

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, spring 2016

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *A Girl Reading: Portrait of Theophila Palmer* (c. 1771), Oil on Canvas, H. 38in x W31in. Gift of Ethelbert R. Billings, 1863.

This charming portrait has been a symbol for young female intellectuals at the Athenaeum for years. The painting's creator, Sir Joshua Reynolds (British, 1723-1792) was one of the most sought-after and influential portraitists of the eighteenth century. Born in 1723 in Plympton, England, he served as an apprentice for four years under the fashionable London painter, Thomas Hudson, beginning in 1740. By the following decade he had become one of the busiest portrait painters in London, and its primary arbiter of the "Grand Manner" style. In the beginning of Reynolds' career he was known for his "natural" depictions of his sitters, but come the 1760's he developed a more self-conscious and classical style, having fallen under the influence of Baroque painters in Europe.¹ His typical client featured men, women, and children of the upper class, and even some members of royal families, such as his most important commission: the Family of the Duke of Marlborough (1771)² This portrait of his *A Girl Reading* is unique in which her pose is not rigid, and its less classical than previous works, indicating that it was created for pleasure.

As a child Reynolds had been profoundly influenced by his older sister Mary, whose love for drawing and artistic exploration seem to have inspired his own.³ In this 1771 portrait of Mary's daughter, Theophila Palmer (1757-1848), Reynolds pays tribute to his beloved niece. Of his many nieces and nephews, Theophila, lovingly referred to as "Offy" was the artist's clear favorite; indeed, Offy lived with Reynolds in London from the age of thirteen, until her marriage at twenty-four to Robert Lovell Gwatkin in 1781⁴.

Theophila's portrait, most likely painted the year she came to live with her uncle, shows the fourteen-year-old girl engrossed in a book. Wearing a blue silk mantle tied in front with a light blue ribbon over a white dress, she is represented rather informally, as evidenced by the lack of powder on her reddish-brown hair (a subtle visual detail that an eighteenth-century viewer would have noticed). The portrait was later restored in 1977, adding a fashionable pink hue to Theophila's dress.⁵ The background of the portrait is extraordinarily dark, which was common throughout his numerous portraits. Her dress, and book are of neutral colors, with exception of the plush green chair she is sitting in. This combination of dark background and earth tones draws the viewer's attention to the sitter, especially to her face.

¹ "Sir Joshua Reynolds: British painter" Encyclopaedia Britannica, Last modified March 07, 2016. <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Joshua-Reynolds>

² Id.

³ Mannings, David, and Martin Postle. *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000. 363.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Providence Athenaeum *Annual Report*, 1895. [Athenaeum Archives.]

Theophila's brow is furrowed and her eyes are focused on her book. The book in Theophila's hand is Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa: Or the History of Young Lady* (1748).⁶ *Clarissa* is the story of a tragic young heroine whose family has recently come into wealth and status. Her family, for the sake of their newly found grandeur forces the protagonist into an unwanted marriage. *Clarissa* is part of three volumes, and it is evident that Offy is heavily entranced in the story.

The Athenaeum is fortunate indeed to have acquired such an important piece in its collection. Ethelbert R. Billings, Esq of Providence, Rhode Island, gifted the painting to the Athenaeum in 1863, having acquired the painting from his deceased brother, Alpheus Billings and his partner Mr. Cadman of London.⁷ Alpheus Billings and Mr. Cadman were partners in both business, and aesthetics. Ethelbert Billings gifted five objects to the Athenaeum from his brother's collection. The portrait was created in London, as was Mr. Cadman. It is with thanks to the deceased art collectors that the Athenaeum has ownership of such a London treasure.

Reynolds was not only an artist, but also a valued intellectual in London. His election as the first President of the Royal Academy in 1768⁸ was not only a measure of his reputation as a painter, but also of the administrative, political, and academic skills it required to lead such a prestigious institution. The Royal Academy was formed by a group of artists and architects as a venue for intellectual discussions as much as for the development of artists' technical training.

Although Reynolds believed the genre of history painting was the most "noble"⁹ calling for any artist, he rarely had the time to produce them. He will always be best remembered, then, for his spectacular portraits -- including this endearing portrait image of his beloved Offy. Though he would create a later portrait of the mature Theophila¹⁰, following her marriage, this 1771 portrait of his niece conveys none of the tenderness and intimacy of her earlier portrait -- rather, we see status-conscious fashion and high piled, powdered hair that might belong to any one of Reynolds aristocratic patrons.

Ceara Bowman

⁶ Ibid, Mannings. 364.

⁷ Providence Athenaeum Annual Report, September 1863.

⁸ "About the RA | Royal Academy of Arts." About the RA | Royal Academy of Arts. Accessed March 08, 2016. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/about-the-ra#our-story>.

⁹ "Sir Joshua Reynolds." www.nationalgallery.org. Accessed March 5, 2016. <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/sir-joshua-reynolds>.

¹⁰ "Theophila Gwatkin (née Palmer)." Theophila Gwatkin (Nee Palmer). Accessed March 08, 2016. <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw36719/Theophila-Gwatkin-ne-Palmer?LinkID=mp57161>.

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