CHAPTER 7

Subjects from art history generate interest in subjects from literary biography.—Paintings from the lives of Shakespeare, Milton, and later authors.

The biographical part of English literature, which Dr. Johnson said he loved most, entered painting by routes both indirect (foreign) and direct (native). The flourishing Victorian commerce in pictures from the lives of English authors derived remotely from what may seem, at first glance, an irrelevant subject: Pliny’s legend of the Maid of Corinth, who, to preserve in her eyes the form of her departing lover, traced his shadow on the wall. ¹ According to the ancients, this was the origin of painting; and when their treatises were reexamined in the seventeenth century, the myth was repeatedly made the subject of paintings, the most famous of which was Murillo’s _El Cuadro de las Sombras_ (ca. 1660). The story’s popularity among French artists reached its peak between 1770 and 1820, and in those years it was also retold in English art and poetry. Alexander Runciman painted it at Penicuik House in 1771, and two years later David Allan’s version won a medal at the Accademia di San Luca, Rome. William Hayley wrote a poem, “The Maid of Corinth,” which Wright of Derby illustrated.

In 1826, in a reduction that unfortunately would be typical of Victorian artists who had no particular scruples against debasing a noble and venerable subject, Mulready converted the theme into modern rural genre terms, moving the scene to a moonlit cottage and substituting for the Maid of Corinth a country boy sketching his father as he slept. The picture’s title, significantly, was not _The Origin of Painting_ but _The Origin of a Painter_, by which Mulready linked his production with a much more familiar subject of Italian and French painting, the lives of artists. Almost from the time Giorgio Vasari published his _Vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiana_ in 1550, painters had memorialized true and imaginary incidents in the private and professional careers of their celebrated
predecessors. This strain of biographical interest reached its climax in nineteenth-century French art. Between 1804 and 1886, no single Salon was without at least one incident of art history recounted in artistic form; in the 1820s, there were as many as ten per year, and in some later years as many as twenty. There was a similar burst of interest among English artists, who, in this as in other respects, shared the academic preoccupation with the art of the golden past. The inspiration for Browning's poems about artists—"Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Pictor Ignotus," "Old Pictures in Florence"—came at least as much from the contemporary fashion for such paintings as from Vasari. As early as 1820, Turner showed at the Royal Academy his Raffaello Accompanied by La Fornarina, Preparing his Pictures for the Decoration of the Loggia. Between 1837 and 1873, scenes from the lives of Raphael, Salvator Rosa, Gimbacue, Quentin Matsys, Holbein, Brueelleschi, Dürer, Titian, Michelangelo, Rubens, Rembrandt, Teniers, Correggio, Velázquez, Murillo, Veronese, Tintoretto, and Giotto were produced in English studios, in many instances by painters who were also well known for their scenes from literature: Maclise, E. M. Ward, Richard Redgrave, Eyre Crowe, Leighton, William Bell Scott, Dyce, Wallis, Henry O'Neil, Noel Paton. In 1829-33, Allan Cunningham published his six-volume Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects, whose title proclaimed its intention of being the English counterpart of Vasari, and in due course, subjects of paintings were taken from British art history. John Absolom painted Opie When a Boy Reproved by His Mother; Ward, Benjamin West's First Effort in Art and The Foundlings Visit Hogarth's Studio; Frith, Hogarth at Calais; and Charles Lucy, The Reconciliation Between Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

If painting and poetry were sister arts, it more or less followed that painters and poets (and writers in general) were brothers, and further that the lives of writers provided artists with materials as attractive as the lives of painters—the more so when the art public was also a book-reading one. Here a triad of conventional themes in Renaissance and later art supplied welcome precedent for British paintings illustrating the lives of writers—composing their greatest works (often under divine or at least allegorical inspiration), presenting them in homage to their patrons (the graphic equivalent of the literary dedication page), and reading them aloud either to patrons or to favored friends.

Thus Rembrandt had painted The Evangelist Matthew Inspired by the Angel and Homer Dictating His Poetry to a Scribe; Caravaggio, St. Matthew and the Angel (who is literally guiding the saint's hand in one composition, hovering over him in another) and St. Jerome writing (again, two quite different compositions). Ghirlandaio and Lucas Cranach, among others, also depicted St. Jerome; the Cranach painting, Kardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg als heiliger Hieronymus in der Landschaft (1527), was a fancy, or role-playing, picture showing the cardinal as scholar-saint, writing outdoors at a table set on a tree stump with his convent on a hill in the background and various animals in attendance. Poussin's companion pictures The Inspiration of the Lyric Poet and The Inspiration of the Epic Poet were in English collections early in the nineteenth century, the one at Great Cumberland Lodge, Windsor, and the other, then titled Petrarch Composing His Odes, in the collection of the connoisseur Thomas Hope. The Earl of Northwick owned Antonella da Messina's St. Jerome in His Study and
Richard Westall, *Milton Composing "Paradise Lost"* (RA 1802) (Sir John Soane’s Museum, London). An old theme in art revived: an author in the God-given throes of composition. The appeal of the subject was doubled in the present case because it also illustrated the edifying theme of filial devotion. It was most effective on those spectators who were unaware of Dr. Johnson’s statement, in his life of Milton, that “his daughters were never taught to write; nor would he have been obliged, as is universally confessed, to have employed any casual visiter in disburthening his memory, if his daughter could have performed the office.”

Carlo Dolci’s *St. John Writing the Apocalypse*. Paintings like these formed the lineage of the frequently depicted scene of Milton dictating *Paradise Lost* (pl. 112), as well as more distinctly genre subjects such as Burns composing “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” and (twice, in 1884 and 1887) “To a Mouse.”

Pictures of St. Jerome offering his translation of the Bible to the infant Jesus—examples of the subclass of paintings known as “donor portraits”—may have been in the Vicar of Wakefield’s mind when he placed himself, in the wandering artist’s eclectic painting, offering his learned works on the Whistonian controversy to his wife (see chapter 1, above). After the presentation (or substituting for it) came the actual recital of the work to an auditory. Homer reciting the *Iliad* to the Greeks and Virgil reading the *Aeneid* to Augustus and Octavia were repeatedly portrayed subjects of the kind in Renaissance and neoclassic art; Angelica Kauffmann painted the latter scene in 1788 and Ingres somewhat later (1812). Hazlitt knew “a common French print, in which Molière is represented reading one of his plays in the presence of the celebrated Ninon de l’Enclos, to a circle of the wits and first men of his own time,” including Corneille, Racine, La Fontaine, St. Évremond, de la Rochefoucault, and Boileau.
Like Pietro Longhi's *A Poet Reciting His Verses* (1770s), showing an assembly of contemporary ladies and gentlemen listening to the poet, in English hands these pictures often were a kind of conversation piece, though omitting Longhi's extraneous touch of an angel winding his long trumpet. Some scenes were as fictitious as the one showing the poet Feramorz reading "Paradise and the Peri" to Lalla Rookh in Moore's poem. It may well have been that Blind Harry, the fifteenth-century minstrel, did recite his 11,000-line poem on Sir William Wallace as he was represented as doing in a picture by James Drummond at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1846. But in degree of likelihood, there was little to choose between Spenser treating his wife and Sir Walter Raleigh to *The Faerie Queene* in manuscript or Wyclif reading his translation of the Bible to John of Gaunt, Chaucer, and Gower. There may have been a shade more plausibility in a picture of Milton reading his *Defensio Regis* to Cromwell and Allan Ramsay trying out *The Gentle Shepherd* on the Countess of Eglington, but most paintings of the sort were the products of no more than sentimental fancy: Goldsmith reading a novel (his own *Vicar of Wakefield*) to his "Jessamy Bride," Miss Horneck, and Burns similarly obliging Highland Mary.

In any event, all such scenes from the lives of English authors came before the picture-buying public with credentials from earlier and higher art. The displacement of Homer, Virgil, Petrarch, and the book-writing saints by native talent may have been a drastic development, but the company English authors thus joined suggests the esteem in which they were then held. No novelty was involved, therefore, when English artists came to select scenes of many kinds from literary biography to join incidents from art history on exhibition walls. Encouraging them was a popular curiosity about the lives and personalities of authors that had originated in the eighteenth century. An offshoot of the prospering antiquarianism of the day, it had received particular impetus from Boswell, the tireless collector and retailer of stories about Dr. Johnson, and from Pope's early biographers, who incorporated into their books materials about the poet gathered by his friend Joseph Spence. In 1795, a year after the publication of Mrs. Thrale's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, one of the several early collections of Johnsoniana, Fuseli expressed the rationale, already given currency by Johnson himself, that led his contemporaries to prize such biographical lore:

> . . . Those writers who, with intelligence, disinterestedness and taste, select the anecdotes of genius, the features of extraordinary men in their deshabillé, on the spur of a great moment or when indulging in the genuine effusions of an unguarded hour, contribute, perhaps, more to a real knowledge of men and manners, open a clearer insight into the head and heart of others, than he who professedly sets out with a series of events to instruct.

Fuseli was the first artist of consequence to take advantage of this interest in authors' lives. The several anecdotal paintings in the Milton Gallery, however, were not the first to draw from the poet's biography. A quarter-century earlier (1775), the Society of Artists had displayed a picture of Milton's house at Chalfont St. Giles, drawn in bibulous circumstances that have already been described (see chapter 1, above). Thus, even before Dr. Johnson published the *Life* (1779) which was responsible for acquainting a large audience with Milton's biography, the poet's personal fame had begun to figure among the literary associations that might help artists sell their pictures.
Down to the end of the eighteenth century, no similar interest in Shakespeare's life was reflected in art. The initial celebration had concentrated on the allegorical (Shakespeare as secular divinity) rather than the biographical (Shakespeare as a Stratford boy who made good in the London theater). Its tone had been set in 1769, when Garrick had virtually taken over Stratford-on-Avon to mark, five years late, the bicentenary of the Bard's birth. Although the great jubilee included numerous forms of praise, such as fireworks, a masquerade ball, an oratorio (Dr. Arne's Judith), and a sweepstake race, the trimmings over-all were heavily emblematic. In the program—an ill-timed rainstorm forced the cancellation of the actual event—was a procession, with Shakespeare's characters, accompanied by Melpomene, Thalia, and the Graces, riding in a triumphal chariot. The odes that were recited and the songs that were sung were also allegorical. During the following theatrical season in London, two productions capitalized on the widespread publicity the Stratford celebration generated. Garrick's rival at Covent Garden, George Colman, staged Man and Wife: or the Stratford Jubilee, and Garrick himself produced at Drury Lane The Jubilee, which was performed ninety-one times during that season (the century's record) and thirty-five times in his last season (1776). Both shows, but especially the latter, featured pageants and processions of Shakespeare's characters. Bardomania bringing spectacle close to the borders of pantomime. Grouped under banners bearing the titles of the plays and carrying identifying stage properties, Garrick's cast entered the theater from the street and threaded their way through the audience. A more lasting effect of the Stratford Jubilee on the theater was seen in the drop curtains, which were often decorated with allegorical designs linking England's supreme poet with the Graces and the Muses in the best neoclassic manner.

The easel painters of the time worked in the same adulatory spirit, almost definitively expressed in Gray's "The Progress of Poesy," in which Shakespeare was himself represented as an artist:

George Romney, The Infant Shakespeare Nursed by Tragedy and Comedy (Boydel’s Shakespeare Gallery) (Petworth House). The companion to pl. 113; together they supplied the element of allegory that was, at that time, indispensable to any celebration of Shakespeare.

Far from the sun and summer-gale,
In thy Albion’s green lap was Nature’s darling laid,
What time, where lucid Avon strayed.
To him the mighty Mother did unveil
Her awful face: the dauntless child
Stretched forth his little arms and smiled.
“This pencil take,” (she said) “whose colours clear
Richly paint the vernal year:
Thine too these golden keys, immortal boy!
This can unlock the gates of Joy;
Of horror that, and thrilling fears,
Or ope the sacred source of sympathetic tears.”

In 1784, Joseph Strutt, an artist-antiquary remembered today for his pioneering researches into old English customs and sports, exhibited at the Royal Academy a group portrait of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser, with personified Nature dictating to Shakespeare to the rather obvious exclusion of his fellow poets. For Boydell, Romney painted companion pieces, The Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions and The Infant Shakespeare Nursed by Tragedy and Comedy (pls. 113, 114). Imitators followed culpably close; there was another Infant Shakespeare Nursed by Tragedy and Comedy, by a totally obscure artist, at the Royal Academy in 1792. Romney also projected, but did not complete, a study of Nature Unveiling Herself to Shakespeare, which was as clearly drawn from Gray’s poem as was the poetess Helen Maria Williams’s encomium on a sketch she saw: “The partial Nymph unveil’d her awful face, / And bade his colours clear her features trace.” Angelica Kauffmann (The Fame and Tomb of Shakespeare) and Stothard (The Graces Crowning Shakespeare) produced works in the same emblematic vein.

Another treatment inspired by neoclassic models brought the image of the poet one step closer to reality, if only by association. Without depriving him of his godlike role, they surrounded him with visually realized samples of his imaginative output—groups of characters from the plays,
arranged in a procession as in a sculptural frieze, or in Garrick's productions at Stratford and Drury Lane. In 1806, Fuseli exhibited The Nursery of Shakespeare: The Infant Nursed by Tragedy, Caressed by Comedy, Surrounded by Some of the Most Striking Characters. Flanked by a selection of figures, the infant was literally nursed by Tragedy, while Comedy, breast bared, awaited her turn. The very next year, Stothard showed his procession of the Canterbury pilgrims (pl. 251), the sensational success of which led him to emulate Fuseli and present a group of Shakespeare's tragic and comic characters in a picture at the Royal Academy (pl. 115). With the fading of the neoclassic fashion, such pictures lost favor. One of the last was Henry Howard's The Vision of Shakespeare (1830), which the architect Sir John Soane, whose tastes were firmly rooted in the preceding century, bought for his museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Meanwhile, the classic device of the pantheon was occasionally adopted to celebrate the English poets. This really was nothing new. Portraits and sculptured busts of authors had adorned libraries in ancient Rome, and as early as the fifth century A.D., manuscripts had sometimes borne portraits of their authors. The putative images of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, equipped with scroll or book, embellished medieval copies of the gospels, and secular writers were so memorialized in England beginning with the portrait of Chaucer in the manuscript of Hoccleve's Regimen of Princes (ca. 1412). When the spirit of the Enlightenment animated English society, bibliophiles like the Earl of Halifax and Lord Oxford revived the old Roman practice. At his new mansion in Mayfair, built in 1747–49, Lord Chesterfield—the very one whose patronage Dr. Johnson eloquently declined (his library is glimpsed through the door in E. M. Ward's Dr. Johnson in the Anteroom of Lord Chesterfield [pl. 47])—amassed the finest such gallery of the time, twenty-two paintings in all: Chaucer, Spenser, Jonson (one genuine, one dubious), Waller and Cartwright (both erroneously identified as Milton), Butler, Denham, Cowley, Dryden, Wycherley, Otway, Prior, Swift, Congreve, Addison, Rowe, Pope, Sidney, Shakespeare, the Earl of Dorset, and the Earl of Rochester. (All but three are now in the Senate House of the University of London.) An array of such icons was, in fact, an indispensable adjunct of eighteenth-century gentlemen's libraries, lending the very word "gallery" a social cachet readily exploited when Boydell and Fuseli embarked on their Shakespeare and Milton projects.

And so William Blake was working in a long-established tradition when, in 1800, he painted in Hayley's library at Felpham a tempera frieze consisting of eighteen portraits of great poets, eight of whom were English.
Besides Shakespeare and Milton, there were Chaucer, Spenser, Dryden, Otway, Pope, and Cowper, each depicted after the traditional likenesses (the "Hoccleve" portrait of Chaucer, the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare, and so on) and accompanied by vignettes from the poet's works, such as the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, Macbeth, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and scenes from Otway's _Venice Preserved_ and Pope's _Eloisa to Abelard._10 (The set is now in the City Art Gallery, Manchester.)

But it was the more accessible, down-to-earth conception of poets as human beings with no pretensions to divinity that fed the quickening appetite for literary-biographical paintings. Beginning even before Fuseli portrayed scenes from Milton's life in his gallery, a number of compilations, some in several volumes, provided treasuries of moving, quaint, or intimate stories of authors and reports of their conversation: Isaac D'Israeli's three collections, _Curiosities of Literature_ (1791–93), _Calamities of Authors_ (1812), and _Quarrels of Authors_ (1814), and the seventeen thick volumes of _Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century_ (1812–16) and

116. George Cruikshank, _The First Appearance of William Shakespeare on the Stage with Part of His Dramatic Company in 1564_ (RA 1867) (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund). An oil copy of the exhibited painting, which may have been a watercolor; one of the numerous by-products of the celebration in 1864 of the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. The scene of this whimsical extravaganza is the stage of the Globe playhouse in 1564 (thirty-five years before it was built—and it never possessed the Victorian theater's proscenium, curtains, or footlights); the date is 23 April, the approximate time when Shakespeare was born at Stratford-on-Avon. Surrounding the cradle, replacing the symbolic figures in Romney's pair, are characters from the plays, those from the comedies and romances generally on the left and those from the tragedies and histories on the right.
Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century (1817–58), compiled by John Nichols and his son, publishers and proprietors of the venerable Gentleman's Magazine. (The father is said to have been among the guests at Josiah Boydell's dinner when the Shakespeare Gallery was conceived.) In 1820, two separate editions of Spence's Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men came out the same day—the first publication of the work, which previously had circulated only in manuscript.

At the same time, Sir Walter Scott was bringing historical characters, including authors, into his romances for cameo appearances. Thus Shakespeare turned up briefly and anachronistically in Kenilworth. Scott's successors adopted the device to add a spurious touch of authenticity to their fictions. The success of this practice, which culminated in Thackeray's introduction of Addison, Steele, and Swift in the later pages of The History of Henry Esmond, encouraged genre artists on occasion to treat historical figures in the same way, inserting them into anecdotal or narrative situations—documentable, legendary, or utterly imaginary—just as novelists dropped them into their scenes.

Further encouragement came from such works as Anna Jameson's Memoirs of the Lives of the Poets (1829), which went through a number of editions. These romanticized excursions into poets' private lives, a genre of popular writing that was one more product of the keepsake age, offered abundant subjects for painting. Mrs. Jameson's book alone included Burns's love affair with Highland Mary, Swift's ambiguous attachment to Stella and Vanessa, and Pope's courtship of Mary Wortley Montagu—three episodes that, as treated by Mrs. Jameson and her fellow story-spinners as well as by subsequent painters, had the quality of sentimental myth rather than of sober literary biography.

Side by side on the shelves with these contributions to readers' sentimentalized visions of their favorite authors appeared another brand of popularized literary biography typified by William and Mary Howitt's indomitably chatty two-volume Homes and Haunts of the Eminent British Poets (1847). The coming of the railway was bringing tourism into middle-class life, and such books constituted guides, for the active excursionist and the armchair reader as well, to all the sites associated with the British poets. They usually were generously illustrated with engravings, and thus reinforced the popularity of paintings showing the same locales, either landscapes or studies of individual buildings. The appeal of association, so marked in pictures from Burns and Scott, extended to innumerable works of landscape and architectural art whose titles, if little else, referred to well-known writers.

By the late 1820s, the outworn flights of Shakespeare-devotional fancy represented by allegorical, processional, and hall-of-fame paintings were beginning to be replaced by pictures that catered to the public's growing eagerness for intimate glimpses of the Elizabethan playwright whose bust by George Dance, inscribed "We shall not look upon his like again," had presided over the entrance to Boydell's Gallery in Pall Mall. At the time of the Jubilee, Garrick had presented the citizens of Stratford-on-Avon with Benjamin Wilson's Shakespeare in His Study, one of the first attempts to imaginatively re-create the poet's appearance. This effort had nothing to do with the persistent attempts to discover and authenticate portraits that
were claimed to be genuine likenesses. The authority on Shakespeare portraits in the early nineteenth century was James Boaden, whose treatise on the subject, with a title so long as to require eight lines in a modern book on Shakespeare's many "lives," was published in 1824. Appropriately enough, the man Shakespeare, undistracted by Nature, Muses, Graces, or any other spiritual beings, was introduced into Regency exhibition rooms by Boaden's son John, a painter whose oeuvre included almost fifty pictures from English literature, none of them remarkable. One of his two contributions to the British Institution show in 1826 repeated Wilson's subject of half a century earlier, accompanied by a portrait of Queen Elizabeth, a view of the Globe playhouse, and another of Stratford church. At the same exhibition could be seen a fanciful painting by another hand, *Shakespeare, After His Return to Stratford, Entertains His Father and Mother, By Reciting the Character of Sir John Falstaff, in The Merry Wives of Windsor.* The permeation of the Shakespeare legend, already a luxuriant printed growth of legend and hearsay, by a succession of even wilder whims in pictorial form was gathering momentum.

Numerous unsupported (and in many cases totally unsupportable) anecdotes of Shakespeare had been absorbed in the eighteenth-century biographies and now were repeated, in turn, in separately published biographies both scholarly and catch-penny, and in "lives" prefixed to editions of Shakespeare's works that appeared year by year. The effect of such repetition was to increase the credibility of every nugget of supposed "fact." To these almost universally accepted tales, at this moment when painters were turning to subjects from Shakespeare lore, playwrights and novelists were adding their share of fresh fiction. At Covent Garden in 1829, Charles Kemble played Shakespeare in C. A. Somerset's *Shakespeare's Early Days,* a production soon followed by something called *Shakespeare's Dream* (1831) and other equally free conceptions of the dramatist's personal life. The novelists were not far behind. Robert F. Williams's trilogy *Shakespeare and His Friends; or, "The Golden Age" of Merry England,* *The Youth of Shakespeare,* and *The Secret Passion,* published between 1838 and 1844, added considerably to the store of bogus Shakespeareana.

If the artists did not absolutely outclass the dramatists and novelists in inventiveness, they gave them a good run for the money. The least removed from sober history—though even they had their share of sentimental fancy—were the many paintings that represented the topography of Shakespeare's early life. In the 1840s, a national campaign was waged to rescue his birthplace from dilapidation, refurbish it, and endow it with a permanent curatorship. One result of this effort was a growing interest in Anne Hathaway's cottage as the site of what was fondly imagined to have been an ideal courtship such as was depicted, with extravagant embellishments of floral prose, in Emma Severn's novel *Anne Hathaway; or, Shakespeare in Love* (1845). This romantic subject was so exempt from total decay that it appeared on the walls of the Royal Academy as late as 1902. In due course, many paintings of the birthplace and the cottage appeared: routine, if not actually banal domestic scenes whose only claim to more than a passing glance was their prominently announced Shakespearean association. A specialist in this line of work at one juncture was Henry Wallis. In a single Academy exhibition (1854), he hung *In Shakespeare's House, The Font in which Shakespeare was Christened,* and *The Room in
which Shakespeare was Born (pl. 117). A fourth picture in the same series, The Parlour in Anne Hathaway’s Cottage (perhaps rejected by the Academy), was shown in the same year at the British Institution. Such pictures approached within hailing distance of historical reality; there was a certain residue of authenticity, however small. So much could not be said for such impudent attempts to borrow Shakespearean cachet for run-of-the-mine interiors as a painting catalogued ten years earlier as The Great Hall, Hampton Court, In This Hall Many of the Plays of Shakespeare were Originally Performed. The artist was more certain of this supposition than any scholars have been, then or now.

Against interiors or exteriors carefully contrived to suggest Elizabethan décor, Shakespeare’s life story, or what passed for it, was told in paint. Since Shakespeare unquestionably married Anne Hathaway, it was reasonable to suppose that he had previously courted her. So far, the artists were on relatively solid ground. But another subject, Shakespeare’s arraignment before the local magnate, Sir Thomas Lucy, on a charge of deer-stealing, had only the very tenuous authority of oral say-so: a piece of late gossip first printed by Nicholas Rowe in 1709 and subsequently assimilated without much questioning into the received narrative of Shakespeare’s youth. Walter Savage Landor adopted the episode in one of his Imaginary Conversations (1834), and three years later, George Harvey, a leading Scottish painter, exhibited his version, the first of several by various artists, at the Scottish Academy. Like other pictures depicting apocryphal scenes from Shakespeare’s biography, the engravings made of it helped distribute these legends more widely, as well as deepening people’s faith in them. Pictures were as effective a disseminator of falsehood as print.

According to another story, originating with Sir William D’Avenant and then passed from one generation of Shakespearean students to the next until it was finally put into print in 1753, Shakespeare’s first job when

117. Henry Wallis, The Room in Which Shakespeare Was Born (RA 1854) (Tate Gallery, London). The room as it was shown to tourists after the Birthplace was purchased by national subscription in the 1840s. This was one of three related paintings Wallis showed at the 1854 Academy; the others were In Shakespeare’s House (now at the Victoria and Albert Museum) and The Font in Which Shakespeare Was Christened.
he arrived in London was holding horses outside the playhouse. This
supposed event naturally attracted animal painters whose interest in liter­
ary biography was minimal but who knew a good subject for a horse
painting when it came to their attention. Another story, recorded by that
indispensable collector of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gossip
John Aubrey, inspired a picture of Shakespeare and the hostess of the
Crown inn, Oxford (RA 1844). The accompanying note explained that
Shakespeare sometimes stopped at the inn on his way from Stratford to
London. What it failed to mention was that the source of Aubrey's state­
ment was D'Avenant, son of the innkeeper and his beautiful and witty
wife, who, in his cups, was wont to imply that Shakespeare sired him
during one such layover. So, at least, his statement was interpreted,
though modern opinion is that he meant to say that he considered himself
to be an inheritor of Shakespeare's poetical genius rather than his natural
son.

Aubrey also reported that "Ben Jonson and he [Shakespeare] did
gather Humours of men dayly where ever they came"—that is, studied
their characters from the life. "The Humour of the Constable in Mid­
somernight's Dreame," said Aubrey, confusing that play with Much Ado
About Nothing, "he happened to take at Grendon, in Bucks (I thinke it was
Midsomer night that he happened to lye there)." This was the germ of
Henry Stacy Marks's painting, How Shakespeare Studied (RA 1863).

Shakspeare [reported the Athenaeum], rather a coarse presentation, is seated in
the porch of an Elizabethan inn, watching the "humours" of a knot of folks
standing in the street before him. An old city legal authority, probably the
original of Dogberry before he had his "losses," is enlightening an audience
consisting of a vapouring knight and a swash-buckler sort of a fellow. By
Shakspeare's feet is a dog, an ill-drawn animal, but an apt companion to him,
not, we believe, previously suggested by any authority.12

The Examiner critic detected in the surrounding figures the roadside
originals of Malvolio, Pistol, Justice Shallow, Slender, and Shylock, the
last-named "in a Jew clothesman who trades under the golden sign of the 'Fleece' and is tempting Mrs. Page into a bargain."  

Shakespeare's largely undocumented associations with the London literati of his time offered artists an excellent chance to introduce into anecdotal paintings portraits of various Elizabethan celebrities such as might be found in Nicholas Hilliard's miniatures, thus enhancing each picture's supposed historical and literary interest. No matter if the events or juxtapositions strained credulity; it was pleasant to imagine that they might have happened. In 1840, for example, visitors to the British Institution could see Shakespeare giving Ben Jonson's wife a "compliment" (present) to be given in turn to their daughter, his godchild. Also on hand: Beaumont, Fletcher, Raleigh, and Jonson himself, who was "receiving an appropriate lecture" from the young barrister John Selden. In the same year, the Royal Academy's clientele saw David Scott's populous canvas of the Globe theater the day Queen Elizabeth came—a most unlikely event in itself—to see *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which, according to Rowe, she had commissioned. "Groundlings and balcony men, the great literary lights of the Elizabethan age, and the patrician and political notables of the time" (the words are those of Scott's brother), all were there. The "sharp wits in the Mermaid" were present too, including Ben Jonson, "in plain black, a humble dress in those gay days . . . clenching his hand, and enjoying the practical jibes of the Merry Wives." Another canvas representing a kind of Tudor hall of fame was John Faed's *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (RSA 1851), the company including Chapman, Lyly, Florio, Drayton, Daniel, Marston, Nashe, and Jonson. Such pictures were the equivalents in literary art of the paintings of recent historical events, such as Haydon's *Meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society* and George Hayter's *The House of Lords Discussing the Bill to Divorce Queen Caroline*, which were, in effect, portrait galleries of contemporary notables assembled within single frames.

Shakespeare was repeatedly shown reading his latest production to a rapt auditor or audience. Usually it was Queen Elizabeth who was thus favored. In 1834, Stothard had him reading *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to her. The next year a lesser artist, showing the same subject, failed to specify the play; a much later one, Henry Nelson O'Neil, proposed that it was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The scene of the latter painting (RA 1877) was the gaily appointed royal barge floating down the Thames on a sunlit day, the monarch reclining Cleopatra-like on cushions as her favorite poet ("a reddish-haired man with a phrenologically intellectual forehead" according to one critic) sat uncomfortably before her on a stool. It was George Cattermole, however, who most audaciously capped a dubious legend with an extreme unlikelihood. In 1868, he depicted Shakespeare reading a play to, of all people, his old bete noire Sir Thomas Lucy. Evidently all was forgiven.

Another of Wallis's paintings was a fanciful scene in a sculptor's workshop at Stratford the year after Shakespeare's death (pl. 119). While children in nineteenth-century dress played at the open door, a visitor watched the sculptor as he finished the "bust" (actually a half-length figure) that was to be incorporated into the monument in Holy Trinity Church. Palgrave, "reading" the picture as a modern critic might read Hogarth or Turner, professed in the *Saturday Review* to find symbolic
meaning in the details: "... In bringing together, as accessories of this single atelier, the Gothic corbels and a religious statue, together with an Italian model of the human muscles, Mr. Wallis, we presume, intended to indicate that meeting of the Old Art and the New which Shakespeare himself symbolized." 16

Milton exceeded even Shakespeare in the number of paintings that showed real or supposed events in their respective lives. About fifty are recorded, half of them in the two decades 1830–40 and 1850–60. In 1850, each of the three regular exhibitions, the Royal Academy, the British Institution, and the Society of British Artists, had at least one. The subject most often painted was that of the blind poet dictating to his daughters, sometimes with a suggestion of celestial grace streaming down into the chamber. Dr. Johnson quoted Jonathan Richardson’s report that “he would sometimes lie awake whole nights, but not a verse could he make; and on a sudden his poetical faculty would rush upon him with an impetus or oestrum, and his daughter was immediately called to secure what came.” 17 Romney painted the scene in 1793, it was on the Miltonic agenda that Barry never carried beyond the point of sketches, Fuseli included it in the Milton Gallery, and Westall exhibited his version in 1802 (pi. 112). At least fifteen later treatments are recorded.* Thackeray had no praise for Haydon’s interpretation of the scene at the Society of British Artists in 1840:

A buxom wench in huge gigot sleeves stands behind the chair, another is at a table writing. The draperies of the ladies are mere smears of colour; in the foreground lies a black cat or dog, a smudge of lamp-black, in which the painter has not condescended to draw a figure. The chair of the poetical organ-player is a similar lump of red and brown; nor is the conception of the picture, to our thinking, one whit better than the execution. 18

Other aspects of Milton’s domestic life were the topics of much contro-

119. Henry Wallis, A Sculptor’s Workshop, Stratford-on-Avon, A.D. 1617 (RA 1857) (Royal Shakespeare Theatre Picture Gallery ©). A blend of two popular kinds of narrative painting, showing an artist at work in a fictitious scene suggested by literary biography. As usual, some liberty was taken with the known facts: the workshop of Gerard Johnson (Janssen), who sculpted the first Shakespeare monument, was in Southwark, not Stratford; and if he worked from a death mask, there is no record of such priceless evidence of Shakespeare’s features. Reviewers were divided on the identity of the onlooker. The Athenaeum (9 May) said he was Ben Jonson, but the Saturday Review (23 May) hedged: “Burbage is it, or Southampton?”
Henry Fuseli, The Return of Milton's First Wife (ca. 1799) (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). An incident in Milton's life that was not included in the group of biographical paintings in the Milton Gallery (cf. pl. 34). "He was at a Friend's house upon a Visit; his Wife Surpriz'd him; she came into the Room and all in Tears flung her Self at his Feet. At first he seem'd Inexorable, but the Submission of a few Minutes drove away the Provocations of So Long a Continu'd Crime. He Melted, Receiv'd her, and was Reconcil'd" (Jonathan Richardson in his life of Milton, 1734). Fuseli sent this painting, along with several others, to his Liverpool patron William Roscoe, in part payment for loans Roscoe had made him. However, represented a totally fictitious episode, that of a pair of foreign ladies coming upon the teen-aged Milton as he lay asleep under a tree near Cambridge and being so impressed by his beauty that the younger composed some extempore lines in Italian which she left in his hand. Milton, so the myth went, conceived such a passion for "the fair unknown" that he went to Italy in an unsuccessful search for her, whom he
thought of to the end of his days as his own Lost Paradise. Several later artists illustrated the same scene, which they sometimes transferred to a suburb of Rome in deference to what was reported to be the local Roman version of the story.  

Milton also appeared in a number of the paintings from seventeenth-century history that were so popular in the Victorian era, as much for their colorful costuming and portrayals of “manners” as for whatever political overtones they may have possessed. In several, all dating from 1850 and after, he was one of the principal figures. Frederick Newenham’s scene of Cromwell dictating to Milton—turnabout, the poet’s daughters might have said, was fair play—the dispatch in favor of the persecuted Protestants of the Valleys of Piedmont attracted considerable notice when it was hung at the British Institution in 1850. In 1877, Ford Madox Brown painted the same episode, adding Andrew Marvell to the cast of characters. Other Milton-Cromwell paintings went further in their fancy. One, at the Royal Academy in 1854, showed Cromwell “directing Milton to prepare a copy of his Latin verses, intended to accompany the portrait of himself which he is about to send to Christina of Sweden”—the first Mrs. Milton being in attendance, as she almost certainly was not. The most improbable of all was the scene by Charles Lucy in which Milton was represented playing the organ to an appreciative Cromwell.  

Since fewer people were acquainted with Chaucer than with Shakespeare and Milton, there was much less interest in the older poet’s life. Little of substance was known about it in any case, and such information as was available was not conducive to free adaptation in the domestic or sentimental mode of popular art. The first painting drawn from his life was William Bell Scott’s Chaucer, with His Friend and Patron John of Gaunt, and the Two Sisters, Catherine and Philippa, Their Wives (RA 1842), a title wisely and more descriptively shortened to Chaucer Reading His Poem of The Flower and the Leaf to John of Gaunt when it was shown subsequently at the Royal Scottish Academy. The half-dozen paintings representing Chaucer between 1845 and 1856 may have been inspired in part by the publication in the former year of the first biography (Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas’s) to be founded on fact rather than legend.  

At the Free Exhibition of 1848, Chaucer, along with Gower and John of Gaunt, was an auditor rather than a performer in Ford Madox Brown’s Wyclif Reading His Translation of the Bible. When this painting was shown, Brown had not yet completed a work he had begun in Rome in 1845, after his chance encounter with a passage in Sir James Mackintosh’s History of England while reading at the British Museum. As he remembered it when writing of the event in his diary two years later, the passage ran: “And it is scarcely to be wondered at, that English about this period should have become the judicial language of the country, ennobled as it had recently been by the genius of Geoffrey Chaucer.” “This at once fixed me,” Brown recorded. “I immediately saw a vision of Chaucer reading his poems to knights & Ladyes fair, to the king & court, amid air & sun shine.” His first intention was to call the painting, a triptych with Chaucer in the center panel and Wyclif and John of Gaunt in the wings, “The Seeds of the English Language.” Then (one notes that this was just half a century after Blake painted his garland of poets on the walls of Hayley’s library) Brown substituted what he called “a love-offering to my favourite poets,
to my never-faithless Burns, Byron, Spenser, and Shakespeare." The finished painting (pl. 121), exhibited at Liverpool in 1853, was titled on the frame Milton: Spenser: Shakespeare: Chaucer Reading the Legend of Constance to Edward III and His Court. An. Dom. 1375: Byron: Pope: Burns. Chaucer occupied the central panel, flanked by three poets in each of the wings. Another version of the panel meanwhile had been exhibited, alone, at the Royal Academy in 1851.

Although Shakespeare and Milton dominated the gallery of scenes from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literary history, a few of their contemporaries were occasionally represented independently of them. Spenser was seen in his study in a picture (RA 1839) "from an authentic portrait." Ben Jonson was portrayed on a visit to Drummond of Hawthornden (RSA 1867). In 1862, six years after his Death of Chatterton (below) created a stir, Henry Wallis painted the death of Christopher Marlowe. It must have been a melodramatic presentation indeed. "The corpse," said the Times, disapproving of the subject (a "miserable end in a bagnio brawl"), "lies scarce seen amid the wreck of shattered chairs, upset candlesticks, flagons, and torn table-cover, by the light in the hands of the terror-stricken inmates of the foul place, who have gathered at the top of the stairs leading down to the room in which the brawl has taken place. Through the open window is seen the moonlit street with the assassins running away." 21

Two paintings from Defoe's life are recorded. The earlier, praised as having "the true congenial and Hogarthian spirit," was E. M. Ward's Daniel Defoe and the Manuscript of Robinson Crusoe (RA 1849). In the shop of a publisher-bookseller, a supercilious assistant returned to the young Defoe the rejected manuscript, while the proprietor obsequiously did the honors of the establishment to a successful scandalmongering author, Mary de la Rivière Manley. The other picture, a crowded scene of London life by Eyre Crowe (RA 1862), showed the doughty journalist standing

---

121. Ford Madox Brown, The Seeds and Fruits of English Poetry (1845–53) (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). This triptych memorializes Brown's deep attachment to nine English poets. A considerably altered version of the central panel was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1851 (now at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney), and another, painted 1856–58, is at the Tate Gallery. The composition strikingly resembles that in an illumination of Chaucer reading aloud, found in a fifteenth-century manuscript of his Troilus and Criseyde (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge).
serenely in the pillory as punishment for writing his ironical pamphlet, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. Grateful Whig housewives tossed bouquets to him, and a gentleman knelt before him, drinking his health. Conforming to the mid-Victorian insistence on historical accuracy in details, the painter depicted Defoe as he was described in the hue-and-cry notice: “a middle-sized spare man, about forty years old, of a brown complexion, and dark brown coloured hair, but wears a wig; a hooked nose, a sharp chin, gray eyes, and a large mole near his mouth.”

Sir Richard Steele figured in art most prominently, however indirectly, as the former occupant of the house in Hampstead that Constable included in his *View of London* (RA 1832). But he was also shown with his mother in a picture (1804) suggested by his essay in the *Taller* (No. 181), and later, when Thackeray in his *English Humorists* had directed attention afresh to him as a lovably feckless husband, writing to his wife explaining why he would not be home for dinner (Eyre Crowe at the winter exhibition in Pall Mall, 1860, and another painter at the Society of British Artists, 1880).

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, curiously enough, occasioned more paintings than did Steele. She was painted “at Belgrade” (no further clue offered) by John James Chalon (RA 1834) and as the nominal subject of a routine picture of a coquette in Turkish dress (RA 1858). When the Queen Anne period had come into fashion as a setting of costume-and-wig art, painters remembered the story of her being introduced at the age of eight or nine to her father’s companions at the Kit Kat Club as “the Reigning Beauty of the Year.” William Frederick Yeames depicted it in 1884. His rendition gathered inside one frame a whole constellation of popular motifs: a beautiful child in her white satin and lace, crowned with the fashionable tall head-dress of the day; the humor of the situation (grave age paying tribute to blossoming youth); colorful masculine costume; and literary-artistic allusiveness in the persons of Addison, Steele, and Kneller among others.

Lady Mary also figured in the most famous picture taken from the biography of Alexander Pope, Frith’s *The Rejected Poet* (pl. 122). Based on a fragment of hearsay related in an edition of Lady Mary’s letters, it showed what purported to have been the occasion of her estrangement from the physically unattractive poet, her responding with hearty laughter to his declaration of love. Frith painted it for “a collector, of a somewhat vulgar type,” as he later described him, who was under the impression that Pope was a Pontiff of Rome (“The Pope make love to a married woman—horrible!”).

Apart from Turner’s painting (1808) of the demolition of the villa at Twickenham, a house that was long a favorite subject for topographical artists, the only other picture of consequence relating to Pope was Eyre Crowe’s *Pope’s Introduction to Dryden, at Will’s Coffee House* (RA 1858), another example of the literary portrait gallery, in which Steele, Addison, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and other writers of the day witnessed the clever Windsor lad’s showing his verses to the old poet, ensconced in his favorite nook in the coffeehouse.

Jonathan Swift, an equally controversial man of letters, was more frequently painted. In the forty years after his first appearance at the exhibitions in 1854, he was the subject of at least a dozen pictures, dominated by a sentimental and trivialized view of his relations with the two
Goldsmith has bought a bottle of wine with
the guinea Johnson sent him to pay his
rent, and now Johnson, searching for a
chattel that will accomplish what the
guinea did not, is reading the manuscript
of his friend's novel, which (as readers of
Boswell could predict) he will go out and
sell for sixty pounds. "Suppose him
Goldsmith to have been incarcerated and
ruined, as many a noble mind has been,
what would the world have lost!" ex­
claimed the Literary Gazette (27 May). But
the manuscript of the Vicar was safe, and
the world would eventually be indebted to
it for some scores of paintings. The picture
of the Good Samaritan on the wall is
another example of symbolic iconology in
Victorian anecdotal art, with a double ref­
erence: Johnson is succoring Dr. Gold­
smith, who is himself a healer.

women in his life, Stella and Vanessa. Crowe's Dean Swift at St. James's
Coffee House 1710 (RA 1860) portrayed him reading a letter from Stella
while a dandy received a communication of his own, a three-cornered,
rose-tinted billet doux brought by a waitress. Four years later, Crowe
showed Swift sitting in his study, this time morosely contemplating a tress
of Stella's hair. Millais exhibited two subjects that were nominally from
Swift, Stella (pl. 103) and Vanessa (RA 1869). But these were merely be­
lated fancy portraits, with no attempt to individualize the two women
from the clues found in Swift's letters and journal.

One of the last Swift pictures, Frith's Swift and Vanessa (RA 1881), was
more dramatic. The subject was Swift's bursting unannounced into Van­
essa's house after discovering her letter to Stella asking whether Swift was,
as report had it, married to her. "Then, without speaking a word, but with
a look that froze her blood, he threw the letter on to the table and left her
for ever." Frith confessed in his frequently self-deprecating autobiogra­
phy that he "found the subject . . . a very difficult one. I fear it required
a more powerful pencil than mine to portray the crushed heart and mind
of Vanessa, or the lightning fury of Swift." The Saturday Review agreed.
The picture, it said, was "remarkable for every quality it ought not to
possess."25
Samuel Johnson was among the first writers to be repeatedly the subject of anecdotal pictures once the fashion got under way—not surprisingly, since the several portraits his friend Reynolds had painted of him had made his physical presence, as an art critic observed in 1854, "familiar to the infancy of every beholder." By the 1840s, Boswell's biography had passed through a number of editions, including John Wilson Croker's controversial one of 1831, and this classic work was supplemented by numerous collections of anecdotes, authentic or spurious, which had accumulated like barnacles on the Boswellian hull. From 1843 to 1880, at least fifteen paintings showed Johnson at various moments in his well-reported life. At the Royal Academy in 1843, E. M. Ward showed the Doctor in Goldsmith's squalid lodgings (pl. 123). Ward's second picture (pl. 47), exhibited two years later, was based on a familiar story relating to Johnson's hope of obtaining assistance from Lord Chesterfield. Thackeray found it

... a very good Hogarthian work ... representing Johnson waiting in Lord Chesterfield's ante-chamber, among a crowd of hangers-on and petitioners, who are sulky, or yawning, or neglected, while a pretty Italian singer* comes out, having evidently had a very satisfactory interview with his Lordship, and who (to lose no time) is arranging another rendezvous with another admirer. This story is very well, coarsely, and humorously told, and is as racy as a chapter out of Smollett.27

Johnson as a subject for biographical painting attracted an ill-assorted pair of artists toward the end of the 1850s. Eyre Crowe, who as we have seen was something of a specialist in pictures from eighteenth-century literary history (Defoe, Swift, Addison, Steele, Pope, Goldsmith, Sterne) showed a Scene [unidentified] at the Mitre: Dr. Johnson, Boswell, Goldsmith (RA 1857). Some years later he was to paint Dr. Johnson's Penance 1784 (RA 1869), depicting him standing bareheaded in the rain in the Uttoxeter market, repenting his having once refused to tend his father's bookstall there. Another Dr. Johnson at the Mitre (1860) was by an artist who normally worked in a vein far removed from that of Crowe and his fellow anecdotalists. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in a pen-and-ink sketch (Fitzwilliam Museum) and a watercolor copy (Tate Gallery), recalled Johnson's taking to the Mitre for dinner two young women from Staffordshire who had called to solicit his opinion on Methodism; after dinner, according to Boswell's informant, "he took one of them upon his knee, and fondled her for half an hour together."28

At the height of Frith's popularity, in 1868, he exhibited at the Royal Academy Before Dinner, at Boswell's Lodging in Bond Street (pl. 160), the occasion of Goldsmith's display of his stylish new coat,

Johnson [said the Times], looming large in the circle, like a huge Spanish galloon, with Garrick playing, like a light English pinnacle, about him; Goldsmith admiring Mr. Filby's immortal peach-blossom coat before the glass; placid Sir Joshua trying, by help of his trumpet, to catch the joke that is passing between him and Murphy and Bickerstaff; Bozzy beginning to fidget in his chair, and Tom Davies, who has been keeping dinner waiting, being ushered in at the door by the maid. . . .29

Frith sold this picture to the dealer Agnew for the very substantial price, for the time, of £1,200; later it was sold by Christie's for £4,567 10s., "the largest price," Frith noted, "that had been paid for the work of a living artist at that time."30 He returned to Dr. Johnson for at least two more pictures. Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Siddons (RA 1884), suggested by a

*Thus Ward improved on the story, substituting for Colley Cibber, a servile dramatist and poetaster, a female figure with an unmistakable sexual innuendo.
passage in Thomas Campbell’s life of the actress, merged Nollekens’s bust and Reynolds’s portraits in the figure of Johnson, and Gainsborough’s and others’ portraits in that of Mrs. Siddons. Two years later, Frith exhibited *Dr. Johnson’s Tardy Gallantry* (RA 1886), in which Johnson, belatedly realizing that the French lady (Madame de Boufflers) whom Topham Beauclerk had brought to see him deserved greater honors than he had bestowed on her during their visit, overtook the pair as they reached the Temple gate and, said Beauclerk, “brushing in between me and Madame de Boufflers, seized her hand, and conducted her to her coach. His dress was a rusty brown morning suit, a pair of old shoes by way of slippers, a little shrivelled wig sticking on the top of his head, and the sleeves of his shirt and the knees of his breeches hanging loose”—a description made to order for what might be called an anticostume piece.31

Other Johnsonian subjects seen on Victorian walls were John Irvine’s *Dr. Johnson at Tea at Mrs. Thrale’s with Goldsmith, Garrick, and Reynolds* (RSA 1845) and his later pair at the same gallery (1852), *Johnson and Richard Savage Walking the Streets of London* by day and night. W. J. Grant’s *Dr. Johnson Carries Home the Poor Girl He Found Deserted in the Streets* was seen at the Royal Academy in 1855, and James Drummond’s *Dr. Johnson and Boswell*—incident not specified—at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1858. James Smetham painted *Mr. Robert Levett and Dr. Johnson Visiting a Poor Family* (RA 1862), and Marshall Claxton *The Last Interview between Sir Joshua Reynolds and Dr. Johnson* (SBA 1865).

During his lifetime, Johnson’s friend Oliver Goldsmith had been something of a living legend in his circle of fellow writers and artists. Anecdotes of his checkered career and his charmingly irresponsible character were passed down to the Victorians in many forms. The appearance within a decade of three biographies—Sir James Prior’s formless compilation of documents, down to the laundry lists that henceforth would be the standard symbol of biographical irrelevance (1837), Washington Irving’s briefer narrative (1844), and John Forster’s solid and readable work (1848)—wrapped the figure of Goldsmith in a thick aura of sentimental affection, at the very moment when, not accidentally, *The Vicar of Wakefield* became the favorite subject of early Victorian anecdotal painters. From the middle to the end of the century, some twenty scenes from Goldsmith’s life are recorded. Most Victorians chose to minimize the faults of vanity, improvidence, and irritability Thackeray conceded in a lecture otherwise overflowing with charity, concentrating instead on his ingenuousness and amiability. It was in this spirit that the artists painted “poor Goldy” and his skimpy wig and worn knee breeches. E. M. Ward showed him earning a night’s lodging at a Flemish farmhouse by playing the flute (RA 1844) and flouncing out of a fashionable house, where he was superseded as attending physician by a mere apothecary (pl. 124). Abraham Solomon’s *An Awkward Position* (RA 1851) portrayed him futilely searching his pockets for money to pay for the tea to which he had treated the daughters of a respectable gentleman at Islington. There was even a rendering (SBA 1869) of the anecdote, first told by Bishop Percy in 1801 and conveyed down the chain of biographies, that while Goldsmith was writing in his squalid London room, there appeared to him “a poor ragged little girl of very decent behavior, . . . who, dropping a curtsy, said, ‘My mamma sends her compliments, and begs the favour of you to lend her a chamber-pot full of coals.’"
A signal contribution Washington Irving made to Goldsmith mythology was the fancy that he had been hopelessly in love with Mary Horneck, the "Jessamy bride" whom Reynolds and Hoppner painted and whom Hazlitt once met in Northcote's painting room. No episode in his life, real or imaginary, was more quintessentially Victorian in its sentimental splendor than this. Thomas F. Marshall showed him reading a manuscript to Mary and her sister (RA 1852), a subject repeated forty years later by Margaret Dicksee (RA 1894). In the interim, Eyre Crowe showed the last scene in the Goldsmith story, *Brick Court, Middle Temple, April 1774* (RA 1863): the room filled, as a reviewer said, "with mourners the reverse of domestic: women without a home, without domesticity of any kind, with no friend but him they had come to weep for—outcasts of that great, solitary, wicked city, to whom he had never forgotten to be kind and charitable." Extrapolating from Irving's statement that Goldsmith's coffin was opened to obtain "a lock of his hair . . . for a lady, a particular friend, who wished to preserve it as a remembrance," Crowe placed the Misses Horneck at the scene, unlikely though their presence in that squalid setting was.

Four years before Goldsmith died, not far from Brick Court, in a garret in Gray's Inn, the most-painted death scene in literary biography was enacted: the suicide of the seventeen-year-old Thomas Chatterton, precocious forger of the poems of a fifteenth-century Bristol monk named Rowley, which initiated a legend that was to have wide literary repercussions in generations to come. The pathetic glamor attached to the premature death of an adolescent (supposed) genius outweighed the fact that Chatterton was, after all, a fraud; and in contemporary opinion, he was regarded as the undeserving victim of Horace Walpole and Dr. Johnson.
125. Thomas J. Barker, *The Poet Chatterton* (RA 1860) (Victoria Art Gallery, Bath). A fairly late example of the use of Chatterton as the prototype of the Romantic starving poet in a garret. Except possibly for the rolled-up manuscripts, an allusion to the poems of a fifteenth-century monk that Chatterton claimed he had found in St. Mary Redcliffe Church, Bristol (he had actually forged them), there is little to identify the scene as belonging specifically to the Chatterton legend.

who stubbornly, and rightly, refused to believe in the authenticity of the "Rowley" poems. Some years after his death—the precise dates cannot be fixed, but the best guess is the 1780s—two painters depicted the scene: the busy Henry Singleton and a very minor artist named John Cranch, who painted portraits and history pieces as well as a category of novelty art called “poker pictures” and, as a member of the Edmonton circle with whom John Constable had contact in the summer of 1796, gave the bud-

126. Mrs. Edward M. Ward, *Chatterton*, 1765 (RA 1873) (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery). Hard at work on his forgeries, the boy is disturbed by his foster mother, to whom he complains (according to a fictionalizing biographer), “You are too curious and clear-sighted; I wish you would bide out of the room. It is my room.” Through the window can be seen the tower of St. Mary Redcliffe.
In July 1782, a picture of the living Chatterton in his garret was engraved for the *Westminster Magazine* under the Hogarthian title of *The Distressed Poet*; and the design subsequently was circulated in the form of handkerchiefs on which it was printed, a rare if not absolutely unique distinction for a literature-related work of art.

But Chatterton did not come into his own as a subject of painting until well after he had become the object of the Romantic poets' adulation. In “Resolution and Independence,” Wordsworth celebrated him as “The marvellous Boy, / The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride”; Coleridge wrote a “Monody on the Death of Chatterton”; Keats, sensing a kinship with the “Dear child of sorrow—son of misery” that he perhaps subconsciously knew would be perpetuated by his own untimely death, not only addressed a sonnet to him but dedicated “Endymion” to his memory. Not until 1834, however, did a painter take up Chatterton again. This was a now-forgotten artist named William Proctor, who exhibited a canvas titled simply *Chatterton* at the Society of British Artists.

Between 1846 and 1886, there were half a dozen English paintings of the death of Chatterton, several accompanied by a line from Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, “Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight.” Presiding over them was Henry Wallis’s picture (pl. 127), which, by what may have been no more than a coincidence, was hung only months after the publication of a novelette called *Chatterton: The Story of a Year*, by Milton’s future biographer David Masson. It had mixed reviews. “The subject,” said the *Literary Gazette*, “flatters the maudlin sensibilities of many who consider themselves, like Chatterton, neglected geniuses. . . . Holiday costume and fine modeling . . . have been brought in to disguise the horrors of a scene at which true humanity shudders. . . . We object to the figure of a suicide, even of a Chatterton, being decked out in rainbow robes, and dignified with features of ideal grandeur.”

On the other hand, Ruskin was unstinting in his praise: “Faultless and wonderful: a most noble example of the great school. Examine it well inch by inch,” he urged the readers of his *Academy Notes* for the year; “it is one of
There were also several paintings of Chatterton while still alive and busy at Bristol. A picture of him writing the supposed poems of Rowley (1846) has been cited by his modern biographer, E. H. W. Meyerstein, as "probably one of the world's worst pictures"—an extravagant claim, considering the magnitude of the competition in Victorian England alone. The next year, W. J. Montaigne exhibited at the Royal Academy an incident in the Chatterton legend in which a local dealer, offering him a tribute in the form of a cup with "Thomas" inscribed in gold, received the haughty reply, "Paint me an angel with wings and a trumpet, that he may trumpet my name over the world."

Robert Burns was eleven years old when Chatterton died. His fame was more widespread, and the harvest of Burns pictures incomparably larger (at least sixty biographical ones). Public interest in his private life was kindled early, beginning with Dr. James Currie’s piously scandalous biography prefixed to the first volume of his collected poetry (1800). Within a decade, artists were traveling to Burns country as they had already begun to travel to the land of Scott’s poems. Joseph Farington and Sir Thomas Lawrence dropped by Stothard’s London home in 1810 to see the sketches he had made in Scotland the previous summer. "Many of [the] sketches," Farington recorded in his diary, "were views of places from which engravings are to be made to accompany an edition of Burn’s [sic] poems. He made a drawing of the House in which Burn’s was born; the room in which He wrote, with the desk at which He wrote & the Chair on which He sat. So far is this kind of enthusiastic admiration now carried." Stothard was in the vanguard of artists who were to paint every scene even tangentially related to Burns’s life. There were portrayals of him in the glorious throes of composing—Sir William Allan, for instance, showed him writing "The Cotter’s Saturday Night"—and reading the finished product to a patron (the Duchess of Gordon, in Edinburgh, 1785).
Burns's supposed love affair with "Highland Mary" accounted for as many pictures as were concerned with all the other occurrences of his life put together (some thirty out of the sixty). According to a story first set current by the Greenock Burns Club, shortly followed by the engraver and compiler Robert Cromek in his Reliques of Burns (1808), the "Highland Mary" addressed in two or three of the poems was Mary Campbell, whom legend soon idealized into his great "spiritual" love. Actually, Mary was, as a recent biographer puts it, "merely another peasant-girl beguiled into lifting her skirts by the force of Robert's personality and the urgency of his desire," who died bearing one of his illegitimate children. But sober biographical fact, in Burns's case as in Shakespeare's, was no match for sentimental fancy, and Highland Mary figured in picture after picture—being courted by the earnest young peasant-poet (pl. 128), posing alone in the act of day-dreaming about him (in the best manner of the Keepsake beauties), listening to him reading his latest verses, resting on her way to visit her parents as in a Thomas Faed canvas (RA 1856) that Ruskin praised as "very lovely in its kind," and—a recurrent theme—parting from him forever. In sheer number of appearances, the fair maid of the Highlands compared well with the record scored by any other literary heroine, and she had the sanction of biographical authority—no matter that the authority was itself unreliable. The other, all too soundly documented woman in Burns's life, Jean Armour, was obviously unavailable for artistic treatment. It would have been hard to sentimentalize a heroine whom the hero married only after she produced their second pair of twins.

Burns's compatriot Sir Walter Scott was the sole nineteenth-century author to figure in more than a handful of biographical pictures. From his initial success as a poet in the first decade of the century, he was a national celebrity. Devotees of his work, including such artists as Turner and Leslie, made pilgrimages to hospitable Abbotsford on pleasure or business. The periodicals of his day and for many years thereafter abounded with accounts of his genial personality, as well as with speculations on the origins of his characters and descriptions of appreciative wanderings in "Scott country." Numerous artists painted his portrait, and immediately after his death in 1832, the annual exhibitions witnessed a new phenomenon, the graphic documentation of a contemporary author's life. At the Royal Academy the next year, Edwin Landseer portrayed him sitting in the Rhymer's Glen as described in Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border. The publication of John Gibson Lockhart's lengthy and much praised biography in 1837–38 added fresh interest to anecdotal pictures from Scott's life. He was seen reading the manuscript of The Lady of the Lake to an old farmer in a painting at the Royal Academy in 1839, and at the same place in 1844 he was depicted as a young man dining with one of the blue-gown beggars of Edinburgh. The next year, at the Royal Scottish Academy, an artist portrayed an incident in the Edinburgh gang warfare of Scott's youth, recalled in his reminiscences to Lockhart, when the wounded "youthful Goth" nicknamed "Green-breeks" honorably refused to identify the assailant who had put him in the hospital. Most of the artists who repeatedly took subjects from the Waverley novels, among them the Faed and Lauder brothers and Charles M. Hardie, painted subjects from Scott's life as well. The least characteristic doubtless was J. P. Davis's entry at the Society of British Artists in 1837, described in the catalogue as A Conference in the Shades: Bonaparte is Vindicating His Policy,
At the age of sixteen, Byron fell madly, helplessly in love with Mary Chaworth, two years older than he. She derided him as “that lame boy,” and in any event was already engaged to a young foxhunting country squire. Byron later idealized the one-sided affair in “The Dream.” In Brown’s own idealization, Mary has the standard Pre-Raphaelite profile, and Byron bears little resemblance to any known portrait.

The imagined situation into which Ward thrust Byron had already become a cliché of Victorian poetry and fiction, the lover as a jealous outsider, sometimes eating his heart out as his beloved is giddily involved in a ball (the situation in Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” for example). The Athenaeum (10 May) reminded its readers that Byron was “the hater of waltzes and the derider of women.”

None of the Romantic poets were represented very often in biographical art. Byron’s youthful love affair with Mary Chaworth was recalled in several pictures drawn from his poem “The Dream.” One of them was a landscape by Charles Eastlake (pl. 325) that, to be sure, had nothing to do with the story the poem describes; and another was Ford Madox Brown’s portrayal (pl. 129) of the poet “pouring out impassioned nothings” to Mary, as the artist’s grandson put it, “whilst Mary has only ears for the distant sounds of the hoofs of that sturdy Nimrod Jack Musters’s horse, and eyes for that scarlet-coated gentleman himself.”

Millais also (1856) painted Byron’s Dream. E. M. Ward used another (imaginary?) moment from the futile courtship in his Byron’s Early Love (The Dance) (pl. 130). One of the few surviving biographical pictures is Sir William Allan’s Lord Byron Reposing in the House of a Turkish Fisherman, After Having Swum the Hellespont (RSA 1831).

Joseph Severn memorialized two of his friends at Royal Academy exhibitions: Shelley Composing His Prometheus Unbound, Amidst the Ruins of Rome (1845) and Keats, at Hampstead, When He First Imagined his Ode to the Nightingale (1851). Half a century later, Eyre Crowe painted Shelley at Marlow Writing the Dedication of the Revolt of Islam (RA 1904). Except for these isolated instances, the vein of painted “biographical illustrations” of English authors ended with Scott and Byron. Only a few formal portraits of Victorian writers were to be seen at the exhibitions. Neither during their lifetime nor later did Tennyson and Carlyle, for example, figure in anecdotal genre scenes, replete though their modern biographies are with picturesque episodes that would have tempted artists’ brushes in their day.