

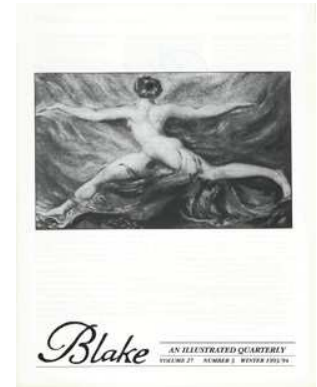
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R E V I E W

Peter Canon-Brookes, ed., *The Painted Word:
British History Painting, 1750-1830*

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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all-important cultural text, the more so since it acknowledges that in the eyes of current academic feminists, this style failed to achieve the revolution in female discourse that Wollstonecraft attempted.

Kelly concludes with an interesting analysis of Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, which he reads as an attempt to reclaim a "feminized" French Revolution (170), a controversial reading of her *Letters* from Scandinavia as the self-destructive representation of the female philosopher as merely a woman (193), and a familiar reading of *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, which usefully focuses on the trial scene as staging the thematic concerns of the book as a whole.

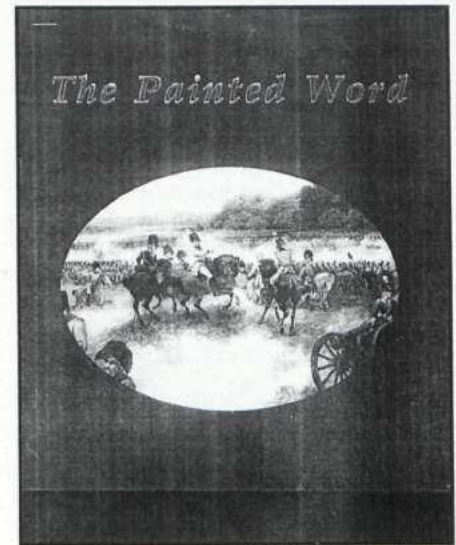
Readers will continue to turn to Eleanor Flexner, Emily Sunstein, and especially Claire Tomalin for more engaging accounts of Wollstonecraft's personality and the development of her thought, and to Mary Poovey, Cora Kaplan, and the contributors to the second Norton Critical Edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for more perceptive accounts of the ambivalences and contradictions in Wollstonecraft's life, thought, and writings. But Gary Kelly's *Revolutionary Feminism* provides the best account we have of how Wollstonecraft's literary style and rhetorical engagement with specific texts worked to construct a "revolution in discourse" that verbally embodied the rights of women to participate equally in the bourgeois cultural revolution of the romantic period.

The Painted Word: British History Painting, 1750-1830. Ed. Peter Canon-Brookes. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester NY: The Boydell Press, 1991. 139 pp. 156 plates. \$70.00.

Reviewed by
G. E. Bentley, Jr.

This impressive little book on *The Painted Word* has nothing to do with William Blake (who is mentioned only in an aside to Stothard's "Pilgrimage to Canterbury" engraving). However, it has everything to do with his context, for history painting was what Blake practiced (in water colors) all his life, giving visible form to heroic and dramatic events from literature and history, including religion and myth. Here is set out verbally and, more important, visually, a record of what Blake and his leading contemporaries from Barry and Fuseli to Reynolds and West thought was the noblest form of visual art, the equivalent of the epic in poetry and of the opera and symphony in music. We can scarcely appreciate the consistent sense in Blake's art without understanding what he and his contemporaries meant by history painting, and here the context as it developed in his time is set out more completely than I have found elsewhere.¹

But there is a paradox here, for most of those who devoted their lives to history painting, such as Barry and Blake and Haydon, starved for their pains, and many of the painters who spoke most eloquently of the dignity of history painting, such as Reynolds and Romney, made their handsome livings by painting portraits. The noblest history paintings were heroic in size, and the only walls appropriate for such



heroism were in great houses and churches and munificent institutions, such as the Royal Society of Arts which commissioned (but did not pay) James Barry to cover the walls of its Great Room with his series of paintings illustrating "The Progress of Human Culture." However, the noblemen and bishops and magnates with suitable walls to decorate preferred pictures of their dogs and horses and wives, rather than Culture or Il Penseroso or The Prodigal Son. Of the devotees of history painting, only the Americans Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley were commercially successful; for West, success was guaranteed by the personal patronage of George III, and for both West and Copley it was prints rather than paintings which established their popularity and secured their incomes in old age.

One might like to think our own time more enlightened about painting than Blake's, for family portraits and race horses no longer dominate the walls of the best galleries and homes. However, fashionable ladies and noble sportsmen have not been displaced in public favor by goddesses and prophets, for this exhibition of "The Painted Word" was the last to be held at the distinguished Heim Gallery, which has now gone out of business. The noble and the heroic apparently have no more appeal to our age than to Blake's.

The Painted Word consists of:

- 1 Michael Bellamy, Foreword 5
- 2 Martin Butlin, Introduction 7-8
- 3 Martin Postle, "Narrative Painting: Hogarth to Reynolds" 9-13
- 4 Peter Canon-Brookes, "From the 'Death of General Wolfe' to the 'Death of Lord Nelson': Benjamin West and the Epic Composition" 15-22
- 5 David Alexander, "Print Makers and Print Sellers in England, 1770-1830" 23-29
- 6 David Alexander, "Patriotism and Contemporary History, 1770-1830" 31-35
- 7 Geoffrey Ashton, "The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery: Before and After" 37-43
- 8 Catalogue by Martin Butlin, Michael Bellamy, Martin Postle, and Peter Canon-Brookes 45-132
- 9 Bibliography 133-35
- 10 Index of Artists, Engravers and Publishers 137-39
- 11 Reproductions of each of the 142 works exhibited, including color plates of each of the paintings

The reproductions are, of course, the most important part of the work. Many are small (c. 3.8 x 6.4 cm.), but the most important ones, such as West's "Death of General Wolfe" (1776) and Copley's "Death of Major Peirson" (1796) and De Louthembourg's "Battle of Maida" (1807) occupy the whole page (21.6 x 22.9 cm.) or more, though of course still a great reduction from the original dimensions (De Louthembourg's painting is 152 x 215 cm.). Considering that what was available for exhibition was merely what the Heim Gallery could offer for sale, the range, quality, and importance of what was shown is, to me, astonishing. Prints such as Wilson's "Destruction of the Children of Niobe" (1761) and Reynolds's "Nativity" (1785) and West's "Death of Lord Nelson" (1811) may be acquired readily enough by the affluent and the assiduous, but the Heim Gallery also exhibited the paintings behind some of the these famous engravings. Doubtless the most famous and influential attempts to commercialize history painting were John Boydell's Shakspeare Gallery (1786 ff.), Thomas

Macklin's Poet's Gallery (1789 ff. — including the Bible), and Robert Bowyer's Historic Gallery (1793 ff.), combining fashionable annual exhibitions and multi-volume folio publications.² Indeed, Boydell was "the most important patron of the arts in England in the late eighteenth century" (39). The paintings shown at their annual exhibitions to which fashionable London flocked are, of course, unique, but a surprising number were in the Heim Gallery exhibition:

- 1 James Northcote, "A Monument Belonging to the Capulets, Romeo and Paris dead; Juliet and Friar Lawrence" (*Romeo and Juliet*) for Boydell's Shakspeare (#66);
- 2 Francis Wheatley, "Ferdinand and Miranda Playing at Chess" (*The Tempest*, V, 1) (1790) for Boydell (#92);
- 3 Richard Westall, "Portia and Bassanio" (*The Merchant of Venice*) (1795) for Boydell (#108);
- 4 John Opie, "The Death of Archbishop Sharpe" (1797) for Bowyer (#103);
- 5 Northcote, "The Murder of the Princes in the Tower" signed "James Northcote pinxt 1805" "Commissioned by Samuel Whitbread" (the previous version [1786] inspired Boydell's Shakspeare Gallery) (#49);
- 6 James Durno, "Shallow, Silence, Falstaff, Bardolph . . ." (*II Henry IV*, III, ii), "reduced version" of the painting for Boydell (#117);
- 7 James Durno, "Falstaff (as the Old Woman of Brentford) and others" (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV, ii), "reduced version" of the painting for Boydell (#118).

Virtually all serious English painters of the time made history paintings, and "it is important . . . to dispel the popular myth . . . that narrative painting was the beleaguered activity of a handful of individuals"; "indeed this is one of the aims of the present exhibition" (11). English "narrative painting"³ came of age in the 1760s, when

native artists such as John Hamilton Mortimer, Robert Edge Pine, Nathaniel Dance, and Joseph Wright (of Derby), carved out their careers, and foreigners, notably Giovanni Battista Cipriani, Angelica Kauffmann and Johann Zoffany, brought a new sophistication to figurative art, in England. (10)

But it was the American Benjamin West who transformed the genre of history painting in the public consciousness:

the fundamental changes in the relationship between painters and their public, the rise of exhibitions charging for entry (directly or indirectly), the vast increase in the dissemination of reproductive prints . . . , and the evolution of modern marketing techniques, all owe their greatest impetus to [West's] *The Death of General Wolfe* [1776] and the inspiration provided by its example. (18)

The Painted Word is both an important document and a valuable study of history painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As such it has a great deal to offer any serious student of William Blake.

¹ Michael Bellamy writes

Considering the great amount of ink which was spilled over the subject of History painting in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is amazing how little has been written about it since . . . no attempt at an overall survey of what exactly was meant by the frequently incanted phrase 'History Painting', covering both the paintings and the engravings made from them, appears to have been undertaken. (5)

² (1) *The Dramatic Works of Shakspeare*, Revised by George Steevens, 9 folio volumes with 99 plates (c. 43 x 29 cm.) plus two elephant-folio volumes (c. 68 x 51 cm.) with 93 different plates (London: John and Josiah Boydell, 1791-1805); (2) *The Old [and The New] Testament*, Embellished with Engravings, from Pictures and Designs by the Most Eminent English Artists, 6 folio vols. with 70 engravings (c. 28.5 x 37.0 cm.) -34s 113 vignettes (London: Thomas Macklin, ?1791-1800) plus *The Apocrypha* . . . , 1 vol. with 6 full-page plates and 23 extraordinary, large vignettes by De Louthembourg (London: Cadell & Davies, 1815-16); (3) David Hume, *The History of England*, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688, 5 folio vols. in 9 with 195 plates (London: Robert Bowyer, 1793-1806).

³ The use of "narrative painting" as a synonym for history painting seems to me unfortunate, for it includes works such as Hogarth's very popular suites of designs for "The Rake's Progress" and "Marriage à la Mode," which are certainly "narrative paintings" and equally certainly not history paintings.