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Edited by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn

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PART I

Performance

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I

PETER THOMSON

Acting and actors from Garrick
to Kean

Garrick flourished during the years when educated Englishmen (and a few privileged English women) were admiring their own enlightenment at the same time as they debated issues of 'proper' public conduct. He both encouraged and benefited from a new, quasi-philosophical interest in actors as exemplars of controlled behaviour. Some measure of self-admiration is essential to any actor's wellbeing, and Garrick, despite his constant fear of ridicule, had plenty of it; a current of concern with how he 'looks' runs through his voluminous correspondence. His career marks a transition from an insistently aural theatre, represented by the sonorous James Quin (1693–1766), to a primarily visual one.

The demand for looking-glasses boomed during the final decades of the eighteenth century,¹ indicative both of an increase in self-awareness and of 'the new prominence of beauty as a social and political category'.² The idea of the spectator as detached observer and connoisseur, boosted by Addison and Steele's launching of *The Spectator* in 1711, was not swept away, but it was subjected to pressure by the contradictory cult of sensibility. Laurence Sterne's sentimental traveller carries with him everywhere 'the interest . . . which men of a certain turn of mind take . . . in their own sensations'.³ *A Sentimental Journey* was the publishing highlight of 1768, and not all its readers were alert to the wicked innocence of its irony. Hugh Kelly's *False Delicacy*, puffed into popularity that same year at Drury Lane by Garrick's publicity machine, imported 'sentiment', in the form of exaggerated altruism, to the theatre without a hint of irony. The play was an invitation to actors to parade fine feeling, to display the appropriate vocal and bodily expression of it – in other words, to offer themselves as a mirror image for the men and women in the audience whose gentility was best evidenced by their feeling for others. In the sentimental comedies and tragedies of the period from 1759 (the year in which the first two volumes of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* were published) to 1789, actors embodied and empowered that significant proportion of the public who took an interest in their own sensations.

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If we are to understand the vehemence with which debates on theatre and morality were being conducted, we need to recognise the peculiar delight that people took in the spectacle of fellow human beings – or themselves – in benevolent action during the years immediately preceding the French Revolution. ‘Let us never forget’, says Harley, the eponymous hero of Henry Mackenzie’s pseudo-novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771), ‘that we are all relations.’⁴ This is a book, improbably successful on first publication, in which homage to Sterne unintentionally reaches the level of parody. It features a Miss Walton, for whom ‘humanity was a feeling, not a principle’ (p. 9), and even a dog of feeling, appropriately named Trusty, which ‘gave a short howl and died’ when its master was evicted by a landlord ‘who did not choose to have any farm under £300 a year value on his estate’ (pp. 61–2). The vogue for *The Man of Feeling* was matched in the theatre by Richard Cumberland’s *The West Indian*, staged at Drury Lane in 1771 with Thomas King (1730–1805) in the title role of Belcour. King was a versatile comedian, but ill-equipped to play the dashing insouciant prodigal son in whom the audience must perceive ‘through the veil of some irregularities, a heart beaming with benevolence and animated nature.’⁵ For one thing, King was too old for the part and, according to Mrs Inchbald, ‘looked to be so’. What Betterton could get away with at the beginning of the century was no longer so readily acceptable after the Garrick reformation, which had placed acting, particularly comic acting, in closer touch with ‘real life’.⁶

In an age inclined to make a virtue of sentiment, theatrical connoisseurs were subjected to ridicule. In Sterne’s view, ‘the whole set of ’em are so hung round and *befetished* with the bobs and trinkets of criticism . . . that a work of genius had better go to the devil at once, than stand to be tricked and tortured to death by ’em.’ He takes as his exemplar the connoisseur who answers the question, ‘how did *Garrick* speak the soliloquy last night?’, like this:

Oh, against all rule, my Lord, – most ungrammatically! betwixt the substantive and the adjective, which should agree together in *number*, *case* and *gender*, he made a breach thus, – stopping, as if the point wanted settling; – and betwixt the nominative case, which your lordship knows should govern the verb, he suspended his voice in the epilogue a dozen times, three seconds and three fifths by a stop-watch, my Lord, each time.

To which Sterne’s narratorial voice responds:

Admirable grammarian! – But in suspending his voice – was the sense suspended likewise? Did no expression of attitude or countenance fill up the chasm? – Was the eye silent? Did you narrowly look? – I look’d only at the stop-watch, my Lord. – Excellent observer!⁷

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Sterne was already indebted to Garrick for introductions to literary society in London before Volume 3 of *Tristram Shandy*, from which this passage is quoted, was published in 1761, and would be further indebted to him for a loan of £20 the following year, sufficient to enable him to visit Paris, where he wrote to his benefactor on 10 April 1762: 'You are much talked of here, and much expected, as soon as the peace will let you – These last two days you have happened to engross the whole conversation of two great houses where I was at dinner.'⁸ But, even allowing for bias and flattery, both as narrator and letter-writer Sterne's observations provide an important commentary on Garrick's style and status.

Garrick's acting antagonised many connoisseurs of the 'old' school, more because of what he did with his voice than what he did with his body. When he made his London debut as Richard III in 1741 – in the comparatively safe playground of an unfashionable 'illegitimate' theatre – he knew the risk he was taking. It was an extraordinarily lively theatrical year, during which green-room orthodoxy – the unrecorded gossip of backstage aficionados – was to be disturbed. The issue, fundamentally a matter of morality, was villainy. In February 1741, Charles Macklin (1699–1797) had offered to the Drury Lane audience, without the sanction of his fellow-actors, a Shylock who was *not* a comic grotesque. He had made regular visits to London's Jewish quarter and read Josephus's *History of the Jews*, and he invested Shylock with a pathos that owed more to observation and study than to stage tradition. Garrick, formally in trade as a wine merchant, spent off-duty time with Macklin and was impressed by his revisionary approach to rhetoric: first practise the lines as you would speak them in normal conversation, was Macklin's advice, and only then elevate them for performance. There is a case to be made for Macklin as the first active professional to envisage a systematic training for actors, one which he was himself too quarrelsome to sustain, and Alan S. Downer has gone so far as to propose that 'what Macklin taught, Garrick tricked up for popular consumption'.⁹ What is certain is that the Richard III Garrick presented to the audiences who flocked to Goodman's Fields in October 1741 was received by them as a 'real' villain. But the furore inspired by Garrick's performance had more to it than that. For both its attackers and its defenders the theatre was a testing ground for moral progress. If Garrick's villainy as Richard was real, it was also irresistibly charming. The moral ambiguity of such an apparent contradiction inflamed debate. The argument that theatre deludes met the counter-argument that theatre reiterates the worldly need to distinguish between appearance and reality. Through the eighteenth-century quest for self-knowledge the fluid interplay of actor and role came to be thematised. The actor under pressure from the text was comparable to the quester for virtue under

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pressure from circumstance. The personal status of Garrick, during his thirty-year management of Drury Lane (1747–1776), was rarely absent from such fundamental enquiries, many of which centred on the exercise and control of the passions.

By the time Garrick took to the stage, it had become axiomatic that tragic acting was the domain of the passions. There was certainly some kind of gestural code to assist in ‘the just delineation of the passions’,¹⁰ though we know neither how rigorously it was adhered to by the actors nor how confidently it was read by the spectators. Insofar as the tragic actor was expected to represent humanity under the pressure of extreme emotion, though, the more significant point is Macklin’s: ‘[i]f the actor has not a philosophical knowledge of the passions, it is impossible for him to imitate them with fidelity’.¹¹ Of what might ‘a philosophical knowledge of the passions’ have consisted? For Descartes, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, the passions were perceptions, sentiments or emotions of the soul which were caused, sustained and strengthened by some circumstantial agitation, and most eighteenth-century theories were variations or elaborations on this Cartesian theme. In proposing that the soul’s passion is communicated through the body as an action, Descartes was unwittingly accommodating Hamlet’s advice to the players. Properly disciplined, the tragic actor verified Descartes, and the capacity of the body to express the mind (or soul) was an eighteenth-century commonplace, encapsulated with casual flair by Sterne: ‘[a] man’s body and his mind, with the utmost reverence to both I speak it, are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin’s lining; – rumple the one, – you rumple the other’.¹² But it does not follow that the rumpling of the lining will accurately echo the rumpling of the jerkin. It will certainly not do so, Sterne goes on, ‘when you are so fortunate a fellow, as to have had your jerkin made of a gum-taffeta, and the body-lining to it, of a sarcenet or thin persian’. It is the special skill of the (great) actor to communicate through the body, by way of the ‘sympathetic imagination’, the condition of the mind. The commonplace injunction to actors was to ‘learn to FEEL’, and the common assumption that ‘No actor pleases that is not *possess’d*’.¹³

So far so good; but bodily expressiveness is insufficient if the voice is dissonant. Garrick’s characteristic pauses were carefully studied, both to ensure that each passion was fully established and to make the most of his eventually celebrated skill in executing rapid transitions from one passion to another within a single speech. The shift was already in progress during the ‘three seconds and three fifths’ (more likely one and a half seconds) of silence, and it was in the facial features that the transition was most vividly signalled. The ‘scientific’ interest in physiognomy was well established by the time Lavater wrote his famous *Essays* (1789–1798). Applied to the passions, it

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merited the title of 'pathognomy'. Garrick's extraordinary mobility of face, which was the despair of many portrait artists and the basis of his best-known party trick, amazed and thrilled audiences. It provided Denis Diderot with confirmation of his argument that actors can communicate passions without feeling them:

Garrick will put his head between two folding doors, and in the course of five or six seconds his expression will change successively from wild delight to temperate pleasure, from this to tranquility, from tranquility to surprise, from surprise to blank astonishment, from that to sorrow, from sorrow to the air of one overwhelmed, from that to fright, from fright to horror, from horror to despair, and thence he will go up again to the point from which he started. Can his soul have experienced all these feelings, and played this kind of scale in concert with his face?¹⁴

Diderot's concern was not simply with acting, nor simply with contradicting the followers of Horace who argued that an actor must truly experience the emotions he is portraying if he is to move his audience, but philosophically with actors as exemplars of human complexity. The admiration felt for Garrick in France (and reported by Sterne in 1762) was unadulterated by the petty rivalries and professional jealousies that threatened to blight his life in London. The vital truth about Garrick is that his social and cultural impact was not confined to the theatre. His legendary energy, scarcely containable on stage, was given free rein elsewhere. Even Dr Johnson, often critical of his former pupil, credited him with being 'the cheerfullest man of his age'.¹⁵ The flavour of Garrick is neatly captured in an anecdote recorded by William Hazlitt in his 1826 essay, 'Of Persons One Would Wish to Have Seen':

Once at a splendid dinner party at Lord -'s, they suddenly missed Garrick, and could not imagine what was become of him, till they were drawn to the window by the convulsive screams and peals of laughter of a young negro boy, who was rolling on the ground in an ecstasy of delight to see Garrick mimicking a turkey-cock in the court-yard, with his coat-tail stuck out behind, and in a seeming flutter of feathered rage and pride.¹⁶

It is of no importance whether such an incident ever took place. It gives us Garrick, hobnobbing with the aristocracy but taking time out to reduce a houseboy to helpless laughter, and it introduces us to the fact that Garrick, almost uniquely in an age of increasing specialisation, was at home in both tragedy and comedy. Attempts retrospectively to establish a theory of acting that determined his performances in either genre are doomed to failure. He was a showman, one of those rare stars who, even when following

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fashion, gave the appearance of leading it. The various manuals that appeared in the wake of Aaron Hill's *Essay on the Art of Acting* (1746) are more detailed, but rarely more informative, than Robert Lloyd's *The Actor* (1760), which is itself little more than a consensual poetic homage to Garrick. For contemporaries, he maintained the appropriate balance between understanding and the finer sensibility that is the essential characteristic of the great actor; the sensibility, that is, that enables him to feel and to communicate the passions (and/or humours) that the playwright aims to excite.

If tragedy was the domain of the passions, comedy was the domain of the humours. It was a distinction that Garrick endorsed, though with the slippage inevitable in an actor who never systematically theorised his practice. Critical of the rigidity of French tragic actors, he could persuade himself that 'there must be *comedy* in the perfect actor of tragedy', a fruitful insight not easily reconciled with his doctrinaire insistence that the passions have no place in comedy nor laughter in tragedy.¹⁷ It was generally accepted in the eighteenth-century theatre that the humours, unlike the passions, are constitutional, and constitutionally unique to each individual. It was of the actor of comedy, rather than tragedy, that Macklin was thinking when he answered the question 'what is character?' with, 'the alphabet will tell you. It is that which is distinguished by its own marks from every other thing of its kind.'¹⁸ Comic actors could meet the expectations of playwrights by displaying the warring humours that brought the characters into conflict. Passions, by contrast, are subject to human control, and defenders of the high moral purpose of the theatre could argue that tragic actors exemplified for theatregoers the perils of unrestrained passion. In 'high' comedy, though – the kind that Garrick played – there should always be restraint:

Familiar nature forms thy only rule,
From Ranger's rake to Drugger's vacant fool.
With powers so pliant, and so various blest,
That what we see the last, we like the best.
Not idly pleas'd, at judgment's dear expence,
But burst outrageous with the laugh of sense.¹⁹

As caricature for Hogarth stood below character, below comedy was farce, but it was the stageworthiness of eighteenth-century farces that provided comic actors with their most reliable showground.²⁰ Garrick wrote and acted in them. It is only the snobbery of literary tradition that has shackled him, whose genius was for comedy, in the ranks of tragic actors.

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Actors of tragedy

Despite the pre-eminence it accorded to tragedy, the eighteenth century produced none that has held its place in the national repertoire. Even those that shone briefly were modelled on the poetic drama of a bygone era. For the most part, then, tragic actors made their reputations in a language that was not of the age, and in plays that had been beaten into shape – ‘reformed’ – by journeymen dramatists. By the end of the century, not least because of Garrick’s enthusiastic endorsement, Shakespeare’s supremacy was undisputed, and this has caused some distortion in the historical assessment of tragic acting. The hierarchy established by the brief stage histories that preface many editions of Shakespeare has left its imprint. Garrick features, along with John Philip Kemble and Edmund Kean, but actresses of the period, other than Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth, are largely ignored. Susanna Cibber (1714–1766) and the versatile Hannah Pritchard (1711–1768) supported Garrick in many of his most celebrated tragic roles, and Mary Ann Yates (c.1729–1787) was chosen above any of her male colleagues to speak Sheridan’s ‘Monody to the Memory of Mr. Garrick’ at Drury Lane in March 1779. The neglect of Yates is symptomatic of the insistently masculine and misleadingly ‘Shakespearean’ reading of Garrick’s period of management. She tends to be mentioned, when mentioned at all, in the list of capricious women with whom the beleaguered manager was forced to negotiate; but caprice may be no more than the male interpretation of legitimate assertiveness.²¹ Historically speaking, it is Yates’s misfortune to have been a great performer in small plays – as the Duchess in Robert Jephson’s *Braganza* (DL, 1775), as Margaret of Anjou in Thomas Franklin’s *The Earl of Warwick* (DL, 1766) and in the title role of Richard Glover’s *Medea* (DL, 1761). What signifies here is the eagerness of playwrights, from Nicholas Rowe in the early eighteenth century to Percy Bysshe Shelley one hundred years later, to provide material for powerfully affecting actresses. Sarah Siddons was only one among many performers to assert, by their own example if rarely by their own precept, the rights of women. Even so, the Siddons phenomenon demands attention.

The Kemble dynasty was a force in the London theatre for more than fifty years. Sarah (1755–1831) was the eldest child of theatrical parents. Her mother, also Sarah, was the daughter of a provincial theatre manager, and evidently the impetus behind her husband’s following his father-in-law into management. The strength and the independence of the female line, from mother to daughter to daughter’s niece, famous in her own right as Fanny Kemble (1809–1893), are striking. Striking, too, is the provincial apprenticeship served by Sarah Siddons and the most famous of her siblings, John Philip

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Kemble (1757–1823). We should be wary of assumptions that the provinces were the preserve of coarse acting throughout this period, though it is probably true that the style of performance encouraged in the intimate Georgian theatres outside the capital was ill-suited to the challenge of playing at the constantly enlarging patent theatres of London. Certainly Siddons floundered on her metropolitan debut in 1775. But, seven years later, the actress returned triumphant, now the mother of four young children and the chief breadwinner in a family shadowily served by her ineffectual husband.

The private lives of actresses were hungrily probed by gossip-mongers, and it is not the least of Siddons's achievements to have kept scandal at bay for most of her unquiet life. She came to represent, for two generations, the pain and dignity of womanhood, for the most part in non-Shakespearean roles: Isabella in Garrick's version of Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*, Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*, Lady Randolph in Home's *Douglas*, Calista in Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, the title role in Rowe's *Jane Shore*. It was not until 1785 that she first played Lady Macbeth in London. This was her most celebrated role, but not her favourite. She found the part, in accordance with contemporary critical views, too masculine, and her 'possession' of it (in the imagination as much as the memory of the immediately succeeding generations of theatregoers) is the chief reason for her curiously abiding asexual image. Siddons was, in fact, acutely conscious of her femininity. From preference, as Jan MacDonald has argued, 'she "performed" herself as a good mother before her audiences to excuse her "unwomanly" ambition as an actress in the public sphere.'²² It was, then, an accident of history that Siddons became associated in the public mind with the Burkean sublime. The sublime, in Uvedale Price's paraphrase, 'produces astonishment by stretching the nervous fibres beyond their normal tone',²³ and this is an apt enough description of the Siddons effect. For Burke, the distinguishing feature of the sublime is that we submit to it, as Hazlitt clearly did to Siddons:

She raised Tragedy to the skies, or brought it down from thence . . . she was not less than a goddess, or than a prophetess inspired by the gods . . . She was Tragedy personified. She was the stateliest ornament of the public mind.²⁴

This, from one of the most acute theatrical observers of any age, is not criticism but surrender, and it speaks for Siddons's thirty-year reign (1782–1812) as Queen of Tragedy. Joshua Reynolds, painting her as the Tragic Muse in 1784, translates her into an image of the sublime. Even Gainsborough's society portrait of 1785, whilst not disguising the length of the nose, offers an image of serene elegance. For a more astringent analysis, it would be hard to better Shearer West, for whom 'Siddons's perfectionism did not consist so much in knowing the character intimately as acquainting

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herself with the picturesque possibilities of the passions expressed by that character'.²⁵

Shearer West's informed linking of acting with easel art, in the case of Siddons with the grand manner of historical painting, is an essential guide to our understanding of the eighteenth-century stage. Garrick, a friend of artists and a judicious collector of their work, had done much to stimulate the connection, and it was almost inevitable that the idea of himself caught on canvas at a dramatic high point would infiltrate his performances.²⁶ Siddons, monotonously reviewed as if she were a work of art, carried the process to its limit. In later years the self-image stultified. Trapped in her own formidable legend, she used grandeur to protect herself on stage and off it. There is a well-attested anecdote which suggests that she may have lost the ability to hear, but not to see, herself. The year was 1802, and Siddons was embarking on a money-making tour of Irish theatres with Patty Wilkinson, daughter of the indefatigable manager of the York circuit of theatres, as her companion. On the way through Wales they stopped at Penmaen-Mawr to admire the landscape:

A lady, within hearing of us, was in such ecstasies, that she exclaimed, 'This awful scenery makes me feel as if I were only a worm, or a grain of dust, on the face of the earth.' Mrs. Siddons turned round and said, 'I feel very differently.'²⁷

The Tragic Muse had pronounced. Did 'Mrs. Siddons' agree with her?

John Philip Kemble's theatrical scars were always more visible than his sister's. For a man so long engaged in management, he remained oddly isolated from most of his theatrical colleagues. His Catholicism may have been a contributory factor, but his major crises, culminating in 1809 with the debacle of the Old Price riots at Covent Garden, were the result of an inability – or stubbornly conservative refusal – to recognise the shift in political consciousness consequent on the French Revolution. To rid himself of the Catholic taint of Jacobitism, he made a spectacle of his Hanoverian monarchism. The Prince Regent, whilst welcoming Kemble into his Whiggish circle, would sometimes entertain his 'court' by mimicking him, making a feature of Kemble's famously pedantic pronunciation, but after his accession as George IV, he would remember him as 'one of my earliest friends'.

The point here is that Siddons and Kemble were able to take advantage of the access to high society that had been opened up by Garrick, but that they did so at the cost of their relationship with their fellow-actors. Often misjudged by his contemporaries, Kemble has been historically frozen in misjudgment. He is the 'cold' actor, surrounded on one side by the heat of Garrick and on the other by the fire of Edmund Kean. Thomas Lawrence's grandiose portraits of Kemble advertise the statuesque splendour of his style, particularly in the Roman roles (Cato, Brutus, Coriolanus) that he made his