

JOHN RAGSDALE AND WILLIAM COLLINS ONCE AGAIN

Scholars of the mid-eighteenth-century poet, William Collins (1721–59), are familiar with the name of John Ragsdale (1714?–90). In 1783, he provided one of the most important accounts of the poet to William Hymers, of Queen’s College, Oxford, who was then working on an edition of Collins’s poems.¹ As Mary Margaret Stewart has established, Ragsdale knew Collins in the mid- and late 1740s and not, as earlier critics have assumed, while he lived in Richmond where another acquaintance of Collins, James Thomson, the author of *The Seasons*, resided.² Stewart also suggests that Ragsdale was acquainted with George Payne, the eldest nephew of Collins’s father. Payne lived in Bruton Street, near New Bond Street, and it is possible that he provided Ragsdale with information on the Collins family. In 1749, Ragsdale, a goldsmith and jeweller, and his friend Richard Chadd had opened a shop in New Bond Street; they retired from business in 1768.

Little information is available on formative influences on Collins, his acquaintances, and his work whilst in London (where, according to Samuel Johnson, he had arrived as a “literary adventurer” in “about 1744”).³ In a letter to his friend, John Gilbert Cooper, the author of *Letters Concerning Taste*, Collins, in 1747, among other things, described his passion for the theatre and opera. He mentions the actor, Samuel Foote, and the theatre manager, John Rich, as well as a song by Colley Cibber.⁴ His friendship with Thomson, a successful dramatist who, in 1745, had

¹ See John Ragsdale to William Hymers, “Particulars of Mr. William Collins, the Poet (1783),” *Monthly Magazine*, 21 (July 1806), pp. 494–95.

² Mary Margaret Stewart, “Further Notes on William Collins,” *Studies in English Literature*, 10.3 (1970), pp. 569–78. Ragsdale moved to Richmond after Richard Chadd’s death, in 1771.

³ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, ed. and introd. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 4, p. 120.

⁴ See H. O. White, “The Letters of William Collins,” *Review of English Studies*, 3/9 (1927), p. 15.

produced his tragedy of *Tancred and Sigismunda*, would have given Collins further opportunities to cultivate his interest in the stage. Writing to Hymers, Ragsdale records Collins's close acquaintance with David Garrick and Foote "who frequently took his opinion on their pieces before they were seen by the public."⁵ By the time he met Ragsdale, Collins had already published his patronage poem *An Epistle: Addressed to Sir Thomas Hanmer, on his Edition of Shakespeare's Works* (1743) in which he lamented the long neglect of tragedy, especially the decline of the Greek genre, and that "Ilissus' laurels, though transferred with toil, / Drooped their fair leaves nor knew the unfriendly [Roman] soil" (33–34).⁶ By contrast, he lauded Shakespeare's dramatic art which had reinvigorated the tragic form and was able to promote "The historian's truth, and bid the manners live" (78). In the mid-1740s, Collins not only frequently attended theatrical performances but engaged with the history of drama by introducing a range of theatre-related information, especially concerned with classical works of Euripides and Sophocles and more recent dramatists such as Davenant, Otway, Addison, and Rowe. The theatre would have been a common interest that Collins and Ragsdale shared. At the time of his death, Ragsdale owned a range of fashionable material culture spin-offs such as porcelain figurines and engravings of David Garrick in various dramatic parts. Ragsdale also possessed the 1747 nine-volume reprint of Hanmer's illustrated edition of Shakespeare's works.

In his letter to Hymers he recalled that, "having a general invitation to my house, he [Collins] frequently passed whole days there, which he employed in writing them [his odes], and as frequently burning what he had written, after reading them to me."⁷ Apparently, at some point Ragsdale had had manuscripts by Collins in his possession, but had lent these to acquaintances

⁵ Cited from *The Poetical Works of William Collins*, ed. Alexander Dyce (London: William Pickering, 1827), pp. 28–29.

⁶ Cited from *The Complete Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Harlow: Longman, 1969), p. 392. Line numbers are given in parentheses.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

who never returned them. While enjoying the jeweller's hospitality, he would no doubt also have had access to the collections that Ragsdale and Chadd were building up. A hitherto neglected source of information may help to sketch the environment in which Collins was able to foster his preoccupation with books, music, drawings, and paintings to which he would have had access when staying at Ragsdale's. In this setting the like-minded Ragsdale and Collins would have been able to discuss the latter's projects and pursuits.

The document in question is the very rare *Catalogue of the Genuine Household Furniture ... of John Ragsdale, Esq. Deceased*. The title page of the catalogue records that it took six days to dispose of the deceased's belongings, which were sold by the auctioneer, Mr. Compton, of Great Maddox Street, Hanover-Square, London.⁸ The sale took place at Ragsdale's "late dwelling house, / On the West Side of New Bond Street, / Near Conduit Street" and commenced on Monday, 14 March 1791. Ragsdale's collection of books were sold on the fourth day of the auction; although many of the volumes listed in the catalogue postdate the 1740s, their general subject matter—ranging from a large number of ornate and expensively engraved folio collections of prints such as Spence's *Polymetis* (1747) and architectural works, an extensive collections of dramatic texts, several French, Italian, and Latin dictionaries, historical works in English and French, works on landscape gardening, and various atlases—would have appealed to a young man as widely read as Collins.

Among the 71 lots in octavo, there are copies of such English classics as Butler's *Hudibras*, Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, several editions of Thomson's and Young's works, Gay's *Fables*, two nine-volume editions of Shakespeare and Pope's *Works* (1751), Pope's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with engravings (1760), a twelve-volume edition of Swift's *Works*, several editions of

⁸ It appears that the copy consulted is unique. I am grateful to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, for digitizing the catalogue for me.

Shenstone's works, Somerville's works (1766), and Churchill's poems (1769).⁹ Interestingly, none of Collins's publications is listed in the catalogue, although his slender collection of *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects* (1746), according to Ragsdale, written at his house, and the earlier *Persian Eclogues* (1742) might have been contained in Items 1 and 2 of the catalogue, "A Parcel of pamphlets" and "A large parcel of bound books" (p. 23). Collins's favourite authors, Milton and Spenser, are not represented in the collection, but the catalogue comprises two copies of Le Sage's *Gil Blas*, in French, a text to which Collins referred in his letter to Cooper and in "Manners: An Ode." Ragsdale also owned a large number of copies of the *The Spectator*, *The Tatler*, and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, as well as a range of collected editions of plays. Classical works, with the exception of Ogilby's Homer and Virgil (in folio), Francis's four-volume Horace, and Pliny's *Epistles* (4to), are absent, although works by Boccaccio in French translations are available. The list of books in quarto and folio reveals Ragsdale's wealth but also that he must have had a developed interest in painting, architecture, and music; the catalogue even includes two manuscript volumes of Italian songs and a setting for "Hart's ode MS." The fifth day of the sale was dedicated to Ragsdale's large collection of prints and books of prints which the auctioneer listed in 178 lots, in addition to framed furniture engravings sold on the second day.

The sale catalogue of Ragsdale's belongings adds contextual information to our understanding of Collins's life in London; it especially sheds light on the bookish, cultural, and painterly interests of a man in the 1740s who was carving out a niche for himself as a successful goldsmith. While Collins certainly would have been able to consult the latest publications in poetry and drama at the shops of his booksellers, Andrew Millar or Mary Cooper (and Robert Dodsley), he would not ordinarily have had access to the kind of visual art collected by

⁹ See *Catalogue*, pp. 22–24.

Ragsdale. Above all, Ragsdale offering Collins a conducive environment to compose his odes, especially at a time when, according to Dr Johnson, the poet may have been “doubtful of his dinner, or trembling at a creditor”—as when he was “immured by a bailiff ... prowling in the street” on which occasion Johnson had recourse to the booksellers who, “on the credit of a translation of Aristotle’s *Poeticks*, ... advanced as much money as enabled him to escape to the country”¹⁰—ought to be understood as a significant moment in the poet’s day-to-day life. Ragsdale’s recollection of the frequency of Collins’s visits indicates that in the environment of Ragsdale’s and Chadd’s home, Collins was at ease, passing “many happy hours” and enjoying Ragsdale’s “particular friendship.”¹¹ It is possible that his ode on “the Music of the Græcian Theatre”¹² (now lost), that he mentions at the end of November 1750, was stimulated by his London experience of the theatre and the interests of his friend Ragsdale. Further, in the absence of any specific record of Collins’s encounter with visual art, the sale catalogue of Ragsdale’s household (but also the jeweller’s wide-ranging interests that can be inferred from the catalogue) offers a valuable account of the domestic realm of a like-minded man in which Collins could cultivate his own interests by means of exchanges of ideas and reading.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Lives*: 4: p. 120.

¹¹ Cited in Dyce, p. 28.

¹² Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryskamp eds., *The Works of William Collins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), xxvi–xxvii. Wendorf and Ryskamp reproduce a letter from Collins to Dr. William Hayes, Professor of Music at Oxford, regarding this ode (89).