

ACTING THEORY AND THE ENGLISH STAGE  
1700-1830

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the Preface to George Grant's *An Essay on the Science of Acting* (1828), we encounter the presumed author himself, at the point of sending his treatise to the press, and two of his friends, at pains to comprehend what drove him to write it in the first place. As one of them, 'Mr. Cavil,' puts it, 'Why, don't you know that the town has been already inundated with works professing the object, scope, and design of the one you propose?' When the author, a self-proclaimed 'veteran stager,' suggests mildly that 'surely ... there still may be points which have hitherto been overlooked by my talented contemporaries,' Mr. Cavil responds passionately, 'Why, man, if you only take time to consider the matter, you [will remember that we] have treatises in abundance on the drama; have we not theatrical magazines and inquisitors, dramatic histories of all sorts, criticisms of all sorts, daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly; you are mistaken, my friend; believe me, you are mistaken; your subject has been unfortunately chosen.' It is only when the 'veteran stager' confesses that he turned to writing about theatre because he is 'possessed by the devil in the shape of an empty purse,' that Cavil acquiesces: 'Why, now you speak; now you come to the point; that indeed, is an argument that bears down all before it, and is not to be resisted.'<sup>1</sup>

This facetious conversation offers several important insights to the student of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture. First, treatises on acting seem to have claimed a niche of their own in the period's print market: the author's friends immediately recognize the 'object, scope, and design' of his book. Second, the 'abundance' of such books did not decrease readers' appetite for them: the author still hopes to profit by his work, and even skeptical 'Mr. Cavil' agrees that this money-earning scheme is not without merit. Third, it seems to have been easy to step forth as an expert on 'the science of acting'. The availability of a rich body of previously published materials made it possible for almost anybody to proclaim himself or herself a 'veteran stager'<sup>2</sup> and cash in on the subject. Indeed, in spite of the author's claims that he will focus on the points hitherto 'overlooked by [his] talented contemporaries,' his *Essay* is entirely derivative, its ideas easily traceable to such eighteenth-century writers as John Hill, Colley Cibber, Paul Hiffernan and William Woodfall.

The *Essay* thus exemplifies a particular mode of theatrical writing that evolved throughout the preceding century, drawing on two discourses. One, represented by pamphlets, newspaper articles and book-length treatises, focused on the personalities, social lives and specific performances of famous entertainers, who, as George Winchester Stone observes, 'were subject for endless conversations as well as for voluminous writing during the period – an output which steadily increased from the beginning of the [eighteenth] century'.<sup>3</sup> The other discourse concerned acting theory as a science and the oratorical skills of actors and actresses as compared with those of other professional speakers, such as lawyers, clergymen and politicians. Traditionally grounded in the works of Quintilian (particularly his *Education of an Orator*, c. 95 AD), publications on elocution and the use of body language expanded throughout the century. They included natural-philosophical discussions of passions as well as disquisitions on the mental efforts and muscles involved in their representations, the physical characteristics of successful actors that one had to be born with and the skills one had to learn, and the differences among various national styles of acting.

A purchaser of Grant's *Essay* would have expected to find in it evocations of the classical theory of elocution, tidbits from memoirs of famous actors, critical references to specific performances, and a comparison between the English and French (or English and German, or English and Italian) styles of acting, as well as some practical advice to aspiring thespians. It remains debatable, however, to what extent eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers recognized publications such as Grant's *Essay* as adding up to a particular genre, one that we today may call the genre of stagecraft writing. Two factors seem to support the claim for an acknowledged separate genre. First, by the late 1780s, there emerged a specific format for treatises on the science of acting, manifested by similarities in the structure of their tables of contents. A typical treatise would start with a sketch of a theatrical tradition construed as a precursor of modern English acting (e.g., Roman, French or sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English acting), then consider 'the laws' of different genres (e.g., tragedy, comedy, farce and pantomime), and conclude with chapters on the 'art of acting',<sup>4</sup> often featuring dramatic passages designed to illustrate various passions and evoking performances of well-known actors in specific roles.

Second, the writing itself was quite self-conscious. It referenced other contemporary works on the subject, either explicitly quoting them (John Hill's *The Actor* was one popular source) or engaging in what we would consider outright plagiarism, while claiming to be different from earlier works in this mode: that is, more practical and prepared to answer the immediate concerns of would-be actors. These assertions of difference may be taken as our strongest argument for the contemporary cultural perception of stagecraft writing as a separate genre, for it appears that by the late 1780s, authors of acting treatises thought of

themselves as working within a specific representational tradition, one that they assumed their audience would be well familiar with.

The question of audience can be approached very differently, however, and considered as evidence *against* the strong genre claim. For, even though treatises on the art of acting advertised themselves as how-to guides, oriented narrowly toward 'young candidates for adventuring on the stage',<sup>5</sup> their contents belied that narrow orientation. Very few of them actually lived up to their promise of useful practicality (Thomas Rede's *The Road to the Stage* being one important exception to this rule); most seem to have been aimed at an audience that extended far beyond the 'young candidates' for acting. With (amateur) historical overviews of various national traditions of acting, borrowings from contemporary natural philosophy for their analysis of the work of 'passions', and portrayals of famous actors in specific roles, stagecraft manuals sought to entertain a broad variety of readers, not just active theatregoers and those pursuing stage careers.<sup>6</sup>

In this respect, it might be useful to compare the intended audience of stagecraft manuals with that of the burgeoning contemporary genre of theatrical memoir and that of the similarly thriving genre of theatrical journalism. Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume comment on the 'growth of theatrical biography and autobiography at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries', while Charles Harold Gray posits the 1770s as the decade when 'theatrical criticism at last [arrived] at a respectable position in English journalism'<sup>8</sup> and 1795 as the year when 'at last, the profession of theatrical critic was established'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, just as theatrical memoirs and criticism grew in spurts throughout the century and seem to have reached their critical mass by the 1790s, so did the treatises on the art of acting. The simultaneous growth of these various theatrical discourses suggests the emergence and cultivation of a broader audience increasingly conditioned to read and think about theatre without necessarily being directly involved with the stage. Authors of stagecraft manuals therefore must have targeted many of the same readers who avidly consumed the memoirs of David Garrick, Charles Macklin, Margaret Woffington, Edmund Kean, John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, as well as sections such as 'The Actor', 'Dramatic Strictures', 'The British Theatre' and 'The Theatrical Review', of such publications as the *Public Ledger*, *London Evening Post*, *General Evening Post*, *St James Chronicle*, *Middlesex Journal*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Morning Post*, *London Magazine*, *General Advertiser*, and *Morning Herald*.

The stagecraft manuals thus both fed and shaped this broader cultural appetite for thinking about actors and acting while their actual practical value to 'young candidates' for the stage remained questionable. (Note that professional actors often supplemented their income by offering lessons for aspirants, which is to say that there were other ways of learning about the profession, more effective than reading books such as Grant's *Essay*.)<sup>10</sup> The realization that these publica-

tions were oriented toward a much broader audience than they professed to be thus complicates our claim that they added up to a specific recognizable genre.

Militating further against the strong genre claim is the sheer number of publishers associated with these treatises. By the time of the publication of Grant's *Essay*, no single printing-house had established itself as a primary venue for acting manuals, though a number of publishers associated with these manuals had brought forth periodicals that published theatrical criticism, as well as works authored by professional actors, by poets writing about theatre, and by self-appointed historians of the stage. For instance, bookseller and publisher John Coote (1733–1808) who printed both *The Theatrical Review for the Year 1757 and Beginning of 1758* and Thomas Wilkes's *A General View of the Stage* (1759), also brought forth the *Weekly Magazine and Literary Review* and the *Royal Magazine, or Gentleman's Monthly Companion*, as well as works by David Garrick, Samuel Foote, Charles Churchill, Arthur Murphy and Paul Hiffenan.

The goal of this set is thus to follow the development of stagecraft manuals from the early 1700s to the late 1820s by situating them in the context of the contemporary discourses that influenced them (e.g., treatises on physiognomy) as well as in the context of critical writings on theatre that developed simultaneously with these manuals and, together with them, shaped the growing theatrical readership. As such this edition stresses the importance of recognizing publications about acting as a crucial part of the period's cultural imagination, one that engaged the audience well beyond that immediately involved with theatre and that was implicated with a broad variety of political, aesthetic and literary discourses and practices. Some of these discursive connections have been compellingly mapped out in the works of such scholars as Joseph R. Roach (*The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*), Shearer West (*The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representations in the Age of Garrick and Kemble*), Janet Todd (*Sensibility: An Introduction*), Alan T. McKenzie (*Certain, Lively Episodes: The Articulation of Passion in Eighteenth-Century Prose*), Cheryl Wanko (*Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*) and Paul Goring (*The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture*). It is the hope of the editor that the reproduction of texts, many of which have never before been reprinted and thus remain relatively unknown to students of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture, would encourage more scholars to turn their attention to this fascinating and under-explored subject.

Among the issues regularly addressed by stagecraft publications (such as the history of theatre, the relationship between painting and acting, the physiology of acting, and the evolution of the concept of 'natural' acting), two might be singled out as particularly controversial in their own time. First, the authors of acting manuals and theatrical reviews were often preoccupied with the problem of natural talent as opposed to acquired skills. The list of physical attributes nec-

essary for a career in theatre (e.g., good figure, expressive face, resonant voice) was often followed by an argument about the relative merits of long training. The authors considered whether years of practice could make up for a lack of innate aptitude for projecting one's emotions onto the audience. Hence Aaron Hill in the *Prompter* (Volume 1, this edition) took issue with the claim that players – and not writers – 'should direct the Stage' because it 'requires an infinite Length of Practice, and Years, before an Actor can be formed to the Art'. The *Prompter's* riposte to this notion was that during the 'unhappy course of the Civil Wars', all actors disappeared (most of them having been killed in various battles), but once the theatres reopened after the Restoration, several brilliant performers, such as Betterton, emerged seemingly out of nowhere, 'all at once', apparently requiring no lengthy training. In contrast, observed the *Prompter*, now, after many years of uninterrupted theatrical training and practice, we have 'the Very Worst Set of Actors that ever disgraced the Nation'. On the whole, as Hill saw it, 'the Longest Life, spent in Profession of an Actor's Art, may contribute Less to his Accomplishment and Perfection, than a few short Months, applied with Diligence, to the Study of its actual Duties'.

Another frequently addressed problem had to do with the 'sincerity' of emotions felt by actors, a problem outlined, perhaps most memorably, in Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. In the winter of 1764–5, David Garrick and his wife were visiting France. Diderot happened to be present at a private party given in their honour, and he later described Garrick's impromptu performance for his hosts:

Now I will tell you a thing I have actually seen. 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? I don't believe it; nor do you.<sup>11</sup>

Diderot was addressing his fellow theatregoers who believed that when an actor portrays an emotion on stage, he or she must feel at least some of that emotion and so end up a changed person. Playing a cruel murderer *must* harden your heart, while playing a lover must make you want to be one in real life.

Garrick's countrymen apparently shared this view. As one treatise published in England in the 1770s put it, 'These gentlemen [actors] arrive at a pitch of virtue, to which few, who are employed in speculation, attain to: they reduce theory to practice. The delusive scenes of love exhibited on the stage are performed by

them in real life.<sup>12</sup> The anonymous author thus expressed the enduring public suspicion that one cannot embody feelings and yet remain unaffected by them.

Samuel Johnson begged to differ. Defending his friend, he wrote: 'If Garrick really believed himself to be that monster, Richard the Third, he deserved to be hanged every time he performed it'. Similarly, the anonymous author of *The Theatrical Review, for the Year 1757 and Beginning of 1758* (Volume 1, this edition) praised the comic actor John Arthur for staying in control while on stage by remembering, so to speak, that he was acting: 'His features are very variable, and there runs thro' his whole countenance and performance a certain ludicrous gravity, that commands laughter irresistibly; all those he manages with great judgment'. In contrast, another comic actor, Edward Shuter was regularly carried away by his own performance: 'his whole countenance, behavior and person fall naturally into what is laughable; but that spirit of drollery is not always governable, it is hard-mouthed, and often runs away with the spirit of his part'.<sup>13</sup>

Roger Pickering (Volume 1, this edition) steered a tentative middle course. While observing that 'the delicacy of theatrical expression can never be expected from an actor that does not feel his part', he devoted most of his treatise, *Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy* (1755), to 'general instructions on the artificial management of the body and the voice'. As he saw it, feeling the part might be important but learning how to fake the feeling was a surer way to success. Pickering's approach was similar to Aaron Hill's, who observed pragmatically in the *Prompter* (Volume 1, this edition) that as long as the actor did his best to inhabit his role, his actual emotions were less relevant: an 'Actor, who assumes a Character, wherein he does not seem, in Earnest, to be the Person, by whose name he calls himself, AFFRONTS instead of entertaining, the Audience'.<sup>14</sup>

We hear the echoes of these debates about actors' sincerity in such works as Henry Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (1807), a translation from German of Johann Jacob Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (1785), significantly revised to reflect the conventions of 'the English drama'. To illustrate what he called 'the communicative power of gesture', Siddons treated the reader to the following scene:

When a person sits at the theatre, after having seen a play acted three or four times, his mind naturally becomes vacant and inactive. If among the spectators he chances to recognize a youth, to whom the same is new, this object affords him, and many others, a more entertaining fund of observation than all that is going forward on the stage.

This novice of an auditor, carried away by the illusion, imitates all he sees, even to the actions of the players, though in a mode less decisive. Without knowing what is going to be said, he is serious, or contented, according to the tone which the performers happen to take. His eyes become a mirror, faithfully reflecting the varying gestures of the several personages concerned.

All humour, irony, anger, curiosity, contempt, in a word, all the passions of the author are repeated in the lines of his countenance. This imitative picture is only interrupted whilst his proper sentiments, crossing exterior objects, seek for modes of expressing themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Note how Siddons's tableau subtly foregrounds the 'fake' nature of the sentiment portrayed on stage by mentioning casually that this is the third or fourth time that the spectator has seen the play. Surely, even if one envisions an actress working herself up to burning with real 'anger, curiosity, or contempt', realizing that she is doing it the fourth night in a row takes away some of one's belief in the reality of her feelings.

Siddons's *Practical Illustrations* represents one of the many important eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century treatises on the art of acting not included in this edition. Because the present series focuses primarily on less-known works, the reader may consider complementing this selection with eighteenth-century treatises on acting and the history of the stage readily available from other sources. Such treatises include John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus* (1708), Charles Gildon's *The Life of Mr Thomas Betterton* (1710), Colley Cibber's *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (1740), Luigi Riccoboni's *An Historical and Critical Account of the Theatres in Europe* (1741), Samuel Foote's *A Treatise on the Passions, So far as they Regard the Stage* (1747), Theophilus Cibber's *The Life and Character of that Excellent Actor Barton Booth* (1753), Aaron Hill's *An Essay on the Art of Acting* (1753), John Hill's *The Actor; or, A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (1755), James Burgh's *The Art of Speaking* (1761), William Cook's *Memoirs of Samuel Foote* (1805) and James Boaden's *Memoirs of Mrs Siddons: Interspersed with Anecdotes of Authors and Actors* (1827).

Among critical works reflecting on these texts, particularly useful are Alan Downer's classic essay 'Nature to Advantage Dressed, Eighteenth-Century Acting' (1943), Earl Wasserman's 'The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Acting' (1947), John Harold Wilson's 'Rant, Cant and Tone on the Restoration Stage' (1955), Charles Beecher Hogan's 'Introduction' to Part 5 of *The London Stage 1660–1800* (1968), Philip H. Highfill Jr's 'Performers and Performing' in Robert D. Hume's *The London Theatre World, 1660–1800* (1980), Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume's *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays 1675–1707* (1985) and Dene Barnett's *The Art of Gesture: The Practice and Principles of 18th Century Acting* (1987).

Complementing the selection of eighteenth-century works on physiognomy and gesture with occasional comments on emotions as portrayed on stage are Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789–98), Charles Bell's *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting* (1806) and Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (1806).



Finally, complementing the present selection of periodicals discussing actors and acting, are the *Gentleman's Journal*; or, *The Monthly Miscellany* (1691–94); *Tatler* (1709), *Spectator* (1710–12, 1714), *Theatre, by Sir John Edgar* (1720), *Champion* (particularly 1742–3), *Covent-Garden Journal* (1752), *Gray's Inn Journal* (1752–4), *London Chronicle* (1757–8), *Idler* (1758), *Monthly Review* (1757), *Literary Magazine; or Universal Review* (1756–8), *London Spy and Read's Weekly Journal* (1761), *Middlesex Journal*, (1769–76), *Public Ledger* (particularly in 1771–2), *St James Chronicle* (1770s–90s), *General Evening Post* (1771–3), *Morning Post* (1772, 1773 and 1775), *Prompter* (1789), *Theatrical Guardian* (1791), *Morning Chronicle* (particularly in 1769–1820), and *London Magazine* (particularly in the 1820s).<sup>16</sup>

## Notes:

- G. Grant, *An Essay on the Science of Acting. By a Veteran Stager* (London: Cowie and Strange, 1828), pp. 8–11, 11.
- Although further verification is needed, the author of the Essay might be George Grant 'listed in Lord Chamberlain's records as "Box and Lobby keeper" at the King's Theatre in 1784–5' (P. H. Highfill Jr, K. A. Burnim and E. A. Langhans (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, (Carbondale, IL and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), vol. 6, p. 311.
- G. W. Stone, *The London Stage, 1660–1800: Part 4, 1747–1776*, 12 vols, (Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinois University Press, 1960–8), p. 90.
- W. Cooke, *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism. Containing An Analysis of the Stage under the following Heads, Tragedy, Tragi-Comedy, Comedy, Pantomime, and Farce. With a Sketch of the Education of the Greek and Roman Actors; Concluding with Some General Instructions For Succeeding In the Art of Acting* (London: Printed for G. Kearsly, 1775).
- Paul Hifferman, *Reflections Upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy* (London: Printed for W. Johnston, 1755), p. 74.
- For a related discussion of the influence of theatrical performance on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists, see A. T. McKenzie, *Certain Lively Episodes: The Articulation of Passion in Eighteenth-Century Prose* (Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), M. Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), J. Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), and N. Nachumi, *Acting Like a Lady: British Women Novelists And the Late Eighteenth Century Stage* (New York: AMS Press, 2008).
- J. Milhous and R. D. Hume, 'Playwrights' Remuneration in Eighteenth-Century London', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 10. 2–3 (1999), p. 17.
- C. H. Gray, *Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 191.
- Ibid.*, p. 308.
- For discussion, see Highfill, 'Performers and Performing,' in R. D. Hume, *The London Theatre World, 1660–1800* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), pp. 155–6.
- Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. W. H. Pollock (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), p. 60.
- Anon., *The Advantages of Theatrical Entertainment Briefly Considered. Quoted in Shearer West, The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991), p. 13.
- The Theatrical Review, for the Year 1757 and beginning of 1758. Containing Critical Remarks on the Principal Performers of both the Theatres, Together with Observations on the Dramatic Pieces, New or Revised; that have been Performed at either House within that Period. To which is added, a Scale of the Comparative Merit of the above Performers* (London: Printed for J. Coote, 1758), pp. 27–8.
- [A. Hill and W. Popple], *Prompter*, 62 (Friday 13 June 1735).
- H. Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action, adapted to the English Drama. From a Work on the Same Subject of M. [Johann Jakob] Engel, Member of the Royal Academy of Berlin. Embellished with Sixty-Nine Engravings, Expressive of the Various Passions, and Representing the Modern Costume of the London Theatres. Second Edition, Improved* (1807, London: Printed for Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1822), pp. 35–6.
- For a discussion of specific publications on theatre appearing in these periodicals to 1795, see Gray, *Theatrical Criticism*.