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## Subjects of the Gaze: Rubens and his Female Portraits

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SUBJECTS OF THE GAZE:  
RUBENS AND HIS FEMALE PORTRAITS

by

GABRIELLE CHRISTINE VAN RAVENSWAAY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Art History  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

My paper investigates Peter Paul Rubens' female portraits in terms of the male and female gaze, psychoanalytic analysis, and historical context. My research will support the idea that Rubens painted women in a sexualized manner based on what Foucault coins the male gaze.<sup>1</sup> The paintings evaluated in this project include portraits of Rubens' wives, Isabella Brandt and Helene Fourment, and portraits of wealthy patrons such as Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria, Anne of Austria, and Marie de' Medici. It is incorrect to view these paintings as pure, complete depictions of identity because women in this time were always defined and observed by men.<sup>2</sup> However by deconstructing the male gaze and also acknowledging the role of the active female gaze of the subjects of these works, a more complex construction of female identity is uncovered. Throughout history the feminine has been generalized to be passive and silent. My project aims to build on recent feminist scholarship that works to uncover more responsible and representative descriptions of the images of women in history.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "Discipline and Punish" from *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 549-565.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992): 44.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my family and dear friends who have supported me so much throughout this process.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

In the hierarchy of painting in art history the portrait falls far below the pinnacle of history painting. Even today, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) is best known for his allegorical and religious masterpieces. However, during his lengthy and prestigious career Peter Paul Rubens, executed many different portraits. Portraiture was in no way the focus of his career. However, in the beginning, portraiture was a means with which to support himself. For Peter Paul Rubens portraiture was “a task he would almost have liked to, but could not always, avoid in his frequent intercourse with personages of rank and quality.” Although he himself never thought of his portraits as pivotal to his career, his contribution to the genre is significant and deserves exploration. This paper focuses specifically on the even less studied area of his female portraits. By comparing the portraits Rubens executed of his wives, Isabella Brant and Helena Fourment, and the portraits he executed of the female social elite, Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria, Anne of Austria, and Marie de’ Medici, a deeper understanding of the influences shaping the portraits is understood. The combination of psychoanalysis, contextual analysis, and contemporary feminist theory on the gaze and viewing provides insight into the way the viewer perceives female portraits executed by a male artist.

Portraiture is often perceived as simply a study of the sitter. Each element, each stylistic choice in the work is made to reveal the character of the subject. While portraits reveal to the viewer information about the sitter and their culture, they also reveal information about the painter. As creator of the image the artist can only produce a portrait of how he saw the sitter therefore staging an “intervention . . . [which deserves] proper evaluation of the portrait artist’s

performance in interpreting (or concealing) the impersonating subject, when impersonating something is such an essential feature of the subject's social identity."<sup>3</sup> This points to the idea that a portrait is not simply an honest depiction of who a person is but instead it is a depiction of the socially constructed normative role they wish to project and to idea that the artist incorporates his own view of the sitter into portrait. It is therefore appropriate to discuss Rubens biography when trying to analyze the portraits he completed of female sitters. The way he viewed women in general and his relationships with the specific women he depicted influenced the images he created of them. While the portraits of his wives are warm and intimate, the elite portraits are more formal and distant. For example, Ruben's *Portrait of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria* (Figure 1) is deemed the "lovely but icy mechanical doll" while the wives are the embodiment of "natural warmth and the bubbling security of loving and being loved."<sup>4</sup> By comparing the portraits of his wives and the portraits of elite women it is clear to see how his own relationship, socially and sexually, influenced the portraits he made. The public commissions are of women emotionally inaccessible to the painter, while the private portraits of his wives evoke the intimacy he shared with them.

By limiting this study to the portraits of women by Rubens, it is obvious that the issue of gender is central to the interpretation of these images. The topic of gender influences that of portraiture in many ways from "the concerns of particular artists, the ways they represent themselves and others, the gender politics of their time and place, and fashions of male and female dress and behavior."<sup>5</sup> The subjects of these portraits display of performance of gender

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 89.

<sup>4</sup> Feghelmk, Dagmar, and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2005), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 148.

roles expected on the patriarchal culture of the time. As mentioned before it is not only the subjects gender that influences the portrait but that of the artist. The seventeenth century social conception of gender roles shaped the gaze of the viewer, the artist, and the female subject. Therefore, the use of theory on the gaze to study these seventeenth century portraits must be rooted in a contextualized analysis and understanding.

As mentioned previously, this paper uses contemporary feminist theory on the gaze and viewing combined with psychoanalysis and contextual analysis to provide insight into the way the viewer perceives female portraits executed by a male artist. Like Patricia Simons in her article “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture” I use here a “dialogue rather than a confrontation between historical and psychoanalytic interpretations.”<sup>6</sup> While she explored Italian Renaissance Female portraits, my goal is to analyze the 17th century Dutch portraits of women done by Rubens. Portraits are supposed to depict the physiology of an actual person and so “perhaps more than any other form of pictorial representation led themselves to the study of identity and agency.”<sup>7</sup> It is easy to look for elements of pure identity of the sitter within such a work. However, such a practice is irresponsible especially for female portraits by male artists. In the history of European female portraiture specifically, the female is never independent. She is always accompanied by the male gaze, that of the audience and of the artist.<sup>8</sup> The construction of these portraits is influenced by the fact that Rubens painted women in

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture,” edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992): 41.

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Pearson, introduction to *Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe: Gender, Agency, Identity*, ed. Andrea Pearson (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 2.

<sup>8</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Company, 1972), 47.

a sexualized manner based on what Foucault coins the male gaze. The male gaze proposes that females in paintings are placed for the viewing pleasure of the male. In each of these works we see not simply a portrait of a woman, but also a portrait of how a man viewed a woman. History, largely, has left us with the definition of women mostly in terms of the men in her life: her marriage, her family, and in this case the artist that painted her. Rather than viewing these portraits as simply pure, true to life representations of these women, it is necessary to explore the complex interaction between how the gaze of the subject, the gaze of the artist, and the gaze of the intended viewer complicates the image. The point is not to just further restrict these women singularly into objects of the male gaze but explore the how they negotiated and interacted within the patriarchal system of the time.

The paintings evaluated in this project will include portraits of Rubens' wives, Isabella Brandt and Helene Fourment, and portraits of wealthy patrons such as Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria, Anne of Austria, and Marie de' Medici. There is a degree to which each is objectified by the male gaze of both artist and viewer in their portraits which is important to understand because it makes clear that these portraits are not sites of purely self-determined identity but are performances of socially approved roles. However, it is important also to acknowledge the degree to which these norms prescribed to women by a patriarchal system were internalized and made part of their own identity. These portraits slot these women into the role of wife and mother. These roles do not represent the complex, intersectional identities of these women but rather only represents one part. It is by exploring the female gaze and female agency of these women, not only their objectification by male gaze and exploitation by a patriarchal society, that a more intricate understanding of their image can be discussed.

## CHAPTER 1: “A BIOGRAPHY OF PETER PAUL RUBENS”

Peter Paul Rubens was the youngest son of Jan Rubens and Maria Pypelinck. Although far from poor, Rubens’ upbringing was not always the most luxurious. His ancestors were respectable tradesmen but not nobility or intellectual elite. Rubens’ father Jan Rubens was the first in his family to be educated thanks to the generosity of his mother’s second husband, Jan de Lantmetere, who financed Jan’s education in Louvain, one of the most prestigious institutions in Europe at the time. It was there that Jan Rubens decided to study law. On August 29, 1550 he departed for Rome to study at ‘La Sapienza’ University where in 1554 he was awarded a doctorate in ecclesiastical and civil law.<sup>9</sup> The Antwerp that Jan Rubens’ left was a prosperous city hailed as the business center of Europe. It was upon Jan Rubens’ return to Antwerp in 1559 that the city began a downward economic spiral that would impact Peter Paul Rubens’ own life. Jan Rubens rose the ranks quickly after his return to Antwerp. He married Maria Pypelinck who was of a respectable if equally bourgeois family. He was also elected as the deputy magistrate to the burgomaster of Antwerp in 1562.<sup>10</sup> Just a few years later the Spanish crown would deal a heavy blow to the Low Countries and especially Antwerp.

In 1555 the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, divided up his empire and retired into monastic life at the Hieronymite monastery of Yuste in Estremadura. In this split, Charles V’s son Philip II was given rule of Spain and the seventeen provinces that made up the Low Countries. Philip would prove to be less effective of a ruler than his highly esteemed father. He

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Avermaete, *Rubens and his Times*, trans. Christine Trollope (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1968), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 4.

had neither his father's "wisdom nor strength . . . [and] felt only aversion and suspicion towards the Low Countries."<sup>11</sup> Philip II isolated himself in the Escorial and left his half-sister, Margaret of Parma, as regent of the Low Countries along with Spanish troops to run the country. Furthermore, Philip II highly underestimated the Protestant Calvinist sway in the Low Countries. Philip was highly distrustful of anything that wasn't Spanish or Catholic and harshly opposed the spread of Protestantism. Antwerp was both the richest and "most enlightened" of the provinces and also "from the fifteenth century onwards . . . had acted as a refuge for Protestant immigrants" so it is no surprise the city erupted in revolt against Spanish rule. In response, Philip II sent troops with the 'ferocious Duke of Alba' as their leader who unleashed "an orgy of pillage massacre, rape and torture" saving special destruction for the illustrious city of Antwerp.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, the Catholic citizens would grow tired of the Calvinists who put their city in danger. The revolutionaries, including Jan Rubens along with his wife and four children in 1568, were exiled along with their leader William the Silent, Prince of Orange who fled to Cologne. The city of Antwerp would never fully recover from the destructive campaign of the Duke of Alba.

While living in Cologne Jan Rubens served as lawyer to the Orange family. His is described as "a good and useful lawyer . . . [and] also an attractive man, good looking, [and] charming."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps too charming for his own good, Jan was later put under arrest in March 1571 for his affair with Anne of Saxony, William the Silent's wife. In the face of her husband's adultery, Maria Rubens surprisingly fought valiantly to free her husband with no "lack [of] intelligence or spirit. . . Alone, in exile, she confronted the powerful house of Orange-Nassau."

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<sup>11</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 7.

She wrote letters pleading for forgiveness and when that failed all but blackmailed the Prince of Orange to release her husband or have knowledge of the affair made public. At that, Jan Rubens was set free on the condition a 6,000 thaler fine was paid (which Maria provided by selling her possessions). The Rubens family then moved to Siegen, Germany where Maria “kept the family alive by subletting rooms and growing her own food.”<sup>14</sup> It is here that Maria gave birth to two more sons, Philip (b. 1573) and Peter Paul (b. 1577). The two brothers would have a close relationship until Philip’s death. Jan Rubens, a lawyer and so well-educated man, passed this education to his sons which would serve them in their future careers.<sup>15</sup>

After Jan’s death in 1587, the Rubens family moved back to Antwerp and reverted back to the Catholic faith. Antwerp no longer the busy mercantile city but a city that suffered from the closing of their port due to northern secessionists blocking navigation down the Schelde River. Maria Rubens returned to the Rubens family house in Antwerp and put her energy into raising her children. Peter Paul Rubens was educated at the finest school in the city run by Rumboldus Verdonck.<sup>16</sup> In this time he learned both Greek and Latin and studied classical thinkers such as Cicero, Virgil, Terence, and Plutarch. After the completion of Peter Paul’s schooling, Maria, in the interest of integrating him more with “good society”, secured him a position in the household

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<sup>14</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," in *Seventeenth-Century Art & Architecture*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008), 145. Jan Rubens taught both his sons Latin and Italian. In adulthood, Rubens was “so familiar with the writings of . . . Cicero, Seneca, Horace, and Juvenal that he could quote appropriate passages in his letters.” Peter Paul Rubens kept up with his education his entire life, amassing a library of over three hundred books by his death. Therefore his “close knowledge of ancient mythology, philosophy, and Catholic Doctrine meant that, unlike his peers, he did not need to have literary or theological consultants” while completing his art works.

<sup>16</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 9. Lescourret explains here and later that it is here that Rubens would befriend Balthasar Moretus, the grandson of the famous Plantin the printer. The two would be lifelong friends and collaborate in producing books, which Rubens would illustrate and Moretus would publish. Rubens would produce many prints of his work to further spread his fame in Europe.



of the Countess of Lalain.<sup>17</sup> It was a position that the young Peter Paul did not care for, as he left his position in less than a year and announced his desire to become an artist. It is important to acknowledge the important role Maria Rubens played in the success of the Rubens family. She embodied strength, and independence and did not shy away from the struggles she faced. She faithfully moved her entire family to a different country when her husband was exiled for revolutionary activity. She single-handedly rescued her husband, a man who had cheated on her, from jail and when he died moved her entire family again back to a city in near economic ruins in which she made sure her children had education and opportunity. Although not much more is known about Maria Rubens, one can see her children benefitted greatly from strength and intelligent maneuvering. Perhaps, it was from his mother that Peter Paul derived the direct, frank strength that appear in the gaze of some of his female portraits.

In 1591 at the age of fourteen Peter Paul Rubens started his artistic training. The exceptional education from his parents and the exposure to both protestant and catholic doctrine greatly aided him in his artistic career. His education and the admirable social positioning of his family provided him with the “confidence needed to deal with powerful patrons” of which he would have many. The artistic world into which Peter Paul was being thrown was heavily divided between the traditional painters who held to the Northern style and classicizing ‘Romanists’ who followed the Italian school. Rubens would work in the studio of Tobias Verhaegt for a couple of months before apprenticing under Adam van Noort in 1592. He worked under the “painter who expressed the very essence of Flanders . . . the opposite of Italian” for

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Avermaete, *Rubens and his Times*, 33.

four years.<sup>18</sup> Rubens then moved on to apprentice under one of the most prominent artists in Antwerp at the time, Otto van Veen (Venus). Otto van Veen was the complete opposite of van Noort. He was one of the Romanists and had studied in Italy and “absorbed the influence of Correggio and Andrea del Sarto.”<sup>19</sup> When his apprenticeship was over, Peter Paul Rubens was admitted to the Guild of St. Luke in 1598. In the beginning of his career during his apprenticeship with Venus and his trip to Italy, Rubens’ style would be heavily indebted to this Italian school. It would only be later that he would achieve the perfect synthesis of Northern and Southern technique that he would be his claim to fame.<sup>20</sup>

Rubens began his journey to Italy in on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1600 at the age of 23.<sup>21</sup> The first stop Rubens made in Italy was in Venice. Through a lot of luck and a little charm Peter Paul met and soon after was employed by the Duke of Mantua. It was under this first upper class patron Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, that Rubens would begin his dual career of artist and diplomat. Vincenzo Gonzaga was known in his time for being extravagant, wealthy, having the most elegant court, and one of the most extensive art collections. In the Duke’s lavish palace, Rubens would have been able to view and copy “frescos by Pisanello or Mantegna, tapestries woven in Flanders after cartoons designed by Raphael . . . paintings by Bellini, Correggio, Titian, Veronese, Leonardo, Caravaggio.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout his career Rubens would receive the respect and patronage of the ruling class of Europe. Rubens broke the mold of artist as craftsmen.

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<sup>18</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas L. Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation: Studies in His Religious Paintings between 1609 and 1620* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 148.

<sup>22</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 20.

The struggle for artists to raise their profession from artisan to liberal would continue throughout the century but artists were fighting more earnestly than ever for recognition. Francisco Pacheco, father-in-law to Velázquez, would most eloquently articulate these ideas in his book *The Art of Painting* published in 1649, nine years after Rubens' death. In this publication Pacheco "elevated [painting] to the rank of liberal art . . . and he showed that painting also won its entitlement to noble rank by serving religion, thereby contributing to the moral elevation of humanity."<sup>23</sup> Although much earlier than Pacheco's treatise, Rubens raised himself as an artist to the level of "intellectual and gentlemen."<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve and maintain Rubens' led a very disciplined and regimented lifestyle unlike many Flemish artists on their trips to Italy who "led a jolly and boisterous existence."<sup>25</sup> It is this life-long, self-imposed disciplined order that would allow Rubens to reach heights beyond any other artist of his time.

During his eight years in Italy he visited several cities such as Rome, Mantua, and Genoa. Everywhere he went Rubens would continue to sketch and even make interventions and alterations to his copies of great masters.<sup>26</sup> It is in Genoa that he studied palace architecture that would later inspire the design of his studio in Antwerp, and that he completed portraits of several members of the Doria family including the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria (1606) and Marchesa Veronica Spinola Doria<sup>27</sup>. Rubens used interactions with elite society, despite his general dislike for nobles, to secure further favor, recommendation, and commission. Peter Paul would have even more opportunity to build his noble connections as his patron and protector, the

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<sup>23</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 23-24.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 148.

<sup>25</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 40.

Duke of Mantua, requested Rubens accompany a retinue of gifts to the King of Spain from which Vincenzo was hoping to receive the title of Admiral.<sup>28</sup> Rubens suffered delays on his journey and several of his paintings were damaged on the way. When he finally arrived at the Spanish court on May 13 1603, the King was away. Though unfortunate this gave Rubens a much needed opportunity to repair his damaged paintings. To further the disappointment, when the King did return, Rubens was not granted an audience with him to present the gifts in person. The trip was not totally unproductive however. During his time in Spain, Rubens made copies of several works in the royal collection including Charles V's prized Titians. He also produced several originals including "a suite of the twelve apostles, several portraits of [the Duke of] Lerma's son [the Duke of Lerma himself] and the Duke of Infantado's family."<sup>29</sup> Rubens worked very quickly while in Spain and gained the admiration of the Duke of Lerma who suggested Rubens become official Spanish painter. However, Rubens was eager to return to Italy which he did in 1604.

Rubens at first went back to Mantua but very quickly turned around and went to Rome in 1605. During this time, Rubens worked on the commission to decorate the Chiesa Nova at the recommendation of Scipione Borghese, selected works for the Duke of Mantua's collection (including Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*), and found a house for Duke Vincenzo's son who had become a Cardinal.<sup>30</sup> Rubens made several trips back and forth between Mantua and Rome

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<sup>28</sup> Roger Avermaete, *Rubens and his Times*, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 150.

to please his main patron but at the end of 1608 was forced to finally return to his home in Antwerp after receiving news that his mother had fallen ill.

By the time Rubens reached home his mother had passed away. And so upon his homecoming his first action was to bury his mother. “His grief was so overwhelming that he needed to retreat to a monastery for a few weeks” and did not resettle in Antwerp until 1609.<sup>31</sup> Politically, Rubens returned at the fortunate time of the 12 Year Truce signed between the Seven Provinces and the Spanish Netherlands. With the help his brother, Rubens would then gain audience with the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Infanta Isabella who would make Rubens official court painter. The rewards granted by the Albert and Isabella were unheard of in the Low Countries court at this time. He was granted a “high retainer as well as a separate fee per painting” and was also allowed to set up his home and studio in Antwerp instead of in the Brussels court.<sup>32</sup> Rubens was deeply connected to his home city and was not willing to sacrifice his freedom to be distracted by the court life of which he was not particularly fond. His decision to remain in Antwerp reveals that despite all his workings with nobility up to this point in his career he was still a “Flemish bourgeois at heart.”<sup>33</sup> In October 1609, Rubens married Isabella Brant, his brother Philip’s niece by marriage.<sup>34</sup> She was 17 years old at the time and the daughter of a highly respected humanist and lawyer. In 1611, Rubens purchased the house of which half would be a home for his new wife and family and half would be studio for himself.<sup>35</sup> Rubens spent years on the renovation to make his home in the Italian style after the copious drawing and

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<sup>31</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 56.

<sup>33</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, “Flanders,” 154.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Avermaete, *Rubens and his Times*, 80.

notes he had made while in Genoa. It was until 1616 that the Rubens family finally settled in their new modest painter's palace. Peter Paul Rubens ran his new studio with the same discipline that he ran his life. It is what made his studio the most productive in Europe. His reputation spread and Rubens would have so many requests from prospective students that "he frequently refused people" including some relatives, for he only kept those with the most potential in his studio (namely Jacob Jordaens, Francis Snyders, and Anthony van Dyck).<sup>36</sup> Not only did he have to refuse students, Rubens also refused commissions. The recorded catalogue of Rubens amounts to over 1,400 works in his 40 year career (his apprenticeship works are now lost).<sup>37</sup> Peter Paul Rubens accomplished this by running his workshop like a business. He collaborated both with his students and other artists to create many of his works in the years his studio was open. Based on their specialization, students in Rubens's studio would complete parts of commission usually leaving the figure or even just the face for the master to complete. To have a work done entirely by Rubens would mean the cost would rise exponentially. In his own words "... if I had done the entire work with my own hand, it would be worth twice as much."<sup>38</sup> One of the biggest commissions of his career was for the Marie de Medici cycle begun in 1622 and completed in 1624. In this cycle Rubens immortalized the disgraced Queen in a perfect "synthesis of painting, politics, diplomacy and humor."<sup>39</sup> Rubens was also meticulous in his receipt of payment owed for his work and also in the assurance of his copyright in order to

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<sup>36</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 145.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, Trans. and ed. by Ruth Saunders Magurn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 76. Letter from Rubens to Trumbul dated 26 January 1621. Also see Marina Daimon, "Telling What is Told: Originality and Repetition in Rubens's English Works," in *Concepts of Creativity in Seventeenth Century England*, ed. by Rebecca Herissone and Alan Howard, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 157.

<sup>39</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 123.

ensure the integrity of his work. It is in this time that Rubens solidified his Italo-Flemish style of grand scale combined with minute detail, his fortune, and his reputation across Europe.

The productivity of Peter Paul Rubens studio would only falter with the death of his wife Isabella from the plague in 1626. Little is known about Peter Paul and Isabella's relationship prior to her death. The marriage portrait of the two of them painted by Rubens shows a gentle, affectionate couple (Figure 2). His feelings towards her become more clear after her passing. He writes in a letter:

“As for myself, I have lost a very good companion, whom I could, whom I ought to have loved reasonably, for she had none of the shortcomings of her sex; she was neither morose nor weak, but so good, so honest, so virtuous that everyone loved her throughout her life, and weeps for her in her death. Such loss strikes me to the very depths, and since the only true remedy to all ills is oblivion, born of time, I have the strength to put all my hope in that. But it will be very difficult to separate my grief from the memory that I shall keep, my whole life long, of that dear creature who was loved and respected by all.”<sup>40</sup>

While any passion for his late wife if not expressed, it is painfully clear the love and immense respect Ruben's had for his late wife. He does not lament the loss of her beauty but touts her strength and virtue. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that Rubens does not view all women in such a fair light. Rather, despite all the faults that he knows the female sex possesses, Rubens picks for himself the only women who do not fall to these weaknesses. This letter makes it clear that Rubens both subscribes to the patriarchal societal preconceptions of the female gender and is deeply fond of his female family members.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, trans. and ed. by Ruth Saunders Magurn, 136.

For the four years after his first wife's death, Rubens would leave Antwerp and his studio to pursue diplomatic duties in an attempt to solidify peace between the revolting Dutch northern states, the Low Countries, and Spain. In his absence his workshop production crawled to nearly a halt. In these years he would travel to the northern Netherlands, Spain, France, England, and Denmark in hopes of helping to negotiate peace for his country. He had successes but also bitter failure in his career as a diplomat in which he was both heralded and snubbed for being an artist turned ambassador.

His diplomatic career for the most part ended when he married his second wife, Helena Fourment on December 6, 1630 when Rubens was 53 and Helena was 16.<sup>41</sup> Rubens spent the last five years of his life completely devoted to his family and his painting in their new home in the countryside outside of Antwerp. He worshipped his new wife and painted her in both portraits and allegories. His family members would serve as his sole muses in the last five years of his life. It is a wonder he painted at all in his last years. The gout that had tortured him his whole adult life grew worse and arthritis added more pain. On May 27 1640 Peter Paul Rubens fell into a coma and died on June 2.<sup>42</sup> It is important to recognize through his biography how much his country, his people, his family affected his artwork. Even in painting a portrait Rubens' own history and personality shine through along with that of the subject. Some centuries his oeuvre would be rejected as frivolous and other centuries it would be hailed as genius. However, for the past four hundred years, his work would never be lost nor forgotten.

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<sup>41</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 186.

<sup>42</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 221.



## CHAPTER 2: “THEORY OF THE GAZE”

Scholarship about the gaze has gone through many transformations before arriving at the current feminist interpretation. Feminist theory on the male gaze has been used thoroughly in art history to address images of female figures, but there is less works dealing with the female gaze, agency, and subversion of the patriarchy. As my paper analyzes the female portraits of Peter Paul Rubens through both male and female gaze, it is important to first address the development of scholarship and theory about the gaze. The term gaze was first made popular by Jacques Lacan in his work “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*” in which he discusses awareness of self and of gaze in the mirror stage and the loss of autonomy when one realizes one is an object that is gazed upon.<sup>43</sup>

Michel Foucault then uses the term gaze in the context of power relations and self-regulation in “Discipline and Punish.”<sup>44</sup> According to Foucault the “body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it . . . [and] is caught up in a system of subjection . . . the body becomes useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, all bodies can produce power and be subjected to it because “power is exercised not possessed” and is part of a relational system that includes everyone from the pinnacle of society “right down to the depths of society.”<sup>46</sup> In his essay, Foucault uses the Panopticon, a prison in which each cell separates each person but in which everyone is visible, as

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<sup>43</sup>Jacques Lacan, “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*.” from *Reading Images*, ed. Julia Thomas, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 138-148. Jacques Lacan (3 April, 1901 – 9 September, 1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist whose ideas had a great impact on post-structuralism, critical theory, and film theory.

<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish” from *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 549-565. Michel Foucault (15 October, 1926 – 25 June, 1984) was a French philosopher, social theorist, and literary critic who was labeled as a post-structuralist, label which he denied preferring to be a addressing instead what he called theories of modernity.

<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish,” 549.

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish,” 550.

an example of a power-knowledge system.<sup>47</sup> In this system the inmate is induced into a “state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power . . . [by]sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it . . . inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearer.”<sup>48</sup> It is the knowledge that one is visible and subject to the gaze of others that modifies behavior to suite a certain power system. In this way “western democracies act as their own jail-keepers. They internalize the social control that monitors society and maintains the disciplined efficiency of the social system.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the gaze carries power and consequence. It is a tool in perpetuating a certain socially constructed order. This principle is later examined by feminist theorists in relation to patriarchy and the male gaze and female objectivity.

In 1989, feminist film critic Laura Mulvey first coins the term “male gaze” in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”<sup>50</sup> Although her essay deals specifically with film, it laid out an important way of viewing, in general, female representation in the context of male viewership. Her argument centered around Freudian psychoanalysis of a strict male versus female dichotomy in which the “actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man.”<sup>51</sup> Mulvey goes further to gender the gaze of the viewer of the film/image as male as well (regardless of actual gender of viewer). While the viewer gains pleasure from the act of viewing the woman/object, they can also do so by “identif[ying] with the main male protagonist .

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<sup>47</sup> Foucault’s Panopticon is a fictitious construction that refers to how the gaze and knowledge of being subject to the gaze automatically reinforces the power structures of society.

<sup>48</sup> Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish,” 554-5.

<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish,” 554.

<sup>50</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-26.

<sup>51</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*, 25.

. . with the active power of the erotic look.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, in the established language of patriarchy, the sexualized image of a woman is constructed to satisfy the male sexualizing desire and gaze and is completely “symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected on to the female image.”<sup>53</sup> According to Mulvey’s analysis the female subject is no longer a representation of an actual woman but a symbol of both male desire and lack of masculinity. It is not the woman’s personality or identity that is necessarily represented but the “psyche’s political reality and its manifestation in image and representation.”<sup>54</sup> In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey holds to a strict interpretation of gender as female/femininity and male/masculinity. While the use of such binary is inappropriate in contemporary views on gender fluidity, it is useful when looking at older images, such as the seventeenth century portraits of Rubens, created in a historical context in which the view of gender, gender roles, and sexuality were constructed as far more rigid and binary.

After Mulvey, the male gaze is specifically analyzed in an art historical context in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* and Patricia Simons “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture”<sup>55</sup> both which show how historically the objectification of the female body by the male gaze is present in visual art. In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger corroborates Laura Mulvey’s definition of male gaze as active and the female object as passive. Berger goes on to explain in a fashion after Foucault, that not only does man objectify woman, but woman objectifies woman through self-regulation.

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<sup>52</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*, xiii.

<sup>54</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*, xii.

<sup>55</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47; Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames,” 41.

One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to women themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.<sup>56</sup>

And so, Berger turns Mulvey's male fantasy of the image of a woman into social reality. For it is not just fictional representations of women that are subject to the male gaze, but actual women as well. To grow up within a patriarchal language system and patriarchal visual system leaves no other choice but to internalize to some extent male dominance and male gaze and have it be reality. A woman is treated by a man based on how she looks. Therefore, in order to survive and “to acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it.”<sup>57</sup> And so women alter their appearance to be treated by others in the manner they wish to be treated. And so in portraits of women we can analyze their visual appearance and representation to ascertain to a limited extent how they wish to be treated.

While John Berger focuses mainly on the male gaze and female nude in European art, Patricia Simons uses theory on the male gaze to analyze the profile female portraits of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Italy. Her article proposes a “dialogue rather than a confrontation between historical and psychoanalytic interpretations . . . [that] will characterize the gaze as a social and historical agency as well as a psychosexual one.”<sup>58</sup> And so Mulvey's concept of male gaze and female object/image of “establish[ed] . . . political reality,” is here contextualized in the specific historical and social positioning of the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance. Simons separates men and women along the same lines as Mulvey and Berger in that these female images were

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<sup>56</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

<sup>58</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames,” 41.

created “by male artists for male patrons . . . addressed male viewer . . . [while] to be a woman in the world was/is to be object of the male gaze: to “appear in public.”<sup>59</sup> And so a woman of a fifteenth century context was automatically “a bearer of her natal inheritance and an emblem also of her conjugal line once she entered the latter’s boundaries, a woman was an adorned Other who was defined to existence when she entered patriarchal discourse primarily as an object of exchange.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the portraits of these women does not function as a formal description of their appearance nor a study of their individual personality but their value in terms of dynastic lineage both past and potential future. Women at this time were valued by their family’s wealth and status both natal and marital and therefore valued based on their potential to bear male children to carry on the family’s wealth and status. With the dowry system, women at this time were bartered, bought, and sold in order to form alliances that would ensure the family dynasty. And so when these women were represented in art, they were put on display but only “at the time of her marriage . . . [while] otherwise she was rarely visible, whether on the streets or in monumental works of art.”<sup>61</sup> Simons puts forth that these women are positioned within the frame in profile so that the male can gaze can fall upon them uninterrupted turning the female subjects into “inactive objects gazing elsewhere, decorously averting their eyes.”<sup>62</sup> In these female portraits the women themselves are also decorated in a “performance which allowed, indeed expected, a woman’s visible presentation in social display and required an appropriately honorable degree of adornment” because “a wife’s public appearance was a sign of her propriety

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<sup>59</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames,” 41.

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames,” 42.

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames,” 42.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames,” 44.

and her husband's trust" and of family prestige.<sup>63</sup> So within this historical, cultural context the female image under patriarchal rule is put on display specifically for the male gaze to be valued in terms of social status and procreative ability. By placing them in profile "the female eye was disempowered and her body an emblem for the display of rank, honor and chastity."<sup>64</sup> Just as Mulvey discussed images of women in modern film as "male fantasy"<sup>65</sup> so too is the image of the Quattrocento female profile a male fantasy that makes the female representation a symbol rather than true depiction. Also like both Mulvey and Berger, Simons acknowledges the "degree of female complicity in an extreme patriarchy" and the amount in which these women internalized male defined order, culture, and gaze.<sup>66</sup> To be raised and socialized in this hierarchical patriarchy meant that to some degree or another this performance and visual display on the women's behalf became part of their identity and sense of self.

In a similar fashion as Simons, I wish to use a "dialogue rather than a confrontation between historical and psychoanalytic interpretations" to help analyze the female portraits of Peter Paul Rubens done in the seventeenth century.<sup>67</sup> While Simons looked at profile bust paintings of women in the Renaissance, my paper will deal with largely three quarter view female portraits painted by Rubens. While still objectified by the male gaze, the portraits of women by Rubens differ from those analyzed by Simons in that they gaze out at the viewer instead of passively looking away. They still bear all the insignia of visual social display with adornment and costume to perpetuate the significance of family, dynasty, and social rank.

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<sup>63</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames," 42-43.

<sup>64</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames," 52.

<sup>65</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames," 51.

<sup>67</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames," 42.

However, now the male gaze is interrupted by a returning female one. This is not to say that the male gaze is completely negated, just complicated. In order to analyze each portrait, it is important to contextualize both the male and female gaze in a particular historical setting.

As the creator of the image, Rubens is the first male gaze to interact with the female subject and it is his gaze through which the images we have now are filtered which is why it is important to analyze Rubens biography to determine how his gaze affected the image. Secondly, we must analyze the patriarchal system of the seventeenth century to examine the social order both painter and subject were complicit in. Lastly, it is important to analyze the context of female gaze of the subjects through biography when possible in order to determine the level of internalization or subversion of the male gaze. At the time, the patriarchal system and male gaze were not an inescapable Foucaudian Panopticon prison but allowed space for some women, such as Marie de' Medici to attempt to subvert and challenge the male gaze with a gaze of her own.

Only since the latter half of the twentieth century has Marie de' Medici been lifted from the passive so called "feminine" role prescribed to her by historians. Only more recently has her education, patronage, and capacity to rule been more responsibly analyzed.<sup>68</sup> It is through her exceptional education and position of power that Marie de' Medici becomes a great patron. And it is through her status as patron that she is able to control the way she is portrayed in art, specifically the Rubens cycle, and able to challenge the objectifying male gaze and have herself

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<sup>68</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art of Patronage* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 1-2. Marrow goes in depth about how historians have painted Maria de' Medici in stereotypical roles such as "weak," incompetent ruler or jealous wife and mother. Even her early biographer Louis Batiffol is dismissive of her abilities as a patron and describes her patronage of Rubens as merely fortuitous. Although scholars such as J. Michael Hayden, Wolfgang Stechow, Edwald Vetter, and Jacques Thuillier and Jacques Focart create a more thoughtful portrayal of the regent, they still cannot seem to separate Maria's ability as a "queen and patron from her physical appearance and role as a wife."

portrayed in a position of prestige and power. Many royal females were patrons of the arts and Peter Paul Rubens had many other royal female patrons such as the Marchesa Veronica and Brigida Spinola Doria, Anne of Austria, Princess Margherita Gonzaga, and Infanta Clara Eugenia. However, there is a difference between these elite women and Maria de' Medici. While most women "were expected to collect art in order to lend status to their husbands' position, Maria was able to commission work which would express her own point of view."<sup>69</sup> Although the portraits of these other women display power, it is not their own power but the power of their family, husband, and father. In such portraits they become a symbol of dynastic power constructed for a public setting. By remaining in control of the artistic direction of the Ruben's commission, Maria de' Medici publicly glorifies her own accomplishments in a twenty-four painting cycle.

These portraits of wealthy female patrons are clearly separated from the intimate portraits in which Rubens portrays his wives. They differ in their private viewership and in the interaction of Rubens with the subject. The portraits of elite women stand as symbols of dynastic power and portray women that are economically, socially, and sexually very distant from the painter. Rubens wives on the other hand are very available to the artist. Rubens instead conceives these images of his wives as symbols of his love, intimacy and adoration for these women as wives and mothers of his children. It is clear from the quote mentioned in the previous chapter from Rubens letters that he clearly separates his wife into a special category separate from all other less worthy women.

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<sup>69</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art of Patronage*, 1.



As for myself, I have lost a very good companion, whom I could, whom I ought to have loved reasonably, for she had none of the shortcomings of her sex; she was neither morose nor weak, but so good, so honest, so virtuous that everyone loved her throughout her life, and weeps for her in her death. Such loss strikes me to the very depths, and since the only true remedy to all ills is oblivion, born of time, I have the strength to put all my hope in that. But it will be very difficult to separate my grief from the memory that I shall keep, my whole life long, of that dear creature who was loved and respected by all.<sup>70</sup>

Rubens still views women in general as having the shortcomings of moroseness and weakness but his wife, the woman he chose, lacks such weakness and instead is good honest and virtuous. Ruben's gaze is not separated from the social context from which it originates. Therefore, when inspecting these portraits, it is important to analyze the male and female gaze, the intended audience, the patronage, and the historical context to create a more accurate and responsible understanding of these women.

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, 136.

### **CHAPTER 3: “PORTRAITS OF RUBENS WIVES”**

This project was partially motivated by the fact that the female portraits of Rubens are understudied. The sub-category of the portraits of Rubens wives is particularly neglected. These were not women of exalted social status or unusual power. They are not allegorical figures or mythical goddesses. Both Isabella Brant and Helena Fourment were middle class women from respected families in Antwerp. Rubens does several intimate portraits of both his wives. As much as I'd like to discover how these women subverted the patriarchal institutions of marriage and society at the time there are hardly any sources or writings from Fourment or Brant themselves. There are only the references Rubens makes to his wives in the letters of his that survive. Therefore, I can only responsibly analyze most these portraits based on the way Rubens perceived the two women. Rubens was deeply devoted to both of his wives and held them on a pedestal higher than all other women. This devotion comes across poignantly in the intimate portraits he does. The affection shown in these portraits serves as a perfect point of contrast with the elite female portraits I will discuss in the next chapter. Although these portraits of Helena and Isabella are more intimate than the formal portraits of the social elite female subjects, they arguably are equally lacking in depicting the true personality of either. We see Helena and Isabella not as who they were but as Rubens saw them. When Rubens turns his gaze his wives, he sees each as loving wife and mother. This not to say that they were not either of these. However, the portraits presented are not pure representations of her person but rather of her through the eyes of her husband. In the portraits of his wives the women's sexual and social intimacy with their husband affects the way he portrays them. It is under his gaze they become in one way objects and symbols of wifely devotion and all the duties that entails in Flemish society.

With the scarcity of writings recording the voice of Helena Fourment and Isabella Brant, I cannot discern if they felt trapped and objectified within the patriarchal confines of marriage. For many women of this time, the role of wife and mother was satisfying and deeply integral to their identity. It is however, only one layer to their identity.

After his sojourn in Italy, Rubens somewhat reluctantly moved back to Flanders in 1608. He returned at the fortunate time of the 12 Year Truce signed between the Seven Provinces and the Spanish Netherlands. There he established his studio and went on to gain the diplomatic and artistic renown mentioned before. In October 1609, Rubens married Isabella Brandt. She was 17 years old at the time and the daughter of a highly respected humanist and lawyer.<sup>71</sup> It is not long after their marriage that Rubens' creates his first wifely portrait, *Honeysuckle Bower* ca. 1609 (Figure 2). It is a marriage portrait of the newlywed couple sitting in front of the bush from which the painting gains its title. Both Isabella and Peter Paul Rubens are dressed in the finest clothes. They are swathed in silk, trimmed in lace, and topped with hats. The image is of a confident and well off pair and exalts Rubens success and his ability to provide a luxurious life for his new wife. The honeysuckle itself serves as "a symbol of permanent togetherness of man and wife."<sup>72</sup> In the tradition of the male/female, husband/wife hierarchy of scale, Isabella Brant on the right side of the canvas sits lower than her husband. Despite the formal aspects of dress, positioning of the figures and iconography, there is a close, casualness between the couple. With Rubens himself depicted in the painting there is a distance between the figures in the painting and us as the viewer while an increased closeness between Rubens and his wife. The two figures look directly out together to meet the eye of the viewers that gaze upon the splendor of the

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<sup>71</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> Dagmar Feghelmk and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women* (Munich: Prestel Verlag: 2005), 26.

couple. In the portrait, Isabella and Peter Paul Rubens are positioned so their bodies turn inward towards each other. Different elements of the two discreetly overlap, caress, and touch which adds a sense of intimacy to this obvious display of social status and achievement. This fondness is almost shocking to come from a time when marriage portraits were often somewhat cold and extremely formal, such as with the formal portraits of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria (Figure 1) or earlier examples of profile portraits from the Renaissance. The affection between the figures in the painting is mutual, neither overtly dominating the other. Although Peter Paul Rubens stands taller, Isabella sits slightly in front of him. The hem of her dress even covers his foot slightly. Isabella's hat seems to graze Rubens' hand as he gently rests it on his rapier. Most obviously, the two hold hands gently (Figure 3). Again, neither fully dominates the other in this action. Isabella does not cling to Rubens, and he does not grasp her possessively. Isabella Brant is the one to place her hand on top and Rubens gently turns his palm up to support hers. In the way that Rubens depicts the marriage in this painting, it appears to be one of a mutual affection and consent. Socially and economically the couple is depicted happy and confident. Although a seemingly natural scene catching a split moment between the couple, the composition has been clearly constructed to display all the elements Rubens wished to put on view. This is the first painting to depict "full-length, life size portraits depicting bourgeois subjects" with the intent to use life size scale to "give the viewer something of equal status to look at."<sup>73</sup> Despite her large tilted hat and a light source coming from the left, Isabella's face seems to be illuminated perfectly to highlight and display her beautiful face nestled in collar of ruffles.

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<sup>73</sup> Dagmar Feghelt and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women*, 29.

Rubens painted a few other portraits of his first wife Isabella, but none to the full length aggrandizing scale of their first marriage portrait. While by no means, a piece meant for the public, *The Honeysuckle Bower* served to display the united stability to those who entered their household. The other portraits Rubens completes of Isabella Brandt are more intimate still. While there are some full-length, seated portraits of anonymous women done by Rubens that could possibly be Isabella, the three that are positively her are all smaller works depicting her from either the waist or shoulders up: a painting at Cleveland Museum of Art. c. 1620 (Figure 4), a drawing at the British Museum. c. 1621-22 (Figure 5), and a painting possibly done after the drawing in the Galleria Degli Uffizi C. 1626 (Figure 6).<sup>74</sup> In all three Isabella is shown in a similar small-collared dress shown to be black in the paintings. The low square neckline shows a hint of a white décolletage and ample bosom. The use of gesture in both the Cleveland and Uffizi paintings creates a sense of movement and directs the eye as it did in *The Honeysuckle Bower*. Isabella gently brings her hand up to her chest in both, drawing the viewer's attention to her neckline and then up to her face. It is a face less idealized than in *The Honeysuckle Bower* where the still teenage wife gazes calmly out with only a hint of a smile that does not touch any other part of her serene face. The later, smaller, more private paintings made ten or more years later are less idealized. Isabella's face is less smooth and her hair has darkened and is not as neatly combed back. In the British Museum drawing especially, the gentle wisps of hair that escaped her high wrapped and braided hair style are made obvious. She still wears only a small smile but instead of the idyllic, classical raising of the corners of the mouth in *The Honeysuckle Bower*, Isabella smirks playfully in these later portraits. Especially in the Cleveland painting and the

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<sup>74</sup> "Ritratto di Isabella Brandt, moglie dell'artista," *Virtual Uffizi Gallery*, accessed February 22, 2017, <https://www.virtualuffizi.com/ritratto-di-isabella-brandt%2C-moglie-dell%27artista.html>

British Museum drawing Isabella's lips pout slightly, the corners of her mouth lift and tighten into a smile that raises and defines her blushing cheeks. All these little details come together to create a more intimate and momentary image. This playful smile is meant for Rubens, not us. This honest, softer, more accessible wispy haired image of Isabella is by Rubens and for Rubens. Any other viewer steps into the role of Rubens as they gaze onto this lovingly detailed image.

Isabella Brant died tragically young in 1626, it is speculated from the plague.<sup>75</sup> It is unclear whether the Uffizi portrait of Isabella was completed before or after her death. Rubens was deeply affected by the death of his first wife especially in conjunction with the previous loss of his mother in 1608. Rubens held the women he selected to be part of his personal life in very high regard. The quote mentioned in the first chapter from a letter Rubens wrote following the death of his first wife makes clear his reverence of these particular women:

As for myself, I have lost a very good companion, whom I could, whom I ought to have loved reasonably, for she had none of the shortcomings of her sex; she was neither morose nor weak, but so good, so honest, so virtuous that everyone loved her throughout her life, and weeps for her in her death. Such loss strikes me to the very depths, and since the only true remedy to all ills is oblivion, born of time, I have the strength to put all my hope in that. But it will be very difficult to separate my grief from the memory that I shall keep, my whole life long, of that dear creature who was loved and respected by all.<sup>76</sup>

As pointed out previously Rubens does not lament the loss of her beauty but touts her strength and virtue. Rubens does not revere women in general but elevates his wives to a standard above the overall perceived weakness of women. This translates to a warmth and directness in the

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<sup>75</sup> Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 123.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, 136.

portraits of his wives that contrasts with the sense of separation and status of his other female portraits of elite social class.

After Isabella's death in 1626, Rubens remarried to Helena Fourment in 1630. Both marriages were characterized by an affection that revealed itself in the portraits Rubens painted of them. However, the level of intimacy of these portraits is also due to the sexual relationship between the subject and painter. Specifically concerning his second youthful bride, Rubens is quoted as in a letter as saying: "I decided to marry [as I am] not yet finding myself fit for the abstinence for the celibate, and, if we must give first place to mortification, we may enjoy licit pleasures with thankfulness etc., and I have taken a young wife of modest but citizen family."<sup>77</sup> And so the wife as source of emotional, social, and sexual love and so producer of heirs can be read in Rubens' portraits of his wives.

Later in his life, after he remarried, he phased out of his diplomatic duties and focused more on his painting. Portraits and landscapes became more common subjects in his last decade.<sup>78</sup> He appears enamored with his second wife and "blissfully happy for he painted eight portraits of her alone or with their children." Several of the portraits follow the compositional formula Rubens created in his portraits, most notable in portraits of the socially elite such as the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria. This formula included a column and red drapery to highlight the figure as well as a balcony overlooking a landscape in the background.

One such example is the 1630-1631 portrait of *Helena Fourment in her Wedding Dress* (Figure 7). Similar to the Doria portrait Helena is depicted in full length in an elaborate wedding

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, 370.

<sup>78</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 151.

gown with a collar, though much smaller than the Marchesa's. The orange sprig in her hair references their wedding on St. Nicholas's day as well as the "post-nuptial gift of gold and jewels" she wears.<sup>79</sup> In the background is the familiar red drapery and columned balcony overlooking landscape. This format solely used for royal patrons, is now used to elevate the wife of an artist and daughter of a silk merchant to the level of aristocracy. However, Helena is depicted seated instead of standing which makes her less imposing than the Marchesa Doria. The chair she sits on is turned at a diagonal so that she leans in openly and attentively. This is not a solemn marriage portrait but rather an intimate one of a blushing "bewitching bride."<sup>80</sup> Another portrait of Helena that includes the formulaic column and drape is one of her and her son Frans in 1635 (Figure 8). The typically aristocratic arrangement is now transformed into an image of intimate maternity. Helena dressed more casually this time and holds her young son in her lap like the Madonna and child. Similar to the other portraits mentioned she looks out at the viewer, or rather at Rubens.

Although these two portraits of Helena are more intimate than the Marchesa they arguably are equally lacking in depicting the true personality of either. We see Helena not as who she was but as Rubens saw her. When Rubens turns his gaze to her, he sees her as loving wife and mother. This is not to say that Helena was not either of these. However, the portraits presented are not pure representations of her person but rather of her through the eyes of her husband. And so, an interesting connection and dichotomy is made in Rubens role as a husband desiring an image of his wife as well as the artist with the power and skill to execute such a painting on his own terms absent commission. Rubens is both creator and observer. And so even

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<sup>79</sup> Dagmar Feghelt and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women*, 43.

<sup>80</sup> Dagmar Feghelt and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women*, 43.



though these portraits are of his wives they are informed by Rubens' own psyche. And even if by Barthesian principles the author/artist is dead, here Rubens' can still be seen as reader/viewer with his gaze providing a level of meaning to the work. In this way, the image is composed within Rubens conception of who his wife was and what she meant to him.

In this way both Isabella and Helena are defined in terms of their status and the gaze of the man who painted them, their loving husband. These images serve as snapshots of how a man viewed his wives. They are images of intimacy and tenderness. They show these women in the guise of wifely adoration and loving mother. I do not use the word guise to suggest that the role of wife and mother were inauthentic and foreign to the identity of Isabella and Helena. Rather their performance of this role is an internalization of the patriarchal system in which they live. This role does not embody their entire personhood but is only one element of their intersectional identity. It is the aspect which Rubens most emulated and so most depicted. So one can say these portraits were made above all for the singular male heterosexual viewership of Rubens.

However, there is one portrait of his wife Helena that complicates this singular view. The *Het Pelsken* (Figure 10) was painting by Rubens towards the end of his life between the years 1635 and 1650. It depicts a completely nude Helena wrapped in a small fur. Rubens lovingly depicted his second wife in a realistic, natural manner. She seems to be in the middle of the motion of bringing the fur around her body. It is less an image of voyeuristic intrusion but rather a fleeting intimate moment between husband and wife. For an artist to use their own wife as a nude model is very rare<sup>81</sup>. Helena is very recognizable and so this portrait would have been very private as it would not be appropriate for a Catholic woman to be depicted in a sexually available

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<sup>81</sup> It is rare although not unheard of as with van Eyck's *Woman at her Bath*

way to a public audience.<sup>82</sup> Though it would be easy to use this portrait as an example of an image created exclusively for the male gaze it is complicated by the fact that in his will Rubens left this portrait for his wife, Helena. The portrait spent much of its life held privately by Helena, subject only to her gaze.<sup>83</sup> While the image was constructed by a male gaze it is complicated by the female one. Like the other images, it is constructed under the male gaze of Rubens and is influenced by his own social and sexual relationship with his wife. However, it is the only one where we have the specific interaction between the portrait and the subject it portrays. There is no way of knowing exactly what Helena Fourment thought of this portrait of her but there is one surviving letter written by her and her will of 1658 which together make clear her confidence as a member of the “affluent patrician elite of Hapsburg Netherlands,” the wife of two prominent diplomats (her second husband being Jan Baptist de Broecheoven), a devout catholic, and the mother of eleven children.<sup>84</sup> And so how would a respectable catholic woman view an overtly sexual image of herself? It would be easy to interpret this a portrait created by a male artist as simply objectifying the female form for the heterosexual gaze of the husband. However, Helena’s gaze both on the painting as viewer and out of the canvas as subject creates an interpretation of the work dealing not just with the male gaze but with female viewership and agency within the institution of marriage. Helena’s role as sexual partner to her husband was an important aspect of her role as wife. Her sexuality was then legitimized through the institution of marriage both socially and religiously. Through marriage the man and woman are no longer

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<sup>82</sup> Margit Thofner, “Helena Fourment’s Het Pelsken,” *Art History* 27 (2004): 5.

<sup>83</sup> Margit Thofner, “Helena Fourment’s Het Pelsken,” *Art History* 27 (2004): 4. Thofner discusses the unsubstantiated anecdote that Helena Fourment kept the portrait in a secret cabinet when it was in her possession as proposed by J.F.M Michel in *Histoire de la vie de P.P. Rubens*. There is also no evidence of Helena Fourment’s desire to destroy the painting. See footnote 5 of Thofner.

<sup>84</sup> Margit Thofner, “Helena Fourment’s Het Pelsken,” *Art History* 27 (2004): 3. Also see footnote 1 and 24.

separate but two in one flesh. Therefore, by gazing upon her own flesh in the portrait, Helena might also interpret it as that of her husband. Furthermore, there was discussion of marriage, sex, and procreation at the time that did not deny “licit sexual pleasures” but instead supported “being one flesh and taking honest pleasure in the act of mutual ejaculation was . . . an acceptable, and indeed desirable part of Christian imagery.”<sup>85</sup> And so when Helena gazed upon this picture, perhaps she would also be reminded of her own pleasures of sex and marriage, not only the pleasure she provided to her husband.

*Het Pelsken* functions similarly to the other wifely portraits done by Rubens in that it reveals Helena in her role of mother and wife. However, it does so in a highly erotic nature compared to the subdued nature of the other portraits. And in consideration of spectatorship, the nude in this case is less purely objectified than the covered figure. It is by looking at the female spectatorship of *Het Pelsken* that female agency, even within the patriarchal confines of society and marriage, can be found. This issue of male versus female spectatorship also plays an interesting role in the elite portraits of women completed by Rubens in which viewership deals not only with the issue of female agency but also female power.

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<sup>85</sup> Margit Thofner, “Helena Fourment’s *Het Pelsken*,” *Art History* 27 (2004): 17-18. The author also refers to Thomas Sánchez’s *Disputationum de sancto matrimonii sacramento* and galenic views of marriage. Sánchez (1550 – 19 May, 1610) was a 16th-century Spanish Jesuit who used case-based reasoning.

## CHAPTER 4: “PORTRAITS OF ELITE WOMEN”

In contrast to the intimate nature of Rubens’ portraits of his wives, the portraits he completes of upper class women are far more formal and reflect the distance, both socially and sexually, between the artist and the subject. Despite these differences, the portraits of these women are similarly constructed under the male gaze and portray the expected roles these elite women played in the patriarchal system which they occupied. The portraits of these elite women, such as Anne of Austria and the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria, serve as symbols of power. Not the inherent power of these individual women but of the power of their family, both father and husband. And so, similarly to the portraits of Isabella Brant and Helene Fourment, the portraits of these elite women capture them singularly as symbols of wife and mother and do not reflect their entire identity. However, there are major differences. These include the difference in social strata mentioned before, the public nature of these portraits, the fact that they were commissioned rather than purely motivated by the desire of the artist, and not to mention the role of mother/wife in an elite family dynasty is vastly different. For elite women, the stakes were particularly high to fulfill this role. Marriage for the seventeenth century elite was an important, highly negotiated contract at the time involving social, economic, and political significance. In using the same dowry system used in previous centuries, marriage was a means through which the father could “collect his dowry and appropriate her honor to the needs of his own lineage.”<sup>86</sup> Women in the role of wife and eventually mother served as tools with which to establish and further the family lineage. They were essential in securing an advantageous alliance to obtain

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<sup>86</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture,” edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992): 42.

political power and to produce the heirs that would carry on the lineage. While all women at the time bore the expectation to marry for the family and produce male heirs, the women of the elite bore the expectation to produce dukes, princes, and kings. These women served as a symbol of their lineage both past and potential future. Therefore, the portraits commissioned of them reflect power and pride coming not from the woman as an individual but as a symbol of a dynastic institution. While this cycle of marriage and pressure to produce children in this patrilineal tradition in many ways restricted women into roles of mother and wife, it would be unfair to the women of the seventeenth century to generalize this time as a patriarchal system that imprisoned all women absolutely. Despite obvious oppression based on gender there are instances of female agency particularly among elite women who were more socially and economically privileged. Perhaps the female portrait completed by Rubens that best displays female agency is the massive cycle of paintings of Marie de' Medici. This ambitious cycle is unique in its sheer size and in the collaboration between powerful female patron and male artist. The portraits are vastly different from any of Rubens other female portraits in its complexity. Millen and Wolf describe it as "too vast and multiform in its sources and allusions, too humanly biographical, too fully bound up with what the Queen wished to convey. . . [than] could be realized out of the mind of the artist himself."<sup>87</sup> Though the series is complicated by the male gaze it stands as a supreme example of a woman patron choosing to have herself shown in a position of power in her own right. And so by analyzing the effects of the male gaze on all the portraits as one layer of reading, a deeper more complicated understanding of them can be explored.

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<sup>87</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens' Life of Maria de' Medici* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9.

Although not core to his artistic aspirations, portraiture would earn Rubens the elite and royal patronage he needed to become a successful artist. It was in Italy under his first upper class patron Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua that Rubens began his dual career of artist and diplomat. Throughout his career Rubens would receive the respect and patronage of the ruling class of Europe. During his eight years in Italy Rubens traveled to cities such as Rome, Mantua, and Genoa. It is in Genoa that he studied palace architecture that would later inspire the design of his studio in Antwerp, and that he completed portraits of several members of the Doria family including the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria.<sup>88</sup>

Portraiture was by no means the focus of Ruben's career. However under the patronage of Duke of Mantua in Italy, Rubens was ordered to do many such portraits for the Duke's "hall of beauties."<sup>89</sup> At the time the hierarchy of subjects in painting placed histories and mythologies at the top and portraits squarely at the bottom. The artist's masterpiece would always be a large, complicated history and never the portrait. Especially towards the beginning of his career portraits such as the ones he completes for the Doria's would have been side projects in the progression of his career. Although of peripheral interest, Rubens work became extremely influential to European portraiture. While his innovative equestrian portrait of the Duke of Lerma would begin a motif in male portraiture, his full length portrait of the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria (Figure 1) would be highly influential in female portraiture.<sup>90</sup>

The Spinola and the Doria were both very influential and wealthy aristocratic families in Genoa. In a manner not uncommon at the time, the two related families arranged a marriage that

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<sup>88</sup> Marie-Anne Lescouret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 40.

<sup>89</sup> Gustav Glück, "Rubens as Portrait Painter," 4.

<sup>90</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 152.

would consolidate their wealth and power. In 1605, Brigida Spinola married her cousin Giacomo Massimiliano Doria. In this context *The Portrait of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria* (Figure 1) done by Rubens in 1606 commemorates her marriage and the wealth and status of her family. The Marchesa is shown in a sumptuous wedding gown. The fashionable gown is light colored version of the Spanish style with its rigid structure, high ruffs, hanging sleeves, and rich jewelry.<sup>91</sup> The copious amounts of white silk, the jewels on her dress and hair, and the enormous lace collar are more than enough to convince any viewer of her and her family's wealth. The size of the painting would have made her an imposing figure as well. She is one of the first and most influential full length portraits of a woman. Although originally a full length portrait, it was cut down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to its present 60 x 38 ¼ inch size<sup>92</sup>. The original composition can be seen in a sketch drawing done by Rubens (Figure 11). The sketch shows the full length Marchesa on the right with a red curtain flowing behind her framing her face. In the drawing the architectural elements are expanded beyond what is presently seen in the painting to show a colonnaded balcony opening over a landscape shown on the left. The combination of three-quarter female portrait, architectural background, and red curtain becomes a formulaic design that is reused both by Rubens in the portraits of Anne of Austria, Isabella Clara Eugenia, Lady Arundel and by other artists of the time such as van Dyck's 1623 portrait of Elena Grimaldi to depict aristocratic patrons.<sup>93</sup> While her clothing and surroundings place the Marchesa socially above the viewer, the receding columns in the background physically raise her above the viewer

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<sup>91</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, "Fashion at Antwerp." *The Burlington Magazine* 119 (894) (The Burlington Magazine Publications Ltd.: 1977) 667-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/878985>, 1.

<sup>92</sup> National Gallery of Art, *Art Object Page: Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria*, Accessed March 28, 2016 <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.46159.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 151.

as well.<sup>94</sup> She is in all ways elevated and separated from those below with her confident composure.

This confidence is often described as aloof and not showing the personality of the Marchesa. The focus of the portrait is “on rank and status; it reveals virtually nothing about her own character and personality.”<sup>95</sup> This is heightened by her idealization. It was said that the Marchesa Spinola Doria was “attractive, but no goddess”<sup>96</sup> but in this portrait she is the beautiful personification of wealth and aristocracy. This is not a portrait about her, it is a portrait of her. She is not representing her own wealth and status but that of her family newly consolidated by her marriage. As the Marchesa looks down at us the viewer, she would have also looked down on Rubens. At the time Rubens was still a fairly young artist, albeit an artist who had built a good reputation. Although he had gained the reputation of a handsome man who “dressed like a gentlemen . . . and audaciously wore the golden chain of an aristocrat,”<sup>97</sup> the fact is, he was not aristocrat and so not her equal. The coldness in this portrait is not a reflection on the Marchesa’s own lack of personality but rather on how the artist viewed the sitter. Therefore, the depiction is a result of the gaze of the artist. Rubens reveals nothing about her personality because he is not privy to it. We see not the portrait of a woman, but a portrait of how a man viewed a woman. There is little known about the life of the Marchesa and this painting similarly reveals little of her. To us, she is defined in terms of the men in her life: her marriage, her family, and the artist that painted her.

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<sup>94</sup> Dagmar Feghelmk and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women*, 53.

<sup>95</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, “Flanders,” 151.

<sup>96</sup> Mark Lamster, *Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2009), 34.

<sup>97</sup> Mark Lamster, *Master of Shadows*, 34.



After Ruben's departure from Italy, the establishment of his studio in Antwerp, and subsequent rise to prominence as a producer of grand religious and mythological works, the demand for Rubens to complete portraits did not avail. During the time of the Marie de' Medici commission (1622-1624), Rubens made several trips to Paris. It is during these trips that he would have created two portraits of Marie de' Medici's daughter-in-law Anne of Austria (1601-1667) (Figure 12 and Figure 13).<sup>98</sup> Anne would have been around twenty-five years of age when these portraits of her would have been completed and for eleven of those years she was the wife of Louis XIII. These portraits of Anne function very similarly to those of the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria. Both women serve as symbols of the wealth, power, and status of their respective families. Both meet the viewer's gaze directly and confidently, creating a distance and aloofness that Ruben must have been confronted with himself.

The portrait of Anne of Austria in the Louvre (Figure 12) is composed almost in an identical fashion to that of the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria.<sup>99</sup> The only difference is that Anne is seated instead of standing. The architectural setting and highlighting red drapery framing the head of the sitter is almost interchangeable between the two. The background of the portrait of Anne is perhaps more ornate befitting the Queen consort of the King of France with Corinthian columns and golden details. Gold too plays heavily in the sophisticated detailing of her green silk dress. The billowing, intricate sleeves and enormous collar seem to prevent Anne from sitting back into her chair or relax her arms to her sides. She seems to loom outward and forward to occupy the space and look down at the viewer. This sumptuous ensemble is finished

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<sup>98</sup> "Portrait of Anne of Austria, Queen of France," *Norton Simon Museum*, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/F.1965.1.059.P>

<sup>99</sup> It is unclear whether this portrait was done completely by Rubens or by his workshop after a Rubens original.

off with a copious amount of pearls and emerald lining her waist, falling across her chest, forming her tiara, her earrings, and of course the enormous pendant placed on her bosom. The wealth of costume continues in the next portrait Rubens completes.

To say that the depiction of the Anne of Austria now in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (Figure 13) is an escalation of the use of wealth as symbol to communicate familial power is an understatement. Anne is a solitary figure against a dark background. In contrast to the previous portrait, she is shown standing perhaps in part because it would be impossible for her to sit when encased in a sheer mass of silk, lace, fur, and jewels. The Queen is shown “dressed with a "Medici" pleated lace ruffle around her neck and a jeweled crown on her head.”<sup>100</sup> The elaborate lace collar and crown seem almost tame compared to the magnificent dress she wears. The bodice and sleeves are accented with the use of ermine fur, a material reserved for royalty and a quintessential symbol of wealth and status. Round pearls placed in clusters of four again decorate both the bodice and the sleeves and form the double bracelets she wears on both her wrists. Tear drop pearls also hang from her ears and hang from the jeweled cross on her chest. Her display of wealth and confidence arise not for her as an individual but as a symbol for her family and the crown of France. Anne of Austria here is literally clothed in the French coat of arms with the blue silk serving as a background on which the yellow gold *fleurs-de-lis* is stamped across her body. Even the lower half of her bodice blooms into a tri-foil shape similar to the three leaves of the *fleur-de-lis*.

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<sup>100</sup> "Portrait of Anne of Austria, Queen of France," *Norton Simon Museum*, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/F.1965.1.059.P>

Although emblazoned with the emblem of France as a representation of its queen and therefore wife and expected mother to kings, it's important to understand the degree to which Anne of Austria was not French, not mother, and not adored wife at the time of these portraits. Anne's mother was Margaret of Austria and her father King Phillip III of Spain. The orchestration of the marriage between Anne and Louis was initiated by the Spanish in 1602 and was seen as a means of "stabilizing relations with France and keeping Henry IV from making war against the Habsburgs" and a solidification of peace within the Roman Catholic realm.<sup>101</sup> Final copies of the contract would not be signed until 1612 laying out the marriage Anne and Louis as well as that of Louis's oldest sister, Elizabeth, to the crown prince of Spain, Phillip IV.<sup>102</sup> Anne came to France in 1615 to marry Louis with very little knowledge of the French language and instructions from her father to "influence her husband's policies in favor of Spanish interests."<sup>103</sup> And so the two fourteen year old acquaintances were married in a grand ceremony after which "Marie de Medici staged the bedding of the bride" and the two consummated their marriage to avoid the possibility of annulment. Anne's marriage to Louis would be a troubled one and Anne of Austria "never quite lost her alien status in the eyes of many of her subjects." Even as queen consort she was often overshadowed by the presence and power of Marie de' Medici. As to her role of mother, she would not provide the French crown a male heir until 1638 and before that experienced several "accidents" since 1619 resulting in

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<sup>101</sup> Ruth Kleinman, *Anne of Austria: Queen of France* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>102</sup> Ruth Kleinman, *Anne of Austria*, 15. "By the terms of the contracts, each princess was to receive a dowry of 500,000 gold ecus, although no money was actually to be paid by either side unless one or the other marriage should not be concluded. In addition, each princess was to bring with her jewelry work 50,000 gold ecus and to renounce her right of inheritance. This meant more on the Spanish side than the French, since French royal lawyers for centuries had maintained that the crown of France could not be transmitted to a woman whereas in Spain there was no barrier to a princess succeeding to her father's crown if she had no surviving brothers."

<sup>103</sup> Ruth Kleinman, *Anne of Austria*, 16.

miscarriage. And so the power and wealth of the portraits of Anne at this time do not reveal the tension and pressure to fill the role of wife and mother demanded of her at this time in her life.

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt of female portraiture as a display of wealth, motherliness, wifeliness, and power is the twenty-four painting cycle completed by Rubens for Marie de' Medici (Figures 14 to 37). While incorporating some of the same purposes as the previous elite female portraits discussed, Marie de' Medici's biographical montage is unique in its unabashed display of individual female power and agency. This series stands out in this study because of Marie de' Medici's "special case . . . [as] a woman who was both the patron and the portrayed, the viewer as well as the viewed."<sup>104</sup> Therefore, the female gaze deserves to be analyzed in order to understand the message Marie de' Medici wished to convey. However, it is also necessary to analyze the extent to which the contemporary male gaze of both artist and audience at the time complicates the interpretation of female power. The mix of allegory, religious imagery, female nudity, classical reference, and royal symbolism creates a complicated set of highly charged propagandistic images that could lead to varied interpretations of this highly controversial regent. Only recently has scholarship about Marie de' Medici shifted away from past stereotypes of the French regent as a "weak and incompetent ruler . . . vain, excitable, . . . bigoted and slow-witted, yet domineering and intriguing."<sup>105</sup> Therefore, this analysis of the gaze must be grounded in the historical contextualization of this series' location, audience, political environment, and the life of its main subject.

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<sup>104</sup>Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 101.

<sup>105</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 1.

Marie de' Medici (1575-1642) was born in Florence to Francesco I and Johanna of Austria.<sup>106</sup> Although her childhood was plagued with the death of her mother, father, and stepmother, she had the privilege of a prominent family name and a more extensive education than most women were allowed at the time. She was allowed by her father to study mathematics along with rhetoric and the arts including "painting architecture, sculpture, engraving, music, and the connoisseurship of precious stones."<sup>107</sup> Her love of the arts would extend into her later life with her patronage of many artists including Rubens and Frans Pourbos<sup>108</sup>. This early interest in education would seem to disprove conceptions of Marie de' Medici as slow-witted. Not only did her education and love of art have early beginnings but her agency and ambition as well. Marie de' Medici earned the descriptors of "opinionated and stubborn" in her refusal of several marriage offers due to her view that "she would either marry a king or else join a convent" showing her recognition that marriage would serve as her path to power.<sup>109</sup> Marie's desire would finally be met when she wed Henry IV, King of France, by proxy on October 5, 1600 at the age of twenty-five. Marie de' Medici was Henry's second wife. His first marriage to Marguerite de Valois was annulled by the Pope due to the fact that she had borne no children. The pressure of Marie to fill her role as wife, mother and gentrix would be even higher in the wake of the failure of Henry's first wife to meet societal expectations of Queen consort. Within her first ten years in

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<sup>106</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens' Life of Maria de' Medici*, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*, 6.

<sup>108</sup> Frans Pourbos the younger (1569-1622) was a Flemish painter whose patrons included Marie de' Medici, Duke of Mantua, and other prominent European rulers. Pourbos completed a portrait of Marie de' Medici dated 1609-1610 depicting the queen in the same coronation dress as Anne of Austria wore in the previously discussed Rubens portrait c.1622-25 showing that while Marie de' Medici would go on to create this massive self-propagandistic series with Rubens she was also subject of portraits which denied her individual agency in favor of a symbolic role displaying the dynastic power of the French royal family.

<sup>109</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*, 6.

France, Marie de' Medici would fulfill this obligation to her husband and the country of France by giving birth to six children, five who survived until adulthood, including the future king of France, Louis XIII.<sup>110</sup> Marie did not play a passive role as mother and wife during her marriage to Henry IV but rather played a significant role in court. When Henry became ill in 1603 he named Marie as regent and named her a member of his royal council, on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1610 before departing on a military campaign he again ensures Marie de' Medici will be regent if he dies, and finally on May 13<sup>th</sup> of the same year Henry has Marie officially crowned the Queen of France in a coronation ceremony in Saint-Denis.<sup>111</sup> And so despite the Salic laws of France denying a woman ruler, Henry ensured that Marie would have such a power in the event that he died before his son came of age. Coincidentally, the day after her coronation Henry was murdered by a religious fanatic, making Marie de' Medici the Queen regent of France for the eight-year-old Louis XIII.<sup>112</sup> Marie would continue to serve as regent even as her son was crowned king in October of 1610, declared of age in October 1611, and was married to Anne of Austria in November 1615 bringing a new Queen to France. The rift between Marie de' Medici and Louis XIII begins due to the trust Marie places in her advisor Concini, who is despised by the populace and whose "corruptness and arrogance becomes flagrant" to the point that Louis has him murdered and his mother placed under house arrest and which would eventually lead to her expulsion from Paris on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1617.<sup>113</sup> Negotiations between the parties of Marie and Louis would culminate into the eventual reconciliation in which Marie was welcomed back into Paris

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<sup>110</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures*, 16.

<sup>112</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures*, 16.

<sup>113</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures*, 16.

in November of 1620. Not long after her return, Marie de Medici would begin discussion with Rubens about the monumental cycle for her Luxembourg palace that would glorify her biography in a way that reestablished her power in a court that had expelled her not long ago.

As the brief biography above suggest, Marie de' Medici's life as the Queen of France was not a leisurely affair. From the beginning the people of France were suspicious of a foreign queen, as they would later be with Anne of Austria, and also wary of another Medici queen, as Marie's relative Catherine de' Medici had been when she married Henry II. Like Catherine, Marie would go on to serve as regent which is a complicated and controversial position in a country whose law, rooted in patriarchal preconceptions, prohibits the rule of a woman. Add to this the tensions Marie had experienced with her son, the work that she commissioned from Rubens would have to be specifically planned and extremely nuanced to try to proliferate the idea of Marie de' Medici as a capable, powerful ruler that was good for the country of France.

To assume this series of work was patronized solely for the view of its female patron for her private residence would be a mistake. Marie's selection of Luxembourg as her residence as the dowager Queen was both for the healthier atmosphere and the "Queen's unsuccessful attempt to place her palace in a broader urbanistic contrast. . . [by placing] the entrance of the palace . . . at the opening of the Rue de Tournon so that after the demolition of some houses it would have led directly to the Louvre."<sup>114</sup> Although this was never realized, it is obvious that although she no longer lived in the Louvre, Marie de' Medici had every intention of being connected to court life from her new palace. Therefore, the series was not just for the pleasure of only Marie, her

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<sup>114</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*, 21.

family, and friends but a propagandistic tool to reestablish Marie's power to courtiers and her son, the King of France. Although technically in a private residence, the Marie de' Medici cycle was clearly created for public view. Due to the public context and political contact it is no surprise that Marie de' Medici was extremely involved in determining the direction of this work. As per their contract, Rubens promised Marie de' Medici:

. . . to draw and paint with his own hand twenty-four pictures in which shall be represented the histories of the very illustrious life and heroic deeds of the said Queen according to the specifications [in subjects up to the number of nineteen] which, as has been said, have been given to the said Sieur de Rubens by the said Majesty [who will transmit to him the other five subjects while he is working on the first ones] . . . And the said Rubens recognizes that the said lady the Queen has reserved to herself the authority to increase or decrease the subjects of the said pictures before they have begun, and to have those pictures which do not please her retouched and changed once the pictures have been received here.<sup>115</sup>

And so although Marie would have been counseled by several advisors, the contract makes it clear that she held the final say in how she would be depicted.<sup>116</sup> Style and composition of these would be left in the capable hands of Peter Paul Rubens but even then, the Queen could request changes. And so Marie de' Medici chose the subjects of her twenty-four paintings to be a *Portrait of Johanna of Austria, Portrait of Francesco I de' Medici, The Fates Spin the Destiny of the Future Queen, The Birth of Marie de' Medici, The Education of the Princess, The Presentation of Her Portrait to Henry, The Wedding by Proxy in Florence, The Disembarkation at Marseilles, The Meeting of Marie and Henry in Lyons, The Birth of the Dauphin at Fontainebleau, The Consignment of the Regency, The Coronation in Saint-Denis, The Death of*

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<sup>115</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de' Medici*, 43.

<sup>116</sup> Marrow cites Richelieu (manager of Marie de' Medici's residence), Maugis (Superintendent of Finances), Peiresc and even Rubens as being consulted by the Queen about subject choice.



*Henry IV and the Proclamation of Regency, The Council of the Gods, The Regent Militant: The Victory at Julich, The Exchange of the Princesses at the Spanish Border, The Felicity of Regency, Louis XIII Comes of Age, The Flight from Blois, The Negotiations at Angouleme, The Queen Opts for Security, The Reconciliation of the Queen and Her Son, The Triumph of Truth,* and finally *The Queen Triumphant*.

The topics selected by Marie de' Medici use actual points in her biography to craft a narrative that does more to project an image of power than describe the events realistically. From the moment the fates spin her destiny, through the death of her husband, her trials and eventual reconciliation with her son, Marie de' Medici is depicted in classical strength and calm. At a time of unease, shortly after her return from exile, Marie de' Medici commissioned a piece that directly and unapologetically addresses the events of her exile and return in *The Flight from Blois, The Negotiations at Angouleme, The Queen Opts for Security, The Reconciliation of the Queen and Her Son* (Figures 30 to 33). It is the unapologetic nature of these works that is most striking. The Queen stands calm and unfazed in *The Flight from Blois, The Negotiations at Angouleme*, and *The Queen Opts for Security*. In *The Reconciliation of the Queen and Her Son* (Figure 33) and *The Triumph of Truth* (Figure 34), both in which she is shown with Louis, she is not depicted subordinate to her son. She doesn't beg for or even hint at a need for forgiveness from him. It is clear that the political purpose of this work is not to gain favor by flattering the King but rather to provide "a continuing challenge to Louis XIII's policy, a denunciation of his past actions with regard to both the state and his royal mother, and in consequence one more tactical move in the Queen Mother's strategy designed to win back the influence if not the power

she had held as regent.”<sup>117</sup> Marie portrays herself from birth to her present state as destined for power. The overt use of mythological, classical imagery in this cycle perhaps best reinforces this sense of destiny and is “needed to emphasize her divinity through such comparisons because the Salic law denied her the “mystical gifts” associated with the monarch.”<sup>118</sup> From the Muses in *The Education of the Princess* (Figure 16) to Mercury offering the olive branch in *The Negotiations at Angouleme* (Figure 31), not to mention an entire painting dedicated to *The Council of the Gods* (Figure 25), the use of classical imagery elevates Marie and makes clear purpose of power over reconciliation.

Although a radical series, there are elements that recall more typical female aristocratic portraits such as those discussed earlier in the chapter. Marie’s role as mother and wife feature prominently in this cycle meant to extoll her independent power. This is not surprising considering Marie’s own view of marriage as a path to power and the clear expectation to provide Henry with a partner that would bear an heir based on the annulment of his first marriage. In *The Presentation of Her Portrait to Henry* (Figure 17), Henry stands in front of an image of Marie very similarly composed to the portrait of the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria and the two portraits of Anne of Austria. The bust portrait of Marie within this larger composition shows her sumptuously dressed with her face framed by a large collar. It is a portrait made specifically for the male heterosexual gaze. It is a portrait meant to signify the wealth and status of her family and her ability to fill the role of wife and queen. The objectifying male gaze is made even more obvious by the figure of Henry marveling at the portrait. Like the

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<sup>117</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures*, 11.

<sup>118</sup> Deborah Marrow, *The Art Patronage of Maria de’ Medici*, 57.

other portraits mentioned, Marie gazes out of her portrait. However, she does not gaze at her husband to be but rather directly out towards the other gaze she is subject to, the audience of the series. She is the only figure in this canvas that is given “the power of direct communication with the audience” through her “confident and unflinching outward gaze.”<sup>119</sup> It creates an interesting interplay of male and female gaze. This work exhibits an instance in which the subject is both object and active participant. Marie de’ Medici both adheres to the tradition of male voyeurism and female portraits as part of the marriage ritual and subverts the male gaze with a direct gaze of her own. This ambiguity provides a site for the exploration of the multiplicity of female identity at the time. It exhibits the extent to which women were restricted by patriarchy and objectified and yet in still found ways to subvert the system and be active agents.

Her role as mother and producer of future kings also features a prominent place in the series through *The Birth of the Dauphin at Fontainebleau* (Figure 21). It gives visual proof to her fulfillment of her duty to King Henry IV and the people of France to produce an heir to the throne. By doing so, she is depicted in this work atop a throne of her own with the royal purple draped across her lap.

And so, this series depicts that it is by virtue of Marie de’ Medici’s birth, education, marriage, and motherhood that she named regent by her husband and crowned in *The Consignment of the Regency* (Figure 22) and *The Coronation in Saint-Denis* (Figure 23). Her right to rule is here legitimized by her connection with her husband the King and yet it is not completely dependent on him. In *Consignment of the Regency* Marie stands taller than Henry as

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<sup>119</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 102.

he confers the status of regent upon her. In *The Coronation in Saint-Denis*, Marie is shown in the same coronation dress that Anne of Austria will later be depicted in her portrait by Ruben's. The *fleur de lis* pattern of the dress similarly serves to make Marie herself a symbol of France. Yet while this portrait does not give us a depiction of Marie the person, when put in the larger context of the scene of the coronation and the series as a whole, Marie is afforded a much more active role than the portrait of Anne.

The first half of the series addressing Marie de' Medici's education, marriage, motherhood, and role as Queen when Henry was still alive contains imagery that adheres more to that traditionally expected from a woman at that time. In these images, Marie's power is rooted in her success in the role of wife, mother, and Queen consort. It is the images addressing her power after the death of her husband that prove to be more controversial. The difficulty for Rubens in portraying a contemporary woman in a position of power lies in the fact that there was no visual repertoire in existence at the time to depict an independently powerful woman. And so, Rubens had to adapt the already existing highly patriarchal visual signifiers to serve a female subject. This conflation of gender specificity leads to very complicated and controversial images. The three works that best display this issue are *The Regent Militant: The Victory at Julich* (Figure 26), *The Felicity of Regency* (Figure 28), and *The Queen Triumphant* (Figure 37). In one way when examined from the female gaze like that of Marie de' Medici, the appropriation of symbols reserved for male rulers makes clear her desire to be seen as a powerful individual in her own right. However, when examined by the male gaze like that of the French courtiers and King, these male power symbols mixed with the use of female nudity by Rubens throughout the series can create a situation in which Marie de' Medici is objectified by the male gaze or a

situation in which her image inspires castration fear in the male viewer.<sup>120</sup> Both of these situations would negate the influential purpose of this propagandistic series.

*The Regent Militant: The Victory at Julich* depicts the only military action that Marie de' Medici participated in during her regency. The Queen is shown in full regalia atop a white horse. The use of equestrian portrait to portray the power of a male ruler hearkens back to Marcus Aurelius. The white horse in the portrait bears a striking resemblance to the horse in the famous *Portrait of Duke of Lerma* by Rubens in 1603 (Figure 38). Both the horse and the helmet she wears highlight the militaristic aspect of the painting. Perhaps the most male specific attribute that Marie possesses in this portrait is the baton. It is another symbol seen in many male portraits, including that of the Duke of Lerma, that represents strength and power. In this respect it is natural for Rubens to adorn Marie with these conventional symbols of power. However, the phallic nature of the baton and its inherent connection to male virility creates a complicated image when placed in the hands of a woman. While the use of such symbols were intended to "act as positive affirmations of the queen's abilities, in spite of her gender, to govern wisely and lead France to glory, the seventeenth-century view of women as potentially dangerous temptresses like Delilah who used their femininity to gain power over men that these images at the same time allowed for very negative interpretations of Marie de' Medici."<sup>121</sup> This negative reading of pairing of male symbols with female subjects is heightened in images that also show the queen's bare breast such as with *The Felicity of Regency* and *The Queen Triumphant*. In *The Felicity of Regency*, the bare breasted image of Marie de' Medici stares out confidently from her

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<sup>120</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 108.

<sup>121</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 106.

seat. She is accompanied by the traditional attributes of male rulers including scales of justice, a scepter, orb, and throne. In *The Queen Triumphant*, again Marie de' Medici is bare breasted and stares confidently out at the audience as she is crowned by two putti. Her male ruler attributes in this image include a helmet, armor, cannon, and guns. The wide meaning of female nudity at this time opens the potential interpretation for negative interpretations of these works by the male French courtiers who would have been its audience. The female nude is sexually objectified by the male heterosexual viewer. The objects of typically male rule combined with the sexualized nudity of the female figure feed into the Delilah stereotype and would have "reminded contemporary viewers of the then-current topos of the queen as a woman trying to usurp traditional male power."<sup>122</sup> And so in the case of these images, the intention of the female patron could possibly be negated or misinterpreted by the male gaze.

Despite all of this, this series makes clear Marie de' Medici's role as an active agent. Her patronage and control over her own image allowed her to attempt to project an image of power. Power not solely drawn by serving as a symbol of family and dynasty but individual power and active agency. It is clear that she did not deny her socially determined role as wife and mother. It is just an integral part of her portraits by Rubens as the portraits of Anne of Austria and the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria. They all reflect the societal distance between the painter and the subject and serve to contrast to the intimate portraits of the painter's wives. However, the Marie de' Medici stands out as a product and display of female agency and resistance to pure objectification under the male gaze.

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<sup>122</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 106.

## CONCLUSION

Though left mostly unaddressed thus far, the technical elements of Rubens' female portraits provide an exceptional display of the painter's skill. Rubens' rendering of the flesh and fabric of these women is extremely successful on an aesthetic level. Rubens' creation of a popular formula for female portraiture left a lasting influence. His work the *Portrait of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria* (Figure 1) was pivotal in creating an influential formula for portrait painting that Rubens and artists after him continued to use. This formula included a column and red drapery to highlight the figure as well as a balcony overlooking a landscape in the background. One artist who was heavily influenced by Rubens was his student Anthony van Dyck. Van Dyck was Rubens most well-known and prodigious students and is one of the artists adopted Rubens formula for female portrait. Unlike Rubens whose focus was never portraiture, van Dyck embraced the genre and in his relatively short life became leading court painter in England and one of the most influential portraitists of the time. It is through followers, like van Dyck, that Rubens' contribution to portraiture impacts the entire genre within the European context.

The understanding of a portrait as simply a depiction of an actual person would lead to the assumption of stable meaning and purpose. With no allegory or metaphor or narrative, it should serve as snapshot of a person. It is expected to report to the viewer the physical appearance of the subject and inherently the truth of the subject's personality. The image of the person and the person themselves somehow synchronized. However, that is not entirely the case. To begin with, painted portraits such as those by Rubens do not always depict the physical

attributes of the sitter with complete accuracy. As with his *Portrait of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria*, although still recognizable, her beauty is exaggerated beyond her actual physical appearance as one contemporary viewer comments that the Marchesa was “attractive, but no goddess.”<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, the medium itself negates any possibility for mistaking a portrait for the actual person. Despite his best efforts, Ruben’s painted flesh would never breathe to embody the person he depicted. And so, while portraiture does not necessarily provide truthful all-encompassing representation it does “confront the issue of truthfulness of representation, given the occasionality of reference inevitably connecting the art work and the person.”<sup>124</sup> While the truthfulness of a portrait does not lie solely in its connection with its sitter, the meanings of a portrait can be better ascertained through the discussion of the interaction of the gaze of the artist, subject, and audience all together. This notion is perhaps even more important when looking at images of women, whose voices have been inaccurately represented or completely erased. To see the portraits of Helena Fourment or Anne of Austria to be complete depictions is inaccurate because the genre of portraiture does not rely solely on the sitter but rather “portraits exist at the interface between art and social life and the pressure to conform to social norms enters into their composition because both the artist and the subject [and the viewer] are enmeshed in the value system of their society”<sup>125</sup> By acknowledging the role of context and that of the gaze of subject, artist, and audience a more complicated and nuanced reading of these female portraits can be created.

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<sup>123</sup> Mark Lamster, *Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2009), 34.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>125</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.



As creator of these images, Rubens relationship with the sitter and his opinions about women in general shaped his female portraits. Rubens' gaze as artist is the main cause the main difference between the portraits he does of his wives and those he does of wealthy women patrons. The portraits of his wives are more intimate and casual while his portraits of elite women are formal and distant. Rubens gaze is the first to interact with the subject and so his own relationship with these different women based on social and sexual availability impacts the image he creates.

As his wife, Isabella Brant and later Helena Fourment occupy the same socio-economic status as Rubens and are sexually available to the artist allowing him to depict them in a more intimate manner. The fact that these works are not mandated by commission gives Rubens even more control over the style and content of the image. The private context these images occupied also meant that Rubens would have been the primary viewer of these images. As both viewer and artist, these images of Isabella Brant and Helena project more of Rubens' expectation and understanding of these two women as his wife and mother of his children rather than an embodiment of their personal identity. This is not to say that the role of mother and wife did not play a part in these women's understanding of themselves. However, these portraits slot these women into socially normative roles that their husband expected them to fill.

The opposing formal, distant images of the Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria, Anne of Austria, and Marie de 'Medici are due their elevated socio-economic status. Just as the intimacy of Rubens' relationships with his wives are reflected in his images of them, the formality of his relationships with the Marchesa, Anne, and Marie are similarly reflected. Instead of being for the private view of the artist, the public setting of these portraits meant these images had to adhere

mores strictly to the accepted social norms of the culture to be successful. Therefore, like the wife portraits, these elite portraits of women do not embody their self-determined identity but rather their expected role again as wife and mother. The elite marriage portraits specifically serve as symbols of familial and dynastic power. These women are not allowed individual power are imbued with the wealth and power of father and husband and serve to display it for the audience to view. And so, the portraits Rubens completes of his wives and of the female social elite don't simply record the gaze of the sitter but an interaction of multiple gazes. The art work is the relationship between the gaze of the artist and the subject as well as the relationship between the gaze of the subject and that of the intended viewer and all the cultural baggage each brings with them.

And so, the acknowledgement of multiple gazes provides more than just a viewer/object relationship. While the male gaze objectifies the portraits of these women, the female gaze complicates it and allows us to interpret these women as not only objects and instead explore the level of agency or restriction they experienced. To different degrees these women both internalize and subvert the patriarchal system of the time. To grow up within a patriarchal language system and patriarchal visual system leaves no other choice but to internalize to some extent male dominance and male gaze and have it be reality. A woman is treated by a man based on how she looks. Therefore, to survive and "to acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it."<sup>126</sup> All of the portraits from Isabella Brant to Anne of Austria to even the more controversial series of Marie de' Medici involve these women in the role of

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<sup>126</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

mother and wife. The expectation of these women to be devoted mother and wife is reinforced by the patriarchal pressures both from society and from an internalization of these pressures.

Two images in this study seem to break the mold of male objectification and explore to an extent female agency and viewership. Rubens' nude portrait of Helena Fourment known as *Het Pelsken* seems a perfect example of a female image made exclusively to be objectified by the male gaze due to its sexual nature. However, the fact that the portrait spent much of its life in the private view of Helena herself allows us to explore her female gaze on this image. And so, when Helena gazed upon this picture, perhaps she would also be reminded of her own pleasures of sex and marriage, not only the pleasure she provided to her husband. In this case the female viewer releases the image from pure objectification.

The other image that challenges most the male gaze is Rubens Marie de' Medici cycle. The cycle of Marie de' Medici serves as a unique example of a woman in control of her own image choosing to depict herself as powerful in her own right. Unlike the other elite portraits, Marie's depiction of herself in a position of power does not simply serve to elevate her family. She is not reduced to a dynastic symbol. Although some the images she chooses to place herself in still rely on her role as mother and wife, their purpose was to forward the individual political ambitions of Marie de' Medici. Other images, such as *The Regent Militant: The Victory at Julich*, *The Felicity of Regency*, and *The Queen Triumphant*, reject traditional female roles and instead place Marie de' Medici in the context of objects typically signifying male rule and power. Absent visual language to express female power, Marie de 'Medici and Rubens had to rely on the appropriation of symbols typically reserved for men. While under the female gaze of Marie de' Medici such symbols would communicate royal power. However, under the gaze of

the male courtiers who would have made up the audience of these images would perhaps not inspire the same confidence in Marie de' Medici's power. These male power symbols mixed with the use of female nudity by Rubens throughout the series can create a situation in which Marie de' Medici is objectified by the male gaze or a situation in which her image inspires castration fear in the male viewer.<sup>127</sup> The loss of Marie de' Medici's intended propagandistic meaning when her images confront the male gaze calls into question the successes, or lack thereof, of the series. Perhaps it is the "intolerable propaganda . . . [and] proto-feminist content that Rubens' massive series had little influence on Parisian art at the time."<sup>128</sup> Regardless of assertions of success or failure, the Marie de' Medici serves as a unique example of female agency and attempt to subvert the patriarchal system of the time.

This paper reinforces the cultural complexity of portraiture and applies it to female portraiture to provide a more nuanced understanding of their role and identity. By acknowledging the combined effect of the gaze of the artist, the subject, and the viewer these female portraits can be understood on several levels rather than as static snapshots. Their objectification under the male gaze must be acknowledge to understand these portraits but their role is not only as object. The image of the sitter does not totally embody the personality of the sitter, but the image allows us to explore the degree to which the role they perform in their portrait existed as an element of their personal identity. By exploring the layers of meaning created by the interaction of gaze, a more complex understanding of these women arises rather than simply looking at them as objects. While at times silenced by history, women have found ways to be active agents in society. To look at these seventeenth century portraits as pure sites of

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<sup>127</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 108.

<sup>128</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, "Flanders," 168.

objectification is to deny acknowledgement of the agency of women such as Helena Fourment and Marie de' Medici.

## FIGURES



Figure 1. *Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria*

1606, National Gallery of Art, DC.



Figure 2. *The Honeysuckle Bower*  
ca. 1609, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 3. Detail of *The Honeysuckle Bower*  
ca. 1609, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 4. *Isabella Brandt*  
c. 1626, Galleria Degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 5. *Portrait of Isabella Brandt*  
c. 1621-22, British Museum.





Figure 6. *Portrait of Isabella Brandt*

c. 1620, Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 7. *Helena Fourment in her Wedding Dress*

1630-31, Oil on canvas, 64 x 54 in., Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 8. *Helena Fourment with her Son Frans*

1635, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 9. *Helena Fourment with Two of Her Children, Claire-Jeanne and Francis*  
1635, Louvre.



Figure 10. *Het Pelsken* or *Portrait of Helena Fourment with a fur coat (Venus in Fur Coat)*  
1630-1640, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.



Figure 11. *Study for Portrait of Brigida Spinola Doria,*

1606, Pen and brown ink with wash over black chalk, 31.5 x 18.5 cm., Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.



Figure 12. *Portrait of Anne of Austria*

1621-25, Louvre.





Figure 13. *Portrait of Anne of Austria*  
c. 1622-1625, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.



Figure 14. *The Destiny of Marie de' Medici*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 15. *The Birth of the Princess*  
1622-25, Louvre.

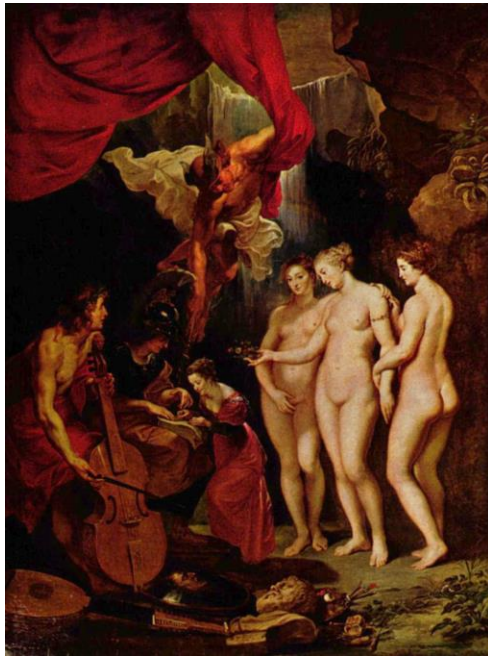


Figure 16. *Education of the Princess*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 17. *The Presentation of Her Portrait to Henry IV*

1622-25, Louvre.





Figure 18. *The Wedding by Proxy of Marie de' Medici to King Henry IV*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 19. *The Disembarkation at Marseilles*  
1622-25, Louvre.





Figure 20. *The Meeting of Marie de' Medici and Henry IV at Lyons*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 21. *The Birth of the Dauphin at Fontainebleau*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 22. *The Consignment of the Regency*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 23. *The Coronation in Saint-Denis*

1622-25, Louvre.





Figure 24. *The Apotheosis of Henry IV and The Proclamation of the Regency*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 25. *The Council of the Gods*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 26. *The Regent Militant: The Victory at Jülich*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 27. *The Exchange of the Princesses at the Spanish Border*  
1622-25, Louvre.





Figure 28. *The Felicity of the Regency of Marie de' Medici*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 29. *Louis XIII Comes of Age*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 30. *The Flight from Blois*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 31. *The Negotiations at Angoulême*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 32. *The Queen Opts for Security*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 33. *Reconciliation of the Queen and her Son*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 34. *The Triumph of Truth*  
1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 35. *Portrait of Francis I*  
1622-25, Louvre.





Figure 36. *Portrait of Johanna of Austria*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 37. *Portrait of Marie de' Medici as Queen Triumphant*

1622-25, Louvre.



Figure 38. *Portrait of Duke of Lerma*

1603, Museo del Prado.

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