



Bereavement in the arts

Ole Worm: continuing bonds in a C17th Danish family portrait

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Abstract: A Danish family portrait from the early modern period includes Ole Worm and his three wives. This medical polymath brought new ways of thinking about natural history to the royal court when Denmark's fortunes were declining. The individuals and inscriptions represented in the portrait show Worm's academic standing and his allegiance to church teaching. Worm's tragic family life emerges from an analysis of the characters. This portrait may be interpreted at three different levels; at its deepest level, it demonstrates the representation of continuing bonds of, particularly spousal, affection in the seventeenth century.

Keywords: spousal grief; family portrait; continuing bonds; seventeenth century

In the seventeenth-century people commissioned portraits to provide, first, a visual record of themselves to hang among their family portraits for future generations to admire and second, a visual record of themselves to donate (either the original or copies) to relatives and friends living some distance away, like the lady who begged a portrait of a friend, 'to deceive my solitude' (NRS GD40/V/27). The element of flattery was probably often there, hence Oliver Cromwell's instruction that he be painted 'warts and all' (Piper, 1952-4 p30), but the most important thing was that the sitter should be instantly recognisable. In this paper we explore the rationale for a painting by an unknown artist of a somewhat extended early modern family (1647; Figure 1), housed in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. This portrait of an affluent

Danish family in the mid-seventeenth century raises, on closer examination, many issues relating to family grief in general and spousal grief in particular. Through these issues, this painting illuminates aspects of the debate around the continuation of bonds of affection (Stroebe, 2005). In order to fully comprehend the meanings which the anonymous painter was conveying, it is necessary to find out who the people in this portrait were, the nature of their milieu and the significance of their portrayal.

In addition to the family occupying the majority of the canvas, there are five men wearing anachronistic classical robes situated to the left, where the male family members were traditionally placed in historical portraiture. Together with the individuals, some inscriptions have been included to assist the viewer's understanding of this painting.

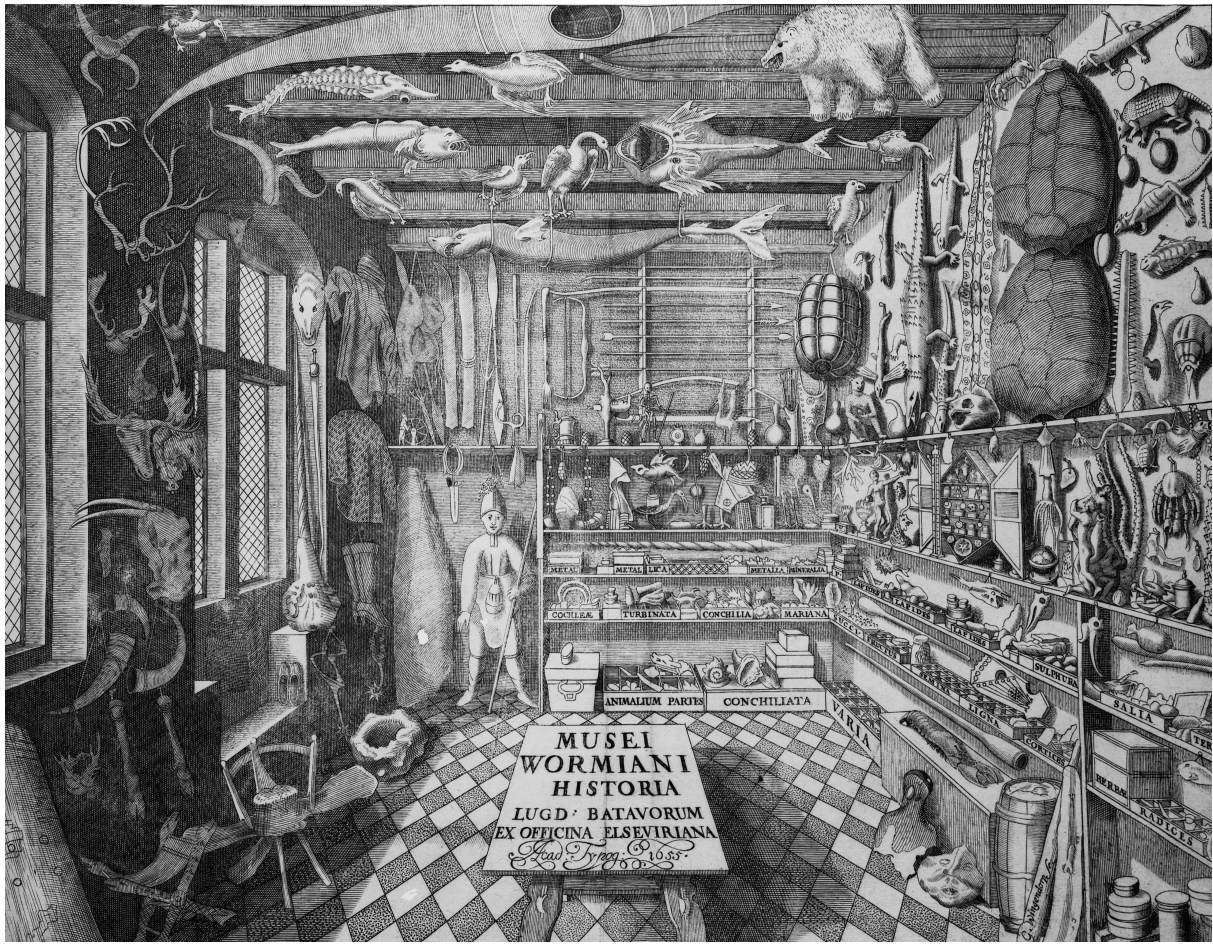


Figure 2 Cabinet of Curiosities in the Museum Wormianum 1655 (Wellcome Library, London) Courtesy of Wellcome Images

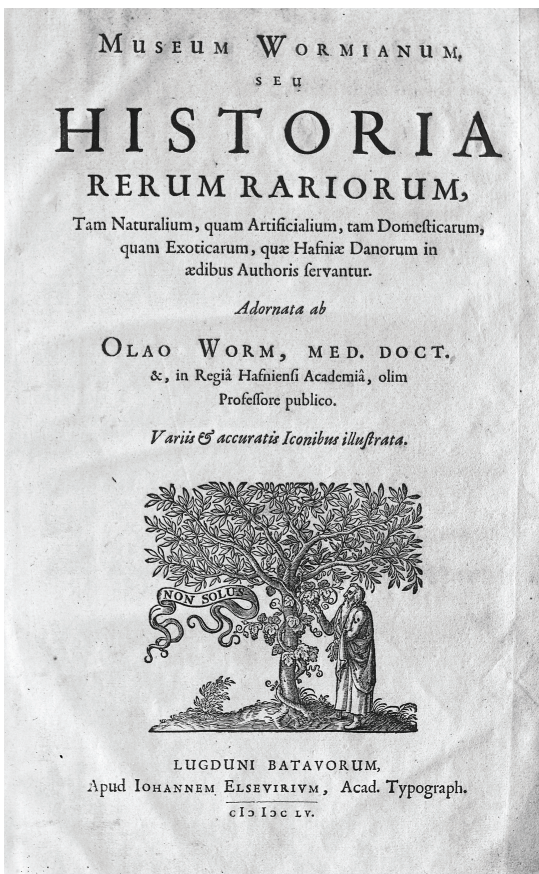


Figure 3 Museum Wormianum Catalogue 1655 (Wellcome Library, London) Courtesy of Wellcome Images



Figure 4 Posthumous Engraving; 'Olaus Wormius' by G. Wingendorp 1655, after C van Mander. Courtesy of Wellcome Images

The portrait as an historical document

Before analysing the context and the content and discussing the issues, though, the authority of paintings as historical evidence deserves attention. Caution is needed when using images as historical evidence (Burke, 2001). The viewer should beware of assuming the representativeness of a painting, but nonetheless this unknown painter is to be regarded as a social historian who has produced an 'art record' demonstrating family size, tragedies, and aspirations (Burke, 2001 p104).

This portrait was painted during the early modern period, when people in general were less literate and they did not regard letters as appropriate places in which to express personal feelings; but there are frequent glimpses of deep affection between spouses (Marshall, 1983). This painting constitutes one of those glimpses.

For many families, the family bible was used to record details of life events (O'Toole, 1993); but for the better off, paintings began to serve a similar function in the sixteenth century. Such portraiture featured particularly prominently in north-western Europe (Wheaton, 1988). The value of these portraits lies not only in their artistic worth and their insights into family relationships, but also, according to Wheaton, in the painting's role in helping resolve family strife over, for example, inheritance rights. Thus, in the event of the death of a spouse and the remarriage of the survivor, the complex family relationships and disputes about property and the estate could be made less acrimonious by a kin portrait.

The context of the portrait

During the late sixteenth century, Danish-Norwegian supremacy in the western Baltic was being eclipsed by the rising star of Sweden. Despite its international misfortunes, though, Denmark was embarking on a cultural renaissance (Shackelford, 1999). Into this paradoxical scenario Ole Worm (1588-1654), a wealthy physician, introduced a novel approach to natural philosophy. Born into an affluent family in the northern Jutland city of Aarhus, Worm did not fit comfortably into the Danish court in Copenhagen, admits Worm's biographer, Ejnar Hovesen (1987). This unease was despite Worm having been from 1648 until his death, court physician to King Frederick III (1609-1670). Before his royal appointment Worm was professor of, first, Latin and Greek and, subsequently, Aristotelian physics and, eventually, medicine at Copenhagen University. His dismay at how little his students knew of the natural world led him to catalogue and display in his museum or 'cabinet of curiosities' (Figure 2 Museum Wormianum, 1655; Figure 3 Catalogue, 1655), his collection of artefacts of animal, vegetable or mineral origin (Shackelford, 1999).

Despite his many spectacular achievements, Hovesen represents Worm as a humble, hard-working, family-oriented man. He enjoyed good health until 1650, when he developed prostate problems, but he succumbed to the plague. This physician is probably most easily recognisable

from a posthumous engraving entitled 'Olaus Wormius' by G Wingendorp (Figure 4, 1655), after Karel van Mander III.

The Worm family portrait

In this painting of thirty-one approximately life-size characters, Ole Worm the patriarch, is positioned to the left of centre. The senior family members stand in a formal arrangement, which softens with the youngsters. The background, representing the tenuous state of Denmark, comprises a ruined castle set against a threatening sky; this threat appears to lessen as the sky brightens over Worm's third wife and his two surviving daughters, bringing an optimistic note. In the topmost of three rows of individuals, Ole Worm's off-centre position allows the five women in his life, with his two sons-in-law, to take pride of place on the right. These eight figures bear inscriptions giving their names and dates; the occupations of Ole Worm and one son-in-law are given, but the dates for the latter (Jens Schjelderup) are not provided.

The people

Shadowy figures on the left represent five men, with inscriptions; an inscription on a rock endorses their authority, stating:

Salvator Mundi cum Quatuor Discipulis Suis (Saviour of the World with his four disciples)

Kasper Andersen considers that the four figures standing at the left 'pictured as four apostles, are Worm's professor colleagues from Copenhagen University' (2008). Thus, he argues that the credentials of the family as both learned and God-fearing are established by the painter. These religious credentials are even more strongly endorsed by the Christ figure, indicated by a halo, seated in front of the four professor/disciples and Ole Worm. Wearing the most brightly coloured extended garment of the painting, a red drape, Christ is the only figure indisputably looking away from the artist. His eyes rest on Dorothea and Susanne, the first two wives who predeceased Worm, and the tiny babies they hold. The Christ figure appears to be holding the hands of two small girls who, dressed alike, are probably twins. They may be Susanne and Magdalene, two of the daughters of Willum, Ole Worm's elder son. The family tree (Hovesen, 1987 p280-1) does not state their dates which, together with their proximity to Christ, may indicate their early demise.

The grand, if off-centre, figure of Ole Worm has his left hand on the cap of a girl, who may be Dorothea, his eldest daughter with his third wife. It is likely that his hand is restraining the youngster because 'he had difficulties with his daughter Dorothea, who did not agree with her father's choice of husband. She later fled from the family she had been placed at.' (Hovesen, 1987 p270).

The two identically-clad, yet comparatively insubstantial, women standing immediately to the right of Ole Worm are crucially important, as they represent his first two wives (Figure 5). Next to him is Dorothea Fincke (1596-1628), daughter of a professor of medicine, whom Ole Worm married



Figure 1 *Ole Worms Familieportræt* (Portrait of Ole Worm and his Family) 1647 by an Unknown Artist
 (© Niels Elswing/The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen)

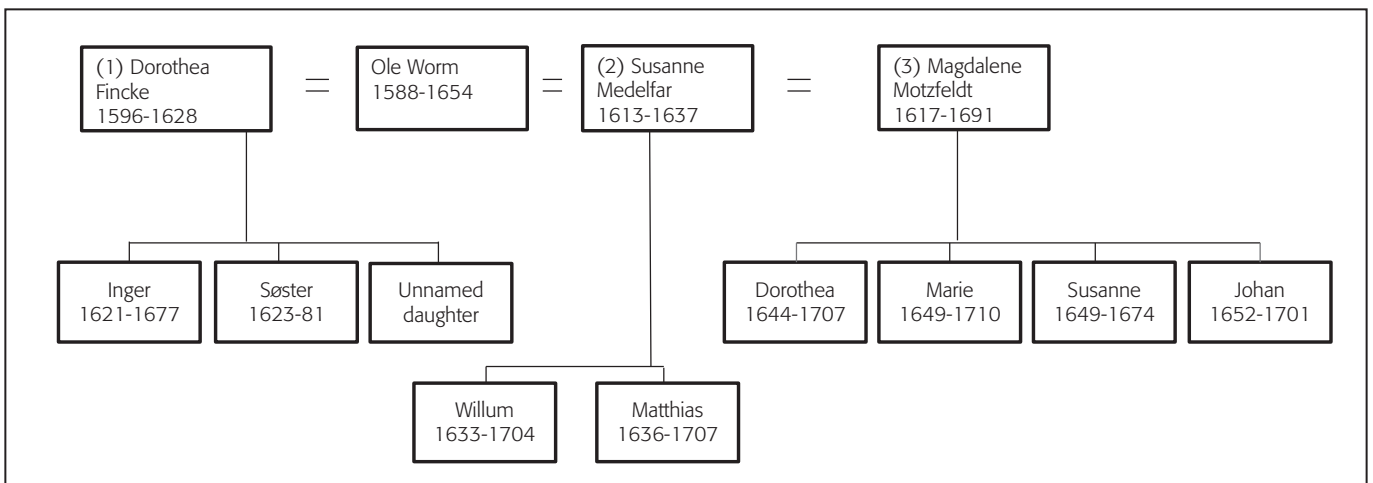


Figure 5 Family Tree showing the surviving children of Ole Worm and his three wives (adapted from Hovesen, 1987 p280)

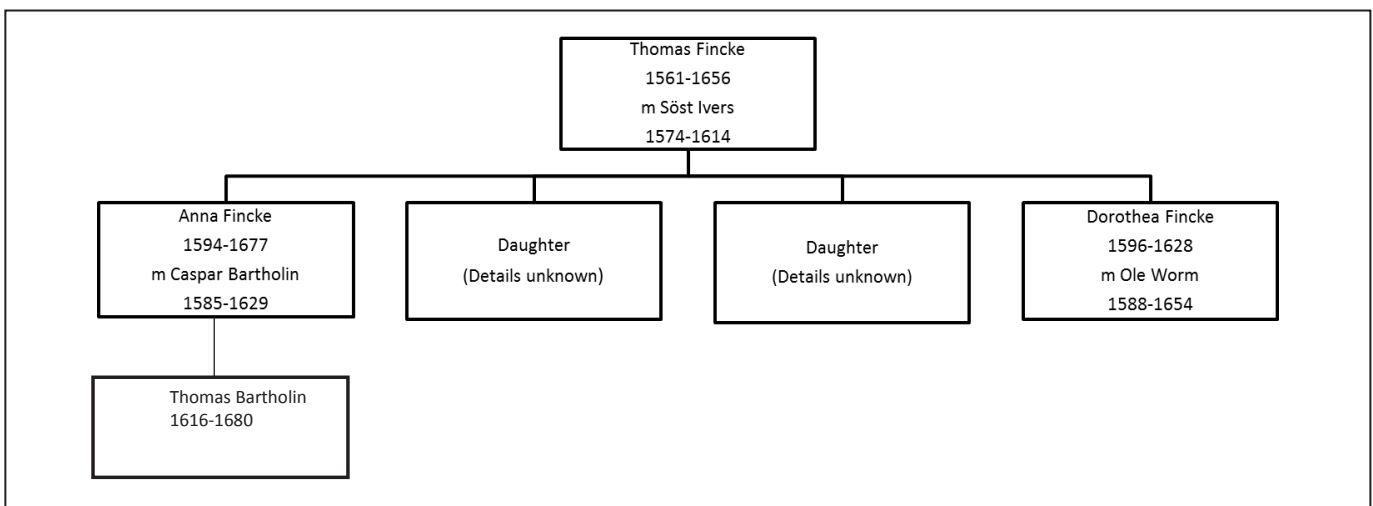


Figure 6 Family Tree showing the relationship between Ole Worm and Thomas Bartholin (adapted from Hovesen, 1987:280-1)

in 1619. She gave birth to six daughters of whom only three survived (Hovesen 1987 p270). Dorothea is holding a baby who is dead, as shown by her eyes being closed (Mander & Marshall, 2003). This may be the daughter whose name is not known, but who was born and died later in 1619 during a plague outbreak. That the baby girl survived for a few weeks is evident from her red cap and being dressed in a red gown, the colour matching Christ's robe. Further meaning in the choice of red is found in its being symbolic of the resurrection. This meaning corresponds with the painting by an unknown Netherlandish artist of the two month old Cornelia Burch who is wearing ornate red sleeves. Although Cornelia's eyes are open, she is, like Dorothea's child, dead. Thus, it appears that red was a colour favoured in representations of little ones who had died.

Ole Worm's much-loved wife fell victim to another plague outbreak in 1628, leaving him with three daughters aged under twelve, Inger, Søster and another who is unnamed.

Two years later in 1630 Ole Worm married Susanne Medelfar (1613-1637), whose father was Bishop of Lund. All of the couple's first three children died; they do not appear on the family tree and their names are unknown, although a girl and boy did die of smallpox. The portrait shows Susanne holding a very small, rather floppy child, who is presumed to represent the other little girl. The fact that she is naked, except for a loose cloth, suggests that she did not survive long enough even to be clothed. Susanne and Ole Worm eventually had two sons who reached adulthood; they were Willum and Matthias, born in 1633 and 1636 respectively. Approximately sixteen months later following a brief and unexpected illness Susanne died, to be mourned by Ole Worm, his three daughters from his first marriage, and Willum and Matthias.

In the family portrait, Ole Worm's third wife Magdalene Motzfeldt (1617-1691) is positioned to the right of Dorothea and Susanne. In comparison with the two dead wives she appears robust, even slightly self-satisfied. Their firstborn child was Peter, who lived for ten months. The death of little Peter is recorded by Hovesen (1987 p271) as having been particularly upsetting for Ole Worm, as he wondered whether his grief had affected his mind. His previous losses had clearly not prepared Ole Worm to cope with the death of this toddler. It is uncertain whether Peter features in the family portrait. Magdalene's left hand sits on the shoulder of a long-haired child, who may be a boy, but this may be Johan who (according to the family tree) was Ole Worm's last child, born in 1652. In 1644 the wayward (see above) Dorothea was born and was followed by Marie and Susanne in 1649. Being born in the same year these may be the twins represented by two identically clad little girls in the front row of the portrait (4th and 5th from R). After the birth of Johan the couple's fertility may have been checked by pressures of work and family, by Magdalene's advancing years and by Ole Worm's deteriorating health.

The final four individuals on the back row are Ole Worm's surviving daughters by his first wife Dorothea and their husbands. First are Inger (1621-1677) and Jens Schjelderup, who later

became bishop of Bergen, and who were married in 1639. The younger daughter, Søster (1623-1685), and her husband Erik Torn were married in 1640.

The front two rows comprise the children of Ole Worm and his three wives and of his two daughters. The identification of these children is less straightforward than identifying the adults, and is unnecessary for this paper. Unlike the painting, which addresses both spousal and parental grief, in this paper we seek to focus more on the former than the latter.

The words

The painting's inscriptions assist understanding of its meaning. First, the words and dates above the adults help to identify the senior family members.

Second, bottom left, on a stone among folds of the Christ figure's robe, is the reference: 'Matthew 19 verse 14'. This demonstrates the significance of children to the Christian religion:

13 Then were there brought to him little children ... the disciples rebuked them.

14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

This quotation suggests that this portrait celebrates Ole Worm's large family and even encourages others to do likewise. Inscriptions such as this reflect the common belief of parents that their duty was to raise children to be God-fearing (Bedaux & Ekkart, 2000). Additionally, the not uncommon inclusion of dead children in such paintings gave consolation to parents, who could find reassurance that their children were safe with God.

The third, even more obscure, inscription is written in Latin set among rocks to the left of the painting.

[?G]ravidas Worm Salu[]

hac cerne tabula

Ingenii Sobulem si velis

orbis habet'

Th. Barth .D.

This paean of praise for the distinguished patriarch of the abundant family is particularly meaningful. It reflects admiration for large families, to increase the number of godly. At the foot of this inscription is the name of Thomas Bartholin, the even more eminent polymath who commissioned this portrait (1616-1680). He was the son of Caspar Bartholin (1585-1629), the husband of Anna Fincke, sister of Dorothea, Ole Worm's first wife and Worm's brother in law. When Caspar Bartholin died prematurely, leaving thirteen year old Thomas, his uncle Ole 'adopted' him, overseeing his education and 'mentoring' the youngster's progress through Copenhagen's medical hierarchy (Porter 1963). Thus, this portrait appears to praise the man who was, effectively,

a father to Thomas Bartholin. Thus, this painting becomes a memorial to Ole Worm (Wheaton, 1988). This inscription is the portrait's only evidence of the renowned Thomas Bartholin.

This family portrait symbolises, first, a celebration of the accomplishments of Ole Worm, not least, his remarkable family. Paradoxically it demonstrates life's frailty and grief's proximity, featuring multiple losses in maturity, as well as infancy and childhood, even for a powerful medical dynasty.

Discussion

The Worm family portrait (1647; Figure 1) is surprising, perhaps disturbing, to twenty-first century eyes for various reasons. First, the appearance in a family picture of dead people is alien in a society where death is sanitised (Taxidou, 2004 p9) to the point of repudiation. Portraits including representations of the dead were less disconcerting in early modern times, when death was ever present (Wilson, 1993; Wheaton, 1988; Mander & Marshall, 2003).

Second, the portrayal of Ole Worm's three wives is only marginally less disquieting. Such disquiet is associated with the relative infrequency in westernised societies of the death of a spouse during the childrearing years. Thus, a partner being alone, is probably due to relationship breakdown, with varying degrees of acrimony. Any such ill-feeling is unlikely to be dissipated with a new relationship. Thus any modern picture rarely includes more than one spouse; making the Worm family portrait even more remarkable to contemporary viewers.

While Jean Wilson has documented the representation of death in childbirth in England (1993), Dorothea and Susanne died of causes unrelated to childbearing. Further, the artworks mentioned by Wilson, such as the Saltonstall Family Portrait (David des Granges, 1636-1637), feature only two wives, unlike the Worm family. Similarly, Robert Wheaton reports that Hans Holbein painted the Burgomeister Meyer's deceased first wife into his Madonna painting (1526) *following* the demise of two of their sons (1987).

The portraits featuring spouses who have died, like many early works, have been criticised for their neglect of romantic, even affectionate, expressions by Lawrence Stone (1977). Wheaton (1988) rejects Stone's assertion because his argument confuses ideology with practice. This rejection is supported by the Saltonstall Family Portrait (see above), which demonstrates a tenderness contradicting Stone's thesis. Further, it may be that the presence of Dorothea and Susanne in the Worm family portrait clearly indicates the enduring affectionate regard in which they were held.

A further, and significant, indicator of affection is found in two of Magdalene's daughters (Dorothea and Susanne) bearing the names of Ole Worm's first two wives (Figure 5). In Scotland the tradition was that first children took grandparents' and parents' names; the names of others occurred, if at all, much further down the line. By patriarchal convention, Ole Worm would have selected the names, with the significant possibility that he was

preserving the names, and affectionate memories, of his first and second wives.

The lasting nature of such affectionate feelings or 'bonds' is recognised as a contrast to the Freudian understanding of grief dominating twentieth-century western cultures (Freud, 1957). Sigmund Freud argued, psychoanalytically speaking, that grief effectively and efficiently breaks or relinquishes affectionate bonds in the survivor, when the object of affection is lost through death. The purpose of grief, he maintained, was to facilitate the surviving partner's normal functioning, which to be healthy, is independent of the one who is lost. Margaret Stroebe and her colleagues (1992) argue that the focus on the breaking of bonds may have been a twentieth century artefact, as nineteenth century poets ardently sought to recognise continuing relationships. In the view of the profoundly religious nineteenth-century culture, this loving relationship was to be resumed in the afterlife. While Stroebe and her colleagues explore grief in the nineteenth century and in non-western cultures, their consideration of spousal grief does not reach the seventeenth century, portrayed in the Worm Family Portrait.

The development and gradual acceptance of 'continuing bonds' with the deceased has moved forward since the late twentieth century (Stroebe *et al*, 2012). Particularly relevant to the Worm Family Portrait, is the study by Miriam S Moss and Sidney Z Moss (1996 p172-4) of the continuing bonds of widowhood. These researchers found that continuing affection for a deceased spouse has beneficial effects in the event of remarriage. The continuing relationship may be recognised as caring for the one who is lost, as maintaining low level intimacy, in positive family dynamics, in ongoing commitment and in lasting identity support. Moss and Moss show that, far from threatening the new relationship, such continuing affection is interpreted by the new partner as reassurance of fidelity. Thus, perhaps the potential for such reassurance was comforting to Susanne and Magdalene when they married Ole Worm; the likelihood of this potential extends the work of Moss and Moss beyond their findings as, unsurprisingly, their work only encompasses second marriages.

Further aspects of the continuation of bonds debate are illuminated by Roberta Dew Conant, who considers how images and the *sense of presence* affect grieving (1996). The benefits of imagery and sensations emerge in the survivor's adjustment to spousal loss. There is, however, no consideration by Conant of the place of artworks in this adjustment; but in spousal loss Therese Rando proposed that paintings of the deceased serve to maintain connections (1993). The 'month's mind', celebrating and possibly still marking four weeks from the death, became extinct in England in Elizabethan times, but continues to reflect continuing relationships elsewhere (Cressy, 1990). In another area, childbearing loss, images in the form of artworks and photographs have been addressed and shown to help grieving parents (Mander & Marshall, 2003).

In their research to identify the circumstances under which the continuation of bonds of affection facilitated better adaptation

to spousal loss than their relinquishment, Stroebe and colleagues sought to examine the 'expectedness' of the loss (2012). These researchers found that adaptation was most difficult for those in whom the loss was unexpected and firm bonds of affection continued. This poor outcome would have applied to Ole Worm, whose first two wives died unexpectedly, or as unexpectedly as any seventeenth-century death could be.

Conclusion

This Worm Family Portrait represents a veritable cornerstone of the Danish renaissance. The painting of Worm and his family originated as a form of propaganda to encourage a nation which, despite a domestic cultural renaissance, was experiencing waning international fortunes. First glance suggests the painting is merely a patriarch surrounded by abundant progeny.

Closer scrutiny of both the portrait and Ole Worm's family life, though, shows that he experienced many personal tragedies. Additionally, his standing as an academic and physician was eclipsed by his nephew and 'mentee', whose gratitude prompted this portrait's commissioning. The portrait's austere background represents a nationalistic view of Denmark at the time. More optimistically the doom-laden backing lightens to become brighter around the younger family.

In contrast to his sorrowful life story, while demonstrating academic prestige, this painting suggests that Ole Worm may have achieved some equanimity, if not satisfaction, through his continuing bonds with his wives who had died and their children, some of whom had also died. Thus, this early modern painting extends the visual evidence for the existence of continuing bonds back to the seventeenth century.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the help of Iain Abbot, Kasper H Andersen, Anne Chirnside, Valerie Fleming, Norman Irons, Helle Kilkenny, Jo Murphy-Lawless, Alison Nuttall, Kim Minke, Sheila Rodgers, and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for supporting publishing the portrait in colour. ■

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