

# The 'public man' and the 'private theatrical'

Frank Delaval's 1751 production of *Othello* and the performance of masculinity

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**Slide 1: white text and the University of Lincoln logo lay over an aquatint of the interior of a theatre. The view is from the back of the auditorium towards the stage. Tiers and boxes on either side are thronged with people.**

Drawing on histories of identity and manhood, I will today present an example of reciprocity between so-called 'private' theatricals and the negotiation of 'public' masculinity in the mid-C18th. The presentation is drawn from a chapter in my thesis, which proposes that their participation in amateur theatre is a fertile ground for exploring the articulation of masculinity by two eighteenth-century men: John Hussey Delaval, and his elder brother Frank. Although my thesis focuses on John, it's Frank who will be my focus today.

I'll begin by introducing you to him, and to his production of *Othello* in 1751. I'll then move to construct a framework of intellectual discourse within which this can be interrogated, before returning to Frank to resolve the questions that I have posed.

**Slide 2: white quotation on a blue background. To the left is a portrait of two young children in 18<sup>th</sup> century dress – a girl (Rhoda Delaval) on the left, and a boy with a dog (Frank Delaval) on the right.**

Sir Francis Blake Delaval, who his family called Frank – and I likewise – was born in 1727, the heir to another Sir Francis, formerly Captain Delaval of His Majesty's Royal Navy, and his wife Rhoda, nee Apreece. Here Frank is shown as a child, with his elder sister and a pet dog.

I'll return to some aspects of his life in a moment, but I wanted to begin – a little backwardly – by quoting from this memoir, written after Frank's death from a stroke in his 40s. Because I think it sums up something that's at the heart of my presentation today: an apparent dichotomy in how Frank was perceived by the public, compared to those who knew him well in private: "Generous, sincere, affable and polite" and always "the gentleman and man of honour" is how the author describes him, while also noting that he had "a strong passion for pleasure", "itch for play", and "violent attachment to the ladies", that "hurried him into many extravagancies [...] and ridiculous situations".

Alongside his upright qualities then, Frank was remembered by his contemporaries as having been victim to, "many foibles, caprices, and even vices".

**Slide 3: white quotation on a blue background. To the left is a full-length portrait of Frank Delaval as an adult. He wears a red army uniform and poses with a rifle in hand.**

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These 'foibles' are perhaps what underpin the more commonly told stories during Frank's lifetime, and arguably since.

Newspaper reports suggest an undercurrent of curiosity and comedy around him, which was at times satisfied by accounts of his experiences, and at others with fictions imagining an air of spectacle around his life. In November 1757, for example, the *London Chronicle* reported – with editorial tongue firmly in cheek – that Frank had been appointed to the governorship of New York, while in June 1768 the *St. James's Chronicle* ran this story of his having been robbed by highwaymen; the thrust of the piece being not driven by a concern for his welfare or a warning about the dangers of the roads, but by the anecdote that this misfortune had befallen Frank twice, in a single evening. In short then, Frank is remembered mostly as a figure of fun.

**Slide 4: white quotation on a blue background. To the left is part of an engraving of the front of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane from the street.**

However, we also see Frank's name regularly in connection with the theatre. In his biography of actor Samuel Foote, for example, Ian Kelly (2012, p. 389) writes that Frank was (quote) a "student of acting [who, as] heir to a great swathe of Northumberland [nevertheless] sought metropolitan celebrity in London, with Foote as his side-kick."

Amateur involvement with the theatre by the Delaval family is well recorded in the archives and contemporary commentary chronicling their activities. Frank's sister Rhoda wrote one December of a younger brother having, "[sic] undertaken to entertain us with a Pantomim intertainment, of his own composeing" (NRO 650/D/12), and travel writer Henry Swinburne (1841, pp. 98-101), too, wrote of having attended a performance by the family, at Seaton Delaval.

Frank shared his family's interest and, in 1751, hired Drury Lane Theatre – shown here on the slide – so that his eldest siblings and their inner circle could perform Shakespeare's *Othello*, with Frank in the title role. The production was watched by Horace Walpole, who wrote (quote) that, "The rage was so great to see [it], that the House of Commons literally adjourned at three o'clock on purpose".

Costs for the production ran to nearly £2000, which Frank paid for from funds recently acquired via his marriage to an older widow, Isabella Countess of Egmont, who had been left well provided for in her first husband's will, and who was apparently entranced by Foote to see marriage to the philandering Frank as her destiny.

And, if you're thinking now that this tale of a marriage of convenience to fund the lifestyle of a man-about-town sounds familiar, you would be right...

**Slide 5: full screen image – 'The Marriage' from Hogarth's 'A Rake's Progress'. A young man and a much older woman stand in front of a priest to be married. In the background is a younger woman holding a young child.**

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...because Frank Delaval could almost *be* the spendthrift Tom Rakewell in Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* – compelled to save his fortune by marrying a wealthy bride while his mistress and the mother of his illegitimate child looked on.

When cast in this light though, staging Shakespeare's solemn tragedy seems an unusual choice for Frank. And it's this that leads me on to my key question today: What does it mean, that Samuel Foote's protégé opted to 'privately' hire a theatre to act out the central role in the moralising *Othello*, for a clamouring audience of his peers? Was Frank Hogarth's Rake, or was he instead reputable as his memoirist later entreated people to believe?

By framing Frank's *Othello* within discourse on the eighteenth-century theatre, manliness and the concept of a 'socially turned' cultural identity (Wahrman, 2006), I'll now address that question, and suggest that Frank's 'private' (in inverted commas) theatrical was an attempt to perceptibly realign a rakish youth with Shakespeare's strong moral narrative, in a court of public opinion.

**Slide 6: white quotation on a blue text box. In the background is a painting of a full House of Commons, sometime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.**

Two months after his performance as Othello, Frank once again tried his luck on the hustings, and was returned as the Member of Parliament for Hindon, beginning the life of what Matthew McCormack has called the 'public man': a man (quote) "of a certain station whose destiny it was to serve the public good", through the articulation of cultural masculinities in the political domain.

Central to eighteenth century masculinity was the idea of independence; a (quote) "condition in which self-mastery, conscience and individual responsibility could be exercised". Such 'independence' was measured against a range of conditions, including property ownership and the income that it provided, patriotism, personal responsibility, and the demonstrable exercise of agreeable character traits including virtue, sincerity, and politeness. The possession of these tangible and behavioural assets offered a man a kind of 'masculine capital' with which to subsidise and articulate his fitness to take on political responsibility as a 'public man'.

Frank's participation in the 'public life' appropriate to his station was profoundly influenced by his ability to demonstrate this independence. And yet, this appears to have been something of a struggle. To understand his choice of *Othello* to move his private passion for theatre into the public gaze therefore, it is also necessary to consider the 'public' / 'private' paradigm in relation to Frank's experiences.

**Slide 7: white quotation on a blue text box. In the background is the same aquatint of the theatre from slide 1.**

The very language used to describe the business of a 'public life' in Westminster suggests its conflation with the theatre. Men operating within the corridors of government have been called 'political actors', while parliaments have been reported as playing host to "serious, uplifting theatre" as well as "vulgar theatricality".

So, too, can the idea of 'private theatre' be problematised. Was the staging of theatrical productions for an invited audience truly private, just because it took place within the domestic setting or through the hiring of a theatre? Authors have indicated not. Helen Brooks, for example, writes of private theatre owners seeking to (quote) "emulate the public mode of performance" and of amateur actors attending public theatres for tips on their own performances. Referencing Jurgen Habermas' work, Brooks also calls for a reassessment of 'private' and 'public' theatrical practices as quoted here: "Historically the term 'private theatricals' has led to associations with the domestic, intimate, and amateur, and resulted in such theatrical activity being sidelined [...] Yet whilst our contemporary use of the term 'private' might suggest the binary division of 'private' and 'public' theatres, there was [...] no fixed definition of 'private' in the late eighteenth century. 'Private theatricals' [thus] signified a number of different understandings of 'privacy', including the nature of the place itself and the performance's accessibility to the general public."

A 'private' theatrical production such as that staged by Frank Delaval could therefore be employed as a tool for articulating oneself publicly, through the medium of performance.

**Slide 8: white quotation on a blue text box. In the background is a detail from a mezzotint of actress Peg Woffington, wearing her hair in a man's style.**

As Helen Brooks has called for 'public' and 'private' theatre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to be studied within its own context, so too has Dror Wahrman called for a reconsideration of identity against an 18<sup>th</sup> century backdrop.

Drawing parallels with acting, Wahrman argues for an understanding of the self as mutable. For him, identity in the time of Frank Delaval was something that could be cast on and off in a succession of self-identifications, each equally as authentic and convincing as the last, and as the next. Acting a character and being a character could be synonymous and were mediated by one's visible behaviours. Actress Peg Woffington, for example – who is shown here on the slide in one of her famous 'breech part' roles – was understood by audiences to convincingly adopt a male cultural identity for the duration of her performances, by adopting socially recognised behaviours of manhood. And yet she was able, just as convincingly, to return to presenting a cultural identity that matched her biological sex once the performance ended.

What made this possible is the idea that identity at this time was non-essential – (quote) "not anchored in a deeply seated self [but rather] outwardly or socially turned".

In other words, a man's identity was reflective of socially-leaning, collective ideals of manhood; a 'masculine *identity*', rather than the interiorised *individuality* that we might recognise today.

It's against these intellectual backdrops that I suggest Frank Delaval's *Othello* should be read. In particular, I'll now propose a reading of the production where it's framed as a strategy that sought to articulate Frank's 'fitness to rule' in the theatres of power, by exploiting norms of identity play within the theatre of pleasure.

**Slide 9: white quotation on a blue background. To the left is a half-length portrait of Samuel Foote, looking directly at the viewer. He is wearing a dark coat, perhaps with a hood, a mustard-coloured waistcoat, a white stock with lace, and a powdered wig.**

Despite the Delavals' theatrical activity at Seaton Delaval, Ian Kelly suggests that the 1751 *Othello* was the first occasion on which Frank and his family had 'trodden the boards' of the London stage. Perhaps because of his friend's tender experience, Samuel Foote (who's shown here) assumed the role of coach, preparing Frank for the leading role.

Kelly demonstrates the pair's close relationship by quoting Foote's dedication to Frank, in the former's collected works: "Whatever Dissipations the World may suppose our Days to have been consumed, many, many Hours have been consecrated to other Subjects than generally employ the Gay and the Giddy and unless I am greatly mistaken, it will soon be discovered, that joined to the acknowledged best heart in the World, Mr Delaval has a head capable of directing it."

Kelly's interpretation of this tribute is that Foote intended to (quote) "reposition Frank in the public imagination as less the playboy and more the artist", and I agree. In these words, Foote implicitly acknowledges public opinion of the pair as 'gay and giddy' and moves to counter this by foregrounding his friend's virtues as a kind-hearted and level-headed character.

Crucially, Foote couches this in theatrical terms, prefacing his declaration of Frank's good character with a note that he has chosen not to recount the friends' (quote) "many Conversations on the Subject of Comedy". He thus sets up a juxtaposition between the 'dissipated gay and giddy' character that public opinion supposed Frank to be on the one hand (personified by Comedy), and the heartfelt and level-headed man that Foote considered his friend to be, on the other. And, although he doesn't explicitly say as much, it isn't too great a stretch to personify this latter character assessment as Comedy's traditional counterpoint: Tragedy; the serious face of theatre.

We might therefore align Foote's entreaty for a reassessment of Frank's character with the latter's choice of *Othello* for his London debut. In staging a tragedy for an audience of his peers, Frank moved to articulate that he was more than a comedic figure. He did this by demonstrating possession of the masculine capital that underwrote men's performance of the role of 'public man': in the first part, he showed that he had the wealth needed to finance the production and, in the second part, that he could perform the essential qualities of independence, such as moral probity and level-headedness.

**Slide 10: white quotation on a blue background. To the left is a portrait of a man playing the role of Iago during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He is seated, and looks out to the left of frame, away from the viewer. He is dressed in the costume of an earlier century, wearing a red doublet with gold braid, a white ruffle, and a red cloak trimmed with gold braid.**

In addition to considering the production as an articulation of masculinity, we can also now frame it within notions of identity at the time.

In insinuating that Frank should be recognised by his peers for his socially harmonious 'dramatic', as well as for his 'comedic' but socially discordant traits, Foote's dedication tacitly acknowledges that both such groups co-existed. Furthermore, Foote's words imply that it was considered desirable for Frank to be

aligned with the reputable rather than the rakish aspects of his identity, suggesting that the pair were cognisant of the 'socially leaning' nature of identity defined by Wahrman; of seeking to reflect a set of collective values that defined the 'identity' of a 'public man'.

Commitment to the *craft of acting*, as described by theorists such as Charles Gildon and John Hill, was a key part of Frank and Foote's strategy to achieve this. In these theories, the actor was encouraged to (quote) "transform himself into every Person he represents", and to ensure that "he lives, not acts the scene". Foote was himself a proponent of this, having likewise written of Garrick's skill in (quote) "persuading [an audience] that he is the real Man". Presumably, this was a point of view that he also passed on to Frank, in preparing him for his role in *Othello*.

Studying acting, and performing in a 'private' theatrical, for an audience familiar with the customs of identity play in such a setting, was thus an ideal vehicle for Frank to begin transmigrating himself into the character of 'public man'.

**Slide 11: white quotation on a blue background. To the left is a full-length portrait of Frank Delaval as an adult. He wears a red army uniform and poses with a rifle in hand.**

Despite securing the parliamentary seat of Hindon following the *Othello* production, Frank's parliamentary career was undistinguished. He attempted to style himself as a patriot with a short service among the British forces raiding St Malo in 1758 but contemporaries remained unconvinced of his bravery – Walpole, for example, wrote mockingly that (quote) "Delaval has turned Capuchin with remorse for having killed four thousand French with his own hand". Frank also failed as a dynastic patriarch – fathering illegitimate children but no heir – and continued to be in debt; selling his inheritance in the family estates to his brother John and living, by 1771, as only the titular head of the family, on an annuity. Furthermore, the adultery proceedings brought by his wife were surely well known and, although they don't seem to have appeared in print at the time, were certainly published in full after the death of both parties.

Notwithstanding the efforts to 're-brand' Frank in the public imagination described then, the strategy appears not to have been a success. While a steadfast friend to some, Frank remained a figure of fun or model of vice to others.

The failure is perhaps explained by quoting Wahrman, who reminds us that un-related actors could temporarily become identical twins (quote) "through identical costuming". In other words, if one did not continue to appear the part, one ceased to be believable in the part. So too it seems to have been for Frank, who became Shakespeare's solemn and tragic Othello for the duration of the 1751 performance, but afterwards reverted to his former self – 'warts and all'.

**Slide 12: white text and the University of Lincoln logo lay over a portrait of six youths of various ages, in 18<sup>th</sup> century dress. On the left is a pair of young men, one with his arm around the other. On the right are two younger girls, seated. In the centre is a young woman (Rhoda Delaval) with a young man standing behind her (Frank Delaval).**

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And so, to conclude: this paper has traced a little of the biography of Francis, 'Frank' Delaval – shown here to the right of centre, standing with some of his siblings.

In particular, I've focused on his interest in the theatre, and on framing him within intellectual discourse around Georgian masculinity. In doing so, I have aimed to establish that commonly held dichotomies of 'work and play' / 'public and private' were more nebulous in practice than a convenient lexical divide would have us believe.

Through application of McCormack's work on 'public men' we've seen that manliness was articulated through the possession and performance of independence; which was understood as both a freedom of will, and a condition in which one exercised agreeable traits such as virtue and level-headedness.

This 'performative manliness', as we might call it, can be equated with what Wahrman has called a 'socially turned identity': a (quote) "non-essential notion of identity that was not anchored in a deeply seated self". In this reading of identity, enacting the traits of manhood were understood not simply to evoke, but to *transform* the identity of the performer.

This notion was embodied in Early Modern philosophies of stage-acting, as practised by Samuel Foote – of whom Frank was a great friend and protégé. It is through their practice that Frank and Foote were able to connive in the strategic transfiguration of the former into a 'public man', in part through the 1751 *Othello*.

Finally, by acknowledging Brooks' work to redefine 'privacy' in the eighteenth-century theatre, and by synthesising this with discourse on manliness and identity in the same period, I propose that Frank Delaval's practice of amateur dramatics is elevated from being a 'private' leisure activity of little consequence except to the pursuit of pleasure, to being a far more significant instrument for the negotiation and dissemination of masculine identity.