

## Roscius

John Hill, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London: R. Griffiths, 1750), pp. 68–71. Bodleian Library, Oxford University, shelfmark Vet. A4 f.746.

Charles Churchill, *The Rosciad* (London: Printed for the author, 1761), pp. 1–3, 81 [18], 20, 21–2. Bodleian Library, shelfmark Vet. A5 e.1861 (2).

Garrick acquired the nickname ‘Roscius’ on his first trip to Dublin in 1742, when he acted there in the summer at the New Theatre in Smock Alley, running through all the parts he had made his own in London and, for the first time, playing Hamlet, to great applause, with Peg Woffington as Ophelia. The nickname stuck, and though it was also used ironically by his enemies, anticipating hubris, it served to link Garrick’s reputation permanently to the greatest actor of antiquity, a friend of Cicero who lived in the first century BC, who similarly achieved recognition and fame at a time when actors, in general, were not highly thought of. In a sense, then, ‘Roscius’ stands for a basic habit of audiences and theatre critics, in the forging of a connection, or even a comparison, between actors, and – significantly for the eighteenth century in particular – forging a connection between the classical age and an age that sought to emulate it. The existence of a new Roscius in the British Isles in the 1740s was a cause for national pride.

It is also a nickname associated with the strain of panegyric that emerged in both poetry and prose, in which the surpassingly excellent Garrick can sometimes seem to have surpassed criticism altogether. ‘All the labours of the critics can do nothing by the dead letter of criticism against the living force of Mr. Garrick’s representation,’ admitted Elizabeth Montagu in May 1770.<sup>1</sup> An editor of Shakespeare, George Steevens, writing five years earlier, had agreed: ‘Often when I have taken the pen in my hand to try to illustrate a passage, I have thrown it down again with discontent when I remembered how able you were to clear that difficulty by a single look, or particular modulation of voice, which a long and laboured paraphrase was insufficient to explain half so well!’<sup>2</sup> Acting itself becomes impossible to paraphrase, such is its power. Arthur Murphy notes that Colley Cibber, writing about Thomas Betterton, another English ‘Roscius’, ‘does not descend, as we might have expected, into minute particulars’; in Garrick’s

case, 'Many of his great parts in tragedy were so many lectures on the subject. Hutcheson on the passions does not give so clear an analysis.'<sup>3</sup>

In *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing*, Garrick's triumph is also one of man over nature's limitations. 'We believe that Mr Garrick is the smallest man that ever attempted the character of a king or heroe,' writes the critic, 'who makes the capital figure in the play he appears in; but we also believe him to be one of the greatest men that ever did so' (below, p. 83):

[...] he no sooner spoke than we forgot every thing we saw, to give attention to what we heard; and that notwithstanding his naturally contemptible figure, no man ever fill'd a stage with more majesty than he, in those speeches in the third act, where he expresses all the rage and anguish mix'd together that words perhaps are capable of describing. (below, p. 85)

To one of Garrick's twentieth-century biographers, the author of these words, the physician, biologist and theatrical dilettante Dr John Hill (1714–75), appears to be 'a figure who, even by the standards of the eighteenth century, must be rated as outstandingly bizarre.'<sup>4</sup> At different times, Hill operated as an apothecary, an actor, a theatre critic and, in the eyes of the poet Christopher Smart, an 'archduke'. He had 'scurrilous courage – on paper – and has no less abject pusillanimity when called to account for his outrages,' said Percy Fitzgerald: 'He had a libellous periodical, called "The Inspector," which he wrote entirely himself, and which was said to have brought him in, in a single year, no less a sum than fifteen hundred pounds. In this organ he assumed the airs of a public critic, could air his own opinions ... with an amusing vanity.'<sup>5</sup> Yet Hill deserves more serious consideration than these dismissals would suggest. He played a crucial role, for one thing, in the mid-century circulation of ideas about theatre. *The Actor* was Hill's translated variation on *Le Comédien* (1747) by Pierre Rémond de Sainte Albine. It first appeared in 1750, and was then expanded for a second edition five years later. It was this second edition that was then translated back into French as *Garrick, ou, Les acteurs anglais*, and found an attentive reader in Denis Diderot, who took issue with Hill's theories on acting in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien*.

Like Garrick, Hill maintained that as much skill should go into the portrayal of a soldier as a monarch, a bit part as a romantic lead, and argued that 'Playing is a science, and is to be studied as a science'; 'A perfection in the player is the hiding himself in his character.'<sup>6</sup> But whereas Diderot and others would argue that this concealment is a process of abnegation, of wearing a mask and nothing more, Hill saw it as a matter of entering into the character completely – so that, for example, only somebody who has loved can play a lover. Garrick, seen as the actor who either feels nothing of the character he is portraying or feels everything, epitomizes either Diderot's automaton or Hill's man of feeling.

The compliment that came from the poet and clergyman Charles Churchill (1732–64) in March 1761 not only celebrated Garrick as the greatest of actors – albeit one surrounded by flawed or even mediocre colleagues – but turned its author into a celebrity. Churchill had paid himself for the publication of his immediately successful satire *The Rosciad*, but soon found himself called on to expand on it for eight subsequent editions in the course of the next two years. The structure of the poem certainly made that possible: it imagines ‘Roscius deceased’ and the subsequent competition among the actors to succeed him. New challengers could easily be accommodated, though it is Garrick who inevitably emerges as the heir to the throne. Churchill had been watching the players closely, according to Thomas Davies, from ‘the first row of the pit, next to the orchestra’: ‘In this place he thought he could best discern the real workings of the passions in the actors, or what they substituted in the place of them.’ As Davies tells the story, Churchill ‘had no occasion to advertise his poem in the public prints; the players spread its fame all over the town; they ran about like so many stricken deer; they strove to extract the arrow from the wound by communicating the knowledge of it to their friends.’ Furthermore, the public thought that the poem was ‘a pleasant and reasonable retaliation for the mirth which the stage had continually excited at their expence.’<sup>7</sup> What the theatre historian John Genest called ‘Churchill’s never-to-be-forgotten Poem’<sup>8</sup> was, to Davies, ‘a very poignant censure on the mistakes and defects of the plays in general [but] a laboured panegyric upon Mr. Garrick, who purchased more envy by it than he could possibly acquire fame.’<sup>9</sup> Garrick’s turn to feel the ‘satirical lash’ would come, however, very soon, when his alleged response to the *Rosciad* – that Churchill had done it in the hope of receiving the freedom of the house – got back to the author, who duly and furiously turned against him in *The Apology*, published in May 1761. Like *The Rosciad*, it was popular enough to go through several editions in that year alone, though Garrick hurried to agree a peace with Churchill, through mutual friends.

#### Notes

1. Boaden, vol. 1, p. 385.
2. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 216–17.
3. Murphy, vol. 2, pp. 177–9.
4. McIntyre, p. 278.
5. Fitzgerald, p. 149.
6. John Hill, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London: R. Griffiths, 1755), pp. 12, 152.
7. Davies, vol. 1, pp. 313–4.
8. John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, 10 vols (Bath: H. E. Carrington, 1832), vol. 4, p. 631.
9. Davies, vol. 1, p. 315.

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We believe that Mr. *Garrick* is the smallest man that ever attempted the character of a king or hero, who makes the capital figure in the play he appears in ; but we also believe him to be one of the greatest men that ever did so. We have already quoted the excellencies of Mr. *Quin*, in the character of *Pierre*, whose figure all the world must allow pleads vastly in his advantage in the character of that great, that hardy commander. We expect, from the nature of the character, a man of stature in it ; yet we do not observe that Mr. *Garrick* is an inch too short in it while he plays it ; or scarce that he is a whit inferior to Mr. *Quin*, while he's saying to his false friend, who assures him he has taken care to save his life,

I scorn it more, because preserv'd by thee :  
 And as when first my foolish heart took pity  
 On thy misfortunes, sought thee in thy miseries,  
 Reliev'd thy wants, and rais'd thee from the state  
 Of wretchedness in which thy fate had plung'd  
 thee,  
 To rank thee in a list of noble friends,  
 All I receiv'd in surety for thy truth  
 Were unregarded oaths ; and this—this dagger,  
 Giv'ᵐ

*The* A C T O R. 69

Giv'n with a worthless pledge, thou since hast  
 stol'n:  
 So I restore it back to thee again;  
 Swearing by all those pow'rs which thou hast  
 violated,  
 Never from this curs'd hour to hold communion,  
 Friendship, or interest with thee; tho' our years  
 Were to exceed those limited the world.  
 Take it—farewell—for now I owe thee nothing.

If we would see the power of art to hide the deficiencies of nature in regard to this performer in a yet stronger light, let us recollect him in King *Lear*. We are apt to believe that the want of figure never appear'd so glaringly in Mr. *Garrick* as in this character. It must be acknowledg'd that to look at him only, he appears rather a *Gomez* or a *Fondlewife* than a *British* monarch: but who ever recollected this when they heard him say to his unnatural daughter,

Blasts upon thee.

Th'untented woundings of a father's curse  
 Pierce every sense about thee. Old fond eyes  
 Lament this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,  
 And cast ye with the waters that ye lose  
 To temper clay.—No, gorgon, thou shalt  
 find  
 That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think  
 I have thrown off for ever.

If there be any thing that comes in competition with the unluckiness of this excellent player's figure in this character, it is the appearance he made in his new habit for *Othello*. We are us'd to see the greatest majesty imaginable express'd through-

70            *The* A C T O R.

throughout that whole part; and tho' the joke was somewhat prematurely delivered to the public, we must acknowledge that the appearance he made in that tramontane drefs made us rather expect to see a tea-kettle in his hand, than to hear the thundering speeches *Shakespeare* has thrown into that character, come out of his mouth. Tho' we acknowlege that Mr. *Garrick* did well to part with this character to a man whose figure seems more adequate to our ideas of a heroe; yet we cannot but observe at the same time, that when he perform'd it, he no sooner spoke than we forgot every thing we saw, to give attention to what we heard; and that notwithstanding his naturally contemptible figure, no man ever fill'd a stage with more majesty than he, in those speeches in the third act, where he expresses all the rage and anguish mix'd together that words perhaps are capable of describing.

Ha! false to me!

I swear 'tis better to be much abus'd,  
Than but to know't a little.

What sence had I of her stolen hours of lust;  
I saw it not, thought it not, it harm'd not me;  
I found not *Cassio's* kisses on her lips.—

He that is robb'd, not wanting what is stolen,  
Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all.

I had been happy if the general camp,  
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known! O now for ever  
Farewel the tranquil mind, farewel content,  
Farewel the plumed troops, and the big war,  
That make ambition virtue: O farewel  
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing sife,  
The royal banner, and all quality,

Pride,

*The* A C T O R. 71

Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious  
war :

Farewel! *Othello's* occupation's gone.

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[ 1 ]



T H E  
R O S C I A D.

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OSCIUS deceased, each high aspiring  
play'r

Push'd all his int'rest for the vacant  
chair.

The buskin'd heroes of the mimic stage

No longer whine in love, and rant in rage;  
The monarch quits his throne, and condescends 5  
Humbly to court the favour of his friends;  
For pity's sake tells undeserv'd mishaps,  
And their applause to gain, recounts his claps.  
Thus the victorious chiefs of antient Rome,  
To win the mob, a suppliant's form assume; 10  
In pompous strain fight o'er the extinguish'd war,  
And shew where honour bled in ev'ry scar.

BUT though bear merit in Rome appear,  
'Tis not the strongest plea for favour here;

B

We

1                   The R O S C I A D.

We form our judgment in another way ;                   15  
 And they will best succeed, who best can pay :  
 Those who would gain the votes of British tribes,  
 Must add to force of merit, force of bribes.

WHAT can an Actor give ? in ev'ry age  
 Cash hath been rudely banish'd from the stage ; 20  
 Monarchs themselves to grief of ev'ry play'r,  
 Appear as often as their image there :  
 They can't, like candidate for other feat,  
 Pour seas of wine, and mountains raise of meat.  
 Wine ! they could bribe you with the world as soon ;  
 And of roast beef they only know the tune.           26

But what they have they give ; could CLIVEDO more.  
 Though for one million he had brought home four ?

S---R keeps open house at Southwark fair,  
 And hopes the friends of humour will be there. 30  
 In Smithfield, Y---s prepares the rival treat,  
 For those who laughter love instead of meat.  
 F---TE, at Old House, for even F---TE will be  
 In self-conceit an actor) bribes with tea ;  
 Which W---K---S---N at second hand receives,           35  
 And at the New pours water on the leaves.

THE TOWN divided, each runs sev'ral ways,  
 As passion, humour, int'rest, party sways.  
 Things of no moment, colour of the hair,  
 Shape of a leg, complexion brown and fair ;           40  
 A dress well chosen, or a patch misplac'd,  
 Conciliate favour, or create distaste.

FROM galleries loud peals of laughter roll,  
 And thunder SHUTER's praises—he's so droll.  
 Embox'd the ladies must have something smart, 45  
 PALMER ! Oh ! PALMER tops the janty part.  
 Seated in pit, the dwarf with aching eyes  
 Looks up, and vows that BARRY's out of size ;  
 Whilst to six Feet the stripling vig'rous grown,  
 Declares that GARRICK is another COAN.           50

WHEN place of judgment is by whim supply'd,  
 And our opinions have their rise in pride ;

When,

The R O S C I A D. 3

When, in discoursing on each mimic elf,  
 We praise and censure with an eye to self;  
 All must find friends; and A--M--N bids as fair 55  
 In such a court, as GARRICK for the chair.



GRAY-BEARDED vet'rans, who, with partial  
 tongue,  
 Extol the times when they themselves were young;  
 Who, having lost all relish for the stage, 605  
 See not their own defects, but lash the age,  
 Receiv'd, with joyful murmurs of applause,  
 Their darling chief, and lin'd his fav'rite cause.  
 FAR be it from the candid Muse to thread  
 Insulting o'er the ashes of the dead. 610  
 But just to living merit, she maintains,  
 And dares the test, whilst GARRICK's Genius  
 reigns;  
 Antients, in vain, endeavour to excel,  
 Happily prais'd if they could act as well.



LAST, GARRICK came.—Behind him throug a  
 train  
 Of snarling critics, ignorant as vain.

ONE

The R O S C I A D. 21

ONE finds out,—" He's of stature somewhat  
low. ————— 705  
 " Your Heroe always should be tall you know.—  
 " True nat'ral greatness all consists in height." ———  
 Produce your voucher, Critic.---" Serjeant KYT. ."  
 ANOTHER can't forgive the paltry arts  
 By which he makes his way to shallow hearts ; 710  
 Mere pieces of finesse, traps for applause. ———  
 " Avaunt unnat'ral start, affected pause."  
 FOR me, by Nature form'd to judge with phlegm,  
 I can't acquit by wholesale nor condemn.  
 The best things carried to excess are wrong ; 715  
 The start may be too frequent, pause too long.  
 But only us'd in proper time and place,  
 Severest judgment must allow them Grace.  
 IF Bunglers, form'd on Imitation's plan,  
 Just in the way that Monkies mimick Man ; 720  
 Their copied scene with mangled arts disgrace,  
 And pause and start with the same vacant face ;  
 We join the critic laugh ; those tricks we scorn,  
 Which spoil the scenes they mean them to adorn.  
 BUT when, from Nature's pure and genuine  
 source, 725  
 These strokes of acting flow with gen'rous force ;  
 When in the features all the soul's portray'd,  
 And passions, such as GARRICK's, are display'd ;  
 To me they seem from thickest feelings caught :  
 Each start, is Nature ; and each pause, is Thought.  
 WHEN Reason yields to Passion's wild alarms,  
 And the whole state of Man is up in arms ; 732  
 What, but a Critic, could condemn the Play'r  
 For pausing here, when Cool Sense pauses there ?  
 Whilst, working from the heart, the fire I trace,  
 And mark it strongly flaming to the face ; 736  
 Whilst, in each sound, I hear the very man ;  
 I can't catch words, and pity those who can.  
 LET Wits, like Spiders, from the tortur'd brain  
 Fine-draw the critic-web with curious pain ; 740  
The

