



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Newspaper “Trial” of Charles Macklin’s *Macbeth* and the Theatre as Juridical Public Sphere

Kristina Straub

*Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Volume 27, Number 3-4, Spring-Summer 2015, pp. 395-418 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ecf/summary/v027/27.3-4.straub.html>

# The Newspaper “Trial” of Charles Macklin’s *Macbeth* and the Theatre as Juridical Public Sphere

Kristina Straub

## ABSTRACT

Actor Charles Macklin’s 1773 production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* for Covent Garden Theatre manager George Colman sparked a newspaper controversy over the actor’s appeal to his audience for the right to perform, even when that performance was not universally well received. Macklin staged a dramatic defence against bad reviews of his *Macbeth* in the London newspapers, which, in turn, precipitated rioting in the theatre and Macklin’s subsequent firing. The newspapers’ recordings of and reactions to this controversy over Macklin’s rights as an actor exploded into a larger print discussion of the rights of actors and audience members within the theatre that stressed the need for aristocratic, male representation and authority over women and their male “inferiors.” Macklin subsequently won a lawsuit against the actors who had been charged with barring him from his profession, a victory that reveals the sharp contrast between the British judicial system’s recognition of individual rights and how poorly those rights fared in the messy, subjective realm of the theatre’s class- and gender-informed “tastes.”

## AUTHOR

**Kristina Straub** is professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University, where she teaches eighteenth-century British studies, performance studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies. Her most recent book is *Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2009).

In October 1773, veteran actor Charles Macklin (1697?–1797) produced and starred in a new *Macbeth* for George Colman at Covent Garden Theatre. Macklin was well known for his comic roles and his innovative characterization of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, but he had struggled professionally and financially throughout his long career. His letters to Colman show the actor, then in his seventies, attempting to gain stable employment at Covent Garden by proposing to take on three major Shakespearean roles, the first of which was *Macbeth*.<sup>1</sup> Macklin's plan to star in *Macbeth* was an implicit challenge to David Garrick's interpretation of the role. The dominance of Garrick's adaptation, his almost godlike status on the London theatre scene, and the fact that Garrick had not performed the role since 1768 made acting techniques for this role a favourite topic in the newspapers, and Macklin knew quite well what he was getting into. He gave the play new costuming and staging (including Scottish dress for *Macbeth*), heightened spectacle for the opening march and banquet scenes, and witches who toned down the comedy and played up the mysticism of their roles. The staging and costumes were generally praised, but the seventy-something actor's performance was at best given credit for good intentions and at worst ridiculed. The play lasted only four performances because of noisy and at times violent audiences, and its performance set off a flurry of newspaper attacks on Macklin. In response, the actor came onstage before the play on the third night to appeal directly to his audience's fairness and good judgment. While that night's audience listened quietly, the next night's acted out their disapproval in the theatre; the newspapers published accounts of these events, as well as the debates and disagreements about them, for several subsequent months. The debacle in the theatre led to Macklin's firing and ultimately a court case, the whole series of events constituting a meta-performance that had far more public impact than the staging of the play itself.<sup>2</sup>

1 Charles Macklin, manuscript letter to George Colman, October 1773, Folger Shakespeare Library. Macklin had a mixed history with Colman, who was the defendant in several Chancery suits filed by the actor.

2 Michael Ragussis, Daniel O'Quinn, and David Worrall have written important books that address how London theatres ignited larger public performances that impacted British public life far beyond theatre walls. Ragussis, *Theatrical Nation: Jews and Other Outlandish Englishmen in Georgian Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); O'Quinn, *Staging Governance:*

By some accounts, Macklin's production failed simply because of the actor's age-related limitations, including the loss of so many teeth that he reportedly whistled some of his lines. In addition, the actor's celebrity was identified with his villainously ethnic Shylock, making the Scottish noble warrior a reach for Macklin, even apart from his advanced age.<sup>3</sup> But the extent of controversy in the daily press and the complicated and conflicting terms of the debate over Macklin's performance suggest that more was at stake than an actor's attempt to play a role out of his age and genre range. The staging of the play consolidated some of the emergent, but soon to become dominant conceptions of Shakespeare's play. Macklin's non-comedic witches followed the critically approved "Caledonian Sibyls" of 1768, and a tartan-clad Scottish Macbeth had been done by West Digges in Edinburgh in 1757. Audiences were ready for these changes, which shaped future productions of the play. Macklin's performance was the point of contention. While the *London Evening Post* and *St. James's Chronicle* condemned his acting as "murdering" Macbeth, the *Morning Chronicle* tactfully praised Macklin's conception of the character. Even the *Morning Chronicle* conceded, however, that Macklin did not fully realize his aspirations for the play.

Colman was finally forced to fire Macklin by writing on a chalkboard in the midst of a theatrical riot so noisy that his verbal submission to the audience's demands could not be heard. Neither the riot nor the firing of Macklin is remarkable, as every historian of eighteenth-century theatre knows. Macklin's *Macbeth* is nonetheless an important event in the history of theatre because Macklin's performance as Macklin the actor combined with the loud and sometimes violent performances of Covent Garden audiences to precipitate a maelstrom of discussion in the press on the theatre's status and authority in the realm of public opinion, as, in Arthur Murphy's words, a "fourth estate."<sup>4</sup> Macklin, a self-educated Irish immigrant, practically asked for scapegoating by

*Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770–1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3 Emily Hodgson Anderson, "Celebrity Shylock," *PMLA* 126, no. 4 (2011): 935–49, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.4.935>.

4 Ragussis, 13.

aggressively asserting his rights as an individual on the stage, in the press, and, later, in the courts. The newspapers repeatedly restored Macklin's performances as Macbeth and as himself, acting almost as an extension of the conflict within the theatre. But they also served as a messy, multi-voiced, yet ultimately effective means of policing theatrical conflict, setting limits on the rights of actors and audiences. Macklin was forced to take his case to court, where he won a suit claiming that he had been unlawfully deprived of his livelihood by the rioters. But even this victory for the rights of a scapegoat actor marked the difference between theatrical and juridical public spaces. Uppity actors and unruly audiences asserting their control over theatrical space, throughout the century so often the object of the newspapers' reportage, came to epitomize the potential for social disorder implicit in a British public arena that valued liberty and individual rights. The newspapers recast the heterogeneous, performative power of the theatre as a dangerous force that confused identity categories and disrupted class and gender hierarchies.

*The Actor, Murderer, Litigator, and British Inquisitor*

If, following Joseph Roach's apt nomenclature, David Garrick was the It Boy of the mid- to late eighteenth-century stage, Charles Macklin might be seen as the Anti-It.<sup>5</sup> While he was a celebrity whose personal biography was in public circulation, inevitably permeating reception of his professional performances, Macklin also had the reputation of a colourful character actor, to translate eighteenth-century celebrity culture into modern terms. Macklin's revision of Shylock, from the broadly comic character in *The Jew of Venice* to the dark complexity of the role in his restored, Shakespearean version, prepared some writers to expect a great Macbeth from the aging actor: "As to Mr. Macklin ... from his forcible and correct performance in the Merchant of Venice, I own, for my own part, Mr. Printer, that I expect to be highly entertained by him in Macbeth." On the other hand, the same writer admits doubt about Macklin's ability, both because of his age and because "his cast and habit of acting has been chiefly in the comic way."<sup>6</sup> In addition to

5 Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

6 *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 22 October 1773 (Issue 1378), 17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers. References are to this edition, cited as *MCLA*.

Shylock, Macklin was famous for ethnic comedy, particularly his parody of Scottish aristocracy as Sir Archy McSarcasm in *Love a la Mode*. While Macklin's Shylock gave audiences reason to think he could bring seriousness and dignity to a role previously played for laughs, his strong association with a parody of Scottish identity must also have factored into the public's anticipation and reception of his Macbeth. To further accentuate the incongruities of Macklin's kilted, ethnically Scottish Macbeth, the actor's antagonism towards the Scots was as much a prominent part of his celebrity profile, down to the biographical detail of his alleged abuse, as a child, at the hands of a Scottish master. His track record in comic ethnic roles, combined with his well-known plebeian and Irish roots, fought with the dignity of a noble Scots warrior.

Macklin began rehearsals determined that his Macbeth was going to exceed standard performances of a play so often performed that the actors could practically do it in their sleep. A pre-performance report in the *St. James's Chronicle, or the British Evening Post*, 19–21 October, gives an actor's account of "The REHEARSAL OF MACBETH": "We began as usual at Ten in the Morning, and did not finish till Three in the Afternoon, owing to the many learned and curious Lessons of our great Instructor—the new old Macbeth." The unnamed actor recounts the cast's resentment of Macklin's relentless professionalism:

By that Time we had got thro' the third Act, and the King and Banquo were both dispatched, we all grew tired, and muttered out our Grief in Corners. That Rogue Sh—t—r, who has Wit for his Tenant, cried out, the Case was very hard! For the Time was, that when the Brains were out the Man would die. Our Teacher overheard him, and good-naturedly replied, "Ay, Ned, and the Time was, that when the Liquor was in the Wit was out; but it is not so with thee." Old Comical-one rejoined in the Words of Shakespeare, "Now, now thou art a Man again!" and so we all went to Dinner.<sup>7</sup>

This amusing theatrical anecdote, a hoary popular genre in the newspapers by 1773, puts the ambitious Macklin in his place, with Ned Shuter, as one of a merry band of players, a demographic more known for their relish in food, drink, and conviviality than for professionalism and hard work. It nonetheless documents

<sup>7</sup> *St. James's Chronicle, or the British Evening Post*, 19–21 October 1773 (Issue 1979). References are to this edition.

a tension, even before the notorious first night of performance, between Macklin's ambitious goals as a theatrical professional and the "place" of the theatre as marginal to anything serious—and upper-class—about British culture. The London newspapers tracked this tension, making Macklin's *Macbeth* a test case for the professionalism and status of the theatre.

Macklin was born to play the role of instigator in the publicity that ensued after his *Macbeth*. His well-publicized biography fitted him out as an icon of individual mobility across lines of class and ethnicity. Born in Ireland to parents "indigent in the extreme," according to his biographer Francis Asprey Congreve, Macklin began his working life as "a very inferior servant in Trinity College, Dublin; where he used to attend in the menial capacity of errand boy on the students and fellows of that seminary."<sup>8</sup> Samuel Foote asserted that Macklin did not learn to read until over the age of twenty, a claim that Congreve doubts (10–11), but it seems likely that Macklin deserved his reputation as a self-educated man. A thirty-nine-page catalogue of Macklin's library indicates extensive reading, and his manuscript diary shows an informed and capacious intellect.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Garrick, however, whose diplomatic skills enabled the son of a half-pay army officer to become a "reformer" of the stage and friend of the nobility, Macklin carried with him all the baggage of plebeian Irishness. The biographical feature that did the most to keep Macklin's reputation close to the suspect side of his plebeian and Irish roots was his violent temper. In 1735, he was tried for the murder of fellow actor Thomas Hallam and convicted of manslaughter. Hallam's death was clearly not the result of malice on Macklin's part, and the actor was let off with minimal punishment. But the sensational story of Macklin and Hallam fighting over a wig in the green room and Macklin stabbing the other actor through the eye was repeated in every Macklin biography published as occasional filler in the periodical press.

8 Francis Asprey Congreve, *Authentic Memoirs of the Late Mr. Charles Macklin, Comedian. In Which Is Introduced a Variety of Particulars Hitherto Unknown to the Public; Together with Notes Illustrative and Explanatory* (London: J. Barker, 1798), 10–11. References are to this edition.

9 The catalogue can be found in *Mackliniana*, an extra-illustrated edition of Francis Asprey Congreve's *Authentic Memoirs of the Late Mr. Charles Macklin, Comedian*, located in the Folger Shakespeare Library, as can Macklin's manuscript *Diary*.

Macklin's public image, already tainted by ethnicity, poverty, and criminal violence, was not improved by his tendency to embroil himself in public fights. His relationship with Garrick, once friendly, was damaged by readiness for a quarrel. In the early 1740s, the two actors united in leading the actors' rebellion against Drury Lane manager Charles Fleetwood; that attempt at asserting actors' rights ended badly for Macklin with Garrick employed and Macklin out of work and blaming Garrick, probably unfairly, for the loss of his position. Macklin allegedly sought revenge, as James Boaden reports, employing "friends" to "annoy" Garrick in his part of Bayes on 6 December 1743.<sup>10</sup> As was habitually the case with Macklin's "causes" against theatre managers and other actors, the newspapers extended the fight beyond the time and space of theatrical performance. Congreve writes that "a paper war was ... carried on between the two parties, with no small degree of asperity" (21). While Macklin returned to Drury Lane thirteen days after the riot, in 1753 he announced his retirement from the stage and the opening of his notoriously unsuccessful tavern-cum-lecture hall, the British Inquisition. While important to the development of British debating societies and a critical link between theatre and other spaces for public opinion, this part of Macklin's professional history further reinforced his reputation for claiming a public role not usually allowed to actors.

This ambitious venture set up Macklin as an uneducated plebeian aspiring to the authority of a public philosopher: "This institution is upon the plan of the ancient Greek, Roman, and modern French and Italian societies, of liberal investigation. Such subjects in Arts, Sciences, Literature, Criticism, Philosophy, History, Politics, and Morality, as shall be found useful and entertaining to society, will there be lectured upon, and freely debated."<sup>11</sup> After a dinner, lectures by Macklin on a range of topics were to be followed by debates of questions posed by him. Some of these questions, recorded in a 1754 handwritten bill, reflect a liberality consonant with the inclusiveness of a relatively inexpensive commercial enterprise: "Whether Women are not better

10 *The Private Correspondence of David Garrick with the Most Celebrated Persons of His Time; Now First Published from the Originals and Illustrated with Notes. And a New Biographical Memoir of Garrick* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1781), 1:xi.

11 Document inserted in *Mackliana*, opposite p. 35 of Congreve biography.



qualified by nature for Eloquence & Politicks than men and whether they ought not to have a liberal Education”; “Whether it is consistent with Humanity Religion or true Policy for a free Nation to make Slaves of Human Beings.”<sup>12</sup> Macklin’s realization of a public sphere in which every person with the price of dinner—including women—had an equal say, under the leadership of a self-educated Irish actor, had a short but notorious life. While as many as eight hundred people turned out for the first night, by 1757 the enterprise had failed, and Macklin was broke and the object of public ridicule. As with his prior attempts to influence public opinion on matters theatrical, the newspapers served both as the actor’s venue for publicity and the means of policing those attempts through scathing public criticism. The newspapers’ characteristic mix of paid advertisements with news and editorials put Macklin’s ideal of a socially egalitarian debating society cheek-by-jowl with vicious attacks on him as a plebeian stand-up intellectual; not surprisingly, the most scathing critiques of the British Inquisition focus on Macklin’s plebeian and Irish roots.

Macklin returned to the theatre and had his first success as a playwright in 1759 with *Love a la Mode*. The popularity of this piece prompted Henry Mossop and other proprietors of the Crow Street Theatre in Dublin to pirate the play, a common practice in the unregulated area of theatrical literary property. This piracy precipitated Macklin’s first foray into the Chancery courts in 1763 to defend his ownership. His suit was successful, and three years later he was back in Chancery with a suit against two London booksellers/printers (Urquhart and Richardson) who were publishing an edition of *Love a la Mode*. He won again in the courts, and the actor/playwright seems to have developed a propensity for litigating cases to defend his literary property rights as well as his financial claims as an actor against theatre managers.<sup>13</sup> In sum, Macklin came to his 1773 production of *Macbeth* with a deserved and, for an actor, unusual reputation for claiming his right to be heard in public venues off the stage: the court, the lecture hall, and, most contentiously, the newspapers. His claim on public attention went beyond that of any other actor in the period; even Garrick

12 *Mackliana*, opposite to Congreve, 56.

13 Thanks to Susan Brown, professor of history at the University of Prince Edward Island, for sorting out Macklin’s history in the courts.

veiled his self-promotions behind anonymous publications and the work of newspaper editor friends such as Henry Bate. Macklin, the Irish former servant turned actor-playwright and public intellectual, was by 1773 notorious for making claims to speak that went beyond the appeals of an actor attempting to please an audience. His response to attacks on his *Macbeth* was no exception, and he fought back from the stage, in the press, and, finally and successfully, in the courts. Before that legal victory, however, Macklin's protests against the condemnation of his work and his public claims to justice made him a figurehead for everything that was over-reaching, indecorous, and even dangerous about the theatre as a space in which the lower classes, the not-English, actors, and women had voices that could challenge hegemonic systems of status, ethnicity, and gender.

### *Macklin's Performance*

The friendliest newspapers reviewing Macklin's *Macbeth* reluctantly admitted the problem of Macklin's age. Many wanted to like Macklin's *Macbeth*, but had to admit that "a man, who has passed the venerable climacteric of this mortal life" is not likely to succeed at such a role: "His ideas of the character seemed strong, natural, and clear.—But, alas, what avail all these, if the executive powers counteract the gifts of imagination!"<sup>14</sup> Macklin's "chaste conception" of the part was beyond the abilities of his aging body.<sup>15</sup> Reviewers less friendly to Macklin went straight to the actor's plebeian roots in their reviews. The *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* complained of the "dismal croaking and ungraceful acting of the ungentleman-like Macklin,"<sup>16</sup> and followed up that attack by calling Macklin's *Macbeth* "an old toothless dotard, with the voice of a tired Boatswain—a person clumsy, awkward and disagreeable; and, to crown all, a vulgarity of utterance, confirmed by a manner totally insupportable" (*MCLA*, 5 November 1773,

14 Review of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, Covent Garden Theatre, October 1773, *Middlesex Journal, or Universal Evening Post*, 23–26 October 1773 (Issue 714). References are to this edition, cited as *MJ*.

15 "Though the wreath he madly aimed to snatch, like *the fancy-formed dagger*, still hangs, and must for ever hang, deriding his vain grasp, yet a leaf or two fell upon his hoary head, as an honorary compensation for some rays of merit, which did credit to his abilities" (*MJ*, issue 714).

16 Review of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, Covent Garden Theatre, October 1773, *MCLA*, 2 November 1773 (Issue 1387).

issue 1390). The *Middlesex Journal, or Universal Evening Post* saw a dull (but probably exhausted) Macklin draining dramatic tension from Macbeth's confrontation with the witches: "Mr. *Macklin*, we believe, is the first performer of the character who conceived, that a Poet intended this infernal music and dancing to have no effect upon his troubled mind; however, we found him, on Saturday night, unmoved at these different exertions of their sorcery, standing at the mouth of the cave, as melancholy and stupid as a fatigued coal-heaver" (*MJ*, issue 714). If Macklin was trying to create a "chaste conception," leaving behind the play's eighteenth-century history of "pantomimical" plebeian performance, his attackers sought to put the actor back in his place by alluding to identities—"ungentleman-like," "Boatswain," "coal-heaver"—that evoked his humble roots. Appleton reports that one reviewer claimed he could not tell Macbeth from the witches;<sup>17</sup> the latter's comic, plebeian antics blur into the Macbeth of an actor who had, indeed, played a witch in multiple performances.

Macklin's Macbeth was also, to use Marvin A. Carlson's useful term, ghosted by his Scottish and ethnic performances.<sup>18</sup> The *Middlesex Journal* criticized Macklin's British hero as an amalgam of ethnic, as well as plebeian identities: "His voice, so long attuned to this famous *Scottish* and *Israelitish* dialects, is much impaired by the loss of many teeth; so that with the facetious *Quin*, he may be rather said to *whistle*, than to play *Macbeth* ... An incessant vibration of the hands, as a counterfeit of shaken nerves, was so truly ridiculous, that it only wanted—'a *second Daniel!*—a *second Daniel!*' to make it his original *Shylock*" (*MJ*, issue 714). Macklin's performance of Macbeth was criticized, defended, and generally replayed in newspapers for weeks following the play's opening. But this debate over the performance of Shakespeare was quickly overshadowed by the scandal of Macklin's performance of Macklin, a performance that specifically evoked the role of the newspapers in shaping public opinion about the theatre: "MR. MACKLIN, last Saturday night, at Covent-garden Theatre, just before the play began, entered upon the stage with a large parcel of news-papers in his hand, and addressed the audience" on the unfairness of the press

17 William W. Appleton, *Charles Macklin, An Actor's Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 180.

18 Marvin A. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 11.

reviews of his *Macbeth*. Macklin must have cut a striking figure, addressing an astonished audience, newspapers held dramatically before him. A line had been crossed: the object of criticism had literally taken hold of his critique, performing his victimization by the press. The press responded by restoring in multiple reprintings and accounts the actor's performance of himself. This restoration created a public controversy over not only Macklin's performance, but also the question of what kind of public sphere was constituted within the theatre walls.

Macklin's speech, given on the stage while dramatically presenting physical copies of his bad reviews, directly addresses the audience as if they are judges in a courtroom, setting the terms of the encounter between actor and audience as juridical rather than theatrical:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My appearing before you in my own character, instead of that which I am this night appointed to perform, is an unexpected measure; but in my distressed condition, from my feelings as a man and an actor, in order to produce decency in this theatre to-night, and from my duty to the public, I humbly hope it will be found to be a necessary one.

I am sensible, that by a certain set of people, this address to you will be deemed a very saucy step ... but I hope, and trust, that it will excite a very different effect in the minds of the candid and the just, when they shall have heard my motive for this proceeding; which, with your indulgence and protection, I will humbly lay before you.<sup>19</sup>

Macklin appeals as a "man and an actor" on a level playing field to the "candid and the just" who will judge his claims as if in a British court; he literally performs on the stage the role of the rights-bearing individual, claiming voice and space in an egalitarian public domain. As so often was the case in Macklin's forays into Chancery Court, Macklin is also his own lawyer, pleading his cause against the newspapers, effectively putting the latter on trial.

Macklin's staging of this courtroom scene can be parsed out from his rhetoric. If he is the rights-bearing subject pleading his cause against the newspapers and asserting his claim for damages, the audience is the just "tribunal" before whom he has

19 *General Evening Post*, 30 October–2 November 1773 (Issue 6249). References are to this edition, cited as *GEP*.

always won his case: "I have not the least reason to complain of that *awful and impartial tribunal*; which, from my observation, and the experience of the oldest actors I have known, never yet condemned *piece or actor* that had *merit*." The villains in this performance are the newspapers: "the usage I have met with from *news-writers*, is without example in the *history of the stage*." With the actor's eye for effective props, Macklin held in his hands "folios of *paragraphs, epigrams, intelligences*, and what is called *criticisms*, upon me; some even *before I appeared in the character*; such as do no great honour to the *press*, or to the *genius, candour*, or erudition of the gentlemen who *produced them*" (*GEP*, issue 6249). The rhetorical effect of this carefully staged performance was not lost on the press. While the crowd in the theatre that night sat in stunned silence, the newspapers immediately defended themselves by deflecting Macklin's criticism. The *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* printed a letter from "Tom Spatter," "a venal pen in the service of any cause," lamenting that "Macklin, Sir, has given us the moral stab ... I have heard of a man who built himself a monument with the stones that had been flung at him. Something like this Macklin has done: He put together a bundle of letters, paragraphs, epigrams, puns, defamation, &c. and the hoard of malice became an argument in his favour, nay, it became so fatally reversed as to prove, in the judgment of a whole audience, a real panegyrick" (*MCLA*, 1 November 1773, issue 1386). The straw man and fictional scapegoat Spatter assumes the guilt that Macklin would have put on the newspapers he so movingly brandished before his audience tribunal.

Finally, Macklin's appeal combined the juridical with the theatrical by playing the aesthetic card of Shakespeare. His claim to his audience's respect is based on not only his right to free speech but also a shared respect for the greatness of Shakespeare. Macklin distinguishes himself from the mediocre performer, who "plods on, from the indulgence of the public, and their habit of seeing him, in safety." He is "the actor that can be impassioned *in the extreme*, and is *enflamed by Shakespeare's genius*." This actor "will, on his *first appearance in Macbeth*, be carried out of the reach of *sober judgment*, and of wary, nice discretion; *those passions*, and *that flame*, will *run away* with him; will make him almost *breathless; crack or hoarsen* his voice; *arrest* his memory; confuse

his *sight*, his *action*, *gait* and *deportment*." The audience, equally awed by the enormity of the actor's task, will, with "*candour*" and "*the nicest judgment*" expect nothing more than "that he shewed he *understood* his character; that he gave noble *marks* of genius and *judgment*; and that when he had played the part half a *dozen times*, he would then charm and convince his audience of his powers." Macklin idealizes theatrical performance as a joint enterprise between actor and audience, united in their shared veneration of Shakespeare; unfortunately, Macklin recognizes, this ideal is not always realized: "But let this man be but *checked* by a *single hiss*, *all his fire* will instantly cool; his spirits *abate* their motions: *grief* and *despair* will seize him; and at once he becomes the *pinning broken-hearted slave* of the *Tyrant* that ruined a wretch that was laboring to please him, who did not dare to resent the cruelty, nor to assist himself" (*GEP*, issue 6249). The ideal of realizing a Shakespeare whose power always exceeds the "competent capacity" (*GEP*, issue 6249) of the actor dwindles into a sordid power relationship between "*Tyrant*" and quivering "*slave*." Implicit in the republican and abolitionist rhetoric of this appeal is an image of the theatre potentially defined as either democracy or dictatorship. Under the former, the actor is an aspirant to Shakespearean greatness; under the latter, an abject slave who can never realize that greatness. Following his rival Garrick's lead, Macklin uses Shakespeare to underwrite the enterprise of British theatre, but Macklin's version of Shakespeare as the foundation of the stage supports an ideal, egalitarian theatre in which professional achievement—not class or ethnicity—determines the right to speak. The audience who witnessed Macklin's performance of himself as champion of Shakespeare sat in stunned silence for over an hour and then allowed the play to go on uninterrupted: "Mr. Macklin's Address was received with universal applause, and he went through the character, accompanied by the repeated plaudits of the spectators" (*GEP*, issue 6249). Macklin's performance attempted to stage in his own terms the set of social interactions that David Worrall terms a theatrical "*assemblage*"—the dynamic interchanges between theatrical performance, audience performance, and print apparatus.<sup>20</sup> Neither subsequent audiences nor the newspapers were subdued into the roles that Macklin would have them play in his theatrical courtroom drama.

20 Worrall, 1–24.

When Macklin next took the stage as Shylock, the *London Chronicle* of November 18 reports that hissing and catcalls stopped the performance. Macklin attempted to address the audience but was turned offstage by the ensuing noise: "Upon a hint given him by a person close to the orchestra, who made himself intelligible to him, he retired, disrobed himself of his Shylock's dress, and came forward in his own cloaths, when the scene of the tumult was renewed."<sup>21</sup> Still unable to be heard, Macklin again left the stage and returned as Shylock, to no avail. At this point, Colman was forced to write on a blackboard that he had fired Macklin. The *Morning Chronicle* reflected on the twin debacles of *Macbeth* and *The Merchant of Venice*: "How astonishing was it to observe an audience who came to hear one of the best plays of the immortal Shakespear, wait with patience while an old man sat upon the stage to read news-papers, and talk about himself; and how strange to drive a good actor off the stage for that impertinence which their own weak indulgence was the real occasion?" (*MCLA*, 18 December 1773, issue 1426). Macklin's performance in defence of his performance as *Macbeth* tested the limits of playhouse politeness; it also occasioned a new burst of public reflection in the newspapers on the volatility of theatre audiences whose swings in favouritism towards actors ignored aesthetic standards to the point of preventing the plays of Shakespeare while enduring the partisan tactics of individual actors.

Macklin, as Colman's scapegoat, was expelled from the theatre, but the newspapers continued to replay Macklin's defensive performance and its aftermath. While the actor was silenced within the theatre walls, the newspapers continued their own courtroom drama on their pages, repeatedly publishing Macklin's speech, affidavits from various audience members and accused rioters, and generally recreating events in response to Macklin's onstage appeal. As Macklin's performance became old news, the focus of this trial in the newspapers shifted from Macklin to the performances of his supporters and detractors among theatre audiences. As if in some kind of virtual court, the newspapers repeatedly printed documentation of the events that happened in the theatre, including, in addition to Macklin's speech and affidavits from actors accused of heckling him, eyewitness accounts of audience behaviour.

21 *London Chronicle, or Universal Evening Post*, 18 November 1773 (Issue 2644).

Ironically echoing Macklin, the newspapers reflect aspirations for and anxieties about a theatrical public that is idealized as a public sphere united by the art of Shakespeare and British patriotism. For example, on 12 November 1773, the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* claims that protecting Macklin from audience harassment is a patriotic duty: "It is this kind of protection that keeps the British constitution in *heart and vigour*; it is *this kind of protection* that ever has stood up against *oppression*; that ever has, and ever *will* repel, and *conquer it*: and he who does not feel this *spirit*, is not worthy to enjoy it. It is that which sets the British subject in a safety above all others in this mortal state; by *that*, and that *only*, we live *free*; and *for that*, it will ever be an Englishman's *best policy* to resolve, and his highest glory to *die*" (MCLA, issue 1396). Another account of Macklin's firing asks, "But is this decent, rational, or consistent with a polished, or a free people, a people whose national characteristic is justice and good nature?" (MCLA, 27 October 1773, issue 1382). The darker image of the public, as everyone who was in the theatre or who had read in the newspapers about the contention over Macklin knew, is that of a mob riven by social and aesthetic differences and ruled only by the raw power of embodied violence and verbal and print abuse. If Macklin had tried to put the newspapers on trial, the newspapers responded by staging a print tribunal on the nature and behaviour of British theatre audiences.

### *The Theatre: What Kind of Public?*

Macklin's *Macbeth* was not, of course, the single event that precipitated such concern about the theatre as one of the largest and most obvious sites for staging—on and off the stage—differences among the British polity. But that incident seems to have been a tipping point for feelings that had gathered momentum by the fall of 1773. Another contemporary public controversy over the role of the theatre contributed to reflections on the diversity of theatre audiences: Justice John Fielding's attempt to suppress a revival of *The Beggar's Opera* on the grounds that it encouraged criminality among the poor. On Monday, 20 September 1773, the *Morning Chronicle* reported that "An eminent and very useful magistrate not a hundred miles from Covent Garden, is greatly desirous of suppressing the performance of the Beggar's Opera, and has



wrote to Mr. Garrick, for that purpose. The reason alledged is, its immorality” (*MCLA*, issue 1349). Opinions divided for and against Fielding, with some dismissing his objections as a misunderstanding of the play (*MCLA*, issue 1349), while others agreed that “many an unhappy convict has studied the character of Macheath with more attention than the Player, who represents it at Covent-Garden” (*MCLA*, 8 November 1773, issue 1392). The theatres responded to Fielding’s attempt at censorship. The prologue to a 1 November 1773 performance of Home’s *Douglas* positions itself above such public squabbles:

Our story’s innocent, nor do we fear it,  
 For ev’n a bench of justices might hear it;  
 Here’s no Macheath, my friends, to give offence  
 To powerful rogues, possess’d of little sense.  
 (*MJ*, 2–4 November 1773, issue 718)

Outside the theatre, newspapers paired the controversies over *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Macbeth*. By 23 November, the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* coupled the two plays’ heroes, announcing itself done with theatrical controversies in favour of a return to the traditional public concerns of the London guilds:

So a fig for Macbeth, Macheath, and Macklin;  
 My stage is the hustings, my theatre Guild-hall,  
 Bull and mouth then for ever—say Livery-men all.  
 (*MCLA*, issue 1405)

These discussions of the theatre’s impact on the lower orders heightened awareness of the class differences that informed audience performance in response to Macklin’s *Macbeth*. In addition, Macklin’s appeal to the audience as to a jury seems to have sparked public reflection on how diverse audiences function as bodies expressive of public opinion.

The *Morning Chronicle*, writing about the riots, critiques the process by which public opinion is expressed in the playhouses in words that are worth quoting at some length:

The audience, whom the managers have always addressed in the most humble and depreciating stile *in words*, have never yet stumbled upon any better method of expressing their opinion than by hissing, shouting, tearing up benches, breaking chandeliers, and

every outrage that can distinguish a lawless band of desperadoes [*sic*]; every one of whom are undoubtedly subject to an action of damage.—A brawny chairman with a good voice, gives a more decisive opinion, and ascertains more clearly the sentiments of such auditors, than 50 men of candour, humanity, and judgment.

The Ladies, as a very necessary preliminary, are handed out, and with great *civility* deprived of their right to give an opinion concerning theatrical management, tho' they contribute most materially to the support of stage exhibitions, and by their presence add the strongest attractions to the theatre. How easily and yet how decisively might the opinion of an audience be given, if the mode of the House of Commons, of contested elections and every other large company, was adopted either by standing up, or by holding up hands? The ladies will probably smile at the idea of holding up their hands; but that is not necessary, if they lay their commands on the gentlemen whom they honour with their smiles, and who *in their presence* will conduct themselves in a manly, but not boisterous manner. (*MCLA*, issue 1405)

This remarkable reflection on the process by which the theatrical public expresses opinion critiques its physicality and its embodied violence, both explicitly linked to the lower classes. The actors and the theatre manager have words at their disposal, but the audience has only the allegedly plebeian tools of inarticulate noise and physical force. The problem, according to this writer, is that the current process gives more power to the lower classes—the “brawny chairman”—than to more polite men and women. The essay proposes an alternative model of public politeness that suppresses class differences through a decorum based on gender. The “brawny chairman” is represented, as in parliament, by upper-class males who express audience opinion—and represent the ladies—in an orderly manner. A politely inclusive theatre public would give voice to women whose opinions would be decorously signalled by protective gentlemen, a process that notably omits the voices and bodies of plebeian audience members. Instead of following the tradition, in theatrical riots, of escorting women out, this idealized theatrical public avoids confrontation between plebeian and upper-class men by including women. Upper-class women as civilizing influences had been part of the theatrical public's image since the Ladies' Shakespeare Club of the 1730s, and had recently re-entered public notice through Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on ... Shakespear* (1769). The *Chronicle* carefully submits

“civilizing” feminine influence to masculine authority in public speech, wielded, of course, by the right sort of men.

For months after Macklin’s *Macbeth*, newspapers focused on the theatrical public: the model audience, acting in polite concert under the leadership of gentlemen, contrasts with reports on “real” audiences characterized by inarticulate violence. Moreover, the suspect corporeality of the audience blends into suspicions directed at the role that theatrical professionals play in fostering violence in the theatre. Macklin’s performance as himself called attention to theatrical professionals’ attempts to influence public opinion, and in accounts of the riots following Macklin’s *Macbeth*, actors are depicted as playing a particularly suspect role. Macklin initially accused actors Samuel Reddish and Nicholas Sparks of starting the hissing and catcalling against him. A writer for the *London Evening Post* corroborates this accusation.<sup>22</sup> Macklin allegedly sought revenge after his dismissal by Colman by planting his “bullies” in the audiences of subsequent Covent Garden performances.<sup>23</sup> The “brawny chairman” voicing theatrical opinion in this case was uncomfortably associated with the actor’s attempts to manipulate the audience. The *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* comments that “Our correspondent would never advise an actor of any consequence to go into the galleries, from which it has been remarked that the hisses generally originate, as he may innocently lay himself under undeserved blame” (Monday, 15 November 1773, issue 1398). Already socially amphibious, the actor’s claim on respectability evaporated as soon as he associated himself with the plebeian parts of the audience. Both Macklin and Garrick were accused of recruiting lower-class men from taverns to disrupt rival performances. Macklin’s performance foregrounded the role of theatrical professionals in the constitution of the theatrical public; just as the “brawny chairman” needed to be subsumed in polite performances led by gentlemen, the actor needed to disassociate himself from all that was plebeian in the theatre. Both theatrical public and professionals are ideally regulated by powers that are masculine and upper class, in contrast to the history of both as characterized by social diversity and opportunities for public agency that defied class hierarchy.

22 *London Evening Post*, 26–28 October 1773 (Issue 8048).

23 *MCLA*, 16 November 1773 (Issue 1399).

A major concern with the Macklin riots was the suspected hiring, by both Macklin and his detractors, of men so low on the social ladder that they would not have entered the theatre if not paid to be there:

WHEREAS several respectable persons have observed that there have been many people in the pit and gallery on the nights that *Mr. Macklin* has acted *Macbeth*, who were dressed like *barge-men*, *waggoners*, *carters*, *stable-men*, &c ... and as it is supposed that *such persons* do not go into such places *at their own expence*, and as those persons have endeavoured by *hissing*, speaking, and *laughing very loud*, in order to disturb the performance ... for where party, faction, or critics, as they are called, take such unwarrantable measures, as to send disorderly people, of a mean cast, on purpose to disturb the peace and quiet of the public, in a place where the *strictest decency* and candour ought to prevail, they should not only be noted, but reprehended severely. (*MCLA*, 6 November 1773, issue 1391)

Fears over the hiring of thugs resonate with Fielding's objections to *The Beggar's Opera*; at what point does audience diversity tip into criminality? In fact, fighting between audience members broke out, underscoring fears of plebeian violence in the theatre. The *Morning Chronicle* writer points to "a posse of people ... who if they were not butchers, had all the inhumanity ascribed to that order of people, and would certainly have knocked down Macklin with as little remorse as slaughtermen knock down oxen" (*MCLA*, issue 1398). The *Middlesex Journal, or Universal Evening Post*, on the other side, attributes violence to Macklin's supporters: "Several gentlemen, we hear, on expressing their disapprobation of the performance, were struck with bludgeons, and otherwise most cruelly treated, amongst whom was Mr. *Aldus* an eminent attorney of Gray's Inn; he had five ruffians upon him at once, who almost killed him and then robbed him of his purse" (*MJ*, 13–16 November 1773, issue 723). Reports of Mr Aldus's imminent death proved exaggerated, but Macklin was also accused of hiring red-haired ruffians, who bawled out "Macklin for ever, damn the rascals who dare oppose him there's a shilela [*sic*] for 'em!" and violently assaulted "all in their way who were not of their own party" (*MCLA*, 10 November 1773, issue 1394). Macklin's Irish ethnicity emerges, as it had so many times in his career, as a lightning rod for the many kinds of transgressions against social hierarchies performed by the actor and his supporters. Lines were drawn in the newspapers between

tolerable audience diversity, differences that answered to the ordering authority of the “gentlemen,” and diversity of class and ethnicity that bred violence against that authority. Theatrical professionals, in turn, are characterized as fostering and capitalizing on class conflicts for their own ends. The theatre itself becomes a space in which audience and actors both embody a potential for violence and social disorder, demanding regulation, and haunted by suspicions associated with embodied performance.

### *Macklin in Court*

A new chapter in the history of anti-theatricality, written by the newspapers, Macklin’s performance as Macklin pleading his case for justice in front of a stunned audience supplants the actor’s aesthetic performance with a political one that could not be resolved within the playhouse. The actor took his performance to the courts, claiming that the rioters had deprived him of his livelihood: “Mr. Macklin has been very busy among the lawyers, and threatens to prosecute those gentlemen who were most active in expelling him,” reports the *Middlesex Journal and Evening Advertiser* of early December 1773. Tainted by Macklin’s recent performance on stage at Covent Garden, Macklin’s resort to legal channels was treated contemptuously by the press: “It is to be sure very modest in Mr. Macklin to prosecute the gentleman who punished his insolence; this is absolutely disputing the right of an audience to hiss in reality, but if he carries the question into Westminster-Hall, he must have a jury of Shylocks to give him a verdict.”<sup>24</sup> Shylock, the embodiment of despised ethnic difference, invades the British court in this paranoid fantasy of theatricality infecting British justice. The *St. James’s Chronicle, or the British Evening Post* reports that “It is said that Lawyer Macklin and Doctor Kenderick have joined Forces against the Managers of Covent-Garden Theatre; and that the former has advised the Doctor to follow his Advice and seek Redress in Westminster-Hall; and has assured him that he may have his Play acted by applying to the Court of King’s Bench for a Mandamus, which the Doctor has agreed to do, if the Sale of his Play shall furnish the Fees” (2–4 December 1773, issue 1998). The press did not miss the implications of Macklin’s turn to the courts. Like plays, the performances of theatrical professionals should be subject to public opinion, not legal authority. The products and

24 *Middlesex Journal and Evening Advertiser*, 1–4 December 1773; Issue 731.

persons of the theatre should not be given the egalitarian standing implied by the right to civil trial.

Despite the newspapers' opinions, the actor won his suit against the ringleaders of the riots against him under no less a judge than Lord Mansfield. Having won his case, Macklin took the moral high ground, refusing most of the damages to which Mansfield ruled he was entitled. Mansfield remarked, "Mr. Macklin, though an excellent player, had never acted his part so well as on that day."<sup>25</sup> Macklin's performance as a gentleman superior to financial motives validated his performance in court as a rights-bearing individual. The significance of this moment was not lost on Georgian theatre professionals. Macklin's young friend, Tate Wilkinson, saw it as a triumph for all actors: "That excellent performer, and undoubted good stage preceptor of unbounded credit, for the honour and reputation of the fraternity, has shewn and proved in a full court of justice, and asserted the proper rights and privileges of an actor, as an Englishman, and has not only relieved the oppressed performer's mind, when overpowered by injustice and calumny, but made himself rise, not only in a distinguished light as an asserter of natural liberty, but elevated him in a much superior degree when possessed of retribution for wrongs and associated villainy combined against him" (2:65–66).

In a clever play on the role that linked Macklin to both Shakespeare and his own problematic ethnicity, Wilkinson attributes the actor's victory to British justice and the Bard:

he never forgot his master Shakspeare, who says,  
That man shews likest God,  
When mercy season[s] justice. (2:66)

Macklin performed in court the antithesis of the ethnic difference of a Shylock, a British citizen and "asserter of natural liberty," defender of "the proper rights and privileges of an actor, as an Englishman." Macklin's court victory did not, however, lead to triumph in the theatre, for while he continued to act well into his nineties, his subsequent career, dogged by failing memory and poor health, was more pitiable than successful. The courts finally proved

25 Quoted in Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life, by Tate Wilkinson, Patentee of the Theatre-Royal, York & Hull in Four Volumes* (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1790), 2:66. References are to this edition.

kinder to the old actor than the theatrical public. The theatre as a space for public performance, unlike the court, depends too much on an always/already problematic embodiment and too little on abstract “rights and privileges.” Macklin’s proud victory dwindled into pathetic spectacle, with only traces remaining of the actor’s once-powerful performances of difference in the characters of Jew, Scot, and Irishman.

Not surprisingly, he never again performed Macbeth, the role that he conceived so strongly and acted so poorly. Ironically, his production helped to elevate the play above its operatic and “pantomimical” history, in consonance with the rising dignity of Shakespeare the national poet. At the same time, the embodied performances of actors and audience within the playhouse in the fall season of 1773 contributed to a historical process by which British justice, individual rights, and Shakespeare came to figure abstractly and ideally in contrast to the embodied, messy and potentially violent diversity of actors and audiences. Mansfield based his decision on Macklin’s right to earn a living, and he explicitly stepped away from deciding on matters of taste, such as the approval or disapproval of performances. Despite the history of censorship by the state, the question of what should and should not be performed on the stage is decided in the eye of the beholder, a field of vision notoriously problematic within egalitarian, juridical models of social governance.<sup>26</sup>



26 My understanding of the complex and often contradictory relationship between the courts and the playhouses was made possible by Lisa Freeman’s work on anti-theatricality in “Adjudicating Bodies in the *NEA v. Finley*” (paper presented at Carnegie Mellon University, 31 October 2013).



Figure 1. *M<sup>r</sup>. Macklin in the Character of Macbeth. Act 11<sup>d</sup>, Scene 3<sup>d</sup>* (Charles Macklin [1697?–1797] as Macbeth). Source: Folger Shakespeare Library; used by permission under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, for this image only.





Figure 2. *Shylock Turnd Macbeth* ([London]: M Daryl, 1773). Source: Folger Shakespeare Library; used by permission under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, for this image only.