

*Rubens's Life of Maria de' Medici: Dissimulation and the Politics of Art in Early Seventeenth-Century France**

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The Life of Maria de' Medici, the biographical series of twenty-four large-size paintings executed for the Queen Mother of France by Peter Paul Rubens in 1622–25, is traditionally regarded by historians as both a masterpiece of Baroque art and a monument of political naïveté. According to this view, the series was a disrespectful visual bravado that exposed both patron and painter to scandal by publicly advertising the queen's political ideas and ambitions, which were not only audacious, but often in opposition to those of her son King Louis XIII. This article challenges this assessment by reading the Life within the context of seventeenth-century uses of dissimulation and spatial control as strategies to limit both intellectual and physical access to information. It argues that the series was imbued with multiple layers of meaning, intended for different audiences, and that access to these was strictly controlled by the queen and her circle.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 11 May 1625 King Louis XIII of France paid an official visit to the *Life of Maria de' Medici* (1622–25), the series of twenty-four paintings Peter Paul Rubens had just completed for the queen mother's new Parisian residence, the Luxembourg Palace. A few days later, the painter informed his friend Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc of the outcome of this visit, noting with enthusiasm how craftily Claude Maugis, the queen mother's *aumônier* (court chaplain), had concealed the “real meaning” of the paintings from the king: “The king did me the honor of coming to see our gallery on his first visit to the Luxembourg Palace, which has been under construction for now more than sixteen or eighteen years. His Majesty

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appeared to be very pleased with our paintings, as I was told by all those who were present and, in particular, by Monsieur de Saint-Ambroise [Maugis] who served as the interpreter of the subjects and who most artfully diverted and dissimulated their real meaning.”¹ Rubens’s letter provides extraordinary insight into one of the most celebrated pieces of Baroque art. First, it defines the work as having a “real meaning” (“vero senso”), thus implying the existence of a false, counterfeit, or nominal one; second, it indicates that these meanings were far from self-evident even to the elite, as the king himself needed an interpreter; and third, it makes plain that this interpreter could either reveal the work’s meaning(s) or conceal them with *diversione e dissimulazione* (diversion and dissimulation) depending on the occasion, which is to say depending on the audience.

As with the vast majority of those he exchanged with his French correspondents, Rubens’s letter is written in Italian, and seventeenth-century Italian is unambiguous as to the artist’s choice of terms: *diversione* is the act of *divertire*, that is to divert or to deflect someone’s attention or train of thought; *dissimulazione* is the act of hiding under a false appearance; *vero senso* is the actual, real meaning (from the Latin *sensum*); and *artificioso* (from *artificium*) is the attribute of a skillful performance, whether material or rhetorical. Also noteworthy is Rubens’s choice of the term *interprete* to describe Claude Maugis, for what an interpreter does is to translate, and the Italian verb *tradurre* (to translate) stems from the same Latin root as the verb *tradire* (to betray).² The painter seems thus to emphasize the betrayal of the king on the occasion of his visit to the gallery. Implicit in Rubens’s text is the understanding that the *Life of Maria de’ Medici* carried content that the queen thought best hidden from some — including her son the king — and that this content was codified in ways that allowed the queen and her advisers control over what to disclose and to whom. Thus the *Life of Maria de’ Medici* is not only a masterpiece of Baroque art, but also, according to Rubens himself, a tour de force in the art of dissimulation that was a central feature of early modern European society.

Defined as the “concealment of what is” by Torquato Accetto, the author of the fascinating treatise *Della dissimulazione onesta* (*On Honest*

¹Rubens, 3:353: “Il re ancora mi fece l’honore di venire a vedere la nostra Galeria, per la prima volta che giamai pose gli piedi in quel palazzo, che sono più de 16 o 18 anni che se cominciò a fabricare. Mostrò ancora S. M. d’haver ogni sodisfattione delle nostre pitture, come mi è stato riferito di tutti che si trovarono presenti e particolarmente di Mr di S. Ambrosio che servì d’interprete degli soggetti con una diversione e dissimulazione del vero senso molto artificiosa.”

²On the terms in this paragraph, see especially the dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca (available online at <http://www.lessicografia.it>).

Dissimulation, 1641), *dissimulation* is the art of deliberately concealing, disguising, or silencing something.³ Its sister art, *simulation*, defined by the same author as the “pretence of what is not,” concerns instead the affectation, fabrication, or counterfeiting of something.⁴ Dis/simulation was the subject of an abundant literature across seventeenth-century Europe, in forms ranging from moral philosophy and political theory to courtesy books.⁵ That early modern Europeans were preoccupied with these themes is hardly surprising, for they would have understood that the ability to simulate and dissimulate were fundamental skills in a world dominated by religious divisions, by the rise of the court, and, more generally, by an elite that sought to protect its privileged access to knowledge.⁶ Whether it was a matter of dis/simulating one’s religious beliefs in order to protect one’s life or dis/simulating one’s thoughts in order to navigate the codes and intrigues of court life, whether it was a matter of wanting to criticize the religious and political establishment without risking censorship and imprisonment or, at the other end, wanting to preserve the moral, social, and political order by limiting access to ideas and information, early modern European men and women of all social strata proved to be skillful performers of simulation and dissimulation.

That the *Life of Maria de’ Medici* would participate in such a culture is unsurprising. Dis/simulation is the very matter of art; moreover, the paintings were produced at court — that is, in the very core of the environment that made dis/simulation a necessity. Furthermore, the content of the paintings was rather daring. The series was a visual narrative of the queen mother’s biography that illustrated several episodes of contemporary history and featured leading figures of the establishment — members of the royal family, aristocracy *grands*, Cardinal Richelieu, the Duke of Luynes — without shying away from controversy. Rather than simply celebrate in predictable fashion the queen’s virtues as wife, mother, and regent on behalf of Louis XIII during his minority (1610–14), the series also promoted her disputed claims to government and her contentious political views (particularly regarding the alliance with Spain) and illustrated episodes from the *Guerres de la mère et du fils* (*Wars of Mother and Son*, 1619–20), in which the troops of her allies had opposed those of Louis XIII. In doing so the series “largely had the potential to irritate Louis XIII,” as Fanny

³Accetto, 27.

⁴Ibid.

⁵See the bibliography of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises published in Cavaillé, 387–402.

⁶See especially Zagorin; Cavaillé; Soll, 72–88; and Snyder.

Cosandey puts it, as well as anyone who feared the power of the House of Habsburg or who believed that a muscular, absolutist monarchy was the solution to civil unrest.⁷ It seems obvious why certain people, including the king, would have had to be diverted from such content. This explains why an exceptional group of advisers was put to work on defining the *Life*; its program was developed by some of the most refined political minds of the time — Richelieu, Pierre Dupuy, and Rubens — and its complex allegorical language was fine-tuned by two great scholars, Rubens and Peiresc. It is not likely that anyone in this group would have ignored or underestimated dis/simulation as a communication strategy for both textual and visual material.

And yet art historians have traditionally construed the *Life of Maria de' Medici* as the naïve bravado of a defiant but politically inept queen who conceived a visual narrative disrespectful of the king her son and then displayed it to the broadest possible audience, only to realize too late that its controversial message would backfire.⁸ This reading is based on two broadly accepted assumptions: first, that the gallery of the Luxembourg Palace where the paintings were originally hung was accessible to courtiers — “a sort of waiting room preceding the queen’s apartment” — and, second, that the paintings’ language and content were likewise accessible to the same elite.⁹ This is how Ronald Millen and Robert Wolf reached the conclusion that the series was an irreparable mistake, that “once the paintings were on the walls, Maria and her closest advisers may have found themselves the objects of scandal and murmurings,” and that this scandal was the real reason why Rubens was unable to complete the second series the queen had commissioned from him for the Luxembourg: the *Life of Henri IV* (1628–30).¹⁰

Both assumptions are incorrect, as are the conclusions derived from them. Not only was Maria de' Medici far less naïve than seventeenth-century bias suggested, but abundant evidence shows that her gallery in the Luxembourg was not an antechamber but one of the least accessible rooms of the palace: only select individuals could enter it and only by

⁷Cosandey, 360.

⁸The literature on the *Life of Maria de' Medici* is vast. Among the fundamental works, see Simson; Thuillier and Foucart; Held, 1:89–128; Seward; Marrow, 55–72; Millen and Wolf; and Warnke. Among more recent studies, see in particular Johnson; Cosandey, 333–60; Cohen; Carroll, 102–61; and Dubost, 657–76.

⁹Thuillier and Foucart, 31. According to Millen and Wolf, 8, the gallery was the “main public room” of the Luxembourg Palace. As for the accessibility of the series’ content, see *ibid.*, 9–10.

¹⁰Millen and Wolf, 12.

invitation or permission from the queen herself. Moreover, Rubens's correspondence shows that the *Life's* visual language was far from accessible and that, quite the opposite, its complex allegories limited intellectual access to the paintings even when physical access to the gallery was granted. Finally, the seventeenth-century textual descriptions of the series show that they were written under the close supervision of the queen and her painter, thus enabling the *Life* to be widely publicized without compromising its confidential content.¹¹

2. THE *LIFE OF MARIA DE' MEDICI*

It was the assassination of King Henri IV on 14 May 1610 that projected Maria de' Medici onto the international political scene as regent to the throne on behalf of Louis XIII, then nine years old. As a woman, a foreigner, and a Medici, the regent faced the mistrust and the opposition of many. Unprepared by her education for political rule, dubbed the "fat banker" for being heir to her family's mercantile fortune, and associated with the Black Legend of her predecessor, regent Catherine de' Medici, Queen Maria had also become the female head of a kingdom that, by Salic law, excluded women from accession to the throne.¹² Maria's regency lasted for four years that are now regarded as a period of economic and demographic growth as well as of stability and peace.¹³ By contrast, political tension and civil war characterized the years following Louis XIII's coming of age. In the *Lit de Majorité* of 2 October 1614, Louis appointed his mother to lead the Council instead of taking the reins of government himself, thus effectively prolonging Maria's rule for an indefinite time. This gave rise to a rebellious disillusionment among the aristocracy *grands* who, like the Prince of Condé, found themselves excluded from a Council that they had planned to control. Their dissatisfaction quickly escalated from harsh criticism of the queen mother's policies, to a call for the Estates-General, to a series of civil wars that lasted into the

¹¹My new interpretation of the architectural layout of Maria de' Medici's apartment in the Luxembourg Palace upon which the present article is based has been previously published, in both French (Galletti, 2003; Galletti, 2012, 154–73) and English (Galletti, 2010). The present article expands upon issues in Rubens's cycle following from the architectural situation that I had raised but not developed in these publications, in particular the issue of dissimulation of meaning.

¹²The coinage of the "fat banker" epithet is attributed to Henriette d'Entragues, Henri IV's favorite of the early 1600s: Carmona, 108. On Salic law and women regents, see Cosandey, 19–54; Crawford, 13–23; Hanley; and Taylor. The modern standard biography of Maria de' Medici is Dubost's.

¹³Dubost, 363–72, 389–409.

spring of 1617. Maria's government ended on 24 April of that year, with the assassination of Concino Concini, the last (and least able) of her ministers, her exile to the Château of Blois, and Louis XIII's seizing of power. As Jean-François Dubost puts it, "Louis, as a new Orestes, had killed the mother," and an encumbering one at that, for not only do historians agree that Maria was overambitious and arrogant — that is, subversive of the rules of women's participation in government as understood in France at the time — they also agree that her personal relationship with the young king was difficult.¹⁴

Yet the ascension of Louis to government did not put an end to the tension. Besides their own thirst for political power, what the queen mother's opponents had exposed were the central issues of early seventeenth-century French politics; these would not, and did not, simply go away with the installation of a new, more explicitly legitimate rule. Debate continued to revolve around the internal, foreign, and religious policies of the kingdom, as well as the nature of the monarchy itself. Notions of absolutism competed with notions of a limited monarchy in which the aristocracy would play a greater role; anxieties about France's independence from the House of Habsburg pressed up against fears of waging war with a most powerful enemy; and the toleration of Protestantism granted by the Edict of Nantes (1598) found both opposition and support among French Catholics, for many saw a hardening of policy against Protestants as a potential gateway to yet another round of religious conflicts or as a sign of the monarchy's submission to the authority of the pope. The stakes were high and opinions divided enough that it is not surprising that Maria de' Medici found the necessary political, financial, and logistical support first to escape from exile, in February 1619, and then to launch two wars, in 1619–20 (*Guerres de la mère et du fils*), with the intention of destabilizing the government, or, as she might have phrased it, ending the negative influence of the king's favorite, Luynes, over royal policy.

In 1622, once peace had been reestablished and her presence in the king's Council restored (albeit to a less powerful position than the one she had held in the 1610s), Maria de' Medici commissioned Rubens to create a cycle of twenty-four large-size paintings dedicated to her extraordinary life and destined to decorate the gallery of her newly built Luxembourg Palace. The *Life of Maria de' Medici*, which would become one of Rubens's most celebrated masterpieces, was highly innovative for its style and its monumental scale, as well as for its departure from existing models, both ancient and contemporary, in its content and language. First, the cycle

¹⁴Ibid., 539.

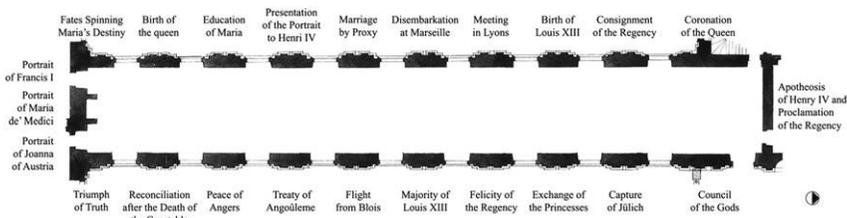


FIGURE 1. Location of the paintings in the gallery of the Luxembourg Palace. Author's diagram.

depicted a living ruler whose actions and ambitions were situated not in a safely distant or mythical past, but in the present of its viewers. Second, it depicted an extensive biographical narrative spanning almost five decades rather than focus on a particular event, as in the sculpted reliefs of ancient Roman triumphal monuments such as the Arch of Constantine and the Trajan Column, or on individual snapshots of court life, as in the Valois Tapestries. And third, in this cycle Rubens rejected the strictly mythological language of its celebrated precedents, the Galerie François I^{er} in the Château of Fontainebleau, for example, or the Artemisia Tapestries, and adopted instead an unprecedented combination of allegorical imagery and naturalistic portraiture.

The cycle is composed of three portraits — the queen herself; her father, Francesco I Grand Duke of Tuscany; and her mother, Joanna of Austria — and twenty-one narrative scenes that start with the *Fates Spinning Maria's Destiny* and end with the *Triumph of Truth* (fig. 1).¹⁵ The first ten paintings, which hung on the west wall of the gallery, depict scenes from Maria's life as Medici princess and Queen of France, from the *Birth of the Queen* to the *Coronation in Saint-Denis* (fig. 2). On the north wall of the gallery, followed the *Apotheosis of Henri IV and Proclamation of the Regency of the Queen* (fig. 3), which brings together the two most important episodes in Maria's political career, the death of her husband and her rise to government on 15 May 1610. On the east wall the last ten canvases illustrate aspects of Maria's regency (fig. 4) and her struggles after Louis XIII's majority (figs. 5–8), before concluding on the theme of harmony between mother and son, with the *Reconciliation after the Death of the Constable* and the *Triumph of Truth* (fig. 9).

¹⁵Images of the paintings are available online via Atlas, the database of the works on display at the Louvre (http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=crt_frm_rs&langue=fr&initCritere=true).



FIGURE 2. Peter Paul Rubens. *Coronation of the Queen in Saint-Denis* (13 May 1625), 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 3. Peter Paul Rubens. *Apotheosis of Henri IV and Proclamation of the Regency of the Queen* (14–15 May 1625), 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 4. Peter Paul Rubens. *Felicity of the Regency*, 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 5. Peter Paul Rubens. *Majority of Louis XIII*, 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 6. Peter Paul Rubens. *Flight from Blois* (21–22 February 1619), 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 7. Peter Paul Rubens. *Treaty of Angoulême* (30 April 1619), 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 8. Peter Paul Rubens. *Peace of Angers* (10 August 1620), 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 9. Peter Paul Rubens. *Triumph of Truth*, 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

The chronology and content of the series are noticeably uneven: only two paintings are dedicated to the first twenty-four years of Maria's life (the *Birth of the Queen* and the *Education of the Princess*), while seventeen depict episodes dating between 1599 and 1621 (from the *Presentation of the Portrait to Henri IV* onward). Of these, twelve focus on the decade immediately preceding the commission to Rubens (from the *Consignment of the Regency* onward), and six focus on the four years of the regency alone (from the *Apotheosis of Henri IV and Proclamation of the Regency of the Queen* to the *Majority of Louis XIII*). More than half of the paintings address delicate political issues: the alliance with Spain (the *Council of the Gods* and the *Exchange of the Princesses*); the civil wars of 1619–20 (the *Flight from Blois*, the *Treaty of Angoulême*, and the *Peace of Angers*); and the assertion of Maria's natural right to participate in government during Henri IV's lifetime (the *Consignment of the Regency*), during the regency following his death (the *Apotheosis of Henri IV and Proclamation of the Regency of the Queen*, the *Capture of Jülich*, and the *Felicity of the Regency*), and even after Louis XIII's coming of age (the *Majority of Louis XIII* and the *Triumph of Truth*).

The content of the cycle and the timing of its commission suggest that Rubens's *Life of Maria de' Medici* can be understood as a display of magnificence aimed at adding to the queen's power as well as a form of persuasion aimed at promoting her views — in particular regarding the alliance between the Houses of Bourbon and Habsburg and the defense of the traditionally participatory (as opposed to absolutist) nature of the French monarchy, in which the aristocracy and members of the royal family played a central role.¹⁶ Of course, such messages were destined to find opponents among her contemporaries and certainly had the potential to unnerve the king. The alliance with Spain was a highly divisive matter in 1625, when the cycle was unveiled; the references to the wars of 1619–20 suggested that rebellion and civil unrest were viable, if extreme, ways to steer royal policy; and the queen mother's claim to political power not only challenged gender roles, but also likely stirred bitter sentiments in a king who, a few years earlier, had resorted to a coup d'état to take what was nominally his own throne.

¹⁶Dubost, 658–59, has exposed the anachronism of interpreting the cycle as compensating for Maria's loss of political power, as has been proposed by Bardon and by Millen and Wolf, by pointing out that at the time of the commission and execution of the cycle the queen mother was in a position of power, not weakness. On the use of imagery to persuade, manipulate, and add to the sovereign's glory and magnificence in early modern France, see especially Burke.



FIGURE 10. Peter Paul Rubens. *Council of the Gods*, 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Some of the paintings — such as the *Council of the Gods* (fig. 10), the *Flight from Blois* (fig. 6), and the *Triumph of Truth* (fig. 9) — seem particularly provocative. In the *Council of the Gods*, Peace and Concord, personified by a female figure with a caduceus and a kneeling figure holding a sheaf of arrows, are pleading with Jupiter while Juno helps place two pairs of doves on the globe that sits in the center of Olympus. In the foreground, Apollo and Minerva disperse a group of Vices and Furies. Rubens's correspondence indicates that the subject of the painting is the alliance with Spain via the arrangement of the double marriage of Louis XIII with Anne of Austria and of Philip IV with Elisabeth of France (celebrated on 24 November 1615 and represented by the painter in the *Exchange of the Princesses*).¹⁷ Accordingly, the *Council* has been read as hinting at “the long-range policy of peace which the queen regent envisioned as her great contribution to the Europe chess-game” — that is, peace between France and Spain supported by marital ties — and her “declaration that her policy would have had the approval of her sainted spouse.”¹⁸ As the arrangement of the Spanish marriages had been at the core of the aristocratic rebellions of 1614, and opinion about the course of Franco-Spanish relations was still bitterly divided in the mid-1620s, with the Huguenot rebellions raging against the background of the Thirty Years' War, the painting might have been perceived by some as a tactless provocation on a very sensitive issue.

¹⁷Rubens, 2:415.

¹⁸Millen and Wolf, 143.

Also provocative, the *Flight from Blois* depicts an act of disobedience dating from February 1619, when the queen mother fled the Château of Blois where she had been exiled in 1617 after the assassination of Concini. In the painting, Minerva, the incarnation of wisdom and courage, is guiding the queen through the night (represented by the hovering figures of Night and Dawn) toward the group of her rescuers, with the Duke of Épernon in the foreground. In the background, one of the queen's ladies is still negotiating the descent from the walls of the château, an allusion to the humiliations the queen had to suffer in order to reconquer her own freedom. Maria's night flight set off the wars of 1619–20, which were resolved via a long negotiation process that Rubens represents in the following paintings, the *Treaty of Angoulême* and the *Peace of Angers* (figs. 7 and 8). Thus the *Flight* was a powerful reminder, first, that the exclusion of the queen mother from government was not without consequence and, second, that royal power in France was still a matter of negotiation, not imposition, since a rebellious aristocracy was ready to raise armies against the king when unsatisfied with his policy.

Meanwhile, the *Triumph of Truth* depicts Maria and Louis as having reached a final, definitive peace made possible by the death of Luynes (represented in the preceding painting, the *Reconciliation after the Death of the Constable*) and by the truth that his death revealed: that the interest of France and the Crown lay in the natural harmony of its two heads, mother and son, unencumbered by the external interventions of malicious, self-serving ministers like Luynes. Of course, the notion of France having two heads — sitting as equals in the painting and sharing the crown of glory — was less than flattering for the king.

Yet early modern commentators read these paintings as laudatory of the queen mother, not as challenging of the king and his policies. Two of the series' most broadly circulated descriptions, Giovanni Pietro Bellori's *Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (1672) and André Félibien's *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes* (1725), identify the *Council of the Gods* with a representation of "the Providence of the queen" and of "the care the queen has taken of the kingdom during the regency"; the *Flight from Blois* with an "image of her misfortunes" or of the "reversals of her fortune"; and the *Triumph of Truth* with "Time unveiling Truth" and "the perfect and sincere union of Their Majesties."¹⁹ Clearly the series' controversial content — its *vero senso*, according to Rubens — could be concealed under other, less threatening layers of interpretation.

¹⁹Bellori, 229, 231–32; Félibien, 1725, 3:419, 423, 425.

The exclusive emphasis historians have placed on the *Life's* potential to irritate the king and its allies undermines two of the series' essential aspects. First, that the *Life* contained more than one layer of meaning: it could be presented to its viewers as a form of *laudatio* of the queen's merits as wife and mother of kings, regent to the throne, and guardian of the security of the state; or it could serve as an assertion of the queen's disapproval and dissatisfaction with royal policy. Second, that its multiple meanings targeted different audiences — which is to say that the audience of the paintings, not the paintings themselves, determined which message was to be conveyed. In fact, the ability of an image or group of images to provoke or to irritate is not an intrinsic quality: what decides whether a visual message transmitted through an image or group of images will lead to a scandal or will generate consensus is the composition of its audience and the audience's ability to extract the underlying meaning. The same critique of royal policy that Maria might have been foolish to show to the court at large could be astutely shown to a carefully selected elite that shared her disapproval and dissatisfaction. The support the queen mother received from a portion of the aristocracy when she rebelled against Louis XIII shows that such an elite did exist.²⁰ Therefore, the *Life of Maria de' Medici* did not only have the potential to irritate, it also had the opposite potential, thus far overlooked by historians: to encourage and give confidence to those who shared the queen mother's vision, who had supported her in the past, and who might feel emboldened by the cycle's narrative to do the same in the future. Of course, such a double-edged narrative could be shown only to some and had to be carefully hidden from others; its *vero senso* was an attempt at persuasion based on the ability to implement a degree of exclusivity and to accept a consequent degree of risk.

3. PHYSICAL CONTROL: THE QUEEN'S PRIVATE GALLERY

The claim that the queen's gallery in the Luxembourg Palace was the waiting room to her apartment, and thus largely accessible to courtiers, was first made by Jacques Thuillier and Jacques Foucart in 1967 and then incorporated into all subsequent literature.²¹ The claim is not only unsubstantiated — Thuillier and Foucart did not produce any evidence, nor did subsequent studies — but is also flawed regarding what is known of the spatial layout of the apartment and the ceremonial practices of the court of France in the early seventeenth century. Specifically, the location of the

²⁰See especially Dubost, 604–19.

²¹Thuillier and Foucart, 31.

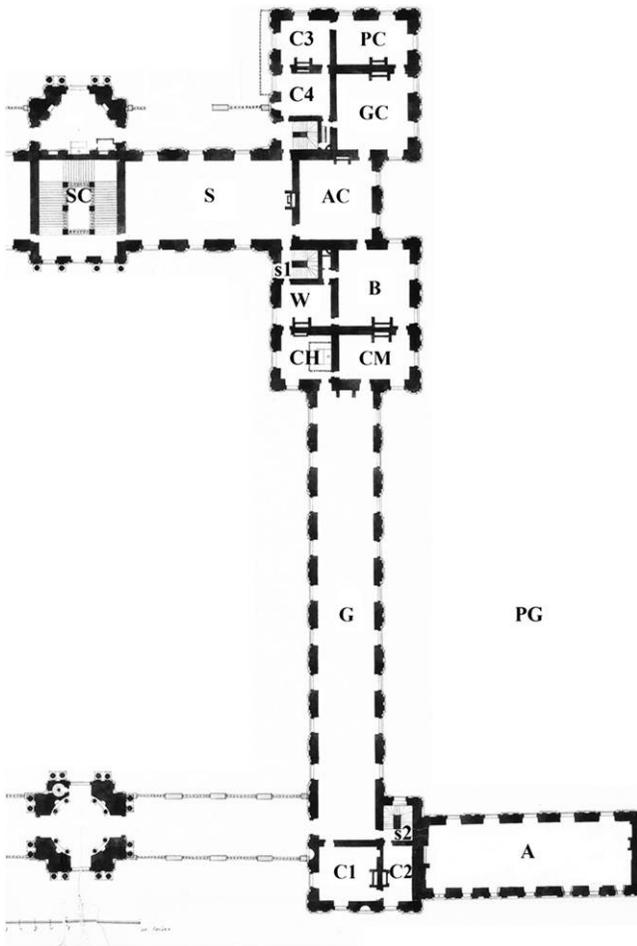


FIGURE 11. Maria de' Medici's apartment in the Luxembourg Palace. (SC) main staircase, (S) *salle des gardes*, (AC) antechamber, (B) bedchamber, (CM) Cabinet des Muses, (CH) private chapel, (W) wardrobe, (s1–2) secondary stairways, (G) gallery, (C1–4) *cabinets*, (GC) Grand Cabinet, (PC) Petit Cabinet, (A) aviary, (PG) private garden. Author's diagram.

gallery (fig. 11, G) has been misunderstood with respect to the main staircase of the palace (SC) and the main room of the apartment, the queen's bedchamber (B), which was used both for affairs of state and as the queen's sleeping room. According to Thuillier and Foucart, a visitor who was received by the queen in the bedchamber — a foreign diplomat on an official mission, for instance — would have entered her apartment from the *salle des gardes* (presence chamber, S), then turned into the landing area of a service

stairway (s1), and walked through the queen's wardrobe (W) and private chapel (CH) before reaching Rubens's gallery. From there, he would have gone through the queen's Cabinet des Muses (CM), a room for the queen's private business, before arriving in the bedchamber. This hypothetical itinerary is more than just tortuous: it is at odds with court ceremonial.

During the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth century, French royal apartments were typically laid out in enfilade between two poles: a public pole, near the entrance, and a private pole, near the sovereign's bedchamber.²² Of course neither the term *public* nor the term *private* should be understood here in their present-day sense. In this historical context, *public* refers to those spaces whose accessibility was regulated by ceremony — that is, rooms that courtiers could enter during the daytime, between the *lever* (rising ceremony) and the *coucher* (daily retirement) of the king, on the sole basis of their social rank, such as the *salle*, the antechamber, and the bedchamber.²³ *Private* designates instead those spaces whose accessibility was regulated directly by the sovereign — that is, rooms that no one, no matter their rank, could enter without express invitation. The quarters of Henri II in the Château of Saint-Léger (fig. 12), for instance, included a *salle* (S), an antechamber (AC), and a bedchamber (B) that could all be accessed by courtiers on the basis of rank only, whereas the rooms beyond the bedchamber, the *cabinet* (closet or study room, C), the wardrobe (W), and the gallery of the king (G) could only be accessed upon invitation from the king himself.²⁴

Further developments of court ceremonial, in particular during the reigns of Charles IX (1560–74) and Henri III (1574–89), led to the expansion in size of royal apartments; prior to Louis XIV's Versailles, however, this did not affect the regulating principles of their layout. While larger than that of Henri II in Saint-Léger, the apartment of Charles IX in Fontainebleau (fig. 13), for example, was still organized around a public pole constituted by *salle* (S), antechamber (AC), second *salle* (S2), and bedchamber (B), and a private pole that included one or two *cabinets* (C) and the king's gallery (G).²⁵ Characteristic of these layouts was a progression in privacy that, on the one hand, afforded courtiers an unambiguous map of

²²Guillaume, 33; Chatenet, 2002, 142–54, 194–98.

²³On the *lever*, the *coucher*, and the daily rounds of the sovereigns, see Knecht, 64–71; Chatenet, 2002, 114–33, 187–90.

²⁴Chatenet, 2002, 174.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 179.

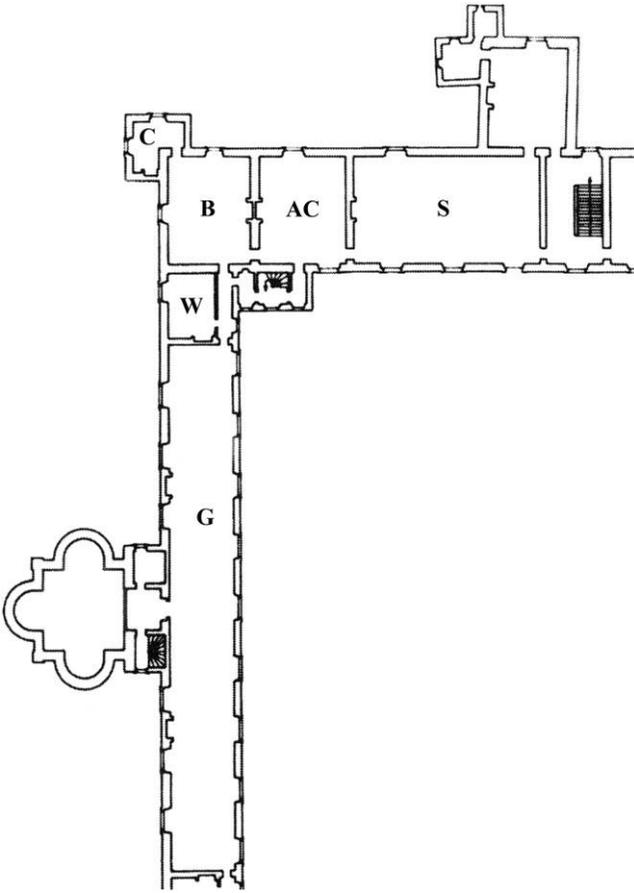


FIGURE 12. Henri II's apartment in the Château of Saint-Léger. (S) *salle*, (AC) antechamber, (B) bedchamber, (C) *cabinet*, (W) wardrobe, (G) gallery. Author's diagram.

the social hierarchy — those who could only go as far as the sovereign's antechamber were clearly distinguished from those who could walk on into the bedchamber and those who had to stop in the *salle* — and, on the other hand, provided sovereigns and their intimates with the chance to isolate themselves from the court as well as with alternative entries and exits via the secondary staircases that were usually located near the private rooms.

The layout of Maria de' Medici's apartment in the Luxembourg Palace was not substantially different from its sixteenth-century predecessors.²⁶ The

²⁶Galletti, 2003; 2010; 2012, 154–73.

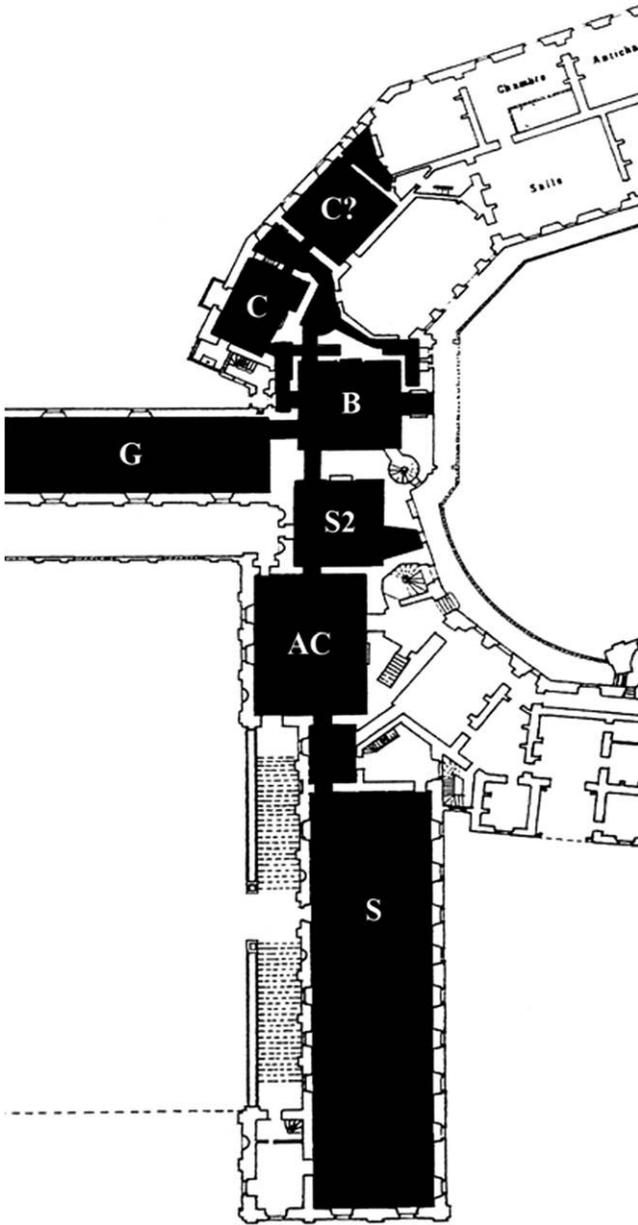


FIGURE 13. Charles IX's apartment in the Château of Fontainebleau. (S) *salle*, (AC) antechamber, (S2) *salle*, (B) bedchamber, (C) *cabinet*, (G) Galerie François I^{er}. Author's diagram.

apartment, which occupied the first floor of the west wing, was composed of thirteen rooms, four public and nine private (fig. 11). As in the above-mentioned examples of Saint-Léger and Fontainebleau, the queen's bedchamber (B) served as boundary between the public and private areas of her quarters: rank regulated access to the bedchamber itself and the rooms that preceded it, the *salle* (S) and the antechamber (AC), whereas the queen regulated access to the rooms that followed it, the Cabinet des Muses (CM), the private chapel (CH), the wardrobe (W), the gallery (G), and the two *cabinets* (C1 and C2) at the north end of the gallery. One of these *cabinets* opened with a balcony onto the spectacular two-storied interior of an aviary (A). A private stairway (s2) gave access to the ground floor of this aviary and led to the queen's private garden (PG), a walled-in portion of the large garden adjoining the residence; the same stairway also allowed for an alternative passageway into and out of the queen's apartment. At the south end of the apartment, symmetrical to the bedchamber (B) and located on the opposite side of the antechamber (AC), was a Grand Cabinet (GC), a public room that shared some of the characteristics and functions traditionally associated with the bedchamber: it was an often-crowded room where courtiers gathered in the presence of the queen and where affairs of state were often handled, including some of the Council's meetings. The Grand Cabinet was adjoined by a Petit Cabinet (PC), which enabled small groups to withdraw in confidential gatherings, and by two smaller rooms (C3 and C4) that might have been used as additional wardrobes or *cabinets* to store some of the queen's belongings and collections.

The location of the Medici gallery in the Luxembourg Palace clearly indicates that it was a private space, for it could be entered only from rooms that were not freely accessible to courtiers: the Cabinet des Muses and the queen's private chapel at one end, the queen's *cabinets* and private stairway at the other. Textual sources confirm this, showing that the queen used the gallery as a discreet path of access to her quarters — that is, a path that allowed select visitors to be given audience without having to pass through the *salle*, the antechamber, and the bedchamber where courtiers would see them. Such was the case when Richelieu paid an unofficial visit to the queen in 1630, after falling out of her grace. As reported by Giovanni Battista Gondi, the Florentine resident in Paris: “On the said twenty-third [of November 1630], the king and president Souffran spent the entire morning in the apartment of the queen [mother] trying to convince her to look favorably on said Cardinal [Richelieu]. After dinner, Their Majesties retired in private in the Cabinet des Muses. . . . Shortly afterward Cardinal Bagno and Cardinal Richelieu joined them, but they passed through the gallery so

that no one could enter and witness this event.”²⁷ On a daily basis, the queen would have used the gallery to isolate herself temporarily from the court or, as architect Sebastiano Serlio put it, famously summing up a gallery’s main purpose, “to take a stroll.”²⁸ Taken alone or in the company of selected guests, these strolls provided sovereigns with a chance to discuss private matters or simply to take a break from a society that expected kings and queens to be easily approachable and largely available to courtiers.²⁹ And, of course, to be a sovereign’s guest in his or her private quarters was a mark of the highest honor.

Exceptions to the rule did occur. The chronicles of the *Journée des Dupes* (10 November 1630), when the crisis between Maria de’ Medici and Richelieu reached its peak, show the cardinal accessing the queen’s gallery freely. On that day, Richelieu entered unannounced in the queen’s Cabinet des Muses while she was trying to convince Louis XIII to ban him from court. According to the *Mémoires* of François de Bassompierre: “The cardinal found the door between the [queen mother’s] antechamber and chamber closed, so he went in the gallery and knocked at the door of the *cabinet* [Cabinet des Muses] but received no answer. Finally, as he knew his way around the apartment, he entered the cabinet from the queen’s private chapel, the door to which had been left open.”³⁰ Richelieu could only have accessed the gallery from the *salle* (S) and wardrobe of the queen (W) or from the private staircase at the north end of the apartment (s2). As both of these access points were controlled by guards, Bassompierre’s account indicates that Richelieu had regular access to the most private rooms of the queen’s apartment.

The misinterpretation of the Luxembourg gallery as a room broadly accessible to courtiers derives from the projection of later customs onto a little-known past. The vast majority of studies exploring the relationship between social structures and architectural space in early modern France have focused either on the late Valois courts or on Louis XIV’s Versailles, while leaving largely unexplored the period between the 1590s and the 1660s. As Maria de’ Medici’s apartment in the Luxembourg was considerably larger than its Valois precedents, historians have read it through the lens of Versailles, which did feature a public gallery leading

²⁷Letter of Giovanni Battista Gondi, 28 December 1630, Archivio di Stato, Florence, Mediceo del Principato, filza 4643, fol. 375^r–375^v, cited in Galletti, 2003, 127. Other examples of galleries used in similar ways are found in Chatenet, 2002, 154; Chatenet, 2008, 7.

²⁸Serlio, 7:56.

²⁹On the expected availability and approachability of French kings and queens, see Knecht, 67–70.

³⁰Bassompierre, 4:120–22, cited in Galletti, 2003, 127. Further sources for the *Journée des Dupes* are found in Mongrédien, 187–203.

to the king's bedchamber — the Galerie des Glaces. The layout of the king's apartment in Versailles, however, was conceived in accordance with the new ceremonial practices of a court that had little in common with those of the first Bourbons.

Contrary to what the modern museum-goer might assume and what the Galerie des Glaces might seem to confirm, a lavishly decorated gallery conceived for private use, like the Luxembourg gallery, was not an anomaly in early modern France. Indeed, sixteenth-century royal galleries were typically intended for private use and were often lavishly decorated, as in the case of the Galerie François I^{er} in Fontainebleau.³¹ Nor did private galleries disappear with the introduction, during the reign of Henri IV (1589–1610), of galleries intended for public ceremonies. Rather, private and public galleries coexisted during the first half of the seventeenth century as separate, parallel spaces used on different occasions for different purposes.³² Court chronicles and diplomatic correspondence show, for instance, that while the Petite Galerie of the Louvre was often used for events that implied the presence of the court at large — such as baptisms, funerary ceremonies, and public receptions of foreign officials — the adjacent Grande Galerie maintained the traditional functions of a private gallery.³³ Private galleries also turn up in seventeenth-century architectural theory: in the 1620s, architect Jacques Gentilhâtre defined a gallery as “a room to take walks while talking business with friends,” for instance, and as late as 1676 historian André Félibien gave the same definition of a gallery as “a room where to take strolls” that Serlio had provided about a century earlier.³⁴ Of course, the habitual function of a room did not prevent exceptional uses. Private galleries could be open to worldly occasions and public ceremonies if their owners so wished, as in the case of the banquet Maria de' Medici hosted in her gallery in honor of Henrietta Maria of France and Charles I of England in May 1625.³⁵

³¹For more examples, see Guillaume, 37–40; Chatenet, 2008, 6–9.

³²On the appearance in France of the first public galleries and their development during the seventeenth century, see in particular Chatenet, 2008, 10–11; Mignot, 2008, 17–19.

³³On the Petite Galerie of the Louvre, or Galerie des Illustres, see Chatenet, 2008, 11. As to the Grande Galerie, Thomas Platter, 28, wrote that Henri IV would retreat there “to be on his own,” and a number of testimonies show that the king also used it for private audiences, as in the case of the audience given to Pedro de Toledo, the special ambassador of Philip III of Spain, in 1608: *Mercure François*, fol. 1:252^v.

³⁴Gentilhâtre, fol. 353^r; and Félibien, 1676, 605; both cited in Mignot, 2010, 42.

³⁵For further examples of private galleries occasionally hosting public events, see Guillaume, 39–40.

As already discussed, the term *private* is not synonymous with off-limits in this context, and so that the Luxembourg gallery was a private room does not imply that Rubens's paintings were out of sight or reserved for small audiences. Rather, it means that, regardless of numbers, their audience was personally selected by the queen who alone regulated physical access to the gallery. Until its modern conversion to a museum display, the *Life of Maria de' Medici* was never accessible to the undifferentiated crowds of a sovereign's antechamber as historians have thus far asserted; instead, it was reserved for an elite selected by the heroine of the narrative herself. Nor is the term *private* intended here as in opposition to, or denial of, the public function that Rubens's series performed as a carrier of political content, whether in the laudatory expression addressed to Louis XIII and his allies or in the provocative *vero senso* that targeted the sympathizers of the queen his mother. On the contrary, it was precisely its location within a realm controlled by the queen that allowed for the series' multiple layers of meaning. In fact, had Maria de' Medici's gallery been a public room, designed to host rituals accessible to the court at large, the subjects of its decoration would have most likely been as noncontroversial as those of other public galleries of the time, such as the above-mentioned Petite Galerie of the Louvre and the king's gallery in the Luxembourg Palace itself, which consisted of unambiguous celebrations of Henri IV's dynastic ties and military accomplishments.³⁶ Thuillier and Foucart's assumption that hanging the *Life of Maria de' Medici* in a broadly accessible room was a mark of the queen's naïveté needs, indeed, to be reversed; it is precisely that the series is more than a simple *laudatio* of the queen that suggests that it was conceived for an elite, not for a general audience.

4. INTELLECTUAL REGULATION: RUBENS'S ALLEGORIES

Controlling physical access to a room is one way to prevent unwanted visitors from seeing its contents, but it is neither the only way nor the safest, since unwanted visitors might still find their way in. A more reliable method of control is to make sensitive material difficult to read and understand. This is precisely what Rubens's complex visual language brought to the *Life of Maria de' Medici*: a form of intellectual exclusion that doubled the queen's control over the accessibility of her gallery.

³⁶On the decoration of the Petite Galerie of the Louvre, see Thuillier. On the function and decoration of the gallery of Henri IV in the Luxembourg Palace, see Galletti, 2010, 90–91.

Rubens's series was unveiled in the spring of 1625, only six years before Maria de' Medici's definitive exile from France in 1631, and a mere handful of records attests to the visits made to the gallery. These records indicate that access to the room was, of course, granted to the advisers who had worked with the queen and her painter on defining the series, including Richelieu, Maugis, and Peiresc. Likewise, access would have been granted to the queen's political allies — such as Épernon and the Guises, and the envoys from the court of Spain, the pope, and the Medici — who made up part of the program's intended audience.³⁷ Without additional records it is not possible to speculate beyond the obvious circle of intimates and allies and establish even a tentative list of other visitors to the gallery or of events that took place in it within the queen's lifetime.

Yet there is evidence of a banquet being hosted in the gallery on 27 May 1625 as part of the celebrations of the marriage of Henrietta Maria of France to Charles I of England. The event is mentioned by a number of sources, including Giovanni Battista Gondi; Cassiano dal Pozzo, who at the time was in Paris among the party of Cardinal Francesco Barberini; and the Brienne manuscript, a collected volume of letters, memoirs, and contracts concerning Henrietta Maria's wedding arrangements and ceremonies.³⁸ These sources list among the banquet's participants the members of the royal family (with the exception of the king, who was indisposed), the Duke of Buckingham and the special envoys of the King of England (who were to escort Henrietta Maria across the Channel), and “all those of high ranking at court.”³⁹ No description of Rubens's paintings, which had by this time been hanging on the gallery walls for about two weeks, is known to have been produced on this occasion and no source mentions the series. The Brienne manuscript and dal Pozzo's *Legatione* do not make any reference to the room's decoration, while Gondi acknowledges only the presence of “sumptuous hangings,” an expression that likely refers to tapestries rather than to Rubens's canvases.⁴⁰ Either no one informed the queen's guests about how to read the series' *vero senso*, or such information did not leak

³⁷The sources on the definition of the cycle's program and on the role of its various participants are Rubens's correspondence vols. 2–4 and the Baluze memorandum, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Baluze 323. A visit by Épernon to the gallery in 1630 is recorded by his biographer Girard, 454–55, cited in Merle du Bourg, 101.

³⁸Letter of Giovanni Battista Gondi of 31 May 1625, Archivio di Stato, Florence, Mediceo del Principato, filza 4638, not paginated (published in Marrow, 107); dal Pozzo, fol. 140^r–140^v; and *Lettres, mémoires, actes*, fol. 327^r.

³⁹*Lettres, mémoires, actes*, fol. 327^r.

⁴⁰Letter of Giovanni Battista Gondi of 31 May 1625, Archivio di Stato, Florence, Mediceo del Principato, filza 4638, not paginated (published in Marrow, 107).

outside the room to those who were not present. Neither would be surprising, for the banquet's guests were likely made up of the kind of elite within the elite that the gallery was designed for — separated from the outside world, even the world of the court, by a closed door and a degree of silence.

Furthermore, the record shows that physical access to Rubens's gallery did not automatically correspond to intellectual access to the *Life's* meaning. The series incorporates several layers of meaning, from the laudatory to the religious to the institutional; the political message is central, but it is not the only message.⁴¹ These multiple meanings are wrapped in a complex allegorical language that was not easily legible to Rubens's contemporaries. When he wished, the painter (and, one needs to keep in mind, diplomat) could divert a question about the paintings' meaning by pretending that he had lost his personal notes on the allegorical program and that without them he could not remember the exact details. As he wrote to his friend Dupuy in February 1628: "I will send you a letter for Mr. Morisot, which I delayed doing so far only because I was hoping I could find among my files some memoir of the subjects depicted in the Medici gallery. So far nothing has turned up, but I hope it will."⁴² Such a ruse (meant to stonewall Morisot, of course, not Dupuy) could only be employed in a world that found the cycle's full range of meaning as difficult to decode as succeeding centuries have.⁴³ The combination of complex visual language and multiple layers of meaning, in turn, encouraged a high degree of ambiguity of expression — a most fertile ground for dis/simulations — thus making it possible for the *Life's* viewers to be manipulated into reading certain elements while ignoring others.

The testimonies of the visits made by Cardinal Barberini and by Louis XIII provide clear evidence that the cycle was meant to be read differently by different visitors and that its *vero senso* — the very core of its potential for controversy — was meant to be hidden or revealed depending on the identity of the visitor. Rubens's allegories were the key to these variations in accessibility of meaning. Cardinal Barberini visited the Luxembourg gallery with his entourage on 7 June 1625, as dal Pozzo records in the *Legatione*.⁴⁴ Dal Pozzo provides thumbnail descriptions of each painting starting from the south end of the gallery, where the portraits of the queen mother and her

⁴¹On this aspect, see particularly Cosandey, 341–54.

⁴²Rubens, 4:365.

⁴³As Thuillier and Foucart, 40–42, have pointed out, the impermeability of Rubens's language was at the core of eighteenth-century criticism of the *Life of Maria de' Medici*.

⁴⁴Dal Pozzo, fols. 159^r–162^r.

parents were displayed, and progressing to the west, north, and east walls following the chronological order of the narrative. Only occasionally does he add brief commentaries, as for the *Birth of Louis XIII*, about which he writes, “the painter had so well expressed the pain and joy of the parturient, although with much lasciviousness.”⁴⁵ About the *Council of the Gods* (fig. 10), dal Pozzo writes, correctly, that the painting represents “the reciprocal wedding arranged with Spain.”⁴⁶ As mentioned before, the *Council’s* political content is highly charged and potentially divisive, but its exact theme is barely intelligible because of the complexity of the allegories devised by Rubens, which early modern commentators consistently misidentified. And yet no hint of ambiguity inflects dal Pozzo’s text, which suggests that Cardinal Barberini and his train were instructed on how to properly interpret the scene by one of Maria de’ Medici’s advisers. This would not be surprising, as the cardinal supported her pro-Spain policy.

The same did not apply to Louis XIII. When the king visited the gallery on 11 May 1625, Maugis, the appointed interpreter of the series, “artfully dissimulated” the paintings’ “real meaning,” as Rubens noted in the letter to Peiresc cited at the beginning of this essay, most likely by emphasizing the laudatory aspects of Rubens’s narrative. Thus was Louis XIII deceived in the queen’s gallery, and the series’ *vero senso* deliberately distorted in order to conceal what might provoke or offend him. Millen and Wolf note that, on the occasion of Louis XIII’s visit, Richelieu seems to have realized the potential dangers of such deception and the risk involved in showing the king and his entourage the scenes dedicated to the wars of 1619–20.⁴⁷ According to Rubens, the cardinal was “in considerable distress at seeing that the new subjects were badly received.”⁴⁸ Yet the cardinal’s concerns must have been assuaged by Maugis’s adroitness, for the visit was considered a success, the issue was quickly dropped, and, to the contrary of what Millen and Wolf assume, Rubens did not fall from grace following the inauguration of the gallery. It is true that Richelieu tried to have the painter dismissed, but his first attempt to do so dates to 1623, when the canvases were nowhere near complete, so he must have been motivated by something other than the potential scandal of the series.⁴⁹ In any case, the cardinal did not succeed in his attempt; if the *Life of Henri IV* was left unfinished, it is not because Rubens lost his commission but because

⁴⁵Ibid., fol. 160^v: “haveva il pittore talmente [bene] espresso, se ben alquanto lascivamente, il dolore e l’allegrezza della parturiente.”

⁴⁶Ibid., fol. 161^v: “il scambievol matrimonio trattato tra Francia e Spagna.”

⁴⁷Millen and Wolf, 11–12.

⁴⁸Rubens, 3:353.

⁴⁹See Marrow, 29–30, 41–48; Schnapper, 127–28.

construction of the gallery destined to receive it was not completed until the summer of 1629, the year preceding the queen's disgrace.⁵⁰

During her career as regent, member of Council, and fomenter of rebellious forces against Louis XIII, Maria de' Medici certainly showed some of the naïveté that has traditionally been attributed to her by historians. Yet the account of Louis XIII's visit shows that displaying the *Life* in the Luxembourg gallery was neither naïve nor foolish, for physical access to the room was under the control of the queen and intellectual access to the paintings could be manipulated at her wish. Moreover, the content of the paintings and the means to dissimulate it had not been devised by the queen mother alone but, as Rubens underlines when using the expressions "our gallery" and "our paintings" in his letter to Peiresc, it had been concerted with a group of cunning political advisers. Thus to construe the cycle as the embarrassing choice of a politically naïve queen is not just to revert to a biased, seventeenth-century image of Maria de' Medici, but to deny the process that brought her *Life* into shape.

5. CONTROLLED BROADCASTING: THE *LIFE* IN PRINT

The combination of physical and intellectual controls that Maria de' Medici was able to exert over Rubens's series also extended to the broader world of the print sphere — the texts and images circulating across early modern Europe. Thanks to its novelty and to the notoriety of both its patron and its painter, as well as its Paris location, the *Life of Maria de' Medici* was destined to travel well beyond the walls of the Luxembourg and beyond the world that the queen mother and her circle could hope to control. There is no question that both the queen and Rubens could have gained from broadcasting a masterpiece that added prestige to their names, but to allow the *Life* to travel solo in the form of printed copies and commentaries was to risk exposing it to the scrutiny of an audience that could not be manipulated by the likes of Maugis, thus undermining the intended privacy of some of its content. Maria de' Medici and her advisers avoided such consequences by censoring visual and textual reproductions of the series.

No copies of the *Life of Maria de' Medici* circulated during the queen mother's lifetime. While drawings of the Luxembourg Palace traveled as far as Florence and London in the early seventeenth century and served to inspire other architectural projects, no known drawings were made at the

⁵⁰Galletti, 2008, 43–45.

time of the cycle.⁵¹ Moreover, with the sole exception of the oil sketches that Rubens sent to Maugis during the preparation of the final canvases, no known painted reproduction was made in the seventeenth century, and the first printed copies to circulate would not be published until 1710. (These were made after the famous drawings by Jean-Baptiste and Jean-Marc Nattier.)⁵² These facts are striking, considering how widely prints of famous artworks were distributed in the early modern period and also considering the extent to which the success of Rubens's workshop depended on the production of replicas of the master's paintings.⁵³ These would have included painted copies made in the Antwerp workshop by Rubens and his assistants, and printed copies based on Rubens's own drawings and made by the many printmakers who collaborated with him, such as Lucas Vorsterman, Paulus Pontius, and the Bolswert brothers. Such copies were an effective means to disseminate Rubens's work and fame and were highly profitable, especially since the artist obtained privileges that granted him the exclusive right to publish copies of his work in several countries, including France.⁵⁴ It was most likely the queen mother's choice, not the artist's, to renounce the benefits, monetary and otherwise, that reproducing the *Life of Maria de' Medici* would have assured him.

It was through texts, not images, that the Luxembourg series was publicized across early modern Europe. The century that followed the completion of the paintings saw a proliferation of commentaries and descriptions of the gallery by a variety of authors, including Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1672), Roger de Piles (1677), André Félibien (1666–85, 1725), and Jean-Baptiste Dubos (1719). Yet these texts leave out essential features of the scenes, offer little or no interpretation for their allegorical apparatus, and consistently misidentify their subjects. The authors replicated the same mistakes and inaccuracies of the earliest commentators, Mathieu de Morgues (1626) and Claude-Barthélémy Morisot (1626, 1628), who, under different circumstances, had each produced court-approved

⁵¹On the drawings of the Luxembourg palace sent abroad, see Goldenberg Stoppato, 60–61; Summerson, 74–75, 80.

⁵²Rubens, Nattier, and Nattier. Nattier's prints are available online at <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/rubens1710>. On the sketches sent to Maugis (today in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, Germany), see Rubens, 3:39–40; Held, 1:91–93; Merle du Bourg, 59.

⁵³Muller, 60–61.

⁵⁴On the pricing of these copies, see De Marchi and Van Miegroet, 39–42; Sluijter, 17–18; Tummars, 43; Peeters, 108–20. On the privileges, see Orenstein, Leeftang, Lijten, and Schuckman, 174.

descriptions of the series meant to circulate to a wider, Latin-proficient European elite the same dissimulations of meaning that Maugis had provided to Louis XIII.

Morgues's *Vers latins* simply lists the subjects of the paintings, whereas Morisot's *Porticus medicæ* provides descriptions of their content in verse. Neither text offers insight into what Rubens called the "real meaning" of the paintings. For instance, neither identifies correctly the alliance with Spain as the subject of the *Council of the Gods* (fig. 10). Instead, Morgues calls the painting an allegorical representation of Maria's wisdom in her role as regent — "At the request of Juno, the gods chase away the horrible monsters who are terrified by the light of the young god" — while Morisot offers a more literal, and therefore even less clear, interpretation: "The Furies armed against the widow and others; the gods defeat the Taenarian monsters, fighting for the safety of the Gauls."⁵⁵ In the accompanying verses, Morisot elaborates further: "Here a painting more appealing than heaven. Some fight for the peace of God; in the distance, horrid monsters, which Tartarus pours forth from its tripartite river, are put to flight. The insatiable thirst for rule, the anxious envy of subordinates, novelties brought forth by sudden upheavals, impulsive anger, and the spirit of rebellion subside and the underworld, the ground below having given way, is plunged into a dark cave and there bound with a hundred chains."⁵⁶ Readers of this description might have felt puzzled about what, exactly, was on the canvas, but they would have been left with the impression that the *Council* was about a heroic fight against evil forces, and thus further distanced from its actual subject.

Both Morgues and Morisot also skipped over the potentially controversial features in the scenes referring to the wars of 1619–20 and focused instead on the features that characterized Maria as the victim of an adverse destiny and as the seeker of peace. For the *Flight from Blois* (fig. 6), Morgues writes, "I escaped to see again my dear king and children; a mother's love breaks all bonds," thus presenting

⁵⁵Morgues, 151: "Horrida monstra Dii pellunt Junone volente / Haec juvenis lucem pertimere Dei"; Morisot, 1626, 5: "Furias in viduam armatas aliâque; Taenari monstra Dei debellant, pro Galliarum salute pugnantes."

⁵⁶Morisot 1626, 5: "Blandior hinc caelo facies, pugnantisibus ipsis / ob pacem Diuis, procul importuna fugantur / monstra, tripartito quae Tartarus edidit amne, / imperiosa sitis regni, liuorque secundis / anxius, & subito nouitas elata tumultu, / impatiensque sui rabies, animusque rebellis / diffugiunt, caecóque Erebi conduntur in antro / deturbatata solo, centúmque reiuincta cathenis."

Maria's escape from exile as an act of maternal love rather than of disobedience.⁵⁷ Morgues also made maternal love and affliction the subjects of the two following paintings, the *Treaty of Angoulême* and the *Peace of Angers* (figs. 7 and 8), described respectively as "Tell us, Mercury, of the parent defeated neither by war or by deception; the love of the mother has conquered the offspring" and "In you alone, goddess, you who take care of afflicted mothers and are solace to widows, may there be protection and peace for me."⁵⁸

Likewise, Morisot's descriptions center on the adverse circumstances that Maria navigated with the help of the Olympian gods; again his descriptions are more literal but no less deceptive than Morgues's. The *Flight* is listed as "Night and Moon help the departing mother, Gallia promises the return, and the Duke of Épernon and his men receive the one coming to them," and described in these words: "There is no less concern among the pious for the mother of the gods. Indeed she, most sorrowful, having been torn from her son, condemns envy and dispels wrath with her glance. Chaste Diana helps the chaste and Night herself allows her own shadows to lift, Gallia comforts the one emerging and pledges joy, a glorified return, and long-awaited triumphs to a gloomy heaven."⁵⁹ The *Treaty of Angoulême* is presented as "Mercury and Cardinal Richelieu hand off the olive [branch] to the queen mother, by which gesture she is called back into the court; Cardinal de La Valette and Prudence keep watch over the one remaining," and described further as: "With no delay, Maia, most beautiful and fertile, shines light into the night, eases the grief of the powerful virgin, and restores peace and unity. A handsome man, distinguished by olive branches, reaches out toward the Palladian queen, and in returning love the mother sighs and, amazed by the changed gods, the gifts of the cherished son, and the virgin, distributes the promised joys. Fortune can hardly trust in herself, and in

⁵⁷Morgues, 151: "Erupi me carum regem prolemque revisam / omnia maternus vincula rumpit amor."

⁵⁸Ibid., 152: "Interpres divum nec Marte nec arte parentem / dic victim, matris viscera vicit amor" and "Afflictis Dea quae praestas viduisque levamen / matribus in te una sit mihi tua quies."

⁵⁹Morisot, 1626, 7: "Abeunti matri Nox et Luna fauent, reditum promittit Gallia, Espernonius Dux cum suis venientem ad se suscipit" and "Nec minor in matrem divum stat cura piorum, / illa quidem distracta suo maestissima nato / invidiam damnat, sed vultu corrigit iram: / casta Diana fauet casta, tenebrasque resolui / permittit Nox ipsa suas, solatur euntem / Gallia, et in tristi promittit gaudia caelo, / palmatos reditus, exoptatosque triumphos."

how favorable affairs have turned.”⁶⁰ On the *Peace of Angers* Morisot wrote, “She follows Mercury as he leads her to the Temple of Peace and the weapons which have been gathered into a pile are lit afire to the wailings of the ministers of Discord,” and added the following verses: “As the Furies surge forth from the infernal waves, they conjure new conspiracies and turn over in their breasts new plans. Discord will cry eternally in a dark prison and will make its pleas at the threshold of a locked door. The wars are far off, as are the threats of crimes; the weapons, having been gathered up, are burned. Golden Peace comes back with joyous mien, and the gates of the Temple swing open, and from the happy hearth they let it be known that the poets will have wished a long youth for the son and a long life for the mother. And Mercury, in offering the olive branch, made the sign of peace.”⁶¹

As Morgues was Maria de’ Medici’s *prédicateur ordinaire* (court preacher) and the author of a number of panegyrics and political pamphlets in her support and defense, it is not surprising that the *Vers latins* did not disclose to readers the sensitive political matters embedded in Rubens’s paintings. Not only was Morgues loyal to the queen, but he most likely concerted his text with her as a way of publicizing the series while censoring part of its content. Morisot’s *Porticus medicaea* is equally misleading, but unintentionally so. Morisot, a member of the Dijon parliament with no close ties to the queen mother and her inner circle, had no access to the confidential meanings of the series. In fact, Rubens dismissed Morisot’s 1626 edition for “not having captured, in several instances, the real meaning [of the paintings].”⁶² To avoid a second rebuff, in 1628 Morisot submitted to the painter a revised version of his text for approval

⁶⁰Ibid.: “Oliuam Mercurius cum Cardinali a Rupefalcata Reginae matri defert: quo signo reuocatur in Aulam, excubant sedenti Cardinalis Valetinus et Prudentia”; revised in the second edition as “Mercury hands off the olive [branch] to the queen mother, by which gesture she is called back into the court; Cardinal Richelieu and Prudence keep watch over the one remaining”: Morisot, 1628, 10. Morisot, 1626, 7: “Haud mora fecundae proles pulcherrima Maia / lucem inter noctes aperit, virgaque potenti / compescit luctus, pacemque et foedera reddit, / blandus, Palladae ramis insignis oliuae. / Haeret, et in reduci mater suspirat amore, / mutatosque Deos, et cari munera nati / miratur virgam, promissaque gaudia differt, / Fortuna vix fisa suae, rebusque secundis.”

⁶¹Morisot, 1626, 7: “Sequitur ad Templum Pacis ducentem Mercurium, arma in cumulum congesta flammis dantur, frustra ululantibus Discordiae ministris” and “Exsurgant Furiae licet infernalibus undis, / coniurentque novas fraudes, nova pectore versent / consilia, aeternum caeco Discordia flebit / carcere, et ad clausi plorabit limina Iani. / Bella procul, scelerumque minae! Congesta cremantur / arma, redivit festo rursus Pax aurea cultu, / et Templi patuère fores, letoque dederunt / signa foco, longam nato cecinère iuventam, / et longam matri vates cecinère senectam / Mercuriusque, data pacem signauit olive.”

⁶²Rubens, 4:1.

before publication, stating in the accompanying letters that he would integrate any requested changes.⁶³ That none of the controversial content of the series was revealed in this second, revised edition shows that Rubens's rebuttal of the earlier text was not meant to bring the paintings' *vero senso* to light and make it accessible to a wider audience. Well to the contrary, what the painter — and, through him, Maria de' Medici — aimed for was to gain control over Morisot's text, which should therefore be regarded as an official court publication like that of Morgues.

Because they were written during the lifetime of both the artist and his patron and in collaboration with them, Morgues's *Vers latins* and Morisot's *Porticus medicaea* were treated as authoritative sources by the authors of later descriptions such as Bellori and Félibien, who both provided edulcorated versions of the series' political content. The same is true of the captions for Nattier's prints of 1710, by far the most successful popularization of Rubens's paintings, where the *Council* becomes a portrayal of "the felicity of the queen's government" and the *Flight* a "testimony of her misfortune."⁶⁴ Well known and widely circulated, these later texts and images perpetuated into modern times the initial and deliberate concealment of part of the *Life's* meaning. That scholars continue to debate how to interpret the series and Rubens's allegorical language is proof, in itself, that it was possible to broadcast the images (and their prestige) while obscuring part of their content, and that Maria de' Medici, her painter, and her advisers had succeeded in doing so.

6. CONCLUSION

The physical displacement of works like the *Life of Maria de' Medici* from their original settings into museum galleries has contributed to a displacement of cultural meaning, for the modern privilege of easily accessing these works — by going to the Louvre or to its website, as opposed to waiting for a queen's invitation to visit her private quarters — is rarely recognized as a privilege or as modern. This fact, combined with the biased but enduring characterization of Maria de' Medici as naïve and foolish (a characterization crafted by her detractors after her 1631 exile and loss of power), along with a misunderstanding of social and spatial protocols at the courts of the early Bourbons, has allowed for historical narratives to project the current visibility of Rubens's canvases onto the past and then, in a circular argument, to misconstrue the series as the source of its patron's public embarrassment.

⁶³Morisot, 1656, 123–24, 130.

⁶⁴Rubens, Nattier, and Nattier, 17, 24.

While there is little doubt that Maria de' Medici was a defiant personality and not always a skillful player in power games, it is simply not tenable to represent Rubens's *Life* as a foolish bravado that exposed the queen to public scandal. Despite the claims of Millen and Wolf, there is no evidence that the series provoked a scandal or that its content directly or negatively affected the career of either its painter or its patron. Nor is there any evidence that during the queen's lifetime the series was accessible to the broad audience of the court at large, as historians have suggested.

Rather, the paintings and their potentially provocative contents were secured by layers of obfuscation, physical and intellectual: the gallery where they hung could only be accessed by permission of the queen, and the series' political message was hidden behind the veil of Rubens's complex allegorical language. As shown by the very different experiences of Cardinal Barberini and King Louis XIII, the meaning of the paintings could either be revealed to or concealed from those who visited the gallery: the series could be read either as an innocent, if pretentious, *laudatio* of the queen mother and her virtues or as a form of visual persuasion supporting her claims to power and her often antagonistic political views. The latter reading was reserved for a select group of friends and potential allies who shared, or who might have been willing to adopt, the queen mother's vision; the former reading was publicized to a wider public through texts produced under the direct supervision of the queen and her painter, namely Morgues's *Vers latins* and Morisot's *Porticus medicæa*. Ultimately the series proved to be a masterpiece in the art of dissimulation that, not unlike the works of libertine authors such as Vanini, Naudé, and La Mothe Le Vayer or the so-called translations of Tacitus and Machiavelli by Amelot de La Houssaye, had more to say than it pretended to but only to the exclusive few. With the publication of Nattier's prints in 1710 and the transformation of the Luxembourg gallery into a museum in 1750, Rubens's paintings for the first time became largely accessible to the public. Yet displaced from the political, historical, and cultural context in which and for which they had been conceived, they also became unable to fully communicate their nuanced, multilayered significance.

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