1769-2016 and All That Jazz

by David P. Gontar (April 2014)

> *They say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.*
>
> — *Shakespeare*

At the conclusion of the Seven Year's War, Britain's global empire was firmly established. North America and India were well in hand. The first of the Hanover kings to possess English as his native tongue, George III, sat amiably atop the throne. With the signing of the Treaty of Paris, February 10, 1763, the mood of security gave way to pomp and euphoria. Later that year, on September 15, 1763, trendy thespian David Garrick and his trophy bride, Viennese ballerina Eva Maria Violetta, left London for a Continental jaunt. Peter Walch observes, "Their trip was designed in part for their mutual physical relaxation and at least secondarily to give his audiences, whom he suspected of becoming weary of his dominating presence upon the English stage, a rest as well." (Walch, 523) Prof. Walch adds, "Garrick was playing the role of British gentleman on the Grand Tour with considerable relish and panache." (Walch, 523) Lionized in London, he thrived on publicity, and was so used to being the butt of criticism and satire that on occasion he even penned adverse notices of his own performances. Though he possessed a labile countenance difficult to capture with pen or brush, an avalanche of Garrick figures and visages nonetheless inundated spectators, theatre-goers and many a country seat. (See, *e.g.*, Thomas Patch's droll caricature, "David Garrick in Italy," Exeter Museum and Gallery) David Garrick was the "Enlightenment's" rock star and Hollywood bombshell rolled into one; he was also the supreme and undisputed master of Shakespearean stage repertoire.

The Garricks continued exploring Italy through 1764, which happened to be the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of William of Stratford-on-Avon. Though the optimal date had now passed, Garrick wasn't fazed. As Martha Winburn England explains, by 1767 the residents of Stratford had begun fabrication of a new town hall. (England, 11) Town fathers approached him to request a portrait of himself and a Shakespeare bust, only to discover that their prospective donor had bigger fish to fry. In fact, since his return from Italy Garrick had

been nursing a far more ambitious aim: a Shakespeare “Jubilee,” or Brobdingnagian-publicity stunt, designed to thrust Stratford and Garrick (not necessarily in that order) up in lights forever. A drowsy sheep village nestled beside the meandering Avon would morph into a poetaster's Potemkin Village, a theatrical extravaganza complete with ceremonies, masques, pyrotechnics, concerts, and period balls. It was to be an Anglo-Saxon Mardi Gras, in which art crept while pompous façades and ballyhoo ballooned. Innocent of letters but eager for profit, the local burghers astutely grasped the plan's advantages. A verse of indigenous origin exulted:

> *Come, brothers of Stratford, these flocks let us shear,*
> *Which bright as if washed by our Avon appear!*
> *The coolest are they who from fleeces are free,*
> *And who are such trimmers, such trimmers as we?*
> *Sing tantarara, shear all, shear all!*
> *(England, 22)*

Guided by Garrick and his minions, work got under way, with an opening date projected for August 6, 1769. With the inevitable delays, the grand opening was put over to the following month.

During the interim, however, something intriguing occurred: a brilliant comet, first detected by Charles Messier (1730-1817) on August 8, 1769, swept across Europe and the British Isles. While throngs of merrymakers stared slack-jawed at the eerie display, Napoleon Bonaparte, the dread soldier who would reshape the modern world was craftily born in Corsica on August 15, 1769, the first of his many surprise attacks. In early September as the gates of the Shakespeare Jubilee burst open, this astronomical prodigy was still predominant.

Such conjunctions might be more easily dismissed had Shakespeare not deliberately brought comets into his own authorial orbit. As poet and thinker, such events seemed to him fraught with ineluctable meaning. Indeed, there are many volumes of his collected works (especially those based on *The Stratford Town Edition* of 1904) whose very first words raise the significance of a comet's arrival:

> *Hung be the heavens with black! Yield day to night!*
> *Comets, importing change of times and states,*
> *Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,*
> *And with them scourge the bad revolting stars*
> *That have consented unto Henry's death.*

(King Henry VI, Part One, I, i, 1-5, punctuation amended)

Similar references to portentous comets can be found in *Pericles*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Naturally there are many today who wonder whether Shakespeare credits accounts of gods, omens, ghosts, and prophecies; close reading of the texts strongly suggests it. (See, *e.g.*, Fernie, Ewan; Gontar, 161-185.) After all, this 'early modern' poet had one foot planted squarely in the medieval worldview (See, *e.g.,* E.M.W. Tillyard); modern naturalism and skepticism had not yet been universally embraced. The passage above is a good example. For what force could have swept aside England's greatness under the majestic rule of the beloved King Henry the Fifth if not an hostile concatenation of stellar agencies? Unlike the fixed stars themselves, whose regular movements afforded a relative modicum of predictability, comets were adventitious and troubling invaders whose rare intrusions signaled cosmic shifts in nature. Yet in the lines quoted above the Duke of Bedford invites comets to penetrate the sublunary realm not to subvert order directly but to “scourge” rebellious stars which have presided over the catastrophic losses of the Realm. Whether acting for good or ill, a comet was a sign of incipient ruptures in the social and political fabric. In 1769, the rebellion of the American colonies, the French Revolution and the 'meteoric' rise of the Napoleonic empire all lay just beyond the horizon. Hence some of the revelers who descended on Stratford for the transmogrification of “Shakespeare” must have done so with a sense of unfolding glory. The moment was big with the Future – yet redolent of the Past. Did not the successful conclusion of the Seven Year's War hearken back to England's 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada which launched English hegemony and the career of its bard? Fate is a two-edged sword; ahead might lie further blessings. What is known is this: under the basilisk eye of Comet Messier (1769) the name of “William Shakespeare” exploded into the firmament of public consciousness amid a frenzy of hucksterism and tawdry commercialization launched by promoter David Garrick, a turbulence that accelerates in the 21st century; and a man was born who would dazzle the world with military exploits and come to be the ruler of Europe, only to be ultimately defeated by an English officer. As the French empire emerged out of the Sphinx-like Napoleon, so from Shakespeare's mind sprang an intellectual and entertainment Hydra whose academic and popular bastions still hold sway on campuses, studios, wood stages, iPads and multiplexes around the globe.

On the other hand, by 1769 the sober naturalistic and mathematical philosophy of Sir Isaac Newton was well in the ascendant. His *Principia* was published in 1687. Telescopes were bringing into focus a cosmos controlled by laws capable of mathematical formulation. Hence for the few sophisticates in the crowd, the comet would have been nothing more than a material object in trajectory. It was the masses of common folk who lived not in thought but in feeling

for whom things were more complex, more profound. Vestiges of Stonehenge, Druidism and magic flowed in Celtic blood. Behind the “seeming knowledge” advanced by natural philosophy lay the uneasy sense that there remained things in heaven and earth beyond the comforts of merely calculative explanation. Indeed, this discrepancy continues to our own time. Do we know everything? Not quite. Our age is a chiaroscuro: the rays of “science” are often felt to only heighten the dark. What, then, did the comet of 1769 betoken, destiny, doom or . . . nothing at all? Ironically, it was the groundlings of the 18th century to whom Shakespeare's spiritual cosmology spoke most keenly.

Readers interested in learning more about the Jubilee will easily find a wealth of information. Martha Winburg England's classic *Garrick's Jubilee* (Ohio State University Press, 1964) is a convenient launching pad for study. It provides a close look at the objections, criticism and satire that arose when the more refined and thoughtful sensibilities of England became apprised of the penny arcade atmosphere brewing at Garrick's “jubilee,” which, for all its bardolatry, was always more about its robust impresario than its nominal subject. There is no need to catalogue the smarmy excesses which must have had our immortal poet turning in his grave. Rather than rehearse garish details (which include a giant boiled turtle), it will be sufficient to glance at Mr. Garrick's personal contribution, his “*Ode to Shakespeare*,” the centerpiece of a cavalcade of bad taste. This *Ode*, modeled on William Havard's *Ode to the Memory of Shakespeare* (1756), was spoken by Garrick as a recitative over string accompaniment (music courtesy of Thomas Arne). In his 'Advertisement' Garrick presented it “to the public as an object of their good nature, – to his friends as an exercise of their partiality, – to his enemies as a lucky opportunity of venting their wit, humour, criticism, spleen or whatever else they please, should they think it worthy of their notice.” In itself, of course, the “*Ode*” of David Garrick was plainly *not* worth anyone's notice. But, as a specimen of the human mind's capacity for exploitation, self-deception and *amour propre*, it has unique importance, especially in light of the projected Shakespeare hysteria about to be unleashed in 2016.

But let us pause to lend Mr. Garrick an ear.

> *To what blest genius of the isle,*
> *Shall Gratitude her tribute pay.*
> *Decree the festive day,*
> *Erect the statue, and devote the pile?*
> *Do not your sympathetic hearts accord,*
> *To own the 'bosom's lord?'*
> *Tis he! 'Tis he! – that demi-god!*
> *Who Avon's flow'ry margin trod,*

While sportive Fancy round him flew,

Where Nature led him by the hand,

Instructed him in all she knew,

And gave him absolute command!

'Tis he! 'Tis he!

'The god of our idolatry!'

To him the song, the Edifice we raise,

He merits all our wonder, all our praise!

Yet ere impatient joy break forth,

To tell his name, and speak his worth,

And to your spell-bound minds impart

Some faint idea of his magic art;

Let awful silence still the air!

It's unlikely, of course, that there was much silence – though there should have been.

Raucous stanzas mellow not with age. Though he enacted Shakespearean personae, it has been justly doubted to what extent Garrick actually digested the corpus, for everything in this appalling sing-song palaver betrays a lack of appreciation of that 'most humorous sadness' which is Shakespeare. If ever there was anything he loathed, it was cheap doggerel and vain flattery. Yet in his effusive litany, Garrick serves up heaping helpings of both, ironically in Shakespeare's honor! This is of reminiscent of Malvolio's *faux pas* in *Twelfth Night*. Duped by Maria into wooing his boss, Lady Olivia, he appears before her in cross-gartered yellow stockings, sporting a foolish grin on his face. These are things she is known to detest. (II, v, 191-199) The difference is that Malvolio is the victim of a clever plot and could urge that in his own defense, whereas Garrick (and the scribblers whose breathless dedications mar the 1623 Folio) have no excuses. Garrick appears as the victim not of others' schemes but of his own ambition, avarice and presumption. Readers who wish to take the measure of his blunder can review Shakespeare's firm and heartfelt repudiation of flattery in: the *Woodstock* manuscript (see, Gontar, 186); *Julius Caesar*, II, i, 202-208; III, i, 39-43; *King Henry VI*, Part One II, i, 52; *King Henry VI*, Part Three, III, ii, 143; *Twelfth Night*, I, v, 293; *King Richard II*, II, i, 88; *King Henry VI*, Part Two, I, i, 161; *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 141, et al.

Did Shakespeare write for praise?

He that is proud eats up himself.

Pride is his own glass, his own trumpet, his own

chronicle – and whatever praises itself but in the deed

devours itself in the praise.

(Troilus and Cressida, II, iii, 152-156)

And what is flattery but the antechamber of pride?

He does me double wrong

That wounds me with the flatteries

of his tongue.

(King Richard II, III, iii, 211-212)

As for quality of poetry, to understand Shakespeare's standpoint we need look no further than the sonnet sequence in *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which Biron, the King and two other lords compose love poems which descend from mediocre to downright ghastly. As Dumaine declaims his passion one can almost hear Shakespeare gritting his teeth:

On a day – alack the day –

Love, whose month is ever May,

Spied a blossom passing fair

Playing in the wanton air.

Through the velvet leaves the wind

All unseen can passage find,

That the lover, sick to death,

Wished himself the heavens' breath.

“Air”, quoth he, “thy cheeks may blow;

Air, would I might triumph so.

But, alack, my hand is sworn

Ne'er to pluck thee from thy thorn –

Vow, alack, for youth unmeet,

Youth so apt to pluck a sweet.

Do not call it sin in me

That I am forsworn for thee,

Thou for whom great Jove would swear

Juno but an Ethiop were,

And deny himself for Jove,

Turning mortal for thy love.”'

(IV, iii, 99-118)

And let's not forget:

The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates,
And Phibus' car
Shall shine from far
And make and mar
The foolish Fates.
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, I, ii, 26-34)

Funny, but pretty awful. Yet David Garrick was not to be outdone in bombast. He echoes the very worst in Shakespeare.

From the dark cloud, the hidden light
Bursts tenfold bright!
Prepare! prepare! prepare!
Now swell at once the choral song,
Roll the full tide of harmony along;
Let Rapture sweep the trembling strings,
And Fame expanding all her wings,
With all her trumpet-tongues proclaim,
The lov'd, rever'd immortal name!
SHAKESPEARE! SHAKESPEARE! SHAKESPEARE!
Let th' inchanting sound,
From Avon's shores rebound;
Thro' the Air,
Let it bear,
The precious freight the envious nations round!

Well, it's the thought that counts, they say. But is this thought?

Without a clue as to how a lad from the boondocks could have so rapidly scaled the heights of Mt. Parnassus, Garrick follows Milton and other “warbling” savants in chalking up Shakespeare's preternatural abilities to the gratuitous favors of “Nature” and “Fancy.” Yet philosopher John Locke had published his ground-breaking *Essay on Human Understanding* eighty

years earlier, in 1689, in which he showed beyond peradventure that knowledge is based on experience. And Locke's insights were preceded by Sir Francis Bacon's 'inductive' empirical method in *Novum Organum* (1620). By Garrick's time empiricism had become the epistemic English watchword. Any rational account of the writer's panoramic vistas and portrayals of courtly manners and idealized language would have been based squarely on instances of direct personal exposure. (See, Touchstone: “Wast ever in court, shepherd?”, *As You Like It*, III, ii, 11-43.) It goes without saying that the stripling from Stratford had no *entrée* in Elizabeth's privy chamber. But an aristocratic Shakespeare lines no pockets. The Stratford tourism industry which Garrick founded relied – and still relies – on the sensational and preposterous rags-to-riches saga of the deer-poaching-Mulberry-tree planting youth who takes London by storm. That's the sterner stuff that sells tickets and souvenirs in bustling Stratford Village.

Though Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* gently mocks his hyperbolical heroine by having her refer to her panting adolescent swain as “the god of my idolatry,” (II, i, 156) David Garrick had no hesitation in filching this ironic trope to characterize the English people's reverence for Shakespeare. But divinity creates *ex nihilo*, without effort, without care. What human beings forge in the smithy of their souls, to the contrary, comes at the cost of anguish, blood, sweat and tears. Garrick's *Ode to Shakespeare*, then, was composed not in honor of a man; it eulogizes a member of a fictive pantheon, one coarse enough to batten on trumpery as if it were nectar and ambrosia. Garrick's Shakespeare is an idol indeed, a bathetic vampire feeding on our “low-crookèd curtsies and base spaniel fawning.” (*Julius Caesar*, III, 1, 43)

Interspersed between Garrick's spoken lines are choral airs set in anapestic tetrameter, a metrical drone nowadays reserved for giggling babes. '*Twas The Night Before Christmas* and *Yertle the Turtle*, for example, are cast in anapestic tetrameter. (“So Yertle the Turtle King lifted his hand / And Yertle the Turtle King gave a command.”) One need hardly add that Shakespeare's preferred line is iambic pentameter. Only once did he ever stoop to anything as monotonous and juvenile as anapestic tetrameter, and that was to satirize the euphuistic cadences of his era in *Love's Labour's Lost*. (see, Boyet, II, i, 234-249.) Yet Mr. Garrick was sufficiently inspired to rush in where bards fear to tread. *Attendez* – and be edified:

Thou soft-flowing Avon, by thy silver stream
Of things more than mortal, sweet Shakespeare would dream,
The fairies by moonlight dance round his green bed,
For hallow'd the turf is which pillow'd his head.

The love-stricken maiden, the soft-sighing swain,
Here rove without danger, and sigh without pain,

The sweet bud of beauty, no blight shall here dread,
For hallow'd the turf is which pillow'd his head.

Here youth shall be fam'd, for their love, and their truth
And chearful old age, feel the spirit of youth; [!]
For the raptures of fancy here poets shall tread,
For hallow'd the turf is that pillow'd his head.

Flow on, silver Avon, in song ever flow,
Be the swans on thy bosom still whiter than snow,
Ever full be thy stream, like his fame may it spread,
And the turf ever hallow'd which pillow'd his head.

That “turf” would be truly “hallow'd” which shielded Shakespeare's ears from such twaddle. One should not, of course, condemn the poor meter, but the callow fellow who had the unmitigated chuztpah to use it in connection with the author of *Hamlet*. Evidently the lusty 18th century cultivated dozens of such dishwater ditties. Alas, each age must be accorded its Tin Pan Alley. But David Garrick was no Robbie Burns (1759-1796), who at ten years of age was too young to star at the English Jubilee. (see, *Flow Gently, Sweet Afton*, 1786).

* * *

Could we safely immure Mr. Garrick and his tacky confederates in the deepest *bolgia* of history, it would be one less headache. After all, the Russians buried their Chernobyl. The problem is, as someone once put it, past is prologue. (*The Tempest*, II, i, 979) Garrick's stentorian Ghost still stalks the land. For you see, 2016 is the 400th anniversary of the Stratford man's death, and the Shakespeare Industry is cranking up for a rollicking good time, as we learn in the Saturday, 5 January 2013 issue of *The Observer*. According to Mr. Ewan Fernie, Chair of Shakespeare Studies at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, the European union is being urged on this august occasion to bestow upon Shakespeare the title of “Poet Laureate of Europe” and – you guessed it – to present a spanking new version of Garrick's *Ode*! And why not? Has anything changed in 247 years? Part of the problem with the European Union, says Mr. Fernie, is that it has been conceived as a mere economic instrument. “What we want to do is suggest that there's a great cultural tradition to affirm and promote.” Indeed, who would ever think about 'economics' when there's so much damn money to be made? Never mind what Shakespeare did to the French in the *Henry* plays. The frogs are grown up now, and obviously in a mood to forgive and forget. Let's invite them to the party, it will be Field of Cloth of Gold all over again! Observed *The Observer* nostalgically:

> *Garrick put Stratford on the international map, transforming its former image as a provincial town. The programme took Shakespeare to the streets, with fireworks, a procession of characters from the plays and a masked ball. But the highlight was Garrick's delivery of his Ode, which hailed Shakespeare as "the god of our idolatry." Set to music by Thomas Arne, it was performed by the orchestra and chorus of Drury Lane Theatre. In 2016 the performers will be the Ex Cathedra [!!] Choir and the Orchestra of the Swan.*

Yes, history is poised to repeat itself (again). Curious about all this, we emailed Prof. Ewan Fernie on September 26, 2013 to learn of his progress, and were pleasantly surprised to hear back from him next day. Unfortunately, it seems the funding needed to campaign for Shakespeare as Poet Laureate of Europe was withheld. However, earnest talks with the European Union are proceeding, Prof. Fernie assures us. So, while 2016 may not see our Shakespeare crowned Europe's Poet Laureate, there is little doubt we'll be able to thrill to the fireworks, masked balls, the million chips hewn from the eternal Mulberry tree, and, best of all, a world-class broadcast of David Garrick's inimitable *Ode*. *Jubilee: The Sequel* is sure to reap megabucks for those poetry-loving merchants of County Stratford. Princess Kate and hubby Prince William will be putting in cameo appearances, as flashbulbs pop. Make your reservations early. Our own reservations are on record.

Well, there's precedent for all this. Long before 1769, Pope Leo X became famous selling "Indulgences" (that is, get-out-of-Purgatory-free cards) to obtain the cash to refurbish a drooping St. Peter's Basilica. At his installation in 1512 the brash new Pope leaned over and chortled to his brother, "Since God has given us the Papacy, let us enjoy it." And, *mutatis mutandis*, shall we not relish our bard? Let the welkin roar!

Naturally we double-checked our Almanacs to see if there's a pesky comet in the neighborhood which might spoil the fun in 2016. And — wouldn't you know it? — there is! The National Aeronautics and Space Administration had three proposals pending for 2016, one being the placement of a "Comet Hopper" on Comet 46P/Wirtaner to do whatever one does while perched on a comet. Sadly, there wasn't enough money and the "comet hopper" was scrapped. But 46P/Wirtaner must be presumed on its way and undaunted.

What, then, says our poet of things to come? Do we not whistle in the dark?

> *These late eclipses in the sun and moon*
> *portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature*
> *Can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself*
> *scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship*

falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries,
discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked
'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under
the prediction: there's son against father. The King
falls from bias of nature; there's father against child.
We have seen the best of our time. Machinations,
hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow
us disquietly to our graves.
(King Lear, I, ii, 101-112)

And *pace* cynical Edmund, goes not Shakespeare's heart with this? Old Lear is the victim of flatterers, after all. (I, i, 146-147) Mindless festivities tempt fate, like the super-elegant Titanic in its petty girth and pride, oblivious to a menacing sea. What if our giddy laughter goes not unheard, our vanities be seen? The gaze of Nemesis is pitiless and cruel.

WORKS CITED:

Martha Winburn England, *Garrick's Jubilee*, Ohio State University Press, 1964

Spiritual Shakespeares, Ewan Firnie, ed., Routledge, 2005

Ewan Fernie, personal correspondence, September 27, 2013

David P. Gontar, *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, New English Review Press, 2013

The Observer, January 5, 2013

Dr. Seuss, *Yertle the Turtle*, Random House, 1958

William Shakespeare The Complete Works, 2d ed., S. Wells and G. Taylor, eds., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005

Peter Walch, “David Garrick in Italy,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Summer, 1970)

David P. Gontar's latest book is