

**‘SUBLIME AND INFERNAL REVERIES’: GEORGE ROMNEY AND THE  
CREATION OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY HISTORY PAINTER**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **'Sublime and Infernal Reveries': George Romney and the Creation of an Eighteenth-Century History Painter**

The image of George Romney presented in his early biographies is of a successful society portraitist by day but the creator of 'sublime and infernal reveries' at night by candlelight. Today these passionate designs from literature are characterized as proto-Romantic but, paradoxically, they were created within the context of a disciplined renaissance-humanist tradition. Romney's amateur and professional literary friends supplied him with a profusion of potential subjects and produced eulogistic verses about the artist and his works, stressing his sensitivity, seclusion, humble origins and natural genius. Taking their cue from the formulaic writings about artists from antiquity and the renaissance, the poets applied to Romney legends concerning artistic predispositions towards melancholy and emotional depth and provided a format in which his works of sentimental or tragic themes could be appreciated. The desired end result of their concerted and contrived enterprise was a fame for the artist which also reflected glory on the writers.

Post-Romantic art-historical methodologies have taken for granted that deference on the part of the artist towards advisors and patrons carried negative associations and have underestimated the collaborative nature of creativity in the eighteenth century. George Romney's career demonstrates that even within changing social and creative orders, and alongside more modern impulses, longstanding traditions involving a close association between artists and advisors, striving for mutual benefits, survived well into the early-Romantic period. Examination of the extensive Romney primary-source material, including correspondence with literary friends and his jottings on subjects and artistic theories in notebooks, is undertaken within the context of an analysis of Romney's works and the means of their promulgation. This thesis offers a new interpretation of Romney's career and argues that artistic production in late-eighteenth-century Britain cannot be fully understood unless the ambitions and methods of the literary figures advising artists are considered.

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A note about illustrations: All works are by George Romney unless otherwise indicated. Attempts have been made to ascertain dimensions and the exact media used in all works, and when available are supplied.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that historiographical analysis is a fundamental aspect of this thesis, referencing from the early Romney biographies and obituaries is of significant importance in providing a new context in which to understand Romney's works. In addition, other contemporary writings are vital for the interpretation of the role that poetry and literature served to enhance Romney's career, such as the encomiastic verses that associates wrote about the artist and his specific works and the notice he received within the poems and novels of his friends that were not directly related to his art. Romney's own writings are also scrutinized, particularly his correspondence with his literary advisors as well as his notes in sketchbooks and elsewhere which express his thoughts on art theory and composition. In short, the most tantalizing sources in the Romney literature are primary: he was the subject of more poetry and puffing, to a more concerted and contrived extent, than arguably any other late-eighteenth-century British artist—as Allan Cunningham put it in his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (London; J. Murray, vol. 5, 1832, p. 80), 'No artist of that day was more berhymed or bepraised. Nameless bards led the way, and their betters followed, with epistles melodious and long.' Cunningham noted that Romney moved 'among persons of less literary eminence' than did Reynolds, yet it was Romney who 'has perhaps been the most fortunate in his biographers....his character as a man and his talents as a painter have been more cleverly as well as cordially dealt by'. Two of the major literary friends who showered Romney with panegyrics while alive provided posthumous accounts as well: Richard Cumberland's 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney', *European Magazine* (June 1803), appearing eight months after the artist's death, was the first to expose him as an ill-at-ease neurasthenic, a Romantic-style characterization that is more systematically exploited in William Hayley's *The Life of George Romney, Esq.* (London, 1809). Hayley's untoward influence on Romney, as perceived by the artist's son, resulted in John Romney's rearguard-response biography, *Memoirs of the Life and Art of George Romney* (London, 1830): these two biographies utilized the opinions of John Flaxman, to different degrees, to bolster their cause. The early accounts have in common their partiality towards their subject—including a great deal of special pleading—and a portrayal of the artist as in the sway of 'poetic fervor', which contrasts with the narratives of some of Romney's contemporary academic



artists (such as Edward Edwards in his *Anecdotes of Painters who have resided or been born in England*, 1808; John Hoppner in his Review of Hayley's *Life of Romney*, *Quarterly Review*, Nov. 1809; and even Henry Fuseli in Pilkington's *Dictionary of Painters*, 1805), equally biased but with the different intention of relegating his reputation to an inferior status. While all of these slanted early sources need to be read critically, they are nonetheless crucial for understanding how Romney's unconventional career was interpreted—the thousands of surviving drawings; the scores of unfinished canvases, both portraits and subject pictures; his eschewal of the Royal Academy and his refusal to exhibit his works publicly after 1772; and his relative lack of interest, as compared to Reynolds and Gainsborough, in assuring his legacy through the medium of reproductive prints after his works all suggest that Romney's long-term reputation was negotiable and heavily dependent on written sources.

Despite the good efforts of his eulogists, by the end of the nineteenth century Romney's declining profile was indeed ripe for rejuvenation during his resurgence of popularity in the Duveen era, when a wave of market-driven scholarship attempted to keep up with the increased interest in his portraits as well as the legends concerning his private life, most notably his much-speculated-about relationship with Emma, Lady Hamilton and the abandonment in Kendal of his illiterate wife when he moved to London in 1762. Humphrey Ward and William Roberts, sponsored by the fine-art dealer Agnew, produced in 1904 a catalogue raisonné of Romney's works attached to a fairly brief but predictable biography. Here, Ward and Roberts show little interest in the subject pictures, and even less in the drawings, but their two volumes are of great value for the inclusion of previously unpublished materials, such as Romney's sitters diaries (now in the British Library), which were obtained from the sale of the collection of the artist's granddaughter Elizabeth Romney, 1894. The archival basis for Ward and Roberts's *Romney* takes their publication a step beyond the usual gentleman-connoisseur or professional-biographer tradition of the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century Romney scholarship. Examples of the former are Sir Herbert Maxwell's *George Romney* (London, 1902) and Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower's *George Romney* (London, 1904); of the latter is Hilda Gamlin's *George Romney and his Art* (London, 1894). Yet these biographies are useful for observing the perpetuation of myths formed in the earlier biographies and other



contemporaneous writings as well as assessing changing perceptions of Romney. A more critical view of Romney's works is given in Arthur B. Chamberlain's *George Romney* (London, 1910), which included a relatively respectable amount of discussion on the works from literature, especially the eighteen black-chalk cartoons now in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool but originally donated to the Liverpool Royal Institution by John Romney in 1823. Chamberlain, a curator of British art, was well placed to approach Romney studies with a more professional method; in addition, his publication reflects the expanding interests of scholarship and connoisseurship in the twentieth century.

Scholarly writings on Romney in the twentieth century focus predominately on his drawings as the area most promising for new discoveries and insightful discussion. Christie's 1894 Elizabeth Romney sale of the great bulk of drawings and sketchbooks handed down through the family was the main source for the large collections of Romney drawings that were formed in the modern era among discerning connoisseurs. Most of these initial collections have now been dispersed into smaller private and public collections, and the vicissitudes of the drawings and the early efforts to identify subject-matter are surveyed by Patricia Milne-Henderson in the exhibition catalogue *The Drawings of George Romney*, Smith College, 1962. Milne-Henderson (later known as Patricia Jaffé) thoroughly researched the Fitzwilliam Museum's cache of approximately 670 Romney drawings, the core of which is John Romney's 1817 bequest of 164 drawings, and published a well-annotated Fitzwilliam exhibition catalogue in 1977, *The Drawings of George Romney*. Jaffé's chief contribution to the field—the identification and contextualization of the subject-matter of the drawings—was anticipated in the Master's thesis of Anne O. Crookshank, 'The Subject Pictures and Drawings of George Romney' (Courtauld Institute, 1952), which contained an appendix of many of the subjects that Romney tackled in various media. Another Romney scholar whose interests lie in the drawings and subject pictures is Yvonne Romney Dixon, whose 1977 Ph.D. dissertation, 'The Drawings of George Romney in the Folger Shakespeare Library' (University of Maryland), subjected the drawings in the Folger to a pointed stylistic analysis. This research was augmented in Dixon's *'Designs from Fancy': George Romney's Shakespearean Drawings* (Washington, 1998), which examined the Folger's Romney holdings in context with Romney drawings and paintings of



Shakespearean topics from other collections. Jennifer Watson's Master's thesis, 'The Paintings of Emma Hart (Lady Hamilton) by George Romney: A Study of their Significance in Relation to His Historical Works' (Oberlin College, 1974), attempts to combine an aspect of Romney's portraiture with the subject pictures, and Watson has produced an exhibition catalogue, *George Romney in Canada*, 1985, which also includes both portraits and subject-drawings. David A. Cross has considered the portraits and historical works as a backdrop to Romney's biography in *A Striking Likeness: the Life of George Romney* (Aldershot, 2000). This book applies a modernist psychoanalytical approach to Romney—and by extension, therefore, his works—while also adopting the methodology of a late-Victorian biographer in its acceptance of the Romney lore as scripted in the three primary biographies, a tendency observed in virtually all of the modern writings about Romney.

Romney has also featured as a component in wider studies; for instance Victor Chan's '*Leader of My Angels': William Hayley and His Circle* (Edmonton, 1982), an exhibition catalogue that treats Hayley non-critically as an inspiring fulcrum for artistic production. (Chan also produced a Stanford University Ph.D. dissertation, 'Pictorial Image and Social Reality: George Romney's Late Drawings of John Howard Visiting Prisoners', 1983, not seen by this writer.) Romney appears in the scholarship devoted to other artists in Hayley's circle, such as John Flaxman, William Hodges, and particularly, William Blake; for instance, in Jean Hagstrum's 'Blake and British Art: The Gifts of Grace and Terror' (Kroeber and Walling eds, *Images of Romanticism*, New Haven and London, 1978) Romney is discussed in terms of his overlap with and influence on Blake's sublimity. Romney is discussed as one of the British artists in Rome in the 1770s who were interested in assimilating Italian classicism alongside less classicizing aesthetics in Nancy L. Pressly's *The Fuseli Circle in Rome* (New Haven, 1979).

A new era of Romney scholarship began in 2002 with the publications that accompanied the first comprehensive exhibition of Romney's works—integrating portraits, history paintings, and drawings—in the modern period. Alex Kidson's exhibition catalogue *George Romney 1734-1802* provided a perceptive overview of Romney's career and works that the previous studies dedicated to narrower areas of research did not attempt. The accompanying publication, '*Those Delightful Regions*

*of Imagination': Essays on George Romney* (ed. by Kidson, New Haven and London, 2002), brings together several historians of eighteenth-century British art, who, through their own areas of expertise, contextualize Romney's career and integrate him into the field of eighteenth-century scholarship more so than had been before accomplished. Several of these contributors had already provided essays for *Transactions of the Romney Society*, a publication of short, specialist articles on Romney-related topics. However, none of these studies endeavour to interpret Romney's relationships with his literary friends and their writings about him in terms of the exigencies of career manipulation. As yet, there is indeed negligible scholarship analyzing the role of the literary advisor in the production of eighteenth-century art. My own 'George Romney, Robert Potter, and the *Painter's Poet*', *Transactions* 7 (2002) and 'Tuching the Times too nearly: George Romney in 1793', *Transactions* 10 (2005) consider the works and their creation in terms of the impact that Romney's literary friends had on his finding of subject matter, his conception and realization of the subjects, and the reception of the works. This thesis continues on from these articles with the objective of revealing the importance of the literary advisor to Romney in particular and of demonstrating the necessity of understanding the relationships between artists and literary figures to the wider field in general.



## METHODOLOGY

This thesis analyzes and challenges received presumptions about Romney and his proto-Romantic creative process, and it reveals the traditional and even academic aspects of his career alongside the less conventional. It also argues that standard interpretations of Romney's working methods are based on misunderstandings of the actual cultural values and practices in place in the artist's period. As early as Cunningham's *Lives of the British Painters* (1829-33), certain notions about late-eighteenth-century artistic customs were established that have proved long-lasting. Specifically, Romney's circle of literary friends and their activities were lampooned in a way that denied the orthodoxy of an artist receiving assistance from a poet or an erudite advisor, not to mention the benefits available to the literary figure through an association with a successful artist. Martin Postle in his *Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Subject Pictures* (Cambridge, 1995) argues for a political component to Cunningham's biographies, which intended to overturn the elitism of the previous generation of artists and their emulation of foreign artistic tastes—Cunningham had taken on board the writings of Charles Lamb regarding Reynoldsian-era social politics. The Victorian and Edwardian Romney biographies take on board Cunningham's satirical view of the situation, and further removed from the era under discussion, appear to have lost the comprehension of the long tradition of artists and poets mutually assisting each other while seeking glory and everlasting fame, and they show how quickly knowledge of the old order was lost. The artifice involved in promoting Romney's career and the pompous and turgid language of the early biographies—all of which was completely conventional—quickly became an embarrassment best ignored. Post-Romantic sensibilities are offended at the thought of renaissance patterns of patronage still current in Britain at such a late date, and it has become preferable to anachronistically apply an ideal of isolated, creative independence to proto-Romantic artists than to accept that deference was shown to literary figures by artists, even artists producing sublime, innovative imagery. Misunderstandings of the conditions of eighteenth-century artistic production continue in modern scholarship: Iain Pears (*The Discovery of Painting*, New Haven and London, 1988) and David H. Solkin (*Painting for Money*, New Haven and London, 1992) have characterized the commonality between painters and poets as virtually extinct in the late-eighteenth century, and when it did exist it was oppressive



to the artist and was suffered under duress. Refutations of these mistaken and misleading views of cultural history are found not in art-historical scholarship but in the work of literary historians. J.C.D. Clark (*Samuel Johnson, Literature, religion and English cultural politics from the Restoration to Romanticism*, Cambridge, 1994) has argued that, even alongside the growth of the vernacular, late-Renaissance humanism lasted in Britain much longer than historians generally acknowledge; Dustin Griffin (*Literary Patronage in England, 1650-1800*, Cambridge, 1996) explains the historiographical misinterpretations by suggesting that anything other than creative independence as a gold standard is anathema to descendants of the Whig view of history, who interpret the eighteenth century as a rapidly-democratizing culture rather than one still heavily dependent on hierarchies and established orders. The primary sources on which this research relies offer overwhelming evidence for Romney's role as a participant in traditional creative collaborations; for instance, his correspondence with advisors such as William Hayley, Robert Potter, and William Mickle find these writers not only defining which subjects are appropriate for the artist to treat but also the manner in which they should be executed. These exchanges find comparable precedents in the surviving documents between artists and advisors in the Italian Renaissance onwards: scholarship on artists and advisors in that period is certainly less scarce than in eighteenth-century studies and is referenced here to support this thesis. The Golden Age of British painting cannot be fully apprehended until all aspects of artistic production are considered seriously—no matter how awkward and unfashionable they may now seem.

This thesis is arranged roughly chronologically as well as thematically. The dating of some of Romney's works, particularly drawings, is not straightforward. Sketchbooks with Romney's own inscribed titles and dates on the cover often prove to have been used at a different time or over a long period of time. Internal evidence, such as studies for known and securely-dated portraits or draughts of letters and various other laundry lists are often more helpful for defining chronological bounds. The work of Patricia Jaffé, Yvonne Romney Dixon, and Alex Kidson in dating the drawings on the basis of stylistic analysis has been a tremendous contribution to the field and is employed here. This thesis has also applied a method of dating-by-poetry: in some instances a *terminus ante quem* can be established for particular works that were previously undated but are mentioned in published poetry; for example, Romney's



design for *Nature Unveiling to the Infant Shakespeare* is referenced as a product of 'Romney's graceful pencil' in Helen Maria Williams's *Ode on the Peace*, first published in 1783. As crucial as the sketchbooks are for unfolding Romney's creative process, it must be kept in mind that they represent an incomplete view in that many have had pages removed or have been entirely dismembered and dispersed, some partially rebound later. And what is more, some important documented sketchbooks are now untraced; others are inaccessible in private collections. The recent publication 'Romney Sketchbooks in Public Collections', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 8 (2003) by Yvonne Romney Dixon and Alex Kidson provides invaluable information on the available sketchbooks. It is also true that surviving sketchbooks and drawings do not necessarily represent the totality of subjects that Romney attempted or even that were suggested to Romney, and hard and fast conclusions cannot be made regarding which subjects he took up or which he rejected. The appendix to this thesis provides an annotated list of the subjects found in various sources, mostly unpublished, that friends offered to Romney. Of these suggested subjects, many have not been identified in drawings or paintings but it cannot be definitively established whether or not they were ever put to paper, or if they were executed but later subjected to John Romney's editing or were simply lost through attrition.

This writer strives also to maintain awareness of the limitations of the early biographies. Comparisons of the letters printed in Hayley's and John Romney's memoirs of the artist with the same letters in manuscript found in archives reveal that they have generally been edited for spelling, grammar, and content. While Romney scholars are fortunate to have three accounts written by intimates of the artist, as tempting as it may be to take them at their word what is required is the more difficult task of reading them critically and in their proper historical context, which exposes their mythmaking. This demands a familiarity with contemporary values and literary conventions, and likewise, the secondary biographies need to be appreciated for their post-Romantic biases. Just as all of these biographies have selectively chosen particular works to support their arguments about Romney, this thesis, too, operates a selection process that does not pretend to be comprehensive. Given that the purpose of this research is to provide a context for Romney's career in light of his relationship with literary advisors, works are chosen for discussion that are particularly illustrative

of creative interaction through documentation such as correspondence, early biographies, press reports or published poetry. Although Romney's literary works are obviously of great importance to the argument, particular portraits are also an essential part of the story.

Finally, this thesis does not consider Romney as a singular case in his use of literary advisors but only as a particularly well-documented one. He was perhaps more astute than many artists in perceiving the potential advantages of aligning himself with literary figures and it is true to say that he utilized the system to a greater extent than most of his contemporaries. The parameters of this thesis require an in-depth study of this particular artist's career, yet this same methodology could profitably be applied to other individuals or to the British school as a whole. This thesis attempts to achieve an appropriate balance between an analysis of Romney focusing on his literary advisors and contextualization within the wider artistic environment.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When it comes to Romney scholarship, the most apt phrase is *ars longa, vita brevis* in the eighteenth-century understanding of the term: one lifetime is not enough to master the vast amount of materials relating to George Romney and his career. Therefore, I appreciate greatly the advantages of standing on the shoulders of the giants who have already contributed so much to the field, particularly Anne Crookshank, Patricia Jaffé, Yvonne Romney Dixon, David Cross, and Alex Kidson. This thesis also had the great advantages in its early stages of exposure to the wisdom of two professors at the University of Maryland, William L. Pressly and Anthony Colantuono. At Liverpool John Moores University, I have been extremely fortunate to experience the generous support of Julie Sheldon and Colin Fallows. I am also indebted to other friends and scholars for the many enlightening conversations on my topic in particular and the field in general: Hugh Belsey, Barbara Bryant, Julius Bryant, Judy Egerton, Penny Morrill, and Nancy Pressly among others. I should like to thank the many members of staff in the various libraries and archives that I have consulted—many went beyond the call of duty in their willingness to assist—and include those at the British Library; Sydney Jones Library Special Collections, University of Liverpool; the National Art Library; the Department of Prints and Drawings, British Museum; and the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. Finally, I would like to thank Alex Kidson, for making it all possible.

## INTRODUCTION

### Part I The Creativity of George Romney. 'Infernal reveries' and 'men of learning and taste'

The critical reputation of the British artist George Romney (1734-1802) rests on his body of portraits and designs from literature.<sup>1</sup> As one of the most successful members of the eighteenth-century British School—the 'third man in portraiture' after Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough—he produced approximately 2,000 portraits and considerably fewer paintings of a historical or poetical nature. Of the 5,000-odd extant Romney drawings, the majority are not related to his thriving portraiture practice but are instead examples of intense and vigorous invention. Romney continually complained of feeling 'shackled' to portraiture and of needing desperately 'to strip myself of drudgery in the shabby part of my art' and 'give my mind up to those delightful regions of imagination'.<sup>2</sup> Such ambitions are implied throughout the extensive correspondence, much of it unpublished, between the artist and the several prominent literary figures who proffered advice on subject-matter and even gave suggestions on composition. Taken out of context, Romney's protestations against his obligation to portraiture provide support for the view of the British school as deplorably oppressed and marginalized. But considered as affecting language directed at those who were in a position to boost his career through social connections and public writings in his favour, Romney's awareness of the advantages of relationships with literary advisors becomes apparent. Romney's closest literary friend, the poet William Hayley (1745-1820) states that he wrote his *Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter*, addressed to Romney in 1778, to 'animate the genius and promote the reputation of that aspiring yet diffident artist'<sup>3</sup> but Romney was not

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis the descriptive terms 'historical', 'literary', 'poetical', and 'imaginative' for subject pictures will observe their eighteenth-century usage, being essentially interchangeable. Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Discourse of 1771 attempted to define and discriminate between the various genres of painting. As regards idealisation, Reynolds admits 'In conformity to custom, I call this part of the art History Painting; it ought to be called Poetical, as in reality it is'. Yet throughout the Discourses he utilizes the description 'historical' for ennobled pictures of various subjects. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>2</sup> William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq.*, (London: T. Payne, 1809), 123, 203, letters from Romney to Hayley, Feb. 1787 and 12 Aug. 1793. Such remarks are common in the early Romney biographies and primary sources.

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.* ed. by John Johnson (London: Henry Colburn and Co., 1823) I: 172.



completely diffident and Hayley was not solely altruistic. In actual practice, their relationship is a model of the mutual benefits available to artists and writers.

Romney's associations with classically-minded amateurs such as the Lord Chancellor Edward Thurlow and Philip Yorke, Lord Hardwicke as well as more professional writers such as Hayley, Richard Cumberland, Anna Seward, William Mickle, and Robert Potter resulted in not just public recognition for the artist but a copious supply of potential subjects for high-minded paintings as well. In his biography of Romney, Hayley reproduces a letter from the artist calling him the best at conceiving 'subjects suitable for pictures, than all the men of learning and taste, I ever met with, put together'.<sup>4</sup> It was Hayley who, probably while hosting one of his gatherings of writers and other artistic guests at his country villa near Earham in Sussex, wrote inside a small notebook entitled 'Hints for Pictures' the directions for depicting the Danish warrior Hallmundus as well as Lucan with his lyre in Elysium, complete with a translated passage from Statius. Hayley adds, 'These two subjects indeed are taken from the notes to our new work and we have extracted them in hopes of their hitting the Fancy of our Dear Painter in one of his sublime and infernal Reveries.'<sup>5</sup> The apparent paradox of Romney embodying the idea of the proto-Romantic artist creating fantastical imagery with fervid abandon, but within the context of a concerted and contrived, Renaissance-humanist tradition, is the fulcrum for analyzing Romney's historical designs and the role that literary advisors played in his creativity, career, and posthumous reputation. The collaborative nature of Romney's works has been too little examined in previous related studies, and the wider artistic production of the early-Romantic period in Britain will not be fully understood until the motives and actions of the literary figures that were advising and writing about artists are considered.

A relationship between members of a well-connected, well-educated elite adhering to established, hierarchical orders and an artist such as Romney—a relatively uneducated provincial embracing the new modes for sublime and unclassical subjects and more independent methods of creativity—suggests an inherent conflict. Hayley

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Romney to Hayley 11 October 1793, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Ms. L1957/1451. Hayley's 'new work' was his *Essay on Epic Poetry* (London: J. Dodsley, 1782).



admits as much in the notes to his didactic poem of 1782, *Essay on Epic Poetry*: 'I have frequently condemned subjects which my friend Romney had selected for the pencil; but in the sequel, my opinion only proved that I was near-sighted in those regions of imagination, where his keener eyes commanded all the prospect.'<sup>6</sup> This polite confession aside, the palpable tension and probable clash between the two worlds has contributed to the most striking aspects of some of Romney's historical designs—their execution of classicizing subjects with expressionistic release, or, non-classical subjects treated with the gravitas of the ancients (figs. 1 and 2). But to characterize Romney's career solely as yet another harbinger of the coming Romanticism in the arts would be to miss the fundamentally orthodox aspects of his creative processes and his relationships with poets. Certainly, the early biographical sketches of Romney, by Hayley and Richard Cumberland, among others, do present a Romantic view of the artist as an 'obscure, untutored child of nature', with 'aspen nerves, that every breath could ruffle'.<sup>7</sup> But Hayley, for one, also reveals his deeply conservative opinion of their relationship in his writings about Romney. Given the artist's temperamental 'peculiarities', 'he would frequently want the counsel of a frank and faithful monitor, to guard him against those excesses of impetuous and undisciplined imagination'.<sup>8</sup> Hayley, and doubtless most of the other writers assisting him in his career as a history painter, saw themselves in the tradition of the respected humanist advisors of the Italian courts, such as Mario Equicola, who dictated to a willing Titian the complete *invenzione* for his painting done for the *camerino* of Duke Alfonso d'Este, *Feast of the Gods*.<sup>9</sup> Yet this renaissance posturing among Romney's circle is not necessarily inconsistent with their view of Romney as sensitive, saturnine, and reclusive—all the hallmarks of the Romantic artist—as these were the same characteristics that Giorgio Vasari and other biographers had claimed for several Renaissance artists, most notably, Michelangelo. Romney's career might be better

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<sup>6</sup> *Essay on Epic Poetry*, notes to the third epistle. Hayley's comments here are within the context of his discussion of Alexander Pope and the deleterious effects of *his* overly-influential friends and advisors. Hayley is careful to distinguish himself as a more prudent and light-handed critic and advisor.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney, *European Magazine* (June 1803), 417; *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland. Written by Himself. Containing an account of his life and writings....* (London: Lackington, Allen & Co., 1807) II: 211.

<sup>8</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> See Anthony Colantuono 'Dies Alcyoniae: The Invention of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*', *Art Bulletin* 7 (1991):239-256. Equicola, along with the humanist Paride da Ceresara, also devised the *invenzioni* for the paintings done for Alfonso's sister, Isabelle d'Este in Mantua, giving instructions to artists such as Mantegna, Perugino, and Correggio. See Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua* (New York University Press, 1971).



characterised not so much as proto-Romantic as an example of Renaissance-Romanticism.

Rudolf Wittkower has suggested that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century view of the artist as non-conformist and unstable was an artificial construct informed by fashionable philosophies such as Neoplatonism, which revived antique notions of artistic eccentricities and poetic fury.<sup>10</sup> Of course all this co-existed with the more sociable and complaisant artist, eager to move into the courtly sphere. This is the learned painter that Leon Battista Alberti conceived in *De Pictura* of 1435, who associates with literary men both for the social cachet this will bring and for assistance with the inventions of their history paintings.<sup>11</sup> In eighteenth-century Britain these ideas were purposely cultivated and revived: not only was the renaissance mode of melancholy given new currency in the Age of Sensibility but Alberti's dictums were reiterated in the Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) at the Royal Academy. Reynolds also encouraged the artist to aspire towards liberal arts status but conceded that there may be shortfalls in the scope of their reading; this may be remedied by the cultivation of 'learned and ingenious men', who will be 'pleased with communicating their ideas to artists, when they see them curious and docile, if they are treated with that respect and deference which is so justly their due'.<sup>12</sup> Romney, then, on first glance appears to practise what Reynolds—who obviously considered himself a special case as an artist *and* a literary man—preached. But the famously unacademic Romney, who ultimately subverts the image of the docile artist as well as the standard interpretation of his literary texts, and Reynolds, the authoritative President of the Royal Academy and proponent of traditional

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, 'Individualism in Art and Artists: a Renaissance Problem.' *Journal of the History of Ideas* xxii (1961) 291-302; see also Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn, The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), Chapter IV, 'Eccentric Behaviour and Noble Manners.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. by Cecil Grayson (Phaidon Press Ltd., 1972, reprint London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991), 88.

<sup>12</sup> The seventh discourse, delivered 10 December 1776, *Discourses on Art*, 118. That Reynolds in his Discourses has provided a synthesis of received academic orthodoxy is confirmed by the references to authority within the Discourses themselves as well as in Reynolds's notes in his commonplace book. See Frederick Whitley Hilles, *The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (Cambridge University Press, 1936; reprint by Archon Books, 1967), Appendix I, 'Sir Joshua's Reading Notes'.



aesthetic and creative theories, serve to illustrate the neo-Renaissance dichotomy of artistic models in eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>13</sup>

Artistic rivalry is a traditional theme in artists' biographies reaching as far back as antiquity, and indeed, the alleged rancorous divide between Reynolds and Romney is a commonplace in their early literature. While any personal enmity between the two artists would have been an attractive trope to their respective partisans and therefore susceptible to exaggeration, there were certainly significant aesthetic, cultural, and political divides between the two artists' circles.<sup>14</sup> In the late 1790s, Lord Chancellor Thurlow (1731-1806), looking back two decades when the now-deceased Reynolds and the virtually retired Romney had dominated the business of portraiture in London, recalled that the town had been divided by the 'Reynolds faction' and the 'Romney faction', and that he was 'of the Romney faction' (fig. 3).<sup>15</sup> Romney's son, John, believed that it was Reynolds's rebuffing of Thurlow's literary advice that had brought the Lord Chancellor over to his father's side. Thurlow had sat to both artists for his portrait in 1781, and during these sittings had recommended to each the story of Orpheus rescuing Eurydice from the Underworld. Although Reynolds declined to take up the subject, Romney's positive response delighted Thurlow, who then sent the artist a long passage of the story translated from Virgil's Latin.<sup>16</sup> Although in this instance Romney seemed eager to please this well-placed, potential patron and produced several drawings and cartoons that corresponded closely to Thurlow's prose

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<sup>13</sup> The precursor of Romney's Renaissance-Romanticism is the Wittkowers' 'proto-Bohemian' artist of c.1500, 'separated from the Bohemian era proper by the centuries of the conforming artist.' They argue for a parallel between the renaissance artist who had freed himself from the constraints of the medieval guilds and the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century artists freeing themselves from academic strictures. *Born Under Saturn*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> See Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 93-4; John Romney, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney*, London: 1830, 163, 172-177; Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters* (London: J. Murray, 1829-33), Vol. 5, 46-144. For modern assessments of the relationship between Romney and Reynolds see Alex Kidson, 'Reynolds and Romney: The Anatomy of a Rivalry', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 1 (1996): 4-7; Martin Postle, 'Factions and Fictions: Romney, Reynolds and the Politics of Patronage' in *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination': Essays on George Romney*, ed. by Alex Kidson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 63-96.

<sup>15</sup> *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978-84), 3:1046, 17 Aug. 1798. John Romney supported this assessment in a letter of 1805 to Hayley, saying that his father's professional reputation would be oppressed until 'the Reynolds faction be dead and gone'. See John Flaxman Papers, Fitzwilliam Museum, Ms 91-96/1949.

<sup>16</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of George Romney*, 168-173, 175-177. Reynolds also refused an idea for a painting from Lord Hardwicke, who was to prove a useful advisor to Romney, on the grounds that the subject was inappropriate and would have required modern dress. See John Ingamells and John Edgcumbe, *Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 117, letter from Reynolds to Hardwicke, 5 March 1783.



translation, increasingly, he gained the confidence—or the inclination—to veer from these revered texts and strike out into uncharted pictorial territories. Although he demonstrated sufficient ‘docility’ to his literary friends, this urge for creative independence posits Romney in opposition to the Reynoldsian, academic model of artistic production.

In discussing post-Renaissance art theory it is entirely appropriate to consider contiguous literary theories, as philosophies concerning the rules and aims of the visual arts were drawn from the precepts of rhetoric, grammar, and poetics. Alberti had compared learning to paint with the steps involved in learning to write; but later theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed the concept of a holistic relationship between ‘sister arts’ out of the surviving scraps of references to painting and poetry from antiquity.<sup>17</sup> Most cogently, Horace’s dictum *ut pictura poesis*, ‘as is painting, so is poetry’, established a supposed parity between the arts.<sup>18</sup> Although in his *Ars Poetica* Horace never intended to enunciate a commandment intertwining the arts to such an extent, his authority was frequently cited by post-Renaissance art theorists to bolster their cause, most blatantly in Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy’s *De arte graphica*, commonly known in Britain through John Dryden’s translation, *The Art of Painting*, first published 1695.<sup>19</sup> This treatise, directed as much towards a readership familiar with the *belles lettres* as towards the practising artist, provided a synthesis of all the official doctrines promulgated by the various Continental academies. Du Fresnoy—and Dryden—counter notions that art should be anything but a rational striving for ideal beauty, totally respectful of the achievements of the past:

The principal and most important part of Painting, is to find out and thoroughly to understand what Nature has made most beautifull, and most proper to this Art; and that a choice of it may be made according to the gust and manner of the Ancients, without which, all is nothing but a blind, and rash

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<sup>17</sup> See Rensselaer W. Lee, ‘*Ut Pictura Poesis*: The Humanistic Theory of Painting’, *Art Bulletin* 22 (1940): 197-269.

<sup>18</sup> See Wesley Trimpi, ‘The Meaning of Horace’s *Ut Pictura Poesis*’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36 (1973):1-34. As Trimpi points out, the supposed relationship was problematical from the start, as the original reference from Horace’s *Ars Poetica* was merely describing a relationship involving stylistic expression. Similarly, Aristotle’s comparisons of the two arts have been taken out of context as well.

<sup>19</sup> See Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton University Press, 1970), Chapter 2, ‘*De arte graphica* and the search for a New Authority’. Lipking explores the influence of Du Fresnoy and other neoclassical theorists on Reynolds’s thought in Chapter 7, ‘Reynolds’s Discourses’.



barbarity; which rejects what is most beautiful, and seems with an audacious insolence to despise an Art, of which it is wholly ignorant: which has occasion'd these words of the Ancients: *That no man is so bold, so rash, and so overweening of his own works, as an ill Painter, and a bad Poet, who are not conscious to themselves of their own Ignorance.*<sup>20</sup>

Although Romney's respect for classical antiquity was considerable, there is no scope here for the modern artist to innovate and deviate from received correctness and create intuitively. This is most probably what annoyed Romney, for according to Hayley, 'He thought rather contemptuously of some applauded literary works relating to his own art, and particularly Fresnoy's Poem, translated into English prose by Dryden, and into rhyme by Mason. He said that in his early life the precepts of it, had perplexed and misled him exceedingly.'<sup>21</sup> Four years after Reynolds and the poet William Mason published their updated translation and commentary of *The Art of Painting*, the *Public Advertiser* of 22 September 1787 announced that Hayley and Romney were to collaborate on one of their own:

Mr Hayley is employed with his friend Romney, at Earham, in making a new translation of Fresnoy on the art of painting—a spirit of rivalry has given birth to this undertaking—the promised consequence is that Mason shall curse his ill timed ambitions, & Sir Joshua blush at the annotations. The body of the poem is to be executed by Hayley, the notes & the extraordinary remarks by the scientific Romney.<sup>22</sup>

Nothing more is known of this alleged plan but judging by the scattered, sometimes incoherent, notes on the theory of art interspersed among drawings in Romney's sketchbooks, he lacked the discipline, not to mention, time, to commit to a major literary project.<sup>23</sup>

Reynolds was careful to dispel the opinion that Samuel Johnson contributed heavily to the Discourses, but in a never-completed biographical sketch of Johnson, written at

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<sup>20</sup> John Dryden, *The Art of Painting* in *The Works of John Dryden* Vol. XX, Prose 1691-98. ed. by Alan Roper, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 40. This is a facsimile reprint of Dryden's 1695 first edition.

<sup>21</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 337.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in the Whitley Papers, 1283, the Department of Prints and Drawings, the British Museum.

<sup>23</sup> Hayley regretted Romney's 'desultory' method of reading and writing as 'he had a fund of original ideas relating to his own art, and also such an uncommon energy of mind, that, with a moderate application to the pen, he might have rendered himself a writer of very powerful eloquence'. *Life of Romney*, 116. For Romney's writings on art theory see sketchbooks in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C (c.61).; Cumbria Public Record Office, Barrow (Z-242); and a loose sheet discussing the proper usage of gestures and expression in the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum (Ms. L1957/942/79). See also Romney's theoretical writings in his notebook used in Italy, Romney papers, Fitzwilliam Museum.



the request of James Boswell, he allowed that Johnson had formed his mind to think.<sup>24</sup> Johnson's philosophies concerning models of imitation in poetry certainly concur with Reynolds's theories concerning the rules for emulating the old masters. In his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) Johnson surveyed developments in English literature, admiring with reservations Abraham Cowley's translations of Pindar's Greek odes, regularized into the English vernacular. While a 'servile' method of translation was not to be admired, it was also possible to go too far in asserting creative freedom; Johnson thought Cowley had 'spread his wings so boldly that he left his authors. It was reserved for Dryden to fix the limits of poetical liberty, and give us just rules and examples of translation.'<sup>25</sup> In his first Discourse to the Royal Academy students, Reynolds does not hesitate to recommend 'an implicit obedience to the *Rules of Art*, as established by the practice of the great Masters.' Those artists wishing instead to proceed under their own intuition will soon find their progress impeded by their own ignorance:

Every opportunity, therefore, should be taken to discountenance that false and vulgar opinion, that rules are the fetters of genius. They are fetters only to men of no genius; as that armour, which upon the strong is an ornament and a defence, upon the weak and mis-shapen becomes a load, and cripples the body which it was made to protect.<sup>26</sup>

Augustan-neoclassical treatises, and their often defensive tone, are in dialogue with the increasing calls for originality in English poetry—a theme that was spilling over into the pictorial arts as well. Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759 decried the kind of creativity that relied on a slavish imitation of correct prototypes, prompting his metaphor of rules as crutches: 'a needful Aid to the Lamé, tho' an Impediment to the Strong'.<sup>27</sup> For William Duff, genius of the most original sort is distinguished by its vivid and inventive imagination, 'by which it sketches out a creation of its own, discloses truths that were formerly unknown, and exhibits a succession of scenes and events which were never before contemplated or conceived'. Furthermore, the original author must 'burst the barriers of a separate state, and

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<sup>24</sup> *Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. by Frederick W. Hilles (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1952), 66. See also Hilles, *The Literary Career of Reynolds*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, Vol. II, 364, quoted in J.C.D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson, Literature, religion and English cultural politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 25-6.

<sup>26</sup> Delivered 2 Jan. 1769, Reynolds, *Discourses*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London: A. Millar and R. and J. Dodsley, 1759) 28.



disclose the land of Apparitions, Shadows, and Dreams'.<sup>28</sup> But this method of creativity ill accords with the standard version of artistic practice, which incorporated quotations from past masters as knowing and witty advertisements of a writer's, or an artist's, erudition. The viewer of Reynolds's *Master Crewe as Henry the VIII* or his *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen* (fig. 4) would be expected to recognize his sources—be it Holbein or Poussin and Romanelli.<sup>29</sup> While such selective borrowing in portraiture or history painting carried the weight of classical and renaissance approbation, there was also another position to take within the discourses of originality and imitation. The classical writers Seneca and Macrobius discussed imitation in terms of the metaphor of the bee: the gathering of pollen from different flowers and the following digestion that transformed the materials into nectar provided an appropriate pattern for the poet wishing to build on earlier textual models. Yet the digestive process could be so transformative, and the resulting creation so completely new, that the original model was no longer apparent.<sup>30</sup> This 'dissimulative' version of imitation, which implies an emulative, even eristic, relationship with the original model, is most closely analogous with Romney's favoured method of illustrating literature. His use of continuous narrative; his conflation of various themes and scenes; his violation of the Aristotelian unities—all departed from the academic norms of history painting.

Hayley, who was accustomed to finding suitable subjects for Romney during a 'chace of ideas', understood, whether he approved of it or not, that the artist would then transform the model in his idiosyncratic way: 'Romney was willing to take a leading idea from one of our great poets, but he had an excursive vigour and richness of fancy, that made him delight in adding images of his own creation to those, that were

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<sup>28</sup> William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius and its various modes of exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, particularly in Poetry* (London: Charles Dilly, 1767), 89, 141.

<sup>29</sup> For Reynolds's selective borrowings see John Newman, 'Reynolds and Hone, *The Conjuror Unmasked*' in *Reynolds*, ed. by Nicholas Penny (London: the Royal Academy of Arts, 1986), 344-354; R. Wittkower, 'Imitation, Eclecticism, and Genius' in *Aspects of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by E.R. Wasserman, (Baltimore, 1965), 143-161.

<sup>30</sup> For the various renaissance and classical models of imitation see G.W. Pigman, 'Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance', *Renaissance Quarterly* 33 (1980): 1-32. Hayley states (*Life of Romney*, 328) that one of the treatises on art that Romney admired was that of Mengs, which uses the bee metaphor to explain how 'Art can easily surpass Nature; for since no flower produces honey from every part, the Bee visits that only from which it can extract the richest sweets; thus can also the skilful painter gather from all the creation the best and most beautiful parts of nature, and produce by this Artifice the greatest expression and sweetness.' *The Works of Anthony Raphael Mengs...*, trans. by Joseph Nicholas D'Azara (London: R. Faulder, 1796) I: 19.



furnished by the author, from whom he caught the groundwork of his intended composition.<sup>31</sup> While it might be more acceptable for a poet to attempt to operate from the principles of an original genius, an artist would find less support in his or her attempts to create in an unfettered manner. Edward Edwards's unsympathetic biography of Romney expresses well the conventional view:

He made some attempts in historic painting, but his compositions in that line of art are conducted too much upon those eccentric principles which have lately been displayed in painting as well as poetry. This peculiarity is easily distinguishable in the pictures which he painted for Boydell's Shakspeare Gallery, which have so little solidity of expression, that it is difficult to discover what scenes they are intended to represent.<sup>32</sup>

Romney's life-long interest in Shakespeare made him a likely artist to take on the challenge of original-genius creation as so much of this discourse centred on the National Poet and Presiding Genius.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it was predominately his experimental illustration of *The Tempest*, painted for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, on which Romney staked his critical reputation as a history painter (fig. 5). But attempting to emulate Shakespeare was the province of the poet: built into the treatises on genius was the presumption that the painter would be following the poet's lead. William Duff, while arguing for the daring methods of an original genius, upheld the standard relationship between poetry and painting, believing that more imagination was required of the poet. He concludes a long paragone favouring poetry over painting with praise of Virgil's description of a sea-storm in the *Aeneid*, which was superior to seascapes executed by even 'the ablest Masters in the Art of painting'.<sup>34</sup> It is tempting to see Romney's sublime and innovative *Tempest* as a conscious retort to such conventional views.

Dryden's *Art of Painting* had commented on the consequences of undisciplined creativity and the potential hazards of this method:

The thoughts of a Man endued with good Sence are not of kin to visionary madness; Men in Feavers are onely capable of such Dreams. Treat then the Subjects of your Pictures with all possible faithfulness, and use your Licences

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<sup>31</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 208-9.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Edwards, *Anecdotes of Painters who have Resided Or Been Born In England* (London: T. Payne, 1808), 279.

<sup>33</sup> For the importance of Shakespeare to British artists of the era who were attempting to redefine the idea of the artist see William L. Pressly, *The Artist as Original Genius: Shakespeare's 'Fine Frenzy' in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Art* (University of Delaware Press, forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> Duff, *Essay on Original Genius*, 198.



with a becoming boldness, provided they be ingenious, and not immoderate and extravagant.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, given the understanding that the goal of all the arts is to be morally improving, to instruct and please, subjects must be chosen that are accepted and easily recognized; on the other hand, if an artist entertains a dissimulative relationship with the literary text, then the original subject and its inherent moral will be lost. Yet certain artists in the second half of the eighteenth century began to rebel against the second-class status of the art of painting. From the late 1760s onward, painters such as James Jefferys, John and Alexander Runciman, Henry Fuseli, and James Barry appear to be appropriating the challenges aimed at writers to create sublime and supernatural subject matter, and began to disclose 'Apparitions, Shadows, and Dreams' for themselves.<sup>36</sup> John Hamilton Mortimer, who was capable of painting historical pictures conventional enough to win a prize from the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1763, became increasingly given to creating unusual and horrific subjects. His *Incantation* of 1770 (fig. 6) was painted from no specific literary source; however, within a new construct of *ut pictura poesis*, the purchaser of the work engaged William Mickle to create a poem around it.<sup>37</sup> Such works, when exhibited at the Royal Academy or the Society of Artists, brought their creators much notoriety and did not escape the censure and ridicule of the public and the press. Even though Romney lacked the public exuberance of this generation of artists—he ceased to exhibit at the Society of Artists after 1772—his public perception was that of a fashionable portraitist who also dabbled in this sort of horror on the side. In the comments written down in his 1783 copy of the Royal Academy exhibition catalogue, Horace Walpole included Romney, who had not exhibited publicly for more than a decade (and never at the Royal Academy), among the artists who were indulging in a taste for un-classicizing subjects: 'Of late, Barry, Romney, Fuseli, Mrs. Cosway, & others, have attempted to paint Deities, Visions, Witchcraft &c, but have only been bombast & extravagant, without true dignity.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Dryden, *Art of Painting*, 80.

<sup>36</sup> Duff, *Essay on Original Genius*, 141. See Pressly, *The Artist as Original Genius* for a discussion of the fulfilment of the discourse of original genius among a new generation of artists veering from standard subject matter and standard methods of creativity.

<sup>37</sup> *The Sorceress; or Wolfwold and Ulla* is written in imitation of medieval ballads. *The Poetical Works of William Mickle, with The Life of the Author* (London, C. Cooke, 1794), xxv.

<sup>38</sup> A photocopy of Walpole's annotated exhibition catalogue is in the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Walpole's comments may have been sparked by Fuseli's R.A. exhibit of 1783, *The Weird Sisters*. *The Public Advertiser* (1 May) considered this painting 'like every Thing else of Mr Fusili's,



By this time Romney had learned how to capitalize on his outsider status and had found an alternative method for keeping his name before the public: his friendships with poets and writers ensured positive commentaries on his literary designs as well as portraits while avoiding the newspaper criticisms aimed at the public exhibitions.

Romney's earliest important literary connection in London was the playwright and poet Richard Cumberland (1732-1811), with whom he cultivated a friendship some time after arriving in London from Kendal in 1762, leaving behind a wife and small son—a fact of great consternation to those writing about the artist in the nineteenth and early twentieth century during his Duveen-era renaissance.<sup>39</sup> Although there is some confusion over the dating of the several portraits Romney painted of Cumberland, they seem to have appeared at propitious moments in the rising writer's career: a conventional poet's portrait, pen-in-hand (fig. 7), was probably painted as Cumberland was writing his first plays in the late 1760s.<sup>40</sup> Another one, depicting him in the flattering guise of a quasi-togate thinker (fig. 8), is most likely the portrait exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1771 and then engraved by Valentine Green, which coincides with the run of his very successful comedy *The West Indian*.<sup>41</sup> Cumberland was not a writer answering the calls for supernatural or sublime subjects, but he was aware of developments occurring in the arts. Just prior to the Society of Artists exhibition of 1770, Cumberland wrote to Romney advising him on the two paintings he was preparing to submit that were intended to represent John Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (figs. 9 and 10). Cumberland thought that Romney would be mistaken to title his pendant personifications after Milton's poems. He found these Italian phrases too 'modern, barbarous, and affected' to be suitable for the paintings as

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in the "extravagant and erring Spirit"—he draws correctly, but his Imagination, impetuous but not full, is the most incorrect Thing imaginable!' Quoted in Martin Myrone, *Gothic Nightmare, Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 130.

<sup>39</sup> The hard feelings toward Romney's domestic improprieties by the Victorians is perhaps best expressed in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem *Romney's Remorse* of 1889, which fantasizes that Romney, who returned to Kendal and the care of this long-neglected wife for the last three years of his life, realizes at the eleventh hour that her loving attention was worth more than all of his accomplishments in art. See Robert Inglesfield, 'Tennyson's "Romney's Remorse"', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 7 (2002): 27-31.

<sup>40</sup> See Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2002), 91-93. Another Cumberland portrait with writer's iconography is in the National Portrait Gallery, London, but probably dates from a few years later. See fig. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Kidson speculates that this portrait is the one identified by Horace Walpole in his Society of Arts catalogue for 1771 as 'Mr. Cumberland author of the *West Indian* comedy...the nose seems quite to project'.



They are borrowed from poetry, and by bringing Milton's descriptions to our minds, they rob your ideas of their originality. Descriptive poetry has been frequently assisted by painting, but I think the latter art has seldom excelled when the pencil has copied after the pen. Mr. West is now transcribing an ode of Horace upon canvass, and has flagrantly failed. I fancy he did not take his *Death of General Wolfe* from the paltry poem called *Quebec* or the *Conquest of Canada*. No, Sir, let the poets wait upon you, and give your figures their natural titles in their own language, or in established classical terms. The solemn figure is strictly that of the muse Melpomene; and Mr. Reynolds has led the way in calling the other *Euphrosyne*. I think I should render those into English by the titles of *Meditation and Mirth*.<sup>42</sup>

Cumberland conceives of the paintings in theatrical or allegorical terms, and he is here urging Romney to strike out beyond mere literary illustration. The use of the word 'transcribing' in reference to Benjamin West's painting from Horace underscores his assessment of this as a purely imitative, uncreative way to work. Without renouncing his classicizing tastes, and even while acting as a traditional literary advisor, Cumberland is acknowledging changing creative orders.

Historically, poetry had usually assumed a privileged position over painting not only in theory but in practice, too. This translated into expectations on the part of the poet of deference from artists; the intellectual and social superiority of the literary figure was usually taken for granted. Titian displayed humility by stating that, as a painter, he had only provided the body (*corpo*) of *Feast of the Gods* but Equicola's poetic conception of the painting had supplied its soul (*anima*).<sup>43</sup> Equicola, in a treatise on the arts, deprecated the art of painting and its ill-educated practitioners—'idiots'—for producing objects that cannot be eternal: 'Painting perishes with time, while the fame of the good poet increases. Therefore just as the soul is superior to the body, and just as immortality must be preferred to mortality, so too poetry exceeds painting in

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<sup>42</sup> Cumberland to Romney 30 March 1770, Osborn Mss. 4058, Beinecke Library, Yale University, also reprinted in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 62. Cumberland told Romney that if he insisted on titling the paintings *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* his 'dramatis personae' would be liable to criticism. In the end, Romney's pendants were exhibited as *Melancholy* and *Mirth*. It is possible that Romney's original intentions with the paintings were simply to replicate the type of paired antitheses known since antiquity—Pliny (*Natural History* 34:70) records that two of Praxiteles' statues 'expressing opposite emotions are admired, his Matron Weeping and his Merry Courtesan'. Romney would again paint a paired *Melancholy* and *Mirth* in the 1780s, and in 1791 for the Prince of Wales he tailored two of his studies of Emma, Lady Hamilton to fit this mould; one became a Magdalene, and of its partner he wrote to her, 'the lively one I have made to suit Calipso'. Letter from Romney to Emma Hamilton quoted in Hilda Gamlin, *George Romney and his Art* (London, 1894), 226.

<sup>43</sup> Colantuono. '*Dies Alcyoniae*', 239. Titian's phrasology was a commonplace in art theoretical discussions, and it had roots in similar statements made by Cicero in his *Pro Archia Poeta*. See Martin Warnke, *The Court Artist*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 87.



excellence.’<sup>44</sup> It will become clear that something of this attitude survived among most of the poets in Romney’s circle. Hayley was especially attracted to artists who, because of their over-developed emotional sensitivities and under-developed intellects, required his superior faculties—especially an artist such as William Blake, perpetually on the verge of being reduced to ‘the Incapacity of an Idiot’.<sup>45</sup> The poet Anna Seward (1747-1809), who met and befriended Romney while the two were visiting Hayley in 1782, expresses her thoughts on the natural inferiority of artists in a letter to Erasmus Darwin. In discussing the discovery of John Opie, the ‘Cornish Wonder’, by the satirical essayist Peter Pindar (Dr. John Wolcot), she mentions that

he found Opie without any other powers of mind above those of his fellow-labourers in the tin-mines; and that he continued dull and unapprehensive upon every subject except that of painting. When nature gives to a human being that strong propensity to some one art or science, which produces a Colossus in that line, his other faculties are not always proportionally strong. Poetry, indeed, seems to have this superiority over painting and music, that, while we sometimes see a stupid man a fine performer on instruments, or a fine painter, we never see him a fine poet.<sup>46</sup>

Seward’s opinions are a reiteration of those expressed by the fifteenth-century humanist Leonardo Bruni in a letter to Lauro Quirini, where the same point is made regarding the excellence of an artist being separate from the other intellectual virtues.<sup>47</sup>

The right of eighteenth-century British literary figures to claim a genius for pictorial invention, even without any talent or ability in execution, is supported not only in renaissance-humanist thought but also in contemporary philosophical treatises. Alexander Gerard’s *An Essay on Genius* of 1774 grants a good measure of this highest of faculties to those non-artists who had ‘invented the subject of a picture, and in idea designed the whole of it, so that, from their description of their conception, a

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<sup>44</sup> Colantuono, ‘*Dies Alcyoniac*’, 239-40.

<sup>45</sup> Hayley to Lady Hesketh, 15 July 1802, British Library Add. Mss. 30803A, quoted in Morchard Bishop, *Blake’s Hayley* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1951), 278.

<sup>46</sup> 22 May 1789, Seward to Darwin, *Letters of Anna Seward written between the years 1784 and 1807* In 6 vols., ed. by A. Constable, Edinburgh, 1811, Vol I: 272.

<sup>47</sup> Bruni cites Socrates’ *Apology* for his authority. See Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators, Humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition 1350-1450* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 122-3. Any resemblance between her letters and those of Bruni’s would have been most likely welcomed by Seward—she collected her own letters with an eye towards publication, even re-writing and updating some, much in the humanist tradition. See Cecil H. Clough, ‘The Cult of Antiquity: Letters and Letter Collections’ in *Cultural Aspects of The Italian Renaissance. Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. by Cecil H Clough (Manchester University Press, 1976), 33-67.



master might execute it, though they themselves never used the pencil'.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, a genius for poetic ability is the highest as it comprises all the various philosophies. The practice of the more literate members of society providing artists with ideas both on particular subjects and their execution was common enough in this period to have become the topic one of Peter Pindar's satirical verses, *Subjects for Painters*. The descriptions of various topical and historical scenes follow an imaginary argument with Benjamin West in which the author insists, 'You *must*, you *shall* have tale, and ode, and hint.'<sup>49</sup> Yet the contemporary satires and caricatures pretending to expose the follies of the established order have tended in later scholarship not to provide proof of the continuation of a classicizing culture throughout the eighteenth century but rather to obscure its workings and even deny its existence. The systematic ridiculing of Romney's relationships with his literary friends begins with John Hoppner's hostile jabs in his assessment of Hayley's *Life of Romney* (*Quarterly Review*, November 1809) but it is raised to an art in Allan Cunningham's biography of 1832: Cunningham puts together a fictive gathering at Hayley's Sussex villa including Romney, Charlotte Smith, William Cowper, and Anna Seward, whose pretensions and pomposity extended even to the 'ludicrous flattery' consumed at the breakfast table, when,

the ordinary greetings were Sappho, and Pindar, and Raphael; they asked for bread and butter in quotations, and "still their speech was song." They then separated for some hours: poetasters, male and female, retired, big with undelivered verse; and Romney proceeded to sketch from the lines of Hayley, or make designs as he had suggested. When the hour appointed for taking the air came, the painter went softly to the door of the poetess—opened it gently, and if he found her—"With looks all staring from Parnassian dreams," he shut it and retreated: if, on the contrary, she was unemployed, he said, "Come, Muse;" and she answered, "Coming, Raphael."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Genius* (London: T. Cadell, 1774), 418. Baxandall (op.cit., 124) points out that Bruni, who advised Ghiberti on his bronze doors, and other humanists held that an ability to discern and discriminate in the arts was not related to any actual ability to practice them.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Pindar, *Subjects for Painters* (London: G. Kearsley, 1789); a New Edition, 1793; also reprinted in *The Works of Peter Pindar, Esq., In Three Volumes* (London: John Walker, 1794), Vol. II: 229-321.

<sup>50</sup> Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (London: J Murray, 1832), vol. 5:107. The group that Cunningham caricatures had never all been gathered together at the same time. Cowper's reputation had borne up better than the rest, and Cunningham had to remark that he was 'among but not of' the coterie', and he judges Cowper's verses gold compared to the 'Birmingham ware' of the rest, 106.



This parody ignores the fact that, although for the most part their brand of verse had become obsolete by the time Cunningham was writing, all of these poets had achieved popular and critical success in their day.<sup>51</sup>

Methodologies informed at least partly by post-Romantic notions of creative independence overestimate the amount of disapproval that was shown over deference to patrons and artistic collaboration in the period and underestimate the sheer orthodoxy of artist-advisor relationships. Benedict Nicolson, in the first major twentieth-century study of Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797), clearly deplores the fact that the artist involved a wide group of patrons and advisors, including Josiah Wedgwood, William Hayley and Erasmus Darwin, in the development of his works. While painting *The Corinthian Maid* in 1782, Wright sent Hayley a sketch of the work and asked for his advice on everything from the lighting and the still-life objects to be included to the proper expression for the face of the maid. Nicolson reproduces a portion of this fascinating letter from Wright to Hayley but remarks, 'There can be few examples since the Renaissance where a painter has relied so heavily on a poet for so many details in a single picture—and there are further points that Wright raises in the same letter which we have omitted simply out of fear of growing tedious.'<sup>52</sup> In *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* David H. Solkin's discussion of Wright ignores his paintings from literature and his extensive use of advisors in order to portray the artist in quite a different light. Solkin focuses instead on Wright's earlier scenes of modern academies and scientific conversation-pieces, such as *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* of 1768, using

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<sup>51</sup> Hayley, whose works in the 1780s went through several editions, received particularly positive criticism in the *Monthly Review*, such as the piece discussing the *Essay on History* of 1780 (LXIII: 30-38), which celebrated 'this new star in the poetical hemisphere, whose appearance we noted with so much pleasure, continues to shine, if possible, with increasing splendor'. John Brewer has seen past the denigration of Seward and her circle by earlier biographies, such as E. V. Lucas's *A Swan and her Friends*, 1907, and re-assessed her importance to a community of provincial poets in *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), Chapter 15, 'Queen Muse of Britain: Anna Seward of Lichfield and the Literary Provinces'. Charlotte Smith also received favourable mentions in the *Monthly Review*, and her *Elegiac Sonnets* was heavily subscribed among the fashionable elite. See Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith, a Critical Biography* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998). Cowper's continuing reputation is the most assured, yet ironically he was the least prolific and the most reclusive of this group. Hayley's repeated entreaties to William Pitt eventually secured Cowper the promise of a pension in 1794 for services to poetry.

<sup>52</sup> Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby, Painter of Light* (London and New York: the Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, 1968), Vol. I: 145. In letters to Hayley and Wedgwood, Wright gave each of them the credit for being the first to suggest *The Corinthian Maid*. Nicolson reproduces extracts of some of the many letters between Wright and his circle during the 1780s, when the artist was especially focusing on painting scenes from literature, see 130-157.



these paintings to illustrate his argument about the radical, democratizing changes that had taken place in English culture since the beginning of the century, when Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, dictated instructions to artists in his employ while also attempting to dictate taste and morals to society's elites.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Iain Pears has supposed that

The ideal of the patron collaborating with the artist in order to achieve exactly the sort of work he wanted—a process demonstrated in its more extreme form by the Earl of Shaftesbury's creation of his *Judgement of Hercules*—becomes exceptionally rare as this period progresses. On occasion, traces of the more involved and enthusiastic patron can be found, such as Archbishop Drummond reading extracts of Tacitus to West in order to give him an idea of what he wanted in the *Agrippina*; or George III repeating the operation by reading the poor man Livy for the *Final Departure of Regulus*.<sup>54</sup>

Romney's career is particularly susceptible to this kind of misunderstanding given the great number of experimental and modern-appearing designs in sketchbooks; on loose sheets; and in large-scale black chalk cartoons, which were, according to John Flaxman, 'examples of the sublime and terrible, at that time perfectly new in English art' (fig. 11).<sup>55</sup> However, there are primary sources of a different category, and equally voluminous, that are usually dismissed as regrettable and embarrassing distractions: the letters to and from literary advisors and the verses that were dedicated to Romney as well as other encomiastic writings on his art. Yet these help to put his works and his career into a fuller context and make the reciprocal benefits between the painter and the poets clear.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money, The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), Chapter 6, 'Joseph Wright of Derby and the Power of the Aesthetic' and Introduction, 'On Painting, Commerce and the "Public" in Eighteenth-Century Britain', especially pp 4-13 on Shaftesbury's aesthetics and his relationships with John Closterman and Paolo de Mattheis, who painted his portrait and *The Judgement of Hercules* respectively.

<sup>54</sup> Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: the Growth of Interest in the Arts in England 1680-1768* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 143. Given that John Galt's idealised biography of West, heavily supervised by the artist himself, is the source for such information it can be presumed that this kind of creative process was not considered derogatory to the artist in any way. Furthermore, the possibly embellished episodes mentioned of West being read to also serve to evoke the well-known anecdote about Rubens having Tacitus read to him while he painted. See John Galt, *The Life and Works of Benjamin West, Esq....Part II* (London, 1820), 12.

<sup>55</sup> Flaxman's very favourable criticism of Romney's works, specifically his black chalk cartoons of various literary subjects, appeared in Hayley's *Life of Romney*, 309.

<sup>56</sup> This partial view of Romney in the biographies and criticism has been the norm from the nineteenth century to the present. Romney's contact with Hayley lasted from 1776 until the former's death in 1802, yet this has not hitherto inspired a substantial critical analysis of their collaborations, nor have the relationships between Hayley and the other artists in his circle received much in-depth study. Morchard Bishop's *Blake's Hayley* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951) essentially takes the form of a



## Part II The Creation of Fame: Writing about Romney

Allan Cunningham remarked that although Romney struggled for success in his early years in London, eventually, 'No artist of that day was more berhymed or bepraised. Nameless bards led the way, and their betters followed, with epistles melodious and long.'<sup>57</sup> Romney was the subject of two different poems declaring that the arts had at long last returned to Britain and he would be the artist to bring glory to the nation. His portraits, subject pictures, graphic designs, and even works not necessarily executed but only imagined by the writer were praised in epigrams, odes, sonnets, and ekphrases. Eulogistic writings followed soon after his death, mostly from the same pens that had celebrated him in life. Despite a distaste for the form and tone taken in much of the writing on Romney, Cunningham perceived the careful contrivances behind them:

Of all our eminent artists Romney has perhaps been the most fortunate in his biographers. Reynolds squandered his wines, his portraits, and finally, his fortune, on men of skill and genius; yet none of them wrote a word worthy of him when he was gone. Romney moved among persons of less literary eminence, yet his character as a man and his talents as a painter have been more cleverly as well as cordially dealt by.<sup>58</sup>

Romney's body of work from the period in Kendal and the early years in London before he is known to have been closely associated with any major poets or writers reveals that he was easily finding plenty of interesting subjects: designs from mythology such as *Perseus and Andromeda*; episodes from Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*; scenes from British literature and history, such as *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Death of David Rizzio*, and *Elfrida* and a picture from recent history, the first depiction of *The Death of General Wolfe*, are present either in sketchbooks or were known to have been painted and exhibited.<sup>59</sup> But in addition to his yearning for 'the sublimer works of the poets', and his happiness when 'any of his literary friends

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Hayley biography and indeed provides a thin account of William Blake's artistic involvement with Hayley.

<sup>57</sup> Cunningham, *Lives of the British Painters*, 1829-33, 5: 80.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>59</sup> See John Romney's list of works in the Kendal Lottery in *Memoirs of Romney*, 24-5. See also Alex Kidson and Yvonne Romney Dixon, 'Romney Sketchbooks in Public Collections', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 8 (1993), sketchbooks in the Huntington Library, Abbot Hall and Kendal Town Hall.



would furnish him with subjects from which he might make his selection',<sup>60</sup> Romney obviously understood the more significant services that his connections with poets and other writers could provide.

In his *Lives of the Painters* Giorgio Vasari comments in several places on the fame and glory that poets were able to bring to his contemporary and earlier Italian artists. In mentioning Petrarch's verses to Simone Martini; Pietro Bembo's and Ariosto's praise of Giovanni Bellini; and Giovanni dell Casa's sonnet to Titian he remarks, 'What greater reward can our artists desire for their labours than to be celebrated by the pens of illustrious poets.'<sup>61</sup> As a biographer, of course, he, too, added fame to the artists and works he discussed. Vasari was only repeating the pattern set by the first-century historian Pliny the Elder, who praised particular antique artists and their well-known works—which had become better known in the poetry that sang their praises. Referring to a statue by Myron celebrated in verse, Pliny makes the pithy observation that 'most men owe their reputation more to someone else's talent than their own'.<sup>62</sup> This was still patently true in eighteenth-century Britain: those who were writing about Romney and promoting his career were also in the process of building their own reputations and saw the advantages of an association with a fashionable artist.

Richard Cumberland recalled in his *Memoirs* bringing the prominent actor and manager David Garrick to Romney's studio in 1768 to survey his latest works. Noticing an in-progress portrait of Cumberland, Garrick commented on its merits and advised the artist to depict the sitter with a pen in his hand, 'a paper on his table, and make him a poet; if you can once set him down well to his writing who knows but in time he may write something in your praise?'<sup>63</sup> Cumberland comments that Garrick's words were not 'absolutely unprophetic', though he demurs from listing his many writings on the artist. Throughout their long friendship Cumberland would publish verses addressed to Romney in the *Public Advertiser* in 1770; dedicate two odes to

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<sup>60</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 156-7.

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 1<sup>st</sup> published 1551, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1568; this edition trans. by A.B. Hinds (London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1950), Vol. II: 52.

<sup>62</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History in Ten Books*, trans. by H. Rackman (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), Vol. IX: Book 34, line 55.

<sup>63</sup> *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland*, 310. See figs. 7 and 8; footnotes 40 and 41. Garrick was accustomed to advising artists, particularly Francis Hayman, see Brian Allen, *Francis Hayman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 17.



him in 1776 (*To the Sun* and *To Dr. Robert James*); compose an imaginary ekphrasis featuring Romney as Timanthes that was used to puff the Boydell Shakespeare scheme in *The Observer*; refer to Romney's works in the text of his novel *Arundel* of 1789; and write an obituary-biography for the *European Magazine* in 1803. A classical scholar and a government official, Cumberland was just becoming known as a playwright at the time he befriended Romney. His first successful play, *The Two Brothers* of 1769, which included reference in the epilogue to Reynolds's portrait of Garrick between the comic and tragic muses,<sup>64</sup> was followed by his popular sentimental comedy *The West Indian*, which opened January 1771, and for which Romney designed the title page vignette of Tragedy and Comedy (fig. 12). It was around this time that Cumberland published his verses to Romney in the *Public Advertiser*—verses that speak of Romney as if he were one of the noble protagonists in a Cumberland play whose patience and virtue are rewarded in the end. The poem despairs of the 'Gothic rage' and 'monkish ignorance' that brought an end to the classical era but it rejoices at the revival of art in Italy and the now burgeoning British school. With Reynolds to lead the way, and followed by Cotes, Dance, Gainsborough, Mortimer, Stubbs, Wright, Zoffany, and West, this artistic community lacks a certain figure who stands at the seaside

Apart, and bending o'er the azure tide,  
 With heav'nly Contemplation\* by his side,  
 A pensive artist stands in studious mood,  
 With down-cast looks he eyes the ebbing flood;  
 No wild ambition swells his temperate heart,  
 Himself as pure and patient as his art;  
 Nor sullen sorrow, nor intemp'rate joy  
 The even tenour of his thoughts destroy:  
 Shunn'd by the bold, unnotic'd by the proud,  
 He strays at distance from the clam'rous crowd;  
 A blushing, backward candidate for fame,  
 At once his country's honour, and its shame.  
 —Rous'd then at length, with honest pride inspir'd,  
 Romney, advance! be known, and be admir'd.

\*The few who attended the unfashionable exhibition at Spring Gardens, may possibly recollect to have seen a full-length figure, which answers to this character, painted by a Mr. Romney, a name totally unknown to the modern professors of virtu.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> See Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Subject Pictures* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 31.

<sup>65</sup> First published in the *Public Advertiser* 12 June 1770 and reprinted in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 63-66. Cumberland also reprints the poem in a slightly amended version in his own *Memoirs*



Cumberland here refers to the recent Society of Arts exhibition that included Romney's pendant paintings *Melancholy* and *Mirth*, and although he had earlier steered Romney away from titling them *l'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and thus illustrating Milton's poetry, these verses incorporate imagery taken directly from *Il Penseroso*. Phrases about the pensive subject with down-cast looks accompanied by Contemplation not only bring Milton to mind but also cast Romney as the melancholic personification himself. Cumberland understood the sophisticated poetic tool of allusion: by referencing *Il Penseroso*, he was able to align Romney and himself with the highly-respected seventeenth-century English poet in the context of a new, original work. This was an important aspect of the creative thrust of eighteenth-century British literature—an aspect which had nothing to do with the servile practice of transcription—and an idiosyncratic form of allusion would be an equally important device for Romney as well.<sup>66</sup>

Cumberland's verses and odes dedicated to Romney, and his simultaneous rise as a literary figure—not to mention the portraits of him well known through exhibitions and engravings—probably provided inspiration to the struggling younger poet and playwright William Hayley (fig. 13), for in 1778 he published *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter*, addressed to Romney. The *Epistle* follows the same basic Enlightenment theme of progress in the arts and society that Cumberland's poem had done but in a greatly expanded version. The rise of the arts in Greece, their decline and revival, and their recent arrival in Britain (with Reynolds being the first to be touched by the muse of painting) is also spun out in Augustan-neoclassical couplets, but lengthy, scholarly notes augment the superficial criticism and facile rhymes. Hayley advises Romney to shun the vanity of portraiture for a higher genre and even offers specific subjects of a nationalistic flavour to the artist, who 'art has chosen,

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of 1807. Describing Romney as totally unknown to connoisseurs is an untrue rhetorical flourish but also an indication of Cumberland's attempts to claim as his exclusive discovery this new talent. At this point Romney was actively exhibiting his works and receiving public notice.

<sup>66</sup> See Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2002), Part I 'The Poet as Heir' for the anxieties of Augustan literature regarding its relationship with the Shakespearean and Miltonic achievement alongside the appropriation of the new, neoclassical genre. For the influence of Milton's *l'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* on the eighteenth century see Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'False Themes and Gentle Minds', *Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 1986), 19-30; Raymond Kiblansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), 227-231; Eleanor M. Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969, reprint, Columbia University Press, 1932), 14-16 and Chapter Two, 'Invocations to Melancholy'.



with successful hand / To spread her empire o'er this honor'd land'. The *Epistle* was well-reviewed and a popular success, and both Hayley's and Cumberland's attentions to Romney became a talking point in London society. Edward Gibbon remarked of the verses that, 'if they did not contribute much to [Romney's] professional prosperity, they may be justly called an elegant advertisement of his merit'.<sup>67</sup> Fanny Burney wrote to her sister of Samuel Johnson's comments in 1778 on the rise of 'Romney, the Painter, who has lately got into great business, & who was first recommended & patronized by Mr. Cumberland. "See, Madam, said Dr. Johnson, Laughing, what it is to have the favour of a *Literary* man!"'<sup>68</sup> Even after Romney's death the verses and their effects were still remembered and discussed. In 1803 Ozias Humphry, who had travelled with Romney to Rome thirty years earlier, told Joseph Farington that Hayley's poem to Romney, which appeared not long after his return from Italy, had been 'of great service' to the artist.<sup>69</sup> The writer of Humphry's obituary in 1810 mentioned Hayley's poem, which was 'commended by the critics, quoted by the newspapers, magazines, and reviews, and, in short, became so popular a subject of attention, that it diverted the public favour to Romney, whose long-established reputation had well qualified him to profit by the kind intentions of his poetical encomiast'.<sup>70</sup>

There is little doubt that Hayley expected—and got—substantial returns for his 'signal' services to Romney.<sup>71</sup> Although his initial, introductory letter of 1776 invited Romney down to Earham for a rest from the drudgery of his portraiture business, Hayley soon set him to work as his in-house portraitist.<sup>72</sup> This first of Romney's annual late-summer, early-autumn visits to Hayley was productive of portraits of two

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<sup>67</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Fanny to Susanna Burney, 26 Sept. 1778, *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Larse E. Troide and Stewart J. Cooke, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) Vol III: 168

<sup>69</sup> *Farington's Diary*, 15 May 1803, VI: 2031

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, 'Biographical Account of the late Mr. Ozias Humphrey. April 1810', *Gentleman's Magazine* LXXX Vol. I: 378-380.

<sup>71</sup> This is certainly how John Romney felt. After his father's death John was involved in several squabbles with Hayley over financial matters and arguments over the ownership of certain portraits. Complaining in a letter of 22 August 1803 to Thomas Greene about an old, un-repaid loan from his father to Hayley, John remarks that Hayley 'insults my father's memory by saying it is no more than a just return for his signal services....' NAL Ms. L1948/4031/21.

<sup>72</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 71-76. William Blake found himself in a similar situation many years later: at the invitation of Hayley and the promise of meaningful work, Blake relocated to Sussex but he found himself underemployed. He complained of his frustrations to his friends and family at this time. See *The Letters of William Blake with related documents*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1980), especially William Blake to James Blake, 30 January 1803, 50.



of his close friends, then also visiting: William Long, the eminent surgeon, and John Thornton, a lawyer who had been at Trinity Hall, Cambridge with Hayley.

Subsequently, his library would fill up with Romney's painted faces. Hayley recalled that Romney was 'particularly pleased by my reading to him, Italian books upon painting', and he was delighted with the anecdotes in Vasari's *Lives*.<sup>73</sup> It is difficult to imagine that Hayley did not read aloud Vasari's comments on painters fortunate enough 'to live in the time of some famous writer, by whose works they sometimes receive a reward of eternal honour and fame in return for some small portrait or other courtesy of an artistic kind'.<sup>74</sup> The artist's son recognized that 'posthumous fame was an object of Mr. Romney's ambition', and he observed that Hayley's intimation that he was to write Romney's biography made his father 'extremely afraid of doing any thing that might give offence', and made him vulnerable to Hayley's manipulations.<sup>75</sup>

Romney's gifts of portraits fit into a culture of flattery outlined in Reggie Allen's essay 'The Sonnets of William Hayley and Gift Exchange'. Allen sees Hayley's method of inserting himself into the sphere of prominent characters with an introductory letter and an accompanying laudatory sonnet as a means of securing an artistic community of painters and poets based on sympathy and reciprocity. Ideally, the recipient should respond positively, but even if they did not, Hayley could still publish the poem he had sent: 'Each sonnet he published thus reiterated his role as a poet. Those that praised other artists reaffirmed his generosity as a patron and those that praised other patrons reaffirmed his social connections. The works his artists produced about him performed the same social functions as the works by him.'<sup>76</sup> The exchanges of verse between Hayley and Anna Seward, and Hayley and William Cowper are mirrored by Romney's portraits of these figures and the sonnets addressed to him expressing their thanks and admiration of his ability to 'trace/On chart or canvass, not the form alone/And semblance, but, however faintly shown,/The mind's

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<sup>73</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 328.

<sup>74</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, I: 128. Vasari is here discussing the relationship between Simone Martini and Petrarch, and the gift of a portrait of Laura.

<sup>75</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 140, 164.

<sup>76</sup> Reggie Allen, 'The Sonnets of William Hayley and Gift Exchange', *European Romantic Review* 13 (2002), 384. A much earlier commentator on this circle has put it more bluntly: 'Reciprocity governed the lower slopes of Parnassus with an iron hand.... if reciprocity is our theme it is time to come to Mr. Hayley himself; for it was he and Miss Seward who carried the art of mutual admiration to its highest point in English literature'. Lucas, *A Swan and her Friends*, 167.



impression on every face'.<sup>77</sup> The pastel portrait that Romney had made of Cowper in August 1792 while both were with Hayley at Eartham (see fig. 99), remained in the library there after they left. Cowper laboured daily for two months, attempting different poetic forms, to compose the appropriate verses to commemorate this gift from Romney to Hayley, and he then sent the finished sonnet to Hayley for approval before it was given to Romney. Meanwhile, Romney was fulfilling his promise to Cowper to send him a portrait of Hayley. This arrived at the end of November, and Cowper wrote both to Romney, to thank him, and to Hayley, with verses on how this portrait would maintain their warm friendship.<sup>78</sup> Anna Seward, the 'Swan of Lichfield', also wrote sonnets inspired by her visit to Eartham and the exchange of portraits. Romney copied the portrait he had made of Seward for Hayley's library and gave it to her as a gift for her father (fig. 14).<sup>79</sup> Naturally, Romney received thanks for the portrait in the form of an 'impromptu' from Seward. Hayley cites this as one of many instances in which Romney's 'benevolent affections', which were stronger than any 'pursuit of affluence, or fame', resulted in a portrait of a member of their circle.<sup>80</sup>

The appreciative verses aimed at Romney's portraits stretched well beyond this particular group to include various admirers of the painter and his sitters, which illustrates a general climate of versifying being indulged in polite eighteenth-century society. In the biography of his father, John Romney reprints several of these poems, such as the anonymous verses on the portrait of the beautiful Miss Shakespear, 'As angels lovely, and as Venus fair'.<sup>81</sup> Horace Walpole's poem on the portrait of Lady Craven declared, 'Romney alone, in this fair image caught/Each Charm's expression

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<sup>77</sup> William Cowper's sonnet to Romney on the pastel portrait of the former. Cited in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 227.

<sup>78</sup> For the letters discussing the portraits and their accompanying verses, from August through December 1792, see *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford University Press, 1984), Vol IV: 177-251.

<sup>79</sup> The provenance of the Seward portraits is uncertain. There are two known versions; one at the University of Vermont, the other at the Winston-Salem Public Library, North Carolina. Seward was highly pleased with Romney's rendering of herself: writing to Hayley 9 Nov. 1788 she calls it one of the finest portraits she ever saw, and she notes with pride that it has outshone an earlier portrait by another artist: 'I keep the one by poor Kettle, for which you know I sat at nineteen, as a foil to Titiano's, and am diverted with people taking it for my mother's picture, after they have looked at Romney's.' *Letters of Anna Seward* II: 190.

<sup>80</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 89-90; John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 200-203.

<sup>81</sup> The poem was sent to Romney by 'U.B.', October 1785. John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 196.



and each Feature's thought'.<sup>82</sup> Of course this tradition extended beyond Romney and even on to the Anglo-American world of Gilbert Stuart, who received a poem about his portrait of Sarah Morton, the 'American Sappho', from the sitter herself. Stuart responded to Morton in verse—an exchange that recalls the poetry Michelangelo traded with admirers of his Medici Tomb sculpture *Night*.<sup>83</sup> These kinds of formulaic encomiums praising the artist's skill along with the attributes of the sitter derive from early Renaissance conventions, as demonstrated in the sonnets by Petrarch which praised the naturalism and mimesis in the portraits of his Laura.<sup>84</sup> But it is in the writings about Romney's subject pictures that his eulogizers are able to truly flex their poetic muscles and demonstrate their appropriation of other, more ambitious literary traditions.

Although the larger part of Romney's business was devoted to portraiture, his drawings and paintings inspired by literature attracted a disproportionate share of literary attention. Writing about these works clearly required a greater knowledge of the history of art and more powers of discernment than did praising the beauty of a portrait. J. Cooper's ode on *Milton and his Daughters* (see fig. 188), painted in 1793-4, is more of a paean to Milton than to Romney, and it goes beyond the painted canvas to include a brief description of some of the sublime scenes from *Paradise Lost* in the style of the antique epigrams on art.<sup>85</sup> Hayley's 1788 collection of his poems and plays includes the *Sonnet on Romney's Picture of Cassandra*, which was also written in the form of a quasi-ancient epigram, and it incorporates the common trope of comparing an artist and his or her work to the most celebrated classical painter, Apelles.<sup>86</sup> He later also wrote a sonnet on Romney's picture of *The Maid of Orleans*, which illustrated Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part I*.<sup>87</sup> Anna Seward took the opportunity of her *Epistle to Mr Romney, Being Presented by Him with a Picture of*

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<sup>82</sup> Walpole's verse is reprinted in Humphry Ward and W. Roberts, *Romney, a Biographical and Critical Essay with a Catalogue Raisonné of his Works* (London: Thos Agnew and Sons, 1904), Vol. I:51.

<sup>83</sup> Morton's verse and Stuart's reply of 34 lines were published in *The Port Folio* 18 June 1803. For Michelangelo see *Vasari's Lives*, Vol. IV: 135; Norman E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet, The Renaissance Response to Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 75.

<sup>84</sup> See Land, *The Viewer as Poet*, 81-2.

<sup>85</sup> Reprinted in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 229-30.

<sup>86</sup> See David Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles, A Study in the Humanist Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), Chapter Five, 'Apelles and the Tradition of the Academies'. Cast cites comparisons between modern and ancient painters, particularly Apelles, beginning as early as writings on Giotto, Simone Martini, and Jan van Eyck.

<sup>87</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 159-60.



*William Hayley, Esq.* to expatiate not only on Hayley's portrait and his genius but also to muse on *pictura poesis*; to survey the greatest renaissance painters; and to write ekphrastically about John Gay's ballad *Sweet William's Farewell to Black-ey'd Susan*, a subject also treated by Romney—although it is difficult to know if she was writing in response to a design by Romney or if he took the hint of her poem to approach the subject in the first place. These writings take their cue from the humanist tradition, and ultimately, from the writings on art from antiquity, and although most of the professional writers who befriended Romney were familiar with Latin and Greek (Seward and Cumberland would in fact publish translations of literature from antiquity), there were also plenty of classical sources on art available in English—books which testify to a broad interest in classical culture throughout the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the century, the third Earl of Shaftesbury's influential essay *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules* gave instructions for composing an ideal history painting based on Xenophon's fable.<sup>88</sup> The theme of the choice of Hercules is also covered in Joseph Spence's *Polymetis or, An enquiry concerning the Agreement between works of the Roman poets and the remains of the antient artists*, which was first published in 1747 and went through several editions and abridgements up to 1823. John Dryden's translations from Ovid and Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* provided some of the more picturesque scenes from antique literature. Dryden's *Art of Painting* includes a list of antique and modern references on art in translation: 'the Library of a Painter, and a Catalogue of such Books as he ought either to read himself or have read to him'.<sup>89</sup> The *Anthologia Graeca* was available in English in many forms, not least of which was John Elsum's *A Description of the Celebrated Pieces of Painting of the most Eminent Masters Ancient and Modern* of 1704, which translated Greek epigrams on painting, such as *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia, Daughter of Agamemnon; by Timanthes*, into rhyming couplets. Daniel Webb's *Inquiry Into the Beauties of Painting; and into the Merits of the Most Celebrated Painters, Ancient and Modern*, 1760, was widely read. George Turnbull's *Treatise on Ancient Painting* of 1740, like Webb's *Inquiry*, compares specific antique

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<sup>88</sup> Published 1713 with the second edition of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*. This essay clearly inspired Reynolds's *David Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy* of 1762. Garrick, who was involved in the conception of the painting, owned Shaftesbury's essay and a French translation of the original Xenophon source. See Martin Postle, *Reynolds, the Subject Pictures*, 21-25.

<sup>89</sup> Dryden, *Art of Painting*, 129-131.



artists with their counterparts in modern painting—meaning Raphael, Poussin, etc.—which offered a template for anyone wishing to take this paragone a step further to include modern British artists. Hayley is one who did do this, and his wide reading is evident in the notes at the end of the *Epistle to an Eminent Painter*; the scholarly citations there provide a good bibliography for anyone needing guidance in the classical tradition of writing about art.

The goals of the literary figures assisting Romney and other eighteenth-century British artists were not far removed from those of their models in the Renaissance. Norman E. Land has argued that the humanist writings on art, as seen in the published letters of Pietro Aretino, served several purposes: they showed a familiarity with the rhetorical descriptions of art from antiquity in epigrams and ekphrases; they demonstrated the writer's knowledge of art and its purposes; and they advertised the writer as a friend and confidant of artists—a friend important enough to be able to provide the artist with publicity.<sup>90</sup> Martin Warnke has given a further interpretation of Aretino's involvement in the arts. Through his poetry and prose discussions of paintings he built up the fame of specific artists and acted as an agent between them and noble patrons. In this way Aretino shared in their glory, using art 'as a means to achieve his objectives with the princes of Europe.'<sup>91</sup> The committee of British artists putting forth a plan in 1755 in favour of the establishment of a royal academy of arts demonstrated their awareness of the means of advancement in the arts and the mutual advantages available to artists and those supporting them. They explain the discrepancy between the historical prestige of artists on the Continent and the present situation at home not as an inherent lack of ability in native artists but as the result of less sophisticated patterns of patronage: 'When Princes for their Grandeur, or Priests for their Profit, have had Recourse to Painting, the Encouragement given to the Professor gave Spirit to the Art; and every one thought it worth his while to

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<sup>90</sup> Land, *The Viewer as Poet* 151. Several Aretino titles, including the *Lettere* are listed in the posthumous sale catalogue of Hayley's library, *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, ed. by ANL Munby (London; Mansell Publishing 1971), 90

<sup>91</sup> Warnke, *The Court Artist*, 85. See also David Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles* (42-43) for the involvement in the arts by humanists attempting to ingratiate themselves with powerful figures at court. There is much evidence for the intersection of art and politics in a later period, particularly as regards the invention of Guido Reni's *Abduction of Helen* and the encomiums that shaped its reception in the 1630s. Anthony Colantuono has demonstrated how this painting was deployed as a tool of political persuasion, its iconography devised within a sophisticated network of literary and political patronage that included papal influence. *Guido Reni's Abduction of Helen: The Politics and Rhetoric of Painting in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).



distinguish himself, in Hope of sharing the Reward.’<sup>92</sup> This suggests that the struggle to promote British art allowed for the importation of particular renaissance cultural and artistic practices and explains how Reynolds could claim over twenty years later that there were many literary men willing to assist artists with their history painting.

Reynolds did not mention it but there were also many literary women who were ready to align themselves with sympathetic artists in order to enjoy the same mutual benefits as did their male counterparts. Helen Maria Williams (1761-1827), a young poet new to London in the early 1780s, quickly immersed herself into elite, intellectual circles and formed her career as a writer of prose and verse addressing progressive themes such as the abolition of slavery and the European exploitation of Native Americans. The lengthy list of subscribers to her collection of verse published in 1786 comprises the most fashionable and liberal members of the nobility, prominent Whigs, and the literati; and it also includes Hayley and his wife, Eliza, as well as both Romney and Reynolds. These two artists receive a mention in her poem *An Ode on the Peace*, written in 1783, which celebrates the new era brought by the end of hostilities between Britain and her former colonies in America:

Bright painted living forms shall rise,  
And wrapt in Ugolino’s woe,  
Shall Reynolds wake unbidden sighs  
And Romney’s graceful pencil flow,  
That Nature’s look benign portrays\*,  
When to her infant Shakspeare’s gaze  
The partial nymph, “unveiled her awful face,”  
And bade his “colours clear” her features trace.

\*“Nature’s look benign portrays”—a subject Mr Romney has taken from Gray’s Progress of Poesy.<sup>93</sup>

Reynolds’s *Ugolino and his Children in the Dungeon*, from Dante’s *Inferno*, was well known after being exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1773, and it had also received notice in Hayley’s *Epistle to Romney*.<sup>94</sup> Yet Romney’s *Nature Unveiling herself to the Infant Shakespeare*—like the *Cassandra*, the design of the sad, seaside damsel

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<sup>92</sup> *The Plan of an Academy for the Better Cultivation, Improvement and Encouragement of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and the Art of Design in General*... (London, 1755), vi. Among the artists signing this pamphlet are Gavin Hamilton, Francis Hayman, Thomas Hudson, and Joshua Reynolds.

<sup>93</sup> *An Ode on the Peace*, reprinted in Helen Maria Williams, *Poems* (London: T. Cadell, 1786).

<sup>94</sup> James Northcote recalled that Reynolds’s picture first existed as only the head of a beggar until either Oliver Goldsmith or Edmund Burke suggested it be expanded into a historical picture illustrating Dante. See Postle, *Reynolds, the Subject Pictures*, 138-40.



*Black-ey'd Susan*, and the unfinished *Maid of Orleans*—was exhibited nowhere but Romney's studio; and even there it was only viewable in the form of graphite or pen and ink drawings, a black chalk cartoon (see figs. 134 and 138), or possibly as an unfinished oil. Williams's footnote within her poem reveals her familiarity not only with the work itself but even with the literary invention of *Nature Unveiling*. This contradicts the presumption that Romney's designs from fancy were strictly the personal and private exercises of a recluse and evidence of his career frustrations, known only to a select few (an idea fostered in the early biographies and repeated subsequently) but rather supports the idea that access to Romney's Cavendish Square home and studio carried a cachet of its own, being an alternative exhibition venue to the Royal Academy.

Hayley is known to have advised both Romney and Wright of Derby against joining the Academy, and although Wright eventually did become an academician—albeit a disgruntled one—Romney never did.<sup>95</sup> Much has been made of Romney's supposed snub by the Academy in the early, faction-conscious biographies, and Cunningham supposed that he took pleasure in 'witnessing the odium which the President's party incurred by keeping an artist of his talents and fame out of their ranks'.<sup>96</sup> But according to Hayley, Romney made a conscious choice—after persuasion—to avoid the inevitable aggravations of a 'post so ill suited to a mind of sensibilities too acute for the peaceful enjoyment of a high public station'. Yet, paradoxically, Hayley's arguments in favour of 'confining the display of his works, whether portraits or fancy pictures, to the circle of his own domestic gallery' saw that domestic setting become 'a favorite scene of general resort'.<sup>97</sup> Romney's business and social life certainly did not suffer for his distance from the Academy; as a viewing space his studio attracted opposition figures as prominent as Charles James Fox, the Prince of Wales, the

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<sup>95</sup> In discussing academy politics and the choice of academicians, Joseph Farington repeated a story about Wright's hostility towards the offer of a diploma. He further remarked that 'Romney & Hayley, both of whom are unfriendly to the academy have contributed to prejudice Wright against it'. *Diary of Joseph Farington*, 20 Oct. 1796, III: 679-80. John Romney bitterly regretted that his father was influenced against the Academy and points out that he had thrived when a member of the Society of Artists. *Memoirs of Romney*, 139-40. That Romney entertained late plans to set up a small, private academy for the benefit of young artists argues that he was not philosophically opposed to academic principles but that the reasons for his lack of RA membership were more complex.

<sup>96</sup> Cunningham, *Lives of the British Painters*, Vol. 5: 77. Cunningham argues, 'his name has lost nothing by coming down to posterity untagged with initials', which, by the vantage point of the early-mid nineteenth century, may not necessarily be true.

<sup>97</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 100-102.



Duchess of Devonshire, and Thomas Paine. The comings and goings at his studio and home were well known—the readings of the latest plays by Cumberland or Hayley as well as the performances of Emma, Lady Hamilton held at Cavendish Square were reported in the press or disseminated through society gossip.<sup>98</sup> Romney's deliberate Academy-outsider status obviously made him stand apart in the London art world and made him an attractive artist to write about for anyone desiring special notice as a cutting-edge poet—especially those indulging in the poetry of sensibility, a genre infusing many of Romney's portraits and subject pictures. Such direct and indirect publicity of the artist and his works makes Romney's disinclination to exhibit publicly after his trip to Italy (the paintings contributed to the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery after 1790 being the notable exception) a moot point, and Hayley was one of the figures who benefited from Romney's aura of exclusivity.

For all his poetic homage to the Augustan world of Pope and neoclassical couplets, Hayley's reputation was that of a modern, enlightened figure associated with progressive causes and, after the era of the French Revolution and the backlash-hysteria of the English 'White Terror', he was considered by some as a 'violent Republican'.<sup>99</sup> His didactic poems from the 1770s through the 1790s—his publications on painting and sculpture as well as the *Essay on History* of 1780 and the *Essay on Epic Poetry* of 1782—do tap into the fashionable nationalistic rhetoric that supported the rise of British arts. The common Protestant hostility towards allegory and Christian iconography, resulting in anti-French and anti-Catholic sentiments, are present in this discourse and inform Hayley's verse as much as anyone else's, and he puts his sense of national pride across blatantly in his *Epistle* to Romney. Having declared that the recent military triumphs over France had caused Painting to smile on 'this propitious ground', he characterized French painting as a perversion of beauty that mistook bombast for grandeur and affectation for grace:

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<sup>98</sup> Romney's activities were most frequently reported in *The World*, which retained contributors who happened to be social acquaintances of the artist. They reported 20 Feb. 1787, 'Some days since, Mr. Cumberland read his new Comedy at the home of Mr. Romney, in Cavendish Square, to a select party. The Play is well spoken of, & we have no doubt, deserves it...' Romney mentioned to Hayley in a letter of 29 Aug 1791 of Lady Hamilton performing in his house in front of 'some of the nobility'. Later, in 1796, Romney was writing to Hayley of the prominent visitors to his 'much frequented' gallery, which included Charles James Fox and the Prince of Wales more than once. Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 165, 239.

<sup>99</sup> *The Diary of Joseph Farington* 6 Jan. 1795, II: 289. The conservative and pro-Academy Farington had little patience with anyone he suspected of democratic sympathies and uses this phrase towards others as apparently the worst insult he can muster.



Loaded with dress, supremely fine advance  
Old Homer's heroes, with the airs of France.  
Indignant Art disclaim'd the motley crew,  
Resign'd their empire, and to Britain flew.

Hayley's derision of the motives of priests and princes as patrons of the arts is framed more crudely. He imagines a painting commissioned by a 'rich Abbess' which

Makes wild St. Francis on the canvas sprawl,  
That some warm Nun in mimic Trance may fall,  
Or fondly gazing on the pious whim,  
Feel saintly Love o'erload each lazy limb,  
Mistaking the Cloister's dull embrace,  
That cry of Nature for the Call of Grace.<sup>100</sup>

This passage gains even more bite given that it was written shortly before heated anti-Catholicism exploded into the Gordon Riots of 1780.<sup>101</sup>

The success of the *Epistle* brought a second edition in 1779 and a third in 1781, which were both corrected and enlarged. The edition of 1781, now re-titled *An Essay on Painting: in Two Epistles to Mr. Romney*, incorporated changes that allowed Hayley to advertise his hugely popular poem of that year, *Triumphs of Temper*, whose heroine, Serena, Romney had painted, imparting 'to th' ideal Fair/ Yet more than Beauty's bloom, and Youth's attractive air'.<sup>102</sup> Hayley repeated these twelve lines of added verse about *Serena* in his biography of Romney, acknowledging 'the zeal and kindness with which the colours of my friend embellished and gave celebrity to the most successful offspring of my Muse' (fig. 15).<sup>103</sup> Throughout Hayley's career, the benefits he received from Romney are obvious. But examination of the conditions that gave rise to the *Epistle to an Eminent Painter* argues that Hayley saw Romney right from the start as an expedient tool in building his own fame. This was recognized in the profile of Hayley that appeared in *Public Characters*, which charted his calculated rise to prominence and his search for the appropriate poetic vehicle that

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<sup>100</sup> *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter* (London: T. Payne and J. Dodsley, 1778), part II: line 105; part I: 386-392; Part II: 325-330). The first edition of the *Epistle* was published anonymously.

<sup>101</sup> Hayley's eye-witness account of the Gordon Riots is related in a paragraph within a long letter of mainly literary matters to his friend Beridge of Derby 11 June 1780. He condemns the 'immense mob of sharp-visaged sour-soul'd Scotch Zealots render'd doubly frantic by religious Enthusiasm & strong Liquors' and expresses his strongest indignation at the damage done to Lord Mansfield's library. Beridge Papers, private collection, U.K.

<sup>102</sup> William Hayley, *An Essay on Painting: in Two Epistles to Mr. Romney* (London: J. Dodsley, 1781), Epistle the Second, line 487-8.

<sup>103</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 95. Two of the *Serena* paintings sported the very recognizable features of Emma Hart (figs. 15 and 88), which would have ensured even more notice to the painter and the poet.



would show him ‘not as a competitor for momentary and perishable applause, but as a candidate for noble and lasting reputation’. Hayley looked at several different topics on which to settle his muse, until ‘painting displayed attractions which decided his opinion....His essay on painting was published in 1778, and Hayley regularly began his life as an author, in his thirty-third year’.<sup>104</sup> A comparison of Hayley’s library before and after his association with Romney and the writing of the *Epistle* supports the view of his relatively late interest in the visual arts: Hayley’s manuscript catalogue of his impressive collection of books compiled in 1772-3 comprises titles on painting numbering in the single figures. However, the 1821 posthumous sale of his library reveals an exponential rise in books on painting, sculpture, architecture, and iconography, which now total over 100—not to mention scores of other books that would have been useful in his role as advisor to artists, such as books on classical literature; modern and primitivist poetry; and cultural studies on Native Americans, Arabians, and the early Hebrews.<sup>105</sup>

The letters from John Thornton to Hayley while the latter was writing the *Epistle* illuminate further the nature of his quest for public acclaim. Thornton, who was with Hayley at Eartham during Romney’s first visit, had been providing constant advice and encouragement on literary matters. Writing to Hayley, who was on a visit to London and sitting to Romney during September 1777, Thornton told him,

I am pleased & provok’d with Romney, & both in the highest Degree: his attention & Friendship to you delights me as much as his Detention of you in Town chagrines me. However I must console myself for my present Loss of your Company by reflecting that this eminent Painter is transmitting your person to Posterity, as your Poetry will to late Times preserve the Memory of your generous & exalted Virtues.<sup>106</sup>

In this letter, Thornton critiqued the in-progress poem, scrutinizing every word. In some places he found it ‘too diffuse, & luxuriant in many Parts, & will bear still a little pruning’, whereas other lines were ‘in Pope’s best manner who is certainly a model in compositions of this kind’.<sup>107</sup> Thornton then circulated the verses among other literate friends, including William Long—‘Longinus’—who ‘is convinc’d that

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<sup>104</sup>[Edward Quinn] *Public Characters of 1799-1800* (London: Richard Phillips), 448.

<sup>105</sup>For the early catalogue see Hayley Papers, West Sussex Public Record Office, Add. Mss. 52,473; Munby, *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, 85-171.

<sup>106</sup> Hayley Papers, West Sussex PRO, Add. Mss. 2816; 12 Sept. 1777.

<sup>107</sup> Thornton to Hayley, 25 November 1777, op. cit.



the title should be George Romney Esq—& I think so too notwithstanding Cumberlands Dedication'.<sup>108</sup> The decision to accord Romney such prominence in the title was most probably considered carefully. Boswell recorded a conversation between Reynolds and Dr. Johnson in which they discussed the propriety of Cumberland having dedicated his odes of 1776 to Romney. Johnson felt that

they would have been thought as good as Odes commonly are, if Cumberland had not put his name to them; but a name immediately draws censure, unless it be a name that bears down everything before it. Nay, Cumberland has made his *Odes* subsidiary to the fame of another man. They might have run well enough by themselves; but he has not only loaded them with a name, but has made them carry double.<sup>109</sup>

Hayley's *Epistle* was first published without any author's name given, be it out of a dignified modesty or cautiousness over its reception; however, after its success with the critics, the second edition was published with Hayley's name on the title page.

Hayley's fame was not necessarily seen by all as of the glorious variety. After receiving her gift of a laurel crown, Horace Walpole wrote sardonically to Lady Ossory on the current mode of self-promotion through public versifying:

I tried it on immediately; but it certainly was never made for me; it was a vast deal too big, and did not fit me at all...but if you would give me leave to present it to poor Mr. Hayley, or Mr. Cumberland, who ruin themselves in new laurels every day, it would make them as happy as princes; and I dare answer that either of them would write an ode upon you....<sup>110</sup>

But perhaps the most perspicuous commentator on artistic encomiums was James Barry (1741-1806). As an uncompromising history painter he resented the attention given to the 'artfully bloated names' of living portraitists and 'other unimportant triflers', which diverted the public from more important works. He understood that the praise of such fashionable artists had more to do with partiality and friendship

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<sup>108</sup> Thornton to Hayley, 20 December 1777, op. cit. In his *Memoirs*, Hayley admits to the assistance he received from Thornton and Long, his 'Aristotle and Longinus', as well as from Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke, who discussed the poem favourably with Romney and offered ideas of improvement to for the second edition. Hayley 'availed himself' of the suggestions and sent a letter of thanks to the Earl along with a flattering sonnet. This in turn elicited a letter of thanks from the Earl. *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.* ed. by John Johnson (London: Henry Colburn, 1823) I:172-3.

<sup>109</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ed. by R.W. Chapman (Oxford University Press, 1980), 747-8, 12 April 1776.

<sup>110</sup> Walpole to Lady Ossory, 20 June 1785, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford*, ed. by Mrs. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), Vol. 13: 271. For the tension between the painter of a portrait and the portrait's sitter and the competition for fame see Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 285.



than true criticism, and indeed, even the surviving writings from antiquity actually said very little about the qualities of the art they were discussing. Barry felt that the proof of the unreliability of classical sources on art was evinced in the example of modern panegyrics of paintings and painters,

which are transmitted to us through the vague exaggerated mediums of poetry and rhetoric, where particulars are but seldom specified, and even when they are, little else is discoverable than the effort of the writer to collect the whole powers of his own art, and to express himself with the greatest possible force or elegance upon the subject he has in hand, and frequently with but little reference to that which appears to have introduced it. Of this no one can doubt who has read Pope's Epistle to Jervoise, and the very spirited and elegant Poem lately published by Mr. Hayley.<sup>111</sup>

If Hayley's verses to Romney were self-serving, so, too, were his suggestions of subjects. Wright of Derby's painting *The Corinthian Maid* of 1783 (fig. 16) and Romney's drawings of the subject of probably an earlier date (fig. 17) provide de facto illustrations to Hayley's *Essay on Painting* as this story of the founding of the arts is given prominence in both the text and the endnotes. The ideas embodied in the tale, such as love being the foundation for the pictorial arts and the implications involving female sacrifice and virtue provide credence to Hayley's brand of sentimental poetry and prose, offering classical authority for the heroic but faithful and chaste women in his *Triumphs of Temper* and *Essay on Old Maids*.<sup>112</sup> Anna Seward also offered subjects to her artist friends that would illustrate and advertise her latest literary endeavours. In 1788 she wrote to a friend of her work on a Runic ode (*Herva at the tomb of Argantyr*), saying she was 'building more than 200 rhymes, upon a gothic foundation... the basis appears to me far more sublime than even the descent of Odin; and it presents the finest possible moment to Mr Wright's fire-tipt pencil'.<sup>113</sup> An ardent admirer of Hayley, Seward treasured her friendship with him and recited his verse at social gatherings. She also closely followed his career path:

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<sup>111</sup> Barry's comments were published in his 1783 account of his series of paintings in the Great Room of the Society of Arts, London, and reprinted in *The Works of James Barry*, ed. by Dr. Edward Fryer (London, 1809), Vol. II: 375, 398, 401-2. Barry felt that both 'moral and good' and 'hireling scribblers' were equally guilty of this vague and general, ultimately meaningless praise.

<sup>112</sup> For the popularity of the story of the maid of Corinth in the eighteenth century and the contemporary discourse of women's role in the arts, see Ann Bermingham, 'The Origin of Painting and the Ends of Art: Wright of Derby's *Corinthian Maid*', *Painting and the Politics of Culture*, ed. by John Barrell (Oxford University Press, 1992), 135-164; Robert Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism', *Art Bulletin* 34 (1957): 279-290.

<sup>113</sup> Seward to Court Dewes, 17 June 1788; in November she writes to Hayley of the same subject. *Letters of Anna Seward*, II: 137, 190.



not only did she write her own *Epistle to Romney*, she also wrote *Verses to the Celebrated Painter, Mr. Wright of Derby* in 1783—the same year as Hayley's *Ode to Mr. Wright of Derby*, which was written 'in the hope of cheering the depressed spirit of a suffering genius' and published privately initially but included in Hayley's 1785 and 1788 collections of poems and plays.<sup>114</sup>

While Romney's literary friends and acquaintances among the peerage might not have had such commercial ambitions, all of his other professional-writer friends can be shown to have often suggested subjects that would have directly benefited their careers. This is possibly true even as early as the late 1750s, when Romney's illustrations to the newly-published volumes of *Tristram Shandy* were probably instigated by a propitious meeting with Laurence Sterne in York.<sup>115</sup> But in the later successful London years, there is no doubt that illustrations by Romney, or references to his celebrity, were seen as an efficient means of tasteful advertisement for a writer. In 1779 William Mickle (1735-1788), then at the height of reputation due to his translation of Camoens's *The Lusiad*, 1775, wrote to Romney with specific ideas for appropriate subjects for paintings. In the letter he reminds Romney that Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke, and 'the Poet Laureat'<sup>116</sup> had already recommended a scene from *The Lusiad*—the *Crowning of the Skeleton of Inez*—and he also suggests another *Lusiad* scene: 'You have been so good as to talk of attempting the apparition by the Cape of Good Hope. You know much better how to groupe the story than I can suggest, but there can be no harm in offering my ideas.' Mickle then discusses the most effective kind of lighting for the composition as well as the passions he had invented for this scene in his translation, 'those of melancholy gloom, the rage of disappointed pride and the ferocious consolation of revenge'.<sup>117</sup> In the same letter Mickle, from Edinburgh, also offers hints for a scene from the life of Mary, Queen of

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<sup>114</sup> *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley* I: 305. Hayley had made the acquaintance of Wright in 1776, the year he met Romney. Hayley's verses to Wright were prompted by a gift he received from the artist of a version of *Virgil's Tomb*. Given the benefits Romney had received from Hayley's *Epistle to an Eminent Painter*, there is every reason to suspect that Wright's motives in his gift-giving were not totally without self-interest.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Cumberland's biography of Romney (*European Magazine*, June 1803) refers to his period of apprenticeship and travels with Christopher 'Count' Steele and the early paintings: in Kendal, because of the author's recent encouragement in York, Romney 'painted several scenes from the *Tristram Shandy* of Sterne' (420). The paintings are lost but the print *Dr. Slop in the Parlour of Mr. Shandy* is reproduced in Hayley's biography, facing p. 30.

<sup>116</sup> William Whitehead filled this post until 1785, but Mickle might be making an ironical reference to Hayley, who was just climbing to prominence with his *Epistles to Romney*.

<sup>117</sup> Mickle to Romney, 12 April 1779, National Art Library, Ms. L1948/4031/39.



Scots, the subject of a poem he had published several years earlier. In fact, Romney had already painted Mickle's suggestion, *The Death of David Rizzio in the Presence of Mary Queen of Scots*, around 1762.

Romney's association with the Reverend Robert Potter (1721-1804) is similarly characterized by a striving for mutual benefits. Potter, continually struggling to support his family and pressing for advancement in the Church, met Romney in 1778, just as his *Tragedies of Aeschylus Translated* was achieving the popular and critical success that should have led to remuneration and preferment. While sitting to Romney for his portrait that summer, Potter was preparing notes to the text for an expanded second edition. The two obviously shared thoughts on illustrating particular scenes from the plays, as in the notes to *The Persians* Potter writes ekphrastically about the scene of the appearance of Darius' ghost and then informs his readers that noble paintings were on the way:

The excellent Mr. Romney gave a strong instance of his good sense and fine taste, when he called Aeschylus "the painter's poet:" the public may expect to see this scene, and some others, designed by him in the genuine spirit of Aeschylus; so that the translator will have this merit, if he has no other, to have given rise to some paintings that will do honour to our country.<sup>118</sup>

But Potter's correspondence with friends reveals his bitterness over both Romney's frustrating slowness to respond and his failure to achieve promotion in the Church. Romney did execute designs from Aeschylus though they did not progress beyond drawings and black chalk cartoons. Potter may have been expecting illustrations for later editions of Aeschylus or celebrated independent works inspired by his translation, but he apparently did not feel in the end that Romney had brought honour either to him or the nation.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the evidence of such conflict Romney continued to consult literary friends well into the 1790s, even as his subject pictures appear less tied to their literary sources than ever before and when, presumably, he was in less need of the assistance of an advisor. The reduction of subjects into their essentials, and the fluid elisions of themes and motifs from subject to subject produced a number of works of an abstract

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Potter, *The Tragedies of Aeschylus Translated* (London, 1779, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Vol. II: 354.

<sup>119</sup> Potter was eventually granted the prebendal stall at Norwich Cathedral by Lord Thurlow. See my 'George Romney, Robert Potter, and the *Painter's Poet*', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 7 (2002): 13-25.



and enigmatic character (fig. 18). This creative independence constitutes a renegotiation of the relationship between painter and poetry which effectively undermines the principles of *ut pictura poesis* and the traditional role of the literary advisor. This is the picture of an artist not relying on assistance for minute and mundane details of particular narratives for subject paintings. But there is no one single picture of Romney's creativity throughout his career any more than there is one model determining his relationships with the literati. Cumberland's ideas expressed in a letter for various subjects to suit 'an historical picture for the Noble person we were speaking of', a painting requiring 'beautiful forms in the nude, magnificent Scenery, with rich tints & a Splendid variety', included Apollo either coming to or leaving Thetis in her grotto; Clodius 'in a female disguise finds admission into the mysteries of Ceres'; or a group of bacchantes assisting at the initiation of a rustic nymph. Cumberland even offered an evocative description for this last suggestion:

They assail her Senses with Wine, Music and Dance; She Hesitates, and in the moment betwixt the allurements of pleasure and Temples of bashfulness, she accepts the Thyrsus in one hand & seizes the goblet with the other. Triumph and revelry possess the whole Groupe, & to every attitude of gayety, every luxuriancy of scenery enriches & enflames the composition.<sup>120</sup>

That Romney made numerous designs of *The Initiation of a Rustic Nymph* (fig. 19), apparently chosen as an expedient to depict beautiful forms, raises the question of how much in other instances the artist was inspired by literature in a fundamental sense; for here, *form* was of primacy not subject-matter. Also here, the closeness with which many of the *Rustic Nymph* drawings follow Cumberland's advice betrays the artist's willingness to please both the advisor and the patron in a traditional way. On the other hand, despite Hayley's repeated efforts to have the prison reformer John Howard memorialized in painting in a manner that matched his poetic tributes to the man, Romney failed to produce anything that Hayley's conservative artistic tastes would have found appropriate to illustrate his *Eulogies of Howard*, 1791.<sup>121</sup>

Romney's responses to Hayley's hints for pictures relating to prison scenes—probably excerpted from Howard's own matter-of-fact published reports—resulted in

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<sup>120</sup> Letter from Cumberland to Romney dated 30 September (no year given), Osborn Mss. 4058, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>121</sup> While Hayley devotes a relatively considerable section of his biography of Romney to a discussion of Howard's public benevolence and personal virtues and refers to a spare, naturalistic drawing, 'the offspring of friendship', that Romney provided for Hayley's 1780 *Ode to Howard*, he does not discuss the later designs at all.



peculiar graphite and pen and ink designs of dislocated limbs and mannerist malproportions that one can presume veer wildly from Hayley's suggestions and seem to have more in common with other contemporary subjects and concerns than the objective inspections of prison (fig. 20). Yet Romney sent Hayley letters of thanks for his 'descriptions of the picturesque prison scenes which will produce new ideas in my mind. I hope you will not forget how such kindness affects me, and how useful I find those subjects for art, that you send me.'<sup>122</sup> He also around this time mentioned designs of other subjects that he would send for Hayley's 'approbation'.<sup>123</sup> Hayley's suggestions may have ignited Romney's creativity but it appears that he sought encouragement and approval of his subjects and treatments of them from a trusted friend with firm literary credentials and a vast library as much as, or more than, a mere handout of materials.

Providing artists with subject-matter was, of course, only one facet in the building of a glorious fame. Writings about artists in their lifetimes provide a format in which their works are framed; posthumous writings have the greater task of fixing an artist's reputation for perpetuity. This necessarily demands that the eulogies of Romney, particularly the three biographies written by his intimates, be read critically. The agendas of these tributes are made clearer by the dialogues they carry on with each other and by their somewhat conflicting narratives. Hayley was personally insulted that Cumberland's short biography described Romney as an awkward provincial too vulgar to associate with the great, and he confided to John Flaxman that 'if I wanted any spur to impel me to an act of Friendship I might find one in the *Memoirs of Romney* which Mr. Cumberland has inserted with *his Name* in the European Magazine for *June* [1803]'.<sup>124</sup> Several years after Hayley's death, John Romney unleashed his bitterness towards his father's friend and advisor and the damage this friendship had caused to Romney's career and personal life. Not only was John angry

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<sup>122</sup> Romney to Hayley, 5 Jan. 1793, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 197. The letter continues, 'Indeed these came very opportunely for \_\_ had said something rather coarse to me, which wounded me very deeply, as it touched my hobby horse, and my ambition. He accused me of neglecting my portraits, and of vanity in doing things that do not turn to account. O what a damper! He likes money better than fame: but no more!'

<sup>123</sup> Romney to Hayley, 12 Dec. 1793, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 208. Here is planning a series of paintings on the *Seven Ages of Man*: 'I think of making my pictures the size of my Indian woman, and the number of the set twelve. What do you think of my plan?'

<sup>124</sup> Letter from Hayley to Flaxman, 7 Aug. 1803, *The Letters of William Blake*, 59. The sniping between Cumberland and Hayley had moved over into Cumberland's autobiography, where he refers to Hayley on a literary matter unrelated to Romney as a 'gnat'. *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland* II: 400.



at Hayley for steering his father away from the Royal Academy but he was also angry at Reynolds for being considered the better artist; at Fuseli for his uncharitable remarks about Romney's works; and at Cumberland for implying that money was a motivating force in his father's career.<sup>125</sup> All had their own methods for preserving Romney's reputation and all had their ideas on what constituted his genius—Cumberland's Romney is an edgy noble savage; Hayley's portrait of a hazardously unbalanced artist focuses on the negative aspects of the genius personality; the subject of John's biography is a natural man, rational and tame, representing the positive side of genius. But all of these views, in one way or another, support Romney's unacademic approach towards illustrating literature.

Given their long, close friendship, the length of his book and his qualifications as a biographer, Hayley's account of Romney is usually perceived as definitive. And Hayley confessed to Flaxman that the 'Caro Pittore had many years ago expressed a wish to me that I would write a Life of Him if I happened to be the survivor—He not only did this but He furnished me with many particulars of his early days from his own Lips for this purpose'.<sup>126</sup> This news set beside Hayley's claims in the Romney biography that the artist loved to be read to from Vasari's *Lives* as well as Bottari's collection of artists' letters<sup>127</sup> suggests that writings about the artist were informed by an awareness on the biographer's part—and Romney's—of the long tradition of presenting artistic lore. In this light, the fusing of formulaic conceptions about artists and their creativity derived from antique and renaissance sources as applied to Romney points to his collusion in the project; one suspects that Romney's relationships with his literary friends, his choice of subject-matter, and the tone of his letters to Hayley—presuming that they are faithfully reproduced in the biography—were performed with an eye on his legacy.<sup>128</sup> In addition, the many sensitive studies

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<sup>125</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 172-7.

<sup>126</sup> Hayley to Flaxman, 7 Aug. 1803, *Letters of Blake*, 59. Hayley cites a letter of Romney's from 1791 in which the artist indicated to Lady Hamilton that the biography was underway. *Life of Romney*, 158.

<sup>127</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 328. Vasari's *Vite* and Giovanni Bottari's *Raccolta de Lettere sulla Pittura, Scultura ed Architettura*, 7 vol. 1757 were among the titles in Hayley's library sale, and he cited from them both in the notes to his *Epistle to Romney*.

<sup>128</sup> In a refreshingly critical observation in Ward and Roberts's catalogue raisonné and biography, *Romney*, 1904, p. 68, the issue is raised of Hayley's trustworthiness concerning the Romney letters included in his biography, which are 'so obviously "edited" by the biographer'. Without actually accusing Hayley of fabricating the letters to suit himself, their suspicion is implied in their remark about the tone of the letters that show Romney 'as liable to frequent fits of depression, morbidly sensitive, and often profoundly unhappy. He cheers up when he goes to Earham...'.



and frenetic drawings done late into the night, by candlelight, were not hidden in a garret but were known to those writing about him as evidence of Romney's similarity to earlier artistic eccentrics. The Romney presented in the biographies fulfils the image created for him in his lifetime as the meditative man of feeling attracted to the gravity of emotive themes and classical forms as well as the Renaissance-Romantic irritable loner construed later—the reliance of all his encomiasts on the conventional artistic legends, selectively chosen from, contributes to the somewhat contradictory portrayals in the biographies.

The following chapters analyze the mythologies that the early writings about Romney established and both examine his fixture within them and attempt to disentangle him from their continuing influence. Specific works are discussed for their conditions of creation, revealing the extent to which Romney's literary friends were involved in the invention, execution and reception of finished paintings as well as less-finished designs in various media. These chapters offer evidence for the orthodoxy of relationships founded on reciprocal strivings for fame and glory, which in late-eighteenth-century Britain represents both the final sparks of an extinguishing tradition and the conscious role-playing involved in the revival of successful earlier cultural models.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Modern Timanthes: Romney and the *tragick stile of painting*

Allan Cunningham's biography of Romney brackets his trip to Italy, 1773-1775, with the verses published in his honour—Richard Cumberland's panegyric of 1770 and two odes dedicated to him in 1776—though he supposes that 'the roar of the ocean deafened the ear' of this ardent student of antiquity and the grand manner to such 'flattery and melody'.<sup>1</sup> Cumberland certainly had high hopes that Romney's grand tour would effect a radical rise in the artist's public profile. Writing to Romney in Rome, 14 August 1774, Cumberland assures him that the English competition—Barry, West, Dance, and Reynolds—had exhibited no 'advances in taste and execution':

How unlike to the god-like simplicity of the Antients before your Eyes, & their Copyists of Modern Antiquity the Heroes of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century....Rely upon me when I assure you, you are not forgot, on the contrary your fame rises, as the Expectations of your Country encrease, and we shall demand great things from you on your return; The designs of M. Angelo with the Colouring of Titian will have been your study and the fruits of it will build you both fame & fortune.<sup>2</sup>

Romney would come to learn that his post-Rome fame and fortune would depend on his ability to make the most of his newly-acquired artistic credentials as well as the 'flattery and melody'. And in many cases, those singing his praises were simultaneously endeavouring to capitalize on Romney's fame and fortune. Those writing about Romney and suggesting subjects to him that accorded with their own sensibilities found the trip to Rome the perfect background in which to contextualize the artist's feel for classical tragedy and the sublime—aspects which had actually been present in Romney's works all along as seen in the subjects he had been choosing and the motifs used in them. Romney may have early on received help with his works from erudite friends or he may have operated more independently, but after the trip to Rome, his relationships with the literati become more public and high profile, with Romney playing the part of Reynolds's 'docile' artist. But in reality, Romney was often taking an active role in the search for subjects and ways to

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painter, Sculptors, and Architects* (London: J. Murray, 1832) 5: 83.

<sup>2</sup> Cumberland to Romney, Osborn Mss. 345/4, Beinecke Library, Yale University.



represent them. Romney could boast of something that some of his literary advisors could not—having made a trip to Italy, and his first-hand knowledge of the art of the Continent combined with the view of classical culture known through books that his friends provided was a working formula that must inform many of Romney's post-Rome works. And, as an artist who had been to Rome, Romney could more easily gain the status required to incorporate him into the tradition of writings about the legendary artists of antiquity and the Renaissance; Romney could now be put forward as a modern antique.

A study-tour of Italy may have been generally perceived as a career requirement for an ambitious British artist but Romney's enthusiasm for the grand manner and the classical tradition is not in doubt. His friend from youth Thomas Greene had in 1764 sponsored a trip to Paris so that Romney would no longer be 'mortified by the answers he was obliged to give to Gentlemen inquiring if he had been abroad, and that circumstance compelled him to paint at a low price'.<sup>3</sup> But whether or not his subsequent increase in business was due at all to that short Continental trip, by the time Romney set out for Rome with the miniaturist Ozias Humphry in spring 1773 he left behind a profusion of sitters and gave up earnings of twelve hundred pounds a year, which John Romney considers 'striking proof' of disinterested and noble intentions.<sup>4</sup> John, always striving to steer perceptions of his father's persona towards the *via media*, argues that in Rome it was Raphael who served as the greatest tutor to Romney. John imagines that his father took an approach of moderation as did the master himself: 'Michael Angelo should be studied rather than imitated; the *fierte* of his overcharged style should be tempered by other milder characteristics of art. It was thus that Raffaele did when he saw his works in the Capella Sistina....'<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, John must admit to what the evidence of the letters written from Italy

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<sup>3</sup> Greene's comments are part of a biography he wrote of Romney less than a month after the artist's death in November 1802. The manuscript was passed to Cumberland and formed the basis for his biographical memoir published in the *European Magazine*, June 1803. The original document, Preston Record Office, Dawson-Greene Papers, is reproduced in David A. Cross, 'George Romney: the Earliest Biography of 1802', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 9 (2004), 16.

<sup>4</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., 100. John must have been reading a book he had inherited from his father's library: Mengs noted that the young Raphael studied the works of competitors, 'and having seen those of Michael Angelo he did as Bees who extract honey even from bitter flowers, because Buonaroti was a remedy too violent for Raphael'. *The Works of Anthony Raphael Mengs*, trans. and ed. by D'Azara (London: 1796), 139.



and the sketchbooks used there reveal: not only did Romney's studies and interests encompass both the harmonious beauty of Raphael and the sublime *terribilità* of Michelangelo in the Vatican and elsewhere, but also the rest of those 'Heroes of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century' plus the 'primitives' of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as well as, of course, the remains of classical antiquity.

Romney's close attention to Raphael and Michelangelo conforms to the opinions of Reynolds expressed publicly in his *Discourses* and privately in a letter to James Barry, who was in Rome 1766-70. Reynolds advised Barry against wasting too much time attempting to earn the patronage of passing English milordi; instead one should rather 'live on bread and water than lose those advantages which he can never hope to enjoy a second time, and which he will find only in the Vatican, where I will engage no Cavalier sends students to copy for him....but it is *there* only that you can form an idea of the dignity of the art, as it is only there that you can see the works of Michael Angelo and Raffael'.<sup>6</sup> Reynolds stressed the importance of the Vatican frescoes in his fifth Discourse, delivered and printed shortly before Romney left for Italy, but an earlier lecture provided equally valuable information: Romney wrote down in his Italian notebook, almost verbatim, the advice of the second Discourse, 1769, on what to see in Bologna, and upon reaching that city he writes to Humphry, who had remained in Rome, that 'My first business, as you may suppose, was to look for the pictures which Sir Joshua has mentioned in the Discourses. I found them nearly such as he has described them.'<sup>7</sup>

That he was never associated with the Royal Academy doubtlessly fuelled the early myths regarding Romney's self-tutelage and his distancing from academic principles, though, as John Romney points out, as well as his apprenticeship in the North with the portraitist Christopher Steele, the early years in London were spent working in the Duke of Richmond's sculpture gallery and the private drawing academy in St.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter Reynolds to Barry, c. spring 1769, *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. by John Ingamells and John Edgecumbe (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 29-30. Reynolds felt that to see Raphael and Michelangelo at their best one must see their frescos, as their oil productions elsewhere (disparaged by Michelangelo) were second rate. Fifth Discourse, 10 December 1772, Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) 81.

<sup>7</sup> Italian notebook, no accession number, Fitzwilliam Museum. Romney's letter to Humphry, early 1775, John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 119.



Martin's Lane.<sup>8</sup> In Rome, Romney most likely joined many of the other visiting artists who attended day classes at the French Academy or some of the private academies; and he is known to have retained the services of a young woman who hired herself to artists for nude life modelling—a transaction that was, according to John, conducted with as much delicacy and decorum 'as the nature of the business would admit of'.<sup>9</sup> In his letter from Bologna to Humphry, Romney reports that the academy there owned 'five or six very fine anatomical figures in different actions, taken of in coloured wax; it is by much the finest school for studying in that I have seen'.<sup>10</sup> The copies that Romney made in oil of old master paintings and the sketchbooks and notebooks he used in Italy are proof enough that he had undertaken a disciplined system of essentially academical learning, whether formally or informally. Carefully labelled anatomical diagrams and ecorché studies and notes jotted down on the technicalities of mixing paints and artistic theory are juxtaposed with lists of subjects for 'Pictures on Poetry and History'. The drawings of antique sculptures and reliefs; of posed models (fig. 21); of ruins such as the Colosseum and the temples at Tivoli; and simple landscape views of the Campagna are all carried out in Romney's most sensitive, controlled strokes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 48. Apart from this reference, there is no other evidence of Romney's association with the St. Martin's Lane Academy. Yvonne Romney Dixon, too, has set out to correct misconceptions of the artist's working practices, arguing that his eagerness to embrace academic traditions of draughtsmanship is at odds with the still-current view of Romney as exclusively a self-taught creator of spontaneous and modern drawings. 'Romney's Drawings and the Academic Tradition', in Kidson, ed., *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination: Essays on George Romney* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) 187-221.

<sup>9</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 97. John is careful to point out that the young model was always chaperoned by her mother, and 'notwithstanding this species of prostitution, it does not appear that her mind was actually corrupt'. Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 57, reports that Romney thought her figure 'remarkably fine' and confirmed that she was both modest and chaperoned. John and Hayley might not need have worried: Henry Fuseli remarked that his female nude model in Rome carried a dagger and was not afraid to use it against 'gl' impertinenti'. *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. by John Knowles (London, 1831) I: 51. Hayley also mentions studies after other models in Italy; in particular, a 'Roman dwarf, called Baiocco', who posed for a head of Brutus. For the opportunities available to the visiting student-artist see Nancy L. Pressly, *The Fuseli Circle in Rome* (Yale Center for British Art, 1979), v-xii. Pressly lists Pompeo Batoni, Anton Raphael Mengs, and Gavin Hamilton among the artists who had set up private facilities for students. Humphry's obituary states that while in Rome he studied at the usual places, such as the French Academy, the Vatican, the Capitoline Museum, and various collections, but in addition he 'had an evening academy in his own apartment, which was frequented by some of the ablest living Artists'. 'Biographical Account of the Late Mr. Ozias Humphry', *Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1810, 378.

<sup>10</sup> John Romney, *Ibid.*, 120. According to John, Romney's admiration for the Bologna Academy was mutual; he surprisingly claims that at some point during his father's brief visit to the city he was offered the presidentship of the institution, 'which honour, however, he thought proper to decline for many weighty and obvious reasons', 112.

<sup>11</sup> See sketchbooks in Cumbria Record Office, Barrow, Z-242, Z-243; Department of Prints and Drawings, Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF 27895, 27896, 27897, 27898; Yale Center for British Art, New



In Rome Romney was known for his hard work and attempts at relative seclusion amid the rather incestuous community of thirty to forty British artists centred near the English coffee house at the Piazza di Spagna—the *ghetto degl' Inglese*. The letters of several British artists, so evocative of the creative climate in Rome, reveal the perception of hazards attending intense study. Joseph Wright, also studying assiduously in Rome at about the same time as Romney, had suffered, like many others, some poor health while abroad. He tells his sister that he would have recovered 'was not my attention and application continually engaged with the amazing and stupendous remains of antiquity; and so numerous are they, that one can scarce move a foot but the relics of some stupendous works present themselves'.<sup>12</sup> The intoxicating mixture of renaissance paintings, especially in the Vatican, and the ubiquitous remains of classical antiquity, which only gained visual power through their fragmentary and abstracted condition, produced powerful effects on the artists visiting Italy. This is perhaps best expressed in Henry Fuseli's drawing *The Artist Overcome by Antiquity* (fig. 22). Barry described Rome as a 'fairy land' which induced 'deliriums' of surpassing Michelangelo and Raphael.<sup>13</sup> Yet the many deliriums and fevers breaking out among the British artists in Rome could just as easily be attributed to the extreme weather: Wright described the summer of 1774 as one proving fatal to many, with temperatures reaching 120 degrees. He told his brother that, even though he was living in one of the coolest parts of the city, high on a hill, the 'intolerable heat' and distillation of sweat 'relaxed the mind and body so much as to render them unfit for study and application'.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that within the Roman artistic community the story of the architect Francesco Borromini's derangement and suicide, sleep-deprived during an oppressively sultry August night,

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Haven, B1979.12.290, B1980.30; and the notebook in the Department of Manuscripts and Printed Books, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, no inventory number.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Wright to his sister Nancy, 22 May 1774, Derby Local Studies Library Mss. BA 921.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Barry to Dr. Sleight, Nov. 1767, *Works of Barry*, ed. by Dr. Edward Fryer (London, 1809) I:139.

<sup>14</sup> William Bemrose, *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright, ARA* (London and Derby: Bemrose and Sons, 1885) 34. Not only was the trip to Rome blamed for Reynolds's hearing loss and the transformation of Fuseli's hair to white overnight, according to Hayley (*Life of Romney*, 55), Romney 'repeatedly lamented that our amiable friend Wright, the painter of Derby, had laid the foundation of those cruel nervous sufferings, which afflicted his latter years, by excess of application during his residence in Rome'.



was still a talking point.<sup>15</sup> These factors could help explain the tales of aberrant British behaviour in Rome, such as Barry's and Alexander Runciman's obsessions with sinister plots and James Jefferys's hysterical ravings in the street, complete with an exchange of pistols.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the cause, the outré acts and personalities of the British artists in Rome became a talking point: the newsy letters of the expatriate English Jesuit priest John Thorpe to Lord Arundell of Wardour speak of British artists and their vices in Rome, describing them as a 'set of the most extravagant oddities imaginable....'<sup>17</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in their important study of the formation and continuation of specific preconceived notions regarding the artistic persona and acts of creativity argue that artists from antiquity onwards were granted special licence for non-conformist behaviour.<sup>18</sup> Although the obsessive application of Leonardo while painting *The Last Supper* or Michelangelo's secrecy in the Sistine Chapel might appear, as Rudolph Wittkower has pointed out, as distinctly individualistic traits, they also conform to specific literary *topoi* concerning artists' compulsive relationships with their work.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, eighteenth-century British artists, and those writing about them, were aware of the long tradition of eccentricities reiterated in artists' biographies, and it can be presumed that those visiting Italy—living amidst the birthplace of so many of those legends—were occasionally indulging in and living up to stereotypical expectations.

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<sup>15</sup> The full account of his death, which occurred 1667, was only published 1730 in Pascoli's *Vite de' pittore, scultori ed architetti moderni*. See Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn, The Character and Conduct of Artists* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), 140-42. John Sunderland has discussed the role of the English grand tourist—such as the third Earl of Shaftesbury—in disseminating oral lore about artists in Italy, in particular, Salvator Rosa. 'The Legend and Influence of Salvator Rosa in England in the eighteenth century', *Burlington* 115 (1973), 785-6.

<sup>16</sup> For Barry's fears of assassination and his and Alexander Runciman's intimations that John Runciman's death in Rome was due to foul play see William L. Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 11-15; Duncan Macmillan, *Painting in Scotland* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1986), 49-50. For the 'Nervous fever' and depression suffered by Thomas Banks, Maria Hadfield's melancholy, and Jefferys's episode of anti-social behaviour see David Bindman, 'Thomas Banks's *Caractacus before Claudius*: new letters to and from Ozias Humphry', *Burlington* 142 (Dec. 2000), 769-772.

<sup>17</sup> 30 July 1774, Thorpe/Arundell Mss., cited in Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby, Painter of Light* (London: Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, 1968), 8. For Father Thorpe's involvement in the artistic scene in Rome see John Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1701-1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 939-41.

<sup>18</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (trans. by Alastair Laing, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, first published Vienna, 1934), Introduction, 1-12; Chapter 4, 'The Special Position of the Artist in Society', 91-132.

<sup>19</sup> 'Individualism in Art and Artists', 292-6. Wittkower has in *Born Under Saturn*, Chapter Three, 'Artists' Attitudes to their Work' surveyed these conventional themes, including the involvement with one's work to the extent of disregarding food, sleep, hygiene and dress—a commonly recurring theme in Vasari.



Not surprisingly, Hayley tried to apply some of these themes to Romney in Italy. Much to John Romney's consternation, Hayley attributed the artist's 'intense and sequestered study' in Italy to his inherent 'cautious reserve; which his singular mental infirmity, a perpetual dread of enemies, inspired, that he avoided all farther intercourse with his fellow-traveller, and with all the other artists of his country, who were then studying at Rome'.<sup>20</sup> Hayley's source for this information was Humphry himself, who also told Joseph Farington that Romney was 'a man of uncommon Concealment; in no way communicative. In what related to his Art He reserved his studies, refusing to let them be seen while He was in Italy'.<sup>21</sup> John interprets the situation differently, asserting that his father was deadly serious about his precious time in Italy whereas Humphry was 'undoubtedly a gossip and an idler, which was not the case with Mr. Romney, who might probably wish to study when the former wanted to talk'.<sup>22</sup> Wright's letter from Parma to Humphry in Florence, 24 July 1775, discusses Romney's opinions on the specific works he had seen and copied in the north of Italy, making it clear that their circle was fully aware of Romney's studies and respected his advice.<sup>23</sup> Romney's mental stability and rational study in Italy—as opposed to the experience of so many of his colleagues—contrasts sharply with Hayley's characterisation of the artist as 'frequently subject to a constitutional tremor of nerves' and with feelings 'perilously acute'.<sup>24</sup> Hayley probably would have been more just to have observed that Romney's thoughtful and sensitive temperament was suited to the grandeur and dignity of Italy and its classical past and that the trip had a salutary effect on the artist. When leaving Rome, Romney mused wistfully at the bright 'rays of Apollo' from the top of Mount Viterbo, surveying the vista for what he

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<sup>20</sup> William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq.* (London: T. Payne, 1809), 55.

<sup>21</sup> *The Diary of Joseph Farington* VI: 2117, 28 Aug 1803. Farington may have embellished Humphry's account just as Hayley had done: a letter in the Pierpont Morgan Library MAES6 (ES00130), dated 28 April 1804, is the response from Humphry to Hayley's request for information about the trip to Rome for use in the Romney biography. Humphry, recalling events of thirty years previous, does not imply that Romney's 'cautious reserve' was due to anything as sinister as a personality infirmity; Humphry's narrative mostly deals with the actual journey by land and sea to Italy. Another manuscript (Fitzwilliam Museum, Romney Papers), dated 24 Nov. 1809, is John Romney's critique of Hayley's recently published *Life of Romney* accusing the author of yielding too much credit to inaccurate authorities and having 'misrepresented these authorities'.

<sup>22</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 94-96.

<sup>23</sup> Derby Local Studies Library, microfilm 8962, letter reprinted in Bemrose p.36.

<sup>24</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 301, 329. John Flaxman (himself in Rome 1787-1794) admired Romney's ability to achieve in two years abroad what 'is usually attained by foreign studies of much longer duration'. Op. cit., 308.



realised would be the last time, and he later wrote to a fellow student still there, 'Think, O think, my dear Carter, where you are, and do not let the sweets of that divine place escape from you; do not leave a stone unturned that is classical; do not leave a form unsought out that is beautiful; nor even a line of the great Michael Angelo.'<sup>25</sup>

Romney had certainly appreciated the sedate grandeur and the sweet divinity of Italy—among the works that John Romney lists as being executed in Rome or soon after his father's return to England in 1775 are *Venus and Adonis*, *Alope*, *The Destruction of Niobe's Children*, and *Ceyx and Alcyone*, subjects part of the grand-manner canon.<sup>26</sup> But Romney, in common with many of the British artists in Rome, was also exploring subjects and styles beyond the conventionally classicizing. Although surrounded by classical sculptures and old master paintings of a calibre and quantity only available on the Continent, he executed several compositions in Rome of a favourite old subject, *King Lear*.<sup>27</sup> Romney shared his love of Shakespeare with the highly literate Henry Fuseli (1741-1825). Fuseli, who had read Shakespeare and even translated some plays into German while still a youth in Zurich, looked at the Sistine Ceiling and envisaged a similar ceiling inhabited by Shakespearean characters. Given his exuberant and confident approach to a diverse array of subject-matter and his strikingly unusual mannerist forms, Fuseli is traditionally considered the central figure among the British artists in Rome during his 1770-1778 stay, and one in which influence moved largely one way. However, Romney's subjects were equally eclectic, throughout his career, and a case can be made for a mutual influence between the two artists, or at least a healthy competition. Their later illustrations to Thomas Gray's *Descent of Odin* were germinated in Italy, as were other subjects from non-classical sources. Both artists would be preoccupied with separate Miltonic projects

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Romney in Venice to George Carter in Rome, c. Feb. 1775, reproduced in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 117; NAL Ms. L1957/942/1:2,3.

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit., 257. These subjects are listed in John's catalogue of drawings donated in 1817 to the Fitzwilliam Museum. Still a youth living in the North when his father returned to England, John is unable to be precise about titles and dating of the Roman-era works. Hayley (*Life of Romney*, 55) was not yet acquainted with Romney at this stage in his career, and he comments that 'in the memoranda, which my friend desired me to preserve as a foundation for a history of his professional pursuits, it surprises me to find no list of the works that he executed at Rome.' Richard Cumberland, one of the few Romney biographers who could have had personal knowledge of his works in Rome and the period just after his return, is disappointingly uninformative.

<sup>27</sup> See Louvre sketchbook, R.R. 25897, *Lear Awakening*. In addition, John Romney lists two drawings from *Lear* as being made in Rome or when just back in England. *Memoirs of Romney*, 257.



in the 1790s; each made studies in Rome of *Satan Startled by the Touch of Ithuriel's Spear* from *Paradise Lost*.<sup>28</sup>

Romney's particular interest in tragic and sublime subjects while abroad is revealed in the drawings of mourning figures surrounding a corpse on a bier (fig. 23), fiend heads and seated hags, and in the drawings and notes jotted down on the rituals of mystery cults and sacrifices.<sup>29</sup> Such themes were of pre-existing interest to Romney but the trip to Italy was the perfect opportunity to delve more deeply into them. In a sketchbook inscribed 'June 5, 1773' Romney has written down the subject 'Ephigenia Sacrificing from Euripides' and made a note to himself to 'see a sacrifice in the Aldobrandini Marriage', the most esteemed antique painting yet unearthed.<sup>30</sup> Judging by the subjects he had tackled in his earlier years, Romney was predisposed towards the themes of classical tragedy he would be exposed to Italy. His series of drawings from *Perseus Freeing Andromeda* (fig. 24), dating from as early as the 1760s, and the many studies of the *Accusation of Susannah*, also pre-Rome, betray an attraction to the idea of a dramatically victimized and threatened figure, most often female. The group of drawings depicting Susannah, the heroine from the Old Testament Apocrypha, includes a relatively finished composition with a frieze-like multitude who witness the accusers making their false case for a sentence of death for adultery (fig. 25). Romney's interest in this subject continued even after returning from Italy; his son claims that the *Accusation of Susannah* progressed to a large composition which was painted 'in chiaroscuro' at night by artificial light in January 1777, though it remained unfinished.<sup>31</sup> It is possible that Old Testament scenes such as *Susannah* and the *Sacrifice of Isaac* were merging into classical sacrifices even before Romney reached Italy. A succession of drawings in a sketchbook dated to the early 1770s show a humiliated and crouching nude female who had frequently been related to *Susannah* scenes but here eventually develops into the protagonist of a ritual slaughter

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<sup>28</sup> See Barrow sketchbook Z-242, used by Romney in Italy 1773-75; Fuseli's drawing is inscribed 'Roma Oct 76'. See N.L. Pressly, *Fuseli Circle*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> In the Louvre's Italian sketchbooks RF 27897 and RF 27898 Romney has copied antique reliefs of the sacrifice of bulls and rams; in the Yale Centre for British Art sketchbook B198.30 are notes on a sacrificial ritual with libation and in the Fitzwilliam notebook he has written 'Eleusinian mysteries'.

<sup>30</sup> B198.30, Yale Centre for British Art. This sketchbook was probably started in Florence before arriving in Rome 18 June.

<sup>31</sup> *Memoirs of Romney*, 145. John suggests that it remained unfinished due to the difficulties of painting by harsh, only partially-shaded artificial light. John's description of this painting as having figures 'upon a small scale and numerous' accords well with the Yale drawing.



(figs. 26 and 27).<sup>32</sup> The raised hand of the knife-wielding, robed elder and the subdued and bound figure of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 28) speak the same iconographic language as Romney's composition. But Romney's drawing could well represent the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. The plumes of smoke and the faintly sketched in figure flying in at the top must indicate Diana, the *deus ex machina* who intervenes and halts the killing, as similarly occurs in Isaac's sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, in both this drawing and in the *Accusation of Susannah* composition, Romney has followed the much-discussed classical precedent invented, according to legend, in Timanthes' painting of Iphigenia's sacrifice. The fourth-century Greek artist hid the face of Agamemnon, the father of Iphigenia, to indicate a grief beyond expression—a conceit praised in antiquity by Pliny, Cicero, and Quintilian, among others, and in the eighteenth century by numerous British critics and poets. George Turnbull in his *Treatise on Ancient Painting* of 1740 admires this noble and sublime device, 'introduced into Painting by the judicious Hand of Timanthes; who well understood how to make the best use of every Circumstance of a well-told Story in a good Poet, and to rival it in Painting'.<sup>34</sup> Daniel Webb's *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*—a book Romney was reading and making notes on in Rome—also discusses the ancient painters, whose fame long outlasted their actual works. Webb rates Timanthes' insight highly and even concludes that the subject of Iphigenia holds more pathos and sublimity than the Christian martyrs of modern painters, which were bound to inspire inferior paintings

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<sup>32</sup> See Royal Academy sketchbook 781a. This book also contains a drawing (p.86) that can be tentatively identified as the *Abduction of Persephone*.

<sup>33</sup> Eighteenth century classical scholarship still admitted the notion that the pagan Greek myths had been generally derived from the Old Testament. In giving a synopsis of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* Charlotte Lennox supposes that 'this idea seems to have taken its rise from Abraham's sacrifice of his son, confounded with that of Jephtha's daughter'. *The Greek Theatre of Father Brumoy Translated by Mrs. Charlotte Lennox* (London: Dodsley, 1759) I:340. See also M.L. Clarke, *Greek studies in England 1700-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 1945), 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> George Turnbull, *A Treatise on Ancient Painting, containing observations on the rise, progress, and decline of that art amongst the Greeks and Romans... to which are added some remarks on the peculiar genius, character, and talents of Raphael, Michael Angelo, Nicholas Poussin, and other Celebrated Modern Masters....* (London: A. Millar, 1740), 51. Turnbull gives ultimate credit for invention of the conceit to Euripides and, before him, Homer. Although there were many examples of the hidden-face gesture on ancient sculptural reliefs, particularly sarcophagi, to be seen by the grand tourist, they are little discussed in eighteenth-century treatises; presumably they lacked the appeal of the Timanthes legend known through surviving literary references. This motif had become such a cliché in painting by 1778 that Reynolds felt obliged to recommend against it in his 8<sup>th</sup> Discourse. He warned the students that the repeated use of this device will cause them to be 'justly suspected of using artifice to evade difficulties' in their art. *Discourses*, 165.



as they were drawn from 'a religion, which professes to banish or subdue the passions'.<sup>35</sup>

Publications such as Webb's and Turnbull's that praised lost ancient paintings even higher than the revered old masters—the 'modern copyists' such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Poussin—made it impossible for British artists to measure up to, as Barry put it, such a 'hyperbolic and visionary standard'. Barry recognized the fallacy in putting so much faith in rhetorical descriptions of unseen pictures which probably only existed 'in the minds of many people, like Cicero's Perfect Orator, or the Stoicks' Perfect Man, as so many abstract ideas of the most perfect conceivable grace, or beauty, or expression'.<sup>36</sup> It is little wonder, therefore, that Romney would make a point of seeing a rare example of a surviving ancient painting in Rome. The so-called *Aldobrandini Wedding* (Fig. 29), discovered c. 1604 and located in the eighteenth century at the Villa Aldobrandini, was well known to grand tourists and other British consumers of virtu through Jonathan Richardson's *Account of some of the statues, bas reliefs, drawings and pictures in Italy* of 1722; through prints; and copies. Among those who had seen it and discussed it, including Federico Zuccaro, Peter Paul Rubens, Nicolas Poussin, and Johan Winckelmann, it was generally thought to represent the rituals surrounding a wedding ceremony.<sup>37</sup> Its uniqueness as an extant large-scale, figural antique fresco led to extravagant claims, such as it being the work of Apelles, the most famous ancient Greek painter. Its true iconographical significance is as uncertain as its authorship but antiquarians such as Bernard de Montefaucon were willing to see nuptial rituals involving blood-letting and libations and a figure representing *Regina sacrorum*, a priestess who officiates at sacred ceremonies and sacrifices.<sup>38</sup> Turnbull decided that the ceremonies of marriage had

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel Webb, *An Inquiry in to the Beauties of Painting, and into the Merits of the Most Celebrated Painters, Antient and Modern* (London: R & J Dodsley, 1760), 147. In Romney's notebook used in Italy (Fitzwilliam Museum) he has transcribed 18 lines of verse in rhyming couplets on the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*.

<sup>36</sup> *Works of Barry* II: 376-7.

<sup>37</sup> See Frank G.J.M. Miller, *The Aldobrandini Wedding, Iconological Studies in Roman Art* III (Amsterdam, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Bernard de Montefaucon, *L'Antiquité Expliquée et Représentée en Figures. Tome Troisième Seconde partie* (Paris, 1719), 220. A 7-volume edition of Montefaucon is no. 61 among the titles in the John Romney Christies sale 9 May 1834, which dispersed the books and paintings that had belonged to George Romney and at his death were acquired by his son. The relationship and analogies in ancient Greek thought between the wedding procession and the procession towards the sacrificial altar, with features such as the veil and the symbolic seizure of the bride's wrist by the bridegroom, the *cheir'epi*



been sufficiently explained by antique writers and instead focuses his discussion of the painting on the 'virtuous blush' of maidens, citing classical authors on the merits of veiled modesty: 'The Bashfulness of Brides on these Occasions, which is so often alluded to by Poets, is charmingly expressed in the Figure of the Bride in this Piece' (fig. 30).<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the loose interpretations and the simplified and idealised views of antiquity presented in such publications illustrate a particular culturally-conditioned aesthetic that has more to do with conforming to contemporary sensibilities than historical accuracy. Many of the subjects that Romney's literary friends encouraged share these mores. The *Initiation of a Rustic Nymph* drawings, as conceived by Richard Cumberland (fig. 31), are congruent with the current interpretations of the *Aldobrandini Wedding*—both depict the urging on of a blushing innocent, subscribing to a fanciful view of antiquity that indulges in both a privileging of female modesty and the coaxing of innocence into worldly knowledge.

Despite their limitations, eighteenth-century British books on classical art and culture, especially when lavishly illustrated, proved useful to artists. The published volumes of William Hamilton's collection of antiquities (1766-76), whose illustrations recreated in a flat, un-scrolled effect the iconography of ancient painted vases, provided a template for artists working in a neoclassical style who would never get to Italy, such as Thomas Stothard in his book illustrations; for those who had not yet reached Italy, such as John Flaxman in his work for the Wedgwood firm, and even for artists studying in Italy.<sup>40</sup> Fuseli, while enjoying the opportunities of drawing after antiquities on-the-spot, also drew inspiration from an engraved plate in Hamilton's series to produce an imaginative adaptation of heroic male nudity for his *Hamlet* illustration, *The King of Denmark Poisoned by his Brother While Sleeping*, inscribed 'Roma 71 Oct' (figs. 32 and 33). James Barry wrote from Rome to a patron back home thanking him for recommending Joseph Spence's *Polymetis*, a book on ancient

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*karpō* gesture, is discussed in Mary R. Lefkowitz, 'The Last Hours of the Parthenos' in *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece*, ed. by Ellen Reeder (Princeton University Press, 1995): 32-38.

<sup>39</sup> George Turnbull, *A Curious Collection of Ancient Paintings accurately engraved from Excellent Drawings, Lately done after the Originals by one of the Best Hands at Rome, with an account where and when they were found, and where they now are...* (London, A Millar, 1741), 12-13, plate IV.

<sup>40</sup> See Shelley M. Bennett, *Thomas Stothard, The Mechanism of Art Patronage in England circa 1800* (University of Missouri Press, 1988), 6-7; *John Flaxman, R.A.*, ed. by David Bindman. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1979), cat. entries 32, 46. For the influence of the Hamilton collection publication of the arts see Ian Jenkins, 'Contemporary Minds, Sir William Hamilton's Affair with Antiquity' in *Vases and Volcanoes, Sir William Hamilton and his Collection*, ed. by Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 40-64, cat. entries 60, 61.



art and iconography illustrated with engravings after classical statues, reliefs, sarcophagi, and coins. Barry found it 'altogether the most able and useful work upon the heathen deities that ever fell in my way: it has been of the greatest profit to me', although he admits to being frustrated by its overly-idealised and effeminate interpretation of antiquity as seen in its 'trifling and coxcomical' style of writing and the 'little, pretty, white feet of the Venus de Medicis' (fig. 34).<sup>41</sup> Romney knew and made use of *Polymetis* as well, and, like Fuseli, he is adroit in freely borrowing from books for unlikely new purposes. Romney's Lapland witches, a theme of long interest that began in Rome or just after, might have found their figural prototype in a book illustration. George Turnbull in his *Curious Collection of Ancient Paintings* illustrates 'The Figure of an old woman with a distaff' (fig. 35), which he believes represents either 'Pallas, disguised in the likeness of an old Woman, when she came to chastise the vanity of Arachne....Or it may represent one of the Parcae', the Roman Destinies who spin out the thread of each person's life.<sup>42</sup> Romney's many Lapland witch drawings show less compositional variation than do his other groups of drawings; for this theme he had found a favoured motif that required little experimentation, and it was a motif strikingly similar to the Turnbull illustration—a seated woman in profile, wearing a cap, with knees pulled up to the chest (fig. 36). Romney, whose formal education ended at age eleven, eventually built up an impressive collection of books relating to his art but he also had the advantage of access to the libraries of his intellectual friends. Hayley says of Romney that during his annual visits to Earham, 'his first object was to prevail on me to collect for him a copious variety of subjects for fancy-pictures, by hunting through many books of an extensive library'.<sup>43</sup> The posthumous sale of Hayley's books included *Turnbull's Collection of Ancient Paintings*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Letter from Barry to Dr. Sleight, Nov. 1767, *Works of Barry* I:144. *Polymetis: or, an Enquiry concerning the Agreement Between the Works of the Roman Poets, and the Remains of the Antient Artists. Being an Attempt to illustrate them mutually from one another.* By the Revd. Mr. Spence (London: R. Dodsley, 1747) is written in the style of a classical instructive dialogue on the arts as done by Philostratus in his ekphrastic *Imagines*. The libraries of both Hayley and Romney included editions of *Polymetis*.

<sup>42</sup> *A Curious Collection of Ancient Paintings*, 13, plate V. Given its circular format, this engraving must be based on a coin or medal.

<sup>43</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 326.

<sup>44</sup> Lot 2623. A.N.L. Munby, *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, Vol. 2, *Poets and Men of Letters* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1971), 170. 'Turnbull on Ancient Painting' is also listed in Hayley's ms. library catalogue of the early 1770s. In Romney's library was an edition of *Histoire générale des cérémonies, mœurs, et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde, representées... de la main de Bernard Picard*, (John Romney sale no. 63), which does include a short



The libraries of those in Romney's circle indicate the extent to which the taste for classical culture was active throughout the eighteenth century. Several recent studies have challenged the prevailing 'neo-Whig' view of the period, which emphasizes the move towards a commercial and bourgeois society and a vernacular culture without acknowledging the continuing dominance of aristocratic and classicist orders.<sup>45</sup> As J.C.D. Clark has put it, 'Late humanist classicism...lasted for longer, and was more powerful, than historians or literary scholars have generally allowed; yet this unique historical formation lacks a name which would easily characterise it'.<sup>46</sup> Neither have art historians considered the neoclassicism in the visual arts of the late-eighteenth century as evidence of a continued—even heightened—reliance on Greco-Roman literature. While the increase in knowledge of the physical appearance of the classical world through eighteenth-century archaeological excavations certainly fuelled the fashion for neoclassicism, the ambitions of literary figures wishing to align themselves with classical literature through art should also be considered as an important factor.<sup>47</sup> Given the esteem granted to English literature that imitated, adapted, or translated the classics onto the page or the stage, such as John Dryden's *Aeneid*, Alexander Pope's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Richard Glover's *Medea*, it is logical that ambitious writers would give attention to classical writings on art and artists. When Hayley advised Joseph Wright to paint the Homeric subject *Penelope Unravelling her Web* (fig. 37) and suggested adding the sickly, feverish figure of Penelope's son Telemachus in order to reinforce her role as the faithful-but-worried

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section on the religion and rituals of Laplanders, though the engraved illustration (1741 edition, Vol. 6, chapter 3) bears much less similarity with Romney's compositions than does that in Turnbull.

<sup>45</sup> See Dustin Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Griffin argues that although high culture became more accessible as the eighteenth century progressed through developments such as book publishing by subscription, exhibitions, and pleasure grounds, it is a mistake to overestimate the cultural shift of patronage; arts in Britain still relied to a great extent on the sponsorship of the elite (9). For the tension between the classical and the vernacular in the eighteenth century see Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> J.C.D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson, Literature and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Most standard studies of neoclassicism in the visual arts have interpreted the phenomenon in political terms or in stylistic terms as a reaction against rococo forms. See Michael Levey, *Rococo to Revolution: Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting* (London, 1966), Ch. 5 'Nature and the Antique', 165-198; Hugh Honour 'Neo-Classicism' in *The Age of Neo-Classicism* (London, 1972), xxi-xxiv; Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton, 1967), passim.



wife and mother, he was certainly familiar with Pliny's praise of Zeuxis' painting of Penelope, 'in which the picture seems to portray morality'.<sup>48</sup>

The eagerness of British artists and literary figures to be associated with the admired artists of antiquity and their encomiasts accounts for the remarkable accordance between the surviving titles and descriptions of ancient artworks and those subjects tackled by artists in the second half of the eighteenth century. Both Thomas Banks and Benjamin West executed versions of *The Death of Epaminondas*, a subject painted in antiquity by Aristolaus. Reynolds's *Hercules Strangling the Serpents*, was originally painted by Zeuxis and was the topic of an ekphrasis by Philostratus the Younger.<sup>49</sup> Parrhasius' *Philoctetes* and Apelles' *Venus Anadyomene* were re-created 2,000 years later by James Barry (fig. 38). Theodorus's series of paintings on the Trojan War is an idea revived in Gavin Hamilton's Trojan War paintings and Alexander Runciman's plans for the decoration of Sir James Clerk's home at Penicuik.<sup>50</sup> Artists and advisors would have found Turnbull's *Treatise on Ancient Paintings* a useful compendium of antique writings on art: he cites Pliny, Ovid, Lucian, Cicero, the *Anthologia Graeca* and other classical sources for his information on specific artists and works. Yet Turnbull's treatise is no simple dictionary; his stated aim is to demonstrate how painting and poetry improve taste and morality. His method of instruction includes a comparison of ancient artists with their modern counterparts, but for Turnbull and Spence and Webb it would have been unthinkable to construct any kind of analogy between their countrymen and ancient Greek painters. That writers in the second half of the eighteenth century began to grant to living British artists classical credentials every bit as grandiose as those previously given to Raphael, Titian, and Correggio is a measure of how far and how quickly the British school had advanced in this period. Two years after a group of artists seceded from the Society of Artists and formed the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768, the English translation of Ludovico Dolce's dialogue on painting, featuring Aretino as interlocutor, provided a format for highlighting the achievements of British artists and

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<sup>48</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Ch. 35: 62. Bemrose, *Life and Works of Wright*, 61; Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby*, 146-7.

<sup>49</sup> In a letter to the Duke of Rutland, Reynolds states that he is making use of Abraham Cowley's translation of Pindar's description of the subject. Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, The Subject Pictures* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 207.

<sup>50</sup> Runciman changed his mind in Rome and conceived instead a series on the Scottish figure Ossian. See Macmillan, *Painting in Scotland*, 33-38, 52-54.



critics. Dedicated to George III for his patronage of the arts, the book's preface boasts of the two flourishing societies that were fostering 'a noble spirit of emulation among our artists' and the 'liberal encouragement' that they were receiving. Several of Benjamin West's historical pictures were mentioned as ones that 'would have done honour to Rome, even in the time of Raphael and Titian'.<sup>51</sup> If West could be conceived as rivalling famous artists of the past, then it follows that the position of highest honour—a comparison with Apelles—would be assigned to Reynolds. Traditionally, Raphael's talent, worldly success, and gracious comportment amid the powerful elite made him the natural heir to Apelles, the artist who Alexander the Great had valued so much that he gave him his own mistress, Campaspe.<sup>52</sup> But in the new atmosphere of respect for British artists, London now a new artistic centre, Britain's own Raphael-figure, the president of the Royal Academy and the respected writer of Discourses, came to be referred to in reviews and poems as the ultimate in artistic success:

Reynolds, th'Apelles of our modern Days,  
Shines forth superior, tho in different ways;  
Has of *two* Arts attain'd the lawrel'd Heights;  
Paints with a Pen, and with a Pencil Writes!<sup>53</sup>

Leo Braudy has observed that a basic component in building fame is a re-fashioning or comparison of a figure with an earlier famous person, and that 'recovering the past is always linked to celebrating an aspect of the present'. He also stresses the important role that writers have played, from antiquity onward, in achieving fame for others as well as themselves. On the humanist practice of reviving antique texts he argues that the 'renewed fame of the classical author enlarges the reputation of his

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<sup>51</sup> *Aretin, A Dialogue on Painting. From the Italian of Ludovico Dolce* trans. by W. Brown (London, 1770), Preface. Romney has written inside the cover of a sketchbook dating to the early 1770s, now in the Royal Academy, 'Aretino, Dialogue on Painting'.

<sup>52</sup> See David Cast, *The Calumny of Apelles, A Study in the Humanist Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981). 186-91. For Turnbull, it is Raphael's demeanour as much as his art that repeats the example of Apelles: 'First of all, there is a very remarkable Likeness in genius, Abilities and Character, between the two noted Chiefs of the Art, Apelles and Raphael, by whose Works it hath acquired its highest Glory. For this reason, the last is commonly called the second Apelles, or Apelles revived. They are describ'd to have been of the same Temper, Turn, and Disposition of Mind'. *Treatise on Ancient Painting*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> *On the Transcendent Merit of Sir Joshua Reynolds President of the Royal Academy of Painting as a Writer, and a Painter*, manuscript verses, 1777, British Museum Add. Mss. 36,596, f. 208, cited in Hilles, *Literary Career of Reynolds*, xvi. Even Hayley refers to him as Britain's Apelles in the *Epistle to Romney*, II: 123.



editor/translator/critic, the testament of language outlasting the frailty of the individual body'.<sup>54</sup> Braudy's analysis of the machination of fame has relevance for those eighteenth-century British writers involving themselves in the arts, and it helps to clarify the probable dual motives behind Richard Cumberland's clever piece of ekphrastic writing in the 1788 edition of his *Observer* series, which managed to aggrandize himself and praise Romney at the same time. At a time when the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery had been conceived and heavily publicized, though not yet open for business, Cumberland's essay effectively advertises the scheme and its main contributors with a flattering analogy between the leading British painters and their imagined antique counterparts; while his detailed knowledge of the in-progress Boydell paintings also advertises his own insider-status and his knowledge of ancient and modern art and his skills in writing about them. Supposedly reproducing a recently-discovered antique document, Cumberland tells of a stately Athenian citizen who, wishing to honour the national poet Aeschylus, commissioned the best Greek artists to paint scenes from the tragedies and 'constructed a spacious lyceum for the reception of these pictures, which he laid open to the resort both of citizens and strangers, and the success of the work reflected equal credit upon the undertaker and the artists, whom he employed'.<sup>55</sup> Astute readers would have recognized in the Athenian 'Areopagite' the Alderman John Boydell and his Shakespeare Gallery enterprise, and they would have recognized in the discussions of Greek painters the British artists who were preparing their paintings for the Gallery. The essay purports that Apelles, 'in the vigour of his genius though advanced in years', painted 'Aegisthus, after the murder of Agamemnon by the instigation of Clytemnestra, in the act of consulting certain sibyls, who by their magical spells and incantations have raised the ghost of Agamemnon, which is attended by a train of phantoms, emblematic of eight successive kings of Argos'. This is clearly meant as an analogy of Reynolds, who was painting *Macbeth and the Witches* for Boydell. Parrhasius is described as a colonial who became an adopted citizen of Athens and who was celebrated for his *Epaminondas*, though he painted for the Aeschylean project a scene of the mad King Oedipus taking shelter in a storm—an allusion to West and his *Lear*

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<sup>54</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 34, 282-294.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Cumberland, *The Observer: being a collection of Moral, Literary and Familiar Essays* Vol. IV (London: C. Dilly, 1788), 58.



*in the Storm* for the Shakespeare Gallery. But Cumberland's most complete discussion of an ancient artist is reserved for Timanthes:

This modest painter, though residing in the capital of *Attica*, lived in such retirement from society, and was so absolutely devoted to his art, that even his person was scarce known to his competitors. Envy never drew a word from his lips to the disparagement of a contemporary, and emulation could hardly provoke his diffidence into a contest for fame, which so many bolder rivals were prepared to dispute.<sup>56</sup>

This description of Timanthes is not known from antique literature but it does match the character of the pensive artist without 'wild ambition', who 'strays at a distance from the clam'rous crowd' that Cumberland had celebrated in verse eighteen years previously. The ekphrasis proposes that Timanthes illustrated Aeschylus's lost sequel to *Prometheus Chained*. In the alleged *Prometheus Delivered*, the hero's supernatural abilities are channelled into raising a sea storm from a deserted island, which greatly distresses his watching daughter. Cumberland was aware—as were many others—of Romney's painstaking efforts to complete his painting of Prospero and Miranda from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which was finally delivered to Boydell a year after the Gallery's 1789 opening and which Cumberland would have known at this stage through the many studies of Miranda's anxiety (fig. 39).

The Romney as Timanthes ekphrasis was the last major piece of writing promoting Romney that Cumberland undertook. During the past decade he had seen his position as Romney's closest literary friend usurped by William Hayley, who had been more aggressive in aligning himself with the artist and gained more notice and profit from the relationship than Cumberland ever had. Hayley's *Epistle to Romney* was credited with bringing Romney into prominence after his return from Rome but Cumberland had already dedicated an ode to the artist declaring that he had returned to England with 'some specimens of so auspicious a sort, that, when encouragement shall provoke your genius to its full display, we are persuaded you will take rank with the first masters of the highest province and best age'.<sup>57</sup> Fuseli's brief biography of

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<sup>56</sup> Cumberland, op. cit., 58-61. Cumberland may have been aware that James Barry had painted himself as Timanthes in his *Crowning the Victors at Olympia*, the third painting in his series *The Progress of Human Civilization* at the Society of Arts. Here Barry does not refer to Timanthes' *Iphigenia* but to his other well-known painting of a cyclops, whose large size is indicated by much smaller satyrs measuring his thumb against a Thyrsus. See William L. Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 98, 191. See fig. 206.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 313.



Romney contends that he did indeed 'devote himself entirely to historic painting' back at home, but

the opinions of his friends, his own fears, and the taste of the public, soon determined him to abandon that pursuit, and the unprofitable visions of Michelangiolo and Shakspeare soon gave way to the more substantial allurements of portrait, his rooms were now thronged with Nobles, Squires, Ministers, the Elegantes, the Belles and Literati of the day, and he divided the tributes of fashion with Gainsborough and Reynolds.<sup>58</sup>

The hundreds of surviving 'visionary' drawings from this period are proof that Romney had not abandoned that pursuit; moreover, the financial security of portraiture enabled him to indulge his love of designing from literature, and, crucially, his portraiture business brought a wider net of potential literary friends and patrons for subject pictures through his door, as Fuseli noted. Josiah Green, an artist who knew Romney before his trip to Italy, wrote in December 1776 to Humphry in Rome of the speedy transformations in the fortunes of his old friend, now installed in a well-appointed studio and home in Cavendish Square. Green warns Humphry of stiff competition, and he expresses astonishment at 'how so short a travel could give such excellence to his Pencil! how an almost *unfriended* Man should at once contract so noble and numerous a Patronage!'<sup>59</sup>

Hayley, of course was one of the most important friends Romney made in the post-Rome period. In his biography of the artist, Hayley speaks much about Romney's working habits when down at Earham with him or back in Cavendish Square. He says he gladly interrupted his own work to assist Romney in a 'chace of ideas', which was usually productive of an 'infinite number of sketches' from fancy as well some more finished studies on canvas.<sup>60</sup> Hayley also refers to several planned collaborations 'uniting poetry and design' which never came to fruition, although their *Cupid and Psyche* project progressed to some completed verses and a series of black chalk cartoons. However, Hayley states, rather disingenuously, that these verses were speedily thrown aside 'for the sake of devoting my attention to a work, that I hoped to render more conducive to the professional honor of my friend—I mean

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<sup>58</sup> *A Dictionary of Painters from the Revival of the Art to the Present Period* by the Rev. M. Pilkington ed. by H. Fuseli 1805, 465-66. John Romney, probably correctly, perceives resentment on the part of Fuseli and other artists towards Romney's post-Rome success. *Memoirs of Romney*, 155, 173, 243.

<sup>59</sup> Josiah Green to Ozias Humphry, 10 Dec. 1776, Humphry MSS. Hu2/47, Royal Academy library, cited in Kidson, *George Romney*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 76-7.



my Epistles to Romney, written in 1777, and first printed in the following year'.<sup>61</sup> The *Poetical Epistle to An Eminent Painter* publicly encourages him to paint with 'patriot passions', like the Greeks had done, shunning portraiture and its vanity for subjects celebrating great Britons, such as the noble deaths of humanist-heroes like Thomas More and Philip Sidney, as well as the Satan of the Whigs' favourite poet, John Milton. In reality, Hayley was not averse to portraiture, and a more characteristic picture of his literary advice is revealed in the notebooks he composed for Romney's private use, full of subjects of a more international and universal flavour, with a strong slant towards themes that heroize victimized-but-virtuous women.<sup>62</sup> The trials of the Psyche at the hands of a domineering Venus is just the kind of female subject that Hayley was attracted to, and conveniently, Romney had already shown interest in the subject of *Cupid and Psyche* when in Rome, perhaps as a response to Raphael's painted ceiling of this theme in the Chigi palace. In the Italian notebook he had written down 'Psyche Crossing the River Sticks', and in a sketchbook used there are two more reminders of the story plus a drawing of Psyche with the ferryman of the underworld, Charon, in the River Styx.<sup>63</sup>

The series of seven designs from *Cupid and Psyche*, presumably the outcome of this first collaboration with Hayley, were among a group of eighteen black chalk cartoons that John Romney donated to the Liverpool Royal Institution in 1823. Endeavouring to secure his father's reputation, John wrote to the leading intellectual and art collector of that city, William Roscoe, with the offer and with his hopes that in making this bequest Liverpool would 'become hereafter a second Florence'.<sup>64</sup> John admits that the cartoons were unlikely to attract the vulgar, not being 'of a kind to decorate a saloon but highly proper for an Academy', and he assures Roscoe that 'men of cultivated minds & of refined taste' will appreciate them.<sup>65</sup> In his catalogue of the cartoons, 'fancy or poetic Designs in chalk some of a sublime, others of a beautiful character', which were 'done in the winter evenings by candlelight as a relaxation, when Mr. Romney's mind had been jaded by portrait painting during the

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<sup>61</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 78-9.

<sup>62</sup> See NAL Ms. L1957/1451 and 1452.

<sup>63</sup> Yale sketchbook B198.30. Romney has written 'Psyche in different parts' and 'Cupid and Psyche'.

<sup>64</sup> John Romney to William Roscoe, 3 Feb. 1823, Liverpool Royal Institution Archive, University of Liverpool Library, RI 61.8(1). The cartoons are now in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



day', John lists the subjects from *Cupid and Psyche* as well as the three from *Orpheus and Eurydice*; *Prometheus Chained*, the *Ghost of Darius*, and *Atossa's Dream* from Aeschylus; one from Thomas Gray's *Descent of Odin*; *Medea*; and from Shakespeare, two on the *Infancy of Shakespeare* and the *Death of Cordelia*, and he mentions that many more were given away or lost.<sup>66</sup> But John considered the *Cupid and Psyche* designs as the most impressive cartoons of the group and the ones that should be more widely known for the sake of his father's reputation. He unsuccessfully petitioned Roscoe to repeat the example of the set of Raphael prints of the same subject and have them engraved with verses inscribed underneath, 'so that a work might be published combining my Father's name with yours....Mr. Hayley was to have put the fable into verse for the same purpose'.<sup>67</sup> Hayley, referring to the abandoned collaboration, says he intended to translate *Cupid and Psyche* from Apuleius's *Golden Ass* and produce 'a poem on the subject in emulation of Dryden's delightful fables'.<sup>68</sup> Hayley probably had in mind Dryden's titillating reinterpretations of Italian renaissance and classical literature; however, Romney's chaste series recalls Dryden even less than it resembles Raphael. A finished oil of the *Wedding of Cupid and Psyche* (fig. 40), begun probably before the cartoons, is the closest Romney comes to Raphael's fresco series; but even here, the secluded intimacy and sweet innocence of the couple differs greatly from Raphael's convivial feast (fig. 41).<sup>69</sup> Romney might have agreed with Daniel Webb, and others, who found Raphael's *Cupid and Psyche* paintings weak in expression and lacking in grandeur, and in the black chalk series he does not follow

<sup>66</sup> John Romney to William Roscoe, 4 March 1823, University of Liverpool Library, RI 61.8(3). John particularly regrets the loss of a picture of *Caius Marius* in the dungeon. John Flaxman's letter to Hayley 2 Jan. 1804, when he was assisting him in laying in materials for the Romney biography, discusses 'the whole Catalogue of his Chalk Cartoons as I think it was your opinion in common with other Sufficient judges that they were the noblest of his Studies, besides they were but few in number, the following were the Subjects—A Lapland Witch raising a Storm—Charity & her Children—Pliny & his Mother flying from the eruption of Vesuvius—the following from Aeschylus—Raising the Ghost of Darius—Atossa's Dream—The Furies—'. *The Letters of William Blake with related documents*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, third ed., 1980), 73.

<sup>67</sup> John Romney to William Roscoe, 11 April 1823, University of Liverpool, LRI 61.18(4). Roscoe declined on the grounds of the expense of undertaking the project and that he had nothing new to add to the already-existing English verse on *Cupid and Psyche*. Lot. No. 52 of the John Romney sale of his father's collection of books and artworks (Christies 9 May 1834) was 'Raffaello's Cupid and Psyche, the set of thirty very fine impressions; and two duplicates'.

<sup>68</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 78. Two 17<sup>th</sup>-cen. editions of Apuleius were listed in the sale of Hayley's books, Munby, *Sale Catalogues*, 88, 92.

<sup>69</sup> *Cupid and Psyche* was painted just after Romney returned from Rome, according to his son, but was probably unfinished and set aside. Hayley (*Life of Romney*, 274) says that Romney had found it and finished it off as late as 1798. John Romney also notes that it was afterwards owned by William Long, who took the liberty of adding to the nude figures 'a piece of drapery where none was required'. *Memoirs of Romney*, 143.



the iconographic plan of the old master.<sup>70</sup> Alex Kidson has considered Romney's oil of Cupid and Psyche's happy ending to be orthodox and lacklustre compared with the imaginative treatment of the earlier incidents in the tale, Psyche's tribulations at the hands of a jealous Venus.<sup>71</sup> The cartoons focus on this aspect of the narrative, undoubtedly with Hayley's encouragement. In *Psyche Before Venus* (fig. 42), the kneeling maid, drawn from Romney's stock motif for humiliated females, receives her list of demands, which will include collecting waters from the source of the Styx at the summit of a mountain and crossing over to Hades and back. In this cartoon and in *Psyche Ordered by Venus to Fetch the the Waters of the Styx* (fig. 43), Jean Hagstrum has seen the 'somber but haunting portrayal of innocence trembling at the edge of the unknown', noting that this mixture of delicacy, mystery, and danger was a common theme in contemporary literature.<sup>72</sup> As John mentioned, the cartoons were executed in two different styles, but within each of these two cartoons are elements of both the masculine-sublime and the feminine-beautiful combined. The severe architecture, jagged branch, and yawning abyss emphasize through contrast the softer forms of the submissive Psyche. Similarly, in a drawing that was probably a study for a cartoon that is now lost (fig. 44), Psyche's fragility in body language is most blatantly underscored by the aggressive and burly figure of the rowing Charon, a figure borrowed from Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (see fig. 187).<sup>73</sup>

In the *Cupid and Psyche* series, Romney—and Hayley—did not choose to produce a masculine epic cycle such as the *Labours of Hercules*; rather, their protagonist, Psyche, epitomizes the feminine epic, and she is a likely prototype for the heroine of Hayley's most successful publication, *Serena of the Triumphs of Temper* (1781), who also must endure several trials of her own before being rewarded with a good husband

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<sup>70</sup> Webb, *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, 175. Like Romney, James Barry had read Webb, and he agreed with this assessment of the Chigi frescos, finding them hackneyed; but he excuses Raphael on the basis that at the time that he was painting, 'the treasures of Greek learning, which only could have afforded light into these matters, were as yet almost unopened'. *Works of Barry*, II: 380-82.

<sup>71</sup> Kidson, *George Romney*, 11; cat. 45; the whole series of cartoons from *Cupid and Psyche* is reproduced in cats. 60-66.

<sup>72</sup> Jean Hagstrum, 'Blake and British Art: The Gifts of Grace and Terror' in Karl Kroeber and William Walling, eds., *Images of Romanticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 76-8.

<sup>73</sup> Hayley (*Life of Romney*, 78) declared that Romney had drawn 'no less than eight elegant cartoons' from *Cupid and Psyche*. This pen and ink drawing is perhaps more suitable for stylistic analysis than the cartoons: their poor condition and the extensive re-touching by artists at the Liverpool Royal Institution and John Romney himself render stylistic analysis somewhat hazardous. See Kidson, *George Romney*, 104, 120.



(fig. 45).<sup>74</sup> Hayley called for a manly, nationalistic English epic in his *Essay on Epic Poetry* but never produced one himself; his muse was taxed with much lighter fare. And his brand of poetry agrees with the subjects he suggested to Romney at different times: women as virtuous and sacrificial wives and mothers are represented in subjects such as the Indian Brahmin widow sacrificing herself on her husband's funeral pyre; 'Ercilla, the Spanish Epic Poem—Woman searching the battlefield by moonlight for the body of her husband'; Argentaria, the widow of Lucan who completed his unfinished poetry; Epponina, who protected her husband Sabinus from the persecution of the Romans and was ultimately executed with him; Aristides's *Infant Suckling from its Dying Mother*. Examples of women as faithful and obedient daughters are Harpalice, a Thracian princess who avenged her wounded father (fig. 46); the Danish warrior Hallmundus's daughter, who inscribes his deeds as he expires from his wounds; and various mourning females are suggested, such as a young girl mourning over a dead fawn; Polyxena spotted by Achilles mourning at the tomb of Hector and Briseis weeping at the tomb of Achilles.<sup>75</sup> Elements of the trials of Psyche, Susannah, and other classical and biblical-era heroines are reprised in Hayley's least successful work, *Essay on Old Maids*, which purports to be an homage to spinsters and virgins through stories gathered from obscure antique literature and from 'antediluvian fragments' recently discovered by a travelling friend. In a chapter devoted to various devices used to ascertain virginity, Hayley tells of Leucippe, who, accused of 'impurity', must face a test in a cave ruled by Pan in the grove of Diana: a suspended pipe in the cave sings sweetly when approached by a virgin but groans when facing the unchaste. In a 'moment of universal anxiety', with her father, suitor, and accuser watching, she approaches the pipe, and at this point Hayley exclaims, 'What a group for the pencil! New pictures succeed'.<sup>76</sup> Romney's drawing of this

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<sup>74</sup> This gendering of styles in literature and painting was recognized by a critic in *The London Chronicle* 29 April 1777, who pointed out that lately it was a woman, Angelica Kauffman, who was exhibiting historical pieces while so many of her male colleagues were employed in the lesser genres of portraiture and landscapes, which was 'as great a phenomenon in the painting as it would be if our poets dealt in nothing but sonnets and epigrams, while our poetesses aspired to the highest and most difficult department of their art, the producing of epic and heroic compositions'. Quoted in Wendy Wassyng, *Angelica Kauffman* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 86.

<sup>75</sup> See NAL Ms. L1957/1451, 1452; letters from Hayley to Romney, NAL 1957/942/3/5&6; notes to *Essay on Epic Poetry*.

<sup>76</sup> *A Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids. By a Friend to the Sisterhood* (London: T. Cadell, 1785), 153. Although the first edition was published anonymously, Hayley's authorship was widely known and caused him to become an object of controversy. William Cowper admits to Hayley that he was reprimanded by a friend for his association with the 'wicked rogue' who wrote the essay on 'Antivirginityship'. *Letters of William Cowper* IV: 264, 307. Anna Seward, whose faith in Hayley's



scene (fig. 47) and others from the *Essay on Old Maids*, including, the *Trial of the Stygian Fountain* (fig. 48), another test of purity, in which the rising waters stop only for a virgin, were not used in the illustrated third edition of the *Essay*; however, Thomas Stothard's designs—closely modelled on Romney's though not credited—were. Perhaps to the disappointment of many of his ambitious literary friends, Romney never showed any interest in becoming involved with publishing and book illustration. His vision of his work was too expansive to be reduced to a page.

Romney's various jottings on art theory are consistent with the general principle presented in the treatises he is known to have read at some point—by Du Fresnoy, Reynolds, Anton Raphael Mengs—namely, that the goal of the artist is to find what is most beautiful in nature and idealise it, a practice perfected by Raphael,<sup>77</sup> but they also reveal his idiosyncratic interests. Romney repeatedly stresses the importance of grandeur, simplicity, and expression: in his Italian notebook he praises nature as 'the fountane that over flows with good sence' though he also writes admiringly of a school not usually thought of as naturalistic, the 'Glorious and Stupendous' Egyptians, who were 'simple and grand almost without movement'; and he also admires the Greeks, 'likewise simple and elegant and grand'. This appreciation of simplicity and grandeur encompasses the expression of the passions, which, in 'endeavouring to conceal them affect you and the exaggerating shall disgust you'.<sup>78</sup> Nearly two decades later he was still noting down the true elements of painting as

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muse had heretofore been unshakeable, perceived that 'this whimsical work, richly illuminated by all those emanations, so lightly, so wantonly betrays the cause it affects to defend, that I could wish it had never passed the press'. *Letters of Anna Seward* I: 124.

<sup>77</sup> 'The Art of painting is said to be an imitation of nature; from whence it appears, that in its perfection it ought to be inferior to it; but this subsists conditionally... Art has one thing very important, in which it by far surpasses Nature, which is in Beauty.... The Art of Painting is, to choose of all the subjects of Nature, the most beautiful, gathering, and placing together the materials of different places, and the beauty of various persons...', *The Works of Mengs*, 18. 'The poets, orators, and rhetoricians of antiquity, are continually enforcing this position; that all the arts receive their perfection from an ideal beauty, superior to be found in individual nature.... Every language has adopted terms expressive of this excellence. The *gusto grande* of the Italians, the *beau ideal* of the French, and the *great style*, *genius*, and *taste* among the English are but different appellations of the same thing', Reynolds, *Discourses*, 42-3. 'The principal and most important part of Painting, is to find out and thoroughly to understand what Nature has made most beautifull, and most proper to this Art'; 'It is difficult enough to say what this Grace of Painting is; 'tis to be conceiv'd and understood much more easily than to be explain'd by words.... 'Tis by this grace that *Raphael* has made himself the most renown'd of all the *Italians*, as *Apelles* by the same means carry'd it above the *Greeks*', Dryden, *Art of Painting*, 116, 155.

<sup>78</sup> Italian Notebook, Fitzwilliam Museum: 'Painting consists of a few simple principles which the artist must set up as standards and never lose sight of ... those principles are, *simplicity*, *clearness*, *breath*, *character*, and *expression*, and *gusto* which is formed out of those five feelings—'.



‘Composition / Character / Expression / Grandure / Simplicity’.<sup>79</sup> In thoughts such as these and in his precocious Hellenism Romney was more in tune with the theorists extolling antique artists than those which strive ultimately for beauty and name Raphael the first painter. Turnbull’s *Treatise on Ancient Paintings* praises Timanthes above all of the ancient artists for his mastery of expression, invention, and the sublime in painting—‘the poetical Part in which he was so eminent’.<sup>80</sup> Turnbull refers to Longinus’s essay on the sublime to explain Timanthes’ ability to transport and ennoble the mind of the spectator with lofty conceptions that were only hinted at in his imagery. His *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, which veiled the father’s face from visible grief, was the best example of Timanthes’ manner of expressing more to the imagination than was shown to the eye. Such decorum put his works on a level with the highest forms of poetry:

That Timanthes was justly said to have excelled in Tragedy; and that there is the tragick Stile in painting, as well as in Poetry, is plain from what is said of his Ajax, his Medea, his Orestes, his Iphigenia, and his Medusa: to excel in which tragick Subjects, so as to avoid the painful and disagreeable, or the too horrible, is, as ancient Authors have observed, extremely difficult.<sup>81</sup>

If Romney identified with Timanthes, this would explain why no studies have been discovered that illustrate William Mickle’s idea for a painting of the exhumation and crowning of the decaying skeleton of Inez, a gory subject from his translation of *The Lusiad*. Mickle admitted it was a difficult subject but one that ‘the pencil of Romney would overcome’ and he advises the artist to reveal the emaciated body and the ‘sceptre as if dropping from her dead hand’.<sup>82</sup> The attempt to reach the heights of the sublime without stepping into the ridiculous underpins Romney’s long career, and he valued his own intuition to achieve this—in a notebook he advised himself, ‘Beware that your fancy do not carrey you beond your good sence.’<sup>83</sup> And Romney was critical of the departure from common sense in all the sister arts: he decries the

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<sup>79</sup> ‘Composition is conceiving the Subject Poetically and justly to throw every thing into the Picture that the subject will admit of that is grand and will illustrate without destroying the simplicity of the Picture that is, nothing hetrogenius or triffeling—’. Sketchbook C.61.72, in use c. 1791, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

<sup>80</sup> Turnbull, *Treatise on Ancient Painting*, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Op. cit., xxxi, 27.

<sup>82</sup> William J. Mickle to Romney, 12 April 1779, NAL Ms. 1948/4031/39. Likewise, one of the subjects that Hayley suggests in the *Epistle to Romney*, the heroic daughter of Sir Thomas More in the act of reclaiming his rotting head from London Bridge, is unknown among Romney’s designs. See *Epistle to Romney* (1777), note XLIV.

<sup>83</sup> Italian notebook, Fitzwilliam Muscum.



tradition begun in Leonardo's *Last Supper* and continued since whereby Judas, despite 'that violence in his looks and gestures', is not recognized as Christ's betrayer, which is 'a par with the stage where the actor speakes aloud enough for all the house to hear and the actor not two yards from him is supposed not to hear a word he says'.<sup>84</sup>

Romney evidently understood that all of the expressive arts had their roots in the eloquence of classical rhetoric. Daniel Webb cites Quintilian and Cicero on painting's ability to move the passions, even more so than their own arts, and he mentions that before the Romans, Greek writers spoke of 'the drama of a painter, of the moral of painting'.<sup>85</sup> Webb believes that history painting, 'the representation of a momentary drama', shares with its theatrical counterparts 'first, a subject, or fable: secondly, its order or contrivance; thirdly, characters, or the manners; fourthly, the various passions which spring from those characters'. Therefore, regarding composition, the history painter may borrow elements 'from the stage; and divide it into two parts, the scenery, and the drama'.<sup>86</sup> It is understandable that history painting would assimilate features of the epic and the tragic—the highest genres of poetry and drama; and these forms were the best for replicating the power of the ancients. For Reynolds, the highest achievements in painting were examples of the 'epick stile' as mastered by the Roman, Bolognese, and Florentine schools.<sup>87</sup> Turnbull says that a particular excellence in painting, *Furia*, was common both to the Florentine masters and the ancient painter Timomachus, who, along with Timanthes, was a 'tragick Painter':

He excelled most in melancholy and horrible Subjects: And shewed that the tragick Stile may be attained to in Painting as well as in Poetry; or that the former is no less capable of moving, and purging, (as Aristotle calls it) our Pity and Horrour than the latter. And therefore his pictures are highly celebrated by the Greek and Latin Poets.<sup>88</sup>

Webb agrees with this assessment in judging Timomachus's *Medea* a beautiful example of terror and pity united. Further, he notes that 'The Medea was a subject of emulation to the wits of Greece; each contending to do justice to those inimitable

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<sup>84</sup> Romney's draft discourse, undated, NAL Ms. 1957/942/79.

<sup>85</sup> Webb, *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, 32-3.

<sup>86</sup> Op. cit., 144, 136.

<sup>87</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses* (IV, 10 Dec. 1771), 62.

<sup>88</sup> Turnbull, *Treatise on Ancient Painting*, xxix, 61.



expressions', and he translates into couplets several epigrams on *Medea* from the Greek Anthology.<sup>89</sup> The Rev. Robert Potter, the translator of the Greek poets, began advising Romney on literary matters after their meeting in 1778, but the popularity in both antiquity and in eighteenth-century revivals of Euripides' story of the parricidal vengeance of a wronged woman means the artist would not have necessarily needed a poet to recommend the story.<sup>90</sup> James Barry had exhibited *Medea Making her Incantation after the Murder of her Children* at the Royal Academy in 1772, and he later made at least two oil sketches of Medea contemplating the murder of her children c. 1777 (now all lost). The great tragedienne Mary Ann Yates was appearing in Richard Glover's *Medea* on the London stage for much of the 1770s—Robert Edge Pine exhibited *Mrs. Yates as Medea* at the Society of Artists in 1770 (fig. 49); the next year Romney painted and exhibited there the same actress as the tragic muse, Melpomene (fig. 50).

Romney's large black chalk cartoon *Medea Contemplating the Murder of her Children* (fig. 51) is of an uncertain date but sketchbook studies for the subject begin soon after his return from Italy.<sup>91</sup> His interest in Medea was perhaps maintained by his friendship with Emma Hart, who became his model and muse after their meeting in 1782. Hart's well-known theatrical talents formed her as the perfect model for historical subjects: prior to her rise in fame and status after heading to Naples in 1786 to become the mistress, and later, wife, of the British Ambassador, Sir William Hamilton, her sittings and posings for Romney provided a welcome outlet for her histrionics. At the ambassador's court she awed spectators with her *tableaux-vivantes* and monodramas achieved through the artful arrangement of hair and veils and appropriate facial expressions and body language. Witnesses such as Johann W. von Goethe and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun reported on her performances in which, posing

<sup>89</sup> Webb, *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, 162-5.

<sup>90</sup> The subscribers to Potter's first volume of *The Tragedies of Euripides*, 1781, include Hayley, Reynolds, George Romney and John Romney. In the Preface Potter lists the learned Euripides' artistic accomplishments, which includes the design of 'Agamemnon at the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the execution of which has rendered the name of Timanthes immortal', viii.

<sup>91</sup> John Romney (*Memoirs*, 257) lists four Medea studies among the works done in Rome or just after his return, all now in the Fitzwilliam Museum. The sketchbook in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, dated to 1777-78 based on the sitters listed for known portraits on several pages, contains drawings of Medea as well as Psyche and a 'death-of' subject, all treated in large-scale cartoons. Patricia Jaffé cites several Medea drawings in two now lost sketchbooks, one inscribed 'May 1777', the other dating from 1775-1778 on internal evidence. *Drawings by George Romney from the Fitzwilliam Museum* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 8-9. Other loose drawings are known in the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.



only with an antique vase or other simple prop, she quickly vacillated between emotional extremes, as seen in her representation of the murderous mother Medea, followed instantly by the suffering mother Niobe.<sup>92</sup> Hart must have adopted these attitudes during her frequent sittings to Romney, which produced sketches as well as finished and unfinished paintings of subjects such as *Iphigenia*, *St. Cecilia*, *Cassandra*, *Circe* and various bacchantes. A letter that Romney wrote from Earham to Hart in Naples discussing paintings that she had posed for illuminates the nature of their collaborations and suggests that he valued her conception and realization of classical subjects and her part in his creative process:

Mr. H has this moment brought me a subject which he and I think you wonderfully expressive of and would suit. It is Alexander dragging the Pithia to the Tripod to deliver the oracle or to prophesi after her refusal and under the act of forcing her she waxed mild and peaceable and said he was invincible. Thus, he was satisfied. What do you think of it? I will expect to know how you conceive it.... When I return to London I intend to finish the Cassandra and the picture of Sensibility. The Bacchanalian picture is in status quo, allso the Serena and the Cibebe and the Medea, the last is the figure sitting with her hair floating in the air.<sup>93</sup>

The Medea Romney mentions may be the large cartoon or it might be an oil sketch with Medusa-like hair traditionally titled *Emma as Medea* (fig. 52) but given the lack of definitive attributes or a defined backdrop, this painting could represent a number of emotionally-charged figures. Yet this compositional simplicity is an underlying principle in Romney's conception of historical representation, and he appreciated it in Hart's theatrical attitudes, gushing to Hayley that 'her acting is simple, grand, terrible, and pathetic'.<sup>94</sup>

Richard Payne Knight wrote to Romney in November 1776 to follow up on their earlier discussions in Rome concerning theories on expression and the sublime. On composition he advises the artist, 'A single figure is more proper for the sublime than a groupe. Parts, though ever so judiciously connected, distract the attention', and he speaks of the kind of decorum that Romney would have been receptive to, arguing

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<sup>92</sup> See Betsy Bolton, 'Sensibility and Speculation: Emma Hamilton' in *Lewd and Notorious, Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), 133-61; Kristen Gram Holmström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on some Trends of Theatrical Fashion* (Stockholm, 1967), 110-40.

<sup>93</sup> From Romney in Earham to Emma Hart, summer 1786, sketchbook C.60, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

<sup>94</sup> Romney to Hayley, 8 Aug, 1791, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 162.



that exalted and sublime character can only be depicted by maintaining dignity; thus 'Julius Caesar was so solicitous in his last moments to preserve it, that he wrapt his face in his cloak, lest any signs of pain or fear should discover the weakness of human nature. A great mind should appear to feel deeply, and yet suffer boldly.'<sup>95</sup> In stressing that it was the 'taste of the Greek painters, to rest the merit of their compositions on a single character or expression', Webb associates Timomachus's *Medea* with Timanthes' decorum in hiding the face of Iphigenia's grieving father in order to avoid excessive and distracting elements:

The children of Medea, we are told, were represented smiling at the dagger in their mother's hand; her fury, mixed with a pity of their innocence, has been fully described: Would you extend composition beyond this, you rather weaken than improve it; is it to be imagined, that a painter, capable of such expressions as these, could not have marked the subordinate emotions in a number of assistants? We have already taken notice, in the Iphigenia of Timanthes, of the Climax in the expressions; and of his singular ingenuity, in distinguishing his principal character.<sup>96</sup>

James Barry had read Webb but was unwilling to defer to the authority of antique paintings known only through descriptions, and vague ones at that: 'All that has been taken notice of by the ancient writers in the celebrated picture of Timomachus amounts only to the divided will of Medea, between her affection for her children, and her jealousy on her husband's marriage to Creusa.' But Barry believed that the subject is capable of more, and he describes ekphrastically his sketch for the subject done c. 1777, which includes Medea in 'agitation, with the preparations for a sacrifice around her', while one of her children, oblivious to the danger, plays at her feet, the other one clings to her in fear. In addition, Barry includes in the distance 'indications of the marriage' of Jason and his new bride.<sup>97</sup> Romney, too, read Webb critically, and

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<sup>95</sup> Payne Knight in Rome to Romney in London, 24 Nov. 1776, Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 327. Payne-Knight then cites the revered sculptural group the *Laocoon* as an example of noble suffering in terms strongly suggestive of the 'noble simplicity' and 'sedate grandeur' of Johann Winckelmann's influential theories. See David Irwin, ed. *Winckelmann, Writings on Art*, (London: Phaidon, 1972).

<sup>96</sup> Webb, *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, 186-7. Franciscus Junius, in his *The Painting of the Ancients*, 1638, advises artists treating Medea subjects to see the description of Timomachus's *Medea* in the Greek epigrams and to imitate his discretion: 'for as in Tragedies, so likewise in Pictures, all things are not to be laid open before the eyes of the spectator. Let not Medea, sayth Horace, murder her own children in the presence of the whole people....so that an Artificier had better leave out some parts of a story than [lose] modesty', 243.

<sup>97</sup> From Barry's account of his series of pictures in the Society of Arts, 1783, reproduced in *Works of Barry II*: 376. Pressly (*Life and Art of James Barry*, 233) records the nineteenth-century sales of several Barry *Medea* sketches, some of which might be associated with the composition that Barry described. However, the artist was fully familiar with the conventions of antique ekphrases, which had as much to do with rhetoric than with an actual executed work of art.



in a sketchbook used in Rome he jotted, 'In contradiction to Mr Webb In large Compositions where the mind is moved by one great expression, if there be many more of a subordinate nature but differing when the heart is once touched the others tho in an inferior degree of bodily expression increase the sorrow the pity the humanity etc.'<sup>98</sup> Romney and Barry may have shared ideas on how to improve on Timomachus's *Medea* with added expressions and details while their own studies were taking shape. Romney's basic drawings of a contemplative Medea (fig. 53), develop into several augmented compositions that include the children and a subordinate group of the arriving Jason and Argonauts. In one study (fig. 54) Romney has tried to delineate the divided will of Medea as was done by Timomachus and praised in an antique epigram, versified into English couplets:

Behold, united by his art  
The lovers frenzy, and the mother's heart;  
Mark how the strugglings of her soul appear;  
Here fury flashes, and there melts a tear.<sup>99</sup>

And as in Barry's description, Romney indicates that one child possesses a growing awareness of danger but the other one is unaware of his mother's intentions; however, he has increased the pathos by having the boy nursing, as though a perversion of the traditional *Madonna and Child* or *Charity* iconography.<sup>100</sup> A related drawing represents the next step—the suspicious child keeps his distance while a sinister Medea beckons him (fig. 55).

The most finished of Romney's *Medea* compositions, the large black-chalk cartoon, observes Webb's and Payne Knight's obligatory one dominant expression. Compositionally, Romney has hardly gone beyond the noted elements in the Medeas of ancient epigrams and ekphrases—her tortured expression; the knife that she holds; the two boys.<sup>101</sup> He has taken care to represent the precise passion appropriate to Medea: whether or not Emma Hart sat for this composition, Romney has referred for facial expressions to a book he had owned since 1755, an edition of Charles Le Brun's treatise on the passions. Le Brun's pathognomical theories relate the outward

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<sup>98</sup> Sketchbook Z-242, Cumbria Record Office, Barrow.

<sup>99</sup> Webb, *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting*, 165.

<sup>100</sup> One of the lost cartoons represented *Charity and her Children*, see fn. 66 above.

<sup>101</sup> Romney has evidently given most of his care to the representation of Medea: the positioning of the boys is not fully resolved, hence the presence of the disembodied extra arm. However, when discussing the cartoons it should be kept in mind that they have been 'reinforced' by John Romney and unknown others.



expressions of the passions to the inward movements of the soul, based on seventeenth-century scientific knowledge and metaphysical assumptions. Given that 'the Soul receives the images of the Passions' in the middle of the brain, it is the face 'where the Passions more particularly discover themselves', and more particularly, as the gland that is responsible for this function is situated in the forehead, it is the eyebrows that are most expressive part of the face.<sup>102</sup> Of the various movements that the eyebrows are capable, a rising up at both ends with a depression in the middle is indicative of bodily pain and the darkest of passions (fig. 56). For the flying hair, Romney may have been aware of Callistratus's ekphrasis on a statue of Medea that 'disclosed the nature of her soul': her 'unkempt' hair was a sign of her distemper.<sup>103</sup> In most of his Medea compositions Romney has added the serpents that drive her chariot, but as traditional symbols of envy and evil, they may also refer to Medea's ruling passions.

As his commentary on Webb showed, Romney thought a liberal display of expressions could add, not detract, from a picture's emotional force, but in the Medea cartoon expression is not indulged at the expense of simplicity. The common assumption that Romney's reductive compositions are owing to his lack of ability with multi-figured compositions and a weakness in anatomy does not take into consideration that simplicity is a leading imperative for the classical sublime.<sup>104</sup> As early as Alberti, artists are encouraged to follow the practice 'observed by the tragic and comic poets, of telling their story with as few characters as possible', who should number no more than nine or ten.<sup>105</sup> Reynolds reiterates this philosophy and cites Annibale Carracci's injunction to include no more than twelve figures in a historical

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<sup>102</sup> *A Method to Learn to Design the Passions, Proposed in a Conference on their General and Particular Expression. Written in French, and illustrated with a great many Figures excellently Designed, by Mr Le Brun... Translated into English, and all the Designs engraved on Copper, By John Williams, Esq.* (London, 1734), 20-1.

<sup>103</sup> *Philostratus Imagines, Callistratus, Descriptions*, trans. by Arthur Fairbanks (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1931), 421.

<sup>104</sup> Hayley (*Life of Romney*, 82-3) indicts Romney's inadequate 'mastery in anatomical science' and an over-reliance on his skills as a portraitist, which hindered further development. This attitude is present even in modern Romney biographies: David A Cross in *A Striking Likeness, The Life of George Romney* (Ashgate, 1999), 145, remarks that 'an excess of portraits had diminished Romney's skill in composition. The vast majority of his canvases show single figures and of these many were bust portraits, requiring little ingenuity of design.'

<sup>105</sup> 'I think Varro's dictum is relevant here: he allowed no more than nine guests at dinner, to avoid disorder', Alberti, *On Painting*, 75-6. Alberti is paraphrasing Marcus Terentius Varro's maxim, 'Not less than the Graces, not more than the Muses'. John Romney (*Memoirs*, 59) repeats this phrase in references to Romney's historical compositions and conversation pieces.



composition.<sup>106</sup> Romney's most classicizing designs pare the figures down considerably and replicate the spare aesthetics of early literature and drama more consistently than any neoclassical painter.<sup>107</sup> John Flaxman championed Romney's adherence to antique principles, likening his cartoons after Greek literature to Greek sculptural reliefs, which, like ancient pictures, 'told their story by a single group of figures in the front, whilst the back ground is made the simplest possible, rejecting all unnecessary episode, and trivial ornament, either of secondary groups or architectural subdivision'. Romney achieved this by 'considering in profound silence by the hour' the casts of 'Grecian sculpture' he had filled his gallery with and then making drawings or paintings from them.<sup>108</sup> Essentially, Flaxman is re-phrasing Reynolds's assessment of Poussin's merits: due to his veneration and copying of ancient sculptures and paintings, especially the *Aldobrandini Wedding*, 'no works of any modern has so much of the air of Antique Painting'. Furthermore, Poussin's favourite subjects were the ancient fables, which he was eminently qualified to paint, being knowledgeable of 'the ceremonies, customs, and habits of the Ancients', and he 'seemed to think that the style and the language in which such stories are told, is not the worse for preserving some relish of the old way of painting'.<sup>109</sup> Romney, too, became 'eminently qualified' in ancient art and literature—he could have acquired considerable knowledge of the style of ancient literature from his classically-educated friends while executing the cartoons. What is more, an increasing amount of antique literature was becoming accessible to a wider readership through English translations.

Pope's popular adaptations of Homer published between 1715 and 1726 translated primitive Greek literature into heroic Augustan couplets, to the annoyance of serious Greek scholars.<sup>110</sup> The rise of the English vernacular throughout the eighteenth

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<sup>106</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, IV, 65.

<sup>107</sup> John Romney is more perceptive than is Hayley of Romney's affinity for classicizing principles: 'Grand art is the *dramatic* and *epic*, in which one great and simple action seizes and absorbs all the feelings of the spectator; and either petrifies with horror, or melts with pity, the sympathies of the heart.... The art of grouping and combining figures is highly meritorious, but the soul of painting consists in action and expression; and these are rendered more effective by being simple and grand.' To support Romney's grasp of classical theory John mentions the hidden expression of grief in the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* and the lower portion of Raphael's *Transfiguration*—both quoted by Romney in several compositions—as achieving 'grandeur and force by the means of simplicity and concentration'. *Memoirs*, 59.

<sup>108</sup> In Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 310-12.

<sup>109</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses* (V, 10 Dec. 1772), 87-8.

<sup>110</sup> See Kirsti Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth-century notions of the early Greek epic* (Cambridge University Press 1979), Chapter Four, 'Pope's View of Homer', 57-64.



century, rather than replacing classical tastes, actually facilitated a new appreciation of the less polished forms of early Greek literature, rendered in less correct and artificial styles.<sup>111</sup> Robert Potter's blank verse *Tragedies of Aeschylus* (1777), the first complete English translation of the fifth-century dramatist, managed to please the public and critics alike. Potter's *Aeschylus* won the approbation of prominent literary figures such as Dr. Parr, James Beattie, Horace Walpole, and the influential bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu, whose patronage brought the Norfolk curate quick access to polite society. Potter visited London in July 1778, and while there he attended the theatre and pleasure gardens in the evenings but 'the days were spent chiefly in rambling from Painter to Painter, which to me is the highest of all entertainments'.<sup>112</sup> Potter was 'often at Sir Joshua's', where his son had his portrait done, but he also visited Cavendish Square, where 'the excellent Romney gave me my head, as a picture a wonderfull fine one, and Said to be an extraordinary likeness; this will not visit Scarning till the next Summer, as the Painter was pleased with his production, and wished to exhibit it in his gallery during the next winter: he has a right to be obliged' (fig. 57).<sup>113</sup> The gift finally arrived the next August after several nudging letters from Potter, in which he also sent to the artist in exchange for the portrait hints for pictures with the promise of more to come.<sup>114</sup> Given the rather unremarkable nature of Potter's portrait, one suspects that it was an association with the celebrated author-translator and his *Aeschylus* that Romney wanted to advertise in his rooms.

John Romney says that his father read *Aeschylus* immediately after its publication and was 'forcibly impressed by the boldness and sublimity of the subjects' and that he ranked Aeschylus next to Shakespeare 'as a powerful delineator of the stronger

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<sup>111</sup> J.C.D. Clark's *Johnson, Literature and Cultural Politics* configures the change after mid-century from an 'Anglo-Latin' culture to one that includes an appreciation of Greek forms in largely political terms, broadly dividing the High Church, Tory Latinists from the progressive, Whig Hellenists. Somonsuuri and M.L. Clarke, *Greek Studies in England* also survey the shift of taste from Augustan correctness to more 'primitive' literature.

<sup>112</sup> 19 Aug. 1778, Rev. Robert Potter to his nephew John Conway Potter, National Library of Wales Ms. 12433D / Wigfair 33D.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. See also Potter's letter to Elizabeth Montagu 28 Jun, 1779, where he recalls the London trip the previous summer, Montagu Mss. 4160, Huntington Library, San Marino.

<sup>114</sup> Potter to Romney, 12 June, 24 June, 18 July 1779, NAL Ms. 1948/4031/40-44. Potter wrote to Romney 14 Aug. upon receiving the portrait with 'most grateful thanks for so valuable a present'. NAL 1948/4031/45.



passions'.<sup>115</sup> In smaller pen and ink studies and in large chalk cartoons Romney illustrated two scenes from *The Persians* around this time—*The Ghost of Darius*, where the dead King of Persia foretells the dire outcome of continued warfare with Greece (fig. 58), and *Atossa's Dream*, in which his widow foresees the death of their impetuous son Xerxes through the disharmony between the personifications of Greece and Persia (fig. 59). Potter thought Aeschylus's works abounded with 'pittoresque images, arising from the most vivid imagination, marked with the most precise expression', and he considered the appearance of the ghost of Darius 'one of the finest subjects for picture, that ever employed the pencil of a painter'.<sup>116</sup> Throughout the translation Potter stresses the sublimity of the early playwright, who found theatre in a rude state but added 'the force and spirit of Lyric Poetry to the gravity and magnificence of the Tragic stile'.<sup>117</sup> Potter aimed to produce a 'manly' translation, believing that 'Aeschylus is not to flow Soft as the whispers of a maid in love'. But his method of translating the spare poet involved the addition of descriptive and emotive adjectives, which created a text in tune with the sensibilities of much contemporary English literature.<sup>118</sup> Still, Potter believed that his translation uncovered a poet of both decorum and sublimity, who was 'born with a soul of fire, and animated with whatever is great and noble, all his ideas are magnificent and full of energy; what he conceives boldly he expressed with a correspondent dignity of style'.<sup>119</sup> Romney no doubt would have been pleased when Potter publicly associated him with the sublime antique poet. The sittings to Romney in 1778 had coincided with Potter's preparation of notes for a second edition of *Aeschylus*, published 1779, that would make the translation accessible to an even wider audience. In the footnote

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<sup>115</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 161.

<sup>116</sup> Potter's note to the scene including the Ghost of Darius, *Tragedies of Aeschylus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: T. Cadell, 1779) II: 354.

<sup>117</sup> *Tragedies of Aeschylus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. I: xiii

<sup>118</sup> Potter expressed his philosophies of translating Aeschylus in a letter to his publisher, 17 Dec. 1778, Pierpont Morgan Library Department of Literary and Historical manuscripts. Potter wrote to Edward Jerningham 23 Nov. 1785 of the current state of literary tastes, despairing that, 'nothing pleases now but the Sing-Song of two or three mellifluous misses and the Semperfluous Mr. Hayley. I am proud of having given my honest testimony against this degeneracy...contrasting the sublime and spirit-stirring strains of the more than mortal antients with the insipid lullabies of these ephemery warblers'. Jerningham Mss. JE695, Huntington Library. Reuben A. Brower in 'Seven Agamemnons', in *On Translation* ed. by R. Brower (Oxford University Press, 1966) 174-195 asserts that eighteenth-century translations generally adapt the original Greek by emphasizing 'the feeling' over 'the act' of a text. The *Monthly Review* (LIX, 1778, 286) considered that Potter's translation possessed a measure of 'original genius. To catch the graces, soften the peculiarities, and yet retain a faithful likeness, of an ancient or foreign author, is in some instances attended with more difficulty than even the first composition'.

<sup>119</sup> Potter, *Tragedies of Aeschylus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. I: xxiv.



that augments the scene of Darius' ghost, Potter mentions its wonderful imagery—'the royal shade, the servile prostration of the affrighted satraps, the grief and the tears of Atossa'—all of which appear in Romney's *Ghost of Darius* cartoon. However, it cannot be definitively determined if Potter was describing an in-progress Romney design or if, conversely, Romney used Potter's description as a compositional guide, or even if the footnote and cartoon were conceived in tandem during discussions as Potter sat to Romney. In any event, Potter gave credit to the 'excellent Mr. Romney' within the pages of this edition for designating Aeschylus 'the painter's poet'.<sup>120</sup> Although Potter promised his readers forthcoming paintings of this and other scenes from his translation, no finished or unfinished oils from Aeschylus are known among Romney's oeuvre.

In his use of black chalk for this and the other cartoons, Romney obviously felt that the medium suited the subjects. According to Pliny, the origins of painting began with simple outlines but 'the second stage when a more elaborate method had been invented was done in a single colour and called monochrome'.<sup>121</sup> This anecdote was probably pointed out by Hayley—he had thoroughly researched Pliny for his *Epistle to Romney* and cited him for the story of the *Corinthian Maid* and the origins of art. The cartoons were not executed in mere outlines, as would perhaps suit designs from Homer, but represented an early-classical style contiguous with the fifth-century Greek dramatists. Hayley proves that Flaxman was not the only one who found the cartoons evocative of antiquity: he recalled the 'fervent praise' the poet Joseph Warton bestowed on the scenes from *The Persians*, 'a favorite drama of Warton, and of every scholar, who takes a lively interest in the glory of Greece. The cartoon was so powerful in its spirit and expression that it seemed worthy to have been applauded by Aeschylus himself.'<sup>122</sup> Monochrome also satisfies Romney's simplification aesthetic and his quest for the sublime. In his letter from Rome, Payne Knight had warned of the distractions of beautiful colouring, which may please and exhilarate the

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<sup>120</sup> Op. Cit., vol. II: 354. See my 'George Romney, Robert Potter and the *Painter's Poet*' *Transactions of the Romney Society* 7 (2002), 18, for Potter's interaction with Romney while writing the notes for the second edition of *Aeschylus*.

<sup>121</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 35, ch. 5:15.

<sup>122</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 224-5. Romney's remarks on Flaxman's designs from Homer reveal that he was sensitive to the proper use of antique styles to fit antique literature: 'They are outlines without shadow, but in the style of antient art. They are simple, grand, and pure; I may say with truth very fine. They look as if they had been made in the age, when Homer wrote'. Letter to Hayley, 2 Aug. 1793, *Life of Romney*, 203.



mind but is 'improper for the sublime which disposes us to be serious'.<sup>123</sup> William Blake thought Romney's use of chiaroscuro in the cartoons displayed well his 'chief beauties', and he advised Hayley to have them engraved for the artist's biography in a finished manner as opposed to just outline as 'his merit is eminent in the art of massing his lights and shades'.<sup>124</sup> Blake seems to have perceived that Romney himself considered the cartoons not as preliminary studies but finished works in their own right. Although the Aeschylus cartoons were admired by these discerning critics, the translator found them less memorable—in a letter to Edward Jerningham discussing literary paintings, without any direct mention of Romney or his *Persians* cartoons, Potter remarks, 'The best picture scene in Aeschylus is the ghost of Darius rising from his tomb; but the painter would probably make damned work of it.'<sup>125</sup>

Despite Potter's frustrations with Romney over the lack of publicly-known Aeschylus paintings and another portrait that was slow to arrive, their correspondence continued for several years and is illuminating for the manner in which Romney utilized his literary advisors. While Potter was translating plays for his next publication, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (1781-3), he and Romney considered subjects from the drama of *Alcestis*, the Queen of Thessaly who sacrifices herself to save her husband, Admetus, and is later revived through supernatural agencies. Being familiar with Romney's recent Aeschylean pictures, both of which included a resurrected ghost, Potter naturally concludes that 'the Scene in Alcestis, which you mean, is not where she dies, but where she is brought back to her husband; this I will immediately transcribe for you', which he did, reminding the artist that his *Euripides* was pre-publication and the excerpt should not be passed around; however, he was permitted to show it to 'any friend you may have an inclination to consult'.<sup>126</sup> But Romney was interested in a different scene from *Alcestis* from an altogether different source; he had apparently written to Potter for advice about Thomas Gray's discussion of the subject. Potter replied to the artist, 'my memory is so very treacherous, that I do not

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<sup>123</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 237. Similarly, Reynolds in his fourth Discourse pointed out that 'Poussin, whose eye was always steadily fixed on the Sublime, has often been heard to say, "That a particular attention to colouring was an obstacle to the Student, in his progress to the great end and design of the art".' *Discourses*, 68.

<sup>124</sup> Blake reports that both Flaxman and the engraver James Parker agreed with him that such finished plates were necessary 'to give a true Idea of Romney's Genius'. Blake to Hayley, 4 May and 22 June 1804, *Letters of Blake*, 89, 96.

<sup>125</sup> Potter to Jerningham, 15 June 1788, Jerningham Mss. JE704, Huntington Library.

<sup>126</sup> Potter to Romney, 24 Jun., 18 Aug. 1779, NAL Ms. 1948/4031/40, 45.



recollect where or how Mr. Gray Speaks of it, if you will point it out to me, I will very readily send you the Scene'.<sup>127</sup> One of Romney's other consultants must have found for him the recently published collection of Gray's letters, edited by William Mason, which included a manuscript written in Italy

in which [Gray] has set down several subjects proper for painting, which he had never seen executed, and has affixed the names of different masters to each piece, to shew which of their pencils he thought would have been most proper to treat it. As I doubt not that this paper will be an acceptable present to the Reynoldses and Wests of the age, I shall here insert it.<sup>128</sup>

Gray writes ekphrastically of biblical scenes to be executed by Guido and Correggio and of a picture by Domenichino showing 'Medea in a pensive posture, with revenge and maternal affection striving in her visage; her two children at play, sporting with one another before her. On one side a bust of Jason, to which they bear some resemblance.'<sup>129</sup> In another painting, to be done by Poussin, Gray imagines 'Alcestis dying; her children weeping, and hanging upon her robe; the youngest of them, a little boy, crying too...her right arm should be round this, her left extended towards the rest, as recommending them to her Lord's care; he fainting, and supported by the attendants'.<sup>130</sup> A Romney drawing executed in graphite and ink of a languid, dying woman on an antique bed (fig. 60) closely follows Gray's version of the scene, rendered not for its supernatural possibilities but as a quiet, domestic tragedy. A related drawing (fig. 61) dismisses the weeper at the foot of the bed and transfers her hidden-face gesture of unpresentable grief to the husband. Appropriately, these two drawings recall Poussin's *Death of Germanicus*, the seminal neoclassical 'death-of' prototype and probably a picture that inspired Gray's ekphrasis (fig. 62).<sup>131</sup> A third, less finished drawing (fig. 63) attempts the representation of the overwhelming

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<sup>127</sup> NAL Ms. 1948/4031/40.

<sup>128</sup> *The Works of Thomas Gray*, ed. by Edward Grosse (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1885), Vol. III: 194. Mason in his edition of the letters (1775) had attached the manuscript to a letter from Gray to William Palgrave (March 1765) in which he advises his correspondent on what artworks to see on his grand tour.

<sup>129</sup> Op. Cit., 195. Although Gray's ekphrasis does not differ substantially from the many classical and modern epigrams and ekphrases on Timomachus's *Medea*, if this helped to stir Romney's interest in the subject then the *Medea* cartoon can be dated to c. 1779-80.

<sup>130</sup> Op. Cit., 196.

<sup>131</sup> See Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, 28-39. Discussions of Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* in the eighteenth century attributed its source both to Timanthes's hidden-face motif and to ancient funerary reliefs; see Turnbull, *Treatise on Ancient Paintings*, xxx. Thomas Martyn in *A Tour through Italy*.... (London, 1791), 254, records seeing at the Borghese Palace the relief of the 'life and death of Meleager, from which Nic. Poussin borrowed the composition of his extreme unction in the seven sacraments, and his death of Germanicus'.



emotions of Admetus, shown collapsing in the foreground as Gray prescribed.<sup>132</sup>

Potter eventually sent Romney a long transcript of his finished *Alcestis* death scene from Euripides, but Gray's concise, descriptive invention provided a much more picturesque resource.

As far as Romney was concerned, his relationship with Potter was probably an ideal artist-advisor partnership. Potter understood that, along with reinterpreting the well-known classics, Romney delighted in finding fresh, untried subjects, and with the previously little-known Aeschylus, he was given the opportunity to create new pictorial precedents. Potter perceived Romney's affinity for the tragic martyr, offering, while translating Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, to send the scene of Iphigenia's sacrifice, 'and that of Polyxena, which is very fine'.<sup>133</sup> Potter was also aware of Romney's sensitivity to female beauty: in suggesting 'the death of Montezuma and the destruction of Mexico', he recommend including 'a female Mexican, the golden-quivered daughter of the Cacique'; and in suggesting a 'new' subject that he had never 'seen or heard', *Jason in the House of Pelias* from Pindar, he tells Romney that he may add Medea to the scene, as 'I know that you take a particular pleasure in adorning your pictures with a fine woman'.<sup>134</sup> But perhaps Potter was most valuable in his ability to puff Romney and his works publicly, in respected literary works of wide appeal. Hayley said that Cumberland's odes dedicated to Romney after the trip to Italy were inscribed 'to the painter with such a friendly address, as might be reasonably expected to serve him by introducing the travelled artist to the notice of his country'.<sup>135</sup> Hayley was one who noticed Romney's rising fame, and his rapid moves to dominate the artist suggest that grand-tour credentials made him all the more attractive to the literati. Like most artists who studied in Rome, Romney brought home a store-house of visual citations to be recycled into future works. What he could not bring back, however, was any evidence

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<sup>132</sup> I have already discussed these drawings and identified their subjects in my 'George Romney, Robert Potter and the *Painter's Poet*', 14-16. Judy Egerton, although not identifying any subject, recognized that these three drawings were of a group, related by grief and melancholy. She conjectures that in the third drawing, the flying figure could represent 'the soul departing from the body—or, more prosaically, someone rushing to fetch a doctor'. *Twenty Five Drawings by George Romney* (London: Agnews, 2002), cats. 17-19. If this drawing does represent *The Death of Alcestis*, the two standing figures in the background at left could depict the two immortals instrumental in her death and resurrection, Apollo and Heracles.

<sup>133</sup> Potter to Romney, 26 Dec. 1780, NAL Ms. 1948/4031/49.

<sup>134</sup> Potter to Romney, 12 Jun., 18 July 1779, NAL Ms. 1948/4031/41-43.

<sup>135</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 63-65.



of the most celebrated ancient painters; but the fact that they lived on courtesy of literary sources must have instilled Romney with faith in his poetic friends.

The most useful literary friends to Romney were those who perceived his personal and artistic proclivities and were able to associate him with the well-known qualities of artists from the classical past and the 'modern antiques' from the sixteenth century. In Potter's Preface to his *Euripides* he formulates an equation for the classics he translated, stating that 'Euripides was to Aeschylus what Raffaele was to Michael Angelo', and he refers his readers to Reynolds's Discourse of 1772, which compared the two artists.<sup>136</sup> There Reynolds extols Raphael's taste and judgement in reinterpreting the beauty and simplicity of the antique. However, if Raphael and Michelangelo are judged by the criteria of Longinus's sublime, which 'being the highest excellence that human composition can attain to, abundantly compensates the absence of every other beauty, and atones for all other deficiencies, then Michael Angelo demands the preference.'<sup>137</sup> Romney must have known that the British Apelles had cornered the Raphael market but there was still room for the British Timanthes to appropriate Michelangelo's Aeschylean sublime. The poets and writers promoting these artists managed to borrow some of the glory from the heroes of the sixteenth century for eighteenth-century British artists and shifted the idea of modern antiquity to their own day.

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<sup>136</sup> *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London: J. Dodsley, 1781), vol. I: xi. Given the many references to Reynolds's paragone in the *Discourse* of 1772—including Hayley's citation of it in his notes to the *Epistle to Romney* (1777, note XIII)—one concludes that this would have been familiar to Potter's readers. The next year Joseph Warton refers his own readers to Reynolds on Michelangelo vs. Raphael in his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1782), II:465.

<sup>137</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses* (V, 10 Dec. 1772), 83-4.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Genius of Suffering: Romney as *Il Penseroso*

In the last pages of *The Life of George Romney, Esq.*, published in 1809, Hayley's 'offerings to the departed' include his own poetic epitaph to Romney; a portrait of the artist done years before by the author's teenaged son, Thomas Alphonso Hayley; and from the son of a former pupil of Romney the maudlin tribute *An Elegy on the Death of George Romney, Esq. By J. Romney Robinson, Aged Ten Years and Eight Months*, printed alongside an illustration of the young poet (fig. 64). Romney's identity as a moody, melancholic figure, an image so successfully staged in his lifetime, long outlived him. Although many eighteenth-century British portraitists invested their sitters with an air of dignified gravity or even melancholy to imply emotional and intellectual substance, and many more history painters dealt in poignant and heart-rending subjects, it is Romney whose works are still read as reflecting his dark persona. A recent exhibition of illustrations to Milton's *Paradise Lost* included Romney's sketchy drawing *Satan, Sin, and Death* and the more worked-up *Fall of the Rebel Angels*, which is clearly inspired by the heroic nudes and composition of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Hanging among several other examples of sublime Miltonic paintings and drawings, only Romney's works suggested to the curators that the artist was 'suffering from some kind of mental instability when he drew them'.<sup>1</sup> This follows John Hayes's idea of Romney as 'neurotic and introspective, distrustful and unsociable, he had few friends'; therefore the aged and infirm artist returned to his family in the Northwest, 'where he died insane'.<sup>2</sup> While the public writings about Romney from the 1770s through the 1790s mostly describe him as a lone and studious figure, representing the eighteenth-century definition of melancholy in its more positive and rational aspects, the posthumous biographies reinterpret Romney's contemplative nature as—although a sign of his genius—an impediment to his career, and they confuse physical and mental 'peculiarities', construing them as inborn character traits that escalate to full-blown neurasthenic hypochondria. Hayley's *Epistle to Romney* of 1778 predicted a great body of important works as a result of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Woof, Howard J.M. Hanley, and Stephen Hebron, *Paradise Lost, the Poem and its Illustrators* (Grasmere: the Wordsworth Trust, 2004), 125. Catalogue entries 33 and 34 reiterate the exhibition label.

<sup>2</sup> John Hayes, *Paintings of the Sixteenth through Nineteenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 229.



artist's 'ripen'd judgment' post-Rome, and the verses conclude with wishing him 'Raphael's Glory join'd to Titian's Years'; three decades later Hayley's biography sums up Romney's personal and professional qualities with 'admiration and esteem for the rare endowments of my friend, united to great pity for his melancholy excesses of sensibility, and for all the singularities of nature, and of habit, that seemed to preclude him from accomplishing many great objects of his continual contemplation and desire'.<sup>3</sup> This shift in tone is partially explained by changes in literary fashions: the biographies were written in an era that placed less value on the rational and the universal and more on individual eccentricity and emotional incontinence. A century later during Romney's renaissance in the Duveen era, a biographer who set out with the intention of demystifying genius in the arts and replacing its 'guiding spirit' with the concept of natural ability coupled with perseverance resorted to traditional language to justify Romney's eccentricities, judging him 'as in the thrall of his *daemon*—that indefinable force which impels him to fulfil his destiny'.<sup>4</sup> In performing one of their most traditional and most vital services—that of ensuring everlasting fame—Romney's literary friends applied Romantic notions to his life and character, effectively written in stone, that were the true epitaph to the artist and the man.

Romney's propensity to portray his sitters in flatteringly serious poses as well as his affinity for sad, tragic figures; 'death-of' subjects; and various other melancholic themes shared with sentimental literature had made him an attractive figure to the poets and playwrights in the Age of Sensibility. Romney's literary circle was strongly aligned with the movement that infused poetry, novels, and plays with high-keyed emotions and refined feelings that were expressed vehemently and unashamedly, sometimes mawkishly, leading to doubts over sincerity. But this same sensibility, when rising above passive self-absorption, could in condemning the corruption of modern society also manifest actively in progressive social issues concerning reform and benevolence. Romney often supported the poetry and philanthropic causes in

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<sup>3</sup> William Hayley, *An Essay on Painting, in Two Epistles to Mr. George Romney* (London: J. Dodsley, the Third Edition, Corrected and Enlarged, 1781), Epistle I:10. Epistle II:568; William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq.* (London: T. Payne, 1809), 331.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Herbert Maxwell, *George Romney* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1902), 6. Maxwell perceived that Romney's unique qualities among his peers informed his work in that 'none perceived more keenly or rendered more surely than he, that blend of sensuous attraction and chaste meditation in the matron'. 165.



which his friends were involved and was sometimes the only artist among various lists of subscribers.<sup>5</sup> When positing sensibility as a cultural bridge between neoclassical literature at the beginning of the eighteenth century and Romanticism at the end, it is fair to say that the fashionable poets who befriended Romney, given their rhyming couplets and didactic intent, expressed in turgid tones, were more deeply rooted in the Augustan world than they anticipated the less stilted literature to come.<sup>6</sup> Hayley, Cumberland, and Anna Seward were all ardent proponents and practitioners of sentimentalism yet they also would have understood the classical roots of the genre: they would have recognized the plots and themes of antique literature that recur in modern sentimental genres; they would have known of Aristotle and Cicero's linking of the profound mind with melancholy; Seneca's philosophies on beneficence; Virgil's rural retreat. The classical erudition that infuses their sensibillious poetry of feeling and virtue finds empathy with Romney's melancholic impulses, which encompass both classical tragedy and the eighteenth-century 'English Malady'.<sup>7</sup> Romney's natural proclivities, added to his trip to Italy and his access to poets and their libraries, qualified him to redistribute affecting classical themes into modern modes, just as was done in the literature of sensibility.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Romney is among the subscribers to Helen Maria Williams' *Poems* of 1786 and Charlotte Smith's 1789 edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*, and he is one of about 50 donors towards a monument to 'the Man of Benevolence', John Howard, listed by the Howardian Committee in *The Times*, 18 Sept. 1786—here he is the only artist mentioned.

<sup>6</sup> See Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', in *Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime* ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 11. Eleanor Sickels points out that many of the themes associated with mid-eighteenth-century elegiac and melancholic verse should not necessarily be considered 'preromantic' as they were already present in the neoclassical period, such as the subject of rural retirement from urban corruption as well as the interest in ruins as relating to the contemplation of mutability. *The Gloomy Egoist, Moods and Themes of Melancholy From Gray to Keats* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969, reprint of Columbia University Press, 1932), 11-13, 70-72.

<sup>7</sup> The manifestation of excessive feeling in physical and emotional maladies, more marked in Britain than anywhere else, was much discussed in the eighteenth century by both foreigners and the British. Most were in accord that these 'nervous distempers', such as the spleen, the vapours, melancholy, and hypochondria, although physiologically based, affected the mind and personality and were more extreme in Britain probably due to the changeable climate and the luxuriousness of this wealthy society. See George Cheyne, *The English Malady, or a Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of spirits, Hypochondriacal, and Hysterical Distempers, &c.* (London, 1733), 59-60; Oswald Doughty, 'The English Malady of the Eighteenth Century', *The Review of English Studies* II (1926): 257-269. For the Elizabethan roots of eighteenth-century melancholy in the visual arts see Roy Strong, 'The Elizabethan Malady', *Apollo* 26 (1964): 264-69; Lawrence Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady, A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951). For the cultivation of melancholy among Romney's colleagues, see Frederick Cummings, 'Boothby, Rousseau, and the Romantic Malady', *Burlington* 110 (Dec 1968): 659-666.

<sup>8</sup> Kirsti Simonsuuri discusses the eighteenth-century break with the classical inheritance, pointing out that the new experimental literary forms of the era actually were indebted to the past in utilizing classical themes in an unclassical genre. Devices such as the voyage of adventure, the miraculous



Romney Robinson's *Elegy on the Death of George Romney* is a late example of the genre of verse imitative of Thomas Gray's influential *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, first published in 1751: phrases used in the tribute to Romney, such as 'ruthless time' and 'mouldering spires', reveal that the mid-eighteenth-century graveyard school of poetry maintained adherents into the nineteenth century. The poem and accompanying engraving demonstrate how closely Romney was associated with melancholy and sentimental literature through his utilization of poetic devices and his relationships with the poets themselves. The portrait of Romney Robinson both illustrates specific imagery of his verses to the artist, such as the muse of painting bending 'in sorrow o'er his tomb', and presents a believable, though fictive, tomb monument. The common motif of a female figure mourning beside an urn is also seen in Thomas Banks's monument to Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke, a friend and advisor to Romney and Hayley (fig. 65). Several of Romney's literary friends cultivated a funereal aesthetic that was integral to their poetic identities: Hayley, always careful to offer sufficient 'sepulchral tribute to the dead' had to compile a catalogue to keep track of all the epitaphs he had written;<sup>9</sup> Anna Seward first came to prominence with her *Elegy to Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on Major André* (1781), tributes to two recently fallen national heroes. Romney, a committed exemplar of what plausibly could be called the graveyard school of British painting and sculpture, had embraced similar subjects with his *Death of General Wolfe*, *Death of King Edmund*, and *Death of David Rizzio*—all dating before 1766 and all either destroyed or untraced.

The classical and other traditional themes underlying modern sentimental literature also inform the genre of sentimental painting and sculpture that developed in the

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rescue, the hero in disguise, and true love put to the tests, drawn from classical epics and drama, recur in eighteenth-century sentimental poetry, novels, and plays. *Homer's Original Genius, Eighteenth-century notions of the early Greek epic* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 27. For Janet Todd the difference between the elements of domestic pathos present in classical tragedy and sentimental literature is that in the former the sentimental and the pathetic remain subordinate to plot and character, as opposed to the latter's tendency to centralize them. *Sensibility, An Introduction* (London: Methuen & Co., 1986), 3.

<sup>9</sup> West Sussex Public Record Office Add Mss. 2758. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, as well as his epitaphs, Hayley's 'sacred duties to the dead' included, as he recalled in his memoirs, writing memorial biographies of his son, Thomas Alphonso Hayley, William Cowper, and Romney. *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.* ed. by John Johnson (London: Henry Colburn, 1823) II:40, 72.



second half of the eighteenth century. Robert Rosenblum has surveyed the 'thousands' of late eighteenth-century death-bed and mourning scenes, especially in Britain and France after the 1770s, which, although drawn from Christian lamentation iconography and classical stoic themes, were often conflated and transformed into new, non-classical milieux while maintaining the same dramatic, usually moralizing principles.<sup>10</sup> Romney's 'death-of' paintings from the 1760s, all apparently in the grand manner even though none depicted classical or Christian subjects, were among the earliest examples of this kind of historicism.<sup>11</sup> Such weighty themes—whether in classical or modern guises—continued to dominate Romney's drawings, subject pictures, and even his portraiture for the rest of his career, comprising a greater proportion of his oeuvre than that of any other British painter of the era. The strong undercurrent of suffering that continually surfaces in motifs such as the mourning female figure and the hidden-face gesture could argue that Romney had a greater affinity with tomb-monument sculptors than with his contemporary painters (figs. 66 and 67).<sup>12</sup>

The sculptural remains of classical antiquity that Romney and other painters and sculptors were exposed to in Rome were inherently melancholy: as relics of a lost civilisation they fulfilled a *memento mori* role in and of themselves; but further, the original function of so many of the artefacts, such as sarcophagi, urns, grave stelae, and portrait busts was funereal or commemorative (fig. 68). As Lady Miller put it in her *Letters from Italy*, Rome was 'not a place of gaiety' even though agreeable 'for all

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<sup>10</sup> See Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton University Press, third edition, 1970), 28–40, 50–54.

<sup>11</sup> Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. Romney', *European Magazine* (June 1803), 420, discusses the praiseworthy expressions of the figures in *The Death of Rizzio*; John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 41 confirms that it was painted on 'a large scale' and was cut up, though he had seen some of the fragments. John discusses (45–9) the artistic license Romney took with Wolfe's uniform, which paradoxically was a source of negative criticism—he had erred from the 'proper' regimental battlefield dress for the dying general. *The Death of King Edmund* received the second prize from the Society of Arts in 1765, see John Romney, 52, and Cumberland, 421. Two classical death scenes from the 1760s, Gavin Hamilton's *Andromache Bewailing the Death of Hector*, 1761, and Thomas Banks's bas-relief *Death of Epaminondas*, 1763, also mark the early stages of the eighteenth-century deathbed genre but might be closer to the Baroque conception of the theme, as seen in Poussin's influential *Death of Germanicus*, than Rosenblum's idea of a new historicism utilizing non-classical imagery.

<sup>12</sup> Romney shares the same creative aesthetic with these sculptors, especially those who studied in Rome, in the transfer of motifs into new genres. For example, John Flaxman's monument to Barbara Lowther is indebted to the antique *Polyhymnia*, which can also be seen in Romney's portrait of Sarah Siddons. See Jennifer C. Watson, 'Romney's theatrical portraiture', *Apollo* 136 (1992): 147–151. See Nicholas Penny, *Church Monuments in Romantic England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), figs. 5, 19, 49, 50, 60, 78, 95.



those who love the fine arts, and have a real pleasure in the study of antiquity; which yet rather inclines one to melancholy than cheerfulness'.<sup>13</sup> His Italian sketchbooks show Romney seeking out many of the most esteemed antique sculptures, copying them seemingly with an eye for their future use. He drew the well-known *Weeping Dacia*, a pedestal panel at the Capitoline Museum depicting the personification of a conquered Roman province (fig. 69), and other reliefs featuring dejected female figures, which inspired him to pose his Roman model *all' antica* (fig. 70). Not surprisingly, this mournful motif turns up as a stock item in Romney's store. Drawings in a sketchbook dating to the mid 1780s featuring a bent and downcast female probably represent Romney's design for a memorial to John Thornton (fig. 71), who had died not long after helping Hayley write his *Epistle to Romney*, and who himself became the subject of one of Hayley's published tributes.<sup>14</sup> Hayley states that by 1784 he had formed amid his extensive grounds 'a rustic grotto as an entrance to a shady sequestered walk', which was intended to become a mausoleum to the memory of Thornton, and Romney, while at Earham, exercised his abilities as a sculptor and modelled 'a little figure of *afflicted Friendship*, in the form of a reclining female, to rest on a sepulchral vase'.<sup>15</sup> The piece was carried back to London for firing but it was apparently set aside at Cavendish Square and eventually broke apart. However, before the sculpture was lost, it was most probably seen by Romney's trainee at that time, Thomas Robinson, who went on to depict his son, the author of the *Elegy on the Death of George Romney*, lyre in hand beside the weeping female atop the artist's monument. Romney Robinson seems poised to strew his flowers and then step off into a shady sequestered walk as that designed at Earham. Hayley, who commissioned both the *Elegy* and the accompanying portrait from the Robinsons, never saw Thornton's mausoleum completed with a sculpted tribute; however, at least in the pages of the biography, he was able to give Romney an appropriately sculptural monument.

<sup>13</sup> Written 1 May 1771, Lady Anna Riggs Miller, *Letters from Italy, describing the manners, customs, antiquities, paintings, &c. of that country, in the years MDCCCLX and MDCCXXI* (London, 1777, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) II: 227.

<sup>14</sup> Thornton died 5 Jan. 1780, and by spring Hayley had published *Epistle to a Friend, on the Death of John Thornton, Esq., By the Author of "An Epistle to an Eminent Painter"* ... (London: J.Dodsley).

<sup>15</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 97-8. John Romney (*Memoirs of Romney*, 165), in testifying to his father's versatility, recalled a 'beautiful monumental figure which he moulded in clay, representing a female sitting in a pensive attitude'. Flaxman also refers to Romney's talents in various fields, remarking that he 'modelled like a sculptor'. Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 313.



In utilizing the *Weeping Dacia* motif with all of its mournful connotations in his design for the Thornton monument, Romney had kept to the spirit of the piece, but his modifications of it and other antique motifs in portraits that incorporate elements of melancholy as a fashion accessory illustrate well the flexible transposition of classical elements into modern modes. Several portraits from the post-Rome era are good examples of what Romney was known for—what Cumberland referred to as his ‘exquisite compositions for the display of female beauty in melancholy and affecting attitudes and situations’.<sup>16</sup> In *Elizabeth, Countess of Derby* (fig. 72) the sitter displays her beauty and emotional affectation by recalling not only the *Dacia*-type but another well-known classical sculpture variously identified as *Juno Matrona*, *Livia*, *Pudicity*, and *Melpomene* (fig. 73), a statue whose gravity Horace Walpole appreciated in having it copied for a monument to his mother.<sup>17</sup> Begun in 1776, the Countess of Derby’s portrait was finally finished and paid for in January 1779, when it then went to the engravers. While waiting for her portrait from Romney, Lady Derby also sat to Reynolds in an equally glamorous and fashionable though more buoyant aspect, suggesting that the pensiveness in Romney’s picture was not the sitter’s permanent state.<sup>18</sup> The letters from Lady Newdigate to her husband while she was sitting for her portrait make it clear that Romney at times persuaded his sitters to adopt this serious attitude. She tells of her negotiations with the artist over her likeness, and after several re-paintings she writes, ‘You will not disapprove that I would not let Romney fix all that Care upon my Brow.’<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Mary, Lady Beauchamp-Proctor (fig. 74) needed no prompting to wear her wistful

<sup>16</sup> ‘Memoirs of Mr. George Romney’, *European Magazine* (June 1803), 423.

<sup>17</sup> For the influence of the *Weeping Dacia* on Romney’s portraiture see Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2002), 98, 113, 152. For the *Juno Matrona* see Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 300, fig. 157. Like the *Weeping Dacia*, the *Juno Matrona* was mentioned by the Richardsons in their 1722 and 1728 guides to antiquities and was sought out by grand tourists. Haskell and Penny point out that much after Walpole’s time, scholars agreed that the sculpture’s original function was indeed sepulchral.

<sup>18</sup> The Reynolds portrait, painted and exhibited in 1777, is destroyed but it, too, was engraved and the engraving is illustrated in David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), cat. 813. Reynolds, too, tapped into the taste for female portraits of sensibility and also, especially from the 1750s to the 1770s, often painted the chin-in-hand pose. See Richard Dormant, *British Paintings in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia, 1986), 288-91. Romney’s delay in completing *Elizabeth, Countess of Derby* may be an instance of deliberate retention in his studio of a portrait of a sitter well known for their beauty or accomplishments, as occurred with the portrait of Potter in 1778. Alex Kidson has discussed Romney’s post-Rome studio as a viewing space which incorporated other such ‘marketing strategies’. See *George Romney*, 23-6.

<sup>19</sup> Hester Newdigate to Sir Roger Newdigate, 1792, quoted in Arthur B. Chamberlain, *George Romney* (London: Methuen & Co., 1910), 274.



expression; she habitually cultivated the full sensibility experience, walking daily through nature to indulge in solitary meditation, and valuing her reading as productive not of knowledge but of 'quiet, composure, resignation, & a cheerful melancholy'.<sup>20</sup> Leaning against a sarcophagus-like plinth, she is the modern counterpart of the classical figure depicted in the sculpted roundel who is mourning at a tomb, which reinforces the painting's autumnal theme of transience. Intended as a disparagement, John Hoppner remarked that Romney's draperies were 'better adapted to sculpture than painting, and gave to his figures more the appearance of coloured statues, than representations of animated nature'.<sup>21</sup> Here, only the flattering blush breaks the ivory white of her skin and the drapery, whose cascading knife pleats do mimic those seen on the mournful sculpted figure in the roundel.<sup>22</sup> Despite her monumental air, Lady Beauchamp-Proctor's emotional state is the 'soothing-sweet', 'white' melancholy current in elegiac poetry that has nothing to do with personal grieving; the generalized contemplation expressed here is the painted equivalent of Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*.<sup>23</sup> Given that death is probably the most universal—and adaptable—theme available to an artist it is little wonder that Romney would invite thoughts on mortality not just in his subject pictures but in his portraiture as well.

Romney's male sitters, even when adopting the pose that appears to have been drawn from an antique grave stele or when integrated among other melancholic paraphernalia, usually fail to evoke the same pensive air as does *Mary, Lady Beauchamp-Proctor*. For example, in the portrait of Sir John Trevelyan (fig. 75) the sitter appears unconcerned with conveying any sensibility beyond a love of the landscape, which he owns. Another masculine client, Jeremiah Milles (fig. 76), even when got up in quasi-Van Dyck dress and holding a book transmits little of nostalgia. Contemporary press reports bear out that Romney was perceived as having less

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from Beauchamp-Proctor to Edward Jerningham, cited in Robyn Asleson, 'Antiquity, Mortality and Melancholy in Romney's Portraiture' in *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination*, ed. by Alex Kidson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 174; see also Robin Asleson and Shelley M. Bennett, *British Paintings at The Huntington* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 2001), 402-6.

<sup>21</sup> John Hoppner, *Essays on Art* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1908), 101, originally appearing in Hoppner's review of Hayley's *Life of Romney* in the *Quarterly Review* (Nov. 1809).

<sup>22</sup> Lady Newdigate confirms that it was the artist who requested she wear a white garment for her portrait: she writes to her husband of complying, with difficulty, to Romney's demand that a 'white Satin' be produced by the time of her next sitting, and it was to be left with him all summer. She regretted that a hastily borrowed gown 'won't satisfy him'. Chamberlain, *George Romney*, 274.

<sup>23</sup> Sickels (*Gloomy Egoist*, 130) surveys the phrases such as 'sadly soothing' and 'sweetly sad' that recur in the many 18<sup>th</sup>-century odes to melancholy, solitude, contemplation, and silence, 46-58.



facility in painting men than women: the former were judged to often appear hard and 'mean in character', whereas 'the *female heads* of Romney are in general touched with a very tender and bewitching hand'.<sup>24</sup> These views were surely informed by the lyrical mood that hangs over his portraits of women and his fancy pictures, which almost exclusively feature female protagonists. The delicate feelings associated with sensibility were generally considered feminine qualities, for better or worse, and were therefore more easily given in paint to women; but Romney's female-centric aesthetic also conforms to the longer tradition in art of applying allegorical concepts to the female body to produce personifications, including *Melancholia*.<sup>25</sup>

Romney's now-lost oil exhibited at the Free Society in 1767, *Two Sisters, Half Length*, was reinterpreted when engraved and published three years later as *Two Sisters Contemplating On Mortality* (fig. 77), a tweaking of semantics that moves the painting from the less-valued genre of portraiture towards the elevated sphere of history painting. Although Romney had already painted several female portraits which admitted faint ruins into their backgrounds or contained other meditative devices, this picture seems to have been designed from the outset as a deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries between portraiture and history painting, which must account for the comment upon its exhibition that it was 'in the style of Mr. Reynolds'.<sup>26</sup> Various studies for *Two Sisters* display the evolution of the picture, with early stages depicting the women in contemporary dress and in alternative positions, with assorted props for meditation, such as urns, books, and sundials (figs. 78 and 79). The finished composition, as seen in the print, expresses its *memento mori* theme

<sup>24</sup> Unidentified newspaper cutting, on internal evidence dated to spring 1787, Cumbria Public Record Office, Barrow; *The Times* 23 Nov. 1786.

<sup>25</sup> See Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Picador, 1987). Warner explains (12-13) that historically women lacked the individuality permitted of men and were therefore more suitable for embodying wide abstractions in that 'the female form does not refer to particular women, does not describe women as a group, and often does not even presume to evoke their manners', for instance, Liberty.

<sup>26</sup> Algernon Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great Britain 1760-1791, The Free Society of Artists 1761-1783* (Bath: Kingsmead Reprints, 1967), 218. Alex Kidson also detects in other Romney pictures of the 1760s a deliberate appropriation of Reynolds's stylistic vocabulary, and he elucidates Romney's tactics of emulation in pointing out that the publishing and exhibition of the print of *Two Sisters*, the first of Romney's works to be engraved, 'served as a timely advertisement of Romney's strengths as a competitor for Reynolds....' Kidson, *George Romney*, 62. See also cat. 11, *Lady Blunt*, whose preliminary studies appear with *Two Sisters* in the Kendal Town Hall sketchbook. Compare also in Kendal the studies for *Mrs. Wilbraham Bootle*, which include an urn and vague ruins among its backdrop props. *Two Sisters* has not been associated with any specific portrait commission or known sitters as were these two portraits.



more blatantly than is normally seen in Romney's portraits, where contrivances of mood serve as a support to the ethereal beauty of the sitter. One of the women points to a headless (female) statue with one hand, while her other hand and arm are resting against a possibly pregnant abdomen, underscoring the cycle-of-life theme. Musing against a backdrop of classical ruins—complete with contrasting sculpted scenes of revelry and a dejected spandrel figure—the women are dressed in Van Dyck's quasi-pastoral costume, which adds another historical layer to the image and further removes it from prosaic modern portraiture.<sup>27</sup> *Two Sisters* illustrates the specifically English melancholy developed in the Elizabethan era and made more elegant with the bittersweet languor that lay over portraits of the ill-fated Caroline court (fig. 80). In common with the personifications Melancholy and her companion Contemplation of Milton's *Il Penseroso* (c. 1632), *Two Sisters* represents the melancholy born of reason and philosophy—the kind that Mary Wollstonecraft complained was denied to women, it being too 'masculine', as opposed to the debased form of effusive melancholy common in modern sensibility.<sup>28</sup>

As discussed in the Introduction, in both his letter of March 1770 to Romney advising on the paintings that were originally intended to be exhibited under the titles *l'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (see figs. 9 and 10) and in his published verses to the artist a few months later, Cumberland took care to ensure that Romney was personally identified with the concepts of melancholy and contemplation. In a relatively short space of time, a concentrated surge of artistic and marketing activity points to a premeditated enterprise on the part of Romney, with Cumberland's assistance, of formulating an image as a specialist in serious subjects slanting towards melancholy. Between 1770-1771, the engraving of *Two Sisters Contemplating on Mortality* was published, and it was shown at the Society of Artists exhibition along with the pendants *Melancholy* and *Mirth*, which were soon also engraved and published, though re-titled *l'Allegro*

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<sup>27</sup> See especially Van Dyck's *Olivia Porter, Venetia Digby as Prudence* (National Portrait Gallery, London). Robyn Asleson's valuable reading of this image stresses its connection to the *et in arcadia ego* theme, especially as configured by Poussin. 'Antiquity, Mortality and Melancholy in Romney's Portraiture', 170-73.

<sup>28</sup> Wollstonecraft argues that due to the 'absurd' practices of education, even accomplished women are expected to cultivate weakness, submission, and feeling at the expense of intellect. She cites a male writer's view that 'it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy' as evidence of the kind of reasoning used to maintain intellectual inferiority in women, and she also comments on the specious argument that 'man was made to reason, woman to feel'. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 66, 134-7.



and *Il Penseroso*—this print was exhibited under the name *Melancholy* at the same Society of Artists exhibition in which Romney showed *Mrs. Yates as the Tragic Muse*.<sup>29</sup> And in the middle of all this a portrait of Cumberland was exhibited, engraved, and published, while his verses to Romney were published in the *Public Advertiser*. This poem, putting Romney forward as a pensive, studious and solitary figure, directly invokes Milton's *Il Penseroso* in its celebration of sequestered contemplation and betrays itself as one of the many eighteenth-century heirs of Milton's paeon to pensive, 'white' melancholy.<sup>30</sup> In addressing the qualities of the paired antitheses *l'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Milton ultimately chooses the emotional state of Melancholy over Mirth, and it appears that Romney follows this programme, too, given that the engraving of *Melancholy* was exhibited without its partner and given that it is *Il Penseroso* that Cumberland's verses to Romney reference. Geoffrey H. Hartman argues that in these poems Milton created a fresh, new English lyricism in contrast to the ponderous allegories and classical gods of foreign literature, and his temperate and reasonable spirits and personifications played into ideas concerning the moderation of the British genius.<sup>31</sup> The Romney that Cumberland portrays in his verses is the essence of Milton's gentle Melancholy and the British spirit, as

No wild ambition swells his temperate heart,  
Himself as pure and patient as his art;  
Nor sullen sorrow, nor intemp'rate joy  
The even tenour of his thoughts destroy.<sup>32</sup>

But this Romney is unrecognizable as the subject appearing in the later, mythologizing biographies, which indicate that new ideas concerning British genius had taken hold. The posthumous biographies are more under the sway of Shakespeare's fire and irregularity than of Milton's classical learning. The philosophy that extolled the original genius of Shakespeare and Ossian—claiming

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<sup>29</sup> The prints *Two Sisters Contemplating on Mortality* (published by J. Boydell) and *l'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (published by Robert Sayer) were engraved and exhibited by Robert Dunkarton.

<sup>30</sup> See Sickels, *Gloomy Egoist*, Chapter Two, 'Invocation to Melancholy'.

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'False Themes and Gentle Minds', *Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 22. Hartman further remarks that it is beside the point that this supposed reasonable British genius was a nationalist myth, although it would become an issue for Blake, 'who rejects Milton's compromise and engages on a radical confrontation of the poetic genius with the English genius'. Yet Blake might have appreciated Milton's concept of genius more than Hartman here suggests if Samuel Palmer is correct in thinking that Blake valued a print of Durer's '*Melancholy, the Mother of Invention*', which hung next to his engraving table, as it was probably 'seen by Milton, and used in his *Penseroso*'. *The Letters of William Blake with related documents* ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1980), 174.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Cumberland, Verses to Romney published in the *Public Advertiser*, 12 June 1770, reprinted in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 63-66.



them both as 'the British Homer'—was fed by an off-shoot of sensibility, the cult of the primitive. Discussions of Romney's 'wildness and fire'<sup>33</sup> fit the changing paradigms of the biographers, whose own poetic identities and outputs evolved little in style though they could not help but be aware of burgeoning cultural trends.

The seriousness visible in *Two Sisters Contemplating on Mortality* revisits Romney's later portraits and historical designs but the perception of his works would become increasingly shaped by his association with poetic friends and the entwining of their respective careers. Hayley remarked that the boost his confidence had received from the success of the *Epistle to Romney* encouraged other such compositions. One of these was *Venus to Lady Warwick*, a set of verses inspired by an admired Romney portrait and operating on the conceit that the narrator is the Goddess of Love herself, who taught the artist to trace 'the sweetness of that lovely face':

'Twas I, and Romney owns as much,  
Who guided every finer touch  
Directing still with secret hints,  
The form, the character, the tints;  
'Twas I, among his pencils plac'd  
One with superior virtue grac'd,  
Made of soft down from Cupid's feather,  
Which all the Graces tied together.<sup>34</sup>

These are examples of the soft phrases and flowery diction, the 'pretty nothings', that Wollstonecraft felt had invaded literature and conversation as 'caricatures of the real beauty of sensibility'.<sup>35</sup> The fundamental conventionality of most of the poets in Romney's circle is reflected in his likenesses of them, particularly Cumberland (fig. 81), Hayley (fig. 82), and Seward (see fig. 14). In such portraits Romney rarely attempts to rise beyond the generic, resorting to traditional poets' iconography—the chins resting in hands, fingers touching temples; the smatterings of pens, scrolls and books; the unfocused eyes turned upward towards inspiration. Hayley doubtlessly would have been delighted with any portrait of himself resembling the dignified manner in which Alexander Pope, one of his favourite writers, was often portrayed (fig. 83).<sup>36</sup> Such traditional treatments stand in stark contrast to Reynolds's portrayal

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<sup>33</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 178.

<sup>34</sup> William Hayley, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.*, ed. by John Johnson (London, 1823) I:185; John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 144.

<sup>35</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 6-8.

<sup>36</sup> The paraphernalia of poets' portraits can be seen as early as the Roman pavement depicting Virgil and continue with little evolution to the eighteenth century, when they were consistently applied to the



of his close friend the 'literary colossus' Samuel Johnson (fig. 84), known for his conviviality but here a picture of self-absorption, of engaged internal dialogue. Reynolds's written character sketch of Johnson confirms that when isolated his mind 'appeared to be preying on itself' and he exhibited 'strange antic gesticulations', which Pope referred to as 'convulsions'.<sup>37</sup> But Romney's poetic friends generally required more decorum and idealism in their portraits, with no signs of mental turmoil beyond a scholarly melancholy. Anna Seward praised Romney in effusive verse that described the arrival and unpacking of her flattering likeness, when 'the sight of thy breathing canvass shone / And made the magic of thy pencil known'.<sup>38</sup> Naturally, the portrait remained in Romney's studio long enough to be seen by the public and commented on in the *Morning Herald*, who said that the picture rendered Seward 'as pensive as poetry and painting can make her'.<sup>39</sup>

If Romney's portraits of his literary friends are formulaic, in turn, the word-portraits of Romney by his biographers are equally conventional—even when the discussions focus on the malign products of Romney's uncertain nervous system, which included 'that insidious malady the hypochondria' and 'that insidious distemper, Melancholy'.<sup>40</sup> This, too, drew from a long tradition in writings about artists. Far from pioneering a Romantic and radical form of historiography, the posthumous biographies of Romney borrow from well-established ideas on the eccentricity and instability of artists; their carefully-contrived depictions of Romney exhibit a transparent methodology of sourcing earlier clichéd anecdotes of particular artists and general hyperbolic artistic lore found in written and oral histories. With the sanction of humanist literary theory, these biographers proceeded without concerns of plagiarism and selectively chose from these earlier sources for their 'original'

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portraits of Pope, who took a great interest in his likenesses. See David Piper, *Image of the Poet: British Poets and their Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 55-78, figs. 4, 62, 67, 68, 73, 82.

<sup>37</sup> Reynolds felt that Johnson's gestures were related to deep, psychological conflicts related to his fear of being alone and his dread of melancholy and they 'were meant to reprobate some part of his past conduct'. *Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. by Frederick W. Hilles (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1952), 55, 60-61, 70.

<sup>38</sup> 'Impromptu', quoted in John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 200-3.

<sup>39</sup> Review of Romney's 'Picture Gallery', *The Morning Herald*, 1787, Whitley Papers 1282, British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings. Chamberlain judges Romney's portraits of eminent figures to be lacking Reynolds's intellectuality and insight, especially as seen in the latter's portrait of Laurence Sterne, yet he sees that Romney's paintings of Hayley, 'though not untinged by the flattery of friendship...are, nevertheless, admirable in their indication of the character of one who was a curious mixture of shallowness and enthusiasm'. Chamberlain, *George Romney*, 332.

<sup>40</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 225, 245.



compositions.<sup>41</sup> Romney's biographers were sufficiently qualified to do this: Cumberland's writings on art included a published catalogue of the paintings at the royal palace at Madrid as well as a biography of Velasquez; Hayley's commentary to his *Epistle to Romney* displays a thorough knowledge of writings about artists from antiquity onwards, and his continuing research is reflected in the subsequent updated editions of the poem.<sup>42</sup> The Reverend John Romney, a Cambridge fellow, cultivated the air of a learned country gentleman, and after inheriting his father's library of books relating to the history of art he continued to augment it.<sup>43</sup> Each of the biographers, in one way or another, fulfilled literary ambitions of their own while seeing to Romney's perpetual reputation.

In *The Life of George Romney, Esq.*, Hayley claims that Romney 'never wished to be delineated without some strong shadows in the portrait; truth and affection equally oblige me to say, that in his fits of constitutional spleen he sometimes indulged such a degree of petulance, as might fill a sympathetic associate with serious concern, or with ludicrous surprise.'<sup>44</sup> Hayley's discussions of Romney's temperament usually advance little beyond the seventeenth-century metaphysics of Le Brun's theories on the passions or Bellori's explanation of Caravaggio's extreme chiaroscuro and tenebrism, which were related to his 'physiognomy and appearance; he had a dark complexion and dark eyes, and his eyebrows and hair were black; this coloring was naturally reflected in his paintings'.<sup>45</sup> Hayley proclaims himself and Romney adept in detecting connections between the exterior and the interior:

The person of Romney was rather tall, his features were broad and strong, his hair was dark, his eyes indicated much vigour, and still more acuteness of mind. The feature of the human visage, which he considered as the surest index of the heart, was in his own countenance very remarkable. By the quick

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<sup>41</sup> See Maria H. Loh, 'New and Improved: Repetition as Originality in Italian Baroque Practice and Theory', *Art Bulletin* 86 (Sept. 2004): 477-504.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance the verse and accompanying footnotes in the third edition (*An Essay on Painting, in Two Epistles*, 1781) on Salvator Rosa and the Baroque Spanish painters that do not appear in the 1778 *Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter*. All editions rely heavily on Pliny, Vasari, and the collection of artists' letters recently published by Bottari.

<sup>43</sup> See A Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures, Reserved after the Death of that Celebrated and elegant painter, Romney, as some of the most Capital of his Productions by his Son, the Rev. John Romney, deceased, in provenance of whose Will they are now sold...Christie's, 9 May 1834. Many of the titles can be linked directly to Romney through subscription lists, such as 'Richardson's Iconology, 1778' and 'Birch's Views' (1791), but the sale also included books published after Romney's death.

<sup>44</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 317.

<sup>45</sup> Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672), translated in Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 350.



or tardy movement of the fibres around the lips, he was accustomed to estimate the degrees of sensibility in his sitters; and of himself, in this particular, it might have been said with truth, *His own example strengthens all his laws; He is himself, the Sensitive he draws*. For his heart had all the tenderness of nature; never I believe, were the lips of any man more quick to quiver with emotions of generous pity at the sight of distress, or at the relation of a pathetic story. His feelings indeed were perilously acute.<sup>46</sup>

Cumberland's memoir of Romney published six years earlier had also highlighted his emotively trembling voice and his tears, 'to which he was by constitution prone'.<sup>47</sup> The overstatement in the biographies of Romney's great degree of inherent sensibility might well reflect contemporary fixations on 'feeling', yet this also represents a late permutation of ancient ideas about physiologically-based humours and their effects on the artistic personality. Pliny's opinion of the sculptor Silanion, whose overly 'intense passion for his art' and bizarre antics earned him the nickname 'the Madman', may have taken into consideration Aristotle's theories on the melancholy humours and creativity as well ideas on supernatural *furor poeticus*, linked back to Plato; Vasari quite clearly incorporates the Neoplatonic conflation of Plato's supernatural inspiration and Aristotle's physiology into a *divino artista* when celebrating the mystical advent of the brooding Michelangelo; Romney's biographers, while freely picking and choosing themes from all the earlier writings on artists, take on board a priori assumptions about the biology of the creative type and resulting life patterns.<sup>48</sup>

Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz have outlined the relatively limited repertoire of anecdotes that recur in artists' biographies, often transformed in new guises.<sup>49</sup> Themes

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<sup>46</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 300-1.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney', *European Magazine* June 1803, 423.

<sup>48</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 34:81; Vasari, *Lives of the Painters* IV: 108-9. For the concept of creative genius from antiquity forward see Paul Kauffman, 'Heralds of Original Genius' in *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell* (New York: Russell and Bromley, 1967, reissue of 1926 Harvard edition), 192-217; see Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn, The Character and Conduct of Artists* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), Chapter Five, 'Genius, Madness, and Melancholy'.

<sup>49</sup> *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, trans. by Alastair Laing, first pub. in Vienna, 1934), Chapter Two, 'The Heroization of the Artist in Biography'. The authors illustrate this point with Pliny's story of Lysippus, who was stirred to become an artist upon hearing Eupompos answer the question of who had been his master by pointing to a crowd and remarking, 'there are my masters'. Bellori appropriates this quip and attributes it to Caravaggio to explain his anti-academicism, yet when Passeri has Guido Reni point to a group of antique statues when asked where he found such beautiful models 'the form of the anecdote has been severed from its connection with a specific content and survives independently'. 17. Flaxman's comment (in Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 307) that when Romney 'first began to paint, he had seen no gallery of pictures, nor the fine productions of ancient sculpture; but men, women and children were



involving the early life of the artist, such as the rustic beginnings, the tracing of outlines in the sand or on other impromptu supports, the obstacle of unsuitable employment and the fortunate accident that delivers a discoverer of talent, *deus ex machina*, are literary devices that bend with the demands of the biography at hand. Pliny's remark that art had its origins in the tracing of a man's shadow in outline is probably instrumental to the trope in Vasari whereby the young artist is often first found expressing his genius in this primitive fashion: *Lives of the Painters* has the youthful Giotto tending sheep and drawing their forms with a stick in the ground until his future master Cimabue happens along; similarly the boy-shepherd Andrea del Castagno is discovered drawing animal outlines on a wall. Carel Van Mander in *Het Schilder-boeck* moves the theme to Jooris Hoefnaghel, who draws both in the sand and covertly in his attic until a visiting nobleman persuades the boy's father to encourage his talents—this providential triumph of artistic talent over early hindrances appearing in these sources re-emerges as a commonplace in later biographies by De Piles and others.<sup>50</sup> The core of all these motifs is found with remarkable conformity in Romney's biographies. Cumberland's sketch of Romney's early rural years covers his dissatisfying apprenticeship with his cabinet-maker father, which continues until a fellow carpenter, 'an unconscious patron of the arts, and founder, as he may be called of the fortunes of our Painter', lends the budding artist a magazine full of engravings from which to copy. The further intervention of a neighbouring gentleman sways the father to consider a career as a painter for his son, especially as by this point Romney's drawings 'began to display themselves on the walls of the workshop, and the doors of the barn, not in the shapes of chairs and chests of drawers, but in the likenesses of men and women, sketched in chalk, and so ingeniously done, as drew a crowd, not of customers, but of idlers, to admire them'.<sup>51</sup> John Romney's discussion of his father's years as a trainee cabinet-maker, when 'his

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his statues, and all objects under the cope of heaven formed his school of painting' continues the motif in a transmuted form.

<sup>50</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 35:15; Vasari, *Lives of the Painters* I: 66, II: 11-12, Vasari also give these origins to Beccafumi and Sansovino, and it turns up later in the biographies of Zurbarán and Goya; see Kris and Kurz, *ibid*.

<sup>51</sup> 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney', 418-19. Cumberland, who shortly after Romney's death was prevailed upon by some of their friends to quickly produce a memoir—obviously to beat Hayley to it—relied heavily on a manuscript prepared for him by Romney's childhood friend Thomas Greene. Although Cumberland's telling of Romney's early artistic stirrings conforms to Greene's letter closely, the anecdote of Romney drawing on walls appears to be an invention of Cumberland. Compare to 'Thomas Greene to William Long', 9 Dec. 1802, Preston Public Record Office (DDGr Box 55); reproduced in David A. Cross, 'George Romney: the Earliest Biography of 1802', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 9 (2004): 13-17.



genius was struggling in obscurity, and labouring under every disadvantage', cites his quasi-miraculous rescue in the form of a woman, 'like some inspiring genius', who alone recognised his gifts and commissioned a portrait—his first: 'To this lady the world is chiefly indebted for eliciting the hidden sparks of his genius; who might, therefore on that account, be regarded as the foster-mother of his art.'<sup>52</sup> In Hayley's rendering, 'the fortunate incident, which led him to a cultivation of the particular art, that he was destined to profess' appears in none of the other biographies. Here Romney 'amazed and delighted' his parents with his talent by drawing from memory the countenance of a stranger he had seen in church: 'the applause, that he received from this accidental performance, excited him to draw with more serious application'.<sup>53</sup>

The biographies exhibit more agreement in describing Romney's single-minded dedication to his work. John Romney remarks that his father 'followed the precept of Apelles,—*nulla dies sine linea*,—with such reprehensible strictness, as to make no other distinction of the sabbath than that his labour on that day was less severe, and upon subjects more pleasing to his fancy', and he calculates these working days as thirteen hours long.<sup>54</sup> The other biographers concur that Romney was so absorbed in his paintings and drawings that he stopped only for 'a little broth' or a hot beverage.<sup>55</sup> Again, this disproportionate enthusiasm harks back to earlier tropes of self-denial for one's art, such as Pliny's tale (*Natural History* 35:10) of the abstemious painter Protogenes, who lived on soaked lupins while working to avoid 'blunting his sensibilities' with luxuries. This kind of dietary eccentricity also appears in the biography of Piero di Cosimo, whose obsession with his work found him subsisting solely on boiled eggs.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Vasari's picture of the pathologically-irritable Piero appears to have provided Hayley, at least, with a prototype for a portrayal of Romney, with many points of contact in evidence. We are told that the odd Piero favoured solitude; nevertheless, when in company 'his conversation was so various and diversified that some of his sayings made his hearers burst with laughter'. Hayley

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<sup>52</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 145, 155.

<sup>55</sup> Cumberland, *Memoirs of Mr. Romney*, 423. See also Robinson's memoir in Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 322; 327.

<sup>56</sup> Vasari II: 176-182. See Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic*, 125-6, for the formation of these biographical tropes.



maintains that Romney's speech also had a provocative quality even while all the biographers refer to his habitual shyness and secluded habits. He records that 'a lady of brilliant talents, and extensive reading, who has long been dead, used to say, "I love to meet Romney at Earham, because I am sure of hearing from him such remarks, as we hear from no other mortal." I have often regretted, that I never formed a collection of his pointed sayings.' And in another place Hayley recalls being struck by an invective of Romney's 'in so comic a point of view, that it produced a hearty laugh, in which he joined in perfect good humour, and with reflections both comic, and serious, on his own irritability'.<sup>57</sup> Both Piero and Romney suffered strokes in their later years (the implication being from excessive labour) but persisted in attempting to work, presenting a pathetic sight—Piero with his lifeless hand and Romney with his numb and shaky one.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, for Vasari, Piero provided a cautionary tale, saying that, although he had greatly benefited art, his strange behaviour had hindered appreciation of his genius, and thus 'every man of ability and every excellent artist ought to consider the end in the light of these examples'. Essentially, Hayley's whole biography recapitulates this sentiment, insisting that Romney would have wanted his 'very singular infirmities of mind' known to the world to help advance 'the knowledge of mental weaknesses', and even less chivalrously, he comments on the lack of great historical works that Romney left behind despite 'the sanguine presages of a poetical friend in his favor'; still, the artist would have wished Hayley's narrative to expose all his failings as 'useful to future artists...that it may excite them to plan betimes, and to persevere in resolute, and well-concerted plans for reaching the highest excellence, which their respective powers may enable them to attain'.<sup>59</sup>

Romney may have resembled Piero di Cosimo most in his morbid fears for his own wellbeing. This is certainly a trait well exploited in Hayley's biography. He says

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<sup>57</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 302, 317

<sup>58</sup> Hayley, *op.cit.* 289, 294, tells of Romney's paralytic strokes that probably began as early as 1796 and which affected his hand and his eyesight. He relates the 'singularly affecting sight' of watching Romney, along with Hayley's ailing son, Thomas, in 1799 'struggling under the severe disadvantage of personal calamities', yet Romney continued to work 'with an infirm hand' on a new self-portrait. See also John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 253. According to Vasari (II: 182), after Piero's stroke, 'he wanted to work, and not being able on account of the paralysis, he became so enraged that he would try to force his helpless hands, while he doddered about and the brush and maul-stick fell from his grasp, a pitiful sight to behold'.

<sup>59</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 10, 81.



Romney was 'subject to "thick-coming fancies," concerning trivial variations in the symptoms of his health', which those at Eartham strived to alleviate. In fact, 'the friends of Romney did not think his sufferings the less entitled to their attention and pity, because they knew them to be merely imaginary: on the contrary several of his associates were ever eager to employ both reason and raillery, in freeing him from those oppressive phantoms, which his powerful imagination under these transient clouds was so apt to produce.'<sup>60</sup> Cumberland, too, gives a picture of an emotionally delicate Romney being coddled by well-meaning but rather patronising friends in describing his quiet self-absorption when among intimates which was broken by sudden outbursts—'sallies of natural genius, clothed in natural eloquence', uttered with a 'peculiarity of expressive language, that was entirely his own, and in which education or reading had no share'. When listening to a recitation, a noble sentiment 'springing from the heart of the speaker never failed to make his eyes overflow, and his voice tremble, whilst he applauded it. He was on these occasions like a man possessed, and his friends became studious not to agitate him too often, or too much with topics of this sort'.<sup>61</sup> When Hayley contrasts the spleen of Romney, which 'burst out in rapid and transient flashes, like the explosion of a rocket' with that of Lord Thurlow, which 'rolled forth in a gloomy volume like an eruption of smoke, followed by fluent fire, from the labouring Vesuvio' but then remarks that they resembled each other in that 'whenever they wished to please, the stile and tone of their conversation united uncommon charms of entertaining vivacity and of delicate politeness',<sup>62</sup> it becomes prudent to question how much Romney knowingly indulged in role-playing and, indeed, how complicit he was in creating the mythologizing biographies.

Kris and Kurz argue that the effects on the artist's psyche of the oral and written traditions concerning artistic lives could result in 'enacted biography', a conforming to expectations that is perhaps more unconscious than conscious.<sup>63</sup> In Romney's case, self-awareness is indicated in Hayley's admission that Romney loved to be read to from Vasari's *Lives* and in his several statements—in the biography and elsewhere, privately—that Romney not only wished him to write his life but also furnished the potential author with 'many particulars of his early days from his own Lips for this

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<sup>60</sup> Hayley, *op.cit.*, 267, 242.

<sup>61</sup> Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. Romney', 423.

<sup>62</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 271.

<sup>63</sup> Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic*, 132.



purpose'.<sup>64</sup> But then artists' collusion in the perpetuation of artistic myths had long been recognised. Giovan Battista Armenini's 1587 *Dei veri precetti della pittura* complained of the enacted biography he saw played out among his contemporary artists, which was prompted by the illiterate and the educated alike,

to whom it seems natural that a painter of the highest distinction must show signs of some ugly and nefarious vice allied with a capricious and eccentric temperament, springing from his abstruse mind. And the worst is that many ignorant artists believe themselves to be very exceptional by affecting melancholy and eccentricity.<sup>65</sup>

Reynolds's biographer James Northcote found it apposite to defend his former master against such implications, insisting that he had 'none of those eccentric bursts of action, those fiery impetuosities which are supposed by the vulgar to characterize genius, and which frequently are found to accompany a secondary rank of talent but are never conjoined with the first'.<sup>66</sup> Of course, fictions in artists' biographies would be easy to expose were an unsympathetic reader so inclined. John Hoppner found Romney personally repellent and took the opportunity of reviewing Hayley's *Life of Romney* to publish his aversion both to the artist and to the biographer. He argues that Romney's request to Hayley to write his life story is at odds with the picture of the modest and retiring artist that is presented in the biography, and he mocks the attempts to heroize this unsavoury man and bad artist. Hoppner has no tolerance for Hayley's hagiographic declarations of Romney's 'exquisite sensibility' and sufferings and retorts that 'the compassionate feelings with which Mr. H. so liberally endows him, Romney never knew'.<sup>67</sup> The poetic licence of the biographies notwithstanding, Romney probably was inclined towards nervousness and depression, but his son claims that 'it was only in the decline of life, when his health was impaired by application, and his feelings ruffled by peculiar circumstances, that he manifested that

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Hayley to John Flaxman, 7 Aug., 1803, *The Letters of William Blake*, 59; see also Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 3, 55-56, 328, see 158, where Romney is alleged to have told Emma, Lady Hamilton in 1791 that Hayley had already begun the biography.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*, 92. The Wittkowers interpret this sixteenth-century backlash against eccentric behaviour as representing proto-academic sentiments, spearheaded by Vasari's praise of the gentlemanly artist.

<sup>66</sup> James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1818) II:321. It seems that Northcote's peers were quite aware of the possibility that affecting 'genius' involved a certain amount of play-acting: Reynolds, Boswell, and Johnson's other friends debated just how involuntary the writer's 'antic gesticulations' actually were. Hilles, ed., *Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 60.

<sup>67</sup> John Hoppner, *Essays on Art*, 90-92. Curiously, despite his harsh criticism of Romney, Hoppner was among those who purchased works at Romney's posthumous sale, 1807.



morbidness of feeling, which Mr. Hayley has been so particular in noticing'.<sup>68</sup> In the end, whatever private sufferings Romney may have endured in his life and for his art were re-presented for public consumption in the biographies, theatrically framed.

Each of the biographies at some point utilizes allusion as a literary device, supporting their claims for Romney's significance through comparison with a noteworthy figure. Hayley does this when mentioning that one of Romney's favourite books was Bottari's collection of artists' correspondence: 'I recollect that in reading a letter of Salvator Rosa, I said to him, "here Romney, here Salvator has drawn your portrait, as well as his own, in a single short sentence—*tutto spirito, tutto fuoco, tutto bile*—all spirit, all fire, all bile." In truth the imagination of my friend was his master and his tyrant.'<sup>69</sup> Hayley most likely read this passage to Romney while undertaking research for the expanded 1781 edition of the *Epistle to Romney*, which included a new section of verse devoted to Rosa and his image as a painter of 'daring Fancy' and 'bold ideas'.<sup>70</sup> But even more so than Rosa's sublime paintings, it was probably his image as an unacademic rebel-genius that suggested the parallel with Romney. Any resemblance that Hayley detected between his friend and Salvator Rosa's non-conformist persona is validated in the self-portrait that Romney began at Earham in 1784, which was destined to hang in Hayley's library (fig. 85). Although in the biography Hayley continually stresses Romney's spirit, fire, and bile, his language in discussing a portrait that bodies forth those qualities is surprisingly restrained—he says that the self-portrait 'well expresses that pensive vivacity, and profusion of ideas, which a spectator might discover in his countenance, whenever he sat absorbed in studious meditation'. Hayley saw the portrait as representing his friend, at the age of forty-nine, 'in the most active season of his existence' and not, apparently, then under

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<sup>68</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 246.

<sup>69</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 328. Listed in Hayley's posthumous library sale is Giovanni Bottari's *Raccolta de Lettere sulla Pittura, Scultura ed Architettura*, '7 vol. scarce Rom, 1757'. Hayley is referring to a letter from Salvator to a friend of May 1654: 'Da sì fatte indegnità argomentate; come possa stare l'animo d'un vostra amico tutto bile, tutto spirito, tutto fuoco'. I: 321.

<sup>70</sup> See John Sunderland, 'The Legend and Influence of Salvator Rosa in England in the eighteenth century', *Burlington* 140 (1973): 785-9. Sunderland discusses the myths of Rosa's outlaw personality based on entirely apocryphal stories that shaped his reputation in the eighteenth century and that found their fullest expression in the 1824 biography by Lady Morgan, which is really a gothic novel 'masquerading as a monograph', 786. The scholarly note (XXXV) to line 405, first epistle of Hayley's *Essay on Painting: in Two Epistles to Mr. Romney* (London: J. Dodsley, third edition, 1781), somewhat in contrast to his own verse and to current myths, casts Rosa as a learned and philosophical painter and poet and reprints one of Rosa satires on the art of painting. He comments on the artist's close friendship with the poet Ricciardi and cites Bottari's *Lettere sulla Pittura* for their correspondence.



the influence of 'those wonderful variations in the nervous system, that throw a shadowy darkness over the mind, and fill it with phantoms of apprehension' as at other times.<sup>71</sup>

For John Romney, who owned the self-portrait after Hayley's death, any 'physiognomist' would recognise in it 'the head of a man of genius'.<sup>72</sup> What is more, John saw that his father portrayed a 'serious and thoughtful mood, as if he felt himself in the solemn act of consigning to posterity a memorial of his personal form and existence'. To underscore his father's commemorative intentions, John includes his own sonnet to the portrait, which speaks of the *memento mori* function of this

Semblance exact of Him, who erst had skill  
To stay the wasting hand of time, and save  
The living form of life, while in the grave  
The sad remains their destin'd lot fulfil—<sup>73</sup>

John is probably correct in sensing the deliberation and self-knowledge behind the portrait. Romney was fixing his image for a specific audience—Hayley's set of friends, the same figures who assisted the artist in disseminating his image to a wider audience. The self-portrait draws from traditional melancholy imagery to forge a modern picture of creative genius. The crossed-arm pose that Romney strikes is found in Elizabethan and Jacobean portraiture when indicating melancholy and in contemporary emblematic imagery to illustrate the malcontent type (fig. 86)<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the broad stroke of paint marking out the positioning of Romney's body

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<sup>71</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 96, 254, 155. Hayley's tame assessment of Romney's self-portrait contrasts with his remark about Romney in a 1787 letter to Thomas Greene, a mutual friend, 'You know his spirit is as wild as the wind of the Equinox'. Lancashire County Record Office, Preston, Ms. DDGrCs/3/61.

<sup>72</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 192. John's theory was proved right when the portrait, several decades after his death, was on display to the public; 'physiognomists' and biographers openly celebrated its Romantic qualities. Arthur Chamberlain remarked that 'the portrait of himself in the National Portrait Gallery is a fine piece of character-reading, giving the moody, suspicious, poetic dreamer to the life', *George Romney*, 331. C. Lewis Hinds records the typical comment of visitors to the National Portrait Gallery as "'He looks a man of genius"... Certainly he looks an impressionable, sensitive, and easily moved man, with his large, somewhat mournful eyes and the high brow.' *Romney* (London and New York, 1908), 54.

<sup>73</sup> Romney, *op. cit.*, 192-3. John is here reiterating the traditional claim for the art of painting summed up in Alberti's *De Pictura* as 'Through painting the faces of the dead go on living for a very long time'. *On Painting*, trans. by Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991), 60. John's mournful sonnet then directly addresses his father's memory before closing with musings on his own mortality.

<sup>74</sup> See Strong, 'The Elizabethan Malady', figs. 1-4, 7. William L. Pressly in 'Gilbert Stuart's *The Skater*: An Essay in Romantic Melancholy', *American Art Journal* 18 (1986): 43-51 persuasively argues that Gilbert Stuart tapped into this same tradition in his emblematic portrait of William Grant, who skates crossed-armed in a broad-brimmed black hat—also a motif from earlier melancholy iconography. See fig. 6 for Stuart's own self-portrait with crossed arms.



in the unfinished part of the painting suggests that his legs are also crossed, counterpoising his semi-recumbent posture. As a society portraitist, Romney naturally devoted sufficient time each day to personal grooming, but here he wears the unkempt hair and five-o'clock shadow of a creator preoccupied with weightier concerns.<sup>75</sup> Romney has taken care to portray the antithesis of the polite academic painter, brush and palette in-hand: this frustrated history painter has no hands. John Romney attributes the portrait's unfinished state to Hayley's impatience in acquiring it for his library<sup>76</sup> but the artist may have intended all along to assume the unfinished ethos of the divine renaissance creators who left the evidence of a burst of *il furore dell' arte*, and in so doing, privileged the creative process more than the finished product.<sup>77</sup>

While painting the self-portrait Romney comported himself as an equal member of Hayley's circle of friends—to achieve reciprocity he engaged John Flaxman, who was also at Earham in 1784 decorating Hayley's library, to sculpt for him 'a bust of his Sussex friend'.<sup>78</sup> But there are signs that Romney's identity as the sensitive genius earned him special privileges. In a gushing letter from Anna Seward to her 'dear Titiano', she tells him, 'Conscious of your aversion to writing, and of the overwhelming demand upon your time, a letter from you is never to be expected. I know you love not your Friends the less because your pen is a banished utensil.'<sup>79</sup> Hayley makes much of Romney's lack of interest in the pen, claiming that he 'resembled, and far surpassed, Michael Angelo in a dislike to the mere manual act of writing'. Hayley quotes Michelangelo on his aversion to writing—irksome because

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<sup>75</sup> Romney's assistant at the time he painted the self-portrait was Thomas Robinson, who provides in Hayley's biography a sketch of Romney's daily routine, which included, after breakfast and before receiving the day's four-five sitters, a session of drawing 'while his servant was setting his hair'. Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 322. William Cowper remained indebted to Romney for the gift of a particularly fine razor strop made by Romney's Turkish barber. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford University Press, 1984), 242, 392.

<sup>76</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 192. John also presumes it was begun at Cavendish Square, not Earham, and unaccountably he dates it to 1782.

<sup>77</sup> Kris and Kurz (*Legend, Myth and Magic*, 48-9) point out that Vasari was among the first to collect drawings as evidence of the artist's creative process, which signals a change in philosophy from the medieval craftsman's emphasis on finish and the High Renaissance's interest in invention rather than pure mimesis.

<sup>78</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 96.

<sup>79</sup> Seward to Romney, 9 May 1792, Beinecke Library, Osborn Mss. 13363, Yale University. Robert Potter also excuses Romney from these social niceties even while sending him subjects for pictures: 'You have such an aversion to writing that I know it is in vain to expect the favour of a letter from you; therefore with regard to yourself I must be contented with hoping you are well'. Potter to Romney, 26 Dec. 1780, NAL Ms. 1948/4031#49.



“it is not my art”—but then discusses the copious amount of letters and poetry the artist produced. Hayley doesn’t here mention the sheer scale of Romney’s letters to him, which in the period between 1789-1799 alone number approximately one hundred,<sup>80</sup> but probably to justify exposing some of Romney’s intimate correspondence in the biography he declares that, although Romney abhorred writing, a letter to a confidante could reveal his ‘natural eloquence’ flowing from tender feelings, capable of exciting ‘a considerable degree of sympathy, even in a stranger’. This praise of Romney’s sensibility and native powers of expression continues in one of the most hyperbolic passages of Hayley’s biography:

Had Romney devoted himself to the pen, instead of the pencil, he would have been a writer as original as Rousseau. I have often thought that these two eminent persons, though different in their studies, and in their fortune, were in some points wonderfully alike. They had the same vehemence of desire for distinction, the same intensity of application in the pursuit of it, and the same nervous terror of secret, or rather supposed enemies, which occasioned or encreased their frequent fits of depressive disquietude.<sup>81</sup>

The tastes and sensibilities of Hayley’s circle were in complete accord with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s imperative of feeling and benevolence. As a moral and literary archetype of the virtuous poet in exile, his influence is seen not just in their verse but also, for example, in Hayley’s abjuration of corrupt city life for his rural retreat as the self-styled ‘Hermit’ of Eartham.<sup>82</sup> In *Triumphs of Temper*, Hayley’s best-selling poem, a visionary scene (Canto V) where the heroine Serena is guided through various realms à la Dante features the spirit of Rousseau, who re-tells the sad fate of his heroine Julia of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* while his listeners are ‘convuls’d with sympathy’ and touched with ‘dear delicious pain’. John Romney says that around 1781-2 his father painted four pictures of Serena ‘to gratify Mr. Hayley’, paintings

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<sup>80</sup> See British Library Mss. 30805. Hayley regrets that he did not save their earlier correspondence. *Life of Romney*, 114-16.

<sup>81</sup> Hayley, op. cit., 124-5.

<sup>82</sup> Sickels (*Gloomy Egoist*, 70-2) characterises the eighteenth-century retirement theme related to invocations of a ‘sweet’ melancholy as a persistent though diluted form of classical retirement. The hermit theme is a logical corollary to retirement, ‘carrying the implication that their seclusion somehow gives them prerogatives of virtue and wisdom, naturally of a somewhat melancholy cast’. Frederick Cummings marks this trend among Joseph Wright of Derby’s circle, which included Seward and Hayley, see ‘Boothby, Rousseau, and the Romantic Malady’, *Burlington* 110 (1968): 659-66.



which served to advertise the poem and which the author gratefully acknowledges his friend 'contrived to finish in despite of his many avocations' (fig. 87).<sup>83</sup>

The preface of *Triumphs of Temper* declares intent to benefit society by cultivating 'good-humour' and admits it is aimed principally for the perusal of the 'Fair Readers'. It was doubtless the popularity of this poem that prompted Joseph Farington to recall in 1803, 'Hayley was the *work-basket poet* of that day.—His verses were upon every girl's sofa.'<sup>84</sup> Appropriately, Romney's model for some of the *Serena* paintings was one of Hayley's fair readers claiming to have benefited from the poem's lessons.

Shortly after her marriage in 1791, Emma Hamilton wrote to Romney from Naples and sent regards to Hayley; she credited *Triumphs of Temper* for her sweet disposition, saying, 'it was *that* made me Lady Hamilton... Sir William more minds temper than beauty'.<sup>85</sup> Hayley proudly relates the creation of one of these paintings and his own role in its invention while visiting Romney's studio in November 1786. Noticing a recently painted head of Emma, Hayley imagined that an enlarged, full-length picture might illustrate the episode in Canto V where Serena reaches out to touch a mimosa shrub in the pleasant realm of Sensibility. Romney agreed to this; Hayley procured the said plant; and the picture, 'a personification of Sensibility', was finished (fig. 88) and 'deservedly admired in Romney's gallery', which must have pleased Hayley and seemed a fair trade for his many services to the artist.<sup>86</sup>

For those writing about Romney, the Rousseauesque natural man and noble savage provided an ideal analogy for the poorly-educated, provincial artist, and this construction features largely in all of the biographies. Cumberland marvelled that this 'obscure, untutored child of nature' achieved success entirely *ex proprio suo Marte*.<sup>87</sup>

Even John glorifies Romney's humble origins in speaking of his father's early years

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<sup>83</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 180; Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 94-5. As well as these *Serena* paintings, Romney also designed other episodes from the poem that were eventually used to illustrate the poem in the sixth edition, though credited to Thomas Stothard. See *The Triumphs of Temper; a Poem in Six Cantos* (London: T. Cadell, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 1788).

<sup>84</sup> *Diary of Joseph Farington* ed. by Kenneth Garlick and Angus MacIntyre (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979): VI: 2031.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Gamlin, *George Romney*, 224. Hayley and his poem received a similar endorsement from Amelia Opie, who, responding to Hayley's public praise of her, introduced herself to him with a letter 23 Jan. 1813: 'One of my earliest recollections is a sense of obligation to you; as "The Triumphs of Temper" was one of the first books of poetry which I read aloud to my mother; and as she judiciously held up its admirable heroine as a model for imitation, the delight which I felt in the beauty of the poem was increased by a consciousness that it improved while it pleased me—' British Library Ms. 0805/38.

<sup>86</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 120-1.

<sup>87</sup> Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. Romney', 418, 420.



in the country, when he was as ignorant of art as the Corinthian Maid and when 'nature may be regarded as his chief instructress' and of his later years in London, when, shunning the kinds of social engagements that Reynolds attended he walked into the country to study nature, observing plant-life and 'places of resort frequented by the lower orders, as excellent schools for the study of character'.<sup>88</sup> John implies that anyone with such rural roots, even himself, is inherently inclined towards wandering 'pensive, and unseen,/ By some lone brook'—he has written his own sonnet, a classic of the school of melancholy-nature poetry inspired by Thomson and Collins, to prove his point.<sup>89</sup> The language used to paint Romney as this brooding nature-artist had already been encapsulated in William Duff's *Essay on Original Genius*, which reveres poets of distant ages:

Happily exempted from that tormenting ambition, and those vexatious desires, which trouble the current of modern life, he wanders with a serene, contented heart, through walks and groves consecrated to the Muses; or, indulging a sublime, pensive, and sweetly-soothing melancholy, strays with a slow and solemn step, through the unfrequented desert, along the naked beach, or the bleak and barren heath. In such a situation, every theme is a source of inspiration, whether he describes the beauties of nature, which he surveys with transport; or the peaceful innocence of those happy times, which are so wonderfully soothing and pleasing to the imagination.<sup>90</sup>

As with Duff's primitive poet, Romney's creativity is also said to have reflected his natural surroundings. In a romantic description of the Lakeland scenery in which Romney grew up, John imagines that those storms and tempests, brilliant and glowing sunsets, and swelling eminences of distant mountains 'must have afforded him fine ideas of the sublime'.<sup>91</sup> And, believing Romney's creativity and persona entwined, John Flaxman commented, 'indeed his genius bore a strong resemblance to the scenes he was born in; like them it partook of the grand and beautiful; and like them also, the bright sunshine and enchanting prospects of his fancy, were occasionally overspread with mist and gloom'.<sup>92</sup> This poetic view of nature and Romney's place in it was codified as early as Cumberland's 1770 *Public Advertiser* verses, which posited the artist standing alone at the seashore, pensive, and without worldly ambition,

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<sup>88</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 9, 249, 176-7.

<sup>89</sup> Romney, *op.cit.*, 246-7.

<sup>90</sup> William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius and its various modes of exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, particularly in Poetry* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1767), 271-2.

<sup>91</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 248-9.

<sup>92</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 307.



promoting him as the portraitist for any reader or amateur poetaster of sentimental nature verse or devotee of the cult of the primitive.

The overtly poetical character of Romney's *Mrs. John Birch* of c. 1779 (fig. 89) suggests that the sitter or the commissioner of the portrait appreciated such forms of fashionable verse and was drawn to Romney out of a perceived empathy. The composition of the painting may owe its origins to the *Weeping Dacia* but any mournful connotations have been tempered to a sweetly-soothing melancholy more in tune with Joseph Warton's influential poem of 1744, *The Enthusiast; or the Lover of Nature*, which celebrates an uncorrupted sylvan world inhabited by musical, free-loving dryads. But Mrs. Birch might not be just any lascivious nymph; her lyre and rustic wood-pipe suggest she may represent Erato, the Muse of Lyric Poetry, who, according to *Polymetis*, 'presided over love-sonnets and all the amorous kinds of poetry', and who is usually seen depicted 'genteely dressed; and has a pretty look, tho' thoughtful'.<sup>93</sup> As a paragon of feminine sensibility, Mrs. Birch is a child of nature, sitting directly on the ground. But this pose also draws from a long tradition in English portraiture first seen as an expression of Elizabethan melancholy and repeated sporadically afterwards. *Mrs. Birch*, therefore, is part of the continuum of poetic iconography that surfaces in the portraits of Sir Godfrey Kneller (fig. 90) and later in Wright of Derby's homage to the philosophies of Rousseau in his portrait of Brooke Boothby, painted about two years after the Romney portrait (fig. 91).<sup>94</sup>

Romney's depiction of Jaques from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* argues that he was conscious of the theme of Elizabethan melancholy and its imagery (fig. 92). Romney added this figure to the picture that his and Hayley's friend the landscape painter William Hodges submitted to the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery in 1789. Romney was an appropriate choice to enhance Hodges's painting, for according to Hayley, he loved to indulge in meditation, 'with a degree of solemn humour, resembling the moody reflexions of Jaques, in *As You Like it*'.<sup>95</sup> Although the character of Jaques was a satire on the fashionable Elizabethan malcontents who affected Continental

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<sup>93</sup> Joseph Spence, *Polymetis* (London: R. Dodsley, 1747), 90.

<sup>94</sup> For the influence of this tradition, specifically via Kneller, see J. Douglas Stewart, 'Kneller's Long Shadow: John Smith's Mezzotints and Joseph Wright of Derby', *Burlington* 143 (1976): 410-13. See also Cummings, 'Boothby, Rousseau and the Romantic Malady', figs. 19-22, 24-6.

<sup>95</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 265.



dispositions, none of Shakespeare's irony was mentioned in the review which praised Hodges's painting for its 'picturesque effect' and sedate and solemn hue: 'The scene is calculated for meditation.'<sup>96</sup> In placing the pensive Jaques by a brook to brood on the wounded stag, Shakespeare betrayed an awareness that water could convey emotion. As Roy Strong points out in his study of the development and continuation of Elizabethan melancholy, the streams in so many of the related images, such as Isaac Oliver's *Edward Herbert, Lord Cherbury* (fig. 93), express visually the philosophy articulated in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1628, which rhapsodized on walking in solitude 'betwixt Wood and Water, by a Brook side, to meditate upon some delightsome and pleasant subject ... A most incomparable delight it is so to melancholize, & build castles in the air....'<sup>97</sup>

The exploitation of water as an accompaniment of melancholy is rife in sentimental nature poetry of the eighteenth century and is also a recurring motif in Romney's works. Pen and ink drawings in a sketchbook of the 1760s probably depict a classical story of a sea-tragedy that separates two lovers such as *Hero and Leander* or *Ceyx and Alcyone* (fig. 94), and in his catalogue of drawings donated to the Fitzwilliam Museum, John Romney mentions a study from a later period of a woman embracing a washed-up body, which he identifies as *Ceyx and Alcyone* (fig. 95). John also lists 'The Damsel; from the ballad, "Twas when the seas were roaring," or perhaps a personification of Sorrow' (fig. 96) and one more from John Gay's *'Twas when the Seas were Roaring* (fig. 97). Romney made several drawings from Gay's *Sweet William's Farewell to Black-ey'd Susan*, a song about a sailor's departure, and his ballad about a mournful woman who waits by a stormy sea for her lover, when 'His floating corpse she spy'd: / Then like a lily drooping, / She bow'd her head, and dy'd'.<sup>98</sup> The subject of Susan and William may have been initially suggested to

<sup>96</sup> *Public Advertiser*, April-May 1789, quoted in *William Hodges 1744-1797*, ed. by Geoff Quilley and John Bonchill (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 200.

<sup>97</sup> Strong, 'The Elizabethan Malady', 267. Cummings ('Boothby, Rousseau and the Romantic Malady', 660) argues that Joseph Wright and his circle could have known Oliver's *Edward Herbert* through the engraving that illustrated Herbert's autobiography, published by Horace Walpole in 1764.

<sup>98</sup> *The Poetical Works of John Gay*, ed. by G.C. Faber (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 181-3, 357-8. In *Memoirs of Romney* (234) John mentions an unfinished 'Susan, from the ballad of "When the Seas were roaring"' of 1793, a title that represents a confusion of the two Gay ballads. John faced a daunting task in attempting to sort through and catalogue his father's paintings and drawings—finished and unfinished—and occasionally his guesswork or deliberate re-titling is obvious. He was almost certainly responsible for naming the works sold at Christie's in 1807, where the several lots entitled *Solitude* were probably designated thus on the spot to fit perceptions of Romney's oeuvre.



Romney in Anna Seward's *Epistle to Mr. Romney, Being Presented by Him with a Picture of William Hayley, Esq.*, c. 1782, which included an ekphrastic discussion of the imagery in Gay's two poems.<sup>99</sup> A painting from *'Twas when the Seas were Roaring* was included in the posthumous Christie's sale, described as 'a despondent Female seated upon a Rock, overpowered with Grief; a Gleam of Light is thrown upon the Brest and Arms of the Female with richest effect'.<sup>100</sup> Presumably, all of these sea-tragedy illustrations shared a limited repertoire of interchangeable motifs: while reviewing the more finished literary and historical works Romney left behind for possible illustrations to Hayley's *Life of Romney*, William Blake recommended 'Black Ey'd Susan, a figure on the Sea shore embracing a Corse', which could just as easily describe the *Ceyx and Alcyone* drawing.<sup>101</sup>

Given Romney's attraction to water as an emotive agent, it is understandable that while attempting to assist Charlotte Smith with the publication of an illustrated fifth edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets*, it is Romney whom Hayley entreated to supply 'a pensive pathetic muse on a rock' to accompany her *Written on the Sea Shore, October 1784*, a dismal sonnet of tempestuous winds, screaming sea-birds and a desolate narrator, 'shipwreck'd by the storms of Fate'.<sup>102</sup> As with the illustrations to Hayley's *Triumphs of Temper* and *Essay on Old Maids*, Thomas Stothard supplied the drawing of the mournful woman, based on a Romney design, which was used for the book's engraving. Although Romney spent time with Smith at Earham, liked her, and admired her facility for quickly churning out popular mournful sonnets and politically-inclined novels, all of his writer friends were aware of his disinclination to

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<sup>99</sup> The poem was in response to a gift from Romney of Hayley's portrait and was circulated privately but eventually published in *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. by Walter Scott (Edinburgh, 1810). John Romney (*Memoirs of Romney*, 180) states that the poem was written in 1781, but it is more likely that it was written the next year after Romney and Seward first met at Earham. In any event, the poem does not appear to be describing the appearance of an actual Romney design as her verses do not accord closely to Romney's known drawings of the subject or the descriptions of the unfinished painting, which dates from c. 1793. See Appendix, 'Susana, from when the seas were roaring' for a further discussion of this matter.

<sup>100</sup> Lot 117, *A Catalogue of the Select and Reserved Collection of Paintings, of That eminent and very celebrated Artist, George Romney, Esq. R.A.* [sic]...Christie's, 27 April 1807.

<sup>101</sup> Blake to Hayley, 22 June 1804, *Letters of William Blake*, 96.

<sup>102</sup> Letter from Hayley to Romney, 1787, Barrow Record Office, Ms. Z251, quoted in David A. Cross, *A Striking Likeness* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 170. Hayley had promised Smith that Romney would produce an illustration, and in persuading the unenthusiastic artist he tells him, 'I know you would almost as soon be sent into Hell as set about such a task but Coraggio Signor!' See Charlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets* (London: T. Cadell, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 1789), Sonnet XII. The edition is dedicated to Hayley, and Romney is among the subscribers.



be associated with the book trade as an illustrator. When discussing her upcoming eighth edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* with its publishers, Cadell and Davies, Smith exhibits a keen understanding of the business of publishing, especially illustration, as well as a desire for firm control over the process. She expressed dissatisfaction with the new drawings that the professional illustrators had supplied and had explicit ideas for improving them, wanting one of the female figures to display 'a little more of sorrowful, mournful expression', which she thought could be achieved with 'a single stroke of the Graver about the mouth or perhaps brows', and declaring 'the figure of the Nymph too fat. It takes off all that pensive look which becomes such an ideal being & looks more like the plump damsel of the Dairy than a Naiad'.<sup>103</sup> Smith directed the copying of her portrait in crayons that Romney had done at Earham in 1792 (fig. 98), which was to be used in the new edition, and was careful to establish whether or not he wished to be credited. She had also planned to include a poem she had written about the portrait but confessed to her publishers that she found Romney 'so odd & capricious a Man that I do not know whether I can print it without his consent for which I have written to Mr. Hayley'; two weeks later she mentions, without further discussion, 'I must give up publishing the lines I had written (some years since) to Romney'.<sup>104</sup> Although Smith had made a career out of flaunting a socially acceptable kind of melancholy and despair, she evidently found Romney's fragile artistic temperament inconvenient, as doubtless did his other literary friends who would never let melancholy interfere with business.

Another poet who had joined the party gathered at Earham in August 1792 was William Cowper. Two of Romney's biographers made a pointed effort to bring to light the analogies between the artist and this poet. In his autobiography of 1807, Cumberland announced that Hayley would soon publish Romney's life, and 'if he says no more of him, than that he was at least as good a painter as Mr. Cowper was a poet, he will say enough; and if his readers see the parallel in the light that I do, they will not think that he shall have said too much'.<sup>105</sup> Hayley lived up to this proposal:

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<sup>103</sup> *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Judith Phillips Stanton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), to William Davies, 25 April 1797, 266; to Davies and Thomas Cadell, Jr. 5 March 1797, 255.

<sup>104</sup> *Letters of Charlotte Smith*, op. cit., Smith to Cadell and Davies, 25 April 1797, 266; 28 April 1797, 269; 15 May 1797, 272.

<sup>105</sup> *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland, Written by Himself...* (London: Lackington, Allen & Co., 1807), 212-13.



he discusses at length the portrait Romney made of Cowper at Earham for the library (fig. 99) and the sonnet the sitter wrote in return; he remarks on the 'genius, the benevolence, and the misfortunes of Cowper', which Romney found so attractive; and he points to their similar sensibilities, which included 'deep sensations of gratitude for even the most simple offices of kindness from a friend', and, as a sign of their more profound likeness, he mentions that each of the men suffered the loss of 'of his enchanting faculties, before his departure'.<sup>106</sup> Having introduced himself as intimately into Cowper's life and work as he had done with Romney's, Hayley was in a position to know that Cowper's 'black melancholy' of the religious kind easily matched Romney's more secular 'blue devils'.<sup>107</sup>

Both Cowper's sonnet to Romney and his portrait of Cowper are usually considered superior to the usual productions relating to this circle. As Arthur Chamberlain put it, while Romney's portraits of Hayley 'suggest the shallowness and self-esteem of that amiable belauder of his friends, and scribbler of dull and trivial verse', the Cowper likeness 'is one of his most powerful studies, which goes much deeper than the mere delineation of the outward features of the man and poet'.<sup>108</sup> Lacking the usual writerly paraphernalia, this portrait is essentially a physiognomical study, and Hayley stresses Romney's identification with Cowper as he scrutinized and defined his face. He presumes that Romney chose pastels, an unusual medium for him, in order to replicate the sitter's sensitivity. Hayley characterises the portrait as a masterly and faithful likeness, but paradoxically he says, 'Painters are said to infuse into all their portraits some portion of themselves; and it is possible that Romney may have super-added a little of his own wildness and fire to the native enthusiasm of the poet whom he so zealously portrayed'. Given this affinity between artist and sitter, Hayley is referring to both of their poetic sensibilities when quoting Shakespeare's satire of creative fury from *Midsummer Night's Dream* V.i.12:

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<sup>106</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 177-84.

<sup>107</sup> Hayley, op. cit., 245, relates an afternoon's outing with friends to view some paintings that was able to lift Romney's 'formidable legion of blue-devils', however, he would not find Cowper's moods so easy to manipulate and would needs resort to more elaborate ruses. See Morchard Bishop, *Blake's Hayley* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), Chapter Six 'The Pension' for Hayley's bold and relentless campaign to bully governmental patronage for Cowper from Thurlow and Pitt. See Sickels, *Gloomy Egoist*, 27, for the religious black melancholy that 'finds no "sweets" in looking on the "dusty urn," no pleasing diapason in the echoes from beyond the tomb'.

<sup>108</sup> Chamberlain, *George Romney*, 331-2; see also John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 226-8.



Romney wished to express what he often saw in studying the features of Cowper. "*The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling.*" And I think he expressed it without over-stepping the modesty of truth and nature, but some persons, and ladies in particular, more conversant with the colloquial, than with the poetic countenance of Cowper, have supposed Romney's portrait of him to border on extravagance of expression.<sup>109</sup>

After Cowper's death, Hayley wished to have the portrait engraved for his biography of his friend, but in order to appease the subject's relatives, it was necessary to have the 'wildness and fire' removed from the poet's eye. For this Hayley solicited the skills of William Blake, who proudly claimed that Cowper's relatives were exceedingly pleased with his rendition (fig. 100), particularly Cowper's cousin Lady Hesketh, who 'never could bear the original Picture'.<sup>110</sup> Cowper, in his sonnet to Romney, had interpreted the portrait quite differently. He admired the artist's ability in this and in other portraits to capture both the sitter's form and 'The mind's impression too on every face', though in his own case he concluded that no symptoms of woe were visible, 'For in my looks what sorrow could'st thou see, / While I was Hayley's guest, and sat to thee?'<sup>111</sup>

Cowper's long interest in the abolition of slavery and other progressive causes endeared him to Hayley and his friends, most of whom had been great supporters of the prison reformer John Howard. Hayley had initially instigated a friendship with Howard by addressing an ode to that 'hero of humanity' in 1780, and the poem was accompanied with Romney's illustration, which was 'the offspring of friendship' (fig. 101).<sup>112</sup> Hayley was actively involved with the Howardian Committee in the raising

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<sup>109</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 178.

<sup>110</sup> *Letters of William Blake*, William Blake to James Blake 30 Jan. 1803, 50.

<sup>111</sup> The sonnet is printed in Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 227. Cowper contradicts this statement of mood in several of his letters written to various friends and relations during his August-through-September 1792 stay at Earham. While he speaks highly of the congenial company and beautiful surroundings, he also admits that the wildness of the landscape 'rather increases my natural melancholy', and he refers to the return of the nocturnal problems that plagued him at home in Weston: 'I always wake more or less in terror, and can seldom attain to any degree of cheerfulness till an hour or two after rising. Then the employments of the day and the incidents of it divert my attention, and my looks and feelings become much like those of other people'. See *The Letters of William Cowper* IV: 160-91.

<sup>112</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 87. Although he here identifies Romney as the illustrator, it was in fact published with only the engraver, Bartolozzi, credited. In an unpublished letter of 11 June 1780 Hayley tells a friend of his upcoming poem, 'to which I have procured a design from a painter whom you may guess but I must not name'. Beridge Papers, private collection, U.K. Hayley recounts his initial meeting with Howard, which the poem had effected, and he includes his introductory letter to the 'sublime philanthropist' in his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.*, ed. by John Johnson (London: Henry Colburn and Co., 1823): 203.



of a monument to Howard, and he and Romney—the only artist—are among the subscribers, including the Duke of Richmond, William Wilberforce, Erasmus Darwin, and ‘a Dissenter’, who are listed in *The Times* 18 September 1786. After Howard contracted gaol fever and died in 1790, Hayley was quick to publish another tribute, *The Eulogies of Howard: A Vision* in 1791. He mentions that Romney had wanted to paint ‘a series of pictures, to express his veneration for the character of Howard; and to display the variety of relief, that his signal benevolence afforded to the sufferings of the wretched’. He also says that Howard had related ‘several scenes, of which he had been a spectator in foreign prisons, that he thought most suited to exercise the talents of a great moral painter’.<sup>113</sup> Romney’s illustration of Howard for the 1780 *Ode* is a simple narrative picture whose main focus is the benevolence of the prison inspector—a theme developed in Francis Wheatley’s genre picture of 1787, *Howard Relieving Prisoners* (fig.102). But the series that Romney produced during the first half of the 1790s, scores of drawings large and small, pencil scribble and more finished pen and wash, was probably never intended for illustrations to Hayley’s recent poem, nor were these drawings what Howard himself probably would have imagined (figs. 103 and 104). These highly expressionistic illustrations still include the presiding figure of Howard, even if only in the most abstract form, although the spotlight here shifts away from the reliever himself to the desperate plight of the writhing inmates. Romney’s interest in the grand theme of human suffering, particularly as experienced by the incarcerated, was shared with others in the political turmoil of the 1790s and is seen in the lazar-house drawings of Blake and Fuseli illustrating Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (figs.105 and 106) and the prisons of Dante’s *Inferno* portrayed by them and others. However, in modern scholarship Romney’s *Howard* drawings are interpreted as personal cries of psychic distress and as evidence of ‘the agony of his struggle’.<sup>114</sup>

The numerous extant Howard drawings are examples of Romney’s tendency, which increased over the years, to produce groups of related drawings of intense subject matter that are seemingly restlessly repeated but with little obvious progression or

<sup>113</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 87, 89.

<sup>114</sup> See Victor Chan, *Leader of My Angels, William Hayley and His Circle* (Edmonton Art Gallery, 1982), 67. Patricia Jaffé, *Drawings by Romney* (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, 1977), 67, calls for ‘expert analysis by an historically sensitive psychologist’ to clarify these and related works of the 1790s in light of Romney’s mental state.



resolution, adding to the perception that his works are highly subjective and indicators of a distempered mind. Yet in this inclination for repetition and lack of finish, Romney finds a parallel with the more experimental form of sentimental literature, which is, as Northrop Frye has characterized it, a matter of process rather than finished product and may exhibit refrain for refrain's sake, maintaining an emotional pitch through 'hypnotically repetitive' sound-patterns.<sup>115</sup> Romney's *Howard* series partakes of this aesthetic; any compositional changes from one drawing to another are only subtle and are, as Yvonne Romney Dixon has recognised, 'largely adjustments in the rhythmic pattern of the designs' as opposed to significant narrative developments.<sup>116</sup> Frye argues that the idea of literature as process is most fully explored in the works of Laurence Sterne, particularly *Tristram Shandy*, where the reader witnesses the author in the process of writing the book. This kind of avant-garde literature was anathema to at least one of Romney's writer friends: Cumberland called *Tristram Shandy* 'the most eccentric work of my time', and remarked on its 'tricks' of 'frivolity and buffoonery'.<sup>117</sup> However, although he felt Sterne had 'misapplied his genius', Cumberland did appreciate his ability to delineate character with a vivid and detailed quality 'that made his descriptions pictures, and his pictures life', especially in the pathetic episode of the death of Le Fevre.<sup>118</sup> John Romney implies that his father tackled several scenes from *Tristram Shandy* as a result of Sterne's encouragement during their meeting before 1760 but also because the artist personally identified with this pre-eminent sentimental author and his brand of literature: 'as the work itself was completely in unison with the character of his own feelings, it is no wonder that he made it a school for study'.<sup>119</sup> Hayley regretted that Romney's *Death of Le Fevre* was lost but he relied on the testimony of the artist's oldest friends that the picture was 'a master piece of pathetic expression'.<sup>120</sup> Adam Walker, who had served as a model while Romney was painting it, provided a

<sup>115</sup> Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', 12-14.

<sup>116</sup> Yvonne Romney Dixon, *Designs From Fancy: George Romney's Shakespearean Drawings* (Washington, D.C., Folger Shakespeare Library, 1998), 86.

<sup>117</sup> Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 269-70. Anna Seward, too, expressed dismay with certain progressive aspects of modern poetry, considering Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* an 'oddity' and 'the greatest quiz of a composition I ever met with'. She gives qualified praise to Cowper's *The Task*, which contains philanthropic sentiments but she thought it let down by its pessimistic view of human nature. See E.V. Lucas, *A Swan and her Friends* (London: Methuen and Co., 1907), 157; *Letters of Anna Seward* I: 294.

<sup>118</sup> Cumberland, op. cit., 271.

<sup>119</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 30.

<sup>120</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 33. Hayley tells that Daniel Braithwaite 'has repeatedly assured me he thought it the most affecting picture he ever beheld'.



recollection of *Death of Le Fevre* that suggests that even at this early date Romney was applying the principles of historical mobility to depictions of modern literature, instilling them with classically affective themes and motifs:

The dying lieutenant was looking at Uncle Toby (who sat mute at the foot of the bed) and by the motion of his hand was recommending his son to his care: the boy was kneeling by the bedside, and with eyes that expressed his anguish of heart, was, as it were, turning from a dying to a living father, begging protection, a most pathetic figure. Trim was standing at a distance in his usual attitude, and with a face full of inward grief.<sup>121</sup>

Walker's ekphrastic description is strikingly close to that of Thomas Gray on his imaginary *Death of Alcestis* and Romney's renderings of that subject (see figs. 60, 61, and 63). It is safe to assume that Romney's other non-classical death subjects from this early period also treated their grand theme with similar classicizing dignity—pages from a sketchbook of the early 1760s reveal the rapid development of the *Death of General Wolfe* composition, where a Baroque-style Mary swooning on the hill of Golgotha transmigrates into the collapsing British general on the Plains of Abraham (fig. 107).<sup>122</sup>

Whereas Romney and his advisors found it entirely appropriate to borrow traditional, classicizing forms for modern genres, the converse was possible, too—sentimental literature could be utilized to embellish new treatments of classical themes. While translating from Virgil's *Georgics* the scene of Orpheus's descent into the Underworld and his doomed attempt to rescue his wife, Eurydice, Lord Chancellor Thurlow recommends that Romney focus on the most pathetic point in the story, when Orpheus, who disobeyed the command not to look back at Eurydice, sees her pulled away from his grasp, 'the moment of her uttering her last words'.<sup>123</sup> He further advises Romney to depict her perfect beauty and simultaneously the fading of it, where dimples and smiles become soft melancholy and her neck and chest collapse and flatten: 'Any one of the ideas brought too forward will shock the eye; the

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<sup>121</sup> Hayley, op. cit., 33.

<sup>122</sup> Given that the sketchbook in Kendal also contains on the first few pages prior to the *Wolfe* studies several drawings of a figure wafted upwards by putti it is possible that Romney was considering an allegorical, classical apotheosis for the death of the general. Benjamin West, who painted his more celebrated *Death of Wolfe* several years after Romney's, eventually treated the death of Horatio Nelson as an apotheosis (National Maritime Museum, London).

<sup>123</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 170. John reproduces Thurlow's long letter (nearly 1,000 words) to Romney pp. 168-172. It is undated but John suggests that it sprang from Thurlow's discussions with Romney while sitting for his portrait.



impossible is the thing required—to shew the last, faint traces of strong passion in a figure without strength; and express the influence of death without its deformity. Richardson has done it wonderfully in the death of Clarissa, to which you are referred.’<sup>124</sup> Although Thurlow was a respected classical scholar, he betrays himself under the sway of sentimental literature as well in holding up Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa Harlowe* as an *ars moriendi* model. Richardson’s protagonist chooses death—by starvation—as the means to assert her freedom and preserve her virtue, an idealisation of extreme passive sensibility that elevated her in the eyes of some of her female admirers as a ‘martyr to our sex’s glory’.<sup>125</sup> The book’s scene of Clarissa’s prolonged and halting death, with spells of fainting and reviving, illustrates Frye’s argument that sentimental literature maintains a heightened level of emotion through length and repetition.<sup>126</sup>

Hayley claims that due to differing conceptions between Thurlow and Romney regarding the execution on canvas of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and the latter’s qualms about pleasing his patron, a painting was never begun—but he stresses that Thurlow did purchase one of Romney’s *Serena* pictures from *Triumphs of Temper*.<sup>127</sup> John Romney’s telling of his father’s and Thurlow’s interaction contradicts Hayley’s; he says that their discussions on *Orpheus and Eurydice* during Thurlow’s sittings (for at least two portraits, which occurred between late 1780 and early 1784) were harmonious, and he mentions that an unfinished oil was found among the other works abandoned and ruined at the Hampstead house after Romney’s retirement to the North.<sup>128</sup> It is impossible to know exactly what Thurlow had wished to see on canvas but the finished cartoons (figs. 108 and 109) and preliminary drawings of the subject suggest that Romney was attempting to create imagery that corresponded to Thurlow’s text. When corresponding with Cowper about the merits of translating the classics into English with blank verse as opposed to with rhyme, the Chancellor advised against using unnatural and unfaithful couplets, believing the translator could come closer to the original author with a stricter translation, which could still preserve both ‘the ease of genuine English and melody, and some degree of that elevation

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<sup>124</sup> Romney, op. cit., 171.

<sup>125</sup> Sickels, *Gloomy Egoist*, 26.

<sup>126</sup> Frye, ‘Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility’, 14.

<sup>127</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 93.

<sup>128</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 172.



which Homer derives from simplicity'. He then provides Cowper with a literal rendering of Greek poetry in English and challenges him to poeticize the translation, to 'elevate it, and polish it, and give it the tone of Homer'.<sup>129</sup> Essentially, the translation of *Orpheus and Eurydice* that Thurlow sent Romney, 'rendered word for word' though a 'juster picture, than looser translation ever gives of the original', was a gauntlet similar to the one thrown to Cowper.<sup>130</sup>

Most of Romney's known illustrations of *Orpheus and Eurydice* depict the point in the story that Thurlow had privileged, their sad separation.<sup>131</sup> Although he has not staffed the scene with the characters Thurlow's text mentions, Cerebus, the Furies, Pluto, and Charon, Romney has set the scene according to this translation, evoking the 'black and coarse clouds, of a texture all but massy', and he has shown Orpheus 'catching at the rack of the clouds, which fold Eurydice' and her 'vainly stretching forth her hands to him for relief and rescue'. Romney also appears to be following Thurlow's advice on various research avenues: in the same sketchbook (dated in Romney's hand 'September 1783') that he has jotted a reminder about Thurlow's purchase of *Serena* he has also listed 'Clarissa in Prison', 'Belvidera' (yet another virtuous, martyred female), and 'Polimetis subjects P. 263—275' (fig 110).<sup>132</sup> It was most likely Thurlow, or another friend wishing to assist Romney in pleasing the Chancellor, who recommended these pages from *Polymetis*, which discuss the same inhabitants of the Underworld that appear in Thurlow's translation from Virgil and include the illustration of the ferryman of the Styx, Charon (fig. 111), and a

<sup>129</sup> See *The Letters of William Cowper* IV, August 1791. This correspondence between Thurlow and Cowper was instigated by his reading of Cowper's recent blank verse translation of Homer, which was intended to usurp Alexander Pope's hegemonic rhymed version.

<sup>130</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 168. Thurlow's admits that his literal translation is more awkward than a poetic translation but will be judged more authentic to the original to one 'who minds the subject more than the style'. The story of *Orpheus and Eurydice* had already been translated into flowery English by Dryden and Congreve, based on Virgil and Ovid respectively.

<sup>131</sup> Studies for the subject are in various private and public collections, including the Fitzwilliam Museum. John Romney's catalogues that accompanied his gifts of works to the Fitzwilliam and the Liverpool Royal Institution imply that the cartoon depicting Eurydice about to be bitten by the snake that would kill her while fleeing from Aristaeus (now in the Walker Art Gallery) was from the *Cupid and Psyche* series. Romney had apparently been considering the *Orpheus and Eurydice* story for some time—his Roman notebook (now in the Fitzwilliam) lists under 'Passages for Pictures on Poetry and History' 'The fourth Georgic of Virgil, Page 262 / The story of Aristaeus and and Cyrene / and Orpheus descent into Hell p. 274'. Alex Kidson suggests that while sitting to Romney, Thurlow may have seen his studies of *Eurydice Fleeing from Aristaeus* and then decided to encourage the artist to paint for him the scene of Orpheus and Eurydice together in the underworld. See Kidson, *George Romney*, 134-6, 164.

<sup>132</sup> See Truro 1923.142.3. None of these subjects appear in the sketchbook, which contains many other such 'laundry lists'.



passenger, whose posture is not unlike Romney's Orpheus. Romney may have also remembered the advice in the letter from Richard Payne Knight, who believed that the sublime was born not of size but of expression and advises delineating the facial and bodily turmoil of a struggling but dying figure in the manner of the *Laocoon*; however, once strength has departed, the languor of the *Dying Gladiator* becomes the proper model.<sup>133</sup> Romney might have felt the need to look to antiquity as Thurlow had admitted that Clarissa's countenance of 'christian composure' at her death was 'less complicated' than what one would expect to see in Eurydice. A pen and ink study of Eurydice being dragged away by the Fates (fig. 112), when compared to the more finished cartoon, displays a more tortured expression and may demonstrate Romney grappling with her proper rendering; he may have begun to suspect that he had indeed been given an impossible task. Thurlow may have felt that Romney's translation and elevation of his literal text was not as poetic as he had envisioned and declined to take any commission further, or, this influential figure, who granted patronage to poets such as George Crabbe and William Cowper, and to the clergy, including Robert Potter and John Romney, may have in this instance been merely exercising his powers as a humanist literary advisor attempting to steer matters of taste and aesthetics.

Most of Romney's literary friends were happy to own his portraits, especially of those in their circle, by gift or by payment, though they did not show the same eagerness to acquire his subject pictures, which, despite their various progressive impulses, argues for their essentially un-adventurous ideas about the visual arts. This is best supported by the modern-appearing but ultimately conservative biographies of Romney that his friends created. Like Romney, Cowper was the subject of a Haylean biography that eulogized his sensitivity. In Hayley's framework, the oeuvres of both men were presumed to mirror their souls—which may echo the principles of Romanticism, but in reality is a humanist construct developed in Ficino's Neoplatonic Academy with roots in Longinus's essay on the sublime.<sup>134</sup> Bernard Barton may have been familiar with Hayley's biographies when writing to John Linnell of seeing Romney's portrait of Cowper, saying, 'such a picture will hardly ever be taken again unless a mad

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<sup>133</sup> Letter from Payne Knight from Rome to Romney in London, 24 Nov. 1776, in Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 323-4.

<sup>134</sup> Such philosophies are behind the conception of 'the divine' Michelangelo. See Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn*, 93-4; Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic*, 126.



painter should again have a mad poet for his sitter'. Barton speaks of the powerful, 'mournful feeling' of the portrait which rivets the viewer and touches a chord of sympathy, stirring a 'mournful pleasure which neutralizes the pain it would otherwise inflict'.<sup>135</sup> This is essentially the definition of the sublime in eighteenth-century aesthetics and an apt metaphor for the works of Romney and Cowper. Harold Bloom has said that Cowper is an example of the best of eighteenth-century poetry, which combines the exalted, metaphysical feelings of the sublime and the compassionate and humane spirit of sensibility.<sup>136</sup> Romney's sad and tragic works, executed with classical restraint and in more impassioned fashions, could also be said to be the best of the Age of the Sublime, bridging neoclassicism with Romanticism.

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<sup>135</sup> Barton to Linnell, 8 Aug. 1838, in *The Literary Correspondence of Bernard Barton* ed, by James E. Barcus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 196), 99-100. Barton had previously only known the engraved version of the portrait, which had 'softened it down a great deal'.

<sup>136</sup> Harold Bloom, Introduction in *Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime*, 1-9.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Painting Shakespeare: Romney and the God of his Idolatry

In the catalogue that accompanied a carefully selected group of 164 of his father's drawings donated to the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1817, John Romney lists *The Infancy of Shakspeare* and 'a variety of designs from this subject; dear to him because he delighted in painting women and children, and because he almost venerated Shakspeare'.<sup>1</sup> In his 1830 biography of his father John continues with the implication of an intimate relationship between Romney and the National Poet, pointing out that his first essay in oil was *King Lear in the Tempest Tearing off his Robes* (fig. 113), done in Kendal, and his last attempt, in 1798, was another study from the same scene: 'From both these we may infer, that Shakspeare was his favourite author from beginning to end. And thus, by uniting the extremes, as it were, in one point, he completed the circle of his professional life.'<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, John knew that the image that had been created of his father as an 'obscure, untutored child of nature'<sup>3</sup> indicated a more profound association with Shakespeare than a mere career interest. The notion of Shakespeare promoted in the eighteenth century, the poet of nature unencumbered by rules of dramatic correctness or excessive learning, popularized a specifically British—and crucially, non-French—conception of creative genius that could also extend to an artist such as Romney if one wished to make the connection. The Shakespeare encomiasts generally agreed that a limited education was no disadvantage to this provincial poet, for 'whatever other learning he wanted, he was master of two books, unknown to many of the profoundly read, tho' books, which, the last conflagration alone can destroy; the book of Nature, and that of Man'.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, John asserts that while still in the Northwest his father had gained some instruction from books such as Leonardo's *Treatise on Painting* and *Art's Masterpiece*, 'yet, till he went to London, nature may be regarded as his chief instructress; it was she whom he worshipped as his professional divinity'.<sup>5</sup> As a cleric in the Anglican Church John

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<sup>1</sup> A draught version of the catalogue is in the National Art Library, Ms. L1957/942/10.16-19, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The catalogue was included, with very little alteration, in John Romney's *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830), 257-66.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., 26.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney', *European Magazine* (June 1803), 417.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London: A. Miller and R. and J. Dodsley, 1759), 81.

<sup>5</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 249.



is rather careful in the wording of his father's reverence for a mortal poet but encoded in his parlance is the enthymeme that to worship nature is to worship Shakespeare. Given his facility for painting portraits and subject pictures alike that were evocative of vernacular melancholy-nature poetry, it follows that Romney would be drawn to the ultimate nature poet. In Shakespeare Romney found suitably affecting subjects malleable enough to be treated variously as theatrical portraits or history paintings, as late-gothic-primitives or in a classicizing 'serious stile'.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, Romney found encouragement to disregard the stifling rules of academically-sanctioned imitation and convey, like an 'enraptured Bard', his 'impetuous transports of passion' and make unreal objects visible by 'the vigorous effort of a creative Imagination'.<sup>7</sup> The conception and execution of many of Romney's Shakespearean designs depart not only from the apparent text but also from expectations concerning proper literary illustration and challenge the received understanding between *pictura* and *poesis*.

William Hayley acknowledged Romney's imaginative deviations from Shakespeare, but he implied that his artistic interpretations were born more out of ignorance than from any special insight into the poet. Having around 1789 exhorted Romney to rival Reynolds, who had just sent his *Infant Hercules* to Saint Petersburg, and paint a scene from the life of Czar Peter as a gift for Empress Catherine, Hayley was disgruntled to find that

the idea of painting from his favorite Shakespeare was much more alluring to the spirit of Romney. He had a quick and keen relish for the beauties of that wonderful poet, altho' his own fancy was so volatile, and his mode of reading so desultory, that it may be questioned, if he ever read, without interruption, two acts of the dramas that he most cordially admired.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cumberland characterizes Romney's Kendal-era *Lear* paintings thus as opposed to his more comical scenes from *Tristram Shandy*. 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney', 420.

<sup>7</sup> William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius and its various modes of exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, particularly in Poetry* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1767, 177. It would be useful here to consider Jonathan Bates's discussion of Shakespeare's communality: 'By "Shakespeare" we mean not an individual, but a body of work, and that body was shaped by many individuals—by Ovid and Shakespeare's other literary precursors, by Marlowe and his other dramatic precursors, by the actors of his company, by the audience without whom no play can be completed'. 'Shakespeare and Original Genius' in *Genius: the History of an Idea*, ed. by Penelope Murray (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1989), 94. To Bates's list of Foucaultian 'authors' one could add the nationalistic eighteenth-century discourse of original genius, which promoted Shakespeare above all other poets.

<sup>8</sup> William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq.* (London: T. Payne, 1809), 113-14, see also 208-9. Hayley's directions for painting six scenes from the life of Czar Peter are found in the notebook inscribed 'Hints for Pictures', NAL Ms. L1957/1451. Of the dozens of subjects listed here and in another notebook, NAL Ms. L1957/1452, none are from Shakespeare.



John Romney might have known that Hayley did not worship Shakespeare, and he might have wished that Hayley, who he considered a malign influence on his father professionally and personally, therefore would not have interfered in Romney's Shakespearean works. But the reverse is true: the author of *An Essay on Epic Poetry*, who celebrated the poets of the most didactic and most exalted genre of literature from antiquity to the modern era, who was a classicist at heart and cared little for the gothic supernatural, inserted himself figuratively and literally into Romney's Shakespearean paintings—Hayley may have compared Romney to the melancholic Jaques but he supplied himself as the model while Romney painted the figure for William Hodges's *As You Like It* illustration and he also posed for the character of Prospero in Romney's *Tempest*, which, in addition to *As You Like It*, was visible to the crowds attending the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery after 1790.<sup>9</sup> Hayley was even confident enough to overrule the advice Romney received from other erudite friends, such as Lord Chancellor Thurlow, who referred the artist to a particular nobleman in Jacobus Houbraken's *Heads of Illustrious Persons of Great Britain* for an appropriate model for Prospero, though Hayley recalls that when he and the artist 'examined the character of the countenance together, we thought it utterly unfit for the purpose'.<sup>10</sup> But perhaps most saliently, Hayley makes it clear that he was present at the famous dinner at Josiah Boydell's house in West Hampstead in November 1786 when Romney, Benjamin West, John Hoole, George Nicol, and several others formulated an admirable plan with the powerful publisher and alderman John Boydell to form a gallery of paintings of Shakespearean scenes and to publish a new illustrated edition of the *Works*. And Hayley also stresses that he was present, too, at the earlier, less-well-known conference at Cavendish Square between Romney and Boydell, when the idea to link Shakespeare with commerce and the elevation of the British school of

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<sup>9</sup> In the Romney biography Hayley doesn't admit to these modelling sessions; however, his son, Thomas Alphonso, wrote to him at Earham from London 3 March 1795 telling of visiting Romney and being given a painting, 'a little head that he painted of you in the character of Jaques lying down & leaning on his elbow. I think the Likeness is well kept up'. West Sussex Public Record Office, Hayley Papers Add. Mss. 2817. John Romney (*Memoirs of Romney*, 151) refers to Hayley posing for Prospero. In a letter to his friend John Berridge of Jan. 1788, Hayley recalls his recent visit to Cavendish Square, where he slipped on ice and badly cut his face: 'I was like the Figure of the blood-boltered Banquo when I rose & rapt at my Friends door, but I soon got myself into such a condition as to sit to Him for half a Face at least in his finishing one of his Historical Heads'. Berridge Papers, private collection, U.K.

<sup>10</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 131.



painting was first mooted.<sup>11</sup> The contents of Hayley's library reflect both his personal reading taste as well as the wide research undertaken for his various publications, yet it held little in the way of Shakespearean titles.<sup>12</sup> His enthusiasm for this particular poet may have been tepid, but the combination of national pride and the arts that Boydell had promoted was not inconsistent with the agenda promulgated in Hayley's didactic rhymed essays on poetry, painting, and eventually, music and sculpture.

Hayley was aware of Romney's interest in Shakespeare from the very start of their friendship in 1776. His first letter to Romney inviting him down to Earham to 'exchange, for a short time, the busy scenes and noxious air, of London, for the cheerful tranquillity and pure breezes of our Southern coast' was clearly meant to seduce: 'to speak the language of your favorite Macbeth, "*I conjure you by that which you profess,*" to moderate your intense spirit of application, which preys so fatally on your frame'.<sup>13</sup> A short time later, Hayley's *Epistle to Romney* does recommend painting from Shakespeare but in this context the advice is best interpreted as an obligatory inclusion of the National Poet within strongly nationalistic verse.<sup>14</sup> Hayley might never have seen Romney's early *Lear* paintings (the *Lear in the Tempest Tearing off his Robes* and a *Lear and Cordelia*, both done in Kendal, and another *Lear* painting exhibited in London at the Free Society, 1763), although William Blake, while surveying Romney's works for Hayley as he prepared the biography, admired 'above all, a picture of *Lear and Cordelia*, when he awakes and knows her,—an incomparable production...exquisite for expression; indeed, it is most pathetic; the heads of Lear and Cordelia can never be surpassed, and Kent and the

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<sup>11</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 105-6; see also John Romney's version of these events, *Memoirs of Romney*, 151-3.

<sup>12</sup> See the 1821 posthumous auction of Hayley's nearly 3,000 books in *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons* ed. by ANL Munby (London; Mansell Publishing 1971), 85-171. Apart from classical literature and scholarship, the largest category of titles is to do with Augustan literature, particularly criticism of Alexander Pope, and much on Milton. A similar ratio of books is seen in his much earlier manuscript catalogue of c. 1772-3, where two Shakespeare editions are listed—but one is scratched out. Hayley Papers, West Sussex Public Record Office, Add. Mss. 52,473.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, 73-4.

<sup>14</sup> *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter* (London: T. Payne, 1778). The very general lines on Shakespeare, 'this chief Inchanter of the willing breast' (Part II: 438-450) are in contrast to the ekphrastic scenes Hayley creates in describing suggested subjects from Milton (Part II: 451-474). Elsewhere (II: 285-8), the agenda of the poem is summed up in the lines on Romney's various spheres of painting: 'Tho' led by Fancy, thro' her boundless reign, / Well dost thou know to quit her wild domain, / When History bids thee paint, severely chaste, / Her simpler scene, with uncorrupted taste.' The fact that Hayley was personally chiefly a patron of Romney's portraits puts his publicly-stated literary advice in perspective.



other attendant are admirable; the picture is very highly finished'.<sup>15</sup> Given the early date of this painting it is reasonable to presume it shared the general formal awkwardness of *Lear in the Tempest Tearing off his Robes*, yet many surviving drawings of the subject reveal that Romney maintained a strong interest in the relationship between Lear and his daughter for many years, peaking during his most classicizing phase—the years in Rome and the period back in England extending into the early 1780s—and exhibiting an entirely more experimental and fluid approach (fig. 114). In these drawings, his study in Italy is evident: Cordelia's gesture of modesty in drawing back her veil derives from classical statuary; alternatively, posing her bent down with her arms crossed over her chest (fig. 115) echoes the body language of humility and submission seen in countless quattrocento Annunciation paintings.

Depictions of Lear awakening from madness with Cordelia in attendance are most numerous in Romney's surviving cache of drawings but he also treated the climactic event from the end of the play, the death of Cordelia and Lear's futile attempts to awaken her as he checks for breath (fig. 116). In this, as well as the early *Lear Tearing off his Clothes*, Romney, although an avid theatre-goer, proves himself not beholden to the idea of Shakespeare created on the London stage as were many Shakespearean illustrators.<sup>16</sup> Among Shakespeare's 'irregularities', his mixing comedy and tragedy in a single play was one of the offences most vexatious to neoclassical critics and one subject to correction.<sup>17</sup> Alexander Pope in the preface to

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<sup>15</sup> Blake to Hayley, 4 May 1804, *The Letters of William Blake with related documents*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 89. Blake relates to Hayley 28 May that the owner of the painting, Adam Walker, who had also modelled for it, said that it was painted when Romney was 18 (which would date it to 1752). Walker also showed Blake what he considered Romney's first painting—a copy from a Dutch picture of a boor smoking, which had inscribed on its back, 'This was the first attempt at oil painting by G. Romney'. He named the large portrait of his family (*Walker Family*, now in the National Portrait Gallery, London) as 'the last performance of Romney'. Walker's version of Romney's career contradicts John Romney's thesis that Lear 'completed the circle of his professional life'.

<sup>16</sup> See William L. Pressly, *A Catalogue of Paintings in the Folger Shakespeare Library: "As Imagination Bodies Forth"* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), Essay, 9-21, and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Although Shakespeare had his share of pedantic British neoclassical critics, such as Thomas Rymer and John Dennis, it is the criticism of the French theorists such as René Le Bossu, René Rapin, and Mme. Dacier that seems to rankle the most. Kirsti Simonsuuri argues that even throughout the era when neoclassical theory was at its height in Britain, c. 1680-1730, British academics differed from the French in seeing 'originality from the start as a particular quality of the poetic mind', which set the conditions for an early re-assessment of the merits of the primitive Homer, and ultimately, the irregular, incorrect literary forms of Shakespeare. *Homer's Original Genius, Eighteenth-century*



his edition of Shakespeare's works praises and damns his author simultaneously, commending his strengths while admitting his shortcomings. Pope points out that the true sphere of Shakespeare is the theatre, where 'Stage-Poetry' is levelled to the appeal of the '*Populace*', and he argues that Shakespeare's vulgarities can be explained in that he was, as well as a poet, an actor, 'and they have ever had a Standard to themselves, upon the other principles than those of *Aristotle*....most of our Author's faults are less to be ascribed to his wrong judgement as a Poet, than to his right judgment as a Player'.<sup>18</sup> However, eighteenth-century audiences and actors were expected to have higher standards, and the judgement and authority of the modern stage in interpreting Shakespeare is vouched for in Nicholas Rowe's preface to his edition of the *Works*, where he extols Thomas Betterton's insightful performances of *Hamlet*: 'No man is better acquainted with *Shakespear*'s manner of expression, and indeed he has study'd him so well, and is so much a master of him, that whatever part of his he performs, he does it as if it had been written on purpose for him, and that the Author had exactly conceiv'd it as he plays it.'<sup>19</sup> Given that this kind of respect was accorded to theatrical productions of Shakespeare, it follows that many interpretive emendations were made on the stage. Most notoriously, Nahum Tate's 1681 'improved' *Lear* saw the fool removed from the tempest on the heath scene, and this version exerted influence in the theatre well into the nineteenth century. Moreover, another improvement saw the unfair death of Cordelia purged in favour of a happy ending.<sup>20</sup> Despite the misgivings of Hayley about Romney's reading habits, the early *Lear in the Tempest Tearing off his Clothes* oil and the later *Death of Cordelia* drawings include elements that could not have been seen in the

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*notions of the early Greek epic, 1688-1798* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 32-6. David Wheeler discusses the philosophies behind the Shakespearean adaptations of the era, which included issues relating to culture and politics. 'Eighteenth-Century Adaptations of Shakespeare and the Example of John Dennis', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1985) 438-49.

<sup>18</sup> *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear, in ten volumes. Publish'd by Mr. Pope and Dr. Sewell* (London: J Tonson, 1728) I:v-viii.

<sup>19</sup> Rowe's preface from his editions of Shakespeare (first published 1709) was reprinted in Pope, op. cit., I-li.

<sup>20</sup> Both David Garrick at Drury Lane and George Colman at Covent Garden removed the fool from the heath scene, although Colman resented Tate's alterations and considered restoring the fool. However, he concluded that 'such a character would not be endured on the modern stage' and acquiesced. See W. Moelwyn Merchant, *Shakespeare and the Artist* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 191. Pope might alter the infelicity of certain phrases but he retains both the fool and the death of Cordelia. Pope's method of editing is mainly concerned with the aesthetics of supplying elegant poetry. See Marcus Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton, and eighteenth-century literary editing* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-132.



popular renditions of the eighteenth-century stage—Lear and the fool together on the heath and Lear with the dead body of Cordelia.<sup>21</sup>

Whether faithful to the text or not, Romney's Shakespearean designs adapt an eclectic mix of sources well beyond the theatre for their dramatic visual expression, a method shared with several others of his generation of artists, especially those who studied in Rome. Henry Fuseli's experimentations with the *Death of Cordelia* saw the scene inserted into his planned scheme for a Sistine-style Shakespearean ceiling as well as an unprecedented abstract rendering done in Rome (fig. 117).<sup>22</sup> James Barry's *Death of Cordelia*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1774 and, as a later, expanded version, exhibited at the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery after 1789, treated the subject as a Renaissance pieta (fig. 118). Having these innovative approaches to *Lear* in mind may have misled John Romney while collecting and naming his father's black chalk cartoons for a bequest to the Liverpool Royal Institution in 1823.<sup>23</sup> John claims that the cartoon he titled *The Death of Cordelia* (fig. 119) displays the results of Romney's diligent study in Rome and the acquisition there of the ability to 'unite Grecian grace with Etruscan simplicity' as well as his natural possession of a 'poetic fervour and almost magical influence, which directs both the pencil and the pen'.<sup>24</sup> John is right to presume that Romney was capable of adapting his Shakespearean creative fervour

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<sup>21</sup> Romney's exhibit with the Free Society in 1763 no. 184 'A scene in King Lear, as written by Shakespeare' may signify a discernment among those paintings based on stage versions and one that is more textual. Both Romney and Blake have executed *Lear* designs that do appear to follow Tate's version in that they depict Lear asleep with his head resting on Cordelia's lap, as described in *The History of King Lear, A Tragedy by William Shakespear Revived, with Alteration, by Nahum Tate, esq. As it is now acted at the Theatre Royal, in Drury Lane and Covent Garden, London, 1775*, p.57. Romney's spare drawing (Fitzwilliam Museum, BV 7) appears to be an experiment in the alternative version, whereas Blake's watercolour (Tate Britain), as David Bindman has argued, may draw more inspiration from his favoured historical resource, Milton's *History of Britain*, in placing the two characters in a prison, which accords with the earliest stories of Lear, the descendant of Brutus of Troy, and his daughter and successor, Cordelia. 'Blake's 'Gothicised Imagination' and the History of England' in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes* ed. by Morton D Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 42.

<sup>22</sup> Fuseli freely adapted motifs from antique sculpture for his Shakespearean designs while in Italy, as can be seen in his *Macbeth and the Witches*, which incorporates the pose of the Borghese Gladiator. See Nancy L. Pressly, *The Fuseli Circle in Rome* (Yale Center for British Art, 1979), figs. 34, 35. The most innovative depiction of *Lear* from the period is arguably John Runciman's 1767 *Lear in a Storm* (National Gallery of Scotland), painted around the time of his trip to Italy, whose Romantic language makes all discussion of sources from the page vs. the stage moot.

<sup>23</sup> For John's catalogue and other correspondence with William Roscoe concerning the bequest see Liverpool Royal Institution Archive, University of Liverpool Special Collection RI 61. No dates are given for the cartoons other than John's statement in a letter from 4 March 1823 that 'they were done in the winter evenings by candlelight as a relaxation, when Mr. Romney's mind had been jaded by portrait painting during the day. It is more than 40 years since they were executed'.

<sup>24</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 162-3.



into such classicizing language; however, William Pressly has persuasively argued that the iconography of this cartoon accords more closely with the death of Sigismunda from Boccaccio's *Tancred and Sigismunda*, which had been translated by John Dryden.<sup>25</sup> Although Pressly admits that the Folger *Death of Cordelia* also includes female mourners where Shakespeare did not, their inclusion in the black chalk cartoon fits the story of Sigismunda and the maidservants attending her death. Other details of the cartoon may be interpreted as pointing to the Sigismunda story, such as the goblet containing the heart of her murdered lover, Guiscardo, and her guilty but repentant father, Tancred, weeping at the foot of her deathbed.<sup>26</sup> As argued in Chapter One with respect to Robert Potter's literary advice, Romney found inspiration for his *Death of Alcestis* designs not in Potter's translation of Euripides but in Thomas Gray's ekphrasis of ideal subjects painted by ideal painters, first published in 1775 (see figs. 60, 61, 63 ). Gray also lists there a picture for Salvator Rosa, 'Sigismonda with the heart of Guiscardo before her', which suggests that Romney could have followed the poet's recommendation for this subject, too.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as Alex Kidson suggests, Romney may have given John some indication that this cartoon could represent both of these thematically-related stories as 'his capacity for eliding subjects in his own mind was highly developed'.<sup>28</sup> What is certain, however, is that before and during the period that Romney executed the cartoons, he was also filling sketchbooks and loose sheets with drawings that are surely Lear with Cordelia (fig. 120) as well as the more generalized deathbed scene (fig. 121, see fig. 23), which was a formal motif that obviously particularly appealed to him.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> William L. Pressly, 'Romney's Peculiar Powers for Historical Painting', in *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination: Essays on George Romney*, ed. by Alex Kidson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 106-11. See Dryden's *Sigismonda and Guiscardo*, from Boccaccio in *Fables Ancient and Modern; Translated into Verse*, 1700.

<sup>26</sup> It needs to be pointed out that any analysis of the cartoons is complicated by the fact that these fragile objects have been 'touched up' and restored several times over their history, by artists at the Liverpool Royal Institute and by John Romney himself. See John Romney and William Roscoe correspondence, University of Liverpool Special Collection RI 61, 4 March and April 11 1823.

<sup>27</sup> *The Works of Thomas Gray*, ed. by Edward Grosse (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1885), Vol. III: 195. Other British artists had already painted scenes from the story, including William Hogarth in 1759 and Francis Hayman, 1765.

<sup>28</sup> Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2002), 119.

<sup>29</sup> Romney's Fitzwilliam sketchbook PD 404-1995, used just after returning from Rome in 1775, contains several drawings related to the 'Death of Cordelia' cartoon as well as drawings relating to the other cartoons—subject matter repeated in the contemporary Walker Art Gallery sketchbook, 10850. Sketchbooks used in Italy in the Yale Center for British Art (B.1980.30) and the Louvre (R.F. 27897 and 27898) also contain deathbed scenes, although the authenticity of this last sketchbook has been doubted. See Alex Kidson and Yvonne Romney Dixon, 'Romney Sketchbooks in Public Collections', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 8 (2003), 45.



The linear, archaizing-classical visual language that Romney gives his *Lear and Cordelia* designs suits this story from British antiquity but it would be going too far to suggest that Romney's sense of classicism was literal and an attempt was being made to match stylistically the relatively primitive cultural state of British antiquity for the sake of historical accuracy. Romney's sense of classicism was much more flexible and non-specific, embracing the continuum of art-historical development. In Italy Romney was doubtlessly influenced by the sculptural reliefs of *conclamatio* scenes on sarcophagi, such as the well-known *Death of Meleager*-type, which had been copied by everyone from Poussin to Jacques-Louis David (fig. 122).<sup>30</sup> Romney's deathbed scenes recall the antique as filtered through the succeeding centuries; he has emulated the early-renaissance revivals of the genre that quoted the classical hidden-face gesture and the frieze-like format but added extra emotion (figs. 123 and 124). Romney's sympathy for the quattrocento 'primitives' is attested to in his comments about the artists he studied and copied in Italy—he admired the 'great simplicity and purity' of Cimabue and the 'strength of character and expression' of Masaccio, saying, 'I was surprised to find several of their ideas familiar to me, till I recollected having seen the same thoughts in M. Angelo and Raphael, only managed with more science.'<sup>31</sup> In discussing the cartoon he knew as *The Death of Cordelia*, John Romney remarked that 'the weeping mutes are exquisite', which suggests that he recognized these figures as deriving from the patterned sculptural figures on the door jambs of gothic cathedrals or those tomb monuments depicting the weepers present at the funeral liturgy (fig. 125).<sup>32</sup> The motif of rhythmically-repeated figures features in

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<sup>30</sup> Largely acknowledged as the inspiration behind Poussin's *Death of Germanicus*, the *Death of Meleager* sarcophagus was known in several versions, including one in the Borghese Palace much discussed by grand tourists and one at Wilton House, Salisbury. In addition it appeared as an engraved plate in Francois Perrier's *Icones* of 1645, which was a publication that John Flaxman recommended to the students at the Royal Academy as late as the 1820s. Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 47.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Romney to Charles Greville from Venice 29 Feb. 1775 recalling his visit to Florence. Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 114. Romney's Italian notebooks reveal that he had befriended Thomas Patch, the English artist living in Florence whose precocious interest in the quattrocento primitives resulted in several publications of prints after the early masters. Notes in Romney's Yale sketchbook B198.30 suggest that he relied on Patch for entrée to private collections in Florence.

<sup>32</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 163. See Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (London, 1964), 60-1, figs. 241-8. Hayley recalled accompanying Romney and Flaxman to Westminster Abbey in August 1783, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, (London, 1823) I: 309. He doubtless also would have accompanied them while visiting Earham to Chichester Cathedral, where they could have seen the tomb of Joan de Vere, noted for its especially fine decorative weepers. See *Chichester Cathedral, An Historical Survey*, ed. by Mary Hobbs (Phillimore and Co., 1994), fig. 113.



several of both Romney's Shakespearean designs (figs. 126 and 127) and Henry Fuseli's (fig. 128). In Rome, both artists were exploring Shakespearean subjects in novel ways while simultaneously pioneering an artistic vocabulary to fit never-before-depicted scenes of medieval subjects, such as Gray's imitation of Norse poetry, *The Descent of Odin* (see fig. 11).

Gray's adaptations of Northern legends and irregular, pre-classical Greek odes into modern British poetry dovetail with the contemporary Shakespeare discourse, which managed to bring Britain's medieval and gothic past into a new, positive light.<sup>33</sup> To the most severe neoclassicist critic, Britain's pre-modern era of Catholicism and dark superstitions was a source of shame, but a celebration of the unique native culture was necessary to combat French cultural domination. As Joseph Addison pointed out in one of his well-known *Pleasures of the Imagination* essays, the indigenous 'fairy way of writing' was unknown to the ancients, being a product of later ages,

when pious frauds were made use of to amuse mankind, and frighten them into a sense of their duty. Our forefathers looked upon nature with more reverence and horror before the world was enlightened by learning and philosophy, and loved to astonish themselves with apprehensions of witchcraft, prodigies, charms, and enchantments.....Among all the poets of this kind, our English are much the best by what I have yet seen; whether it be that we abound with more stories of this nature, or that the genius of our country is fitter for this sort of poetry; For the English are naturally fanciful, and very often disposed by that gloominess and melancholy of temper which is so frequent in our nation, to many wild notions and visions to which others are not so liable.<sup>34</sup>

Shakespeare's cultural nationalism is evident in his celebration of the local spirits of Britain, such as the fairies of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the ghosts of *Macbeth*

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<sup>33</sup> This is reflected in the popularity of works that either collect stories of the vernacular, such as Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* or skilfully re-create early literature, such as Macpherson's *Ossian* and Chatterton's fictive medieval monk, Rowley. The scholarship assessing Gray's contribution to the primitivist cause is vast, but perhaps most pertinent here would be Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse in Britain 1750-1820*, 1998, which discusses Gray's visual interpreters Romney, Fuseli, and Blake; Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 351-99. See also M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1953), 76-88 for the collapse of the neoclassical tradition and the rise of the lyric as a poetic norm.

<sup>34</sup> *The Papers of Joseph Addison, Esq. in the Tatler, Spectator, Guardian, and Freeholder...* (Edinburgh, 1790) III: 280, from the *Spectator* No. 419, 1 July 1712. Not surprisingly, Addison then remarks that 'among the English, Shakespear has incomparably excelled all others'. John Romney—ever mindful to present *his* version of events—contrasts the working habits and lifestyle of Romney with Reynolds, who, when finished with his professional duties, 'sought relaxation and recreation in the refined society of accomplished literary men', whereas John's father went for long country walks after work, where 'he had great pleasure in observing evening and twilight effects, and began four pictures, suggested by such observations, representing the visitations of ghosts or fairies at that solemn and fancy-moving hour'. *Memoirs of Romney*, 176-7.



and *Henry VI*; and this was a kind of supernatural writing that would have come naturally to him, for as Samuel Johnson argued, ‘the English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity’.<sup>35</sup> While maintaining the neoclassical style of rhyming couplets in his own poetry, Pope takes pains to pay tribute to Shakespeare’s originality—as opposed to the Aristotelian correctness of literature and drama under the jurisdiction of the *Académie Française*—and he memorably likens the Bard to ‘a majestick piece of *Gothick Architecture*’, which has more strength and solemnity than the modern, elegant Continental style of building, and it also has ‘the greater variety, and much the nobler apartments; tho’ we are often conducted to them by dark, odd, and uncouth passages’.<sup>36</sup> Even the rational Johnson, not normally given to primitivist philosophy, sees that an unpolished culture could have its advantages, though he admit he is not impartial in his defence of Shakespeare against the ‘minute and slender criticism of Voltaire’.<sup>37</sup> The praise that Shakespeare received for depicting scenes from British history, in an ‘irregular’ style, benefited Romney’s cause, too, as an orthodox approach to historical painting was anathema to his goals. Never a literalist illustrator, Romney did not feel obliged to observe the historical minutiae of the plays or please popular taste and fashion—unlike the illustrations in Rowe’s edition of the *Works*, which saw Macbeth on the heath comporting with witches and spectres, while he, himself, dons a full Kit-Kat wig and dancing-master pose. Romney’s Shakespeare is not just the celebrator of local mythology but the representative of themes universal and timeless.

Many of Romney’s most elevated and grandiose Shakespearean paintings and drawings are not from the plays of classical history but, paradoxically, derive from those plays containing the most supernatural elements, such as *Midsummer Night’s*

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<sup>35</sup> *Mr. Johnson’s Preface to his Edition of Shakespear’s Plays* (London: J. and R. Tonson et. al., 1765), xxxii. Rowe’s assessment of Shakespeare’s literary age concurs: ‘We are to consider him as a man that liv’d in a state of almost universal license and ignorance: there was no establish’d judge, but every one took the liberty to write according to the dictates of his own fancy.’ Nicholas Rowe in Pope, ed., *The Works of Shakespear*, xlvi.

<sup>36</sup> Pope, ed., *The Works of Shakespear*, xxv.

<sup>37</sup> *Johnson’s Preface to Shakespear*, xxx. Johnson’s *Dictionary* was a triumph of the English vernacular, yet when it came to poetry, Johnson preferred more refined language, as can be seen in his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779). His criticism of Gray in the series was one of his harshest and most polarizing of the biographies; see Herbert G. Wright, ‘Robert Potter as a Critic of Dr. Johnson’, *Review of English Studies* XII (1936):305-321. The *Lives* begin with the generation after Shakespeare—Johnson’s fullest discussion of him is contained in the Preface to his edition of the *Works*, a project which took nine years to fulfil the promise of delivering it in eighteen months. See also J.C.D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson: Literature, religion and English cultural politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75-8.



*Dream, The Tempest, and Macbeth*. Although he made studies of witches and fiends incessantly, he could also envisage the horrors of *Macbeth* as poetic abstractions (fig. 129). In addition, *Macbeth* could serve as a vehicle to paint an actor-in-role picture that straddles the spheres of portraiture and history painting (fig. 130) and has as much to do with the celebrity of the model than with Shakespeare's poetry. John Romney refers to the portrayal of John Henderson in his esteemed performance of *Macbeth* as 'upon a Bolognese half-length', which suggests that the painting was meant to bring the kind of grand-manner respectability and notoriety to both the artist and the actor as William Hogarth's *David Garrick as Richard III* had done (fig. 131).<sup>38</sup> John recounts the early stages of the composition, when Romney was attending the public readings that Henderson and Thomas Sheridan gave at the Freemason's Hall in 1785. Henderson's recitation from *Tristram Shandy* was 'exquisite beyond conception, while Sheridan's readings were 'drawling and heavy'; nevertheless, Romney was 'so forcibly struck with the countenance of a man staring with all his attention at Sheridan, that he could not refrain from studying it carefully as an appropriate representation of a witch's face; and having on his return home sketched it on canvass, he afterwards introduced it into the picture of Henderson'.<sup>39</sup> While publicity for the actor may have been part of the original impetus behind *Henderson as Macbeth*, Henderson's untimely death in November 1785 brought unforeseen attention to the painting, with newspapers following the progress of 'Romney's incomparable head of poor Henderson' until its completion and engraving in 1787.<sup>40</sup> Henderson's mastery of a wide range of Shakespearean roles primed him

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<sup>38</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 166. Hogarth was exceedingly proud that his picture sold for £200, affirming his worth in competition with the old masters. See Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 398-401. Garrick, who wished Hogarth to engrave the painting, was savvy not only about publicizing himself through portraiture but in his relationship with artists in general. His letter of 1745 advising Francis Hayman on his painting of *Lear in a Tempest*, giving detailed compositional direction, was meant to produce a painting that, as Brian Allen has pointed out, would conform closely to the nuances of his own performances as King Lear. *Francis Hayman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 16-19.

<sup>39</sup> JR 166-8. John refers to Henderson as only one of Romney's social group at this time with pronounced thespian leanings, such as Sheridan and the Rev. Charles Este—not to mention the playwrights Cumberland and Hayley. John says that Romney and some of this group of 'wits' eventually formed themselves into the Unincreasables Club, which was limited to eight members. This is somewhat contradicted in the *Literary Anecdotes* of John Nichols (London, 1812, vol. II: 638), who mentions a wider membership. What John doesn't mention is that most of this particular circle of Romney's friends had access to the publishing world. Charles Este, for instance, contributed to the daily paper *The World*, which commonly puffed Romney's latest and upcoming works.

<sup>40</sup> The *Public Advertiser* of 20 Dec. 1785 thought the painting 'incomparable for the enchanting combination of portraying the mind & character as well as giving a fac-simile of the outward man'. The *Morning Chronicle* reported 16 Feb. 1786 that it was 'nearly finished'. The painting (bought by



as the successor to Garrick as the Shakespearean authority in the theatre, and Romney must have wished that their association implied Henderson's imprimatur on his own painted Shakespearean interpretations. The painting certainly makes no concessions to academic propriety concerning improving nature into more generalized beauty—Henderson's much-noted rounded features are readily and intentionally recognisable.

Romney's theatrical paintings were subject to the criticism that John Hoppner levelled on his attempts at 'subjects of a more elevated cast', which were failures as 'the portrait of his model never failed to obtrude itself, vitiating his historic or poetical character'.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps none of his literary or historical paintings were guiltier of this supposed breach than those of Emma Hart. Romney proudly displayed her features in paintings hanging in his showroom long before she gained respectability as the wife of Sir William Hamilton, Ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples. And as Lady Hamilton she remained loyal to her old friend: it was at Romney's house that she chose to give to a select group of London society a sample of the famous performances that had dazzled the elites of Europe. While temporarily back in London for her marriage in the summer of 1791, all other work for Romney took second place to whatever sittings and posings the soon-to-be Lady Hamilton was able to grant.<sup>42</sup> This visit was well timed, for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery was at its height of success and adding new paintings at each year's exhibition season; Romney took this opportunity to at least begin several paintings featuring his favourite model that were intended for the Gallery. While she and Sir William were making the rounds of London society, Horace Walpole remarked of the performances of the Ambassador's 'pantomime mistress, or wife,' that although 'people are mad about her

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the Uncreasibles) was engraved and published by John Jones 19 May 1787. See Whitley Papers, Dept. of Prints and Drawings, British Museum. Henderson first began to sit to Romney in late 1780, and he built up a considerable stock of studies of the actor in-role as Macbeth and Falstaff.

<sup>41</sup> From Hoppner's review of Hayley's *Life of Romney* in the *Quarterly Review*, Nov. 1809, reprinted in *Essays on Art by John Hoppner* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1908), 101. Richard Cumberland confirms that the painting was not only 'a capital composition in his very best stile' but also 'a striking likeness of that excellent actor'. 'Memoirs of Mr. Romney', 422. Hoppner's criticism repeats that of Caravaggio's academically-minded critics, who also indicted the artist for painting unidealised models that were recognised as particular characters. See Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), Appendix II 'Old Reports About Caravaggio', 343-387.

<sup>42</sup> Romney's newsy letter to Hayley 29 Aug. 1791 (*Life of Hayley*, 164-5) tells of a spate of daily sittings, sometimes even twice a day, and he mentions that 'she performed in my house last week, singing and acting before some of the nobility with most astonishing powers: she is the talk of the whole town, and really surpasses every thing both in singing and acting, that ever appeared'. Although she had lived openly with Sir William as his consort for several years, the official wedding did not take place until 6 Sept. 1791.



wonderful expression', her kind of exaggerated attitudes were inappropriate for classical subjects as most antique statues are without 'any expression at all, nor being designed to have it'.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, as an interpreter of the more modern and vivid National Poet and of poetry without a long and rigid tradition of iconography to influence expectations, her expressions were ideal. Hayley confirms this in his gushing discussion of her talents and her modelling sessions with Romney: 'Her features, like the language of Shakespeare, could exhibit all the feelings of nature, and all the gradations of every passion, with a most fascinating truth, and felicity of expression....her peculiar force and variations of feeling, countenance, and gesture, inspirited and ennobled the productions of his art.'<sup>44</sup> Romney had already painted Emma Hart in the guise of Cassandra, probably based on Robert Potter's translation of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, before she first left for Naples in 1786. Hayley's *Sonnet on Romney's Picture of Cassandra*, published in his 1788 collection *Poems and Plays*, spoke of the painting as rivalling Apelles and as greater than any specimen of antique tabature that those digging around 'Parthenope, with curious toil' might uncover. But the new sittings prompted another version of the earlier painting, now repackaged for the Boydell Gallery as the mad ravings of the Cassandra from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (fig. 132).<sup>45</sup> John Romney was aware of Emma's pulling power—especially as Lady Hamilton—and he claims that the exhibition of *Cassandra Raving* at the Gallery from 1792 influenced a change in fashion from high, elaborate hair-styles and tightly stayed waists to a more 'simple and graceful mode of dress, approaching nearer to the Grecian'.<sup>46</sup>

The creative surge that Romney experienced from Lady Hamilton's London visit in the summer of 1791 lasted at least until the next February, when he wrote to his son, 'I have nearly finished Cassandra; I believe it will do well. Joan D'Arc is

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<sup>43</sup> To Mary Berry 17 Aug. 1791, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. by Mrs. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905) XV:40-1. Walpole then transcribes for his correspondent some circulating verses which speak of Emma's attitudes as bringing to life 'The artist's spell, the poet's thought'.

<sup>44</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 119-20.

<sup>45</sup> I have already discussed this in my 'George Romney, Robert Potter, and the Painter's Poet', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 7 (2002), 24, fn. 16.

<sup>46</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 195-6. Emma Hamilton was still associated with Romney in the minds of their contemporaries as late as 1805, when Charlotte Smith wrote to a friend of the modern fashion for antiquity, saying it would be no wonder 'if the next race of refined Ladies are after the model of Romneys divinity, Emma Lady Hamilton'. *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Judith Phillips Stanton (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 703.



considerably advanced; and I have finished several pictures and begun others.'<sup>47</sup> However, the *Joan of Arc* picture from *Henry VI Part I*, although intended as a companion to the *Cassandra Raving* Boydell exhibit—and although Hayley had a bespoke sonnet ready addressing this painting of 'most powerful expression...one of the finest that he ever painted from the features of his favorite model'—remained unfinished.<sup>48</sup> Also intended for the Shakespeare Gallery was a *Constance* from *King John* (perhaps never begun) and *Ophelia*, which, Flaxman characterises as 'the most pathetic perhaps of all his works' even though never finished.<sup>49</sup> But John Romney boasts proudly of the 165 guineas his father received around 1791 from Mr. Newberry for *The Infant Shakespeare Nursed by Tragedy and Comedy*, which clearly features Emma Hamilton as the figure of Comedy (fig. 133).<sup>50</sup> Of all of the many designs that Romney had based on the idea of the infancy of Shakespeare over the years—or, for that matter, of any of his finished works—Hayley declared this painting the most excellent. In praising the charm and perfection of each figure, he doubts 'if either Phidias or Apelles could have expressed the dawn of dramatic genius in an infant bard, with greater feeling, or greater felicity. Romney in this performance has rivalled the tenderness of pencil, and the graceful sweetness of expression, that he greatly admired in his favorite Corregio.'<sup>51</sup> Here, as in other places, Hayley betrays his preference for those of Romney's literary works that centre on tender relationships and female beauty—especially that of Emma Hamilton.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John Romney, op.cit., 223. She probably also sat at this time Romney's *Titania, Puck, and the Changeling* (National Gallery of Ireland).

<sup>48</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 159. Hayley includes a letter from Romney (157) written during this period thanking him for 'the subjects you have pointed out, (from Shakespeare) for the present I have fixt on Joan la Pucelle making her incantation, and another I intend from her appearance on the walls of Rouen, with a torch in her hand'. The sonnet puts words into Joan's mouth expressing her gratitude to both Shakespeare's and Romney's redeeming pictures of her. Drawings for the two *Joan of Arc* subjects are in the Fitzwilliam Museum, BV131 and LD 153, 154.

<sup>49</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 309. Flaxman continues: 'Ophelia, with the flowers, she had gathered, in her hand, sitting on the branch of a tree, which was breaking under her, whilst the melancholy distraction visible in her lovely countenance, accounts for the insensibility to her danger'. Romney wrote to Hayley in January 1794 that 'my Ophelia is nearly finished', but nothing more is known of the painting until it winds up in the 1807 Christies sale of Romney's works, whose catalogue describes it similarly but includes mention of the background: 'Ruined buildings and Romantic Scenery'.

<sup>50</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 219. The Boydells borrowed this painting from Newberry for a print, which was included in the 1803 folio of illustrations. Appearing at the end of the folio, this image and the *Infant Shakespeare, Nature and the Passions*, which was slotted in at the beginning, bracket the series.

<sup>51</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 304. Hayley includes a print based after the painting engraved by Caroline Watson (opp. p. 305). Of the ten reproductions of Romney's works that illustrate the biography, four are various heads of Emma Hamilton.

<sup>52</sup> Romney wrote to Emma soon after her arrival in Naples in 1786, telling her that he has made a copy of the head of an unfinished full-length *Cassandra* she had sat for to be given to Hayley, who will hang



Emma had doubtless sat for other designs relating to the infancy of Shakespeare but the subject had interested Romney long before their meeting in 1782. Post-Rome sketchbooks from the mid-to-late 1770s include drawings related to the black chalk cartoon *Nature Unveiling to the Infant Shakespeare* (fig. 134). This design—whether drawing, cartoon, or unfinished oil—was well-enough known for Helen Maria Williams to have referenced it in her *Ode on the Peace* of 1783.<sup>53</sup> By this point Romney was filling sketchbooks with an associated composition, *The Infant Shakespeare Nursed by Comedy and Tragedy*, a subject that was also treated in a large black chalk cartoon (fig. 135). This represents essentially the same cast of characters but for the loss of Nature: a drawing in the Folger Shakespeare Library might represent the pivotal moment when the figure of Nature transfuses into the figure of Melpomene, muse of tragedy (fig. 136).<sup>54</sup> The various ideas and motifs experimented with in these designs coalesce in a large painting that Romney gave free of charge to Boydell around 1790, *The Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions* (fig. 137), where Melpomene and Thalia, muse of comedy, are now the personifications Sorrow and Joy, who are surrounded by Love, Hatred and Jealousy on the left and Anger, Envy and Fear on the right.<sup>55</sup> When exhibited at the Shakespeare Gallery, a reviewer noted that Romney was treading ‘the dangerous and devious path of allegory’ in establishing the origins of Shakespeare’s highly-extolled ability to portray with precision the passions of the human mind. Although Romney’s ‘idea is poetic and elegant’, the very serious face of the infant is ‘not such as will please the Ladies’.<sup>56</sup> Not only in this but in all of Romney’s infancy of Shakespeare

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it in ‘the most conspicuous part of his beautiful liberic, he says the sight of such a head allways inspires him with poetical ideas, it has so much beauty and expression’. Draft letter from Romney to Emma Hart, Art. Vol. C60, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. This *Cassandra* is most likely the original from which Caroline Watson engraved the illustration that faces p. 172 in the biography.

<sup>53</sup> Sketchy drawings for the design are in the Walker Art Gallery sketchbook and the Fitzwilliam sketchbook PD 404-1995. Williams’s poem was reviewed in *Gentleman’s Magazine* March 1783, providing an absolute *terminus ante quem* for the composition. Her mention in the poem of both Romney’s *Nature Unveiling* and Reynolds’s *Ugolino* as examples of the artistic excellence occurring in the new post-war era evidently did no harm to her career: this favourable review remarked (245) that she had acquired ‘a pass-port to the Temple of Fame’. In a sketchbook in the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro 1923.142.3, Romney has made note of this issue of *Gentleman’s Magazine*.

<sup>54</sup> See a similar drawing in Princeton University, 48-1641.

<sup>55</sup> Although Emma probably posed for many of the *Infant Shakespeare Nursed by Comedy and Tragedy* designs, she was not in London at the time Romney is thought to have painted this picture, and Romney may have relied on other models—though he could have relied on previous studies and memories of Emma.

<sup>56</sup> Unidentified newspaper, Press Cuttings 1737-1811, Witt Library, Courtauld Institute.



subjects, some elements of allegory are present that reveal an understanding of the current debates on the importance of Shakespeare. Romney's explorations of the origins of Shakespeare go far deeper than Hayley's comments on the soft beauty of the female adult and infant models.

Helen Maria Williams had mentioned in a footnote to her poem *Ode on the Peace* that Gray's *Progress of Poesy* of 1757 was an inspiration behind Romney's *Nature Unveiling to the Infant Shakespeare*. Gray's poem celebrates the kind of lyric poetry that neoclassical authority denigrated—written in the form of an irregular Pindaric ode, it argues for a primitive expressive basis for poetic creativity, which offers an alternative to the Aristotelian philosophy of poetry as imitation.<sup>57</sup> In the *Progress*, poetry follows freedom's train, and it has moved from Greece, then Latium to Albion, where 'Nature's Darling' was born along the Avon, and 'To Him the mighty Mother did unveil / Her awful face: The dauntless Child / Stretch'd forth his little arms, and smiled' (lines 86-8). The suggestion of Shakespeare's birth as an almost religious miracle had already been presented even more explicitly in Joseph Warton's *The Enthusiast; or the Lover of Nature* of 1744. Warton borrowed from Milton's *l'Allegro* the notion that Shakespeare, as Fancy's child, warbled his 'native woodnotes wild' (line 134) to portray his nativity as though a Christ-like one, complete with adoring shepherds:

What are the Lays of artful Addison,  
Coldly correct, to Shakespear's Warblings wild?  
Whom on the winding Avon's willow'd Banks  
Fair Fancy found, and bore the smiling Babe  
To a close Cavern: (still the Shepherds shew  
The sacred Place, whence with religious Awe  
They hear, returning from the Field at Eve,  
Strange Whisperings of sweet Music thro' the Air). (lines 130-7)

Although it has been noted that Romney's *Infancy of Shakespeare* compositions draw from Christian nativity iconography,<sup>58</sup> the striking similarity between Romney's *Nature Unveiling* designs (fig. 138) and a plate from *Polymetis* (fig. 139) has not before been discussed. The author admits that he cannot positively identify the

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<sup>57</sup> See Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 32-52.

<sup>58</sup> It has also been pointed out that Romney's iconography conforms to the tradition of portraying *The Infant Hercules*. See David Piper, *Image of the Poet: British Poets and their Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 107; Edgar Wind, *Hume and the Heroic Portrait* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 25; Pressly, *Paintings in the Folger Shakespeare Gallery*, 320.



subject of this antique sarcophagus though it does call to his mind the description from Statius of the chief muse Calliope receiving the poet Lucan at his birth and Horace's 'idea of Melpomene on a like occasion'. He conjectures that the figure ready with the 'robe' to receive the baby poet is Erato, the muse of lyric poetry.<sup>59</sup> At this stage, Romney's drawings of the attendants with Nature are equally uncertain and are not yet as identifiable as Melpomene and Thalia, as they will be in later incarnations, but he has clearly borrowed from the bent figure that Spence called a nurse both her posture, for the attendant on the left, and her headdress, which is given to Nature, and the little tub that the classical poet arrives on is given to the infant Shakespeare in all of his compositions. It is fitting that at this stage, just after Rome when Romney was in the full flush of his classicism, depictions of Shakespeare would conform to an antique relief. And Romney would have found much literature to support his construct of Shakespeare as an ancient, infant poet.

William Duff in his *Essay on Original Genius* says that Shakespeare is 'the only modern Author (whose times by the way compared with the present are not very modern) whom, in point of Originality, we can venture to compare with those eminent ancient Poets', such as Homer and Ossian.<sup>60</sup> Within the original genius discourse—an offshoot of the battle between the Ancients and Moderns—Shakespeare could be an Ancient or a Modern to suit the argument. The primitivists admired antiquity, though not as a source of immutable authority but as a site of creativity in its primordial, pure and non-corrupted state. Edward Young stated the paradox, 'the less we copy the renowned Antients, we shall resemble them the more', explaining that as Shakespeare's originality had not been diluted by any 'vapid Imitation', he was elevated to the esteem of the earliest authors; and what is more, 'Shakespeare is not their Son, but Brother; their Equal, and that, in spite of all his faults'.<sup>61</sup> Even those who otherwise aligned themselves with the most artful and 'coldly correct' poetry, when it came to the defence of Shakespeare, adopted the voice of the primitivist. Pope claims that Shakespeare is the most original and inspired of poets—'Homer himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of nature.... The Poetry of

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<sup>59</sup> Joseph Spence, *Polymetis, or, An Enquiry concerning the Agreement Between the Works of the Roman Poets, and the Remains of the Antient Artists. Being an attempt to illustrate them mutually form one another* (London: R. Dodsley, 1747), 91.

<sup>60</sup> Duff, *Essay on Original Genius*, 287.

<sup>61</sup> Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 21, 78.



*Shakespear* was Inspiration indeed: he is not so much an Imitator, as an Instrument, of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks *from her*, as that she speaks *thro' him*.<sup>62</sup> Pope is getting to the heart of the eighteenth-century Shakespearean myth: Shakespeare is a supernatural genius, born from and formed by nature, not learning. Shakespeare in his freedom from oppressive rules is a metaphor for the British nation, the ideal symbol for this constitutional monarchy throughout a long century of military conflict and cultural competition with absolutist France. In common with the bards of uncultivated states, Shakespeare represents culture without connotations of the overly-luxurious, even decadent, French. Johnson had said of the era in which Shakespeare was writing, 'Nations, like individuals, have their infancy'.<sup>63</sup> Elevated to the position of presiding National Genius, Shakespeare allowed Britain to embrace its comparatively unsophisticated cultural history and redefine the measures of literary progress.

Romney's depictions of Shakespeare as an infant exploit the idea of Shakespeare as primeval poetry, genius in its infancy in a state of nature. And yet his youthful poet, especially as seen in *The Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions*, appears preternaturally alert and wise and, according to the Boydell Gallery reviewer, likely to disturb the ladies. But this is the picture of Young's category of Adult Genius, which 'comes out of Nature's hand, as *Pallas* out of *Jove's* head, at full growth, and mature: *Shakespeare's* Genius was of this kind'.<sup>64</sup> Whether a miraculous Christ-like birth or a heroic delivery à la pagan mythology, Romney's infant Shakespeares portray the axiom that 'Genius has ever been supposed to partake of something Divine'.<sup>65</sup> Romney's Shakespeares illustrate well the Bardolatry expressed in Garrick's ode recited at the commemorative Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford in

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<sup>62</sup> Pope, Preface to *The Works of Shakespear*, ii

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *Preface to Shakespear*, xxxiii. Duff privileged the scope for imagination in poetry not only of infant states but in the youthful works of individual poets themselves, and he recommends the early works of Tasso, Pope, and Milton, remarking that 'the performances of a youthful Poet, possessed of true Genius, will always abound with that luxuriance of imagination, and with that vivacity and spirit which are suitable to his years', although lacking an adult, masculine vigour. *Essay on Original Genius*, 29-38.

<sup>64</sup> Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 31. Nicholas Rowe had already similarly implied that Shakespeare's genius was born fully formed and therefore exhibited no linear process of development. He concluded that it would be difficult to arrange the plays in succession: 'Perhaps we are not to look for his beginnings, like those of other authors, among their least perfect writings; art had so little, and nature so large a share in what he did, that, for ought I know, the performances of his youth, as they were the most vigorous, and had the most fire and strength of imagination in 'em, were the best. Rowe's preface in Pope, *The Works of Shakespear*, xxxiii.

<sup>65</sup> Young, op. cit., 27.



1769 and many more times later on the London stage, verses that quote from the plays themselves while reinforcing the legend that the National Poet's perinatal companions were Nature and Fancy:

To what blest Genius of the Isle  
Shall Gratitude her tribute pay,  
Decree the festive day,  
Erect the statue, and devote the pile?  
Do not your sympathetic hearts accord  
To own the "bosom lord?"  
Tis he! Tis he! That demi-god  
Who Avon's flow'ry margin trod,  
While sportive Fancy round him flew,  
Where Nature led him by the hand,  
Instructed him in all she knew,  
And gave him absolute command.  
Tis he! Tis he!  
"The god of our idolatry!"<sup>66</sup>

John Romney compared *The Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions*—"one of the most poetical of Mr. Romney's pictures"—to William Collins's *The Passions. An Ode for Music* as 'a work of pure imagination'.<sup>67</sup> This poem, which posits the youthful *Music* surrounded by passions such as Joy, Fear, Anger, and Jealousy would have provided a fitting conceptual basis for the young Shakespeare surrounded by these personifications, as delineation of the passions was the poet's strong point. For Pope, 'The *Power* over our *Passions* was never possess'd in a more eminent degree, or display'd in so different instances'. He points out that Shakespeare can effortlessly make the heart burst, yet 'how astonishing is it again, that the passions directly opposite to these, Laughter and Spleen, are no less at his command!'<sup>68</sup> However, it was his method of mixing these passions that added fuel to

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<sup>66</sup> *An ode upon dedicating a building and erecting a statue to Shakespeare at Stratford upon Avon. By D.G.* (London, 1769). A witness of the festivities surrounding the Jubilee described the oratorios, *tableaux vivantes*, and fireworks as well as a spectacle involving a large transparency covering the home of Shakespeare's birth: 'The subject was the sun struggling though the clouds, to enlighten the world,—a figurative representation of the fate and fortunes of the much beloved bard'. *Anecdotes, Bons-Mots, and Characteristic Traits of the Greatest Princes, Politicians, Philosophers, Orators, and Wits of Modern Times... by the Rev. John Adams, A.M.* (London: G Kearsley, 1789), 309. William Pressly has argued that the blinding light of Nature in *Shakespeare, Nature, and the Passions* is inspired by these kinds of special effects. Furthermore, he points out that the faint 'Shaksperc' inscribed in the clouds above her head corresponds to Garrick's ode, when he repeats the mantra of the poet's name. *The Artist as Original Genius: Shakespeare's 'Fine Frenzy'*, University of Delaware Press, forthcoming.

<sup>67</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 174.

<sup>68</sup> Pope, Preface to *The Works of Shakespear*, iii.



the fiery debate over Shakespeare's improprieties. Johnson considered that what had been censured by the critics was in actuality an observance of 'the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination'. Therefore, Shakespeare was justified in uniting 'the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition'.<sup>69</sup> Romney's *Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions* combines various opposed passions in one composition, too, and is a comment on Shakespeare's righteousness every bit as persuasive as Johnson's.

However much a Shakespeare eulogist, Romney was no Shakespeare purist, despite the image John Romney may have wished to create. Romney found the motif of an infant surrounded by adorers an adaptable one—malleable enough even to illustrate an episode from Hayley's *Essay on Old Maids*. Presented as an antediluvian fragment 'from the pen of Enoch himself', the temptation of the avowed virgin Kunaza with a scene of maternal joy is configured just as the infancy of Shakespeare, only Kunaza and her sister replace Comedy and Tragedy and the licentious tempter Pharamus is added, looking on (fig. 140). John Romney included this and other drawings from *Essay on Old Maids* in his Fitzwilliam bequest, even though he found its 'affectation of scriptural language' offensive, perhaps to ensure that his father receive credit for these designs: Hayley's third edition of *Old Maids*, 1793, included four plates, 'T. Stothard, del.' (fig. 141).<sup>70</sup> *Shakespeare Between Tragedy and Comedy* and *Nature Unveiling* had also morphed into *Infancy of Jupiter* compositions in the early-to-mid 1780s, where a goat takes over the role of instructress from Nature (fig. 142) and later, elements of the infant Shakespeare cycle will be seen in the early formation of drawings depicting Titania and the changeling from *Midsummer Night's Dream* (fig. 143), and an atypical composition of *The Infant Shakespeare* (inscribed on the verso, 'The Birth of Shakespere') (fig. 144) is almost interchangeable with the slightly sinister *Queen Mab* drawings (fig. 145). Romney approached Shakespeare like a true primitivist, just as he did antiquity, as terrain to be explored and transported for

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *Preface to Shakespear*, xii-xiv.

<sup>70</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 262. John says that although the book 'reflects no credit on its author', Romney's *Rape of Kunaza* 'is designed with all the force and spirit of Raffaele'. See Fitzwilliam Museum, BV97. The story of Kunaza is found in *A Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids. By a Friend to the Sisterhood* (London: T. Cadell, 1785) II: part III, 13-37.



modern exigencies, without an undue concern for rules. He was also open to the view of Aeschylus as a prefiguration of Shakespeare as suggested in Robert Potter's translation and happily repeated the disunities of time and place in his illustrations as did these authors. Although in defending Aeschylus Potter enlisted the support of Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* to plead exemption from constraining rules for 'heaven-born genius' and points out that the Shakespeare-reading English public should be used to such improprieties, he submits Aeschylus to the kind of textual improvements to which Shakespeare had also been subjected, admitting the necessity of softening the gorgons of *The Furies* for his female readership and rendering them by degrees 'the best company in the world'.<sup>71</sup> Yet Romney's Furies (fig. 146) appear closer to that 'foul sisterhood on the Athenian stage' that Potter said had produced 'fatal effects upon the children et les femmes enceintes' than the 'perfectly good-humoured' Eumenides of this new version.<sup>72</sup> A reviewer of Potter's translation remarked of the disunities of this play that 'the furies pass from Delphos to Athens with less ceremony than Shakespeare's warlike Harry from England to France';<sup>73</sup> Romney has gone further and combined moments and characters not textually together—in Potter's *The Furies*, the ghost of Clytemnestra does not confront her son and murderer, Orestes, here in the Delphic sanctuary of Apollo; he was already fleeing to the Temple of Minerva at Athens before she appeared and roused the sleeping Furies. Here again, Romney has created a literary illustration that provides a response to contemporary critical debates.

Richard Cumberland was familiar enough with Aeschylus and Shakespeare to compose for his *Observer* essays the ekphrasis advertising the Boydell project that

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Potter, *The Tragedies of Aeschylus, Translated* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Norwich: J. Crouse, 1777) I: xxii-xxiii, II: 221-5.

<sup>72</sup> Potter, *Op. cit.*, II: 224. Romney would have found the lengthy discussion of the furies in *Polymetis* helpful in composing this composition. Spence cites classical authors, especially Virgil, for the deeds and the appearance of the furies, who were 'very terrible to behold. Their look was very much like that, which might make any unfortunate woman pass for a witch, in any of our country-villages at present'. He goes on to describe their clothing and snakey hair in picturesque terminology. Spence, *Polymetis*, 271-7.

<sup>73</sup> [George Colman] 'The Tragedies of Aeschylus Translated by R. Potter', in the *Monthly Review; or Literary Journal* LIX (Oct. 1778), 286. Colman, like Potter, draws several parallels between Shakespeare and Aeschylus without implying that the former has imitated the latter. Potter (*Tragedies of Aeschylus* I: xxxii) acknowledges that Milton, Gray, and Collins have imitated the 'fire' of Aeschylus's genius but he does not include Shakespeare among the 'learned of these later ages' who have imitated him. This is consistent with the idea that Shakespeare was an original genius not dependent on models other than nature.



was based on an analogous relationship between the works of the two playwrights.<sup>74</sup> Cumberland brought to light the correspondence between Aegisthus's murder of Agamemnon urged by Clytemnestra, the consultation of sybils and a raised ghost with the scene from *Macbeth* that Reynolds, the modern Apelles, was painting for Boydell (fig. 147). The modern Timanthes was drawn to the scenes of conjuring and magic in the works of both writers. In a play full of possibilities for illustrations, Romney chose from Aeschylus's *Persians* the two scenes where the ghost of Darius appears (see figs. 58 and 59).<sup>75</sup> A pen and ink study related to the black chalk cartoon of *The Dream of Atossa* (fig. 148) shows even greater interest in the ghost and the furore and terror his appearance has wrought, bringing it front and centre and editing out the subsidiary sleeping Atossa. He also made many studies of raised spirits from Shakespeare, such as the scene from *Henry VI Part II*, I:iv, where Bolingbroke, Southwell, and Margery Jourdain conjure a spirit to prophesy the future (fig. 149) as well Joan of Arc's fiends from *Henry VI Part I*, V:i.<sup>76</sup> One of Romney's favourite plays, of course, was *Macbeth*, and drawings from the many scenes of horror, violence and supernatural events are seen almost throughout his entire career. While filling a post-Rome sketchbook with studies for the subjects of the black chalk cartoons, he has also drawn one of the weird sisters (fig. 150) with 'a choppy finger laying / Upon her skinny lips' (I: iii). Just days after the Boydell scheme was finalized, *The Times* reported 5 December 1786 that Reynolds was to illustrate the cavern scene with the cauldron; Fuseli the confrontation between Macbeth and the witches on the heath; and Romney 'takes the more varied scene of the *Supper*, at the instant when the Ghost of Banquo appears, and Macbeth exclaims—"the table's full"'. By 13 January *The Times* was advertising the names of more artists and paintings, with Romney and Joseph Wright of Derby engaged to work on *The Tempest* and Romney still signed up for his *Macbeth* banquet scene. However, although many drawings of Macbeth recoiling at Banquo's ghost are extant (fig. 151),

<sup>74</sup> See Richard Cumberland, *The Observer: being a collection of Moral, Literary and Familiar Essays* Vol. IV (London: C. Dilly, 1788), 56-63.

<sup>75</sup> During his sittings to Romney in 1778, Potter doubtlessly discussed with Romney what turned up in a footnote to the scene of the raising of the ghost of Darius regarding the libations prior to the conjuring, that, 'The Persians were greatly addicted to (what we call) magical incantation, which probably they learned from the conquered Chaldaeans'. *Tragedies of Aeschylus* II: 351.

<sup>76</sup> The spectre rising from smoke figure is also used for the prophetic in the *Descent of Odin* as seen in the Liverpool cartoon and a related drawing in the Fitzwilliam, BV 55. The raised spirit of Eve from Hayley's Kunza story is illustrated in a manner suggesting that Stothard's design drew heavily from a Romney prototype. See *Essay on Old Maids*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: T. Cadell, 1793) II: facing p. 35.



a finished painting was never delivered to Boydell. John Romney says that the banquet scene and the cavern scene from *Macbeth* and the first act of *The Tempest* were ones that 'he had studied much' and were ready to transfer to canvas even before the Shakespeare Gallery was thought of, which suggests a logical reason for the initial assigning of these scenes to Romney. In the biography, John takes every opportunity to compare the works of Reynolds—particularly his feeble contributions to the Boydell Gallery—unfavourably with those of his father and to imply jealousy on the part of the President of the Royal Academy towards his less well-connected rival. In a perhaps not unrelated discussion of Romney's sketches for the banquet scene from *Macbeth*, John speaks of an important design that was ready to transfer to a large cartoon but had gone missing so suddenly 'as to leave suspicion of theft. The loss was very serious indeed, as it prevented him from painting a picture on this subject, in which he had intended to have introduced the portrait of several friends'.<sup>77</sup> John might well have suspected that a partisan of Reynolds was responsible for the disappearance of a sketch that as a fully-developed painting would have settled the matter of Romney's superiority for good. Romney's many surviving drawings from *Macbeth* (fig. 152) suggest that any pictures finished from this play would have been sublime and powerful—much more so than what the president of the Royal Academy produced.

It is almost a certainty that Hayley was one of the several friends whose portrait would have appeared among the guests at Macbeth's banquet had Romney completed the painting. Although mentioning his own presence at the early Boydell discussions, Hayley in the Romney biography downplays his involvement in the venture, saying he only wrote up a 'brief sketch of the project' for advertisement and a letter to engage his friend Wright of Derby at the request of Alderman Boydell.<sup>78</sup> But the correspondence between Hayley and Wright proves that his involvement behind the scenes was not so modest, with Hayley advising Wright not only on the specific scene to be painted (Act IV: ii of *The Tempest*) but also considering compositional details

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<sup>77</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 154, 265-66. John included 10 drawings from *Macbeth* in the bound volume of drawings that he donated to the Fitzwilliam Museum. His remark that the *Macbeth* cauldron scene of Reynolds 'wants dignity, energy, and fire; and there is in the whole composition a feebleness unworthy of the practised pencil of Sir Joshua' is typical of his Boydell paragon. Not only is Romney's *Tempest* superior to this, so, too, does his *Infant Shakespeare and the Passions* decimate the 'insipid and vulgar' characters of Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort*. See 172-7.

<sup>78</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 105-12.



on everything from the lighting of the scene to the proper dress of the characters (fig. 153).<sup>79</sup> The precise nature of Hayley's advice on Romney's *Tempest* from Act I (fig. 154) is less well documented, although it is for sure that he oversaw the development of the painting at every step. John Romney says that regretfully the initial idea for the painting, already in train when Boydell's scheme was initiated, was not the one carried through in the finished painting. John knew that the preparatory drawings for the Boydell painting held art-historical value and donated many to the Fitzwilliam Museum but he says he kept the study of the earlier composition, which featured Miranda, her father, Prospero, and his bestial slave, Caliban, with a subsidiary scene of the shipwreck in the distance. John judged this a perfectly satisfactory design, yet at some point 'some officious individual suggested to Mr. Romney that this picture would not be regarded by the critics as an historical composition, as it consisted of only three figures not sufficiently combined'.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, Caliban was removed and the shipwreck scene was brought forward, juxtaposed with the now diminished group of Prospero and Miranda. Two sketches among the Fitzwilliam bequest surely relate to this initial concept: the first includes those three protagonists plus the sprite Ariel, who drives the winds at the request of the gesturing Prospero (fig. 155). The second appears to mark the first stages of the new idea, with traces of flailing figures in the sea just becoming visible on the left as the abstract form of Caliban fades and morphs into the rocky shapes that make up Prospero's cell on the right (fig. 156). This new composition combining two separate scenes from the play, Prospero's magic act to avenge his brother's usurpation of the dukedom of Milan and the actual conjured storm itself, in which the brother and other mariners are left to their fate (fig. 157), would become critically the most controversial element of the painting, and with hindsight, is dealt with harshly in the assessments of both Hayley and John Romney. Although Hayley says that the picture 'has the primary characteristic belonging to works of true genius, it seizes and it enchants, though it does not absolutely satisfy the mind'; the great force and magnificence of the execution is let down by the lack of a 'clearness of conception in the design, for the hurly-burly in the ship, and the cell of the princely enchanter are unfortunately huddled together. This appeared to me a

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<sup>79</sup> See Wright to Hayley 4 December 1786, William Bemrose, *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright A.R.A.*, 1885, author's extra-illustrated copy in Derby Art Gallery, Ms. p. 58a and Wright to Hayley 7 Feb. 1789, Inglefield Mss.

<sup>80</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 153.



radical error in the original sketch, which the artist tried many expedients to counteract, but which, in my opinion he was never able completely to remedy.'<sup>81</sup>

Hayley's private correspondence confirms the existence of an intimate, even exclusive, association between the painter and the poet on the *Tempest* picture but while writing the Romney biography recent memories of criticism levelled at the Boydell paintings in particular and the scheme in general as well as its failure financially and the consequent selling of the 167 paintings in 1805 at shockingly low prices seems to have shaped his account of events.<sup>82</sup> Hayley tells of his magnanimous conversion of the indoor riding house at Earham to a large painting room with a sea view for Romney, who there made his first sketches on canvas of *The Tempest*. Hayley understood the pressure on Romney—and other British artists known mainly for portraits or other less exalted genres—in producing a large-scale history painting in a sublime mode with multiple figures in action, and he says the fear of failing in this 'created many a tempest in the fluctuating spirits of Romney'.<sup>83</sup> And Hayley adds that the artist's intimate friends, who

endeavoured to animate and support his courage, were not without their fears of his sinking under this mighty undertaking. Having sketched at Earham a beginning of his design, in some points happy, and in others unfortunate, he returned with his great canvas to London in the autumn. Rejoining him there in November [1787], I had the pleasure of observing the progress he made in his arduous work, and of adding my influence to that of other friends, who were peculiarly solicitous to encourage him on this important occasion.<sup>84</sup>

Hayley's letters to John and Martha Berridge of Derby report on his supervision of Romney while working on *The Tempest*. He writes to them from London 14 November 1787 of having managed to persuade Romney to let Lord Chancellor

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<sup>81</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 141.

<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of the fortunes of the Gallery and a catalogue of the sale see Winifred Friedman, *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery* (London and New York: Garland Publishing, 1976).

<sup>83</sup> Hayley, *op. cit.*, 128. Hayley had received a letter from Joseph Wright written 4 Dec. 1786 in response to his application to Wright to paint something for Boydell. Wright speaks of both his 'ardent desire to contribute my mite to this noble work, & a dread of not being able to compleat it which in publick understanding, is a very serious business... The indifferent and very precarious state of my health, the dreadful size of the pictures & perhaps a limited time to compleat them in, had made me in my own mind give the matter up, till yesterday my friend Berridge on his return from Ashburne called upon me, and after having read your Letter, expressed the warmest wishes for my understanding the Subject you mention or any other I might like better; I mentioned my objections to ingaging in the work at all, which he in great measure talked & laughed away, So now for the Subject without further loss of time....' *Life and Works of Joseph Wright*, Bemrose extra-illustrated, Ms. p. 58, Derby Art Gallery.

<sup>84</sup> Hayley, *op. cit.*



Thurlow, who had expressed an interest in the Boydell project, see the underway painting, 'but he has hitherto persevered in a Resolution of letting no Eye but mine be a witness to the progress of his Work'.<sup>85</sup> If Hayley really was the sole witness to the *Tempest* at this point, then he was indeed the 'officious individual' who had recommended the alteration of the initial, simpler composition which John Romney praised.<sup>86</sup>

In discussing Thurlow's interaction with Romney over *The Tempest* in the biography, Hayley's account there somewhat contradicts his private letter to the Beridges; nevertheless it is the source of a much-repeated anecdote illustrating Thurlow's apparent poor opinion of Romney.<sup>87</sup> In this version, recounted third-hand, Hayley receives a letter of 10 November 1787 from a friend saying that another mutual friend, Thomas Carwardine, said that Thurlow's first comment on hearing of Romney painting for the Shakespeare Gallery was, 'What! is Romney at work for it? He cannot paint in that style, it is out of his way; by God, he'll make a balderdash business of it'. Carwardine then attempts to assure Thurlow that Romney was capable of this style of painting after all, even though he had not seen the design himself as 'he shews it to no mortal yet'. Hayley's correspondent tells him that Carwardine coaxed the 'terrified artist' into meeting with Thurlow and that 'they debated several points with warmth, and spirit on both sides'.<sup>88</sup> Tenuous as this report of Thurlow's conversation may be, his alleged initial reaction to Romney painting from Shakespeare is not inconsistent with that of other well-placed arbiters of the fine arts when considering Boydell's British school of painters. Horace Walpole similarly exclaimed,

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<sup>85</sup> Beridge Papers, private collection, U.K. Hayley had written to the same recipients in October announcing his arrival in London: 'various articles have brought me into this scene of bustle—particularly my anxiety for the progress of the dear Painters very grand & important Picture', although Hayley was not staying at Cavendish Square on this trip. Ibid. Hayley's *Memoirs* prove that did not become personally acquainted with Thurlow until November 1788. *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.* ed. by John Johnson (London: Henry Colburn, 1823)I: 370-1.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Cumberland, also classed as an intimate, had apparently not seen Romney's painting even though he had made social visits to Cavendish Square during this period—*The World* reports 20 Feb. 1787 that Cumberland gave a reading of his latest play at Romney's house. Cumberland's *Observer* essay of 1788 speaking of the in-progress Boydell paintings describes Romney's offering in terms that make it clear he is referring to the initial composition of just Prospero, Miranda, Caliban and a distant shipwreck, not the revised composition combining the two separate scenes.

<sup>87</sup> David A. Cross, *A Striking Likeness* (Ashgate, 1999), 143; Kidson, *George Romney*, 6; and Shearer West, 'Romney's Theatricality', in Kidson, ed., *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination*, 134 are only the most recent to repeat this narrative from the biography, at face value.

<sup>88</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 129-130.



mercy on us! *Our* painters to design for Shakespeare! His commentators have not been more inadequate. Pray, who is to give an idea of Falstaff now Quin is dead? And then, Bartolozzi, who is only fit to engrave for the *Pastor fido*, will be to give a pretty enamelled fan-mount of Macbeth! Salvator Rosa might, and Piranesi might dash out Duncan's castle; but Lord help Alderman Boydell and the Royal Academy!<sup>89</sup>

Walpole's deference to the acclaimed actor James Quin (d. 1766) is a sign of the privileging of the theatre's interpretation of Shakespeare over that of British artists, which is also expressed in a Boydell Gallery review of 1790, which warns artists of the pitfalls in attempting to paint Shakespeare as 'He is a School of Painting himself, but that art cannot illustrate him....Critical knowledge of the Bard is absolutely essential to the composition of such a work as may completely gratify a Fine Taste. The intense application of a [John Philip] Kemble or a [George Davies] Harley are needed to that Painter who purposes here to build a lasting fame.'<sup>90</sup> However, another Boydell commentator enunciated a different point of view, expressing relief that the painters had not

sought for and gathered their ideas from the theatre, and given us portraits of the well-dressed Ladies and Gentlemen [of the stage]....There was some reason to fear a representation of all that extravaganza of attitude and start which is tolerated, nay in a degree demanded, at the playhouse. But this has been avoided; the pictures in general give a mirror of the poet....[The Shakespeare Gallery] bids fair to form such an epoch in the History of the Fine arts, as will establish and confirm the superiority of the English school.<sup>91</sup>

Such inconsistencies in criticism might reflect a lack of cultural consensus but they are also an indicator of a free press and a relatively wide franchise in the arts—a situation not shared in the better state-funded though more tightly-controlled arts of France. It is obvious that Romney's friends in the press, particularly his fellow Unincreasables Club member Charles Este of *The World*, were behind the frequent

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<sup>89</sup> Letter from Walpole to Lady Ossory, 5 Dec. 1786, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, XIII: 430.

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous review of 1790 from V&A Press Cuttings II:542.

<sup>91</sup> *The Morning Advertiser* 6 May 1789, quoted in Friedman, *Boydell Shakespeare Gallery*, 75. A manuscript discourse in the Romney Papers (1957/942/79), National Art Library, in philosophy agrees with these sentiments. Romney expresses dismay with the blind imitation of the great masters, particularly Leonardo's mistake in the *Last Supper* that had been repeated ever since, where the characters do not recognise Judas as the guilty member of the party, even though his features strongly mark him as such. This error is 'pretty much a par with the stage where the actor speaks aloud enough for all the house to hear and the actor not two yards from him is supposed not to hear a word he says'. Romney is apparently unable to suspend disbelief in these instances for their lack of a fundamental overriding truth in conception.



blurbs that kept the public interested in the little-seen but much-touted *Tempest*. Between 9 June 1787 and 30 September 1788 *The World* mentions Romney's progress on the painting eight separate times and give tantalizing hints on its developing appearance. These reports announce that the painting is taking shape at Earham and that 'few people are yet in luck enough to get a sight of this work', although they vouch for its 'great sublimity'. In March 1788 they report that the two balancing scenes, 'Prospero & his groupe on one part, & the crew on the other' have been successfully combined, and 'the supernatural beings, a difficulty more arduously surmounted, is however a difficulty no longer'. That Hayley was feeding these details from Earham is likely, and the public was reminded of his involvement in the project in the puff stating that the nearly finished work was owing to Romney's 'own genius, to Earham, & perhaps the owner of that enchanting spot, Mr. Hayley'.<sup>92</sup> Yet, it is difficult to imagine Hayley providing helpful assistance on a painting with supernatural elements, which is a genre in which it is he who was 'out of his way', not Romney. Their approach to their respective works was antithetical: Hayley's didactic poems, ostensibly calling for modern, relevant forms in the arts that were free from the constraints of rules, are written in the turgid form of the Augustan couplet, thus the style contradicts the content; Romney's frenetic sketches often had no model, and even his canvases were sometime 'painted directly from invention, but never with a copy placed before him', which represents a true break with the bounds of convention.<sup>93</sup> In the *Essay on Epic Poetry*, Hayley had professed to admire Romney's indignation upon hearing 'in terms both arrogant and tame / Some reas'ning Pedant on thy art declaim' on theoretical laws and limits, which Romney then refuted with a display on the canvas of what had been pronounced impossible to depict (lines 315-34). But any such liberal statements found in Hayley's didactic poetry are easily outweighed by the many more conservative views expressed about Romney's creativity in private letters and in the biography, where Hayley remarks of his role as a 'frank and faithful monitor, to guard him against those excesses of impetuous and undisciplined imagination'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> See Whitley Papers, 1283-6, British Museum.

<sup>93</sup> John Romney (*Memoirs*, 130) says 'It is remarkable that he never made finished drawings for his pictures; he only designed the general idea and effect, and executed the minor parts when he painted the picture'. John contrasts this to the method of Benjamin West, whose paintings were copied from minutely-detailed drawings, losing any original freedom.

<sup>94</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 72. Judith Wardle has examined the *Essay on Epic Poetry* in reference to Hayley's relationship with and influence on Blake, and she has found the *Essay* to be full of



As *The Tempest* was in its final critical stages—and a year late on delivery to Boydell—Romney instructed his servant at Cavendish Square to deny entry to all callers. Cumberland attempted to pay a visit but was turned away, and an embarrassed Romney asked his son, who was in residence at the time, to write a letter of apology. Cumberland replied on 18 April 1790 that only Romney's stupidest friends would not understand his need to avoid interruption and 'unseasonable praise', therefore, 'he did perfectly right in holding the door against all observers, and myself (tho' one of the most anxious, and I flatter myself the least intrusive) amongst the rest'.<sup>95</sup> Romney's *Tempest* was finally finished in April 1790—but his absence from the inaugural season of the Boydell Gallery in May 1789 meant his was not one of the thirty-four paintings subjected to the initial scrutiny of the press or included in James Gillray's print *Shakespeare Sacrificed; or The Offering to Avarice*, which called into question Boydell's altruistic motives and ridiculed specific paintings (fig. 158). Fuseli's *Midsummer Night's Dream* painting (fig. 159); Barry's *Lear with the Dead Cordelia*; and Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* (fig. 160) are implicated in the Alderman's enterprise of reducing the beloved Bard to ashes while sponsoring ridiculous paintings for the sake of the money-bags atop a volume of the *Works* and for an association with the noble Temple of Fame, where a trumpet blasts forth 'puffs'—which Romney's partisans had made full use of. Now visible to the public, Romney and his *Tempest* would be just as vulnerable to the criticism of the public as his colleagues had been.

According to one apparently widely-held view, British artists should not be attempting to paint Shakespeare at all. Walpole commented in 1790 that 'the Shakespeare gallery is truly most inadequate to its prototypes; but how should it be

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inconsistencies and an indication of Hayley's essential conservatism. She remarks that his tendency to ride the fence on certain issues, for fear of giving offence, negates his merit as a critic. "Satan not having the science of Wrath, but only of Pity", *Studies in Romanticism* 13 (1974) 147-154. While Wardle does not give Hayley credit for the instances in the *Essay* where he does indeed state his case strongly, he does present both sides of the argument concerning the propriety of supernatural machinery in poetry and fails to voice his own opinion, but Anna Seward, finely attuned to Hayley's ideas, in a letter to a friend remarks that he is against it. *The Letters of Anna Seward*, ed. by A. Constable (Edinburgh: 1811) I: 141, 30 March 1786.

<sup>95</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 214-15. Not surprisingly, this is somewhat contradicted in Hayley's account, where he speaks of bringing to Cavendish Square to see the painting near completion a 'rather fastidious Connoisseur' of the Italian schools, who was unexpectedly impressed. He also records that Thurlow and the Rev. Dr. Warner inspected and admired the painting in March. *Life of Romney*, 142.



worthy of them! If we could recall the brightest luminaries of painting, could they do justice to Shakespeare? Was Raphael himself as great a genius in his art as the author of *Macbeth*? And who could draw Falstaff, but the writer of Falstaff?'<sup>96</sup> Richard Payne Knight had also suggested in his letter to Romney that Shakespeare was essentially unpaintable. Having defined the sublime as possessing an infinite quality, which allows the mind to wander and transport itself beyond the confines of vision and even the limits of nature itself, he points out that the 'witches of Macbeth are very sublime when we read the play, but become ridiculous, when represented on the theatre'. These imaginary figures are the province of the poet, and the 'painter must remember that this is the infinite sublime, and consequently out of his art'.<sup>97</sup> But perhaps the most salient caveat concerning painting Shakespeare came from Boydell himself. His preface to the exhibition catalogue of 1789, reprinted yearly after that, announced that the principal goal behind the entire undertaking was to promote the noblest part of art, historical painting, which had been neglected for portraiture in Britain. What is more, 'no subjects seem so proper to form an English School of Historical Painting, as the Scenes of the immortal Shakspeare', yet, paradoxically, Boydell states that

he possessed powers which no pencil can reach; for such was the force of his creative imagination, that though he frequently goes beyond nature he still continues to be natural, and seems only to do that, which nature would have done, had she o'erstepped her usual limits—It must not then be expected, that the art of the Painter can ever equal the sublimity of our Poet. The strength of Michael Angelo, united to the grace of Raphael, would here have laboured in vain.—For what pencil can give to his airy beings 'a local habitation and a name.' It is therefore hoped, that the spectator will view these Pictures with this regard, and not allow his imagination, warmed by the magic powers of the Poet, to expect from Painting, what Painting cannot perform.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from Walpole to Lord Hailes, 21 Sept. 1790, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, XIV: 292.

<sup>97</sup> Payne Knight's ideas on the 'infinite sublime' anticipate the Romantic-era Shakespearean criticism of Charles Lamb, who expressed exasperation with the Boydell painters for even attempting to fix limits to Shakespeare's infinity. He professed to prefer the earlier, cruder and less pretentious stage-on-a-page illustrations and resented the idea of 'Opie's Shakespeare, Northcote's Shakespeare, light-headed Fuseli's Shakespeare, wooden-headed West's Shakespeare, deaf-headed Reynolds' Shakespeare, instead of my and everybody's Shakespeare. To be tied down to an authentic face of Juliet! To have Imogen's portrait! To confine the illimitable!' Quoted in W. Moelwyn Merchant, *Shakespeare and the Artist* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 67; see also Frederick Burwick, 'The Romantic Reception of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery', in Walter Pape and Frederick Burwick, eds., *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery* (Bottrop: Verlag Peter Pomp, 1996), 145.

<sup>98</sup> Preface to *A Catalogue of the Pictures &c. in the Shakspeare Gallery, Pall Mall* (London: printed by H. Baldwin and sold at the place of exhibition, 1789), signed by John Boydell 1 May 1789. A sceptical reviewer perceived that Boydell was here attempting to deflect or prevent any negative criticism of the paintings for fear of exhibiting a lack of civic pride and generosity towards the struggling British school of painters. Letter to the editor, signed 'H', *Gentleman's Magazine* LX (Dec. 1790), 1088.



Thomas Banks's sculpture *Shakespeare between Poetry and Painting* (fig. 161), which adorned the façade of the building and as a print decorated the folio, implied a parity between the sister arts that did not in reality exist, and in truth, never had. The understanding that painting should follow the poet assigns an inherent position of inferiority to the painter. Yet this subordinate standing could be denigrated further, as articulated in an uncompromising review of the Boydell Gallery in which the 'horror, extravagance, vulgarity, and absurdity' of the paintings are blamed not on the artists but on 'the characteristic defects of the author whose works were their model' and on the taste of the nation, 'which, along with his beauties, idolizes also these errors of its favourite poet'.<sup>99</sup> In this view, artists are little more than unimaginative, mechanical copyists.

The reviews of Romney's *Tempest* confirm that this grand and imposing canvas (10'x 15') made a strong impact on first view. *The Morning Chronicle* wrote,

Mr Romney claims the first notice. His painting from the *Tempest* has all the grandeur of the Antients. The composition and the figures are in the best style of the old Masters; the colouring is of the Venetian school—Splendid, chaste, harmonious. It looks like a picture of other times, and reminds us of those immortal works which have had the sanction of ages, and gave an exalted and permanent situation in the Temple of Fame.<sup>100</sup>

*The Times* (21 December 1790), in a piece of more discerning criticism, similarly began their review of the Gallery by stating that 'the painting which claims our first attention is the offspring of Mr. Romney's pencil'. The painting is assessed 'on the whole a most impressive, grand, and finely executed work', and specific passages are marked out as examples of 'superior design and colour', such as the naked back of the male figure in the ship, and the heads of Prospero and Miranda (fig. 162) are judged grand and enchanting. Yet the reviewer feels obliged to remark that 'the painter has violated the unity of the scene. Prospero and Miranda have nothing to do in it, and two parts of the play are brought together which should have been represented in

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<sup>99</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, op. cit. This staunch classicist even called for these Shakespearean scenes to be painted in the nude. James Jeffcrys, when studying in Rome in the 1770s actually had executed a series of nude Shakespearean drawings but in a Fuselian mannerist-sublime mode, which was probably not what this reviewer had in mind. See William L. Pressly, *The Artist as Original Genius: Shakespeare's 'Fine Frenzy' in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Art* (University of Delaware Press, forthcoming).

<sup>100</sup> Press Cuttings 1737-1811, Witt Library, Courtauld Institute.



different pictures. This is a liberty which cannot be justified; nor do we know the painter who should attempt to improve upon the designs of Shakespeare'. Ironically, Nicholas Rowe had pointed out that in *The Tempest*, 'one may observe, that the Unities are kept here, with an exactness uncommon to the liberties of his writing'.<sup>101</sup> It is true that the play unfolds in one place, the island, and in a reasonably short space of time but a different irregularity is at work here. Grant Scott has argued that Shakespeare organized the play spatially rather than temporally, presenting clusters of simultaneous and overlapping episodes, and Romney's conflation of separate scenes, therefore, demonstrates a profound understanding of his textual source.<sup>102</sup> Shakespeare does not portray the moment of Prospero's conjuring of the storm, it is implied; Miranda does not witness the storm with Prospero but alone, and Prospero never sees the storm for himself at all; the shipwreck itself is narrated from two somewhat contradictory viewpoints differing in their interpretation of the storm's severity—Romney has naturally chosen the most dramatic version, that of the sprite Ariel who has carried out Prospero's instructions to create the furious tempest.<sup>103</sup> John Romney spoke of his father's 'endless toil—a struggle with impossibilities' in reconfiguring the composition of *The Tempest* to incorporate the two scenes: 'By this alteration he endeavoured to unite two principal actions, which were essentially distinct, though referring to one another—an anomaly in composition, which nothing could justify but the supposed supernatural agency of Prospero'.<sup>104</sup> But surely, just as Rowe thought *The Tempest*'s 'Magick has something in it very solemn and very poetical', Romney, too, saw the potential to portray this supernatural agency as more than an extravagant, gothic curiosity; this is Shakespeare elevated beyond trivial rules of dramatic correctness into the noblest of grand manners.

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<sup>101</sup> Rowe in Pope, ed., *The Works of Shakespeare*, xlv.

<sup>102</sup> 'To Play the King: Illustrations from *The Tempest* in the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery', in Pope and Burwick, eds., *Boydell Shakespeare Gallery*, 116. Scott rightly credits Romney with an innovative compositional solution, but he does not mention that an illustration from the 1709 Rowe edition of the *Works* also, although as a far-distant figure, includes a conjuring Prospero in the same scene as the prominent shipwreck. This illustration might have been in Romney's memory when composing his *Tempest*. See Pressly, 'Romney's "Peculiar Powers for Historical and Ideal Painting"' in Kidson, ed., *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination*, 111-19.

<sup>103</sup> Given that Act I of *The Tempest* consists only of a view of the foundering ship and that Miranda, Prospero, and Ariel only make their entrance in Act II, it is rather incongruous that the Boydell Gallery catalogue and the *Tempest* print name the scene as 'Act I. Scene I'. However, *The Times* advertisement of 13 Jan. 1787 that first mentions Romney's upcoming scene is named 'Act I. Scene II', and it briefly describes the original design which consisted only of Prospero, Miranda, Caliban, and a ship in the distance. It appears that the proprietors were grappling to come to terms with Romney's changing interpretation of the scene.

<sup>104</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 153.



As discussed in the previous chapter, Romney had long been interested in utilizing water as an associate of emotions such as melancholy but it was also the means to convey more powerful and sublime sensations. It would only take a small step to move the sinister magic of the storm-stirring Lapland witch (fig. 163) into the figure of Prospero.<sup>105</sup> One consequence of compressing the two scenes into one is the near immersion into the storm of Prospero himself, which underscores his role in the central episode of the play and increases the drama and sublimity of the storm scene. Romney had owned a copy of Leonardo's *Treatise on Painting* since at least 1754, and here he would have found a colourful description of 'How to represent a tempest', which corresponds closely to his many preliminary and more finished designs for the painting (fig. 164). This section of the treatise speaks of a violent scene of a whirling wind and impetuously driven clouds that clash against each other as well as the desperate and shrieking mariners.<sup>106</sup> Leonardo provides an apt programme for painting Ariel's narration of the ship's inhabitants leaping into the foaming brine, when 'Not a soul But felt a fever of the mad and play'd Some tricks of desperation'. Ferdinand, son of the King of Naples, was the first to leap, with 'hair up-starting,— then like reeds, not hair', crying 'Hell is empty, And all the devils are here' (Act I: ii). Leonardo's directions for painting a tempest also speak of a froth produced by the crashing waves, 'which being rais'd up by the Wind, may fill the Air as with a thick Cloud'. Romney's painting is destroyed, but drawings and the large-scale oil sketch (see fig. 5) indicate that this frothy substance produced when waves crash against rocks is precisely what he has devised for the insubstantial barrier that separates Prospero and Miranda from the shipwreck, and this is the area that seems to have given the engraver a great deal of trouble. John Romney compares *The Tempest's* irregularity with that of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, in which also 'two principal actions are brought together, which have no relation to each other except a supposed coincidence of time' and which was a painting that Romney copied in Rome and kept in his studio. John might have mentioned another Raphael painting that adheres visually more closely to *The Tempest's* cloudy barrier, *Moses and the Column of*

<sup>105</sup> Yvonne Romney Dixon has demonstrated beautifully with a series of drawings how the Lapland witches melded seamlessly into *Macbeth's* witches. 'Designs from *Fancy*': George Romney's *Shakespearean Drawings* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1998), 35-9, plates 9-11).

<sup>106</sup> *A Treatise of Painting by Leonardo da Vinci. Translated from the Original Italian....* (London: J. Senex, 1721), 53. Romney's copy of this, with his name inscribed with the date 1754, is in the Fitzwilliam Museum.



*Cloud* in the Vatican loggia, a print of which Romney owned.<sup>107</sup> But Romney would not have been inspired exclusively by masters of the high renaissance; his vague, viscous barrier resembles nothing as much as the indeterminate forms that divide the separate scenes in early-renaissance compositions that are structured with continuous narrative (see fig. 28). Romney's archaisms fulfil the principle of *recueil pour mieux sauter*, for the *Tempest* studies and oil sketch show clearly what the print fails to convey, that the source of movement and the heart of the composition is a pre-Turneresque vortex.

The reception of *The Tempest* argues that the allowances granted to the National Poet were not equally extended to the nation's painters. Even Reynolds had run afoul of the critics with his Boydell painting from *Henry VI Part II, The Death of Cardinal Beaufort*. Reynolds's portrayal of the Cardinal's sinner's death with grimaces and writhing had elicited from *The Times* the remark, 'the veil of the Grecian Painter might, in this instance, have been happily copied by the British Apelles'.<sup>108</sup> But the inclusion of a demonic head (eventually painted out by either Reynolds or a later hand) behind the dying man to illustrate the lines 'O! beat away the busy meddling fiend That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul' (Act III:ii) offended their doctrinaire proprieties even more so: 'we rather apprehend that some Fiend has been laying siege to Sir Joshua's taste, when he determined to literalise the idea. The license of Poetry is very different from that of Painting: but the present subject is complete in itself, and wants not the aid of machinery from Heaven or from Hell'. The *Gentleman's Magazine* reviewer also condemned the conceit, saying, 'Belzezebub is of the race of Fuseli, the father of ghosts and spectres, and we leave him to his parent'.<sup>109</sup> For Walpole, the devil-head was 'burlesque', and he claimed to prefer the illustration of the scene in Thomas Hanmer's 1743 edition of the *Works of Shakespear*, which 'gives the fact simply, pathetically, and with dignity, and just as

<sup>107</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 153. Lot no. 80 of the 1834 Christies sale of the books and prints that John had inherited from his father is 'Raphael's Bible'.

<sup>108</sup> 8 May 1789, quoted in Albert Roe, 'The Demon behind the Pillow: A Note on Erasmus Darwin and Reynolds', *Burlington* 113 (1971), 463. John Romney also referred to this painting in reference to Timanthes' device of hiding Agamemnon's face to increase the imagination's conception of his anguished expression. In discussing the superiority of his father's Boydell pictures to Reynolds's, he notes that King Henry's face is concealed though not out of the principles of Timanthes but as a convenience to escape a difficult task. *Memoirs of Romney*, 174.

<sup>109</sup> Vol. LX (Dec. 1790), 1089.



you wish it told'<sup>110</sup> (fig. 165). Erasmus Darwin's defence of Reynolds's painted metaphor, and his call to 'enlarge the sphere of pictorial language', was a view not frequently voiced and one running contrary to the philosophy expounded in Lessing's *Laokoön*, which argued for delimiting the domain of art to the portrayal of beauty and for the business of description and allegory to be left to poetry.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps Fuseli could get away with fantastical paintings but something more dignified and factual was expected of the British Apelles and Timanthes.

The *Times* review of 21 December 1790 that found such merit in *The Tempest* had prefaced its analysis of the painting with a detailed exposition on the causes of 'the violent severity of criticism with which it has been treated', concluding that this resulted from artistic jealousy, particularly from the Royal Academy, who would have seen that Romney painted 'a better picture than could be produced by any one of that body'. The truth in this forthright admission of the factious nature of the British artistic environment is borne out in the posthumous criticisms of Romney by academic biographers and commentators. John Hoppner had nothing good to say about *The Tempest*, and Edward Edwards's disparagement of Romney's Boydell paintings for their formation upon 'those eccentric principles which have lately been displayed in painting as well as poetry' mark him out as an aesthetic enemy.<sup>112</sup> Hayley spoke of Romney's great relief when he finished the painting and he says that Romney was 'happily conscious that it was the production of no ordinary painter'.<sup>113</sup> Romney knew as well as anyone that his synoptic view of *The Tempest* broke academic rules, and even the original simpler design much praised by John Romney

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<sup>110</sup> Walpole to Lord Hailes, 21 Sept. 1790, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, XIV: 292.

<sup>111</sup> Darwin's radical philosophy is expressed as a footnote to his poem *The Botanic Garden*, 1789. Quoted in Roe, op.cit. For further discussion of the reception of this painting see Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Subject Pictures* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 258-64. For Lessing, see Rensselaer W. Lee, 'Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting', *Art Bulletin* 22 (1940), 202, 214-17.

<sup>112</sup> Hoppner states that the painting was viewed with 'cold indifference' and was disposed of at the Boydell sale for 'the amazing sum of fifteen guineas, about half the price of the canvas and the frame!', when in actuality it sold for 50 guineas. Review of Hayley's *Life of Romney*, *Quarterly Review* (Nov. 1809), 100. Edward Edwards, *Anecdotes of Painters who have resided or been born in England* (London, 1808), 279. In perpetuity, the negative criticisms of *The Tempest* have been more memorable than the positive ones and have distorted understanding of the reception of the painting. The academy-loyalist and Romney-hater Joseph Farington's unsubstantiated claim that 'Bowyer, is afraid of employing Romney, on acct. of the unpopularity of his Tempest picture in the Shakespeare gallery' has been cited numerous times as the definitive assessment of the paintings reception. *Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. by Garlick and Macintyre (Yale University Press, 1978)I: 215, 17 July, 1794.

<sup>113</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 140-1.



also conflated moments of the play: Miranda, Prospero, and Caliban do not appear together during the storm in Act I: ii as Romney's drawing has proposed. But Romney saw his *Tempest* painting as rational, with nothing extraneous and as obeying an internal truth: he advised Joseph Wright not to include the subsidiary group of drunken revellers into his *Tempest* painting for fear of spoiling the effect.<sup>114</sup>

*The Tempest* would serve as something of a monument to Romney's career as a history painter. In an act full of perceptive symbolism, Martin Archer Shee painted Romney's portrait around 1798 as he took over the lease on the Cavendish Square house from the ailing and retiring Romney, and as a tribute to the older artist, he is posed against his great *Tempest* canvas (fig. 166). A few years later when Shee was rising as a force in the Royal Academy, he produced a didactic poem in couplets, *Rhymes on Art*, which caught the notice of Hayley. Writing to Flaxman in 1805, Hayley called it 'an elegant & animated poem' though 'I should more have admir'd his enthusiastic Veneration of Reynolds, if He had not omitted the name of his great Rival, our Friend Romney, an omission that appears to me the more striking, as the poetical Painter resides, I believe, in the very House so long inhabited & embellish'd by the Pencil of our Friend!'<sup>115</sup> Romney's poetry was his painting: he had dared to appropriate the discourse of original genius that urged modern poets to imitate not Shakespeare's works but the man's method of unfettered creativity, and yet so few had. It was Romney who claimed at the beginning of the Boydell project that he wished to rid himself of the ultimate form of imitative artistry—portraiture—and give his mind up to 'those delightful regions of imagination'.<sup>116</sup> These were the 'eccentric principles' that Edwards saw in Romney's Boydell pictures.

Whether Romney's grasp of Shakespeare owed more to his interactions with actor friends, critics, and poets than to his own 'desultory' reading cannot be known for sure. Reynolds had made scholarly notes on Shakespeare, some of which had been published in both Johnson's 1765 and Edmond Malone's 1780 editions of Shakespeare; but Romney, who Hayley would have us believe had never read two

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<sup>114</sup> Wright to Hayley, 7 Feb. 1789, Inglefield Mss., Derby Local Studies Library.

<sup>115</sup> Hayley to Flaxman 11 Dec. 1805, Flaxman Papers, Fitzwilliam Museum, Ms 91-96/1949.

<sup>116</sup> Romney to Hayley, Feb., 1787, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 123. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 20, summed up the proper method for achieving an originality like Homer's as 'Imitate; but imitate not the *Composition*, but the *Man*'.



acts of Shakespeare in succession, was the better Shakespearean artist. The reluctant Reynolds was induced to paint for the Boydell Gallery only upon receipt of 1,000 guineas; Romney was one of the instigators of the project from the start. Henry Repton's review of the Shakespeare Gallery upon its 1789 opening declaimed the usual platitudes of the many merits of the project for British artists and the nation. But in a less conventional comment, he foresees the contribution of artists in a strikingly new light: 'Through *Shakespeare*'s soul, the Genius of British Poetry poured forth the most wondrous efforts of the *Pen*; and, by the same channel, the Genius of British Painting now displays the choicest Productions of the *Pencil*.'<sup>117</sup> This renegotiation of the rules of painting after poetry allows the same supernatural spirit that inspired Shakespeare to equally inspire artists: painting and poetry are not the sister arts now as much as *weird sisters*. Romney is arguably one of the very few British artists who can lay claim to having fulfilled this promise.

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<sup>117</sup> *The Bee; or a companion to the Shakespeare Gallery: containing a catalogue-raisonné of all the pictures; comments, illustrations, and remarks* (London: T. Cadell, 1789), Preface.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Congenial Spirits: Romney, Milton, and Biographical Illustration*

At the height of their success with the Shakespeare Gallery, the Boydells began to advertise their plan to publish illustrated volumes of John Milton's poetical works. The public were invited to support this project in the same spirit in which the Shakespeare had been 'so liberally encouraged', for 'this National Edition of our *first Heroic Poet* is intended as a companion to that of our *first Dramatic Poet*'.<sup>1</sup> The advertisement also mentions that Volume One will include *Paradise Lost* and a new *Life of Milton* to be written by Mr. Hayley, and the biography would be ornamented with several prints after well-known portraits of Milton taken in his lifetime plus 'a Print representing Milton when blind, dictating the *Paradise Lost* to his daughter writing, from a capital Picture painted by Mr. Romney' (fig. 167). In his *Memoirs*, published posthumously in 1823, Hayley claims that he sacrificed his plans to join John Flaxman in Rome to comply with the Boydell firm's request to write the *Life of Milton* at the urging of Romney, who wished 'the paymasters of the Shakspeare gallery to behave to him with the greater kindness and liberality, concerning the many important pictures, that he himself had thoughts of executing for the adventurous proprietors of that splendid undertaking'.<sup>2</sup> However, in the *Life of Romney*, Hayley had spoken of Romney's involvement with Milton in decidedly less mercenary terms. There he claims that Romney considered religion as the most powerful incentive to artistic exertion and that he worked under the sublime principle that painting was 'an act of devotion'. Hayley adds that had Romney completed the unfinished *Temptation of Christ*, a Miltonic scene which he had strongly urged the artist to paint, it might have 'proved a glorious monument of his devout and laudable ambition'.<sup>3</sup> Hayley also says that he expected to see Romney's 'old age as devout as that of his favorite

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<sup>1</sup> *A Catalogue of the Pictures &c. in the Shakspeare Gallery Pall-Mall, London, 1793*. The advertisement and prospectus of the Milton project by John and Josiah Boydell and their partner, George Nicol, appears at the end of the Shakespeare Gallery catalogue and is signed 15 May 1793.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq.*, ed. by John Johnson (London: Henry Colburn, 1823) I: 429.

<sup>3</sup> William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq.* (London: T. Payne, 1809), 303-4. Hayley had his son transcribe the scene for Romney and later reminded him of it and encourage him to commence a painting. (*Life of Romney*, 230). Hayley later mentioned to Flaxman, when the two were discussing which of Romney's works Blake might engrave for the Romney biography, that the *Temptation* was 'a design which I had pressed him to make the Keystone in the Arch of his Historical Reputation'. Hayley to Flaxman, 18 June 1804, *The Letters of William Blake, with related documents*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1980), 94.



Michael Angelo' and that his devotional feelings were such that had he 'employed his talents entirely on sacred subjects, he would have greatly resembled that amiable and devout painter of Italy, Fra Giovanni Angelico'. But also, 'the tenderness and sublimity of Milton were equally the objects of Romney's admiration, and if his own powers had been fairly and fully exerted, they would have rendered equal justice to each characteristic of that divine poet, to whom he devoted, at this time [1794] many of his private hours'.<sup>4</sup> In the biography of Romney that was intended as a corrective to Hayley's biography, John Romney set aside Anglican orthodoxy to suggest that it was a British poet, Shakespeare, that his father worshipped; John preferred to propose that it was the moving tragedies and bawdy humour of Shakespeare that Romney venerated most, rather than the canonical British epic poem based on the sacred scriptures but written by a dour, regicidal republican. Perhaps more annoying to John than Hayley's suggestion in his biography that Romney revered Milton as much as he did the Bible were the verses in Hayley's *Epistle to Romney* referring to a special affinity between Milton, *Paradise Lost*, and the artist:

Let Milton's self, conductor of thy way,  
Lead thy congenial spirit to portray  
In Colours, like his Verse, sublimely strong,  
The scenes that blaze in his immortal song.

Hayley presents himself in the *Epistle* as a 'conductor' to Romney, too, and leads him to paint Milton's Satan in a more beautiful aspect than he had been hitherto,

In worthier Semblance of infernal Pow'r  
And proudly standing like a stately tow'r,  
While his infernal mandate bids awake  
His Legions, slumbering on the burning Lake.<sup>5</sup>

Hayley had more reasons in the 1790s to link Romney and Milton than ever before. His *Life of Milton* provided the platform to profess his artistic and political views, and Romney's illustrations of Milton's works and of the poet himself, if properly shaped, could only bolster Hayley's cause. Yet Romney's final active decade is distinguished by an increasing desire to paint scenes from literature though in an increasingly personal and poetic manner, his works taking on the sublimity of the National Heroic Poet and the irregularity of the National Dramatic Poet—works that do not simply

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<sup>4</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 211.

<sup>5</sup> *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter* (London T. Payne, 1778), lines 451-4, 463-6.



follow the lead of the poet, be it Shakespeare, Milton, or Hayley, no matter how congenial.

During the 1790s Romney was largely preoccupied with Shakespeare and Milton, often working on illustrations from these two poets simultaneously, as his letter of 8 April 1793 to his brother James in India reveals:

Hayley has been writing the Life of Milton, which is a capital worke—it is to be published with a new edition of Milton by the Boydells—I am painting a scene of the great Bard with his Daughters for a frontispiece for the worke—I have just finished a picture from midsummer nights dream, it is only a description of Titania sitting by the seaside talking to her Indian woman when with child, the child Titania and Oberon quarrelled so much about.<sup>6</sup>

Romney's characterization of his *Indian Woman* from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (fig. 168) as 'only a description' is a subtle but important indicator that Romney was aware that his method of illustration was not entirely textual or orthodox. Neither the Indian woman nor the changeling are among the dramatis personae of the play; rather, they are merely mentioned in conversations between Titania and Oberon. Titania recalled her acquisition of the coveted changeling, when its mother, an Indian votaress to Titania, imitated the sails of a distant ship while her womb was 'then rich with my young squire' (II: i). Furthermore, Romney has taken liberties with logic in depicting alongside the reclining Titania the fairy Puck playing with the changeling—who is at this time, apparently, still *in utero*. Richard Cumberland especially praised the beautiful 'character, scenery, and execution' of this picture, whose 'image is caught from Shakespeare', suggesting that he, too, recognized this scene as a creative synopsis only loosely inspired by the play, as probably did the painting's purchaser, William Beckford.<sup>7</sup> Romney used the play as a springboard for other summary treatments of the story, such as *Titania, Puck, and the Changeling*, once owned by Emma Hamilton and probably a product of her 1791 trip

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<sup>6</sup> National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum Ms. L1957/942:1-1. This letter is reproduced and discussed fully in my 'Tuching the Times too nearly: George Romney in 1793', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 10 (2005), 10-18. Even earlier, in late 1791, when Romney first mentioned to Hayley that he was working on a Milton composition, he also produced a portrait of Hayley's son as Puck, or Robin-Goodfellow, from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 167-8.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney', *European Magazine* (June 1803), 422. John Romney also thought this 'one of the most exquisite of Mr. Romney's pictures' and was proud that it sold for 300 guineas. He cites Act II, Scene ii, presumably as there takes place the reclining of Titania among her fairies. Just as occurred with Romney's *Tempest*, which also conflated various moments of a play, there is an ambiguity over which scene exactly is represented. *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830), 234.



to London (fig. 169); the highly elegiac *Titania and her Fairies* (fig. 170); a commission from Hayley's neighbour Lord Egremont, a painting of his family as *Titania and her Fairies shooting at Bats* (Petworth); and several unfinished *Titania Reposing* canvases.<sup>8</sup>

There is nothing to suggest (*pace* Hayley) that these Shakespearean subjects were intended for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery. Romney, along with other artists, including Sir Joshua Reynolds, Henry Fuseli, and Joseph Wright of Derby, had cause to be dissatisfied regarding payment from the Boydells, and Hayley, on behalf of Romney and Wright at least, acted as an ameliorating agent.<sup>9</sup> Nor is there reason to presume that Romney wished to provide all the illustrations for the edition of Milton's works—Richard Westall was named as illustrator in the first Boydell Milton announcement of 1793 and some of his designs from *Paradise Lost* were included among that year's Shakespeare Gallery exhibits. In painting *Milton and his Daughters* Romney did not conduct himself as a book illustrator, producing a small drawing or painting of dimensions considered for easy transfer to the page, but rather created a grand, large-scale, exhibitable painting eventually sold to Samuel Whitbread on the advice of Charles James Fox, though the Boydells paid Romney 50 guineas for the rights to engrave it for Volume One of the *Poetical Works*. Several years after the Shakespeare and Milton projects, John Boydell thanked Hayley for his role as go-between and 'peace-maker' with a gift of the eighteen prints after Romney's paintings that the firm had published over the years, although Hayley suspected Boydell may have also wished 'to be mentioned with tenderness in a Life of Romney, as there was

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<sup>8</sup> John Romney recalls 'various unfinished pictures representing Titania under different circumstances, and in different attitudes; one of which, a beautiful naked figure, I regret much that I did not reserve from the [1807 Christie's] sale. It was, in truth, a very fairy. It represented her reposing in her bower, and in a state of somnolency; and, if I remember rightly, Bottom sleeping by her side. All these except one, were, I believe, bought by artists; and have, I have no doubt, contributed essentially to improve the taste of the succeeding generation of painters'. *Memoirs of Romney*, 234.

<sup>9</sup> The artist's son claims that, although Romney had donated his *Shakespeare and the Passions* to the Gallery free of charge as a gesture of goodwill, payment for other paintings was much delayed. In addition, Romney became disillusioned with the tokenism of employing the major artists initially and then turning the bulk of the work over to less expensive and presumably inferior artists. John says that despite Romney having been the instigator of the project, 'his enthusiasm, however, soon began to cool when he discovered that the Boydells were making a commercial speculation of it, which was in fact the cause of its failure'. *Memoirs of Romney*, 152. Romney was doubtless as perturbed as was his son that Reynolds was promised 1,000 guineas—500 up-front—for his *Macbeth*, compared to his late-arriving 600 gs. for the *Tempest*, and similarly Wright perceived a slight in receiving a lesser payment than other artists. For the rancorous letters between Wright and John Boydell see William Bemrose *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright, A.R.A.* (London and Derby, 1885), 97-100. For Hayley's letter written on behalf of Wright see Bemrose Extra-illustrated, Derby Museum and Art Gallery.



some contention between Him & the painter in which I was the ambassador of my friend....<sup>10</sup> Hayley reveals his philosophy on the nature of the artistic temperament and his position as an advisor more clearly in his letter to Boydell, thanking him for the prints and expressing admiration for his accomplishments, though empathizing on the ordeals of the past: 'To conduct so arduous a business thro many years of unfavourable Seasons & to negotiate with a multitude of persons subject to all the varieties of Irritability belonging to Genius & Emulation without some errors & Dissentions would be too much to be expected for any human Being.'<sup>11</sup>

Evidence argues that Hayley's activities as an advisor became more ambitious in the 1790s, at a time when this was perhaps least required by Romney, who was still carrying on his portraiture business while also attending to his designs from fancy and even dreaming up, as he told his son, 'a sistem of original subjects, morel, and my own—and I think one of the grandest that has been thought of—but nobody know of it— Hence it is my view to wrap myself into retirement, and pursue these plans, as I begin to feel I cannot bear trouble of any kind—'.<sup>12</sup> Romney, like Hayley, had no love for the company of the *ton* or the satire that flowed from sophisticated sets, yet both, despite their relatively retired lifestyles, became the topic of the wits in verse and in gossip. In the early 1790s a rhyme circulated mocking the kind of pompous sonnet exchange in which Hayley indulged, particularly as seen in his relationship with Anna Seward:

*Miss S:* Prince of Poets, England's glory,  
Mr. Hayley, *that* is you!  
*Mr. H:* Ma'am, you carry all before you,  
Trust me, Lichfield Swan, you do,  
*Miss S:* In epic, elegy or sonnet,  
Mr. Hayley, you're divine!  
*Mr. H:* Madam, take my word upon it,  
You yourself are all the Nine!<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hayley to Flaxman, 18 June 1804, *Letters of William Blake*, 94. Hayley does not elaborate on the nature of the contention but he does say that he had 'once made peace between them by lending the Alderman my picture of Sensibility to be Engrav'd—His unexpected present to me verifies, you see, that holy maxim "Blessed are the peace-makers"'.  
<sup>11</sup> Hayley to John Boydell, 3 June 1804, Hayley papers XI, Fitzwilliam Museum.  
<sup>12</sup> Letter Romney to John Romney, 15 March 1794, NAL Ms. L.1948/4031/3. John Romney prints a portion of this letter, spelling improved, in *Memoirs of Romney*, 244.  
<sup>13</sup> Morchard Bishop (*Blake's Hayley*, London, 1951, p.70) cites *The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott*, 1930, for the verses and for the authority that Dr. Mansel, Bishop of Bristol, was the author. A version of the rhyme was recorded in Joseph Farington's diary, where he supposes the author was an adversary of Hayley's, George Steevens. *Diary of Joseph Farington* ed. by Kenneth Garlick and Angus MacIntyre (Yale University Press, 1979) IV:107-8, 4 Dec. 1793.



As a frequent subject of Hayley's verse, Romney had become guilty-by-association.

*The Times* reported 10 August 1790 that

Romney, the painter, is gone into Sussex, to pay his annual visit to Hayley the poet, where they will pass the remainder of the summer in offering incense to each other's vanity. According to the former, the latter is superior to Homer; and, the words of the latter, the former is superior to Raphael. It is no wonder these Gentlemen are so affectionately satisfied with each other.

Romney had also, perhaps, become too associated with Hayley's failures on the London stage—not only was he seated in the upper boxes with Hayley on the opening night of ill-received plays, but the press reported of Hayley's pre-opening readings conducted at Romney's house and that the artist had contributed to the scenography for particular plays. *The Times* (30 January 1790) referred to Hayley's tragedy *Eudora* as 'a strange jumble of absurdities' and remarked that his plays and 'more fortunate literary productions, have rendered him so frequently the hitherto unobtruding subject of censure and eulogium'. Or, as Hayley would have it in his *Memoirs*, all of his dramatic compositions 'appeared to have arisen under the influence of unfavourable stars'.<sup>14</sup> These ill-starred offerings did not escape the notice of Peter Pindar, who in his *Elegy to Apollo* called Hayley 'the man of words, of stilt-supported phrase':

So *lofty*, yet in ware so *humbly* dealing!  
So classically tasteless! Big with nought!  
So tender, yet so destitute of feeling!  
So sentimental too, without a thought!<sup>15</sup>

The poem was accompanied by a caricature of John Nichols, the editor of *Gentleman's Magazine*, and Hayley, who is seen in his stilted climb towards the Temple of Fame, with a copy of *Eudora* dangling from his coat-tails (fig. 171).

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<sup>14</sup> *Memoirs of Hayley* I: 409. *The Oracle* had reported 8 Dec. 1789 that 'Hayley's Tragedy [*Eudora*], of so high promise, is forthcoming with the grandest aid that genius & skill, supported by friendship, can afford—for Romney designs the garments, &, to the just preparations of powerful effects, makes up the venerable face of the Hero....' Hayley recalls that he and Romney were 'so disgusted with the wretched manner, in which some important parts of the scenical apparatus were rendered ridiculous, that Hayley determined to withdraw his drama from the theatre immediately'. Hayley implies that this play and *Marcella*, another in which Romney was present at opening night, were the victims of a conspiracy against his works on the part of the theatre managers. *Memoirs* I: 394-409.

<sup>15</sup> *A Benevolent epistle to Sylvanus Urban, Master John Nichols, Printer... Not Forgetting Master William Hayley: To Which is Added An Elegy to Apollo... By Peter Pindar, Esq.* (London: G. Kearsley, 1790), 26.



If Hayley was experiencing anxiety over his creative output and reception, telling Cowper in 1792 that his 'shining time' was over,<sup>16</sup> he compensated by involving himself in the creativity of successful friends—often with a view towards beneficial collaborations. He wrote to Flaxman in Rome 31 December 1791 telling him of his recent solicitation to write a Milton biography for Boydell and encouraging him to execute some Miltonic sketches as 'I may be able, by the Influence I have with the editors of this publication, to introduce your design; which may contribute to your renown as an artist, & to your emolument'.<sup>17</sup> He wrote to Rome again five months later of the possibility of using Flaxman's drawings from Dante, an author that Hayley and Cowper were considering translating, in a 'complete & magnificent English Dante embellish'd by our confederate Labours'.<sup>18</sup> And the next year Hayley is stirring Cowper to produce a new edition of his Homer translations with illustrations by Flaxman.<sup>19</sup> Hayley was in 1793 also advising William Hodges on his works and attempted to involve Hodges and himself in a 'quadruple alliance' and produce a 'confederate work' with Cowper and Romney.<sup>20</sup> Hayley was probably trying to hitch himself and Hodges onto the pre-existing ideas for an *Ages of Man* series that both Cowper and Romney had been independently ruminating. Cowper had been considering since 1791 beginning a poem *The Four Ages of Man*, planned for his first period of leisure, but Hayley began to agitate for it as a collaboration around May 1793. Cowper attempted to deter Hayley, telling him, 'I know myself too well not to know that I am nobody in verse, unless in a corner, and alone, and unconnected in my operations', but a week later Hayley had won him over, and Cowper was now 'delighted with your projected quadruple alliance' and promised to devote his powers to 'the production of my quota, the Four Ages'. The nature of Hayley's inducement becomes clear when Cowper further remarks that the plan is 'most opportune, as any

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<sup>16</sup> See Bishop, *Blake's Hayley*, 148. Cowper writes to Hayley 1 May 1792, reassuring him that at 47 he still had a chance to revive and that he himself suffered from the same worries, only 'I was older than you are when I began to glitter'. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford University Press, 1984) IV: 68.

<sup>17</sup> Hayley papers, IX, Fitzwilliam Museum.

<sup>18</sup> Hayley, from Cowper's home, Weston Underwood, to Nancy Flaxman, Rome, 25 May 1792, Hayley papers IX, Fitzwilliam Museum.

<sup>19</sup> William Cowper to General Cowper, 10 Sept. 1793, *Letters of Cowper*, IV: 394.

<sup>20</sup> There is much discussion of this in 1793 in the letters of Hayley to Romney, Hodges, and Cowper, although Hayley appears to be sparing with the details—Romney did not know what the exact project was, and Cowper was not aware of who the intended artists were. See Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 198-201; *Letters of Cowper* IV: 358, 364. An undated letter from Hayley to Hodges, Hayley papers IX, Fitzwilliam Museum, expresses his disappointment that 'a cold revolution' seems to have taken place in Hodges's mind concerning the collaboration 'that we once talked of with such reciprocal fervour and that you now mention no more'.



project must needs be that has so direct a tendency to put money in the pocket of one so likely to want it'.<sup>21</sup>

John Romney believed that the system of original moral subjects that his father had mentioned in a letter referred to the *Ages of Man*.<sup>22</sup> Romney's interest in the subject may have begun around the time he painted the figure of the melancholy Jaques for Hodges's *As You Like It* illustration exhibited in the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, 1789. But Jaques's well-known soliloquy (II: vii) on the stages of life as the seven acts of a play provided Romney only with a starting point, for as Hayley recognized, his goal was not to limit himself to Shakespeare's text:

Romney was willing to take a leading idea from one of our great poets, but he had an excursive vigour and richness of fancy, that made him delight in adding images of his own creation to those, that were furnished by the author, from whom he caught the ground work of his intended composition. For example, in a picture that he began of the first age, he did not represent the Infant 'Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.' But on the bosom of its reclining mother, whose couch is surrounded by several attendants, and among them her husband, a young man of florid health in the habiliments of a hunter, who seems eager to give a kiss of benediction to his wife and child before he sets forth for the chace.<sup>23</sup>

Whether or not these subjects would have resulted in a series of paintings had they been set to Cowper's and Hayley's poetry is a moot point as nothing came of the plan, but Romney did produce several preliminary designs for the stages, especially the first, the *Birth of Man* (fig. 172), although they appear little like the more-finished design that Hayley described. The similarity between the drawings of this subject and *Howard Visiting a Prison* designs (fig. 173) is not surprising; he was concurrently working on both of these subjects along with Miltonic and Shakespearean themes continuously during the first half of the 1790s, as his correspondence and sketchbooks testify.<sup>24</sup> Romney's inclination towards conflating scenes and eliding subjects was

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<sup>21</sup> See *Letters of Cowper*, IV: 337, 358, 364, letters of 16 May, 29 June, 7 July 1793.

<sup>22</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 244.

<sup>23</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 208-9. Hayley acknowledges that no finished paintings were produced.

<sup>24</sup> Hayley's annotated list of Romney's letters to him in the British Museum (Add. Mss. 30805) is very useful for tracking the paintings and drawings around this time. For 1793: Feb 16, 'The prison scene Hint for a picture'; March 26, 'Thanks for advice concerning his Picture of Milton—and to Tom for a transcript from Milton'; April 22, 'Thanks for Hints relating to his Milton and for new pictures'; Dec. 12, 'his thoughts of paintings, the 7 ages in 12 pictures. And in 1794: Jan 10, 'His Ophelia near finished—His seven ages advancing in Design, resolves to paint the first and last very soon—asks my advice on the mode of treating them'; Feb 5, 'of the Boydells—and his picture of Milton. His plans of art—the seven ages and the visions of Adam—His designs made and commended—more plans from Milton'; Sept 13, 'he has begun the first stage of Man—and his great Cartoon from Milton and a



fully developed at this time, and plenty of shared motifs are seen whether among subjects thematically related in an obvious way or not. The *Birth of Man* drawings share scribbly, harsh strokes with many of the *Howard* drawings, suggesting a similar kind of turmoil: it has been suggested that the *Birth of Man*, so reminiscent of Romney's many classicizing death-of scenes, does in fact suggest death-in-childbirth, which underscores the cycle-of-life theme.<sup>25</sup> And Romney is certainly still relying on his favoured old motif, the tragic, frieze-like deathbed.

Romney's discussions of his many plans for grand paintings grouped in series around this time begin to sound impracticable, and one gets the sense that he was overloaded with ideas, Hayley feeding him ever more. Hayley encouraged other projects then in train, such as the setting up of an academy for young painters and the purchase of land, which were eventually realised as the house and 'academy' in Hampstead.<sup>26</sup> Romney responds to some un-named new proposal of Hayley's, writing to him 15 February 1794 that 'I like your new plan, but it would be a work of many years, and much depends on my health and spirits'. Romney says that he is already working on the *Seven Ages* as well as *Paradise Lost* scenes of Adam and Eve, Satan, and the Flood, all of which existed already on paper and all grand.<sup>27</sup> Then, as is common in his letters at this time, Romney implores his correspondent to remain silent about his

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prison scene'.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2002), 225. For Patricia Jaffé these drawings epitomize Romney's gloomy outlook; their resemblance to the Howard prison scenes signify his morbid philosophy regarding the beginnings of a human life. Jaffé can confirm that these drawings, albeit such a departure from Hayley's description, are meant to represent the *Birth of Man* as the type is seen in an undated sketchbook, inscribed 'Birth of Man', which has been dismembered but recombined in another album. *Drawings By George Romney from the Fitzwilliam Museum* (Cambridge 1977), 74. In other cases confusion has arisen over *Birth of Man* drawings due to their atypical appearance: several entered the Folger Shakespeare Library as *The Birth of Shakespeare*.

<sup>26</sup> Hayley had Flaxman in Rome purchase for him casts of the best classical statuary that could be obtained, giving Flaxman £100 and leaving to his discretion which works to buy. See letter from Flaxman in Rome to Romney, 12 Sept 1792, Osborn Mss. 5283, Beinecke Library, Yale University. The casts had arrived by Jan. 1793 and Romney was pleased, both 'for the choice, and the perfection of the casts. I shall have one of the finest Museums in London for antique sculpture'. Hayley (*Life of Romney*, 197). Hayley (195-6) cites a letter of 10 Nov. 1792 as the first in which Romney mentions negotiations of the purchase of land and building a painting room: 'he often pleased himself with an idea of forming a domestic academy, and of proving a beneficent foster-father to juvenile artists'. Although he never founded a formal academy at Cavendish Square or later at the Hampstead house, he was known to have lit the cast room at night for his own and for intimates' enjoyment and drawing. See Flaxman's account in Hayley, 311. For the building of the Hampstead house begun after 1796, see Jean Wallis, 'Romney's House on Holly Bush Hill in Hampstead', *Transactions of the Romney Society* 10 (2005): 19-31. Romney's drawings of ground-plans and elevations are common in the sketchbooks of the 1790s; see for example Abbot Hall, Stanford University, Fitzwilliam Museum, and Yale Center for British Art sketchbooks.

<sup>27</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 212.



projected works. Although this is usually taken as a sign of Romney's increasing mental frailty, there is another reason that merits consideration as well: he may have wished to retain the novelty of his original designs without worry of usurpation and competition in the close-knit London art world. Romney probably would have agreed with Henry Fuseli that the only two ways for a British artist to get ahead was to do as Benjamin West and either paint for the king or 'meditate a Scheme of Your own'. Fuseli had little respect for West's work but had to envy his long, secure connection with George III and his clever strategies for marketing prints: 'In imitation of So great a Man, I am determined to lay, hatch and Crack an egg *for myself* too—if I can. What it Shall be—I am not yet ready to tell with Certainty—but the Sum of it is, a Series of Pictures for *Exhibition*, Such as Boydells and Macklins.'<sup>28</sup> Fuseli would in the mid-1790s consider painting a series based on Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche*, something Romney had worked on twenty years previously, as well as 'Shakespeares Seven Stages of Life from *As You Like it*, I have Likewise thought on and painted the *Infant* but not "Spewing in the Nurses Lap"'.<sup>29</sup> Fuseli's ability to seize on interesting subjects and seemingly effortlessly churn out finished paintings must have seemed a particular threat to Romney, and more than once Fuseli would produce paintings of subjects that Romney had pioneered, including *The Infant Shakespeare Between Comedy and Tragedy* (c. 1805) and *Milton Dictating to his Daughter* (1794).<sup>30</sup>

Romney and Fuseli were bound to consider each other rivals: the two separate Milton projects in which they respectively became involved were posited as such in the press. Fuseli had by August 1791 drawn up a plan with the support of his friend the book publisher Joseph Johnson to illustrate a new edition of Milton's works, Cowper to translate the Italian and Latin poems and edit and annotate all of the text. By September Cowper had agreed to contribute to 'a Milton that is to rival, and if possible to exceed in splendour Boydell's Shakespeare', and in October Romney was

<sup>28</sup> Fuseli to William Roscoe, 17 Aug. 1790, *The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli*, ed. by David H. Weinglass (New York: Krauss International Publications, 1982), 60.

<sup>29</sup> Fuseli to Roscoe, 14 Aug. 1795, *Letters of Fuseli*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> See D.H. Weinglass, *Preliminary Reumbered and Revised Fuseli Catalogue Raisonné* (Gert Schiff's 'Johann Heinrich Füssli', 1973), 1991, IV: cats. 1099, 1481. Romney would have learned in his earliest years in London that original subjects were soon appropriated by ambitious artists: his *Death of General Wolfe* may have won some praise in 1763 but it was West's version that became iconic and brought a fortune through prints to West and Boydell.



writing to Hayley of the newly-advertised plan.<sup>31</sup> The Boydells were not to be outdone and had retained Hayley to write the biography of Milton for their own edition of *Poetical Works* by the end of 1791. Yet a published report stating that he and Cowper were now hostile competitors concerned Hayley enough to write an introductory letter in February 1792 to the reclusive poet in Weston Underwood accompanied by a sonnet, *On Hearing That Our Names Had Been Idly Mentioned in a Newspaper, as Competitors in a Life of Milton*. Cowper—who had never intended to write a biography of Milton, only translate and edit—quickly succumbed to Hayley's overtures and entered into a close correspondence with his new brother-bard, although he decided against publishing Hayley's flattering sonnet, for 'if I publish his Compliment to me, I shall feel myself bound to answer it with another to him, which he will in his turn hold it necessary to publish also, and thus we shall coax and wheedle each other in rhyme to the annoyance of all discrete persons and to our own utter confusion'.<sup>32</sup> Hayley enthused to Romney that he had 'found the thing I most wanted in the world, a *congenial poetical Spirit* willing to join with me in the most social and friendly Cultivation of an art, dear to us both, & particularly dear to us as the cement of Friendship'.<sup>33</sup> Hayley and Cowper were particularly attached to each other and to their Miltonic works by a desire to 'vindicate Milton from the malignant asperity' that Samuel Johnson had expressed in his *Lives of the Poets*, 1779.<sup>34</sup> Johnson had cast a sceptical eye over the previous eulogistic accounts of the seventeenth-century writer and presented him as an uneven poet and a flawed human being. That Johnson's assessment of Milton owed something to political difference was widely perceived and widely censured: Robert Potter thought 'the spirit of party' infused the Tory Johnson's works and was often 'disagreeable, but in the Life of Milton it is disgusting'. Potter is quick to point out that he cannot agree with nor defend the dangerous principles of Milton's republicanism; still, he believes that

<sup>31</sup> See *Letters of Fuseli*, Joseph Johnson to Cowper 22 Aug. 1791, Cowper to Samuel Rose 14 Sept. 1791, 65, 71. Hayley papers, British Library Mss. 30805, Hayley lists a letter from Romney October 1791, 'mention of Cowper engaged in Fuseli's Milton...' Romney was clearly already working on Miltonic designs as another letter, dated 31 October, mentions 'his grand composition for Milton'.

<sup>32</sup> Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 5 April 1792, *Letters of Cowper* IV: 47.

<sup>33</sup> Hayley, from Weston Underwood, to Romney, May 1792, Hayley papers, British Library, Mss. 57772. Cowper evidently felt the same, as he related to Hayley a dream he had had in which Milton appeared to him and commended the work of the two living poets. Cowper to Hayley, 24 Feb. 1793, *Letters of Cowper* IV: 296.

<sup>34</sup> *Memoirs of Hayley* I: 425.



literary criticism should be above political partiality.<sup>35</sup> Another author in Romney's circle, Anna Seward, was no more a radical than was Potter but she, too, was incensed at the life of Milton produced by Johnson—'the greatest enemy that poetic science ever had'.<sup>36</sup> Like Potter and Seward, Cowper's anger stemmed from both the political and critical angle of Johnson's account of Milton. Cowper's recent great project had been the rendering of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into blank verse as a riposte to the flowery couplets of Pope's long-popular translation. In addition, his acclaimed poem *The Task* had been constructed without rhyme, striking a blow for the modern English vernacular and poetic freedom. Johnson, however, had declared of Milton's blank verse in *Paradise Lost* that it was a metre suited to languages more melodious than English, and as he was no rhymers, Milton was 'to be admired rather than imitated'.<sup>37</sup> Cowper was indignant over the great poet's besmirched reputation, and he put his faith in Hayley's biography, predicting, 'you will do him justice, and under your hands his laurels will grow again'.<sup>38</sup>

Cowper was not alone in judging Hayley the appropriate biographer; the Boydells must have known that he had been attempting to vindicate Milton for some time. As well as in the *Epistle to Romney*, Hayley had spoken glowingly of Milton in his *Essay on Epic Poetry*, 1782, where he is 'that English, self-dependant soul / Born with such energy as mocks controul' (Epistle I: 335). In addition, in an essay on Johnson Hayley argues that the critic had not understood the tenderness of Milton's heart, which was 'exquisitely displayed' in Eve's speech in *Paradise Lost* Book IX, where,

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Potter, *An Inquiry into some passages in Dr Johnson's Lives of the Poets: particularly his observations on lyric poetry and the odes of Gray*. (London: J. Dodsley, 1783), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Seward to H. Cary, 1 July 1788, *The Letters of Anna Seward*, ed. by A. Constable (Edinburgh, 1811) II: 145

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill (Hildesheim, 1968, first ed. Oxford, 1905) I: 190. Milton's preface to *Paradise Lost* explains the verse of the poem, arguing that rhyme is the marker of lame poetry, 'an invention of a barbarous age'. Johnson argues the opposite in the Milton biography. For Milton as a poetic and spiritual influence on Cowper see Dustin Griffin, 'Cowper, Milton, and the recovery of Paradise', *Essays in Criticism* 31 (1981): 115-26.

<sup>38</sup> Cowper to Hayley, 1 May 1792, *Letters of Cowper* IV: 68. See also his letter of 31 Oct. 1779 to William Unwin (*Letters* I: 307), where he angrily disputes Johnson's theories on English and blank verse. James King argues that Cowper's personal and political dislike of Johnson and his treatment of Milton, which is seen in his annotated copy of *Lives of the Poets*, only increased under the influence of his new friend Hayley. 'Cowper, Hayley, and Samuel Johnson's "Republican" Milton', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 17 (1987): 229-38.



having eaten the forbidden fruit she resolves that Adam must share in her fate, for 'So dear I love him, that with him all deaths / I could endure, without him live no life'.<sup>39</sup> The *Monthly Review* remarked that the public would thank the Boydells for engaging Hayley to write a new life of Milton and that those 'who cherish with peculiar regard the remembrance of Milton as a *patriot*, as well as a *poet*, will rejoice in the prospect of his recovering, from the justice of a biographer congenial with him in manly and liberal sentiments, that moral lustre of character which it was so manifestly the aim of his last prejudiced, though able, biographer to sully and obscure'.<sup>40</sup> Hayley lost no time in beginning his research on the Milton project, eliciting the assistance of friends who were willing to trawl through the libraries of Oxford, Paris, and Rome, and borrowing books from contacts in England and overseas. He requested a copy of the rare *Adamo* of Andreini, possibly Milton's source for *Paradise Lost*, from George Nicol, the Boydells' partner and the King's bookseller, suggesting that he search for it in the Royal library.<sup>41</sup> Neither was Hayley reticent in spurring Cowper to progress with his own Miltonic work—Hayley visited his new bosom friend in Weston Underwood in May, and in August, Cowper came down to Eartham for work and pleasure.

Romney arrived at Eartham 11 August 1792 for his annual visit and found Hayley, Cowper, and Charlotte Smith all busily working on their respective literary projects. Romney later wrote to his son of their activities, which included translating the

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<sup>39</sup> *Two Dialogues; containing a Comparative View of the Lives, Characters, and Writings of Philip, the late Earl of Chesterfield and Dr. Samuel Johnson*. (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 119. Hayley says of the passage Bk. IX: 795-833 in which Eve revels in her new strength and wisdom but vows to prevent a chaste and obedient Adam of eternal life remarrying after her death that 'our divine poet caught the true tone of female nature, in those simple, beautiful and pathetic lines'.

<sup>40</sup> Review of *The Poetical Works of John Milton, with a Life of the Author* by William Hayley, *Monthly Review* (Feb. 1795), 122.

<sup>41</sup> James Stanier Clarke to George Nicol, 5 Feb. 1792, Hayley Papers, XXIV, Fitzwilliam Museum. The Hayley Papers contain many letters for the years 1792-3 pertaining to Hayley's writing of his *Life of Milton* and offer proof of his diligent and thorough research into his subject. His friends in Rome, Flaxman and Joseph Cooper Walker, traced Milton's steps while there for Hayley and sent whatever intelligence they could find. Hayley kept the Boydell firm apprised of his progress, writing to George Nicol 2 Aug. 1792 of a 'rich cargo of Miltoniana' that he was devouring and telling him that 'Winds of all the Corners blow me Tidings of Milton, or at least the sound of his name—I have just receiv'd Letters concerning Him from Italy & France—there is nothing to be found for us in the Vatican, or the great Library at Paris—but it is in some degree satisfactory to know, there is nothing in Repositories, that ought to be examined ... a literary friend learning of my Enquiries at Rome writes me word he will soon procure for me a copy of Milton given by Swift to Stella, with various remarks written for this celebrated Lady by her more celebrated Preceptor. Pray assure yr very kind Friend the liberal Isaac [Reed] of Literature, who lends Books, & very rare books, so lavishly, I am charm'd with his generous good nature, & will treat his curiosities with a much tender care, as if they were living daughters of Milton'.



*Adamo*, 'an Italian play on the subject of Satan [*sic*] about twenty lines was the number every day', and spoke admiringly of their industry:

Mr. Cowper is a most excellent man, he has translated Milton's Latin Poems and I suppose very well—Hayley is writing the Life of Milton so you must suppose we were deep in Milton, every thing belonging to him were collected together and some part of those works read every day. Mrs. Smith is writing another Novel which I think as far as it is advanced is very good. She began it while I was there and finished one volume—she writes a Chapter every day and was read every night without wanting any corrections. I think her a woman of astonishing powers.<sup>42</sup>

For his part, Romney worked on his *Milton and his Daughters* composition and *Paradise Lost* scenes, presumably with the full encouragement of Hayley and Cowper. Several undated loose drawings show that Romney was interested in a variety of *Paradise Lost* subjects, such as the meeting at the portals of Hell between the devil, his daughter, and their offspring from Book II, *Satan, Sin, and Death* (fig. 174) and the discovery by the guardian angels of Satan at the ear of Eve, *Satan Starting at the Touch of Ithuriel's Spear* from Book IV (fig. 175) but several sketchbooks that are dated more firmly to this period better demonstrate Romney's thought processes as he assimilated all the unfolding Milton scholarship at Earham.<sup>43</sup> From page to page, figures and motifs weave in and out of different subjects in the sketchbook inscribed in Romney's hand 'August 92 Milton Flood' in the Fitzwilliam Museum. The book, as indicated on its cover, is occupied with Adam's vision in Book XI of the catastrophic event that will result from his and Eve's sin: the distressed and collapsing characters of *The Flood* become the writhing figures of a Howard lazaretto scene (fig. 176); the group reverts to a *Flood* composition; and in a remarkable transition, a *Flood* scene begins to acquire the essence of a *Satan and the Fall of the Rebel Angels* study—the same slumped, supported figures from the other groups are present, but the figure of strength gains even more power here and has raised his arm, not out of despair but in defiance. An interspersed page of single figure studies isolates these integral figures (fig. 177). A British Museum sketchbook used around the same time also exhibits a melding of subjects—Lady Macbeth

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<sup>42</sup> Romney to John Romney, 10 Oct. 1792, Romney Papers, Fitzwilliam Museum.

<sup>43</sup> Romney had been interested in Milton long before he met Hayley, of course, and had drawn *Satan Starting at the Touch of Ithuriel's Spear* in Rome (Barrow sketchbook). As argued in previous chapters, Romney was interested in Thomas Gray's ekphrasis of imaginary paintings, and one subject mentioned (ideally to have been painted by Correggio) is 'Ithuriel and Zephon entering the bower of Adam and Eve; they sleeping, the light to proceed from the Angels'. *The Works of Thomas Gray*, ed. by Edward Grosse (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1885) III: 194.



imploing her husband evolves into Adam and Eve after the Fall; she beseeching and he resisting. Macbeth, himself, in these pages is almost indistinguishable from the rebelling figure with raised arm seen in the Fitzwilliam sketchbook and elsewhere. And again, these scenes are juxtaposed with Howard prison scenes.<sup>44</sup> Romney had been responding to the suggestions from Hayley in this period for prison scenes to illustrate Howard's inspections but in the context of the contemporary interest in Milton, the scene of Adam's vision of the future horrors in the Lazar House (*Paradise Lost* Book XI) offers great thematic congruence here. Although Romney had always freely transferred motifs and quotations throughout his subject-matter, the drawings of the 1790s, concentrated as they are in intense, focused groups, and conveying a consistent mood of anguish, suggest a conception of these subjects as related in a fundamental way, a more knowing and sophisticated utilization of allusion than was applied in his earlier years.

It would be pointless to deny that the current political climate informs the drawings that Romney was making around this time. During his stay at Earham news came in of the latest sinister developments in the French Revolution: the apprehending of the royals at the Tuileries Palace in Paris and the killing of their guards occurred as Romney travelled down to Sussex 10 August; a month later during the more widespread September Massacres, those suspected of counter-revolutionary sympathies were culled. Romney and Hayley would have taken especial interest in these events as they had undertaken a three-week trip to Paris two years previously and still had several friends living there, among them Rev. John Warner, chaplain to the English ambassador.<sup>45</sup> At that point, a year after the storming of the Bastille but before the Reign of Terror was in action, Hayley says that they were impressed with France and shared a 'hope so magnificent in promises of good to mankind...unconscious that the splendid vision was destined to sink in the most

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<sup>44</sup> BM 1921, 07141.1 This sketchbook is inscribed and dated twice: firstly, 'Midsummer Nights Dream/ Milton/July 22 1790' and again, 'Milton July 1792', so it was probably taken on the summer trip down to Earham. The same cast of characters fill the sketchbook in the Huntington Library inscribed by Romney 'October 1792' (66.14) and the Abbot Hall sketchbook he inscribed 'August 6 1793'.

<sup>45</sup> Hayley tells in his *Memoirs* (I: 407-8) of his intention of finding a French governess for his young son; he and Romney also befriended Madame de Genlis, governess to the children of the Duc d'Orléans, who was to visit them in London in 1792. The Romney papers in the National Art Library contain several scurrilous letters from Hayley to Romney on the topic of Thelassie, a French dancer that Romney became attached to around this time and who apparently lived at Cavendish Sq. for a few years. In his manuscript catalogue of the letters he had received from Romney (British Library, Add. Mss. 30805) Hayley lists several that refer to Romney's 'French model' or 'foreign friend'.



execrable horrors of barbarity and blood'.<sup>46</sup> They were not alone among the British in imagining at that early stage of the Revolution that France might form a more democratic government, such as the English-style constitutional monarchy so treasured by Whigs. But the news reports in the late summer of 1792 put paid to these idealistic expectations. Couched in the most alarmist and, no doubt, exaggerated language, the English newspapers spared no gore in relaying accounts of heads on spikes and even cannibalism.<sup>47</sup> Cowper, who declared himself a staunch Whig in favour of parliamentary reform and the abolition of slavery though no revolutionary, presumed to speak for all of those gathered at Earham while writing to a friend:

We are here all of one mind respecting the cause in which the Parisians are engaged; wish them a free people, and as happy as they can wish themselves. But their conduct has not always pleased us: we are shocked at their sanguinary proceedings, and begin to fear, myself in particular, that they will prove themselves unworthy, because incapable of enjoying it, of the inestimable blessings of liberty. My daily toast is, Sobriety and Freedom to the French; for they seem as destitute of the former, as they are eager to secure the latter.<sup>48</sup>

Romney confesses in his correspondence to feeling disturbed; once back in London he wrote to Hayley that the dreadful news from Paris of the slaughter of the priests had him so 'agitated with the situation of that Poor country' that he was not able to work.<sup>49</sup> In a letter to his son in October he said that 'the extraordinary events that have succeeded each other for the last three months past has interested and astonished the world in a very high degree: the present moment is an epock to Liberty such has never happened before since the creation—I confess the sublimity of it taking it together has interested and agitated me much'.<sup>50</sup> Six months later, Louis XVI having been executed and war now declared on England, Romney wrote with a shaking hand to his brother in India 8 April 1793 relaying the latest newspapers' accounts of European events.<sup>51</sup> Romney possibly may have had a minor stroke as early as this but

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<sup>46</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 143.

<sup>47</sup> See *The Times*, 17 Aug., 12 Sept. 1792.

<sup>48</sup> Cowper to Catharina Courtenay, 10 September 1792, *Letters of Cowper* IV:191

<sup>49</sup> Romney to Hayley, 8 Sept. 1792, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 184.

<sup>50</sup> Romney to John Romney, 10 October 1792, Romney Papers, Fitzwilliam Museum. This letter appears in *Memoirs of Romney* (226) but John edited out this particular passage.

<sup>51</sup> Romney to James Romney, 8 April 1793, National Art Library, Ms. L1957/942/1/1. Romney apparently avidly read—and collected—newspapers: in 1795 he intended to send James 'half a year's news-papers' to keep him abreast with the events back in Europe. William Cockin to Capt. James Romney, Bombay, 3 March 1795, NAL Ms. L1957/942/7/3.



the writing hand that was 'weake and trimbles' may have had as much to do with his nervous state.

As this letter was being written, the engraver William Sharp was preparing to publish a print after Romney's portrait of Thomas Paine (now unlocated), which was painted the previous summer just before the trip down to Earham (fig. 178). Paine's image at this time was more familiar than ever. As a response to the horrors occurring in France, the British government, with the support of much of the populace, instituted repressive legislation and encouraged less legal means of intimidation to avert any potentially threatening activity among 'levellers'. While the Reign of Terror in France allowed the death penalty for an author writing in favour of the re-establishment of royalty (a decree reported in the English *Times* on the day that Romney wrote to his brother), William Pitt's 'White Terror' included imprisonment for selling Paine's *Rights of Man* (Part I published 1791, Part II, 1792), the republican manifesto promoting the abolition of all monarchy and which is advertised clearly in Sharp's engraving of the Paine portrait. Several printers and booksellers were made an example, including Richard Phillips, who wrote to Cowper in June 1793 from the 'Leicester Bastile' asking him to write and circulate some verses, perhaps some that might be sung in the streets, in favour of his release. Cowper wrote in reply that he feared that any such poetry might be dangerous to himself: 'A tame composition, in short, would not serve *you*, and a spirited and vehement one might ruin *me*'. Cowper also balked when Thomas Clio Rickman, 'a red-hot Paynite', wrote to him making overtures of friendship, presuming political sympathies; Cowper vowed with indignation not to reply.<sup>52</sup> In his biography of Payne, Rickman lists Romney, Sharp, Mary Wollstonecraft, Joel Barlow, and Dr. Priestley among Paine's 'friends and acquaintances' in London before he was forced to flee to France in 1792.<sup>53</sup> In his biography of Romney and in his own *Memoirs*, Hayley completely avoids mentioning this circle of friends. John Romney, however, deals with Paine and his 'mischievous writings' roughly, praising his father's physiognomical skill in the Paine portrait but

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<sup>52</sup> See *Letters of Cowper* IV: 351-6 for the correspondence about the Phillips case and pp. 105, 125 for his thoughts on Rickman. Cowper wrote to Hayley 10 June 1792 of this impertinent correspondence: 'he is a violent overturner of thrones and Kingdoms, and foolishly thinks to recommend himself to me by telling me that he is so. He adds likewise that Mr. Paine often dines with him'. Cowper wrote to his cousin Lady Hesketh later in the month complaining again of Rickman's letter.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine* (London: Thomas Clio Rickman, 1819), 100. Romney's Diary for Monday 4 July 1791 included this entry: 'dine at Mr. Pain at ½ pt 4'.



judging the character of the sitter 'simple, but vulgar, shrewd, but devoid of feeling'.<sup>54</sup> This would have been a common sentiment at the time that the portrait was engraved: Paine was tried in absentia, found guilty of seditious libel, and burnt in effigy in several mock-trials all over the country in 1792-3. Cowper, for one, regretted that Paine was 'executed in effigy only, and not in reality'.<sup>55</sup> Paine was mentioned in *The Times* 29 August 1792 with derision together with another radical who would face the fire of the crowds: Thomas Walker, a politically-active Manchester cotton merchant, had his home and offices burnt by a 'church and king' mob in December 1792; two years later he was tried for sedition and Sharp again published an engraving after a Romney portrait of a notorious figure.<sup>56</sup>

There is some evidence that Romney was a member of the Society for Constitutional Information, which was first organized in 1780 to put forward the reformist cause in Parliament but became more radical after the start of the French Revolution. But he is not known to have been called to Privy Council in 1794 to be questioned on suspicion of treason as were Sharp and the sculptor Thomas Banks for their membership in the Society.<sup>57</sup> Patricia Jaffé has reproduced some jottings from a now untraced

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<sup>54</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 224. It is not known if the original portrait included the mischievous writings or if this was a conceit of Sharp's: the several copies after Romney's original that survive do not all contain the papers fluttering on the left. John thought Sharp's engraving 'clever', and rising above Sharp's reputation as a radical to ponder his father's professional legacy, he wishes that Sharp had engraved more of Romney's works, for even this portrait 'alone would have rescued his name from oblivion'.

<sup>55</sup> Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 1 June 1793, *Letters of Cowper* IV: 342. See H.T. Dickinson, *British radicals and the French revolution 1789-1815* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 34-40; David Bindman, *Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution* (London: British Museum, 1989), cats. 50-60 for the caricatures, mugs, and handkerchiefs capitalizing on Paine's infamy.

<sup>56</sup> Walker was acquitted in April, but before the print was published in November Sharp wrote to Walker, 'If you will be kind enough to get into a good scrape—it will make it sell wonderfully well'. Quoted in David Alexander, 'A Reluctant Communicator: George Romney and the Print Market', in *Those Delightful Regions of Imagination: Essays on George Romney* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 268. The overall small number of prints issued of Romney's works in these years (seven in 1793 and five in 1794—one of these a reissue of the Paine engraving) make the Paine and Walker engraving more significant.

<sup>57</sup> See Julius Bryant, 'The Royal Academy's violent democrat', *British Art Journal* 6 (Winter 2005): 51-8. Edward Smith in *The Story of the English Jacobins Being an Account of the Persons Implicated for High Treason in 1794* (London: Cassell's Monthly Shilling Library, 1881, pp. 112-13) claims, 'Romney the painter, and William Sharp, a distinguished engraver of the day, were members of the society [for Constitutional Information]. Their chief offence was the production of a portrait of their friend Paine. They were both simple-minded men, hardly reflective enough to be able to contribute much to the cause of reform, beyond a steady support of their colleagues....the administration of the day could not have laid their hands on two more harmless beings than Sharp and Romney'. Although the methodological rigour of this publication is unclear, and no supporting evidence has yet been uncovered to link Romney to this society, his membership, perhaps especially in the early years of its existence (its early supporter the Duke of Richmond was a loyal Romney patron), cannot be ruled out.



sketchbook dated on the cover 'August 1792' and has interpreted them as representing Romney's sympathies with the revolutionaries and even with their violence. She states that an account of the massacres at the Tuileries on 10 August 1792, copied in Romney's hand, is in the voice of an aristocrat who decries the 'Blackguards'. The text then continues, 'and I find from his account that all are Blackguards except them that are *born gentlemen*—so you see I am amongst the Blackguards—and I hope to God that they will prevail'.<sup>58</sup> However, it does not seem completely clear that this passage, too, is not part of a quoted transcription, as opposed to Romney's own commentary, and must be granted ambiguous. Added to the picture of Romney's political stance is the entry in Joseph Farington's diary for October 1797 stating that Nathaniel Marchant had just seen Romney, who was 'a convert from Democracy, and now says He believes Monarchy is best after all. A Friend applied to the King to make him His Majesty's Portrait painter after the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds—The King answered that the "vacancy was filled." Had He been appointed Romney said He wd. then have exhibited.' However, the highly-partisan Farington's reliability on matters political is tenuous—his frequent denigration of those with different viewpoints to his own as 'violent republicans' or 'democrats' roused Marchant to term him 'a violent aristocrat'.<sup>59</sup>

If Romney's politics are not clear-cut, those of his friends and advisors are easier to track, even given the rapidity with which events and political stances in the 1790s shifted. Richard Cumberland staged a comic-opera in April 1793 at Covent Garden about the Peasants' Revolt, *Wat Tyler*, but the Lord Chamberlain's censorship required Cumberland to 'new model' it and re-name it *The Armourer*, and it quickly closed. Romney told his brother about attending the opening in his letter of 8 April:

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Just as the biographies make no incriminating references to Romney's politics, so, too could the relevant private correspondences have been 'edited' prior to their donation to various archives. I am grateful to Dr. Bryant for his communications on this subject.

<sup>58</sup> Jaffé, *Drawings By George Romney in the Fitzwilliam Museum*, 66. This quotation is discussed further in my 'Tuching the Times too nearly: George Romney in 1793', 17-18. Attempts by this writer to locate the sketchbook in the original or notes or photographs taken from it have not been successful.

<sup>59</sup> Bryant, 'The Royal Academy's violent democrat', 51; *Diary of Joseph Farington* ed. by Kenneth Garlick and Angus MacIntyre (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978) III: 910. Curiously, the *Public Advertiser* 29 Feb. 1792 reported, 'Mr Romney the Painter is to succeed Sir Joshua Reynolds as Sergeant Painter to the King. For the honour of the country the greatest painter in it should always have this place'. Nothing more is known of this alleged appointment. Of course, any discussion of Romney's politics and his frame of mind in the 1790s must bear in mind that he at some point suffered a series of strokes that affected him physically and probably mentally and emotionally as well.



'it is taken from the story of Wat-Tiler, but the subject tuching the times too nearly, he has been obliged to alter it, so much, that it has lost much of its original spirit'.<sup>60</sup> A similar anxiety about a perceived relevance of art to current political life saw the Duke of York order the closure of William Hodges's exhibition of his grand history paintings *Effects of Peace* and *Consequences of War* in early 1795.<sup>61</sup> Cumberland was no more a dangerous radical than was Hodges, and to reinforce that fact he lavishes praise in his *Memoirs* on Edmund Burke's counter-revolutionary tract *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1790) as some of the best writing in the English language, 'so brilliant a cluster of fine and beautiful passages in the declamatory style'.<sup>62</sup> Burke's high-flown rhetoric against the overturning of the natural order and his idealisation of the French royals immediately instigated a pamphlet war, Mary Wollstonecraft quickly publishing *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 1790, and Paine following with *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution* soon after. Romney's closest friends were moved to respond as well: Cumberland wrote a personal letter of support to Burke; Hayley says that the trip he and Romney had made to Paris in August 1790 had filled him with such philanthropic hope for the 'progress of public felicity in France' that he 'began a prose work, projected as a reply to the intemperate invective of Mr. Burke'. However, Hayley set it aside, distracted with the illness of a friend and then his own, and when recovered he turned his hand instead to a comedy intended for the French stage.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, many perceived Hayley as a radical—Farington called him 'a violent Republican'—and Cowper

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<sup>60</sup> NAL Ms. L1957/942. Romney wrote to Hayley 22 April that Cumberland's opera was 'cruelly abused', Hayley's catalogue of Romney's letters, British Library Mss. 30805. See *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland* (London: Lackington, Allen and Co., 1807) II: 278.

<sup>61</sup> See Harriet Guest, 'The Consequences of War in the Winter of 1794-95' in *William Hodges 1744-1797* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 61-70. Farington recorded 30 Nov. 1794, the day before the exhibition opened, that, according to Marchant, Hodges was concerned that some of the imagery in the *War* painting might be seen as relating to the present, *Diary* I: 266-7. Hodges also reported that it was Hayley who had 'first suggested to him that landscape paintings were capable of expressing moral subjects'.

<sup>62</sup> *Memoirs of Cumberland* II: 271.

<sup>63</sup> This play was never produced; the French censors bridled at a 'courtezan' character. *Memoirs of Hayley* I: 409-13. He says it was just as well for his 'peace of mind' that the reply to Burke never went beyond three or four pages. As late as 1797 Hayley was still considering, resuming an earlier project of writing a poem inspired by the 1790 trip on the 'visionary hopes that France, on the demolition of despotism, might gradually form a free constitution on the English model... Full of these benevolent but visionary ideas, he had begun an extensive historical and moral poem, as a lesson to both countries. Parts of this composition had been highly extolled by his confidential friends; but the subsequent atrocities of the French soon induced him to lay aside a composition that appeared no longer seasonable'. I: 478



advised him of a rumour claiming that he was the controlling voice or even the true author behind Charlotte Smith's recent works, which had evolved from classic sentimental-melancholy fare into somewhat controversial writings suspiciously sympathetic to the French revolutionaries.<sup>64</sup> Even Cowper could see that that the anti-French hysteria was overblown, observing that 'all the Torys now-a-days call all the Whigs Republicans'.<sup>65</sup> Hayley had never professed publicly or privately to be other than an ardent Whig and a liberal literatus: when critiquing the *Letter to the National Convention of France* of Joel Barlow, an American poet considered more radical than Paine, Hayley told the author, 'Many thanks for your new publication, which tho I am *not yet a Republican*, I have read with great pleasure—it is full of spirit & philanthropy.'<sup>66</sup> Hayley's philosophy towards civic engagement is summed up in his introduction to his collection of poems and plays, where he admits that his love of literary retirement had prevented him from 'serving the community in scenes of active life' but he felt it his duty to promote the interests of society with his poetical pursuits, such as *Triumphs of Temper*, which encouraged domestic felicity between the sexes, or the prescriptive essays that were intended to spur a youth with passion for art or literature.<sup>67</sup>

Wollstonecraft's response to Burke includes a vehement criticism of his cultural politics—she portrays the author as a victim of sensibility, the '*manie* of the day', which had elevated self-indulgent and impotent sentiment above true humanitarianism, allowing Burke to mourn more for the insulted French queen and

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<sup>64</sup> Cowper had been obliged also to deny to friends that Hayley was the author of a pro-revolutionary novel *Man As He Is* (Robert Blage, 1792); letter Cowper to Hayley 21 May 1793. Cowper also wrote to his conservative cousin Lady Hesketh this month assuring her that the rumours were false and that Hayley 'is no more a democrat than I am, but a lover of liberty to the very bone'. *Letters of Cowper* IV: 336, 340. See *Diary of Farington*, 6 Jan. 1795, II: 289. Note that Farington's next entry (7 Jan.) reports third-hand of a Mr. Freebairn, who 'is a violent Republican & talks of going to America'.

<sup>65</sup> Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 10 Feb. 1793, *Letters of Cowper* IV: 289.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Lewis Leary, 'Joel Barlow and William Hayley: A Correspondence', *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 3 (1949), letter from Hayley to Barlow 23 Oct. 1792, 333. The previous year Hayley had advised Barlow in London to stop by Romney's house, where he could see works 'as are visible only to his Intimate acquaintance'. Barlow was soon after living near Romney in Cavendish Square. *Op. cit.*, 328-9.

<sup>67</sup> *Poems and Plays By William Hayley in Six Volumes* (London: T. Cadell, 1785) I: xv. Hayley's ideal of literary retirement is not so much that of the Roman Imperial poets but of the British Augustan ones, particularly Pope, whose image as the first independent author not patronized by party greatly appealed to Hayley. Hayley deals harshly in his *Essay on Epic Poetry* with writers too closely associated with the flattery of rulers, such as the examples of Virgil and Augustus and Spenser and Elizabeth I. This is an instance where Hayley's pronouncements are *not* inconsistent with his practice. His love of literary independence—and a dread of public satire—is probably why he turned down the post of laureateship in 1790, by then a much ridiculed office.



spoiled artworks than for ongoing cruel poverty, the sufferings of the desperately ill, and the horrors of slavery: 'Such misery demands more than tears.'<sup>68</sup> Her thesis may help put into perspective the figures of sensibility in Romney's circle as well as Romney's own works, which, if they do not determine his political involvement, do reveal his philosophical and temperamental inclinations. Romney's prison/lazaretto drawings, much like John Howard's published reports of his inspections in the 1770s and 1780s, do not demonize the incarcerated as guilty offenders; rather, the drawings heroize the abstract suffering figures, usually nude, far above the brutish gaoler figure who is always present, and indeed, the crowd take on more significance than the figure of Howard himself (fig. 179; see figs 20, 103, 104). As discussed in Chapter Two, Howard's active benevolence, leading 'stern-ey'd Justice to the dark domains, / If not to sever, to relax the chains' (Erasmus Darwin, *Loves of the Plants* 453-4, 1789), may have initially been a fundamental source of inspiration for Romney's prison designs. Hayley surely would have encouraged depictions of the reformer that concentrated on his Christ-like philanthropy—the first letter (with accompanying poem) that Hayley sent to Howard suggests that it was his image as a man of feeling that was most appealing: 'Considering your inquiry into the state of prisons, as the sublimest example of charity that was ever exhibited by a private individual, I could not help feeling a desire to make known my sense of that obligation which you have conferred on human nature in general'.<sup>69</sup> But after the fall of the Bastille in 1789 the prison had become a symbol of much wider oppression. Romney's tightly-packed, intermingled bodies of men, women, and even children dehumanized in these confined, 'black holes' may accord with the typical findings of Howard's travels but also, in the 1790s, when both the slave trade and the abolition movement were at their peaks, other descriptions of human incarceration may infuse these images. The Rev. Thomas Clarkson's information gathered from slave-ship eyewitnesses about the

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<sup>68</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France. By Mary Wollstonecraft.* (London: Joseph Johnson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1790), 5-6, 111-12, 136-7, 151-4.

<sup>69</sup> *Memoirs of Hayley* I: 204-5. Hayley first approached Howard with his letter and *Ode* in 1780; later, in the 1791 *Eulogies of Howard: A Vision*, his view of the recently-deceased man was even more hagiographic—in this work Hayley relates the praises of Howard's sanctity from the vantage point of a 'Paradise of true glory', whose portal was presided over by 'Genius and Sensibility'. As well an exemplar of enlightened secular benevolence, several scholars have seen Christian iconography in these images, with Howard taking on the role of a Christ in the Descent to Hell. See Lorenz Eitner, 'Cages, Prisons, and Captives in Eighteenth-Century Art,' in Karl Kroeber and William Walling eds., *Images of Romanticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 35; Bindman, *Shadow of the Guillotine*, 170.



wretched conditions suffered on the Middle Passage was most widely promulgated through the shocking print of the 'cargo' configuration on the Liverpool ship the 'Brookes', published in April 1789 (fig. 180).<sup>70</sup>

The prison drawings are related to other drawings in which generalized human suffering or terror is the thread which runs through disparate subjects, yet the subject becomes subsidiary to the powerful formal qualities of bodily eloquence. This move towards the universal or the allegorical fulfils grand manner principles but is also a useful expedient in a repressive environment. John Mee has shown how certain radical writers escaped prosecution for seditious libel by employing as a loophole fable, irony, and allusion to convey coded subversive rhetoric; an artist seeing publishers gaoled, plays altered, and exhibitions closed might resort to a similarly vague visual language.<sup>71</sup> As the poet of *Il Penseroso*, which had founded a particular strain of English melancholy poetry, Milton had long been considered a national treasure; but in the 1790s, as the political figure who had assisted in the overthrow of the regal authority of his day Milton, too, was subject to this new era of scrutiny and censorship. Radicals made use of Milton to argue that 'Republicanism is not incompatible with virtue', most notably by the defense in the trial of Thomas Paine.<sup>72</sup> But the greater trend was to deny Milton's political relevance to the present day. The Boydells obliged Hayley to alter the tone and reduce the length of his Milton biography—the long passages of Milton's prose writings, some of them political and referring to the execution of Charles I, were cut—so Hayley resolved to publish his own full-length edition, which restored much of Milton's prose and added some of

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<sup>70</sup> Clarkson's research was also made known in his publications *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, 1786 and *Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*, 1788. The print of the 'Brookes' proved useful in abolitionist lectures and publications and as an exhibit presented to Parliament. Eitner discusses prison imagery in a political context beyond Howard and in an aesthetic context as being sometimes examples of the Burkean sublime. 'Cages, Prisons, and Captives', 13-38. As discussed in Chapter Two, Romney's scenes of suffering captives must be seen in context with those of his contemporaries, who were also illustrating lazarettos and other topically-motivated scenes.

<sup>71</sup> See John Mee 'Examples of Safe Printing: Censorship and Popular Radical Literature in the 1790s' in *Literature and Censorship*, ed. by Nigel Smith (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 81-95. Blake's prophetic books of the 1790s are probably the best example of an artist conveying political imagery (and, of course, text) in a symbolic and personal idiom. For the largely allegorical treatment of the French Revolution in British art see Bindman, *Shadow of the Guillotine*, 66-74.

<sup>72</sup> From the proceedings of Paine's trial, quoted in Philip Cox, 'Blake, Hayley and Milton: A Reassessment', *English Studies* 75 (1994), 439-40. Thomas Erskine, representing Paine, quoted from *Areopagitica, a Speech of Mr. John Milton for the liberty of unlicensed Printing to Parliament*.



Cowper's translations of the Latin and Italian poems and passages from the *Adamo*.<sup>73</sup> Yet even this unexpurgated biography was hardly controversial, and Hayley's preface is largely concerned with correcting mistaken notions about Milton's prose as 'having a tendency to subvert our existing government'. He admits that his friend Edward Gibbon thought that re-publishing the prose of Milton at the present time would be irresponsible and 'productive of public evil', but Hayley counters that Milton lived during an age of gross abuses of regal power, unlike the present era of constitutional monarchy which the Glorious Revolution of 1688 established; therefore the case for republicanism or regicide in England was obsolete.<sup>74</sup>

Milton's poetry remained unthreatening in the 1790s as long as his rebellious Satan of *Paradise Lost* was not interpreted as the intended hero of the piece. Conservative propaganda commonly relied on devil imagery to describe the French or English revolutionary, and *Paradise Lost* was often invoked: addressing Parliament in 1794, Burke said that France would now provide a painter with an apt model for Hell and that even Milton's genius and imagination could not have created 'such a devil as a modern Jacobin'.<sup>75</sup> In this light it is not surprising that when reporting that Romney was painting Paine the *Morning Chronicle* quipped, 'But whether for an individual likeness or as the hero of *Paradise Lost* is not stated. Those, however, who have seen

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<sup>73</sup> Correspondence between Hayley and the Boydell partner, George Nicol, the King's Bookseller, is in the Fitzwilliam Museum Hayley Papers. Hayley's frank letter of 10 March 1793 complaining of his inadequate payment for the job precipitated the falling out over the content and length of the biography in the autumn. Boydell's first volume of *the Poetical Works* with Hayley's abridged biography was published 1794, his expanded edition, 1796. See also Hayley's *Memoirs* I: 450-1 for his telling of this episode.

<sup>74</sup> *The Life of Milton, In Three Parts. To Which Are Added, Conjectures on the Origin of Paradise Lost: With an Appendix. By William Hayley, Esq.* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), vi-vii. Hayley further declares that the era of panic in which the Republican writers of the seventeenth-century were viewed with alarm so recently had now passed. This was certainly not true, as suspected radicals, including publishers, were still being gaoled. Given that John Boydell as well as the publisher of the second edition of Hayley's Milton biography, Thomas Cadell, were among those members of the Stationers Guild who signed a declaration against seditious writings, Hayley's *Life of Milton* could not have been deemed particularly subversive. Dustin Griffin discusses Hayley's biography in the context of the eighteenth-century writings about Milton in the 'assimilationist' line, which argued that had Milton lived into the post-Glorious Revolution age, he too would have become a Whig supporter of the modern government. *Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14-16.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Ronald Paulson, 'Burke's Sublime and the Representation of Revolution' in *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. by Percz Zagorin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 249. After the horrors of the August and September Massacres, Anna Seward wrote to a friend 22 Sept. 1792, 'What legions of fiends rise up in Paris!—who have disgraced their originally noble cause!....At length, my apprehensions, as well as yours, are awakened, that the diabolic spirits, who infest our yet prosperous island, succeed in their endeavours to spread the poison of seditious and causeless discontent amidst our lower classes'. *Letters of Anna Seward* III: 175-6.



the sketch say it's *devilish like*'.<sup>76</sup> The Jacobin-devil connection relied on the brutish Satan known from traditional iconography and as used in early illustrations to *Paradise Lost* (fig. 181). But a new conception of a more heroic and beautiful figure had superseded this convention and was especially suitable for depicting those moments in *Paradise Lost* Book I when Satan was potentially the victor, rallying his troops of fallen angels and hurling defiance at Heaven, as seen in Westall's illustrations for Boydell (fig. 182) and James Barry's independent prints (fig. 183).<sup>77</sup> Fuseli produced an array of sublime Satanic imagery for his Milton Gallery (fig. 184), a plan which survived both the collapse of the collaboration with Joseph Johnson after a downturn in the economy and also of Cowper's mental health: his commentary on *Paradise Lost* stalled after Book III when he found the task of justifying Satan's ways to his readers just too harrowing.<sup>78</sup> But what had destabilized Cowper charged artists, and the opportunities that *Paradise Lost* offered for exciting imagery were irresistible. Blake's interpretation of the poem suggests that Milton's Hell and the devil were much more interesting than his Heaven and holy figures because he 'was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it'.<sup>79</sup> But illustrations of Satan were not necessarily politically motivated; several calls had been made in nationalistic or aesthetic terms to update this kind of imagery. Barry, like Hogarth before him, had railed against 'hackneyed' treatments of biblical subjects, and he indicted Raphael and Michelangelo for painting Satan 'according to the old woman's conception of him,

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<sup>76</sup> 28 June 1792, quoted in the Whitley Papers 1289, British Museum. The demonic view of the revolutionaries was especially exploited in counter-revolutionary caricatures. See William L. Pressly, *The French Revolution as Blasphemy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), figs. 18, 19, 41, 54, 55, 98.

<sup>77</sup> For the development of Satanic iconography see Marcia Pointon, *Milton and English Art* (Manchester, 1970) and *Paradise Lost: The Poem and Its Illustrators*, ed. by Robert Woof (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2004). Barry planned his own series of *Paradise Lost* illustrations but regretted that he had not kept his works secret as others had since 'trampled' on his territory. See William L. Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 151-67.

<sup>78</sup> Cowper wrote to Hayley 25 Nov. 1792 of his melancholy and difficulties in working on Milton: 'The First Book of the *Paradise Lost* is in truth so terrible and so nearly akin to my own miserable speculations in the subject of it, that I am a little apprehensive, unless my spirits were better, that the study of it might do me material harm'. IV 241. A year later Cowper told his cousin with relief that, as the outcome of a conference between Hayley and Joseph Johnson, the Cowper-Fuseli edition was 'postponed on account of the war, which leaves the world no leisure for literary amusements; Johnson accordingly thinks it would be too hazardous to send forth so expensive a work at present'. See *Letters of Cowper* IV: 241, 407. After years of financial struggle to open the Milton Gallery in 1799 and 1800, which was not a success, Fuseli may have regretted turning down the offers of Thomas Lawrence and John Opie to join his scheme as partners. *Letters of Fuseli*, 92. See also *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, ed. by John Knowles (London: Henry Coburn, 1821) I: 171-235.

<sup>79</sup> From *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, finished 1793. See Bindman, *Shadow of the Guillotine*, 69-70.



with horns and claws'.<sup>80</sup> Burke's essay on the sublime, written long before any revolutions had made an attractive devil threatening, praised Milton's 'noble picture' of Satan addressing his troops, quoting lines from *Paradise Lost*, Book I: 'He above the rest In shape and gesture proudly eminent Stood like a tower; his form had yet not lost All her original brightness ....'<sup>81</sup> Romney, and readers of the *Epistle to Romney*, may have had another inducement to paint a beautiful Satan: Hayley's footnote to his advice on painting from Milton repeated the Vasarian lore about Spinello Aretino's painting of the battle between St. Michael and Satan—the devil was so annoyed at Spinello's unflattering depiction of him that he appeared to the artist in a dream, effectively scaring him to death.<sup>82</sup> Unlike Cowper, Romney persevered in confronting *Paradise Lost* and told Hayley that his plans for painting from it included scenes of *The Flood* and 'three where Satan is the hero, and three of Adam and Eve', or even perhaps six of each.<sup>83</sup> Romney's heroic Satan exists in many nude figure studies of a beautiful warrior (fig. 185) shielding himself from the ammunition of St. Michael raining down from Heaven. This Satan is also featured in more expanded compositions (fig. 186) that remind what an impact Michelangelo had made on Romney in Rome. Romney's depictions of the battle between Heaven and the fallen angels share the same tall, rectangular composition and chaotic treatment of space as the *Last Judgement* (fig. 187), which may be seen as a sequel to Satan's rebellion and the corollary of original sin. As in the Sistine fresco, Romney's drawings of this scene combine sculptural male beauty with contorted bodies falling down to Hell on the right. Within the context of Romney's oeuvre, these doomed figures are interchangeable with those of so many other subjects, suggesting that a consistent viewpoint underlies them all. If Romney saw an allegory of revolution in *Paradise Lost* then he seems to have interpreted it to mean that rebellion ultimately fails and oppression prevails.

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<sup>80</sup> *An Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (London, 1775). Although Barry did entertain radical politics, his political imagery was usually presented under the veil of allegory, and here his need to promote himself at the expense of the old masters seems to supersede politics. Hayley owned Barry's *Inquiry*, and in the endnotes to the 1778 *Epistle to Romney* in reference to his advice to paint Milton's Satan, Hayley says, 'It is remarkable that the greatest painters have failed in this particular. Raphael, Guido, and West are all deficient in the figure of Satan. Richardson observes in his description of the pictures of Italy; "Je n'ai jamais vu d'aucun Maître une représentation du Diable, prince des Diables, qui me satisfait"', 76.

<sup>81</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 48.

<sup>82</sup> Third edition of the *Epistle to Romney* (now re-titled *An Essay on Painting: In Two Epistles to Mr. Romney*, J. Dodsley, 1781), Epistle II, Note LVI to verse 523.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Romney to Hayley 15 Feb. 1794, Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 212.



Hayley's public advice in the *Epistle to Romney* to paint Satan 'Proudly standing like a stately tow'r' essentially repeats Burke's discussion of the sublime in Milton's imagery. However, Hayley's private advice for painting from Milton is of a much different flavour. In Romney's 'Miscellaneous Hints for the Pencil' notebook Hayley suggests scenes of Edenic tranquillity from *Paradise Lost* Book V, such as Adam and Eve entertaining the Angel Raphael in their 'Sylvan Lodge', and he has included transcriptions of the relevant passages. He suggests from *Samson Agonistes* the episode where a tearful and contrite Delilah begs forgiveness from Samson for her treachery. This scene Hayley conceives as an appropriate companion for the 'conjugal Fidelity and affection of the Roman matron Epponina to her husband Sabinus whom she concealed and supported a considerable time in a subterranean retreat'.<sup>84</sup> The intent to demonstrate above all else Milton's benevolent domestic character, especially regarding his relationships with the women in his life, is the driving force behind Hayley's *Life of Milton*, both editions. As the Boydells' censorship in 1793 had forced him to reduce his 'whole-length portrait' to a 'pitiful miniature',<sup>85</sup> Hayley was relying on Romney's illustration of Milton and his daughters to augment his word-picture of the poet, and he involved himself heavily that year in the composition of it. Hayley had been communicating with the Boydells about the portraits to be used in the *Life* soon after becoming involved in the project in 1791. He advised their partner George Nicol to visit Thomas Brand Hollis, who possessed two Milton portraits, and he requested they acquire 'the original cast for Romney to paint from', presumably a bust or a life/death mask.<sup>86</sup> Romney had been planning a Milton and daughters composition much earlier as part of an intended British geniuses series, which was to have included Newton, Bacon, and Wren, all in a similar

<sup>84</sup> Romney family papers, NAL Ms. L/1957/1451. This notebook is undated and may have been added to over a number of years. It also includes hints for five scenes from the life of Czar Peter, which Hayley was encouraging in the mid-to-late 1780s. Drawings of a female figure beseeching a male, possibly Samson with Delilah or Adam with Eve, are seen in sketchbooks of the early 1790s in the British Museum and Abbot Hall.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Hayley to Cowper 12 Dec. 1793, *Memoirs of Hayley*, I: 450.

<sup>86</sup> See James Stanier Clarke, on behalf of Hayley, to George Nicol, 5 Feb. 1792; Hayley to George Nicol, 2 Aug. 1792; Hayley Papers XXIV, Fitzwilliam Museum. Hayley would have known of the great interest in Milton's physiognomy, verified by the notorious events of August 1790, when admirers of the poet, along with less scrupulous profiteers in search of relics, dug up what was thought to be Milton's corpse and compared the mouldering remains with the biographical descriptions of him to determine identity. The case was widely reported in the press and prompted various responses in verse; among them, Cowper's *On the Late Indecent Liberties taken with the Remains of Milton*, which Hayley published in his 1803 biography of Cowper. See Allen Walker Read 'The Disinterment of Milton's Remains' *PMLA* 45 no. 4 (Dec 1930) 1050-1068.



domestic attitude to the Milton portrait, but the commission for the Boydell *Milton* and the visit with Hayley and Cowper at Earham August 1792 doubtlessly provided the impetus to seriously work up and finish a painting.<sup>87</sup> Having declared to Nicol that his chief object in writing the *Life of Milton* was to 'render perfect Justice to the amiable qualities of the Man',<sup>88</sup> Hayley set out to dispute Johnson's unflattering biography of Milton published fifteen years previously, and he—and Cowper—would have expected Romney, as a congenial spirit, to do the same.

As much as Hayley disliked the political and religious prejudices in Johnson's life of Milton, its biographical method was just as likely a source of contention. Johnson bristled at the hagiographic tone that earlier Milton biographers had employed; he read these texts critically and was not afraid to expose with wit the myths that they had set in place. Hayley maintained the Neoplatonic philosophy of the earlier biographies that a poet and his or her works are intrinsically linked; he trawled the narratives of Milton's nephew Edward Phillips, John Aubrey, Jonathan Richardson, Thomas Newton and other commentators for anecdotes of the poet's life that explained specific passages in his poetry, and conversely, found poetry to illustrate the events of his life.<sup>89</sup> This especially comes into play in refuting Johnson's characterization of Milton as severe and arbitrary in his 'domestick relations' and with 'a Turkish contempt of women'.<sup>90</sup> Hayley counters that no reader of sensibility will agree with Johnson when perusing a passage from *Paradise Lost* praising Eve's virtues, which proves Milton appreciated the mental and personal graces and 'all the loveliness of woman'. And Milton particularly should be given credit for enduring his first unhappy marriage—Hayley believes that Milton's 'own connubial infelicity' is paralleled in the protagonist of his *Samson Agonistes*, 'Intangled with a pois'nous bosom-snake'. Milton's wife had deserted him but returned in contrition, on her

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<sup>87</sup> As early as 6 Jan. 1790 *The World* reported, 'Romney is in possession of Sir Isaac Newton's Mask, taken very finely in Plaster of Paris. From it he is to paint for the Duke of Marlborough an historical portrait, with Milton as its companion'. Nothing is known of the commission referred to here, but the *Newton* was not painted until the winter of 1794 and remained unsold in the artist's lifetime (now in a private collection, U.K.); the 'great men' series seems to have been abandoned after the *Newton*. See Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 186-7; John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 228-30, 235-7. Hayley says that Romney commenced the Milton portrait in spring 1792; John Romney locates its origins to 'those attic conversations' at Earham with Cowper and Hayley in August 1792.

<sup>88</sup> Hayley to George Nicol, 1 June 1793, Hayley Papers XXIV, Fitzwilliam Museum

<sup>89</sup> Dustin Griffin points out that Hayley's method was conventional and that 'to an extent that we have perhaps not properly recognized, eighteenth-century readers were accustomed to read poetry biographically'. *Regaining Paradise*, 6-7.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* I: 157.



knees, an episode which is here cited as the source behind the description of Eve's shame after the Fall where she implores forgiveness from Adam:

Now at his feet submissive in distress!  
Creature so fair his reconciliation seeking,  
His counsel whom she had displeas'd, his aid  
As one disarm'd his anger all he lost.<sup>91</sup>

Johnson said that when this wife, the mother of Milton's three daughters, died in childbirth he did not mourn her long and soon remarried; when the second wife also died similarly he 'honoured her memory with a poor sonnet', which naturally Hayley reprints as proof that 'the rough critic was unable to sympathise with the tenderness that reigns in the pathetic poetry of Milton'.<sup>92</sup> Hayley's agenda was clear to the critic of the *Monthly Review*, who saw an attempt being made to 'obliterate every moral stain' from Milton's image and promote his superior virtue rather than his genius. The reviewer questions if it is necessary that Milton be so saintly; after all, 'he had a *character*—and character can scarcely be said to subsist in an accumulation of all human excellencies', yet, 'under the delicate varnish with which his portrait is glossed by the softening brush of his present biographer, we scarcely distinguish its bold and prominent features'.<sup>93</sup>

Hayley's trump card in his biography was the recently-uncovered document unknown to Johnson, Milton's will, which proved that the poet thought his daughters 'unkind' and that they conspired to defraud him, leading Hayley to remark that the 'tender and sublime poet, whose sensibility and sufferings were so great, appears to have been almost as unfortunate in his daughters as the Lear of Shakespeare'.<sup>94</sup> Milton's

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<sup>91</sup> William Hayley, *Life of Milton, In Three Parts. To Which Are Added, Conjectures on the Origin of Paradise Lost: With an Appendix* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 197-200; 91-2. The domestic tone of Hayley's narrative provided Fuseli with fodder for his series of paintings about Milton's private life—he cites 'Hayley's *Life of Him*' in a letter of 4 Nov. 1800 to William Roscoe discussing a shipment to Liverpool of several such paintings, which included a 'Return of Milton's Wife, pleading forgiveness'. He also lists 'Milton's Vision of his Second wife', which appears to be based on his sonnet to her, and 'Milton dictating to his daughter' around this time. *Letters of Fuseli*, 218, 223.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson, *Lives* I: 116; Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1796, 140-1.

<sup>93</sup> Review of Hayley's biography in the 1794 first volume of the Boydell *Poetical Works of John Milton*, *Monthly Review* XVI (Feb. 1795), 122-3. The reviewer also questions the wisdom of citing poetry for biographical illustration as if factual given the fictions and conventions of poetry and points out that Hayley, a poet himself, should know this. The same journal reviewed the expanded biography of 1796 (XIX Feb. 1796, pp. 252-5) and had 'nothing to add' to their previous review only that the additions to this second edition had increased its value. There is nothing to suggest that either edition was perceived as radical.

<sup>94</sup> Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1796, 161-2, 191-2.



relationship with his children was one of the most controversial aspects for his biographers to deal with, and Johnson had repeated the claims that their father oppressed the girls and did not teach them to read or write or that he only taught them to read but just enough to pronounce without understanding, calling them forth at odd hours for their services. Whereas Johnson pitied the daughters, Hayley found them 'ungrateful', 'undutiful', 'disobedient', and even 'inhuman' but he excluded Deborah, the youngest and favourite daughter, from the worst aspersions as she provided powerful support to his argument: Milton must have educated the girls after all, for Deborah, according to an account not mentioned by Johnson, was her father's amanuensis—'a circumstance of which my friend Romney has happily availed himself to decorate the folio edition of this life with a production of his pencil'.<sup>95</sup> Hayley refers to this portrait (fig. 188) as if another historical document, and, with a degree of circularity, it does generally reflect the tenets of his *Life of Milton*. However, elements of the painting argue that Romney synthesized the earlier biographies for himself, putting forth his personal interpretation of the man just as Johnson and Hayley had done.

While working on the painting, Romney received plenty of advice from Hayley, who received letters of thanks from the artist for his hints relating to the picture on 26 March and 22 April 1793.<sup>96</sup> Preliminary drawings show that Romney's approach to the composition was flexible as he grappled with its configuration as well as details such as the position of Milton's chair, his clothing, and his posture, and Hayley doubtlessly voiced his opinions on many such matters. Although Hayley was interested in the verisimilitude of Milton's appearance and supplied the artist with the Faithorne portrait, supposedly made *ad vivum* (fig. 189), Romney would have been expected to idealise the poet. But Romney does not demur from the facts and

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<sup>95</sup> Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1796, 198-9. In the 1794 Boydell edition this same claim is included (p. cxii) juxtaposed with the engraving of this portrait. This anecdote comes from Aubrey, who 'expressly affirms' it and who was 'personally acquainted with the poet, and who had probably consulted his widow in regard to many particulars of his life'. Hayley also cites Richardson's account that Deborah claimed that her father was 'delightful company' and that she spoke of it as no hardship that she and her sisters read to him from languages that they couldn't understand. Johnson, on the other hand, reiterates the report of Newton that Milton's granddaughter spoke ill of him and stated that he would not let his daughters 'learn to write, which he thought unnecessary for a woman'. Johnson, *Lives* I: 139 fn. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Hayley's catalogue of Romney's letters, British Library Add. Mss. 30805, March 26: 'Thanks for advice concerning his Picture of Milton—and to Tom for transcript from Milton'; April 22, 'Thanks for Hints relating to his Milton and for new pictures'.



effectively indicates Milton's blindness with skeletal dark holes, aided by the tenebrism of the baroque lighting. Milton was known to have had light brown hair parted in the middle, and was called 'the Lady' in his youth for his loveliness. Hayley emphasized Milton's physical beauty and he quotes Aubrey's epigram that Milton's 'harmonical and ingenuous soul dwelt in a beautiful and well proportioned body'.<sup>97</sup> Johnson, on the other hand, cites Richardson's account that Milton was 'not of the heroick stature' and 'narrowly escaped from being short and thick'.<sup>98</sup> Both Johnson and Hayley repeat the description that an elderly clergyman gave to Richardson of Milton about the time of his composing *Paradise Lost* as 'pale but not cadaverous', dressed in black clothes, his hands and fingers gouty with chalk stones, to be found seated in a 'small chamber hung with rusty green'.<sup>99</sup> But Hayley does not include the account from Richardson that Milton 'composed much in the morning and dictated in the day, sitting obliquely in an elbow-chair with his leg thrown over the arm', a description more in accord with Johnson's characterization of the rebel who 'felt not so much the love of liberty as repugnance to authority'.<sup>100</sup> A drawing in the Fitzwilliam Museum of Milton in the unmannerly attitude of draped leg and slipperless foot (fig. 190) suggests that Romney was attracted to Johnson's image of the 'surly republican'. A sketchbook at Princeton University that features a cluster of drawings of Milton amid other contemporaneous subjects, such as *Titania Reposing*, Howard groups, and *Paradise Lost* scenes, proves that he gave considerable thought to developing the picture in this direction: not only does Milton exhibit the irreverent body language of flung leg and broodingly crossed arms, Romney has also tried out a gesture of a defiantly raised arm, as seen in some of his Satan studies (fig. 191). Indeed, a fairly large and finished oil sketch (fig. 192) argues that Milton in a non-erect attitude was considered for the final painting, though Hayley must have argued that it lacked decorum—his biography stressed that those who knew Milton 'regarded him as a model of manly grace and dignity in his figure and deportment'.<sup>101</sup> But Johnson reported a different manly trait—Milton was 'vigorous and active, and delighted in the exercise of the sword, in which he is related to have been eminently

<sup>97</sup> Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1796, 195.

<sup>98</sup> Johnson, *Lives* I: 151.

<sup>99</sup> Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 196; Johnson, *Lives* I: 135.

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, *Lives* I: 152, 156-7.

<sup>101</sup> Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1796, 195. For a discussion of other preliminary studies see Kidson, *George Romney*, 223, n. 12.



skilful'.<sup>102</sup> The studies in the Princeton sketchbook and a sketchy study on a loose sheet (fig. 193) shows that Romney gave serious thought to presenting Milton in a more dynamic pose, which contrasts with the passive bearing of the finished painting. In the end, Romney's illustration of Milton, with its green-tinged room and his pallor and black clothes, is largely consonant with that of the clergyman, though Romney does not exhibit the gouty hands. Instead, he has hidden them under the flowing drapery of the formless banyan, beneath which can be discovered that Milton's arms are crossed in the slouched posture of the preliminary studies, and this final positioning is not unlike that in Romney's own self-portrait (see fig. 85).

George Nicol appreciated how important Romney's portrait was in presenting the right Milton to their readers, and Romney may or may not have been aware that he, too, was concerning himself with the composition of the painting. Hayley wrote to Nicol 10 March 1793 that he would

certainly give the Hint you desire to our dear Romney, & indeed I have some other important Hints to give him on the *same picture*—there must be I think but *one Daughter* introduc'd, for the *two Eldest* were counterparts of those two amiable Ladies of your acquaintance *Gonerill & Regan*, or as a Welsh Knight said to James the 2d of his two *royal Daughters* "please yr Majesty they are both B\_\_\_chs by G\_d".<sup>103</sup>

The Fitzwilliam study attests that Romney at some point did include just one daughter reading, but in the finished painting, Deborah, as amanuensis appears dutifully recording her father's dictation, thus affirming Hayley's argument of parental-filial harmony. But, more controversially, Romney has added the least favourite daughter, Mary, reading, despite the doubts that Johnson raised on this issue; yet her intimidated glance towards Milton's imposing form is suggestive of the resentment of one 'condemned to the performance of reading and exactly pronouncing' languages not understood at the whim of the father.<sup>104</sup> As Romney did in so many other places, he

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<sup>102</sup> Johnson, *Lives* I: 150.

<sup>103</sup> Hayley papers XXVI, Fitzwilliam Museum. Romney's letter of 26 March acknowledging Hayley's advice on the picture must refer to this. In the Boydell advertisement of 15 May 1793, Romney's upcoming picture is described as 'A Print representing Milton when blind, dictating the *Paradise Lost* to his daughter writing, from a capital Picture painted by Mr. Romney', which suggests at this stage the Boydells expected just one daughter.

<sup>104</sup> Johnson, *Lives* I: 145. There is an inherent contradiction in Johnson's biography where the girls are variously said to have been forbidden to learn to read or write while in other places their pronouncement of the foreign languages and their taking dictation is freely referred to. Phillips's biography had stated that Anne, the eldest daughter, due to a bodily infirmity was excused from this



has within the principles of continuous narrative combined separate textual anecdotes into one scene—the daughters are simultaneously being dictated to while Milton is being read to. But this artful construct more successfully evokes Milton's divided nature and ambivalent reputation than did Hayley's bland portrait of the poet. Romney's Milton is the rebellious republican, the austere Puritan, the harsh parent, the melancholy visionary poet, and has *character*.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, a comparison between the painting and the print that was bound into the Boydell edition of Hayley's *Life of Milton* (fig. 194) suggests that Hayley or Nicol stood over the engraver advising him to soften the scowl of the down-turned mouth, lighten the brow, and give the hair a more youthful bounce. This slightly rejuvenated portrait represents better the Milton who 'resembled his own Adam in the comeliness of his person'.<sup>106</sup>

Hayley had very definite ideas about Romney's portraiture and did not hesitate to request adjustments to bring physiognomies into line with his own conceptions, especially regarding those portraits in which he had a personal stake. Surviving correspondence illuminates the manufacture of Romney's late portraits of Hayley—which also happened to include the artist's self-portrait. In his biography of Romney, Hayley introduced the topic of two group portraits begun at Earham around 1795-6 as evidence that the artist 'never exercised his pencil with so much pleasure, as when he employed it in a disinterested manner, to indulge the feelings of friendship'.<sup>107</sup> Both *Flaxman Modelling the Bust of Hayley*, which Hayley referred to as 'the great picture' (fig. 195) and *The Four Friends* (fig. 196) on the surface present Hayley as the presiding genius among congenial spirits, but a measure of subversion on the part of the artist may also be read into these images. In each picture Romney has introduced his own portrait though in each case he is marginalised to the periphery of

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task of reading. Johnson may not have known of the document showing the signatures of the daughters—Anne's was only a mark, confirming her illiteracy. Johnson, *Lives* I: 159, n. 6.

<sup>105</sup> The writer in the *Monthly Review* (Feb. 1795) who found this feature missing from Hayley's *Life of Milton* did not comment on Romney's illustration: Benjamin Smith's engraving of it was only published by the Boydells 4 June 1795, therefore, the early pressings of the *Poetical Works* Vol. I did not include the print. Hayley seems to have acted as a negotiator between Romney and the Boydells on this issue, and a letter to Nicol 7 March 1794 probably refers to this. It reads, 'I thought I had settled all yr perplexities to yr perfect Gratification. The delay you regret arises solely from yr own Failure in an absolute promise—a Failure that astonish'd & has involved me in a very curious situation—'. Hayley papers XXIV, Fitzwilliam Museum.

<sup>106</sup> Hayley, *Life of Milton*, 1796, 92. It is tempting to argue that the engraver has also added a floral print to Milton's chair, not visible in the original painting, to relieve some of the austerity of the décor, but the now poor condition of the painting makes any such conjecture hazardous.

<sup>107</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 240.



the composition and truncated by its edges. Indeed, the preliminary drawing for the great picture (fig. 197) suggests that the absent artist was only considered for the painting at a later stage. Joseph Wright had been persuaded to give some informal drawing lessons to Hayley's son, Thomas, in Derby in 1794, and in 1795 Thomas was installed at Flaxman's house as an official apprentice to 'Praxiteles' and was often found at Cavendish Square visiting the 'Caro Pittore', drawing in the new sculpture gallery.<sup>108</sup> The great picture commemorates Thomas's tutelage under Flaxman, Romney, and above all, his father, whom Thomas addressed in his letters 'Prophet'. Hayley wrote to Flaxman 15 November 1794 discussing plans for Thomas and expressing delight that the sculptor had approved of Romney's recent Milton painting, and he says that he hoped they would all 'animate one another to the happy accomplishment of many creditable productions'. He also mentions that he was commencing a didactic poem on sculpture and would be relying on Flaxman's assistance as much as his 'little disciple' did.<sup>109</sup> Yet despite the beneficial reciprocity among these people, this painting posits Hayley as the oversized source of the artistic centrifugality: he is being simultaneously sculpted by Flaxman and, presumably, painted on the canvas that Romney hides behind.<sup>110</sup> The great picture would surely fulfil the expectations of Anna Seward, who, writing Hayley of his influence on her and a poetaster friend remarked, 'See how we little satellites move around you, our Jupiter!'<sup>111</sup>

In his biography of Romney, Richard Cumberland mentioned *Flaxman Modelling the Bust of Hayley* as one of Romney's larger portraits, 'historically grouped, and another,

<sup>108</sup> See the letters between Hayley and his son while he was in London in Hayley papers, Add Mss. 2817, West Sussex Public Record Office. Many of these are reproduced in *Memoirs of Thomas Alphonso Hayley*, Volume II in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*.

<sup>109</sup> Hayley papers IX, Fitzwilliam Museum. *An Essay on Sculpture: In A Series of Epistles to John Flaxman, Esq. R.A.* was finally published in 1800, delayed by the serious and ultimately fatal illness of Hayley son, yet in his *Memoirs* (II: 449) Hayley states that it was the dying wish of Thomas that the *Essay* be completed which provided the impetus to finish and publish it.

<sup>110</sup> A bust of this size of Hayley is not known. Alex Kidson points out that the preliminary study shows an in-progress bust of much more modest dimensions. See *George Romney*, 229-31. Thomas wrote to his father 1 Jan. 1797 of a recent dinner with friends at Cavendish Square, where Hayley's portrait by Romney was produced and Thomas brought out 'my first little clay model of you'. West Sussex PRO.

<sup>111</sup> Seward to Hayley, 10 May 1788, *Letters of Anna Seward* II: 121. There is every reason to suspect that Hayley would have had a hand in the iconography of the portrait—some time after this portrait was begun Hayley sent an allegorical sketch of his own design to Thomas and Flaxman featuring their likenesses and the insignias of their profession plus those of Romney; this design, whether to be painted or sculpted, was meant to illustrate the Three Ages. Letter from Hayley to Thomas spring 1797, *Memoirs of Hayley* II: 322.



in which he has introduced himself, thrown into the back-ground, and in shade, an interesting groupe'.<sup>112</sup> John Romney referred to this last as a 'Conversation Subject', which he first heard of in a letter from his father of 10 November 1796 discussing his recent long but much-needed rest at Eartham. To justify extending his stay there, 'and to amuse Mr Hayley I began a Picture of four Friends, and compleated it—Hayley, Tom, young Myers, and My self, which is thought one of my best Pictures'.<sup>113</sup> Hayley considered this picture, titled by the artist himself *The Four Friends*, of Romney, Thomas and his admired sculpture of Minerva, Thomas's friend William Meyer in his Cambridge gown, and Romney's 'friend of Eartham, seated at a table with Tully's Essay on Friendship before him', as unfinished. In fact, he thought that some of the heads in both of the portraits needed work but he was especially vocal about Romney's portraits of himself. Hayley frequently urged Thomas to exhort Romney to finish these paintings

and particularly to do more justice to his own expressive countenance, desiring him to remember, that as he was so kind as to paint his own features to please me, they ought to be full of intelligence and kindness, their proper and native characteristics. It is rather surprising, that the artist whose pencil had delicately flattered so many faces, did to seem to think himself entitled to be commonly civil to his own in the two pictures, where he was requested to introduce a good resemblance of himself in the group of his friends. From an excess of modesty, or from capricious indolence, to which the most active mortals are now and then subject, he has so slighted each portrait of himself, in the two pictures I allude to, that both may be considered rather as caricatures, than fair likenesses of the painter.<sup>114</sup>

Yet Romney never altered either picture to Hayley's satisfaction. Hayley's frustrations over the great picture only grew when he discovered that the painting, which remained with Romney, was not to be a gift to him outright, but only to be in his possession during his lifetime and then to go to Romney's old friend Thomas Greene. After Romney retired to the North in 1799, much enfeebled, an unseemly exchange of bickering letters took place over several years between Hayley and Greene and John Romney concerning the painting. Hayley implored Romney to adjust his will regarding this bequest; Romney did not. John Romney, concerned about his father's posthumous reputation, considered the picture an example of

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<sup>112</sup> Richard Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. Romney', *European Magazine* (June 1903), 422.

<sup>113</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 240-1; MAES ES23093, Pierpont Morgan Library Dept. of Literary and Historical Mss.

<sup>114</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 240, 253-4. Hayley says also that the larger picture, although well intentioned, was never finished either, for Romney intended 'to repaint two of the heads', or rather, Hayley *wished* him to do so.



Romney's excellence and wished to have it engraved. An incensed Hayley began a new campaign of letters spring 1801, and wrote to an increasingly ailing Romney begging him not to allow the picture to be engraved so as to 'retrieve me from Pains of Heart, that I little deserve to feel'.<sup>115</sup> Ostensibly, the recent death of Thomas Hayley was what would have caused this pain had the picture entered the public domain as an engraving, but he had long been disturbed by the imagery. Hayley finally acquired temporary possession of it, and after Greene died in 1810, it was sent on to his heirs. Hayley requested their mutual friend William Long take on the role of middleman and keep it for the Greene heir. Long, an amateur artist, had been accustomed to touching up and adding to Romney's paintings, and Hayley requested that he do 'what our dear Romney intended to do himself, but left undone, namely to paint over my Head once more, & take from it some of that sour, & fierce, Expression, which might suit a portrait of *Dionysus at Corinth* but not a peaceful *Hermit of the South*'.<sup>116</sup> Hayley must have seen that in the two friendship pictures Romney's 'caricatures' of himself, half-smiling sardonically, undermined the seriousness of the projects and highlighted the pomposity of 'the Hermit'.

Romney's wife, now taking care of her retired husband in his last days, desired a copy in oils of the great picture. Hayley advised against this as it was such a poor representation of the artist, and he suggested instead that she receive as a present a copy of another of his self-portraits, which would be copied by 'the good enthusiastic Blake, whom I have taught, with the aid of Meyer's and your portraits, to paint miniatures with considerable success'.<sup>117</sup> One of these self-portraits was a pastel rendering in spectacles that Romney had done during his last trip to Earham in February 1799 to 'gratify his host'. But Hayley found that Romney had made himself too placid and smiling and had his son copy and improve it, giving Romney an aspect that 'exhibited more faithfully the energy of his character'.<sup>118</sup> It appears that Thomas's version is the one included in the frontispiece of Hayley's *Life of George*

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<sup>115</sup> See Hayley's letter to Romney in Kendal, which appears here copied in a letter from John Romney to Greene, MSL 1957/942/10-2, National Art Library. See related letters in the Osborn Mss. 7040, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Dawson-Greene family papers, Lancashire Public Record Office.

<sup>116</sup> Hayley to Long, 20 Dec. 1810, Osborn Mss. 7040, Beinecke Library, Yale. Long is not known to have taken possession of the painting or to have painted over it. The painting remained in the Dawson-Greene family until the twentieth century.

<sup>117</sup> Hayley to Romney in Kendal, 21 April 1801, Osborn Mss. 7040, Beinecke Library, Yale.

<sup>118</sup> *Memoirs of Hayley* II: 452.



*Romney* (fig. 198), in which he has constructed his idea, with the help of Caroline Watson, of the three ages of Romney—youth, middle age, and old age. Hayley had attempted to control Romney's image in life and after his death; and yet Hayley even had the final say on *The Four Friends* after his own death: never happy with Romney's self-portrait in this painting, Hayley approved when 'a very judicious artist, who has great respect for the talents of Romney, and who wished to make a finished drawing of this group omitted the head in question, to avoid being an accomplice with a man of genius in treating his own character of countenance with such glaring injustice'.<sup>119</sup> This is the version which Caroline Watson engraved and which was used as a frontispiece for Hayley's autobiography, published in 1823 posthumously; now the four congenial friends are down to three (fig. 199).

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<sup>119</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 254.



## CONCLUSION

Romney died 15 November 1802 in Kendal surrounded by his family after suffering one or more devastating strokes. His son John later complained bitterly of the contrast between the graves of Zoffany and Gainsborough in Kew chapel yard and Reynolds's monument in St. Paul's and that of his father, in an 'obscure country churchyard' in Dalton near his birthplace, with no monument to 'distinguish him from the common herd of mankind'.<sup>1</sup> John stated that this last insult—a local M.P. refused him permission to erect a monument—was owing to his final illness, brought on by his years of 'intense application', which saw the departure of his mind before his body; thus he 'lost all the éclat, that marks the abrupt departure of Genius'.<sup>2</sup> John was also indignant about the biography that William Hayley had published in 1809. As early as 1801 John seems to have anticipated that he would not be happy with anything that Hayley wrote about his father and tacitly had in mind a defensive comeback biography of his own. He told Romney's old friend Thomas Greene, 'I can assure you that Hayley is a villain, and I can prove it. I cd wish to live if it were only to defend myself against the calumnies of Hayley, for I am sure he will abuse me shd I die before him.'<sup>3</sup> But Hayley's main impetus in writing the Romney biography was the memoir that Richard Cumberland submitted to the *European Magazine* for June 1803, which contained the offensive (to Hayley) remark that Romney was 'never seen at any of the tables of the great, Lord Thurlow excepted'—that and the promise made to Romney during 'one of our socially studious mornings' to, if he should outlive the artist, write a biography based on memoranda that Romney himself had supplied.<sup>4</sup> Hayley declared that he was writing a less distorted account, and having faced the moral question of whether or not a confidential biographer should display the 'failings' and 'imperfections' of their friend, he feels sure that 'could the great artist himself answer such a question from the tomb', he would express his positive affirmation. But the imperfections that Hayley exposes largely stem from Romney's excesses of genius and sensibility, and this biography operates from the same

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<sup>1</sup> Draught of John Romney's letter to the editor of *The Monthly Magazine* for April 1817, NAL Ms. L1957/942/10/22.

<sup>2</sup> John instead installed a marble 'cenotaph' with an urn in relief at the church of Kendal, still in situ. For his letter 12 May 1815 to Lord George Cavendish, who did not allow the erection of the monument at Dalton, see NAL 1957/942/10/23.

<sup>3</sup> John Romney to Thomas Greene, 19 July 1801, Dawson-Greene Papers DD Gr C2/3/84, Lancashire County Public Record Office.

<sup>4</sup> Hayley, *The Life of George Romney, Esq.* (London: T. Payne, 1809), 2-11.



underlying principles that drove his account of Milton: at heart Hayley was a eulogizing epitaphist.<sup>5</sup> Longevity offered John the opportunity to supersede his foe's writings, and he waited until after Hayley's death in 1820 to begin work on his own Romney biography. John asked Flaxman's permission to reproduce some of his correspondence with Romney, and he must have felt finally vindicated by the opinions that Flaxman expressed on the flawed methodology of Hayley's biography:

I am not surprised at your desire to correct misstatements in the published life of a father so eminent in his art, adorned besides with qualities equally rare and valuable. I am sure his late biographer intended to honour his memory with his best judgment; we may sometimes think we have offered a splendid tribute, where glitter supplies the place of reality, and false sentiment usurps the place of real principle; how much it is to be regretted such publications abound at present! They blind the understanding, and destroy the religious and moral sense of right. A son's corrections are, perhaps, the best antidotes, although the task is delicate and difficult.<sup>6</sup>

The friends of Romney were not satisfied with the short obituary-biographies that appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and *Monthly Magazine* within two months of his death and nominated Richard Cumberland to produce a longer biography as soon as possible, 'or a less accurate account may come from some other hand'.<sup>7</sup> Although these old friends pooled their resources to supply Cumberland with biographical details, the potential author was reluctant to take on the job; he had in mind writing a more scholarly biography based on real criticism of the works and complained that he did not have enough materials before him, such as a list of the finished paintings and the 'Sketches, taken mostly by candle-light, which I conceive as highly valuable'. Cumberland worried that without a proper review of the works, his biography could go no further than the obituaries already published, for 'the life of a man, whose habits were of that retir'd cast, which mark'd the character of Mr. Romney, is very unproductive of events, and the narrative must be uninteresting'.<sup>8</sup> Cumberland's misgivings were justified as in the 'Memoirs of Mr. George Romney' he is able to do little more than enumerate Romney's paintings, and he focuses his narrative on

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<sup>5</sup> See Noel H. Osborne, *The Epitaph Book of William Hayley* (Chichester County Council, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> John Romney, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830), 232.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Thomas Greene to William Long, 9 Dec. 1802, Osborn Mss. 7040 Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>8</sup> Cumberland to Greene, 13 Jan. 1803, Mss. DD Gr C2/3/24 Lancashire PRO; Cumberland to Greene, April 2003, *The Letters of Richard Cumberland*, ed. by Richard J. Dircks (New York: AMS Press, 1988), 287.



Romney's life story and his character as a primitive-genius type. Clearly, Cumberland never considered divulging in the memoir those biographical details—most likely not 'uninteresting'—that were discussed among Romney's friends. Cumberland remarked to Greene that Romney was 'betrayed into Impurities, which Morality cannot pardon, tho' Candour may fairly plead that he kept his Weakness out of sight and never offended the Decorum of Society, or lost his Respect for Virtue, tho his Practice did not strictly conform to it'. This unnamed weakness was part of the failings that 'sunk him in his own Esteem, sapp'd his Constitution, anticipated all the Symptoms of old age, & finally struck him down into the Grave, a man worn out before his Time'.<sup>9</sup> Robert Southey's review of Hayley's autobiography notes that his *Epistle to Romney* failed to make Romney a successful history painter, and despite the artist's assimilation in Rome of the noble principles of art,

his conduct was not consistent with this magnanimity; there was a moral infirmity in his nature, so that, with many generous and noble qualities, he acted an unfeeling and wicked part in life; and if the numerous sketches of what he intended to do did not evince that he possessed the highest powers of conception, posterity would be little able to infer it from what he had done. The artist, as well as the man, was ruined by moral weakness, and he lost the fame and forfeited the happiness which were both within his reach.<sup>10</sup>

Hayley quipped in a letter to Greene that Romney had 'as many *sultanas* as an *asiatic prince*'.<sup>11</sup> But Hayley's private correspondence with Romney suggests that he was a partner in at least some of the artist's vices: in a letter written around the time of their trip to Paris in 1790, Hayley negotiates with Romney the destiny of a certain '*Rustic Parisian*', who, it is proposed, should be brought to Earham to ascertain 'how far she might suit either *either you or me*, as a *lasting connection of a serious nature*'. Either way, Romney had 'the *prior claim*', and Hayley promises not to interfere in this 'mischief' unless Romney is '*too prudent or too nobly employed to be fully in love*

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<sup>9</sup> Part of a letter from Cumberland to Greene, transcribed by Greene in his letter to William Long 9 Dec. 1802, Osborn Mss. 7040 Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>10</sup> Review of *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, in *Quarterly Review* Vol. 31 no. 62 (1825), 281. Southey notes that Hayley's biographies of Romney and Cowper were feeble and more remarkable for what they suppressed than for what they communicated. John Hoppner's review of Hayley's biography of Romney in the *Quarterly Review* (Nov. 1809) had also been harsh towards the artist; he implied that Hayley's panegyric-style of writing was convenient for covering up a multitude of sins.

<sup>11</sup> Hayley to Thomas Greene, 13 Dec. 1789, Dawson-Greene Papers DD Gr C2/3/33 Lancashire PRO.



*with her yourself perhaps I may be less discreet & more romantic*'.<sup>12</sup> All the biographies generally observe the Neoplatonic philosophy that an artist's works are the mirror to his or her soul; but the limited views of Romney presented negate that dictum; the viewer cannot properly judge Romney's art or soul without being given the full picture. The aspects of Romney's life and career that so incensed his nineteenth-century commentators—the desertion of his wife in 1762 and his crush on Lady Hamilton—were apparently red herrings: those mysterious, deeper 'failings' could have formed the basis of much more valuable and interesting biographies than those that channelled Romney into the formulaic conceptions of artists found in the long tradition of writings on art.

Whatever was the nature of those 'awkward circumstances' in his past that Romney regretted in a semi-confessional letter to the Rev. Samuel Greatheed in 1795, he vowed to respond to his correspondent's Christian advice and stop employing the Lord's Day for the vain and worldly purpose of portraiture and turn his attention to the less profitable field of history painting, and especially to religion.<sup>13</sup> This he did, only Romney's religion was the version found in the poetry of John Milton. John Romney says that his father's designs from Milton were his last, and he asserts that he had the first of his strokes while working on *The Temptation of Christ from Paradise Regained* around 1796 (figs 200 and 201.).<sup>14</sup> Hayley had the head of the passive Christ excerpted from one of the suitably frenetic, sublime designs of this subject and engraved for the biography (fig. 202). In the dozen illustrations that ornament his

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<sup>12</sup> Hayley to Romney (undated but upon internal evidence, 1790), MSL 1957/942/27 National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum. The woman under discussion was probably 'Thelassic', the French dancer whose presence at Cavendish Square caused some sort of falling out between Romney and his son in the early 1790s.

<sup>13</sup> Romney to the Reverend Mr. Greatheed, 3 June 1795, copy of a letter from a Sotheby's sale, 1930, Whitley Papers 1291, British Museum. There are three letters from Greatheed to Romney in NAL MSL 1948/4031, two written in May advising him on Christianity, and one written 4 June 1795 in response to Romney's letter above, in which Greatheed expresses delight that Romney was intending to stop working on Sundays: 'I consider any instance of a person who has lived many years inattentive to religion, becoming a resolute and steadfast Christian, as great a miracle of Divine Power as the Resurrection of a Corpse from the Grave'. Romney probably knew Greatheed through Cowper, but Greatheed had himself sat to Romney in April of 1795 (on weekdays). Romney's diaries for 1795 show him receiving sitters on Sundays on average once or twice a month; after this letter to Greatheed in June there appears no real slacking off of this practice. See Ward and Roberts, *George Romney* (London: Agnew's, 1904) Volume I, Diaries.

<sup>14</sup> Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 253, 266. Hayley says the stroke took place while painting the *Ages of Man* (*Life of Romney*, 288). There are many contenders for 'the last' sketches or paintings Romney ever made. In another place John claims that his last subject was *Lear*, *Memoirs of Romney*, 26; the Christie's 1834 catalogue of John's collection calls a portrait of Hayley his last.



biography of Romney, Hayley mostly ignored the advice of Flaxman and Blake to include the noblest of his studies, such as the black chalk cartoons, in favour of Emma *en rôle* fancy pictures. John's biography was unillustrated but he had his own method of editing and shaping Romney's body of work through the bequests of drawings to the Fitzwilliam Museum, 1817, and cartoons to the Liverpool Royal Institute, 1823. In writing to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, John refers to the group of 164 drawings as the '*Store Pictorio*' of studies made in his leisure and committed to his portfolio as the basis for future great works: 'You will perceive that they are extremely slight, but such they were intended to be, they possess none the less, all the great essentials of a picture, colouring alone excepted, but they particularly excel in a powerful & accurate expression of the passions & feelings of the mind'. But John's language turns more Romantic in describing their actual creation—'they are the imbodyed ideas, the embryos of future pictures, snatched from oblivion during the fervid moments while the impression was yet strong upon the imagination'.<sup>15</sup> And this forked language reflects the nature of the gift: a blend of strongly classicist subjects treated in Romney's most controlled strokes in a relatively finished manner along with some bolder compositions in pen and ink and wash and subjects such as conjuring scenes from Aeschylus, Shakespeare, or Gray.

It may have been easy enough to interpret the thousands of drawings that Romney left behind as stores for future grand works but it was harder to explain why so few of those works were ever finished. John would rather blame the poor taste of the times than imply that the sketches were not developed or paintings not finished due to Romney's indolence or a lack of concern with his eternal legacy. But in carping about Romney's enforced drudgery in portraiture and the poor patronage for anything else John fails to point out that what subject pictures his father *did* finish mostly found ready buyers. Hayley's task is more difficult, for having devoted so much effort to providing Romney with literary advice, and having asserted that Romney's main interest was not short-term gain but posthumous glory, he must therefore indict the artist's personal failings for his disappointing output in the face of the multitude of drawings, amid which he 'fell at last, like a Titan overwhelmed by the mountainous

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<sup>15</sup> John Romney to the Rev. William Wells, NAL Ms. L1957/942/77.



fragments, that he had piled upon himself'.<sup>16</sup> Hayley, John, and Cumberland all agree that Romney lacked a consistent, methodical approach to finishing his paintings, and with a bit more management and patience for the laborious and tedious parts of his art he could have accomplished great things. Essentially, his biographers were not equipped to seriously consider that Romney might not have necessarily wanted to finish all of these designs, nor could they really appreciate Romney's most modernist impulses.

Romney's pupil during the mid-1780s, Thomas Robinson, spoke of his master's constant sketching and thought that 'some of those sketches have great merit, and gave me, at that time, a greater idea of his genius, than even what he painted: he certainly had an idea of having some of them engraved'.<sup>17</sup> Romney enthused over Flaxman's outline drawings of Dante and Homer that were engraved, and from them Romney 'caught a portion of his soul': they were 'in the style of antient art' and 'much to the old cathedral, simple, and pure' (fig. 203).<sup>18</sup> In his embrace of avant-garde/archaic linearism or in his expressionistic and abstract pen and ink splodges (fig. 204). Romney is at odds with the academic idea of artistic progress as a move towards greater naturalism. Romney's designs often display a defiantly anti-naturalistic, mannerist ethic that forgoes the demands of correct anatomy and rational perspective (fig. 205). Reynolds decried those *pittori improvvisatori* who dashed out the flashes of their imagination—while sketching certainly had its advantages to the artist, the 'evil to be apprehended is, his resting there, and not correcting them afterwards from nature'.<sup>19</sup> Between the two theories on the ideal method of imitating

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<sup>16</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 327. The theme of Romney's failures as a history painter is one that Hayley returns to more than once: see also 79-83, 172, 329-31. See John Romney, *Memoirs of Romney*, 129, 145. Richard Cumberland, 'Memoirs of Mr. Romney', *European Magazine* (June 1803), 421-2.

<sup>17</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 323. Romney, like many other artists, collected drawings, perhaps in the same spirit as had Vasari: to catch the painter's first thoughts of invention, thoughts ripest in 'artistic fury'. The 1805 T. Philips sale catalogue of Romney's prints and drawings includes works attributed to Michelangelo, Bandinelli, Pietro Testa, Giulio Romano, Raphael, the Carracci, and Guido Reni among others.

<sup>18</sup> Letters from Romney to Hayley, 2 Aug. 1793 and 26 Sept. 1794. Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 203, 221. For Flaxman's published designs see Sarah Symmons, 'The Spirit of Despair: Patronage, Primitivism and the Art of John Flaxman' *Burlington* 117 (1975): 644-650; *John Flaxman, R.A.*, ed. by David Bindman (Royal Academy of Arts, 1979). Bindman (p.86) suggests that Flaxman did not appreciate the outline drawings in the same manner as did Romney—rather, he saw them as designs for later sculptures and was somewhat bemused at their positive reception.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. by Robert W. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), Discourse XII, 1784, 214. For the philosophies regarding the imitation and idealisation of nature formulated as early as the trecento and still current in Reynolds's thought see



nature contested in academic theory—the imitation of the finished product of creation (*natura naturata*) or the imitation of the act of creation itself (*natura naturans*)—Romney leaned towards the latter and privileged the creative process.<sup>20</sup> This is in distinction to his literary friends, such as Hayley, Cumberland, Anna Seward, and Helen Maria Williams, who returned to their works in subsequent editions, altering and correcting, polishing and re-editing them, valuing finished product, as opposed to Romney's respect for the integrity of the original creation. His greater spontaneity brought him into line with the discourse of original genius, which extolled poets, like Shakespeare, who created in unfettered transport, and encouraged writers to imitate not the works of original geniuses but their manner of creativity. From Reynolds's earliest Discourses onward he warned artists against those 'dazzling excellencies, which they will find no great labour in attaining' and the seductive notion put forth in writings about the arts that genius was 'a kind of *inspiration*, as a *gift* bestowed upon peculiar favourites at their birth', whereas actually, genius was 'the child of imitation', born of hard work and methodical application.<sup>21</sup> Even Fuseli, probably the greater rival to Romney given his many sublime and flamboyant drawings and paintings that appeared to be the impetuous dashings of divine fury, betrays his academic principles in his assessment of Romney's career. Fuseli enunciated what the Romney partisan-biographers avoided saying, that Romney the portraitist deferred his career as a history painter to a 'distant moment when satiety of gain should yield to the pure desire of glory, a moment which never came'. Ultimately, 'his life furnishes a signal proof of the futility of the idea that genius is of a passive quality, and may be laid by or taken up as a man pleases'.<sup>22</sup>

In such viewpoints Romney cannot be construed as anything other than a failed history painter and a tragic case. In this perspective Hayley's *Epistle to Romney*, which elevated history paintings over portraiture and encouraged the artist to do the

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Ernst Gombrich, 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences' in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1966), 1-10.

<sup>20</sup> For the interpretation of these classically-based theories in post-renaissance academic thought see Jan Bialostocki, 'The Renaissance Concept of Nature and Antiquity', *Renaissance and Modernism* 20 (1963), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse I, 2 Jan. 1769; Discourse VI, 10 Dec. 1774, 17-19, 94-100. Reynolds argued in the first Discourse that Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* offered proof that the most eminent artists reached their position by hard work, and their increased fame only spurred even greater industry.

<sup>22</sup> *A Dictionary of Painters from the Revival of the Art to the Present Period* by the Rev. M. Pilkington, ed. by H. Fuseli (London: J. Johnson, 1805), 465-6.



same, was an embarrassment to the author and the recipient of the address. But to accept such a simplistic construal of Romney's life is to overlook the advantages he wrought from his relationship with Hayley and other literary contacts that contributed to his career as a draughtsman, history painter, and portraitist. Romney, like most other contemporary British artists, lacked the polyglot skills of Fuseli and a few others but was enfranchised in the world of classical erudition—and its store of potential subject-matter—through the growing number of English translations of previously unapproachable texts.<sup>23</sup> Romney's Roman notebooks suggest that he and other artists there shared thoughts on scenes from history and copied down titles of specific books to consult for text and imagery, although passing grand tourists and literary correspondents back home also contributed to the artist's tutelage.<sup>24</sup> Back in England, the popularity of widely-available vernacular poetry and other literature, not to mention the semi-deified Shakespeare and Milton, meant that any artist with ambitions beyond portraiture would not be short of potential subject-matter. And one could argue that the history paintings British artists were attempting were not of the complex allegorical kind adorning the *camerini* of princes that required elaborate written programmes and intellectual assistance.<sup>25</sup> But of course, finding subjects for artists, translating them into the vernacular, and delivering them with directions for their composition was historically not the only service a literary advisor could provide.

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<sup>23</sup> Both Reynolds and Barry seem to have some proficiency in Latin, Italian and French. Fuseli's mastery of Greek was exceptional, though Flaxman was teaching himself the language in the 1790s, as was Blake in the early 1800s, both with the encouragement of Hayley.

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix, entries for Plutarch's Lives and Roman History. James Barry consulted *Polymetis* while in Rome as revealed in his correspondence with a literary friend, and Romney at some point purchased this book of valuable text and imagery for artists interested in antique art. Fuseli and Flaxman relied on books such as Sir William Hamilton's series of engravings after his collection of classical vases, even while in Rome. Romney's travel journal for his trip through France to Italy (Fitzwilliam Museum) finds him discussing ruins he encounters in reference to 'Paladio', a book (perhaps the 1730 Lord Burlington edition of Palladio's works) he was obviously familiar with. Romney is known to have discussed matters of classical art and the manner of proper execution of such subjects with Richard Payne Knight in Rome, only through the survival of the latter's correspondence, and many more encounters probably took place between artists and aesthetes in Rome that are simply undocumented.

<sup>25</sup> Claire Robertson has argued that just as mythographic handbooks that were designed especially for artists engaging in complex paintings appeared, the role of the literary advisor, far from being made redundant actually increases and their involvement becomes better documented. The service of an overall 'architect' was still required to collate and synthesize and put into context the sources to be used and devise their arrangement. And, of course, the literary advisors usually fulfilled a social role, acting as a trusted intermediary between the patron and the artists. 'Annibal Caro as Iconographer: Sources and Method', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (45) 1982: 160-81.



Despite Horace's dictum that as is painting, so is poetry—the basis on which post-renaissance academic theory rested—in actuality, the role of the poet in society and that of the artist were never equal. The literary figure, though, with his or her greater social clout, was able to introduce the artist into society literally and, through poetry or other forms of writing, figuratively. This function was so important that some late-eighteenth-century artists appropriated the role of literary advocate for themselves. Whereas Romney had Cumberland to posit him as the modern Timanthes, James Barry, unable to maintain temperate relationships with his literary friends, particularly Edmund Burke, put himself forward as Timanthes in the self-portrait he included among the crowd in the *Crowning the Victors at Olympia*, one of the series of paintings depicting *The Progress of Human Civilization* at the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce and repeated the conceit in a later self-portrait (fig. 206). Hayley likened Romney to Salvator Rosa in the biography but John Hamilton Mortimer not only identified himself with the Italian artist through his paintings and etchings but also was responsible for the published commentary on the 1772 Society of Artists exhibition in which he was designated 'the English Salvator'.<sup>26</sup> Fuseli was not above praising his own works in the *Analytical Review*, and Reynolds is known to have colluded in the production of Thomas Warton's *Verses on Sir Joshua Reynolds's Painted Window at New-College Oxford*, 1782 and James Beattie's *Dissertations Moral and Critic*, 1783, in which he is mentioned in a flattering light. This involvement supports Mrs. Thrale's remark in 1777 that Reynolds's thoughts 'are tending how to propagate Letters written in his Praise, how to make himself respected as a Doctor at Oxford, and how to disseminate his Praise for himself, now Goldsmith is gone who used to do it for him'.<sup>27</sup> These well-read and highly articulate artists could still rely on the weight of a respected poet when necessary. Fuseli, who had supplied literary advice to Cowper when the poet was translating Homer's Greek, was capable of adopting the traditional artist's role in

<sup>26</sup> See John Sunderland, 'John Hamilton Mortimer and Salvator Rosa', *Burlington* 112 (Aug. 1970), 528.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, The Subject Pictures* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 182. Postle argues that Warton's poem, partially conceived as payback for Reynolds's support for his admission to the Club in 1777 and his appointment as poet laureate, was planned to promote Reynolds's work as the artist pointed out to Warton that originally the poem only referred obliquely to the artist without directly mentioning his name; therefore, 'if the title page should be lost it will appear to be addressed to Mr. Jervais'. This shortcoming was corrected for the next printing. Reynolds reviewed Beattie's *Dissertations* before it was published, and suggested a better way of mentioning himself within the text, providing a proposed re-write of the relevant text. See John Ingamells and John Edgecumbe, *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 107.



the exchange of reciprocal services with literary figures. When his Milton project was struggling financially in 1799 he approached his friend William Roscoe, a respected scholar, and requested that he join others who had praised him in verse. He told Roscoe that 'John Milton must be *puffed*, not to go to the bottom in my Time as he did in *his* own. Verses and paragraphs muse be written, *falsis involventia Vera*', and he asked him to set aside his literary works and 'write me as good or as serviceable a Copy, of Verse as has been written between the time of Homer and Cowper.'<sup>28</sup> That a figure such as Fuseli, who epitomizes the image of the proto-Romantic artist, relied on poetry as puffing to this extent, at this late stage, argues that verse held social currency in the period to an extent that has been greatly underestimated in modern art-historical scholarship. Artists were bound to benefit not only from the poetry about them and their works published in books and more ephemeral newspapers and magazines but also from the verse that was read at private dinners and parties; circulated in private correspondence; and published privately for a small though influential readership.<sup>29</sup>

Hayley, and probably several other of Romney's literary friends, was doubtlessly disappointed that despite his 'signal services' to the artist so few illustrations were finished of subjects that he had recommended—particularly subjects that were directly related to Hayley's own works. He had tried to steer Romney's tastes and output to match his own sentimental style but his ultimate ability to dictate terms was not always guaranteed. In discussing his Shakespearean designs Hayley admitted that Romney took a leading idea from a great poet but transformed it with his 'excursive vigour and richness of fancy'.<sup>30</sup> Romney's form of imitation and emulation of his sources could involve a subversion of the subject through style of execution: Hayley, Mickle, Potter, and Thurlow might not have recognized their delicate but virtuous heroines in the substantial female exemplars of gravitas that fill Romney's drawings

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Fuseli to William Roscoe, 24 May 1799, *The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli*, ed. by David H. Weinglass (New York: Kraus International Publications, 1982), 195. *Verses to Henry Fuseli, Esq RA On His Series of Pictures from the Poetical Works of Milton By Wm Roscoe Esq* appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* June 1799.

<sup>29</sup> The diaries and letters of Fanny Burney, Horace Walpole, Hester Thrale, James Boswell, and other culturally-aware figures demonstrate that verse about artists was a common topic among their friends. Anna Seward was known for her melodious recitations among Lichfield's society, and Hayley's *Memoirs* (I: 244-9) mention her readings of his *Ode to Howard*. Given her adulation of Hayley and all he wrote it is highly likely that the *Epistle to Romney* was made known to her crowd orally if no other way. Hayley's wife, writing to him from Bath, mentions his poetry being read at society parties there.

<sup>30</sup> Hayley, *Life of Romney*, 208-9.



(fig. 207). Two examples of Romney's creative independence and poetic ethic at their highest, the *Indian Woman* and *Milton Dictating*, were among the finished paintings that, in his own opinion, were in a 'great stile' and did him 'greater Credit than any I have painted before....I have had all the critics and they are surprised I do not pursue History'. He did intend to pursue history but in his own way, devising a system of original moral subjects and his series on Milton: 'hence it is my view to wrap myself into retirement, and pursue these plans, as I begin to feel I cannot bear trouble of any kind'.<sup>31</sup> But as his age increased and his health declined amid an unstable social and political climate, he had less appetite for the minutiae of finishing pictures—portraits or subject pictures—in a conventional manner than ever before. But at least his private Miltonic designs were spared the public exposure of Fuseli's paintings as his Milton Gallery failed, despite the poetry in its favour. In the end, the construction of Romney as a sensitive and melancholy outsider, which was meant to advertise his credentials as a serious history painter, may have paradoxically boosted the demand for his portraits from a fashionable clientele attuned to the cult of sensibility, thus undermining the tenets of the *Epistle to Romney*. If Romney entertained any regrets about not ending his portraiture business earlier, he need only observe the example of Fuseli, who had only maintained a career of painting large-scale history by frequently pressing friends for financial assistance or illustrating small books. Romney's financial security enabled him to indulge in drawings and larger designs in an uncompromising manner and to depend little on the demands of fashion. Intending to compare Romney unfavourably with Reynolds and his innovations in pigments and other technical and aesthetic developments, John Hoppner stated that Romney was 'almost the only man we recollect, whose manner underwent no change....'<sup>32</sup> What may have been intended a disparagement by Hoppner was a virtue to Romney's encomiasts: he had consistently tapped into the tragic and the affecting in his subjects and favoured particular themes and visual motifs until the end, making him an attractive figure to write about. During the first

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<sup>31</sup> Romney to John Romney, 15 March 1794, NAL Ms. 1948/4030/3.

<sup>32</sup> John Hoppner in his review of Hayley's *Life of Romney*, *Quarterly Review* (Nov. 1809), reprinted in *Essays on Art by John Hoppner, R.A.* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1908), 102-3. Nearly two centuries later, John Hayes assessed Romney's career in a similar view: 'His best period was between 1775-1780, when he was most under the influence of classical antiquity, notably the flowing draperies of classical sculpture; subsequently his style hardly changed, marked though it was by a gradual deterioration in quality'. *British Paintings of the Sixteenth Through Nineteenth Centuries* (Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 229.



half of the nineteenth century, the many lines written in favour of Romney were relegated to obscurity and his works were demoted in significance. However, the value of Romney's works was fantastically raised in the late nineteenth century, a new era, without the help of—or perhaps *in spite* of—the verse that was originally meant to promote them, while the writings of his literary circle did not undergo any similar renaissance and seem unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future.

Of all the verse written about Romney, perhaps the most prescient was that composed by old friend William Cockin, a schoolteacher of Lancaster. Written in 1769 and published in 1776, *The Journey; A Familiar Epistle from the Country To Mr G. R\_\_\_y, Painter in London* gives the humorous view of a rustic in the metropolis who offers Romney his poetry: A *rhyme*, good Sir,—won't this divert your Spleen? / Yes, if I judge aright, the jingling art / Will ever hold its influence o'er your heart', and credits Romney's art with having exceeded the powers of poetry: "'Tis your's to charm where poets must despair'. But then Cockin foresees a time in the future when all this worldly success is over,

When, the brush thrown by, some demi-gloom,  
A lord-knows-what confines you to your room;  
When rains beat round as if they rain'd in spite,  
No picture auctions in Pall-Mall invite,  
And all that Wit can either do or say  
For once wants force to drag you to the play;  
Then, should old Friends and scenes of youthful joy  
Come o'er your mem'ry and your thoughts employ,  
And housewife fingers from a snug bureau  
To aid the feast, your Northern packets draw,  
Amid the rest 'tis hop'd the present chime,  
This flimsy syllabub whip'd up in rhyme,  
Will help to keep (like flip-flops or a jelly)  
The hungry winds from wambling in your belly.  
Flimsy!—Avaunt!—I can't admit a doubt,  
Though thin the meal, you'll quarrel with the clout;\*  
(\*Alluding to one of our homely proverbs.)  
Secure to please, whate'er its merits be,  
That 'twas well meant, and that it came from me,  
Your faithful friend,  
And servant,  
W.C.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Published in *Occasional Attempts in Verse By W. C.* (Kendal, 1776)



Romney returned to the North in 1799 and moved into a family home. Cockin was persuaded to move in and served as Romney's amanuensis until his own death, under Romney's roof, in 1801. Cockin had supplied the hand that answered Hayley's letters telling of the progress of his protégé William Blake, who was now lodged under Hayley's roof in Sussex carrying out commissions under his patron's watchful eye. But as the first obituaries of Romney were being published in January 1803, Blake was complaining of Hayley that, as a poet 'he is frighten'd at me & as a Painter his views & mine are opposite; he thinks to turn me into a Portrait Painter as he did Poor Romney, but this he nor all the devils in hell will never do'.<sup>34</sup> If any moment could claim to be the beginning of a new era, perhaps this was it.

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<sup>34</sup> William Blake to James Blake, 30 Jan. 1803, *The Letters of William Blake with related documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1980), 50.



## WRITINGS ABOUT ROMNEY IN HIS LIFETIME

The list below cannot pretend to be comprehensive given the ephemeral nature of much of the verse written about art and artists in the period. The correspondence of figures such as Fanny Burney, Horace Walpole, William Hayley, and Anna Seward reveals that many verses were composed not with the intention of being published but rather to be recited at social gatherings or circulated in letters. Or verses might be published privately to be distributed among a select group: in the case of Hayley's *Ode to Joseph Wright of Derby*, written to cheer 'the depressed spirit of a suffering genius', the poem was published privately in 1783 but was included in the 1785 and 1788 editions of *Poems and Plays by William Hayley*. Romney's circle of friends—whether professional literary personalities or not—largely maintained poetic aspirations and composed many informal verses to him but much of this poetry is now lost. Yet there was also a substantial amount of published verse dedicated to Romney: as Allan Cunningham put it, 'nameless bards led the way, and their betters followed, with epistles melodious and long'. The majority of the titles listed below can be interpreted as a means of puffing the artist and his works; it is also notable that they usually appeared at propitious times in the author's literary career and indicate the strong alliance between artists and poets, indeed between *pictura* and *poesis*, in the period.

- 1764 John Halliday, *On Beneficence*. Makes reference to Romney's painting *Death of General Wolfe* and the prize it had won at the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce the previous year.
- 1669 William Cockin. *The Journey; A Familiar Epistle from the Country To Mr G. R\_\_\_y, Painter in London*. Published in 1776 along with other specimens of verse from Romney's friend from the Northwest.
- 1770 Verses Addressed to Romney by Richard Cumberland, *The Public Advertiser* 12 June 1770. Intended to introduce to the public a 'blushing, backward candidate for fame, / At once his country's honour, and its shame'.
- 1776 Cumberland publishes two odes: *To the Sun* and *To Dr. Robert James*. Both were dedicated to Romney, who had returned from Italy after his two-year study-tour. The dedication commends Romney's diligence abroad and his 'disinterested passion' for his art. He is expected to have returned with 'some specimens of so auspicious a sort, that, when encouragement shall provoke



your genius to its full display, we are persuaded you will take rank with the first masters of the highest province and best age of painting’.

- 1777 William Hayley, *Venus to Lady Warwick*, verses in which Venus speaks of guiding Romney’s hand in painting this beautiful woman.
- 1778 William Hayley, *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1779; 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1781, where it is re-named *An Essay on Painting: In Two Epistles to Mr. Romney*. The first of Hayley’s long, didactic poems on the arts, the *Epistle to Romney* offers encouragement to paint important historical pictures, as opposed to portraits, and names specific subjects worthy of painting. Subsequent editions were expanded and reflect Hayley’s ongoing poetic output: the 1781 edition has added verse about Hayley’s current poem *Triumphs of Temper*, which Romney eventually illustrated in four finished paintings.
- 1779 Horace Walpole, verses to Romney’s portrait of Lady Craven, which praise the beauty of the sitter and Romney’s skill: ‘Romney alone, in this fair image caught / Each Charm’s expression and each Feature’s thought’.
- 1782 William Hayley, *Essay on Epic Poetry*. Romney is mentioned in a passage of verse that decries the obstacles to creativity that pedantic critics cause: Romney grows frustrated at listening to a declamation of laws and rules and then presents on the canvass what had been pronounced impossible to depict. Romney is also mentioned flatteringly in a footnote, where Hayley confesses that Romney was often more far-sighted than he was regarding fancy subjects.
- c.1782 Anna Seward, *Epistle to Mr. Romney, Being Presented by Him with a Picture of William Hayley, Esq.* This long poem displays Seward’s knowledge of the old masters and the theories governing painting and poetry. It speaks ekphrastically of John Gay’s melancholy poetry *Sweet William’s Farewell to Black Ey’d Susan* and *’Twas When the Seas Were Roaring*, which Romney was to illustrate.
- 1782 Anna Seward, *Verses on Leaving Eartham*. Written at the end of the late-summer visit to Eartham, where she and Romney first met. She refers to his ‘soul sublime, which, like his pencil, ‘Glows with bold lines, original and strong’.
- 1783 Helen Maria Williams, *Ode on the Peace*, mentions Romney’s designs for *Nature Unveiling to the Infant Shakespeare*, which had not been exhibited and may have only existed in the form of a drawing or large cartoon.
- 1784 William Hayley, *Sonnet on Flaxman’s Bust of Romney*. This was in response to a ‘diminutive, but expressive bust of the painter’ done when all three were together at Eartham. Unpublished but probably circulated privately.
- 1785 Anonymous verses about Romney’s portrait of the ‘Beautiful Miss Shakespear, signed ‘U.B.’



- 1785 Richard Payne Knight. John Romney supposes the verses signed 'RK' were the product of the eminent connoisseur: 'Transcendent artist! How complete thy skill! / Thy power to act is equal to thy will. / Nature and art in thee alike contend / Not to oppose each other, but befriend'.
- c.1785 Verses on Romney's Portrait of John Henderson. John Romney refers to published verses that spoke highly of Henderson but 'the compliment meant for the actor, was unintentionally paid to the painter.'
- 1788 William Hayley, *Sonnet on Romney's Picture of Cassandra*. Published in Hayley's collection of poems, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, but possibly written earlier.
- 1788 Anna Seward, *Impromptu, to George Romney, Esq.* Written as a response to receiving a portrait of herself from Romney.
- 1788 Richard Cumberland, in his series of essays, *The Observer*, inserted into the fourth volume a supposed antique fragment that speaks of ancient painters in veiled reference to modern British ones, specifically three who were currently known to be working on paintings for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery: Reynolds, West, and Romney. Romney is recognized through the discussion of Timanthes and his paintings, and is characterized as modest and retiring, and not emulative of fame.
- c.1791 William Hayley, *Sonnet on Romney's Joan of Arc*. Verses on a never-completed painting based on the sittings that Emma, Lady Hamilton gave Romney in the summer of 1791 and possibly intended for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery.
- 1791 Richard Cumberland, in his *Observer* series, fourth volume, publishes 'a poetic rhapsody in the manner of The Task upon the first view of Attalus's country mansion', which makes brief mention of Romney and Apelles.
- 1791 Richard Cumberland's novel *Arundel* includes verses originally addressed to a painting that Romney had done of Cumberland's wife Eliza, but is here re-worked to flatter 'Louisa'.
1792. William Cowper, *To George Romney, Esq.* Written as a response to the portrait that Romney had done of him while both were at Earham in August 1792. Cowper praises his ability to catch not only 'semblance, but, however faintly shown, The mind's impression too on every face'.
- c.1792 Charlotte Smith wrote verses to Romney about the portrait that he did of her about the same time as the Cowper portrait; she intended to publish the poem along with an edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets*, but in the end, the poem was left out.
- After 1795 John Romney refers to the verses produced some time after Romney painted *Milton and his Daughters* (1793-4), sent by J.C. Cooper in appreciation of the pleasure he had received from a print of this painting (published 1795). The verses show the author's familiarity with the sublime scenes of *Paradise Lost*.



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- Chicago, U.S.A. Chicago Art Institute: one sketchbook.
- Chichester, U.K. West Sussex Public Record Office: Hayley papers.
- Derby, U.K. Derby Local Studies: Joseph Wright papers. Derby Museum and Art Gallery: Joseph Wright correspondence (in Bemrose extra-illustrated *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright, A.R.A.*)
- Derbyshire, U.K. Private Collection: Beridge family papers.
- Durham, U.S.A. Private Collection (now Atlanta High Museum of Art): one sketchbook.
- Essex, U.K. Private Collection: one sketchbook.
- Houston, U.S.A. Houston Museum of Fine Art: one sketchbook.
- Kendal, U.K. Abbot Hall Art Gallery: three sketchbooks, Romney family papers. Kendal Town Hall: Sketchbook.
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Courtauld Institute: three sketchbooks.  
Holborn Public Library: one sketchbook.  
National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum: one sketchbook, Romney family papers (including two 'Hints for Pictures' notebooks), Christie's sale



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