Remembering the Mother, Presenting the Stepmother: Portraits of the Early Modern Family in Northern Europe

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This study began with a book on widowhood when I was looking for a cover image that would move beyond the expected stereotype of an old woman in black to convey the gendered legal and economic conditions of a surviving spouse and his or her children in medieval and early modern Europe. In the end a widow, a young one with her child, appeared on the book cover, but the widowers and their families stayed with me. The survey of portraits considered here is not exhaustive. Rather, this essay explores how families and the artists they commissioned in the 1500s and 1600s visually presented a remarriage to the viewer and what these representations reveal to us about the place of first wives, second wives, and the children of their respective marriages. The paintings examined here deserve attention because they disclose the ambivalence of remarriage in a way that complements the evidence gained from sifting through legal records and laws, letters and plays, probate inventories, wills, and marriage contracts. In these portraits the loss of a spouse and mother and the commemoration of her care for offspring and years of married life are juxtaposed with the future children and social connections offered by a new wife.

In the Baptism of Christ triptych by Gerard David, the donor Jan des Trompes is presented to the viewer by his patron saint John the Evangelist in what appears, at first glance, to be a typical scene of the donor and his family. On the left wing of the triptych, Trompes, a city councillor and civic officeholder in Bruges, kneels alongside his son as spectators to the
baptism of Christ in the central panel. On the right wing, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary protects Trompes’ wife Elisabeth van der Meersch and their four daughters (see fig. 1). But when we close the panels, a more complicated family reality emerges. On the exterior wings we find the donor’s second wife Madeleine Cordier, the stepmother to the children inside, kneeling with her daughter, and presented by her patron saint Mary Magdalene to the Virgin and Child sitting opposite (see fig. 2).

The painting with its layers of wives and children and its portrayal of serial marriage on the interior and exterior wings allows us to reflect upon the place of the mother and the stepmother in the lifecycle of an early modern family and the separate but entangled family bloodlines.

The interior and exterior wings of the *Baptism of Christ* triptych invite questions about how a painting “fixes a particular memory” or memories and how a painting might “rearrange and re-order” time or confront the viewer with the intermingling of the dead and the then living. Early modern portraits of the multiple layers of family and serial marriages raise numerous questions about the uses of memory and the arrangement of father, dead and living wives, and their children in an imagined vision of a family painted for posterity. For the children of the first marriage bed, did the image of their mother serve to reinforce the continuity of her presence in the household despite her physical absence and the loss of her care, especially in children so young they might have no visual or sensual memory of their mother at all? For the husband, did the commemorative gesture of a posthumous portrait serve to underline the trade or political alliances and social networks formed with the marriage? For the stepmother, did the continual presence of the mother in a domestic or devotional portrait ease or complicate her life with her husband or her stepchildren?

This article examines the commemoration of the mother alongside the second wife or stepmother in family portraits of the early modern period in Northern Europe. The representations of a husband in a painting alongside his serial wives strike the modern viewer as odd within a Judeo-Christian European context, but these complex images represented the early modern emphasis on lineage, the bonds of affection between spouses in remembrance of a marriage (even one already dissolved by
Figure 1. Gerard David, *Baptism of Christ*, c. 1502–1508, oil on wood, central panel 129.7 cm × 96.6 cm, left and right panels 132 cm × 43 cm, Stedelijke Musae Brugge Groeninge Museum, Bruges, Belgium — © Lukas — Art in Flanders VZW.
Figure 2. Gerard David, *Baptism of Christ*, c. 1502–1508, oil on wood, left and right exterior panels 132 cm × 43 cm, Stedelijke Musea Brugge Groeninge Museum, Bruges, Belgium — © Lukas — Art in Flanders VZW.
death), and even the potential conflicts between parents and stepchildren or half-siblings over property and inheritance.

Jean Wilson has tentatively suggested that the interior panels of David’s *Baptism of Christ* served “a memorializing function,” perhaps “initially . . . commissioned for an altar where prayers would be said for his first wife,” who died in March 1502. If the interior and exterior wings were painted at the same time in the *Baptism of Christ* triptych, after the first wife’s death and Jan des Trompes’ remarriage, one might wonder if it was a strategy intended to avoid having to place the two wives and their sets of children side by side. It is not known for certain if the triptych was completed in “two phases,” although the presence of the eldest daughter of Jan des Trompes’ second marriage allows the dating of the painting of the exterior wings to about 1507–1508. A son Jean and a daughter Jeanne also survived from this remarriage before their mother Madeleine Cordier died in 1510, and they are not depicted. Were the exterior panels commissioned as an afterthought upon remarriage? Or as Jan des Trompes’ tribute to the new motherhood of Madeleine when she became, more than a stepmother, a mother in her own right?

Art historian Shirley Blum has remarked on the “extraordinary similarity” and “loss of individuality” in the faces of the *Baptism of Christ* triptych. The second wife “Madeleine Cordier’s face is so like that of Elisabeth van der Meersch [the first wife] that one might think they were sisters.” This blended identity among serial wives can be frequently found on monumental funerary brasses of the late medieval and early modern periods, where the template for one wife is repeated for a second or third, but David’s paintings “often incorporated portraits and highly individualized characters” rather than ideal or identical figures. While the faces of the daughters of Jan des Trompes and Elisabeth van der Meersch from the first marriage bed each have a distinct expression and features, the two wives look remarkably similar. Jan and Elisabeth’s daughters on the interior wing seem frozen in a childhood when their mother was alive. Moreover, the duration of their parents’ marriage seems compressed in the depiction of the numerous children so close together in age. Their little half sister on the exterior wing, shown not as an infant but as a young girl gazing
peacefully at the baby Jesus, seems to have caught up to her older siblings in a strange distortion of time. And yet the configurations of interior and exterior family groups reflect perhaps more accurately the separate marriage beds of remarried families than some of the later styles of blended family portraits we shall examine.

Remarriage and Stepfamilies in Context

Martha Howell’s research shows high rates of remarriage in the bustling urban hubs of Flanders among widows and widowers in the mid to late 1400s. The legal records of Douai often reveal a third and sometimes a fourth marriage. Placing Douai in the broader context of the Low Countries, Howell shows that these high remarriage rates resulted from the customary laws allowing the survivor control of conjugal property after the death of a spouse; however, moving into the early modern period, as property became more controlled by contract and by a legal emphasis on lineage, remarriages probably became more difficult for a widow because she might not have the same resources she had enjoyed under custom.¹⁰

Measuring the remarriage rates of the Dutch gentry over a 150-year period—many of whom were patrons of tomb sculptures and family portraits—Sherrin Marshall found that “when gentry women were widowed, they tended not to remarry, particularly if their first marriage had produced children,” although the “percentages of remarriages were much higher” among widowers. During the years of the Dutch revolt, however, when high numbers of adult males died in the war or through execution, the rate of widow remarriage at 31% outweighed the male counterpart at 19%. For sixty years of Marshall’s study, the remarriage rate of widowers was twice or more that of widows; between one-fifth and one-third of Dutch gentry widowers remarried.¹¹ For a later period in Amsterdam among more modest social classes, 45.9% of widowers remarried whereas only 23.9% of widows entered a new marriage. When Anne McCants compares her eighteenth-century Amsterdam data with a survey of early modern populations in Geneva and urban and rural England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she finds that across these regions “widowed men were about twice as likely to remarry as widowed women.”¹²
Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux’s research on northern France affirms that for the early modern period “remarriage was much quicker and easier for men, a point on which all statistics are concordant.” She places the specific remarriage rates of Rheims, France in various European contexts of age at marriage and age at widowhood, number of dependent children, rural versus urban patterns, and the interval between death of spouse and remarriage.\(^{13}\) In general, for men and women across Europe, remarriage rates were higher in the sixteenth century and began to decline in the seventeenth through eighteenth centuries.\(^ {14}\)

Across Europe, the overall pattern of remarriage is clear. Widowers were more likely to remarry than widows with a shorter interval between marriages. A man’s aging was not as much of a barrier to remarriage, and the presence of children made the widower even more likely to remarry, whereas dependent children and older age reduced the likelihood of a widow’s remarriage.\(^ {15}\) The portraits examined in this article offer an opportunity to understand the perspective of the early modern woman who took up an offer of marriage from a widower, sometimes a father with children from his previous marriage. The stepmother was a common figure in the lives of many children across early modern Europe.

In historiography on the early modern family, widowhood, women’s roles as guardians, and the opportunities to remain widowed or to remarry have been well studied, but the consequences of a remarriage have not.\(^ {16}\) We know very little about stepfamilies and blended families in the early modern period, despite the frequent choice to remarry, especially among widowers.\(^ {17}\) One of the most prized, encouraged, and praiseworthy roles of womanhood was maternity within marriage and the years of caregiving it entailed. The role of wife was a stepping-stone on the path to motherhood for most women in early modern Europe, but, as Naomi Miller and Naomi Yavneh have shown, wetnurses, stepmothers, guardians, and others might share the “spectrum of caregiving roles.”\(^ {18}\) A recent retrospective on the history of the family in early modern England has re-assessed Lawrence Stone’s focus on “parent-child relationships” to encourage, among other topics, research on “a variety of parenting relationships across life courses.”\(^ {19}\)
As some of the early modern funerary monuments and portraits explored here convey, the loss of a wife was particularly poignant if she had died trying to bear her husband an heir. The representations of remarriages and blended families in tomb sculptures and paintings of the early modern period to be explored here offer sources for examining remarriage and the roles of wives as mothers, or stepmothers, or both. Samuel Johnson suggested in the eighteenth century that the man who takes “a second wife . . . pays the highest compliment to the first, by shewing that she made him so happy as a married man, that he wishes to be so a second time.”20 The woman who married a widowed father lived with the history of the husband’s first marriage — for better or worse — and, if they could remember her, probably the ongoing love and loyalty of the children for their mother.

Funerary Monuments and Family Memory

Maria DePrano has pointed out the “paucity of research exploring how Renaissance women were memorialized after death.”21 In this section, consequently, to complement the portraits we briefly examine the conventions of portraying the family in northern European funerary monuments of the 1400s through 1600s. Jean Wilson argues that in the late 1400s and early 1500s, for the sector of the urban population in Bruges keen to “live nobly,” the altarpiece “would become the forum wherein the desires and ambitions of this prosperous and ambitious social group might be represented and preserved for future generations.” An altarpiece commission by an urban donor, such as Jan des Trompes moving his way up the social ladder with civic offices, was similar to the more longstanding practice among the nobility of establishing “funerary chapels” or “monumental sculpted tombs.”22 By the late 1500s through the 1700s, paintings of family groups had replaced the altarpiece or religious donor portrait as the commission of choice among the upwardly mobile and the nobility in northern Europe, although the practice of designing burial tombs continued. To “keep the memories of the deceased alive,” the Dutch aristocracy in the seventeenth century commissioned tomb sculptures. Frits Scholten turned to family portraiture in the Netherlands for clues to understand these lavish tombs.
and found a “modest visual tradition that combined the living and dead members of the family in a single scene.” Some shared conventions about the remembrance of loved ones and lineage, therefore, seem to emerge in both the funerary monuments and in the family portraits of the early modern period.

There was a place for the dead among the living even after the Reformation, and it was not unusual in early modern culture to portray the living alongside the dead even if they had not lived alongside one another in life. Funerary monuments and tomb sculptures of the late medieval to early modern era sometimes captured for eternity a vision of the family that had never existed. “The representation of multiple marriages on a single monument was a common practice in early modern England, as it was elsewhere in Europe,” according to Peter Sherlock, because these monuments show the members of the family at a single moment in time, rather than as a series of unfolding events in the life cycle of a family — weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

On a monumental brass or a sculpted monument the figure of a husband on a tomb might lie alongside the figures of one, two, or even three successive wives and their children. A grave dating from 1472 in Thornton, Buckinghamshire, for example, shows Robert Ingleton etched in monumental brass, accompanied by his three wives. His first wife appears on his right hand side with the children of the first marriage bed arranged beneath the couple. On his left stand both Ingleton’s second and third wives, with the children of each subsequent marriage bed engraved beneath their respective mothers. The tomb of Sir John St. John in the church of St. Mary, Lydiard Tregoze, Wiltshire, commemorates his first wife, who died in childbirth with their thirteenth child. She cradles a swaddled infant, who survived despite the death of his mother, both sculpted in effigy on St. John’s left hand side. The recumbent effigy of St. John’s second wife Margaret Wiltmore, still alive when the tomb was commissioned, lies on his right. In the first half of the sixteenth century in northern France on a tomb sculpted in relief, a “chevalier” prays with his three wives “of whom he had 14 children, 4 dying young.” The sixteenth-century monument of a bourgeois of Lille commemorates Mathieu Segon (who died in 1562), his first wife Jeanne Choquet (who died twenty-seven
years before him in 1538), his second wife Isaveau Desprez, and the children of the two marriage beds. As Nigel Llewellyn has argued, status and lineage were meant to be evident on family tombs: “To support the system of precedence and hierarchy upon which the codes of honour relied, it was essential to know absolutely who was related to whom, precisely which wives had carried which children, and how the association of honour was spread through the community and through the clan.” Even if some of the visual codes have been obscured by time and changing sensibilities, a concern for lineage is still apparent in these early modern tombs in the coats of arms, family names, titles, identifications, careful insertion of dates, and representations of the husband or father, wives, and children who died in infancy, as well as those who survived their parents.

It is not always known whether the second or subsequent wife was complicit in designing the funerary monument in which she was to share an eternal marriage bed with her husband and his first wife. The early seventeenth-century funerary monument of Sir William Peryam, in Crediton, Devonshire, depicts all three of his wives and his four daughters. Peryam’s third wife and stepmother to his daughters probably commissioned the tomb sculpture after his death. In Rouen, an écuyer and civic judge died almost twenty years after his first wife, and his second wife followed him to the grave twelve years later. Three decades separate the deaths of the first wife and the second wife, but their recumbent effigies appear on either side of their husband. In these cases, was the second wife’s burial place determined by her husband at the time of his death, and she simply carried out his wishes? Or did the second wife commission the tomb after his death and take her place alongside her husband and his first wife? In a number of instances in early modern England, a husband commissioned a monument to a wife who had died in childbirth. The husband’s recumbent effigy lies alongside or appears with the deceased wife and swaddled infant, perhaps with the intention that he would eventually be buried at the site. Several of these husbands seem to have had a change of heart and can be found buried with a second or subsequent wife. Thomas Cecil, first Earl of Exeter and the eldest son of Lord Burghley, who died in 1623, arranged for a funeral monument at Westminster Abbey for his two wives, but Frances Brydges Chandos, his second wife, a stepmother and mother of
only one surviving child, seems to have chosen to be buried in Winchester rather than in the premier burial site in England where her husband had allocated a place for her.\textsuperscript{34} Many combinations of family members lay together in perpetuity on these northern European burial monuments of the early modern period: son and stepmother, husband and wife and father-in-law, father and mother, with both the dead children and the survivors.\textsuperscript{35} The appearance of a second husband or stepfather on a funerary monument or in an early modern painting seems to have been much more unusual. In late medieval Arras in the French region of Flanders, a wife appears to be sculpted in relief with her two husbands and daughters.\textsuperscript{36} A painted triptych funerary monument represents Nicolas Le Prévost, a \textit{maître des comptes} in Lille and \textit{conseiller} of Maximilian of Austria, alongside his wife Jeanne de La Porte, who died as a remarried woman forty-one years later in 1534. In the central panel, the couple Nicolas and Jeanne pray and appear as they would have in the 1490s before Nicolas’ death. Six sons are positioned behind their father, while six daughters appear in prayer behind their mother. Jeanne de la Porte’s second husband, Valérien de Raisse, an \textit{écuyer} who died in 1526, is presented on the left panel by his patron saint Valerian, while a canon, presumably Maximilien le Prévost, the son of the couple, who was a canon at St. Pierre, appears on the right panel of the triptych.\textsuperscript{37} Stepmothers were more frequent figures in the lives of early modern children, but the rare appearances of second husbands and stepfathers probably has more to do with the ensuing household arrangements upon remarriage as well as honor, lineage, family name, reputation, life course, and the lack of financial means available to the widow to commission a piece. It is too early to say at this point, but I am pursuing these possibilities as part of a project on remarriage and stepfamilies.\textsuperscript{38} Funerary monuments could simplify the family tree, for example, when a husband was buried with only a first wife or a second wife, sometimes accompanied by the children who had died in infancy or early childhood and preceded their parents to the grave.\textsuperscript{39} Were these omissions the result of stronger affective ties with a first wife or a second wife, the control of a living second wife, or mere pragmatism? In Étonges, France, at
the tomb of François d’Anglure, Vicomte d’Étoges, his wife Marie de Vérès lay alongside him in recumbent effigy. They were accompanied in death by the effigies of a daughter Susanne and a young male infant. Another Anglure boy of this marriage was buried separately in a nearby church.40 Their four surviving children were not represented. Although this family tomb was desecrated in the tumult of the French revolution and is no longer complete, at first glance we appear to be looking at the tomb of a nuclear family, acknowledging the loss of their precious young children who preceded their parents to the grave. But Marie de Vérès was François d’Anglure’s second wife, who had been widowed by Louis de Brichanteau after bearing him eleven children. Vérès, widow and mother, became a stepmother to Isabeau d’Anglure, the only child from François d’Anglure’s first marriage. This stepdaughter would later become embroiled in an inheritance dispute with her half brothers, the sons of Marie de Vérès from this second marriage, and accuse her stepmother of undue influence over her father François.41 As a mother and stepmother, Marie de Vérès had numerous children to protect from her first and second marriage beds, but there is no evidence of the previous marriages at the tomb, or of the nineteen surviving and deceased children from three marriage beds of two husbands and two wives. The modern viewer of the tomb faces a simplified representation of the Anglure-Vérès alliance without acknowledgement of the history, legacies, potential inheritance disputes, and children of the first marriage beds.42

Early modern funerary monuments frequently represented the dead in the company of the living or recreated a family in death as it had never existed in life; this “family fiction” might combine two wives who may never have met and yet lay in the same eternal marriage bed or it might omit, simplify, and prune the family tree of some of its branches.43

From Funerary Monuments to Paintings for the Church, for the Home, and their Publics

This practice of “family fiction” crossed over into portraiture when a powerful husband might commission portraits to commemorate his wives for personal and for dynastic reasons. King Sigismund August of Poland
had the matching portraits of his first and second wives—Elizabeth of Hapsburg and Barbara Radziwill—intimately bound together in a dip-
tych covered in red velvet like a book that one could open and admire or prop open to display. The small, personal format of these commemora-
tive portraits served a private and portable purpose. Maximilian of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor (1486–1519), continued to commission portraits of his first wife Mary of Burgundy for several decades after her death in 1487 and his second marriage in 1493. Court records reveal commis-
sions to paint Mary of Burgundy’s image in 1500 and again in 1510, and the Holy Roman Emperor also ensured his first wife’s presence at the funerary monument he commissioned for himself. The most public way of maintaining the memory of Mary of Burgundy’s dynastic legacy to Maximilian’s empire and to her children was the relief sculpture (ca. 1500), which included his second wife Bianca Maria Sforza, that was placed over the entrance to Maximilian’s palatial residence in the central square of the town of Innsbruck. In the sculpture Bianca, who became stepmother to his two children with Mary, flanks Maximilian. Beside Bianca is the enduringly youthful Mary, sculpted thirteen years after her death, serving to remind all visitors to the Holy Roman Emperor’s court of his claim through Mary to Burgundy and the Netherlandish states where she had lived. As Ann Roberts remarks, “Maximilian made a point of keeping Mary’s image before the eyes of his contemporaries, through the nearly 40 years he outlived her.”

In Italy, as DePrano asserts, “the likenesses of deceased women hung in prominent locations in Renaissance palazzi long after the death of the sitters, thus preserving their memory and contributing to the honor of the family,” and reinforcing and reminding the visitors of their matrilineal ties and social networks. Margaret Koster has somewhat controversially yet convincingly argued that, rather than giving witness to the celebration of a wedding, the famous Arnolfini portrait painted by Jan Van Eyck in 1434 commemorates the wife of an Italian merchant in Bruges, who probably died in childbirth. Van Eyck combined images of the living and the dead in a number of his paintings, and in the Arnolfini portrait he contrasts the somber colors of the grieving, living husband with the bright green dress worn by the idealized woman, with her otherworldly glow, painted more
beautifully dead than alive. More importantly, Koster suggests that art historians may have confused the meaning of the image because the “commemoration of women — dead or alive — was rare.”

Some of the confusion, I suspect, stems from the portrayal of the living alongside the dead in a painting as opposed to a tomb sculpture or monumental brass. A portrait of a woman alone, or in Renaissance profile, or even in a portable diptych, serves as a memento of her life. A portrait of a living husband and his dead wife, however confusing, remembers the couple as they were — a couple. But add another wife, and a range of children and the proliferation of roles, meanings, and “family fictions” confounds: mother, stepmother; mourning, celebrating; nurturing, replacing; welcoming, bidding farewell.

The commemoration of the dead intermingled with the living is an uneasy mix because, to the modern eye, there is something unsettling about transferring funerary representations of a husband and two or three wives to a painted family portrait intended for a domestic setting. Robert Wheaton has suggested that the “persistence of the dead spouses in family portraits reflected the legal fact that the bond that had created the earlier marriage persisted in the property rights of the relict and the children of that marriage over the property brought by the defunct spouse. In a legal as well as an emotional sense, the defunct remained a member of the family.”

Indeed, some early nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpretations of these paintings reflect a certain discomfort with the representation of these blended families in death, as they never appeared in life.

Remembering the First Wife, Positioning the Second

In a devotional portrait dating to the early 1500s the donor Leonard von Völs and his family kneel before Mary, the Queen of Heaven (see fig. 3). The painting of the von Völs family showing its coat of arms seems to have hung in the private chapel at their castle Prösels in Southern Tyrol, part of Italy until the nineteenth century. Leonard von Völs, a traditional military noble, friend and ally of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, appears dressed in armor, accompanied by his battle horse. Von Völs kneels directly beneath the Virgin Mary and is by far the largest of the human figures in the painting. His sons Melchior and Christoph by his first wife Regina von Thun, who
Figure 3. The Master of the Hapsburgs, *Mary as Queen of Heaven*, ca. 1507–8, pine boards, 122 cm × 107.1 cm, Inv. Nr. Gm 332, courtesy of Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, Germany.
died in 1498, kneel behind him. On Mary's left hand side, the deceased first wife kneels alongside Katharina von Firmian, the second wife to Leonard von Völs and stepmother to the sons of the first marriage bed.

Leonard von Völs looks upon his two wives, but most directly at his second wife, who wears the bonnet of married women of the period. His first wife, probably deceased for about a decade when the painting was commissioned, is of a smaller stature and wears a jeweled headdress without the customary bonnet to indicate her married status, possibly because she was not the current wife. Although the first wife, Regina von Thun, is placed closest to her husband and sons, she appears so petite that she is more or less the same size as her children. The second wife/stepmother seems to eclipse the mother of von Völs' sons, but Regina von Thun's place as mother still required commemoration and recognition. The second wife/stepmother's larger stature, almost matching that of her husband, seems to grant her a measure of status in the painting and lends credence to the suggestion that the painting be considered as a votive painting commissioned before her death or as a commemorative epitaph for this second wife and stepmother von Firmian, who died in 1507. This painting acknowledges the importance of lineage in its depiction of the first wife and the male heirs of the first marriage bed, yet it also seems to demonstrate the affective bonds of the husband for the second wife/stepmother. Leonard von Völs was married three times, and his third wife Ursula Montfort would have worshipped in the private chapel of the Castle Prössels where the painting of her husband, her stepsons, and her predecessors was installed.

About two decades later, Jakob Meyer, a mayor of Basel, Switzerland, commissioned a portrait by Holbein for his private chapel that portrays the Meyer family praying before a “Madonna of Mercy” (see fig. 4). As described by Jochen Sander, “Mary’s cloak is opened to envelop the family of the patron kneeling at her feet, bringing them symbolically under her protection.” From the viewer’s left, the donor Jakob Meyer, accompanied by a young boy and a male infant, kneels in prayer before the Madonna. On the other side of the Madonna, we see the profiles of two kneeling women accompanied by a young girl. Some interpretations of this painting, in trying to explain the presence of the two adult women, Meyer’s first and second wives, have suggested that Meyer asked Holbein to add the
Figure 4. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Madonna with Basel Mayor Jakob Meyer and his Family*, 1525-1526 and 1528, oil on panel, 169.5 cm × 126.5 cm, Hessian House Foundation [Hessische Hausstiftung], on loan to Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Artothek image no. 10800 © Hans Hinz / ARTOTHEK.
profile of his deceased first wife Magdalena Baer to the painting after it had been completed. But the story is much more interesting and complex if we look at it from the perspective of the second wife, who was alive to see the painting of her family hung in the private family chapel. The *Madonna of Mercy* was Holbein’s second commission by Meyer. In 1516, a young Holbein painted Jakob Meyer and his second wife, Dorothea Kannengiesser in two companion portraits when Meyer was the newly elected mayor of Basel and the couple had been married for three years. Meyer commissioned Holbein to paint the Madonna a decade later, in 1525–1526, when Holbein returned to Basel from England. Meyer was trying to restore his reputation after a scandal in which he was removed from civic office and had become increasingly isolated as a Catholic in a newly Protestant town.

When Meyer commissioned the Madonna, his first wife Magdalena, who died in 1511, had been dead for at least fourteen years. He remained a widower for two years before his remarriage; by 1525, twelve years into Meyer’s second marriage, his wife Dorothea was still living with the spectre of the first wife and the commemoration of Magdalena in this portrait of the family under the protection of the Madonna. Jakob Meyer chose to honor Magdalena in this portrait, perhaps as a reminder to others of his marital ties to the Baer family because his former brother-in-law, Hans Baer, had bravely guarded the banner of Basel at the battle of Marignano. The identities of the young boy and the male infant have been disputed. Some have ventured that the St. James and the infant John the Baptist represent a son or sons from the first marriage or a newborn from the second marriage, but Jochen Sander asserts that no archival sources have been found to suggest any children born to Meyer other than Anna, the young girl represented in the painting.

There are some signs that the second wife Dorothea or her husband Jakob was not happy with her portrayal and her merged identity alongside her predecessor. Initially, Dorothea had an identical bonnet and scarf to the first wife, as can be seen in the color drawing of Dorothea prepared by Holbein before the Madonna painting in the 1520s (see fig. 5).

This style of bonnet and scarf worn by married women in German language areas of Europe obscured the features of both wives, covering
Figure 5. Hans Holbein the Younger, Portrait of Dorothea Meyer, born Kannengiesser c. 1525-26, black and colored chalk on white prepared paper, 39.5 cm × 28.1 cm, Inv. 1823.141, Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.
their jaws and foreheads — perhaps conveniently in the case of representing the first wife whom Holbein had presumably never seen, since he would have been only fourteen when she died.58 To portray the first wife Holbein resorted to the profile portrait which “creates a distance” from the viewer. This Italian Renaissance technique for portraying women dated to the mid 1400s and by the early 1500s would have been considered “old-fashioned.”59 Artists in northern Europe occasionally used the profile view, for example, in the 1500s in the posthumous portraits Maximilian commissioned of his first wife Mary of Burgundy.60

When Holbein returned to Basel from England in 1528, Meyer asked him to alter the painting. Rather than adding in the first wife, as previous interpretations have suggested, recent x-ray studies of the painting show that Holbein painted over the bonnet and scarf of the second wife Dorothea so that her face became more visible and her identity distinguished from the first wife. Some have ventured that the alterations to Dorothea’s headdress simply update the fashion. However, the changes were completed only three years later, and German married women and widows continued to wear this style of bonnet and scarf at least into the 1540s.61 In fairness, the x-rays show the daughter Anna with flowing maiden’s locks, much as Holbein had first sketched them. Holbein painted over the young girl’s hair to reflect the headdress of a betrothed young woman. He also altered Anna Meyer’s nose, although in profile she still looks enough like Magdalena Baer, the first wife, to cause confusion even though she was a child of the second marriage. Holbein’s placement of the two wives side by side and the subsequent alterations to Dorothea Kannengiesser, highlight the “manipulation of memory” that might help a second wife emerge from a deceased first wife’s shadow with a distinct identity fifteen years into her own role as wife and seventeen years after her husband’s first marriage had ended.62

A century later, the style of family portrait had moved beyond the religious triptych or altarpiece to the more secular setting of a domestic interior scene or landscape. The Saltonstall Family portrait, 1636–1637, which hangs in the Tate Gallery London, is perhaps the most famous of the portraits of blended families or stepfamilies (see fig. 6).63 In the painting, a pale woman lying in bed looks out to Sir Richard Saltonstall,
Figure 6. David Des Granges, *The Saltonstall Family*, 1636-7, oil on canvas, 248.3 cm × 309.5 cm, inventory no. T02020, Tate/Digital Image © Tate, London, 2009.
who holds the hand of the eldest of his two small children. Saltonstall’s gaze is directed to a woman seated next to the bed, holding a swaddled infant. It was initially suggested that the woman holding the infant in the foreground was a nurse tending to the child while the mother recovered during her lying-in period. An alternative interpretation suggested that the mother in childbed had died, but was represented a second time seated in the chair, as she had appeared in life, similar to the scene portrayed in John Souch’s contemporary portrait of Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife in the Manchester Art Gallery. For the Saltonstall portrait, it is now believed that the pale woman in bed, partially covered by the bed curtain, represents Sir Richard Saltonstall’s first wife, Elizabeth Basse, who died in 1630, and that with her hand gesture she draws the viewer’s attention to her children with Sir Richard. The seated woman is actually the second wife and stepmother to the two surviving Saltonstall children of the first marriage. She holds her own newborn, a child of the second marriage bed. Mary Parker married Sir Richard three years after the death of his first wife, had a child the following year who did not survive and another in 1636 around the time the portrait was painted. While the painting commemorates the first wife and reinforces her relationship with her husband and children, this blended family portrait acknowledges the new wife, and places her in the foreground, in her roles as both mother and stepmother of the Saltonstall children.

In an almost contemporary portrait of a noble family from Utrecht in the Netherlands, we see the family of Godard van Reede as painted by the Saftleven brothers in 1634 (see fig. 7). Godard van Reede shows himself to be a widower as he stands next to his first wife’s corpse with his hand on a skull and the Latin inscription “ANHELO / SUPERSTES / ET SPERO” that announces “I breathe, survive, and remain hopeful.” Her husband remains close to her but does not quite join her under the elaborate red and gold canopy in the countryside, nor does he step on the opulent woven rug laid across the ground. He evidently continues to mourn her loss because the Latin inscription alludes to the breathless, panting, gasping early stages of grief. An extinguished candle and an hourglass in the foreground remind the viewer of the first wife’s demise as she lies on her canopy deathbed with her eyes closed and hands in prayer. An infant wear-
Figure 7. Cornelis Saftleven and Herman Saftleven, *Godard van Reede van Nederhorst and his Family*, 1634, oil on canvas, 210 cm × 143 cm, Slot Zuylen, Utrecht, Netherlands; www.slotzuylen.nl.
ing a winding sheet accompanies her in death, perched on her mother’s body and indicates to the viewer that the first wife Emerentia Oem van Wijngaerden died in childbirth. The gold lettering against a luxurious red fabric beneath the corpse confirms the death of the baby girl and her mother: “EXTINCTA. PROLE. QUIESCO” [My child is dead and I am at rest].

Beyond the depiction of the mother’s corpse and her tiny infant in its burial garment, the meaning of the rest of the painting is not immediately evident to the modern viewer. The youngest living child clings onto Godard van Reede, and his father gently steadies the boy with his hand. A number of other children and some fully grown young women surround a seated woman or play in the landscape. Their identities are much less clear. For the widowed father, the painting served a second purpose as he prepared for remarriage and presented his putative second wife to his children and to posterity. As the Latin inscription suggests, he is “the surviving one” and he has “hope” for the future. His hope and his future have been painted into the canvas alongside his grief. At the time of this portrait, Catharina van Utenhove, in her mid-thirties, was betrothed but not yet married to Godard van Reede. The soon-to-be stepmother was carefully placed by the artists at the center of the portrait — central to family life. Here the future stepmother, Catharina, is reminded of the fertile marriage between Godard and his wife Emerentia by the cornucopia in the foreground and the bowl of fruit on Catharina’s lap. Surrounding the stepmother-in-waiting are the eight surviving children, while the tiny dead infant clinging onto her mother even in death and the five angels in the sky suggest that there may have been even more children, miscarriages, or stillbirths during this fifteen-year first marriage. The artists have portrayed Catharina physically close to the middle children; they stand at her side, almost eager.

The painting expresses half grief, mourning, and remembrance; half celebration, betrothal, and overture. Initially, this family portrait looks like a man mourning and commemorating the death of his wife. Our eye is drawn to the childbed and the extravagant red and gold canopy in the landscape. Godard is right next to his wife, leaning towards her, contemplating her death and their marriage. Yet, here is Catharina, the betrothed stepmother-in-waiting, placed in the inner circle of the children, ready
to nurture. She is, nevertheless, a diminished figure, seated and rather
dwarfed by the children around her, especially the eldest daughter. This
domestic painting, commissioned before Catharina’s marriage for display
in her future household, evokes her difficult position as she stepped into
the role of substitute mother. One can only wonder if Godard van Reede
commissioned the portrait, as both commemoration of a dead wife and
mother and celebration of a new bride and stepmother, to ease the transi-
tion from one wife to another.

To reflect further on these portraits of remarriage, let us return
to Gerard David’s *Baptism of Christ* triptych commissioned by Jan des
Trompes in the early 1500s (figs. 1 and 2). The placement of the second
wife Madeleine on the exterior wing of the *Baptism of Christ* triptych con-
veys, probably more than most historical sources, the ambivalent position
of the second wife and stepmother as she married a widower with chil-
dren. Moreover, the layered and sequential additions to the family on the
exterior wing reveal the tiered structure of a household with a remarried
father. Whether the triptych was “kept as a private altarpiece for family
use” or used more publicly to promote the ambitions of its donor, how
was it placed on display? Were the wings kept closed for the sake of the
new wife and stepmother? Or open to show off the painting of the donor
Jan des Trompes and honor his first wife Elisabeth and their son and four
daughters? Or, with tongue in cheek, we might imagine that the panel
with the donor and his son might remain on display, while someone in
the household might close the interior panel portraying the first wife, so
that the second wife Madeleine Cordier on the exterior panel could appear
beside her husband.

These early modern paintings from across northern Europe raise
questions about the functions of these portraits as to exactly how they
remember former relationships while welcoming or presenting new ones,
how they look into the past and nod to future possibilities. Once the
mourning had ended and a new phase of life had begun, how might the
portrait be transmitted to preserve and perpetuate the memory of the fam-
ily? After his second widowhood, Jan des Trompes married for a third time
to first-time bride Jaquemyne van de Velde, with whom he had two sons
before his death in October 1516. His third wife seems to have remar-
ried in the autumn of 1518.\textsuperscript{70} A couple of years later, in December 1520, after the death of the eldest son portrayed beside his father in the triptych, Jacquemyn van de Velde, her second husband, and Jan des Trompes’ heirs donated the triptych to the Brotherhood of the Clerks, the confraternity of magistrates who owned the chapel within Saint Basil’s Church in Bruges, and it left the family forever.\textsuperscript{71}

David’s painting commemorated and presented for posterity some imagined moments of the Trompes family members as witnesses to Christ’s baptism or, on the exterior wings, playing with the baby Jesus. In the early sixteenth-century paintings by David, the Master of the Hapsburgs, or Holbein, the suspension of reality, which allows the viewer to imagine the donors’ presence before Christ or the Madonna, continued in the painted “family fiction,” combining the layers of kin, living and dead. In the Saftleven brothers’ seventeenth-century portrait of Godard van Reede and his family (fig. 7), the fanciful red and gold canopy or baldachin in the landscape alerts the viewer that everything is not as it seems. And yet the bereavement and commemoration as well as the hope and possibility in these portraits seem real.

Representing remarriages on canvas or in limestone, however, is probably no stranger than the omissions in the many “nuclear family” portraits and tombstones we may view without realizing their hidden history. These remarriage paintings deserve our interest because they express the remembrance and farewell to a wife and mother as well as the introduction and establishment of a new one.

Notes

1. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds., Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (London: Longman, 1999). The image chosen for the cover was Gerard ter Borch’s A Widow Peeling Apples, discussed in Wayne Franits, Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 189–90, Figure 169. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Peter Botma, Alyda Faber, Katrin Jacob, Tim Stretton, Geraldine Thomas, and George F.W. Young in the preparation of this article and thank them for their generosity with their time and knowledge. I am indebted to conference audiences at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto; the Australian Historical Association “Locating History” conference, University of Melbourne, Australia; and the
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seminar participants of the “Discipline of History Seminar Series” at the University of Adelaide, Australia for their comments and questions. Wayne Franits kindly offered guidance from an art historian to an historian when I first became interested in paintings of blended families while working on widowhood in early modern Europe. The editors, especially Jane Donawerth, and the anonymous readers aided me immeasurably with their detailed comments, and I hope they see their advice reflected here. I am very grateful for their help. Once again, thanks are due to Sandra Hamm of Saint Mary’s University library, expert procurer of interlibrary loans.

2. Gerard David, *Baptism of Christ*, ca. 1502–1508, oil on wood, central panel 129.7 cm × 96.6 cm, left and right panels 132 cm × 43 cm, Groeninge Museum, Bruges, Belgium. From an art historical perspective, David’s innovation appears in the continuous landscape and background of the left, central, and right panels. In this manner the Trompes family witness the historical scene of the baptism without being separated by time or space, and thus they share the “sacred ground of Christ”; see Shirley Neilsen Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 111, 114.


17. Much of the discussion on stepparents, stepchildren, stepbrothers and -sisters, half siblings or stepfamilies has been the indirect result of research on widowhood, remarriage, parenting, or sibling relationships; see, for example, Howell, *Marriage Exchange*, 1–26, 229–39; Manon van der Heijden, “Contradictory Interests: Work, Parents, and Offspring in Early Modern Holland,” *The History of the Family* 9 (2004): 355–70; Susan Broomhall, “Corresponding Affections: Emotional Exchange Among Siblings in the Nassau Family,” *Journal of Family History* 34 (2009):143–65; Steven Ozment, *Flesh and Spirit: Private Life in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Viking, 1999), chs. 1 and...


31. For other examples, see Oursel, “Monuments funéraires,” 354–57.


34. Llewellyn, “Honour in Life,” 185.


38. See, for example, the Dutch funerary monument commissioned by a young widow within weeks of her husband’s death in 1664. Her sculpted figure with open face and almost bare shoulders leans on its side quite attractively beside the sculpture of her husband’s rather sleepy corpse in his bedclothes and nightcap. Anna van Ewsum remarried quickly, but for decades the tomb by the sculptor Verhulst remained to commemorate Carel Hieronymus van In- en Kniphuisen, their seven years of marriage together, and their bloodlines. About forty-five years after her first husband’s death, Anna van Ewsum had one of the sculpted putti on the funerary monument removed to be replaced with a standing sculpture of her recently deceased second husband, George Wilhelm van In- en Kniphuisen, who was not only a relative of her first husband, but the father of her only surviving child and her spouse for more than four decades. Her second husband’s life-size statue, which had graced their residence for almost a decade and a half, was transferred to the funerary monument when he was buried there in 1709. She survived her second husband by another five years, but her tomb sculpture remained a youthful and somewhat provocative widow leaning on a Bible with an hourglass counting out her remaining time in the world. See Scholten, “Good Widows,” 329–30, 342, 346; a photograph of the tomb is available on the University of Groningen library website: http://irs.ub.rug.nl/ppn/301870586; Foto van het praalgraf van Anna van Ewsum en Carel Hieronymus Knyphausen in de kerk van Midwolde bij Leek. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Netherlands; Frits Scholten, *Sumptuous Memories: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Tomb Sculpture* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2003).


42. François d’Anglure’s effigy is now missing but was part of the original design; see Maxence Hermant, “La commande artistique en Champagne du Nord au XVIe siècle: les vicomtes d’Étôges et leurs tombeaux,” Études marnaises (2006): 95–120; Palissy database [Base Palissy], Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Direction de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine, France; http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/palissy/ accueil.htm. Unfortunately, I could not obtain a photograph of this tomb in time for publication. A search of this French government database using the family name “Anglure” as a term will supply a range of photographs of the tomb in Étôges, France.


47. DePrano, “At Home with the Dead,” 21, 22, 26.


51. The dating of the painting before 1508 can be ascertained because of the representation of a single rather than double-headed Reich eagle, which became law under Emperor Maximilian I in 1508.

52. Almost contemporary with the painting of Leonard von Völs and his wives and children and the triptych of Jan des Trompes of Bruges and his wives and children is the donor portrait of Giacomo Loiani dated to ca. 1510, though painted in an older style. Loiani, a Bolognese merchant living in Flanders in the later 1400s and early 1500s, can be seen under the protection of St. Catherine of Bologna. The merchant is portrayed with his Flemish first wife dressed in the northern style, with whom it seems he had at least one son, and with his Italian second wife, a stepmother, though no children appear in the painting; see Margaret Koster, “Reconsidering St. Catherine of Bologna with three donors by the Baroncelli Master of Bruges,” Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art, 26, no. 2 (1998): 8.

53. Hans Holbein the Younger, The Madonna with Basel Mayor Jakob Meyer and his Family, 1525–1526 and 1528, oil on panel, 169.5 cm × 126.5 cm, Hessian House
Foundation [Hessische Hausstiftung] now on loan to the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.


57. Portrait of Dorothea Meyer, born Kannengiesser, ca. 1525–26, black and colored chalk on white prepared paper, 39.5 cm × 28.1 cm, Inv. 1823.141, Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.


61. Sander, “Holbein’s Madonna,” 216; see, for example, the portrait of Katharina von Bora, D. Martini Luthers nachgelassene Witwrawn/in ihrer Traurung [The widow of Martin Luther in mourning] in Dagmar Freist, “Religious Difference and the Experience of Widowhood in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Germany,” in Cavallo and Warner, eds., Widowhood, 164, 178, Figure 2.


63. David Des Granges, The Saltonstall Family, 1636–1637, oil on canvas, 248.3cm × 309.5cm, inventory no. T02020, Tate, London, UK.


66. Cornelis Saftleven and Herman Saftleven, Godard van Reede van Nederhorst and bis Family, 1634, oil on canvas, 210cm × 143cm, Slot Zuylen, Utrecht, Netherlands; http://www.slotzuylen.nl/.

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68. Ainsworth, Gerard David, 234; Wilson, Painting in Bruges, 70–71, 74.


