Edmund Burke’s Part in the Jubilee Oration

The explicit statement of the idea of the poet as creator was made in the Jubilee ode and oration. It is my hypothesis that Edmund Burke wrote about eight hundred words of the oration spoken by Garrick. No eyewitness, no direct evidence proves it, and so we must weigh opportunity, motive, and means. Burke indubitably had the mere opportunity. The two men enjoyed a long and unbroken friendship. The families were intimate. During the time in question, Burke asked Garrick for the loan of a thousand pounds; no letter in the preserved correspondence answers the request (the published correspondence is clearly incomplete), but Burke made the purchase the loan was to facilitate, and relations between them continued warm and jocular, marked by mutual respect and the record of favors graciously given and received.

The human situation suggests motives. Garrick took seriously the attacks on the Jubilee. He schemed carefully in framing his reply, and there is record of two plans he formulated and discarded: one, to answer his critics in the “Address to the Ladies”; two, to answer directly the challenge to his scholarship by making scholarly speeches at Stratford. But he ultimately accepted the dichotomy of Actor versus Scholar, inasmuch as he met the attacks with theatrical arguments. He would not, under the circumstances, have gone for help to a professional Shakespeare scholar. In all his preparations for the Jubilee he took the best help available; if an oration was needed, Burke
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was the best orator available. Burke was in no sense a professional Shakespeare scholar.

Burke also needed defense that summer; the Junius letters were appearing in the Public Advertiser side by side with Jubilee satire, and rumor attributed the authorship of the letters to Burke. In the drawing room, Garrick was Burke’s best defense. Such was the intimacy between the two men that Garrick’s denial silenced rumors.

What motive lay behind the preservation of anonymity? For the Jubilee oration is anonymous. Garrick never claimed authorship. The oration was printed before the Jubilee only. It appeared in the Advertiser for September 5, in Scots Magazine, the Whitehall Evening Post, Lloyd’s Evening Post, The Court Miscellany, and Jopson’s Coventry Mercury, always headed: “An Oration in honour of Shakespeare, intended to be spoken by Mr. Garrick, at Stratford-upon-Avon, during the jubilee.” Other Jubilee writings were printed for sale; not the oration. It appears in none of Garrick’s collected works, is never cited to him, even in abbreviated form. The first publication stating that Garrick wrote the oration appeared in 1806, with no evidence for attributing it to his pen. The oration was admired. At the time, it was assumed that he had taken help in its composition, but no letter, memoir, diary, or newspaper squib suggests any specific name for his helper except that of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, and she flatly denied the rumor. Moreover, her letter denying it was written immediately following a visit with her good friend Edmund Burke during which the Jubilee was a subject for discussion; he may have told her of his assistance. Mrs. Montagu was pleased with the prominence given her Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare at Stratford and in the published ode, and she enjoyed the dramatization at Drury Lane. She was pro-Jubilee, but she gave Garrick no help in person. Burke at this time had completed his slow and reluctant “divorce of
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the Muse," as he called his abandonment of belles-lettres. William Burke had replied to "The Muse Divorced" by a verse advising him:

Preserve your Pen for good, but private Ends
T'amuse yourself, Instruct and Charm your Friends.  

Once committed to politics, Burke followed this course; yet his Muse would have been at his friend's disposal, and Garrick would have respected his desire to keep his pen "private."

But let us consider the possibility that Garrick did write the oration, and for some reason refused to take advantage of his favorable publicity (an action not characteristic of him). Granting that Garrick certainly had opportunity and motive, did he have the means? His knowledge of Shakespeare was great, and his love was great. He had knowledge of Shakespeare's contemporary writers surpassing any man of his day. It was on a broad and sound comparative knowledge of dramatic literature that Garrick declared Shakespeare the god of his idolatry. The ode which declares it deals with the ideas expressed in the oration. Yet I take the position that Garrick did not have the means for writing the oration. The style is not his. On stage he could assume almost any nature, but the power did not extend to his writings.

He was a tolerably good parodist, but even his parodies are recognizable products.

Like many actors whose minds are well stocked in the memory section, he relied heavily on the apt and familiar quotation—as he did in the opening and closing sections of the oration, which he did write.

He strove for sudden, theatrical effects.

His prose on paper is jerky, unbalanced. When he reached an emotional climax, he changed the subject.
His organization is phonetic and emotional rather than logical.

His transitions are loose or nonexistent; he knew he could establish transitions by inflection and physical deportment.

He had no gift of imagery. With startling theatrical genius and literary éclat, he perceived and staged the congruity between life at the moment and some familiar phrase or classic situation. He could top a line with the best in history—that is, extend a given metaphor into unanticipated areas of thought. His prologues, epilogues, and epigrams are built mainly by the latter method, his best plays by the former. Linked with his theatrical genius, this perception of congruity in the apparently incongruous caused his writings to be highly valued in a day which cherished a “fine turn.” Left to his own devices, however, he was liable to produce something like “Be the swans on thy bosom still whiter than snow,” when he addressed the Avon. The innocent sensuality of the line is appropriate to the occasion, but the metaphor is not really great. Every item in the ode was staged, the mottoes on the transparencies were placed in the town, the chopped-down trees and uninclosed meadow were there to be used as “opening vistas,” and it was very effective.

In early days the actor Quin, seeing his audiences drawn away to Garrick’s style of acting, compared Garrick to George Whitefield, saying the public would soon return to the true church. Garrick “misunderstood” the true church to mean Rome, called Quin the pope and himself the Anglican church in his light-hearted quip: “It is not Heresy, but Reformation.” “The cheerfulest man of his age,” Johnson said; and Goldsmith said he was a wit “if not first, of the very first line.” That cheerfulness, that wit, that theatrical genius moved him to top his own line about the fame-like-a-stream, to convert his metaphor back to the literal when he flung open the Rotunda doors to display the swelling stream. But the metaphor in the original line does
not seem to represent literary genius. Two Jubilee metaphors, each staged with great care and consummate skill, made history: one, likening Shakespeare to the turtle, was a “topping” of a Burke metaphor; the other, the likening of Falstaff to a newly made world, if my hypothesis is correct, was another.

Burke did not write like Garrick. The oration opens and closes in Garrick’s style. From a misquotation of Pope he proves the supreme importance of drama among the arts. He closes with the thought that Shakespeare is dead and some day we shall all be dead, and in view of this fact—substantiated by several poetic quotations—we all should be better men and have more appreciation of Shakespeare. Between these two typical Garrick products is this passage:

It was happy for Shakespeare, and for us, that in his time there was no example by the imitation of which he might hope to be approved. He painted nature as it appeared to his own eye, and not from a transcript of what was seen in nature by another. The genius looks not upon nature, but through it; not at the outline only, but at the differences, nice and innumerable, within it; at all that the variation of tints, and the endless combinations of light and shade, can express. As the power of perception is more, more is still perceived in the inexhaustible varieties of life; but to copy only what another has seen is to render superior perspicacity vain; and neither the painter nor the poet can hope to excel who is content to reflect a reflection, and to seek for nothing in nature which others have not found.

But there are beauties in Shakespeare not relative—powers that do not imitate, but create. He was as another Nature: he represents not only actions that were not performed, but beings that do not exist; yet to these beings he assigns not only faculties, but character; he gives them not only peculiar dispositions, but characteristic modes of expressing them: they have character, not merely from the passions and understandings, but from situation and habit; Caliban and Ariel, like Shallow and Falstaff, are not more strongly distinguished in consequence of different natures than of different circumstances and employments.

As there was no poet to seduce Shakespeare into imitation,
there was no critic to restrain his extravagance; yet we find the force of his own judgment sufficient to rein his imagination, and to reduce to system the new worlds which he made.

Does anyone now inquire whether Shakespeare was learned? Do they mean whether he knew how to call the same thing by several names? for learning, with respect to languages, teaches no more; learning, in its best sense, is only nature at the rebound; it is only the discovery of what is; and he who looks upon nature with a penetrating eye derives learning from the source. Rules of poetry have been deduced from examples, and not examples from rules: as a poet, therefore, Shakespeare did not need books; and in no instance in which he needed them as a philosopher or historian does he appear ignorant of what they teach.

His language, like his conceptions, is strongly marked with the characteristic of nature; it is bold, figurative, and significant; his terms, rather than his sentences, are metaphorical; he calls an endless multitude a sea, by a happy allusion to the perpetual succession of wave to wave; and he immediately expresses opposition by taking up arms, which, being fit in itself, he was not solicitous to accommodate to his first image. This is the language in which a figurative and rapid conception will always be expressed: this is the language both of the prophet and the poet, of native eloquence and divine inspiration.

It has been objected to Shakespeare that he wrote without any moral purpose; but I boldly reply that he has effected a thousand. He has not, indeed, always contrived a series of events from the whole of which some moral precept may be inferred; but he has conveyed some rule of conduct, some principle of knowledge, not only in almost every speech of his dialogue, but in every incident, character, and event.

The first question to be raised in considering Burke's "means" for producing the oration is: Did he hold this opinion of Shakespeare? Some decades ago the answer would have been: Not so far as is known from his writings. Thomas MacKnight, writing in 1858, concluded that Burke's lack of appreciation of Shakespeare was almost his only flaw. The Burke canon then in print might lead to such a notion, for the essay on taste does not mention Shakespeare, nor does the fragment on drama
left in manuscript. Examples of the sublime and the beautiful are drawn from Homer, Virgil, Milton, with only two allusions to Shakespeare, one of those in a footnote. A Burke letter (now of questioned authenticity) said Plutarch was his favorite author and "Il Penseroso" was the greatest poem in the English language, though the same letter mentions Shakespeare.

In 1862, after MacKnight had published, a schoolboy letter of Burke's was printed which speaks of "my favorite Shakespeare." But it was 1923 before *The Reformer* was made public. Arthur William Samuels found a file of the publication in Dublin and reprinted it along with many early writings.

Burke entered Trinity College in Dublin on April 14, 1744. In November, 1745, Garrick came to Dublin for a brilliant season at Smock Alley. Mr. Samuels says the two may have met then (the date of their first meeting is not known). At any rate, young Burke saw Mrs. Bellamy and Spranger Barry join Sheridan and Garrick in memorable performances of Shakespeare. *The Reformer* attests young Burke's serious and continuing interest in the theater. It was a weekly periodical conducted and mainly written by him during his last months at Trinity College. Thirteen numbers appeared, one each Thursday from January 28 to April 21, 1748. The aim was to raise standards of public taste in the drama.

For one deep in the lore of Jubilee factions, it is interesting to see in *The Reformer* many names of persons later embattled in the Jubilee conflict, and to note the consistency with which pro-Jubilee spirits are viewed with sympathy and Jubilee satirists with antipathy. Burke's early opinions on dramatic technique show the lifelong consistency of some of his ideas. The opinions are unusual for the time, and even more unusual for the reasoning on which they are based. His most radical opinions are based on an appeal to tradition; his advice to the future is based on a sense of history. His dislike of stage alterations
(which then were all but taken for granted) came from what he saw as violations of the Elizabethan spirit; his pleas for decorum are argued from the conventions and beliefs of the age to which the play was addressed. For example, he was offended by comic witches in Macbeth because the audience to which Macbeth was addressed took witches seriously. His statements on Shakespeare anticipate romanticism in their sense of history, their reasoning on dramatic rules, their concept of genius and art.

Shakespeare had a Genius perhaps excelling anything that ever appeared in the World before him, so divine as even sanctify'd (if I may use the Expression) those Blemishes which in him only are pardonable; he had little Occasion for Rules, who found the Springs of Nature so copiously supply'd within him; for as Homer's Works are said to have furnished Aristotle with them, so this great Genius has (tho in less Degree) given Rise and Sanction to the best among us; so impossible is it for Men to be exact in the copying of Nature without coinciding in the same things; such is Shakespeare's Praise, that Parts which in other Men might be increased with Labour and Study, were in him the absolute Gift of Heaven;—Otway's small spark is lost in his blaze; and as for Dryden, he as industriously avoided Nature as this great Genius imitated it:—with respect to the Minores Poetae such as Rowe, Addison, and those who have wrote Tragedies since then, their works may be termed ingenious rather than great, and such as have deserved the Approbation, not Wonder of Mankind.9

That the mind of the schoolboy produced this romantic effusion in 1748 does not prove that the man wrote in 1769 the full statement of romantic doctrine of the oration, but it does suggest certain consistency of ideas.

Rhetoric. The firmly knit clauses, the skilful transitions, the balance of elements in the oration are like Burke's rhetoric. Ivor Brown and George Fearon noted the disparity between the oration and Garrick's Jubilee writings by saying it has, surpris-
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ingly, a "Ciceronean grandeur." It is oratorical rather than theatrical, suggesting the Cicero of 1769 rather than the Roscius of that age. It has the latent power of weighty rhetorical elements held in careful counterpoise. The oration is framed on a device often used by Burke: the incremental effect of a word reiterated in varying grammatical functions and varying (sometimes deceptive) shifts of meaning. The word nature is thus deployed throughout the oration. The actual meaning of the word is not constant; it gains in subtlety and force, leading swiftly from one concept to another while the word remains the same and clause is linked to clause in a patterned change and repetition that is typical of Burke's logical or quasi-logical structure.

Images. Burke's imagery has been classified by Henry Willis Wells as "expansive" in type. The expansive image appears in powerful and original theoretical speculation (e.g., Bacon, Jeremy Taylor, Shakespeare, Burke). Unlike the "intensive" image of emblematic thought, it is not easily visualized. Both terms of the metaphor have imagistic value and mutually reinforce one another. Professor Wells did not exemplify Burke's use of this image; perhaps his metaphor of tradition as an oak tree will serve, or his passage on society as a contract. "Society is indeed a contract," he says.

Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure; but the State ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are
living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular State is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures each in their appointed place.

The contract calls to mind first a voluntary legal and commercial union entered into for common material advantage, then it seems to be an inevitable condition of man, then it transcends the human and the mundane. In the course of this brief passage Burke uses verbal forms so as to suggest that what began as a free partnership has come to be seen as a chain (linking, connecting, holds, etc.). In similar manner in the oration, Poet is a major term of a metaphor; a succession of minor terms (painter, prophet, seer) merge their meanings until the poet becomes a creator of new worlds governed by the autonomy of the artist.

Mysticism. The powers of genius are described in terms which suggest the organicism that was part of Burke's mental disposition. The poetic process is rendered in the metaphor of creation of new worlds and new psychic entities. The beings live, the worlds move governed by such cosmic laws as govern society in the passage quoted above, at once man-made, inevitable, and transcendent. Garrick was no mystic, but Burke has been called by Dr. Carolyn Spurgeon one of the greatest philosophical mystics of English literature. "He believes in a life in the Universe, in a divine order, mysterious and inscrutable in origins and in ends, of which man and society are a part."12

Tactics. Consider the method by which the oration does not openly take issue with eighteenth-century truisms, but rather dissolves them and reverses them into new ideas. Both the oration and the passage cited from The Reformer raise the
question of neoclassical strictures, the "flaws-and-beauties" school of criticism. Aristotle is invoked, the Rules first acceded to, and then attached to poetic practices that seem foreign to them. I am not insinuating a charge of sophistry. Burke did not think Aristotle was a neoclassicist; he thought the mathematical sort of Lockean reasoning was opposed in spirit to Aristotle. "Aristotle, the great master of reasoning, cautions us, and with great weight and propriety, against this species of delusive geometrical accuracy in moral arguments, as the most fallacious of all sophistry." To those literary critics of the late eighteenth century who in England and Germany denounced "the cold correctness of the Stagyrite," Burke probably would simply have cited Aristotle himself. The Jubilee oration, as compared with The Reformer, demonstrates what may be an increased skill in this argumentation by reconciliation; certainly it displays the same unusual interpretation of Aristotle. In the 1770's both Maurice Morgann and Pierre Le Tourneur drew on the oration as a common source for their method of reconciling Shakespeare and Aristotle: since Aristotle's rules are descriptive rather than prescriptive, he would have written quite other rules had he only had Shakespeare's plays as a basis.\textsuperscript{13}

Consider the concept of originality. A similar method of reconciliation reinterprets Locke into Locke's antithesis. The oration first presents the artist in Lockean terms. He seems to be a \textit{tabula rasa} receiving sense impressions in a conventionally empirical manner. Then he sees through Nature (to what? a materialist might ask). Then he is "as another Nature," originating his own data independent of sense impressions in a manner far removed from the empirical denial of originality.

The poet, a just creator under Jove, was a critical truism derived from Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's idea of the act of creation was a rational selectivity according to rules prescribed by society; the oration leads the reader to a mystical vision of
the artist creating new worlds and new beings with their own histories and habits. The force that produces them is creative, the force that governs them is the individual judgment of the artist, the artist is autonomous.

Burke and the eighteenth century. Professor Alfred Cobban has traced with meticulous care the pattern of Burke’s absorption and reversal of ideas current in his day. One is reluctant to place beside Professor Cobban’s reasoned discourse the rather hectic writings of Charles Knight; in fact, I feel some reluctance to call a witness whose views are generally at variance with my own. Yet the writings do occupy a key position; only one history of eighteenth-century Shakespeare criticism was written during the full flush of romanticism—Studies in Shakspere (1849) by Charles Knight. Announcing himself as spokesman of the school of criticism founded by Coleridge and Schlegel, he views the preceding century as a period that understood neither poetry nor criticism. He noted some sound but inconsequential work done late in the century by Whiter and Morgann, but for the rest he cuts a swathe of indiscriminate contempt through great names and small: Rowe, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Pope, Warburton, Johnson, Hume, Farmer, Malone, Sherlock. Being French and therefore not morally responsible, Voltaire was less culpable in his attacks on Shakespeare than was Mrs. Montagu in her “maudlin defense.” Garrick had French blood and French sympathies, he was under the malign influence of his old teacher Johnson, and he made stage alterations. This “manager-botcher” of a theatrical dolt could not have written the Jubilee oration, nor could he even have understood the sentences as he spoke them. For in the darkness that covered the earth in those days, there shone one pure ray of light, daystar to the sun of Coleridge—the Jubilee oration. It was never Garrick who was “the first man in England to discover that Shakespeare was a creator.” Only one man was alive in 1769 with a philosophy broad and
deep enough to have produced the oration. That man was Edmund Burke.¹⁵

Samuel Johnson. Place beside the first paragraph of the oration, as quoted, this passage from Chapter X of Rasselas. “The business of the poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip [cf. “all that the variations of tint . . . can express”] or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest [cf. “the endless combinations of light and shade”].” The Rambler, No. 36, says: “Poetry cannot dwell upon the minuter distinctions, by which one species differs from another, without departing from that simplicity of grandeur which fills the imagination; nor dissect the latent qualities of things, without losing its general power of gratifying every mind by recalling its conceptions.” (Cf. “the differences, nice and innumerable.”)

Beside the second paragraph, place the words of the Preface: “His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places . . . by the peculiarities of studies or professions . . . they are the genuine progeny of common humanity . . . . In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.”¹⁶

Beside the fifth paragraph place, not so justly, Johnson’s adverse criticism of Shakespeare’s language (“ungrammatical, perplexed and obscure,” he “has corrupted language by every mode of depravation.” “A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it”) but more fairly, his praise from the Preface: “The dialogue of this author is often so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it scarcely seems to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation, and common occurrences.”¹⁷
The sixth paragraph affronts Johnson directly: It has been said—by Johnson, in a passage so familiar as hardly to need quotation: "He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. . . . This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time and place."18

So William Blake annotated the Discourses of Reynolds (which were erroneously attributed to Johnson). And in the oration, another age confronts Johnson, an age not fully come, but foretold at Stratford. Burke had foresworn belles-lettres and gone on to other battles; they were not the revolutions Blake desired, but Burke had his own type of mysticism.

Patterns of public reaction. In England Burke's early critical writings were not failures, but "fruitless successes," to use the phrase of Thomas W. Copeland. Historians of German literature, on the other hand, have used "epoch-making" to describe the effect on German thought. Lessing and Kant were deeply affected. Following a similar pattern, the Jubilee oration as an abstract statement had little effect in England, though I can trace its influence later in the century in the Scottish Common Sense school, especially in the writing of William Richardson. But in Germany it found an enthusiastic audience among the young intellectuals who formed the nucleus of the Sturm und Drang. Three men (Herder, Goethe, Lenz) who made subsequent statements on the matter withdrew from their position of Jubilee enthusiasm for Garrick. The oration, in other words, and the dramatization of its concepts, made claim on their sympathies that was out of proportion to their admiration for Garrick in other aspects of his work on Shakespeare. Much that ramified from these German writings came back into English criticism by way of the German readings of Coleridge and Carlyle.
The abstract statement of the oration made slight impression in England. What got the ideas into the bloodstream was Garrick's staging of them. From theaters in London, the provinces, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the colonies, the doctrine was pronounced, and was met by continuing and unavailing protests from pious and rational natures, denounced as the death of reason, idolatry, superstitious sacrifice, blasphemy. The metaphor of poetry as heterocosm was a commonplace of English criticism with a history traceable (as Professor Meyer Abrams has traced it) back to the Italian Renaissance. Used simply as a metaphor it carried no stigma of blasphemy. As for the appearance of Shakespeare's statue on stage surrounded by his "creatures," that had been going on since 1741. By 1769 some people thought it was a cliché offensive by its triteness, but no one before the Jubilee had denounced it in the name of reason or religion. The Jubilee message was something quite different from what had been before, and the public knew it. Whether the individuals saw the complex of ideas as the only true wisdom, or "spilt religion," or the death of reason, the complex of ideas was not made up of Locke and Shaftesbury.

Garrick dramatized, publicized it. He could turn an abstruse idea into stagecraft, as he did turn Brown's language theories into stagecraft and produced the first spoken recitatives for his ode. He made no contribution to abstract thought in that field, yet the spoken recitative went into French opera from Garrick, not directly from Brown. "Damn the man," Kitty Clive once said in awestruck exasperation. "He could act a grid-iron." He was indeed a great actor, and he mirrored his age. Confronted with a mind of such generating greatness as Burke's, he might have mirrored something that wrought subtle alterations in European ideas. But I do not think he wrote the abstract statement. The grammar, imagery, method, and content seem to be Burke's.


3. Ibid., 225.


8. Ibid., pp. 68-70. For the date 1862, see p. xxvi, "Leadbeater Papers."


15. Charles Knight, *Studies in Shakspere* (1868), p. 555. First published in 1849. Knight, who had close associations with Stratford (he was on the committee for the purchase of the Birthplace), probably read the oration in Wheler's History, which attributes authorship to Garrick.


17. Ibid., p. 13.
