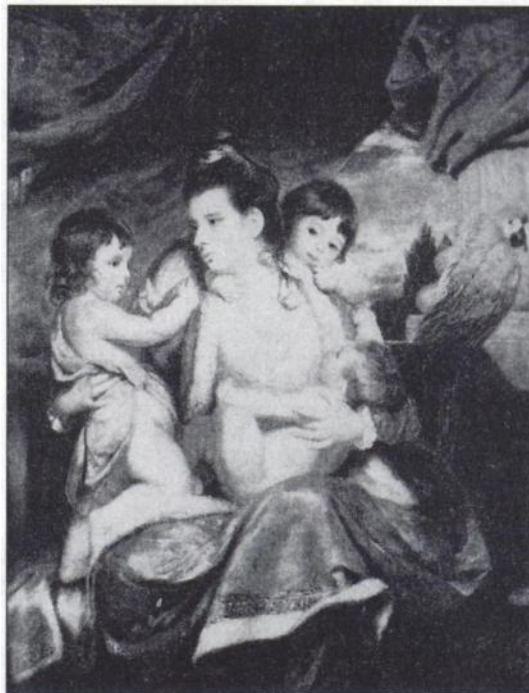


Lady Cockburn and children

Elinor Kapp

Why do children always know when we want them to behave beautifully and do the opposite? No doubt Lady Cockburn thought it a delightful idea to pose as Cornelia with her children in the classical style so fashionable in 1773. Sir Joshua Reynolds has caught a moment of formal harmony just before it dissolves into all too human chaos. Who can doubt that at any second George, the imp on the right of the picture, will tighten that chubby clasp into a strangle-hold and pull down the temptingly loose coils of mother's hair? James, the child on the left, will not be slow to join in and baby William will howl as he is trampled on by his lively brothers. One small boy on his own is (sometimes) manageable; three together in any century spell trouble for grown-ups! Their mother already has a faintly strained look behind her lofty pose. She is distancing herself from the situation by fixing her eyes on the middle distance in a way well known to those who have discovered from experience that pleas, bribes, prayers and even threats cannot prevail against the exuberant life in a group of children. Will she eventually give way with good humour and indulge in a romp, or will it be smacks and tears all round and nursemaids summoned to remove the guilty parties, roaring, back to the nursery? She looks quite young in spite of the stuffy pose so who knows which way it will go. We tend to assume that youngsters in the old days were always brought up with harsh discipline. Of course life was hard and brutal for everyone and child abuse common, but many parents have also loved, petted and delighted in their children throughout the ages. The stern puritanical manuals that grate on us so much – "You must break a child's will by the age of five", "Spare the rod and spoil the child", "Rule by fear" – were written by disapproving experts to counteract what were seen as lax tendencies to over-fondness and spoiling of children.

The pose is based on Italian allegorical pictures of a century or more earlier but the sense of liveliness in repose is helped by the way the light areas carry the eye round the figures in a broad asymmetric band between the lower left and upper right of the picture. There are bright pinkish flesh tones and strong contrasts in the eyes and hair. At the top and bottom of the picture the dark drapes in burgundy and



Lady Cockburn and her three eldest sons, by Joshua Reynolds. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees of the National Gallery, London

brownish gold are made rich and sumptuous by lines of gold braid, fur and fringing which also accentuate the diagonal lines. Our eyes focus on the three heads in the upper line and then down James's body on the left and round to the head of the baby as a secondary focus. Baby Williams's right arm reaches up to touch his brother and complete the oval circuit. Behind the family group is a glimpse of classical landscape beyond a pillar. Daringly the painter has used tones of green and blue here and in the parrot's plumage that do not occur anywhere else, breaking rules we are taught about balance. It risks turning it into two different paintings but in the hands of a master it works. The landscape is muted and misty and gives a sense of great space beyond the family group, counter-balancing the intensity of human life and putting it into a serene and peaceful context.

Quite why a parrot should appear in such a landscape is not clear! Sir Joshua has painted him with great clarity. His feathers are soft and bright, his cream and black face and beak are a small and intense imitation of the human faces. Although the parrot is facing out of the picture, the curve of his beak and the backward-looking eye turn us in again back to the family. The parrot appears to be sidling away, well aware from experience that when George looks round for more mischief it will be best to have his tail

feathers well out of reach. Where the ancients would often paint in a skull or a grotesque as a shadow comment on the futility of life, Sir Joshua in a kindlier mode has given the parrot a knowing and cynical expression, a gentle comment on the joys of family life.

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