



Romanticism on the Net

The South Seas Onstage

Michael Gamer
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

This essay explores how the theater supplied a visual and sonic language for understanding the far-flung reaches of the world and spectatorship more generally. While beginning with Charles Darwin aboard the HMS Beagle, its primary focus is the aftermath of Captain Cook's first and second voyages in the 1770s and 1780s, especially the roles played by the Royal Academy of Science, the Royal Academy of Art, and London's Theatre Royals in creating the visual and sonic vocabularies by which British subjects came to imagine the islands and peoples of the South Pacific. Theater's intense topicality requires taking full stock of the cultural bodies and institutions with which it interacts, and nowhere are such collaborations more visible than in early spectacles that introduced the islands of the South Pacific to the British public. Surveying *Harlequin Robinson Crusoe* (1781) and *Omai; or, A Voyage around the World* (1785), the essay explores the roles played by Joseph Banks, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg, Thomas Linley, and others in shaping how London—and eventually provincial—audiences understood the meaning and import of Cook's voyages of exploration and colonization.

Biographical Note

Michael Gamer is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania and British Academy Global Professor of English and Drama at Queen Mary University, London. He is author of *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). As part of the Multigraph Collective, he also helped write *Interacting with Print: Modes of Reading in the Age of Print Saturation, 1700-1900* (University of Chicago Press, 2018). He is currently at work on an edition of the works of Ann Radcliffe and a monograph, the working title of which is *Romantic Melodrama: Feeling in Search of Form*.

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

1. When Colette Davies and Amanda Blake Davis originally invited me to do one of the keynote addresses for the BARS *Romantic Futurities* Early Career and Postgraduate Conference, I accepted immediately and—as is hopefully always true in such cases—with some trepidation. There was the prospect of speaking alongside Emily Rohrbach (whose essay on Keats and the sonnet form I am currently reading); of being likely the oldest participant present; and, most dauntingly, of needing to write something worth hearing to scholars early in their careers. Given the conference’s theme, I wanted to share something not only about the future but also *to* the future—in this case of the field.
2. Keynotes are fundamentally different from articles. They need to be broadly inclusive and written for the occasion. Any deep dives they indulge in need to do double duty as methodological case studies—as exempla of what might be done given a particular set of materials and concerns. More important than all of this, though, they need to be *fun*—to make connections that are unexpected yet still convincing, that hopefully delight and possibly inspire.
3. Then Covid hit (as of this writing, it is hitting a second time, even harder), exacerbating other, equally profound uncertainties about where our discipline is going and the future of the university. In the face of those concerns, I want to begin this essay by loudly applauding the organizers of *Romantic Futurities*. At a time when most conferences were being canceled and few models for online meetings of any scale existed, they moved forward and put on a seamless, engaging conference, including two compelling workshops for job-seekers. As I watched these various sessions unfold, I couldn’t help but think that I was

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

seeing the true future of the field, and that in such daring and capable hands it might find a way forward to thrive.

4. One of the reasons I write about Romanticism lies in its fondness for a similar sort of daring and expansiveness. In presenting “The South Seas Onstage,” I’ve tried to honor those constitutive traits by sharing new work from a current project on melodrama. This particular slice explores how the theatre of the 1770s and 1780s supplied a visual and sonic language for understanding not just the far-flung reaches of the world but also spectatorship more generally. While beginning, counterintuitively, with Charles Darwin aboard the HMS Beagle in the waning years of the Romantic period, the essay moves quickly back in time to the 1770s and 1780s, to the first and second voyages of Captain Cook and the subsequent efforts of the Royal Academy of Science and London’s Theatre Royals to create sights and sounds by which British subjects came to imagine the South Seas. We usually think of Darwin’s voyage as particularly forward-looking, re-shaping the course of the nineteenth century. In looking back to earlier voyages and the host of representations generated by them, I hope to show how even the most game-changing futurities have rich histories that frame them. This is, I believe, especially true of the early Romantic stage, which dominated metropolitan culture and frequently acted as a primary means of representing new discoveries and technologies to the public. If we tend to underestimate the theatre’s role in shaping cultural imaginations, part of the reason lies in our tendency to imagine it as unconnected to other cultural bodies, particularly military and scientific ones. My hope, therefore, is that even if some of the actors in this essay prove familiar, the assembled connections will nonetheless prove novel, even expansive. At the very least, I can think of

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

no better examples of early-career researchers than Charles Darwin, Joseph Banks, and Omai. May we all have their triumphs and their impact.

* * * * *

5. When Charles Darwin sailed into the South Pacific aboard the *H.M.S. Beagle* in 1835, he arrived—as most travelers do—with specific preconceptions about what he was to find there. Arrivals are always shaped by expectation—that, and our own habits. Darwin’s journals make his clear his own well-defined predilections and routines as he worked his way around South America and the Galapagos. These were pronounced enough to have predicted different behavior from him when he arrived in Tahiti in the late spring weather of November. This is the man who had left medical school without a degree, who generally preferred flora and fauna to people, and who needed the influence of his mentor to gain his first, extraordinary gig as a self-financed naturalist and journalist: a circumnavigation of the globe, stopping and places of scientific interest, taking 4-5 years.

6. All of this is recorded in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), where, for the first sixteen chapters of that account, Darwin discusses primarily, and often exclusively, the flora, fauna, and geology of the places he encounters—doing so with his characteristic compression and synthesis. However much human beings pop up in the narrative incidentally as drivers, port officials, or local hosts, they almost never appear as objects of analysis. The most memorable exception are his lines on the inhabitants of the “miserable land” of Tierra del Fuego, but even these reflections end with Darwin assuming the people

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

to have adapted to their extreme surroundings (Darwin, 3:305). His notes in his sixteenth chapter on the Bay of Concepción and the island of Santa Maria just after a major earthquake are more the norm. There, finding the coastal land flung upwards as much as forty feet, he finds confirmation that seismic activity could make mountains out of ocean floors, explaining why shell fossils could be found at high altitudes in places like the Andes and the Alps (Darwin 3:375). As might be expected, this line of thinking continues on the Galapagos, where he documents his encounters with tortoises and birds similar to those on the mainland yet subtly different.

7. Voyaging from one set of volcanic islands to another, it is at least a bit surprising that Darwin did not continue to do as he'd been doing, collecting flora and fauna and observing local geological phenomena. After all, the islands of the South Pacific and New Zealand feature ecosystems at once striking and unique. Like the Galapagos, much of this region collectively now forms a UNESCO Biosphere Site. Yet, on his arrival to this part of the world, the collector of specimens who would later author *The Origin of Species* instead wrote almost exclusively on its peoples and cultures, and particularly on customs, performances, and rituals. The reason—at least, half of it—lies, counterintuitively, in London's high society and stage from half a century earlier. Once one begins contemplating social networking in the eighteenth century, however, the process by which the South Seas made it to the stage, and hence to the public imagination, becomes inevitable. And that journey begins not with Cook landing in Tahiti, New Zealand, and Australia, but with the early-career researcher who accompanied him there, Joseph Banks.

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

8. Banks could not have been more different from Darwin. Where Darwin traveled alone, Banks had a retinue. Where Darwin needed patrons, financial and otherwise, Banks was wealthy and well-connected. Having brought five assistants on Cook's first voyage in the *Endeavour*, for the second he had secured a grant of four thousand pounds from Parliament for a full cadre of scientists and artists, including two horn players and the painter Johann Zoffany. He then had spent five thousand pounds of his own money to refit the upper deck of Cook's second ship, *The Resolution*, to accommodate his entourage, making it so top-heavy as to be unsafe. The events that followed the refitting are telling. Finding his ship in an altered state, Cook insisted that it be restored to its original condition, which it was. Neither Cook nor the Admiralty, however, told Banks. When Banks saw the restored vessel, "he swore and stamped upon the Warfe, like a Mad Man, and instantly ordered his Servants and all his things out of the Ship" (Elliott and Pickersgill, 7). Given what he had spent on the refitting, one might understand his anger. But it was to no avail. Not willing to be dictated to, Cook replaced him with the German Scientist Johann Reinhold Forster and some bagpipe players, and—probably smiling to himself—sailed away.



Figure 1: *The Fly Catching Macaroni*, M. Darly 12 July 1772. British Museum Object 1868,0808.4476

9. *Not* sailing with Cook a second time most likely accelerated Banks's ascent to prominence as a scientist and public figure. His trove of specimens (brought back from the first voyage) made him London's most important botanist. His wealth and youth, meanwhile, made him a target for fashionable satire as various accounts of Cook's journey began appearing (See

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

Figure 1). Among these was the official *Account* commissioned by the Admiralty and written by John Hawkesworth, which portrayed Banks and his colleague Dr. Joseph Solander as specimen-hunters of questionable value and dubious sexual morals. Banks's status as single man around town, no doubt, fed this portrayal, and his reputation as a sexual adventurer was cemented by the satiric *Epistle from Oberea, Queen of Otaheite, to Joseph Banks, Esq., Translated by T. Q. Z. Esq., Professor of the Otaheite language in Dublin, and of all the Languages of the undiscovered Islands in the South Sea; and enriched with historical and explanatory notes* (1774), which depicted him as a comic amalgam of scientist, monster-hunter, and amoroso:

When in strong gin thy skilful hands shall steep,
Some unclass'd fowl or monster of the deep;
Think of the raptures which we once have known,
And waft one sigh to *Otaheite's* throne. (*Epistle from Oberea*, 15)

Adapting strategies resonant with our own age of social media, Banks countered by creating powerful images of himself and distributing them widely. Benjamin West drew and painted him, as did Joshua Reynolds. He also *worked*—tirelessly, sometimes around the clock—to catalogue and represent what he'd found on his voyage with Cook, turning his home at 21 Soho Square into a workshop. There, he and his staff worked to catalogue everything scientifically and to print the most accurate and beautiful reproduction possible of the visual record of the Cook voyage.



Figure 2: *Sir Joseph Banks, Baronet*, by Joshua Reynolds, ©National Portrait Gallery, London

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

10. The book they produced—*Florilegium*—though never formally published, arguably changed the fields of botany and anthropology for the next half-century. Featuring hundreds of full color illustrations and 738 engravings that could be seen alongside the specimens themselves, the book was unique in the field and available for consultation only at Banks's home. Perhaps better than anyone else of his age, Banks understood the concept of exclusivity: how to create desire by limiting access. This applied not just to the botanical specimens that comprised the *Florilegium*, but also to the hundreds of drawings of indigenous men and women Banks had commissioned during Cook's first voyage. Simply put, if one wished to see South Pacific specimens, one applied to Mr. Banks.

11. Once elected President of the Royal Society in 1778, Banks applied these same principles to effectively control the way exploration of the new world was presented to western eyes. He commissioned explorers to far-flung regions and published their reports. He transformed Kew Gardens into an imperial hub, and engineered the introduction of tea to India and sheep and grapes to Australia and New Zealand (see Fulford, Lee, Kitson, 34-43). It was this image—best captured in Joshua Reynolds's portrait of him next to a globe (Figure #2), a letter under his fist inscribed *Cras Ingens iterabimus aequor*, or "tomorrow the wide seas again"—that he projected to the public. Without Banks, some fundamental things about the world would look very, very different today. And with him, the first pillar of our theater for staging the South Seas is now in place, in the form of a brilliant social player who, when he invited you to see his etchings, you went.

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

12. Among those calling on Banks in Soho Square were Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Thomas Linley, in their respective capacities as manager and composer-in-residence of Drury Lane Theatre. Wishing to capitalize on the recent news of Cook's death in Hawaii, they wished to produce a musical pantomime set in the South Pacific. Here it is worth reminding ourselves of the theatres' role in representing major world events: in an age when newspapers had no illustrations, theatres frequently took on the task of visualizing them for the public. Hence Sheridan and Linley's visit to peruse Banks's hundreds of drawings and dozens of paintings of indigenous peoples, not to mention his samples of tools, garments, musical instruments, and transcriptions of songs. These would provide them authoritative fodder to produce not just costuming and sets, but also a full musical score for a curious and largely ignorant audience.

13. The aim of resulting entertainment, *Robinson Crusoe; or, Harlequin Friday* (Drury Lane, 1781), was clear: to invite direct comparisons with the recently deceased Cook by transplanting Crusoe to the South Seas. To ensure that the pantomime would please as a visual spectacle, Sheridan invited Phillippe Jacques de Louthembourg to design the set, costumes, and props. Presenting the South Seas with his characteristic mixture of romance and realistic detail, Louthembourg took special pains also to reproduce the details of Defoe's novel precisely, presenting Crusoe's cave as meticulously ordered and inventoried (McVeigh, 141-2). Linley's music, meanwhile, mixed exoticism with scientific precision, preserving its crescendos for scenes of conflict and violence. The scene where Crusoe rescues Friday, for example, opens with a "Dance of Savages" dominated by drums, from which the captive Friday breaks free and Crusoe fires a warning shot to clear the

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

battleground (there is no bloodshed). According to the account published by *The London Chronicle*, Crusoe then coaxes Friday to draw near, and Friday “kneels down, kisses Crusoe’s foot, and places it on his neck, in token of submission and obedience.”¹ This and other scenes sought to paint the British as liberators, with Crusoe standing in for Cook as symbolic protector of the Pacific.

14. As one might expect, audiences found such representations timely and inspiring. Tracking the play’s depiction of “Spanish-English disputes over empire,” John McVeagh notes that “Cook’s recent Pacific voyages had made this topical,” pointing to accounts in the February 1781 *Universal* and *Lady’s* monthly magazines (McVeigh 140 and 151n5; see also O’Quinn 23). The play’s resonance, moreover, extended to the box office. In a short note in *The London Stage Part V: 1776-1800*, Charles Beecher Hogan remarks that Covent Garden significantly outpaced Drury Lane during the 1780-81 and 1781-2 seasons, largely because “Drury Lane had little either of novelty or of general interest to offer to the public. Sheridan continued to see to it that his own plays and his adaptations of older plays were frequently brought forward. The stock repertory, with, as has been noted above, very indifferent success at the box-office, was otherwise adhered to” (*London Stage Part V* 1:361-2). While his account is largely true, it neglects to note *Robinson Crusoe*, which, playing for forty nights in its first season and twenty-nine in its second, effectively reversed the fortunes of what otherwise would have been disastrous seasons. Providing no Christmas pantomime for the Christmas season, Drury Lane’s receipts for late December and the first four weeks of January averaged a mere £139 per evening (compared to Covent Garden’s £236.7s for the same weeks), and would have been even lower but for a royal command

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

performance that filled the house on 17 January. Not so during the February run of *Robinson Crusoe*, which brought Drury Lane average nightly receipts of £216 (Covent Garden's sank to £192 in February).² While box office figures are frequently opaque, these tell an unusually clear story, since neither theater changed their repertory or practices as February turned—other than Sheridan's successful introduction of the South Seas onto the Drury Lane stage.

* * * * *

15. Four years later in 1785, Sheridan had recourse to Cook and the South Seas again for another pantomime. This time, however, the connections were more direct and based (however loosely) on a historical figure: Omai, the brilliant Pacific Islander who electrified London society when he arrived via the *Adventure* to London in October of 1774.

16. Omai was a native of Ra'iatea. Having narrowly escaped with his life during a war with neighboring islanders from Bora Bora, he chanced to meet Cook's second-in-command, Tobias Furneaux, during Cook's second voyage. He managed to get invited onto the HMS *Adventure*, and then simply refused to leave. Furneaux kept him as a guide for his linguistic skills, which proved invaluable as the *Adventure* journeyed south to New Zealand and then Australia, before continuing further west. As Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee, and Peter J. Kitson have noted succinctly, Omai's mission was simple: "He had witnessed the effect of British guns at first hand and now said he was 'going to Britannia to get *poopooe's* [guns] of the *Aree* [chiefs].'" With these ultimate power tools he would re-take his native island from the

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

Boraborans, gaining land, status and a home in the process” (49). He landed in England on the *Adventure* in 1774, and in doing so instantly became a sensation as the first Polynesian to set foot on British soil.

17. What is clear from his extended stay in London is that Omai was well-versed in the nuances of performance, identity, cutting a figure, and gift-giving and receiving—particularly the gift of hospitality. Polynesian chiefs were famously lavish in bestowing food and feasts: in part to display their power and status, and in part because, as Cook’s journals retail, they wanted iron tools. As a matter of course, therefore, Cook brought axes, nails and other iron gifts whenever invited to the house of a chief. Sometimes, however, these gift exchanges could turn darker, and even resemble arms races. Cook’s New Zealand and Tahitian journals detail several moments like this. The most pertinent instance to my argument—largely because Omai was present for it—is the episode brilliantly analyzed by Vanessa Agnew in her study of music and early British cultural encounter in Polynesia. Among other things, Agnew makes clear that neither the Admiralty nor Cook had fully understood the impact of performance in shaping cultural encounter, particularly in cultural exchanges where performers and audience members exchange roles several times.

18. On Tonga everything began innocently enough. As Agnew notes, having requested to see Cook’s marines being drilled, the chief Finau then invited Cook’s men to a Tongan exhibition. What they saw that evening was magnificent:

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

more than a hundred men, ranged in neat lines and moving “as one man.” They carried small wooden paddles that they flourished with powerful finesse to the accompaniment of drum beats and a huge chorus of singers. By all accounts, the performance was vastly impressive and the voyagers agreed it would have met with “universal applause” on a European stage. (Agnew 174; see also Ledyard 21-3 and Cook 3:109)

Certainly the Tongan performance impressed Cook’s crew, though their appreciation also, they noticed, subtly shifted the balance of power. The next day Cook, seeking to regain an upper hand, put on a display of fireworks, only to find himself on the following day witnessing a lengthy and impressive succession of gladiatorial combats and dances. More troubling, though, were their comic dances, which parodied the displays of Cook’s marines and caused great anxiety among Cook’s crew. As marine corporal John Ledyard testified of the Tongan exhibitions, “though they evidently entertained us, we were not certain they were solely intended for that purpose... [and] never let them know by any superfluity of parade or other means that we were jealous of their numbers or their boldness and skill.... Our only defence was certainly our imaginary greatness” (Cook 22-3; quoted in Agnew 174). Ledyard’s enigmatic final line nicely captures the complexity of the encounter: his belief, on one hand, in his innate British superiority; and his realization, on the other, that his own welfare depended entirely on perception, and thus on the semiotic power of his own performance. The words “certainly” and “imaginary” tell the story here—not to mention setting the scene for Omai’s own form of imaginary greatness.

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

19. Omai could not have appeared in London under more auspicious circumstances. Public interest in the South Pacific was at a high pitch during the 1774-5 season, and in Banks he found as well-connected a host as London could offer. In return, Banks found in Omai not just the hottest social property of the season but also a means of bolstering his own public image by taking on the role of prudent guardian. Omai had arrived at Soho Square with the same illness that had killed the other two Pacific Islanders on board, and Banks's physicians recommended a convalescence that limited social exposure to protect from further infections. These first weeks of rest and calm enabled Banks to commission several portraits: first by William Parry, who painted a conversation piece with Omai, Banks, and Daniel Charles; next by Nathaniel Dance; and finally by Joshua Reynolds, whose portrait became his sole contribution to the Royal Academy's annual art show a few years later. While Omai was sitting, he saw visitors; but even royalty had to go through Banks, who delayed presenting Omai at court until his health had fully repaired itself.

20. In one sense, then, Omai stood as Banks's most wondrous specimen. Far from arriving pressed between the pages of a book or pinned to a board, Omai was every bit a living man—handsome, in his early twenties, and standing over six feet tall. Over time, the many portraits made of him increasingly emphasize his beauty and striking physicality. The eyes become bigger, the hair longer and fuller, the lips more shapely, the costume smacking more and more of classical Athens and Rome. Londoners made much of him, and Omai also made much of them. If we think of Omai in this different light, turning the tables—a man with a project, a man with an agenda—we can begin to understand how he was every inch as bold a discoverer as Cook or Banks. He did this by toeing a fine line between two

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

roles: that of noble savage and that of a natural aristocrat. In reality, of course, he was neither. Back at home, Omai had hailed from the less important *raatira* class, but he emerged in London as a quick study of social forms and an eye for rich but not ostentatious dress. Hence his quiet, even brilliant attentiveness in company; hence his preference for Genoa velvet and disdain for gold braiding and gems. Whether Banks tutored him or he just, as I suspect, came to his own conclusions, Omai ably met the demands of social performance without Banks needing to be present.

21. Here, Fanny Burney's correspondence is useful for giving us a sense of the sensation Omai caused in high society:

[G]lad as I was to see this great personage, I extremely regretted not having *you* of the party, [...] but the notice was so extremely short it was impossible. Now to facts. Susy & my Brother went last Monday to the play at Drury Lane when Jem spied Omai and his friend Mr. Banks—Upon which, [...] Jem went to them. Omai received him with a hearty shake of the Hand, & made room for him by his side. Jem asked Mr Banks when he could see him to Dinner? Mr B. said that he believed he was engaged every Day till the holy days, which he was to spend at Hinchinbroke. Jem then returned to Susy. However, on Tuesday night, very late, there came a note directed to my Brother.—*Omai presents his Compliments to Mr Burney & if it is agreeable and convenient to him, he will do himself the Honour of Dining with Mr Burney to morrow. But if it is not so, Omai will wait upon Mr Burney some other Time that shall suit him better.*

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

Omai begs to have an answer, & and that if he is to come, begs Mr Burney will fetch him. (Burney 59)

The late-night note gives one a sense of the situation here, with Omai sending it after one evening engagement with Banks on finding that there would be a free night. Even more telling is Omai's use of the forms of invitation, its conventional language and use of the third person instead of "I" and "you"—contrasted with his balder request to be fetched to the engagement.

22. It is worth remembering that the largest villages Omai had witnessed had populations of around 5,000 people. London in 1774 had a population of nearly one million people, and extended more than six miles from east to west, from Kensington to Bethnal Green. Consider these things, and add to them the small matters of a new language, foreign ways, smoke, bad water, worse smells, and, above all, the noise, and we can begin to contemplate the magnitude of the feat Omai was in the process of pulling off—and evidently enjoying himself while doing it. This, at least, is the portrait of Fanny Burney's letter as well as the testimonies of others, most of whom were uniformly pleased with Omai and did not hesitate to project their own desires and beliefs onto him. For Burney, therefore, Omai represented innate nobility in the tradition of Rousseau—a truly noble savage of open good humor and seemingly effortless, natural good breeding, both on *entrée*:

As he had been to Court, he was very fine. He had on a suit of Manchester velvet, Lined with White satten, a *Bag*, lace Ruffles, & a very handsome sword which the

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

King had given to him. He is tall & very well made. Much Darker than I expected to see him, but had a pleasing Countenance.

He makes remarkably good Bows – not for him, but for any body, however long under a Dancing Master’s care. Indeed he seems to shame Education, for his manners are so extremely graceful, & he is so polite, attentive, & easy, that you would have thought he came from some foreign Court. You will think that I speak in a high style; but I assure you there was but one opinion about him.

And on taking leave:

Before 6, the Coach came. Our man came in, & said ‘Mr Omai’s servant.’ He heard it at once, & answered ‘*very well.*’ He kept his seat about 5 minutes after, & then rose & got his Hat & sword. My Father happening to be talking to Mr Strange, Omai stood still, neither chusing to interrupt him, nor to make his Compliments to any body else first. When he was disengaged, Omai went up to him, & made an exceeding fine Bow,—the same to mam—then separately to every one in the company, & then went out with Jem to his Coach.

He must certainly possess an uncommon share of observation & attention. I assure you every body was delighted with him. I only wished I could have spoken his Language. (Burney 60-2)

As Burney’s description makes clear, during his stay Omai caused a great deal of speculation. His manners and conduct became sustained objects of analysis; his actions

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

functioned as lightning rods on questions of innate rank or aristocracy, and nature versus nurture. We might, then, excuse Charles Darwin's later interest in Pacific Islanders—in the people of the South Pacific rather than its other flora and fauna—on his arrival to that part of the world. After all, he had years of precedents, starting with Omai—whom Londoners could not pigeonhole, yet in whom they saw what they wanted to believe.

* * * * *

23. It is worth remembering that when Omai departed with Cook on his third voyage in 1776, he thought his diplomatic mission had been successful. He fully expected Cook's assistance in liberating his island, but in the end Cook declined any military intervention in such disputes, dropping Omai back off at Huahine without the guns he wanted. Here, the biographical Omai disappears from view. Shortly thereafter, so did the biographical Cook, dying in Hawaii. And in both cases, more dramatic versions of each man took center stage.
24. Few military officers are portrayed in apotheosis, ascending to heaven—and those who make it usually do so bearing arms. Cook does so bearing a sextant. But Cook's death in Hawaii also brought Omai back into the picture: first in 1779 with the play *The Death of Captain Cook*, where a strange sort of female alter-ego to Omai named Emai stands at the center of the action; next, more tenuously, with *Robinson Crusoe; or Harlequin Friday*; and finally through John O'Keeffe's *Omai: or a Trip round the World* (Drury Lane, 1785), which would become the most popular English play of that decade.

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

25. The reasons why are I hope interesting; at the very least they will be familiar. For *Omai*'s sets, costumes, and scenery, Sheridan coaxed Loutherboung out of retirement. Again access to Banks's archive of drawings and objects from the South Seas was granted, and this time for a pantomime that did not require fidelity to an earlier text for its details and props. For *Omai*'s set and costume design, therefore, Loutherboung drew heavily on the drawings of Cook's official draughtman Samuel Webber, and the results were sensational. Where *Robinson Crusoe*'s stage triumph lay primarily in Loutherboung's recreation of Crusoe's cave and his fidelity to Defoe's text, *Omai* allowed him to present not just an island landscape but also the full range of sights and sounds of the South Seas, from domiciles, dress, and everyday implements to ceremonies, songs and dances, and sacred rituals.

26. Sadly, most of Loutherboung's set designs have not survived; like most sets, they were used and reused until they fell apart. In the case of *Omai*, however, we're lucky. A few of his models for that show are preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London—his customary design practice being to create three-dimensional prototype and then, with a team of assistants, to build the actual set in the theatre itself. Rather than the usual sliding panels and flat backdrops, Loutherboung created three-dimensional sets that actors could move through—where buildings had doors that actually opened, where caves could be entered, trees climbed, and walls hidden behind. However diminutive in scale, the Victoria and Albert *Omai* designs (Figures 3 and 4) vividly capture how actors might work within a full-size Loutherboung set to present audiences with a more integrated and immersive experience—all based on official drawings authorized by Banks and commissioned by the British government. These final considerations confirm what otherwise might seem strange

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

to say of a popular pantomime – *Omai*'s documentary power – since the play presented to a general public a global suite of sights that until then had been available only to the few.



Figures #3 and #4: Phillippe Jacques de Louthembourg, two set designs from *Omai; or, A Trip round the World* (1785) ©Victoria and Albert Museum, E.158:1-1937 and E.161:10-1937

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

27. The same can be said for the figure of Omai himself—whose exclusivity in the previous decade had created the pent-up demand unleashed here, and who in this play is transformed into a chosen Prince fought over by two gods. Thus, the play opens with Omai’s father, Otoo, invoking the god of his ancestors, Towha, who answers his call to inform him that his son, Omai, is in danger—yet at the same time calls forth his own spirits to comfort Otoo and spirit Omai away. As Omai is presented with a talisman, Britannia and Londinia appear as witnesses to the pact, as Britannia declares:

Still shall my sons, by *Cook*’s example taught,
The new-found world protect and humanize.
In soft alliance bound, this British maid [Londinia]
Be thine, and Love, a radiant throne shall fix
Firm as my rock, where sits bright *Liberty*. (*A Short Account* 4)

It is hard to imagine this scene, but it might help to imagine the actress Elizabeth Inchbald standing at her full height as Britannia in a Polynesian scene surrounded by spirits dancing to a full orchestra playing entirely new music. If one imagines all this—Inchbald as Britannia giving Londinia, played by renowned and talented Ann Crawford, to Omai, played by the versatile William Cubitt darkened for the occasion and dressed like Omai in his Reynolds portrait—one might begin to understand the draw.

28. Still, I won’t belabor the point. Omai is swept off to England in pursuit of Londinia, and hijinks occur as the audience is presented with full sets depicting Plymouth, Kensington

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

Gardens, and Margate from behind the Pier. Then, by magic means, Omai and Londinia are magically taken to Kamtschatka for a dance, to Mongolia for a Glee, and to Tonga and New Zealand for a series of hair-breadth escapes, until Omai finally he returns home, where Londinia is delivered to him during a grand Procession, and the god Eatooa addresses him in his native tongue, translated as follows:

Ambassadors and Plenipots here swear fealty in the name of all states to Prince Omai, who has travelled farther than ever canoe paddled, to the Country of the mighty George, whose great sword in the hand of Elliott, keeps the Strong Rock from the rich King of Lima, even in his own land. [...] Omai ne'er shall want! All Reverence! (*A Short Account* 20)

The play then ends with Louthembourg's Grand Painting of Captain Cook's apotheosis (Figure 5) descending from the ceiling, but this time with Cook also onstage—all supported by a full chorus singing that “the Genius of Britain forbids us to grieve, Since Cook, ever honor'd, immortal shall live.”

He *came*, and he *saw*, not to *conquer*, but *save*;
The *Caesar* of Britain was he;
Who scorn'd the ambition of making a slave
While Britons themselves are so free. (*A Short Account* 25)

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

I will end with this particular piece of problematic wish-fulfillment, this desire to have it both ways—for, much as audiences were invested in a Cook who was not like his Spanish, French, or Dutch predecessors—and who thus would not intervene in Island disputes—their need to make Omai a prince and a commander of men perfectly exposes the fault line at work here, and that resides at the core of British colonial history. After all, just as Omai came to embody innate nobility, so Cook embodied what determination, precision, and the newest science could accomplish. That's not a battle that was supposed to be lost, and the only rational response was for audiences to imagine Cook's spirit rising to heaven, urging us not to mourn. Put another way, By the time the South Seas finally made it into the limelight, its sets peopled by the finest actors London had to offer, a sort of Hollywood effect had occurred, complete with happy endings, divine intervention, and a strange sort of Oceanic manifest destiny garbed in the wardrobe of scientific exploration, and holding a sextant rather than a sword.



Figure #5: *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1794), by John Webber after Phillippe Jacque de

Loutherbourg ©Royal Academy of Art

Works Cited

Agnew, Vanessa. "Listening to Others: Eighteenth-Century Encounters in Polynesia and Their Reception in German Musical Thought." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 41, 2008, pp. 165–88.

"An Account of the Pantomime of ROBINSON CRUOE, or HARLEQUIN FRIDAY." *The London Chronicle*, no. 3770, 27–30 January 1781, p. 7.

A Short Account of the New Pantomime Called Omai, or, A Trip round the World; Performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. With the Recitatives, Airs, Duets, Trios and Chorusses, and a Description of the Procession. The Pantomime, and the Whole of the Scenery, designed and invented by Mr. Louthembourg. The Words written by Mr. O'Keeffe; and the Musick composed by Mr. Shields. London: T. Cadell, 1785.

Burney, Fanny. *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney, Volume II: 1774–1777*. Edited by Lars E. Troide, McGill UP, 1990.

Cook, James. *Journals*. 3 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961.

Epistle from Oberea, Queen of Otaheite, to Joseph Banks, Esq., Translated by T. Q. Z. Esq., Professor of the Otaheite language in Dublin, and of all the Languages of the undiscovered Islands in the South Sea; and enriched with Historical and Explanatory Notes. London: J. Almon, 1774.

The London Stage 1660-1800: Part V: 1776-1800. Edited by Charles Beecher Hogan, 3 vols, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1968.

Darwin, Charles. *Journal and Remarks, 1832-1836. Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty's Ships Adventure and Beagle, between the years 1826 and 1836*. 3 vols, London: Colburn, 1839.

Romanticism on the Net #76 (Spring 2021)

Elliott, John and Richard Pickersgill. *Captain Cook's Second Voyage: The Journals of Lieutenants Elliott and Pickersgill*. Edited by Christine Holmes, Dover, NH: Caliban, 1984.

Fulford, Tim, Debbie Lee, and Peter J. Kitson. *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Ledyard, John. *Collected Writings*. Edited by James Zug, Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2005.

McVeagh, John. "Robinson Crusoe's Stage Debut: The Sheridan Pantomime of 1781." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1990, pp. 137–52.

O'Quinn, Daniel. *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005.

¹ See "An Account of the Pantomime of ROBINSON CRUOE, or HARLEQUIN FRIDAY" published in *The London Chronicle*, no. 3770, 27-30 January 1781, p. 7. No manuscript of the pantomime script survives. Other papers publishing detailed descriptions include *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 3651, 30 January 1781, p. 4; and *The Morning Herald*, no. 78, 30 January 1781, p. 3. See also *A Short Account of the Situations and Incidents exhibited in the Pantomime of Robinson Crusoe at the Theatre-Royal, Drury-Lane*. London: T. Becket, 1781.

² In calculating these figures, I have excluded benefit nights for both theatres, which have their own dynamics and for which Covent Garden does not provide receipts.