PART TWO

IMAGES FROM SHAKESPEARE
INTRODUCTION

W. P. Frith, reminiscing at the age of eighty-nine: "Mrs. King, our washer-woman . . . sat to me in 'Ramsgate Sands.' One day when I was painting her I quoted some lines from Shakespeare. 'Them's lovely lines,' she said. 'I should think they are; they're Shakespeare's.' She looked rather puzzled, so I said, 'You've heard of Shakespeare, haven't you?' 'Yes, sir,' says she; 'wasn't he something in your line?"'

Not surprisingly, pictures from Shakespeare accounted for about one-fifth—some 2,300—of the total number of literary paintings recorded between 1760 and 1900. They are impressive graphic evidence of the age's conviction that Shakespeare was incomparably the supreme poet of England and, many (not chauvinists alone) came to say, the world. They began as a product of the developing Bardolatry that stemmed from the realization in the first decades of the eighteenth century that Shakespeare was something special, not just another "old dramatist" in the company of Marlowe, Jonson, Dekker, Beaumont and Fletcher. In time, the paintings came to emblematize the Romantic critics' near-deification of Shakespeare; and in their most prosperous years, they reflected the prevalence of that same adoration, half reverent and half embarrassingly matey, in Victorian middle-class culture. In 1769, Garrick had produced a stately festival in which the trappings of neoclassic hero worship, such as allegory, predominated; the Victorians, by contrast, expressed their admiration of the Bard by buying sentimental volumes on the supposed girlhood of his heroines and edifying compilations of his wit and wisdom. The paintings from the plays faithfully mirrored each turn in the celebration of Shakespeare.

He entered art under the most dignified auspices. The doctrine of ut pictura poesis offered a convenient association: if Shakespeare was a great poet, the sister art of painting should respond to, and memorialize, that greatness; theoretically at least, only the brush of a Michelangelo or a Raphael could do justice to his genius, as no flood of verbal panegyric could. On a more practical level, he was the provider of numerous subjects appropriate to history painting, the highest form of art; and, as a bonus, late in the eighteenth century, his pastoral comedies and romances supplied literary tie-ins for landscapists in the Claudian tradition.

Critics, actors, and painters alike were fascinated by Shakespeare's uncanny penetration into the secrets of the human heart. As early as 1713-15, essays analyzing his characters had appeared in periodicals; the critic Joseph Warton published five papers on characters in King Lear and The Tempest in 1753; and in the 1770s appeared several whole books on the subject, typified by William Richardson's Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of Some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters (1774), with chapters on Hamlet, Macbeth, Jaques, and Imogen. Thomas Whately's Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare, written some years earlier, was published in 1785. Meanwhile, the greatest actor of the time, David Garrick, had brought to the portrayal of many Shakespearean characters a psychological insight and physical expression that substantiated the discoveries critics and "moral philosophers" (analysts of the human mind) were making in the study. Two of Garrick's most famous roles, Macbeth (pl. 156) and Richard III (pls. 2, 198), were particularly significant to the psycho-
logical thought of the time. "By the last quarter of the century, [they] emerge as two opposite types of dramatic character and, at the same time, their 'minds' become archetypes of the human mind in its varied reactions to the impinging outside world."9

It was not accidental that these figures were among the most frequently depicted subjects of Shakespearean painting at the time. Psychological truth was of as much concern to painters as it was to actors like Garrick and critics like Warton. A well-known history painter, John Hamilton Mortimer, exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1775 a dozen pen drawings of Shakespearean characters, each purporting to represent the expression of an "impassioned state of mind."6* The age's most sought-after portrait painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds, was less interested in conveying who his sitters were or what they had done (the usual approach of portraitists down through Kneller) than in suggesting what they were as human beings. In an essay printed for the first time in 1952, his summary of the attractions Shakespeare had for painters stressed the element of character portrayal:

To observe of Shakespeare that he observed everything that passed before him and considered it with a poetical mind, and that he took his ideas from nature herself, would be superfluous praise. I would only observe that by considering nature as a poet, he involuntarily considered it as a painter. His descriptions are pictures: Dover Cliff; "her head sometimes on one side, sometimes on t'other"; "clear sky of fame." He appears to have looked at the human face like a painter who wishes to imprint on his memory the movements of the features when any particular character was expressed: "peeping through their little eyes"; "swell their cheeks to idle merriment." The frown of the forehead, and the expression of the eyes in consequence, had been observed before, but "a napkin ill laid up".—7

In the very first years that Shakespearean subjects began to be painted in some quantity (the 1780s), a distinction was made between paintings derived from the literary text and those that originated in the theater. The former bore the more honored credentials. When Robert Edge Pine (see chapter 2, above) advertised his series of pictures to be engraved, he was at pains to dissociate them from mere theatrical paintings, of which he had produced a number as a young man, including several of Garrick. "These subjects, having hitherto been unattended to, but for frontispieces to the plays," he said, "it may be proper to observe, that the pictures proposed, are not meant to be representations of stage scenes; but will be treated with the more unconfined liberty of painting, in order to bring those images to the eye, which the writer has given to the mind; and which, in some instances, is not within the power of the Theatre."8

As persons of intellectual or imaginative bent found more and more reasons to study Shakespeare, successive editors strove to restore the printed texts of the plays to the condition in which they supposedly had left the hands of the poet. This was a critical undertaking in more than one sense, because it marked the beginning of the long process, requiring more than a century to complete, by which the "authentic" Shakespearean text was restored to the theater.9 In the eighteenth century, the plays as their first audiences knew them, or even as editors found them in the grievously mangled folio texts, were seldom seen on the stage. Some were acted so infrequently as to have no impact whatsoever on the public; and in the second half of the century, a number—Richard II, Titus An-
dronicus, Troilus and Cressida, the three parts of Henry VI, and Love's Labour's Lost—were never performed.

With only two exceptions, Othello and Twelfth Night, in the first half of the century the Shakespearean repertory was regularly staged in versions for which the word "adaptations" is, in some instances, too generous a synonym and "improvements," the term employed at the time, an outright lie. The extreme case was that of Nahum Tate's perversion of King Lear (1681), discussed below.* Not until 1838 was Shakespeare's own text to be followed, by Macready. Romeo and Juliet was performed in Otway's adaptation entitled The History and Fall of Caius Marius; Macbeth, in D'Avenant's version; The Tempest, successively in Dryden / D'Avenant's, then Shadwell's; The Taming of the Shrew in four different versions, all under different titles; Cymbeline in D'Urfey's adaptation; 2 Henry IV in Betterton's; and so forth. One of Garrick's signal services to the progress of the English stage was his refusal to produce some of the most egregiously pseudo-Shakespearean plays and his restoration of substantial passages of the original text in others, including Tate's Lear, although he performed Colley Cibber's Richard III as written, without any additional lines from Shakespeare. Thanks largely to Garrick's reverence for Shakespeare ("God," he said, "of my Idolatry—Shakespeare—Him! Him! He is the Him! there is no Other"), most of the outright "adaptations," with their blatantly non-Shakespearean material, disappeared from the stage in the second half of the century. But the true Shakespeare was restored in the theater only in imperfect form, with many cuts, rearrangements, and

*A hint of the uneasiness with which painters, and perhaps their clientele, regarded Tate's abomination as a source of Lear pictures is discernible in the way Romney's and Barry's paintings (Free Society of Artists 1763 and RA 1774 respectively) were listed in the catalogues: "from the play as written by Shakespeare."
The prevalence of these unauthentic versions on the stage crucially affects our understanding of the relation between Shakespearean painting and the contemporary theater. Although wise historians use such evidence with caution, some of the paintings are a fairly copious source of information on the manner in which a play was mounted and performed, including conventions of costume, pose, action, and business for which there is no warrant in the accepted Shakespearean text. But what proportion of the paintings were derived from actual performances and what proportion from printed texts is as yet unknown. And which printed texts? Assuming that the artists customarily referred to them—a too hasty assumption, actually, because many paintings seem to have been merely reworkings of earlier designs, including engraved book illustrations, without any fresh recourse to the play—they could choose between the standard “literary” editions of the time and the texts used in the theater. Bell’s much-used pocket edition of 1773-74, for example, printed the texts of twenty-four of the plays from the prompt books current in the theaters royal (eighteen from Drury Lane, six from Covent Garden), and the editions of Shakespeare in Mrs. Inchbald’s *British Theatre* (1808), *Oxberry’s English Drama* (1818-23) and Cumberland’s (1828-30) were actually John Philip Kemble’s performing scripts. To add an extra twist of the screw, these printed acting texts were no more sacrosanct than the pure (in terms of that day) Shakespearean ones that they had themselves violated. A scene or action that was in one version of the adaptation may have been absent from another. In some paintings of the last scene in *Othello*, the hero smothers Desdemona, as Shakespeare’s text dictates and as he also does in Kemble’s script. But in others, he stabs her—as he is directed to do in Bell’s edition, from which Kemble’s prompt-book text was derived. To determine which paintings from *The Winter’s Tale* are traceable to the Shakespearean text and which to the staged versions, it must be borne in mind that in the standard acting version from Garrick’s time onward, the first two acts and most of the third were omitted, and the scenes most favored in art were those that were either omitted or severely cut and relocated in the play as then performed.

No one has yet attempted to discover the actual sources, iconographic, literary, or theatrical, of all the surviving pictures from Shakespeare’s plays. Such an examination would finally establish the true relation they bore to the corrupt acting versions, some of which held the stage into the mid-Victorian era—how many, for example, represent scenes that were cut in production (or, vice versa, scenes added without textual authority). The several Shakespearean paintings by, or attributed to, Hogarth are early cases in point. His Vauxhall Gardens picture, presumably copied from an engraving, of Henry VIII leading Anne Boleyn to court is not from Shakespeare’s play but from Colley Cibber’s production of 1727. It is “faithful neither to Shakespeare nor to history.” Hogarth’s scene from *The Tempest* (pl. 172) is from the literary text, not from any performance, because until 1746, a decade after the putative date of the picture, the play was performed only in the form of a Restoration opera, in which the scene does not occur. Hogarth’s most famous “Shakespearean” picture,
of Garrick as Richard III (pl. 2), is based not on Shakespeare's Richard III but on Cibber's Henry V, to which Cibber transferred lines from the Richard play. Thus the Shakespeare of painted art is not necessarily the Shakespeare of one's reading copy; it is "Shakespeare" in the marvelously elastic sense created by the wayward inventiveness of the theater, from Betterton to Irving.

How closely, if at all, did the frequency with which paintings were made from a play correspond with its popularity on the stage? For the half-century 1751–1800, the theatrical data for which have been exhaustively collected, a tentative answer can be made. The five most-performed plays in London were Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Richard III, Macbeth, and The Merchant of Venice. The plays from which the most pictures were derived in the same period (omitting the large selection in the Boydell Gallery, which was determined by considerations having nothing to do with the theater) were Macbeth, King Lear, As You Like It, Romeo and Juliet, and the two parts of Henry IV. Obviously, no close correlation is apparent.

Until similar statistics on the relative popularity of the Shakespearean plays in the nineteenth century have been compiled, no such comparison can be made for the period when the overwhelming majority of Shakespearean pictures were painted. But some impressions based on exhibition records can be reported. The comedies and romances were much more popular with artists, and supposedly with their clientele, than the tragedies:* the recorded paintings from the former two categories of plays numbered (very roughly) 950, and from the tragedies, 550. There were approximately 200 pictures from the English history plays, but only some 60 from the Greek and Roman ones. The most popular plays (in a descending range of 170–100 each) were Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. In the middle category (100–150 paintings) fell Macbeth, Othello, Henry IV, Twelfth Night, The Taming of the Shrew, Cymbeline, The Merry Wives

*Partly because of the box-office appeal of the pageantry and elaborate scenery associated with such productions, the comedies were often turned into lavishly mounted musicals. Dryden, D'Avenant, and Purcell had shown the way long before, with their operatic version of The Tempest. Between 1816 and 1833, not only that play but A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, As You Like It, The Merry Wives of Windsor, and All's Well That Ends Well were given similar treatment, often with music by Henry Bishop and settings by the busy and talented Grieve family. It is probable that the characteristics of these musical presentations—their colorful prettification, their sedulous attempts at Fancy—in turn influenced painters, whose pictures of Shakespearean romance often suggest that they wanted viewers to hear the music to which the scenes were set.
of Windsor, and King Lear. In the range of 50–25 paintings were Much Ado About Nothing, Henry VIII, The Winter's Tale, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and Antony and Cleopatra. Each of the remaining plays in the Shakespeare canon was the source of fewer than 25 pictures.*

The decade-by-decade record of paintings across the whole of the nineteenth century reveals some interesting tendencies. Macbeth and King Lear were definitely the first tragedies to enlist many painters' brushes. Hamlet was taken up strikingly late: apart from the four subjects in the Boydell Gallery, few Hamlet pictures were produced before the early 1800s. Along with Romeo and Juliet, however, Hamlet retained its popularity, probably because of Ophelia, much longer than did the other tragedies, which declined in popularity after mid-century. The Falstaff plays (1 and 2 Henry IV and The Merry Wives of Windsor) virtually disappeared from the exhibitions after the 1860s.

Pictures from Shakespeare fully participated in the boom in literary paintings during the period 1830–60. The most popular plays in the art galleries then—a selection that implies pretty much about the taste of those early and mid-Victorian years—were Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. The history plays, however, were unaffected by this prosperity; like that of Twelfth Night, the level of their popularity remained constant.

Many other conclusions may be drawn from the information presented in the following pages on the individual plays, arranged in the order adopted in the Complete Penguin Shakespeare (1969). Taken all together, the facts offer an ironic commentary on an opinion expressed more than once in Boydell's time, as in this statement in a newspaper in 1790:

To speak of Paintings illustrative of SHAKESPEARE, is to misapply terms. He is a SCHOOL of Painting himself; but that art cannot illustrate him. All, and much more than the pencil can express, is conceived by the most negligent reader of his Works.—The Painter's Art is but to fix the limited degrees of Passion that the language of the Poet puts us into complete possession of: in proportion as this can, or cannot be successfully done, rises or falls the perfection of the Art. It is for the embodying images, present visibly to the mind, to gratify by their identity, to delight by their truth. . . . [W]e hesitate not to say that the finest Works of the Art in this country are not drawn from the page of SHAKESPEARE.14

If Shakespeare was indeed beyond the reach of art, there were hundreds of English painters who declined to believe it.

*It should be borne in mind that all the figures cited throughout this part and Part Three are based on the sample described in the Introduction to the book, and do not in any instance refer to the total production of pictures on any given subject—a sum that is impossible to arrive at.