

# Theatrical Portraiture

## *Background Notes*

Robin Simon — 22 February 2023



1 William Hogarth, *David Garrick as Richard III*, 1745. Oil on canvas 90.5 x 250.8 cm. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Theatrical portraiture is a distinctively British art form, reflecting the central role of the theatre in national life. Such paintings show actors in action, as though in the middle of a performance on the stage. They function as records of how plays were performed but also as portraits of the performers. And they had another important function: as a kind of 'history painting'. This possibility was first perceived by William Hogarth in 1745 with *David Garrick as Richard III* [illus. 1]. At first sight, this is very much a history painting, that is to say, it is a dramatic interpretation of a literary text, as carefully prescribed by the French academy of painting and sculpture in the late seventeenth century. The academy, whose rules were accepted everywhere in Europe, placed history painting at the top of a hierarchy of artistic genres, which continued downwards via portraiture through landscape until it reached the bottom with still-life.

Hogarth's painting followed the rules of history painting. It focused upon just a few specific lines of a text, it showed a character in action, and it observed the 'unities': one action, at one time, and in one place. But at the same time Hogarth spectacularly defied the rules, in that the picture is also a portrait of a recognizable person, the actor David Garrick, something that academic history painting could never allow. In making this breakthrough, Hogarth resolved a perpetual complaint about art in Britain: that there was no patronage of history painting and that all the British were interested in was portraits.

What made Hogarth's innovation all the more effective was that the theatre had been identified by the French academy as the best model for painters of 'histories' to follow in composing their pictures. The academicians had not, of course, been thinking that artists should show a specific moment in an actual theatrical performance, let alone focus upon an individual performer, but that is what Hogarth did.

As we shall discover, where the eighteenth-century theatre was concerned, the texts were not always what we might expect, and Shakespeare's plays, for example, were usually presented in radically adapted form. There were good reasons for that, even though this was the age of ever more scholarly editions of his works. The first is that Shakespeare failed to observe the unities and, until the Romantic period, that was an almost insuperable obstacle to his acceptance in Europe and, to a surprising degree, also in Britain, at least so far as performing his plays in the original was concerned. He was certainly admired and revered as our greatest writer, but there were two Shakespeares in eighteenth-century Britain: one on the page, and another on the stage.

The French academy would never have considered Shakespeare as an appropriate literary source but for Hogarth, who was determined that a British school of painting should be established for the first time, nothing could have been more appropriate. He had been testing the waters for some time before he painted *Garrick as Richard III*. First, with paintings of a scene from the big hit musical of the period, *The Beggar's Opera* [illus 2], in which he portrayed the individual actors on stage, and again in a picture showing Falstaff choosing his recruits (from *2 Henry IV*), in which all the actors could be identified. Around the same time he made a painting taken from a couple of lines of

Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a clever thing to do, since Milton together with Homer, no less, had appeared in the title of Voltaire's *Essay upon the Epick Poetry of the European Nations, from Homer down to Milton*, which was published in London in 1727 (a friend of Hogarth's had translated it for Voltaire). Then, shortly afterwards, Hogarth painted an episode from *The Tempest* [illus 3], a picture that scrupulously followed the academic rules, its chief innovation being that the source was Shakespeare. Moreover, Hogarth interpreted Shakespeare's original text, at a time when *The Tempest* was only ever performed as an opera in an adaptation by Dryden and Davenant.



2 William Hogarth, *The Beggar's Opera*, 1729. Oil on canvas, 59.1 x 76.2 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven



**3** William Hogarth, *The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2*, c. 1734. Oil on canvas, 80 x 105.4 cm. National Trust, Nostell Priory

As we shall see, Hogarth was not quite the first artist to interpret a Shakespeare play in paint nor indeed to paint a theatrical portrait. A few examples of earlier paintings of the kind date, not surprisingly, from the years after the Restoration of Charles II, who was himself so interested in the theatre [illus 4].



**4** Anonymous Flemish artist working in London, *Cave Underhill as Obadiah in 'The Committee; or The Faithful Irishman'*, c. 1662. Oil on panel, 38 x 30 cm. Garrick Club

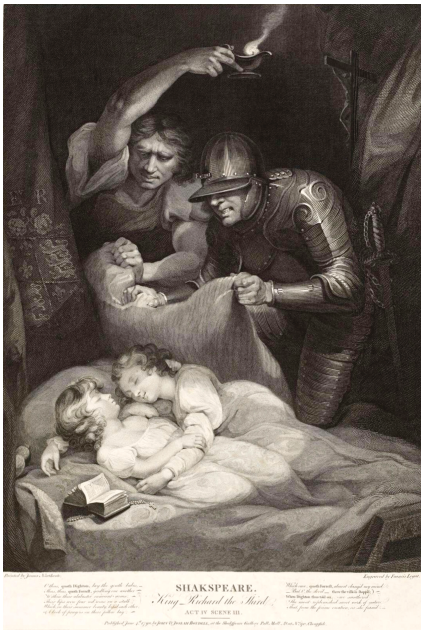
Hogarth's principal successor was the German artist Johan Zoffany, whose first commission in England in 1762 was from none other than David Garrick, showing the actor in a play called *The Farmer's Return* [illus 5]. Inspired by Hogarth, Zoffany went on to become a complete master of theatrical portraiture, perfecting the art of showing actors in and out of character at the same time. Zoffany worked with the publisher Robert Sayer in the production of engraved prints after his paintings, exploiting the insatiable public thirst for images of favourite performers.



5 Johan Zoffany, *David Garrick in 'The Farmer's Return'*, 1762. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Zoffany was followed by two specialists in the genre, George Clint and Samuel de Wilde who, like Zoffany, managed to convey the impression that their paintings were taken directly from the stage. Nothing could have been further from the truth, in fact, as a rare unfinished sketch by Clint confirms.

Alongside theatrical portraiture proper, the painting of episodes from Shakespeare, initially explored by Hogarth in *The Tempest*, became a genre all of its own. The launch of John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in 1789 [illus 6 Northcote, *Murder of the Princes*] ignited a veritable explosion of history paintings drawn from the plays of Shakespeare, a phenomenon that lasted throughout the nineteenth century and beyond [illus 7 Millais, *The Princes in the Tower*], further illuminating the long and contradictory tale of history painting in Britain.



6 Francis Legat after James Northcote, *The Murder of the Princes in the Tower*, 1790. Engraving for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery



7 John Everett Millais, *The Princes in the Tower*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 147.2 x 91.4 cm. Royal Holloway, University of London

Finally, we shall look at Laurence Olivier's 1955 film *Richard III* and discover that theatrical portraiture inspired this outstanding example of the twentieth century's most distinctive art form, the movie.

### **Suggestion**

Watch Laurence Olivier's film *Richard III* (1955) in advance of the lecture (or afterwards)

### **Some further reading**

Robin Simon, *Hogarth, France and British Art: The rise of the arts in eighteenth-century Britain* (Paul Holberton Publishing/ Hogarth Arts 2007)

Martin Postle, ed., *Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed*, exh. cat. (Yale University Press 103), especially the chapters and catalogue entries on the theatrical pictures by Robin Simon

Robin Simon, *Shakespeare, Hogarth and Garrick: Plays, Painting and Performance* (forthcoming, Paul Holberton Publishing, April 2023)

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