The Art of Fine Drama: Inchbald's *Remarks for The British Theatre* and the Aesthetic Experience of the Late Eighteenth-Century Theatre Goer

> History of literature is a process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic, and the author in his continuing productivity.
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> Hans Robert Jauss (1982: 21)

> A great genius […] will always realise the feelings of his character, and be transported beyond himself […] "pectus inanitor angit irritatat malis et falcis terroribus implet ut magus" ("troubles the heart with nothings, inflames it, filling it with dark fictitious fears").
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> David Garrick quoting from Horace's *Epistles* (Benedetti 2001: 199)

In 1806 the novelist, dramatist, and actress Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821), by then the successful author of some nineteen plays – nearly all published - and three novels, was commissioned by the publishers Longmans to write of series of prefatory remarks to *The British Theatre*, an ambitious editorial undertaking which was issued primarily in weekly instalment until 1808, when it was finally collected in twenty-five volumes. Inchbald's prefaces - one hundred and twenty-five in number - introduced the plays selected by the publishers (Manvell 1987: 127; Jenkins 2003: 452-3) with brief biographical and critical annotations on each playwright and his or her work. From a critical point of view, the sheer bulk of the enterprise was bound to make for an erratic and at times perfunctory result. Despite these shortcomings in the overall execution, *Remarks for the British Theatre*[1] remains an invaluable contribution in reconstructing the theories of drama and acting at the end of the Eighteenth Century. It also helps to illustrate the epoch-making transition between two diverging aesthetic systems – waning neoclassical criticism on the one hand (which found its outstanding examples in the works of Nahum Tate, Joseph Addison, William Warburton and Samuel Johnson, amongst the others, as models of editorial and critical experience - especially in the field of Shakespeare editions – all of whom Inchbald reverently acknowledges, yet on occasion does not hesitate to challenge) and the dawning theatre criticism of romantic stamp that would soon be produced by the pens of Samuel T. Coleridge and Charles Lamb.

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[1] The complete title of the collection reads: *The British Theatre: or, a Collection of Plays, which are acted at the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and Haymarket. Printed under the Authority of the Managers, from the Prompt Books; with Biographical and Critical Remarks.*

In this respect the selection proposed by *The British Theatre* is highly significant: although Shakespeare remains by far the most represented author (with twenty-four plays spanning over five volumes, a predictable presence in keeping with exploding Bardolatry), the dramatic series has a strong bias towards the late Eighteenth-Century stage, of which fifty-seven examples are collected. Conversely, the Restoration is thinly covered (by eleven plays only, most of which are either heavily bowdlerised comedies or serious dramas – an obvious choice in itself, which highlights the links between domestic and she tragedy, and the later Georgian stage). Still on a general level we may add that, although the plays "were often collected and bound by the purchaser" (Macheski 1990: 12) - thus varying the order of placement from set to set - an original and highly revealing principle flanks the more favoured assemblage by chronology or author. In point of fact the set I used in my research (*The British Theatre* 1808) seems to stress generic variety, often binding specimens of tragedy, historic drama, opera and comedy within the one volume. Thus it may be argued that - whenever possible - each tome of *The British Theatre* aimed at reflecting the generic variety of the late Eighteenth- and early Nineteenth-Century stage, seen as genre mixing within the one play (for instance tragicomedy, sentimental or multi-plot drama) and as regards the varied structure of the dramatic evening (Cox 1999; Saggini 2005).[2] Finally this policy may contribute to explaining the lack of a unifying preface to the whole collection: whilst undermining Inchbald's overall critical authority – already destabilized by the publisher-editor interdiscourse underlying this series as such - variety of critical purpose is always preferred to formal and thematic unity.

Inchbald's dominating poetic criteria are expressed in a letter to George Colman the Younger, included in the collection as a public answer to the attack he had addressed to her after the appearance of her remarks on *The Jealous Wife*, a well-known comedy by the pen of his father, George Colman the Elder. In her reply, Inchbald states – through an artfully penitent, and generically conventional *excusatio propter infirmitatem* - the intent behind her "cursory remarks of a female observer":[3]

> In one of those unfortunate moments, which leaves us years of repentance, I accepted an overture, to write from two to four pages, in the manner of preface, to

[2] Although Inchbald had nothing to do with the plays to be published, this choice seems to reflect her macrotextual inclinations as well as her dramatic awareness, as testified by the other two dramatic selections she edited for Longmans (*A Collection of Farces and other Afterpieces*, in seven volumes, London, 1809 and *The Modern Theatre: A Collection of Modern Plays, as Acted at the Theatres Royal, London*, in ten volumes, 1811), whose contents she "may have had much more influence on" (Smallwood 2001: x n. 9).

[3] All quotations from *Remarks on the British Theatre* are taken from an edition with no page number (Inchbald 1990). For purpose of clarity, all quotations will be followed by the title in brackets of the play they preface. Colman the Younger's letter and Inchbald's reply are prefixed to his comedy *Heir at Law*.

> be introduced before a certain number of plays, for the perusal, or the information, of such persons as have no access to any diffuse compositions, *either in biography or criticism*, but who are yet liberal contributors to the treasury of the theatre. (The italics are mine)

Two arguments are stressed by the author. After lamenting the pressure the periodical writer has to strive under, "compelled, occasionally, to write in haste; in ill health; under depressed spirits", Inchbald points out her original editorial approach: "[y]our attention […] give[s] a value to these trifles, I never set on them before. The novelty of the attempt was their only hoped for recommendation." Elsewhere she specifies: "the celebrity of a work naturally excites contemplation on its author" (*Hamlet*). The structure of most remarks thus finely balances anecdotes about the author and/or actors of the play being - usually accompanied by some moral comment - with information on its genesis, sketchy generic criticism and numerous observations on its staging and stage history. Inchbald's constant attention to thespian biographical events confirms the new importance attributed to the author function, and testifies to the development of a society of conspicuous consumption – be it material, biographical, as well as cultural at large. The short narrative of the life of an author and/or actor becomes a channel of truth and morality for the use of the general public, eager to possess consumer, literary as much as mnestic goods, with neoclassic emphasis on utility and morality.

> With the various earnings of his pen, […] poor Gay, in search of riches, placed all he had accumulated in the bank of the famous South Sea Company. - His warmest wishes were soon accomplished, and his little fortune become treble. – He was advised to sell out, and purchase an annuity with his increased store – he waited to have it still augmented, and lost every guinea he was worth in the world. (*The Beggar's Opera*)

Johnson's influential warnings on "the power of example" (*Rambler*, no. 4) are rigorously applied to biography.[4] While Joseph Addison's "pious writings […] have softened the harsh spirit of ancient religion, whilst they have confirmed all his principles", and his friendship with Richard Steele became honourable from "the instruction which their joint labour bestowed on mankind" (*Cato*), on the contrary George Farquhar's dissipated lifestyle deserves but condemnation: "in adorning vice with wit, and audacious rakes with the vivacity and elegance of men of fashion, youth, at least, will be decoyed into the snare of admiration". Accordingly inflexible *biographic*

[4] In her remarks on the "immoral tendency" of Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, Inchbald shows further her familiarity with Johnsonian criticism by quoting almost *verbatim* from this same *Rambler* essay: "[t]hat party of critics, in opposition, who extol this play for its moral purport, should recollect, that, on account of present modes and fashions, its power of example is much confined."

justice will account for "the apparent joy, with which [Farquhar] expected his dissolution" at the age of twenty-nine (*The Beaux' Stratagem*).

In similar fashion, plays are presented through the analysis of their most significant characters, which are always discussed in terms of their originality, credibility and, often enough, ruling passion, according to a critical trend later adopted by the Romantics which had developed with the mid-century Shakespeare criticism (for instance, William Richardson's *A Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of some of Shakespeare's remarkable Characters*, 1774). Inchbald suggests that dramatic characters be drawn with truth and judgment, that is to say they must always be natural (preservation of character type) and shun extravagance even in comedy, which gentility separates from farce. In Susannah Centilivre's *Bold Stroke for a Wife*, "probability is so often violated, that the effect, though powerful, is that of farce, and not genuine comedy", whereas the "wholly refined [and] perfectly delicate" language of Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* is infinitely superior to the coarseness of slapstick.

> To give blunt repartee, or other humorous dialogue, to characters in low life; to produce variety of comic accidents, by which a petty tradesman, a sailor, or a country clown, shall raise a peel of laughter, is the easy attainment of every whimsical writer. (*The Brothers*)

In Inchbald's own late version of neo-classicism, linguistic decorum presides over style and dialogue at all times so as not to disturb the spectator's sense of propriety. Accordingly all characters must speak and act according to type. In this way the audience may recognise themselves in the on-stage characters and obtain an instructive lesson through an evaluation of the fictitious actions.

Inchabald also agrees with the fundamental neoclassic tenet which expected comedy and, above all, tragedy to teach moral truth, punish vice and reward virtue, and accordingly she supports the idea of poetic justice: "Mr Morton has added more valuable materials than humour – many admirable reflections are dispersed throughout the work, and an excellent moral is introduced at the catastrophe" (*Cure for the Heartache*). In point of facts she recurrently praises the moral purpose shown by the best dramatists, who contribute to making the theatre a place of entertainment and teaching: "Instruction and information ever accompany amusement" (*The Deserted Daughter*), and she praises Cumberland who "throughout all his numerous works, preserv[ed] a strict sense of the dues of morality" (*The Brothers*). As to her contemporary Hannah Cowley, she writes: " 'Bold Stroke for a Husband' […] has advantages conducive to the reputation of the stage. Here is contained no oblique insinuation, detrimental to the cause of morality – but entertainment and instruction unite, to make a pleasant exhibition at a theatre, or give an hour's amusement in the closet."

However the well-established language of formalism and rational criticism - pivoting around such terms as truth, Nature, reason, verisimilitude – becomes ineffectual when Inchbald comments on the new province of serious, often highly spectacular drama that had developed in the second half of the Eighteenth Century. The eponymous protagonist of Joanna Baillie's *De Monfort* – a play "that will ever be rated as a work of *genius*" (the italics are mine) - "inspires a sublime horror to the last moment of his existence". The eighteenth-century theory of taste and the precision of its critical lexicon seem unable to take in this new kind of drama "of original and very peculiar formation" (*De Monfort*). Similarly, the remarks on a contemporary staging of *Macbeth* open with two sombre, intense statements: "In this grand tragic opera is combined that which is terrific, sublime, infernal. Spirits are called from the bottomless pit, to give additional horror to the crimes which are here perpetrated." In the moral system underlying the new aesthetics of the spectacular, violent passions and other tumultuous affections of the mind are accorded the same ethical status and socialising function previously reserved to human sympathy:

> Terror is here ably excited by descriptions of the preternatural: horror by the portraiture of guilt: and compassion, by the view of suffering innocence. – These are three passions, which, divided, might each constitute a tragedy; and all these powerful engines of the mind and heart are here most happily combined to produce that end, - and each forms a lesson of morality. (*The Count of Narbonne*)

Elsewhere she comments on the terrifying climax of a realistic drama highlighting the influence of the passions (in today's terms, the emotions), whose function appears now even more modellising than that traditionally reserved to sentiment:

> From the first scene of this tragedy to the last, all is interesting, all is natural – occurrences, as in real life, give rise to passions; passion inspires new thoughts, elevates each sentiment, embellishes the language, and, and renders every page of the production either sweetly pathetic, or horribly sublime. (*Fatal Curiosity*)

Reading through the whole of the *Remarks* it thus becomes evident that the discursive practices of the Enlightenment are often significantly challenged by a new aesthetic discourse. The function of tragedy, for instance, is no longer identified with Aristotelian catharsis - the arousal and homeopathic purgation of terror and pity which leaves us in a state of emotional (and moral) balance - but rather with the stimulation of "a peculiar sympathy" in the heart of man, "who, whilst he beholds this sorrowful picture of human weakness, discovers along with it *his own likeness*, and obtains an instructive lesson" (*Coriolanus*; the italics are mine). Inchbald here seems still mindful of Johnson's position about the audience's consciousness of fiction as expressed in *Preface to Shakespeare's Plays*: "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because

they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring *realities* to mind" (1929: 28; the italics are mine).

In a revision of the neo-classic theory of dramatic character, particularity is always preferred to universality, and 'realities' to general nature, as shown by the brief summaries of some popular historical plays. Tragic characters must be admirably conceived but, even more importantly, they must be *affecting*. A good tragedy must in fact "charm the understanding, delight the imagination, and melt the heart" (*Romeo and Juliet*). In this respect *The Distressed Mother*, Ambrose Philips's now hardly remembered adaptation of Racine's *Andromaque*, is highly praised for the domestic interest added by the English author, who preferred to indulge more in the 'social passion' of love in the story of Hermione for Pyrrhus, or the forlorn condition of Hector's widow than did his French counterpart, whose elevated characters risked being perceived as unnatural.[5] In the same fashion, in discussing Dr. Flanklin's *Earl of Warwick* she states:

> Edward [the Fourth] is excellently described in the play of "Jane Shore" as her betraying and doting lover. In "Richard the Third" he is depicted as a dying king, and the beloved husband of this very Elizabeth, for whom, in this tragedy, he sighs; and whose power over his heart caused the resentment of his friend, the Earl of Warwick […]. (*Earl of Warwick*)

Again "the emphatic experience of negatively emotional art" (Levinson 1997: 29) is described as follows: "The passions of grief, joy, fear, and bitter woe, which this tragedy pourtrayed, found instant access to every heart, from the aged to the youthful, either by the avenue of parental or filial love" (*Douglas*).

Whilst serving to diversify each act, the various combinations of the affective incidents and domestic interests of the historical characters thus tend to highlight individuals over type. Accordingly "history, real solemn history" (Austen 1985: 123) such as Hume's (*The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James II*, 1754-62) is revised and recounted as the personal – and often gendered - *stories* of men and, in particular, women seen in their private character. As declared in her discussion of William Shirley's *Edward The Black Prince*, "the poet's fancy should likewise have been exercised in giving birth to a female of much more importance than Mariana; for without a very interesting woman's part, few plays will be attractive."[6]

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[5] See Steele's famous criticism of the same play in *The Spectator*, no. 290 (1 February 1712): "the Character which gives Name to the Play, is one who has behaved her self with heroick Virtue in the most important Circumstances of a female Life, those of a Wife, a Widow, and a Mother. […] the Sorrow of the Heroine will move even the Generality of Mankind. Domestick Virtues concern all the World […]" (Steele and Addison 1988: 410).

[6] Similarly, Inchbald's implied reader is often female: "This is a play which all men admire, and which most women dislike. Many revolting expressions in the comic parts [[…]

In her comments on Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens* she writes:

> Dryden's Octavia is, however, much less refined than Lee's Statira. The first pardons her husband's love to Cleopatra, and is willing to accept his reluctant return, with an alienated heart; - whilst the last makes a solemn vow, never more to behold the man who loves her to distraction, because he has given her one proof of incontinence. There is deep knowledge of the female heart evinced in both these incidents.

Inchbald's theatrical awareness as actress and playwright keeps the role of the actor always central in her *Remarks*: plays are discussed in terms of performance, gesture, pantomime, and stage situation. At the same time the pleasure of the audience and their expectations are always in focus. Stage effectiveness is connected to the rapidly-evolving structure of the theatre building itself. The spectator's perspective is kept well in mind, as the numerous references to the theatrical morphology of galleries and boxes or to the larger theatres point out. Most importantly, creation of character and actor's performance are considered as important as plot. Inchbald's first-hand stage experience makes her appreciate the actor's independent artistic ability, and leads her to identify dramatic character with his creation. Accordingly each character is evaluated through the detailed appraisal of the acting styles of the various performers who played the role over the years:

> Garrick appears to have been the actor, of all others, best suited for this character [Richard III]. – His diminutive figure gave the best personal likeness to the crooked-back king. He had, besides, if tradition may be relied on, the first abilities of a mimic; and Richard himself was a mass of mimicry, except in his ambition, and his cruelty. Henderson was received with welcome in the character, when Garrick was no more; and Kemble and Cooke have been followed on the same ground. (*King Richard III*)

Mise-en-scène is analysed from the diachronic point of view. This practice contributes to the reconstruction of the reader's/spectator's horizon of expectations by "bring[ing] to view the hermeneutic difference between the former and the current understanding of a work" (Jauss 1982: 28). Inchbald's awareness of historical reception highlights those fluctuations in taste that rendered such characters as Lord Ogleby outmoded (*The Clandestine Marriage*), and she is careful to explain why performances must be updated: "[t]o know the temper of the times with accuracy, is one of the first talents requisite to a dramatic author" (*John Bull*). In an enlargement of the fundamental neoclassical tenet of dramatic didacticism, she updates the Horatian *utile et dulce*, including spectacularism and emotionalism amongst the interests of the audience in order to teach a good

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together with Falstaff's unwieldy person, offend every female auditor" (*King Henry 4th First Part*).

lesson, the audience must be pleased – the appeal to shifting popular taste must thus remain central.

Since Inchbald perceives every dramatic performance as the complex interplay of multiple codes – including lighting, scene painting, costumes, and music – which combine to gratify sense, successful staging will have to reckon with effective stage viability: "The senses are, indeed, powerfully engaged by the grandeur of the spectacle on a London theatre – and the senses highly gratified, are sometimes mistaken, by the possessor himself – for the passions" (*The Tempest*). The description of another favourite Shakespearian tragedy provides a powerful example of masterful staging and performance:

> It is impossible to contemplate the consistent disposition of able actors of appropriate **habiliments**, and of picturesque **scenery**, with which this tragedy is now embellished at the London theatres, and not boldly demand – where was Garrick's taste, his innovating judgement, his common sense […] that he could perform this historical tragedy […] with the characters dressed in coats, waistcoats, and hats, so as to place the scene in modern times, or every scene in England? […] To those who are unacquainted with the effect wrought by the theatrical action and decoration, it may not be superfluous to say – the huge rocks, the enormous caverns, and blasted heaths of Scotland, in the scenery; - the highland warrior's dress, of centuries past, […] the splendid robes and banquets held at Fores; - the awful, yet inspiring **music**, which accompanies words assimilated to each sound; - **and, above all, the fear, the terror, the remorse; the agonizing throbs and throes, which speak in looks, whispers, sudden starts, and writhings, by [the actors] render this play one of the most impressive moral lessons which the stage exhibits.** (*Macbeth*; all the emphases are mine)[7]

Shakespeare's splendid disregard of the unities and probability, which Warbuton had famously described as "the noblest effort of that sublime and amazing imagination, peculiar to Shakespeare, which soars above the bounds of nature, without forsaking sense; or, more properly, carries nature along with him, beyond her established limits" (quoted in the remarks on *The Tempest*), is here matched by a grandiose new style of acting – controlled by the ruling 'unsocial' passion of ambition - and by a new theory of popular judgement that revises the whole notion of realism and moral utility as well as their expression. The force of unruly passions invests the principles of acting themselves, now described through the idiom of the grand and the Sublime. Inchbald divides the so-called 'plays of high character' from the plays that please in representation, and she recalls how David Garrick, the renowned Roscius of the preceding actorial generation (he retired from the scenes on June 10th 1776), had turned down John

[7] For a discussion of the stagecraft in *Macbeth* see Branam (1956) and Marsden (1995: p. 160 n.1). Comparing mid- and late eighteenth-century theatre criticism appears that the amplified role of the witches, which guaranteed spectacularism in the Shakespeare adaptations commencing with Davenant's, became complemented – often supplanted - by attention to the passions experience by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Home's *Douglas* for "want of reverence for the taste of the public." As it happened, the "domestic interest" of the story was complemented by the electrifying acting of Mrs. Crawford and the "pathetic tenderness" (*Douglas*) displayed by Mrs. Siddons, which turned each performance into a success. In Inchbald's perception, sentimentalism and passionality mingle in fact in the bosom of every spectator: "the passions of grief, joy, fear, and bitter woe, which this tragedy portrayed, found instant access to every heart, from the aged to the youthful, either by the avenue of parental or filial love" (*Douglas*).

Inchbald's *Remarks* show how the new aesthetic principles applied to the representational arts brought forth a new acting theory - aptly described by a contemporary critic as "heart in action" (Boaden 1831: I, iii) - which, in turn, produced a new critical language. This histrionic - and hence linguistic - shift is typified by the implicit juxtaposition of Garrick's and John Philip Kemble's aesthetics of representing, seen as their relevant modes of achieving dramatic impact through the imitation of Nature (sympathetic performance). The early- and mid- Eighteenth-Century debate about the actor had focused on whether he or she "experienced genuine emotion while he is performing or it merely represented it technically" (Benedetti 2001: 182). Diderot's *Paradox on the Actor* (published c. 1773) had crowned the great Roscius actor sublime because he succeeded in showing absolute detachment through reflection, perfect self-possession and technical control (or, as the French philosopher put it, through *nulle sensibilité*) (Roach, 134-142; Saggini 2003). The vitality of Garrick's interpretation relied on total physicality and constantly changing facial expression, which succeeded in giving bodily form to the kinetic flux of the Passions in a display of virtuous duality that was once pointedly described by James Boswell as a kind of double feeling. Georg Lichtemberg left a particularly famous - almost scientific - testimony of Garrick's performance as Hamlet:

> Horatio starts, and say[s] 'Look, my lord, it comes' […] At these words Garrick turns sharply and at the same moment staggers back two or three paces with his knees giving way under him; his hat falls to the ground, and both his arms, especially the left, are stretched out nearly to their full length, with the hands as high as his head, the right arm more bent and the hand lower, and the fingers apart; his mouth open; […]. His whole demeanour is so expressive of terror that it made my flesh creep even before he began to speak. (Roach 1985: 86-87)

It is significant that but few decades later Inchbald stigmatises Garrick's acting as a kind of "*mimicry*" (the italics are mine), a low representational form based on a codified – i.e. scientifically systematised - grammar of *physicality* which she implicitly censures as a slightly ennobled form of pantomime or puppet-like acting. In fact she affirms: "those who doubt the justice of certain elogiums passed on Garrick, in many parts he acted, still suppose he was very excellent in the part of Ranger; yet the comedy lives,

though Garrick is no more" (*The Suspicious Husband*). Yet again this reference, although in negative, is to Dr. Johnson himself. According to a well-known thespian anecdote Garrick's learned friend had denied that the loud talk of the stage box audience might upset the great Roscius because, as he tartly put it, "Punch has no feeling."

If we focus on the actor's art of nonverbal expression, Inchbald's critical language reveals that the feelings of the audience were no longer captivated by the display of a body that is supremely expressive, immediate and mobile (as Garrick's) but rather classical, static, majestic - in a word, sublime (as Kemble's). Always aware of the audience, she says:

> Kemble's Jaques is in the highest estimation with the public: it is one of those characters in which he gives certain bold testimonies of genius, which no spectator can controvert. Yet the mimic art has very little share in this grand exhibition. (*As You Like It*)

From a linguistic perspective, Inchabld's comparative criticism of Garrick's, Kemble's and his sister Sarah Siddons's aesthetics of representation coincides with Leigh Hunt's view in *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres, including General Observations on the Practice and Genius of the Stage* (published in 1807). Here the superiority of the "*mimetic* over the literary part of the stage, of the organ, in fact, over its inspirer" (Hunt 1894: xxxix; the italics are mine) is condemned by Hunt, who censures powerful expression based on "grins, […] chattering" and "gaiety of limb" (*ibid.*:xxxviii) by comparing it to the ability displayed by an "accomplished ape" (*ibid.*:xl). Conversely, Kemble conceives "majestic passions" and "loftier emotions" (*ibid.*:4) thanks to a figure "manly and dignified, his features […] strongly marked with what is called the Roman character." (The extra-literary reference is to the audience's growing familiarity with the rhetoric of history painting as applied to theatrical portraiture, whose best-known examples were Sir Joshua Reynold's quotation of Michelangelo in *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* and Thomas Lawrence's "sublime" portraits of Kemble as Rolla in Sheridan's *Pizarro* and as Coriolanus). The critic explains further,

> There is always something sublime in the sudden completion of great objects, and perhaps there is not a sublimer action on the stage that the stride of Mr. Kemble as Zanga, over the body of his victim, and his *majestic* exultation in revenge. (*ibid.*:5; mine the italics)[8]

[8] See Inchald's remarks on the same play by Edward Young: "Deservedly high as this tragedy must ever rank among English dramas, it is but seldom brought upon the stage, and then the actor who performs Zanga must be its sole support. This character is of such *magnitude*, and so unprotected by those which [sic] surround him, that few performers will undertake to represent it: a less number still have succeeded in braving the danger. Mr. Kemble stands *foremost* among those, and draws some splendid audiences every year merely to see him" (*The Revenge*; the italics are mine). It must be remembered that

Now compare the above judgement by Hunt with Inchbald's description of the two actors as Osmyn, the protagonist of William Congreve's successful *The Mourning Bride*:

> Garrick had great spirit and fire in every scene of the part – but not the fire of love. Kemble has not even the sparks. Yet Kemble looks *nobly*, *majestically* in Osmyn; and reminds the audience of the lines […]
> ----- *Tall pillar rears* its marble head,
> Looking tranquillity. -----
> And shoots a chillness to the trembling heart (*The Mourning Bride*; mine the italics)

Elsewhere she quotes from Colman's *The Mountaineers*, describing the actor as follows: "he [Kemble] is a rock / *opposed* to the rude sea that beats *against* it: / worn by the waves, yet still *o'ertopping* them / in sullen *majesty*" (the italics are mine).[9] Kemble's innovative mode of acting aptly complements a new expressive theory of tragedy - now defined "an imitation of life in passions" (Hunt 1984: 2) aiming at touching the heart - which dismantles neo-classical hostility to unrestrained emotions, and privileges individuality over universality, sympathy in grief and melting pathos over regular method and reason.

Furthermore it is worth noting that Inchbald's similes recurrently compose Kemble's onstage passions as forms in space, remarkable in their suggestion of vertical stately grandeur. In similar fashion, commenting on Siddons's powers of acting Hunt significantly turns to Longinian aesthetic categories: "the bewildered melancholy of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep, or the widow's mute stare of perfect misery by the corpse of the gamester Beverley, [are] two of the sublimest pieces of acting on the English stage" (*ibid.*: 13). Here Hunt applies Edmund Burke's definition of the Sublime to dramatic representation: "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but *at certain distance*, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are *delightful*" (Burke 1990: 36-37; mine the italics). Similarly, Euphrasia's grateful transport in her mute prostration makes him praise the actress's artistry in the language of emotionalism: "I shall never forget *the glow which rushed to my cheeks* at this *sublime* action" (Hunt 1894: 15; mine the

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Inchbald had played opposite to Kemble, for whom and for whose sister Siddons she had written *A Case of Conscience* (1800-01) (Manvell 1987: 201).

[9] It is worth remembering that concept of "dignity" had a precise and well-defined role in the contemporary cultural sphere. It had been associated with moral virtue since Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions & Times* (1711) and, later, with Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762), through to the use made of it in Joshua Reynolds' s *Seven Discourses on Art* (delivered from 1769 to 1790). The concept of a dignified mode of acting thus becomes a revision of the neo-classic doctrine of decorum, considered as the respect for credibility through keeping speech, gesture and action appropriate and coherent to the characters (linguistic, theatrical and event decorum).

italics). 'Sublime' thus indicates both a quality found in Siddons's *acting* as much as the *affect* experienced in the perceiving theatre goer. Most significantly, it establishes an emotional identification - worked out through the body - between an outer quality of the world and an inner mental state of the spectator.

Hunt's words describe an extremely complex aesthetic experience of the agent's, who lives almost a kind of perceptive *transfert* to which we may apply Greimas's definition of *aesthesic*, as the sensorial and physical perception of art (Greimas 1987). For the late eighteenth-century spectator as constructed by the contemporary aesthetic discourse, the theatrical experience of the emotions - on the part of the author, the actor, the auditor as well as depicted by the artwork itself (Lyons 1997) - is connected to their physiological symptoms, in a reversal of Diderot's famous assumption of inner distance, according to which "the separation of manifestation from the mental experience is the measure of an actor's art" (Roach 1985: 148). In this shifting aesthetic paradigm, universal standards of taste are slowly replaced by emotion, generality by individual experience (pathemic conjunction), and Aristotle's cathartic terror and pity as phenomena of the mind are transformed into a stirring of the body which re-lives (almost *relieves*) upon itself the onstage affects of the actors. As already declared by Arthur Murphy half a century before, "Fable is but a secondary Beauty; the exhibition of Character, and the excitement of the Passions, justly claiming the precedence in dramatic poetry" (*Letter to Voltaire*, 1753).

This new theory of popular judgement appraises the quality of the play by its effects on the audience (Gray 1931 289). "Those [readers] who have seen [Kemble] will *weep* as they read, and *tremble* as they weep" (*The Mountaineers*; mine the italics), avows Inchbald, who continues:

> The *genius* of Kemble gleams terrific through the gloomy John. No auditor can hear him call for his
> "Kingdom's rivers to take their course
> Through this burn'd bosom,"
> And not *feel* for that moment parched with a scorching fever. (Mine the italics.)

Genius is the epithet – used also for Joanna Baillie - which indicates the original creator, be it the dramatist (author of the play-text) or the actor (author of the play-performance).[10] Inchbald's linguistic choice thus reminds us that at the time dramatic authorship was radically challenged, as the collective nature of production was brought to the fore in a tension which

[10] For an early appraisal of the theory of genius, see Joseph Addison papers in *The Spectator*, no 160 (3 September 1711) and in particular no 592 (10 September 1714): "there is sometimes a greater judgement shewn in deviating from the rules of art, than in adhering to them; and there is more beauty in the works of a great genius that is ignorant of all the rules of art, than in the works of a little genius who not only knows, but scrupulously observes them".

freed the work of art from its textual constraints, "destabiliz[ing] notions of authorship and originality" (Gamer 1999: 833). Inchabald's insistence on the difference between the closet and the stage – i.e. between scripts written for professional production and texts better suited to reading - and her recurrent appreciation of dramatic performance are signals that in this new aesthetic system plays are to be defined in terms of the acting and its effects as well as by the plots, decorum and morality, the criteria of the older neo-classic theory.

Remarks on The British Theatre are a kind of "ideological spectrograph" (Wilson 1990: 392) offering an unparalleled testimony of the late Georgian cultural, economic, and aesthetic context. "As a synchronic cross-section of a moment in development" (Jauss 1982: 36) positioned at the crossroads between *Rezeptioncritik* and didacticism, their value is manifold**:** they testify to the private possession and democratisation of culture behind the making of the modern English reading audience (Benedict 1996), they give evidence of the establishment of professional theatre criticism (Gray 1931: 308), they reveal the new late-Georgian aesthetics of the text – in its double dimension of poetics (authorial) *and* performance (actorial) - and, finally, their attention to contemporary modes of acting illustrates the late eighteenth-century theory of performance and hence of popular judgement as expressed through the language of emotion, the Sublime, and imagination.

As a zone of transaction between the text and the off-text, Inchbald's *Remarks* disclose a privileged place of pragmatics. Thus their documentary and intellectual importance well takes precedence over their moral engagement in terms of the older critical discourse. Reading around and through the text we become aware that the language of neo-classic rational criticism and empiricism gives way to the language of timism, while the experience of the *impassioned* spectator – whose active reception is now at the centre of the literary, theatrical, and artistic performance - connects the realm of the aesthetic as the rational evaluation of the mind (mediated cognition) with the aesthesic as the unmediated, overflowing physical response of the body and its passions.

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