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# Sister Act: The Royal Siblings Who Capture The World's Imagination

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This week we've seen the media focusing on two royal brothers, Prince William and Prince Harry, who are destined to capture the world's headlines for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Janice Seto takes this opportunity to take a look at why we're so fascinated by siblings, focusing on the always glamorous Miller sisters, led by Princess Marie Chantal of Greece.

Why do we find sister sets so fascinating? And by set, at least three (two is a pair). It's because they flesh out for us the potential for multiple futures without being schizophrenic! Sort of like Three Faces of Eve. This tends not to happen with brothers — because boys compete. The majority of sisters 'tend and befriend'.

Sister sets cover the map. They are literary figures (the Brontes), heiresses (like the Millers and the Canadian McLaughlin daughters (whose father Colonel Sam's company became General Motors of Canada), and socialites like the Morgans and the Cushings.

In American politics the Kennedy sisters (Jean, who was later appointed President Bill Clinton's Ambassador to Ireland; Patricia, who married the Brit member of Frank Sinatra's 'Rat Pack', Peter Lawford; and Kathleen, who was widowed from the Marquess of Hartington, heir to the Duke of Devonshire. His younger brother and heir, Andrew, was married to Deborah, from another famous set of sisters, the Mitfords.)

In Asia, Soong sisters come to mind. As the saying goes, one loved money, one loved power, one loved China. (Respectively, Ai-ling's husband, HH Kung was one of the richest Chinese men before the Communist Revolution; Mei-ling, wife of Chiang Kai-shek); and Ching-ling, the widow of the much older founder of the Republic, Dr Sun Yat-sen).

Royal sister sets are especially appealing. Their families saw them as invaluable means to serve their country and more importantly secure the dynasty via prestigious marriages to men of wealth and connection.

Catherine de Medici made sure her daughters contracted marriages that were advantageous to her as Queen Mother of France (such as to the future Henri IV of Margo of literature and film fame). And Elizabeth I prevented many of her female relatives from marrying to safeguard her place as Queen.

The most intriguing sister sets have three aspects in common, and I will use the Miller sisters to illustrate them.

First, who are the Miller Sisters?

They came to fame in 1995 when Marie Chantal, the middle daughter of American billionaire Robert Miller (co-founder of the Duty Free Shop luxury goods empire) and his Ecuadorian wife, Chantal, became engaged to Crown Prince Pavlos of the Hellenes (colloquially, of Greece).

Eldest daughter Pia Cristina had married a Getty and the youngest, Alexandra, was to marry Prince Alexandre von Furstenburg, son of designer Diane and Prince Egon, a son of Italian heiress, Clara Agnelli.

The Miller family lives life to the full with a chalet in Gstand, luxury residences all over the world, the record-breaking yacht the Mari-Cha III, and fine art & haute couture tastes.

Back to the list of why sister sets fascinate us:

1) SOCIAL: Not too ubiquitous but at the right place, right time, standing out without sticking out. You can depend on a Miller Sister to add the right touch of glamour. Their Latina mother, Chantal, emphasized "don't get fat", sent them to fine schools like Le Rosey, and made sure the girls were a credit to their family. No Marina Ogilvy antics for this family.

They first got noticed in the Miller DFS base of Hong Kong, and entertained at homes in Hong Kong, Paris (Ile St Louis), London, and New York. They dressed well. They behaved well. And they all married well. (At least the first time!)

2) SMART: All of them did some college, marrying men of some intelligence, not for them the Mr Hursts of the world (remember your Pride & Prejudice?)

3) SUPPORTIVE: In the telefilm, Little Gloria, Happy at Last, based on the book on the custody battle over the mother of CNN's Anderson Cooper, a memorable scene has the Morgan sisters charging into a room, a fierce, cohesive, strong unit, defending sibling Gloria Morgan Vanderbilt. In her recent interview with UK Vogue from her new base in London, Marie Chantal mentions how close the sisters are. The Miller Sisters have already taken their social prowess across the Atlantic from New York.

Born-royal examples of Sister Sets include the Montenegro princesses (whose marriages includes royals in Yugoslavia, Russia and King of Italy), the daughters of Prince Carl of Sweden & his wife Princess Ingeborg of Denmark (Marthe the crown princess of Norway, Astrid the Queen of the Belgians, and Margreta, princess of Denmark), and the tragic last Romanov grand duchesses, united by fate.

Sister Sets do not share any of these three characteristics:

1) INSIPID (devoid of personality or character): Or as Americans would say: "They got a life!" None of the sister sets become cabbages after marriage. Alexandra Miller von Furstenburg is known for her edgy fashion sense. Whereas the daughters of George III and Queen Charlotte stuck close to home, without much personality of their own. Unfortunately, they were not a fecund lot either.

In literature, the Bennet sisters of Pride & Prejudice are not a sister set either. Jane & Elizabeth stand out. Lydia too, but for the wrong reasons. But as for Mary and Kitty? Can't say much.

## 2) INSIGNIFICANT: Either

through accomplishments or marriage, Sister Sets make a mark (or a small dent) on history. They chose husbands with connections. Just as the widowed Jacqueline Kennedy could hardly marry a dentist, it is reported that "no title, no accent, no play" guided their dating and marital choices. And Miller money created grand, spectacular wedding ceremonies.

Take Crown Prince Pavlos of Greece, whose royal connections include reigning sovereigns. His mother's sister is Queen of Denmark (talk about loyalty, Margrethe II refused to officially visit Greece for years until the legal situation of her sister's family, exiled Queen Anne-Marie, was regularized. Margrethe II, Anne Marie, and Benedikte form another Sister Set.) The sister of Pavlos's father (ex-King Constantine of Greece) is Queen Sofia of Spain. At many high profile royal events, where Pavlos & Marie Chantal are invited, another Miller sister and even parents may be there. They make a striking appearance: well-groomed, charming, attractive, coutured, buffed. A welcome change from grunge, punk, and eccentric princesses.

## Contrast

this fine choice of husband with the low-key social profile of Jean, Duc de Vendome, son of the Orleans claimant to France. None of his immediate relatives reign, although many are wealthy and sociable in France and Germany (i.e. his aunt Diane de France Duchess of Wurtemberg).

The social cache of Jean is just not the same as Pavlos. The legitimist claimant to France, the hunky Luis Alfonso, too, has effectively moved his base to Latin America due to his advantageous marriage to Margarita Vargas, Venezuelan heiress.

## Another

set of sisters, the Savoia three, siblings of Italy's Victor Emmanuel all made media savvy marriages.

3) INDECISIVE: If the situation is bad, change it. Alexandra tried to save her marriage by working for Diane von Furstenberg and even going to yoga centres like The Ashram. Pia even moved with husband Christopher Getty and their four children to Hong Kong for a while and acted as creative ambassador with Sephora (after the shotgun marriage between LVMH and DFS).

But in the end, sisters say Life is short and move forward. For her part, Marie Chantal launched a line of clothing for the children of well-heeled parents.

Critics of Marie Chantal label her as lightweight, and perhaps they do have some merit. Her children were not raised to speak Greek, which is unfortunate given the turbulent history of the family and their past striving to solidify themselves as true Greeks. This may be rectified with enrollment in the Hellenic College, founded by their grandfather in exile, Constantine II. And a while ago, she said 'no more fashion shows' but, no sooner had she said this than she appeared in her regular front row seat of the haute couture catwalk of Valentino, designer of her wedding dress.

Perhaps the defining reason is that Marie Chantal and Pavlos choose to make London their home, instead of Greece. This despite the fact that the former royal family is now legally permitted to return. (And for that matter, Constantine & Anne Marie still live in Hampstead. As for Constantine and Anne Marie, the former queen is said to be scouting out places to live in Greece, all of which takes time.)

It's claimed Pavlos's work in finance requires him to be in a major trade capital like London or New York. Also, Marie Chantal likes being close to her family, and both sisters are in London.

Add to which the fact she doesn't speak Greek...

However, similar arguments surround the Bulgarian royals, who are mainly based in Spain, where their heiress mother hails from and where they were raised. This is despite the fact their father, former King Simeon II, has returned to Bulgaria and recently served as Prime Minister.

The rules are different for former sovereign families who have to make their own way in the world and have no official duties. It is rare indeed that former sovereign families have the means to return to their now expensive homelands. Not everyone can be like former King Michael of Romania and Dom Duarte Braganza in Portugal.

Still, Marie Chantal is not leaving the media eye anytime soon. Which is a good thing for us royal watchers.

As couples produce fewer children and family sizes shrink, sister sets become rarer and rarer. No wonder we enjoy observing this unique family dynamic every chance we can.