

A beautiful assemblage of an interesting nature: Gainsborough's *Charity Relieving Distress* and the Reconciliation of High and Low Art

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Abstract

In the competitive environment of the eighteenth-century London art scene, Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds were often perceived as great rivals. While they shared patrons, sitters, and a stake in the future of British art, their differing artistic approaches caused considerable friction, indeed Gainsborough seceded from the Royal Academy of Art in 1784, boycotting its exhibitions and activities. This essay, however, argues that Gainsborough's* *Charity Relieving Distress**, painted in the year of his secession, proposes a charitable resolution of their aesthetic attitudes. The complex interrelation of allegorical and anecdotal form is interpreted as a pictorial attempt to reconcile their approaches through the concept of charity, a virtue of powerful artistic lineage in the western tradition, and of contemporary social importance*.



Figure 1

Thomas Gainsborough, *Charity Relieving Distress*, 1784, oil on canvas, 98 × 76.2cm. On display at Gainsborough's House. Digital image courtesy of Gainsborough's House.

In 1784, the celebrated painter Thomas Gainsborough did two remarkable things: he seceded from exhibitions of the Royal Academy of Arts, and he painted *Charity Relieving Distress* (fig. 1). Although invited to join the Academy as one of its inaugural members in 1768, Gainsborough's relationship with the institution and its president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, was both distant and conflicted. From 1773 to 1776 he boycotted its yearly exhibitions, complaining of the way his paintings were displayed, and in April 1784, after another quarrel with the hanging committee, withdrew all his works from the exhibition.¹ For the next three years, Gainsborough absented himself from the Academy's operations and showed his works, not at the official, annual exhibitions at Somerset House, but privately in his painting room at Schomberg House, Pall Mall.² The press followed the row with alacrity, contributing to the public perception of Gainsborough's temperamental eccentricity, and the rivalry between him and Reynolds.³ While the dispute was ostensibly over the placement of his portraits of the royal family, it can also be read as the culmination of Gainsborough's long-standing ambivalence towards the authority of the institution and its ideas about art. Exhibited at Schomberg House three months after his much-publicized break with Britain's first, and much awaited, crown-chartered institution of art, *Charity Relieving Distress* may be interpreted in relation to Gainsborough's complex relation to its theoretical programme. Through subject, compositional structure, and iconography, it challenges the hierarchy of artistic modes adopted by the fledgling institution. In place of political invective, however, *Charity Relieving Distress* seems to propose, through the deliberate interrelation of allegorical and anecdotal forms, a charitable resolution between the higher and lower genres of painting as they were set forth in Reynolds's *Discourses*. Painted in luminous glazes and rich colour, *Charity Relieving Distress* depicts a young woman dispensing food to a ragged family in front of a townhouse. On the stairs below the group, a solitary male figure looks on with admiration at the spectacle of benevolence, and on the left

hand side, a third woman is seated on the ground by a loaded mule. The house, forming an architectural backdrop to the event, is ornamented with vines and doves roost on its eaves, and the whole scene is suffused with light from the upper left, which bathes the figures in golden evanescence. In subject and style, *Charity Relieving Distress* is an idealized image of private and spontaneous benevolence, in which the wealthy share the excesses of the table with those in need. What we see today, however, is but a fragment of the original work, which was significantly cut down sometime in the nineteenth century.⁴ A copy made after the original by the artist's nephew and apprentice, Gainsborough Dupont (ca. 1784; fig. 2), as well as a mezzotint by Richard Banks Harraden published in 1801, more than a decade after Gainsborough's death (fig. 3), reveal that the painting was initially much larger, with a more extensive compositional and iconographical programme. The act of charity was specifically located within the doorway of the house, which, decorated with an ornate pediment and a crest, was once an imposing motif.⁵ Beside it, two finely dressed young women, presumably daughters of the house, were placed as additional spectators to the giving of alms. On the left-hand side, a large archway balanced the open door, and the loaded mule was driven through it by a bowed figure mounted on a donkey, past the woman seated on the ground.⁶ Conferring religious approbation on charitable giving, a square-towered Gothic church presided over the scene.



Figure 2

Gainsborough Dupont, *Charity Relieving Distress*, circa 1784, oil on canvas, 127.6 × 102.2 cm. Collection of Indianapolis Museum of Art. Digital image courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art.



Figure 3

Richard Banks Harraden, *Charity Sympathising with Distress*, 1801, mezzotint, 59.6 × 42.8 cm. Gainsborough's House, Sudbury. Digital image courtesy of Gainsborough's House.

When the painting was exhibited at Schomberg House in July 1784, Henry Bate-Dudley, champion of Gainsborough and editor of the *Morning Herald*, catalogued these details, providing a useful description of the painting:

This picture consists of an elegant building, in one of the approaches to which, is an ascent of steps, and at a distance an arch, through which a loaded mule is passing. The principal objects are a beggar-woman, who is receiving relief from a female servant belonging to the

*house. The beggar has an infant in her arms, and one on her back, and is also surrounded by others: some of whom, appear terrified at a dog who will not suffer their approach to the House.— Two children, on the steps of the door are represented making observations on the circumstance. A very fine summer sky is introduced. A vine is represented against the side of the house; several pigeons also are described fluttering about the building. The whole of which forms a beautiful assemblage of an interesting nature.*⁷

Bate-Dudley itemizes many of the components of Gainsborough's painting, and is an important guide for the modern viewer. Some details, however, seem to be hastily observed, or only vaguely remembered. The charitable woman is called a servant, but the similarity of her clothing to that worn by the young ladies in the doorway, as well as her proximity to them, suggest she could well be a member of the wealthy family. Moreover, Harraden's mezzotint was dedicated to "the Nobility and Gentry, Whose Humane exertions are employed in alleviating the distresses of the Poor", interpreting the benevolent young woman as a member of the family to whom the house belongs.⁸ In addition, the dog that seemed so threatening crouches in a pose of friendly interest characteristic of Gainsborough's paintings, and the children pay him little attention. Despite these discrepancies, Bate-Dudley's description of the painting as a "beautiful assemblage of an interesting nature" evokes the original complexity of Gainsborough's picture, and allows one to broach the work's sophisticated narrative and aesthetic meanings. By way of his review, Dupont's copy, and Harraden's print, the compositional and iconographical programme of Gainsborough's painting may be reconstructed and interpreted, particularly in connection to debates about the nature and future of art in Britain. Through the elaborate architectural setting, especially the use of doorways and threshold spaces, Gainsborough's painting aligns with contemporary conceptions of charity as a form of benevolent exchange, a mediating disposition that forms ideal relationships between individuals and allows access to the heavenly realm. Furthermore, through the self-conscious mixing of allegorical and anecdotal forms, the idea of charity as a mediating social virtue is extended to issues of aesthetic politics; indeed, the painting seems to offer the prospect of a benevolent reconciliation between high and low forms of art. This argument builds upon Martin Postle's ingenious realization that in painting the beggar family, Gainsborough drew on Reynolds's personification of Charity for the New College Chapel window at Oxford University.⁹ While Postle used this identification to stress the religious meanings of Gainsborough's painting, I would like to add a further layer of interpretation by suggesting that Gainsborough depicts two figures of charity: an allegorical one and an anecdotal one, which, in their benevolent encounter, propose a charitable reconciliation between the general and the particular, the visual vocabularies of history painting, promoted by Reynolds, and the "fancy picture" genre popularized by Gainsborough.¹⁰

Though the competitive relationship between Reynolds and Gainsborough has been widely addressed, this article examines the ways in which Gainsborough negotiated the theoretical principles espoused by the president in his own art practice.¹¹ It identifies a distinctly pictorial attempt by Gainsborough to reconcile their divergent approaches through the concept of charity, a virtue of powerful artistic lineage in the western tradition, and of contemporary social importance. This approach is indebted to the interpretative framework of Gainsborough scholars Ann Bermingham, Michael Rosenthal, and Amal Asfour and Paul Williamson, who have examined his oeuvre in relation to questions of aesthetic ideology and contemporary sociability.¹² Bermingham's important exhibition and book, *Sensation and Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door* (2005), which included essays by Rosenthal and Asfour and Williamson, considered the Cottage Door paintings as ambitious, emotive subject pictures that

challenged conventions of public art and academic tradition and contributed to the visualization of the modes of seeing and feeling specific to sensibility.¹³ Indeed, Bermingham and Rosenthal's contributions to this book are part of a long-standing exploration of the modernity of Gainsborough's art, its critical position in relation to the civic humanist tradition of academic art theory, its engagement with contemporary culture, and its response to a growing middle-class audience.¹⁴

The present article likewise takes *Charity Relieving Distress* as visual evidence of Gainsborough's attitudes to academic painting and his own ambitions for the direction of British art.¹⁵ Despite the charm of the painting's subject, and its fanciful combination of buildings and figures, it has a very real message that relates pointedly to the hierarchy of forms established in Reynolds's *Discourses on Art*.¹⁶ In adopting the charitable imagery of contemporary morality, Gainsborough's painting deliberately stages a reconciliation of the allegorical and the observed, offering an "argument in paint" for a composite formulation of morally serious art fitted to a commercial and benevolent age.¹⁷

Charity on the threshold

Charity was a crucial subject and practice in the development of eighteenth-century British art. It was the basis of one of the earliest, semi-public exhibitions of painting and sculpture in London, at Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital in 1747, a key attempt, led by William Hogarth, to foster a national, modern school. The exhibition was designed to attract patrons to the institution (and the exhibiting artists) and mingled the display of art with the humanitarian culture of charitable giving. It also provided an opportunity to show ambitious art on religious themes in the absence of patronage from the Church or state.¹⁸ Hogarth, Francis Hayman, Joseph Highmore, and James Wills contributed large-scale biblical subjects on charitable themes, and John Michael Rysbrack sculpted an allegory of Charity and a marble frieze. Gainsborough himself contributed a roundel of the building to the exhibition, early evidence of his association with the St Martin's Lane Academy and the empirical, modern approach to painting advocated by Hogarth, Hubert Gravelot, and Hayman.¹⁹

Charity remained, in the latter half of the century, one of the most enduringly popular subjects of British art. From the 1760s on, remarkable numbers of paintings and prints on charitable themes were exhibited at the Society of Artists and the Royal Academy.²⁰ Edward Penny's *The Marquis of Granby giving Alms to a Sick Soldier and his Family* (1764; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1765, proved so successful that he made three autograph versions and marketed a mezzotint engraved by Richard Houston.²¹ Paintings of charity were also exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts by Johann Zoffany, who showed his *Beggars on the Road to Stanmore* in 1771 (private collection), and Penny's student, William Redmore Bigg, who was praised for his sentimental scenes of benevolence, such *Schoolboys Giving Charity to a Blind Man*, exhibited in 1780 (location unknown), and *A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* of 1781 (Philadelphia Museum of Art).²² These paintings and prints answered the call for moralizing imagery made by critics such as Vicesimus Knox, who argued in his *Essays* of 1778 that painting, by depicting benevolent acts, "may be rendered something more than an elegant mode of pleasing the eye and the imagination; it may become a very powerful auxiliary of virtue".²³ In their idealized depictions of benevolence to the deserving poor, these accessible portraits and fancy pictures mobilized the everyday for the purposes of moral edification and sentimental satisfaction.²⁴



Figure 4

Cesare Ripa, *Carità* from *Iconologia*, Padua, 1611, 72.
Digital image courtesy of The Warburg Institute.

In depicting the giving of alms in everyday situations with recognizable contemporary figures, paintings by Penny, Zoffany, and Bigg revised the allegorical image of Charity that dominated the old-master tradition. Charity, in allegorical guise, was traditionally represented as a breast-feeding mother embracing two children.²⁵ According to Cesare Ripa's influential compendium of allegories and personifications, *Iconologia* of 1611, the children represent Faith and Hope, who Charity nurtures, and the image forms a Christian allegory of maternal and divine devotion (fig. 4).²⁶ The allegorical image of Charity was well represented in English collections at mid-century; an Anthony van Dyck *Charity* (ca. 1627–8; fig. 5), which depicts a woman in red robes embracing several children, was in the collection of the Earl of Lonsdale by 1763, and the Duke of Devonshire possessed Carlo Cignani's *Charity* (private collection), which was engraved by Simon Ravenet after a drawing by John Hamilton Mortimer in the same year.²⁷

While the allegorical tradition continued to inform eighteenth-century paintings of charity, as the example of Reynolds will attest, on the whole, benevolence was increasingly represented in terms of contemporary British experience. This contemporary reworking of the theme can be linked to the influence of Hogarth's pioneering "modern moral subjects". This "intermediate species of subjects", drawn from the common incidents and customs of urban life, mingled the strategies of comic Northern genre painting and the high moral seriousness of classicist history painting to "entertain and improve the mind".²⁸ While eschewing the satire of Hogarth's approach, modern painters of charity from the 1760s onwards, Gainsborough included, took advantage of his re-invention of moralizing subjects by using the familiar spaces and figures of contemporary British life. Indeed these paintings of everyday benevolence can be connected to the increasing importance of "social" virtues in contemporary British society and what John Barrell has termed the "attenuation" of the discourse of civic humanism in moral philosophy and art. Aimed at an audience of private individuals, modern charitable subjects promoted the softer virtues of an increasingly commercial age, such as generosity, kindness, amiability, liberality, and compassion.²⁹ In representing civil ideals of humanity and benevolence, pictures of charity could in this sense atone, at least at the level of representation, for the deleterious social effects of commerce and industrialization.³⁰

Artists were thus responding in pictorial ways to the contemporary interest in the practice of almsgiving and the moral virtues of compassion and benevolence.³¹ As Samuel Johnson rather drily put it, “no sooner is a new species of misery brought to view, and a design of relieving it professed, than every hand is open to contribute something, every tongue is busied in solicitation, and every art of pleasure is employed for a time in the interest of virtue.”³² Charity is in many ways the primary social virtue of the eighteenth century, enshrined as a Christian duty, a social necessity, and a demonstration of sympathetic feeling. In 1752, Henry Fielding claimed it to be “the very characteristic of this Nation at this Time”. “I believe”, he wrote, “we may challenge the whole World to parallel the Examples which we have late given of this sensible, this noble, this Christian Virtue.”³³ Johnson, in a 1758 edition of *The Idler*, rather agreed, conceding, “the present age, though not likely to shine hereafter among the most splendid periods of history, has yet given examples of charity, which may be very properly recommended to imitation.”³⁴ The moralist Hannah More crowned the century as “the Age of Benevolence” in 1791, affirming the popular conception of Britain as a charitable nation.³⁵



Figure 5

Studio of Anthony van Dyck, *Charity*, circa 1630s, oil on canvas, 141.9 × 105.4 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. Digital image courtesy of Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

This atmosphere of self-congratulation was in some measure justified by the unusual provisions made for the poor in English law and the rise of humanitarian institutions. Unique in Europe, England possessed a parish-based, tax-funded structure of relief for the destitute.³⁶ In addition, rising numbers of “associated charities” were founded to assist particular groups of needy individuals.³⁷ Inspired by the success of the joint-stock economic enterprise, many entrepreneurial Britons took part in philanthropic ventures funded by private subscription and managed by committee.³⁸ Charities such as the Foundling Hospital, chartered in 1739 to house, feed, and educate “exposed and deserted young children”; the British Lying-In Hospital “for delivering poor married women”, established in 1749; and the Magdalen House “for the

reception of reformed and penitent prostitutes”, founded in 1758, complemented and critiqued the provisions of the poor laws, generating a modern humanitarian culture that mingled personal benevolence with a sense of public duty.³⁹ Eschewing traditional notions of aristocratic benevolence, charity in the eighteenth century was increasingly the purview of a morally anxious middle class that aimed to improve the health and condition of the distressed, and fortify moral virtue.⁴⁰

Rather than a simple matter of giving alms, however, charity in the eighteenth century was also understood as an ideal relationship between oneself and one’s fellows. Summing up its many personal and social manifestations, the popular Presbyterian preacher Dr Hugh Blair described charity as:

*the comforter of the afflicted, the protector of the oppressed, the reconciler of differences, the intercessor for offenders. It is faithfulness in the friend, public spirit in the magistrate, equity and patience in the judge, moderation in the sovereign, and loyalty in the subject.*⁴¹

As Blair suggests, charity is a disposition of generosity and compassion that permeates all levels of social life and establishes a contract of reciprocity between the enfranchised and those in need. Joseph Addison said as much in 1711, when he wrote in *The Spectator* that charity was the practical application of “Good-Will or Benevolence, in the Soul”, and that “Gifts and Alms are the Expressions, not the Essence of this Virtue.”⁴² Voicing a similar attitude, Johnson, in the first edition of his *Dictionary of the English Language*, defined the primary meanings of charity as “tenderness; kindness; love”, and “goodwill; benevolence; disposition to think well of others”, putting “liberality to the poor” and “alms, relief given to the poor” as the last of his definitions of the term.⁴³ Blair, Addison, and Johnson suggest that charity in the eighteenth century entailed a mode of being as well as an act of giving. The Christian virtue of charity constituted love—for God, and for one’s neighbour.⁴⁴ As the animating principle of Christianity, and foremost of Faith and Hope among the three Christian virtues, Charity formed an ideal attitude of openness to the plight of others, and established the spiritual foundation for more practical forms of assistance.⁴⁵ In its more secular application, it was the love, kindness, and generosity that mediated and moderated relationships between self and other.⁴⁶

For Gainsborough, charity was a vital social virtue, inspired by his quickness of feeling for other human beings. Defending the state of his finances in a letter to his sister, Mary Gibbon, he insisted “as God is my Judge, I do what I do more from Charity and human feelings than my other Gratifications.”⁴⁷ His biographer, Philip Thicknesse, confirmed his generosity, publishing accounts of his benevolence in the *St James’s Chronicle* and his *Sketch of the Life and Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough* at his death in August 1788.⁴⁸ Recalling his attempts to secure a subscription for a gentlewoman and her child impoverished by the suicide of her husband, Thicknesse congratulated Gainsborough on his immediate and generous response, claiming that despite his tendencies as a “Humourist”, his “susceptible mind and his benevolent heart, led him into such repeated acts of generosity”.⁴⁹ In keeping with this biographical portrait, an obituary published in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1788 asked that a “tear be shed in affection for that generous heart, whose strongest propensities were to relieve the claims of poverty, wherever they appeared genuine!”⁵⁰ As a man with an “indisputed reputation of strong sensibility”, charity was the necessary expression of Gainsborough’s emotional sensitivity to the sufferings of others.⁵¹ Considered in this context, Gainsborough’s *Charity Relieving Distress* appears to draw deliberately on the eighteenth-century practice and conception of charity. Firstly, in positioning the giving of alms at the doorway of the townhouse, the painting reflects the importance of doors as sites of benevolence in eighteenth-century London, as well as the idea of charity as an act of

compassionate exchange. In a 1752 pamphlet on poverty and the poor laws, the clergyman Thomas Alcock included church doors among the sites at which mendicants accumulated. Beggars, he claimed, “take their stand at the Corners of Streets, or the Doors of Temples, at any public Places of Passage or Resort, in order to make their Distress more known, and move the Charity of Travellers, Passengers, or Worshippers, by a view of their pitiable case”.⁵² Likewise, domestic doors were also popular places to petition for alms. In his *Covent-Garden Journal*, Fielding remarked upon the “immense numbers of beggars who frequent our streets, and are to be found at almost every door”.⁵³ Traditionally, a woman or child would knock at the door of a house requesting money, employment, or some food. As Tim Hitchcock has shown, the ritual of knocking for charity and “charring” for alms survived undiminished into the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ In this sense, doors formed regular places for charity, sites of sometimes sudden and unsolicited contact between the affluent and the indigent. Forming thresholds between social classes and the spaces they inhabited, doors frequently demarcated an area in which rich and poor made contact through charitable exchange.⁵⁵

Gainsborough, however, expands the architectural iconography of charity by using doors and passageways to position the act of almsgiving in a larger in-between space. On the right-hand side of the scene, the door of the house opens into the interior of the wealthy abode, and on the left-hand side, an archway leads into the town. This area, framed by the two apertures, is extended into a stage-like space. Elevated by the set of stairs and flanked by entrances and exits, it provides a kind of theatrical setting for the charitable act, replete with a seated audience member. Moreover, the paired doors and arches allow the mediating qualities of charity to be evocatively portrayed.⁵⁶ Through this arrangement of figures and spaces, Gainsborough depicts the act of charity as an ideal exchange between social classes. Separated from the beggar family by the line of the stoep, the benevolent young woman reaches over this boundary to tip food into the upturned hat of the young boy.

On each side of this dividing line, different social spheres are constructed. Behind the beggar family, the mounted figure travelling through the archway and the indigent woman seated on the ground evoke the increasing movement of the poor as a result of the enclosure of commons and development of agrarian capitalism.⁵⁷ In the doorway of the great house, the elegant pair by the balustrade represents the stability and comfort of privilege. Transgressing the line that distinguishes indigence from affluence, and public space from private property, the young woman makes contact with the poor family through her act of charity. Only she transcends the boundary between wealth and poverty, fortune and misfortune, connecting the two sides of the composition and momentarily uniting its opposed social groups.⁵⁸ The whiteness of the plate directly between them additionally focuses the viewer’s attention on this point of intersection, and the reaching arms of the standing girl and infant child, which mirror the outstretched curve of the young lady’s arm, reinforce the physical contact taking place between giver and receiver. Her act of charity is thus represented as a gesture that transcends spatial and social boundaries. Secondly, this moment of charitable contact is also extended metaphorically between earthly and heavenly domains. Fluttering about the eaves of the house, several doves roost and strut. A lone dove, however, has taken to the air and is captured with wings aloft, directly above the act of charity. Looking down upon the figural group, the dove seems to be transformed from an ordinary, ungainly pigeon into a suggestion of the Holy Spirit, positioned to crown the giving of alms as an act of divine virtue.⁵⁹ Picked out in opaque greys and whites, this dove is more defined than its fellows, and the surrounding pentimenti indicate that Gainsborough took some care with its positioning.⁶⁰ Illuminated by a clear, warm light, the dove is located above the

infant in the woman's arms, who is made Christ-like by their alignment. Poised delicately over their heads, looking down on the exchange, the dove is the uppermost part of this central narrative group and invokes the religious approbation of charity, the presence of godliness in benevolence.

Through its iconography, Gainsborough's picture engages with the religious conception of charity as access to the spiritual world. Not only did charity mediate between self and other, but it was also imagined to form a link between the believer and the deity. As the Reverend Philip Barton told his congregation in 1736, "Charity unites us to God; it makes us a Part of the divine Image, and gives us the Resemblance of his Supreme Perfections."⁶¹ Likewise, in a 1761 sermon, the Reverend Ebenezer Radcliff stressed the contact charity established between sinner and redeemer, preaching that charity "draws down the blessing of God upon our temporal concerns", and "brings us the nearest to the sublime character of the God of all perfection".⁶² Charity thus formed a web of connection, both between humans on earth, and between the mortal and divine realms.⁶³

Within Gainsborough's painting, the charitable act seems indeed to "draw down the blessing of God", creating a kind of spiritual contact between the mortal world and the heavenly realm.⁶⁴ Here, both giver and receiver have a rough equivalence in terms of compositional structure; the benevolent giver is placed no higher than those she relieves, nor do the grateful beggars kneel to receive her bounty. Rather, it is the dove above their heads that takes precedence, and shows that Gainsborough's spatial hierarchy is not based upon the dictates of social class, but upon spiritual virtue. On this vertical axis, the dove invokes a connection between the unseen divine world above, and the earthly one below. Rising atmospherically into the clouds, the church tower in the background reinforces the dove's spiritual allusions. In Gainsborough's picture, the giving of alms to the distressed mediates horizontally between human beings and social spaces, and vertically between earthly virtue and divine reward.

Gainsborough's two charities

Gainsborough's construction of ideal, mediating relationships between social classes and between heaven and earth has, however, a further level of significance. The composition of the painting, its spatial motifs and iconographical references, not only gesture to charity's role as an ideal form of exchange between affluent and indigent, and the earthly and the divine, but also to its mediation of different approaches to the art of painting. Addressed in terms of eighteenth-century art theory, the painting can be viewed as an attempt to depict a compassionate and benevolent resolution between the visual vocabularies of history painting and the fancy picture. Alongside the dove, which shifts from being an ordinary pigeon into an image of the Holy Spirit, other figures in Gainsborough's painting take on powerful allegorical meanings. Recently, Postle has suggested that the mother draped with children, whom Bate-Dudley described as a "beggar woman", is in fact an allegorical figure of Charity.⁶⁵ Postle founds this interpretation upon the striking similarities between Gainsborough's figural group and Joshua Reynolds's *Charity* (ca. 1779; figs. 6 and 7), one of a number of Christian virtues designed for the New College Chapel window at Oxford University (fig. 8).⁶⁶ While the final product was to be painted directly onto the windowpanes by the glass painter Thomas Jervais, Reynolds did not waste the opportunity to exhibit his designs, working the panels up into finished paintings of the Christian virtues for the Royal Academy exhibition of 1779.⁶⁷



Figure 6

George Siegmund Facius after Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Charity*, 1781, stipple and etching print, 503 × 326 mm. British Museum, London. Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 7

Thomas Gainsborough, *Charity Relieving Distress* (detail), 1784, oil on canvas, 98 × 76.2cm. On display at Gainsborough's House. Digital image courtesy of Gainsborough's House.

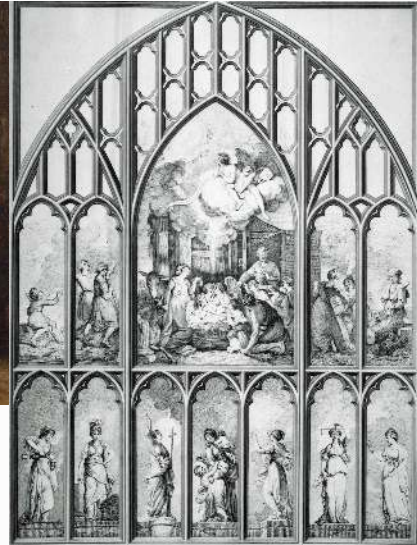


Figure 8

Richard Earlom after Joshua Reynolds, *The West Window of the Chapel, New College Oxford*, 1785, engraving, 64.7 × 45.8 cm. British Museum, London. Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

Reynolds here borrowed from the allegorical depiction of Charity in Renaissance and seventeenth-century art, in which she is personified as a woman nursing or embracing several children. The artist was well versed in this tradition; on his tour of Italy in 1752, he recorded seeing “a Charity by Guido” in the Pitti Palace, most probably Guido Reni’s *Charity*, of 1624–5 in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence (fig. 9), which includes the basic elements of Ripa’s model, showing a cloaked woman breastfeeding an infant and embracing another while a third leans over her shoulder.⁶⁸ As Francis Broun has shown, he also owned a small oil sketch on panel of part of a lost *Charity* by Van Dyck, either by Van Dyck’s hand or his own.⁶⁹ He made characteristic use of this model in his 1773 portrait of *Lady Cockburn and Her Three Eldest Sons* (fig. 10), showing a seated Augusta embracing her three young boys in a similar arrangement to that used by Van Dyck.⁷⁰ The Cockburn painting may also have been modelled on a large Caritas drawing in ink by Jan de Bisschop (Morgan Library and Museum, New York) of a seated woman in an architectural setting surrounded by children that was in the artist’s own collection.⁷¹ Drawing yet again upon this iconographic model, Reynolds’s life-size personification of Charity for the New College window emphasizes its Christian and maternal aspects: against a swirling background of atmospheric clouds, a young woman holds an infant to her breast, clasps another around the middle, and looks tenderly down on a third who holds onto her waist and leans back to look up into her face.⁷²



Figure 9

Guido Reni, *Charity*, 1624–5, oil on canvas, 116 × 90 cm. Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Digital image courtesy of Palazzo Pitti, Florence via Wikimedia Commons. The reproduction is part of a collection of reproductions compiled by The Yorck Project. The compilation copyright is held by Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH and licensed under the GNU Free Documentation.



Figure 10

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Lady Cockburn and Her Three Eldest Sons*, 1773, oil on canvas, 141.5 × 113 cm. National Gallery, London. Digital image courtesy of National Gallery via Wikimedia Commons, photograph belonging to and uploaded to the public domain by Arts639 on 28th April 2014.



Figure 11

Thomas Gainsborough, *A Study for Charity Relieving Distress*, black and white chalk on buff laid paper, 24.7 × 33.5 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Image courtesy of Sotheby's.

While not so steeped in the allegorical tradition, Gainsborough's oeuvre also indicates an interest in the personification of Charity. An undated trois crayons drawing, probably from the 1780s, depicts a seated woman with three children of different ages, forming an intertwined figural group. Although the figures are in contemporary dress, the composition has a striking similarity to the allegorical Charity of art-historical tradition, which would have been familiar to Gainsborough, at the very least through Rysbrack's marble bas-relief for the Foundling Hospital.⁷³ In *Charity Relieving Distress*, however, the allegorical nature of the figure is beyond question, as is its emulation of Reynolds's work. Like Reynolds's *Charity*, Gainsborough's standing female figure is draped with children, although hers seem slightly younger: the child on her back and the baby in her arms are only infants. The small boy, hanging from his mother's waistband and holding his foot in the air, however, appears to have been lifted directly from Reynolds's painting. A preparatory drawing for *Charity Relieving Distress*, sold at auction in 2004, suggests that Gainsborough developed the figural grouping so that it emulated Reynolds's painting more closely (fig. 11). While the initial sketch depicts the same number of figures, they are more closely arranged, and the boy at the edge of the group only peeps around her skirts. In the final painting, he separated the children receiving alms from the mother and her infants and reworked the left-hand boy so that he leans back and kicks up his foot in the same manner as Reynolds's. Gainsborough's female figure has, however, a greater sensuality, revealing the hint of a nipple, and she and her three children are more ragged. Their bare, dirty feet concede the actualities of the life of the poor and demonstrate their need, while the beauty of the mother and the grace of the children's deportment suggest they have been aestheticized for consumption

within a genteel domestic interior. Despite these crucial differences, the basic vocabulary of Gainsborough's and Reynolds's figural groups is remarkably similar, and suggests a direct relationship between the two works.

Gainsborough would have had ample opportunity to see Reynolds's *Charity* when he presented it at the 1779 Academy exhibition, to which Gainsborough himself had contributed six works.⁷⁴ *Charity Relieving Distress* seems, in fact, to refer directly to Reynolds's figure, incorporating his allegorical image into an everyday scenario of spontaneous benevolence. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that the source of the boy's unusual pose in both paintings appears to be Raphael's Cartoon, *The Healing of the Lame Man* (ca. 1515–16; fig. 12), in which a nude boy in the foreground leans back and lifts his foot while tugging at the sash of one of the spectators.⁷⁵ Raphael's Cartoons were the epitome of high art in England; although ensconced at Hampton Court, they were highly visible to artists through James Thornhill's painted copies and Nicolas Dorigny's engravings, and were made the subject of various treatises espousing their virtues as models for aspiring artists.⁷⁶



Figure 12

Raphael and workshop, *The Healing of the Lame Man*, circa 1515–16, body colour on paper mounted on canvas, 342 × 536 cm. Royal Collection, London, on loan to the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Seeing Gainsborough's beggar woman as a personification of Charity, and as a deliberate quotation of the high-art tradition exemplified by Raphael and utilized in Reynolds's painting, has important implications for the painting's meaning and its relationship to eighteenth-century art theory. Indeed, it appears that Gainsborough presents two figures of charity here. The ragged woman lightly carrying her load of children epitomizes the allegorical, Christian, and maternal Charity of the high-art tradition, while the young woman in the door represents the particularized, individual almsgiving frequently depicted in British fancy pictures. From this point of view, it seems that the allegorical figure of Charity has brought the two additional children to the door, where they gratefully receive the alms that the young woman bestows. Two dimensions of charity are thus depicted: its generalized, allegorical conceptualization, and its everyday practice.

Reinforcing these differentiated, but complementary, forms of charity, the architectural elements of Gainsborough's painting correspond to their ideal and practical forms. Behind the personification of Charity, the church spire emphasizes her status as a visualization of one of the three Christian virtues; and, on the other side of the composition, the open door of the townhouse

suggests the generous distribution of material wealth that ordinary benevolence entails. The paired figures of charity, and the paired apertures that allow access to the different edifices of benevolence, combine to form a composite image of charity that combines its ideal and everyday expressions. In this sense, Gainsborough's painting stages a moment of contact between the "general" and "particular" forms of representation that differentiate history painting from the lower genres in eighteenth-century British art discourse. From this perspective, *Charity Relieving Distress* offers an alternative approach to the hierarchy of pictorial modes that attempts to reconcile the putatively higher and lower forms of art.⁷⁷

An aesthetic reconciliation

The discourse of general and particular forms was used by Reynolds to differentiate the best exemplars of painting, and the opposed visual vocabularies appropriate to history painting and the minor genres.⁷⁸ In his *Discourses* Reynolds established his, and the institution's prerogative: to provide a system of art education that would elevate art and the status of artists to the highest possible level. In order to achieve this aim, sufficiently talented students were encouraged to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of general form and to the genre of history painting, traditionally viewed as the highest mode of art.⁷⁹ While all art in Reynolds's theory is based upon imitation, the "great stile" of history painting is distinguished for its selective synthesis of particular observations to produce an ideal and unseen beauty. As the president put it, "the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists . . . in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities and details of every kind."⁸⁰ Through the combination of the best and most universal forms in nature and the study of the old masters (Reynolds recommends Raphael, Michelangelo, and the Carracci), the artist was to aim at producing an "idea of the perfect state of nature".⁸¹ For Reynolds, general form presented a "true idea of beauty" and conferred an ennobling "intellectual dignity" upon the productions of art that would ensure their posterity and cultivation of public virtue.⁸²

Particular form, on the other hand, constituted a close observation of the varieties of things visible in nature. While general form depicted an ideal image of human action and beauty, carefully selected and composed, the particular was produced through the imitation of specific models. For Reynolds, it was epitomized by Dutch paintings by Adriaen van Ostade and Adriaen Brouwer, scenes that showed "people engaged in their own peculiar occupations; working, or drinking, playing or fighting".⁸³ Dutch painting formed a paradigm of the particular for Reynolds, who concluded that the Dutch were "so far from giving a general view of human life, that they exhibit all the minute particularities of a nation differing in several respects from the rest of mankind".⁸⁴ While Reynolds admits that the Dutch artists were "excellent in their own way",⁸⁵ he encouraged his students to keep their "principal attention fixed upon the higher excellencies" and to practise producing the general form required for history painting.⁸⁶ In advancing the general over the particular, Reynolds aimed at promoting a universally elevating and ennobling form of art liberated from the dictates of fashion or other cultural specificities, and able to appeal to the apparently unchanging, abstract and universal principles of human nature.⁸⁷ Reynolds aligned general and particular form with a hierarchy of genres that elevated the "great style" of history painting and demoted the genres of portraiture, landscape, and the fancy picture. The generality of the subject matter conferred superiority upon the genre, hence, "a History-Painter paints man in general; a Portrait-Painter, a particular man, and consequently, a defective model."⁸⁸ As a result, Reynolds advised students to take up "sufficiently general" subjects, such as "the great events of Greek and Roman fable and history", which are "familiar and interesting

to all Europe”, and “the capital subjects of scripture history, which, besides, their general notoriety, become venerable by their connection with our religion”.⁸⁹ Alternatively, the lower genres could be improved by borrowing from the methods of history painting, and to this end, Reynolds commended the use of allegorical figures in genres such as portraiture as appropriately general inclusions that will elevate the picture through allusion to grand and heroic ideas and concepts. Unlike allegorical poetry, which he found rather tedious, Reynolds insisted that allegorical figures in painting could produce “a greater variety of ideal beauty, a richer, more various and delightful composition”, and create an opportunity to exhibit the artist’s skill.⁹⁰ As Reynolds’s *Charity* and *Lady Cockburn and Her Three Eldest Sons* attest, this was a method the president put to especial use.

Gainsborough’s invitation to join the Academy in 1768 put him in contact with the theoretical tradition of art espoused by Reynolds, and the ideological contrast it formed with his own practice generated considerable friction. Though characteristically evasive about the aims and meanings of his paintings, Reynolds’s prejudice in favour of the great style provoked occasional private outbursts from Gainsborough that reveal his ideas about the nature and role of art. In a 1773 letter to the painter William Hoare, who had sent him a copy of Reynolds’s fifth Discourse of 1772, in which the subject of general and particular forms continued, Gainsborough confided:

*Betwixt Friends Sir Joshua either forgets, or does not chuse to see that his Instruction is all adapted to form the History Painter, which he must know there is no call for in this country . . . Every one knows that the grand Style must consist in plainness & simplicity . . . but Fresco would no more do for Portraits, than an Organ would please Ladies in the hands of Fischer; there must be Variety of lively touches and surprizing Effects to make the Heart dance.*⁹¹

The evident incongruity of calls for generalized, elevated history painting with the demands of patrons for domestically scaled paintings of secular subject matter, and indeed with Gainsborough’s own empirical practice, which depicted the sensual and ornamental in landscape, likeness, and dress, appears to have troubled the artist, and curtailed expressions of his artistic ambitions. In a 1783 letter to architect William Chambers, describing his latest painting, *Two Shepherd Boys with Dogs Fighting* (ca. 1783; Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood) he attempted to distance himself from Reynolds’s lofty aims. Declaring himself without ambitions towards history painting, he wrote: “you know my cunning way of avoiding great subjects in painting & of concealing my ignorance by a flash in the pan.”⁹² These flippant remarks disguised, however, a deeper engagement with academic precepts, and submerged a current of thought that surfaced in his paintings.⁹³



Figure 13

Thomas Gainsborough, *Diana and Actaeon*, circa 1786, oil on canvas, 158.1 × 188 cm. Royal Collection, London. Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust / © HM Queen Elizabeth II 2015

Despite his protestations against history painting, Gainsborough's works of the 1780s betray a shift in attitude towards its style and subjects, and carefully incorporated a response to Reynolds's dictates.⁹⁴ Concluding his letter to Hoare, he claimed that "there is no other Friendly or Sensible way of settling these matters except on Canvass", and in his productions of the 1780s, it appears he did just that, by introducing deliberate, inconspicuous historical references into his paintings.⁹⁵ Indeed, the evidence of Gainsborough's only attempt at mythological painting, *Diana and Actaeon* (ca. 1784–6; fig. 13), started some time in 1784 (the same year as *Charity Relieving Distress*), confirms his interest in the possibilities of history painting, blending and blurring mythological subjects with his own idiosyncratic painterly style.⁹⁶ Furthermore, in a 1783 letter to William Pearce, Gainsborough claimed that his landscapes at the coming Royal Academy exhibition were to be mounted "in the great stile", undoubtedly an indication of his new artistic ambitions.⁹⁷

After numerous disputes with the hanging committee of the Academy exhibitions, Gainsborough seceded from the institution in April 1784 and, in this climate of artistic independence, appears to have taken up the axioms of the Academy in complex and provocative ways.⁹⁸ *Charity Relieving Distress* was not included in the list of paintings due to have been exhibited that year at the Royal Academy, and given Gainsborough's rapidity of execution, it is conceivable that the painting was completed between his secession in April and its private showing on 26 July.⁹⁹ With its evident paraphrasing of Reynolds, *Charity Relieving Distress* can indeed be read as a response to the president's ideals, but rather than rancorous invective against the institution, it seems to propose an alternative relationship between the artistic modes classified by Reynolds that levels the hierarchy and reconciles the divergent impulses of theory and practice, history painting and fancy picture.¹⁰⁰

With Reynolds's *Discourses* in mind, it appears that *Charity Relieving Distress* takes up the academic doctrine of general and particular forms. In this sense, the painting gives us two versions of charity—one presented in a generalized, allegorical style, and the other, a particular

instance of everyday benevolence appropriate to the fancy pictures that Gainsborough was creating at this time. Moreover, Gainsborough uses the contact established between the two figures through the act of almsgiving to provide a conciliatory connection between the pictorial traditions they represent. He brings these two figures together via the children they succour. Converging to assist the distressed, the two charities fulfil the spiritual and practical demands of compassion, and in so doing, combine the general and particular forms of representation that Reynolds had argued to be representative of the “great” and “inferior” styles of painting.¹⁰¹ Their contact thus reconciles the allegorical and the everyday, the visual vocabularies of history painting and the fancy picture. From this perspective, Henry Bate-Dudley was right to call this painting a “beautiful assemblage of an interesting nature”, for Gainsborough’s work is indeed a composite image that conjoins and connects both general and particular form.¹⁰²

The two figures of charity, expressive of the ideal and practical forms of benevolence, thus enact an encounter between the theoretical ideals of the Academy and Gainsborough’s work in the fancy picture genre. Reynolds himself had advocated the practice of borrowing or quoting from classical art, either a “thought, an action, attitude or figure”, and “transplanting it” into one’s work. This borrowing, however, was to be motivated by rivalry: “he should enter into a competition with his model”, claimed Reynolds, “and endeavour to improve what he is appropriating into his own work”.¹⁰³ For Gainsborough, this reference to Reynolds’s allegorical figure of Charity appears made not to compete with or outstrip him, but to propose a benevolent resolution between his theoretical, generalizing model of art, and Gainsborough’s own dedication to the observable world.¹⁰⁴ In their amicable cooperation, the two charities suggest a peaceful meeting between the opposed artistic formulae, a desired reconciliation between allegory and anecdote. Moreover, the compositional equality with which they are treated suggests a radical equivalence between the “great” style of history painting and the everyday aesthetic of the fancy picture.¹⁰⁵

Charity Relieving Distress thus appropriates the visual vocabulary of history painting into the compositional “particularity” of the fancy picture; but rather than incorporating history’s techniques through *paragone*-style competition, *Charity Relieving Distress* appears to argue for their fundamental equality as different approaches to similar moral questions.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, this transposition takes place in Gainsborough’s characteristically shimmering brushwork. Transparent, layered glazes of paint add a luminous, scintillating quality to the formal clarity of the figural group. The looseness and mobility of successive strokes invites the spectator’s optical completion, opening up the painting to the imaginative participation of the viewer. This appeal to the viewer’s sensibility was considered inappropriate by Reynolds, who expressed misgivings about “the great latitude which indistinctness gives to the imagination, to assume almost what character or form it pleases”.¹⁰⁷ Gainsborough’s sensual and virtuosic style elicits an interactive kind of beholding that insists not on the authority of the artist’s own vision, but on a visual and sentimental collaboration between work of art and viewer.¹⁰⁸ As a result, the painting represents a desired rapprochement between general and particular form with a “Variety of lively touches and surprizing Effects” that truly “make the Heart dance”.

Gainsborough’s painting thus constructs three narratives of compassionate exchange: charity is at once represented as a moment of social contact between needy and benevolent, a spiritual connection between earthly virtue and heavenly reward, and lastly, as an ideal, conciliatory meeting between the emblematic and the everyday that ultimately enacts a resolution between high and low forms of art. While it is perhaps tempting to see this painting as gesturing towards

the broader and more personal reconciliation that took place between Reynolds and Gainsborough over the latter's deathbed in 1788, it is better understood as a commentary, not simply on their personal rivalry, but on the nature and future of art in Britain.¹⁰⁹ In this sense it continues Hogarth's legacy of the "intermediate species of subject" and ongoing negotiation and attenuation of the discourse of civic humanism. Mixing the allegorical and the anecdotal, the theories of the academy with the discourse on moral virtue, Gainsborough's painting offered a new paradigm for painting that reconciled the divergent impulses of history painting and the fancy picture and levelled the hierarchy of general and particular forms.¹¹⁰ Like his contemporary, Joseph Wright of Derby, whose paintings of scientific spectacles made similar use of the scale and pathos of history painting, Gainsborough's late work provides a model for a morally serious art conceived for domestic display and viewing by a middle-class audience.¹¹¹ *Charity Relieving Distress* therefore constitutes a pictorial argument for a modern kind of art that combines the emblematic with the everyday, and which is embedded in the values and experience of a commercial and sentimental age.

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About the author

Georgina Cole is an art historian specializing in eighteenth-century art and theory. She received her PhD from the University of Sydney in 2010 with a thesis on doors and the visuality of genre painting in eighteenth-century France and Britain. In 2011 she was a Visiting Scholar at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven and at present is Lecturer in Art History and Theory at the National Art School, Sydney. Her current research examines representations of blindness and the blind in eighteenth-century British art and the relationships between sensation, epistemology, and morality in Enlightenment thinking.

Footnotes

1. William T. Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1915), 95–97, 212–20, and John Hayes, ed., *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 160.
2. In late 1787, Gainsborough began to rebuild his relationship with the Academy. Had he not died suddenly in August 1788, there is evidence to suggest he would have achieved a full reconciliation with the institution and its members. See Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough*, 294–95, 306–7, and William Vaughan, *Gainsborough* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 146. When Reynolds delivered his fourteenth discourse in the form of a eulogy to Gainsborough, it was clear that he was considered one of the most significant members of the Academy.

3. *The Morning Herald*, owned by Gainsborough's friend, Henry Bate-Dudley, editorialized in support of Gainsborough, and *The Whitehall Evening Post* against him. See *The Morning Herald*, 23 April 1784, and *The Whitehall Evening Post*, 22–24 April 1784. A more impartial account was given in *The Morning Post*, 23 April 1784, 14.
4. Ellis Waterhouse notes that the painting was cut down to 30 x 39 in. (76.2 x 99 cm) from its original size of 49 x 39 in. (124.5 x 99 cm). See Waterhouse, *Gainsborough* (London: Spring Books, 1966), 120.
5. The print was made in 1801, either after Gainsborough's painting, or Dupont's copy. There is little available documentation on the provenance of *Charity Relieving Distress*. Waterhouse notes that it appeared in the Lord Robert Spencer sale of 1799 as an "Italian Villa". See Waterhouse, *Gainsborough*, 120.
6. Postle has intriguingly described this figure as a Catholic monk, in an interpretation of the potential non-conformist religious meanings of this painting. See Michael Rosenthal and Martin Myrone, *Gainsborough* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 232. Although this hooded figure bears some resemblance to a Catholic monk, it differs widely from popular satirical images of Catholics produced at the time. See John Miller, *Religion in the Popular Prints, 1600–1832* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986).
7. Henry Bate-Dudley, "A View of Mr. Gainsborough's Gallery", *Morning Herald*, 26 July 1784, 4.
8. Most modern accounts of this painting describe the charitable woman as a servant. See Michael Rosenthal, *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough: "A Little Business for the Eye"* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 231, and Martin Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), 67. Close examination of this painting provides little evidence for her identification as a member of the working class, however.
9. Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough*, 67, and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 178–79.
10. On the genre of the fancy picture, see Martin Postle, *Angels and Urchins: The Fancy Picture in 18th-century British Art* (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery, 1998), 5–8.
11. The personal and artistic relationships between Reynolds and Gainsborough have been the subject of numerous exhibitions and debates. See Homan Potterton, *Reynolds and Gainsborough* (London: National Gallery, 1976); Timothy Clifford, Antony Griffiths, and Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Gainsborough and Reynolds in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1978); and Oliver Millar, *Gainsborough and Reynolds: Contrasts in Royal Patronage* (London: Buckingham Palace, 1994).
12. Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986); Amal Asfour and Paul Williamson, *Gainsborough's Vision* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1999); Rosenthal, *Art of Thomas Gainsborough*.
13. Ann Bermingham, ed., *Sensation and Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).
14. See Bermingham, Introduction to *Sensation and Sensibility*, 1–34, and Michael Rosenthal, "Gainsborough's Cottage-Doors: A Matter of Modernity", in *Sensation and Sensibility*, ed. Bermingham, 77–95.
15. My article is indebted to existing scholarship on Gainsborough's attitudes to art theory, such as Michael Rosenthal, "Gainsborough's *Diana and Actaeon*", in *Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art, 1700–1850*, ed. John Barrell (Oxford: Oxford Univ.

- Press, 1992), 167–94; Michael Cole, “Gainsborough’s Diversions”, *Word & Image* 13, no. 4 (1997): 366–76; and Asfour and Williamson, *Gainsborough’s Vision*, 226–75.
16. Reynolds’s discourses were published within his own lifetime and collected into a single edition in 1797. All citations are to Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1988).
 17. The idea of an “argument in paint” is drawn from Edgar Wind’s important essay “Hume and the Heroic Portrait”, where it is applied to an analysis of the relationships between philosophy and portraiture. Here I use it in relation to art theory and Gainsborough’s visualization of an alternative formula for morally serious painting to that outlined by Reynolds. See Edgar Wind, *Hume and the Heroic Portrait: Studies in Eighteenth-century Imagery*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 3.
 18. See David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), ch. 5.
 19. The important influence of Hogarth and the St Martin’s Lane Academy on the formation of Gainsborough’s art and aesthetic politics is explored by Rosenthal in *Art of Thomas Gainsborough*, 121–45. On Hogarth’s empiricism, see Frédéric Ogée, “Je-sais-quoi: William Hogarth and the Representation of the Forms of Life”, in *Hogarth: Representing Nature’s Machines*, ed. David Bindman, Frédéric Ogée, and Peter Wagner (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2001), 71–84, and Michel Baridon, “Hogarth the Empiricist”, in *The Dumb Show: Image and Society in the Works of William Hogarth*, ed. Frédéric Ogée (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 191–202.
 20. See E. D. H. Johnson, *Paintings of the British Social Scene: From Hogarth to Sickert* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 97, and Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough*, 67.
 21. David H. Solkin, “Portraiture in Motion: Edward Penny’s *Marquis of Granby* and the Creation of a Public for English Art”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1986): 1–23.
 22. The press regularly singled Bigg out for praise. See “Continuation of an Account of the Paintings, &c. exhibited this year by the Royal Academy”, *The Morning Chronicle*, 27 May 1780, 6; “The Painter’s Mirror for 1781, No. IV”, *The Morning Herald*, 8 May 1781, 2; and “Account of the Exhibition of Paintings &c. at the Royal Academy”, *St James’s Chronicle*, 5 May 1781, 4.
 23. Vicesimus Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2 vols. (London: Charles Dilly, 1778), 1: 222.
 24. For the representation of the “deserving poor” see John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 214–20, and *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), 83–85.
 25. For the evolution of this motif and its dissemination through northern Europe, see Edgar Wind, “Charity: The Case History of a Pattern”, *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1, no. 4 (1938): 322–30.
 26. See Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (1611; New York: Garland, 1976), 72. Postle argues for Reynolds’s appropriation of Ripa’s model, while Wind traces his use of the Charity allegory back to Michelangelo and Raphael. See Wind, “Charity”, 323.
 27. See Susan J. Barnes and others, *Van Dyck: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings* (New Haven and London, Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 298; John Sunderland, *John Hamilton Mortimer: His Life and Works* (London: The Walpole Society, 1988), 123; and Wind, “Charity”, 326–28.
 28. William Hogarth, *Anecdotes of William Hogarth, Written by Himself* (London: J. B. Nichols and Son, 1833), 8–9.

29. John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: "The Body of the Public"* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 2–4.
30. Barrell argues "the upgrading of such virtues as 'humanity' and 'pity' was especially of benefit to the *victors* of the commercial system, who were offered thereby the consolation of engaging in private moral transactions with its *victims*." *Political Theory of Painting*, 60.
31. Postle, *Angels and Urchins*, 21–24.
32. Samuel Johnson, *The Idler*, 2 vols. (London: J. Newbery, 1761), 1: 20.
33. Fielding, *The Complete Works of Henry Fielding, Esq.: Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. W. E. Henley (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967), 14: 185.
34. Johnson, *The Idler*, 1: 19.
35. Hannah More, *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (London: T. Cadell, 1791), 42.
36. See Michael Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain, 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 447, and Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 9–13.
37. On the rise of voluntary charities in the eighteenth century, see Michael J. D. Roberts, "Head Versus Heart? Voluntary Associations and Charity Organisation in England, c.1700–1850", in *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from the 1690s to 1850*, ed. Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 66–86.
38. See Ruth McClure, *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), vii–viii.
39. Donna Andrew, in her study of charities in eighteenth-century London, argues that the most successful institutions were those that combined compassion, patriotism, and mercantile interest in their rhetoric. See Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 71–74. On the growing humanitarianism of eighteenth-century philanthropic culture, see David Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1660–1960* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1964), 14. On the Royal Humane Society, see Carolyn D. Williams, "'The Luxury of Doing Good': Benevolence, Sensibility, and the Royal Humane Society", in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Mary Mulvey Roberts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 77–107.
40. Owen has described eighteenth-century British charity as modern humanitarianism—a collective effort that replaced erratic and feudal forms of aristocratic beneficence. See Owen, *English Philanthropy*, 12–13. Paul Langford describes the new kind of entrepreneurial, middle-class charitable individual in Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 482–84. Eighteenth-century clerics and commentators also argued that charity constituted an opportunity for moral reform—of both giver and receiver alike. See Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, 42–43. According to Barrell, the middle classes had the most to gain from the promotion of social virtues such as charity to the level of public responsibility, as the confusion between public and private virtues minimized the difference between the enfranchised ruling classes and the unenfranchised, "private" members of society, and thus permitted the latter to participate in the cultural shaping of English society. See John Barrell, *Political Theory of Painting*, 54–58.
41. Rev. Hugh Blair, "Charity", in *Sentimental Beauties from the Writings of Dr. Blair* (London: John Wallis, 1798), 185.
42. Joseph Addison, "Of Charity", in *Maxims, Observations and Reflections Divine, Moral and Political* (London: E. Curll, 1736), 5. From mid-century, moral philosophy, literature, and

- poetry placed an increasing emphasis on the role of sympathetic feeling in creating social formations, in day to day social intercourse as well as the reception of books and works of art. Paul Langford describes this as a “sentimental revolution”. See Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, 463. On sensibility and its emphasis on emotive experience and response in literature, morality, and philosophy, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996).
43. Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London: J. Knapton, 1751), vol. 1.
 44. On universal love, or universal benevolence, see R. S. Crane, “Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling’”, *ELH* 1, no. 3 (1934): 209–11.
 45. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians verse 13 supplied the most widely used notion of Christian charity, and proved a popular sermon topic. For the Christian tradition of charity, see Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, 13–22.
 46. Deborah Valenze stresses the wider definition of charity beyond the giving of alms in “Charity, Custom and Humanity: Changing Attitudes Towards the Poor in Eighteenth-century England”, in *Revival and Religion Since 1700: Essays for John Walsh*, ed. Jane Garnett and Colin Matthews (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 61.
 47. Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 135.
 48. See *St James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 16–19 August 1788.
 49. Philip Thicknesse, *A Sketch of the Life and Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, Esq.* (London, 1788), 41–42.
 50. Obituary, *The Morning Chronicle*, 5 Aug. 1788, 4.
 51. Obituary, *The Morning Post*, 5 Aug. 1788, 2. On Gainsborough’s religious beliefs and background, see Hugh Belsey, *Gainsborough’s Family* (Sudbury: Gainsborough’s House Society, 1988).
 52. Thomas Alcock, *Observations on the Defects of the Poor Laws, and on the Causes and Consequence of the Great Increase and Burden of the Poor* (London: R. Baldwin, 1752), 28.
 53. Fielding, *Complete Works*, 14: 82.
 54. See Tim Hitchcock, “Begging on the Streets of Eighteenth-century London”, *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 486–87.
 55. See Tim Hitchcock, “Begging on the Streets of Eighteenth-century London”, *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 486–87. Doors were also used metaphorically to describe compassion. The Anglican theologian Bishop Joseph Butler called compassion a “door” to one’s innermost feelings. See Joseph Butler, “Upon Compassion”, Sermon 5, in *Butler’s Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and A Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue*, ed. T. A. Roberts (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 51.
 56. On the role of doors in eighteenth-century British scenes of charity, see Georgina Cole, “Painting the Threshold: Doors, Space and Representation in Eighteenth-century Genre Painting”, PhD thesis, Univ. of Sydney, 2010, 158–210.
 57. Michael Rosenthal sees Gainsborough’s repeated depiction of peasants on the move in his paintings from the 1770s and 80s as a critique of the impact of enclosure on the “moral economy” of the countryside. See Rosenthal, “Gainsborough’s Cottage Doors”, 90, and *Art of Thomas Gainsborough*, 202–10.
 58. Charity is performed here by women, who seem to be the sources of benevolence. This may be linked to what Asfour and Williamson have pointed out are dominant themes of nurture and nourishment in the Cottage Doors, which are likewise administered by women rather than

- men. See Amal Asfour and Paul Williamson, "Gainsborough's Cottage-door Scenes: Aesthetic Principles, Moral Values", in *Sensation and Sensibility*, ed. Bermingham, 97.
59. Rosenthal identifies the pigeon as an evocation of the Holy Spirit in *Art of Thomas Gainsborough*, 231, as does Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough*, 67. Gainsborough was not averse to allegorical spiritual allusions. Rosenthal examines other traces of religious iconography in "Gainsborough's Cottage Doors", 81–83. Asfour and Williamson have also analysed the broad, heterogeneous spirituality of Gainsborough's work, particularly its connection to themes of the New Testament and the life of Christ. See Asfour and Williamson, *Gainsborough's Vision*, 261–67.
 60. The residual smears of lead white suggest that Gainsborough moved the dove slightly to the right, where it hovers directly above the infant child and standing little girl.
 61. Philip Barton, *The Superiour Excellency of Charity. A Sermon Preach'd Before the Sons of the Clergy, at Their Anniversary-meeting in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Thursday, Febr. 19, 1735* (London: T. Wotton, 1736), 9.
 62. Ebenezer Radcliff, *The Charitable Man the Best Oeconomist, Patriot, and Christian. A Sermon Preached at St. Thomas's, Southwark, On January the First, 1761* (London: J. Waugh, 1761), 5, 9. For Gainsborough's religion, see note 47.
 63. Andrew argues that charity itself constituted an act of devotion in the eighteenth century that demonstrated faith in God and salvation. See Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, 15.
 64. Rosenthal argues there are also religious allusions in Gainsborough's cottage doors. See "Gainsborough's Cottage Doors", 81.
 65. See Postle in Rosenthal and Myrone, eds., *Gainsborough*, 232, and Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough*, 67.
 66. Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 171–79.
 67. Oil sketches of the same dimensions were also produced. The sketch for Charity is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Stipple engravings of Reynolds's virtues, including Charity, which were printed in black-and-white and colour editions, were published by John Boydell in 1781.
 68. Reynolds's sketchbook of his journey to Florence in 1752 is held in the British Museum, Ass. No. 296123001, British 201.a.10 PIIIb. His account of the Pitti Palace is on folio 24.
 69. Francis Broun, "Sir Joshua Reynolds' Collection of Paintings", PhD thesis, Princeton Univ., 1987, 100–102.
 70. See David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 137. Wind sees this as evidence of Reynolds's "witty" appropriations of old-master paintings. See Wind, "Charity", 328.
 71. I am grateful to Donato Esposito for sharing this insight. On Reynolds's collection of old-master drawings, see Donato Esposito, Jenny Graham, and Cristina S. Martinez, ed. Sam Smiles, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Acquisition of Genius* (Plymouth: Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 2009).
 72. Reynolds was a subscriber to George Richardson's English version of Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1777, which included new plates of the allegorical images. See George Richardson, *Iconology; or, a Collection of Emblematical Figures*, 2 vols. (London: G. Scott, 1779).
 73. See Clifford, Griffiths, and Royalton-Kisch, *Gainsborough and Reynolds*, 22. There is a similar sketch in black chalk heightened with white in the Morgan Library, dated ca. 1780–5. See Rosenthal and Myrone, *Gainsborough*, 228.

74. Numbers 98–103. See Algernon Graves, ed., *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*, 4 vols. (1905; New York: B. Franklin, 1972), 2: 192.
75. This figure was singled out for praise in the *The School of Raphael; or, the Student's Guide to Expression in Historical Painting* (London: John Boydell, 1759), 16.
76. See Arline Meyer, *Apostles in England: Sir James Thornhill and the Legacy of Raphael's Tapestry Cartoons* (New York: Columbia Univ., 1996), 17–81.
77. Gainsborough also quoted from the ancient and old-master tradition in the portrait of his daughters of 1763–4 (Gainsborough's House, Sudbury), which included a statuette of the Farnese Flora. See Belsey, *Gainsborough's Family*, 88. Gainsborough also showed an interest in religious iconography, which is discussed in Asfour and Williamson, *Gainsborough's Vision*, 228–68. The question of Gainsborough's literary ambitions remains a vexed one, but it now seems clear that his paintings reveal a greater intellectual ambition than his letters and biographers cared to admit. On Gainsborough's evasiveness, in prose and paint, see Cole, "Gainsborough's Diversions", 366–76.
78. Barrell argues that the discourse of general and particular form is the foundation of Reynolds's attitudes toward art. See *Political Theory of Painting*, 82–90, and Walter J. Hipple, "General and Particular in the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Study in Method", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11, no. 3 (1953): 231–47.
79. Rensselaer Lee has described Reynolds as "a late and important exponent of humanistic doctrine". See Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967), 68–69. For Reynolds's variations from humanist discourse, and the context of his interpretation of it, see Barrell, *Political Theory of Painting*, 69–162.
80. Reynolds, Discourse III (1770), in *Discourses*, 44.
81. Reynolds, Discourse III (1770), in *Discourses*, 44–45.
82. Reynolds, Discourse III (1770), in *Discourses*, 43.
83. Reynolds, Discourse IV (1771), in *Discourses*, 69.
84. Reynolds, Discourse IV (1771), in *Discourses*, 69. On the concept of minuteness in British aesthetic theory, see Harry Mount, "Morality, Microscopy and the Moderns: The Meaning of Minuteness in Shaftesbury's Theory of Painting", *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 125–41.
85. Reynolds, Discourse IV (1771), in *Discourses*, 69.
86. Reynolds, Discourse V (1772), in *Discourses*, 77.
87. Reynolds, Discourse III (1770), in *Discourses*, 48–49.
88. Reynolds, Discourse IV (1771), in *Discourses*, 70.
89. Reynolds, Discourse IV (1771), in *Discourses*, 58.
90. Reynolds, Discourse VII (1776), in *Discourses*, 129.
91. Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 112.
92. Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 152.
93. The complex relationship between Reynolds and Gainsborough was well documented by their contemporaries. See William Jackson, who catalogues their differences in *The Four Ages; Together with Essays on Various Subjects* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798), 170–84.
94. Rosenthal suggests that relations between Reynolds and Gainsborough began to change during this period. In 1782, Reynolds bought Gainsborough's *Girl and Pigs*, and in the same year, Gainsborough began to paint the president's portrait, a work that remained unfinished. See Rosenthal, "Gainsborough's *Diana and Actaeon*", 182.

95. Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 113. Rosenthal has argued that Gainsborough “painted against Reynolds’s academicism” in landscapes that develop “serious” ethical and artistic meanings. See Rosenthal, “Landscape as High Art”, in *Glorious Nature: British Landscape Painting, 1750–1850*, ed. Katharine Baetjer (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1993), 22–26. It is worth noting that Gainsborough’s only trip abroad, to the Low Countries in September 1783, was taken not long before *Charity Relieving Distress* was painted. His exposure to the canon of European painting, particularly the Flemish grand manner style of Rubens and Van Dyck, may have inspired the inclusion of allegorical figures in this picture. On Gainsborough’s trip, see Amal Asfour, Paul Williamson, and Gertrude Jackson, “A Second Sentimental Journey: Gainsborough Abroad”, *Apollo* 146 (Aug. 1997): 27–30.
96. Rosenthal sees *Diana and Actaeon* as an example of Gainsborough’s complex engagement with Reynolds’s theory and practice that playfully combines an appropriate subject with an inappropriate method of execution. See Rosenthal, “Gainsborough’s *Diana and Actaeon*”, 184–92. In my view, *Charity Relieving Distress* is a similarly critical work, which engages with concepts of genre and representation. At Schomberg House in Pall Mall, where the Gainsboroughs moved in 1774, they were neighbours to the auctioneer James Christie. Gainsborough’s friendship with Christie would have contributed to his knowledge of old-master paintings and perhaps the influence of this tradition on his practice in London. See Vaughan, *Gainsborough*, 112.
97. See Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 153.
98. The dispute was mainly over the hanging of *The Three Eldest Princesses* according to “the line”, which dictated full lengths be hung more than eight feet (2.4 metres) from the floor. See *The Morning Herald*, 22 April 1784, and Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 160.
99. The Royal Academy archive has a list of eight paintings destined for the exhibition of 1784, but Whitley cautions it may be incomplete. The list includes portraits of royalty and aristocracy, as well as *The Three Eldest Princesses*, which was at the heart of the dispute. A letter to the editor of *The St James’s Chronicle*, however, claims that “thirteen or fourteen pictures from Mr Gainsborough’s pencil were withdrawn”, and in Bate-Dudley’s article in *The Morning Herald* of 1784, the number is increased to seventeen. See Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough*, 212–13. It is therefore unclear whether *Charity Relieving Distress* was painted for the exhibition, or after Gainsborough’s secession.
100. Rosenthal also argues that Gainsborough’s Cottage Doors, especially *The Woodcutter’s Return*, constitute an alternative to Reynolds’s formula for academic painting. See Rosenthal, “Gainsborough’s Cottage Doors”, 82.
101. Solkin argues that an inverse movement in history painting toward the particularizing details of genre painting characterizes the works exhibited at Vauxhall and the Foundling Hospital by Hogarth and Hayman. Gainsborough’s combination of genre echoes this tendency in the fancy picture. See Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 198–206.
102. Bate-Dudley, “View of Mr. Gainsborough’s Gallery”, 4.
103. Reynolds, Discourse VI (1774), in *Discourses*, 107.
104. Rosenthal, in this sense, describes Gainsborough as “committed to the representation of perceived realities”, in “Gainsborough’s *Diana and Actaeon*”, 184. On Gainsborough’s empiricism, see Asfour and Williamson, *Gainsborough’s Vision*, 1–22.
105. This could also be read as a resolution between the public virtues of humanist history painting (evoked by the emblematic figure of Christian charity), and the private virtues depicted in genre painting (symbolized by the generous young lady). In this sense, Gainsborough’s

painting responds to what Barrell has identified as a “complication of the distinction between public and private virtue” that ultimately attenuated the authority of humanism in British culture. See Barrell, *Political Theory of Painting*, 58.

106. The seventeenth-century *paragone* debate, initiated by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Trattato della pittura*, considered which of painting, sculpture, or architecture, was the most difficult and superior of the arts. On the persistence of this debate in the eighteenth century, especially in terms of the relationship between painting and sculpture, see Laura Auricchio, “The Laws of Bienséance and the Gendering of Emulation in Eighteenth-century French Art Education”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 231–40.
107. Reynolds, Discourse XIV (1788), in *Discourses*, 259.
108. Bermingham argues persuasively that Gainsborough’s paint handling produces an “optical fusion” between painting and beholder. See her Introduction to *Sensation and Sensibility*, 15–16. Barrell has remarked that Reynolds “repeatedly attributes value to what is fixed, settled, permanent, solid, as opposed to whatever is floating, fluctuating, fleeting, variable”. See *Political Theory of Painting*, 80. Asfour and Williamson have suggested that Gainsborough’s paintings are in fact about perception, and “less concerned with apprehending nature *per se* than with an awareness of the process of apprehension”. See Amal Asfour and Paul Williamson, “Splendid Impositions: Gainsborough, Berkeley, Hume”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 405–6.
109. See Gainsborough’s letter to Reynolds in Hayes, ed., *Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, 183. Reynolds alluded to the affecting nature of this final meeting in his fourteenth Discourse of 1788, in *Discourses*, 252.
110. Michael Cole argues that Gainsborough developed an “alternative, anti-Historical ideal for the fledgling British school”, in “Gainsborough’s Diversions”, 371. Here, however, I have argued that instead of rejecting Reynolds’s precepts, Gainsborough’s late works combine and resolve their principles with his own.
111. On the modernity of Wright’s paintings, and their conscious appeal to a new kind of private, polite, and commercial audience, see David H. Solkin, “ReWrighting Shaftesbury: The Air Pump and the Limits of Commercial Humanism”, in *Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art, 1700–1850*, ed. John Barrell (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 73–99.

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