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978-0-521-87985-9 - Representing Shakespearean Tragedy: Garrick, the Kembles, and Kean
Reiko Oya

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Garrick's prologue*

When Learning's triumph o'er her barb'rous foes
First rear'd the stage, immortal SHAKESPEAR rose . . .

On 15 September 1747 David Garrick (1717–79) was hoping for yet another evening of triumph to ornament his distinguished theatrical career. After making his sensational London debut as Richard III at Goodman's Fields in 1741, the talented actor successfully transferred to Drury Lane the next year and went on to contract with James Lacy as its joint patentee in April 1747. Garrick was opening the first theatrical season under his management that evening and was to deliver a special prologue to mark the occasion. The majestic first stanza of the poem traced the history of the London stage, with William Shakespeare at its glorious root:

When Learning's triumph o'er her barb'rous foes
First rear'd the stage, immortal SHAKESPEAR rose;
Each change of many-colour'd life he drew,
Exhausted worlds, and then imagin'd new:
Existence saw him spurn her bounded reign,
And panting Time toil'd after him in vain:
His pow'rful strokes presiding truth impress'd,
And unresisted passion storm'd the breast.¹

This was a perfect inaugural statement for Garrick, whose ingenious impersonation of the Shakespearean characters, together with his professed 'idolatry' of the playwright himself, was soon to establish him as the 'high priest' of the great Elizabethan. The prologue, however, was not of his own composing. The sweeping couplets had been penned by a struggling literary hack, one Samuel Johnson, who, after unsuccessfully proposing a new Shakespeare edition in 1745, was now launching a project of a new English dictionary. It was uncharacteristically generous of Johnson to let Garrick mouth his excellent prologue. The real author was not going to be mentioned on that evening's stage (in fact, Johnson's authorship would not be acknowledged until the publication of Robert Dodsley's *Collection*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Representing Shakespearean Tragedy

of *Poems by Several Hands* in 1748) and the audience would naturally assume the prologue to be Garrick's. This normally uncompromising lexicographer-to-be had even made a textual alteration 'at the remonstrance of Garrick' ('I did not think his criticism just; but it was necessary he should be satisfied with what he was to utter').²

From the next stanza, the prologue charted the general decline of the London stage. After Shakespeare came Ben Jonson (stanza 2), who lacked his predecessor's natural inspiration and made do with 'studious patience, and laborious art'. Predictably, although his reputation endured, the plays themselves were of only temporary interest:

A mortal born he met the general doom,
But left, like Egypt's kings, a lasting tomb. (ll. 15–16)

After the intermission caused by the Civil War, immorality and obscenity dominated the Restoration stage (stanza 3). The playwrights did not aspire to 'JOHNSON's art, or SHAKESPEAR's flame' but indulged in the decadent cultural climate and shamelessly catered for the pleasure-seeking audience:

Themselves they studied, as they felt, they writ,
Intrigue was plot, obscenity was wit.
Vice always found a sympathetick friend;
They pleas'd their age, and did not aim to mend. (ll. 19–22)

Finally, 'Virtue' banished the lewd shows and the age of neoclassicism arrived (stanza 4). Knowledgeable rules and regular declamations were, however, not a recipe for a true tragedy:

Then crush'd by rules, and weaken'd as refin'd,
For years the pow'r of tragedy declin'd;
From bard, to bard, the frigid caution crept,
Till declamation roar'd, while passion slept. (ll. 29–32)

The mindlessly regular drama eventually gave way to 'Pantomime, and Song' that were entertaining in a more obvious manner.

What would happen on the London stage under Garrick's new management? Johnson did not give any definite answer (stanza 5), as nobody 'the coming changes can presage, / And mark the future periods of the stage':

Perhaps if skill could distant times explore,
New Behns, new Durfeys, yet remain in store.
Perhaps, where Lear has rav'd, and Hamlet dy'd,
On flying cars new sorcerers may ride.
Perhaps, for who can guess th'effects of chance?
Here Hunt may box, or Mahomet may dance. (ll. 41–6)

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Garrick's prologue*

3

As will be surveyed in the following chapters, all these possibilities were to become a reality. Writers at least as talented as Aphra Behn and Thomas D'Urfey, if not quite Shakespeare, would try their hands at playwriting. Flying witches would stay as popular as ever, while Lear and Hamlet would not stop raving and dying. Edward Hunt's boxing and Mahomet Mussulmo's rope-dancing might not actually reach Drury Lane, but one of the four tragedians I shall discuss would certainly resort to these light entertainments in his strolling days.

The new manager and leading actor could not tell the future of the stage, as it was the audience that had the casting vote on it. Johnson's prologue continued (stanza 6):

Hard is his lot, that here by fortune plac'd,
Must watch the wild vicissitude of taste;
With ev'ry meteor of caprice must play,
And chase the new-blown bubbles of the day.
Ah! let not censure term our fate our choice,
The stage but echoes back the publick voice.
The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
For we that live to please, must please to live. (ll. 47–54)

This was a drastically pessimistic rereading of Hamlet's famous definition of the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (3.2.21–5). While Hamlet emphasised the purposefulness of the theatrical mirroring, Johnson lamented the helplessness and passiveness of players and managers in the face of the frivolous public. Hamlet's theatre taught the world, while Johnson's counterpart was taught by it. As was customary in a theatrical prologue, Johnson's 'drama's patrons' primarily referred to the immediate audience rather than Hamlet's 'nature' or 'the very age and body of the time' at large: the new manager needed to gesture deferentially to the spectators in front of him and plead for their support. Nevertheless, the two formulations did point to the same complicity of the stage, the audience and contemporary cultural climate.

The ensuing chapters are an attempt to delineate the theatrical future that Johnson refrained from foretelling, with special reference to the four great Shakespearean tragedians who adorned the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London stage: David Garrick, John Philip Kemble and his sister Sarah Siddons, and Edmund Kean. The premise throughout is that their performance can be appraised correctly only when placed alongside contemporary criticism, playwriting, painting and other art forms. The players gave daring expression to Shakespeare's tragedies by modifying the scripts and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

sophisticating their acting, and their interest in strong tragic emotion and characterisation facilitated, and was facilitated by, theatrical and literary critics, playwrights and painters. The dialogic relations between the four tragedians and their contemporaries constitute the topic, or even the contention, of this study, which needs to be defined further against a recent critical trend.

From the 1980s, the post-Restoration afterlives of Shakespeare came to be investigated in broader cultural contexts than in traditional literary scholarship and (to use the dominant metaphor) the processes of ‘appropriation’ of his plays and his authorial image have been brought to light. Studies into theatrical adaptations,³ scholarly editions⁴ and Shakespearean allusions and quotations in political propaganda and Romantic poetry⁵ have illuminated the ways in which Shakespeare and his posterities have utilised each other’s contemporary political and ideological relevance. Michael Bristol’s provocative discussion of the phenomenal celebrity of the Bard and Gary Taylor’s spirited overview of what he called ‘Shakesperotics’ epitomised the new cultural interest,⁶ while studies in more particularised problems of Shakespeare’s reception have been collected in several anthologies.⁷

While successfully revising the ‘deadening historicism’ of the old philologists and their avowedly neutral (but in fact very judgemental) literary studies, the new cultural approaches entail their own theoretical difficulties. First, many of the recent researchers share an interest in the history, politics and ideology that presumably dictated Shakespeare’s afterlife and, all too often, regard the specific personalities involved in the appropriations as part of a larger historical process that is predominantly anonymous, impersonal and inexorable. Shakespeare’s posthumous destiny was allegedly controlled by ‘paradigm’, ‘a certain historical juncture known as the Enlightenment’, ‘England’s own transition from the aristocratic regime of the Stuarts to the commercial empire presided over by the Hanoverians’, ‘politics in Georgian England’, and ‘our culture, as well as that of generations before us’.⁸ The preoccupations of these critics are typically to chart ‘a *shared* sense of the *national* importance of Shakespeare and a *general* agreement about the *broader* contours of his authorial image’,⁹ rather than particular manifestations of the playwright and his plays as such.

The impersonal perception of history shared by these critics obviously owes much to such Marxist sponsors of reception studies as Walter Benjamin, Robert Weimann and Raymond Williams. In an influential formulation of the concept of history, Benjamin for one states that the ‘products of art and science owe their existence not merely to the effort of the great geniuses who created them, but also, in one degree or another, to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries’.¹⁰ The exiled thinker’s acute

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Garrick's prologue*

5

awareness of the violent historical process and sympathy with the oppressed multitude notwithstanding, I find this dichotomy between great geniuses and their anonymous contemporaries highly problematic. My work will register many individuals who, strictly speaking, were not prodigies but would strenuously resist being categorised into the nameless, uninterested and uninteresting group of 'contemporaries'. Being less talented than Shakespeare did not stop them being men and women of great enterprise, and their undertakings were too ambitious and daring, if ultimately unsuccessful, to be described as mere toil. Benjamin's 'great geniuses' themselves are little more than impersonal abstractions, in that they supposedly create masterpieces outside the sphere of everyday human intercourse. Some of the personalities I will survey (David Garrick, for example) did have a fair claim to the rank of genius, but even their works came into being through vivid interactions with their colleagues, rivals and predecessors. Shakespeare's cultural relevance in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London can, and indeed should, be illustrated in more intimate, personal terms through analyses of the incessant dialogues between the players and their friends.

The second difficulty is closely related to the first. The concept of 'appropriation' postulates a certain strategy and purposefulness on the part of the appropriator, and the most significant achievement of the recent cultural scholarship has been the discovery of the immediate political and ideological objectives that Shakespeare's seemingly frivolous afterlife has served. Defying the critical tradition (numbering the authoritative George C. D. Odell, Hazelton Spencer and Brian Vickers among its advocates) that dismissed the post-Restoration theatrical adaptations as sheer artistic blunders, researchers have proved Nahum Tate, for example, to have been no fool in creating his happy-ending *King Lear* in 1681 but on the contrary an efficient propagandist of the Tory cause at the time of the Exclusion Crisis.¹¹ Cultural approaches, on the other hand, tend to turn a blind eye to what was left *unappropriated*. An interesting case in point is the following passage from Tate's preface to his *King Lear*:

*Lear's real, and Edgar's pretended Madness have so much of extravagant Nature (I know not how else to express it) as cou'd never have started but from our Shakespeare's Creating Fancy. The Images and Language are so odd and surprizing, and yet so agreeable and proper, that whilst we grant that none but Shakespear cou'd have form'd such Conceptions, yet we are satisfied that they were the only Things in the World that ought to be said on those Occasions.*¹²

This remarkable statement, which has been largely overlooked by the researchers of appropriation, vividly conveys how the frenzied characters' effusion of tragic sentiments surprised the adapter and even baffled his

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[More information](#)

enterprise in part. According to the same preface, Tate intended to add 'Probability and Regularity' to the original tragedy and would have fared better if he had dropped Shakespeare's 'odd and surprizing' lines, which actually create the feeling of 'there being two different plays uneasily combined' in the adaptation.¹³ Along with his appropriative strategies, Tate's inability either to cut or to replace the raging language, his amazement and bewilderment – in other words, the adapter's failed appropriation – must be carefully attended to, as they shed light on the immense potential of the Shakespearean tragedy that has survived political and ideological contingencies for more than four hundred years.

My first chapter, on David Garrick and his *King Lear*, addresses this province of the irrational by tracing the attempts of the talented actor and his close circle of friends to portray, and explain, the protagonist's madness on stage and on page, with various degrees of success. It studies the tragic emotions that Garrick conveyed through (and sometimes in spite of) the promptbooks he used, and maps out the theatrical and literary responses that his impersonation occasioned. The second chapter, on the Kemble siblings and *Macbeth*, discusses the two essays on the tragedy written by the actor and actress respectively and their partnership on stage as the regicidal couple. Their compelling representation of terror and supernaturalism in the legendary 1794 staging of *Macbeth* is subsequently compared with parallel attempts at sublime expression in the works of Joshua Reynolds and Edmund Burke. The third chapter, on Edmund Kean and *Hamlet*, studies the disparity between the theatrical and literary lives of the Danish prince in Kean's performance and the critic William Hazlitt's response to it. The compositional processes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Remorse* (1813) and John Keats's *Otho the Great* (1819) are also examined in detail, as they are rather unlooked-for offshoots of the literary and theatrical *Hamlet*.

Encompassing various cultural interests over many decades, my discussion is necessarily eclectic. The chosen materials, however, are analysed in textual as well as intimate and personal details. Much attention is paid to the many theatrical anecdotes recorded in popular biographies and in personal letters. Admittedly, their testimonies are inconsistent, incomplete and openly prejudiced, and hardly qualify as records of historical truth. Their unrestrained narratives, on the other hand, capture the haunting memories and emotions of the Shakespearean stage in a way not possible in other types of writing. These documents record the ongoing dialogues between the individuals concerned and, as seen in Tate's dedicatory letter, their very incoherence often reveals their innermost concerns. The concept of 'truth' may not be particularly valid in theatrical studies to begin with,

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[More information](#)*Introduction: Garrick's prologue*

7

when a performance is no doubt experienced differently by every one of the few thousand spectators each night.

Human intercourse is liable to coincidences and accidents, another fact that has been neglected by cultural critics. For instance, the generous gesture that Johnson displayed in letting Garrick use his prologue is understandable only when we go back to Lichfield in 1736 when a small boarding school was launched and advertised in the *Gentleman's Magazine*: 'At Edial, near Lichfield, in Staffordshire, young gentlemen are boarded and taught the Latin and Greek languages, by SAMUEL JOHNSON'. The only pupils enrolled were an eighteen-year-old neighbour David Garrick, his brother George, and one Mr Offely, and the school collapsed in no time. Johnson and Garrick soon left their hometown together to try their fortunes in London.¹⁴

Or we must go further back to 1727, when the ten-year-old Garrick put on the very first performance of his life at the house of his mentor Gilbert Walmesley. The play was George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). Garrick not only took the role of Sergeant Kite himself but also tried out various 'young gentlemen and ladies' and distributed the parts very carefully. Johnson, who was also a frequent visitor at Walmesley's, 'was applied to by the little manager for a prologue to be spoken on the occasion'. Johnson was 'willing enough to oblige his young friend' but somehow failed to compose one in time for the performance. As W. Jackson Bate points out, Johnson probably decided to make up for the past failure by writing the Drury Lane prologue twenty years later.¹⁵

Johnson's great prologue challenges cultural determinism even further by having remained unspoken by Garrick after all. He was indisposed on that opening night. By terrible misfortune, Garrick missed the very first show under his management and was replaced by an understudy.¹⁶ The prologue which the feverish manager failed to deliver concluded:

Then prompt no more the follies you decry,
As tyrants doom their tools of guilt to die;
'Tis yours this night to bid the reign commence
Of rescu'd Nature, and reviving Sense;
To chase the charms of sound, the pomp of show,
For useful mirth, and salutary woe;
Bid scenic virtue from the rising age,
And Truth diffuse her radiance from the stage. (ll. 55–62)

Now we are ready to explore Garrick's, Kemble and Siddons's, and Kean's Shakespearean enterprises, along with all the individuals and happenings that surround them.

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[More information](#)

I

*Winding up 'th'untuned and jarring senses':
Garrick, King Lear and contemporary
theatrical/literary criticism*

I ADAPTATION AND IMPERSONATION: GARRICK'S *KING LEAR**A controversy*

From the end of 1753, a series of journal articles attracted the attention of the literati and teatrogoers of London. In the three instalments from 4 December of the *Adventurer*, Joseph Warton analysed the madness of King Lear and identified his misguided resignation of the crown as its cause. Warton's proposition was instantly contradicted in the *Gray's-Inn Journal* by Arthur Murphy (alias Charles Ranger), who held the ingrate Goneril and Regan, not the lost kingship, responsible for Lear's madness. An anonymous third writer then joined the discussion and imputed the insanity, rather predictably, to the combination of the political and domestic factors.¹

Their different conclusions notwithstanding, the three critics shared an important critical inspiration: their essays followed the plot and language of the contemporary literary editions, rather than the happy-ending stage versions, of *King Lear*, but their appreciation of the tragedy was deepened by David Garrick's acting in the title role. Referring to Lear's 'O me, my heart! My rising heart! But down!' (2.2.313), Warton commented:

I SHOULD be guilty of insensibility and injustice, if I did not take this occasion to acknowledge, that I have been more moved and delighted, by hearing this single line spoken by the only actor of the age who understands and relishes these little touches of nature, and therefore the only one qualified to personate this most difficult character of LEAR, than by the most pompous declaimer of the most pompous speeches in CATO or TAMERLANE. (*Adventurer* 2:256)

Murphy's acknowledgement was more comprehensive. Republishing the *Gray's-Inn Journal* essays in two volumes in 1756, Murphy revised this article and inserted a new introductory statement (using the persona of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Benjamin Wilson, *David Garrick as King Lear*. Engraved by James McArdell.

‘Mr. Candid’) specifically to inform the reader how Garrick had stimulated his criticism:

At the last Meeting of our Club, my Friend, Mr. *Candid*, informed us, that he had lately seen the Character of *King Lear* admirably performed by Mr. *Garrick*, and that he had since thrown together some Remarks upon that excellent Tragedy, which he desired I would this Day communicate to the Readers of the *Gray’s-Inn-Journal*. (*Gray’s-Inn Journal* 2:73)

The third anonymous writer complained about ‘the several Attempts that have been made by different Commentators from the Time of Mr. *Rowe*’ that had led ‘to the mutilated Condition our Poet was thrown into by subsequent Editors’. In fact, the best annotation on Shakespeare could be found on the stage:

I can’t forbear mentioning the Obligation which the Public has to the Genius of Mr. *Garrick*, who has exhibited with great Lustre many of the most shining Strokes of *Shakespeare’s* amazing Art; and may be justly stiled (as he was once called by you) his best Commentator: For ’tis certain, he has done our Poet more Justice by his Manner of playing his principal Characters, than any Editor has yet done by a Publication. (*Gray’s-Inn Journal* 2:88)

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Reiko Oya

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Representing Shakespearean Tragedy

In his reply to the third critic, Murphy complimented the actor once again by referring the readers to ‘the noblest Commentary this, or any Poet ever had’:

I mean Mr. *Garrick's* Performance of *Lear*, in which there is displayed in so just a Knowledge of the human Mind under a State of Madness, together with such exquisite Feelings of the various Shiftings of the Passions, so finely at the same Time enfeebled with the Debility of Age, that I believe, whenever this admirable Actor ceases to play this Part, the unhappy Monarch will lose more than *fifty of his Followers at a Clap*. (*Gray's-Inn Journal* 2:222)²

Before going into the details of their theatre-inspired literary analyses, and the impact they were to have on Samuel Johnson's edition of Shakespeare, some reference to the mid-century *King Lear* on stage, with the charismatic Garrick in the title role, is due.

Poetic justice and madness: Tate and Garrick

Immediately after the Restoration, Nahum Tate drastically rewrote Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the instigation of one Thomas Boteler.³ According to Tate's dedicatory letter to this obscure gentleman, the original tragedy was ‘*a Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht*’ that needed to be supplied with ‘*what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale*’; two qualities the absence of which adds to, rather than detracts from, the greatness of the tragedy for today's audience. While ‘Tatifying’ Shakespeare's language, the adapter simplified the characters and made the plot both understandable and overtly entertaining.⁴ Cordelia was provided with a lover (Edgar) and her blunt rejection of an oath to Lear, which was an ‘unjustified roughness’ in a dutiful daughter,⁵ was rationalised as an emergency measure for her to avoid marriage to Burgundy. In a new aside Tate's Cordelia explained her straits to the audience and secured her moral integrity:

Now comes my Trial, how am I distrest,
That must with cold speech tempt the chol'rick King
Rather to leave me Dowerless, than condemn me
To loath'd Embraces! ('Tate', I.1.92–5)

Edgar's disguise as Mad Tom, which was originally a way to save his own life, was likewise dignified as a decision secretly to help Cordelia. Tate's Edmund ('Bastard'), on the other hand, was wicked in a far less excusable manner than in Shakespeare and his illicit love affairs with the two elder daughters and lust after Cordelia were portrayed emphatically.

Most of all, Tate transformed the denouement by sparing the lives of Lear and Cordelia and crowning the good daughter jointly with Edgar.