

# Re-viewing failure: William McGonagall as Macbeth at the Theatre Royal, Dundee, 1858<sup>1\*</sup>

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In June 2020, William McGonagall, famous as ‘the worst poet in the history of the English language’ or – as the library housing his archive puts it – ‘the world’s best bad poet’, featured as the subject of the historian Ryan Latto’s podcast, *Unearthed*.<sup>2</sup> In asking what lessons might be learned from the ghosts of the past, Latto cites McGonagall’s persistence in the face of creative adversity as inspiration for all artists impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Like most work on McGonagall, Latto makes his case by focusing on McGonagall’s poetry as a means by which to explore the tension that lies at the heart of his celebrity: a strongly articulated level of self-belief and its mobilisation through clunkingly bad, and publicly decried, verse. However, McGonagall’s enigmatic status as ‘the world’s best bad poet’ is anticipated by – and galvanised by – an identity embedded in the theatrical culture of mid-nineteenth-century Dundee. It is therefore necessary to bridge a gap in McGonagall scholarship by connecting the established image of the ‘best bad’ poet with McGonagall’s earlier career as an actor specialising in Shakespearean tragedy. Offering a re-view of McGonagall’s 1858 performance as Macbeth, I want to show that it is precisely by bringing McGonagall’s various modes



Figure 1: Studio portrait of William McGonagall (courtesy of Libraries, Leisure & Culture Dundee).

of performance together that we can begin to unpick his complex local celebrity, understanding it as rooted in a mobilisation of what Sara Jane



Figure 2: The Theatre Royal, Castle Street, Dundee from a publication of 1822 (courtesy of [www.arthurlloyd.co.uk](http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk)).

Bailes has called a ‘poetics of failure’ (Bailes 1980).

It was in December of 1858 that McGonagall performed selected scenes from *Macbeth* at the Theatre Royal in Castle Street, Dundee, concluding with Act 5, Scene 8: Macbeth’s demise in the final battle with Macduff. McGonagall details a sense of the tension that had arisen between himself and the actor who played opposite him, reporting that Macduff, perhaps conscious of McGonagall’s prowess in fighting scenes, ‘tried to spoil me in combat by telling me to cut it short.’<sup>3</sup> Rather than acquiesce to this demand, McGonagall’s Macbeth, despite having

been thoroughly run through with Macduff’s sword, refused to die. In a ‘review’ appearing in the June 1872 edition of *Dundee People’s Journal*, the author, ‘Old Stager,’ remembers how McGonagall ‘kept dodging round and round Macduff, as if he had made up his mind to have a wrestle for it.’ Ignoring Macduff’s ‘quite audible’ requests that he ‘go down,’ McGonagall’s Macbeth, instead, ‘maintained his feet and flourished his weapon about the ears of his adversary’ in a manner that left Old Stager imagining ‘the performance ending in real tragedy.’ Eventually, Macduff, ‘tired of such tomfoolery, flung his sword to the side,’

seized hold of McGonagall, and ‘brought the sublime tragedy of Macbeth to a close in a rather undignified way, by taking the feet from under the principal character.’<sup>4</sup>

That the story of this prolonged performance continued to circulate in local cultural memory well after 1858 is made clear by the fact that it is the subject of two further ‘reviews,’ appearing in 1876 and 1887 respectively. Usefully, the 1887 review (this time by D. Taylor for the *Dundee Evening Telegraph*) reproduces that of 1876, a poem by the ubiquitous Old Stager and published in the *People’s Journal*:

[...] I knew ‘twould be a dreadful fight,  
For William has a fiery vein;  
He showered his blows with main and might,  
And nearly murdered Fife’s brave Thane!

He seemed to think Shakespeare had erred  
In getting him killed by Macduff;  
For though he often felt the sword  
Yet he disdained to cry ‘enough’ [...]<sup>5</sup>

Recounting the poem and the performance, Taylor concludes that in his encounter with Macduff, ‘it was quite evident’ that this Macbeth ‘had made up his mind to die hard.’<sup>6</sup> Here, the phrase ‘die hard’ evokes the persona of the guileless try-hard that intrigues Ryan Latta in 2020, but Taylor adds nuance by stressing McGonagall’s decision-making, his considered choice to disrupt audience expectations of Shakespeare’s text in 1858. This recognition of intent is replicated by Old

Stager who describes McGonagall as having ‘evidently made up his mind to astonish the “gods” at the Theatre Royal. However, the qualification here that McGonagall’s performance is aimed at the audience seated in ‘the “gods”’ is particularly telling: these patrons, occupying the cheapest seats in the house, consisted of McGonagall’s shopmates, weavers from the local mills, who had also made up the bulk of the audience for McGonagall’s earlier appearances in Dundee. At the Theatre Royal, Taylor and Old Stager tell us, McGonagall resolves to play Macbeth for a specific audience with specific demands.

Indeed, by 1858 McGonagall was well-known within Dundee and the occupants of the Theatre Royal ‘gods’ had clear expectations regarding his performance: reports Taylor, ‘[they] went to see him for they thought they would get a treat, and they were not disappointed.’ This ‘treat’ can be unpacked through a survey of local commentaries concerning McGonagall’s activity within the industrial spaces, amateur dramatic clubs and penny booths of Dundee during the 1840s–50s. What these uncover is a desire to read McGonagall’s performances through the lens of his notorious expressions of ‘self-[conceit].’<sup>7</sup> Thus, reports about McGonagall’s ‘confidence in the superiority of his talents,’ his orations delivered ‘for the edification of his fellow workers’ and his loud disdain for

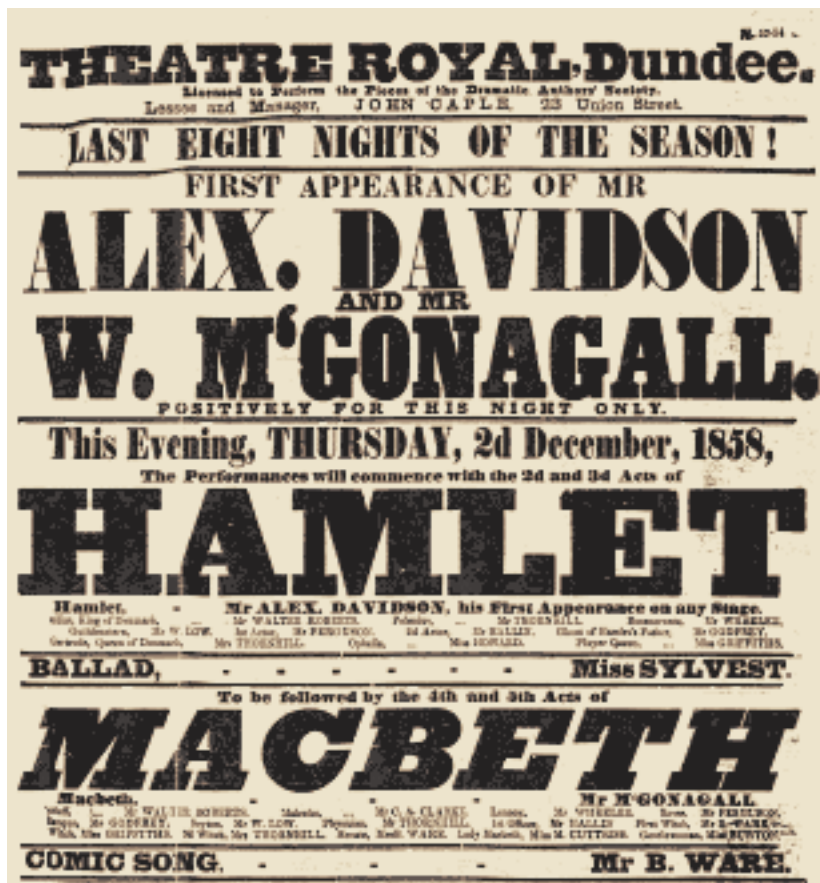


Figure 3: Theatre Royal playbill, 1858 (courtesy of [www.arthurhulloyd.co.uk](http://www.arthurhulloyd.co.uk)).

lesser actors (‘Give that man five pounds for playing like that? By heavens they saw me they would give me ten’) are matched with gleeful descriptions of his comeuppance in performance.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, we learn of a much-rehearsed and widely encouraged programme of parts to be delivered at Peter Street Hall that is scuppered by an audience who do not show up; we discover that McGonagall’s first professional engagement as Macbeth is marred by the company’s refusal ‘to lend their best [costume],’ rendering him ‘more like

Highland beggar than the “Great Thane”;

we hear that during one performance, and exhausted by the ‘might and main’ of his delivery, McGonagall’s voice becomes ‘so hoarse that he could scarcely be heard,’ a direct result of his refreshments having been spirited away ‘like the witches in his favourite tragedy.’ Of McGonagall’s skill, we are told that ‘He had a most retentive memory, and could – well, not exactly *recite*, but he could *yell* whole passages from “Macbeth”, “Richard III”, “Hamlet” or “Othello” ...’.<sup>9</sup> His ‘style of

acting was all his own,' reiterates Old Stager: 'But what a style! [It] never varied, being one continual roar from beginning to end.'<sup>10</sup>

These accounts confirm two important details: firstly, they show that McGonagall had established a distinctive celebrity within Dundee prior to the 1858 performance at the Theatre Royal; secondly, they reveal that the appeal of that celebrity is rooted in failure, on McGonagall's performative exposure as an object of ridicule. Old Stager's poetic review concludes instructively here:

[...] The curtains fell on this foul play  
Ere William could get time to rise;  
But those who saw him the next day  
Said he looked black – between the eyes

From this I fear you will all three [Garrick,  
Kean, Kemble]  
See that your laurels now must fade  
And even Irving, from Dundee,  
Must learn how Macbeth should be played.<sup>11</sup>

The delight taken by Old Stager, both in McGonagall's theatrical flop, and in the futility of the comparison with Irving, is palpable. Evaluating responses like this more broadly, Gord Bambrick's work invites us to consider McGonagall as fulfilling a cultural function approximating that of the fool, his performances actively staging local socio-cultural class tensions and inducing, through failure, a pleasurable catharsis in his audience. Bambrick explains how working-class audiences participated in a collective rejection of McGonagall's cultural pretensions (and their associated values), subjecting him to uninhibited

'rituals of laughter and humiliation' in the process (Bambrick 1992). In response to this treatment, McGonagall famously maintained a Keaton-like 'Stoneface' and continued to promote his reputation for 'self-[conceit]' publicly, expressing unshakeable confidence in his abilities. Of the 1858 *Macbeth*, Taylor registers amazement at McGonagall's 'belief he acted splendidly,' concluding that 'William's ideas of the business were quite different from any other person's [sic].'<sup>12</sup> The incongruity pinpointed here between McGonagall's expressions of his own greatness and the reception of his creative output remains the defining feature of McGonagall's legacy. It continues to puzzle cultural commentators who variously assess McGonagall as suffering from an undiagnosed bio-psycho-social disorder or, most famously, as a 'heroic failure': somebody who was, in Stephen Pile's terms, unintentionally and 'so giftedly bad that he backed unwittingly into genius' (Pile 1980: 123). However, I want to return here to the way in which Taylor and Old Stager pinpoint McGonagall's decision-making at the Theatre Royal in 1858, his deliberately provoking intervention in the development of his performance of *Macbeth*: 'he made up his mind to astonish the "gods."' It is exactly by foregrounding McGonagall's agency as *Macbeth* that Taylor and Old Stager invite us to reconsider McGonagall's legacy as an 'unwitting' and preposterous 'heroic failure' and to imagine him, instead, as consciously operating a *poetics* of failure.

For Bailes, it is precisely 'when the constituents of a familiar paradigm are made to fail' that 'something else' begins to happen on stage;



and this ‘something else’ is nothing less than a productive renegotiation of the parameters of performance, the creation of new possibilities, a ‘poetics’ of failure (Bailes 1980: 62). Crucially, this is a renegotiation that underscores the agency of the artist who ‘consciously [deploys failure] in the production of the event.’ Centring McGonagall’s agency in his counter-cultural *Macbeth* of 1858 means encountering him anew: not as a ‘heroic failure’ in the sense that Pile implies it, but as somebody who determinedly produces failure as ‘something else;’ indeed, as an artist who makes ‘failure [*work*]’ (Bailes 1980: 2). Like Taylor and Old Stager, I underscore McGonagall’s intention here, contending that when he addresses the ‘gods’ in 1858, McGonagall makes failure *work* by offering a performance that consciously foregrounds and advances his well-known – and derided – local celebrity, a celebrity shaped by Dundee’s rich theatrical and socio-industrial microcultures.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, McGonagall takes advantage of a mode of performance inherited from the early modern stage and embedded within the text, what Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster have explored as ‘personation’ (Weimann and Bruster 2008). When *Macbeth*, run through with Macduff’s sword, does not fall but, rather, ‘gains vitality’ with ‘every death thrust,’ McGonagall repurposes this theatrical function of the early modern actor-character to great effect: switching to a presentational mode of acting, he offers the audience an alternative performance, the ‘treat’ that they have come for.<sup>14</sup> This is a celebration of local celebrity that is made coherent precisely through a renegotiation

of the established parameters of Shakespearean performance, through failure that *works*. Privileging a persona forged within the industrial space of the local mills, the city’s amateur dramatic circuit and the spectacular culture of the penny gaffs, McGonagall’s performance of *Macbeth* intrudes awkwardly into the grand space of the Theatre Royal and fails, wonderfully.

Re-viewing the 1858 *Macbeth* through the prism of Bailes’ poetics of failure invites us to re-view McGonagall’s literary and socio-cultural performances more broadly, to consider the ways in which he leans in to the ‘treat’ enjoyed by local audiences. Indeed, McGonagall himself asks us to acknowledge a coherence between his reputation as a local tragedian and his identity as a poet: in five of the six extant versions of McGonagall’s autobiographical writing housed in the William McGonagall Collection at Dundee City Library, McGonagall declares his 1877 rebirth as a poet through appropriations of *Macbeth*:

[the desire to write poetry] was so strong, I imagined that a pen was in my right hand, and a voice crying, ‘Write! Write!’<sup>15</sup>

The image conjured up here of McGonagall, in his sitting room at Paton’s Lane, visualising a phantom pen in his hand and moved by a disembodied, imperative voice is provocative. It is an image that works to activate the readers’ imagination, drawing not only on the rich visual culture associated with Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* but on a local history that connects McGonagall with the role; moreover, the image does not just juxtapose the two but brilliantly interweaves them.

Here, the dagger, transformed into a pen, becomes a dual symbol of Macbeth's and McGonagall's failures while the disembodied voice, remembering Macbeth's 'Sleep no more,' invites us to complete its ghostly injunction to McGonagall, that he 'Write! (no more).'<sup>16</sup> Understanding McGonagall as consciously operating a poetics of failure across multiple modes of performance allows us to read this autobiographical appropriation of *Macbeth* as a playful representation that skilfully blends sincerity with absurdity, a hallmark of McGonagall's persona. It is a representation that stresses a clear and deliberate connection between different modes of performance, an extension of McGonagall's Shakespearean 'treat' into verse and, later, into performance poetry (where *Macbeth* featured as a key component of the repertoire). As retrospective accounts of McGonagall's decision to become a poet, the autobiographical appropriations of *Macbeth* also alert us to McGonagall's highly developed awareness of an emerging trend in the cultural landscape of the 1870s.

As Kirstie Blair has discussed at length, Scottish verse culture of the 1870s, promoted through the local press, encouraged bad poetry as a 'highly publishable subgenre' through which pleasure could be derived from guessing if 'the author was writing strategically as opposed to ignorantly' (Blair 2019: 177). This trend for bad verse clearly intersects with McGonagall's already established renown for bad acting: that is, it is another example of failure that *works*. The 1870s had ushered in a period of decline for the weaving industry in Dundee and while McGonagall

initially responded to subsequent economic pressures by appealing for paid work as an actor, he swiftly identified and capitalised upon the synergy that exists between his theatrical celebrity and the contemporary fashion for bad poetry. Of McGonagall's poetry, Blair notes that his 'success, if it can be called such, rests not on distinctiveness but on *familiarity*' but, crucially, that familiarity is already established by 1877 (Blair 2019: 178). McGonagall's persona, rooted in the theatrical landscape of Dundee and possessed of a 'strong desire to write poetry' now becomes newly mobilised through the local press and, like his Macbeth, refuses to die. Indeed, the shift into verse and the harnessing of local print culture that it entails inevitably increases McGonagall's recognisability within Dundee. It is at this point that McGonagall's mobilisation of a multimodal poetics of failure and his specifically local celebrity fully coalesce, generating the enigma of his legacy.

Kerry O Ferris argues that local celebrity (that is, celebrity that operates in a 'smaller, more circumscribed' space) is characterised by vulnerability, a vulnerability that 'links the public and private [self] ... in a more unpleasant way than the gratifications of recognisability' pertaining to national or international stardom (Ferris 2010: 392; Ferris 2016: 228). This vulnerability stems from what Ferris identifies as a combination of recognisability and entitlement on the part of the public, an idea that draws on Erving Goffman's concept of 'open persons' as those who are socially exposed through lack of 'sacred value' (Goffman 1963: 126). McGonagall's own exposure within the space of Dundee has been well-documented,

not least by McGonagall himself who lamented the relentless ‘custom of annoying me’ that characterised his lived experience within the city. In 1893 he gave a despondent account of his treatment in Dundee to the *Weekly News*: ‘... before I leave home every morning I say to myself “I wonder if I am to meet with abuse this morning” ... I won’t travel a hundred yards when I am assaulted, pointed at with the finger of scorn, and laughed at and giggled at by silly girls.’<sup>17</sup> This treatment reflects the increasingly hostile reception that McGonagall received on stage from the 1870s. At the Nethergate Circus in 1879, for example, McGonagall, performing *Macbeth* with his trademark ‘whirlwind of passion’ (‘declaiming wildly’ and ‘treading the stage with tragic strides [whilst] waving his arms in furious style’) found himself met with ‘a shower of ancient eggs, tin cans, potatoes, bags of soot, bags of flour, and packages of mysterious compounds.’ Brandishing ‘his glittering sword’ at the audience, McGonagall eventually fled when “another hurricane of missiles, more overpowering than the one before, descended’ and, though the gallery exploded in ‘enthusiastic cheering’ to encourage him back onstage, the *Weekly News* reports that this ‘was not to be’ for McGonagall had ‘tasted in a very literal sense the “sweets” of popularity.’<sup>18</sup>

The ‘sweets’ of McGonagall’s popularity documented in these two *Weekly News* articles speak to McGonagall’s vulnerability in Ferris’s terms, his Goffmanian ‘open-ness’ within the local community. That openness is invited – and intensified – by a poetics of failure that promotes a slippage between the onstage and the offstage

self, producing a lack of ‘sacred value’ as an affect of performance. This is a dynamic bolstered by McGonagall’s expressions of ‘self-conceit’ which further consolidate his poetics of failure within the space of public discourse. Bleeding into the everyday, McGonagall’s act renders him a subject who can be ‘engaged at will,’ confronted by a public with ‘nothing to lose’ in the exchange. Accordingly, McGonagall’s fraught encounters within the city space evidence the impact of what Ferris calls the ‘interactional experience of recognisability,’ a connectedness that draws attention to how McGonagall’s image should be understood as co-produced by the local community (Ferris 2016: 232). The consequence of this mutually reinforcing co-production is that McGonagall becomes enmeshed in a network of overlapping discourses of public and private selfhood, a ‘structured polysemy’ that drives questions about his motivation and, frustratingly, denies the possibility of their resolution (Dyer 1979). Was McGonagall a ‘gullible fool or shrewd rogue?’ asks Norman Watson; ‘was he really able to sustain the same comic character non-stop, both off and on stage ... ?’ asks Chris Hunt (Watson 2010: 253; Hunt 2011: 12). These questions are generated by the fusion of McGonagall’s poetics of failure and the interactional nature of local celebrity, each perpetuating the other.

It is precisely William McGonagall’s counter-cultural engagement with Shakespeare in 1858 that invites us to identify and unpick the complex and overlapping mechanisms that underpin and drive the ‘best bad’ poet’s enigmatic image. Ryan Latta is right to recognise McGonagall’s ability



to weather creative and economic adversity as a source of inspiration during the pandemic. But re-viewing the 1858 *Macbeth* asks us to do so, not by reproducing engrained ideas about McGonagall as an unwitting 'heroic failure,' but to think of him instead as a figure of agency who exploited failure as a means of production, and as a performer who embraced poetry as an extension of an act that already worked. It spotlights the locality of McGonagall's celebrity as key, both in the construction of an image that pre-dates his fame as a poet, and in the evolution of that image and its legacy from the 1870s. The 1858 *Macbeth* at the Theatre Royal invites us to celebrate the myriad ways in which, on the stage, on the page, and on the streets of Dundee, William McGonagall showed himself to be an artist who screwed his courage to the sticking place, and failed.

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Links

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/>

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/william-mcgonagall/>

<https://www.leisureandculturaldundee.com/localhistory/wmcgonagall#collapse1>

<http://www.mcgonagall-online.org.uk/life/brief-autobiography>)

Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Dr Norman Watson for his insight into McGonagall's Dundee and Dr Erin Farley whose expert knowledge enabled me to remotely access relevant archival holdings at Dundee Central Library.
- 2 *Unearthed*, Podcast, produced by Ryan Latto, 2021. Available at <https://unearthed.buzzsprout.com> (last accessed 16 August 2023).
- 3 'The Autobiography of Sir William "Topaz" McGonagall.' *Dundee Weekly News*, 1901. William McGonagall Collection, Dundee Central Library.
- 4 'Recollections of a Stage-Struck Hero,' *The People's Journal*, 22 June 1872.
- 5 Taylor, D, 'Episodes in the Life of a Showman Chapter IV,' *The Evening Telegraph*, May 27 1877.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 'Recollections', 1872.
- 8 'Recollections', 1872; 'Episodes in the Life of a Showman Chapter III,' *Evening Telegraph*, May 20 1877.
- 9 'Episodes III', 1877; 'Recollections', 1872
- 10 'Episodes IV', 1877,
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 'Episodes IV', 1877.
- 13 For an account of this relationship see Watson, Norman, *Poet McGonagall* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2010.)
- 14 'Episodes IV', 1877.
- 15 Original MS of an Autobiography by William McGonagall, c.1880, William McGonagall Collection, Dundee Central Library. The image also occurs in *The Autobiography and Poetical Works of William McGonagall* (1887); *The Authentic Autobiography of the Poet McGonagall* (n.d.); *Poetic Gems* (1890) and *The Autobiography of William Topaz McGonagall* (1901). For a comprehensive account of McGonagall's autobiographical writing see Watson, *Poet*.
- 16 *Macbeth*, III, ii, 38.
- 17 'Poet McGonagall Disgusted with Dundee', *Weekly News*, 13 May 1893 (qtd. in Watson, *Poet*, p. 203). See also 'Poet McGonagall Disgusted with Dundee', *Dundee Courier*, 6 May 1893.
- 18 'McGonagall at the Circus,' *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 2 February 1889.