

How to read a source

Cheat sheet for teachers

Archival documents

1. Bill from John Rich to Augusta, Princess of Wales

John Rich (1692-1761) was the manager of Covent Garden Theatre—alongside Drury Lane, Covent Garden was one of two ‘patent’ theatres in London, which had a special license to stage ‘legitimate’ drama, including Shakespeare’s plays.

This is a bill issued to Augusta, Princess of Wales, from John Rich; according to the note at the bottom the payment was delivered by a ‘Mr Reynolds,’ and confirmed by Jonathan Ballard, the theatre’s treasurer.

Payments are for theatre tickets, probably for the hire of private boxes (though, unlike the Drury Lane bill, this one does not say so directly), between 3 February and 19 April 1759. Each date is matched with a payment for £5 and 5 shillings.

Each date corresponds to not one but *two* play titles. This is because a night at the theatre in the eighteenth century often included several separate performances; perhaps a serious tragedy followed by a farce, light opera, or pantomime. The first title is probably the ‘main piece’: Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline* (twice), John Fletcher’s *Wit Without Money* and *The Humorous Lieutenant*. These were followed by shorter plays—two of these were also adaptations from Shakespeare: *Katharine* and *Petruchio* from *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Florizel and Perdita* from *The Winter’s Tale*.

2. Robert Fulke Greville’s diary for 19 December 1788.

Transcription:

‘Friday Dec^r: 19th The Appearance of HM’s manner was not so favorable as that of last night & He indicated symptoms of Crossness—Some books had been given to Him about this time by Dr. Willis, of these were four Volumes of Cibber’s Works, & some of Footes Plays – To whom He was obliged for King Lear I know not, but somehow it had been imprudently given to Him. Dr Warren who came to Kew this morning expressed great objection on this circumstance to Dr Willis – His Son Dr John Willis got all the books from the King & they were replaced in the Library—’

Greville was a courtier in George III’s household. In this period, the household was based at Kew Palace in West London, and included several doctors. Dr Francis Willis (who attended the king along with his son, John), was a specialist in mental illness who had been invited to travel from Lincolnshire to treat the king. Colley Cibber and Samuel Foote were both popular playwrights in the eighteenth century.

Images

1. John Absolon, *Hamlet*, 1849

This painting depicts the same performance as the watercolour we have already explored. Instead of showing the side-on view and the audience, this image shows the front-on view of the stage.

Absolon may have used artistic license to make the stage look larger than it was in real life.

The scene portrayed seems to be Hamlet's meeting with his father's ghost in Act 1. This scene was very popular with artists, who often emphasised Hamlet's shock at the appearance of the ghost.

2. Louis Haghe, *The Performance of Macbeth in the Rubens Room*, 1853

This later watercolour shows another performance underway in the Rubens Room, a little over four years later. The actress is Ellen Kean (wife of Charles), playing Lady Macbeth, apparently in the 'sleepwalking' scene in Act 5. Two other actors, behind her, play the doctor and a gentlewoman.

Many of the paintings on the wall are the same ones that can be seen in Absolon's painting.

The audience is notably more male-dominated. In the front row of the royal enclosure, Prince Albert sits with three women: Queen Victoria is probably the figure in black; the others are likely to be her mother, the Duchess of Kent, and her cousin, Princess Mary Adelaide of Cambridge.

The royal children have also multiplied: there are four in the 1849 painting, and six in the 1853 painting—presumably some of the queen's younger children were now considered mature enough to attend performances (she eventually had nine children: Victoria, Bertie, Alice, Alfred, Helena, and Louise are probably depicted here; Arthur was only three when this was painted; Leopold and Beatrice had not yet been born).