

BEAUTY OR THE BEAST: MONSTROSITY AND COURTLINESS IN LAVINIA FONTANA'S PORTRAIT OF TOGNINA GONZALEZ

Sophie Durbin
Amherst College

Monsters and the Maternal Imagination

What creates a monster? This question troubled the minds of many Western thinkers during the sixteenth century, whose conflicting perceptions of science and Christianity led to an obsession with the creation of monstrous offspring. One Italian author, Andrea da Volterra, expressed in his 1572 child-rearing manual the religious importance of aesthetics, proclaiming that children should be “living portraits of the beautiful image of God.”¹ The role of producing beautiful children naturally fell to the mother. Many believed that children owed their appearance to their mother’s imagination during pregnancy. French surgeon Ambroise Paré wrote in 1585 that “one more commonly sees children who resemble their father than their mother because of the mother’s great ardor and imagination during carnal copulation.”² The notion of “maternal imagination” led doctors to

¹ Caroline P. Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 162.

² Wendy Doniger and Gregory Spinner, “Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting,” *Science in Culture* 127, no. 1 (1998): 112, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351306928-4>.

recommend that pregnant women hang paintings of idealized figures above their beds to imprint beauty upon their unborn children.³

Children who defied beauty standards, did not resemble their parents, or, most upsettingly, were born disfigured, appalled but also fascinated the public mind. Paré again attributed these misfortunes to the mother, writing in his encyclopedia *Des Monstres et Prodiges* that women should not observe “monstrous things” while pregnant or else conceive grotesque babies: “Et partant faut que les femmes, á l’heure de la conception, et lors que l’enfant n’est encore forme...n’ayent à regarder ny imaginer choses monstrueuses.”⁴ Nonetheless, all measures of society regarded human “monsters” with intense curiosity, and occasionally some measure of respect.⁵ European courts boasted collections of humans with unusual physical features or deformities, such as dwarfs, although they particularly coveted rarer specimens like the “hirsute” Gonzalez family.⁶ Pedro Gonzalez⁷ and his children, famous for the thick fur covering their entire bodies, occupied a unique position traveling among the courts as both treasured objects and marvels of nature. Although we now know that Pedro Gonzalez passed on hypertrichosis, a genetic condition that causes excessive hair growth, to his children, a sixteenth-century viewer would more likely attribute Tognina’s condition to the maternal imagination or perhaps a divine force.⁸ The family’s time spent among European courts produced numerous artistic depictions, although a portrait of Pedro’s daughter Tognina⁹ emerges distinct from the rest. Painted by Lavinia Fontana circa 1590, Tognina Gonzalez’s portrait opposes the expectation for women to avert their gaze from monstrosity and asserts Fontana’s breadth of intellectual interests by revising the tradition of scientific art.

Lavinia Fontana, a Bolognese painter who lived from 1552 to 1614, lived a remarkable life as a woman in the male-dominated world of art, paving the way for later female Italian artists like Artemisia Gentileschi.¹⁰ Scholars now recognize Fontana as the first known female career artist, as she successfully lived off her earnings from commissions and sales.¹¹ Her art garnered acclaim among the noble families of Italy, including the papacy, and she frequently received commissions for portraits.¹² Many biographers, including Caroline P. Murphy, believe that Fontana has the largest surviving body of work

³ Doniger and Spinner, 112.

⁴ Ambroise Paré, *Des Monstres Et Prodiges*, ed. Jean Céard (Geneva: Droz, 1971), 37.

⁵ Paré, 37.

⁶ Christiane Hertel, “Hairy Issues: Portraits of Petrus Gonsalus and His Family in Archduke Ferdinand II’s Kunstkammer and Their Contexts,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 13, no. 1 (2001): 1.

⁷ Also referred to as Petrus Gonsalvus or Gonsalus.

⁸ Hertel, “Hairy Issues,” 16; Dahlia Saleh et al. “Hypertrichosis,” *StatPearls* (2023), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK534854/>.

⁹ Also referred to as Antoinetta.

¹⁰ Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 1.

¹¹ Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 1.

¹² Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 1.

of any female artist prior to the eighteenth century, even considering that many of her paintings have since been lost.¹³ Despite lacking a title herself, Fontana was socially respected and became associated with her refined—and some might argue, staid—portraits of the nobility, rendering one of her subjects even more shocking. Among her self-portraits, depictions of noblewomen, and religious and mythical iconography lies a prominent outlier: the portrait of Tognina Gonzalez (Fig. 1).¹⁴

Fontana's decision to paint Tognina, a young girl whose genetic condition caused her to grow thick hair throughout her body, appears to assert her versatility as an artist and diverges from her otherwise homogeneous pool of clients. At first glance, the painting's style resembles Fontana's portraits of noblewomen and children. Tognina's intricate dress, sedate facial expression, and somber black background suggest she is a high-born daughter. She holds up a piece of paper to the viewer, which appears to communicate her literacy in the tradition of female self-portraits. Many women artists valued education and portrayed themselves in the act of writing or, like Sofonisba Anguissola, holding a piece of writing.¹⁵ However, this polished image is interrupted by one glaring detail: Tognina's fur-covered face. A sixteenth-century audience may have been familiar with notions of monstrosity and medical abnormalities due to the naturalist craze sweeping through Europe; however, they would have found Fontana's choice of portraiture highly unusual in comparison to the typical medium of scientific illustrations.¹⁶ Fontana's approach towards Tognina evokes a kinder attitude toward the girl's plight than other images of the Gonzalez family.

Cave or Court?

The body of artwork depicting the Gonzalez family as grotesque and animalistic can be traced back to the dehumanization of their patriarch, Pedro, after his displacement to continental Europe. Fontana's portrait of Tognina marks a significant shift away from these titillating images of monstrosity. In 1556, an adolescent Pedro arrived at the court of Henri II of France from his birthplace in the Canary Islands, most likely enslaved.¹⁷ The European rulers viewed him as an invaluable wonder but not quite human. Transferred among the various courts and uprooted from his home, Pedro lacked autonomy even if he appears stately and well-treated in painting (Fig. 2). Most portraits of Pedro present him in courtly robes and occasionally show his full body, a composition typically reserved for prominent figures and the nobility. Nonetheless, other elements of these paintings, especially their settings, reveal an alternate understanding of Pedro—one more concerned with his animality than humanity.

¹³ Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 1.

¹⁴ Vera Fortunati Pietrantonio, *Lavinia Fontana of Bologna, 1552–1614* (Milan: Electa, 1998), 27.

¹⁵ Babette Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture in Early Modern Bologna," *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2004): 255.

¹⁶ Hertel, "Hairy Issues," 1.

¹⁷ Hertel, "Hairy Issues," 4.

A 1621 inventory of Archduke Ferdinand II's private collections, the *Kunstammer*, lists Pedro as “der rauch man zu München”—“the hirsute man from Munich”—the sole human in a list of inanimate objects.¹⁸ The Archduke further degraded Pedro by commissioning an unknown Bavarian artist to create a series of portraits of the Gonzalez family, which located them in a cave despite their formal dress (Figs. 2, 3, 4). Although the full-length composition extends some dignity, the setting of a cave casts the family as animals unearthed from the back corners of nature.¹⁹ In contrast, Fontana's decision to place Tognina against a black background illuminates her subject's face, employing a soft chiaroscuro, and seeks to highlight Tognina's features rather than hide her in a cave.

While Hertel proposes that the Bavarian portrait of Pedro's non-hairy wife acts as a foil to her children's courtly portrayal, I argue that any apparent class difference does not diminish her family's purposeful affiliation with the animal world (Fig. 5). Instead, Fontana appears to have likened Tognina to her mother's portrait in order to undermine the divide between her condition and her humanity. The 1621 *Kunstammer* inventory lists Tognina's unnamed mother as “aines bürgerlichen weibsbildt,” a middle-class woman, and her portrait has a modest half-length composition.²⁰ Hertel theorizes that the mother's middle-class status, evidenced by her plain dress, indicates the greater respect for her hairy family members, who warranted fine robes and full-length portraits. Nonetheless, the mother receives even greater esteem than fancy clothing—the portrait treats her as human. She stands indoors, without any elements of nature, and the artist pays greater attention to her facial features, resulting in a naturalistic portrait. Fontana's portrait bears a closer resemblance to this representation, avoiding references to the wilderness, and aligns Tognina with humanity.

Specimens and Spectacles

Despite the sensitivity of Fontana's portrait, comparisons to scientific illustrations of the Gonzalez family suggest that Tognina's portrait still borrows from the naturalist tradition. Fontana may have hoped to associate herself with the perceived rationality and intellect of scientists while also broadening her repertoire with a singular subject. Just as Archduke Ferdinand II listed Pedro as an item in his *Kunstammer*, prominent naturalists often categorized the Gonzalez family as monsters or natural phenomena alongside non-human flora and fauna.²¹ Ulisse Aldrovandi, a Bolognese naturalist, notably viewed Tognina as more animal than human, describing her as “mulier viginti annorum hirsuto capite simiam imitante”—“a twenty-year-old woman with a hairy head who resembles an ape”—underneath her illustration in *Monstrorum Historia* (Fig. 6).²² Aldrovandi, a friend of

¹⁸ Hertel, “Hairy Issues,” 4.

¹⁹ Hertel, “Hairy Issues,” 4.

²⁰ Hertel, “Hairy Issues,” 5.

²¹ Hertel, “Hairy Issues,” 4.

²² Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Animali e Creature Mostruose Di Ulisse Aldrovandi*, ed. Biancastella Antonino (Milan: F. Motta, 2004), 203.

Fontana's, most likely introduced her to Tognina, complicating the legacy of her seemingly unique portrait.²³ Did Fontana also treat Tognina as a scientific specimen?

Certain aspects of Fontana's portrait hint at her desire to gain recognition for artistic innovation beyond her commissions of noblewomen. Her introduction to Tognina through Aldrovandi presents the possibility that the portrait served as an elevation of the naturalist's simpler illustration. Rather than conveying courtliness, Tognina's ornate attire may showcase her as a valued possession, much like her father's entry in the *Kunstkammer* inventory. The paper, rather than proving Tognina's literacy, acts closer to the inscriptions in scientific texts, detailing her father's origins in the Canary Islands as if recounting his pedigree.

One cannot deny that the sixteenth-century fascination with monstrosity piqued Fontana's curiosity. Many artists admired medical abnormalities as natural, God-given works of art. One painter observing a dissection of conjoined twins noted "that if they were done in Ivory, he would have paid any money for them."²⁴ No matter their esteem for nature's curiosities, these artists failed to acknowledge people like Tognina as individuals capable of emotion and rational thought. No other portrait by Fontana or similar artists displays a young girl holding up a piece of paper containing her father's heritage. The paper treats Tognina like an inanimate object in need of categorization, listing her provenance just like any other conquest in a royal collection.

Joris Hoefnagel's illustrations of the Gonzalez family in *Animalia Rationalia et Insecta*, published around 1575–80, testify to the coexisting attitudes of pity and amazement towards medical anomalies that may have influenced Fontana (Figs. 7, 8). Tognina's paper mimics an inscription in *Animalia* in which Hoefnagel uses Pedro's first-person to explain his scientific origins: "Petrus Gonsalus [I am], the foster child of the King of France, / Originated in the Canary Islands / Tenerife brought me forth hairy all over my body / (Distributed) [,] a marvelous work of nature..."²⁵ However, Hoefnagel simultaneously admits sympathy for Pedro's condition, writing underneath his likeness, "Man, born of woman, is poor in days, but rich in sorrows," a verse from Job 14.²⁶ Characterizing Pedro as both a product of nature and a "man, born of woman," Hoefnagel situates Pedro on the border between animal and human. Likewise, Fontana does not fully embrace Tognina's personhood through her choice of portraiture; she includes the paper to satiate her audience's curiosity about Tognina's peculiar appearance.

Portraiture and Personality

²³ Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 163.

²⁴ Lorraine Daston, "Nature by Design," in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones et al. (New York City and London: Routledge, 1998), 240.

²⁵ Hertel, "Hairy Issues," 9.

²⁶ Hertel, "Hairy Issues," 7.

The paper's prominence in the portrait and the lack of other identifying objects reveal Fontana's further differentiation of Tognina from a high-born daughter. Fontana ensured that Tognina carefully angled the piece of paper towards the viewer, marking its contents as crucial to our understanding of the portrait. Beyond the writing on the paper and Tognina's ornamentation, the portrait offers no clues to Tognina's interests and personality. In contrast, Fontana's self-portraits emphasize her accomplishments and skills, often including books and musical instruments (Fig. 10). Her portraits of noblewomen and children typically place her subject within an indoor setting that advertises their wealth and status, occasionally including a pet to conjure an atmosphere of leisure. Fontana develops their identities, providing evidence of their personal lives. She avoids labeling them like scientific specimens. While Fontana does not dehumanize Tognina nearly to the extent of the Bavarian portraits of her family, choosing a black background instead of a cave, she still fails to accord Tognina the full respect given to her other sitters. The utter disparity between Fontana's portrait of Tognina and the rest of her portraits speaks to her experimental intent as an artist.

A charcoal sketch of Tognina lends nuance to Fontana's perspective of the girl, supporting Fontana's desire to foray into the world of scientific illustrations while perhaps treating Tognina more sensitively than other artists (Fig. 12). Many scholars support the sketch as Fontana's superior representation of Tognina, arguing that the portrait hides Tognina's face beneath a "mask of fur" or "furry mask."²⁷ The sketch, in contrast, minimizes Tognina's condition and clearly demarcates the hair on her face from the hair on her head, using reddish-brown charcoal for the face and black for the rest of her body. Fontana distinguishes Tognina from a furry animal by separating her face from her head, unlike the Bavarian portraits which exaggerate the Gonzalezes' novelty by juxtaposing unvarying fur against elaborate court dress. Unlike her frozen expression in Fontana's portrait, Tognina appears alive in the sketch, her alert eyes and faint smile capturing her liveliness and humanity.

Yet, although the sketch rejects naturalist connotations, emphasizing Tognina's innocence and girlhood with gentle lines, it also softens and conceals Tognina's true features. Fontana's portrait may surpass the sketch in its naturalism, as photographs of hypertrichosis show that the condition does indeed create the appearance of a "furry mask," leading to a dense growth of hair on the face.²⁸ Fontana shows greater sympathy for Tognina, diminishing her monstrosity and likening her to a normal girl, but also hides the reality of her life. The 1590 portrait, despite its objectifying implications, refuses to beautify Tognina.

While Fontana's sketch may romanticize Tognina's appearance, its sister sketches present compelling evidence that Fontana still treated her subject more open-mindedly than any other artist. The sketch belongs to a series of nineteen portraits representing a variety of subjects, from nuns and

²⁷ Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 163; Hertel, "Hairy Issues," 15.

²⁸ Armand Marie Leroi, *Mutants: On Genetic Variety and the Human Body* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 277.

friars and noblewomen to a self-portrait of Fontana herself.²⁹ The identical half-length composition of the portraits demonstrates that Fontana treated them all with equal dignity, awarding no special distinction to social status.³⁰ Tognina's inclusion among these ranks signifies her normality. Fontana exhibits purely artistic interest in this series. She likely selected her unrelated subjects to practice drawing a diversity of figures. If the portrait shows Tognina's reality as a hairy little girl curiously arranged in courtly attire and identified through her father's foreign heritage, the sketch shows the idealized life Fontana may have wished for her. In this mild world of charcoal, Tognina sits among equals, free from the shadow of scientific observation, and her condition is an afterthought.

²⁹ Although Hertel also notes that the "sitters are represented without props that would strongly indicate their social status or their occupation," some of them wear religious garb and Fontana portrays herself with a quill and paper, so the portraits do provide evidence of occupation.

³⁰ Hertel, "Hairy Issues," 15.



Figure 1: Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Tognina Gonzalez*, c. 1590, oil on canvas, 57 x 46 cm, Musée du Château, Blois.



Figure 2: *Hirsute Man*, *Petrus Gonsalvus* (b. 1556), c. 1580, oil on canvas, 190 x 80 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



Figure 3: *Madeleine Gonsalvus, Daughter of the Hirsute Man Petrus Gonsalvus (b. 1574), c. 1580, oil on canvas, 123 × 86 cm, Ambras Castle.*



Figure 4: *Enrico Gonsalvus, Son of the Hirsute Man Petrus Gonsalvus (b. 1576), c. 1580, oil on canvas, 100 × 86.5 cm, Ambras Castle.*



Figure 5: *Wife of the Hirsute Man Petrus Gonsalvus*, c. 1580, oil on canvas, 111 × 92 cm, Ambras Castle.



Figure 6: Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Tognina Gonzalez*, in *Monstrorum Historia*, 1642.



Figure 7: Joris Hoefnagel, *Pedro Gonzalez and His Wife Catherine*, Plate 1 from *Animalia Rationalia et Insecta*, c. 1575–80.



Figure 8: Joris Hoefnagel, *The Children of Pedro Gonzalez*, Plate 2 from *Animalia Rationalia et Insecta*, c. 1575–80.



Figure 10: Lavinia Fontana, *Self-Portrait at Clavichord*, c. 1577, oil on canvas, 27 x 23.8 cm, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca.



Figure 11: Lavinia Fontana, *Sketch of Tognina Gonzalez*, c. 1590.

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