



## Portrait of a Young Woman

By Selena E. Molina ©2023

### Synopsis

The subject of Italian painter Parmigianino's portrait Antea (also known as Portrait of a Young Woman) has long baffled art scholars. This historical fiction seeks to end that debate.

Antea is much more than paint on the Painter's canvas.

Young Antea is playful and innocent. Old Antea is hardened but admirable. And the Antea caught in his paint, she is the most fascinating of all. As Antea tells her tale, her past, her present, and her future weave together demonstrating the human condition—the changes and challenges we all must endure and the ingrained resentments we cannot shake.

Finally with a voice, Antea has much to say.

### Cast (FP = female presenting, MP = male presenting)

- Antea (18-25, FP)
- Young Antea (5-12, FP)
- Mother (25-40, FP, German accent)
- Father (25-40, MP, German accent)
- Old Antea (50-70, FP)
- Grandson (5-12, MP)
- Daughter in Law (25-40, FP, british accent)
- Son (25-40, MP, british accent)
- The Painter (20-35, MP, Italian accent)

### Production Plans

- Staging notes: the stage is segmented into three, one for each timeline: (1) Antea and the Painter use center stage; (2) Young Antea, Mother, and Father use stage left, and (3) Old Antea, Grandson, Daughter in Law, and Son use stage right
- Set
  - Green backdrop across entire stage matching portrait
  - Removable panels for the other timelines
    - Outdoor somewhere in Great Britain for Old Antea
    - Inside a modest soldier's house in Germany for Young Antea
  - Set pieces
    - Chair & easel with canvas for stage center
    - Bench for stage right
    - Living room chair for stage left
    - Movable living portrait pieces
- 16th Century garb (painting was created circa 1525)

*(Curtain opens on a living portrait of Antea, Calata ala Spagnola 5 (Joan Ambrosio Alza, 1508) plays for 20-30 seconds while Antea is frozen, when the music ends Antea steps out and the portrait is disbanded, she addresses the audience directly)*

**Antea:** I hear I'm quite famous. Infamous really. Although my master gave me a name, he refused to disclose my true identity. Unaided, the masses still struggle to place me, to fit me neatly in any expected role. In my memorialized state, I appear to some plain, to others extraordinary. As you well see, I don a mix of luxury and commonplace items, odd indeed. I'm told my affect seems sullen but slightly sensual. I hear the spectators ask, was I innocent, the ingenue, or a devious and sultry paramour? They wonder, was I a person dear to the artist or someone for whom he felt nothing at all? The answers will forever haunt me.

*(Young Antea runs in from stage left and hides behind the preset chair)*

**Antea:** I forget much about my youth, of the time before the Painter took so much from me. I was free then.

*(Mother enters stage left gently searching for Young Antea, with Young Antea's winter clothes in hand)*

**Antea:** *(looking lovingly at her)* And my mother. What I wouldn't give to have her wrap me in her arms one more time.

**Mother:** *(calling)* Tea?

*(Young Antea giggles)*

**Antea:** I'm right here, Mother.

**Mother:** Oh Tea, please. We must get going. There's no time today for your games.

*(Father enters stage left, both Anteas steel at the sight of him)*

**Antea:** I have no interest in seeing him. *(Exits)*

**Father:** *(coldly)* Enough.

*(Old Antea enters stage right with Grandson's hand in hers as he cries)*

**Old Antea:** You should cherish your father! He only wants what's best for you.

**Grandson:** But he never lets me play! He only cares about house work and my lessons. Oh Grandmother can't I play with you? *(He clutches as her legs and she pushes him away and sits on a nearby preset bench, he follows sheepishly)*

**Father:** Home is a place for order and obedience. No more *(with disdain)* frivolity.

**Mother:** She's only a child, dear.

**Father:** A child run amok. You shall both be outside in five minutes. That's a command. *(exits)*

*(Mother goes to comfort and prepare Young Antea for the event)*

**Old Antea:** You dry your eyes young man. And thank the heavens you never met my father. *(Coldly)* Now go inside and apologize to your father or I'll show you how stern an elder can be. That's a command.

*(Grandson exits stage right, Mother and Young Antea exit stage left)*

**Old Antea:** *(to the sky)* Oh Father, you'd be so proud. Terrifying a child, causing his tears and pain. I expect you quite enjoyed that moment. Rest assured, I did not. I do not wish to cause him pain, to be the one he fears. But I must keep him safe! This world is not like it was in your time. Dangers lurk in all corners and only through a firm hand will he survive. That is love! You acted solely on malice.

*(Mother and Father enter stage left)*

**Mother:** Why do you have to be so stern with her? She's growing more terrified of you every day.

**Father:** Gut! She needs to learn to be frightened. I am frightened! Just last week, cousin Wilhelm's little girl went missing. They think she followed a man into the woods. And across town, they found a child's body mutilated in the alleyway. I will not allow our daughter to be next. Even if I have to be the villain, even if she hates me for it. I have to keep her safe!

*(Mother and Father embrace as he holds back his emotion, lights dim as they exit)*

*(Daughter in law enters stage right, approaching Old Antea)*

**Daughter in Law:** I know you mean well but could you try, perhaps, a gentler approach?

**Old Antea:** He needs to toughen up.

**Daughter in Law:** But he's a child.

**Old Antea:** And children need to be taught. Do you have any idea how difficult it can be to build a worthwhile life? Of course you don't. You have known nothing untainted by the sheen of privilege and wealth. *(Son enters silently, unseen)* Why you ever chose to stray so far below your station to wed my son will forever baffle me. But I will not let you raise my grandson unwise to the world around him. He must be prepared!

**Son:** *(rushing to his wife's side)* Mother. Stop this at once! *(takes Daughter in Law into his arms)*

**Daughter in Law:** I'm fine. I know you think little of me. And I am wise enough to know I can never change that.

**Son:** But he is our son. We will raise him as we see fit, Mother. If you cannot stand idly by and support us, *(struggling)* then, maybe, you should find somewhere else to stay. *(Daughter in Law and Son exit)*

**Old Antea:** *(to audience)* Stand idly by? Stand idly by?! *(lights dim as she stewes in her anger)*

*(The Painter enters, guiding Antea to center stage)*

**The Painter:** I must paint you. I must memorialize everything that you are and everything that you have brought to me. *(positioning her with admiration)* The world simply must see this.

**Antea:** *(flattered)* Me? You wish to paint me? Sir, I really must complete my tasks, the madame surely will not be pleased—

**The Painter:** Never mind her. You are my muse! No more chores for you, no more housework or menial duties. You, my dear *(taking her face in his hands)* are art.

**Antea:** *(trying awkwardly to pose as models may)* Shall I... or maybe, this? Oh, I have never truly thought about how it might look to others if I... *(striking a new pose)* is this what you are wanting?

**The Painter:** *(laughs)*

**Antea:** I knew this was a mistake, please allow me to go ... *(begins to leave)*

**The Painter:** *(stopping her)* No, no, you misunderstand. Your beauty, your unique, captivating beauty comes from your idle moments. I have watched you stand idly by as you wait for us to finish our meals or call for your assistance. So pure, untainted, unbothered. You, in your idle place, that is what I wish to capture.

*(Young Antea runs in, pursued by Father, lights dim on Parm & Antea, lights up on Old Antea)*

**Father:** Halt! *(Young Antea abides)*

**Mother:** *(entering quickly)* I will calm her, dear, please go back to your work.

**Father:** *(to Mother)* This cannot continue. There is no place for such wickedness. *(to Young Antea)* Hear me clearly–

**Father & Old Antea:** Children must be idle.

**Old Antea:** But I am no child. I have paid my idle time, to Father, to the Painter. How dare my own son demand my idleness? He shall not have it. *(exits angrily)*

**Mother:** Antea, please go play. *(Father glares)* And do try to keep it down. *(Young Antea exits)* What has you so stressed my dear?

**Father:** We need to prepare her. It's almost time.

**Mother:** *(exasperated)* She's not ready, she's still too young. Dear, can she not be a child a bit longer?

**Father:** This is all for her!

**Mother:** How? How can you possibly think selling her to that household is best for her?

**Father:** I am not selling my daughter. I am protecting her! Don't you understand? Despite our victory in Italy, the Imperial Army has not been paid. They have abandoned us. This, this life that you enjoy, it cannot sustain. They will come for us. They will take everything we have.

**Mother:** Let them. Let them take it all. All but her!

**Father:** What fanciful thinking! If they take it all, we cannot provide for her. Surely you cannot want her to know such struggle. In Rome, she can pay her way through housework. And she will be protected.

**Mother:** Protected? From what?

**Father:** Can't you hear the rumblings? The Duke will soon face the consequences of his abuse. I will gather the others and ensure that he is brought to justice. But it will be a rough battle, and there will be residuals. She needs to be elsewhere until it is safe.

**Mother:** What she needs is her family.

**Father:** And she shall have it. Once this is resolved, we shall march to Rome and I will collect Antea and all the riches within her reach. We will finally have all we need, all we deserve. *(taking her hands)* She will be safe. You have my word.

**Mother:** *(reluctantly)* Is this truly the only way? *(Father nods)* Then I shall teach her all she needs to know. *(both exit stage left)*

*(lights up on Parm & Antea)*

**The Painter:** How is it that you can stay so still? So unassuming?

**Antea:** I'm told I was a rather rebellious child. But my mother taught me that it is now my place to serve, to tend to the wishes of my masters and to want for nothing.

**The Painter:** *(approaching suggestively)* Do you truly want for nothing?

**Antea:** *(flushed)* I want only to please you.

*(As The Painter reaches for Antea's face, the lights dim on them; Son enters with Daughter in Law stage right)*

**Daughter in Law:** Your mother speaks of wealth like it's an evil. But you were barely a pauper.

**Son:** We had reserves for sure. But mother rejected anything above that necessary to survive. Bankers would plead for investments, suitors would seek her favor, but she never strayed.

**Daughter in Law:** Was it because of your father? Her love for him?

**Son:** *(scoffs)* There was no love there. She gave him everything, but when the Imperial Army came, he abandoned her.

**Daughter in Law:** I thought he died in the Sack of Rome?

**Son:** That is the tale she tells. The truth is, he fled. The cowardly artist left her behind, knowing she had no one and nowhere to go.

**Daughter in Law:** Her path has been tumultuous.

**Son:** Oh, my love, I know it is irrational, but I cannot be yet another man who abandons her. I will reason with her, I swear. She will be better, you'll see. *(lights dim and they exit quietly)*

*(lights up on Parm & Antea, he is actively painting)*

**The Painter:** What about your father?

**Antea:** My father was a stern and disciplined man.

**The Painter:** Was he military?

**Antea:** Oh no, nothing more than a farmer. When he passed, my mother followed shortly after and I came here to work.

*(lights dim on Parm & Antea; Mother enters with Young Antea, stage left)*

**Mother:** You must tell them you're an orphan.

**Young Antea:** What's an orphan?

**Mother:** That means me and your father are no longer here to care for you.

**Young Antea:** *(growing emotional)* Where are you going?

**Mother:** Nowhere, my dear. But you must tell your masters that we have passed. Think of it as make believe. You can create whatever stories you'd like about us and then imagine that version of us is no longer here.

**Young Antea:** But you'll still be here, right?

**Mother:** Always. Now what stories would you like to create? How about for your father? Wouldn't it be quite fun if he was a farmer?

**Young Antea:** *(greatly amused)* A farmer!? Father could never be a father.

**Mother:** In your imagination, he can be anything.

*(Young Antea breaks into laughter and the two embrace and exit; lights up on Parm & Antea)*

**The Painter:** *(frustrated)* We've lost the light. You musn't distract me so much as I work. Then I shall never finish.

**Antea:** I am most sorry, sir.

**The Painter:** *(coldly)* We will resume tomorrow. *(exits)*

*(Antea takes a letter from her pocket, as she silently reads, Mother enters stage left, writing)*

**Mother:** My Dearest Antea - Oh how I hope this letter finds you well. I write with good news, my love. The time for us to reunite is nearing. Your father's battalion has convinced the dishonorable Duke Charles to lead them toward Rome. Your father will follow your instructions toward the greatest of riches and then he will come for you. You will finally be free of your servitude, and can return home at last. Then, finally, we will have all we need, and the three of us will be together again. I love you and I will see you soon. With Love, Your Mother.

*(Antea looks to the audience conflicted as the lights dim and she places the letter back in her pocket; Mother exits; Young Antea enters skipping)*

**Young Antea:** *(sing song)* Father was a farmer, Mother loved him so, once Father was a goner, Mother had to go *(giggles)*

**Father:** *(from off stage)* Halt's maul! *(Young Antea cowers and exits)*

*(The Painter enters and approaches Antea)*

**The Painter:** Let us try this today *(he dresses her with the ferret and earrings from the portrait)*. Yes! Yes, that's it. Bellissima! *(he begins painting)*

*(Old Antea enters stage right wearing the same earrings)*



**Old Antea:** *(to audience)* I wear these when I wish to be close to him. All those hours spent posing, I could not help but grow fond of his ways. I learned every line in his face. Every expression he could possibly make. *(The Painter acts out expressions as she speaks of them)* His wide excited eyes, his frown of distaste when his brush betrayed his purpose, his admiration that compelled him to stop in awe. How warm his stare, how fulfilling and intoxicating. It felt like... love. I'm sure now that it was love, to some extent. Sometimes he would become so moved that he would rise to kiss me. *(Parm rises and kisses Antea on the cheek, Old Antea holds her cheek feeling the memory)*. I think of those moments often. *(exits)*

*(The Painter returns to painting)*

**The Painter:** I am nearly finished now.

**Antea:** And you are satisfied?

**The Painter:** Most satisfied.

**Antea:** What shall you do then? Once you've finished?

**The Painter:** Uncle has arranged for us to paint the church of San Salvatore in Lauro. And then, well, I must turn to what moves me.

**Antea:** Your next muse?

**The Painter:** Why, yes, the work mustn't become stale. *(proudly)* It is complete. I need my sealant. *(The Painter exits)*

*(Antea pulls a letter from her pocket, Father enters as she reads silently)*

**Father:** Daughter. We are nearing Rome. We shall be there on the sixth sunrise of May. Once we have breached the walls and I have secured sufficient bounty, I will come for you as I promised your mother I would. *(Pauses with grief, then collects and delivers sternly)* I expect you to be ready. Father.

*(The Painter enters before Antea can return the letter to her pocket)*

**The Painter:** What do you have there?

**Antea:** Oh nothing *(turning away and trying to put the letter away)*

**The Painter:** Who would be writing you letters? You have no family. (*growing jealous*) Is it a man? Have you been giving yourself to another man while I allow you to lay in my bed?! (*moving toward her aggressively*)

**Antea:** Of course not. It is but a scrap of parchment. Please.

(*The Painter rips the letter from her hands and reads it, furious*)

**The Painter:** What is this? You are no orphan! You are... your father is... a German? An Imperial soldier!? What treachery is this?!

**Antea:** Please, I never meant to hurt you. And my father surely never would.

**The Painter:** The Imperial troops care for no one. If they are truly coming to Rome, they are coming to pillage and slaughter!

**Antea:** They are not! They are coming for what we are owed. For the riches that your kin horde and lord over the rest of us. (*light dims as they continue silent argument*)

(*Old Antea enters with Son stage right*)

**Old Antea:** She thinks her wealth grants her some privilege, to live a life of leisure. She does not know of hard work or struggle. Yet she pities us! Can't you see that she thinks we are beneath her?

**Son:** She certainly does not. She is my wife and the mother of my son. You cannot continue to speak of her that way, Mother. I will not allow it.

**Old Antea:** Allow it? When did you start speaking to your mother that way?

**Son:** I am the man of the house now, Mother. If you are to stay in my home you must abide.

(*Old Antea and Son sit together on the bench, lights up on Parm & Antea*)

**The Painter:** For the entirety, you were nothing more than a covert enemy, plotting against our solitude. Lying with every breath!

**Antea:** It was not all lies. Every moment with us was true. I love you!

**The Painter:** Love? (*scoffs*) You forget your place. This (*displays painting*), this is the only value you held. And now it's mine. You are nothing. (*exits, Antea crumbles as light fades around her, lights up on Old Antea and Son*).

**Son:** Mother, please. You know I love you. And I want you in our life. But my wife and my son must come first. Can you not understand that?

**Mother:** (*after a moment of deliberation*) Of course, son. You are a good man and I know you will live your oath, as good men do. (*Sighing*) She is far from what I would have picked for you... (*son grimaces*) But that is the last I will say about it. You have my word.

**Son:** (*relieved*) Come, let us go back inside.

**Mother:** I will be right there.

(*Son exits, Young Antea enters, packed bag in hand*)

**Mother:** (*from offstage*) Come, Antea, it's time to go.

**Young Antea:** (*shouting off stage*) Coming! (*to audience*) Hi, I'm Antea. I have the most wonderful mother in the world.

**Father:** (*from offstage*) Schnell!

**Young Antea:** That's my father, bleh! I'm a lady now, so my parents say it is time for me to work. I am off to Rome, where I will take care of a house for artists. (*dreamily*) There, I can play make believe and pretend my father was a farmer (*giggles*). I'll remember my mother as she is. She is already perfect. I will miss her the most. (*exits excitedly; lights out on stage left, panel removed*)

**Son:** (*from offstage*) Mother?

**Old Antea:** I'll be right there. (*to audience*) That's my son. He has grown into an admirable man. Firm, yet kind. Confident, yet self-aware. Sometimes I see so clearly his father's determination running through him. But he will do better. He must.

**Grandson:** (*from offstage*) Grandmother, will you come play?

**Old Antea:** (*unintentionally harsh*) In a minute. (*checking herself, adding kindly*) Dear. (*to audience*) That's my grandson. He has the most wild spirit. My mother used to say the same

about me. Somewhere along the way, though, I changed. I had to. I cannot imagine what would have become of me, of us, if I did not... But my son is right, I've gone too far with my austerity. My father's coldness ran through me, a dormant genetic defect, no doubt. I will be better. Like my mother. Coming dear! (*exits gleefully; lights out on stage right, panel removed*)

**Antea:** (*from the ground, rising naturally as she speaks*) No one called for me. The Painter walked out that door and fled from the war without a second thought. I waited for my father, broken and incomplete. Eventually, I found his body pierced by the sword of a Swiss Guard. For a moment, I almost felt... but then I saw his expression. Even in death, he reeked of contempt. For me, for this world. That was my father. Do you want to know how he told me of my mother's passing? (*pulls note from her pocket, Father enters devastated, having difficulty writing, Antea reads coldly*) "Your Mother is dead." (*Father exits*) That's it, that's all he wrote. I wanted to stomp on his body, punish him for the life he brought me. But I know it would have pained my mother. I paid my respects and then, I gathered all I could and fled for a new life, (*holding her stomach*) for us. As for the other me, the young, innocent parts of me, they remain captured, caught, in his paint, suffocated by his sealant. That part of me shall live forever in his work. (*Calata ala Spagnola 5 (Joan Ambrosio Alza, 1508) begins to play softly but increasing in volume, stage pieces move around her as she speaks, making her into a living portrait again*). He called it "Antea: Portrait of a Young Woman." (*after a few moments frozen, lights out and curtain closes*)

**THE END**