

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY, THEATRE AND SHAKESPEARE

I

Victorian Shakespeare, with its complexes of authenticity, actuality and identity, is an intensely visual construction, reliant upon an ideology fiercely held yet rarely stated. To this, notions of time are central – time as made evident through history, time in the relation between past and present, time in organising the plays' duration in performance and their rhythms while being read. The coming together of these forces in relation to the play is a microcosm, as well as a focussed concentration, of the much larger forces of time and the visual, two major determinants of Victorian worldviews, with which the plays interact in every dimension and at every level.

One point of entry into this maze of intersections and influences, that demonstrates a move from large social events and their supporting assumptions to a more precise field of enquiry into the plays in their Victorian configurations, is suggested by an image from the very centre of the age: *The Opening of the Great Exhibition*, by Henry Courtney Selous (Plate 1). The painting, and the event it both records and constructs, make forceful, ordered statements about the British Empire, projecting the Great Exhibition as a celebration of a defining moment in history. In this the painting typifies the concern to see the present through the past, to give it validation through its innate superiority while acknowledging its dependence on heroic precedent and tradition. The royal party at its centre present an affair of state as an intimate gathering, revealing innate values of dignified intimacy and emotional nurture, at the same time presenting the function of imperial splendour; they have about them the air of a family gathering or a moment from dramatic performance, immediate, personal, and shared by

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onlookers both in and before the canvas. Around them are balancing forms of the past, in the equestrian statues on either side, their presentation *en grisaille* as well as their partly concealed placing revealing their status as contributory rather than equal to the identities of the present. They are the figures, once vivid but now eclipsed, from whose earlier endeavours the fullness of the present has grown, and by which they are now eclipsed but still valued. In this the image reflects the idea that, as countless spectators noted at the time, this moment was history in the making: ‘The whole was a great national event; an epoch in history; a period to date from in the chronology of future annalists.’¹

The whole is brought together by the painting’s composition and iconography. It presents a stage, on which the Queen and her family are the principals, to whom the viewer’s eye is drawn through a recession of dignitaries that convey the concern for hierarchy central to the age’s governance and thought. The galleries at each side continue the focussing manoeuvre, simultaneously reflecting a theatre auditorium and peopled by the multiple supernumeraries of the mid-Victorian practicable stage. This is theatre, the painting asserts; but it is a theatre in which the present offers a construction of the past and makes its own contribution to the future; through its serious parody of theatre the painting makes its lasting impression, the present made historical through the mingling forms of stage and easel. Seen in larger terms, it stands as metaphor of the configuration, presentation and memorialising of the works of Shakespeare during the long reign of Victoria. Moving further away from the image itself to consider its larger settings, two details complete the Shakespearean inflections of both image and subject. The sentence on the historical significance of the Great Exhibition, quoted at the end of the last paragraph, comes from William Cole’s biography of Charles Kean, the actor-manager whose work above all would transform the visualisation of time on the Shakespearean stage. After painting the scene, Selous went on to produce several hundred line drawings for Cassell’s *Illustrated Shakespeare*, a project that combined the textual authority of the Cowden Clarkes and a concern for antiquarian detail in location and costume with the visual immediacy of multiple treatments of the action interspersed with the double-column text.

That this painting reflects a common iconological tradition of presenting the stage from the auditorium is shown by comparison with Thomas Rowlandson’s aquatint ‘Dr Syntax at Covent Garden Theatre’ (Plate 2). Typical in presenting a theatre interior, it is also relatively rare in showing a Shakespeare play in performance, revealing the state of production in the years immediately preceding the changed attitudes of the later period. That the volume in which the image appeared was reprinted frequently in the century’s later years shows their concern

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for earlier literary and visual forms, but also reveals the foundations on which later theatre built its performative and its social identities. William Combe's text that describes the event – in its fictional embrace of an actual moment prefiguring a technique that, common in the eighteenth century, becomes dominant in the nineteenth – also voices a disquiet with earlier theatre that would achieve new force less than a decade after the volume first appeared:

'Twas Shakespeare – but in masquerade.
I've seen a farce, I scarce know what;
'Twas only fit to be forgot.
I've seen a critic, and have heard
The string of nonsense he preferred.
Heaven bless me! where has Learning fled?
Where has she hid her sacred head?²

Comparison with the Selous painting suggests one way in which later productions would address this, in the use of full-scale built-up scenes resting on architectural principles. Such a comparison across forms is by no means inappropriate. The Selous, and the Crystal Palace ceremony that it shows, moves towards theatre in its attempt to create history in the present; the theatre, in the built-up sets of Telbin, Lloyds and the Grieve family, leans towards architectural history in its desire to actualise the plays as visual experience.

The network of visual, historical, performative and illustrative relationships offered in the pairing of Selous and Rowlandson is an immediate opening to the discussion of time and the visual sense in the Victorian age, with Shakespeare at its centre. It emblematises the essential concern of Victorian Shakespeare with painting, production and illustration, resting in almost every manifestation on a concern with a very specific order of authenticity to the past. Victorian Shakespeare activity, in performance, editing and painting, is united by bonds ideological, methodological and material, through links both complex and dynamic. At their essence is an awareness of the workings of time – in the concept of progress and the relation between past and present that haunted the age, in the growth of history as a pursuit in leisure and profession, through the pursuit of authenticity, and through the actuality of the plays as temporal progresses and images as temporal concretions. In this is manifested the constant evaluative balancing of the historical past and the experienced present as visual constructions, in terms both aesthetic and moral. Both were facilitated and extended by the rapidly multiplying determinants and material structures of the visualisation of time in literary and dramatic forms, all of which were absorbed into, acted upon and

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in part driven by the visual and temporal forces all around them. Disentangling and then reassembling these forces, to reveal what is arguably the major force of Victorian Shakespeare activity, on the stage and in painting, in illustrated edition, in records of performance through engraving and photograph, and in the construction of the plays in the memory of reader and viewer, is the purpose of this book. The Victorians' own pictorial exploration of Shakespeare and time thus becomes the subject of the exploration that these chapters constitute.

II

Time as a concept and an experience was probably more thoroughly reconfigured during the Victorian period than in any preceding age. Changes in social and economic structures, the moral and intellectual organisation of knowledge, and the technology by which everyday life was determined were all directly linked to the generation and perception of visual objects, in both objective and subjective worlds. The age's obsession with history – time past in relation to time present, the latter constructing the former as well as living in its shadow – as preordained narrative, as the raw material of philosophy, and as the basis of nationhood, was continually represented in paintings and illustrated books. Developments in abstract science, the technology of transport and processes of manufacture transformed the way time was measured, and how it manipulated the life of the individual. The theatre, building on technology and social change, explored and exploited new ways of showing and measuring the past and the present. All these forces found statement through the new media that themselves compressed time – the mass printing techniques that began with the development of the steam press, wood-pulp paper, wood engraving and the stereotype press, the photograph, all firmly established by mid century.

Shakespeare was throughout the period revered as the summit of the nation's aesthetic achievement, a marker of patriotic and moral identity, and the embodiment of cultural maturity in those who knew or affected to know his works. In an age to which the visual was central, configurations of his plays in visual form ally with the age's temporal concerns to develop innovative exploitations of time as idea and as measurable quality. These extend along a number of axes, and the full richness emerges only when they are brought together. The obsession with accurate visual presentation of past settings in the theatre came to dominate scenography in complex built-up sets, but it also changed the plays' action and idea through the extensive cuts that these demanded, changing their temporality

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in both rhythm and extent. The desire for visual fidelity to the past, allied to a fierce concern for the morality of representation, showed itself in the techniques of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers, which injected a special kind of immediacy to the seen identity of earlier time. It was given quite new resonances from the mid century by the presence of photography, which in turn impinged upon the theatre and easel painting. These forms intersected with, and were in turn influenced by, the profusion of illustrated editions of the period, which both gave visual statement to individual moments of the plays and redefined the rhythm of their action and idea by their placing within the printed words. A concern for character outside the plays' continuum affected stage, canvas and print, generating a new temporal faultline within the plays as conceived and shown. Beyond the stage, the visual determined the way in which audience and onlooker formed the plays in memory, the basis of individual cultural identity.

All of these were directed, and helped to direct, the larger project of the construction of history. Before the 1860s, history was the province of the broad category known as the man of letters, with Lord Macaulay as its most celebrated practitioner. Macaulay's writings, sometimes openly and nearly always by implication, made clear that the past was seen wholly in comparison with the present. The reasons for this, and a cause for the popularity of the form, have been variously explained. Those who saw history as guided by some concealed force, ranging from divine will to the 'hidden hand' of the market earlier defined by Adam Smith, or a faith that in the end the good will triumph, viewed it as a justification of the present through its proffered hope in the future. Thomas Carlyle took a polemicist approach, in *Past and Present* making explicit and detailed points of comparison between an earlier, corporatist society and one resting on the feral capitalism of 'the cash nexus'. Even when the cyclical view of history is interpreted in its most sombre model, that of Giambattista Vico – as a process of ascendancy, prime and decline – it is still through an idea of temporal change to which progress is fundamental that it operates. The irony is implicit within the timing of the Great Exhibition. For some, it embodied the process of history as a movement towards the supremacy of civilisations. For others, its location seemed to embody the apex of empire, the moment of stillness before the stall towards decay. The conflict between these two is evident repeatedly in literary forms, most notably in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the illustrations and paintings that grew from it. But whether perceived as a consolatory refuge from industrialised society or a moral signpost towards regeneracy, history was essentially a dialogue in which the present anxiously examined the past and sought its own identity.

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Reading about history was a major occupation in the Victorian period. Mudie's Circulating Library was established in 1842 and patronised extensively by middle-class readers. In 1858–9, history and biography accounted for 22 per cent of its stock, exceeded only by fiction, with 42 per cent.³ Its main competitor, W. H. Smith, founded in 1858, added sales at railway stations to lending books for a small subscription. Popular history built on the eighteenth-century foundations of Paul Rapin,⁴ David Hume and Catherine Macaulay, all of whom produced vigorous accounts with invented dialogue, character portraits both written and engraved, and direct statements of national identity and purpose. Not without cause did this become known as 'picturesque' history;⁵ it was the desire to construct history as an evolving pattern, composed of exchanges between individuals who thought, felt and moved through an actual landscape as did its readers, that directed writing of this kind. History was a re-enactment of turning points generated and resolved by individuals from earlier ages, but constructed through the ideological and emotional language of the present.

Much historical writing built on the key feature of contemporary popular fiction, incisive and enthralling narrative. The breadth and pace of both forms relied heavily on the visual sense, both within narrative prose and in engraved illustration. David Hume's history had been continued after his death by Tobias Smollett, and illustrated with specially commissioned prints. Its apotheosis was an edition in five folio volumes issued between 1793 and 1805 by Robert Bowyer, with designs by Robert Smirke. These engravings reproduced paintings exhibited in a specially built gallery at the same time, and in the same London street, as John Boydell's much more celebrated Shakespeare Gallery. Their approach is typified in an image of Edward V from the 1788 edition (Figure 1),⁶ with an elaborate frame resembling a memorial plaque and a predella showing a central biographical moment, making immediate the individual and the life – or, in this and many other examples, the death. Two further images are important: one, by Thomas Stothard, shows Hume himself, with the figures of Britannia dictating to Clio, muse of history, revealing the nationalist nature of the endeavour (Figure 2). The other, an etching by Thomas Cook (Figure 3), places Shakespeare within a similar frame. Together, the three demonstrate the overlap between nationalism, biographical history and Shakespeare in the visual and ideological construction of the past established at the end of the eighteenth century.

Perhaps in consequence of such conventions, perhaps because of the way in which the past was imagined, written history is frequently presented as direct visual experience. The approach is most directly evident in one of Macaulay's early pieces for the *Edinburgh Review*, titled simply 'History'.⁷ The writer compares

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1 Thomas Cook: engraving of Edward V, from David Hume's *History*, 1788.

history to landscape, with foreground and background, discusses history as portrait painting, and praises Livy for his 'picturesque effect' and 'painting of the narrative', before going on to regret the inability of some recent historians in 'the art of presenting pictures to the imagination'. The essay closes with a peroration in which the ideal history is described, its features linked by the fourfold repetition of 'We should see'. Macaulay's visual imagery continues throughout the period, almost as if he has set the conceptual stance and linguistic formula for others to follow.

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2 Thomas Stothard: design for an engraving of David Hume, with Britannia and the Muse of History, c. 1780s.

Equally revealing is a passage in the same essay on the qualities needed in the historian: ‘The talent which is required to write history thus bears a considerable affinity to the talent of a great dramatist. The dramatist creates; the historian only disposes. The difference is not in the mode of execution, but in the mode of conception’ (p. 292). The quality is taken up in the technique of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*. Written in the present tense, it contains frequent asides in which the narrator laments the course of events, giving it the immediacy of dramatic performance.

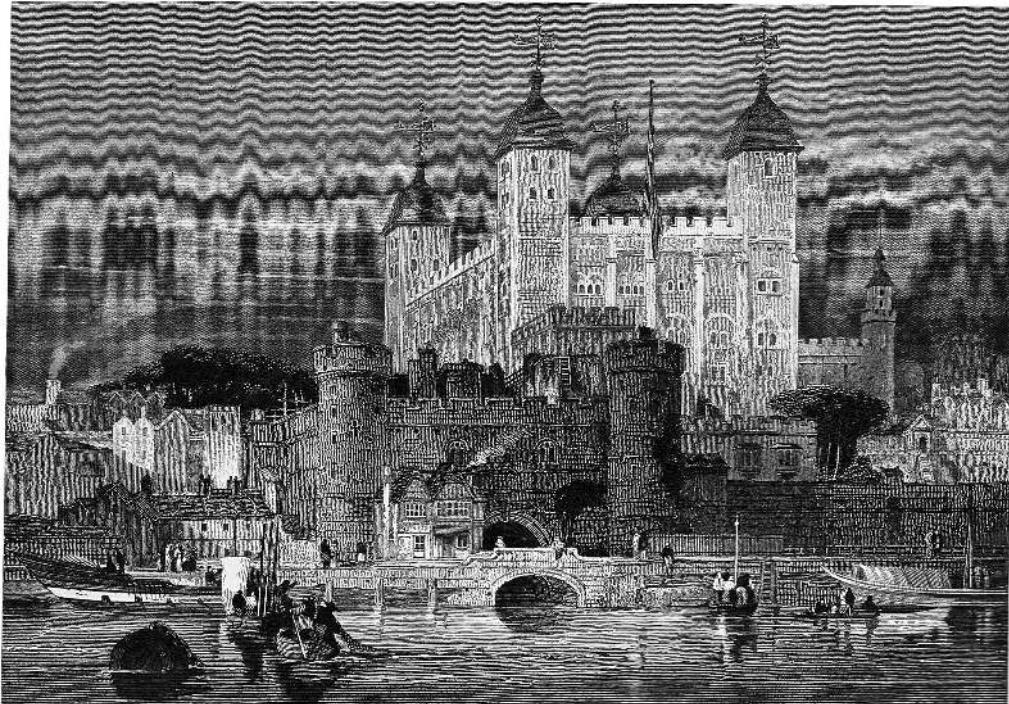
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3 Thomas Cook: etching of Shakespeare, eighteenth century.

Perhaps the best drawing together of ideas of history, seeing it as an intensely visual statement of national identity through moral example, in the form of a theatrical display, was given by the Revd John Lingard, whose *History of England*, published in six volumes between 1819 and 1830 and reissued as an abridged schools edition in 1855, was the natural successor to the narrative histories of Hume: 'Our annals are fraught with animating scenes of national glory, with bright examples of piety, honour, and resolution, and with the most impressive and instructive lessons to princes, statesmen, and people.'⁸ As history leaned towards the novel, so the novel established its respectability by borrowing the forms of history. Walter Scott is frequently credited with making respectable the habit of novel reading, an achievement resting on the structural device of rooting event and emotion in the actuality of the past. It is less often remarked

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4 David Roberts, engraved by E. Finden: *The Tower*, 1670, published by Charles Tilt in 1831 for the extra-illustration of Walter Scott's *Peveril of the Peak*.

that his novels cover every period of English history, from Richard I to George III, although interestingly his omission of Richard II and all of the Henrys may suggest an unease about duplicating Shakespeare. In constituting a complete narrative history, they must for many have been a source of historical knowledge equal to Shakespeare's plays. In them, visual description in words was important, but so was illustration through engravings. Early editions could be embellished by the addition of prints specially produced for the purpose (Figure 4). Many of these, and those in the later *Abbotsford Edition*,⁹ the first to include all the novels, show the locations in which the events took place – a structure that would continue in illustrated editions of Shakespeare, and in their staging, from the 1830s onwards.

In concept, this was related to an important form of contemporary study: the writing, and avid reading, of local history. For readers familiar with the landscapes of Scott's novels, such images would be immediately resonant; to those who were not, the direct presentation would convey the impression of locality and, hence, of greater involvement. Just as Wordsworth's poetry had earlier validated all