



This is a repository copy of *The language of portraiture in the early nineteenth century novel: a study in Opie and Austen*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/98476/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Bray, J. (2016) The language of portraiture in the early nineteenth century novel: a study in Opie and Austen. *Women's Writing*, 23 (1). pp. 53-67. ISSN 0969-9082

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2015.1103989>

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

**Joe Bray**

## **The Language of Portraiture in the Early Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Study in Opie and Austen**

This article examines how two female writers of the early nineteenth century, Amelia Opie and Jane Austen, employ the language of portraiture in their fiction to illustrate the difficulties inherent in the assessment of character, especially for the female heroine. The representation of actual portraits in their work is discussed, along with the use of language associated with the form. Both writers, it is suggested, are aware of important changes within the theory and practice of portraiture in the period, and explore these in their fiction to draw attention to the instability and subjectivity of interpretation.

Keywords: the nineteenth-century novel, portraiture, likeness, Amelia Opie, Jane Austen.

### **Introduction**

This essay demonstrates how two female authors of the early nineteenth century, Amelia Opie and Jane Austen, incorporate and adapt the language of portraiture, as well as discussion of actual portraits, in their fiction, and examines the effects created. One particular term frequently associated with portraiture comes under detailed scrutiny: likeness. The essay argues that this is a key concept for both writers as they illustrate the similarities and differences between characters. Yet as their works show, it was also a hotly-contested, slippery term which was constantly being re-negotiated in this period, as a result of wider changes surrounding the theory and practice of portraiture itself. Both authors, it is suggested, exploit the tensions within the term to indicate the difficulties involved in assessing character, and to highlight the complexities of both visual and verbal representation.

### **“Likeness” and the Portrait**

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a growing uncertainty over the form and function of the portrait. As Shearer West observes, between 1790 and 1815 “portraiture began to be a less defined art, as it took on the qualities of history or genre painting.”<sup>i</sup> Many critics have traced the blurring of portrait and history-painting in the late eighteenth century to the theory and practice of one of the leading portrait-painters in the period, Sir Joshua Reynolds. In his fifteen lectures given to students of the Royal Academy between 1769 and 1790, which were known collectively as *Discourses on Art*, Reynolds urges his audience to aspire to what he calls the “grand” or “great” style of history-painting, which he feels has fallen into decline since the golden age of Michelangelo and Raphael. At times he can seem almost dismissive of the “lower” genres such as portrait, landscape and comic painting, all of which, in comparison with history-painting, do not come near to “the greatest style.” “None of them are without their merit,” he announces, “though none enter into comparison with this universal presiding idea of the art.”<sup>ii</sup> He declares that

“an History-Painter paints man in general; a Portrait-Painter, a particular man, and consequently a defective model” (70).

Yet on other occasions in the Discourses Reynolds suggests that the boundary between the portrait and the history-painting is not so clear-cut. He claims that the portrait can also “express the general effect of the whole which alone can give to objects their true and touching character” (193), and “confer on the Artist the character of Genius” (192). In the eleventh Discourse, for example, he praises Titian, claiming that “by a few strokes he knew how to mark the general image and character of whatever object he attempted; and produced, by this alone, a truer representation than his master Giovanni Bellino, or any of his predecessors, who finished every hair” (195). He judges that Titian’s portraits, as well as his history-paintings and landscapes, display an “excellence of manner” since “whatever he touched, however naturally mean, and habitually familiar, by a kind of magick he invested with grandeur and importance” (197). Even in this “contracted subject,” Reynolds asserts, “there are therefore large ideas to be found” (200). In his own portraits too, Reynolds sought to incorporate the excellencies of the “grand style.” Nicholas Penny argues that “a good many of Reynolds’s portraits were almost as heroic, divine, splendid – and as fictional – as the history paintings in the grand manner,”<sup>iii</sup> while Shelley Bennett and Mark Leonard point out that he not only “emulated the composition and technique of Old Master paintings in devising his portraits,” but also “hung some of his own portraits among the famous collection of Old Master paintings that he exhibited in the gallery of his studio.”<sup>iv</sup>

The consequence of Reynolds’s blurring of the distinction between the portrait and the history-painting was that the traditional association of the portrait with producing an accurate representation of its subject began to be questioned, or, as West puts it, “likeness was no longer the primary concern of the portraitist.”<sup>v</sup> For Reynolds in the Discourses, the most important feature of “grand style” is that it “does not consist in mere imitation”: “I will now add that Nature herself is not to be too closely copied. There are excellencies in the art of painting beyond what is commonly called the imitation of nature: and these excellencies I wish to point out.”<sup>vi</sup> In Reynolds’s view, “a mere copier of nature can never produce any thing great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator” (41). Instead of an individual likeness, the genuine painter should strive for what Reynolds calls “the idea of central form,” or “a just idea of beautiful forms,” which is “more perfect than any one original” (44-5). Such comments are evidence, for John Barrell, of “an insistence that portraiture should aim, as far as possible, at the excellencies of the grand style, and so at a clarity of marking though not at a laboured fidelity.”<sup>vii</sup>

Reynolds is not the only writer on portraiture in the period to insist that great art involves more than simply “copying” nature. In his Lectures on Painting, which, like the Discourses, were delivered at the Royal Academy (in February and March 1807), Amelia Opie’s husband, the painter John Opie repeatedly emphasises that the “soul of the art” lies in “invention and expression.”<sup>viii</sup> Though he admits that “perfection” in these skills “presupposes perfection in the humbler and more mechanic parts, which are the instruments, the language of the art” (11), Opie stresses the importance of “deviating from real fact and individual forms in search of higher excellence” (69). In the first lecture he sets out “three distinct principles or modes of seeing nature,” which for him are “indicative of three distinct ages, or stages of refinement, in the progress

of painting” (12). In the first authors confined themselves to “an exact copy or transcript of their originals, as they happened to present themselves, without choice or selection of any kind as to the manner of their being” (12). Practitioners of the second stage “have endeavoured to choose the most perfect models, and render them in the best point of view” (13). The third stage is, however, the one towards which painting should aspire in Opie’s view. It includes works which “have looked upon nature as meaning the general principles of things themselves, [...] have made the imitation of real objects give way to the imitation of an idea of them in their utmost perfection, and [...] represented [them] not as they actually are, but as they ought to be” (13). According to Opie, “this last stage of refinement, to which no modern has yet completely arrived, has been called the ideal, the beautiful, or the sublime style of art” (13).

For Opie, then, as for Reynolds, “getting above individual imitation, rising from the species to the genus, and uniting, in every subject, all the perfection of which it is capable in it’s kind, is the highest and ultimate exertion of human genius” (15). Unlike Reynolds, however, he does not seem to believe that this “sublime style” can be achieved through the portrait. He vehemently decries “the inordinate rage for portrait painting (a more respectable kind of caricature),” by which the English artist is “condemned for ever to study and copy the wretched defects, and conform to the still more wretched prejudices, of every tasteless and ignorant individual, however in form, features and mind utterly hostile to all ideas of character, expression, and sentiment” (34). Opie is clearly speaking from experience here; as his wife’s memoir of him after his death confirms for much of his career portrait-painting provided his only guaranteed source of income.<sup>ix</sup> His distaste for the form becomes most apparent when he describes the remarks he has overheard at exhibitions, perhaps in response to his own portraits: “one’s ear is pained, one’s very soul is sick with hearing crowd after crowd, sweeping round and, instead of discussing the merits of the different works on view (as to conception, composition and execution), all reiterating the same dull and tasteless question, Who is that? and Is it like?” (77).

The writings of Reynolds and Opie thus suggest that although this was a “portrait-painting age,” the association of the portrait with producing a “likeness” was controversial and much debated. The term itself in fact has continued to provoke discussion in theoretical treatments of portraiture. Introducing a special issue of *Art Journal* on the topic in 1987, the editor Richard Brilliant notes that “even the notion of likeness itself presupposes some degree of difference between the things compared, otherwise they would be identical and no question of likeness would arise.”<sup>x</sup> He argues that “falsity – as a failure of the complete correspondence – is itself an essential ingredient in the concept of likeness,” and thus “it would seem that all portraits have to be false, and consciously so, in respect to their Subjects, if they are to have validity as works of art” (171). In Brilliant’s view, “likeness is never more than a represented approximation that operates conceptually to fix transiency in an inclusive image, when change in spirit and body is the essential characteristic of the human Subject” (172), and “the degree of likeness, comprehended historically as some requisite quotient of resemblance, may vary almost without limit, effected more by changing views about personal identity and the function of artistic representation than by the peculiar physiognomy or appearance of the Subject” (171-2).<sup>xi</sup> From a different theoretical viewpoint, Marcia Pointon has also emphasised this approximate and ever-changing quality of “likeness.” In drawing attention to the fact that the eighteenth-

century portrait is “material property” and that its meanings are “to be produced contextually,” she argues that the accurate representation of the subject, or “likeness,” is “a shifting commodity, not an absolute point of reference; it is an idea to be annexed, rather than a standard by which to measure reality.”<sup>xii</sup>

## Amelia Opie

As the wife of a leading, if somewhat reluctant portrait painter in the period, it is not surprising that language associated with portraiture is found frequently in Amelia Opie’s fiction. It is used especially to indicate contrasts between characters. For example in “The Revenge”, from her collection *Simple Tales* (1806), the heroine Sophia, irked by Augustus’s unfavourable comparison of her with her rival Lavinia Warldorf, does everything possible to denigrate the latter, claiming to her aunt that ““madame Waldorf’s charms, which Augustus sees so plainly, are now only a face in the fire, which is visible only to one person.”<sup>xiii</sup> Under her influence Augustus feels Lavinia’s “glowing image replaced in his fancy by a faded miniature”, while “present in reality to his view was a lovely, animated, warm-hearted girl, in all the bloom and untamed vivacity of early youth” (III, 294). He declares finally: ““But Lavinia! oh, my Sophia! she is no more to be compared to you, now! – no, nor do I believe that she ever was worthy of the slightest comparison in beauty to you!”” (III, 308-9). Lavinia’s gradual replacement by Sophia in Augustus’s affections is thus indicated by the contrast between the former’s transformation into “a faded miniature” and the latter’s immediate animated vivacity. Similarly in “Happy Faces; or, Benevolence and Selfishness”, from *Tales of the Heart* (1820), the contrast between Sir Edward Meredith and Mr. Fergusson is described by the narrator as follows: “Fergusson was a large coarse picture, painted for effect, and scarcely to be endured but at a distance; Sir Edward was a highly-finished cabinet picture, which charmed the more the nearer it was approached.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Through her marriage Opie would also have been well aware of contemporary debates surrounding portraiture. Shelley King has discussed how their “companionate marriage” led to “reciprocal professional benefits,” describing it as “as much a marriage of the arts as of individuals.”<sup>xv</sup> She demonstrates how paintings and especially portraits become a feature of Opie’s poetry after her marriage, claiming that “in uniting literature and painting, she articulates a perspective she shared with her husband” (47-8).<sup>xvi</sup> After John’s untimely death shortly following his lectures to the Royal Academy it was Amelia who prepared them for publication, along with a memoir of husband through which much of our knowledge of their marriage is derived. This work confirms that, in King’s words, “in the Opie household the portrait as a genre was the subject of conflicted responses.”<sup>xvii</sup> On the one hand Opie confirms her husband’s frustration with this branch of his art, observing that “of all employments, portrait-painting is, perhaps, the most painful and trying to a man of pride and sensibility, and the most irritating to an irritable man,” yet on the other she reports him being quite happy to acknowledge to his fellow academicians that his wife influenced his increased output of female portraits in the early years of their marriage.<sup>xviii</sup> Opie herself, in anticipating the charge that she has ameliorated her husband’s character, uses language which indicates her familiarity with the practice of portrait-painting, and contemporary questions concerning its representational accuracy:

Whatever were the faults of Mr. Opie, admitting that I was aware of them, it was not for me to bring them forward to public view; and the real worth of his character in domestic life, I only can be supposed to know with accuracy and precision: and I most solemnly aver, that I have not said in his praise a single word that I do not believe to be strictly true; - but it was my business to copy the art of the portrait-painter, who endeavours to give a general rather than a detailed likeness of a face, and, while he throws its trivial defects into shadow, brings forward its perfections in the strongest point of view. (53)

The frustrations and complexity of the portrait-painter's art, as well as the potential benefits of rendering "a general rather than a detailed likeness" are felt throughout Opie's fiction. In her most well-known novel *Adeline Mowbray* (1804) a contrast is drawn between the brilliant, dying writer Glenmurray and his more worldly cousin Charles Berrendale. Though the facial resemblance between them is such that "they were, at first, mistaken for brothers,"<sup>xix</sup> there are important physical differences too, which point to their dissimilar characters: "Glenmurray was remarkable for the character and expression of his countenance, and Berrendale for the extreme beauty of his features and complexion. Glenmurray was pale and thin, and his eyes and hair dark. Berrendale's eyes were of a light blue; and though his eye-lashes were black, his hair was of a rich auburn: Glenmurray was thin and muscular; Berrendale, round and corpulent" (II, 169-170). Glenmurray recommends to Adeline that she marries his cousin after his death, reasoning that "he is reckoned like me, and I thought that likeness might make him more agreeable to you," only for Adeline to reject the prospect as "odious": "To look like you, and not be you, Oh! insupportable idea!" (II, 199). Yet after Glenmurray has died, Adeline begins to "look on Berrendale and his attentions not with anger, but gratitude and complacency; she had even pleasure in observing the likeness he bore Glenmurray; she felt that it endeared him to her" (II, 228). However once they are married the selfishness of Berrendale's character soon becomes apparent, and Adeline is continually haunted by her awareness of how much better she would have been treated by her previous lover: "How different, thought Adeline, 'would have been HIS feelings and HIS expressions of them at such a time! Oh! - ' but the name of Glenmurray died away on her lips" (III, 53).

In *Adeline Mowbray* then "likeness" is a complex and potentially deceptive quality. After Glenmurray's death the heroine at first discerns a "likeness" between him and cousin, apparently disregarding their physical differences under the influence of her deceased lover's wishes. The details of their appearance seem less important than Glenmurray's rather vague "he is reckoned like me". Yet this general kind of "likeness" soon proves misleading, as the true nature of Berrendale's character, and its contrast with Glenmurray's, emerges. Opie's later novel *Temper* (1812), in which portraits are a particularly frequent topic for discussion and debate, takes this potential unreliability of "likeness" further, suggesting it involves an inevitable subjectivity of interpretation, and highlighting the confusions that can result.

The novel concerns a girl with an ungovernable temper, Agatha, who after the death of her father becomes increasingly hard to control. She defies her mother and elopes with the dashing Mr. Danvers, only to discover that he is already married, and disposed to treat her very badly. She has a child, Emma, but dies in poverty shortly

afterwards, still separated from her family. Eventually Emma is reunited with her grandmother, Mrs. Castlemain, and though she too has a temper which at times seems to be leading her into danger, she is finally brought under the control of her grandmother and her friends and makes a happy marriage with the good-natured hero Henry St. Aubyn.

As Emma and Agatha are frequently compared, the novel abounds in language connected with portraiture, especially the term “likeness.” When Agatha’s mother Mrs. Castlemain first sees her grand-daughter she is “so powerfully” reminded of her lost daughter that “with a heart oppressed almost to bursting she rushed out of the room, and walked on the lawn to recover herself. But then she recollected how foolish she was to allow herself to be so painfully overcome by a resemblance which must endear Emma to her, and she resolved to re-enter the parlour, to contemplate the likeness from which she had before fled.”<sup>xx</sup> Soon “the lapse of years” is “entirely forgotten, and the illusion complete,” and Mrs. Castlemain even addresses Emma as “My dear dear child!” (I, 146). Her friend Mr. Egerton is also struck by the resemblance:

“The likeness strikes even me,” replied Mr. Egerton, “who saw your daughter only when pale and faded by uneasiness of mind. – And I fear,” added Mr. Egerton, “that the likeness in one respect extends still further; and that in the ungovernableness of her temper she also resembles her mother.”

“Perhaps she does,” said Mrs. Castlemain; “but so as she be but like her, I care not, however dear the complete resemblance may cost me!” (I, 147)

Mr. Egerton’s college friend Mr. Vincent has a similar reaction on first meeting Emma:

At this moment Mr. Vincent was announced, and received by Mrs. Castlemain with marked cordiality. When she presented him to Mr. Egerton, he too seemed glad to see him as an old College acquaintance; but Mr. Vincent was so struck with the strong likeness that Emma bore her mother, who has really captivated his young heart the first time he beheld her, that he could scarcely speak the welcomes which he felt; and Emma, blushing at his earnest yet melancholy gaze, turned to the window. (II, 239)

All three characters are strongly affected then by the “likeness” which Emma bears to her mother, and extend the physical resemblance to draw comparisons between the two characters. For Mrs. Castlemain and Mr. Vincent in particular, Emma’s “likeness” to Agatha triggers a powerful set of memories and feelings that they had, and indeed still have, for the latter.

Emma’s “likeness” to her mother is made more complicated, however, when Mr. Egerton shows her a veiled portrait of Agatha in Mrs. Castlemain’s dressing-room and promises “to relate the history of that dear unhappy woman.” Emma at first cannot believe it is a portrait of her mother, mournfully exclaiming “O sir, is it possible that my mother could ever have looked so young, so happy, so beautiful?” (I, 310). Mr. Egerton confirms that it represents Agatha before “she became the slave of an

imperious temper and ungovernable passions, and by an act of disobedience paved the way to her own misery and early death,” which prompts Emma to reflect further:

Emma blushed, looked down, and remained silent for a moment; but looking again at the picture, she suddenly observed, “Surely I have seen a face like that, for the features seem quite familiar to me!”

“You have,” said Mr. Egerton with a significant look, which, as Emma’s eyes involuntarily turned towards a pier glass opposite to her, she was at no difficulty to explain, and she blushed again; (but from emotions of a mixed nature, for pleasure was one of them,) as “the consciousness of self-approving beauty stole across her busy thought.” (I, 311-2)

Emma is thus only persuaded of the “likeness” of the portrait when she looks at the glass and sees her own reflection. Its “likeness” to her own face is confirmed, and by extension to that of her mother at the same age. There is thus a complex process of recognition and self-recognition at work here; Emma herself stands as an intermediary between the portrait and her mother, without whom, in her own perception at least, there can be no resemblance. The interpretation of “likeness” is thus a three-way process, involving the portrait, the subject it is supposedly “like” and the viewer herself, supporting Brilliant’s emphasis on portraiture’s “necessary incorporation” of “a viewer not privy to the intimate psychological exchange between the artist and the person portrayed but whose view often determines the significance of the work, or of the subject.”<sup>xxi</sup>

There is a more instantaneous, less mediated operation of “likeness” shortly afterwards however. The portrait represents Agatha at the age of sixteen. In order to show Emma the effects of “passion and temper” on the countenance and to try and dissuade her from following in her mother’s footsteps, Mr. Egerton then shows her a “large miniature” of her mother at twenty-four:

Emma, surprised and affected, took the picture with a trembling hand, but had no sooner beheld it, than she exclaimed in a voice inarticulate from emotion, “This is indeed my mother!” and sunk back in her chair almost choked with the violence of her feelings. (I, 313)

These examples suggest then that “likeness” can be a complex, mediated process, capable of having a powerful, violent effect, yet open to, indeed even dependent on, a subjective point of view. Elsewhere in the novel this complexity is explored further, and “likeness” shown to be even more susceptible to interpretation and disagreement. Mrs. Orwell (who looked after Agatha when she was a single parent) presents a portrait of Agatha and her child, which shows her “awaiting with clasped hands and a look of wild anguish the effect of the nutriment which Mrs. Orwell was going to convey into the infant’s mouth”:

“It is very like her,” said Mr. Egerton with a quivering lip.

“It is like, indeed!” said Emma, gazing wistfully on the beloved face of her unhappy mother.

“It is not like my child as I knew her!” exclaimed Mrs. Castlemain wildly, and falling back on the sofa in an agony almost too great to bear. (II, 389)

“Likeness” can also be the cause of misunderstanding. Mrs. St Aubyn hopes that Mr. Egerton’s enthusiastic praise of her son Henry’s appearance could translate to an admiration for herself, whereas in fact he has reminded him of someone else completely:

“What a countenance that young man has!” cried Mr. Egerton, as Henry bounded past, and smiled on them as he went.

“He has indeed,” simpered Mrs. St. Aubyn; adding, with affected and hesitating timidity, “Do you see any likeness? Some people say that – ”

“A likeness! O yes, I do indeed see his likeness to one very dear to me;” – for he concluded she alluded to her husband’s cousin, Clara Ainslie, whose image was always present to his mind, and whose name he thought Mrs. St. Aubyn from delicacy forbore to mention.

“Do you not see the likeness yourself, dear madam?” asked he, pressing her arm gently as she spoke.

“Why – yes,” replied the lady, “I believe I do; but I must be a bad judge, you know – ”

“You are too modest,” rejoined Mr. Egerton, again pressing her arm kindly [...] (I, 252-3)

“Likeness” then is not a fixed, determinate constant in this novel, but rather perpetually in flux, and open to subjective interpretation. In Brilliant’s terms it may “vary almost without limit.”<sup>xxii</sup> The narrator comments at the start of volume III that “I am well convinced that no two persons can receive exactly the same impressions from any one object or scene, but that, however like the impressions might be in the aggregate, they would be different in the detail” (III, 1). For Opie, throughout her fiction, “likeness” is a powerful, yet complex quality, which, like the portrait with which it is often associated, illustrates the potentially hazardous nature of interpretation. The final part of this article turns to another early nineteenth-century novel in which the notion of “likeness” is again prominent, and the cause of even greater confusion.

### **Jane Austen’s Emma**

Portraits feature heavily throughout Jane Austen’s writing career; from the illustrations by Cassandra which accompany her sister’s pithy descriptions of the monarchs of Volume the Second’s “The History of England,” through Elizabeth’s decisive appraisal of Darcy’s portrait at Pemberley, to Charlotte’s comparison of the miniature of Mr. Hollis with the large-scale portrait of Sir Harry Denham in Sanditon. It is however in the last novel published in her lifetime that Austen investigates most fully the complexities of the portrait, and the uncertainties concerning the interpretation of character that it can raise.

Emma’s proposal to attempt the “likeness” of her friend Harriet Smith earns Mr. Elton’s instant enthusiasm. Believing that he is in love with Harriet, Emma is confused by his praise for her drawing: “Yes, good man! – thought Emma – but what has all that to do with taking likenesses? You know nothing of drawing. Don’t pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet’s face.”<sup>xxiii</sup> As the

drawing of the portrait progresses, Emma fails to see that it is her supposed skill at “taking likenesses” rather than Harriet’s “likeness” that Mr. Elton admires. She is forced to admit that “there was no being displeased with such an encourager, for his admiration made him discern a likeness almost before it was possible. She could not respect his eye, but his love and his complaisance were unexceptionable” (41).

When the portrait is finished Elton is in “continual raptures” and defends it “through every criticism” (41). He is particularly insistent on its “likeness”. To Mrs. Weston’s observations that “Miss Woodhouse has given her friend the only beauty she wanted” and “The expression of the eye is most correct, but Miss Smith has not those eye-brows and eye-lashes. It is the fault of her face that she has them not,” he replies “I cannot agree with you. It appears to me a most perfect resemblance in every feature. I never saw such a likeness in my life. We must allow for the effect of shade, you know” (41). Similarly, when Mr. Woodhouse expresses his anxiety that Harriet appears to be sitting out of doors, Mr. Elton is fervent in his praise:

“You, sir, may say any thing,” cried Mr. Elton; “but I must confess that I regard it as a most happy thought, the placing of Miss Smith out of doors; and the tree is touched with such inimitable spirit! Any other situation would have been much less in character. The naïveté of Miss Smith’s manners – and altogether – Oh, it is most admirable! I cannot keep my eyes from it. I never saw such a likeness.” (42)

Mr. Elton’s repeated praise for the “likeness” of the drawing is further evidence of the fact that, in Pointon’s words, this is “a shifting commodity, not an absolute point of reference; it is an idea to be annexed, rather than a standard by which to measure reality.”<sup>xiv</sup> It is his partiality which makes him see “likeness” where others, even the artist herself, do not. After the first day’s sketch Emma judges that although there is “no want of likeness,” “she meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance” (41), and she later acknowledges to herself the truth of Mr. Knightley’s criticism that she has made Harriet “too tall”: “Emma knew that she had, but would not own it” (41).

While Mr. Elton obsessively insists on the “likeness” of Emma’s drawing in this episode, his wife is if anything even fonder of discerning resemblances, especially between Hartfield and Maple Grove. On her first visit to the former she cannot resist comparing every aspect to her rich brother-in-law’s home:

Mrs. Elton seemed most favourably impressed by the size of the room, the entrance, and all that she could see or imagine. “Very like Maple Grove! – She was quite struck by the likeness! – That room was the very shape and size of the morning-room at Maple Grove; her sister’s favourite room.” – Mr. Elton was appealed to. – “Was not it astonishingly like? – She could really almost fancy herself at Maple Grove.”

“And the staircase – You know, as I came in, I observed how very like the staircase was; placed exactly in the same part of the house. I really could not help exclaiming! I assure you, Miss Woodhouse, it is delightful to me, to be reminded of a place I am so extremely partial to as Maple Grove.” (224)

The Eltons' insistence on seeing "likeness" everywhere, whether in a drawing or house design, acts as a caution to the reader. It is a reminder that behind the term lurks a subjective partiality, that can be exploited by the self-serving and vulgar. Emma is concerned throughout with the possible deceptiveness of "likeness," and the ways it can mislead, and cause misunderstanding. The word usually occurs in the novel in the context of a comparison of two characters. Thus when Harriet suggests to Emma that she will be "an old maid at last, like Miss Bates!" after her friend has told her that she has "very little intention of every marrying at all," Emma's characterisation of Miss Bates is withering:

"That is as formidable an image as you could present, Harriet; and if I thought I should ever be like Miss Bates! so silly – so satisfied – so smiling – so prosing – so undistinguishing and fastidious – and so apt to tell every thing relative to every body about me, I would marry tomorrow. But between us, I am convinced there never can be any likeness, except in being unmarried." (73)

The reader is perhaps less likely to dismiss this "likeness" given Emma's self-satisfied behaviour towards Harriet early in the novel. Indeed the way that she talks about Miss Bates here, with the dashes and repetition, ironically mimics the patterns of Miss Bates's own speech throughout the novel, suggesting that the resemblance between the two is less improbable than Emma would wish.

Emma is keener to embrace "likeness" in a conversation with Frank Churchill as the two of them consider what they have in common, after Frank's engagement to Jane Fairfax has come to light. Though he at first rebuffs her suggestion that "in the midst of your perplexities at that time, you had very great amusement in tricking us all," she persists with her interpretation:

"I am sure it was a source of high entertainment to you, to feel that you were taking us all in. – Perhaps I am readier to suspect, because, to tell you the truth, I think it might have been some amusement to myself in the same situation. I think there is a little likeness between us."

He bowed.

"If not in our disposition," she presently added, with a look of true sensibility, "there is a likeness in our destiny; the destiny which bids fair to connect us with two characters so much superior to our own." (391-2)

Just as Emma is eager to repudiate Harriet's suggestion of a "likeness" between her and Miss Bates then, so she is determined to see one between her and Frank. Yet Frank's silent bow, coupled with Emma's over-dramatised "look of true sensibility" again invite the reader to question this comparison. "Likeness" is again a slippery, shifting concept, as the similitude it suggests is shown to be subjective and partial; the result of interpretation.

This article has demonstrated then that both Amelia Opie and Jane Austen were very familiar with contemporary debates surrounding portraiture, especially the hotly-contested concept of "likeness," and that this awareness finds its way into their fiction in various ways. For both authors, "likeness" is a powerful, yet complex quality, which rarely leads to clarity and transparency. Rather, both employ it to suggest the

hazardous opacity of interpretation, and the inevitable subjectivity involved in assessing character. For both these writers immersed in the artistic and cultural theories of their age, the portrait, and the language associated with it, is a way of raising the uncertainties of representation, and the potential chaos and confusion that it can generate.

Dr Joe Bray  
School of English  
University of Sheffield  
Jessop West  
1 Upper Hanover Street  
Sheffield S3 7RA  
j.bray@shef.ac.uk

---

---

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 76.
- <sup>ii</sup> Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, edited by Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 51.
- <sup>iii</sup> Nicholas Penny, "An Ambitious Man: The Career and Achievement of Sir Joshua Reynolds." In Nicholas Penny (ed.) *Reynolds* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986), pp. 17-42, 17.
- <sup>iv</sup> Shelley Bennett and Mark Leonard, "'A Sublime and Masterly Performance': The Making of Sir Joshua Reynolds's Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse." In Robyn Asleson (ed.) *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999), pp. 97-140, 109. See also Heather McPherson, "Picturing Tragedy: Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse Revisited." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33: 3 (2000): 401-430.
- <sup>v</sup> West 2004, 76.
- <sup>vi</sup> Reynolds 1975, 41.
- <sup>vii</sup> John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 123.
- <sup>viii</sup> John Opie, *Lectures on Painting*, delivered at The Royal Academy of Arts (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1809), 11.
- <sup>ix</sup> A Memoir by Mrs Opie, and Other Accounts of *Mr. Opie's Talents and Character* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, Paternoster-Row, 1809).
- <sup>x</sup> Richard Brilliant, "Editor's Statement: Portraits: The Limitations of Likeness." *Art Journal* 46: 3 (1987): 171-2, 171.
- <sup>xi</sup> See also Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 25-6.
- <sup>xii</sup> Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 176, 9. For another discussion of the complex relationship between likeness and identity, see John Gage, "Photographic likeness." In Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture: Facing the subject* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 119-130. Highlighting the eighteenth century's "idealising conception of likeness", Gage observes that "Portrait painting worked by an additive method in which features were progressively painted into the image until it was agreed that a satisfactory likeness had been created, and, as the case of Reynolds and Gainsborough has suggested, the concept of 'satisfactory' was a very fluid one" (123).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Amelia Opie, *Simple Tales* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, Paternoster Row, 1806), III, 291-2.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Amelia Opie, *Tales of the Heart* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster Row, 1820), IV, 110.
- <sup>xv</sup> Shelley King "Portrait of a Marriage: John and Amelia Opie and the Sister Arts." *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 40 (2011): 27-62, 28, 40.
- <sup>xvi</sup> See also Shelley King "'So soon the lone survivor of you all': Representation, Memory, and Mourning in Amelia Opie's 'On the Portraits Of Deceased Relatives and Friends, which Hang Around Me.'" In Alden Cavanaugh (ed.) *Performing the "Everyday": The Culture of Genre in the Eighteenth Century* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), pp. 120-9.
- <sup>xvii</sup> King 2007, 122.

- 
- <sup>xviii</sup> A Memoir by Mrs Opie 1809, 42-3, 17-18.
- <sup>xix</sup> Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray, or The Mother and Daughter: A Tale* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, & Orme, Paternoster Row and A. Constable and Co. Edinburgh, 1805), II, 169.
- <sup>xx</sup> Amelia Opie, *Temper, or Domestic Scenes: A Tale* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster Row, 1813), I, 145-6.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Brilliant 1991, 8, 31.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Brilliant 1987, 171-2.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, edited by Fiona Stafford (London: Penguin, 1996 [1816]), 38.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Pointon 1993, 9.

**Dr Joe Bray** is a Reader in Language and Literature in the School of English at the University of Sheffield. He is the author of *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (2003), and *The Female Reader in the English Novel: From Burney to Austen* (2009), and the editor of, amongst others, *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012). He is currently working on a monograph entitled *The Portrait in Fiction of the Romantic Period*.