CHARACTER OF SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

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THE authority of Sir Joshua Reynolds, both from his example and instructions, has had, and still continues to have, a considerable influence on the state of art in this country. That influence has been on the whole unquestionably beneficial in itself, as well as highly creditable to the rare talents and elegant mind of Sir Joshua; for it has raised the art of painting from the lowest state of degradation, of dry, meagre, lifeless inanity, to something at least respectable, and bearing an affinity to the rough strength and bold spirit of the national character. Whether the same implicit deference to his authority, which has helped to advance the art thus far, may not, among other causes, limit and retard its future progress? Whether there are not certain, original errors, both in his principles and practice, which, the farther, they are proceeded in, the farther they will lead us from the truth? Whether there is not a systematic bias from the right line by which alone we can arrive at the goal of the highest perfection? —are questions well worth considering. From the great and substantial merits of the late president, we have as little the inclination as the power to detract. But we certainly think that they have been sometimes over-rated from the partiality of friends and from the influence of fashion. However necessary and useful the ebullitions of public or private enthusiasm may be to counteract the common prejudices against new claims to reputation, and to lift rising genius to its just rank, there is a time when, having accomplished its end, our zeal may be suffered, to subside into discretion, and when it becomes as proper to restrain our admiration as it was before to give a loose to it. It is only by having undergone this double ordeal that reputation can ever be established on a solid basis—that popularity becomes fame.

We shall begin with his merits as an artist. There is one error which we wish to correct at setting out, because we think it important. There is not a greater or more unaccountable mistake than the supposition that Sir Joshua Reynolds owed his success or excellence in his profession, to his having been the first who introduced into this country more general principles of the art, and who raised portrait to the dignity of history from the low drudgery of copying the peculiarities, meannesses, and details of individual nature, which was all that had been attempted by his immediate predecessors. This is so far from being true, that the very reverse is the fact. If Sir Joshua did not give these details and peculiarities so much as might be wished, those who went before him did not give them at all. Those pretended general principles of the art, which, it is said, ‘alone give value and dignity to it,’ had been pushed to their extremest absurdity before his time; and it was in getting rid of the mechanical systematic monotony and middle forms, by the help of which Lely, Kneller, Hudson, the French painters, and others, carried on their manufactories of history and face painting, and in returning (as far as he did return) to the truth and force of individual nature, that the secret both of his fame and fortune lay. The pedantic, servile race of artists, whom Reynolds superseded, had carried the abstract principle of improving on nature to such a degree of refinement, that they left it out altogether; and confounded all the varieties and irregularities of form, feature, character, expression or attitude in the same artificial mould of fancied grace and fashionable insipidity. The portraits of Kneller, for example, seem all to have been turned in a machine; the eye-brows are arched as if by a compass;

the mouth curled, and the chin dimpled, the head turned on one side, and the hands placed in the same affected position. He thought that beauty and perfection were one and he very consistently reduced this principle to practice. The portraits of this mannerist, therefore, are as like one another as the dresses which were then in fashion; and have the same 'dignity and value' as the full-bottomed wigs which graced their originals. The superiority of Reynolds consisted in his being varied and natural, instead of being artificial and uniform. The spirit, grace, or dignity which he added to his portraits, he borrowed from nature, and not from the ambiguous quackery of rules. His feeling of truth and nature was too strong to permit him to adopt the unmeaning style of Kneller and Hudson; but his logical acuteness was not such as to enable him to detect the verbal fallacies and speculative absurdities which he had learned from Richardson and Coypel; and, from some defects in his own practice, he was led to confound negligence with a grandeur. But of this hereafter.—

Sir Joshua Reynolds owed his vast superiority over his contemporaries to incessant practice, and habitual attention to nature, to quick organic sensibility, to considerable power of observation, and still greater taste in perceiving and availing himself of those excellences of others which lay within his own walk of art. We can by no means look upon Sir Joshua as having a claim to the first rank of genius; his own account of genius is a sufficient proof of this, for every man, in reasoning on the faculties of human nature, describes the process of his own mind. He would hardly have been a great painter if other greater painters had not lived before him. He would not have given a first impulse to the art, nor did he advance any part of it beyond the point where he found it. He did not present any new view of nature, nor is he to be placed in the same class with those who did. Even in colour, his pallet was spread for him by the old Masters, and his, eye imbibed its full perception of depth and harmony of tone, from the Dutch and Venetian schools, rather than from nature. His early pictures are poor and flimsy. He indeed learned to see the finer qualities of nature through the works of art, which he, perhaps, might never have discovered in nature itself. He became rich by the accumulation of borrowed wealth, and his genius was the offspring of taste. He combined and applied the materials of others to his own purpose, with admirable success; he was an industrious compiler, or skilful translator, not an original inventor in art. The art would remain, in all its essential elements, just where it is, if Sir Joshua had never lived. He has supplied the industry of future plagiarists with no new materials. But it has been well observed, that the value of every work of art, as well as the genius of the artist, depends, not more on the degree of excellence, than on the degree of originality displayed in it. Sir Joshua, however, was perhaps the most original imitator that ever appeared in the world; and the reason of this, in a great measure, was, that he was compelled to combine what he saw in art with what he saw in nature, which was constantly before him. The portrait-painter is, in this respect, much less liable than the historical painter to deviate into the extremes of manner and affectation; for he cannot discard nature altogether, under the excuse that she only puts him out. He must meet her, face to face; and if he is not incorrigible, he will see something there that cannot fail to be of service to him. Another circumstance which must have been favourable to Sir Joshua was, that though not the originator in point of time, he was the first Englishman who transplanted the higher excellences of his profession into his own country, and had the merit, if not of an inventor, of a reformer of the art. His mode of painting had the graces of novelty in the age and country in which he lived; and he had, therefore, all the stimulus to exertion, which arose from the enthusiastic applause of his contemporaries, and from a desire to expand and refine the taste of the public.

To an eye for colour and for effects of light, and shade, Sir Joshua united a strong perception of individual character,—a lively feeling of the quaint and grotesque in expression, and great mastery of execution. He had comparatively little knowledge of drawing, either as it regarded proportion or form.[1] The beauty of some of his female faces and figures arises almost entirely from their softness and fleshiness. His pencil wanted firmness and precision. The expression, even of his best portraits, seldom implies either lofty or impassioned intellect or delicate sensibility. He also wanted grace, if grace requires simplicity. The mere negation of stiffness and formality is not grace; for looseness and distortion are not grace. His favourite attitudes are not easy and natural, but the affectation of ease and nature. They are violent deviations from a right line. Many of the figures in his fancy-pieces are placed in postures in which they could not remain for an instant without extreme difficulty and awkwardness. We might instance the *Girl drawing with a Pencil*, and some others.[2] His portraits are his best pictures, and of these his portraits of men are the best; his pictures of children are the next in value. He had fine subjects for the former, from the masculine sense and originality of character of many of the persons whom he painted; and he had also a great advantage (as far as practice went) in painting a number of persons of every rank and description. Some of the finest and most interesting are those of Dr. Johnson, Goldsmith (which is, however, too much a mere sketch), Baretti, Dr. Burney, John Hunter, and the inimitable portrait of Bishop Newton. The elegant simplicity of character, expression, and drawing, preserved throughout the last picture, even to the attitude and mode of handling, discover the true genius of a painter. We also remember to have seen a print of Thomas Warton, than which nothing could be more characteristic or more natural. These were all Reynolds's intimate acquaintances, and it could not be said of them that they were men of 'no mark or likelihood.' Their traits had probably sunk deep into the artist's mind; he painted them as pure studies from nature, copying the real image existing before him, with all its known characteristic peculiarities; and, with as much wisdom as good-nature, sacrificing the graces on the altar of friendship. They are downright portraits, and nothing more. What if he had painted them on the theory of middle forms, or pounded their features together in the same metaphysical mortar? Mr. Westall might just as well have painted them. They would have been of no more value than his own pictures of Mr. Tomkins, the penman, or Mrs. Robinson, who is painted with a hat and feather, or Mrs. Billington, who is painted as St. Cecilia, or than the Prince of Wales and Duke of York, or the portraits of

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[1] This distinction has not been sufficiently attended to. Mr. West, for example, has considerable knowledge of drawing, as it relates to proportion, to the anatomical measurements of the human body. He has not the least conception of elegance or grandeur of form. The one is matter of mechanical knowledge, the other of taste and feeling. Rubens was deficient in the anatomical measurements, as well as in the marking of the muscles: but he had as fine an eye as possible for what may be called the picturesque in form; both in the composition of his figures and in the particular parts. In all that relates to the expression of motion, that is, to ease, freedom, and elasticity of form, he was unrivalled. He was as superior to Mr. West in his power of drawing, as in his power of colouring.--Correggio's proportions are said to have been often incorrect: but his feeling of beauty, and grace of outline, was of the most exquisite kind.

[2] Our references are generally made to pictures in the late exhibition of Sir Joshua's works in the British Gallery.

Sir George and Lady Beaumont. Would the artist in this case have conferred the same benefit on the public, or have added as much to the stock of our ideas, as by giving us facsimiles of the most interesting characters of the time, with whom we seem, from his representations of them, to be almost as well acquainted as if we had known them, and to remember their persons, as well as their writings? Yet we would rather have seen Johnson, or Goldsmith, or Burke, than their portraits. This shows that the effect of the pictures would not have been the worse, if they had been the more finished and more detailed: for there is nothing so true, either, to the details or to the general effect, as nature. The only celebrated person of this period whom we have seen is Mr. Sheridan, whose face, we have no hesitation in saying, contains a great deal more, and is better worth seeing, than Sir Joshua's picture of him.

In his portraits of women, on the contrary (with very few exceptions), Sir Joshua appears to have consulted either the vanity of his employers or his own fanciful theory. They have not the look of individual nature, nor have they, to compensate the want of this, either peculiar elegance of form, refinement of expression; delicacy of complexion, or gracefulness of manner. Vandyke's attitudes have been complained of as stiff and confined. But there is a medium between primness and hoydening. Reynolds, to avoid the former defect, has fallen into the contrary extreme of negligence and contortion. His female figures which aim at gentility, are twisted into that serpentine line, the idea of which he ridiculed so much in Hogarth. Indeed, Sir Joshua, in his Discourses (see his account of Correggio), speaks of grace as if it were nearly allied to affectation. Grace signifies that which is pleasing and natural in the posture and motions of the human form, as Beauty is more properly applied to the form itself. That which is stiff, inanimate, and without motion, cannot, therefore, be graceful; but, to suppose that a figure, to be graceful, need only be put into some languishing or extravagant posture, is to mistake flutter and affectation for ease and elegance. Sir Joshua seems more than once (both theoretically and practically) to have borrowed his idea of positive excellence from a negation of the opposite defect. His tastes led him to reject the faults which he had observed in others; but he had not always power to realise his own idea of perfection, or to ascertain precisely in what it consisted. His colouring also wanted that purity, delicacy, and transparent smoothness which gives such an exquisite charm to Vandyke's women. Vandyke's portraits (mostly of English women) in the Louvre, have a cool, refreshing air about them, a look of simplicity and modesty even in the very tone, which forms a fine contrast to the voluptuous glow and mellow golden lustre of Titian's Italian women. There is a quality of flesh-colour in Vandyke, which is to be found in no other painter, neither in Titian, Rubens, nor Rembrandt; nor is it in Reynolds, for he had nothing which was not taken from those three. It exactly conveys the idea of the soft, smooth, sliding, continuous, delicately varied surface of the skin. Correggio approached nearer to it, though his principle of light and shade was totally different. The objects in Vandyke have the least possible difference of light and shade, and are presented to the eye without being reflected through any other medium. It is this extreme purity and clearness of tone, together with the elegance and precision of his particular forms[3], that places Vandyke in the first rank of portrait-painters. As Reynolds had not his defects, he had not his excellences. We accidentally saw the late

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[3] Mengs speaks feelingly of ‘the little varieties of form in the details of the portraits of Vandyke.’

Lady Mount-Joy at the exhibition of Sir Joshua's works in Pall-mall: nor could we help contrasting the dazzling clearness of complexion, the delicacy and distinctness of the form of the features, with the half made-up and faded beauties which hung on the walls, and which comparatively resembled paste figures, smeared over with paint. We doubt whether the same effect would have been produced in a fine collection of Vandyke's. In the gallery of Blenheim, there is a family picture of the Duchess of Buckingham with her children, which is a pure mirror of fashion. The picture produces the same sort of respect and silence as if the spectator had been introduced into a family circle of the highest rank, at a period when rank was a greater distinction than it is at present. The delicate attention and mild solicitude of the mother are admirable, but two of the children surpass description. The one is a young girl of nine or ten, who looks as if 'the winds of heaven had not been permitted to visit her face too roughly'; she stands before her mother in all the pride of childish self-importance, and studied display of artificial prettiness, with a consciousness that the least departure from strict propriety or decorum will be instantly detected; the other is a little round-faced chubby boy, who stands quite at his ease behind his mother's chair, with a fine rosy glow of health in his cheeks, through which the blood is seen circulating. It was like seeing the objects reflected in a glass. The picture of the late Duke and Duchess of Marlborough and their children, in the same room, painted by Sir Joshua, appears coarse and tawdry when compared with 'the soft precision of the clear Vandyke.'[4]

Sir Joshua's children are among his *chef d'oeuvres*. The faces of children have in general that want of precision of outline, that prominence of relief, and strong contrast of colour, which were peculiarly adapted to his style of painting. The arch simplicity of expression, and the grotesque character which he has given to the heads of his children, were, however, borrowed from Correggio. Sir Joshua has only repeated the same idea ad infinitum, and has, besides, caricatured it. It has been said that his children were unrivalled. Titian's, Raphael's, and Correggio's were much superior. Those of Rubens and Poussin were at least equal. If any one should hesitate as to the last painter in particular, we would refer them to the picture (at Lord Grosvenor's) of the children paying adoration to the infant Christ, or to the children drinking in the picture of Moses striking the rock. Our making these comparisons or giving these preferences is not, we conceive, any disparagement to Sir Joshua. Did we not think highly of him, we might well blush to make them. His Puck and the single figure of the Infant Hercules are his best. The colour and execution are most masterly in both, and the character is no less admirably preserved. Many of those to which his friends have suggested historical titles are mere common portraits or casual studies. Thus we cannot agree with Mr. Sotheby in his description of the infant Jupiter and the infant Samuel. The one is a sturdy young gentleman sitting in a doubtful posture without its swaddling-clothes, and the other an innocent little child, saying its prayers at the bed's feet. They have nothing to do with Jupiter or Samuel, the heathen god or the Hebrew prophet.[5] The same objection will apply to many of his fancy-pieces and historical compositions. There is often no connection between the picture and the subject but the name. Sir Joshua himself (as it appears from his biographers) had no idea of a subject in painting them, till some ignorant and officious admirer undertook to supply the deficiency. What can be more trifling than giving the portrait of Kitty Fisher the mock-heroic title of Cleopatra? Even the celebrated Iphigenia (beautiful as she is, and prodigal of her charms) does not answer to the idea of the story. In drawing the naked figure, Sir Joshua's want of truth and firmness of outline became more apparent; and his mode of laying on his colours, which, in the face and extremities, was relieved and broken by the abrupt inequalities of surface and variety of tints in each part, produced a degree of heaviness and opacity in the larger masses of flesh-colour which can indeed only be avoided by extreme delicacy, or extreme lightness of execution.

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[4] The large picture of the Pembroke family at Wilton is a finer commentary on the age of chivalry than Mr. Burke's Reflections.

[5] Where boundless genius brooding o'er the whole,
Stamps e'en on babes sublimity of soul,
Whether, while terror crowns Jove's infant brow,
Before the god-head awed Olympus bow:
Or while from heav'n celestial grace descends,

Shall we speak the truth at once? In our opinion, Sir Joshua did not possess either that high imagination, or those strong feelings, without which no painter can become a poet in his art. His larger historical compositions have been generally allowed to be most liable to objection, considered in a critical point of view. We shall not attempt to judge them by scientific or technical rules, but make one or two observations on the character and feeling displayed in them. The highest subject which Sir Joshua has attempted was the Count Ugolino, and it was, as might be expected from the circumstances, a total failure. He had, it seems, painted a study of an old beggar man’s head; and some person, who must have known as little of painting as of poetry, persuaded the unsuspecting artist, that it was the exact expression of Dante's Count Ugolino, one of the most grand, terrific, and appalling characters in modern fiction. Reynolds, who knew nothing of the matter but what he was told, took his good fortune for granted, and only extended his canvass to admit the rest of the figures, who look very much like apprentices hired to sit for the occasion from some neighbouring workshop. There is one pleasing and natural figure of a little boy kneeling at his father's feet, but it has no relation to the supposed story. The attitude and expression of Count Ugolino himself are what the artist intended them to be till they were pampered into something else by the officious vanity of friends—those of a common mendicant at the corner of a street, waiting patiently for some charitable donation. There is all the difference between what the picture is and what it ought to be, that there is between Crabbe and Dante. The imagination of the painter took refuge in a parish work-house, instead of ascending the steps of the Tower of Famine. The hero of Dante is a lofty, high-minded, and unprincipled Italian nobleman, who had betrayed his country to the enemy, and who, as a punishment for his crime, is shut up with his four sons in the dungeon of the citadel, where he shortly finds the doors barred against him, and food withheld. He in vain watches with eager feverish eye the opening of the door at the accustomed hour, and his looks turn to stone; his children one by one drop down dead at his feet; he is seized with blindness, and, in the agony of his despair, he gropes on his knees after them,

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Meek on his knees the infant Samuel bends,
Lifts his clasp'd hands, and as he glows in prayer,
Fixes in awful trance his eye on air.

Mr. Sotheby's poetical epistle to Sir G. Beaumont.

——'Calling each by name
For three days after they were dead.'

Even in the other world he is represented with the same fierce, dauntless, unrelenting character, 'gnawing the skull of his adversary, his fell repast.' The subject of the Laocoon is scarcely equal to that described by Dante. The horror there is physical and momentary; in the other, the imagination fills up the long, obscure, dreary void of despair, and joins its unutterable pangs to the loud cries of nature. What is there in the picture to convey the ghastly horrors of the scene, or the mighty energy of soul with which they are borne?[6]

Nothing! Yet Dr. Warton, who has related this story so well; Burke, who wrote that fine description of the effects of famine; Goldsmith, and all his other friends, were satisfied with his success. Why then should not Sir Joshua be so too?—Because he was bound to understand the language which he used, as well as that which was given him to translate.

The Cardinal Beaufort is a fine display of rich mellow colouring; and there is something gentlemanly and Shakspearian in the King and the attendant Nobleman. At the same time, we think the expression of the Cardinal himself is too much one of physical horror, a canine gnashing of the teeth, like a man strangled. This is not the best style of history. The picture of Macbeth is full of wild and grotesque images; and the apparatus of the witches contains a very elaborate and well-arranged inventory of dreadful objects. The idea of Macbeth seems to be taken from the passage in Shakspeare—'Why stands Macbeth thus amazedly?' The poet has in this taunting question of the witches laid open the inmost movements of his mind. Why has the painter turned his face from us? *Garrick between tragedy and Comedy* is, to say the best, a very indifferent performance. He appears to be 'grinning for a wager.' We cannot conceive how any two ladies should contend for such a prize, nor how he should be divided between them. The muse of comedy is as childish and insipid as the muse of tragedy is cold and repulsive. The whole is mere affectation without an idea. Mrs. Siddons, as the tragic Muse, is an improvement on the same false style. It is not Mrs. Siddons, nor is it the tragic muse, but something between both, and neither. We would ask those who pretend to admire this composition, whether they think it would convey to anyone who had never seen the original, the least idea of the power of that wonderful actress in anyone of her characters, and as it relates to the expression of countenance alone? That it gives an idea of any thing finer, is what we cannot readily make up our minds to. We ought perhaps in fairness to close these remarks with a confession of our weakness. There was one picture which affected us more than all the rest, because it seemed to convey the true feeling of the story, and that was the picture of the Children in the Wood.

To return once more to Sir Joshua's general character as a painter. He has been compared to Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Vandyke, Rembrandt, and Correggio, and said to unite all their excellences. It will be well to qualify this praise. He had little congeniality of mind, except with the two last, more particularly Rembrandt. Of Raphael, it is needless to say any thing. He had very little of Titian’s manner, except perhaps a greater breadth and uniform richness of colour than he would have acquired from Rembrandt. He had none of the dignity or animation of Titian's portraits. It is not speaking too highly of the portraits of Titian to say, that they have as much expression, that is, convey as fine an idea of intellect and feeling, as the historical heads of Raphael. The difference seems to be only, that the expression in Raphael is more contemplative and philosophical, and in Titian more personal and constitutional. In the portraits of the latter, the Italian character always predominates: there is a look of piercing sagacity, of commanding intellect, of acute sensibility, which it would be in vain to expect to find in English portraits. The daring spirit and irritable passions of the age and country are as distinctly stamped upon the countenances, and can be as little mistaken as the costume which they wear. Many of them look as if it would be hardly safe to be left in the room with them, so completely do they convey the idea of superiority.[7] The portraits of Raphael, though full of profound thought and character, have more of common humanity about them. –Of Vandyke, as we have observed before, Sir Joshua had neither the excellences nor defects. Some years ago, we saw his picture of the Marquis of Granby, and Vandyke’s picture of Charles I (engraved by Strange) standing by one another, in the Louvre. The difference was striking. The portrait of the nobleman looked heavy and muddled, from the mode of heaping on the colours, and the determination to produce effect alone without attention to the subordinate details defeated itself. The portrait of the unfortunate monarch, on the contrary, displayed the utmost delicacy and facility of execution. Every part would bear the nicest inspection, and yet the whole composition, the monarch, the figure of the horse, and the attendants, had all the distinctness, lightness, and transparency of objects seen in the open air. There are some persons who will still prefer the former mode of execution as more bold and dashing. For the same reason, we might prefer the copies of the head of the Marquis of Granby, which we so often see in conspicuous situations in the vicinity of the metropolis, to the original.

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[6] Why does not the British Institution, instead of patronising pictures of the battle of Waterloo, of red coats, foolish faces, and labels of victory, offer a prize for a picture of the subject of Ugolino that shall be equal to the group of the Laocoon? *That* would be the way to do something, if there is anything to be done by such patronage.

Of Rubens our admired countryman had neither the facility nor brilliancy. He was crude and heavy both in drawing and colour, compared with the Flemish painter. Rembrandt was the painter of all others whom Sir Joshua most resembled, and from whom he borrowed most. Strong masses of light and shade, harmony and clearness of tone, the production of effect by masterly, broad, and rapid, execution were in general the forte of both these painters. Rembrandt had the priority in the order of time, and also in power of hand and eye. There are no pictures of Reynolds's which will stand against the best of Rembrandt's for striking effect and an intense feeling of nature. They are faint, slovenly, dingy, and commonplace in comparison. Rembrandt had even greater versatility of genius. He had an eye for all objects as far as he had seen them. His history and landscapes are equally fine in their way. He might be said to have created a style of his own, which he also perfected. In fact, he is one of the great founders and legislators of art. Of Correggio, Reynolds borrowed little but the air of some of his female heads, and the models of his children, which he injudiciously overloaded with the massy light and shade of Rembrandt, instead of the tender chiaroscuro of Correggio, the only colouring proper for that kind of soft, undulating, retiring line of beauty. We shall sum up our opinion by saying, that we do not find in the works of Sir Joshua either the majesty and power, the delicacy and refinement, the luxurious splendour and dazzling invention, neither the same originality of conception, nor perfect execution, which are to be found in the greatest painters. Nevertheless, his works did honour to his art and to his country.

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[7] A young artist of the name of Day, in company with Mr. Northcote and another student, taking leave of some pictures of Titian in a gallery at Naples said, with tears in his eyes,--‘ Ah! he was a fine old mouser!’ This contains more true feeling than volumes of poetical criticism. Mr. Northcote has himself given a striking description of Titian, in his elegant allegory called the Painter’s Dream, at the end of his life of Sir Joshua. It is worth remarking, that notwithstanding the delicacy and ingenuity with which he has contrived to vary the characters of all the other painters, yet when he comes to his favourite modern, he can only repeat the same images which he has before applied to Correggio and others, of wanton Cupids and attendant Graces.