

Shakespeare and Garrick

By Vanessa Cunningham

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Reviewed by Sky Gilbert

Like most satisfactory scholarly works, Vanessa Cunningham's *Shakespeare and Garrick* sets modest goals and achieves it. For instance, she introduces her book by saying: "By the end of the [18th] century alteration in the sense of rewriting had virtually ceased. How Garrick both accelerated and retarded this change will be explored below" (12). Though Cunningham succeeds in presenting an in depth exploration of Garrick's alterations to Shakespeare, her defense of Garrick is significantly flawed. However, Cunningham's extensive research on Garrick should be of special interest to Oxfordians.

The famous 18th century actor and editor of Shakespeare, David Garrick (1717-1779), is a controversial figure. *Shakespeare and Garrick* attempts not only to explore his career but to rescue him from infamy. Cunningham says, "He is today both praised for restoring the plays and condemned for presenting travesties" (7). She goes on to say, "Seeing Garrick as either rescuer or false priest – both are distorted" (10-11). It is perhaps more difficult for modern Shakespeare enthusiasts to see Garrick as a rescuer, for what are we to think today of a man who cut and added to Shakespeare's plays to the point of significantly rewriting them?

Cunningham's defense of Garrick must be seen in the context of historiography and performance theory, for she not only challenges conventional historical wisdom (i.e., the dismissal of Garrick as someone who misrepresented Shakespeare's texts), she also uses contemporary performance theory in Garrick's defense. According to Cunningham, Garrick was not merely a man of his own day; he is a man of ours. In defense of Garrick, Cunningham quotes from Stephen Orgel: "Orgel in fact, has argued that the early modern 'scripts for performance were intended to be fluid and were constantly adapted by actors, authorial authenticity in a single text only being an issue when plays were to be published'" (11). Orgel is, of course, arguing as a New Historicist, attempting to put Shakespeare's text into the sociopolitical context of his day. However, Cunningham goes on to suggest that though the differences between the many quartos and folios that have come down to us suggest that Shakespeare's original texts may have been somewhat fluid, theatrical "texts" are *by nature* fluid, as Garrick was "only doing what acting companies (including Shakespeare's) have always

done, and some still continue to do.”

Cunningham’s definition of theater is a truly contemporary one. In the last twenty years, performance theorists have argued that we cannot study plays without researching their performance history, and that what we read on the page is only a blueprint for what a play might be, because a play can only be realized in performance. The Oxford Shakespeare has moved in this direction; a significant portion of each of its most recent scholarly introductions has been devoted to performance history of the plays. Patrice Pavis, in his *Dictionary of Theatre* (1999), defines a play in terms of a “situation of enunciation”—in other words, a performance—suggesting a play is not merely a written or published text:

In his reading of the text, the director seeks out a situation in which the characters’ utterances, the stage directions, and the director’s own commentary on the text can be given concrete expression. The director’s dramaturgical analysis exists only once it is given concrete expression in the play on stage, using space, time and the materials and actors. Such is stage enunciation: bringing into play all the scenic and dramaturgical elements deemed useful for the production of meaning....
(338)

Cunningham validates Garrick’s rewriting of Shakespeare as part of the fluid process that defines theater. Though the “final text” of a novel is generally the published text, plays, on the other hand, are “rewritten” each time they are performed, by the director and actors—depending on how they interpret them for an audience. According to this definition of theater, Garrick’s editorial changes become an aspect of performance.

But Cunningham points out that, although a fluid concept of theater dominated English stage from the early modern through most of the 18th century, this approach suddenly became much less popular in the period after Garrick’s death, when interpretations of Shakespeare moved from the stage to the page. Cunningham traces this transformation in detail through the 18th century theatrical and literary scene of London, and points to the publication of Malone’s landmark sixteen-volume edition of Shakespeare’s plays in 1790 as a turning point. She is right to remind us that before Malone, Garrick’s drastic editorial changes may have been received by the theatergoing public as truth, whereas after the move from “stage to page” scholars began to claim ownership of Shakespeare’s texts. Cunningham’s non-judgmental presentation of this important historical shift is valuable because it forces us to examine the contradictions in the modern paradigm of Shakespeare scholarship that generally go unquestioned. For although some scholars may spout performance theory, overwhelmingly they still believe that it is primarily their job—not an actor or director’s job—to discover what a “real” Shakespeare text might be. Their methodology for discovering the “real” text is, of course, not to revise it in production as Garrick did, but to analyze the various contradictory quartos and folios

in the study.

Is Cunningham's relativist defense of Garrick valid? Is it up to each generation to recreate the texts through performance? Or is there a "true" Shakespeare text that is alternately subverted or misinterpreted by different generations of stage directors? On one hand, I cannot agree with contemporary scholars who see it as their vocation to police a "true" text and protect it from bastardization. The task of discovering what Shakespeare actually wrote may well be as huge a challenge as discovering who he actually was. I think scholars may ultimately have more luck with the latter than with the former. It is virtually impossible to discern what is—in any given case—Shakespeare's "true" text, because the folios and quartos are endlessly contradictory concerning certain words and phrases. More significantly, Shakespeare's poetry is fundamentally polysemous. In other words, Shakespeare wrote at a time when the English language was in flux, and meanings were fluid. He also wrote in a style that has its basis in wordplay (i.e., in shifting meanings). Thus, attempts to discover what any specific "true" Shakespeare text is, may, in fact, be running counter to the nature of the work.

Though Cunningham's justification of Garrick seems to support the essentially polysemous nature of Shakespeare's text, it contains a paradox. For she is not merely speaking of the essential fluidity of Shakespeare's texts, she believes, like Orgel (and Pavis), that plays are essentially fluid, that their meanings change with every production's interpretation. But why does Cunningham cite Garrick as one who precipitated this fluidity? On the contrary, Garrick—though he drastically revised what many now consider to be the "true" texts—was a director relentlessly devoted to fixing the meaning of Shakespeare's work. Theater's transhistorical fluidity (as claimed by Cunningham through her citing of Orgel) is a pleasant enough concept, but in actuality has little to do with the realities of playmaking. Though the meanings of plays may change from one decade to the next, actor/manager/director/dramaturges like Garrick—and modern day conceptual directors—attempt to fix the meanings of plays once each time they direct. Most performances, in contrast to confirming a text's "fluidity," constitute instead a perhaps hopeless quest to produce a definitive interpretation. Cunningham has borrowed this contradiction from Orgel and performance theory: the aspect of theater which performance theorists use to prove its fluidity—i.e., the fact that it is open to directorial interpretation—is, in actual practice, an activity deeply related to fixing the meaning of the text once and for all. Garrick's attempts to rewrite Shakespeare were attempts to congeal the meaning of Shakespeare's expansive texts. In this respect, he has more in common with 20th century scholars than Cunningham allows.

Cunningham's exhaustive research and detailed observations concerning Garrick's interpretations of the plays have interesting implications for Oxfordians, mainly because many of the misconceptions that were fostered by Garrick have found their way into present-day Stratfordian approaches to Shakespeare. For instance, the wisdom that informs many of the pronouncements made by present day Shakespeare experts like Harold Bloom may well find their seeds in Garrick's work.

Bardolatry is a good example. Garrick was one of the most famous Shakespeare

enthusiasts to treat the author as God. Cunningham quotes Susan Green describing Garrick's performance of his "Ode to Shakespeare" — first performed at the Jubilee at Stratford (to coincide with the erection of a statue to Shakespeare) in 1796: "Most scholars agree that English Bardolatry was affirmed when Garrick held his grandiose, but hilariously tawdry deification of the Bard at his jubilee" (107). Cunningham's description of the actual content of the Ode (which was a speech accompanied, recitative style, by music) is revealing:

Shakespeare is celebrated for his 'wonder-teaming mind' and ability to 'raise other worlds and beings' (lines 66-67). He is nature's heir, admired for his control of the 'subject passions' (line 81). Shakespeare even has the god-like power to force the 'guilty lawless tribe' (line 102), like Claudius to confess concealed sins: 'Out bursts the penitential tear!/ The look appall'd the crime reveals' (lines 108-109). Shakespeare ('first of poets, best of men,' line 288) is a moral force for good.

(110)

Garrick's *Macbeth* is a case in point. The new lines that Garrick wrote for Macbeth's death scene are Christian in a melodramatic and moralistic way that is found nowhere in Shakespeare's texts: "'Tis done! The scene of life will quickly close...Ambitions vain delusive dreams are fled/ And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror..." (58). But, significantly, Garrick's emphasis on Shakespeare's ability to create moral (and moralistic) characters cannot, according to Garrick, be separated from his virtues as a man.

Another aspect of Garrick's Ode is interesting in relation to modern day bardolatry. Much of Garrick's editorial work, according to Cunningham, was focused on editing wordplay from Shakespeare's texts. In the comedies (and the humor in Shakespeare's tragedies) censorship was necessary because "what was objectionable about the old plays was not the subject matter itself—the perennial themes were sex, class and money—but the crudity of language used to refer to staple plot elements such as cuckoldry and seduction" (27). In *Romeo and Juliet*, much of the sexual joking had to be removed for "the majority of critics of the 18th century deplored Shakespeare's wordplay" (65). The problem with *Romeo and Juliet* was the "quibbles." A quibble was defined as "low conceit depending on the sound of words; a pun" (64). Thus, 830 lines were deleted. Garrick's excisions must be seen in context; the attitude to wordplay in general changed during the 18th century as wit became "kinder and gentler" and critics scorned the excoriations of Restoration comedy. Though at the time this was thought to be merely an emphasis on a different kind of wit, I would submit that it was, in effect, an attack on wit itself—and ultimately a critique of a language-centred theater. As soon as puns and sexual subtext are excised from humor, the polysemous quality of the language is fundamentally challenged.

Essentially, what Garrick did was remove the words that he found obscure or tainted by "double entendre" and replace them with poetry of his own that gave actors (particularly himself) more opportunity to portray the specific moral choices

of the character being played. Because Garrick was a theatrical innovator, the new words that he gave himself to speak as Macbeth and Lear were accompanied by what were considered realistic facial expressions and gestures that articulated the way in which the moral dilemmas of the character found concrete expression. This became his trademark as an actor.

I would suggest that Garrick's emphasis on Shakespeare's character creation and his relatively careless treatment of Shakespeare's language is similar to bardolator Harold Bloom. Bloom's favorite character is undoubtedly Falstaff. And Falstaff was (not coincidentally, I think) the only Shakespeare character to be mentioned in Garrick's Ode. Bloom controversially prefers Falstaff to Hamlet. Perhaps Bloom's choice of Falstaff (like Garrick's) had to do with the fact that Falstaff is a (arguably) kinder, gentler, less morally ambiguous character than Hamlet.

I suggest this because the hallmark of Bloom's Shakespeare criticism is not only his emphasis on Shakespeare's characters but on their moral value, which he singles out over poetry as Shakespeare's most significant contribution to theatrical art, literature, and human consciousness itself. For instance, Bloom says of Falstaff: "Many of us become machines for fulfilling responsibilities; Falstaff is the largest and best reproach we can find. I am aware that I commit the original Sin that all historicists—of all generations—decry, joined by all formalists as well. I exalt Falstaff above his plays" (13-14).

Both Garrick's and Bloom's approaches are, I would suggest, fundamentally moralistic. Both critics (the first of the "stage" and the second of the "page") focus not on Shakespeare as stylist or poet, but instead on Shakespeare as the creator of human beings who teach us about goodness (in Garrick's case) and "human-ness" (in Bloom). For Oxfordians the "character obsession" that typifies both approaches is significant because attached to it are spoken or unspoken notions about Shakespeare's essential goodness and/or worthiness as a person. In addition, though we may disagree with Alan Nelson's idea that de Vere was fundamentally "monstrous," most Oxfordians would agree that the very real Edward de Vere was necessarily more complex and less "perfect" than the fantasy of the gentleman farmer and family man created by Stratfordians. Finally, this fantasy came to its first and perhaps most brilliant flowering during the era of a master bardolator named David Garrick.

Works Cited

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