

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07066-9 - *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.: Interspersed with Characters and Anecdotes of his Theatrical Contemporaries: Volume 1*

Thomas Davies

Excerpt

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THE
L I F E
O F
DAVID GARRICK, Esq.

CHAPTER I.

Some account of Mr. Garrick's family---His early acquaintance with Mr. Walmsley and Dr. S. Johnson---His voyage to Lisbon---Return to England---Becomes pupil to Dr. Johnson---Sets out in company with him for London.

ALL excellence has a right to be recorded. I shall therefore think it superfluous to apologize for writing the life of a man who, by an uncommon assemblage of private virtues, adorned the highest eminence in a public profession.

VOL. I.

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In a narrative of Mr. Garrick's life will unavoidably be included many theatrical anecdotes, and a variety of observations upon several comedians of both sexes, who distinguished themselves by superiority in their profession. Their merits I shall endeavour to display, and their characters I intend to delineate with truth and candour.

The grandfather of Mr. Garrick was one of those unhappy French protestants who, upon the revocation of the Edict of Nantz, sought for an asylum in England.

The father of Mr. Garrick, whose christian name was Peter, obtained a captain's commission in the army, and generally resided at Lichfield. His son David was born when he was on a recruiting party in Hereford, and baptized, as appears by the register in the church of All Saints in that city, February the 20th, 1716. His mother's maiden name was Clough, daughter to one of the vicars in Lichfield cathedral. Captain Garrick was a man of an amiable disposition, and much respected
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for his affable demeanour and agreeable conversation. Mrs. Garrick, though not beautiful in her person, was very attractive in her manner; her address was polite, and her conversation sprightly and engaging: she had the peculiar happiness, where-ever she went, to please and to entertain. Though restrained in their circumstances, captain Garrick and his wife were welcome to the best families in Lichfield.

Young Garrick was a most sprightly and diverting boy; he engaged the attention of every body who knew him. Mr. Walmley, register of the Ecclesiastical Court in Lichfield, a gentleman much respected, of very considerable fortune, and a friend of captain Garrick, took early notice of him; he would often unbend himself by listening to his odd questions, and divert himself with his smart repartees and frolicksome actions. When young Garrick was about ten years of age, he was put under the care of Mr. Hunter, master of the grammar-school at Lichfield. This gentleman was an odd mixture of the pedant and the sportsman;

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he was a very severe disciplinarian, and a great setter of game. Happy was the boy who could slyly inform his offended master where a covey of partridges was to be found; this notice was a certain pledge of his pardon.

Davy Garrick, though remarkable for not being attached to puerile diversions, which he would always abandon to give ear to some matter of entertainment and discourse, or to draw the attention of others by some lively and wild sallies of his own, did not apply himself with any assiduity to his book. He had conceived a very early passion for theatrical representation, from which nothing could turn him aside. When he was little more than eleven years of age, he formed the project of getting a play acted by young gentlemen and ladies. After he had made some trial of his own and his companions abilities, and prevailed upon the parents to give their consent, he pitched upon the Recruiting Officer for the play. He assembled his little company in a large room, the destined place of representation; there

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there we may suppose our young Bays distributed the several characters according to the merits of the performers. He prevailed on one of his sisters to play the part of the Chambermaid; Serjeant Kite, a character of busy intrigue and bold humour, he chose for himself.

Samuel Johnson, now the first name in the literary world, who was then very young, but had given early proofs of uncommon genius, was applied to by the little manager for a prologue to be spoken on the occasion. With this request Mr. Johnson, we know not for what reason, did not comply, though willing enough to oblige his young friend; and some old prologue was adapted to the peculiar circumstance of the time, and, I suppose, was spoken by Serjeant Kite.

The play was acted in a manner so far above the expectation of the audience, that it gave general satisfaction, and was much applauded. The ease, vivacity and humour of Kite, is still remembered with pleasure at Lichfield.

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This first stage attempt of our English Roscius was in 1727.

Not long after, he was invited to Lisbon by an uncle, who was a considerable wine-merchant in that city; but his stay there was very short, for he returned to Lichfield the year following. It is imagined that the gay disposition of the young gentleman was not very suitable to the old man's temper, which was, perhaps, too grave and austere to relish the vivacities of his nephew.

However, during his short stay at Lisbon, young Garrick made himself agreeable to all who knew him, particularly to the English merchants who resided there, with whom he often dined. After dinner they usually diverted themselves by placing him upon the table, and calling upon him to repeat verses and speeches from plays, which he did with great readiness, and much to the satisfaction of the hearers. Some Portuguese young gentlemen of the highest rank, who were of his own age, were also much delighted with his conversation. I have heard him say, that he had been often
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in company with the unfortunate duke D'Aveiro, who was put to death, about twenty years since, for a conspiracy against the king of Portugal.

Our young traveller, on his return to England, was sent once more to Mr. Hunter's school, where, it is certain, he did not make a very considerable progress in learning; his mind was too unsettled, and his temper too volatile, to apply closely to any particular study. Several of his father's acquaintance, who knew the delight which he felt in the entertainments of the stage, often treated him with a journey to London, that he might feast his appetite at the playhouse.

Mr. Samuel Johnson, about the beginning of the year 1736, undertook the instruction of some young gentlemen of Lichfield in the belles lettres; and David Garrick, then turned of eighteen, became one of his scholars, or, to speak more properly, his friend and companion. But the master, however rich in the stores of Greece and Rome, was not better disposed

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posed to teach the precepts of learning with that exactness which is necessary to form the classical scholar, than young Garrick was willing to learn them. Dr. Johnson, in his conversation, conveys admirable lessons of instruction, and communicates knowledge with a profusion and liberality peculiar to himself; but he cannot, perhaps, easily descend to the minutiae adapted to young and uninformed minds.

Notwithstanding the brilliancy of his parts, the classic authors had as yet no charms for Mr. Garrick; his thoughts were constantly employed on the stage; for even at that time he was very busy in composing plays. When his master expected from him some exercise or composition upon a theme, he shewed him several scenes of a new comedy, which had engrossed his time; and these, he told him, were the produce of his third attempt in dramatic poetry.

After a trial of six months, Mr. Johnson grew tired of teaching the classics to three or four scholars; and he and his pupil

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pupil Garrick agreed to try their fortunes in the great metropolis.

As this is an incident in the lives of two very celebrated men, I shall endeavour to authenticate it by transcribing two letters to Mr. Colson, a celebrated mathematician at Rochester, which were published originally in the Cambridge Chronicle, and were communicated to the editors of that paper by John Newling, Esq; who married the niece of professor Colson; both written by Mr. Walmisley, a gentleman whom I have already had occasion to mention,

To the Rev. Mr. COLSON, &c.

“ My dear old friend, Lichfield, 1737.

“ **H**AVING not been in town since the
 “ year thirty-one, you will the less
 “ wonder at seeing a letter from me; but
 “ I have the pleasure of hearing of you
 “ sometimes in the prints, and am glad to
 “ see you are daily throwing in your va-
 “ luable contributions to the republic of
 “ letters.

“ But

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“ But the present occasion of my writing
“ is a favour I have to ask of you. My
“ neighbour Capt. Garrick, who is an
“ honest, valuable man, has a son who is
“ a very sensible young man, and a good
“ scholar, and whom the captain hopes, in
“ some two or three years, he shall send
“ to the Temple, and breed to the bar ;
“ but at present his pocket will not hold
“ out for sending him to the university.
“ I have proposed your taking him, if you
“ like well of it, and your boarding him,
“ and instructing him in the mathematics,
“ philosophy, and human learning. He is
“ now nineteen, of sober and good dispo-
“ sition, and is as ingenious and promising
“ a young man as ever I knew in my life.
“ Few instructions on your side will do ;
“ and in the intervals of study he will be
“ an agreeable companion for you. His
“ father will be glad to pay you whatever
“ you shall require within his reach, I
“ shall think myself very much obliged
“ into the bargain.

GILB. WALMSLEY.”

To