

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07067-6 - *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.: Interspersed with Characters and Anecdotes of his Theatrical Contemporaries: Volume 2*

Thomas Davies

Excerpt

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T H E
L I F E
O F
DAVID GARRICK, Esq.

C H A P. XXXI.

Account of the riot occasioned by the advanced prices to the two Gentlemen of Verona, and the tragedy of Elvira—Account of the chief agent.—Hero of the Fribleriad, &c.

A Riot in a playhouse is very different from a tumult in the street; the latter is a sudden fray arising from ignorance or mistake, generally soon ended, and often without any mischief done to any body; whereas the former is almost always the

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refult of a conspiracy, proceeding from private repentment, and in its consequences pernicious to the object against whom it is levelled.

In January 1763, a certain gentleman and his confederates circulated a printed advertisement throughout all the coffee-houses, taverns, and other public houses in the neighbourhood of Covent-garden and Drury-lane; wherein they set forth the great injustice of the managers of the play-houses, in presuming to exact the full prices on the night of a revived play; whereas they conceived that they had no reasonable claim to these charges from the beginning to the end of a night's entertainment, except on the addition of a pantomime. They declared, with seeming moderation, at the same time, that their demand of redress should be urged with decency and temper, and an explanation of the managers conduct required in a manner becoming gentlemen.

The confederates chose a very odd, or rather improper, time to enforce the doctrine

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trine of submission to their authority, on the benefit-night of the writer, who had altered the play of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, at a time when the full charges were never disputed.

A Mr. Fitz——k, who is since dead, appeared the avowed ringleader of these reformers, who were determined to disturb the audience, and deprive them of their right to enjoy the representation of a play unmolested.

This gentleman harangued the spectators from the boxes, and set forth, in very warm and opprobrious language, the impositions of the managers; and, with much vehemence, pleaded the right of the audience to fix the price of their bill of fare. When Mr. Garrick came forward to address the house, he was received with noise and uproar, and treated with the utmost contempt by the orator and his friends. He was not permitted to shew the progressive accumulation of theatrical expences, the nightly charge of which, from the year 1702 to 1760, had been raised from 34l. to above

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901. They would not suffer him to speak one word in defence of himself and his partner. It had been an invariable custom with Booth, Wilkes, and Cibber, to demand full prices on the acting of a new play which cost them additional expence in decoration. I am informed too, that the present managers of Drury lane and Covent-garden, from the prodigious increase of expediture on various occasions, are obliged to charge their actors, for a benefit play, 100l.

But this tribune of the people, Mr. Fitz——k, would hear no apology, would listen to no remonstrances in favour of the patentees; they must not be allowed a night's time, no, not an hour, to deliberate on a matter of so much consequence to themselves and all dramatic writers, but must yield unconditional submission to a peremptory order of this despotical gentleman and his associates, or the house must be torn to pieces, as a punishment for non-compliance.

The consequence of not instantly giving up the privileges of authors to the superior claims

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claims of dumb shew, was the tearing up the benches, breaking the lustres and girandoles, and committing every act of violence to which they were prompted by their ungovernable rage and malice. The play was given up, and the money returned.

The next night a new tragedy, called *Elvira*, written by Mr. Mallet, was acted at Drury-lane. The rioters, headed by their spokesman, enforced their former demand in the same violent and laconic manner. When Mr. Garrick appeared, they cried out with one voice, “Will you, or will you not, give admittance for half price, after the third act of a play, except during the first winter a pantomime is performed?” The manager, who had learnt the lesson of obedience by the losses which he had sustained the preceding evening, replied in the affirmative. But, however, peace was not to be restored till some of the players had made an *amende honorable*, for daring to espouse the cause of their master. Mr. Moody was called upon to apologize for the offence he had given, in

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stopping

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stopping a madman's hand who was going to set fire to the play-house. He, imagining that he should bring the audience into good humour by a laughable absurdity, in the tone and language of a low-bred Irish-man, said, "He was very sorry that he had displeas'd them by saving their lives in putting out the fire." This speech was so ill taken, that it rather enflamed than cooled their rage; and they loudly and vehemently insisted that he should go down on his knees, and ask their pardon, Moody was so far from complying with this positive command, that he had the courage absolutely to refuse, saying, "I will not, by G—." When he came off the stage, Mr. Garrick was so pleas'd with his behaviour, that he received him with open arms, and assur'd him, that whilst he was master of a guinea, he should be paid his income; but that, if he had been so mean as to have submitted to the required abasement, he never would have forgiven him.

The tumult was so great on Moody's refusing to comply with the demand of the audience,

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audience, that, to appease their wrath, Mr. Garrick promised he should not appear on the stage again during the time he was under their displeasure.

Mr. Moody's situation was by no means eligible. He was reduced to the necessity of either taking leave of the capital, and joining the itinerant actors in the country, or of depending upon the generosity of the manager. He could expect no mercy from the gentlemen who had enjoined so severe a penance for an act of duty: he was therefore determined, after weighing all consequences, to seek redress from the original plotter of all the mischief, Mr. Fitz——k himself.

He waited upon him at his chambers in the Temple. The interview was extraordinary, and part of it will perhaps appear most to advantage in dialogue. That gentleman seemed somewhat surpris'd when Moody address'd him in these words, "I suppose, Sir, you know me."

Fitz. Very well, Sir; and how came I by the honour of this visit?

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Moody.

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Moody. How dare you ask me that question, when you know what passed at Drury lane last night; where I was called upon by you to dishonour myself by asking pardon of the audience upon my knees?

Fitz. No, Sir, I was not the person who spoke to you.

Moody. Sir, you did; I saw you, and heard you. And what crime had I committed, to be obliged to stoop to such an ignominious submission? I had prevented a wretch from setting fire to the playhouse, and had espoused the cause of a gentleman in whose service I had enlisted.

Fitz. I do not understand being treated in this manner in my own house.

Moody. Sir, I will attend you where you please; for be assured, I will not leave you till you have satisfied me one way or other.

Mr. Fitz-----k, perceiving that Moody was determined to exact satisfaction, asked him what reparation he wished to have. Moody said, he expected that he would sign his name to a paper, and repair the injury, by acknowledging that he had acted towards

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towards him in a most unjust and improper manner; at the same time that he would request his friends not to insist on the penance prescribed to Mr. Moody, but to receive him to favour on his making any reasonable excuse.

Mr. Fitz-----k now assumed the man; he declared that no power on earth should prevail on him to sign such a writing. Mr. Moody then renewed his positive resolution to right himself. After some farther altercation, Mr. Fitz-----k proposed to serve Mr. Moody in another way, and perhaps more effectually than the signing of any instrument whatsoever. “ I know
“ Mr. Moody (said Mr. Fitz-----k) goes to
“ the Jamaica coffee-house; I will meet
“ him there to-morrow morning, and fix
“ upon a proper method to accommodate
“ matters to his entire satisfaction.”

Mr. Fitz-----k did not meet Mr. Moody. However, he sent a gentleman to him with whom he was well acquainted, and one very willing and able to bring about a reconciliation between the audience and the actor.

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actor. Mr. Fitz-----k now began to view his conduct with impartial eyes, and to make some amends for his past outrageous conduct to the actor and manager; he wrote a letter to Mr. Garrick in a strain very condescending, and to a proud man sufficiently humiliating. The chief purpose of his epistle was to acquaint him, that whenever he thought proper to introduce Mr. Moody to the audience, he and all his friends would attend, and contribute to his being reinstated in the favour of the publick.

Having closed this article of Fitz-----k's particular behaviour to Mr. Moody, I would beg leave to observe, that degrading the actor must tend to lessen the pleasure of the spectator. What just notions of propriety of behaviour, what knowledge of elegance in manners, or representation of what is grand or graceful, humourous or gay, can an audience expect from a wretch who is driven to a degree of meanness unworthy of a man? I would by no means encourage insolence in the player, but repress it immediately, and exact such reparation as it becomes