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Living in an Ideal World: the Portrait of the Lucy Family

Figure 1 British School, *The Family of Sir Thomas Lucy, c.* 1626/28, National Trust Collection, Charlecote Park, Warwickshire ©*National Trust Images/Derrick E. Witty*

This paper draws together material and archival sources to investigate the portrait of *The Family of Sir Thomas Lucy, c.* 1626/28 (Figure 1), which now forms part of the National Trust Collection at Charlecote Park in Warwickshire, home of the Lucy family for many generations. This portrait is illustrative of a much broader concern with the group portraits of early modern provincial gentry

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families which, it is asserted remain an under-utilised source of evidence for both historians and art-historians.[2] The gentry used such paintings to establish familial legacy and heritage for future generations, to memorialise virtue and to remind viewers of the sitters' prestige, piety and entitlement to power, all whilst keeping the memory of the dead alive in the minds of the living. They were also exemplars of family life, presenting conventionally gendered images of idealised families. This is significant because the family, as the basic unit of society, was essential for the formation and transmission of belief and identity, and the place where children were socialised.

The relationship between gentry families, their land, houses and portraits was of great importance, jointly signifying inheritance, wealth, status and permanence. Portraits in particular were key elements in constructing collective identity, linking ancestors to present, past and future generations, their country house and its ownership.[3] This portrait, by an unknown artist, was painted around 1626 and shows Sir Thomas and Lady Alice Lucy and their family in a stylised version of their home. It was the largest and most accomplished painted portrait in a programme of artistic patronage which the couple undertook throughout their thirty years of marriage.

The Lucys were senior gentry in Warwickshire claiming long lineage and holding extensive estates in the middle Avon valley near Stratford-on-Avon.[4] The room in which the family is posed displays

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[2] For definitions of the gentry see: Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 9.

[3] Recent art-historical debates, have understood the term 'identity' to include approaches which highlight marginalised social groups, often non-elites, whose concerns were over looked by earlier scholars for example, gender or racial identity: Richard Meyer, 'Identity', in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 345

[4] For history of the Lucy family see: Richard Cust, 'Lucy, Sir Thomas (1583x6–1640)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17152, accessed 7 July 2017; Richard Cust, 'Lucy , Alice, Lady Lucy (*c.*1594–1648)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/66713, accessed 26 April 2017]; Robert Bearman, 'Lucy, Sir Thomas (*b.* in or before 1532, *d.* 1600)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2015 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17151, accessed 26 April 2017]; Mary Elizabeth Lucy, *Biography of the Lucy family of Charlecote Park in the county of Warwick,* (Privately printed by Emily Faithfull and Co, 1862); Richard Cust, 'William Dugdale and the Honour Politics of Stuart Warwickshire', in *William Dugdale, Historian, 1605-1685*, ed. by Christopher Dyer and Catherine Richardson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 89-108.

their wealth, status and refined taste, while the adults' sombre but fashionable clothes signify their serious intent and moral stance.[5] The children's clothes and the jewellery worn by the girls and their mother are finely painted and display their value; for the girls, this was related to their future roles as elite wives.

This portrait contributed to Thomas and Alice Lucy's almost mythic status as heads of an ideal early modern family. They were pious or godly Protestants and their reputation depended both on portraits and contemporary sermons and writing. Alice in particular was described as a model of feminine piety and the Puritan minister of Great Budworth in Chester, John Ley, dedicated his life of Jane Radcliffe to her alongside the pious Lady Harley.[6] He addressed the pair as 'two truly virtuous and religious ladies' claiming: 'I doubt not but (as elect Ladies) your names are registered together in the book of life'.[7]

Like his wife, Sir Thomas's reputation was constructed in print as well as paint, and he was described by the family chaplain Robert Harris, as being 'so rare and proficient' in either 'sacred or secular learning' that 'he was accounted a living library'.[8] His funeral sermon described him as a patriot for his country and a leader of his county. He was seen as a model citizen and gentleman.[9]

The portrait shows the couple seated upright, their gazes fixed and steady, on high backed velvet chairs which indicate their seniority in the family where they alone have been afforded such a privilege. They are surrounded by seven of their sixteen or so children, a sign of their fruitful marriage and god's blessing. For Lady Alice, her large family (she probably gave birth to about sixteen children) and her role as a mother was central to her self-fashioning. In her funeral eulogy,

[5] See: Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, (London: Batsford, 1986), p. 65.
[6] Cust, 'Lucy , Alice,' *ODNB* (2008).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Robert Harris, *Abner's Funerall* (1641), pp. 25-6.
[9] Cust, 'Lucy, Sir Thomas'.

another of the Lucys' household chaplains, Thomas Dugard, extolled her fecundity: 'A very fruitful vine she was and many were her olive plants about her table. Some of them have seen death before her: ten she has left behind her.'[10] So integral to her pious persona was her role as a mother that Dugard idealized her as the epitome of the godly mother, claiming '… her children [as] her chief ornaments'.

Figure 2 English School, *Alice Lucy, c.* 1620-25, oil on canvas, National Trust, Charlecote Park, ©National Trust Images

An earlier portrait of Alice as a young woman, together with another of her husband, were probably hung as pendant or paired portraits; this one shows her visibly pregnant, her hand both concealing and pointing towards her belly. (Figure 2).[11] This is among the relatively common genre of portraits dating between about the 1580s and 1630s, known as 'pregnancy portraits' when it

[10] Thomas Dugard, *Death and the Grave, or, a Sermon Preached at the Funeral of That Honorable and Virtuous Ladie, the Ladie Alice Lucie, August 17, 1648*, *Sermon Preached at the Funeral Of ... The Ladie Alice Lucie.* (London: London : Printed by William Dugard, 1649), Accessed Early English Books Online; See also: Ann Hughes 'Thomas Dugard and His Circle in the 1630s – a 'Parliamentary –Puritan' Connexion? ', *Historical Journal,* 29, pp.771-93; Ann Hughes, 'Dugard, Thomas (*bap.* 1608, *d.* 1683)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/66139, accessed 26 April 2017].

[11] There is second, similar portrait of Lady Lucy of the same date which is not shown here.

became relatively common for sitters to be depicted in a visible state of pregnancy.[12] These sitters were often from 'unequivocally' Protestant families like the Lucys and it is likely that the choice of pose had a confessional motive associated with the belief among Protestant writers that marriage and child-bearing were spiritually elevated states for women.[13] The jewellery, posture and clothes of these earlier portraits acted as prototypes for later depictions of Alice, helping to preserve her image as a young, fruitful wife in the minds of subsequent generations. Figure 1, the portrait of the whole family, suggests that her qualities as a godly mother are to be inherited, since the blue and white Chinese porcelain bowl of ripe cherries which her eldest daughter Constance shares with her mother suggests the fruitfulness of the marriage but also the sharing of feminine values, as well as Constance's deference and duty of obedience to her mother.

Models of family life were placed before husbands and wives by both the church and the writers of the popular conduct manuals who ascribed rigidly gendered duties for husbands, wives and children.[14] These included respect and obedience from wives to husbands and between children and parents. The traditional positioning of husbands and wives, she on the right of the frame, on her husband's left hand, he on the left of the frame, was a convention inherited from Elizabethan portraits where the man's left or sinister side was considered inferior. The turn of the wife's body towards her husband was seen as a respectful acknowledgement of his presence. This duty of obedience from wives to husbands was apparently contradicted by the desire for mutuality and unity within marriage.[15] Here this is expressed by the responsibility the couple evidently share for raising their children.

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[12] Karen Hearn, '"Saved through Childbearing": A Godly Context for Elizabethan Pregnancy Portraits', in *Art Re-Formed Re-Assessing the Impact of the Reformation on the Visual Arts*, ed. by Tara Hamling and Richard L. Williams (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 65-68.
[13] Ibid. p. 66.
[14] See for example: William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties*, (1622), II Treatise pt I, Accessed Early English Books Online.
[15] Ibid.

The family's formal, though relaxed, poses suggests their confident superiority, sometimes described as a kind of 'psychic balance' consisting of relaxed demeanour and gestures which imply the confidence and assurance expected of elite families.[16] Behind Alice's right shoulder, an elderly nursemaid brings the youngest child to her mother. The servant's ruddy complexion contrasts with her mistress's pale skin, a marker of social distinction which elevates the status of the younger woman and reinforces the belief that it was the duty of women of all ranks to care for children. The boy perched precariously on the arm of his mother's chair emphasises the same message, his hand lies over hers in a sign of his dependence on, and affection for, her.

Early modern portraits rarely challenge societal norms and almost always depict patriarchy as the correct form of family governance, since the way that men governed their families was seen as an indicator of their fitness for public life as magistrates or members of Parliament, both offices which were held by Sir Thomas. His role as patriarch is made explicit here as his second daughter Margaret lifts her hand and her gaze towards her father, seemingly seeking his approval and signalling her respect for, and dependence on her father.

This depiction of Sir Thomas as an exemplary gentleman and family man is confirmed by the props on the table behind him, hard to distinguish but depicting spurs, a bit and books. The books suggest his serious intent and piety and reinforce the notion of his fitness for public office. The spurs and bit indicate his mastery over his many horses and his role as a cavalry officer; importantly, they are also signifiers of self-control and temperance and, together with the books, combine the scholar with the sportsman. The horse and the ability to control it were essential markers of elite masculinity. Sir Thomas's love of horses and prowess as a sportsman were important in establishing his credentials as a man of the country. This love was evidently genuine and his will

[16] Malcolm R. Smuts, *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England* (Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 204.

contains five separate legacies of horses, including to his son Spencer to whom he left 'the two horses call the Hobby and that called Mingnon with two colts and two mares'.[17] While many English gentry families owed their fortune to money made in the city, it was essential that it was seen to be spent it in the country, often on their country house which, together with coats of arms, funeral monuments and portraits, signified long lineage and social standing.[18] Here, the idea of Sir Thomas as a man of the country is made explicit by the presence of dogs and a hawk, pointing to his right as a land owner to hunt and take part in elite rural sports. The boys in this family are identified as inheritors of the masculine rural skills of hawking and hunting, both through their association with the bow and the ease with which they play with the dog.

Perhaps the chief preoccupation and function of families like the Lucys was the perpetuation of the family name and estate through the production of a male heir. The heir is often signified in portraits, either by the gesture of a hand on his shoulder or sometimes by the presence of a hat. This portrait it is a little different; on the left of the canvas is what appears to be an open window through which the Lucy's son and heir and Margaret's twin brother Spencer (b. 1616), enters from a formal garden. As he steps up and over a window sill, his gaze is turned to the viewer and he carries before him a blue and white bowl of peaches like the one which his sister Constance offers her mother.[19] The figure of the boy and the fruit simultaneously signify wealth, fashionable taste in garden design, a secure lineage and the rich fruit which he brings his family, all of which combine to represent his future role as benevolent, natural and legitimate. The large classical pillar between Spencer and his father simultaneously acts as a framing device to divide the sections of the painting and signifies fortitude, implying the strength of the Lucy 'house' and the ability of father and son

[17] TNA, PROB /11/185 Will of Sir Thomas Lucy, 1641.
[18] Robert Tittler, 'Social Aspiration and the Malleability of Portraiture in Post-Reformation England: The Kaye Panels of Woodsome, Yorkshire, *c.* 1567', *Northern History,* 52 (2015), p. 277.
[19] Professor Roy Strong's refers to the fruit as apples not peaches; his analysis is made on the 1740–1744 copy of the portrait in the Walker Art Gallery, not on the version in Charlecote Park; Roy Strong, *The artist and; the garden*, (London: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 38.

to uphold its values. Almost invisible on the dark pillar behind Sir Thomas is the inscription 'Deus mihi haec otia fecit' translated 'God hath given this tranquility/leisure', a paraphrase from Virgil, Eclogue I, l.6, substituting 'nobis' with 'mihi'.[20] This phrase sums up the ideal nature of the scene in which a tranquil family life is described as God given. The figures in the interior space appear unaware of Spencer's presence as he enters the room and he too looks away from the rest of his family to engage the viewer, demonstrating his liminal status in the composition as he both moves inwards towards the family and looks outwards to his active role in the world.

Therefore, this portrait reinforced the idealising narrative constructed around the Lucy family – it shows them living well, the ideal life of the provincial gentry. Related to this was the need to 'die well', which is illustrated by the large marble monument commissioned by Dame Alice following her husband's death in 1641 (Figure 3) and which is still in the rebuilt church of St. Leonard in Charlecote. The expensive marble and fine quality of its carving with its classical architectural style speak eloquently about the status of its subjects whilst its scale and enormous coat of arms provide a strong visual reminder of the antiquity and permanence of the Lucys' lineage. Their dominance and entitlement to land is asserted here in the sacred space of the church.[21]

[20] Translation: National Trust images.
[21] Nigel Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 165. See Cust, 'William Dugdale and the Honour Politics of Stuart Warwickshire', pp. 89-108.

Figure 3 Nicholas Stone workshop (part by John Schorman), Monument to Sir Thomas Lucy, black and white marble, St Leonard's Church, Charlecote. Author's photograph

Figure 4 Detail of 'the library' in the monument to Sir Thomas Lucy, St Leonard's Church, Charlecote. Author's photograph

Figure 5 Detail of Sir Thomas Lucy on horseback in the monument to Sir Thomas Lucy, St Leonard's Church, Charlecote. Author's photograph

Here, many of the familiar tropes which idealised the couple in life reappear. Sir Thomas's superior position, armour and dynamic pose contrast with Lady Lucy's prone, passive and inferior position in their 'correct' gender relationships. Depictions of Sir Thomas as a horseman and man of the country reoccur in details of the monument, which include carvings of classically authored books and a fine depiction of him mounted on a cavalry horse (Figures 4 and 5). Ironically for a man who loved horses it was a fall from one which led to his death.[22] For pious Protestants like the Lucys dying well generally meant dying prepared, in a state of readiness to meet their maker, something which was obviously made harder by a sudden accident. Sir Thomas however did not die immediately after the fall but was ill for several days before he died. This, according to the Reverend Robert Harris, who was present at the deathbed, allowed time for him to die with a prayer on his lips, part of the important deathbed performance which was frequently recorded for the benefit of others.[23]

[22] Cust, 'Lucy, Sir Thomas', *ODNB.*
[23] Lucy, *Biography of the Lucy family of Charlecote Park,* p. 27.

For his wife, the commissioning of this monument was a demonstration of her continued wifely devotion and the duty placed on widows to remain faithful and respectful of their husband's memory. Following her husband's death, Alice Lucy suffered declining health and 'was for the most part confined to her chamber where she was said to have made a church of her own house'.[24]

Figure 6 The figure of Dame Alice Lucy in the monument to Sir Thomas and Alice Lucy, St Leonard's Church, Charlecote. Author's photograph

Her figure on the monument conceals a handkerchief under her hand, a sign of her sorrow and perhaps also a reminder of a wedding or betrothal gift (Figure 6). Her cupped hand over both the handkerchief and her belly recalls her first duty and the central element in the construction of her pious persona, motherhood. Like her pose, the jewellery which she wears in death is almost identical to that in which she was depicted twenty years earlier as a young mother (Figure 2).

[24] Ibid.

This paper has argued that by paying attention to details of composition and iconography, portraits of provincial families can provide a rich source for both art-historians and archival historians. While portraits like the one discussed here reflect broad social trends they also contain private messages about the lives and relationships of individual families and are specific to their own particular place and time. They are performances, or little stage sets which operate to produce and enforce ideology through many generations. They reveal important aspects of familial identity, beliefs and ideas about life and death which were as idiosyncratic as the narratives and memories embedded in them.

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