

The Puppet Princess

Politics and the Representation of Gender and Power in Rubens's *The Disembarkation at Marseille* from *The Life of Marie de' Medici*

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In January 1622, Peter Paul Rubens traveled to Paris to receive the most important commission of his life: the decoration of the two galleries at the Luxembourg Palace, residence of the Queen Mother of France, Marie de' Medici. The project was enormous. In the first gallery, the Queen Mother charged Rubens with depicting her life in twenty-four panels; in the second gallery, she charged him with depicting the life of her deceased husband, Henri IV.¹ Rubens only completed the first cycle, but he delivered a masterpiece. Rendered in glowing color and sensuous flesh, and draped in a complex language of allegory, *The Life of Marie de' Medici* glorifies the Queen. History and myth intertwine in tribute to the Queen and create a confident assertion of her right to power.

This assertion of Marie's authority, however, is not as confident as it might first appear. A closer inspection of the cycle reveals that it ultimately fails to provide a convincing picture of active female power. Throughout the work, representations of the Queen vacillate between passivity and heroism, as if Rubens were unable to fashion a coherent vision of Marie's power. What accounts for this inconsistency? What cultural and political forces were at work in the production of Marie's image?

As a female ruler trying to establish her authority in a patriarchal society, Marie de' Medici occupied an ambiguous position. During her reign as Regent for her son, Louis XIII, from 1610-1616, the Queen was dogged by questions about her legitimacy and competence. She had to contend not only with the rivalry of her son, but also with the intrigues of court. After the Regency, the Queen was exiled to Blois for four years, and she only returned in 1621 after a tenuous reconciliation with the full-fledged King. But even by 1622, her position was far from secure as she and her son continued to vie for power.² In this light, Marie's decision to commission a cycle of paintings about her life amounted to a political act,

which was designed to remind the court of her authority, to bolster her claims to power, to reassert her legitimacy, and to provide an everlasting tribute to her reign and her quest for peace.³

Aware of the precariousness of her situation, Marie realized that she had to fashion her image carefully. Had she presented herself in a purely heroic light, the implied challenge in such a representation would have had disastrous political consequences. In parts of the cycle, therefore, the Queen appropriated contemporary tropes of femininity that extolled passivity and eschewed active heroism. By fashioning herself in this way, the Queen sought to avoid the dangerous political fallout that would have accompanied any perceived threat to her son's authority. Of the paintings in the cycle, *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* best reveals Marie's use of images of passive femininity in shaping her representation. In the work, Marie's passivity does not signal the Queen's lack of control over her image or her inability to transcend the gender norms of a patriarchal court culture; on the contrary, it represents Marie's solution to her problematic position, both in her immediate political situation and more broadly as a woman in power in Early Modern France. In short, her passivity demonstrates not weakness, but the Queen's skillful negotiation of contemporary constructions of femininity and her use of gender manipulation as a political tool, a weapon in the game of political power at the French court.

In order to explore the dynamics of Marie's image in the cycle, we must first understand the circumstances that gave rise to the commission. Marie married the king of France, Henri IV, at the relatively late age of 27 in 1600. She arrived at a court that was deeply mistrustful of her and her family after the earlier reign of Catherine de' Medici, who had instigated the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. Furthermore, she had to contend with both the rivalry of the king's mistresses and the machinations of his ministers. Aware of her tenuous position, she convinced her husband to have her crowned as Queen on 13 May 1610. As chance would have it, the next day Henri was murdered on the street by a religious fanatic. Prevented by France's Salic law from succeeding her husband on the throne, Marie took decisive action, and within hours the Parliament of Paris named her Regent of France for her nine-year-old son, Louis XIII. Throughout her seven-year reign, she continued to implement many of her husband's policies. She considered the negotiation of peace between the great powers of Europe to be her chief aim, which she tried to accom-

plish through a series of diplomatic marriages between her children and the Houses of Spain and England.

After seven years as Regent, Marie was unwilling to cede her power, but she soon she saw her power begin to crumble. In 1617, her son, now in his majority, had Marie's favorite, Concini, assassinated. He had his wife, a childhood friend of the Queen, put on trial for witchcraft, and he exiled Marie to Blois. After a series of wars between mother and son, the two sides reconciled in the summer of 1620 with the Treaty of Angers, which was brokered by the Queen's upstart *créature*, Richelieu. With peace restored, Louis XIII reinstated his mother in the Royal Council.⁴

It was during this delicate period in 1622 that work on the cycle began. For the task, Marie called upon the illustrious Flemish painter and diplomat Peter Paul Rubens.⁵ Designed for semi-public display in one of the galleries in her palace, the cycle allowed Marie to make a statement about her political legitimacy and power to the elites of Europe—courtiers, nobles, and ambassadors—who would have contemplated Rubens's work as they awaited an audience with the Queen.⁶

The decision to use Rubens for the paintings of the galleries stemmed from a number of factors. Though some scholars have argued that Marie stumbled upon the artist by "dumb luck," Deborah Marrow has shown that the Queen, in the tradition of her ancestors, patronized art quite astutely throughout her career, and she was ever mindful of the importance of fashioning an effective public image.⁷ In 1600, Rubens had his first contact with Marie when he attended the Queen's proxy marriage in Florence as a representative of the Duke of Mantua. Both Marie's sister Eleonora, Duchess of Mantua, and her close advisor, Nicolas de Peiresc, knew the painter and could have advised the Queen in her decision. But perhaps most importantly, Marie, astute patron that she was, realized that Rubens's virtuosic technique and command of allegory made him one of the few artists able to handle such a project.⁸

Rubens's contract, signed at the Louvre in February 1622, called on the artist to paint "twenty-four pictures in which will be represented the very illustrious life and deeds of Madame the Queen," with "all the stories which are written down and enumerated at length in accord with the Queen's intention."⁹ The pictures, which began at the entrance wall, were hung clockwise in chronological order. On the first wall hung the first half of the cycle, which portrayed the Queen's childhood, her marriage, and her coronation. The wall facing the entrance contained a large paint-

ing of the apotheosis of Henri IV and the proclamation of the regency. The second half of the cycle detailed the events of Marie's reign as Regent, her quarrels with her son, and their reconciliation.¹⁰

Rubens's task was not easy. In the first place, a monumental series of paintings dedicated to a living person had never before been attempted. In addition, that living person was a woman. Thus, the work had to be done carefully to avoid political complications. Most notably, the cycle could not offend the king, with whom Marie still had a tenuous relationship.¹¹ As art historian Geraldine Johnson notes, "Marie de' Medici and Rubens must have been aware...of the possible problems involved in developing a series of paintings which would extol the Queen's abilities to govern France without suggesting that she was a dangerously aggressive woman intent on seizing traditional male power."¹² To meet these challenges, Rubens had to develop a new rhetoric of female heroism—one distinct from the representations of battle scenes and military victories that were typical of masculine courtly art. Art historian Kristin Belkin notes, Rubens "turned to mythological allusions, emblematic references, personifications of vices and virtues and religious analogies to veil an often unheroic or ambiguous reality...employ[ing] a strange cast of characters to appease factions."¹³ The use of allegory was not uncommon in the 17th century, but Rubens, with his vast intellect, transformed a standard collection of images and symbols into a monumental tribute to the Queen that were general enough for its educated viewers to be able to interpret it in a way that suited their interests.¹⁴

But allegory was not the only tool that Marie and Rubens used to calm her critics. In addition, the artist and his patron appropriated the image of passive femininity in their representation of the Queen. Indeed, Marie's political concerns about the commission—the desire not to offend the king and the problem of depicting the deeds of a female ruler—resulted in a rejection of a consistently heroic image throughout the cycle. In many of the panels, Marie appears submissive, vacant, and almost consumed by the momentum of the allegorical figures swirling about her. An analysis of *The Disembarkation at Marseille* will bring to light the function of the Queen's lack of agency in the cycle.

The Disembarkation at Marseilles depicts Marie de' Medici's first arrival in France as the wife of Henri IV. Rendered in high Baroque style, the scene features a crowded, energetic composition of dramatically gesturing figures who are awash in vibrant reds, fleshy pinks, and gold. In

the center of the picture, the future Queen descends the velvet-swagged gangplank of her gilded ship, on which a knight of Malta, dressed in black, stands guard. She is led by her aunt, the Grand Duchess Cristina, her sister Eleonora, Duchess of Mantua, and other members of the Florentine party. Allegorical figures of France, dressed in a blue cape dotted with *fleur-de-lys*, and The City of Marseille—representatives of the State officials at the actual disembarkation—stand in front of the group, their arms out-stretched to welcome the Florentine princess. Behind them, their attendants hold out the royal baldaquin. Amidst the smoke of celebratory cannon fire, Fame flies overhead and sounds her twin trumpets in triumph. In the foreground, Nereids splash in the turbulent sea—exposing their sensuous, fleshy bodies to the gaze of the viewer—while Tritons help anchor the ship.¹⁵

In the midst of this activity stands Marie de' Medici, her body limp, her face devoid of expression, and her eyes blank and unfocused. She seems to ignore the encouragement of the figures of France and the City of Marseilles. The reluctant princess, like a puppet, must be led ashore by a cavalier, who appears to prop her up by holding her arm. Although the women in Marie's entourage also lack the animation that characterizes the rest of the piece, their alert gazes are fixed at definite points, and they therefore contrast with Marie's vacant expression. Marie, who called on Rubens to glorify her life in an effort to regain power, is completely passive in this painting.

Surprisingly, while many scholars have examined actively heroic representations of the Queen in the cycle as a whole, they have neglected the dynamics of Marie's passivity in this particular painting. For example, Geraldine Johnson claims that in the cycle, "the Queen's triumph was over her own gender and its limitations in the eyes of seventeenth-century patriarchal culture," that "in the *Disembarkation at Marseilles*, Marie de' Medici not only symbolically walks away from her earlier political attachments in Tuscany but also literally walks over the frothy nude Nereids frolicking in the sea below."¹⁶ She fails to acknowledge, however, that it is a *man* who leads her over the nude Nereids.¹⁷ Likewise, Katherine Crawford holds that in the cycle, Marie "rejected the foundational aspects of a gender politics that required feminine deference and dependence."¹⁸ But does she? In fact, Marie's submissiveness and her need to have a male guide her in *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* signifies the very "feminine deference and dependence" that Crawford says the Queen eschews. Al-

though Crawford notes that Marie also fulfills “expected female roles” in the paintings,¹⁹ she, like Johnson, fails to address the problem of the Queen’s lack of agency directly.

How, then, do we account for this lack of empowerment? What role did Marie’s deferential representation play in her political project? Working on the formal level, some art historians have traced the Queen’s passivity to an unresolved tension between the allegorical figures and living people. By examining the Queen’s depiction in its political context, other scholars have attributed the problem to a network of political control governing the cycle. In a series of works produced in the 1940’s, Otto von Simson argued that the Queen’s passivity points to Richelieu’s control over the works.²⁰ Since then, other scholars have argued that the King had influenced the paintings; he had, in fact, commissioned Rubens to produce a series of tapestry cartoons of the *Life of Constantine* to rival his mother.²¹ Even the Queen’s own advisors controlled and censored the paintings’ imagery.²² Recent historical research, however, has made these interpretations unconvincing. For example, historians like Deborah Marrow have shown that Marie had more control over the production of her image in general, and over the cycle in particular, than previously thought.²³ These scholars argue that Marie took a keen interest in art patronage, and that she used art to express her own point of view and her own ambitions.

To fully understanding its meaning, then, we must see *The Disembarkation at Marseille* in the context of the broader world of Early Modern French culture and politics. Indeed, the problem of representing the active heroine emerges as a salient feature of this period. Deborah Marrow points out that the passivity exhibited by the Queen is not limited to the *Medici Cycle*; rather, it appears throughout Rubens’s later work and in courtly art in general.²⁴ It would therefore have been unwise for Marie to deviate too aggressively from this model; otherwise, she would have appeared overtly threaten her son’s authority. Nevertheless, feminized heroism was not always problematic. During her regency, Marie had successfully cultivated a somewhat androgynous heroic female image, embodied in the *femme forte*, to back up her claims to power and work against the limitations imposed by Salic law.²⁵ But after her fall from power, as Deborah Marrow notes, “there was an attempt to purge the female from royal imagery and to strip the heroic female image of its strength in order to support the rule of Louis XIII.”²⁶ Accordingly, dur-

ing the 1620's, French political writers transformed the ideal of the noble Amazon, the savior of France, into a tyrant²⁷ and they began to equate feminine virtue with passivity.²⁸

In response, Marie had to adjust her pictorial strategy if she wanted to regain her influence. The Queen did not unwittingly accept the conventions of courtly art. Rather, she understood the negative shift in attitude towards the *femme forte*, consciously devised a passive image of herself, and instructed Rubens to include it in *The Disembarkation at Marseilles* in order to present herself as less threatening. During this period, her supporters also began to deemphasize the Queen's active heroism and highlight her passive qualities—her obedience, fidelity, and piety.²⁹ By realizing the importance of appropriating contemporary conceptions of femininity and by using them in her painting cycle, Marie de' Medici, to use Crawford's phrase, negotiated political "gender performance"³⁰ to advance her cause.

In the difference between the *bozzetto* (oil sketch) of *The Disembarkation* and the final version, for example, we can see how Marie may have demanded changes in her representation to make her appear less challenging. In Rubens's preparatory sketch, Marie stands farther above the other figures; she gazes down at them with haughty authority, and she appears commanding and powerful. This presentation, however, would have been unacceptable to the Queen, who could not risk offending her son or his supporters. Confronted by his rivalry, Marie had to tread carefully to avoid provoking his anger, and her assumption of the passive feminine image reveals the careful steps she took not to offend him or make an outright challenge to his authority. With this representation, she was able to display her political legitimacy in a way that neither deviated from her perceived roles as a female regent nor invited comparisons with Louis XIII.

This mastery over gender manipulations was not new. Historian Katherine Crawford demonstrates that Marie transgressed accepted gender norms throughout her reign and that she manipulated representations of femininity as part of her political strategy. After the death of Henri IV, for instance, the Queen, in a rather theatrical manner, presented herself to the court and her people as both grieving widow and dutiful mother. She shows that, in her devotion to the family, she would sustain France and the monarchy through the regency. This performance, as Crawford notes, was a crucial step in her consolidation of power at the

beginning of the regency. Without it, she would not have gained the sympathy and support of her people. Even at the beginning of her rule, then, Marie understood the importance of conforming to expectations of her role as woman while also manipulating understandings of her gender to gain power at court.³¹ Twelve years later, when her power was more precarious than ever, she reassumed the image of the passive, dutiful mother in *The Disembarkation at Marseille*.

Still, not all of the panels portray a passive Marie. In *The Triumph at Juliers*, for instance, Rubens portrays the Queen as the *femme forte*. He presents her atop a horse and in full military costume—an image from which she had tried to distance herself in other panels. In glorifying herself with Rubens's work, it seems Marie was unable to resist displaying herself in a mode typically reserved for kings. This panel, as Crawford points out, becomes a source of unresolved tension between the two models of femininity—the Queen as mother and wife versus the Queen as *femme forte*—in the cycle.³² The panel also hints at Marie's ambitions to usurp her son's power and once again rule France.

But for the moment, this problem went unnoticed by the court, and the work succeeded magnificently. Marie de' Medici unveiled the cycle on 11 May 1625 for the celebration of the marriage between her daughter, Henriette-Marie, and the King of England, Charles I. This day was the Queen Mother's greatest triumph. Back in the limelight after her years of exile at Blois, she celebrated, simultaneously, a marriage that would fulfill her diplomatic vision of bringing peace to Europe and the presentation of a work of art that sent a clear message to the court about her renewed status.³³ As Jacques Thuillier explains:

There can be little doubt that this sumptuous feast represented for Marie the finest hour of her life: the entire court and ambassadors of other powers were there to behold, as she advanced down the gallery amid blazing candles and the glints of fresh-gilded stuccoes, a Queen sparkling with jewels; her image, repeated twentyfold in the pictures on the walls, appeared in the company of Olympian gods and goddesses in painted allegories of the varied fortunes of her life: by art she assumed all perfection, in an apotheosis whereby she already took her place among the great heroines of history.³⁴

Marie de' Medici's guests praised her and her new work of art. She

seemed to have convinced the court that she had accepted her role not as the ruler of France, but as its deferential Queen Mother.

The Queen's moment of glory, however, could not last. During the next six years, Marie continued to vie for power with her son. Her former favorite, Cardinal Richelieu, became not only the most powerful man in France, but also her bitter enemy. Though Louis XIII and Richelieu had organized the unveiling of the cycle, by 1631, they were no longer willing to tolerate her attempts to claim her former power, and they banished Marie for the last time. Marie escaped to Brussels and died, still in exile, in Cologne in 1642. She had finally lost her battle for authority.³⁵

The Life of Marie de' Medici provides a fascinating view into the politics and culture of early 17th France and Early Modern Europe, where the power of the image resounded throughout the great courts, and the ability to self-fashion that image became an essential political tool. Though we cannot know for certain Marie's motives for commissioning the cycle, we can appreciate that what could have been a ludicrous piece of bombast ended as a magnificent assertion of a ruler's ability to manipulate and transfigure her identity to make a political statement. The stakes of the commission were high, and even though Marie did not win more power, Rubens's tribute to her life has become a lens through which we can examine the dynamics of gender, power, and representation in the court culture of 17th century Europe.

In the cycle, the multi-faceted presentation of the Queen's image, the virtuosic shifting between different modes of feminine representation, reveals Marie's mastery over the power of the image. Katherine Crawford observes that this mastery became "unintelligible" to her contemporaries.³⁶ But, perhaps more accurately, it came to signify the threat she posed to her son and to the patriarchal power structure of the French monarchy. Marie displayed admirable skill in fashioning her image, but, by appropriating active as well as passive representations of femininity, she exposed her ambitions to become not the dutiful Queen Mother, but the ruler of France. Despite her skillful deployment of constructions of passive femininity in *The Disembarkation at Marseilles*, she remained, in the eyes of Louis XIII and Richelieu, a dangerous woman.

Endnotes

¹ Kristin Lohse Belkin. *Rubens*. (London: Phaidon, 1998), 175.

² *Ibid.*, 173.

³ Katherine Crawford. *Perilous Performances*. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 84; Paul.

Oppenheimer. *Rubens: A Portrait*. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 257; Wendy Beckett. *The Story of Painting*. (London: DK, 2000), 342.

⁴ Jacques Thuilliers, and Jacques Foucart. *Rubens's Life of Marie de' Medici*. (New York: Harry H. Abrams, Inc., 1967), 12-19.

⁵ Belkin, 175.

⁶ Crawford, 89.

⁷ Deborah Marrow. *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*. Studies in Baroque Art History, ed. Ann S. Harris, no. 4. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).

⁸ Marrow, 42; Susan Saward. *The Golden Age of Marie de' Medici*. Studies in Baroque Art History, ed. Ann S. Harris, no. 2. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 42.

⁹ Quoted in Oppenheimer, 261.

¹⁰ Belkin, 181-182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 176-181.

¹² Géraldine Johnson. "Pictures Fit for a Queen: Peter Paul Rubens and the Marie de' Medici Cycle." *Art History* 16, no. 3 (September 1993): 447.

¹³ Belkin, 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵ Interpretation of the work's iconography from Ronald Forsyth Millen, and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mythic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens's Life of Maria de' Medici*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 63-72.

¹⁶ Johnson, 456.

¹⁷ At the same time, though, Johnson rightly notes how the painting disempowers Marie by pointing out that not only do the nude Nereids display themselves for the delectation of the male viewer (the primary audience for the painting was male), but also, in their prominent position, take away attention from the future Queen.

¹⁸ Crawford, 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰ Otto George von Simson. "Richelieu and Rubens: Reflections on the Art of Politics." *The Review of Politics* 6, no. 4 (October, 1944): 422-451.

²¹ Martin Warnke. *Peter Paul Rubens: Life and Work*. (New York: Barrons, 1980), 124.

²² For example, see Juliuz Chroscicki A. "The Recovered Modello of P. P. Rubens's *Disembarkation at Marseilles*: The Problem of Control and Censorship in the Cycle *Life of Marie de' Medici*." *Artibus et Historiae* v. 26 no. 51 (2005) p. 221-49.

²³ Marrow, 43.

²⁴ Marrow, 71.

²⁵ Elaine Rubin. "The Heroic Image: Women and Power in Early-Seventeenth Century France, 1610-1661." (Ph.D diss, George Washington University, 1977), 46-49.

²⁶ Marrow, 71.

²⁷ Rubin, 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁹ Marrow, 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

³¹ Crawford, 71

³² *Ibid.*, 88.

³³ Thuillier, 9-11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ Crawford, 79-89.

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