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# Picturing Ekphrasis: Image and Text in Shakespeare Painting


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## ABSTRACT

In this essay I consider the counter-intuitive (even apparently impossible) enterprise of picturing ekphrasis—of visually depicting the verbal representation of the visual. I do so by attending to two paintings, by William Martin and James Barry, of the disturbing scene in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in which Iachimo gains illicit entry to Imogen's bedroom and proceeds to record details of both the room and her body, details he later uses to convince Posthumus, Imogen's exiled husband, of her infidelity. I argue that Martin's and Barry's attempts to paint this event of ekphrasis—of ekphrasis as violation—respond to and need to be understood within the specific institutional and aesthetic contexts of vexed intermediality in late-eighteenth century London, in particular the ascendancy of spectacular dramaturgy, the arrival of the literary gallery, and entrenched notions of painting's textuality. Martin and Barry, I suggest, show ekphrasis in order to interrogate and eschew both its rhetorical imperative (image as word) and its iconophobic implication (image as less than word). In picturing ekphrasis, their paintings trouble the conception of the painting as a would-be poem and resist the textual and textualizing gaze that demands that they submit to the procedures of reading.

If ekphrasis, as W. J. T. Mitchell writes, attempts what cannot be done—for “Words can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their objects” (152)—then the picturing of ekphrasis would seem to fold this at once formal and ontological impossibility back on itself. It proposes not only that the image may, through the descriptive protocols of ekphrasis, become text but that this very verbal becoming might itself be something that can be rendered pictorially. To adapt James Heffernan's usefully straightforward definition of ekphrasis to my purposes, picturing ekphrasis would have to involve the visual representation of “the verbal representation of visual representation” (*Museum of Words* 3). I'm not, to be clear, thinking about artistic realizations of ekphrastic objects, as for instance in John Flaxman's sculptural recreation of the *Iliad*'s shield of Achilles (1821). Nor am I concerned with the “reverse ekphrasis” that Garrett Stewart finds in paintings of scenes of reading (81–115). I'm interested, rather, in the image of the ekphrastic act itself, which is also, necessarily, the image of the ekphrast.

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Such depictions are rare, but in the final decades of the eighteenth century, British art offers us, remarkably, two: William Martin's *Iachimo in Imogen's Chamber* (c. 1784) and James Barry's *Iachimo Emerging from the Chest in Imogen's Chamber* (c. 1788–95). Both paintings represent the same, disturbing scene (2.2) in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Iachimo has traveled from Rome to the British court with the express purpose of seducing Imogen, whose exiled husband, Posthumus, has accepted Iachimo's wager concerning his wife's chastity. Quickly discovering that Imogen is beyond temptation, Iachimo conceals himself in a trunk to gain illicit entry to Imogen's bedchamber. Once Imogen is asleep, Iachimo emerges from his hiding place and proceeds to record details of both the room and Imogen's body. He also removes a bracelet from her arm. Two scenes later (2.4), back in Italy, Iachimo then persuades Posthumus of his wife's infidelity by describing at length the interior of the bedchamber and a mole close to one of Imogen's breasts, particulars that are given further credence by the physical evidence of the bracelet.<sup>1</sup> Together, these scenes stage ekphrasis as an act of sexual violation, in terms not only of Iachimo's voyeuristic incursion into Imogen's bedroom but also of the non-consensual transformation of her private space and body into a male-authored text that addresses itself to men—in short, of the male textualization of the female image as both the announcement and the enactment of an erotic and avowedly proprietorial claim of the former over the latter. We will look more closely at these scenes in a moment. For now, though, I want simply to note that the first of them has been a favorite of illustrators and painters since the early eighteenth century. It is not hard to see the appeal. This is a scene, after all, about seeing, scopophilia, and the allure of the image. And it is a scene, too, that gave male artists full license to work in the tradition of the reclining female nude.

To look at the many illustrations of this bedchamber scene is to recognize how far it stands (in) for the play as a whole. That it does so still is evident from the cover of the current Oxford World's Classics edition of *Cymbeline*, which is adorned with a detail from Giorgione's and Titian's *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1510). That the scene has functioned synecdochally from the very start can be seen in Michael Vandergucht's engraving of 2.2 for Nicholas Rowe's landmark *Works of Mr. William Shakespear* of 1709, in which each play is accompanied by a single, defining image. Vandergucht's design establishes the key compositional juxtaposition—a gendered juxtaposition—that subsequent depictions replay, in one form or another: the alert Iachimo, slinking from his chest (movement, action, calculation, libido, the gaze); Imogen asleep on her bed, one breast exposed (repose, passivity, obliviousness, chastity, the looked-at body). But Vandergucht does not show either the act or the implements of inscription. Nor, for that matter, do later illustrations of the scene. Robert Smirke, in a plate for Charles Taylor's *Picturesque Beauties of Shakespear* (1786), depicts the stealing of the bracelet, as does Thomas Uwins in 1827; meanwhile, Richard Westall (1795), Henry Fuseli (1805), and John Thompson (1827) imagine Iachimo, a figure of stealth and concentration, gazing intently at Imogen.<sup>2</sup> None of these images include, or so much as imply, the “tables” or tablet in which Iachimo writes (2.2.24). It is in this crucial respect that Martin's and Barry's paintings distinguish themselves from all other artistic renderings of the scene that I've found. Martin and Barry attend to the event of writing; they picture ekphrasis.

This is not to say that the two paintings depict the exact same moment. The current whereabouts of Martin's canvas, once owned by the Folger Shakespeare Library, are



**Figure 1.** Francesco Bartolozzi, after William Martin, *Iachimo in Imogen's Chamber* (1786; painting c. 1784). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

unknown, so we must instead look at Francesco Bartolozzi's fine engraving of it ([Figure 1](#)).<sup>3</sup> Here, Iachimo makes copious notes on a scroll of paper as he bends over the sleeping Imogen, studying the mole on her left breast. The paper and pencil, for so they appear, are obvious anachronisms given that *Cymbeline* is set in Roman Britain, but the significant detail is that they are in direct contact. Iachimo is reaching the far-right edge of the paper and is at the very point of beginning a new line. Writing is happening—happening, one might add, with uncommon intensity. By contrast, Barry's painting ([Figure 2](#)), like Vandergucht's illustration, shows Iachimo creeping from the trunk. But here, in his left hand, he clutches his writing tablet and stylus. Where in Martin's picture, Iachimo is almost on top of Imogen, Barry situates the two figures at a distance. Yet this distance is fragile, for along with Iachimo's left foot, his open tablet—and it is important that it is open—already enters the space occupied by Imogen's bed; it precedes Iachimo's body; it goes ahead of his almost spectral gaze. We are being shown the moment at which ekphrasis commences.

There is much to say about these paintings, but in order fully to understand how (and why) they picture the scene of ekphrasis it is first necessary to consider the specific matrix of word-image relations through which they emerge and to which, in complex ways, they address—or rather, present—themselves. The development of new intermedial practices and spaces within what Sophie Thomas calls the late eighteenth-century's "culture of looking" (626) meant that questions concerning the





**Figure 2.** James Barry, *Iachimo Emerging from the Chest in Imogen's Chamber* (c. 1788–95). Image Courtesy of the Royal Dublin Society Library & Archives.

interaction between visual and verbal arts, and of the subsumption of the former to the latter, were very much live within London's day-to-day cultural landscape. In particular, the ascendancy of a spectacular dramaturgy, made possible and even necessary by the enlarged theaters of London, was seen by some to imperil the verbal bases of the play; the emergence of the literary gallery saw the works of Shakespeare, Milton, and other English poets provide not merely an endless source of inspiration for artists but the structuring, textual logic for a new kind of exhibition culture; while the literary gallery itself reaffirmed and represented a culmination of British art's increasing commitment to the dictum of *ut pictura poesis* ("as in painting, so in poetry"), of the belief—enshrined in the ethos of the new Royal Academy (established 1768)—that British painting might culturally elevate itself not only through an engagement with the canon of British literature but also by formally aspiring to the affordances of text. It is thus no coincidence that Martin's and Barry's paintings were created within a decade of one another, and part of my argument will be that the picturing of ekphrasis only became thinkable (and desirable) at this precise moment in British cultural history. With a more secure sense of these institutional and aesthetic contexts of intermediality, I then circle back to the paintings themselves. Martin and Barry, I wish to suggest, *show* ekphrasis in order to interrogate and eschew both its rhetorical imperative (image as word) and its iconophobic implication (image as less than word). In picturing ekphrasis, that is, their paintings trouble the Academy-sanctioned conception of the painting

as a would-be poem and resist the textual and textualizing gaze that demands that they submit to the procedures of reading.

## I.

When Iachimo first steals from the trunk, the stage seems set for sexual violence. Comparing himself to Tarquin (the rapist of Lucretia) and Imogen to Venus (“Cytherea”), he wishes that he “might touch, / But one kiss, one kiss!” (2.2.12, 14, 16–17). Only thirteen lines into his soliloquy does he suddenly recall his as-yet-unknown purpose, at which point the fantasy of rape gives way to—is transformed into—the exercise of ekphrasis:

But my design—  
To note the chamber. I will write all down.  
*He writes in his tables*  
Such and such pictures, there the window, such  
Th’adornment of her bed, the arras, figures,  
Why such and such; and the contents o’th’ story.  
Ah, but some natural notes about her body  
Above ten thousand meaner movables  
Would testify t’enrich mine inventory. (2.2.23–30)

Critical engagements with this soliloquy and the question of ekphrasis in the play have attended, in particular, to two interrelated issues. The first is that of the rape that never arrives or, rather, arrives in unexpected form. Developing Heffernan’s contention that ekphrasis rehearses a “powerfully gendered” contest in which “the voice of male speech” attempts “to control a female image” (*Museum of Words* 1), Marion Wells understands the scene “as a figurative rape” wherein Iachimo transforms Imogen’s “body into a signifier in his own narrative” (213–14). Imogen-the-reader—she has been reading Ovid’s account of Philomela, no less—becomes Imogen-the-read. As Rebecca Olson observes, ekphrasis does not involve and is not about the woman in *Cymbeline*; it is rather “a strategy by which men describe the female body in order to triumph in a verbal competition with other men” (47).

How, we must ask, does this imbrication of gender, violence, and ekphrasis play out on the canvas? More especially, what is happening when this scene is given to a viewer in the iconographical guise of the reclining female nude? I will consider these questions when I return to the paintings. What requires more immediate attention—and herein is the second issue that has occupied this scene’s critics—is what the audience does not (and cannot) see. After all, Iachimo’s speech in 2.2 is not ekphrastic. Before he takes out his tablet, Iachimo embarks on a Petrarchan blason that lingers over specific parts of Imogen’s body: her skin “whiter than the sheets,” her lips “Rubies unparagoned” (2.2.16–17). Once he starts writing, however, his speech moves away not only from erotic metaphor but from meaningful description. In place of the catalog we might expect him to offer, he refers merely to “such and such.” The detail exists in his writing, not in his speaking. Ekphrasis as a rhetorical exercise does not take place until 2.4, where the audience is finally given the description denied them two scenes earlier. Iachimo, back in Rome, now enumerates the features of the bedchamber: a “tapestry of silk and silver” that depicts Cleopatra meeting Mark Antony on the river Cydnus; a chimneypiece that shows “Chast Dian bathing;” a roof “fretted” with “golden cherubins;” silver

andirons in the form of “two winking cupids” (2.4.69, 82, 87–88, 89). As Leonard Barkan maintains, “Shakespeare is staging the drama of cultural absence and poetic recuperation in the spaces that separate picture from word and Italy from England” (157).<sup>4</sup> In 2.2, the audience—the Globe’s audience, to be precise—neither see the contents of the room nor learn of this information by any report. Only later, in another scene and another country, are its invisible contours finally made known.

This dialectic between the seen (the eye) and the unseen (the mind’s eye), the spoken and the unspoken, is, for most of the play’s critics, the very stuff of which dreams are made on the Shakespearean stage. Ekphrasis, reasons Joel Altman, “instantiates early modern theatricality”; it expanded almost without limit a play’s visual horizon (273, 275).<sup>5</sup> Theater, Barkan notes, made literal Philip Sidney’s figure of poetry as “a speaking picture,” a conception of drama’s work that perhaps explains Sidney’s anxious derision of theatrical representation in his *Defence of Poesy* (141–42). *Cymbeline* calls upon, and toys with, the spectator’s imagination. And, to this extent, 2.2 and 2.4 of the play have been understood fundamentally to depend on what is not actually there, materially, on the stage. As Claire Preston puts it, the “ekphrastically reported objects do not of course exist on stage; *nor should they*” (para. 29; my emphasis).

But on the elaborate scenic stages of the eighteenth century such objects could and did exist. Imogen’s bedchamber was no longer a space that the audience needed wholly to imagine. Where in the first folio the opening stage direction of 2.2 refers simply to “*Imogen, in her Bed*” (376 of the Tragedies), from Rowe’s edition onwards eighteenth-century texts of the play call instead for “*A magnificent Bedchamber*” (6: 2771). That the period’s scenographic revolution gave a new and different inflection to *Cymbeline*’s negotiation of the visible is clear from Elizabeth Inchbald’s remarks in *The British Theatre* in 1808:

Among the many amusing things, both seen and heard, at the representation of “*Cymbeline*,” that part in which the great author is concerned, generally makes so slight an impression upon an audience, that, when the curtain is dropped, they immediately discourse upon the splendour of Imogen’s bed-chamber. (4: 3–4)

Inchbald, like Preston, evidently wishes that the interior of Imogen’s room not be shown, or at least not so lavishly. Note, in particular, how her statement unfolds, the qualification of that early parenthetical clause (“both seen and heard”) acknowledging a contest between image and text that quickly resolves itself in Inchbald’s open critique of spectacular effect and its audience. The complaint was a common one in an age of enormous playhouses. Covent Garden Theatre, remodeled in 1792, held 3000 spectators; the new Drury Lane, which opened in 1794, had a capacity of 3600 and possessed a stage 108 feet high, 83 feet wide, and 93 feet long. These were, as playwright Richard Cumberland grumbled, “theatres for spectators rather than playhouses for hearers, . . . The splendour of the scenes, the ingenuity of the machinist and the rich display of dresses, aided by the captivating charms of music, now in a great degree supercede the labours of the poet” (57). Performed in such spaces and in accordance with this ascendent spectacular dramaturgy, *Cymbeline* had become for Inchbald a play effaced by the visual and material sophistication—the ineluctable thereness—of its own representation.

Martin and Barry, then, were painting the bedchamber scene at a moment when theatrical practice was understood to have subordinated the word to the image, or

even to have elevated the visual to the point where it occluded the textual. To be reminded of the abiding anxiety that this medial shift generated among the canonical Romantic poets and essayists—an anxiety carefully traced by Gillen D’Arcy Wood—one need only glance at Coleridge’s claim, in a lecture on Shakespeare in 1811, that the bare stage of early modern theater was far preferable to the “artificial, extraneous inducements” of contemporary drama: the one was “a delight and employment for the intellect,” the other mere “amusement for the senses” (1: 228). Romantic antitheatricity, its privileging of the experience of reading over that of spectation, was in many ways a form of cultural nostalgia, a wish to retreat to the scenery-less stage of early seventeenth-century public theaters.

I’m not suggesting that we ought to regard Martin and Barry as painting staged ekphrasis in any obvious sense. Theirs is not theatrical painting *per se*. John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery, for which Barry’s picture was commissioned, consciously eschewed a route that would have seen paintings depict celebrity actors of the day (Altick 45; Brylowe 26; Dias 59). Opening in Pall Mall in 1789, the Gallery was tied, rather, to a grand publishing enterprise in the shape of Boydell’s illustrated edition of Shakespeare’s works, which featured engravings drawn from the exhibited paintings. But contemporary theatrical production nonetheless is a significant—if, in the case of Boydell’s Gallery, partially repressed—matrix for Martin’s and Barry’s pictures because it was a multimedial practice in which the vexed relationship between word and image was being thrashed out on a nightly basis as a constitutive process of spectacular theater’s paragonal form. Theater, as practice and as idea, was necessarily a preeminent cultural mechanism for adjudicating the relative functions and merits, and the interaction, of the verbal and visual at this time. More particularly, as Inchbald’s comment establishes, *Cymbeline*’s staging of ekphrasis positioned its bedchamber scene as a focal point for such intermedial negotiations and anxieties.

Both Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery and the new 1794 Drury Lane have a place in John Brewer’s timeline of “Spectacular London” (232), and it is perhaps tempting to consider the genre of Shakespeare painting as the realization of spectacle’s promise (or threat) to render words obsolete. But this would be to misunderstand the imperatives of eighteenth-century English painting, which, as David Solkin argues, “often aspired to the condition of a readable text” (3). Ronald Paulson has likewise suggested that—lacking an established tradition of its own and seeking to challenge the dominance of foreign painting in the home art market—English painting of the period modeled itself on the canon and textual constitution of English writing (Shakespeare and Milton, above all) to the extent that it might almost be viewed as “a branch of literature” (3). In his *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715), for instance, Jonathan Richardson contends that “Painting is a sort of Writing, it ought to be easily legible” (76). Similarly, in an essay published in the *Analytical Review* in 1788, Henry Fuseli cites Simonides’s famous aphorism, “Painting is silent poetry, / And poetry is a speaking picture,” before launching into an extended comparison of the two media: “The excellence of pictures or of language consists in raising clear, complete, and circumstantial images, and turning readers into spectators. A stile of painting is the same as in writing, be it words or colours, they convey sentiment” (216). That the first sentence here repeats almost verbatim a statement already made by Thomas Warton (2: 165) only reaffirms how entrenched the Horatian notion of *ut pictura poesis* remained at the end of the century.



These statements of Simonides and Horace propose an equivalence that masks asymmetry. In the first, as Heffernan observes (“Review” 968), poetry can picture but paintings cannot speak; in the second, as Barkan reminds us (30), what is being defined is poetry, not painting. In taking these lop-sided, text-image analogies not only as theoretical axioms but also, in the case of the Royal Academy and the Shakespeare Gallery, as an institutional logic, eighteenth-century painting put itself on the back foot.<sup>6</sup> Consider the following statement by Joshua Reynolds in his eighth discourse:

Poetry having a more extensive power than our art ... operates by raising our curiosity, engaging the mind by degrees to take an interest in the event, keeping that event suspended, and surprising at last with an unexpected catastrophe ... The Painter’s art is more confined ... What is done by Painting, must be done at a blow. (145–46)

This concession of the limits of painting, from the RA’s founding president, is not far removed from Lessing’s famous distinction in *Laocoön* (1766) between poetry and painting as respectively temporal and spatial arts, a distinction through which Lessing openly accords the verbal greater power than the pictorial.<sup>7</sup> Consider, too, Coleridge’s avowal that “*painting cannot go beyond a certain point; poetry rejects all control, all confinement*” (2: 496), or Boydell’s caution to the patron of his Shakespeare Gallery that he “not allow his imagination, warmed by the magic powers of the Poet, to expect from Painting, what Painting cannot perform” (x). This disclaimer prefaces the Gallery’s catalog, which invited viewers to compare the exhibited pictures with apposite excerpts from the plays. If late eighteenth-century theater threatened the visual’s eclipse of the verbal, then, conversely, contemporaneous painting openly aspired to the qualities of textuality in a gambit that often amounted to an admission of its own deficiency.

In terms of the phenomenon of the literary gallery, this history of vexed intermediality has been told at length and brilliantly by Luisa Calè and Thora Brylowe. In *Fuseli’s Milton Gallery: “Turning Readers into Spectators”*, Calè focuses on the literary gallery as a space in which the supposedly opposed phenomenologies of reading and viewing were entwined in powerful and disconcerting ways that challenge the antipictorial bias of prevailing critical approaches to British Romanticism. Brylowe, by contrast, sees the literary gallery as an attempt to elevate painting (by aligning it with the prestige of the poetic canon) that inadvertently led to its abjection as “illustration” (118); its very constitution as a “visual anthology” of textual moments necessarily and counterproductively posited art as the facsimile of literature’s original (26, 32).<sup>8</sup> What I take from these accounts is that, like the theater, painting in the period required both its producers and consumers actively and relentlessly to engage in paragonal arbitration. Put differently, the intermedial traffic of Romantic culture further destabilized the always far-from-secure distinction between word and image. With each of these terms variously claiming to subordinate, mimic, or become its opposite, artists and public alike were required to navigate cultural occasions and spaces premised on verbal-visual exchanges of dizzying intricacy and confusion.

The painting of ekphrasis is a rare and complex instance of such navigation. In engaging with Shakespeare, and with *Cymbeline*’s bedchamber scene especially, Martin and Barry locate themselves at a tense and transformative meeting point between words and pictures, diagetically (in that Iachimo’s ekphrasis is crucial to the play’s action) and also theatrically (in that the scene raises the question of just how a stage’s

showing relates to a character's telling). What is more, Martin and Barry depict the precise reverse of their own painterly act: they fashion images of a text (Shakespeare's) that concerns the texting of an image (Imogen's room and body). This constitutive paradox—the visual rendering of Iachimo's verbal rendering of the visual—is made possible, I have been suggesting, by the cultural space in which these painters operated, a space in which word-image relations were unusually fluid.

I do not, though, want us to regard these paintings as mere symptoms of historical process. Though the very notion that the event of ekphrasis might and should be pictured arises within the specific set of cultural conditions I have traced, this notion itself demands that painting behave self-reflexively, even that it operate as a form of theory. Put simply, how could an artist paint ekphrasis without grappling with—and inviting his spectators to grapple with—the differing ontologies of verbal and visual form and the differing phenomenologies of verbal and visual experience? Here I'm building on the insights of two critics who have pushed back against the logocentric supposition that theory's work is linear and discursive. The first is Hanneke Grootenboer, who calls on us to recognize that “art is a form of thinking, and that painting is capable of offering us a thought, rather than a meaning or a narrative” (2). Reworking Barthes's concept of the “pensive image,” Grootenboer contends that seventeenth-century Dutch paintings “produce not knowledge, per se, but rather a theoretical insight ... that leads us to the realm not of the unknown but of the unthought” (13). The second is Mitchell, with his concept of “metapictures”: “pictures that show themselves in order to *know* themselves” and that consciously resist the assumption that the image can only be understood once it is framed by language (description, exegesis) that is other than and “outside” of it (48, 68). Language, of course, is not only outside Martin's and Barry's paintings; it is part of their compositional fabric in two respects, as the scene being represented (*Cymbeline* 2.2) and as the act of ekphrasis that occurs within that scene (Iachimo's notation). As metapictures, they think through and trouble the presence and function of the texts within themselves. In the period that broadly subscribed to the ideal of painting as “a sort of writing,” these pictures of ekphrasis theoretically probe and ultimately denounce the possibility of their own textuality, both by playing with the codes and expectations of multiple pictorial genres and by frustrating the narrative and referential coordinates of readerly attention.

## II.

Let me, at this stage, return to an observation I made at the outset: that the two paintings concern different points in the event of ekphrasis. Unlike Barry's later picture, Martin's *Iachimo in Imogen's Chamber* depicts writing as a visual fact. Iachimo is certainly looking at the mole on Imogen's breast, but the act and artifacts of inscription curiously dampen the erotic potential of what the viewer is being shown. The discernible copiousness of Iachimo's writing and the studiousness of his concentration seem odd, incongruous, as if they do not belong in this painting even if they do belong in this Shakespearean scene. The scrawled-upon scroll occupies the center of the picture, the light that falls on its upper half drawing our eye. More than this, the scroll comes between the figures of Iachimo and Imogen; it intervenes, it instantiates distance where, in its absence, there would be a more overtly sexually charged and immediately threatening

proximity between the two figures. Iachimo hovers over Imogen and yet it is the scroll, not her body, that he touches; notably, the scroll's slope and curl replicate the incline of Imogen's sleeping body. In *Cymbeline*, to recall Olson's contention, ekphrasis excludes women even as it appropriates their bodies through the descriptive act. Martin's painting seems to visualize this ekphrastic displacement. I do not mean to suggest that its depiction of ekphrasis-as-violation is not disturbing. My point is that Martin renders this sense of unease in the form of iconographical short-circuiting. The ekphrastic act is generically unsettling: in Imogen's partially-naked figure, Martin locates his viewer in the scene of a reclining nude—his Imogen recalls Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538)—but the hermeneutic and voyeuristic protocols of this genre are then disrupted by the awkward and unwelcome figure of writing that sits at the painting's center.

I believe it is possible to be still more specific. Martin's picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1784, two years after Fuseli's *The Nightmare* had been shown there, causing a sensation. The correspondences between these two bedroom scenes are so marked that Martin's *Imogen* may have struck many of its early viewers as a conscious reworking of Fuseli's painting. In both, a darkened interior defined largely by the flowing contours of curtains and bedsheets provides the backdrop for a scene in which an out-of-place figure sits upon a sleeping woman, the twisted horizontal of whose body angles towards the viewer. Martin replaces Fuseli's incubus with Iachimo and his scroll, and in doing so reconfigures the erotics of his prototype. Where, for Marcia Allentuck, Fuseli's incubus is "overtly lascivious" and "solicits the spectator with a smug, grotesque, bestial sneer" (39), Martin's ekphrast neither invites nor embodies erotic fantasy from or for the viewer. Iachimo seems transfixed less by the sexual allure of Imogen's body than by the intense nature of his ekphrastic task. Seen through *The Nightmare*, he and his writing implements become intruders not only within the dramatic space of the bedchamber but also within the formal and sexual space of the reclining nude.

Nor is the scroll the only text on show here. Resting open on the bedside table in the right foreground is a book, the bottom edge of its right page folded back to mark the place of reading. On the one hand, as a visual and technological counterpoint to the paper and pencil in Iachimo's hands, this book summons a repertoire of intersecting medial, spatial, and temporal oppositions: scroll versus codex, manuscript versus print, private versus public, the now of writing versus the then of the already written. On the other hand, the book's pages, like the scroll, are illegible. As Garrett Stewart observes of paintings of readers, this illegibility of pictured text is necessary: unlike the careful pictorial representation of figures, "the sharply painted replica of a page ... wouldn't be a picture of its referent so much as its equivalent, a verbal document in its own right" (72). For Stewart, the page's pictured illegibility, in which lines of text are merely lines—wavering, indistinct—is "a way of keeping faith with painting's own nature" (66). Martin's picturing of ekphrasis refuses to let its spectators become, in the most literal sense, readers.

Of course, if these spectators are familiar with *Cymbeline* then the painting's texts are known and present even if they cannot be read: Iachimo is recording exactly the details that he recounts to Posthumus upon his return to Italy; Imogen's bedtime reading is Ovid's account of Philomela. But the painting's visual invocation of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* at least partially displaces, or competes with, its literary referent. When the Academy's patrons stood before Martin's canvas in 1784, did they first and foremost see Shakespeare or, rather, a variation on (even a subversion of) a recent

theme by Fuseli? *The Nightmare* is a rare instance of a Fuseli painting that does not take up a literary text; therein, as Calè observes, lies “its open-endedness” (“Poetics” 86). Martin thus turns his picture of a Shakespearean text towards a picture that fascinated and disconcerted contemporaries precisely in its refusal to give up—to speak—its meaning.

For Stewart, paintings of readers exhibit “durational envy” (87): that is, they betray both hope and alarm that the temporality of the shown might give way to the temporality of the told, in what reverses the terms of Mitchell’s influential notion of “ekphrastic fear,” whereby description is shadowed by the dread that its own act might be so effective as to nullify the distinction between the visual and verbal (154). But there is no such fraught mixture of desire and apprehension in Martin’s painting. It is a picture *about* text that insists, confidently, that it *isn’t* text. Unlike Stewart’s scenes of reading, in which painting is drawn to the allure of textual experience (with its promise of interiority), Martin’s picturing of ekphrasis is no less than the picturing of language’s unwarranted incursion at the site of visuality. Here, as we have seen, the artifacts of text are compositionally incongruous rather than inviting, while the literary source (Shakespeare) must wrestle for the viewer’s attention with a more immediate visual template (Fuseli). Moreover, Iachimo’s monomaniacal determination to textualize the scene before him means that he fails fully to acknowledge or respond to it. No proxy for the painting’s viewer, he is rather the staged antithesis of the kind of pictorial attention that the painting solicits. Martin’s *Iachimo in Imogen’s Chamber* is a painted *paragone* in which the affordances of the word (male) are weighed and found insufficient when confronted with the visual (female) form. Audaciously, it opposes the logic of *ut pictura poesis* from within the flourishing tradition of literary painting; it shows the protocols of textual creation and fascination in order to exorcize them.

Such resistance to the picture-as-text doctrine finds ready theoretical support in the writings of none other than James Barry. In his early publications, Barry dutifully rehearses the familiar, sister-arts line; his *Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England* (1775), for instance, quotes Simonides and assures us that painting and poetry are “branches and emanations of the same art” (2: 233). However, his lectures as the RA’s Professor of Painting—a post to which he was elected in 1782—speak against this principle in unique and forceful fashion.<sup>9</sup> Discussing the topic of design in his second lecture in 1784, Barry argues that while the writer need simply express an idea in language, which is bound by the limits of nation but “continually exercised by the poet and his readers through the whole of life,” the painter must realize “the conception of his subject” in a medium “altogether foreign to ordinary pursuit” (1: 409). In essence, verbal representation is banal and culturally relative; visual representation requires uncommon skill and yet is universally understood. What is more,

The perfections of form in the painter’s figures do not, like those of poetry, depend upon the narrow compass of the spectator’s mind; the figure in painting and sculpture is actually produced, and in its highest and most cultivated degree of conception, and completed in all its parts. The natural inference which follows from this consideration of compleatness and actual existence (and which is wonderful, should have escaped the discernment of so many ingenious writers) authorizes me to affirm, that painting is not, as has been said, a

silent poem, and poetry a speaking picture; but much more truly, that painting is poetry realized; and that full, complete, and perfect poetry, is indeed nothing more than an animated account or relation of the mere conception of a picture. (1: 410)

Ideas, Barry contends, *are* pictures, and painting is thus not the communication or mediation of the idea but rather its miraculous instantiation in and as form. Language, on the contrary, is intrinsically (and merely) ekphrastic: it imperfectly relates the idea-as-picture. This account owes much to Lockean epistemology, of course, with its model of the mind as a camera obscura and its attendant wariness of the arbitrariness of words.<sup>10</sup> But Barry's privileging of the senses (the "actual") over the imagination ("the narrow compass of the spectator's mind") precisely inverts the first principle of the aesthetic theory that emerged from Locke's visual epistemology in the formulations, especially, of Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke.<sup>11</sup> Barry sets himself against the antipictorialism implicit in the RA's ethos; and he articulates a counter-position to the apotheosis of the imagination, and attendant suspicion of the actual, that was later to be a signature move of Romanticism in its Coleridgean and Wordsworthian inflections.

Martin's *Iachimo in Imogen's Chamber*, I have argued, offers a pictorial version of this critique of language by depicting a cautionary scene in which a writer is so caught up in the act of mediation, in creating a "relation" of what he sees, that he fails to attend to and embrace the *thereness* of his physical and visual environment. And in his own *Cymbeline* canvas, Barry likewise finds in the painting of ekphrasis—the painting, on his view, of language's essential, and inevitably ancillary, function—a visual means of pushing back against the enshrined notion of the speaking picture. Barry, however, takes a different approach. He gives us neither the act of writing nor the fact of text; Iachimo clasps a stylus and tablet but the latter is, as yet, blank. And though the tradition of the reclining nude is still an obvious and obligatory point of reference for Barry's picture (our eye is certainly drawn to Imogen's pillow, the brightest spot in the painting), there are other genres in play here. The first and more expected of these is history painting, as is signaled by the picture's huge size (286 by 361 centimeters) and Shakespearean subject (Boydell claimed that the "great object" of his Gallery was to "establish an *English School of Historical Painting*" [v]). Barry's scene is one of action: the large, in-motion figure of Iachimo is climbing from the trunk, the toes of his sandaled left foot just making contact with the floor, the edge of his open tablet suddenly catching the light.

However, the presence of a second genre takes us by surprise, for the profusion of different objects in Barry's painting invokes the aesthetic of the still life. This is especially the case in the rear of the bedroom, where we see a mirror, glass jug, bowl, quill and inkstand, and sealed letter on a table, behind which hangs a wall tapestry. Framed on all sides (moving clockwise, by the precariously suspended curtain, a feathered hat, Imogen's bed, and the chimney flue), this domestic assemblage resembles almost a painting within a painting. But the clutter of things spills out from this space. At the left of the picture, there is an ornate mantelpiece, on which sit ceramic vessels; a freestanding ceramic column with a rococo leaf design; a large bell; and, above the fireplace, a painting or fresco. In the upper right, a caged bird hangs by a moonlit window. On the same side, the headboard is fringed with carved angels. And in the right foreground, in another section that approaches a painting within a painting, Barry carefully depicts a loom,



resting on which are spools of thread, scissors, and a book, while a wicker sewing basket hangs from it. It is not just the number of objects on show here, almost all of which are anachronistic, but the range and abundance of embellished surfaces and forms. Barry imagines this scene as Iachimo's, and perhaps the viewer's, emergence into a world of thingness and ornamentation.

To be sure, Barry attends closely to Shakespeare's text. The tapestry shows Cleopatra on her barge, while the chimneypiece depicts "Chast Dian bathing." But such fidelity frustrates rather than facilitates the specific mode of reading that the Shakespeare Gallery fostered. The catalog keys this painting to 2.2 of *Cymbeline*, which it reproduces in full while italicizing 2.2.11–14 to indicate the precise few seconds chosen by the artist. But any viewer who sought to correlate this excerpt with the painting before them—moving to and fro between page to canvas—would have found little in the text to help them parse the clutter of Barry's scene, for the painter shows what Shakespeare's reader and original audience learn (by ekphrastic report) only in 2.4. His picture splices two scenes, two moments of drama. As Inchbald's above-mentioned comment reveals, contemporary productions of the play undertook something similar, but whatever the "splendour" of the bedchamber on the stage, the vast playhouses of the day could not possibly offer either the degree of detail, or the capacity to observe that detail up close, to linger over it, that Barry's vast painting provides. Taking a Shakespearean scene of calculated absence that solicits its audience to imagine what they cannot and should not see, Barry carefully and emphatically renders everything visible in a manner that gives the eye little opportunity to rest. His painting delights in making Iachimo's "such and such" (with its appeal to "the narrow compass of the spectator's mind") into the "actually produced."

It is not enough, however, to say that this painting resists the specific texts (the play, the catalog) that the governing aesthetic of the literary gallery would have frame and subordinate it. Like Martin's picture, Barry's opposes the very principle that the image should aspire to (be) language. As Barthes observes of the Dutch still life, "the object is never alone, and never privileged; it is merely there, among many others" (64). Norman Bryson makes a similar point when he defines still life painting as "the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest" (60). So the narrative valence of the Shakespearean details is almost lost amid the confection of objects and forms of Barry's own invention, and these details include not only the tapestry and chimneypiece but to some extent even Imogen. She is simply one more beautiful object offered up to Iachimo and the painting's viewer.<sup>12</sup> Still life tells no story and the presence of its structural logic in Barry's picture works against the narrative basis of history—or more exactly, literary—painting. William Pressly reads Barry's painting as dramatizing the word-image opposition in the respective figures of Iachimo and Imogen, the latter of whom might be linked to the visual arts by her bedside loom (*Artist as Original Genius* 146). Yet this is to reimpose story onto a painting that casts it off. The more one looks at Barry's picture, the more the contrast between the two figures dissolves under the pressure of the vortex of forms that surrounds them and of which they are a part.

Instructive here is Barry's reiteration and elaboration of his attack on the *ut pictura poesis* ideal in his *Letter to the Dilettanti Society* (1798), the publication that precipitated his expulsion from the RA.<sup>13</sup>

But the art of painting is debased by the complaisance of calling it a language. It is a mode of communication as much superior to language, as the image of any thing in a looking-glass is more satisfactory and superior to any mere account of the same thing in words. It is difficult, and would lead us into the depths of philosophy, to say, what is the difference between the actual thing and its image in glass; and yet ... they are both equally actual to the sense of seeing in a third spectator ... the painted object is equally permanent with what we may call the actual or real one. The truth is, that they are all pictures alike, painted equally on the retina or optical sensorium. (2: 585–86)

Barry's twist on the commonplace notion of mimesis, whereby art is "the mirror of nature," puts the phenomenology of seeing above the ontology of the real. It matters little whether the image (reflected, represented) is not its original; to the spectator's eye, they are the same. What is significant about this unusual theory is that it makes sense of the odd manner in which the carefully rendered tapestry of Barry's *Cymbeline* painting, wherein classical buildings are clearly delineated in its background, can easily be mistaken for a deep recession of the room's space. As such, Cleopatra, her entourage, and even the Sphinx that adorns the riverside steps, seem physically present in Imogen's bedroom. This confusion is heightened by the lack of distinction between the monochrome of the tapestry and the bleached, moonlit objects gathered on the table before it. And what could the largest of these objects be but a mirror? Occupying the exact center of the picture, it is almost Barry's signature, his way of showing that he is showing (not telling) a world in which the represented (Cleopatra et alia) is no less actual, no less *there*, than the real (Iachimo, Imogen). In Iachimo's account of the bedchamber in *Cymbeline* 2.4, he twice states that the bedroom's pictures were of such verisimilitude that their personae seemed animate: the tapestry was "so rarely and exactly wrought" that it appeared "true life," while the "figures" of the chimneypiece looked "likely to report themselves" (2.4.75–76, 82–83). Barry's painting literalizes what is, for Iachimo and Shakespeare, only the rhetoric of *enargia*. In Martin's picture, text is shown so that its limits, its difference from the thrill of visual presence, might be exposed and rejected. But in Barry's picture, the very need for language is forestalled.

Thanks to Janine Barchas's remarkable digital reconstruction of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, we can once more walk into the North Room of the exhibition rooms at Pall Mall, on the east side of which hangs Barry's painting. It is by far the largest canvas on the wall and the bottom of its frame rests on the floor. In emerging from the chest, Iachimo seems to enter our space even as we seem to enter his. Like him, we are encountering Barry's disorienting scene for the first time. Barry's Iachimo—in contrast to his counterpart in Martin's painting—is a proxy for the spectator. His tablet and stylus are at the ready, just as Boydell's patron would have arrived at this scene with their catalog in hand. Iachimo is poised to write; the painting's spectator, Barry could safely presume, would be poised to read—not just the catalog entry but, through it, the picture. Yet in Barry's painting, the event of ekphrasis, always just beginning, will never take place. The blank tablet is one more object in a history-painting-as-still-life that defies description and, more especially, narrativization. In this painting, all is already fully present.

Boydell never had Barry's painting engraved. According to Pressly, it was neither listed in Boydell's catalog for 1802 nor included in the collection's sale in 1805 (*Life and Art* 146). Why this exclusion? Pressly suggests that Barry and Boydell likely disagreed

about payment. But perhaps the painting's unnerving resistance to the aesthetic ideology of the literary gallery, its picturing of the scene of ekphrasis as a means of playing out not simply the image's difference from but its supremacy over the word, was a factor in Boydell's decision not to purchase it. Certainly, the painting generated dismay and confusion when it went on display. The *Oracle* (30 April 1795) opined: "BARRY, the Painter, than whom no man *theoretically* knows more, has lately painted the *trunk* scene in *Cymbeline*, in a stile that equally confounds the Artist and the Connoisseur. Every thing is distorted and extravagant" (3).<sup>14</sup> This frustration of the connoisseurial gaze, aligned as it would have been with the sanctioned textual hermeneutic, is exactly what Barry's and Martin's paintings aim at. To picture ekphrasis was to recuperate the unreadability, the thereness, of the image. And it signaled not, as the *Oracle* grumbles, a discordance of theory and practice, but rather the elevation of pictorial practice *as* theory.

## Notes

1. Many modern editions of *Cymbeline* use the names Giacomo and Innogen. To avoid confusion, I refer throughout to Iachimo and Imogen, as the characters were known in the eighteenth century.
2. Isaac Taylor, after Robert Smirke, *Iachimo Stealing the Bracelet*, engraving, plate 3 of Charles Taylor, *Picturesque Beauties of Shakespeare* (London: Charles Taylor, 1786), British Museum [hereafter BM] # 1868,0822.5871; William Ensom, after Thomas Unwins, [*Cymbeline*, Act 2, Scene 2], engraving (c. 1827), BM # 1868,0822.5704; James Stow, after Richard Westall, *Cymbeline. Act 2. Scene 2. A Bedchamber*, engraving (London: John Boydell, 1795), BM # J,29.56; Robert Hartley Cromek, after Henry Fuseli, [*Cymbeline*, Act 2, Scene 2], engraving, illustration for vol. 9 of *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. George Stevens and Alexander Chalmers (London: F. C. and J. Rivington et al., 1805), BM # 1868,0822.5616; John Thompson, [*Cymbeline*, Act 2, Scene 2], engraving, illustration for vol. 9 of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* (Chiswick: Charles Whittington, 1826), BM # 1859,0709.1629. All these images can be viewed by keying in the museum number at [www.britishmuseum.org/collection](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection).
3. The Folger sold the painting to the American Shakespeare Festival Theater and Academy in February 1962. The subsequent financial collapse of the ASFTA led to the sale of the bulk of the Shakespeareana in its collection, but Martin's painting was not included in this auction (Sotheby's, New York, sale no. 3829, 29. Nov. 1975–29 Jan. 1976).
4. On this issue of *Cymbeline*'s staging of absence, see also Barret and Sillars's *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination* (244–48).
5. Elam makes a similar point in his consideration of ekphrasis on the stage (51–53).
6. As Altick argues, the founding of the Royal Academy in 1768 was "the moment when art derived from English literature achieved what might be called official status" (17).
7. An English translation of *Laocoön* did not appear until 1836. As Sillars notes (*Painting Shakespeare* 8), its theoretical influence wasn't evident in British art until after this date.
8. On the Shakespeare Gallery's confusion of verbal and visual see also Burwick 17.
9. My argument here runs counter to that of Lenihan, for whom Barry's later writings remain confused on this issue (109).
10. In a note, Barry writes: "Words after all are but words ... They are but symbols formed for the eye, out of 24 arbitrary scratches, called letters, and certain vibrations of the air" (1: 412n). Compare Locke 405.
11. Locke famously compared the human mind to a *camera obscura*: "the Understanding is not much unlike a Closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible Resemblances, or Ideas of things without" (163). Locke's epistemology provides the basis, in different ways, for Addison's "Pleasures of the Imagination" essay,

serialized in the *Spectator* (nos. 411–421) in 1712, and Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1757.

12. Pressly suggests that Barry shows knowledge of earlier frontispiece illustrations of the scene (*Life and Art* 144). Certainly, in its profusion of objects Barry's painting resembles Vanderghucht's prototypical depiction of the scene. The key difference is that Barry presents Iachimo as an ekphrast.
13. Barry began work on his *Cymbeline* painting in 1788. It was included in the catalogue for the Shakespeare Gallery from 1792 but in fact did not go on display until 1795. See "Paintings from Shakespeare," and both the 1788 and 1793 "The Shakespeare Gallery" columns from the *Morning Chronicle*.
14. Tellingly, art historians continue to discuss Barry's picture as a baffling anomaly, with Bindman describing it as "a peculiar painting [that] is hard to reconcile with Barry's relatively staid treatment of mythological and literary subjects" (240).

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