



Sandro Jung. James Thomson's *The Seasons*, Print Culture, and Visual Interpretation, 1730-1842



Sandro Jung. *James Thomson's The Seasons, Print Culture, and Visual Interpretation, 1730-1842*. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2015. *Studies in Text and Print Culture*. xxi, 287 p., ill. ISBN 9781611461916. US\$ 80.00 (hardcover).

Published as the inaugural volume in the author's series *Studies in Text and Print Culture* at Lehigh University Press, this interdisciplinary and profusely illustrated monograph sheds light on an iconographic corpus that is as broad as it is complex: visual representations of James Thomson's poem *The Seasons*. Its critical perspective interweaves visual and material cultures, text-image relations, reading practices, and the history of the book, publishing, and art. The premise of Jung's argument is that booksellers, sensitive to material presentation and its impact on consumers, packaged eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century illustrated editions of *The Seasons* in imaginative ways, capitalising on the appeal of the paratextual apparatus and the illustrative supplement. The critic proposes a critically informed view of illustrations, which "serve both as intra-textual interpretive markers and as referents to an extra-textual economic and cultural world that anchors the subjects represented in the visual and material cultures of art, music, fashion, and luxury objects, as well as practices of collecting and exhibition" (2).

This study covers the period stretching from 1730 (marked by the publication of the first collected edition of the individual *Seasons*) to 1842 (signalling the edition of the Etching Club, which the author considers the last of nineteenth-century editions to propose "illustrations that meaningfully illustrate specific scenes from the poem rather than focus on capturing mood and natural description" [2]). Adding layers of contextual meaning to his sophisticated analyses, the author also discusses a wide range of standalone representations of *The Seasons*, such as small-scale prints, large-format furniture prints, paintings, pocket diaries, and other material objects that were inspired by Thomson's classic and demonstrate its extraordinary cultural resonance. Although it focuses primarily on British editions (produced in London and other centres of production, including notably Scotland), the study also presents brief but useful case studies of editions illustrated in France, Germany, and America, thus informing transnational literary history in consequential ways. Thomson's bestseller was illustrated by a large number of artists, including William Kent, Bernard Picart, Charles Eisen, Thomas Stothard, Francesco Bartolozzi, Angelica Kauffman, Thomas Bewick, and Richard Westall. Some illustrators who received commissions to produce images for *The Seasons* are



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well known today outside of the specialised field of the illustrated book, whereas others deserve to have their contribution to book illustration reassessed and this study invites us to do just that.

Serving also as an introduction to the volume, Chapter 1 deals with the visual paratext from a theoretical perspective and sketches its importance in this particular corpus. Thomson's painterly imagination and his use of evocative description in the representation of space and characters to create a visual experience for the readers undoubtedly contributed to the appeal of *The Seasons* to artists and skilled craftspeople, while aiding publishers and booksellers in finding ways to design creatively and promote effectively their products. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive account of the illustrated editions of *The Seasons* published from 1730 to 1798, with reference to significant changes in copyright law at the centre of which the poem found itself, and as a consequence of which it entered the realm of commodification and became "cultural capital that could be marketed in ever-new ways" (38). Two interpolated tales - "Celadon and Amelia" and "Palemon and Lavinia" - figure prominently in the author's discussion of book history and commodity culture. With erudition and critical finesse, Chapter 3 examines eighteenth-century visual representations of *The Seasons* that can be considered contributions to high culture, such as paintings and prints displayed and circulating independently of the text. Chapter 4 provides an account of early and mid-nineteenth-century editions of *The Seasons* outlining the shift to new interpretative models, while showing how booksellers tailored products to interest various readership strata by offering editions in more than just a standard format and aimed at a socially-diverse clientele. Jung is not discriminatory in his choice of editions, deliberately referring to affordable, small-format, serialised, and rare book products as well as those supported by high-end subscription ventures. A wide-ranging selection of illustrations - baroque, classicist, sentimental, realist, naturalistic, symbolic, allegorical, etc. - allows us to apprehend the richness of this iconographic corpus, to appreciate originality and recognise imitation, and to understand the illustrated book as a medium negotiating changes in taste, reading practices, and *zeitgeist*.

Steeped in literary and book-historical theories, the refined prose of this monograph is surprisingly readable, and the wealth of illustrations generously included by the publisher renders it most enjoyable. A small drawback is the lack of a bibliography: to the reader unfamiliar with this iconographic corpus, a list of primary sources or at least a catalogue of



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editions of Thomson's canonical poem discussed in the monograph would have provided a much-needed global view of the illustration of *The Seasons* through time. Moreover, a reference is made to the author's *Database of Eighteenth-Century Book Illustration* and a URL is provided (see 257n39), but it was not operational when I repeatedly attempted to consult it. Nonetheless, this is a study that deserves a prominent place in private and public libraries alongside seminal studies focusing on the illustration of a bestseller through time, such as David Blewett's *The Illustration of Robinson Crusoe: 1719-1920*, W.B. Gerard's *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination*, Rachel Schmidt's *Critical Images: The Canonization of Don Quixote through Illustrated Editions of the Eighteenth Century*, Lynn Shepherd's *Clarissa's Painter: Portraiture, Illustration, and Representation in the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, and Jeanne K. Welcher's *Visual Imitations of Gulliver's Travels, 1726-1830*. This survey is, however, unique in its in-depth consideration and layering of a number of critical foci: the text in its aesthetic presentation and paratextual framing; the image as an expressive means of communication and revealing supplement to the text; illustration in relation to technical means of production and ways of printing; the visual and verbal components in their material symbiosis; the book as a consumer product designed for and packaged with a specific clientele in mind; and cultural context (visual, material, print, literary, etc.). It would be fascinating to pursue this investigation beyond its temporal and representational borders to examine the afterlives of Thomson's *The Seasons* in other media, markets, and timeframes. The scholars who will embark on that scholarly adventure will be greatly indebted to this exceptional monograph.

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