# INTRODUCTION

The roots of tragic acting go deep into the remote pre-Hellenistic past, and nobody has any idea what dramatic performance was like then. Only very recently have attempts been made to reconstruct the acting of the Greek classical period. The nature and technique of tragic acting is obscure at least until the late seventeenth century; even then there is little hard evidence. Only when we reach the time when theatre people and interested critics begin writing books about the theatre, when actors begin to compose memoirs, when theorists write upon the subject of the tragic actor and the proper acting of tragedy, and when newspapers and magazines are sufficiently advanced and culturally sophisticated to review performances, only then are we presented with a great deal of information about tragic acting.

Generally speaking, this period is the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth, with the proliferation of theatre criticism, biographies and autobiographies of actors, prints, drawings, paintings, and finally photographs, there is much more evidence on which to base an examination of tragic actors – except, of course, for the one insurmountable obstacle that mighty as was their power their art was writ in water and has gone for ever, to be recovered, very partially, only by words and frozen visual images.

The advent of the actress complicates the whole business of the examination of tragic acting. When Sarah Siddons began to act in the English provinces in her teens, women had only been able to practise upon the professional stage of England for a century, though in France and Italy the professional actress can be traced much further back. As these three essays make clear, while Siddons, Rachel, and Ristori operated on the stage within the general limits understood by their contemporaries of 'tragic'

acting, which comprehended actors as well as actresses, their gender added the complexity of female emotional structures and the responses of female rather than male characters to the situations and extreme pressures of tragedy.[1] Each essay examines a particular image of the feminine embodied in the figure of an actress, conscious that there is nothing inevitable about the association of the human body with abstract value and that meanings are always historically contingent.

When Sarah Siddons began her acting career in the 1760s it was generally understood that tragic acting was larger than life, that it was elevated beyond any other kind of acting. As the epic was raised above other forms of poetry, so was tragedy exalted above other forms of dramatic writing. In *The Actor*, published in 1750, John Hill declared, 'The nature of this species of the drama requires that every thing about it carry the air of grandeur.'[2] Thus the tragic actor's bearing, gesture, movement, speech, and facial expression all had to be appropriate to this elevation. An 'air of grandeur' became one of Mrs Siddons' marked characteristics and the idea survived, being later attributed to both Rachel and Ristori despite their pronounced physical differences.

Eighteenth-century tragic acting also subscribed to the notion that the principal passions must be made distinct from one another and codified according to their visual and auditory attributes into a universal language of the stage. Indeed, the idea of universality and the importance of the general, which applied to all mankind, over the particular, which might be merely an individual idiosyncrasy of far less significance, was explicitly stated by Dr Johnson in poetic theory and by Joshua Reynolds in artistic theory; Sarah Siddons was their contemporary.

It is not surprising that in the nineteenth century, under the pressure of the Romantic movement and its concern with the value of individuality, and of the new psychology and its application to human behaviour, ideas of universality should begin to disintegrate and tragic acting should change. Such cultural and scientific developments always affect the theatre and the work of the player as much as that of the playwright. Romanticism had already led to an emphasis upon character in dramatic action and therefore the necessity of a unified conception of character in the playing of a tragic role, as in Mrs Siddons' Lady Macbeth. It also valued the individual rather than the general passion. This shift to a more internalised or psychological

style of acting is marked by an increasing insistence that the performer should show the transitions from one moment to another, should act through reaction, should convey the thought processes that eventually issue in speech.[3]

Psychology, with its interest in abnormal states of mind and the scientific analysis of behaviour, allowed actors opportunities to develop striking portrayals based upon coherent interpretations of character and emotion. Such interpretations were just as relevant to the revival of classical roles as to the creation of new parts in modern plays. It became acceptable – as it usually was not in the eighteenth century – to give a completely new interpretation of a well-known part layered, by passing theatrical generations, with the accretions of tradition. On the English stage this is what Edmund Kean did in 1814 with Shylock, and Henry Irving in 1878 with Hamlet. Similar processes took place in the French and Italian theatre: Rachel's Phèdre both replaced and extended earlier interpretations by Champmeslé and Clairon; Mirra in Alfieri's tragedy became one of Ristori's principal roles, supplanting the hugely successful interpretation by Carolina Internari, whom Ristori credits with having helped her develop her own individualistic approach to the character.

Inevitably, the degree of innovation in any performing style tended to be measured by comparison with others. Sometimes these comparisons operated according to common standards and techniques, irrespective of gender: Siddons with Garrick, Rachel with Lemaître, Ristori with Salvini. More often the comparison was specifically with performers of the same sex, either contemporaries or antecedents: Siddons against Anne Barry; Rachel against Mademoiselle Georges; Ristori against Carlotta Marchionni. But from the eighteenth century onwards there was the elite context of the *tragédienne* too, Pan-European in its range, drawing upon a more limited number, among them most obviously Siddons, Rachel, and Ristori. These great names came to epitomise not only the the dominant styles of a particular epoch, the differences and the similarities between national traditions, but the universal aspirations of the female tragic performer.

'Siddonian' entered the English language in the 1780s and became a touchstone throughout the nineteenth century. When the actress in Mrs E. Lynn's three-volume novel of 1851, *Realities*, recites, she goes 'through

Siddonian attitudes' and her deep voice utters 'Siddonian melodrama'.[4] When Rachel performed in London in 1846 she was greeted with a sonnet that concluded: 'The Shakespeare of the Gaul was great Corneille / The Siddons' throne is graced by thee, Rachel!'[5] 'We have even forgotten what *the* Siddons has been in that which *the* Rachel is', the *Morning Post* had confessed in 1842.[6] The *Atlas* agreed: 'She holds now, relatively, the laurel crown which was last worn by Siddons.'[7] Comparison could cut both ways, of course; in 1856 Macready was complaining that Ristori ('. . . merely a melodramatic abandonment or lashing-up to a certain point of excitement') was not nearly as impressive as Rachel had been, let alone Siddons.[8]

The actresses were as conscious of precedent as their audiences. When she considered playing the role of Lady Macbeth in England, Rachel was warned that Siddons had exhausted every possibility, especially in the sleepwalking scene: 'Oh, but I have an idea of my own,' she replied, 'I should lick my hand.'[9] When Ristori played the part, she paused in the letter-reading scene, 'looked down at her bosom and gradually closing her open hand she seemed to tear in the very act the infant from her nipple and dash it to the earth'.[10] With hindsight we can see very clearly how, through relish for the violent gesture that expressed a brilliant insight, psychological realism might develop out of a previously melodramatic style.

Passion crosses boundaries and captures audiences. That point is made in Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne* (1807), when the heroine is taken by an English family to see Mrs Siddons in *Isabella, or The Fatal Marriage*:

> The noble figure and professional sensibility of the actress captivated the attention of Corinna so much, that during the first act her eyes were never turned from the stage . . . It requires so much the more genius to be a great actor in France, because very little liberty is allowed in that country for an individual or original genius; general rules being so much adhered to. But in England an actor may venture anything, if Nature inspires him. These lengthened groans, which appear ridiculous when they are related or described, startle us when we hear them. Mrs. Siddons loses nothing of her dignity when she throws herself prostrate on the ground. There is nothing that may not be admirable, when an innate emotion accompanies it, an emotion which comes from the centre of the soul, and governs those who feel much more even than those who are witnesses of it. There is among different nations a different manner of playing tragedy: but the expression of

> grief extends from one end of the world to the other, and from the savage to the King there is something similar in all men, when they are truly miserable.[11]

Compare that fictional instance, the imaginary Corinna exposed to an imagined Siddons, with the real-life Lady Arthur Lennox experiencing the full force of the living Rachel in London in 1841. The moment the actress left the stage at the end of *Horace*, we are told:

> . . . some very piercing shrieks were heard, which lasted some time. Much anxiety was manifested by a large portion of the audience, who might with the more reason suppose that Mademoiselle Rachel had uttered those distressing cries, as, whilst taking leave of the house, one of the performers in *Les Horaces* had hastened from the *coulisses* to render her support. On inquiring, however, we ascertained that the lady whose sensibility had been so far overpowered by the agony of the scene was Lady Arthur Lennox who occupied one of the stage boxes. Her ladyship's sufferings excited the universal sympathy of the audience.[12]

A sophisticated London audience could identify with its stricken member because it, too, had felt the inspirational power of a great performance.

Given the shabby incompetence of the companies with which they frequently chose to surround themselves, it sometimes seems surprising that the *tragédiennes*' capacity to create rapture should have operated so consistently. Was it, as George Eliot, who saw Ristori in Rome in 1869, rather cynically complained, nothing but 'so miserable, stupid an egoism' that made the star opt for 'a cheap company that turns the ensemble into a farce or burlesque which makes an incongruous and often fatally neutralising background to her own figure'?[13]

In fact Eliot's protest betrays her ignorance of an Italian tradition in which Ristori's company policy was not unusual. The *mattatore*, or star actor, was generally surrounded by inferior performers, so as to allow the star to shine more brightly. The concept of ensemble was not developed at all in the Italian tradition, and the companies were run as extended families, in which younger and lesser members of the social hierarchy deferred to the more dominant figures. In France, by contrast, Rachel, who had graduated from the Comédie-Française where hierarchy was thoroughly institutionalised, attracted some hostile comment for drawing upon her own relatives in a seemingly nepotistic way.

This question of cultural difference in company management and acting styles must add another dimension to the way in which we read the critical opinion of the time. Whatever Italian audiences saw when Ristori performed with her company was not the same as what English or American audiences saw, accustomed as they were to look differently at the interaction between performers on stage. None the less, even in the early years of the century, audiences would make their feelings plain if standards fell below an expected minimum. In 1841, the actor playing Orestes in Racine's *Andromaque* uttered his last speech 'amid roars of laughter and showers of hisses' from a London audience;[14] and this on the same evening that Rachel was applauded for her extraordinary intensity. That moments of the highest emotion could emerge out of what sometimes appears to us to have been near to chaos is partly because acting styles were still organised around significant moments or 'points', and partly because international audiences knew what they looking for in an individual performance. Even the Royal Family was seen to be laughing during *Horace* at the St James' in 1846 when 'an appeal was made to the "august visage" of one of the performers, who "did and looked the terrible" in the most novel style'. Yet 'the poverty of the accessories exhibited Rachel in a more exalted point of view – and in this small theatre we are enabled to follow every line of change in her countenance – a study of surpassing interest'.[15]

The qualification is significant. As we each demonstrate in our respective essays, 'face-acting' pre-exists realism, is subtle and psychologically nuanced long before the invention of the camera, and it survives the building of large theatres – though only those in the best seats could fully appreciate the power and subtlety of an expressive countenance. From the late eighteenth century until the late nineteenth, at a time when the female body was kept rigid by heavy costumes and elaborate under-garments, spectators looked to an actress for the kind of powerful facial expression that conveys strong emotions. Siddons' 'brilliant and piercing eyes',[16] Rachel's 'quick and restless action of the eye-lids'[17] and 'quivering nostrils',[18] Ristori's 'flexibility of countenance'[19] and 'wild eyes, dishevelled hair'[20] were the means by which they conveyed the inner turmoil of the exposed woman. Even the fashion for neo-classical drapery, for 'the statuesque', did nothing to inhibit the expression of stress: rather it provided a significant contrast. Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, Phèdre, even Medea are

all examples of roles in which a sculptural poise could coexist with a desperate awareness of an extreme situation.

It is surely significant that those three famous characters are all mothers. As Michael Booth stresses, maternity had played its part in some of Siddons' most celebrated roles; Rachel and Ristori were both candidates for the part of Medea, a legendary and troublesome mother, in Ernest Legouvé's imitation of Euripides.

In the course of the nineteenth century Medea became a important focus in the continual process of redefining the feminine, and Legouvé's romanticised version was to be regularly revived in English, as well as in French and Italian. On the London stage alone it was brought back at least six times between 1857 and 1872. There was even a burlesque, *Medea; or the best of Mothers with a brute of a husband* by Robert B. Brough, in which Medea was played by a man (Frederick Robson) and the ending turned into comedy by the survival of the children.[21]

At this distance Rachel's on-off plans to perform in Legouvé's version, which he offered first to her, are not easy to unravel. It is certainly true that she had requested a new play from the writer who, together with Scribe, had already provided her with a great success in *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, yet when *Médée* was presented to the Reading Committee of the Comédie-Française, she encouraged its rejection. A Russian tour intervened, in the course of which she seems to have agreed to appear as Medea after all. Then, in 1854, cast down by the death of her sister, Rebecca, she changed her mind yet again. This indecision seems to have had several causes since the written statements that have survived make quite different points.

In a letter to Legouvé, for instance, Rachel protests that the play does not suit her style:

> I see the part is full of rapid and violent movements; I have to rush to my children, I have to lift them up, to carry them off the stage, to contend for them with the people. This external vivacity is not my style. Whatever may be expressed by physiognomy, by attitude, by sober and measured gesture – that I can command; but where broad and energetic pantomime begins, there my executive talent stops.[22]

However other comments would suggest that it was the unsympathetic nature of the role that made Rachel nervous, which still seems odd because she was above all celebrated for her ability to convey ferocious feelings.

(G. H. Lewes' famous tribute, 'the panther of the stage', may well have been inspired by Jason's 'No woman but a tiger' in Euripides' play).

At the same time, the standard point of comparison between Rachel and Ristori, who did eventually take on the role, was that the Italian regularly supplied what was lacking in her French rival: womanly tenderness, not perhaps the most obvious requirement for Medea. Yet here is the actor George Vandenhoff reminiscing in 1860:

> This is the point, too, in which RISTORI, the Italian *tragédienne*, so far surpasses the French one; in loving sweetness, the outgushing of a trustful, unselfish woman's heart. Rachel might make you wonder at her energy, her force, her demonical intensity. Ristori makes you weep with her, and love her by her nobleness, the depth of her feeling, and its feminine expression. Even in Medea, the character which Rachel refused to play, Ristori is a woman; outraged, injured, revengeful, maddened with her wrongs, but still a woman: Rachel would have made her a tigress, or a fiend![23]

It is certainly true that, as Elaine Aston has pointed out, Legouvé's play tends to stress the heroine as betrayed wife rather than as child-murderer.[24] Indeed, perhaps it was the pathetic element that Rachel recognised in *Médée*, reminding her that her own tragic talent lay elsewhere. Rachel M. Brownstein has plausibly argued that from Rachel's point of view the problem with Legouvé's play might well have been that, although it had a classical subject, it fell far short of the harsh neo-classical tragedies in which she had first found her voice.

Conversely, it may have been the chance to play to some degree *against* her own most celebrated qualities that drew Ristori to Medea. When, in 1855, Legouvé, impatient with Rachel's vacillation, first offered the Italian actress the part, she read it with initial misgivings, but was soon persuaded. In her *Memoirs* she records how she felt the play to be superior to other versions that she had read, and significantly notes that it offered her 'magnificent situations'. By this she means that the play could afford a series of the melodramatic stage-pictures at which she excelled, but in her account of the preparation for the opening in Paris she describes her fascination with the role in terms bordering on the obsessive: 'I thought of nothing – dreamed of nothing – but Medea.'[25]

Although apparently a devoted mother and daughter in her private life, Ristori's choice of roles often emphasizes the alternative version of

those conventional types: Mirra, the incestuous daughter; Medea, the murdering mother; Lady Macbeth and Phèdre, women who subordinate their mothering instincts to their pursuit of power or whose libidinous drives push everything else to one side. On stage these fearful dark figures of the imagination, these fantasy roles ruled by violence and supposedly unnatural passions, some of them already performed by either Siddons or Rachel and long associated with their names, were the opposite archetypes of the safely domesticated female, 'The Angel in the House'.

In her art the *tragédienne* could move far beyond the limits of the social worlds she inhabited as a woman; her theatre was therefore a profoundly paradoxical place, a public arena for the display of what was publicly disallowed, where the representation of suffering and of desire might be the first signs of resistance. Whenever acting is expressive of deeply hidden feelings it becomes both seductive and dangerous, to performer and audience alike. As a contribution to sexual politics, tragic acting involved both psychic assertion and an irresistible, often erotic, form of self-display. Although our insistence upon tragedy as a form of counter-ideology might seem to conflict with transcendent Aristotelian beliefs, all the evidence tells us that it was the most immediate and the most sensual, as well as the most individually heroic of genres. Lasting images of legendary women, of triumph as well as of submission, marked by strength as much as by swoon, by courage as much as by madness: these are the political legacy of the great tragic actress.

# SARAH SIDDONS

MICHAEL R. BOOTH

The funeral of Sarah Siddons took place on the morning of 15 June 1831. She was seventy-five years old and had long been retired from the stage. Nevertheless, the funeral, ostensibly a private ceremony, became a national event. The procession, winding its slow dark way from her residence in Upper Baker Street to St Mary's, Paddington, consisted of thirteen blackly bedecked mourning coaches and a number of private carriages, at least eleven of the coaches being occupied by performers from Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres.[1] Five thousand people were said to have witnessed the funeral. Public tributes filled the press, as they had when she retired in 1812. That retirement was not final: she appeared on a few occasions after that, and it was upon one of these that William Hazlitt, in an act of homage to her greatness, remarked, 'She was Tragedy personified. She was the stateliest ornament of the public mind.'[2] William Charles Macready, no mean judge of acting, worshipped her, which was extraordinary for one of his distrustful mind and sceptical temperament. He declared, 'In no other theatrical artist were, I believe, the charms of voice, the graces of personal beauty, and the gifts of genius so grandly and harmoniously combined.'[3] Years after her death he worked tirelessly – and, finally, successfully – to erect a statue of her in Westminster Abbey. Macready was an eminent actor, Hazlitt an eminent critic, but their reaction to her art was only typical of a veritable cornucopia of praise and adulation poured out during her career, upon her retirement, and again upon her death. 'With her the sun of Melpomene will set',[4] wrote Thomas Gilliland gloomily, four years before she retired, and that about summed up how her contemporaries felt.

Never before, nor since, were such accolades bestowed upon an