

John Opie's Portrait of Charles Macklin and the 'Shakespeare Gallery'

John Opie's portrait of Charles Macklin (ca.1699-1797) is one of the more technically accomplished likenesses of the celebrated actor-playwright. It was the work of a painter hailed as "the English Rembrandt" – there was hyperbole in that soubriquet, but Opie (1761-1807) was certainly among the more talented British portraitists of his day and his skills are evident in his rendering of Macklin. The portrait is furthermore notable for depicting Macklin doing something other than acting. Visual artists had typically portrayed Macklin, like most actors, in character – costumed and suspended at a moment within a drama. Macklin was generally shown as Shylock, the role for which he was renowned – this was how Johan Zoffany had painted him. But Opie produced a scene of studiousness, with Macklin in gentlemanly garb and wig, holding a fold of papers, with a quill and inkwell beside him. It might be seen as an image of an actor preparing for a part – akin to Robert Edge Pine's portrait of David Garrick, which shows Garrick similarly seated with a quill and inkwell to hand (NPG82). But where Pine's Garrick holds identifiable reading matter – a printed copy of *Macbeth* – Opie's Macklin appears to be holding writing paper, and his absorbed expression and the gesture of his right hand suggest he could be murmuring a line he has composed before committing it to paper. The image precludes a definitive interpretation, but it is unequivocal in its depiction of Macklin as himself and it allows for a view of him as an author – as a creator of literature and not only the performer of others' words.¹ Macklin had, after all, authored many plays, and two of them – *Love à la Mode* and *The Man of the World* – remained extremely popular.

¹ Some other images show Macklin out of stage costume but not as a writer – e.g., engravings of portraits by John Charles Lochée (1787), John Wright (1794), William Beechey (1796).

Despite the exceptionality of the portrait, little has been known about its origins. This note considers some misinformation that has attached to it and it modifies its existing history by bringing to light new details regarding when Macklin sat for Opie. It also adds to the exhibition history of the work by uncovering an important early setting in which the picture was displayed.

There are actually two oil-on-canvas versions of the work, one in the Garrick Club (G0449) and the other in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG1319) (see Figs. 1 and 2). The Garrick Club painting, with a superior execution, particularly in the modelling of the face, is probably the primary version. The NPG is, in fact, wary of giving a definite attribution to theirs, stating that it is “possibly a damaged original by John Opie”. The gallery dates the painting to “circa 1792” and remarks of the work’s genesis: “The portrait is said to have been painted for ‘a clergyman named Clarke’, presumably the Rev. Edward Daniel Clarke, mineralogist, traveller and antiquary (1769-1822)”.² The NPG provenance also includes a later Clarke: the portrait was sold for “a gentleman named Clarke” in 1856, before reaching the gallery through a 1902 sale.³ The provenance of the Garrick Club version points to it being in the collection of Thomas Harris, the manager of Covent Garden Theatre, before being sold at Christies in 1819 and later entering the club through the collector Charles Mathews.⁴ The Garrick Club does not date its version.

² <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitExtended/mw04142/Charles-Macklin?LinkID=mp02896&role=sit&rNo=0> (accessed January 2019)

³ Regarding both Clarkes, the NPG draws on Ada Earland, *John Opie and His Circle* (London: Hutchinson, 1911), 54 + 292.

⁴ Geoffrey Ashton, *Pictures in the Garrick Club: A Catalogue of the paintings, drawings, watercolours and sculpture*, ed. Kalman A. Burnim and Andrew Wilton (London: Garrick Club, 1997), 249.

Several print versions of the painting were produced, notably a stipple engraving by Jean Condé, based on the Garrick Club version (see Fig. 3). This was included in an edition of Macklin's *Love à la Mode* and *The Man of the World* which was published by subscription in 1793 by John Bell to relieve Macklin from poverty. The engraving itself is dated July 1792 and bears the inscription: "Charles Macklin / Comedian / in his 93rd Year". It is apparently the date of this engraving – together with the inscription – that underlies the dating of Opie's painting to circa 1792. Since Condé copied Opie, the inscription creates an implication that Opie had also painted Macklin at 93, which, if 1699 is accepted as Macklin's birth year, places his work in 1792.⁵ In fact, though, there is evidence that points to Opie beginning work on the portrait earlier – indeed it suggests that Macklin was a mere 89 when Opie picked up the brush.

The first piece of evidence is a newspaper report. On 23 January 1788, the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* announced "The veteran Macklin is sitting to Opie for his portrait", and noted that the painting promised "to be an extremely strong likeness".⁶ This was repeated in the *Morning Chronicle* the next day. Bringing the date of Opie's work forward in this way is significant because it places the portrait at a key moment in Macklin's life: it was around this time that he was forced to realise that his stage career was nearly over. On 10 January 1788, he was to play Shylock at Covent Garden when he suffered a breakdown. It

⁵ Macklin's birth year is uncertain, but 1699 is generally accepted. John Jope Rogers used an alternative year – 1689 – and, by adding the 93 years from Condé, dated the Garrick Club version to "around 1782" (*Opie and his works: Being a catalogue of 760 pictures* [London: Colnaghi, 1878], 123). Earland erroneously dates the painting to 1796 (*Opie and His Circle*, 292).

⁶ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 23 January 1788.

did not keep him from the stage, but he was disoriented and, as the newspapers reported, he felt obliged to apologise to the audience:

Within these very few hours I have been seized with a *terror* of mind I never in my life felt before; – it has totally destroyed my *corporeal*, as well as *mental* faculties. I must, therefore, request your patience *this* night – a request, which an *old man* of EIGHTY-NINE years of age may hope is not unreasonable. Should it be granted, you may depend this will be the LAST night, unless my health shall be entirely re-established, of my ever appearing before you in so RIDICULOUS a situation.⁷

Macklin got through his performance but was not able to play in the afterpiece, his own *Love à la Mode*. He was on stage again a few days later and acted very occasionally until retiring finally in May 1789, but his lapse that night was an incontrovertible sign of his waning powers.

In this context, Opie's representation can take on new connotations. Known for forthright self-assertiveness, Macklin probably had some influence upon how he was painted, and what is notable is that the portrait is conspicuously not an image of deterioration – either mental or physical – but of ongoing creativity, as though Macklin wishes to display himself as still active and inventive even if his days on the stage will soon be behind him. Like earlier images of Macklin as Shylock, Opie's portrait is still, in a sense, depicting a performance but here, I suggest, Macklin is playing a different version of himself: Macklin the author. His most recent finished play was actually *The Man of the World*, completed in 1781, but the lack of more recent work is no indication that he had ceased to regard himself as a writer and no longer wanted to be considered as such by those who saw

⁷ *General Evening Post*, 10-12 January 1788.

him – or saw his image. Indeed, later in his dotage he would still talk of always having ‘a comedy to finish’.⁸ In the context of his troubles on stage, Opie’s Macklin may be seen as a man assertively refusing to admit he is a nearly spent force by foregrounding a facet of himself which, unlike his power to act, has not been publicly exposed as weakening.

There is further evidence that supports this earlier dating of Opie’s work, and this returns us to the “clergyman named Clarke” in the NPG provenance. The source for the idea that a Reverend Clarke paid for the painting is a recollection by the writer and theatre lover John Taylor published in 1832:

I remember to have dined with Macklin at the house of a clergyman named Clarke, who had paid Opie for a portrait of him. The Rev. Mr. Whalley, the editor of the works of Ben Jonson and of Beaumont and Fletcher, was of the party. This learned, intelligent, and pleasant gentleman [...] was afterwards, as I understood, obliged to leave this country, having, like myself, been ensnared by a false friend to accept bills, which he was unable to discharge. [... He] was never able to return to England.⁹

It is actually the fate of the Reverend Peter Whalley that tells us that Macklin sat for Opie before 1792. Taylor was correct in recalling that financial difficulties forced Whalley abroad. He initially went into hiding in England before fleeing to Flanders and thereafter dying in Ostend on 12 June 1791. His death followed “a few months residence” in Flanders.¹⁰ This information does not allow for a clear-cut dating of the gathering at Clarke’s house, but it places it long before 1792 and so substantiates the evidence of the 1788 newspaper report.

⁸ William Cooke, *Memoirs of Charles Macklin* (London: 1804), introduction.

⁹ John Taylor, *Records of My Life*, 2 vols. (London: 1832), II, 12.

¹⁰ This detail is given in Whalley’s *DNB* entry by William Prideaux Courtney; the duration of his time abroad is not stated in Whalley’s *ODNB* entry by A. E. Brown.

An effect of this new dating of Opie's work is that significant doubt falls upon the identification of Clarke as, to quote the NPG again, "presumably the Rev. Edward Daniel Clarke, mineralogist, traveller and antiquary (1769-1822)". This identification is originally the conjecture of Ada Earland, with its basis in Taylor's anecdote and a misdating of Opie's work to 1796.¹¹ With the 1788 dating, the conjecture becomes untenable. In 1788 Edward Daniel Clarke was not yet 20 and was a student at Cambridge with limited means.¹² The clergyman to whom Taylor refers – with his London house, eminent dinner guests, and money to spend on art – must surely have been a different Clarke. The capital boasted many Reverend Clarkes at that time; which among them admired Macklin enough to pay Opie for a portrait should now be deemed a mystery, but we do at least have a clearer idea of when the transaction occurred.

1792, though, remains a significant date in the history of Opie's image of Macklin. Condé's engraving was produced that year and – something that has apparently been entirely overlooked – the portrait also went on view before the London public. A newspaper account indicates that a portrait of Macklin by Opie was displayed early in 1792 at John Boydell's "Shakespeare Gallery", the grand exhibition space which had opened in Pall Mall in 1789. The idea behind this celebrated gallery was the encouragement of a school of British history painting on the footing of contemporary Shakespeare worship, and Boydell, an entrepreneurial publisher, commissioned many prominent artists – among them Opie – to paint scenes from Shakespeare's plays for his venture. The gallery's collection was

¹¹ *Opie and His Circle*, 53 + 292.

¹² Anita McConnell, "Clarke, Edward Daniel", *ODNB*.

periodically expanded – it was, as one scholar describes it, a “dynamic organism”¹³ – and within a batch of new pictures introduced in 1792 was the portrait of Macklin. The *Morning Chronicle* reported that among new works by Opie was “a portrait of the Patriarch of the Drama, old Macklin. This father of the theatre, has a countenance exactly suitable to Opie’s pencil, and the Artist has delineated both countenance and character with the fidelity of a mirror”.¹⁴

The display of Macklin’s portrait there was unusual since it stretched the basic policy of the gallery which was to showcase “paintings which exclusively represented scenes from Shakespeare’s plays”.¹⁵ Only occasional exceptions were accepted. George Romney’s *Infant Shakespeare Attended by Nature and the Passions* was hung there, and when Henry Raeburn’s *Sir John Clerk and Lady Clerk of Penicuik* arrived from Scotland too late for a Royal Academy exhibition Boydell made room for it in his gallery.¹⁶ Boydell appears to have treated Macklin’s portrait as an irregular hanging rather than a true part of the collection, since it was not listed in the yearly printed catalogues which recorded and publicized the gallery’s evolving collection. But why was it displayed at the Shakespeare Gallery at all?

This part of the portrait’s history is almost certainly connected to the subscription edition of Macklin’s plays which was initiated by Macklin’s friend Arthur Murphy and

¹³ Ann R. Hawkins, “Reconstructing the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery”, in Joseph M. Ortiz (ed.), *Shakespeare and the Culture of Romanticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 207-229 (229).

¹⁴ *Morning Chronicle*, 24 January 1792.

¹⁵ Alice Rylance-Watson, “John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery (1789-1805)”, British Library website (2016) <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-boydells-shakespeare-gallery-1789-1805> (accessed January 2019).

¹⁶ David H. Solkin, *Art in Britain 1660-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 235.

involved several other supporters of Macklin who was then suffering both poverty and infirmity. Subscriptions were being solicited in early 1792 at exactly the time when the painting went on display – an advertisement for the edition was included in the very issue of the *Morning Chronicle* that reported the news of the portrait. Probably the hanging was a part of the publicity campaign around the edition, with the exhibition of the portrait being co-ordinated by Boydell, the publisher Bell, plus Thomas Harris, the first owner of the Garrick Club version who was supportive of Macklin long after their professional manager-performer relationship was over.¹⁷ It seems Harris lent his painting to be copied by Condé and hung in the gallery, while Boydell, a subscriber to the edition, allowed his gallery to be used to attract further subscribers through Opie's vivid depiction of Macklin.

The portrait, showing Macklin with paper and quill, was an ideal image for promoting and prefacing an edition of Macklin's plays. Condé's inscription of 'Comedian', though, pointed back to Macklin's career as an actor. Furthermore, in the surroundings of the Shakespeare Gallery, it may be that many visitors immediately envisaged Shylock when they saw Opie's original. Macklin had embodied that Shakespearean role for more than half a century and, however he was painted by such luminaries as Opie, he would always be seen as more a performer than an author.

¹⁷ William W. Appleton, *Charles Macklin: An Actor's Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 231.



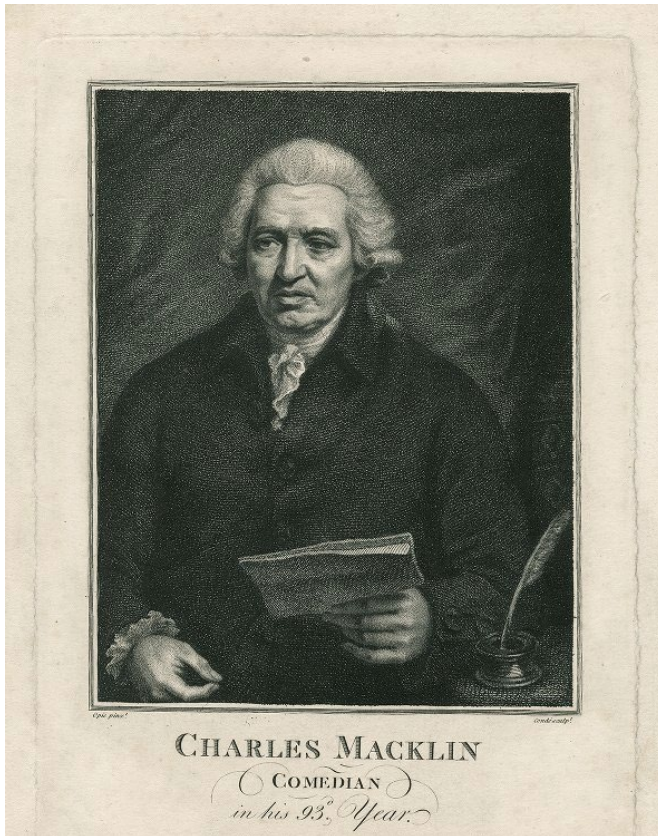
John Opie (1761-1807), 'Charles Macklin'

Oil on canvas, 895mm x 692mm, Garrick Club



John Opie (1761-1807), 'Charles Macklin'

Oil on canvas, 908 mm x 705 mm, National Portrait Gallery



Jean Condé (1765-1794), engraving of 'Charles Macklin' by John Opie (1792).

Folger Shakespeare Library.