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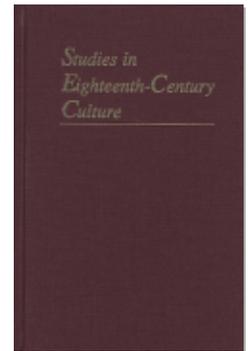
## Image

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# Image

CLARE HAYNES

The word *image* had a double meaning in eighteenth-century Britain. It could indicate a representation of something or an idol. This connotation was apt because art was frequently shadowed by the specter, in Christian terms, of its mis-use. This essay contributes to the discussion of devotion by offering some observations on the ways in which portraiture and religious imagery supported devotion whilst also giving rise to anxieties over idolatry, which can be defined as mis-directed or inappropriate devotion.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of the century, there was something of a revolution in the production of portraiture. Elite patrons still commissioned large, grand-manner portraits, but an array of smaller forms proliferated, which served an expanding middle-class market. These might be hung on a wall, kept on a table, or, sometimes, in the case of painted miniatures and silhouettes, worn on the body. Portraits recorded and supported friendships, amorous attachments, and familial relationships; part of their popularity and social power lay in their ability to substitute for the absent or the lost.<sup>2</sup> However, both making and using a likeness were potentially problematic, morally both and in relation to the second commandment.

Surprisingly, perhaps, these issues were explored most fully not in theology or art theory but in the genres of sentimental and Gothic fiction, where images were frequently given enormous power.<sup>3</sup> There is room here to consider only one example, which is drawn from a minor but representative short story of 1787: “the portrait, which he had held clasped between his hands, he kissed with apparent devotion; and, fastening it round his neck,

as he knelt, again saluted it, lifting his eyes upwards, and with a deep sigh exclaiming—‘O my dearest mother, I am now prepared to follow thee!’”<sup>4</sup> The story from which this extract comes tells of a young man, named The Criminal, who has been falsely accused of robbery and murder. He is so overwhelmed by the accusation that he suffers a physical collapse and wishes only to die, to be with his mother. In a common plot device, the portrait becomes the means by which he is identified as the illegitimate son of the prosecution barrister and the grandson of the judge. Over a few short pages, the portrait effects a complete moral reversal, as the young man is revealed to be virtuous and the barrister to have been corrupt, he having raped and abandoned the boy’s mother. In the passage quoted, the gestures of clasping and kissing and the upward gaze of his eyes present the image of devotional fervour commonly associated with superstition and feminine enthusiasm, not with rational Protestantism. There is no suggestion that the young man is Catholic; rather, his address to his mother’s portrait is irrational, unmanly, idolatrous. The portrait also acts as an idol in another way, as an image with a disruptive, miraculous force to upset the status quo and reveal a surprising truth.<sup>5</sup> In fictions such as *The Criminal*, the categories of portrait and idol overlap, and the slippage between image and original is exploited to explore the shadows of devotion.

While the Church of England had an extensive apologetic and catechetical literature on idolatry and the Roman Catholic church, it had no settled position on its own use of religious imagery. Plainness continued to be regarded by some as not only appropriate and safe but also as most conducive to prayer, while others recognised an ambiguity in biblical teaching, which left room for works of art to serve in a limited way as ornament and towards edification. For example, Bishop Gilbert Burnet offered a stern indictment of Roman Catholicism’s use of images before observing that “the Prohibition of making an Image does not seem to bind in all Cases, where there is no danger of Idolatry, or Inclination to it; and where Pictures, or Statues, are made only for a Remembrance, or Ornament.”<sup>6</sup> This view was rarely expressed so clearly, nor was it often expanded upon. There seems to have been a reluctance to engage with the issues in print, and, certainly, no positive theology of art was attempted. Writers about art rarely offered more than a cursory consideration of the issue of religious art, even as they advanced more general ideas about its affective power.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, religious images were widely used in a variety of contexts. Illustrated bibles and books of common prayer were popular, and religious paintings and prints were often used to ornament domestic spaces. Furthermore, from the 1720s, narrative paintings were used increasingly as altarpieces in churches. Their role, however, was limited, for they could

be granted no part in prayer or worship. The ultimate goal of religious devotion was an unmediated relationship with God. Thus, in her *Method of Devotion*, Elizabeth Burnet, Bishop Burnet's wife, prayed: "Lord, shut out of my Mind all vain Thoughts, with all worldly Representations, that being empty of my self, and of all corporeal Images, I may be filled with Divine Light, and made capable of thy spiritual Presence."<sup>8</sup> Burnet, in a similar way to *The Criminal*, pleads for the sublime redundancy of the image, which the coming into the presence of the original will bring about. As this brief account has indicated, images were granted great power in fiction and devotional literature in many different ways, not least in policing the proper aims and boundaries of devotion.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. On idolatry in the context of British art, see Clare Haynes, "In the Shadow of the Idol: Religion in British Art Theory 1600-1800," *Art History* 35, no. 1 (2012): 62-85.

2. Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1993); Kate Redford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), and Marcia Pointon, "'Surrounded with Brilliants': Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England," *Art Bulletin*, 83, no. 1 (2001): 48-71.

3. Kamilla Elliott, *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction: The Rise of Picture Identification, 1764-1835* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012).

4. Mr. Harrison, "The Criminal," *The New Novelist's Magazine* 1 (1787): 6.

5. Gothic fiction, from *The Castle of Otranto* onward, relied heavily on statues and paintings that move or speak.

6. Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Church Catechism, for the use of the Diocese of Sarum* (London: John Churchill, 1710), 115.

7. Haynes, "In the Shadow of the Idol" and Clare Haynes, "Anglicanism and Art," *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume II: Establishment and Empire, 1662-1829*, ed. Jeremy Gregory (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017): 371-91.

8. Elizabeth Burnet, *A Method of Devotion: or, Rules for Holy & Devout Living* (London: Joseph Downing, 1713), 10.

9. The anxiety over visual art was much stronger than that which concerned music's power to mislead the senses in devotion. See the charity sermons of the Three Choirs Festival held annually from 1715, including Samuel Croxall, *The Antiquity, Dignity, and Advantages of Music* (London, 1741); Benjamin Newton, *A Church of England's Apology for the Use of Music in her Service* (Glocester, 1760); and, Samuel Glasse, *The Beneficial Effects of Harmony* (Glocester, 1778).