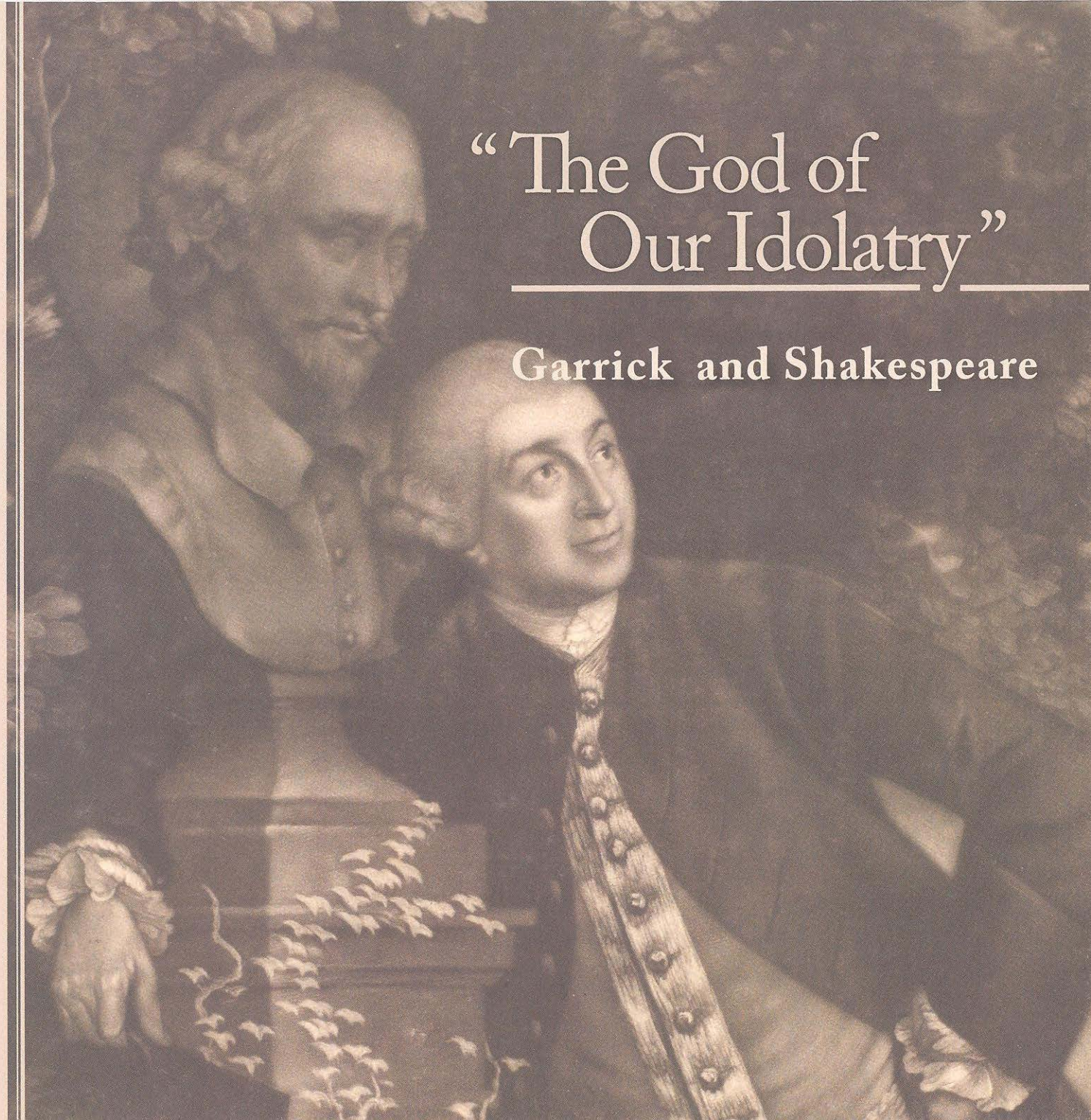
Shakespeare at Yale

The Lewis Walpole Library

Yale



"The God of Our Idolatry"

Garrick and Shakespeare

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Garrick and Shakespeare

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Exhibition curated by:

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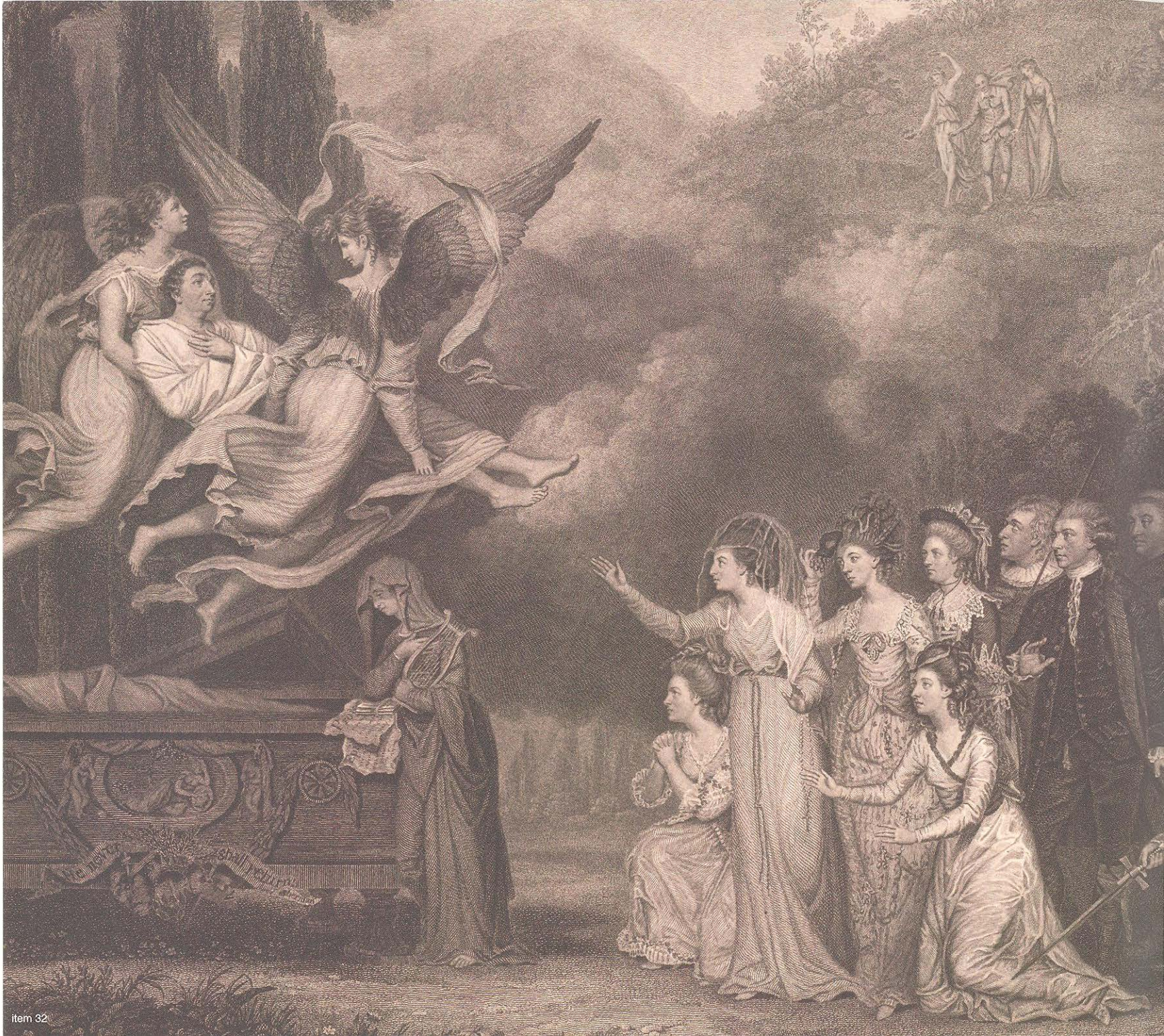

item 32

When the great actor David Garrick apostrophized Shakespeare as "the god of our idolatry" at the Stratford Jubilee in 1769, he spoke not only for an age but for all time. Today, the sacred flame that George Bernard Shaw called "Bardolatry" burns as brightly as ever: the semester-long celebration, "Shakespeare at Yale," which boasts at least one commemorative event scheduled on every day of the spring 2012 term, attests to the poet's iconic staying power. Bardolatry as we now know it, however, originates in the eighteenth century. Dryden loved Shakespeare, but Garrick's contemporaries worshipped him, and they expressed their devotion in the form of festive pageants, sculptural monuments, printed encomiums, graphic images, personal correspondence, and of course regular and frequent revivals on the stage.

Garrick was a manager as well as an actor, and as such he took charge of the selection and preparation of the repertoire for the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. He also served as the chief starring attraction. His popular adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and his astute managerial promotions of them in the poet's name advanced the trend of Shakespeare-worship, making of the English theater a kind of national secular religion. When Garrick played Lear, Parliament adjourned, Hannah More went into emotional shock for four days, the Montgomery sisters swooned, and the two grenadier guards posted at either side of the stage, grizzled veterans of foreign wars, sobbed unashamedly into their mustaches. Even the actresses playing the unfeeling Goneril and Regan broke character and wept. Diderot advised his fellow *philosophes* that a trip to

London to see Garrick act was more important to their educations than taking the Grand Tour. The discerning German visitor Georg Christoph von Lichtenberg, writing home from London in 1775 on the occasion of having seen Garrick's Hamlet, observed that the English public had conferred a kind of sainthood on Shakespeare, whose verses they committed to memory and recited in the place of prayers, mouthing the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy from their seats as Garrick spoke it from the stage. "Thus a large number of English children," Lichtenberg marveled, "know Shakespeare before they have learnt their A.B.C.s and Apostles' Creed." But the adoring public came to know their Shakespeare, more often than not, from Garrick's adapted versions, declaimed from the stage to packed houses and printed from the Drury Lane promptbook copies in affordable editions such as those in *Bell's British Theatre*.

From his debut as Richard III in 1741 until his farewell performance of that role in 1776, Garrick's fans applauded his versions of their favorite tragedies, comedies, romances, and histories, and they queued to see the star's updates of Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Romeo, Leontes, and Benedick. Largely without access to earlier editions, however, the eighteenth-century playgoer could not know for certain where Shakespeare ended and Garrick began. In the versions of the Shakespearean roles that Garrick played, Lear ends up alive and well at the fall of the final curtain, having installed the lovebirds Cordelia and Edgar as his royal successors; Romeo wakes up Juliet so that they can properly say goodbye before they die; and Macbeth expires (onstage) only after repenting his bloody crimes in a scenery-chewing death scene, added by Garrick, who

enacted every spasm of remorse and penitent gurgle. But even as he brought these and many other Shakespearean characters to vivid life on his own terms, Garrick presciently used his skill as a publicist to fuse his own celebrity with that of the Bard. "Shakespeare is not more admired for writing his plays," observed Horace Walpole in 1765, with something less than unalloyed enthusiasm, "than Garrick for acting them." Reasoned arguments like Walpole's for respecting Shakespeare's texts could not be expected to prevail in the face of stage-tested consumer preference. "The drama's laws," Garrick's mentor Dr. Johnson sighed, "the drama's patrons give." The custom of the day was for newspapers to pay the theaters for the right to print announcements of coming attractions and news of the players. Uniting literary and theatrical celebrity, Garrick's marketing of his popular Shakespearean brand produced a demand for painted and graphic images, critical commentary, and biographical anecdotes that artists and scribes alike hastened to supply. It also produced favorite topics of polite conversation among theater-goers and the literate public, permeating the personal correspondence and printed matter of the age with an entertaining mix of Shakespearean allusion and stage-door gossip.

Thomas Gainsborough's painting of Garrick with the bust of Shakespeare, which survives as a mezzotint by Valentine Green (1769), shows the kind of industrial-strength image-making that Walpole was up against. Gainsborough depicts the actor reclining against the plinth with a proprietary arm wrapped familiarly around the Bard. The light of apprehension seems to flash in Garrick's eyes, as if the marmoreal Shakespeare

item 1

might be whispering some special confidence to him out of the corner of his mouth. Mrs. Garrick, the lovely dancer "Mademoiselle Violette" (née Eva Maria Veigel), said that Gainsborough's portrait was the best likeness of her husband that she ever saw, and there were hundreds of images made of the actor during and after his lifetime from which to choose. They included the hagiographic tribute by George Carter titled *The Immortality of Garrick* (1783), which shows the host of Shakespearean characters enacted by Garrick assembled to mourn his passing, and the many vignettes of him in costume for those roles. But for discerning viewers then and now it is Hogarth who captured the dramatic force of Garrick's acting most effectively in *Mr. Garrick in the Character of Richard the 3d*. Even the hard-to-please Walpole remembered Garrick's Richard III as preeminent among the three roles—Hamlet and Lear were the other two—in which the physical details of the performance "were as capital and perfect as action could be." Hogarth captures Garrick's characterization of the guilty tyrant at precisely the moment he awakes in horror from the nightmare he has been dreaming into the nightmare he is living.

The emotional impact of Garrick's Shakespearean characterizations can be studied intimately in the personal correspondence of the English diplomat and poet, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708 - 1759), especially in the letters he exchanged with his two teenaged daughters, Frances (affectionately known as "Fanny") and Charlotte. While Sir Charles was abroad on embassies to Dresden and St. Petersburg in the 1750s, his daughters wrote to him about Garrick's performances on the London stage. Even as the Hanbury

Williams girls chattily engaged their father in the everyday language of filial duty and family, they diplomatically filtered their own emotions through their reviews of dramatic characters and events, substituting public expressions of romance and tragedy for their private hopes and woes, particularly in their responses to Garrick's renditions of two plays, *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*, both of which turn on the vexed relations between fathers and daughters.

The girls' missives, addressed to "Dearest Papa" and signed "your most Dutiful and Affectionate Daughter[s]," keep the absent father abreast of events pertaining to the day-to-day operations of the household and the more extraordinary events in the lives of his children, such as trips to London to see the theatre. In that spirit, little Charlotte writes: "My Dearest Papa, . . . Yesterday I went to see the Rehearsal & Garrick did Bayes better if possible than ever I saw him. Tonight is the opera, & tomorrow Alas! the Country!". But in this epistolary family romance, the path of love does not run smooth. Lady Frances Hanbury Williams (1709 - 1781) has separated from her husband, and the daughters know of her deep estrangement from their father, if not the reason why. Plays and actors become for both parent and children the moral and emotional reference points around which their troubled relationship can be negotiated or at least clarified, as the daughters write with increasing urgency and concern to their father, imploring him to take better care of his health, to break his long and unexplained silences with more frequent replies, and above all to return home to them soon. When he replies, which is evidently not as often as might reasonably be expected, he can be

effusively loving but also withholding and juridical. They tend to be affectionate, but increasingly cautious and distressed—justifiably so, as borne out by Hanbury Williams' incremental descent into melancholia and madness as his diplomacy failed in the run-up to the Seven Years War and his depression deepened. Garrick's Shakespearean performances become an indirect way of talking about these other intimate dramas, the most subtly moving instances of which occur when Fanny tries to use the attractions of the London hits that Hanbury Williams is missing, such as Garrick's version of *The Winter's Tale* (called *Florizel and Perdita*) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (called *Catharine and Petruchio*), to lure him back to England, if only for a visit. Hanbury Williams' austere reply to Fanny's letter of loving supplication, addressed to both Fanny and Charlotte, is meant to disenchant their expectations, even as it condescendingly affirms their report of the actors' powers: "I don't wonder at your liking any Play where Garrick and Mrs Pritchard act. Their speaking would deceive an abler judgment than yours."

Similar pleadings by the daughters on grounds of paternal love had previously drawn a rejoinder from Papa on the importance of duty. Like

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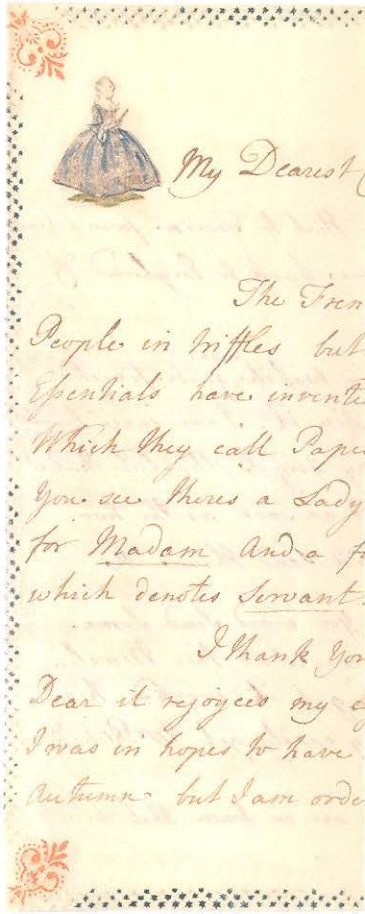
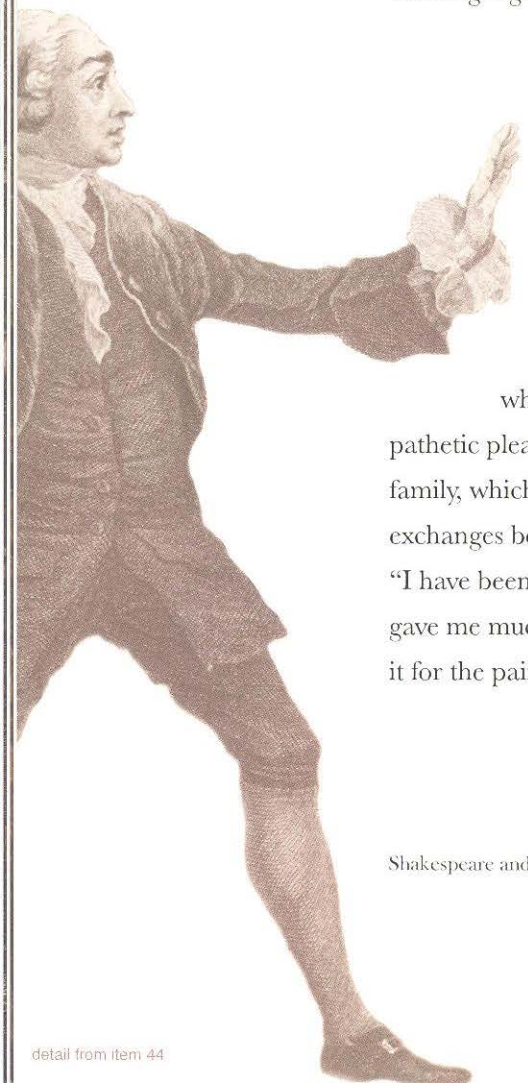
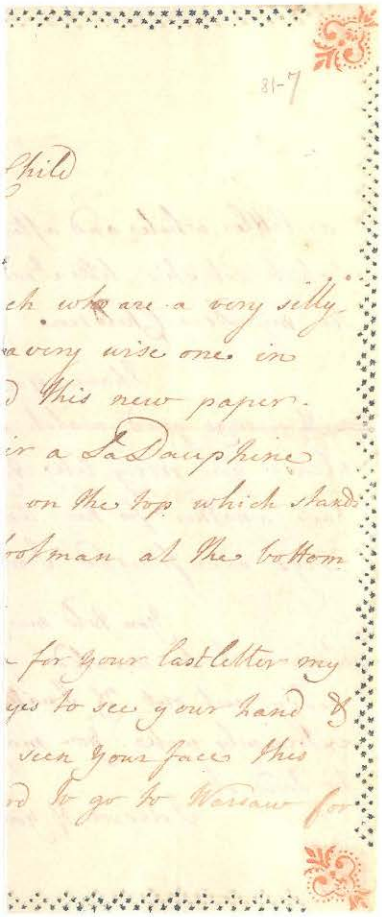


child, like parent—as he expresses himself obliquely yet unmistakably through the language of dramaturgical allusion: "My Beloved Children: . . . . Did you ever read two plays of Dryden All for Love & Don Sebastian, — there are two Scenes in those plays, One between Anthony & Ventidius. The Other between Sebastian & Dorax, that after Shakespear's Scene between Brutus & Cassius, are certainly the best dramatic productions in our Tongue & worth your Reading." The citation of *All for Love*, Dryden's ground-up re-working of *Antony and Cleopatra*, is unconsciously double-edged, painfully so, as the call to public duty by Ventidius to Anthony, which supports the absent father's position, is reiterated later by the pathetic pleas of the Roman's two children for his prompt return home to his family, which do not support it at all. But the most telling and moving of all the exchanges between Fanny and her father comes in her report of Garrick's Lear: "I have been with Mama at the Play since I wrote to you, it was King Lear acted by Garrick, so well, that it gave me much more pain, than pleasure & has made me desire never to see another Tragedy." She can't watch it for the pain it gives her, but she uses the occasion to tell her father how badly it hurts. She does not explain to



detail from item 44



him why it hurts because she need not, or perhaps she cannot. Her letter does have one highly desired effect, however: Hanbury Williams answers it. His swift and irascible reply to Fanny on the subject of *King Lear* cements the impression of familial cognitive dissonance agitated by Garrick's performance:

"I am sorry, Dear Fanny, that you went to such a play as King Lear since it had such an affect upon you, 'tis one of the worst of Shakespear's[,] founded upon just such a Story as my Nurse told me when I was four years old of a King & three daughters &c. There are not twenty good lines in the whole Play. . . . I have seen the part done by Garrick & I saw it done by Booth, but Garrick does it best. My favorite Plays of Shakespear are Julius Caesar, Othello & Macbeth. But the only Perfect Thing He ever wrote is the Character of Wo[o]lsey in Harry the Eighth. I think that so fine that I know of no writing in any language that I am conversant with that comes up to it. Every scene between Harry the Fourth and his son are inimitable."

By dismissively grounding the lightning strike of Garrick's Lear in Shakespeare's portrait of a disgraced minister in another play, the childless prelate Woolsey, or in the father-son ambivalence of Bolingbroke and Prince Hal, Hanbury Williams both disavows and identifies with the magic of the Bard, while at the same time,

by rattling off a string of the preferred tragedies that are not *King Lear*, he puts up a skilled but doomed psychic defense by short-circuiting the "nursery story's" implications for the tragedy of his daughters' confusion, loneliness, and pain. On his return from his failed mission, Hanbury Williams's madness had progressed to the point where he could no longer properly recognize his daughters. No penitent Leontes or awakened Lear in the happily ended version, playing out his life as a romance, he may or may not have realized that his beloved daughter Fanny, now Lady Essex, after a difficult childbirth, had preceded him in death by several months. But, with or without tragic recognition, something uncannily akin to the Lear action had played itself out in his life, following Shakespeare's version, which Garrick had significantly restored in his revival of 1756, after all.

Eighteenth-century audiences worshiped the dramatist that Garrick called "the god of our idolatry" not only by demanding extravagant odes, beautiful pictures, and sculpted monuments to commemorate him for all time. They also adulated him by live performances—the ones that they attended, Garrick's at Drury Lane above all, and the ones that they enacted every day, on "this great stage of fools."

Joseph Roach
Sterling Professor of Theater and English
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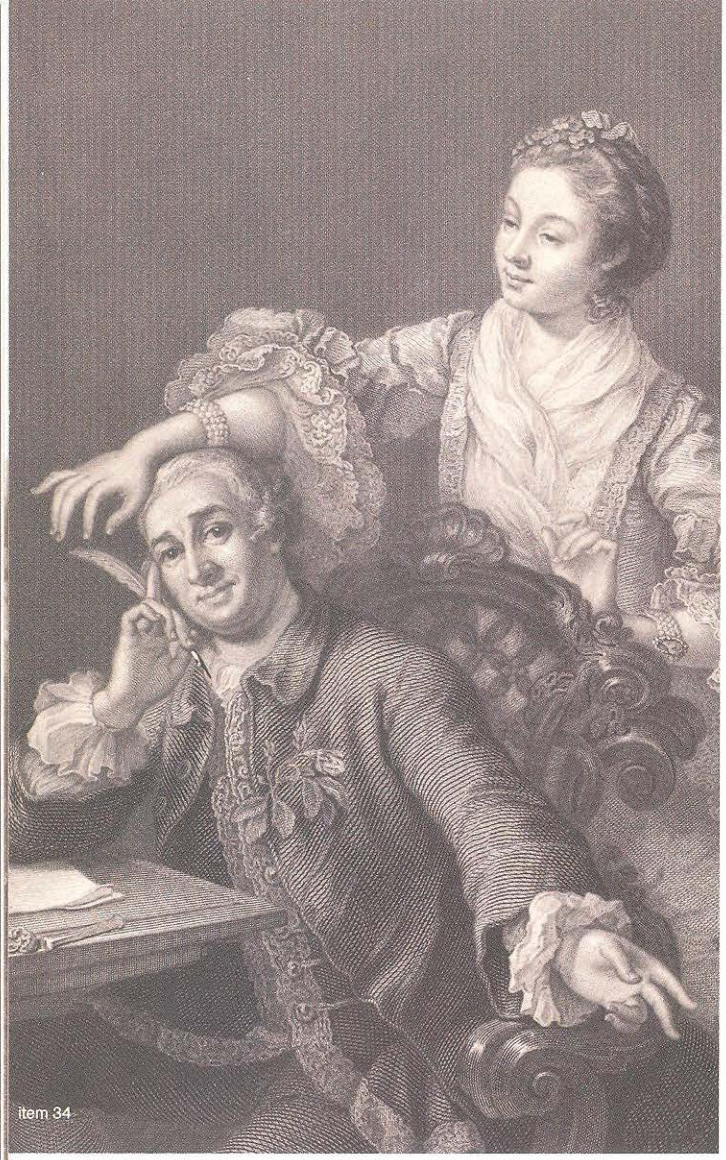
item 34

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST in Order of Installation

HALL

1. Valentine Green (1739 – 1813) after Thomas Gainsborough (1727 – 1788)
David Garrick Esqr.
Mezzotint
Published 2 April 1769 by J. Boydell
769.04.02.01+

2. Edward Fisher (1722 – before 1782) after Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792)
Garrick between Comedy and Tragedy
Stipple engraving
Published ca. 1762
Portrait File

CASE 1

3. Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708 – 1759)
Letter to "My Dearest Child"
Dresden, 30 June 1748 NS
Hanbury Williams Papers 81-7

4. Frances Hanbury Williams (1735 – 1759)
Letter to "My Dear Papa"
27 January 1752
Hanbury Williams Papers 54-234

5. Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708 – 1759)
Letter to "My Beloved Children"

Dresden, 27 February 1752
Hanbury Williams Papers 81-119

6. Charlotte Hanbury Williams (1738 – 1790)
Letter to "My Dearest Papa"
London, 28 December 1756
Hanbury Williams Papers 61-95

7. Frances, Countess of Essex, née Frances Hanbury Williams (1735 – 1759)
Letter to "My Dearest Papa"
24 January 1756
Hanbury Williams Papers 61-1

8. Artist Unknown
Sketch of a Man (Sir Charles Hanbury Williams?)
Ink on paper
Hanbury Williams Papers 78-275

9. David Garrick (1717 – 1779)
Catharine and Petruchio ... Alter'd from Shakespear's Taming of the Shrew (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1756)
49 1818 v. 14

10. David Garrick (1717 – 1779)
Florizel and Perdita; or, The Winter's Tale ... Altered from Shakespear (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1762)
49 1810 v. 3

11. William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)
King Lear
In *Bell's Edition of Shakespeare's Plays ... Regulated from the Prompt Books* (London: Printed for J. Bell, 1773 – 1774)
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Ig 17 73G v. 2

12. Harding? after John Giles Eccardt (fl. 1740 – 1779)
Sir Charles Hanbury Williams
Stipple engraving
Published after 1746
Portrait File

13. Artist Unknown
Frances, Countess of Essex
Mezzotint
London: Hodgson & Graves, 1838
Portrait File

CASE 2

14. Author Unknown
[*Verses*]
In: Henry Temple, Viscount Palmerston (1739 – 1802)
Album (1776 – 1818)
Mss Vol 126

15. Horace Walpole (1717 – 1797)
Book of Materials, 1771
Manuscript bound in green vellum
49 2615 II

16. Horace Walpole (1717 – 1797)
Letter, in Thomas Kirgate's hand, to Mrs. Garrick
Berkeley Square, 11 January 1796
Horace Walpole Correspondence

17. Thomas Davies (ca. 1712 – 1785)
Dramatic Micellanies: Consisting of Critical Observations on Several Plays of Shakespeare … with Anecdotes of Dramatic Poets, Actors, &c.
(London: Printed for the author, 1783 – 1784)
49 3918

18. Paul Hiffernan (1719 – 1777)
Dramatic Genius. In Five Books (London: Printed for the Author, 1770)
769 1770 H53

19. Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751 – 1816)
Verses to the Memory of Garrick. Spoken as a Monody at the Theatre Royale in Drury-Lane (London: T. Evans, 1779)
533 752

20. J. Miller (fl. 1769 – 1825)
Garrick [*and*] *Shakespear*
Etching
The London Magazine, August 1769
61 L845 v.38

CASE 3

21. Artist Unknown
Garrick in the Character of Hamlet. Act I. Scene 4th
Etching with hand coloring
Printed for R. Sayer, 1766
Bound into Thomas Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq…* (London, 1808)
53 G193 D28d Copy 2 v. 1

22. Clippings from newspapers, 1769 – 1777
Bound into Thomas Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq…* (London, 1808)
53 G193 D28d Copy 2 v. 2

23. David Garrick (1717 – 1779)
Essay on Acting (London, 1744)
49 1818 v. 19

24. Attributed to David Garrick (1717 – 1779)
The Fairies. An Opera. Taken from A Midsummer Night's Dream, Written by Shakespear … (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1755)
77 6md x755

25. Joseph Pittard
Observations on Mr. Garrick's Acting; in a Letter to the Right Hon. the Earl of Chesterfield (London: Printed for J. Cooke and J. Coote, 1758)
53 G193 P686

26. Artist Unknown
Mr. Garrick in the Character of Macbeth
Etching
Printed for R. Sayer, 1769
Portrait File

27. Charles White (1751 – 1785) after Thomas Parkinson (fl. 1769 – 1789)
Mr. Garrick in the Character of Mackbeth
Etching
Published for *Bell's Edition of Shakespeare* 25 September 1775.
Portrait File

28. Artist Unknown
Mr. Garrick in the Character of King Lear. Act ye 3d Scene ye 1st
Etching
Printed for R. Sayer, 10 October 1769
Portrait File

WALL

29. Maker Unknown
Shadow Box Framed Depiction of an Actor in Performance (David Garrick?)
Watercolor on paper with silk fabrics, wood, and feathers, in a wooden frame
Early nineteenth century
Object 943

30. Caroline Watson (1760 or 1761 – 1814) after Robert Edge Pine (1730? – 1788)
Garrick
Stipple engraving
Published 1 March 1783 by Robert Edge Pine
Oversize Portrait File

31. Thomas Letton (fl. 1784)
To the Lovers of the Drama
Etching and stipple engraving
Published for T. Letton by Picot, 1781
781.05.23.02++

32. James Caldwall (1739 – 1819) and S. Smith after George Carter (1737 – 1795)
The Immortality of Garrick
Etching and engraving
Published 20 January 1783 by G. Carter
Drawer 783.01.20.01

33. *Explication du Dessein* [Accompanies 32]

34. Herbert Bourne (1820 – 1907) after William Hogarth (1697 – 1764)
Garrick and His Wife
Etching and engraving

Published by P&D Colnaghi, mid-nineteenth century
Portrait File

35. Artist Unknown
Mr. Garrick [and] Mademoiselle Violetti
Etching and engraving
From *The London Magazine*, June 1749
749.00.00.10

36. Pierre Viel (1755 – 1810) after Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792)
David Garrick, Ecr
Etching
Portrait File

37. Cook after Nathaniel Dance (1735 – 1811)
David Garrick Esq
Engraving
Published for John Bell, 17 August 1779
Portrait File

38. William Dickinson (1746/7 – 1823) after Robert Edge Pine (1730? – 1788)
David Garrick
Etching and stipple engraving
Published 1778?
Portrait File

39. Johann Sebastian Müller? (1715 – 1790?)
David Garrick, Esqr
Etching and engraving, with stipple
Portrait File

item 2

40. John Lodge (d. 1791)
Mr. Garrick delivering his Ode at Drury Lane Theatre on dedicating a Building & erecting a Statue to Shakespeare
Etching
Published 1770
770.09.00.06

41. Patrick Begbie after James Adam (d. 1794) and Robert Adam (1728 – 1792)
View of the New Front towards Bridges Street of the Principal Entry to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane
Engraving
Published 1776
Yale Center for British Art B1977.14.10958

42. Benedetto Pastorini (b. 1746)
Inside View of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, as it appears from the Stage; altered & decorated in the year 1775
Engraving
Published 1776
Yale Center for British Art B1976.1.186

43. William Hogarth (1697 – 1764) and Charles Grignion (1721 – 1810) after William Hogarth
Mr. Garrick in the Character of Richard the 3d. Shakespeare Act 5 Scene 7
Etching and engraving
Published 20 June 1746
Hogarth Collection


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44. Simon François Ravenet (1706 – 1774) after Benjamin Wilson (1721 – 1788)
Mr. Garrick and Miss Bellamy in the characters of Romeo and Juliet
Etching and engraving
Published by John Boydell, 1765
Drawer 765.00.00.91

45. Charles Spooner (1720 – 1767) after Richard Houston (ca.1721 – 1775)
Mr. Garrick in the Character of King Lear - "King Lear", Act III, Scene V
Mezzotint
Published 1761
Yale Center for British Art B1976.1.203

Suggestions for Further Reading

Vanessa Cunningham, *Shakespeare and Garrick* (Cambridge, 2008)

Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford, 1992)

Giles Stephen Holland Fox-Strangways, Earl of Ilchester, and Elizabeth Langford-Brooke, *Life of Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams: Poet, Wit and Diplomatist* (London, 1928)

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Lichtenberg's Visits to England as Described in His Letters and Diaries*, translated and annotated by Margaret L. Mare and W.H. Quarrell (Oxford, 1938)

George Winchester Stone, Jr. and George M. Kahrl, *David Garrick, a Critical Biography* (Carbondale, 1979)

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