

The Gondi: Family Strategy and Survival in Early Modern France.

Joanna Milstein.

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Over the past generation, scholars have given increasing attention to the transnational relationships that helped shape early modern life, and Joanna Milstein's thoughtful, carefully researched book is a significant addition to this literature. The Gondi family whom she studies offers an exemplary case. They began as Florentine bankers, and some members of the family remained in Italy throughout the period; for a time they had an outpost in Spain as well. But in the mid-sixteenth century they also established branches in France, first as merchants and bankers, then as prominent landowners, statesmen, and ecclesiastics. Their story thus exemplifies a second important feature of early modern society: the possibilities it offered for dramatic social mobility, upward and downward alike. To the vocal dismay of many contemporaries, who disliked their sudden prominence, Italian origins, and Catholic politics, the Gondi needed only a generation to establish themselves at the very top of the French aristocracy, as dukes and great feudal lords, whose incomes dwarfed those of even some other peers. By the early eighteenth century, following the famous misadventures of Cardinal de Retz, they had disappeared from the French scene.

Milstein focuses on the upward phase of this trajectory, tracing the family's history into the reign of Henri IV and saying little about what happened to it thereafter. Gondi success, she shows, began with the monarchy. Catherine de Medici found a reliable ally in these fellow Florentines, appreciating both their financial skills and their unswerving loyalty through difficult times. Amid the factional and ideological struggles of the sixteenth century, loyalty of this order was not a given, and it brought the Gondi immense rewards, in the form of cash, honors, and high offices. That included positions in the French church; for a full century, the clan dominated the bishopric of Paris, and it held a variety of other church positions as well. The family also understood the importance of internal unity. Its branches supported one another, within France and across national lines, and women of the family advanced its interests at least as much as the men. They too understood the Crown's importance to the family's position, and they stayed especially close to Catherine de Medici, to whom they offered intimate advice and from whom they reaped large material benefits.

Both men and women of the family brought to these encounters a sophisticated, supple culture, suggesting the continued influence on them of their Florentine past. Their business skills remained sharp even as they ascended the social ladder, and they continued into the seventeenth century to lend money to the Crown, farm taxes, and advise other great families. At the same time, they collected art, supported writers, and held salons; they wrote occasional pieces of political reflection. In the explosive circumstances of the sixteenth century, these cultural attainments had practical as well as personal significance. Commanding as they did the multiple layers of Renaissance

learning, the Gondi were ideally suited to serve the Crown in delicate international missions, notably those involving the papacy, the Italian princes, and the Duchy of Savoy. In each of these negotiations, domestic and international politics overlapped, for all France's warring factions had ties to these outside powers. Gondi diplomacy was another tool by which the family established its internal eminence.

Milstein's analyses rest on impressively abundant documentation, drawn from Italian and American as well as French collections, and for the most part she stays close to this documentary foundation. That interpretive prudence is both a strength and a weakness, for many of the Gondi documents are letters to powerful people, whose support the family needed. As a result, Milstein tends to see the Gondi as they wanted to be seen. She energetically defends them against contemporaries' gossipy criticisms, and she emphasizes the coherence, good sense, and effectiveness of their collective strategies, with only brief attention to moments of family discord and to individuals' inner lives. But the sixteenth-century Gondi spectacular successes justify this emphasis on strategy and discipline. As well as any French family of their era, they understood the game they were playing.

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