

Introduction

Iconic and Dynamic

What is transition? Transition names a process of change between objects whose properties define that transition: emotions, chords, gradients, colours, genders.¹ It also names the moment, long or brief, in which such transformation occurs. To identify a transition is thus to acknowledge both the dynamic quality of a process of change and the iconic quality of a rich and recognisable moment. Further, the identification of transition appears to grant meaning: this came from that or that must lead to this; here was the moment when everything was possible or there was the point of no return. As a tool for the making of meaning, criticism has relied upon transition's simultaneous invocation of the iconic and the dynamic. This reliance is particularly visible in eighteenth-century writing about the theatre but is by no means limited to it.

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Hamlet sees his father's ghost, Zara questions the foundations of her faith, King Lear curses Goneril, Alicia goes mad, Macbeth sees an air-drawn dagger, and Jaffeir threatens to murder his wife. Known as 'points', 'hits', or 'turns', these moments were among the most criticised and celebrated of the eighteenth-century stage.² One performer's rendition of a point would be set against that of their rivals and predecessors in that role. A writer's ability to create such striking moments was a key part of their appeal to audiences more interested in the pathos of a tragedy than its plot. It is the contention of this book that all such points, hits, and turns were often and may again be considered as expressions of what I call the art of transition. I give this name to both the writer's capacity to connect powerful emotive subjects into a compelling sequence and the performer's ability to give physical expression to that sequence through the presentation of sequential passions. Consider those points I just evoked, where we may find, as eighteenth-century audiences and readers were pleased to find, Hamlet's sudden transition from scornful commentary on the state of Denmark to

the terror of ‘Angels and ministers of grace defend us’, the frustrated anger that bursts through Zara’s avowal of her love for Osman, the melting conclusion of Lear’s imprecation against his ‘thankless child’, Alicia’s flights of hatred and despair, the restless combat between ambition and fear in Macbeth, and Jaffeir’s confused vacillation between rage and love. From scorn to terror, from love to anger, from fury to self-pity, from hatred to despair, from ambition to fear, from rage to love, each of these points may be understood as moments of transition.

We can distinguish different kinds of transition in these moments: there is the physical transition between performed passions, occurring in a flash or drawn out over several seconds; there is equally the conceptual transition between one idea and another within a text. We might call the former ‘embodied’ transition and ascribe it to the actor; we might call the latter ‘literary’ and ascribe it to the author. To do this too strictly, however, is to diminish the potential of transition as a critical concept and to repeat a move that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century, when critics like Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt argued that no performance, with its physical transitions, could fully capture the intellectual significance of the sequences of thought and feeling written by the playwright. Instead of accepting such a hard division between the transitions of the actor’s body and those conceived in the author’s mind, this book recovers a more complex critical standpoint. Such a standpoint recognises that a performer might sometimes add new ideas to their script (for better or worse), and such a standpoint also reflects the belief that an author may sometimes write with such power or clarity that their words bring about a physical response in the actor, reader, or audience member. While the differences between performance and script remain important, what matters first is the very fact of transition itself. Take Hamlet’s encounter with the ghost on the battlements of Elsinore: this point is a moment of embodied transition, as the actor’s body tenses into terror; this point is also a violent shift of subject, from statecraft to the supernatural – yet it is the way all these changes are enfolded into the instant that make it one of the most famous passages both in the eighteenth-century theatre and in the period’s editions of Shakespeare’s works. A sensitivity to this point as a point of transition, both on the page and on the stage, allows us to see how it is not just famously iconic but changing and dynamic also. When we sense this, the movement inherent in the moment, we share in an eighteenth-century appreciation of dramatic art.

The successful practice of the art of transition creates a hit. This hit depends upon transition’s ability to imbue the iconic moment with

Transition, Attitude, and Tone

3

dynamic potential, opening a range of little-understood pasts and possible futures. This is a key insight of eighteenth-century writing about drama, especially tragedy, and this book – itself mainly focused on tragic drama – both identifies how such an insight was made and examines how a sensitivity to transition can inform our own critical practices today. I draw my evidence from letters to, between, and about actors; manuals purporting to teach the art of public speaking; paintings of famous performers; promptbook markings that accentuate sequential patterns; periodical reviews and retrospectives; the notes and the punctuation of playscripts; and many other objects that fall within what James Boswell once called ‘literary productions relative to the art of acting’.³ By examining how these sources make use of the art of transition, I demonstrate the validity of transition as a fundamental concept for three things: first, for the analysis of the composition, criticism, and performance of eighteenth-century drama; second, for the reintegration of that drama into a multidisciplinary and multimodal environment; and third, for the tracing of an evolution in attitudes towards theatrical affect that runs from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to the essays of Lamb and Hazlitt.

Transition, Attitude, and Tone

Jaffair threatens to murder his wife Belvidera in the final scene of the fourth act of Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d* (1682). In his *Dramatic Censor* (1770), the critic Francis Gentleman offers his commentary on this famous point: his writing will serve here to ground the concerns of my work, from the importance of transition in writing about drama to the wider context within which this concept operates, both in the eighteenth century and now. As was typical for hits, points, and turns, Gentleman made use of Jaffair’s threats as an arena for comparing two prominent figures in the London patent theatres: David Garrick, the actor-manager of Drury Lane, and Spranger Barry, the leading male actor of Covent Garden.⁴ Otway’s play was a staple of the repertoire at this time, and it tells the story of a failed attempt to overthrow the Venetian senate. Jaffair’s friend Pierre is a part of this conspiracy, while his wife is the daughter of a senator. Treated poorly by his father-in-law, Jaffair accepts Pierre’s invitation to join the ranks of the conspirators and places Belvidera in their custody, along with a dagger to kill her with if he betrays their loyalty. After one of the conspirators assaults Belvidera, she confronts her husband and forces him to reveal the plot to her father and the other senators in return for the merciful treatment of Pierre and his associates. But the senate breaks its

word and condemns them to death. This brings us to the end of Act IV, when Belvidera tells her husband that all his co-conspirators have been arrested.

Gentleman compares the performances of Barry and Garrick through each of the turns of the drama. Up to this moment, they have been neck and neck: Barry ‘could not be surpassed’ in Jaffeur’s speeches to his father-in-law in the first act, but ‘we must give Mr. GARRICK considerable preference’ for his version of the point ‘where Belvidera is delivered to the conspirators.’⁵ Now, however, when Susannah Cibber’s Belvidera tells Garrick’s Jaffeur ‘of the torments which are preparing for his friends’, the manager of Drury Lane decisively proves his superiority to his rival:

Mr. GARRICK steps forward and begs description, by an amazing variety of transitions, tones and picturesque attitudes; the distracted confusion which flames in his countenance, and the gleams of love which shed momentary softness on the stern glow of rage, exhibit more complicated beauties than any other piece of theatrical execution we have seen.⁶

Gentleman’s praise for his friend and benefactor is hardly without bias, yet it contains in miniature two approaches to the definition of transition that will structure my discussion here. First, it places transition alongside ‘tone’ and ‘attitude’ as theatrical techniques employed by Garrick for the production of a spectacle that ‘begs description’, and it is through comparison to writing about the other, better-known, technical aspects of performance that the peculiarities of transition become clear to us now. Second, Gentleman enumerates the feelings of ‘confusion’, ‘love’, and ‘rage’ that the actor’s techniques express in this point and thus indicates how transition – along with tone and attitude – intersects with eighteenth-century understandings of emotional and mental states. Something of the nature of that intersection is evident here in Gentleman’s praise of the scene’s ‘complicated beauties’ and his use of metaphors of fire to capture the unfolding dynamic of the passions of the point, as scripted by Otway and exhibited by Garrick.

To start with the trio of transitions, tones, and attitudes, a wealth of research in the fields of both theatre history and what Abigail Williams calls ‘the history of sociable reading’ allows us to define the techniques described by the latter two terms with ease.⁷ In Tiffany Stern’s overview of acting practice, she notes that attitudes were a crucial part of Garrick’s style, being moments when the performer paused and held a pose, thus ‘indicating (and encouraging) reflection about the part performed’.⁸ As Stern goes on to argue, such a technique produced either ‘applaudable

Transition, Attitude, and Tone

5

tableaux, or high-class claptraps'.⁹ The hostile review in Theophilus Cibber's *Two Dissertations on the Theatres* (1756) of Garrick's performance as Romeo provides a counterpoint to Gentleman's praise of this performer's 'picturesque attitudes' in *Venice Preserv'd*.

He is now going to the Tomb [...] Yet on the opening of the Scene, — the Actor [...] advances about 3 or 4 Steps,—then jumps, and starts into an Attitude of Surprise:—At what?—why, at the Sight of a Monument he went to look for:—And there he stands, till a Clap from the Audience relieves him of his Post.¹⁰

Cibber's dash-ridden prose offers a parodic re-enactment of what he considers to be the ability of attitudes to disrupt the smooth unfolding of a performance in favour of audience gratification. Yet whether praised or criticised, such poses were a well-established part of performance in the period. Barton Booth, who acted a generation before Garrick, is held up by Cibber as an example to follow, since his 'attitudes were all picturesque' and gained their grace from this actor's study of classical sculpture and history paintings.¹¹ This practice, first trialled by Booth in a performance of Joseph Addison's *Cato* (1713), had itself been modelled on the Italian castrato Nicolò Grimaldi's use of iconic poses in opera.¹²

In the noisy, fully lit, and undisciplined theatres of the eighteenth century, the execution of attitudes played an important role in engaging the eyes of the audience in the face of a host of other distractions. Tone had a similar purpose, compelling audience attention even from those unable to make out what was happening on the stage. As such, Glen McGillivray argues, tone was a crucial 'part of the rhetorical [...] armoury of the eighteenth-century actor'.¹³ Yet an actor's tone of voice could, like the execution of attitudes, be both criticised and praised according to its variety and decorum. As Thomas Sheridan put it in 1762, 'A just delivery consists in a distinct articulation of words, pronounced in proper tones, suitably varied to the sense, and the emotions of the mind', and there are many examples of the judging of actors' voices according to these criteria.¹⁴ Richard Cumberland, at a distance of sixty years, recalled the 'deep full tone' of James Quin and Susannah Cibber's 'high-pitched but sweet' recitation of verse,¹⁵ while Thomas Davies, again at some historical distance, praised Booth's 'strong, yet harmonious pipe', which could reach 'the highest note of exclamatory rage' without hurting the music of its tone.¹⁶

But what of the first term in Gentleman's trio? With his 'harmonious pipe' and 'attitudes [...] all picturesque', it should be no surprise that Booth was also held up as a paragon of transition, with Cibber praising the way in which, whenever this man assumed one attitude or another, he 'fell into them with so easy a transition, that these masterpieces of his art seemed but the effect of nature'.¹⁷ As with all descriptions of historical practice, we should ask ourselves whether Booth ever actually did this (as Bertram Joseph has argued) or whether Cibber is simply using an actor who died in the 1730s to criticise Garrick's dominance of the theatre in the 1750s.¹⁸ However, given my focus on how theatre criticism functioned in the eighteenth century, the settling of such a question is of less importance to me than the way in which Cibber here presents transition as something that occurs *between* attitudes.

Unlike the techniques of tone or attitude, both of which are keyed to the expression of something, especially an emotion, transition seems concerned with the arrangement of these subjects into sequence. It is, in Cibber's account, the process by which Booth assumed an attitude appropriate to the material being performed. Yet the very nature of transition, as something at once essential but necessarily liminal, has made it resistant to definition, either by scholars of the long eighteenth century (who rarely discuss the term at any length)¹⁹ or even by those writing in the period itself.²⁰ In 1800, Charles Newton admitted that he did not 'recollect the Mention of this Grace of Oratory in any Author' when he came to explain 'Transition' in the introduction to his *Studies in the Science of Public Speaking*.²¹ Yet, like Gentleman and Cibber, he also recognised its significance, arguing that 'good [...] Readers or Speakers' are those who 'nicely discriminate and strongly mark every TRANSITION'.²² Newton offers a definition of the term in the context of public performance as 'the passing on to an entirely new Subject, Sentiment, or Passion', which he later condenses to 'the passing of one Passion or Sentiment to another'.²³ Strikingly, Newton's effort at defining transition bears comparison to Samuel Johnson's more general explanation of the word in 1756 as a 'passage in writing or conversation from one subject to another' (itself copied from the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*).²⁴ Using these definitions, it appears that when Gentleman praised the 'amazing variety of transitions, tones and picturesque attitudes' employed by Garrick in his performance of Jaffeir, he praised three distinct but interconnected things. Garrick's voice was adapted to the character's rage at one moment and to his love at another. Garrick's body occasionally came to adopt a variety of held attitudes specific to such emotions too. And Garrick's transitions

Transition, Attitude, and Tone

7

functioned as a passage between distinct tones and attitudes, joining them together to form a compelling spectacle.

There is, however, another way of understanding transition. Gentleman's placing of the word alongside tone and attitude suggest that it serves as more than the passage between different expressions of emotions and has instead the status of an object of appreciation in its own right. Consider, for example, John Hill's comments in 1755 on Garrick's performance as Archer in a production of George Farquhar's *Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), where he claims that 'Till this performer play'd this part, we never knew what beauties it was capable of, in the sudden transitions from passion to passion'.²⁵ The actor's 'sudden transitions' (or perhaps Farquhar's scripting of them) are positioned here as one of the 'beauties' of the comedy. When writing about Garrick's *Lear*, Gentleman makes a similar comment, arguing that 'the transitions of *Lear* are beautiful'.²⁶ In both these phrases, transition is less something that occurs between bits of a play and more one of the defining features of the drama itself. Transition here refers more to a moment of transformation or metamorphosis or, to use one of Johnson's other definitions of the word, a 'change'. A tension in how transitions might be apprehended now emerges. On one hand, it is seen as a dynamic passage between two things, and we find Jaffier's expression of his love so striking because Garrick transitions into it from rage; on the other, transition is itself the iconic object of our admiration, a moment of transformation or change that amazes us.

A description of what might constitute true excellence in acting written a few years before Garrick's debut by Aaron Hill (no relation to John) captures this tension. Hill praised the performer who 'stops short, upon *pensive* PAUSES and makes *Transitions* (as the Meanings vary) into *Jealousy, Scorn, Fury, Penitence, Revenge, or Tenderness!*'²⁷ Like Newton's description of transition as a 'passing' and Johnson's of a 'passage [...] from one subject to another', Hill's wish for an actor who 'makes *Transitions* [...] into' new embodiments of emotion captures what we might call the dynamic quality of transition, operating to connect distinct subjects. At the same time, however, Hill's placement of transitions 'upon *pensive* PAUSES' both makes an important distinction between transition and pause and, crucially, intimates the iconic quality of such moments too: after all, the hypothetical actor 'stops short' at such places. A little later in the same text, Hill repeats the same tension when he describes 'the very *Instant* of the *changing Passion*' to be found in a point: this is a paradox brought about by transition, a technique which both operates as a dynamic

passage between ‘*changing*’ passions and makes these changes into iconic ‘instants’ of metamorphosis.

Tone, attitude, and transition are thus all significant techniques for the performance of a text, but it is Gentleman’s third term that creates a productive tension between the iconic and the dynamic qualities of spectacle and, with its double logic, helps exhibit what he calls the ‘complicated beauties’ of the moment. ‘Exhibit’ is Gentleman’s term and reminds us that, while we may distinguish between the literary transitions written out by Otway and those embodied by Garrick, we should also recognise how closely intertwined the two phenomena are: the ‘complicated beauties’ of this moment are produced by both actor and author, since both figures seem to have used the power of transition to shape emotion into art. This becomes especially clear when we consider the intersection of Gentleman’s first tricolon of techniques (transition, attitude, tone) with his second tricolon’s elocutionist emphasis on emotional states (rage, love, confusion) and read Gentleman’s commentary alongside Otway’s script and other artefacts of Garrick’s performance.

The Language of Fire

Gentleman located Garrick’s rendition of Jaffeur’s feelings in the actor’s famously mobile face when he described how confusion ‘flames in his countenance’.²⁸ Otway’s text also places these unstable emotions here by having Belvidera describe how her irate husband’s ‘lips shake’ and how his visage becomes ‘disordered’ as she tells him of Pierre’s fate.²⁹ From this exchange on, it is easy to trace Gentleman’s ‘rage’, ‘love’, and ‘confusion’ through the remaining lines of the scene: Jaffeur calls his wife ‘Traitoress’ and confusedly tells her ‘thou hast done this; | Thanks to thy tears and false persuading love’ (IV. 495–96), but seconds after saying the word ‘love’, he succumbs to that tender feeling, inviting his beloved to ‘Creep even into my heart, and there lie safe’ (IV. 499). This sequence is one of several within this point, for Jaffeur’s rage will soon replace his love once more. Again, there are textual triggers for this: Jaffeur calls his heart his wife’s ‘Citadel’ and then exclaims ‘— ha! —’ at the mention of this word, which recalls the Venetian prison where his friends are incarcerated and returns him to his rage, the dashes marking the transition (IV. 500). Newly aflame, he tells Belvidera to ‘stand off’ and finally draws out the dagger he has been fumbling throughout the scene (IV. 500–02). As his anger builds, Belvidera’s pleas for clemency fail to have any effect, until she throws herself to her knees and cries ‘Oh, mercy!’ (IV. 516). These words bring

The Language of Fire

9

about another transition for the actors to embody. Jaffeur follows his wife's cry by continuing the pentameter with a weakly phrased prohibition – 'Nay, no struggling' – but Belvidera completes the line with a much stronger, enjambed imperative – 'Now then kill me | While thus I hang about thy cruel neck' (iv. 516–17). Unable to do so, Jaffeur's resolution breaks: proclaiming that 'by immortal Love, | I cannot longer bear a thought to harm thee' (iv. 522–23), he throws the dagger from him, embraces his wife, and closes the act with the wish that Belvidera speak to her father and 'conquer him, as thou has conquered me' (iv. 537).

By presenting Otway's writing in terms of the emotional states named by Gentleman, I find myself repeating a distinctly eighteenth-century practice of thinking about drama as a sequence of passions. If a theatregoer had been particularly inspired by Garrick's rendition of Jaffeur's feelings (or Cibber's of Belvidera's), they might, for instance, have bought a copy of the recently published *Art of Speaking* so as to learn from its author, James Burgh, how to give similar performances at home.³⁰ After a fifty-page essay dispensing advice on the most appropriate tones and attitudes to adopt when representing everything from affectation of piety ('canting' tone and hands 'clasped together') to desire (suppliant tone and 'bending the body forward'), Burgh provides over eighty lessons to his reader.³¹ Each lesson – one of which is reproduced in Chapter 1 – consists of a short text accompanied by marginal annotation and in-line typographic symbols. Modern performers, employing Bill Gaskill and Max Stafford-Clark's technique of 'actioning', might work through such examples today by employing transitive verbs to describe what their characters are attempting to do to someone alongside their lines, writing out such things as 'I greet', 'I question', 'I threaten', 'I reassure', and so forth.³² Burgh, however, writes in the margin what emotion should be present at each point in a speech. He does not *action* scripts, but rather *impassions* them, reminding the performer to switch between the exhibition of 'remorse' and 'despair' when executing Claudius's attempts to pray in *Hamlet*³³ or to move between 'vexation' and 'spiteful joy' in a dialogue between Shylock and Tubal made famous after a performance of it by Garrick's mentor, Charles Macklin.³⁴ Each of Burgh's examples is published under a header naming the key passions contained within, and, although Burgh does not include the confrontation between Jaffeur and Belvidera in his book, it would not look out of place with Gentleman's enumeration of 'confusion', 'rage', and 'love' as its title.

Blair Hoxby makes use of *The Art of Speaking* to support his argument that approaches to tragic drama between the start of the sixteenth and the

end of the eighteenth century placed pathos (rather than plot) at their centre. Specifically, Burgh helps to indicate the extent to which passions, not actions, were the ‘dramatic units of crucial significance in early modern tragedy’.³⁵ In addition to his ‘impassioned’ examples, Burgh also exemplifies this in his introductory essay, where he ties specific tones and attitudes to individual feelings. That tragic plays were about passions and that, accordingly, their performance was too is also clearly part of many of the examples already given here. Gentleman spends many more words discussing Garrick’s performance of Jaffeir’s love and rage and comparing this actor’s capacity for emotion to Barry’s than he does reminding his reader of the specifics of Otway’s plot. In Aaron Hill’s articles on acting, he imagines a performer capable of considering how ‘the *Meanings* vary’, but only as a way of guiding their transitions into the most appropriate passions. As for Newton, his definition of transition as ‘the passing on to an entirely new Subject, Sentiment, or Passion’ not only supports Hoxby’s claim to the validity of passion as the object of performance but also – thanks to his inclusion of the terms ‘subject’ and ‘sentiment’ – indicates how, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, the specific emphasis on passion’s primacy had now declined. Indeed, it is essential to recognise that Hoxby’s case for the crucial dramatic significance accorded to the passions should be understood in terms of the evolving and uncertain definition of passion throughout the early modern period, ranging from the basic etymological sense of a powerful feeling that is suffered (from the Latin *passio*, and ultimately the Greek *πάσχειν*, itself at the root of *pathos*) to the elaborate categorisations of the philosophers and the priorities of elocutionists like Sheridan or John Walker.³⁶ Different understandings of what constituted passion had, as Joseph Roach has shown, significant ramifications across the eighteenth century for the study of acting as the dramatic expression of a character’s feeling. Specific to my argument here, such definitions and redefinitions of the passions allow us to sharpen our understanding of how the emotional climaxes of dramatic, especially tragic, points might be considered as products of the art of transition.

René Descartes would recognise Jaffeir’s love for Belvidera as a ‘primitive passion’. In his *Passions de l’âme* (1649), he named wonder, hatred, desire, joy, sadness, and love as a specific set of passions, which – like the primary colours in painting – could, through their combination, produce the full spectrum of human feeling.³⁷ For Descartes, Jaffeir’s love, along with any other passion, would be caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits.³⁸ Descartes’s spirits, inspired by the animal spirits of Galen, act upon the soul when their movements agitate