“The Family Piece”: Oliver Goldsmith and the Politics of the Everyday in Eighteenth-Century Domestic Portraiture

Christopher Flint

Still to ourselves in every place consign’d,
Our own felicity we make or find:
With secret course, which no loud storms annoy,
Glides the smooth current of domestic joy.
The lifted ax, the agonizing wheel,
Luke’s iron crown, and Damien’s bed of steel,
To men remote from power but rarely known,
Leave reason, faith and conscience all our own.

Oliver Goldsmith¹

I

As the speaker in Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Traveller” implies, “the smooth current of domestic joy” in eighteenth-century Britain was supposed to run its “secret course” untouched by history, power, torture, or storm. Families should, instead, seek a “remote” space for rational, spiritual and moral self-possession, “consign’d” to a state where the devious uses of the ax, wheel, crown, and bed are “rarely known.” Whether simply found or actively made, “domestic joy” ought to be

CHRISTOPHER FLINT is Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. He has completed a book entitled Disrupted Legacies: Family Relations and Narrative Form in Eighteenth-Century British Prose Fiction and is currently working on a study relating eighteenth-century British print culture and prose narrative.

determined by the shared desire among family members to create a resolutely separate sphere. In Goldsmith's poem, however, such family privacy necessitates an observer who both explains the value of household seclusion and exposes it. By contrasting his hard knowledge of power to the "felicity" he celebrates, the speaker virtually denies his inclusion in the secure domestic group that his emphatic use of "our" seems to promise. In order to picture the family's retreat from political contingencies he must, though pretending to be a member, stand away from it. The poem suggests, perhaps inadvertently, that the ideal depiction of household relations alerts the viewer to painful political realities while suppressing them within the family itself; like the speaker, "our" reading of the poem situates us both within and without the shared community of others.²

Goldsmith's sentimental novel The Vicar of Wakefield, itself a domestic portrait, also examines the separation of family and state, but adopts a more skeptical position than "The Traveller," testing the Primroses' capacity to resist external representations of power as they endeavor to validate their own internal image of security. In this respect, Goldsmith's novel simply reproduces a persistent literary anxiety in the eighteenth century about the family's conception of itself. From Penelope Aubin's The Life of Madame Beaumont (1721), in which Belinda, the novel's protagonist, verifies the hero's merit by gazing at his family paintings, to Pride and Prejudice (1813), or gothic narratives like The Castle of Otranto (1764), where galleries of ancestral portraits trouble the susceptible protagonists, countless works of fiction document the urge to manifest family by displaying artful images that, while they are meant to idealize the family, persistently mirror its problematic relationship to representation. On a meta-narrative level, the portraits within novels embody the writer's own interest in making characters and convincing stories about them. But in a more general sense, these family portraits (often called "family pieces" in the eighteenth century) embody the narrative's self-reflexive concern with the troubling exchange between private experience and public performance. In Goldsmith's poignant phrase they transcribe the desire to make "reason, faith and conscience all our own" within a context—a punishing world of customs, laws and governments—that negates the family's urge to regard itself as self-sufficient.

That contradiction is demonstrated when the family members in The Vicar of Wakefield fail to anticipate the impracticality of an enormous family piece they have commissioned and effectively signal their own demise as a functioning social and representational unit. Indeed, deciding to represent their own domestic harmony in the form of a commodity simply exposes them to a semiotic indeterminacy of particularly destructive force. Describing the evolution of the portrait in a chapter subtitled "The family use art, which is opposed with still greater," Goldsmith emphasizes the protean nature of representation (and domestic representation specifically).³ As the subtitle suggests, the family's art begets contrary art, continually widening the gap between image and subject as it satirizes the Primroses' relationship to family myth.

In this particular instance of collective self-fashioning, the family's failures of artistic insight are many. For one, they commission a picture they cannot really afford, exposing to the world a social, economic and aesthetic vanity they can-
not themselves fully perceive. Wanting to outdo the Flamboroughs, a rival family that has already gained notoriety for a series of individual portraits showing each member holding an orange, “a thing quite out of taste, no variety in life, no composition in the world” (82), the Primroses opt for a “large historical family piece” to show the “superiority of our taste in the attitudes” and thereby reclaim their eclipsed status. The family puts art in the service of social competition and a public display of private life, but because no one can think of an appropriate “historical subject” they instead come to the “unanimous resolution” of “being drawn together” as “independent historical figures” (82). Rather than representing structural (or even personal) relations among the sitters, the painting intensifies the discordant and “artificial” roles to which the family aspires, undoing the sentimental oneness the picture was intended to celebrate. The Primroses want to present a public image of concord but instead engender an image of private chaos; unable to conceive a historical portrait of the family adequate to their belief in unanimity, the Primroses lose themselves in historical difference. Disrupted by the eccentric “aspect” each individual participant selects, the picture ultimately reveals the psychic dislocation of the family:

My wife desired to be represented as Venus, and the painter was desired not to be too frugal of his diamonds in her stomacher and hair. Her two little ones were to be as Cupids by her side: while I, in my gown and band, was to present her with my books on the Whistonian controversy. Olivia would be drawn as an Amazon, sitting upon a bank of flowers, dressed in green joseph, richly laced in gold, and a whip in her hand. Sophia was to be a shepherdess, with as many sheep as the painter could put in for nothing; and Moses was to be dressed out with a hat and white feather. Our taste so much pleased the ‘Squire, that he insisted on being put in as one of the family, in the character of Alexander the Great, at Olivia’s feet. This was considered by us all as an indication of his desire to be introduced into the family. (82–83)

Not so much an idealized portrait but an image of disorder, where a vicar offers a ponderously clothed Venus a set of volumes on strict clerical monogamy, the picture frames the family’s attempt to unify itself in spite of various forces corrupting it: the vanity of the parents, the credulity of the children, and the machinations of a preying nobility. It succeeds neither as a work of art nor, despite the diamonds and gold, as a commodity. An attempt at self-promotion, the picture clearly offers only false surfaces and unattainable hopes. It not only enhances the Flamboroughs’ simple taste but also contradicts the Vicar’s own conviction about the Primroses, that “a family likeness prevailed through them all, and properly speaking, they had but one character” (21).

Much of the painting’s inappropriateness stems from its misrepresentation of social status. Squire Thornhill’s inclusion in the painting first connotes an apparent harmony, a promise of future material and social eminence for the Primroses, and verification of the seemingly natural gentility of the family. His allegorical pose at the feet of the woman he desires even appears to promise sexual submission: Alexander the Great is suitably matched with Olivia’s Amazon dominatrix. But when, a short time later, the Squire abducts Olivia under the pretenses of an elopement, later
to seduce her with a false marriage and then leave her destitute (thus justifying the
reference in the painting to his role as usurper and conqueror), he widens the disparity
between the family’s representation of itself and the bleak reality of its economic and
social vulnerability. Olivia’s elopement with Squire Thornhill is the pivotal event of
the novel and precipitates the worst of the Primroses’ calamities (the Vicar calls the
incident “the first of our real misfortunes” [92]). But the botched family portrait
implies that the daughter’s moral failing is simply a single instance of the illusions
about family already embodied in the portrait. Though a cause of misfortune (and
missed fortune), Olivia’s behavior reflects the family’s collective misconceptions about
the relationship between domestic myth and domestic practice (or, more simply in this
case, between the pictorial and the real). The Squire’s stratagem to deceive Olivia and
her family—the “greater art” mentioned in the subtitle—is primarily the result, then,
of the Primroses’ joint inability to read their own “art” closely enough. As the effects
of “representation” multiply, it becomes clear that the family can neither resist nor
control its own urge to make itself over, to produce, however unwillingly, consequences
meriting narrative (and pictorial) delineation.

In the portrait, the several myths about family—its integrity, its capacity to fulfill individual yearnings, its nobility, its aesthetic appeal, its unity and its privacy—fail to generate an appropriate or equivalent practice. Private and public are never synthesized; if anything, the public domain—the marketplace of images threatens to turn the private life of the family inside out, exposing the frailty of the family’s belief in itself. The inherent tension between the group and the individuals composing it reveals political overtones—between husband and wife, parents and children, gentility and aristocracy. Indeed, the Vicar has previously compared his role of the family to a “little republic” in which he “gave laws” (33). Though he is pictured as he really is, or at least appears to be in public, he nonetheless participates in and, despite his own moral objections, tacitly endorses the family’s misdirected aspirations; he is a figure of failed spiritual authority within a materialist fantasy. His decision to stand in propria persona signals not only his dogmatic insistence on maintaining moral seriousness despite the family’s theatrical intentions but also his absolute faith in verisimilitude, his desire to, in his words, “profess with the veracity of an historian” (19). He seems to be a fragment of a conversation piece—that is, small-scale figures in modern dress conversing or conversant with one another—inserted into another genre entirely, the life-size allegorical family portrait. But his participation shows, at the very least, a critical failure of vision and his pose, Whistonian books in hand, is deceptive. It suggests that his fame derives from his writing, when, in fact, according to his own admission, “as they never sold, I have the consolation of thinking are read only
by the happy Few” (22). Moreover, during the planning of the painting, his role as
silent objector typifies his passive approach to ethical instruction in general. As he
says of his domestic actions on an earlier occasion, “[I] continued silent, satisfied with
just having pointed out danger, and leaving it to their own discretion to avoid it” (38).
Similarly, the false opulence the family chooses to have represented in the painting (in diamonds, gold and as many sheep as “the painter could put in for nothing”) belies
the family’s meager circumstances and falsifies their peculiar attempt at “historical”
detail. As Marcia Pointon contends in a discussion of actual paintings, “The conversa-
tion piece offered—as no other historical document did—the possibility of publicly
enumerating material possession to the point of fetishization” (162). In Goldsmith’s allegorical family piece material possessions are not only fetishized but fictionalized. The Primrose portrait represents an aspiration more than a reality and has little to do directly with the actual economic and political condition of the family.

Goldsmith’s parable of misrepresentation accentuates the practical and theoretical complexities of generating a social iconology of the family; it is less an example of the Freudian “family romance”—that is, the often problematic appeal of fantasizing a superior family background than the one you are born with—than a case of collective delusion. As a mirror for the narrative, the Primrose portrait reflects one of the main dilemmas facing an artist (either painter or author) who seeks both to promulgate norms about the family and faithfully record family behavior: that is, whether to endorse Rousseau’s claim that “there is no more charming picture than that of family” or show that, in Charles Fourier’s words, “all family relations are corrupt.”

The material fate of the Primrose painting further emphasizes the disparity between family myths and family realities. Once completed, the Primroses discover that the frame is too large either to fit decorously on any wall in the house or even to be moved out of the room where it had been stretched and painted. Instead of gratifying the family’s vanity it leans “in a most mortifying manner, against the kitchen wall” where it becomes the jest of all their neighbors. “One compared it to Robinson Crusoe’s long-boat, too large to be removed; another thought it more resembled a reel in a bottle; some wondered how it could be got out, but still more were amazed how it ever got in” (83). Like the Squire’s disruptive presence, the awkward size of the painting reflects the inconsistencies of the family’s desires. Not only does it fail as a commodity in terms of its public value, but it also fails in terms of its private use value within the family. The house itself is incapable of containing the self-inflated image of the people it is supposed to surround and protect. A portentous event, particularly since the house and, presumably, the portrait trapped within are later destroyed by fire, the episode of the family painting recapitulates the central theme of the novel: that the sentimental ideal of the happy family, however genuinely nurturing it may be, provides a cumbersome, illusionary and often self-destructive model of behavior.

II

While the contrast between “ideal” and “real” representation underlines an antithesis between ideology and practice that Goldsmith seems intent on exposing generally, the Primrose’s “historical family piece” specifically addresses a persistent eighteenth-century concern about domestic representations. Satirizing the allegorical family pieces extolled by Sir Joshua Reynolds, it enters into a debate over the virtues of idealized and accurate portraiture, and the relation of that debate to social behavior. Goldsmith’s fictional portrait was an attempt to mediate an artistic conflict between those who espoused Reynolds’s dictate about the grandeur of art and those who commended the naturalistic style of artists like Thomas Gainsborough who preferred to paint families in conversation pieces. The same confrontations between the allegorical and real or the ideological and factual that spoils the Primrose
painting are also staged in the exchanges between the heroic and informal modes of portraiture represented by Reynolds and Gainsborough. In choosing a family piece as the central icon of his novel, Goldsmith accentuates how such popular visual representations of the family sought to naturalize domestic relations that were themselves often part of highly polemical discussions about the making of both class and history. The family piece, then, aimed both to construct and to deny the constructedness of civil behavior at the most basic level of social formation in eighteenth-century Britain. The two modes of domestic portraiture, while appearing to be opposed, were, to a large extent, complementary aspects of the same maneuvers to display the family while disassociating it from the contingent and factional nature of political iconography.

Sir Joshua Reynolds offered perhaps the most explicit theoretical resolution to how the artist could sublimate the ideological function of the family piece. One of the most powerful arbiters of aesthetic principles in the second half of the eighteenth century, Reynolds, a friend of Goldsmith’s, demanded that all art, even "minor" art like portraiture, appeal to what he called "a cultivated and prepared artificial state of mind." A typical Reynolds family piece like "The Daughters of Sir William Montgomery as "The Graces adorning a term of Hymen" elevates the sitters, three Irish sisters, by rejecting modern taste and robing them in heroic costume (see Plate 1). By echoing "attitudes" (that is, postures) from classical painting, Reynolds strives to "raise and improve [the painter's] subject... The Lower may be improved by borrowing from the grand" (132). This borrowing produces what he himself called his "great style" (105). In "The Daughters of Sir William Montgomery," the generalized pastoral background; the strong diagonal composition created by the extension of arms, descending heads and slanting chain of flowers; the various classical objects (the statue of Hymen, an urn, and the ram's head); and the canopy, which balances the foliage, all harmonize the parts of the represented world so as to create an image that is equally nature and artifice. Indeed, Reynolds deliberately conflates the ideal and the real since the canopy is attached to the tree trunk with a prominent and verisimilar double bind of rope.

In discussing Reynolds's portraits, critics routinely note the abstracting role of classical imitation in his work. As Ernest Gombrich observes about "The Daughters of Sir William Montgomery": "what it wants to conserve—the artistic conceptions of the past, handed down in an unbroken chain from generation to generation—is already fading away like an elusive dream. The past cannot be retrieved by 'imitation'... the dualism already inherent in the commission pervades the work as a whole. The two worlds of portraiture and of history, of realism and imagination are held in a perfect, if precarious balance." Reynolds wants to create a universal historical perspective; as he claims in the Seventh Discourse, whether in "the serious duties of life" or in "the pursuit of lighter amusements" we "pursue the same method in our search after the idea of beauty and perfection of each; of virtue, by looking forwards beyond ourselves to society, and to the whole; of arts, by extending our views in the same manner to all ages and all times" (193–94). The portrait of the Montgomery sisters seeks "the whole." It is part of the process that all of Reynolds's art engages in, the search for what he calls the "central form."
Reproduced by permission of the Tate Gallery.
In Reynolds's harmonic display of past and present, history either becomes attenuated, insofar as the artist prolongs the continuity between classical Greece and eighteenth-century Britain; or it disappears altogether, as the two periods generalize each other out of existence. In the Montgomery painting, for instance, the relationship between allegory and realism is ambiguous: the sisters may have posed in classical garb for the painting or Reynolds may have wanted to suggest that he had captured them, so to speak, during a family charade; they may, on the other hand, have been imagined as graces solely by the artist. However one chooses to regard them, they seem intended to transcend time; they are of the modern world, but they evoke ancient classical values. The viewer does not so much enter their world as observe it being transformed into another symbolic register.

This abstracting process intends to convey, in part, the universality of family relations. The painting, commissioned by the bridegroom of one of the daughters (Elizabeth, in the middle), depicts the sisters, who were already known locally as the Irish Graces, shortly before Elizabeth was married (perhaps that is why she is the only one in motion, on a course that will take her past the statue of Hymen). Anne, on the far right, was already married, as her position on the other side of the statue is meant to indicate. Barbara, kneeling, though beckoned by Elizabeth to join the other two in the matrimonial space beyond Hymen, was as yet unengaged. The painting simultaneously reveals the latent potentiality for future families in the sisters' various nuptial and prenuptial states and records the present family relations that, like the flower chain that connects the figures, binds the women together as the daughters of Sir William Montgomery. Reynolds links past, present, and future by denoting the triple association of the three subjects; they are daughters in the title, sisters in the painting, and future or de facto wives (and mothers) by implication. The daughters seem particularly suitable as universal figures because, as women, they might readily be seen by their culture as subjects who "naturally" expected to fulfill standard, prescribed roles in life.10

Gainsborough, in contrast to Reynolds's formal elevation of his sisters, consciously renounced "the great style," adopting what he called a "simple Portrait way."11 The disagreement between them indicates broad ideological differences.12 Gainsborough prided himself on the naturalness, spontaneity, and truthfulness of his conversation pieces. His portrait of "Mr. and Mrs. Robert Andrews," for example, positions the sitters near their own home in Auberies, Suffolk and duplicates a particular landscape that denotes historical specificity—that is, sometime around 1749 (see Plate 2). The fashionable clothing the couple wears, particularly the woman's billowing pannier, mark them as members of a particular class of country gentility whose historical moment is the moment of the painting.13 The couple's direct frontal gaze (at artist and viewer alike) connotes a high degree of self-consciousness, as if to say they acquiesce in the admittedly contrived circumstances of the conversation piece (which is supposedly defined by its informal rendering of people). In Gainsborough's conversation piece the couple is posing for a picture. Though leisureed, their leisure evidently occupies them; it is their business, as it is the business of their class.14 Rather than a Reynoldsian classical event, painting in the Andrews world is simply a part of their well-defined genteel life.15
Most commentators on this painting assume that Gainsborough is implying a natural relationship between the country gentlemen’s family and the land it occupies. According to Ann Bermingham, for example, “more remarkable than its revelation of the economic base of naturalization is the painting’s revelation of the specific myth of economic production that, according to Marx, sustained this first generation of agrarian capitalists—the myth of the Robinsonade. . . . Sport and providing, leisure and labor all happily coincide. Andrews’s farm is not just a sign of status but also his very life’s labor, his physical and moral sustenance. The painting works toward an organicism in which man and nature partake of one another in an equilibrium suggested by even the painting’s balanced division of space between the two” (29).16 But the Robinsonade myth to which Bermingham refers, evoking an autonomous producer like Crusoe who relies solely on personal invention, resources and labor, is never suggested by Gainsborough. Andrews’s hunting, like the partridge he has given his wife (who holds it in her hands), has none of the urgency that would make it a symbol of necessary subsistence or Robinsonian survival. Nature may be conveniently linked to human culture (the left front foot of the iron bench, even as it echoes Frances Andrews’s crossed feet, intertwines symbolically with the tree’s root system), but it neither integrates nor shares space with the human couple; rather, it is annexed by them. Like the allegorical Primrose portrait, though more justifiably, Gainsborough’s conversation piece celebrates individual family achievement by erasing or minimizing those forces outside the family that it cannot subsume or that are beneath its dignity (like the laborers who invisibly bundle the wheat).

The Andrews’ leisure is symbolically important, nonetheless, insofar as it gives value to the natural setting. The details and extent of the landscape suggest a fertile, particularly English expanse of country. Though the act of labor is, significantly, repressed, the products of labor find their meaning exclusively in relation to the leisureed couple, particularly in the empty but fully cultivated wheat field.17 The painting would seem to justify the proprietary attitude of a leisureed class and the quantity of world (and, one must suppose, laborers) it proportionately masters. Like Reynolds, Gainsborough perceives a connection between subject and landscape, but his approach is not trans-historical; it seeks, instead, to record a defined moment of time. Not accidentally, the harvest seems to conclude precisely at the couple’s feet.18 But Gainsborough’s empiricism, no less than the Primroses’ absurd fetishization of unpossessed goods, converts the world into a field of desire in which objects provide a uniform view that consciously eliminates social disparities. Where Gainsborough’s picture succeeds is in inviting its viewer to identify with the perfect ordinariness of this harmony and see it as natural and comprehensive.

This contemporary specificity accounts for what Edgar Wind regards as the crucial difference between Gainsborough and Reynolds, that is, “Gainsborough’s tendency to cling to the material world and Reynolds’s desire to free himself from it.”19 Gainsborough’s portrait serves the function of materializing time and evoking a new sense of history; it is part of an increasingly dominant trend in the eighteenth century toward what Wind calls “historical truth.” In fact, Wind goes on to link the artistic debate over formal and informal depiction to a polemic about heroic and skeptical views of life in philosophy and history. Reynolds, whose work
Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson and James Beattie admired, represented a “common sense” approach to knowledge that honored the eternal verities: “The existence of the external world, the reality of the soul, the continuity of personal identity . . . the certain existence of God” (12). Battling Hume’s “reliance on natural feeling refined by skepticism,” or his preference for instinct over understanding (which to Hume was notoriously unreliable), the “common sense” school championed image-making that “encouraged” belief, nobility and rationality. Gainsborough, who sought to capture the material splendor of the moment in his paintings, whose technique favored spontaneity and direct apprehension, seemed constitutionally averse to Reynolds’s “great style.” In some ways he was the perfect executor of Hume’s skeptical naturalism. Applied to domestic representation, these opposed modes organized domestic imagery into apparently exclusive categories: one traced the relatively ahistorical continuity of the family; the other recorded its immediate and particular permutations.

One might assume that Goldsmith, by virtue of his friendship with Reynolds and Johnson, would have preferred the heroic mode of portraiture, but he objected to the artist’s “pictorial flattery” even though he admired Reynolds’s technique. Although not a Humean skeptic, Goldsmith believed the heroic mode shifted the real into abstraction and metaphor, and, therefore, into chaos. Mr. Burchell, the Vicar of Wakefield’s moral and aesthetic spokesman, implies as much when he comments on the Latin strain adopted by poets in England: “English poetry, like that in the latter empire of Rome, is nothing at present but a combination of luxuriant images, without plot or connection—a string of epithets that improve the sound, without carrying on the sense” (46). In a novel resolutely about family mythmaking (and just as resolutely plotted), this correlation between pictorial luxuriance and failure of plot implies that, for Goldsmith, a work of art succeeds only when it makes connected images seem simple and natural. That is one of the reasons why the Primrose portrait is such a failure.

This need to naturalize art, and to reject disconnected portraits like the one chosen by the Primroses is explained, in part, by the social purpose of Enlightenment aesthetics. According to Terry Eagleton, the abstract or heroic modes of representation could hardly have appealed to a revolutionary, anti-aristocratic class seeking to expound its own legitimate and “natural” claims to political dominance. As Eagleton puts it, “The emergent middle class, in an historic development, is newly defining itself as a universal subject. But the abstraction this process entails is a source of anxiety for a class wedded in its robust individualism to the concrete and the particular. If the aesthetic intervenes here, it is as a dream of reconciliation—of individuals woven into intimate unity with no detriment to their specificity.” In other words, in order to validate a shift in class relations, a myth had to be created that did not look like myth. Inventing a new image of the family was one strategy that enabled a middling class to fashion this invisible myth (where the particular seemed to be an end in itself, as in a Gainsborough portrait, or as in Goldsmith’s critique of the “historical family piece”). The family, as an especially intense form of social classification, in which the individual intersected in what seem to be the most natural and instinctive ways with an emerging political group, offered an ideal “site” for contesting an old history and generating a new one.
Even apparently naive conversation pieces reveal this mystification of the particular and immediate. Portraits like those painted by Arthur Devis, for instance, both present domestic detail in a direct manner and as part of a study in theatrical display. If the families in Reynolds's allegorical pieces were transformed into theater and myth, the families in Devis's conversation pieces simply were theater. Whether painting a family portrait set in an interior or out in a landscape, Devis structured his composition as a series of planes, what one historian calls "theatrical flats," that convey an architectonic rigidity. In the portrait of "John Bacon and his Family," for example, the figures occupy the foreground (upstage); an impressive pillared arch defines the middle ground like a painted backdrop; while in the background, as if through a rearstage entrance, an opulent dining room shows through the archway (see Plate 3). Most of the objects placed about the scene serve a symbolic as well as empirical function. The medallion portraits of John Milton, Alexander Pope, Sir Francis Bacon, and Isaac Newton on either side of the arch; the display cases; the reflecting telescope and transit quadrant in the drawing room; and, above all, the world globe beneath the dining room table; all signify Bacon's specific involvement (as an academic and as Fellow of the Royal Academy) in contemporary English learning. The artist reveals the private Georgian home, but, because of the father's wide-ranging interests, it also appears to contain the world itself (even if that world is impertinently stashed beneath a table). Typically, a prop coupled with a simple gesture (Bacon pointing to his eldest son's flute, for instance) serves to establish emotional relationships in the picture. In the postures the figures adopt, formal attitude rather than expression conveys the intimacies of family life. As in Gainsborough's conversation piece, the gaze of Mrs. Bacon and her younger children shows their awareness of artist and viewer; the family is revealed in a moment of ordinary domestic activity but also recognizes the unusual occasion for display to which they have been subjected. Instead of visibly playing their roles (like the Montgomery sisters), their performance, in the moment of unveiling, is made to seem a part of their daily routine. An austere inaction presides over the entire scene; no untoward motion disrupts the fashionable exhibition of domestic harmony. The intimacy of the scene, the intrusion of artist upon private life, is nearly refuted by the constraint in execution, composition, and expression.

Like Goldsmith's Mr. Burchell, Devis rejects borrowing "luxuriant images" to "improve" a work of art, but in staging the domestic interior he exploits the artifice that elevates Reynolds's subjects. Unlike Reynolds, however, the resulting abstraction is made consonant with the everyday rather than a substitution for it. Devis's painting, then, while it seeks to reproduce the material condition of its subject, manifests a nearly compulsive artifice. The house of cards that the younger children are constructing on their own small table offers a kind of playful counterpart to the formal rigor of the Palladian interior and the studied execution of the composition. The curtain hanging impossibly from the upper left accentuates (as in Reynolds) the proscenium-like arrangement of domestic life and reinforces what one might be tempted to call the devised nature of the scene. The individuals themselves were not even modeled from life but from large, malleable dolls with their own sets of costumes (called lay figures) that the artist arranged in his studio. The attitudes of the figures were, in turn, derived from manuals of deportment, like François Nivellon’s *Rudiments of*
Genteeel Behavior, to ensure that the patron and his family exhibited the modish postures of middle-class fashion (see D'Oench, cat. 3, Sartin, 23–25). Perhaps most remarkably, while the painting appears to represent a specific interior belonging to John Bacon, Devis almost always painted generalized settings, which he often used more than once. The scene here, as in many other Devis pieces, offers an abstracted and idealized simulacrum of various patrons’ homes, or, as Stephen Sartin conjectures, the sort of domestic surroundings “to which they had aspirations” (22), and yet it also inserts minutely observed possessions actually owned by John Bacon. Attempting to turn themselves into subjects of aesthetic stature, the families in these paintings, not unlike the Primroses, open up a gap between lived and represented experience that, like the gap between history and myth or household and theater, both enhances and distorts material social relations.

That the informal mode of domestic art produced its own complicated social perspective did not escape Goldsmith. In the last paragraph of The Vicar of Wakefield Dr. Primrose offers a different picture of the family than the one in the allegorical painting, and it seems, on the surface, to imitate the “simple Portrait way” favored by Gainsborough and Devis: “As soon as dinner was over, according to my old custom, I requested that the table might be taken away, to have the pleasure of seeing all my family assembled once more by a cheerful fire-side. My two little ones sat upon each knee, the rest of the company by their partners. I had nothing now on this side of the grave to wish for, all my cares were over, my pleasure was unspeakable. It now only remained that my gratitude in good fortune exceed my former submission in adversity” (184). This ending view of the family occurs when the Vicar finally sees his family restored to harmony; his minimal description of the final domestic scene rejects the allegorical excess of the painting and provides a version of family peace that more closely approximates the scene in a typical conversation piece. The passage certainly emphasizes the viewer’s “unspeakable” pleasure at gazing upon the “assembled” family, and appears to recommend the plain style exemplified by Gainsborough, Devis or the Flamborough pictures (where each figure simply holds an orange). Goldsmith’s tableau, however, represents the perspective of a member from within the very family that is the object of scrutiny. The concluding image of family emerges not for others to view but as a private verbal portrait that either elides character and author or, as is typical of most of the novel, creates an ironic difference between them. Throughout the novel Goldsmith intensifies his satire of simple family life by making various characters, including the Vicar (who narrates the story), oblivious to their own fallible renditions of themselves. Like the speaker in “The Traveller,” whose very wandering puts him outside the domestic “current” he admires, the implied author of The Vicar of Wakefield both yearns for and recognizes the limiting closure of the family he portrays. Even the simple, empirical, conversational view of the domestic scene maintains a complex set of perspectives on the society it pretends only to record and, as the Vicar’s custom of arranging his family in a visually pleasing way suggests, it requires a highly calculated act of composition (including clearing the table). Goldsmith may directly mock the allegorical or historical family portrait, but he also subtly mocks its alternative, the conversation piece, by linking it to the narrator’s naive version of “historical veracity.”
III

The dilemma Goldsmith alludes to in the Primrose portrait, where the abstract and figurative seep into the images and extinguish the empirical force of the representation, was not always a polarized issue. In Hogarth’s conversation pieces, for example, artifice and naturalism are meant to create a productive tension. Although preceding the artists I have mentioned, Hogarth anticipated many of their concerns, especially regarding the heroic and informal modes of portraiture, and sought to play them off one another. Speaking of the artist’s “hieratic quality,” Ronald Paulson observes that “Hogarth’s pictures represent, in this sense, the process of exposing the pre-established connections between facts of experience and spiritual referents.”23 Often he accomplished this doubling of the general and specific by supplying emblematic objects (paintings, books, housewares, discarded clothing, etc.) that supplement the realism of the central action. Thus in Hogarth’s portrait of the Malpas family (called “The Cholmondeley Family” after Lord Malpas became the third earl of Cholmondeley) the composition is split into two essentially generational spaces. The adults congregate in front of an imposing, well-stocked library as if the books manifested their human dignity (see Plate 4). The formal demeanor of the figures matches the austere background. The only child present on this side is an infant son too young to be mischievous who is propped on a table by his mother’s side but who gazes delightedly at the havoc being wreaked by his two brothers at the entrance to a picture gallery on the opposite side. Symbolizing undisciplined energy, the two older boys use books (stacked on a chair) simply as props for their game. The corner of the carpet they have

turned up and a book hanging suspended in the air after being dislodged from the volumes stacked on the table (signs of action entirely foreign to Devis) mark the transitional point between adult responsibility (pictured to the left) and childish anarchy (illustrated on the right). This division of space and experience extends even to the rather unusual presentation of the dog, who seems to be exhausted (or perhaps disgusted) by the children's antic behavior but who also turns its rear unceremoniously towards the adult members of the family.

The expressive severity of the vertical pillar dividing the boys in front of the picture gallery from the adults in the library creates two distinct household spaces, one linked to literary, the other to visual arts. The raw realism of the boys both mirrors and inverts the postured elegance of the adults. The eldest son and heir, George, even stretches his hand over a book in imitation of his father, perhaps attempting to protect the contents of the library (symbol of the paternal estate) from the less responsible actions of the second born, Robert, who is kicking the stack of books in an effort, it seems, to climb on top of them. The benign look on George's face and the impish expression on Robert's suggest that they are, naturally enough, oblivious to the symbolic evocation of sibling rivalry and primogeniture that their miniature battle of the books anticipates. Their playful relationship, moreover, parallels the much more dignified treatment of Lord Malpas and his brother James, Colonel of the 34th Regiment of Foot, as they stand under the family coat of arms that spreads over the securely ordered library. To emphasize the homology between sets of brothers, Hogarth positions the head of the younger adult brother about a head's length above the older's, duplicating the relative levels at which the heads of George and Robert appear. In this way, Hogarth implies the complicated relationship not only between brothers in families of large fortune but also between the natural (represented by the unselconscious play of the two boys) and the conventional (manifested in the motionless attitudes of the adults). The mirroring of youthful and adult brotherhood suggests that there is a natural, even instinctive, responsiveness in the children to the socializing process that ensures their acceptance of the civil and economic principles of the world into which they have been born.

The feature that most denotes the generalizing of specific experience, however, is the curtain hanging on either side of the composition. As in Reynolds and Devis, the effect is to alert us to the staginess of the family piece. Exaggerating the histrionic effect, Hogarth uncharacteristically adds (on the left, directly above mother and child) two putti who play with the drapery cord as they draw back the material in theatrical fashion. Using these amoretti functionally, Hogarth unveils the privacy of the home, glamorized into sentimental myth, for public scrutiny (such paintings would have, in fact, been displayed in Hogarth's studio before passing into private ownership). This angelic contrivance suggests a symbolic level that, more than simply supplementing the realistic details, complicates Hogarth's didactic realism. For the two putti serve several abstracting purposes. Visual and modal counterparts to the boys romping in the opposite corner, they represent the mediated capacity for play in the adult world. As unreal figures in an otherwise realistic context, bits of myth amid the stolid eighteenth-century household, they imply that love and revelry are experienced by the adults as abstractions or imagined pleasures (such is the price of maturity).
The putti, however, also disclose a condition in the adult world that contradicts their levity, by signifying both Lady Malpas's dead children and the death of the mother herself. Lady Malpas, over whom the cherubs symbolically flutter, died of consumption in 1731. Though perhaps commissioned before her death, the painting was not completed until 1732. In a painting otherwise devoted to domestic amusement (whether collecting books or climbing on them), the putti serve as marks of woe. The intention was probably to indicate the purposelessness of sorrow, by implying Lady Malpas's happy assumption into the afterlife, such that the death of a mother and wife seems no different from her life at home, where she still sits; and the result is a blurring of both temporal and material details. The single figure of wife and mother is both there and not there, in the present and past simultaneously, yet not entirely allegorized as in Reynolds. Surrounded by the ordinary domestic scene, she at once expresses the fecundity of life and the omnipresence of death. The father, meanwhile, looks fondly upon the youngest child, whose facial tilt and features recall what Paulson calls “the spectral mother” and whose intermediary position between the couple symbolizes the woman’s biological and spiritual legacy, as preserved in the father's gaze (The Art of Hogarth, 92). The infant son links a living paternal force and a dead maternal influence.

“The Cholmondeley Family,” then, comes close to resolving the conflict between real and ideal portraiture that emerges later in the argument between Reynolds and Gainsborough. But even it succumbs to a similar problem. Though capturing in realistic detail the vivacity of young children, the painting suppresses real grief (the tragedy of death among the adults) in order to preserve an idealized vision of home. The realistic domestic scene becomes, in effect, a haunted house; the conversation piece a ghost story. The family is reconstituted in an artificial way that, refusing to register loss, creates a timeless and immaterial domain of furniture, art, people and poltergeists. It is a fantasy of unity created by the artist and preserved through the father’s represented vision as he looks upon his wife's nearest biological issue.

It is this striving for absolute ideological unity—one that transcends place, time, and even death—that produces the atemporality common to many of the family pieces. In their own ways, Reynolds, Devis, Hogarth, and even Gainsborough to some extent, deliver images of totality that confuse the specific and general, the literal and the symbolic, time and timelessness, history and myth. Everything in each domestic scene mirrors everything else; the figures occupy architectural spaces that reveal their functional roles in the household; material objects become family likenesses. There are differences, of course: Gainsborough seeks to naturalize the subject’s relation to the material domain while Reynolds aggressively discloses its emblematic and universal appeal. But all these portraits were driven by the need to reveal how human nature discovers itself while contemplating its involvement in a social context. In the process, however, each one virtually erases the very political relations it strengthens. Part of a social revolution in image-making, the close alliance of personalities and possessions in the family piece creates the semblance of a world in which the rift between subject and object is made seamless. The opulent imagery in Reynolds, the meticulous household details in Devis, the crowd of wall paintings and books in Hogarth, the insouciance of the figures in Gainsborough, and the devoted attention to
lush clothing and drapery in all of them points to a leisured moneyed class seeking to signify itself in a proliferating mass of other representations.

The static nature of the paintings is partly the product of this close identification of existence with material consumption, not surprisingly, since the family piece itself was a particularly commodified object. Perhaps inevitably, the paintings assume the quality of tableaux, much in the same way that Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (whose scenes were frequently popularized in various artistic forms that duplicated the style of the conversation piece) often focus on descriptive scenes which retain the quality of a picture. As in the closing scene of Goldsmith's novel, where the Vicar sees in the comforting pictorial assembly of his enriched family the end of all his "cares," conversation pieces provided a stable portrait of domestic relations that obstructed time without seeming to reject the specific temporal moment of the image. Their repeated scenes of felicity suggested that a specific but reproducible sameness in domestic life could simply avert the vicissitudes that political and economic events outside the home continually threatened to introduce into the household. Where allegorical pieces neutralized social, economic and political pressures by invoking a world of myth, the conversation pieces (like sentimental fiction) sublimated temporal cares by making everyday practice and myth synonymous.

It is only when Hogarth, like Goldsmith, subjected the family to narrative consequences that he brought into full play the dialectical possibilities of idealism and realism. Only Hogarth, of the artists I have mentioned, attempted to offset what he evidently regarded as the crucial limitation of domestic painting—its plotlessness, or, in other words, its avoidance of time. The satiric "progresses" Hogarth created foiled the static idealism of the conversation piece, even though Hogarth was himself a highly successful innovator of the very thing he satirized. His "Marriage à la Mode," an attack on contracted marriage, caricatures the latent money relations which inform the social and biological connections celebrated in the conversation piece. Hogarth's sequence emphasizes the gap between image-making (in this case, as it relates to genteel family mythography) and human practice. By developing a narrative sequence he hoped to animate scenes in such a way as to render cause and effect visible. Most of the plates in "The Harlot's Progress," "The Rake's Progress" and "Marriage à la Mode" not only participate in an ongoing story, they usually represent, in themselves, a sequence of events. In the fifth picture of the painted version of "Marriage à la Mode," for example, the central depiction of the cuckolded peer dying while his wife kneels in contrition at his feet is balanced to the left by the murderer fleeing out a window and, to the right, by the constable and his assistant breaking through the door to investigate the commotion (see Plate 5). As micro-histories contained within a macro-history, such pictures multiply cause and effect, intensifying the moral determinism that creates, in Hogarth's own words, "modern moral Subjects" (quoted in Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times*, 1:266).

It is, perhaps, this narrative tendency that accounts for Hogarth's elevation of written discourse through the imposing library that appears in "The Cholmondeley Family." Although Hogarth most often compared his works to the theater, he also occasionally likened them to writing. Commenting on their "histori-
cal" aspect, he suggested that this quality in his pictures "proceeded from their being designed in series and having something of that kind of connection which the pages of a book have" (quoted in Paulson, Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times, 536, footnote 9). Like Goldsmith, however, Hogarth recognized that narrative depiction required a substantially different execution from the conventional family portrait. Whereas the portraits, predictably, idealized family interaction in a relatively static manner, Hogarth's sequences focus on the anti-familial histories of harlots and rakes (who are, by definition, counterparts to wives and husbands) or on a family in the process of modish disintegration. It is as if the action demanded by narrative necessitated the obstruction of family regularity. Insofar as Hogarth's sequences may be said to extol family by depicting its negation, they, like Goldsmith's juxtaposition of the "historical family piece" and the disastrous tale which follows, parody the family piece and align (as if it were inevitable) the unfolding of plot with the family's undoing. It is hard to imagine "Marriage a la Mode" hanging in anything but a supremely ironic household (appropriately enough, it was never privately owned). Nonetheless, imagining such a home sheds light on the paradoxical nature of the family portrait.

Like Hogarth, but in a more subdued fashion, Goldsmith portrayed family relations dialectically. In The Vicar of Wakefield, he is consciously aware of his obligation to praise domestic virtues. The novel's famous "Advertisement" insists that "the hero of this piece unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth; he is a priest, an husbandman, and the father of a family. He is drawn as ready to teach, and ready to obey, as simple in affluence, and majestic in adversity" (14). This would seem to be a clear manifesto of the paradigmatic function that the domestic novel, in its depiction of the patriarchal family, was supposed to serve. A force of absolute unity, the Vicar is "drawn" as someone who combines spiritual, agricultural, and social paternalism in a manner that makes the world fully domesticated. But, as critics have repeatedly argued, the inconsistent, even apparently hypocritical, behavior of the Vicar creates ironic judgments that refute the Advertisement's hyperbolic assessment of his family character.26 It is indeed questionable whether the Vicar really is "majestic in adversity" when his behavior so frequently demands correction from those he is supposed to teach. As his eldest son at one point sternly admonishes: "Hold, Sir . . . or I shall blush for thee. How, Sir, forgetful of your age, your holy calling, thus arrogate the justice of heaven, and cling those curses upward that must soon descend to crush thy own grey head with destruction" (159). As in Hogarth's satiric progresses, moral perception comes from without as a narrative effect. The work of art does not seek to duplicate the desire of the estranged "Traveller" for inclusion in the domestic felicity he describes; nor, in the manner of Reynolds, does it require the viewer to decode the moral intention presented through classical allusions that adorn the artist's portrayal of family. The novelist's indirect mode of authorial comment parallels the problematic nature of a painter's intrusive relationship to his family subjects. Goldsmith's domestic tale initially seems to reassert domestic art by converting the allegorical family piece into a literary form of domestic realism akin to the conversation piece. Ultimately, however, it reveals a critical capacity in art to stand aloof from the domestic ideology and civic humanism it popularizes.

Hogarth's comic "progresses" destabilize the family ideology of the conversation piece by subjecting it to narrative movement. Similarly, the perilous fic-
titiousness of domestic life is communicated in Goldsmith’s novel not only by the tensions within the Primrose portrait but also by the way the picture relates to the family’s ensuing history. Where the painting offers a static, idealized, if ultimately absurd depiction of “reality,” the narrative events following its completion are all of movement and disaster, as the family attempts, unsuccessfully, to recover its supposed wholeness. Events become characterized by energy, mobility and change, particularly the Vicar’s pursuit of his wayward daughter. Unlike the pictorial representation, whose “independent” or unrelated figures reveal none of the energetic forces that activate plot, the narrative description that follows records the actions that turn the family’s ideal conception of itself into actual disasters, and, in the process, give birth to plot (however catastrophic). 27 As a narrative conversation piece the final tableau is, therefore, barely adequate to the stormy family history related in the narrative and prefigured in the allegorical family piece it attempts to counteract. Ultimately, Goldsmith’s irony provides a dialectical alternative to the modes of domestic portrayal exhibited in the allegorical family piece and the conversation piece. The Primroses’ framed allegorical picture engenders its opposite, the Vicar’s conversational narrative frame, which, in turn, gives way to the novel’s overall ironic framing of the sentimental family.

IV

With both the novel and the family piece (and their counterparts in satiric parody), we see a type of large-scale marketing in the eighteenth century of domestic conduct meant for essentially bourgeois consumption, indoctrination, and affirmation. This was, of course, a complex process that is recorded not only in novels and paintings but also in such things as Palladian architecture, conduct books, sentimental family drama, new marriage legislation and divorce settlements, suburban culture, foundling hospitals, the popularization of maternal breast feeding, and home medical treatment. That the middling classes were both producing and consuming these things, creating conditions for the enactment of domestic myths, perhaps even glamorizing old behaviors by linking them to new mechanisms of control, accounts, in part, for the theatrical aspect of family iconography in the period and the preference for conversation pieces over allegorical ones. It also suggests that the novel, and other forms of conduct literature, were not so much privileged agents in the creation of a new and modern domestic subjectivity as aspects of a rich social pageant whose aim was to act as if a radical change had occurred. But, as Hogarth’s and Goldsmith’s irony also indicates, the narrative progress of this pageant was neither uniform nor always forward looking; it did not invariably tend toward a progressive nuclear family that adequately sheltered liberal dogma about individual rights and affective sentiment.

Part of this complex social elaboration of domesticity, the family pieces of the eighteenth century were at once a public summation of the family and a private adornment. While the allegorical family pieces Goldsmith derides with the Primrose portrait belonged to a long, essentially aristocratic tradition, the conversation pieces he more subtly exposed were a rather sudden phenomena. Novelties at first, they became extraordinarily popular in the 1730s and continued to be produced well into the nineteenth century (though they seemed to have peaked in popularity
towards the end of the eighteenth century). Though originally created for upper-class patrons, they almost immediately attracted the interest of those in the middling classes. Somewhat akin to the "realistic novel," they appear to have been directed predominantly at an upper middle-class clientele whose family relations they sought to naturalize. Even their almost universal custom of regarding domestic subjects in full figure, in order to provide a comprehensive view of life, distances the viewer from the intimacy, subjectivity, and close empirical perspective the paintings were supposed to encode. The informal, or conversational nature of them implied an unselfconscious familiarity that was, at once, newborn and yet suggestive of a well-established social ease. Eighteenth-century sentimental novels performed a similar function. Like the conversation piece, they were largely consumed by readers who resembled the subjects they were reading about. Unlike the travelogue, the novel delivered knowledge about the reader's experience, about domestic, rather than foreign or exotic customs, in such a way as to elevate the apparently given normalcy of the everyday.

But if Goldsmith's ironic deflation of household ambition in the allegorical pictures indicates the contrived nature of past images of the family, his treatment of the domestic informality that characterizes the conversation piece implied that modern affective behavior was also staged. That both were intended for display in the home, then, emphasizes their similar conflation of private self-satisfaction and public assurance. As Pointon argues, "all portraiture is public, and the questions of power that are formulated on the domestic stage are subtly insistent precisely because they are articulated indirectly rather than overtly as they tend to be in the court arena" (164). Like the portraits showcased at Pemberley, and particularly the one of Darcy that Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet (in the company of members of her own family) finds so compelling, the conversation pieces blur the distinctions between public and private. More importantly, they suggest that the private reality can never fully assert its privacy, which not only needs the idea of a public realm to define itself oppositionally but which also must become public in order to validate its ethical and conceptual value. The private is made public in order to be meaningfully private. As Austen's narrator observes: "There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance." The modestly idealized images of the family in conversation pieces and sentimental fiction, like the flattering picture of Darcy, were used to nurture the inhabitants indoors with a comforting image of intimacy, closing the gap between the family's "actual" experience as a functioning social unit and cultural (or class) myths about domestic order. Posed self-consciously against allegorical depictions of family, they articulated class aspirations while disavowing the need for them.

The "historical family piece" in Goldsmith's novel, then, characterizes a larger trend in the (con)figurations of family in English eighteenth-century culture. Painters and novelists alike, attuned to the intense signifying force of the family, were aware of how images that celebrated the "smooth current of domestic joy" could also help produce responsible members of a liberal society. They could make the homology between the family's interests and the state's, which is never precise, seem natural, indispensable and absolute. But if the naturalistic conversation piece was intended to familiarize political relations that were usually inconsistent with its avowal of domestic privacy, it also inevitably positioned the viewer as an excluded observer.
whose critical faculties always threatened to deconstruct the family’s cherished belief that it could be “remote from power.” The naturalist debate was governed, then, by a complex mystification of the “real”; if Reynolds’s classical mode overtly renounced originality and verisimilitude, the naturalist mode, while seeming to reject allegory and deny the very signs of its own constructedness, inevitably reinscribed them. What Goldsmith seems to be suggesting is that the novel and portraiture are similarly engaged in political acts of domestic regulation that are only superficially free of the corruption frequently associated with “politics.” Both authorized reputedly new familial attitudes by exploiting visual, literary, and behavioral conventions as if they had no prior history and, therefore, no damaging connection to old techniques of power.

NOTES


2. That Samuel Johnson provided all but the couplet on torture (435–36) for the poem’s concluding ten lines suggests the degree to which the contradictory perspectives it contains are of a relatively broad social and aesthetic concern. For an account of how these lines are at odds with the general effect of the rest of the poem see Marshall Brown, Preromanticism (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991), 116–24. Brown notes that Johnson’s stress on “synthetic resolutions” belies Goldsmith’s emphasis on a “constant antithesis with no possibility of reconciliation,” however much the latter might have yearned for the adequate accommodation of “individual consciousness” to “the problems of commonality.” The suppressed “longing” of the poem, Brown contends, is “for an emancipated individual consciousness.” As I will be arguing, this contrariness emerges in Goldsmith’s fiction as a double rifting in the individual subject and the commonality of family. The image each individual produces of an emancipated self is as divided as the image of the family commonality that appears in domestic portraiture.


5. That the picture is painted and then trapped in the kitchen is probably meant to be an ironic indication that the vanity which occasions the work impedes the warmth, nurturance, sociability, informality, modesty, economy, and practicality that the kitchen of an eighteenth-century farm house conventionally signified. The Vicar, at least, describes it in such terms: “Though the same room served us for parlour and kitchen, that only made it the warmer. Besides, as it was kept with the utmost neatness, the dishes, plates, and copper, being well scoured, and all disposed in bright rows on the shelves, the eye was agreeably relieved, and did not want richer furniture” (32–33).


7. Ernest Hans Gombrich, “Reynolds’s Theory and Practice of Imitation” in Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 133. Gombrich also gives a complete description of the various pictorial sources that Reynolds “imitates”: “The reader who has followed us on this tortuous path, and has seen with us elements of Reynolds’s Lady Keppel,” of Poussin’s “Sacrifice to Hymen” and Rubens’s “Three Graces,” of Poussin’s “Bacchanal” and of an anonymous “Rape of Proserpina” all as parts of the master’s material, ‘may well be reluctant ever to look at the outcome of this synthetic process again, for fear that, once dissected, the painting may never be restored again to its former unity” (132).

8. According to John Barrell: “It is the task of shaping an audience into a public that the doctrine of the central form, as set out in the third discourse, is dedicated. The central form is the form that we arrive at, as it were by a process of averaging the various different forms exhibited by the objects of any species,
be they swans, doves, or men. By this process we arrive at an understanding of the ‘common form’ of a species. . . . when we recognise the ‘original’ of an object represented by its central form in a painting, what we are recognising is not simply the object itself, but the ground of agreement between our experience, and our minds and imaginations, with those of other observers who also recognise it. . . . the central form is the means by which, in recognising what our minds have in common, we recognise our nature in its highest, its universal form." See The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public' (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 93. On Reynolds's imitation in the portrait of the Montgomery sisters see also Nicholas Penny, ed., Reynolds (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 262–64 and 351–52; Edgar Wind, “Borrowed Attitudes” in Reynolds and Hogarth in Hume and the Heroic Portrait: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Imagery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 69–73.

9. In fact, according to Gombrich, the sisters were renowned not only for their beauty (hence their being popularly referred to as “the Irish Graces”), but also for their work as amateur actresses (131), making the adornment of their figures in classical garb particularly suitable. The acting context here suggests that the figures are engaged in a meta-artistic act of imitation that resembles the imitative process at work in Reynolds's painting, which is, in turn, part of the artist’s general pursuit of the “common form.”

10. For a full and incisive account of the political and ideological context of eighteenth-century theories of painting, and Reynolds’s influential role in its development, see Barrell, especially 1–162. For Barrell, eighteenth-century attempts to theorize painting centered on the need to adapt principles of “civic humanism” (whose chief form of aesthetic expression is the heroic mode) in relation to a “nation where the division of labour had so occluded the perspectives of its members that none of them, or almost none, could grasp the ‘idea’ of the public” (2). See also Marcia Pointon, “The Fantastic Gallery: Portraiture and Political Strategy” in, Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 94–104; Richard Wendorf, The Elements of Life. Biography and Portrait-Painting in Stuart and Georgian England (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990).


12. Barrell notes that Reynolds approved Gainsborough’s “eager desire . . . that his pictures, at the Exhibition, should be seen near, as well as at a distance” since their loose brushwork tends to resolve into clarity as the observer steps back from them [see Reynolds, 313]. Interestingly, Reynolds sought to justify the “indistinct style of representation” in Gainsborough’s landscapes by claiming that this gradual resolution into clarity showed that the artist’s images ultimately assumed “general shapes” and therefore represented “the more public kind of landscape painted by Claude” (Barrell, 121). In effect, Reynolds argues, Gainsborough’s art, rather than producing an ambiguity at odds with “public” forms of painting, confirmed Reynolds’s hypothesis about the “central form.”

13. For a close and illuminating analysis of Gainsborough’s painting that resembles mine in some aspects, see Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 28–33. Bermingham notes that Frances Andrews’s wide hoop dates from the 1740s, her “round-ear” cap under a straw bergére hat rolled in imitation of a milkmaid’s from the 1730s, while Robert Andrews’s “Kevenhuller Cock hat . . . was the rage among the beaux of London” (28–29). The couple is striving hard to be fashionable and contemporary.

14. Bermingham notes that the “hunting attire, gun, and dog represent privilege, for at that time only landowners holding property worth £100 or more were allowed to hunt game” (29).


17. Bermingham also notes this absence, but she regards it as a hidden contradiction (31). My argument is that the painting does not attempt to hide its separation of a leisured class from the economic particulars it requires to sustain itself in the first place. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are not made a part of an organic harmony with the landscape so much as they are presented as sole possessors who have the privilege to enjoy the landscape as their private object. Not a part of the earth or of labor, they appropriate them, in the same way that Frances Andrews's hat appropriates the style of a milkmaid. Their leisure role, moreover, is emphasized by the bench set strategically, as a place of rest and observation, right at the edge of the field where others have labored, fronting the tree whose duty now is to provide genteel shade.

18. Bermingham notes that several commentators (Hayes, 203, for example) have also understood the field to symbolize "the prospective fertility of the newlyweds themselves" (29).


24. Ronald Paulson, *The Art of Hogarth* (London: Phaidon, 1975), 92. The mother's death was a notable event since she was the eldest daughter of Sir Robert Walpole. Pointon notes that angels frequently signalled deceased members of the family in eighteenth-century group portraits, but it is, nonetheless, a rare event in Hogarth's conversation pieces. See Pointon, 208. Of Hogarth's use of the curtain in his conversation pieces, Solkin observes that "we can look upon the opened curtain as another sign of a subjectivity that is at the same time autonomous and oriented to an audience, telling us that private nature and public theater are effectively one and the same... Hogarth presents his figures as beings unto themselves, and simultaneously as expressive of a class ideology that grants them an entirely self-determining ontological status" (87). I would only emphasize that the self-determination was as much a fictional intervention as the curtain or the putti in the Cholmondeley portrait.

25. Paulson notes that Hogarth started his independent professional life purposefully by working in conversation pieces since they were particularly lucrative. Similarly, as Bermingham describes, Gainsborough was forced by circumstances to paint conversations when he may have preferred to devote most of his time to landscapes (42–46).


27. Goldsmith, in fact, specifically emphasizes movement in these scenes of catastrophe. Olivia’s elopement is announced by one of the sons, Dick, who comes running in to report his sister’s flight in a post chaise. The Vicar subsequently sets out upon the road to pursue his wayward daughter. Along the way he encounters his eldest son, George, who had earlier gone abroad to seek his fortune; the son describes, for the first time in the novel, his worldly, and predominantly futile wanderings. Returning home with his daughter, the Vicar arrives only to see his house, and presumably the portrait along with it, devoured by fire (probably the most drastic example of Goldsmith’s symbolic deconstruction of the home.) The Vicar, after a moment of paralyzing despair, dashes into the flaming structure to rescue the children remaining within. Burned in the fire, the Vicar eventually succumbs to an illness that parallels Olivia’s ill health, as if her moral and somatic condition were symbolically linked to his. Finally transported to jail, on charges brought by Squire Thornhill, Primrose attempts to reform his fellow prisoners until he is miraculously saved by Burchell, now revealed as Sir William Thornhill, *deus ex machina*.