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## SHAFTESBURY V. RICHARDSON: A COUNTERFACTUAL EXERCISE

Towards the end of his *Essay on the Theory of Painting*, published in 1715, Jonathan Richardson offered an apology for his book in the form of an anecdote about his fellow painter, Peter Lely. The anecdote goes thus:

A Man of Quality, Sir *Peter Lely*'s intimate Friend, was pleas'd to say to him one Day, *For God's sake, Sir Peter, how came you to have so great a Reputation? You know I know you are no Painter... My Lord, [answered Lely] I know I am not, But I am the Best you have.*<sup>1</sup>

The implication is that Richardson's *Theory of Painting*, while the work of a man who was no writer, was also the best the British had. This anecdote not only forms a graceful and self-deprecating coda to Richardson's book, it is also very revealing. It demonstrates the insecurity of British art lovers at this time, their painful awareness that their country had yet to produce either painters or writers on art of the highest quality. At the same time, however, it also betrays Richardson's pride that his *Theory of Painting* was the first substantial, and substantially original, work of art theory published by a British writer. In 1715 Richardson's *Theory of Painting* was, indeed, the best the British had, and as such it exerted a powerful effect on British thinking about the visual arts over the next fifty years. Richardson's book was widely read and admired by art lovers, from Horace Walpole to Sir Joshua Reynolds.<sup>2</sup> It was not until Reynolds's own *Discourses* began to appear in 1769 that Richardson's *Theory of Painting* was supplanted as the most visible British statement on the theory of art.

It was, however, only a quirk of fate that allowed Richardson to claim that his *Theory of Painting* was both the only and the best work of its kind published by a Briton. For at the very time that he was writing the *Theory of Painting* Richardson's contemporary the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury was also writing a book of art theory, a book that was to have been called *Second Characters*. Had *Second Characters* been completed, it would probably have appeared in about 1715, at pretty much exactly the same time as Richardson's *Theory of Painting*. Shaftesbury lived long enough to complete only two sections of the book, the introductory 'Letter Concerning the Art, or Science, of Design' and an essay describing an ideal painting of the Judgment of Hercules. Both works were published separately. *The Judgment of Hercules* appeared as an individual essay first in French in 1712 and then in English in 1713, before taking its place in the 1714 second edition of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* in 1714.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Richardson (the Elder), *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, London 1715, p. 228 [hereinafter: *Theory of Painting*].

<sup>2</sup> For Walpole, see *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, London 1828, vol. IV, pp. 24–25 (1<sup>st</sup> edn London 1762–1771). For Reynolds see below, n. 12. For his ownership of a copy of Richardson's *Theory of Painting* see C. Gibson-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment*, New Haven–London 2000, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> A.A. Cooper, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules* (London 1713); Shaftesbury, *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*, [in:] idem, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London 1714, vol. III, pp. 345–391 [hereinafter: *Characteristicks* (1714)].

In some copies of that edition it was joined by the ‘Letter Concerning Design’, which went on to appear in subsequent editions of the *Characteristicks*.<sup>4</sup> At Shaftesbury’s death from tuberculosis at the age of 42 in 1713 the remaining two parts of his projected book were left incomplete. One of these was to have been a commentary on an ancient Greek text, the Tablet of Cebes, which would have used a discussion of a painted allegory to offer instruction on how to lead a virtuous and happy life. The fourth and final part of *Second Characters* would have been an essay provisionally entitled *Plasticks, An Epistolary Excursion on the Original, Progress, and Power of Designatory Art*. This would, to judge from the surviving notes, have been by far the longest section of *Second Characters*.<sup>5</sup> It is also the section which bears most comparison with Richardson’s *Theory of Painting*, as it offers a theoretical and historical discussion of art. Had Shaftesbury’s health been restored by his move to Naples in 1711, he would no doubt have been able to complete and publish *Second Characters*.

That he did not has not stopped Shaftesbury from being presented by several modern historians as, in effect, the father of British art theory.<sup>6</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, I think that this is a far-fetched notion, inspired more by Shaftesbury’s eminence as a philosopher and his appeal as a literary stylist than by his actual level of impact on later thinkers and writers on the visual arts.<sup>7</sup> These accounts also tend to give the impression that a far more substantial corpus of art theory by Shaftesbury was known to eighteenth-century readers than was actually the case. In fact the sum total of Shaftesbury’s published writings on the visual arts at that time consisted of the short essay on *The Judgment of Hercules*, the even shorter ‘Letter Concerning Design’, and a brief if highly suggestive two-page passage in *Characteristicks*.<sup>8</sup> However, modern historians tend to bulk out their references to Shaftesbury’s thought by referring to his notes for the fourth part of *Second Characters*, *Plasticks*, which survive in the Public Record Office in London and were first edited and published by Benjamin Rand in 1914.<sup>9</sup> As fascinating as these notes are, those citing them often rather gloss over the fact that they were completely unknown to eighteenth-century readers. While Shaftesbury’s published writings on the visual arts certainly were read I find little evidence to support those who see the subsequent history of British art theory as an ongoing reaction to Shaftesbury’s thought. Indeed, such evidence as there is suggests that Shaftesbury’s writings on the arts were nothing like as well-known as we might now suppose. In 1732, for example, the journalist James Ralph contended that Shaftesbury’s writings were ‘little known’ among modern painters,<sup>10</sup> while in 1749 the architect John Gwynn urged that Shaftesbury’s brief pronouncements on the imitation of nature in *Characteristicks* should be more ‘attentively considered’.<sup>11</sup>

As Carol Gibson-Wood has suggested, the true father of British art theory was not Shaftesbury but Richardson.<sup>12</sup> For all their plodding prose and pedestrian arguments, it is the works of Richardson which constitute the true foundation stone of the distinctively British branch of art theory. It was the works of Richardson, not those of Shaftesbury, which, according to Joshua Reynolds, persuaded him to become a painter, for all that he had also read Shaftesbury as a young man.<sup>13</sup> And it was from Richardson’s digest of the continental art theoretical tradition, not from the rather different digest offered by Shaftesbury, that Reynolds took his points of reference when he came to write the Discourses.

But what if Shaftesbury *had* lived to publish *Second Characters*? What if we posit a counter-factual universe in which Shaftesbury, as he lay languishing in Italy, was suffering not from tuberculosis but from that other common eighteenth-century complaint, hypochondria? What if the Italian sun had returned him to

<sup>4</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] idem, *Characteristicks* (1714), vol. III, pp. 410–11.

<sup>5</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks, or the Original, Progress, and Power of Designatory Art*, [in:] idem, *Standard Edition. Complete Works, Selected Letters and Posthumous Writings*, eds. W. Benda W. Lottes, F.A. Uehlein, E. Wolff, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2001, vol. I,5 [hereinafter: *Plasticks*].

<sup>6</sup> Most influentially by J. Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, New Haven–London 1986, pp. 1–68.

<sup>7</sup> H. Mount, *The Englishness of English Art Theory*, “Oxford Art Journal”, vol. 25, 2002, pp. 102–103; idem, *Leonardo’s ‘Treatise’ and the Empirical Undertow in British Art Theory*, [in:] *Leonardo in Britain: Collections and Historical Reception*, eds J. Barone, S. Avery-Quash, Florence 2019, pp. 205–206.

<sup>8</sup> Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (first ed. 1709), [in:] idem, *Characteristicks* (1714), vol. I, pp. 142–144.

<sup>9</sup> Shaftesbury, *Second Characters; or, The Language of Forms*, ed. B. Rand, Cambridge 1914.

<sup>10</sup> *Of Painting*, “Weekly Register”, no 112, 3 June 1732, reprinted in “Gentleman’s Magazine”, vol. 2, 1732, p. 788.

<sup>11</sup> J. Gwynn, *An Essay on Design: Including Proposals for Erecting a Public Academy*, London 1749, p. v.

<sup>12</sup> Gibson-Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 230–232.

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds’ remark about Richardson is reported in Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, Oxford 1905, p. 2 (1<sup>st</sup> edn 1779). See also F.W. Hilles, *The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London 1936, pp. 5–6. For Reynolds’s reading of Shaftesbury see Hilles, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

both physical and mental health, enabling him to finish his book and return to England to see it into print? One might imagine that its publication would have coincided with, perhaps even slightly pre-empted, that of Richardson's *Theory of Painting*. One might also imagine that a published *Second Characters*, the work of an aristocrat from a famous political family, of a man whose philosophical writings were already well-known, would have attracted more attention than the first book by a professional portrait painter from a modest background, especially given that *Second Characters* would almost certainly have been far more stylishly written than Richardson's book. What, then, might the impact of this hypothetical *Second Characters* on the subsequent development of British art and art theory have been? As with any exercise in counter-factual history, such musings can only ever be a matter of speculation, although I will finish this paper with some frivolous thoughts on the matter. The greater part of this paper will, however, be devoted to a more substantive issue – a comparison between Richardson's *Essay on the Theory of Painting* and the *Plasticks* section from Shaftesbury's *Second Characters*, to the end of establishing how the two texts might have differed. Even here there is an element of speculation: Shaftesbury's surviving notes are sufficiently fragmentary and disordered to leave considerable uncertainty about the form that his finished book would have taken. They are, moreover, largely written in what we might call a 'notes to self' style which may give a misleading impression of the language he would have used in the finished text. Nevertheless, with the help of the more accurate edition of *Plasticks* published in 2001 in the Standard Edition of Shaftesbury's works<sup>14</sup> we can make a few observations about how his text would have differed from that of Richardson.

We should begin by acknowledging that there are important points of resemblance between Shaftesbury's *Plasticks* and Richardson's *Theory of Painting*. Both authors wished to improve painting in Britain and both voiced their frustration at the lowly status of the art in their country. Both authors set out to raise that status, so that painting might be no longer regarded as merely an amusement, a 'vulgar science', or a demonstration of mechanical skill.<sup>15</sup> Both men, in other words, wanted their art theory to be what Michael Baxandall has called an 'operative theory', one that would have an actual effect on the behaviour of painters and patrons, rather than being a mere literary exercise.<sup>16</sup> Both Richardson and Shaftesbury, for example, stressed the importance of painters being learned in order to show that painting was a liberal art and not merely a mechanical craft.<sup>17</sup> Both authors focus their comments mainly on history painting and believed in the hierarchy of genres, although both also respected the qualities seen in the lesser genres. Both writers also believed that painters should present a perfected idea of reality rather than simply copying nature.<sup>18</sup> As these characteristics suggests both writers were heavily indebted to that classical branch of art theory which originated in fifteenth-century Italy and had been further codified by French authors in the later seventeenth century. Indeed, both *Plasticks* and Richardson's *Theory of Painting* can be seen as attempts to digest and adapt this tradition of art theory for a British audience.

It is, however, when we start to think about the question of audience that we begin to see significant differences between Shaftesbury's *Plasticks* and Richardson's *Theory of Painting*. Although Richardson would later address upper class art-lovers in his *Two Discourses on connoisseurship* (London 1719), his *Theory of Painting* was primarily aimed at his fellow painters. Throughout his book, Richardson advises painters not only to paint in a certain way, but also to think, read, converse and live in a certain way.<sup>19</sup> He clearly believed that the best way to improve British painting was to improve British painters. Shaftesbury, on the other hand, envisaged *Plasticks* as an epistolary work in which each separate section would begin with the words 'My Lord', as if it were a letter to one of his fellow aristocrats.<sup>20</sup> His *Letter Concerning Design*, addressed to his art-loving friend Lord Somers, had opened in the same fashion.<sup>21</sup> This framing device indicates that Shaftesbury's target readership thus lay primarily among men of his own class. Indeed, one of the justifications he

<sup>14</sup> See n. 5 above.

<sup>15</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 161 ('vulgar Science'), 170. See also Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] idem, *Second Characters...*, pp. 18–27; Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>16</sup> M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven–London 1985, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 196; Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 20–24.

<sup>18</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 258, 267, cf. Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis*, [in:] idem, *Characteristicks* (1714), vol. I, pp. 142–144; Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 9, 30, 160–162.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>20</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 161–162.

<sup>21</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] idem, *Second Characters...*, p. 18. Somers is addressed repeatedly throughout the text.

gave for his book was that it would enable those of the ‘Better Sort’ to defend their interest in the visual arts against critics.<sup>22</sup> Shaftesbury’s belief was that the improvement in British painting for which he hoped would stem not from the ambitions of British painters but from the taste and knowledge of British patrons. As he stated in the *Letter Concerning Design*:

without a public voice knowingly guided and directed, there is nothing which can raise a true ambition in the artist; nothing which can exalt the genius of the workman or make him emulous of after fame, and of the approbation of his country, and of posterity.<sup>23</sup>

For Shaftesbury artists were workmen who must be led by those with taste, much as he himself had directed Paolo de Matteis in the realisation of his blueprint for the Judgment of Hercules.<sup>24</sup>

Such an opinion is consistent with the views about modern painters Shaftesbury expressed in his notes for *Plasticks*, in which he describes them as ‘mere wretches’ and ‘mechanick Knaves’ lacking in any learning.<sup>25</sup> While Shaftesbury may have toned down these opinions in the published version of *Plasticks*, he clearly saw artists as needing direction by men of taste. Richardson, a practising portraitist, inevitably took a different view on this matter, and throughout the *Theory of Art* placed the responsibility for the improvement of the arts in the hands of the artists themselves.

Shaftesbury did, however, also intend his book to be read beyond his core target audience, which he defined as ‘the Critick, the real Virtuoso, or Philosopher.’<sup>26</sup>

He even planned to include illustrations, in the form of engravings after key works, in order to help his readers understand his ideas.<sup>27</sup> He had no time for those philosophers who were unable to communicate with anyone other than other philosophers,<sup>28</sup> and remarked that ‘Nothing in the text’ should be included:

but what shall be of easy smooth & polite Reading; without seeming Difficulty, or hard Studdy: so as that the better & gentiler Rank of Painters & Artists, the Ladys, Beaux, courtly Gentlemen, & more refin’d sort of Country & Town-Wits, and notable Talkers, may comprehend, or be perswaded that they comprehend what is there written, *in the Text*.

To make life easier for these classes of reader, he resolved to keep his main text simple and straightforward in content and style and to put all the hard philosophising and quotes from Latin and Greek in footnotes.<sup>29</sup> To judge from the copious quotes in ancient languages in his notes for *Plasticks*, these footnotes would have been quite long, resulting in a Talmud-like structure (Shaftesbury admitted that his actual model was the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* of the French philosopher Pierre Bayle, another work with copious footnotes).<sup>30</sup>

While Shaftesbury also criticised those who used affected French and Italian technical terms in discussing the arts, he was not above inventing a few technical terms of his own.<sup>31</sup> In all cases these were drawn from ancient sources. From classical theories of rhetoric, for example, he borrowed the terms *hyperbole* and *ellipsis*.<sup>32</sup> For Shaftesbury hyperbole meant the deliberate exaggeration of the size of a person or thing above that which would be expected within the perspectival scheme of a painting, while ellipsis means a tactical reduction in the detail and finishing of the subsidiary parts of a painting. Among his other neologisms was the

<sup>22</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 170

<sup>23</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] idem, *Second Characters...*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> For Shaftesbury’s own account of this process see Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] idem, *Second Characters...*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>25</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 204, 211, cf. p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 285

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 282.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 165–166. He also promised to translate material in foreign languages ‘for such Artists in the *modern way* as are not Schollars in the *antient*’ (p. 164).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 163, 165.

<sup>31</sup> He was, indeed, quite self-conscious about the fact that he was doing this. See Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 262. The care with which Shaftesbury was thinking about the language he was going to use to put across his ideas is also evident from his notes for a glossary, see *ibidem*, pp. 262–265.

<sup>32</sup> For hyperbole see Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 236–238; for ellipsis see *ibidem*, pp. 239–241; for both terms see *ibidem*, p. 281.

term *rhyparography*,<sup>33</sup> by which he meant what we would now call low genre painting, while his preferred term for landscape painting was *perspective*.<sup>34</sup>

It is notable that all Shaftesbury's neologisms are derived from Latin and Greek. Richardson, by contrast, inclined towards words which had been brought into English by Dutch dealers and artists – he calls landscapes *landscapes* and genre paintings *drolls*.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to what Shaftesbury seems to have been planning Richardson presents his book in straightforward continuous prose and without footnotes. While Shaftesbury was conscious of the need to rein in his learning in order not to frighten off painters, ladies and other unscholarly beings, the more insecure Richardson was anxious to appear as scholarly as possible, for example by quoting frequently from Italian authors, in particular Dante.<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult to judge the actual style in which a published version of *Plasticks* might have been written because Shaftesbury's notes are very much notes. However, in these notes we do find occasional instances of Shaftesbury's powers as a writer, suggesting a sophistication, passion and immediacy which would in all likelihood have far surpassed the functional but pedestrian prose of Richardson. For example, he describes a painting by Domenichino in the dome of the chapel of San Gennaro in Naples Cathedral as looking like 'an Orange [studded] with Cloves', an effective punchline to an anecdote in which he relates how the artist was paid by the number of heads he included and thus chose to maximise his returns by including as many bodiless angels as possible.<sup>37</sup>

That Shaftesbury quoted extensively from Greek and Latin sources and Richardson from Italian tells us much about their respective frames of reference. Shaftesbury was a well-read classical scholar, and the sources he mentions most often are those from the ancient world, above all Horace's *Ars Poetica*, but also Homer, Virgil, Xenophon, Pliny, Plato and Aristotle. He was also well acquainted with Franciscus Junius's *De pictura veterum* (London 1637), a comprehensive digest of the writings on the ancients on the visual arts.<sup>38</sup> It was from these sources that Shaftesbury, on most issues an Ancient in the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns, derived his values and his principal terms of reference.<sup>39</sup> Richardson, less widely read, does not refer to any ancient sources and those he mentions most often are Italian authors, above all Bellori and Vasari. Both writers also owed a substantial debt to modern French writers, perhaps inevitably given that those writers had been so actively engaged in codifying art theory. Both writers were, however, also highly ambivalent about this debt, understandably given that Britain was then just emerging from a long war with France. This was, moreover, the period during which the French became firmly established as the great rival and other against which the British defined themselves, a role they would continue to play for the next two centuries. Shaftesbury and Richardson would be far from the last Britons to find themselves both substantially indebted to French culture and profoundly resentful of that debt.

The two men responded to this feeling of ambivalence in different ways. Richardson's solution was to pretend that the French didn't exist. In the entirety of his *Theory of Painting* he cites only two French theorists, André Félibien and Roger de Piles, and mentions each only once. This is despite the fact that Richardson unquestionably took de Piles's writings, and especially his *Cours de peinture par principes*, as a model, and arguably the primary model, for his own theory of art.<sup>40</sup> He was, perhaps, gambling on the likelihood that de Piles' book, as yet untranslated into English, would be unknown to most of his readers.<sup>41</sup> The more confident Shaftesbury approached the problem in a different way, frequently referring in his notes for *Plasticks* to his

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 257–258.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 278.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. *ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 212.

<sup>38</sup> For direct references to Junius in Shaftesbury's, *Plasticks*, see pp. 192–193, 198, 245.

<sup>39</sup> On Shaftesbury and the Ancients see L. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-century England*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 46–47; H. Mount, *Morality, Microscopy and the Moderns: the Meaning of Minuteness in Shaftesbury's Theory of Painting*, "British Journal for Eighteenth-century Studies", vol. 21, 1998, pp. 133–139. It is notable that Shaftesbury almost always gives the term 'ancient' a positive meaning and the term 'modern' a negative one in his notes for *Plasticks*, see e.g. pp. 286, 211.

<sup>40</sup> R. de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes*, Paris 1708. On what Richardson did and did not owe to de Piles see Gibson-Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 143. The one mention of de Piles' *Cours* in Richardson's *Theory of Painting* occurred near the end of the book (p. 230).

<sup>41</sup> De Piles' *Cours* was first translated into English as *The Principles of Painting*, London 1743.

reading in modern French theorists, both artistic and literary.<sup>42</sup> However, these references were as likely to be negative as positive – throughout his writings Shaftesbury lost no opportunity to attack French writers (and, indeed, French painters, French culture and French politics). The modern source he mentions most frequently is Roland Fréart de Chambray's *Idée de la perfection de la peinture* (Paris 1662), a book which Shaftesbury almost always refers to in a negative light.<sup>43</sup> Shaftesbury was especially critical of what he believed to be Fréart's misunderstandings of Raphael and his misguided attacks on Michelangelo, whom Fréart had notoriously castigated for his monstrous failures of decorum in the *Last Judgment*.<sup>44</sup> Shaftesbury's dislike of most things French stemmed from his political beliefs; as a liberal civic humanist he believed in government by an enlightened and disinterested elite and he despised the absolute monarchy of the French.<sup>45</sup> Among other things he saw this form of government as giving rise to a corrupted taste in art, and he was especially scornful about the harmful effect that French taste had had on the great Poussin, who had been compelled by French patrons to produce works in little rather than on the grand scale which Shaftesbury saw as essential for history painting.<sup>46</sup>

Like Richardson, however, Shaftesbury was far more indebted to French theorists than he was willing to admit. Indeed, Fréart was perhaps his most important model, suggesting that the loathing that Shaftesbury voiced for the Frenchman's ideas was at least in part a patricidal reflex, a desire to slay his own progenitor. It was from Fréart, alongside Franciscus Junius' *De pictura veterum*, that Shaftesbury derived his five parts of the art: Invention, Drawing, Colour, Expression and Composition. Richardson expanded this list to seven, eight, or even nine, depending on how you count them, adding Handling, Grace and Greatness and perhaps the Sublime to the list given by Junius and Fréart.<sup>47</sup> An even more striking debt to Fréart is Shaftesbury's willingness to discuss, in his notes for *Plasticks*, examples of bad artistic practice. The use of examples of good practice was commonplace in book of art theory at this time. These examples were usually drawn from the works of Raphael, who was universally agreed to have been the greatest painter of modern times. Fréart, for example, cited prints after Raphael as his examples,<sup>48</sup> while Richardson referred to prints after Raphael, drawings by him and, above all, to the Raphael tapestry Cartoons then at Hampton Court.<sup>49</sup> But Fréart also, as we have noted, devoted sections of his book to savage attacks on Michelangelo. This use of negative examples was a more unusual tactic, and one which, for the most part, did not appeal to Richardson. Shaftesbury, by contrast, makes frequent use of examples of bad practice. His rogues' gallery included a painting by the Dutch artist Adriaen van der Werff which he offered as an example of harmful minuteness,<sup>50</sup> almost all modern British portraitists (with the exception of his favourite John Closterman),<sup>51</sup> all French artists apart from Poussin, Claude and Gaspar Dughet,<sup>52</sup> and Italian, Spanish and Flemish seventeenth-century artists of the more florid, sensual or veristic types, including Rubens, Bernini, Pietro da Cortona, Luca Giordano, Jusepe de Ribera and Caravaggio.<sup>53</sup>

This prolific use of negative examples would have given Shaftesbury's book a very different feel from that of Richardson. It also underlines the extent to which he wanted his book to constitute an operative theory, one that would actually change and guide the tastes of British patrons. By including negative examples Shaftesbury must have hoped to steer his compatriots away from mindless portraits, minute demonstrations of Dutch craftsmanship or sensual paintings from Flanders, France and Italy, all of which were, he knew, very popular amongst his countrymen. Against these works, Shaftesbury set a team of painters whom he held in high esteem. The captain of this all-star team was Raphael, who is mentioned far more often than any other painter in the notes to *Plasticks* and whom Shaftesbury regarded as the only modern painter to have come

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 184, 209, 222, 236, 245, 253, 255, 286.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. *ibidem*, pp. 209, 236, 255.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 230, 236. For Fréart on Michelangelo see R. Fréart de Chambray, *An Idea of the Perfection of Painting*, trans. J. Evelyn, London 1668, pp. 14–15, 67–68.

<sup>45</sup> See Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 189–194.

<sup>46</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 212, 235, 269.

<sup>47</sup> See Gibson-Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>48</sup> Fréart de Chambray, *An Idea of the Perfection...*, pp. 22–24.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 93–95, 101–102.

<sup>50</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 281. See also H. Mount, *A Warning to the Curious: Shaftesbury and Van der Werff in 1712*, [in:] *The Visual Culture of Holland in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries and its European Reception*, eds J. Jazwierski, P. Taylor, Lublin 2015, pp. 67–92.

<sup>51</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 254–255, 257.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 271, 277.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 226, 239, 242, 243, 252, 256, 271, 277.

close to perfection.<sup>54</sup> His vice-captain was the ‘incomparable’ Poussin, who would, Shaftesbury believed, have risen to similar or even greater heights had he not been held back by French patrons.<sup>55</sup> The rest of the team was made up of Domenichino, Michelangelo (with some reservations), Salvator Rosa, Gaspar Dughet, Giulio Romano, Guido Reni, Titian and Annibale Carracci.<sup>56</sup>

This rather small canon gives a good idea of Shaftesbury’s tastes, and puts him firmly in the camp of Italian theorists who favoured the decorous and austere works of the Carracci and their pupils over the more sensual works of their rivals. Perhaps more significantly, it also allies Shaftesbury with the *Poussinistes*, that group of French seventeenth-century theorists, including Fréart, who favoured the more severe and intellectual works of Raphael and Poussin over more sensual paintings.<sup>57</sup> ‘Chaste’ and ‘severe’ are, indeed, two words which Shaftesbury applies to Poussin, and he praised the same painter alongside Raphael and Giulio Romano for their ‘unmixt pure & simple Grace void of Affectation.’<sup>58</sup> Throughout his notes for *Plasticks* Shaftesbury praises the more intellectual parts of painting, and sees sensual qualities like colour as merely a means to an end (although he does not go quite so far as Fréart, who was so suspicious of the sensual appeal of colour that he discussed it only in terms of light and shade).<sup>59</sup>

Shaftesbury also shared with Fréart a fascination with perspective.<sup>60</sup> He frequently judges paintings by their size, calling those smaller than life-size, and especially those that are highly finished, ‘false’. Shaftesbury also showed an acute sensitivity to the relative size of the figures and other components within a painting, again calling those that are smaller than they should be within the overall perspective of the painting ‘false’.<sup>61</sup> He did, however, also allow for hyperbole, the possibility that figures might, if appropriate, be larger than they should be within the perspective scheme, a quality he thought best exemplified by the works of Michelangelo.<sup>62</sup> To judge from the notes for *Plasticks*, much of the published version of the work would have been concerned with discussions of these matters. While this obsession with perspective may seem odd to modern eyes, it is consistent with Shaftesbury’s debt both to Fréart and to another French writer of Fréart’s generation, Abraham Bosse.<sup>63</sup> It was to these earlier French theorists that Shaftesbury was principally indebted, rather than to later French authors like de Piles. While Shaftesbury mentions John Dryden’s deluxe translation of Charles Du Fresnoy’s *De Arte Graphica* with notes by de Piles he does not seem to have been very interested in it, and he does not mention any other works by de Piles.<sup>64</sup>

Richardson, on the other hand, owed much more to the *Rubéniste* school of French theorists headed by Du Fresnoy and de Piles. He too saw Raphael as undoubtedly the greatest of painters; indeed, his veneration of Raphael, and especially the Tapestry Cartoons, almost exceeds that of Shaftesbury.<sup>65</sup> But his tastes were far more catholic than those of Shaftesbury. Richardson was also a fan of Rubens and Van Dyck, in addition to Venetian painters like Titian and Veronese.<sup>66</sup> Here we should acknowledge that the tastes of our two authors must have been affected by their respective experiences. Shaftesbury was a widely travelled man who had made himself familiar with recent Italian art while living in Naples, and could draw on memories like that of seeing the painting by Van der Werff he had so disliked in Rotterdam. Richardson, on the other hand, had never travelled overseas and was dependent on his own extensive collection of prints and drawings and on paintings he had seen in Britain. This explains in part the prominence he gives to the Raphael tapestry Car-

<sup>54</sup> Among many examples see e.g. Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 206, 214, 152, 277.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269, 252.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 176, 186, 202, 214, 242, 252, 258, 269, 277, 282.

<sup>57</sup> For Fréart’s liking for Raphael, Giulio Romano, Poussin and Domenichino see *An Idea of the Perfection...*, pp. 67–68, 91, 122–125.

<sup>58</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 213, 246.

<sup>59</sup> Fréart de Chambray, *An Idea of the Perfection...*, pp. 13, 32. On Shaftesbury’s dislike of gaudy, new and obtrusive colouring see e.g. *Plasticks*, pp. 271–274. Cf. his dislike of ‘richness’, *ibidem*, pp. 239, 247, and ‘licentiousness’, *ibidem*, p. 196. For Fréart’s belief that invention and expression were the highest parts of art, with proportion, colour and perspective described as more mechanical, see Fréart de Chambray, *An Idea of the Perfection...*, p. 121. For Fréart’s distaste for the interest of modern painters in colour, handling, massing and drapery see *ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>60</sup> For Fréart on perspective see e.g. *An Idea of the Perfection...*, pp. 36–46.

<sup>61</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 235–238, 266, see also pp. 212, 292.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 236.

<sup>63</sup> Shaftesbury mentions Bosse’s writings on p. 209 of *Plasticks*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 209, 222, 262.

<sup>65</sup> He claimed that Hampton Court, where the Cartoons were hung, was the best treasury of works by Raphael in the world, surpassing even the Vatican (Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, p. 102, cf. p. 112).

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 41, 106–108, 151, 160.

toons and to the works of Van Dyck and Rubens. However, Richardson's enthusiasm for Flemish art cannot only be attributed to its availability. He showed, in contrast to Shaftesbury, a genuine interest in the more sensual, formal and mechanical aspects of art. While Shaftesbury referred to painters as 'mechanick Knaves',<sup>67</sup> Richardson argued at some length that the manual skills needed by painters placed them above writers, since they were required to use both their hands and their brains.<sup>68</sup> While Shaftesbury saw colour as merely sensual, Richardson wrote enthusiastically and sensitively about colour and drawing and added handling, or brushwork, to the key parts of the art.<sup>69</sup> In his sensitivity to colour and to light and shade Richardson was very indebted to de Piles, and, like de Piles, he advanced a theory of art which was at least in part formalist. Like de Piles, Richardson was capable of admiring the formal qualities of a work regardless of its subject. For Shaftesbury, by contrast, subject matter was all important.

This difference is also evident in the ways in which our two authors discussed pictorial composition. For Shaftesbury, following Fréart, composition was a matter of organising the key figures within a strict perspectival scheme in such a way that they could tell the story being represented most effectively.<sup>70</sup> Richardson, on the other hand, followed de Piles in advancing the possibility of seeing pictures of attractive patterns of colour or of light and shade, even repeating de Piles' famous argument that the light and shade in a picture should be focused in masses so that it resembles a bunch of grapes rather than separate individual grapes.<sup>71</sup> In arguing thus de Piles and Richardson were laying down the foundations for a modern, abstracted way of thinking about composition, a way of thinking that would later be taken up by Reynolds, and later still and much more emphatically by members of the Aesthetic movement in the nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> It is indicative of Richardson's formalism that he frequently compares painting to both poetry and music, in both of which, he argues, there is a sensual dimension. Of painting, for example, he writes that:

its beautiful Forms, Colours and Harmony, are to the Eye what Sounds, and the Harmony of that kind are to the Ear; and in both we are delighted in observing the Skill of the Artist.<sup>73</sup>

Shaftesbury, on the other hand, preferred to compare painting to philosophy, most famously in the *Judgment of Hercules* in which he likens history painting to moral philosophy and landscape painting to natural philosophy.<sup>74</sup> While Shaftesbury does at times compare painting to poetry, at others he denies the conventional *ut picture poesis* parallel between the two arts.<sup>75</sup> In his notes for *Plasticks*, he even prefigures Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766) in contending that there are some subjects, especially horrible or violent ones, which while acceptable in poems are unsuitable for paintings, because the painter has of necessity to give determinate form to what he is representing rather than leaving that realisation to take place in the mind of the reader.<sup>76</sup>

That Shaftesbury belonged to the more austere school of the *Poussinistes* was consistent with what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of his art theory: his insistence on the moral role of painting. Far more emphatically than any of his French predecessors, Shaftesbury believed that the purpose of painting, the quality that raised it above a mere mechanical trade, was its ability to give moral guidance to the spectator. 'All true Painting', he asserted in his notes for *Plasticks*, is 'moral'.<sup>77</sup> Shaftesbury's ideal painting of the *Judgment of Hercules* offered a lesson in virtue, and he famously imagined that it might be hung in the gallery of a young prince in order to contribute to his moral education.<sup>78</sup> It was for this reason that Shaftesbury placed

<sup>67</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 211.

<sup>68</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 26–35.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 144–160.

<sup>70</sup> A good example of this is Shaftesbury's description of an ideal imagined depiction of the story of Bacchus and Ariadne (*Plasticks*, pp. 260–261), very much along the same lines as his blueprint for an ideal depiction of Judgement of Hercules (Shaftesbury, *Judgment of Hercules*). Cf. Fréart's analysis of Raphael's *School of Athens*, which again focuses heavily on how the subject matter is conveyed (*An Idea of the Perfection...*, pp. 109–117).

<sup>71</sup> See Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 114–133, and especially pp. 115, 121 (in which he borrows de Piles' analogy of the bunch of grapes) and p. 128 (in which he talks about the importance of giving the 'mass' of light an 'agreeable form').

<sup>72</sup> See H. Mount, *Reynolds, Chiaroscuro and Composition*, [in:] *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art*, eds. P. Taylor, F. Quiviger, London–Turin 2000, pp. 172–197.

<sup>73</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, p. 8, cf. p. 144.

<sup>74</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*, [in:] *idem*, *Second Characters...*, p. 53.

<sup>75</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 166, 222.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 286–288.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177. See also pp. 177, 179–183, 186, 217, 264.

<sup>78</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] *idem*, *Second Characters...*, p. 26.



primary importance on invention and expression, the parts of the art which enabled the moral story told by the picture to be communicated most clearly and effectively. Colour and handling, by contrast, were of less importance. For Shaftesbury, being amused by the sensual qualities of a painting like colour and brushwork would have constituted an ignoble response.

Richardson also believed that painting might have a moral and didactic role. He argued, for example, that portraits can inspire us to follow the examples of famous people, and also that the people represented in portraits will feel compelled to live up to the elevated depictions of themselves given in their portraits.<sup>79</sup> As this suggests, Richardson felt that portraiture should be ranked alongside history painting,<sup>80</sup> a move that went against the usual construction of the hierarchy of genres and which was both self-aggrandizing, given that he was himself a portraitist, and pragmatic, given the notorious domination of British art by portraiture.<sup>81</sup> Richardson's remarks on the moral role of painting are, however, quite brief. Indeed, he gives equal weight to the argument that painting is to be valued for the knowledge it gives us about things in the world, about 'Arms, Buildings Civil and Military, Animals, Plants, Minerals', or what would then have been regarded as natural, rather than moral, philosophy.<sup>82</sup> The bulk of Richardson's *Theory of Painting* is, moreover, composed of chapters on the parts of the art, on invention, colour, handling, and so on, and is primarily focused on the practicalities of designing and making a painting.<sup>83</sup>

Shaftesbury, by contrast, seems to have been planning to follow Fréart in covering all five parts of the art within just one chapter.<sup>84</sup> A much greater proportion of *Second Characters* would have been taken up with considerations of how painting should carry out its moral role. While Richardson's belief that painting should be a source of knowledge about nature echoed that of the Royal Society, Shaftesbury had no time for the empiricism promoted by that body.<sup>85</sup> In the *Judgment of Hercules* he implies that the highest form of painting should take moral philosophy, not natural philosophy, as its model, and implies that the knowledge conveyed by painting is valuable not because it informs us about the world for its own sake but because it helps us to be better human beings.<sup>86</sup> Unlike Richardson, Shaftesbury did not believe that portraiture could play that role as readily as history painting, and, he consequently saw the dominance of British art by portraiture as a source of regret.<sup>87</sup> For Shaftesbury portraiture was 'not so much as a liberal Art nor to be so esteem'd; as requiring no liberal Knowledge, Genius, Education, Converse, Manners, Moral-Science, Mathematicks Opticks: but merely practical, & vulgar.'<sup>88</sup>

While Richardson believed that painting would improve as a result of the efforts of increasingly skilled and theoretically aware painters, Shaftesbury believed that the moral history painting he desired would emerge as a result of political and social circumstances. He argued that the political liberties which had emerged in Britain as the consequence of the establishment of a constitutional monarchy would automatically give rise to good taste, as the disinterested individuals whom he envisaged as the proper leaders of this state would have the freedom to exercise their natural instincts for truth and beauty. As he wrote in the 'Letter Concerning Design':

When the free spirit of a nation turns itself this way, judgements are formed; critics arise; the public eye and ear improve; a right taste prevails, and in a manner forces its way. Nothing is so improving, so natural, so congenial to the liberal arts, as that reigning liberty and high spirit of a people, which from the habit of judging in the highest matters for themselves, makes them freely judge of other subjects, and enter thoroughly into the characters as well of men and manners, as of the products of works of men, in art and science.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>81</sup> Unlike Shaftesbury, but like other British writers on the visual arts, Richardson trumpeted the supremacy of British portraiture (*Theory of Painting*, p. 143).

<sup>82</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 43–160.

<sup>84</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 166.

<sup>85</sup> See Mount, *Morality, Microscopy and the Moderns...*, pp. 135–140; *idem*, *Leonardo's 'Treatise'...*, pp. 209–212.

<sup>86</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules*, [in:] *idem*, *Second Characters*, pp. 53, 35, 54.

<sup>87</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 283–284.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 257. Cf. Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis*, [in:] *idem*, *Characteristicks* (1714), vol. I, pp. 142–143.

<sup>89</sup> Shaftesbury, *A Letter Concerning Design*, [in:] *idem*, *Second Characters...*, p. 23.

This argument was underpinned by Shaftesbury's belief that everyone is equipped with an innate sense of truth, and, more significantly from an art theoretical point of view, of beauty, which is the visual form of truth.<sup>90</sup> This meant that once men were freed from political or economic shackles to attend to their instincts, a taste for beauty and truth would naturally come to the fore and the arts would improve.

Shaftesbury's belief in innate ideas was diametrically at odds with the thoroughgoing empiricism of his one-time tutor John Locke, who had argued that the mind is a *tabula rasa* untainted by any instinct until it starts to learn from sensual impressions. Throughout his writings Shaftesbury felt the need to challenge Locke's epistemology, an epistemology which was, he must have realised, rapidly becoming a matter of orthodox belief amongst his countrymen.<sup>91</sup> In his notes for *Plasticks*, for example, he argues against Locke that the presence of instinct in dogs and birds indicates that the same must apply to humans.<sup>92</sup> Richardson, on the other hand, was a straightforward follower of Locke's empiricism, as Carol Gibson-Wood has shown.<sup>93</sup> The difference is evident in their respective accounts of how painters arrive at their conceptions of the ideal. For Shaftesbury this is unproblematic, given that the painter is equipped with an innate sense of beauty which informs his selection of his models and any combinations or improvements he makes to them.<sup>94</sup> For Richardson, as for any empiricist, the issue is more difficult, and he never gives a clear account of how the painter arrives at his ideas of beauty and perfection. At one point he refers in quick succession to the painter selecting from nature and to the painter forming a model of perfection in his mind,<sup>95</sup> but he is clear neither about how the painter should know what to select nor about how his module of perfection should be formed. It was an issue that would later vex the similarly Lockean but much more intellectual Reynolds, whose struggle with the problem resulted in the rigorously empirical but completely impractical solution of the central form, in which the ideal was to be derived from the average of all individual specimens of a particular figure or type.<sup>96</sup>

In contrast to the situation in Britain, Shaftesbury argued that in France the presence of an absolute monarch surrounded by fawning courtiers was an obstacle to the emergence of good taste. As a result French taste was corrupt and addicted to small, sensual paintings.<sup>97</sup> Shaftesbury's argument that the quality of the arts will be determined by the social and political conditions that give rise to them is quite different from that advanced by French theorists, whose works tend to imply that ideal history painting is the consequence of breeding up learned and theoretically informed painters, perhaps supported in their education by an academy. While Richardson does briefly suggest that the Greeks produced great art because they were great men,<sup>98</sup> he for the most part follows French authors in believing that great art is the consequence of the talents and personal qualities of individual painters.

Although the close association Shaftesbury made between political conditions and artistic quality is well-known, the originality and significance of this idea has not, I believe, been sufficiently appreciated. The radical implications of this way of thinking for our understanding of the history of art might, I think, have been much more readily apparent had *Second Characters* been published in its entirety. We are used to hearing that Winckelmann, with his contention that the qualities of ancient Greek art reflected the qualities of ancient Greek society, invented the social history of art.<sup>99</sup> Fifty years earlier, however, Shaftesbury was making very similar arguments in his notes for *Plasticks*, in which he extended his argument that art reflects society beyond the Britain and France of his own day to the history of art as a whole. He asserts, for example, that the barbarous forms of non-European art were attributable to the barbarous cultures that produced them, and that the ceramics produced by the tyrannised Chinese were poor until they were taught better taste by the enlightened British and Dutch.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 167 ('for, all Beauty is Truth'), 189–190. Cf. Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis*, [in:] *Characteristicks* (1714), vol. I, p. 142. See also J.A. Bernstein, *Shaftesbury's Identification of the Good with the Beautiful*, "Eighteenth-century Studies", vol. 10, 1977, pp. 304–125.

<sup>91</sup> E.g. Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 188–190. See also Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–30; Mount, *Leonardo's 'Treatise'...*, p. 209.

<sup>92</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 188–190.

<sup>93</sup> Gibson-Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–186.

<sup>94</sup> See e.g. Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, p. 200.

<sup>95</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, p. 161–162.

<sup>96</sup> J. Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. R.R. Wark, New Haven–London 1975, pp. 44–45 (Discourse III, 1770).

<sup>97</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 212, 235, 269. See also Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 189–194; R. Woodfield, *The Freedom of Shaftesbury's Classicism*, "The British Journal of Aesthetics", vol. 15, 1975, pp. 260–266.

<sup>98</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, pp. 206–208.

<sup>99</sup> J.J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Dresden 1764. For a typical presentation of Winckelmann as the originator of the social history of art see M. Hatt, Ch. Klönk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, Manchester 2006, p. 22.

<sup>100</sup> Shaftesbury, *Plasticks*, pp. 206, 221.

He also foreshadows Winckelmann in arguing that the quality of ancient Greek art was attributable in part to the healthy diets, regular exercise and unabashed display of nudity in ancient Greek culture.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile, the revival of the arts in Renaissance Italy took place, according to Shaftesbury, in the republics of Venice and Florence, where the citizens had, for the first time since antiquity, the freedom to develop taste and judgment.<sup>102</sup> Had these thoughts been published we might well now be describing Shaftesbury, rather than Winckelmann, as the father of the social history of art. Richardson, by contrast, followed the older Vasarian model in describing the rises and falls of quality during the history of art without really explaining why they happened.

Another feature of Shaftesbury's thought which sets him apart from his French forbears was his disappointment that the greatest modern art had been so dominated by Christian iconography. In an extraordinary passage in his notes for *Plasticks* he ridicules depictions of God the Father, whom he describes as being shown as a broken, haggard old man bearing a carcass in his lap and a pigeon in his bosom. Christ, too, he saw as a graceless, barbaric and, I'm sorry to say, unaesthetically Jewish figure.<sup>103</sup> For Shaftesbury, ancient gods, goddesses and heroes were far more suitable as models for the artist. Richardson was also troubled by images of God the Father as a decrepit old man.<sup>104</sup> Rather than poking fun at them, however, Richardson wondered if God was an appropriate subject for depiction, on the grounds that he was beyond the imagination of any mortal being. He was, indeed, so nervous on this point that he never actually refers to God by name, instead preferring circumlocutions like the 'Supreme Being'.<sup>105</sup> Just fifty years after the iconoclasm of the Civil War, such an anxiety about religious, and specifically Catholic, imagery is understandable in two Protestant Britons who were trying to sell painting to their Protestant countrymen.<sup>106</sup> Again, however, there is a big difference between Richardson's more tactful, deferential approach and Shaftesbury's fearlessly outspoken views. These differences may be attributed in part to the fact that the former was an orthodox Anglican while Shaftesbury was a Deist, and also no doubt to the fact that one man was a working painter and the other a wealthy aristocrat.

Shaftesbury's views on religious art epitomise the uncompromising nature of both the language and arguments found in the notes for *Plasticks*. Even if he had toned them down for the final, published version, it is difficult to imagine that a completed *Second Characters* would not have been far more definitive in its arguments and far more vivid in its language than Richardson's *Theory of Painting*. Richardson's book was written in a spirit of compromise, as an attempt to find some middle ground between the demands of the classical theory he had inherited from the continent and the state of affairs in Britain – a spirit of compromise best exemplified by his attempt to elevate the portraiture which was so dominant in Britain to a status close to that of history painting. While Richardson believed that painting did have a moral purpose, his de Pilesian formalism opened the door to a far wider range of artistic appreciation than that advocated by Shaftesbury, a range of appreciation that made it possible to enjoy the Dutch, Flemish and Venetian art which were popular among British collectors in addition to the greatest art of Florence and Rome. For Richardson it was important to continue to get on with the British art lovers who were commissioning portraits and buying Dutch and Flemish pictures. Shaftesbury, on the other hand, had no need to compromise and no interest in doing so, and consequently advanced his vision of a moral and ideal history painting, large in scale, free in brushwork and derived from Raphael and the more austere Bolognese painters as the only way in which the British would be able to produce a satisfactory artistic equivalent to their enlightened political state.

If Shaftesbury's *Second Characters* had been published in 1715 how, then, might it have changed the landscape of thinking about art in Britain? We are now in the realm of pure speculation, but I think we can suggest two alternative stories, in one of which that landscape was profoundly transformed, in the other of which *Second Characters* had little effect.

In the first story *Second Characters* was published in 1715, immediately attracting an excited reaction among both virtuosi and painters, to such an extent that when Richardson's *Theory of Painting* appeared in print two months later little notice was taken of it. The reaction of the virtuosi was especially significant. It

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 199, 208.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 211.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 202–203

<sup>104</sup> Richardson, *Theory of Painting*, p. 54.

<sup>105</sup> E.g., *ibidem*.

<sup>106</sup> Shaftesbury especially associated the painting of unacceptably cruel and horrible things like bloody martyrdoms with 'Popish' taste, see *Plasticks*, pp. 286–268.

was Shaftesbury's good fortune that the book's publication coincided exactly with the beginning of the long political ascendancy of the Whigs. Just as the Whigs took up and promoted the Palladian style in architecture, so Whig patrons like the Earl of Burlington seized on *Second Characters* as a blueprint for an artistic style which would reflect their own political values. And Shaftesbury was, as everyone knew, himself a one-time Whig politician and the grandson of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, the virtual founder of the party. The Whigs were helped in this enterprise by the clarity with which Shaftesbury advanced his theories and his plentiful examples of both good and bad paintings. Using their wealth and political power, the Whigs began by focusing their patronage mainly on history painters from abroad, a move made necessary by the lack of home-grown history painters. However, seeing the massive patronage that attached itself to the one native history painter of any quality, James Thornhill, other British artists, amongst them William Hogarth, were inspired to take up history painting. The transformation of the first St Martin Lane's Academy into a new Royal Academy in 1730 reflected and cemented this development. The style promoted and taught by this new Academy was precisely the severe, moral style advocated by Shaftesbury. Subsequent British writers on art argued for similar values, thus giving rise to a distinctive British school of art theory which has recently come to be known as civic humanist theory. Prominent among these authors were connoisseurs from upper class backgrounds, who continued to dominate the discussion of art. Both connoisseurs and painters especially admired the unequivocally anti-French stance adopted by Shaftesbury, and the severe style of history painting he advocated acquired powerful patriotic overtones. By the time Reynolds came to deliver his discourses at the Academy he had little to do but to re-present the arguments already made by Shaftesbury – the battle for a British school of history painting had already been won.

That is one story. In a second story, Shaftesbury's *Second Characters* appeared at much the same time as Richardson's *Theory of Painting* and both books received a polite level of interest. Shaftesbury's book was praised for its elegant style and the clarity of its arguments and it was immediately judged to be superior to Richardson's on both counts. Some of the words it introduced into the language – rhyparography, hyperbole, ellipsis – became for a time quite fashionable among the virtuosi. Several young painters, reading *Second Characters*, were inspired to paint in the severe moral style advocated by the book. The life stories of these young painters does not, however, make pleasant reading. The patronage which they imagined would stem from Shaftesbury's ideas did not appear, and poverty and disillusionment resulted. British painters who wanted to make a living continued to paint portraits, while upper class art lovers who had been inspired by *Second Characters* responded by buying Italian paintings from abroad rather than patronising native painters. Those same upper class art lovers also continued to buy Dutch paintings and even French rococo works, and they reacted to the discrepancies between these tastes and the doctrines advanced by Shaftesbury and other theorists by retreating behind a polite wall of silence. The discussion of painting was, for good or ill, left to the painters, who began to realise that the pragmatic, compromising theory offered by Richardson offered a more workable model than the idealistic and outspoken version offered by Shaftesbury. And so it was that when Joshua Reynolds comes to deliver his discourses to the new Royal Academy in 1769 he followed in Richardson's footsteps in attempting to deliver a compromise between continental art theory and British taste and modes of thought. In particular, Reynolds, like Richardson, based his theory on the Lockean empiricism which had become so integral to British ways of thinking and which Shaftesbury had so violently shunned.<sup>107</sup> In the wake of Reynolds's domination of British art theory Shaftesbury's *Second Characters* came to be seen as an eccentric curiosity, a work more similar in its significance to Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* than to the mainstream works of Richardson or Reynolds. Shaftesbury's *Second Characters* had turned out to be one of those books of art theory which, as Denis Mahon once put it, help the polite to speak more elegantly about art without actually affecting their behaviour.<sup>108</sup>

Which version do you believe? I'm afraid my money would be on the latter. I suspect that even if Shaftesbury had completed his book the history of classical art theory in Britain would still have been a long, drawn-out failure. But even if the effects of Shaftesbury's *Second Characters* on the future of British art is ultimately unknowable, the one thing we can say with certainty is that the book, if finished, would have greatly enriched the literature of art written in English.

<sup>107</sup> As, in real life, Reynolds indeed did; see A. Asfour, P. Williamson, *On Reynolds's Use of De Piles, Locke, and Hume in his Essays on Rubens and Gainsborough*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", vol. 60, 1997, pp. 222–225; Mount, *Leonardo's 'Treatise'...*, pp. 216–217.

<sup>108</sup> D. Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*, London 1947, pp. 5–6.

SHAFTESBURY *VERSUS* RICHARDSON:  
ĆWICZENIE KONTRFAKTYCZNE

## Streszczenie

Autor rozważa, co mogłoby się stać, gdyby trzeci hrabia Shaftesbury żył na tyle długo, aby ujrzeć publikację swojej planowanej książki z teorii sztuki, *Second Characters*. Sugeruje, że *Second Characters* zakwestionowałyby i być może zastąpiłyby *Theory of Painting* (Teorię malarstwa) Jonathana Richardsons starszego (1715) jako pierwszy znaczący i oryginalny brytyjski wkład w teorię sztuki. Dużą część swych rozważań autor poświęca na porównanie *Theory of Painting* Richardsons i tekstu *Plasticks* z *Second Characters*, do którego zachowały się notatki Shaftesbury'ego. Porównanie to pozwoliło na wysunięcie tezy, że teoria malarstwa, którą Shaftesbury zaproponowałby swoim rodakom, różniłaby się pod pewnymi względami od tej przedstawionej przez Richardsons. Shaftesbury, zwracając się przede wszystkim do arystokratycznych mecenasów, a nie do malarzy, miał wizję przyszłości sztuki brytyjskiej bardziej wzniosłą, ale równocześnie bardziej zawężoną niż ta zaproponowana przez Richardsons. Dla Shaftesbury'ego najważniejsza była moralna tematyka w malarstwie, najbardziej cenił tematy historyczne, które najlepiej było pokazywać w dużej skali i z zastosowaniem surowego stylu. Richardsons natomiast był bardziej tolerancyjny wobec brytyjskiego upodobania do portretów oraz zmysłowego malarstwa i proponował teorię sztuki, która była po części formalistyczna. Autor podkreślił również znaczenie zrównania przez Shaftesbury'ego zdrowia społecznego i politycznego społeczeństwa z jakością jego sztuki oraz wysunął przypuszczenie, że gdyby *Second Characters* zostały opublikowane w czasie, gdy powstały, moglibyśmy teraz uznać Shaftesbury'ego, a nie Winckelmanna za ojca społecznej historii sztuki. Artykuł kończy się założeniem dwóch możliwych skutków opublikowania *Second Characters* na początku XVIII w. – jednym mógł być silny wpływ na brytyjską sztukę i brytyjski stosunek do sztuki, drugim zaś mogłaby być marginalizacja tego tekstu z powodu bezkompromisowego podejścia Shaftesbury'ego do ówczesnych gustów brytyjskich.

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## SHAFTESBURY V. RICHARDSON: A COUNTERFACTUAL EXERCISE

## Summary

This article considers what might have happened had the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury lived long enough to see his planned book of art theory, *Second Characters*, into publication. It suggests that *Second Characters* would have challenged, and perhaps supplanted, Jonathan Richardson the Elder's *Theory of Painting* (1715) as the first substantial and original British contribution to the theory of art. Much of the article consists of a comparison between Richardson's *Theory of Painting* and the 'Plasticks' section of *Second Characters*, for which Shaftesbury's notes survive. This comparison suggests that the theory of painting which Shaftesbury would have offered to his compatriots would have differed from that offered by Richardson in certain important respects. Primarily addressing his text to his fellow aristocratic patrons rather than to painters, Shaftesbury's vision for the future of British art was both more high-minded and more narrow than that offered by Richardson. For Shaftesbury the moral subject matter of painting was all-important, and the artistic traits he most admired, including historical subjects, grandeur of scale and austerity of style, were those he saw as best placed to transmit that moral subject matter. Richardson, by contrast, was for more tolerant of the extant British taste for portraits and more sensual styles and offered a theory of art which was in part formalist. The article also stresses the importance of the equation Shaftesbury made between the social and political health of a society and the quality of its art, and suggests that had *Second Characters* been published at the time when it was written we might now consider Shaftesbury, rather than Winckelmann, as the father of the social history of art. The article ends by considering two possible outcomes had *Second Characters* been published in the early eighteenth century, in one of which it had a profound impact on British art and British attitudes to art, and in the other of which Shaftesbury's refusal to compromise with current British tastes condemned his text to no more than a marginal status.

**Keywords:** art theory; social history of art; aesthetic theory; 18th Century British aesthetics; taste; beginnings of art history; neoclassicism;