

Artwork of the Month, April 2021

Grace England

Charlotte Fitzroy, Peter Lely, 1670s

Acquired by York Art Gallery in 1949, and one of its treasures, this painting, by the court artist Sir Peter Lely, depicts the illegitimate daughter of King Charles II by his mistress Barbara Villiers, accompanied by a young, unknown page. The Friends-sponsored MA student, Grace England, discusses the image's classical symbolism as well its imperial overtones.



Peter Lely, Charlotte Fitzroy, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.6 cm, York Art Gallery, YORAG 18

On a first glance at this painting, what do we see? We see an in part classically dressed, almost luminously white, young girl, who gazes lazily out at us. A handsome page to her left looks adoringly up at her, proffering fruit. A shadowy background and a large carved stone relief are behind her. Who is she? Why does she have a kneeling page who

appears barely older than herself? And why is she surrounded by imagery of classical revelry?

The young sitter is Charlotte Fitzroy, one of several acknowledged illegitimate children that King Charles II had by his mistress Barbara Villiers, whose married name was Barbara Palmer, 1st Duchess of Cleveland. The name 'Fitzroy' was a direct allusion to the fact that Charlotte was a child of the king, and it is believed that she fostered a fairly close relationship with her father, remaining in contact via letter throughout her adulthood.

This work, painted by the Dutch artist Peter Lely (1618-1680), the principal court painter, may well have been completed around 1677, at which time Charlotte was twelve or thirteen years of age. A convincing hypothesis is that it was commissioned upon her marriage to Edward Henry Lee, 1st Earl of Lichfield, to whom she was betrothed aged nine, and whom she married in 1677, when she was still just twelve years old. While this may seem shocking to our modern sensibilities, it was not unusual for the children of seventeenth-century royalty or nobility to marry young. Charlotte's husband was only a year older at the time of the wedding, and she would give birth to the first of their at least eighteen children, in what proved a very happy marriage, when she was still only fourteen.

Indeed, while Lely depicts her quite clearly as still a child, her stance is decidedly un-'childlike.' Her look is knowing, wise almost: she stares not just out but almost past the viewer. The one foot that emerges from the drapery is bare, possibly to signify her youth, yet most of the symbolism that surrounds her clearly points to the likely purpose of this image as a celebration of the marriage, and to Charlotte's suitability and value as a bride.

For instance, in her right hand she delicately holds a bunch of grapes by the stem. This motif was widely used in contemporary Dutch portraits of young men or women, with the stem symbolising marriage and the grapes virginity. By holding the grapes thus, as if offering them up to the viewer, Charlotte offers up her own virtue, signifying that she is ready to be married. This gesture suggests that our painting is not just a simple portrait, but an image of matrimony and virtue; on this interpretation it

becomes a political symbol, a marketing proposal directed at the family of her future husband.

Charlotte's attire and the classical elements of the painting are also telling. Charlotte is seen in a strange amalgam of contemporary fashion and classical dress: her chemise, trimmed with lace, is overlaid with a pink silk toga-like garment that flows around her feet. In the background we see a classical-style stone urn, with a carved relief of naked putti, pulling along an animal draped with garlands, the leader carrying an assortment of objects and instruments. The relief is supposedly based on a drawing after Antonio Allegri, usually known as Correggio, in the Devonshire Collection, entitled *Putti with a Goat*. It is an image of frivolous youth, suggestive of the world of the classical god Bacchus (Dionysus in Greek), the god of wine, fertility, and festivity.

This Bacchanalian relief, positioned behind the painting's classically attired subject, may itself be a veiled reference to her royal parentage. Charles II's promiscuous and extravagant lifestyle (of which historians are now well aware) was certainly not unknown to contemporaries. It was also a common theme for Baroque monarchs to compare themselves directly to classical gods and heroes. A key example is Louis XIV of France, who notably styled himself after the god Apollo. Similarly in his collection of portraits of court ladies, known as *The Windsor Beauties*, [Lely depicted Barbara Villiers](#), Charlotte's mother, as the goddess Minerva, in a comparable amalgam of seventeenth-century and classical costume.

Is the artist perhaps seeking to portray Charlotte as an offspring of the god Bacchus? Depicted as she is in these archaic surroundings, whilst being served fruit by a beautiful young servant, it is not hard to imagine Charlotte as some demi-god, seated atop Mount Olympus.

A key aspect that we have yet to acknowledge, and that is vital to this work, is the anonymous page. Who is he? Why does he appear barely older than Charlotte herself, and clearly shown to be in a position of servitude to her? Whilst sadly he cannot be identified, it is believed this boy is one of the earliest depictions of a South Asian individual in English painting. His presence is also interesting given the significance of the painting's date. It was in the 1670s that Charles II ratified a series of acts which would greatly strengthen the powers of the East India

Company, giving it rights of territorial acquisition, the command of troops, and the power to exercise civil and criminal jurisdiction over colonised areas.

This figure's kneeling position and proffering gesture may be a hint at colonialism and imperial power. A comparison might be made with a ceiling painting by Spiridione Roma, *The East Offering its Riches to Britannia*, commissioned by the East India Company in 1778 for East India House in London. India is personified by a kneeling woman, who offers up a plate of her produce to the enthroned Britannia. Just as in our painting, Britannia is marked out by the paleness and luminosity of her skin, as well as her classical-style drapery. Like Charlotte, she is shown as the epitome of femininity, beauty, and purity, but also of power.



These imperial themes can be seen as integral to our work's matrimonial intentions. Charlotte's connection to the throne, and thus to the Empire, is just as vital in her marriage contract as her youth and beauty. She is depicted not only as the daughter of a powerful British monarch, but also of the ruler of an overseas empire. While the name and history of the kneeling page may be lost, his prominence within the painting is

nevertheless vital to understanding the political context of this painting's creation and its message.

In conclusion, is this a portrait of Charlotte Fitzroy? Not exactly. Charlotte Fitzroy is not shown simply as the pre-teen illegitimate daughter of Charles II. She is shown instead as a classical goddess, a personification of beauty, virtue, and most importantly power, through subtle hints of her divinely ordained parentage and connections to a steadily growing Empire. She is shown as a divine representation of marriage – a striking portrayal that conceals the darker elements of the work's history that I have uncovered. While gazing upon this undoubtedly beautiful and serene work, it is important to remember that this is an image of two children, not a single child – one a child-bride, the other an anonymous person of colour, who has seemingly been coerced into servitude through British imperialism.

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April 2021

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