

Compelling Questions: Was Catherine de Medici a “Black Queen?”

This lesson plan is sponsored in part by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Eastern Region Program, coordinated by Waynesburg University.

In this inquiry students will analyze extracts and depictions of Catherine de Medici to more deeply understand how queen regents could hold power and use it. Students will also learn about the impact the Protestant Reformation in France had on her sons’ reigns. Students will explore documents in four rounds:

1. *How is Catherine de Medici remembered?*
2. *How did Catherine de Medici keep power?*
3. *Was Catherine de Medici anti-Huguenot (Protestant)?*
4. *Finally, was Catherine de Medici a “Black Queen?”*

Overview: Who was Catherine de Medici?

Born in April 1519, Caterina Maria Romola di Lorenzo de Medici was an Italian-born French Queen, regent and mother. The Medici family were wealthy bankers and patrons of the arts. Pope Clement VII arranged her marriage to the second son of the King of France. In 1535 he became heir to the French throne and in 1547 he was crowned Henry II, making Catherine the new French Queen. Henry II suddenly died in a jousting accident in 1559 making Catherine’s eldest son Francis the next king. Francis died a year later and was succeeded by their ten-year-old son, Charles IX. Across both reigns Catherine acted as a queen regent. Catherine optimized her position as former wife and mother to the French king’s to influence political policy and establish power. She was regularly depicted as the mourning wife and devoted mother. One of the defining events of the period was the French Wars of Religion. In 1572 Catherine arranged a marriage for her daughter Marguerite to the Protestant King, Henry of Navarre. During the wedding, a protestant Huguenot leader was murdered along with hundreds of other protestants in what became known as the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. Catherine appears to have been regularly trying to appease and reunite both sides. After Charles IX died from tuberculosis in 1574, Catherine’s third son Henry succeeded him as Henry III. Tragedy again would strike when her fourth son died of malaria and with Henry without an heir. This escalated the Wars for Religion. Just months after his mother died, in 1589, Henry III was assassinated leading to the Protestant, Henry of Navarre being named King of France.

ROUND 1: How is Catherine de Medici Remembered?

Document A: Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen

In his 1978 article, ‘The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen’, Sutherland attempts to understand medieval perceptions of Catherine de Medici as an assertive, wicked and cunning queen. The following extract addresses these perceptions and attempts to trace where these might have originated from.

Few great historical figures have come down to us so loaded with malediction [cursed] as Catherine de Medici. The legend of her wickedness... depicted her, among other things, as cold, cruel, calculating, treacherous, and evil. She was a monster of selfish ambition, who sacrificed her children, her adopted country, her principles - if she ever had any - , and all who stood in her way to the satisfaction of her all-consuming desire for power. Thus, she was fully prepared to commit any crime. Naturally there are many variations on this theme, some moderate and some immoderate. But, in one form or another, it has continued to receive

widespread credence and support, and there are still few historians who have not been influenced by the legend of the wicked Italian queen. It appears to have sprung from the extreme polemical writings of the Protestant pamphleteers, who laid on Catherine all the blame for the massacre of St. Bartholomew.

Thus, in some works Catherine became not only the wicked author of the massacre but also the symbol of all that was held to be degraded in the mores of the time. It was perhaps inevitable that Catherine should have suffered in this way because her vulnerability was increased by a dual disadvantage. She had the misfortune to be both a woman and of Italian paternity. This invited comparisons with the notorious Machiavelli, with whose undeservedly sinister reputation her name has often been emotively associated. Furthermore, she bore the responsibilities of the crown without enjoying its authority.

Sutherland. N. M (1978) 'Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen' In The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 9, No 2. Kirksville: Truman State University.

Guiding Questions:

1. What kind of source is this?
2. When was it written?

According to Document A, how was Catherine de Medici remembered?

ROUND 2: How did Catherine de Medici keep power?

Document A: Workshop of François Clouet, Catherine de' Medici and her younger children.

This document is a painting by François Clouet, a French Renaissance painter. The painting depicts Catherine de' Medici standing alongside four of her children, including the newly crowned Charles IX (from left to right: Hercule François, Charles, Marguerite, and Henri). Catherine was regularly depicted as a maternal figure rather than an independently powerful woman.



François Clouet, a French Renaissance painter c.1561 portrait.

Guiding Questions:

1. What kind of source is this?
2. When was it painted?
3. Look at the clothing Catherine is wearing in the painting. What can this tell us about how she wanted to be remembered?

Document B: A Manuscript for Théodore Godefroy

The following is an extract from 'Le Ceremonial Français... a manuscript for Théodore Godefroy. Godefroy was a 16th century French scholar. In the document, Charles IX highlights Catherine's political status. Charles removed his hat as he approached his mother as a sign of respect that was usually only accorded to kings.

[T]he queen [mother] rose and went toward the king on his royal seat to declare that she remitted into his majesty's hands the administration of his realm which had been given by the estates assembled at Orleans. And as a sign of this, the said lady went toward the said lord and he descended three or four steps from his throne to come before her with his hat in his hand. And he made a great reverence to this woman and kissed her, and the king said to her that she would govern and command more than ever.

Crawford. K (2000) 'Catherine de Medicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood' In The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 31, No. 2. pp.643-673. Kirksville: Truman State University.

Guiding Questions:

4. What kind of source is this?
5. When was it written?
6. What does this document tell us about Catherine's power in the court and her relationship with Charles IX?

Document C: Michel de L'Hospital, Oeuvres Completes

Michel de L'Hospital was a catholic lawyer who worked for the French government in the 16th century. Catherine de Medici named him chancellor in 1560 hoping he might reconcile the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. In this short extract he refers to the reign of her second son, Charles IX, and emphasizes Catherine's special status and power.

He is in his majority, and I do not hesitate to say in the presence of his majesty ... that he wants to be regarded as an adult in all things and everywhere, and in every place as having strength, except towards the queen his mother, to whom he reserves the power to command.

Michel de L'Hospital, Oeuvres Completes, 16th century. Translation by Dufey. P. J. S (1824) Paris.

Guiding Questions:

7. What kind of source is this?
8. When was it written?

9. Why might the young King reserve power for his mother?

Document F: Catherine de Medicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood [Modified]

This document is a secondary source on the political life of Catherine de' Medici. The extract discusses Catherine's political pragmatism in using motherhood to her advantage.

Despite long-standing disabilities attached to women as political actors in France, Catherine de Medicis moved into a position of political [power] largely on her own initiative by presenting herself as a devoted wife, widow, and mother as the basis of her political entitlement. [Using] her conformity with accepted notions of female behavior, Catherine defended her authority (but not always her power)... Catherine staked her political career on being considered above all to be a good mother. When Catherine finally became a mother after a decade of infertility, she rapidly became known for being a devoted and exemplary one... Shortly after Henry II's death, the constable of Montmorency told Catherine that only she could [protect the crown for] her royal son [as **regent**]... Catherine took the accepted premise that a woman had certain responsibilities, especially with respect to motherhood, and used it to [change the rules of the] French monarchy. This necessarily meant she undid, at least partially, the [belief that women couldn't be] political actors in the French monarchy. She had to do this by basing her entitlement on fulfilling accepted feminine roles and then augmenting their content.

Crawford. K (2000) 'Catherine de Medicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood' In The Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 31, No. 2. pp.643-673. Kirksville: Truman State University.

According to these documents, how did Catherine de Medici keep power?

ROUND 3: How did Catherine de Medici deal with religious divisions?

Document A: Edicts of Amboise and the Edict of Saint-Germain

The brief rule of Francis II ended abruptly when he died. Catherine dismissed his hostile advisors and assumed the regency of her second son, Charles IX. These edicts, The Edict of Amboise and The Edict of Saint-Germain, also known as the Edict of January, were landmark decrees of tolerance signed by Catherine de Medici on behalf of the king. They gave protestants the right to preach for the first time and ended the long period of persecution. The Catholic response was aggressive and it almost immediately began the War of Religions with the Catholic massacre of Huguenots in the town of Vassy.



Edict of Saint Germain, January 1562

Guiding Questions:

1. What kind of source is this?
2. When was it written?
3. What does it mean that a Catholic woman signed this into law?

Document B: The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew 1572-1584, François Dubois.

The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew is an oil painting by François Dubois depicting the infamous 1572 massacre. It is not known whether the artist witnessed the events. Catherine is a major part of the image as she is seen emerging from the Louvre in her mourning black veil to observe the mass of dead bodies. This section of the painting has been zoomed in to make it easier to see. Think about how Catherine is represented in this painting, ominously casting her black veil over the dead. Although diplomatic accounts can prove Catherine played no role in the masacre, at the time, many Catholics and Protestants believed Catherine had instigated the events.



François Dubois (1529 - 1584). "Le Massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy." c.1572-1584. Óleo sobre tabla. 93.5x151.4 cm. Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts.

Guiding Questions:

4. What kind of source is this?
5. When was it created?
6. Does it seem probable that Catherine would have changed her perspective on Protestants? Why or why not?

According to these documents, How did Catherine de Medici deal with religious divisions?

ROUND 4: How did the image of Catherine de Medici as a “Black Queen” take form?

Document A: Journal of Pierre de l’Estoile

The following extract is a verse transcribed in the 1575 journal of Pierre de l’Estoile. The verses refer to Catherine’s extreme passion for power. Note the violent language used.

You marvel how a woman, after annulling the Salic law, boldly presses Gallic necks to her authority. Alas! She unmans cocks, tearing off their crests and testicles; a virago holds sway over the French. An unbridled woman dines on [men], and as she devours this food, she smacks her lips and says, “Thus I castrate Gallic courage, thus I unman the French, thus I subdue them!”

Murphy, S (1992) ‘Catherine, Cybele and Ronsard’s Witnesses’ In Long, K (Ed) High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France. Kirksville: Truman State University.

Guiding Questions:

1. What kind of source is this?
2. When was it written?
3. How did this primary source interpret Catherine’s power?

Document B: The Memoirs Of Marguerite De Valois

Marguerite de Valois was the daughter of Catherine de Medici and the sister of the French King Charles IX. In this letter she describes the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, which took place during the celebrations of her wedding to King Henry of Navarre, the protestant. She states her knowledge of the events and any role her mother may have played in it.

King Charles, a prince of great prudence... went to the apartments of the Queen his mother, and sending for... all the Princes and Catholic officers, the "Massacre of St. Bartholomew" was that night resolved upon.

Immediately every hand was at work; chains were drawn across the streets, the alarm-bells were sounded, and every man repaired to his post, according to the orders he had received, whether it was to attack the Admiral's quarters, or those of the other Huguenots [Protestants].

I was perfectly ignorant of what was going forward. I observed everyone to be in motion: the Huguenots, driven to despair by the attack upon the Admiral's life, and the Guises, fearing they should not have justice done them, whispering all they met in the ear.

The Huguenots were suspicious of me because I was a Catholic, and the Catholics because I was married to the King of Navarre, who was a Huguenot. This being the case, no one spoke a syllable of the matter to me.

At night, when I went into the bedchamber of the Queen my mother, I placed myself on a coffer, next my sister Lorraine, who, I could not but remark, appeared greatly cast down. The Queen my mother was in conversation with some one, but, as soon as she espied me, she bade

me go to bed. As I was taking leave, my sister seized me by the hand and stopped me, at the same time shedding a flood of tears: "For the love of God," cried she, "do not stir out of this chamber!" I was greatly alarmed at this exclamation; perceiving which, the Queen my mother called my sister to her, and chid her very severely. My sister replied it was sending me away to be sacrificed; for, if any discovery should be made, I should be the first victim of their revenge. The Queen my mother made answer that, if it pleased God, I should receive no hurt, but it was necessary I should go, to prevent the suspicion that might arise from my staying.

I perceived there was something on foot which I was not to know, but what it was I could not make out from anything they said...

As soon as I beheld it was broad day, I apprehended all the danger my sister had spoken of was over; and being inclined to sleep, I bade my nurse make the door fast, and I applied myself to take some repose. In about an hour I was awakened by a violent noise at the door, made with both hands and feet, and a voice calling out, "Navarre! Navarre!" My nurse, supposing the King my husband to be at the door, hastened to open it, when a gentleman... threw himself immediately upon my bed... pursued by four archers, who followed him into the bedchamber... In this situation I screamed aloud... [The] captain of the guard, came into the bedchamber, and, seeing me thus surrounded... reprimanded the archers very severely for their indiscretion, and drove them out of the chamber. [He assured] me that the King my husband was safe...

Five or six days afterwards, those who were engaged in this plot, considering that it was incomplete whilst the King my husband... remained alive... and knowing that no attempt could be made on my husband whilst I continued to be his wife, devised a scheme which they suggested to the Queen my mother for divorcing me from him.

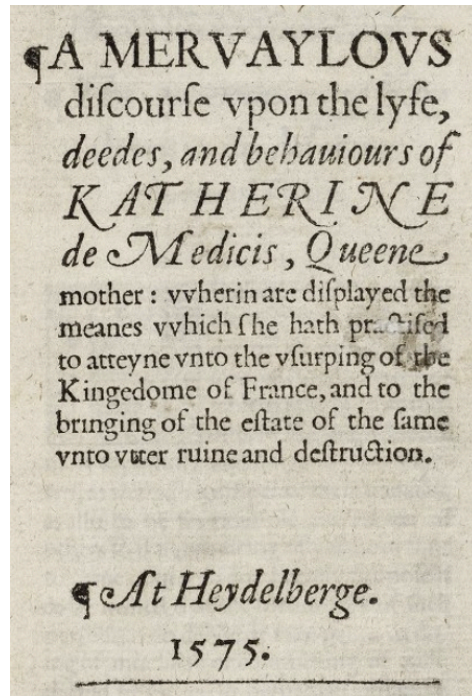
Valois, Marguerite De. "Letter V." *The Memoirs Of Marguerite De Valois*. Project Guttenberg. N.D.
Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12967/12967-h/12967-h.htm>.

Guiding Questions:

4. What kind of source is this?
5. When was it written?
6. Does Marguerite blame her mother for the massacre? Explain.

Document C: Discours Merveilleux

The author of this pamphlet is not known, but it has been attributed to Henri Estienne with the date of 1575, but the text may have been printed as early as 1574. Whether he was Catholic or Protestant is unknown as he refers to both as "we" and "us" throughout the document, but it seems more likely to be a (Protestant) as it's printed in Heidelberg, which was a Protestant town in Germany. At least 9 French editions were published as well as versions like this one in English, Latin, and German. The Discours Merveilleux accuses the corrupt character of Catherine de Medici and blames her for the destruction of France. It draws on anti-Italian and misogynist prejudices of the readers to paint the notorious image of Catherine as the Black Queen, even comparing her to Brunhild and Fredegund, two equally notorious French queens from the 7th century.



Attributed to Estienne, Henri, 1531-1598. *Discours merueilleux de la vie, actions, et deportemens de Catherine de Médicis*. English translation. 1575, reprinted in English in 1693.

Guiding Questions:

7. What kind of source is this?
8. When was it written?
9. How might a pamphlet like this impact public perception of Catherine de Medici?

According to these documents, how did the image of Catherine de Medici as a “Black Queen” take form?