“All the Many and Varied Remedies and Secrets”: Sexual Practices and Reproductive Knowledge in the Renaissance

BRIAN SANDBERG

Maria de’ Medici was pregnant with her second child in 1602 when she wrote: “I hope, with God’s help, that I have already passed through the most dangerous part of my pregnancy, and entering into the sixth month, I will bring it to term with the happy issue that you and all my good friends desire of me.” Maria de’ Medici frequently discusses issues of sexuality and reproduction in her correspondence, which can be usefully examined in comparison with letters written by female members of the Medici family and their agents. This extensive body of manuscript correspondence, housed at the Archivio di Stato di Firenze and partially analyzed by the Medici Archive Project research team, allows this essay to contribute new perspectives to an already extensive literature on gender and sexuality in Renaissance Italy and France. Exploring noblewomen’s communication in Medici correspondence of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries offers a fascinating glimpse into early modern women’s own conceptions and practices of sexuality.

Contemporary understandings of bodies and health shaped Renaissance women’s attitudes toward sexuality and their sexual practices. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Florentine-based Medici dynasty was a key provider of medicine to princely courts throughout Europe because of its exceptional botanical gardens and its extensive trading networks, which gave family members special access to rare medicines. Medici princesses at various courts shared information about sexuality and reproduction, draw-
ing on Renaissance medical treatises and texts available in Florence. These noblewomen regularly acted as repositories of reproductive knowledge and medical advice, routinely recommending specific doctors to family members. Medici women sometimes contemplated bodily health in relationship to passionate love and sexual desire, especially during exchanges concerning courtship and marriage negotiations.

Discussions of sexuality emerged most explicitly in Medici correspondence concerning procreative sexuality and marital relations. Sixteenth-century social and religious norms encouraged early modern married couples to engage frequently in sexual intercourse in order to reproduce. Young noblewomen experienced great familial and social pressure to get pregnant as soon as possible following marriage, except in cases of the marriage of an adolescent or a widow. Medici women worried about news that married relatives were not sleeping together, sometimes noting the frequency of a husband’s visits to his wife’s bedchamber. Medici agents were anxious when reports from the Spanish court indicated that king Felipe III was not sleeping with his wife, Élisabeth de Bourbon, who was one of Maria de’ Medici’s daughters. Dynastic concerns about reproduction thus routinely prompted frank discussions of sexuality among female members of the Renaissance ruling families.

Medici correspondence reveals a wide variety of sexual equipment that was deployed to assist married couples in performing intercourse and achieving pregnancy. Portraits of married partners were hung near beds to focus the lovers’ thoughts. Eleonora de’ Medici, for example, had a portrait of her new husband hung by her bedside in 1584. Tapestries and paintings depicting sacred and secular stories of faithful love, feminine virtue, and fertile marriage often decorated Florentine bedrooms. A tapestry cycle depicting the story of Tobias was intended for the bedroom of Eleonora de Toledo in Palazzo Medici in the 1540s. Erotic paintings and frescos of nude women and sensual lovemaking subjects adorned the walls of some bedchambers, intended to inspire sexual activity. “Most Renaissance erotica adopted subjects from the literature of classical mythology,” Bette Talvacchia explains, indicating that “legends concerning the loves of the heroes, stories of the Olympian deities’ entangled affairs, and the amorous exploits of Jupiter in particular provided numerous pos-
sibilities for descriptions of erotic situations.” Noblewomen used special perfumes to enhance the pleasure of their bedrooms. Elaborate beds with canopies and coverings were given to brides, to create sensual spaces for lovemaking. Élisabeth de Bourbon received a fantastic jewel-studded bed from her relatives at the Medici court in 1624, presumably for this purpose. Princesses’ beds often displayed sensual imagery, such as one set of tapestry bed hangings that included depictions of fruit and flowers, which may have symbolized fecundity. Erotic prints and drawings of satyrs and sexual positions could provide intimate arousal in bed during foreplay. When married partners were apart, love letters could be used to fan the flames of desire and prepare for sexual relations when the couple was reunited.

The sexual ability and fertility of princely women was constantly evaluated by courtiers and their correspondents. Letters by these women frequently reported rumors of noblewomen’s supposed pregnancies at other princely courts. Cristina di Lorena offered Caterina de’ Medici, duchess of Mantua, advice on determining if she were pregnant, indicating that “if your courses have not come, you can believe that you are pregnant, I believe, since you have always had a very regular period.” Caterina was to use a special belt and a stone that Cristina had sent her to assist her pregnancy. Medici communications were filled with reports of births, gift-giving, baptisms, and god-parenting. Each princely court across Europe organized lavish ceremonies after a successful birth to celebrate the ruling family’s solidity and to publicize their dynasty’s preservation through the prospects of inheritance and marriage alliance.

Medici women exhibited great concern about pregnancies, providing health advice for expecting mothers in the family. Fears of miscarriages prompted discussions of health, midwives, and the complications of childbirth. Caterina de’ Medici, duchess of Mantua, was instructed “not to eat too much,” but to have bleedings “for a certain time when pregnant to stay healthy.” The birth of Louis XIII in September 1601, a mere nine months after Maria de’ Medici’s marriage to the French king Henri IV, confirmed her fecundity and the fertility of her lineage. Maria de’ Medici spent most of the first decade of the seventeenth century in successive pregnancies, giving birth to six children in nine years. Medici agents at the Bourbon
royal court in France routinely reported on Maria de’ Medici’s pregnancies, providing detailed accounts to her Florentine relatives.24

In a context where fertility was so critical, impotency represented a serious problem for any married couple that failed to produce a child quickly. When married princely couples experienced sexual problems, Medici women and their agents discussed impotency cures and fertility enhancements. Giovanni de’ Medici reported that Leonor de Guzmán, countess of Uceda, had asked “with much familiarity and secrecy if I know whether, among all the many and varied remedies and secrets of the Most Serene Prince [Ferdinando I de’ Medici], there is something that treats or alleviates sterility, or that augments the faculty to reproduce, either in men or women.”25 Giovanni, who was at the court of the Spanish Netherlands in Brussels, asked a Medici official in Florence to send him an appropriate remedy as soon as possible. Women at the Medici court, such as Cristina di Lorena, often fulfilled such requests by sending medicines, ointments, and preparations to their correspondents. The failure of intercourse in noblemen’s sexual encounters with their wives or extramarital partners could have serious political repercussions. For example, Giangiacomo Medici di Marignano had lost a testicle when he was wounded by an arquebus shot, and there were rumors that he was impotent as a result.26 Such reports could greatly damage a nobleman’s prospects of marriage. As Vincenzo I Gonzaga courted one of the daughters of Francesco I de’ Medici, the grand duke worried that “according to certain voices from the Farnese, the prince [Vincenzo] is impotent,” so he hesitated to sign a marriage contract with Vincenzo’s father, the duke of Mantua, “if we are not first satisfied about his potency, and thus there should be a test in Venice.”27 A test was subsequently administered, and it apparently satisfied Francesco I, who soon signed the contract for Vincenzo’s marriage to Eleonora de’ Medici.

Love affairs and illicit sexuality within their families caused great concern for Medici women, who took great care to protect the reputations of their households. Their correspondence included ample discussion of prostitutes and courtesans, especially in Rome. Warnings about Giovanni de’ Medici’s extramarital sexual relationship with a woman reached Caterina de’ Medici, duchess of Mantua, as he prepared to visit the Mantuan court. The duchess wrote that: “I heard that the Signor D.
Giovanni [de’ Medici] is coming here for Carnival, and is bringing that woman of his with him, and as much as the first part of this decision is pleasing to me, the second part annoys me. . . . I consider that woman only as a whore.”

Married noblemen’s affairs provoked dangerous jealousies and political concerns about illegitimate children. Noblewomen’s affairs could be especially troubling, since some noblemen responded with violence to such challenges to their control over women’s sexuality. Pietro di Cosimo I de’ Medici murdered his wife Eleonora di Garcia de Toledo in 1576, brutally punishing her adultery and hunting down her lover.

The detailed discussions of sexuality in Medici women’s letters demonstrate that early modern noblewomen were attentive to a wide array of reproductive health issues. These women exchanged intimate sexual information and reproductive knowledge, providing crucial advice and counsel for their families as they shared “many and varied remedies and secrets.” Renaissance noblewomen such as the Medici princesses thus played important roles in communicating sexual practices and in diffusing reproductive knowledge among elites in early modern Europe.

Notes

1. The original reads: “[J]espere Dieu aydant que ayant desja passé le temps le plus dangereux de ma grossesse & entrant comme je faiz au sixiesme mois je l’acheveray avec lheureuse issue que vous & tous mes bons amys me desirent.” Maria de’ Medici to Ferdinando I de’ Medici, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 26 July 1602, MdP 4729, f’ 52.

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2. Research for this essay relies on manuscript sources consulted directly in Mediceo del Principato [hereafter, MdP] collection of the Archivio di Stato di Firenze [hereafter, ASF] and on extracts from additional manuscript sources from the same archive, compiled in the Medici Archive Project [hereafter, MAP] Database, available online at www.medici.org. This article has benefited greatly from the collaborative research approach of the Medici Archive Project, and particularly from the comments and advice of Sheila Barker, an expert on the history of medicine who has consulted many of the same volumes in the ASF.

3. Thomas V. Cohen, Love and Death in Renaissance Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and

4. Instead of focusing on the rich polemical works concerning the querelle des femmes or the normative literature concerning women’s bodies, this study examines Medici feminine correspondence in the MdP collection of the ASF.


10. Insert, MdP 4949, f˚ 910, in MAP Database, 7933. Eleonora de’ Medici seems to have insisted on sleeping with her husband, despite her doctor’s advice that she
sleep alone while recovering from a fever. Traiano di Fabrizio Bobba to Piero di Francesco Usimbardi, Mantua, 23 April 1588, MdP 2940, n.p., in MAP Database, 4681.

11. Camillo Capilupi to Ferdinando I de' Medici, 4 April 1584, MdP 2939, n.p., in MAP Database, 4400.


13. Pier Francesco Riccio to Pietro Aretino Camaiani, Pisa, 13 November 1542, MdP 1170, f° 78, in MAP Database, 2399.


16. A resin perfume for Eleanora de Toledo’s bedroom is discussed in Tommaso di Iacopo de’ Medici to Pier Francesco Riccio, Poggio a Caiano, 18 October 1549, MdP 1175, insert 2, f° 35, in MAP Database, 12996.


20. Ferdinando I Gonzaga to Caterina di Ferdinando I de’ Medici, 26 February 1617, MdP 6109, n.p., in MAP Database, 7042; Ferdinando I Gonzaga to Caterina di Ferdinando I de’ Medici, 2 March 1621, in MAP Database, 7060.

21. For an example, see Averardo di Raffaello de’ Medici di Castellina to Curzio di Lorenzo da Picchena, Madrid, 3 May 1623, MdP 4952, n.p., in MAP Database, 8933.

22. The original reads: “Caterina voi siate di natura sana et hora dicendomi che state molto bene dico che sin a questo giorno se le purghe non vi sono venutte si può credere che siate gravida poichè secondo mi vien detto voi siate [siete] [sta] sempre benissimo regolata...” Cristina di Lorena to Caterina di Ferdinando I de’ Medici, 28 April 1617, ASF, MdP 6110, f° 343, in MAP Database, 7037. Sheila Barker provides a more comprehensive reading of this document’s medical advice in her forthcoming work.

23. The original reads: “Madama Sma mia comandato scrivere a V.A.S. che lei cerchi di non mangiare troppo...bisognava cavarli sangue dun certo tempo, quando con gravida per far portarsi a bene.” Claudia d’Albon Coppoli to Caterina di Ferdinando I de’ Medici duchessa di Mantova, Pisa, 15 January 1618, ASF, MdP 6113, f° 56–57 [also analyzed in MAP Database, 18676].
24. For discussions of Maria de’ Medici’s pregnancies, see Maria de’ Medici to Ferdinando I de’ Medici, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 26 July 1602, MdP 4729, f° 52; Cosimo Baroncelli to Belisario di Francesco Vinta[?], Monceaux-les-Meaux, 11 July 1605, ASF, MdP 5157, f° 378; Pietro Accolti to Belisario di Francesco Vinta, Paris, 2 March 1608, ASF, MdP 5157, f° 750.

25. Giovanni de’ Medici to Belisario di Francesco Vinta, Bruxelles, 30 March 1603, ASF, MdP 5155, f° 408–409: “. . . questa Signora mi domandò con molta familiarità et secretezza, se io sapevo che fra li molti e varij rimedi et secreti che ha il Serenissimo Padrone [Ferdinando I de’ Medici], ci fusse cosa che fusse buona, o a rimediare alla sterilità, o, a augmentare la facoltà del poter generare, si nel huomo come nella donna.”


27. The original reads: “. . . rispetto a certa voce uscita da’ Farnese che il Principe era impotente, non volemmo firmare le capitulazioni, se prima non restavamo giustificati della sua potenza, et così convenimmo che in Venezia se ne facessi la prova, dove inviammo una giovane con la quale egli ci rese molto ben chiari et giustificati della vanità della voce sparsa, con tutte quelle satisfazioni che habbiamo saputo desiderare.” Francesco I de’ Medici to Bongianni di Piero Gianfigliazzi, Florence, 10 April 1584, MdP 5046, f° 348, in MAP Database, 16148.

28. The original reads: “Ho presentito che il Sig.r D. Giovanni [de’ Medici] viene a far costà il Carnevale, et che mena seco quella sua femina, et si come la prima parte di questa sua resolucion mi piace, credendo che V.A. haverà caro di rivederlo in cotesta casa, così la seconda mi da fastidio . . . io non tengo detta Donna se non per puttana.” Cosimo II de’ Medici to Caterina di Ferdinando I de’ Medici duchessa di Mantova, Florence, 7 February 1619, MdP 6108, f° 563, consulted in MAP Database, 6302. On Giovanni de’ Medici, see Brendan Dooley, Amore e guerra nel tardo Rinascimento Le lettere di Livia Vernazza e Don Giovanni de’ Medici (Florence: Polistampa, 2009), a volume I have not yet been able to consult.


30. Pietro di Cosimo I de’ Medici to Francesco I de’ Medici, Pisa, n.d. [July 1576], ASF, MdP 5154, f° 86.