

Rubens, Peiresc, and the *Birth of Maria de' Medici*

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For nearly a century, scholars have puzzled over what appears to be an anomaly in Rubens' allegorical painting of the *Birth of Maria de' Medici*, the fourth canvas in his grand cycle of the *Life of Maria de' Medici*, painted between 1622 and 1625 for rooms adjoining the queen mother's private apartments in the Luxembourg Palace in Paris and now in the Musée du Louvre (Fig. 1).¹ Much of our understanding of the iconography of this canvas is due to Rubens' own description of it in a letter to his friend, the royal librarian Pierre Dupuy, written in response to the erroneous interpretation of the painting that the poet and panegyrist Claude-Barthélémy Morisot had published in 1626.² The composition is a night scene from which the zodiacal sign of Sagittarius shines forth. The torch-bearing Lucina, goddess of childbirth, seems to have just passed Maria to Florence, a goddess wearing a mural-and-floral crown. At the bottom of the painting, the river god personifying the Arno and the Florentine lion, or *marzocco*, recline together. Above the child's head, two female figures representing the Hours scatter rose petals

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1. The most recent study of the painting can be found in RONALD FORSYTH MILLEN and ROBERT ERICH WOLF, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens's Life of Maria de' Medici*, Princeton 1989, in which previous bibliography and scholarly opinions are recorded. See esp. pp. 30–37 and 234–235.

2. The letter is dated 29 October 1626. See *Codex Diplomaticus Rubenianus. Correspondence de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses œuvres*, ed. MAX ROOSES and CHARLES RUELENS, Antwerp 1887–1909, IV (1904), no. CCCCXV, pp. 1–7. The poem was published as CLAUDE-BARTHÉLÉMY MORISOT, *Porticus Medicæ. Ad illustrissimum Cardinalem Richelieuum...*, Paris 1626; with a second (revised) edition published in Lyons in 1628.

on the newborn infant's head and a young male genius carries a cornucopia full of the attributes of power and wealth.

The puzzle of the painting is twofold: first, Maria's birth is represented at night, and, second, the zodiacal sign of Sagittarius appears in the sky above her. Both these features seem to contradict what has long been established about Maria's birth; namely, that she was born on 26 April 1575 and that according to family tradition she was born at some time around noon.³

Maria's baptismal record, dated 27 April 1575, survives in the archive of the Opera del Duomo in Florence:

Aprile 1575, martedì 27. Maria del Ser[enissi]mo Granduca di Toscana Fran[ces]co di Cosimo de Medici et della Ser[enissi]ma Gio[vann]a d'Austria, N[ata] 26, h[ore] 16, P[ieve] S. Romolo. Comp[ari] il R[everendissi]mo Mons[igno]r Nunzio Carlo Cicada et la Ill[ustrissim]a Sig[nor]a Leonora de Tolledo de Medici.⁴

The notation of the birth as occurring during the sixteenth hour of 26 April follows the Florentine convention of a twenty-four-hour clock, in which the hours are counted from the previous night's sunset. This fact is demonstrated by the two other contemporary documents concerning Maria's birth. In a seventeenth-century horoscopic chart preserved in the Biblioteca Moreniana in Florence, the time of birth is detailed as: "D[iei] 26, H[ore] 16, M[inuti] 0 H[o]r[ologi] [by the clock]" and "D[iei] 25, H[ore] 23, M[inuti] 4 P[ost] M[eridie]m [after noon, when the sun transits

3. See MILLEN and WOLF (as in n. 1), p. 30, where the authors note that the incorrect date of 1573 persists in the literature. See LOUIS BATIFFOL, *La vie intime d'une reine de France au XVII^e siècle*, Paris 1906 (ed. Paris 1931, I, p. 2); and JACQUES THUILLIER and JACQUES FOUCART, *Le storie di Maria de' Medici di Rubens al Lussemburgo*, Milan 1967, p. 12; SUSAN SAWARD, *The Golden Age of Marie de' Medici*, Ann Arbor 1982, esp. p. 29; and RÜDIGER AN DER HEIDEN, *Die Skizzen zum Medici-Zyklus von Peter Paul Rubens in der Alten Pinakothek*, Munich 1984.

4. Archivio dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Battezzati: Femmine dal 1571 al 1577, fol. 71v.

the local meridian]” (Fig. 2).⁵ This note clarifies that on 25 April the sun set at 7.04 pm, at which point the clocks were reset for the following day and 26 April began.⁶ A second horoscopic chart in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence (hereafter BNCF) provides similar, but not identical, information.⁷ Maria’s birth is noted as “D[iei] 26, H[ore] 16, M[inuti] 25 H[o]r[ologio]” and “D[iei] 25, H[ore] 23, M[inuti] 35 P[ost] M[eridie]m”, suggesting that this astronomer/astrologer or his source calculated the sunset of 25 April 1575 as occurring at 7.10 pm (Figs. 3, 4).⁸ In both cases, however, the ‘received wisdom’ that Maria de’ Medici was born during the month of April at a time near midday is preserved. Furthermore, both charts show that at the moment of her birth, Maria’s Sun was in Taurus, her mid-Heaven was in Gemini, and her Ascendant was in Virgo. The zodiacal sign of Sagittarius, so prominent in the Rubens painting, is found lurking at the bottom of her chart, inauspiciously close to the planet Saturn.

5. See Biblioteca Moreniana, Florence, MS Bigazzi 235, fol. 46v. MILLEN and WOLF (as in n. 1) mistakenly cite the manuscript as being in the Biblioteca Riccardiana. I thank the director of the Biblioteca Moreniana, Anna Maria Ognibene, for her help in clarifying this matter.

6. A time that modern conventions would label as 11.04 am becomes 11.04 pm or 23.04 when the beginning of the day has been calculated from the previous day’s noon (12.00 plus 23 hours and 4 minutes. It becomes 16.00 when the beginning of the day is set at the previous night’s sunset – but only if the time of sunset is 7.04 pm, or 19.04 according to modern reckoning, since 16 hours after 19.04 (modern reckoning) is 11.04 am (modern reckoning).

7. See Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (hereafter BNCF), MS II.—.107, fol. 117v. The citation in MILLEN and WOLF (as in n. 1), p. 235 n. 19, is incorrect. I thank the staff of the manuscript room in the BNCF for their patience as I worked my way through the numerous volumes of horoscopic charts in their collection.

8. Difficulties in understanding the assumptions underpinning pre-twentieth-century time notations are most fully demonstrated in the varying opinions on the significance of the astrological iconography of Baldassare Peruzzi’s ceiling decoration of the Sala di Galatea in the Farnesina. Despite the scholarly attention this puzzle has received (most notably from Mary Quinlan-McGrath and myself in a series of articles in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* published in the 1980s and 1990s), I would argue that none of the proposals made so far has ‘solved’ (or, perhaps, ‘resolved’) the complexities of the different components of the cycle satisfactorily.

Faced with the problematic depiction of Sagittarius in the *Birth of Maria de' Medici*, most scholars have assumed that its presence must relate to something other than her birth. Most recently, for example, Ronald Millen and Robert Wolf proposed that the prominence of Sagittarius in the painting is due to the fact that the “sign” (their term) of Henri IV, her future husband, was Sagittarius: “Henri was born on December 12 or 13, 1553, thus well under that domination.”⁹ The Archer at the apex of Rubens’ composition, they argue, appears as a sign of Maria’s destiny as the future bride of Henri IV of France.

There are two problems with this interpretation. First, the placement of another person’s astrological data into what is a very significant rendering of a specific event seems counterproductive. It is without iconographic precedent and seems, even after measured consideration, unlikely. Second, whereas the early part of December is canonically associated with the transit of the Sun through the sign of Sagittarius, both seventeenth-century tables of ephemerides and calculations made by more modern means show that on 12 and 13 December 1553 the Sun had already passed the confines of Sagittarius and was positioned a few degrees into the sign of Capricorn. Moreover, in the horoscopic chart of Henri IV’s birth, preserved in the same series of volumes in the BNCF as that which contains Maria’s chart, the position of Henri’s Sun is clearly recorded as being 2° 10’ 11” Capricorn (Fig. 5).¹⁰ If Sagittarius is not significant in Maria’s own horoscope and if it is not even Henri’s so-called ‘Sun-sign’, then why has Rubens included it in his painting of Maria’s birth?

As is well known, three letters survive from the correspondence surrounding the commission of the cycle of paintings concerning exactly this point. Nevertheless, the information relevant to an understanding of the exact time of Maria’s birth has not been fully appreciated.

In the first letter, dated 1 August 1622, Claude Maugis, abbé de Saint-Ambroise (Maria’s adviser and agent in the commission), writes to the scholar and antiquarian Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who had met Rubens during the artist’s early days in Paris and was to remain a lifelong

9. See MILLEN and WOLF (as in n. 1), pp. 34–35.

10. See BNCF, MS II.—.107, fol. 25v.

friend and ally.¹¹ He complains of a slight delay in the schedule of painting, apparently caused by Rubens’ desire to know “the sign that ruled the queen’s birth...He wanted to know whether she was born in the daytime or at night” (“le signe qui dominoit à la naissance de la Royne...Il voulait savoir si elle estoit née de jour ou de nuict”). As the abbé reports: “It was Taurus: Her Majesty was born in April, at midday” (“C’estoit le Taureau: Sa Majesté est née en Avril, à midy”).¹² The letter confirms two expectations: that Rubens (as was his habit) was meticulous in his procedure of pulling together the iconographic components of a painting, and that the abbé was in possession of the same information as is preserved in the documents – that Maria was born near midday and her Sun was in Taurus.

When Peiresc forwarded the abbé’s letter to Rubens, however, he wrote an accompanying note that is very interesting. It demonstrates how many details can be misunderstood in the transmission of astrological information from one person to another. In the note Peiresc adds that

to lift the obstacle that impeded the the conclusion of your business ...I do not believe that what he has said about the sign of Taurus is true; [since] the Queen has said that she was born in April, at midday, the sign of Taurus could not have been at the Ascendant. But the mathematicians [astrologers] can easily determine this point. For my part, I estimate that it will be Leo or Virgo, which are more honorable signs than that of Taurus.¹³

Despite the fact that, on the surface, both the abbé and Peiresc reflect a similar cultural background, the latter completely misunderstood the content of the letter. First, Peiresc assumes that when the abbé mentions

11. A good overview of their relationship is provided in CHRISTOPHER WHITE, *Peter Paul Rubens: Man and Artist*, New Haven and London 1987, esp. pp. 173–179.

12. See *Codex Diplomaticus Rubenianus* (as in n. 2), III, 1900, pp. 9–12.

13. “per levare l’impedimento della risoluzione del negotio di V.S. Cio ch’egli dice del segno di Tauro non credo che sia vero, perche la regina dice esser nata in Aprile a mezodij in cui hora il segno del Tauro non poteva essere l’ascendente. Ma i mathematici lo determinaranno facilmente stimando che sarà piu tosto il Leone ò la Vergine et que’ saranno piu honorati di quello del Tauro”: *Codex Diplomaticus Rubenianus* (as in n. 2), III (1900), pp. 10–11.

the queen mother's *segno*, he means her Ascendant; when, in fact, for the abbé "le signe qui dominoit à la naissance de la Royne" is her "Sun-sign", the portion of the zodiac in which the Sun is located at the moment of her birth. This is clear from the fact that Peiresc claims, quite rightly, that it is astronomically impossible for the sign of Taurus to be on the Ascendant at noon in April. As he notes, the sign that would most likely be on the Ascendant at that time is either Leo or Virgo – an observation borne out by the Florentine horoscopes, both of which show Maria's Ascendant near the middle degrees of the sign of Leo.¹⁴

The ensuing correspondence between Peiresc and the abbé has been lost. The next reference to the painting is in the letter dated 29 October 1626 from Rubens to Dupuy (see n. 2) in which the artist attempts to explain some of the iconographic elements of the *Birth of Maria de' Medici* that had been misunderstood by Morisot. In the letter, he says:

Turning to the fourth painting, those figures that he calls 'cupids' and 'zephyrs' are the happy Hours of the birth of the Queen, which you can identify from their butterfly-wings and that they are female. But the youth who carries the cornucopia filled with scepters and crowns is the good Genius of the Queen; and at the top of the painting, there is the Ascendant of her horoscopic chart, Sagittarius.¹⁵

If nothing else, this letter makes it clear that Rubens, at least, believed he had painted Maria de' Medici's Ascendant in his picture, and that he understood it to be Sagittarius.

It is a dangerous business to attempt to fill in missing documentary evidence, but it does seem worth while to speculate about what might have happened between Peiresc's letter of 1 August 1622 and Rubens' completion of the painting. Obviously, Peiresc was dissatisfied with the

14. The Moreniana chart has the Ascendant at 13° 42' Leo and the BNCF chart places the Ascendant at 18° 19' Leo.

15. "Ma per tornar alla tavola IV quelli che lui [i.e. Morisot] chiama Cupidini e Zephiri sono le hore felici della nascita della Regina, che si cognosce delle ale de papilioni e che sono femmine ma quel giovane che porta il cornucopia ripieno di scettri e corone e il genio buono della regina et in cima è l'ascendente del'oroscopo il sagittario": *Codex Diplomaticus Rubenianus* (as in n. 2), IV, pp. 1–7.

information that had been supplied by the abbé, and he must have decided either to write again, in order to ask the abbé to clarify his statements, or to take matters into his own hands and solve the puzzle of the queen’s Ascendant himself. The fact that he refers to “mathematici”, who might easily find an answer, suggests the latter. Nevertheless, he needed a birth-time, which, had he written to the abbé or to any of the queen’s secretaries, most likely would have been passed back to him as “26 aprile 1575, hore 16 horologii”. The French, however, unlike the northern Italians, did not usually set their clocks from the previous day’s sunset. The term ‘French’ hours is most often used to refer to *horae communes* – a simple, equal-hour system, divided into two groups of twelve: one beginning at midday and the other beginning at midnight. Equally, one very popular form of counting the hours, found as a regular feature of late medieval and Renaissance sundials and Eastern-inspired astrolabes, were the so-called ‘Babylonian’ or ‘Greek’ hours.¹⁶ This was an equal-hour system which counted *horae ortu solis* (“hours [calculated] from sunrise”). In recasting Maria de’ Medici’s horoscope, the French “mathematici” might have used printed tables, but – as they were calculating for a latitude and longitude that was outside of France – it is much more likely that they would have used an astrolabe with latitude-specific plates. This raises the intriguing question of whether it could have been the hour-scales on the instrument itself that determined the method by which the hours were counted by Peiresc’s “mathematici”.

In Florence, sunrise varies from 6.48 am to 6.08 am throughout the month of April. If one takes a compromise time of 6.30 am and calculates forward the 16 hours 0 minutes recorded in the Biblioteca Moreniana manuscript and in the letter of the abbé de Saint-Ambroise, a very interesting picture of the heavens appears (Fig. 6). Maria’s Ascendant falls neatly into Sagittarius. And, even if one uses the slightly later time of 16 hours and 25 minutes recorded in Maria de’ Medici’s horoscope in the BNCF, the Ascendant still appears within the sign of Sagittarius.

16. For the prevalence of *horae ortu solis* scales on Eastern and Eastern-inspired astrolabes, see DAVID PROCTOR, “The Construction and Use of the Astrolabe”, in *Astrolabes at Greenwich: A Catalogue of the Astrolabes in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich*, ed. KOENRAAD VAN CLEEMPOEL *et al.*, London 2005, pp. 15–22, esp. 19–20.

This configuration, although it is wrong, exactly matches the events depicted in Rubens' painting and provides a context for Rubens' own belief that he had painted "in cima...l'ascendente del'oroscopo il sagittario". Moreover, it explains why the sky is shown at night, even though the abbé clearly stated that the queen was born during the day – "à midy". Sixteen hours after 6.30 in the morning is what those who calculate their day from the previous midnight (the large majority of the clock-bound people of the modern age) would recognize as 10.30 pm.

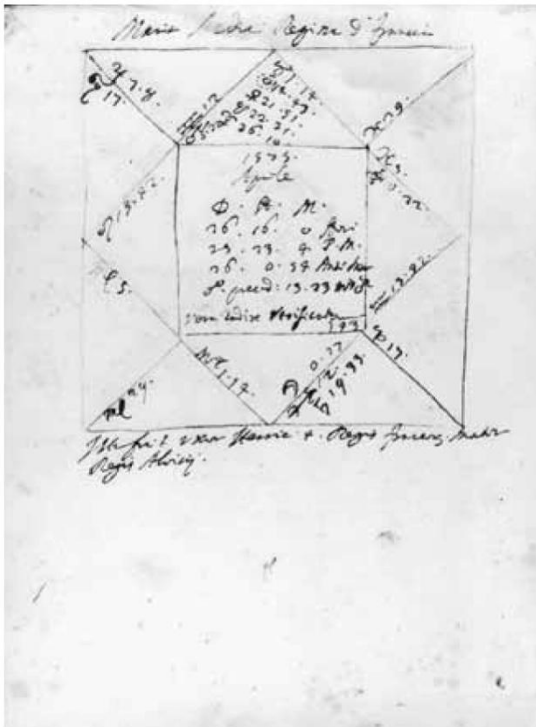
Everything we know about Rubens suggests that he invested a great deal of time and effort in securing information to support accurate renderings of all the iconographic components of his paintings. Conversely, much of what one has learned about astrology seems to indicate that whereas the 'science' itself should not be termed 'inexact', the matter in which calculations and interpretations were brought together often allowed for a certain degree of flexibility. Faced with the knowledge that Peiresc felt the information he had received from the abbé was faulty and that Rubens was an artist who "always seemed to want to know the facts before disregarding and discarding them",¹⁷ I would tend towards accepting the possibility that an astrologer in Paris or Antwerp interpreted a birth date which read "nata 26 aprile 1575, hore 16" as meaning 16 hours after the local (Florentine) sunrise – especially if he were using an astrolabe to help him with his calculations. In which case, Rubens' reputation as one of the most learned and careful iconographers in the history of art remains happily intact and without blemish.

17. See MILLEN and WOLF (as in n. 1), p. 34.



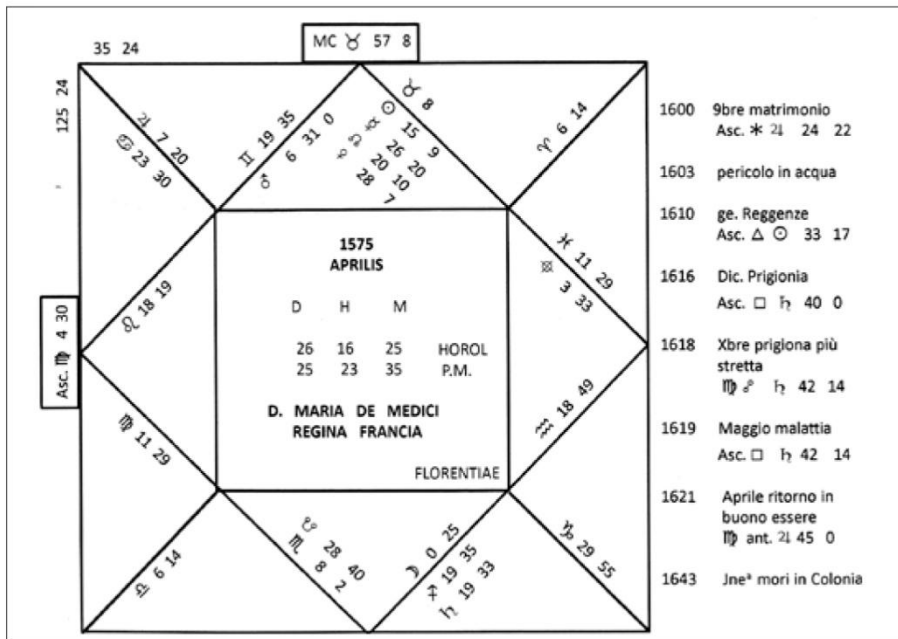
1. PETER PAUL RUBENS, *The Birth of Maria de' Medici*, 1622–25, oil on canvas, 394 × 295 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. 1770.



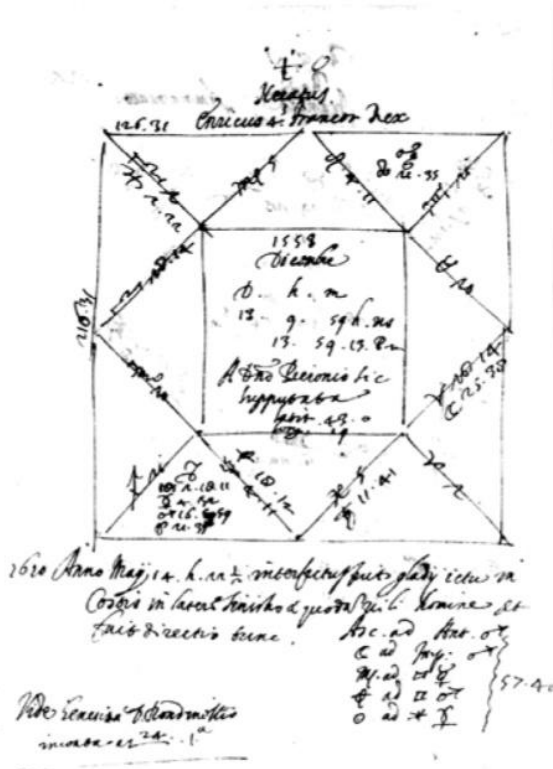


2. Natal chart of Maria de' Medici, seventeenth century. Biblioteca Moreniana, Florence, MS Bigazzi 235, fol. 46v.

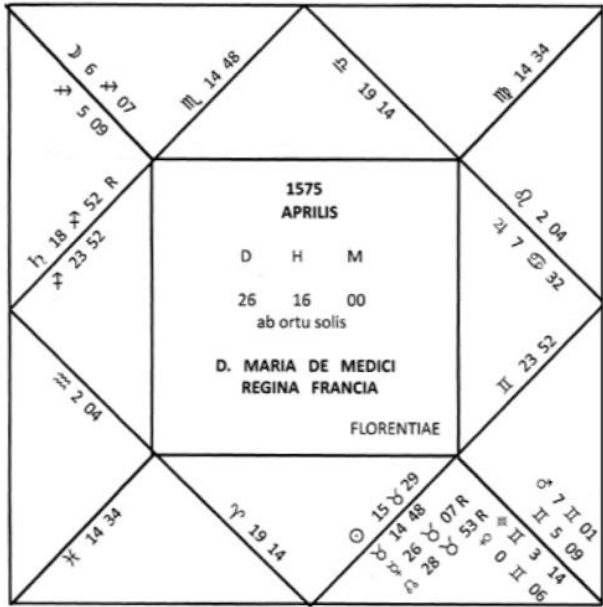
3. Natal chart of Maria de' Medici, seventeenth century. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (hereafter BNCF), MS II.—107, fol. 117v.



4. Transcription of natal chart of Maria de' Medici (as in Fig. 3).



5. Natal chart of King Henri IV of France, seventeenth century. BNCF, MS II.—.107, fol. 25v.



6. Natal chart of Maria de' Medici, calculated *ab ortu solis*, by Kristen Lippincott.