

King of Chaos

The Strange Lives of Samuel Johnson



The figure of Samuel Johnson serves to both intrigue and fascinate, but so little of his story has been properly examined that ultimately he is little understood beyond triviality. Seeking to address that balance by shining a light across the life of one of the most remarkable and bizarre characters in all of Cheshire history, we discover that sometimes the truth really is stranger than fiction.

In the Dark Wood

In a quiet corner of Cheshire, at a spot where the old village meets the new, beneath a dappled canopy of Beech leaves there lies a grave. Built in brick with an inscribed stone slab atop it, it rests in a woodland named after the man that lies within. This is the grave of Samuel “Maggoty” Johnson - the last Jester in England. But with his tomb, as with his life, things are far from what they seem.

There are some characters remembered to history in headlines and bold colours. Those who became synonymous with a certain event or time, forever crystallised in alongside it. Famous, be it nationally or locally, they act as reference points for the ages. Others, edging more towards the circles of the historians, have been remembered by comparatively clear lines too; their connection to their time and place, be them substation or more obscure, nonetheless remain relatively easy to digest and understand.

Yet some characters act as a far more complex clockwork in the mechanism of their history. From one angle they may appear understood, but take the slightest sidestep, look again, and you will find that they have become unrecognisable. They are a myriad of avatars, and which one presents to us is entirely dependent on the portal we happen to be viewing them through; the obtuse, the difficult. The utterly fascinating...perhaps most of all because they are the most human. The most like ourselves.

For most of us today, the identity of the man that was born as Samuel Johnson in Gawsorth in 1691 is almost entirely linked to that of “the last jester”. A child-friendly cartoon that inspires local school projects and whose grave provides a curious distraction for passing rambblers. But this adopted moniker of the fool is mostly something we have ourselves bestowed upon his name, if for no other reason than it's the easiest option.

For many in the time of his life, depending on who you were, he was known as a teacher. Or an actor. A writer. Or perhaps it would seem, a madman. His grave itself is testament to the cofounding nature of his life. The slab atop his tomb is inscribed, many believe, directly from his own dictation. Calling himself by both his birth name and his self-styled latter day title of Lord Flame, it references the self-certified “eccentrics of his Genuis” - and the small matter of how he is most definitely entering the afterlife as his master character of fire.

The fact that there is then a second slab, placed beside his table-tomb at sometime in the nineteenth century and which looks to address his memory with its own inscription in something of a mocking tone, only furthers the mystery of his legacy. We will come

to view these inscriptions and their potential meanings later in the piece. Now though, which is not always the case, in order to gather the components of his life in a manner that may help enable an understanding of this most intriguing son of Cheshire, we must start at the beginning. The beginning of the unique and bizarre life-long riddle he has left for us all.

The Gawsworth Players

It is fitting perhaps that such an idiosyncratic figure as Johnson should be born to Gawsworth, as amongst all the great houses of Cheshire there is none to be found with a history more intrinsically entangled with rumour and intrigue than that of Gawsworth Hall. With only five families incumbent since the time of Norman settlement, Gawsworth is a bastion of our national timeline that serves as a truly fine example of manorial English heritage. The present hall, a Tudor master-build of 1480 with tilting ground and Elizabethan pleasure garden, has long inspired the idea that you cannot understand Cheshire without seeing Gawsworth Hall. Yet despite all of its attractions and delights, it would seem that Gawsworth Hall has something of a penchant for inspiring uniquely tilted events in the lives of those connected to it.

First, there's Mary Fitton, maid to Queen Elizabeth I, whose wild manner at court and scandalous affair with the Earl of Pembroke saw her cast from the Queen's inner circle and reportedly provided the inspiration for Shakespeare's seductive "Dark Lady" of the sonnets.

Then enter Charles Gerard, a Royalist Lieutenant-General of the King's Horse and veteran of Civil War battles at Edgehill, Bristol, Newbury, Newark & Naseby, who ejected the Fitton's from the hall on return from exile in 1662 on the strength of a claim that Alexander Fitton's original inheritance was based on a forged document. Most fascinating of all though is perhaps the situation that arose upon the death of the 3rd Earl of Macclesfield in 1701.

With no natural heir to the estate, Gawsworth was left to a niece, a certain Lady Mohun. Contested by another potential heir in the form of the Duchess of Hamilton, the feud raged on until 1712 when the ladies respective husbands - Lord Mohun and the Duke of Hamilton - took the dispute to its ultimate conclusion and killed one another in a pistol duel in Hyde Park. It was an event of such note that in its wake, Queen Anne herself campaigned for a ban on such means of violent resolution. It is a fitting backdrop of events from which begin our tale of Samuel Johnson - as whilst Johnson

was himself no patron of Gawsworth Hall, it would seem the hall had a guiding hand in his rather marvellous journey from the very start.

Dancing Master Johnson

Parish records show that Samuel Johnson was christened at St. Micheal's in Macclesfield in December of 1691. The son of a Joannis Johnson, it is the only record pertaining to Johnson's birth that fits the timeline. Confirming his birth is something that can never be taken for granted, but from that winters day Christening, we can begin to look through the winding path of his life and attempt to unravel the mystery of the man. Compared with those of the people he would come to be so well connected with, these were genuinely humble beginnings. How such a child was able to rise to a position where by his claim of being the last jester in England was accepted to posterity is a considerable question to pose.

In essence there are two distinct types of Jester present throughout history. The "Natural Fool" would be an individual seen to be naturally suited to the role by virtue of physical deformity or mental state, whereas the perhaps more rounded and ultimately vocational role of "Licensed Fool" is that which should be more closely associated with Johnson; think more paid comic of the court than physical curiosity. Ultimately however, whether a natural or licensed fool, the position of court jester was far from a laughable appointment. Often on a par with members of the court's inner circle such as grooms and ladies in waiting, the role of the jester can trace its roots back to the courts of ancient Egyptian Pharos and Chinese Emperors. Beyond the more obvious acts of comedy performance, drama and musicianship, the jester could be relied upon - in fact encouraged - to speak freely; assumption being granted that the fool's way with words would provide a far more palatable manner in which to point out any folly in their master's plans and business.

Bad news too, so often a dangerous and deadly burden to bare, was often left to the breaking of the jester; something brilliantly illustrated here in an account from fourteenth century France. Following the destruction of his fleet by the English at the Battle of Sluys in June 1340, it is reported that Phillip VI of France was given the news of defeat by his jester who burst into his presence with a series of exclamations;

The cowardly English! The bastard English! The faint-hearted English!

When the King asked why the jester was so negative in his opinion of the English character, the jester supposedly replied;

Because they would not jump out of their ships into the sea as our brave Frenchman did!

Such access to power naturally brought its own privileges too. Will Sommers, jester to Henry VIII appears to have grown so close to the King that Henry felt it fitting to include him in the 1545 portrait Henry the Eighth and His Family alongside his former wife Jane Seymour, his daughters Mary and Elizabeth and son Edward. But Johnson was not the fool of a monarch. There is no reference to him in connection with the Kings of his lifetime, George I, II and III respectively. So if he was to be “the last jester” it was in the court - or perhaps to be more accurate, the pay - of a patron outside of Royal circles. Enter the Duke of Montegu.

Making an Impression

John Montagu, 2nd Duke (otherwise known as both Viscount Monthermer and Marquess of Monthermer thanks to the intricacies of the British nobility system) was something of an eighteenth century celebrity. Born in 1690, by fifteen he was already deemed fit to partake in a Grand Tour of the continent - something usually reserved for young upper class men in the early twenties - and was soon married to Lady Mary Churchill, daughter of the Duke of Marlborough and part of one of the most powerful families in the burgeoning now British Empire. Come 1722 and we find Montagu as governor of Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent in the West Indies, and in the throws of a time that he appears to have spent indulging in sponsorship of naval adventuring courtesy of his appointment of the “merchant” Nathaniel Uring as deputy.

Uring, who was sent to sea with seven ships at Montagu’s behest with the intention of creating further new British colonies in the Americas ultimately failed in his pursuits, his endeavours often checked by French troops present across the region in a game of naval cat and mouse that many wealthy members of the British nobility were wont to undertake in the off chance that one would come good in their name. This tale of chance is important, as it shows an insight into Montagu’s adventurous character. His desire perhaps, to play the imperialist. The kind of chap that may consider his inner

circle something of an imperial court.

At the point of Montagu's Caribbean adventuring, Johnson's own career had already achieved enough to find him remarkable in the context of the times, as we know that come the early years of the 1720s he had achieved a status of Dancing Master to Manchester's more affluent middle-class families. This, from his birth in Gawsorth to a local family without title, is striking enough to wonder if there may have been something in Johnson's lineage that allowed him to make such deft moves in society. After all, this is a young man that appears born into a rural life of farm work and manorial support. To move into the arts without a helping hand surely demonstrates his possession of a serious natural talent.

Johnson's profession - which involved him teaching the dances and entertainment of courtly settings to those families wishing to make entry into such circles - naturally brought him into contact with all manner of folks within the world of Georgian high society. Such was Johnson's own standing within that world that in 1722, the same year as Montagu became governor in the West Indies, he curated a ball in Manchester that was noted by none other than the esteemed local poet - and inventor of short hand - John Byrom.

Johnson's star, however humble of origin, was definitely on the rise, and by 1724 his abilities in dance and as a master fiddle player had taken him to London. The move would change Johnson's life forever.

The Birth of Lord Flame

When the Theatre Royal Haymarket opened on December 29th 1720, it was just the third public theatre to be opened in the now world famous West End of London. Its debut performance was the privilege of a group known as The French Comedians of His Grace the Duke of Montague and their play *La Fille a la Morte, ou le Badaud de Paris* (*The Dead Girl of Paris*) would place it at the heart of the emerging theatre scene in an area of London that had previously been more used to seeing the sight of hay carts blocking the market roads than French actors. Indeed, so noted upon was the company that had provided the theatre's first performance that for several years the venue was known by many as simply The French Theatre.

The theatre's first major success however would come courtesy of a play written by Johnson - following a meeting with the Duke - whose patronage of the theatre is born out in the name of that opening French troupe. It is at this point that we might recap

Johnson's life before things get genuinely strange. A Gawsworth boy of supreme artistic talent and the force of character to establish himself as a serious contender in the artistic circles of society. In April 1729 Johnson's play *Hurlothrumbo, or The Supernatural* ran for thirty consecutive nights at The Theatre Royal. Johnson was also the main star, singing, dancing, playing the fiddle and for much of it, whilst wearing stilts. His characters name Lord Flame was a kind of high king of chaos and seemed to have awoken something in Johnson's soul. Something that would never leave again.

If that sounds to you like a somewhat bizarre spectacle to behold, you're not alone. An 1855 remembrance of the play stated that "a more curious or insane production has seldom issued from the human pen" - not that Hurlothrumbo's artistic insanity was seen as a negative in the time of its setting. Rather, if anything the spectacle appeared to cast something of a spell. The theatre was packed to the rafters each night with some of the most influential and fashionable celebrities of the day in attendance, creating an audience that, it is said, quite literally applauded the piece from beginning to end every single night.

The so called 'nonsense play' feels like a forerunner of Monty Python and a piece that that contained such wonderfully insightful dialogue as "this world is all a dream, and outside, a dunghill pav'd with diamonds" and "rapture is the egg of love, hatched by a radiant eye". A particular section of revelation seems to have involved the singing of a song that hoped to inspire a king to make himself a cocktail of gunpowder and brandy.

In the wake of the play's success, it would become satirised in popular culture in that manner which denotes true cultural impact. It was referenced in Henry Fielding's play *Authors Farce* that very same year and again twenty years later in his novel *Tom Jones*, where the insanity of the play is personified by reference to Johnson himself in a passage that reads;

...thus the famous author of Hurlothrumbo told a learned bishop, that the reason his lordship could not taste the excellence of his piece was, that he did not read it with a fiddle in his hand; which instrument he himself had always had in his own, when he composed it.

Copies of the play would be found in many esteemed residences - Lord Walpole, one of the most prominent politicians of the day, reportedly ordered no less than 30 copies, each signed by the author. The theatres connection with the Duke of Montagu had

brought Johnson to the attention of a patron and for the next decade Johnson became a serious fixture in the world of London theatre.

Further productions would hit the stage; *The Mad Lovers*, *All Alive and Merry*, a comic opera called *A Fool Made Wise*, a tragedy entitled *Pompey The Great*. Other connected pursuits would come to Johnson's door too, all equally bizarre. It is Johnson who is believed to have been behind the publishing of a collection known as *The Merry Thought* - a collection of graffiti and poetry lifted from the ale house windows and public latrines of London.

Yet whereas Hurlothrumbo had been both a theatrical phenomenon and a published success, Johnson's follow up's were not. Over time, the life he had left as a Dancing Master in Manchester seemed to become the more viable one once more and by the mid-1740's, his theatre career waning, he was back in Cheshire.

Maggoty Brains

Returning to Gawsworth, Johnson appears to have been given provision to live at the hall. His private audiences for local gentry showed his talents to be far from dimmed and in the guise of the performing Lord Flame, he was still something of a sensation. It seemed that playing the character enabled Johnson to relive his glories, maybe even build new ones. For such a precocious mind, it was only a matter of time before Lord Flame took over entirely. It is from this time, coupled with his earlier patronage by Montegu, to which I believe the idea of "the last jester" belongs. As at Montegu's discretion earlier in his life, Johnson's talent as Lord Flame afforded him a life of performance and patronage back at Gawsworth.

There are some resources online that place Johnson as an inhabitant of the hall itself, but this seems very unlikely. The duel of 1712 left the estate in the hands of the Gerards until William Stanhope, 1st Earl of Harrington purchased it later in the eighteenth century and it remained with the family until 1935. Much more likely is that Johnson was accommodated on the property as part of his deal as in-house performer, a period that would consist of the last thirty years of his life and in which Johnson's actions in the village appear to have grown steadily stranger.

Rumours as to the nature of Johnson's private life soon began back in Gawsworth. A mysterious female companion had joined him; and one that apparently had more than a passing resemblance to the infamous "dark lady" herself. He wandered abroad at night in the woods as Lord Flame; his skills in performance rumoured to be enabled by some

strange magic. Not all locals thought it quite so esoteric however, explaining Johnson's lifestyle away far more prosaically. Johnson they said, had "maggots in his brain." And so, the image of Maggoty Johnson - the last Jester in England - was born.

At some point toward the end of his life, Johnson is said to have fired an arrow from the rooftop of New Hall, the Georgian manner house built for Lord Mohun in 1707, his stated desire being that he be buried in a tomb where it landed.

That spot is the plot now known as Maggoty Woods and that grave, courtesy of the words implied to have been ordered by Johnson himself, grants us a snapshot of the view the man had of himself. This, and its strange counterpart that appears in the following century, combine into a conundrum that, while at first may well seem to offer us further insight into the strange and wonderful lives of Samuel Johnson, upon study feels rather more like his final joke. His own inscription, a riddle of his life, reads as follows;

Under this Stone
Rest the Remains of Mr SAMUEL JOHNSON
Afterwards ennobled with the grander Title of
LORD FLAME
Who after having been in his Life distinct from other
Men
By the Eccentricities of his Genius
Chose to retain the same Character after his
Death And was, at his own Desire, buried here May
5th A.D. MDCCLXXIII aged 82.
"Stay, thou whom Chance directs or ease persuades,
To seek the Quiet of these Sylvan shades
Here, undisturbed and hid from Vulgar Eyes
A Wit, Musician, Poet, Player, lies
A Dancing master too in Grace he shone
And all the arts of Opera were his own
In Comedy well skilled he drew Lord Flame
Acted the Part and gaind himself the Name
Averse to Strife how oft he'd gravely say
These peaceful Groves should shade his
Breathless Clay
That, when he rose again, laid here alone

*No friend and he should quarrel for a Bone
Thinking that were some old lame Gossip nigh
She possibly might take his Leg or Thigh”*

What are we to take from this testament? It's clear that the story of Johnson choosing the woods as his burial plot seems indeed to be the case. His concern with confusion over his bones being mistaken for someone else has often been put down to the idea that he had been buried in the local church prior to re-internment in the woods but again, this seems unlikely. Indeed the country burial register names the woods as his burial spot. Perhaps the inscription was always designed to have people like us searching in vain for meaning to his madness some two hundred and fifty years later. It certainly keeps us talking about Lord Flame. If so, it was a trick that not everyone seems to have appreciated.

At some point in the eighteenth century, a second, more curiously cautionary inscription was placed at the site by a third party. It is believed by some that this second slab and inscription was laid at the request of Lady Harrington (whose family name has been adopted by the local pub) with the aid of Rev.Edward Massey in order to “balance out” the humour of Johnsons own dictation. Reading the lines however, one would be forgiven for sensing a deeper motivation at the root of the addition;

*If chance hath brought thee here, or curious eyes
To see the spot where this poor jester lies
A thoughtless jester even in his death
Uttering his jibes beyond his latest breath
O stranger pause a moment, pause and say:
"Tomorrow should'st thou quit thy house of clay
Where wilt thou be my soul? in paradise?
Or where the rich man Lifted up his eyes
Immortal spirit would'st thou then be blest
Waiting thy perfect bliss on Abraham's breast
Boast not of silly art or wit or fame
Be thou ambitious of a Christian's name
Seek not thy body's rest in peaceful grove
Pray that thy soul may rest in Jesus love
O speak not lightly of that dreadful day*

*When all must rise in joy or dismay
When spirits pure in body glorified
With Christ in heavenly mansions shall abide
While wicked souls shall hear the Judges boom
"Go ye accursed into endless gloom"
Look on that stone and this, and ponder well
Then choose twixt Life and Death,
Heaven and Hell'*

The Last Laugh

Samual Johnson's resting place comes today complete with the standard palate of ghost sightings and spooky inclinations that you might expect, including the classic "say his name three times and he will appear" - and one suspects he'd have quite liked that. In fact, one suspects he'd have quiet liked the confusion the second slab has added to his story too. His grave is, on the surface, a curious local monument to a local figure who has somewhat affectionately become known as Maggoty Johnson. Beneath the facade however, lies a story of incredible progress and social mobility. A crash-map of success and indulgence, talent and fortune. A truly unique life lived.

Ultimately however, we will never quite know exactly who we should be commemorating there. The Dancing Master - the humble local who through force of talent and luck of connection rose to inhabit the lofty social circles of Manchester? The playwright and actor that took an emerging London theatre scene by storm with his eighteenth century, proto-pythonesque insanity shows? The more serious writer, working from the fringes of the literary world as he fought a losing battle with the brilliance of his own mind? Or perhaps it really is simply the jester; the hired, entertaining hand who would perform on cue for the great and good of high society.

That is our choice to make. Our opinion to express, and a question I dare say that folks will be pondering long after you and I are gone. Maybe we should just take Maggoty's word for it, for as far as he was concerned, the answer is clear.

It may have been Samuel Johnson who was born in the village of Gawsworth back in 1691...but the man that was buried there on the 5th May 1773 was very definitely Lord Flame.