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Communicative Capacities of German Marriage Portraits: *Portrait of a Daughter of Dietrich Bromsen*

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Ahh, portraiture: the Facebook, Instagram, and Tinder profiles of 1635. Portraiture has historically been one of the most powerful means for constructing and performing identity, whether viewers of portraits realize this or not. Rarely are portraits objective representations of their sitters. Instead, they are constructs, carefully crafted narratives about people's identities that the people in the portraits want us, the viewers, to believe. Do they *want* to show us their authentic selves, though? Returning to the social media example—has anyone ever swiped right on a hot guy and discovered too late that he looks like a tortoise in real life? Similarly with portraiture, the showing of authentic selves has not historically been among the sitter's highest concerns. The German baroque painting *Portrait of a Daughter of Dietrich Bromsen* (Figure 1) by Michael Conrad Hirt from circa 1635 embodies these tensions well. Viewers of the portrait are greeted with a scrupulously thorough staged identity of the woman on the canvas. She is constructed as the ideal German woman: wealthy, stately, and impeccably virtuous. The portrait, which is presumed to be marriage portrait made around the time of her wedding in 1635, uses a complex system of visual codes to tell us that marrying this woman is one of the greatest privileges available to Germankind at the time. How does the portrait achieve the full construction of the woman's identity, though? And is there any room left in the portrait for getting to know *her*? To understand the portrait, we must first understand the context in which it was created, particularly the experiences of women in German Baroque society in the first half of the 17th century.

Figure 1. Michael Conrad Hirt. *Portrait of a Daughter of Dietrich Bromsen.* 1635. Oil on Canvas. Dayton Art Institute.

By modern standards, their experiences were less than stellar. Women were defined by their relationships to men as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives with marginal legal or social rights. Society thrust stringent and unforgiving expectations of virtue upon them in very different ways than it did for men.

Figure 2. Attr. Cornelis Anthonisz. *The Wise Man and the Wise Woman.* Woodcut. 15th c. Rijksmuseum.

This famous print (Figure 2) from the second quarter of the 16th century juxtaposes a wise man with a wise woman. The two figures are clothed in allegorical outfits that suggest the virtues they should possess to be wise, and they have accompanying text to explain the meaning of the imagery. The virtues of the man all relate to his ability to be a successful, productive member of society—note the scales of justice in his left hand and the carpentry tool in his right. The woman's virtues, however, all relate to being a good wife. Her lips are locked because she is meant to speak as little as possible. The turtledove on her chest symbolizes her devotion exclusively to her husband. The mirror she holds is a symbol of humility…and so on and so

forth. Modesty, meekness, piety, silence, prudence, obedience, and above all chastity were more than womanly virtues: they were social requirements. Women were bombarded with imagery in the form of widely available, moralizing prints like this one telling them how they should behave, and punishments for transgressions were not insignificant. A reality of women's lives in the Baroque period was the enduring threat of domestic violence. Although the belief was gradually falling out of favor, certain preachers did inform their congregations that some women were so bad that they had to be beaten by their husbands to be morally corrected. Women were expected to submit joyfully and entirely to their husbands' wills even if they disagreed with them, and if husbands found fault with their wives' virtues or behaviors, it was not *completely* socially inacceptable for them to beat their wives. Women were accorded sole responsibility for the maintenance of marital harmony, and they had very little power to change their situations if things were bad. In the patrician classes especially, women also had limited agency in the choice of marriage partners. This was less significant among the poor laboring classes who were not transferring money and titles around as they wed, but with the urban elite most marriages were arranged by a couple's parents to establish family alliances.

That said, at least the urban elite could *get* married. The social and religious institution of marriage was undergoing significant changes in baroque Germany at the time the *Portrait of a Daughter of Dietrich Bromsen* was painted. For one thing, some preachers were gradually introducing the idea that marriage should involve emotional satisfaction between the husband and wife, rather than just the obeisance of the woman. This improved marital circumstances for the patrician classes, but marriage—or even consensual cohabitation of any kind—was about to become much harder for the poor people. Among the poorer classes and even among the middle classes who lacked the financial resources for a full wedding, a practice known as concubinage

in which a man and a woman lived together without being married was fairly common up until the start of the 17th century. Marriage was also not strictly regulated by the church or by the government. It was more of a social institution than a religious one, so when marriages began based on engagement rituals and whether they were even documented was often hazy. As the century wore on, however, marriage became increasingly institutionalized as part of the German protestant church. Marriages now had to be recognized by priests to be considered valid, and legal punishments for intercourse out of wedlock skyrocketed. Many unwed mothers even turned to infanticide to hide the results of their actions and avoid the punishments for the sin of fornication. Even legally engaged couples who had intercourse before their wedding days faced reprehension, though of a substantially milder nature than that faced by the unwed and unlikely-to-be-wed mothers. The important phrase there is "unlikely to be wed." Marriage, besides becoming institutionalized in the church, was also growing more expensive than ever before. Couples now had to be able to prove that they had the financial resources to establish and maintain a household before they could legally wed. With a growing wealth gap between the urban elite, the newfound middle classes, and the laboring poor, lower-class people could not afford to get married the legal way. Thus, they turned to concubinage and fornication to meet their emotional, social, and physical needs, but they were punished for it. Unsurprisingly, the paywall of marriage and the punishments for trying to work around it were far less of a concern for the patrician classes—society did not seem to have the same level of interest in preventing the elite from breeding as it did from preventing the poor. Regardless, marriage was a contested institution throughout Baroque Germany, and its frequent changes lent it an aura of anxiety that affected people all across the class spectrum.

Returning, now, to the *Portrait of a Daughter of Dietrich Bromsen*, viewers can see all of these conflicting, competing, and conspiring forces at work in the representation of the woman. If marriage in German society of the 1630s was a privilege, marrying *this woman specifically* was an even greater one. Almost every aspect of the painting communicates that this woman is the ideal German wife and mother—virtuous, chaste, and *fantastically* wealthy and well-connected. The portrait depicts a solitary woman in a red jacket who gazes out at viewers with an ambivalent and ambiguous expression on her face. Her head is covered with gold sequins and cylinders of lace, and thick gold chains trail languidly down her neck dangling medallions at her waist. Her shimmery brocade jacket is trimmed with elegant lace at the cuffs, and a massive white neck ruff encircles her face. On her hands and wrists are yet more jewelry, with rings and gold bracelets prominently displayed on both hands. Her family's crest and some information about the woman and her marriage are included in the top left corner of the image, and a greenish curtain hangs down in the top right, framing the woman as well as bounding her in the composition. Her portrait is life-sized. On a similar scale to the viewer, she looks out and meets the audience's gaze with a directness that is mildly unsettling. She watches and waits as people take in her outfit and all that it is meant to communicate about her.

One of the most striking elements of this image that grabs viewers when they first look at it is the woman's headpiece and neck ruff. They are, by modern standards, more than a little bit absurd, which is why modern viewers tend to notice them. However, by 17th century German standards, they represent the peak of fashion, as well as the apex of wealth and privilege. Historical records on this woman and her family indicate that her father had powerful mercantile connections across Europe, enabling him to afford the most sought-after lace from Flanders and Milan for the adornment of his daughters. Given the high price of lace at the time, this woman's

abundance of it on her headdress and on her sleeves would have communicated to contemporary viewers the cosmopolitan wealth of her family. The neck ruff serves a similar purpose (although it has a few other functions which will be explored later). Neck ruffs are made of starched layers of linen pleated and folded together numerous times to produce the circular ruff shape. Thus, they are an excess of fabric, especially when they are as wide and tall as the one in the portrait. This, along with the exquisite Italian brocade (compare to Figure 3) that makes up the woman's jacket, would have served as further indicators of wealth to viewers at the time. Modern audiences, of course, might miss this, as the contemporary Western age relies on mass-produced fabrics that lack the same class connotations. However, the same audiences certainly do not miss the gold. The woman is quite literally dripping with it. The work of German goldsmiths was prized at the time for its artistry, and this woman flaunts it in her sequined headdress, rings, bracelets, medallions, chains, and pendants. Concerns about having enough money to start a household were certainly not applicable to this woman, which is a part of what made her such an ideal woman to marry.

Figure 3. Italian brocade. 17th c. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Regarding the woman's medallions, something that is lost to modern viewers but that would not have been lost on audiences in the woman's community is that she is wearing two medallions of the Swedish royal family. In 1520, a great-grandfather provided shelter to the man who would eventually become the king of Sweden, thus establishing ties with the Swedish monarchy that persisted to the woman's day. Her connection to the monarchy and the fact that she could impart this connection to her husband's family were characteristics that would not have gone unnoticed by the woman's in-laws.

So, she is fabulously wealthy *and* well-connected to the mercantile and monarchical powers of Europe—what more could a German man want in a marriage partner? Actually, he could want quite a lot, because the portrait has much more to communicate about the woman's virtuous and noble nature. Certain pictorial elements, both of her posture and of her dress, communicate that this woman possesses all the virtues one would expect in an ideal German wife. As previously discussed, the woman's head is stylishly covered; in German society at the time, women were expected to cover their heads as a sign of submission to their husbands, so her headpiece communicates her conformity to this expectation as well as her obedience to her husband. Her clothing also completely obscures the natural shape of her body, which serves as a sign of the all-important virtue of chastity. Almost universally across Europe, fashions that changed the shape of the body—that minimized the waist and padded the hips, specifically—were in vogue in the Baroque period, partially because in theory, the distortion of the figure would cause the subversion and minimalization of desire for the dangerous female form. European society in the Baroque period was extremely religious regardless of creed, and the expression of sexuality was viewed as sinful, which was reflected earlier in the discussions about the criminalization of fornication. There was even a massive debate in Germany in the 1680s

about whether women should or should not wear clothing that exposed some of their breasts, with detractors referring to the style as foolish, vexatious, damnable, and downright satanic. While the 1680s are a good fifty years off from this portrait, the debates and questions hashed out then were not irrelevant to life in the 1630s. Wearing clothing that changed the shape of her body and that concealed almost all of the skin—basically any part that could provoke male desire—showed that this woman was chaste and pious, rather than physical or sensual in any way. What with chastity being the defining virtue of women's characters in Baroque Germany, the importance of this fashion choice cannot be understated: her fitness for wifehood stems from her chastity even more than it does from her wealth, because without it, she would be an outcast from society, no matter how rich she was.

On a final note regarding clothing—besides showing off her wealth and concealing her body, the woman's clothes have one other important function: they restrict her movement. With tightly laced stays, padded hips, a stiff brocade jacket, and a thick, starched neck ruff, this woman only has slow, small movements available to her—certainly, there would be no running or jumping wearing all those layers and that jewelry. Immobility, however, was quite the point. The working classes moved—they labored, they farmed, they dug, they built—which are all sorts of indecorous actions not suitable for a person of the patrician classes, *especially* one as wealthy and well-connected as this woman. Baroque fashions were as much about concealing and changing the body shape as they were about immobilizing it so that the elites who wore these fashions could only move with grace and dignity. In other words, they did not *because they could not* move like peasants. Thus, the woman's outfit gives her a stately bearing and an almost regal posture, imparting on her a sense of class and nobility that would have stood out as ideal qualities in a marriage partner.

Other aspects of the painting communicate further elements of the woman's virtuous character. Her nuanced facial expression, at best hard to read and at worst utterly inexplicable, features thin lips that look slightly drawn and pursed. Even if the woman's face actually did look like that, her expression is effective in imparting an aura of silence to her. Her thin, drawn lips look hesitant—she seems unlikely to speak, possibly ever—which reflects the idea that silence was a crucial feminine virtue at the time. Also notable about her body language is the way in which her right hand rests across her stomach. Compositionally, this is an important device for making the hand and all its adornment visible to the audience, because with the angle at which she is standing, if her hand were down, it would be invisible to viewers. However, her hand is also resting basically right over where a pregnant belly would emerge if the woman were to carry a child. Possibly, the positioning of her hand on her not-*currently*-pregnant midriff hints at her childbearing roles to come.

So, what is known about this woman after spending so much time with this painting? Simultaneously everything and nothing—viewers know everything about her that the painting *wants* them to know. She is rich, well-connected, virtuous, noble, and ready to bear children—in essence, the ideal German woman in the Baroque era. However, viewers also know nothing about her. Her personality, her likes and dislikes, what she thought of that ridiculous headdress, all remain a mystery to her enraptured audience. The portrait is effective in constructing a legible identity for the woman, an identity that would have been exactly what she needed to succeed as best a woman could in Baroque society. However, whether that identity had anything to do with who the woman actually was was irrelevant then and remains elusive now. Instead, viewers can only conjecture about the self contained in her grey eyes, a self that this portrait will never allow anyone to get to know.

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