

## Short Article

### *The Anatomist* by Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827): The Play's the Thing

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Thomas Rowlandson's print, *The anatomist*, published by Thomas Tegg of Cheapside on 12 March 1811, is one of Rowlandson's most recognizable caricatures with a medical theme. For the modern day non-historian, Rowlandson's comic prints, particularly the more abundant social as opposed to political caricatures, are characteristically transparent and easily accessible to interpretation, no doubt contributing to the artist's continued popularity after two centuries. According to his biographer Bernard Falk, Rowlandson's humorous conceptions "may be roughly defined as chunks of visual experience distilled into broad and simple comedy".<sup>1</sup> Ronald Paulson has contrasted the compositions of Rowlandson with the "narrative" and "emblematic" works of William Hogarth (1697–1764), observing that the two artists, besides occupying opposite ends of the eighteenth century, "are also representatives of the change that took place in the signifying structure of graphic art between the age of the emblem and the age of romantic expression".<sup>2</sup> According to Paulson, Rowlandson's scene "never tells more than the simplest anecdote that is least in need of commentary".<sup>3</sup> Falk echoes these sentiments: "Because for the most part Rowlandson is content with the surface appearance of things, he is easy to live with, calling for no special preparation of mood, his meaning plain and instantaneously conveyed to the observer".<sup>4</sup>

Meaning in *The anatomist* is less "instantaneously conveyed" than one generally encounters with Rowlandson. The viewer senses he is not privy to an allusion, and that a deeper appreciation would be aided by knowledge of a specific incident or context. Indeed, Joseph Grego, who catalogued Rowlandson's prints in 1880, begins this particular entry with "[t]he meaning of this print is not very obvious". He continues:

It may be assumed that Dr. Sawbones has secured a new subject; but whether an admirer of the anatomist's lady has had himself conveyed into her presence by simulating death, or changing places with the "subject" does not appear. However, the critical situation of the lively gentleman on trestles does not seem conducive to a tranquil state of mind; the operator is deliberately getting out his saws, knives, scissors, and other repellent anatomical instruments in a business-like spirit, for he has, according to an announcement, to deliver *A Course of Anatomical Lectures, accompanied with Dissections*, and he is in want of a subject for demonstration. The lady, filled

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard Falk, *Thomas Rowlandson: his life and art*, New York, The Beechhurst Press, 1952, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Paulson, *Rowlandson: a new interpretation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>Falk, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 164.



Rowlandson. Del

# THE ANATOMIST.

Figure 1: *The anatomist* by Thomas Rowlandson, 1811. (Wellcome Library, London.)

The Anatomist by Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827)

with the direst apprehensions, is trying to impress on the anatomist the remarkable and unusual fact that the dead man has returned to life.<sup>5</sup>

Details regarding the print are similarly open to interpretation in the British Museum *Catalogue of political and personal satires*, the description noting that the bust on the lintel of the door is “Hippocrates frowning down at the scene”, and concluding that the print is “probably a satire on body snatching”.<sup>6</sup>

The “critical situation” of the print is clear enough: an assignation between the man on the table and the lovely young woman is compromised by the appearance of the physician, who, oblivious to the fact that the intruder is very much alive, is preparing to vivisect him. But, did the lover gain entrance to the house by pretending to be a corpse, or was he already present and, trapped by the arrival of the physician, obliged to disguise himself as a subject of dissection? Has he indeed just wakened, rather than feigning the sleep of death? Is the young woman trying to persuade the physician that the man is not dead, or dissuade him from proceeding with the dissection in a desperate attempt to conceal her lover? Is this “probably” a satire on body snatching, and is it, in fact, Hippocrates who looks down upon the scene from the lintel? One familiar with Rowlandson is not accustomed to such speculation and so many questions not readily answerable.

To dispense with perhaps the easiest of the uncertainties: the bust on the lintel bears little or no resemblance to most representations of Hippocrates, appearing more Elizabethan than Greek. This observer initially assumed that the bust represented William Harvey, since the man responsible for the momentous discovery of the circulation certainly is an appropriate onlooker in the dissection studio. But viewed out of a medical context, the bust arguably resembles Shakespeare. As vindication for this confusion, Garrison, referring to William Harvey, states that “[t]he resemblance of his finely domed head to Shakespeare’s is a matter of comment”.<sup>7</sup> Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it is the bard, and not the anatomist, who is frowning upon the proceedings beneath him.

Shakespeare would indeed have reason to frown if he were looking down upon an enactment of a play entitled *The anatomist: or, The sham doctor*, a farce penned by Edward Ravenscroft (taken from Hauteroche’s *Crispin médecin*, circa 1670) and first produced at Lincoln’s Inn Fields in November of 1696.<sup>8</sup> Ravenscroft’s efforts have been characterized as “almost all concocted of borrowed materials, thrown together carelessly, aimed at the least critical members of the contemporary audience”.<sup>9</sup> In Act II, Scene 1, the servant Crispin is visiting the maid Beatrice in the laboratory of her employer, the Doctor. The Doctor, who is awaiting the arrival of a dead body from the gallows, returns unexpectedly, and with no avenue of escape, Crispin obeys Beatrice’s bidding to assume the role of cadaver.<sup>10</sup> This incident from the play clearly corresponds to

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Grego, *Rowlandson the caricaturist*, 2 vols, London, Chatto and Windus, 1880, vol. 2, p. 202.

<sup>6</sup> M Dorothy George, *Catalogue of political and personal satires, preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, 11 vols, London, Trustees of the British Museum, 1935–54, vol. 9, no. 11800, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Fielding H Garrison, *An introduction to the history of medicine*, 4th ed., Philadelphia and London, W B Saunders, 1929, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Hughes and A H Scouten, *Ten English farces*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1948, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Ravenscroft, *The anatomist: or, The sham doctor*, London, R Baldwin, 1697, in Hughes and Scouten, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, pp. 96–120.

the “critical situation” of Rowlandson’s print. Incidentally, the Doctor in the play, in his excitement, does make specific reference to Harvey: “If any of my fellow Physicians were here now, especially those who doubt the Harveyan Doctrine, I’d let ’em plainly see the Circulation of the Blood thro the *Systole* and *Diastole*”.<sup>11</sup>

Rowlandson was without doubt familiar with this play. We know that he was an avid theatre-goer, with a number of his prints and drawings dealing with the theatre.<sup>12</sup> We also know that the play *The anatomist* remained a stock afterpiece throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, with widely scattered performances at Drury Lane toward the end of the century and at least as late as May 1805.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, we know that the farce opened at the Drury Lane Theatre on 19 December 1801, with the English actor and comedian, John Bannister, playing the role of Crispin.<sup>14</sup> In reference to the theatrical season of 1801, Bannister’s biographer records:

Bannister’s novelties during this season were neither numerous nor particularly interesting. The revival of a very old and often altered farce, “The Anatomist; or, The Sham Doctor,” presented him in the part of Crispin, a tricky, chattering valet, who, after personating a corpse intended for dissection, finds himself under the necessity of pretending to be a physician. The situations in which he is placed produce some merriment; but there is little in the piece to apologize for its existence, much less to require its revival.<sup>15</sup>

Bannister’s portrayal of Crispin is crucial in this context because of the actor’s close connection with Rowlandson. Bannister and Rowlandson were lifelong friends, presumably having first met in their teens while both students at the Royal Academy of Art in 1777.<sup>16</sup> If Rowlandson did not personally see his close friend in the production, he most certainly would have been familiar with the plot and one of its most memorable pieces of farce business in the script.

A decade’s separation between the established date of Bannister’s appearance in *The anatomist* and the publication date of Rowlandson’s print does not diminish their likely connection. From 1808 to 1821, Rowlandson produced a large number of “crudely comical caricatures, designed to sell at sixpence plain and a shilling coloured, which hugely appealed to the indiscriminating masses, who relished the obvious and often tendentious humour”.<sup>17</sup> Discussing the same time period, Grego observes that “for some time Rowlandson’s ambition seemed to cool down, and although he was working hard, and producing a fair average of results, he appeared satisfied to turn his skill to the most prosaic account, as a means of earning a livelihood”.<sup>18</sup> The publisher Tegg could have purchased a batch of old drawings, with Rowlandson having made the drawing—or a version of it—years before the date of publication. Had he not resurrected an earlier drawing, Rowlandson might have revisited an old, unrealized idea or recollected the memorable scene from a

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> University of Kansas (Miscellaneous publication of the Museum of Art, no. 66), *The school for scandal: Thomas Rowlandson’s London; an account of his life & times & especially his depictions of the theatre, together with some discussion of the life & works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan & of his play The school for scandal as performed at the University Theatre*, Lawrence, University of Kansas, 1967, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes and Scouten, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> John Adolphus, *Memoirs of John Bannister, comedian*, 2 vols, London, Richard Bentley, 1839, vol. 2, p. 344.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Falk, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>18</sup> Grego, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 1, pp. 28–9.

forgettable production *de novo*, out of necessity, during a period in his career when he was churning out a fairly large number of “low prints” for subsistence.

Certainly, the representation of the scene in Rowlandson’s print is not faithful to the scene in the play. First, despite the fact that the Doctor does make sexual advances on Beatrice, he is not a point of a love triangle with Crispin. Crispin is involved with Beatrice romantically, but the main reason for his presence in the Doctor’s quarters is to deliver a letter from his employer, Young Mr Gerald, to the Doctor’s daughter and love interest Angelica, via her servant Beatrice. Secondly, Rowlandson’s young lovers, by their attire, are not of the servant class. And finally, in the play, Crispin’s circumstances are not as dire as presented in the print. While the Doctor intends to “experiment immediately” on the newly arrived corpse (still warm and even clothed), he does not have his gruesome instruments at hand, since Beatrice claims she is unable to find them, having hidden them herself. She subsequently persuades the Doctor to postpone his dissection, hastening his exit on the false pretences of an emergency house call.

Rowlandson was unlikely to have been concerned with the liberties he took with the scene or whether or not the purchasers of his print were even aware of the Ravenscroft farce. Without doubt, the topic of anatomic dissection (and the means by which bodies became available) were in the collective consciousness of both Rowlandson and his audience, since the stealing of bodies from London graveyards was almost a commonplace by the 1720s, and the body snatching era of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries coincided with most of Rowlandson’s life and artistic career.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Rowlandson presumably came in contact with William Hunter as a student at the Royal Academy of Art (where the latter was appointed anatomy professor in 1769) and examples of his work specifically involve the dissection room (including the Hunter brothers at work in the dissection room at the Anatomy School in Great Windmill Street), surgical amputations on the living, anatomical lectures, and “resurrection men”.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, while it is evident that the physician portrayed in *The anatomist* is apparently not much concerned with the provenance of his subject material, the anatomic dissection context remains a backdrop and not the primary purpose of the print.

Specifically, the theatrical scene in Ravenscroft’s play presented a marketable idea, and Rowlandson’s overriding concern presumably was to exploit the farce business into a suitable vehicle for his well-worn themes of the contrast between youth and age and the love triangle. Nor would Rowlandson have felt it necessary to clarify the connection between the old man and the young woman. As a familiar motif, an old man contrasted with two young people began appearing in Rowlandson prints around 1785, and the old man “does not have to be a husband, of course; and it is not always clear whether he is one, or a father or guardian of the girl. He is essentially age”.<sup>21</sup> As Paulson notes, “it is not the anecdote but the relationship between the people and the place which matters”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Ruth Richardson, *Death, dissection and the destitute*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup>William C Butterfield, ‘A caricaturist of the eighteenth century anatomists and

surgeons’, *Surg. Gynecol. Obstet.*, 1977, 144: 587–92.

<sup>21</sup>Paulson, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

In an edition of reproductions of twelve of Rowlandson's "medical caricatures", among which *The anatomist* figures, all but one were produced between 1810 and 1813.<sup>23</sup> Certainly physicians were worthy subjects for humour, and their portrayal in prints probably enhanced their commercial appeal; in comedic visual art, it is clearly advantageous if the butt of the joke is a readily recognizable one. Art scholars and historians lament the fact that Rowlandson, one of the greatest draughtsmen produced by England, "is better known to the public for his least desirable prints, and under his most common-place aspect".<sup>24</sup> Included in these, of course, is *The anatomist* and evidently many of us with pretensions must consign ourselves to part of an historical "indiscriminating mass". At the time, Rowlandson was likely to be judging his own success primarily in terms of sales. And while physicians would none the less like to consider *The anatomist* one of their own, an equal claim could be made that it is just as much a "theatrical" print. The most relevant answer notwithstanding—that the *The anatomist* is above all a "commercial" print—the bust on the lintel holds the key to the question at hand, which could be settled once and for all if the two Williams did not look so much alike.

<sup>23</sup> Morris H Saffron (foreword by), *Thomas Rowlandson: Medical caricatures*, New York, Editions Medicina Rara Ltd, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> Grego, op. cit., note 5 above, vol. 1, p. 6.