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Battista Sforza, Countess of Urbino: A Privileged Status in Motherhood.

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This paper will examine the posthumous representation of Battista Sforza, countess of the court of Urbino during the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Battista died of pneumonia as a result of complications after childbirth. With her final pregnancy, the countess produced a son, the sole heir to his father's name and power. The birth of Guidobaldo and Battista's success in securing the continuation of the Montefeltro lineage, name and rule clearly influenced the count's decision to commemorate his wife through numerous art works which were commissioned shortly after her death and can be considered as unusual within the context of this period. Through the successful delivery of a male heir, Battista received a privileged posthumous position within her conjugal family. This thesis stems from an argument made by David Herlihy in which he states that due to motherhood, Renaissance Italian women were elevated in status. Of particular importance to the discussion of the high regard which Battista achieved posthumously is the creation of the myth to explain both the significance of her son's delivery as well as the divine assistance given to her to conceive the child. This paper will examine two art works commemorating the countess, Justus Van Ghent's *Communion of the Apostles* and Piero della Francesca's *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*. As will become apparent through the examination of the visual evidence, the images can be separated into two categories; those intended for an ecclesiastical location and those designated to be displayed within the secular environment. The division of locations for the art works reflects the double persona of a consort; as a wife and mother and as a capable ruler in her husband's absence.

“Women begin the processes through which human cultures strive to achieve what their individual members cannot- indefinite life, immortality.” (Herlihy 1991, p.53)

Introduction

The premise of this paper is to demonstrate that, through the successful delivery of a son and heir to their husbands' name and wealth, those who died as a result of childbirth received an elevated and honoured posthumous position within their conjugal families. The basis for this argument stems from the work of David Herlihy and his analysis of the status of women during the Renaissance period. He argued that it was through motherhood that a woman could achieve an increased standing amongst their peers. (Herlihy 1991, pp.33-52) Herlihy in the quotation above conclusively linked the biological function of a woman to the concept of immortality and argued that it was through their bodies alone that this could be accomplished. This paper examines the posthumous representation of Battista Sforza, countess of Urbino and wife of Federico da Montefeltro, during the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Battista died as a result of complications after childbirth. With her final pregnancy, she produced a son, the sole heir to his father's name and power. The art works which were commissioned to commemorate the countess can be considered unusual within the context of this period. The presence of unique qualities therefore is of particular interest in terms of how they convey the importance of the woman depicted within them as well as the significance of this event in the life of a Renaissance woman. This paper begins with an examination of the myth and its significance to both Battista and the works which were subsequently created to commemorate her. This is followed by an analysis of two of the commemorative works and how the prescribed location of these works- an ecclesiastical setting and a secular environment- affected the manner in which the countess was represented. The examination of the myth and visual evidence

will demonstrate that Battista embodied the ideal consort, as a mother and as co-ruler of her husband's court.

The birth of her son Guidobaldo and Battista's success in securing the continuation of the Montefeltro lineage clearly influenced Federico's decision to commemorate his wife in numerous art works. Of particular importance to this discussion is the creation of a myth which describes Battista's personal plea to God for divine assistance in producing a son, the dream which she had about his conception and the successful delivery of Guidobaldo nine months later. The myth also plays an instrumental role in constructing a comparison between Battista and the Virgin Mary in terms of the intervention of divine forces in the conception of the ideal child, a characteristic which is reiterated and emphasised in the art works honouring the countess. Jennifer D. Webb argues that the propagation of this myth sought to replace the picture of Battista as ruler with that of a mother willing to sacrifice herself for the birth of her son. (Webb 2006, p.258) She goes on further to state that the level of Battista's involvement in political and diplomatic engagements was unusual for this period. (Webb 2006, p.258) Webb's argument is inaccurate as other noted consorts of the Renaissance such as Isabella d'Este, marchesa of Mantua, played a pivotal role in the running of her husband's court while also producing numerous children. One can assert that the myth in fact bolstered the countess' standing as a consort and ruler, demonstrating her fervour and determination in providing her spouse with an heir while simultaneously fulfilling her duties as a political substitute in his frequent absences. The designated location for each of the works needs to be discussed in detail in order to determine the impact that it had upon how the artist represented Battista to its intended audience. Through the examination of the visual evidence, the images can be divided into two categories: those intended for an ecclesiastical location and those designated to be displayed within a secular setting. As will become evident, those works which were

destined for an ecclesiastical site reflected the church's position on women, that is, as a wife and mother. Within the secular environment, the artist could focus on her role as co-ruler, an equally important aspect of her life. The ruler's wife as characterised by Baldassarre Castiglione in his influential book *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*), possessed a double persona; she had to fulfil her biological function as a woman as well as her domestic obligations while also simultaneously performing her civic duties as a consort. Battista had to satisfy both her domestic and public responsibilities as a ruling lady and the images which include her posthumous representation reflect this need to reconcile the dual facets of her life.

The numerous art works which were created to commemorate the countess can be considered as unusual within the context of the Renaissance period, particularly in the setting of the Italian courts. It must be noted that Battista's mother, Costanza Varano, who also died in childbirth was posthumously celebrated in numerous literary works for her intellect and erudition. (Clough 1996, p.39) A precedent was clearly in place for the commemoration of the Sforza women for their roles as consorts and their ability to ensure a male heir for their husband. What is noticeably unusual about Battista's posthumous veneration is the combination of the visual and text, a feature which is unique to her commemoration.

Commemoration through the Written Word

The creation of the myth emphasising the 'miraculous' conception of the all-important son plays an integral role in the countess' veneration through art. The story was recounted by the sixteenth-century chronicler of Guidobaldo's life, Bernardino Baldi, in order to elucidate the context of his birth and importance to the Montefeltro lineage. The birth of a legitimate son was deemed essential to ensure the continuance of dynastic rule. The birth of a boy thus had direct

consequences for the countess. A consort was required to demonstrate her fecundity both to her husband and to those who resided within the court. Although Battista had successfully given birth to nine daughters, her son's birth was essential to secure and to consolidate her familial and political position, confirming her acceptance by the citizens of Urbino as a suitable and capable ruler in Federico's absences. The countess was under immense pressure to produce the preferred offspring; her determination to provide Federico with a son is clearly attested to in contemporary accounts. For example, during the war of Naples, Federico asked his wife to join him at Magliano, where they spent the winter together. (Ricci and Bacchi della Lega 1888, pp.294-296) The rationale for her actions demonstrates her preoccupation with this matter and so the construction of the myth memorialising the birth of Guidobaldo was particularly apt as a means of documenting the countess' continuing attempts to provide her husband with an heir.

To recount the story was to perpetually memorialise the event and its protagonist. The story describes Battista's journey to nearby Gubbio with her husband in April of 1471 where she threw herself before the sacred image of Saint Ubaldo, the patron saint of the city, praying fervently for help in conceiving a boy. (Ricci and Bacchi della Lega 1888, pp.294-296) She fell asleep before the icon and dreamt of a tall tree whose branches extended to the sky. She was lifted over the tree and gave birth to a beautiful male phoenix who remained with her for thirty-six days before it opened its wings and flew towards the sun. The rays of the sun burned the phoenix who subsequently disappears. On awakening, Battista described the dream to her husband who was said to have understood the underlying symbolic meaning of the vision. (Ricci and Bacchi della Lega 1888, pp.294-296) Nine months after the reverie, she gave birth to Guidobaldo, named in honour of the saint who was believed to have intervened on his parents' behalf in his conception. The myth provides a

valuable insight into her devotion to her duty, her willingness to risk her own life through numerous pregnancies over a short period of time and Federico's exploitation of this event to advance his family name and notoriety.

Deconstructing the Myth

Each of the components was carefully chosen by the creator of the myth for their symbolic meaning and how these could be manipulated so as to benefit the propagandistic function of the story. The phoenix, a bird traditionally associated with the Christian idea of resurrection and rebirth can be read in two ways. (Spencer Hill 1984, p.61) Firstly it may refer to the conception and birth of Guidobaldo as the bird is clearly defined in the myth as masculine. The presence of the number thirty-six with its connotations to the reproductive cycle adds to this theory. It has been argued that it corresponds to the thirty-six days mentioned in the myth as it occurs before the symbolic birth of the phoenix, that is, the opening of its wings. (Grazia Pernis and Schneider Adams 2003, p.54) A connection can also be made between the phoenix and a beautiful male child in contemporary society as the Italian word for bird, *uccello*, is also slang for penis. (Grazia Pernis and Schneider Adams 2003, p.53) The use of a familiar motif to emphasise the need for male children would have been evident to the myth's audience and was correlated in the visual arts with the abundance of nude male children or *putti* on numerous objects and images created during this period, visually highlighting society's preoccupation with the production of male offspring.

The mythical bird's presence may also be understood as an allusion to the countess herself. The phoenix can be interpreted in a number of ways: as a symbol of resurrection and rebirth, as a metaphor of secular immortality which one could achieve through one's offspring, as a symbol of unequalled beauty and virginal purity and finally it functioned as a poetic synonym for a rarity due

to its reputed uniqueness. (Spencer Hill 1984, p.64) Each of these can be applied to the myth in question. The deliberate flight of the bird into the sun refers to Battista's self-sacrifice. From her fragile body Guidobaldo emerged and thrived just as the new phoenix arose from the ashes of its predecessor. The concentration on the forfeiture of her own life to ensure her son's existence is crucial to the story, a theme, revisited in the works created in her honour. As a symbol of virginal purity and unequalled beauty, the phoenix functions as a testament to the elegance and chaste nature of the countess. The legitimacy of the children she produced for her husband was of paramount importance to the preservation of the purity of the Montefeltro lineage. Federico, himself an illegitimate son, saw it as vital to highlight the pedigree of his son who was to become the rightful successor of the court after his father's death. The interpretation of the bird as a symbol of rarity and uniqueness is a fitting choice for a myth constructed about a woman who proved her excellence not only as a mother and wife but also a competent co-ruler. The commemoration of Battista's fulfilment of her uxorial duties reflected positively upon her husband and her son. (Webb 2006, p.53) She is documented here as a truly virtuous woman, whom God chose to assist in the successful delivery of a healthy boy as a result of her exemplary comportment.

Commemoration in the Ecclesiastical Setting: The *Communion of the Apostles*

Justus Van Ghent's *Communion of the Apostles* executed in 1473 as the altarpiece for the church of Corpus Domini extols the church's position on women and their role within society. In the eyes of the theologians, women were the inferior sex, destined to be subservient and subordinate to their superiors, men. The scene is divided into three distinct sections and figural groupings. In the foreground Christ gives communion to his apostles. This group is counterbalanced by a group of men in contemporary courtly costume

on the far right which includes a depiction of Federico in a humbled and modest position. (Grazia Pernis and Schneider Adams 2003, p.91) Of particular importance is the inclusion of the third figural grouping, that of the woman and child in the background behind the contemporary company of men. The infant boy has been identified as a representation of Guidobaldo. He participates in the group consisting of his father by the focus of his attention and gaze. He however remains at a distance from this group through his positioning in the background symbolising that he must wait to become ruler. This is emphasised by the fact that Guidobaldo is dressed in a similar colour fabric to that of the background. It also demonstrates that the viewer's attention should remain focused upon the figural groupings in the foreground. By his very presence in this work, Guidobaldo alludes to his birth and to his mother to whom his life was indebted. A subtle reference to Battista is made here by the presence of the single pearl, the countess' favourite gemstone, on the headdress he wears.

The identity of the female figure has been a matter of much debate among scholars. Some argue that she is the boy's nurse, Penthesilea Baglioni, a strong proposition when one takes into account that Battista had been dead for just over a year and Guidobaldo's care would have been entrusted to a nurse to ensure his wellbeing. Others propose that this was a representation of the countess and therefore intended to act as a memorial to the deceased. (Aronberg Lavin 1967, pp.18-19) This identification is validated by the examination of her facial features suggesting that this representation is based upon a portrait of Battista and corresponds with those of the countess as seen in the *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*. The affectionate manner in which the woman holds the infant is reminiscent of the representations of the Virgin and Child found in the devotional images created during the period such as Luca della Robbia's *Madonna and Child*. A strong emphasis is placed upon the maternal bond between the Madonna and her Son in these works and can be

compared to the depiction of Battista and her son, thus creating a connection between the ruling and holy family. Battista had a close personal relationship with the confraternity with the establishment of the Urbino branch of the *Monte di Pietà*, a bank which loaned money to the poor. Battista signed the original charter for the bank in the name of Pope Pius II on 6th April 1468. (Aronberg Lavin 1967, pp.18-19) As a crucial duty of a consort, charity brought fame and spiritual merits to the woman while simultaneously alleviating the social problems of the city. Such actions demonstrated how a ruler and his wife should use their power and wealth for the good of their family and the city. (Rogers and Tinagli 2005, p.242) That the female figure depicted in the altarpiece was intended as a representation of the deceased is verified by her close ties with the confraternity. The figure's simple dress corresponds with this argument as it refers to the final requests of the countess, who on her deathbed asked to be buried in the garments of the tertiaries of Santa Chiara, demonstrating her personal connection to the key religious orders of the city. (Webb 2006, p.62)

The positioning of the mother and child in the background adds a further commemorative dimension to the painting. The figures are confined within a small dark space with a projecting ledge concealing their bodies from the viewer. The artist thus separates them from the group of contemporary figures depicted in the foreground. It creates a tomb-like space in which the deceased is placed, alluding to the fact that she is indeed dead at the time that this work was created. One may question why Guidobaldo has been situated within the space which clearly makes a visual statement about his mother's passing. The artist has deliberately avoided any misinterpretation within the painting by directing the child's mournful gaze towards his father. Battista's confinement in the niche-like structure consigns the countess to a secondary and inferior position within the painting as a witness to the events that unfold in the foreground. It is in this element of the work that the influence of the confraternity can be seen

exacted upon the altarpiece. Although the countess had a strong personal connection with the confraternity as discussed earlier, the assignment of women to a secondary position by the church therefore meant that Battista could not interact with, or be included amongst, the contemporary group as this would have been deemed inappropriate in an ecclesiastical commission. She must be located in the background as a bystander and a witness to the main scene taking place in the foreground. The niche in which she is represented appears to be a part of an interior complex, marking her location in society as the domestic scene, signifying her role as a wife and mother and a subordinate to her husband.

The mother and child play an important role in the work through their juxtaposition with the objects of communion in the opposite recess. It has been argued that the figures read as complementary to the niche's contents- the altar-bread box and vessel for the wine- which through divine intervention were transubstantiated into the body of Christ. (Aronberg Lavin 1967, pp.18-19) She goes on further to state that the figural group can be interpreted on a divine level, referring to the supernatural assistance given to the countess to produce her child in a similar manner as divine grace changed the everyday objects of wine and bread into the Corpus Domini. (Aronberg Lavin 1967, pp.18-19) The role of motherhood is once again emphasised in this reading, demonstrating that the altarpiece was intended to promote not only the Eucharistic message, the key subject of the work, as determined by its prominence in the foreground, but also the importance of Battista's prescribed role as a mother to not only her immediate family but to the church and society in general.

Commemoration within the Secular Setting: *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*

The secular environment of the palazzo ducale provided the count with the opportunity to memorialise another important aspect of his wife's life, her role as his consort and co-ruler of the court. Unlike the commissions for the ecclesiastical setting, the works created for the palace promoted the authority, power and legitimacy of the ruling family. (Rosenberg 2010, p.8) The palace was not only the familial residence of the ruling couple, it was a semi-private space where visiting dignitaries, diplomats and ambassadors from other Italian courts and countries would have been invited to stay in order to have a private audience with the count. In Piero della Francesca's *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, the focus is predominantly placed upon her uxorial duties as a consort and her importance to the running of the court.

Accord and harmony, deemed essential for the validation of the prestige of the court, are the central themes of Piero's work executed c.1472-1474. The above concepts were only attainable through the presence of a proficient consort in a court ruled by a *condottiere*. Each element was carefully chosen to promote and propagate the image of the ideal court and the magnificence of those who ruled it. On the obverse of the image, the artist depicts the profiled portraits of the couple, set in front of an expansive and detailed landscape facing one another. Federico wears a simple red *giubbone* and the cylindrical red *berretta* often worn by *condottieri* princes. (Woods-Marsden 2002, p.97) The austere appearance of the prince is furthered by the omission of any ostentatious display of jewellery or ornament on his person. The countess represents the ideal court lady magnificently dressed (*magnifica pompa*) in contemporary costume, adorned with her most precious jewels, her hair in an elaborate coiffure with the small facial features and high forehead considered fashionable at this time. (Woods-Marsden 2002, p.101) Ronald Lightbown argues that the intricate

hairstyle was used not only to express the sitter's rank; it also gave weight and majesty to her head. (Lightbown 1992, p.237) The abundance of pearls, other precious stones and the costly brocade dress in her portrait signified the wealth of her husband and of their court. (Hollingsworth 2010, p.335) The use of the profile pose was clearly influenced by the medallic tradition dating from the Classical period, a genre that recently had been revived in the Italian courts as a form of visual propaganda promoting the rulers and their courts. (Murray and de Vecchi 1985, p.100) The profile portrait was synonymous with power, authority and prestige. Its employment demonstrates the patron's wish to be portrayed as a contemporary emperor and his wife as an empress possessing great influence and nobility. The alignment of the sitters' facial features and their positioning allowed the artist to depict their fixed gaze upon each other, reinforcing the promotion of their unified rule to the viewer. The use of complementary colours enhances this display of symmetry with an identical shade of red employed for the costume of Federico, his berretta, the touch of colour on Battista's lips and the red brooch she wears. The portraits of the two figures and the various components of their depiction therefore act as a balancing force in this image, indicative of the stability that the ruling couple brought to their court.

The positioning of the couple before an expansive and continuous landscape underlines their joint control as their large scale portraits dominate their surroundings just as the power of these rulers presided over their territories. (Schneider-Adams 2000, p.91) The influence of the Northern European tradition of double portraits is evident here by the juxtaposition of the figures against an extensive vista as can be seen in Hans Memling's *Double Portrait of An Elderly Couple*, an early example of its genre. (Aronberg Lavin 2002, p.259) Unlike Memling, Piero did not include a balustrade to separate the sitters from the scene behind them signifying that the landscape and those who ruled over it were unified; the couple integral to the preservation of the land and vice versa.

The countryside appears to be far more placid and earthly than the reality of the Urbino landscape and it has therefore been argued that its modification can be interpreted as visual evidence of how it was tamed and maintained by its benevolent rulers and the effects of harmonious administration. (Aronberg Lavin 2002, pp.259 and 264)

Battista has been represented on the left side of the diptych, an unusual feature for a double portrait. The man was usually depicted on the heraldic dexter, to the right of Christ, with the woman positioned on the sinister left. (Woods-Marsden 2002, p.111) Scholars have argued that her placement on the left of the image was due to the need to conceal Federico's injured eye, as it was essential for a Renaissance ruler to hide any infirmity from the audience. (Hollingsworth 2010, p.335) Her inclusion in the more honourable position would only have been deemed appropriate and acceptable due to her death. Although this image projects the unity of the couple, references to gendered societal roles are still visible. Federico was considered the ruler with Battista as his consort to support her husband in this task when necessary. Patricia Simons maintains that Federico has been constructed as the more active, dominant figure. (Simons 1988, p.17) It is clear from the obverse of the diptych that a number of interpretive layers are present within this work as Battista is represented as a co-ruler and allocated a prestigious position as a key contributing figure to the political stability of the court. Simultaneously she is presented as a woman who must appear subordinate to her husband. The image promotes the political harmony of Urbino and the exalted position of its rulers, indicating the work's function as a tool of propaganda.

The reverse of the diptych celebrates the personal achievements of the couple and it is within these panels that the prescribed roles of the ruler and his consort are most closely adhered to. Image and text work together here to provide the

viewer with an insight into the accomplishments of the sitters. The theme of unity is underlined in a similar manner as on the front. Federico regains the position of honour in the scene of the Triumph of Fame with Battista in the Triumph of Modesty providing a complementary image as a loyal and capable consort. Of particular interest is the representation of the female personification of Charity who is accompanied by a pelican and is unique to this work. The pelican was believed to nourish her chicks with her own blood, and here is shown tearing at its own breast to draw blood to feed her young. Woods-Marsden states that its appearance may be read as a reference to Battista's self-sacrifice, reinforcing the myth. (Woods-Marsden 2002, p.109) This subtle allusion reinforces the central theme of the scene celebrating the chaste nature of the countess, her ability as a wife and mother and a statement regarding the legitimacy of the heir she bore. Aronberg Lavin argues that, as the work was hinged and relatively small, it was to be opened to its different sides on various occasions and therefore functioned as a keepsake for private reflection. (Aronberg Lavin 2002, p.265) When closed, the allegorical representations of the couple's virtues depicted on the reverse acted as a 'shield', protecting the ruler portraits within. (Cecchi 1992, p.144) The diptych was therefore designed so that the visualisation of the sitters' values was visible when portable, promoting the ideal behaviour expected of the ruler and his consort. The front panels represented a more authentic view of the couple as co-rulers of their domain.

Conclusion

Within the context of late fifteenth-century Italy, Battista should not be considered as a feminine anomaly or a rarity of her sex. The wives of rulers of the courts were adept in their role as consorts. This led to the emergence of a new 'type' of woman, one who could successfully run the household and fulfil her duties as a wife and mother while simultaneously aid her husband in the

running of the court. It can be surmised that the art created in response to Battista's death validated the creation of the myth, focusing- dependent upon the specific site for the work- on the fulfilment of her dual role as a lady of the court. The significance of the myth demonstrates the importance of this singular event in the life and memorial of this woman. To her contemporaries, Battista personified this ideal consort; a dedicated mother and wife and a capable and erudite ruler in her husband's absence.

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