



‘Much humour and spirit’: a Grand Tour caricature by Joshua Reynolds

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THE DISTINCTLY FORTUITOUS CIRCUMSTANCES in which the young Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) found himself in Italy have been frequently rehearsed (Plate 2).¹ Captain Augustus Keppel (1725-86), having been forced to dock at Plymouth to repair his vessel bound for the Mediterranean, granted a free passage to the local artist who, at home in Devon, was already displaying his precocious abilities. After a sojourn on Minorca, Reynolds reached the Eternal City in April 1750. Reynolds’ ability to charm his aristocratic sitters was the foundation of his phenomenally successful career – and indeed it was



what had got him to Rome in the first place – so it does not surprise that he was soon on good terms with the resident and visiting *milordi*. The year after his arrival, he painted his well-known *Parody of the ‘School of Athens’* (Plate 3) in which various English and Irish visitors (identified by name in one of Reynolds’ Roman notebooks) act out a deliberately grotesque lampoon of Raphael’s famous work in a gothic, rather than classical, architectural setting, ironically suggestive of the, supposed, northern barbarism of his sitters.² The caricatures related to the School of Athens, at once erudite and playful, have long had a distinct place within Reynolds’ early oeuvre, and at the same time have become

1 – Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)

CARICATURE OF LORD BRUCE, THE HON. JOHN WARD, JOSEPH LEESON JNR, AND JOSEPH HENRY OF STRAFFAN 1751, oil on canvas, 58.7 x 43.6 cm (courtesy of Simon C. Dickinson Ltd)

2 – Joshua Reynolds, SELF-PORTRAIT

c.1750, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 47.5 cm (detail) (courtesy Yale Center for British Art)



defining images of the Grand Tour. Ellis Waterhouse described their purpose as ‘an excellent way of keeping friends with the richer English visitors, who might one day be his patrons in England’.³ Witty, knowing and technically proficient, these are quite unlike anything else Reynolds would paint in the long years ahead. The significance of the Roman caricatures to an understanding of Reynolds’ early career makes the correct identification of a further work from the series (Plate 1) an unusually significant addition to his oeuvre. In total, five caricatured portrait compositions are known, in addition to the *Parody*, two of which survive in two autograph versions, including the work published here, making seven in total.⁴

The driving force behind the commissioning of the caricatures – and certainly the purchaser of three of them – seems to have been Joseph Leeson, a wealthy, if distinctly



3 – Joshua Reynolds

PARODY OF THE 'SCHOOL OF
ATHENS'

1751, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 133.5 cm
(© National Gallery of Ireland)

4 – Russborough House,
Co Wicklow

(from John Neale, VIEWS OF THE SEATS
OF NOBLEMEN AND GENTLEMEN, 1826)

boorish brewer, who can be seen standing in pride of place at the centre of the *Parody of the 'School of Athens'* with heavy irony taking the role of Plato in Raphael's original. The *Parody* itself was commissioned by Leeson's nephew, Joseph Henry (1727-96). Leeson (soon to be created Earl of Milltown) was unusual for the relatively advanced age at which he made the Grand Tour and for the fact that this was the second of his two trips to Italy; he had previously visited in 1744-45.⁵ On his visits, Leeson patronised Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789) and acquired a typically Grand Tour collection of paintings, antique and more modern sculpture, intended to fill Russborough, county Wicklow, the great house that was under construction to designs by Richard Castle (d.1751) as he and his son sojourned in Italy (Plate 4). On his previous Italian tour, Leeson had been painted in a forceful portrait by Pompeo Batoni (1708-87), and on this visit, his son, also Joseph (1730-1801) (Plate 5), and nephew would sit for the Lucchese artist. Towards the end of 1750, Leeson's circle in Rome also commissioned caricatures of themselves from the elderly Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674-1755), which are utterly different from the elegant idealisation of Batoni's portraiture.⁶ One of the most elaborate of these shows the younger Joseph Leeson with Lord Charlemont (1728-99) (Plate 7). These works by Ghezzi, executed in pen and brown ink and completed just a few months earlier, were, no doubt, the immediate source of inspiration which led Leeson and his circle to ask the young Reynolds to try something similar, but in oil.

Leeson Jnr, together with Joseph Henry, appears again in one of three stand-alone caricatures by Reynolds commissioned by his father (Plate 6), and it is a further





5 – Pompeo Batoni (1708-87)
 PORTRAIT OF JOSEPH LEESON JNR,
 LATER 2ND EARL OF MILLTOWN
 1751, oil on canvas, 90 x 73.5 cm
 (© National Gallery of Ireland)

version of this composition that can now be identified as an autograph work by the artist (Plate 1). From the left, the two pictures show the ‘elegant beanpole’ Lord Bruce (Thomas Bruce-Brundell, 1729-1814), who had arrived in Rome by Easter 1751 and quickly became part of Lord Charlemont’s coterie.⁷ Standing next to Bruce is another member of Charlemont’s circle, the Hon John Ward (1725-88), later 2nd Viscount Dudley. Ward, like Bruce, had appeared in a caricature by Ghezzi, and features in another one of Reynolds’s caricatures, but is the only one of the four men shown here who does not reappear in the *Parody*.⁸ Next to him we see Joseph Leeson Jnr, later 2nd Earl of Milltown, who was mocked as an ‘incurable simpleton’, and whom even Batoni, that most flattering of artists, conspicuously fails to render in any way sympathetic (Plate 5).⁹ Young Leeson certainly did not display the urbanity or possess the scholarship of his cousin Joseph Henry, who is shown to his right.¹⁰ Henry, described as ‘the most erudite in classics of the entire Irish and British contingent at that time in Rome’, commissioned work from Richard Wilson (1714-82), sat to Batoni and, like his uncle, ordered four works from Vernet.¹¹ Robert Adam (1728-92), who described him as a ‘clever, sensible fellow’, noted ‘he has seen much of the world to purpose’, something that could not be said of all Grand Tourists.¹² Henry later published an essay on Raphael’s *Madonna del Pesce* (Museo del Prado, Madrid), and in a further caricature by Ghezzi is shown



6 – Joshua Reynolds

CARICATURE OF THOMAS BRUDENELL (BARON BRUCE), THE HON. JOHN WARD, JOSEPH LEESON JNR (LATER
2ND EARL OF MILLTOWN), AND JOSEPH HENRY OF STRAFFAN

1751, oil on canvas, 63 x 49 cm © National Gallery of Ireland / Milltown Gift, 1902



7 – Pier Leone Ghezzi

(1674-1755)

CARICATURE OF JOSEPH LEESON

JNR AND LORD CHARLEMONT

1750, pen and brown ink on paper

with traces of chalk, 32 x 22 cm

(Philadelphia Museum of Art,

Bequest of Anthony Morris Clark)

sedulously consulting a volume on Roman antiquities (Plate 8).¹³ Here, by contrast, he is seated on the right, studying ‘with a witless expression’ a large volume inscribed ‘Cloacha Massima’, referring to the great sewer of ancient Rome, and showing an image of its outfall into the Tiber.¹⁴ On the Grand Tour, lavatorial humour could co-exist very comfortably with displays of erudition.

Back at Russborough, Leeson hung his three Roman caricatures in his panelled study – a private male sphere just off the drawing room (ironically, it later became Lady Beit’s boudoir).¹⁵ The caricatures descended in the Milltown family at Russborough through the nineteenth century until the last three earls (who were brothers) failed to produce a son between them, and in March 1906 the entire collection at Russborough, including the three caricatures, was given to the National Gallery of Ireland on the death of the last countess, Lady Barbara.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the newly identified work spent the nineteenth century twenty miles due north of Russborough, at Killadoon, county Kildare, home to the Clements family, where it is recorded for the first time in an inventory of 27th June 1836. At that date it was hanging in the dining room and was listed as ‘Reynolds of Lords Milltown, Aylesbury and Dudley and Mr Henry of Straffan’.¹⁷ The picture remained at Killadoon, still hanging

8 – *Pier Leone Ghezzi*

CARICATURE OF JOSEPH HENRY

1750, pen and brown ink on paper
(Metropolitan Museum New York,
Rogers Fund)



in the dining room, until it was sold at Sotheby's on 21st January 2020, as lot 57 when it was catalogued as a copy after Reynolds. However, a likely provenance links it back to the Leesons. Joseph Leeson Leeson Jnr, the 2nd Earl of Milltown, who features so prominently in the present work, was godfather to Caroline Clements (c.1781-1805), daughter of Robert Clements (1732-1804), later 1st Earl of Leitrim. Clements was in Italy in 1753, just after the Leesons.¹⁸ It seems a reasonable assumption that the Reynolds caricature was a gift from Leeson to his goddaughter's family, and that it has been at Killadoon since the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, far from being a copy it is an autograph work by Reynolds of superlative quality.

It has long been known that some of the caricatures existed in more than one version. David Mannings is somewhat inconsistent in the attributional status he ascribes to these. He categorises the present work as 'COPY private collection', while stating that the caricature of Sir Charles Turner, Sir William Lowther, Joseph Leeson and Monsieur Huet 'exists in two versions', one at Holker Hall and one at Bowood.¹⁹ Expanding on this, he writes of the latter: 'Waterhouse thought this might be a contemporary copy of the picture at Holker Hall. The compiler considers it an authentic second version, probably by Reynolds himself'.²⁰

The fact that both ‘second’ versions have a suggestive provenance back to one of those depicted – the picture now at Bowood was in the possession of Sir Charles Turner’s widowed daughter-in-law – implies that they were commissioned directly by one of the sitters. Reynolds in Rome was a young jobbing artist a long way removed from the painting room in Leicester Fields, with Giuseppe Marchi (1721-1808), James Northcote (1746-1831) and other assistants producing versions, and indeed painting large parts of the ‘prime’ portraits themselves. If replicas of these small pictures were needed, he would be the obvious person to whom to entrust the commission. Indeed, the implicit suggestion that an Italian artist was asked to copy these small, idiosyncratic, pictures in Rome when the young Reynolds was on hand seems perverse. Even less likely is the possibility that the Killadoon picture was copied by an artist back home in Ireland. Indeed, Mannings, by arguing for the autograph status of the Bowood picture, acknowledges that Reynolds produced replicas of the caricatures. It seems the least likely of all possible scenarios that he should produce a version of one of the caricatures while another artist was asked to paint a replica of another.

This evidence is strong but circumstantial. It is corroborated, however, by the multiple pentimenti that a recent cleaning has revealed. At the same time, Reynolds’ assured handling and control of palette here is absolutely consistent with the works in the National Gallery of Ireland. Also corroborative are the differences between the present work and the National Gallery of Ireland replica (Plates 1 and 6). As with the two versions of the caricature at Holker Hall and Bowood, the two versions of the Lord Bruce, John Ward, Joseph Leeson Jnr and Joseph Henry are of slightly different sizes, and while generally very close, they are not identical in detail. The main difference is that the rather busy detail of Joseph Leeson’s upraised hands is omitted in the ex-Killadoon picture while Reynolds has given Bruce an even more impressively aquiline nose. The 1836 inventory should be taken at face value and the attribution to Reynolds reaffirmed.²¹

According to his pupil and biographer James Northcote, Reynolds later regretted his early foray into caricature:

I have heard Reynolds himself say, that although it was universally allowed he executed subjects of this kind with much humour and spirit, he yet held it absolutely necessary to abandon the practice; since it must corrupt his taste as a portrait painter, whose duty it becomes to aim at discovering the perfections only of those he is to represent.²²

Clearly these delightful forays into caricature did not corrupt Reynolds’s taste. Instead they remain as among the most appealing of his early works, and seemingly the only portraits that he painted in Rome. The rediscovery of an additional work in the series with a likely provenance back to one of the sitters, via his god-daughter, makes for one of the most exciting additions to Reynolds’ early oeuvre in recent years.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For example, see Ian McIntyre, *Joshua Reynolds, The life and times of the first President of the Royal Academy* (London, 2003) 37-76.
- ² For the *Parody of the 'School of Athens'*, see Cynthia O'Connor, 'The Parody of the School of Athens', *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, XXVI, 1983, 4-22, and David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: a complete catalogue of his paintings*, 2 vols (New Haven and London, 2000) I, 491-92.
- ³ Ellis K. Waterhouse, *Reynolds* (London, 1941) 8. In general, see Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, I, 491-93, and Sergio Benedetti, *The Milltowns: a family reunion*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Ireland (Dublin, 1997) 51-65.
- ⁴ In addition to the three caricatures in the National Gallery of Ireland and formerly at Russborough, two versions of Mr Turner, Sir William Lowther, Joseph Leeson and M. Huet exist, at Hoker Hall and Bowood, while a caricature showing John Woodyeare, Dr William Drake, Mr Cooke and Sir Charles Turner is in the collection of the Rhode Island School of Design, having descended in the family of one of the sitters John Woodyeare. A distinct but related work, Ralph Howard's *Escapade* (private collection), showing Grand Tour high jinks, is in a private collection. See Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, I, 491-93.
- ⁵ See Benedetti, *The Milltowns*, and William Laffan and Kevin V. Mulligan, *Russborough: a great Irish house, its families and collections* (Russborough, 2014) 84-131; John Ingamells, *Dictionary of English and Irish travellers to Italy, 1701-1800* (London, 1997), 593-94, entry by Michael Wynne.
- ⁶ Benedetti, *The Milltowns*, 36-47.
- ⁷ Nicholas Penny, *Reynolds*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy (London, 1986) 177; in general, see Ingamells, *Dictionary*, 146-47. Bruce subscribed to Charlemont's plans for an Academy for British artists in Rome. In addition to an extensive tour of Italy, Bruce visited Holland, Germany, Scandinavia and Russia. He was painted again, rather more conventionally, by Reynolds in 1765, served as tutor to George III's children, and was created Earl of Ailesbury in 1776.
- ⁸ Ingamells, *Dictionary*, 978.
- ⁹ See Laffan and Mulligan, *Russborough*, 132.
- ¹⁰ While the figures of Leeson Jnr and Lord Bruce are repeated in the *Parody* almost exactly as they appear in the present work, Henry, who commissioned the *Parody*, is given additional prominence as, taking the position of Diogenes the Cynic in Raphael's original, he sprawls on the steps to the right of centre.
- ¹¹ Benedetti, *The Milltowns*, 51.
- ¹² Cited Ingamells, *Dictionary*, 484, entry by Cynthia O'Connor.
- ¹³ Joseph McDonnell, 'Joseph Henry of Straffan, a connoisseur of Italian renaissance painting', in Michael McCarthy (ed.), *Lord Charlemont and his Circle: essays in honour of Michael Wynne* (Dublin, 2001) 77-89.
- ¹⁴ Ingamells, *Dictionary*, 484, entry by Cynthia O'Connor.
- ¹⁵ They are listed as hanging here in 1826 in John Preston Neale's account of the house, together with 'two views of Rome' by Panini, a portrait of the Earl of Suffolk attributed to Holbein, and St Agatha by Guercino. See Kevin V. Mulligan, *Rich Specimens of Architectural Beauty: John Preston Neale's Irish country houses* (Tralee, 2020) 153, 173.
- ¹⁶ Also included in the Milltown Gift to the National Gallery was Reynolds' *Parody of the 'School of Athens'*, although this had not been commissioned by the Leasons but by Joseph Henry. However, it was sold from his family at Christie's in March 1868 and subsequently acquired by Lady Barbara, and so was reunited with the three related caricatures.
- ¹⁷ Clements Papers, 'Manuscript Inventory of pictures etc. at Killadoon', compiled for Mary, Countess of Leitrim, 27th June 1836.
- ¹⁸ Ingamells, *Dictionary*, 214.
- ¹⁹ Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, I, 492, 493.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, 493.
- ²¹ Mannings based his judgment that the Killadoon picture was a 'copy' on the strength of a photograph alone. Nicholas Penny took a different view, writing in the catalogue of the 1986 Royal Academy exhibition: 'There is another version of the painting in a private collection in Ireland which may well be autograph.' Penny, *Reynolds*, 177. The recent cleaning has proved Penny's intuition correct. The attribution to Reynolds has now been confirmed by Dr Martin Postle after first-hand inspection.
- ²² James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds...*, 2 vols (London, 1818) I, 46.