



Fuseli  
Drama and Theatre



Henry Fuseli:  
Great Literature, Sublime Paintings

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introducing sublime and heroic themes, Fuseli abandoned Winckelmann's noble simplicity and quiet grandeur in favour of dramatic intensity and pointed emphasis.<sup>12</sup>

Far from being drowned out by this profusion of novel sources of inspiration, his fascination with Shakespeare synthesised with his admiration of Michelangelo: sketches for a temple dedicated to Shakespeare's memory (fig. 3) are recognizably patterned on the Sistine Chapel. The skill with which Fuseli moulded his artistic identity, in the eyes, too, of the outside world, is evident, for example, in the letters Johann Gottfried Herder sent to his mentor Johann Georg Hamann from Rome: the artist, he wrote, was a 'genius sweeping one along like a torrent, an idolater of Shakesp[eare] and now Shakesp[earean] painter'; elsewhere he described Fuseli as a 'painter of character' and 'young Michelangelo of the Germans'.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after his return to London, the newly established Royal Academy solicited works for its first exhibition, to be held at the recently completed Somerset House. Fuseli submitted a monumental oil painting: a scene from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (cat. 50). After several earlier drawings, the work was unmistakable evidence that the great British writer's verse epic had engaged his pictorial imagination. Each new work he contributed to the Royal Academy's exhibitions over the following years signalled his ferocious determination to generate buzz about himself and his art in the British capital. On one occasion, he challenged Reynolds, by now the president of the Academy, with an act of open rivalry. Aware that Reynolds would submit a *Death of Dido*, Fuseli painted his own version of the ancient theme. His calculation proved correct: not only were the works of the newcomer without academic training (cat. 12) and the Academy's president (fig. 4) facing each other in the gallery, the reviewers also drew comparisons between them.<sup>14</sup> Besides the ancient subject from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Fuseli showed his *Queen Katherine's Dream*, a scene from Shakespeare that had never been translated into painting (cat. 39). The following year, in 1782, he presented his *The Nightmare* (fig. 5; see cat. 69). Although



Fig. 3: Henry Fuseli, sketch for Shakespeare frescoes: *Macbeth*, 1777/78, pen and ink drawing, washed, 27.3 x 19.6 cm London, British Museum (Schiff 476)

the contemporary response to this daring composition with its lugubrious eroticism was evenly divided between enthusiasm and outrage,<sup>15</sup> the picture imprinted itself so indelibly on the collective memory that it came to lead a life of its own quite detached from the artist who created it: as an emblem of the dark flipside of the Enlightenment and the seed of Romanticism, the sphere of the irrational, where dream blends into manic delusion.<sup>16</sup>

### Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and Fuseli's Milton Gallery

At the time John Boydell came up with his idea for a Shakespeare Gallery, the young Royal Academy's stated objective was to develop and foster a specifically British art; British history painting, in particular, was to be cultivated as the island nation's distinctive answer to Classicism, where the French held hegemony, and a second key genre on a par with portraiture.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the Shakespeare revival promoted with great energy by the famous actor David Garrick



Fig. 4: Joshua Reynolds, *The Death of Dido*, c. 1775–81, oil on canvas, 147.5 × 239.2 cm  
London, Royal Collection Trust



Fig. 5: Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 126.7 cm  
Detroit Institute of Arts (Schiff 757)

had borne fruit – ‘The Bard’ was generally accepted as the national author.<sup>18</sup> It followed that paintings on Shakespearean themes informed by the generic conventions of history painting promised to be a positively ideal fulfilment of the ambition to bring an autochthonous and patriotic art into being.

So if, by 1786, when Boydell held his dinner party, Fuseli's name was on the list of artists who were thought capable of nurturing a genuinely British painting with British themes, it was







Cat. 11 *The Death of Oedipus*, 1783–84









Cat. 17 *Britomart Freeing Amoretta from the Spell of Busirane*, 1824



Cat. 21 *Huon and Rezia United, with Fatme, Sherasmin and Oberon*, 1804–05

Cat. 22 *Amanda/Rezia Plunges into the Sea with Huon, while Fatme is Held Back*, 1804–05



Cat. 23 *Titania Shows Amanda her Son, Born in the Grotto*, 1804–05

Cat. 25 *Huon, Disguised as a Gardener, Meets Sultana Almansaris Accompanied by Nadine*, 1804–05

Cat. 24 *Titania Finds the Magic Ring on the Shore*, 1804–05

Cat. 26 *Almansaris Visits Huon in Prison*, 1804–05



Cat. 31 *The Fire King*, c. 1801–10











Cat. 50 *Satan Starting from the Touch of Ithuriel's Spear*, 1779







Cat. 55 *The Creation of Eve*, 1793



Cat. 64 *The Infant Shakespeare between Tragedy and Comedy*, 1805–06





Cat. 66 *The Ladies of Hastings*,  
1798–1800



