"The Underpainting and the Overpainting": Layers of Power and Powerlessness in Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait*

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Abstract:

Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait* (2022) revisits late-Renaissance Italian courtly life, with its intrigues of dynastic politics, to explore the short life and mysterious death of Lucrezia de' Medici, third daughter of Cosimo, Duke of Florence. Lucrezia, aged sixteen in the novel, is married off to the older Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, a pawn in her father's hands to fulfill his wish for a political alliance between the two families. O'Farrell enters the young woman's life inspired, as she acknowledges in the Author's note, by Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842), a dramatic monologue that, in turn, draws inspiration from a portrait of Lucrezia. Both Browning and O'Farrell endorse the rumour that the girl was murdered by her husband, though the official records suggest that she probably died of 'putrid fever'.

O'Farrell's historical narrative, the article argues, is both an act of appropriation of a true story and a creative re-reading of it, that intertextually engages with a different source, Browning's poem. Through the figure of Lucrezia, O'Farrell aims to explore the life of women who are obscured by men, entrapped and circumscribed by a patriarchal society that suffocates their aspirations and expectations, and ruthlessly stifles any attempt at autonomous choices.

Keywords: Renaissance Italy, patriarchy, fragmentation of the self, subtext, feminist critique, gender relations, power dynamics.

Introduction

> My God, had women written histories
> Like cloistered scholars in oratories
> They'd have set down more of men's wickedness
> Than all the sons of Adam could redress
> (Wife of Bath, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*)

Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait* (2022) revisits late-Renaissance Italian courtly life, with its opulence and intrigues of dynastic politics, to limn the short life and mysterious death of a young woman, Lucrezia de' Medici, third daughter and fifth child of Cosimo, Duke of Florence, and his brilliant Spanish wife, Eleonora of Toledo.

In *The Marriage Portrait,* O'Farrell juxtaposes the scant factual records of Lucrezia's short life with portraiture, minute descriptions of places and atmospheric evocations of psychic landscapes, and reimagines her story against the background of Renaissance Italy. The article argues that the writer works the little threads of historical detail into the narrative tapestry, to delve deeper into other layers, "other narratives, hiding in the shadows behind the one that we think we know" (Kleiber 2023), the "secret places in the text [that] are the internal mark of its inexhaustibility" (Ricoeur 1983, 75). It is a textual 'secrecy' that the narrative itself engenders, signalling the hermeneutic potential that an untold story opens up both for the writer and the reader.

She explores the subtext of Lucrezia's life, epitomized by the symbolic title of the last chapter, "the underpainting and the overpainting" (O'Farrell 2022, 413)[1] and, by filling the empty spaces in her obscure life, she restores her agency. In fact, a favourite theme of O'Farrell is to bring to light the tangled stories of women plunged into extreme psychological states by warping relationships. They are compelling characters whose lives were overshadowed by men and enacted in the background, silenced or confined by paternalistic societies, and bypassed by grand historical narratives, as happened to Anne Hathaway to whom she gave back a story and a voice in her previous novel *Hamnet* (2020).

This aspect of the text will be discussed guided by Pierre Macherey's argument that "the speech of the book comes from a certain silence, [...] a *certain absence*", the text's "unconscious", what it tacitly implies, and that "the work is founded on the multiplicity of its meanings" (1978, 85, 78, italics in the original).

A young woman, a poem and a portrait

The real Lucrezia was married off to the twenty-four-year-old Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, at the age of thirteen, in 1558. She was the replacement bride for her elder sister Maria who had been promised to Alfonso, a marriage contract signed by her father, Cosimo I de' Medici, to seal the peace between his Spanish ally, King Philip II of Spain, and his longtime rival Duke Ercole II d'Este, Alfonso's father, but Maria had unexpectedly died of malaria in 1557 before the wedding could take place.

Renaissance marriages of the aristocratic classes "were about wealth, lineage, and political cachet, not romantic love" (Mandel 2000, 720), and daughters were significant in Cosimo's dynastic plans to further his ducal ambitions, as "political alliances through marriage could be a means of cementing Medici power" (Langdon 2006, 98). So the Medici-d'Este alliance had to be honoured to heal the breach between the two ducal families and maintain the delicate and outwardly civilized balance of power between the two courts: one, the d'Este, could claim antecedents stretching back to Charlemagne; the other, the Medici, not many generations back mere merchants, were only recently ennobled and striving for hegemony in Italy.

Allegedly Lucrezia, "hardly past childhood, was infatuated, but Alfonso by all accounts was not attracted to her" (Langdon 2006, 140), though he accepted her as replacement for her elder sister. Using his military campaigns as an excuse to delay his child-bride's move to Ferrara, Alfonso

left Florence three days after the wedding and went to France to fight for Henry II, while Lucrezia remained at the Medici palace almost sequestered indoor by her austere mother for the following two years, strongly resenting her long and harsh period of 'incarceration'. During his absence, Alfonso, "apparently, could not be moved to write to his young wife", though one of his retainers at the Florentine court reported to him that his wife was always sad, scarcely smiled, and "pined for letters from him" (Langdon 2006, 143-144).

On his father's death in 1559, Alfonso returned to Ferrara where he was sworn in as the 5th Duke. Towards the end of January 1560, he sent his uncle Francesco d'Este to fetch Lucrezia. Accompanied by her brother Francesco, she set out for her husband's court and made her magnificent official entrance into Ferrara on the 17th of February.

Less than a year later, on the 21st April 1561, after two months of illness, she died of 'putrid fever' according to the official records, a political blow for both families who entered a period of deep mourning. Immediately suspicions were voiced and rumours began to circulate that she had been poisoned by her husband through motives of jealousy, but actually symptoms of decline from consumption were already apparent before she left Florence for Ferrara. Besides, inter-court documents dispel such gossips recording that Alfonso and his family proved sincerely caring during Lucrezia's final months of treatments. "Her marriage of less than three years – wholly marred by her pathetic, lingering death in exile in Ferrara, under sympathetic Este care but mostly isolated from her family – informs the brief historic traces there are of her" (Langton 2006, 141).

At the beginning of O'Farrell's novel, Lucrezia is sixteen, "not quite a year into her marriage" (1) to Alfonso, her destiny bound up in political expediency. This barter, a young woman's future for social prestige, fuels O'Farrell's tale of expectations and betrayal. In the Author's note, O'Farrell declares that she conflated "both the marriage and the departure, so that Lucrezia [...] is married and leaves for Ferrara in one single event at the age of fifteen". Besides, she renames Alfonso's two sisters "to avoid confusion with other characters in the book" (434), and brings forward the grim episode of Alfonso sentencing his sister's lover to death that, in reality, happened after Lucrezia's death, in 1575, not 1561.

O'Farrell enters the young woman's life inspired, as she acknowledges both in the Author's note and in many interviews, first by a poem and then by a painting, and brings that young woman back to life. The poem is Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842), a dramatic monologue, whose protagonist is widely believed to be based on Alfonso II d'Este, and that in turn draws inspiration from a portrait of Lucrezia, most likely the one housed at the Palatine Gallery, in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, very close to Casa Guidi, Robert Browning's Florence residence. In his dramatic monologue, Browning endorses the hypothesis that the girl was murdered by her husband, a sinister situation that forms the kernel of the novel.

By choosing to make the Duke himself address a silent listener, who turns out to be the envoy of the family of his potential future wife, Browning offers a subtle psychological examination of the Duke's mindset, and conveys his possessive, jealous nature and his overbearing hubris. He does it

through a process that starts from a neutral beginning: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive" (ll. 1-2). Then, through a succession of delicately engineered stages, the poet forms the complex portrait of a marriage, inside which a young wife's simple-minded happiness is set against her husband's sophisticated awareness of his sense of destiny, lineage and prestige of class, attributes that mark him as a typical Renaissance grandee: "She thanked men – good! but thanked / Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/ With anybody's gift" (ll. 31-34). Historical sources confirm these personality traits and describe Alfonso as "immoderately arrogant and conceited", someone who "prided himself beyond measure upon his bravery, intelligence, and ancient descent. With all that he was vengeful and ever ready to pursue a feud" (von Chledowski 1919, 311).

Gradually, the reader becomes aware of the Duke's egotism and callousness, his flashes of resentment and criticism of his wife and what, in his view, are her failures in decorum. His enigmatic portrait comes to full life in the brilliant last lines of the poem, reaching a chilling climax in the unexpected final revelation, "Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (ll. 43-46), thus silencing her. The end of the poem foregrounds the Duke's lack of human affection, his obsession with power and the resolute cynical determination to assert it, in order to control even his wife, one more object to possess and display in his private art collection.

In a very insightful analysis of Browning's poem, Louis Friedland discusses the specific nature of Alfonso's jealousy in these terms: "The Duke's jealousy [...] may be more properly termed an arch-egotist's overweening desire for possessiveness, – an egotist who [...] exacts the last measure of obedience to his will for exclusive ownership" (1936, 674-75).

His immoderate desire for possession could only be quenched by reducing her life to the rigid dimension of a painting. When her life is extinguished, she is no longer full of life, yet still a potential source of jealousy, to be preserved, hidden behind a curtain and shown only at his own will. So, he blandly recollects his wife, a young girl sacrificed to his tyranny because she refused to be 'owned', in the same way as he owns the painting of his "Last Duchess" or the bronze statue of "Neptune/ [...] Taming a sea-horse" (ll. 54-55), both art objects essential instruments for the display of power. The statue, the image of a powerful, brutal god taking control over a sea-horse, a creature evoking vitality and freedom, symbolically also sums up the unbalanced marriage relationship between the Duke and his young wife.

Indeed, Alfonso was a well-known patron both of fine arts – painting, architecture, sculpture – of music and literature, in this latter sphere a patron of Torquato Tasso, who wrote his *Aminta* (1573) for him, and who also appears in O'Farrell's text. Browning's "Last Duchess" will become "my first Duchess" (337) in O'Farrell's, a slip of the tongue of Alfredo that speaks volumes about his personality. Browning's poem is a subterranean presence in the novel, its influence surfacing at a few points, in some allusions that signal difference rather than similarity between the two texts. In O'Farrell's version of the story, "Browning is still present, but her treatment half-obscures it, bringing what was underneath to the surface" (Bucknell 2022).

In talking about the genesis of her novel, O'Farrell reveals that, as for Browning, the other source of inspiration was the portrait of Lucrezia de' Medici, commissioned by her family probably in early 1560, just before her departure for Ferrara, and attributed to the workshop of the Medici court portrait painter Agnolo di Cosimo, known as Bronzino.

In the same interview, O'Farrell adds that, after re-reading Browning's poem, she downloaded Lucrezia's portrait on her phone and,

> As soon as I saw her, it was a kind of lightning bolt. I knew as soon as I looked into her eyes that I was going to write a novel about her and that I was looking at the subject of my next book (Kleiber 2023).

What she found intriguing was that in the portrait Lucrezia is not smiling, and she looks really troubled, worried, anxious, "as if she has something she wants to say" (Kleiber 2023). Because, although the girl is 'imprisoned' in the framed portrait, there is a sense of her interiority emanating from her image that the writer wants to explore, as "no human creature can be completely silenced by a text or by an image" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 16).

Intrigued and inspired by the portrait of the mysterious young girl and her grave expression, a small pale face engulfed by a dark background, and puzzled by her mysterious early death, O'Farrell weaves for Lucrezia what Paul Ricoeur calls "the as yet untold story", a story that demands to be narrated because,

> in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative (1983, 75).

In O'Farrell's novel, Alfonso commissions the marriage portrait – which, however, is fictional – to Sebastiano Filippi, called Il Bastianino, a real court portraitist. The presence of this painter gives the Duchess the chance to meet two of his apprentices, one of which will play a crucial role in the dramatic turn her life will take.

O'Farrell unravels Lucrezia's story sweeping back and forth, interweaving two narrative threads and timelines, and alternating the novel's focus. One narrative charts Lucrezia's life trajectory, starting from her conception, her childhood and early adolescence in Florence, then her brief married life, up to the moment when Alfonso takes her to his country hunting lodge, when the two threads converge. The other follows Lucrezia's present state during her final hours at the lodge when she realizes that her husband is planning to kill her.

O'Farrell flouts the linear ordering of temporal sequence as she does not recognize in chronology a propulsive narrative force and privileges thematic rather than temporal connections; so there are constant time shifts, a temporal dislocation that mirrors both the protagonist's psychological fragmentation and *how* our mind works, while, at the same time, creating mystery and suspense. The writer uses, most of the time, the present tense to bring the past back to life, manipulating time and

point of view – to keep the reader vacillating between sympathy and skepticism – and a close third person narrator internally focalized from Lucrezia's point of view. O'Farrell's construction of narrative point of view is a powerful means to bring readers imperceptibly to share the values of the text, hollowing out a linguistic space that they are invited to occupy and from which to challenge the dominant values and gender assumptions of the world she is portraying, with an open, critical mind.

"A wild and lonely place"

The brief first chapter sets in motion the present narrative strand and offers the epistemological key to enter the text. The novel opens in 1561, at a remote "fortress" (2) in Bondeno, west of Ferrara, where Alfonso has taken Lucrezia. It is a rural retreat, the fitting place for her potential demise, being "a high-walled edifice of dark stone" (1) that looks more like a prison or a tomb, surrounded by dense forest, an inescapable place that epitomizes Lucrezia's condition inside her marriage. She is seated at a long dining table, facing her husband; unexpectedly, at the end of the first paragraph, "with a peculiar clarity" (1), observing his face in the flickering light of a candle, she has the foreboding that her husband "intends to kill her" (1), a sudden realization that is like "a dark-feathered bird of prey [that] has alighted on the arm of her chair" (2).

So, not only O'Farrell endorses the rumour that the girl was murdered by her husband, but, unlike Browning, the revelation of Lucrezia's death comes at the very beginning and the entire narrative is framed by the impending murder. The reader's concern, then, is not with what happens but *how* and *why* it comes to happen. Besides, whereas Browning's poem is centred on Alfonso's resentment, his egotism and disapproval of his wife's behaviour, O'Farrell is interested in capturing Lucrezia's subjectivity and psychology, by tracing her existential trajectory: first, as a solitary, but profoundly imaginative, young girl who knows little of the world beyond her family's palace walls and can do nothing to resist the dynastic pressures on her as a woman. Then, her growing sense of imprisonment and obligations as a young bride. In both cases, she is expected to show obedience, the main requirement of the ideal woman at the time, first to her parents, then to her husband.

In that initial moment of terror, Lucrezia becomes an observer of her own plight and has a disembodied view of herself "hovering by the vaulted ceiling, looking down at herself and him" (2), observing what appears to be a sort of prelude to her death, almost as if she is watching a play in a theatre. This sense of doubleness, a split between her mind and her body, when she sees herself from outside, a watchful remove from action, and the feeling of being distanced from not only her surroundings but from herself, is a motif that returns in several crucial scenes, when fear and emotional distress threaten her psychic integrity. Lucrezia's sudden revelation about her demise plunges the reader immediately into her panicked mind: on the one hand, it creates a tense and threatening atmosphere that rises as the two narrative threads draw closer. On the other hand, it interrogates the gap between what Lucrezia knows and what, in her feverish and fervid imagination, she assumes is happening, sowing the seeds of doubt in the reader that maybe she is simply a spirited young girl drawing conclusions too quickly.

The ominous certainty of her impending death surfaces five times in the first four pages and recurs with regularity throughout the text. O'Farrell underscores Lucrezia's rising panic through formal devices: she combines the use of the present continuous with a succession of questions in a paragraph, and the hammering repetition of words or phrases, all devices that contribute to give readers the impression that they are inhabiting the girl's mind and following her accelerated thinking process. Besides, the writer intersperses the section with elements that contribute to ground Lucrezia's fear in reality and not in her imagination: Alfonso is not "in his customary place" at table; he "straighten[s] a knife" (1) in his hands, "resting his fingers on the bare skin of her wrist" (2), almost to signify his possession of her. Besides, he entertains her with a tale about hunting and the description of his fingers covered in blood when releasing the arrows to hit the target.

In her frightened mind, Lucrezia connects these details to Alfonso's abrupt decision, what appeared to be a capricious whim, to set on a sudden journey on a cold, wet winter day, to reach a "wild and lonely place" (1). She also suspects that her husband has carefully schemed to leave her trusted maid behind in Ferrara, separating her from others, to be sure that he would be alone with her, and begins to wonder *how* he will kill her. Lastly, she recalls the words her sister-in-law had whispered to her: "You will be blamed" (2), a subtle hint at the urgency for her to conceive an heir to secure Alfonso's delicate political position and the safety of his region. On the one hand, to Lucrezia this seems reason enough for her husband to wish to get rid of her – as she has failed to have a child as yet; on the other hand, it underscores how a woman's function inside the marriage is tied to her reproductive nature, basically to be a fruitful womb. This necessity is epitomized by her mother Eleonora, named "La Fecundissima" (9), and her personal Latin motto, "'CUM PUDORE LAETA FOECUNDITAS' ('Joyful fertility with modesty')", because, "for a state's survival and hegemony, succession was *the* paramount concern" (Langdon 2006 86, 99 italics in the original).

The dynamics of the interaction in this very brief section brings to light, and problematizes, the traditional stereotypical dichotomy that sees the male's 'transcendence' of nature symbolized by his ability to hunt and kill, and the female's identification with nature in her role as a life-giver which perpetuates the species. As Simone de Beauvoir commented, in a patriarchal world, superiority or authority "has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills" (1953, 58), an ideology that has constructed woman as man's Other.

Lucrezia's fears of death seem to be confirmed the next morning when she begins to feel sick and vomits. Once again, she recollects her sister-in-law's repeated warning about Alfredo: "You have no idea what he is capable of" (362), advising her to be "very, very careful", going on to insinuate that, as Alfredo "has never [...] got a woman with child" (363), it is *he* who is responsible for the lack of an heir, but that *she* will be blamed for it. Actually, the Duke died childless and, from all indications, even before he married Lucrezia, he "had good reasons to dread the oncoming of physical impotence" (Friedland 1936, 669), for causes that were not set forth by the authorities but hinted at in unmistakable terms.

O'Farrell chooses a female narrative gaze and consciousness to offer readers both a first glimpse

of the unbalanced psychological power relationship inside the marriage and of Alfonso, whose charming façade masks a Machiavellian dark side, viewed at court "like Janus, with two faces, two personalities. And he can switch between them" (258), as frequently happens in the course of the narrative, at times quite abruptly and unexpectedly. There are many instances of Alfonso's dark side surfacing in the novel, with unpredictable explosions of anger, sometimes directed at Lucrezia who is forced into psychological submission and in puzzled awe of such moments, that can happen even for the most banal of reasons, as when she opens a window fascinated by the dramatic scenery of an impending storm outside. Alfonso orders her to shut the window and when she hesitates, he reaches her, seizes her wrists and pulls her away, "his hand closed about her upper arm like a manacle" (275), considering her behaviour reckless. When she tries to justify herself, he warns her: "Do not [...] be foolish enough to interrupt me when I am speaking. Now or ever" (277), and makes it clear that he expects her to obey his orders without delay or hesitation. Though Lucrezia feels flames of anger smoulder within her, she realizes that she is powerless in facing the "vengeful, irascible monster in human form" that her husband has turned into, and tears fill her eyes. When he sees this, he calms down and, she ponders, "the beast is banished: Alfonso is back" (279).

However, the most shocking proof for Lucrezia of her husband's degree of cruelty is his decision to put to death his sister Elisabetta's lover when he discovers their secret relationship, even compelling Elisabetta to watch, as "he commanded the guards to hold her fast, so that she could not get away" (357). This revelation leaves Lucrezia speechless and under the impression of being no longer in "a tower room but in a box, shuttered off from the world" (357), totally defenseless. This personality trait of Alfonso is confirmed also by historians who maintain that the Duke was "master of life and death over all in Ferrara, and disposed at times to exercise his power with ruthless cruelty" (Friedland 1936, 674).

O'Farrell consciously intends the novel's first section to serve as a paradigm for the larger plot, as it foregrounds and juxtaposes images of suffocating imprisonment with fear and the impulse to escape, motifs that resonate through both narrative trajectories. The atmosphere of entrapment has clear literary echoes: the first one that comes to mind is the episode of the stately, chilly red-room in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), a place that, like Lucrezia's hunting lodge, is "a kind of patriarchal death chamber" in Gilbert' and Gubar's words (1979, 340). Closely resembling the split perception of herself that Lucrezia has, in the red room little Jane Eyre perceives her own image reflected in the "great looking-glass" as a "strange little figure" (Brontë 1908, 8), alien and disturbing, floating towards her. Even more apposite for the marriage dynamics they both evoke is "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, another story of a woman's suffocating confinement and urge to escape from a censorious and paternalistic husband, a narrative punctuated by the presence of a figure – her 'double' – imprisoned behind the wallpaper. In all three texts, the relationship between imagery of enclosure and the use of doubles are complementary signs of female victimization, signifying existential conditions in which the protagonists are "confined within uncomfortable selves as well as within uncomfortable spaces" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 443) that they desperately yearn to escape.

Lucrezia is trapped all her life: to begin with, in her family's grand palace where, as underscored by the second epigraph to the novel from Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), "the ladies ... are forced to follow the whims, fancies and dictates of their fathers, mothers, brothers and husbands, so that they spend most of their time cooped up within the narrow confines of their rooms". Here, still a powerless teenager, she is "used as a link in [her father's] chain of power" (282), an object of exchange, a socially and politically prized, exchangeable body, existing in relation to two men who are involved in the 'market' as active participants, to ensure political alliances that would cement Medici power. It is a commodification that rests on a dual, hierarchized opposition and the abasement of woman, a conceptual organization that upholds the patriarchal status quo in which the "subordination of the feminine to the masculine order [...] appears to be the condition for the functioning of the machine" (Cixous 1980, 92). Then, within her marriage, she feels "nailed into a wooden box and placed in [a] tomb" (80) with a series of requirements and constraints as a young bride, imprisoned both literally in her husband's palaces and symbolically in the eponymous marriage portrait, actually a correlative objective of her condition.

Short chapters recounting the on-going events of the following hours, alternate with much longer ones giving us Lucrezia's backstory. So, in the second chapter, the narrative shifts back in time to Lucrezia's conception in 1544 and to Florence.

A caged tigress and a framed Duchess

In Lucrezia, O'Farrell portrays a sensitive, solitary young girl, with an intractable wild streak since childhood, in her mother's view, a daughter of privilege but rebellious to the constraints of her station. Confined to a court in which she struggles to be fully accepted in her diversity, she restlessly scrutinizes the distant horizons, almost yearning after an *other* dimension to find her true self. Historical records corroborate Lucrezia's melancholic disposition, exacerbated by her austere mother who sequestered her indoors, and also report that Duke Cosimo was fond of calling her "Obstinate one!", adding, "She is just like us!" (Mandel 2000, 732), a true Medici. She is well-educated and gifted with true talent in the artistic sphere. During her art lessons she learns that "the world had different layers and depths, [...] and could be constructed from lines that converged and intersected" (31). She tries this theory out in her pictures with such compelling perfection of perspective and wealth of details that her drawing tutor is taken aback, because they are surprisingly complex for a small child; he even shows them to the court artist, Giorgio Vasari, who is truly impressed by her skills.

Yet, scholarly opinions on Lucrezia differ: some "suggest that she was quite worthy of adulation, both intellectually and personally" (Mandel 2000, 736). Others maintain that she was "unprepossessing, lacking in vivacity", less intellectually bright and "less physically appealing than her sisters" (Langdon 2006, 140); however, some scholars note that her grace and fine appearance, as mirrored in her official portrait, were praised and acknowledged in court correspondence. Gabrille Langdon attributes the negative critical views to past scholarship, and asserts that "Lucrezia

was schooled in Greek and Latin and knew how to play a musical instrument and to sing" (2006, 132), a view that is embraced by O'Farrell in her description of the girl.

In the novel, Lucrezia's restless and free spirit resents the stifling atmosphere of the family palazzo that is like a prison to her. This constant sense of oppressive restrictions finds its best symbolic representation in an episode that comes towards the beginning of the novel. Lucrezia, still a tiny but curious, untamable child, sneaks around the palace secret passages all by herself at night, eavesdropping at doors, unafraid, and sees guards bringing a caged tigress into the palace dungeons. She is upset by the desperate, mournful cry of "a creature captured against its will, a creature whose desires have all been disregarded" (18), a line that sounds more and more prescient of what Lucrezia will feel like when she is married off to Alfredo. Once her father takes the children into his exotic menagerie, to show them the animals he keeps there, and Lucrezia is moved to tears by the terrible, sad beauty of the lonely tigress, sympathizing with the imprisoned creature's "searing pain" (45). She fearlessly reaches through the bars of the cage and strokes the tigress, unarmed, identifying with the caged feline, even believing that "she was the new tigress" (26).

The tigress is a signifier of Lucrezia's existential condition: as a child, her behaviour terrifies her mother, who decides to have her removed from the nursery and banished to the basement kitchen because, her wet nurse Sofia remarks, she is "like a wild animal" and "run[s] like a savage" (13). When she is four years old, she likes spending hours "looking out at the city and the distant hills beyond" (13), yearning for freedom and refusing to perform the usual duties expected of her. As a young adolescent, she is 'caged' in a marriage contract in which she has no say and trapped at her husband's court where she realizes that, like the tigress, "captivity had been her destiny all along" (21).

The other major symbol of her condition of entrapment in the novel, a correlative objective of Lucrezia's condition, is the titular marriage portrait that Alfonso orders to his court painter, Il Bastianino, actually Alfonso's favourite artist.

The portraits

Though both Browning and O'Farrell are inspired by a portrait of Lucrezia de Medici, its representation as well as its function and role in the two texts are different. In the dramatic monologue, Browning chooses the Duke's eyes as filters to introduce the Duchess who is only observed, commented on and talked about, but whose voice, obviously, is never heard. The Duke's controlling male gaze is more interested in admiring the finished portrait, in which the Duchess is objectified and fetishized for his own pleasure, and in praising the painter, Fra' Pandolf, who captured her glance's "depth and passion" (l. 8), rather than the young woman herself. The Duchess, in fact, as already observed, is actually the object of the Duke's severe censure, having proved less docile than he expected and incompatible with the hierarchic principle he embodies.

Interestingly, in the novel, the portrait that inspired Browning, by "the master artist Bronzino", her figure "depicted in a black dress, with pearls around the neck, one hand raised", is heavily criticized both by Alfonso, who thinks that it is a terrible portrait of her, and especially

Lucrezia, who "sees nothing of herself in it and cannot bear to look upon it" (174).

Unlike Browning who observes Lucrezia through the Duke's eyes, the dramatic monologue being actually a portrait of Alfonso, despite its title, O'Farrell's female perspective redirects the reader's attention. She wants to reach towards the girl "trapped on the other side of [the portrait] and help her to climb out" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 16), to liberate her from the confines of the painting, flouting the classical tendency of art to reduce female figures to passive objects offered to the male gaze.

Besides, the portrait in Browning's dramatic monologue is a finished art object, to show proudly as evidence of the owner's fine art connoisseurship, whereas the marriage portrait in the novel is an ongoing process that unfolds before the readers' eyes, under the watchful control of the Duke who expects the painter to follow his instructions faithfully. The final product, in both texts, is "a wonder" (378); moreover, in the novel it is the device through which O'Farrell allows the reader to follow Lucrezia's growing powers of perception and emotional maturity. More importantly, it also encapsulates Lucrezia's transformation from Lucrè, the Florentine adolescent Lucrezia de' Medici, into the new Duchess of Ferrara, weighed on by anxieties and nightmares, who sees her portrait bloom, brush after brushstroke, until it becomes a masterpiece, whereas she declines.

Through this period of existential liminality, she is a subject-in-process, a condition that generates in Lucrezia a "feeling of incorporeality, of displacement" (377) when she observes her image in the portrait: "The Duchess is present, in the painting. There she stands. Lucrezia is unnecessary; she can go now. Her place is filled; the portrait will take up her role in life" (377). The artistic process that underpins the completion of the portrait, dictated and directed by her husband, not by the artist, in all details transforms Lucrezia into the Duchess, and she senses that it actually substitutes her living self with the painted, lifeless image of her.

However, there is also something else in the portrait that at first puzzles Lucrezia; when she regards it, she is almost transfixed:

> In the painting is a woman who looks like her, or a version of her, or an ideal – she cannot tell which. This is her, yet not her; it is so disturbingly like her, while being completely unlike her. It is Lucrezia, but it is also someone else (375).

Her look is frank and defiant, her expression bold; it is a portrait, she concludes, "at once scaldingly public and deeply private" (376). A sudden flash of enlightenment makes her realize that the ability to capture the complexity of her emotions in her facial expression and the profound understanding of her nature that the picture transmit cannot be the outcome only of the artist's skills or of her husband's detailed indications, but of someone who can truly read into her most intimate, passionate spirit and feel empathetic to her. She rightly suspects that it is the work not of Il Bastianino, the portrait painter, but of his apprentice, Jacopo, a young boy whose life she saved, by mere coincidence, when she found him unconscious in a corridor of the *delizia* palace the summer before.

"The underpainting and the overpainting"

The portrait has a dual symbolic significance: on the one hand, it freezes her image and transforms her into an 'object', albeit artistic, to be gazed at, trapped both within its frame and in the dress that she is ordered to wear for it, "an outfit designed to [her husband's] specification" (333), in which, however, "she cannot recognize the person she is" and that makes her look as if "a woman has been cut into four pieces" (334). It is an image of fragmentation that echoes the Lacanian 'body in pieces', a psychic dismemberment that flaunts the illusory nature of her perceived unitary self. When she looks at the mirror image her portrait reflects back, she does not identify with the creature imprisoned within its frame, the product of an oppressive, censorious Symbolic Order. This split in the self, already observed before, will be dramatically foregrounded in the last chapter.

To Alfonso, the painting must convey "her majesty, her bloodline", because, as he sternly murmurs to Il Bastianino while looking at the sketch the painter is showing him, "she is no ordinary mortal. [...] I want everyone who looks upon this to know instantly what she is: regal, refined, untouchable" (333). Alfonso's indications for the marriage portrait are consistent with scholars' observations that portraits of women in Renaissance Italian courts are dynastic portraits, "not studies of the self", in which family lineage is stressed. Actually, "what is presented to the viewer is an ideal, or rather, an identity shaped by an ideal. It is not so much an individual but a cypher [...] fashioned to convey a specific role", and portraits are visible signs speaking of "nobility and *magnificenza,* and therefore of virtue" (Tinagli 1997, 49, 51, italics in the original).

On the other hand, the portrait, unexpectedly and paradoxically, is also the instrument that indirectly allows Lucrezia to escape the pre-ordained destiny of death that history had written for her, flout the traditional patriarchal paradigm of subjection and tyranny, and re-write her story. This will happen thanks to Jacopo, to whom O'Farrell assigns the structural role of 'helper', who will play a crucial role in the deft plot twist that the writer deploys in the novel's climactic conclusion.

After delivering the finished portrait to the Duke and before leaving, unexpectedly and unseen by everyone, Jacopo approaches Lucrezia. Addressing her in a "strange tongue" (259) that no one except her can understand, being the Neapolitan dialect that her nurse used to speak in the *palazzo* nursery, he warns the Duchess that she is in danger. His words do not surprise her at all, but simply confirm what she has been dreading all along; she is both stupefied and even moved by his gentleness and care, his look "full of concern" (381) for her, something she has long forgotten and "far from anything she has felt" (382) in her short married life. Then, before hurrying to leave the palace, Jacopo tells her that he has tampered with the lock of the servant kitchen door so that she may open it and escape, adding that she must leave as soon as she can and he would be waiting for her in the forest.

In the present of the narration, Lucrezia wakes up in the middle of the night, still feeling ill but also struck by a sudden hunger. She is in her room with Emilia, her faithful maid, daughter of Lucrezia's wet nurse, who has reached her undercover with Il Bastianino; in fact, she had been left behind when Alfonso had suddenly decided to take Lucrezia to the country lodge, the episode that is narrated at the beginning of the novel. Emilia's presence at the lodge has a key function in the denouement of the story.

While Emilia sleeps in her bed, Lucrezia dons her maid's dress to go and look for some food in the kitchen. In that moment, the disembodied motif returns and she sees herself from outside: "It seems to her" that "perhaps" there are three Lucrezias in her bedroom. She is an external passive observer of the other two, and addresses the "one who cowers still in the bed" as "this girl", the other "who appears in the painting [as] the Duchess Consort", and even refers to herself in the third person as "the girl in the drab dress" (418) who hears someone talking to her inside her head. Lucrezia is experiencing a disintegration of the self, paradigmatic of a traumatized psyche, a psychological condition intensified by her emotional tension and fear for her life at such a critical moment.

She sneaks out and, once she reaches the kitchen, she tries the door handle, even though she is skeptical that Jacopo's plan would work, thinking that rags "triumph[ing] over all that Alfonso has at his disposal, [...] is nothing less than madness" (423). Against all odds, the door swings open and she "stands on the stone ledge of the threshold" (424). She is actually in a liminal position: inside, "at her back is death, her death. She is certain of this"; outside, before her, another form of death "somewhere in the woods or out on the road, in the open countryside, with Alfonso bearing down on her on horseback" (425). So apparently she has no choice because, she muses, "she has never had any choice" (423). Yet, if going back is sure death, she decides to embrace risk and escape in the forest.

This surprise ending comes in the last chapter, "The underpainting and the overpainting" (413), where O'Farrell deploys a narrative switch that echoes *Hamnet*'s, a climax that departs from historical records of Lucrezia's life. In fact, while Lucrezia pulls shut the door behind her, Alfonso and his henchman Baldassare sneak up to her bedroom, unaware that the woman who is sleeping in bed is Emilia, and suffocate her to death. Even though the girl is strong and fights back, she is no match for the two of them who actually "crush [...] her face and torso" (426). The physical brutality of the murder leaves her so disfigured that she is unrecognizable, and no one ever realizes that a substitution has unwittingly been made.

Emilia's disfigurement is proleptically foreshadowed by an episode halfway through the novel when, as small children, while playing hide-and-seek in the kitchen, a boiling pot fell. Lucrezia narrowly escaped being hit, whereas Emilia was scorched and disfigured, somehow offering herself as a sacrificial victim: "If it had to be one of us, it was better that it was me who was disfigured" (231), Emilia concludes when she recollects this episode with Lucrezia a few hours before she is murdered.

While Alfonso and Baldassare leave the bedroom, after their brutal effacement of a human life, the narrative shifts back to Lucrezia, who "is moving across open ground, through the dark winter night, running, running, with all her strength, towards the merciful canopy of trees" (432). This is the last image of Lucrezia on which the novel ends. However, between this final moment and the previous view of the girl taking "a leap from the ledge" (430) and running away from the fortress, there are two pages that switch consistently to the future tense. Here O'Farrell's narration appears to oscillate between fantasy and desire, holding out some possibilities for the protagonist to offset the choicelessness that has dominated Lucrezia's whole life. While escaping, Lucrezia "*hopes*" (italics added) that Jacopo "is waiting in the trees" (430), so that maybe, with his help, she will escape Alfonso's

predatory clutches. In these few paragraphs, that are even typographically separated by three asterisks from the rest of the text – a sort of window opened onto another fictional dimension – O'Farrell envisages a shift from the 'real' to Ricoeur's "kingdom of the *as if*" (1983, 64), which is emplotted in the narrative to configure a possible world that challenges the real one and counterbalances Lucrezia's tragic destiny.

The moment when she will actually reach Jacopo is left as a silence, the "*absence"* postulated by Macherey and mentioned at the beginning of the article. It is an evasion that must be embraced as being part of the book's unconscious, a zone of indeterminacy left for readers to refigure. The text's silence, however, "is not a lack to be remedied, [but] the juxtaposition and conflict of several meanings", a conflict that "is not resolved or absorbed, but simply *displayed*", revealing "the inscription of an *otherness* at its margins" (Macherey 1978, 84, 79 italics in the original).

Lucrezia's expression of hope is followed by the narration of the long journey that she and Jacopo will begin and that will eventually end in Venice, "a city of uncertainty, where land and sea meet and mingle" (430), where she will finally become the artist that she had always been at heart. Her miniature paintings, coveted by collectors, apparently hide secret layers beneath the uppermost painting, a palimpsestic presence of fantastic images and creatures that she has secretly drawn and cherished all her life. In fact, since she was an adolescent, they have enabled her to express in secret the most intimate, wild side of her that she was expected to suffocate, but that she had to cover up after with more 'innocent' figures for the censorious viewer to see.

The underpaintings of these miniatures are visible only to "the bravest" who discover, when they rub away the surface, "the face of one particular woman" looking at the viewer with "an enigmatic, unfathomable gaze" (431) at the centre of their frames. Yet, not even this is certain, because others find no underpainting, no hidden vision, but simply a plain *tavola.*

The deliberate indeterminacy of this brief section lends itself to alternative critical interpretations: on the one hand, this narrative segment might textualize the fulfillment of Lucrezia's hope of escaping and becoming an artist, a sort of act of compensation for her tragic real life story. On the other hand, these two pages might be pointing to one more instance of Lucrezia's disembodied perception of herself from outside, 'dreaming', even hallucinating, of escaping. This interpretation, however, would not coherently accommodate the presence of Emilia in her room and her murder.

However, when Lucrezia closes the servants' back door behind her, she openly flouts the plot that history had assigned to her and breaks free from her gilded cage; thus, "she becomes other and elsewhere" (331) as she used to do at night when Alfonso made love to her. In the end, what is left of the Duchess, as Lucrezia had foreseen, is her marriage portrait, intended to replace her, "hung in the Duke's private chamber, covered at all times in heavy velvet drapes. No one is permitted to pull back the curtain, and look upon the Duchess's face without the Duke's express permission" (429). The male process of reducing a woman to an object, mere property, to own and control, typical of patriarchal societies, culminates with this transformation, a point on which Browning's dramatic

monologue and the novel coincide. Yet, in O'Farrell's text, Lucrezia is given the possibility of escaping through art, finding her free voice in her artistic creations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, O'Farrell departs from historical record and replots female destiny, prising open an alternative space of freedom for the protagonist within the text, a site of resistance, because the shaping of the plot is another pervasive form of representation the novelist can deploy to envision a more active role for a woman. The writer offers the unfortunate Duchess a different fate to Browning's dark imaginings, but one no less dramatic, and her strategy of reversal has also a problematic side as it requires the sacrifice of an innocent young girl's life. It is a conclusion that raises questions, problematizes Lucrezia's personality and cannot be truly defined satisfactory in relation to her psychological make-up, as it jars with her sensibility and emotional world.

Lucrezia's loyal maid is brutally erased from the story, even linguistically: she is denied her own name in death, her body disfigured, and reduced to a "form in the bed, barely visible in the gloom" (425), an innocent life who vanishes from the novel without acknowledgement. The readers' rejoicing in the survival of one victim of violence ends up making them almost complicit in the death and erasure of another.

This is the textual 'overpainting'; yet, reading against the grain, exploring the silences in the "secret underpainting" (431), the unconscious of the text, and bearing in mind that a novelist who "exploits psychological Doubles" frequently juxtaposes "two characters; the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited [...] self" (Rosenfield 1963, 328), an alternative reading is possible, "on a figurative and psychological level" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 361). The "girl" Lucrezia leaves behind in bed is her other self, her 'double', the compliant girl who should submit in obedience, and that must be relinquished in order to set herself free at last. It is a critical hypothesis authorized by the many traces where the motif of the double surfaces (160, 164-165, 229, 398) and the text underscores the physical similarity and complementary psychology of the two girls, who are even milk sisters, as well as their deepening relationship as equals. These complementary doubles may appear as opposites in the narrative, but what is important is "the way in which they reveal the loss of identity of the main character" (Rosenfield 1963, 328) and her psychic disintegration.

The Duchess in the portrait is her husband's ideal image of her, actually "a version of her" (375) framed in the portrait and trapped in Alfonso's patriarchal world of oppressiveness and ruthless violence. The Lucrezia that escapes is the passionate, free self whose mysterious power "refuses to stay in her textually ordained "place" and thus generates a story that "gets away" from its author" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 28). The authentic Lucrezia is the one who manages to break loose from both patriarchy and the 'coherence' of the text, with its stable, univocal reading and who, in her otherness, in her silent refusal to be enshrined in submissive domesticity, threatens her husband's world and authority.

What she leaves behind is a frame, a beautiful art object to contemplate and the mere illusion of possession of a man who, imprisoned in the fortress of his cynical egotism, fails to understand that, though he has a portrait that is a "wonder", it is not equal to the living, breathing creature that he has tried to suffocate.

Endnotes:

1. O'Farrell, Maggie. *The Marriage Portrait.* London: Tinder Press, 2022. Further references are to this edition and given between parentheses after quotations in the text.

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