



Catherine de Medici

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Introduction

Orphaned in infancy, imprisoned in childhood, heiress to a vast fortune, Catherine de Medici was raised in Florence, Italy, a city dominated by her ruling family. At age fourteen, she became a princess in a magnificent alliance to Henry, son of King Francis I of France. She suffered as her husband became bewitched by the elegant Diane de Poitiers. But after an agonizingly childless decade when she saw popular resentment build against her, Catherine conceived the first of ten children, and succeeded in making the court her own. She transformed the cultural life of France by importing much of what we now think of as typically French -- cuisine, art, music, fashion -- from her native Italy, cradle of the Renaissance.

After a freak jousting accident in 1559, when a wooden splinter fatally pierced Henry's eye, Catherine found herself suddenly thrust into the maelstrom of French power politics, for which she discovered she had inherited a natural gift. As she learned to become both a superb strategist and ruthless conspirator, Catherine's indomitable fight to protect the throne and her children's birthright ensured the survival of the French monarchy for two hundred years after her death.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did the death of Pope Clement VII, the uncle who brokered her marriage to Henry II, affect Catherine's political situation in France?
2. How would you characterize the relationship between Catherine and the woman known in court as "Madame" -- Diane de Poitiers, Henry's not-so-secret mistress?
3. How did Henry's tragic death ensure a bloodless *coup d'etat* by the Guise clique?
4. What role did the poor health of her children play in Catherine's political ascendancy?
5. To what extent was Catherine's fascination with astrology and the occult significant in her decision-making as a ruler, and how did these unusual interests affect her historical reputation?
6. In what key respects did Catherine's rule as Queen Mother of France differ from Elizabeth I's rule as sovereign of England?
7. Why did the 1561 formation of the Triumvirate, the unlikely alliance between Montmorency, the Guises, and the Marshal de Saint-André, represent a challenge to Catherine's moderate religious policy?
8. How would you characterize Catherine's involvement in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the French wars of religion?
9. What does Catherine's embrace of innovations like tobacco, the side-saddle, women's drawers, the folding fan, and the handkerchief reveal about her character?
10. To what extent did Catherine's efforts to preserve her children's birthright dictate the nature of her rule?

About the Author

Swedish by birth and educated in Britain, Germany, and France, Leonie Frieda speaks five languages. She lives in London with her daughter and son. *Catherine de Medici* is her first book.