



As you like it

In the Victorian period the illustrated Shakespeare edition was, according to Stuart Sillars, an expert on Shakespeare and the visual arts, ‘the broadest channel by which the reading public gained an acquaintance, whatever its nature or intensity, with the plays of Shakespeare’.

These illustrated editions of the Complete Works would have been the first encounter with Shakespeare that many readers would have had. Members of the working class, who may not have been able to experience Shakespeare in the London theatre, would have found these editions more affordable. A consequence of this was that the experience of Shakespeare was often based on these illustrated pages rather than the stage. As such, these editions played an important part in how the Victorian population thought about and constructed Shakespeare.

Such was the importance of images, especially wood-engraved illustrations, during the Victorian period that scholar Brian Maidment compares them to the ‘use of the photograph in contemporary society’. Before the development of wood engraving and the printing technology that allowed for the mass circulation of illustrated books, Shakespeare’s Works often contained just a single frontispiece or a few illustrations per play that were printed on different pages than the text.

Ophelia



Henry V



King Lear



From 1840–1870 (the ‘golden age’ of Shakespeare illustration) the illustrated edition became a theater of the book, an Iconoplay, where words and images combine in complex interaction, just as they do on the stage, with the illustrator fulfilling the role of stage director and deciding how best to ‘stage’ Shakespeare’s scenes. With the advent of the Iconoplay, we witness not only more integration between word and image, but also a vast increase in the sheer quantity of illustrations in these editions: each play contains anywhere between 15-30 illustrations.

Developed around the late 1780s by Thomas Bewick, wood engraving allowed artists to create images with a high level of sophistication that could be reproduced easily and cheaply. Because the wood used to engrave the images was usually boxwood, it was very durable, and the wood blocks could be set alongside type in the printing press, which allowed for word and image to be combined on a single page. Wood engraving, combined with more efficient printing techniques, meant that the Victorian literature trade was transformed into a mass-produced commercial industry and, for the first time, illustrated books became affordable to working- and middle-class families.

These illustrated editions, which were hugely popular in the Victorian era, are also an important part of our cultural heritage and, indeed, our construction of Shakespeare’s plays as we understand them today. Yet they are often only available to researchers in special collection libraries. My recent project, the Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive (available at shakespeareillustration.org), centers on four of the most significant illustrated Shakespeare editions in the Victorian period – Charles Knight’s Pictorial Shakspeare, Barry Cornwall’s Works of Shakspeare, Howard Staunton’s The Works of Shakespeare, and Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke’s Plays of Shakespeare – and makes available over 3,000 of these illustrations. With this online, open-access resource, users can explore and interrogate the complex relationship between the page and the stage, and between word and image.

Every image in the archive has been tagged so users can search for certain characters or plays. Users can also search for other content that the illustration may contain, such as ‘doorways’ or ‘walking sticks’. All the illustrations have been digitized at a high resolution, and users can share images and leave comments. The archive’s Creative Commons license allows users to take the images and do whatever they like with them.



The Tempest

Wood engraving, in many ways, was the New Media of the Victorian era. And, like the web today, it touched upon all aspects of society and allowed for knowledge to be disseminated in new ways and across all social classes. Because of the advent of the digital, it has become far easier to comprehend and appreciate ‘the book’ as a piece of technology. We understand the past in terms of the technology available to us today, and we comprehend the present in terms of technology from the past. As the Canadian intellectual Marshall McLuhan observed, ‘When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.’

The Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive is an attempt to understand the ‘new situation’ we find ourselves in (the digital) by using the ‘flavor of the most recent past’ – Victorian wood-engraved Shakespeare illustrations.