

= Irene (play) =

Irene is a Neoclassical tragedy written between 1726 and 1749 by Samuel Johnson . It has the distinction of being the work Johnson considered his greatest failure . Since his death , the critical consensus has been that he was right to think so .

Irene was Johnson 's only play , and was first performed on 6 February 1749 in a production by his friend and former pupil , David Garrick . The play was a commercial success and earned Johnson more money than anything else he had written up to that point . It was never revived during his lifetime , and there is no subsequent evidence of any other full @-@ scale productions of Irene anywhere until 1999 , making it one of the most unsuccessful plays ever written by a major author .

= = Background = =

Johnson began writing Irene around 1726 when he first began to work in his father 's bookshop . While in the bookshop he befriended Gilbert Walmesley , the Registrar of the Ecclesiastical Court of Lichfield . Johnson would discuss Irene with Walmesley , and read him some of the early drafts . At one point , Walmesley told Johnson that " he was making Irene suffer so much in the first part of the play that there would be nothing left for her to suffer in the later part " . Johnson joked that there was " enough in reserve ... I intend to put my heroine into the ecclesiastical court of Lichfield which will fill up the utmost measure of human calamity " .

Johnson wrote a considerable part of Irene in 1737 while teaching at Edial Hall School , the academy he had founded in 1735 . Johnson spent his evenings working on his play while ignoring his wife Elizabeth (known as Tetty) . This provoked David Garrick , his student , to perform a skit mocking the incidents , although the incidents he portrayed were more than likely his own fabrications . However , the play was written mostly for Mrs. Johnson ; she was fond of it and hoped it would be a success . Her belief in the play inspired Johnson to finish it and push to have it performed . When Edial Hall failed , Johnson travelled to London and brought the unfinished manuscript with him . In 1737 , Johnson tried to submit Irene to Charles Fleetwood , the owner @-@ manager of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane , but Fleetwood rejected it on the grounds that there was no patron and his theatre was catering to other types of performances . Johnson tried in 1741 to have the unperformed play printed , but this too failed . He seems to have continued to revise it over the next several years , since a manuscript notebook contains draft material made not earlier than June 1746 .

It was not until Garrick took over as manager of Drury Lane Theatre that the play was guaranteed a production . By this point Johnson was hard at work on his Dictionary , but he found time for further work on Irene .

= = Play = =

Johnson 's main source for the story of Irene was Richard Knolles 's Generall Historie of the Turkes (1603) , although he also made some use of George Sandys 's Relation of a Journey ... containing a Description of the Turkish Empire (1615) , Herbelot 's Bibliothèque Orientale (1697) and Humphrey Prideaux 's Life of Mahomet (1697) .

In Knolles 's work , the Sultan Mahomet conquers Constantinople in 1453 and captures a Greek Christian named Irene . He decides to take her as his mistress , and while pursuing her romantically he ignores his duties as a monarch . Soon , the kingdom is falling apart from neglect and the subjects begin to riot , so Mahomet kills Irene to prove his dedication to his people . Johnson alters the story to emphasise the theme of Irene 's temptation . His Mahomet offers Irene a deal : if she becomes a Muslim , he will preserve her life and give her power at his court .

IRENE :

Forbear ? O do not urge me to my ruin !

MAHOMET :

To state and pow 'r I court thee , not to ruin :

Smile on my wishes , and command the globe .
Security shall spread her shield before thee ,
And Love infold thee with his downy wings .
(Irene II. vii II . 79 ? 83)

Johnson goes on to emphasise how the pursuit of worldly power tends to corrupt . After Irene has accepted the Sultan 's offer and abandoned her religious faith , she falls out with her virtuous friend Aspasia :

ASPASIA :

Ah ! let me rather seek the convent 's cell ;
There where my thoughts , at intervals of pray 'r ,
Descend to range these mansions of misfortune ,
Oft ' shall I dwell on our disastrous friendship ,
And shed the pitying tear for lost Irene .

IRENE :

Go , languish on in dull obscurity ;
Thy dazzled soul with all its boasted greatness ,
Shrinks at th ' o 'erpow 'ring gleams of regal state ,
Stoops from the blaze like a degenerate eagle ,
And flies for shelter to the shades of life .

(Irene III. viii. II . 93 ? 102)

As a result of her decision to become Mahomet 's queen , Irene becomes ensnared in a complex power struggle between his various advisors : the First Visier Cali Bassa , the Aga Mustapha , and the officer Abdalla , who is suffering from unrequited love for Aspasia . Mahomet becomes convinced that Bassa , with Irene 's complicity , is plotting against him . Two of Abdalla 's captains kill Irene , but with her dying words she reveals that Bassa 's true accomplice was the Greek soldier Demetrius , Aspasia 's lover , who has safely escaped with his loved one . On learning that Irene had not been conspiring against him , Mahomet is distraught :

MAHOMET :

Robb 'd of the maid , with whom I wish 'd to triumph ,
No more I burn for fame or for dominion ;
Success and conquest now are empty sounds ,
Remorse and anguish seize on all my breast ;
Those groves , whose shades embower 'd the dear Irene ,
Heard her last cries , and fann 'd her dying beauties ,
Shall hide me from the tasteless world for ever .

(Irene V. xii. II . 42 ? 48)

The play is written in blank verse but , as Walter Jackson Bate claims , " reads like heroic couplets from which the rhyme has been removed , and couplets in which the poet has so much anxiety to keep a strict regularity of meter that other considerations ? even of style and rhythm alone ? become sacrificed . " It is evident from the scansion of the above lines that Johnson pronounced " Irene " in its Classical form with three syllables , / a??ri?ni? / eye @-@ REE @-@ nee , and not in the contemporary form / ?a??ri?n / EYE @-@ reen .

= = = Stage history = = =

David Garrick 's acceptance of Irene for production prompted Johnson to finish rewriting the play . Garrick changed the play 's title to Mahomet and Irene , and requested changes that would make the play more acceptable to his sense of theatrical style . Johnson was initially opposed to the changes and complained that Garrick " wants me to make Mahomet run mad , that he may have an opportunity of tossing his hands and kicking his heels " . Johnson 's friend John Taylor resolved the dispute and Johnson ultimately carried out Garrick 's suggestions , which included revising Irene 's death scene so that she would be strangled onstage , instead of offstage as originally written .

Mahomet and Irene opened on 6 February 1749 . Elizabeth Johnson was unable to attend the

performance because of illness . Johnson arrived at the theatre in the kind of clothing he considered as the " distinction of dress " required of a playwright ; he wore " a scarlet waistcoat with gold lace and a gold @-@ laced hat " . The Prologue " soothed the audience , and the play went off tolerably , till it came to the conclusion " . The conclusion in question was Irene 's onstage strangulation , which upset the audience and provoked shouts of " Murder ! " . The actress quickly left the stage ; for all successive performances Garrick restored Johnson 's original ending .

The play was performed for nine nights , by the standards of 18th century London a very respectable run . Johnson received £ 195 17s. for the performances . Robert Dodsley published the playscript on 16 February 1749 and Johnson received an additional £ 100 . Perhaps ironically , in view of its later eclipse , this made Irene the most financially lucrative work Johnson had yet written : during this period of his career , only the Dictionary earned him more money .

= = = Cast = = =

Hannah Pritchard played the role of Irene and Garrick cast himself in the role of Demetrius . Other notable actors in the play 's original cast were Susannah Maria Arne (using her professional name " Mrs. Cibber ") as Aspasia and Spranger Barry as Mahomet .

The complete cast list , according to the first edition , is as follows :

Mahomet , Emperor of the Turks ? Mr. Barry

Cali Bassa , First Visier ? Mr. Berry

Mustapha , A Turkish Aga ? Mr. Sowden

Abdalla , An Officer ? Mr. Harvard

Hasan , Turkish Captain ? Mr. Usher

Caraza , Turkish Captain ? Mr. Burton

Demetrius , Greek Nobleman ? Mr. Garrick

Leontius , Greek Nobleman ? Mr. Blakes

Murza , A Eunuch ? unlisted

Aspasia , Greek Lady ? Mrs. Cibber

Irene , Greek Lady ? Mrs. Pritchard

Attendants on Irene ? unlisted

= = Critical response = =

Irene has never been the most admired of Johnson 's works . Even James Boswell found it wanting :

Analysed into parts , it will furnish a rich store of noble sentiments , fine imagery , and beautiful language ; but it is deficient in pathos , in that delicate power of touching the human feelings , which is the principle end of the drama . Indeed Garrick has complained to me , that Johnson not only had not the faculty of producing the impressions of tragedy , but that he had not the sensibility to perceive them .

Johnson 's friend Bennet Langton recorded the author 's own later disenchantment with the piece :

At another time , when one was reading his tragedy Irene to a company at a house in the country , he [Johnson] left the room ; and somebody having asked him the reason of this , he replied , " Sir , I thought it had been better . " '

The early 20th century consensus of opinion was summed up by George Sampson in 1941 : " Of his early tragedy Irene [...] it is enough to say that its moral dialogues , its correctness of plan and its smoothness of verse do not suffice to give it any rank as drama . " T. S. Eliot suggested an explanation for the play 's unpopularity and neglect :

His verse has none of the dramatic qualities ; it is correct , but correctness in such isolation becomes itself a fault . The play would be more readable to @-@ day , if he had written it in rhyme ; the whole would be more easily declaimed , and the good things more easily remembered ; it would lose none of its excellence of structure , thought , vocabulary and figures of speech . What would be mellifluous in rhyme , is merely monotonous without it .

F.R. Leavis argued that Boswell 's criticisms of the play ? " that [Johnson] has no sense of the theatre , and worse , cannot present or conceive his themes dramatically " ? were " obvious " , and that Irene was a failure because Johnson 's best poetry (such as *The Vanity of Human Wishes*) was " a poetry of statement , exposition and reflection : nothing could be remoter from the Shakespearean use of language [...] than the Johnsonian . " Like Eliot , Leavis suggested that the play might have been better if Johnson had not been determined to write it in blank verse :

He is clearly determined that his verse shall not be changed into the ' periods of a declaimer ' , and that it shall not be said that the audience cannot easily perceive ' where the lines end or begin ' (see his remarks on blank @-@ verse in the *Life of Milton*) . In couplets , of course , he couldn 't have written so dismally . With the absence of rhyme and of the movement goes the absence of wit . And without the wit he is without the Johnsonian weight .

Johnson biographer Walter Jackson Bate has attempted to defend Irene , arguing that the reason why it is considered so bad is that the reader cannot help being aware that " it is by one of the masters of English prose style (who also had a powerful command of one kind of poetic style) , and it is also by one of the supreme critics of literature in whatever language " . Bate claims that if contemporary readers were able to encounter the play without knowing who had written it , " it would not seem too bad " ; but since we cannot forget Johnson 's achievements in other fields of literature , reading Irene is an especially depressing experience : " the heart begins after a while to sink except in the most resolute Johnsonian , and sometimes even then . "