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Subversion, Self-Determination, and the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family*

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The Renaissance family portrait served a nobler role than a simple work of art. It functioned instead as a representation of history, a preservation of legacy, a record of lineage, and/or a documentation of relationships. It could be memorializing or celebratory, or it could feign to be so while carrying a much grimmer and more pointed message.



Figure 1, Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family*

Lavinia Fontana's 1584 *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family* (Fig. 1), commissioned by Laudomia Gozzadini in Bologna, exemplifies the latter. The patroness herself sits dressed in red with her sister Ginevra, who was deceased at the time. Between them sits their father Ulisse, also deceased, and at the fringes stand Laudomia's husband, Camillo, and Ginevra's husband, Annibale.¹ To a casual eye, the purpose of this painting seems mundane: to celebrate the marriages and to honor relatives post mortem. However, to dismiss this work as a simple commemoration of the double marriage and a tribute to the conjugal bond would be to miss the nuances of the painting, which tell a far more discordant story.

Closer analysis shows Fontana diverging greatly from portraits of similar typology and social standards of the time. Fontana transgresses cultural norms by compositionally diminishing the husbands' authority over their wives and returning the women to the household of their father, thereby emphasizing the patrilineal rights of her patroness. This reassociation and the power ascribed to Laudomia independently are achieved through an integration of cues from the

composition, the clothing and objects depicted, the public and private relationships of the subjects, the inscription on the back of the work, and the divergent typology and style. With these elements, Lavinia Fontana creates a portrait entirely atypical for its time.

Compositionally, it is immediately clear who the dominant and secondary figures of the *Portrait* are. The sisters Laudomia and Ginevra sit in the foreground, occupying more space than any of the men, their rich ornamentation contrasting sharply with the dark simplicity of the men's garb. Ulisse Gozzadini, while painted further in the background than his daughters, is almost dead center. By contrast, Annibale and Camillo fade into shadow, greatly obscured by their wives in front of them. The prominence of the father and the insignificance of the husbands in relation to their wives is too marked for a common conjugal reading to be plausible. In addition, Annibale and Camillo have no seat at the table, the space occupied only by the family of origin. They are closed out of the inner circle, met almost entirely with the backs of Ulisse, Ginevra, and Laudomia, which suggests they are unwanted and peripheral. Fontana adds a connection between spouses in the form of their hands resting on their wives' shoulders, but the slight, timid nature suggests it is a nominal gesture only. In the case of Laudomia, it is unclear whether her husband's fingertips are even touching her shoulder or just hovering slightly above it. A complete separation could have explicitly conveyed a chill between the spouses, but deliberately including what seems to be an ineffectual attempt at connection evokes (at least to the contemporary viewer) a hint of the sisters' scorn. In this way, Annibale and Camillo appear as outcasts within their own family, evincing an unusual alteration to the power dynamic.

Because the husbands are openly slighted, the women's clothing – exact replicas of the dresses and jewels supposedly purchased with their father's money

1 Caroline P. Murphy, "Lavinia Fontana and Le Dame Della Citta: Understanding Female Artistic Patronage in Late Sixteenth-Century Bologna," *Renaissance Studies* 10, no. 2 (1996): 195.

for their marriages – seems suspiciously out of place.² In contrast to the sisters' well-lit dresses, shadows almost obscure the garb of Annibale and Camillo, but what is visible seems far too plain to be wedding attire. Laudomia and Ginevra, as was customary, brought substantive dowries when they married their distant cousins in 1570, the usufruct of which was paid to them by the trustees of Ulisse's estate.³ The sisters also inherited money from the deaths of other family members, a sum of which they jointly invested in land.⁴ However, after the deaths of Ginevra and several aging trustees, Annibale assumed full control of the management of Ulisse's entire estate, including Laudomia's dowry and the sisters' land in 1576 and 1581 respectively.⁵ Unfortunately for Laudomia, Annibale, swayed by the corruptive influence of power, began withholding money from her as early as 1579.⁶ The wealth of her own family started slipping inexorably from her grasp. Thus the wedding gowns and jewelry in the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family* serve as a pointed reminder about where ownership of that money rightfully ought to lie.⁷ The exactitude of the replication supports this interpretation because Fontana's attention to detail on every jewel the sisters wear and the conspicuous lack of matching riches sported by the husbands evinces Laudomia's desire to emphasize the sisters' patrilineal wealth. This choice closely associates the women with their father and his estate while distancing them from their husbands' households. In Renaissance Italy, the transfer of a bride from her family of origin to her husband's family was absolute, and much like a sale.⁸ To diminish the impact of that exchange while her husband still lived profoundly undermined the established marriage practices of the time.

Despite the sisters' conspicuous marriage attire, several aspects of their clothing do not correspond with a typical reading of marriage celebration. The

black lace overdress, an addition by Fontana, is suited for mourning, perhaps symbolic of the deaths of Ginevra, Ulisse, and all the children the sisters had buried; four of Ginevra's children and six of Laudomia's had not survived infancy.⁹ The physical, pictorial darkness on the dresses may also cast a metaphorical shadow on the marriages that those dresses represent.¹⁰ After all, these two marriages saddled Laudomia with a dishonest, controlling brother-in-law and, evident in stipulations from her will that Camillo's bastard children never receive her money, an unfaithful husband.¹¹ By this interpretation, the husbands' general inclusion in the portrait becomes complicated. Perhaps Laudomia felt she gained a certain authority through her marital state and the resulting implications of legitimate adulthood. The other original element of Laudomia's appearance is the lynx pelt draped over her lap, which symbolizes chastity and sharp sight.¹² The latter implication might subtly state that she was aware of the ways in which Annibale and Camillo were mistreating her, and indicate her unwillingness to be deceived. The implication of chastity is potentially another way of symbolically separating Laudomia from her husband in favor of her birth family. Laudomia showed herself to be fertile, albeit bearing only two children who survived infancy, but after the death of her only son, the pregnancies stopped. The loss of an heir must have disappointed Camillo bitterly, perhaps putting an end to their sexual relationship. Under this reading, the lynx pelt might then allude to the distance between Camillo and Laudomia, recalling the days of her virginity, during which time the only male with whom she could be associated with was her father. This further minimized the stated relevance of her husband.

This emphasis on birth family is marked very visually. Ulisse and his daughters are all around one table, the light striking their brows in much the

2 Caroline P. Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: a painter and her patrons in sixteenth-century Bologna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 119 and 122.

3 Caroline P. Murphy, "Lavinia Fontana: an artist and her society in late sixteenth century Bologna" (PhD diss., University of London, 1996), 164.

4 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: a painter*, 123.

5 Ibid., 121-123

6 Ibid., 124

7 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana and Le Dame della Citta*, 198.

8 Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 215.

9 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: a painter*, 126-127

10 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: an artist*, 176

11 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: a painter*, 130

12 Ibid., 127

same way, whereas Annibale and Camillo stand in the shadows. The small dog on the table, caressed by Laudomia, is most likely a *fides* motif.¹³ Lapdogs commonly accompanied noblewomen in portraiture, as seen in one of Fontana's other works, *Portrait of Constanza Alidosi* (Fig. 2). However, the dog lies on the center of the table – dominated by the family of origin – and not Laudomia's lap, allowing Fontana to imply Laudomia is faithful to a very specific (and here, literal) circle of people. When a woman was married, her allegiance was supposed to transfer to her husband and her new family, but the targeted nature of her loyalty symbol seems to suggest the opposite in Laudomia's case.¹⁴



Figure 2, Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Constanza Alidosi*

Despite the numerous allusions to the collective power and importance of Laudomia's birth family, it is not always emphasized as a single undifferentiated unit. Power is ascribed to Laudomia specifically, (and to Ginevra too, to a lesser degree), through color and composition choice. The vividness of her red dress is striking in comparison to the dark and neutral attire of the other subjects, setting her apart and evoking life, strength, and boldness. While Laudomia gives her father the middle of the paint-



Figure 3, Sofonisba Anguissola, *Portrait of the Artist's Family*

ing, he points towards her as if redirecting the viewer's attention; in this way, Laudomia expresses both daughterly piety by ceding overt centrality to him and her own legitimacy through her father's pointed approval of her. Although all the subjects face the viewer directly, they are also angled toward Laudomia, guiding the viewer's eye toward her as well. Both sisters are accorded importance by the massive amount of space they occupy in the foreground. Both also benefit from the inscription on the back of the painting. The subjects' names and ages are specified, along with, surprisingly, the men's identification relative to the women.¹⁵ They are the "father of" or "husband of," while the sisters are simply named, when traditionally it would be the other way around. That the sisters are quite literally not defined by the men present is a remarkably progressive statement that Laudomia and Fontana have made.¹⁶ Inscribed beneath Laudomia's name is "fece fare la presente opera," meaning, "she has had made this present work."¹⁷ Though she yields the center space to her father, ownership of the entire scene is hers. While the majority of the compositional cues emphasize Laudomia's association with her father's family, these other details give her authority of her own, clearly communicating her proprietorship and intentionality. Finally, Fontana painted the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family* with dimensions of 253.5cm by 191cm. The *Portrait* is enormous for its kind, its subjects almost life-sized and its dimensions more appropriate to an altarpiece



Figure 4, Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, *Family Group Portrait*

13 Ibid., 127.

14 Diane Owen Hughes. "Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy," in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, edited by John Bossy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 98.

15 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: an artist*, 157.

16 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: a painter*, 118.

17 Murphy, *Le Dame della Cita*, 195.

than a family portrait of that era. The grandeur of such a large painting makes it, and Laudomia's assertion of patrilineal authority, unignorable.

The *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family* transgresses more than just size typological norms. Portraits of adult women with their fathers were all but nonexistent. When a woman was grown, she married or went into a convent; either way she was separated from her parents. Painting Laudomia and Ginevra with Ulisse at all, ignoring the other connections described previously, had to have been a very deliberate association that strongly undermined the fact of their marriages. This transgression then makes the *Portrait*, and by consequence its intended message, difficult to categorize. One category of family portraiture is parent(s)-and-child(ren), typically done to document legacy and lineage, as seen in Sofonisba Anguissola's 1558-9 *Portrait of the Artist's Family* (Fig. 3) or any of the family portraits of Giovanni Antonio Fasolo (Fig. 4, Fig. 5).¹⁸ Fasolo's *Portrait of a Family Group* (Fig. 5) shows a typical parent-children scene: the patriarch



Figure 5, Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, *Portrait of a Family Group*



Figure 6, Lorenzo Lotto, *Conjugal Portrait*

– his dominance evinced by his size and centrality – surrounded by his progeny, with his offspring in arm's reach. His children are young and presumably unmarried, tied only to his household, so their relevance in the painting is grounded in their relationship to their father as his heirs. Fontana treats the sisters similarly in the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family*, drawing them back home to their father.

Precluding that categorization from fitting well, however, is the fact that this type of portraiture is notably not done with adult children, especially not married adult daughters who are essentially no longer part of the family.¹⁹ The inclusion of the husbands makes this reading even more questionable. Furthermore, that Laudomia's two daughters and Ginevra's three sons were alive but not pictured sidesteps the purpose of commissioning such a portrait. Fontana is economical, painting only enough of the necessary players to recount the Gozzadini drama. Her omissions eliminate lineage as the intended subject and prompt the viewer to consider the anomalous nature of the relationships between the people shown.

Another potential category for the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family* is a conjugal portrait, but the centrality of the father and the discrepancies of the spouses' depictions disputes that interpretation. The conjugal portraits of Lorenzo Lotto (Fig. 6, Fig. 7) feature spouses who are alone with each other (or alone save a cherub or *fides* symbol) and unambiguously central. Lotto's depiction of Micer Marsilio Cassotti and Faustina Cassotti (Fig. 6) demonstrates tropes of the genre conspicuously absent from the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family*. The groom clearly presents a ring, the proud



Figure 7, Lorenzo Lotto, *Conjugal Portrait*

18 Diane Owen Hughes. "Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17, no. 1 (1986): 26; Jacqueline M. Musacchio, "The Material Culture of Family Life in Italy and Beyond," in *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*, edited by Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 283

19 Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 224-225.

symbol of marriage, for the viewer to see as he reaches across to slip it onto his bride's finger. Lotto's bride and groom are on the same level as each other, making contact not only by holding hands but also by sitting close enough to press their legs together. This physical connection is a far cry from the chilly hovering of Camillo's fingertips over Laudomia's shoulder. While a grinning, winged Cupid literally links Lotto's couple with a yoke, Fontana does everything possible to distance her patroness from her marital commitment. Lotto's couple also dominates the compositional space with rough equality in terms of the attention given to each person. Neither is shuffled off to the side or relegated to obscurity as in Fontana's painting. Fontana's refusal to adhere to any particular category of portrait is a powerful indicator of the dysfunctionality of the family shown.

As well as being typologically transgressive, the *Portrait* is stylistically abnormal. There is a great stillness about the scene that is unusual in most group portraiture. Laudomia arches one brow as though she is waiting for something from the viewer: acknowledgement of



Figure 8, Bernardino Licinio, *Portrait of Arrigo Licinio and His Family*

her story, perhaps, with all its subtle implications. None of the subjects look at each other; all stare outwards confrontationally, or perhaps expectantly, due to their unwavering intensity. Tension becomes apparent in the stiff and minimal nature of what little interaction there is. Compare this with Bernardino Licinio's *Portrait of Arrigo Licinio and His Family* (Fig. 8) or another Fontana *Family Portrait* (Fig. 9), in which the subjects look at each other, reach out for each other, raise their hands to speak, and display or proffer objects. From this dearth of interaction, Fontana thus hints at the unusual relationships between her subjects, as well as the

twining histories that composed the story of the *Portrait*.

Also contributing to these stylistic clues is the jarringly unflattering portrayal of Ginevra. In an era where women were idealized in art, often to the point of being unrecognizable, this is a strange choice.²⁰ Perhaps Laudomia, unable to produce a single surviving heir, made this decision out of resentment for her sister who produced several; in immortalizing herself as the more beautiful sister, Laudomia could, in a small way, assert a bodily triumph of her own.²¹ Perhaps, though, it reflects the unflattering truths about the family that culminated in the commissioning of the portrait. Fontana conspicuously abstains from glossing over her subjects' flaws to stress this brutal truthfulness with which the Gozzadini narrative is related.



Figure 9, Lavinia Fontana, *Family Portrait*

Lavinia Fontana's compositional and stylistic choices in rendering the Gozzadini family subvert social expectations by stressing the sisters' connection to their father's household and minimizing their connections to their husbands. Laudomia Gozzadini, financially dependent on an unscrupulous brother-in-law and tied to an adulterous husband, commissioned the *Portrait of the Gozzadini Family* subtly to assert her patrilineal rights, to express the offenses committed against her, and to communicate her chosen allegiances. Robbed of control of her circumstances, she nonetheless took control of her image for posterity. Eventually, in a lawsuit conducted from 1609 to 1614, she recovered what was hers. Annibale's dishonesty came to an end, but Laudomia's profound statement of self-determination remained immortalized by Lavinia Fontana's hand.²²

20 Rachel D. Masters, "The Portraiture of Women during the Italian Renaissance," (Honors thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 2013).

21 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana and Le Dame Della Citta*, 198.

22 Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: a painter*, 135.

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