



**Book Review**

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**Corresponding Author:** Meri Tek Demir, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Faculty of Science and Letters, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Türkiye.

**ORCID:** 0000-0002-2085-3057

**O'Farrell, Maggie. *The Marriage Portrait*. London: Tinder Press, 2022.**

**Meri Tek Demir** 

Female authorship has long succeeded in reinterpreting various forms of narratives and Maggie O'Farrell's 2022 novel *The Marriage Portrait* appears as a notable example in contemporary women's writing. *The Marriage Portrait* offers readers an alternative perspective on Renaissance Italy, drawing inspiration from art history with a focus on Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, who became known as the Duchess of Ferrara through her marriage to Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara in 1560. A brief historical context of Lucrezia and Alfonso's matrimony and her mysterious death is introduced in the "Historical Note" at the beginning of the book. It is followed by two literary epigraphs; one from Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" and the second from Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Whilst the short extract from *Decameron* addresses to the women's life in the Florence court in general, Browning's "My Last Duchess" deserves particular attention since as O'Farrell remarks in the "Author's Note", "Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, is widely considered to have been the inspiration for Robert Browning's poem 'My Last Duchess'; Lucrezia di Cosimo de Medici d'Este, Duchess of Ferrara, is the inspiration for this novel" (*The Marriage Portrait* 433). Unlike Robert Browning, who objectifies Lucrezia's portrayed figure through the eyes of Alfonso d'Este; O'Farrell's narrative portrays Lucrezia as an active and vibrant character, liberating her from the confines of the painting, taking opposition to the classical approach of art history which typically reduces female figures to passive objects in the art works. Lucrezia, the protagonist, is depicted as a strong-willed character from birth. Nevertheless, her strength contrasts with her vulnerability and fear of death, which she attributes to her husband Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara. The story unfolds in a non-linear sequence, starting with the final hours of Lucrezia in 1561 and the chapters stretch between 1550s to Lucrezia's birth to her death. Considering the novel's beginning, the reader is likely to think that the whole story will be based on Lucrezia's murder plotted by Alfonso, and this may not be an inaccurate contemplation. However, as the story flows, it reveals the process of personal growth in the Renaissance context, which also turns into a battle for survival. Besides being fictional, the novel still provides rich elements to explore cultural perspectives and distinctions between Florentine and Ferrarese courts, which is a remarkable detail for the contemporary reader to understand more about Italian culture.

The novel commences in 1561 at a "Wild and Lonely Place" as is referred in the chapter heading. There it is, the reader's first meeting with a 16-years-old Lucrezia and her husband Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara at their dining table after a long travel from Ferrara to this uncanny place, where Lucrezia is quite sure that she will be murdered. The opening chapter masterfully builds suspense and indicates a potential murder plot. Yet, O'Farrell alters this notion playfully throughout the novel. While rare, there are instances in which Alfonso is portrayed as

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a caring, protective husband or at least Lucrezia intends to believe so, in order to carry her life by fulfilling the role of the duchess. Being a noble by birth, raised in the Florentine *Palazzo* as one of the children of beautiful and powerful Eleonora and Cosimo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, Lucrezia has all the features and priorities of growing into a noble lady. Nevertheless, her personality surpasses the expectations of the both Florentine fashion she is used to and the new Ferrarese court she becomes a part of after marriage. Along with the fear of murder, her wild nature is indicated from the early chapters which take the reader back to 1544. The chapter named “The Unfortunate Circumstances of Lucrezia’s Conception” introduces Eleonora, a strong and beautiful woman who skilfully balances her marriage to the powerful Cosimo, Grand Duke. She knows that, “[h]er body is strong and fruitful. The people of Tuscany, she knows, refer to her as ‘La Fecundissima’, and it is entirely apt” (*The Marriage Portrait* 9). So, she knows to use those features for the sake of her own freedom that not many women in her position enjoy. Her fascination with duty and freedom, however, finds a different way in Lucrezia’s characterisation. Ever since she was born, Lucrezia’s nature differs very much from her siblings and Eleonora cannot find any other reason for this fierce nature than the circumstances in her conception as the title refers. Whether a superstitious belief or not, Lucrezia seems exultant throughout the chapters. She is captivated by the idea of wilderness; she does not fear wild animals, which is very well projected through the flashback of her experience with a tiger in the Palazzo when she was just an infant. Also, she displays a keen interest in arts and painting. After all, as a little girl growing in a court that has Giorgio Vasari as the court artist is a great opportunity for such a character to develop her artistic skills. Besides, Cosimo is referred to as a father who cares about educating his children, especially in Classics, which he is extremely fond of and how Lucrezia feels privileged of having a good education as a woman is given in different instances of the storyline.

However, can all these features prevent Lucrezia’s death, or can she break free from her constraints? It is also worth considering whether she can truly escape the boundaries of her new title as the Duchess of Ferrara, while in her father’s court she was simply little Lucrezia. As the story unfolds, Lucrezia’s fear and the ominous implications about her potential murder leave little space for alternative possibilities of Lucrezia’s future. Lucrezia already carries the burden of replacing her deceased sister in becoming wife to Alfonso. Even though she enjoys her early times in the villa, before going to Ferrara, life totally changes for her after her official entrance to the court. While there are various incidents that reflect these changes, my particular focus is on the process and outcome of Lucrezia’s portrait, referred to as the “Marriage Portrait”. As O’Farrell mentions in the “Author’s Note”, Europe houses only one remaining portrait of Lucrezia, a small painting by Agnolo Bronzino, which was created before she departed Florence and a few reproductions in different collections (*The Marriage Portrait* 434-5). However, the reader can trace the allusions of Lucrezia’s Florentine portrait in both marriage portraits. The novel highlights Alfonso’s impatience and excitement about the portrait. Lucrezia also seems fond of the idea, expressing dissatisfaction with her Florentine portrait’s dark background and awkward expression, elements symbolising her only true portrait in real life. Interestingly, the painting process is controlled by the Duke rather than the painter himself. Alfonso gives all the instructions and the elements to the painter. He even chooses the dress Lucrezia is supposed to wear, a Ferrarese costume, a stark departure from her usual Florentine fashion. For Alfonso, the portrait must convey her noble lineage and marriage for which the jewelleries are good instruments to visualise. In all these details, we witness Lucrezia’s objectification in the eyes of Alfonso and the painter. When the painting is completed and unveiled, nobody dares to speak until the Duke expresses his thoughts. It will be his judgement, whether the painting represents the expected Duchess of Ferrara or not. At this moment, Lucrezia observes everyone in the room and she feels as though they are all frozen, becoming a part of the painting. In a way, it can be said that O’Farrell creates a moment of painting within a painting through Lucrezia’s lense and the reader witnesses an ekphrastic experience. Looking at the painting, Lucrezia no longer sees the Florentine Lucrezia de Medici but the Duchess of Ferrara. There she experiences a sense of displacement, “The Duchess is present, in the painting. There she stands, Lucrezia is unnecessary, she can go now. Her place is filled, the portrait will take up her role in life” (*The Marriage Portrait* 435). This is what Alfonso created. It is not the painter’s, but Alfonso’s control to transform Lucrezia into the duchess. Echoing Robert Browning’s poem, Alfonso wants to control anything related to the Duchess in the painting and wants the spectator to see the painting through his interpretation. However, there lies another significant detail that catches Lucrezia’s attention. Even though the figure represents the duchess that Alfonso idealizes, the facial expression of the figure mirrors Lucrezia’s complex emotions, which is neither the work of Alfonso nor the master painter Il Bastianino from Michelangelo’s studio, but Jacopo, one of the two young apprentices of Il Bastianino, whom

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Lucrezia meets earlier by coincidence and saves his life. Now, we see that Jacopo intends to save Lucrezia's life and for my own interpretation, the display of the portrait, not only becomes the objectification of the Duchess, which eventually brings her expected duties on display, the one and most important duty to give an heir to Alfonso, it also becomes her acknowledgment of the brutal realities about the Ferrara court, especially through her interactions with Alfonso's sisters. Yet, another sad fact about Lucrezia is, the more she yearns for her family in Florence, and Sofia who raised and even helped her to postpone the marriage to Alfonso as much as she could, she becomes more pushed to adopt her Ferrarese role, especially by her dutiful mother Eleonora, who thinks what Lucrezia fears is the results of her wider imagination, which she has ever since she was a child. The only shelter she feels about Florence becomes her maid Emilia that came with her to Ferrara.

Overall, *The Marriage Portrait* offers more than a mere fictional retelling of a Renaissance story. O'Farrell's focus on the transformation of Lucrezia di Cosimo de Medici into the Duchess of Ferrara, particularly through the lens of the famous and sole portrait of Lucrezia as inspiration, dedicates her a voice to her and delves into the depths of her inner world through O'Farrell's imagination. O'Farrell's reinterpretation provides the reader with multidimensional perspectives about the obscure story of Lucrezia. Beyond the generally known details of Lucrezia's eventual fate, whether a murder or illness as history suggests, O'Farrell explores the process of Lucrezia's becoming the Duchess, which sheds light on the female position in Renaissance Italy. The portrayal of her journey to becoming the Duchess is symbolised by the process of the painting, which appears as the strongest symbolisation since women are mostly the mute and passive objects of the paintings and Lucrezia becomes one through Alfonso's control of the painting process. Interestingly, however, O'Farrell lets Lucrezia interact with the painting, which overshadows Alfonso's control and interaction which is echoed in Browning's "My Last Duchess". In this regard, the book also deserves appraisal within the context of art history through the female perspective. As a final note, O'Farrell's generosity in sharing the sources and her experience in the preparation process in the endnote and acknowledgements are highly remarkable, for it provides great opportunity for readers interested in art and literature disciplines.

#### **Work-Cited**

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