Sexual Reproduction and Parental Love in seventeenth-century
Dutch Family and Children's Portraits

Jan Baptist Bedaux

Introduction

In 1628 Elizabeth Stuart commissioned Gerrit Honthorst to paint a larger than life-size portrait of her family (fig. 1). This picture, which was meant as a gift for her brother Charles I of England, tends to be regarded nowadays as a scene from Honoré d'Urfé's L'Astrée.[1] But whether or not the aristocratic family portrait was inspired by this pastoral tale, there can be little doubt as to the theme depicted. The immense statue of Mother Nature laden with fruit, to which the father, Friedrich von der Pfalz, calls our attention, immediately suggests fertility. The father's demonstrative gesture communicates a certain pride in his progeny, who are abundantly present in the picture.

This is by no means the only painting from the period attesting to reproductive success. Fertility, it may well be argued, is the leitmotiv of a great number of sixteenth and seventeenth-century family portraits, of sitters from burgher milieus as well as aristocratic. In portraits of burghers, fertility was usually visualized on a more modest scale. Instead of monumental statues of Mother Nature we find a well-filled fruit basket, an object more in keeping with the domestic ambience of this sort of portrait (fig. 2-4).

The bunch of grapes as a symbol of fertility

We may ask ourselves where the motiv of the fruit actually came from. It originally developed from a group of late sixteenth-century family portraits of an existing iconographic type, namely that of a family gathered round a laid table. During the 1590s this type gradually became entwined with motifs taken from Psalms 1 and 128, which teach that a God-fearing life breeds happiness, prosperity, and progeny. In these psalms the God-fearing husband is likened to a tree planted by a stream, which bears fruit each season without fail and whose leaves shall never wither, the children to olive plants, and the wife to a fruitful vine.[2] Such an intertwining of motifs occurs for the first time in a family portrait dated 1583, probably from the southern Netherlands, which in all likelihood originated in Reformed circles (fig. 5). The anonymous artist who was commissioned to do this portrait found himself faced with the problem of how to combine the scene of a family gathered round a laid table - a scene that is usually set indoors - with motifs that only occur outdoors. He solved it by removing the table from the house and placing it on the adjoining terrace. This trouvaille enabled him to integrate the tree growing by the stream into a landscape, and to place the vine with its bunches of grapes, which surround the woman's head like a halo, against the facade of the house. He depicted the children with olive plants between their folded hands, and inscribed the strapwork cartouches on either side of the Hebrew tetragram with the lines from the psalms containing these metaphors of husband and wife. At bottom center are the opening lines of Psalm 128: "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee." The tenor of these lines is visualized both by the threatening hand of God with a whip and a rod in

the top lefthand corner of the picture, and by the richly laden table.[3]

Around 1600 we find a number of prints depicting the same biblical passages. The earliest in the series is by Jacob de Gheyn, datable ca. 1595 (fig. 6).[4] This print has fewer motifs than the painting, and apart from the food on the table it only depicts the metaphors of the husband as the fruit-bearing tree, the wife as the vine, and the children as olive plants. De Gheyn has placed his family indoors, which weakens his realism, for he had to remove part of the wall on the left so as not to deprive us of the view of the tree by the river. The vine rising from the floor to the woman's right and the olive plants next to the children are equally peculiar.

In the print by Robert de Baudous, whose treatment of the theme is indebted to de Gheyn, the space is rendered much more consistently, for the open wall has been closed (fig. 7).[5] However, for the sake of the metaphors occurring in the psalm, one of the walls contains an open arch. Finally, in the print by Claes Jansz. Visscher, an ordinary doorway is substituted for this unrealistic element (fig. 8).[6] Here the door is ajar, enabling the observer to catch a glimpse of both the tree and the vine. Visscher also omitted the unreal olive plants shooting up from the floor. However, one element that is most remarkable from the point of view of realism is the vine that has crept into the room through the upper windows. This curious motif also occurs in a family portrait from the northern Netherlands, dated 1627, where the vine enters the room through an open window and continues along the wall over the heads of the sitters (fig. 9). Here the painter has dropped the metaphor of the tree, and has replaced the olive plants by a branch of cherries, held by the child sitting on its mother's lap.

To this iconographic series we may add a family portrait attributed to Jan van Teylingen (fig. 10). This picture, presumably painted about 1630, is crucial to the development of our theme. The portrait shows a married couple with their two living children, rigidly symmetrical against the wall of a realistic room. The wall is divided in half by a pier separating two windows. In front of this pier, which bears the portrait of a deceased child, is a table with an assortment of fruit, on the table-top as well as on the platter. The father, as head of the family, sits on the right of the table. His son stands in front of him, holding a pear by its stem. The mother is at the other end of the table, and beside her is her daughter carrying a basket of fruit on her left arm. With her right hand the daughter grasps a bunch of grapes, which the father significantly holds up to the beholder. The bunch of grapes is attached to a vine that originates from the right hand of the mother, and winds itself across the table, behind the daughter, towards the father's hand. It can therefore be argued that the vine serves, as it were, as a natural extension of the wife, who is after all referred to in the psalm as the fruitful vine. The vine-leaves, clearly visible through the windows, create the impression that the vine held by the wife is connected with the one outside.

What has also been omitted from this painting is the metaphor of the husband as the fruit-bearing tree. The artist lets the husband share in the metaphor of the vine, which was originally reserved for the wife. This begins to make sense if we bear in mind that the "fruit," although borne by the woman and especially associated with her, after all involves both husband and wife. Together with his wife, the husband now advertises the fertility of the family by means of the bunch of grapes.

The following stage in the development of the theme is reached when the vine is pruned away to the stem of the bunch. Now that the vine is discarded, leaving us with the bunch of grapes, it is the wife who - entirely in keeping with the Psalm - evolves into the

vine, and consequently becomes part of the metaphor (fig. 11).[7]

In my opinion, this stage was strongly influenced by a selective pressure on realism, as with the evolution of the pictorial image generally. This pressure was particularly strong in portraiture. Unlike prints with a general didactic purport, where abstract children overgrown with olive plants are still imaginable, individual portraits generally contain metaphors that are supposed to be less obtrusive. While the biblical metaphor retained its meaning and remained timeless, it seems that its visualization was increasingly judged on the basis of the criteria of realism and visual consistency. The price to be paid was a certain erosion of the biblical metaphor, as well as a loss of emphasis. The conspicuous vine, an important semantic selector in an interpretation analogous to Psalm 128, vanished. So it is not surprising that once the image of the bunch of grapes without its vine established itself, the grapes became easily interchangeable with whatever fruit happened to present itself (fig. 12). It also explains why the bunch of grapes ended up in the fruit platter, where it belongs (figs. 2-4), and why it probably came to represent fertility in a more general sense, rather than in the specifically biblical meaning, which focused on the wife and connoted piety and fear of God.

It is by no means my intention to suggest that the pictorial evolution of the biblical metaphor of the family reconstructed here, gives a chronologically precise idea of an actual development on all points. Unquestionably, there must have been artists who skipped certain stages in this process. Something else that should be taken into account is that the development may have been influenced by other pictorial traditions, such as Mariological iconography. There seems little doubt, for example, that the dish of fruit in The Holy Family by Joos van Cleve refers to Mary's fertility - particularly if the fruit is seen in conjunction with the written text held by Joseph, which shows the very fragment from the Ave Maria that speaks of Christ as the fruit of Mary's womb (fig. 13). As regards the individual portrait, it is clear at an early date that existing pictorial traditions had a pruning effect on the depiction of the grape metaphor. This is exemplified by the early sixteenth-century portrait of Agniete van den Rijne by Joos van Cleve (fig. 14). This painting was executed in accordance with an existing compositional formula, with the sitter being portrayed half-length, holding an object referring to a specific virtue, or the sitter's name or profession. Agniete, for instance, holds a small bunch of grapes with an elegant hand. The vine is transferred to the windowsill which forms part of the illusionistic picture frame.

What is clear in all these cases is that the image, too, has laws of its own. The gradual transformation of the image, occasioned by a selective pressure on realism, eventually enables the image to release itself from its verbal origin, and to develop in an unforeseen direction.

So any sort of fruit, regardless of how or by whom it was held, or whether it was simply lying on a platter, must nearly always have referred to this highly general concept of fertility. It should be emphasized that when dealing with this concept we must not merely think of the quantity of the offspring, but of its quality as well. Or, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, "Offspring does not only imply begetting children, but also raising them" - a view that was still valid in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[8] Begetting children inevitably implied educating them. Hence breeding and education are concepts inherent in each other, and references to breeding or education were usually made in terms of metaphors derived from agriculture. In these metaphors, the seed from which the ripe fruits eventually originate, is synonymous with the male seed that produces fine children, while the cares with which the seed, the fragile plant, and the fruit must be surrounded are symbolic of education.[9] In the

case of the average portrait, therefore, painters did not need to trouble about the sort of fruit, nor how or where it should be depicted.

Deceased children

As we have seen in Psalms 1 and 128, the psalmist links the fear of God with offspring, or, to put this in a more modern idiom, religion is related to reproductive success. For some time now, this relationship has been the subject of sociobiological research.

One of the functions of religion is that it may enable man to use his consciousness to the fullest in planning his own life without allowing the unavoidable ending of this life to mar his ambition to become and to remain socially successful. It is this ambition, the quest for social status, which is a key to explaining much of human behavior, and which must have been important in optmizing inclusive fitness throughout human evolution.[10]

It is this social status that was certainly of importance when the kind of portraiture discussed above was commissioned. As faithful God-fearing Christians, the sitters, mostly wealthy burghers, showed their reproductive success in familiar fertility metaphors and by the presence of their progeny.

In this context, it is important to remember that life-expectancy differed greatly from one social group to another. Infant mortality in the lowest classes was twice as high as that in the highest. The children of rich burghers led a life that was very different from that in the families of farmers, manual workers and laborers. There was no need for them to participate in the production process from an early age, and there was more time for play. Their mothers, who were similarly free from the production process, had more time to devote to them. Unlike working women, they themselves breast-fed their offspring, or otherwise had a wet nurse live in. This in itself had a positive effect on the mortality rate within their own class.[11]

Paradoxically, these family portraits depicted not only children who were living, but also those who had died. While, to us, a deceased child can hardly be said to contribute to the multiplication of one's genes, or to represent reproductive success, this is a matter that was viewed differently in the 17th century. When measuring reproductive success, little real distinction was drawn between a living child and one who was dead. I remember once asking an elderly Reformed father how many children he had. His answer was five. However, I later found out that two of these children had been long dead, and that this man therefore made no distinction between deceased children and those who survived.

This line of reasoning is rooted in the Bible, specifically in the Book of Job. God tested Job by depriving him of everything he held dear, even his children. When Job persisted in his faith, God rewarded him with the double of what he had lost. However, we know that Job had originally had seven sons and three daughters, and that only the same number of children were restored to him. This can nonetheless be seen as a doubling, as we can add the number he was given as a reward to the number of those who had died.

In the 17th century it was customary to add the number of deceased children to those who were living. Even after death, a departed child was still regarded as a full member of the family. This is illustrated in Dutch portraiture, which makes frequent depictions of deceased children. Notwithstanding their inability to multiply their parents' genes, such children by no means detracted from the social status with which God had blessed these parents. On the contrary.

Departed children were depicted in various ways. Easily the most common was to portray them as angels hovering above the surviving members of the family (figs. x). Children on their deathbeds were also popular (figs. x). There are also examples in which the deceased child is seen alive, either in the mother's arms, or on her lap; however, in contrast with the surviving siblings, this child is partially or wholly naked (figs.x).

It is not so long ago that historians such as Ariès, Shorter and Badinter asserted that our notions of family relationships, motherhood and childhood were modern inventions. In their opinion, there was a time when affection played a negligible role in family life; parents in a traditional family were supposed to have been indifferent to their offspring, if not downright hostile towards them. Maternal love was non-existent, and there was certainly no sadness upon a child's death. Any idea of the child as a unique being (with a right to be cherished and to a treatment suitable to its age-group) had yet to be discovered. This school of thought holds that the current ideal of the harmonious family with the affective relationships that are concomitant to it--in other words, the nuclear family--is a development of recent history. Generally, the child in its own right is seen to have been an 18th-century creation dating from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Émile*.

It is hard to understand why such a large group of historians should have subscribed to such a perverse idea, from which some knowledge of ethology might perhaps have shielded them. Political motives no doubt underlie such a view of history. Not for nothing did Utopians--Marxists, Maoists and Feminists, to name but a few--regard the family as an obstacle to the attainment of their goals. And, in this, what could be more useful than the support of sympathetic historians who regard the family as a modern invention, and therefore as something that can easily be reversed?

The life-expectancy of the average 17th-century citizen of the Dutch Republic was very low. In his important demographic study, *Het Noorderkwartier*, Van de Woude specifies that in one region this was as low as 23. Average life-expectancy was determined to a significant extent by the high rates of infant mortality, and by the large numbers of woman who succumbed to infection or to other complications during their confinement. A newborn had a 50% chance of living to the age of twenty; 45% did not live to the age of ten. While there are no definitive child mortality figures, it is certain that children up to the age of five were at the greatest risk: 85-90% of deaths took place below this age.[12] Under such circumstances, Shorter suggests, parents would hardly tend to invest energy and affection in their children. And anyone who did not invest affection, he must have reasoned, would not have mourned if a child died.

Justifiably, this picture of loveless parents has recently been subjected to much criticism (Mount, Pollock). Evidence against Shorter's proposition is not hard to find. A wealth of contemporary literature also shows the situation during the Dutch Republic to have been the exact opposite. And the overwhelming number of funerary child portraits remaining from the period hardly suggests that these paintings were commissioned by loveless parents who were indifferent to their children.

Naturally, I would not wish to claim that nothing has changed over the centuries. By no means: much has changed--but not the fundamentals. The so-called nuclear family with all its affective characteristics was always the normal family. It is a universal human grouping, predominating, it seems, in all known societies throughout world history. And to this, many moving portraits from the 17th century also bear witness.

Notes

1 For the painting see Hermann Braun, *Gerard und Willem van Honthorst,* Göttingen 1966 (diss.), p. 46 and cat. nr. 83. In the catalogue of Charles's collection made between 1637 and 1640 the portrait is mentioned as being "in manner of storie." This addition proved to be misleading, and prompted a search for a fitting story, in which the pastoral setting of the painting became the guiding principle. Braun states (p. 229): "Honthorst derived the scene from the end of the tale. In doing so, he is more interested in catching the atmosphere of 'per aspera ad astra,' than in a close rendering of the text. Moreover, it was not possible to stick to the text, since the children of the Bohemian king and queen ought to be given a prominent part" ("Honthorst entlehnt die Szene dem Schluss des Romans. Dabei trift er unter dem Aspekt 'per aspera ad astra' mehr die Stimmung, als dass er sich allzusehr an den Text hält. Dieses war ohnehin nicht möglich, da den Kindern des böhmischen Königspaares eine entscheidende Rolle zukommen sollte"). This in itself seems to me to be ample reason not to consider this novel as a possible source for the scene. Besides, "storie" need not imply more than figuurstuk (figure painting). For historie in the sense of figuurstuk see Hessel Miedema, *Karel van Mander: den grondt der edel vry schilder-const,* Utrecht 1973, vol. 1, p. 126, and vol. 2, pp. 462-63. The interpretation based on d'Urfé was recently adopted (albeit with some reservations) by Alison McNeil Kettering in her *The Dutch arcadia: pastoral art and its audience in the golden age*, Montclair & Woodbridge 1983, pp. 67, 1O1, 172.

2 The relevant lines from Psalm 1 read as follows. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

Psalm 128 reads: "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table. Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord. The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel."

3 The aged woman inside the house watching the scene outdoors through a window is possibly a visualization of verse 6 of Psalm 128. For the painting see Dirk de Vos, *Stedelijke Musea Brugge: catalogus schilderijen 15de en 16de eeuw,* Bruges 1979, pp. 71-72. The texts in the picture read as follows.
Top left:

Ghelijck Eenen Boom ontrent die water beken
Ten bequamen tijde, zijne goede vruchten gheeft
Alzo sal oock wesen den man Gyeleken
De welcke In de vreese des heeren leeft.

PSALM I

(Like a tree by the rivers of water/ That brings forth his right fruits in his season,/

Thus shall be the man/ Who lives in the fear of God.)

Top right:

Dijne huijsvrauwe die sal wesen vruchtbaer
Als Eenen welgheladen wynstok Idoone
Ende u kijnderen Als planten van Oliven Claer
rontome uw taefelen Reijn ende schoone.

Psal CXXVIII

(Your wife shall be fruitful/ Like a sweet well-laden vine,/ And your children like pure olive plants/ Round about your table untainted and clear.)

Bottom center:

Salych Sijnse die den Heere vreesen Onghemete[n]
Ende die wandelen in syn weeghen tot allen tijen
Den Aerbeyt uwer Handen die Sult ghij Eeten
Salich zydy Ende u zal Seer wel gheschijen.

(Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord without measure/ And those who will always walk in his ways./ The labor of your hands you shall eat,/ Blessed you are, and you shall prosper.)

4 The first text below the print is a metrical Latin translation of Psalm 128, derived from Paraphrases Psalmorum Davidis poetica (1566) by George Buchanan (1506-1582). The second text is a rhymed version in Dutch of Psalm 128.

5 The first text in the print repeats the Latin text in the print by de Gheyn (see note 17). The second consists of a rhymed version in Dutch of a combination of Psalms 1 and 128.

6 The first text in this print is a rhymed version in Dutch of Psalm 128 (different from the one in the print by de Gheyn). The second is a rhymed version in French of Psalm 128.

7 For the identification of the figures in this portrait see R.E.O. Ekkart, "Een portret van Laurens Jacobsz. en zijn gezin," *De Boeken wereld* 1 (1985-86), nr. 3, pp. 13-15.

8 The "Summa Theologica" of St Thomas Aquinas, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, pt. 3, Supplementum, London 1922, p. 147 (49, art. 2). Cf. also L.F. Groenendijk, *De nadere reformatie van het gezin. De visie van Petrus Wittewrongel op de christelijke huishouding*, Dordrecht 1984, p. 139ff; Donald Haks, *Huwelijk en gezin in Holland in de 17de en 18de eeuw*, Assen 1984, p. 157ff.

It was not without reason that Ripa in his image of "Fecondita" or "vruchtbaerheyt" (fertility) speaks of "veele goede, deughdsaeme, en treflycke kinderen" ("many fine, virtuous, and excellent children"); see Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of uijtbeeldingen des verstants*, ed. D.P. Pers, Amsterdam 1644, pp. 579-81. In this context he tells the story of a wealthy woman who flaunted her riches in the house of the fertile Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi. Cornelia detained the woman until her twelve children came home from school, and retorted, pointing at her offspring: "Behold, these are all my tapestries and valuables." This story, taken from Valerius Maximus, was the incentive for a family

portrait by Jan van Bylert, see G.J. Hoogewerff, "Jan van Bylert, schilder van Utrecht (1598-1671)," *Oud Holland* 80 (1965), p. 23, fig. 27; Jan Baptist Bedaux, "Schatten van Kinderen," *Vitrine* 8 (1995), nr. 7, p. 27.

9 For these metaphors see Jan Baptist Bedaux, "Discipline for innocence. Metaphors for education in seventeenth-century Dutch painting," in idem, *The reality of symbols. Studies in the iconology of Netherlandish art 1400-1800*, The Hague & Maarssen 1990, pp. 109-170.

10 See e.g. Marcel Roele, "Religious Behaviour as a Utility- and Inclusive Fitness-Optimizing Strategy," *Social Science Information* 32 (1993) pp. 387-427 with further literature.

11 See e.g. Lily E. Clerkx, "Kinderen in het gezin," in G.A. Kooy ed., *Gezinsgeschiedenis. Vier eeuwen gezin in Nederland*, Assen & Maastricht 1985, pp. 111-136.

12 A.M. van der Woude, *Het Noorderkwartier. Een regionaal historisch onderzoek in demografische en economische geschiedenis van westelijk Nederland van de late middeleeuwen tot het begin van de negentiende eeuw*, Wageningen 1972.

Illustrations

fig. 1 Gerard van Honthorst, Portrait of the family of Elizabeth and Frederick, King and Queen of Bohemia, 1629. Hannover, Collection Prince Ernst August von Hannover

fig. 2 Emanuel de Witte, Portrait of a family, signed and dated 1678. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek

fig. 3 Anonymous, Portrait of a family. Antwerp, Museum voor Schone Kunsten

fig. 4 Jan Boeckhorst, Portrait of a family. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek

fig. 5 Anonymous, Southern Netherlandish (?), Portrait of a family, dated 1583. Bruges, Stedelijke Musea

fig. 6 Jacob de Gheyn II, Saying grace. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Printroom

fig. 7 Robert de Baudous, Saying grace, 1608/10. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Printroom

fig. 8 Jan Claesz. Visscher, Saying grace, 1609. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Printroom

fig. 9 Anonymous, Portrait of a family, 1627. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on loan to the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht)

fig. 10 Jan van Teylingen, Portrait of a family. Privat collection.

fig. 11 Pieter Pietersz., Laurens Jacobsz. and his family. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

fig. 12 Attributed to Jacob Gerritsz. Cuyp, Portrait of a family. Location unknown

fig. 13 Joos van Cleve, The Holy Family. New York, Metropolitan Museum

fig. 14 Joos van Cleve, Portrait of Agniete van den Rijne (?). Enschede, Rijksmuseum Twenthe

rest follows