

JOHN BOYDELL'S SHAKESPEARE  
GALLERY AND THE PROMOTION OF  
A NATIONAL AESTHETIC

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a new analysis of John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, an exhibition venture operating in London between 1789 and 1805. It explores a number of trajectories embarked upon by Boydell and his artists in their collective attempt to promote an English aesthetic. It broadly argues that the Shakespeare Gallery offered an antidote to a variety of perceived problems which had emerged at the Royal Academy over the previous twenty years, defining itself against Academic theory and practice. Identifying and examining the cluster of spatial, ideological and aesthetic concerns which characterised the Shakespeare Gallery, my research suggests that the Gallery promoted a vision for a national art form which corresponded to contemporary senses of English cultural and political identity, and takes issue with current art-historical perceptions about the 'failure' of Boydell's scheme.

The introduction maps out some of the existing scholarship in this area and exposes the gaps which art historians have previously left in our understanding of the Shakespeare Gallery. In the first chapter, I examine the spatial construction and location of the Gallery and the extent to which this started to define, from an early stage, the ideological territory which Boydell's venture would come to occupy. The second chapter considers the Gallery's anti-Academic foundations in greater detail, focusing on the reception of Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* in order to illuminate the patriotic and ideological concerns of Boydell and his artists before considering the appeal of James Northcote's paintings from the English history plays. The third and fourth chapters examine works by Henry Fuseli and Robert Smirke respectively, and consider how the particular kinds of artistic identities which these artists promoted in their works were revelatory of qualities which were coming to be seen as peculiarly English. The final chapter follows the reception of the prints and the book edition that emerged as later stages of Boydell's project and demonstrates that - contrary to general art-historical perceptions - the Shakespeare Gallery enjoyed a continued cultural significance well into the nineteenth century.

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## INTRODUCTION

In November 1786, an ageing John Boydell – the proprietor of the most successful print empire of the day – held a dinner at his home to which he invited a number of well-known artists and other professionals with an interest in the visual arts. By the end of the evening these gentlemen believed that they had hit upon a formula which would revive the flagging fortunes of history painting in England. Although there was subsequently some dispute as to who was the originator of the idea, Boydell's guests were in agreement that there was one national subject on whose importance the English public could have no difference of opinion – Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

By the beginning of December, proposals for a scheme had already been drawn up by Boydell, his nephew Josiah and the bookseller George Nichol. The project was to have three main stages. The first involved the commissioning of paintings depicting scenes from Shakespeare's plays, to be painted by leading contemporary artists, including Sir Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, Henry Fuseli, Angelica Kauffman, James Barry, Gavin Hamilton, Joseph Wright of Derby, George Romney, John Opie and James Northcote.<sup>2</sup> These paintings would form a permanent exhibition – the Shakespeare Gallery – and would be painted in one of two different sizes, corresponding to either the second or third

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<sup>1</sup> My account of the Gallery's history is indebted to earlier scholarship on the subject, namely Winifred Friedman, *Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery* (New York and London, 1976); Sven Bruntjen, *John Boydell, 1719-1804: A Study of Art Patronage and Publishing in Georgian England* (New York and London, 1985); Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca, 1992); Robert D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1978) and Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (eds.), *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery* (Bottrop, 1996). These works are discussed in more detail below.

<sup>2</sup> John Singleton Copley's name also appears in the prospectus but he never actually painted a scene for the Gallery. The exact reasons for this are unknown, although we can guess that he was probably too immersed in painting his monumental *Siege of Gibraltar* to be able to accept another commission. He was certainly on good terms with Boydell, who had commissioned his *Death of Major Pierson* (as well as Woollett's engraving after it) and *The Siege of Gibraltar*. Boydell also approached Gainsborough to paint a subject for the Shakespeare Gallery, but would not pay the £1000 fee which the artist demanded for such a painting.

stage of the project.<sup>1</sup> The second stage involved the commissioning of a series of engravings after the larger paintings, to be executed by the country's most prestigious printmakers and bound into an atlas-sized folio. Finally, the smaller paintings would be reproduced as smaller, quarto-sized prints, to be incorporated into an eight-volume edition (it later became nine volumes) of Shakespeare's plays, the literary aspect of which would be overseen by the literary editor George Steevens.<sup>2</sup>

This was an ambitious project, and a costly one. Between 1786 and 1789, the proprietors of the Gallery raised the estimate of their expenses from £50,000 to £100,000. They aimed to recover these expenses – and make a profit, of course – by a complex system of charges for the various options on offer to the public. Not only was this system something of a challenge to administrate, but the lengthy processes involved in the various stages of painting, engraving and publishing meant that it would be some time before Boydell could hope to recover his expenses. In the event, it was almost twenty years before the publishing aspect of the project reached its final stages, with the publication in 1805 of the edition of Shakespeare's plays: the same year in which the Gallery itself was dismantled. Boydell's financial ambitions had never come to fruition. Faced with bankruptcy thanks to a combination of factors – in particular, the war with France which cut off his export market, and a series of unwise commercial decisions on his own part – he obtained, in March 1804, an Act of Parliament enabling him to sell off the Gallery and its contents by lottery.<sup>3</sup> The lottery took

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<sup>1</sup> The initial proposal did not envisage the production of differently-sized canvases. The Boydells planned to commission at least seventy-two paintings (though they hinted that this number would be exceeded) and to have them engraved in large and small formats. Subscribers eventually received 100 large engravings, and 92 smaller prints, with only a small proportion of the smaller prints engraved after the large paintings.

<sup>2</sup> Although there was no set size for the paintings, the larger canvases were life-size, with West's *King Lear* being possibly the largest at approximately twelve feet by nine feet. The smaller canvases tended to be of a size around 30 by 20 inches. Some of the larger paintings had two differently-sized plates engraved, for both the folio and the book edition.

<sup>3</sup> Boydell explained his financial improvidence as a consequence of his 'natural enthusiasm for promoting the fine arts': in hindsight he felt that it would have been more prudent to have channelled a percentage of his profits into commissioning new paintings and engravings for the Gallery, while in reality – he claimed – he had put all of his profits back into the scheme (John Boydell, letter to Sir John William Anderson, 4 February, 1804, quoted in *A Collection of Prints from pictures painted for the purpose of illustrating the dramatic works of Shakespeare by the artists of Great Britain*. 2 vols (London: 1803), I, preface [pages not numbered]).



place the following January, with all 22,000 tickets having been sold. The lucky ticket – which won the entire collection of Shakespeare paintings – belonged to a Mr Tassie, the owner of a medallion business: shortly after his win he sold the paintings at Christie's for just over £6,000, dispersing the collection into several hands.<sup>1</sup> The paintings were never reassembled and a substantial proportion of them have now been lost. The Shakespeare Gallery premises – purpose-built for Boydell's exhibition – was subsequently leased to another important artistic venture, the British Institution.<sup>2</sup> John Boydell did not live to see the sale of his grand project – he had died a few weeks before the lottery took place, at the age of 86.

The Shakespeare Gallery had, however, initially appeared destined for great success, having opened on 4 May 1789 to an overwhelmingly enthusiastic reception from the press and public. Hopeful (and, in many cases, entirely convinced) of the Gallery's status as an embryonic 'English School of Painting', newspaper critics sought to signal their patriotism and aesthetic sensibility by heaping praise on both Boydell's enterprise and the artists' productions. Here, they enthused, was no less than the 'first English Olympiad', an enterprise to 'rank the name of Boydell with the Medici', one which would 'tend to the advancement of the grandest branch of Painting, and promote very essentially the dependent art of Engraving'.<sup>3</sup> For commentators observing the build-up to, and opening of, the Gallery, Boydell's plan offered to redeem English painting and place it on an equal footing with its continental counterparts, confronting the cultural inferiority of the nation and proving that British history painting could be both aesthetically and financially successful.

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<sup>1</sup> Josiah Boydell offered Tassie £10,000 for the Gallery and its contents just before they were sold off, but Tassie – believing his prize would fetch much more at auction – asked for £23,000, a price which Boydell was unable to pay.

<sup>2</sup> On the British Institution, see Peter Fullerton, 'Patronage and Pedagogy: The British Institution in the Early Nineteenth Century' in *Art History*, 5:1 (1982), 59-72; Ann Pullan, 'Public Goods or Private Interests?: The British Institution in the early Nineteenth Century' in Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughan (eds), *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790-1850* (Cambridge, 1998), pp.27-45; Jordana Pomeroy, 'Creating a National Collection: the National Gallery's Origins in the British Institution' in *Apollo* (August 1998) 41-49; and Nicholas Tromans, 'Museum or Market?: The British Institution' in Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd (eds.), *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2000), pp.56-68.

<sup>3</sup> *The World* (5 May 1789) p.2 and *The Whitehall Evening Post* (5-7 May 1789), p.3.

The failure of the Shakespeare Gallery to achieve its grand commercial ambitions is a well-rehearsed episode in the history of British art, and it is within the context of this financial failure that the Gallery has hitherto been judged. Most crucially – and most detrimentally – twentieth-century art historians have adopted stridently retrospective viewpoints when considering the Gallery, reading its success (or rather lack of it) in terms of its enforced closure, or in terms of a teleological (and highly selective) art-historical narrative which chooses to see all artistic moments as leading inexorably towards the present. Thus, while the Shakespeare Gallery continued to generate interest for much of the nineteenth century, the developments of the international modernist movement made it difficult for a writer such as George Henry Danton – writing in 1912 – to comprehend the aesthetic and national concerns of the Gallery. No possessor of Baxandall's 'period eye', Danton revels in the cultural prejudices of his moment:

The Gallery is for us now a revenant of a past and somewhat impossible generation. A certain air of English commercial roastbeefism clings to it ... The plates belong in parlors of the haircloth age, where indeed, they may still often be found. It is before the day of the painted snowshovel and the crayon portrait, but the delicacy of the Adams' decorations has gone out and the new strength of Romanticism has not come in.<sup>1</sup>

Hovering temporally between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, the Shakespeare Gallery offends Danton's taste for the seamless transition between artistic movements in their inevitable course towards the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> It cannot quite be consigned – like the painted snowshovel and the crayon portrait – to the convenient dustbin of kitsch (the necessary 'other' and consolidating force of the avant-garde), but hovers ambiguously and inconveniently between two cultural

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<sup>1</sup> George Henry Danton, *Tieck's Essay on the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery* (Indianapolis, 1912). On the 'period eye', see Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> This transitional impulse was famously revealed the following decade by Alfred H. Barr in his diagrammatic representation of 'The Development of Abstract Art' which maps out a series of artistic movements and Schools, connected by arrows. Barr's chart is reproduced in Eric Fernie (ed.), *Art History and its Methods* (London, 1995), p.179.

eras, the product of an ‘impossible generation’.<sup>1</sup> Value judgments aside, Danton’s confusion is understandable, given the diversity of the images produced for the Gallery which certainly straddle the Neoclassical (Gavin Hamilton, Angelica Kauffman, James Barry, Henry Tresham) and the Romantic (Henry Fuseli) as well as generating numerous alternative aesthetic types which simply cannot be categorised under either of these headings. However, it is precisely the gap between these movements, the issues for the contributing artists of ‘what comes next’, and of what a modern English school of painting could – and should – look like which are not only the most intriguing aspects of the Gallery, but which should rightly place it at the centre – not at the peripheries – of the history of British art. These issues surely provide a more valid frame of reference for determining the significance of the Gallery than the kinds of narratives which have hitherto been constructed around Boydell’s project.

Possibly the most significant piece of work on Boydell’s scheme – and certainly the study which has provided art historians with the bulk of their information about the Gallery – is Winifred Friedman’s 1976 doctoral thesis, *Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery*.<sup>2</sup> Her research was extremely important in providing a detailed historical account of the project from its inception to its demise, yet her concluding remarks present the reader with an overview of the Gallery based upon a perception of declining artistic standards and financial failure. Her preoccupation with Boydell’s commercial motives, combined with some rather puzzling attempts to tie the artistic aspect of the project to early eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, left little possibility for any other conclusion. Friedman’s work – no doubt because of its immense usefulness in providing us with much empirical material in relation to the Shakespeare Gallery – has been largely adhered to by subsequent art and cultural historians. Taking up the commercial aspect of the venture, Sven Bruntjen gives us a similarly downbeat account of the Shakespeare Gallery in his doctoral thesis on Boydell’s patronage of the arts. While he attempts to hail the sale of the lottery as a ‘financial success’ for the Boydell firm, ‘since they obtained £66,000 to pay a great portion

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<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between the avant garde and kitsch, see the influential essay by Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant Garde and Kitsch’ in *Partisan Review*, VI, No.5 (Fall 1939), 34-49.

<sup>2</sup> Friedman, *op. cit.*

of the debts owing on the Shakespeare project’, there is no disguising the contrivance of this interpretation, given Bruntjen’s overall interest in patronage and commercial practice.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Morris Eaves, in *The Counter Arts Conspiracy*, has taken up the theme of ‘inefficiency’ in relation to the Shakespeare Gallery’s system of artistic production and reproduction, a theme which effectively undermines Boydell’s status as the ‘commercial Maecenas’ and his attempts to ‘transform two narratives that had often been opposed, the commercial and the aesthetic, into one.’<sup>2</sup> Eaves gives a significant amount of space to Boydell within the section of his study devoted to commerce, even crediting him with the creation of a new – though, he claims, inevitable and belated – era in the history of British art. *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy* is the most serious scholarly study to date of the discourses of nation and commerce surrounding the development and promotion of the English School in the Romantic period, and is impressive in the breadth of its scope as well as in the detail in which it analyses particular episodes and individuals. Boydell, for example, frames the section of the book devoted to commerce, and is placed within the context of a network of artistic and commercial forces – including the English exhibition space and Josiah Wedgwood – which illuminate the cultural climate within which his particular brand of patronage evolved and operated. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly the focus on the fate and finances of Boydell rather than upon the qualities of the artists he employed and the aesthetic they generated – a focus which pervades the existing historiography of the Shakespeare Gallery – which leads to his negative conclusions about the success of the Gallery, which Eaves sees as having finally sunk under the weight of the ‘gross inefficiency of [its] cumbersome system of production’.<sup>3</sup> It would be unfair to entirely dismiss Eaves’s evaluation of the Shakespeare Gallery, which does make sense within the kind of cultural narrative he is writing, and is clearly shaped by the section of his study it is used to illustrate. No doubt, though, had it featured in the chapter on ‘Nation’ rather than that of ‘Commerce’, a somewhat different conclusion might have been

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<sup>1</sup> Bruntjen, p.117.

<sup>2</sup> Eaves, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Eaves, p.57.

drawn, one which might have evaluated positively the Gallery's role in what Eaves calls the 'English School discourse' rather than dismissing it as a last-ditch attempt to make history painting financially viable.

My study, in contrast to Eaves's, takes a somewhat different perspective on the mechanisms of the Shakespeare Gallery. It focuses on the artists and paintings themselves (at least, in as sustained a way as the limitations of a five-chapter thesis can allow: necessarily, more artists are left out than examined in the following discussion) as the central force in the attempt to forge a national school of history painting, and on the reception of the paintings and their cultural significance both in the period and beyond. Boydell – of whom much has already been written by art and cultural historians – thus does not feature as largely as he has done in previous studies, chiefly because I see his role as that of a facilitator rather than an interventionist patron. Although Boydell clearly had a vision for the aesthetic principles which an English school might embody, the nature of these principles (that such a school would be rooted within the fundamentally English tenets of liberty, originality and freedom of expression) meant that he was to allow a significant degree of freedom to the artists he employed, avoiding the endorsement of a particular visual style.

During the last decade, an expanded interest in the Shakespeare Gallery has resulted in two publications which have suggested new perspectives from which to examine the Gallery's function and appeal. The catalogue compiled by Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape, *The Boydell Shakespeare Prints* published in 1996 brings together a series of essays which examine the cultural significance of the engravings. Thus, for example, Grant F. Scott reveals the political implications of the representations of *The Tempest*, Georgianna Ziegler's essay considers the construction of femininity in the Gallery, John Gage looks at the project in the context of the 'redemption' of English engraving and Pape, Burwick and Achim Hölter separately examine the literary reception of the engravings, while other essays look more generally at the marketing, aesthetic

ideology and satires of the gallery.<sup>1</sup> A number of these essays are exemplary pieces of scholarship and the collection as a whole is particularly strong in terms of illuminating the significance of the engravings in Germany – a context which had not previously been explored. Nonetheless, there are a number of methodological problems apparent across the volume, not least of which is the lack of any apparent and collective framework from which to examine the Gallery – a problem which is indicated from the outset by Burwick’s rather confused introduction. While the essays cover a significant number of issues, they simultaneously occlude many more. The focus on the prints rather than the paintings, while a perfectly valid path of enquiry, necessarily gives a selective view of Boydell’s project and its reception, one which cannot fully take account of the cultural, aesthetic and social significance of the exhibition and the paintings themselves, and which – in its focus on the literary reception of the prints – seems preoccupied with the cultural primacy of the word over the image rather than on the significance of the paintings within artistic discourses. A number of the essays and catalogue entries, meanwhile, attempt to relate the Boydell images to contemporary theatrical paintings or portraits – a limited course of enquiry since only a small number of the large canvases can be said to approximate to this genre (and even then, only in the loosest possible sense), thanks to Boydell’s anxiety to steer his artists away from ‘mawkish portraiture’.<sup>2</sup>

In short, while the essays cover a lot of ground, the ground covered does not always appear the most appropriate place on which to step, and a lot of territory is left unexplored. In the volume’s focus on negative literary and satirical commentary on the Gallery by figures such as Lamb, Tieck and Gillray, there is little sense of the positive reception which emerged from other cultural locations, no sense of the ways in which Boydell and his artists collectively mobilised a

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<sup>1</sup> Essays focusing on the literary reception or theatrical aspects of the images include Frederick Burwick, ‘The Romantic Reception of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery: Lamb, Coleridge, and Hazlitt’; Achim Hölder, ‘Ludwig Tieck’s Commentary on the Copperplate Engravings of Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery’; Walter Pape, ‘“An Adopted Daughter of Luxury”: Georg Forster’s Aesthetics and Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery’; Grant F. Scott, ‘To Play the King: Illustrations from *The Tempest* in the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery’; Georgianna Ziegler, ‘Suppliant Women and Monumental Maidens: Shakespeare’s Heroines in the Boydell Gallery’, all in Burwick and Pape (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Jerningham, *The Shakespeare Gallery: A Poem* (London: 1791), p.4.

particular kind of cultural and aesthetic patriotism, and certainly little sense of the art historical significance of the Gallery itself. Burwick and Pape's examination of the prints appears to have inevitably – and, no doubt, unwittingly – led the authors to follow in the footsteps of previous scholars who have, in Christopher Rovee's words, gone in for 'out-of-hand dismissals' of the Gallery itself.<sup>1</sup>

Rovee himself has explored – with reference to the Gallery's depiction of episodes from *The Winter's Tale* – some of the means by which Boydell's artists effected 'the accommodation between civic virtue and private taste.' Allowing the painters an agency which previous scholars – thanks to their focus on Boydell – have failed to acknowledge, Rovee – expanding on the arguments of Louise Lippincott – contends that a democratising 'miscibility of genres' and the way in which this aesthetic practice related to modern nationhood, was the main achievement of Boydell's undertaking', providing an aesthetic solution that Boydell would not have foreseen.<sup>2</sup> Rovee's essay – published when this thesis was in its final stages – adopts a number of salient methodological standpoints, but his most refreshing virtue is his willingness to engage with the images he discusses in a sustained way, a practice which has been almost entirely absent in previous art historical considerations of the Shakespeare Gallery. Implicitly – or otherwise – dismissing the paintings as melodrama or kitsch, few scholars have taken seriously the aesthetic aspirations of the Gallery, despite the clear evidence that both contemporary audiences and contributing artists regarded it as the most significant artistic venture of the 1790s, many of them privileging it over the Royal Academy itself.

So decisive has been the legacy of Friedman's historiography that its narrative of failure has even found its way into accounts of the gallery's function in the urban

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Rovee, '“Everybody's Shakespeare”: Representative Genres and John Boydell's *Winter's Tale*' in *Studies in Romanticism*, 41 (Winter 2002), p.510.

<sup>2</sup> Rovee, p.510. Lippincott's argument is that expounded in her 'Expanding on Portraiture: The Market, the Public and the Hierarchy of Genres in Eighteenth-Century Britain' in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture: World, Image and Object in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York, 1995). In this essay, she argues that the history painter 'succeeded as an exponent of civic virtue to the extent that he could expand on the genre of portraiture' (p.76).

culture of the 1790s, a context in which it was, in fact, highly relevant and successful. Richard Altick's impressively researched account of the *Shows of London*, for example, gives an account of the Shakespeare Gallery in the context of other art exhibitions of the eighteenth century. While he acknowledges its role in the expansion of the exhibition scene towards the end of the century, he similarly remains preoccupied with the financial failure of the scheme which, in his version of events, becomes synonymous with the failure 'to establish a British School of Painting' and overshadows his own history of exhibition culture.<sup>1</sup> Consistently constrained by this awareness of financial failure, scholarly discussions of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery have restricted our understanding of how the Gallery functioned in the visual and urban culture of the late eighteenth century, hindered a sustained analysis of the images themselves, and marginalized the project from the history of British art. The adherence to specific historical and biographical narratives in discussions of the Shakespeare Gallery – narratives which focus either on Boydell's intentions or seek to outline a progressivist account of British art – has occluded the Gallery's position within other, possibly more fertile contexts. The essentially downbeat accounts of the Gallery by art historians – which could not be in starker contrast to the accounts offered by Boydell's contemporaries – seem even to have discouraged its reassessment in the light of the methodological and theoretical changes which have affected the discipline of art history over the last two decades. One isolated – but all too short – assessment of the Gallery which manages to side-step Friedman's historiography has recently been offered by C. Suzanne Matheson. Her brief survey – as part of an essay on 'Viewing' written for the *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* – of the Gallery's negotiation of issues relating to the viewing public has suggested that it might be possible to construct alternative contexts within which to evaluate its function and appeal.<sup>2</sup>

This project sets out to offer such a reassessment by attempting to move away from the restrictive frameworks within which the Shakespeare Gallery has hitherto found itself constrained, and to provide new contexts from which to

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<sup>1</sup> Altick, p.107.

<sup>2</sup> C. Suzanne Matheson, 'Viewing' in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, 1776-1832*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999), pp.187-197.



explore its cultural significance. Thus, the thesis moves away from the prevailing concerns with the discourse of commerce and the biography of Boydell and focuses instead on issues of exhibition culture, cultural patriotism and artistic identity – concerns which generate an alternative narrative of the Shakespeare project and its art-historical significance. Obviously, each of these issues might individually offer a perspective from which to analyse the Shakespeare Gallery and could easily have offered a framework for a thesis in its own right. However, it is the meshing together of these issues which I find suggestive and which – I believe – most accurately represents the underlying concerns of Boydell’s artists and critics. These are considered very briefly below, since the chapters which follow offer a sustained analysis of these questions in relation to specific works on display in the Gallery.

Boydell didn’t simply set himself the task of instigating an English School of Art, but also recognised the necessity of providing an appropriate showcase for its display. Part of his decision to design and construct a purpose-built Gallery in a fashionable part of town for his exhibition had to do with a shrewd sense of the role which such a space would play in the publicity of his scheme. However, the Gallery also served as an artistic forum which took issue both with the prevailing conditions of the Royal Academy’s exhibition rooms and with the aesthetic ideology which underpinned the Academy. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the Academy and the exhibitions it generated, an interest which is most vividly and impressively exemplified by the exhibition and collection of essays, *Art on the Line* respectively curated and edited by David Solkin.<sup>1</sup> The scholarship which Solkin brings together provides an extensive analysis of the social and artistic dynamics at work at the Somerset House exhibitions, examining the Academy’s building, public, artists and critics, and the genres of art on display through a series of well-researched and lucidly-written essays. Both the book and the exhibition have been invaluable in

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<sup>1</sup> David H. Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House* (New Haven and London, 2001). The exhibition space of the 1780s is also discussed in Matherson, *op. cit.* and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London, 1997).

illuminating what Solkin describes as ‘a defining moment in the history of British art’.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, Solkin’s book obscures an alternative exhibition culture spanning the metropolis in this period, and fails to acknowledge that the criticisms of the Academy – which gathered pace in the 1780s – were actually being dealt with in a sustained and constructive way by a number of artists and entrepreneurs who had an interest (and not just a financial one) in the direction of British art. These exhibitions – of which the Shakespeare Gallery was arguably the most significant in scale and ambition – offered a significant challenge to the Academy and weakened its ‘uniquely important status’.<sup>2</sup> The first chapter of this thesis sets out to recover this alternative exhibition culture, and to situate the Shakespeare Gallery at the heart of it. The chapter not only maps out the extent of the exhibitions networking the St. James’s area in the 1780s and 90s, but explores the spatial dynamics of these exhibitions and considers the ways in which they attempted to redress the problematic aspects of artistic production and viewing which the space of Somerset House had engendered.

The second chapter opens up the questions of cultural patriotism which are explored in the remainder of the thesis. Just a year before the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery, Reynolds had offered his fellow-artists a hazy glimpse of what an English School might look like – though he was far from admitting that such a thing existed, or would do so in the future. ‘If ever’, he claimed in his fourteenth *Discourse*, ‘this nation should produce genius sufficient to acquire to us the honourable distinction of an English School, the name of Gainsborough will be transmitted to posterity, in the history of the Art, among the very first of that rising name’.<sup>3</sup> The fourteenth *Discourse* was something of an ideological anomaly within Reynolds’s art theory, and reflects the growing belief – most vividly promoted in the Shakespeare Gallery the following year – that an English School required something more than the emulation of its exalted continental

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<sup>1</sup> Solkin (2001), p.xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London, 1975).

precedents and a deference to Academic training and theory.<sup>1</sup> What that something might be, however, was a vexed question and one which seemed to produce any number of answers. No doubt it was the supposed nature of the English – characterised by the liberty and independence of its constitutional and Protestant foundations – which both generated and justified the multiplicity of directions in which British art seemed poised in this period.<sup>2</sup> Boydell's Gallery capitalised and expanded upon these directions, generating an aesthetic argument about artistic liberty and originality, one posited upon a freedom from ideological rule and foreign influence. The necessary characteristic of these defining qualities was that they precisely *refused* to define. Rather they sought to define the English *against* certain (and largely foreign) categories – a convenient and not unpredictable scenario given that the English attempt to forge a national school of painting came fairly late in the day.<sup>3</sup>

The vagueness of these aesthetic qualities – of liberty, originality and freedom from rules – has posed certain methodological problems for art historians attempting to discuss or define the 'Englishness' of English art. Most famously, Nikolaus Pevsner's study on this subject – still a provocative text nearly fifty years after it was written – attempts to delineate what he calls a 'Geography of Art' as opposed to the standard 'history' of art.<sup>4</sup> As he soon discovers, however, the two are closely intertwined, since even something as nationally-circumscribed as language fluctuates dramatically over the centuries. Like his predecessors and compatriots Hegel and Wölfflin, Pevsner recognises that there is 'the spirit of an age [the Hegelian concept of *Zeitgeist*], and there is national

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<sup>1</sup> On the question of the English School see Morris Eaves, *The Counter Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca, 1992) and William Vaughan, 'The Englishness of British Art' in *Oxford Art Journal*, 13:2 (1990), 11-23.

<sup>2</sup> William Vaughan's discussion of 'The Englishness of British Art' frames Protestantism as a positive force in the English School discourse, rather than the prohibitive one which artists earlier in the eighteenth-century had identified.

<sup>3</sup> This practice also located English painting firmly within contemporary discourses of Britishness which almost invariably sought to define the nation in oppositional terms to a Gallic other. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London, 1956).

character [*Volkgeist*].<sup>1</sup> While he notes, however, that ‘the two can act in accordance and they can interfere with one another until one seems to black out the other completely’, Pevsner does not really deal with the question of how (if at all) we can recognise which of the two we are seeing. This represents a huge problem since Pevsner’s discussion draws upon a historically and generically diverse range of works, artists and patrons from York Minster through Hogarth, Wedgwood and Frith to modern urban planning. In the process, he identifies ‘Englishness’ as incorporating a number of (not necessarily inter-related) characteristics. For example, it lies in ‘line and not body’, and is ‘specifically unsculptural, unplastic’; it is visible in Hogarth’s rejection of the Grand Manner and its subjects; it is apparent in the fact that ‘the purpose of [English] painting is not painting, but the telling of stories’ or the relaying of moral messages, while Reynolds’s Englishness is discernible in the gap between his theory and practice, in his ‘detachment’ and ‘self-conscious choice of style’.

Taken out of context and relayed briefly here, these findings run the risk of being caricatured as oversimplistic, even though they are by no means implausible – indeed, some of the issues explored in this thesis might seem to corroborate them. What is problematic, however, is the attempt to provide an overarching teleology of English style which implicitly refuses to take on board the problem of the intertwining of national and historical characteristics, and the frequent impossibility of distinguishing between the two. For, although Pevsner acknowledges this problem at the outset of the book, it is summarily brushed aside in the following chapters, leaving us with little sense of whether Pevsner is providing us with a history or a geography of English art – or both. This thesis is not quite so ambitious as Pevsner’s study. Rather, it seeks to examine the Englishness of English Art in a particular place and at a particular time. Even within the fifteen years of the Shakespeare Gallery’s existence, England witnessed huge political and social changes which materially altered and

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<sup>1</sup> Pevsner, p.16. See also G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1975) and Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (New York, 1950).

sharpened both collective and subversive notions of national identity.<sup>1</sup> A study of Boydell's Shakespeare project, therefore, offers an opportunity for a micro-history of an episode in British art from which we can extrapolate notions of Englishness – in both its artistic and political forms – without losing sight of the historical nature of the discursive networks it inhabits.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the chapters which follow examine a number of trajectories through which Englishness is constructed aesthetically in the Shakespeare Gallery, as well as suggesting the visual qualities which it is defined against.

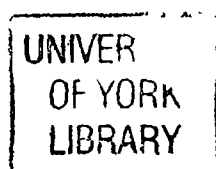
Although there was a significant amount of energy expended in the late eighteenth century on both the theory and practice of history painting, the genre has yet to be seriously considered as expressing aesthetic qualities which are peculiarly English. The English School – at least in its 'golden age' of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – is almost invariably celebrated for its contributions to portraiture and landscape painting, with naturalism seen as its prevailing quality. In an important study of English landscape painters, Kay Dian Kriz has identified a gap in the historiography of English landscape painting which tends to focus on how the nation is pictured via sites and activities which have nationalist connotations. In *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter*, she argues that 'it is one thing for an image to represent a specifically "English" form of landscape and quite another for an image to be seen to embody its producer as an ideal of Englishness'.<sup>3</sup> Kriz's emphasis on the visual rhetoric rather than the subjects of landscape painting suggests that generic categories might subservient to issues such as the handling of paint in defining the 'Englishness' of English painting. While she fails to explicitly draw this conclusion however, Kriz's focus on the style rather than the subject of painting is highly suggestive, and this thesis attempts to achieve a similar

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<sup>1</sup> On the subject of national identity in the Georgian period, see Colley, *op. cit.* and Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (London, 1987). An interesting discussion of the cultural performance of patriotism can be found in Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> My use of the term 'discursive network' is indebted to the formulations of Peter de Bolla, who describes these networks in terms of an overlapping and intersection of discrete areas of discourse (*The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford, 1989)).

<sup>3</sup> Kay Dian Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1997), p.5.



equilibrium in its consideration of the subjects and style of the Shakespeare paintings. The Englishness of the *subject* of Boydell's painters can be taken as read: my focus here is on the visual qualities which the Shakespeare Gallery artists (and – intriguingly – foreign artists such as Fuseli) sought to garner in order to situate their art – and themselves – as peculiarly English.<sup>1</sup>

The third and fourth chapters examine the artistic identities of two of Boydell's contributors – Henry Fuseli and Robert Smirke – and the extent to which these identities manifested particular qualities of Englishness that defined the Gallery more broadly. While Fuseli had become well-known during the 1780s, his reputation as a highly idiosyncratic painter whose canvases and artistic persona revealed vestiges of genius, originality and eccentricity was confirmed by his exhibits at the Shakespeare Gallery. Smirke, meanwhile – who had not achieved much notice within the Academy, having made his living mainly as a book illustrator – was lauded by critics on the opening of the Gallery as the legitimate successor of Hogarth and an important figure in the new English school. Alongside an analysis in Chapter II of the respective ideological positions of Reynolds and Northcote, these two chapters illuminate the extent to which the Shakespeare Gallery fostered new concepts of the artist which differed sharply from those proffered earlier in the century, and those fostered in the Academy.

By the 1780s, there were two main facets defining notions of artistic identity, each of them indebted to a large degree to the theory and practice of Reynolds, arguably the most financially successful English artist to date. The *Discourses* presented a vision of the ideal artist as a highly-trained and skilled figure, working painstakingly within the parameters of a universal classical tradition and deferring to his (invariably continental) predecessors. Hypotheses surrounding genius are strictly curbed within the *Discourses* while manifestations of local –

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<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth-century cult of Shakespeare has been delineated and analysed by a number of scholars including Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997); *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London, 1992); *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism, 1730-1830* (Oxford, 1989); *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford, 1986); Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship 1600-1769* (Oxford, 1992) and Gary Taylor, *Re-Inventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London, 1991).

as opposed to universal – qualities are disparaged. The former is simply a myth subscribed to by a credulous public and maintained by artists who recognise that it is not in their interest to disillusion viewers, while the latter reveals an inability to transcend low and vulgar subjects and attain the ideal forms which ambitious art should embody. Reynolds's practice, meanwhile, like that of many of his contemporary painters revealed the extent to which artistic identity was bound up with an aspirant form of social identity. To a large degree, it was the practice of portraiture which allowed artists to achieve the status of gentlemen towards the end of the century and – in many cases – to be accepted within the highest strata of society. If an artist was to portray the rich and famous, he must not only be fluent in the social idioms and etiquette which defined the wealthy and aristocratic, but his studio should provide a space within which men and women of rank would feel comfortable and where their social credibility might even be enhanced.<sup>1</sup> A gentlemanly status thus ensured the success of the portrait painter, just as much as the success of the painter ensured his gentlemanly status: since portraiture was the most common genre of painting, it is perhaps not surprising that such social considerations became almost inextricably bound up with notions of artistic identity.

As we shall see, however, the Shakespeare Gallery offered a rather different paradigm for English artistic identity, one in which genius, locality and idiosyncrasy were set above the traditional academic and social values to which artists might have hitherto aspired. In part this new paradigm is representative of a shift towards a Romantic concept of the artist. This, in itself, makes the Gallery of particular interest within the history of British art for, while this shift is well-rehearsed, it has become something of a cliché, and has been treated as being somehow rather seamless and instantaneous. The opportunity for the isolation of a cultural moment, such as the early years of the Shakespeare Gallery, where this transition, and the cultural and artistic imperatives which fed into it at both ends, can be frozen and scrutinised, suggests that the Gallery has

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<sup>1</sup> On the practice of eighteenth-century portraiture, see Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 1993) and David Mannings, 'At the Portrait Painter's: How the Painters of the Eighteenth Century Conducted their Studios and Sitzings' in *History Today*, 27 (1977), 279-97.

an importance beyond that hitherto recognised by art historians. Most crucially, these aesthetic qualities were not seen so much as part of a continent-wide artistic impulse (as Romanticism has subsequently been understood to have been), but rather as embodying vital components of a distinctly national culture, constitutionally-rooted components which revealed the fundamental make-up of the nation and its political and cultural superiority.

The collectivity of Boydell's artists thus operated in a rather different way to that of the Academy, which was perceived through one of two contradictory lenses by critics of the exhibition during the 1780s: either in terms of the discord which was seen to pervade the institution, or in terms of an autocratic collective which sought to stifle political and artistic idiosyncrasies which might be at odds with the Academy's ideology. The variety and originality of the artists contributing to the Shakespeare Gallery, however, was seen as representing the vitality of an English school which had a rational basis in the political fabric of the nation. The framing of these qualities as desirable artistic commodities made a number of artists more visible than they might have been had their canvases been left in the hands of the Academy. Figures like Northcote, Opie, Fuseli, Smirke and William Hamilton, hitherto working 'merely as *satellites* attending upon the higher *constellations*' now attained the kind of consequence the Academy could not afford them: in the end at the Gallery itself, they even eclipsed Reynolds and West, in whose classically-inclined hands – the Gallery's critics felt – the future of an English school could not be safely entrusted.<sup>1</sup>

The first four chapters of the thesis suggest a number of trajectories which the Shakespeare Gallery offered for the future of English art. The final chapter examines what happened after the closure of the Gallery. Art historians have treated the Gallery's closure as synonymous with its failure, but it is clear that the paintings, prints, book edition and the exhibition space which the project engendered enjoyed an extended afterlife which was imbued with the continuing concerns and ideology of the exhibition itself. Chapter Five maps out some of the ways in which the Gallery was consumed and appropriated by both domestic

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<sup>1</sup> *Public Advertiser* (28 May 1789) p.4.



and foreign audiences, collectors, artists and entrepreneurs until the second half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, it illuminates the presence of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery at the centre of a history of British art, rather than at the final stage of a ill-fated drive for a national form of history painting.

## CHAPTER I

### CREATING A SPACE FOR ENGLISH ART

*John Boydell: 'The citizen, the artist and the gentleman'*

John Boydell had built up his print-publishing business, and his reputation as the foremost printseller of the day, from his Cheapside shop in the heart of the City of London. His first shop – also on Cheapside – had opened in 1751 at a time when the market for prints was expanding rapidly.<sup>1</sup> By 1768 his business had proved so successful that he moved to larger premises across the street, at No 90 Cheapside, on the corner with Ironmonger Lane, a site which gave him the distinct benefit of having two street-facing shop windows.<sup>2</sup> By the last quarter of the eighteenth century Boydell's was, without competition, the most impressive print emporium in the country, if not in Europe. It was, in fact, rather more than a conventional print shop and operated to some degree like a would-be gallery, with visitors not only being offered a multitude of prints to peruse but also invited to view Boydell's large collection of paintings, which were kept stacked one behind the other in one of two rooms containing works by native and continental painters.<sup>3</sup> While Boydell's early activities had focused on the reproduction of landscape paintings – he had, for instance, published his own *Collection of One Hundred and Two Views, &c in England and Wales* in the mid 1750s and William Woollett's celebrated engraving of Richard Wilson's *Niobe* in 1761 – he quickly established a reputation for himself as the country's foremost patron of history painting, accumulating a substantial collection of works by contemporary English artists such as James Northcote, John Opie and John Singleton Copley.

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<sup>1</sup> For some recent studies of print culture in the capital, see Timothy Clayton, *The English Print, 1688-1802* (New Haven and London, 1997), Mark Hallett, *The Spectacle of Difference: Graphic Satire in the Age of Hogarth* (New Haven and London, 1999), Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven and London, 1996) and Sheila O'Connell, *London 1753*, exh. cat. (London, British Museum, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> This account of Boydell's business is indebted to Friedman and Bruntjen. A number of eighteenth-century prints showing Londoners looking at prints hung in shop windows suggest that not only was the display of prints a successful marketing activity for printsellers, but that viewing them in this way was a regular aspect of contemporary urban life. See Donald, *The Age of Caricature*.

<sup>3</sup> See Sophie von la Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786, being the diary of Sophie von la Roche*, trans. Clare Williams (London, 1933), pp. 237-238.

The presence of the paintings – and of a large collection of drawings – within the shop added a new dimension to Boydell’s activities. Printsellers did not tend to buy, much less exhibit, paintings and established artistic hierarchies decreed that there was a significant distance between the liberal art of painting and the mechanical craft of engraving.<sup>1</sup> Boydell’s art collection thus distinguished him from his competitors, elevating his business above the standard run of urban printshops. It situated him not as a mere merchant of mass-produced engravings, but as a patriotic and liberal encourager of English art, ‘a man in whom’ – one visitor to the Cheapside shop pronounced – ‘are united the very rare virtues of integrity, taste, and generosity; in him we see the citizen, the artist and the gentleman’.<sup>2</sup>

For such writers, Boydell represented a model of bourgeois industry which could be held up as a foil to aristocratic decline and dissipation in order to identify an appropriately modern version of Britishness and patriotism.<sup>3</sup> Well before the Shakespeare Gallery opened, he was seen as almost single-handedly compensating for the nobility’s neglect of the fine arts. While, the *Public Advertiser* claimed in 1784, ‘the greater part of our nobility are engaged in gaming, horse racing or electioneering’ the arts were ‘indebted to a private citizen of London ... Mr Alderman Boydell, who has given very great encouragement to historical painting, and to whom it is chiefly owing that a School of Engraving is now established in this country, superior to any in France or Italy’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the activities of engravers such as Hogarth in promoting engraving as an ambitious art form, engravers were not accepted for membership of the Royal Academy. The single exception to this rule was Francesco Bartolozzi who had been brought over from Rome to engrave the King’s drawings: he was elected to the Academy as a painter. On the status of engraving as an art form in the late eighteenth-century art world, see Clayton, *op. cit.* and Sarah Hyde, ‘Printmakers and the Royal Academy Exhibitions, 1780-1836’ in Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp.217-228.

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Post* (14 November 1786), p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Boydell’s short, unpublished autobiography promotes an image of himself as the Industrious Apprentice: his relation of his life is at pains to stress his diligence, frugality, self-improvement and public and private virtues, and like Hogarth’s Industrious Apprentice, he also becomes Mayor of London. See John Boydell, ‘An Autobiography of John Boydell, the Engraver’ ed. W. Bell Jones, *Flintshire Historical Society*, Vol XI (1925), 79-87.

<sup>4</sup> *Public Advertiser* (28 April 1784), p.2

Boydell's shop thus functioned as a monument to its proprietor's achievements in the progress of English art, and represented an attempt to forge an alliance between the worlds of commerce and art, and between the concerns of business and taste. The ground floor of the premises was occupied by the sales room, while an upper storey housed a collection of drawings and paintings within two rooms widely known simply as 'Alderman Boydell's Gallery'. The vestibule of the 'gallery' was filled with a number of chalk drawings by Josiah Boydell, Richard Earlom and Joseph and George Farington after paintings from the collection amassed by Sir Robert Walpole at Houghton Hall. Boydell had published a collection of engravings – *The Houghton Gallery* - taken from these drawings between 1774 and 1788, and issued in numbers of ten plates.<sup>1</sup> By the time the publication was completed, the collection of paintings had long since - and controversially - been sold to the Empress Catherine II of Russia, leaving Boydell's collection of prints as the sole record of these paintings in England. Boydell's fortuitous documentation of this important erstwhile English collection thus served to position him as a patriotic figure who comprehended the value of art and of cultural proprietorship, even if the aristocrats who owned these objects had failed to honour their responsibilities in this area.<sup>2</sup> The visitor writing for the *Morning Post* in November 1786 - who was keen to demonstrate a familiarity with the now-departed collection of paintings – described the drawings as possessing 'all the spirit, fire, and animation of their excellent originals'.<sup>3</sup>

On entering the upstairs Gallery, the visitors found themselves in a top-lit inner room which housed paintings by contemporary English artists. Canvases on display towards the end of 1786 – according to the *Morning Post* and to Sophie von la Roche who visited the shop in September of that year – included Copley's

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<sup>1</sup> The eventual two-volume publication which resulted from this lengthy project featured 157 plates and was entitled, *A Set of Prints Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in the Collection of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Russia, lately in the Possession of the Earl of Orford at Houghton in Norfolk*.

<sup>2</sup> The collection had to be sold by Horace Walpole's nephew, George, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Orford, because of the debts he accumulated as a result of his extravagant spending.

<sup>3</sup> The writer, 'Fabius', may well have been engaged by Boydell to write a 'puff' of his 'gallery' in the hope that it would attract more visitors, many of whom would be induced to spend money in the sales area of the premises which they would, of course, have had to walk through on entering and leaving the premises, much in the vein of the modern-day museum shop.

*Death of Major Pierson*, Northcote's two canvases of the reunion of the two sons of Edward IV and of their murder (taken from Shakespeare's *Richard III*), some sea-pieces by Paton, a painting by Matthew William Peters from the *Apocrypha*, Miller's painting of the swearing in of the Mayor of London and Opie's *Assassination of James I of Scotland*. Along the top of the walls, going around the room, hung a series of portraits of eminent English artists and, in particular, engravers. Adjoining this room was another gallery, which seems to have housed paintings by, or copies after, foreign artists. This was a much smaller and darker room but Boydell compensated for these deficiencies by building a series of extremely wide doors, each a foot apart, upon which the paintings were hung, and which could be opened consecutively so that the paintings could be viewed by light coming through the window.<sup>1</sup>

Boydell's Cheapside 'gallery', in sum, represented (and presented) the nucleus of Boydell's various commercial and civic projects: the publication of the *Houghton Gallery*, the inception of the Shakespeare Gallery (with Northcote's two paintings from *Richard III*), and the origins of the collection which he would later present to the City of London to hang in the Guildhall. More broadly, the 'gallery' offered a source of encouragement to native painters and engravers. Above all it manifested the ascendancy of the British School of engraving over the French and Italian Schools, gained entirely – many claimed – through the exertions of Boydell alone, a fact which clearly led Boydell to believe that he might do the same for English painting (and which some believed he was already well on the way to doing<sup>2</sup>). But in the commercial environment of the City, there was no disguising the fact that Boydell's business owed its success not only to 'national good taste' (and to the taste of its proprietor in particular) but also to 'the love of gain'. The acquisitive nature both of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sophie von la Roche describes this smaller gallery space as a 'very little room [in which] he has use of the corner space, filling it with nothing but doors a foot apart, five of which are as wide as the wall and open very easily after one another, so that on the side facing the window he can show a number of fine paintings with the light full on them by means of this invention keeps the dust off, and is able to hang them, for which purpose the remainder of the room was neither large nor light enough' (von la Roche, pp. 237-238).

<sup>2</sup> Fabius, for example, credited Boydell with suppressing the public appetite for portrait-painting and proving that English painters were capable of representing more than a mere 'powdered wig, or sprig of myrtle'.

proprietor and of the spectator / consumer who entered Boydell's shop are clearly signalled by Sophie von la Roche's ingenuous exclamations at the 'immense stock, containing heaps and heaps of articles' to be encountered in Boydell's premises, while 'Fabius', writing for the *Morning Post*, as well as commending 'that truly great mind which science can alone look up for patronage and protection', noted that the collection of paintings was initially 'collected together for the private emolument of the possessor'<sup>1</sup> The potentially problematic fact that Boydell sought not only to accumulate these paintings in the manner of a private collector, but with the added motive of making a profit by engraving them, would have been all too conspicuous given the fact that the 'gallery' and the sales room stood cheek-by-jowl.<sup>2</sup>

In Sophie von la Roche's *Diary*, the visit to Boydell's shop hovers ambiguously between the kind of elevated aesthetic experience she enjoys at the studios of West, Reynolds and Gainsborough or at Charles Townley's sculpture collection, and the acquisitive frenzy she indulges in when window shopping along Oxford Street. For von la Roche, London was a capital city which excelled in display, whether of art or of commodities, a city in which 'every article is made more attractive to the eye than in Paris or in any other town'.<sup>3</sup> She was as impressed by the novel mode of displaying silks, chintzes or muslins (hung down in folds so one could see the effect of the material when made into a garment, and displayed in all colours 'so one can judge how the frock would look in company with its fellows') as she was with the layout of Charles Townley's Park Street collection. If von la Roche found herself apportioning an equivalent amount of attention and praise to elevated art and objects of commerce during her tour of London, the distinction between the two categories became even more blurred when she visited Boydell's Cheapside shop. Here, she found herself taking pleasure in the contradictory impulses which the visit offered, enjoying the pleasing urban spectacle which the shop windows contributed to when viewed

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<sup>1</sup> von la Roche, p. 237 and *Morning Post* (14 November 1786), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Although Boydell is credited with remunerating his artists in generous terms, his profits were such that he could well afford to do this. While, for example, he paid Woollett the unusually large fee of £150 for the engraving after Wilson's *Niobe*, Boydell himself made an almost embarrassing £2,000+ from the plate.

<sup>3</sup> von la Roche, p.67

from the street, before stepping inside to observe the crowd which she had, until a few moments ago, been part of:

I was struck by the excellent arrangement and system which the love of gain and the national good taste have combined in producing, particularly in the elegant dressing of large shop-windows, not merely in order to ornament the streets and lure purchasers, but to make known the thousands of inventions and ideas, and spread good taste about, for the excellent pavements made for pedestrians enable crowds of people to stop and inspect the new exhibits. Many a genius is assuredly awakened in this way; many a labour improved by competition, while many people enjoy the pleasure of seeing something fresh – besides gaining an idea of the scope of human ability and industry.

I stayed inside for some time so as to watch the expressions of those outside: to a great number of them Voltaire's statement – that they stare without seeing anything – certainly applied; but I really saw a great many reflective faces, interestedly pointing out this or that object to the rest.<sup>1</sup>

For Sophie, the alliance between art and commerce was not necessarily a contradictory one: the 'love of gain and the national good taste' prove, in fact, to be harmonious bedfellows, with the fruits of their union visible throughout the metropolis, where the 'excellent pavements' provide a kind of viewing platform for a vast theatre of human and national achievement. Boydell's shop window serves simultaneously as a disseminator of taste to a broad public, as an index of the progress of 'human ability and industry' and as a 'lure' to potential purchasers, neatly reconciling the rarely compatible categories of art, industry and commerce; of taste, utility and consumerism.

The problem emerges when Sophie moves inside the shop. Embodying the *flâneur*'s desire to simultaneously be part of the crowd and yet detached from it, Sophie occupies a privileged position from which she is able to witness the elision between urban spectacle and aesthetic appreciation which she had herself just participated in. Inverting the glass window to frame the act of spectatorship

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<sup>1</sup> von la Roche, p.237.



itself, Sophie discriminates between various kinds of looking – the empty ‘stare’ and a more reflective gaze – which suggest that the relationship between art and commerce is not so easily reconciled by others as it is by herself. With the transparent façade failing to visibly mark the boundaries between art and spectacle, the commodity status of the ‘heaps and heaps of articles’ on display clearly threw some members of the crowd into some confusion as to whether they were being appealed to as consumers or spectators.

Recognising this once she had entered the shop, Sophie moves upstairs to view Boydell’s collection of paintings, now more predisposed to view the works on display as a gallery rather than ‘stock’. Boydell’s printshop – in its more elevated sense (and in its more elevated storeys) – functioned, as we have seen, as a kind of gallery of contemporary English historical painting which operated beyond the established (summer) exhibition season and displayed, without an admission charge, works by major artists such as Copley and Peters who no longer exhibited at the Royal Academy. Somewhat cramped when Sophie visited it in September 1786, it was clearly inconceivable that it could accommodate the ambitious enterprise which would begin to take shape in the coming months. If, as we have seen, the premises may have momentarily appeared to approach something resembling a gallery of continental and contemporary painting, no one was fooled into thinking that this was anything more or less than a profitable business. It was clear that the Shakespeare project would require large, purpose-built premises that corresponded to Boydell’s ambitions.

*Topographies of Display: Locating the Shakespeare Gallery*

These ambitions were no different to those of any other prosperous trader in Georgian London:

A transit from the City to the West End of Town is the last step of the successful trader, when he throws off his *exuviae* and emerges from his chrysalis state into the butterfly world of high life. Here are the Hesperides

whither the commercial adventurers repair, not to gather,  
but to enjoy their golden fruits.<sup>1</sup>

As Southey's pseudonymous Spaniard suggests, there was something altogether loftier about doing business in the West End. Here the accumulative nature of trade was glossed over, its grubby operations made clean by the *arriviste* entrepreneur's ability to spend rather than merely earn. This was the luxury which Boydell had earned for himself, and he accordingly bought the lease for 52 Pall Mall, the premises previously occupied by the famous Dodsley's bookshop, and then briefly by the picture dealer Vandergucht. Clearly pleased with his move, Boydell was soon publishing prints with the Pall Mall address listed alongside his more established location.<sup>2</sup>

But the move to Pall Mall was indicative of something rather more than mere social mobility.<sup>3</sup> Pall Mall had been the location of the Royal Academy's first premises from 1768 to 1779 and, during the 1780s and 90s, this stretch of the West End consolidated its reputation as a prominent artistic arena. Boydell's decision to base his Shakespeare Gallery on Pall Mall was simultaneously astute and fortuitous, for while he no doubt saw in the St James's location a polite and fashionable urban space with a burgeoning reputation for artistic display, even he could not have foreseen the cultural cachet which the area would acquire in a relatively short space of time after the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery. In April 1794, *The Times* noted that this particular stretch of the metropolis was now offering the discerning viewer an extended aesthetic experience:

The fashionable pedestrians have now enough to engage  
their attention in Pall Mall exclusive of the constant

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<sup>1</sup> [Robert Southey], *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*, 3 vols. (London, 1807) I, 123.

<sup>2</sup> Boydell was not the only entrepreneur to do this. In 1793, the miniature painter Robert Bowyer announced his move from his Berners Street residence to Schomberg House on Pall Mall so that he could 'carry on with propriety and convenience' the display of his collection of paintings known as the Historic Gallery. (Robert Bowyer, *Exhibition of Pictures, painted for Bowyer's magnificent edition of the History of England*, London (1793), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> This section of the thesis is a revision of my essay '“A World of Pictures”: Pall Mall and the Topography of Display, 178-1799' in Miles Ogborn and Charles Withers (eds.), *Georgian Geographies: Essays on Space, Place and Landscape in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester, forthcoming 2004). I am grateful to the editors for their comments on an early draft of that essay, and to Ed Oliver for producing the final version of the map.

auctions at Christie's ... [T]he old Shakespeare on the North side, the Historical Gallery, the New Shakespeare, with the Polygraphic Pictures, on the South side, ... are all so well worth notice, it would be doing discredit to the National taste and curiosity to suppose almost any person should leave town without seeing them.<sup>1</sup>

The *Times* was not the first publication to note the proliferation of artistic sites along Pall Mall. A number of contemporary London guide books also mapped out for their readers an itinerary of visual consumption across Pall Mall and the surrounding streets, an itinerary which took in the elegant architecture of St. James's and the fashionable exhibitions which many of these buildings housed.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these texts promoted Pall Mall as the artistic nucleus of the capital, and as a space which could claim a distinct advantage over the now geographically-distanced Royal Academy, which in 1780 made a reversal of the move advocated by Southey's Don Manuel, moving from Pall Mall to a location at the cusp of the City, to Somerset House on the Strand.<sup>3</sup>

Boydell's scheme was joined by a number of imitators within the space of a few years – Macklin's Poet's Gallery (1788), Robert Bowyer's Historic Gallery (1792), James Woodmason's New Shakespeare Gallery (1794) and Henry Fuseli's Milton Gallery (1799) – each of them fusing grand exhibition schemes with ambitious engraving and book projects. All of these ventures, each of them promising to revive or inspire an English School of historical painting, were situated a short distance from the Shakespeare Gallery on Pall Mall. But, as the *Times* suggested, they were by no means the only artistic attractions which the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times* (30 April 1794), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> During the lifetime of the Shakespeare Gallery, these guidebooks included Thomas Malton, *A Picturesque Tour through the Cities of London and Westminster* (London, 1792), Sir John Fielding Junior, Richard King Esq. and Others [pseuds.], *The New London Spy; or a Modern Twenty-Four Hours Ramble through the Great British Metropolis* (London, 1793) and [Anon.], *The Picture of London for 1802* (London, 1802).

<sup>3</sup> The significance of Pall Mall as a site of artistic display has been ignored by art historians. A recent exhibition at the Museum of London undertook a broad mapping of the 'creative quarters' of the metropolis from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, but this focused on areas populated by artists rather than on sites of display (a preference which resulted, quite reasonably, in the isolation of Leicester Square, Covent Garden and Marylebone as the significant artistic sites of the eighteenth century). See Kit Wedd, *et. al.*, *Creative Quarters: the art world in London 1700-2000*. I am more concerned, here, with the spaces in which art was exhibited and encountered, rather than produced.

area had to offer (Figure 1). The Royal Academy's move to Somerset House in 1780, from its earliest premises at 125 Pall Mall was met, almost immediately, with a flurry of exhibitory activity in the very space which it had left behind. 125 Pall Mall continued in its function as an exhibition space housing not only Macklin's Poets' Gallery and Fuseli's Milton Gallery, but also a number of important collections which were put up for sale, among them the Orleans, Desenfans and Bishop of Bristol's collections. Schomberg House, meanwhile – home to the Historic Gallery – was an illustrious and fashionable artistic site. During the 1780s and 90s, the building accommodated the studios and apartments of Gainsborough and Richard and Maria Cosway, as well as the exhibition rooms of the Polygraphic Society.<sup>1</sup> In 1794, the Irish entrepreneur James Woodmason opened his New Shakespeare Gallery in this building, across the road from the original version and featuring works by many of the artists whom Boydell had employed. Next door to Schomberg House were James Christie's famous auction rooms, through which a number of important British and European collections passed, particularly during the political upheavals of the 1790s.

The surrounding streets of St. James's extended the artistic topography of Pall Mall. On King Street, off St. James's Square, were the Imperial Museum – a collection of Old Master paintings exhibited until 1787 – and, from 1789, the European Museum which initially exhibited works for sale by English artists at the same time as displaying continental collections. The Great Room at Spring Gardens, situated just to the east of Pall Mall, had been the main exhibition venue for the Society of Artists – a body which had a particularly antagonistic relationship with the Royal Academy – and also housed a number of one-man shows and other exhibitions during the 1780s. Meanwhile, several aristocratic and royal residences in the area housed picture or sculpture galleries which could be viewed on application. The most notable of these were Devonshire House, on

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<sup>1</sup> On Gainsborough's residence at Schomberg House see Rica Jones and Martin Postle, 'Gainsborough in his Painting Room' in Michael Rosenthal and Martin Myrone, *Gainsborough* exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 2002), pp.26-43. On the Cosways, see Stephen Lloyd, *Richard and Maria Cosway: Regency Artists of Taste and Fashion*, exh. cat., (Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, 1995).

Piccadilly, and Charles Townley's collection on Park Street. A number of fashionable printsellers were also located on Pall Mall and the surrounding streets, the best known of which were Samuel Fores (based along Piccadilly) and Hannah Humphrey whose business (along with her most significant asset, James Gillray) moved to the highly fashionable St. James's Street in 1797.

The significance of these displays should not be underestimated. Some of the collections put up for sale at 125 Pall Mall and at Christie's formed large-scale exhibitions lasting for several weeks and often running concurrently with the Royal Academy's show. The Bishop of Bristol's collection, for example, which closed just before the RA's 1788 exhibition opened, contained over 450 paintings (putting it in the same league, in terms of scale, as the Royal Academy which showed 446 works that year) and was widely puffed in the press as a favourite resort for people of fashion and taste. Such collections offered many viewers their first opportunity to see Old Master paintings, and to view them alongside the works of native artists. Hazlitt, for example, chose to date his initiation into 'the pleasures of painting' to his visit to the Orleans collection in 1798, where he saw works by Titian, Raphael and Guido for the first time:

[I]t was there I formed my taste, such as it is ... I was staggered when I saw the works there collected, and looked at them with wondering and with longing eyes. A mist passed away from my sight; the scales fell off. A new sense came upon me, a new heaven and a new earth stood before ... We had all heard the names of Titian, Raphael, Guido, Domenichino, the Caracci —but to see them face to face, to be in the same room with their deathless productions, was like breaking some mighty spell — was almost an effect of necromancy! From that time I lived in a world of pictures... This was the more remarkable, as it was but a short time before that I was not only totally ignorant of, but insensible to the beauties of art.<sup>1</sup>

Hazlitt may have entered an imaginative 'world of pictures' at this point, but he had also stumbled across a literal, geographical one which had been energetically

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<sup>1</sup> William Hazlitt, '[On the pleasures of painting] The same subject continued' in P. Howe (ed.) *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (London and Toronto, 1932), VIII, 14-15.

cultivated in Pall Mall over the previous two decades. The illustrious roll-call of contemporary artists and entrepreneurs working and exhibiting in these streets amounted to nothing less than a vibrant and competitive arena of artistic production and display which had sprung up in the Academy's move away from Pall Mall to Somerset House.<sup>1</sup>

*The Royal Academy Exhibition at Somerset House: consolidation or crisis?*

*The Academy's relocation to the Strand* was a move which had not gone entirely smoothly, for a number of reasons. Although William Chambers' new building was widely admired, the splendour of the edifice could not detract from the criticisms which the Academy came under during the course of the 1780s. The new building brought together the schools, administration and exhibition space of the Academy for the first time, but far from consolidating the institution, it appeared rather to expose tensions and contradictions between these bodies by bringing them into close proximity. Over in the St James's area, meanwhile, the Academy's old territory was being used to negotiate precisely the kinds of problems which the Academy's administration and exhibition had engendered. After 1780, a variety of artists, collectors and entrepreneurs took up the urgent concerns of patronage, aesthetic education, history painting and the prospect of an English School, and attempted to redefine the relationship between the art work and the public sphere which – as we shall see – the Academy was spectacularly failing to resolve. They did so in a variety of spaces on and around Pall Mall, where their collective attempts to construct a viable correlation between history painting and the public mounted a serious challenge to the hegemony of the Academy. Conflict between the Academy and other spaces of contemporary artistic production has traditionally been identified by art historians as beginning in earnest around the mid-nineteenth century, and as forming a key component in the narrative of European Modernism. It will become clear in the course of this study of Boydell's Shakespeare venture, that

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<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, the most ambitious study to date of the Academy's residence at Somerset House is to be found in Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line*.

the challenge to the ideological space of the Academy had begun far earlier than has hitherto been recognised. Although Boydell and other Pall Mall exhibitors may not have ostensibly set out to challenge or disparage the Academy, their exhibitions were certainly represented in the press as offering such a contest.<sup>1</sup> These exhibitions fuelled discussion at a far more public level than had hitherto been experienced, demanding a reassessment of how patronage, artistic production and spaces of display might operate beyond the institutional enclave of the Academy, and within a more inclusive public sphere.

The initial challenges to the Academy came from within its own ranks. They came from a number of artists who were either disillusioned by the institutional politics and discriminatory hanging of paintings at Somerset House, or simply felt that the Academy was no longer, if it ever had been, the place to show ambitious historical works. The first to do so was John Singleton Copley. In the spring of 1781, having completed his commemorative painting of the death of the Earl of Chatham, Copley decided to take advantage of the Academy's recently-vacated premises on Pall Mall to exhibit his work. The Academy's treasurer, William Chambers, thwarted Copley's plans, preventing his use of 125 Pall Mall and accusing him of self-interest. Nevertheless, Copley's show went ahead in nearby Spring Gardens (Figure 2). Copley made no secret of the dispute between himself and Chambers, quoting from their acrimonious correspondence as part of his advertising for the show, and the eventual exhibition of the Chatham painting would have no doubt benefited from the added anticipation and publicity which the whole episode engendered. Over the course of the following two decades, Copley proceeded to exhibit his most ambitious canvases in a variety of locations on and around Pall Mall. *The Death of Major Pierson* was exhibited in rooms on the Haymarket in 1784, while *The Death of Chatham* was exhibited again at various times and locations around Pall Mall, including No. 125 where it was displayed alongside the Bishop of Bristol's collection in 1788. In 1791, stuck for a venue large enough to house the enormous *Siege of Gibraltar*, Copley erected an eighty-four foot long tent in Green Park, close to St

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, a substantial amount of press criticism and reportage relating to the art world was in fact paid 'puffery' inserted by these artists and entrepreneurs, suggesting a greater degree of agency on their part than has been hitherto recognised.

James's Palace. In 1799 he displayed his latest historical work depicting *Admiral Duncan's Victory at Camperdown* in another tent, this time in Lord Sheffield's garden on Albemarle Street, as part of a triple-bill exhibition of his works.

Copley's example was swiftly followed by other artists, most notably by Thomas Gainsborough in 1784. After a dispute with the RA's hanging committee he displayed his latest works in his studio at Schomberg House, and was never to exhibit at the Academy again. By now, the press was beginning to comment upon the numerous secessions from the Academy. The majority of these absent artists had begun to exhibit independently, and many chose to exhibit in the same geographical space within which Copley had immersed himself. What was particularly notable about the activities of Copley and many of his imitators was that they sought to cultivate, on and around Pall Mall, a space for the display of ambitious historical painting, the most prestigious genre in the academic hierarchy, and that they sought to portray moments from contemporary history which held a specific interest for English viewers. Thomas Stothard, for example, who exhibited mainly literary and mythological drawings at the Academy, showed one of his few contemporary history paintings, *The Death of Lord Manners* (Figure 3), at a Mr Haynes's on the corner of Cockspur Street, facing Pall Mall, in 1783. George Trumbull and George Carter, more rigorous than Stothard in their attempts to forge careers as history painters, both held exhibitions in the area in the second half of the 1780s, depicting, like Copley, key military moments in the Gibraltar campaign of 1782.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition of work by Carter, Copley and Trumbull focusing on this one military campaign formed a substantial and competitive project to realize new subjects, idioms and spaces for history painting. While the Academy's avowed intention was to nurture an English School of history painting, the results it achieved could not have been more distant from its ambitions. A comparison

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<sup>1</sup> Trumbull's *Sortie Made by the Garrison of Gibraltar* was shown as part of a one-man exhibition held at Spring Gardens in February 1789: Horace Walpole apparently pronounced it to be the 'finest picture he had ever seen painted north of the Alps' (Helen A. Cooper, *John Trumbull: The Hand and Spirit of a Painter*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1982), p. 62). Carter's exhibition opened at the beginning of May 1785 at the Royal Academy's former premises on Pall Mall (*Morning Herald*, (2 May 1785), p.1).



between the exactly contemporaneous exhibitions at Somerset House and the French Salon in 1787 (Figures 4 and 5) shows that while artists exhibiting at the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture produced and displayed predominantly large-scale history painting, the Royal Academy in England was far from fulfilling its ideological goals. At Somerset House, history painting mingled indiscriminately with the lesser genres, which tended, by their sheer quantity, to prohibit the sustained contemplation of more elevated art. Particularly troubling was the abundance of celebrity portraiture, easily the most intriguing component of the exhibitions for the crowd which was, after all, visiting the Academy towards the end of the London Season and came fuelled with the latest gossip surrounding the figures portrayed.<sup>1</sup>

Copley's exhibitions during the 80s and 90s not only suggested the artist's desire for self-promotion and his financial ambition, but they also signalled a desire to be part of the cultivation of an ambitious artistic space in the metropolis which would function independently of the Academy. In the aftermath of the Academy's move to Somerset House, Pall Mall and its immediate environs came to present itself as such a space, cultivating its identity in marked opposition to Somerset House whose site – as we will see – had brought to the fore a number of problems for the Academy. By 1800, a bitter Henry Fuseli – finding his Milton Gallery at 125 Pall Mall unable to compete with the panorama of Seringapatam at Leicester Square and the “posies of Portraits and knickknacks of Somerset House” – was anxious to illuminate a division or hierarchy of sites of visual display.<sup>2</sup> He blamed not artistic competition for his lack of success (and he might perhaps have had reason to do so, with Boydell and Bowyer only a few hundred yards away from him) but the competition offered by the lesser spectacles on offer elsewhere in the metropolis which pandered indiscriminately

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of the kind of associations and gossip which the medley of (often scandalously inter-related) portraits may have invited, see Gill Perry's essay, 'The Spectacle of the Muse: Exhibiting the Actress at the Royal Academy' in Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line*, pp.111-125.

<sup>2</sup> See Altick, p.108. Fuseli's project clearly failed at the exhibition stage, unlike the Shakespeare Gallery whose financial losses are attributable to the collapsed market for the engravings.

to the public's vanity and appetite for novelty, and which could not have been in starker contrast to the intellectual ambitions of Fuseli's exhibition.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the Royal Academy, in its detachment from Pall Mall, had become increasingly associated with the superfluity of weird and wonderful shows which went under the name of 'exhibitions' in the late century, and correspondingly disassociated from the real artistic heartland of London. The location of Somerset House made manifest the fluidity of the term 'exhibition' and its lack of aesthetic exclusivity. Whitley points to a 1788 newspaper advertisement which illuminates the proximity of the Academy to the exhibitions of 'curiosities' which pervaded that particular area of the metropolis:

There is now added to the elegant exhibition adjoining Somerset House, in the Strand (consisting of Automaton Figures which move in a great variety of descriptions, by clockwork, with the Diamond Beetle, scarce and valuable paintings, Needlework, Shells, Flies, Water Fall, etc. etc., so universally admired) some of the most beautiful and striking Pencil and Chalk drawings by Mr Lawrence, late of Bath, now at 41 Jermyn Street.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Mr Lawrence' in question was, of course, the young Thomas Lawrence. The proximity of Somerset House to exhibitions of dubious status - such as that described by this newspaper - was made all the more explicit by the fact that an aspiring artist like Lawrence might choose to exhibit his works at nearby shows which were more accurately defined as spectacles than art exhibitions, at the same time as they exhibited at the neighbouring Academy.<sup>3</sup>

The juxtaposition of these exhibitions, artistic and otherwise (and, indeed, the simultaneous collection of such heterogeneous objects within a single display), must have been problematic for the Academy whose supporters had tended to

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<sup>1</sup> Farington advised Fuseli to 'get some ladies to attend his exhibition to make it more general'. Fuseli himself felt that he needed to write something 'to explain it' (Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre; vols 7-16 ed. Katherine Cave (New Haven and London, 1978-1984), IV, 1226).

<sup>2</sup> William T. Whitley, *Artists and their Friends in England, 1700-1799*, 2 vols. (New York, 1968), II, 104.

<sup>3</sup> In 1788, Lawrence exhibited six works at the Academy exhibition.

deal with the rival Society of Artists' exhibitions by aligning them with precisely the kind of displays which the Academy now neighboured – displays, for example, of 'little Misses shell and needle works'.<sup>1</sup> It was now Somerset House itself which was in close proximity to a number of lesser 'exhibitions' such as the menagerie and life-size puppet shows at Exeter Change, and Lunardi's hydrogen balloon, Astley's equestrian amphitheatre and the wax-works at the Lyceum, while Spring Gardens was nearer to the burgeoning artistic environment of Pall Mall. The geographical proximity of these spectacles – fashionable but hardly elevated – and the fact that some of them were advertised in the press as being exhibitions *near* Somerset House must have added to the ambiguous nature of the Academy's new space. Visiting Somerset House as part of her tour of London in 1786, Sophie von la Roche was quick to note the geographic disadvantage which the site suffered from, admiring the building itself but observing that if it were 'situated on St. James's Square it would merit a visit from all quarters of the globe'.<sup>2</sup> Pall Mall and the surrounding streets of St. James's were regarded as the fashionable end of town, an area of architectural splendour and up-to-date lighting and paving, with its parks and gardens offering a refreshing respite from the city air and crowds. The area was the location of several aristocratic and royal residences, fashionable promenades, gentleman's clubs, coffee houses and booksellers' shops – spaces in which existing and emerging ideas of the public sphere had been debated and played out in the course of the century.<sup>3</sup> Somerset House, however, hovered ambiguously

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<sup>1</sup> *The Whitehall Evening Post* (18-20 April 1780), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> von la Roche, p.154.

<sup>3</sup> The emergence of a public sphere in the eighteenth century has been the subject of much debate amongst historians, art historians and literary scholars over the last decade, following the publication in English of Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1989). Many scholars have pronounced themselves wary of the all-too-tempting conceptual framework which Habermas offers (see, for example, Brian Cowan, 'What was Masculine about the Public Sphere?: Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post-Restoration England' in *History Workshop Journal*, 51 (2001), 127-157; Thomas Broman, 'The Habermasian Public Sphere and "Science in the Enlightenment"' in *History of Science*, 36 (1998) 123-149; and the essays in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29, No.1 (1995) and *Studies in Romanticism*, 33 (1994) ) believing that 'the term [i.e. "public sphere"] has become so fluid that with a little imagination it can be applied to almost any time and any place' (Cowan, p.128). Nonetheless the fact remains that the eighteenth century witnessed an unprecedented number of writings and debates about the nature of the public and, as far as the art world is concerned, not only the first public exhibitions of art in England but the rise of a veritable 'rage for exhibitions' by the end of the century. The assumption behind discussions of the public sphere in this chapter has been that the audience for art I have been discussing is a complex phenomenon made up not only of actual visitors to [cont'd ...]

between the City and the ‘polite’ end of town, situated along the commercial thoroughfare of the Strand whose dizzying array of shop windows afforded a spectacle for such passers-by as Sophie von la Roche who spoke of the seductive ‘lure’ of the ‘new exhibits’ which the shop windows offered.<sup>1</sup> Sophie’s descriptions of the show windows whose ‘dazzling spectacle’ she consumes along the Strand and on Oxford Street often come uncomfortably close to the experiences which critics of the Royal Academy were particularly scathing of. Both kinds of viewing – on the street and in the exhibition room – confounded the viewer with the excessive products on display; both sought to seduce or disarm the viewer, to arrest his or her attention with glaring lights and colours and with luxurious packaging; and both allowed the viewer to mistakenly believe that this visual gluttony amounted to a manifestation of taste.

The Academy’s problems did not merely remain outside the front door of Somerset House, but pervaded the institution. Some Academicians waged covert press wars against each other, others ceased to exhibit there, and students felt that the institution was failing to honour its obligations to aspiring artists. Meanwhile, the press was keen to point out that Somerset House was not a space for the promotion of history painting but offered, rather, a bizarre spectacle which placed an abundance of portraiture and its narcissistic viewers in uncomfortable juxtaposition.<sup>2</sup> Here, critics claimed, could be found the kind of gaudy, glittering wares that were symptomatic of the debasement of art through its contaminating contact with an unenlightened commercial public. More eager to flaunt its (dubious) social credibility than to actively patronise the arts, the

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exhibitions whom we can account for empirically, but also constructed through a range of artistic discourses and practices. Thus the real and hypothetical natures of the public will invariably diverge and intersect at different moments, but will inevitably retain a dual aspect even at the rare moments when they might coincide. In this sense, the ‘public sphere’ identifiable in the environs of Pall Mall is as much a construction of various political, social and cultural interests as an empirically verifiable entity. For an exemplary discussion of the congruence or otherwise of the art audience with the public see the introduction to Thomas Crow’s *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London, 1985).

<sup>1</sup> von la Roche, p.237. For an assiduous reconstruction of the Strand and its shops in the eighteenth century see Hugh Phillips, *Mid-Georgian London* (London, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Comparing portraits to the ‘originals’ was a popular activity for visitors to the annual exhibition to indulge in. On occasion, the ‘originals’ would court publicity by sitting close to their portraits and inviting recognition. On the unwelcome centrality of portraiture to the Academy exhibitions, see Marcia Pointon’s essay in Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line*.

new art-viewing public typically found itself mirrored on the walls of the exhibition space, its ‘profusion of rosy cheeks, cherry lips, and black eyebrows [thrusting themselves]’, one critic observed – in a simultaneous critique of painterly artifice and the cosmetic enhancement of modish women – ‘on our notice the moment we enter a modern exhibition room’. The artists themselves, naturally eager for their works to be noticed in the crowded exhibition space, colluded with their sitters’ desire for self-promotion, fashioning ‘the highest coloured pictures’ and framing them obtrusively with ‘the fiery glare of burnished gold’.<sup>1</sup>

The Academy’s decision to charge an admission fee to visitors to the annual exhibition was widely criticised by the press and public, who believed this measure to be a kind of double ‘tax’ on a public whose purse had already been ‘drained to support royal munificence’.<sup>2</sup> For those who failed to see the Academy’s double cost to the public, the entrance charge was considered derogatory to the King, whose liberality supported the institution, and it was observed that ‘an imputation of this nature of the munificence of the Prince would be cautiously avoided’ in France or Prussia.<sup>3</sup> The Academy’s rationale for the admission charge as the only means they could find to ‘prevent the rooms from being filled by improper persons’ prompted the press to ask exactly who might be deemed a ‘proper’ viewer. The suggestion that a proportion of the public who had, it was pointed out, all indirectly contributed ‘to produce and support this royal institution’, might be deemed socially ‘improper’ was not easily ignored.<sup>4</sup> Clearly one correspondent’s view that ‘an object of sight is meant for all that can see’ was not one shared by the Academicians.<sup>5</sup> And, as one ‘Peter Hint’ pointed out, the shilling charge was an ‘easy ... admittance to those regions of taste’ for many kinds of viewer that might be deemed ‘improper’ such as the ‘Macaronies’ and their companions, the ‘free and easy lasses’ of the town.<sup>6</sup> The press were keen to point out that the Academy’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Chronicle* (2 May 1781), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *London Courant* (15 May 1780), p.2.

<sup>3</sup> *St James’s Chronicle* (29 April – 2 May 1780), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> *London Courant* (15 May 1780), p.2.

<sup>5</sup> *London Courant* (15 May 1780), p.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (18 May 1780), p.2.

motives were nothing but mercenary. It was reported that one viewer, mistakenly believing that the payment of a shilling designated him a 'proper' person, failed to gain re-admission to the exhibition when he presented his catalogue at the door the next day.<sup>1</sup> One 'Admirer of the Arts' suggested that if the Academy's alleged motives were true, they would have no objection to refunding each viewer's shilling at the end of the exhibition season.<sup>2</sup> Strangely, the accusation of being on the grasp for fast cash came to be more overwhelmingly levelled at the Academy than at any of the more speculative and commercial ventures on Pall Mall, nearly all of which were regarded, conversely, as operating in the spirit of enlightened and disinterested patronage, and artistic ambition.

Meanwhile, the presence of women in the exhibition space raised a number of other issues of concern to the Academy and its critics. On the inaugural exhibition at Somerset House, a number of newspapers and their correspondents voiced their alarm at the fact that female viewers were confronted – in the cast room – with a shocking display of 'Apollos, Gladiators, Jupiters and Hercules all as *naked* and as *natural* as if they were alive', a sight which apparently guaranteed that any woman must instantly 'forfeit her claim to delicacy.'<sup>3</sup> Since – the *Morning Post* protested – no representative of the Academy was on hand to explain the 'history of these antiques' to the female members of the Royal family, or to point out to them 'the distinguishing parts of the anatomy of an ancient dying gladiator', these could only represent objects of indecency, and not

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<sup>1</sup> *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (16 May 1780), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> *Public Advertiser* (30 May 1780) p.2.

<sup>3</sup> *Morning Post* (15 May, 1780), p.4. On the problems associated with women viewing antique sculpture, see Chloe Chard, 'Effeminacy, pleasure and the classical body' in Gill Perry and Michael Rossington (eds.), *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture* (Manchester, 1994), pp. 142-161. Spaces did exist, however, at the end of the eighteenth century where women could engage in a sustained viewing of classical sculpture, including the male nude, without the problems identified at the Academy. Two 1794 watercolours by William Chambers depicting Charles Townley's house at Park Street show female visitors viewing and drawing from his collection. These are reproduced in Ruth Guilding, *Marble Mania: Sculpture Galleries in England, 1640-1840*, exh. cat. (London: Sir John Soane's Museum, 2001). The presence of Zoffany's painting of the *Tribuna at the Uffizi* in the 1780 exhibition, however, certainly might appear to corroborate the furor over the display of nude statuary in the exhibition space, locating the activity of viewing such objects firmly within a privileged male sphere.

art.<sup>1</sup> Such concerns clearly implied that there was little hope for less well-educated women, and in recognition of this fact, fig leaves were placed over the incriminating parts of these objects the following year. As Dian Kriz has recently shown, the female presence in the exhibition space – in both its ideal and corporeal forms – was subject to a complex process of discussion and negotiation which both revealed the Academy's inability to resolve the heterogeneity of its audience into something approximating a public body, and simultaneously provided the Academy with a means of sustaining 'the excitement and interest of its publics'.<sup>2</sup>

The raising of these issues of money, class and gender in the immediate aftermath of the Academy's move to Somerset House meant that the RA's attempts to forge a new identity for itself backfired dangerously. Failing to identify or realise a consensual public from its very inception in 1768, its move to the Strand simply accentuated this problem, which increased with an alarming rapidity throughout the 80s.<sup>3</sup> During this decade, the Academy's exhibitions came to be seen as a space identified certainly not in terms of consensualism, nor even in terms of heterogeneity (as has been previously argued by cultural historians) but as a space operating in terms of exclusion and division. The systematic categorising of the audience – and the rejection of its 'indiscriminate' members – which the questions of social and sexual propriety had occasioned was replicated in the ranks of the Academicians themselves. During the decade many of the Academy's most successful members such as Gainsborough, Copley, James Barry, Joseph Wright of Derby, Thomas Stothard and Matthew William Peters began to exhibit in alternative spaces, or ceased to exhibit at the Royal Academy altogether. Ostensibly driven away by institutional politics and discriminatory hanging (although supporters of the Academy accused them of self-interest and greed) they held a series of successful exhibitions which mounted a serious challenge to the authority and artistic merit of the Academy.

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Post* (15 May, 1780), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> K. Dian Kriz, ' "Stare Cases": Engendering the Public's Two Bodies at the Royal Academy of Arts in Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp.55-63.

<sup>3</sup> For the lack of consensualism of the Academy's early audiences see the final chapter of Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press (1993).

These issues all tended towards one larger question – that of whose interests the Academy was supposed to serve. With the public and a number of prominent artists convinced that the Academy was failing to provide a democratic space for the display and viewing of art, it seemed clear to many that the institution was in danger of becoming a monument to ‘selfishness, extortion and rapine’.<sup>1</sup> And there was worse to come. In the aftermath of Gainsborough’s secession in 1784, when the hanging committee refused to comply with his instructions for the hanging of his portraits of the three Princesses, there was more discord when it emerged that the Academy’s students felt themselves to be the victims of a ‘mercenary system’ which was failing to honour its obligations to aspiring artists. The Academy was attacked for its admission rules for students which allowed them to view the exhibition only after it had been open for ten days, and then presented them with a ticket which allowed them free admission on just four occasions, a system which was administered ‘by that most shabby of all methods, cutting off a corner of their tickets every time they enter the rooms’.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the most visible - and commented-upon - face of the Academy was the annual exhibition, which was housed, after 1780, in a series of purpose-built rooms, the most imposing of which was the Great Room, the main focus of the exhibition. As John Murdoch has pointed out, Chambers’s design for the interior space of the building led the visitor from the street through a number of ‘artfully changing levels ... from comparative dimness at the bottom to a blaze of light at the top’.<sup>3</sup> This literal and allegorical journey clearly functioned to impress upon the visitor that he or she was being drawn away from the level of the street, into a more cerebral space – a circumstance which was further emphasised by the Greek inscription over the door of the Great Room which warned none without taste to enter the room (Figure 6). Chambers’s architecture was in many respects a great success, and was certainly widely praised in the press on the event of the

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<sup>1</sup> *London Courant* (15 May 1780), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Post* (26 April 1784) p.3.

<sup>3</sup> John Murdoch ‘Architecture and Experience: The Visitor and the Spaces of Somerset House’ in Solkin (ed.) *Art on the Line*, pp. 9-22. As Murdoch points out, this was also an allegorical journey undertaken by students as they progressed from the drawing rooms below to exhibiting in the Great Room at the top of the building.



Academy's inaugural exhibition at Somerset House in 1780. In addition, the Royal Academy's sharing of Somerset House with other public and scholarly institutions such as the Naval and Excise Offices, the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries served, in part, to inoculate the Academy from the contaminating presence of the street. Yet the dimensions and dynamics of the Great Room itself seemed to encourage and exacerbate some of the worst excesses of contemporary exhibition culture – practices that Boydell and his imitators, as we shall go on to see, actively sought to avert within their own exhibitions.

Despite Chambers's attempts to divest visitors to Somerset House of the experiences of the street, many viewers found themselves with no other means of recourse to the works on display. To a large degree, this situation was stimulated by the kinds of works displayed in the Great Room – overwhelmingly portraits – which tended to draw the viewer's mind to snippets of society gossip, recollections of theatrical performances or the desirability of wealth and luxury. Worse might ensue when the visitor attempted to view the exhibition as a collective, and to make associations between the works on display. Encouraged by the broad symmetry which the imposition of 'the line' engendered (Figure 7), critics and viewers were fond of attempting to make sense of the crowded and heterogeneous body of exhibits by resorting precisely to the visual order imposed by the hanging committee and noting the relationship of works juxtaposed or facing each other.<sup>1</sup> As just one example, the critic of the *Morning Herald* observed of the centrally-positioned canvases in the 1785 exhibition that:

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<sup>1</sup> 'The line' was a moulding, eight feet up the wall which established a divide between larger and smaller canvases, allowing smaller works to be viewed close up while large paintings could be seen from an appropriate distance, having been tilted forwards to increase visibility. As is evident in Sandby's plan for the Academy's 1792 exhibition, assembling four walls, to be hung from floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall with canvases was a task more appropriate to a technician than to a latter-day curator. It was a feat of logistics in which individual canvases were subsumed into a broader picture of interlocking shapes, but one which, once constructed, did not necessarily yield any visual or ideological coherence, despite the frequent and playful presence of visual or generic rhymes across the wall occasioned by the reflection of poses in portraits or the balancing of genres such as landscape and history across the walls. For more on this, see Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp. 23-25.

The portrait of Mrs Smith [by Reynolds], from its situation in the Academy, stares West's *Sermon* full in the face. That she should be opposite to St. Peter is well; and that she should be in full view of the Prince of Wales [also by Reynolds], is better. Her back is of course turned on the clergy in a state of undress [presumably referring to William Beechey's portrait of a clergyman]; but that she should be putting on her glove, and seemingly taking a walk towards the Lord's Supper is totally improper. This picture should have been placed under Maria Cosway's *Deluge* that it might share the common fate of the wicked.<sup>1</sup>

These comments show that the narrative of modern artistic progress spun out across the walls of the Great Room was not always entirely salutary, and threatened to expose the incompatibility of modern society with the requisites and ideals of elevated art and taste. The presence of mistresses of aristocratic men (Mrs Smith was the mistress of Sir John Lade), as well as of the men who associated with such women (the Prince of Wales was, of course, notorious for his dalliances with beautiful but morally-dubious women), sits uncomfortably alongside moralising history painting such as West's and Cosway's, and portraits of more worthy figures such as Beechey's clergyman. The comments and associations made by the *Morning Herald* expose a central and essential paradox in the viewing of paintings at Somerset House: while the viewer expected a didactic display of moral and elevated art which was in keeping with the Academy's much-vaunted ideology, he or she ultimately relished the juxtapositions of high and low, moral and salacious, ideal and real, public and private which the heterogeneous exhibits – and contemporary taste – engendered.

Meanwhile, the social fluidity of the area surrounding Somerset House offered an ironic comment on the Academy's highly disproportionate display of portraiture. One newspaper relayed the views of one of its correspondent who felt that

such is the impression of vice [in the metropolis], no disguise can conceal its effects, and in proof of his

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Herald* (3 May 1785), p.2.

assertion he calls the attention of the public to the portraits of the females exhibited in Somerset House, in which a speculative eye may easily distinguish the vicious courtesan from the modest maiden or chaste wife.

Somerset House is not more remarkable for the exhibition of copies in the day, than originals in the night. Some dozens of [*illegible*] prostitutes parade in the front every evening, to the disgrace of humanity and scandal of police.<sup>1</sup>

The ease with which the writer moves from the juxtapositions of respectable and dubious portraiture on the walls of the exhibition room, to the temporal flux between fashionable exhibition and shocking self-display is highly suggestive. The social fluidity of the Strand with its nocturnal overspill from the disreputable spots of Covent Garden and Drury Lane neatly mirrored the ‘indelicacy of placing the portraits of notorious prostitutes, triumphing as it were in vice, close to the pictures of women of rank and virtue’.<sup>2</sup> The alarming possibility was that the continuity between the street and the exhibition space might offer a way for the audience to view the works of art, one which was hardly consistent with the existence (however precarious) of a polite public sphere.

In this respect, it was unfortunate that the Academy should have chosen to retain its one shilling admission charge after moving to Somerset House, a venue which made much of its status as a supposedly “public” building. Accusations of ‘mercenary motives’ persisted throughout the decade, and charges of being involved in ‘low traffic’ and ‘extortion’ made the Academy sound as if it were joining the nearby shopkeepers and City ‘stockjobbers’ in dealing in commodities rather than displaying art.<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the century, Charles Lamb likened the crowd which thronged the Strand to a ‘multitudinous moving picture ... like the scenes of a shifting pantomime’, thus tying the entire locale, its visitors and inhabitants into a visual geography of spectacle, novelty and entertainment. The fact that visitors to the exhibition at Somerset House

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<sup>1</sup> *The Daily Universal Register* (10 May, 1786), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Post* (8 May 1786), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> *London Courant* (15 May 1780), p.2 and *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (27 April, 1784), p.2.

incurred a similar entrance charge to that demanded by neighbouring pantomimes, spectacles and theatrical displays only made the associations between the Academy and the neighbouring street life all the more inevitable.

The theatres, meanwhile, mainly concentrated around Covent Garden within easy walking distance of Somerset House, enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the RA's annual exhibition. Guaranteed to augment the sitter's and the artist's fame, theatrical portraiture was arguably the most popular genre at the exhibition, pandering to the public's insatiable appetite for celebrity images. As Gill Perry has pointed out, the two spaces operated as extensions of, and substitutes for, each other, with the exhibition opening just as the theatres' winter season was drawing to a close.<sup>1</sup> With the proliferation of theatrical portraiture on display in the Great Room, it was unlikely that viewers were ever going to succumb to the desired effects of Chambers's allegorical architecture: instead they found themselves once again responding to a visual and spectacular culture which had as much to do with the environs of Somerset House as with the Academy itself.

While the move to Somerset House had partly been an attempt to consolidate the Academy by housing the offices, schools and exhibition space in one building, in effect it had simply increased the tensions and contradictions thrown up by the relationships between these components by bringing them into close proximity. It was now clear that their interests could not be simply or literally mapped onto each other. The perceived and continual failure of the Academy to respond to the interests of the public, its members or its students was summed up by the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* when the exhibition opened in 1784 as 'littlenesses unworthy a Royal institution, [and which] degrade the land'. The writer went on to draw an unflattering comparison between the mercenary nature of the Royal Academy, and the magnanimity of one artistic entrepreneur in particular:

Is it not unbecoming that an exalted individual should have more liberal attachments to the arts than the

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<sup>1</sup> Perry, 'Spectacle of the Muse', p. 111.

conductors of the national school? Mr Boydell, in his love for the arts, collects at an immense expence, the most splendid exhibition of drawings in Europe, and presents it to the public eye free of all expence; yet the Royal Academy of England, cherished by the countenance of Majesty, an object of national pride, is made an article of low traffic.<sup>1</sup>

The mercenary motives of the Academy were now laying them open to accusations of the kind of small-minded commercial ambitions which even the most successful commercial print publisher of the day stood elevated from. In pursuing these motives, the Academy had jettisoned the public, its artists and its students from its core while Boydell was assembling a public through the free display of his carefully chosen collection.<sup>2</sup> The problems which took place in the new site at Somerset House were problems which focussed attention on institutional politics and on the public itself, at the expense of the institution's artistic programmes and ideologies. Meanwhile, the pursuit and display of artistic excellence was deemed by many to be taking place outside of, and in spite of, the Academy, by a man whose wealth, taste, patriotism and public spirit offered to compensate for the failings of the RA.

### *'The First English Olympiad': Defining the Shakespeare Gallery*

The Shakespeare Gallery opened on 4 May 1789, with 34 paintings on display in the main galleries. The visitor entered the Gallery from Pall Mall through a fairly narrow frontage, designed by the architect George Dance (Figure 8). The façade – which was architecturally innovative with its ammonite capitals – offered a spectacular addition to the architectural splendour of Pall Mall and its surrounding streets and squares (Figure 9).

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<sup>1</sup> *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (27 April 1784) p.2. During the 1780s, critics frequently noted that particular historical canvases on display at the Academy had been commissioned or purchased by Boydell.

<sup>2</sup> The Academy's exhibits that year were not so carefully chosen. The secession of Gainsborough left a substantial portion of wall space which needed to be filled quickly, and it was noted that there was a greater proportion of portraiture than in previous years, much of it provided by Reynolds.

Boydell's choice of architect had been astute. While William Chambers had received virtually no public commissions before designing the new Somerset House, Dance (and, before him, his father) had built up an impressive portfolio of public commissions in the City – most notably Newgate Prison and the improvement of the Guildhall. Chambers had come increasingly to be seen as a tyrannical and self-interested figure, an image which sat uncomfortably with his role as architect and Treasurer of a public institution. The opening of the Royal Academy's 1789 exhibition – shortly before the Shakespeare Gallery opened for the first time – was tainted by rumours of Academic discord, of which Chambers was the ostensible cause, appearing 'to arrogate too much consequence, and to treat the rest of the body with too lordly a control'.<sup>1</sup> Dance, meanwhile, though also a member of the Academy had remained removed from Academic wranglings, seeking instead to promote the professional interests of his colleagues through, for example, his foundation of the Architects' Club which met, significantly, in St. James's Street.

The choice of an architect associated in the public's geographical imagination with the public buildings of the city would have added to the illusion that the Shakespeare Gallery was a public, rather than a private, venture. Nonetheless, Dance would have found himself having to negotiate the limitations of the space at No.52 Pall Mall, which must have appeared a long way from offering the basis for a public form of architecture. If William Chambers had found difficulties in designing a frontage for Somerset House which would fit the 135 feet between existing buildings (Figure 10), the design for the Shakespeare Gallery must have been an even more pressing problem for Dance who was being asked to design a façade just 25 feet in width.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the exterior of the building would only be encountered by visitors through the two dimensions of its frontage, which opened straight into an interior vestibule and did not allow for the kind of architectonic experience that Dance's previous public buildings, and Chambers's new Somerset House, offered. The limited dimensions of the frontage of 52 Pall Mall thus posed for the architect the difficult task of finding a rapidly legible

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Post* (27 April 1789) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Murdoch, 'Architecture and Experience', p.17.

architectural vocabulary which would convey to visitors and passers-by the fact that the building was a showcase of British art and a monument to Shakespeare.

It was this latter fact which seems to have provided Dance with his ultimate inspiration for the façade, a fact which allowed him also to seamlessly unite the public and private natures of Boydell's Gallery. Dance's design, incorporating a relief sculpture by Thomas Banks, embraces the two-dimensionality of the façade, making little attempt to incorporate protruding columns or pediments, and producing a design which gave the illusion of being one enormous carved design rather than a construction. Lying flat against the outer shell of the building, the columns, entablature and pediment resist the perspectival play of architecture, working instead as a framing device for Banks's sculpture, which is incorporated into a broader composition that shares more in common with contemporary monumental sculpture than established architecture (Figure 11).<sup>1</sup> Dance's façade would, on this level, have been easily legible to passers-by, who would have been familiar with the conventions of monumental sculpture and recognised in this street-side composition a restrained version of what was a predominantly Anglican visual form.<sup>2</sup>

While Dance provided an architectural composition which advertised the Gallery's status as a monument to the national poet, Banks sculpted an alto-relief which elaborated on the nature of Boydell's project (Figure 12). Again, Banks was an astute choice for Boydell, a figure who Reynolds regarded as 'the first British sculptor who had produced works of classic grace', but whose *oeuvre* also included a large portion of works on specifically British themes.<sup>3</sup> The combination of the classical and the British which had come to define Banks's

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* was one newspaper which described the design as "monumental", (5 May 1789), p.2, while Ludwig Tieck described the Gallery itself as being more beautiful and perhaps more durable than the monument to Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey ('Die Kupferstiche nach der Shakspeare-Galerie in London' (1793) in *Kritische Schriften* (Leipzig, 1848), p.3).

<sup>2</sup> On eighteenth-century figurative monuments, and their negotiation of Anglican debates, see David Bindman and Malcolm Baker, *Roubiliac and the Eighteenth-Century Monument* (New Haven and London, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds is quoted by Allan Cunningham, *Lives* (1830), III, 86. Banks monuments and busts of contemporary figures included Captain Cook, Warren Hastings, Sarah Siddons, William Woollett and Boydell himself.

work clearly situated him as the appropriate artist for a subject such as *Shakespeare between the Dramatic Muse and the Genius of Painting* which demanded a fusion of the universal and the local, the classic and the modern.

Shakespeare was not an uncommon subject for British sculptors: monuments or busts of the poet could be found in Westminster Abbey, and at private residences such as Stowe and at that of the actor, David Garrick. Banks would certainly have been familiar with the Westminster Abbey monument, sculpted by Peter Scheemakers in whose studio the young Banks had begun to study his craft (figure 13).<sup>1</sup> Banks's sculpture, however, differed from that of his predecessor in one crucial way. While Scheemakers sculpture depicted the poet leaning on a pedestal which is adorned with a dagger, laurel wreath, an actor's mask and busts of his patron Queen Elizabeth and the subjects of two of his plays, Henry V and Richard III, Banks's alto relief seeks to link Shakespeare's art with the art which the viewer could encounter in Boydell's Gallery.

Seated on a rock, Shakespeare – apparently on the verge of rising – is flanked by two allegorical female figures: the Dramatic Muse on his left and the Genius of Painting on his right. The Dramatic Muse carries a lyre, and holds a laurel wreath out to Shakespeare, apparently offering him words of counsel. The Genius of Painting, meanwhile, carries a plate and brushes, and gestures towards Shakespeare, while gazing out at the spectator. Banks's obvious source for this composition is the much-vaunted Choice of Hercules topos recommended by eighteenth-century art theorists as offering an appropriately civic subject for painters.<sup>2</sup> On an initial glance, the viewer can quickly recognise that the two

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<sup>1</sup> It seems that Banks was never an official pupil of Scheemakers, but had befriended some of his pupils and obtained permission to draw and model in his studio in the evenings.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Choice of Hercules' or 'Hercules at the Crossroads' as a subject for painters – seen since the Renaissance as exemplifying the intellectual and morally-edifying nature of painting – was most famously advocated by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury in his 'Essay on Painting', published in the third volume of his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London, 1714). Its centrality to eighteenth-century art theory underpinned the ethical basis of painting and the expectation that ambitious art should expound moral and public qualities, prompting the spectator to choose – like Hercules – the path offered by Virtue over the temptations offered by Vice. Scholarly discussions of this topos include David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 1993), pp. 63-64; John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven and [cont'd ...]



female figures adopt the roles of Virtue and Pleasure within Banks's composition. The Genius of Painting is immediately marked out as the sensual creature – her breasts exposed, she looks out of the composition and engages the viewer with her gaze while Shakespeare rests his hand upon her shoulder. The Dramatic Muse, meanwhile, is turned away from the viewer (though her robes may be as revealing as those belonging to Painting, we are unable to see this) and seems encumbered by the emblems of her profession. The profile of her face half-eclipsed by the masks of Tragedy and Comedy fixed to her hair, she turns to Shakespeare, seemingly imploring him.

Although the Choice of Hercules is the obvious (continental) precedent for Banks's composition, the sculpture also differs from the established conventions of this topos in a number of ways. First, it is clear that Painting, the sensual figure, is not offering a lower path to Shakespeare than that offered by her rival. Both women point upwards, both apparently indicating a Parnassian path in their counsel to Shakespeare, a path which the poet, judging from his distant gaze – which significantly does not engage directly with either woman, but seems to imply that he is familiar with their arguments – has already chosen. Neither is Banks inclined to adopt the conventional signifiers of difference between the two women, the differences in dress, pose and accoutrements which distinguish Virtue from Pleasure. Instead, the two figures are compositionally balanced, their poses and emblems reflecting each other and offering an appropriate support for the figure of Shakespeare. They seem to represent, not morally contrasting figures, but the harmonious forms of two Sister-Arts. And if Painting, clutching her colour palette in a semi-naked state still represents something of the traditional figure of Pleasure then, on this occasion, she is not a figure who needs to be renounced. She serves to reconcile the sensual qualities of paint, its physicality, and its appeal to the eye with the less visceral attributes of the mind.

Banks's negotiation of, and ultimate departure from, the Choice of Hercules motif served an important function. Initially, it would have served to direct the viewer's attention to the fact that the building was more than a simple monument to Shakespeare, that it was equally a temple of British art and 'a nobler collection of Painting than has ever yet appeared in England'.<sup>1</sup> Banks's invocation of a motif which was well-known as offering an exemplary subject for painters thus served to focus attention on the purpose of Boydell's Gallery as a space for ambitious historical painting. His undermining of this theme, however, made a number of additional points about the ideology of this particular Gallery space and the ambitions of the artists who had contributed to it. While *Pleasure and Virtue* offer morally-conflicting paths to the wavering Hercules, the *Dramatic Muse* and the *Genius of Painting* do not gesture towards particular paths. This has not so much to do with the limitations of sculpture in delineating distant planes, but rather more to do with the fact that the female figures are gesturing towards Shakespeare himself. Painting's gaze in the direction of the viewer as she points to the poet suggests that it is Shakespeare himself (and not, we might infer, the civic narrative of Hercules's choice) who offers the ideal subject for British painting. By conspicuously distorting the Herculean iconography, Banks's sculpture suggested that the Shakespeare Gallery had found the means by which British painting could offer a strong, and distinctive, challenge to continental painting and to the Academic system.

Shakespeare's encounter with the *Dramatic Muse* and *Painting* offered a neat sublimation of the experience the viewer would have on entering Boydell's temple of the muses, an experience which was further signalled by the ornamental lyres and wreathes on the lower register of the façade. The architectural device created by Dance and Banks thus served to impress upon the visitor a number of issues. First, the novelty of Dance's façade, with its specially designed capitals, and of Banks's sculpture, with its negotiation of the classical and the self-consciously British, anticipated the kinds of stylistic issues which were at work within the Gallery itself, issues of originality, precedence and Britishness. Significantly, Banks's sculpture was described by one periodical as

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<sup>1</sup> *The Star* (14 May 1789), p.3.

being ‘the most perfect piece of sculpture that has yet been produced by a native of Great Britain’, an acknowledgment which clearly boded well for the remainder of Boydell’s project.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the continental precedents discernible within Banks’s composition were clearly imported as witty allusions rather than with unswerving reverence for the continental schools of painting: the Choice of Hercules motif is, as we have seen, quickly undermined by Banks’s deployment of his figures, while the often-recognised similarity between the pose of Shakespeare and that of the figure of Dawn in Michelangelo’s Tomb of Lorenzo de’Medici would have served to convey a humorous – albeit somewhat outrageous – allusion to the Gallery’s proprietor as a modern-day Medici, one which was quickly spotted by the press.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, however, these allusions did not inhibit the viewer’s comprehension of the building’s façade, which was restrained and instantly legible, revealing the interior to be both a monument to Shakespeare, and a temple to the muses. In all these respects, the efforts of Dance and Banks offered a counterpoint to the Strand block of Somerset House which not only failed to reveal the Britishness of the institution (John Murdoch has recently described it as ‘still the most overtly ‘Parisian’ building in London’) but also chose a maritime theme for its external sculpture rather than one indicative of the Academy’s activities.<sup>3</sup>

As we have seen, a decision to announce the subject-matter of the Academy and its exhibition space at the level of the street would have been problematic, and it was clearly Chambers’s intention to draw the viewer as far away physically and

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<sup>1</sup> *European Magazine*, quoted in C.F. Bell (ed.), *Annals of Thomas Banks* (1938), p.74.

<sup>2</sup> As we saw in the Introduction, critics did make the connection between Boydell and the Medici, a connection which had, in fact, been made two years previously when the *World* reported that Boydell, on his visit to Paris in September and October 1787, ‘gave such favourable impressions of his spirit and taste in patronage of art – that the people there, who are not apt to be historical in their praise, began to talk of his with the Medici’ (*The World* (29 October 1787), p.2). Gerald L. Carr has pointed out that Boydell may have had a special relationship with the *World*, which might suggest that the analogy was one actively promoted by Boydell (‘David, Boydell and *Socrates*: A mixture of anglophilia, self-promotion and the press’ in *Apollo*, 137 (1993), p.310). The subversion of the Hercules topos could also be regarded as a peculiarly British practice, as in the case of Reynolds’s portrait of *Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy* of 1761. Two interesting discussions of eighteenth-century paintings which negotiate this iconography can be found in David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 1992), pp.61-65 and Angela Rosenthal, ‘Angelica Kauffman: Ma(s)king Claims in *Art History*, 15, No.1, (March 1992), 38-59.

<sup>3</sup> Murdoch, p.12. Chambers’s design was, of course, closely modelled on that of the Louvre.

mentally from the street before confronting him or her with works by the Academy's artists. At the Shakespeare Gallery, however, the proprietor and his artists seemed prepared to deal with the viewer in rather different terms, announcing the Gallery's presence at the very level of the street. Perhaps most telling of all in relation to the Academy was the inclusion of an ambiguous quotation from Hamlet on the plinth upon which Shakespeare rests: "He was a man, take him for all in all / I shall not look upon his like again." While the inscription could be read in a number of ways, it differed substantially from the often-quoted inscription above the door of the Academy's exhibition room (Figure 6). First, it was not in Greek but taken from the works of the national poet. And secondly it focused attention on the subject of the exhibition rather than on the audience itself, offering an invitation rather than a prohibition.

Boydell's confidence in putting high art literally out on the street, in signalling its availability to the public, suggests an anticipation of a certain kind of viewer, one who was practised in the reading of a complex urban visuality. Celebrated as Banks' sculpture was as an ambitious aesthetic object, it also would have participated in a broader visual topography of shop and inn signs, themselves often utilising the name and iconography of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the figures of Shakespeare, Poetry and Painting would have participated in a wider dialogue along this stretch of St. James's, linking the Shakespeare Gallery not only with other artistic sites, but also with the literary public sphere, with the numerous bookshops which the street housed, for example, including the premises belonging to George Nichols, the publisher of the book edition of Boydell's Shakespeare. Boydell thus sought to make the viewing of history painting not a hermetically-sealed, temporally-limited experience, as was the case with the Academy's isolation of its exhibitions from the spectacular consumerism of the Strand, but offered high art as an everyday aspect of the life of the metropolitan

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<sup>1</sup> This particular visual form was not necessarily an insignificant one. J.T. Smith, the author of the 1828 biography of Nollekens, relates that a number of painters, including members of the Academy, had painted shop signs or coach panels. He notes that the portrait painter Clarkson had painted a sign of Shakespeare for a shop on Little Russell Street which apparently cost £500. If this is true, this was a phenomenal amount of money and far more than most painters earned for painting a conventional canvas. See J.T. Smith, *Nollekens and his Times* (London, 1949), p.13.

public, a process which was permitted by the rather more rarefied commercial character of Pall Mall.

On walking through the double door of 52 Pall Mall, the visitor found himself in a 'spacious vestibule' and, after a short flight of steps, reached an eight-foot wide stone staircase which led to the central gallery.<sup>1</sup> As Francis Wheatley's watercolour shows, (Figure 14) the first floor consisted of three rooms, interconnected by arches in which the Shakespeare paintings hung.<sup>2</sup> In addition there were rooms on the ground floor, also offering changing displays. Here the visitor could see the drawings and prints after the paintings as they became available, the typography which would be used in the book edition and – at various times – John Boydell's drawings from the Houghton collection (which had previously been on display in the Cheapside shop), portraits of Boydell and the contributing artists, and a number of popular contemporary history paintings and their prints.

Entering the Gallery and paying the admission charge of one shilling (which – Boydell and the press were keen to emphasise – had rather different connotations to the shilling paid at the Royal Academy) the viewer was given a catalogue containing the text of each Shakespearean scene which was depicted in the Gallery.<sup>3</sup> This formed a kind of anthology of the most celebrated passages from Shakespeare which, despite the general feeling that everyone was familiar with

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<sup>1</sup> This account of the gallery space is taken from Giles Waterfield (ed.), *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain, 1790-1990* exh. cat., (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1991), pp.129-131; Bruntjen, *op.cit.*; pp. 160-162 and Altick *op.cit.* as well as contemporary press reviews. The sense of remove from the space of the street would not have been as pointed as at Somerset House: as well as Banks's sculpture, viewers would have encountered a number of other rooms of the lower floors, all of which housed aspects of the Shakespeare project, such as drawings, prints and typography.

<sup>2</sup> The deployment of a series of rooms with connecting arches through which the back wall of the last room could be glimpsed was another innovation of Dance's: this plan was later used in a number of galleries, including the Dulwich Picture Gallery and the National Gallery of Scotland. The third room of Boydell's Gallery was not opened until the Gallery's second year when the collection of paintings had expanded.

<sup>3</sup> While, at the Academy, visitors paid their shilling just to prove that they could do so, Boydell's visitors were encouraged to believe that they were, like Boydell, collective patrons of the arts.

the plays, allowed the viewer recourse to the narratives of the scenes depicted.<sup>1</sup> Boydell had provided a preface to the catalogue, thanking the subscribers for their ‘liberality’ and stating his own hopes for the progress of English history painting, which he hoped to see ‘attain (advanced in years as I am) such a state of perfection in England that no man in Europe will be entitled to the name of a connoisseur, who has not personally witnessed their rapid progress’.<sup>2</sup> He also set forth his credentials for the project, reminding viewers that it was largely through his efforts (more recognised abroad, he seemed inclined to believe, than at home) that an English School of Engraving had been established, tipping the balance in the import-export market for prints in favour of the British. At this point, clearly conscious of the taint of commerce, Boydell was quick to assure viewers that he only mentioned ‘this circumstance, because there are of those, who, not putting much value on the advancement of national taste, still feel the [presumably economic] advantage of promoting the arts’.

Boydell also attempted to forestall criticisms of the undertaking, warning viewers to remember that Shakespeare ‘possessed powers which no pencil can reach’ and that ‘it must not be expected that the art of the Painter can ever equal the art of our Poet’. Hastening to elucidate the boundaries between the malignant ‘cavils of pseudo-critics who rather than not attempt to shew wit would crush all merit in the bud’ and the ‘candid criticism [which] is the soul of improvement’, Boydell was clearly seeking to discourage the kind of flippant reviewing that often accompanied the Royal Academy’s annual exhibitions, a practice which he was quick to mark out as unconstructive and unpatriotic, since the critic’s eagerness to reveal his wit was placed above any credible concern for the public for whose good he ostensibly wrote. He went on to voice his hopes for the improvement which the encouragement of the public (and constructive criticism from reviewers) might foster in the younger artists, who ‘all know, that

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<sup>1</sup> It emerged that viewers were not familiar with *Titus Andronicus*, a scene from which was depicted by Thomas Kirk. Critics were unsure whether being familiar with the narrative, and recognising that Lavinia had been raped and mutilated (something which Kirk had tastefully concealed) was a good thing in this case. Meanwhile, the catalogue’s status as a mini-anthology of Shakespearean scenes would have aligned it with works such as Elizabeth Griffith’s *The Morality of Shakespeare’s Drama Illustrated* (London, 1775).

<sup>2</sup> John and Josiah Boydell, *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery, Pall Mall*, (London, 1789), p. iv.

their future fame depends on their present exertions, for here the Painter's labours will be perpetually under the public eye, and compared with those of his contemporaries'.<sup>1</sup>

Boydell was keen to point out that this was a public undertaking which offered the artist a degree of exposure he could not otherwise hope for, the remainder of his works being 'either locked up in the cabinets of the curious, or dispersed over the country, in the houses of the different possessors.'<sup>2</sup> The Shakespeare Gallery, unlike the short run of the exhibition at the Royal Academy, offered artists the opportunity to place their works under permanent public scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> For the newspaper critics, this new set of conditions offered an unprecedented opportunity to justify their precarious existence in the exhibition space, with Boydell appearing willing to offer the public and the critics an important role in the project. *The Gazetteer* announced that

the papers teem with remarks upon the paintings in the Gallery of Shakespeare, and among these remarks there will doubtless be many which are well worth attending to. The pictures being one property, it must unquestionably be the wish, as it is undoubtedly the interest of the Proprietors, to have them as perfect as possible, and should any errors which can be amended be pointed out, we may fairly rely upon their being done away by next exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

The press responded to its newfound powers by producing criticism of unprecedented detail and quality, and was gratified to find that several of its criticisms were taken into account.<sup>5</sup> As more paintings were added in subsequent years – totalling 167 by the end of the Gallery's lifetime – it became clear that the dynamics of this exhibition venture were offering something quite

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>3</sup> At this point, Boydell had no idea that the collection would end up being dispersed: he later claimed that he had intended to give the collection to the nation on his death.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (8 May 1789) p.2.

<sup>5</sup> As just three examples, William Hodges's unsuccessful scene from *The Winter's Tale* was replaced with the same scene painted by Wright of Derby; the allegorical demon which Reynolds had introduced into *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort* was removed; and Fuseli's Miranda – judged by one critic to rival Caliban in beauty – was altered by the artist to produce a rather more attractive version.

new to the public. Not only were canvases altered and improved, but initial concerns about gaudy colouring (a frequent criticism at the Academy's exhibitions) were allayed in subsequent years as it was noted that time had mellowed the tone of the paintings, producing a more harmonious effect. Meanwhile the addition of new canvases over the years necessitated a shifting hang, with existing works being moved around and benefiting from different lighting, perspectives and juxtapositions.

Boydell's apprehensions of malignant criticism proved unfounded on the Gallery's opening. Throughout 1787 and 1788 the press had reported on commissions and the progress of works to be displayed in the Gallery. The build-up of anticipation surrounding its opening paved the way for an enthusiastic critical reception while comparatively little attention or praise was afforded to the Royal Academy's exhibition which had opened a week earlier.<sup>1</sup> The *Analytical Review* observed of Somerset House that 'the historical talents of the artists having been almost exclusively engrossed by the public scheme of Mr Boydell, and the private one of Mr Macklin, the exhibition of this place is become of still less importance than even that of last year'.<sup>2</sup> The 'present deficiency' of the Academy's exhibition was put down to the 'grand undertaking of Boydell and Nicol ... [whose] gallery will, on its opening, amply compensate for the mediocrity of the Royal Institution.'<sup>3</sup> The *St. James's Chronicle* latched onto Boydell's rhetoric and claimed that '[t]hough the Royal Academy has been established in England thirty years; and its annual Exhibitions applauded, we may consider the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery as the first Æra of competition in Painting'.<sup>4</sup> Although the writer was careful to avoid overtly

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<sup>1</sup> It is unclear how much of this criticism may have been orchestrated by Boydell himself. Alongside his own catalogue, Boydell commissioned a critical catalogue from Humphrey Repton entitled *The Bee; or, a Companion to the Shakespeare Gallery*. The content of this publication overlapped with the Gallery's opening reviews. Since it is not clear whether Repton wrote *The Bee* (which was advertised as a work of collaborative criticism written by a 'hive of fellow labourers') before or after the opening of the Gallery – and since it is likely that Boydell had a significant amount of input into *The Bee* – there are some grounds for believing that a proportion of the press reviews may similarly have been commissioned by Boydell as puffs.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Arts: Royal Exhibition at Somerset House' in *The Analytic Review*, IV (1789), p.106. The writer of this review was, in fact, Henry Fuseli who singled out his own works at the Shakespeare Gallery and Somerset House for a particularly favourable response.

<sup>3</sup> *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (28 April 1789) p.4.

<sup>4</sup> *St. James's Chronicle* (5-7 May 1789) p.4.



censuring the Academy, he hinted that the Academy's exhibitions had worked to occlude the work of certain artists, stating that 'the publick will judge on this occasion [i.e. the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery]; and the works of Fuseli, Hamilton, Northcote, Rigaud, and Smirk, will be ranked with those which have hitherto engrossed the general attention'. The writer proved to be correct – over the following years these artists in particular were singled out by the press. Their stylistic attributes, as we will see in subsequent chapters, proved to be vital components in the attempt to form an English School of history painting.

*Space and Spectatorship: the character of the Shakespeare Gallery and its visitors*

The formulation of the Shakespeare Gallery as an egalitarian space (unlike – the *St. James's Chronicle* critic leaves us to infer – the Academy whose authoritarianism and discriminatory hanging practices had worked to occlude certain artists) pervaded the press criticism. Not only did the press and public respond to Boydell's invitation to 'candid criticism', and not only did a younger stock of artistic talent emerge, but criticism itself found itself liberated from the necessity of staking the kind of connoisseurial claims that functioned as markers of class and privilege. While critics of the Academy's exhibitions often felt themselves to have arrived at the highest level of aesthetic judgment when they were able to recognise the influence of a Guido or a Teniers in a contemporary painting, this kind of connoisseurship had a restricted presence at the Shakespeare Gallery. The critics (almost certainly the same critics who reviewed the Academy's exhibits) found that Shakespeare offered entirely new subjects for representation and evaluation, and that the ensuing aesthetic – which seemed to owe little to artistic precedence, influence or mannerism – might be defined a characteristically British in one crucial way:

In England, and England only, every man thinks as he will, speaks as he will, and writes as he will. In the Gallery, every picture *carries an air of freedom* – every Painter gives *his own* idea of a character without any the smallest reference to that drawn by his contemporary...

[T]o the exertions of genius the constitution of England is in the highest degree favourable. Every man feels himself at liberty to express *what* he feels in the *manner* he feels it ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

The writer is suggesting that the unhindered operations of English liberty within the Shakespeare Gallery produces a collection of canvases which are to be recognised for their individuality and originality, rather than for the kind of collective aesthetic which is generally held to characterise a particular school of painting. The diversity of styles, and the confidence to pursue a particular aesthetic, are however in themselves symptomatic of Englishness. While it is impossible to pin down *a* particular visual language as definitive of an English School, the plurality, freedom and co-existence of the Gallery's stylistic diversity can be seen as indicative of that fundamental tenet of Englishness, the constitutional liberty of the people.

Written at the height of the controversy surrounding Fox's Libel Bill, these comments demonstrate how easy it might be to slip from a consideration of the politics of the art world into political discourse itself.<sup>2</sup> Although they appear within a column specifically dedicated to an examination of the latest additions and changes to the Gallery in 1792, it is hard to separate them from the political concerns which are to be encountered elsewhere in the newspaper. What is significant here, though, is not that there might be a relation between aesthetics and politics – this would have been nothing new at all – but that the art world might offer an exemplum which could justify broader political claims. Not only is this embryonic English school of painting to be noted for the aesthetic liberty granted to its artists, but – we are invited to infer – it also represents in microcosm the English constitution in its perfection. The individual energies and discursive dynamic between artists and the public are deemed to function in a cohesive manner, with a palatable blend of liberty and consensus which was evidently so tangible that it could be used by the press to remind its readers of

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Chronicle* (28 March 1792) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> The Libel Act of 1792 gave juries, rather than judges, the right to decide whether something constituted sedition. It came at a time when the freedom of the press was being severely curtailed by Pitt's government.

their constitutional rights. Of course the language of politics also legitimated the Shakespeare Gallery. If there was any doubt that such diverse, and occasionally idiosyncratic, artistic practice could be represented as a collective school, then the English constitution could put these doubts to rest.

As the political temperature in England heated up during the first half of the 1790s, the Shakespeare Gallery came increasingly to be seen as a democratic space indicative of British liberty, which offered to re-work the dominant and authoritarian practices of the Academy. This claim was further substantiated by the opening of Bowyer's Historic Gallery in 1792, which served to highlight a set of ideological distinctions alongside the geographical demarcations which distinguished the Pall Mall exhibitions from Somerset House. At the beginning of April 1794, the *Morning Post* offered its readers a preview of the coming exhibition season. It held out little hope that the Royal Academy's exhibition – shortly to open – could show much of value, suggesting that a series of Galleries along Pall Mall had siphoned the artistic talent away from Somerset House:

The Historic Gallery is again open to the public, and boasts multiplied productions, and increased effect. Such are the additional works this year, that we tremble for the splendour of The Exhibition; as many eminent R.A.s, by contributing highly finished performances to this Gallery, must have abridged the time necessary to produce Pictures worthy of Somerset Place. If this should prove a real statement of the case, an eternal round of mawkish portraits, with feeble imitations of Claud, Salvator, and Canaletti will mark the progress of an institution patronized by Royalty; and the Man of Taste, the Foreigner of Discrimination, will resort to the Shakespear; the Poets, and to the Historic Gallery, to form a just estimation of the genius of our artists, and the influence of encouragement by the People.<sup>1</sup>

Immersing its art criticism in the political discourse of the 1790s, the *Morning Post* – an opposition newspaper – was quick to mark out a distinction between two kinds of artistic spaces which had emerged by the end of the eighteenth century, one kind an enclave of royalty, the other patronised by the people. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Post* (1 April 1794), p.3.

circuit of commercial galleries which Pall Mall offered allowed viewers to witness the productions of English ‘genius’ in place of the Academy’s usual imitations of foreign artists, to view history painting rather than portraits, and to visit exhibitions which were public spaces rather than merely speaking to the interests of an aristocratic few. In the *Morning Post*’s version of events, this set of exhibitions not only challenged the Academy but was sowing the seeds of its demise: for while artists were busy preparing for their new entrepreneurial patrons, they were simply sending the dregs of their work – their ‘mawkish portraits’ and ‘feeble imitations’ – to Somerset House.

Operating throughout the 1790s, the Shakespeare and the other commercial galleries on Pall Mall benefited from some extremely fortuitous timing, not least because of the problems which had arisen at the Academy following its move to Somerset House. Escalating criticisms of overabundant portraiture, discriminatory hanging, slavish artistic imitation and a disregard for the interests of its public, its students and even some of its own members had, as we have seen, been channelled into accusations of institutional tyranny by the press.<sup>1</sup> This set of accusations, and the political connotations they implied, offered a neat ideological package which the Shakespeare Gallery could readily be defined against. A great deal of ambiguity surrounded the notion of what it meant to be a ‘royal’ institution: did this truly imply that the Academy was a ‘public’ institution, or was it in fact simply serving the interests and ambitions of an aristocratic and courtly few? By the time the new galleries opened, the political climate in Britain had given a new impetus to these questions and allowed Boydell’s venture in particular to assume a natural place in the political discourse which pervaded almost every aspect of public life in the 1790s. Boydell’s gallery, many sections of the press were eager to claim, was the home of a truly public art. Suffused with an air of liberty and patriotism, operating through a system of artistic meritocracy and acknowledging the patronage and the interests of the public, the Shakespeare Gallery – and the other schemes it inspired – offered a promising future for an English school of painting.

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<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between the press and the Academy, see Mark Hallett, ‘“The Business of Criticism”: The Press and the Royal Academy Exhibition in Eighteenth-Century London’ in Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp.65-75.

The press offered a highly visible and politicised characterisation of the Shakespeare Gallery, its artists, productions and visitors, but it was by no means the only vehicle through which the Gallery was represented. Particularly intriguing is Wheatley's watercolour depicting the re-opening of the Shakespeare Gallery in 1790, its second year of existence. The watercolour clearly drew upon an established genre of exhibition images, exemplified most notably by Ramberg's well-known representation of the RA's 1787 exhibition. As in Ramberg's image, Wheatley's composition centres upon members of the royal family (in this case the Dukes of Clarence and York rather than the Prince of Wales) being guided through the exhibition – in this case by the proprietors John and Josiah Boydell, although Reynolds (identifiable from his ear trumpet) is also part of this central group. The image, like Ramberg's, also makes much of its fashionable and sociable spectators, among them the Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Jersey and Sheridan.

Nonetheless, Wheatley's image departed from Ramberg's in a number of ways. Avoiding his predecessor's stagey perspective, which served as a showcase for a highly self-conscious and narcissistic crowd as well as for the exhibition itself, Wheatley provides an edited view of the exhibition, taken from the centre of the room rather than the back wall and which provides an intimate, close-up rendering of the exhibition and its visitors. Lying a short distance from the central group rather than from the voyeuristic perspective of Ramberg's print, Wheatley's viewpoint suggests the scale of Boydell's project through the accidental glimpsing of further canvases through two sets of receding arches, avoiding the overwhelming thrust of canvases which Ramberg effects and which critics of the Academy habitually commented upon. The visitors to the exhibition, meanwhile, are stripped of the kind of satirical inflection which Ramberg imposes upon the Academy's public. They are visiting Boydell's Gallery to look at art, not at each other, and engage comfortably in the viewing

and discussion of paintings on display, all of them, crucially, history paintings.<sup>1</sup> The female visitors – a problematic component of the public in representations of the Academy’s exhibitions – are shown as being capable of scrutinising and comprehending the exhibits without the guidance and mediation of their male companions.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Reynolds occupies an ambiguous role in Wheatley’s image. While his presence clearly adds credibility to the claims of Boydell’s Gallery as a space for ambitious art, his centrality to the image (and hence to the ideology of the space it defines) is not underscored quite so clearly as it is by Ramberg. No longer the spokesperson for the exhibition, Reynolds stands slightly behind the Boydells and the Duke of York, and points out a canvas to the Duke of Clarence, who appears to be ignoring him and listening to the Boydells instead. The point is implicit rather than fully realised, but it does suggest that Wheatley is keen to avoid the kind of categorisation of the viewing public within the social hierarchies which images of the Academy invariably delineated. Instead, Wheatley is at pains to balance the kind of prestige and cachet which Reynolds and the royal visitors confer upon Boydell’s gallery with the sense that they are part of a broader, self-assured public at ease in the presence of high art and in little need of the kind of pedagogical authority which Reynolds offers in Ramberg’s image. The Dukes of Clarence and York themselves were keen to underscore their status as anonymous members of a sociable public within this gallery space. This was a role which the Duke of York relished, one newspaper claimed, taking up ‘the envied privilege of mingling undistinguished among the people it is possible he may one day govern, in a plain Frock and Slippers’ the year before Wheatley’s watercolour was painted.<sup>3</sup> The Duke of Clarence, meanwhile, though he actually claimed to have little taste for poetry or painting,

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<sup>1</sup> As C.S. Matheson has pointed out, none of the ‘ordinary visitors’ in Ramberg’s print pay any attention to the history paintings on display (C.S. Matheson, ‘“A Shilling Well Laid Out”: The Royal Academy’s Early Public’ in Solkin, *Art on the Line*, p.48).

<sup>2</sup> This is the case with representations of the Academy exhibition other than Ramberg’s, such as Charles Brandoin’s 1771 image and Daniel Dodd’s of 1784, where male viewers seem to exert a mediating, explicatory presence, allowing their female companions to access and comprehend the works on display in much the same way as the *Morning Post*, in 1780, had suggested that the princesses required a (implicitly male) guide to explain the history and form of the antique sculpture at Somerset House.

<sup>3</sup> Collection of press cuttings held at the National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2 volumes (hereafter *V&A Press Cuttings*), II, 589.

continued to drop in at the Gallery during the 90s to participate in discussions of the latest happenings at home and abroad.<sup>1</sup>

In its departures from the precedents offered by Ramberg, Wheatley's watercolour owes more to another kind of exhibition image which operated beyond the Academy, this time – and significantly - representing the displays of John Singleton Copley's work in the area surrounding Pall Mall (Figures 2 & 15). Bartolozzi's and Dodd's images present exhibition spaces in which the painting itself is of primary significance, a point which is underscored by the fact that the audience has largely turned its back on us, indicating not only its absorption in the canvas on display but also resisting its own status as a legitimate object for visual consumption. Not only had Copley produced canvases of an almost unprecedented scale and effect, but his exhibitions clearly sought to redefine the relationship between the work of art and its public, defined problematically in visual and verbal representations of the Royal Academy either as a kind of incorporated spectacle or as entirely at odds with each other. The regulation of the audience into enlightened and emotive spectators is most blatantly effected by Dodd who positions a group of viewers in front of the canvas where they quite literally complete the circle of spectators surrounding the dying Chatham within Copley's painting. Bartolozzi's image, meanwhile, had a different kind of regulatory function: distributed as a ticket for visitors entering the exhibition, it clearly functioned as a kind of laconic guide for those viewing Copley's vast canvas. Clutching these tickets as they entered the exhibition, the spectator could see him or herself defined as an informed and reflective members of a fashionable yet discerning public.<sup>2</sup> Viewers no longer compete with each other and the exhibits for notice, but appear to converse comfortably on the painting's merit and on the events it depicts as legitimate participants in the realms of art and nationhood.

Viewing Wheatley's watercolour, visitors to the Shakespeare Gallery would have seen themselves defined in much the same terms, as comfortably engaged in new

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<sup>1</sup> *Farington*, I, 202.

<sup>2</sup> On the regulatory function of the exhibition print, see Matheson, *'A Shilling Well Laid Out'*.

kinds of viewing. Yet, crucially, Wheatley's image resisted the kind of regulatory function which tended to characterise the exhibition print. While it may well have acted as a kind of blueprint for behaviour within the exhibition space, the image was produced as a single watercolour, resisting the commodification, dissemination and display which Ramberg's and other images became subject to as engraved prints, a process which reinforced the narcissistic aspects of the Academy's exhibition and public. Thus, at the same time as Wheatley sought to depict and define an audience at the Shakespeare Gallery, the very absence of his image from the public gaze suggests the lack of either a desire or need to display, regulate or flatter the viewers visiting Boydell's exhibition.

Of course the absence, or at the least the partial sequestration, of the image from the public view can be seen in itself as a regulatory strategy.<sup>1</sup> Accustomed and encouraged to view itself through the lenses of the numerous graphic representations and printed commentaries that dealt with the exhibition space — representations which spanned the entire spectrum from the satirical to the polite — the Academy's audience was a highly self-conscious one. The overwhelming absence of such imagery and commentary in relation to the Shakespeare Gallery, which, unlike the Academy exhibition, elicited extended reviews of each painting with no observations on the behaviour or composition of the audience, suggests a desire to direct the public's attention away from its own body, and onto the works of art themselves.

Meanwhile the pictures buzz in the background, becoming more hazy as the perspective space of the Gallery recedes into the third room. Hanging on the back wall of the main room the paintings on display are — on either side of the arch — Matthew William Peters's scenes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Much Ado about Nothing* and — above the arch — what appears to be West's

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is no evidence of who Wheatley's watercolour was produced for (or who bought it), or where it was exhibited, it is possible that it may have been bought by Boydell and hung within the Shakespeare Gallery itself. If this is the case, the image would have operated in much the same vein as Bartolozzi's entrance ticket to Copley's exhibition.



depiction of the heath scene from *King Lear*.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the ‘gaudy glare of unblended masses’ which ‘jostle each other, and crowd the room’ at the Academy, the paintings here – a year after the Gallery’s opening – formed a harmonious display, one which worked both with and apart from the crowd.<sup>2</sup> At the Academy the relationship between the crowd and the exhibits had sometimes seemed too close, particularly with the display of portraiture inviting comparisons between the paintings and the ‘originals’ in the room. As Ramberg’s image shows with its equally distinct focus on the crowd and the paintings on display, the relationship between viewers and exhibits could sometimes be rather too literal, causing a competitive frisson between the two.<sup>3</sup> Wheatley’s watercolour, on the other hand, may be read as imaging a harmonious interaction between viewers and paintings, where the critical interventions of the public and critics, and the art work’s susceptibility to commentary and exchange operate as a kind of discursive dynamic through which the function, status and identity of both the public and art are informed, played out and consolidated through a reciprocal and mutually-enhancing relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, Boydell’s Gallery also sought to play down the relationship of the Shakespeare canvases with the realm of the theatrical, a perennial problem – as we have seen – at the Academy, and one which the subject of the Gallery might have all too easily incurred. The established territory for paintings of Shakespearean scenes before the opening of the Gallery had lain firmly within the genre of portraiture rather than history painting, with artists such as Hogarth, Zoffany and Fuseli depicting celebrated actors in the roles for which they had

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman has identified this last painting as Reynolds’s *Macbeth and the Witches*. This is impossible since Reynolds’s painting was not hung in the Gallery until after his death, in 1793. From what I can make out of the painting from Wheatley’s watercolour, it seems to resemble West’s *King Lear* more closely.

<sup>2</sup> *The Analytical Review*, 1789, Vol IV, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> There are contemporary accounts which suggest, for example, the difficulties which male viewers faced when viewing art when accompanied by female companions. Satirical though many of these may be, they illuminate the dilemma of whether a gentleman should most properly devote his attention to the work of art or to his companion.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, it is significant that Wheatley’s image specifically alludes to the *re*-opening of the Gallery in its second year where, as we have seen, existing paintings were re-hung and altered taking into account the previous year’s reviews, and when the colouring of the canvases had begun to mellow over time.

achieved their greatest acclaim. Although hugely popular with the public, who had an apparently insatiable appetite for prints after such celebrities, they did not fare so well with those for whom ambitious art was high on the agenda: such critics deemed theatrical portraiture to be a cultural product symptomatic of the fickle tastes of a celebrity-obsessed middle class public. The press, however, voiced a sense of relief on their initial viewing of the Shakespeare Gallery, commending the painters for avoiding the dubious genre of theatrical portraiture:

There was some reason to fear, that our painters would have sought for, and gathered their ideas from the Theatre, and given us portraits of the well-dressed Ladies and Gentlemen

“Who strut and fret their hour upon the stage,  
And then are seen no more.”

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 play house. But this has been avoided; the pictures in general give a mirror of the poet.<sup>1</sup>

While, as we will go on to see in the following chapter, the dependence upon an academic (and foreign) classicism was instantly perceived to be inappropriate to the ideology of Boydell’s gallery space, another facet of contemporary Academic practice was also seen to be problematic. Boydell’s artists’ studious avoidance of these two opposing modes of visual practice, the one too cold, the other – as the *Gazetteer* noted – too extravagant was neatly commented upon by the *Public Advertiser* who commended Robert Smirke for his depiction of Anne Page and Slender from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* which, in the critic’s view, contained ‘nothing stolen from marble, or from the theatre’.<sup>2</sup>

Strictly speaking, a wholehearted rejection of the playhouses had not really taken place. Northcote’s paintings from *Richard III* contained portraits of the actor John Phillip Kemble as Richard, while William Hamilton’s scene from *As You Like It* used Kemble’s sister, the very distinctive Sarah Siddons, as the model for Rosalind. Both painters, however, seem to have taken to heart a piece of advice

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (5 May 1789), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Public Advertiser* (25 March 1790), p.3.

which the *Gentleman's Magazine* had offered to Boydell and his artists several months before the Gallery's opening to avoid the false mannerisms of a dubious art whose formal demands shared little in common with those of painting:

That the first instruction to [his] artists was to forget, if possible, that they had ever seen the plays of Shakespeare, as they are absurdly decorated in modern theatres ... as for stage attitudes, those which have pleased most have pleased only because they were not lasting enough to be critically examined. Before their propriety could be questioned, they were at an end. Had many a celebrated posture been rendered stationary, till the survey of a few minutes would have enabled us to form a just opinion of it, our applause would have been changed into disgust.<sup>1</sup>

The theatre, and its representation – as the two critiques offered by Boydell's critics show – posed a number of problems to artists, notwithstanding the enormous popularity of images of celebrated actors and the corresponding fame which such works might confer upon the artist. First, and most crucially, the genre of theatrical painting could never be seen as anything more than mere portraiture, whatever the pretensions of such celebrated canvases as Reynolds's *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* may have been. As such, they eluded the crucial criteria of historical painting that stated that the artist should paint elevated and ideal subjects which were divested of the taint of the particular and the ephemeral. Secondly, images taken from the theatre were potentially more problematic than any other kind of portraiture, given the dubious moral reputation of actors and, in particular, actresses.<sup>2</sup> While players as a class were becoming increasingly professionalised during the course eighteenth century, the highly visible sexuality of actresses such as Mary Robinson, Dorothy Jordan, Peg Woffington and the cross-dressing Charlotte Charke ensured that the profession retained some of its more dubious attractions – qualities which hardly sat comfortably within the supposedly rarefied genre of history painting. And thirdly (for our purposes at least, though we could significantly lengthen the list

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cautions in Judging of Paintings from Shakespeare', *Gentleman's Magazine* (September, 1788), 778-9.

<sup>2</sup> On the sexuality of actors and actresses, see Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton and Oxford, 1992).

of potential problems) Boydell's attempts to regulate the audience visiting the Shakespeare Gallery, and to direct them towards new modes of viewing, would hardly have been given a helping hand by making too explicit a connection between the exhibitions offered by the gallery and the playhouse. As Stallybrass and White have shown, the eighteenth-century theatre was a space in which a number of strategies attempted, without discernible success, to transform the unruly audience into a 'deferential and receptive bourgeois audience.'<sup>1</sup> The similarity (to a lesser or greater extent) of this audience with the Academy's heterogeneous and disorderly public was not, as artists who specialised in theatrical painting well knew, in question. But this was precisely the aspect of contemporary exhibition culture which Boydell was eager to suppress within the Shakespeare Gallery, and which the bringing into play of theatrical gestures and personalities within that gallery space would no doubt have threatened to unleash. In extinguishing the taint of the theatrical from his Gallery, Boydell was attempting to ensure the engagement of a receptive audience with paintings which belonged unambiguously to the realm of high art.

Having begun to characterise the space and spectators of the Shakespeare Gallery, and to chart the kinds of ideological arguments which were being made about them, we can end by suggesting that part of the Gallery's appeal may have been its location in yet other urban topographies networking the social and political sites and spaces of St. James's and Westminster. Reading Joseph Farington's diary, which unfortunately does not begin until nearly four years into the Shakespeare Gallery's lifetime, we can begin to suggest that the Gallery took on a rather fluid function during the 90s, and operated as a site for political, literary, social and business concerns as well as continuing and expanding in its ostensible function as a site for artistic display.

Farington's *Diary* is highly suggestive, mapping out the Shakespeare Gallery as a meeting-place for the exchange of views and information between visitors with

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986). If these processes sound familiar to us, this is because the conceptual framework offered by Stallybrass and White has influenced the work of a number of historians of eighteenth-century British art.

various professional and personal concerns. Farington himself produced one work for the Shakespeare Gallery, a collaborative painting with Robert Smirke of the scene at Gadshill from *Henry IV, Part I* for which he painted the landscape and Smirke the figures. He frequently visited the Shakespeare Gallery during the 90s for business, social and political reasons. He conducted a large part of the administrative process for his engravings for *The History of the River Thames* at the Gallery, liaising on the publication with a number of figures who were also involved in Boydell's project. But Farington's concerns were not merely artistic, and during two significant incidents in the mid 90s his visits to the Gallery coincided with literary and political events. The first incident revolved around the intended production and publication of a play, *Vortigern*, which, it was claimed, was a recently discovered play by Shakespeare. The claimant – one William Ireland, son of Samuel Ireland the publisher of Hogarth's works – deceived a number of people into accepting the authenticity of this forged work, including his father and Sheridan. Farington and George Steevens (the editor of Boydell's Shakespeare), both more cynical of Ireland, were clearly fascinated with this case and became embroiled in what can only be described as an impromptu trial of the manuscript which took place at the Shakespeare Gallery over a period of several weeks. During this time, the Gallery became a site of literary and historical debate, in which a number of visitors pronounced their opinions, produced orthographical facts and reported on the play's worsening fate in London's playhouses and bookshops. The Shakespeare Gallery appeared to offer itself as a logical site for the exposition of the play's inauthenticity, and within its space visitors could claim an identity as informed participants in critical, literary debate.

The second function which the Shakespeare Gallery occupied for Farington was a political one, and revolved around the 1796 Westminster Election at which the pro-ministerial candidate Gardner formed a coalition with Fox against the Radical, Horne Tooke. Farington was on good terms with Gardner, Pitt's candidate, supporting him at the poll (and possibly – like many of his colleagues – casting a second vote for Fox, although in his eagerness to note how everyone else voted, Farington is rather evasive about his own views). Before doing so, however, Farington called into the Shakespeare Gallery from where, joined by

Josiah Boydell, the publisher George Nicol (also Boydell's brother-in-law) and the printer George Bulmer, he went to the hustings at Covent Garden having attempted to solicit votes for Gardner and Fox from a number of his friends and colleagues. When the polls closed a fortnight later, Farington was back at the Shakespeare Gallery hearing about the events at Fox's victory dinner the evening before. He had also made up a list of his friends and colleagues in the art world, noting who they had supported.<sup>1</sup>

Looking back at Wheatley's image, we can see that it has a distinct political flavour to it, containing portraits of a number of supporters of the Whig party, including Sheridan himself. The Duchess of Devonshire and Lady Jersey had, twelve years before Farington exerted his influence over his acquaintances, paraded through Westminster wearing blue and buff and soliciting votes from shopkeepers (and Fox himself was keen to reiterate his proximity to Falstaff when he visited the Gallery).<sup>2</sup> It would be inferring too much to suggest that the Gallery itself represented a particular political interest. In any event, Farington's political leanings appear to be rather different to those of the Whigs assembled in Wheatley's image, and it would be difficult to be prescriptive about the political beliefs of individuals in a decade in which those beliefs often appeared to alter materially. But what we can suggest is that the Shakespeare Gallery offered a space, independent from the perceived autocracy of the Academy, where political concerns might be discussed, debated and played out. Participating in the political geography of the surrounding streets, which included a number of politically-affiliated gentleman's clubs as well as Carlton House and Westminster, the Gallery seems to have operated as a space where political issues might be addressed by members of a polite public sphere.. It would also have worked rather differently to other artistic sites in the area which offered a more satirical or partisan approach to the political – sites such as Hannah Humphrey's St. James's Street printshop displaying the latest offerings of Gillray, or William Austin's 'Patriotic Print Rooms' on this same street which, in the mid 80s, had displayed busts of the Prince of Wales and various members of

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, II, 565-592 *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> *V&A Press Cuttings*, Vol II, 543. Fox was consistently caricatured as Falstaff by graphic satirists in the 1780s and 90s.

the Opposition, following Austin's rejection from the Academy for his republican views.<sup>1</sup>

The Shakespeare Gallery, we can suggest, played the part of a more moderate site. While Gillray envisaged the streets of St. James's in 1796 as divided between the interests of the pro-government White's Club and the Opposition Brooke's Club, and bathed in the blood of a republican massacre (Figure 16), Farington and his colleagues seemed happy to endorse a coalition as a peace-keeping measure, and at the same time to tolerate the views of their more radical colleagues such as Northcote and Opie. Unlike many of the fiercely partisan sites in the surrounding streets of St. James's, the Shakespeare Gallery appears to have offered a site where men and women with various political leanings and professional concerns might come together and share a common ground. To an extent, it was the subject of Boydell's Gallery itself which facilitated such a process. For if Shakespeare's 'freedom' had, as the *Morning Chronicle* suggested, infused the works of Boydell's artists, it also conferred and legitimated a corresponding freedom for the viewer. Sharing a common knowledge – for critics agreed that the works of Shakespeare were understood by, and appealed to, everyone – the public brought together in the Gallery was one shaped by the artistic, literary, historical and constitutional experience which the subject of Shakespeare offered. From within this space, the viewer could engage with the various dimensions of the public sphere (of which the political and literary episodes Farington notes in his diary are only two examples), having already been defined as a legitimate participant *in* that sphere.

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We have begun to see that the space of the Shakespeare Gallery negotiated various issues which had become increasingly problematic after the Royal

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<sup>1</sup> Austin's expulsion from the Academy was reported by the *Gazetteer* in 1784 in a piece revealing the tensions and factions at the Academy (*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (27 April 1784), p.2. The following spring, the *Morning Herald* and the *General Evening-Post* carried advertisements for Austin's 'Patriotic Print Rooms'. (*Morning Herald* (10 May 1785), p.2 and *General Evening-Post* (26-28 April, 1785), p1). On Gillray, see Richard Godfrey, *James Gillray: Art and Caricature*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 2001).

Academy's move to Somerset House. Participating in an urban space whose aesthetic ambitions and collective ventures posed a significant threat to the Academy, Boydell also attempted to establish a spatial dynamic within the Gallery itself which constituted the public in rather different ways to the Academy. While the Academy was struggling to conceal the disunity between its artists, its student, its public and its administration, Boydell was assembling a group of artists, many of whom had ceased to exhibit regularly at the Academy, to produce ambitious works of distinctively English art. They, like the public who viewed their works, were simultaneously brought together by the patriotic and accessible figure of Shakespeare, and ostensibly granted the freedom of their own particular vision of the subject. As for the beleaguered students of the Royal Academy, their access to the exhibition limited by the Administration, Farington noted at the end of 1794 that they 'are subscribing a shilling each to pay for advertisements of thanks to Messrs. Boydell and Macklin, for the privilege granted them to go into their picture galleries with[ou]t expence' (and presumably without the limitations which the Academy imposed upon them at the annual exhibition).<sup>1</sup>

Having suggested some of the ways in which Boydell's gallery space facilitated an oscillation between various roles which might define the viewer as a participant in the public sphere, we can now go on to look in detail at some of the images on display in the Gallery, and consider the ways in which they offered a variety of trajectories for the future of an ambitious national school of painting. In a variety of ways they challenged the existing ideologies surrounding elevated art, breaking down its structures and assumptions and offering new frameworks for the production and viewing of contemporary English painting. Collectively, and within the ideological space of Boydell's Gallery, they envisaged – more clearly than the Gallery's financial failure would suggest – the various directions in which an English School of painting might progress, and the terms within which it should be defined.

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, I, 278.



## CHAPTER II

REYNOLDS, BOYDELL AND  
NORTHCOTE: NEGOTIATING  
THE IDEOLOGY OF THE  
ENGLISH AESTHETIC

*Producing the Academic*

As an ambitious artistic venture, Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery found itself, at a very early stage, having to negotiate its ideological terrain with that already occupied by the Royal Academy. Employing artists whose main opportunity for display and self-promotion, and – in many cases – whose artistic affiliations lay with the Academy, Boydell had to tread carefully. The anti-academism which we encountered in the previous chapter on the opening of the Gallery was not apparent from the outset: one of Boydell's first steps after the conception of his scheme was to approach Reynolds who, as the President of the Royal Academy and the country's most celebrated living artist, could potentially confer a significant degree of artistic prestige and credibility onto what was essentially a commercial venture. Boydell went to great lengths to ensure the involvement of the Academy's President in his project, offering Reynolds an unprecedented amount of money for any canvases he should choose to contribute to the Shakespeare Gallery.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Reynolds produced three canvases for Boydell: *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort* (exhibited on the Gallery's opening), a *Puck* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (exhibited at the Gallery in 1790) and the canvas he had originally planned, *Macbeth and the Witches* (which was not

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<sup>1</sup> This was not an easy negotiation. Reynolds was not a particular friend of Boydell's and, unlike many of the other artists contributing to the scheme, had not had business dealings with him in the past (the portrait of Lord Heathfield, commissioned by Boydell - who had it engraved - was not commissioned until the latter half of 1787). On the initial approach, and on a second application, Reynolds refused to participate in the project, and it was only by convincing him that the success of the scheme hinged upon his participation that Boydell was eventually able to secure the President's reluctant participation. Although Reynolds's hesitation may in part have been due to a snobbish disposition towards a man whose activities were so obviously commercial, it seems that his own motives were not so dissimilar: he had claimed that his 'engagement in portraits was such as to make it very doubtful' (F.W. Hilles, *Portraits. Character Sketches of Oliver Goldsmith, Samuel Johnson, and David Garrick, together with other MSS of Reynolds recently discovered among the private papers of James Boswell* (New York, London and Toronto, 1952), p.62). As Boydell well knew, this was not so much a reflection of the extent of Reynolds's sitters list: rather, it was a mannerly way of saying that history painting would not pay as well as the aristocratic sitters whose pockets ran deep. At this point Boydell - who was obviously prepared for this argument - produced 500 guineas and laid it on the table, stating that he was willing to pay whatever Sir Joshua chose to demand, but adding that it was necessary to the success of the Shakespeare project that he should be able to publicise Sir Joshua's participation in the scheme. The lure of hard cash evidently swayed the decision and Boydell was able to flaunt Reynolds's name in the Gallery's initial publicity (the original manuscript of the proposal for the Shakespeare Gallery - held by the Boston Public Library - shows Reynolds's name at the head of the list of contributors, and distinguished by a much larger font).

exhibited until after his death due to a dispute with Boydell about the terms of payment).<sup>1</sup>

The contributions of the Academy's President to the scheme, however, did not exactly serve the purposes we might expect. If, at the planning stage, his involvement signalled the ambitious aesthetic programme of Boydell and his contributors, when the Gallery eventually opened over two years later, Reynolds's pictures actually ended up serving as a foil for the other works on display, which came to be seen as offering more fitting prototypes for ambitious English art than those produced by the Academy's President. Rather than exemplifying the patriotic basis of the Shakespeare Gallery, Reynolds's works for Boydell were widely denounced as derivative, unpatriotic and ultimately contradictory to the Gallery's agenda. Above all, they were seen as irredeemably Academic and foreign, characteristics which seemed to have little to do with a modern and distinctively English School of painting. For Boydell and his artists, then, Reynolds unwittingly served to illustrate and strengthen the dichotomy of English and foreign art, and to make manifest the success of a new generation of artists in the attempt to forge a distinctively national school of art.

On the opening of the Royal Academy twenty years previously, Reynolds had delivered the first of his celebrated *Discourses on Art*. Intended to commemorate the long-awaited institution of a national academy of art in England, the tone of the lecture was necessarily defensive as well as celebratory. The stickiest point came when Reynolds attempted to represent the absence of an Academy in England until this date as somehow advantageous, as something which promised ultimately to extinguish the wide-spread sense of the country's artistic inferiority:

One advantage, I will venture to affirm, we shall have in our Academy, which no other nation can boast. We shall have nothing to unlearn. To this praise the present race of artists have a just claim. As far as they have yet proceeded, they are right. With us the exertions of genius will henceforward be directed to the proper

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<sup>1</sup> The *Puck* was initially exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1789 before being hung in the Shakespeare Gallery the following year.

objects. It will not be as it had been in other schools, where he that travelled farthest, only wandered farthest from the right way.<sup>1</sup>

The apparent eccentricity of Reynolds's argument was in fact firmly rooted in a well-established tradition in which the historiography of European art adhered to a biological pattern of growth, maturity and decay. This historiography had been mapped out by Vasari in relation to the Italian artists of the Renaissance, and was current in the thinking of other historians of European art in the eighteenth century, such as Winckelmann and Barry.<sup>2</sup> However, this model posed a very serious problem to Reynolds and English artists: if other schools - in particular the Italian and French schools - had invariably followed a cyclical process of growth, maturity and decline, then surely the founding of an Academy in England could do little more than simply initiate a similar process? Reynolds's response to this was to recommend to the Academy's students the careful observation of, and 'implicit obedience to ... those models which have passed through the approbation of ages [and which] should be considered ... as perfect and infallible guides' - to learn, in other words, from the mistakes as well as the perfections of deceased artists. The failure of the English to institute for themselves until now a national academy of painting was thus neatly transformed into a peculiar advantage, one which might mean that the errors of their continental predecessors might be learnt from and avoided, and that the route to perfection might be a swifter and less arduous one for English artists. It meant, in other words, that the biological pattern might be stopped short, and the apparently inevitable path from maturity to decline avoided altogether.

In one crucial sense, Reynolds's argument anticipated the debates on artistic style which accompanied the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery. His belief that the Continental schools had invariably strayed further into mannerism the further they evolved was a well-recognised problem in the historiography of art, and one

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert Wark (New Haven and London, 1988), *Discourse I*, p.16. All future references to the *Discourses* are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, trans. Alexander Gode (New York, 1968) and James Barry, *An Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (London, 1775).

which any debates on an English school needed to take account of. Boydell exploited this problem in order to validate the stylistic variety his project ultimately manifested: the Shakespeare Gallery was to be distinguished for the liberty and diversity of its aesthetic which offered no tangible set of formal stylistics through which English art might easily be recognised - and which, of course, might also contain the seeds of its ultimate downfall.

However, for Reynolds the notion of an English school had to be offset against the Academic requirement for art to manifest universal qualities above those which merely revealed the local and particular. Hence, the *Discourses* consistently advocated the pursuit of what Reynolds terms the 'Grand Style' – an aesthetic posited upon ideal beauty and a 'grandeur of ...ideas' which consists in 'being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind' – a visual quality which he sees as being most consistently revealed in the works of Michelangelo and Raphael.<sup>1</sup> The achievement of the Grand Style was, for Reynolds, the marker of genius and taste, revealing an ability to endow the mechanical aspects of drawing, painting and sculpture with an intellectual quality by transmuting base materialism into a generalised and ideal form. While the basis of the Grand Style was in part generic – it could not, for example, reside within the realms of genre painting, still life or portraiture – Reynolds also suggested that by no means all historical or literary subjects offered access to the general and ideal. Rather, the Grand Style could only be manifested in historical subjects which had a universal (by which he means European) rather than national relevance – for example in subjects from scripture and from Greek and Roman myths and history which were 'familiar and interesting to all Europe, without being degraded by the vulgarism of ordinary life in any country'.<sup>2</sup> Although Reynolds does not explicitly mention subjects from English history and literature, it is fair to assume that he would not regard these as a legitimate basis for a universal art form: his attitude to the Shakespeare Gallery as a vehicle for ambitious art is likely to have been ambivalent.

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Discourse III*, p.45.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, *Discourse IV*, p.58.

The essential difference between Reynolds's Academic formulation of the precepts of ambitious art and the ideology of the Shakespeare Gallery lay in these divisions between the universal and the local. While Academic theory vaunted the superiority of an aesthetic which transformed the particular into the general, it was precisely the qualities of nation and locality which the Shakespeare Gallery sought to harness. The status of Shakespeare as a peculiarly English writer whose aesthetic resisted the neoclassicism expounded by the French Academy would have eased the Shakespeare Gallery's theoretical shift from a universal to a local aesthetic, but it is important to recognise the extent to which a visual quality which took Englishness as its foundation was far from conventional in art-theoretical terms. While Boydell was eager to exploit the prestige which Reynolds's involvement in the Gallery would bring to his project, it was clear very quickly after the Gallery's opening that there was a clash of values involved in the bringing together of the Academic and the overtly English aesthetic which Boydell was eager to generate.

In this chapter, I will look more closely at how this dialogue (constructive or otherwise) between the Academy and the Shakespeare Gallery manifested itself in art-theoretical and pictorial terms. We have seen in the previous chapter how Boydell's Gallery was constructed both spatially and ideologically in opposition to the Royal Academy. This chapter will consider how new discussions about the form and matter of an English school of painting emerged in the early years of the Shakespeare Gallery - discussions which frequently appeared antagonistic to the ideals of the Academy and its President. For, contrary to the beliefs of Reynolds, many of the critics visiting the Shakespeare Gallery on its opening believed that the methods of teaching employed in the English and foreign academies meant that there was, in fact, a great deal for English artists to 'unlearn' - and the critical response to Reynolds's work for Boydell (which was consistently censured for the foreign derivation of its aesthetic) indicated that the Academy's President was one of the chief candidates for such a process of unlearning. The Shakespeare Gallery - they hoped - represented the beginnings of such a process of 'unlearning' and held the promise of a self-consciously national art form.

As we shall see, this was not an entirely objective response to Reynolds's work on the part of his critics. But it certainly served a particular role in highlighting the agenda and the success of Boydell's Gallery. Perhaps most significant in terms of the denouncement of Reynolds's work as implicitly 'Academic' is the clear evidence that there was in fact no clearly-defined notion of an 'Academic style' in England at this time: this, in fact, was not something which would emerge until well into the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> At some level, of course, the Academy set out a clear aesthetic and ideological programme for its members and students that it was at pains to flaunt, not least by means of numerous self-representations in the form of paintings signalling the Academy's pedagogic function (Figures 17 and 18). Such images invariably show the Academy to be a teaching space imbued with the ideal forms of the antique, the study of which is the fundamental basis of an artistic training and career. The publication of Reynolds's *Discourses* and their excerption in the daily and bi-weekly newspapers also gave some indication that there was a privileging within the Academy of certain aesthetic practices - in theory at least. The mainly classical subjects stipulated for students competing for the Academy's annual prize, and the institution's recommendation of a period of study in Italy were similarly suggestive of a desire that students should embrace the precepts of the classical tradition. In reality, however, these were seen as largely theoretical, even token factors - ones which were largely at odds with the visual practice of the President and that of the bulk of Academicians and exhibitors who tended to pursue a variety of artistic (and financial) goals. In practice it was difficult for the public to have any clear sense of what the visual agenda of the Academy might have been - even from the perusal of Reynolds's discourses, which themselves demonstrated a surprising inconsistency or eclecticism (depending on your point of view) in the privileging of particular styles and artists.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, historians of nineteenth-century art are beginning to question whether there was even such a thing in the nineteenth century. In the introduction to their collection of essays on the nineteenth-century Academy, Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd make the astute point that 'it is impossible to speak of a specific ideology of academism anywhere near as explicit or intrusive in its direct impact on the minutiae of teaching, producing, exhibiting and reviewing art as the writings of Alfred J Barr or Greenberg often became in the mid-twentieth century' (Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd (eds.), *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 2000), p.5).

Most significantly - and most alarmingly - audiences and critics saw little evidence of a consistent aesthetic ideology when they visited the annual exhibition, the public face of the Academy. There - as Henry Fuseli noted in 1789 - 'the usual farrago of portraits, landscapes, imitations, or rather copies of still life, &c jostle each other and crowd the room [alongside] a few historical pictures', while within the genres themselves there was little to be found in the way of a coherent style'.<sup>1</sup> If anything, it was the heterogeneity of the exhibits which was overwhelming rather than the dominance of a particular visual ideology. Moreover, while the competitive space of the exhibition room did result in the dominance of one particular kind of visual effect, this had little to do with the 'Grand Style': rather, as Fuseli pointed out, it was an aesthetic generated by the 'jostling' nature of the exhibition, one that resorted to spectacle, heightened colour, scale and *chiaroscuro* in order to solicit the attention of the viewer.<sup>2</sup> It almost seems as if there were a kind of archaeology of style at the Academy in which the surfaces of the display offered a modern, visual heterogeneity while buried underneath, in theory and practice (for students at least), was a 'real' Academic art which occasionally might find its way onto the walls of the Great Room itself. The 'academism' of the Academy was contained, quite literally, beneath its less cerebral visual productions within the space of Somerset House itself, where the cast room and smaller exhibition rooms devoted to the display of works by Old Masters were situated on the floors below the Great Room. These spaces could easily be missed or avoided by visitors to the annual exhibition, who saw another quite contradictory face of the Academy in the exhibition space itself, a face which many took to be definitive.

This sense of a stylistic archaeology at the Academy, of simultaneously yet incongruous visual practices, offered a convenient model for the Shakespeare Gallery to define itself against. The overall ideology of the Gallery depended upon a juxtaposition with a more austere, traditional and theoretical notion of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Analytical Review*, vol IV, 1789, 106.

<sup>2</sup> For evidence that artists modified their paintings to achieve this effect once the canvases had been hung in the Great Room, see Shelly M. Bennett, 'Anthony Pasquin and the Function of Art Journalism in Late Eighteenth-Century England' in *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 8 (1985), 197-204.



Academy, one which would illuminate the presence of an 'authentic' English art form in Boydell's Gallery through a fairly clear-cut process of contrast. On the other hand, the Shakespeare Gallery also sought to define itself against the more modern, commercial and bourgeois aspects of the Academy through the production of a space that eliminated the sense of visual and ideological heterogeneity at Somerset House which embraced everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. By bringing these two opposed (and caricatured) notions of the Academy simultaneously into play - indeed by actively producing them - the Shakespeare Gallery made its own artistic agenda doubly visible.

My assumption here is that, while there was no distinct evidence of the existence of an *Academic* style 1789, the Shakespeare Gallery (or at least the debate surrounding its opening) served precisely to bring the *notion* of such a style into existence. In one sense, this is no startling discovery and simply represents a modification of the recent argument that the Academy gains ideological significance through its encounter with the Modernist aesthetic:

.... it could be argued that academies become more powerful as social and cultural institutions at the moment in which academism was confronted with, and weakened by different methods of calibrating aesthetic value as well as other ways of dealing with the status of nature or the nature of representation.<sup>1</sup>

In such a narrative, the Shakespeare Gallery would simply be one of many events which served to 'produce' the Academic in order to possess something tangible to define their own aesthetic or ideological prescriptions against.<sup>2</sup> The Shakespeare Gallery, of course, can hardly be seen as fitting into a history of modernism - although there is a clear argument for including it within a history of *modern style*, a rather different thing altogether. But what it does share with the avant-garde is its dependency upon the Academic, and its need to construct it, if necessary, in order to add credibility to its own existence. The Shakespeare Gallery, indeed, necessitated more strongly a process of construction of the

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<sup>1</sup> Denis and Trodd, p.2

<sup>2</sup> For later examples of this kind of Academic 'production', see Greenberg (1939) and Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' in *Art*, (London, 1914).

Academic than did nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-academism which at least had established tangible examples of reactionary artists within the Academy to position itself against.<sup>1</sup>

In many respects, the process of academic ‘construction’ which the Shakespeare Gallery promoted was one which sought – and needed - to actively misrepresent or caricature the Academy. Reynolds’s *Discourses* were certainly far from condoning the kind of unabashed pictorial plagiarism or cold classicism which the press was beginning to implicitly ascribe to the Academy. At times, his *Discourses* appear to cohere almost seamlessly with the patriotic and democratic discourse which surrounded the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery. Or, at least they seemed to in sentiment but were necessarily constrained by their clear institutional basis, resulting in a theoretical incoherence or conflict which critics of the Academy were quick to exploit. In December 1788, for example, five months before the Shakespeare Gallery opened, Reynolds devoted his latest *Discourse* to an evaluation of the works of the recently-deceased Gainsborough.<sup>2</sup> Reynolds began his lecture with a recommendation that – as well as consulting his own observations of nature – the student should study as extensively as possible the works of other artists. This was not simply, as the previous *Discourses* may have implied, in order to accumulate a vast store of ideas which could be deployed in the student’s own work, but precisely to make the student *less servile and dependent*:

When we draw our examples from remote and revered antiquity ... we may suffer ourselves to be too much led away by great names, and to be too much subdued by overbearing authority. Our learning, in that case, is not so much an exercise of our judgment, as a proof of our docility. We find ourselves, perhaps, too much overshadowed; and the character of our pursuits is rather distinguished by the tameness of the follower, than animated by the spirit of emulation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bell’s attack on William Powell Frith and Luke Fildes in ‘The Aesthetic Hypothesis’.

<sup>2</sup> Boydell had been keen to secure Gainsborough’s involvement in the project as well as Reynolds’s. The artist refused to paint for Boydell for less than 1000 guineas, however, a price which Boydell would not stretch to.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds, p.247.

Reynolds went on to criticise the ‘late artists of the Roman School’ such as Mengs and Battoni, arguing for the paucity of their achievements since ‘the way was prepared for them, and they may be said rather to have lived in the reputation of their country, than to have contributed to it’. Still claiming that English artists had ‘nothing to unlearn’, Reynolds, noted that when painters such as Gainsborough ‘communicated to their country a share of their reputation, it is a portion of fame not borrowed from others, but solely acquired by their own labour and talents’. If for a moment, Reynolds was coming close to anticipating the patriotic discourse of aesthetic liberty and cultural superiority which emerged a few months later on the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery, he was predictably forced, by the end of the lecture, to revert to warning students against deviating from ‘that style which this academy teaches, and which ought to be the object of your pursuit’. While Gainsborough may have succeeded in managing to ‘cover his defects by his beauties’ or even in making beauties of these defects, Reynolds ensured his students were aware of the necessity ‘never to lose sight of the great rules and principles of the art, as they are collected from the full body of the best general practice’. The locality, intuitiveness and peculiarity of Gainsborough’s pictorial language must be seen as a law unto itself rather than a manifestation of the ‘great universal truth of things’ that was the true business of any student at the Academy. Within the terms of Reynolds’s academic discourses, Gainsborough was simply the exception that proved the rules.

Despite the complexity of Reynolds’s *Discourses* and their clear reluctance to import a straightforward academism which did not respond to the particular needs of English art, there was an increasing tendency among certain critics to caricature the aesthetic ideology of the Academy and the pictorial practice of its President. And it seems that at no time and place was this tendency more marked than in the early years of the Shakespeare Gallery. This process of Academic ‘construction’ was not, of course, one which Boydell’s artists set out *en masse* to create. Serious historical painters such as Reynolds, James Barry, Angelica Kauffman and Gavin Hamilton – and others who saw the progress of art running and continuing within the grooves of a classical tradition – would hardly have involved themselves in a project whose ostensible aim was to

undermine the visual language which their works deployed and which their reputations hinged upon. Rather, this construction was one which was put together (at times precariously) by the press, who demonstrated two broad modes of anti-academism in their remarks on the Shakespeare Gallery. The first was to perpetuate a notion of classicism as cold, foreign, unpatriotic and uninspired – and to implicitly ascribe this pictorial language to the Academy.<sup>1</sup> By these means, the apparent lack of consensus of the English School in the Shakespeare Gallery, the diversity of its stylistic manifestations, could be dealt with by making foreign art appear to be over-consensualised. The second form of attack involved mounting a critique of Reynolds's visual practice, and questioning his legitimacy as the inceptor of an 'English School of Painting', a designation which now appeared more appropriate to Boydell.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will examine these constructions of 'Academism' and the role they played in legitimating the Shakespeare Gallery's claim to be the foundation of an English School. But first we will need to look more closely at the issues pertaining to an 'English School' and how the Shakespeare Gallery found itself positioned within this debate.

*'A School of Painting is now established ...'*

In many ways it is unsurprising that the period of the 1780s and 90s was a time when the question of a national style came to be debated. The Royal Academy had been in existence for several years, Reynolds's *Discourses* were being periodically published and, combined with a burgeoning nationalism, these

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<sup>1</sup> To a certain extent, the sense of the Academy's foreignness was not unfounded. Shearer West has pointed out that a significant proportion of the founder members of the Royal Academy were foreign (most notably Italian) and that on moving to Somerset House, the interior decoration of the building was largely the responsibility of the foreign artists, leaving visitors to the Academy with a sense of the 'uneasy combination of Italian hagiography and nationalist sentiment'. West's research also interestingly shows that foreigners became increasingly marginalized within the Academy in the years after 1789. (Shearer West, 'Xenophobia and Xenomania: Italians and the English Royal Academy' in *Italian Culture in Northern Europe in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 116-139.

<sup>2</sup> As suggested in the previous chapter, it is not clear how much of the press criticism of the Shakespeare Gallery was actually generated by Boydell himself. It does seem highly unlikely, however, that he would have gone to the expense of commissioning Rome-trained artists such as Henry Tresham and Gavin Hamilton simply to denounce their works in order to emphasise the stylistic qualities of other works.

factors seemed to beg the question of what English painting might actually look like, and stand for. The fact that, in most people's cultural imaginations, English painting meant simply portraiture – running in a brief tradition from Van Dyck to Reynolds – and that this was the tradition which the Academy seemed to be endorsing in its visual practice, was not a satisfactory state of affairs for the majority of artists and critics. The pressing question was how an elevated native tradition might establish itself, and what pictorial form it might take. But this was not a matter which could be easily resolved. At its most simplistic, it was for some an issue which involved a clear-cut choice between established foreign styles. James Barry, for example, recommending the establishment of 'some proper public collection of ancient art', perceived that artists had a simple choice between just two prestigious visual modes, '...adopting the manly plan of art pursued by the Carraches, and their school at Bologna, in uniting the perfections of all the other schools ...or whether (which I rather hope) we look further into that most essential article, the style of design, and endeavour to form it altogether in conformity with the taste of the Greeks'.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, critics reviewing Barry's canvases for Boydell found themselves taking one of two tracks, either praising the 'learned' and 'classically correct' basis of his works, or criticising their coldness and claiming that the artist studied marble rather than nature.

For others it was less a case of outright imitation than careful assimilation. This certainly seemed to be the case with Reynolds's theoretical propositions which demonstrated an eclectic taste in relation to foreign artists and schools, while his painterly practice was alternately praised and criticised for its visual alchemy. In his sixth *Discourse*, Reynolds had observed that the art of painting was 'intrinsically imitative' (of other artists, as well as of nature) and proclaimed 'inspiration' to be no more than an explanation given by those unable to account for 'what is the full result of long labour and application' and which they

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<sup>1</sup> Barry, *Letter to the Dilettanti Society*, p.24. The fact that Barry went on to praise the French for their privileging of the latter style and to applaud the fact that David and his followers now had a public 'who will meet their work with correspondent feelings, who will give it the same generous, becoming, patriotic reception which has ever so peculiarly and so exemplarily characterised that gallant nation' would no doubt have done little to recommend the Grecian style to the majority of his readers.

erroneously perceive to be ‘inaccessible to themselves’.<sup>1</sup> Imitation, he believed, was a necessary and progressive practice, for ‘if we were forbid to make use of the advantages which our predecessors afford us, the art would be always to begin, and consequently remain always in its infant state, and it is a common observation, that no art was ever invented and carried to perfection at the same time’.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Reynolds was no believer in ‘the drudgery of copying’, which he discountenanced as ‘a very delusive kind of industry; the student satisfies himself with the appearance of doing something; he falls into the dangerous habit of imitating without selecting, and of labouring without any determinate object ... those powers of invention and composition which ought particularly to be called out, and put in action, lie torpid, and lose their energy for want of exercise.’<sup>3</sup> Reynolds’s notion of ‘imitation’ was more subtle than Barry’s, recommending not an easily-caricatured choice between the aesthetic wares of the established Schools or eras but the extensive study of a variety of Schools as a kind of springboard to invention in which ‘a mind enriched by an assemblage of all treasures of ancient and modern art, will be more elevated and fruitful in resources in proportion to the number of ideas which have been carefully collected and thoroughly digested.’<sup>4</sup> Certainly this notion of ‘assemblage’ could be traced through the spaces of Somerset House where antique casts and old master paintings on the lower floors led to an overwhelming variety of modern works whose indebtedness to their predecessors was often commented on by the press, though not always as ‘thoroughly digested’ as Reynolds might have hoped. We will look in greater detail at Reynolds’s attitude – and that of his critics – to the practice of imitation in a later section of this chapter. For now it is sufficient to note that his attitude is less dogmatic and more nuanced than that of Barry – but that it was an attitude which nonetheless hinged upon an implicit deference to the art of the past and a determined rejection of the ‘imaginary power of native genius’.

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Discourse VI*, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *Discourse VI*, p.99.

Yet increasingly, a potential English School was coming to be seen as something which might have an idiosyncratic basis, something which ought to proclaim the liberty of the English nation, and might even reject the example of foreign artists outright. Reynolds's notion of the 'false opinion' concerning the existence of 'native genius' was declining in credibility, and even he (as John Barrell has shown) can be read as gradually putting forward a new ideological framework 'in order to create and confirm a national community, as something opposed to a civic republic of taste', albeit a community posited upon native custom rather than genius.<sup>1</sup> The reality of a recognisably English School founded upon visual qualities which were distinctively English became particularly vivid in the weeks surrounding the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery.<sup>2</sup> Not long after the Gallery's opening, *The Oracle* offered an optimistic account of the health of the English school, consolidating the positive reception of the Shakespeare Gallery with an equally congratulatory appraisal of Macklin's Poets' Gallery:

For spirited and successful enterprize, the present season will be memorable – In advancement of the arts an epoch is formed, and the name of Macklin eminent as their promoter. Too long have English artists languished as imitators: let them give scope to native energy, and they will be acknowledged as originals. The Italian School has been deservedly approved. The Flemish, with much merit, has been over-rated, because, with ability to excite admiration, we have condescended to be applauders. For a long time it was the literary reproach of England, that she had no historians of merit. Learned pretension was aroused, and behold a Hume, a Gibbon, a Stuart and a Robertson – names allied to merit and dear to fame. – Painting underwent a similar reproach; and, lo! A Gainsborough, a Reynolds, a Hamilton, and a Fuseli. Is it to royal patronage that we owe such men? Certainly not. – Is it to noble patronage? Alas at this very moment some of Gainsborough's masterpieces remain unpurchased. The spirit of the people is English patronage. *The Holy Family* by Sir Joshua, in this Gallery, first opened the eyes of the public to native

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<sup>1</sup> John Barrell, 'Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Englishness of English Art' in Homi K. Bhaba, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York, 1990), pp. 154-176.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'English' is used in a very loose sense here, as indeed it was by the contemporary press, who were inclined to regard artists such as Henry Fuseli and Angelica Kauffman as their compatriots when it suited their arguments to do so.

merit; and with surprise they were they informed that the artist was their countryman. Whilst the other arts advance with noisy pretension, in praise of painting be it said – *tuum est in silentio regnare*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Oracle* was not the only newspaper to suggest that an English school was not simply incipient, but in fact fully realised. *The Public Advertiser* observed at the opening of the Royal Academy's exhibition that 'it must give pleasure to the lovers of the arts to observe, that a School of Painting is now established in this country, superior to any at present existing in France or Italy'.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, was qualified praise. The current state of the visual arts in France, and particularly Italy, was consistently derided by English artists, critics and connoisseurs as symptomatic of the degeneracy of these nations - the declining fate of their painting was hardly something which most would have considered an English school should aspire to. Moreover, *The Public Advertiser's* observation, in the same article, of Reynolds's increased output in the genre of historical painting this year is undermined firstly by the implication that this was an unusual practice for the President, and secondly by the knowledge that two of his three major historical canvases 'are said to be purchased by that liberal encourager of the arts Mr Boydell'.

This fact would have reinforced the view expounded by *The Oracle* that it was not royalty or the nobility who were encouraging and patronising the national arts, but the 'spirit of the people' – something which Boydell was seen increasingly by the press to embody. The fact that the most ambitious works produced by the Academy's President for the annual exhibition were known to be purchased by an entrepreneur rather than commissioned by royalty could have done little to enhance the Academy's credibility as a royal institution. All these factors contributed to a sense that if there was - or was to be - such a thing as an

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oracle*, Tues. June 2, 1789, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, April 28, 1789, p.3.



English School it was almost against the odds that it would establish itself, in spite of the Academy and the tastes of the nobility.<sup>1</sup>

The slightly contrived arguments of the *Public Advertiser* that the Academy exhibition provided clear evidence of the existence of an English School suggest that this was a debatable point. Far more prevalent was the view that a national school was not yet established but that ventures like Boydell's and Macklin's offered its foundations. As we saw in the previous chapter, *The St. James's Chronicle* was one of a number of newspapers to suggest that the Shakespeare Gallery offered to compensate for the Academy's thirty years of apparent failure, arguing that it differed from the Academy in that 'every artist of merit has been invited to enter the lists as a candidate for fame, and encouraged to employ his genius to express the grand ideas of the favourite English bard.'<sup>2</sup>

The critic's view that the Shakespeare Gallery had finally 'unveiled modest and concealed merit' which had previously been occluded by the King's near-exclusive patronage of West and the nobility's adulation of Reynolds suggests that the conventional systems of patronage had (albeit unwittingly) set the English School off on the wrong track. They seemed archaic and exclusive in the light of the more widespread, middle-class interest in art which had evolved over the course of the century.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the workings of the open market could be equally problematic for painters, as the proliferation of portraiture in the period suggests. But in the right circumstances, given the existence of commercial but public-spirited men such as Boydell and Macklin, the market offered redemption for English artists. In the Shakespeare Gallery, a more inclusive competition might be witnessed in place of the usual two-horse race, one based upon merit rather than privilege, and which promised to nurture rather than stifle a national School. In fact, this spirit of competition, of merit freed

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<sup>1</sup> On its opening in 1768, the Academy had, of course, been at the centre of the 'English-School' debate, and Reynolds's opening *Discourse* dealt squarely with the issues this debate raised. Just twenty years later, however, the Academy was seen by many as either peripheral to this discourse or confirming its most pessimistic assumptions.

<sup>2</sup> *The St. James's Chronicle; or British Evening Post*, Tues. May 5 – Thurs. May 7, 1789, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> On this new audience for art, see Solkin, *Painting for Money* and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997).

from the dictates of aristocratic patronage promised to be the essence of an English school, and to guarantee the individuality and liberty of its artists.

Boydell himself was, of necessity, ambiguous in voicing a view about the existence of a national school. His enterprise hinged upon the premise that there was at present no such thing, and that the Shakespeare Gallery would represent a new era for English history painting. But the enterprise hinged equally upon the recognition that there was a present generation of artists who *did* collectively constitute (at least the ingredients for) a national school – or how else could the Gallery claim to represent this school? Boydell's tactic was to invoke the age-old biological metaphor, claiming that England was currently a 'country where historical painting is still but in its infancy – to advance that art towards maturity, and establish an English School of Historical Painting, was the great object of this design'.<sup>1</sup> Having, as he claimed in the preface to the Shakespeare Gallery catalogue, almost single-handedly established an English School of engraving, he clearly believed that he had the credentials to do the same for English painting.

Boydell's confident rhetoric paid off, and the press and public were quick to laud him as the 'father of the British School of painting', an appellation which clearly put him in competition with Reynolds.<sup>2</sup> It was confidently asserted by one optimistic critic that 'the institution of the Shakespeare Gallery may awaken such a spirit among our nobility, and give rise to the display of such talents among our artists, as will in a future day render Britain the emporium of art, and we may have foreigners travel to this country "to see the wonders we have wrought" as we now travel to Italy'.<sup>3</sup> Not only did the Gallery provide an example to a nobility which was preoccupied with collecting foreign art and commissioning their own portraits, but it also provided English artists with 'a strong motive to exert their powers and aspire to greater perfection', where previously a lack of encouragement had 'quenched many an exalted genius, chilled many a fervid mind, and depressed powers which might have been a source of independence to

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<sup>1</sup> John Boydell, Preface to *A Catalogue of Pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery*, p. ?

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, Thurs. May 7, 1789.

<sup>3</sup> *The General Evening Post*, Thurs. June 4 – Sat. June 6, 1789, p.3.

themselves and an honour to their country.’<sup>1</sup> The name of John Hamilton Mortimer – England’s best-known historical painter prior to 1780 - was frequently invoked in this context and represented as a potential Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio or Teniers, but for a ‘tasteless nation’ which ‘suffered him to waste his hours in painting portraits’.<sup>2</sup>

These arguments suggested quite clearly that, contrary to the arguments of many foreign writers and visitors, there was no essential or climatic reason why England should not produce a painter of equal genius to those of other nations. In fact, there was already clear evidence of the existence of such men: it was simply the depraved taste of the nobility which had inhibited their progress.<sup>3</sup> But, the press claimed, even the tyrannical taste of the aristocracy had not entirely precluded the successes of artists such as Mortimer, Wilson, Hogarth and Gainsborough. In the following years the sense of cultural confidence accelerated – no doubt as much because of a nationalistic desire to surpass the continental neighbours as because of a real sense of the achievements displayed in Boydell’s Gallery. This cultural imperative led to a more determined assertion in favour of the state of historical painting in England on the subsequent re-openings of the Shakespeare Gallery, with *The Diary* in 1790, as just one example, claiming to ‘hazard very little in asserting, that the British Artists have already gained the palm of historic painting from every nation of Europe’.<sup>4</sup> Boydell himself was quick to exult in the new-found success of national artists, claiming a superiority over even the ancients when the Gallery re-opened in 1790 exhibiting the productions of Ann Seymour Damer. She, he claimed, was not simply ‘a lady of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Diary, or Woodfall’s Register*, Wed. May 13, 1789, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> *The General Evening Post*, Thurs. June 4 – Sat. June 6, 1789, p.3 and *The Diary, or Woodfall’s Register*, Wed. May 13, 1789, p.4. John Hamilton Mortimer is discussed in the following chapter. *The Diary* also cites the example of Mengs, forced to emigrate in order to pursue a more ambitious genre of painting than portraiture.

<sup>3</sup> The argument that the growth of Britain’s visual arts was stunted by the effects of the Reformation is surprisingly rarely used after Hogarth’s death. Barry, however, writing in 1774 believed it to be ‘a misfortune, never entirely to be retrieved, that painting was not suffered to grow up amongst us, at the same time with poetry and the other arts and sciences, whilst the genius of the nation was yet forming its character in strength, beauty and refinement [i.e. during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, ]’ but rather that ‘the taste of the public, and the labours of the artist, was, from this period, turned into a new channel and has spent itself upon portraits, landscapes, and other inanimate matter’, *Inquiry*, pp. 121-125.

<sup>4</sup> *The Diary, or Woodfall’s Register*, Fri. March 26, 1790, p.3.

high birth and accomplishments’, but possessed ‘talents of which her country ought to be as proud, as neither Greece nor Rome, where sculpture was in its glory, could, in that department of the fine arts, boast a female artist.’<sup>1</sup>

Other critics seemed decidedly bullish in their desire to take on their continental counterparts, and in particular the powerful discourse of nature expounded by Montesquieu, Du Bos and Winckelmann which claimed to account for the unsuccessful cultivation of the fine arts in England. One correspondent to *The Diary* (a newspaper seemingly heading the cause of the English School) ridiculed this supposedly scientific theory as akin to ‘putting man in the same class with a bunch of grapes, or a China orange, and supposing he cannot ripen without the aid of a burning sun, or a hot bed.’<sup>2</sup> For the correspondent – calling himself ‘Ferdinand’ - the proof of the orange was in the eating, and the Shakespeare Gallery offered ‘a most ample proof, and affords a fair promise of the English School ... attaining a marked and indisputable superiority over the nations upon the continent’. *The Diary’s* desire to compete with the neighbours was nothing, however, compared with the patriotism expounded by the opposition newspaper, *The Morning Chronicle*, which (as we saw in the previous chapter) chose a ripe moment to suture its political principles with its aesthetic tastes. It is worth looking at this quotation again, this time within the broader context of the article in which it appears, in order to illuminate the peculiar form of aesthetic nationalism which the critic’s viewing of the Shakespeare Gallery pictures engendered:

Had such a plan been adopted in France to the honour of Moliere – in Spain to the honour of Cervantes – in Portugal to the honour of Camoens – or in any other nation to the honour of their national poet, the pictures would have had that general similarity which belongs to each people; they would have been tintured with the national manners, and carried a shade of the national government. In England, and England only, every man

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<sup>1</sup> Boydell, *Catalogue*, 1790, p. xiv. The problems of the professional female sculptor were nonetheless constantly articulated in contemporary writings on Damer. See Alison Yarrington, ‘The Female Pygmalion: Anne Seymour Damer, Allan Cunningham and the writing of a woman sculptor’s life’ in *The Sculpture Journal*, 1(1997), 32-44.

<sup>2</sup> *The Diary, or Woodfall’s Register*, Mon. March 22, 1790, p.3.

thinks as he will, speaks as he will, and writes as he will. In the Gallery, every picture carries an air of freedom – every painter gives his own idea of a character without any the smallest reference to that drawn by his contemporary. All this proves, in opposition to Montesquieu, and a number of other theorists, that the climate of England is not more unfavourable to art than that of any other country, and to the exertions of genius the constitution of England is in the highest degree favourable. Every man feels himself at liberty to express *what* he feels in the *manner* he feels it ought to be.’<sup>1</sup>

These comments offered an abrupt riposte, not simply to the pseudo-scientific theories of Montesquieu *et al*, but also, apparently, to the theoretical reflections of the recently deceased Reynolds. While a national school might – as John Barrell’s reading of Reynolds suggests – establish itself through the creation of ‘a national community of taste’, whose members are encouraged ‘to recognize the similarity of their tastes and practices by becoming aware of how they differ from those of other nations’, it seems clear here that the discourse of custom is coming under some strain.<sup>2</sup> In the *Morning Chronicle*’s argument it is precisely the English nation’s *lack* of irrational customs and spurious collectivity (the ‘national manners’ that define the French, Spanish and Portuguese) that serves to define its people. Naturally, this was a political argument as much as (or perhaps even more than) an aesthetic one, one which expounded the discourse of natural rights at the expense of the discourse of custom. But, nonetheless, the need to rid the debate surrounding the English School of the possibility of an affiliation with the discourse of custom has clear implications that English painters possess genius, talent and liberty enough to be defined collectively simply *in terms of* this genius, talent and liberty. This is in contrast to the Schools of other nations which – it is implied - slavishly adopt shared styles, as well as becoming imitators and mannerists of those who have preceded them. While Reynolds had proclaimed genius to be the ‘child of imitation’, since it is only ‘by being conversant with the inventions of others, that we learn to invent’ the *Chronicle* and the press in general found itself expounding a more Romantic version of genius, one which was exemplified by the figure of Fuseli, an artist who many

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<sup>1</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, Wed. March 28, 1792, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Barrell, ‘Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Englishness of English Art’, p.168.

felt was not born to follow rules, and – more importantly – one which was compatible with a nationalist rhetoric.

Despite such confident assertions and patriotic gesturings, there still appeared to be little consensus as to what exactly an English School implied. *The Morning Chronicle's* and Boydell's assertions that it was precisely the indefinability of the English School – its resistance to 'slavish imitation' and 'monotonous sameness' – which gave it its particular character were not necessarily an argument which was universally endorsed, and for some was simply symptomatic of the lack of direction which the 'School' seemed to display.<sup>1</sup> For most, there was a need for the English School to have slightly more tangible characteristics than those identified by the *Chronicle*. The question of whether an English School painting had in fact been established or not was inevitably going to be an inconclusive one, given that it was unclear to many what such a School might actually look like. How might the 'English School' be recognised if no one was sure which pictorial forms it might embody, or which traditions it should embrace or reject? Clearly the Shakespeare Gallery was not inclined to be prescriptive on this point, and critics viewing the exhibition claimed to recognise an 'English School' in a number of surprisingly disparate works. But what the Gallery did do, as we shall see, was to prompt the question of how a 'native energy' might manifest itself and what exactly the aspirations of England's artists should be. The Royal Academy, on its opening in 1768, had invited similar questions and debates, but twenty years on, it seemed to many that it had failed to move beyond a theory or practice which deferred to the continental masters. The Shakespeare Gallery changed the agenda of the debate and some of the most important manifestations of this debate were the arguments made in relation to works which demonstrated a clear adherence to the style of one or other of the 'foreign schools'.

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<sup>1</sup> John Boydell, Letter to Sir John William Anderson (Cheapside, 4 February, 1804). Reproduced in full in *A Collection of Prints from pictures painted for the purpose of illustrating the dramatic works of Shakespeare by the artists of Great Britain*. 2 vols (London, 1803), I, [no page numbers].

*'The defects of the Roman School'*

It was not until December of 1790 that *The Gentleman's Magazine* published a reaction to the Shakespeare Gallery. The magazine's correspondent – calling himself simply 'H' – seemed blissfully oblivious to the arguments elsewhere in the press surrounding the establishment of an English School of history painting, ensconcing himself firmly in the camp of the connoisseur of foreign art instead, and choosing to evaluate the works on display according to these criteria. It is worth looking at his comments for a moment here as they offer a telling counterpoint to the predominantly nationalist, and occasionally culturally xenophobic, discourse which pervaded the press criticism of the Shakespeare Gallery. Most crucially, they reveal a standard of taste which had become an established paradigm over the course of the century through theoretical writings from Richardson's to Reynolds's, but which the Shakespeare Gallery and its reviewers consistently undermined. 'H's comments reveal the extent to which Boydell's artists and critics departed from established criteria of aesthetic prestige and evaluation in their attempts to illuminate the requisite qualities of an English school of painting.

'H' clearly realised the extent to which his remarks diverged from the existing criticism of the Shakespeare Gallery: he began by deflecting the remarks in Boydell's preface to the catalogue on the 'cavils of pseudo-critics', which he believed endeavoured 'to preclude the strictures of criticism, by affixing the opprobrium of malignity to all animadversions which should not be favourable to the performances there exhibited'.<sup>1</sup> Instead he embarked upon an extensive critique of the works on display with regards to their 'invention' and their 'execution'. Beginning with invention, 'H' noted that it had 'three great branches: I. the choice of the subject; II. the composition; III. the expression'. The first two of these he believed the Shakespeare Gallery painters to have fundamentally failed in. The 'characteristic defects' of Shakespeare, namely

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol 60 (December 1790), pp. 1088 – 1090.

‘the excesses of horror, extravagance, vulgarity and absurdity’ could scarcely be avoided by the artists when choosing their subjects, while the fact that ‘almost every composition is confounded and overcharged with figures’ was similarly blamed on ‘the same want of unity and simplicity’ which marked – and apparently marred – Shakespeare’s work. For ‘H’ the main source of lament was the inability of the artists (thanks to the lack of opportunity which Shakespeare afforded them) to attain the ‘sublime and elegant simplicity of the classic painters of Italy’, although he did concede that some of the works of Northcote, Reynolds and Boydell possessed ‘a chaste simplicity of composition that Raphael or Guido might not have disowned.’ More generous on the point of expression, ‘H’ noted that ‘few of these pieces fail in the representation of their story; many express it with energy and some with genius, grace, and elegance.’<sup>1</sup>

Despite condemning Shakespeare’s works for offering scant opportunity for the artist to attain the kind of classical simplicity and unity which defined the Roman school, ‘H’ was forced to admit to the eventual success of these paintings which, he conceded, ultimately achieved ‘genius, grace and elegance’ – the accepted hallmarks of any prestigious school of painting. While the form and subject-matter of these works were very different to those of the works of Guido, Raphael and the Caraccis, ‘H’ found himself describing the effect of the Boydell works in much the same language he would have used in relation to the Roman School. Undeterred by the obvious limitations of using this School as a standard by which all other schools and works might be measured, ‘H’ went on to examine the execution of the works in Boydell’s Gallery. In the point of execution there were, he claimed, two essential branches – design and colouring.

The first of these ‘H’ broke down into three models, each easily summed-up and illustrated by reference to a particular school. These he ranked in a clear hierarchy of value as imitating either ‘vulgar nature’ (i.e. the Dutch School), ‘the best examples of common nature’ (as appear in the Venetian and Flemish Schools’) or ‘the union of the most perfect parts of the most beautiful examples

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1088.



which nature affords us, combined to produce complete and classic grace, such as we see it in the statues of the antients, and in the schools of Rome and Bologna'. The latter was clearly the preferred style for 'H', an 'organ of grace and dignity ... which raises the subject above the frailties of human nature and makes it almost a god,' but he lamented the 'few attempts at this manner to be found in the Gallery, which at least merit to be so called'. 'Its true style' he opined, 'seems to be little known among us, and still to be confined to the southern part of the Alps ... how is it possible that this chaste and correct manner should ever be brought to accord with the loads of gaudy drapery which oppress the greater part of the personages here painted?'

'H's' privileging of the classical tradition, and of a rigid Academic theory which places the Roman School at the head of a hierarchy of styles and genres was theoretically uncontroversial and, in particular, coincided seamlessly with the academic precepts of Reynolds.<sup>1</sup> Viewed alongside the remainder of the press criticism of the Shakespeare Gallery, however, it sticks out as an almost reactionary piece of writing, one which seeks to shore up the rearguard of established taste. For while 'H' sought to represent the *execution* of works by Angelica Kauffman and Henry Tresham as regrettably failing in the attempt to replicate the 'true style', the more common reaction was to condemn them for emulating this archaic foreign style in the first place.<sup>2</sup> In the same year, another critic described Gavin Hamilton's austere scene from *Coriolanus* (Figure 19) in the following terms:

The subject is *Roman*, the figures, scene, sky, colouring, *Roman*, and *Roman* colouring we have not taste enough to admire. The high studied connoisseur, who has visited the Vatican, and contemplated this style until he is

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<sup>1</sup> In his fourth *Discourse*, Reynolds delineated a stylistic hierarchy at the top of which he placed the Roman, Florentine and Bolognese schools, and the 'best of the French school, Poussin, Le Sueur and Le Brun'. Below these he placed the Venetian, Flemish and Dutch schools, although the latter occupied a slightly lower position in Reynolds's hierarchy as its painters 'have still more locality' than the former two (Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse IV, pp. 62-69).

<sup>2</sup> 'H' does not mention Tresham by name – he simply refers of 'one of our painters ... [who] has shown some happy marks of [the Roman style] in his female figures ... [but who] would have been more successful if his judgement had been equal to his imagination'. By a process of elimination, this can only refer to Tresham since Gavin Hamilton's *Coriolanus* was not exhibited until the following year.

enraptured with it, will unquestionably pronounce the highest eulogiums on its learned merits; but with such pictures as that from *The Tempest* [presumably Fuseli's, which entered the Gallery that year] it does not coalesce. It is observed by Vasari that "the works of Battisto Franco had a similar fate. When in conjunction with Titian, Paul Verones, and Tintoret, he was employed to adorn the library of St. Mark, his paintings gave less satisfaction than any of the others". The *dry* manner of the Roman school was very ill calculated to please those who had been accustomed to the luxuriant splendour and richness of Venetian colouring. A jury of Romans would have given a different verdict; for in the more noble parts of the art, Battisto Franco was not inferior to his rivals'.<sup>1</sup>

When we find a critic claiming that he does not have sufficient taste to admire something, it is a fair assumption that he is making more of a pronouncement on someone else's tastes. Although the reviewer concedes that there must be a certain merit to be found in the works of the Roman School, these merits can only be observed by men who have sufficient leisure for contemplation, as well as adequate learning – not something which the critic or the majority of the readers he addressed himself to possessed.<sup>2</sup> The works of the Venetian School, meanwhile, offered a more immediate appeal to the viewer, inviting a visual pleasure which was clearly more sensual than intellectual and, as such, potentially accessible to a greater proportion of the public. In likening Hamilton's work to that of Battisto Franco – incongruous within a space which privileged the sensory over the intellectual aspect of the visual – the critic was implicitly likening the aesthetic of the Shakespeare Gallery to the more accessible visual idiom of the Venetian School. Here, he found himself in agreement with 'H' who noted that 'the second style of design is that generally adopted in the pictures of the Gallery' and that, despite the failure to replicate the 'true style', the Gallery displayed 'many successful examples of well-selected common nature': 'H' cited the works of Northcote, Opie, William Hamilton and Matthew William Peters as commendable examples of this style of painting, going so far as to say that 'Guercino has certainly rivals not despicable in the English School'.

<sup>1</sup> *V&A Press Cuttings*, II, 585.

<sup>2</sup> No doubt this claim was more than a little disingenuous, and fitted into a broader critique – widespread in the press by the end of the century – of the learned connoisseur.

While the critic of Hamilton's *Coriolanus* was willing to endorse a historiography which witnessed a progression in perfection from line to colour, 'H' saw the relation between these pictorial concerns rather differently. His concerns were firmly rooted in an academic theory which privileged line over colour, seeing the two terms as opposing parts of a moral and aesthetic antithesis. In the Shakespeare Gallery, 'H' believed, 'the eye which has been accustomed to the chaster works of Italy can hardly fail to be disgusted at first sight with the gaudy glare of the rooms, and is even tempted to refuse sufficient subsequent attention to discover the real beauties which are here to be found.' A linear style was the true and moral form of elevated history painting, while colour (or at least an over-indulgence in the process of colouring which deviated from what was pictorially necessary towards a base appeal to the viewer's sensual nature) was at best the dazzle of mere ornament, or at worst dangerously seductive and debasing. 'H' was certainly not alone in his views. Such comments, as we saw in Chapter I, were uttered annually by a number of critics entering the Royal Academy's exhibition rooms, who berated the 'glitter' and 'glare' of the gaudy canvases desperately appealing for the spectator's attention. And such critical commentary on the annual exhibition was simply a refraction of art theoretical views which had tended to view the art of colouring rather suspiciously. Du Fresnoy's enraptured commentary on colouring set the tone for an altogether more guarded theoretical debate in the eighteenth century, one which adapted the language of his argument to make a case for the superiority of line over colour. Du Fresnoy had noted that colouring, 'the soul of painting',

Is a deceiving Beauty, but withal soothing and pleasing:  
So she has been accus'd of procuring Lovers for her  
Sister, and artfully ingaging [*sic*] us to admire her. But  
so little have this prostitution, these false colours, and  
this deceit, dishonoured painting, that on the contrary,  
they have only served to set forth her praise, and to make  
her merit farther known.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles-Alphonse du Fresnoy, *De Arte Graphica*, quoted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, *Art in Theory, 1648 – 1815*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 164.

It was all too easy for this ‘Beauty’ to make the transition from procuress to prostitute – a metaphor that occurs frequently in the art criticism and theory of the eighteenth century. John Opie later summed up the trend among art teachers and theorists to warn against ‘the fascinating charms of this Cleopatra of the art, for which hundreds “have lost the world, and been content to lose it”’.<sup>1</sup> He counted Reynolds among the hundreds, claiming that the latter had almost ‘lost himself’ in becoming ‘the slave and master of colouring’, in spite of his theoretical sense that colouring was ‘detrimental, if not incompatible with the grand style of art’.<sup>2</sup>

But while ‘H’s’ comments had a venerable theoretical basis, there is reason to believe that at the turn of the century, the academic distinction between line and colour was beginning to wane in credibility. Opie went on in the same lecture to represent the warnings of art teachers against the seductions of colouring and its opposition to the grand style as an erroneous conclusion, one arrived at by witnessing the ‘abuse’ of colouring by the Venetian and Flemish Schools, whilst simultaneously supposing that its deficiency in the Roman and Florentine Schools was due to a wilful rejection of its blandishments rather than to any painterly incapacity. The issue by now seemed not to be that there was a moral or aesthetic choice to be made between line and colour, but rather that a means needed to be found by which these terms might be visually reconciled.<sup>3</sup>

‘H’s’ comments differed from those of the Academy’s critics in being an isolated rather than collective critique of gaudy colour and a failure to replicate the ‘grand style’. A number of critics re-visiting the Shakespeare Gallery in 1790 commented on the mellowing of the tones and the harmony of tints that had taken place during the year since the Gallery had first opened, which suggested that some of the artists may have taken steps to prevent the rapid fading of colour over time which Reynolds was frequently criticised for. Moreover, the majority

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<sup>1</sup> John Opie, ‘Lecture IV, “On Colouring”’ in Ralph N. Wornum (ed.) *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians*, London (1889), p.314.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the theoretical bias against the dangerous lure of colouring did not prevent a number of Academicians from falling for Mary Probis’s claim to have discovered the secret of Venetian colouring, and from handing over money to her to discover this ‘secret’.

of the critics viewing more 'linear' and overtly neoclassical works by artists such as James Barry, Angelica Kauffman, Henry Tresham and Gavin Hamilton observed in these images 'many of the defects of the Roman School' rather than being inclined to praise their emulative qualities.<sup>1</sup> Barry's scene from *King Lear*, for example (Figure 20), while praised by some for its aesthetic erudition, was almost universally condemned for the coldness of its colouring – it was felt that the artist had 'studied the antient statues, till he had forgot the colouring of nature' and that the linearity of the image was better suited to an engraved reproduction than to the painting itself.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin West's scene from *King Lear* (Figure 21) – more Grecian than Roman – was described in similar terms to Barry's, as a work in which an intellectual approach to art comes dangerously close to a mechanical one:

... Mr West keeps the beaten path of the antients, contemplates *nature* through the medium of *Grecian art*, and, rigidly adhering to his models, aims at the union of dignity with precision. When he has planned a picture in his mind, he calculates his powers, submits it to rule and compass, balances his figures with the exactness of a merchant balancing his ledger, weighs the whole with the utmost nicety and makes a sketch ...

As his figures are given in the sketch, so they are exhibited in the finished picture. Like the laws of the Medes and Persians, he altereth not. But his finishing is not always an improvement: in clearing away their asperities he destroys their energy. With smoothness of surface they acquire a hardness of outline, and are sometimes polished until the spirit evaporates.<sup>3</sup>

Although the critic acknowledges that West has avoided his usual defects in his canvas for Boydell, he is nonetheless keen to articulate a clear critique of classicism, one which exposes technical precision, adherence to rules and a liking for high finish not as elevated and intellectual, but as somehow vulgar, mechanical and mercantile. Clearly this was a shrewd manipulation of the conventional wisdom which posited the classicism of the Greek and Roman

<sup>1</sup> *St. James's Chronicle* (25-27 March 1790), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> *The Morning Post*, 2 June, 1789 and *The St. James's Chronicle*, Tues. May 5 – Thurs. May 7, 1789, p.4 – among others – made these points.

<sup>3</sup> *The Public Advertiser* (5 June 1789), p.4.

schools as the most cerebral and prestigious visual idiom, and it suggests that a quite contrary and distinctive aesthetic agenda was being established at the Shakespeare Gallery. The suggestion, in the *Public Advertiser*, that this agenda had something to do with ‘spirit’ and ‘energy’ and little to do with the following of rules or the pedantry of finish, is one which we will find repeated and elaborated upon again and again in the course of this thesis.

But there was something rather more than a mere cultural xenophobia at play in these critiques of the Roman and Greek schools. Elsewhere in the Gallery, William Hamilton was praised by Fuseli for treating a ‘French scene with French ease’ in his scene from *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Fuseli’s opinion that ‘a happy mixture of rural gaiety or courtliness, and fashionable airs, amuses the eye wherever it glances; [and that] as in the fetes of Lancret and Watteau we are pleased with a variety of ‘riens agreables [agreeable nothings]’ suggests that the presence of discernibly foreign influences in the Shakespeare Gallery canvases was not entirely to be condemned. Similarly, critics noted – in terms of praise rather than criticism – ‘the delicacy of the Flemish school’ in Ramberg’s scene from *Twelfth Night*, and the fact that Opie’s eye seemed to have ‘caught a ray of Caravaggio’.<sup>1</sup> Although relatively scarce, these positive comments on foreign influences in the Shakespeare Gallery canvases demonstrate that an engagement with Continental modes of painting might occasionally be appropriate and worthy of praise. More significantly, they suggest that the aesthetic generated within Shakespeare Gallery was one which was at odds not so much with *foreign* visual practices and schools, but with a *particular* aesthetic – the classicism of the Roman and Greek schools which the Academy held in such esteem.

This critique was voiced with particular force in relation to the Rome-based artist, James Durno. While the subjects of *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Troilus and Cressida* could certainly not have been painted in anything other than a neoclassical idiom, Durno’s paintings served to expose the disjunction between the distinctively English subjects offered by Shakespeare, and the precedents offered by Continental artistic traditions. His painting of *Falstaff*

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<sup>1</sup> *V&A Press Cuttings*, II, 556 and *Analytical Review* vol IV (1789), p.110.

*examining his Recruits* (Figure 22) was summarily dismissed by *The Diary* for ignoring the pre-requisite ‘Englishness’ of the scene. ‘This is so exquisite a scene’, the critic lamented,

so fraught with humour, so marked with character, that it required the pencil of a Hogarth, and even Hogarth could not have done it justice. The Painter is we are informed at Rome, and having been there several years, has we suppose taken his ideas from Greek statues and Roman figures. Be that as it may, his figures in this picture have not an English air. Falstaff has not that broad dignified English humour with which Shakespeare has marked the character, and with which Quin always played it.<sup>1</sup>

These comments demonstrate the extent to which Shakespeare’s most celebrated characters and plays were the subjects of a deeply engrained sense of cultural proprietorship. Falstaff not only belonged to Shakespeare: he belonged to England. In the playhouse he belonged to Quin and if any artist could lay claim to him, it could only be Hogarth and certainly not a painter who was so thoroughly immersed in a foreign culture.<sup>2</sup> For Humphrey Repton, the painting possessed little merit. It deserved ‘a place in this collection, to show the variety of styles between the present English and Italian Schools: but the artist, by long residence in Rome, seems to have contracted a hard streaky manner, more resembling the wet drapery of the Ancients, than what we see in nature.’<sup>3</sup> The problematic sense that the paintings commissioned from Rome-based artists such as Durno and Hamilton served simply as a foil for the more spirited productions of the newly-fledged English school, and had little value in their own right, was not exclusive to Repton. Northcote derided the works of both these artists, as well as Boydell’s need to ‘have *something from Rome*’.<sup>4</sup> Boydell himself, shortly after the opening of the Gallery, declined to commission any more paintings from foreign artists, claiming that ‘at the beginning of the present

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<sup>1</sup> *The Diary: or, Woodfall’s Register* (18 May 1789), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Hogarth had, of course, painted *Falstaff and his Recruits* although the reviewer was clearly unaware of the painting, which had not been engraved.

<sup>3</sup> Repton, *Bee*, p.36.

<sup>4</sup> James Ward, *Conversations of James Northcote, R.A. with James Ward, on Art and Artists*, edited and arranged from the manuscripts and note-books of James Ward by Ernest Fletcher (London, 1901), p.43.

undertaking, I did not imagine we had so many good artists among us' – a statement which served to underscore both the superiority of the contemporary British School over that of Italy, and the success of Boydell's venture.<sup>1</sup>

In initially extending his patronage to artists such as Durno, Hamilton, Tresham and Kauffman, Boydell had, it seems, been demonstrating the credibility of his project as an ambitious artistic venture, commissioning works by artists who had been subject to the most prestigious forms of training and influence, and who additionally formed a kind of British collective in Rome. Back in London, though, and seen in the context of the Shakespeare Gallery itself, these works acquired a rather different ideological flavour. The suggestion, in practice, the actual function of some of the paintings in the Gallery became their useful demonstrative role in exposing the distinction between the Italian and the English schools of art is a particularly intriguing one. The Englishness of English art, in short, might become fully apparent when viewed alongside the productions of artists working abroad. But if these artists, working in Rome, seemed conveniently and geographically extraneous to the English School, there was another figure at the very core of the English art establishment whose works provoked a similar process of censure and marginalisation. For, as the spokesman for the Academy – whose ideology and traditions the Shakespeare Gallery defined itself so sharply against – Reynolds's works invited a still more elaborate and pronounced critique of foreign artistic influence.

*The want of 'art and caution': Reynolds's pictorial borrowings*

The inception of the Shakespeare Gallery would have posed certain problems to Reynolds in his capacity as President of the Royal Academy. Even if he had welcomed the idea of such a venture in principle, he would have known that the Gallery would deprive him of a number of exhibitors, as indeed it did: Northcote, Opie and Fuseli, the rising stars of the 1780s, produced significantly fewer and

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from John Boydell to William Hamilton, dated 1 January 1793, Washington D.C., Folger Shakespeare Library, MS Y.c. 255 (5)



less ambitious works for the Academy than they had done in previous years. Reynolds, indeed, found himself in a rather similar situation to that which he had faced in 1784, when Gainsborough's last minute withdrawal of his canvases left the President having to fill the gaps with works of his own – all of them portraits. This time, however, Reynolds had time to prepare for the eventuality, as the *St. James's Chronicle* was quick to note in the April of 1789:

It has been supposed the [Royal Academy] exhibition of this year would not sustain its usual reputation, as the most eminent artists have been occupied in the undertaking of Mr Boydell and their productions will be exhibited at the opening of his Gallery. The President of the Academy has not been uninfluenced by this opinion, and has made evident efforts to rescue the institution from contempt.<sup>1</sup>

Reynolds had contributed three history paintings to the Academy's 1789 exhibition which, no doubt owing to the Shakespeare Gallery and Macklin's Poets' Gallery, contained even more portraits than usual – a *Cimon and Iphigenia*, a *Cupid and Psyche*, and *The Continnence of Scipio* (Figures 23-25). Although, as Martin Postle, points out, the three paintings were in all likelihood painted at intervals during the preceding decade rather than in the months leading up to the exhibition, they were clearly selected for that year's show with a good deal of consideration.<sup>2</sup> The *Cimon and Iphigenia* and *Cupid and Psyche* – possibly hung together - would have worked as a witty mirror-reflection of each other, identically sized and compositionally balanced but with a neat reversal in gender terms between voyeur and object. The unexpected re-appearance of Cupid in the *Cimon and Iphigenia* would no doubt have helped to secure the sense of congruence between the two canvases, while both fused their thematic sexuality with the sensual lure of colour and painterly effect.

*The Continnence of Scipio*, however, offered a thematic counterbalance to Reynolds's other two canvases. Their unabashed indulgence in sensual delight was juxtaposed with Scipio's heroic renunciation of the charms of an already

<sup>1</sup> *The St. James Chronicle; or, British Evening Post*, Sat 25 – Tues 28 April, 1789, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures* (Cambridge, 1995), p.225.

betrothed Carthaginian woman, a narrative which exemplified the civic discourse frequently expounded by Reynolds in his *Discourses* and which exalted the public virtues over private interests.<sup>1</sup> All three canvases took for their thematic bases frequently-recommended Academic narratives, each of them with a prestigious art-historical pedigree that served to endow Reynolds himself with an air of artistic *gravitas*. More importantly the three paintings would have worked together as an ensemble to demonstrate Reynolds's proficiency in a variety of visual languages, and to present a portfolio of stylistic variety and virtuosity. Viewers and critics were quick to attribute differing stylistic derivations to each canvas, observing *Scipio's* compositional similarity to the works of Parmigianino, *Cimon's* indebtedness to the works of Titian and Rubens, and likening the style of the *Cupid and Psyche* that of Correggio.<sup>2</sup>

No doubt, this represented a clear strategy on Reynolds's part to display three generically-prestigious but stylistically disparate works which would advertise his proficiency in the pictorial languages of different schools of painting. This practice would have reinforced his eclectic theoretical stance which, during the 1780s, sought to position Flemish artists alongside those of the various Italian schools in defiance of traditional Academic precepts. In general, Reynolds's historical canvases for the 1789 exhibition were praised for both their ambition and execution. However, a few notes of ambiguity sounded amidst the praise, not because of Reynolds's apparently faddish privileging of Rubens and of the Venetian school over the usual Academic suspects, but for rather more surprising reasons. The remarks of the *Times* give an indication of the contemporary critical reservations about the dependency on, and reference to, the foreign:

*The continence of Scipio* is a bright example of Roman virtue; - but it has furnished a most unfavourable example of British painting. We shall therefore look for the reputation of the English School in a much more incontinent picture.

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<sup>1</sup> The most influential discussion of the civic humanist discourse within eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art theory is John Barrell's *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven and London, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Post*, 30 April, 1789, p.2 and *The Times*, 30 April, 1789, p.2;

*Cymon and Iphigenia*. The figure of the latter is among the happiest productions of Sir Joshua's pencil. We do not remember that anything so like Titian has been produced in Leicester-Square. Cymon is rather too satirical, and from the expression, as well as colouring of this picture, we are disposed to suspect, that our great *English* painter has lately been dabbling in the works of a certain great *Flemish* painter.<sup>1</sup>

The pointed juxtaposition of the '*English* painter' and his foreign counterparts clearly undermines the aesthetic programme of the Academy's President. Although the *Scipio* was deemed by the press to be the least successful of Reynolds's works for the 1789 exhibition, the *Times*'s linking of 'Roman virtue' with 'unfavourable' British painting gives a hint that there is also an ideological absurdity here, that what might be good in Rome is not necessarily good for England. It is unclear, at this stage, whether the limitations of Reynolds's canvas arise from a failure in execution or from a more inherent problem, one to do with the theoretical basis, and appropriate visual form, of an English School. The comments on *Cimon and Iphigenia* are similarly unresolved. While clearly inclined to praise the painting and its approximation to Titian, the later suspicion that 'our great *English* painter has lately been dabbling in the works of a certain *Flemish* painter' recalls the kind of criticisms of pictorial conjuring made by Nathaniel Hone several years previously (Figure 26).<sup>2</sup> In Hone's satirical portrayal of the Academy's President, Reynolds is represented as something of a visual alchemist, taking the designs of the Old Masters and visibly transforming them into the dubious substance of a modern art. The *Times*'s belief that Reynolds had now turned to dabbling in the style of Rubens is yet another instance of Reynolds's critics perceiving evidence of pictorial plagiarism from foreign sources in his works. What is relatively new, however, is the suggestion that this apparently uncontentious Academic practice should somehow be an inappropriate one for the President of the English Royal Academy.<sup>3</sup> But while

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, Thurs. April 30, 1789, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> On Hone's *The Conjuror* see John Newman's essay, 'Reynolds and Hone: *The Conjuror* unmasked' in Nicholas Penny (ed.), *Reynolds*, exh. cat., (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1896), pp.344–354.

<sup>3</sup> The rejection of the stylistic qualities of the Old Masters and the belief that English art should manifest something peculiar to the nation was nothing new, of course. Hogarth had made precisely this point in his *The Battle of the Pictures*. However, Hogarth's stance was notoriously [cont'd ...]

this remained little more than a suggestion or even just an ambiguous hint in the Academy reviews, it seemed to become a fully-resolved belief less than a week later when the critics (presumably those same critics who reviewed the Academy exhibits) visited the Shakespeare Gallery for the first time.

When the Gallery opened, Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* (Figures 27 & 28) attracted – as might have been anticipated – more attention than any other painting on display. However, it was not necessarily the kind of interest which he and Boydell might have hoped for. Many critics praised the ‘great merit’ of the painting: *The Gazetteer* even went so far as to proclaim it a ‘*chef d’oeuvre* of Art’. But these positive comments were submerged under the weight of a large-scale controversy, one which seemed to question the entire system of Academic practice, and Reynolds's status as the father of an English School of painting. This controversy formed a significant component of the debate on the forms and derivations of a potentially English aesthetic, offering a clear indication – according to critics – of how an English school should *not* be constituted. This critique was most economically voiced by the *St James's Chronicle*, which seemed to be suggesting that the Shakespeare Gallery was a space in which the conventional markers of merit would no longer do:

The merits of this picture are great and numerous: but are they such as were expected from the President of the Royal Academy, on the present, important summons of national Genius in the Arts? The death of Cardinal Beaufort is too like that of Germanicus by Poussin, to claim the distinction of an original composition. It we speak capriciously, we may easily be convicted for the print is in the collection of every man of taste.<sup>1</sup>

That Reynolds had chosen for his pictorial source Poussin's celebrated *Death of Germanicus* (Figure 29) was, in one sense, no great surprise. Poussin was highly esteemed by eighteenth-century art theorists, collectors and connoisseurs – by ‘every man of taste’, as the *St. James's Chronicle* indicates. Prominent

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anti-Academic and what is unusual in 1789 is the taking up of this point of view by visitors and ostensible supporters of the Academy.

<sup>1</sup> *The St James's Chronicle; or, British Evening-Post*, Sat. May 9 – Tuesday May 12, 1789, p.3.

writers on art such as George Turnbull and Jonathan Richardson had both devoted sections of influential publications to the artist, with the former claiming that with Poussin had ‘died all the greatest talents necessary to good historical painting.’<sup>1</sup> Important artists and collectors such as James Thornhill, Robert Walpole and the Duke of Rutland had purchased paintings by Poussin during the course of the century, while the Academy signalled its esteem for the artist by taking the unusual step of displaying the *Seven Sacraments* at its 1787 exhibition.<sup>2</sup> Reynolds himself had painted several subject pictures which came from the very Academic tradition which Poussin’s work exemplified, the latest being the *Continence of Scipio* exhibited in that year’s RA exhibition, a subject which Poussin had painted in 1640.<sup>3</sup>

Reynolds knew that the ‘Poussinesque’ was a visual idiom which, despite the patriotic discourse, Boydell was far from averse to. In the autumn of 1787, Boydell and his nephew had visited Paris – probably to promote the Shakespeare Gallery – where the former was apparently sufficiently impressed by the work of Jacques-Louis David to invite him to London, an invitation which the French artist seems initially to have accepted.<sup>4</sup> An anonymous article published in the *World* at the beginning of October, which has now been attributed to Boydell, described David’s *Death of Socrates* (displayed in that year’s Salon) as ‘the most exquisite and admirable effort of art which has appeared since the *Capella Sistina* and the *Stanzas of Raffaele*’ and ‘a picture which would have done

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<sup>1</sup> George Turnbull, *A Treatise on Ancient Painting* (1741), p.165. See also Jonathan Richardson, *Two Discourses* (1719) and *An Account of some of the Statues, Bas-reliefs, Drawings and Pictures in Italy, with Remarks* (1722). The latter contains a detailed description of the *Death of Germanicus*.

<sup>2</sup> The paintings were displayed in the Council Room. The *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* claimed that this display made the one shilling admission charge worthwhile, but noted that the juxtaposition of the ‘old school’ and ‘new’ could only injure the reputation of modern artists (1 May 1787), p.3. The following month, a trial took place in the Guildhall between the dealers Desenfans and Vandergucht. The plaintiff claimed that Vandergucht had sold him – for the sum of £700 – a fake Poussin. The trial lasted for five hours, and the testimonies of a number of artists and collectors of Poussin’s work called to pronounce on the authenticity of the painting was reported on in the press. The reporting in the *World* (8 June, 1787) demonstrates the extent of the cultural distinction inherent in the ability to distinguish a genuine canvas by Poussin, as well as in owning one.

<sup>3</sup> Other subjects shared by Poussin and Reynolds include the finding of Moses and nativity scenes.

<sup>4</sup> This episode is recounted in Carr (1993).

honour to Athens in the age of Pericles'.<sup>1</sup> The London press, which reported frequently on the art world in France and on David in particular, habitually made two kinds of comparison in relation to David. First, they did not fail to recognise the artist's indebtedness to Poussin for his austere classicism. And secondly, they drew comparisons between David and Reynolds, apparently regarded as the French painter's English equivalent.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the press and to fellow artists, Reynolds would not have been unaware of the reputation and talents of David – the French artist had applied to Sir Joshua, via Brooke Boothby, for permission to exhibit either the *Death of Socrates* or the *Oath of the Horatii* at the 1788 Royal Academy exhibition. Reynolds's sudden decision to paint the *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* instead of *Macbeth and the Witches*, as originally planned, may have in part been due to a desire to paint the kind of deathbed scene, ripe with civic and moral overtones, which had brought such fame to Poussin and David, as well as to attempt to satisfy his patron's tastes.<sup>3</sup>

The decision to adopt a compositional formula which derived from a celebrated painting thus sought to make statements at various levels. That the *St. James's Chronicle* should criticise Reynolds for what was, after all, a far from uncommon visual practice is therefore somewhat curious. It seems that within the context of the Shakespeare Gallery, however, certain visual practices previously regarded as merits by many have, for some reason, become defects. The implication seems to be that the Academy's President has failed to comprehend and respond to the particular requirements of Boydell's Gallery. He is somehow felt to have been

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<sup>1</sup> *The World* (2 October 1787), p.2. The attribution was made simultaneously by Carr, *op. cit.* and by Phillippe Bordes ( 'Jaques-Louis David's Anglophilia on the Eve of the French Revolution', *Burlington Magazine*, 134 (August 1992), 482-90).

<sup>2</sup> On 18 April 1788 *The Times* (p.3) and the *Public Advertiser* (p.2) reported that 'they have at present in Paris an historical painter of reputation, betwixt whom and our English Reynolds, the French are very fond of drawing comparisons'. They went on to note that 'the objection made to his stile is that he is sometimes too servile an imitator of Poussin' observing that the latter 'is an admirable model; but true genius disdains all trammels, and ... forms a manner of its own'.

<sup>3</sup> It is not clear why David did not, in the event, exhibit at the Royal Academy, though he, did, of course hold exhibitions in England (much in the vein of Copley) in later years. Although Reynolds would probably not have seen the *Death of Socrates* he would almost certainly have known the two engravings by Pietro Martini of the 1785 and 1787 Salon exhibitions, which feature thumbnails of works by David (*The Oath of the Horatii* and *The Death of Socrates*, respectively). Another deathbed scene by Poussin which was highly esteemed in the eighteenth century was the *Testament of Eudamidas* (see Richard Verdi, 'Poussin's *Eudamidas*: Eighteenth-Century Criticism and Copies', *Burlington Magazine*, 113 (1969), 513-524).

unpatriotic, to have not taken seriously the ‘important summons of national Genius’, in his eagerness to pursue the supposedly universal values of Poussin. Whatever the ‘numerous’ merits of Reynolds might be – and no one seemed inclined to deny him these – they are not ones which are compatible with the ‘originality’ required of an English School. Implicit in this critique of Reynolds is the suggestion that his role as President of an Academy dependent on foreign or universal artistic models has somehow rendered him incapable of making a meaningful patriotic and original contribution to Boydell’s incipient English School of painting.<sup>1</sup>

*The St. James’s Chronicle* was not the only publication to identify Reynolds’s pictorial borrowing from Poussin. Before the Gallery opened, another newspaper commented upon the compositional similarity, referring those readers who had not seen the original *Death of Germanicus* (which was in Italy at this time) to Boydell’s print shop where a copy of the painting would provide viewers with proof of the quotation.<sup>2</sup> Evidence of the reference to Poussin would thus have been apparent not just to the gentlemen of taste whom the *St James’s Chronicle* claimed would be likely to possess a print after the Poussin, but to anyone who had visited Boydell’s shop – which was, as we have seen, the largest print emporium in the metropolis and a business of international repute. Looking at a print or the copy after Poussin’s *Death of Germanicus*, Reynolds’s compositional borrowing would have been immediately obvious – indeed he makes only the smallest modification to Poussin’s central figures. Reynolds’s entire composition takes as its template the imagery of the dying Germanicus and the three soldiers to his right, merely modifying slightly the pose of Germanicus for the dying Beaufort and removing the Roman helmets and spears from the onlookers (even the cut of Henry’s clothes remains the same as that of the central soldier in profile at the centre of Poussin’s canvas). Reynolds revises Poussin’s celebrated work by zooming in on the central figures, adapting them into a

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<sup>1</sup> On the threat posed by David and the French Academy to the nascent British School in the French Revolutionary era, see William Vaughan, ‘“David’s Brickdust” and the rise of the British school’ in Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest, *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism* (London and New York, 1993), pp.134-155.

<sup>2</sup> *V&A Press Cuttings*, Vol II, p.369 (dated March 1789)

vertical format and rotating the line of vision a few degrees to the right so that we seem to be looking at the scene from the position of Poussin's Agrippina.

But the fact that Reynolds's canvas appeared to be almost as palpable a response to Poussin as the actual copy in Cheapside was not the only observation of pictorial borrowing to be made about the painting. Fuseli, too, noted the compositional borrowing but also went on to suggest a stylistic derivation as well:

The shades of death are spread over this chamber; a descant, after this, on Henry's resemblance to the centurion of Poussin; on the fellows substituted for Salisbury and Warwick; on hysterics instead of despair; on the infernal monkey at the pillow, can take as little from the impression this picture has made on us, as a jargon of Rembrandt-hues, gold, flesh and magic, can add to it.<sup>1</sup>

Fuseli regarded Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* as the artist's finest work, claiming that 'if he had never painted another picture he would have gained immortal honour by that alone'.<sup>2</sup> If he was willing to overlook Reynolds's unsubtle importing of its composition into his own work, as well as many of the other faults which critics had pointed out, Fuseli's linguistic metaphor reveals a difficulty with Reynolds's visual language – that is to say, the way he has expressed himself in paint. Reynolds's painterly syntax of *chiaroscuro*, of gold and red hues, and his thick textures of drapery and shadow, Fuseli suggests, amount to a kind of superfluous Rembrandtesque 'jargon', a visual language which was neither universal nor parochial, nor even individual, but merely affected and gauche.

To those familiar with the theoretical writings of Reynolds – or with art theory more generally - the pictorial marriage of Poussin and Rembrandt would have seemed a strange one. In his eighth *Discourse*, delivered some eleven years

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<sup>1</sup> *The Analytical Review*, Vol IV, 1789, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Matthew Pilkington, *The Gentleman's and Connoisseur's Dictionary of Painters*, London, 1798, p.523.



previously, Reynolds had described Poussin and Rembrandt as ‘two painters of characters totally opposite to each other in every respect, but in nothing more than in their mode of composition, and management of light and shadow.’<sup>1</sup> He went on to summarise their differences:

Rembrandt’s manner is absolute unity; he often has but one group, and exhibits little more than one spot of light in the midst of a large quantity of shadow; if he has a second mass, that second bears no proportion to the principal. Poussin, on the contrary, has scarce any principal mass of light at all, and his figures are often too much dispersed, without sufficient attention to place them in groups.

Reynolds voiced no theoretical preference between the two artists, believing that ‘each of them ran into contrary extremes, and it is difficult to determine which is the most reprehensible, both being equally distant from the demands of nature, and the purposes of art’ – an unusual stance for an Academician.<sup>2</sup> But if the respective and equal faults of these artists seemed to be that one was too austere in his avoidance of ‘that ostentation of art, with regard to light and shadow’ which the other was eager to draw attention to, Reynolds’s practical resolution of this opposition seems to have descended more firmly on one side than the other. While the critics were keen to note the pictorial plagiarism from Poussin, looking at the painting alongside Fuseli’s criticism and the eighth *Discourse* seems to suggest a clear privileging of the merits of Rembrandt over the faults of Poussin. If one of the shortcomings of Poussin for Reynolds was his lack of pictorial unity and his inability to group figures (though clearly this is far from being an objective fact) then *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort* appears to set out to resolve this problem. Looking again at Reynolds’s painting we might suggest that it is in fact not as unmediated a copy of Poussin as it might initially appear. Indeed Poussin’s linear style, the dispersal of his figures across the surface of the picture plane and the disjointed nature of the central group of figures are ruthlessly edited. The central figures are brought into near-focus and isolated as a group; the frieze-like composition is pared down, its strong horizontal format resolved

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse VIII, p.147.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse VIII, p. 148.

into a vertical composition which creates depth beyond the picture plane; and Poussin's unwillingness to deploy the painterly effects of *chiaroscuro* rejected in order to draw the viewer's eye towards the figure of Beaufort.

Moreover, Reynolds's painting established an ideological as well as a visual tension with Poussin's. While the story of Germanicus was the example *par excellence* of stoicism, revenge and marital and civic virtue, the death of Cardinal Beaufort could hardly have been a more different affair. An ambitious, underhand and outright vicious character, Cardinal Beaufort lies on his deathbed tormented by the prospect of what awaits him, and incapable of the stoical resolve of a Germanicus. By removing the large group of mourners – and most crucially the women and children – surrounding Germanicus and replacing them with three figures more intrigued than grieving at the fate of Beaufort, Reynolds invites an ironic comparison between the exemplary life of Germanicus and the villainous actions of Beaufort. Poussin's painting is thus alluded to both for the academic prestige it offers the artist and for the anti-heroic overtones that its distortion confers upon the subject of Reynolds's painting.

Reynolds's referencing of Poussin, along with his painterly emulation of Rembrandt, was clearly more complex than critics gave him credit for. It may have derived, in particular, from Reynolds's own sense that the art of Shakespeare generated an aesthetic that was entirely at odds with a straightforward neoclassicism. While Shakespeare's disregard for classical decorum was something that French critics had condemned, Reynolds had criticised the rules themselves, putting forward a case for 'a new code of laws' to accommodate Shakespeare's 'mixture of grave and gay, the grandeur of general ideas with the familiar pathetic, the artful with the artless – that is, finished passages with the most simple and natural expressions'.<sup>1</sup> Reynolds's unpublished 'Essay on Shakespeare' implies, by extension, that to use Shakespeare as a source for history painting requires a breaking of academic doctrine in favour of a visual eclecticism which might reconcile the universal

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Reynolds, 'Essay on Shakespeare' in F.W. Hilles, *Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1952), p.112. The date of this unfinished essay is unclear, but it seems to have been written some time around the mid 1770s.

with the local, the cerebral with the comic, the finished with the natural. His referencing of Poussin, only to reject his linearity, his lack of painterly effect and his narrative ideology, was clearly manufactured with the particular demands of Shakespeare's aesthetic in mind. In particular, the juxtaposition of two apparently conflicting visual registers – those of Poussin and Rembrandt – which in the Academic discourses had been deemed so incompatible, offered a clear consideration of a 'new code of laws' for ambitious English painting.

But if the press could not see beyond the obvious borrowing from Poussin, it seems that there were other aspects of the painting which reinforced their perceptions of the artist's dependence and servility. Two other details in the canvas caused a controversy, one which overlapped with the critique of Reynolds's style. The first was the presence of a demonic imp on Beaufort's pillow, and the second was the figure of Beaufort himself whose 'grin of despair and death' was believed to have been too literally transcribed from Shakespeare. The main objection to the demon was its allegorical nature – being only a metaphorical device in Shakespeare's text it was almost unanimously deemed inappropriate or ludicrous that this 'figure' should appear in paint. Although the ostensible reason for this lack of decorum had to do with the divergence between poetry and painting, it quickly emerged that the controversy hinged upon other concerns altogether. *The Times* noted that,

The licence of Poetry is very different to that of Painting; but the present subject is complete in itself, and wants not the aide of machinery from Heaven or from Hell. When the darkness of Romish superstition prevailed, and when the Christian mysteries were acted as plays, a painter might have been forgiven for such an intrusion, even in an historical representation; but in this enlightened period, astonishment and pity wait upon it.<sup>1</sup>

Seen alongside the borrowing from Poussin, the allegorical demon provided proof of the archaism and foreignness of Reynolds's pictorial practice. Rather than seriously engaging with the terms of the Shakespeare Gallery in an attempt

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times* (8 May 1789), p.2.

to produce a modern, national art, Reynolds seemed unable to dislodge himself from the track of the classical tradition, and loath to relinquish the styles and the beliefs of the past. Even those who sought to justify Reynolds's inclusion of the fiend did so by arguing that allegorical figures had been 'introduced by the best painters into their best works', and citing the examples of Raphael, Poussin, Le Seur and Rubens.<sup>1</sup> This argument represented an isolated position removed from the prevalent, nationalist discourse surrounding the Gallery's opening, which argued overwhelmingly that an English School could only be founded upon principles peculiar to itself, and not upon the basis of a continental artistic tradition. Most crucially, it was felt that Boydell's Gallery worked by 'rendering the enthusiasm for Shakespeare in England, what superstition had been in Italy', a feeling which implicitly positioned Reynolds as unpatriotic by failing to reject outright the 'superstition' of Italy when he adopted a subject from Shakespeare, a rejection which had, moreover, been all too clearly paved out for him by the fact that Shakespeare's demon was a mere metaphor.

The allegorical fiend was subsequently obliterated from Reynolds's canvas, and from Caroline Watson's copper plate after the painting, following the controversy caused by the work's exhibition in 1789. Judging from a caricature by Gillray (Figure 31), however, we can deduce that it was originally a black-skinned creature, which lurked behind Beaufort's head, with its claws on the bolster.<sup>2</sup> Fuseli's denouncement of this 'infernal monkey at the pillow' offers a clue to Reynolds's thinking when he insisted on incorporating this allegorical device as a literal figure within the composition. As we will see in Chapter IV, Fuseli positioned himself quite aggressively as a challenger to Reynolds in the years surrounding the Shakespeare Gallery's opening, in particular painting subjects which he knew Reynolds had chosen to paint for Boydell. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that Reynolds – unable to shake off his competitor – should have chosen to respond to him in precisely the terms which Fuseli was most celebrated for, creating a figure which many viewers would have recognised as emulating (however feebly) the 'Fusilesque', and in particular the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Sat. May 23, 1789, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> James Gillray, *Shakespeare Sacrificed; – or – The Offering to Avarice* (1789).

celebrated *Nightmare* of 1782 (Figure 30).<sup>1</sup> While the world of the supernatural and the macabre, however, was recognised – as we shall see – as being a territory peculiar to Fuseli, Reynolds’s handling of this sub-genre could not shake off the imprint of mere ‘superstition’, an impression which was perhaps made all the more perceptible thanks to his referencing of Poussin. In apparently asking viewers to see his work as part of the classical tradition which Poussin exemplified, Reynolds’s own canvas simply comes to be seen as belonging to the barbarous negative of that tradition: to the superstitious and the grotesque.

The final major criticism of *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort* – concerning the ‘grin of despair’ on Beaufort’s face – overlapped with the controversy surrounding the allegorical fiend. It was suggested by critics that the grin was ‘too literally rendered from Shakespeare’, and William Mason – who visited Reynolds’s studio while the work was in progress – suggested that Shakespeare would never have used the word ‘grin’ at all, if he could have found a better word.<sup>2</sup> Like the compositional plagiarism from Poussin and the presence of the allegorical fiend, Reynolds’s rendering of Beaufort’s despairing grin represented yet another literal, unmediated transcription, one which suggested a lack of subtlety or selection in Reynolds’s pictorial practice. The grin, however, represented a slightly different problem for the critics. Rather than simply being transcribed from the art of the continental past, it was transcribed too literally from Shakespeare and, as such, seemed removed from the classicising effect which some critics might have hoped would accompany the figure of Beaufort. *The Times* suggested that,

If the greater part of the Cardinal’s face had been covered by the sheeting of the bed, the subject would have been as well understood, and the hand alone, to which there is such a particular allusion in the moment of the scene, would have produced an effect equally powerful and much more pleasure than the present painful display of agonizing features. – The hand, which is wonderfully painted, would have been sufficient to

<sup>1</sup> Fuseli’s aesthetic is discussed in fuller detail in the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> William Cotton, *Sir Joshua Reynolds and his Works. Gleanings from his Diary, unpublished manuscripts, and from other sources*, ed. J. Burnet, London (1856)

mark the grip of despair, heightened by the request of the King, or the convulsion of death, which rendered the departing spirit insensible to it.<sup>1</sup>

These remarks, of course, represent merely a slight modification of the famous remarks of Winckelmann on the sublimity of the Laocoön in whom ‘the most violent sufferings’ are not perceptible in Laocoön’s facial expression – which remains inexpressive – but through the contractions of pain elsewhere in his body.<sup>2</sup> Here it is the *idea* of the Laocoön which should be imitated and *not* its actual, physical form. In one sense, of course, these remarks were curious. Beaufort was no Laocoön – just as he was no Germanicus either – and it would have been ludicrous to endow him with the kind of noble restraint with which both these figures met their respective deaths. Yet the desire to see Beaufort’s suffering of pain and horror transferred from his facial expression to some other bodily signifier – or, as other critics suggested, for it to be covered up, as Poussin does with the more distraught figures at Germanicus’s deathbed – can be seen as a component of a broader argument which sought to berate the Academy’s President for his apparent inability to negotiate and select in relation to his visual and narrative sources. In certain circumstances, the *Times* noted, it might be appropriate for the ‘British Apelles’ to adopt ‘the veil of the Grecian painter’: it was clear, however, that the continental garments which Reynolds had chosen to adorn his canvas were rather less discrete and somewhat more crude and unbecoming.

Part of the critique of *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort* had to do with the apparent inauthenticity of the figures within Reynolds’s canvas – critics were quick to point out that the figure of Henry and the ‘fellows substituted for Warwick and Salisbury’ bore little resemblance to the characters in Shakespeare’s play.<sup>3</sup> But if Reynolds was falling short of his mission to

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, Fri. May 8, 1789, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, trans. Henry Fuseli, London (1765), p. 30-32.

<sup>3</sup> Northcote notes that the figure of Warwick, far from resembling the ‘energetic, tearing devil that he was’ looked more like ‘a common porter’ and had in fact been painted from Reynolds’s colour grinder, Grandi (Ward, *Conversations of James Northcote*, p.234). Northcote thus adds vulgarity to the list of crimes committed by Reynolds in this painting.

contribute to a national school of painting, it seemed that the overwhelming reason for this was his simultaneous inability to disguise his pictorial sources, and to negotiate the intellectual aspects of the work. The first part of this critique overlapped perceptibly with Reynolds's own theoretical views on the practice of pictorial borrowing:

[H]e who borrows an idea from an antient, or even from a modern artist not his contemporary, and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of it, with no seam or joining appearing, can hardly be accused of plagiarism.... Borrowing or stealing with such art and caution, will have the right to the same lenity as was used by the Lacedemonians; who did not punish theft, but the want of artifice to conceal it.<sup>1</sup>

That Reynolds's own borrowing failed to deploy the 'art and caution' which he recommended, laid his work open to charges of plagiarism and dependence – of transferring a visual device or stylistic quality to his own canvas with the seams and joins showing. That Reynolds himself had warned against this practice suggests that – for him – *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort* may simply have been an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate pictorial borrowing, rather than a practical demonstration of his theoretical views. Yet the press seemed to see things rather differently. Their focus upon the foreignness of Reynolds's compositional and stylistic derivations, their identification of 'Romish superstition' in the allegorical demon, and of the President's lack of independence from his visual and literary sources, seemed to manifest a literalness and an artistic servility which was best ascribed to Academic practice, and best kept away from the Shakespeare Gallery.

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Discourse*, Discourse VI, p.107

*The True Father of the English School?*

While Boydell could not have anticipated the marginalisation of Reynolds's aesthetic within the space of the Shakespeare Gallery, this process nonetheless – and paradoxically – served a useful purpose for the Gallery. Initially, of course, Reynolds had been crucial to the success of the Shakespeare Gallery, and his inclusion in the scheme helped to underscore its credentials as an ambitious and credible attempt to promote English history painting. If, in the event, Reynolds's work for Boydell failed to meet the criteria which the press deemed essential to a national school of painting, then this served simply to reinforce the aesthetic generated elsewhere in the Shakespeare Gallery, and to guarantee Boydell's position as the founder of an English School of painting.

To lay claim to such a title necessarily involved dealing with the existing claim to the title, which was generally felt – by the 1780s – to belong legitimately to Reynolds.<sup>1</sup> On the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery, however, it seemed to be Boydell rather than the President of the Royal Academy who was widely regarded as the true claimant to the title. While the press associated Reynolds with his continental predecessors and the (implicitly foreign) academic system, a patriotic discourse came to surround the figure of the Gallery's founder. The *Morning Post*'s initial inspection of the Shakespeare Gallery noted that 'the enterprising Proprietor of these admirable works has done much for the Arts, and they in return will do much for him; for by his spirit and taste, an English School for Historical Painting will be established, which will keep his name in perpetual remembrance and regard.'<sup>2</sup> The *Times* went further, observing that it was to Boydell alone that the present and future state of British art could be attributed and entrusted: 'historical painting and engraving are almost exclusively indebted to Mr Boydell for their present advancement as they will be for their future perfection; and the artist of after times will visit his tomb with that spirit of veneration which will be due to the Father of the British School of Painting.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On Reynolds's contested reputation within the English School discourse, see the final chapter of Postle (1995)

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Post* (5 May 1789), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times* (7 May, 1789), p.2.



While Martin Postle has differentiated between Reynolds and Boydell as ‘the “modern Apelles” and “modern Maecenas”’, it is clear that there was an alternative – and actually more widely pronounced – process of designation on the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery which put both figures up for the title of the ‘Father of the British School of Painting’.<sup>1</sup> While there had been a general sense, prior to 1789, that Reynolds had some claim to such a title, the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery seemed to posit an alternative set of criteria to those which Reynolds exemplified. The true father of an English School of painting should not, it seemed, be a figure who held up a particular and discernible visual idiom for imitation by fellow artists. Rather, he would more properly be someone who failed to do precisely this, someone who could ‘induce talents into manly and publick competition’, and who would encourage individuality and originality among artists.<sup>2</sup> If British artists were to rival their continental predecessors, they could only do so by adopting a new set of visual terms and aesthetic criteria, and not by attempting to imitate the styles and practices of existing schools of painting which, in their apparent homogeneity, contradicted the essential tenets of Englishness.

When, in the 1770s, Boydell and Reynolds had both attempted to represent themselves as ambitious pioneers of English art, the terms they chose for these representations anticipated the debates which the Shakespeare Gallery would more fully pursue (Figures 32 & 33).<sup>3</sup> Reynolds’s self-portrait – like the later *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* – employed the pictorial language of Rembrandt to indicate the artist’s proficiency in exploiting the sensual qualities of paint. Wearing academic robes, Reynolds is posed in an authoritative fashion next to a bust of Michelangelo, indicating his attachment to the classical tradition.<sup>4</sup> As a portrait which was to be hung at the New Somerset House (we can see it in

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of Postle’s chapter on Reynolds’s paintings for Boydell and Macklin (*Reynolds*, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *St. James’s Chronicle* (2-5 May 1789), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Both men sought to disseminate these portraits through mezzotint engravings by the leading engraver, Valentine Green.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds’s pose is also derived from Van Dyck’s engraved portrait of Adam De Coster, adding a further level of artistic allusion to the portrait (see Penny, p.287).

Singleton's depiction of the Council Chamber (Figure 18), hung behind the cast of the *Laocoön*, it offered an appropriately academic and reverential approach, on a variety of levels, to the classical and Continental artistic traditions.

Boydell's portrait worked rather differently, though it was no less programmatic. Dressed in the attire of a wealthy tradesman, Boydell is seated in a reflective pose, inadvertently revealing to the viewer a print of St. George slaying the dragon.<sup>1</sup> On the table on which he rests his elbow are a catalogue of prints sold by the Boydell firm, and a burin, indicating Boydell's status as a printseller and a practitioner of the art of engraving. On a ledge to Boydell's left, we can see the three volumes of his publication of the *Collection of Prints Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in England*. While Reynolds's self-portrait had attempted to immerse the artist within a continental academic tradition, Josiah Boydell's portrait of his uncle emphasised John Boydell's Englishness, visible not only through his advocacy to artists of national subjects such as St. George, but also through his commercial activities which made pragmatic attempts to improve and disseminate both national taste and English engraving.

Several years later, when the paths of these two men crossed for the first time, it was perhaps not surprising that their aesthetic agendas should have been exposed as essentially incompatible. The highly visible foreignness of Reynolds's work – potentially prestigious as it may have been in almost every other scenario – now attested to the Englishness of Boydell's Gallery by offering a counterpoint against which a national aesthetic might be measured. Of course, this involved a certain amount of wilful misinterpretation of Reynolds's visual practice by the press: Reynolds's referencing of Poussin, along with his painterly emulation of Rembrandt, was, as we have seen, more complex than the critics gave him credit for, and may have derived, in particular, from Reynolds's own sense – entirely in keeping with the ideology of the Shakespeare Gallery – that the art of Shakespeare generated an aesthetic that was entirely at odds with a straightforward neoclassicism. But despite Reynolds's eagerness to distance himself from the neoclassical works in the Shakespeare Gallery, the critics

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<sup>1</sup> This subject does not appear in any of Boydell's catalogues.

seemed intent upon incorporating his paintings into that very body of work which seemed so extraneous to the spirit of Boydell's enterprise, categorising his art as foreign and Academic, and essentially at odds with the contemporary English school.<sup>1</sup> But if Reynolds's art seemed easy to characterise, and to dismiss, the paintings which were admitted by critics to be legitimate productions of the English School necessarily took on the opposite attribute – the aesthetic they generated collectively proved almost impossible to define. Far from being a problem for the majority of Boydell's critics, however, the diversity and occasional idiosyncrasy of the works on display at the Shakespeare Gallery could be conveniently dealt with by reminding viewers of the constitutional liberty of the English nation, and by revealing the diverse virtues of its people.

*Picturing the 'nation of domestic sentiment': James Northcote's scenes from English history*

While Reynolds's works struggled to achieve recognition for their contribution to Boydell's patriotic enterprise, one of Sir Joshua's former pupils was instantly recognised by the press to be a significant participant in the newly-formed British School – a participant, moreover, who offered a challenge to the dubious authority of Reynolds and consolidated the accounts which placed Boydell at the centre of the English School narrative. Towards the end of a lengthy assessment of James Northcote's exhibits for the Shakespeare Gallery, the *Public Advertiser* noted that

The junior artists who exhibit in the Shakespeare Gallery have displayed strong marks of genius and taste, and though they *once* appeared merely as *satellites* attending upon the higher *constellations*, they now emulate the splendor of these great *luminaries* and give fair promise of attaining *equal* eminence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see in Chapter IV, Reynolds's *Macbeth and the Witches* invited similar criticisms to the *Death of Cardinal Beaufort*. Reynolds's attitude to the Rome-based artists who exhibited at the Shakespeare Gallery is suggested in Ward's *Conversations with Northcote*, which records Reynolds's disappointment on seeing a much-praised painting by Gavin Hamilton (improbably lauded as a 'superior Raphael') in Rome (Ward, *Conversations of James Northcote*, p.43).

<sup>2</sup> *Public Advertiser* (28 May 1789) p.4.

Though the ‘great luminaries’ are not mentioned by name, it is fair to assume that the critic was referring to Reynolds and West, whose works had dominated the walls of the Academy exhibitions during the 1780s, while the exhibits of figures such as Northcote, Opie and Fuseli - the ‘junior artists’ referred to by the critic – were treated as occupying a lower rank in the artistic hierarchy. A relatively recently-elected member of the Royal Academy (he was elected as a full member in 1787), Northcote had, by the end of the 1780s, managed to make the transition from portraiture to history painting.<sup>1</sup> His *Captain Engelfield and his Crew saving themselves from the Wreck of the Centaur*, displayed at the centre of the West wall in the Academy’s 1784 exhibition (Figure 34), guaranteed his position as a history painter and secured the artist a number of subsequent commissions. Over the next three years, he continued to exhibit large-scale historical works at Somerset House which, on two occasions, were juxtaposed with similar compositions by his rival, Opie.<sup>2</sup> Dramatic, and appealing to the public appetite for the sublime, Northcote’s compositions were clearly designed to achieve maximum impact within the crowded and commercial space of Somerset House (Figure 35).<sup>3</sup>

Although a former pupil of Reynolds, Northcote seems to have felt little affinity with either his master or the Academy, claiming, rather, that it was the sustained patronage of Boydell which ‘enabled me to become an historical painter, which

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<sup>1</sup> Northcote – somewhat implausibly – ‘blamed’ his rival John Opie for this transition. Returning from a three-year stay in Rome in 1780, Northcote had found himself eclipsed by Opie, whose ‘discoverer and patron’ John Wolcot (*alias* Peter Pindar) was keen to demolish the competition and – according to Northcote – set out to sabotage his career, issuing threats, disparaging his work to influential personalities on the London scene and inserting anonymous reviews of his work in the press. Northcote claimed that Opie effectively deprived him of his market for portrait painting (highly unlikely given the number of painters which this particular market sustained) and that he ‘turned from necessity to painting small historical and fancy subjects from the most popular authors of the day, as such subjects are sure of sale amongst the minor print-dealers, being done in a short time, and for a small price.’ This information is taken from Northcote’s unpublished autobiography in the British Library (BL Add. MSS 47792)

<sup>2</sup> In 1786, Northcote exhibited a large-scale canvas of the *Death of Prince Leopold of Brunswick*, while Opie exhibited his *Assassination of James I of Scotland*. The following year, Northcote’s *Death of Wat Tyler* and Opie’s *Murder of David Rizzio* were hung opposite each other in prime positions within the Great Room, as can be seen in Ramberg’s image of that year’s exhibition (Figure 4).

<sup>3</sup> On Northcote’s work within the context of the Academy exhibition, see Martin Myrone, ‘The Spectacle as Sublime: The Transformation of Ideal Art at Somerset House’ in Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp. 81-83.

otherwise I never could have been to any extent'.<sup>1</sup> For Northcote, the commercial aspect of Boydell's project was far from relevant, or even apparent, and he consistently represented Boydell as offering a disinterested and distinctly pre-commercial form of patronage. Northcote certainly seems to have regarded Boydell with more gratitude and respect than he felt towards Reynolds, despite having spent five years as Sir Joshua's pupil. While he noted of his time with Reynolds that he had 'learnt nothing from him: and none of his scholars (if I may except myself) made any figure at all', Northcote described Boydell as an encourager of young artists, 'a man of sense and liberality, and a true patron of the art', sublimating his patron's business practices into something approximating an ideal form of aristocratic patronage'.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, for Northcote, a commercial attitude towards art and patronage was something he was more willing to ascribe to Reynolds than to Boydell. While Boydell had persevered – apparently disinterestedly in Northcote's eyes – in the 'noble undertaking' of the Shakespeare Gallery, an enterprise which Northcote had foreseen would 'prove his [financial] ruin', Reynolds comes under attack from his former pupil, even at the point when he had taken Northcote under his wing, for his commercial practice and exploitation of his pupils. According to Northcote, Reynolds's motivation for taking him – and other students of the art – into his studio was 'knowing that he could soon make me useful to him in his profession'.<sup>3</sup> Northcote complained in his memoirs that he had spent most of his time making copies of Reynolds's paintings for him before they left his studio, or painting drapery, while Sir Joshua hid himself away so that his pupils would not discover his 'manner of working, [and] use of colours and varnishes.' In their respective evaluations in Northcote's reminiscences, Boydell is absolved from the taint of commerce that pervaded his career, and presented instead as a

<sup>1</sup> Ward, *Conversations of James Northcote*, p.114. Boydell had encouraged Northcote before the opening of the Gallery, buying his 1786 exhibit of *The Princes in the Tower* and commissioning the 1787 *Death of Wat Tyler*.

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Conversations of James Northcote' in P.P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* (London and Toronto, 1932), Vol XI, pp. 199 & 219. I use the term 'ideal' since the reality of aristocratic patronage in the second half of the century generated a flood of complaints about the abundance of contemporary portraiture, be it of oneself, family, dogs, horses or estates.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gwynn, *Memorials of an Eighteenth Century Painter, James Northcote* (London, 1898), p.63

generous patron of the arts, while Reynolds is portrayed consistently as a worldly and commercial painter who ultimately felt ‘little desire ...for the higher branches of this Art’ and who assumed the role of the archetypal master determined to ‘consult [his] own interest more than the advancement of his scholars’.<sup>1</sup>

Despite his apparent exploitation at the hands of Reynolds, Northcote’s work for the Shakespeare Gallery revealed the younger artist’s capacity to respond to the particular aesthetic and patriotic demands of Boydell’s scheme – an ability which Sir Joshua was felt by critics to be lacking. Boydell himself recognised the appeal of Northcote’s works and was overheard to say that it was ‘more his interest to employ [Northcote] than any one painter who had exhibited in the Gallery, as [his] pictures were the most admired of all there; and that he would rather give [him] a great price than anybody’.<sup>2</sup> Although Boydell clearly felt that the project necessitated the inclusion of Reynolds in order to guarantee its credibility – and that Reynolds had to be paid the highest price because of his reputation – it appears that the alderman visualised another kind of artistic hierarchy within the Gallery, one based upon merit and promise rather than position and fame.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Northcote’s writings should probably be read with an accompanying dose of salt. He wholeheartedly immerses his writing within a genre of artistic biography that is as indicative of his ambitions and egotism as it is of the reality of his training. In true Vasari-esque fashion, he narrates his struggles against the disapprobation of his father, who had planned for his son to work in the family business as a watchmaker. Having proceeded, virtually penniless, to London, he overcomes his lack of instruction and late start in life, recording that he improved as much in one year as any of Reynolds’s previous pupils had in three. The most outrageous piece of artistic mythologizing comes when Northcote casts himself as a modern-day Zeuxis, claiming that a portrait he had painted of one of Reynolds’s housemaids was so lifelike that Sir Joshua’s pet macaw (who apparently hated this particular housemaid) attacked it. Northcote was keen to point out that this was one of his earliest attempts at portrait and that no portrait by Reynolds (clearly no Parrhasius to Northcote’s Zeuxis) had ever produced this effect on the bird (*Life of Reynolds*, 2 vols (London, 1819).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Samuel Northcote to James Northcote dated 30 August 1789, quoted in Gwynne, p.208.

<sup>3</sup> Boydell’s system of payment according to the reputation of artists inevitably caused some problems. Joseph Wright of Derby was outraged to discover that he had been paid substantially less than some of the other painters, notably West and Reynolds. Wright demanded to know if his painting was not ‘as large as Mr West’s’, whether it did not have ‘more work in it’, whether it was not ‘more highly finished’ and whether the public had not ‘spoken as well of it’, a set of questions which clearly puts the basis of the economics of art under some strain. Wright’s letter is reproduced in Bruntjen, pp. 130-1.

Boydell commissioned eight works from Northcote for the Shakespeare Gallery, all but one of them from the English history plays. In addition he purchased Northcote's much-praised 1786 Royal Academy exhibit, *The Murder of the Princes in the Tower*, whose acclaim, in Northcote's version of events, first suggested the possibility of a gallery dedicated to the works of Shakespeare (Figure 36).<sup>1</sup> On the opening of the Gallery in 1789 Northcote's exhibits, in addition to the 1786 *Murder of the Princes in the Tower*, were *Arthur and Hubert from King John*; *Edward IV, Queen Elizabeth and the Young Prince* from *3Henry VI*; and *The Meeting of the Young Princes* from *Richard III*. In 1791, his additional scene from *3Henry VI* depicting *Rutland and his Tutor* was exhibited, and the following year, his *Death of Mortimer* from *1Henry VI* was displayed alongside a much-awaited sequel to the 1786 painting, depicting the *Burial of the Royal Children*. Northcote's final canvas for the Shakespeare Gallery was the scene of *Richard and Bolingbroke's Entry into London* from *Richard II*, exhibited in 1794. In addition, his 1787 R.A. exhibit, *The Death of Wat Tyler*, which had originally been commissioned by Boydell, was displayed in a lower room at the Shakespeare Gallery between 1790 and 1793. Northcote's only painting for the Gallery not to be taken from one of the English history plays was his 1790 canvas depicting Juliet awakening to find Romeo and Paris dead.

John Boydell clearly recognised the importance of English history as a subject for ambitious English art. Not long after the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery, Horace Walpole reported that Boydell's 'plan is not confined to illustrate the works of Shakespeare; he has in contemplation, a subject of still higher importance. His intention is, to perpetuate all the most memorable, important events in the history of our country, both in paintings and engravings'.<sup>2</sup> Boydell's latest patriotic and artistic plan was not brought to fruition, and it was Robert Bowyer who was to accomplish this project, with his Historic Gallery opening in 1793 across the road from the Shakespeare Gallery at Schomberg House, and employing many of the artists who Boydell had commissioned for

<sup>1</sup> This was simply one of several competing versions of the origin of the Shakespeare Gallery.

<sup>2</sup> Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, ed. F.W. Hilles and P.B. Daglian, 4 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), IV, pp.208-209.

his Shakespeare scheme. Nonetheless, Boydell's plans in this area throw some light on significance of the English history scenes in Boydell's Gallery which, at the same time as they formed an important part of the Shakespeare project, also represented a discrete and self-contained form of historical painting in their own right. It is not surprising, then, that Reynolds – despite his predilection for the supra-national subjects 'interesting to all Europe' which he revealed in his fourth *Discourse* – should have chosen a scene from English history as one of his opening exhibits for Boydell.

According to the artist James Ward, Northcote had an extensive knowledge of English history, and in particular of the events constituting the Wars of the Roses, events which he believed to contain artistic as well as historical interest:

'The tragic events of those sad times', observed Northcote, 'afford fine subjects for the painter and the poet; the gloomy dungeons, and the armour, and the caparisoned horses, produce the finest picturesque effects. I myself, at any rate, have drawn largely from that period, for there is one family – that of Edward IV – which I may almost say I have got half my livelihood by.'<sup>1</sup>

Four of Northcote's paintings for Boydell depicted episodes from the short lives of the children of Edward IV, from Queen Elizabeth's presentation of the infant Prince of Wales to her husband, to the burial of the princes, while his other two paintings from the Henry VI trilogy depicted earlier moments in the Wars of the Roses. Within the Shakespeare Gallery as a whole, a number of paintings chronicled these civil wars, and even offered the viewer alternate versions of their origin, with depictions of the deposition of Richard II and Bolingbroke's assumption of the crown by Northcote and Mather Browne respectively, and the portentous plucking of the red and white roses in the Temple Garden depicted by Josiah Boydell (Figure 37). From the critics' point of view, the latter was a well-chosen and highly significant scene – despite its understated visual qualities – revealing a 'union of Poetry, History and Painting [which] interests us all' and which was calculated to prompt a sustained reflection on the part of the viewer

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<sup>1</sup> Ward, *Conversations of James Northcote*, p. 195.



on the horror of civil war and the incalculable bloodshed caused by the thirty six years of conflict which – one of Boydell’s critics observed – did not stop until ‘the hand of death ... had actually extinguished every male heir of each line’.<sup>1</sup> The paintings depicting scenes from English history were deemed by critics to be instructive and valuable in terms of the subjects they depicted, as well as offering a sound basis for a distinctively English art form. While Reynolds may have chosen astutely in settling on a scene from one of Shakespeare’s English history plays rather than from one of the Roman plays chosen by Gavin Hamilton and Henry Tresham, his apparent eagerness to invest the subject with the pictorial qualities of celebrated continental painters severely limited his claim to be a participant in – let alone the figurehead of – a national school of painting. Northcote, meanwhile, was seen by critics as seamlessly bringing together historical, patriotic and aesthetic concerns in a way that offered a fruitful solution to Boydell’s ‘English School’ project.

Like Fuseli and Smirke, whose works for Boydell we will examine in chapters III and IV, Northcote laid claim to a particular territory within the Shakespeare Gallery. Of the twenty eight large paintings from the English history plays in the Gallery by thirteen different artists, over a quarter of them were painted by Northcote.<sup>2</sup> Northcote’s canvases were deemed to have a specific relevance within the context of an English school and to be particularly effective in addressing an English audience. Reviewing the scene from *3HenryVI* depicting King Edward and his Queen with their young son (Figure 38), the *Public Advertiser* declared the scene to be characteristically English:

“I like to talk to that man” said George the Second speaking of Mr Pitt, “I like to talk to that man, for he makes me understand him”. Upon this ground the pictures which are in this Gallery painted by Mr Northcote are entitled to great praise. For English history, he has very sensibly given us English figures.

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<sup>1</sup> *Public Advertiser*, 22 May, 1789, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Northcote’s closest competitor in the genre was Josiah Boydell who produced four works for his uncle’s Shakespeare project, all of them depicting scenes from English history and bringing him recognition from the press as an accomplished painter. The other artists working on historical scenes, who included Opie, Reynolds, Fuseli, Smirke, Rigaud and Westall, all painted one or two works each.

They are marked with that energetic air, that Baronical hardihood which distinguishes our firm but ferocious ancestors, of whom we can only say “such were our Nobles”. For like the obsolete names of families which we sometimes see inserted in old deeds, though the *man* is recorded, the *race* is extinct. The figure of Edward is such as history records, and the discovery of the body at Windsor since the painting of this picture, in a degree confirms.<sup>1</sup>

The *Public Advertiser's* comments typify the broader critical response to Northcote's exhibits for Boydell, which describe Northcote as speaking in the 'mother tongue of nature' and dealing in the kind of empirical truth which characterised the appropriate recounting of history – both of these regarded as characteristically English qualities which stood apart from foreign artifice, rhetoric and affectation.<sup>2</sup> Like the elder Pitt, he speaks a language which is intelligible to his countrymen. Devoid of grand rhetorical gestures, Northcote's scene from *3Henry VI* hinges instead upon the dramatization of virtue and sentiment under threat (from the figure of Gloucester, the future Richard III, separated from the King and his followers at the left of the canvas) which characterises a number of his other works for Boydell. The centrality of the local, the domestic and the sentimental within his works clearly responded to the demands of a new and extended audience for art and, although the *Public Advertiser* laments the extinction of a hyper-masculine Englishness which it sees Edward and his nobles as embodying, these figures actually manifest a more complex relationship towards the female figures which counterbalance them in Northcote's composition than the critic suggests.<sup>3</sup> While there is a compositional division between the male and female figures in the canvas, with the erect figures of Clarence and Hastings mirroring the upright rod which Edward holds in his left hand and the female figures fused together in their contemplation of the young prince, there is a clear sense of negotiation between the masculine and the feminine which is effectively encapsulated in the gesture of Edward's right hand

<sup>1</sup> *Public Advertiser*, 28 May, 1789, p.4. Edward IV's tomb in St George's Chapel at Windsor had been opened early in 1789, revealing a skeleton which was 6'4", a considerable size for a man in the fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> *Public Advertiser*, 28 May, 1789, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> The depiction of the monarch in terms which revealed his private virtues can be seen as symptomatic of the representative strategies surrounding the figure of George III, whose image came to embody middle-class, domestic qualities. See Colley, *Britons*, pp. 208-236.

towards his wife and son. Bent forward towards the proffered prince, Edward's informal pose belies the severity of his kingly trappings and mirrors the leaning figures of the Queen and her attendants. Clarence and Hastings, far from revealing the 'firm [and] ferocious' disposition which the *Public Advertiser* equates with the English nobility, appear similarly affected by the young prince, and Northcote's use of chiaroscuro metaphorically reveals the humanising effect which the child radiates across the scene – but which Gloucester resists. Clutching his downward-thrust sword in an inverted and negative reflection of the gesture made by his brother, Gloucester's contemplation of the infant prince – who has put him at a further stage of remove from the inheritance of the crown – suggests his positioning outside a collective sphere of domesticity and sentiment in which men and women, and nobles and servants, coalesce.

Although Northcote's scene is, in a sense, characteristic of a new kind of history painting which emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, and which hinged upon a collectivity of sentiment in order to address its new public, the presence of Gloucester within the canvas indicates an additional – and potentially threatening – dimension to such 'exhibitions of sympathy', a dimension which Northcote's other canvases drew upon and dramatized.<sup>1</sup> Four in particular of his Shakespeare Gallery exhibits – the *Murder of the Princes in the Tower* from *Richard III*, the *Arthur and Hubert* from *King John* (Figure 39), the *Rutland and his Tutor* from *3Henry VI* (Figure 40) and the *Burial of the Princes* from *Richard III* (Figure 41) – revealed an increasing fluency on Northcote's part in the staging of this 'virtue in distress' theme and the apparently conflicting visual registers which it brought into play. His *Murder of the Princes in the Tower* had been well-received when first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1786, described by critics as 'one of the grandest and most impressive subjects we ever saw', belonging to the 'first class of modern art'.<sup>2</sup> After the exhibition closed, it had

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'exhibitions of sympathy' comes from David Solkin's *Painting for Money*, the first art-historical text to provide an extensive treatment of sympathy as a form of ideological currency in eighteenth-century history painting.

<sup>2</sup> *The Whitehall Evening Post* (26 April – 2 May, 1786), p.3 and *The Public Advertiser* (3 May 1786), p.3. The one exception to the positive criticism of the painting was the review written for the *Morning Post* on 3 May which is likely to have been penned by John Williams (*alias* [cont'd ...])

moved to Boydell's Cheapside shop where it was clearly one of the highlights of the upstairs gallery devoted to the productions of the contemporary English School, and was joined by a second painting from *Richard III* offering a prequel to the murder (Figure 42).<sup>1</sup> On her visit to Boydell's shop in 1786, it had been this canvas which had made the biggest impression on Sophie von la Roche, who found herself transfixed by the peculiar blend of sentiment and sublimity which the canvas synthesised:

There are two pictures of Edward IV's sons: the first shows the charming twelve-year old Edward V in the Tower, embracing his brother, now likewise stolen from out his mother's arms and glad to have his boon companion and playmate with him again. The second presents the royal brothers lying close together in innocence, beauty and fraternal affection, asleep and hands tightly clasped as if they had grasped each other in horror at the dark, unfriendly room, or with some secret presentiment of their fate, had feared to fall asleep - their murderers with a lamp, a satanic expression on their countenances. The impression left by these pictures must remain unforgettable in every mother's mind.<sup>2</sup>

Sophie's comments suggest that the painting held a wide-ranging appeal for the spectator, managing to combine the dual categories of the sublime and the beautiful, and their productive emotions of horror and sympathy. Most famously delineated in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), these concepts had been rigidly polarised by Burke as 'ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure' and each of them defined by an oppositional set of physical characteristics.<sup>3</sup> While many artists and writers took the divergence between these aesthetic categories as indicative of their immiscibility, Burke's division had not, in fact, been so clear-cut:

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Anthony Pasquin, although the writer refers to himself in this review as "Fresnoy") who clearly held a grudge against Northcote.

<sup>1</sup> *The Morning Post* (14 November 1786, p.2) includes the two paintings in its description of the Gallery.

<sup>2</sup> Von la Roche, p.238.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 1990), p.113.

In the infinite variety of natural combinations we must expect to find the qualities of things the most remote imaginable from each other united in the same object. We must expect also to find combinations of the same kind in the works of art ... Black and white may soften, may blend, but they are not therefore the same. Nor when they are so softened and blended with each other, or with different colours, is the power of black as black, or of white as white, so strong as when each stands uniform and distinguished.<sup>1</sup>

For those viewing Northcote's canvases with their juxtaposition of beauty and sublimity and of virtue and crime, however, it was precisely the combination of these dual categories which provided the images with their dramatic force and appeal, and which actually served to reinforce these concepts. While Burke's study suggested that the most affecting natural and artistic creations depended upon the unblended isolation of either the sublime *or* the beautiful within that object, Northcote's canvases – and their critical reception – posed the possibility that these dual categories were not merely oppositional but could engage with each other in a process of aesthetic reciprocity that offered an appeal of its own. *The Murder of the Princes in the Tower*, for example, brings the contrasting physical qualities of the sublime and the beautiful prescribed by Burke into play within the canvas, where the dark, colossal figures of the assassins are pitched aggressively against the delicate, illuminated figures of the princes. Staged within a compressed space, the scene takes on a heightened and claustrophobic intensity, with the four figures almost filling the vertical and horizontal planes of the canvas, and the emblems of Christianity – the rosary and open missal in the foreground and the suspended symbolic crucifix in the background – bracketing the composition. Clasped together in fraternal affection, the sleeping princes (portrayed as significantly younger than Edward's twelve years) lie unsuspectingly trapped between the burly figures of the poised assassins and the picture surface. The suspended pillow acts as a boundary between the two aesthetic zones which Northcote has established in his composition: clutched emphatically by Forest and Dighton, it establishes a dramatic tension between the spheres of virtue and evil, and beauty and sublimity – a tension which gives

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

the painting its particular force and effect. As von la Roche's comments suggest, the viewer's subject position is calculated to maximise the sentimentality and horror of the scene: positioned towards the left of the canvas and viewing the action from below, the viewer is backed into what seems to be the corner of the room, where the sense of imminent threat is forcibly impressed upon him/her.

For those who claimed to be connoisseurs, meanwhile (though the credibility of the term was waning towards the end of the century), Northcote's canvases offered an additional kind of appeal, one which allowed the recently-elaborated concepts of the sublime and beautiful to be diverted into traditional art-historical concerns and practices. One critic, for example, noted of the *Murder of the Princes in the Tower* that "to the innocent beauty of the character which distinguishes the work of Guido, the artist has opposed the terrific graces of Michaelangelo", while another noted of its prequel that Northcote's canvas held 'attractions for the high-studied connoisseur' and 'the man who does not know a term of the art'.<sup>1</sup> Although Northcote's work was capable of sustaining a connoisseurial response, this response was not deemed to be any more valid than any other – or, indeed, to be particularly appropriate at all: if anything, in the face of such scenes, it might indicate the critic's or connoisseur's location outside a public sphere which hinged upon the transaction of sympathy and sensibility.

Increasingly, it was the ability and freedom to respond to Northcote's scenes in emotional rather than detached terms which situated their audience as appropriate viewers of English art. The production of sentiment allowed for an immediate and legitimate response to Northcote's works, one which, viewers were quick to note, suspended the process of aesthetic judgment, generating a highly materialised sensibility for which Arthur's tears and Rutland's swooning offered a template.<sup>2</sup> One critic – perhaps rather disingenuously – pronounced

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<sup>1</sup> *The Public Advertiser* (28 May, 1789), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> The kind of materialised sensibility which Northcote's images produce is comparable with a number of contemporary prints illustrating scenes from novels such as Richardson's *Pamela* and Burney's *Evelina* which depict the heroines of these works in highly emotional states. A number of these prints are reproduced in David Alexander, *Affecting Moments: Prints of English* [cont'd ...]

himself too overcome, on viewing *Rutland and his Tutor* (Figure 40) to even begin to delineate the aesthetic merits of the painting:

Of Northcote's newly-finished picture from Shakespeare, it is sufficient at present to say, that we feel the effect too much to be able minutely to describe the means by which it is accomplished.

Whatever is most impressive in the art, and most forceful in the appeal to the passions, seems here to be presented to the eye; and where this appeal is to the *softer* passions, we love its influence too well to withhold our admiration till we can ascertain the degrees and varieties of its merit.<sup>1</sup>

Another critic responded to the painting in similar terms, noting that 'the composition is bold and catches hold of the imagination before criticism is at liberty to perform her office'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, as a piece of heightened melodrama, Northcote's *Rutland and his Tutor* did not hold back. Carefully constructed through a series of complex diagonal rhythms, the action of the scene is staged across the canvas's horizontal dimensions, pushing upwards vertically and taking place entirely in the foreground. While the perspectival depth of the scene is obscured by the immediacy and extent of the action, Clifford's braced left leg and his right arm protrude towards the picture plane, giving a threatening energy to his actions and allowing the viewer an immediate and uneasy access to the scene, which appears on the verge of intruding into his or her territory. As with the earlier *Arthur and Hubert* and *The Murder of the Princes in the Tower*, the image's effect accrues through an elaborate and exaggerated multiplication of gestures which convey with expressive force the feelings, dispositions and intentions of the characters – a visual shorthand which, we remember, Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* had been criticised for neglecting in favour of delineating the 'grin' of despair on Beaufort's fate. The clasped hands of the swooning Rutland and the restraining hand of his Tutor who attempts to

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*Literature made in the Age of Romantic Sensibility, 1775-1800* exh. cat (York: University of York, 1983).

<sup>1</sup> V&A Press Cuttings, II, p. 586.

<sup>2</sup> V&A Press Cuttings, II, p. 582. The immediacy of sympathy and sensibility as a moral viaduct which could bypass the more lengthy workings of reason was commented upon by a number of moral philosophers in the period, most notably by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759).

arrest Clifford's sword are positioned pathetically in the midst of a sea of aggressive but frozen gestures of which they are the object. As the Tutor attempts to reason with Clifford, the mediating gesture of his left hand is threatened by the muscular force of a soldier who has scaled the wall, while Clifford pushes the Tutor away with one hand and appears on the verge of driving forward his sword with the other. Encapsulating a complex sequence of emotions, actions and personalities, the picturesque mapping of these gestures makes the scene quickly legible for the viewer, accelerating his or her emotional response to the scene and – as the critics suggest – suppressing any inclinations towards a detached, connoisseurial evaluation of the image.

The viewer's credibility as a participant in the English public sphere thus partly hinged upon his ability to disarm himself against the practice and concerns of connoisseurship and engage in what Robert Bowyer – the proprietor of the Historic Gallery – identified as the defining characteristic of the British:

Britain is eminently the nation of domestic sentiment. Elsewhere it may occasionally burst out with momentary rapture; or strike the eye, with force indeed, but in solitary instances. Here it pervades a whole people, and burns with a durable flame.<sup>1</sup>

There had already been some recognition of this fact (if such it was) in the artistic discourses of the second half of the century, with artists abandoning the prescriptions of a civic humanist academic theory and painting works which constructed a public through the production of sympathy and a collectivity of private virtue. Northcote's choice of English history as a subject for his paintings was fortuitous since it allowed him to fuse his interest in the production

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bowyer, *Elucidation of Mr Bowyer's Plan for a Magnificent Edition of Hume's History of England* (London, 1795), pp.9-10. On the Historic Gallery, see Cynthia E. Roman, *Pictures for Private Purses: Robert Bowyer's Historic Gallery and Illustrated Edition of David Hume's 'History of England'*, unpublished PhD dissertation (Brown University, 1997). Significantly, Bowyer's Gallery elaborated upon the aesthetic of moral sentiment which Northcote's English history scenes expounded, with a large proportion of its exhibits depicting intimate, sentimental and domestic moments, many of them revolving around female and child figures.



of sympathy alongside history's ostensible function of researching and recording past deeds and personages. For Hugh Blair, as for many other commentators, the historian's crafted neutrality was not fitting to the purpose of his task, which was to 'discover sentiments of respect for virtue, and of indignation at flagrant vice':

We are always most interested in the transactions which are going on, when our sympathy is awakened by the story, and when we become engaged in the fate of the actors. But this effect can never be produced by a Writer, who is deficient in sensibility and moral feeling.<sup>1</sup>

Like painting in the eighteenth century, the writing of history was being undertaken with a broader market in mind than the educated, male audience which had been its traditional consumer.<sup>2</sup> As Mark Salber Phillips has shown, historical writings in the eighteenth century inhabited a post-classical era, and reframed the '*vita activa*' of classical histories within a 'discourse of the social' which acknowledged the centrality of the 'more permanent and peaceful scenes of social life' within the historical psyche of middle class and female readers.<sup>3</sup> Like the visual arts, English historiographical practice was not only eschewing its classical tradition, but was coming to regard its continental precedents as incompatible with the realities of a modern, commercial Britain – and, as the comments of the *Oracle* earlier in this chapter show, it was deemed to have been successful in revealing the ability of England (which clearly also incorporates Scotland in the mind of the critic) to produce historians such as Gibbon, Hume, Stuart and Robertson to rival the classical historians. The *Oracle's* inclination

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols (London, 1783), II, 281.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, in his discussion 'Of the Study of History' recommended the reading of history as the occupation 'best suited to [the female] sex and education' (in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), p.563) while Joseph Priestly hazarded that history was one of the few vehicles that allowed for a contemplation of vice which would not put temptation in the way of susceptible young people (*Lectures on History and General Policy; to which is prefixed, an essay on a course of liberal education for civil and active life* (Dublin, 1788), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000). The latter quotation is taken by Phillips from Robert Henry's *History of Great Britain from the Invasion by the Romans under Julius Caesar* (1771-93) which offered, not a linear version of this history, but ten books (each of them focusing on a separate chronological epoch), each of which was divided into seven chapters offering a particular theme, e.g. civil and military history; ecclesiastical history; history of commerce; history of the universal and ornamental arts, etc. The thread of each chapter could thus be picked up in the subsequent book and allowed the work as a whole to sustain a variety of interests and concerns that pertained to modern, commercial society.

to bracket these historians alongside Boydell's artists as examples of unassuming English merit suggests that there was some additional credibility to be derived for English painting in pointing to the recent, and similarly belated, advent of English historical writing. Although not derived from the perspective of any of these acclaimed historians (though Bowyer's Gallery is, of course, another matter), Northcote's paintings clearly invoked an additional area of cultural discourse which reinforced the anti-Academic and patriotic rhetoric of Boydell's Gallery.

Most crucially in terms of the particular aesthetic which Northcote's images engendered, the writing of national history was now coming to be regarded as sharing more characteristics in common with imaginative literature than had previously been recognised. While objectivity still remained an essential quality in the writing of history, Blair and others felt that neutrality should not detract from the historian's most important task – one which was described in terms which overlapped, interestingly, with contemporary discourses on the moral function of the visual arts:

General facts make a slight impression on the mind. It is by means of circumstances and particulars properly chosen, that a narration becomes interesting and affecting to the Reader. These give life, body, and colouring to the recital of facts, and enable us to behold them as present, and passing before our eyes. It is this employment of circumstances, in Narration, that is properly termed Historical Painting ... Though the period of which [Tacitus] writes may be reckoned unfortunate for a Historian, he has made it afford us many interesting exhibitions of human nature. The relations which he gives of the deaths of several eminent personages, are as affecting as the deepest tragedies. He paints with a glowing pencil; and professes, beyond all writers, the talent of painting, not to the imagination merely, but to the heart.<sup>1</sup>

The historian's task is thus to 'paint' a vivid and affecting narrative which speaks to the heart – a claim that takes issue with traditional precepts which deemed that

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<sup>1</sup> Blair, II, 274-279.

history should be valued, above all, for its political and didactic functions. The analogy with painting is suggestive on a number of levels, but chiefly because it sheds light on Northcote's predilection for the fifteenth century – and, presumably, more broadly, English history, given that he also painted subjects from other eras – as offering what he defines as 'picturesque' opportunities for the painter. For Northcote, the 'picturesque' qualities of the era do not merely reside in the profusion of armoury and horses which it allows the artist to deploy but, rather, in the numerous 'tragic' and 'sad' episodes which it encompasses. In short, the picturesque is not simply a visual category – as contemporary debates about this particular aesthetic might appear to suggest – but an emotive one as well, which offers the kind of 'exhibitions of human nature' and 'tragedies' that Blair describes, and which speak to the heart as well as the eye.<sup>1</sup> Here, of course, we are also trespassing into the language of dramatic representation – an area of cultural practice which would clearly also offer a fruitful analogy with Northcote's highly melodramatic images. But more broadly, we are finding all these representative strategies – history, painting and theatre – intersecting within an eighteenth-century cult of sensibility.

Although coming under some criticism by the end of the century, sensibility - a kind of luxury of feeling, of which tears and fainting were recognised as being the most compelling manifestations or worst excesses, depending upon your point of view - was a widely-recognised and much-discussed social phenomenon. In brief, it served as a kind of moral viaduct, which allowed for an immediate response to the situation in hand (almost always representative rather than real) that could bypass the more lengthy processes of reason. Most crucially, it ostensibly operated across class and gender categories, although it was seen to pertain more to the middle classes and to women, the kind of readers

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<sup>1</sup> Northcote's sense of the picturesque diverges sharply from that being promoted in the 1780s and early 1790s by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight who regarded it as an objective and purely visual category (and, in Knight's case, a highly elitist one, since it presupposed a familiarity with art in order to be able to enjoy or appreciate natural landscapes), divested of the kind of emotive response which pertained to either the beautiful and the sublime.

and spectators who now constituted an increasing audience for history publications and for art.<sup>1</sup>

In this way too, we can suggest, Northcote's images hinged upon an aesthetic response which was inclusive of a broad audience, and which was calculated upon immediacy, whilst – as the remarks of the critics observing *Rutland and his Tutor* suggested – also holding open the offer of a more sustained kind of viewing. While it would be missing the mark to claim that Northcote's paintings are images of sensibility *per se*, or that they contribute significantly to that discourse, we can suggest that they incorporate a strand of sensibility within their more complex concerns which is revised to fit the patriotic agenda of Boydell's Gallery, and to negotiate its diverse audience. Fused with the mechanisms of sensibility, the kind of patriotism which is ascribed to the viewer of Northcote's scenes is as instinctive and involuntary as tears or fainting: confronted with the sight of legitimate monarchs and heirs under threat, his or her national – as well as moral – sentiments are revealed to be almost physical. The spectators encountering Northcote's images might no longer be fitted for the kind of active citizenship which defined the heroes of the classical republics, but their feelings of patriotism are revealed to be quickened and easily aroused by modern (and intrinsically commercial) processes of sensibility.

While Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* revealed his pictorial dependency and apparent inability to either deal with the specificities of English history or the ostensibly sublime qualities of Beaufort's despair and death, Northcote's images demonstrated the younger artist's ability to generate a new kind of aesthetic category which was capable of responding to the patriotic instincts of modern viewers and of negotiating a broad audience of essentially private individuals. By juxtaposing the sublime and the beautiful in his canvases, in a way which challenged the contemporary logic that positioned these categories as essentially discrete and immiscible, Northcote's images invoked a form of

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<sup>1</sup> On this 'culture' of sensibility, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London, 1986); G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London, 1992) and Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge, 1996).

national and moral sentiment which spoke with immediacy to a range of viewers, and which hinged upon modern definitions of the function and appeal of history. Having briefly sketched out one way in which the Shakespeare Gallery offered an alternative to the apparent foreignness and dependency of Reynolds's art, we will now go on to examine two other artists whose work, though very different to Northcote's, also came to be seen by critics as embodying the kind of Englishness which Boydell's project required. Paradoxically, the artist whose canvases for Boydell were deemed by critics to have been most successful of all in revealing and directing the visual qualities of the English school was the Swiss artist, Henry Fuseli. Significantly, his paintings were even more explicit than Northcote's in engaging with and challenging the visual practices of Reynolds and the Academy.

CHAPTER III

‘THE SHAKESPEARE OF THE CANVAS’:  
FUSELI AND THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF ENGLISH ARTISTIC GENIUS

In 1800, James Dallaway published his *Anecdotes of Art in England*, a survey of the fine arts in England from Saxon times that culminated in an alarmingly brief account of the contemporary English school. The only living artist – aside from the Royal Academy’s President, Benjamin West – to be discussed in more than a sentence by Dallaway was the Swiss immigrant, Henry Fuseli, who by now had become something of an artistic celebrity.<sup>1</sup> Northcote was merely mentioned alongside Thomas Lawrence as ensuring ‘the continuance of an English school, and the happy application of those classical precepts which its founder Sir J. Reynolds, delivered with so much dignity and effect’ – his earlier aesthetic now neatly converted into an anglicised response to the classical tradition. Fuseli, meanwhile, had taken on a rather different artistic identity. Referring to the artist’s Milton Gallery which had opened in Pall Mall the previous year, Dallaway noted that:

Mr Fuseli’s boundless imagination has attempted, with surprising effect, to embody several metaphysical ideas, which occur in the Paradise Lost. He has gained a free and uncontrolled admission into the richest regions of fancy; but appears not to be solicitous about how few of his spectators can partially follow him there, or how many of them are utterly excluded. He paints only for learned eyes; and is so decidedly a mannerist, that artists of the next century will have a new style to criticise or imitate called the “Fusilesque”.

Dallaway highlights a number of aspects of Fuseli’s artistic identity at this time. The sense that Fuseli painted ‘only for learned eyes’ was one frequently voiced in the exhibition reviews of the 1780s and 90s, and became a particular issue on the opening of the Milton Gallery, when a number of Fuseli’s friends warned

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<sup>1</sup> James Dallaway, *Anecdotes of the Arts in England* (London, 1800), p524. Rather ironically, both living exemplars of the English school discussed at length by Dallaway were foreigners.

him of the exclusionary nature of the exhibition.<sup>1</sup> During the 1780s and early 90s however – and in particular in the early years of the Shakespeare Gallery – the public had watched with interest as Fuseli developed a ‘whimsical’, ‘eccentric’ and ‘extravagant’ style peculiar to himself, apparently fuelled by an ‘inexhaustible imagination’ and ‘strong genius’ which made him the most conspicuous artist in Boydell’s Gallery.<sup>2</sup>

On the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery in 1789, it was Fuseli more than any other artist who appeared to embody the originality and freedom of the fledgling English school. However it was the very eccentricity which this implied that simultaneously set Fuseli apart from his contemporaries, leaving him hovering between the alternate classifications of ‘genius’ and ‘madman’. Moreover, Fuseli’s status as a foreigner could be invoked – when his idiosyncracies all got too much – to set him apart from the remainder of the ‘English school’ at the same time as it might be conveniently overlooked by his apologists or those who sought to yoke his qualities to the cause of a national aesthetic. In latter years, Fuseli’s ‘eccentricity’ or ‘genius’ have invited a fairly standard response among art historians, who tend to view him (alongside William Blake) as somehow removed from the artistic culture of his time. This view of Fuseli as an outsider has until fairly recently dominated art-historical studies, resulting in numerous readings of a post-Freudian nature, preoccupied with the artist more in terms of the dynamics of an individual, hermetically-sealed, and often deviant personality, rather than as belonging to a broader visual culture.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fuseli himself considered writing a pamphlet to ‘explain’ the exhibition, and Farington recommended that Fuseli ‘get some ladies to attend the exhibition to make it more general’. George Nicol, meanwhile, noted that there were ‘parts of great ability, but the public would laugh’. See Farington, IV, 1226.

<sup>2</sup> For some examples of the kind of press criticism which retailed Fuseli’s ‘genius’, see *Morning Post* (14 May 1784), p.3; *Morning Herald* (2 May 1786), p.3; *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (12 May 1789), p.3 and (19 May 1789), p.2; *The Star* (14 May 1789), p.3 and (18 May 1789), p.3; *Morning Post* (2 June, 1789), p.2; *Public Advertiser* (4 June 1789), p.3; *Public Advertiser* (18 March 1790), p.3; *St James’s Chronicle* (20-23 March 1790), p.4 and (5-7 May 1789), p.4; *The Diary; or, Woodfall’s Register* (26 March 1790), p.3;

<sup>3</sup> An example of this kind of writing is the essay written by Gert Schiff for the catalogue produced by the Tate Gallery in 1975, in which Schiff uses Freudian theories of fetishism, object-loss and castration anxiety to account for Fuseli’s ‘unconscious fear and hatred of women’. (‘Fuseli, Lucifer and the Medusa’, in *Henry Fuseli, 1741-1825* (London, 1975) pp. 9 – 20.



Despite the relatively large volume of writings on Fuseli, only two scholars have questioned the established historiography, aligning the apparently idiosyncratic nature of this artist firmly within – rather than apart from – the dominant artistic practice of the day. Oscar Bätschmann opens his study of *The Artist in the Modern World* with an extract from a letter from Fuseli to his patron William Roscoe in which the artist voices his determination to leap onto the literary-exhibition bandwagon started by Boydell and Macklin and to ‘lay, hatch and crack an egg for myself too’ – a determination which later materialised into the Milton Gallery.<sup>1</sup> In Bätschmann’s study, Fuseli - far from being an esoteric outsider - serves to epitomise the new ‘exhibition artist’ whose most important task was ‘to calculate or steer public reaction’ through the production of spectacle and sensation. This revision of Fuseli and his *oeuvre* has recently been taken further by Martin Myrone who argues for the modernity of this artist, and the receptiveness of his style to the peculiar, and spectacular, climate of the exhibition space.<sup>2</sup> Fuseli is seen by Myrone as one of a handful of artists who were able to transform ideal art to accommodate ‘the reality of commercial spectacle and sensation’ that pervaded the Academy exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

These recent, and long overdue, reassessments of Fuseli’s style and appeal have provided a useful challenge to the dominant historiography surrounding the artist, which has tended to deal overwhelmingly in notions of genius, originality and idiosyncrasy as if these were somehow removed from contemporary concerns and market influences. In this chapter, I want to examine the ways in which the works Fuseli produced for the Shakespeare Gallery built upon an exhibition practice which he had established during the early years of the Somerset House exhibitions, but also adapted themselves to new concerns particular to the space of Boydell’s gallery. For Boydell – who was keen to revitalise the English school discourse – Fuseli was a particularly important figure to have on board, providing a clearly visible example of the liberty and

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Bätschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World: The Conflict between Market and Self-Expression* (Cologne, 1997) p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli* (London, 2001) and ‘The Spectacle as Sublime: The Transformation of Ideal Art at Somerset House’ in Solkin, *Art on the Line*, pp. 77-91.

<sup>3</sup> Myrone, ‘The Spectacle as Sublime’, p. 80. Myrone includes Northcote and the sculptor Thomas Proctor in this category.

originality of English (based) artists. In particular, Fuseli's status (contested though it was) as an artistic genius – which, as we shall see, appeared to mesh almost seamlessly with eighteenth-century conceptions of Shakespeare's genius – not only added credibility to Boydell's scheme, but also substantiated the concept of an English school which was based on qualities other than the rigid prescriptions of academic conventions. The marketability of such qualities as genius, originality and artistic liberty was something which Boydell and Fuseli were no doubt aware of – although they could not have foreseen how political circumstances would serve to make these attributes all the more potent within the English school discourse. This chapter will examine the aggressive retailing of a certain artistic identity within the space of Boydell's Gallery, an identity which hinged upon Romantic qualities apparently extraneous to the commercial order, but which were nonetheless impelled by it.

Born in Zurich in 1741, Fuseli was deterred by his father – himself an artist – from following his early predilection for drawing, and instead joined the Church. His studies brought him into contact with a number of well-known German literary figures and intellectuals such as Lavater, Jacob and Felix Hess, and Bodmer, and he developed a wide knowledge of European literature. Not long after taking holy orders, Fuseli was forced to leave Zurich after exposing acts of political corruption in the city, travelling through Germany to settle in England in 1763. On arriving in London, Fuseli embarked on a brief literary career before receiving encouragement from Reynolds to pursue painting as a profession.<sup>1</sup> Taking Reynolds's advice to heart, Fuseli subsequently spent eight years in Rome, before returning to London in 1779. During the course of the 1780s, he exhibited a number of canvases at the Royal Academy, where he gained a reputation for the originality and eccentricity of his canvases (in particular the celebrated *Nightmare*, exhibited in 1782) – a reputation which led to important commissions from Thomas Macklin and Boydell.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fuseli's most notable publication was his translation of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (London, 1765).

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information about Fuseli's career, see Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli* (London, 2001); David Weinglass, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations by and after Henry Fuseli* (Aldershot, 1994); John Knowles (ed.), *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, the former written and the latter edited by John Knowles, with a new introduction by David H. Weinglass*, 3 [cont'd ...]

*'The whole brood of our infant mythology': genius, imagination and the supernatural*

Fuseli produced nine canvases for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery – three from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and one from each of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV, Part 2*, *Henry V*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. Of these, six featured fantastical or supernatural figures, a category which was felt to be Fuseli's particular province. In 1788, the *Morning Herald* had pronounced that 'Mr Fuseli should always be confined to incantations, superstitions, orgies, and the wildest excursions that nature will admit'.<sup>1</sup> No doubt this was a view shared by Boydell, for he had already commissioned Fuseli to paint three of the most celebrated of Shakespeare's supernatural scenes for the opening of his Gallery in 1789, and the artist continued to operate a monopoly on this kind of representation during the Gallery's lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

Fuseli occupied an anomalous and contentious position within the artistic culture of the day. Generally speaking, his admirers and detractors differed most vociferously on the question of whether or not he could be classed as an artistic genius.<sup>3</sup> This was a category which had come under increased scrutiny during the course of the century, with a number of publications seeking to define and

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vols (New York, 1982: facsimile reprint of the original edition of 1831); and Gert Schiff, *Henry Fuseli, 1741-1825*, exh. cat (London, Tate Gallery, 1975).

<sup>1</sup> *Morning Herald* (22 April 1788), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> These three scenes were the scene from *Hamlet* in which Hamlet's father's ghost appears to him, the scene on the heath from *Macbeth* where the witches appear to Macbeth and Banquo, and the *Titania and Bottom* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Fuseli's painting of King Lear banishing Cordelia was also exhibited at the Gallery's opening.

<sup>3</sup> For a number of commentators, Fuseli's art was symptomatic of 'genius run mad' and he was often treated as 'one of the worst as well as the best painters in the [Academy's exhibition] room'. See, for example, *Morning Post* (5 May 1785), p.2; *Public Advertiser* (4 May 1786), p.2 and (22 May 1786) p.2. *The Public Advertiser* (19 May 1789) recommended that Fuseli find some aesthetic 'middle path' which would allow him to reconcile the 'exuberance of eulogium and causticity of animadversion' which his works typically invited. Both Peter Pindar and Edward Dayes came down on the negative side of this fence, with Dayes commenting that Fuseli's 'efforts of the sublime ... have always appeared to me more like the dreams of a lunatic, than the productions of a sound mind'. See Edward Dayes, *The Works of the Late Edward Dayes* (London, 1805), p.326 and Peter Pindar, *Memoirs of the Royal Academicians* (London, 1796), pp.116-118.

interrogate the meaning of genius. For many, Fuseli would have served as a ‘test’ of such theoretical formulations, and certainly the majority of critics viewing the artist’s works chose to employ terminology lifted from writings such as William Duff’s *Essay on Original Genius* and Alexander Gerard’s *Essay on Genius*, describing Fuseli and his imagination as ‘wild’, ‘enthusiastic’, ‘irregular’, ‘extravagant’, ‘fanciful’ and ‘sportive’.<sup>1</sup>

Such writings sought to discriminate between genius and ‘mere capacity’ or intellect.<sup>2</sup> Although requiring the tempering effects of judgement in order to avoid discordant or improper effects, genius – in both science and the arts – was considered by Duff and Gerard as originating from man’s faculty of invention or imagination, however ‘irregular, wild [and] undisciplined’ that faculty might be.<sup>3</sup> Gerard’s essay, in particular, revealed a tension between the moderating faculties of judgment and taste, and the more intriguing qualities of genius. Despite the moral utility of the former in curbing the excesses of the latter, Gerard was quick to observe that

the wildness and extravagance of invention, sometimes procures higher praise, than the utmost nicety and correctness. We ascribe so great merit to invention, that on account of it, we allow the artist who excels in it, the privilege of transgressing established rules, and would scarce wish even the redundancies of his natural force and spirit to be lopt off by culture: this, we are afraid, might check the vigour of his invention, which we reckon so capital an excellence that nothing could make amends for want of it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are used consistently throughout William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius, and its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, particularly in Poetry* (London, 1767) and Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Genius* (London, 1774).

<sup>2</sup> Gerard points out that the subject of genius had hitherto been scarcely touched upon by writers, since it had been ‘reckoned a subject which can be reduced to no fixt or general principles; its phenomena are almost universally regarded as anomalous and inexplicable’ (Gerard, pp.3-4).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

With this increased appetite for instances of artistic genius, a significant amount of attention was devoted by contemporaries to the pathology of Fuseli's art, in particular on the opening of the Shakespeare Gallery. The widespread rumours (much-cited by art historians) of the artist eating raw pork for supper served for some as the only means of accounting for the 'whimsical' presence of the fairies in the canvas of *Titania and Bottom*:

The fact of indigestion producing a strong effect on the imagination, is fully ascertained. The monstrous forms which the latter brings forth, in consequence, are immediately sketched, and, when necessary, embodied on the canvas!<sup>1</sup>

It was not just raw pork which was held to be accountable for the excesses of Fuseli's imagination. Rumours of opium-use also abounded, and even the physician Edward Jenner enquired of Joseph Farington 'if it were true that Fuseli took opium when he had a subject to conceive that his imagination might be as wild as possible'.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not these rumours contained any truth, it is clear that a certain mythology was being constructed around the figure of Fuseli, one which Romantic writers (and 'opium-eaters') such as De Quincey and Coleridge were later willing to perpetuate.<sup>3</sup> For some, Fuseli's 'genius' (if such it was) was more pathological and could only be described in terms of madness, disease or contagion. Viewing the artist's *King Lear* on the Shakespeare Gallery's opening, for example, the *Diary* relayed the following anecdote:

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<sup>1</sup> *Public Advertiser* (31 May 1790), p.4. Allan Cunningham later dismissed these reports (*Lives of the Most Eminent British Artists*, London (1829-33, reprint 1879) Vol II, p.93).

<sup>2</sup> Farington, III, 660.

<sup>3</sup> De Quincey mentions Fuseli's consumption of raw pork in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (although he seems to have been unaware of any opium-use by the artist). Coleridge, writing to Southey in 1794, expresses an intention to write an ode based on Edgar's song from *King Lear*. 'I shall set about [writing] one', he writes 'when I am in a humour to abandon myself to all the diableries that ever met the eye of a Fuseli'. For a study of opium-use by Romantic writers see Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination: Addiction and Creativity in De Quincey, Coleridge, Baudelaire and Others* (Wellinborough, 1998).

When the second George proposed General Wolfe to command the expedition to Quebec, the Duke of Newcastle begged his Majesty to consider that the man was mad; “If he is mad,” replied the old Monarch, “if he is mad, I wish to God he would bite some of my Generals.”

In like manner we have often wished that Mr Fuseli would bite some of our cold-blooded artists of the present day. They would then be marked by something.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein, the *Morning Chronicle* observed of Maria Cosway’s exhibits in the Academy’s 1785 exhibition that she had ‘caught the *Fuzeli*’, while William Godwin was later to criticise Mary Wollstonecraft for ‘having caught the infection of some of his faults’<sup>2</sup>

The general tendency of such commentary – whether it retailed the artist’s indigestion, addiction or insanity – was to imply that Fuseli’s art was the product of certain physical or psychological abnormalities, rather than the result of any artistic training or, indeed, skill. Certainly, Fuseli had received little in the way of formal artistic training, despite having an artist father and spending several years in Rome.<sup>3</sup> His draughtsmanship seems to have been largely self-taught, expanding on some early and rudimentary training by his father from whom he subsequently had to hide his youthful essays in the art. As a colourist, meanwhile, Fuseli’s training and technique were sparser still. John Knowles,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Diary; or Woodfall’s Register* (26 May 1789), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Morning Chronicle* (18 May 1785), p.2 and William Godwin, ‘Memoirs of the Author of *The Rights of Woman*’ in Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, *A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of the Author of ‘The Rights of Woman’*, ed. Richard Holmes (London, 1987, originally published 1798), p. 233. Martin Myrone has observed that Cosway was the artist most frequently compared to Fuseli. See his, *Body-Building: British Historical Artists in London and Rome and the Remaking of the Heroic Ideal, c. 1760 – 1800* (unpublished PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1998) p 254-55.

<sup>3</sup> Fuseli’s father wished to prevent his son from also becoming an artist – although Fuseli continued to draw surreptitiously – and the young Fuseli was ordained as a Zwinglian minister, a career which only lasted some two years.

Fuseli's first biographer, noted that not only had Fuseli not used oil colours until the age of 25, but that,

He was so inattentive to these materials, that during life he took no pains in their choice or manipulation. To set a palette, as artists usually do, was with him out of the question; he used many of his colours in a dry, powdered state, and rubbed them up with his pencil only, sometimes in oil alone, which he used largely [ ... ] with an addition of a little spirit of turpentine, and not infrequently in gold size; regardless of the quantity of either, or their general smoothness when laid on, and depending, as it would appear to a spectator, more on accident for the effect which they were intended to produce, than on any nice distinction of tints in the admixture or application of the materials.<sup>1</sup>

Although it seems that this effect was hardly deliberate (Fuseli described himself as an artist who has 'courted, and still continues to court Colour as a despairing lover courts a disdainful mistress'), the impression of having received no formal artistic training no doubt played a not unhelpful part in the contemporary construction of Fuseli's artistic identity.<sup>2</sup> Knowles was forthright in declaring that the paucity of Fuseli's artistic training was in fact the ideal catalyst for the development of the artist's genius, as well as the guarantor of his continued fame:

It appears doubtful whether this deficiency in his early education, and his neglect also of mechanical means, will

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<sup>1</sup> Knowles, Vol I, p. 397.

<sup>2</sup> Fuseli, *Lecture on Colouring – In Fresco Painting* in Knowles, Vol II, p. 333. On the other hand, Fuseli notes in his eulogistic treatment of Michelangelo in his lecture on *The Art of the Moderns* that the Italian artist had 'contented himself with a negative colour, and as the painter of mankind, rejected all meretricious ornament'. Knowles, Vol II, p.86. The self-taught aspect of Fuseli's artistic persona coincided with that of John Opie, who was 'discovered' working in a Cornish mine and brought to London by John Wolcot (*alias* Peter Pindar), where he was feted as the 'Cornish Wonder'.

be detrimental to his fame as an artist, particularly in the minds of those who can penetrate beyond the surface; for if he had been subjected to the trammels of a school, his genius would have been fettered; and it is then probable that we should have lost those daring inventions, that boldness and grandeur of drawing (incorrect, certainly, sometimes in anatomical precision) so fitting to his subjects, and that mystic *chiar'oscuro* which create our wonder and raise him to the first rank as an artist.<sup>1</sup>

Writing after Fuseli's death, Knowles was not only prophesying Fuseli's posthumous appeal but also relaying the attraction which his works had held for contemporaries. Numerous reviews written during the 1780s attested to the fact that Fuseli's canvases manifested 'more reading than painting', that they were 'wonderfully conceived, but execrably drawn'.<sup>2</sup> This did not necessarily imply unequivocal criticism. The contemporary discourse of genius expounded the artistic genius's disregard of accepted pictorial conventions and rules, acknowledging that these formal concerns were of use to the man of mere talent, but denouncing them for setting 'rigid bounds to that liberty, to which genius often owes its supreme glory'.<sup>3</sup> As the *St James's Chronicle* suggested when commenting upon the unconventional disposition of figures in Fuseli's *Death of Dido* of 1781, adhering to what is 'generally allowed to be a good composition' could, in fact, be detrimental to the progress of the art:

We must attribute it [i.e. the painting's composition] to a kind of singularity aimed at by this artist. Criticks should not be severe on that head; first, because it is often productive of excellent effects; and secondly, if we do not allow artists to be singular, they will be apt to fall into a disgusting sameness. The Italian Schools are

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<sup>1</sup> Knowles, Vol I, p. 397-8.

<sup>2</sup> *St James's Chronicle* (28 April - 1 May 1781), p.4 and *London Courant* (12 May 1781), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition, in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (London, 1759), p.27. These sentiments were also shared by Duff and Gerard.



famous above all others, on account of the great variety of stile they afford. As soon as painters began to imitate each other they were undone. The French School was ruined by that alone, from the very first Period of its excellence.<sup>1</sup>

The 'singularity' manifested in Fuseli's work, then, could be regarded as a vital and vitalising component of the contemporary English school of painting, in spite of – and perhaps even because of - the artist's frequent flouting of the techniques of the art. No doubt this facet of Fuseli's artistic identity appealed to Boydell when he set about commissioning artists to work on his Shakespeare project, for Fuseli more than any other artist might be called upon to exemplify the liberty of English artists, their freedom from rules and constraints, and their ability to transcend mere 'manner'. If his art, as Knowles suggested, directed itself at 'the minds of those who can penetrate beyond the surface', this meant something rather different to Dallaway's detection of intellectual or cultural elitism. It meant that Fuseli's art held an appeal for those who set little store by rules, those who relished the aesthetic which might ensue when these rules and conventions were trespassed, an aesthetic which required spectators to access their imaginative and emotive faculties rather than their store of theoretical formulae.<sup>2</sup>

But there was one other crucial factor which made Fuseli an invaluable asset for Boydell, and that was the hinging of his artistic qualities with those of England's most celebrated poet. It was during the course of the eighteenth century that Shakespeare had acquired the status of the national poet, a process which was born of a newfound cultural nationalism. To a large degree, this was an anti-French imperative that sought not only to respond to Shakespeare's Gallic

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<sup>1</sup> *St James's Chronicle* (28 April – 1 May 1781), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Viewing Fuseli's canvases for the Shakespeare Gallery, a number of critics pronounced themselves unable to perform their task, finding themselves instead 'swallowed up in the mute admiration of genius'. For the incongruity of Fuseli's art with established rules of art and criticism, see *The Public Advertiser* (12 May 1786), p.2 and (4 June 1789), p.3; *The Star* (18 May 1789), p.3; *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (12 May 1789), p.3.

detractors, but also to challenge the neoclassical basis of French literary theory.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the *St James's Chronicle's* snipe at the 'disgustful sameness' of the French school of painting mirrored arguments in literary criticism which had already adopted new terms with which to determine the merit of literary productions.<sup>2</sup> It was this set of terms which would provide Fuseli with the means of seamlessly binding up his reputation with that of Shakespeare.

Jonathan Bate has argued that not only did the eighteenth century elevate Shakespeare to a figure of near-mythical status, but that the process of distinguishing his works from 'those admired by 'French' taste required the creation of a new descriptive literary-critical language', one which we now associate with Romanticism.<sup>3</sup> In short, the appropriation of Shakespeare for cultural and nationalist ends required the requisition, prioritisation and redefinition of terms such as 'imagination', 'genius' and 'originality' so that they corresponded precisely to the qualities which Shakespeare's art was seen to embody. 'Genius', Bate asserts, 'was a category invented [during the eighteenth century] in order to account for what was peculiar about Shakespeare.'<sup>4</sup> While the implication that the Romantic movement may never have happened were it not for Shakespeare is clearly rather far-fetched, there is no denying the centrality of both his works, and the aesthetic values they exemplified, to the literary and artistic culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

The Shakespeare Gallery, indeed, was able to stake its claims for the future of English art on much the same ground as that which critics had previously

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<sup>1</sup> A large number of writings on Shakespeare by English authors in the first half of the eighteenth century were written in response to French criticisms of the poet's disregard of the unities of time and space, his indiscriminate mingling of the genres of tragedy and comedy and his failure to adhere to classical notions of decorum. Voltaire was the particular bugbear of Shakespeare's admirers.

<sup>2</sup> On an alternative, but related, distinction between the French and English schools – one based on the opposing qualities of artifice and nature – see Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter*, Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> Detailed discussions of the cultural significance of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century can be found in Jonathan Bate's studies, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997), *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism, 1730 – 1830* (Oxford, 1989) and *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford, 1986) and in Gary Taylor, *Re-Inventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London, 1991)

cultivated when describing the peculiar 'genius' of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's 'originality', his freedom from the constraints of classical art, his disregard of generic hierarchies, and his ability to delineate vulgar characters as thoroughly as kings and princes (all traits consistently pointed out by Shakespeare's eighteenth-century commentators) clearly correspond to the kind of aesthetic ideology which the previous chapters have demonstrated were at work in Boydell's Gallery, an ideology clearly opposed to the Academic system. Moreover, Shakespeare's departure from, or lack of familiarity with, the fundamental tenets of classical decorum was regarded by some to be a form of cultural patriotism. This sense of an aesthetic rooted in the national characteristics of the English was as discernible by foreign commentators as it was at home. The leader of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, Johann Gottfried Herder (similarly preoccupied with the question of how Germany might forge a self-consciously national literary and artistic style) observed that a nation in search of a cultural identity could not simply import its literature from the ancient Greeks:

...let us now assume a nation which, on account of circumstances which we will not pursue, had no desire to ape ancient drama and run off with the walnut-shell, but rather wanted to create its own drama ... If possible, it will create its drama out of its own history, the spirit of its age, customs, views, language, national attitudes, traditions, and pastimes ... Clearly, I am referring to the *toto divisis ab orbe Britannis* and their great Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the truth of this reading may have been, it is significant that Herder is retrospectively attributing to Shakespeare's public the possession of a clear cultural agenda, one which we should instantly recognise as being premonitory of the aspirations voiced by Boydell some two centuries later. First on the

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Shakespeare' (1779) trans. Joyce P. Crick in H.B. Nisbet (ed.) *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, (Cambridge, 1986), p. 167. Fuseli would have known, or at least known of, Herder through Lavater.

agenda was the desirability of creating a drama of one's own which might rival that of the classical tradition. And second was the belief that this drama might expound entirely different aesthetic values to those hitherto esteemed, that it would, in fact, be most ideally cultivated from the 'raw material' of the nation and its people.<sup>1</sup>

Like Shakespeare's art, Fuseli's aesthetic suited the ideological and patriotic aims of Boydell's Gallery despite, paradoxically, the fact that he was Swiss.<sup>2</sup> Fuseli, indeed, embodied many of the characteristics which could be perceived as representing Englishness – his eccentricity, originality, and professed ardour for liberty were qualities which were also held to define the national character.<sup>3</sup> As an outsider, these qualities would have been all the more visible, and served to make him the consummate Englishman at the same time as he was the outlandish foreigner. His visual eclecticism, and the cosmopolitanism of his background and training – which embraced both northern and southern Europe – meant that Fuseli found a natural home in English visual culture – a culture which hinged upon variety, bravura and the absorption of continental sources into an entirely new and underivative aesthetic. Even those evaluating Fuseli's art and the English School in a negative way conceded that he had fully embraced the characteristics of the national aesthetic: Georg Forster (sarcastically observing the fact that Fuseli was a 'German (!) artist') observed of *Titania and Bottom* that 'the boldness in visualising such play of imagination would not have been sufficient for the foreigner Fuseli to be acclaimed if he had not at the same time educated himself eagerly according to the peculiarities of the British school so that he can be numbered among them'.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, no artist in Boydell's Gallery served as effectively as Fuseli to simultaneously epitomise the characteristics and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* Shakespeare was an important figure for the *Stürmer und Dränger*, who appropriated him in their own quest for a distinct (and anti-Gallic) cultural identity.

<sup>2</sup> This fact is an interesting inversion of the value which the English national poet held for the cultural agenda of the *Sturm und Drang* movement.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650 – 1850* (Oxford, 2000). The love of liberty was also held to be a defining characteristic of the Swiss – see Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'Romanticism in Switzerland' in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, *Romanticism in National Context* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 134 – 171.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Forster, 'Geschichte der Kunst in England. Von Jahre 1789', quoted by Walter Pape, "'An Adopted Daughter of Luxury": Georg Forster's Aesthetics and Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery' in Burwick and Pape, p.p. 129-130.

impulses of the nation, English art and Shakespeare. Numerous critics commented on the uncanny congruence between Shakespeare's work and Fuseli's, pronouncing his canvases to contain 'all the magic of Shakespeare' and characters 'such as Shakespeare alone could evoke'.<sup>1</sup> Fuseli, above any of Boydell's other artists, was the natural painter of Shakespeare, 'the Shakespeare of the canvas'.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that this was a calculated response. Fuseli's choice of subjects for the Gallery was clearly predicated on the reputation Shakespeare had acquired during the eighteenth century as the unrivalled delineator of the sublime, supernatural and fantastic. For many critics, Shakespeare's genius lay not so much in his depiction of the entire spectrum of human nature as in his ability to depict witches, ghosts and fairies. At the beginning of the century, Nicholas Rowe pronounced that Shakespeare's 'genius does nowhere so much appear as where he gives his imagination an entire loose, and raises his fancy to a flight above mankind and the limits of the visible world.'<sup>3</sup> Three years later, Addison was to concur in this belief, although he seemed rather at a loss to explain the success of these supernatural figures, 'so wild and yet so solemn ... that we cannot forbear thinking them natural, tho' we have no rule by which to judge of them'.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the century, it was clear that it was precisely this lack of rules which attested to Shakespeare's genius, and which elevated him above his neoclassical rivals. In 1793, the German writer Ludwig Tieck attempted to explain the success of 'Shakespeare's treatment of the Marvellous' in a passage that is worth quoting at some length:

Admiration has often been expressed for Shakspeare's genius which in so many of his artistic works leaves the common course behind and seeks out new pathways, following the passions now into their most subtle

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Post* (20 July 1789), p.2 and *Star* (18 May 1789), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Cunningham, *Lives* Vol II, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, 6 vols (London, 1974), II, 197.

<sup>4</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 419, in Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, *Selections from 'The Tatler' and 'The Spectator'*, ed. Angus Ross (London, 1988), p. 397.

nuances, now to their uttermost bounds, now initiating the spectator into the mysteries of the night, transporting him into the company of witches and ghosts, then again surrounding him with fairies wholly different from those terrible apparitions. Given the boldness with which Shakspeare offends against the customary rules of the drama, we too often overlook the immeasurably greater artistry with which he conceals from our notice such want of regularity: for the touchstone of true genius is to be found in the fact that, for every audacious fiction, every unusual angle of depiction, it is able to predispose the mind of the spectator to the acceptance of illusion; that the poet does not presume on our goodwill but so excites our imagination, even against our wishes, that we forget the rules of aesthetics, together with all the notions of our enlightened century, and abandon ourselves completely to the lovely delusions of the poet; that after its intoxication the soul willingly yields to fresh enchantments and the playful imagination is not awoken from its dreams by any sudden, unpleasant surprise.<sup>1</sup>

For Tieck, while anyone could break or follow rules, it took nothing short of a genius to both break the rules and conceal the fact. The creation of an illusion which successfully suspends the viewer's usual powers of criticism and love of orthodoxy is a powerful energy capable of displacing both the apparently universal 'rules of aesthetics' and the hegemonic force of eighteenth-century enlightened rationalism. And while, Tieck implies, the satisfaction that one might feel on seeing a masterly demonstration of rules successfully adhered to is

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Tieck, 'Shakespeare's Treatment of the Marvellous', trans. Louise Adey in Jonathan Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London, 1992), p. 60

finite, the pleasure offered by Shakespeare's irregular illusions is infinite, inducing a new stream of associations and imaginary sensations.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it was a coincidence that Tieck should avail himself of the vocabulary of abandonment and intoxication when Fuseli was reputedly accessing his own imaginary territory through the use of opium. But it was certainly no coincidence that during his career Fuseli should adopt as one of his chief artistic sources a poet whose reputation as a genius hinged upon a judicious and unparalleled breaking of the rules of aesthetics via the deployment of a subject matter which placed the irrational and supernatural alongside the most profound observation of human nature.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, the breaking of certain long-held aesthetic rules could be seen as constitutive of a new aesthetic system, one which was productive of the sublime – an aesthetic category which we have already encountered in relation to Northcote's works. In 1785, Frances Reynolds, by means of a 'diagrammatic representation' (Figure 43), delineated the 'progressive stages or degrees of human excellence'. At the boundary of a 'circle of humanity' Reynolds places beauty and truth, which she perceives to be 'the utmost power of rules'. Between this base and the ultimate point of her pyramid (identified as sublimity) is an area Reynolds describes as 'the region of intellectual pleasure, genius, or taste'. In the centre of this region is located grace, 'the general limit of the powers of imagination of taste'. Beyond this, however, can be found sublimity, 'the *ne plus ultra* of human conception! the alpha and omega', an effect attained by very few.<sup>3</sup> Reynolds's argument was a development of that famously formulated by Edmund Burke some thirty years earlier in which it is implied (though never explicitly stated), via a set of gendered binaries, that the sublime is a more significant aesthetic than the beautiful.<sup>4</sup> For Reynolds, the sublime is produced when the artist goes

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<sup>1</sup> This argument corresponds to an increased interest in associationist aesthetics in England, the best known example of which is Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (Edinburgh, 1790).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the language of Tieck's essay echoes several of the reviews of Fuseli's Boydell canvases.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Reynolds, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste* (London, 1785), pp.1-7.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 1990). There is, however, a sense of ambiguity in this [cont'd ...]

beyond the supreme mastery of rules (productive of beauty and truth) and into the utmost reaches of the realm of genius. Precisely how this might come about remained unexplained, however – at least until associationist theory came of age, as it did in 1790 with the publication of Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*.

Unlike Frances Reynolds, Alison saw beauty and sublimity as the end product of the same process, namely an exercising of the imagination. Although this process had certain conditions if the emotions of beauty and sublimity were to be attained, Alison's theory presupposed subjectivity and the plurality of response rather than the existence of *a priori* rules.<sup>1</sup> As with almost all eighteenth-century writings on aesthetics, Alison's treatise overlapped with contemporary art theory in resisting a democratisation of taste that might run alongside the rapidly expanding market for art. While he believed there was no inherent difference between one man's aesthetic sensibilities or another's, he did argue that the daily grind of business or labour common to 'the inferior situations in life' worked to produce a contraction in man's 'notions of the beautiful and sublime', while it is 'only in the higher stations ... or in the liberal professions of life that we expect to find men either of a delicate or comprehensive taste'.<sup>2</sup> Where Alison's theories differed from Academic theory, however, was in positing a psychological, response-orientated view of art which argued that beauty and sublimity arose from trains of associated ideas rather than being immanent in any plastic form, as opposed to a theory of artistic production that presupposed that there was such a thing as beauty of form.<sup>3</sup>

Fuseli himself voiced reservations about Alison's theory of the association of ideas – as a painter he would have been unlikely to relinquish the academic

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suggestion – despite the grandeur of the sublime, beauty is the quality productive of social relations.

<sup>1</sup> The essential condition was that the succession of ideas which an object initiates are themselves productive of a simple emotion, for example that 'the images suggested by the prospect of ruins, are images belonging to pity, to melancholy, and to admiration' (Alison, p. 53).

<sup>2</sup> Alison, p.62.

<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of these issues, see Andrew Hemingway, 'Academic Theory versus Association Aesthetics: The Ideological Forms of a Conflict of Interests in the Early Nineteenth Century' in *Ideas and Production*, Vol 5, 1985, pp. 18-42.



shibboleth of essential beauty.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, his own writings on art hovered between a conservative academism and a more psychological and emotive approach to artistic production, one which we can evaluate in relation to his works in the Shakespeare Gallery. Fuseli's most perceptible distancing from academic theory is to be found in his rejection of the *ut pictura poesis* doctrine that assigned a strict narrative basis to ambitious painting, presupposing that it was not within the artist's province to 'find or to combine a subject from himself, without having recourse to tradition or the stores of history and poetry'.<sup>2</sup> Fuseli disdains receiving 'as alms from [poets and novelists] what he has a right to share as common property', arguing that the *Laocoon* does not derive its effect from its literary tradition and would even be more powerful 'were it considered only as the representation of an incident common to humanity' rather than the visualisation of an incident in Virgil.<sup>3</sup> More surprising is Fuseli's suggestion of where painters might derive their inspiration from, if it is not to be from the pages of literature and history. Here he seems to implicitly reject the notion that high art should have that moral basis which was such an imperative feature in academic theory. Painters, he suggests (citing the example of Theon the Samian who is mentioned by Quintilian), might gain celebrity through an 'intuition into the sudden movements of nature, which the Greeks called *φαντασιαις*, the Romans *visions*, and we might circumscribe by the phrase of 'unpremeditated conceptions' the re-production of associated ideas.' He goes on to quote from Quintilian in describing 'that power by which the images of absent things are represented by the mind with the energy of objects moving before our eyes':

He who conceives these rightly will be a master of passions; his is that well-tempered fancy which can imagine things, voices, acts, as they really exist, a power perhaps in a great measure dependent on our will. For if these images so pursue us when our minds are in a state of rest, or fondly fed by hope, or in a kind of waking dream, that we seem to travel, to sail, to fight, to

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<sup>1</sup> See his review of Alison's *Essays on Taste* in the *Analytical Review*, May 1790, p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Fuseli, *Lecture on Invention*, in Knowles, p.141.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.143..

harangue in public, or to dispose of riches we possess  
not, and all this with an air of reality, why should we not  
turn to use this vice of the mind?

It was precisely through this ‘vice of the mind’, Fuseli was quick to point out, ‘by this radiant recollection of associated ideas, the spontaneous ebullitions of nature, selected by observation, treasured by memory, classed by sensibility and judgment’, that Shakespeare became the ‘supreme master of passions’.<sup>1</sup> Such powers of association were responsible not only for the characterisation of Falstaff and Shylock, Hamlet and Lear, but also for the existence of various preternatural beings in his plays.

Although Alison’s theory of the association of ideas was posited upon viewer response and reception rather than providing a directive for artists, earlier writings in the associationist tradition – and most significantly for our purposes, Alexander Gerard’s *Essay on Genius* – were more concerned with the mechanisms of the inventive process, claiming that genius is the product of a ‘peculiar vigour of association.’<sup>2</sup> Fuseli’s own theory and practice worked to make the associationist aesthetic primarily artist-driven. While he obviously deployed subjects from Shakespeare, he did so in a manner which would have been perceived as fitting to the spirit of Shakespeare himself, using these subjects as a springboard for associations rather than rendering them in a literal sense. Looking, for example, at Shakespeare’s text as they viewed Fuseli’s painting of *Titania and Bottom* (Figure 44) viewers would have noticed that Shakespeare did not provide the framework so much as the springboard for Fuseli’s conception, which was described by Repton as ‘a medley of pleasing romantic oddity’.<sup>3</sup> Here Shakespeare’s account of an enchanted weaver who wakes to find himself the object of the Queen of the Fairies’ amorous desires, and with an ass’s head transplanted onto his own to boot, is taken to the perimeters of imaginative association by Fuseli. In Shakespeare’s text, Bottom orders his fairy attendant Peaseblossom to scratch his head, while he dispatches

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 143-145..

<sup>2</sup> Gerard, p.41.

<sup>3</sup> Repton, *Bee*, p.23.

another, Cobweb, to kill him a 'red-hipped humble bee' using a thistle, and to bring back the 'honey-bag'. While Fuseli represents both these figures, they are simply a small part of the extravagant repertoire of figures and actions which are staged across the canvas to create a far more elaborate 'fairy world' than that suggested by Shakespeare.

In both this scene, and the subsequent one *Titania's Awakening* which entered the Shakespeare Gallery in 1791 (Figure 45), Fuseli adopts a visual and imaginative rhythm which works outwards from the centrally-placed protagonists, becoming increasingly more fantastical and disturbing as we move towards the perimeters of the canvas. At the core of the first painting we find Titania waving a wand in one hand and caressing Bottom with the other, while Peaseblossom scratches Bottom's ear and Bottom himself asks Mustardseed to assist Peaseblossom in scratching, for he seems to have inexplicably grown 'marvellous hairy about the face'. Surrounding Titania and Bottom we encounter, from bottom left, a moth-headed figure contemplating a serpent in a nearby pool, who appears to have captured some kind of creature, one of whose limbs protrudes from a bundle of red cloth. Above him are three diminutive female figures who appear to be a mother and two children, one of whom holds a tiny creature that seems to be half-infant, half-chrysalis who reaches towards Titania and Bottom. A series of ethereal fairies hover across the top half of the canvas, while Titania and Bottom are flanked by two stiff and highly-fashionable female figures who may represent Helena and Hermia, the mortals who are also victims of Puck's mischief. Towards the right of the canvas a laughing girl holds a bowl of berries, while another fashionable, though possibly disreputable, female figure looks outwards towards the spectator, holding a small gnome on a lead, while another tiny figure whispers into her ear. Just to the right of her, two more tiny fairies dive into flowers, while at the bottom right hand corner of the canvas, a witch crouches holding a demonic-looking creature.

Disposed in a circular form around Titania and Bottom, these imaginary figures with their variety of motions and actions suggest an infinite rhythm of association on the part of the artist whose imagination is only arrested by the parameters of the canvas. At either side of the canvas are two markers of

narrative reality – Cobweb killing the bumblebee towards the bottom left, and the ‘knavish sprite’ Puck, responsible for performing the spell whose effect we witness, at the right. These two figures, diagonally balanced across the canvas from each other, function as a kind of visual caesura for the process of Fuseli’s imagination which ebbs outwards generating the circular rhythm of figures surrounding Bottom, but is contained and given shape by these two narrative markers. The presence of these two figures neatly stalling and framing Fuseli’s conception between the recognisable markers of Shakespeare’s own fairy characters (that is to say, between the central figures of Titania and Bottom and the outer limits of the canvas marked by Cobweb and Puck) suggests that Fuseli’s supposedly organic, spontaneous and unarrestable flow of imagination was in reality more crafted and less ingenuous than it might at first appear to be. But the fiction of genius was an irresistible one to Fuseli’s contemporaries, who devoured it voraciously and reproduced it in the initial reviews of *Titania and Bottom*.

While the viewer is able to identify a number of characters in the painting, attempting to decipher the canvas and fix a stable meaning or identity to each of its figures proved to be (as it still does) a difficult, if not impossible, task. Edward Dayes noted, just after the closure of the Shakespeare Gallery, that the two *Midsummer Night’s Dream* paintings ‘are so full of contemptible whimsies, as to render them unintelligible; and to understand them, would require a madman’s glossary’.<sup>1</sup> In short, for Dayes, Fuseli’s canvas offended the contemporary (academic) taste for narrative and moral truth by stubbornly resisting the hermeneutic strategies conventionally adopted by the spectator. For some spectators, though, the attraction of Fuseli’s painting may well have been precisely its lack of universality, its private associations and the glimpse it afforded into the imaginings of a ‘genius’ – for this was a word repeatedly used by critics in relation to this canvas, many of whom deemed it to be the *ne plus ultra* of Fuseli’s *oeuvre*. Referring to the ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘fervid’ nature of Fuseli’s earlier canvases, the *Gazetteer* brought out all the contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Dayes, *Works*, p. 327.

adjectives attached to the notion of genius when it described the latest production of this 'eccentric' artist:

This exuberance of genius, this wildness of fancy, this unbounded extent of imagination, led us to form very high expectations of his designs for Shakespeare; but high as these expectations were raised, he has, in this picture gone far beyond them. There are moments peculiarly propitious, when men surpass themselves; at one of these moments he must have conceived and painted this representation of Fairy Land, of which it is not too much to say, that, as no one except Shakespeare could so happily have peopled it with Elfs and Elfins, Fays and Fairies, and the whole brood of our infant mythology; so no one except Fuseli could so happily have painted it.<sup>1</sup>

Here, quite beside any technical merit the painting might possess, is a clear fascination with the operations of two minds of artistic genius, exclusive within their own fields, but mutually complementary. Here also is the concept – as Drummond Bone has suggested – of genius as a 'kind of aporia ... the 'what' which escapes the categories of comprehension and of speech', a kind of excess or elusiveness.<sup>2</sup> Rather than representing any easily discernible artistic type, Shakespeare and Fuseli are marked out as exceptions, going beyond that which others might create or even expect, possessing a certain *je ne sais quoi* which can only be categorised in the paradoxical class of the uncategorisable. The critic's surprise that Fuseli has both surpassed himself and the expectations of his viewers participated in a broader sense that Fuseli had, in this canvas at least, attained the impossible. Boydell himself had felt it necessary to attach a disclaimer to his Gallery, affixing to the accompanying catalogue the warning

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<sup>1</sup> *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (12 May 1789), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Drummond Bone, 'The Emptiness of Genius: Aspects of Romanticism' in Penelope Murray (ed.) *Genius: The History of an Idea* (Oxford, 1992), p.113.

that ‘it must be remembered that [Shakespeare] possessed powers which no pencil can reach’:

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>1</sup>

Perhaps Boydell penned this disclaimer expecting to be pleasantly contradicted. If we bear in mind the strong likelihood that he was responsible for puffing the Gallery in a number of contemporary reviews, he could in fact guarantee the contradiction which would have served as a neat marketing ploy reinforcing the extent of Fuseli’s artistic achievement. Certainly some of the reviews seemed to have precisely these comments in mind. The *Public Advertiser*, for example, deployed Boydell’s quotation from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and noted that Fuseli’s imagination, ‘calls forth objects beyond the boundaries of nature

“and gives to airy Nothing  
A local Habitation and a Name.”<sup>2</sup>

Others appeared to reinforce Boydell’s belief that certain subjects saw the artists labouring under an impossible task that nothing short of ‘magic powers’ could alleviate, but proclaimed that it was precisely this kind of power which was at work in Fuseli’s canvas, a power which not only allowed him to achieve the

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<sup>1</sup> Boydell, *Catalogue* (1789), p. x.

<sup>2</sup> *Public Advertiser* (31 May 1790), p. 4. ‘Anthony Pasquin’ [pseud. John Williams] also deployed this quotation in assessing Fuseli’s artistic abilities (see *Memoirs of the Royal Academicians, being an attempt to improve the national taste* (London, 1796), p.116.)

impossible but also to produce a veritable cocktail of heady aesthetic emotions in the spectator:

...who could ever hope to see exhibited in colours, the Fairy forms which sport and wanton in the sun-shine of genius? Whoever supposed it possible to fix on canvas the airy volatile figures which display, in the poetic *colours* of Shakespeare, their *many coloured sides*? This, however, Fuseli has effected in the painting now before us. A *tableau* which exhibits the most astonishing mixture of the sublime, the beautiful, the fantastic, the grotesque; and in which fancy, whim and genius, conspire to produce images and to raise in the mind of the spectator sensations which one would have supposed it were impossible for any thing short of magic to excite. Other painters have obtained immortal fame by imitating Nature; Fuseli, like Shakespeare, has created a world of his own.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the figure of Titania, wand in hand and conjuring up an assemblage of bizarre and elaborate figures, served to reinforce the analogy of artistic conjuration that posited Fuseli as the hero of his own canvas. Perhaps too, the indeterminate identity of the supernatural figures that formed Fuseli's (as opposed to Shakespeare's) conception of the scene may have had the welcome effect of reflecting an all-the-more certain identity onto the artist, an identity as the modern exemplar of enigmatic artistic genius. What allowed Fuseli to achieve this mythical status was his subjugation of an academic approach to painting (for such an approach is, as we will later see, nonetheless present in the canvas) to an associationist approach to the art. This approach simultaneously marked Fuseli out as an appropriate and proficient recipient of Shakespeare's text (as we will recall from Tieck's appraisal of the merits of the poet), and as possessing the vigorous powers of imagination attributable to the artistic genius.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Star* (14 May, 1789), p.2.

Thus, Fuseli is posited as both a man of literary taste and a man of genius. Capable of accessing the sublime and the beautiful through a stream of associations set in motion by his correct reading of Shakespeare, he is nonetheless free from any debt to the poet for the minutiae of his canvas, which in turn is capable of inspiring in the spectator a spectrum of responses that are not necessarily a product of Shakespeare's text.

The theory of the association of ideas as a manifesto for artistic invention held an additional appeal over academic theory for British artists in that it was a home-grown contribution to the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. It also took into account the existence of a broader public sphere whose participants could (albeit in varying degrees, as Alison's theory suggested) utilise their own associations within a varied agenda of aesthetic response. Nonetheless, Fuseli's canvas exposes a series of problems within the formulation – or at least the practice – of associationist aesthetics. As part of an empirical science, this theory validated the internal operations of the mind as long as these operations were ultimately tempered by judgment on the occasions when they were to be directed towards the production of art and literature. This suggested the same kind of concern with taste, decorum and unity that pervaded academic art theory but which was perhaps harder to regulate within the context of a theory which generally took an oppositional stance towards pre-ordained rules. And certainly Fuseli's canvas manifests a no doubt unwelcome, though perhaps inevitable, effect of the summoning of imaginative associations.

While critics might have detected a communal substance in the painter's instancing of 'the whole brood of our infantine mythology', they could only have guessed at the private factors underlying the conception of the painting, whose erotic overtones we can begin to account for today thanks to the survival of a small number of pornographic drawings made by the artist, and apparently destroyed by his wife after his death. Titania's declaration to Bottom that 'thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no', results in a canvas reminiscent of the numerous eroticised sketches by Fuseli in which fashionable and stylised women (often two or three together) enact dominant sexual practices on a faceless male. Peopled with courtesans and voyeurs, and featuring a fascination with elaborate



hairstyles, the imagery of these drawings seeps into Fuseli's dream world. The courtesans with their fetishised hair re-appear here as the female figures surrounding Titania and Bottom, the ubiquitous voyeurs of Fuseli's drawings reappear in the figure of Puck, while the woman holding the gnome in reins appears to be modelled on Fuseli's wife, who the artist depicted as a courtesan in several of his drawings, looking out provocatively at the viewer. In the later painting of *Titania's Awakening*, the awakening Bottom appears to be based on a drawing made by Fuseli in the 1770s in which a male figure lies slumped in a state of post-coital exhaustion (Figure 46) surrounded by a group of figures. In the painting, the phallus of the earlier drawing is replaced by an indeterminate creature which crouches between Bottom's legs, a contortion of limbs which slinks away, its head hidden.

Such highly eroticised elements – surely obvious even to viewers oblivious of the conflation between the painting and Fuseli's drawings – would have represented a problematic consequence of the dynamic of literary consumption, visual production and spectatorship which the canvas produces. At the very least, they suggested that the theory of association posited an essentially privatised mode of response and invention that might, at best, be at odds with the avowedly public function of art and, at worst, offend contemporary standards of decorum. The sexuality – rather than a more acceptable sensuality (for the canvases themselves have a dry, brittle quality that negates the sensual quality of paint) – of Fuseli's images certainly represented the extreme product of a privatised mode of response and production. Although it is difficult to suggest how this particular aspect of Fuseli's canvases operated within the space of the Shakespeare Gallery, it is clear that this aspect of his work remained in the realm of the unsaid, and that the erotic qualities of some of his canvases was displaced onto the pictorial language of the supernatural and grotesque.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fuseli's were not the only canvases in the Gallery which hinged upon the erotic: Matthew William Peters (previously the cause of some moral concern at the Academy, prior to his becoming a clergyman, thanks to his titillating fancy pictures depicting women thought by many viewers to be prostitutes) had painted a scene depicting *The Merry Wives of Windsor* which put some viewers in mind of his earlier canvases. Humphrey Repton, for example, described Peters's Mrs Ford as 'the most wicked, seducing object of desire, that ever tempted man, to make a fool [cont'd ...]

*'The father of ghosts and spectres': Fuseli, Reynolds and the territory of the sublime*

If Fuseli's canvases manifested 'all the magic of Shakespeare', they simultaneously distanced themselves from the work of one artist in particular.<sup>1</sup> He had already produced at least one canvas as a deliberate challenge to Reynolds - his *Death of Dido*, exhibited in 1781.<sup>2</sup> In the two years leading up to the Shakespeare Gallery's opening Fuseli set about painting subjects which overlapped with those the President was reported to be considering for Boydell. At the beginning of 1787, it was announced in the press that Reynolds would contribute two supernatural subjects to the Shakespeare Gallery – a scene from *Macbeth* depicting the Pit of Acheron, and one from *Hamlet*. This was confirmed in an advertisement for the project which appeared in the *Morning Herald* on January 17<sup>th</sup>, and which stated that the scene from *Hamlet* painted by Reynolds would be the scene in the Queen's closet with the dead Polonius, Hamlet, Gertrude and the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Previous reports, however, had suggested that Reynolds was considering an earlier scene from the play:

Sir Joshua Reynolds has turned his attention to Hamlet, but is as yet undecided in opinion. The Ghost, the platform, the moonlight and glitter of armour are showey attendants on the young Dane, and have other attractions with Sir Joshua – that make him frequently exclaim, "I'll speak to it!"<sup>3</sup>

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of him' – a response which was clearly sanctioned by Boydell, who had commissioned Repton's descriptive catalogue. (Bee, p.11).

<sup>1</sup> *Morning Post* (20 July 1789), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> On the two *Dido* paintings see Myrone, 'The Spectacle as Sublime'. Fuseli's canvas is also discussed in David A. Brenneman, 'Self-Promotion and the Sublime: Fuseli's *Dido on the Funeral Pyre*' in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 62: 1(1999), 69-87.

<sup>3</sup> *Morning Herald* (6 January 1787), p.2.

Meanwhile, initial press reports suggested that Fuseli would paint Lear and Mad Tom in the storm. *Macbeth*, it was noted, 'is his forté, but the ground is already occupied'.<sup>1</sup> By the time the Gallery opened just over two years later, there had been some changes to these early plans. Reynolds abandoned his intentions to paint a scene from *Hamlet*, and the moonlit scene on the castle battlements was painted by Fuseli instead (Figure 47). Meanwhile, Fuseli did not take up the subject of Lear and Mad Tom (which was painted by Benjamin West instead), but chose to paint a scene from 'his forté', *Macbeth* (Figure 48), timed to entered the Gallery in advance of Reynolds's canvas from the play, which was never finished (Figure 49).<sup>2</sup> Both of these subjects were exhibited on the opening of the Gallery, while a year later Fuseli had produced a small canvas of *Puck* which entered the Gallery at the same time as Reynolds's painting of the same subject, itself adapted from one of Reynolds's fancy pictures at Boydell's request and exhibited at the Academy in 1789 (Figures 50 & 51).<sup>3</sup>

Irrespective of whether or not Fuseli conceived of these subjects as a direct challenge to the Academy's President (and it seems quite probable that he did, bearing in mind both the *Dido* affair and Fuseli's tendency to scoff at the works of his competitors in the Shakespeare Gallery, such as Barry), the press was clearly disposed to make comparisons between Fuseli and Sir Joshua.<sup>4</sup> While Reynolds may have held sway at the Academy, it seems that the Shakespeare

<sup>1</sup> *Morning Herald* (15 January 1787), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Boydell was apparently willing to accept *Macbeth* in its unfinished state, but Reynolds refused to sell it for less than 1500 guineas. This was a phenomenal sum – Reynolds was already the highest paid artist in the Gallery, earning 500 guineas for *Cardinal Beaufort*. Reynolds claimed that he 'could have got £2000 if he had spent the same time on portrait-painting which was employed on that picture (see John Ingamells and John Edgcumbe (eds), *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (New Haven and London, 2000), p.230). Boydell eventually obtained the painting from Reynolds's executors for 1000 guineas (see David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings*, 2 vols (New Haven and London, 2000) I, 544).

<sup>3</sup> George Nicol's grandson relates that Boydell had visited Reynolds with Nicols while the artist was working on the *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* and seen the portrait of a naked child in the studio. Nicols suggested that 'it can very easily come into the Shakespeare, if Sir Joshua will kindly place him on a mushroom, and give him fawn's ears, and make a Puck of him'. Mannings and Postle, I, 557.

<sup>4</sup> Northcote related to Prince Hoare that he had visited Hampstead with Fuseli to see Barry's *King Lear*. He reported that it 'was the cause of vast pleasure and triumph to Fuseli for indeed it was greatly below my expectation, very bad indeed. Fuseli enjoyed it much and cracked many jokes on it'. James Northcote to Prince Hoare, 24 December 1787 in Henry Fuseli, *The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli*, ed. David H. Weinglass (London, 1987), p.39.

Gallery was the legitimate territory of Fuseli, and the Academy's president inevitably came off worst in the reviews of Boydell's Gallery. If, in choosing to paint the *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* rather than depicting the scene from *Hamlet* or hurrying on his canvas of *Macbeth*, Reynolds had hoped to sidestep the issue of artistic competition, he nonetheless found his canvas the subject of unfavourable comparison with Fuseli. 'H' ended his largely unfavourable comments on *Cardinal Beaufort* by noting that 'Belzebub is of the race of Fuseli, the father of ghosts and spectres, and we leave him to his parent'.<sup>1</sup> Clearly Fuseli and Reynolds were perceived to occupy different aesthetic and ideological territories, and Reynolds was now in danger of trespassing.

To a large extent, Fuseli's status in the Shakespeare Gallery was dependent upon the construction of an artistic identity that was conceived of as oppositional to that of Reynolds. When the Gallery opened, Fuseli had not yet been elected as an Academician - he was seen by many of the reviewers as part of a second generation of artists whose talent had previously been occluded by that institution. The *World*, for example, noted a few days after the Gallery's opening that 'untried talents are establishing':

Fuseli flourishes; Smirke, perhaps another Hogarth, is known; and of [William]Hamilton the fortunes are made!<sup>2</sup>

Two days later the *Morning Post* castigated this 'booby print ... [which] records the wonderous works of Hamilton, Fuseli and Smirke, but is wholly silent on the labours of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Peters, Opie and other distinguished artists'.<sup>3</sup> The implication seems to be that there were two camps within the Shakespeare Gallery - the established artists headed by Reynolds, and a new generation of more dynamic artists epitomised by Fuseli. An acrimonious dispute the following year would have done little to dispel this perception. When Fuseli was elected an associate of the Academy, over Reynolds's favoured candidate (the

<sup>1</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 60, December 1790, pp. 1088-89.

<sup>2</sup> *The World* (5 May 1789), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> *Morning Post* (7 May 1789), p.2.

architect Bonomi), Reynolds resigned his role as President and had to be cajoled back to the post by his fellow academicians.<sup>1</sup>

Martin Postle has described the difference between Reynolds and Fuseli as ‘one of degree rather than a direct contrast’, citing the mutual influence which the two artists had on each other during the 1780s.<sup>2</sup> Martin Myrone, however, has recently shown that Fuseli actively set out to offer a challenge to Reynolds’s *Death of Dido* after seeing the Academy’s President at work on the canvas.<sup>3</sup> By the time the Shakespeare Gallery opened it seems that the differences between the artists were indeed contrasting ones rather than minor variances. They were differences which hinged not only upon stylistic qualities, but also on the construction of artistic identity and – most significantly – on conflicting notions about the concept of artistic genius.

As an artist and personality, Fuseli would have been anathema to Reynolds’s concept of genius. Reynolds was well aware of the attractions which the cult of artistic genius offered to viewers and readers, and saw his art theory as engaged in a difficult struggle to overcome the public’s predilection for biographical accounts of preordained inspiration. In *Discourse Six*, delivered while Fuseli was acquiring an early reputation as a ‘wild’ and ‘eccentric’ genius in Rome, Reynolds described his own personal predicament as the head of an institution devoted to the training of young artists:

Those who have undertaken to write on our art, and have represented it as a kind of *inspiration*, as a *gift* bestowed upon particular favourites at their birth, seem to insure a much more favourable disposition from their readers,

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous pamphlet published at the time, and which has been attributed to Fuseli, attributes to Sir Joshua ‘the love of power, the thirst of rule, and a dictatorial spirit [which] have been evident, from the beginning of his administration to the close of it’. The writer implicitly contrasts the faction and corruption of the Academy and its members with the behaviour of ‘the Boydells [who], by their establishment of the Shakespeare Gallery, have a greater claim to the homage of the Arts, than the aggregate body of the nobility and gentry of Great Britain’. *Old Artist, Observations on the Present State of the Royal Academy; with Characters of Living Painters* (London, 1790), pp. 17-22.

<sup>2</sup> Postle (1995), p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> Myrone, ‘The Spectacle as Sublime’.

and have a much more captivating and liberal air, than he who attempts to examine, coldly, whether there are any means by which this art may be acquired.

This was a double conspiracy, Reynolds went on to explain – not only did the public, ignorant of ‘the *cause* of any thing extraordinary’, relish what appeared to them ‘as a kind of magick’, but artists themselves did not find it to be in their interests to disillusion the public and admit that they were actually practitioners of an ‘intrinsically imitative’ art.<sup>1</sup> No doubt Reynolds would have considered Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* – and in particular the almost blasphemous account of Michelangelo – to be the pinnacle of such effusive and self-promoting deceit.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Fuseli found himself the subject of secularised versions of Vasari’s genre during the 1780s and 90s. Whilst Vasari had attributed Michelangelo’s genius for sculpture in part to his having imbibed the milk of a wet-nurse living in a Tuscan quarrying village – who also happened to be the wife of a stone-cutter – it was now speculated that Fuseli’s nurse must have been ‘proverbially superstitious, and that goblins and demons had been brought forward to embarrass his growing mind’.<sup>3</sup>

While Reynolds may have accepted such factors as contributing to the overall tenor of the artist’s mind, he rejected the overriding mythology they supported. There was, he believed, simply no such thing as native genius, and he took advantage of his first opportunity to provide a lecture to the Academy to discredit ‘that false and vulgar opinion, that rules are the fetters of genius’.<sup>4</sup> Reynolds was most likely responding to the numerous contemporary writings on genius and originality that were currently in circulation, such as Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* which asserted that artists had to choose

<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse VI, p. 94-95.

<sup>2</sup> Although, in his fifth *Discourse*, Reynolds admitted that Michelangelo’s genius burnt with ‘extraordinary heat and vehemence’, his description of genius is rather restrained by contemporary standards, as befits the tone of the remainder of the *Discourses*.

<sup>3</sup> Pindar, *Memoirs*, p. 117. The apogee of this mythologizing came in the 1830s with Cunningham’s entry on Fuseli in his Vasari-esque *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters*. Fuseli also shared the predicament with Michelangelo of having to overcome the opposition of his father who had in mind for his son something rather more socially elevated than a career as a painter, and consequently of having to practice drawing in secret.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse I, p.17.

whether to 'soar in the regions of Liberty, or move in the soft fetters of easy imitation'.<sup>1</sup> Young's 'choice' would have had a particular resonance for artists, and for would-be history painters especially – he likened it to that academic shibboleth, the Choice of Hercules, with Imitation having 'as many plausible reasons to urge, as Pleasure had to offer to Hercules' who nonetheless overcame her urgings and 'made the choice of a Hero' (i.e. Virtue / Originality). Over the following years, Reynolds would become increasingly more defensive in his view of genius, which took on a heightened urgency in 1791 when he wrote his reactionary *Ironical Discourse* explicitly linking notions of innate genius to the revolutionary fervour he detested. Genius, Reynolds now felt justified in asserting, was an insidious conspiracy, capable of overturning the natural order.

Reviews of Fuseli's work in the Shakespeare Gallery were rather less alarmist. However they were at pains to emphasise that Fuseli's talent was one that disdained constraint, whether from aesthetic rules or within the conception of his literary sources. Even criticisms of Fuseli's Shakespearean canvases seemed only to reinforce the overwhelming sense that Fuseli was indebted to no one for his artistic conceptions. In an otherwise unflattering review of the artist's *King Lear*, the *Public Advertiser* noted Fuseli's incompatibility with the demands of conventional history painting:

There are painters who cannot fairly display their talents unless they are left to the full exertion of their own powers. They cannot copy the ideas of others. The descriptions, which to common artists are landmarks, and operate as guides to truth and nature, are to them checks, and cramp that genius which they are intended to direct. Of this class is Mr Fuseli: in ghosts, fairies, elphins and witches, his imagination is left at its full play, and he

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Young, *Conjectures*, p.18. Reynolds was certainly familiar with Young's *Conjectures*, and explicitly refers to it in the eleventh *Discourse*. Other writings on this subject which were contemporaneous with Reynolds's opening discourse include William Duff's *Essay on Original Genius* (1767), E. Capell's *Reflections on Originality in Authors* (1766) and William Sharpe's *Dissertation upon Genius* (1755).

enters into the spirit of the Poet; but in recording history, in displaying history, and exhibiting individual nature, he is not quite so happy.<sup>1</sup>

It does not take much reading between the lines to recognise that this is praise thinly disguised as criticism. The *Public Advertiser* defines a hierarchy of artistic practice over which Fuseli presides, while other painters (even history painters) are described as mere textual topographers, delineating the ‘landmarks’ of literary sources or depicting mere facts. This hierarchy overlaps with another hierarchy of Fuseli’s own formulation, one which was at odds with the established, academic hierarchy of genres. In the first of two lectures on *Invention* delivered to the students of the Royal Academy, Fuseli defined a tripartite structure for ambitious art that elaborated upon the existing generic hierarchy. Invention, he claimed,

...receives its subjects from poetry or authenticated tradition; they are *epic* or sublime, *dramatic* or impassioned, *historic* or circumscribed by truth. The first *astonishes*; the second *moves*; the third *informs*.<sup>2</sup>

What is significant here is that the ‘historic’ – which had been since the seventeenth century the acknowledged superior of all other generic categories – now finds itself subjugated to two additional artistic genres, which are evaluated according to the sensation aroused in the reader rather than any moral utility they might possess. While this has the obvious effect of undermining a civic humanist theory of art, it simultaneously serves to ascribe to the artist a degree of autonomy that had previously lain beyond his reach. While Fuseli claims (apparently for the sake of argument, for we have seen him refute this assumption just a few pages earlier) that the subjects of artistic invention come from poetry or history, the implication is that the value of painting can be determined according to the degree of imagination with which it is invested, a

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<sup>1</sup> *Public Advertiser* (4 June 1789), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Knowles, II, 156-57.



practice which serves to transform the particular into the general through a process of abstraction and, thus, to guarantee the genius of the artist. In validating the general over the particular, Fuseli's hierarchy mirrors – and replaces – the academic hierarchy of genres (landscape and portrait painting are scarcely worth a mention in his lectures), and only narrowly avoids describing the painter of historical fact as pursuing the 'anxiously minute detail of a copyist'. There is little doubt in his mind that the bottom of the hierarchy is occupied by those who busy themselves with subjects traditionally extolled by the academic system, such as the Death of Germanicus, which require the artist to apply 'all the real modifications of time and place, which may serve unequivocally to discriminate that moment of grief from all others', in a manner which seems curiously akin to portrait-painting. Next comes the dramatic style – epitomised by Raphael in painting and Shakespeare in literature – which seems in essence to represent a kind of intermediary between the historic and the epic, elevating pure history and inscribing it with 'character and pathos'. But the supreme artistic category in Fuseli's hierarchy is the epic or sublime – epitomised by Michelangelo and Homer – whose aim is 'to impress one general idea, one great quality of nature or mode of society, some great maxim, without descending to those subdivisions, which the detail of character prescribes'.

Although not published until towards the end of the Gallery's lifetime, Fuseli's early lectures seem to have simply been a textual articulation of a theory he had been obviously practicing for some time. And if any contemporary artistic juxtapositions served to make visible the rungs of Fuseli's aesthetic hierarchy, it was the simultaneous display of his and Reynolds's work in the Shakespeare Gallery, in particular the juxtaposition of their two *Macbeths* after 1793 (Figures 44 & 47). As Martin Postle has argued, the years after Sir Joshua's death saw a struggle 'between those who wished to apotheosise Reynolds as the moral, as well as the artistic, founder of the British School and those to whom the deification of Reynolds was fundamentally detrimental to the cultivation of an indigenous and yet diverse artistic community'.<sup>1</sup> Reynolds's *Macbeth and the Witches* seems to have represented one of the early sites of contest in this

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<sup>1</sup> Postle (1995), p.276.

struggle, with the press and public occupying very little middle ground between scathing criticism and eulogistic praise. As we shall see, what they seemed to be differing about were two essentially very different notions of artistic genius.

Fuseli was no stranger to the subject of *Macbeth*. It is no surprise that the *Morning Herald* should have described the play as his 'forte', for the artist had already produced a number of canvasses depicting dark, expressive and supernatural moments from the play. His latest scene depicted the moment of Macbeth and Banquo's encounter on the heath with the three witches who foretell that Macbeth will be King, and Banquo the father of kings. Anonymously reviewing his own painting in the *Analytical Review*, Fuseli wrote:

This is a sublime scene, and the figure of Macbeth uncommonly grand: a character too great to be daunted by an extraordinary event, betrays no sign of fear, or even astonishment; the slumbering fire of ambition is roused, and the firmly-nerved hand of power raised to command those to stay and say more, from whom a dastard would have fled. At this moment, only one passion agitated the soul of Macbeth: a daring hope was labouring for birth in a shape he had but a glimpse; of as the bubbles melted into air, in a moment, he reflected, undisturbed by jarring emotions, and darted towards his future grandeur.

The figure and attitude of Banquo appear rather strained and inferior to the rest of the composition, which, like a stupendous feature in nature, seizes the whole mind, and produces the concentrated calm of admiration, instead of the various dilated pleasurable sensations, which arise from contemplating grace and beauty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Analytical Review*, Vol IV (1789), p.111.

Fuseli is keen to attach a number of theoretical points to his canvas, most notably that its sublimity derives from the clarity of simple expression. The overwhelming effect of the painting is to impress upon the spectator the idea of ambition or power, and in producing this effect it has been necessary for the painter to expunge all other details and emotions from the canvas so that 'only one passion agitates the soul of Macbeth' and he remains 'undisturbed by jarring emotions'. Thus, the canvas is stripped bare of incidental details, and the composition centres upon the idealised figure of Macbeth, whose individuality (i.e. any particularised dress and features) is subjugated to a general passion. Deployed in a forceful attitude, Macbeth appears to be conjuring the vision of the witches himself rather than being a mere recipient of their predictions, while diagonals of light and vortexes of dark cloud serve respectively to illuminate the protagonist and blot out the surrounding landscape. The figure of Banquo – as Fuseli himself points out – is inferior to the powerful figure of Macbeth, and even the witches – by now 'melting into air' - seem subjugated to the expression and attitude of the dominant male protagonist. In essence, the canvas works to transform individual details into one general idea, to impress the mind with 'the concentrated calm of admiration' rather than with a succession of varied sensations.

Fuseli saw this metamorphosis of the individual into the general as the summit of expression in art, and was later to describe the most celebrated figures from classical art and mythology as participants in a process whereby physiognomical detail and individual expression are subsumed by the scale of powerful, unadulterated emotion:

Only then, when passion or suffering become too big for utterance, the wisdom of ancient art has borrowed a feature from tranquillity, though not its air. For every being seized by an enormous passion, be it joy or grief, or fear sunk to despair, loses the character of its own individual expression, and is absorbed by the power of the feature that attracts it. Niobe and her family are assimilated by extreme anguish; Ugolino is petrified by

the fate that swept the stripling at his foot, and sweeps in pangs the rest. The metamorphoses of ancient mythology are founded on this principle, are allegoric. Clytia, Biblis, Salmacis, Narcissus, tell only the resistless power of sympathetic attraction.<sup>1</sup>

Fuseli clearly saw his *Macbeth* as the pinnacle of ambitious art, on a par with that of the ancients, and perhaps the pose of his protagonist (highly figural and idealised, but not clearly identifiable with any specific antique sculpture) would have served to reinforce the analogy. Macbeth's suggestive affinity with sublime sculpture such as the *Niobe* and the *Laocoon* (Figures 52 & 53), all definable as such by their forceful clarity of unmixed expression, marked Fuseli out as an ambitious painter of the epic and sublime, and as an artist capable of emulating the ancients without any accruing any visual debt to them.

The same, however, could not be said for Reynolds much-maligned painting of *Macbeth and the Witches*. Reynolds's subject comes from a later point in the play when Macbeth seeks out the witches, desirous of seeing his destiny. In Shakespeare's text, Macbeth is confronted by an armoured head which warns him to beware of Macduff, then by a bloody child which issues an apparent reassurance (though in reality a riddle) that 'none of woman born shall harm Macbeth'. Next appears a crowned child carrying a tree which pronounces another riddle, and finally an apparition of eight kings followed by the murdered Banquo, the latter proving too much for Macbeth's troubled conscience. Finally, the witches perform a fantastical dance and disappear, leaving Macbeth to prepare for his next bloody deed, the murder of Macduff's wife and children.

Rather than choosing and isolating a single, expressive moment as Fuseli has done, Reynolds conflates the action of the scene within his canvas, incorporating the various visions and simultaneously depicting the witches conjuring the apparitions, and then in their transformed and vanishing state at either side of the

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<sup>1</sup> Knowles, Vol II, 259-60.

canvas. The critics were not slow to observe this fact, noting the inappropriateness of the scene for the painter's canvas. The *Oracle* claimed that

This sublime invocation yields nothing to the Painter; it is anticipative and suppositious; - the subject must be taken from the progress of the action. Sir Joshua presents us with the *effects* of the enchantment in the production of the apparition.

His conduct is *here* open to numerous exceptions – what are consecutive appearances in the Poet, determinating each before the commencement of another, are in the present picture brought together – there are visible at once the long line of Kings – and within a circle the armed Head – the bloody Child – and the Infant crowned. By this mode of treatment the *passion* is simplified, which in the Poet must be *various*; and the business is *complex*, which in the design of Shakespeare was meant to be *simple*.<sup>1</sup>

Reynolds has, according to the critic, done something rather more than merely disregard the unities of time and space. In conflating a succession of dramatic moments which are productive of various emotions, Reynolds has simplified them – in the reductive sense of the word, rather than with any sense of the distillation of pure emotion which we witnessed in Fuseli's canvas. Moreover, the striking effect and individual significance of each isolated apparition in Shakespeare's text becomes diminished and confused as they are amassed together for our perusal. The canvas, the *Oracle* suggests, amounts to little more than the sum of its parts, and it is perhaps no surprise that Sir Joshua has turned Macbeth's back to the spectator:

If the face of Macbeth were to be seen, we know not of what it could be expressive; for of the *sweet bodements*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oracle* (6 April 1793), p.2.

[i.e. of the crowned infant] it could *not*, since the *line of Kings* defeats his joy, and, and plunges him again, in acute sorrow and disappointment. Compound emotions are but little in the Painter's power. Sir Joshua has, therefore, turned to the spectator the back of Macbeth. This, indeed, is shunning a difficulty, with which so great an Artist might have been expected to struggle.

Like Fuseli, the critic rejects mixed or complex expression as unfit for the painter, and despite his criticism of Reynolds for turning Macbeth away from the spectator, there is also a sense of the inevitability of this decision given the simultaneous incorporation of the various apparitions.<sup>1</sup> For this writer, the painting's main flaw is its lack of legibility which arises not merely from the confused amalgamation of apparitions, but most significantly from the figure of Macbeth himself whose attitude seems neither 'striking or natural' and whose 'left hand seems extended with little meaning'. While the hand of Fuseli's Macbeth is legible as 'the firmly-nerved hand of power raised to command those to stay and say more', Reynolds's *Macbeth* fails to impress upon the mind of the spectator the 'one general idea' upon which sublime or epic painting inevitably hinges. The critic makes his final, devastating point at the end of the review:

The whole excites no emotion, either of *terror* or *astonishment*. It is not aided by its vicinity to the bold enthusiasm of Fuseli's first scene of the same subject.

The comparison with Fuseli, implicit throughout the review, is now fully articulated. The 'bold enthusiasm' (synonymous with 'genius') of Fuseli's conception is the antithesis of Reynolds's composition which is confused, illegible and, despite having 'fine parts', fails to add up to a coherent whole. Fuseli's canvas, meanwhile, produces a single and immediate 'concentrated' idea in the mind of the spectator, its parts ruthlessly sacrificed to the whole, and its

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<sup>1</sup> Fuseli had also made the point that mixed expression is incompatible with the imitative arts in an unsigned review of Raspe's *Catalogue of Tassie's Gems* in the *Analytical Review*, XI (1791), 262.

theoretical and aesthetic underpinnings made doubly manifest by its proximity to Reynolds's painting.

Hung in close proximity in Boydell's Gallery, the two *Macbeths* would no doubt have invited numerous such comparisons but, as I have mentioned, there were two sides to the critical reception of Reynolds's *Macbeth and the Witches*. Two days after the *Oracle's* scathing review of the painting, the *Morning Chronicle* published a review that offered a rather different perspective on it. Intriguingly, the reviewer not only avoided comparisons with the nearby canvas by Fuseli, but, rather, attempted to praise Reynolds's painting with a carefully chosen critical terminology. The critic begins his review with a bold and surprising assertion:

One of our great Poets asserted, that

Shakespeare's magic could not copied be,  
Within that circle, none durst walk but he!

Sir Joshua Reynolds has in this picture proved that the Bard was mistaken, for he has penetrated the Cave of Hecate, and with a poet's eye viewed the unhallowed mysteries of the Weird Sisters. All the objects which were drawn by our Deity of the Drama, are here introduced: from the pencil of any other artist they would have been a chaotic mass of incongruous materials; on the canvas of Sir Joshua Reynolds they form *one great whole*, and however heterogeneous the objects, unite in giving one grand and impressive effect, that proves the ardent mind and glowing imagination of the late President, was in perfect union with that of the mighty Master of the scene before us.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Morning Chronicle* (8 April 1793), p.2.

In his partiality for Reynolds, the critic realises that there are two essential claims that he must make for the artist – first, that Reynolds is the rightful painter of Shakespeare, that only his conception can do justice to the genius of the poet; and secondly that he possesses the requisite measure of genius or imagination to paint the sublime. In making these claims for the grandeur, ‘spirit’ and imagination of Reynolds’s canvas, the critic finds himself borrowing from the critical language that had been deployed over the past four years to describe the contributions of Fuseli to the Shakespeare Gallery. The only way to avoid the unfortunate juxtaposition with Fuseli, it seems, is for Reynolds to somehow take on the identical artistic qualities which define his rival.

In 1793 – the year in which Reynolds’s *Macbeth and the Witches* finally made its appearance in the Shakespeare Gallery – Fuseli was at work painting the same subject for Woodmason’s Shakespeare Gallery (Figure 54). Fuseli’s artistic theory later expounded distinct views on the impropriety of minute detail to such a scene, views which manifested an implicit disdain for Reynolds’s depiction of the subject. In his *Aphorisms Chiefly Relative to the Fine Arts*, he noted that ‘the minute catalogue of the cauldron’s ingredients in *Macbeth* destroys the terror attendant on mysterious darkness’, while in the second of his lectures on *Invention*, he made a thinly veiled attack on Reynolds’s canvas:

It is not by the accumulation of infernal or magic machinery, distinctly seen, by the introduction of Hecate and a chorus of female demons and witches, by surrounding him with successive apparitions at once, and a range of shadows moving above or before him, that *Macbeth* can be made an object of terror, — to render him so you must place him on a ridge, his down-dashed eye absorbed by the murky abyss; surround the horrid vision with darkness, exclude its limits, and shear its light to glimpses.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Knowles, II, 225-26.



There is no doubt that Fuseli conceived of his painting for Woodmason as a remedial version of *Macbeth* that offered itself as a deliberate challenge to Reynolds's conception of the scene. Fuseli isolated the most powerful and expressive of the apparitions – the armoured head – whose impact he intensified by showing a 'colossal head rising out of the abyss, and that head Macbeth's likeness'.<sup>1</sup> Fuseli informed Knowles that his canvas attempted 'to supply what is deficient in the poetry' since

...when Macbeth meets with the witches on the heath, it is terrible, because he did not expect the supernatural visitation; but when he goes to the cave to ascertain his fate, it is no longer a subject of terror ... To say nothing of the general arrangement of my picture, which in composition is altogether triangular, (and the triangle is a mystical figure) ... What, I would ask, would be a greater object of terror to you, if, some night on going home, you were to find yourself sitting at your own table, either writing, reading, or otherwise employed? Would not this make a powerful impression on your mind?<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while Reynolds had been enslaved by Shakespeare's relation of the scene, providing a 'minute catalogue' of the apparitions and the cauldron's ingredients, Fuseli saw himself as the practitioner of a more liberal art, isolating an expressive moment from the text and giving it increased intensity by mirroring Macbeth's own physiognomy in the armoured head. Compressing the figures into a vertical format with strong geometrical structures, and obliterating both the foreground and background with an apparently infinite shroud of darkness, the visual economy of Fuseli's canvas guaranteed its force of expression, while the cluttered and complex composition of Reynolds's *Macbeth and the Witches* plunged the subject into bathos. Perhaps with his circular format of human,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to John Knowles, in Knowles I, 189-90.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

supernatural and animal figures, Reynolds had hoped to emulate the success of Fuseli's *Titania and Bottom*. In fact, his scene of conjuration with its smoke, flames and magic circle comes dangerously close to resembling Gillray's caricature of the Shakespeare Gallery (Figure 31). What Reynolds had failed to recognise was Fuseli's ability to adopt very different artistic strategies across the literary genres which Shakespeare's plays offered, deploying an appropriately sublime and expressive visual style for the tragedies and investing the comic scenes with an exuberant play of fantasy. Reynolds's apparent failure in the branch of the sublime contributed to Fuseli's success in this department, positioning Fuseli simultaneously as the 'Shakespeare of the canvas', and as the supreme practitioner of ambitious art. It was a comparison which he had cruelly but efficiently enforced by ensuring the conflation and juxtaposition of his Shakespearean subjects with those of the Academy's President.

*Originality: retailing the illusion*

Fuseli's status as one of the most successful of Boydell's artists, we can now suggest, was not only to do with his natural affinity with, and talent for, the sublime, but also had to do with the mastery and manipulation of certain artistic conditions and market factors. In the competitive climate of Boydell's Gallery, Fuseli was able to cultivate his existing reputation as an artistic genius through a process which simultaneously likened him to, and distanced him from, Shakespeare. By choosing to depict Shakespeare's scenes of the sublime and supernatural, Fuseli no doubt anticipated that the critical terminology which eighteenth-century critics had assigned to the poet – a terminology which retailed the superiority of genius, imagination and originality in artistic production – would reinforce his own artistic identity. But in either going beyond Shakespeare's conceptions (e.g. in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* compositions) or in paring down the narrative content of the scenes in order to intensify a moment of terror or sublimity (e.g. in the scenes from *Macbeth* for Boydell and Woodmason), Fuseli rebutted the established academic doctrine which subordinated artists to the conceptions of poets and historians. His

canvases advertised him as a Promethean figure – not the mere transcriber of his artistic and literary predecessors, but a creator or originator of new figures beyond the realm of common humanity. This was a double-aggrandizement which simultaneously sublimated the artist and freed the canvas from its hegemonic constraint within the parameters of the text.

In fact, Fuseli's canvases were in no sense as original or unprecedented as they may have initially appeared to viewers such as the critic of the *Public Advertiser* who categorised Fuseli in the class of painters who 'cannot copy the ideas of others'.<sup>1</sup> Rather, they incorporated a variety of carefully-chosen pictorial references. *Titania and Bottom*, for example, contains a conspicuous quotation from Leonardo da Vinci's *Leda and the Swan* (Figure 55), a source which offered a witty reflection of the themes of sexuality and metamorphosis at work in Shakespeare's play. While art-historians have observed the quotation from *Leda and the Swan*, however, we can suggest that Fuseli's *Midsummer Night's Dream* images fuse together a number of further art-historical references which comment upon the spectrum of femininity on display in his canvases, and which have previously been ignored in analyses of his images. In contrast to Leda, the victim of rape with whose fate Titania is (somewhat ironically) identified, we encounter a female figure – to the right of *Titania and Bottom* – who is clearly modelled on the kind of disreputable woman we might encounter in a Jan Steen canvas (figure 56). Looking out provocatively at the viewer, she proffers – not the sexually-suggestive oyster held by Steen's young woman – but a diminutive and aged male figure on a leash, evidence of the triumph of woman over man, a scenario which the dominant female sexuality at work in Fuseli's canvases has already signalled towards. In the pendant *Titania's Awakening*, meanwhile, the figures of Titania and Oberon are derived from Corregio's *Venus, Cupid and a Satyr* (Figure 57) a reference which serves to cast the tropes of femininity and masculinity at work in Fuseli's canvas in an ironic light. In contrast to the oblivious Venus, whose body is the unwitting site of perusal for the satyr and the viewer, Titania directly engages Oberon's gaze and appears to gesture to her body as a site of desire. The able-bodied male, meanwhile – who is present in

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<sup>1</sup> *Public Advertiser* (4 June 1789), p.3.

Corregio's canvas in the figure of the satyr and implicit in the position mapped out for the viewer – is reduced simultaneously in Fuseli's image to the androgynous figure of the jealous husband, Oberon, and the exhausted and emasculated Bottom, both of them victims of Titania's overzealous sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

But, while Fuseli linked the thematic sexuality of his canvases with a series of witty visual references, he also sought to engage in pictorial quotation for another purpose. In particular, both *Midsummer Night's Dream* canvases borrowed a number of figures from the Dutch painter Abraham Bloemaert, most notably from his canvases of *Moses Striking the Rock* (the figure of Titania), *The Slaying of the Niobids* (the awakening Bottom) and *The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis* (the floating supernatural figures in *Titania's Awakening*) (Figures 58 - 60). Although Bloemaert had received some art historical and art-theoretical attention in the eighteenth century (mainly in French, Dutch and Swiss writings, some of which had been translated into English), his work was largely unknown in England, a fact which would have simultaneously served two purposes – to conceal Fuseli's pictorial borrowing from those inclined to regard him as an original genius whilst also adding credibility to his work for the select few connoisseurs familiar with Bloemaert's canvases. Moreover, Fuseli's own estimation of Bloemaert's work – evident in his edition of Pilkington's *Dictionary of Painters* – reveals a painter whose artistic identity was only a slight modification of Fuseli's own:

He formed a manner peculiar to himself, making nature his model for many of the objects he painted, particularly landscape, in which he excelled. His invention was ready, and in his compositions there appears a great deal of truth; his draperies are broad, simple, and have generally a good effect; his touch is free and spirited, his colour mellow, and his works demonstrate that he understood the Chiaro-Scuro very well. But his taste and

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<sup>1</sup> Bottom, with the ass's head now removed, has additional overtones of the weakened and emasculated Sampson, with Titania – her breasts exposed – having a visual proximity to Rubens's Delilah.

style have too much of the Flemish and his figures seem to be the product of his own fancy, without sufficiently attending to nature, as he ought, and above all, to elegant nature.<sup>1</sup>

Bloemaert's idiosyncratic manner, his 'ready invention', fanciful figures, 'free and spirited' brushstrokes and mellow colouring offer an equivalent artistic identity to that of Fuseli, while the Swiss artist no doubt considered himself as avoiding the coarse Dutch taste and inelegancy of his predecessor. Moreover, Fuseli's quotations in both *Midsummer Night's Dream* canvases, worked in a rather different way to Reynolds's pictorial borrowings. Clearly they were rather more eclectic in their disposition and more witty in their deployment, but they also offered an ideological challenge to Reynolds's work. While both *Midsummer Night's Dream* canvases used Italian sources for their central figures (Leonardo's *Leda and the Swan* and Corregio's *Venus, Cupid and a Satyr*) they not only derived their effect from the witty subversion of these sources (hardly the form of 'borrowing' which Reynolds's *Discourses* expounded) but literally surrounded – and overwhelmed – them with an variety of quotations from Northern European sources. Bloemaert's images in particular pointed to a certain kind of history painting, to an alternative tradition to that expounded and practiced by Reynolds.

There can be little doubt that Fuseli's artistic identity was a carefully cultivated one, which hinged as much upon commercial considerations as artistic ones. The viability of Fuseli's art within the commercial space of Boydell's gallery as a response to a heightened public appetite for manifestations of genius and originality over mere talent and regularity – along with his ability to conflate his artistic reputation with that of Shakespeare – would certainly have influenced

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Pilkington, *A Dictionary of Painters, from the revival of the Art to the present period. A new edition, with considerable alterations, additions, an appendix, and an index*, by Henry Fuseli (London, 1805). Fuseli's brother, H.R. Füsslin published his *Kritisches Verzeichniss der besten ... Kupferstiche* a year later, analysing 26 of Bloemaert's prints, while Fuseli's father, John Caspar Füssli, mentions Bloemaert and his sons in his *Raisonirendes Verzeichniss der vornehmsten Kupferstecher und ihrer Werker*, published in 1771.

Boydell's commissioning of the artist for a relatively large number of canvases from carefully-selected Shakespearean plays. For Fuseli himself, the experience fulfilled his artistic and celebrity ambitions, and prompted him to an over-confidence in the marketability of his artistic wares, leading to years of preparation for the opening of his Milton Gallery, a venture which failed to win the artist the kind of financial and critical recognition that he had hoped for. Even the very nature of Fuseli's canvases could not forestall the blatantly commercial nature of Boydell's enterprise. Despite their shadowy outlines, powdery paint surfaces, muted tones and economical technique, Fuseli's canvases demonstrated a surprising responsiveness to the reproductive process and acquired an altogether new dimension as they were given redefinition by line engraving. While this technique revealed the classicising tendencies at work in Fuseli's figures and compositions, the paintings themselves manifested a striking modernity of visual style, one entirely at odds with the perspective, definition and finish of Academic art. Thus, viewed in relation to each other (and Boydell, as we have seen, exhibited proofs or prints after the paintings in a lower room at the Shakespeare Gallery), Fuseli's canvases and their reproductive prints would have served not only to locate the artist within both camps of the classic and the modern, but also revealed him to be the consummate practitioner of an art which was simultaneously commercially viable and aesthetically ambitious.<sup>1</sup> For, while Fuseli's 'spirited' and 'wild' painterly technique retained both his commodified artistic persona and the ambitious aesthetic modernity of his art, the simultaneous receptiveness of this style to the process of engraving further guaranteed the commodification of his art and identity, at the same time as positioning him within the apparently oppositional site of the Academy and the classicising impulses of the line. Classic and modern, commercial and ambitious, Fuseli's art embodied the broader principles at work in Boydell's Gallery, providing a vivid exemplum for a progressive English School of art.

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<sup>1</sup> Fuseli would have regarded the engravings as a recognition of his artistic status. In his *Aphorism* 138, he pronounces that 'Translation and engraving, however useful to man or dear to art is the unequivocal homage of inferiority offered by taste and talent to the mastery of genius' (Knowles, Vol. III, p.113).

CHAPTER IV

‘ANOTHER HOGARTH IS KNOWN’:  
ROBERT SMIRKE’S *SEVEN AGES OF MAN*  
AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
THE ENGLISH SCHOOL

*'The long-lost mantle of William Hogarth'*

At the Royal Academy exhibition of 1796, the prolific Robert Smirke exhibited a painting entitled *The Conquest* (figure 61). The conquest in question is that of a young painter who has succumbed to the dubious charms of his female sitter as he transmutes her flabby features through the aestheticising medium of paint. Rendered flatteringly in profile within the young artist's canvas as a shepherdess whose flock of sheep gaze up at her adoringly, the corpulent sitter rather improbably finds herself attracting similar gazes within the painter's studio. Her elderly male companion waits dotingly for her, the canvas and easel preventing him from seeing the 'conquered' artist who sits enraptured – unable now to distinguish between the sitter and his fanciful artistic creation – his hand clasped to his heart. Smirke was not the first artist to poke fun at the vanity and delusion of those who sat for their portraits, or to suggest the troubling consequences of the gaze as it operated within the portrait painter's studio. But the painting is nonetheless an interesting contribution to the contemporary discussion surrounding portrait painting and art patronage, particularly coming from an artist who had managed to avoid the financial need, or temptation, to pursue portrait painting in order to guarantee or augment his income. It is also unusual in being a satirical commentary on the practice of portraiture that actually made it onto the walls of the Academy's exhibition room. As the painting hung within the space of Somerset House, surrounded by dozens of portraits of fashionable sitters painted by Smirke's fellow artists and Academicians, it would have offered a sly sidelong observation on these other works, and separated Smirke from them.<sup>1</sup>

Smirke's simultaneous inclusion within, and separation from, the body of works executed by his fellow-exhibitors offers a telling commentary on the painter's artistic ideals, practices and aspirations at this time. A celebrated book

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<sup>1</sup> According to the ordering in the Academy exhibition catalogue for 1796, Smirke's painting would have hung alongside a 'portrait of a young lady' by Beechey and another 'portrait of a lady' by Hewson. Excluding the miniatures (which numbered almost 130 and were nearly all portraits) and portraits of animals, there were over 170 portraits in the exhibition that year.



illustrator, Smirke made his living primarily through the commissions he received from publishers such as Boydell, Bowyer and Charles Taylor to produce paintings and drawings for the purposes of engraving. This seems to have provided him with a lucrative enough income to entirely avoid the potential taint of portraiture. During the late 1780s and early 90s he produced a substantial body of work for Boydell's and Bowyer's galleries, this time with the added benefit of being asked to execute canvases for the purposes of exhibition as well as engraving, and – as we have seen – of finding his name mentioned simultaneously with those of Northcote and Fuseli by critics who were keen to identify a new generation of the English school.<sup>1</sup> Thus, on the opening of Boydell's Gallery, Smirke had found himself able to sidestep the appellation of a being a 'mere' book illustrator and was able to move, apparently seamlessly, into the role of history painter.<sup>2</sup> *The Conquest's* implicit suggestion that its author was both part of the Academy (Smirke had been elected a full member in 1792), and detached from its visual practice, was borne out by the fact that Smirke had previously exhibited only six works at the Academy, nearly all of them subjects from the highly-esteemed works of Milton and Thomson, and none of them portraits. Smirke's other two exhibits in the 1796 exhibition, both of them scenes from Shakespeare, would – when seen in conjunction with *The Conquest* - have suggested their author's ambition to avoid the still-pervasive practice of 'face-painting' that dominated the Academy exhibitions.

Shortly after the 1796 Academy exhibition opened, Joseph Farington recorded in his diary that Smirke was proposing to paint on speculation a series of paintings depicting the Seven Ages of Man from *As You Like It*.<sup>3</sup> Possibly Smirke may have hit upon this idea after seeing James Northcote's series of six paintings in the exhibition depicting the fortunes of a 'modest' and a 'wanton' girl – a loose amalgamation of the didactic narratives of Richardson's *Pamela* and Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress* and *Industry and Idleness*. Or perhaps he wished to capitalise

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<sup>1</sup> *St. James's Chronicle* (5-7 May 1789) p.4, quoted in Chapter I.

<sup>2</sup> To compound the question of dubious artistic origins, Smirke had started out his career as a carriage painter.

<sup>3</sup> *Farington*, II, 538. My account of the painting's progress from conception to exhibition at the RA is gleaned from sketchy information throughout Volume III of Farington.

on the success he had achieved in the early years of the Shakespeare Gallery as the legitimate successor of Hogarth - something Northcote's series showed him very clearly *not* to be. While the critics berated Northcote for his 'feeble attempts, in the manner of the great Hogarth', it seemed that the problem was not one of presumption in daring to emulate 'the celebrated master', but a failure in conception and execution.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Smirke – whose depiction of the *Conquest* of the portrait painter was much admired by most critics – was admonished by a dissenting critic for the nature of his aesthetic inclination, which seemed to be deviating *away* from Hogarth – by now widely recognised by audiences as being Smirke's main artistic model. '[B]eware, Mr. S.', the *London Packet* warned, 'of the extravaganza of Rowlandson, it will add nothing to your reputation. Hogarth is your only model.'<sup>2</sup> Possibly heeding this advice, and no doubt unwilling to disappoint the expectations of his audience, Smirke planned his next project along the lines of a Hogarthian 'progress'. Whatever his motivations, apparently confident of attracting a buyer, he went ahead and painted his series intermittently over the next two years – not a move without its risks, given the state of the contemporary art market.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1798, Smirke exhibited the completed series of paintings (Figures 62 -68) at the Royal Academy where, as Thomas Dibdin later recalled, they joined Lawrence's portrait of *Kemble as Coriolanus* in being 'the great stars of that year's attraction'.<sup>4</sup> Although an initial possibility of a buyer for the canvases had by now fallen through, Smirke was assiduous in exploiting his relationship with Boydell to ensure that the publisher eventually purchased the

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<sup>1</sup> Both the *St. James's Chronicle; or, British Evening Post* (30 April -3 May 1796), p.4 and the *London Packet; or, New Lloyd's Evening Post* (25-27 April 1796), p.4 noted Northcote's aspiration and failure to emulate Hogarth.

<sup>2</sup> *London Packet; or, New Lloyd's Evening Post* (2-4 May 1796), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Not only were entrepreneurs like Boydell running into financial difficulties having effectively lost their export market, but there was a deluge of Old Master paintings coming into England from the continent, particularly France, as a result of political events. Despite the prevailing discourse of the English School, collectors would have been more inclined to purchase a work by an old Master rather than a contemporary artist. Smirke also faced the added difficulty of trying to sell seven canvases to the same buyer. It is likely that he was expecting to make money through the publication of engravings after the paintings.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Dibdin, *Reminiscences of a Literary Life* (1836), Vol I, p. 136n.

work.<sup>1</sup> When originally approached in March 1797 Boydell had declined, claiming that times were difficult and that he could not pay the 45 guineas per canvas which Smirke was asking. Eventually, shortly after the opening of the 1798 exhibition, they reached an agreement on a price of 150 guineas, with the expense of the frames to be divided – less than half the amount Smirke had initially hoped for.<sup>2</sup> Just a day after the price had been settled, Smirke received an enquiry from another potential buyer – the painter and sculptor, George Garrard – who had seen the paintings in the exhibition and wished to know whether they were sold. Hoping to make a bit more money than he had received from Boydell, Smirke applied to the print-publisher to allow him to sell the painting on better terms, allowing Boydell to reserve the right to engrave them. Boydell refused to part with them, saying that the pictures were now part of his stock – by now an immense accumulation of ‘English School’ paintings and copper plates.<sup>3</sup> The paintings appeared in the Shakespeare Gallery shortly after this and, despite their smaller size, were engraved for the folio of prints rather than within the smaller series destined for the book edition.<sup>4</sup>

For many critics Smirke’s previous paintings for Boydell, more than those of any other painter, had served to illuminate the particular visual qualities of the British School.<sup>5</sup> His early works for the Shakespeare Gallery were largely comic paintings, and the most celebrated of these – his scenes from *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Figures 69 - 71) – were immediately lauded by critics for their proximity to Hogarth’s

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<sup>1</sup> George Beaumont told Farington that Sir Charles Long was considering purchasing the series (Farington, II, 538).

<sup>2</sup> And quite possibly substantially less than half – frames could often represent a significant expense for painters or buyers.

<sup>3</sup> As we saw in Chapter 1, when Sophie von la Roche visited Boydell’s Cheapside shop, she had described its contents as ‘an immense stock, containing heaps and heaps of articles’ (Von la Roche, p.237). By 1803, the Boydells had accumulated over 5000 copper plates, as can be seen from their *Alphabetical Catalogue of Plates...* (London, 1803).

<sup>4</sup> Smirke’s seven paintings were the only Shakespearean works to enter the Shakespeare Gallery that had not previously been commissioned by Boydell, with the exception of Northcote’s scene from *Richard III* which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1786.

<sup>5</sup> This, I am suggesting, is something rather different to the impulses behind Fuseli’s paintings for Boydell, which served to exemplify the originality and liberty of English artists rather than embodying particular visual practices or styles which could be recognised as being specifically English.

humour.<sup>1</sup> *The Gazetteer*, for example, praised the ‘variety of genius and blaze of excellence’ of Smirke’s scene from *Much Ado about Nothing* (depicting the villains, Conrade and Borachio brought before the Sexton by the ridiculously inept Dogberry and Verges) in terms which made clear Smirke’s natural affinity to both Hogarth and Shakespeare:

To catch the living manners as they rose – to discriminate, and mark the peculiar character of the age he lived in – to give every passion its appropriate stamp, and every countenance its leading mark – in one work, to tell a story to the eye, was the great praise of William Hogarth; - but Hogarth was not happy in painting from the ideas of other men, - nor could Hogarth draw more of the human figure than the face. To enter into the spirit of Shakespeare – to mark the characters of our divine bard with the fullest comprehension and minutest precision, and express the passions by which they are agitated with the most perfect comic humour – to be ludicrous, without deviating into *caricature*, and at the same time to draw correctly, is the great praise of the painter of this picture.<sup>2</sup>

Smirke’s visual power was perceived to reside in his ability to reconcile Hogarth, Shakespeare and empirical truth – three peculiarly English entities. Many critics commented upon Smirke’s perceived superiority to Hogarth who – they claimed – frequently trespassed beyond the confines of truth and propriety, into the realm of caricature. Smirke’s talents, meanwhile, enabled him not only to appropriate ‘the long-lost mantle of William Hogarth’ but also to avoid the excesses of caricature in order to delineate beauty in a form which was perceived by critics viewing the scene from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to be peculiarly English.<sup>3</sup> Here, in his depiction of Anne Page, Smirke was recognised by the critics to be sufficiently responsive to Shakespeare’s text to have avoided the pitfalls which other painters may well have succumbed to. The *Public Advertiser* noted that ‘when some of our artists wish to give a representation of an English beauty,

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<sup>1</sup> Smirke’s other paintings for the Shakespeare Gallery were (in the large series) scenes from *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, another scene from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and two scenes from *1 Henry IV*. He also produced sixteen smaller paintings which were engraved for the book edition.

<sup>2</sup> *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (9 May 1789), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> *The Public Advertiser* (26 March 1789), p.4.

they resort to a Grecian model, and the fashion of this country not warranting the cloathing her in wet drapery, they ransack the wardrobe of the playhouse' (a tendency which Smirke had apparently avoided, giving the viewer 'pure, genuine, unadulterated nature' rather than stealing 'from marble or from the theatre'), while the *Diary* noted that 'Anne Page, it is true, does not possess the grace of a modern fine Lady, but the grace of Shakespeare; and, if she could start from the canvas, we believe her attractive simplicity would bear away the palm of admiration, even from the splendid throng of fashionable beauties that daily croud the gallery'.<sup>1</sup>

Smirke's ability – in his depiction of Anne Page, Slender and Simple – to simultaneously evoke Hogarthian humour, Shakespeare's perspective on mankind, and 'true English beauty' offered a consolidated model of Englishness which was premised upon the specificity of these three qualities to a national (as opposed to a foreign or universal) culture. It was a model which Smirke recycled for his *Seven Ages of Man*, but also expanded upon in order to produce a series of paintings which offered an extended commentary of the qualities and components of the English School of painting. This chapter will examine the centrality of Smirke's series of paintings from *As You Like It* to the production of a distinctively English form of visual culture at work in the Shakespeare Gallery. In particular, it will look at how Smirke's seven canvases sought to construct and redefine the British School, and to contribute to Boydell's attempts to germinate a national school of painting. By looking at the internal dynamics of these canvases, as well as the transitions they made – from the space of the Royal Academy exhibition to the Shakespeare Gallery, and finally to printed form – we shall see that Smirke's series not only played a crucial part in the consolidation of Boydell's project, but also offered a perspective on the English School that worked beyond the immediate space of the Shakespeare Gallery.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Public Advertiser* (25 March 1790), p.2 and *The Diary; or, Woodfall's Register* (29 March 1790), p.2.

Smirke's series visualises the famous passage from *As You Like It*, the allegorical 'All the world's a stage' speech in which the cynical Jaques looks outwards from the Forest of Arden to the wide world beyond and declares that:

.....All the world's a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players,  
 They have their entrances and their exits,  
 And one man in his time plays several parts,  
 His acts being seven ages.

Jaques goes on to detail, with characteristic pessimism, the seven ages of life, each of which are translated by Smirke into a modern-day parable. In the first stage of life, man starts out as an 'infant / Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms'. Smirke's scene (Figure 62) dispenses with the unpleasant imagery suggested by Jaques in favour of a seemingly more sentimental scene in which an infant sits in his nurse's arms, within a neat cottage interior. This ostensibly harmonious setting - where a dog, cat and bird harmoniously co-exist, and where a black servant, wealthy mother and daughter, and a nurse and her labouring-class husband are brought together - stages and naturalises a complex set of relations between class, race and gender, all of which are negotiated through the common humanity invoked by the contemplation of the young infant. In the second stage (Figure 63), the protagonist is shown having grown into a

.... whining schoolboy with his satchel  
 And shining morning face, creeping like a  
 snail  
 Unwillingly to school.

Poised at the centre of an elaborate landscape composition, the young boy pauses – apparently lost in reverie – the backward inclination of his head suggesting his unwillingness to continue his journey to school. In the third canvas (Figure 64), we find the schoolboy transformed to youthful lover, 'sighing like a furnace / With a woeful ballad made to his mistress' eyebrow.' As he sits poised to write, two canvases – one depicting Cupid and Psyche, and the other a triumphant

Cupid sitting astride an orb – hang on a wall behind him, providing a commentary on his apparently love-stricken state. Our protagonist reaches manhood in the fourth scene (Figure 65), as a soldier,

Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard  
 Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel  
 Seeking the bubble reputation,  
 Even in the canon's mouth.

Anxious to be the first among his fellow-soldiers to reach the summit and raise the flag of victory in response to the retreating ships in the distance, he glances defiantly behind him claiming the success as his, while he directs his exhausted and resentful comrades to the next stage of the battle. The next scene (Figure 66) finds him retired from the army and serving as a local Justice

In fair round belly with good capon lined  
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut  
 Full of wise saws and modern instances.

Chastising a weeping pregnant girl and her lover (who has interesting echo of the protagonist's own state in the third painting), he and his companions pompously assume shocked and severe expressions, while their stout figures and ruddy complexions suggest their own tendencies to corporeal indulgence, and a series of heraldic pictures on the wall offer an ironic commentary on the gap between the protagonist's sense of self importance and the reality of his career as a soldier. The sixth age (Figure 64) presents him as an avaricious and obdurate old man, a

...lean and slippred Pantaloon,  
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank, and his big, manly voice,  
 Turned again toward childish treble, pipes  
 And whistles in his sound.

From the doorstep of his large but unwelcoming house he turns away a disabled man and his family, refusing them charity while a ferocious dog seems poised to attack the impoverished visitors. Finally (Figure 68), we encounter him in ‘second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.’ Immobile and seated in a chair, his oblivious companions are a sleeping nurse and a young child, intent upon his house of cards which has just stated to tumble. The inclusion of various *momentos mori* within the composition – paintings of a ruined castle, of the victory of Time and Death, and of Folly enthroned, as well as the snuffed candle and the house of cards – all suggest that our protagonist is now on the brink of death.<sup>1</sup>

As the scenes alternate between exterior and domestic spaces, buttressed by images of birth and death, they offer an uncomfortable commentary on the nature and conduct of modern man. Glancing across Smirke’s series we can see immediately that he has consolidated the debt to Hogarth which critics were quick to identify in his earlier works for Boydell, producing a dubious ‘progress’ of man from the innocence of infancy to a final, unheroic demise which mirrored the careers of Hogarth’s famous protagonists, Tom Rakewell, Tom Idle and Moll Hackabout. This format actually represented a highly unusual staging of the Ages of Man within pictorial dimensions: these ‘ages’ were traditionally amounted to three or five, and the subject had a venerable and long-established art-historical lineage, beginning in the Middle Ages and most famously delineated by Titian, Giorgione and Dosso Dossi. Although the sixteenth-century iconography of this motif varied (figures 72 & 73), the established means of representing the ages of man was through their simultaneous depiction within the format of a single canvas – a formula which Benjamin West deployed when considering the subject in 1783 (figure 74). Smirke’s rejection of this generalised scheme, in which youth, manhood and old age are simultaneously staged across a single canvas, in favour of a more particularised narrative

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<sup>1</sup> The subjects of these paintings have been identified by Richard Hutton in his short catalogue, *Alderman Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery*, University of Chicago (1978). I can see no reason to disagree with his conclusions.



suggests a desire to depart from a continental tradition, and to immerse himself within a more local one: one which had been pioneered by Hogarth.

In many ways this was an entirely natural route for Smirke to have chosen. As we have seen, on the Shakespeare Gallery's opening, he had received the instant and rapturous acclaim of the critics whose overwhelming tendency it was to pronounce him a 'second Hogarth'.<sup>1</sup> For the public and critics, the emergence of Smirke into this emulative category was timely and welcome. His earlier paintings for the Shakespeare Gallery came at the height of a veritable cult of Hogarth during which the public was inundated with publications and anecdotes about the artist, and there was an increased demand for his engravings which consequently soared in price. Publications about Hogarth in the 1780s and 90s included the fourth volume of Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting* (1780), John Nichol's *Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth* (published in 1781 with longer subsequent editions in 1782 and 1785) and John Ireland's *Hogarth Illustrated* (published in 1790 by Boydell, with a supplement containing Hogarth's manuscript writings published eight years later). Collectively, these publications offered a sustained commentary of the life and work of a painter who was coming to be regarded by many as the figurehead of the English School.<sup>2</sup>

Critics and artists – tired, as we have seen, of the hegemony of the continental schools in Academic and connoisseurial discourse – were quick to detect and direct the practice of a more parochial and humorous style. In May 1790, *Walker's Hiberian Magazine* published an extract from a letter written by a 'celebrated Connoisseur'. This 'connoisseur', far from adopting the accepted terminology and preferences of his kind, noted that

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<sup>1</sup> *The St. James's Chronicle; or, British Evening-Post* (14-16 May 1789), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Although many commentators credited Reynolds with this role, Hogarth's reputation was being reassessed at the end of the century to the extent that he offered a serious challenge to Reynolds's position as the originator of an English School. On this challenge, and the extent to which it hinged upon Hogarth's expounding of a cluster of distinctively national visual terms, as opposed to Reynolds's supra-national, universal theoretical concerns, see Martin Postle, 'In Search of the 'True Briton': Reynolds, Hogarth and the British School' in Brian Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 121-143.

The lovers of humour were inconsolable for the loss of Hogarth, but from his ashes a number of sportive geniuses have sprung up, and the works of Bunbury, Anstey, Nixon Rowlandson, &c. &c. have entertained us with an infinite variety of subjects, represented in a new and uncommon style, which though it may fall under the rigid frown of the austere virtuoso, who can relish nothing that is not of the Roman school, yet the sons of mirth and good-humour will still laugh in spite of the dictatorial fiat of the diletanti.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen in Chapter II, the failure of English artists to please the admirers of the Roman school was something that could be construed in positive, patriotic terms. The desirability of a localised aesthetic practice frequently found expression in the 1780s and 90s in a search for the legitimate successor of Hogarth, who was not only (according to many commentators) an ‘original genius’ but had himself militated against the classical and continental traditions. While the artists mentioned by our ‘celebrated connoisseur’ broadly continued the tradition of national satire and caricature in their own particular ways, other artists were far more blatant in their appropriation of Hogarth’s compositions and narratives. Shortly after Hogarth’s death John Collet, for example, produced a series of four paintings entitled *Modern Love*. Here, a young couple proceed from ‘courtship’ and ‘elopement’ to a ‘honeymoon’ and ‘discordant home’ which are described by way of multiple references to Hogarth’s *Marriage à la Mode* (Figures 75 and 76).<sup>2</sup> Later in the century pictorial quotation from Hogarth was still going strong, with Francis Wheatley reconfiguring the third and fifth plates of the *Harlot’s Progress* to describe a contemporary *Den of Thieves* (Figure 77), and the satirist James Gillray frequently quoting from Hogarth.<sup>3</sup> In the decades following Hogarth’s death, such quotations would have

<sup>1</sup> *Walker’s Hiberian Magazine*, Vol 21, Part I (1790), p.385.

<sup>2</sup> Published by Thomas Bradford as a set of engravings in 1766, the series was subsequently re-published by Boydell in 1782.

<sup>3</sup> Just one example is Gillray’s 1786 satire of the Prince of Wales and Mrs Fitzherbert, *The Morning after Marriage – or – A scene on the Continent*, which depicts the prince in the pose of the yawning wife in the second plate of *Marriage à la Mode*. For a discussion of Gillray’s [cont’d ...]

been hugely popular with visually literate viewers who could simultaneously participate in a playful process of recognition, and convince themselves of the continuity of Hogarth's visual practice and wit.

The Shakespeare Gallery itself participated in the fashionable 'Hogarthomania', as Edmund Malone called it, displaying Hogarth's *Painter and his Pug* and the controversial *Sigismunda* inside the Gallery, while Boydell himself issued new, high-quality impressions from Hogarth's copper plates.<sup>1</sup> Justifying the appearance of works such as Hogarth's 'not connected with the Shakespeare plan' in the Gallery in 1790, Boydell observed that 'most of them were painted ... on the same principal, upon which this great work [i.e. the Shakespeare Gallery] was originally undertaken - a desire of promoting an historical school of painting in England'.<sup>2</sup> In particular (though Boydell did not mention this fact), *Sigismunda* was one of the earliest historical paintings to be displayed in a public exhibition in England, having been exhibited in 1761 at the Society of Artists' exhibition: the display of this particular work therefore served to bring together ideologically two exhibition schemes which shared the intentions of encouraging and promoting English art.<sup>3</sup> Thus the reputation of Hogarth (and, by implication, his idiosyncratic opposition to the Academic) was yoked to the cause of the Shakespeare Gallery, providing Boydell with a powerful and celebrated precedent. Seen in this context, Smirke's works would have served to

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identification with Hogarth see Mark Hallett, 'James Gillray and the Language of Graphic Satire' in Richard Godfrey, *James Gillray: The Art of Caricature*, exh. cat. (London, Tate Gallery, 2001).

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Lord Charlemont dated 18 June 1781, Malone noted that '[P]eople here are all seized at present with an Hogarthomania ... Mr Walpole's book first gave rise to it, and a new life of Hogarth that is just published will probably greatly add to the disorder. Some small prints of his that were originally sold for a shilling now sell for fifteen and twenty, either as first impressions or because they contain some slight variations. Mr Steevens has gone so far as not only to collect a complete set of the first and best impressions of all his plates, but also the last and worst of the retouched ones, by way of contrast, to show at the same time all the varieties, and to set the value of the former in a more conspicuous light'. *The Manuscripts and correspondence of James, first Earl of Charlemont*, Vol 1 – 1745 – 1783, London (1891), pp. 382-3. Boydell bought Hogarth's plates shortly after Mary Hogarth's death, and was quick to issue a statement from authoritative engravers such as Bartolozzi and Woollett refuting the common claim that the plates had been retouched after Hogarth's death.

<sup>2</sup> Boydell, 1790, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Sigismunda*, along with six other canvases Hogarth sent to the 1761 exhibition, was the first of his canvases to be sent to a public exhibition: Hogarth did not exhibit at the opening exhibition of 1760. The painting was received negatively by contemporaries and remained unsold (though it had actually been commissioned) until 1790, when it was bought by Boydell.

conceal any seams between Boydell's venture and Hogarth's previous forays into the uncharted territory of an English School of painting, incorporating the Shakespeare Gallery into a broader historical discourse on the desirability and necessity of a national aesthetic.

Jaques's speech from *As You Like It* offered an ideal opportunity for Smirke to cultivate his pictorial proximity to Hogarth since Jaques's cynicism was perfectly fitting to the British graphic tradition and allowed the ages of man (traditionally an elevated art-historical subject) to be translated for the requirements of pictorial satire.<sup>1</sup> For Smirke to flaunt his aesthetic and ideological connections with Hogarth so blatantly is clearly indicative of yet another way in which the direction of an 'English School' was envisaged within the space of Boydell's Gallery. Yet, as we shall see in examining the canvases which Smirke produced, there was more at work than a simple emulation of his predecessor. Indeed, Smirke seems to have taken note of Anthony Pasquin's recently-published criticisms of his (i.e. Smirke's) 'grotesque' style and caricatured characters 'selected from among the crippled and distorted members of society'. Instead he diluted the Hogarthian humour of his work (a humour which Pasquin identified as incongruous with the concerns and ambitions of historical painting) within a varied repertoire of stylistic and generic practices.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being the recipient of an easily identifiable aesthetic 'influence', Smirke's images employ, and hold in tension, a dizzying array of iconographical quotations, stylistic references, pictorial codes and generic categories collected from a broad historical and geographical artistic tradition. This pictorial hybridity, as we shall see, was more than a simple demonstration on Smirke's part of his familiarity with a wide repertoire of visual languages. Rather, it highlighted two main concerns. First, it brought into play a wide and sustained range of references to the contemporary English School, thus both constructing and illuminating the basis of a self-consciously national art form. And secondly, it brought into play

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<sup>1</sup> On graphic satire in the eighteenth century, see Mark Hallett, *The Spectacle of Difference: Graphic Satire in the Age of Hogarth* (New Haven and London, 1999); Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven and London, 1996) and Timothy Clayton, *The English Print* (New Haven and London, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Antony Pasquin, *Memoirs of the Royal Academicians; being an attempt to improve the national taste*. London (1796), p. 130.

a fluctuating mode of spectatorship, one which moved across the categories of private and public, encapsulating contemporary concerns about the status and function of history painting. By both employing and subverting a variety of pictorial codes, Smirke was able to generate alternative narratives within Jaques's narrative – narratives which simultaneously offered a critique of contemporary society, and a sustained consideration, not just of the relationship of the public to art, but also of how contemporary artists had attempted to deal with this problematic relationship. We can best begin to suggest how this might have worked by looking in detail at the seven canvases, and identifying some of the quotations they deploy and the contemporary discourses they invoke.

### *Visualising the English School*

Collectively, Smirke's canvases – at both their most sentimental and their most shocking – invoke a number of contemporary discourses. Looking at the first 'age' of man, the infant being visited in his nurse's cottage by his fashionable mother, we can see that Smirke has represented a scenario which had become highly contentious by the end of the eighteenth century – the practice of sending new-born infants from middle and upper-class homes to live with wet nurses until they were weaned. This practice had been represented rather critically by George Morland ten years previously in his *Visit to the Child at Nurse* (Figure 78) – a painting which clearly inspired Smirke's composition – in which a fashionable mother takes an anxious-looking child from its nurse's arms, where the child clearly wishes to remain. More broadly, social commentators and writers of educational treatises, influenced by the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau (who, despite having placed all five of his illegitimate children in a foundling's home, was a firm advocate of family life), held the fashionable practice of hiring nurses to be responsible for the demise of modern man.<sup>1</sup> With the notable exception of the republican Catherine Macaulay – who indulged visions of public or 'Roman' nurseries (a concept obviously derived from Plato's

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, originally published 1762, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: 2001)

*Republic*) and believed that ‘milk overheated with midnight revels, and with the passionate agitations of a gamester’s mind, must have qualities rather injurious than beneficial to life’ – the majority of these writers tended towards Rousseau’s view that this practice weakened familial bonds, maternal solicitude and female morals.<sup>1</sup> Priscilla Wakefield, for example – writing in the same year as Smirke completed his series – denounced the practice of wet-nursing as unnatural and socially corrosive, exposing the extent to which the delegation of the mother’s ‘sacred task’ threatened the destruction of the country’s familial and class structures:

The helpless infant is not only banished from the arms of its mother, but is consigned to the care of a substitute, who is tempted, by the expectation of large gains, to abandon her husband and her family, to turn a deaf ear to the piteous cries of her own offspring for that nourishment, which she bestows upon a stranger. Too frequently the life of this deserted babe is sacrificed; the husband is rendered profligate; and the woman herself so much corrupted by her own mode of living, as to be unfitted to return to her humble station.<sup>2</sup>

Although far from explicit in Smirke’s first canvas, such comments force us to think again about the apparently sentimental picture we witness. Certainly the image reveals a number of tensions beneath the ostensible veneer of serene domesticity which call into question the harmony of the scene. The black servant, left outside the door of the cottage and growled at by the dog protecting its owner’s territory (anticipating the penultimate scene), acts as a reminder of a set of social relations which are far less amiable than the scene first suggests. The child, meanwhile, looks far from comfortable in the nurse’s arms and seems to be attempting to wriggle away – though not towards his sister, whose attentions he ignores. Finally, the nurse – seated between her husband and the

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education* (1790), p.38.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Wakefield, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex, with Suggestions for its Improvement* (London, 1798), p.17.

affluent mother who employs her – seems to corroborate Wakefield’s fears of the indeterminate social position of this woman’s profession. While her husband hovers at the sidelines of the image, mirroring the similarly alienated black servant on the opposite side of the scene, there is little sense of any parity between the couple and no sign of the nurse’s own child.

These pictorial tensions within the canvas work alongside a set of discernible art-historical interventions. Two earlier works by William Redmore Bigg (*The Charitable Lady* of 1787 – Figure 79) and George Morland (*The Comforts of Industry*, 1790 – Figure 80) offer examples of the kind of image Smirke – in a classic satiric strategy – is positioning his scene alongside and asking the viewer to recall. Drawing upon this fairly standardised iconography of benevolence – and simultaneously undermining it – Smirke’s image can be read as an ironic commentary upon women of rank who affected the occasional display of maternal tenderness and ‘charity’ with regard to their own children.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, another kind of pictorial borrowing – this time from Titian’s *Madonna and Child with St. Catherine and the Infant Baptist in a Landscape* (Figure 81) – adds another dimension to the critique. Adapting the central figures of Titian’s composition to his own domestic setting, Smirke ensures that the additional figures also take on this association. The sidelined figure of the nurse’s husband recalls the often pictorially-distanced figure of Joseph in several paintings of Nativity scenes, while the three visiting figures offer a feminised counterpart to the venerating Magi, one of whom (Balthassar) was traditionally represented as a Negro. But the Christian iconography suggested by this modern-day nativity scene is increasingly subverted, both by the narrative of Smirke’s series with its manifestly unchristian protagonist and the contemporary discourses which it invokes, positioning these references more firmly within the realm of the ironic than the metaphorical.

Rousseau’s criticisms of the practice of wet-nursing was part of a broader critique in his *Émile* (1762) of modern man. It was swiftly translated into

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<sup>1</sup> This represents another element of Rousseau’s critique, in which he observes the occasional ‘tricks of young wives who pretend they wish to nurse their own children. They take care to be dissuaded from this whim’ by their husbands, and especially their mothers (Rousseau, p.13).

English the same year it was published in France, and proved influential throughout Europe. Ostensibly a 'traité d'éducation', *Émile*'s main significance was as a work of moral philosophy, one based upon the premise that man is naturally good. While many moral philosophers (David Hume and Adam Smith being two obvious examples) treated the notion of man's essential humanity very much in the abstract, however, Rousseau's treatise offered a succession of examples of practices prevalent in contemporary society which demonstrated how far modern man had deviated from nature. Man's upbringing and early influences, and the social institutions he found himself constrained by, guaranteed that he emerged into adulthood knowing neither how to be a citizen nor how to be a man of nature – he was a sham, directed into servitude and alienated from his fellow men.<sup>1</sup>

Works of moral philosophy made a significant contribution (as well as adding moral and quasi-empirical authority) to the 'cult of sensibility' which gathered pace in the second half of the eighteenth century. This was a discourse upon which artistic theory and practice came increasingly to rely in order to guarantee the continued significance of the visual arts within the public sphere. Daniel Webb, for example, in his *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting* sidestepped the established civic discourse of art in order to argue that paintings should 'melt the soul into a tender participation of human miseries ... give a turn to the mind advantageous to society [so that] every argument of sorrow, every object of distress, renews the same soft vibrations, and quickens us to acts of humanity and benevolence'.<sup>2</sup> David Solkin has made a powerful argument for the adaptations which history painting found itself having to make in the second half of the century to meet the demands of a new art-viewing public. Smirke's series of paintings, we can suggest, destabilised and undercut many of these new pictorial codes to present a view of modern man more akin to the version described by Rousseau.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Webb, *An Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting* (London, 1760), p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Although Smirke's biography remains sketchy, he was known for his republican views, holding the belief that monarchy was an 'effect of a corrupt society', a view which clearly has much in common with Rousseau's thinking.



Following on from Smirke's first scene (in which the essential goodness of the child is hinted at as being all-too transitory), we come to an apparently sentimental image of a schoolboy posed in a landscape which – despite its pictorial affinity with fancy pictures such as Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* – suggests yet another correlation with Rousseau's critique. Landscape painting was, in the second half of the eighteenth century, becoming invested with an increasingly public function. John Barrell has demonstrated that the comprehension of such far-reaching and complex landscapes as those of Claude Lorrain (a pictorial tradition which the right hand side of the composition clearly draws upon) became a means of legitimating one's fitness for public life. Such landscapes depended for their meaning upon a distinction from enclosed, occluded landscapes indicative of privacy or seclusion from public life.<sup>1</sup> Smirke's canvas brings these oppositions into play at opposite sides of the canvas, poisoning his protagonist squarely in the middle of them. Unwilling to follow the path to school / the outside world, the young boy's head is inclined lazily towards home, already engaged in a hesitancy between public and private life at this formative stage in his youth.

The negative connotations of the first two canvases are relatively subtle at this stage, but they acquire stronger meaning in the course of the subsequent narrative which Smirke delineates. Progressing through the series, we are left with little doubt that the protagonist – poised in the second canvas between public and private life – exemplifies Rousseau's bourgeois man, unable to fulfil the role of a citizen in the classical republican sense, and equally unfitted for a life of virtuous, sentimental retirement. In the third scene, we encounter him ensconced within the private sphere, not with any sense of virtuous retirement, but rather defined through the pictorial language of both Hogarth's works and French erotic painting. Here viewers may have regarded the slightly disorderly boudoir scene as approximating the interior *Before* and *After* paintings by Hogarth, possibly borrowed from the French painter, François de Troy (Figures 82 & 83).

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<sup>1</sup> John Barrell, 'The Private Prospect and the Public View: The Politics of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain' in his *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* (Basingstoke and London, 1992), Chapter 3.

Although the seduction has not yet been accomplished here, it is clearly signalled to by means of a circular narrative operating within the canvas. Starting from the bottom right of the canvas, we can trace a trail of discarded garments moving towards the bed (on which the young lover's eye seems to have furtively fallen), suggesting the lover's desires. Then across the top of the canvas, as the two paintings invite us to read them from left to right, we are presented with a narrative of desire and conquest which undercuts the image of the sighing and inept lover of Shakespeare whose desire is channelled into the chaste contemplation of his mistress's eyebrow. In the first picture, the presence of Cupid and Psyche hints at doomed love and the eventual abandonment of the woman by her lover, while the triumphant Cupid sitting astride an orb (a visual illusion used by Fragonard in his depiction of a forsaken woman, *L'Abandonnée* (Figure 84) painted during the 1780s) consolidates this cruel narrative. Viewers would have been accustomed to 'read' such pictorial clues offered by suggestive paintings within the painting, and to construct the sequence of events which they alluded to. John Ireland's *Hogarth Illustrated* (1790), for example, showed Ireland to be proficient in deciphering precisely this kind of visual shorthand, which Hogarth habitually constructed across his various series: reading carefully-chosen paintings or sculptures within the canvas was an established art-historical practice which attempted to deal with the pictorial limitations of space and time, and which had been invited by a number of Northern European painters, including Vermeer and Watteau.

The fourth scene represented Smirke's protagonist in no less negative a light. When the series was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1798, the critic of the *St James's Chronicle* (Smirke's sole detractor among the generally favourable reviews) singled out this canvas for particular criticism, noting that 'when a young hero should have been personified, [Smirke] has given a short, ill-proportioned, ill-drawn figure'.<sup>1</sup> Choosing to ignore (or wilfully misunderstanding) the textual basis of Smirke's series (the Royal Academy catalogue, like that of the Shakespeare Gallery included the relevant excerpt from *As You Like It*), the critic clearly had certain visual expectations for the

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<sup>1</sup> *St. James's Chronicle; or, British Evening Post* (26-28 April 1798), p.4.

depiction of military scenes, expectations which Smirke had (for good reason) failed to fulfil.

Certainly, the scene draws upon the patriotic battle paintings which had become hugely popular by the end of the eighteenth century – scenes in which artists such as John Singleton Copley and Philip J de Loutherbourg depicted the victorious soldiers, heroic martyrs and swirling flags that suggested the military and moral superiority of the Britain over her enemies (Figure 85). Yet Smirke's painting appears to recall such images only in order to refute their pictorial and ideological construction. The 'revolution of history painting' in the second half of the eighteenth century had resulted in the portrayal of contemporary heroes who were 'depicted as ordinary men' and defined by attributes which secured them within a network of social ties instead of elevating them above their comrades.<sup>1</sup> Thus, both dying heroes and living victors were positioned pictorially within a carefully-constructed social structure which took care to position the civilizing and humanizing virtues alongside more traditional and masculine heroic qualities. David Solkin has shown that this pictorial format represented one among a number of negotiations in the visual arts through which artists sought to account for and consolidate a new kind of viewing public – a middle-class audience, inclusive of women, best appealed to through common sentiments and sympathies.<sup>2</sup> We saw in Chapter I how Daniel Dodd attempted to depict the exhibition of Copley's *Death of the Earl of Chatham* in 1781 (Figure 2) in terms which made clear the painting's ability to bring together and consolidate the disparate members of the viewing public. Although Dodd's image depicts viewers of a non-military death, painters such as Copley and Benjamin West frequently deployed this compositional formula in representing the battlefield, inviting viewers who would never ordinarily have witnessed such a scene to share and participate in the collective gaze and sentiments of a group of surrogate spectators within the canvas (Figure 81).

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'revolution of history painting' was coined by Edgar Wind in his *Hume and the Heroic Portrait: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Imagery* (Oxford, 1986), pp.88-99. For a more detailed analysis of how this 'revolution' manifested itself in relation to the public sphere, see Solkin (1993), pp.190-213.

<sup>2</sup> This was as opposed to the public articulated within the discourse of civic humanism by political and art theorists, and described by John Barrell (1986).

While contemporary history painting almost invariably adopted a pictorial formula which carefully constructed a cohesive, civilized and consensual public sphere both within and beyond the canvas, Smirke's image of the victorious soldier – at the same time as it recalls such scenes – works rather differently. Detached from his comrades, the soldier stands alone on the summit, his only concern being the fame – described disdainfully by Shakespeare as 'the bubble reputation' – which military success will guarantee him. Here, there is no sense of collective interests or shared sentiments – rather the group of soldiers is fragmented and disjointed, an assemblage of awkward postures, distrustful glances and averted gazes. Smirke's ambitious protagonist does not seek comradeship and brotherhood with his exhausted fellow soldiers, but desires instead to be elevated above them, to be distinguished from the rest of his countrymen for the sake of mere personal fame, rather than seeing his actions on the battlefield as contributing to a broader set of social and political concerns. Ignoring his struggling comrade who attempts to haul himself up to the top of the rock, the 'jealous' soldier is concerned only to direct his men towards the next stage of the battle, where their exertions will guarantee his own fame and fortune.

In the next 'age' Smirke extends the satirical inflections evident in his previous canvases and immerses himself firmly within the pictorial tradition of Hogarth, incorporating a blend of humour, satire and narrative detail. This kind of 'examination' scene was a popular one with Smirke who – as we have seen – produced two similar ones for the Shakespeare Gallery, one from *Much Ado about Nothing* (see Figure 69) of Dogberry and his colleagues interrogating Conrade and Boracchio, and another from *Measure for Measure* depicting Escalus, Elbow and Froth (see Figure 70). This sub-genre of painting was in turn derived from Hogarth who had, in his early career, produced a number of such scenes, including *The Denunciation, or a Woman Swearing a Child to a Grave Citizen* (Figure 86) and Shakespeare's *Falstaff Examining his Recruits* (Figure 87). Full of 'wise saws ('sayings') and examples of recent legal precedents ('modern instances'), the three figures interrupt each other, each eager to be the authority in this situation. Visibly modelled on Hogarth's Falstaff, our

protagonist – now significantly more ‘round bellied’ than when we last encountered him – attempts to silence his guests in order to address the abashed couple. His hardened expression promises to yield little sympathy for the young man and woman (she hiding her face in shame, reminiscent of the female victims of Tom Rakewell and Viscount Squanderfield, and he, drooping and emasculated, covering his groin area with his hat) who have become something of a spectacle for the groups of spectators spilling in at each side of the room.

While Hogarth’s painting of *Falstaff Examining his Recruits* had distributed the signs of corruption, pomposity and ineptitude across the canvas, representing each one of his figures as an object of ridicule, there is a more uncomfortable dynamic at work in Smirke’s canvas. Here, the pathetic figures of the young man (modelled on a figure from Greuze’s *The Marriage Contract* (Figure 88) for full sentimental impact) and woman are confronted and juxtaposed with the embodiments of self-importance and bigotry assuming the role of authority and power.<sup>1</sup> While the combined spectacle of the shamed couple and their pompous jurors produces laughter in the viewing officers and servants, our perspective on these juxtaposed figures is a rather more uncomfortable one. The authorised hypocrisy of the justice and his ruddy-cheeked colleagues as they indulge themselves with alcoholic refreshment and a sense of moral superiority gives an unpleasant edge to the humour of the scene, which is more in tune with Hogarth’s modern moral subjects than the comfortably comical Falstaff painting.

Smirke’s subtle reconfiguration of Hogarth’s humorous perspective on Falstaff in the fifth age becomes a fully-realised inversion of established pictorial practice in the penultimate scene. Here we are confronted with the uncomfortable scenario of the ageing protagonist refusing charity to an impoverished family while he retreats back into his large home. In this scene – as in the first – Smirke draws upon the established iconographies of benevolence and contented rusticity, frequently staged in the second half of the eighteenth century by sentimental painters such as Wheatley, Morland, Gainsborough, William Bigg and Edward

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to Greuze’s *Marriage Contract* can also, of course, be construed as ironic given the situation of the young couple, particularly since it is unclear whether the young man is willing to marry his lover.

Penny. In such images, the rural poor are either represented as self-sufficient and contented with their lot, or else as the grateful recipients of aristocratic benevolence. Such images offered clear visual paradigms by way of demonstrating the means by which the poor could be represented (and, by implication, ‘could *not* be represented’), and class relations staged, within the composition.<sup>1</sup> As just one example of this pervasive practice of pictorial hygiene and negotiation, we can turn to Gainsborough’s *Charity Relieving Distress* (Figure 89), in which a servant girl from a wealthy household distributes her employer’s leftovers to a poor family. It is likely that Smirke had Gainsborough’s painting in mind when he composed his sixth canvas which, like Gainsborough’s *Charity Reliving Distress* (known as *The Beggars* until 1801), features an unfriendly dog guarding the territory of its owner against the incursions of the poor.

While the dog in Gainsborough’s painting hinted at the tensions and alienation that were the products of a stratified society, a handful of images represented these problems far more blatantly. In William Beechey’s *Children of Sir Francis Ford giving Coin to a Beggar Boy* (Figure 90) of 1793, the children of a recently-created Baronet demonstrated the benevolent nature of their father (a man who, Martin Postle points out, ‘was not renowned for his good causes’) by giving money to a ragged, emaciated and pallid beggar boy.<sup>2</sup> This ostensible image of aristocratic benevolence nonetheless prompted one critic to question the *status quo* and suggest a reform of the English Poor Law.<sup>3</sup> It is not hard to see

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<sup>1</sup> See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: 1980). Both Barrell and Solkin have focused discussions upon such imagery, Barrell’s argument suggesting the illusionistic *absence* of class in various images of the rural poor, while Solkin offers a reading of Edward Penny’s *Marquis of Granby* in which class structures are dissolved into ties of sympathy and benevolence that form the basis for a new kind of ‘privatised history-painting’ (Solkin (1993), pp. 199-206). Both readings suggest ways in which problems inherent in the social structure and the public sphere might be negotiated or eliminated within pictorial space. What is common to both arguments is the understanding that class relations *as they are* and the tensions evident in the public sphere must not be represented within the elevated art forms of history or landscape painting – both genres, of course, objects of consumption for a middle class and aristocratic audience. (This audience was also an overwhelmingly *urban* audience, which could well explain the export of issues of poverty to a rural setting at a time when it was becoming an increasingly urban problem.)

<sup>2</sup> Martin Postle, *Angels and Urchins: The Fancy Picture in 18<sup>th</sup>-century British Art*, Ex. Cat (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery, 1998), p.93.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oracle*, quoted in Postle (1998), p.93.

why. Just as the half-curious, half-fearful Ford children are dressed in the fashionable finery of the day, so too the beggar boy is given all the physical attributes of his own rank. Stooping, lame, colourless and ragged, he extends his hand to the children, his drained and glazed face unable to meet the gaze of his benefactors. The spatial and psychological distance between the Ford children and the beggar boy is just about as palpable as it could be given the constraints of aristocratic portraiture, and, far from presenting a pleasing illusion of picturesque vagrancy, the painting offered a troubled access to the realities of poverty.<sup>1</sup> The *Oracle* observed that the figure of the beggar boy

cheats the eye so singularly, that he appears to tremble as he solicits alms. Your *Critic* here sensibly remarks, that Nature is violated when we shudder amid a scene of foliage. Heaven keep Poverty from thee, thou man of propriety!<sup>2</sup>

Here the critic offered a revealing commentary upon the unwelcome intrusion of real social concerns into the realm of the aesthetic and, more broadly, into the comfortable spaces of the fashionable Royal Academy exhibition and the collective conscience. An even more revealing image – *The Rocking Horse* (Figure 91) – was offered the same year by James Ward, depicting a wealthy brother and sister playing with expensive toys while a poor woman and her two children look on, separated from their wealthy counterparts by an iron gate which forms part of the estate boundary.

If Beechey's and Ward's paintings threatened to ruffle the surface of the illusion so carefully constructed by the guardians of cultural representation, then Smirke's portrayal of man as uncharitable and lacking in sympathy might be seen as shattering the illusion entirely. While the rustic family grouping, with the disabled father extending his hat to the protagonist for charity, offers a clear direction for benevolence on the part of Smirke's protagonist, he not only fails to take up this position, but resolutely rejects it. Here, the *Oracle's* commentary

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<sup>1</sup> The 'picturesqueness' of poverty became an increasingly popular aesthetic concept during the 1790s, with the publication of works by Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight on the picturesque.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oracle*, quoted in Postle (1998), p.93.

may well be adapted to caution, 'Heaven keep poverty from thee, thou man of property' – as the pictorial space of the painting makes clear that the wealthy and the poor occupy two entirely separate worlds which cannot be negotiated either spatially or psychologically. Retreating into his house, the miserly protagonist severs the ties of common humanity which moral philosophers, novelists and artists were eager to identify as operating within society and insists that the poor are no concern of his. His hostility and aggression towards his social inferiors is indicated by Smirke through the snarling and straining dog, clearly there to keep visitors away from this inhospitable house.

In the final scene, our protagonist meets his inevitable and unmourned end. For this anti-climactic image, Smirke most obviously finds pictorial recourse in the visual language of Dutch genre painting with its intimate interior space, *vanitas* motifs and slumbering servants – components which emphasised the fact that the scene had a moral to be decoded. More intriguingly, though, Smirke incorporates a number of references to Hogarth and his 'progresses'. As we have seen, pictorial quotations from Hogarth's work were not uncommon around this time. Wheatley's *Den of Thieves* (see Figure 77), for example, availed itself of the Harlot's narrative as a kind of visual shorthand within Wheatley's own version of contemporary crime. Yet within the witty visual narrative of Smirke's series, it is worth suggesting that they functioned as something rather more than a simply humorous reference to a popular artist. The protagonist, seated and half-shrouded in a chair by the fireplace, while a child engages in a precarious activity nearby, offers a bizarre and unsettling reminder of the demise of Moll Hackabout (Figure 92). Like Hogarth's Harlot, Smirke's anti-hero is presented as an alienated figure existing beyond the parameters of acceptable moral and social conduct – a figure whose behaviour poses a threat to the illusion of a polite and civilised public sphere.

But not content with simply referencing the *Harlot's Progress*, Smirke's scene also seems to situate itself as an anachronistic narrative predecessor to the history of Tom Rakewell. Looking at the first scene of Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* (Figure 93), which begins after the death of Tom's wealthy but miserly father, we can suggest that Smirke's image incorporates a number of features which



appear to prefigure the opening of Hogarth's *Progress*. The cheerless heath, abandoned crutches and empty candleholder are to be found in both images, with Smirke's protagonist occupying the empty chair and wearing the discarded outer garment we discover in Hogarth's scene. Meanwhile, the once frugal and sparse interior of Smirke's image positions itself as a temporal precedent to the chaos of Hogarth's scene, in which coins spill out of dismantled cornicing, cofferers are opened, and a mass of paperwork informs us of debts and mortgages. Thus, Smirke yokes a sense of continuity to his narrative, ensuring that is succeeded by a new narrative which is the direct result of the obduracy, greed and selfishness of his dying protagonist. The references to the Harlot and the Rake suggest the seriousness of our protagonist's crimes, associating his narrative with the moral and doom-ridden 'progresses' of Hogarth and reminding viewers that the human vices and follies satirised by Hogarth did not just belong to a now-distant era. By situating the young boy building a house of cards as a young version of Tom Rakewell, Smirke makes it clear that his anti-hero's crimes will not die with him but are perpetuated through subsequent generations. At the same time, this pictorial comment sealed his own artistic reputation as the legitimate successor of Hogarth.

As we have seen, the final images of Smirke's series become less ambiguous in turn, leaving us with a sense not of the 'progress' of man, but his regression from the innocence of infancy to the selfishness and corruption of manhood, and finally to a 'second childishness' tainted by the effects of his fruitless life. For one critic – otherwise disposed to praise Smirke as 'one of the select few whose productions contribute to rescue the name of an Academician from disgrace' – the inhumanity of Smirke's protagonist was an objectionable factor. While Smirke's 'female figures in general possess delicacy and sentiment, and in the comic cast his humour is exquisite', the critic could not 'help thinking that his countenances sometimes want the semblance of humanity, by approximating too much to the Cat and Cecropithecian [*sic*] tribe'.<sup>1</sup> No doubt the critic was referring in particular to the penultimate scene, for he was quick to praise the overtly Hogarthian fifth scene for the 'highly comic' portrayal of the 'round-

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<sup>1</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post* (1-3 May 1798), p.3.

bellied justice'. The approximation of the physiognomies and postures of various of Smirke's characters to cats and monkeys seems to have been an issue at times when the comic tone may have been deemed inappropriate, or even disturbing. Certainly Shakespeare's text did not call for the 'lean and slippered Pantaloon' to be depicted in the act of refusing charity, and the fusion of this comic description of old age with the serious and topical issue of benevolence and charity was hardly a savoury one. Detached from the exaggerated comedy of Hogarth which rendered the fifth and final stages (the critic's favourite two scenes) comfortably familiar, the penultimate 'age' presented the viewer with a depiction of human cruelty and avarice which was uncomfortably close to the bone. The distortion of the visual codes of a public art that hinged upon the viewer's alleged social and Christian sentiments (and which were now suggested to be entirely fictitious) added a new dimension to the kind of satirical humour pioneered by Hogarth, though both pictorial languages tended to point up the same weaknesses in mankind. Smirke's paintings, indeed, may have appeared closer to a depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins, than the Seven Ages of Man – another motif with a strong art-historical lineage, and one which was altogether more suited to the bleak narrative of Smirke's series.<sup>1</sup>

But if Smirke's protagonist failed to avail himself of the contemporary visual codes of heroism and benevolence, it was clear that the *Seven Ages of Man* offered the viewer another kind of hero altogether. The referencing of Hogarth, which – as we have seen – culminated in an overt positioning of the series alongside the celebrated "Progresses" of Smirke's predecessor, had the overwhelming effect of positing Hogarth as the hero of Smirke's series and, by implication, of the British School. Seen alongside actual works by Hogarth in the Shakespeare Gallery (and alongside the engravings from Hogarth's copper plates that were being published and sold by Boydell alongside the Shakespeare Gallery prints), the *Seven Ages of Man* positioned Hogarth as a serious history painter, a status which several commentators had previously denied him. While

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<sup>1</sup> Following this allegory, the first and final images in the series could be seen as the buttressing images for a life (initially innocent) which 'progresses' from childish sloth (second age), through lust (third age) to pride (fourth and fifth ages), envy (fourth age), wrath (fourth age), gluttony (fifth age) and avarice (sixth age) before meeting its just desserts.

Reynolds, for example, allowed that Hogarth had ‘invented a new species of dramattick painting, in which probably he will never be equalled’, he berated the artist for ‘very imprudently, or rather presumptuously attempt[ing] the great historical style’ – a comment which served to draw a clear distinction between the ‘domestick and familiar scenes of common life’ which Hogarth illustrated and the proper subjects and style of history painting.<sup>1</sup> Smirke’s series, however, served to blur the distinctions between these two genres of painting. By availing itself of the codes of contemporary history painting – even as he distorts these codes – in two of the scenes in particular, the *Seven Ages of Man* made the distinction between genre painting and history painting significantly less viable, and made clear the aspirations of the former to approach the status of a serious and moral art form.

Moreover, Smirke’s canvases suggested that pictorial satire offered something rather more than mere entertainment, that it could in fact be valued not only for its wit and dynamism but also for serving a clear public and moral function. History painting always threatened to bypass its public function by ‘addressing the Vanity and Nationality of John Bull’ (as John Trumbull put it) in showing the public not as it *was* but as it would like to be seen.<sup>2</sup> Partly coercive and partly flattering, it actually shared more with portraiture than theorists would have cared to admit. Smirke’s canvases, meanwhile, offered a comic yet serious depiction of modern man constructed through a range of contemporary discourses and critiques – on childcare, on bourgeois man’s inability to engage in civic life, on seduction, on ambition, on hypocrisy and on avarice – all of them immediately identifiable to contemporary viewers. More cynical than flattering, Smirke’s canvases offered the viewer a pointed critique of contemporary life, one which engaged the viewer in a more critical and reflective form of spectatorship than that invited by those painters seeking to invoke the illusion of a consensual and virtuous public sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse XIV, p.254.

<sup>2</sup> John Trumbull, *The Autobiography of Colonel John Trumbull, Patriot Artist, 1756-1843*, ed Theodore Sizer (New Haven and London, 1953), quoted in Clayton, *English Print*, p.236.

Smirke's visual practice, however, did not so much represent a challenge to the existing pictorial codes of contemporary history painting as – ultimately – a consolidation of them. For, if the scenes in Smirke's series worked by putting the viewer in mind of particular (and overtly public) modes of painting before distorting these visual codes, they served ultimately to reinforce these kinds of painting by providing a negative to their positive. In constructing a protagonist whose persona was built around a series of anti-types – the 'mewling infant', the lazy child, the youthful seducer, the self-seeking soldier, the corrupt justice, the miser and the friendless invalid – Smirke's satire simultaneously underpinned and consolidated a corresponding series of social constructions based around the discourses and imagery of sentiment, courtship, patriotism and benevolence which his *Seven Ages of Man* was never too far removed from. But, in reinforcing this imagery, the series demanded that its aesthetic and ideological ambitions be taken as seriously as those of painters such as West and Copley. As such, Smirke's *Seven Ages of Man* served not only to heroise Hogarth, but to construct and legitimate a narrative of the English School. The overtly Hogarthian format and tone of the series simultaneously gives way to an eclectic and multi-faceted referencing of a number of English painters, from the deceased Thomas Gainsborough (second and sixth age) and John Hamilton Mortimer (fourth age) to living artists such as Wheatley, Morland and Bigg, and even those artists such as West and Copley whose particular brands of history painting Smirke's canvases ostensibly distort. In this sense, Smirke's series operates as a kind of retrospective of the English School, a fact which would have further indicated its affinity with Boydell's enterprise since the Shakespeare Gallery itself contained a number of celebrated 'English School' paintings which had nothing to do with Shakespeare. Smirke's canvases thus brought into play the visual eclecticism of the English School and internalised its chief artistic personalities, themes and styles.

*An 'admirable set of cabinet pictures': the aesthetic of The Seven Ages of Man*

While there was clearly some sense among the critics that Smirke had failed to avail himself of the ideological codes (i.e. of the heroic, of benevolence or of sentiment) through which the public sphere was habitually represented, others bypassed these considerations in favour of commenting upon the formal qualities of the paintings. Here, again, Smirke found his series the subject of generally favourable reviews. The *Whitehall Evening Post* noted that the series 'exhibits a most agreeable assemblage of cabinet pictures, highly interesting to every admirer of the graphic art', while others described the works as 'exquisite', and noted the 'distinct scenes, fancifully wrought up, and beautifully pencilled.'<sup>1</sup> The recognition of the paintings as 'cabinet pictures' is an interesting one, and represented another aspect of Smirke's artistic identity at this time: in the 1796 Royal Academy exhibition, his painting of the *Conquest* had been praised by one critic as deserving 'a place among our finished cabinet pictures'.<sup>2</sup> This was a term which continued to be applied to the *Seven Ages of Man* at least until the paintings were sold in 1805, when a catalogue listing the works and their buyers advertised the paintings as among the Gallery's highlights on the title page, and referred to them as 'that admirable set of cabinet pictures.'<sup>3</sup> At the sale, the series was one of only three works to fetch a price greater than that which Boydell had originally paid to the artist, suggesting that they offered an appeal beyond that of the other paintings in the Gallery.<sup>4</sup> The use of the definition 'cabinet pictures' in relation to these works suggests a definite aesthetic category, one which had clear implications for the status of the series as historical paintings. Cabinet pictures were small-scale paintings designed specifically for display within a small reception room (the *cabinet de tableaux*) where their size and style were generally more of a consideration than the subject

<sup>1</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post* (1-3 May 1798), p.3, *London Packet; or, Lloyd's Evening Post* (25-27 April 1798), p.3; and *Morning Herald* (26 April 26 1798), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> *St. James's Chronicle; or, British Evening Post* (7-10 May 1796), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> [Anon] *A Catalogue of that truly valuable collection of pictures* [1805]

<sup>4</sup> The other two works were Reynolds's *Death of Cardinal Beaufort* (which just falls into this category in fetching £530. 5s. where Boydell had paid Reynolds £525) and Northcote's painting of the murder of the Princes in the Tower (which Boydell had bought from Northcote for the relatively low price of £42 before the Shakespeare Gallery was even conceived of, and which sold at the lottery for £105).

they depicted (figure 94). This was largely because the paintings in the cabinet were to be regarded as an assemblage that was to be admired for its overall effect – hence the individual works on display were subjugated to the broader concerns of a decorative scheme.<sup>1</sup> Works such as Smirke's which were pairs or sets of paintings were particularly prized by the collector, since they facilitated a symmetrical hang within the cabinet.

The cabinet, like eighteenth-century picture galleries more generally, was free of latter-day conventions of display, hanging its paintings without a strict regard for schools, style, subject or chronology.<sup>2</sup> In one sense, this must have replicated the philosophy of display at the Academy (or rather, the lack of it), where paintings were arranged in terms of size and dimension (and after this, it appears, according to a compositional or generic symmetry, if possible) contributing to a spectacular symmetry across the walls of the Great Room. Prior to the opening of the 1798 exhibition, Joseph Farington (a close friend of Smirke, and an influential figure within the Academy) was keen to convince the hanging committee of the necessity of placing Smirke's paintings together, and at the correct height.<sup>3</sup> Here the concern was, no doubt, not merely that the paintings should be seen to their best advantage, but also that they should enhance the balance and playful symmetry of the overall hang, contributing towards the outward harmony of an otherwise overwhelming quantity of exhibits. Within the Great Room, alongside a dizzying variety of subjects, genres and styles, Smirke's series with its visual eclecticism would have neatly encapsulated the

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<sup>1</sup> On the incorporation of paintings into a broader decorative and ideological scheme in the French context, see Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting account of the development of, and subsequent dissatisfaction for, the *cabinet de tableaux* in eighteenth-century France, see Colin B. Bailey, 'Conventions of the Eighteenth-Century *Cabinet de Tableaux*: Blondel d'Azincourt's *La première idée de la curiosité*', in *Art Bulletin*, Vol LXIX, No. 3, September 1987, pp. 431 – 447.

<sup>3</sup> Paintings of these dimensions were generally hung below 'the line', at eye level. Although Ramberg's print shows small paintings above the line, these were generally placed there as 'fillers' for the gaps between the large historical and portrait canvases. Meanwhile, there was no guarantee that works which constituted a pair or set would be displayed together - Northcote's series for the 1796 exhibition, for example, were separated in the Great Room. Farington was regarded as a particularly influential figure in terms of the sway he held with the Hanging Committee and was frequently appealed to by artists who wanted to secure advantageous positions for their works (see John Sunderland's and David Solkin's essay, 'Staging the Spectacle' in Solkin (2001), p. 30). In this instance, Smirke's paintings seem to have been hung together, as the inclusion of the seven paintings under one catalogue entry suggests.

diversity of the pictorial assemblage which hung around it. Playful as it may have been on the one hand, however, the *Seven Ages of Man* with its 'distinct scenes' would have simultaneously offered a commentary of the lack of visual coherence which viewers found themselves confronted by when visiting the Academy's exhibition. With the sheer variety of the artistic wares contributing to the sense that the Academy had more affinity with a marketplace or bazaar than with any elevated space of aesthetic contemplation, Smirke's series offered both an observation on this practice, and at the same time a counterpoint to it by subjugating his own visual eclecticism to the clear purposes of narrative.

At the same time as Smirke's series participated in the spectacular symmetry and stylistic and generic diversity of the public space surrounding it, the paintings also signalled their detachment from this space through their acknowledged status as cabinet paintings. This classification pointed to a more private, refined space beyond the social *melange* of Somerset House, and offered to locate the paintings in relation to an altogether different form of visual consumption to that practiced by viewers at the Academy. The smallness of the paintings, with their 'beautifully pencilled', 'exquisite' scenes invited a closer, more private kind of viewing than that solicited by larger-scale canvases which depended on manipulated effects of colour and *chiaroscuro*. Demanding that the viewer look at them close-up, the paintings could easily have become lost in the Great Room where the heads and bodies of the crowds of visitors might simply have obscured the view of the canvases had it not been for the fact that, collectively, they would have occupied as significant an amount of wall space as a large-scale history painting.

To compound the paintings' lack of obtrusiveness in comparison with many of its companions, the colouring of the series seems to have been almost conspicuously understated. Despite Farington's efforts to secure an advantageous position for the series at the exhibition, it was felt by critics reviewing the display that Smirke's paintings were 'too low in colour'.<sup>1</sup> This impression was voiced more specifically by the *St. James's Chronicle* which

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, III, 996-998

noted that ‘the colouring is broken and dingy, without a ray of bright light.... [t]his change for the worse, in Mr Smirke’s as well as some others, we attribute to the newly-invented Venetian colouring’.<sup>1</sup> The critic was referring to the debacle the previous year (satirised, as usual, by James Gillray) in which Mary Ann Provis, a young student of painting, claimed to have acquired the ‘Venetian Secret’, the technique of colouring used by Titian and his followers.<sup>2</sup> Smirke was one of seven Academicians who paid Provis ten guineas for the ‘secret’, and the exhibition of that year opened to much debate on the success (or, more accurately, the lack of it) of the new technique.<sup>3</sup> Although Titian’s colouring was known for its clarity and force, the ‘Venetian style’ in the couple of years following Provis’s ‘discovery’ became an accepted term of abuse for any painting which failed to resolve the problems of colouring, whether by introducing ‘the chalky and gold hints of fresco’ or conversely the ‘gaudy glare and flimsy nothingness of fan painting.’<sup>4</sup> However, Smirke seems to some degree to have achieved the richness of colouring associated with the style in some of his 1797 exhibits (as the Tate’s *Sancho Panza and the Duchess* demonstrates), making his understated colouring the following year all the more puzzling. Perhaps Smirke overcompensated for his foray into the ‘Venetian’ technique the previous year, but it seems unlikely that he would not simply have reverted to his former technique.<sup>5</sup> Why, then, did he choose to represent his latest work in ‘low’, ‘dingy’ colours, ‘without a ray of bright light?’

We can only suggest some possible answers to this question – among them the possibility that Smirke’s latest work (like the *Conquest* before it) may have offered an implicit criticism of the pervasive practices of exhibition painting. Small, intimate and privileging ‘delicate pencilling’ over the more blatant effects of painted colour, Smirke’s series refused to avail itself of the technical strategies employed by many of his contemporaries – among them, in the exhibition that

<sup>1</sup> *St James’s Chronicle; or, British Evening Post* (26–28 April 1798), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> See James Gillray’s satire, *Titianus Redivivus; - or - the Seven Wise Men consulting the new Venetian Oracle*, published November 2, 1797.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the ‘Venetian Secret’ controversy, see John Gage, ‘Magilphs and Mysteries’ in *Apollo*, July 1964, pp. 38–41.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gage, *Ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>5</sup> *The Conquest*, for example, was described by the *St. James’s Chronicle* in 1796 as having ‘rich and clear’ colouring.



year, Fuseli and the young Turner who had respectively learnt, and would learn, to respond to the competitive arena of the exhibition space through their visual practice.<sup>1</sup> While Smirke may have been tempted to find his own solution (or, rather to purchase it from Provis) the previous year, his latest ‘strategy’ – for such it undoubtedly was – seems to have been to court attention through his very refusal to conform to the demands of the exhibition space. The apparent deliberateness of Smirke’s low-key colouring can be seen as a rejection of the widespread conventions of exhibition painting, whereby gaudy, dazzling and obtrusive colours forced themselves upon the eye, guaranteeing the viewer’s attention within the competitive space of the exhibition room. In 1769, shortly after the opening of the first Academy exhibition, James Barry observed in a letter to Reynolds that contemporary artistic practice revolved around ‘such people as ours who are floating about after Magilphs and mysteries, and are little likely to satisfy themselves with that saying of Annibal’s [i.e. Annibale Caracci’s], “Buon disegno e colorito di fango” [“good drawing and muddy colouring”]. Barry was clearly aligning himself within a classicist theory of art, one which valued line over colour or was even suspicious of the kind of appeal which colour offered to the viewer. Although not as committed to this classical and academic ideal as Barry was, many critics reiterated similar concerns – particularly after the move to Somerset House – and denounced the commercial strategies used by painters to court the attention of their fickle audience. Within the Academy, the unusually understated colouring of Smirke’s series would have made the paintings conspicuous in themselves, prompting the reflection that the painter had deliberately failed to avail himself not only of the full repertoire of his art, but also of the essential elements of competitive artistic display.

Whilst choosing not to make itself manifest, Smirke’s series nonetheless clearly *was* visible to the critics, almost all of whom commented upon the paintings. In part this may have been due to the space which seven canvases (albeit of a rather small size individually) would have occupied on an individual wall in the great room. At around 30 inches in width each, the paintings would have collectively

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<sup>1</sup> On Fuseli and Turner in the exhibition space, see the essays by Martin Myrone and Michael Rosenthal in Solkin, (2001).

claimed a significant portion of the wall on which they hung, guaranteeing attention.<sup>1</sup> Yet their refusal to attract notice by the established means of brilliant colouring, high finish, dramatic postures or otherwise blatant showmanship would also have been strangely conspicuous, marking out that portion of the wall almost as a void in the otherwise dazzling spectacle of the annual exhibition. Conspicuous in what they ostensibly *lacked*, the paintings signalled their detachment from the strategies of the exhibition painter, but at the same time adopted a strategy of their own which would have induced the curious viewer approach the 'void' to look at the paintings close up and individually, rather than from the distanced perspective which the spectacle of the exhibition seemed to invite.<sup>2</sup>

If Smirke's series offered a simultaneously playful and disrupting presence within the walls of the Academy, what are we to make of its significance within the space of the Shakespeare Gallery? Smirke's early appeals to Boydell to purchase the work suggests that Shakespeare Gallery was the site he had identified for the ultimate display of his series. The Royal Academy exhibition, meanwhile, was a transitory stop for the paintings on their way to the more permanent exhibition space of Boydell's Gallery. However, in some respects, the Shakespeare Gallery may not have offered optimum viewing conditions for a work such as this either. While the Royal Academy exhibition undoubtedly incorporated Smirke's series within a row of similarly-sized canvases which stretched around the perimeter of the room, the series may have found itself, at Boydell's Gallery, dwarfed by the large-scale canvases which formed the main hub of the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, critics commented upon the mellowing of

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<sup>1</sup> The text excerpted from Shakespeare in the catalogue also took up the best part of a page in that booklet, a fact which would have directed the spectators' attention to the paintings themselves.

<sup>2</sup> The recent exhibition at Somerset House, *Art on the Line*, has been revelatory in demonstrating that the Academy exhibitions were best consumed as a spectacle from the centre of the room, and that this viewing position would have been that adopted for looking at large pictures which were above the line. It seems likely that it was only as a secondary act that viewers would have moved in towards the walls in order to examine any canvases close-up.

<sup>3</sup> *The Seven Ages of Man* is listed in the 1802 catalogue as part of the collection of large paintings rather than being classified with the smaller paintings destined to be engraved for the edition of Shakespeare's works - which would have been closer in size to Smirke's series (and which Smirke had contributed extensively to). It seems likely that these smaller canvases were hung in the lower rooms of the Shakespeare Gallery, since the three top-floor rooms had been [cont'd ...]

the colours of the canvases over the Shakespeare Gallery's lifetime, a fact which prohibited the colourful ostentation of any particular canvas at the expense of others. Instead, it suggests that a harmonizing effect was at work which added an organic dimension to the art exhibition and guaranteed the collectivity of the whole. Painted in low, earthy colours, Smirke's series had an old-masterly quality about it, aligning itself with the small, mellow-toned canvases of the Dutch school, but also striving for inclusion within the harmonised setting of the Shakespeare Gallery which, by the time Smirke's canvases entered it, had been in existence for almost ten years. In choosing to paint in this manner, Smirke had not only signalled his detachment from the Academy exhibition, but signalled to their appropriate location in the Shakespeare Gallery, a space where viewers could overlook the surface attractions of painterly effect (and, no doubt, also of canvas size) and engage in a more sustained, intimate viewing of the work of art.

Within the space of the Shakespeare Gallery, the status of the series as cabinet paintings would have become fully realised. The size of the canvases compared with the surrounding paintings would have facilitated this intent, while the 'old masterly' quality of the paintings with their muted colours and allusions to the Rococo and Dutch paintings that frequently formed the core of contemporary 'cabinets' guaranteed their reception as a particular kind of visual art.<sup>1</sup> Although denounced as bad practice by the Royal Academy, Dutch genre painting possessed a clear and increasing appeal to eighteenth-century collectors – including the future George IV - who sought such works primarily for their aesthetic qualities rather than their moral utility. In fitting into the genre of cabinet paintings, Smirke's series thus advertised itself as a work which

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filled before the smaller paintings began to enter the Gallery in 1795. The dimensions of Smirke's paintings of the *Seven Ages of Man* were 23" x 29 ½" as compared to the large paintings which measured approximately 62" by 87" – even collectively, Smirke's painting would not have occupied the same amount of wall space as one of the large Shakespeare Gallery paintings.

<sup>1</sup> On the collecting of Dutch painting in the eighteenth century, see Andrew W. Moore, *Dutch and Flemish Painting in Norfolk: A History of Taste and Influence, Fashion and Collecting* (London, 1988), Christopher Wright, *The Cabinet Picture: Dutch and Flemish Masters of the Seventeenth Century* [check reference], Harry Mount, *The Reception of Dutch Genre Painting in England, 1695-1829* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1991) and Carol S. Eliel, 'Genre Painting During the Revolution and the *Goût Hollandais*' in Alan Wintermute (ed.) *1789: French Art During the Revolution* (New York, 1989).

permitted the increased scrutiny that a small room invited. It was something rather more substantial than a piece of gaudy showmanship that simply sought to attract the fickle exhibition crowd. No doubt Smirke sought for this effect in the end, but it was the tastes of the connoisseur rather than the strategies of spectacle that he appealed to.<sup>1</sup> This strategy corresponded perfectly with the modes of spectatorship invited beyond the canvases and within the space of the Shakespeare Gallery, as we have seen in the first chapter. Like the paintings surrounding it, Smirke's canvases anticipated viewers who were capable of a sustained engagement with the work of art, who were comfortable with its aesthetic qualities as well as its literary themes, and were not guided by the kind of short-sightedness and vanity which the Academy's exhibitors frequently seemed to suppose were the chief attributes of its audience.

The internal dynamics of Smirke's canvases consolidated this process of sustained viewing. As a series, they engendered a narrative complexity which encouraged the viewer to look between canvases in a process which was not only to do with the onward flow of narrative. As we have seen, the dubious heroism of the young soldier raises doubts about his public role and casts the previous three canvases in a different light to that in which they may have previously appeared. In addition, the last scene offers a poignant disjunction of the first, in which the cradle by the fireplace is replaced by the dying man's chair, the nurse is now oblivious to her charge, and real life is replaced by pictorial allegory. The visual – as well as narrative – relations between scenes encourage a dynamic form of spectatorship in which canvases take on new dimensions and meanings through their formal connections with earlier or later 'ages'. This process posits spectatorship as something rather different to the process of textual consumption in which the linear sequence of language and narrative maps out a one-directional course for the reader. The itinerary of the eye is more unregulated than this, a fact which Smirke exploits in the course of his visual narrative. While details in individual canvases point to the continuity of the narrative in the

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<sup>1</sup> Although by no means as sensational as the Scottish artist David Wilkie was to become eight years later, Smirke's series was clearly posited upon a similar kind of aesthetic appeal as *The Village Politicians* (see David Solkin's essay 'Crowds and Connoisseurs: Looking at Genre Painting in Somerset House' in his *Art on the Line*, pp.157-171).

preceding and succeeding canvases, there are – as we have seen - a number of features which disrupt the sequential flow and point to earlier, or non-adjacent, canvases.<sup>1</sup>

By engendering this process of visual play, Smirke illuminated the fact that there was something distinctive about the act of viewing that separated it from the textual consumption on which history painting was initially posited. The visual could offer an unbounded, subjective and dynamic form of cultural activity that offered itself as an alternative to the finite and linearly-constructed forms that literature (and in particular the much-maligned novelistic form whose purveyors were frequently attacked for the voracity of their ‘literary’ appetite) generated. With its multiple layers and forms of address, Smirke’s series invited a complex and alternating mode of spectatorship that recognised the varied functions, appeals and limitations of contemporary painting. Ostensibly based on a passage in Shakespeare, Smirke’s modern-day parable not only mapped out a critique of contemporary man, but fused it with a narrative of the contemporary English School of painting. And preceded art-historically by a number of prestigious works from the Italian School which delineated the various ‘ages of man’, Smirke’s canvases were conspicuous in rejecting these precedents in favour of an overwhelming adherence to an aesthetic which was now recognisably British.

As the canvases were translated into print form and incorporated into the folio of engravings, meanwhile, their status as ambitious art was implied more strongly still. Coming at the end of the first volume of the (two-volume) folio – rather than being incorporated alongside the three other images from *As You Like It* – the series served as the culminating images of the volume, offering a pictorial climax to the first part of Boydell’s narrative of the contemporary English School. While the first volume was constituted almost entirely of scenes

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<sup>1</sup> The continuity of the narrative is pointed to by the window in the first scene which leads to the landscape setting of the second scene; the secluded house in the background of the second scene in which the private, lovelorn yearnings of the young man take place; the discarded sword in the third scene which is taken up in the fourth; the military ‘valour’ of the soldier which is re-iterated in a painting in the fifth canvas and suggests a basis for the ‘civic’ role which the protagonist has achieved; the young, pregnant couple in the fifth scene who prefigure the impoverished family in the penultimate scene; and the dark doorway of the sixth scene which leads to the cheerless heath at which the protagonist slowly ends his days.

illustrating Shakespeare's comedies, there were just three images – from *Macbeth*, by Fuseli, Reynolds and Romney – from the remainder of the plays. These images, significantly (though also rather bizarrely), were placed between the comic scenes and Smirke's *Seven Ages of Man*, a positioning which served to incorporate the series into the second part of the Boydell engravings – those dedicated to the tragedies and history plays – despite their ostensible positioning in the first volume.<sup>1</sup> Buttressed between more epic, elevated or notorious lives and deaths, Smirke's ignoble and unheroic protagonist is thus not only given yet another ironic inflection, but his narrative is defined as no less appropriate for the basis of a moral, public and ambitious art form.

Smirke's canvases had signalled their affinity with Boydell's enterprise by gesturing clearly – through their visual proximity to Hogarth – to their ultimate destination as a series of engravings through their visual proximity to Hogarth. While many of the other paintings on display at the Gallery had rather open, painterly qualities that made their successful translation into prints appear rather dubious, the somewhat unfinished nature of Smirke's painted images posed no contradiction to the rendering of the series as engraved images. The visual eclecticism of the canvases, their playful relation to the works of Hogarth, and the complex, sustained and multi-referential mode of spectatorship they invited meant that the *Seven Ages of Man* neatly reflected and compressed the visual codes and categories of a fashionable print collection. Within such a collection – possibly alongside the prestigious seventeenth and eighteenth-century artists whose works Smirke simultaneously borrowed from and subverted – the visual and generic diversity of the series would have acquired a new energy. Yet another kind of spectatorship would have been brought into play, one in which visual literacy was placed alongside (or perhaps even supplanted) textual literacy in the reading of the semantic codes of the images. Thus, the perhaps rather self-promoting and commercial aspect of Smirke's series in advertising its natural progression to a series of Hogarthian engravings could be transformed

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<sup>1</sup> The *Macbeth* prints were, in all likelihood, incorporated into the first volume to even up the numbers of engravings in each volume: without the *Macbeth* engravings, there would have been 93 engravings in the first volume, as opposed to 107 in the second. Nonetheless, they are rather incongruous given the comic subjects of the preceding prints.

into a logical final stage in the evolving and complex mode of spectatorship which his work demanded.

Like *The Conquest* – and its exhibition at the Academy – *The Seven Ages of Man* simultaneously affiliated Smirke with his academic colleagues and separated him from them. By adopting and subverting a variety of aesthetic references to the contemporary English School, Smirke was able to position his series both as a wide-ranging retrospective of the English School, and as offering a new mode of visual practice for inclusion within the category of ambitious painting. For, in visibly destabilising the consensualised forms of contemporary history painting, Smirke made a particular set of claims for his own art. In providing the satirical negative to the positive which these history paintings offered, Smirke not only validated, rather than undermined, them – but he also illuminated the shared moral and public functions which satire and history painting had in common. His series thus presented pictorial satire as not merely playful and entertaining, but as an ambitious form of visual production which shared much common ground with its cerebral and polite other. In making this claim, Smirke offered an abrupt riposte to the Academic doctrine (expounded by Reynolds amongst others) which sought to marginalize Hogarth and his art from the canon of ambitious painting. Instead, *The Seven Ages of Man* packaged the English School within a series of images which made clear the varied and dynamic forms of British painting, and which positioned Hogarth and Smirke – and, by extension, the Shakespeare Gallery – at the centre of this visual culture rather than at its peripheries.

CHAPTER V

PALL MALL AND BEYOND: THE RECEPTION  
AND CONSUMPTION OF  
BOYDELL'S SHAKESPEARE AFTER 1793



The engravings after Smirke's canvases joined a two-volume collection of over 100 engravings after the large paintings from the Shakespeare Gallery that formed the one lasting memorial to Boydell's enterprise. Although the prints were, of course, a vital element of Boydell's project, the alderman had not foreseen the financial difficulties which were to beset his business as a result of the Napoleonic wars, and had indulged a hope of giving the Gallery to the nation on his death.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Boydell's death – on 12 December 1804 – was foreshadowed by the prospect of a lottery to offset his debts.<sup>2</sup> The lottery took place on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1805 – the following day the first item reported in the *Times* was the result of the draw, listing the 62 tickets drawn and eligible for prizes. The winning ticket was number 7,431 belonging to William Tassie, who was evidently more interested in the paintings for their commercial value rather than their artistic merit. A few months later, on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> May, the contents of the Gallery were to be found listed on the back page of the *Times*, where the auctioneer James Christie, alongside other vendors with goods for disposal, advertised its auction.<sup>3</sup> The paintings were sold separately over the following three days, dispersing Boydell's *magnum opus* into various private hands.<sup>4</sup> The collection was never to be reassembled, and many of the paintings are now lost or badly damaged. The prints, and the nine-volume edition of Shakespeare which was also an integral part of the project, thus ensured the continued visibility of the Boydell images in the public eye and the collectivity of the now-dispersed works.

For some, the unhappy demise of Boydell's beloved project was evidence that the English School had always been a non-starter. Two decades after the sale of the paintings, William Paulet Carey remarked upon the low prices obtained at the auction in relation to the cost of the enterprise to Boydell. He stated that the

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<sup>1</sup> See Josiah Boydell's preface to the two-volume collection of large prints (*A Collection of Prints from pictures painted for the purpose of illustrating the dramatic works of Shakespeare by the artist of Great Britain*, 2 vols (London: 1803)).

<sup>2</sup> Boydell's death was reported in the press the following day, with the *Times* reporting that 'society has lost, full of years and full of honours, one of its most respectable members, both as a Man and a Magistrate, and admitted by all mankind to be the Father of the Fine Arts in this country' (13 December 1804, p.2).

<sup>3</sup> *The Times* (17 May, 1805), p.4.

<sup>4</sup> The list of purchasers and prices obtained for each painting is reproduced in John Pye, *Patronage of British Art: An Historical Sketch* (London, 1845), pp.279-284.

episode demonstrated that ‘so rooted [was] the prejudice against the efforts of the British pencil in the departments of fancy and history, that the whole collection, with the two pieces of sculpture in *bas relief* by the Honorable Mrs. Damer, sold for only £6181. 18s. 6d; a decided proof that the spirit produced by commercial speculation was, at that time, much greater in the field of the fine arts, than the spirit produced by public taste and the love of country’.<sup>1</sup> Others lamented the continued commerciality of an apparently public art, inescapable even in the Gallery’s demise and its disposal by lottery, which provided commentators with ‘a vast fund of moral satire and ingenious raillery at the expences of the follies and vices of the times’.<sup>2</sup> More recently, art and cultural historians have regarded Boydell’s enterprise as a short and finite episode in the history of British art, one whose significance ended with the dissolution of the Gallery at the beginning of 1805 and which implicitly points to the unchallenged hegemony of the Royal Academy in this period.

But despite the prophets of doom, the Shakespeare Gallery enjoyed a continued presence and appeal within British visual culture and, for many nineteenth-century artists and writers, it even represented the high point of the English School.<sup>3</sup> This final chapter examines the continued significance of Boydell’s project – both in Britain and abroad – beyond the physical existence of the Gallery itself. One of the underlying assumptions governing the methodology of this thesis, one which derives from recent work on the consumption of culture in the eighteenth century, has been that culture is a term that signifies both ‘aesthetic production and the political and socio-economic context in which it

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<sup>1</sup> William Paulet Carey, *Observations on the Probable Decline or Extinction of British Historical Painting*, (London, 1825), p50. The majority of the paintings were sold at a much lower price than the sets of prints. For example, Fuseli’s *Titania and Bottom* and Opie’s scene from *The Winter’s Tale* (both of them praised by reviewers) each sold for £55 13s, and Barry’s *King Lear* sold for £31 10s, while a complete set of the large and smaller engravings was being advertised in Boydell’s catalogue for £63 and £42 respectively (the latter including Steeven’s text of Shakespeare). A number of the paintings were sold for under £10. For those seeking to own a part of Boydell’s Shakespeare, therefore, a painting might be a more affordable option than the illustrated book edition which was clearly a luxury item.

<sup>2</sup> *Gentleman’s Magazine*, Vol 75, Part I (1805), p.213. The *Gentleman’s Magazine* attempted to rescue the Gallery from these criticisms, claiming that in this instance ‘the term “adventurer in the lottery” became for once a term of honour, and a proof of taste’.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Archer Shee, *Rhymes on Art* (London, 1805), p.89.

occurred'; in short, that culture does not become culture until it is consumed.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will illuminate the extent to which the consumption of Boydell's project in its aesthetic and ideological forms not only ensured the continuity of the Shakespeare Gallery after its physical demise, but also made it meaningful. Thus, the chapter is organised around a series of case studies which examine the *consumption* of the prints, book, spaces and aesthetic ideology that Boydell produced and formulated. In looking at the consumption and continuity of Boydell's Shakespeare project beyond the physical space of the exhibition itself, we will see that it continued to exert a presence in the visual culture and art-historical narratives of the nineteenth century – a presence which asks us to reconsider the accounts which twentieth-century art historians have related of the Gallery and, more generally, of the history of British art.

*'A valuable specimen of the fine arts of the country'? – Boydell's Shakespeare in graphic form*

Issued in two separate series, the prints after the Gallery's paintings promised a lasting testimony to the enterprise of Boydell, the patronage of the public, and the success of the English School. In both the preface to the two-volume folio of atlas-sized prints and the advertisement that accompanied the one hundred smaller (folio-sized) prints intended to embellish Steeven's new edition of Shakespeare, Josiah Boydell highlighted the significance of the engravings within the context of a national school. Keen to avoid the unwelcome designation of the smaller prints as mere illustrations to Shakespeare, the younger Boydell – writing after his uncle's death – signalled the importance of the prints *in themselves*:

Viewing the prints here collected ... it may without presumption be affirmed, that such a varied combination of talent united in the embellishment of a single author, is not elsewhere to be found. This volume is therefore

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<sup>1</sup> See the essays, and especially the introduction, in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

offered, not only as an ornament to Shakespeare, but as a valuable specimen of the fine arts of this country.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Boydell situated the images, not merely as accompaniments to Steevens' edition of Shakespeare, but as sharing an equal status with the national poet in manifesting the accomplishments of the fine arts in England. Put in this light, Shakespeare serves to illustrate the importance of the prints, as much as the prints serve to illustrate Shakespeare.

The point was made even more forcibly in the preface to the two-volume folio of large engravings. Here Josiah Boydell inserted the text of a letter written by his uncle at the beginning of 1804 to Sir John William Anderson requesting permission for a lottery to dispose of the Shakespeare Gallery and its contents so that his debts might be discharged. The elder Boydell was still adamant that the Gallery represented the highest point to date of the English School and, moreover, that it offered a distinct challenge to the continental schools:

... I flatter myself the most prejudiced foreigner must allow, that the Shakespeare Gallery will convince the world, that Englishmen want nothing but the fostering hand of encouragement, to bring forth their genius in this line of art. I might go further, and defy the Italian, Flemish, or French Schools, to show in so short a space of time, such an exertion as the Shakespeare Gallery; and if they could have made such an exertion in so short a period, the pictures would have been marked with all that monotonous sameness which distinguishes those different Schools. Whereas, in the Shakespeare Gallery, every artist, partaking of the freedom of his country, and endowed with that originality of thinking, so peculiar to its natives, has chosen his own road, to what he conceived to be excellence, unshackled by the slavish imitation and uniformity that pervade all the foreign schools.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Advertisement to *Boydell's Graphic Illustrations of the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare: consisting of a series of prints forming an elegant and useful companion to the various editions of his works*.

<sup>2</sup> John Boydell, Letter to Sir John William Anderson (Cheapside, 4 February, 1804). Reproduced in full in *A Collection of Prints from pictures painted for the purpose of illustrating the dramatic works of Shakespeare by the artists of Great Britain*. 2 vols (London, 1803), I, [no page numbers].

In reproducing his uncle's letter in this context, Josiah Boydell was ensuring that the engravings would acquire the same ideological significance which the paintings had achieved as possessing a national quality (which - as we have seen - was actually diametrically opposed to a distinct aesthetic) which embodied the liberty and originality of English artists - and by extension, the rest of their countrymen. To push home the point, John Boydell's letter clearly identified himself as a particular kind of patron: a liberal, civic-minded sponsor of the arts whose wish it had been to leave his grand undertaking to 'that generous public, who have for so long a period encouraged my undertakings'.<sup>1</sup> His wishes, Boydell is quick to explain, had been thwarted by a dangerous usurper in the business of patronage, Napoleon Bonaparte, on whose shoulders Boydell rests the ultimate blame for the failure of his Shakespeare enterprise:

...a Tyrant, that at present governs France, tells that believing and besotted nation, that, in the midst of all his robbery and rapine, he is a great patron and promoter of the fine arts; just as if those arts, that humanise and polish mankind, could be promoted by such means, and such a man.

... I could not calculate on the present crisis, which has totally annihilated [my receipts from abroad] - I certainly calculated on some defalcation of these receipts, by a French or Spanish war, or both; but with France or Spain I carried on little commerce - Flanders, Holland and Germany, (and these countries, no doubt, supplied the rest of Europe) were the great Marts; but alas! They are now no more. The convulsion that has disjointed and ruined the whole continent I did not foresee - I know no man that did.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

One senses that Boydell feels himself to have been personally wronged by Napoleon, whose participation in the ‘vandelick revolution’ has not only denied Boydell his vital export market and thus caused the near bankruptcy of the Boydell firm, but has also discredited the noble and patriotic practice of patronage itself. The particular kind of patronage practiced by Napoleon is the accumulation of the spoils of war, the product of ‘robbery and rapine’, whose nationalist fervour is primal and barbaric, and – above all – to be distinguished from the liberal patronage of Englishmen like Boydell, whose ‘fostering hand of encouragement’ is in sharp contrast to the tyrannical Napoleon’s propagandistic utilisation of the arts. The flattering implication for Boydell’s subscribers is that unlike the ‘believing and besotted’ French, they are civilised, free-thinking, humane and truly patriotic. Moreover, Boydell is keen to highlight the role he has played in the financial and artistic prosperity of his county, engaged as he has been in the export of British prints and the development of a foreign market for this particular form of artistic production. His export of an art form which was seen to embody Englishness – and its ready consumption on the continental mainland by printsellers and collectors eager to purchase prints which were visibly English and often recognised as aesthetically and technically superior – positions him as a formidable ambassador for his country and a significant contributor to its national wealth.<sup>1</sup>

In attaching his uncle’s letter to the folio of prints, Josiah was ensuring the continuity of the narrative of enlightened patriotism in relation to the Shakespeare project. The latest political events in Europe, untimely as they were for the Boydells, nevertheless offered the opportunity to further flaunt the nationalist credentials of their scheme. Not only could they continue to represent the Gallery in contrast to the ‘monotonous sameness’ of the continental schools, but Napoleon’s impact upon the financial status of the project further enhanced its nationalist credentials and served to situate the subscribers and subsequent purchasers of the prints as patriotic patrons responding to a new cultural imperative and seeking to salvage the future of English art in defiance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Boydell calculated that he had contributed £350,000 to the national economy through his promotion of the Fine Arts in England (‘Letter to John Anderson’, quoted in the preface to the *Collection of Prints*).

actions of Napoleon. By driving home the renewed significance of the Gallery for English audiences at this historical juncture, the younger Boydell was clearly embarking upon an even more vigorous publicity campaign at home - a campaign which would not, at this stage, salvage the Gallery, but might at least limit the damage.

The transformation of the images from canvas into print form also guaranteed the patriotic aspirations of the project in the sense that this was another category of enterprise in which John Boydell felt he could claim undisputed authority. During the course of his lengthy career as an engraver and print publisher he had seen the dynamics of the trade alter drastically, largely due, he lost no opportunity in claiming, to the growth of his Cheapside business:

When I first began business, the whole commerce of prints in this county consisted in importing foreign prints, particularly from France, to supply the cabinets of the curious in this kingdom. Impressed with the idea that the genius of our own countrymen, if properly encouraged, was equal to that of foreigners, I set about establishing a school of engraving in England; with what success the public are well acquainted. It is, perhaps at present, sufficient to say, that the whole course of that commerce is changed; very few prints being now imported into this country, while the foreign market is principally supplied with prints from England.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the graphic element of the Shakespeare project strengthened Boydell's credentials 'to attempt also an English School of Historical Painting'. Having already achieved success in reforming one branch of the arts, Boydell had clearly felt qualified to move onto another, safe in the knowledge that the ultimate transformation of the Shakespeare paintings into a series of prints would neatly seal and illustrate the success and patriotism of the project. The prints, indeed, constituted an ambitious and elevated sequence of objects in their own right. Just as Boydell had commissioned the leading painters of the day, so he also

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<sup>1</sup> Boydell, preface to *Collection of Prints*, I [no page numbers].

employed an illustrious group of engravers to reproduce the images, a process which constituted the most expensive element of his Shakespeare project.<sup>1</sup>

Although the prints are frequently classified together by art historians, the large and small engravings represented two entirely separate sequences of objects, each with a distinct appearance and function. While the smaller sized prints (still relatively large by the standards of book illustration) were supplied with directions to binders as to the appropriate place for insertion within the text, the larger, atlas-sized prints offered a rather different set of objects, distinct from the text and presenting themselves as a mediated version of the Gallery experience. The first of the two volumes of large engravings began with an engraving by Benjamin Smith of Thomas Banks's *alto* relief from the front of the Gallery, simulating the experience of entering the Gallery to view the works on display.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Josiah Boydell's preface, discussed above, also included the entirety of his uncle's preface to the original catalogue of the Shakespeare Gallery, reminding subscribers of the project's initial objectives (which they could now retrospectively evaluate) and reiterating his uncle's gratitude to the public. Divested of the textual extracts which comprised the original catalogue, the large engravings could be regarded as purely aesthetic objects, less 'illustrative' even than the paintings since they were destined to be consumed as part of a larger collection of prints, in the kind of private space that was quite distinct from that of the book library or the picture gallery.<sup>3</sup>

As John Gage has noted, the Shakespeare Gallery differed sharply from the Royal Academy in the support and status which it accorded to engravers.<sup>4</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> The engravers were paid a greater sum than the artists for any one canvas. For example, Benjamin West was paid £525 for his canvas of *King Lear*, while William Sharpe earned £840 for engraving it, and Fuseli received £294 for his *Titania and Bottom* while Peter Simon was paid £367 10s for his reproduction. The exception seems to have been Reynolds whose works commanded high prices while Boydell spent relatively little on engraving costs for these canvases (Caroline Watson was only paid £210 for the plate after the *Death of Cardinal Beaufort*).

<sup>2</sup> Smith was a stipple engraver, one of the many pupils of Bartolozzi.

<sup>3</sup> Prints were, of course, often stored and viewed within book libraries, but they were granted a distinct physical and imaginative space within that room which was quite separate from the practice of reading.

<sup>4</sup> John Gage, 'Boydell's Shakespeare and the Redemption of British Engraving' in Burwick and Pape, pp.27-31. On the status of engravers within the Royal Academy see Hyde, 'Printmakers [cont'd ...]



engravers were effectively excluded from the English academic system, Boydell consistently alluded to his project as equally and simultaneously involving an English school of painting *and* an English school of engraving, with the implication that the latter was more than merely a means of transmission. This was hardly a new tactic on his part: once ensconced in Boydell's Cheapside gallery after its exhibition at the Haymarket in 1784, John Singleton Copley's *Death of Major Pierson* had been displayed in an elaborate architectural frame (Figure 95) which incorporated oval portraits of not only the artist, but also the draughtsman (Josiah Boydell) and the engraver (James Heath) of the forthcoming print. Within the Shakespeare Gallery, portraits of engravers as well as artists connected with the project – commissioned by Boydell from Gilbert Stuart – were exhibited in a room on one of the lower floors.<sup>1</sup> The Shakespeare Gallery itself was conceived of as a space of display for prints as well as paintings — as early as 1790 the first plates were complete and Boydell was able to exhibit a number of the Shakespeare prints, evidently alongside some earlier engravings which we might safely guess to have been published by the Boydell firm. The *St James's Chronicle* observed that

The exhibition of the prints at the Shakespeare Gallery is not the least valuable part of it. It affords a curious history of the art of engraving in this country for the last forty years, the progress of which has indeed been wonderful — and we may add, has given bread to thousands of ingenious men.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the display functioned as a form of self-promotion or self-congratulation for Boydell since the forty-year period to which the reviewer alludes coincides neatly with the span of Boydell's career as a print publisher. The prints on view at the Shakespeare Gallery efficiently illustrated his role in the progress of the

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and the Royal Academy Exhibitions'. Hyde notes that Academy regulations stipulated that a maximum of twelve prints were to be permitted for display at the annual exhibition, although in practice it was rare that more than two or three were displayed.

<sup>1</sup> *The World*, 16 March, 1790, p.3. The portraits would have included some of the fifteen likenesses commissioned by Boydell between 1783 and 1786 and which had been displayed in the Cheapside shop. The figures painted included Reynolds, William Miller, Josiah Boydell, the Facius brothers, William Sharp, Richard Earlom and John Hall. Stuart's celebrated portrait of William Woollett, engraved by Caroline Watson had also been commissioned by Boydell. (Bruntjen, p.63, n. 54).

<sup>2</sup> *St. James's Chronicle*, 23-25 March, 1790, p.4.

art, and his (apparently) exemplary fusion of capitalist / philanthropic credentials, as well as signalling a similar historical process for English history painting. Most crucially, they convincingly and succinctly illustrated how quickly and efficiently a national school might be established by one who had the means and foresight to promote its cause.

British engraving in the last quarter of the eighteenth century constituted an ambitious and elevated field of artistic production in its own right: a scenario for which Boydell could claim a significant degree of credit. It was comprised of an elaborate network of personalities, practices and commentary which was no less tangible than that which made up the discourse of painting in the period. No less than fashionable portrait painters such as Reynolds and Romney, leading engravers enjoyed a prominent position in contemporary society, cultivating an 'urbanity of manners' and dressing in a manner which signalled their prosperity and denied any residue of an artisanal status.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Boydell relied as much upon the public reputation of his commissioned engravers as well upon the artists he employed in advertising his Shakespeare project. His lengthy list of engravers named in the proposal for the Shakespeare Gallery includes Francesco Bartolozzi, James Fittler, Georg Sigmund and Johann Gottlieb Facius, Thomas Ryder and William Sharp: many of their names would have been familiar to potential subscribers, and their reputations would have compounded the prestige of Boydell's scheme.<sup>2</sup>

There were some 1300 initial subscribers to the Shakespeare project, although not all of them honoured their subscriptions. The Boston Public Library holds a list of signatures of those collecting their subscriptions, containing some 740 names, but this list is unlikely to be comprehensive. In an announcement on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1805, Josiah Boydell and George Nicol informed the subscribers that the medals, manufactured by the industrial entrepreneur Matthew Boulton and intended to be presented to each of the subscribers with their name engraved

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<sup>1</sup> See Clayton, *English Print*, p.210.

<sup>2</sup> Original manuscript of the Prospectus of the Shakespeare Gallery, 1786 in the Boston Public Library, MS G 5029.2 (no. 5)

upon it, were now finished.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of engraving the names, Boydell and Nicol requested the signature of each subscriber. It is not clear whether the list in Boston is the entire list, or simply the part of it which was held in Boydell's Cheapside shop and Nicol's Pall Mall shop for subscribers to sign whilst viewing the medal (sheets were also sent out to subscribers for them to sign). Although the list contains the names of many non-Londoners and even the odd foreigner, it was compiled during the London Season when many of these people may well have been in the metropolis. Even if this list were comprehensive, it does not account for those who did not subscribe to the project but later purchased part or all of its components. All we can surmise from this is that a minimum of 740 households were in possession of the complete Boydell prints by 1805: the copper plates engraved after each of the paintings would have yielded a good many more impressions than this.<sup>2</sup> Collectors could also purchase individual prints from the series from the Boydell firm; the Cheapside shop sold the large engravings for £1.1s as well as the complete series of each set of prints for those who had not originally subscribed.<sup>3</sup>

Josiah Boydell envisaged the list of subscribers as a historically important document comprising 'the autographs of all the first men of taste, who lived in England at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century'. This list of England's 'patrons of native genius' was headed with the signatures of the King and Queen (to whom each of the volumes of the large engravings were respectively dedicated and prefaced with their portraits by Beechey), and the Prince of Wales: it is not surprising, therefore, that so many of

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<sup>1</sup> On Boulton, see Jennifer Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends who Made the Future, 1730-1810* (London, 2002); H.W. Dickinson, *Matthew Boulton* (Cambridge, 1936) and Samuel Smiles, *Lives of Boulton and Watt* (London, 1865).

<sup>2</sup> As an example, Bartolozzi's plate after Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe* yielded only a disappointing 2,500 impressions. Boydell did not include any of his copper plates in the lottery, suggesting that the firm continued to make and sell impressions of the Shakespeare images after 1805.

<sup>3</sup> *An Alphabetical Catalogue of Plates, engraved by the most esteemed artists, after the finest pictures and drawings of the Italian, Flemish, German, French, English, and other Schools, which compose the stock of John and Josiah Boydell.* (London, 1803). The exceptions to this pricing for the small prints were Hamilton's scene from *Much Ado*, Reynolds's *Macbeth* and *Cardinal Beaufort*, and Stothard's *Othello* which sold at £1.11s 6d, while Smirke's *Seven Ages of Man* sold for £5. 5s. The large series could be purchased for £63, while the smaller prints together with the text cost £42.

the subscribers were keen to add their signatures to this document and cast themselves alongside the Royal Family as encouragers of British art. As well as the predictable aristocrats and famed collectors such as George Beaumont, John Julius Angerstein and Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, the list contains the names of a number of professional men: the surgeon, John Bell, from Edinburgh, whose illustrated anatomical publications were well known at the time and revealed their author's interest in the visual arts as well as in his own profession; Thomas Coutts the banker; John Coakley Lettson, an eminent Surrey physician; Thomas Gisborne, an evangelical Anglican Minister and writer on plant and animal life (Figure 96); the manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood and the M.P. Michael Angelo Taylor. Most of the names are not recognisable now, suggesting that a large number of the subscribers were from the professional middle class: they include a significant number of female subscribers and members of the clergy and comprise both London-based and provincial readers and collectors.<sup>1</sup> In 1787, Edmund Malone had related to Lord Charlmont that before the proposals for the scheme had even been completed, nearly 600 people had paid their subscriptions for a publication which was anticipated to cost around 90 guineas and that 'there were not above twenty names among them that anybody knew. Such', Malone concluded, 'is the wealth of this country.'<sup>2</sup> Such, too, was the centrality of reading and the domestic library to the conjugal and social lives of the middle classes, and the addition of a luxury item such as Boydell's Shakespeare edition offered a lavish enhancement to private book collections. Just as the exhibition of the Shakespeare Gallery became a fashionable aspect of London life in the 1790s, so too would the book edition and engravings have offered subscribers a focal point within the space of the private library or print room, a space which was actually far from exclusive but actually actively engendered social and communal experiences of reading and viewing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The cost of the series makes it unlikely that it was owned by less prosperous middle-class households.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Edmund Malone to Lord Charlemont, 9 June 1787, quoted in Bruntjen, p.143 n.81.

<sup>3</sup> See James Raven, 'From Promotion to Proscription: Arrangements for Reading and Eighteenth-Century Libraries' and Naomi Tadmor, '“In the Even my Wife Read to me”: Women, Reading and Household Life in the Eighteenth Century', in James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996) pp. 176-201 and 162-174.

*The Controversy over the Prints*

Like Boydell's artists, the engravers were known as specialists in particular genres, styles or mediums. Bartolozzi was famed as a practitioner of stipple engraving as well as being historical engraver to the King (an appointment he had inherited from William Woollett) while Sharp's unrivalled ability to produce plates from historical paintings using the more ambitious and time-consuming medium of line engraving made him Benjamin West's preferred choice for the print after his *King Lear*.<sup>1</sup> The engravings, indeed, displayed as marked a divergence in style and technique as the paintings themselves did, although this was not necessarily construed in quite the same way by those viewing the prints.

While the stylistic and generic variety of the Shakespeare paintings were perceived by many to be crucial signifiers of the freedom and originality of the English school, the diverse techniques perceptible in the prints were largely considered, conversely, to be symptomatic of very uneven degrees of quality amongst the images, which were perceived as varying from the skilfully produced to the incomplete and rushed. Although line engraving was the preferred technique for the engraving of historical works (the debate surrounding the relative merits of line and stipple engraving seems to have mirrored that surrounding line and colour in painting), the nature of the Shakespeare project demanded certain compromises in terms of time and money. This led to a quite literal compromise between the more 'noble' technique of line engraving and the more rapidly executable technique of stipple: many of the plates used a combination of the two, an effect which several commentators found to be unsatisfactory. Benjamin West, for one, was disappointed by the quality of the engravings, complaining to Farington that

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<sup>1</sup> Stipple, also known as the 'dotted' or 'chalk manner' became fashionable in England from the 1770s. It consisted of a number of fine dots etched or engraved into the surface of the copper plate to create a tonal effect. Line engraving consisted of a series of long lines which were incised into a copper plate: it was a lengthy process but it yielded thousands of impressions.

He was sorry to see them of such inferior quality — He said excepting his *King Lear* by Sharpe [Figure 97], — that from Northcote's Children in the Tower [see Figure 36], — & some small ones, — there were few that could be approved. Such a mixture of *dotting* and engraving, & such a general deficiency in respect of drawing, which He observed the Engravers seemed to know little of, that the Volumes presented a mass of works which He did not wonder many subscribers had declined to continue their subscriptions to...<sup>1</sup>

West's criticisms of the engraved plates were not simply symptomatic of artists feeling that engravers had failed to do justice to their paintings: the Boydell prints also came under attack from engravers seeking recognition for their art. Most famously, John Landseer, an Associate Engraver of the Royal Academy, and a vociferous campaigner for the inclusion of engravers as full members of the Academy, criticised 'shopkeepers' such as Boydell for curtailing the artistic freedom of engravers, and condemned his use of the 'soft blending and infantile infidelity' of stipple.<sup>2</sup> Voiced in a series of lectures at the Royal Institution in 1806, these criticisms lost Landseer his position at the Institution.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the problem of stipple, some of the large engravings were printed in colour, a largely unsatisfactory process which only seemed to illustrate the unwelcome view that engraving was a poor relative of painting.<sup>4</sup> West's and Landseer's comments were not unfounded: a number of the stipple engravings revealed poor draughtsmanship, failing to delineate expression and even, on occasion, proving unable to handle gradations in tone with any subtlety: precisely the effect for which stipple was apparently deployed. Examples of these shortcomings are the plate after Opie's *Romeo and Juliet* by the Facius brothers with its contrived

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, VI, 2231.

<sup>2</sup> John Landseer, *Lectures on the Art of Engraving* (London, 1807), p.126. For a more detailed discussion of Landseer and contemporary attempts to augment the status of engraving see John Gage, 'An Early Exhibition and the Politics of British Printmaking, 1800-1812' in *Print Quarterly*, 6:2 (1989), pp. 122-139 and Eaves, *Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>3</sup> Another engraver to criticise the Boydell prints was William Sharp, the engraver of West's *King Lear*, probably the most successful of the engravings in the series. He resented the invasion of the 'dotted manner' which 'can easily be procured, and which assistants can without any knowledge of drawing, or any Natural taste perform'. (quoted in Gage, 'Early Exhibition', p. 137).

<sup>4</sup> The folio of prints at the Folger Shakespeare Library contains colour duplicates of a number of the prints. It seems unlikely, however, that Boydell was particularly interested in producing colour prints (see Christopher Lennox-Boyd, 'The Prints Themselves: Their Marketing and Survival' in Burwick and Pape).

*chiaroscuro* and naïve facial expressions; Thomas Ryder's plate after Stothard's *Othello* which offers a particularly crude juxtaposition of Othello's blackness and Desdemona's whiteness; and Charles Gauthier Playter's plate after Rigaud's *Comedy of Errors*, which demonstrates the unsuitability of stipple to Rigaud's visual style (figures 98-99). While stipple may have worked well in conjunction with line engraving in many of the Boydell prints, it is clear that some of the prints which relied on stipple for their entire effect offered a poor response to the demands of historical engraving.

As for the defaulting subscribers mentioned by West, Josiah Boydell decided in 1807 to start legal proceedings against them, an action which, if it paid off, would vindicate the quality of the project, renew publicity and limit financial damage. Nonetheless, this was something of a gamble on Boydell's part; he had hired an attorney to write to several of the defaulting subscribers in the conviction that 'few would be disposed to risk the trouble and expense of a law suit to avoid payment of fifty or sixty pounds'; as anticipated a number of the subscribers were prompted to complete their subscription.<sup>1</sup> One subscriber, however, a Mr Drummond, proved willing to take the risk, and a potentially embarrassing trial ensued the following year at the Guildhall.<sup>2</sup> Josiah Boydell attempted to argue his case on the aesthetic quality of the engravings; Farington noted in his diary that Boydell

desired me to prepare Mr West upon the subject, as he would be subpoenaed to give evidence as to the excellence of the engraving of *Lear* by Sharpe after his picture. He proposed to subpoena other artists to speak to the merit of prints after their pictures.<sup>3</sup>

The case divided the London art world, with Landseer, John Hoppner, Beechey and Francis Bourgeois taking Drummond's side and Smirke, Northcote, Fuseli and Peters siding with Boydell. West took off for Windsor when he was subpoenaed, and did not appear in court: we have already seen where his opinion

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, VIII, 3025.

<sup>2</sup> The trial was reported in Rudolph Ackermann's *Repository of Arts*, February 1809 and is also mentioned intermittently in Farington's Diary (IX, 3396-3500, *passim*).

<sup>3</sup> Farington, IX, 3246.

lay, and it is likely that he would not have wanted either to lie in court or take Drummond's side against Josiah Boydell.<sup>1</sup> Drummond eventually won the case by using legal arguments based on the nature of the contract rather than on the firm's actual performance. In the event, Boydell was 'consoled that the testimony had shown the honourable manner in which the House had carried on the Shakespeare work, feeling that the firm was now on higher ground in respect of reputation' than ever.<sup>2</sup> Boydell had, he felt, effectively turned bad publicity into good publicity.

One argument used in the Drummond case concerned the necessity for stipple engraving to be used alongside line engraving. Although the superiority of the latter was conceded, it was claimed that the "dotting and chalk" method had to be employed, since it would have taken forty or fifty years to complete all the plates if pure line engraving had been used.<sup>3</sup> The elder Boydell would have been well aware of the costly delays with which engraving could threaten a commercial project: when the Shakespeare Gallery opened, subscribers were still waiting for Heath's print after Copley's 1784 canvas of the *Death of Major Pierson*, not to mention Bartolozzi's engraving after the same artist's *Death of the Earl of Chatham* of 1781.<sup>4</sup> They would have to wait another seven years for Heath's print to be issued. No doubt, Boydell would have been eager to avoid future repetitions of the criticisms which he had incurred as a result of this delay, and took appropriate steps to ensure the prompt delivery of the Shakespeare prints.

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<sup>1</sup> Another interesting legal wrangle which had involved prominent members of the art world in deciding questions of quality was the Vandergucht vs Desenfans trial held in June 1787. Desenfans had purchased from Vandergucht, for £700, a painting which the latter purported to be by Poussin. Its quality was later disputed, however. A five hour trial ensued in which a number of artists and connoisseurs were summoned as witnesses: Vandergucht was ordered by the court to take back the picture and return Desenfans's money. The case was something of an embarrassment for West who had allegedly praised the painting when Vandergucht showed it to him: Vandergucht had taken West's opinion at face value (though, in fact, West was merely being polite and was uncertain that the painting was actually by Poussin) and had used it to sway Desenfans who was wavering over the purchase of the painting. A rather sheepish West was required to give evidence at the Guildhall, an experience he was clearly not keen to repeat for the Boydell-Drummond trial. (see *The World*, 8 June, 1787, p.3)

<sup>2</sup> Farington, IX, 3450-51.

<sup>3</sup> *Repository of Arts*, *op.cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *V & A Press Cuttings*, Vol II, p 512, dated by hand 13 April, 1789. The small plate after the *Death of Chatham* was the subject of another court case in 1801 when a dispute ensued between Copley and Bartolozzi's assistant J.M. Delatte over the poor quality of the likenesses in the engraving. For an account of this dispute see Gage, 'Early Exhibition', p. 124.



In addition to the resultant mixture of line and stipple, the plates - because of their time-consuming nature - would have needed to be commissioned from a large number of engravers, a factor which further contributed to variations in style and quality. Indeed, the number of engravers credited with involvement in the Shakespeare project might not adequately represent the number of hands actually responsible for the plates, since many engravers employed assistants, sometimes in great numbers.<sup>1</sup> The engraving project, far from enjoying the acknowledgment of variety and individuality which the paintings benefited from, was reliant on a worrying division of labour which pointed up the mechanical status of the art.

In theory the amalgamation of line and stipple could have been regarded as an ingenious compromise between clarity and tone, and of technique versus effect. As Smirke observed, ‘... the excellence of stroke [i.e. line] engraving consisted of the difficulty of execution and ... dotted engraving produced a better imitation of colour and effect.’<sup>2</sup> As we have seen in earlier chapters, many of the paintings on display in the Gallery effected a careful negotiation of the dynamics of line and colour, a process which served to assert the primacy of the visual, and re-considered the often hierarchical relationship between word and image. Perhaps the difficulty lay in the fact that while the (most successful) paintings were perceived to have a distinctly English, anti-foreign flavour, the ‘dotted’ manner may have been perceived to have a foreign - and in particular, French - derivation.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the immersion of engraving within a wider print culture meant that it was a form of imagery which was much closer to the verbal than painting was. The fact that the Boydell prints were destined to be bound up in book form (either as illustrations to a text, or as a folio of prints) reinforced their relationship to the written word even if, as Josiah Boydell claimed, they had attained some parity within that relationship. Just as the clarity of the line in painting was bound up with the narrative demands of history painting, so line

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<sup>1</sup> Bartolozzi, for example, ran a particularly large workshop, employing as many as fifty assistants in the 1770s (A. de Vesme and A. Calabi, *Francesco Bartolozzi*, (Milan, 1928), p. xx.

<sup>2</sup> Farington, IV, 1303.

<sup>3</sup> Stipple was a development of the French crayon technique. It may also have been regarded — like colour in painting — as having a feminine basis, since the earliest stipples in England were those ‘printed in the manner of red chalks’ after Angelica Kauffman’s works.

engraving would have been considered the most appropriate technique for historical prints.

But a clue to the reasons for these criticisms exists in the fact that a proportion of those who criticised the Boydell prints were in fact engravers. Eager to promote themselves within the hierarchy of artistic practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, engravers stressed the difficulty and nobility of their art, and played down its links with the world of commerce. English engraving had achieved prominence within the European market during the 1760s and 70s with commentators noting that English printmakers now rivalled the French in line engraving and had surpassed their neighbours in other techniques such as mezzotint, stipple and aquatint.<sup>1</sup> Roughly synonymous with the career of William Woollett (Figure 100), the rise and peak of English line engraving (which was effectively, for those who troubled themselves to write upon the subject, the same thing as an English school of engraving) did not go unnoticed at home or abroad, particularly in Germany where it played a significant part in German anglomania.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the century, however, engravers found themselves facing criticisms of commerciality, hurried and unskilled techniques, and poor draughtsmanship. These were criticisms which those most prominent in the profession, those who had the most to lose from these attacks, desperately sought to allay and, unsurprisingly, they sought to do so by alluding to the difficulty of line engraving and marginalizing techniques such as stipple and colour printing that aimed at mere effect. At the same time they reinforced a hierarchy of genres within the practice of engraving that mirrored that within the Academy, a process which was relatively straightforward since various reproductive techniques were generally associated with particular genres of painting.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Timothy Clayton, 'Reviews of English Prints in German Journals, 1750-1800' in *Print Quarterly*, 10:2 (1993), pp.123-137. Germany provided a particularly strong market for English artists.

<sup>2</sup> Woollett's most celebrated engravings were the plate after Richard Wilson's *Niobe* (the print which made his name as an engraver) and that after West's *Death of General Wolfe*.

<sup>3</sup> Line engraving was traditionally used for ambitious historical works; mezzotint was a popular technique for reproducing portraits, not least because it was a swift process and the demand for individual portraits would hardly be long-lived. Stipple was generally used for less ambitious [cont'd ...]

*Image and Text*

As we might expect, the Boydells' nine-volume illustrated edition of Shakespeare offered an important addition to some of the finest private libraries in the country. Among these was the library of Sir Mark Masterman Sykes at Sledmere House in East Yorkshire, described by the early nineteenth-century chronicler of 'bibliomania', Thomas Frognall Dibdin, as 'at once copious and choice'.<sup>1</sup> Sykes was a knowledgeable collector of books and prints: the design for the library at Sledmere was commissioned from Joseph Rose while Boydell's Shakespeare was in the process of being published, and was clearly conceived of a space for social display as well as one which could house Sykes's collection of books (Figure 101).<sup>2</sup> Other significant collectors who subscribed to the Boydell Shakespeare included Lord Spencer who maintained a series of libraries at Althorp (Figure 102) which housed important works of art as well as an extensive collection of books; Ralph Willett of Merly, near Wimborne in Dorset, who had designed and built a library at his estate to house his collection of books, but who died in 1795; the connoisseur and collector of contemporary British painting, George Beaumont; and the antiquary, Henry Charles Englefield.<sup>3</sup>

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historical works and fancy pictures. The popularity of aquatint at this time corresponded to that of watercolour, the medium which it usually imitated.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *The Bibliomania: or, Book-Madness; containing some account of the history, symptoms, and cure of this fatal disease*, London (1809) p.81n.

<sup>2</sup> Sykes died childless in 1824, and a significant portion of his library was sold the following year by his brother, Tatton Sykes who had little interest in the fine arts (his interests were agricultural techniques and horse racing). The sale included the Guttenberg Bible now in the Pierpont Morgan Library. The Boydell Shakespeare, however, is still at Sledmere today. The sales catalogues of Sykes's print collection in the Prints and Drawings Room of the British Museum reveal that he had accumulated several thousand prints, including a large number by British artists. I am grateful to Jane Warbuton for information about the library at Sledmere.

<sup>3</sup> The paintings in Lord Spencer's libraries included Rembrandt's portrait of his mother, a *Holy Family* by Raphael and several paintings by Teniers, as well as works by Guido Reni, Pietro Perugino, and Barlo Maratti, and portraits of Michelangelo and Giulio Romano. The library at Merly is mentioned in Raven, 'From Promotion to Proscription'. On Beaumont, see M. Greaves, *Regency Patron: Sir George Beaumont* (London, 1966) and Felicity Owen and David Blayney Brown, *Collector of Genius: A Life of Sir George Beaumont* (New Haven and London, 1988).

Boydell attached no less significance to the book 'stage' of the project than he had to the gallery of paintings or the folio of large prints: he was keen to assert that his edition of Shakespeare stemmed from the same patriotic and artistic motives that had impelled earlier stages of his scheme. As early as 1790 he had sought to endow the typographical aspect of the publication with the same kind of aesthetic significance as the paintings and prints, and to pre-empt any criticisms of the delay that might ensue relating to this aspect of the process:

With regard to any delay that may have taken place in the typographical part of this work – it is to be considered, that when the paper, the ink, the types, and the manner of printing the first sheet of any work is fixed, all improvement so far as regards that work, is at an end, as uniformity must be preserved. The delay, therefore, must be altogether in the beginning of a work, where considerable improvements are attempted. – The principal object of the improvements in the present work, has been an endeavour, to retain the beauty of the best printing, and yet to avoid the dazzling effect which is so distressing to the eye of the reader, in most of the fine specimens of that art.<sup>1</sup>

Boydell clearly conceived of the typographical design (as well as the quality of paper and printing) as an aesthetic issue in its own right, as a mediator between Shakespeare's text and the incorporated images which might buttress their compatibility. To reinforce the point, Boydell made much of the new printing techniques which he – in conjunction with William Bulmer – was responsible for developing, arguing that his edition of Shakespeare would revolutionise British printing. The nation will now, he asserted, 'have an opportunity of shewing the world, that we can print as well in England, it is hoped, as they do at Parma, Paris, or Madrid, where undoubtedly they have lately carried the art to great perfection'.<sup>2</sup> The development of a typographical art that would 'rival those of foreign nations' hinged the publication phase neatly to the painting and engraving stages of the project by reiterating their patriotic rhetoric and ensuring

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<sup>1</sup> John Boydell, *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery, Pall Mall*, London (1790), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Boydell, *Catalogue* (1790), p. xii. 'Dazzling effects' often connoted foreignness in the visual arts and it is likely that the avoidance of such an aesthetic is the typographic aspect of Boydell's project would have further reinforced its Englishness.

that the collectivity of the whole operated on an ideological as well as an aesthetic level.

For book collectors, who were as concerned with typography as a signifier as with what it signified, Boydell's edition of Shakespeare was a landmark in the history of printing. Dibdin noted that

no work of equal magnitude (I speak of the typographical part) ever presented such complete accuracy and uniform excellence of execution. There is scarcely one perceptible shade of variation, from the first page of the 1<sup>st</sup> volume; either in the colour of the ink, the hue of the paper, or the clearness and sharpness of the types.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly the text was intended to be read in a similar way as the illustrations surrounding it (and, indeed, as the paintings which preceded them), not only in terms of what it signified, but also in terms of aesthetic qualities, such as clarity, tone, colour, accuracy, the technical quality of the medium and skill in execution. Certainly, the print and layout of the text reflected the ambitious and elevated nature of Boydell's project (Figure 103): in comparison with earlier editions of Shakespeare, Boydell's employed a large and clear type, uncluttered by annotations and with directions neatly marginalized, which united legibility with grandeur and visibly resisted the 'dazzling effect' often produced by printers of literary texts.<sup>2</sup>

But the intertwining of the book and engraving projects did not signal the project's finality. The text and illustrations still had to be bound, an expense and decision which lay with the subscribers. Boydell issued instructions to binders with the prints, indicating the appropriate place in the text at which to

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *The Bibliographical Decameron; or, ten days pleasant discourse upon illuminated manuscripts, and subjects connected with early engraving, typography, and bibliography*, 3 vols, London (1817), p. 337, n.1.

<sup>2</sup> On the typography of eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, see Colin Franklin, 'Print and Design in Eighteenth-Century Editions of Shakespeare' in *The Book Collector*, Winter 1994, pp. 517-528.

insert them, but it seems that a number of subscribers had their own plans for the text. One such subscriber was George C. George from Penryn in Cornwall. George was a collector of prints and drawings depicting scenes from Shakespeare's plays: he accumulated several hundred prints which he had bound into his copy of Boydell's Shakespeare, expanding the original nine volumes into eleven.<sup>1</sup> George's collection included illustrations to earlier editions by artists such as Hayman and Smirke, series of watercolour drawings by particular artists (Figure 104), contemporary theatrical prints, topographical views of locations mentioned in Shakespeare's plays and engraved portraits of Shakespeare, his contemporaries and historical figures appearing in his plays. The practice of incorporating additional illustrative material into literary and historical texts - known as 'grangerization' after Granger's *Biographical History of England* which recommended the extra-illustration of the text - was relatively common in the late eighteenth century when the print market was at its height.<sup>2</sup> Dibdin referred to it as 'a very general and violent symptom of the Bibliomania', and regarded it as a kind of voracious addiction which often failed to discriminate between good prints and bad. Dibdin's criticism is understandable, coming as it does from a self-confessed bibliomaniac. In particularly extensive examples of extra-illustrated editions, such as that of the Turner Shakespeare in the Huntington Library, the text is literally submerged beneath the sheer quantity of 'illustrative' material: the images do not illustrate the text so much as the text serves as a framing device for the collection of prints and drawings.<sup>3</sup> Recognising this 'symptom of the bibliomania', rival print publishers began to regard Boydell not as a competitor but as a potential asset, advertising their

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<sup>1</sup> Including the Boydell engravings, there are some 700 prints, drawings and watercolours in George's copy of the Boydell Shakespeare, which is now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

<sup>2</sup> The Marquis of Bute's copy of Granger's *Biographical History* extended to 37 atlas folio volumes once his extensive collection of prints had been incorporated into the text.

<sup>3</sup> Robert R. Wark, *Drawings from the Turner Shakespeare* (San Marino, 1973), p. 6. The Turner Shakespeare (so-called after its compiler, Thomas Turner of Gloucester who began compiling the work in 1835) included about three thousand prints and seven hundred and fifty drawings, extending Turner's copy of Boydell's Shakespeare to 44 volumes. See also Shelley M. Bennett, *Eighteenth Century Book Illustrations to Shakespeare: A Catalogue of the Turner Shakespeare in the Henry E. Huntington Collection*. Unpublished MA Thesis: UCLA (1975).

wares as appropriate additions to an extra-illustrated edition of Boydell's Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, George's extra-illustrated edition was variable in the quality of its collection of prints and drawings, but this offers part of its appeal. Robert Wark has dismissed a third of the illustrations in the similar, but larger and later, Turner Shakespeare in the Huntington Library as 'worthless scribbles by rank amateurs', yet one of the most interesting aspects of such grangerised volumes is their incorporation of amateur drawings alongside works by and after acknowledged artists. Included in George's collection are four ink and wash drawings by two local men: a George Webbe of Falmouth and two watercolours by a Lieutenant Robert Cowan of the Devon militia. The drawings were presented to George by the two men specifically for his Shakespeare collection. While Cowan's work (Figure 105) has little technical skill, even by amateur standards, it nonetheless has a fresh and enthusiastic quality, and adds a new, personal and local dimension to George's collection. With Shakespeare's plays providing a ready-made system of classification and ordering for such collections, other taxonomies – dealing in chronologies, artists or schools (and implicitly concerned with aesthetic quality) – might become irrelevant. Important editions such as Boydell's, at the same time as they represented high points in ambitious artistic practice, could also be seen as democratic vehicles which broke down cultural categories and taxonomies of art.

Provincial gentlemen such as George, distanced from the art exhibitions of the metropolis, depended upon the nationwide print trade for their knowledge of the modern art world. For example, Jonathan Elford, a friend of Northcote's from Devon, relied on Northcote to forward prints to him, including his subscription to the Boydell Shakespeare. His brother William Elford, meanwhile, was a skilled

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<sup>1</sup> John Bell, example, placed advertisements which situated the prints sold in his shop as particularly suited to the practice of extra-illustration: "many there are, who wish to possess every article that can tend either to elucidate or embellish the works of the Immortal Bard – such in particular, as well as those who have either Boydell's edition or any of the smaller publications, are respectfully informed that Mr Bell, of the British Library, has several complete sets of prints, fine Impressions, adapted to each of Shakespeare's plays, which may be bound up with any edition of his works, or added to them as a supplementary volume of embellishments. They are equally calculated for being framed as Cabinet furniture" (*The Oracle*, 8 April 1793, p.3).

amateur artist who frequently sent his pictures to Northcote in the hope of having them exhibited at the R.A. exhibition, indicating a degree of artistic communication between the provinces and the metropolis which has yet to be fully explored by art historians.<sup>1</sup> It appears from such evidence that the provincial experience of British art was acquired predominantly through the circulation of prints and through amateur practice, a pastime which was extremely popular among the leisured middle and upper classes.<sup>2</sup> The two frequently coincided, with prints offering an important object for amateur study, and publications such as Rudolph Ackermann's *Repository of the Arts* (published from 1809) advertising the latest novelties obtainable from Ackermann's emporium at the same time as it disseminated news about the contemporary art world. The distinction between the amateur and the professional, as Kim Sloan has pointed out, is a latter-day one.<sup>3</sup> It could even be argued that collectors of the Boydell Shakespeare might regard the work as a spur to their own talents: an excellent example is that of Lady Lavinia Spencer (*née* Bingham) who married the second Earl Spencer in 1781 (Figure 106). She used the volumes of Lord Spencer's copy of the Boydell Shakespeare containing the history plays as a vehicle for her own illustrations, spending sixteen years illustrating her own five-volume copy of the history plays.<sup>4</sup>

Kauffman's portrait of the young Lavinia Bingham depicts a high-minded young woman in a classicised setting, examining a portfolio of drawings of the human figure, presumably executed by Bingham herself. Lady Bingham had received an unusually thorough aesthetic education, and enjoyed a particularly successful

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<sup>1</sup> MSS Hilles Collection, Northcote correspondence (Yale University: Beinecke Library). It transpires from this correspondence that Northcote, in his early career, also sent his exhibition pieces to his native Devon after the exhibition closed, although it seems likely that it was only his family and friends who viewed them. Although there is little existing scholarship on the provincial practice and experience of painting in the Georgian period, the scene in Bath has been explored. See Susan Sloman, *Gainsborough in Bath* (New Haven and London, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> On the rise of amateur painting in the eighteenth century, see Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) and Kim Sloan, *'A Noble Art': Amateur Artists and Drawing Masters c.1600-1800* (London: British Museum Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Sloan (2000) p.7. If anything the distinction was inverted, with the term 'amateur' signifying one who was a true lover of the arts, and practiced it without expectation of payment.

<sup>4</sup> This extra-illustrated copy is described by Thomas Frognall Dibdin in his *Aedes Althorpianae; or an Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures at Althorp; the residence of George John Earl Spencer* (London, 1822), vol 5, pp. 200ff.



'career' as an amateur artist both before and after her marriage, having a number of her works engraved by Bartolozzi.<sup>1</sup> As Kauffman's portrait suggests, however, Lavinia Bingham had aspirations beyond the usual amateur (and feminine) subjects of landscape and flowers. As well as pastel portraits of her family and friends, she drew and copied a number of historical compositions: the illustration of Shakespeare's history plays seems to have been the culminating project of her amateur career and was described by Dibdin as producing 'the most splendid copy in existence of any portion of the printed text of our immortal bard'.<sup>2</sup> Many of Lady Spencer's illustrations for this edition were copies after earlier portraits, illuminated manuscripts, historical, architectural or topographical prints and heraldry designs, but she did include the occasional composition of her own. Several of her designs were marginal illustrations, utilising the extensive space surrounding the text in the Boydell edition. Thus, while Bulmer's page design might have been intended to be deliberately sparse and 'undazzling', it also offered a space for further illustrative incorporations on the page itself: the final volume of Lady Spencer's copy of the Boydell / Shakespeare history plays was 'literally, from one end to the other, in a blaze with gold and radiant colours', a quite different object to the text Boydell had envisaged.<sup>3</sup>

### *New Forms of Dissemination*

While early nineteenth century collectors and amateur paintings saw the Boydell Shakespeare as a vehicle or repository for their own bibliomania, collections and talents, the Victorians took a quite different attitude to the edition. Rather than expanding upon it, they sought to limit it, an action which they saw as actually furthering its appeal. The development of photography as a new medium offered fresh possibilities for the Boydell images, a number of which found themselves reinvented to fit the demands of an increasingly democratised

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Bingham was taken on a two-year tour of Italy by her parents at the age of sixteen (the year of Kauffman's portrait). Horace Mann wrote to Horace Walpole from Florence that the Bingham girls, 'by their judgement of the pictures and all the collection in the [Uffizi] Gallery are looked upon as prodigies at their age here' (Sloan, 2000, p.243).

<sup>2</sup> Dibdin (1822), vol. 5, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Dibdin (1822) vol 5, p.204.

readership. Boydell's project clearly enjoyed some celebrity with the later nineteenth century public, but the size of the engravings was deemed to be a serious obstacle to the project's posterity and its ongoing appeal.<sup>1</sup> In 1864 Stephen Ayling published his series of photographs which reduced the large series of Boydell engravings, pronouncing the original prints to be 'out of place in all but the libraries of the very rich' but noting that their consistent market value was indicative of their ongoing quality and collectability. His new 'version' of the Boydell Shakespeare prints offered itself to a new kind of audience: 'presented in handy form', it was 'suitable for circulating libraries, or the drawing-room table' rather than private libraries and print rooms.<sup>2</sup> Prefaced with a history of the Shakespeare Gallery and with John Boydell's polemical letter to Sir John Anderson, the portable volume offered an account and illustration of the inception of an English school of painting to a middle-class audience, a point which Ayling was keen to emphasise, believing that contemporary artists might benefit from the examples of their predecessors and that audiences might encourage their pursuit of an English aesthetic. 'Our modern artists', he stated, 'have ably illustrated the works of our great dramatist, as the productions of Maclise, Landseer, Leslie, F. Pickersgill, Frith, Le Jeune, Harlow and others, will amply show, but no *series* has hitherto been published so magnificent in conception or execution, or so completely the production of the English school, as that which is now reproduced.'<sup>3</sup> His photographs of the prints are thus intended to encapsulate and disseminate the essence of what Ayling perceives to be an English school of painting for the benefit not only of a new public for art, but also of latter-day artists whose collective aesthetic goals may be deemed to be wandering away from the pursuit of a national art form. By democratising the collective enterprise of Boydell's artists – at a time when photographically-illustrated art books were beginning to be published on a

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<sup>1</sup> As the copper plates were in America by now, further issues of the prints for a domestic audience were no longer possible.

<sup>2</sup> [Stephen Ayling] *The Shakespeare Gallery: A Reproduction in Commemoration of the Tercentenary Anniversary of the Poet's Birth* (London: 1864)

<sup>3</sup> Ayling, p.xx.

regular basis – Ayling was seeking to keep the English School discourse alive and to encourage its continuation through a new generation of English artists.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, Boydell's engravings were pared down by publishers to fit the demands of bourgeois Victorian tastes. A 1875 edition of Shakespeare's plays, for example, took its illustrations from twenty of the large engravings, three of them by Northcote, four by Smirke, and others by Kauffman, Westall, William Hamilton, Romney, Wright of Derby, Barry, Ramberg, Kirk and Miller.<sup>2</sup> The selection made a clear appeal to the Victorian appetite for a melodramatic and feminised form of culture: in particular, Northcote's sentimental historical scenes enjoyed a continued popularity with nineteenth-century audiences.<sup>3</sup> Other publications offered an even more selective experience of Boydell's Shakespeare: an 1878 publication by the Rev. W. Dodd featured just 12 photographs of the engravings, divested of text and bound into a slim volume.<sup>4</sup> Collectively, these ongoing re-inventions of the experience of the Shakespeare Gallery reveal a continued fascination with the Gallery and the vision for English art which it engendered, and suggest that it was still meaningful for Victorian audiences and artists.

Portable, democratic and carefully abridged, the photographic reproductions of the Boydell engravings would have worked in a variety of ways in addition to ensuring to the continuation of the English School discourse. First, the photographs sought to commodify an elevated aesthetic product within an affordable publication: Ayling's portrayal of the Boydell engravings as unwieldy, expensive and out-of-reach to all but the very rich implicitly held up the prints as a valuable and desirable set of objects which his publication offered to put within the reach of the everyday reader. In addition, the ambitious nature of the prints and their visible position in the history of English engraving

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<sup>1</sup> On photographically illustrated books, see Heinz K. Hemish and Bridget A. Hemish, *The Photographic Experience, 1839-1914: Images and Attitudes* (Pennsylvania, 1994), Chapter 11.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of William Shakespeare, edited with a scrupulous revision of the text by Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke* (London, 1875).

<sup>3</sup> Conspicuously absent, given the Victorian vogue for fairy-painting (and photography) were Fuseli's works for Boydell.

<sup>4</sup> The selection of works for this volume was dominated by Northcote, Smirke and Wheatley revealing once again Victorian tastes for the sentimental and the theatrical.

conferred a certain status upon Ayling's medium at a time when the value of photography as an artistic form was still being ascertained.<sup>1</sup> Located within what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'the sphere of the legitimizable', photography developed the means to assume the 'dignity and value' accredited to 'legitimate culture' such as painting and sculpture.<sup>2</sup> One of the more obvious ways in which this occurred was through the development of 'art photography' which sought to represent subjects common in contemporary artistic practice or continental painting of the past, as well as attempting to develop a visual quality of its own.<sup>3</sup> But what is suggestive here is the possibility that photography may not only have made a case for its aesthetic legitimacy by suggesting its affinity with painting, but that, in the cases we have encountered, it also sought to align itself with an earlier means of mechanical reproduction, one which had not only disseminated the painted image, but had made its own claims as a legitimate, ambitious art form, one which the English had excelled at. In sum, Ayling's *Shakespeare Gallery* – and the other Victorian publications which re-issued the Boydell engravings in a new and portable format – pointed to the aesthetic and material value, and the ideological significance of the Boydell project some sixty years after the Gallery was dissolved, situating it at the centre of a history of British art and holding it up as significant for a new generation of viewers, readers and artists.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Jabez Hughes, for example, had recently distinguished between three kinds of photography: his system of classification owed much to the academic hierarchy of genres. At the bottom level was mechanical or 'literal' photography, effectively a simple, unmediated snapshot of an object. Next came art photography, in which the photographer 'determines to diffuse his mind into [objects] by arranging, modifying, or otherwise disposing them, so that they may appear in a more appropriate or beautiful manner'. At the top of the hierarchy was high-art photography, 'certain pictures which aim at a higher purpose than the majority of art-photographs, and whose purpose is not merely to amuse but to instruct, purify and ennoble' (C. Jabez Hughes, 'On Art Photography' in *American Journal of Photography*, 3 (1861), pp. 261-2).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 95-96.

<sup>3</sup> See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (London, 1964) and Helmut Gernsheim, *The Rise of Photography, 1850-1880* (London, 1988).

*The consumption of Englishness: the Shakespeare Gallery abroad*

By 1802, a set of the large engravings from the Shakespeare Gallery had reached the New York publisher and bookseller, David Longworth. In his shop in the fashionable urban gardens known simply as the Park, Longworth opened his own Shakespeare Gallery, displaying a large number of the Boydell prints in magnificent frames on the second storey and nearly obscuring the front of his shop with a colossal sign-painting 'in *chiaroscuro*, of the crowning of Shakespeare'.<sup>1</sup> Like the original Shakespeare Gallery, the New York version was situated in a highly fashionable part of the city, 'an elegant and improving place' which offered 'ready amusement to the mind' and included an 'English and French reading-room' (housing a 'large and various collection of the most recent and fashionable publications') and a theatre, as well as an extensive ornamental urban park.<sup>2</sup> The Shakespeare Gallery was listed in contemporary guides to New York as constituting one of the main attractions of the Park.

Longworth's display of the Boydell prints was selective, exhibiting approximately two-thirds of the large engravings. All of the most popular images were displayed, and Fuseli, Smirke and Northcote were well-represented in Longworth's gallery at the expense of Reynolds.<sup>3</sup> The selection was particularly strong on the comic scenes, excluding only a very small number of these engravings, and was rather more selective with regard to the history plays (excluding the more politically-contentious subjects or battle scenes) and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Evert A. Duyckinck, *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (New York, 1856) and the preface to *Salmagundi; or the Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff and Others* (Paris, 1834).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Latham Mitchill, *A Picture of New York; or, the Traveller's Guide* (New York, 1807), pp. 153-55. New York also had its own Ranelagh and Vauxhall.

<sup>3</sup> Fuseli's *Hamlet* was exhibited, while the American artist's was not: West's version was not well-received, and when the painting was moved to Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century, one viewer refused to believe it could be by West (see Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven and London, 1986), p.271.). Meanwhile, Fuseli's was the only *Macbeth* scene to be displayed, though Longworth did exhibit one engraving after Reynolds (the *Death of Cardinal Beaufort*).

Roman plays. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that the engravings after the comic paintings were the most overtly theatrical of the Boydell images, and hence were particularly suited to the environment of Longworth's business, which specialised in publishing foreign and American plays. The engravings from the history plays, meanwhile, seem to have been selected for having an appeal beyond the mere narrating of British history: particularly numerous were the sentimental scenes of Northcote and the domestic, feminised images from *Henry VIII* by Stothard, Peters and Westall. More politically-charged scenes (including that by the American artist, Mather Browne, of Richard II resigning the crown to Bolingbroke) were simply siphoned away from Longworth's exhibition, as were the scenes from *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* – the latter of which had a venerable art-historical lineage, and may otherwise have been a logical inclusion within Longworth's collection of paintings which hung alongside the engravings.<sup>1</sup>

Longworth published his own *Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery*, a publication which adapted Boydell's catalogue to include the 67 Shakespeare prints and the selection of 30 additional paintings – nearly all of them of non-Shakespearean subjects – which Longworth included in the exhibition, and which he appears to have occasionally added to.<sup>2</sup> For an admittance charge of 12½ cents, visitors to Longworth's Shakespeare Gallery could view the Boydell engravings alongside a small selection of European paintings (including two British paintings, one by William Hamilton and the other by Thomas Stothard) and a slightly larger collection of paintings by contemporary American artists, among them Gilbert Stuart and Charles Wilson Peale.<sup>3</sup> By far the most popular subject for the American artists was the

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<sup>1</sup> Especially significant, perhaps, given the particular history of the United States is the fact that not one of the three large engravings from *Othello* was exhibited in Longworth's premises. Frederick Burwick has pointed out that the Romantic notion of the superiority of the verbal over the visual – as expounded, for example, by Charles Lamb in his criticisms of the Shakespeare Gallery – manifested a xenophobic discomfort at the visualising of 'Othello's colour' (quoted from Lamb). Frederick Burwick, 'The Romantic Reception of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery: Lamb, Coleridge and Hazlitt' in Burwick and Pape, p.145.

<sup>2</sup> David Longworth, *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery* (New York, 1802).

<sup>3</sup> The paintings by the British artists were a scene from Johnson's *Rasselas* (by Stothard – probably a painting done for one of four illustrations for J and E Harding's 1796 edition) and a large canvas of the bedchamber scene from *Cymbeline* (Hamilton). Hamilton had done a [cont'd ...]

founding President, George Washington, who had died some three years previously and whose image (within various portraits, allegorical paintings, monuments, coins and other media) had been widely disseminated as a republican effigy.<sup>1</sup> A series of paintings depicting Washington – including a celebrated portrait by Gilbert Stuart (Figure 107) – in the New York Shakespeare Gallery were accompanied by portraits of the now-retired diplomat and chief justice, John Jay, and the military martyr, General Richard Montgomery. All three men had played key roles in the War of Independence. In addition, a portrait of the current President, Thomas Jefferson, completed the narrative of modern nationhood.

Significantly, among the prints from Boydell's venture which Longworth had chosen *not* to exhibit were the engraved portraits of King George and Queen Charlotte after Beechey which respectively preceded the large prints in their two separate volumes (Figures 108 and 109). Instead Longworth replaced them more appropriately within the walls of his own Shakespeare Gallery with memorials to important American, republican figures. That such portraits, painted by national artists, should have offered a definite appeal in post-Independence America is little surprise. Not only had the nation declared its political independence from Britain, but it had for some time been regarded as a troubling fact that American writers and artists were continuing to manifest 'an astonishing respect for the arts and manners of their parent country, and a blind imitation of its manners'.<sup>2</sup> By the time Longworth had transformed his shop into another Shakespeare Gallery, a widespread cultural nationalism recognised that the new nation needed 'a culture that articulated the fundamental tenets of liberty, constitutionalism, virtue, and simplicity'.<sup>3</sup> Given the nature of these 'tenets', it is perhaps

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painting of an earlier scene in *Cymbeline* for Boydell, the print of which was on display in Longworth's shop. The paintings by continental European artists included conventional subjects such as a *Death of Lucretia*, a *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, an *Apollo a Cupid* and an *Uranus* by Italian painters, as well as a 'head' by Greuze.

<sup>1</sup> See Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (Boston, 1789), p.397-8. For an extended discussion of the cultural nationalism of post-revolutionary America see Joseph J. Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York and London: Norton, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Lester H. Cohen (ed.), introduction to David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990), p xv.

unsurprising that Longworth should have taken the otherwise paradoxical step of juxtaposing nationalist American art with the latest productions of the British School. Boydell's project, as we have seen, expounded similar qualities of 'liberty, constitutionalism, virtue and simplicity' in both aesthetic and political forms, allowing Longworth to appropriate its ideological basis for his own nationalist agenda.

Longworth's Gallery thus revealed a complex relation between American and British art, and it is difficult to know whether the similarities or differences between the two Schools would have been most apparent to contemporary visitors. It would, perhaps, be more accurate to assume that it was the symbiotic and mutually-enhancing relationship between these very different kinds of artistic models which would have been particularly meaningful in generating the aesthetic ideology of Longworth's exhibition. On the most basic level, in juxtaposing works by contemporary American artists with (predominantly Italian) European paintings, Longworth was trying to make a claim for the equality of the American School with the schools most venerated in art history and theory.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of the American paintings, by the artist William Dunlap, the author of the *History of the Arts of Design in the United States*, was of the theoretically prestigious *Choice of Hercules*, a subject still posited as an exemplary basis for ambitious painting.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the visibly different subject matter of the majority of the American canvases signalled their detachment from European art and politics, and flaunted the modernity of the nation. Most obviously, the subject of Peale's *Portrait of General Richard Montgomery who fell before Quebec, 31 December 1775* recalls a canvas painted by John Trumbull when resident in London sixteen years earlier (Figure 110). The second in his series of Revolutionary War series, Trumbull's *Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec* had been engraved in France and circulated in America, its appeal to a British audience reeling from the loss of its

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds's *Discourses* were as widely read in American cities as they were in England. See Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790-1860* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp.17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Another American artist, Ward of Newark, produced small canvases of Shakespeare, Sterne and St John the Divine which hung in Longworth's Gallery.



most significant colony clearly limited.<sup>1</sup> Like Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, the paintings in Longworth's exhibition posited national subjects as the basis for an ambitious national school of painting, a school which might (though only coincidentally) have similar ideological principles to that alternate 'British School' that had flourished outside the royalist and autocratic Royal Academy. While the subjects of the contemporary American school were distinctly anti-British, there were aspects of British national identity (or at least the identity which the British claimed for themselves) that could be conveniently yoked to the American cause, denying an outright severance of the Anglo-American bond. Thus, the juxtaposition with Boydell's canvases created a conveniently symbiotic relationship between the two 'schools' which allowed the national subjects in Longworth's Gallery to claim ideological affinity with Boydell's enterprise at the same time as Longworth sought to reflect the independent and self-confident nature of the American nation and culture, and its fundamental distinction from the former mother country.

While the Napoleonic wars brought devastation to Boydell, the chaotic state of European trade had brought large profits to the American mercantile community. Members of this community were able to plough some of their surplus capital into new enterprises, one area of which was the fine arts. Although there existed nothing like the widespread imperative for a national investment in the fine arts that eighteenth-century England had witnessed (there were plenty of figures, such as John Adams, who viewed the arts with distrust and attributed to them the kind of symptoms of moral degeneracy that European critics of the rococo had previously detected) there were, nonetheless, intermittent impulses of cultural nationalism that induced wealthy Americans to encourage the visual arts in their own country.<sup>2</sup> It was, however, initially difficult to distil the painterly qualities that might characterise an American school of painting when the most celebrated national artists had worked and trained in London in the years prior to Independence. Matthew Pratt's painting of the *American School* (Figure 111) reveals that there was a distinct community in the London art world made up of

<sup>1</sup> See Jules Prown, 'John Trumbull as History Painter' in his *Art as Evidence: Essays on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp.159-187.

<sup>2</sup> See Miller, *Patriots and Patriotism*.

American painters who gravitated to the studio of their compatriot Benjamin West. As Jules Prown has shown, these young artists took on the painterly characteristics, not only of West, but of a number of contemporary British portrait painters, including Reynolds and Francis Cotes.<sup>1</sup> Those that returned to their homeland thus took with them, and further disseminated, the stylistic qualities prevalent in British artistic practice.

In the case of the numerous portraits of George Washington the influence of British artists was particularly clear, for these images owed much to the equally abundant portraits of George III. Not only was there a striking physical resemblance between the two men, but several of Washington's portraitists availed themselves of compositional formulae and pictorial codes used in the king's portraits, including that by Beechey in the Shakespeare Gallery (see Figure 108).<sup>2</sup> The best known of Washington's portraits was that painted for the Marquis of Lansdowne in 1796 by Gilbert Stuart (who had been a pupil of West's), of which he made several copies: one of these copies is likely to be the painting listed in Longworth's catalogue.<sup>3</sup> Stuart's portrait owes much to the equally celebrated portrait of Commodore Augustus Keppel that established Reynolds as 'the greatest painter that England had seen since Van Dyck'.<sup>4</sup> In adapting the pose of Keppel to his portrait of Washington, Stuart was availing himself of a visual code which signalled the civic virtue of his sitter, as well as his own artistic credentials.<sup>5</sup> Longworth noted in the catalogue that Washington was depicted in this portrait as addressing both of the Houses of Congress – presumably giving his farewell address, for he had resigned from office earlier

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<sup>1</sup> See his essay, 'Charles Wilson Peale in London' in *Art as Evidence*, pp.133-158.

<sup>2</sup> As with the promotion of George III as 'Farmer George', Washington also became known as 'Farmer Washington'.

<sup>3</sup> Longworth describes the painting in his shop as 'Stuart's celebrated portrait of Washington, large as life. Size of the canvas, 5 by 8 feet high. The great master of portrait painting, speaking of this picture, said it was his masterpiece. Washington is supposed to be addressing both the Houses of Congress, and the likeness is so strong, that 'tis easy for those who know him about the close of his presidency, to realise in imagination this august ceremony' (Longworth, *Catalogue*, No. 1).

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Malone, introduction to Joshua Reynolds, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds ... to which is prefixed an account of the life and writings of the author by Edmond Malone*, 2 vols (London, 1798), I, pp..xxii-xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> As David Solkin has pointed out, the pose and gesture of Keppel derive from the Togate statue of Tiberius. See David H. Solkin, 'Great Pictures or Great Men? Reynolds, Male Portraiture and the Power of Art' in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 9, no. 2 (1986), pp.42-49.

that year. In placing this audience in front of the picture plane, Stuart allowed the viewer to step into a space which constituted him or her as part of the new nation which the Houses of Congress represented. And in choosing this particular moment (i.e. Washington's farewell address), Stuart was simultaneously able to gesture towards the active citizenship of the President in his political career, and his private virtues as he moved towards a life of benevolent retirement. In yoking these several meanings to his portrait via a series of carefully constructed semantic codes, Stuart was clearly working under the influence of the historical portraiture he had witnessed in England, produced most obviously by Reynolds and by Stuart's compatriot, John Singleton Copley.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the cultural differences between British and American artists were further blurred by the fact that not only did American artists spend a significant amount of time in England, but a number of artists working in the American cities and producing paintings of American subjects at this time were, in fact, British. Archibald Robertson – a Scottish painter who was a former pupil of Reynolds – had arrived in America in 1791 bringing a letter of introduction to George Washington from the Earl of Buchan, and Washington agreed to pose for the painter. Robertson was among the artists whose 'patriotic' images of Washington adorned the walls of Longworth's Gallery, although the subject he chose did implicitly allude to the bravery of the British Grenadiers as well as to the victory of Washington.<sup>2</sup> In addition, an English painter named Woolley who based himself alternately in New York and Philadelphia had two images of Washington in Longworth's Gallery – one allegorical and the other a historical battle painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the composition and some of the details of Stuart's canvas also owe a lot to a 1768 portrait of William Pitt by Charles Wilson Peale, who depicted the statesman as a starkly patrician figure (replete with toga) defending the rights of the American colonies on the basis on the British Constitution (painting reproduced in Prown, *Art as Evidence*, p.144). Viewed with Peale's portrait in mind, Stuart's can be seen as a natural progression in terms of both political history and American artistic practice, for the latter is a visibly more fluent and polished rendition of its subject.

<sup>2</sup> The subject was Washington at the Battle of Monmouth. The catalogue states that ' 'Twas at this time, General Washington severely reprimanded Lee for his pusillanimous conduct; who, in attempting to defend himself, ask'd if the British Greanadiers were ever known to retreat? Washington replied that he should this day see them compelled to it'.

These three paintings certainly appear to have been among the most ambitious of the contemporary 'American' works on display in the New York Shakespeare Gallery, distancing themselves from the 'mere' portraits produced by the majority of the other artists, Stuart perhaps excepted. In particular the allegorical canvas by Woolley signalled the aspirations of the American school and succinctly posited Washington as, like Shakespeare, a worthy subject for the fine arts. Longworth describes the painting as follows:

The portrait of Washington is supported by Liberty, Virtue and Justice – Virtue holding her crown, intimates the reward he has merited. Two female figures in the left, represent Poetry turning to History for a subject worthy her muse. THERE IS NONE MORE WORTHY THAN WASHINGTON. In the right is seated, in a pensive posture, America (in the form of an aboriginal) lamenting the loss she has sustained in the death of her Washington.

Woolley's canvas was one of many similar allegories produced after the death of Washington. What is particularly significant about it, however, is its explicit appropriation of Washington as a national symbol who can provide the basis of the fine arts in America, in much the same way as Shakespeare had offered to revive the flagging fortunes of history painting in England in 1789. As members of a new nation intent upon celebrating only its revolutionary and post-revolutionary history, American artists and writers needed to look no further than the paternal figure of Washington, who could be invested with the sentiments, values, pride and hope of the American public. Longworth's Shakespeare Gallery, indeed, operated as a kind of memorial to Washington, narrating the span of his career in the service of the new nation – his involvement in the revolution, his peacetime political role, his retirement from public life and, finally, his death, were all commemorated on the walls of the exhibition. It is something of a puzzle, in fact, that Longworth should have chosen to re-name his shop the Shakespeare Gallery when by far the most significant images for his customers and viewers would have been the portraits of Washington.

Woolley's canvas was produced with the hindsight of a painter who had witnessed the artistic climate on both sides of the Atlantic. His status as an

immigrant painter was perhaps signalled to in his allegorical portrait of Washington, in which it is likely that the figure of the pensively-posed native American may have recalled West's famous *Death of General Wolfe* (as was certainly the case with another contemporary image of the *Apotheosis of Washington* – Figure 112). Like West, Woolley was a foreigner trying to signal his allegiance to his adopted country and, perhaps, hoping to change the course of ambitious art within it. Indeed, his composition is likely to have recalled a particular aspect of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery – Bank's sculpture in which the Dramatic Muse and the Genius of Painting point out Shakespeare as a fit subject for their respective pencils (see Figure 12). An engraving after Banks's sculpture was on display in Longworth's Gallery, illuminating both a celebrated precedent for the ideological construction of Washington by Woolley, and a sense that specifically national subjects were the only suitable ones for a national school of art.

Longworth's Shakespeare Gallery thus made careful and deliberate use of the original Shakespeare Gallery in providing its own testimony to the talents of American artists. In these circumstances, an image such as Josiah Boydell's scene from *3Henry VI* depicting the son that has killed his father and the father that has killed his son, may have served here as a visual metaphor warning against the total severance of the bonds between America and the mother country.<sup>1</sup> Longworth, indeed, carefully seamed the two projects together by displaying engravings after paintings by Benjamin West and his son, Raphael, for Boydell's Shakespeare, thus further blurring the distinction between the American and British schools that was already indeterminate from the complex nationality of the painters whose work Longworth displayed. While the paintings on display in Longworth's Gallery signalled – in their subject matter – the new nation's political independence, the artistic statements which they were attempting to articulate were somewhat less idiosyncratic, and sought to harness many of the qualities of the British School. That Boydell's project should, for Longworth, have epitomised English art is significant, for it was not simply (or even mainly) the aesthetic forms of English painting that he sought to

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<sup>1</sup> The engraving was among the prints displayed by Longworth.

appropriate for his cause, it was its ideological basis. Out of the prints available to him, Longworth seems to have chosen a selection which best exemplified the tenets of liberty, originality and variety that this thesis has suggested were the foundation of Boydell's enterprise. While Boydell's "English school" may have been visibly distinct from the work of American artists in its style and subject matter, it represented nonetheless a cultural exemplum whose ideology might be invoked, consumed and appropriated by other nations in search of a distinct and elevated artistic identity. For Longworth, Boydell's Gallery embodied this exemplum.

The potential of Boydell's Shakespeare to serve as the cornerstone of a national artistic culture became further evident when the paintings were sold at Christie's in May 1805. The two large canvases by Benjamin West from *King Lear* and *Hamlet* and the large painting by his son, Raphael, depicting Orlando and Oliver from *As You Like It* were purchased by Robert Fulton, a former pupil of the elder West's, for the newly-founded Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. The three canvases would have suggested the success of American artists in the esteemed European art world, acting as a spur to the Academy's artists and students, and – coming from Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery – would have offered a blueprint for the fledgling American School of the kind of visual qualities which a national school of painting might embody.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the copper plates engraved from the large series of paintings were purchased by Shaerjashub Spooner of New York for an American version of the Boydell illustrations, published in 1852: as in England, Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery continued to exert a presence in American visual culture well into the nineteenth century and to be disseminated to new audiences.

The foreign reception of the Shakespeare Gallery was not restricted to the United States, despite Boydell's claims that European markets had effectively been shut off to him by war. We saw in Chapter II that Boydell had visited Paris in 1787 to promote his Shakespeare Gallery: by then he had built up extensive trading

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<sup>1</sup> The Academy was founded in 1805: West was the first honorary member to be elected, and Fulton was the second. See von Effra and Staley, p.507.

connections on the continent, from Amsterdam and Leipzig to Madrid and Venice.<sup>1</sup> The most significant market for English engraving existed in Germany, where large print collections were held by private collectors and University libraries, where a number of journals featured regular reviews of English prints – a practice which had never really developed in England – and where the origins of the academic discipline of art history were being sown in institutions such as the University of Göttingen, which subscribed to the Boydell Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup> In these conditions, Boydell's Shakespeare prints generated a great deal of anticipation and commentary amongst collectors and critics – most of it extremely positive. For the majority of German audiences, the engraved reproduction was their only means of access to an English School of painting, though there was necessary caution in assuming that the print gave unmediated access to the original. Ludwig Tieck, for example, noted in his comments on the Boydell engravings that his criticisms or praise pertained to the engravers, since it was impossible to gauge whether the prints had been produced to the advantage or disadvantage of the painter.<sup>3</sup> Tieck's commentary sought to challenge the prevailing admiration in Germany for the Shakespeare engravings and his opinion of the images of the tragedies in particular is far from flattering.<sup>4</sup> His aesthetic sensibilities were more clearly aligned with the German adulation of Shakespeare which we encountered in Chapter III than with the admiration for the visual artist: he believed that a painter could only be subservient to the genius

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<sup>1</sup> The British export trade in prints is usefully discussed by Clayton, *English Print*, pp.262-285. Clayton points out elsewhere that Boydell had dealers in Paris, Amsterdam and Venice who took subscriptions (for the 1763 *Collection of Prints (engraved by the best hands) from the most Capital Paintings in England*). See Timothy Clayton, 'Reviews of English Prints in German Journals, 1750-1800' in *Print Quarterly*, Vol 10, No. 2, (1993), 123-137.

<sup>2</sup> On the print market in Germany see Clayton, 'Reviews of English Prints in German Journals', *op. cit.*, Antony Griffiths and Frances Carey, *German Printmaking in the Age of Goethe*, exh. cat. (London, British Museum: 1994) and Anne-Marie Link, 'The Social Practice of Taste in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany: A Case Study' in *Oxford Art Journal*, 15:2 (1992), 3-14 and 'Carl Ludwig Junker and the Collecting of Reproductive Prints' in *Print Quarterly*, 12:4 (1995), 361-74. The most significant German publication on English engraving was, of course, Lichtenberg's commentary on Hogarth's prints. See Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *The World of Hogarth: Lichtenberg's Commentaries on Hogarth's Engravings*, trans., with an introduction by Innes and Gustav Herdan (Boston, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Tieck, 'Die Kupferfische nach der Shakspeare-Galerie in London: Brief an einen Freund' (1793), in *Kritische Schriften* (Leipzig: 1848), p.9. I am grateful to Angelika Paige for her help in translating this text. On the German reception of the Shakespeare Gallery, see the essays by Hölter and Pape in the volume by Burwick and Pape.

<sup>4</sup> Tieck was, however, more positive about some of the comic scenes and frequently praised the skill of the engravers over that of the painters whose works they translated.

of Shakespeare and he berates Fuseli and West in particular for their exaggerated and mannerist attempts to approximate the genius of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Although Tieck's is the best-known German commentary on the Shakespeare Gallery engravings, his sentiments were clearly not indicative of the broader critical reception in Germany, in which Tieck described the prints as being 'praised excessively in every paper'.<sup>1</sup>

### *A Continuing Space for British Art*

Six months after the disposal of the Shakespeare Gallery and its contents by lottery, the founders of the British Institution obtained the premises at 52 Pall Mall to house a new kind of exhibition space for British artists.<sup>2</sup> The British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom (BI) was established by a group of connoisseurs who 'represented a cross-section of moneyed London society' and included men such as George Beaumont, Lord Mulgrave, Richard Payne Knight and John Julius Angerstein.<sup>3</sup> An annual exhibition at the British Institution provided an opportunity for British artists to sell their works, whilst also encouraging history painting by offering a premium for the most successful works in this genre. In addition, the Institution provided a supplementary training ground for artists, with several of its members lending Old Master paintings from their collections for students to copy: in this sense, the Institution offered something quite new in artistic education since the Academy did not offer training in painting itself, only in drawing. As Pugin and

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hölzl, p.136. Although Burwick and Pape's volume pays considerable attention to the German reception of the Gallery, it only really examines the negative criticism by Tieck and Forster.

<sup>2</sup> On the British Institution, see Peter Fullerton, 'Patronage and Pedagogy: The British Institution in the Early Nineteenth-Century' in *Art History*, 5:11 (1982), pp. 59-72; Ann Pullan, 'Public Goods or Private Interests? The British Institution in the Early Nineteenth Century' in Hemingway and Vaughan (1998), pp. 27-44; Jordana Pomeroy, 'Creating a National Collection: The National Gallery's Origins in the British Institution' in *Apollo* (August, 1998), pp.41-49; and Nicholas Tromans, 'Museum or Market?: The British Institution' in Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd (eds.), *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London* (London: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 44-55.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Funnell, 'The London Art World and its Institutions' in Celina Fox (ed.), *London — World City: 1800-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 158. Angerstein, Beaumont and Mulgrave had all been subscribers to Boydell's Shakespeare.



Rowlandson's image shows, the annual loan of Old Master paintings formed an exhibition in itself, which was regularly frequented by amateur and student artists (Figure 113). The final function of the BI was to build up a repository of works, to comprise 'a public gallery of the works of British Artists, with a few select specimens of the great schools'.<sup>1</sup>

The BI thus undertook responsibility in a number of areas the Royal Academy had neglected to take seriously. Not only did it provide encouragement and reward for history painters, and offer opportunities for artists to sell their works and develop their skills in handling paint, but it also represented the earliest effort by an institutional body to accumulate something approximating a national collection. While the government and the Royal Academy had turned down various opportunities to purchase important collections - including that of Reynolds- the BI had taken over the Academy's original remit to act as 'a repository of the great examples of the art'.<sup>2</sup> And although the Institution's by-laws made clear that it was being founded 'to extend and increase the beneficial effects of the Royal Academy ... and by no means to interfere with it in any respect', it seemed, before long, that the BI was offering a distinct challenge to the hegemony of the Academy.<sup>3</sup> Important figures within the Academy feared that the Institution would soon 'sink the importance of the Royal Academy', and that its Directors were 'acting in direct rivalry or opposition to the Royal Academy'.<sup>4</sup>

In assuming the space which the Shakespeare Gallery had recently vacated in Pall Mall, the British Institution seems also to have taken on some of the anti-Academic tendencies of Boydell's Gallery, as well as its inclination to unite art and commerce. If these were tendencies which were discerned by visitors to the Institution rather than intended by its founders, it is clear that, at the very least, the BI sought to resolve some of the ongoing problems of Academic training,

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<sup>1</sup> *An Account of the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, containing a copy of the by laws, a list of the subscribers, together with extracts from the minutes of the proceedings of the committees, and general meetings* (London, 1805), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, *Discourses*, Discourse I, p.15.

<sup>3</sup> *An Account of the British Institution*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Fullerton, 'Patronage and Pedagogy', pp.66-67.

practice and patronage. High on its agenda was the valorisation of British art: through the encouragement of the higher genres of art, and by facilitating access to Old Master paintings for the purposes of developing painterly technique, the Institution regarded itself as an important catalyst in the progress of the British school. Within a few years of its opening it could claim that,

A tasteless and disgraceful preference is no longer given to the wretched fabrications of the French and Italian picture-dealers. Our artists are no longer *entirely* confined in the trammels of portrait painting [and] now have no difficulty in referring to the Old Masters.<sup>1</sup>

The Institution latched onto the patriotic rhetoric of its predecessor, claiming that its exhibitions ‘prove[d] that England is a soil in which the polite arts will take root, flourish, and arrive at a very high degree of perfection’.<sup>2</sup> Like Boydell and his visitors, the BI discountenanced the work of the modern French and Italian schools, and sought to direct public taste and painterly practice away from their visual style. It also positioned itself in opposition to the Academy in its refusal to display portraiture, encouraging instead a more cerebral kind of art just as Boydell had done. In addition, the Institution’s belief that British artists ‘now have no difficulty in referring to the Old Masters’ suggests something rather more subtle than the Academic practice of emulation. In ‘referring’ to their continental predecessors, British artists are more than mere copyists - while they are capable of assimilating earlier and prestigious styles into their own work, the Institution makes clear that British artists such as Hogarth and Gainsborough were also ‘Old Masters’ and ultimately painted in a manner that was ‘purely English’.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the BI followed Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery in encouraging the development of a distinctly ‘British’ style, one that would offer a challenge to the

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<sup>1</sup> [British Institution] *Catalogue of the Works of British Artists placed in the Gallery of the British Institution* (London, 1811), pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> [British Institution] *An Account of all the Pictures exhibited in the Rooms of the British Institution from 1813 to 1823, belonging to the Nobility and Gentry of England, with remarks, critical and explanatory* (London: 1824), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12. In 1814, the Institution held an exhibition of British ‘Old Masters’, including works by Hogarth, Wilson, Gainsborough and Zoffany.

continental schools. While the Institution differed from the Shakespeare Gallery in its display of, and dependence upon, Old Master paintings, this served the purpose of allowing artists to copy – but subsequently *progress* from – the painterly style of their predecessors, as well as offering a guide by which to measure the contemporary British School. The Institution offered one of the earliest and most sustained opportunities for the contemplation of works of the British school alongside those of its continental predecessors: for many, this would in itself have signalled a cultural confidence in the progress of the British school to date. The fact that the Shakespeare Gallery had inhabited the BI's premises previously would have served to reinforce the notion of artistic progress, both attaching a distinguished artistic predecessor to the Institution's patriotic impulses and legitimating them. While the Shakespeare Gallery's financial failure was visible in the refurbished building, its aesthetic ideology lived on within that very space through the anti-academic impulses that governed the BI and that offered an alternate space for the education, encouragement and support of artists.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the space of the British Institution and the erstwhile Shakespeare Gallery, a new succession of exhibition spaces sprung up in Pall Mall and the St. James's area at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As well as continuing the association of St. James's as an elevated artistic arena, the new exhibition sites further extended the diversity of visual display within the area. The Society of Painters in Water Colours (Figure 114), located on Old Bond Street, emulated fashionable exhibitions such as those of the Royal Academy and the British Institution, seeking to legitimise the claims of watercolour as an art form which could 'rival the productions of the easel, and surpass the efforts of every other age, and nation' and prove the existence of 'British genius'.<sup>2</sup> A number of artists continued to hold one-man exhibitions in the area. David Wilkie organised his

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<sup>1</sup> On a possible (though tenuous) visual commentary upon tensions within the Royal Academy exhibited at the BI see Eric Shanes, 'Turner at the British Institution in 1806: A Canvas United in a World Divided' in *Apollo*, 150 (1999), 30-36.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Archer Shee, *Rhymes on Art*, (London, 1805), pp.43-44. On the Society of Painters in Watercolour, see Greg Smith, 'The Watercolour as Commodity: The Exhibitions of the Society of Painters in Water Colours, 1805-1812' in Hemingway and Vaughan (1998), pp. 45-62 and *The Emergence of the Professional Watercolourist: Contentions and Alliances in the Artistic Domain, 1760-1824* (Aldershot, 2002).

own retrospective exhibition at 87 Pall Mall in 1812 which included *The Village Festival*, *Blind Man's Bluff* and *Alfred Reprimanded by the Neatherd's Wife*. Much to Farington's dismay, Wilkie hired a man with a board to stand at the bottom on the Haymarket to advertise the exhibition.<sup>1</sup> Many artists felt that he was undermining the Academy by holding a private exhibition almost as soon as he had received his diploma, but he was clearly following an established practice amongst artists who were keen to exploit the rapidly expanding exhibition culture of the St. James's area.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, William Bullock's Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly provided an unusual exhibition space for a succession of large-scale historical works in the first half of the nineteenth century, including Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Christ entering Jerusalem* (1820), James Ward's allegorical painting of *Battle of Waterloo* (1816), Guillaume Lethière's highly acclaimed *Brutus condemning his sons to death* (1817), an allegorical depiction of *Painting* by an artist called Wicars (1817), and Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1820). Perhaps most significant of all, however, was the collection of John Julius Angerstein. Hazlitt, for one, could not contain his enthusiasm for these pictures. 'This is not a bazaar, a raree-show of art, a Noah's ark of all the Schools, marching out in endless procession', he proclaimed: '[it is] a sanctuary, a holy of holies, collected by taste, sacred to fame, enriched by the rarest products of genius ...the finest gallery, perhaps, in the world'.<sup>3</sup> Angerstein's collection was to form the core of the National Gallery: a role which Boydell had conceived for the Shakespeare Gallery before he was forced to sell its contents. The artistic success of the Shakespeare Gallery – and the part it played in cementing the artistic reputation of the St. James's area – thus acted as an impetus for a large number of other exhibitors who continued to exhibit outside the Academy in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and to continue the alternative agenda for British art which the Gallery had inaugurated.

As for the paintings themselves, they assumed a new identity within the collections of those who purchased them - one which suggests their ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, XI, 4123.

<sup>2</sup> Farington, XI, 4093.

<sup>3</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Sketches of the Principal Picture-Galleries in England' in P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, (London and Toronto, 1932), Vol X, p. 7.

presence within the history of British art as it was being constructed in the early nineteenth century. Reynolds's *Macbeth*, for example, was purchased by the Earl of Egremont for his collection of British art at Petworth, where it played a central part in his compilation of the English School (Figure 115), while the Marquess of Buckingham purchased Fuseli's *Titania and Bottom* and its pendant *Titania and Oberon* as an addition to his extensive collection of art.<sup>1</sup> The connoisseur and picture dealer, Michael Bryan, bought six paintings at the auction - four from the small series and Smirke's *Examination of Conrad and Borachio* and Romney's *Infant Shakespeare*. An esteemed expert on artistic matters (he was employed by the King and acted as an adviser in the disposal of the Orleans collection), his purchase of the paintings offered an indication of the ongoing appeal and importance of the paintings in contemporary artistic culture, and validated their status as successful examples of the national school despite the failure of the Gallery in commercial terms. Meanwhile, the purchase of a number of other canvases by figures such as Henry Tresham, the Norwich School painter John Crome (who both purchased a number of the smaller canvases) and the needlework artist Mary Linwood (buying Northcote's *Arthur and Hubert*) suggests that the paintings continued to be of interest to artists and to offer a spur to a broader group of painters aspiring to inclusion in the new English School.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Earl of Egremont's collection, see Christopher Rowell, *Turner at Petworth*, exh. cat (London, Tate Gallery: 2002) and St. John Gore, 'Three Centuries of Discrimination in Apollo', 105:183 (1997), pp. 346-357.

## CONCLUSION

During the final years of the Shakespeare Gallery, a number of artists, both English and foreign, could attest to both the visibility and the superiority of the English school in relation to its continental counterparts. Given the particular political and cultural circumstances of the time, it is perhaps not surprising that the English school should have appeared to diverge most sharply from the example offered by the contemporary French school. Visiting Paris during the Peace of Amiens, Fuseli and Farington were astonished at the extent of the stylistic conformity of French painting. 'I could scarcely have imagined that there could have been so much uniformity in their art', Farington noted in his diary. '...Fuseli claims that all the pictures, better or worse, seem to have come out of the same pot'.<sup>1</sup> Martin Archer Shee, meanwhile, though far from optimistic about the continued patronage of the arts in England, had a great deal of scorn to vent on the French school, which appeared to him to be lacking in the aesthetic liberty which English artists had recourse to:

The taste of the French has undergone a revolution as well as their government, and with as little advantage to the one, as to the other ... the changes, however, have operated in opposite directions; for as, in politics, they proceeded from servility to licentiousness to servility; so in taste they have passed from licentiousness to servility ... the shackles they fondly imagined they had finally torn from their liberties, they have cast upon their arts, and the pencil of a French artists moves in the heaviest manacles of servile imitation. The bravura and inflation of the school of Bouchet [*sic*], are succeeded by the tame constraint, the dry and sapless, statue-like insipidity of the school of David ... They are examples of the ill

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<sup>1</sup> Farington, V, 1900.

consequences of suffering theory to advance too far before practice.<sup>1</sup>

It was not long before French artists began to aspire to the ‘effect’ and ‘effervescence’ of their British counterparts in their attempts to escape the shackles of David and his followers.<sup>2</sup>

This study has shown the part which John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery played in generating and promoting a version of the English School that hinged upon the kind of aesthetic liberty and native energies which, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, came to be commonly-acknowledged attributes of English artists.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, we have seen that Boydell’s artists were able to mobilise contemporary senses of national identity and political superiority in order to map out a number of new and varied trajectories for English art. While this thesis has focused on a select group of the most acclaimed artists, the number of contributors to Boydell’s Gallery means that many more such emergent trajectories have still to be explored.

Certainly, this loose ideology of aesthetic freedom did not represent the *only* version of the English School, and the criticisms of contemporary artistic practice, of its pursuit of portraiture, spectacle and brash effects, continued, particularly in relation to the Royal Academy. At Somerset House, the visual heterogeneity which Boydell’s artists had so neatly turned on its head and converted into a vivid model of stylistic diversity, still remained a problem. Nonetheless, the productions of the Shakespeare Gallery artists had shown the ease with which artists could escape both the theoretical prescriptions and the pervasive practice of the Academy, and generate alternative directions and ideologies for English art. This instance of departure and revision proved to be

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Archer Shee, *Rhymes on Art; or, the Remonstrance of a Painter*: in two parts. With notes and a preface, including strictures on the state of the arts, criticism, patronage, and public taste (London, 1805), pp.2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Noon *et al.*, *Constable to Delacroix: British Art and the French Romantics*, exh. cat. (London, Tate Gallery, 2003), pp. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Dian Kriz (*The Idea of the English Landscape Painter*) discusses these issues as they extend into the early decades of the nineteenth century, and into other pictorial genres.

the first of countless more examples of anti-academic practice in the nineteenth century and beyond that eventually came to characterise English art more strongly than its Academic foundations had ever done.



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