OPEN ARTS JOURNAL

ISSN 2050-3679

FAT? THE CONTESTED FEMININITY OF MARGUERITE DE VALOIS IN RUBENS'S *MEDICI CYCLE*

Scarlett Butler

Abstract

The former Queen of France and Navarre, Marguerite de Valois (1553–1615), is presented as 'fat' in Peter Paul Rubens's The Coronation at Saint-Denis*, one of the monumental history paintings of the Medici Cycle, a series reimagining Maria de' Medici's life and career completed in 1625. This article examines how the incorporation of fatness as a notable element of Marguerite's characterisation illuminates the interaction between body size and gender at the French court in the early seventeenth century. Preparatory oil sketches for* The Coronation *demonstrate that Marguerite's body size expanded as her status is lowered within the image, while it elevates Maria's status and emphasises her authority as mother of the King. By establishing Marguerite as a direct foil to the Queen Mother,* The Coronation *may allude to political satires that accused Marguerite of an unnatural sexuality and problematic infertility. Despite the derogatory discourses which may be alluded to in the painting, Marguerite's appearance is not entirely negative and continues to fit within Rubens's idealised vision of the fashionably 'plump' female body. Due to their cooler, moister humoural makeup, women were often considered to be fatter than men in early modern Europe. However, this tendency is exaggerated in Rubens's art. Round shapes and dappled flesh tones are used to vividly visualise women's constitutional fatness as well as demonstrate Rubens's mastery of his medium. As such, fat enhanced the dynamic and erotic potential of women's bodies in Rubens's art. Ultimately, this article concludes that The Coronation does not so much illustrate criticisms of Marguerite but rather is tailored for a setting in which fat's transgression and its appeal could coexist.*

Keywords: body size, fatness, fat studies, anti-fatness, Rubens, France, French court, gender, Marguerite de Valois, Maria de' Medici, seventeenth century, early modern, baroque
Full text: https://openartsjournal.org/issue-12/article-5/
DOI: 10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2025w05

Biographical note

Scarlett Butler is a PhD candidate in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh. Her thesis explores the visual and medical 'treatment' of fatness in early modern France (*c.*1530–1630) with particular focus on print culture, courtly display and the upheavals in gender roles and class relations during and after the Wars of Religion.

Banner image: Detail of niello-inlaid engraving of a haloed eagle-headed St. John the Evangelist upon gold plaque from Brandon, Suffolk. (©The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0] licence)

FAT? THE CONTESTED FEMININITY OF MARGUERITE DE VALOIS IN RUBENS'S *MEDICI CYCLE*

Scarlett Butler,
University of Edinburgh

A 'fat' noblewoman stands among the assembled guests in *The Coronation at Saint-Denis* by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) (hereafter, *The Coronation*; Figs. 5.1 and 5.2). The monumental history painting reimagines the coronation of Maria de' Medici (1575–1642) that had occurred in May 1610, so around fifteen years earlier. It is one of three large horizontal canvases included in a series of twenty-four paintings now known collectively as the *Medici Cycle*. A meticulous description of the series compiled in 1750 by Abbé Louis Gougenot (1719–67) identifies this figure as 'La Reine Marguerite', in other words, Marguerite de Valois (1553–1615), Queen of France and first wife of King Henri IV (1553–1610) (Büttner, 2023, pp.303–4; Gougenot, 1909, pp.154–201). As the daughter of the final Valois monarch, Marguerite's royal status survived both exile and divorce, with her presence providing valuable continuity to the coronation of Henri's second wife, Maria. In the painting, Marguerite stands directly beside Catherine de Clèves, Duchesse de Guise (1548–1633). Both women are described as 'plump ermined dowagers' by Ronald Millen and Robert Wolf, who are among the few art historians to comment directly on Marguerite beyond noting her presence (1989, p.108). In his excellent and comprehensive study of the *Medici Cycle* in the *Corpus Rubenianum* series, Nils Büttner argues that the other noble guests depicted in *The Coronation* are 'less specific portraits than representative aristocratic participants in the ceremony', '[w]ith the exception of "la Reine Margot" and Maria herself' (2023, p.313).

Figure 5.1: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Coronation at Saint-Denis,* from the *Medici Cycle*, *c.*1625. Oil on canvas, 394 × 727cm. Louvre, Paris. (© 1989 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Jean Lewandowski (Le Couronnement de la reine à l'abbaye de Saint-Denis, le 13 mai 1610 - Louvre site des collections))

Figure 5.2: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Coronation at Saint-Denis,* from the *Medici Cycle, c.*1625. Oil on canvas, 394 × 727cm. Louvre, Paris. (© 1989 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Jean Lewandowski (Le Couronnement de la reine à l'abbaye de Saint-Denis, le 13 mai 1610 - Louvre site des collections))

Büttner notes that Maria's appearance in *The Coronation* derives from a specific drawing of the *Head of Maria de' Medici* now held in the Albertina in Vienna and also suggests that Marguerite's appearance is more generally 'identifiable from contemporaneous portraits' (2023, p.314). Upon further examination, surviving portraits of Marguerite could only ever have provided indirect sources for Rubens's version. The last known work to convey a plausible likeness of Marguerite is a drawn portrait now tentatively dated to the late 1580s (Fig. 5.3) when the Queen was in her mid-thirties. This pencil drawing closely resembles a confirmed portrait of the Marguerite made in 1572 when she was nineteen, one of hundreds of veristic pencil drawings by court artist François Clouet (McIlvenna, 2016, p.20; Fig. 5.4). Both drawings pay close attention to the subtleties of Marguerite's facial features including the highly arched, thin, dark brows, the drooping outer corners of her eyes, the curve and lowered tip of her nose and the faint receding of her chin. These finer details are all absent from *The Coronation.* Even if Rubens did glimpse the 1580s portrait, he has turned the faint double chin it portrays into a substantially enlarged jawline and neck. When combined with her full chest and padded hand, Rubens's posthumous rendering of Marguerite extrapolates a generalised fatness absent from all other likenesses of the Queen. This expansion of Marguerite's body size suggests other sources for her appearance, including the informal repertoire of personal associations circulating at the French court in the early seventeenth century. Though Marguerite received considerable praise for her beauty and wisdom from sympathetic authors, virulent anti-Valois satires have long distorted her biography (Viennot, [1993] 2005, pp.9–10; Klettke & Mutet, 2014, pp.613–14). The dubious title of 'La Reine Margot' refers to this strand of Marguerite's 'reputation'. That this is the moniker used by Büttner to describe Marguerite's presence in *The Coronation* may constitute a discrete allusion to the potentially negative character of her portrayal, which this essay will explore in greater detail (2023, p.313; Viennot, 2005, pp.9–10).

Figure 5.3: Anonymous, *Portrait présumé de Marguerite de Valois, c.*1585–90. Drawing, 29.5 × 22.2cm. Musées de Reims, Reims. (Photo: Xavier Lavictoire)

Figure 5.4: François Clouet, *Portrait de Marguerite de Valois, c.*1574. Drawing, 33.8 × 22.4cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. (Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Discussing body sizes and shapes that depart from present-day Western cultural norms pose distinct challenges for art historians, requiring careful effort to discern how these images were viewed in their original context. As Jill Burke notes, descriptions of women's physical appearance in art often reveal historians' own 'deep seated assumptions about real bodies' and how they should look (2018, p.9). Rubens's art has attracted much critical commentary on fatness but also invigorated discussions about the degree to which fuller bodies were appreciated in early modern Europe. For example, Cordula van Wyhe describes Rubens's 'joyful celebration of the full and soft female body as a fashionable luxury and a hallmark of health, sexual attractiveness and fertility' (2018, p.10). Karolien de Clippel and Leah Sweet also define the 'Rubenesque' female body as ubiquitously pale, soft, rounded, and dimpled, but emphasise the distance between this artistic ideal and living women's bodies (de Clippel, 2007, p.131; Sweet, 2014, *passim*). Sweet also argues that Rubens's female figures were not celebrations of fat models but carefully constructed forms, based on ancient sculpture and designed to showcase his virtuosic '*colore*' technique (2014, pp.136–7).

In keeping with the aim of this special issue, this article foregrounds the role of visual images in conveying the conflicting conceptions of women's bodies that co-existed in early modern European societies. Holly Fletcher's explorations of fatness in Reformation Germany have demonstrated responses to body size were as contradictory then as now, shaped not just by art or medicine but also by personal or embodied experiences, and played a role identity formation (2020, pp.26–32; 2021, p.175). Experience of fatness varied not only across time and place but within one setting or one individual, as Fletcher writes: 'while the size and shape of the body could function as a marker of identity, this identity was not necessarily fixed' (2020, pp.29–30). Even when medical and artistic theory *implied* bodies had singular, coherent meaning there is no unified concept of 'the body' or 'the fat body' in early modern society Fletcher explains (2021, p.175), drawing on the arguments of Caroline Walker Bynum who noted that 'ideas [about the body] differed according to who held them, where and when' (1995, pp.7, 27). Instead, the body was a site of ideological and power struggles. Thus, negative characterisations of certain body sizes stem from contingent social norms and prejudices. These assumptions can shape viewing habits but cannot fully dictate the meanings that fat bodies produce. Here it should be noted that, following conventions in fat studies, this article uses 'fat' and 'fatness' descriptively despite their often negative associations in modern culture. The term 'fat' has been reclaimed as a neutral term by fat-justice activists and fat-studies scholars and is generally deemed preferable to medicalised or normative language like 'obese' or 'overweight' (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009, p.xii–xiv).

Images become particularly useful when attempting to discuss the diversity and tensions in early modern approaches to fatness. Pictures convey the dimensions and complex textures of fat and fatness missing from most textual descriptions in this period. The role of the artistic medium in shaping how a body is received by

the viewer is demonstrated by Rubens's own treatise on painting from statues *De imitatione statuarum,* which emphasises that the dimensions and density of sculpture differ radically from those created by paint.[1] Yet exchange between media can also produce new meanings for body size that language alone cannot fully express. For instance, Rubens's desire to transmute ancient Greek sculptures of Venus into paint produced a radically new and dynamically fluid vision of ideal femininity. Where medical advice, beauty manuals and satires might idealise plumpness in a manner coherent with Rubens's art, these normative texts usually define fatness *against* a 'moderate' figure, making 'fat' a negative extreme by definition. Rubens's realised vision of the female body demonstrates not only the variety of figures which could be contained within this acceptable 'moderate' size, but how the idealised and stigmatised aspects of fatness could exist simultaneously. As this suggests, body fat and fatness are not neutral forms or symbols waiting to be depicted but are reworked by artists to incorporate the ideas, attitudes and tastes of their era. Early modern courtiers paid close attention to bodily appearance and expressions to shape their image or watch for involuntary slips of emotion in others; a skill Nora Peterson observes throughout Marguerite's own memoir and letters (2022, pp.56–75). By exploring Marguerite's pose, proportions, skin texture and tone within *The Coronation,* this article demonstrates that the painting's depiction of fatness was shaped by its courtly setting and the artistic medium, both of which layer cultural interpretations and connections onto the Queen's bodily traits. Visual art is thus a vital tool for approaching the unspoken, temporally and culturally specific assumptions that shape experiences of body size – whether viewed, touched or inhabited.

To interpret the meanings of Marguerite's appearance in a manner that moves beyond modern prejudices requires an attentiveness to the development, style and context of *The Coronation*. The first half of this article traces the painting's development through contemporaneous accounts of Maria's coronation in 1610, later instructions provided by Maria and her advisors and Rubens's preparatory sketches. These sources demonstrate that Marguerite's increased physical size coincides with her subtle demotion and positioning as a negative double to Maria. The second half then frames *The Coronation* within Rubens's broader aesthetic and pictorial techniques, particularly his use of rounded forms and skin textures to visualised women's bodies in a highly gendered and medically coded manner. These techniques allowed Rubens to eroticise and exaggerate corpulence without fully endorsing it, and this reveals how fatness could be simultaneously desirable and stigmatised through its association with 'femininity'. While fat's perceived 'fluidity' has often underpinned cultural critiques of women, my article concludes that this very flexibility opens space for reinterpretation and resistance, offering a reminder of the rebellious, organic nature of embodiment.

Framing Marguerite de Valois

There is no doubt that a negative tinge can be read into Marguerite's likeness in *The Coronation* given her demotion among the court entourage and implied inferiority to the cycle's patron, Maria. By potentially evoking critical satires of Marguerite, which emphasised her body size as a sign of her sexual dysfunction and lack of children, Rubens's composition would seem to frame Marguerite and Maria as contrasting versions of queenship. This contrast enhances Maria's authority as a wife and mother of kings and is in keeping with strong emphasis on these roles noted by Geraldine A. Johnson in both the wider series and in Maria's artistic patronage generally (1999, p.143). Thus, Marguerite's fatness is not a record of her embodied size nor simply a reference to anecdotal accounts but actively contributed to the political content of *The Coronation* by enhancing the visible contrast between Marguerite and Maria.

It should be underscored here that Maria and her advisors maintained tight control over the *Medici Cycle*'s contents and messages, including the subjects and individuals portrayed in the cycle. Commissioned by the Queen Mother following her return to political influence, as indicated by her restoration to the Council

1 The original version of *De imitatione statuarum* was lost in 1720, however its contents were transcribed into a copy of Rubens's pocketbook known as The Johnson Manuscript, which is currently held by the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. For a transcription of the Latin original and an English translation by classics scholar Janet Fairweather, see Thielemann (2018, p.97, 99–100).

of State in February 1622, the series presented a vindicating and triumphal account of Maria's life that lingered on key moments of her empowerment as both the former Queen Regent and current Queen Mother (Millen and Wolf, 1989, p.17). The precise moment of Maria's crowning by Cardinal de Joyeuse (1562–1615) was included in the list of 'approved subjects' sent to Rubens by his friend, the scholar Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637) (Büttner, 2023, pp.13, 47, 310; Sutton, Wieseman & van Hout, 2004, p.29; Millen & Wolf, 1989, p.112). Now known as the Baluze manuscript, this was a memorandum compiled for Rubens in August 1622 that stipulated the order of guests and their costumes for *The Coronation.* This included instructions that required 'La Reyne Marguerite' (Queen Marguerite de Valois) to be placed behind the three princesses of the blood and several other nobles, but makes no comment on her specific dress or appearance (Büttner, 2023, p.15; Various, Baluze 323, fols 55v–56v).

Contemporaneous accounts of Maria's coronation in 1610 demonstrate that the Queen Mother may have shifted the order of guests for Rubens's pictorial reimagining of the event, including lowering Marguerite's status. The jurist Pierre de L'Étoile (1546–1611) noted in his diary that at the actual event Marguerite was second only to Maria's young daughter, princess Elisabeth (1602–44), amongst the court's ladies (1741, vol.4, p.25). Similarly, in a broadside print of Maria's coronation published by Jean Leclerc shortly after the event, Marguerite is prominently displayed at the head of the train of noblewomen in attendance, with no division between the inner circle around Maria and the former Queen (Gaultier, 1610, , 2.55).[2] The significance of this ranking is demonstrated by descriptions of the tense wrangling for prominence which accompanied the actual crowning ceremony, organised by Henri IV to secure Maria's regency before he departed to fight in the first phase of the War of the Jülich Succession (1609–10). In one account of Henri's reign published in 1635, the French historian Scipion Dupleix (1569–1661) suggests that Marguerite was displeased at being outranked by a seven-year-old. He also stated that, in 'considering what she was by birth, what she would have been by marriage, and what she was now in disgrace', her obligation to appear seemed to her 'a kind of public penance' that made her decline in status visible to all of France (Dupleix, 1635, p.403).[3]

Marguerite's appearance in *The Coronation* must also have served as a reminder of her legal separation from Henri IV, as approved by papal edict in 1599. This enabled his marriage to Maria the following year, ensuring some resolution to the crown's financial concerns and the possibility of a royal heir (Büttner, 2023, p.21). Cardinal de Joyeuse's past recommendation in favour of dissolving Marguerite and Henri's marriage was also a political factor in his selection for the actual coronation ceremony, one that carried over into *The Coronation* as a perpetual reminder of the legal validity of the annulment (Millen & Wolf, 1989, p.112). If Marguerite had been unhappy with her position in the original ceremony, her even greater demotion in *The Coronation* would have seemed an even more pointed and political slight on her standing at court. Moreover, when *The Coronation* was first displayed, Marguerite had been dead for a decade; she could no longer defend herself.

Rubens's preparatory oil sketches demonstrate Marguerite's continued demotion within *The Coronation*'s composition as it developed in the painter's studio. The earliest oil sketch for the painting, now held at the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, proposes a composition in which Marguerite is placed somewhat further forward in the court ranks (Fig. 5.5). In keeping with the earliest broadside prints of the event, nobles process from right to left, with Maria kneeling to be crowned at the centre of the work's left half. By placing Marguerite in the immediate foreground, this early composition elongates her body and emphasises her considerable height. Marguerite's chest is covered by a cloak and her torso is shaped into a fashionable silhouette by a stiffly boned bodice or *corps* (referred to as 'bodies' in English; see

2 Gaultier, L. after Bollery N. (1610), *Poutraict du sacre et couronnement de Marie de Medicis,* Paris, Jean Leclerc IV. London, British Museum, Mm,2.55. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Mm-2-55.

3 '[S]e voiant obligée de marcher apres Madame encore enfant, & considerant ce qu'elle estoit par sa naissance, ce qu'elle avoit esté par marriage, & ce qu'elle estoit à present par disgrace, elle s'en alloit faire amende honorable'. Translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.

Bendall, 2021, pp.ix, 3, 157). The narrower format of this sketch suggests it was made before Rubens received the final measurements and formats of the paintings from Peiresc in early April 1622 but may have been sent to his patron, Maria, for approval prior to this date (the 7:9 ratio of the earliest sketch shifts to approximately a 5:9 ratio in the final painting) (Büttner, 2023, p.40).

The reduction in Marguerite's status and the relative broadening of her figure are introduced as the composition was adapted for the widened measurements of the final canvas and its specific intended position in the western gallery of the Palais du Luxembourg, Maria's bespoke residence in Paris. A second surviving oil sketch for *The Coronation,* now in Munich's Alte Pinakothek, demonstrates how the reworking of the composition pushed Marguerite further into the background, casting her body into shadow, diminishing her height and adding visible puffiness to her cheeks. By this stage, Marguerite has been more firmly placed at the centre of the work's left half, directly beside two of Maria's best-known 'enemies', Henri IV's two natural sons with his mistress Gabrielle d'Estrées. César de Bourbon, Duke de Vendôme, smiles out of the canvas, while his brother Alexandre, Chevalier de Vendôme, is positioned with his back to the viewer (Millen & Wolf, 1989, p.108). Further attention is drawn to Marguerite by a male head placed between her and César; this figure looks knowingly at the audience and thus directs their eyes to these less than welcome guests, each of whom had a relationship with Henri IV that represented a distinct threat to Maria's authority (p.108).

Figure 5.5: Peter Paul Rubens, *Coronation of Maria de' Medici, c.*1622. Oil on oak panel, 49 × 63cm. Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. (Photo: Album / Alamy Stock Photo)

Millen and Wolf argue that the initial oil sketch (Fig. 5.5) offered a 'more interesting perspective composition than the final result' (1989, p.107). Yet these shifts evidently aided the promotion of Maria's authority. The final composition emphasises the division of the painting into two halves by expanding the separation between the inner family circle on the right and the wider court on the left. For instance, where Alexandre's flamboyant figure marked the midpoint of the initial composition, a space is opened in the final painting (Fig. 5.1). The new centre of the painting is marked by a gap between two groups of figures, a gap filled with rays of light and falling coins delivered by allegorical personifications of 'Glory' and 'Honour' (Büttner, 2023, p.311). The insertion of the three princesses of the blood in the final version of *The Coronation* compounds this symbolic barrier between the legitimate royal family and reminders of Henri IV's former, dissolved, relationships. Flanked by her son, the dauphin and future Louis XIII (1601–43), and her daughter Elizabeth, Maria is placed at the centre of the royal family group. Maria's role as wife and mother is combined with Henri IV's pointed endorsement of her regency through the coronation ceremony, an endorsement underscored by his placement on a private balcony directly above Maria's head (Fig. 5.1). This placement represents another refinement from the earliest oil sketch, which shows the King's position slightly offset to the viewer's left (Fig. 5.5).

The reversal of the procession's direction also placed Maria and the churchmen crowning her on the right-hand side of the painting. This then works as the side of sovereign authority and the natural culmination of the work. Here it should be underscored again that the *Medici Cycle* was explicitly tailored for the western gallery in Maria's Parisian residence; when taken as a whole, the paintings were designed to enhance her independence from her son, Louis XIII, by creating a courtly setting in which she was the central figure of authority (Millen & Wolf, 1989, p.17; Büttner, 2023, p.96). *The Coronation* represents a pivotal point in Maria's political career and was one of three large horizontal canvases in the series. These were all displayed at the furthest end of the gallery, so at its literal turning point. The compositional crescendo on the right side of *The Coronation* fits with this layout, matching the movement of viewers as they circulated around the gallery clockwise. The other two

horizontal paintings, hung at right angles on either side of *The Coronation* at the end of the gallery, respectively represented *The Death of Henri VI and the Proclamation of the Regency* and *The Council of the Gods* (for a diagram of the cycle's layout see: Galletti, 2014, p.884). While these two works included a huge number of allegorical personifications, *The Coronation* focused on historical individuals whose appearances must have formed major strand of discussions amongst the original audiences for the paintings.

Maria controlled access to the *Medici Cycle* on its installation and thus could mediate such discussions and hence the meanings communicated to viewers. This is a point that has only become clear relatively recently: the function of the gallery was once thought to provide an entryway to the private rooms of Maria's large apartment akin to a lavish waiting room. Yet Sara Galletti has persuasively demonstrated that the 'Rubens Gallery' was instead located within the innermost rooms of Maria's private residence, with access carefully controlled by the Queen Mother herself (2003; 2010; 2012, pp.154–73). As Büttner has noted, entering the gallery was an honour, a place 'to discuss private matters with privileged guests' and for Maria to display her magnificence while retaining a certain 'modesty appropriate of a royal widow' (2023, pp.33, 96–7). Galletti further argues that the complex allegories and visual ambiguity of the series allowed Maria and her advisors to tune their explanations to specific viewers (2014, pp.878, 903). Moments at which the series dissented from the politics of Maria's son could be revealed to close allies on one visit and then artfully concealed on another, such as when Louis XIII himself viewed the series in May 1625 (pp.904–6).

In the final version of *The Coronation*, the dual shift to lower Marguerite's status while broadening her figure and exposing her chest might well cater to the informal world of court gossip and concurrent discussions of reputation which could be held within the relative privacy of the western gallery. This idea certainly fits with other attacks on Marguerite. For example, in 1626, just a year after *The Coronation* was completed, a court ballet would appear to parody *Le grand bal de la Rene Marguerite* (an entertainment the Valois Queen organised in 1612), with the poet René Border representing a 'grotesque' version of the now deceased Marguerite in the character of the 'Grande Duchesse de Billebahaut', described by Margaret McGowan as a 'gross, ugly and clumsy' figure (1963, pp.133–53; 2015, p.204). Popular in the French court during the 1620s, burlesque ballets offered courtiers new opportunities to mock famed individuals. Presenting Marguerite in a 'grotesque' light was thus a political means of asserting authority over the repudiated Queen, as is also the case for *The Coronation.*

The initial viewers of the *Medici Cycle* were drawn from groups continuous with that of the ballet's audience, thus people most likely to know of the rumours surrounding Marguerite. Satirical biographies repeated these rumours, often portraying the repudiated Queen as both hypersexual and concerningly fat, using her body size to enhance their critiques. The connection drawn between Marguerite's concerning size and her outsized sexuality was elaborated in an anonymous satire written in the voice of Henri IV – *Le Divorce satyrique, ou les amours de la reyne Marguerite* – which describes Marguerite's innumerable affairs to imply her husband, the King, was a cuckold (Tresfels, 2020, p.103). The text's description of Marguerite being just as 'big & fat, & voluptuous' ('gros & gras, & voluptueux') as one of these lovers, enhances its vision of her outsized sexual desires (Tresfels, 2020, p.103; Anonymous, 1660, p.206). As Cécile Tresfels has highlighted, *Le Divorce satyrique* represents Marguerite as 'the most deformed woman in France', her body 'transgressing all boundaries'; it is 'extensible, penetrable, unstoppable, it oozes and it consumes, and thus it profoundly disturbs' (2020, p.105; Anonymous, 1660, p.205). Despite following conventional lines of anti-Valois propaganda, which often used accusations of sexual 'disorder' to imply the illegitimacy of royal authority, *Le Divorce satyrique* remains noteworthy. This is because it uses expanded body size to define Marguerite as overstepping the very boundaries of nature in response to her political position and assertive presence in elite French society (on the political significance of the sexual reputation of Valois monarchs see: Crawford, 2010, pp.195–240). Tresfels notes that *Le Divorce satyrique* was written as early as 1607. This was shortly after Marguerite's return to Paris in 1605, newly independent of familial authority, when she would often display her wealth through jewel-encrusted outfits and grand entertainments (2020, pp.103–4).

The early manuscript forms of *Le Divorce satyrique* may have been crucial in transmitting the notion of Marguerite's fatness beyond the commercial, public-facing world of print in the early and mid-seventeenth century. The Valois queen's size is commented upon in the notoriously scathing *Historiettes,* a series of short biographies of notable figures authored by Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux (1619–1692) between 1657 and 1659 (Tallemant des Réaux, 1834, pp.87–91; Scott, 2010, p.18). The *Historiettes* would remain in manuscript form until its publication in several volumes between 1834 and 1835 (Scott, 2010, p.18). While far from an accurate record of historical events, the *Historiettes* provide an insight into the reputation Marguerite left among the capital's elite, based on 'gossip and anecdotes' collected by Tallemant from among his literary circle at the Hôtel de Rambouillet (Scott, 2010, p.18). According to these sources, the Valois Queen was a gallant and witty woman who reappeared from exile with a 'horribly fat' figure (Tallemant des Réaux, 1834, p.87). To compensate for her size, Marguerite dressed in a preposterously enlarged costume, Tallemant claimed, such that she struggled to move through doorways (p.87). Her eccentric behaviour and outmoded dress present the Queen as a somewhat sympathetic but ultimately comic figure, almost a preposterous relic of the Valois monarchy.

These anecdotal accounts of Marguerite's size that were exchanged within the court were fed by a wider network of gossip transmitted orally or in slanderous pamphlets and manuscripts circulating across Paris (McIlvenna, 2016, p.20). According to Una McIlvenna, the rising class of lawyers (*'parlementaires'* like the diarist L'Estoile) were prominent in distributing this 'misogynistic literature', demonstrating their 'resistance to the prominence of women' in political life, often betraying their 'own anxieties around gender and sexuality' (2016, p.20). The political propaganda of *Le Divorce satyrique* betrays this intense anxiety about the destabilising impact of women having non-procreative sex. Here, fatness could mark the perceived unnaturalness of Marguerite's sexuality both in its outsized nature and lack of procreative intent or results. For instance, Marguerite's excessive desire for not 'a thousand' but 'infinite lovers' ('infinies amours') is contrasted in *Le Divorce satyrique* with her 'sterile and fruitless' relationship to her husband, as the couple were known never to have 'produced' an heir (Tresfels, 2020, pp.113–14; Anonymous, 1660, p.214). The text makes this excessive, non-procreative sexuality legible through Marguerite's extreme appearance, in one case by describing her as attending communion with 'a great bosom so uncovered that it resembled rather an ass than breasts' (translation from Tresfels, 2020, p.107; Anonymous, 1660, pp.222–3). The phrase 'grande gorge' is used to refer to Marguerite's chest, however 'gorge' could refer both to the throat or the décolleté (Tresfels, 2020, p.107; Anonymous, 1660, p.222; Cotgrave, 1611, p.495). When combined with the implied confusion between buttocks and breasts, the anonymous author's description of Marguerite's taboo appearance at church suggests both a heavier figure and a confusion of body parts and orifices redolent of non-procreative sexual acts.

This emphasis on Marguerite's size and lack of fertility resonates with the wider medical culture of the period. Excessive fatness was consistently associated with fertility issues in early modern Europe. This was particularly so for elite women, whose relatively inactive lifestyles were thought to combine with the constitutional weaknesses of their sex so as to increase fat around the entrance to the womb and therefore prevent conception. As Sarah Toulalan has demonstrated, while seventeenth-century physicians continued to link corpulence to infertility in both sexes, their warnings and advice largely focused on women's bodies (2014, p.72). According to Jean Liébault's *Trois livres de la sante, foecundite et maladies des femmes* (a French adaptation of Giovanni Marinelli's *Le medicine partenenti alle infermità delle donne*, 1562) 'empty' sterile women were imperfect and justly despised because 'nature created her [i.e. women] mainly to conceive' (1582, p.5). Such women's troubles were caused by 'their natural temperament, which is cold and damp: the habit of their body, which is soft, lax, and of rare texture: the superfluities and excrements of which they are full: the idle, sedentary life […] without exer-

cise that they are forced to lead' (p.5).[4] Liébault further claims that 'obesity and excess fat is a common vice that can cause sterility and prevent fertility in both sexes' and that this was observed by Hippocrates in the Scythian tribes but it affected women more acutely pp.212–13).[5] At the French court, anxieties about the supposed fickleness of women's fertility among the political class were stoked both by repeated succession crises and also by women's visible presence and authority (Guest, 2015, p.44). French political writers and jurists had theorised state authority as being based on patriarchal authority within the household, including a 1550s precept promoting the 'male right' to rule (Hanley, 2006, p.289). Salic law theoretically excluded women from hereditary authority, but these theories were contradicted in practice, as early modern France was governed by a series of powerful female regents – including Marguerite's mother Catherine and successor Maria (Galletti, 2014, p.882).

If slanderous critiques of elite women's appearances could be used to challenge their political authority and question their fertility, could beauty be used to defend their role? Beautiful female figures feature prominently throughout the *Medici Cycle* in the form of allegorical, generic and historical women, all calculated to validate Maria's authority. Johnson has argued that misogynistic and moral objections to these figures could have undermined the propagandistic purposes of the *Medici Cycle*, writing that 'the Queen Mother's inability to control' viewer responses meant 'male viewers in particular could have interpreted very negatively her attempts to assert her power through her seductive female gaze' and the presence of beautiful women (1999, pp.152–3). Where gender pre-determines the response of a generalised 'male viewer' in Johnson's account, Galletti emphasises not only the distinct political identity of each viewer but Maria's control over the interpretations each was given (2014, pp.878, 903). Wider cultural assumptions about gender and the body would likely have interacted with one's specific political position and knowledge when viewing the series. For instance, when describing his viewing of the cycle in June 1625, the Italian scholar Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657) comments both on Rubens's skillful expression of 'the pain and joy of the parturient' in *The Birth of the Dauphin* (i.e. Louis XIII) and the great 'lasciviousness' with which it was painted (Galletti, 2014, p.904) (Fig. 5.6).

Figure 5.6: Peter Paul Rubens, *Birth of the Dauphin, from the Medici Cycle, c.*1625. Oil on canvas, 394 × 295cm. Louvre, Paris. (© 2000 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Thierry Le Mage (La Naissance du Dauphin (futur Louis XIII) à Fontainebleau, le 27 septembre 1601 - Louvre site des collections))

Dal Pazzo's reference to this painting's 'lasciviousness' may refer not to one specific body but to the combined effect of the semi-nude male figures, the exposed breast of a female attendant and the intimacy conveyed by Maria's flushed cheeks, sloping neckline and feet nonchalantly perched on dainty slippers. Thus, the accumulation of nude or daringly dressed women across the cycle may have caught the eyes of some viewers as they circulated through the gallery.

4 'Car, outre leur naturel temperament, qui est froid & humide: outre l'habitude de leur corps qui est mol, lasche, & de rare texture: outre les superfluitez & excremens dont elles sont pleines: outre la vie oysiue, sedentaire & sans exercise que elles sont contraintes de mener pour l'imbecilité de leur corps'.

5 '[L]'obesité & graisse excessive soit vice commun qui peut causer sterilité, & empescher la fœcundité à l'un & l'autre sexe…'.

In *The Coronation,* women are outnumbered by the male figures yet still command the scene. The noblewomens' shared style of dress emphasises their presence as a unit (Büttner, 2023, p.313). Many of the noblewomen depicted fit closely into a typical Rubenesque beauty visible throughout the cycle, with dark eyes, dappled rosy cheeks, bud-like lips and faint double chins. The similarity in their dress and appearance might encourage viewers to discern subtle differences in appearance. Although Marguerite's fatness is represented on a continuum with the other ladies in the painting, many of whom are plump (not least of all Maria herself whose chin and neck are softened by a gentle pad of fat), this similarity enhances the critical nature of these slight differences. Such pictorial invitations to comparison were mirrored in the development of 'gallery of beauties' paintings, a genre that grew in popularity through the seventeenth century as European courts competitively advertised the attraction of *their* noblewomen (Goldsmith, 2014, pp.45–6). Rubens saw initial success in Italy with one such series of 'beauties' made for Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua (1562–1612) (de Clippel, 2007, p.113; Goldsmith, 2014, pp.45–6). In the same period, the *Judgement of Paris* in which three goddesses – Venus, Minerva and Juno – compete to be crowned the most beautiful became immensely popular in court art and performances, as Elizabeth C. Goldsmith has highlighted (2014). These extended codifications of specific norms of female bodily beauty did more than just reinforce this comparative and competitive tendency in European court culture. They also defined and validated perceived ugliness as a gendered mode of criticism.

In *The Coronation*, this comparative type of judgement is specifically invited by the trio of noblewomen arrayed directly ahead of Marguerite (including the dark-haired woman who kneels to support Maria's train). Though their bodies are scrupulously covered, they still reference the appearance of the 'Three Graces' in *The Education of a Princess*, a painting earlier in the cycle that depicts Maria's preparation for her role as Queen (Fig. 5.7). In *The Education of a Princess*, the Graces' unmarked bodies feature small, high and circular breasts, smooth stomachs and elongated legs. This painting forms part of first section of the Cycle, which represents Maria's 'childhood, youth, courtship and years of marriage to Henri IV' and it concludes with *The Coronation*; this tacitly encouraged viewers to consider this painting's relationship to the preceding images before moving on to the next section (Büttner, 2023, p.310). The elevation of feminine beauty to the level of the Three Graces in *The Coronation* implies an unflattering comparison between Marguerite's fatter appearance with that of her peers. This contrast also frames Marguerite as a negative foil to Maria, who in this way expertly proclaims superior right to the rhetoric of beauty over and above her deceased rival.

Painting with fat

Viewing Marguerite in relation to her peers in *The Coronation* suggests that – regardless of the patron's intentions or audience assumptions – any straightforwardly negative reading of her body size is complicated by Rubens's tendency to portray women as pervasively fleshy. This section considers how Rubens's pictorial techniques associate femininity and fatness in *The Coronation,* largely focusing on how gender affects the reception of body size. However, it is worth noting that as a marker of identity fat interacts dynamically with numerous other social categories to produce a variety of conditioned meanings. Gender, class and race all affect how body size has been represented and interpreted, as the American sociologist Sabrina Strings has demonstrated in her work on the enmeshed development of anti-Blackness and fatphobia in Western culture (2019). The extremely elite class of all the women portrayed in the foreground of *The Coronation* inevitably shapes their representation as controlled, coherent, idealised figures, resplendent in their visible riches and pearlescent pallor – whereby their femininity, whiteness and elite class all reinforce one another as naturalised signs of superiority (for discussion early modern skin whitening and beauty culture see Sammern, 2015; and for the legacy of Whiteness in Rubens's art and historiography, see Kinew, 2020). This may allow the fullness of Maria's appearance to go unnoticed or even enhance her perceived wealth and high status when elevated alongside these other traits. Moreover, tacit restrictions were placed on the pictorial language deemed suitable to portray any elite European woman. Thus, any negative overtones in Rubens's portrayal of Marguerite relied on subtle signs of deprecations, as discussed in the previous section.

Not only does Marguerite's appearance in *The Coro-*

Figure 5.7: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Education of a Princess,* from the *Medici Cycle, c.*1625. Oil on canvas, 394 × 295cm. Louvre, Paris. (© 2001 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Ojéda/Le Mage (L'Instruction de la reine - Louvre site des collections))

nation remain within these limits of decorum; it remains coherent with Rubens's visual 'vocabulary' for portraying women's bodies including the use of rounded geometric shapes and fluid flesh tones. Rubens's tendency to emphasise the contrast between male and female body size, tone and texture also lend a distinctly feminine quality to Marguerite's representation as fat (Sweet, 2014, pp.130–42; van Wyhe, 2018, pp.8–10; de Clippel, 2007, p.126). 'Problematic' fatness appears as an exaggeration of women's pre-existing tendency towards plumpness in Rubens's art. As this section will demonstrate, the close association that Rubens draws between fatness, femininity and eroticism fits closely with the appreciation and deprecation of fat arising from anxieties about women's bodies expressed in early modern theories of art and medicine.

While Rubens's use of fat varies in scale and intensity, fat's physical and material qualities are repeatedly linked to a distinctly feminine form of embodiment throughout his art. Rounded shapes are among the pictorial tools Rubens uses to visualise Marguerite's fatness, and these also serve to assimilate her into his standard feminine bodily aesthetic. Such circular shapes include the plumped cheek and chin which suggest a distinctly rounded head as well as her breasts marked by smooth quarter–circles of shadow. The meeting point of Marguerite's skirts with the forward projection of her bodice is picked out by a warm, orange highlight in a manner that emphasises the circular forward expansion of her lower half. This effect was likely achieved with a structured bell-shaped skirt known as a *vertugale* (farthingale in English) that Marguerite was known to favour; her financial records include payments to 'a farthingale-maker' named Nicholas Regnault in 1577 (Boucher, 1995, p.101). However, Marguerite's repositioning somewhat behind other figures in *The Coronation* conceals the intended effect of the *vertugale*. This hooped or stiffened petticoat was meant to emphasise the narrowness of the waist by expanding the hips, as demonstrated in Marguerite's costume in the earliest surviving oil sketch for *The Coronation* (Fig. 5.5). Marguerite's well-known magnificence and flamboyance are also communicated through an exaggeration of other rounded shapes; of all the court ladies, she has the widest ruff and the largest pearls on her bodice. But this point should not be overstated. Rounded forms are used to add a material quality of 'softness' to all the noblewomen visible in *The Coronation*, from the smoothing over of all hard bone or muscle to the repeated circular motifs of pearls, coronets, ruffs, and halos of hair.

The repetitive rounded motifs used to distinguish the women in *The Coronation* sprang from Rubens's own theoretical writings, which stated that 'the circle, or circular figure, dominates the form of the woman' ('Le cercle, ou la figure circulaire, dominient sans la forme de la femme' (1773, p.49)). De Clippel argues that Rubens was associated with his skill in reproducing 'elegant' women's figures in his own lifetime and she further notes that he developed a 'gender sensitive hierarchy' of geometry and proportion in his pocketbook based on his observation of classical sculpture (2007, pp.119–20). In other words, ancient statues, rather than living women, were the objects of Rubens's geometric studies. In the same notebook, Rubens uses a 'Greek Venus' statue to demonstrate his theory that roundness characterized feminine beauty (Fig. 5.8) – dots mark the circles of her breasts

and belly, stretched to elongated ovals for her buttocks and thighs (de Clippel, 2007, p.121; Sweet, 2014, p.140). At its most abstract, the artist describes the circle itself as 'entirely feminine' ('fis omne Foemineum') on a page copied from Rubens's lost pocketbook (Fig. 5.9), where he is schematising the 'divine harmony' of the three fundamental geometric forms in the body — the square, circle and triangle (Thielemann, 2018, p.76; de Clippel, 2007, pp.118, 121).[6]

Figure 5.8: After Peter Paul Rubens, *Ms. Johnson*, fol.99r. London, Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Gallery. (Image courtesy The Courtauld)

Rubens's theory built on ancient Pythagorean and Platonic geometric concepts (Thielemann, 2018, p.76–7). However, where Platonists had emphasized the perfection of the sphere, Rubens tended to favour 'square-based' shapes as 'the most perfect articulation of the human form', arguing that these forms conveyed the 'compactness' of the body as it was found in 'nature' (pp.76–7, n.94). Alongside the initial geometric scheme sketched in his notebooks (Fig 5.9), Rubens wrote that 'cubes' were 'strong, robust, compact and athletic' and would later associate them with virile, male bodies.[7] The artist uses square-based shapes to build up the head and torso of the Farnese Hercules, a monumental third-century Greek sculpture of the ancient hero (Fig. 5.10). Alongside the drawing of Hercules, the artist has written that: 'The form of Hercules, or that of an exceptionally robust man, has the cube (above all) as its foundation'.[8]

For Rubens, the square form conveyed the ultimate 'compactness' of the body in 'nature' that had been lost over time but was still visible in the ancient sculpture (Thielemann, 2018, p.75). It was from these heights that Rubens believed men of his own day had fallen, writing in his treatise *De imitatione statuarum* that: 'The main respect in which men of our age differ from the ancients is their sloth and their unexercised lifestyle: that is, their eating and drinking and lack of concern for the exercise of the body. As a consequence, the pressed-down weight of a stomach protrudes, always full because of assiduous gluttony; legs are effeminized and arms, aware of their inactivity' (pp.78–9, translation by Fairweather in Thielemann). In this passage, Rubens acknowledges the underlying assumptions that fatness was not necessarily a matter of large body size alone, but of the rounder geometric forms and looser textures that suggested a concerning slip towards passive 'effeminacy'.

6 The contents of the 'pocketbook' referred to here was preserved in a manuscript copy which provides the source for all the figure images. This copy is known as The Johnson Manuscript, mentioned previously as the source for the text of *De imitatione statuarum*. Though an 'indirect' source, this manuscript contains the closest record of the original document by the artist. For more information, see Thielemann (2018, p.76).

7 '[F]orte, Robustum, compactum et athleticum'. See Figure 5.9.

8 'Forma Herculea siue robusti viri supra modum ex cubo fundamentum habet'. Original Latin from Thielemann (2018, p.75)

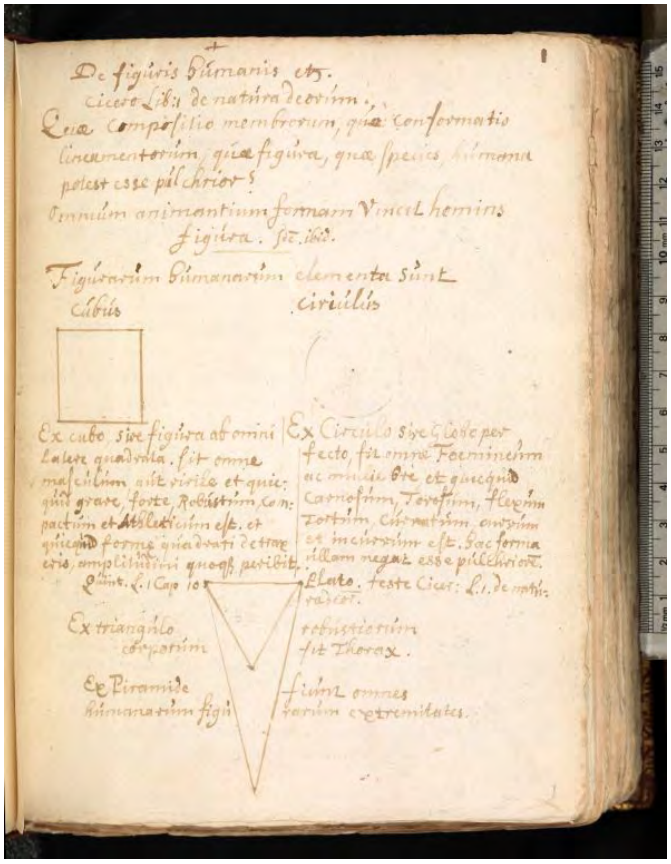

Figure 5.9: After Peter Paul Rubens, *Ms. Johnson*, fol.75r. London, Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Gallery. (Image courtesy The Courtauld)

Figure 5.10: Peter Paul Rubens, *Study of the Farnese Hercules* (recto), 17th century. Pen and ink on paper, 19.6 × 15.3cm. The Courtauld Institute of Art, London. (Image courtesy The Courtauld)

While Rubens's vision of the feminine body as rounded was highly idealized, it was inferior and less compact than the ideal male body. This negatively tinged vision of the feminine body was entirely compatible with pre-existing views that women's constitutionally fatter figures were both their natural state *and* revealed their inherent weakness compared to men. Early modern–art and medical theory provided fertile ground for this view among the *Medici Cycle's* audiences. A popular health guide from 1615 authored by French physician Louis Guyon emphasises the moderate ideal, arguing that some roundness was more suited to beauty in women in particular (Guyon, 1615, pp.528–31). Within his extremely detailed discussion of individual body parts often reiterates a notion of a moderate fleshiness, claiming that a woman's 'belly will be round, soft, & moderately large, & raised: the hips high, full, solid, & fleshy' (p.534).[9] This ideal is applied equally to both mythical and 'real' women, for instance, Guyon compares the bodies of goddesses like Venus to the captivating bodies of noblewomen such as Anne Boleyn and an anonymous lady-in-waiting whose beauty allowed her to marry a 'great Lord' ('grand Seigneur', pp.531–33). Both Guyon's comparison of noblewomen to goddesses and descriptions of ideal fleshiness tallied closely with Rubens's own statement that the ideal female body was 'neither too thin or too lean, nor too big or too fat, but of moderate plumpness, following the model of ancient statues' (1773, p.50).[10] Among the preceding generation of French artists, Jean Cousin the Younger had attempted to visualize this moderate beauty in his book on human proportions or *Livre de pourtraiture*. which included illustrations of the ideal female body from front and back (1571) (Figs. 5.11 and 5.12 for the 1608 edn). Crucially, Cousin defines women's proportions in relation to the male form writing that women had 'arms, legs & thighs, bigger, & fuller than that of the man' (1560, p.iii).[11]

9 '[L]e ventre sera rond, mollet, & mediocrement gros, & relevé: les hanches hautes, pleines solides, & charneuses'.

10 '[Le] corps [de la femme] ne doit être ni trop mince ou trop maigre, ni trop gros ou trop gras, mais d'un embonpoint modéré, suivant le modele des statues antiques'.

11 'La proportion & mesure de la femme veuë par devant, est semblable à l'homme…'.

Where Cousin's images of the female body remain stiff and static models, Rubens's paintings offer a dynamic, textured vision of women's body fat. The enhanced sensorial intensity of Rubens's portrayal of women's body fat played on the ambiguous line between the appreciation of some plumpness and criticism of outright fatness. What early modern art theory about female versus male proportions cannot account for is precisely the elusive quality of touch that Rubens's art uses to portray feminine flesh, thus offering a partial glimpse of the textures and temperatures that fat could evoke in the early modern imagination. Flesh tones are the primary means used by Rubens to achieve this evocative, eroticised aesthetic for his female figures. Though used most extensively in his nudes, this tendency remains visible in Rubens's formal portraiture and history painting. In *The Coronation*, for instance, though her body is hidden by her heavy garments, Marguerite's pale, dappled complexion shines through. Her cheeks and chest are rendered in white dotted with vermillion. The visual effect of this is to enhance the fullness of the rolls of flesh at her chin and neck. This milky skin tone plays a role akin to that of the matching costumes, both serving to unite all the women visible in *The Coronation* in a shared vision of feminine and courtly beauty.

The tones and textures of Marguerite's skin suggest a bodily softness that, in turn, was shaped by Rubens's personal assimilation of broader medical and artistic theories of sex difference and hierarchy as circulating in early modern Europe. According to humoral medicine which still dominated medical literature, women's bodies were colder and moister than men's, tending toward the phlegmatic humour defined as 'slow, big, and sticky' (Dioscoride, 1561, p.12). The ancient Roman doctor Galen's description of the phlegmatic body as 'white, soft, hairless, without visible vessels and joints, slim and cold to the touch' could just as easily describe the smooth, pale female nudes of Fontainebleau (Jouanna & Allies, 2012, pp.338–9). Phlegmatic pallor was a near-constant feature of idealised femininity in early modern visual culture, with art manuals recommending a mix of 'white and vermillion' to produce women's skin tones. Rubens himself described these in humoral terms as a 'colour

Figure 5.11: Jean Cousin, 'Proportion & mesure de la femme veuë par deuant' in *Livre de pourtraiture de maistre Iean Cousin* (Paris: Iean le Clerc, 1608). (National Library of Medicine; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

Figure 5.12: Jean Cousin, 'Proportion & mesure de la femme veuë par le derriere' in *Livre de pourtraiture de maistre Iean Cousin* (Paris: Iean le Clerc, 1608). (National Library of Medicine; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

that partakes of milk & blood or formed by a mixture of lilies & roses' (1773, p.50).[12]

Just as skin tone could be 'enhanced' by cosmetics, the fictions of a painted world could create new extremes of whiteness, exaggerated further by setting two opposing types against one another (Campbell, 2006, p.164). Though often racialised – as in Rubens's *Venus at a Mirror*, *c.*1615

12 'couleur qui participle du lait & du sang ou formée par un mêlange de lys & de roses'.

– this contrast could also be between the sexes. In *Venus, Mars and Cupid* (*c.*1635) (Fig. 5.13), Rubens used body size and skin tone to dramatise and eroticise the contrast between the genders, setting Mars's darkly tanned, muscular and armoured body against the conspicuously nude, pale and plump Venus. Here, Venus's rounded belly and broad hips, larger breasts and generally softer body makes earlier French court styles appear comparatively bloodless.[13] In *Venus, Mars and Cupid*, the goddess's body is porous, shown in the process of lactating into the mouth of her son, Cupid. Rubens's description of women's skin tone resembling shades of 'milk & blood' closely associated female bodies with reproduction in a manner which became explicitly maternal as the lactating breast entered his oeuvre from 1609 onwards (Thøfner, 2018, p.180). As Margit Thøfner has argued, the fertile female body was apt to demonstrate Rubens's own mastery of (pro)creative forces, transforming white lead suspended in linseed oil into maternal milk on the canvas through his 'boldly fluid paintwork' (2018, pp.190–6).

The 'fluid' materiality of paint could go beyond sculpture in this regard, providing an ideal vehicle to display Rubens's mastery of 'flesh-tones' ('carnatura' or 'charnure' in French). A well-known passage from Rubens's aforementioned notebook was circulated in the form of a short treatise titled *De imitatione statuarum*, which discusses the challenges involved in transforming the models provided by classical sculptures into convincingly life-like bodies (Thielemann, 2018, pp.41, 45; Thielemann, 2012, pp.95–146). This compact text is highly influenced by Rubens's association with the circle of the Flemish humanist philosopher Justus Lipsius (1547–1606). In it, the artist cautions against copying the harsh '*densitas*' (density) of sculpture when rendering flesh; instead, delicate shadows and '*maccaturae'* (dents) should be used to convey the '*diaphanitas'* (transparency) of flesh (Thielemann, 2018, p.64). Though '*maccaturae'* has various meanings, including the effect in sculpture where flesh seems to yield softly to touch, Andreas Thielemann notes that for Rubens these '*maccaturae'* could also refer to the dimples, marks and rolls caused by fat's presence under the skin or ageing (2018, p.71). In Rubens's oil painting technique, flesh-like textures and effects were created by gradually building up thin semi-transparent layers of oil paint – itself pigment suspended in fat – to produce depth and soften the hard edges of the body (van Wyhe, 2018, pp.29, 31; Thøfner, 2018, pp.190, 194, 196; Sutton, Wieseman & van Hout, 2004, p.64). As van Wyhe argues in the introduction to the volume *Rubens and the Human Body,* the artist's career-long concern with fleshliness sought not to 'capture' skin or flesh accurately in the static sense, but to render its tones and textures so as to make visible its inherent dynamic and energetic potential, to realise its material existence in paint (2018, pp.27–32).

Rubens's distinct oil-technique is less visible on Marguerite in *The Coronation,* yet her delicately textured skin and the gentle contact between her rounded chin and neck nevertheless produce a softening effect. This sensual aesthetic of skin can enhance the distinctive tactile qualities of fat without necessarily enlarging the overall figure. Strikingly, in an unfinished painted portrait of Maria de' Medici created alongside the *Medici Cycle* (*c.*1622) (Fig. 5.14), Rubens obscures the Queen's body size with her voluminous dark dress. Only the pointed dappling of her skin with dabs of lead white and vermillion suggests the charming 'plumpness' of her skin-texture without definitively increasing her overall body size. This effect is perhaps best appreciated when comparing Rubens's copy of Titian's *The Andrians* (*c.*1523–6) with the original (Figs. 5.15 and 5.16). In Rubens's version, the reclining nude woman in the foreground is dotted with '*maccaturae*' to suggest a pervasiveness of fat under the skin and thus creating a sense of 'fleshiness' without altering her overall body size (de Clippel, 2007, pp.126–31). De Clippel argues that any appraisal of overall 'fatness' in Rubens's nudes is the result of a 'modern' point of view (2007, p.131); however, it is undeniable that his oil-technique has a powerful capacity for realising the textures associated with body fat regardless of precise body size.

In short, Rubens's fluid representation of flesh encourages his viewers to make tactile associations in response to the bodies on display. In the early modern period, such associations would most likely revolve around medical constructions of women's bodies as more phlegmatic, as colder and moister, than those of men. This combination

13 For instance, the small round breasts and porcelain smooth skin of the nude woman portrayed in *A Lady in Her Bath,* made in 1571 by the court painter François Clouet (d.1572), as discussed in Thøfner (2018, pp.182–3).

Figure 5.13: Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus, Mars and Cupid, c.*1635. Oil on canvas, 195.2 × 133cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. (Photo: Imagedoc / Alamy Stock Photo)

Figure 5.14: Peter Paul Rubens, *Maria de' Medici, Queen of France, c.*1622. Oil on canvas, 131 × 108cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. (Source: Masterpics / Alamy Stock Photo)

is visualised in an earlier work in the *Medici Cycle* known as *The Arrival at Marseille*, which depicts Maria's arrival in France by ship (Fig. 5.17). Three Nereids or water nymphs strain to pull the ship ashore, each distinguished by exaggerated folds and rolls of fat across their body where skin touches skin. This exaggeration goes beyond plausibility with at least three folds marking the central Nereid's knee as she strides forward. Despite the unlikeliness of such creases ever occurring naturally, the nymph's knee marks the point at which her human form meets the water and transforms into a tendril of blue-grey scales. This makes it a highly appropriate place to exaggerate the fluid potential of fat, a potential entirely in keeping with early modern humoral medicine. Undulating layers of fat and foam suggest the dissolution of the Nereids' pale bodies and blond hair into the churning water at the bottom of the painting. The nymphs' watery flesh evokes a specific sensation of temperature and moisture – the cool shock of sea spray – as well as the characteristic force and malleability of water (similarly van Wyhe, 2018, pp.29–31). This effect is reinforced by the Nereids' projecting bellies and the creases of fat at their thighs and torsos, which are markedly at odds with the finely clothed and controlled body of the moderately sized Maria depicted in prim white satin above them.

Evidently, fat played an important role in intensifying both the eroticism and the dynamism inherent in Rubens's portrayal of women. In this way, he seems to have harnessed for his own artistic purposes the negative associations of fat with femininity that circulated in the early modern period. From conception onwards, women's moister, cooler and fatter bodies ensured their 'natural' inferiority (see Paré, 1573, p.13). This was why women who slid into excessive feminine fluidity became disorderly, as exemplified by the infertile women with flesh that was 'soft, lax, and of rare texture' both criticised and pitied by Liébault in his reworking of Marinelli's text on women's health (1582, p.5). Rubens did not necessarily counter women's putative inferiority so much as eroticise it to display his mastery. One consequence

Figure 5.15: Titian, *The Bacchanal of the Andrians, c.*1523–6. Oil on canvas, 175 × 193cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid. (Source: classicpaintings / Alamy Stock Photo)

Figure 5.16: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Andrians*, 1630s. Oil on canvas, 200 × 215cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. (Source / photographer: Erik Cornelius / Nationalmuseum Stockholm)

Figure 5.17: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Arrival* at Marseille, *c.*1625. Oil on canvas, 394 × 295cm. Louvre, Paris. (© 2004 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski (Le Débarquement de la reine à Marseille, le 3 novembre 1600 - Louvre site des collections))

of this was that touch was foregrounded in his works. As Christopher Forth argues, pervasive cultural expressions of 'disgust' directed towards fatness often focus on anxieties about touch or the material textures associated with fat (2019, pp.11–12, 22; also see Miller, 1997, p.40). 'Rather than passively yielding to a masterful human touch', Forth writes, 'fatty things seem to touch us back, adhering to surfaces and attaching themselves to our bodies' (2019, p.22). To intensify the desire to touch, Rubens's version of the female body had to play on this unsteady boundary, or rather bond, between desire and disgust. Yet with the pleasures of fat bound up with these dynamics of touch, the gendering of fatness as feminine played into eroticising women's 'weakness'. Marguerite's appearance in *The Coronation* thus alludes not only to specific criticisms of her body size and sexuality but to the lingering potential of all women to be deemed excessively, pathologically feminine.

Epilogue

The close bond between positive and negative assessments of women's bodies in Rubens's art reveals the difficulties that modern art historians face in interpreting perceptions of women's body size in the early modern period. While this article has focused primarily on satirical critiques of Marguerite, the rumoured shift in her appearance in later life was itself intensified by her prior reputation for beauty. The fullest expression of this praise for Marguerite's appearance can be found in the glowing biography – the *Discours de la Reine Marguerite* – written by the retired soldier and court memoirist Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme (1540–1614), which circulated among the court and public in manuscript format from 1614, before finally appearing in print in 1665 (Cottrell, 1970, p.11). In this text, the Queen's size and height are referenced to emphasise her statuesque beauty: '[Her] beautiful face is set upon a magnificent body, with a superb, elegant, and rich size, rarely seen, accompanied by a noble bearing and a dignified majesty' (Brantôme, 1665, pp.179, 203).[14]

Although criticisms of women's appearance remained a dominant form of politicised attack across the seventeenth century, elite women's correspondences and memoirs reveal that a retreat into the rhetoric of beauty was not their only recourse. Creative reworkings of constrictive bodily norms as well as a rejection of idealised beauty can be found in Marguerite's own surviving writings. (The wider spectrum of early modern women likely pursued similar strategies to counter the demands placed upon their appearances even if these are lost or less readily available). For instance, Marguerite frames her own *Memoirs* (written during her exile and first published 1628) as a corrective to several errors in Brantôme's text, including his high praise of her appearance. To emphasise the trials she has endured, Marguerite rejects her friend's 'flattery' of her appearance in his 'portrait', which 'far surpasses the excellence of the figure [as in person] that you wished to make its subject' to the extent that she cannot recognise his description (Valois, 1628, pp.1–2).[15] Similarly, a letter to Henri IV sent in November 1606 demonstrates Marguerite's witty association of her declining physical appearance with her noble lineage. Having suffered significant weight loss due to illness, she wrote that fever had reduced her to an unrecognisable 'skeleton' ('une anatomie'), making her nose appear 'as long as the King [Francis I] my grandfather' (Lettres de Marguerite de Valois, Collection Dupuy, t.217, fol.102, noted in Valois, 1892, p.54). Such rejections of idealised beauty went beyond individual cases to include the reworking of the constitutional delicacy or weakness conventionally attributed to women in some medical texts. In her posthumously published 'docte et subtil discours' ('learned and subtle discourse'), Marguerite provided seven ingenious reasons for the excellence of women. Bodily materiality not overall size was crucial in Marguerite's account, which argued that women's 'organs are composed of a more delicate and excellent material' at odds with the 'rough, dirty and coarse' bodily matter of men (Valois, 1618, pp.11–12).[16] Marguerite's own voice, then, is an important historical rejoinder to her framing in *The Coronation*.

An experiment on the edge of acceptable fatness, *The Coronation* reveals that the limits of appropriate body size often overlapped with the limits of women's theoretically proscribed role at the French court during the seventeenth century. Yet as Marguerite's clever reversal of conventional gender hierarchy suggest, the negative characterisation of women's bodies expressed in satire, medicine and art were far from watertight. Images of fatter bodies aptly demonstrate fat's own tendency to surpass the boundaries set for it in theory and practice. These were limits that Marguerite repeatedly breached or transformed in life. As this article has shown, Marguerite's pale, soft and fluid roundness in *The Coronation* suggest a highly gendered version of the fat body which could be associated not only with sickness, sterility, and

14 '[C]e beau visage est fondé sur un beau corps de la plus belle, superbe & riche taille qui se puisse voire, accompagnée d'un port, & d'un si grave majesté'.

15 'En ce portrait l'ornement du tableau surpasse de beaucoup l'excellence de la figure que vous en avez voulu render le sujet…'

16 'Et faut aduouër que là où les organs sont composez d'vne matière plus delicate & excellente, qu'ils seront au prealable mieux proportionez […] la femme sera plus propre à faire des plus belles actions, que celle de l'homme fait de sange, matière rude, salle & grossiere'.

physical weakness but also with femininity, eroticism and artistic virtuosity. Rubens's vision of Marguerite can only be fully appreciated through a refusal to fix on one singular meaning; her body maintains its endlessly shifting quality, rippling in the light like the dimpled flesh of his nudes.

Bibliography

1 Anonymous (1660) 'Le Divorce satyrique, ou les amours de la reyne Marguerite' in *Recueil de Diverses Pieces, Servans a l'histoire de Henry III Roy de France et de Pologne*, Cologne, Pierre du Marteau.

2 Bendall, S. (2021) *Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body and Women in Early Modern England,* London and New York, Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

3 Boucher, J. (1995) *Deux* épouses *et reines à la fin du XVIe siècle: Louise de Lorraine et Marguerite de France*, Saint-Etienne, Université de Saint-Etienne.

4 Brantôme, P. de Bourdeille (1665) 'De La Reyne Marguerite' in *Memoires de Messire Pierre du Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantome contenans les vies des dames illustres de France de son temps*, Leiden, Jean Sambix le Jeune.

5 Burke, J. (2018) *The Italian Renaissance Nude*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

6 Büttner, N. (2023) *The Medici Series*, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: An Illustrated Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of Peter Paul Rubens Based on the Material Assembled by the Late Ludwig Burchard: In Twenty-Nine Parts, Part XIV*, vol.1, London and Turnhout, Harvey Miller.

7 Bynum, C. Walker (1995) 'Why all the fuss about the body? A medievalist's perspective', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.22, pp.1–33.

8 Campbell, E. (ed.) (2006) *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe, Cultural Representations*, Aldershot, Ashgate.

9 Causse, L. (2021) 'Portrait présumé de Marguerite de Valois, Anonyme français, 16ème siècle', Reims, Musées de Reims.

10 Cotgrave, R. (1611) *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues,* London, Adam Islip.

11 Cottrell, R.D. (1970) *Brantôme: The Writer as Portraitist of His Age*, Paris, Librairie Droz.

12 Cousin, J. (1560) *Livre de perspectiue de Iehan Cousin senonois, maistre painctre à Paris*, Paris, Jehan le Royer.

13 Crawford, K. (2010) *The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

14 de Clippel, K. (2007) 'Defining beauty: Rubens' female nudes', *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art / Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek,* vol.58, no.1, pp.110–37.

15 Dioscoride (1561) *Les commentaires de M. Pierre Andre Matthioli medecin senoys* (trans. M.J. des Moulins), Lyon, Pierre Haultin.

16 Dupleix, S. (1635) *Histoire de Henry le Grand IV du nom, Roy de France et de Nauarre,* Paris, Claude Sonnius.

17 Fletcher, H. (2020) 'Bodyweight and shape in early modern Germany *c.*1480–1620', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge.

18 Fletcher, H. (2021) '"Belly-worshippers and greed-paunches": Fatness and the belly in the Lutheran Reformation', *German History*, vol.39, no.2, pp.173–200.

19 Forth, C.E. (2019) *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, London, Reaktion.

20 Galletti, S. (2003) 'L'appartement de Marie de Médicis au palais du Luxembourg' in P. Bassani Pacht (ed.) *Marie de Médicis: un gouvernement par les arts*, Paris, Somogy.

21 Galletti, S. (2010) 'Architecture and ceremonial in early modern France: The court of Maria de' Medici' in G. Calvi and I. Chabot (eds) *Moving Elites: Women and Cultural Transfers in the European Court System*, Florence, European University Institute.

22 Galletti, S. (2012) *Le Palais du Luxembourg de Marie de Médicis, 1611–1631* (trans. J. Noblet), Paris, Picard.

23 Galletti, S. (2014) 'Rubens' life of *Maria de' Medici*: Dissimulation and the politics of art in early seventeenth-century France', *Renaissance Quarterly,* vol.67, no.3, pp.878–916.

24 Gaultier, L. (1610) *Poutraict du sacre et couronnement de Marie de Medicis,* Paris, Jean Leclerc IV. British Museum, Mm,2.55, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Mm-2-55, accessed 21.9.2025.

25 Goldsmith, E.C. (2014) 'Fanning the "Judgment of Paris": The early modern beauty contest', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, vol.36, no.1, pp.38–52.

26 Gougenot, L. (1909) *L'exposition des tableaux du roi au Luxembourg en 1750* (trans. and ed. J. Laran), Paris, Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français.

27 Guest, C. (2015) *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden, Brill.

28 Guyon, L. (1615) *Miroir de la beauté et santé corporelle, contenant toutes les difformités, maladies, tant internes qu'externes, qui peuvent survenir au corps humain*, vol.2, Lyon, Claude Morillon.

29 Hanley, S. (2006) 'The family, the state, and the law in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France: The political ideology of male right versus an early theory of natural rights', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol.78, no.2, pp.289–332.

30 Johnson, G.A. (1999) 'Imagining images of powerful women: Maria de' Medici's patronage of art and architecture' in C. Lawrence (ed.) *Women and Art in Early Modern Europe Patrons, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

31 Jouanna, J. and Allies, N. (2012) 'The legacy of the Hippocratic treatise *The Nature of Man*: The theory of the four humours' in P. van der Eijk (ed) *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, Leiden, Brill.

32 Kinew, S. (2020) "Sedlmayr's Mother-of-Pearl: Further Notes on Rubens and Flesh Color", *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art*, vol. 2, pp.88–96.

33 Klettke, C. and Mutet, S. (2014) 'Marguerite de Valois: Mise au jour d'un portrait authentique brouillé et enfoui par la construction des mythes', *Bulletin de La Société de l'Histoire Du Protestantisme Français (1903–2015)*, vol.160, pp.613–31.

34 l'Étoile, P. de (1741) *Journal du Regne de Henry IV, roi de France et de Navarre, avec des remarques historiques and politiques du chevalier*, vols 3–4, Haye, Frères Vaillant.

35 Liébault J. (1582) *Trois livres appartenant aux infirmitez et maladies des femmes*, Paris, Jacques du Puys.

36 McGowan, M. (1963) *L'Art du ballet de court en France*, Paris, Éditions du centre nationale de la recherche scientifique.

37 McGowan, M. (2015) 'Marguerite de Valois, Reine de Navarre (1553–1615): Patroness and performer', *Early Music History*, vol.34, pp.191–206.

38 McIlvenna, U. (2016) *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici*, Abingdon, Routledge.

39 Millen, R. and Wolf, R.E. (1989) *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens'* Life of Maria de' Medici, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

40 Miller, W.I. (2009) *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

41 Paré, A. (1573) *Deux livres de chirurgie*, Paris, André Wechel.

42 Peterson, N. M. (2022) "'Il Me Prit Un Frisson Si Grand': Writing the Body in the Mémoires and Letters of Marguerite de Valois", *Early Modern Women*, vol.17, no.1, pp. 56–75.

43 Polachek, D.E. (2015) 'Brantôme's *Dames illustres*: Remembering Marguerite de Navarre' in D. LaGuardia and C. Yandell (eds) *Memory and Community in Sixteenth-Century France*, Aldershot, Ashgate.

44 Rothblum, E. and Solovay, S. (eds) (2009) *The Fat Studies Reader*, New York, New York University Press.

45 Rubens, P.P. (1773) *Théorie de la figure humaine, considérée dans ses principes* (trans. C.A. Jombert), Paris, Charles-Antoine Jombert.

46 Rubens, P.P., engraved by S. Le Clerc, bound by C. Norris (1725–75) *The Johnson Manuscript (manuscript transcript of the Rubens Pocketbook)*, London, The Courtauld, MS.1978.PG.1, https://gallerycollections.courtauld.ac.uk/object-ms-1978-pg-1, accessed 21.9.2025.

47 Sammern, R. (2015) "Red, White and Black: Colors of Beauty, Tints of Health and Cosmetic Materials in Early Modern English Art Writing", *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 20, nos. 4–6, pp. 397–427.

48 Scott, V. (2010) *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France: 1540–1750*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

49 Strings, S. (2019) *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia,* New York, New York University Press.

50 Sutton, P.C., Wieseman, M.E. and van Hout, N. (2004) *Drawn by the Brush: Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

51 Sweet, L. (2014) 'Fantasy bodies, imagined pasts: A critical analysis of the "Rubenesque" fat body in contemporary culture', *Fat Studies*, vol.3, no.2, pp.130–42.

52 Tallemant des Réaux, G. (1834) *Les Historiettes de Tallemant Des Réaux: Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du XVIIe siècle*, vol.1, Paris, A. Levavasseur.

53 Thielemann, A. (2012) 'Rubens' Traktat De imitation statuarum' in U. Rombach and P. Seiler (eds) *Imitation als Transformation: Theorie und Praxis der Antikennachahmung in der frühen Neuzeit,* Petersburg, Michael Imhof Verlag.

54 Thielemann, A. (2018) 'Stone to flesh: Rubens' treatise *De imitatione statuarum*' in C. van Wyhe (ed.) *Rubens and the Human Body,* Turnhout, Brepols.

55 Thøfner, M. (2018) 'Nursing paint: On Rubens, facture and breast milk' in C. van Wyhe (ed.) *Rubens and the Human Body*, Turnhout, Brepols.

56 Tommaseo, N. (ed.) (1838) *Relations des ambassadeurs Vénitiens sur les affaires de France Au XVIe siècle*, vol.1, Paris, Imprimerie Royale.

57 Toulalan, S. (2014) "'To[o] much eating stifles the child": Fat bodies and reproduction in early modern England', *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol.87, no.235, pp.65–93.

58 Tresfels, C. (2020) "'The most deformed woman in France": Marguerite de Valois's monstrous sexuality in the *Divorce satyrique*' in M. Bondestam (ed.) *Exceptional Bodies in Early Modern Culture*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.

59 Valois, M. de (1618) *L'excellence des femmes, avec leur response à l'autheur de l'Alphabet, accompagnee d'un docte et subtil discours de la feu reyne Marguerite envoyé sur le mesme suject à l'autheur des 'Secrets moraux'*, Paris, Pierre Passy.

60 Valois, M. de (1628) *Les Mémoires de la roine Marguerite*, Paris, Charles Chappellain.

61 Valois, M. de (1892) *Memoirs of Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre* (trans. V. Fane), London, J.C. Nimmo.

62 van Wyhe, C. (2018) 'Introduction: Getting under the skin of the imaged Body' in C. van Wyhe (ed.) *Rubens and the Human Body*, Turnhout, Brepols.

63 Various authors (early 17th century) Baluze 323, manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

64 Viennot, E. ([1993] 2005) *Marguerite de Valois: 'la reine Margot'*, Paris, Perrin.