“Lady without Equal”: Lucrezia Paolina, Salvator Rosa, and Feminist Art History

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It is we women, said Leonora, who lighten men’s burden of worries. When we take charge of household affairs... we take over a part of their work, overseeing the whole household. And it’s certainly true that a man can never really find true domestic contentment and harmony without the fond companionship of a woman... without someone to look after him and take care of all his needs, and to share all the good times and the bad times with him.

—Moderata Fonte, The Worth of Women, c. 1592

Keeping House, Making Art

Even when they did not make art, early modern women contributed to its production, whether as models, female kin, mistresses, or wives. Marriage itself was often a sign of professional status for the early modern male artist, although its legal and social benefits for men varied. Artists’ wives might keep accounts, prepare materials, sell works, or run large households (like Rubens’s in Antwerp), sustaining master, pupils, and assistants and offering hospitality to visitors and patrons. Margaret Lemon, van Dyck’s cultivated mistress, ran his residence at Blackfriars between 1632 and 1639, also modeling for portraits and mythological and religious images in which her personality and relationship with the artist became part of the artistic content. Similarly, Rembrandt’s relationship with Hendrickje Stoffels
complicated the iconography of some of his works. She probably posed for the Louvre Bathsheba of 1654, and the two Lucretias in the National Gallery, Washington (1666), and the Minneapolis Institute of Art (1668) have been read, in part, as posthumous tributes to her. Vermeer’s models may have included his wife Catharina and his daughters, and art historians have begun to address the impact of his domestic life on his art. In contrast, Salvator Rosa’s (1615–1673) life-companion and occasional model, Lucrezia Paolina (c. 1620–1696), has remained a mere ornament for his colorful biography, with no substantive connection to his art.

What approach should feminist art historians take toward women like Paolina, whose lives are filtered through the gendered attitudes of male artists and their later interpreters? In the face of scant evidence, scholars have traditionally refrained from integrating these women into interpretations of male artists’ works and lives, leaving vacuums to be filled by historical novelists and filmmakers. H. Perry Chapman notes that this “art fiction” forms a parallel history of art, embracing the socioeconomic content of much current scholarship in the discipline, but countering this content by appealing to the ideal of the male creative genius and the affective aura of the work of art. As Chapman demonstrates for Vermeer’s wife and mother-in-law, women close to male artists tend to fare poorly in art fiction. Scholarly reticence, then, not only colludes with the erasure of women in traditional art history, but also fails to rebut women’s misrepresentation in both fictional and academic discourse. On the other hand, as Irit Rogoff points out in an essay on Gabriele Münter, Wassily Kandinsky’s colleague and lover, our feminist empathy for women of the past who have suffered erasure can provide inspiration, but not an “analytical model for historical understanding or revision.”

Developing such a model has long been a concern for feminist art historians. In 1984, in a foundational article on the artistic and literary representations of Elizabeth Siddall—model for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of artists and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s lover and eventual wife—Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock asserted the impossibility of recovering Elizabeth Siddall from her function as a sign of Victorian femininity and masculine creativity. Documents and representations of Siddall, they acknowledged, are discourses rooted in specific contexts with their
own ideologies of art and gender. However, they also suggested that we reclaim the particularity of women’s lives “by insisting upon the formation of the individual subject in the historically specific material practices of the social relations of class and gender difference.” This approach addresses the frequent absence of women in art-historical discourse, yet recognizes, in Rogoff’s words, “that the missing voices and erased identities cannot, should not, be robustly reconstituted.” Instead, feminist art historians might compensate for evidentiary gaps with a multitude of fragments: partly audible voices, incomplete and mediated texts, and assorted historical narratives that function together to reconstitute, albeit partially, the lives of women who were close to male artists.

This is what I hope to accomplish for Paolina. She and Rosa could not marry legally for most of their life together, because her first husband had abandoned her and disappeared. To the Church, currently strengthening its control over sexual relationships, she was still incontrovertibly married, making the couple vulnerable to Inquisitorial reprisal, especially after their move to Rome in 1649. It was not until 1672 that Rosa, gravely ill, obtained a special license to marry her, in a poignant deathbed scene that reinforces the Romantic view of Rosa as an unconventional, suffering rebel. Paolina’s life is filtered through Rosa’s words and images. We cannot recover her voice, and she will remain to some extent the nurturing presence in Rosa’s letters; the Muse bearing his satirist’s pen; or the personification of human frailty, wearing the roses that mark her as his wife (see figs. 2 and 6). If not for Rosa’s art-historical importance, she would be consigned to the anonymous ranks of non-elite early modern women. However, I see a middle course between viewing her either as a sign of Rosa, or of the biological and cultural constraints affecting seventeenth-century Italian women. In Joan Wallach Scott’s words, a feminist historian must “acknowledge the partiality of one’s story (indeed, of all stories) and still tell it with authority and conviction.” By retrieving as much particularity as possible from Paolina’s experience, I offer a microhistory illustrating gender’s relationality and attendant power discrepancies, suggesting the emotional texture of a relationship, and lending shape and agency to a male artist’s “silent” partner. This microhistory expands to illuminate many facets of early modern society: the impact of the Church’s marriage reforms; women’s experience of multiple pregnancies;
Figure 1. Salvator Rosa, *Self-Portrait (?) as a Philosopher*, 1640s. Photo: National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.
Figure 2. Salvator Rosa, *Lucrezia as the Muse of Satiric Poetry*, 1640s. Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut/Art Resource, NY.
Figure 5. Salvator Rosa, *Portrait of Lucrezia*, c. 1656, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.
Figure 6. Salvator Rosa, *Human Frailty*, c. 1657. Photo: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.
the circumstances surrounding infant abandonment; the gendered nature of honor and grief; and attitudes toward menopause, illness, and aging. By reading key works by Rosa through this lens, we reshape western art history’s master narrative, in which he holds a privileged place: the movement toward artistic autonomy.16 Like other accounts of artists’ mistresses, wives, and models, mine brings a decidedly material, domestic, and gendered dimension to this traditional narrative, in which the transcendent male artist rises above history and social relations.17 As April Masten argues for the lives of artists’ models, Paolina’s story resists the presumed “narrative closure” and autonomy of the male artist’s life, making biography a “potential site of productive resistance.”18

Chafing at limitations on artistic freedom, Rosa fashioned a highly individualistic masculinity. He exhibited and marketed his works to maintain authority over subjects and prices. As a comic actor and satirical poet, he cultivated a notorious public image woven from personal charisma and seventeenth-century culture, particularly its renewed interest in Stoicism, Cynicism, and other ancient philosophies, and in the satires of Horace and Juvenal.19 Rosa’s Cynic disdain for convention, as well as his quest for the Neo-Stoic moderation that eluded him, dovetailed with early modern notions of masculinity. Indeed, the conflict between Cynic and Stoic ideals mirrors the tensions, gaps, and fractures in early modern masculinity. Rosa’s braggadocio and anxieties, copiously documented in his letters, exemplify masculinity (to borrow Diane Purkiss’s term) as a “hysterical” construction that had to be remade constantly to avoid collapse.20 Through his personal and professional choices, Rosa ensured his honor within the competitive contexts of art and poetry. Male honor in early modern Italy was also richly articulated and sustained corporately, through homosocial networks.21 Avoiding powerful patrons, Rosa cultivated a circle of humanist and mercantile friends and admirers. His relationship to Giovanni Battista Ricciardi, a philosophy professor, illustrates the instrumentality of male friendship: Rosa plumbed Ricciardi’s knowledge for unusual subjects, repaying his friend with affection, drawings, pictures, and dedications.22 Moreover, through his deft manipulation of the art market, Rosa enjoyed success, despite his notoriety. Good prices and loyal clients established his honor within the masculine, corporate context of art.23
For women, honor was more circumscribed by sexual status, although there was room for agency.\textsuperscript{24} Rosa’s letters confirm Paolina’s honor within their supportive circle and convey the affectionate tenor of his family life. Moreover, he was evidently faithful, cherishing his “lady without equal in the world” as his wife.\textsuperscript{25} The couple’s irregular status—unmarried yet cohabiting in the kind of informal domestic partnership that had long been common—enabled Rosa, who did not have pupils, run a workshop, or support members of his natal family, to be head of a household while defying convention.\textsuperscript{26} Paolina’s presence in his letters often echoed his Fortune-persecuted persona, strengthened his social bonds, and confirmed his authority as husband and father, although he came by those roles unconventionally. In key images from his oeuvre her image enhanced his role of satirical poet (figs. 2 and 3) and expressed his grief at the death of their first son (figs. 5 and 6).

\textbf{Satire’s Muse (Florence, 1640–1649)}

Rosa met Paolina when she was about twenty, just after he arrived in Florence from Rome in 1640 to work for Gian Carlo de’ Medici, the younger brother of Duke Ferdinand II. Rosa’s biographer, Giovanni Battista Passeri, tells us only that she was beautiful, of good quality, and working as a model, and that her husband had left Florence suddenly, “either in disgust or because he was a fellow of low repute.”\textsuperscript{27} Whatever his reasons, Paolina found herself among the \textit{malmaritate}, abandoned or abused women who turned to religious institutions or their natal families for help.\textsuperscript{28} She may have been living with her widowed mother and two younger sisters, who needed her income, judging from the concerns over dowries expressed in Rosa’s letters (48, 50, 60, 90, and 113).\textsuperscript{29}

Soon after they met, Paolina sent a brief letter to Rosa, then on a visit to Rome, to persuade him to come home soon. She asked, “send news of your wellbeing to quiet my spirit,” and “just console me with a single line.”\textsuperscript{30} She gave birth to their first child, Rosalvo, in June 1641. On July 10, 1646, Rosa noted a miscarriage (17), but Rosalvo’s is the only documented birth during the period when the young couple would have
been most fertile. In contrast, as we shall see below, Rosa’s Roman letters after 1649 confirm three unnamed births, strongly imply a fourth, and Augusto was born in 1657 after Rosalvo died, for a total of six live births. This inconsistency is best explained by lacunae in Rosa’s letters in the 1640s: none remain from 1643, 1644, and most of 1645, and there are large gaps in 1647 and 1648. If there were one or two more undocumented births during the 1640s, Paolina’s parity (number of live births) would be slightly higher than the early modern average of five to six.31 Although couples used condoms, coitus interruptus, or abortifacients, all were highly unreliable methods.32 Breast-feeding for at least a year would have had some contraceptive effect, helping to space births about two years apart.33 However, Rosa regularly sent newborns to foundling homes, claiming they were too expensive (112), but also, probably, because they drew attention to the couple’s illicit relationship.34 Artists’ incomes were rarely secure, and the banquets and performances for Rosa’s Florentine academy, the Percossi (the “stricken ones”) were costly.35 Gian Carlo had dismissed Rosa by mid 1646, but the generosity of merchant Giulio Maffei’s family in Volterra sustained him.36

Rosa’s grandiose intellectual ambitions in the 1640s are evident in the Philosopher and the Muse of Satiric Poetry (National Gallery, London, and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; figs. 1 and 2), stylistically similar paintings with the same early provenance, often interpreted as paired portraits of Rosa and Paolina.37 Although likeness is difficult to ascertain in allegorized images like these, I believe we can reasonably interpret the pictures in terms of Rosa’s construction of himself as a satiric poet, grounded in moral philosophy, with Paolina as his Muse, and that these depicted roles speak to his vision of their life together.38 The philosopher appears in a plain brown coat with black stripe and scholar’s cap and evokes Rosa’s two main philosophical interests: Stoicism and Cynicism. Certainly he valued the autonomy important to each school but absolutely central for Cynicism, and his social and cultural critique demanded the Cynical tactics of well-aimed satirical barbs or outrageous acts to shock society. Without resorting to scatological actions like Diogenes or Crates, Rosa performed the Cynic role of social critic in his poetry and challenged existing expectations for artists.39
In self-portraits from the Florentine period in which his likeness is more demonstrable, Rosa performed his satirist's role as a sword-wielding soldier, possibly a commedia dell'arte character (Palazzo Chigi Saraceni, Siena), and a painter holding a dart along with his paintbrush (Uffizi, Florence). In the London painting, the philosopher's facial expression and the inscription communicate this sharp disdain. A trip to Venice, Padua, and Mantua with Ricciardi in 1648 perhaps explains why the painting echoes self-portraits by Mantegna and Giorgione. The philosopher's monumental form against the sky conveys a formidable self-sufficiency. His dark face, scowling mouth, and furrowed brow suggest artist's melancholy, a watchful, choleric nature, courage, audacity, and anger at envy and calumny. With his right hand, he supports a tablet with a Latin inscription: “Be silent, or say something better than silence,” a common exhortation to brief speech, attributed first to Pythagoras.

The Muse modeled by Paolina extends the philosopher’s mute, Cynic stance into the practice of satiric poetry. The artist had used her earlier (c. 1640) for pendants of Poetry and Music (Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome; figs. 3 and 4), in which she appears with the long nose, small, pert mouth, and loose, wavy hair evident in the Hartford picture, the mourning portrait, and Human Frailty (figs. 5 and 6). Rosa gave Music an upward gaze (like St. Cecilia’s), and Poetry an introspective expression and an ivy wreath—symbol of the poet’s diligent study and Bacchic creative furor. The images are linked by the idea of inspired creativity, in contrast to Rosa’s contemporary poetic satires on Music and Poetry that vilified the debasement of these arts.

The Hartford picture shows a more complex, aggressive Muse, now wreathed in laurel—a more elevated crown suggesting triumph and divine poetic gifts. In Rosa’s etched allegory, the Genius of Salvator Rosa (ca. 1662), Apollonian laurel graces the inscription: “Ingenuus, Liber, Pictor Succensor, et Aequus,/Spretor Opum, Mortisque. hic Meus est Genius./ Salvator Rosa” (Sincere, free, fiery Painter [or Painter-Satirist], and equable, despiser of wealth and death, this is my genius), while both Rosa’s genius and the figure of a dignified female satyr wear ivy wreaths. Apollonian laurel tempers the Bacchic connotations of ivy, just as it tempers the scowling dishevelment of Poetry in the Hartford canvas. As Wendy Wassyng Roworth empha-
sizes, Rosa’s satyress in *Genius*, in consort with the personifications of Stoic Equanimity, Sincerity, Liberty, and Painting, embodied his elevated notion of satire, eschewing its burlesque connotations to convey the noble, moralizing invective of Horace and Juvenal.46

This elevated interpretation begins, though, in the Hartford canvas. The Muse’s gaze is neither seductive nor submissive. She holds writing implements recalling the Muse of epic poetry, Calliope, to aggrandize Rosa’s chosen poetic genre. He emphasized her sharp pen through lighting and by aligning its direction with the diagonals of her shoulder and scarf. Her disheveled hair and ragged headdress lend her a Cynic simplicity and disdain for wealth and social convention. Rosa perhaps alluded to the famous Cynic wife, Hipparchia, whose commitment to the philosopher-poet Crates’s mission both justified human attachment for the Cynic and echoed Paolina’s devotion to Rosa.47 Kristine Patz, drawing on the meaning of the rose as a sign of silence and of Rosa himself, also suggests that the works could have been read in terms of silence between lovers, and Roworth points out how “SILENTIO” is isolated within the inscription.48 This potential legibility in personal terms, however, is combined with the allegorical analogy between painting and poetry. The London and Hartford paintings are symbols of the reciprocally ennobling relationship between these arts: painting is mute poetry; poetry is speaking art.49 When Rosa left for Rome in early 1649 with eight-year-old Rosalvo and Paolina, now about thirty and five months pregnant, it was as an ambitious painter and poet no longer satisfied with the opportunities Florence could provide.

**Art and Abandoned Babies (Rome, 1649–1655)**

Aspiring to be like Nicolas Poussin, Rosa sought a niche in Rome as a history painter with a circle of sympathetic, intellectual patrons.50 He must have had apprehensions about moving to the papal city with a pregnant mistress and illegitimate child. An earlier stay (c. 1635–1639) had ended when he insulted Bernini as a character in an improvised comedy. Having cast satirical barbs at a papal favorite, Rosa left for a more tolerant Florence.51 Now, his irregular “marriage,” his distaste for powerful patrons who could protect him, and his satires would make him vulnerable.
Even though he left Florence with only 300 scudi (to put that in perspective, his yearly rent in Rome was 80 scudi), Rosa announced his arrival with a sartorial display complete with silver-hilted sword and liveried servant. He knew that the market for artists in the city was dynamic and demanded a bold, sustained attention to self-presentation. Paolina, for her part, was focused on hiring a domestic servant: “She reproaches me daily” about it, Rosa wrote to Maffei in May (29). Her reproaches probably reflected anxiety about managing the home and Rosalvo with an impending childbirth far from her mother, a crucial source of support and advice. On June 18, 1649, she gave birth to a baby girl, quickly and secretly sent to the foundling home, and on July 3, Rosa remarked to Maffei that she “is in good health, although suffering from some sadness” (32). Like other early modern parents, Paolina was not reconciled to the loss of her children, even when so many died or were abandoned. At her next birth, she would express intense anger at Rosa’s decision.

After an episode of prolonged menstrual bleeding in 1650, for which Rosa sought the advice of a Florentine doctor (77, 78), she conceived again early the next year, for Rosa wrote to Maffei on April 1, 1651 mentioning this new problem (88). On October 7, 1651, he noted her “packed-up” state in late pregnancy, quipping that this month she will be “beyond pleasing the Mister” (111). On October 28, he informed Maffei about an easier-than-usual birth: a boy, the “spitting image” of his father, was sent to the foundling home, and “Fortune, who, of necessity, wills it so, must take the blame” (112). In this same letter, he described Paolina’s “extreme indignation,” which necessitated calming her “with coolness [flemma, a humoral term]” so as “not to aggravate matters and make [his] destiny stormy.” Rosa blamed his finances, noting ironically that he couldn’t afford children, but people who wanted them couldn’t have them. On October 26, 1652 (151), Rosa told Ricciardi about another pregnancy, and on May 20, 1653, he wrote to Maffei that another infant girl had been sent “you know where” (171).

Rosa’s callous tone to male friends may disguise his true feelings: clearly he took pride in his fertility and the boy’s close resemblance to himself, an important sign of masculinity. Whatever his emotions, his decision was not uncommon, following a longstanding precedent for infant abandonment in
Italy that escalated from the sixteenth century through the early industrial era. Although David Kertzer has argued that the Church’s campaign against bastardy in the pre-industrial period, after Trent, was primarily responsible for this escalation, others stress that the Church was part of a larger social context preoccupied with women’s sexual honor and prone to economic disasters, such as famine, that caused married parents to abandon their babies in great numbers as well. In Rosa’s case, however, illegitimacy does seem to have played a role in his decisions to abandon offspring. He must have been concerned that more children would increase the chances of being noticed by Church authorities, particularly in papal dominions, and he was undoubtedly grateful for the anonymity provided by the wheels (rotating receptacles for infants) in the walls of foundling homes that spread, along with the homes themselves, throughout Catholic Europe.

What did Rosa and Paolina think would happen to their abandoned babies? The attitudes of early modern parents toward this practice are difficult to pin down. High infant and child mortality rates probably convinced some parents that their children had little chance of surviving no matter where they were raised. Some believed that the Virgin protected foundlings, and some hoped to get offspring back by attaching identifying notes or talismans, but few children were actually reclaimed, especially if illegitimate. Foundling homes and their patrons, such as the Medici dukes who financed the Innocenti hospital in Florence, used various means, including images, to promote confidence that the homes nurtured and raised children well, but skepticism grew in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the ranks of foundlings increased. Although the wheels protected infants from dogs and exposure, many died from malnutrition and neglect inside the overcrowded homes, where wet nurses struggled to feed their multiple charges, and babies sent to wet nurses in the countryside might face abuse and neglect as well. So, perhaps Paolina’s resistance emerged not simply from sorrow at the child’s loss but from an understanding of what abandonment really meant. As for Rosa, any concern and remorse he may have felt seem to have been displaced, in his letters at least, onto a malevolent Fortune.

As if in recompense for personal woes, though, Fortune favored Rosa’s professional success in the early 1650s with well-received pictures
and prestigious offers of work, some of which he refused to maintain his autonomy.\textsuperscript{67} Rosa’s impulsiveness, however, was only briefly tempered. 1654 began with the recitation of his notorious satire \textit{Invidia} (Envy), which scurrilously described a powerful cleric, Agostino Favoriti, as Envy’s hideous follower. Subsequently, old rumors that Rosa had not written his own poems resurfaced along with more dangerous accusations of atheism and cohabitation with a married woman.\textsuperscript{68} Although the turmoil had died down, Rosa became nervous after Fabio Chigi became Pope Alexander VII in 1655 because Favoriti was a Chigi protégé.\textsuperscript{69}

Paolina was too pregnant to travel during the summer and fall of 1655, when Rosa wanted desperately to visit Ricciardi; on June 5, he wrote his friend that this birth would be over in October (189). There is neither a description of this birth, nor of the child’s death or subsequent presence; I believe it likely that this baby was abandoned as usual, and Rosa, becoming more cautious, kept quiet. This birth may have affected the tragic events that followed: perhaps the Envy affair was not their sole cause.

\textbf{Mourning and Melancholy (Naples and Rome, 1656–1657)}

On November 6, 1655, Rosa attempted again to regularize his relationship with Paolina by asking Ricciardi to solicit news of her husband from Florence (192). But nothing came of it. In January 1656, a fearful Rosa sent Paolina and Rosalvo to his brother Giuseppe, a priest in Naples. In a long letter to Ricciardi written in February, Rosa poured out his self-reprimands, loneliness, and fear of being imprisoned by the Holy Office (194). He would like to be “the Grand Turk in his seraglio,” not because of lust, but for “the dear company of women like Lucrezia (if there are any others like her in the world—which I don’t believe).”\textsuperscript{70}

Loneliness was the least of Rosa’s problems, though, for he had unwittingly sent his family to a city where the last major pandemic of plague in Italy was brewing, to peak in June and July.\textsuperscript{71} Although Rosa’s sister Giovanna and Paolina survived, his brother, like most clergy in Naples, perished, as did Rosa’s brother-in-law and early teacher, Francesco Francanzano, and all but one of the latter’s children.\textsuperscript{72} The worst blow for the artist was the death of his beloved fifteen-year-old Rosalvo. Rosa’s
despairing letters to Ricciardi in August and September of 1656 recount the tragedy. In a particularly bitter mood, he even chided the ancient Stoics for the useless consolations in their “scribble books” (201).

By mid August, the plague subsided, having killed between 240,000 and 270,000 people in Naples. As an occupant of a house with plague victim(s), Paolina would have been subject to quarantine and perhaps spared the horror of piled corpses in the streets and piazze, but not the alienation that came to victims’ families, cut off from help by quarantine. When it lifted, she went back to Rome, suffering its own, less devastating plague. The couple was still fearful of the Inquisition: on October 21, 1656, Rosa conveyed Paolina’s request to Ricciardi to seek news of her husband in Florence (204). Probably during this time, Rosa painted her in mourning (Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome; fig. 5).

Like Rembrandt’s paintings that depict Hendrickje or evoke their relationship, this image has many layers. It echoes Rosa’s words to Ricciardi on August 19, 1656: “If you have any emotions, imagine how my heart will feel when I find myself alone, face to face with Signora Lucrezia, who is suffering the same bitter grief in her soul” (200). Encountering Paolina’s gaze, we experience the parents’ mutual grief. The portrait’s intimacy and domestic setting may also reflect the early modern construction of maternal mourning as disruptive and appropriately kept private, in contrast to public rituals of parental grief: more moderate, distanced, and focused on the socio-cultural meanings of the child’s death rather than on specific, somatic loss. Women, however, cared for the sick, dying, and deceased bodies of family members, so probably Paolina would have tended Rosalvo while he was ill, and perhaps she shrouded his body before it was taken to the mass graves beyond the city walls or dumped in the Bay of Naples. Her visceral loss is conveyed by the portrait’s directness, but Rosa evoked the depth rather than the spectacle of maternal grief. Perhaps the painting represents Paolina’s own internalization of her grief, Rosa’s pictorial discipline, or both. With Rosa as its primary audience, it may also have provided self-reproof.

Moreover, Paolina appears much like a widow, recalling the “pre-emptive” mourning, embodied in widow portraits pre-dating the husband’s demise, that Allison Levy has discussed. Like the anxious men who com-
missioned these, Rosa—despondent over the loss of his line and the dream of Rosalvo succeeding him as a painter—may have needed to confirm that his own death would be mourned. After hearing of the deaths in his sister’s family in August, he wrote to Ricciardi on September 9: “If you’re not made of marble, consider whether the words and curses of Job are appropriate here, seeing that my own line [seme, seed or sperm] is extinguished and my relations, so that, of all the family I have in the world, not one is left to bear witness to my race” (201). Rosa’s bitterness—irrational, given his abandonment of children—was assuaged by another son’s birth in 1657 (Augusto).

Considering the parents’ different experiences of Rosalvo’s death, *Human Frailty* in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge—an elaborate allegory painted in the wake of the Naples tragedy, in late 1657 or early 1658—appears to be the masculine, public counterpart to the private mourning portrait (fig. 6). In this work, Rosa set out to express parental grief in philosophical terms and embed personal loss in cultural context through the tropes of *vanitas* and melancholy. Its style and iconography deliberately recall *Democritus in Meditation*, an authoritative statement of Rosa’s pictorial inventiveness (1650–51; Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen). The cypress-crowned Terminus herm, the skeleton, owl, and obelisk from *Democritus* are repeated in *Human Frailty*. Rosa added a fallen rocket, butterflies, a thistle, two *putti* in and beside a cradle, blowing bubbles and lighting tow (the latter occurred in papal coronations, symbolizing the evanescence of worldly accomplishments), and his (self-reproving?) signature on the Fates’ knife. As a mother, seated on Fortune’s bubble-like sphere, watches, a winged skeleton guides a child’s hand to write on a scroll, “*Conceptio Culpa, Nasci Pena, Labor Vita, Necesse Mori*” (Conception is Sin; Birth a Pain; Life Toil; Death a Necessity)—a phrase from a twelfth-century poem that Ricciardi had incorporated into his consolatory verses to Rosa.

Through their compositional resemblance to Dürer’s *Melencolia I* (1514) and other precedents, both *Democritus* and *Human Frailty* appropriate melancholy as a debilitating but ultimately enabling masculine condition associated with inspired intellectual and artistic achievement; women’s melancholy, frequently described in terms of lovesickness and
hysteria, lacked the same cachet. Although *Human Frailty* centers on a mother who contemplates the material loss of a child, it articulates this privileged condition of loss along with Rosa’s inventive prowess. Cardinal Flavio Chigi surely recognized the painting’s impressive complexity as an allegory when he purchased it. Despite its iconographic richness, though, *Human Frailty* seems open to biographical readings as well. Just as bereavement could exacerbate the melancholic humor, Rosa destabilized his allegory with personal references, and the materiality of maternal grief in the painting resists allegorical abstraction. The mother’s rose-crown identifies her as Rosa’s wife, and by extension, the child evokes Augusto, vulnerable to death, as well as a memory of Rosalvo. Maternal fulfillment and loss coincide; plump *putti* in and beside the cradle magnify this paradox. Recognizable by her straggling curls and long nose, Paolina holds her robust child firmly on her lap to express a tactile bond between mother and child, viewed by the artist-father from a distance.

In the mourning portrait and *Human Frailty*, Rosa reshaped both allegory and portraiture in personal terms. Together, the pictures testify to the shift toward increasingly individualized expressions of grief in literature and art of the seventeenth century. In the portrait, he contained and perhaps disciplined maternal grief within a private, domestic context. Through the resemblance of the portrait’s subject to a widow, Rosa appropriated maternal grief to assuage his anxiety over his own mortality. Yet, by painting the portrait, he also shared Paolina’s grief and even, perhaps, acknowledged responsibility. *Human Frailty*, with its insistence on the personal, somatic realm, is as much about Rosa and his family as the Baroque allegorical conventions of *vanitas* and melancholy.

**Col Tempo—With Time (Rome, 1660–1673)**

Scholars have noted the paradoxical combination of artistic renewal and accomplishment in Rosa’s last years and his increasing bitterness, misanthropy, sense of isolation, and preoccupation with his health. The fifties were widely considered the decade of decline for men in the early modern period. Rosa’s bodily anxieties were related to his professional capacity,
but amid his complaints, he made it clear that he was still a successful artist. He also changed his style, moving to larger formats with fewer figures and simpler settings, and refused physically demanding commissions. Rosa responded to attitudes toward aging artists that emerged in the sixteenth century. The spectacle of the old painter who no longer could paint well drew attention to the manual aspects of art just when its intellectual basis was being touted. The potential embarrassment of the aged artist, though, was countered by his judgment, knowledge, and withdrawal from tasks he could no longer accomplish well.

Paolina did not become pregnant again after Augusto’s birth. Then in her late thirties, she was almost in menopause, which began for most early modern women in their forties. Although men’s aging was thought of as more gradual and subtle, menopause was a clearer—and earlier—benchmark of female senescence, and images of old women often stood for aging itself. In his late letters to Ricciardi, Rosa appropriated Paolina’s experiences as signs of Fortune’s persecution, his own aging, and melancholy. He was concerned about her, but her illnesses functioned in letters passionately declaring his need for his male friend in the face of age and misfortune. Descriptions of her as “aging and not in very good health,” or variants of that phrase, reinforced Fortune’s ill-treatment and bound Ricciardi more firmly to Rosa. And, despite growing older, Paolina still cared for her family energetically. During the near lethal bout of malaria suffered by four-year-old Augusto in November 1661, for instance, Rosa wrote about her tireless nursing vigil that left her no time to change clothes, likening her to Ariosto’s frenzied hero, Orlando. Reading between the lines, we can sense how memories of Rosalvo’s death must have weighed on her.

The couple separated again in 1664 to fend off recurring gossip about their relationship. This time, Rosa sent his family for over a year to live in a house in Rome offered by Girolamo Mercuri, a liberal priest and loyal friend who had known Rosa in Naples, helped him procure lodging when he first went to Florence, and witnessed Rosa and Paolina’s eventual marriage in 1672. Rosa lamented his loneliness to Ricciardi in a letter of July 31, 1666, saying that Paolina visited him frequently because of his “extraordinary need of her activity.” He continued, “If you would like to see the idea of impatience, you should be with me on the days I am without her.”
Perhaps this period was even harder on Paolina. On July 11, 1665, Rosa reported to Ricciardi that all her hair had fallen out, along with an unexplained “travail that continues to torment her” (311). He urged his friend not to spread this news and, quoting Petrarch’s Sonnet 170, joked: “he who can declare he burns [with love] is in a little fire.”102 Her sudden hair loss could have been caused by hormonal changes, high fever, anemia from pregnancy or prolonged menstrual bleeding, or stress, which the separation surely generated.103 Even though this seems to have been a temporary condition, it must have shaken her.

Paolina’s most serious illness, though, was a leg wound that frequently kept her bedridden and sometimes crying out in pain from 1666 to mid 1669, and recurred in 1671 (339–40, 350, 352–53, 354–57, 360–63, 368, 386). Rosa used the imprecise term flussione, implying bleeding or discharge, but her painful, chronic symptoms and her relatively high parity (five or more pregnancies brought to term) suggest leg ulcers from venous insufficiency.104 Treatments mentioned by Rosa—baths, medicinal decoctions, and purgation—were intended to cleanse her body, a common early modern approach to many illnesses.105 It would have been assumed that her menopause had allowed poisonous substances, normally released through menstruation, to accumulate. Even if some physicians considered stored menstrual fluid merely excessive, the inability to expel it could lead to bloated vessels, with a host of resulting symptoms, from hot flashes to painful, heavy loins and legs, nosebleeds, piles, ulcers, tumors, and dropsy. Indeed, early modern physicians directly connected leg ulcers with menopause.106

Rosa’s Death, Paolina’s Life, and Art History

In 1671, when her wound reappeared, Paolina again took purgatives and went to bed, but this time she suffered kidney stones as well (384, 386). In late 1672, Rosa himself came down with the probable congestive heart failure (dropsy) that killed him on March 15, 1673, at the age of fifty-nine. Paolina would have cared for Rosa during his illness, and welcomed the physicians and friends who visited.107 Before dying, he finally married her, with Mercuri as a witness. She and Augusto continued to reside in their
family home, and despite Rosa’s persistent descriptions of her in the 1660s as “old and not in very good health,” she lived until 1696 (2, n. 4).

Rosa’s letters furnish evidence of Paolina’s life but do not permit recovery of her subjectivity: like her image, her experiences functioned as signs of Rosa’s elaborate visual and verbal self-representation. As a sign, she has bolstered the received art-historical narrative about Rosa—the innovative, outrageous, rebellious forerunner of modern Romanticism who worked toward artistic autonomy. However, when she is viewed through the lens of gender and in the context of women’s history in early modern Italy, she qualifies this narrative in important ways. Her reconstructed biography continually raises awareness of bodily and material existence, yet it would be wrong to see her as unchanging “nature” to Rosa’s progressive “culture.” As Silvia Mantini states, “creating women’s history involves overcoming the assumption that nature and culture are fundamentally distinct and irreconcilable as scientific areas.” Paolina’s biological, maternal, and domestic life was shaped by specific historical conditions: from the Council of Trent’s reforms, to the ready availability of foundling homes, to the Naples plague, to the number of children she bore, affected by her inability to breast-feed and probably affecting her postmenopausal health in turn by increasing her vulnerability to venous insufficiency in her legs. Conversely, Rosa’s cultural accomplishments did not transcend his domestic, material, and bodily life; rather, that life was implicated in his art, poetry, and self-presentation.

The couple’s history makes clear the inseparability of nature and culture, public and private, and the relationality of gender. Rosa achieved his individually shaped masculine identity in the competitive contexts of seventeenth-century art and poetry, but Paolina’s domestic support, and their loving relationship, helped him do this. Through her relationship with Rosa, she constructed an identity that both conformed to and countered norms for women. She exercised agency by devoting herself energetically to the roles of wife and mother, gaining a home and honor within Rosa’s social circle, despite their unmarried status. However, while the couple’s roles were reciprocal and interdependent, they were not equal: Rosa largely determined the course of their life together, and Paolina paid a cost, most tragically in the loss of their children, for his decisions. As Joan
Wallach Scott has argued, the study of gender in history (or art history, I would add) is ultimately political in that it illuminates the inequities of power relations.109

Notes


7. On the misogynistic misrepresentations of Agnes Frey in Dürer scholarship,
“Lady without Equal”


16. See, for example, Scott, Rosa, 232: Rosa’s “most abiding legacy . . . is his bold attitude to the ‘genius’ of the artist and his refusal to paint except when he was carried away by the power of his raptures. It is a proud title to be the first painter to insist on the need for complete artistic independence.”


25. “donna senza pari nel mondo,” cited in Salvator Rosa: Lettere, comp. Lucio Festa, ed. Gian Giotto Borrelli (Bologna: Società Editrice il Mulino, 2003), letter no. 385, Nov. 21, 1671. Subsequently in this essay, I cite Rosa’s letters by number from the Festa/Borrelli edition. Where passages have been wholly or partially translated in Scott, Rosa, I’ve used Scott’s translation in my text and cited it along with the original Italian from Festa/Borrelli in notes. Otherwise, translations are mine.

26. Cavallo, “Bachelorhood and Masculinity,” found that many kinds of households with employees or family members qualified men as head. For Rosa’s dislike of pupils, see Scott, Rosa, 220.


29. Modeling may have been just one of her jobs, because women often pieced together incomes from multiple tasks; see Monica Chojnacka, Working Women of Early
Modern Venice (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 55.

30. Cited in Leandro Ozzola, Vite e opere di Salvator Rosa (Strasbourg: Heitz and Mündel, 1908), 62, n. 1: “Risposta del suo bene stare se vuole che io mi quieti di animo; . . . No sarò più lunga; solamente prego a conslami con uno verso solo.” Paolina could have dictated this to someone, but possibly she learned to read and to write a little at home, or in the religious schools that developed in the wake of the Counter-Reformation: see Domenico Sella, Italy in the Seventeenth Century (New York: Longman, 1997), 133–35.


34. Scott, Rosa, 65.

35. On the Percossi, see ibid., 55–59.

36. Ibid., 43.

37. The paintings were acquired by the Niccolini family in Florence and exhibited in 1767 as a self-portrait with a pendant representing Poetry. A later inscription on the back of the Hartford work identifies the woman as Ricciardi’s mistress dressed as a Sibyl, which may suggest that the writer knew she was a mistress but confused her identity. Paolina was certainly Rosa’s most logical model. For a recent discussion of these works, see Brigitte Daprà, “I Ritratti di Salvator Rosa,” in Museo del Capodimonte, Naples, Salvator Rosa, 60–61. Doubts about their status as portraits have been raised by Wendy Wassyng Roworth, “The Consolations of Friendship: Salvator Rosa’s Self-Portrait for Giovanni Battista Ricciardi,” Metropolitan Museum Journal 23 (1988): 106–9; and “Salvator Rosa’s Self-Portraits: Some Problems of Identity and Meaning,” The Seventeenth Century 4 (1989): 138–39. She argues that the paintings are allegories rather than portraits, although Rosa may well have used himself and Paolina as models.

38. I base my view on the ambiguity of likeness and the flexibility of image categories in the early modern period, as theorized by Patricia Simons, “Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women,” in Languages and Images of Renaissance Italy, ed. Alison Brown (Oxford:


44. Scott, *Rosa*, 64, 78–91.


51. Ibid., 21–22.
52. Ibid., 94, 221.
54. “La Signora Lucretia sempre più si pente di non haver menata una serva di costà e giornalmente me ne rimprovera.”
56. “La Signora Lucrezia è stata alquanto travagliata da’ dolori, ma nel presente si trova con buona salute.”
58. “[Lucrezia] si ritrova bestialissimamente in valigia, e questo mese ne dovrebbe esser fuori piacendo al Signore.”
59. Trans., Scott, *Rosa*, 64–65; “La Signora Lucretia oggi son otto giorni che mandò alla luce un figliolo maschio, copia spiccicata di Salvator Rosa a hore 5 di notte, con più facilità di quello ch’ha sin hora fatto, per la Dio gratia. Il parto il giorno doppo con disgusto straordinario della madre fu portato ad accrescere il numero degli Innocenti per colpa di quella fortuna che forzatamente vuol così. Oh Christo, è pure vero che cento, chi li desiderano e se ci studiano per haverli, non li possono havere, et io che non li vorrei perché non ho il modo d’acomodarli a questo mondo, mi nascono.” [It is now eight days since Signora Lucrezia gave birth to a son, the split (spitting) image of Salvator Rosa, at five o’clock in the evening, with greater ease than previously. Thank God for that. The next day, to his mother’s extreme indignation, he was taken away to increase the number of the innocents and Fortune, who wills it so, must take the blame. . . . Christ, it’s true that hundreds of people want them and, if they try to have them, can’t, while they’re born to me, who don’t want them because I haven’t the means to bring them up in this world.] The following is a portion of this letter not translated in Scott with my translation: “Credemi, Giulio mio, che questa volta ho fatto quanto in grande a quietare la Signora Lucretia,
la quale è stato necessitata ad acomodarsici con flemma per non accrescere materie ad
imperversare il mio Destino. . . . [Believe me, my Giulio, that this time I did a quite a lot
to quiet Signora Lucretia, who had to be reconciled to it (the situation) with coolness (or
calm) so as not to aggravate matters and make my destiny stormy.]

60. “La quale [the baby girl] è dove [voi] sapete.”

61. Valeria Finucci, The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and

62. David Kertzer, Sacrificed for Honor: Italian Infant Abandonment and the
Politics of Reproductive Control (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), esp. 8–37. For critiques
of Kertzer’s thesis, see reviews of Sacrificed for Honor by Nicolas Terpstra, Sixteenth Century

63. Kertzer, Sacrificed for Honor, 103–22, esp. 104.

64. Ibid., 113–19.

65. See Diana Bullen Presciutti, “The Visual Culture of the Foundling Hospital
in Central Italy (1400–1600)” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008); and Diana
Bullen Presciutti, “Carità et Potere: Representing the Medici Grand Dukes as ‘Fathers of

66. Kertzer, Sacrificed for Honor, 144–53. Nicholas Terpstra, Abandoned
Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 2005), 19–20, points out that children had better chances of
survival in orphanages than in foundling homes.

67. Kertzer, Sacrificed for Honor, 144–53. Nicholas Terpstra, Abandoned
Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 2005), 19–20, points out that children had better chances of
survival in orphanages than in foundling homes.

68. Ibid., 102–7.

69. Ibid., 245, n. 2. Rosa’s fear of the Chigi seems exaggerated: for instance, the
Pope’s brother Mario helped him during the scandal over his satire of papal patronage,
Allegory of Fortune (1658–59; Getty Museum, Los Angeles); see Scott, Rosa, 125.

70. Trans. Scott, Rosa, 108–10, “Che per altro vi giuro che vorrei far peggio ch’el
Gran Turco col serraglio. Non già perché mi tormenti la lussuria, ma godere del comodo,
e della cordial compagna di donne come la Signora Lucretia (se come la Signora Lucretia
se ne hanno per il mondo) la qual cosa non credo.”

71. On the Naples plague, see James Clifton, “Art and Plague at Naples,” in Hope
and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500–1800, ed. Gauvin Alexander
Bailey, Pamela Jones, et al. (Worcester, MA: Clark University, College of the Holy Cross,

72. Rosa initially believed that his sister and all her children had died, but this
information proved false. See Scott, Rosa, 245, n. 6.

73. Trans. Scott, Rosa, 109; “Le consolationi degli stoici non passano la [pena]
e gli inventori di coteste metafisiche chi [l’havess]e potuti praticare l’haverei trovati forse
differ[enti] assai da quello che predicheno ne’ loro scart [afacci].”

74. Black, Early Modern Italy, 23.

75. On this alienation, see Lucinda McCray Beier, “The Good Death in
Seventeenth-Century England,” in Death, Ritual, and Bereavement, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke

76. Black, Early Modern Italy, 23, states that Rome lost approximately twenty thousand people.

77. Trans. Scott, Rosa, 110; “Lascio considerare a chi ha viscere come possa stare il mio core nel trovarmi solo in faccia alla Signora Lucretia con una amaritudine simile nell’anima.”


80. On Philippe de Mornay’s literary turning of his wife’s sorrow toward masculine moderation in his Tears on the Death of His Sonne (1591), see Patricia Phillippy, “Paternal and Maternal Mourning,” 203–5.


82. Ralph Houlbrooke, Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 235–37, notes that parental grief for adolescent or adult children was especially deep when they were expected to carry on a parent’s profession; in letter 194 (February 1656), Rosa noted that Rosalvo had great promise as a painter, among his other sterling qualities.

83. Trans. Scott, Rosa, 110; “Se qui ci vanno le parole e bestemie di Giobbe lo lascio considerare à chi non è di marmo essendosi affatto spento il mio seme, e la mia parentela, a segno tale che di quanti parenti ho hauti nel mondo non ve n’è restato per uno da testimoniar la mia schiatta.”


86. Again, the Chigi did not seem to be implacable enemies of Rosa. Scott, Rosa,
notes that Alexander VII Chigi also visited Rosa’s studio in September 1659 and gave him a silver cup and basin two months later.

87. Ibid., 124; Wallace, “Rosa’s Democritus,” 30–31, allows that Rosa’s signature on the knife may refer to the loss of Rosalvo and Rosa’s brother.


89. See Lisa Rosenthal, Gender, Politics and Allegory in the Art of Rubens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 47, for a discussion of fatherly distance in Ruben’s portraits of Hélène Fourment and her children. Rosenthal’s discussion of embodiment in Ruben’s allegories has informed my understanding of Human Frailty.

90. Jennifer Vaught, “Introduction,” in Grief and Gender, 4–6. I would add that, during the time of the Naples tragedy, Rosa etched the highly imaginative Figurines, dedicated to patron Carlo de’ Rossi. See Wallace, Etchings, 12–36.

91. Scott, Rosa, 171; and Langdon, “Gli Ultimi Anni.”


93. Scott, Rosa, 190.

94. Ibid., 173, 191.


96. Wiesner-Hanks, Women and Gender, 95.


98. “invecchiata et di non troppa buona salute” appears in letter no. 305; the remaining citations are variants.

99. “Siamo stati due volte col confessore, et in tutto questo tempo non mi son spogliato che cinque o sei volte. Ma la povera Lucretia, mai . . . La Signora Lucretia, se non s’amala, farà più che Orlando.” (We have been with the confessor two times and in this whole time I have not changed clothes more than five or six times, but poor Lucrezia, never . . . Signora Lucrezia, if she is not sick, will do more than Orlando). Following early modern theories, Rosa blamed Augusto’s double tertian fever on Rome’s pestilential air (Nov. 16, 1661, no. 252). See the Cambridge Historical Dictionary of Disease, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), s.v. “malaria” on fever patterns.

100. Scott, Rosa, 7.

102. “Alla povera Signora Lucrezia, per il travaglio che di continuo la tormento,
li sono cascati tutti i capelli. Non discorro d’altri guai, che: chi può dir com’egli arde, è in
picciol fuoco.”

103. Encyclopedia of Women’s Health, ed. Christine Ammer (New York: Facts on
File, 2005), s.v. “hair loss.”

104. Rosa also used flussione for his ailing teeth and eyes (305, 357). On parity
and venous disease, see Jennifer Beebe-Dimmer et al., “The Epidemiology of Chronic


106. Michael Stolberg, “A Woman’s Hell? Medical Perceptions of Menopause in

107. Lucinda M. Becker, Death and the Early Modern Englishwoman (Aldershot,
UK: Ashgate, 2003), 31, emphasizes that death was a semi-public event presided over by
the woman of the house.

108. Silvia Mantini, “Women’s History in Italy: Cultural Itineraries and New
177.