Citation:

Printed: Thu, 18 Dec 2025

Edge, Dexter. 2014. "Richard Griffith on Mozart as prodigy (1772)." In: *Mozart: New Documents*, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black. First published 19 Jul 2014. [direct link]

Richard Griffith on Mozart as prodigy (1772)

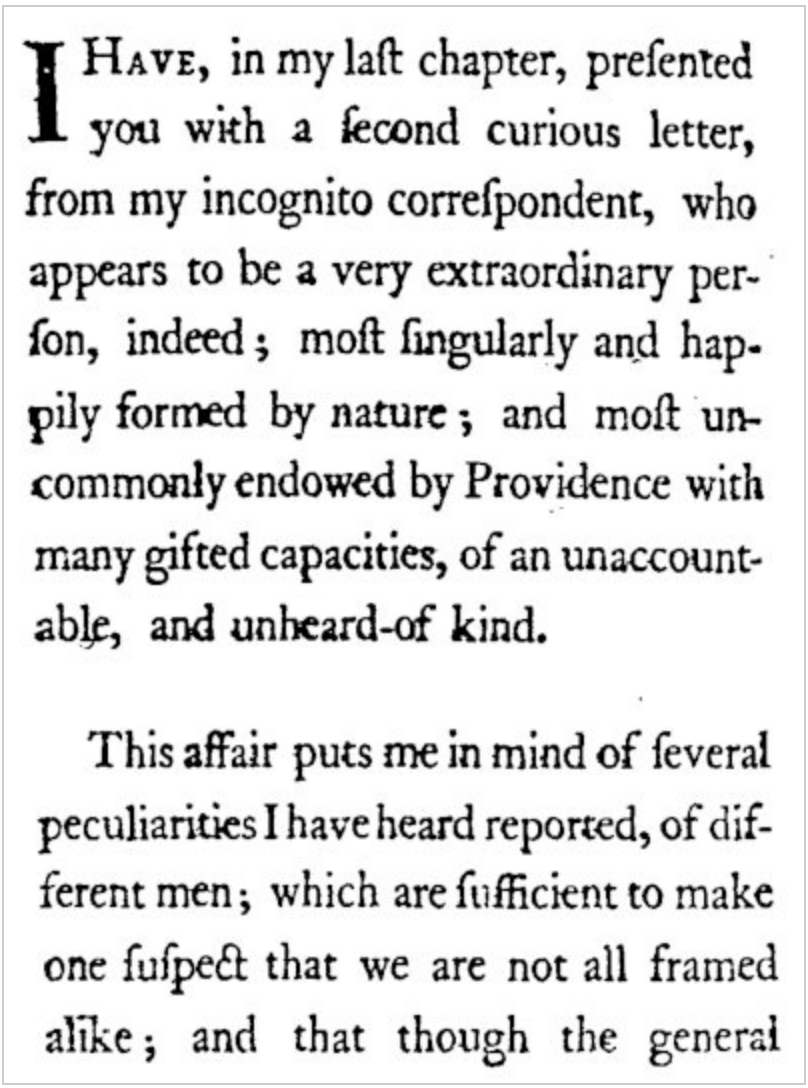
Dexter Edge

[Richard Griffith], *Something New. In Two Volumes.* Vol. 2. London, 1772.

[From Chapter LV, "Observations,"]
[192]

I have, in my last chapter, presented you with a second curious letter, from my incognito correspondent, who appears to be a very extraordinary person, indeed; most singularly and happily formed by nature; and most uncommonly endowed by Providence with many gifted capacities, of an unaccountable, and unheard-of kind.

This affair puts me in mind of several peculiarities I have heard reported, of different men; which are sufficient to make one suspect that we are not all framed alike; and that though the general



I HAVE, in my laſt chapter, preſented you with a ſecond curious letter, from my incognito correſpondent, who appears to be a very extraordinary perſon, indeed; moſt ſingularly and happily formed by nature; and moſt uncommonly endowed by Providence with many gifted capacities, of an unaccountable, and unheard-of kind.

This affair puts me in mind of ſeveral peculiarities I have heard reported, of different men; which are ſufficient to make one ſuſpect that we are not all framed alike; and that though the general

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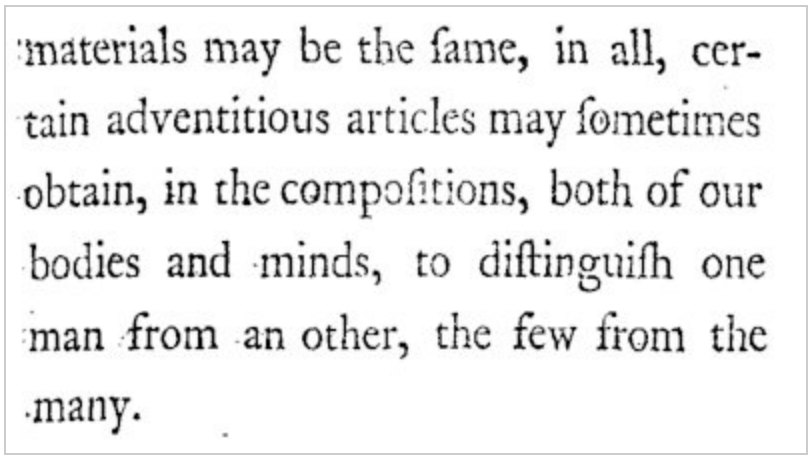
materials may be the same, in all, certain adventitious articles may sometimes obtain, in the compositions, both of our bodies and minds, to distinguish one man from an other, the few from the many.

[...]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[194]

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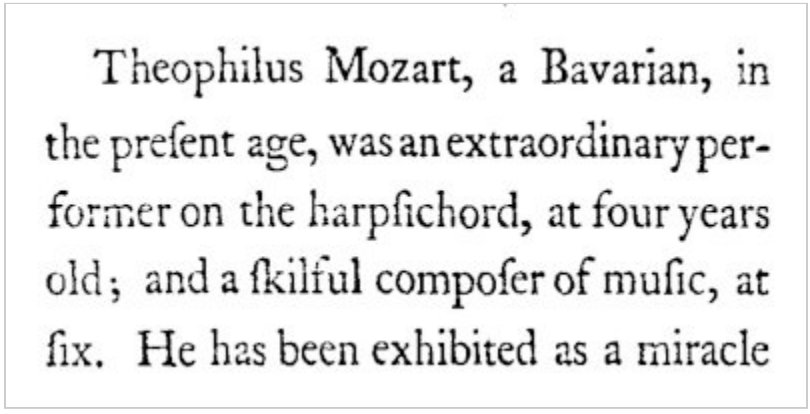
former on the harpsichord, at four years
old; and a skilful composer of music, at
six. He has been exhibited as a miracle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[195]

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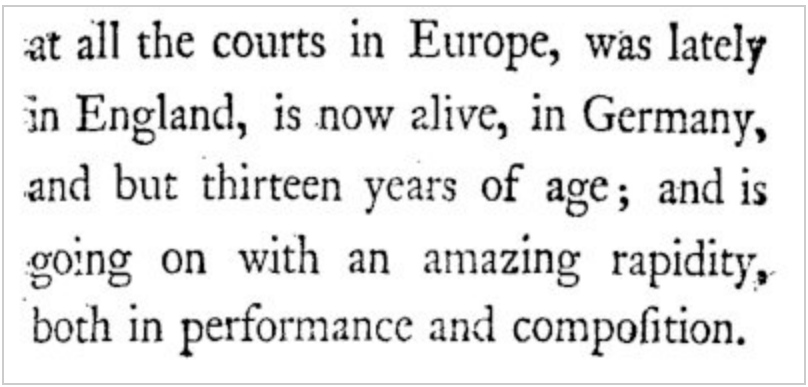
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Commentary

This brief passage referring to Mozart as a prodigy is derived directly from Daines Barrington's celebrated report on the young Mozart, published in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society in 1771 (*Dokumente*, 87–92). Barrington calls the young composer "Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart"; "Theophilus" is a Greek form equivalent to the Latin "Amadeus" and the German "Gottlieb." The form "Theophilus" is rare in references to Mozart, and its usage in *Something New* immediately suggests Barrington as the author's source. Other details in the passage from *Something New* confirm this impression. Barrington incorrectly places Salzburg in "Bavaria" (the city was an independent archbishopric) and writes: "I have been informed by a most able musician and composer, that he frequently saw [Mozart] at Vienna, when he was little more than four years old"; but in fact Mozart first performed in Vienna in the fall of 1762, when he was six. The author of *Something New* calls Mozart a "Bavarian" and repeats the incorrect age. Barrington goes on to write: "Mozart . . . is not now much more than thirteen years of age . . .", which was indeed true when Barrington was writing in 1769, but not when *Something New* was published in 1772. In any case, the passage immediately preceding this one in *Something New*, on "John Barratier," is essentially plagiarized from Barrington, who mentions "Barratier" as a comparable case of a child of prodigious accomplishment (on the identity of "Barratier," see below).

Something New was published under the pseudonym "Automathes," which appears at the end of the book's Preface; the book is now generally attributed to Richard Griffith (d. 1788). Griffith's early life is not well documented, but he was the offspring of a family that had settled in Ireland at the time of James I (Lee/rev. Ross 2004), and Griffith sometimes referred to himself as a "Gentleman of Ireland" (Regan 2011, 96). As a writer, Griffith is today best known for the *Series of Genuine Letters between Henry and Frances*, which he wrote together with his wife Elizabeth (d. 1793), whose family name was also Griffith. The *Genuine Letters* first appeared in two volumes in 1757, with subsequent editions expanding to four (1766) and finally six volumes (1786). Elizabeth was well known in her own right as a playwright, translator, and novelist, and she has received more attention from modern scholars than her husband: *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Eighteenth-Century Writers and Writing*, for example, has an article for Elizabeth, but none for Richard.

Richard is known today, perhaps unfairly, mainly as an imitator of Laurence Sterne (1713–1768). Griffith's *The Triumverate: or, The Authentic Memoirs of A. B. and C.* (2 vols., 1764) is often cited as an imitation of *Tristram Shandy*, and his *The Posthumous Works of a Late Celebrated Genius* (first published in 2 volumes in 1770) was sometimes taken to be an authentic work of Sterne until as late as the middle of the nineteenth century.

To be sure, Griffith muddied the bibliographical waters by publishing under a variety of pseudonyms: "Henry," in the *Genuine Letters* and in his novel *The Gordian Knot* (1769, published together with a novel by Elizabeth); "Biographer Triglyph," in the preface of *The Triumverate*; "Automathes" in the preface to *Something New*; and "Tria Juncta in Uno" on the title page of *The Koran: or, The Life, Character, and Sentiments of Tria Juncta in Uno. M. N. A. or Master of No Arts* (the second title page of *Posthumous Works*). These pseudonymous authors sometimes refer to one another in Griffith's writings as if they were separate people. *The Koran* includes a chapter called "Triglyph and Tristram Compared"; and in *Something New*, "Automathes" publishes two letters written to him by "Tria Juncta." One of these letters explains that the *Posthumous Works* was published on a bet that the author could convince the publisher that it was an authentic work of Sterne—but by writing this, Griffith is admitting that it isn't.

The phrase "Tria juncta in uno" ("Three joined in one") is the motto of the Order of the Bath, where it is understood to refer to the three kingdoms—England, Scotland, and Ireland)—united as one. This choice of pseudonym may perhaps have a bearing Griffith's attitude toward Ireland. (The possible significance of "Tria Juncta in Uno" is not discussed in Regan (2011), an article that is otherwise focused explicitly on the question of Griffith's status as an "Irish" writer).

One of "Henry's" letters in the *Genuine Letters* is signed "Authomathes," and it seems to be partly on this evidence that *Something New* is ascribed to Griffith. The word "automath," now rare, means "a person who is self-taught; an autoditact" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and this meaning is consistent with Griffith's apparent claim to lack any formal education (Regan 2011, 110). In any case, the name "Automathes" would have been known to Griffith from John Kirby's widely read *The Capacity and Extent of the Human Understanding; Exemplified in the Extraordinary Case of Automathes; A Young Nobleman, Who Was Accidentally left in his Infancy, upon a desolate Island, and continued Nineteen Years in that solitary State, separate from all Human Society*, first published in London in 1745.

This rather convoluted background allows us to understand the context of the reference to Mozart in *Something New*. The second volume includes two letters to the author from "Tria Juncta" (the "incognito correspondent" in the passage above), published as chapter 51, "Tria Juncta," and chapter 54 "Tria Juncta Encore." Tria Juncta claims to have two extraordinary abilities that distinguish him from ordinary men: he is able to will himself into a state of ecstasy (page 160), and he can put himself to sleep "at any instant I please, and in any situation or circumstance, whatsoever" (188). It is in his musings about these abilities that "Automathes" (in chapter 55, "Observations") mentions the young Mozart as one among several other examples of extraordinary ability. The author begins by noting that Petrarch mentions a man whose faculty of

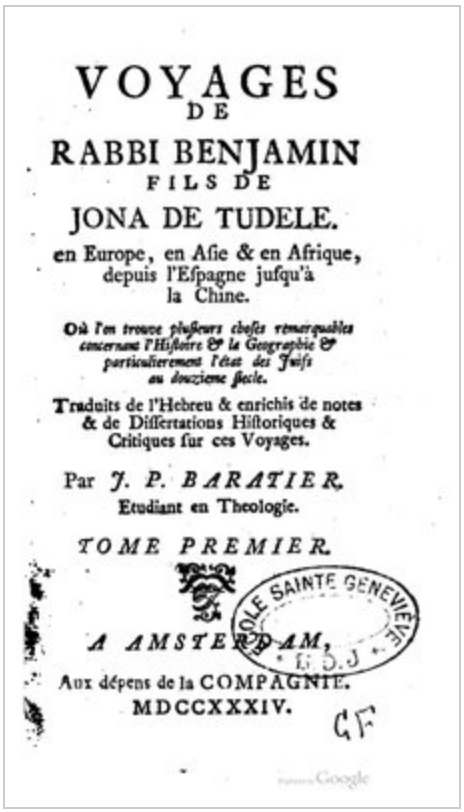
hearing was such that he "preferred the croaking of frogs, to the warblings of the nightingale" (193); the second example is Lord Chancellor Bacon, who "was always seized with a sudden fit of swooning, on every eclipse of the moon" (193). The author then goes on to describe "John Barratier," in a passage taken nearly word for word from Barrington:

> John Barratier, a German, was perfect master of Latin, at four years old; of Hebrew, at six; and of three other languages, before nine. At eleven, he translated the Travels of Rabbi Benjamin, and accompanied it with critical notes and learned dissertations. He astonished all Germany with his uncommon genius and science, and died before twenty.

Barrington's original passage reads:

> Having stated the above-mentioned proofs of Mozart's genius, when of almost infantine age, it may not be improper perhaps to compare them with what hath been well attested with regard to other instances of the same sort.
>
> Among these, John Barratier hath been most particularly distinguished, who is said to have understood Latin when he was but four years old, Hebrew when six, and three other languages at the age of nine.
>
> This same prodigy of philological learning also translated the travels of Rabbi Benjamin when eleven years old, accompanying his version with notes and dissertations. Before his death, which happened under the age of twenty, Barratier seems to have astonished Germany with his amazing extent of learning; and it need not be said, that is increase in such a soil, from year to year, is commonly amazing.

Oddly, Deutsch, in his commentary on Barrington in *Dokumente*, makes no attempt to identify "Barratier." Barrington was almost certainly drawing on *An Account of the Life of John Philip Barretier, Compiled from his Father's Letters, &c.*, published by Samuel Johnson in 1744 as an expanded version of an article that had initially appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1740–41 under the title "Some Account of the Life of John Philip Barretier" (vol. 10, 612, and vol. 11, 87–93). Jean-Philippe Baratier (1721–1740) was a well-known prodigy of the first half of the eighteenth century, who did indeed translate from the Hebrew the so-called *Itinerary* of Benjamin of Tudela (1130–1173) under the title *Voyages de Rabbi Benjamin* (Deutsch has apparently erred in his identification of Benjamin). The translation was published in 1734; but the frontispiece is an engraved portrait of Baratier with a legend reading in part "Aet. 11. Anno 1732. 12. Decembr" ("Age 11, in the year 1732, 12 December"), suggesting that this is the date when the translation was completed. Baratier died on 5 Oct 1740 at the age of "19 Years, 8 Months, and 17 Days, after an Indisposition of eighteen Months," according to the poignant notice in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for Dec 1740 (571).



VOYAGES
DE
RABBI BENJAMIN
FILS DE
JONA DE TUDELE.
en Europe, en Asie & en Afrique,
depuis l'Espagne jusqu'à
la Chine.
Où l'on trouve plusieurs choses remarquables concernant l'Histoire & la Geographie & particulierement l'état des Juifs au douzieme siecle.
Traduits de l'Hebreu & enrichis de notes & de Dissertations Historiques & Critiques sur ces Voyages.
Par *J. P. BARATIER.*
Etudiant en Theologie.
TOME PREMIER.
A AMSTERDAM,
Aux dépens de la COMPAGNIE.
MDCCXXXIV.

The passage on Mozart in *Something New* immediately follows that on “Barratier.” The author goes on to describe a boy of 10 in Marseille “who had discovered a wonderful sagacity in pointing out any place where water lay concealed under the earth” (*Something New*, ii:195).

Notes (⇧)

The title page of the volume cited here reads:

> SOMETHING NEW. / IN TWO VOLUMES. / [...] / VOL. II. / LONDON: / Printed for the AUTHOR; / And Sold by E. and C. DILLY, in the Poultry; and / Messieurs KINCAID and CREECH, Edinburgh. / MDCCLXXII.

Google Books does not currently include a scan of the first volume of this edition, which also appeared in 1772. However, both volumes of the first edition, as well as both volumes of the second, are available at *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (requires subscription). The ECCO scans of both editions are based on copies in the British Library.

The title page of the first volume of the second edition reads:

> SOMETHING NEW. / IN TWO VOLUMES. / [...] / THE SECOND EDITION, / Revised and corrected by the AUTHOR. / VOL. I. / LONDON: / Printed for E. and C. DILLY in the Poultry. / M DCCLXII.

Thus the second edition ostensibly appeared in 1762, ten years before the first. (The title page of the second volume of the second edition also gives 1762 as the date of publication.) Given Griffith’s propensity for bibliographical games, one might be tempted to think that this “backwards” date is intentional. In any case, it certainly cannot be correct, because Barrington had not yet published on Mozart in 1762, and thus Griffith did not yet have anything to plagiarize. Most likely the date on the second edition is simply an error: one “X” was probably inadvertently omitted from the Roman numeral date on the title pages of both volumes of the second edition.

The passage on Mozart from the first edition appears in the second edition with only minor changes:

> *[190]*
> Theophilus Mozart, a Bavarian, in the present age, was an extraordinary performer on the harpsichord, at four years old; and a skilful composer of music, at six. He has been exhibited as a miracle at all the courts in Europe,
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> was lately in England, is now alive in Germany, and about thirteen years of age; and is going on with an amazing rapidity both in performance and composition.

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Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) includes all the volumes described in the commentary and sources notes for this page.

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Categories: Mozart in Literature, Addenda

First Published: Sat, 19 Jul 2014

Citation:

> Edge, Dexter. 2014. “Richard Griffith on Mozart as prodigy (1772).” In: *Mozart: New Documents*, edited by Dexter Edge and David Black. First published 19 Jul 2014. [direct link]