



The Not So Honorable Mrs. Thomas Graham

Thomas Gainsborough, a portrait and landscape painter during the eighteenth century, was renowned both during his life and posthumously for his work. After an already productive career as a painter, Gainsborough moved from Bath to London, where he painted many full-length images of women in a Van Dyck, baroque style (*Gainsborough Paintings* 1). Displaying these portraits after a multi-year break from exhibitions, Gainsborough's "most outstanding exhibit at the Royal Academy of 1777 was the portrait of *The Hon. Mrs. Thomas Graham*" (Cormack 122). The portrait depicts the striking nineteen-year-old in a flowing red and off-white gown shortly after her marriage to a very worthy bachelor (*Gainsborough Painting* 218). She is leaning against a grand column, adorned with jewelry while holding a feather in one hand and her dress in the other, illuminated and pale between her home and a dark landscape.

Many critics feel that Gainsborough depicts Mrs. Graham in a flattering fashion, elegantly exploiting her upper-class status, yet the dramatization of her material possessions and placement choices in the painting demonstrate that these culturally desirable traits of the upper echelons of eighteenth century society were truly binding and far from honorable. The image manifests that women were stuck in the home, unable to break free from the confining role of domesticity and grace that was culturally crafted for them to fulfill. Thomas Gainsborough's portrait *The Honorable Mrs. Thomas Graham* inadvertently displays women's stagnancy in eighteenth century society. Stripped of agency, Mrs. Graham, contrary to popular belief, actually displays societal imprisonment rather than allure when viewed through a modern lens. "Gainsborough eschewed allegory," which means that his choices in the painting are straightforward and purposeful in how he wishes to portray Mrs. Graham, being that she is an aristocratic, respectable lady (Rosenthal 47). Illustrating and advertising wealth are essential to Mr. and Mrs. Graham, so Gainsborough depicts affluence. His choices in the portrait align with what a noble wife and husband admired in a woman: tradition and material worth, which is far from progressive.

The painting's title dictates that Mrs. Graham is "honorable," which explores what it means to be an honorable woman in the eighteenth century. Since Gainsborough is a portrait painter who wishes to please his subject, he draws Mrs. Graham in a fashion that will appear respectable and admirable. Therefore, beautiful gowns, elaborate jewelry, high heels, and an elongated body formulate the definition of honor for Mrs. Graham, her husband, Gainsborough, and most likely the general public of the era. She is referred to as Mrs. Thomas Graham in the title too, which instantly aligns her with her husband. Her identity is dependent upon his name and reputation, so her honor reflects him. Additionally, Mrs. Graham is placed within her home, expressing that her domesticity is superior. Her extravagant house, represented by the column, is essential to her respectability. Excess is the key to honor. Less is definitely not more in Mrs. Graham's case.

Mrs. Graham's instantly striking extravagance in clothes and jewelry intends to express her status and respectability, yet underlying this excessiveness is the need for a woman to look conventional and elegant in order to be considered beautiful and honorable, as the painting's title suggests. Gainsborough's portraits are expressions of how the subject wishes to see herself, as a perfect eighteenth century beauty: "he [Gainsborough] always preferred to paint his sitters in contemporary dress; his fancy dress portraits, notably in 'Vandyck' costume, generally reflected the tastes of sitters rather than his own" (*Drawings* 35). Hired and paid by a client, a portraitist's job is to please his client, who in this case is Thomas Gainsborough, and make the subject look beautiful, "combin[ing] her beauties, or correct[ing] her defects" (*Drawings* 47). Therefore, it is not even the real Mrs. Graham being portrayed, but a fabrication of the young lady with perfect physical traits. To be valued in the culture of that time period, a woman must wear the finest jewelry, with flowing dresses, a big hat, and lots of flair. The painting reminds the viewer that the most expensive, flashy clothes are best, especially in upper-class life. Status and femininity seem to have been most important to Mr. and Mrs. Graham, especially Mr. Graham who financed the excess. If his wife had expensive possessions, she would be a physical representation of his success and money. The gaudiness of the painting hints that he wished for his wife to be viewed as what the twenty-first century calls a "trophy wife." As a high-society woman, status is everything – the more one owns and wears, the more respected she is. This excess overtakes the woman and the painting, distracting from any inner character she might have.

This materialism seems acceptable at first glance, yet it detracts from Mrs. Graham's inner beauty. Distracted by her exterior, viewers instantly judge her on her physical appearance. Her accessories are too much, like the feather in her hat, the ruffles, and the heeled shoes, making the young woman appear overdone: "there is a heightened romantic feeling, a deliberate search for 'glamour', which, in the *Mrs. Graham*, once the first feeling of astonishment at its fabulous dexterity has worn off, seems to fall into excess. These portraits are in a style of remarkable formal elegance which almost overshadows the painter's concern for likeness"

(Waterhouse 26). In this portrait, the viewer does not see the true Mrs. Graham; rather, one sees perfection and “excess,” exploiting the need of an upper-class woman to have the finest adornments. The painting is not concerned with anything but Mrs. Graham’s position in society, aligning with the preferences of the client as well as the reputation-based cultural values. The overindulgence of display conveys that her status is her most significant, if not only, attribute to communicate. This lavishness demonstrates a woman’s need to always look her best, and both Mr. and Mrs. Graham promoted and internalized this attitude.

This painting is dramatic “both in the extravagant masquerade costume, and in the grandiose pose[,] [with] [h]er left hand [and] elegantly displayed fingers [...] grasp[ing] the fluttering drapery, while her right arm falls gracefully to hold the feather” (Cormack 122). This description illuminates that Mrs. Graham’s femininity is what makes her beautiful, especially when it is expressed through her clothing and her pose. She stands tall, yet looks as if she is molded to fit into a certain form because of her stern stance. She does not seem comfortable, especially because of her harsh look away from the painter. Because Gainsborough draws her in a flattering fashion, she fits into the constructed role of the upper-class wife. She is playing the part of a superior woman, and this femininity is of the utmost importance to her: “The delicacy of the softly modelled head, the lovely Van Dyck dress, the richly impasted brushwork in the highlights of the overskirt and the impressionistic handling in the robe beneath, a welter of pinks and lakes and crimsons [are all] [...] of praise to feminine grace and beauty” (*Gainsborough Paintings* 218-9). Her puffy and boisterous clothes make her “graceful” and “beautiful,” not herself. The clothes are striking and elegant, yet prove that women needed to fit a traditional mold and wear certain clothes to be considered honorable.

This mindset was engrained in both the minds of women and men in the era because they both wished to see women portrayed in this fashion of stunning glamour and great expense. The clothes are excessive and distract from the actual subject because it seems as if her money and status are more important than her actual character. This gaudiness creates stagnancy because if Mrs. Graham cares most about her physical appearance and least about her intellectual and moral

advancement, then she can be an honorable wife and woman. If she looks good, nothing else matters. Since Mrs. Graham has fine clothes, she does not seem to need anything else and, therefore, her social identity is her only concern. With status and money, Mrs. Graham is satisfied with her role as a wealthy wife, for she did agree to pose for the portrait.

Situated next to a classical-style, large column covered with vines, Mrs. Graham is paralleled to the structure. They are both beautiful, but regressive. Critics acknowledge the relationship between the young lady and the column: “The regal pose and slight but majestic turn of the head are matched by the mighty plinth and columns (though who but Gainsborough would have straggled a branch and leaves across them), and these dominate the canvas in a way characteristic of the baroque” (*Gainsborough Paintings* 218). Mrs. Graham and the column both have a presence in the painting that seems overdone. Just as the column is large and covered with vines, Mrs. Graham is tall and stoic, adorned with the finest jewelry and fabrics. Both of them convey the theme of excess once again. The column elucidates the retrogression and stagnancy of women too, because this is a classical style of architecture. They are neither progressive nor new-world and this is especially true in the painting, for it is as if prehistoric vines have twisted their way around the pillar, exploiting its antiquity. It is true that “[t]he baroque column is enormous, with leaves tumbling over it,” just like Mrs. Graham is elegant, but both portray a sense of being stuck because they are representations of tradition (Cormack 122). That column is not going anywhere – and neither is Mrs. Graham. The parallel between the two, standing tall and adjacent, proves not only that both are beautiful and elaborate, but that both are filling a role and a purpose, one that is not much more than physical appearance. Just as the column holds up Mrs. Graham, Mrs. Graham must keep up her status in support of herself and her husband. As an object of tradition, the column shows that Mrs. Graham will not change or grow, but she will stay in this role eternally, most concerned with conveying grandeur.

The feather in Mrs. Graham’s right hand, which points down and droops to portray the weight of all this materialism, also emphasizes outer appearance. The feather was viewed by many critics and peers of Mrs. Graham as an added piece of elegance, yet its positioning is

obscure. Such downward motion seems depressing and detracts from her stoic, tall stance. For a painter, “[i]nventiveness in portraiture was a useful tactic for getting noticed” (Rosenthal 46). Therefore, like the column, this feather was a way of adding something special and noticeable to Mrs. Graham. The viewer must wonder why, then, it falls so lazily. It seems as if, like the feather, Mrs. Graham is weak and airy. She could not even stand to hold up such a light object. A man would be holding something heavy or have his arms in a position to portray his strength, but Mrs. Graham is given a feather and she cannot even lift it because she is too “delicate.” The feather symbolizes Mrs. Graham because it represents femininity and fragility, exemplifying her husband’s dominance. Furthermore, it is important to realize what is absent from the portrait. There are no books or animals. There is no trace of the sun. There is no hint towards any other interest besides materialism and appearance, for all that is present in the painting is finery and jewels. Mrs. Graham’s character in the portrait is her status and her appearance. There is nothing about her personality to be garnered from this painting besides her upper-class position, which seems to consume her whole being. The choice of a feather in the painting shows that her femininity is all she has. Mrs. Graham appears to be a figure of admiration, and this admiration stems solely from her wealth and her husband.

Mrs. Graham’s paleness, additionally, juxtaposes with the dark background, making the women appear to be an enlightened, pure figure, yet in contrast to the dark she is simply a naïve creature that needs protection. Gainsborough’s art exemplifies “his search for a grander figure style that would convey more powerful feelings,” so this contrast between the light and the dark is a way to portray the young woman as pure and heavenly (*Drawings* 52). Since a portrait painter’s job is to please the subject, the contrast to him most likely served to make her appear celestial, glowing from the canvas. Yet, the juxtaposition of light and dark is a subconscious way of separating good from evil. Mrs. Graham’s paleness would have been the essence of her beauty and portrayed her virtuousness. She is delicate and calm in the wild world, represented by the dark trees in the background next to her bright calm in the home. Yet, the darkness or the evil lurking directly behind her symbolizes the malevolence of the real world, the world of men and

their lives outside the home. She is not engrossed in it though, for she is protected by here purity, symbolically displayed with her glowing. Moreover, the glowing makes her look like an angel, which also represents goodness and virtue. It is as if she is sheltered and will never experience this dark world because she cannot battle it, hence why she stands on the ground of her porch and not in the dark landscape. This imagery indirectly shows that although Mrs. Graham appears to be an enlightened figure, darkness surrounds her. She only *appears* to be enlightened, yet there is all this knowledge from which she is protected. Mrs. Graham is a portrayal of purity through her glow and color, yet the underlying truth is that she is weak and needs asylum from the real world, illustrated once again by her placement within the boundaries of the home, separated from the yard. Her purity is of paramount significance, for if the boundaries between light and dark fade, she is no longer honorable. Being light and pure amidst the darkness is her only option; there is no room for her to move because she clearly cannot go into the yard that would consume her. Mrs. Graham is forced and stuck into this position of innocence, yet she herself does not even mind it because she clearly chases her domesticity and status as a wife over everything else, as was previously discussed. The subject has learned and internalized purity and femininity.

Mrs. Graham's pose, furthermore, is tall and strong, yet the choice to put her looking to the left with such grim expression shows retrogression, or at the very least, confinement. This portrait was painted later in Gainsborough's life, after he moved to London, and it is said that "after experiencing the sophistication of city life, his [Gainsborough's] work changed and he painted in a style which, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was regarded as the acme of elegance" (Belsey 7). Status here, when he was immersed into cosmopolitan life, was of immense importance and that is why Mrs. Graham, as a lady of metropolitan distinction, stands tall. Mrs. Graham's stance and expression are considered by many critics to be "elegant," yet her eyes look depressed. She is looking backwards and towards the ground. Her dress might convey power and her heels might be fancy, but her expression is questionable. She is stoic, like a statue. Her lips are not in a frown, yet not in a smile. Her eyes seem frozen, with no emotion. Facial

expressions make a subject human and lively, yet Mrs. Graham has none. She is stripped of emotion, for this is not what seems to have mattered. She was only needed to appear valuable, and emotions play no role in that. She needs neither a voice nor agency because her opinions were trivial in comparison to her caliber. A smile or turn towards the painter was clearly insignificant because it would distract from the material items on her. Retrogression also underlies Mrs. Graham's body language because she looks to the left, which is backwards rather than forwards. Instead of seeing progress and hope for the future, she sees, resignedly, her place. She is stuck in these beautiful clothes, fulfilling the traditional model of a domestic wife. That is all she needs to be; that is all she wants to be; that is all anyone else wants her to be. She cannot advance, and her future is set, just as the column. Basically, her present will be the same as her future, for she will still wear beautiful dresses and entertain in the home. Therefore, Mrs. Graham faces towards the left, for there is no need to worry about moving forward.

Finally, placing Mrs. Graham on the boundary between her home and the land is allegorical because it shows that although the world is right at her feet, Mrs. Graham belongs in the home. Gainsborough painted many portraits, and many were of men with guns. All of Gainsborough's portraits with guns show how he was purposeful in his placement of objects, for he wanted to avoid phallic imagery in some and make comments upon libido in others. He purposefully moved and rotated guns between the portraits involving males, because he knew that a slight change in positioning changes meaning (Rosenthal 46). Therefore, Gainsborough did put thought and purpose into his placement of objects and portraits in general. He chose to put Mrs. Graham in her home, with the landscape adjacent. It was as if as a woman, she belongs near the column, snug tightly to the house. She is not frolicking in the trees or out in town. There is so much beyond the home, but she will never truly experience it. Her role now, especially right after marriage, is maintaining the household. Although society appreciated this fact about Mrs. Graham, from a modern lens this seems to perpetuate stagnancy because the woman is confined to the estate. The men are outside with their dogs and guns, standing over their wives, like in

Gainsborough's portrait *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, but Mrs. Graham is constructed within the home. She might feel safer there, but she will never grow or experience the outdoors.

Mrs. Graham is a complete representation of how women were viewed and wished to be viewed in the eighteenth century. She was beautiful and elegant, with a proud stance, but she has no depth, or if she does, her status was superior to it. She fills a conventional role and is a wife, beautiful and committed to the home. Yet, this portrait is weighed down in material so she appears as a trophy wife. In a letter from one woman to her friend after viewing Gainsborough's portraits and considering hiring him, she says, "but I should be very sorry to have any one I loved set forth in such a manner" (Rosenthal 46). To this woman, the portraits of Mrs. Graham and ladies alike seemed stiff and overdone. Some women during the time were disgusted by these types of overdone portraits. Mrs. Graham, to a viewer now, is simply a young lady in a beautiful dress. Yet, we do not know what her smile looked like, what she liked to do, or anything about her emotions. This was the way in which she wished to be viewed and it was the way in which her husband wanted her to be presented – adorned with all types of finery. Women in the eighteenth century like Mrs. Graham were victims of stagnancy and materialism, for they fell prey to the accessories of upper class life and to wifehood. Mrs. Graham is a result of upper-class avariciousness, and the portrait hints at nothing besides exterior beauty. Mrs. Graham represents the epitome of an honorable woman in the eighteenth century, yet honor is no more than excess and immobility.

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