

↳ | Editors' Introduction

1 Illustration before Illustration

This volume is based on an argument: that we have lost the ability to fully understand and appreciate the place of illustration in the Romantic period, a time when large numbers of literary texts carried visual matter but in which the nomenclature and working practices of illustration familiar from the 1830s onwards were not yet established. The aim of this Introduction is to sketch out some new ways of thinking about the place and practice of literary image-making in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and to outline the scope and significance of the chapters gathered together in this volume.

The first point to make is that the Romantic period saw an unprecedented rise in the numbers of illustrated books. According to William St Clair, the end of perpetual copyright in 1774 was followed by an 'explosion' of visual material within printed books: 'Of the millions of volumes which became cheap and plentiful, almost every one is illustrated with at least one engraving, and some with many.'¹ The most significant effect of this 'plentiful' expansion of engravings on literary history was the rise of the affordable, illustrated series of 'old canon' British writers.² This was a new phenomenon aimed squarely at providing standardized 'classics' for the middle-class reading public:

The editions of the poets published by Bell, Cooke, Whittingham and most others, for example, often provided a portrait of the author, an engraved title page, and sometimes a frontispiece, and these were an intrinsic part of the book's design. We find illustrations too in the reprints of the novels, the essays, the conduct books, and Shakespeare.³

But there were also major consequences for art history, as illustration became the standard fare of most established painters:

The reprint publishers thus opened up new opportunities for painters and engravers, and many of the artists who were later to become famous as painters of individual works, including Fuseli, Opie, Smirke, Stothard, Turner and Westall, reached their first viewers around 1800 when they were employed to provide illustrations to be engraved.⁴

This twin development does not seem to have been a response to new technology, such as lithography and the revival of the woodcut, which only began to dominate illustration in the 1830s and after. The established method of engraving images on metal and reproducing them on framed, separate pages remained in use: 'There was no change in technology which suddenly made illustrations cheaper in absolute terms, and newly published books continued, for the most part, to be unillustrated.' Nevertheless, there was clearly a large public appetite for illustration; large print runs kept costs low and the result was an unprecedented access: 'the explosion of reading of literary texts was accompanied by an explosion in the viewing of engraved pictures.' Given the scale and impact of this visual turn in literary culture, it is all the more surprising that, as St Clair notes, this change 'has not been noticed ... nor its implications explored'.⁵ Although St Clair's lament at the absence of scholarship on Romantic 'engraved pictures' is no longer quite so applicable, as this Introduction will show, this field of research is still at an early stage, and some fundamental epistemological questions need to be addressed.⁶ As Cristina Ionescu and Renata Schellenberg observe, illustration still has an 'undefined place' in literary studies and there is 'no commonly accepted or universally used method for the study of the illustrative image'.⁷ Literary critics, art historians, and historians of the book have struggled to identify a methodology for analysing and appreciating the plethora of small-scale images that accompany so many literary texts of the period; moreover, the link between these 'engraved pictures' and the world of displayed works of art needs to be part of any reassessment of Romantic illustration, not least because artists who designed for books did not consider themselves illustrators in the modern sense of that term.

Romanticism and Illustration starts from the assumption that terminology matters and that the absence of the word 'illustration' in its familiar meaning in the Romantic period is significant. To clarify this point, an ECCO search for illustrated texts for the years 1780–93 produces 1,003 results, but few of these books use the word 'illustration' to refer to their images. Instead, we find words like 'embellishment' and 'engraving', terms which imply that the image was not subservient or secondary to the text. One of the aims of this volume is to explore the possibility that illustration before 'illustration' carries meanings that have subsequently been lost to us. Before the modern meaning of the word (a picture commissioned to appear only in a book, representing a moment or scene from the text) appeared for the first time in 1817, and became dominant in the 1830s and 1840s, the concept of a pictorial accompaniment or embellishment suggested that an image was as much a product of art and visual culture

as it was of the book. In fact the word 'illustration' in the eighteenth century was usually used to refer to text rather than image, signalling the presence of textual exempla or extracts. This can be confusing to the modern reader. For example, the use of the word 'illustrated' in editions of the Bible in the eighteenth century did not necessarily refer to pictures. In an edition entitled *The Sacred Books of the New Testament, Recited at Large: and Illustrated with Critical and Explanatory Annotations, Carefully Compiled from the Commentaries and Other Writing* (1739), the exegetical illumination derives from critical annotations, not images. Similarly, *A Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of Some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters* (1784) refers to the ways in which the tenets of philosophy 'illustrate' (throw light on, make real, exemplify) the plays. By the end of the eighteenth century, this earlier use of illustration as enhanced typification is carried over into the semantic field of Romantic visual imagery. Hence Thomas Macklin advertised his literary galleries in the 1790s as 'Pictures painted for Mr Macklin by the Artists of Britain, Illustrative of the British Poets, and the Bible'. The aim of this 'mode of illustrating the authors of our own country' is to exemplify the best qualities of British poetry, not simply to turn textual episodes into pictures. The printed images, which Macklin calls 'engravings' and 'embellishments', had a vital role to play in enhancing rather than serving their texts. The Royal Academy artists he employed need not have felt they were demeaning themselves or compromising aesthetic standards by designing images destined to be reproduced on the page. On the contrary, they may have agreed with Macklin's claim that he was elevating print culture into the sphere of exhibited, mainstream painting and fostering the development of a British school of art. This was a virtuous spiral, raising the standard of both text and image.⁸ To see illustrations as exempla rather than mimetic reproductions makes their relationship with the text one of equals.

This dynamic relates to a second strand of the complex meanings of illustration in the Romantic period. The word also signified the action of making brilliant or distinguished, a meaning present in *Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations* (1776) when Adam Smith writes that in Rome, the law 'gave a considerable degree of illustration to those citizens who had the reputation of understanding it'. Behind this definition may have been a lingering consciousness of an earlier meaning of 'illustration' as illumination.⁹ Did a reader encountering Charles Cooke's 1794 advertisement for his *Pocket Edition of Select British Poets* 'illustrated with SUPERB EMBELLISHMENTS' imagine light flooding from the text, a kind of early digital reader? Stothard's illustrations to Scott which appeared in *The Lady's*

Magazine in 1819 were intended to 'embellish' the accompanying short extracts from Scott. In the choice of visual details and the positioning of the characters they epitomize the plot of the *Waverley* extracts quoted in the magazine, and remind the reader-viewer of the narratives as a whole.¹⁰ In this discursive formation, the picture enhances and elevates the text rather than simply visualizing its contents.

Indeed, in some cases the modern understanding of illustration was completely inverted. In this third genealogical strand, text became the 'illustration' or elaboration of the image. The growing enthusiasm for print collecting led publishers to commission written text for saleable and popular artists and genres. In order to cash in on the rage for all things Hogarth, John Boydell published John Ireland's *Hogarth Illustrated from his own Manuscripts* in 1798, in which Hogarth's unpublished words act as a glossary for the images.¹¹ As the Napoleonic wars drew to an end, Rudolph Ackermann scored a commercial hit with *The English Dance of Death* (1814–16), a series of caricature images by Thomas Rowlandson with an accompanying text by William Combe.¹² The close of the Romantic period saw another flourish of this collaborative publishing format in the middle-brow Keepsake volumes, where poets such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon were commissioned to write poems for high-quality engravings.¹³ At the lower end of the market, Pierce Egan and the Cruikshank brothers collaborated on the illustrated serial *Life in London* (1820–1), a picaresque narrative where text frequently illustrates the images. Egan declares of one particular plate that:

[It] is equal to anything in HOGARTH'S collection; it may be examined again and again with delight: and the author thinks, that his readers will agree with him, that he has not travelled out of his way to thank the artist for the powerful talents he has displayed in portraying such a scene of LIFE IN LONDON.¹⁴

Knowing London relies upon visual skills in this text; the plates are given equal and often primary importance to the letterpress, and indeed formed the basis of many of the theatrical adaptations which flourished in the early 1820s.¹⁵ In the 1830s, this convention flipped ironically into its opposite when a young Charles Dickens was approached by Chapman and Hall to provide text for the satirical cartoonist Robert Seymour's wood-engraved images of sporting and rural life, otherwise known as *Pickwick Papers*. Seymour's tragic suicide after only two issues is thought to have been precipitated by a wrangle over the control over the illustrations, and Dickens's victory (as some conspiratorially-minded critics might see it) heralded the age of 'Phiz'

and the rise of the professional illustrator.¹⁶ In these quite different examples, words become 'paravisual', serving the image rather than controlling and defining it.¹⁷ A similar process was at work in mainstream exhibited art. What might be called literary paintings often showed a scene such as a landscape, accompanied by a quotation from poetry, even though the two were not logically connected. In this case, the text conferred literary status on the image. According to Richard Altick, such paintings were 'detached forms of book illustration, in which were constantly assimilated the literary and artistic tastes of the time. They combined to produce a tertium quid, a new kind of imaginative activity in which the separate experiences of reading and beholding coalesced'.¹⁸ This volume aims to locate new imaginative activity in illustrated Romantic texts.

These three semantic strands (typification, enhancement, and textual accompaniment) show that we must think of literary illustration in the Romantic period in new ways. As the examples adduced so far attest, it was not the case that the explosion of demand for the visualization of literature led straightforwardly to the rise of the professional illustrator who produced tailor-made small images for the printed page. The commissioned artist was usually at several removes from the text. According to the OED, the first appearance of the modern meaning of the word 'illustration' occurs in the title of *Westall's Illustrations to the Works of Walter Scott, Esq.* in 1817, but even here the title-page states that the illustrations are 'beautifully engraved from the Paintings of R. Westall, R.A.'.¹⁹ The illustrated edition was part of a dynamic communication circuit which linked personnel (writers, artists, engravers, publishers, entrepreneurs, readers, viewers), products (paintings, designs, engravings, books, and other forms of printed merchandise), and venues (art and literary galleries, bookshops, print shops, the printed page).²⁰ As Sandro Jung notes, 'The illustrations added to editions serve both as intra-textual markers and as referents to an extra-textual economic and cultural world that anchors the subjects in the visual and material cultures of art, music, fashion and luxury objects, as well as practices of collecting and exhibition'.²¹ The prestige and ubiquity of illustration derived from its complex semantic configuration, its vital role in the canonization of British literature, and its synergies with the art market and artistic institutions. The illustration was a locus of bibliographical, commercial, ideological, and aesthetic concerns, and a portal between the text and its cultural context. As Andrew Piper asks, without venturing an answer: 'how can the romantic engagement with the reproducible illustration be read as part of a larger engagement with the problem of reproducibility itself

that was gradually shaping the romantic bibliocosmos?²² The rest of this Introduction will propose some ways to rethink the wider 'bibliocosmos' of Romantic illustration.

2 'Pictured Wonders'

It may seem counter-intuitive to stake a claim for illustration's importance in Romantic studies, given the scarcity of illustrated editions of the 'Big Six' poets and the major living novelists in their own time (the major exceptions are of course Blake and Scott). The most illustrated poets in the period were actually 'old canon' (Shakespeare, Milton and above all Thomson, whose long poem *The Seasons* was the most illustrated of all eighteenth-century literary texts), and we have to wait until the late 1820s and 1830s before the complete illustrated works of Scott and Byron appear.²³ Romanticism never saw an iconic collaboration between Wordsworth and Constable.²⁴ But as Altick and other scholars have confirmed, mainstream Romantic authors are unrepresentative of a broader visual turn in Romantic literary culture.²⁵ By the end of the eighteenth century, it is not an exaggeration to state that books were both seen and read. Many popular genres were illustrated, including history, travel literature, botany, and medicine. In the field of imaginative literature, children's books, classics and plays, as well as old canon poetry and fiction, were all published in illustrated editions.²⁶ As Fuseli announced in 1788, the role of illustration was to turn 'readers into spectators', a phrase that Calè uses as the subtitle of her book on Fuseli's Milton Gallery.²⁷ For a typical middle-class consumer in London, reading an illustrated edition provided visual pleasures that could be supplemented and reinforced by other forms of related cultural activity: a visit to a literary gallery and the purchase of its merchandise, a visit to Bell's or Cooke's bookshop to inspect Stothard's latest design for an illustration, or a visit to a print shop to purchase an engraving to insert into an 'extra-illustrated' edition.²⁸ An illustration in a book was 'an intermedial cultural object',²⁹ part of a dynamic economy of images that circulated throughout literary and artistic culture, eroding conventional distinctions between the original and copy.

Understanding this lost culture of illustration shifts the way we read the illustrated canon of the Romantic period. The publishers of illustrated editions offered the reader access to the work of the top artists, in effect turning themselves into 'grand impresarios' of art and converting the book into a miniaturized art gallery.³⁰ John Bell, for example, announced proudly that he had secured 'new engagements with the most capital artists in the

kingdom.³¹ Charles Cooke followed suit by claiming that he had hired 'the first artists in the kingdom' and had ensured that 'the arts are not only encouraged, but the taste and judgement of those who are disposed to cultivate them greatly promoted and highly improved.'³² Not to be outdone, John Sharpe vaunted that his volumes were an 'opportunity of possessing specimens of BRITISH ART, even to those whom expense has hitherto forbidden it.'³³ But even those artists who are now seen as central to the work of illustration, such as the immensely prolific and respected Thomas Stothard (1775–1834), were not illustrators in the modern sense of the word.³⁴ Stothard's obituary in 1835 praised the scale of his achievement, nothing less than heralding 'an era in British art' and 'a new taste in the public mind':

Most of the embellished volumes published during the last half century have been illustrated by the inimitable compositions of this truly poetic painter, and they form a monument, not to his fame only, but to that of the country which gave him birth.³⁵

The older meaning of illustration as embellishment (enhancement, illumination) jostles with the newer one (providing tailor-made pictures for a book) in this tribute. Designs by Stothard and others for *The Lady's Magazine* appeared heralded by a similarly complex tribute:

We beg leave to call the attention of our Subscribers to the beauty of the Plate which embellishes this Number; and we can confidently assure them that our future Plates will surpass rather than fall short of this one in excellence. It will, doubtless, be gratifying to the ADMIRERS OF THE FINE ARTS to be informed, that in future it is our intention to illustrate the most popular works as they are published, with highly finished Engravings by HEATH, from the designs of WESTALL, STOTHARD, CORBOULD, &c.³⁶

Stothard's plates were accompanied by extracts from Scott presented as 'explanatory' of the engravings, as much as the other way around.³⁷ When Charles Lamb wrote a sonnet to celebrate Stothard's contributions to Samuel Roger's poem *Italy* (1830), a volume Stothard co-illustrated with Turner and which is now regarded as a masterpiece of steel engraving,³⁸ Lamb found his own distinct vocabulary to express the aesthetic superiority of Stothard's work:

Consummate artist, whose undying name
 With classic Rogers shall go down to fame,
 Be this thy crowning work! In my young days

How often have I, with a child's fond gaze,
 Pored on the pictured wonders thou hadst done. (ll. 1–5)³⁹

Though the poem is entitled 'To T. Stothard, Esq. On his Illustrations of the Poems of Mr. Rogers', Lamb refers to these 'illustrations' as works of art:

Age, that enfeebles other men's designs,
 But heightens thine, and thy free draft refines.
 In several ways distinct you make us feel –
 Graceful as Raphael, as Watteau genteel.
 Your lights and shades, as Titianesque, we praise;
 And warmly wish you Titian's length of days. (ll. 9–14)

Compared to Turner, Stothard is all but forgotten today, but Lamb's eulogy is evidence of the aesthetic impact and reputation of illustrated editions in the Romantic period. Like Lamb, Leigh Hunt also had fond memories of illustrated poetry: Charles Cooke's volumes were 'books at once so "superbly ornamented" and so inconceivably cheap!⁴⁰ Once again, the emphasis is on enhancement and beautification ('ornamented'), not fidelity, realism or accuracy. Reduction in scale, one of the key features of illustration, did not diminish artistic value. Indeed, miniaturization was part of the appeal and charm: 'I doated on their size; I doated on their type, on their ornaments, on their wrappers containing lists of other poets, and on the engravings from Kirk.⁴¹ Thomas Kirk (1765–97) is another forgotten master of pictured wonders, but his name evokes this flourishing collaboration between academic artists and commercial publishers. Purchasing an illustrated book was the equivalent of visiting the Royal Academy and acquiring a work of art, albeit on a reduced scale. By the 1820s, *Life in London* turns this into a snide joke, as Egan describes the textual and visual 'portrait' of his hero Corinthian Tom as one which, 'it is hoped, [...] may bid defiance to the stare, the shrugs, the sneers, the ridicule, the grimaces, and the cant of criticism, whenever it has the honour of being placed in its "true light" by the hanging committee belonging to the Royal Academy.'⁴² However, if Hunt and Lamb are to be believed, some of the more hyperbolic and self-serving claims of the publishers and entrepreneurs were not actually too wide of the mark: illustration was a democratization of British art, making its treasures available to the middle classes (though not yet to the working class, as this required the revival of wood engraving, as discussed below). On 13 December 1790, *The Times* printed a glowing endorsement of Bell, Macklin, and Boydell, concluding: 'let them therefore go hand in hand to the Temple of Fame, to enjoy in triumph and comfort the lasting rewards of their meritorious pursuits.'

It is for these reasons that the literary galleries of the 1790s can be seen as a particularly spectacular attempt to promote illustration as a nationalist cultural mission during a revolutionary and war-torn decade. Despite their commercial failure, the Shakespeare, Milton and Poets' Galleries brought together the 'ornaments' of British art and literature on a grand scale: the displayed paintings and the various forms of illustrated print (editions, designs, serialized instalments or 'numbers,' single-sheet prints in black and white or colour) were mutually complementary. The galleries were sites of 'new configurations which crossed from display, spectacle and gallery into the reproductive print culture of the souvenir' and where it was possible to 'display history paintings but sell book illustrations.'⁴³ The word 'gallery' even referred to both the physical venue and the printed product: Macklin, for example, called his bookshop the Poets' Gallery and his exhibition *The Gallery of Poets*, a canny chiasmus. It was this combination of display and dissemination which distinguished the literary galleries from their most obvious competitor, the Royal Academy.⁴⁴ The Academy had an uncomfortable relationship with the commercial market and this explains its reluctance to exhibit prints and to legitimate the role and talent of engravers, only a few of whom were granted 'Associate Engraver' status.⁴⁵ Painters were generally not classified or regarded as illustrators. Hence an artist such as Francis Hayman, whom Altick describes as the first book illustrator to submit paintings to the Society of Artists, was exhibited as a painter of genre scenes, or as a history painter.⁴⁶ Kirk, Stothard, and other artists exhibited their painted designs for illustration in the normal way, but the prints and illustrated books were absent. Academic honours were given to watch-chasers and enamel painters, but not to engravers, who were perhaps too close to the mechanics of reproduction.⁴⁷ Even though engravings of its paintings were sold for profit, the Academy was rather curmudgeonly in the way it displayed prints in inappropriate rooms where they were unlikely to make much impact.⁴⁸ In the literary galleries, on the other hand, both in their actual (display space) and virtual (printed) form, 'the intricacies of engraving could be viewed to their best advantage.'⁴⁹ Engravers were conspicuous by their huge fees, in complete contrast to the public image of the Academy which downgraded their role.⁵⁰ In the event, the laborious pace of high-quality metal engraving was to prove an insurmountable obstacle to the commercial success of the literary galleries, but the inept economics reflected the fact that the whole point of the gallery was to appreciate the transfer of 'aura' from the so-called original to the engraving: in Christopher Kent Rovee's words, 'No painting existed in its own, original splendour, but only and always in tension with its reproductions.'⁵¹ This 'seemingly

endless recess of images,' in Frederick Burwick's phrase, marks one of the unique contributions of the literary galleries to Romantic visual and literary culture.⁵²

As considerable scholarly attention has been given to Boydell's and Fuseli's galleries, in this volume we concentrate on the understudied Macklin's Poets' Gallery.⁵³ Macklin is particularly interesting, as his aim was not to produce the ultimate illustrated edition of British poets to rival Bell and Cooke. Instead, he published a series of illustrated excerpts of poetry in a format ('Numbers') that resembled a periodical or magazine, and therefore moved illustration away from the bound volume towards the 'extra-illustrated' or more open system of collection and re-assembly. In this respect, he overlaps with another important 'lost' cultural practice that is only now receiving due consideration from scholars.⁵⁴

Extra-illustration or 'Grangerization' was initially restricted to wealthy collectors who added prints to books, binding them into volumes as they thought fit, but by the 1790s the hobby had embraced a wider clientele who may have been responding to the shortage of prints caused by the war with France.⁵⁵ The book trade, spotting a commercial opportunity, began to commission prints specifically designed to be added to existing books. Cooke offered purchasers differently priced packages, his cheapest being a 'Scenic Representation' which the purchaser needed to place in the correct location.⁵⁶ But the practice extended far beyond popular publishers. Bewick and Blake, the conventional champions of Romantic illustrated books, were also involved in the trade. Purchasers of Bewick's bestsellers *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790) and *A History of British Birds* (1797) could assemble a version of the book that matched their individual taste. As Diana Donald explains:

In successive editions of *Quadrupeds* and *British Birds*, many species and figures were gradually added, new tailpieces were introduced to fill up the extra pages, and old ones often changed position – the blocks being occasionally reworked ... Buyers often made choices from among the unbound sheets offered to them – choices that reflected personal taste as much as the recognition of degrees of technical excellence.⁵⁷

Illustrations became paratextual tools with which the reader, publisher, and author could create an evolving, personalized text. When Blake was commissioned by John Flaxman to produce a unique, extra-illustrated copy of Gray's poems for Anne Flaxman, he cut the text from a printed edition and pasted it beneath windows cut into his water-coloured pages, a brilliant example of text and image illuminating each other.⁵⁸ One way to think