to understand. Although widowhood and motherhood in general proved easy targets for misogynist attacks in early modern England, Sidney in many ways seems an unlikely participant in the practice. As a favorite son from a family of notable women, Sidney possessed a kind of profeminism unusual in the early modern period. And, indeed, there are many notable women in the *New Arcadia* representing virtually all stages in a woman’s life, including Parthenia, Pamela, Philoclea, and Helen. Even the less than maternal Gynecia with all her behavioral flaws emerges as a strong woman, one whose inherent virtues ultimately overcome her momentary indiscretions. Cecropia, however, remains a dark and forbidding figure throughout the text, one whose sole narrative purpose seems to test the resolve of other, more virtuous members of the larger Arcadian community.

While it’s tempting to speculate how Cecropia’s villainy would have been represented as a maid or a wife (or a man, for that matter), such speculation in some respects seems superfluous given the political climate at the time that Sidney was writing the *Arcadia*.³⁶ Marriage negotiations

³²Lynne Dickson, “Sidney’s Grotesque Muse: Fictional Excess and the Feminine in the Arcadias,” *Renaissance Papers* (1992): 50.

³³Michael McCanles, *The Text of Sidney’s Arcadian World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 76.

³⁴Martin N. Raitière, *Faire Bitts: Sir Philip Sidney and Renaissance Political Theory* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1984), 32.

³⁵Katherine J. Roberts, *Faire Ladies: Sir Philip Sidney’s Female Characters* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 88.

³⁶While Sidney would not begin his revisions of the *Old Arcadia* until sometime between 1582 and 1584, at which time he added the Cecropia character to the text, her presence is arguably already visible in his representation of Catherine de’ Medici in *A Letter to Queen Elizabeth*.

between Elizabeth and Alençon were well under way. Moreover, the Machiavellian machinations of Catherine de' Medici had long been known to Sidney. He was just eighteen and on his first continental tour in Paris when the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre occurred. Only through the fortuitous intervention of Protestant friends was Sidney able to flee the carnage.³⁷

In *A Letter Written by Sir Philip Sidney to Queen Elizabeth Touching Her Marriage with Monsieur* (1579), Sidney argues forcefully against the proposed match between Alençon and the middle-aged Elizabeth I, citing the dangers that it would represent to a yet struggling English Protestant state. The English people, Sidney argues,

how their hearts will be galled, if not aliened, when they shall see you take to husband a Frenchman, and a Papist, in whom, howsoever fine wits may find further dangers or painted excuses, the very common people will know this: that he is the son of a Jezebel of our age.³⁸

Jezebel was, of course, the wicked wife of Ahab, king of Israel, who nurtured a long line of corrupt rulers even after her husband's death. Indeed, as a widow, she merely intensified the evil begun as a wife, passing along her corruption to her sons before she was finally killed through divine intervention. Even her end seems strangely familiar; like Cecropia, she fell to her death.³⁹ That Sidney's Cecropia is intended to represent the infamous Catherine de' Medici seems clear. That widowhood serves as a most appropriate vehicle through which to condemn this Machiavellian mother becomes obvious as well.

In early modern England, the erasure of threatening widow identity was most often accomplished through remarriage or death. As problematic as remarriage proved, it did serve to contain the threat this "loose electron" induced, for the widow merely re-entered another state of coverture.⁴⁰ And death often solved as many problems as it created, provided it occurred in a timely fashion. In the case of Catherine de' Medici, it did not happen soon enough. This vilified widow of early modern France finally died in 1589, three days after suddenly becoming ill. An autopsy revealed she died of "rotten lungs, a blood-soaked brain, and an

³⁷For a detailed discussion of Sidney's first continental tour, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney, Courtier Poet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

³⁸Sir Philip Sidney, *A Letter Written by Sir Philip Sidney to Queen Elizabeth, Touching her Marriage with Monsieur*, *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 48.

³⁹See 2 Kings 9:30.

⁴⁰Numerous early modern conduct manuals advised against widow remarriage. See, for example, Juan Luis Vives's *Education of a Christian Woman* and *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights* (London: 1632).

abscess in her left side,” visible signs, her critics might argue, of a corruptness nurtured through unauthorized power.⁴¹ After the French Revolution, her body, which had been entombed at Saint-Denis, was removed from this traditional resting place of kings and queens and thrown into a mass grave.⁴² In what was perhaps the final gesture of erasure, French revolutionaries succeeded in wiping away the last vestiges of one whose unveiled identity had proven such a source of social and political turmoil.

As for Cecropia, after her coup attempt fails, as indeed it must, this demonized widow and mother falls ignominiously from a rooftop to her death. While order is not immediately restored to the Arcadian world—the reunited royal family must still slosh through several prolonged bouts of betrayal and intrigue before they achieve a measure of negotiated harmony—Cecropia’s death, followed closely by the removal of Amphialus—does eliminate the threat of competing claims to Arcadian patrilineage. In the end, Pamela and Philoclea are confirmed as rightful heirs to Basilius’s estate as the vilified widow Cecropia is literally erased from the text.

⁴¹Knecht, *Catherine de’ Medici*, 268.

⁴²Knecht, *Catherine de’ Medici*, 269. Catherine de’ Medici’s entombment at Saint-Denis came only after a twenty-one year delay. When she died in 1589 in Blois, inadequate embalming spices required a quick burial in an unmarked grave. The body was later moved to the Valois rotunda at Saint-Denis.