

TAMORA

Was Queen Catherine de Medici of France Tamora's prototype?

- ❖ Scholar Jo Elridge Carney has identified Queen Catherine de Medici of France as a possible source of inspiration for Shakespeare, a prototype, for the character of Tamora, Queen of Goths. Of Florentine-French descent, Catherine had ruled over France as queen consort, then as queen regent, and lastly as the queen mother from 1547 to 1589. She was so widely reviled at the time of her death that her poorly embalmed corpse lay buried in an unmarked, remote wilderness grave for 21 years.
 - During the reigns of her sons Francois II (1559–60), Charles IX (1560–74), and Henri III (1574–89), Catherine, queen mother and regent, held sole power in her hands and exercised it without check or hindrance.
 - In August, 1572, Catherine married off her daughter, Marguerite de Valois, to Henri de Navarre, a Protestant. Six days later, an assassin believed to have been hired either by Catherine, the Duke of Alba, or a member of the Guise family, attempted to murder Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, Seigneur de Châtillon, the patriarch of French Protestants, who was among the thousands of Huguenots who had traveled to Paris for the festivities: fired from across the street, a bullet shot off a finger from de Coligny's right hand and shattered his left elbow. Though King Charles IX sent his own personal physician to treat de Coligny, he was forbidden by his mother, Catherine, from having any personal contact with him. Fearing imminent retaliation for this attempted murder by the Protestants, the royal troops were ordered to make a preemptive strike by going about the Parisian neighborhoods butchering (or drowning) any men, women, and children they suspected of being Protestants. So much blood was spit by the troops and street mobs during that week that the rivers literally ran red along with the streets. Having stormed into de Coligny's hotel, mercenaries beat him, and then heaved him out of a second story window onto the street below. They then decapitated him and finished by hanging up his torso.

- After English printers began printing and circulating accounts of the massacre, English Protestants widely regarded Catherine as a perfidious woman, “malevolent to the core, a wicked queen who master-minded the massacre, who poisoned her enemies, taught her children Machiavellian political strategies, and corrupted their morals.”
 - Soon afterward, when marriage negotiations began between Elizabeth and Catherine’s youngest son, Francis, courtier Sir Philip Sidney and Puritan printer John Stubbs were so outspoken in their criticism that Sidney was banished and Stubbs had one of his hands cut off before being imprisoned.
 - In 1587, following Catherine’s death, a famous English preacher, Job Throckmorton, rejoiced from the pulpit at her demise saying Catherine had only blood, not milk, with which to suckle her children, and that she had raised her children up to be snakes to cultivate “hypocrisy, filthiness of life,” and to “persecute the church of God.”
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- ❖ Tamora pleaded to Titus to exercise mercy upon her sons. She first tried to get him to see/consider her not as a foreigner, a stranger, an enemy, but as another single parent. Sensing failure on that point, she then sought to demonstrate how her sons had taken up arms for their king and country just as his had done, fighting just as bravely and as well. In her last effort, she counseled that by being merciful he would gain considerable favor among the gods, as mercy is closer to their nature than murder.
 - ❖ At the beginning of the play, Tamora is a desperate mother frantically trying to keep her family together. In the eyes of everyone, save the Romans, Titus’ refusal of mercy/clemency is monstrous: the very fact that the deed abides by Roman tradition is an indictment against Rome, and begs the question: who are the *real* savages? The Goths want to preserve their children while the Romans kill their own.
 - ❖ Tamora was a prisoner, a slave, property belonging to Titus, her conqueror. Her body, her life, as well as those of her three sons, were at his disposal just like whatever horses, weapons, gold or silver plate, and wine sacks he took from their homeland as spoils of war.
 - ❖ As would anyone, she wanted security, safety, protection for herself and her family.

- ❖ Having been denied mercy, the rejected Tamora became Titus' foil, as potent in evil as he was in virtue; she rose from being his slave to being his queen, with a claim to vengeance as just and valid as his own

Tamara embodied multiple threats to Roman men

- A femme fatale, she was highly sexual, a widow, promiscuous, exotic, intelligent, cunning, cruel, willful, aggressive, domineering, vengeful, decisive, deceitful, and persuasive.
- She rejected her own womanhood (those qualities popularly associated with women, particularly mothers) and recognized no universal bond between herself and other women (Lavinia).
- She was hardly the preferred Elizabethan maiden, chaste, silent, and obedient.
- She was terribly indiscreet (either didn't cover up her indiscretions or was woefully inadequate at doing so)

❖ *The sacrifice of Alarbus*

- To Shakespeare's contemporary audience, revenge, in its connotation, was nearly synonymous with the modern definition and concept of retribution.
- The pagan, pre-Christian, Roman world of the play is one in which acts of violence—regardless of motivating factors—demanded a response. Consequently, personal feuds (conducted without care of consequences or impact) were perpetuated as a seemingly never-ending cycle of violence.
- When lives were taken by violence, the spirits of the dead required the sacrifice of human lives, the paying of blood debts, in order to find peace; should the loved ones of the dead have failed in this responsibility, the spirits would mercilessly terrorize them with supernatural menace. This is what the Andronici hoped to avoid through a sacrifice.
- Titus—into whose power/custody Tamora and her children had found themselves—consented to Lucius' selection of Alarbus, Tamora's eldest son, as the sacrificial offering—despite the fact that he, being a youth, had not taken up arms against the Romans: none of the Roman dead could hold Alarbus the least responsible for their deaths.
- In the eyes of the Romans, the surviving Goths bore *collective* responsibility for the deaths of the Andronici. In putting *only one* of the Goths to death, Titus was in fact demonstrating restraint and mercy: in

the eyes of his fellow Romans, Titus would have been completely justified in slaying Tamora and her three sons.

- Tamora entreated with Titus, trying to make him recognize the sheer injustice of what he was contemplating on account of her son's innocence and blamelessness.
- Titus' hard heart to a mother's pleas insured that Tamora would orchestrate her own blood feud—assigning collective responsibility for Alabrus' death to the *entire* Andronici. In abiding by Roman tradition to appease the dead Titus unwittingly consigned his entire family to tragedy.

❖ Exacting Revenge

- Tamora was not, as she had pledged herself, a “handmaid to (Saturninus’) desires and a loving nurse, mother to his youth” (children that they would conceive together?)
- Lavinia lied to Demetrius and Chiron: she told them that their fortuitous appearance saved her life, that Lavinia and Bassianus had lured her into the dark woods for the purpose of binding her, casting her down into the pit, and leaving her to the mercy of “A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes, ten thousand swelling toads ...”
- Just as Titus disowned any of his children who acted contrary to his ideals, Tamora threatened to disown Demetrius and Charon if they did not avenge her and their family upon Bassianus and Lavinia: as their reward for killing Bassianus, Tamora personally handed Lavinia over to them so that she would be defiled (and, she had hoped, killed after they had finished).
- Lavinia pleaded with the boys to be what their mother was not—merciful. They would not be disassociated from their mother.
- Tamora grabbed a dagger and was even going to kill Lavinia herself until Demetrius stopped her.
- When Lavinia pleaded to Tamora to allow her to die unmolested she refused.
- When Saturninus was seething with rage and ready to strike against Titus on account of the arrows, Tamora attempted to soothe and quiet him so that she personally would be the agent of Titus' destruction. She promised to utilize all of her skill and art to make Titus harmonious towards them (to forestall Lucius and the Goth army from attacking before Saturninus had rallied enough troops).

- Disguised as Revenge, up from Hell with the avenging demons Rape and Murder, Tamora tested Titus' sanity and resolve. It was she who suggested to Titus that he host and prepare a banquet at his house; she promised to bring his enemies all of whom she would force to stoop and kneel before him. She also suggested that his son, Lucius, leave the Goth's armed camp to join them.
- Ultimately, it was Tamora's flaunting of convention that was her undoing: in having taken Aaron as her lover, and cuckolding Saturninus after their marriage, she assailed not only the religion, tradition, and customs of the known world (Roman and Gothic) but committed a sin universally regarded as taboo—she wantonly took into her bed that most *Other* of Others: a black man. She sexually gave herself to one more alien/foreign than herself, even conceiving and giving birth to his child. She empowered him in his crimes (against whites).

❖ *Titus turned the tables*

- Asked his brother, Marcus, to have Lucius and the Goths encamp wherever they happened to be at present and to have several of the Goth princes accompany Lucius to the banquet.
- Recognizing the trio for whom they really were, Titus forced Tamora (who assumed he was gaga) to leave her two sons behind with him—or else the banquet was off.
- Titus stabbed her to death.
- Lucius, decrying her as a tigress, commanded that no religious rights or sacrifices be undertaken for her soul, no lamentations be made for her death, and that her body be denied burial: her corpse was to be abandoned in the forest to become fodder for the beasts and vermin of the woods.
- ❖ Similarities between Catherine de Medici and Tamora
 - A domineering force and presence, she was the real *power* in the land, her sons being ineffectual and incompetent to govern an empire
 - She was an outsider, an Italian who became the queen of the French nation
 - Both had kinky sexual interests: curious to know whether or not her husband performed any better in bed with his mistress, Diane de Poitiers, than with her Catherine had holes bored into the ceiling above Diane's bed so she could peep and watch. Catherine also formed a spy network of beautiful women whom she enlisted to

seduce and sleep with men whom she suspected of knowing things that she felt she ought to know, too.

- Both women exacted vengeance on those who slandered, shamed, or assaulted them: when her husband was on his deathbed, she refused to allow Diane to come to him (they desperately wanted to see each other one last time); after his death, she seized whatever jewels Diane had been given, forced her out of her home, the Château de Chenonceau, and banished her from Paris.
- Both exasperated conflicts rather than deescalate them.
- Both women, upon their marriages, had virtually no dowries to give to their husbands.
- Like Tamora, Catherine outlived her children--almost: her only surviving son, Henry III, was stabbed to death seven months after she had died.
- Both women were cruel to young girls: having discovered that her daughter, Marguerite, was cheating on her husband, Catherine, had her dragged out of bed one night and her hair ripped out of her skull till she was almost bald. When she finally became fed up with Marguerite's infidelity, Catherine forced her son-in-law to imprison her and kill his wife's lover.