



THE
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THE ROCOCO IN ENGLAND:
BOOK ILLUSTRATORS,
MAINLY GRAVELOT AND
BENTLEY

Robert Halsband

The rococo style, prevalent in early eighteenth-century Europe, was manifested in England not only in the decorative arts but in book illustrations as well. Its general characteristics were lightness and delicacy, with designs often asymmetrical, and incorporating the shell and stone-work (*rocaille*); and above all, it was animated and *mouvementé*. In its eclecticism it absorbed Gothic and Chinese elements, bending them (literally and figuratively) to fit its various contours. These elements are present in book illustrations as well.

Among precursors of the style in England, Simon Gribelin designed plates for Shaftesbury's *Characteristiks* (2nd edition, 1714) and Pope's *Works*, Vol. I (1717). John Pine the engraver decorated the works of Horace in two volumes (1733, 1737) in that style. When Gravelot moved to London in 1732 he had seen the rococo in full flower in Paris. He very soon became the leading designer of English book illustrations. Some of his early, undistinguished work can be seen in George Bickham's *Musical Entertainer* (1737-39). But in 1738 he successfully illustrated the posthumous second volume of John Gay's *Fables* with large plates. In 1740 he designed thirty-eight small frontispieces for Tonson's edition of Shakespeare's plays; but Shakespeare does not lend himself to rococo illustration. (The Goncourt brothers later accused Gravelot of putting him in curling-paper.)

His next and more congenial commission was to join his pupil Francis Hayman in illustrating Richardson's *Pamela* (6th edition, 1742). Since he engraved all the designs, his own and Hayman's, the set has a homogeneous and consistent elegance. Both artists shared the task of illustrating Hanmer's quarto edition of Shake-

speare (1743–44), with Hayman designing most of the plates and Gravelot again engraving all of them. Here, where the rococo element is understated, the plates are more congenial to the text. By himself Hayman illustrated Edward Moore's *Fables for the Female Sex* (1744) and, more successfully, *Paradise Lost* (1749). Although Gravelot dominated rococo book illustration during his fifteen years in London Hayman was able to continue after his departure.

Unlike these commercial and prolific illustrators, Richard Bentley was an amateur whose reputation rests on a single book, *Designs by Mr Bentley for Six Poems by Mr T. Gray* (1753). In this he was patronized by Horace Walpole, centre of the Strawberry Hill set. Bentley's designs were most elaborate: each poem is introduced by a full-page frontispiece, prefaced by a headpiece, begun by a decorated initial letter, and followed by a tail-piece. The most famous poem in the collection, 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard,' allowed Bentley to exploit the Gothic in various ways. Kenneth Clark has rightly called this book 'the most graceful monument to Gothic Rococo.'

In their book illustrations Gravelot and Bentley expressed different aspects of the rococo style. Gravelot's is purer and simpler – delicate, graceful, and fluent, closer to the rococo of Louis XV. Bentley's is the more exotic, extravagant, and flamboyant expression of that style. He adapted and assimilated not only the Gothic and Chinoiserie; he borrowed trappings of baroque decoration such as *singeries* (to mock *homo sapiens*), *terms* and caryatids to frame a scene, strapwork ornament to enclose a design in danger of overflowing or to support one in danger of toppling over. What his designs lose in coherence they gain in provocative interest.

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