The quality of art criticism, including journalistic wit.—The demise of Ut pictura poesis.—The influence of preconceptions; artists' fidelity to the literary source an occasion for praise; quibbles over departures from the text; invented scenes.

A few years ago, it would have been chic to observe that the Victorian painters deserved the low quality of criticism they received. Today, in view of some artists' return to favor, the remark would no longer be regarded as chic. But its assessment of the prevailing level of Victorian art journalism, to use a more accurate term than "criticism," cannot be denied. The fact was that the reviews of the annual exhibitions represented cultural journalism close to its nadir. Editors were reputed to assign the least competent members of their staffs to cover the exhibitions, on the several grounds that they could do no real harm (to the papers, at least), that such assignments could give reporters who were capable of writing about nothing else something to keep them busy, and that in the state of public ignorance of the fine arts, nobody would be the wiser. In 1840, Thackeray wrote:

The world has been imposed upon by persons calling themselves critics, who, in daily, weekly, monthly prints, protrude their nonsense upon the town. What are these men? Are they educated to be painters?—No! Have they a taste for painting?—No! I know of newspapers in this town . . . which send their reporters indifferently to a police-office or a picture-gallery, and expect them to describe [a] Correggio or a fire in Fleet Street with equal fidelity. And, alas! it must be confessed that our matter-of-fact public of England is itself but a dull appreciator of the arts, and is too easily persuaded by the dull critics who lay down their stupid laws.¹

The general incompetence of art critics was still notorious almost forty years later, when Sidney Colvin wrote:

"Art-criticism" has on the whole been conducted so much at random, that a shade of ridicule and discredit has attached itself to the very word. Both before and since the days of Thackeray's genial creation, F. B. [in *The Newcomes*, 1855],

*This outburst occurred in a preliminary passage of his essay "A Pictorial Rhapsody" (*Fraser's Magazine*, June 1840), in which "Nol Yorke" (William Maginn, the magazine's editor), presiding at a staff dinner, delivered a lengthy toast to "Michael Angelo Titmarsh" (Thackeray) as he was about to make his yearly rounds of the exhibitions. In that festive context, a certain amount of satire must be allowed for. But four years later, Thackeray repeated the idea in his own person, though professing to note some improvement in the situation: "The readers of newspapers will remark this year that the leaders of public opinion have devoted an unusually large space and print to reviews of the fine arts. They have been employing critics who, though they contradict each other a good deal, are yet evidently better acquainted with the subject than critics of old used to be when gentlemen of the profession were instructed to report on a fire, or an Old Bailey trial, or a Greek play, or an opera, or a boxing-match, or a picture gallery, as their turn came" (*Fraser's*, June 1844). An irony remains, insofar as Thackeray presumably included himself among the new, "better acquainted" breed of critics. In any case, the low quality of routine art reviewing that persisted through the following decades is evidence enough that Thackeray's charge, however overstated, was not unfounded.
the "art-critic" has been an accepted type of the person who pronounces with a light heart on matters which he has been at no pains to understand. We all know in what kind of consideration the business is usually held by artists themselves. . . . Mr. Poynter [the artist], in his volume of lectures lately published, denounces "the ordinary newspaper ignoramus;" saying that "as a rule English art-critics start on their career by criticizing the exhibitions, and trust to time and chance for learning something about art". . . . Nor can it be said that the disesteem in which newspaper criticism is thus held by artists is without warrant. . . .

It says something about the increasing news value of the fine arts that whereas only some twenty journalists were at the Academy's private view in 1848, the 1892 press preview—now a separate occasion—was attended by no fewer than 300. The countless columns they printed across the years are indispensable to the art historian for their descriptions of paintings that have vanished and to the historian of popular culture for their expression of contemporary taste, but as documents of aesthetic experience they have little value, simply because not much aesthetic experience of any consequence seems to have been involved; if it did occur, it was described in brief, simplistic clichés. The reviewer explained the subject of the picture, applied one or two instant tests to the artist's treatment, and passed on to the next painting. Among these critics was no Hazlitt, bringing to bear on works of art his well formulated aesthetic theory, his acute sensibility, his abhorrence of cant, and his powers of compact description.

In Hazlitt's time, one of the most prolific identifiable reviewers was Robert Hunt, who long served as art critic for his brother Leigh Hunt's Examiner. He had strong prejudices, but he was more readable and often more perceptive than most of his successors. He does not deserve to be remembered solely for his characterization of Blake in 1809 as "an unfortunate lunatic, whose personal inoffensiveness secures him from confinement." Among the other writers whose contributions made up the annual record of the London art scene were a few whose names are not wholly forgotten today. William Michael Rossetti, the nonartist member of the Pre-Raphaelite coterie, for many years wrote for the Spectator, the Academy, the Critic, and other papers of lesser note. The playwright Tom Taylor reviewed for the Times from 1857 to 1880. To artists who resented his condemning, on the basis of a minute's glance, a painting on which a year's labor had been expended, he made up in pedantry what he lacked by way of artistic training and knowledge. Francis T. Palgrave, like Rossetti and Taylor a full-time civil servant, wrote for the Saturday Review but is said to have declined an invitation to contribute art reviews to the Times "on the ground that he could not conscientiously praise the work of many of the smaller contemporary artists," a scruple not shared by many of his colleagues. Frederic George Stephens, another member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle (pl. 252), was the Athenaeum's critic for forty years (1861–1901), being succeeded in that office by Roger Fry. His predecessors on the Athenaeum had included Keats's friend John Hamilton Reynolds (1828–ca.1834), Henry Fothergill Chorley, later to become widely known as a music critic (1836–41), and Frank Stone (late 1840s–mid-50s).

Whatever gifts these individual writers had as judges of pictures—several, like Stephens and Stone, were practicing artists—were suppressed by the general mediocrity that was accepted as the normal condition of art journalism. When their work was unsigned, as it was except
The reception of this painting, by a member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, was spiced with typical "wit": "A very small Una, whose mild, not to say inane, look would astonish Spenser, leads a very large lion. This beast's mane is in a state of permanent erection, so that he looks more like a magnified porcupine with 'fretful quills' than fair Una's 'unruly page'" (Athenaeum, 19 May). "Una is simply a wooden lay figure with a badly-mended joint in the neck; and the lion, not to be conventional, carries a mane of electrified cocoa-fibre round his neck, and our old friend the butterfly upon his nose" (Fraser's Magazine, June, 61: 881). Whistler's adoption of the butterfly as his trademark was a dozen years in the future.

(sometimes) in the magazines, only the recurrence of certain pet prejudices or foibles can distinguish one man's writing from another's. One quality they did have in common, however, was levity. Although all professed to take the fine arts seriously, they could not resist the occupational impulse to hang alongside any painting they disliked a specimen of their wit. One is tempted to think that in his recital of the deficiencies of his fellow reviewers Thackeray should have added that editors often assigned the art beat to the office joker. No form of painting was immune, but pictures from literary sources were more vulnerable than most; it may have seemed particularly fitting to apply verbal humor to pictures from verbal sources. When journalists were sent to see the annual exhibitions and found literary pictures that had neither poetry nor art, they were compelled to liven up the stale commonplaces inspired by the year's crop of commonplace pictures on stale subjects by writing of them with a desperate flippancy. For this reason among others, to read much of their output at one sitting is as numbing a chore as to go through a whole

"Una and the Lion" (RA 1860) (National Gallery of Scotland).
volume of *Punch*—cartoons, conundrums, puns, skits, and all—without a single intermission. Although the art reviewers of the thirties and forties applied plenty of lighthearted as well as vicious remarks to paintings they disliked or failed to understand, the incidence of attempted humor increased after mid-century, when the controversial arrival of the Pre-Raphaelites made unprecedented demands on their fund of invective.

Probably the worst thing that could be said of a run-of-the-mine painting was that, to use a modern word the Victorian art viewer would have welcomed, it was nothing more than *kitsch*. In an era when the fine arts retained, or even improved on, the claim to dignity that they asserted when history painting still was vestigially regarded as the pinnacle of artistic ambition, to denounce a painting as fit only for some utilitarian or frivolous purpose or to associate it with a trivial form of art was to impute to it the ultimate vulgarity: it was a debasement of a noble art. Thus *Fraser's Magazine*, in a routine put-down, said in 1831 of a painting from Prior's poem "Henry and Emma," "We think we have met with something very much like it before, figuring as a frontispiece to a sixpenny song-book, with the only difference that here the figures are magnified to the size of life, which is not by any means an improvement on the original idea." At various times, paintings were described as fit only for scented soap, bonbon, or glove boxes (Marcus Stone's scene from *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1861), or likened to a "Brummagem tea-tray" (the "iridescent rays of mother-of-pearl" in A. J. Woolmer's painting of Portia, 1868), and "sampler-work or tea-board illustration" (one William Rimer's *Ivanhoe and Rowena*, 1853).

The point need not be pursued, because additional samples of comic art reviewing are necessarily scattered through these pages. They provide a convenient background against which the two most readable Victorian commentators on the annual exhibitions, Thackeray and Ruskin, may be judged. Thackeray's comments were not often concerned with literary pictures, but those that were, were wholly characteristic of the man. His observations on the pictures at the exhibitions and on the art scene of his day are of a piece with his other journalism, jaunty, expansive, and good-humored. His is the manner of a literate flâneur who has wandered into a gallery and entertains his companions with a running commentary that is often shrewd, appreciative of the practical difficulties an artist has faced and perhaps surmounted, and invariably engaging. Even what might be, from the pens of his less gifted colleagues, nothing more than stale joking acquires a special flavor when Thackeray picks it up, if only, perhaps, because we know who wrote it. Its flavor, at the very least, is that of the fresh-voiced contributors to the early *Punch*: a parody here (the mock-Spenserian title of a fictitious painting, *Sir Botibol Rescues Una from Sir Uglimore in the Cave of the Enchantress Ichthyosaura*), a comic fancy there ("... the Gow Chrom [in a painting from *The Fair Maid of Perth*] is a theatre-hero, and the Glee Maiden, in pink stockings, looks as if her discomfiture arose from her vain efforts to keep her clothes on her back").

Except for a possibly distinctive Thackerayan nuance, such waggeries were oppressively customary in the art criticism of the time. And the same is true of Ruskin's "remorseless contumely," to adopt his own phrase. Attention has seldom been paid to the humor in his art criticism, nor is there any special reason why it should be. But his criticism of exhibited
paintings, including those from literary sources, is shot through with the kind of humor he shared with his inferiors—which shows how irresistibly contagious it was. Most of it is found in his annual series of Academy Notes, written the moment he returned from the private view, sped through the press, and sold just outside the Academy doors as an instructional alternative to the official catalogue.¹²

Once the foolery is strained out, what remains from the busy pens of Thackeray's and Ruskin's colleagues is an extensive body of criticism that contains some serious ideas, indispensable, however misguided they strike us as being, to our understanding of Victorian art culture. The very lack of individuality in the routine reviews has its value, because it enables us the more accurately to gauge the enlightened public taste of the time, which the critics purported to express, as contrasted with the "popular" taste they never tired of belittling even though their own approached it often than they admitted.

In the days before cultural journalism came to be divided among specialists, several art critics writing for newspapers and intellectual reviews were also, like Hazlitt before them, literary and/or dramatic critics. These versatile men brought to the art exhibitions a larger knowledge of English literature than the average gallerygoer possessed, an equipment that certainly affected their judgments of paintings with literary content, though how deeply or in what directions it is hard to detect. Whatever their professional interest in literature, their writings do offer a fresh way of sampling contemporary literary taste. In their roles as critics of painted literary illustration, they inadvertently reveal their opinions of scenes, characters, "atmosphere," moral content, and the other components of plays, poems, and novels. These attitudes are unstudied; it is pictures that are being reviewed, not books. And so art criticism becomes, by implication, literary criticism as well. Although there is no room in this book to explore the specific resemblances, anyone conversant with the main principles of nineteenth-century literary criticism will find striking parallels in the criteria applied to the year's output of literary paintings.

Missing from the art criticism of the Victorian era was much mention of the old ut pictura poesis concept, which was now a dead issue except insofar as it turned up, pro forma, in the lectures (usually that on "Invention") of painters themselves.¹³ Haydon affirmed its truth on the provincial lecture circuit in 1835,¹⁴ and so, some years later, in his Royal Academy lectures (1843), did Henry Howard, who repeated, once more, the hoary description of painting as "mute poetry" and poetry as "speaking painting" and went on to recommend that "a poetical feeling should be intermingled to the utmost possible extent in all [painters'] productions of whatever class. . . . As far as its own peculiar demands will admit, a picture should be conceived like a poem. . . ."¹⁵ But Ruskin voiced the considered opinion of the day when he deplored the "infinite confusion" caused by "the careless and illogical custom of opposing painting to poetry, instead of regarding poetry as consisting in a noble use, whether of colours or words. . . . Poetry is the employment of either for the noblest purposes."¹⁶

Replacing the theoretical issue of the sisterhood of the arts (though the well-worn phrase itself continued to be too handy to retire) was the related one of illustration. Though by no means new in criticism, it came
into prominence in the early Victorian years as the result of both the unprecedented popularity of subjects from literature and recent technological improvements. In their “address to readers” of the first issue (1842) of the *Illustrated London News*, already quoted in chapter 4, the editors announced:

For the past ten years we have watched with admiration and enthusiasm the progress of illustrative art, and the vast revolution which it has wrought in the world of publication through all the length and breadth of this mighty empire. . . . It has given to fancy a new dwelling-place, to imagination a more permanent throne. . . . Art—as now fostered, and redundant in the peculiar and facile department of wood engraving—has, in fact, become the bride of literature; genius has taken her as its handmaid, and popularity has crowned her with laurels that only seem to grow the greener the longer they are worn.

To which the aged Wordsworth responded four years later, confronting pompous prose with dreadful verse, in a sonnet bearing the unpoetic title of “Illustrated Books and Newspapers”:

Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute
Must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit
The taste of this once-intellectual Land.
A backward movement surely have we here,
From manhood,—back to childhood; for the age—
Back towards caverned life's first rude career.
Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page!
Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear
Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage!

At that date, Wordsworth could not have foreseen that cave drawings, far from being an emblem of man's most savage condition, would be esteemed a century later as evidence of the first glimmerings of the aesthetic impulse in prehistoric man. But his vehemence was shared by few. “Illustration,” not replacing the printed word but supplementing it, was regarded all but universally as a welcome accompaniment to the contemporary March of Mind.

As it was popularly used then, “illustration” meant “to elucidate (a description, etc.) by means of drawings or pictures” (the seventh definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). This was the sense in which it was used by Wordsworth and the pioneers of “illustrated” journalism: the literal transformation of verbal images into visual ones, or even the employment of images to represent a subject initially, without the prior use of language or simultaneously with it, as in the reporting of news events. In art criticism, it had a more specialized meaning: the simple representation of a literary text.* Used strictly, “illustration” in this sense suggested a borrowed pictorialism that lacked any but the most minimal, unavoidable intervention of the artist.

The prior existence of the literary subject offered artists two opportunities beyond that of faithful representation, which would in itself revive the associations already present in the minds of the people who knew the literary source. They could exercise their prerogative of invention (sanctioned by all academic lecturers)† by suggesting a new reading of the familiar scene. Or, going beyond what the academic lecturers, from Reynolds down to Henry Howard, had conceived of as merely the addition of a vague, undefinable “poetic feeling” to the subject, they could invest it with a wholly new beauty, subordinating the subject, as received from the

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*This definition of *illustration* differs from that offered by Martin Meisel: “interpretive re-creation” (*Realizations*, p. 32). Mine is closer to what he means by *realization*. The discrepancy is due in part to our different perspectives and to some degree, perhaps, to our reliance on different samplings of quotations.

†And rather unsatisfactorily defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “. . . the devising of a subject, idea, or method of treatment [emphasis added], by exercise of the intellect or imagination; ‘the choice and production of such objects as are proper to enter into the composition of a work of art.’”
author, to their Romantic need for self-expression. Representation might, then, turn into the expressivism that was central to the Romantic conception of art, as was the case with the great landscapists, who, once liberated from the constraints of imitating Claude or Poussin, availed themselves of that freedom to see and record nature as their temperaments prompted them to do. They could; but should they? This was the issue that underlay most of the criticism to which Victorian paintings from literary sources were subjected.

According to Sidney Colvin, looking back in 1874, the great flaw in eighteenth-century treatments of literary themes had been the artists' reluctance to go beyond the letter of their source, their commitment, that is, to "illustration" in the strict sense:

It occurred to them only to follow in the wake of the narrative, and to aim at interesting the mind, through the avenue of the senses, by showing how those circumstances and incidents happened which had already been detailed to it by literature. In inspiring itself by the strict text of Shakespeare, Milton, and the poets, the arts of design had still less chance of developing their appropriate and peculiar effects. The inventors of the conceptions had fully developed them from their own side, and in connection with particular passages and junctures of incident and feeling; in this shape they had won their popularity; they were not such as the arts could go to work upon independently, and manage from the side which best suited themselves. This danger for one set of arts in becoming subordinate to the other, and inspiring itself from the works of the other, whereas both ought to inspire themselves from different aspects of the same original conception, was generally overlooked in the century. The criticism of the century had not apprehended the notion of an independent development of conceptions, as ideas in literature and as images in art. Criticism imagined quite erroneously (and it was against this error that Lessing wrote his "Laokoon") that the ancient artists had but wrought in order to illustrate the text of the ancient poets.17

Colvin oversimplified, of course. The early illustrators' very lack of servility to their sources strikes us everywhere, not least in Boydell's Shakespeare pictures, where it often led to grotesque incongruity. But the discrepancies were largely those of style, as in the persistent custom of depicting widely diversified literary subjects with the uniform elegance and unreality of the French rococo. Colvin overlooked Fuseli, for one—a not unnatural omission, because Fuseli did not loom very prominently in the retrospect of a century. But, as we now recognize, his many mannerist designs from Shakespeare or Milton—he cherished a very individual conception of Paradise Lost—were the expression of a strong, unique personal vision, as, even more obviously, were Blake's versions. At the end of Fuseli's life, John Martin, another illustrator of Milton, claimed the Romantic artist's privilege of freedom of interpretation. All three artists fitted the requirement laid down by a modern commentator on Miltonic illustration:

... A persuasive illustration does not merely or necessarily take account of everything in the passage or conform to the conception of the critic. We cannot confine the success of the illustration to accuracy in this kind any more than we can judge the merit of Shakespeare's image of Cleopatra by his fidelity to Plutarch. The painter is to the poem as an actor is to a playwright or a performer to a composer. ... We accept the vision of Blake and the anachronism of Martin as imaginative acts faithful to the spirit of the poem. ... What we ask of illustrations for Paradise Lost, then, is something like a new poem upon an old, and in what may be called answerable style. We ask a fresh creative act in which the painter either captures the essence of his subject as we conceive it or so
transmutes his subject that we are required to see it anew. . . . Fuseli’s flamboyant nudes are not untrue to an Adam censured by Raphael for his susceptibility to an Eve fairest of her daughters and vain of her beauty. Yet they are indisputably in Fuseli’s own idiom. And we must read Martin, so to speak, in awareness of the aesthetic and social currents of his time. Part of Martin’s language is the sense of space and grandeur in Paradise Lost; and part of it is the stag, the lion, the dinosaur, the gas arc-lights. . . . Illustration finally is illumination.18 (Emphasis added.)

Theoretically (again), the coming of Romanticism should have given a mighty impulse to this ideal of the creative interpretation of literature in art. “As Romanticism begins,” Peter Conrad has written, “all the arts aspire to the condition of literature, the treasury of moving or ennobling subject-matter, so that painting is assigned the task of illustration”—illustration, that is, in the broad sense, as Turner “illustrated” Nature.19

The Romantic poets voiced their respect for their forerunners by taking old themes and making them their own in the form of new treatments, as Keats did with stories from Boccaccio, and Coleridge with ballads. A writer in Fraser’s Magazine in 1842 urged painters to follow their example. “We once heard a Scotch poet complain that there was no more room for poets less than Shakespeare,” he said.

[But] poets create subjects; poets take up subjects already famous; and, with that rare art which belongs peculiarly to genius, give to common topics a fresh and increasing interest. A great painter will create a position; or, if he adopts a well-known attitude, will, by touch, character, and colour (the very soul of the picture), palliate the robbery by making us forget what is old in the high excellencies of what is new. A painter who will complain of a want of subjects is what Johnson would call “a barren rascal.” . . . Nothing . . . but complete novelty and success can justify the taking up subjects already familiar to us all.20

Implicit in much criticism of Victorian literary painting was the assumption that few artists were up to the challenge presented by their recourse to literary subjects. Only the exceptional painter, it was thought, could maintain the delicate balance between the pressures and impulses generated by the literary source and those originating in the artist’s sensibility. (The additional conflict between literary substance and artistic style—the simple issue of appropriateness—was seldom if ever recognized.) William Michael Rossetti was one of the rare critics who articulated the idea, and he did so rather belatedly (in the late 1850s), when the Pre-Raphaelites, whose in-house apologist he was, had defied convention by infusing a strong element of subjectivity in their paintings of literary themes:

That line of pictorial work wherein the artist renders himself illustrator of another man’s ideas is continually taken up by painters who have little of their own to draw upon, and who cling to a hint from any quarter; but it is in reality one of the most difficult of all to manage. It demands much self-abnegation on the artist’s part, and earnest study of his subject-matter; and presents the double pitfall of too little originality, and too much. No common mind is required in order to enter into another mind’s workings. The artist who gives too little of himself is pretty sure to be a weak man: the artist who gives too much commits the lesser fault, and one which, in the case of a superior man, carries its own palliation with it; yet it vitiates the work of art as an illustration.21

Shrewd and sympathetic though Rossetti’s understanding of the literary painter’s dilemma was, his phrasing seems to reflect true uncertainty on his own part. Originality, the artist’s exercise of his Romantic prerogative to transform an existing literary artifact into a new creation as the poets
had sometimes done, was to be valued, of course—witness the freedom claimed by the artists belonging to the Rossetti circle—but at the cost of his picture’s illustrative function?

A few years later (1866), Henry Nelson O’Neil, who produced at least a score of literary pictures, carried Rossetti’s idea of “self-abnegation” further, urging in a Royal Academy lecture that the artist completely efface his identity as Keats did when he entered the soul of the sparrow pecking in the gravel:

... The really great artist ... makes all the resources of his art auxiliary to the subject, into the spirit of which he throws himself, with such a power of abstraction that he becomes a spectator of the scene depicted; nay, even in delineating the varied feelings that animate the actors, he assumes, for a time, the part itself—smiling with the gay, or mourning with the sad. And he who, in depicting history or poetry, cannot so forget his own identity, whatever may be his mechanical power, never can attain success.²²

There is no evidence that painters of literary subjects were conscious of any such tension between the claims of mimesis (illustration) and expressivism. No Victorian artist was as deeply concerned with the aesthetics of his profession as Reynolds had been, and none left any such quantity of private records as Haydon did. None, so far as the printed record reveals, seems to have been deeply introspective. We cannot tell whether, if the pressures of popular taste had not been so strong, artists would have responded more noticeably than they did to the liberating appeal of Romanticism. Nor can we tell whether they were irritably aware of the restraining influence that the use of literary sources had upon the free play of the imagination, the printed page intervening between them and the observable world about them. In practice, the theoretical conflict was resolved so decisively as to leave no doubt where the weight of popular preference, as reflected by journalism, lay. For every review objecting that an artist followed an author’s description too closely (“... the pencil has attempted a fac-simile from the [author’s] pen”: the Athenaeum on Sir William Allan’s picture from Scott’s The Fair Maid of Perth, 1832),²³ there were a hundred that approved a painting on the ground that “the pencil of the artist has most successfully identified itself with the pen of the Scottish bard” (Fraser’s Magazine on another picture by Allan, from Burns’s “Tam o’ Shanter,” three years later).²⁴ Illustrators, no matter how eminent or how skilled, were expected to preserve the integrity of their source, at whatever cost to whatever urge they felt to indulge their private vision.

The only exception applied to the “ideal pictures” mentioned in the preceding chapter. These were of two kinds. In one, the artist candidly used the literary text, typically a line or two of evocative poetry, as the donnée for a free composition, more decorative than most, that did not purport to represent the content of the literary work. In the other, he simply adopted a dominant figure from a literary source—an allegorical or mythological character, for example—as the personification of an abstract moral or intellectual principle, again without reference to the text. (Eighteenth-century “role playing” paintings often belonged to this latter category, though the term “ideal picture” was not then used.)

The response of the common viewer or his surrogate, the art critic, to a literary painting, and therefore the valuation he placed on it, was dictated
by his preconceptions, which amounted to an adamant reverence for
what he deemed to be the "truth" of the literary text. The power of these
preconceptions had long been recognized, by Reynolds in his seventh
discourse (1777), by Lamb in his outbursts against Boydell's Shakespeare
Gallery, and by that unofficial lawgiver to budding artists Sir George
Beaumont, who told both Haydon and Wilkie that, desirable as it was for
aspiring painters to acquire a "poetic feeling" from reading books, they
should avoid taking actual subjects from literature, for, as he wrote Hay-
don, "you have always the disadvantage of having an admirable picture to
contend with already formed in the minds of the circle—nay, different
pictures in different minds of your spectators—and there is a chance, if
yours does not happen to coincide (which is impossible in all cases) that
justice will not be done you."  

In the lecture quoted above, O'Neil saw in the very strength of these
preconceptions an equally strong challenge to the artist. He recognized,
as Eagles had done,

the difficulty to be encountered in the pictorial representation of the poet's
creations, whose shadowy outlines are solely filled up according to the reader's
fancy, and who, consequently, can only be satisfied in proportion as the painted
image resembles the spiritual form of his own conceptions. And yet this same
impossibility of satisfying all minds becomes an additional source of advantage
to a great artist; for it is in his power, by the strength and beauty of his delineations,
to overthrow for a time all preconceived ideas, and to make the real
impression of his genius usurp the place hitherto filled by fancy alone.  

This is essentially what W. M. Rossetti had said a few years earlier. But the
fact was that few reviewers were willing to let time reconcile an ingrained
preconception with an artist's different view of the literary subject, interest-
ing and valid though this might be. The aesthetic effect of a literary
picture, indeed, was largely irrelevant (though the precise valuation
placed on it differed from critic to critic), and its emotional impact was
inextricably connected with the effect already associated with the scene or
character depicted.

Appreciation of art, therefore, was inseparable from appreciation of
literature; "in talking of the one," as a writer in 1842 put it when praising
Maclise's The Origin of the Harp (pl. 332), "we imperceptibly glide away into
pleasant remembrance of the other."  But this very recognition, on an
everyday level, of the sisterhood of the arts carried its built-in risk to the
artist. As reviewers of the exhibitions chatted on about the subjects of the
pictures on display, they evinced a sternly proprietary attitude toward
English literature, a sign of the great prestige it enjoyed in contemporary
culture. Their message was clear: Don't tamper with our literature.
Praiseworthy as a painting might be on its own terms, it was inescapably
rendered vulnerable to comparison with its source. One form of mild libel
that cropped up from time to time was the assertion that an artist had not
actually read the book he purported to illustrate; another was that he was
simply not qualified to deal with literary subjects. Good cases could have
been made for both charges.

The congeniality of the artist with the author he was illustrating—a
manifestation of that pearl beyond price in Romantic aesthetic theory, the
faculty called "sympathy"—was always singled out for praise when it
could be detected. Robert Hunt said of Stothard's portrayal (RA 1811) of
the dispossessed family leaving their old cottage in The Deserted Village,
Charles R. Leslie, *Sir Plume Demands the Restoration of the Lock* (RA 1854) (Tate Gallery, London). A sketch for the exhibited painting, which was commissioned by Leslie's patron John Gibbons. Millais modeled for the head of Lord Petre; the setting is a room at Hampton Court, with details of furniture from Petworth.

"No man understands so well as Mr. Stothard the union of grace with the rustic character; he is therefore a most faithful delineator of the artless grace of Goldsmith."

The self-effacing fidelity with which Leslie illustrated Sir Roger de Coverley going to church, accompanied by the Spectator, was unquestionably responsible for the acclaim that painting received when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1819. Hunt may be allowed to voice the consensus:

"To excite so universal and strong a sensation as this picture does, is indeed an indubitable proof of the force and faithfulness with which he has transferred to canvass the characters mentioned in No. 112 of the *Spectator*; for interwoven with our feelings and memory as they are by the reading from infancy of that justly popular work, the pictured characters would have had but a weak effect, did they fall short of the written ones of old so much read and understood. . . ."

Praise of the artist’s “truthfulness” sometimes took the form of a reference to previous maltreatments of the subject in art or on the stage. Thus in 1835, the *Times* welcomed another painting (not Allan’s) of “Tam o’ Shanter” with the comment that “it was high time” that the character should be represented somewhat in accordance with the notions which Burns’s immortal poem has engendered. The abominable liberties which have been taken with the hero of one of the merriest and choicest poems of its size in our language (if we may call the language in which it is written ours), first, by being cut in stone-mason’s work, and next by being represented on the stage by Mr. Farren, who would seem to have as accurate a conception of Tam o’ Shanter as he would have of Prester John, made it necessary that someone should rescue that King of Good Fellows from such profanation.

But although critics agreed that painters should respect their literary sources, they differed on what constituted fidelity, because the individual response that “sympathy” entailed could not be wholly suppressed even at
a time when reaction to art and literature was controlled by powerful standards of public taste, and subject to the prevailing morality and rules of what was and was not admissible in art. Although the reviewers saw the same canvases, they often saw them differently, just as they retained differing recollections of the poems and plays that were illustrated. In 1831, the Literary Gazette said of Leslie’s Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman (pl. 45), “Could Sterne have beheld such an illustration of the scene he [Leslie] has so sily and humorously described, he would have hurled his wig up into the air with delight”; but the Times grumbled, “My uncle Toby looks too knowing by half; it is not the Uncle Toby of our fancy.”

In 1854, there was vehement disagreement on the fidelity to Pope of Leslie’s scene from The Rape of the Lock (pl. 149). Ruskin, calling it “an absolute masterpiece,” declared the year after it was exhibited, “Nor was it less admirable as a reading of Pope; for every subordinate character had been studied with such watchful reverence to every word in which it is alluded to throughout the poem, that it seemed to me as if the spirit of the poet had risen beside the painter as he worked, and guided every touch of the pencil.” The Examiner agreed: “It is high praise but just praise to say that the more thoroughly a man has entered into the refined spirit of Pope’s mock-heroic, the more fully will he perceive the tact and skill with which Mr. Leslie has translated it into the painter’s language.”

The vigor with which reviewers attacked artists’ supposed violation of a poet’s integrity depended somewhat on who the poet was. There were, for instance, few complaints against Milton pictures on this score, apart from the tendency of Etty and his followers to stress the nudity they too eagerly inferred from the text. A writer in 1832 recommended to Etty, apropos of his picture from Comus (pl. 150), that he “study more attentively the dignified sobriety of style which characterizes Milton: the old
Leighton evidently was under no such pressure as the market-conscious print-publisher Charles Heath applied to artists like Kenny Meadows. When Meadows showed him drawings of Mrs. Page and her daughter in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that he had made for one of Heath's sleek gift books, Heath insisted that the mother be portrayed as young as her child: "I don't care about her maternity, or Shakespeare, or anything else. You must not make her more than twenty or nobody will buy!" (W. B. Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, 1:114-15.)

The reviewer was himself no more than half right. In his "sonnet: To Genevra," Byron praised "thy eyes' blue tenderness, thy long fair hair," but said nothing about her eyelashes.

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Halliwell [two contemporary Shakespearean editors] would allow it.  

Holding the artist strictly to the literary text was a device repeatedly adopted by Turner's malicious critics. Six years after he exhibited the "utterly incomprehensible daub" that was titled with the fictitious quotation from *The Merchant of Venice*, Turner exhibited an even more controversial painting, *Juliet and Her Nurse* (RA 1836), which was really a montage of scenes from different parts of Venice. "Amidst so many absurdities," said the *Blackwood's* reviewer, "we scarcely stop to ask why Juliet and her nurse should be at Venice." *Surely Shakespeare never located them there.*

As if in partial compensation for being kept on a tight rein, artists were generally given leave to develop a mere hint in the text into a full-fledged exercise of literary fancy. They availed themselves of the same freedom they enjoyed when they painted legendary scenes from the lives of great artists and more or less apocryphal biblical scenes (Dyce's *St. John Leading the Blessed Virgin from the Tomb*; J. R. Herbert's *Our Saviour Subject to His Parents at Nazareth*; and, most famously as far as English painters were concerned, Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents*). Concurrently, the same thing was happening in literature—sentimental popularizers like Mary Cowden Clarke were writing the prehistory of Shakespeare's heroines, tracing their supposed lives up to the moment when they stepped from the wings—and in the theater itself, where uncanonical scenes sometimes were interpolated into the Shakespearean text to represent what was only mentioned, developing a mere textual hint into an extra passage in the dramatic action.

There were, for one thing, scenes that took place offstage, though referred to in the dialogue. The most frequently painted scene of this sort was the dinner at Mr. Page's house in the first act of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (pl. 151). In his portrayal, which was several times imitated, Leslie gathered Falstaff, Mrs. Page, Anne Page, Mrs. Ford, Bardolph, and others as they might have appeared had the script called for the dinner to be performed before the audience.

*Turner's moving the scene from Verona to Venice was no more culpable than Otway's moving it to Rome in his "adaptation." The latter distance is considerably greater.*
152. Paul Falconer Poole, *The Death of Cordelia* (RA 1858) (Victoria & Albert Museum, Crown Copyright). The *Saturday Review* (15 May) objected to the license that the artist, “a hopeless eccentric,” exercised in depicting this moment in the last scene of *King Lear*: “It is very ridiculous in Mr. Poole to introduce . . . a prominent female in a remorseful attitude, who can not be Goneril or Regan . . . for . . . both are dead by this time, . . . [and] how does Mr. Poole know that Shakespeare’s Goneril or Regan would have been remorseful?” A more niggling critic would have pointed out that it should be Lear, not Edgar, who applies the feather test to Cordelia. Compare Barry’s treatment of the same scene, pl. 7.

Even oftener depicted were previous actions that in the text were described retrospectively by participants or reported by breathless eyewitnesses or messengers. The scene in Brabantio’s house during which, as Othello recalls in act 1, scene 3, he narrated his perilous adventures to a rapt Desdemona was painted so often that Victorians may well have come to believe it actually occurred in the play. The recurrently painted death of Ophelia no doubt encouraged a similar misapprehension: the scene is only described by Gertrude. Duncan’s wild horses, a subject of animal painters, are not seen in *Macbeth*, though they are vividly described by Ross (2.4). Pictures from the history plays were especially rich in unperformed actions: the murder of the Princes in the Tower in *Richard III*, reported at secondhand by Tyrell, who had the account from the actual murderers, Dighton and Forrest; the “pouncet lord” picking his way among the corpses on the battlefield as Hotspur furiously describes him in the first part of *Henry IV*; and Bolingbroke’s coronation as the groom briefly describes it to the imprisoned Richard II. Several other subjects filled up small chinks in the Shakespearean text. In 1852, for example, a minor artist showed Desdemona and Othello about to elope in a gondola, an action not specified by the playwright but legitimately inferred at any rate. Some artists, however, exercised their license too licentiously. In a picture of 1828, Lady Macbeth’s deathbed, itself not shown on stage, was attended by the Weird Sisters, and a generation later another scene, equally offensive to purists, was displayed: the boy Hamlet, “joyous and frolicsome, slashing, whip in hand, poor Yorick” as he rode the court jester piggyback.