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'The age of chivalry is gone.' A discussion of the sense of crisis afflicting the British aristocracy in the late eighteenth century within the military portraiture of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

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'The age of chivalry is gone.'[1] A discussion of the sense of crisis afflicting the British aristocracy in the late eighteenth century within the military portraiture of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

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During the latter half of the eighteenth century Britain was in her 'Golden Age' of empire. From the defeat of the French in the Seven Years War (1756-1763) until the British loss of the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), she claimed herself as the 'premiere' kingdom of the world. But during this period, a growing unease prevailed amongst her people. This was social, with an increasing middle-class born of capitalism, economic through her trade and dominance of the seas, and political through the rise of anti-imperialism against the prevailing absolutist monarchy.

In this essay I wish to examine how the sense of crisis in the aristocracy manifested itself in public depictions, namely the military portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and to analyse through the social history of art the pictorial rhetoric that the artist employed for these paintings. I hope to be able to show that the determinations of these

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[1] Burke, E., *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in, Idem, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, London: Henry G. Bohn (1864), pp. 515-516. The full quotation reads, 'But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.'

> aristocratic patrons in asserting 'heroism' and 'civic virtue' through their portrayals unconsciously exposed their self-conscious condition. Their endeavours in creating a modern, patrician appeal reflected the fractured social and political circumstances of the period into which they desperately attempted to adjust, and maintain power.

In 1757 the minister John Brown wrote that the nation had, 'reached a Crisis so important and alarming… (we) are rolling to the Brink of a Precipice that must destroy us.'[2] Such a bleak outlook had been widely felt by a public that witnessed a deteriorating national condition. As Brown later writes, society had reached a state of 'vain, luxurious, and selfish effeminacy.'[3] These bitter sentiments were expressed at a time when rising prices, the Jacobite invasion and the disastrous defeats early in the Seven Years War had knocked society's confidence. But over twenty years later the same grievances arose. Despite the success of the Seven Years War, which set Britain as 'the world's foremost imperial power,' the loss of America to the colonists, the majority of whom were British and Protestant, deprived the British of 'a part of themselves' and forced them to re-examine their identity and carefully consider their public image.[4] The most devastating defeat fell upon the British elite whose competence was now questionable.

It is in military portraiture that we might deconstruct what at first appears gallant and chivalric to expose the underlying concerns of a fraught and self-conscious aristocracy. The main focus of this paper will be Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Portrait of Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton* (1782; National Gallery) [Fig.

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[2] Quote of John Brown from his *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757) pp. 15-16, mentioned in Carter, P., 'An "Effeminate" or "Efficient" nation? Masculinity and Eighteenth-century Social Documentary' in *Textual Practice* 11 : 3 (1997), p. 429. Brown's book went to seven editions in the first year of its publication and its widespread popularity is a testament to the public's agreement with his views.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Colley, L, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, London: Pimlico (2003) p. 148.

1] but other portraits by Reynolds will be examined and the paper will focus mainly on the period immediately after the loss of the American war.

Sir Banastre Tarleton was born in Liverpool in 1754. He was the second son of John Tarleton, a very prominent Liverpool merchant and shipowner trading in sugar and slavery, who was also mayor of Liverpool for 1764.[5] Tarleton was educated in Liverpool, then admitted to Middle Temple in 1770 and matriculated at University College, Oxford in November 1771.[6] In 1773 Banastre's father died leaving him £5000, which he soon squandered on gambling and by 1775, with the assistance of his mother, he bought his commission in the army. With the outbreak of the American war in 1776, Tarleton volunteered for service, presumably to escape his debtors.[7]

Reynolds' portrait of Tarleton was commissioned soon after his return to London in early 1782. Tarleton had made a name for himself during the American war as 'Bloody Ban' through his infamous massacre of the defending colonists near the town of Waxhaws, South Carolina.[8] But because of his many successful skirmishes (and the loss of two of his fingers) Tarleton was lauded as a hero by the establishment, whilst being publicly scrutinised in the daily newspapers, particularly in the highly emotive and anonymous letters published in *The Morning Chronicle* of the 6th and 9th August 1782, which ridiculed his personal and military conduct.[9] Tarleton was a notorious figure, his character encapsulated by Horace Walpole's famous quote, 'Tarleton boasts of having butchered more men and lain with more women than anyone else,' to

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[5] Conway, S., 'Tarleton, Sir Banastre', *Oxford DNB*, Internet publication, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26970, accessed 05/01/10.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid. John Bonehill believes this a likely reason for Tarleton's readiness for war. Correspondence with the author 11/01/10.
[8] Bonehill, J., 'Reynolds' *Portrait* of *Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton* and the Fashion for War', *British Journal* for *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24 (2001), p.133.
[9] Ibid.

which Sheridan retorted, 'Lain with… what a weak expression; he should have said *ravished* – rapes are the relaxation of murderers!'[10] Faced with such a controversial character as Tarleton, Reynolds must have had a very difficult task in portraying him, for he was an embodiment of a public divide that extended beyond the legitimises of war with America, but as Colley states, the very 'legitimacy of the power elite.'[11] For Reynolds the commission was doubly important because Tarleton was also commissioning a portrait by Gainsborough entirely conceived to give maximum public coverage to himself in the Royal Academy's summer show that year.[12] The summer exhibitions at the Royal Academy functioned as a 'crucible of celebrity,'[13] and as John Bonehill has shown, Tarleton 'revelled in his own notoriety' and this ploy sought to actively occupy the public gaze.[14]

In Reynolds' painting, Tarleton is depicted in the green uniform of his troop, known as the Green Dragoons.[15] He coolly adjusts his leggings whilst a battle ensues in the background, the terror of which is reflected in his horse's face.[16] He is poised for action and as one contemporary critic wrote the painting depicts 'Colonel Tarleton as he is taking Horse to attempt the recovery of a lost

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[10] Ed. Postle, M., *Sir Joshua Reynolds; The Creation of Celebrity*, London; Tate (2005) p. 252.

[11] Colley, op. cit., p. 152.

[12] Bonehill, op. cit., p. 127.

[13] Hallett, M., 'Reynolds, Celebrity and the Exhibition Space' in Ed. Postle, M., *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity*, London: Tate (2005) p. 35.

[14] Ibid, p. 140. Indeed further into the essay the reader will be acquainted with the importance of the Royal Academy's summer exhibitions for publishing celebrity.

[15] Mannings, D., *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings*, London: Yale University, (2000), p. 440.

[16] Perini suggests that Tarleton is adjusting his sword which seems more fitting to the subject but as from the mezzotint after the portrait by John Raphael Smith, which was described by Reynolds as 'having everything but the colour' it is quite clear that Tarleton pulls at his leggings. See, Perini, G., 'On Reynolds' Art of Borrowing; Two More Italian Sources', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 136, no. 1090 (Jan, 1994) p. 26, and Ed. Penny, N., *Reynolds*, London: Royal Academy, Exh. Cat., (1986), pp. 300-301.

day.'[17] The pose has been much discussed and it is taken that Reynolds devised Tarleton's pose from the statue of Hermes (then believed to be Cincinnatus) which had been recently bought by Lord Shelburne and a caste of which was displayed prominently at the Royal Academy.[18] The inference here is that Reynolds aligned Tarleton with the great hero of Rome associated with leadership, modesty and civic virtue.[19] The latter quality of civic virtue is of particular importance for it conveys the 'patrician service' done by Tarleton for Britain. For the elite the 'service to the nation' was their honourable duty and the key justification of their position, which now lay at stake.[20] As Hallett sums up, 'Reynolds' portrait… provided a powerful pictorial counterweight to the narratives of colonial loss and military decline being articulated in the period.'[21] It is Reynolds' focus on Tarleton's fighting spirit against imminent defeat (by now the American war was clearly lost) that immortalises his image.

Nevertheless in this portrait the effect is of a conflatory Tarleton whose confidence and self-possessed masculinity present a fantasised image of war.[22] It is exactly this idealisation of war that the young officers who performed a mock battle as chivalrous, medieval knights sought to escape in after their disastrous defeat at Saratoga just seven months earlier, as part of the celebrations for General William Howe's *mischianza* in May 1778 in Philadelphia.[23] 'Sword-in-hand and on horseback they reconstructed the war with the American colonists, as they would ideally have liked it to be: a splendid crusade fought according to the rules by men of birth, and fought successfully.'[24] To a class of

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[17] Hallett, M., 'Reading the Walls: Pictorial Dialogue at the British Royal Academy', Eighteenth-Century Studies, vol. 37, no. 4, (2004), p. 600. The source is not cited.
[18] Mannings, op. cit., p. 440.
[19] Myrone, M., *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinity in British Art, 1750-1810*, London : Yale University Press (2005) p. 220.
[20] Colley, op. cit., p. 170.
[21] Hallett, *Reading the Walls*, op. cit., p. 600.
[22] Bonehill, op. cit., p. 125.
[23] Colley, op. cit., p. 147.
[24] Ibid, p. 148.

society spoilt and made complacent by their swelling empire, Tarleton's portrait was in effect a masking of the realities of the situation and was as much a form of propaganda for the elite as it was intended for the public. Curiously there is a later portrait of Tarleton as a knight in armour executed by his wife, Lady Susan Priscilla Tarleton and still remaining in the family's collection today [Fig. 2].[25] Lady Tarleton has portrayed her husband in the chivalric ideal that he and men amongst him saw themselves beholding. Through the vogue for van Dyckian costume she associates Tarleton with the establishment immediately before the disastrous conflict that had traumatized the British hierarchy for generations afterwards; the Civil War.

The portrait of Tarleton was first displayed at the Royal Academy summer exhibition of 1782 to high critical acclaim. In the *Public Advertiser*, the critic Fresnoy wrote of the painting's 'profound investigation and subtle Display of Character,' whilst another critic wrote, 'The sublime Effect [of the picture] led the Mind into a Train of Ideas [that brought the] whole engagement before it.'[26] Yet of course there were satirical responses such as in the well-known print *The Thunderer,* where the polarity of the heroics of Reynolds' portrait to the cynicism of the satire reflect more faithfully the public's opinion of Tarleton.[27] Peter Pindar's witty, 'LO! Tarleton dragging on his boot so tight!' found something of the effeminate in the soldier.[28] Whatever the immediate effect, the image was popular enough to counter such ridicules and there still exist no fewer than six copies.[29] Though it no longer survives, Gainsborough's equestrian portrait of Tarleton was not so well admired. Critics saw the painting as exposing too much of Tarleton's vanity and self-interest and 'the Painter has

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[25] Bass, R., *The Green Dragoon*, South Carolina; Waterloo: Sandlapper Press, (1980) opposite p. 363.
[26] Both quotes are from, Bonehill, op. cit., p. 123.
[27] Donald, D., 'Caricatures' in Penny, op. cit., pp. 377-8.
[28] Egerton, J., *The National Gallery: The British School*, London, National Gallery (1998), p. 224.
[29] Manning, op. cit., p. 440.

evidently sacrificed too much to the full-speed ideas of a spirited *Martinet*.'[30] Reynolds won this 'rivalry match' against Gainsborough for he concentrated on one aspect that could not be denied of Tarleton, his reckless courage, despite his dubious military record.[31]

If we now turn our attention to another portrait by Reynolds, we might explore further this vogue for heroic virtue in military portraiture. In the summer exhibition of 1784, Reynolds displayed his equestrian *Portrait of the Prince of Wales with a Horse* (1783-4; Private Collection) [Fig. 3].[32] In 1783 the young prince had come of age and was under the full attention of the newspapers and gossip columns on an obsessive level.[33] Anxiety grew increasingly around the prince's public life, as he was perceived to be vain and extravagant, keeping a circle of friends who were 'flatterers… gamesters and debauchees!'[34] The suggestion here is that the prince was 'effeminate' and for civic commentators, as well as the public itself, effeminacy was a sign of mental weakness that led to a shift 'from simplicity and customs which alone keep us from slavery.'[35] In other words, and considering the now official loss of America, there was a fear of a shift from liberty to Absolutism.[36]

Much of the work on the portrait had been carried out in 1783 and it was intended to be displayed that year but was not submitted, for the Prince, 'out of respect for the artist and himself, was unwilling so capital a Work should be hastily finished.'[37] Clearly it was of considerable importance, for 'celebrity is the

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[30] Egerton, op. cit., p. 226.
[31] Hallett, *Reading the Walls,* op. cit., p. 600.
[32] Hoock, H., *The King's Artists*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (2003) p. 164.
[33] Hallett, Reynolds and Celebrity, op. cit., p. 45.
[34] Reported in the Public Advertiser on 20th January 1784 in Hallett, *Reading the Walls*, op. cit., p. 590.
[35] Carter, op. cit., p. 433.
[36] Ibid.
[37] The Public Advertiser, 1st May 1783 quoted in, Hallett, Reading the walls, op. cit., p. 598.

codification of fame.'[38] As previously mentioned the summer exhibitions became a theatre for the 'celebrity' and the dissemination of prints after the portraits was a key way of publicising the image the Prince wished to broadcast.[39]

Reynolds depicts the prince exploiting the vogue for military dress to the full.[40] He wears a red military coat, with blue garter ribbon just visible underneath, and a pink sash round his waist. The red coat is picked out by gold epaulettes and braid, and to add to the flamboyance of the prince's style, a leopard-skin shabracque on his charger.[41] This uniform however is completely fictitious and the prince never did ride into battle.[42] The picture of a prince obsessed with the military reasserted the dignity of the Royal family; clearly Reynolds wished to assert the prince as the leader of men.[43] Unfortunately the painting on its own merits could hardly fight off the already scandalous public image he had amassed. Reynolds, however, mobilised the painting's pictorial associations with others hung around it as well as the memory of previous paintings to give an added sense of authority to the Prince's portrait.[44]

Unfortunately there is not time to discuss pictorial dialogue further with but one exception, for Reynolds aligned the Prince with the memory of Tarleton's portrait of two years earlier, which had been one of the most celebrated and discussed paintings of that year's display.[45] The visually-literate viewer would be able to establish that the Prince's painting depended upon and responded to Reynolds' predecessor as a kind of pictorial sequel, borrowing elements of Tarleton to graph onto the prince a language of heroism and fervour. The way

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[38] Hallett, Reynolds and celebrity, op. cit., p. 37.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Hallett, Reading the walls, p. 590.
[41] Mannings, op. cit., p. 216.
[42] Penny, 'An Ambitious man' in Ed. Penny, op. cit., p. 38.
[43] Hoock, op. cit., p. 164.
[44] This is the basis for Mark Hallett's essay 'Reading the Walls'.
[45] Ibid, p. 600.

in which the prince is situated as if he has stretched out from Tarleton's crouched position, unsheathed his sword and is moments from engaging the offensive ultimately embodies the vigour so praised in Tarleton.[46] Even so it proved less effective as one critic wrote, 'The promise Sir Joshua made in his portrait of Col. Tarleton is badly kept by his performance in the Prince!'[47]

The war had a profound effect on domestic politics and both the Wales and Tarleton portraits represented the Whig cause.[48] It can be seen that the portraits imbue a political motive, especially because Reynolds' *Portrait of Charles Fox* (1782; Holkham Hall) was hung nearby to *Wales* in the 1784 exhibition.[49] As Martin Postle has noted, Reynolds himself had increasingly exposed his Whig sympathies since the early 1770s.[50] However, it would be wrong to say that these portraits were composed to express Reynolds' own political leanings; rather it was an expression of the sitter's. Wendorf defines Reynolds' politics as sharing Burke's 'ambivalence' in the hierarchical structures that his portraits supported and yet, 'he chafed at the embarrassing abuses, at the misuse of aristocratic privilege, rather than at the system itself.'[51] On the other hand Reynolds followed Samuel Johnson's incessant mantra on 'subordination of rank'.[52] In a capacity, the Wales and Tarleton portraits acted as visual propaganda for their sitters but as far as Reynolds was concerned, '(he) simply

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[46] Ibid, p. 601.

[47] Quote of Morning Herald, 27th April 1784 in Ibid.

[48] The Prince of Wales was the patron of the Whig party, whilst Tarleton was to become MP for Liverpool uninterrupted for almost twenty years.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Postle, M., 'The Modern Apelles' in Ed. Idem, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of a Celebrity*, London: Tate (2005), p. 22. It should be noted that Reynolds was also close to oppositionist circles executing numerous portraits of his good friend Admiral Augustus Keppel, a key oppositionist figure.

[51] Wendorf, R., *Sir Joshua Reynolds*: *The Painter in Society*, London: National Portrait Gallery (1996), p. 162. Read Chapter 5, 'Patrons and Politics' for a full discussion of Reynolds' political views.

[52] Ibid.

could not afford, as a portrait-painter, to ally himself too closely with either political party.'[53]

The last painting by Reynolds that I wish to examine was not a commission but a speculative work not dictated by either patron or politics, and was of an earlier period perhaps giving a more neutral insight into Reynolds' own thinking on the establishment's condition. The *Portrait of Captain Orme* (1756; National Gallery) [Fig. 4] was painted a year after the shocking defeat of the Battle of Monongahela in which a force of 2,000 British troops in Canada were ambushed by a much smaller combined force of French and native Americans.[54] General Edward Braddock who led the force had 'five Horses killed under him, was shot through the arm and the Lung, of which he died the fourth day' (after the attack).[55] Captain Orme had been one of three of the General's aides-de-camp. This disaster was heavily reported on for weeks afterward and shocked the nation. Orme is depicted some distance from the battlefield, his body half-turned but his gaze fixed directly to meet the viewer's eye and he holds a piece of paper in his left hand. It is Reynolds' treatment of Orme's face where the viewer is addressed to the double meaning of Orme's expression.[56] The bright half of Orme's face is a reassurance of the resolute British officer with his calm gaze and upturned mouth, but the other, darker half exposes Orme's mental image of the massacre behind him.[57] His left eye is wider displaying signs of what might perhaps be called 'shell-shock', his mouth is slightly downturned and most eerily of all, the light that hits his left cheek somewhat unsettles the viewer exposing his fragility. This portrait is surely designed to play off both readings, for as Hallett sums up it acts as 'an allegory, not only of the shocking military experience at Monongahela, but also of the troubled nation itself.'[58]

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[53] Ibid, p. 174, and Penny, op. cit., p. 35.
[54] Hallett, M., 'Out of the Shadows: Sir Joshua Reynolds' Captain Robert Orme', *Visual Culture in Britain,* vol. 5, no. 2, (2004) p. 43.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Egerton, op. cit., p. 207-8.
[57] Ibid,
[58] Hallett, out of the shadows, p. 49

Today the modern viewer would sense melancholy surrounding Orme's portrayal but to the eighteenth-century viewer the subtlety of his expression would have appeared wholly more acute. In Samuel Bever's *The Cadet: A Military Treatise*, published in the same year as Reynolds' painting, the danger of 'young, debauched and effeminate officers,' was being preached.[59] Bever offers up a resolution to young officers to hone their status as refined gentlemen and it could be taken that Reynolds' portrait aspires to this ideal. Orme is shown as the gallant officer yet at the same time exposes the sensitivity of a gentleman in his witnessing the atrocities of the battle. Reynolds, then, presents to us the modern image of the army officer, at a time of military crisis, and very different to Bever's description of the 'rude and ignorant' individuals perceived in the army at the time.[60] How different to the portraits of Wales and Tarleton, whose sensitivity is lost, instead replaced by aggressive reclamation and ardent masculinity rather than gentlemanly ideals.[61]

The speculation proved unsuccessful and Orme's portrait remained with Reynolds for five years before being sent to the Society of Artists' exhibition in spring 1761.[62] There it was hung near to Reynolds' *Portrait of Lord Ligonier* (1760; Fort Ligonier, Pennsylvania) [Fig. 5] who since 1757 had successfully pushed the war towards British success as Commander-in-Chief of the army.[63] Spirits were high and one officer described Orme as being, 'mixed with rage that war and love of his country can give.'[64] Reynolds' success at altogether changing the response of his painting through his hanging and pictorial dialogue with other paintings clearly shows ingenuity, but also it is clear that the officer's comments signified the public's inability or refusal to empathise with Orme, particularly in the euphoria of British dominance.

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[59] Ibid, p. 52.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Myrone, op. cit., p. 220.
[62] Penny, op. cit., p. 187.
[63] Hallett, out of the shadows, p. 58.
[64] Lloyd's Evening Post, 25th-27th May 1761 mentioned in Penny, op. cit., p. 187.

I would like to suggest then that by the time of Reynolds' Tarleton and Wales portraits the need for a politicising, classicising and more radical rhetoric had become necessary in his portraiture. However, this was not through Reynolds' own development but through the increasingly political determinations of his patrons. The anti-imperialists saw that the threat posed by the merger of heroic virtue and the vice of savage criminality was realised in the figure of Tarleton.[65] The Wales portrait continued this marriage of exemplary civic virtue with effeminacy and 'Quixoticism' and shows to us that in the wake of the American war, 'Heroism' had incorporated foolhardiness and absurdity as central elements, displacing the stern heroics of classicism.[66] And why had this happened? Like Captain Orme's jubilant critic, Britain was very quick to shake off her pessimistic air in the triumph of the Seven Years War, but with the defeat of America, an unfamiliar enemy grown from Britain's own stock, the psyche was forever altered. America was the 'modern' republic and France was to follow just a few years later. The British Aristocracy were in crisis and their fractured, and often-polarized reactions are signs of the complex yet uniform attempt to maintain power.

[65] Myrone, op. cit., p. 220.
[66] Ibid, p. 226.

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