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The Influence of Woman  
in  
History.

Charles Stewart Davison, '98

## The Influence of Woman in History.

History, as it leaves the loom of time, has always been a very intricately woven product. It is the result of many and varied elements in the warp and woof of human progress and destiny. Of the patterns appearing upon it, worked out by the hands that held the threads some are noble in conception, varied in color and design, and beautiful in their completeness. Others are broken in outline and rough in finish as if some evil fate had

caused the hand to drop the threads and pick them up again in a hopeless tangle. They are all the results of countless forces working for and against each other, of great principles acting in their appointed ways of personal ambitions realized and thwarted, of strong wills crossing strong wills, of influences seen and unseen.

Ever since the incident in the Garden of Eden, there has been a force in the affairs of man, controlling his fortunes and affecting his destinies. That force is the influence of woman. Equally with that of man, her influence has been a determining

factor in directing the course of empire, and swaying the destinies of nations. Often during the reign of weak and incompetent kings she has been the power behind the throne, and behind many a scene of the world-drama has she been the director of the play.

Probably the most notable example of women of this character was Catherine de Medici. She was a woman of great personal beauty, of queenly form and magnificent presence, but in her nature had embodied all the vices as well as virtues of her family. She has been called a bigoted Catholic, but her conduct would

justify the statement that she lacked religion of any kind. She favored now the Huguenots and now the Catholics just as it suited her plans. For she loved power, and, the personification of treachery, she would stoop to any means to obtain it. Upon the accession of her son, the weakminded Francis II in 1559, she immediately took charge of affairs and together with the Guises made France wretched throughout the successive reigns of her three sons. She plunged her country into the horrors of a religious war, and for eight years she revelled in conspiracies, treacheries, and assassinations. At the door of

this cold-blooded and unscrupulous woman must be laid the responsibility for one of the most awful crimes which have ever shocked humanity; the massacre of St. Bartholomew's day. The noble-hearted Admiral Coligny, the leading spirit of the Huguenot cause, had incurred the displeasure of the queen-mother because he had counseled the young king to "rule alone, and be no longer governed by others." This so enraged Catherine that she hired an assassin to kill him. But the attempt on his life failed, and the admiral's followers began to rally around their chief and make threats of revenge. The

infuriated Catherine now determined upon a general massacre of the Huguenots. When she had all her plans arranged, she laid before the king for his signature the order for the order for the infamous deed. Charles, haunted by visions of a slaughtered people, shrank from the thought of it, but urged on by the fiendish arguments of his mother, he consented, "provided," said he, "not one Huguenot be left alive in France to reproach me with the deed." At the tolling of a church bell the awful carnage began. For three days and nights it continued until twenty thousand or more were

slain. And for the death of those who on the fatal night did not wear on cap or coat-sleeve the white cross of the papist, who shall answer but Catherine de Medicis.

Another woman who by her influence decided the fate of thousands and brought misery upon the people was Madame de Maintenon.

Under Henry of Navarre, religious toleration had been granted by the Edict of Nantes in 1598. For nearly a hundred years this edict had been the guarantee of the many protestants living in France. But with the marriage of Madame de Maintenon to Louis the Fourteenth came a

change in their fortunes. This woman was a Catholic. Though she was kind and generous in other respects, her religious zeal blunted her higher feelings and made her responsible for an act which bore bitter fruit. It was through her influence that Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes. As a result of this bigoted act, three hundred thousand subjects were driven out of the kingdom. Among them were wealthy merchants, and the most skillful laborers in the country.

Several important and flourishing industries of France were completely ruined, and the manufactures of

other countries greatly increased. Not only this, but indirect results of a far-reaching nature were brought about by this act. The indignation caused by this measure led to the formation of a confederacy against Louis known as the League of Augsburg. This led to the war of the Palatinate with its dreary story of devastation and ruin. Next came the Grand Alliance in which eight monarchs were united against the French king. War again ensued which was terminated only after ten years of fruitless struggle. Thus did the influence of one woman set in motion a

train of causes that led to such dire results.

But not all of woman's influence has been of this character. It would be unfair to point out only the dark deeds in which she has had a part, for much that is brightest and best in history has come to us through her influence. Inspiring records of bravery and self-sacrifice, instances of timely tact and judgment refresh the recital of historical facts. The story of the Maid of Domremy, Jean d'Arc, is too well known to be repeated. It needs but to be mentioned to recall to your minds the poor peasant

girl seeming to hear in her day-dreams  
the voice of her country calling for a de-  
liverer, the brilliant successes which follow-  
ed her recognition as leader, the ingra-  
titude of her countrymen, and the burn-  
ing stake in the streets of Rouen.

Now should we pass by her counter-  
part in the French revolution, the beauti-  
ful Charlotte Corday. Said she; "I saw  
civil war ready to rend France to atoms.  
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cipal cause of the perils and calami-  
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In later times it was the influence of a woman that in all probability prevented war between our nation and the mother country. England had acknowledged the Southern Confederacy.

One of the union ships overhauled the Trent, an English ship, and took from her the representatives of the confederacy to England. In answer to the apology which our government immediately made, the English government framed such an insulting reply that war would undoubtedly have been declared. But when the document was submitted to Queen

Victoria, her intuition foresaw the probable result, and she so altered and tempered the reply that it proved to be acceptable to the United States, and the two greatest nations of the world remained at peace.

Such is a hasty glance at the influence of woman in the past. If she advances to the position she should rightly hold, the future will see her occupying a station of still higher honor and influence.

Charles Stewart Davison '98

Commencement Oration of Charles Stewart Davison, Class of 1898  
Transcribed by Nick Bloom, June 2009  
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

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Nor should we pass by her counterpart in the French revolution, the beautiful Charlotte Corday. Said she; "I saw civil war ready to [rend?] France to [atoms?]: persuaded that Marat was the principal cause of the perils and calamities of the land, I have sacrificed my life for his to save my country." Not entirely successful perhaps, in all she wished to accomplish, yet as an example of unselfish sacrifice

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