CHAPTER 1

FRAMES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Just before Christmas 1791, James Gillray published a print headed *Wierd-Sisters; Minister's of Darkness; 'Minions of the Moon'* (Plate 1).[1] The text is supported by a further inscription:

> To H: Fuzelli Esqr this attempt in the Caricatura-Sublime, is respectfully dedicated.
> Pubd Decr 23, 1791 by H. Humphrey No18 Old Bond Street
> They should be Women! and yet their beards forbid us to interpret, that they are so

The image's main element parodies Henry Fuseli's painting *The Weird Sisters*. The witches are transformed into likenesses of Lord Dundas, Pitt the Younger and Lord Thurlow: respectively Home Secretary, First Lord of the Treasury (equivalent to Prime Minister) and Lord Advocate. Date and publisher are given according to legal necessity, but are useful in locating the image in contemporary politics. The two phases of the moon show Queen Charlotte and George III, the suggestion being that the queen is taking authority during the king's mental instability in the 'Regency Crisis', a parallel with concepts of power in Shakespeare's play. That the politicians are 'minions of the moon' suggests their powerlessness to act in response to the shifting authority and consequent uncertainty of the time, instead following alternately the king and queen; but the quotation from *1 Henry IV* adds further incisiveness, especially when it is recalled in the context of Falstaff's conversation with Hal:

> Let us be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal. (1.2.25–9)

As so often, it is the words after those quoted that are revealing. To call the three politicians 'men of good government' is a satiric comment of great force, given that the administration was renowned for its inadequacy, reflecting what one respected historian has called 'a cabinet of nonentities'.[2] The allusion to the changing phases of the moon underscores the vacillation, word and image working together to hammer home the satiric point. Since Queen Caroline was reluctant to become regent, as legally bound, should the king be judged incapable, the idea of the ministers serving her adds further confusion. The satiric tone continues in the final line, spoken by Banquo in the first encounter with the witches (1.3.43–5), 'You should be women': a further suggestion of the politicians' weakness. All these allusions are accessible to anyone knowing the political circumstances of the time. Image works with caption to present a savage criticism of the state of the nation; had its suggestions been made openly, it seems not unlikely that a charge of sedition would have ensued.

Allusion is also present, aimed at a different target, in the composition of the three figures. This alludes to Henry Fuseli's 1783 painting of the three witches, existing in three separate forms, showing the witches in an exaggerated form of their contemporary stage portrayal as bearded men.[3] With the sham dedication, sheltered under the misspelled name, the reference reveals itself as a satire on the fashionable taste for the grotesque and sensational, of which Fuseli was an extreme example. Yet Fuseli was also one of the most astute visual interpreters of Shakespeare. Fully to grasp the print's satiric force, its readers and intended purchasers would have to be aware of the two Shakespearean quotations in the print's text and Fuseli's painting or engraving of the three witches, itself a comic allusion to the profiled heads on classical medals, and to have related this to the succession crisis – a remarkable breadth of knowledge. In this, the caricature offers an immediate statement of the pervasiveness of Shakespeare's plays in plot, language and idea within the social and political forms of the period. Equally significant is that all these levels of interrelation are presented through the medium of a visual image: it thus provides a forceful concentration of the fundamental concerns of this book.

II

Yet the caricature also poses questions basic to this enquiry. While it demonstrates remarkable skills in its creator, the extent and nature of its readership is less clear, raising an issue insistent in the discussion of visual treatments of the plays. A possible answer may lie in its means of sale. Like most of Gillray's

prints, it would have been displayed in the windows of print sellers, most notably that of Hannah Humphrey who, from 1791, had the exclusive right to sell his work, at the same time moving from Bond Street to St James's. Another etching by Gillray shows a group of people studying the prints in Humphrey's shop window, ignoring an unfortunate man who has slipped over on an icy pavement (Plate 2).[4] The window-gazers come from diverse social groups, including a connoisseur holding an eyeglass, a soldier with sword, a tricorn hat-wearing gentleman, what appears to be a shepherd or rustic of some kind bearing a staff and, at the right, a street urchin with hands in pockets. The range is striking, supporting the frequent claim that the shop windows were, as often suggested, the art galleries of the poor. As a German writer commented in 1798, a visitor to London 'will always see dozens of people outside the shops that sell these caricatures' and specified that they are 'of high and low birth alike'.[5] No parallel images survive of contemporary book-shops, then known as stationers; but it is well known that books were displayed in their windows, opened at the title page, which for illustrated editions appeared opposite the engraved frontispiece that showed a scene from the play. Where the caricatures present a self-contained satirical statement, the frontispieces present a moment of action, but both kinds of image will be seen by those familiar with their meanings and situations and those for whom the images are at best an attractive and inviting glimpse into events as yet not fully understood – something of continued importance in illustrated editions, as later chapters will confirm.

The counter-argument to this is that Gillray's caricatures were bought mainly by the moneyed, educated classes, paralleling those assumed to have constituted Shakespeare's audiences of the same time. Presumably this is true in many individual cases. The interior of Hannah Humphrey's shop was more in the nature of a club for the wealthy, who would gather to discuss the latest etchings and their satirical thrusts, mirroring one of the fashionable London coffee-houses at which business was conducted. In this it was similar to the shop of John Boydell, in mid-century the largest publisher of reproductive prints and at its close the architect of the Shakespeare Gallery. Many would be viewed in a portfolio, which might be purchased or hired, complete with prints, for an evening's discussion.[6] Humphrey's shop also hosted exhibitions of the latest prints, charging an admission of one shilling – the same as that for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, its contemporary at the turn of the century. Fine copies of the prints, coloured by hand without the use of stencils, the practice for cheaper versions, could be bought for as much as a guinea (21 shillings), placing them

well beyond the means of the lowliest window-gazers. Such exhibitions were part of a larger choreography that might involve visiting a play and then discussing it in one of the supper boxes at Vauxhall Gardens, which were adorned with Shakespeare paintings by Francis Hayman, who had designed and painted stage settings for Garrick.

The apparent difference conceals a broader parallel. The prints were not only available in the expensive versions but could be bought uncoloured for a few pence. Similarly, the plays were not only seen by the affluent. For most of the eighteenth century, tickets were sold at half price before the evening's second half; but the crucial point often overlooked is that the change occurred after the third act of the first play, often a Shakespeare. The recurrent riots of the period that greeted attempts to end this practice do not suggest any lack of interest in Shakespeare. The parallel also extends to the sale of images of actors and scenes from the play printed from the 1770s onwards, which were both bound into the editions they illustrated and sold individually. These cheaper versions, including the so-called 'cards' showing actors in character that John Bell included in both his editions, might be pasted on screens or tacked to interior walls, as shown in many of Hogarth's engravings – but, again, there is no quantifiable evidence for the practice.

It is perhaps not too much of a conjecture to consider among the viewers of both kinds of print those described in a parliamentary report of 1733 as 'Prentices, and persons of the like Class'.[7] It might also be appropriate to see within them many of those whom E. P. Thompson describes as coming from a 'tradition of plebeian and tradesman Dissent':[8] those whom William Blake hoped would purchase his *Songs of Innocence* and so free him to work on his larger projects – and Blake himself, we should recall, was an artisan apprentice with no formal schooling in the 1770s. The circumstances suggest that these cultural objects were not merely available to all sorts and conditions of men and women but actively sought out by them, not simply grasping their Shakespearean references but relating their themes to issues of contemporary life.

Assessing the figures for theatre attendance is a hazardous and conjectural undertaking but also an important one, especially in comparison with those for the plays' readers. Records for London theatres show that the frequency with which Shakespeare was performed in the two London patent theatres at the end of the eighteenth century remained the same as in the preceding fifty years, at a mere one in six of every performance,[9] and even this figure has been questioned.[10] There were, of course, other performances in London and beyond; yet overall the picture emerges of a fairly limited availability for audiences of any

social group. But the plays were available in another form, as printed editions. The first after the four folios were those of Nicholas Rowe in 1709 and 1714;[11] both contained frontispiece images. Many later editions, until recently overlooked in favour of the scholarly productions of Johnson and others, followed their lead. Prominent among this group were those with at least one illustration for each play; and from this it is a reasonable conclusion that for many the texts were first experienced not in the theatre or when simply read, but through a combination of text and illustration.

Defining the readership of any edition is similarly perilous, even when accurate figures regarding print runs and sales are available, which is not the case for either of Rowe's editions. Yet the figures for the first of John Bell's two editions, appearing in various forms between 1773 and 1775, suggest that their readership was considerably larger than that of the contemporary scholarly versions.[12] The first edition of Johnson's Shakespeare sold 1,000 copies, and the second a further 750; that of Johnson and Steevens, appearing in 1773 just before Bell's, sold approximately 1,200.[13] Bell himself claimed of the weekly parts that 'above 3,000 copies of the first number, *The Tempest*, had been taken up'.[14] John Lowndes claimed for this that 'no fewer than 8,000 copies were sold in one week'; quoting this, William St Clair gives 4,500, based on contemporary advertisements.[15]

Perhaps more revealing is the subscription list for the 1774 edition, printed as a preliminary to the first volume, which gives a total of 1,459 copies signed for, including multiple purchases, largely by booksellers. Of the total, 594 were for buyers in London and 865 – a little under 60% – beyond. The geographical distribution is remarkable, as are the multiple purchases. Four separate subscribers in Edinburgh ordered fifty, twenty-five, sixteen and twelve copies; individual purchasers bought twenty-nine in Glasgow, twenty-five in Coventry and eighteen in Norwich. Others included thirteen in Tamworth, twelve in Ipswich and twelve in Margate.[16] Subscription involved paying half the price on signature; there is no record of defaulters, but even the most cynical reading would suggest the considerable success of the venture at its inception – and this, of course, does not include sales for the later 1774 or the 1775 issues, or those bought from the publisher independent of the subscription list. The title page shown in Figure 14 (see p. 51) bears the signature of someone not named in the subscription list, which suggests it was purchased either from one of the booksellers named as subscribers or from another source after the list was closed. When Bell was declared bankrupt in 1793, James Barker bought the remaining copies and plates of all the editions and issued them in the following year with

new title pages but otherwise unchanged, extending the life and the readership of the original editions, although no details survive.[17]

This means that, even at the most conservative estimate, the reading experiences offered by Bell's so-called 'Acting' edition were available to a very significant proportion of the Shakespeare-reading public of the fourth quarter of the century, revealing its importance in the cultural mediation and assimilation of the plays. It suggests a readership far different from that expected by David Gentlemen, the *de facto* editor, when he claimed that the volumes would be read during theatrical performances. Nearly a century later, Charles Knight boasted sales of 700,000 for the various serial forms of his own complete edition, extending the figure to one million when a later printing, selling for two shillings, was included.[18] Contrast these figures with those given for Johnson at 1,750 (both editions), Capell (1,500), and Malone's two editions of 1790 (2,400).[19] Numbers sold do not, of course, mean numbers read; but here those sold only as furniture books must be offset by the practice of many owners as sharing the volumes with others, or reading them in groups with families or friends, as often recorded for those purchasing Dickens' serial works that began to appear at the same time as Knight's Shakespeare.

Statistics are, of course, deeply untrustworthy; but even if these contain a modicum of truth, and taking the subscription lists as the more reliable since they include actual names, three principles emerge that are fundamental to the argument of this book. One: Bell's edition seriously outsold the scholarly ones of around the same date; two, it sold largely outside London and so was less likely to be read at performances; three, and most important, the editions contained illustrative frontispieces, continuing the practice of Rowe and others. These factors lead to the conclusion that, for a very large proportion of the public, Shakespeare's plays were experienced in print, and with illustrations. The illustrated edition thus becomes a source of considerable importance in the reception history and in consequence the interpretive practice of the plays.

Comparing these figures to those assembled in relation to performance by Harry William Pedicord – still the most complete – offers at least the possibility of balancing readers against playgoers. Working from records of attendance and receipts at Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn in the 1758–60 season he calculates an average combined daily attendance of 1,979, or 11,874 a week. This he supports by quoting the claim, probably advanced by Samuel Foote, that 'the number of those called Play-Followers cannot be rated at less than twelve thousand in this metropolis'.[20] The problem here is that the figures do not discriminate between those who attended Shakespeare performances from viewers of other

playwrights' work, or those who attended for only the second half of the evening's entertainment. Nor does it – nor could it – record those who attended more than once in weeks when different plays were staged. One does not have to be a statistical genius to realise that these comparisons are, well, odorous; but the overall scale of figures of both print runs and theatre attendance suggests at the very least some kind of parity between those reading illustrated editions and those attending the theatres. Add to this the imponderables in each – the numbers attending both Shakespeare and other plays, the extra readers of illustrated editions, and the unrecorded figures for others with images, encountered in later chapters – and the notion that at least as many encountered the plays in this medium as in the theatre becomes at the least a teasing probability. And, since almost all at this time contained only a single image, presented as the frontispiece, the visual element would have offered an immediate guide to the events and ideas of the play, whether absorbed individually or through discussion.

While this expansion of print was taking place, a parallel tradition was emerging of independent images, first as easel paintings and then in many cases as reproductive engravings. Such works share some of the features of illustrated editions but differ at root in many ways. As later chapters will make clear, an easel painting operates at a wholly different rhetorical level from an original engraving, and one further still from an image designed for a book. The commission and ownership of paintings make them much more restricted in circulation. Reproductive engravings extend this franchise to some degree, but it remains restricted because of the images' size and cost, and also because in many cases they retain the more distanced rhetoric of a larger image – distanced both in viewing situation and in many cases in the systems of depiction and allusion each form employed.

Easel paintings and associated engravings that took the plays' events outside the theatre belonged to the highest genre of painting, the history, and so were placed within a series of conventions shared between painter and patron. Those that related more fully to the theatre relied on balancing conventions of group portraiture; and images of actors in character struck a balance between formal portraiture and ideas of performance related to 'points' – features by which the individual actors had become known – or more general conventions of displaying mood or feeling through gesture or expression. Some original engravings and frontispieces may reflect performance, either explicitly or by implied resemblance, but again their approaches are quite different from those on canvas. True, paintings share the essential foundation of any frontispiece design: the

selection of moment from the play and the consequent act of interpretation this presents. Further, the orders listed here are not rigidly separate. That Fuseli's painting of the witches made reference to a theatrical trope, was popular enough to be produced three times and was then the subject of a political caricature, reveals again the threads that may unite apparently disparate forms, returning to the circle of knowledge and application inhabited by some, at least, of those for whom Shakespeare was a major component of intellectual and emotional activity.

III

That the assertion about Shakespeare being known by every English man comes from a German publication offers another insight into the circularity of forces within which the plays and their visual forms should be seen. That it appeared in a periodical published in Weimar, home of Goethe and Schiller, two of the earliest translators, is one element of this, as one aspect of the exchanges between the two nations at the time; but it also introduces another circumstance too often forgotten. The export of prints would soon be curtailed by a trade embargo, a consequence of the French Revolutionary War in which England was then involved, and which would soon explode into the Napoleonic War. This was the latest and most catastrophic military engagement of the long eighteenth century, by the end of which, according to some estimates, one in every six or perhaps five men served in the army or navy. Recruitment would now take place through the militia system in cities as well as rural areas, and press gangs become more pervasive and much feared. In the navy, deaths through disease outnumbered by far those from enemy action: doubly shocking since lacking the consolation of heroic sacrifice.[21] It is also salutary to remember that Wordsworth's 'Salisbury Plain' poems, mourning the treatment of wounded soldiers and sailors, began to appear in the 1790s.

The constitutional crisis mocked by Gillray was thus only one part of national turmoil. Military engagements, fear of invasion and the larger economic consequences of war would surely have influenced the lives of those attending performances or reading the plays in popular or scholarly editions. The degree and manner in which they influenced performance, in terms of which plays were presented as well as how they were treated, is far harder to measure at this period than in mid-Victorian Britain.[22] The effect might have been felt more strongly on the musical entertainments and farces presented as the second half of theatrical performances, attended as they were by the lower paid, whose members were

numerically more likely to suffer the bereavements and other privations of war than the officer classes and their dependents. These factors demand some consideration to achieve a more complete awareness of the larger frames surrounding Shakespeare activity not only in the Napoleonic period but throughout the century. Consequences of warfare were increasingly apparent in other ways. Overseas involvement had a reciprocal relation with growing imperialism and the burgeoning ideas of national identity, as examined by Linda Colley.[23] The extent to which these are mirrored in performance and image is hard to calculate although, as will later become evident, there are some examples, albeit tantalisingly incomplete. Woven into these strands of social and political change are issues of race and social rank, as campaigns for the abolition of the slave trade became insistent and action against employment and trade legislation through public demonstrations grew more frequent and more violent.[24]

One other force is fundamental to all those discussed above: the pervasive pressures of economics as they affect all those involved in the production and dissemination and consumption of the plays. Not only the theatre managers, print sellers and stationer-publishers were driven by financial survival. Painters had tables of fees for paintings of different size and style; printmakers matched techniques to the extent of an edition and speed of production; artists in turn adopted styles best suited to particular reproductive processes. Especially popular images might be reproduced several times, often changed in size and medium to match intended uses and markets. An economic motive is similarly apparent in Garrick's retention of much of Tate's version of *King Lear*, and his careful judgement in restoring some of Shakespeare's lines but stopping short of including the Fool or restoring Shakespeare's ending. Audience comprehension and taste were together a major economic, and hence aesthetic, determinant in the widening circumstances of stage performance and commercial publishing of the times. Gillray's caricature of the Boydell Gallery[25] was not only a satire of its treatment of the plays; he also attacked the Gallery as an 'Offering to Avarice'. Yet his exclusion from those who contributed to its images was surely as much a financial hardship as a blow to his professional pride.

IV

Earlier studies of Shakespeare and the visual arts – there are many, and many celebrated figures among their authorship – have engaged with these issues or focused on detailed areas within them, with different aims, to

produce different results. Theatre historians have seized on the evidential potential in paintings and prints, understandably so for a subject often lacking detailed description or formal review. Art historians have until the last few decades worked within a hierarchy that overlooked theatre painting; the study of illustration has either been absorbed into stage history or treated with academic and professional disdain. Others have treated paintings largely as instruments of textual criticism, arguing that they performed this function through iconographic allusion or selection of moment to change the ways in which the plays were interpreted at a time when written criticism was as yet limited. The emergence of book history has aided greatly in the study of illustrated editions, not only of Shakespeare but of literary texts in general. All of these, however, have in the main existed in separate compartments, or suffered from the understandable and well-intentioned tunnel vision of separate academic pursuits, each with its own methods and categories. My argument here is that all these elements need to be considered before anything like an awareness of the identity and working of paintings, reproductive prints and perhaps especially illustrations within editions, may be seen as a single perceptual and conceptual entity.

Such an integrated method assumes a different kind of value in illustrations for later eighteenth-century editions aimed not at scholars but at the increasing numbers for whom a knowledge of Shakespeare was a mark of cultural maturity. As patterns of editing and performance develop from the 1740s onwards, the approaches evident in illustrations and the cultural frames within which they appear also change radically. Narrative representation displaces emblematic encryption as the primary modality, and simplicity and immediacy in general characterise the main effects achieved – effects not inferior to the earlier complexity, but different in process and result. The change is first shown in more naturalistic frontispiece images of individual episodes and then in the sequences of engravings interspersed with the text itself, culminating in the through-illustrated editions of the mid-nineteenth century. All these shifts reflect larger cultural and material changes, as the expensive processes of engraving on copper are displaced by cheaper processes using wood and steel. This altered encounter with Shakespeare occurs in parallel with a larger cultural change, to which it in itself contributes. Increasingly, the plays came to be seen as modes of psychological and human interaction which the reader experiences vicariously through their central characters, first through changes in writing about the plays and progressively under the shadow of the novel as the dominant cultural form. At a time when self-advancement was a major concern, the ownership of the