

The Bard's plays in pictures

Shakespeare in the Baillieu Library Print Collection

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On 19 October 1741, David Garrick donned the costume of Richard III for his first Shakespearean performance in London. Roughly four years later, when William Hogarth painted him in this eponymous role, Garrick (1717–1779) had become one of the most popular stage actors in Britain, each performance enhancing his fame, and stimulating a taste for all things Shakespeare. Hogarth's painting, *Mr. Garrick in the character of Richard the III^d*, gained a significant reputation through the second half of the 18th century; as Garrick's popularity rose, the scene was widely disseminated through engravings based on the painting—some produced under Hogarth's supervision, others created independently (illustrated right).¹

The scene is set mid-performance, as King Richard wakes from a dream in which he is visited by the ghosts of his murdered rivals. Shakespeare scholar Stuart Sillars observes that 'this is the one point in the play where time is suspended, since just for an instant Richard thinks he is in one place but in reality is in another'.² The work was particularly unusual for the time, as it could be interpreted as both a portrait and as a history painting. I chose it to introduce this essay as it fits into three important aspects of Shakespearean print culture



that can be explored through the Baillieu Library Print Collection at the University of Melbourne: illustrated scenes from Shakespeare, portraits of Shakespearean actors, and the engraved volumes from the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery.

A turning point in the history of illustrations based on the Bard's works occurred a year before Garrick first played the role of Richard III. In 1740 the publication of the second edition of Lewis Theobald's *Works of Shakespeare* brought the text into a distinctly contemporaneous visual setting.³ These volumes were among

the first to garnish the complete works with illustrations, following Nicholas Rowe's 1709 *Works of Mr. William Shakespear: In six volumes. Adorn'd with cuts*.⁴ Illustrations for Theobald's volumes were lavishly designed by French engraver Hubert-François Bourguignon, known as 'Gravelot', and realised by Gerard Vandergucht, a Flemish engraver born in London. Among the Baillieu Library Print Collection's holdings of illustrations from this volume is the frontispiece for *The tempest* (see p. 42).⁵ Rather than illustrating the eponymous storm that adorned earlier

Previous page: Unknown printmaker, after William Hogarth, *Mr. Garrick in the character of Richard the III^d*, c. 1750–1800, engraving, 25.2×35.4 cm (sheet). 1994.2070, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below Gerard Vandergucht (engraver), after 'H. Gravelot' (Hubert-François Bourguignon), published by H. Lintott etc. for Lewis Theobald, 1740, *Vol. 1. P. 1* [illustration to *The tempest*], etching, 16.8×10.0 cm (sheet). 1959.5380, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



editions, Gravelot chose the pastoral charm of the log-bearing scene (Act 3, Scene 1), creating a setting reminiscent of an 18th-century rococo romance.⁶ His preliminary design (held in the British Museum) is coloured in charming pastel tones, reaffirming this vision.⁷ As Ferdinand and Miranda's love blossoms in front of the reader's eyes, Prospero stands silently in the background, the engraved version obscuring him in a thicket of hatched shadow. Instead of representing his conjured storm, this image conveys the sorcerer's silent, dark and contained power, set against the whimsy of the young couple's storyline.

Among the various illustrated editions of Shakespeare, John Bell's series of acting and theatrical editions, first published in 1773, became the most popular among 18th-century audiences, with innovations that became benchmarks for the future production of similar volumes.⁸ Bell's first major advance was to shift the illustrations from frontispieces into the body of the text, next to the action being represented. Thus, a small rearrangement of existing parts led to a complete reconfiguration of the manner in which readers absorbed the scenes.⁹ To guide the reader further, a quote was printed beneath each image, indicating the moment

Unknown engraver, after James Roberts the younger, published for John Bell, 1775, *Mrs Barry in the character of Constance* [from *King John*], engraving, 17.5 × 10.7 cm (sheet). 2012.0128, gift of Russell Beedles 2012, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

that the action was occurring. In this way the engravings allowed the contemporary reader to experience Shakespeare in the space between the still image and the text, the quoted lines identifying a single point in the story. The images provided a setting for the verse, while the verse in turn gave movement to the images, an experience intensified by the highly emotive moments chosen.

The second innovation born from Bell's editions was the depiction of characters as portraits of contemporary actors and actresses who were known for a particular role. Illustrating Act 2 of *King John* in Bell's Shakespeare for instance, Mrs Barry theatrically pulls part of her headdress from her hair, motioning to fling it out of the picture (right). In a print by an unknown engraver after a design by James Roberts the younger (1748–1809), the scene is captioned with the words of her character, Constance: 'I will not keep this form upon my head, When there is such a disorder in my wit'.¹⁰ Background scenery is conspicuously absent. Instead, the white page acts as the spotlight, the figure isolated during her emotional soliloquy. Unlike *Mr. Garrick in the character of Richard the III^d*, where Hogarth has assembled a rich setting in which to situate his character, the



portraits for Bell's editions maintain this focus on the actors and actresses themselves, even in variants that add a small amount of scenery.¹¹ Indeed, David Garrick remained in many ways responsible for the rising celebrity status of the Shakespearean actor, and the contemporary popularity of the theatre made these new editions especially marketable. For instance, the frontispiece for the 1756 Dublin edition of *The tragical history of King Richard III* is a version of Hogarth's *Mr Garrick*, cropped to achieve

a similar spotlight on the actor, foreshadowing the trend promoted by Bell through the 1770–80s.¹²

This trend continued into the 19th century and, in 1856, New York publishers Martin, Johnson & Co. pressed a line-and-stipple engraving of Charles and Ellen Kean in the characters of King John and Constance.¹³ These actors would hold significance for Australian audiences, as seven years later they were part of a tour that included the United States and Australia. In the distinctly Victorian illustration, the figures pose motionless, like sitters for a portrait. This absence of action intentionally highlights the attention paid to detail in the costumes and scenery, a priority for 19th-century stage productions.

As has been seen thus far, a taste for Shakespeare grew prodigiously through the second half of the 18th century. In 1786, London alderman and publisher John Boydell sought to combine the Bard's popularity with that of the greatest British artists of the day. The project, devised with his nephew Josiah Boydell and bookseller George Nicol, was proposed in the following terms:

Mr. Alderman Boydell, Josiah Boydell, and George Nicol, propose to publish by subscription a most magnificent and

Luigi Schiavonetti (engraver), after Joshua Reynolds, published by John and Josiah Boydell, 1799, *Midsummer-night's dream Act 2. Scene 2. A wood—Robin Good-Fellow*, stipple engraving, 26.8 × 18.6 cm (image). 1959.3835, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

accurate edition of the plays of Shakespeare, in eight volumes Of the largest Quarto Size, on the finest Royal Atlag Paper, to be fabricated for that Purpose ... To accompany this work Messieurs Boydell intend to publish by subscription a series of large and capital prints After Pictures to be immediately painted by the following Artists, from the most striking Scenes in the same Author ... The pictures will be of various Sizes, chiefly as large as Life. As soon as they have all been engraved, they will be hung up in a Gallery built on Purpose, and called the Gallery of Shakspeare.¹⁴

Eighteenth-century artists from the British school, best recognised at this point for portraiture, were called on as Boydell looked to cement their position in the canon of European art, in which many of the great artists had been distinguished by religious and mythological history-painting. The surge in popularity for Shakespeare provided a unique, English platform from which to pursue such an endeavour. John Boydell wrote: 'In a country where Historical Painting is still but in its infancy—To advance that art towards maturity, and establish an

English School of Historical Painting, was the great object of the present design'.¹⁵

Sir Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy, was among the artists commissioned to contribute to the new Shakespeare Gallery, which opened in 1789 to great fanfare. Reynolds' third and final submission, *Midsummer-night's dream*, also called *Robin Good-Fellow, or Puck*, was reproduced in print by Luigi Schiavonetti in 1799 (opposite). The painting was first imagined as a simple portrait of a playful infant, only later transformed into the mischievous imp through the addition of several identifying characteristics and background figures. After seeing the original portrait, John Boydell suggested to Reynolds that it could 'very easily come into the Shakespeare, if Sir Joshua will kindly place him on a mushroom, and give him fawn's ears, and make a Puck of him'.¹⁶

Alongside the adaptation of Reynolds' existing portrait, the Boydell venture involved the assimilation of finished extant paintings that could fit into the project's overarching thesis: the best contemporary British artists painting scenes from Shakespeare. This of course encompassed Hogarth's *Mr. Garrick in the character of Richard the III^D*, with which we are now very familiar.

Henry Fuseli's *King Lear casting out his daughter Cordelia* was among the largest paintings in the Shakespeare Gallery, at 2.6 metres high and 3.63 metres wide.¹⁷ King Lear leaps madly from his seat and gestures furiously to banish Cordelia, who has failed to proclaim her love for him to his satisfaction. The stipple engraving completed in 1792 by Richard Earlom (see p. 46) attempts to capture this drama within the limitations of the printed page. The principal protagonists are lit the most strongly: Cordelia, Lear, his servant the earl of Kent and his two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan. Alongside this spotlighting technique, Earlom exploits the precision afforded by stipple to carefully render the facial expressions of the scene's prominent figures. Although the painting's scale could not be replicated on paper, the confusion and fury on the face of the king at the centre of the page could be brought into even sharper focus.

Ultimately, the Shakespeare Gallery project was one of entrepreneurship, a commercial endeavour, with subscriptions levied to complete folios of prints and high-end editions of Shakespeare made available for purchase. The Boydells' display of the original paintings in a building distinguished from their shop endowed the project with the



Painted by Sir Jos. Reynolds P.R.A.

MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM.

Engraved by L. Schiavonetti.

Act 2. Scene 2.

A Wood. — Robin Good-Fellow.

Pub^d Sept: 29. 1799, by J. O. J. Boydell, at the Shakspeare Gallery, Pall Mall, & N: 90, Cheapside.

Richard Earlom (engraver), after Henry Fuseli, published by John and Josiah Boydell, 1792, *Shakspeare [sic]: King Lear, Act I. Scene I* [Lear casting out Cordelia], stipple engraving, 45.0 × 59.5 cm (image). 2015.0040, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



legitimacy and goodwill of a public gallery. Unfortunately, the crippling economic effects of the Napoleonic Wars saw the gallery close in 1805, the entire collection of paintings sold by lottery in the same year. In a rather tragic Shakespearean twist, John Boydell saw the debt recovered, with all tickets selling, yet did not live to see the lottery drawn, dying a month before, after catching a cold. As the original paintings and their engravings were dispersed, galleries around the world received images of what was a unique moment in the history of English painting and in the history of Shakespearean imagery.

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After Shakespeare, an exhibition exploring the legacy of William Shakespeare, will be on display in the Noel Shaw Gallery, Baillieu Library, from July 2016 to January 2017.

- 1 The original painting is held in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (Inv. no. WAG 634). The University of Melbourne also holds two copies of the impressions of the original William Hogarth versions engraved by

Charles Grignion; see *The works of William Hogarth, from the original plates restored by James Heath ...*, London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1822 (one copy in Rare Books and one in Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne), and *The original and genuine works of William Hogarth*, London: Boydell and Co., c. 1810, Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

- 2 Stuart Sillars, *Painting Shakespeare: The artist as critic, 1720–1820*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 52.
- 3 Lewis Theobald, *The works of Shakespeare: In eight volumes. Collated with the oldest copies, and corrected: With notes, explanatory, and critical: By Mr Theobald* (2nd edn), London: H. Lintott etc., 1740. Rare Books in the Baillieu Library holds the 1762 edition (London: printed for C. Hitch etc.).
- 4 Michael Dobson (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 211. The complete title is *The works of Mr William Shakespear: In six volumes. Adorn'd with cuts. Revis'd and corrected, with an account of the life and writings of the author*.
- 5 The Baillieu Library Print Collection also holds illustrations from the 1740 edition for *All's well that ends well* (1959.5382), *The merry wives of Windsor* (1959.5381), *King Henry V* (1959.5947) and *King Henry VI* (1959.4977).
- 6 The storm itself was the frontispiece for Rowe's 1709 edition.
- 7 Hubert-François Bourguignon, known as 'H. Gravelot', *Illustration to 'The tempest', Act III, Scene 1*, c. 1740, drawing with body colour, 12.3 × 8.0 cm. 1881,0709.30, British Museum.
- 8 Kalman A. Burnim and Philip H. Highfill Jr, *John Bell, patron of British theatrical portraiture: A catalog of the theatrical portraits in his editions of Bell's Shakespeare and Bell's British Theatre*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998, p. 10. For

the Baillieu Library's holdings of Bell's Shakespeare, see *Dramatick writings of Will. Shakspeare* [also known as *Bell's edition of Shakspeare*], London: Printed for, and under the direction of, John Bell, British Library, Strand, 1785–88, Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

- 9 Stuart Sillars, *The illustrated Shakespeare, 1709–1875*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 111–12.
- 10 Late 18th-century copies of *King John* began to include the stage direction 'tearing off her head-dress' in the text following this quote.
- 11 See for instance S. Newnham (engraver), after Ramberg, *Mrs Farren in the character of Hermia (Midsummer night's dream)*, 1785, line engraving, 9.2 × 6.7 cm (image). 2015.0028, purchased 2015, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
- 12 Erin C. Blake, 'Shakespeare, portraiture, painting and prints', in Mark Thornton Burnett, Adrian Streete and Ramona Wray (eds), *The Edinburgh companion to Shakespeare and the arts*, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, p. 428.
- 13 Unknown engraver and artist, published by Martin, Johnston & Co., New York, 1856, *Mr and Mrs Charles Kean as King John and Lady Constance (King John)*, steel engraving, 26.7 × 19.7 cm. 2015.0035, purchased 2015, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.
- 14 From a 1786 prospectus of the same title, published in London, 1 December 1786.
- 15 John Boydell, *A catalogue of the pictures in the Shakespeare Gallery, Pall-Mall*, London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1802, p. v.
- 16 George Nicol to John Boydell, cited in Christopher Kent Rovee, *Imagining the gallery: The social body of British romanticism*, San Francisco: Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 82.
- 17 Petra Maisak, 'Henry Fuseli—"Shakespeare's painter"', in Walter Pape and Frederick Burwick (eds), *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery*, Böttröp: Peter Pomp, 1996.