

Matrixiality, Mapping and "Great Ladies": (Im)Posing Postmodern Perspectives on Leonardo's Femininities

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[W]e need to elaborate another unconscious sphere, a matrixial stratum of subjectivization. . . that entices sex difference *already in the feminine*, since a different gaze is not about criticizing. . . binarity, but about contriving a space for *questions on/from the feminine*. . . . the matrix is a complex apparatus, whose aesthetic-poietic tool is metramorphosis.

(Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, "Re-in/de-fuse")

[Painting is] a discovery which considers all manner of forms with subtle and philosophic attention . . . all of which are surrounded by light and shadow. Truly this is science and the legitimate daughter of nature. To speak more accurately, we would say the grandchild of nature, for all visible things are born of nature, and painting is born of these.

(Leonardo da Vinci, Codex Urbinas, McM. 4v, 19r)

From the sfumato-enveloped Mona Lisa to the ermine paw-pressed Cecilia Gallerani, to the spiral-perm-locked Ginevra de' Benci whose setting sites this paper, Leonardo da Vinci's ageless "great ladies" continue to provoke speculation about identities, symbolism, signification, materiality, and sexuality. A matrixial configuration or, more accurately, the condition of matrixiality, is applicable to all of these frames of reference, interrelating and conjoining Leonardo's works and theories as allegories of "metramorphosis," a complex of becoming. As narrated by artist/theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, organic identities in states of matrixiality are alternately fused, defused, infused, and even refused, just as those of mother and fetus are richly and intensely convergent and divergent in the heightened moments before, during and after birth. "The specificity of the feminine is plural, not singular—and multiple," Griselda Pollock states. Matrixiality is the condition of ultimate ambiguity, that of convergence and intertwining, of two in one, of ideality and reality and all other constructions intermixed at their highest, most organically potent and most organically eruptive potential.

It is well known that Leonardo, an organic and vitalist thinker, worked by processes

of analogy and compounding, suggesting that the “one” was always at least in the domain of “two.” His microcosmic/macrocosmic analogy, with the microcosm of the human being continually referenced to and interdigitated with the macrocosm of the natural world, is also a known quantity. Can we extend that analogy? Can we configure Leonardo as thriving in territories of ambiguity, where functions, identities and terms as such are present only in embryo, and where Renaissance notions of the ideal, echoed and promised in the real, are also in flux? And if so, does Leonardo actually represent matrixial borderspace, by definition a tactile and visually incommensurable stuff, within the conic, pyramidal and concentric ratios undergirding his art? To both questions I would say, yes, Leonardo did think of borderspaces, in a Renaissance sense of the idea. He searched for motive powers, forces, and balances in an intellectual context whose possibilities for signification he compounded, expanding that context into a space of mutually reinforcing and open-ended representations. The context whose boundaries he expanded was also a continuum—a border area—delimited by degrees, from less to more divine.

Moreover, matrixiality is present in the multiple tissues and textures of the works themselves, particularly those which Leonardo evolved in series and over a protracted period. These include maps of the Arno River valley and watershed of ca. 1503-05; drawings associated with the kneeling “Leda” of ca. 1505-08, in which multiple “tissues” and forces (vortices, coiled springs, bubbling water “rapids,” and growing grafted “branches”) are combined and processualized with a thickened drawing style which gives them gravity and force; and the seminal “Great Lady” situs figure of ca. 1508-09, with which I will conclude. Beyond these projects, Leonardo did numerous studies of “two in one.” He detailed human and cow fetuses in utero, devoting considerable study to the cotyledonous tissues of the latter as a “live feed” for the former. He also studied plant seedlings emerging within, but not yet emergent from, their nutritive cotyledons. He analogized live vegetal tissue (again, the cotyledon or embryonic seed leaf, containing stored food) to the movement of water and to live animal tissue (the placental structures of

the gravid cow). Griselda Pollock's geological metaphors adducing matrixiality are also appropriate for considering the feminized, gravid territories of Leonardo, metaphors such as "surfaces rich in possibilities," "strata of subjectivity," and "feminine corporeal specificity." It is difficult to imagine these metaphors being written, much less imagined, without a working knowledge of Leonardo's drawings of heaving rock strata of ca. 1508-10, or the stream-scoured shelf forming the closely encountered rocky bank of his contemporary *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*.

Leonardo's investigations of fluid and fluctuating boundary spaces are too numerous and too complex to delineate here. Suffice it to say that each theme merited his close study over a protracted period of time: studies of water imbricated in channels and coursing over and around obstacles; a lifelong study of fluids and fluid dynamics; an analysis of fossilized crustaceans and other marine animals preserved in mountain walls; and studies and representations of uplifting, erosion, and sedimentation. Considered as a life work, these studies indicate that Leonardo, the inveterate experimenter and empiricist, thrived within the textures of matrixiality. And in representing these thickened textures, Leonardo the artist-scientist prefigured the postmodern notion of matrixiality as a heightened condition of ambiguity and procreative force, encountered tactically and haptically, at "relational borderlines."

So how can we matrixialize Leonardo? Establishing *borders* between the beings and substances he represented pales in light of examining, and permeating their *shifting positions and textures*. In the remainder of my discussion I will survey Leonardo's matrixial territories and representations, while keeping in mind that his analogized and compounded illusions also survey and serve the Renaissance continuum of the real and the ideal.

In recent scholarship, identifying the women in Leonardo's portraits has been paired with decoding and hence compounding their attributes, for example, the grisaille plant wreath and scroll which have been "re-attached" to the back of Ginevra de' Benci's

juniper-framed image, redating the portrait to the period 1474-78. According to art historian David Alan Brown, these attributes “present an emblematic portrait of Ginevra. . . . [Leonardo’s] painting is not only a portrait but also a picture of nature which represents the sitter in light of his own preoccupations as an artist.” Identifying her, along with the laurel and palm, as the key emblem of virtue (“she adorns her virtue with beauty”), feminist art historian Mary Garrard, whose 1991 article “Leonardo da Vinci: Female Portraits, Female Nature” has served as the springboard for this essay, argues that in Leonardo’s representation the sitter herself, “a young woman who had achieved recognition as a poet,” is presented in full recognition of her physical as well as intellectual pursuits. A personification of “real” and “ideal” qualities, she is adorned with virtue inasmuch as her achievements (in the Neoplatonic circles of Florentine poetry), her physical beauty (in the Netherlandish/Florentine mode of the translucent, framed image), and her allegorical self-presentation (screened and crowned in juniper’s pincerlike screen of chastity), set up a chain of analogical frameworks for codifying and celebrating the phenomenon “Ginevra de’ Benci.” As Leonardo’s juniper plant’s layered boundary of pincer leaves suggests, her presence is also tactile, enveloped in a sensate and porous envelope of leaves and fragrance.

Speculating on the palpable atmospheric landscape in the background of the portrait, a boundary space that also serves as an aura for the crisply rendered, juniper arbor screen in the foreground, it becomes even more apparent that “Ginevra” participates in a multiplicity of textual and pictorial worlds. Neoplatonic philosophy specified that the primary world was that of the ideal, the realm of the “celestial Venus.” Garrard notes that “the celestial Venus [was] equated with Mind and divine perfection” (connoted by the auratic screen of sky and landscape), while the earthly Venus [was] conjoined with the sensory realm and of matter”(connoted by the Florentine setting of the landscape, and the progressive encroaching of juniper leaves, Ginevra’s coiled locks, and her delicately rounded “mounds” of flesh). The celestial and earthy Venuses are *theoretically* binary in a

Neoplatonic sense, with the former associated with spirit and mind and the latter associated with matter. Recognizing Leonardo's vitalism, and that for him "the source of change is within matter and not transcendent of it," Garrard fails to take the next step. For Leonardo, both realms are not only interleaved but mutually reinforcing and immanent in the transcendent materiality of the physical world.

The textual and pictorial world of the Renaissance garden and Leonardo's study of it brings us even closer to his transcendent materiality, to his material plenitude and thus, to his matrixiality. In the Renaissance garden, earthly nature was equated with the divine by means of plots with complexly embedded arbors (in Pliny's words, "gardens under the guardianship of Venus" and in Alberti's words, "laurels, cedar trees and junipers, closely interwoven [and] made into circular patterns according to the most highly praised architectural plans"). Theorized as well by Leonardo, garden ideality was adduced by analogy, by design coherence and, most importantly, by material presence—of concentric border massing, border irrigation, and expanding aromatic borders conjoined with complex ornamentation. Leonardo also considered the Venus or "secret garden" while planning a suburban villa for Charles d'Amboise in Milan (ca. 1508) His notes "for the shrine of Venus," codified in the Codex Urbinas, indicate that "round this portico towards the North there should be a lake with a little island in the midst of which should be a thick and shady wood; the waters at the top of the pilasters should pour into vases at their base, from whence they should flow in little channels." Materiality in Leonardo's garden also figured as a grouping or copse of trees aligned to take advantage of a natural hot spring. Watered by rain above and irrigation channels below, based on climatic conditions potted trees could be wintered outside, Leonardo reasoned. His copse of trees, albeit rooted and drawn as an instructional "text" on light and shade, might well represent that proposition. The trimmed and massed junipers behind Ginevra and the spherical hillock behind them, possibly a Venus garden, might also represent a stage of Leonardo's research into garden design and landscape architecture . What is important is that in the Ginevra portrait as

well as extended theoretical and practical studies Leonardo materialized the Venus garden of literature into the reality of his art, delimiting in aerial perspective and in tangible forms an ideal, comprehensive world, a celestial and earthly paradise.

In the worlds of the painter/theorist Leonardo, allusions to divinity were embodied in increasingly tangible, material ideals. The “garden paintings” of his first Milanese period, the *Virgin of the Rocks* (ca. 1483-85) and the *Sala delle Asse* (ca. 1498) initiated his explorations of the more fluid and disruptive spaces of matrixiality. The materiality of these works figures in tactile, turning, and motive bodies; in tactile, radiating plants and rock-splitting roots; and in tactile, rock strata-bedded landscapes that would expand into burgeoningly alive worlds both above and below the regulatory ground plane. In the *Rocks* work, coolly shadowed rock strata and thriving plants breathe in the aura, grace and blessings of the Virgin. Opposing the wild boar of the contemporary *Allegory with Solar Mirror*, whose stony lair supports no other life form, she re-materializes these strata not only as supports for divine presence, but as life forms nurturing by and in turn nurturing the roots and sprouts of divine maternity. As “planted” by Leonardo, this garden cavern intimates virtue as a self-sustaining life system and literally becomes, through is materializing it in light, shadow and unfolding form, a self-sustaining life system of its own.

Explored fully by the end of his Milanese period across the spectrum of the animal, plant and human world, Leonardo’s compound forms—puffed-out “beds”; curved, straight and coiled springs; and multiplying combinations of these and their tonal interstices layered in convincingly deep space—show a matrixializing vision. They are resonant not only in a pictorial sense, but in a tactile sense, intimating a complex, thickening space defined by numerous interpenetrating borders and bordermaking techniques. Writing on Leonardo’s drawings after 1505, David Rosand adduces “physical realization. . . . the stress is on touch rather than vision, on proximity rather than distance—in the terms of Alois Riegl, on haptic rather than optic qualities.” Considering Leonardo’s studies for the kneeling *Leda*

and the Swan (ca. 1505–08), Francis Ames-Lewis sites these pressures and impressions in an embodied field of “bracelet hatching,” a feminized technique for a feminine deity whose earthly Leda-ness “spreads all over Leda’s form, taking in her waist, torso, full breasts, arms and neck. . . extend[ing] yet further to the swan’s body and coiling neck” (not to mention the helical “bracelets” inscribing the mythical “parents” in coiled configurations of potential energy, ready to spring).

A multiplicity, or, more pointedly, a matrixiality of meanings accrues to Leonardo’s late drawings when gender identities and specifically femininities are foregrounded. Leonardo’s cross-sectional analysis of the reproductive female, his “Great Lady” of ca. 1509, may be seen as, alternately, an anatomical composite of respiratory, circulatory, and urino-genital systems; a study of projective, multi-pyramidal geometry; an “aerial” map of an improved, hydraulically channeled, irrigated landscape; a subterranean cavern or canal system mapped by catenary-curved paths; and a growth-inducing arrangement whereby nodal “roots” or nuts, conjoined with a nutritive interface, ramify outward from protective tissues into blood-warmed body space. Leonardo’s frontal and lateral sections of the abdominal cavity site the trachea and bronchii as integrated and overlaid ramifying structures, as well as embodied treelike tissues. Burgeoning with the rounded and petaled forms of their “seeds” (the abdominal organs), these studies are likewise predicated on textures of matrixiality, in Griselda Pollock’s words, textures “inside the visible.”

Ranging from reservoirs to food sacs, from outer protective “bark” layers to inner conductive transportation layers, from the vital sphere of the womb to the viscera which spiral into the fetal position, the Great Lady’s tissues are *all* womblike, all potentially reproductive, and in that sense all matrixial. Likewise are Leonardo’s methods of rendering: hatching, inking, folding, pricking, re-inking, re-detailing, punching, dusting, transferring, redrawing, strengthening, re-hatching, and toning. They become “means of reaching out” (Rosand), prolonging not only the complete realization or birth of the figure(s), but configuring the very emergence of life as prolonged and extended. As image

is replaced by imaging, “birth” is replaced by a “birthing.” And matrixiality reigns.

“Sexuality is the domain where art may be articulated, since we enter both art and sex via the same ‘hole’ in the Real,” Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger states. Conceptualizing a scenario analogous to those stormy agencies described by the later Leonardo, scenarios of ruptured vessels, churning fluids, and “Jack-and-the-beanstalk” seeds, she writes of “an artwork [that] attaches, suspends or creates desire. An object mysteriously embodies a space in the hole. A drive awakes where an art object joins forces with interior objects, bypassing repression and regression at the price of approaching dangerously primary sources of . . . uncanny anxiety, and. . . inviting the viewer to follow it into an unknown, invisible space—yet inside the visible—interlaced by the artist.” Bypassing the Freudian route to Leonardo, which ends up by disembodimenting the feminine in the process of fetishizing it, a more fertile and fruitful path to Leonardo lies along matrixiality. “Within the feminine and within the visible,” matrixiality, I believe, offers a deluge of possibilities.