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For the Purpose of Pleasure: Elinga's Deviation from the Woman Reader Artistic Tradition

By: Kara Westhoven, *University of Massachusetts*

The image of a female reader would not surprise present-day viewers, but this subject has not always been accepted with such ease. In early modern Europe, representations of women reading were often limited to specific types, and created with the intent to conform to gendered norms rarely in a manner that presented women as autonomous critical thinkers. A painting by Dutch artist Pieter Janssens Elinga circa 1660, *Reading Woman* (fig. 1), diverges from these earlier images of female readers. Elinga's piece challenges the traditionally implied purposes of women readers portrayed in art, and simultaneously inserts itself within contemporary Dutch genre painting. While works that came before it focused on female readers with religious and moralistic motivations, Elinga's subject in *Reading Woman* reads for her own pleasure and is presented in a quotidian, manner, making her activity both an everyday one and worthy of celebration.

Reading Woman offers a new approach to depicting women as readers, in contrast to earlier religious or devotional paintings. Depictions of women reading during the early modern period were often limited to religious themes. The image of a devotional female reader is found in Rogier van der Weyden's *The Magdalene Reading* (fig. 2) fragmented from an altarpiece scene of the Virgin and Saints created before 1438. During the fifteenth century,



Figure 1: Pieter Janssens Elinga, *Reading Woman*, c. 1660, oil on canvas.

the representation of reading and print was primarily restricted to male subjects, with only a few exceptions of highly ranked women and female saints depicted with books.¹ In this piece we see Mary Magdalene, a saintly figure, adhering to this pattern. She is evidently a part within a wider religious scene, but is immersed in her reading of the Holy Scripture and removed from the activity around her. Despite being a fragment of another piece, the image captured makes evident that Mary is completely immersed in her reading



Figure 2: Rogier van der Weyden, *The Magdalene Reading*, before 1438, oil on mahogany, transferred from a panel.

as a religious experience. The composition of *The Magdalene Reading* puts Mary close to the viewer, yet she does not engage us in any capacity. Rather, her downward gaze towards the text, and the ornate dress, places Mary Magdalene firmly in her own space and

¹ Christine Inmann, *Forbidden Fruit: A History of Women and Books in Art* (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2009), 38.

thought. Her fine clothing and headpiece stress a saintly standing, while the appearance of the elaborately decorated book makes its sacred nature obvious, elevating her devotional activity. The theme of the saintly figure, deriving spiritual experience through the Holy Word, comprises an acceptable image type of religious female readers.

Other overtly religious depictions of women readers include Rowland Lockey's portrait of *Lady Margaret Beaufort* (fig. 3) In this piece, the book is an apparent object of her devotion. With her eyes fixed ahead, Lady Beaufort is not actively engaged in reading, but the placement of the Bible signals her reverence to the word of God. The image of Lady Beaufort "with book," becomes a symbol of her spirituality. The Netherlandish painting of *Saint Barbara* (fig. 4), created by an unidentified artist in the sixteenth century, continues this pattern of devout representation. Here, Saint Barbara is engaged with a religious text as a means of accessing God. Her divine and saintly status is made evident through the details in her heavily ornamented dress. Unlike Lady Beaufort, Saint Barbara is completely involved in her reading. Seated in a lavish interior, Saint Barbara pays no attention to the busy scene of activity outside her window, demonstrating total concentration on her reading. Although more thoroughly engaged with the text than Lockey's Lady Beaufort, Saint Barbara still serves as an image of a highly devout and exceptional reader.

Beyond religious images, other depictions of female readers forge virtuous associations by using the book as a prop to represent subjects in an intentional manner. In these types of paintings, the book becomes a strategic tool used to demonstrate moral

conviction and character. Sofonisba Anguissola's *Self Portrait* (fig. 5), painted in 1554, is a clear example of this. Unlike previous depictions of religious figures, Sofonisba's direct gaze and lifelike portrayal makes her accessible to the viewer. Soft



Figure 3: Rowland Lockey, *Lady Margaret Beaufort (1433-1509) at Prayer, Countess of Richmond Derby, Mother of King Henry VII and Foundress of the College*, c. 1566-1616, oil on panel.

hair frame her face, and a subtle reflection of light in her eyes makes the self-portrait seem a true representation of her. Yet, Sofonisba is not actively involved with the text she holds in her hand. Instead, she merely points to her name on the open page of this book using it as a prop to make associations with "virgo" and chastity, a demonstration of her character even as it proclaims her authorship of the picture.²

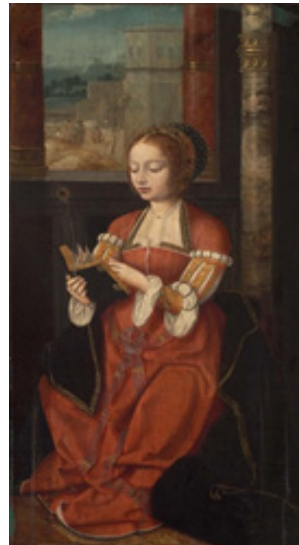


Figure 4: Unidentified Artist, *Saint Barbara*, Netherlandish, 6th Century, oil on panel

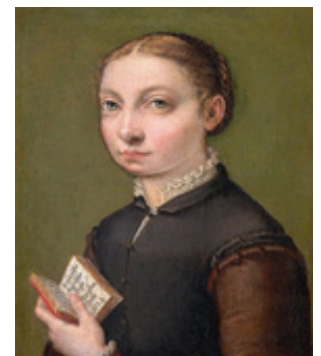


Figure 5: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1554, oil on panel

²Ibid., 58.

A similar Renaissance portrait, *Laura Battiferri* (fig. 6), created 1555-1560 by Agnolo Bronzino, also offers a moralistic representation of the subject forged through associations with reading. Laura is posed in a noble gesture, displaying a book of Petrarchan sonnets as a principled demonstration of character.³ Unlike Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait*, Laura Battiferri is seen at profile, with a strong gaze ahead, completely disengaged from the viewer. While impersonal, the viewer's focus is instead directed to the Petrarchan book Laura holds, her fingers spread to frame the text. Beyond the book itself, the sitter's clothing is traditionally Catholic, the veil serving as another reference to her chastity and character. Yet Battiferri's display of Petrarch's work is more strategic and nuanced than the message conveyed through dress, and the book becomes a means of associating her standing in elite circles.⁴ Unlike religious images where books serve as objects of devotion, in these depictions of female readers show the text as an integral representation of character.

While Elinga's *Reading Woman* is understood as anonymous, earlier images depicted women readers as popularized religious figures. As women's reading was restricted to the realm of religious instruction during the early modern period, political and religious authorities encouraged literacy in a largely didactic manner.⁵ The books available to women during this period encouraged their chastity, as well as devotion and obedience to God.⁶ Images of identifiable, religious female readers reflect these societal expectations. Reading was not portrayed as an enjoyable activity but rather deemed necessary

for religious devotion, represented to the average woman by idealistic and obscure figures. For example, Francisco de Zurbarán's *Saint Margaret of Antioch* (fig. 7) shows the virgin martyr holding a book, and even marking her place in her reading, but clothed in a recognizable costume. Her distinct shepherding dress combined with the presence of the dragon makes Saint Margaret's identity clear to viewers, alluding to the story of her martyrdom.⁷ The reading and reciting of devotional texts, then, becomes another critical aspect of her portrayal and identification. Zurbarán's depiction of Saint Margaret



Figure 6: Agnolo Bronzino, *Laura Battiferri*, c. 1555-60, oil on panel.



Figure 7: Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Margaret of Antioch*, 1630-40, oil on canvas

with the book reflects national piety and cultural reverence for religious reading practices.⁸ The interpretation of the reading saint as an embodiment of Spanish devotional values distinguishes her not as an accessible individual, but rather an exemplary reader for female viewers.

Other images from this period, such as Baltazar Echave Orio's depiction of the Annunciation in *Virgin Leyendo* (fig. 8), again capture the woman reader in the image of a figurehead, recognized by a distinctive

³ Ibid., 60.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 144.

⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁷ Juliana Dresvina, *A Maid with a Dragon: The Cult of St. Margaret of Antioch in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5-7.

⁸ Inmann, *Forbidden Fruit*, 66.

iconography. The reading Virgin is positioned close to viewers, and compositionally, the portrait-like treatment further heightens her proximity. The placement of the lilies, strewn across the table, also functions to identify the Virgin Mary. Her complete immersion in the sacred text is understood through her eyes, fixed to the page, and graceful hand that actively reaches to turn the page. The Virgin herself is glorified through extraordinary decoration, from her embellished clothing to her ornamented furniture. The crown serves as an ultimate suggestion of a monarchical, divine power. While this Annunciation scene clearly promotes women's active religious reading, the Virgin's decoration elevates her literacy beyond the quotidian and makes the activity especially impressive.

Dutch masters depict the subject of the female reader with similar grandeur, creating an air of inaccessibility surrounding literary activity. In Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith* (fig. 9), reference to women's reading is found in the prominent placement of an open Bible. Although we presume that this woman is in the process of reading the Holy Word, the piece is less about the act of her reading and more intent on demonstration of devotion, as suggested by her surroundings. Various religious instruments and symbols frame the woman, who is in fact an allegorical figure in realistic garb. The scene includes a chalice and cross, a crushed snake and strewn apple in the foreground, and a large painting of the crucifixion framed on the rear wall.⁹ Vermeer and Elinga's paintings share similar characteristic representations of shadow and light, as well as points of reflection Vermeer's subject gazes upwards to a glass orb, while Elinga's



Figure 8: Baltazar Echave Orio, *Virgin Leyendo (Anunciación)*, 1621



Figure 9: Johannes Vermeer, *Allegory of Faith*, ca. 1670-72, oil on canvas.

reader sits beneath a small mirror. However, these paintings are drastically different in ornamentation and concept. The many devotional objects that surround Vermeer's reader make it clear that she is an allegory, and not a real individual like the female-reader in Elinga's work.

Vermeer's piece further suggests vast ostentation and wealth, as demonstrated by the woman's fine dress, jewelry, and the lavish interior of the scene. The complexity of textile work and the manner in which it is displayed,

including the pulled-back curtain and the elevation of the detailed carpet, create an air of exclusivity to this woman's experience. Knowledge of Dutch interiors during this period indicates that oriental style carpets were rarely placed on the floor, making Vermeer's display of textiles unusual.¹⁰ Also of note is the black and white marble floor, which, as C. Willmijn Fock concludes, was typically confined to a small narrow space and not entire rooms, even in the most elite Dutch homes.¹¹ With reference to these norms of interior spaces

⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ John Loughman, "Between Reality and Artful Fiction: The Representation of the Domestic Interior in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art" in *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley et al. (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 95.

¹¹ Ibid.

during the period, Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith* becomes a marked symbol of exclusivity. The woman's gesture towards her heart and unstable posture, leaning back towards the table, represent an experience of being overwhelmed by faith. This scene of ostentation makes the woman herself an image of devotion, elevating those who are equally moved by the word of God. While the dramatic interior and rich decoration are critical to understanding of *Allegory of Faith* as an image of a devout female reader, Elinga's *Reading Woman*, instead, represents a woman who is engaged in reading without deeming any significance to her surroundings.

The notion of fulfillment and personal pleasure in Elinga's work is made clear by the subject's absorption in the book and disengagement with any of the objects around her. Given that the Dutch Republic saw immense material growth and a higher standard of living compared to other European nations between the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Elinga's decisive exclusion of any contact between the subject and material commodities is significant.¹² Dutch economic and cultural advancement was typically translated in art through the depiction of luxurious commodities, some of which we see in Elinga's work including paintings, a mirror, upholstered furniture, and china pieces yet his subject is absorbed in the world of her book. Other artists, such as Pieter de Hooch, depict women engaged with these items to create a domestic genre scene that highlights Dutch prosperity and societal values through interaction with goods. For example, in *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard* (fig. 10), De Hooch depicts a housewife who takes great care in storing linens in an impressive cupboard. The room contains various signs of an abundant material culture, including paintings, china, textiles, and a woven basket. Departing from these previous depictions of Dutch interiors and domestic life,

Elinga's *Reading Woman* offers a unique image of an ordinary woman who reads for her own enjoyment, without the distraction of household activity or material display.

In *Reading Woman*, Elinga creates a strong compositional divide between either side of the canvas, separating furniture and items of luxury from the subject herself. Elinga's woman is not only separate from her belongings in a physical sense, but also devotes unwavering attention to reading. In contrast to earlier images of domestic scenes or female reading, we observe this woman from the back, completely engaged in her activity. This approach to the subject prevents direct gaze or judgment by the viewer.¹³ While a great deal of scholarship has characterized Dutch domestic genre painting as promoting a masculine gaze and as moralizing in its agenda Martha Moffitt



Figure 10: Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard*, 1663, oil on canvas

Peacock has argued that an interest in depicting women's lives also existed beyond the conventional interpretation. Peacock suggests an alternate, respectful view, which

stressed the significance of women's domestic roles rather than their subjection.¹⁴ Peacock attributes the inspiration for this divergence to the work of Geertruydt Roghman, and her prints of women fulfilling household tasks. Roghman's women are self-possessed and complete their work from back and profile views. They are not allegorical figures or women put on display, but vital contributors to

¹² Ibid., 73.

¹³ Martha Moffitt Peacock, "Domesticity in the Public Sphere," in *Saints, Sinners, and Sisters*, ed. Jane L. Carroll et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

to home and family life.¹⁵ Roghman's *A Young Woman Ruffling* (fig. 11) exemplifies this desire to portray women within the domestic realm as both important and diligent. Approaching her from a profile allows a view of her work, and makes the woman an individual, anonymous figure celebrated for her contributions. As Peacock suggests, Roghman's prints highlighted women's critical contributions to domestic work, presenting them with new visibility and stressing their significance.¹⁶

Though Elinga undoubtedly was influenced by the same messages that Roghman's work exemplifies, his approach to the reading woman is markedly different from hers. Roghman's woman possesses her own book, placed directly in front of her on the table, yet still there is a stronger correlation to her responsibilities within the domestic sphere. Elinga's piece, in contrast, subverts this role by depicting a woman enjoying the act of reading in of itself, and perhaps, as a break from her duties. We intrude on this private moment as viewers, approaching her from behind to encounter the signs of her escape, including the discarded shoes and her position at the very end of a long room. The woman's relaxed posture in her chair, feet stretched forward, suggests a moment of reprieve. The woman sits in the rear corner of the composition, yet the viewer is still drawn to her activity through the bright color of her red jacket and brilliant white skirt. The gentle light that streams down from the window also brings the reading woman into focus.

As Muizelaar and Phillips write in *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age*, many Dutch domestic genre paintings captured female subjects in the role of motherhood, and forged associations with feminine virtue.¹⁷ In de Hooch's *Interior with Mother Delousing Child* (fig. 12), we see an intimate domestic moment that is similar in feeling to



Figure 11: Geertruydt Rogham, *A Young Woman Ruffling*, Plate 2 from *Five Feminine Occupations*, ca. 1640-57

then, inserts *Reading Woman* into this Dutch domestic tradition, which celebrates women's activity within the private sphere. However, his reader resides in a moment of her own respite and pleasure, a subversion of the matriarchal figure and her associated responsibilities. Elinga also achieves a sense of intimacy in his piece by placing the woman at the end of a long room, with multiple barriers between the viewers and subject. The muted interior colors offer a sense of quiet and emphasize our perspective as onlookers to a personal moment.



Figure 12: Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with a Mother Delousing her Child's Hair*, c. 1658-1660, oil on canvas.

Elinga's piece, but principally a celebration of motherhood. The mother in this painting, like Elinga's reader, wears a red jacket that draws focus to her position within the room. She is approached from the side, providing a profile view of her duties as a mother. Elinga, then, inserts *Reading Woman* into this Dutch domestic tradition, which celebrates women's activity within the private sphere. However, his reader resides in a moment of her own respite and pleasure, a subversion of the matriarchal figure and her associated responsibilities. Elinga also achieves a sense of intimacy in his piece by placing the woman at the end of a long room, with multiple barriers between the viewers and subject. The muted interior colors offer a sense of quiet and emphasize our perspective as onlookers to a personal moment. Her cast-off shoes mark an absence of formality and composure, placing the woman within a personal space, both mentally and physically.

¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁷ Klaske Muizelaar and Derek Phillips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age: Paintings and People in Historical Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 113.

Earlier images created by Dutch artists such as Jan Steen's *A Woman at her Toilet* (fig. 13) use a similar compositional structure to evoke the notion of intrusion into a private scene. A monumental archway decisively separates the subject's space from that of the viewer's, and the discarded items in the foreground create another form of boundary. Elinga uses these same compositional techniques but without the grand archway - which seems especially bombastic - to evoke a sense of intimacy and intrusion. Yet his female subject is not exposed in the flesh like the woman at her toilet. Instead, viewers are privy to a personal moment of leisure and intellect.

Other representations of women in Dutch art moved beyond the home to include reference to women's active participation in the public sphere. Women in the seventeenth century Netherlands possessed a great deal more societal freedom and influence than their European counterparts. Even within the patriarchal structure of the Dutch Republic, contemporary discourse and imagery was relatively sympathetic to women and gave them social significance.¹⁸ Johannes Cornelisz Verspronk's painting of *The Regentesses of the St. Elisabeth Hospital in Haarlem* (fig. 14) reflects the importance and appreciation of women's public roles. Presenting four women as if in the midst of a business meeting, their financial book opened on the table, Verspronk's image of female readers demonstrates their significance in society. Each woman is portrayed in a realistic and individual manner, not as any idealized type. The woman on the right almost challenges the viewer, gesturing towards the book as an invitation to inspect her work on the hospital's official records.¹⁹ In Verspronk's painting, therefore, the book and the act of reading become a means for these women to demonstrate their contributions to society at large. Elinga's depiction of the female reader is certainly influenced by this same praise and



Figure 13: Jan Steen, *A Woman at her Toilet*, 1663, oil on panel.

and respect for women that was prevalent throughout Dutch culture at this time, however, his woman reads with different intention from the *Regentesses*.

Elinga's subject in *Reading Woman* deviates from the celebration of women for their contributions to society and the domestic sphere. The *Reading Woman* places the subject in a position of leisure, reading for intrinsic purpose and pleasure. This woman even subverts the active female reader type presented in earlier images, like the altarpiece fragment of Mary Magdalene, the painting of Saint Barbara, or the *Virgin Leyendo*. Elinga's reader is a universal female figure, placed in a normalized domestic setting, not as an extolled social contributor or exemplary figurehead.



Figure 14: Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck, *The Regentesses of the St. Elisabeth Hospital in Haarlem*, 1641, oil on canvas.

The Reading Woman demonstrates a new appreciation for the subject of an engaged female reader by elevating her activity within a familiar setting. This celebratory understanding of Reading Woman is made evident by Elinga's rendering of natural light in the piece. The light streaming into the room from the upper windows falls gently onto the reader's white

¹⁸ Peacock, "Domesticity in the Public Sphere," 45.

¹⁹ Inmann, *Forbidden Fruit*, 69.

cap, and onto floor just beyond her outstretched feet. However, direct sunlight was often a rarity, as a result of the typical layout of Dutch homes during this period and particularly during the long and severe winters.²⁰ This unrealistic manipulation of light, combined with the manner in which it hits the woman's cap, conveys an enlightened quality. It suggests Elinga's celebration of the woman reader, as well as her own critical thinking and enjoyment derived from the activity. Elinga's *Reading Woman*, therefore, becomes a part of the Dutch genre tradition in which the private sphere of a woman's world is celebrated. Through this piece, Elinga acknowledges and engages with the notion that female leisure reading is a legitimate aspect of the domestic sphere, and one worthy of depiction.

Particularly for a male artist, Elinga's painting presents his subject in an unusually respectful manner. Scholarship on Dutch domestic genre painting has suggested that the artists who painted interior scenes and the patrons who coveted them were overwhelmingly male, making specific types of images precedent. Loughman argues that greater value was placed on symbols of status and honor, or on images that reinforced notions of familial domesticity and nurturing environments.²¹ These genre paintings may appear to capture a snapshot of life in the Dutch Golden Age, but in reality, offer a constructed reflection of the masculine gaze.²² Elinga's *Reading Woman* subverts these traditional types in its absence of allusions to the subject's societal or domestic contributions, and rather celebrates her moment of personal leisure.

The very act of this woman reading is itself worthy of consideration, as the image

of female readers has often elicited sustained and erotic attention by male artists throughout history. Conlon suggests the scene of a woman reading can be interpreted as a threat to masculinity, as it placed capacity for pleasure and wisdom literally into a woman's own hands, rather than under male possession.²³ Conlon also references the dichotomy that exists along gendered lines between passive and active - those who are seen and those who control their gaze - and how this translated into art.²⁴ However, Elinga's *Reading Woman* breaks from norms of passivity because its subject is actively engaged in her own activity, and the viewer's perspective from behind does not allow for a possessive gaze. She is presented as having her own desire and reading for personal pleasure, in clear variation from previous artistic conventions.

Reading Woman challenges other perceived dangers in depicting women actively reading. Mary Ellen Lamb argues that the very image of the woman reader-consumer in the late sixteenth century was threatening and dangerous in its acknowledgement of women's newly found self-determination.²⁵ To address women as active readers was to acknowledge their ability to respond to text and produce personal interpretations, to think critically, to make judgments, and ultimately, to exercise a degree of autonomy that challenged their status within patriarchal society.²⁶ Pieter Janssens Elinga's depiction of a woman reading marks a clear break from earlier imagery and fears about the female reader-consumer. The image is neither threatening nor disconcerting given the scene's familiar domestic setting and comforting quietness. Within what initially appears to be a typical seventeenth century

²⁰ Loughman, "Between Reality and Artful Fiction: The Representation of the Domestic Interior in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," 92.

²¹ Ibid., 97.

²² Muizelaar and Philips, *Picturing Men and Women*, 112-113.

²³ James Conlon, "Men Reading Woman Reading: Interpreting Images of Woman Readers," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 2 (2005): 40

²⁴ Ibid., 44

²⁵ Mary Ellen Lamb, "Inventing the Early Modern Woman Reader Through the World of Goods: Lyly's Gentlewoman Reader and Katherine Stubbes," in *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, eds. Heidi Brayman et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 15-16.

²⁶ Ibid., 18.

Dutch scene, an act of intellectual freedom and self-fulfillment emerges.

In Elinga's *Reading Woman*, an unprecedented intention of the female reader is suggested - that of personal pleasure and leisure. Elinga's work appears to fit neutrally into the tradition of Dutch art, yet *Reading Woman* is also subversive, containing contradictions to both norms of Dutch domesticity and female reader types. She is celebrated as an active reader, but placed within a normalized Dutch interior. Distinct from earlier images with religious and moralistic undertones and as a subtle challenge to customs of Dutch domesticity, Elinga's reading woman is depicted in a respectful and quotidian manner. A stimulating intellectual act and reprieve from feminine duty becomes worthy of celebration in *Reading Woman*.

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