

From Rembrandt's Shadows

Julia van Gorder

Rembrandt (1606-1669) est considéré comme "un maître du chiaroscuro." Une des questions soulevée par Julia van Gorder est à savoir qui se tient dans l'ombre de ses peintures, de ces espaces sombres qui rehaussent le tracé des personnages et de l'effet dramatique. Une seconde question est de niveau pratique, qui est prêt à s'asseoir assez longtemps pour permettre Rembrandt de créer les effets réalistes détaillés? D'un niveau conceptuel, comment le modèle intervient dans le processus de création? Dans le texte de van Gorder, l'exubérance, l'animation et le drame, pour lesquels les peintures de Rembrandt sont connues, se manifestent dans des monologues entrelacés de Rembrandt et de Saskia, la femme et modèle favorite du peintre. Les visions émotionnelles et psychologiques si souvent louangées dans les peintures sont intersubjectives; elles sont une fonction de la voix de Saskia tout comme de celle de Rembrandt. En ce sens, les peintures ne nous disent pas seulement à quoi elle ressemble physiquement (jusqu'au moindre petit détail) mais aussi comment elle perçoit Rembrandt, comment elle voit le monde. Dans ses mots "J'étais réelle. / Étais-je réelle seulement à mes yeux?"

The Archangel Raphael in conversation with Rembrandt:

"I see.... There are many, many portraits of yourself. Your favourite subject?"

"My most available subject, master. Not even my Hendrickje, in her latter years, was willing to sit as long as I need to capture the essence. I'm the only one as patient as myself to sit endlessly."

"You've captured the essence, all right. But what of the shadows?"

"The shadows?" I have a fit of coughing. No one has questioned my work since the 1640s. "I'm an old, dying man, master. I want you to take me with you to God. I've had enough of this life." Why is it you cannot will to live or die? Those are choices, no, they are not choices, they are decisions, made by God alone.

"So you want to be eased out, do you? Yes, I'm curious as to what's

behind all these self-portraits. In the dark. One has to see the dark before one sees the whole. It looks as if you have been lazy.”

He sounds like my father. Is he my father?

“Paint in the shadows for me, and then we’ll discuss God.”

He sets up a mirror beside the easel the way Lastman had done. Then he holds out a hand to my free hand, and pulls me out of bed. In Lastman’s voice he says, “Paint honestly. Honestly.” This is no angel. It’s Pieter Lastman, come back to plague me.

Shadows. He wants to see into the shadows.

That first year — 1632 — I got a commission to paint Dr. Tulp. I moved into his anatomy class and painted him teaching. The corpse was a Leiden man, hanged for robbery with violence. I felt such compassion for him naked and cut up in public that I shortened him and moved him to the foreground of the canvas. I must have pleased those rich bastards in their Puritan finery. From that painting on I had a backlog of commissions that lasted twenty years.

Strange, those twenty years. They expanded, and expanded, until — the whole thing burst, and there was nothing left. Nothing.

I hear my Saskia’s voice, but I can’t hear the words. Who is she talking to? Is she in the next room?

“You were saying?” Raphael asks.

“No, that was Saskia talking. Saskia, my wife. D’you want to hear about Saskia, my lord? She was not a shadow, no, she was part of me.”

*Saskia’s shade:**

I hate it when my Rembrandt says

I was part of him, seigneur.

Was I never myself?

Just a child with no rights,

then a wife, then a mother, then dead.

But through it all, I was Saskia,

I was real.

Was I real only to myself?

*Saskia’s voice, here italicized, was first published in *Event* 26.1; that text was a finalist in the 1997 National Magazine Awards competition.

"I was living with her cousin Hendrick van Ulenborch, the art dealer, had my studio in his house in return for 40% commission on the paintings he sold. Fine, as long as I get on with my work. Get on with my work? Saskia, an orphan, was like a playful child, not supposed to disturb me when she brought me coffee."

When my father died

*I was passed from relative to relative
like a gold thread gown that suits no one,
but is too good to throw out.*

*By being biddable
and a help to my cousin Hendrick's wife,
I was allowed to live with them in Amsterdam.
But no more Friesland skating for our Saskia.*

"Disturb me? I couldn't concentrate after her visits. She'd set herself the task of making me laugh. I didn't like to laugh — my teeth were never good. Her teeth weren't that good either, but that didn't stop her merriment. So I laughed with her. She was not beautiful, but she was *alive*, and she made me feel alive."

"She sat for me, she kissed me. Then the inevitable happened. I was bursting with joy. We went to tell her cousin and aunt. They were ... enraged. Can you imagine — two young people who had found each other — what greater happiness? And the reaction — horror. She was rich. I was only a miller's son. I heard my father saying, *The best is good enough for me*. Then I looked at Saskia's cousin, who produces nothing and makes his money selling other men's work...."

*Was I ever like that — merry?
My cousins, Mennonites both,
had Mennonite worries,
they talked of calf love
taking on the responsibilities of marriage.
My lawyer brothers worried
that painting would not provide
a good living for their sister.
But they didn't love me
the way my Rembrandt did.*

What did they know of love?

“Saskia tricked them. She told them there was bread rising in the oven. All the frowning relatives from Friesland came. They spent two days behind closed doors, then decided marriage would be the cooling water poured on the burning heat of lust. They produced a document. Saskia’s capital was to be tied up in Friesland real estate. The interest was to be used for a house and furnishings for her. I didn’t care about the money — I was earning plenty.”

*I wish I hadn't lied to them
about bread rising in my oven.
Was I being punished, seigneur,
by three days' torture
with the birth of each child,
and that bossy doctor with his shears
and catheter and hook?
And the saffron and anise water
that didn't ease the violence to my body?
When the children were born alive and healthy,
then dead in a few days or weeks?
And then my own slow dying.*

“So we married, rented a house in the Nieuw Doelenstraat to escape from Saskia’s family, and we loved. Me, young cauliflower-face, loved by this exuberant woman. With our own house. And money, money!”

*At first it was such fun
when my husband would shout
“Money, money!”
Yes, at first it was such fun.
Our neighbor, Willem the sawyer,
introduced us to sales by auction.
That first day the three of us
went to a sale in Anthoniebreestraat
of a merchant who had died.
I liked to see other people’s houses and things.
It gave me ideas for furnishing our house,*

*and indeed, I did buy furnishings
for our house at a very good price.
Willem tried to teach Rembrandt how to bid,
but as soon as the auctioneer said, Who'll start the bidding
at five hundred guilders, Rembrandt throws up his arms.
Willem pulls them down. Two-fifty?
We both hold down Rembrandt's arms.
He struggles against us
until others begin bidding at fifty.
Then we let go of him,
but he still goes up to one hundred and fifty guilders
for that painting Hero and Leander
by the Flemish painter, Rubens,
whom nobody has ever heard of.
I didn't want to give it house room
— we had more paintings than walls.
The loft, under the eaves, even my linen cupboard
filled with his treasures.*

"I could buy whatever I wanted! I filled the house with furniture, pictures, sculptures, costumes. Sometimes I had nightmares of my mother coming into that house.... She always said I fly too close to the sun. Yes, Something for nothing equals nothing, she would say."

*In the early days it was me who dressed up with him.
Or rather, he dressed me.
Then he painted me.
I was always in his paintings in those early days.
Even to the end, when I stopped
going to sales by auction because my haemorrhoids
hurt too much when I walked — or lumbered,
to be honest, for Rombartus,
our first son, was so big to carry.
You've never been married, seigneur? —
Or fathered children?*

*Willem told me that if the auctioneer called,
"You aren't going to let this precious item*

go for fifty guilders, are you?"
 my Rembrandt would call back, "No!"
 and the dealers would laugh and bid him up
 past what they would pay.
 D'you mind if I sit down, seigneur?

He and Willem would come home
 their arms full of junk.
 My Rembrandt would be wearing
 part of the costumes — a helmet, a velvet tam,
 and carrying a sword or a spear.
 They would pour ale, dress up,
 and have mock fights to entertain me.
 I would be in bed in the reception room —
 it was more comfortable that way.
 It was even more comfortable
 when Rembrandt bought me a birthing chair.
 I sat in that with my feet on a foot-warmer.
 After the fights, they would dance
 and try to play the rattles, fifes, and tambourines.
 It was such fun.

But the next day I would have to
 get all those old-fashioned, stinking clothes cleaned —
 some had fleas and lice in them —
 and find space in our small rented house
 for all those weapons and medals.
 Yes, he even bought those.
 We had no good servants until Geertghe,
 and with all those students trekking in.
 I insisted he rent a warehouse in Bloemgracht,
 where his students had room
 and so did his treasures.

His Radiance is leaning against the wall. Should I ask him to sit down?
 The place is such a mess. Why is that Cornelia not house-proud like her
 mother? Look at the dustball by his foot. I wish he would fly off again. I
 should have shut the window.

"Tell me, what did your new relatives make of their new relative?"

"Well, they laid a charge against Saskia falsely accusing her of 'squandering her parents' heritage with pomp and ostentation.' So I laid a counter charge of slander, which forced them to withdraw their charge. I somehow ended up paying the court costs, but that doesn't matter."

*They worried when we took on
that house in the Breestraat
not agreeing we could afford it.
They hated my buying furnishings not new.
But they had to give up
on my Rembrandt, warning abundance
is ringed with thorns.*

"It was only money," Raphael suggested.

"Exactly."

"And you had so much, and your Saskia, and your work, and...."

I gave a cry to stop him. The children, the lost lambkins.

We named our first son Rombartus after her father. He ... our first boy, he died two months later. I can still see him in his coffin with that wreath of green and gold leaves we put on his brow.... We named our two daughters Cornelia after my mother. Both born healthy. Then the first one died of the red spots, the second one of the dysentery. My heart wept to see them struggle to live, then give up. So three times I donned the feathered paternity bonnet Saskia had quilted for me, and three times I took it off, until Titus. Well, God brings about the death of all sorrows.

Saskia spent most of her time in bed when she was carrying Titus. After he was born, there was no celebration. She didn't get up again. We had to hire a wet nurse.

*I was never good at nursing babies.
By the time they were born,
my breasts were swollen hard,
my nipples cracked and chapped.
The doctor got me to put lanolin on my breasts,*

*insisted I carry on with the nursing,
 spreading honey on my nipples.
 When the babies died,
 my breasts were so swollen with milk,
 I would moan with the pain. Then Rembrandt
 would lie with me and suck the milk out of my breasts,
 giving me pleasure and pain.
 But that would rouse his lust.
 I was terrified of becoming pregnant again,
 so I held his pomegranates
 in my hand until he got release.
 You've never married, seigneur?
 I hope I'm not offending you.*

At first she was the model servant, the wet nurse. Why can I not paint her? A plump little farm widow from Waterland. Clean, a good cook, caring to my poor Saskia, loving to my boy. But then I found her being loving to me, her master! Inviting me into her bed. So I met her needs, she met mine. She was a force of nature, that one. Not like my poor, sick....

*I felt so sorry for Geertghe
 when we hired her, a plump little farm woman.
 Her husband and infant boy
 had died of the plague in Waterland.
 She was able to nurse my Titus.
 She insisted he not be too tightly swaddled
 and when he got the diarrhea, she kept him
 clean with almond oil, and gave him a tonic
 of cinnamon, crocus and opium.
 She saved his life.*

*She also nursed me — kept me clean,
 which the other servants didn't do.
 I can't give words to how close you are
 to those who care for you.
 I couldn't get out of bed after Titus was born,
 even to sit on the chamber pot. The doctor said
 I was one of the world's great bleeders. He thought*

*we would never stop the bleeding after the other children.
And after Titus — I couldn't stop.
But Geertghe kept me clean, washed my rags,
changed my sheets and aired the pillows three times a day.
She put woodruff among the linens in the cupboard
so that my bed smelled sweet when she changed it.
She kept the house so polished I could see diamonds
in the door hinges when the fire was lit.
She cooked good broths and gave me ewe's cheese
with buttered bread to build me up.
Are you listening, seigneur,
or do you only listen to men?
We played piquet in the late afternoons, she and I.
Finally I was able to ask her
if she would have physical conversation
with my husband.
I knew that if I had another child,
I would bleed to death.*

*I think I was closer to Geertghe than to Rembrandt
when we three lived together, until
I gave her permission to sleep with him.
Was that the worst decision I ever made, seigneur?
I sleep poorly, and I could hear them at it several times a night,
at first whispering, then abandoning themselves
as if nothing else in the world mattered
except driving on to their little deaths.
I was excited and exhausted listening to them.
She would be the first to recover,
and tease him into trying again. I kept worrying
about her becoming pregnant —
what would the neighbours say about that?
But she never did, did she?
She must have had Waterland secrets.*

*The reason I'm going through all this pain, seigneur,
is to face another pain.*

*You see, as she slept with him,
she took over as mistress of this house.
Oh, she treated me still with kindness and respect,
and we never talked about their bedding.
But she bossed my Titus
and she bossed my Rembrandt.*

*You know, when that nice nervous man,
Mr. Spinoza, first came to visit,
he forgot to take his muddy shoes
off at the door, then bumped
into a coat of armour. Well, Our Geertghe
throws him over her shoulder,
brings him into the reception room,
puts him down on the stairs,
takes off his shoes, puts on a pair of our straw slippers,
lifts him to his feet from under his arms,
and says, "Now maybe the master will speak with you."
I was so embarrassed,
but my Rembrandt roared with laughter.*

*And the day he came home with sketches for me
of that Danish woman hanged in the Haarlemstraat,
Geertghe came straight up from the kitchen.
She took the sketches out of my hand and examined them.
"This is outrageous," she says.
"What? That she should be hanged for murder,
or that I should sketch her?" my Rembrandt called.
(He'd gone to hang up his jacket and cap.)
"Both! she shouldn't be publicly hanged like that!
And you shouldn't draw her.
Isn't she entitled to some privacy, even in death?"
"Geertghe," Rembrandt says politely, "She was only a prostitute,
and she killed her procuress — with that axe.
See how they have hung the axe beside her
to remind her of her crime?"
"Only a prostitute!" Geertghe shouts at him.
"She was a human being,*

*lured to Amsterdam in hopes of getting a decent job,
and when she has nothing left to sell,
she sells herself to this procuress,
who subjected her to dirty old men
and robbed her of her money.
I'd kill that woman if she did that to me.
As for you, call yourself an artist? You can't even draw.
Women have five toes as well as men, if you haven't noticed."
With that she flapped up her apron
and went back to the kitchen, calling,
"Supper's been ready for an hour.
The mistress ate her husepot while it was fresh-cooked.
I'm going to make her a drink of tea."*

*He was so caught up in his painting, was my Rembrandt —
he had many commissions and students.
When he came home, after his supper,
he would draw me.
I wish he hadn't.
For one thing, he's so dedicated to being honest,
that he twice did me with that sore under my nose showing.
In the etching it looks like snot, and I told him so.
Then he kept drawing me as I was dying.
Suddenly I have become an old dying woman,
before I have lived the middle part of my life.
I don't want my Titus to remember me as sick and dying.
I want him to know me as I am, a young vibrant woman.
In the end, seigneur — my end —
it was Geertghe who cradled me in her arms,
massaged my cold limbs with almond oil,
and crooned me into this life.
My poor Rembrandt sat
in the birthing chair, weeping.*

I was real to him at last.

