

# Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France

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Poisoner, besotted mother, despot, necromancer, engineer of a massacre: the stain on the name of Catherine de Medici is centuries old. In this critically hailed biography, Leonie Frieda reclaims the story of this unjustly maligned queen of France to reveal a skilled ruler battling against extraordinary political and personal odds.

Orphaned in infancy, imprisoned in childhood, heiress to an ancient name and vast fortune, Catherine de Medici was brought up in Florence, a city dominated by her ruling family. At age fourteen, the Italian-born young woman became a French princess in a magnificent alliance arranged by her uncle the pope to Henry, son of King Francis I of France. She suffered cruelly as her new husband became bewitched by the superbly elegant Diane de Poitiers. Henry's influential and lifelong mistress wisely sent her lover to sleep with Catherine, and after an agonizingly childless decade when she saw popular resentment build against her, she conceived the first of ten children. Slowly Catherine made the court her own: she transformed the cultural life of France, importing much of what we now think of as typically French -- cuisine, art, music, fashion -- from Italy, cradle of the Renaissance.

In a freak jousting accident in 1559, a wooden splinter fatally pierced Henry's eye. Hitherto sidelined, Catherine found herself suddenly thrust into the maelstrom of French power politics, for which she soon discovered she had inherited a natural gift.

A contemporary and sometime ally of Elizabeth I of England, Catherine learned to become both a superb strategist and ruthless conspirator. During the rise of Protestantism, her attempts at religious tolerance were constantly foiled, and France was riven by endemic civil wars. Although history has always laid the blame for the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day massacre by a Catholic mob of thousands of French Protestants at Catherine's door, Leonie Frieda presents a powerful case for Catherine's defense.

This courageous queen's fatal flaw was a blind devotion to her sickly and corrupt children, three of whom would become kings of France. Despite their weaknesses, Catherine's indomitable fight to protect the throne and their birthright ensured the survival of the French monarchy for a further two hundred years after her death, until it was swept away by the French Revolution.

Leonie Frieda has returned to original sources and reread the thousands of letters left by Catherine, and she has reinvested this protean figure with humanity. The first biography of Catherine in decades, it reveals her to be one of the most influential women ever to wear a crown.

Leonie Frieda is the author of a bestselling biography of Catherine de Medici and *The Deadly Sisterhood: A Story of Women, Power and Intrigue in the Italian Renaissance*. She lives in London.

In 1533, 14-year-old Catherine de Medici arrived in France to marry the future king Henri II; over the next 16 years, she endured the dominance of Henri's mistress, Diane de Poitiers, and the disdain of courtiers for her family's merchant background. The sudden death of

Henri launched Catherine into three decades as regent and chief adviser to three sons who ruled in succession. Frieda navigates the twists and turns of the French royal court and family with particular attention to the formation of Catherine's political skills. From her lonely childhood as a tool in the diplomacy of her powerful uncles to her carefully cultivated relationship with her father-in-law and maneuvering through shifting family alliances, the queen learned self-possession, deception and strategy. While Catherine has been maligned for her role in France's wars of religion and in particular the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Frieda argues that Catherine attempted to reach compromise in the religious strife of her adopted country. While trying to flesh out Catherine, Frieda occasionally paints others with a too-broad brush. At times, her descriptions of Catherine's actions as emotionally or politically motivated seem arbitrary. But Frieda's portrait of Catherine is multifaceted, and her presentation of the complicated narrative of five tumultuous reigns is compelling.

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Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women, This book deals with women in political power during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth I, Catherine de Medici, Mary II) and about the gender-based stereotypes that were produced rhetorically about them.

“ . or queen , danger became inherent in what John Knox coined &quot; the monstrous regiment of women . &quot; 5 The historical reading of Catherine de Médicis , Queen of France during the sixteenth - century wars of religion , serves as a touchstone ...”