

‘Toward ornamenting or teaching the *istoria*’: Sir Joshua Reynolds and Narrative Portraiture

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Sir Joshua Reynolds, student of the renaissance masters and inheritor of the neo-classical tradition in art, subscribed to the view outlined by Jonathan Richardson in his *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715),¹ which placed history painting at the pinnacle, and considered portrait painting a less exalted endeavour. Not only did Reynolds subscribe to this traditional hierarchy, he actively perpetuated it in his lectures to students of the Academy.² It has puzzled generations of critics that in spite of his avowed agreement with the status he accorded history painting, Reynolds himself predominantly painted portraits. Some have seen a kind of hypocrisy at work: Reynolds attempting to persuade the students to pursue the ideal of creating a School of British History Painting for little financial reward, while he cornered the lucrative portrait market. Others have seen his choice as a pragmatic acceptance of the preferences of the boorish art-buying patrons for portraits of themselves, their families, and sometimes their animals and even their houses. Yet another view sees Reynolds recognising his own capabilities and limitations—he clearly had a facility for portrait painting, whereas his (few) attempts at historical subjects have not found many admirers (though Catherine the Great was one).

There is, however, another possibility which can be discerned in Reynolds’s writings, and that is that he was trying to raise portraiture to a higher level on the scale of value. In this paper I will discuss some of Reynolds’s portraits in the light of these writings, to see if, together, they provide evidence of such a project.

From Reynolds’s large output of portraits, examples may be drawn from three groups—portraits of actors, allegorical portraits and portraits of public figures. The portrait of *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* 1784 (Fig. 1) is one which might be interpreted as entirely passive. It belongs to the renaissance tradition of equating human attitudes with emotional or intellectual qualities—the particular quality in this case being contemplation. In this painting the gaze of the

seated actress is focused above and beyond the viewer and her expression is consistent with looking at higher, nobler things. There is some question about the true subject of the portrait: is it Mrs Siddons, or is it the Tragic Muse? It has been argued that this portrait is a more truthful representation of Mrs Siddons than was Gainsborough's fashionable portrait, because 'she was the Queen of Tragedy'.³ It is, in effect, a portrait of tragedy *and* a portrait of Mrs Siddons. Serving its double purpose, the portrait tends towards the abstract—the whole painting is heavy, it is dominated by sombre browns, 'simple or grave colours' which Reynolds claims, in Discourse 4, 'heroic subjects require',⁴ suggesting 'dignity' and 'grandeur'.⁵ The large shapes, compounding the overall unity of conception, continue the sense of abstraction, as does the swirling background where mythic figures of Pity and Terror emerge from the mass, almost becoming part of the foreground, providing a link between the unrepresentable realm of unordered imagination and the state of successful representation achieved through rhetorical means (Sir Joshua's or Mrs Siddons's performance). As part of Melpomene's *retinue/repertoire*, they mythologise the painting. The attitude of the central figure, which is borrowed from aspects of two Michelangelo paintings, gives formal weight to the composition and allows for the inclusion in the painting of the ideas and ideologies associated with the eighteenth-century interpretation of the Renaissance project. The figure has presence—weight and solidity—and the expression is serious and appropriate to her character. Yet it is as if the figure is momentarily static and empty, as if Reynolds has depicted the actress in a state of readiness to convey whatever emotion or gesture is demanded by what might next emerge from that background of chaos or imagination.

If this portrait can be said to contain narrative, it is as an implied or potential action based on the context the viewer brings to the painting—the knowledge of Mrs Siddons's profession. This knowledge is brought into imaginative conflict within the frame with the references to Renaissance models and with the allegorical nature of the composition. While Mrs Siddons is not actually doing anything here, the painting is able to suggest different possibilities for action in the roles for which she was famous. Had she been painted 'in character,' however, such potential (for action or interpretation) would not have been available, as the open-ended codes activated by the allegorical style and references to Michelangelo's sibyls would have been limited by particular reference. At its most abstract the painting could be

interpreted as showing Mrs Siddons as a role-taker or utterer of some arcane truth; at its most concrete, the painting could be regarded as the depiction of a particular woman who happened to be an actress. What I am arguing here is that Mrs Siddons is portrayed in Reynolds's painting as general rather than particular tragedy (satisfying the Aristotelian and neo-classical theories of art), yet the potential for particularised expression is inherent in the painting. As well as this, it is recognisable as a portrait of a particular individual, Sarah Siddons. The portrait is thus a 'combination of philosophical and practical interests',⁶ since it satisfies the neo-classic school of exemplary representation of universals and, at the same time, can be included in the realist tradition.⁷ The painting can be said to be combining classical allusion with contemporary subject. This allows for narrative elements like conflict or action (either intellectual or physical) within the frame or between the painting and the viewer, which is one of the criteria Reynolds stipulates for greatness in art, and conforms to his view that the 'value ... of art ... is in proportion to ... the *mental pleasure* produced by it' (my italics).⁸

If the portrait of Mrs Siddons is static, with the narrative element present, if at all, in her readiness to perform, the portrait of *Garrick Between the Muse of Comedy and the Muse of Tragedy* 1761 (Fig. 2) is dynamic as its subject implies a process: choice. The borrowed attitudes in this painting come from that staple of the history genre, the choice of Hercules.

Before discussing Reynolds's interpretation of the choice of Hercules, it will be useful to consider two other interpretations of the same scene. The first is Annibale Carracci's *The Choice of Hercules*, painted in 1595-97⁹ (Fig. 3), which has generally been credited with being Reynolds's inspiration. In this painting a seated Hercules looks directly out of the picture with a vaguely worried expression on his face. The two female figures stand on either side of him. Virtue, who faces the viewer is on his right, is standing beside or possibly slightly behind Hercules, whereas Pleasure, on his left, is standing with her back to the viewer. She could be on the edge of Hercules's vision as he looks out at the viewer. Virtue points out a steep and perilous path as the road Hercules should take. The gesture of her right hand is similar to that of Tragedy's left in Reynolds's painting, though because of the different orientation, the meaning differs. Pleasure spreads before Hercules the diversions of music and the theatre (perhaps Reynolds is making a visual pun derived from the theatrical masks in this painting) as well as her own charms, represented by her diaphanous

garments with their delicate lifting swirls. Hercules looks neither to the right nor the left. He is in the process of making his decision, which was the moral point of the painting. It has been suggested that this painting 'presents a situation, not a story',¹⁰ and it is the case that Hercules, in this painting, seems uncommitted. Virtue is closer to him than is Pleasure, and his body, with the left arm reaching across his chest, is weighted towards Virtue. However, his head inclines slightly towards the figure of Pleasure, and his left leg is lowered to the ground, perhaps indicating the first movement associated with a choice. Virtue leans slightly towards him, and Pleasure draws a little away from him in a movement suggesting an attempt to draw Hercules away from himself and, of course, away from the figure of Virtue. The seated Hercules is the pivot in the painting between the two standing women as the eye is funnelled towards the centre. Yet there is a strong diagonal line in the painting beginning at the feet of Pleasure and moving through Hercules's left foot, right knee, and finally through Virtue's hand pointing out the path she recommends. It could be said that the design, what Reynolds would call the invention, of Carracci's painting allows a story element to be present in the way the viewer is drawn through the geometry of the painting. However, the formal balance of the painting provides this upward movement as only one of the lines of focus, ensuring that Hercules himself and his moral dilemma remain at the centre of the painting.

Another interpretation of this allegorical theme which was designed specifically to allow a story element to be visible is found in a painting dating from 1711 by Paolo de Matteis (Fig. 4). This painting was executed to the prescription of the Earl of Shaftesbury, who wished to use the theme of Hercules's choice to demonstrate man's 'innate inclination to virtue'. In a treatise entitled '*A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*',¹¹ Shaftesbury considers several means by which the story of Hercules's choice between Virtue and Pleasure might be represented, listing advantages and disadvantages associated with the moment selected, the depiction of the individual figures and the relation of the figures to one another. He argues the need for the finished work to be 'a single piece, comprehended in one view and formed according to one single intelligence, meaning, or design; which constitutes a real whole, by a mutual and necessary relation of its parts, the same as of the members in a natural body'.¹² Shaftesbury lists three possible moments which might be chosen to represent the story: 'the instant the two goddesses ... accost Hercules; Or when they are entered on

their dispute; Or when their dispute is already far advanced, and Virtue seems to gain her cause'.¹³ Shaftesbury considers the latter to be the ideal because the whole drama of the situation can be contained in it. At this instant, Shaftesbury claims, Hercules 'is wrought, agitated, and torn by contrary passions. It is the last effort of the virtuous one, striving for possession over him. He agonises, and with all his strength of reason endeavours to overcome himself'. This is the only instant which, Shaftesbury feels, will 'serve to express the grand event, or consequent resolution of Hercules, and the choice he actually made of a life full of toil and hardship, under the conduct of Virtue'. Shaftesbury considers that choosing to represent a time subsequent to this moment—when Hercules has made his choice—would result in an inferior painting in terms of human drama, as 'there would be no room left to represent his agony, or inward conflict, which indeed makes the principal action here ... Nor would there be any more room left in this case, either for the persuasive rhetoric of Virtue ... or for the insinuating address of Pleasure'.¹⁴ Having once chosen the moment to be represented, Shaftesbury contends, the painter (like Hercules, perhaps) is committed to that moment only and cannot introduce (pictorially) incidents which occur before or after the event as this would imply repetition of the subject in different attitudes in the same picture which would not be consistent with his own definition, given earlier, of a history painting. Such repetition of subject would not necessarily have had presented a problem for Medieval artists, for example. Shaftesbury, however, derives his definition of history painting from the move towards a more realistic representation which was part of the development in art theory and practice in the Renaissance.¹⁵

In Paolo de Matteis's representation of Shaftesbury's conception, Hercules's body inclines slightly towards Vice, or Pleasure, but this is because his attention (physical and moral) is focussed on Virtue. This pictorialises Shaftesbury's desire to demonstrate precisely which 'moment should be represented to give the image the greatest moral force'. Shaftesbury argued that though a painting is able to depict only one particular moment, by careful choice that moment is able to 'portray change', and by showing 'the mind moving ahead of the body [may] exhibit past and future'.¹⁶ The point which this painting has chosen to depict, according to Shaftesbury's wish, is that moment when Hercules has begun to favour Virtue. The painting therefore includes the process of his choice even though that cannot, physically, be part of the painting, and it suggests a future in the path that Virtue

points out. Though there is no suggestion of physical movement in the figure of Hercules, the serious attention he gives to Virtue is designed to transmit his considered opinion of the arguments put forward by both Goddesses.

Reynolds would go much further along the road of narrative in his depiction of Garrick's hesitation between Comedy and Tragedy.¹⁷ His decision to allude to the traditional subject of Hercules choosing between Virtue and Pleasure does not mean that he is suggesting a simple equation of Tragedy with Virtue and Comedy with Pleasure or Vice. However, the relative value of high and low art is suggested by means of his allusion. Ellis Waterhouse claims that the subject also alludes to Reynolds's own 'choice' between intellectual high art, or history painting in the classical style, and the more immediately sensual decorative style influenced by Rubens and the Venetian school. Reynolds's choice was, he writes, 'between the more or less intimate portrait, of which he was a master, and the heroic portrait, with which he was beginning to experiment as early as 1760'.¹⁸

In this Reynolds painting there is once again conflict between movement and stasis. The figure of Tragedy, dependent on the firmness of straight lines, alludes to Guido Reni, while that of Comedy derives from Correggio and imitates Hogarth's sinuous line of beauty. Movement inheres in the implied action of the figures. Two of them are apparently leaving the scene, while Tragedy puts a restraining hand on Garrick's arm, admonishing his frivolity and recalling him to the higher passions. In this parody of the Hercules theme,¹⁹ the choice has certainly already been made. Garrick, with eyes still sparkling and face wearing the traces of jest, half turns towards Tragedy and appears to offer his excuses, while continuing the movement of his compliance with Comedy. The background of the painting also reflects the conflict between action and stasis, with a particularised landscape being associated with the active Comedy and a non-representational background (similar to that later employed in the portrait of Mrs Siddons) dominating the static half of the painting.

Garrick's expression in this painting, with the shrug of the shoulders, and 'what can I do' contained within face and hands, indicates that *his* choice has been made. It explains but does not apologise for his dereliction,²⁰ and expresses confidence that Tragedy will not desert him.²¹ The 'John the Baptist' gesture of Tragedy's left hand suggests a kind of equation with the gesture of Virtue in traditional paintings of the subject, yet there is a significant difference.

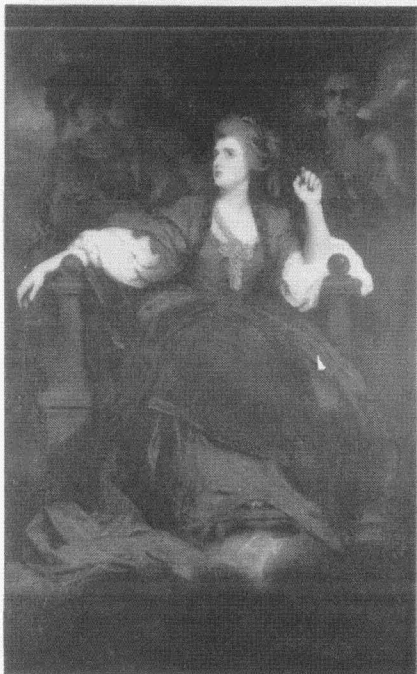


Fig. 1.
Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, 1784. The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino.

Fig. 2.
Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Garrick Between the Muse of Comedy and the Muse of Tragedy*, 1762. Private Collection, London. By permission of E.T. Archive, London.



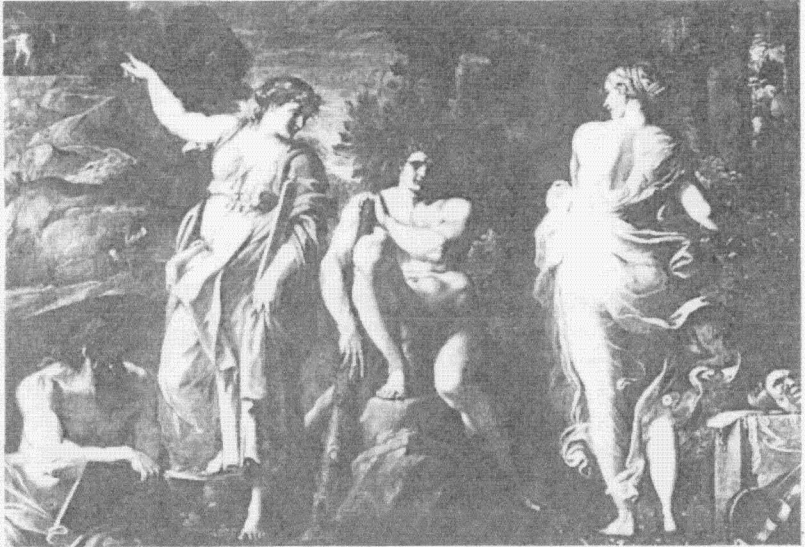


Fig. 3. Annibale Carracci. *The Choice of Hercules*, 1595–7. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.



Fig. 4. Paolo de Matteis, *The Choice of Hercules*, 1711. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

No longer is the gesture pointing out a particular path for the hero to follow—it has a more abstract sense. The gesture refers to both Tragedy and Garrick, for while giving Tragedy authority and dignity, it also suggests a proclamation—‘Behold!’ It thus suggests not only the ‘high’ style of tragedy and the authority of the tragic figure in the theatre, but also Garrick’s supremacy in his art. In this painting Reynolds has combined the comic and the heroic (a practice he commended in Shakespeare, and one which his choice of subject makes relevant, as Garrick was thought to be equally gifted in both comedy and tragedy). He has also imitated the gestures of the masters, using an allusive technique which allowed for immediate recognition of ‘story’ elements in his paintings. In addition to allusion in the gestures and overall composition of this painting there is a strong suggestion of parody indicating a playfulness not usually associated with Reynolds’s works. As well as acknowledging a master in his profession, then, the representation of Garrick also provides us with the, perhaps less heroic, aspirations of the man. The painting, instead of focussing on the contemplation of the choice before him, takes as its subject the action which is the result of a choice having been made. But without the allusions to the traditions and subjects of the past, the painting could contain action but no story; it could be a conversation piece but not a history painting.

By choosing actors as the subjects of these paintings, Reynolds has allowed for a whole range of potential (surplus) context with which these paintings interact—knowledge of roles for which these actors are famous, the particular schools of acting which have their allegiance, the relationship of the actor to the medium and to the public. Sitters who do not bring with them such contexts may, nonetheless, through Reynolds’s habitual borrowings of gestures from well-known masters, still suggest narrative or dramatic action. Group and allegorical paintings allow for the kind of interactive representation which Reynolds favoured. Reynolds’s portrait of *The Marlborough Family* 1776/7,²² for example, ranges through a number of traditional approaches to portraiture within the one painting. To the left the seated patriarch and his son provide the sense of the formal portrait representing status and lineage. Yet the rhythm of movement in the painting which closely aligns the arms of the Duke and Duchess draws the eye to her dominant position in the frame and the family grouping as she stands, protectively, behind her children. She holds all together in an embrace, but the direction of her gaze brings us to the active right hand side of the painting, where individuals interact

with one another and even with the painter, perhaps, and the viewer. It is a portrait of a family, but not a portrait that has been posed with a stiff sense of showing how serious and important the family is. Rather, the portrait shows them as a family, with all that implies of social interaction. *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen*, (*The Montgomery Sisters*)²³ 1774 belongs with a number of portraits of society women who are placed in an allegorical relationship with the viewer through the classical allusions of subject as well as pose. This painting alludes to the three graces but also, because of the private story of each of the sitters, represents a narrative sequence moving from maid to matron. The youngest sister on the left is unmarried, the middle figure is betrothed and the figure on the right has recently married. So, as well as the narrative implied by the rhythm of the painting, which is the action in which they are engaged, there is a narrative of related personal and social significance. This reading of the painting gains support when we become aware that the painting was commissioned by the future husband of the middle sister. In this reading the iconographic practice of the medieval painters of religious art is echoed as the figures can be interpreted to represent an individual's journey from unmarried to married state. The individuals of the paintings are the Montgomery sisters as individuals, but they are also representations of general ideas. The references to antiquity seen in style, setting and drapery, as well as the narrative it alludes to, allow the painting to speak for more than the individuals whose likenesses are depicted. The 'doubleness' which is inherent in Reynolds's treatment of the theme of this painting is consistent with his belief that a painter should strive to do two things at once. In complying with the requirement that 'events must be susceptible to a double ordering', this portrait satisfies Wendy Steiner's definition of narrative painting.²⁴

These portraits painted by Reynolds can be said to be more natural than many of the stiff, formal portraits produced around this period. The implied action is appropriate to the characters represented and the naturalism thus achieved is not to be mistaken for that which grew out of (or exploded from) the cult of the unconscious artist. Reynolds was opposed to a view of art in which the representation could be taken for the reality. He was not one of those who thought that art should deceive the eye. His dismissive comments about the kind of art that attempts to be taken for the object it is representing testifies to that.²⁵ For Reynolds art was much more than representation, as he firmly held that it should have an intellectual dimension.

This dimension was not only the responsibility of the painter, either, as his work attempts to engage the 'reader' in a dialogue with the work as a whole and with the artistry that has put it together.²⁶ The allusions to 'old masters' contained in particular gestures, formal placement of the subject, colouring, drapery or setting (what Horace Walpole called 'wit'), all provide points of intellectual engagement, as does the characterisation of his sitters. Reynolds uses imitation of gestures or poses from classical artists as a way to generate imagination. Even though Reynolds wanted to maintain distance between canvas and viewer—in the sense I have been suggesting of the technique and ideas being part of the subject of the painting, or of its readable context—he can be described as having attempted more naturalistic portraiture than some of his contemporaries and immediate forebears in the English portrait tradition.

If we consider Reynolds's *Commodore August Keppel* c.1752-53 in comparison with Allan Ramsay's *Norman, Twenty-second Chief of Macleod* 1748,²⁷ Reynolds's more naturalistic treatment of Keppel can be seen, as can his attempt to contain something more than simply representation of person or character in his painting. (Comparisons have frequently been made between these two paintings, in part because both painters consciously adopted the Apollo Belvedere pose for their subjects.)²⁸ The obvious symbolic treatment of Macleod is not so immediately apparent in the Keppel, though he is being treated symbolically. Macleod's features resemble the modelling of a marble bust, as do the fingers of his exquisite hand in the classic pose. The Macleod portrait, with an aura around the figure generated by the silhouette and the subject's solid calm confidence in his landscape, suggests the natural dignity and right of the Chief. The dignity of the classical modes combined with Macleod's tartan more than hint at the power inherent in tradition—both artistic tradition and the social/cultural tradition confirm Macleod's right to dominion.²⁹ In the Keppel portrait, however, we see that the 'magisterial' gesture of the right hand has been altered very slightly but significantly, and that the qualities of personal assertion and control are expressed in a different, more active manner. Keppel's gesture and gaze suggest the direction of action (as in the direction of a play) and brings into active consideration matter which has not been included figurally in the painting—which is outside the frame and is therefore available to the imagination of the viewer.

Keppel, in contrast, is a man of action, a leader, a man who can coordinate and direct the actions of others in a crisis. Keppel's grooming is 'unrealistic' in the circumstances (the painting depicts Keppel coming ashore after the wreck of the *Maidstone*), but is representative of those qualities of leadership we would hope to find in someone in his position. The stasis inherent in Macleod's marble features and symbolic gesture is not to be found in Keppel. There is a shift from being to doing, even though the doing has not been included figurally in Reynolds's painting. Thus there is present in the painting what might be called an embryonic 'evaluative device'.³⁰ This has nothing to do with how 'good' we might think a painting may be, but is a characteristic of narrative—the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative'. This provides one way, and it seems to me a significant way, in which Reynolds's portrait of Keppel differs from Ramsay's portrait of Macleod. Though the gaze in both paintings is similar, Reynolds turns Keppel's face further towards the profile, that is, further away from the viewer of the painting and toward the point of his interest which is the implied viewer(s) who are his shipwrecked sailors. The changed position of the hand indicates a gesture of particular and immediate significance rather than of general qualities. Though the configuration of the figures is similar, Reynolds reduces the sense of silhouette so that Keppel is more closely engaged within the landscape. Macleod represents his landscape in so far as it *is* his, it is an extension of himself. The landscape in the Keppel painting is the space within which Keppel's significant action takes place. Though Ramsay may have already used the technique of allusion to classical models, Reynolds has used it here in a different way, one which demonstrated Keppel's personal as well as his public qualities.³¹ This portrait of Keppel could also be compared with those portraits which inserted tools of trade to contextualise the character—in such a portrait we could expect, in Keppel's case, to have him handling a sextant, say. Reynolds did paint portraits such as these, and I am not suggesting that all of his portraits contain narrative. His portrait of Keppel stepping ashore after the wreck of the *Maidstone*, however, contains within it an event, a response to that event and a representation of character as well as person (or appearance). This conjunction has been observed by Matthew Novak, who says that 'much of Reynolds's work is distinguished by an air of suggested, but not intrusive, movement. His figures either seem about to move or to have just come to rest, and he carefully avoids the stop-camera technique of

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frozen or posed activity'.³² The suggested movement Novak refers to implies in its turn a narrative which gives the figure greater meaning than simple representation of appearance.

Alberti's comments on the pictorial commentator may be significant for Reynolds's development of the narrative portrait, or history portrait. In Alberti's terms this is the figure

who admonishes and points out to us what is happening; or beckons with his hand to see; ... or shows some marvellous thing there; or invites us to weep or laugh together with them. Thus whatever the painted persons do among themselves or with the beholder, all is pointed toward ornamenting or teaching the *istoria*.³³

Thus the suggested movement or gesture of the pictorial commentator (in this case Keppel) demonstrates the way Reynolds's work is associated with his aspiration to history painting. His achievement in the Keppel portrait, Waterhouse speculates, chased Ramsay to Italy in order to imbibe from Reynolds's classical sources the lessons he had learned.³⁴

It is in Discourse 4 that Reynolds devotes most space to a discussion of his ideas about the nature of history painting and portraiture: the styles appropriate to each, and how far one can encroach on the other. He feels that the Dutch school has demeaned the nature of history painting by introducing the local and particular to an excessive degree. 'The painters of the Dutch school', he says,

have still more locality [than the Venetians]. With them, a history-piece is properly a portrait of themselves; whether they describe the inside or outside of their houses, we have their own people engaged in their own peculiar occupations; working or drinking, playing or fighting. The circumstances that enter into a picture of this kind, are so far from giving a general view of human life, that they exhibit all the minute particularities of a nation differing in several respects from the rest of mankind.³⁵

This is not meant as a blanket criticism of the Dutch style, as Reynolds says further that such paintings are 'excellent in their own way; they are only ridiculous when they attempt general history on their own narrow principles and debase great events by the meanness of their characters'. This alerts us to a problem (in Reynolds's own terms) inherent in his own artistic endeavours. How far can Reynolds be justified in generalising (or allegorising) his portraits before he has crossed the boundaries of his own theorising and becomes, himself, ridiculous? Later in the same discourse he tackles this question, noting the dangers that lie in wait for the portrait painter who attempts history, for,

unless he is upon his guard, [he] is likely to enter too much into the detail. He too frequently makes his historical heads look like portraits; and this was once the custom amongst those old painters, who revived the art before general ideas were practised or understood. An History-painter paints man in general; a Portrait-painter, a particular man, and consequently a defective model.³⁶

Reynolds's own portraits then must be answerable to his quite categorical proscription as set out here. Keppel, for example, is 'a particular man, and consequently a defective model'. Can he—does he—in addition, satisfy the necessary function of being 'man in general?' As Reynolds criticises the combining of the 'grand' style with the 'ornamental' style, arguing that the resulting composite style diminishes both, should his apparently composite practice of combining the style of history painting with portraiture be indicted by his own words? He sees the problem he has raised and attempts to provide a way out by asserting that though

the great style is always more or less contaminated by any meaner mixture ... it happens in a few instances, that the lower may be improved by borrowing from the grand. Thus if a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject, he has no other means than by approaching it to a general idea. He leaves out all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face, and changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent, which has annexed to it no ideas of meanness from its being familiar to us. But if an exact resemblance of an individual be considered as the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait-painter will be apt to lose more than he gains by the acquired dignity taken from general nature.³⁷

Reynolds attempts this 'improvement' of his portraits in his tendency towards abstraction and by making references to the paintings of antiquity in his representation of dress and setting—particularly in the 'allegorical' portraits, where flowing, Grecian-style garments are depicted, as are backgrounds which have nothing (or little) to do with the contemporary world of the sitters. Even in the portraits of Mrs Siddons and Keppel, the particularities of their dress have been minimised and their facial features, while recognisably representing those persons, have also been given a decidedly 'general' air. In addition, the sitters in such portraits do not engage directly with the viewer. They are engaged in contemplating or acting within a context which places the viewer at a distance and insists that the context be an integral and important part of the composition.

In Discourse 5, delivered to the Academy the following year, Reynolds returns again, briefly, to the question of how far the portrait painter may adopt the grand, or historical, style, and his expansion on

the subject suggests its significance to his own work and in a way accounts for those deviations from the reality of the particular in his own works, of the kind noted above. He attempts to define how the conjoining of the two styles can successfully occur, arguing that the 'lesser' style must remain subordinate, and proportionate to the 'grand' style. 'When a portrait is painted in the Historical Style', he says,

as it is neither an exact minute representation of an individual, nor completely ideal, every circumstance ought to correspond to this mixture. The simplicity of the antique air and attitude, however much to be admired, is ridiculous when joined to a figure in a modern dress. It is not to my purpose to enter into the question at present, whether this mixed style ought to be adopted or not; yet if it is chosen 'tis necessary it should be complete and all of a piece: the difference of stuffs, for instance, which make the cloathing, should be distinguished in the same degree as the head deviates from a general idea. Without this union, which I have so often recommended, a work can have no marked and determined character, which is the peculiar and constant evidence of genius. But when this is accomplished to a high degree, it becomes in some sort a rival to that style which we have fixed as the highest.³⁸

The discussion here relates to the styles of painters like Rubens, Salvator Rosa, and 'all those Artists who are at the head of a class, and have had a school of imitators from Michael Angelo down to Watteau', and no doubt we can include Reynolds himself in this group. His struggle with the concepts which relate to the mixed style are exploratory, tentative, yet tenaciously held and argued with a degree of personal conviction. This does not mean that Reynolds has defined and satisfactorily answered, even for himself, the extent to which a painter may adopt the composite style while still treading that fine line between acknowledgment and subversion of its parent styles, which would allow the new style so created an authority, gained from its progenitors, and a new dynamism, achieved by crossing boundaries.

Reynolds's learning and his arguments in support of the composite or mixed style, however, did not come solely from Italy or the artistic tradition. He argued that the artist should have social skills, should read widely among the poets of his day and, most importantly, should expand his mind. As he was for Garrick, Shakespeare was also one of Reynolds's most studied authors.³⁹ Reynolds goes to Shakespeare to understand the delineation of native English character. More than this, he studies in Shakespeare an independent concept of artistic decorum. This study helps Reynolds to his conclusion that art came before rules; rules necessarily follow art and should not dare prescribe

to it. 'Works precede criticism' he says in his notes for an essay on Shakespeare, and follows this with an explanation of why this is the case:

... few writers are capable of writing both comedy and tragedy. Being thus from accident or incapacity separate, the succeeding critics think they ought to be separate, and much good sense and reason may be brought forward to show the propriety of this separation, in which argument reason alone, not the passions, are consulted. Every man acquiesces to those reasons, and the rule is established. But if there should arise a genius of such magnitude and comprehension equal at least to any of those great men who first suggested to the critics this idea of separating comedy and tragedy, who is equally capable of carrying both to their highest excellence, who could have no prejudice in favour of rules which he never knew, but whose sagacity and general knowledge of human nature served in their stead, and who from the circumstance of his life had been always to the theatre and from his great sagacity knew the art of captivating the audience, drew his rules therefore from nature herself and not at second hand, it may be a question worthy the consideration of critics whether this civilised age does not demand a new code of laws and a thorough examination of those principles on which the contrary practice is founded.⁴⁰

Reynolds says further that Shakespeare, though full of anachronisms and other blemishes, is valuable 'because his mind is intent upon the general effect',⁴¹ and that his success equally depends on his recognition that variety delights an audience. These are two qualities Reynolds values, particularly if they occur in conjunction.

This view of the double nature of the artistic pursuit is expressed in his notes to Shakespeare, where he responds philosophically to the way Shakespeare has constructed his plays, the theory of art which Shakespeare's methodology implies, and its relationship to other theories of art. Reynolds says that:

The mind appears to me of that nature and construction that it requires being employed on two things in order that it may do one thing well. . . . This double operation, what it has been so long accustomed to, begins at last to be a thing necessary, and required even, in affairs where a man would wish the whole powers of his mind to concentrate.⁴²

The idea that Reynolds is proposing here is used as a justification for Shakespeare's practice of interspersing his tragedies with scenes of comedy and with comic characters. It might equally well explain his own practice in works such as the Keppel portrait, where both being and acting are given expression. Reynolds is not prepared to allow as great art those paintings which do not leave space for such doubleness of reader response.

Has Reynolds then, like Shakespeare, created a new genre, one that should not be judged by the rules that have been derived from and applied to other kinds of painting? Robert Moore, in his study of characterisation in Reynolds's portraits, is 'concerned with those paintings suggesting some element of drama, which usually show [Reynolds] at his best'.⁴³ Such paintings not only show him at his best, they are part of his project, carried out simultaneously in his painting and his *Discourses*, to develop a School of English Art, with Shakespeare as its patron, which would be a mixed genre, valuing equally character (the usual preserve of portraiture) and action (the preserve of history). In this interpretation of Reynolds's theory and practice, his work represents not so much a choice between comedy and tragedy—between history painting and portraiture—but the creation of a framework within which both can thrive, informing and qualifying one another.

Notes

- 1 This work of Richardson, according to Boswell, was read by Reynolds as a youth and influenced him to take up art. Samuel Johnson suggests, however, that Richardson's *Two Discourses on the Art of Criticism, as it Relates to Painting* (1719) provided Reynolds's inspiration. See Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses*, ed. Pat Rogers, Harmondsworth, 1992, pp.13–14.
- 2 These lectures were edited by Reynolds's friend Edmond Malone. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Works*, ed. Edmond Malone (1797) 2 vols., Hildesheim and New York, 1971.
- 3 Robert E. Moore, 'Reynolds and the Art of Characterisation', in Howard Anderson and John S. Shea, eds, *Studies in Criticism and Aesthetics, 1660-1800*, Minneapolis, 1967, p.337.
- 4 Rogers, ed. pp.121–2, esp. p.126.
- 5 These words were also used by Reynolds in referring to theatrical representation of nature: 'Theatrical representation ... has its mode of imitating nature. The best acted scene, the most pathetic and what we call the most natural, will be found on examination very affected, and is really very different from a similar scene in real life ... If the mind expands with the grandeur of [the] effect, the great end is answered, and the criticism of naturalness is to be despised'. *Portraits*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles, London, 1952, p.157.
- 6 Moore, p.339.
- 7 The difference between Reynolds and other portrait painters of the period is summed up by his pupil, Northcote, in a comparison with Sir Thomas Lawrence, 'whose pictures', Northcote says, 'were mirrors for personal vanity, to contemplate oneself in ... it was a mistake to suppose they would interest any one else or were addressed to the world at large. They were private, not public property'. In Moore, p.339.
- 8 Discourse 4. Rogers, ed. p.116.

- 9 A reproduction of this work may be found in Norbert Lynton, Alistair Smith, Robert Cumming and Diané Collinson, eds, *Looking into Paintings*, London, 1985, p.63.
- 10 Lynton, *et al.*, p.63.
- 11 Shaftesbury, *Second Characters or the Language of Forms* (1712), New York, 1969, pp.30–61.
- 12 Shaftesbury, p.32. This is Shaftesbury's definition of Tablature.
- 13 Shaftesbury, p.34.
- 14 Shaftesbury, p.35.
- 15 Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance: Form against Context in Painting and Literature*, Chicago and London, 1988, p.2.
- 16 Lynton, *et al.*, p.64.
- 17 David Mannings, 'Reynolds, Garrick, and the Choice of Hercules', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17 (Spring 1984): 259–283, sees Shaftesbury's treatise of 1712 on the subject of the Judgment of Hercules as a literary source for Reynolds's conception in this painting. Following Shaftesbury, Mannings sees the Hercules subject as the process of Education rather than Choice and therefore interprets the painting as charting the actor's education. Presumably this means giving up his predilection for comedy to follow the higher calling recommended to him by tragedy. Shaftesbury allows that there should be a sense of the attraction to the lesser—even a possibility that Hercules would travel that self-indulgent road—in the moment depicted by the painting, a sense that pleasure should have had her say, that Hercules should be silent and Virtue be in full flight. The third stage of the action is the point when 'VIRTUE seems to gain her Cause', and Hercules is shown 'wrought, agitated, and torn by contrary Passions' (pp. 263–264). Mannings argues some close parallels with Shaftesbury's outline before noting some differences. But even in the similarities he notes there is a striking ambivalence (at least, if not outright contradiction, to Shaftesbury's scenario) in the attitude of Garrick. Mannings's argument for Shaftesbury's influence seems to depend on the fact that Garrick is looking at the goddess representing virtue—as Shaftesbury suggests—whereas in most classical depictions of the 'Choice' Hercules looks at neither. However, it seems to me that in looking at Tragedy/Virtue, rather than looking at the goddess he has chosen, Garrick looks at the goddess he has (temporarily) deserted. One reason for the ambivalence in the painting is that Garrick courted both by playing both comedy and tragedy, and it is perhaps unfair both to him and to Reynolds's painting to overload it with moral imperatives derived from the classical references Reynolds has included in his painting. While the moral implications are there, and while they are relevant to the painting, they could be seen to add to the aspect of burlesque (which Walpole saw in the painting of Garrick's facial expression) by having attitudes traditionally associated with high epic employed in what it might almost be possible to call 'low-life genre'. The ambivalence in this painting is consistent with Reynolds's other (literary) portraits of Garrick—his two dialogues and his memoir (see Hilles, Portraits). If I argue that this painting is an attempt by Reynolds to elevate his work to History painting (as does Mannings), I also see it as a kind of parody (or mock-heroic: high treatment of low subject) with the turning upside down (or back-to-front) of Shaftesbury's visualisation, and the burlesquing of suggested accoutrements for Virtue (Virtue's sword becomes the dagger associated with the theatrical Tragedy, for example).
- 18 Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, Harmondsworth, 1978, p.225.

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

- 19 Pat Rogers in his edition of Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* suggests that 'just as the epic could only be produced in literature by now as parody (*The Dunciad*) or through transformation into modern guises (*Tom Jones*), so Reynolds was able in practice to excel in allusive recastings of the mythological (*Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy*) or visions of contemporary greatness (*Admiral Keppel*)'. Rogers, ed. pp.14–15.
- 20 One might be reminded here of Goldsmith's lines on Garrick, where he is portrayed as being negligent of his friends because he knows he can 'whistle them back' when he pleases. Oliver Goldsmith, 'Retaliation' (1774), in Arthur Friedman ed. *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 5 Vols, Oxford, 1966, Vol. 4, pp.352–59. Reynolds makes use of these lines from Goldsmith's poem in his 'reconstruction' of Johnson's dialogue on Garrick's theory of acting.
- 21 This is one of the rare occasions when Reynolds might be said to be using the kinds of facial expressions set out by Le Brun to portray particular emotions. In Discourse 5 he observes that the expression of the passions produces 'distortion and deformity, more or less in the most beautiful faces' (Rogers, ed. p.136). More often Reynolds uses context and allusion rather than particular facial expressions to suggest emotion—see, for example, his *Lord Heathfield* 1788 (Waterhouse, *Paintings in Britain*, p.218) and his *Mrs Bunbury sacrificing to the Graces* 1765 (Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, p.226), to name two very different styles. This technique has similarities with the kind of building (montage) inherent in the Eisensteinian approach to the representation of character which depends on an audience recognising the interrelationship of a number of different features of a complex construction rather than recognition of just one particular code of meaning.
- 22 See Ellis Waterhouse, *Reynolds*, London, 1973, Pl.78. Reproductions of other portraits referred to in this paper may be found in this volume or in Waterhouse, *Paintings in Britain*.
- 23 See Waterhouse, *Reynolds*, Pl.72.
- 24 Steiner, p.14.
- 25 See, for example, Reynolds's second *Idler* paper, *Idler*, No. 79, Saturday, October 20, 1759. In Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Works*, ed. Malone, Vol. 1, pp.353–56.
- 26 An observation Reynolds made about gardens is equally appropriate to his own art. He wrote: 'Without pretending to particular skill in this art [landscaping], yet I suspect that a true idea of a garden, so far from looking like a landscape or having the appearance of being in the state of nature, ought on the contrary strongly to impress art on the mind and [be] marked with the footsteps of man'. Hilles, ed., p.156.
- 27 Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, p.206–07.
- 28 Waterhouse observes that Ramsay anticipated Reynolds's 'specific contributions—that the "grand style" can be achieved by the adaptation of classical models to modern portraits' (*Painting in Britain*, p.203). It seems he also anticipated, in this portrait at least, that kind of doubleness Reynolds pursued in the capacity to enlist costume (for example) to speak for both the universalising aspects of portraiture and the particularisation of an individual.
- 29 David Solkin, 'Great Pictures of Great Men? Reynolds, Male Portraiture, and the Power of Art', *The Oxford Art Journal* 9: 2 (1986) 44, argues that the source for the Macleod portrait 'has always been misidentified as the Apollo Belvedere' and that this mistake has obscured Ramsay's point in the painting.

Solkin considers the source to be based on a type of Roman statue associated with the representation of magistrates, thus drawing attention to the civic virtues. The gesture in such statues (called *ad locutio*) 'signified either greeting or clemency or both'.

- 30 Steiner, p.11.
- 31 See the comparison of these two paintings by Ellis Waterhouse (*Painting in Britain*, pp.221–22). 'The difference in power and character made by Reynolds's alteration of the movement of the right arm, and the immense gain in the appearance of life by limiting the amount of the silhouette which is sharply outlined against the background are additional elements in Reynolds's new receipt for portraiture. In nothing is the new style so distinct from the old as in this marriage of the figure to an appropriate background by a use of light and shade which Reynolds had learned from his study of the Old Masters.'
- 32 Matthew Novak, 'Sir Joshua Reynolds and Composition Theory: The Value of the "Discourses" for the Modern Professional Writer', Diss. Case Western Reserve University, 1989, p.19.
- 33 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer, New Haven, 1956, p.78.
- 34 Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, p.204.
- 35 Rogers, ed. p.129.
- 36 Rogers, ed. p.131.
- 37 Rogers, ed. pp.132–33.
- 38 Rogers, ed. p. 148.
- 39 For all his admiration, Reynolds did not claim for Shakespeare the kind of talismanic qualities that Garrick did. In a letter to the aspiring actor, William Powell (December 12, 1764), Garrick advised Powell to study, to read and to observe polite society. (Almost exactly Reynolds's recommendations to the young artists he addressed in his Discourses.) Garrick went on to advise Powell 'to read at Your leisure other books besides the plays in which you are concern'd ... above all, never let your *Shakespeare* be out of your hands, or your Pocket—Keep him about you, as a Charm—the more you read him, the more you'll like him, & the better you'll Act him ...' *The Letters of David Garrick*, eds David M. Little and George M. Kahr, 3 vols, Cambridge, Mass., 1963. Vol. II, p.436.
- 40 Hilles, ed. pp.111–12.
- 41 Hilles, ed. p.113.
- 42 Hilles, ed. p.119.
- 43 Moore, p.351.