



Woman in Culture and Arts

The Victorian Illustrating of Shakespeare's Women: Metal Engraving

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 2024 January 15 Received in revised form: 2024 April 7 Accepted: 2024 June 11 Published online: 30 December 2023</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Aesthetics,</i> <i>Illustrating Women,</i> <i>Metal Engraving,</i> <i>Mitchell,</i> <i>The Victorian Shakespeare.</i></p>	<p>Introduction This article seeks to examine the illustrated editions of Shakespeare's plays, which were printed using metal engraving. The primary objective is to identify the most determining factors that enhanced the comprehension of the female characters in the plays and to address the inquiry: What were the primary characteristics of the Victorian portrayal of women in Shakespeare's editions? The primary theories and concepts employed in this investigation are derived from Mitchell's book <i>Iconology</i> (1986), in which he discusses the visual revolution in contemporary culture and theory, which is the recognition of the visual realm as equally significant as the verbal realm. Known for his substantial contributions to the disciplines of visual culture and iconology, Mitchell is a prominent historian and theorist of the visual arts and literature. Morteza Lak's article, "Type and Typography as Paratexts of 'Hamlet' in <i>Boydell's Shakespeare Edition</i> (2015)," was a valuable resource during the composition of this study. In it, Lak examines Boydell's version of Ophelia's visual representation, and the "textual mechanisms" (90) that envelop the images in the 1802 Boydell edition of Shakespeare, including the narrative caption and scene and act information. His objective is to demonstrate the impact of typographical features on the interpretation of the illustrations. In doing so, the researcher investigates "the medial function of type and typographic characteristics by which text and image merge to form the holistic makeup of the edition" (87).</p> <p>Methodology This research is a library, qualitative and descriptive study which scrutinizes the 19th-century Shakespeare editions that utilized the steel engraving technique for illustration. It is important to mention that the focus will be on illustrations that were available online at shakespeareillustration.org, babel.hathitrust.org, and the Folger Shakespeare Library, as a result of the limited availability of printed illustrations. In addition, in order to ensure that the remaining plays from each edition are adequately represented, this study will only analyze one or two plays, as the analysis of all plays and images would have exceeded the permissible word count. It is important to note that the research will be supported by a secondary theoretical pillar that will serve to define the feminist interpretation of the illustrated edition, with a particular emphasis on the representation of women in the visualised scenes of Shakespeare's plays. This framework avoids the deep feministic exposition of the ways in which Victorian women were conceptualized, idealized, and visualized as objects of masculine desire in order to prevent any sense of pragmatic and critical complexity. Rather, it unravels the period's approach to the treatment of women as painterly subject matters for the illustrated editions of Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre. Therefore, the theoretical foundation of the discussion will be restricted to Deborah Gorham's conception of the ideal woman in Victorian England.</p> <p>Results</p>

During Victoria's reign, a number of new processes were developed, including outline engraving, stipple, daguerreotype, and photogravure printing, as the 19th century was a period of extensive experimentation and technological advancement. At first, copper was considered a popular metal for engravers, but due to the excessive softness of copperplates and the high price of that metal, after 1820, engravers turned to steel, which was harder and more durable than copper, but cheaper. Steel plates had the advantage of being able to withstand the long prints necessary in the publishing industry and to do more prints without losing quality. Even though the steel engraving took slightly longer time than copper, the capacity to use three to four times as much steel plate compared to a copperplate significantly reduced cost. Also, the hardness of steel permitted engravers to produce precise lines, exquisite details, and more subtle and intricate effects. Therefore, this method was suitable for recording complex characters and scenes in Shakespeare's works. Consequently, the images engraved on the steel served as valuable visual companions to the text of Shakespeare's plays, thereby enhancing the audience's emotional engagement with the narrative and their comprehension of the text. Although these copies were more expensive than the popular 19th-century woodblock prints, some collectors still preferred them over others. Therefore, in the 19th century, this technique was employed to create some exceptional illustrated editions of Shakespeare's works. These editions featured more realistic images than the wood engravings that were the prevalent engraving technique at the time. The objective is to identify a method by which the reader's aesthetic and hermeneutic connection with Shakespeare's plays transcends superficial reading.

Conclusion

In general, it can be argued that the aesthetic evolution of Shakespeare's illustrated works had reached various representations of women in the Victorian era. Consequently, the definition of female beauty in the 19th century was primarily based on a patriarchal construct that was consistent with the value and moral system of the Victorian era. Victorian fashions were frequently extravagant in appearance, and clothing design was determined by merit. In other words, the level of elegance that women possessed was indicated by their elegant dresses, tight corsets, and voluminous, multi-layered, and pleated skirts. Ultimately, the images reviewed in this article suggest that this trend had progressively extended to the depictions of female roles in the printed versions of Shakespeare's plays. In other words, during this period, the images transitioned from emphasizing the conceptual and semantic connection between the images of women and the text, which was prevalent in the eighteenth century, to merely illustrating the attractiveness of women. Therefore, artists endeavored to underscore the artists sought to emphasise their beauty, strength and complexity of female heroes in Shakespeare's works by depicting them in visually attractive ways. In this way, the images in these editions offered readers a comprehensive interpretation of the characters and had the potential to influence their comprehension of them. In other words, the individuals who viewed these images perceived the roles as if they were established in the 19th century and in accordance with the ideals of women of that era. Thus, not only avid readers, but also those interested in fashion, art and aesthetics were attracted to these editions.

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