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978-0-521-89860-7 - Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century

Edited by Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor*

## I

In 1766, Henry Dawkins commissioned the fashionable painter Giovanni Battista Cipriani to decorate the music room at his home, Standlynch Park (now Trafalgar Park) in Wiltshire. Cipriani's interior design depicted the Arts (music, painting and literature), Venus and Shakespeare. *Shakespeare Striding through a Storm-Ridden Landscape* (Figure 1) is a significant yet little-known example of the subject of this volume: eighteenth-century Shakespeare, by which we mean the distinct phenomenon of how Shakespeare was available to eighteenth-century society, what he meant to the period, and what opportunities he offered the eighteenth century for self-expression. Quill in hand, momentarily pausing in the midst of a creative frenzy, Cipriani's Shakespeare is directly inspired by nature; and yet, with his dominating pose, he also controls and mediates nature for the viewer. The apparently natural, tempestuous landscape has significant artificial elements too, including a temple and what appears to be a tomb. This Shakespeare may be in the midst of nature, but it is nature as experienced by the eighteenth-century landed class, which had a penchant for carefully crafted yet seemingly 'gardenless' gardens, such as those designed by the landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown.

The striking pose and lush backdrop of the painting are reminiscent of the period's famous theatrical portraits, such as Benjamin Wilson's depiction of David Garrick as King Lear in the storm (Figure 4, p. 179) or William Hogarth's rendering of the same actor as Richard III (Figure 10, p. 237). While Shakespeare's costume includes an Elizabethan ruff and the earring familiar from the Chandos portrait, an exotic emblem of the figure of the early modern poet, the long cloak and shoes fastened with ribbon seem to belong more to the eighteenth century. Shakespeare is at once historically distant and reassuringly familiar, an early modern

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Figure 1 Giovanni Battista Cipriani, *Shakespeare Striding through a Storm-Ridden Landscape*, wall painting at Standlynch Park (c.1770)

dramatist appropriated as a symbol of eighteenth-century culture. That Shakespeare was considered an appropriate subject for the interior decoration of a fashionable country house manifests his domestication in the period: the Bard became part of everyday life and could be invoked by the wealthy as a means of demonstrating their taste and judgement. No longer invoked only in strictly literary or theatrical contexts, by 1770 (when the Standlynch music room is believed to have been completed) Shakespeare had been let loose on the wider world and permeated multiple facets of eighteenth-century culture.

Above all, Cipriani's Shakespeare is a natural genius, the embodiment of Theseus' description of the poet in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, lines which are inscribed on the scroll at the bottom left of the image:

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The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
 And, as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing  
 A local habitation and a name. (5.1.12–17)

Although Theseus categorizes the lunatic, the lover and the poet as 'of imagination all compact' (5.1.8) and denigrates the imagination as responsible for delusion, the joke is on him since Shakespeare's transcendent imagination created the work of art in which he finds himself.

The Cipriani painting demonstrates that in the second half of the eighteenth century Shakespeare's status in the cultural imagination had been fully established, and since that time he has remained central to English culture. But the playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon was once just one of a number of early modern dramatists who provided material for the stage and was frequently compared with his peers. As early as 1673, less than sixty years after Shakespeare's death, Aphra Behn asserted his dominance over his contemporary Ben Jonson, claiming that 'we all well know that the immortal Shakespears Playes . . . have better pleas'd the World than Johnsons works'.<sup>1</sup> This comment does not imply that Shakespeare had achieved the important cultural status exemplified by the Cipriani painting a century later, but Behn does suggest that Shakespeare's plays soon came to triumph over Jonson's. The records for the 1660–1 theatrical season, however, suggest that on the reopening of the theatres after their eighteen-year closure, Behn's view was not yet necessarily widely shared. During this season, there are records of four Shakespeare plays being staged for a total of eight performances; although apparently only three of Jonson's plays were produced, these achieved a combined total of ten recorded performances.<sup>2</sup> Jonson certainly believed his dramatic works worthy of conservation for posterity: he immortalized them in a folio edition in 1616. But he was roundly mocked for doing so: 'Pray tell me *Ben*, where doth the mystery lurke, / What others call a play you call a worke', quipped an anonymous wit.<sup>3</sup> The idea that the lowly genre of drama should be preserved in a format usually reserved for more prestigious works of literature seemed ridiculous and even somewhat shocking to the early modern literati. Given this rather disdainful attitude towards drama during the early seventeenth century, it is remarkable that the works of any playwright would eventually come to be considered 'a kind of established religion in poetry', as Arthur Murphy claimed of Shakespeare in 1753.<sup>4</sup>

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Unlike Jonson, Shakespeare did not publish his works in folio, but his friends and fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell did so for him in 1623, seven years after his death, and this collection proved to be an important factor in his longevity. The lengthy hiatus in the theatrical scene, as England experienced the perils of civil war and the Interregnum, led to a significant break in theatrical tradition. When the theatres reopened in the Restoration, play scripts were required for performance, and works that had been popular before the closure of the theatres in 1642 and which had been printed, such as Shakespeare's and Jonson's, furnished material for the Restoration stage. The performance data cited above suggest that in the initial season Shakespeare and Jonson were relatively equal in popularity. It would appear, however, that they were not the most successful dramatists on the Restoration stage. Shakespeare's collaborator John Fletcher achieved the most performances documented of any early modern playwright in the 1660–1 season: *The London Stage* records that nine of his works were produced for a total of fifteen performances. Fletcher's dominance is further established by the fact that five plays he co-authored with Francis Beaumont received thirteen documented performances. Shakespeare's works thus occupy fourth place in frequency of recorded stagings, behind the plays of Fletcher, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Jonson.<sup>5</sup> It is not until the end of the seventeenth century that Shakespeare seems to draw level with Fletcher and surpass Jonson: in the 1699–1700 season, out of a total of forty-three recorded performances, five Shakespeare plays achieved a total of six performances, compared with six performances of two of Fletcher's works and one performance of Jonson's *Volpone*. By this time, of course, far fewer pre-1660 plays were being performed because a Restoration dramatic tradition had developed.

What is interesting here is that all of the plays by Shakespeare and Fletcher recorded this season were adaptations of the originals by Restoration dramatists. This might seem to suggest that the works of early modern dramatists were no longer acceptable on stage in unadapted form, but that is not necessarily the case. It is more likely that new plays and adaptations simply attracted more attention and therefore were more likely to be recorded.<sup>6</sup> But crucially it was not just Shakespeare's works that were considered a tarnished and disordered string of jewels, as Nahum Tate famously claimed; other early modern dramatists also provided the raw materials for Restoration performance.<sup>7</sup> It is probably fair to say, though, that Restoration Shakespeare adaptations achieved a greater longevity than adaptations of plays by his early modern contemporaries:

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the happy ending of Tate's *King Lear*, the intense villainy of Colley Cibber's Richard III, and the last-minute reunion between Romeo and Juliet all survived on stage into the early nineteenth century. This sense of early modern drama as raw material for the Restoration is confirmed by Robert D. Hume's reminder that Restoration playgoers would not necessarily have known the author of the work they saw on stage: 'As of 1710', he writes, 'only about one play in twelve was advertized with its author's name attached.'<sup>8</sup>

The situation was similar for Shakespeare in print. He was not the first playwright to have his works published in folio format, and as the century progressed the collected works of Shakespeare, Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher were each published multiple times. After the 1616 edition, further Jonson folios appeared in 1640–1 and 1692; second, third and fourth Shakespeare folios came out in 1632, 1663 (soon after the reopening of the theatres) and 1685; and Beaumont and Fletcher folios were published in 1647 and 1679. Nicholas Rowe's 1709 six-volume *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, touted as the first modern edition of Shakespeare, seems to constitute a landmark event, but even this publication formed part of a project by the publisher Jacob Tonson 'to issue prestigious collections of important writers' work', which included editions of Milton (1695), Beaumont and Fletcher (1712) and Spenser (1715), as well as contemporary dramatists such as Congreve (1710) and Otway (1712).<sup>9</sup>

Rowe did, however, inaugurate a long tradition of eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, just as the Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare helped establish a stage tradition of his works, which increasingly had the dramatist's name attached to them in performance advertisements, whether in unadapted form or not, in a way that was not paralleled by the works of other playwrights.<sup>10</sup> Until Edmond Malone's 1790 edition, however, this editorial tradition paid scant attention to Shakespeare's poetry. Shakespeare was viewed primarily as a dramatist in the eighteenth century, and his sonnets in particular were deemed outmoded and even awkward. By 1741, three major illustrated editions of Shakespeare had been published (edited by Rowe, Alexander Pope and Lewis Theobald), John Dennis had produced the first major monograph on Shakespeare (*An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespear*, 1712), several dozen adaptations of his works had been performed on the London stage, his plays had achieved an unprecedented prominence in the repertoire, and a statue of the Bard had been erected in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

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Although David Garrick has been widely credited as the driving force behind Shakespeare's popularity in the eighteenth century, Shakespeare had already achieved cultural prominence by the time the actor made his debut on the London stage on 19 October 1741. Indeed, Garrick's choice of a Shakespearean role for his first performance – Richard III (albeit in the adaptation by Colley Cibber) – enabled him to establish his own popularity by linking himself to the rising figure of the Bard. Several factors account for Shakespeare's burgeoning status in the late 1730s. The price war between publishers Jacob Tonson and Robert Walker made cheap editions of individual Shakespeare playtexts readily available, increasing the public's access to his works. And access to Shakespeare in the theatre was unwittingly augmented by the 1737 Licensing Act, which mandated that all new plays be approved by the Lord Chamberlain before performance. Theatre managers therefore began to rely on classic plays already well established in the repertoire (many of Shakespeare's works among them) which were known not to offend the censor.

Shakespeare also benefited from the vigorous advocacy of women, who were active in promoting his works in the theatre before the age of Garrick. From 1736 to 1738, a group known as the Shakespeare Ladies Club petitioned the theatre managers to increase the presence of Shakespeare in the repertoire. They achieved demonstrable success, influencing in particular a revival of his history plays. The season before Garrick's arrival at Drury Lane saw a revival of several long-neglected Shakespearean comedies, thanks to the efforts of talented actresses such as Catherine Clive and Hannah Pritchard. Women remained crucial to the development of eighteenth-century Shakespeare: actresses interpreted his plays in performance, influencing their reception by spectators; female playgoers made up a substantial part of the theatre audience and thus helped determine which of Shakespeare's works were seen in the playhouses; and women increasingly entered the literary sphere, contributing to the burgeoning genre of critical commentary on Shakespeare. In this they were aided by the period's emphasis on Shakespeare's perceived lack of formal and classical education. Women were also usually denied access to this type of education in the eighteenth century; Shakespeare's example proved that this was not a barrier to their achieving literary or artistic merit.

During the remainder of the century, Shakespeare conquered the literary scene, exerting a profound influence on a variety of authors and on several other literary genres, and emerged as the most frequently performed dramatist on the eighteenth-century stage. Furthermore,

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Shakespeare came to transcend literature and performance and was identified simply as ‘an Instrument of Nature’,<sup>11</sup> as he is depicted in the Cipriani painting. Memorialized in art and sculpture, mobilized against the French in the cause of English nationalism, used to inaugurate literary tourism at the Stratford Jubilee, and employed as the subject of interior décor in the homes of polite society, Shakespeare exerted a profound influence on eighteenth-century culture. And not only was the figure of the Bard appropriated by the period, Shakespeare offered the eighteenth century myriad ways to understand and display itself.

## II

*Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* elucidates the means through which Shakespeare achieved his exemplary status and explores the impact he had on various aspects of society and culture. The volume builds on a tradition of critical interest in eighteenth-century Shakespeare dating back to the early twentieth century, when scholars began to identify and analyse critical statements on Shakespeare from the period in a bid to demonstrate that it was not deficient in appreciation of the Bard. This interest in Shakespearean criticism and editing was mirrored by an attention to eighteenth-century performance of Shakespeare, focussed particularly on the adaptations. Early critics tended to see these works as ‘adulterations’ which merely added ‘excrescences’ to Shakespeare. More recently, however, these adaptations have been reprinted and anthologized with the result that now not only are they more readily available to the reader, but the editorial attention devoted to these texts has also rescued them from their status as ‘perversions’ of the Shakespearean originals. Similarly, recent analyses of editing and criticism have examined the eighteenth-century literary response to Shakespeare as a distinct phenomenon, rather than simply trying to locate in these works the origins of nineteenth-century bardolatry. Furthermore, a new dimension has been added to the field by studies which seek to explore eighteenth-century Shakespeare as a cultural, sociological and political process.<sup>12</sup>

This recent scholarship has made a concerted effort to view eighteenth-century Shakespeare on its own terms, an approach we aim to further here. Key to this project is the acknowledgement that the eighteenth century’s Shakespeare is not our Shakespeare. We need to recover the ways in which the period experienced the works of the Bard: in stage adaptations designed to reflect the era’s particular aesthetic concerns; in criticism which constructed the playwright as the supreme exemplar



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of English national genius; in editions by scholars whose understanding of the science of editing was radically different from our own; in Shakespearean spin-offs in which both the man and his characters were given new life; and in the discovery, and even forgery, of Shakespearean texts and ephemera. While it is important to acknowledge that the eighteenth century's understanding of Shakespeare was different from ours in substance, the period's approach towards the Bard is in some ways little different from our own. The list above could equally describe many twenty-first-century approaches to Shakespeare, including technologically sophisticated film productions of the plays, debates over authorship and chronology, parallel-text editions of the works which 'translate' Shakespeare's words into modern-day English, spin-offs for children, and the marketing of all kinds of Shakespeariana.

Having recognized this similarity, we can move away from the idea that the eighteenth century polluted Shakespeare, for this condescending attitude is no different from the period's disdainful ideas about Shakespeare's own era. In 1769, the critic Elizabeth Montagu, for example, attempted to excuse the 'lower' aspects of Shakespeare's writing by claiming that he 'wrote at a time when learning was tinctured with pedantry; wit was unpolished, and mirth ill-bred' and so is to be forgiven if 'By contagion, or from complaisance to the taste of the public, Shakespear falls sometimes into the fashionable mode of writing.'<sup>13</sup> Instead we should seek to understand what Shakespeare meant to his eighteenth-century consumers, since this can tell us a great deal about the aesthetic, cultural and political values of the period. As this volume shows, Shakespeare meant various things to various people at various times: on the stage alone his works constituted not just material for adaptation, but also inspiration for other dramatists, a means by which performers could establish their reputations, and a force that could be manipulated for political ends. The volume also demonstrates that Shakespeare came to represent something collective too; a way for England to forge its identity by celebrating its national hero, whether in criticism, in performance, or in popular culture. The eighteenth century created Shakespeare as a national export for England, but the nation was similarly served by its icon, who helped England develop its understanding of itself. In exploring eighteenth-century Shakespeare we can reach a more nuanced understanding of both the period and the dramatist himself by considering the elements of Shakespeare that especially appealed to his eighteenth-century consumers. This in turn can help us to better comprehend our own attitude to Shakespeare and his ongoing literary, theatrical and cultural dominance.



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## III

The first of the five sections in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* focusses on the ways in which Shakespeare's works were produced and consumed in print. It includes chapters by Marcus Walsh, who traces major trends in editing and publishing Shakespeare; by Jack Lynch, who studies critical responses and the ways in which they shaped Shakespeare's reputation; by Antonia Forster, who considers the place of periodical reviews of Shakespeare in the literary marketplace, given the ever-expanding market for new editions and Shakespeare-related material; and by Brean Hammond, who discusses primarily Lewis Theobald's *Double Falshood* and the forgeries of William Henry Ireland.

The second part of the volume examines the place of Shakespeare in eighteenth-century literature. David Fairer's chapter addresses Shakespeare's impact on eighteenth-century poetry, a much-neglected subject. It is complemented by Thomas Keymer's exploration of eighteenth-century novelists, for whom Shakespeare's works constituted a substantial cultural reference point. Tiffany Stern assesses the use made of Shakespeare by eighteenth-century dramatists, who generally worked not with Shakespearean texts but with Restoration adaptations.

The third section is concerned with the increasing popularity and changing nature of Shakespeare performances on the eighteenth-century stage. Robert Shaughnessy considers the staging of Shakespearean drama, exploring technical innovations and the changing acting style of performers from Betterton to Kemble. Jenny Davidson's chapter on adaptations examines the ways in which Shakespeare's plays were altered to suit the eighteenth-century stage and the aesthetic and moral taste of the age. Michael Burden's wide-ranging survey of Shakespeare and opera provides case studies of concurrent operatic adaptations in London and Germany.

The fourth part concerns the memorializing of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century. Shearer West traces the growth of visual representations of the dramatist and his works, which culminated in the establishment of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery. Kate Rumbold focusses on the stories told by and about the Stratford Jubilee, exploring the clash of sacred and banal language. Kathryn Prince's chapter on English nationalism examines the ways in which Shakespeare was used in the eighteenth century both to forge and to delimit a sense of shared national identity.

The final section looks at Shakespeare in a wider philosophical, political and cultural context. Frans De Bruyn's chapter on the French

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Revolution assesses the ways in which Shakespeare was put to use in the charged political climate of the 1790s. Roger Paulin surveys Shakespeare's reception in Germany and considers his influence on Goethe, Schlegel and others. Philip Smallwood is concerned with the relationship between Shakespeare's plays and eighteenth-century philosophy. The volume concludes with a 'Reference guide' by De Bruyn that takes the form of a richly annotated bibliography of the various aspects of eighteenth-century Shakespeare.

A dominant part in the editing and publication of Shakespeare, as Marcus Walsh shows in his opening chapter, was played by the Tonson publishing house and especially by its originator, Jacob Tonson. After publishing his first edition of Shakespeare in 1709, edited by the poet and dramatist Nicholas Rowe, and following the Copyright Act of 1710, Tonson claimed the legal authority to act as the exclusive publisher of Shakespeare's works. In the early 1720s, he turned to Alexander Pope, the greatest poet of the age, to produce a new edition of the plays. Both Rowe's and Pope's editions have distinctive merits, but neither editor was a philological scholar. After Pope's edition was savaged by Lewis Theobald in *Shakespeare Restored* (1726), Tonson engaged Theobald to produce a new edition, which was published in 1733. This was the first in a line of editions – culminating in Edmond Malone's ten-volume octavo of 1790, which included the first serious attempt to determine the chronology of Shakespeare's plays – that allowed eighteenth-century textual editors to develop an increasingly sophisticated practice of scholarly editing and that consolidated the literary importance of his works.

Shakespeare was crucial to the development of both textual editing and critical analysis of contemporary authors in the long eighteenth century. Jack Lynch's chapter provides a counterpart to Walsh's, focussing on the growth of Shakespeare criticism from its infancy in the Restoration to its establishment as a cultural institution by the end of the eighteenth century. As they tried to account for Shakespeare's violation of familiar critical principles – his depiction of mixed characters, his violation of poetic justice, his inattention to the so-called Aristotelian unities – critics and editors were compelled to develop new principles to defend him against foreign criticism. In establishing Shakespeare's text, explicating his obsolete language, and setting his works in their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historical context, critics were forced to work out new conceptions of pedantry and genius and thus helped establish the grounds of subsequent critical analysis and evaluation of 'modern classical' authors.