

Építész a kőfejtőben Architect in the Quarry



Tanulmányok
Dávidházi Péter
hatvanadik születésnapjára

Studies Presented to
Péter Dávidházi
On His Sixtieth Birthday

Szerkesztette / Edited by:

HÍTES Sándor
TÖRÖK Zsuzsa



rec.iti
Budapest • 2010

A kötet megjelenését az
MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézete és a
Nemzeti Kulturális Alap támogatta.



A borító Adam Friedrich Oeser *Sokrates meißelt die drei Grazien*
(Szókratész kőbe faragja a három gráciát) című metszete alapján készült.
A metszet Johann Joachim Winckelmann *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der
griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* című értekezésének első,
1755-ös kiadásában jelent meg először.

© szerzők, 2010

ISBN 978-963-7341-87-8

Kiadja a *rec.iti*,
az MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézetének
recenziós portálja ► <http://rec.iti.mta.hu/rec.iti>

Borítóterv:

Fórizs Gergely ötlete nyomán Csörsz Rumen István
Tördelte: Hegedüs Béla

MICHAEL DOBSON

Garrick, Johnson, and the Ownership of the Role

I'll be getting to Garrick in a few pages, and thence finally to Johnson, but I'm going to begin with a theatrical celebrity from a little after their time. It is May 26th 1823, and Drury Lane Theatre, then leased by R.W. Elliston but with James Winston actually doing most of the day-to-day administration during Elliston's long spells of drunkenness, is in its customary uproar. Elliston and Winston have just been re-engaging the promising and relatively tractable actor Charles Mayne Young, formerly of Covent Garden, and have even been allowing him to play Hamlet and Macbeth during the frequent absences of the company's reigning star, Edmund Kean. Kean, who is given to referring to Young, with characteristic collegial delicacy, as 'that bloody thundering bugger',¹ is not pleased. Kean's more lucrative Drury Lane contract delegates to him the responsibility for 'getting up' those plays in which he habitually appears, and, as Winston's diary remembers, he starts his negotiations on this basis:

Previous to the performance this evening, Mr Kean sent for me to his room. [He g]ave me a paper saying by his articles he had a *right* to *direct* the performances, and therefore he *directed* that *Town and Country*

¹ Gilbert B. Cross and Alfred Nelson (eds.) *Drury Lane Journal: Selections from James Winston's Diaries, 1819-1827*, London: Society for Theatre Research, 1974, 69.

should not be acted next Friday and that he *must* play *Hamlet* that night...²

Winston immediately realizes he needs reinforcements, and that he would be better off on his own territory: he takes Kean to his office, and calls in Elliston. Kean now makes the most explicit claim any actor ever has to the legal ownership of certain stock parts:

Kean there told Mr Elliston he had deprived him of half his fame, that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* were his *property* in Drury Lane, that he was robbed of them, that [Elliston] might as well when he was out of town go into his house and take away his furniture [as] take them from him.... Mr Elliston said Macready, Young, etc, played *Hamlet* at Covent Garden. Kean said he knew nothing of Covent Garden or any other person, he only knew Mr Kane [sic], that there was no other person than Mr Kane, that he would there give a check for £1,000 to be let off [his contract] and he could be attractive elsewhere, etc etc. He left, saying he would send his solicitor to Mr Elliston on Wednesday.³

Come the Wednesday, Kean's solicitor, the long-suffering Mr Broughton of Marlborough Street, was more conciliatory, and freely conceded that the word 'direct' in Kean's contract did not actually give him the authority to dictate which plays should be performed on which nights or with which casts. Elliston, equally, was magnanimous, agreeing to the possibility of allowing Kean to make another American tour before fulfilling his remaining contractual obligations at Drury Lane, and even offering to agree in advance which characters Kean should play on his return. Kean, however, had reverted to his flouncing mood a few weeks later:

July 25: Kean came to town this evening late and slept in his room on the sofa. On Saturday morning he came to me... said he wished to speak to me, and we went into the little Green Room. He wished me immediately to communicate with Mr Elliston that he came to town for the purpose of deciding whether he was to be at Drury Lane next season or if he should sell off his property and retire to America. These were his conditions: that we might engage your Mr Macready and Mr Young for [parts such as] *Rolla* and *Sir Edward Mortimer*, but *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, etc, were his

² Ibid, 67.

³ Ibid, 68.

characters and... he did object to his characters being played when he was out of London. Shakespeare's and Massinger's characters (by the acting of which he saved Drury Lane) were his, and he would not give them up...⁴

In a fresh meeting on July 28, Kean qualified this condition: he now laid claim to six specific roles – Hamlet, King Lear, Richard III, Macbeth, Shylock, and Sir Giles Overreach,

which he wished not to be played while he was from town, but if any of them were, then he should repeat those when he arrived [back] that had been played in his absence.⁵

Performing a role, for Kean, is an act of possession: mingling his bodily labour with the part, he makes it his own, and if another actor is seen to plough his particular dramatic furrows in his absence then he must repossess them at his earliest opportunity, effacing as rapidly as he can the public's witnessing memory that there was ever any Hamlet or Shylock other than Kean's. (One star tragic role is interestingly absent from Kean's catalogue of his prize chattels; 'Othello last year', he told Winston, 'he played till he was sick of'). Kean was by now reconciled to playing a last spell at Drury Lane, slighted though he felt by Elliston's perceived promotion of younger players at his expense, but before he left the Theatres Royal forever he proposed to mount one last campaign of appropriation – this time aimed at possessing some of another actor's share of theatrical posterity:

About half past six he called on me at my house and [said] that [there] was something... that induced him to wish a fresh arrangement, namely, that Mr *Kane* should be advertised [in] his last season of acting in England and that he would go through the whole of Garrick's characters: Scrub, Archer, Able Druggier, etc.

Nearly fifty years after David Garrick's retirement and more than forty after his death, it seems, some roles were still regarded as his property. In the remainder of this paper, I want to consider the relatively simple question that Kean's remarks raise: in the Georgian theatre, how far

⁴ Ibid, 70.

⁵ Ibid.

could someone genuinely and legally make a role his or her own? Occurring at an intersection between the history of the stage and the history of copyright, this is a question with ramifications beyond the theatre – as we'll see in the instance of Dr Johnson's spirited if ultimately unsuccessful defence of his property in his own image.

Kean, contemplating his own retirement and his own legacy in 1823, was clearly beginning to wonder which roles would be remembered as his. Clinging desperately to his big six, he considers whether he might manage a parting Oedipal raid on the fame of his greatest precursor, before vanishing into an ostentatious privacy: after playing Garrick's old roles, reports Winston,

he would retire to America where, if he could have his house surrounded by walls to let in only those he wished, he should be happy. He had been in companies where he had only three shillings a week and to that he would rather return (though there was no chance of that) than be second where he did expect to be first, etc. By this arrangement he would be himself, etc., "Fill your other plays as you choose."⁶

It didn't turn out like that, of course: Kean's last tour of America, in 1825, was dogged by riots inspired by his recent scandalous defeat in a lawsuit for *crim. con.* brought by one Alderman Cox, and he had to flee back to England, where ultimately it would be in *Othello*, the role of which he was already sick in 1823, that he would die mid-performance in 1832. (That's one way of making a role yours: appropriate its lines as your own famous last words).

How had Garrick managed to leave an impression that certain roles belonged to him, so strong that it haunted this massively successful actor, who not only never saw Garrick act but wasn't even born until a decade after his retirement? Something, no doubt, was owed to the success with which Garrick had participated in the mythologizing of himself eagerly promulgated in print by the likes of Arthur Murphy, Denis Diderot and William Hogarth; something, perhaps, to the changes in the theatrical repertory that made some of Garrick's comic roles less attractive to posthumous competitors in the decades following his death. But some, I want to suggest, is purely and simply the result of Garrick's superior management of his own casting, an area of Georgian theatrical

⁶ Ibid, 70-71.

life in which actors and managers, even when on better terms than Elliston and Kean, fought a perpetual battle.

Kean's idea that he actually owned certain roles had a long history, although eighteenth-century theatrical contracts usually did their utmost to suppress it. Back in 1619, for instance, elegists for Richard Burbage felt that the roles he had played belonged so exclusively to him that in mourning the actor they were also mourning his characters:

No more young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,
Kind Lear, the grievèd Moor, and more beside
That lived in him, have now forever died...

In fact, luckily, they hadn't, but for the time being each of these parts was only likely to be played by a single successor among the King's Men, rather than being rotated among the senior players. Even after the Restoration it remained customary for particular actors to hold the proprietorship over particular roles. Michael Mohun, for instance, petitioned Charles II in 1682 on the grounds that he was being ruined by the recent merger between the King's and Duke's companies: the new United Company management were only proposing to pay him at a daily rate when he actually performed and, 'they not having studied our plays', none of his roles were in request.⁷

The professional theatre managers of the eighteenth century, though, wary of putting themselves at the mercy of single performers, were very unwilling to allow actors to monopolize starring roles in this traditional fashion. Georgian actors' contracts are very specific about the management's absolute discretion when it comes to casting and the choice of repertoire, refusing even to allow individual players to opt out of any genres they may have felt were unsuitable for their talents. The young Dorothea Jordan, for instance, signing up to work for Sheridan, Linley and Ford in 1785, agreed that 'to the utmost of her power and capacity' she would, on pain of severe fines,

publicly act, sing or perform, on the stage of the said theatre [Royal, Drury Lane], all and every such part or parts in all such tragedies and

⁷ The petition is reproduced in Allardyce NICHOLL, *A History of English Drama, 1660-1900*, 6 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, 1:365-366.

comedies, plays, operas, farces, pantomimes, entertainments, masques, interludes, dances and other theatrical performances as by or from the said proprietors or their successors or their manager or prompter for the time being shall be ordered, directed or required, or whereof notice shall be given by advertisement in the public newspapers and the fixing up the playbills in the usual and accustomed manner.⁸

If Jordan became popular – as in the event she did – she could only become identified with particular roles at the discretion of the management, who had to balance the benefits they might accrue from her becoming a ‘draw’ as Viola against the possibility that she, like Kean with ‘his’ parts later on, might thereby be able to exert pressure which would hinder them from being able to stage *Twelfth Night* with anyone else in the leading role. A single player’s ownership of a role, then, was a state of affairs which no management wanted: whatever the advantages that might be reaped from being able to advertise a particular star as, say, Hamlet, the box office needed to be able to sell tickets for *Hamlet* whether or not that star was willing, present and sober, and hence eighteenth-century companies made a point of keeping several potential Hamlets always available. In the 1770s the Stock Book of the Theatre Royal in Bath, for instance, with at most eighteen male actors at its disposal, requires three of them to be in perpetual readiness to play the Dane; it also requires five of its ten women to be able to play Ophelia at the drop of a sprig of rosemary, and four of the other five to be permanently word-perfect as Gertrude.⁹ In Bath, you saw *Hamlet* as performed by the resident company at the Theatre Royal, not the Prince of Denmark as performed by Mr X, and there were clearly sufficient understudying arrangements in place for the show to go on even if one of the diseases being treated with the waters flared up into an epidemic.

Under these conditions, you’d think that the cards were stacked against Garrick ever being able to make any role his own to the extent that he did, and to some extent this impression survives a preliminary glance at the performance calendars of Drury Lane. Even under Garrick’s own management, the company, like their colleagues in Bath,

⁸ The contract, now in the Theatre Museum, is reproduced in David Thomas (ed.) *Theatre in Europe, a documentary history: Restoration and Georgian England 1660-1788*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, 238-240.

⁹ See *ibid*, 247-248.

maintained a policy of circulating major stock parts among a number of different players, to such an extent that it's a wonder that Fielding's Tom Jones and Partridge, going to see *Hamlet* at Drury Lane, were lucky enough to see Garrick in the title role rather than an underling. During the period between Garrick's accession to the management in 1747 and his retirement in 1776, the role of Hamlet was played not only by Garrick himself but also by Lee, Lacey, Holland, Mossop, Fleetwood, Sheridan, Powell, Cautherley and Smith, while Mossop, Holland, Smith, Sheridan and Reddish also took their turns at being Richard III. But being manager as well as starring actor made all the difference. On closer inspection, Garrick was doing much what Kean wanted to do in the 1820s – maintaining his authority over certain major roles by strategically repossessing them at intervals, even while rationing his performances to cope with his ill-health – with the difference that, unlike Kean, he could arrange to spread the work of understudying among a number of different actors, so that none of them ever became a serious rival. To be confident of stardom, in short, and to be sure of keeping one's interpretations of the major roles permanently in the public memory, one had to assume the additional burdens involved in becoming an actor-manager.

Being a manager as well as a leading player conferred other benefits, too. Assured of sole control over casting and repertoire by the details of his 1747 agreement with Lacy,¹⁰ Garrick, unlike Kean, was able to gain the credit for his theatre's Shakespearean repertoire even when he wasn't personally appearing in it. This piqued not only his rivals among actors, but other contemporaries with an interest in joining their fame to Shakespeare's, among them Samuel Johnson. As I've explored at length elsewhere, Garrick was widely regarded as personally responsible for the surge of interest in Shakespeare experienced during his lifetime (even though its most intense phase happened before he had even made his debut), to such an extent that whole editions of the Complete Plays, such as Bell's (1774), were dedicated to him. Johnson's edition, however, declined even to mention its editor's former pupil, an omission about which the Great Cham was rebuked by Boswell in 1769. This was only a few weeks after Garrick's Stratford Jubilee, which Boswell had eagerly

¹⁰ Ibid, 237.

attended, but which Johnson had shunned. Like much of Boswell's *Life*, the record of this conversation is given in dramatic form.

BOSWELL: But has he not brought Shakespeare into notice?

JOHNSON: Sir, to allow that would be to lampoon the age...

BOSWELL: Indeed, I do wish that you had mentioned Garrick.

JOHNSON: My dear sir, had I mentioned him I must have mentioned many more; Mrs Pritchard, Mrs Cibber – nay, and Mr Cibber too; he too *altered* Shakespeare.¹¹

From this prickly brush with one theatrical celebrity, the conversation soon turned to another, Samuel Foote, the one-legged comic actor, scriptwriter and mimic. Here too the relative claims on posterity of Johnson himself and of a performer perceived as a rival are at stake. Johnson here attempts to defend his own monopoly on the role of Johnson, asserting a copyright in his own image which a modern French court of law would probably uphold, even if dubious about the menaces by which Johnson maintains it:

BOSWELL. 'Foote has a great deal of humour?' JOHNSON. 'Yes, Sir.'
BOSWELL. 'He has a singular talent of exhibiting character.' JOHNSON. 'Sir, it is not a talent; it is a vice; it is what others abstain from. It is not comedy, which exhibits the character of a species, as that of a miser gathered from many misers: it is farce, which exhibits individuals.'
BOSWELL. 'Did not he think of exhibiting you, Sir?' JOHNSON. 'Sir, fear restrained him; he knew I would have broken his bones. I would have saved him the trouble of cutting off a leg; I would not have left him a leg to cut off.'

Johnson's emphatic refusal to allow Foote to impersonate him seems successful enough in this passage, but in the longer term Johnson's public persona would escape from his control altogether. By comparison

¹¹ On this exchange, see especially Tiffany STERN: <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFullrec.do?&resultNum=14&entries=71&area=mla&forward=critrefr&queryId=../session/126813298923466&trailId=126A81F0247> „I Do Wish That You Had Mentioned Garrick': The Absence of Garrick in Johnson's Shakespeare" = Eric Rasmussen and Aaron Santesso (eds.) *Comparative Excellence: New Essays on Shakespeare and Johnson*, New York: AMS Press 2007, 71-96.

with Garrick's extraordinarily successful long-term manipulation of his theatrical fame – by which roles written by others were still thought of as Garrick's long after his death – Johnson's posthumous image has been primarily shaped by someone else, namely Boswell. The dramatic nature of Boswell's *Life*, with its frequent passages of unmediated dialogue, opened the way for an improbable succession of dramatists and actors to make Johnson into their puppet, in defiance of his own views on the propriety of representing real individuals on the stage, and often in defiance of his own views about practically everything else. He may have for a while escaped being impersonated by the one-legged Foote, but in our times he has not been able to avoid the indignity of being represented, before an audience of millions, by a Scot, Robbie Coltrane, in the episode *Ink and Incapability* from *Blackadder the Third* (BBC television, 1987).

This line of unauthorized, dramatized Dr Johnsons begins in the 1820s with what are unfortunately the two most boring of Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, in which Johnson and Horne Tooke miraculously avoid the inflammatory topic of the latter's revolutionary politics in order to air Landor's tedious views about philology, at vast length. (As we would have said in Oxford in my time, this is the sort of text fit only for the sort of people who take Course 2). The technical aspects of the great lexicographer, however, are laid aside thereafter in favour of the intimate presentations of his social and domestic life offered by Boswell and other confidants. The first actually performed play about Johnson that I have been able to trace was printed in 1860, as the most elaborate of the 'Celebrated Character Charades' provided in Henry Dalton's *The book of drawing-room plays and evening amusements*. In this remarkably elaborate suggestion for whiling away a very long house-party, a team of revellers are first expected to perform a leaden playlet about a comically clumsy servant called JOHN, then another about a paid companion who has secretly married her employer's SON. Then, finally putting the two together for anyone who hasn't got it yet, they are then to enact a four-page 'Conversation between Johnson, Mrs Thrale, and Fanny Burney.' Competition for the leading role may have been dampened by the opening description of the make-up and figure required – 'Appearance stout, large, heavy. Face frightfully

seamed and disfigured with burnt cork'¹² – but the dialogue, largely and avowedly adapted from Burney's journals, isn't bad: 'DR J: Madam, he is a *Scotchman* (*See-saws with signs of irritation*).'¹³

Nothing exactly happens in this 'Conversation between Johnson, Mrs Thrale, and Fanny Burney', but in time the dramatic possibilities of this cast would be developed more fully. If you want to fit Johnson into a conventional plot, you need love-interest, and – despairing of the shadowy figure of his wife Tetty, who inconveniently pre-dated Boswell – scriptwriters have had to seize on Johnson's falling-out with Mrs Thrale at the time of her widowhood and her remarriage to Piozzi. This love-triangle, for instance, forms the core of what remains to date the only opera about Johnson, Richard Stoker's *Johnson Preserv'd*, first performed at what is now Camden Town Hall on the Euston Road in 1967. Jill Watt's libretto in the end despairs of making Johnson at home in this genre; at its conclusion Johnson and Boswell, the one reconciled to life without Thrale and the other to cutting short his flirtation with a housemaid, are heard vanishing from the Thrales' country house in Streatham en route back to London. They sing a chorus in praise of 'good company' as they leave opera to the musical lovers, Piozzi and Mrs Thrale.

For most dramatists, however, Johnson has served primarily as a convenient onstage mouthpiece for viewpoints rejected by the playwrights themselves. Edward A. Newton, one of that remarkable tribe of early 20th century American book-collectors and Anglophiles who gave the world the Huntington and the Clark, followed up *Doctor Johnson: a play* (1923), an affectionate attempt at dramatizing a few highlights from Boswell, with a work which gets much more directly to his point, namely *Mr Strahan's Dinner Party* (1930). This offers us an imaginary conversation between Johnson and Benjamin Franklin, in which Johnson can finally soften towards at least the more civilized among the rebellious colonists, and by implication confer his benediction on his latterday transatlantic admirers. In Chesterton's *The judgement of Dr Johnson* (1927), which like much of Chesterton reads exactly like George Bernard Shaw except with added Catholicism, a clumsy but

¹² Henry DALTON, pseud., *The book of drawing-room plays and evening amusements*, London, [1860], 214.

¹³ *Ibid*, 215.

well-meaning Johnson serves as a stick with which to bash a Virginian rebel's naïve Rousseauism, before saving his life and thereby his soul for the sake of his more intelligent wife. The American question again dominates Charles Hart's verse-drama *Samuel Johnson: a portrait* (1959), remarkable among much else for being the only play about the Doctor in which his cat Hodge actually has to do something on stage. (The cat, going one better than his 'sleeping, if possible' incarnation in Beckett's *Human Wishes*, behaves with conspicuous listlessness, and is diagnosed by Dr Levet as needing a richer diet, upon which Johnson, as per Boswell's anecdote but in iambs, undertakes to provide it, saving his servants the trouble: 'No, I'll go fetch the oysters for my cat: / It is a kindness I would do for him'). The emotional core of this American play, though, if not its poetic highlight, is the chorus which pleads with Johnson to be less insular:

Beyond the Channel lies another land –
O Doctor Johnson, will you understand?
...Love Scotland, hear thou voices out of France!
Wisdom is speaking there perchance:
And do not think it is a little thing,
If colonists seek justice from a king.

John Wain has been the exception in all this, in that his remarkable and highly sympathetic dramatic monologue *Dr Johnson Is Leaving* (1984) makes Johnson's religious anxieties its central subject – albeit while giving its Johnson a surprisingly unJohnsonian syntax. But for the most part, Johnson has suffered more thoroughly in drama since his death than he might have done in Foote's abandoned impersonation, whether berated endlessly about his inflexible attitude to the American rebels or caricatured as a pompous pedant. If you want to maintain your stake in theatrical posterity, it seems, it is better to have securely possessed the roles provided by others than to have posthumously surrendered yours to a biographer. When it comes to theatrical fame, actors – and especially actor-managers – are just better at it than are lexicographers.