

# How to read a source

Shakespeare in the Royal Collection

# What is a source?

- For historians, ‘sources’ are the things we use to learn about the past. These might be texts, images, objects, audio recordings, or video footage.
- A ‘primary source’ comes from the period we’re studying, for example, a handwritten letter from the person we’re studying, or an object that belonged to them.
- A ‘secondary source’ comes from a later time, for example, a biography of the person we’re studying that was published after their death.
- This tutorial looks at primary sources from the 1700s and 1800s.

# 1) How to read archival documents

55462

Her Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales.

1759			£	s	d
Jan 7: y <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	To her Boxes at Anthony & Coppacke	5	5	0
	14 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- the March: of Venice	5	5	0
Feb 7	16 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Ambitious Step Mother	5	5	0
	26 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Much Ado about Nothing	5	5	0
Mar	3 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Richard y <sup>3</sup>	5	5	0
	17 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Euclid's	5	5	0
	31 <sup>st</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Every Man in his Humour	5	5	0
Apr	28 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Orphan of China	5	5	0
May	18 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- Anthony & Coppacke	5	5	0

£ 47 5 0

Rec<sup>d</sup> y<sup>3</sup> Contents of the above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

J. W. Richard  
Treasurer

Reading an 18<sup>th</sup>-century bill

55462

Honorable Highness  
The Princess of Wales

Some questions...

1759			L	S	D
Jan	10	her boxes at Anthony & Copatrac	5	5	
		his Mother: of Venice	5	5	
Feb		Ambitious Pop Mother	5	5	
		Much Ado about Nothing	5	5	
Mar		Richard 3 <sup>d</sup>	5	5	
	17	Jo D	5	5	
	31	Jo D	5	5	
Apr	23 <sup>th</sup>	Jo D	5	5	
		Orphan of China	5	5	

**What is this source?**

A handwritten bill from William Pritchard at Drury Lane Theatre to the Princess of Wales, for 'her Boxes' at a list of plays, dated 1759.

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Her Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales

1759

			£	s	d
Jan. y <sup>e</sup> 12 <sup>th</sup>	To her Boxes at	Anthony & Bonpatac	5	5	—
14 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	the March: of Venice	5	5	—
Feb 7 <sup>th</sup> — 16 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Ambitious Step Mother	5	5	—
26 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Much Ado about Nothing	5	5	—
Mar — 8 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Richard y <sup>e</sup> 3 <sup>d</sup>	5	5	—
17 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Euridice	5	5	—
31 <sup>st</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Every Man in his Humour	5	5	—
Apr. 28 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Orphan of China	5	5	—
May 18 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup>	Anthony & Bonpatac	5	5	—
			£ 47 5 —		

June: y<sup>e</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 1759  
Rec<sup>d</sup>: y<sup>e</sup> Contents of the above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

W. Pritchard  
Treasurer

## What do we hope to learn from it?

For example, we might want to know about:

- Princess Augusta's theatre taste,
- the theatre habits of elite women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century,
- performances of Shakespeare's plays in the 1750s,
- how theatres were managed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

## What makes it difficult to read?

It's handwritten and uses some archaic notation (long 's', 'Do' for 'ditto', 'Rec<sup>d</sup>' for 'received'). We might need to find out how these sums compare to modern money. We might also need to look up some of the titles on the list.

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Her Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales.

1759

Jan 7: y <sup>e</sup> 12 <sup>th</sup>	To her Boxes at Anthony & Bopaha	5 5
14 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5
Feb 7: 16 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5
26 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5
Mar 8 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5
17 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5
31 <sup>st</sup>	To Do	5 5
Apr 28 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5
May 18 <sup>th</sup>	To Do	5 5

£ 47 5

Rec<sup>d</sup> y<sup>e</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 1759  
Contents of the Above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr. Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

J. W. Richard  
Treasurer

## Where is it?

In the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. The printed number in the top corner is part of the archive's system for organizing documents; it was added to the page in the twentieth century.

## How has it been preserved?

As part of the Georgian Papers in the Royal Archives; because of the high status of the recipient (Augusta, Princess of Wales).

**Discuss: What do we miss out on when we look at this as a digital image rather than as an actual object?**

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Hon<sup>ble</sup> Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales

			£	s	d
1759	Jan 7: y <sup>e</sup> 12 <sup>th</sup>	To her Boxes at Anthony & Coptham	5	5	—
	19 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	the Merch: of Venice	5	5	—
Feb 7	16 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Ambitious Step Mother	5	5	—
	26 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Much Ado about Nothing	5	5	—
Mar	8 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Richard y <sup>e</sup> 3 <sup>d</sup>	5	5	—
	17 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Euridice	5	5	—
	31 <sup>st</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Every Man in his Humour	5	5	—
Apr	28 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Orphan of China	5	5	—
May	18 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup>	Anthony & Coptham	5	5	—
			£ 47 5 —		

Rec<sup>d</sup> y<sup>e</sup> Contents of the Above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

Juno: y<sup>e</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 1759

J. W. Richard  
Treasurer

## Who wrote it, and for what reason?

William Pritchard signs himself 'treasurer', i.e. in charge of the theatre's finances. The note also says that the bill is "for the use of the Managers of Drury Lane Theatre." The bill was issued in order to get Augusta to pay up, and kept so that she could keep track of her finances.

## Who did they write it for?

'The Princess of Wales,' aka Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. Originally from Germany, Augusta married Frederick, the son of George II, in 1736. She had nine children. In 1751, Frederick died suddenly, and Augusta's eldest son became the heir to the throne: in 1760, he became King George III. So in 1759, Augusta was a forty-year-old widow in a very privileged social position.

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Hon<sup>ble</sup> Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales

1759		£	s	d
Jan 7: y <sup>e</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup> To her Boxes at Anthony & Coppack	5	5	—
	19 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— the Merch: of Venice	5	5	—
Feb 7	16 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Ambitious Step Mother	5	5	—
	26 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Much Ado about Nothing	5	5	—
Mar	8 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Richard y <sup>e</sup> 3 <sup>d</sup>	5	5	—
	17 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Euridice	5	5	—
	31 <sup>st</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Every Man in his Humour	5	5	—
Apr	28 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Orphan of China	5	5	—
May	18 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ———— Anthony & Coppack	5	5	—
		£	47	5

Rec<sup>d</sup> y<sup>e</sup> Contents of the Above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

Wm Pritchard  
Treasurer

### How is the information laid out?

Addressee at the top. A formal layout with dates on the left, details of the expenses in the middle, and sums of money on the right. All the sums are the same, so there was a fixed rate for one night in a theatre box at Drury Lane. The dates range from 12 January to 18 May, so Augusta went to the theatre more than once a month. The note at the bottom confirms that it was paid, and Pritchard's signature validates that. The note is dated 14 June the same year, so Augusta was reasonably prompt in paying her bills.

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Hon<sup>ble</sup> Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales.

Date	Particulars	Sum
1759 Jan 7: 12 <sup>th</sup>	To her Boxes at Anthony & Bopaha	£ 5 5
14 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> the Merch: of Venice	5 5
Feb 7: 16 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Ambitious Step Mother	5 5
26 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Much ado about Nothing	5 5
Mar 8 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Richard 3 <sup>d</sup>	5 5
17 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Euclid	5 5
31 <sup>st</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Every Man in his Humour	5 5
Apr. 28 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Orphan of China	5 5
May 18 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> Anthony & Bopaha	5 5
		£ 47 5

Rec<sup>d</sup> of Contents of the Above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

June 14<sup>th</sup> 1759

J. Pritchard

## How useful is it as a historical source?

We can be quite confident that this reflects real events. The information is not subjective—it's a bill, not a letter or journal, and Augusta paid up, so she must have felt that it was fair and accurate. It only covers five months, so a relatively brief snapshot of one woman's theatregoing.

## What can it tell us?

It tells us how often Augusta went to Drury Lane in this period, and how much it cost her. It also tells us which plays she attended, and how she kept track of her spending. In this period, 5 out of 9 plays she saw were Shakespeare plays; and she saw *Antony and Cleopatra* twice.

## What does it not tell us?

It doesn't tell us whether this was a typical year for her, whether she was going to the theatre more than usual, or whether she also attended other theatres. It doesn't tell us who accompanied her to the plays, why they chose these plays, whether they enjoyed them. It doesn't tell us whether £47 was a lot of money for Augusta....

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Hon<sup>ble</sup> Roy<sup>al</sup> Highness  
The Princess of Wales

1759			£	S	D
Jan	7 <sup>th</sup>	To her Boxes at <u>Anthony &amp; Cleopatra</u>	5	5	
	19 <sup>th</sup>	To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>The Merchant of Venice</u>	5	5	
Feb	7 <sup>th</sup>	16 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Ambitious Step Mother</u>	5	5	
		26 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Much Ado about Nothing</u>	5	5	
Mar		8 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Richard 3<sup>d</sup></u>	5	5	
		17 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Euclid</u>	5	5	
		31 <sup>st</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Every Man in his Humour</u>	5	5	
Apr		28 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Orphan of China</u>	5	5	
May		18 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> ----- <u>Anthony &amp; Cleopatra</u>	5	5	
			£ 47 5 0		

Rec<sup>d</sup> of Contents of the Above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatres

June 7<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 1759

J. P. Richard  
Treasurer

## How will we find out more?

This will depend on our answer to the earlier question, **what do we want to find out?** There are various bits of information here, and which ones we pursue will depend on what we are focusing on.

For example, we might look for more information on William Pritchard, if we're interested in theatre management. We also might use a resource like the National Archives Currency Converter (<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>) to find out how much £47 and 5 shillings would be worth today.

If we're interested in performance, we might look up the titles on this list to see what kinds of plays Augusta saw other than Shakespeare.

If we have access to more sources like this, we might be able to put it in context: was 1759 a big theatre-going year, compared to 1758 and 1760?

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For Royal Highness  
The Princess of Wales

1759		£	S	D
Jan 7: y <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup> To her Boxes at Anthony & Coppack	5	5	
	14 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> the March of Venice	5	5	
Feb 7	16 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Ambitious Step Mother	5	5	
	26 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Much ado about Nothing	5	5	
Mar	8 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Richard 3 <sup>d</sup>	5	5	
	17 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Euclid	5	5	
	31 <sup>st</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Every Man in his Humour	5	5	
Apr	28 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Orphan of China	5	5	
May	18 <sup>th</sup> To D <sup>o</sup> Anthony & Coppack	5	5	
		£	47	5

Rec<sup>d</sup> of Contents of the Above Bill, by the Hands of  
Mr. Reynolds for the Use of the Managers of Drury Lane  
Theatre

June 7 14<sup>th</sup> 1759

W. Pritchard  
Treasurer

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Hon Royall Highness  
The Prince of Wales

You can adapt this list of questions to other kinds of source...

What is this source?

What do we hope to learn from it?

What makes it difficult to read?

Where is it?

How has it been preserved, and how can we have access to it?

Who wrote it, and for what reason?

Who did they write it for?

How is the information laid out?

How useful is it as a historical source?

What can it tell us?

What does it not tell us?

How will we find out more?

1759

Jan 7: 9 <sup>th</sup>	Boxes at Anthony & Bopatra	5. 5.
14 <sup>th</sup>	The March: of Venice	5. 5.
Feb 7: 10 <sup>th</sup>	Ambitious Pop Mother	5. 5.
26 <sup>th</sup>	Much Ado about Nothing	5. 5.
Mar -- 8 <sup>th</sup>	Richard 3 <sup>d</sup>	5. 5.
17 <sup>th</sup>	Euclid	5. 5.
31 <sup>st</sup>	Every Man in his Humour	5. 5.
Apr: 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Orphan of China	5. 5.

L. S. D.

Reading an 18<sup>th</sup>-century letter

Sir Lucas Pepys has the Honor to inform  
 His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales  
 that His Majesty was all Yesterday  
 evening in a goodnatured deranged state,  
 talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the  
 same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferant  
 Night with only 3 hours & - Half's sleep - That  
 This Morning he is nearly in the same  
 state he was in the evening, but is more  
 agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been  
 permitted to read King Lear, which he is now  
 reading & talking about. -

Kens House  
 Friday 11 o'clock - Dec. 18  
 1788

### What is this source?

A letter from one of the royal doctors, Sir Lucas Pepys, to the Prince of Wales, reporting on the health of his father, George III. The letter is dated Friday 18 December 1788, "11 o'clock", and was sent from Kew House.

Sir Lucas Pepys has the Honor to inform  
His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales  
 that His Majesty was all Yesterday evening in a goodnatured deranged state, talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferant Night with only 3 hours & - Half's sleep - That This Morning he is nearly in the same State he was in the evening, but is more agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been permitted to read King Lear, which he is now reading & talking about. -

Kew House  
 Friday 11 o'clock - Decr 18  
 1788

## What do we hope to learn from it?

For example, we might be interested in learning:

- about George III's illness,
- about medical treatment in the eighteenth century,
- about George III's reading habits....

## What makes it difficult to read?

Again, handwriting can be difficult! The formal tone of this letter (Pepys uses a polite and old-fashioned third-person address) makes it hard to gauge the relationship between the writer and addressee and suggests that there may be a lot Pepys is not saying. Note the euphemisms: Pepys says that the king had "a very Indifferent night", meaning that he did not sleep well, or perhaps that he was distressed or even violent. We might suspect that "talking about" *King Lear* is also a delicate way of describing the king's agitation. This is a letter from the middle of a long series, so we'll need to put it in context carefully.

MED/16/116

Sir Lucas Pepys has The Honor to inform

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

that His Majesty was all Yesterday evening in a goodnatured & deranged State, talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferent Night with only 3 hours & - Half's sleep - That This Morning he is nearly in the same State he was in the evening, but is more agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been permitted to read *King Lear*, which he is now reading & talking about . -

New House  
Friday 11 o'clock - Dec. 18  
1788

MED / 16 / 116

## Where is it?

This too is in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. The pencil note in the top corner shows where this document is kept—"MED" suggests that it is stored among medical documents.

## How has it been preserved, and how can we have access to it?

Along with many other documents, this was preserved as a record of the life of George III and as a letter addressed to the future George IV. More letters from George III's doctors can be found on 'Georgian Papers Online.'

Sir Lucas Pepys has the Honor to inform  
His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales  
that His Majesty was all Yesterday  
Evening in a goodnatured & deranged State,  
talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the  
same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferant  
Night with only 3 hours & - Half's sleep - That  
This Morning he is nearly in the same  
State he was in the Evening, but is more  
Agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been  
permitted to read King Lear, which he is now  
Reading & talking about. -  
New House  
Friday 11 O'Clock - Dec 18  
1788

## How is the information laid out?

This is quite a straightforward report; it explains the king's state of mind from "yesterday evening" to "now" (11 o'clock on Friday). The date and location are at the bottom, which is quite common in letters from this period. The opening, "Sir Lucas Pepys has the Honor to inform..." shows the big gap of status between the writer and the addressee.

## Who wrote it, and for what reason?

Lucas Pepys was a royal doctor, and he's writing to report on the king's health—almost certainly because he had instructions to provide regular updates to the Prince of Wales.

## Who did they write it for?

George, Prince of Wales (the future George IV). The Prince was interested partly because of concern for his father, but also because he was wondering whether he would be made king or 'Regent', i.e. given the powers of the king.

REC'D 16/11/6

Sir Lucas Pepys has the Honor to inform  
His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales  
that His Majesty was all Yesterday  
Evening in a goodnatured & seranged State,  
talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the  
same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferant  
Night with only 3 hours & a half's sleep - That  
This Morning he is nearly in the same  
State he was in the Evening, but is more  
agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been  
permitted to read King Lear, which he is now  
reading & talking about. —

Her House  
Friday 11 o'clock - Dec. 18  
1788

## How useful is it as a historical source?

The information is very up-to-date: Pepys wrote the letter about events he had witnessed first-hand over the last twenty-four hours. But he has a stake in this, as a doctor whose job it is to help the king recover. He's writing to someone with a lot of power and status, so he will be very careful about what he says. And he knows that the Prince of Wales has a vested interest in the King being unable to go on discharging his duties, so he may be telling him what he thinks he wants to hear.

## What can it tell us?

It gives us some granular detail about the king's behaviour during his illness, including the fact that he read Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It tells us that the doctors were paying close attention to how much sleep he got, his manners, and his conversation.

## What does it not tell us?

A lot of context is missing. If we're interested in Shakespeare, for example, we still want to know *why* he read *King Lear*, and what effect the play had on him.

REC'D 16/11/6

Sir Lucas Pepys has The Honor to inform  
His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales  
that His Majesty was all Yesterday  
Evening in a goodnatured & deranged State,  
talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the  
same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferant  
Night with only 3 hours & - Half's sleep - That  
This Morning he is nearly in the same  
State he was in the Evening, but is more  
Agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been  
permitted to read King Lear, which he is now  
Reading & talking about. -

New House  
Friday 11/11/6 - Dec 18  
1788

## How can we find out more?

'Georgian Papers Online' has many more letters from George III's doctors, which help to put this in context.

We might also want to find out more about Sir Lucas Pepys, or generally about George III's illness and the so-called 'Regency Crisis' in the winter of 1788-89.

REC'D 16 / 11 / 6

Sir Lucas Pepys has the Honor to inform

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

that **His Majesty** was all Yesterday evening in a goodnature'd & seranged State, talking as he used to do at Windsor & on the same Subjects, that he has had a very Indifferant Night with only 3 hours & - Half's Sleep - That This Morning he is nearly in the same State he was in the evening, but is more agitated & Confused, perhaps from having been permitted to read King Lear, which he is now reading & talking about. -

New House  
Friday 11 O'Clock - 16  
Dec. 18  
1788

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Use these questions as a starting point to explore these sources in a group:

1. Bill from John Rich to Augusta, Princess of Wales
2. Robert Fulke Greville's diary for 19 December 1788

### Questions

What is this source?

What do we hope to learn from it?

What makes it difficult to read?

Where is it?

How has it been preserved, and how can we have access to it?

Who wrote it, and for what reason?

Who did they write it for?

How is the information laid out?

How useful is it as a historical source?

What can it tell us?

What does it not tell us?

How will we find out more?

What do these sources add to our previous conclusions?

Her Royall Highness  
The Princess of Wales

1759

To John Rich. D<sup>r</sup>

	ℓ	s	d
Feb. 3. Coriolanus and Petruccio.....	5	5	0
..... 20. Cymbeline. and Duke and no Duke.....	5	5	0
March 3. Wit without money, and the Rape.....	5	5	0
April 7 <sup>th</sup> . Numerous Lieutenant and Merizell.....	5	5	0
..... 19. Cymbeline. and the Rape.....	5	5	0
	<hr/>		
	26	5	0

Received the 1<sup>th</sup> June 1759 the Contents of this Bill in full,  
by the Hands of M<sup>r</sup> Reynolds. - Recd. for M<sup>r</sup> J<sup>n</sup> Rich

W<sup>m</sup> Ballard

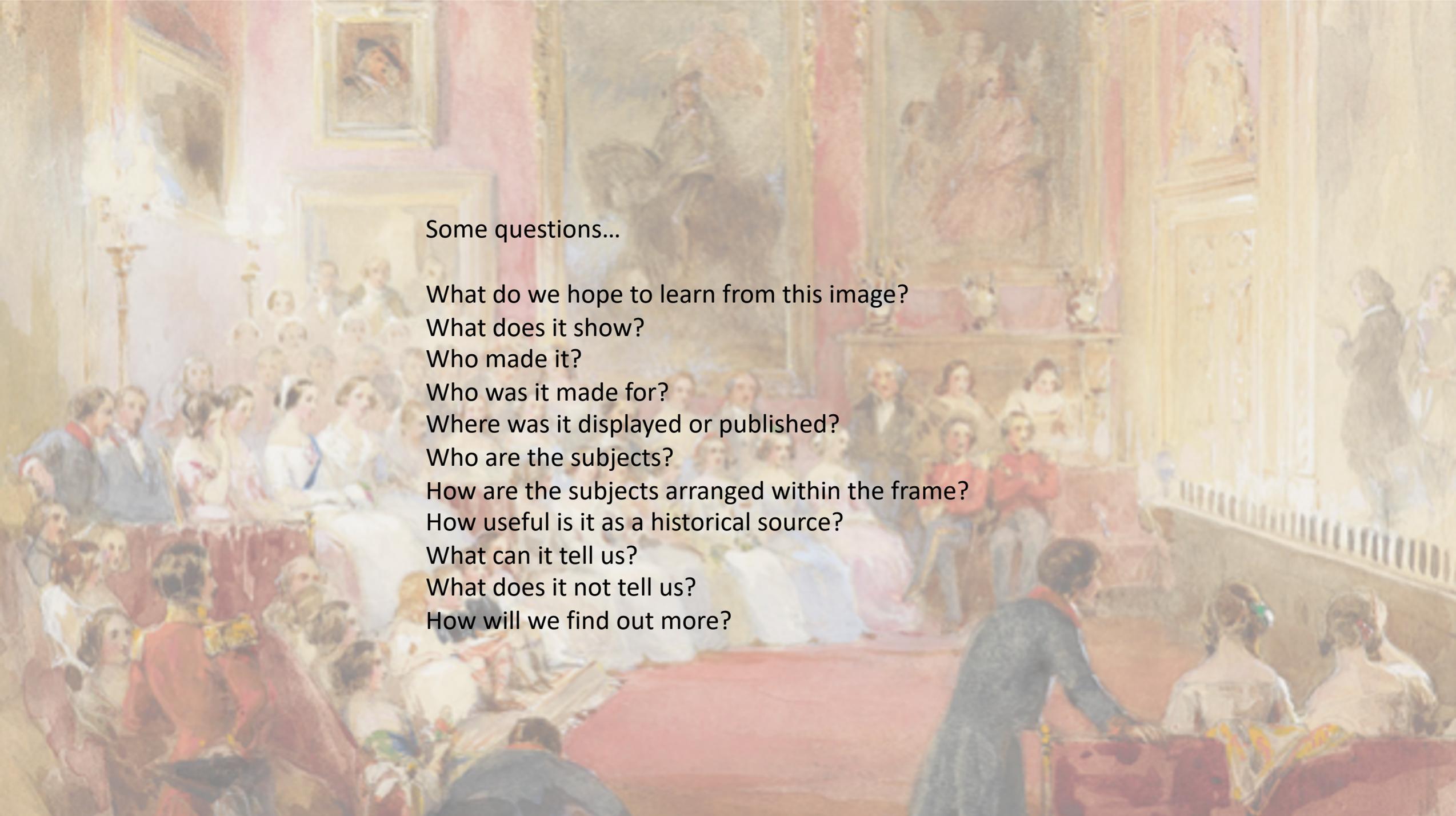
Friday Dec: 19<sup>th</sup> The Appearance of H<sup>r</sup> M<sup>r</sup> manner  
was not so favourable as that of last night & he indicated  
symptoms of Crophness — Some books had been  
given to him about this time by Dr. Willis, of these  
were four Volumes of Gibbers Works, & some of Footes  
Plays — 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 New 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 —

## 2) How to read an image

Shakespeare in the Royal Collection

Reading a 19<sup>th</sup>-century  
watercolour





Some questions...

What do we hope to learn from this image?

What does it show?

Who made it?

Who was it made for?

Where was it displayed or published?

Who are the subjects?

How are the subjects arranged within the frame?

How useful is it as a historical source?

What can it tell us?

What does it not tell us?

How will we find out more?

## What do we hope to learn from this image?

E.g.

- What was it like to be at a private performance at Windsor Castle?
- How did a Victorian actor approach *Hamlet*?
- What kind of artwork was exhibited at Windsor Castle in the nineteenth century?
- How were Victorian theatres organized?

## What does it show?

A small theatre set up in a room at Windsor Castle: two actors are visible onstage, including Charles Kean (in black) as Hamlet. The audience includes women in pale dresses, men in dark suits, and men in military costumes. A row of children are in front of the royal dais; Queen Victoria is recognizable by her tiara and the blue 'Order of the Garter' sash.



## Who made it?

The artist, John Absolon, mostly worked in watercolour. He had worked as a scenery painter in theatres, and he was acquainted with the scenery designers for this production. He must have had a seat in the doorway in order to get this view of the room.

## Who was it made for?

Queen Victoria commissioned this painting as a memento of the event—we can compare it with other paintings recording key events in her life, and other paintings inspired by her theatregoing.

## Where was it displayed or published?

The painting was reproduced as an engraving and published in a book. So the painting itself is a private memento for the queen, but the engraved version is a way for the general public to learn about the queen's private activities.

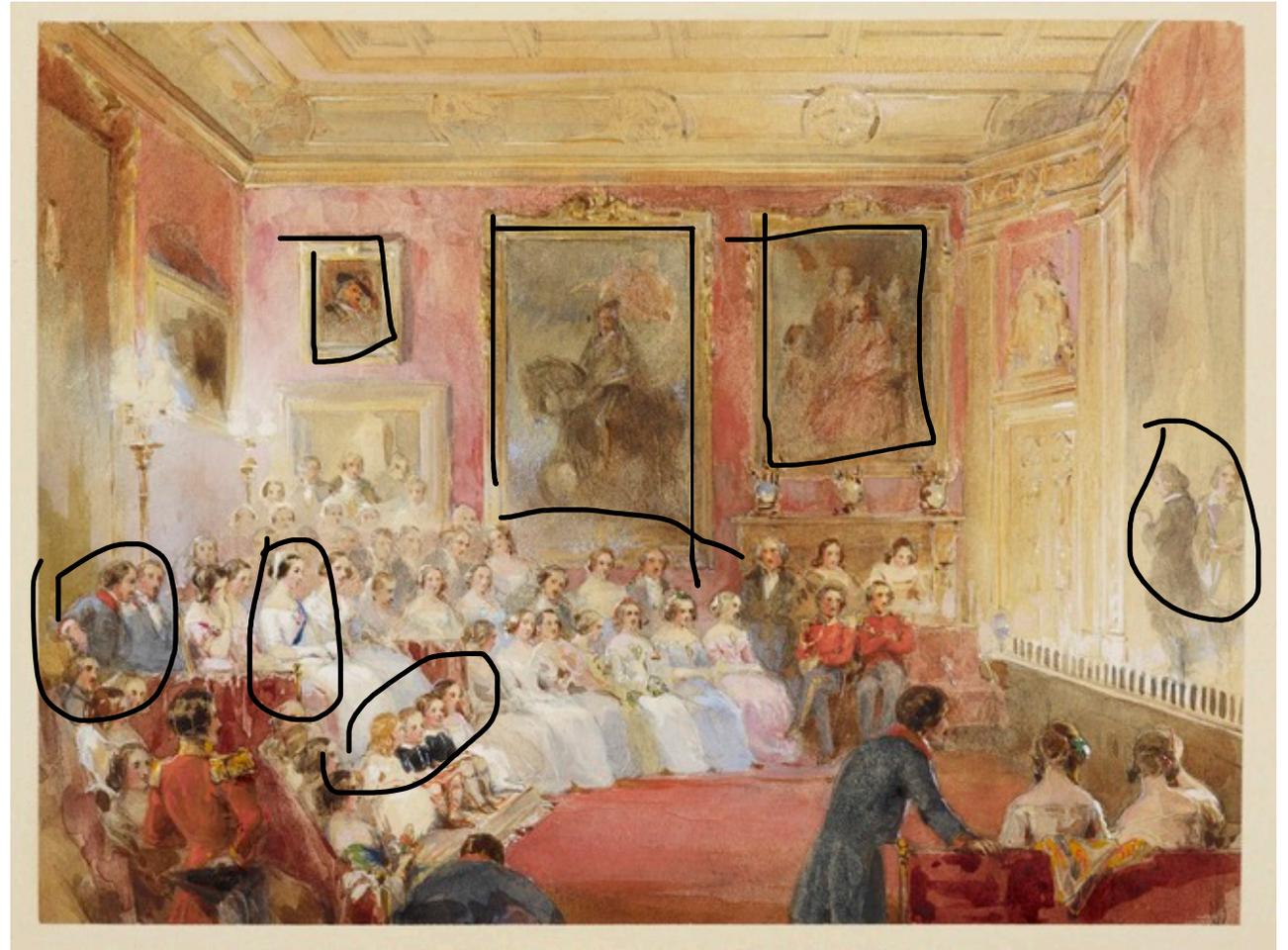


## Who are the subjects?

We can identify Queen Victoria, the actor Charles Kean, and possibly some other members of the audience like Prince Albert and the royal children. We can also identify the artwork by Peter Paul Rubens on the opposite wall.

## How are the subjects arranged within the frame?

The main focus is the audience, not the stage—unusual for theatrical paintings! It seems to be important that individual members of the audience can be recognized, and also that it gives an accurate view of the room, including the paintings.



## How useful is it as a historical source?

It's based on a first-hand experience of an event, but commissioned by the queen, who would have particular priorities for how the event was recorded. Absolon's free style and artistic license might give a distorted impression of the space and the light in the room.

## What can it tell us?

Roughly how the space was laid out and who attended, what the front of the stage looked like and how it was matched to the décor of the room.

## What does it not tell us?

Anything about the performance or the backstage space.



## How will we find out more?

- We could seek out other images of this event, or more broadly of Queen Victoria's theatregoing and Charles Kean's production of Hamlet.
- We could look at Queen Victoria's journal (<http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/home.do>) to read her response to the performance.
- We could look for other images of these paintings by Rubens to see how modern photographs compare to Absolon's watercolour versions.
- We could visit the room at Windsor Castle to compare this painting with the real space.





**Use these questions as a starting point to explore these paintings:**

1. John Absolon, *Hamlet*, 1849

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

What do we hope to learn from this image?

What does it show?

Who made it?

Who was it made for?

Where was it displayed or published?

Who are the subjects?

How are the subjects arranged within the frame?

How useful is it as a historical source?

What can it tell us?

What does it not tell us?

How will we find out more?

**What do these paintings add to our conclusions from the first image?**



