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**Theory of Acting**

From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

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THEORY OF ACTING
The present research would have been impossible without the help of a great number of people who thoroughly deserve my warmest thanks. The collaboration of all those working on Acting Archives Catalogue, the international archive and catalogue of treatises on acting (www.actingarchives.it) compiled by the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”, has been a sine qua non in acquiring material, documents and information of every kind. Present editors are Laura Ricciardi and Barbara Valentino. A number of invaluable personal details of the biographies of British actors of the 1730s were very generously provided by Ines Aliverti. Angela De Lorenzis undertook important research at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, while Giovanna Buonanno, Alda Terracciano and Barbara Valentino procured reproductions of English treatises most of which from the British Library in London. The whole text has been reread by and exhaustively discussed with Lorenzo Mango, and I am particularly grateful to him for his very precise observations and the intense and ongoing exchange of ideas on theories and techniques of acting at all stages of my work. Richard Bates and Anita Weston produced a lively and confident English version of the text, and I owe particular thanks to Anita Weston for the care and passion she put into the final overhauling of the entire translation. Lastly, heartfelt thanks to Marsilio Editori for including La teoria della recitazione in their catalogue and authorizing the online publication of the English version.

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In 1554 a dramatist and intellectual of some note at the court of Ercole II d'Este in Ferrara, Giovan Battista Giraldi Cintio, published his considerable *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie*. This included a number of short considerations on acting which if read nowadays would seem relatively insignificant, at least at first sight. Their historical importance, however, is enormous, and reopened the discourse on the art of acting after a thousand years of silence.

It is of course possible that unknown material has yet to emerge from some archive. At the same time, the fact of the putative material having remained undiscovered for so long, of interest to practically no-one across the centuries, is significant and intriguing in itself.

In classical antiquity the art of acting was the object of study and reflection. We know of the existence of documents on the subject which are no longer extant, while a dialogue of Plato’s which has come down to us is entirely dedicated to the subject. In Roman treatises on oratory the art of the actor is often cited as a model for aspiring lawyers or politicians; the fathers of the Church, on the other hand, were later to make shrewd comments on its corrupting or directly demonic power.

And then silence for some ten centuries. Certainly, even after Giraldi Cintio the subject was hardly in everyone’s mouth. For the rest of the sixteenth century theoretical debate was virtually inexistent, or limited to the Italian area, and the seventeenth would seem to have ignored it. Then suddenly, literally, it exploded. In the eighteenth century articles, essays, and interventions on the art of the actor appeared by the score as acting took on the dimensions of an independent art form. It imposed itself as an object of study within the culture of the age, demanding an analysis of its regulating principles which was met with an energy and subtlety of theoretical elaboration destined to develop for the whole of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through to the present day.

The development of the theory of acting, then, at least in the western world, was marked by a singular discontinuity unlike that of the other arts: literature, music, and painting. More curiously perhaps, its development appears to be disconnected from the development of acting itself. Acting had certainly not disappeared during the thousand years of silence surrounding the art of the actor – the extraordinary period of aphasia which lasted approximately from the sixth to the sixteenth century. Accounts of performances in the early middle ages are few and far between, but we know of very elaborate forms of European theatre in the centuries immediately following which clearly required technically-skillful actors. Moreover, when acting theory began to resurface in Italy in the mid sixteenth century, theatre had for some decades been experimentally studied in schools, academies and courts as part of the rediscovery of classical culture, resulting in an impressive corpus of works on playwriting and the use of the stage and scenery. A timid interest in acting itself was only evinced some time later.
The situation in other European countries was very similar. During the Elizabethan period London theatres were packed out, Shakespeare staged his plays, and figures like Burbage became celebrities: but acting, as far as we know, was light years away from theoretical scrutiny or reflection of any kind. It was never so much as consistently recorded or reviewed, to the extent that we know nothing about the means, forms and techniques used by Shakespearean actors.

When Corneille’s *Le Cid* was so well-received in France in 1637, various critics expressed doubt as to the work’s intrinsic value, attributing its success to the skill of the actors, Montdory and Mlle. Villiers. The public flocked to performances by Molière’s company, while Racine gave an interpretative hand to the famous Mlle. Champmeslé when she played his characters – but the first French treatise on acting only appeared at the beginning of the new century, and it was later still before criteria were defined to distinguish the art of the actor from cognate activities.

To review the history of acting from Greek and Roman antiquity through to the eighteenth century, then, implies unpicking, or attempting to unpick, some of these knots. This has to be predicated on one general consideration. The whole history of the theatre, as opposed to simply acting, has grey areas – or perhaps, more precisely, gaping black holes which seem to have escaped even the perception of contemporaries, at no pains to analyze, theorize about, or in many cases even document them. It was scholars of later centuries who identified these blind spots in seeking to explain the curious lack of information on questions of maximum importance. One example regarding Elizabethan theatre construction and spatial organization of the stage is a case in point. All our knowledge of it rests, astonishingly, on a rough sketch made by a Dutch traveller, and all historiographic research can do is construct and deconstruct a series of hypotheses already deconstructed at source by embarrassing uncertainty.

The explanation for the lack of any contemporary documentation or analysis might seem obvious enough: clearly it was a sheer lack of interest in questions which, for reasons entirely our own, we happen to find significant. But the explanation won’t hold. An impresario building a theatre could hardly fail to be interested in the materials, acoustics, viewing angles, seating-plan, entrances, and the positioning and layout of the stage, just as the public would have a vested interest in seating and view of the stage, and strong opinions as to the various actors’ merits, etc. It is hardly feasible, in a word, that they would pay to stand for hours watching a performance unless it held their full attention.

Enjoying a performance, of course, is one thing and treating it as an object of study quite another. In the latter case it becomes a phenomenon to analyze, rationalize, and record – and do so, moreover, according to criteria meeting the requirements of scholars three- or four-hundred years in the future. All this depends not on the interest assigned to a specific issue by its contemporaries, nor its intensity and importance for them, but on the cultural configurations of the time, which select some phenomena for precise methodological study and not others.

Every culture, in every period, has its silent zones: much-visited, perfectly interesting loci which, however, elicit no fever of documentation or consistent and systematic research. They are rarely recognized by their contemporaries, but they exist. No-one today would deny the importance we ascribe to a view, whether breathtaking or simply curious. Every hotel demands a sea- or mountain-view
supplement; every estate agent can price to the nearest zero the added value of a property overlooking a ruin, a river, or just a patch of grass; and tourists on the Pincio in Rome are spellbound by the domes marching across the city. Yet the significance of a panorama receives relatively little cultural analysis compared with that of previous ages, and it would be difficult to point to a comparative and methodologically rigorous analysis of the various views, or a study of, say, the Rockies, the Himalayas, or the Massif Central which was simply visual and not geological or mineralogical in nature. There are numerous literary descriptions, of course: but we have no precise theoretical tools for classifying views, evaluating them, charting observer-response, comparing them with other forms of observer-participation, etc. We enjoy views and are disposed to pay considerable sums to procure them, but the idea of systematically studying them leaves us cold. If it occurred to anyone to embark on any such study s/he would be hard-pressed to find a point of entry: contemporary culture lacks the specific concepts and possibly lexis—though this is in no way to state that in a few centuries’ time, in a different cultural climate, a consistent number of scholars of a specific discipline, possible called The Art of View Evaluation, won’t be expressing dismay and amazement at our incomprehensible negligence.

This is to say that in every culture, from within a galaxy of experiential forms more or, often, less clearly defined, there emerge some areas which become the privileged objects of study and observation as opposed to others; these latter may even elicit great interest but remain indeterminate, hazy, and undefined by any sharp intellectual focus. The cultivation of specific areas of cultural experience, their definition, and the degree of methodologically-consolidated research applied to them all change in the course of history, and objects of detailed cultural analysis can later become simply acquired or unfocused aspects of experience, as in the study of calligraphy in the East, in previous centuries and the present, or the discipline of oratory in western culture, the subject of impressive quantities of treatises in the classical period and then the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but now totally neglected. Again, the explanation for this is only apparently simple. If oratory’s loss of practical importance can be explained in terms of so many other hidden persuaders, it is more difficult to understand why there is no philosophical critique of talk shows, or a sophisticated art of the interview or the press conference analyzed in exhaustive essays; everything, instead, remains within the limbo of a more or less systematic know-how and the odd piece of advice.

As if all this weren’t sufficiently fluid, the borders of culturalized areas are rarely well-defined. They can shrink, expand, or incorporate contiguous elements previously excluded from in-depth consideration: a case in point might be the relatively recent inclusion of light music in the previously restricted discipline of musical studies, or the extension of literary studies to genres hitherto considered minor or “mass”.

The fact is that a whole series of factors come to bear within a culture in determining an experiential area as worthy of study, its development, and its possible decline. The most obvious is practical interest which, however, is not in itself enough, as we have seen. Then there is the possibility, far from automatic, of drawing defining boundaries, however labile, round a particular study area in conjunction with other, already refined and consolidated areas. Lastly, and above all,
there needs to be an existing conceptual apparatus allowing us satisfactorily to extend and clarify the experience within the cultural boundaries of the time. In the light of these premises it becomes possible to reconstruct the trajectory of the theory of acting within western culture, and to unpick the various otherwise inexplicable knots. If we begin with Greek antiquity it is obviously because any theories on the subject, from any other time or place, have simply not come down to us. As it happens this early documentation provides us with a whole complex, precise, and systematic theory. Acting is theorized and explained in terms of its assimilation or, better, identification with the role of the prophet and the bard, who moves and speaks possessed by the divinity.

When the development of theatre make it difficult to reconcile a vision of possession with the actor’s concrete actions when playing in the comedies of Aristophanes or the tragedies of Euripides, then the archaic conception is adapted rather than abandoned: the uncontainable inner tension belonging to possession proper is transformed into immediate empathy with the character’s feelings, while the need to organize and gauge the feelings elicited by the part allows the actor to elaborate the necessary technique for performing them. Unfortunately we can only follow the early phases of this, and hypothetically: only scraps of accounts are extant.

Of course the whole conceptual construct was to be subverted and destroyed within the new cultural horizons of the fathers of the Church. Not only were acting’s basic characteristics, as recognized by classical culture, to assume negative connotations, but acting was to be perceived in a radically different way, which blurred traditional boundaries and thereby invalidated the categories previously used to understand and study it. This was clearly behind the fact that while the last centuries of the Middle Ages developed complex forms of theatre demanding an equally complex actor-response, there was no parallel attempt to meet them with suitable analysis and theory: the conceptual instruments were lacking.

Successively, when in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries theatre was again studied from the cultural perspective of the classical period, the basic texts, from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Vitruvius’ *De architectura*, were used to analyze textual composition, spatial organization, and sets, but everything relating to the art of acting had been lost: hence the practice-theory gap. Hence, too, the slant inevitably taken by theory, fighting off the attacks of the Church and the scorn of the intelligentsia on the one, practical hand, while also, particularly, looking to Roman treatises on oratory for any passing references to the art of the actor. If originally the actor had identified with the figure of the bard and prophet, he now took on the characteristics of the academic, the lawyer, the preacher – in a word, of the orator pronouncing an elaborately-fashioned speech before a listening public. In this way acting presented itself as the precise and effective expression of ideas, concepts, tales, feelings, and figures of speech, excluding any form of physical skill, such as that of acrobats or jugglers. It became of course impossible, however, to decide what distinguished the actor from any other type of orator. The few attempts to make any such theoretical distinction produced results which today seem curious indeed. For various writers, from Andreini to Lang, the difference between the actor and the preacher lay in the greater difficulty of acting, since the actor had to appear full-body, head to toe, while the preacher in the pulpit was only revealed ‘from the waist upwards’. In his early eighteenth-century *Traité du récitatif*, the first explicit attempt to distinguish the
different forms of oratory and the separate characteristics of acting, Grimarest ended up by putting actors and preachers in the same category, that of declamation. This was distinct from legal pleading or public speaking, but also covered both the sermon and tragic and comic acting.

Needless to say Grimarest hardly went to church to hear a sermon, or to the theatre to watch a play, in the same spirit: the difference between the two experiences was clear and immediate. In the same way, while Andreini and Lang were taking their notes, audiences weren’t in the theatre to see actors moving their limbs from the waist downwards; no spectator stops going to the theatre, and no actor stops working on the stage, developing his personal style, and overcoming technical difficulties because he’s waiting for a theorist to explain what it is that distinguishes him from a lawyer, a preacher, an acrobat, or a huckster, or whatever other figure, for whatever unexpected reason, has suddenly been added to his extended professional family.

The issue is slightly different however. Without a theoretical formulation able to translate the general and immediate perception of a phenomenon into defined concepts, it can never become the object of study and analysis. Acting was able to become an object of painstaking and penetrating study in the seventeenth century precisely because of the ready-made categories of oratory, albeit at the cost of privileging the aspects it sometimes dubiously shared with preaching, pleading, and fast-talking while ignoring the rest. It was from this focus on the ‘oratorical’ dimension of acting – the study and complex taxonomies of the passions and increasingly subtle forms of expression, from the voice and face to the body and limbs – that a conception of the actor’s art as a discrete form, with its own specific properties, was able to develop, and at various levels including the doctrinal. The breadth, subtlety, variety and complexity of a character’s states of mind in the course of a play, and the know-how to reproduce them, were clearly considered inapplicable or unnecessary to a lawyer’s or preacher’s requirements, while the relative stage actions lie beyond the classic gestural code of the orator, who is certainly not obliged to eat, drink, sleep, faint, or die before his audience. Similarly, a number of gestures and attitudes forbidden by the elegance and decorum of oratorical doctrine – raising the arms above the head, shrugging the shoulders, gabbling, behaving with affectation, and even grimacing – are all allowed by the literature on acting when characterization requires it.

In the early eighteenth century, then, the curtain as it were rises on the final scene of acting theory as it developed in Western culture. Slowly and progressively the characteristic traits of the actor detached themselves for the researcher from those of other types of orators, and the defining criterion establishing the confines, characteristics, and procedures of the actor’s art came into sharp and peremptory focus. The actor’s job, whatever s/he does and whatever expedient he uses, however refined or crass, is above all to embody a character. This was hardly news of course: but it now becomes the essential and constitutive function governing all the aesthetic and other stage requirements which condition the actor’s work.

In the light of this new awareness, the notions of the first Italian essayists in the sixteenth century take on a new significance. Once the embodying of the character has been established as the basis of acting, the difference between tragic and comic acting is also clarified, comic characters allowing various more outré or eccentric
poses and attitudes at a considerable remove from the repertoire of the orator. All the gestures and modes of stage behaviour can then be reviewed one by one, during the birth of a critique of acting which had already reached full maturity by the 1730s. In France Luigi Riccoboni’s pronouncements on Baron, a model of acting almost unanimously celebrated by the literature of the time, triggered off a minutely intricate debate; in England Aaron Hill, Colley Cibber, and Samuel Foote, the more celebrated among scores of critics and reviewers, described and dissected actors’ performances with quasi-surgical precision, while in October 1742 the London journal *The Champion* published a review of Garrick’s acting style destined to become exemplary. In a very short time the critical eye trained on the actor’s performance became detailed, technical, and precise, a fact which seems closely linked to the progress in the general theory of acting, as evinced in the treatises by, for example, Rémond de Sainte-Albine and John Hill.

This was to prove anything but an anomalous phase in the development of acting theory: the early eighteenth-century criterion applied to emancipate the actor’s art from the orator’s proved the dynamic and structural fulcrum of ideas about acting for the whole of the nineteenth century. Theory was galvanized and guided by the issues behind the transformation of the character: the birth of the character-as-individual as opposed to the more classical type-character; the tendency to construct a character as a flesh-and-blood man-on-the-street, as opposed to the tendency to emphasize the fantasy dimension; the attempt to read “him” as a superior, more solid and more lasting being than the fragile creature of human reality, or the recognition of an impalpable evanescence, the projection of well-hidden movements of the secret inner being, and so on. The phenomenology of characterization between the early eighteenth century and the early twentieth produced the panoply of different forms in which the human actor sought to use all his technical possibilities of expression to give stage life to figures at varying removes from his own psychological and material nature. This in its turn produced the grid of issues and criteria against which acting was increasingly measured: the various attempts, shortfalls and solutions and thence the development, counterposition and combinations of schools, methods and theories.

Tracing the history of acting theory from antiquity to the eighteenth century, then, means performing the trajectory leading to our contemporary perception of theatre performance. But more than this, it means recognizing a singular adventure for Western civilization as it attempted to come to grips with an intellectually elusive phenomenon, to decode it with the help of conceptual apparatus calibrated on the traits of other activities similar but not identical to acting, and ultimately to recode it within a concept – embodying and representing a character – which was destined to become hard-wired not simply into all considerations of the art of the actor, but the infinite behavioral modes of acting in human relations, on the social stage.
I
ACTING THEORY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Divine Possession. Alteration and Contagion

So far as we know, acting theory in western culture began to develop in Greece in the fifth century BCE; the first work on the subject is one of Plato’s early dialogues, the *Ion*, written in the late fifth or early fourth century. In that period various forms of acting had already appeared in the Greek world, from the declamation of epic poems by rhapsodists who performed at private meetings and public ceremonies, often taking part in official prize-winning competitions, to the reciting of lyrical compositions and acting as we understand it, the theatrical performance of tragedies and comedies.

Plato’s dialogue dealt with the subject by adopting a conception that was traditional in the culture of the time, by which poetic composition and delivery were not two separate activities, but two aspects of a single creative process that was the direct result of divine intervention. This conviction derived from the experience of the primitive *choria*, a group practice that was widespread in archaic Greece and usually associated with religious worship. Participants uttered words, verses and rhythmical formulae and moved together in more or less pre-established patterns so as to reach a state of exaltation of shared feelings and passions, which was regarded as an unequivocal sign of the presence of the god.\(^1\)

In its original form the *choria* was a mixture of poetry, song and dance, which would later develop as separate arts in Greek culture. This meant that over the following centuries down to Plato’s time there was a deep-rooted awareness of the link between these arts (words, gestures, movements and intonations were simply elements in a single expressive act), and their close relation with divine action.

All this must have conditioned the attitude towards acting for a long time. Composing a poem and reciting it seemed like two inseparable moments of a single operation, and at the same time a magic power able to act on those in the vicinity was attributed to the intonations and gestures with which the poem was delivered. Gorgias, a famous sophist of the fifth century BCE, insisted on the mysterious power of words: not for nothing, he observed, some words can gladden those listening, others move the audience to fear or sorrow.\(^2\)

It also seemed clear that only a state of exaltation or rapture, which had previously been a mark of contact with a divinity, could set off the process of poetic creation, which then took form with words, gestures and sounds. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato claimed that poets who relied only on their ability were ‘incomplete’, because, he explained, ‘the poetry of conscious and deliberate artists is overshadowed by that of

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poets in a state of rapture’. Only those who are ‘beside themselves’, he insisted, can properly compose or recite real poetry, and this opinion also persisted in the theoreticians who in Plato’s time kept poetic experience and divine intervention separate. Even Democritus of Abdera, famous for his materialist conception of reality, claimed that no-one could be a poet and ‘sane of mind’ at the same time, because it is impossible to compose real poetry ‘without being inspired to the limit of exaltation’.4

All these convictions are reflected in the Ion, which demonstrates how the rhapsodists declaiming a poetic text cannot have recourse to deliberate technique, regulated by rules that can be learnt and applied to obtain the desired effect. The use of voice, gesture and mimicry escapes the control of those who recite. This is demonstrated by a simple fact. Every rhapsodist, says Plato, specializes in the work of a particular poet. Ion, for example, the protagonist of the dialogue, is expert in Homeric poetry: in the presence of his author’s verse, he is at once moved by an irresistible impulse and his tongue is magically ‘loosened’. When, however, he recites passages from other poets he cannot concentrate and the result is disappointing.

Now, Plato continues, if there were a technique of declamation, with fixed rules for obtaining a good performance, any good, trained artist could deploy them and so recite any text properly.5 But why is a technique of this kind impossible? Because the whole process of poetic expression, from composition to delivery by different performers over the centuries is completely dominated by divine intervention.

At the outset of the creative process the poet cannot even begin to compose verse without inspiration, which is sent to him by a god. Inspiration causes a profound alteration in his mental state: he seems to lose his own intellect and ‘take leave of his senses’. His self-control disappears, and he is literally invaded by the god who speaks and reveals himself through his mouth and the movements of his body. In short, the poet speaks, sings and dances ‘beside himself’, in the grip of a ‘divine madness’.6 In their turn the performers who take the poetry composed by others and declaim it cannot recite it effectively if they are not in the same state of possession caused by the same divinity that had already possessed the author. Through the power of this intervention the rhapsodist is ‘infected’ by the verse he must utter, takes leave of his senses in turn and enters into something like a state of hallucination. While he sings Homer’s words his soul really believes he is in front of the walls of Troy, he sees the heroes meeting in battle, attends to the entreaties of the wounded, and so on. This vision is accompanied by appropriate emotions, and the rhapsodist is irresistibly taken over by the ardour of battle, by terror and by pity. ‘At a tale of pity’, explains Ion, ‘my eyes fill with tears and when I speak of horrors my hair stands up in fright and my heart pounds’.7 And while the rhapsodist declaims, the emotional contagion caused by the poem spreads to the spectators, who at once fall into a state of exaltation and are seized by uncontrollable passions. ‘Every time’, Ion continues, ‘that I look down from the

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3 Plato, Phaedrus, 245a.
4 According to Cicero, De oratore, II,194 and De divinatione, I,XXXVII,80; and Horace, Ars poetica, 295.
5 Plato, Ion, 532c.
6 Ibid., 534b.
7 Ibid., 535c.
stage, I see them weeping, casting terrible glances, and all together terrified by my words’.

In short, the divine action first takes possession of the poet, placing him in a state of hallucination. The poet utters his verse and sees imaginary scenes and figures, as if they were true, while he is transfixed by irresistible emotions. Once his verse has been composed, its contagion creates the same state of emotional exaltation and hallucination in those who declaim it, and finally in the listening public, creating a kind of ‘chain’ of those ‘possessed by the god’.8

In this way the experience of poetic creation and recital was assimilated to prophecy. The divinity, explained Plato, possesses poets and rhapsodists like seers and soothsayers, uses them as its means, and we know ‘that it is not they that say things of such high value, as they have no intellect, but it is the god himself that says them, who speaks to us through them’.9 As Plato describes it, the altered state of the poet and rhapsodist ended up taking on the characteristics that Greek culture attributed to the state of trance of priests and priestesses when they pronounced a god’s oracles in his sanctuary, or of those officiating at and taking part in rites, like those dedicated to Dionysus, Attis or Semele, in which the participants danced and sang to the sound of obsessively rhythmical music that produced a contagious effect, enthralling all those present. At the moment of pronouncing the prophetic word or collectively celebrating the divinity, the subjects entered into a kind of excitement, threshed around, trembled, shook and, losing all self-control, spoke words and phrases whose meaning they would not normally understand. Poetic creation and recital as described by Plato are not very far removed from Cassandra’s prophetic ravings, which had been depicted on stage a few decades earlier in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon. Before the closed doors of the palace of the Atreides, Cassandra is taken over by the power of Apollo, is carried away, starts to groan and see visions of past and future events, and is seized by fear and trembling and the emotions that these visions dictate to her, speaking under direct inspiration from the god.

Poetry, recital and prophecy are thus experiences that leave no room for human initiative and control: in writing and reading our poetry, as in the act of prophecy, it is the god who initiates and conducts the whole process, dictates gestures, movements and words, causes visions and the corresponding emotions and sensations. In these terms a technique of recital based on ability and practice, and consciously controlled by the artists, seems clearly impossible.

However, though Plato excludes the possibility of the rhapsodist’s art being conscious, he recognizes that those who recite are fully aware of the effects they produce on the spectators. When he declaims on stage, Ion not only sees the spectators weeping and panicking at the evocation of terrible scenes, but, he explains:

I must needs watch them very closely, for if I make them weep, I myself shall laugh for the money I will earn, and if I make them laugh, I shall weep for the money I shall lose.10

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8 Ibid., 533d and 536a.
9 Ibid., 534d.
10 Ibid., 535e.
In short, those who recite know full well what they are doing, and, even in their state of exaltation, while performing they must keep a close eye on the results because their economic wellbeing depends on it. It is obviously a short step from this to the possibility of thinking up expedients, rules and regulations, and techniques that will most effectively draw out the audience’s reactions.

**Development of Dramatic Forms. Acting as a Specialized Activity**

When Plato wrote the *Ion* the great season of fifth-century drama, with the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes, had already taken place. In ancient Greece the early drama had originally derived from the primitive *choreia*, being essentially combinations of poetry, music, dance and song organized in certain ways. All the traditional sources agree that tragedy originated as a kind of danced choral singing, the dithyramb. In the sixth century BCE Thespis had introduced some additions to the dithyramb (a prologue and some monologues), which were delivered by a single person standing apart from the chorus. Then, around 534 BCE, performing tragedies was given institutional status in the celebrations of the City Dionysia in Athens, which involved a competition between three different tragic poets. A few decades later Aeschylus introduced a second actor, which opened the way to dialogue and action. Sophocles then added a third person to the stage, and in this way, according to the ancient commentators, tragedy achieved its complete and definitive form.11

Now, in the very period in which the dramatic forms took shape, the inadequacy of the traditional conception of recital seemed to become clear, and the very development of theatrical practice showed the impossibility of explaining the actor’s experience in the usual terms – the terms in which the *Ion* still continued to present the rhapsodists’ activity towards the end of the fifth century BCE. In the following century – the period of Plato’s mature thinking and of Aristotle’s philosophical work – and for a long time after, Greek thought was dealing with the problem of acting in its own characteristic way. It kept most of the original outlook, but tried to mediate and change some aspects of it so as to give a more adequate account of the complexity of the phenomenon.

In the face of the experience of theatrical performances, it was difficult to claim that acting was simply a moment of poetic creation and that it did not require particular abilities or talents different from those necessary for composing verse. The very development of the ways of staging dramatic works between the sixth and fifth centuries was an evident example of the gradual separation of the two activities. At first, when a tragedy was performed, there was no distinction between the function of the poet and that of the actor. Thespis himself recited his own works, as did Aeschylus. Once a second person had been brought onstage however, and engaged in dialogue with the first character, performed by the author-actor, then a new figure

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11 Aristotle’s is obviously the fundamental account, in the *Poetics*, 1449a. But see also the passages quoted by A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 130-131 and particularly the passage by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, III,56: ‘in the past the chorus acted everything in the tragedy, until later Thespis invented the single actor to give the chorus a pause, and Aeschylus the second actor; with the third actor Sophocles gave tragedy its final form’. 
was created: a theatrical performer with a unique and exclusive function. He was no longer involved in poetic creation, but did no more than act.

Of course, in those early days the actor depended closely on the author. Not only was the poet onstage, acting, but he chose and directed his partner. He also handled all fundamental aspects of the performance, trained the chorus and devised the dance movements. Little by little, however, his control had to be reduced. When acting began to take on the characteristics of a specialized activity, the task of training the chorus members was transferred to genuine experts, and the choice of actors was made by the state, which organized the performances. It gradually became clear that the indispensable gifts for writing a text did not necessarily coincide with those required for acting it. According to tradition, Sophocles was the first to give up acting his tragedies because his voice was not sufficiently powerful. Then, in 449 BCE, alongside the traditional prize for the best poet the City Dionysia established a prize for the best actor: acting was formally recognized as having a value of its own.

However, though Greek thought recognized a distinction between poetry and acting, it was never to abandon the perception of a profound unity linking them. Their qualities and their virtues, the natural possibilities of language and of acting might not be identical, but at least they remained connected and fed into each other. That it was the power of poetry that encouraged and fostered acting remained a deep-seated and widespread conviction. Poetry spontaneously ‘unleashed’ acting. Those who express themselves ‘whether in song or in words without music’, observed Plato a few decades after writing the Ion, naturally tend to display what they are saying with their bodies too, for they ‘cannot keep their members absolutely calm’. And in a later treatise that has been attributed to a scholar of the fourth century BCE there is a reference to the stylistic devices that make it possible to compose verse so as to ‘oblige’ even those who don’t want to’ to act.

Reciprocal recognition was given to acting for its capacity to support the poet’s work with its own natural, specific means. The effects that only acting can produce, Aristotle later observed, are essential to some passages, because ‘if we remove the acting’ they seem ‘banal’. In short, poetic creation and acting are two different activities, yet closely linked. Poetry ‘excites’ and ‘gives rise to’ acting, but acting, in turn, animates the poet’s verse with its own special powers and with the special abilities of the performer.

The recognition of acting as an activity distinct from poetic creation clearly opened the way to studying the effects that only acting could create, and the most effective means for achieving them. In this way it became possible to admit the usefulness of a technique that the actor had to learn, perfect with practice and experience, and use astutely onstage. A passage in which Aristotle observes how the study of delivering was a late development, and another in which he claims that ability in theatrical delivery depends more on a natural ‘gift’ than on ‘technique’

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12 Aeschylus was actually famous for his ability in this field. According to one rather late account, he not only invented and introduced new dance moves, but ‘took personal control over the tragedy’ (Athenaeus, Deipnosophists, I,39,21e).
14 Demetrius of Phalerum, On Style, 194. But the attribution to Demetrius of Phalerum is doubtful, as is the dating of the treatise. On this, see P. Chiron’s introduction to the critical edition of the text, Du style, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1993.
15 Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1413b.
demonstrate that a study of this kind, however late in the day, was now being cultivated, and that even though technique was less important than natural gifts, it was still necessary to the actor. Again it is Aristotle who reminds us that Thrasymachus of Chalcedon dealt with the principles of delivery in his *Appeal to Pity*, and we know that a certain Theodorus wrote a treatise on the art of the voice.

In fact, the voice was generally considered to be the essential element in acting, and it was the most famous orator of the ancient world, Demosthenes, who claimed that actors were to be judged by their voices. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the technical observations that we have on Greek acting concern the voice, which was to be above all beautiful, powerful and clear, and which depended largely on the natural gifts of the performer. But this was not enough: the voice also had to be intelligently manipulated. The actor needed to be able to project it across a distance so as to be heard by the whole audience, and at the same time to modulate its volume and tonality to respect the conventions of the stage, which, for example, obliged secondary actors not to distract attention from the main performer.

In addition, although the actor worked in a context that was not at all realistic, his face covered by a mask, sometimes declaiming and sometimes singing the verse, at times to musical accompaniment, he had to give the impression of using ‘a natural voice’ that did not appear at all ‘artificial’. The poet’s text had to be effectively coloured by the intonations and cadence of his voice, giving the words the different inflexions of command, entreaty, narrative or menace, depending on the lines being recited. The same word repeated in the same passage, observed Aristotle, had to be uttered with suitable vocal variations, to give it different overtones each time. At the same time the actor had to regulate rhythm, intonation and volume to render the characteristics of the particular passion that was to be expressed. Meanwhile, critics were ready to identify defects in the use of the voice, and a lexicon of the second century CE gives the terms that various treatises on vocal exercises used to indicate inadequacies in acting. They distinguished between voices that were ‘sonorous’, ‘bombastic’, ‘solemn’, ‘weak’, ‘feminine’ and so on.

To improve their vocal ability actors submitted themselves to intensive training. The early hours of the morning, before eating and the moments before going onstage seem to have been spent on exercises. In the first century BCE Cicero was to describe the way in which tragic actors practised in these terms:

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16 Ibid., 1403b and 1404a.
17 See ibid., 1404a. Theodorus’ lost treatise is mentioned by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, II,103. We do not know if the author was the famous Theodorus, an actor contemporary with Aristotle, or a later author.
23 See ibid., 1403b.
24 Iulis Pollux, *Onomasticon*, IV,114. See also II,111.
25 See Aristotle, *Problems*, XI,22; and Iulis Pollux, *Onomasticon*, IV,88, where he describes how Hermon, an actor alive in the fifth century BCE on one occasion actually missed his cue to come onstage because he was rehearsing his voice outside the theatre.
for years they perform exercises in declamation, seated, and every day, before acting in public, they lie down and gradually raise their voices and, after giving their speech, they sit and bring their voices down from the highest to the lowest tone and in some way they do this to return, so to speak, to themselves.26

Along with the voice, gesture and movement were of crucial importance, but of these we have few accounts. Of course, wearing a mask, the actor could not use any facial expression, but precise movements of the head allowed him to give the fixed expression of the mask different overtones, and there were masks painted so as to show a dual expression, allowing the actor to change position to show the audience the attitude most appropriate for the character’s feelings.27

Most of the available accounts on the gestures of actors concern dance movements, both those performed by the choruses in comedies and tragedies, and those of the pantomime, a performance similar to the dance that had developed quite apart from the drama. The mimic ability of dancers was particularly appreciated: ‘with the rhythm of gestures and movements’, says Aristotle, they managed to depict ‘character and experiences and actions’.28 In the second century CE Lucian insisted on the importance of the dancer depicting the passions, feelings and above all the disposition of the character with his movements, avoiding any superfluous gesture. We also know that the use of the hands was particularly studied, and that the positions and patterns of the dance in the end made up a kind of repertory that could be classified.29

**Emotional Tension and Frenzy. Persistence of “Ion”’s Doctrine**

The development of a wide range of techniques and practices perfected with long exercises not only defined acting as a specialized art that was essentially different from poetry, but excluded the possibility of regarding it as a series of uncontrollable actions performed by the actor in a state of exaltation. Faced with this problem, however, Greek thought proved particularly resistant to abandoning the traditional position, as expounded in the *Ion*, and for several more centuries the actor’s ability to feel and project the most authentic and lacerating feelings during the performance, in a state of extreme exaltation, continued to be considered an obvious, or at least possible, part of his stage performances.

On this point three famous episodes were handed down. The first concerned Polus, a celebrated actor in the fifth century BCE whose technique was said to be so sophisticated as to surpass all his colleagues ‘for clarity and grace of gesticulation and voice’, and who was known to act the most famous tragedies ‘with subtlety and passion’. In despair at the loss of a particularly loved son, he returned to the stage at the end of the period of mourning, interpreting Sophocles’ *Electra*. In one scene of the tragedy *Electra* holds in her hands a funeral urn she believes contains the ashes of her brother Orestes, and bewails his death. Polus, according to a story that was still current six centuries later, did this:

26 Cicero, *De oratore*, I,251.
clad in the mourning garb of Electra, he took from the tomb the bones and urn of his son, and embraced them as if they were those of Orestes, and filled everything not with the appearance and imitation of sorrow, but with genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation. Therefore, while it seemed that a tragedy was being acted, it was real grief on stage.30

Polus then, an expert in theatrical technique, based his performance on the obsessive display of an authentic and personal grief, projecting it ‘genuine and unfeigned’ onto the stage. Another anecdote, concerning Aesopus, a famous tragic actor of the first century BCE, shows the state of profound exaltation that an actor could achieve during his performance:

One day he was playing the part of Atreus in the theatre. On reaching the point when the king is meditating how to avenge Thyestes, he was so beside himself with passion that he struck with his sceptre one of the servants who was running past him, and killed him.31

Finally, we have the description of a dancer who got so carried away acting Ajax’s fury onstage ‘that one might have thought that he was not acting mad, but was truly so’.

He tore the clothes of one who was beating time with an iron sole and, snatching a flute from one of the musicians, broke it over the head of Odysseus, who was nearby, full of pride for his victory. Had his hat not borne the brunt of the blow, the unfortunate Odysseus would have been dead merely for having encountered a demented pantomime actor. As it was, the entire audience became wild with Ajax, leaping, shouting and tearing their clothes.32

Clearly, performing alongside this kind of actor involved an element of risk. But, more important, the fact that these episodes were preserved indicates the stubborn persistence of an archaic perception of the actor’s experience. In the description of Polus wearing Electra’s mourning clothes, holding onstage the urn with the ashes of his own son and lamenting his own ‘real’ grief in Sophocles’ verse, we can see – in the forms of theatrical performance – the primitive ritual character of the old choreia, in which the participants displayed authentic passions and feelings, channelling them in the manner of a religious ceremony. The stories of Aesopus slaying the servant and the dancer maddened by Ajax’s fury show a return of the old idea of acting as close to a state of uncontrollable mental alteration. We can also see again the idea of a contagion that possesses the audience, excited by the performer’s alteration, unleashing among them a corresponding madness.

Of course it is impossible to know if these episodes were true or not; but the mere fact that they were preserved and handed down indicates a continuity in the culture of the ancient world of the archaic way of conceiving acting, associating it with a state of profound frenzy.

30 Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae, VI,5.
31 Plutarch, Cicero, 5.
32 Lucian, Of Pantomime, 83.
Moderation and Self-Control. The Emergence of the Character

The traditional conception of acting, however, was bound to clash with an ideal that was gradually imposing itself in Greek culture between the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and that received much attention, first in the teaching of Socrates, and then of Plato and Aristotle. This was a moral ideal, which posited the ability to control our impulses and desires through the exercise of our rational faculties as a value. In the field of aesthetics this ideal extended to the recognition of the importance of self-control and moderation, which became essential requisites in any work of art: ‘moderation’, claimed Democritus, is everywhere beautiful, ‘what is excessive’ can never seem beautiful.33

As far as acting was concerned, it meant rejecting any uncontrolled emotional expression, reflected in disorderly and excessive gestures. In the Laws Plato condemned the members of the chorus who went into a frenzy, ‘venting all kinds of blasphemy on sacred things’ and who tried to stir the souls of the audience and to ‘make them weep at once’ with ‘words, rhythms and dismal harmonies’.34 In his Poetics Aristotle criticized actors who ‘indulge in restless movements onstage’, precisely like ‘those lamentable flautists who twist and twirl’. Again in the Poetics he later recalled how the actor Callippides was called an ‘ape’ because his gestures ‘were so extravagant’.35 Several centuries later, Lucian was to conclude his story of the dancer seized by a frenzy while interpreting Ajax’s fury, observing that when the artist came to his senses at the end of the performance, he was sick with remorse and shame, and long regretted his excesses, particularly as one of his rivals had later performed the same subject without making the same error and had won general approval.36

The development of acting techniques and the ideal of moderation as an indispensable requisite for all artistic expression thus required actors onstage to keep their irrational impulses under rigorous control. Not that this meant eliminating any emotional tension. Indeed, it remained an indispensable qualification. But in the new cultural climate the tempest of feelings that was originally supposed to take them over and madden them tended to be conceived in profoundly different terms, and was closely linked with a new requirement, that of presenting rigorously and convincingly the precise image of a particular character.

In fourth-century theory, the character – its function in poetic composition and the significance of its presence in making a work – had gradually become the distinctive element of theatrical dramatic form. In the Republic Plato traced the difference between ‘simple’ poetry and ‘imitative’ poetry, observing that in the former the poet spoke ‘in his own person’, while in the latter he reported the discourse ‘as if he were someone else’, and in this way suited ‘his own words to those of the individual character’ as far as possible. And, he concluded, the form of this poetry is that ‘of tragedy and comedy’.37 Aristotle later established the famous distinction between ‘narrative’ or ‘epic’ poetry and ‘dramatic’ poetry, explaining that

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33 Democritus (Diels, fragment B 102).
34 Plato, Laws, VII,800d.
35 Aristotle, Poetics, 1461b-1462a.
36 See Lucian, Of Pantomime, 84.
37 Plato, Republic, III,393a-c and 394c.
in the latter it is the actors who directly represent the whole action ‘as if they were themselves the characters who lived and acted’.\(^{38}\)

It is the presence of the character, then, the living motor force of the action, that constitutes the distinctive element of dramatic form. If, however, the character is to seem convincing and effective onstage, he needs an indispensable quality: an underlying ‘coherence’ in his essential nature, the passions that agitate him, and the actions he performs. He cannot feel passions that are ‘out-of-character’, or show moral qualities that have nothing to do with the actions in which he is involved, or perform actions that seem improbable for a person of his kind. As Aristotle explains:

\[\text{given, for example, someone with a character of this or that kind, what he says or does should seem to emerge from his character in accordance with the laws of truth and verisimilitude.}\]

The figures in the drama were, then, a rigorously pre-arranged combination of character, passions and actions. The different forms this combination could take were codified, and this defined a sort of gallery of figures, or a typology of exemplary profiles of various kinds of humanity, identified by generational, social, economic or moral categories. The typology was widespread in treatises on rhetoric or ethics. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, for example, distinguished the categories of the ‘young’, ‘mature persons’, and the ‘old’, or the ‘rich’, the ‘powerful’ or the ‘unfortunate’. Each of these figures was assigned specific forms of passion and behaviour.\(^{40}\)

Thus, in a perspective of this kind, each theatrical character had to correspond to the parameters of an established typology, and, to render him adequately on stage, the actor had to reproduce precisely his expected passions and behaviour, avoiding attitudes or ways of behaving that might clash with the accepted code. It was absolutely wrong, Aristotle insisted, for example, to represent ladies of the nobility as if they were loose women, or, observed Lucian, bold heroes with a languid and effeminate gait.\(^{41}\)

*The New Form of Emotional Involvement*

Representing characters and displaying their passions and attitudes was, then, the actor’s fundamental task. But to really depict a character in action it was not enough to coldly put together a combination of features that fitted together with each other. A simple combination of the kind would have seemed inert and unconvincing. To animate it, the artist had to really feel, in the act of creation, the passions experienced by the character.

This rule, according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, concerned the poets above all:

\[\text{the most persuasive poets are those that start from the same state of mind as their characters, and experience each time the very passions they intend to depict: so that, for}\]


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 1454a.

\(^{40}\) Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1388b-1391b. The typology of characters, defined by social, generational and moral categories, is also reflected in the form of the masks. On this see the list of masks described in Iulius Pollux, *Onomatikon*, IV,133-154.

example, one whose soul is in turmoil will succeed in representing a soul in turmoil with much greater truth, one who feels angry a soul in anger.42

It was an opinion that had been widespread in the Greek world for some time. Eighty years before, Aristophanes had already used it satirically in a comedy, the Thesmophoriasuca, in which the poet Agathon, whose homosexual tastes were well known, appeared, stretched out languidly on a bed, clad in female clothing and surrounded by elegant toilet articles. He explained that he had to behave like this for purely professional reasons, claiming that no poet could write his plays if he did not assume the manners of his characters. To depict the female figures effectively he therefore had to adopt all their ways and costumes.

Thus Greek culture from the late fifth century BCE reveals a new way of understanding the artist’s emotional involvement at the moment of creation. Alongside the archaic way, which theorized divine intervention able to produce a state of hallucinated and uncontrollable frenzy, there was a more recent conception, in which the artist's participation consisted in his capacity to reproduce in himself a range of passions that rather than being ‘extreme’ and ‘disruptive’, were precise and carefully defined, following the indications dictated by the type of character.

Given this premise, then clearly the actor could do nothing onstage without bringing his own inner self into play. To represent the character he must really feel its passions, and only in this way can he effectively render its attitudes and expressions. This is a carefully controlled and moderate emotional involvement however: the actor uses his own interior tension exclusively to render, with voice and gesture, predetermined expressive attitudes that are rigorously coherent with the figure to be represented.

On the other hand, the control that the actor must exercise over his feelings by no means limits the intensity of the emotional effect of his performance on the audience, which is led to suffer, despair or delight as it follows the vicissitudes of the characters onstage. The ability to unleash the audience’s passions remained, in the opinion of the time, the fundamental criterion for evaluating the mastery of a performer, and it was not for nothing that the most famous actors continued to boast of their ability to make the audience weep unrestrainedly.43 But the audience’s involvement no longer happened through a mysterious contagion of divine origin. It was the simple result of a wholly natural process, already described by Plato, by which all human beings are induced to participate spontaneously in the same feelings and the same passions that they see effectively expressed by others.44

The new theory thus managed to explain much more articulately the phenomenon of acting and its emotional characteristics. At this point, however, a major problem arose. According to the archaic conception the actor’s inner condition was determined by divine action, which wrought havoc in his mind, generating a turmoil of feelings. In the new conception any reference to divine intervention disappeared, and rather than getting carried away, the actor had to feel a series of precisely defined passions: anger, grief, joy, and all the variety of emotions that animated the character as the story developed. An explanation was therefore required as to how through his

42 Aristotle, Poetics, 1455a.
43 See Xenophon, Symposium, III,11.
44 See Plato, Republic, 605c.
simple personal resources he could call them up in himself, scene after scene, just at
the right moment and with reference to the exact type of character.

In actual fact Plato had spoken of a kind of influence that the character being
played could exercise over the actor’s inner frame of mind. Describing artistic
creation as a form of imitation in the Republic and the Laws, he had observed that
imitations extended over time ‘become consolidated into habits and constitute a
second nature’. It is something that happens, he explained, not only ‘for the body
and the voice’, but also ‘for the thought’.45

Now the actor on stage produced an imitation of the character. Indeed, ‘imitating
another in his figure or his voice’ was the ‘most excellent’ form of imitation, and the
imitation inevitably involved the artist’s inner frame of mind.46 Thus while those who
acted could not effectively represent figures too distant from their own nature,47 at
the same time the character’s qualities and inner frame of mind could not fail to
impinge on the soul of the person rendering them onstage – to the point that
interpreting inferior and unworthy figures seemed to Plato harmful and dangerous,
and it became necessary to adopt some severe precautionary measures:

those whom we claim to care for and who should be honest men, we shall not allow to
imitate a woman, young or old, while she insults her husband or challenges the gods
[...] Nor should they imitate slaves or slave-girls performing the work of slaves [...] Nor bad men and cowards, it seems: men that behave contrary to what we have just
said; who insult and mock each other and utter obscenities, drunk or sober; and all
these other unseemly things that individuals like this do to themselves and others when
they speak and act.48

A state regulated by fair and wise laws, then, cannot allow its citizens to play the part
of low and ignoble characters. Yet someone has to, because ‘we cannot know what is
serious without the ridiculous, or any opposites without all their opposites’. Therefore we must have recourse to slaves and foreigners:

Imitations of this kind should be performed by slaves and paid foreigners, yet people
should in no wise ever dedicate themselves to occupations of this kind; let no free man
be known to learn such things, no man and no woman.49

This moral concern, then, gave rise to a vision of acting in which the actor
assimilated the qualities and frame of mind of the character whose gestures and
external behaviour he was reproducing. However, this process of internal
assimilation took a considerable time. The qualities of the character gradually worked
on the deep structure of the actor’s soul, where the vices and virtues of the figures
repeatedly imitated were consolidated. It was therefore a process of moral
transformation that had little or nothing to do with the actor’s ability to draw out of
himself instantly during the performance, a variety of passions that had to follow
each other precisely, as quickly as was necessary for the progress of the scene.

45 Ibid., 395d.
46 Plato, Sophist, 267a.
47 See Plato, Republic, 394e-395a.
48 Ibid., 395e-396a.
49 Plato, Laws, 816e.
For his part, when Aristotle claimed that poets must ‘move from the same frame of mind as that of their characters’ and ‘experience each time the passions they want to represent’, he had solved the question by appealing to a ‘natural gift’. But this simply avoided the problem. Divine intervention able to suddenly unleash the necessary emotional states in the artist had been replaced by a gift of nature that the poet or actor could in no way solicit or regulate. It was a mysterious faculty, beyond any form of control, impossible to excite by any conscious resource of the actor, or through any deft technical expedient.

**The Actor’s Art and the Orator’s**

The principles Aristotle expounded imposed themselves on the aesthetic tradition of the ancient world and reappeared towards the end of the first century BCE in Horace’s *Ars poetica*, which insists on the coherence necessary for character-creation according to the canonical connection of character, passions and behaviour, and also supplies an example of generational typology that includes the figures of the child, the youth, the adult and the old man. Above all the *Ars poetica* repeated the need for emotional involvement in lines that were to become famous:

> Just as a man’s face smiles with those who smile, so it weeps with those who weep. If you want me to weep, you must first suffer yourself: then your misfortunes will hurt me.

However, not even the *Ars poetica* explained how it was possible to arouse the necessary feelings at the right moment. And the solution to the problem, at least according to the surviving documents, was suggested in treatises by Cicero (*Orator* and *De oratore*) and Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*), written respectively in the middle of the first century BCE and towards the end of the first century CE. These works, along with Plato’s *Ion*, are, indirectly, the most extensive treatments of the actor’s art in the ancient world that are still available, and had a fundamental influence on acting theory in the modern age, down to the late eighteenth century.

Cicero’s and Quintilian’s writings actually concern the orator rather than the actor, but are full of comparisons between the techniques of oratory and acting, and start from the declared premise that they are very similar. Above all oratory and acting, Cicero and Quintilian explain, are similar in their aims. When he declaims to an audience, the orator must not only inform and convince, but, like the actor, he must move and delight those present. There is also a similarity in the relation that binds each of them to the text to be spoken. The actor has a play that the poet has composed bearing in mind the effects to be produced onstage. The orator, before facing his audience, prepares his speech, not only choosing the most suitable arguments but also identifying the images, words and phrases that will work most effectively on the audience’s imagination. In this way, declaring what he has

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52 Ibid., 101-103.
53 See Cicero, *De oratore*, III,83.
prepared, just like an actor he uses intonation, gesture and movement, in short, all
the physical expressiveness that is necessary to impress his hearers and shape their
minds. It is a kind of ‘eloquence of the body’, which in the terminology of the
treatises is called actio.\textsuperscript{55} According to Cicero it is a fundamental and indispensable
language that ‘springs directly from the soul’, has an effectiveness ‘that comes from
nature’ and can also have an extremely intense effect ‘on the ignorant, on the mad,
and even on barbarians’.\textsuperscript{56}

The orator’s and the actor’s task consists, then, in transmitting carefully prepared
words and images with the physical language of actio. And in both cases the ability to
master gesture and intonation – the characteristic tools of acting – seems much more
important than the text to be communicated. As actors in the theatre, observes
Quintilian, ‘add so much charm to the best poets that they give us infinitely more
pleasure listening than reading, and manage to ensure an audience for even the worst
authors’, so actio ‘has an extraordinary effectiveness and power in oratory’. Indeed,
‘the nature of what we have prepared in our mind is not so important as the way in
which it is expressed’.\textsuperscript{57} On this point one might invoke the testimony of
Demosthenes, who was an exemplary model of an orator in the ancient world:

When Demosthenes was asked to name the primary element in the whole of oratory, he
made declamation pre-eminent, and also put it in the second and third position, until
his questioner asked him no more: thus it might seem that he regarded it not as the
main element of oratory, but the only one.\textsuperscript{58}

Their ends, their use of the same type of expressive language, the greater
importance of vocal intonation and gesture over the simple effectiveness of the
words and images in the text thus make the actor’s task very similar to that of the
orator. But there is also another more specific element linking them. Both the actor
in a play and the orator must be able to assume the attitudes and expressions of a
personality that is not their own. The actor onstage speaks and acts so as to represent
a character. Not dissimilarly, according to Quintilian, the orator must often stand in
his client’s shoes, and speak and act as if it were his client who was addressing the
audience.\textsuperscript{59} At this point there seems to be such a close affinity between the
techniques of oratory and acting as to make it extremely advisable for the orator to
take lessons from actors. Demosthenes, as Quintilian reminds us, had had the actor
Andronicus as his master, and Cicero at the outset of his career had drawn on the art
of two other celebrated actors, Aesopus and Roscius.\textsuperscript{60}

However, two fundamental differences were identified between actio and acting.
While the orator dealt with authentic facts and real persons, the actor represented
imaginary figures and stories that he had to make living and plausible for his

\textsuperscript{55} Cicero, \textit{Orator}, 55. See also Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, III,222.
\textsuperscript{56} Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, III,221 and 223.
\textsuperscript{57} Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, XI,3,2 and 4. See also Cicero: actio ‘is the prevailing factor in oratory;
without it the best of orators is worth nothing, while a mediocre orator who is good at it, can often
surpass his betters’ (\textit{De oratore}, II,213).
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., XI,3,6. See also Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, II,213.
\textsuperscript{59} See ibid., IV,1,47. See also III,1,8,49 and XI,1,39; and Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, II,192.
\textsuperscript{60} See ibid., XI,3,7. See also Plutarch, \textit{Cicero}, 5; and Macrobius, \textit{Saturnalia}, III,14,12.
audience. In addition, for the orator to be convincing and credible, his own personal authority was essential. In this way, not only when he spoke in his own person but also when he entered the figure of his client, whoever it was, he had to be able to project an image of correctness and decorum.

This led to some important stylistic variations, and the orator had to make a rigorous selection of the expressive possibilities offered by theatrical art. He would avoid gestures that were too heavily imitative, which the actor used to evoke an imaginary situation. In oratory, observed Cicero, the expression of different emotions is ‘accompanied by gesture, but not of the theatrical kind, which gives expression to every word’, but rather ‘by gestures that clarify the situation and the thought in general, not with mimicry but with simple hints’. Also, while it was certainly advisable for the actor to maintain decorum onstage in the interest of good taste, the orator’s authority and dignity constituted a genuine rhetorical weapon which he absolutely could not do without. As Quintilian explains, ‘grimaces and strange gestures that make us laugh when mimes use them’ were unsuitable to him, and ‘the scurrilous pungency of the stage’ still more so. In short, he had to seem generally more sober and measured than the actor:

the actor may use pauses of hesitation, modulations of the voice, various gestures with his hands, different movements of the head. The [orator’s] discourse has a different taste and should not be too highly flavoured; it is based on the action of oratory, not on imitation. Therefore a declamation is rightly criticized when it is full of grimaces, irritating gesticulation and constant changes in the tone of voice.

**The Use of Emotion**

Apart from these stylistic differences, however, the main aim of the actor’s and orator’s whole expressive apparatus was identical: to succeed in unleashing passions and emotions in the audience. Nothing was regarded as more important, not only to gain applause in the theatre, but also to win a case in court, than the ability to emotionally involve the audience. ‘Convincing an audience is necessary’, wrote Cicero, ‘delighting gives them pleasure, but it is moving them that wins the case’, because men ‘judge more on the basis of hatred or love, desire, anger, grief, joy, hope, fear, error, or some other inward emotion, than on the basis of truth, or authority or some question of law’.

And so the orator had to make use of emotional effects in carefully calculated quantities during his oration. He would use them cautiously at the outset, briefly in the next part of his speech, coming to a climax at the end, leaving audience and judges wholly in the grip of the feelings evoked, just as in theatrical performances: ‘the theatre’, claimed Quintilian, ‘should be stirred at the moment in which the ancient tragedies and comedies close to the sound of applause’.

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62 Ibid., I,251. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,88 and 89.
63 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,3,29.
64 Ibid., XI,3,181-183. See also I,8,3 and XI,3,22-24.
65 Cicero, *Orator*, 69. See also 121 and Cicero, *De oratore*, II,178 and 185-86.
66 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,1,51 and 52. See also IV,2,27 and 28, and VI,1,9-10.
This was because the emotions that were so carefully produced might disturb the judge’s rational faculties, not only influencing his opinion, but actually compromising his ability to rigorously evaluate arguments, facts and witness statements:

Let us admit that the evidence makes the judges believe that our case is better: their feelings induce them actually to want it to be so; but what they want, they also believe. When they have started to feel anger, support one side, feel hatred or pity, they now think that it is something that concerns them, and as lovers can no longer judge beauty, so the judge in the grip of feelings completely loses his ability to verify the truth. He is swept along by the tide of passion, and yields himself up to the torrent.67

Thus the emotional impact causes the judge to identify with one of the parties to the case until he thinks that it is something that concerns him, just as a member of the audience normally sympathizes with the hero of a play. Carrying all before him with the flood tide of feelings, the orator manages to blur his perception of reality. Just as on the stage, the real facts lose their objective contours and are shaped according to people’s subjective feelings. An image of the world constructed according to the rigorous parameters of the intellect and adherence to reality is replaced by a vision called up by feeling.

But commanding the emotional reactions of the audience is not easy. To succeed, the orator, like the actor, must make use of a number of tools relating to the form of the text to be spoken and what in theatrical terminology we might call its production, as well as everything connected with the specific resources of acting.

As regards the form of the text, the story and the lines of a tragedy are studied to attract the attention and feelings of the audience. In the same way, in the orator’s speech all the events described must assume a precise emotional colouring, and Quintilian gives several examples of this. To horrify the judge, the orator must make the crime to be condemned seem particularly odious. If it is an assault he will underline its atrocity, recalling that the victim is an old man or a young boy, or a magistrate, or an honest man. He will recall that the fact happened at a dangerous moment for public safety, when ‘most of the trials being held are for acts of this kind’. Or, to arouse compassion, the orator will dwell on the victim’s condition and the sad future his children and his parents can expect, describing the fate of those who have sued for violent attacks when they do not obtain justice: ‘they have to flee the city, give up their goods, put up with all manner of harassment from their enemy’ and so on.68

Then there are the expedients on the ‘production’ side. These are particularly spectacular and are actions the orator can perform, displaying to the audience figures and objects, with effects like a chamber of horrors:

The prosecutors may display bloody swords, bones extracted from wounds and blood-spattered clothes; they may remove the dressing from wounds and reveal the parts of the body that have been beaten […] In this way Caesar’s bloody prætexta, placed at the head of his funeral cortege, drove the people into a furious rage. They already knew that Caesar had been assassinated, and his body had even been placed on the catafalque; yet that garment, drenched in blood, called up the scene of the crime so as

67 Ibid., VI,2,5-6.
68 Ibid., VI,1,15-19.
to give the impression not that Caesar had been killed, but that he had been killed at that very moment.69

Other expedients exploit the typical resources of acting, like the ability to bring out the effect of the sounds of the words in the lines. Rhythms and sounds in themselves work on the listener's feelings, and it is significant, observes Quintilian, that musical instruments can produce emotions without the use of words at all. In this way, a clever use of rhythm and sound will enable the orator to make use of the ‘secret power’ of the melodies and rhythms of music, and this power acts on the mind of all listeners without them being aware.70

Finally, to get an emotional reaction from the audience, at the right moment the orator should declaim his speech as if it is being pronounced by his client, just like an actor who assumes voice, tones and gestures of the character to be represented:

Only the naked facts move people; but when we pretend that it is our clients who speak, then the person causes emotion too. Indeed the impression is not that the judge is listening to someone complaining about someone else’s problems, but that he is hearing the feelings and voices of the victims whose silent faces also move him to tears; and just as those words would obtain greater pity if they were pronounced by them, so, to a certain extent, they are more effective in moving when they are said as if from their mouths; the same happens for actors in the theatre.71

**Emotion and Expression**

All these expedients would have little or no effect, however, if the orator were not able to express with voice and gesture precise and clear emotions. This is the essential requisite, in the theatre and in court, for acting on the audience’s feelings. The listener cannot feel ‘grief, aversion, rancour or fear’, explains Cicero, if these emotions ‘do not seem to be branded on the orator himself’. To provoke a feeling in others one must ‘give the impression of experiencing that [same] feeling intensely’, and so resemble ‘those who really feel it’.72

The signs of a particular passion must involve the whole of the orator’s physical expressiveness, from the eyes to the face, to the gestures, down to the extremities of his limbs and the movement of his fingers.73 And if these expressions are really perfect, their effect will be irresistible, to the point that even adversaries will fall victim to him and be forced to feel despite themselves all the emotions that the orator wants to arouse.74

Now, the external expressions of a passion appear spontaneously in all of us, in the various moments of our lives, when we really feel them. It is a natural process that allows us to understand what others are feeling in their souls: ‘the gesture matches the voice and obeys the feeling together with it’, and in this way ‘the state of mind is recognizable from the expression on the face and the gait’. Besides, observes Quintilian, ‘even in beings without language we can recognize anger, joy and

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69 Ibid., VI,1,30-31.
70 Ibid., IX,4,10-13. See also Cicero, *De oratore*, III,195-198.
71 Ibid., VI,1,25-26.
72 Cicero, *De oratore*, II,189 and 190; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,27.
73 See Cicero, *De oratore*, II,188.
74 See ibid., III,214.
simpering from the gaze and from certain other movements of the body’.\textsuperscript{75} So spontaneous and natural is the process that translates the internal passions into external signs that everybody, however coarse and ignorant, is absolutely expressive when he is possessed by authentic and intense emotions:

> If people in tears, particularly as a result of recent grief, seem to succeed in giving vent to their feelings to some extent, showing remarkable expressiveness, and sometimes anger makes the ignorant eloquent, what other cause is there, if not that in them there is emotional power and, with it, sincerity of feeling?\textsuperscript{76}

Thus, in exploiting the immediate expressiveness that passion possesses in itself, the actor and orator can easily make their gestures and voice more convincing and effective in the theatre and in court. That actors use this system appears, in any case, clear. When they act onstage, notes Cicero, their acting is supported by a lively emotional involvement: to render the poet’s text they have recourse not only to art, but also to authentic and genuine emotion. And he claims to have seen many times at the theatre ‘the eyes of the actor who was declaiming seeming to burn behind the mask’.\textsuperscript{77} For his part Quintilian insists that he has often seen not only tragic actors but also comic actors ‘go away still in tears after removing their mask at the end of a particularly touching action’.\textsuperscript{78}

The natural process that produces the signs of passion on a face and in the gestures of the person feeling it also has another, more precious virtue however. It not only produces immediately and effortlessly the expressions corresponding to the various states of mind, but makes them particularly intense and effective, giving them a special energy. That is why when orators trust to the authenticity of their feelings they achieve effects that would otherwise be impossible. They can, for example, burst into genuine tears in front of the audience, and even turn pale; but above all, their expressions take on an irresistible power, which would disappear if they simply pretended feelings they were not experiencing.\textsuperscript{79}

Mere cold-blooded pretence actually deprives the expressions of their necessary energy: the orator’s manner seems inert and empty, and comes across as a laborious and evident simulation. The result may be disastrous, above all when the orator tries to heighten the effect. The more he tries to coldly reproduce the traits of impetuous passion, the more he risks seeming ridiculous. On this subject Cicero mentions the comments of the famous orator Antonius, who was delivering an impassioned defence, and Quintilian draws the appropriate conclusion in his treatise:

> My lament and my entreaties to all the gods, to men, to my fellow-citizens and to our allies were not without tears or great grief. If all those words I pronounced had lacked any real feeling of suffering on my part, my oration not only would not have been moving, but would have been actually ludicrous.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{75} Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, XI,3,65 and 66.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., VI,2,26. See also X,6,15.
\textsuperscript{77} Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, II,193, and \textit{Pro Sestio}, 120.
\textsuperscript{78} Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, VI,2,35.
\textsuperscript{79} See ibid., VI,2,36.
\textsuperscript{80} Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, II,196.
Sometimes, indeed, the imitation of mourning, anger and indignation will seem ridiculous, if we adapt only our words and the expression on our face to it, but not our mind.\footnote{Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, VI,2,26.}

If it is possible, then, to try to simulate more or less well the signs of a feeling with gestures and the voice, only those who really feel it can manage to transmit it through their external expressions; and if the audience falls prey to the emotions it is because, before they were transmitted to them, those emotions actually existed in the actor’s or orator’s mind. So, to emotionally influence someone who is deciding a case, writes Quintilian, our words must come ‘from a state of mind like that we wish to create in the judge’.\footnote{Ibid., VI,2,27.}

\textbf{The Techniques of Identification}

This seemed to mark a return of the old theory of contagion, by which the passions are transmitted from the mind of the actor to the minds of the audience. The contagion is no longer produced by a divinity, but by the very nature of emotional processes. The external expressions are a mere means for the orator’s flow of feelings to enter into contact with the members of the audience. Then the emotions, which are naturally contagious, inevitably pass into the new subject.

The recurrent metaphor for explaining the phenomenon is that of a fire, which spreads through contact from one material to another:

\begin{quote}
Just as no material is so inflammable as to catch fire unless it is brought close to a flame; so, no mind is so disposed to be influenced by the orator’s power, that it can become inflamed if he does not approach it inflamed and burning.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, II,190. See also Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, VI,2,28.}
\end{quote}

But to set off the contagion and provoke emotional reactions in the audience the orator must be able to really arouse in himself the various passions he wants to unleash in his hearers while he pronounces his speech. He must, as Cicero observes, ‘acquire the ability to become angry, to grieve and to weep in the course of his oration’.\footnote{Ibid., II,196. See also Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, VI,2,28.}

And so the fundamental problem returns, which concerns both acting technique and the orator’s \textit{actio}. No one, notes Quintilian, can feel an emotion to order, by mere force of will, and we have no power over our inner motions.\footnote{See Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, VI,2,29.} How then can someone performing to an audience create in himself, moment by moment, all the inner feelings he needs?

To demonstrate that it is possible Cicero cites the example of theatrical actors. When a fine actor performs a scene he manages to become fired, not just the first time, but also in later performances, day after day, for a long time. So there is no reason why the same should not be possible for an orator, who pronounces his
speech just once, without running the risk of his sensibility being ruined by infinite repetitions of the same scene.⁸⁶

Now, according to Cicero, the actor and the orator manage to become fired in the right way at the right time by following a particular procedure, which originates in the very conditions in which they find themselves when they are before an audience. It is a situation that makes them particularly sensitive to the stimuli created by their own words and actions. The actor is aware that he must show his prowess and put his reputation at stake. The orator also knows that the destiny of real persons and the affirmation of moral values that are close to his heart depend on his words.⁸⁷ Uncertainty as to the outcome of his performance, which can never be guaranteed, as well as the presence of people who are observing, waiting for and judging his gestures and words, generate a special tension in him that leads to a sort of emotional hyperactivity. The words, themes and images — and the very way in which words, themes and images have been carefully arranged, as we have seen, to stir the emotions of all those present, bringing out distressing, terrible or horrible details — in short ‘the very nature of that speech, which is aimed at moving the feelings of others’, moves the speaker ‘even more than his hearers’.⁸⁸ All the visual effects prepared with the same aim, like the appearance of a pitiful or terrible figure onstage, or the display in front of the judges in court of an old, sad defendant, in shabby clothes, his body marked by war-wounds, overpowers the actor or the orator ‘even before he moves others to pity’.⁸⁹

The procedure, then, seems to be this. The words and artifices designed to play on the public’s emotions awaken above all the actor’s or orator’s passions, given his very special emotional state in front of an audience. The passions emerge from his soul in external expressions, marking his features, his gestures and the intonation of his voice, which thus seem particularly effective. From here they are then transmitted by contagion, firing the souls of those present.

For his part Quintilian makes use of the theories of Stoic doctrine, identifying a particular technique that can be used in oratory and acting. All of us in our daily life are accompanied in our minds by images of scenes at which we are not actually present. They are images we create ‘while we daydream our time away’, and we have the impression of ‘travelling long distances, sailing, fighting, haranguing peoples, having great wealth at our disposal’. Some particularly gifted people can call up these visions so vividly and in such detail as to be able ‘to imagine perfectly objects, voices and gestures, as if they were real’. But it is an ability that can easily be developed. Anyone who is able to conceive believable and vivid scenes in this way can easily arouse the corresponding feelings in his mind. Thus the orator and the actor will inevitably feel, moment by moment as the speech or play develops, all the necessary emotions, if they manage to fix detailed images of what they are declaiming or acting in their mind’s eye.

I lament the murder of a man: will I not have before my eyes everything that might credibly have happened in actuality? Will not the assassin suddenly leap out? Will not

⁸⁶ See Cicero, De oratore, II,193; and Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, VI,3,35.
⁸⁷ See Cicero, De oratore, II,192.
⁸⁸ Ibid., II,191.
⁸⁹ Ibid., II,195.
the victim feel terror, will he not cry, or plead, or flee? Will I not see the one strike and the other fall? Will not the blood, the pallor, the groans, and finally the open mouth of the dying man breathing his last be fixed in my mind?\footnote{Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, VI,2,31.}

Absorbed in the tension of performing to an audience, at once engrossed by the words he is pronouncing and the actions he is performing, easily able to call to mind the appropriate images, the actor in the course of his performance thus experiences a series of feelings that spontaneously shape his expressions, make them intense, effective, and able to work on all those present, projecting the emotions that agitate him onto the audience.

\textit{Control and Perfection of Expression}

Once the fundamental problem of the actor has been solved in this way, the process of acting is based on a simple sequence of feelings, their spontaneous expressiveness, and their innate power to spread by contagion. The actor’s ability consists, then, in very little. Once he has found a decent text and an audience ready to listen to him, he need only call to mind clear and detailed images corresponding to the words he is speaking, and the rest follows automatically. His situation steeps him in a kind of emotional hypersensitivity, the feelings rise immediately in his mind, called up by the words and images, and so give his body and voice the most effective expressions. And that is all.

Cicero and Quintilian insist, however, on the actor and orator having a sure and conscious technique, long and difficult, carefully cultivated and practised. Their treatises are based on the conviction that oratory, like acting, can achieve excellent results only if what we are given by ‘nature’ is developed by ‘art’. An orator, for example, must certainly possess particular natural gifts, like an adequate physical appearance, an absence of defects that prevent him speaking correctly or moving easily, a good memory, and a sensitive mind that will readily kindle. All these qualities are indispensable, but without technique they are little use: art must work on them, and only art can perfect what is directly supplied by nature.\footnote{See Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, I,113-115. See also Quintilian, \textit{Institutio oratoria}, I, 26-27, II,17,5-15, II,19,1 and XI,3,10-12.}

The natural process of the sequence of feelings, which is the basis of \textit{actio} and acting, is not in itself enough, then. An actor or an orator who simply displayed to his audience the external signs that were immediately stamped on them by the passions of their souls, would certainly be inadequate to their task, for the obvious reason that the passions of the soul, as Cicero explains, are often ‘confused’, and so the expressions they produce seem obscure and uncertain. To display a passion perfectly it is therefore necessary to remove from its external appearance ‘what causes obscurity’, at the same time bringing out ‘its most clear and visible aspects’.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{De oratore}, III,215.} Only in this way can one act really effectively as the great actor Roscius did, who managed to form every gesture so that it was absolutely clear and perfect, with grace and propriety, producing in the audience both ‘emotion and pleasure’.\footnote{Ibid., I,130.}
Quintilian agreed. The expression of ‘real emotions’ that ‘burst out spontaneously’ should be shaped ‘by teaching and method’. In short, they should be worked on and controlled by the person delivering the speech. Otherwise they look crude and imprecise, and their inadequacy may leave room for the excesses of ‘ignorant’ orators who ‘shout on every occasion, and bellow every phrase’, move and gesticulate wildly ‘and wag their heads like lunatics’.

There is another reason that makes it indispensable for the actor to control his expressions. Those acting, observes Cicero, need to regulate the intensity of every gesture, rationing them appropriately, so as to prepare the effect of the next gesture. For example, to make one gesture particularly meaningful and emphatic, the one before should be lighter and more muted so as not to ruin the effect. The performance thus develops through a series of variations, in which each expressive moment becomes effective in relation to the preceding one, and should therefore bear in mind those that are to follow. In this way while the actor and the orator display an expression dictated by an emotional state, they must maintain a lucid awareness of how the whole speech or scene develops, and decide the intensity of gesture and intonation on this basis. Control of the body is therefore extremely rigorous, requiring long rehearsals before the mirror, as Demosthenes is said to have done.

Now, to perfect the expressions that arise spontaneously from his inner feelings, to refine them of any ‘obscenity’ and make them perfectly ‘clear’, the actor or orator must know exactly what the characteristic external signs of each individual passion are: otherwise he will not be able to control their exact reproduction on his face, in his gestures and in the modulation of his voice. Indeed, as Cicero explains, ‘nature has assigned each emotion an expression, a tone of voice and a specific gesture’, and they ‘are available to the orator to express the various overtones of his speech, as a painter uses colours’.

In De oratore Cicero gives an example by describing some expressive intonations of the voice, which correspond to the exact reproduction of anger, compassion, fear, violence and despondency. While in Book XI of Institutio oratoria Quintilian gives a detailed list of a long series of gestures and movements, with a veritable catalogue of expressions that was to inspire many treatises on oratory for several centuries.

Even while he is being trained, says Quintilian, the orator should learn chironomy, or the laws of hand movements. Later, he must master a complex code of voice and gesture for every part of the body, starting from the positions of the head:

Seemly postures include first of all keeping the head erect and in a natural position, as when it hangs down it suggests humility, when it is thrown back arrogance, when inclined to one side languor, when it too stiff and rigid a brutal nature.

94 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, XI,3,61.
95 Ibid., II,12,9.
96 See Cicero, De oratore, III,102.
97 See Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, XI,3,68.
98 Cicero, De oratore, III,216.
99 Ibid., III,217-218. See also Cicero, Orator, 55 and 56.
100 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, I,11,17.
101 Ibid., XI,3,69.
But the greatest expressive ability lies in the face: the eyes, the cheeks, the lips, the nostrils and even the eyebrows, which indicate anger when they are ‘knitted’, sadness when ‘lowered’, and joy when ‘extended’. Quintilian then proceeds to shoulders, arms, feet, hands and fingers, indicating all the appropriate movements down to the least detail.

If one gently takes the last joint of the index finger on both sides, with the other two fingers slightly crooked, but the little finger less so, the result is a gesture suitable for argument. Yet one has the impression that someone is discussing more animatedly if he holds the middle joint of the finger and contracting the last two fingers still further to match the lower position of the middle finger and thumb. [...] The hand slightly hollowed as when someone makes a vow, and then moved slightly to and fro, the shoulders swaying in unison, is particularly suitable for someone expressing reluctance and timidity. A gesture that expresses wonder consists in turning the palm of the hand slightly upwards, bringing each finger in turn into the palm, starting from the little finger, then, while the fingers are returned to their previous position, opening it and at the same time turning it in the other direction.102

In the meticulous description of all these movements, the search for maximum expressiveness is associated with the need for precise stylization that can confer on the orator’s action not only decorum, but also the grace and beauty that will give the audience an indispensable ‘delight’.

Specialists forbid the hand to be higher than the eyes and lower than the chest; it is seen as still worse to move it downwards, starting from the head, or let it descend beyond the lower belly. The hand should be allowed to rise towards the left, but not beyond the shoulder, further than that is not proper [...] It is never correct to gesticulate with the left hand alone [...] Standing with the right foot and right hand forward is ugly.103

**Possibility of an Anti-Emotional Theory**

Acting in front of an audience, then, combines two kinds of behaviour. One is spontaneous, letting face and gestures display what it simply dictated by the emotions, and one is conscious and regulated, adopting gestures and movements that have been studied and catalogued, both to make the expressions more incisive and to give them a special grace and beauty. Losing the delicate balance between these two forms of behaviour would run the risk of a crude and overexcited performance, or one that was cold and artificial. And this is the explicit position of the treatises of Cicero and Quintilian.

However, the possibility of codifying the expressive signs of the various passions, indicating them down to the last detail, as in Quintilian’s painstaking catalogue, opened another path. By long-practised technique the actor or orator might try to deliberately reproduce these signs – head, arm and hand movements, inflexions of the voice – instantly in himself. The forms of expression used had been studied and codified so as to respond perfectly to the requirements of the theatre or the courthouse, and so appeared absolutely convincing in those particular contexts.

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102 Ibid., XI,3,95 and 100.
103 Ibid., XI,3,112-114 and 124.
Someone able to reproduce them skillfully, adapting them to his own personal characteristics, would therefore be able to render the presence of passions and states of mind well enough to satisfy the most demanding member of the audience. His actual emotional involvement would at this point be superfluous: it would be a mere tool to make use of when his technique was insufficiently perfected, and in certain cases might actually be harmful, disturbing the orator’s necessary concentration on giving a perfect artistic rendering of his expressions.  

The possibility of a model of acting based on the cold but perfect and artistically convincing simulation of the emotions appears in the thought of the time. In a passage of *De oratore* Cicero actually seems to acknowledge that with ‘greater art’ it might be possible to express a passion effectively without feeling it, merely through deliberate simulation. In the *Tusculanae disputationes* too, though he touches on the problem in a special context, while discussing the effects of anger, he certainly takes it as a genuine possibility, and actually makes it the very basis of the actor’s and orator’s art:

> It is certainly not seemly for the orator to feel anger, but it is not improper for him to simulate it. Perhaps we seem enraged to you when we speak sharply and aggressively during a hearing! […] Perhaps you think that Aesopus was angry when he declaimed these verses, or that Accius was when he wrote them? Passages like this are splendid to declaim, and an orator, if he is an orator, does it better than any actor; but one should declaim calmly, in cold blood.

And the same passage was referred to again a few decades later in Seneca’s *De ira* too.

> ‘The orator’, he says, ‘is sometimes more effective when he is angry’. No, but when he imitates someone who is angry: actors too affect people with their declamations, not if they themselves are personally angry, but if they act well the part of someone who is. And with judges and in the assembly too and wherever we have to bend someone else’s will to our way of thinking, we will simulate now anger, now fear, now pity, to inspire them in others and what sincere passions would not have obtained, pretence often does.

The vision of an art of acting whose effects on the audience are not based on direct, immediate contagion of the emotions, but rather on the perception of a special talent in simulation, emerges above all, however, in one of Plutarch’s writings from the same period as Quintilian.

In the *Symposiacs* Plutarch tackles a characteristic problem: why is it that we derive pleasure from watching an actor imitating anger or sadness onstage, while we feel distress or displeasure when we watch someone with these feelings in real life. The problem has no easy answer, and Plutarch solves it like this. If we feel pleasure watching an actor lamenting in despair bereavement and misfortunes, it is because we all have an innate taste for everything that seems produced by art, technique, or by a specific, intelligent, rational ability. Our nature is spontaneously attracted by any

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104 See ibid., XI,3,25.
105 Cicero, *De oratore*, II,189.
107 Seneca, *De ira*, II,17,1.
demonstration of skill and ingenuity. An actor’s performance displays ability, skill and ingenuity precisely because it is not a simple expression of actual feelings, but an astute and expert simulation:

someone genuinely angry or sad shows only the ordinary effects of the passion and the emotion, while an imitation, if it is at all successful, displays ability, which makes it attractive. In this case we take a wholly natural pleasure while we feel distress in the other.108

Thus, between the time of Cicero and that of Plutarch a vision of the art of acting emerges that sees it as residing exclusively in the ability to simulate. It is the result of ability more than inspiration or real emotional involvement. It is all the more attractive, pleasant and effective when the actor manages to use sophisticated technique to reproduce perfectly the symptoms of a passion – but only because that shows special skill. The authentic expression of an emotion that was truly felt would be inert, clumsy and distressing onstage.

II
FROM THE CHURCH FATHERS TO THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Theatre as a Source of Irrational Impulses

The theoretical positions that had emerged from Plato’s Ion to the time of Quintilian and Plutarch were to quickly dissolve in the last years of the ancient world, not because the questions they raised had been solved, but because a new idea of the theatre was taking hold, one profoundly different from that which had guided theoreticians in the classical age. Thanks to this new idea, the very way in which the problem of acting was posed was to change radically.

As is generally known, between the second and fifth centuries Christian authors rigorously rejected the theatre. Their condemnation is explained not only by their critical attitude towards pagan culture, but also by the nature of the most widespread forms of theatre in the early centuries of Christianity. By the time of Quintilian and Plutarch performance of comedies and tragedies was already in decline and gradually heading towards extinction, but theatrical activity was by no means running dry. In the last centuries of antiquity it continued to be appreciated throughout the Roman Empire and were followed by large swathes of the general public with a passion that could border on frenzy. Not for nothing did the fifth-century Christian author Salvianus in his De gubernatione Dei describe the population of Carthage as ‘going wild in the circuses’ and ‘running riot in the theatres’ while the barbarians were laying siege to the city.1

These were entertainments of a very different kind, which, unlike the comedies and tragedies of the classical period, were not performances of carefully written literary texts, but depended more on the immediate effects of stage action, exploiting the actors’ ability and the crudity and violence of the images. In the circus, as Seneca recounted in the first century CE, the fights between gladiators were becoming more and more cruel and Martial could witness displays in which a criminal condemned to death was forced to ‘act’ the part of a character who was to die, and was actually tortured and killed onstage.2

In this period mime artists reached the peak of their popularity. They had probably been performing as wandering actors in the Greek world since the fifth century BCE. Their activities were extremely varied: they appeared as jugglers, acrobats, contortionists, imitators and animal trainers. They worked in the squares, on market days and on public holidays, and were sometimes engaged to appear in private houses and at banquets. They could dance, sing and act out short scenes, largely or wholly improvised. During the imperial period some of them enjoyed particularly high regard, but their performances were considered as belonging to a minor genre, and as a social class they enjoyed little prestige. At various times special

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1 Salvianus, De gubernatione Dei, VI,12.
2 See Seneca, Ad Lucilium, 7, 2-4; and Martial, Liber de spectaculis, 7, 8, 21.
decrees were passed banning their performances and running the companies out of
town, but this failed to stop them, enjoying as they did the support both of the
general public and of the upper echelons of the society.3

Our sources agree in emphasizing the licentiousness of the mimes’ performances.
The stories, the gestures and the dialogue were often obscene. In addition the
companies included not only actors, who were traditionally the only interpreters of
the ‘high’ theatrical genres like tragedy and comedy, but also actresses, who were
often engaged in displays that would be counted as pornographic today. As early as
the third century BCE, the celebrations of Flora included naked women onstage, and
we know that later the mime plays sometimes involved absolutely realistic sexual
display. In his *Secret History* Procopius of Caesarea has left us a description of the
theatrical work of Theodora, a young and much admired porn-star, who later, as the
wife of Justinian, became Empress.

However, what really characterized the popular performances in the late period of
the ancient world was not so much the putative immorality. Aristophanes’ most
famous comedies in the fifth century BCE oozed obscenity. The change taking place
was rather different and modified the concept of what a play was. Unlike the classical
forms of tragedy and comedy, which invited the audience to enter into the events of
an imaginary world with imaginary characters, the new form of theatre revolved
around the exhibition of the actor’s body, inviting a response from the audience
either through the ability and skill of jugglers, acrobats, imitators and dancers, or
through the immediate display of the physical, material reality of their bodies, aimed
at stimulating the irrational and violently passionate impulses of the spectators.
Whether it was the obscene acts performed by a naked actress onstage, or the sight
of a man being tortured in the circus, who, Martial tells us, offered ‘his flesh to a
Caledonian bear’ while his joints were ‘still alive’ and his limbs ‘dripped blood’, the
aim was to provide extreme sensations, which dulled the audience’s intellectual and
imaginative capacities and played on immediate and uncontrollable sense stimuli.4

*The Condemnation of Christian Authors*

It was in front of this kind of entertainment that Christian writers were to
condemn every form of theatre. The most famous work was probably Tertullian’s *De
spectaculis*: written in the late second century, it exercised an enormous influence over
later authors, while the most pointed remarks are to be found in texts by Augustine,
in particular in the *Confessioanes*, written in the late fourth century, and in *De civitate Dei*
from the early fifth century. The question had been tackled, however, by many other
Christian authors in a series of observations, explanations and descriptions that were
reproduced and repeated constantly and almost obsessively.

In all these anti-theatre comments we can identify some essential ideas that form a
sort of theory of the play still alive and kicking in the eighteenth century Age of
Enlightenment. It was a theory based on a vision of human history as a battlefield in
which Satan’s activity is contrasted with the building of the Kingdom of God. The
theatre was recognized as a weapon of the devil to create his dominion on earth.

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23-26.

Theatrical displays, explained the Christian authors, derived essentially from ‘idolatry’. Their origins were linked to the cult of pagan divinities, and these were no more than ‘filthy spirits’, false simulacra of a religion beneath which was hidden the presence and action of the Evil One. Each element of the spectacle was linked to the influence of a particular divinity, and expressed its malefic power. The gestures and movements of the body, observed Tertullian, display the pernicious action of Venus and Bacchus, and reflect the depravity of the senses in the grip of an inebriating pleasure like that caused by wine, while the use of the voice, rhythm and music celebrated an inspiration attributed to the intervention and teaching of the Muses, Apollo, Minerva and Mercury.

With these filthy spirits presiding, all theatrical performances had a destructive effect as they unleashed in the audience feelings, passions and irrational impulses that create ‘a profound disturbance to the spirit’, destroying the state of internal serenity that is proper to the just and holy man. God, explained Tertullian, has ordered us to behave ‘with the greatest gentleness, and the greatest serenity’, without ‘fits of fury, bile, anger and grief’, all of them impulses that ‘cannot be reconciled with the moral law’. Indeed no one can be victim of a passion ‘without falling into sin’. But the shows put on in the circuses produce a dangerous ‘frenzy’ in the audience, the performances of the mimes stimulate our desires through the ‘foulness’ of their gestures and their recourse to obscenity, and in any case, Augustine observed, all theatrical displays aim to ‘excite’ the audience, which only follows the performance ‘with close attention and pleasure’ when it is stirred.

Now, it was certainly not a new idea that the theatre tended to arouse irrational feelings and impulses in its audience. All the ancient authors agreed on this point. The actor’s ability to emotionally involve the audience might actually be proof of his artistic excellence, and so in this respect the Christian writers simply overturned the usual criterion of judgment: if serenity of mind was essential to a good and pious soul, arousing the passions was not a positive act, but a negative one.

However, their thought seems profoundly original when it analyses the manner in which the stage action manages to disturb and upset the minds of those watching. According to the Christian writers, to enflame the passions of the audience, the performances exploit the weakness of our senses, and our senses are genuine ‘windows on the soul’, through which vices penetrate, binding us to sin. Indeed, the pleasure that comes from perceiving any sensible form seemed so dangerous that Augustine not only wanted to refrain from enjoying the light and colour of even natural phenomena, but even questioned the advisability of accompanying religious functions with melody and song. The theatrical spectacle is precisely a form of delight for the senses: the delight that comes ‘from gladiatorial combat, athletic competitions, the actions of mimes or the performance of plays’, observed St Jerome, is like that we obtain from ‘the splendour of jewels, clothes or precious

5 Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 4.
6 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, IV, 1.
7 See Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 10.
8 Ibid., 15. See also Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, VIII, 17.
9 Ibid., 16 and 17; Augustine, *Confessiones*, III, 2.
stones’, and binds us in a net of sensory seduction that ‘captures our soul’, depriving it of its freedom.\(^\text{12}\)

In this perspective the theatre seems an infernal mechanism expressly designed to involve the audience in a tissue of visual and sound incitements that penetrate the soul, disturb and upset it, and are so effective as to break even the most determined will to resist.\(^\text{13}\) There is a famous episode recounted by Augustine in Book VI of the *Confessions*, where he describes the experience of his young friend Alypius, who felt profound disgust for the gladiatorial combats, but was dragged by his friends to the circus. Firm of will, Alypius decided to remain ‘as if absent’, closing his eyes. But he was shaken by a sudden cry from the crowd: the sound forced him to open his eyes and glance quickly at the arena, at which point his soul suffered ‘a wound more deadly than that received in the gladiator’s body that he had wanted to look at for an instant’. The effect is devastating:

> Seeing that blood and drinking in the cruelty was the work of a moment: he did not look away, but fixed his eyes on the sight; unaware, he breathed in the mood of frenzy, delighted in that wicked fighting, drunk on the pleasure of blood […] He watched, he cheered, hot with excitement; when he left he took with him a fever that drove him back there again, not only with those who dragged him there, but leading them and others.\(^\text{14}\)

The Christian conception of plays as a system of images that arouse our sense perceptions, and so penetrate and overwhelm our soul, has some important consequences. First, if the attraction of any sensible form is a dangerous source of sin, then theatrical displays, expressly designed to entice and excite our senses, naturally multiply the power and effectiveness of the presence of evil. Anything performed onstage before an audience exalts its negative qualities and its power to corrupt. Whether it is a bloody gladiatorial combat, the appearance of a female body, or the representation of imaginary events through the gestures and movements of tragic or comic actors, the stage emphasizes its perverse and destructive dimension.

The presence of actresses onstage is an exemplary case. If, says John Chrysostom, we can feel the stirrings of lust just by glancing at a woman walking down the street, or even praying in church, then still less can we remain immune in the theatre, where the appearance of women is deliberately exhibited.\(^\text{15}\) And in the *Liber de spectaculis* attributed to St Cyprian actresses performing onstage are actually considered more sinful and harmful than prostitutes, who at least ply their trade in private.\(^\text{16}\)

But apart from the question of the presence of women, who in any case, whether in the theatre, the street, at home or in church, exercise a dangerous attraction, as the Fathers of the Church saw it, there can be no subject or character, no situation, no story, however pious or edifying, that does not project an inevitably sinful effect when staged, as soon as the details of the story are presented so as to strike the eyes and ears of the public. The only morally innocuous spectacle would consist of images without charm and interest, and so unable to attract an audience.

\(^{12}\) St Jerome, *Adversum Ioviniamun*, II,8.

\(^{13}\) See Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 15.

\(^{14}\) Augustine, *Confessiones*, VI,8.

\(^{15}\) See John Chrysostom, *Homily on David and Saul*, III,1.

In addition, for the Christian authors the fictional character of theatrical events is also significant. If the play consists in displaying images designed to irresistibly strike the audience’s senses, it is of no importance that the events represented are only inventions of the imagination and the actors only pretend to perform the actions of the characters, because, observes Tertullian, ‘if tragedies and comedies are cruel and lewd, wicked and dissolute examples of crimes and lusts, no exaltation of something terrible or vulgar is better than the thing itself’. In short, simulation on stage does not have a weaker effect on our minds than that of a real event. When the mimes dress up, writes Lactantius, to simulate ‘shameless women with indecent gestures’, and ‘show adulteries’, not only do they induce the audience to perform real actions, but their example is particularly baleful because it shows how this behaviour might be ‘observed with pleasure by all’.

Far from mediating and reducing the effect that a real event might produce on those watching, the theatrical simulation is a dangerous distortion that increases the negative quality of the stage experience. As Tatian writes in his Address to the Greeks, when the actor performs he is presenting a ‘falsification’, he is showing outside ‘what he is not inside’. And this kind of falsification, explains Tertullian, is an extremely serious act in the eyes of God, who created the true. We absolutely cannot approve ‘those who falsify their voice, their sex or their age, who solemnly simulate the display of love, anger, sighs and tears’. An actor who alters his features, dresses up, or simulates situations and states of mind, is performing an act of violence on God’s creation.

In this way, by the sinful seduction of the senses and the wicked falsification of reality, the theatre not only excites the audience’s irrational impulses, which is in itself extremely serious, but excites them perversely. The emotions it produces imprison the spectator, who follows the performance spellbound, and, writes Augustine, ‘trembles for joy with the lovers when they enjoy each other indecently’, grieving ‘when they part’, and experiencing a perverted and unhealthy disturbance. This is clearly proved by the senseless pleasure we feel in watching the horrible and distressing events of tragedy.

Of course, observes Augustine, the painful events of tragedy can produce an impulse of pity in the spectator, and that is in itself a good and proper feeling, ‘which arises from the same vein as friendship’. But true, authentic pity induces those who feel it to intervene and bring help, while the pity aroused by theatrical representations invites those who watch ‘only to suffer’, and the greater the suffering, the greater the admiration for the actor who simulates these fiction. This makes it a deviant and distorted pity. Bringing out in its natural ways the emotional reaction of the audience, plays thus dissolve, annul and pervert the awakening of any potentially positive feeling, which ends up losing itself ‘in a torrent of boiling pitch, in great blasts of dark passion in which it willingly changes and deforms itself, diverted from its true course and corrupted from its heavenly clearness’.

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17 Tertullian, De spectaculis, 17.
18 Lactantius, Divinae institutiones, VI,20.
19 Tatian, Address to the Greeks, 22; Tertullian, De spectaculis, 23.
20 Augustine, Confessiones, III,2.
**The New Image of Acting**

This vision of the theatre and its malign effect was important not only because it explains a condemnation that was to hang over acting for a long time, but above all because it radically shifted the viewpoint from which it was considered. That the actor onstage was in effect collaborating with the devil seemed beyond discussion. But that is not the point. Concentrating on the effectiveness of the network of sensations the play traps its audience in, and on the intrinsic falsity of the stage action, which distorts the reality of divine creation in a filthy falsification of gestures and features, the Christian authors no longer regarded the actor's main task as being to depict a character, rendering his emotions precisely. In their eyes acting consisted rather in the ability to create images of any kind that were suitable for striking the senses of the spectators, through the exhibition of the actor's body, his skill and his capacity to simulate. They did not see an actor in a tragedy as engaged in representing a character and expressing his states of mind. Rather they saw a body in action, moving in front of an audience and capturing its attention by exhibiting its ability to change and perform actions that strike our senses.

In this way the traditional theory of contagion, by which the passions, authentic and real in the actor's mind, effectively shape his expressions and are transmitted by their natural energy to the spectator's mind, lost all meaning and became impossible. On the stage, which was the devilish territory of the inauthentic, of fiction and of pure incitement of the senses, the audience's passions were stirred only by what struck their senses and by what was simulated and falsified. The actor's performance was part of the lures and seductions of the stage, which offered an exalted version of gestures, forms and figures for the delight of the senses. The actor achieved his aim insofar as he displayed himself and his skill in performing all kinds of actions and in dissembling. A seductive physical presence and ability, and skill in feigning and distorting became the fundamental parameters of acting. The only emotional involvement that mattered was not that in the actor's inner self, which became irrelevant, but that in the audience who watched the actor perform onstage.

In addition, if the actor's fundamental task was to produce a strong impression on the audience through the display of his body, his physical skill and his abilities, then there was no longer any distinction between the mime who improvised licentious scenes, the juggler who displayed his skill, the dancer whose physical presence and movements excited the audience's desires, and the actor who recited the literary texts of comedies and tragedies. Actors, jugglers, dancers, tight-rope walkers, acrobats and contortionists merely produced images designed to strike the audience's senses, and so belonged one and all to the same indistinct category of entertainers, whose perverted and wicked function was directly inspired by the devil's action.

In later centuries it gradually became the norm to assimilate all these categories in a single grouping enjoying very low social consideration and sometimes extending to healers and beggars who made use of more or less sophisticated forms of simulation. In the later Middle Ages, however, did there start to emerge some attempts to distinguish low-level entertainers who worked through their mere physical ability and skill, from those with culture who also wrote the compositions they sang or acted, which had some literary qualities. In the twelfth century John of Salisbury contrasted the actors of the ancient world, 'more provided with decorum', who represented to the audience real or invented events, and made famous the works of authors like
Terence, with the hordes ‘of mimes, dancers, ballet-dancers, clowns, gladiators, strongmen, gymnasts and conjurors’ that, now that tragedy and comedy had disappeared, offered ‘vacuous frivolity’ and ‘foul entertainments’ for those wallowing in sloth and trying to keep boredom at bay. Then, early in the next century a penitential of Thomas Chabham distinguished entertainers who ‘transform and transfigure their bodies by unseemly positions and behaviour, both denuding themselves and wearing indecent masks’, who were bound for damnation, from those who ‘sing the enterprises of the barons and the lives of the saints, and console men in sickness and affliction’. Finally, the famous Supplica that Guiraut Riquier directed to King Alfonso XII of Castile in 1274, followed by the King’s Declaratio, written by Riquier, contrasted the troubadour, whose verses telling of ‘laudable enterprises to exalt the brave’ may last in time, with the wretched activities of those who ‘perform only conjuring tricks’ or ‘exhibit monkeys and marionettes’, or ‘imitate the call of birds or play instruments and sing for a few coins in low places’. For the late mediaeval point of view it was the presence of a poetic text to pass on to the audience in the acting that seemed to be the premise for salvaging the actor’s work in a form that could be appreciated and accepted.

In this way there began to emerge, at least theoretically, a sharp division between the forms of acting that exalted the actor’s physical ability, his skill in using his body, his acrobatic virtues, and his ability to capture the audience’s attention and amaze it with surprising and unexpected performances and inventions, and the forms of acting that involved reciting finished literary texts, with the main function of giving full access on stage to the effects and power of an exercise of the imagination that had been given a carefully arranged verbal composition.

The Humanist Ennobling of the Theatre

However, so far as we know, in mediaeval documents on the actor there is no consideration of acting techniques. In the high mediaeval period there are very few comments on there being any actual theatrical activity in Europe, and it is mainly the church’s repeated condemnation of mimos, bistriones et joculatores that suggests the continuing existence of professionals or semi-professionals who made a living using their talent as public entertainers.

Later, between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a significant resumption of theatrical activity and a slow development of various dramatic forms, from the liturgical drama to religious drama in the vernacular, to cyclical dramas and plays with secular subjects, farces and morality plays. In some cases they were extremely complex: the play cycles, for example, might last several days, involve numerous stage effects and involve hundreds of performers. But for this later period

too, we have only fragmentary information on acting, and nothing that is even remotely indicative of real acting technique.24

In any case the acting of all these theatrical forms was mainly entrusted to occasional and amateur performers. At first, in the productions of liturgical dramas in the churches, it was the task of priests and deacons. Later the laity were involved, and in some cases they ended up organizing themselves into associations of amateurs involved in staging special kinds of plays. Of course, the professional entertainers who, individually or in small itinerant groups, made a living performing as musicians, singers, storytellers, acrobats and jugglers, might be hired for the productions of religious or profane dramas, but their activity did not enjoy sufficient prestige to be able to call attention to the more or less elaborate techniques they had to employ, still less encourage any theorizing. And so, after the texts of the Greek and Roman periods, thinking about the art of acting went into a long eclipse, and was taken up again only in the late sixteenth century as the result of a long process that began with the development of humanist studies.

As early as the fourteenth century the rediscovery of classical culture had reawakened interest in the plays of the ancient world. It was, however, a prevailingly literary interest among the learned and in the universities: once the works of the classics had been taken as models, the first Latin texts imitating the tragedies and comedies of ancient Rome began to appear in Italy. In the early fifteenth century some of these new plays were acted for a cultured audience, sometimes in the palace of some aristocratic patron, in a somewhat uncertain attempt to reproduce the styles of performance that the culture of the time attributed to the ancient world. Later, progress in scholarly research, and above all the rediscovery of Vitruvius’ *De Architectura* from the first century CE, which contained valuable indications on the structure of the theatres, gave a more accurate idea of Roman staging and opened the way to more careful and well-informed attempts.

Towards the end of the century interest in rediscovering Latin plays had now spread from the academy to the Italian courts. There was a performance of Plautus’ *Menaechmi* at the court of Ferrara during the 1486 carnival. A little later the first comedies written in the vernacular appeared, imitating Latin comedies and tragedies. In 1508 Ariosto’s *Cassaria* was staged at the court of Ferrara. Five years later at the court of Urbino, Bibbiena’s *Calandria* was performed, one of the most popular and well-known comedies of the sixteenth century. In addition, plays written and performed on the model of the ancients spread from Italy to learned circles in the rest of Europe, where they were cultivated in the schools, courts and academies of the early sixteenth century. Furthermore, and more importantly here, this started as a cultural experiment that was the fruit of a literary operation. By its very nature, therefore, it invited theoretical thought, the essential tools of which were obviously to be found in the conceptual apparatus of the classical authors.

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24 For example, a few instructions to the actors are included in the stage directions of the *Mystery of Adam*, dated around 1150, while in the *Poetria Nova* by Geoffroy de Vinsauf, who lived during the papacy of Innocence III (1198-1216), there are thirty-five lines that seem to prescribe rules for acting. Nevertheless, the work is a manual of rhetoric, inspired by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and they are rules concerning the *actio* (*Poetria Nova*, 2031-2065, in E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XII et du XIII siècle*, Paris, Champion, 1924, pp. 259-260).
The scholars were mainly interested in two problems: defining a set of rules that could regulate the writing of texts, and designing a suitable performing space. Thus, in the second half of the sixteenth century a long series of commentaries and treatises appeared, using the ideas derived from Greek and Latin thought, and in particular from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, to discuss the techniques of dramatic composition. In 1529 Gian Giorgio Trissino published the first part of his *Divisioni della poetica*, which was completed by the posthumous second part in 1562. In 1548 Francesco Robortello’s Latin commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* appeared, followed by the works of Bartolomeo Lombardi and Lorenzo Maggi (1550), Giraldi Cintio (1554), Vettori (1560), Scaligero (1561), Minturno (1563), Castelvetro (1570), Bernardino Pino da Cagli (1572), Alessandro Piccolomini (1575), Viperano (1579), Segni (1581) and De Nores (1588), while Vitruvius’ teachings inspired the study of theatrical architecture and stage design. The first indications of this kind could already be found in Leon Battista Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria*, written between 1443 and 1452, and published posthumously in 1485. A few years later Pellegrino Prisciani, a librarian at the court of Ferrara, illustrated and proposed in his *Spectacula* the building of a theatre in bricks and mortar. But the most famous and influential work appeared towards the mid sixteenth century. This was the *Secondo libro di perspettiva*, which Sebastiano Serlio published in Paris in 1545, describing a model for organizing the stage area with examples of the kind of stage design that was spreading rapidly through Europe.

*Humanist Experiments and Court Performances*

While treatises on writing texts and organizing the stage space continued to appear, the problem of acting went on being substantially ignored. Scholars had the models of Terence, Plautus and Seneca available to discuss the literary composition of comedy and tragedy, as well as the considerations in the works of poetics and rhetoric, and in the commentaries of the ancients. Vitruvius was a solid reference point for theory on theatre design. But no source could offer wide-ranging and exhaustive suggestions about acting.

Consequently ideas on the subject were inevitably very vague. According to a widespread theory of mediaeval thought, one still valued in the fifteenth century, the acting of comic and tragic texts was delivered by the ancient Romans as a sort of illustrated declamation: a *reclitator* on a kind of pulpit read, or declaimed, the text to the audience, speaking the lines of all the characters. At the same time, or later, some actors mimed the scene with gestures and body movements, without the use of words.

This singular theory, which may have derived from a passage in the *Etymologiae*, written by Isidore of Seville in the sixth century, was based on a misinterpretation of an anecdote recorded by Livy.25 It was expressed most clearly in a fourteenth-century

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25 See Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, XVIII,43. According to Livy, in his old age the actor Livius Andronicus no longer sang the musical parts in the plays he acted in, but simply performed the gestures while others sang the words of the text (*Ab Urbe condita*, VII,2). This way of acting, in which the speaking of the words and the imitation of the gestures was entrusted to different people, was later regarded by mediaeval commentators as a general form that the Romans adopted in the performance of plays.
commentary by the English scholar Nicolas Trevet on Seneca’s tragedy, *Hercules Furens*:

Tragedies and comedies used to be acted like this: the theatre was a semi-circular area, at the centre of which was a small house in which there was a pulpit, on which the poet declaimed the songs and read his text aloud; outside there were the mimes who represented the expression of the songs, gesturing with their bodies, which they adapted to the character of whoever was being treated.26

This idea, as we have said, was still accepted during the fifteenth century.27 An imaginary reconstruction of this kind must have influenced the first stagings of humanist comedies in Latin by amateurs – scholars, teachers, pupils – where the declamation of the work was entrusted, wholly or in part, to a single *recitator*. In various cases the performances were used in scholarly circles as exercises for the mastery of Latin and the techniques of eloquence, and so the *recitator*, whose task was to render the text effectively to the listeners, could only base himself on the principles of oratory, a discipline that was an essential part of scholastic teaching.28

The rediscovery of ancient acting took the form, then, of the declamation of a literary text following the model of classical oratory. This stylistic choice was to be maintained when the humanist dramas began to be acted by two or more people, as in the performance of Francesco Ariosto’s *In Isidis religionem elegia* at the court of Ferrara in 1444. The very composition of the text, which consisted of two long tirades, first for one and then for the other character, encouraged a declamatory style of acting. But it was the learned character of the humanist experiments, which were works of literary composition inspired by the models of the ancients, that required in general a style of acting close to the declaration of a written text, suitably embellished, observing the principles of correct oral exposition taken from the treatises of the classical world.

In the late fifteenth century, however, when performances of Plautus’ and Terence’s comedies flourished, the figure of the *recitator* finally disappeared and the parts of the various characters were invariably entrusted to actors who spoke and moved. It was in this period, too, that the taste for staging comedies spread in the courts as a form of entertainment at carnival time, or on special occasions and celebrations. The play was a cultured diversion, and the centre of the attraction was no longer the literary elegance of the text, but the liveliness of the plot, the humour of the situations and in particular the splendour of the scenery.


27 See, for example, *De Politia litteraria* by the fifteenth-century humanist Angelo Decembrio which contains a discussion between learned men from Ferrara on the prologue to Terence’s *Andria* (Basileae, Hervagius, 1562, II,21, pp. 143-151).

28 Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* and Cicero’s rhetorical works, which had been rediscovered in their complete form by Poggio Bracciolini in 1416 and the Bishop of Lodi in 1421 respectively, were widely used in teaching, and Guarino da Verona, in his famous school at Ferrara, used them as manuals of precepts. The close relation between Latin performances of classical theatre and oratory was so close that Paolo Govio regarded the decline of these performances as responsible for the decay of oratory. See F. Cruciani, *Il teatro del Campidoglio e le feste romane del 1513*, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1969, pp. XXIII-XXIV.
The actors in these performances were still amateurs, coming from the environment of the court, and the only culturally guaranteed stylistic model available obviously remained that of poetic declamation and oratory. Moreover, the court of Ferrara, which saw the first staging of the classical comedies, was still imbued with the cultural tradition established by the school of Guarino da Verona, the preceptor of Leonello d’Este, a passionate scholar of ancient theatrical texts, the author of dozens of orations, and a famous master of rhetoric. The court festivities also involved university teachers, and Battista, Guarino da Verona’s son and continuier of his school, was probably the translator of Plautus’ *Menaechmi*, which was performed in 1486. The model of learned declamation was therefore present and could not be ignored.

The particular context in which court performances took place in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries imposed a new requirement however. The custom had begun in the circle surrounding the prince, in an atmosphere of festive officialdom. This meant the forms of learned culture had to be mediated by the contiguous but different forms of the court, and so, in the presence of the prince and his guests the performance of the actors, who were mainly members of the prince’s circle, inevitably associated the manners of poetic declamation and oratory with the display of manners typical of a courtier who knows how to move, speak and act in front of the nobility.

This led to experimentation with different styles of acting, which were to become current onstage in later years. It was no coincidence that the first writings on the actor’s art, many decades later, contain hints on how to stand and act similar to the advice that Baldassarre Castiglione offered to the perfect gentleman who had to live in the court environment, in his famous work, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, first published in Venice in 1528.

Castiglione identified a basic quality in the courtier’s behaviour, which is ‘grace’. Grace should characterize every expression, gesture or movement, making them elegant and pleasing. It is a gift of nature, explains Castiglione, which must be developed with ‘pains, industry and care’ and with ‘discipline’. Grace is contrasted not only with coarse and unreflective behaviour that has not been corrected and perfected by ‘art’, but also with ‘affectation’, or the ostentation of the care with which the gestures and words are carefully elaborated to appear beautiful and arouse admiration.

Thus along with grace the other indispensable quality is sprezzatura, or ease, which should give the appearance that ‘what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thinking’. True art, declares Castiglione, ‘does not seem to be art’. In this way the finest ancient orators, learned and expert, strained to give the impression that they had ‘no knowledge of literary art’, and ‘hiding their knowledge, they pretended that their orations were composed very simply and as if springing from nature and truth rather than study and art’. In the same way anyone who has to perform a physical action requiring careful exercise, like shooting an arrow from a bow or handling a sword, seems ‘most perfect’ if ‘he nimbly and without thinking

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30 Ibid., I,26 (p. 127).
31 Ibid., I,26 (p. 128).
puts himself in an attitude of readiness, with such ease that his body and all his members seem to fall into that posture naturally and quite without effort. In short, the actions, gestures and movements of the perfect gentleman in his court appearances should be beautiful, pleasing and always marked by grace. They can become such only if they are the fruit of ‘study’ and ‘art’. But they should then be performed with absolute nonchalance, so as to appear simple, natural and true, and so spontaneous and as if ‘done by chance’.

Obviously, grace is also expressed in speech, when it has ‘ease and elegance’. But these two qualities alone are not enough. When describing an incident, the perfect courtier should manage to describe things so effectively ‘with his gestures as with his words’, that ‘those who hear him seem to see what is recounted happen before their eyes’. In addition, alternating where necessary ‘dignity and force’ with ‘simplicity and candour’, he will be able to arouse ‘those feelings that our souls have within’ and ‘kindle or move them as needed’, or ‘soften and almost intoxicate them with sweetness’. Even this, though, is not enough. When the courtier speaks and expresses himself, he should be able to adapt his action to ‘the place where he is doing it, those present, the time, the cause that impels him, his age, his profession, the object he has in view, and the means that may conduce thereto’.

In short, this vision of behaviour, where gestures and actions are marked by grace, art and ease, includes a way of speaking that can evoke things and images, the ability to arouse emotions and passions in those watching and listening, and the need to behave ‘in situation’, selecting gestures, actions and movements, modulating them and regulating their intensity, adapting them to different circumstances, which are determined by the quality and character of the people we are addressing as well as our intentions: the characteristics attributed to good acting in late-sixteenth-century theory.

It is also worth noting what happens when the perfect gentleman has to dress up to take part in games or celebrations, or when he wants to imitate someone to amuse those present. Dressing up, observes Castiglione, ‘brings with it a certain freedom and licence’, but should never conceal the person’s true nature. If a youth disguises himself as an old man he should have ‘his garments open’ so as to show ‘his vigour’, and a knight dressed up as a ‘rustic shepherd’ should mount a ‘perfect horse’ and be ‘gracefully bedecked’. Thus imitation should always be kept within certain confines, reveal the personality of the imitator, and never become a complete metamorphosis, or grace and loveliness would be destroyed. And this is all the more necessary when a real flesh-and-blood person is imitated for the amusement and entertainment of those present. In this case extreme caution should be used, without ever ‘descending into buffoonery, or going beyond bounds’.

On the other hand humour is in itself a danger that can compromise the grace and elegance of those who make use of it to amuse those present. In fact, laughter is

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32 Ibid., I,28 (p. 132).
33 Ibid., I,34 (pp. 144-145).
34 Ibid., II,49 (p. 271). See also II,43 (pp. 261-262).
36 Ibid., II,7 (p. 204).
38 Ibid., II,50 (p. 272).
almost always aroused by a ‘deformity’ or by ‘something unbecoming’. How, then, should a gentleman behave who exhibits himself in court circles, evoking comic situations or imitating ridiculous characters? He should avoid the solutions used by professional comics, of pulling faces, ‘weeping and laughing, imitating the voices’, or even ‘dressing up as a peasant in the presence of all’. All this, says Castiglione, is unseemly. Rather he should ‘steal’ from the professionals these ways of imitating, and then reduce them and refine them, and so maintain the dignity of a gentleman. The excessive, instinctive and impudent style of entertainers like Berto, a famous jester in the papal court, or of the most cultured and admired professional actors, who were invited to perform in aristocratic circles, should be replaced with a more moderate style making use of the allusive potential of gesture, so by ‘making movements in such a way that those hearing and watching our words and gestures imagine much more than what they see and hear, and so fall a-laughing’.

Professional Actors and the Commedia all’ Improvviso

Alongside the theatre, which had regained a kind of cultural legitimacy from the schools, the academies and the courts by the imitation of ancient models and the claims for the literary quality of dramatic writing, there was a galaxy of professional entertainers who earned a living exploiting their performing abilities. It was an extremely complex world that included court buffoons, mountebanks, acrobats, contortionists, story-tellers, musicians and street singers, as well as snake-oil salesmen and quacks who attracted an audience with short farcical scenes, imitations or stunts.

In the social consideration of the time these people were seen as hovering somewhere between beggars with some special talent and hucksters of dubious repute. Yet it also included some figures with a cultural background, itinerant scholars or men of letters, who had fallen from a more acceptable condition to that of street artist, like Poncelet de Montchauvet, who had once been a Carmelite friar, but who ended up in the early fifteenth century performing as a juggler and farce actor in the Parisian markets.

However discredited and ostracized, professional entertainers were trustees of spectacular techniques with important characteristics designed to obtain easy and certain effects, able to attract an audience and hold its attention, surprising it with the skill of their stunts, capturing it with an effective patter that could be adapted to any circumstances, or making it laugh, whether with leaps, pirouettes and somersaults, or with imitations, saucy quips and dialogues, full of casual vulgarity and often gloriously obscene.

In short, they were performances that even in their crudest forms were founded on some essential elements extraneous to humanist oratorical acting or the assumptions behind court performances: the direct contact with an audience, the absolute freedom of expression that allowed recourse to obscene language and grotesque deformations of the body and physical appearance, the ability to change their voice and features in ridiculous, burlesque, caricatured imitations, and above all

39 Ibid., II,46 (p. 266).
40 Ibid., II,50 (pp. 272-273).
the lack of any hierarchy among words, movement and body language as forms of expression.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries this complex of techniques would compete with the theatrical forms that had arisen from the literary imitation of classical models. The world of the professionals had soon come into contact with the theatrical experiments that had been carried out in literary circles. In Venice, for example, around 1430, some ‘histriones’ had been performing the *Corallaria* by Tito Livio de’ Frulovisi, a pupil of Guarino and a famous teacher of rhetoric, and it had given rise to some controversy. In the following decades, particularly in the early sixteenth century, the involvement of professional actors at events that included the performance of new plays as well as theatrical spectacles of every kind became more and more frequent. In this way some features of professional acting must have provided a sort of model that could, very cautiously indeed, be used by the amateurs involved in performing on the stages at court, in the academies or in some aristocratic homes. They were comic effects, characteristic forms of imitation of behaviour and gestures that the amateurs could adopt, or, in Castiglione’s words, ‘steal’, filtering them and moderating them in the interests of an elegant and decorous spectacle.

Later, however, many of these precautions fell before the attraction that the various forms of professional acting seemed to exercise. In the end these were used fairly directly and freely by some groups, companies or academies of gentlemen, bourgeois or artisans, who began to take up the theatre for amusement as plays became more widespread in the early sixteenth century. Sometimes they acquired sufficient fame to be in demand for celebrations or meetings.

Among these, the most important figure was undoubtedly Angelo Beolco, known as Ruzzante, a bourgeois of both means and culture, who had created a company and wrote and acted his works at the small Paduan court of the aristocrat Alvise Cornaro and in the cultured, aristocratic circles of Venice. The very humour of his texts, which were violently grotesque, obscene and outrageous, required a form of acting very different from the legitimate ones, whose elegance and decorum was certainly accepted by an exclusive audience. In February 1525, for example, he performed in Venice, the guest of a lavish evening of theatrical entertainment, and one distinguished witness, the learned aristocrat Marin Sanudo, observed how the actor acted the part of the peasant ‘most excellently’, adding, however, that the performance of the comedy, was ‘utterly lascivious and with filthy language’, and ‘was condemned’ by all.42

While the methods of professional acting were creeping in to the performances of amateurs, professional actors found in the forms of comedy something that could attract a large and varied public that could include both aristocrats and commoners. This meant that they appropriated the dramatic offerings that had been developed in literary circles for their own commercial purposes, removing them from the ceremonies of court and university and offering them to a paying audience.43 Thus in the second half of the sixteenth century some groups of actors were able to perform an extremely wide-ranging repertoire that included, alongside acrobatics, displays of

skill, dance and song, productions of comedies written in accordance with rules that were now well-established. But, above all, they had now prepared a particular genre of play, in which the elements of literary comedy were elaborated and adapted to the abilities and procedures of professional acting.

This was the *commedia all’improvviso*, which had no finished, written text, but just an outline, or *scenario*, which did no more than indicate how the situation developed scene by scene. Each actor decided his lines, varying them as he saw fit in different performances. The action made equal use of the effectiveness of the words used by the performers, and of the poses, gestures and movements, which could also become games of physical ability, leaps, pirouettes and somersaults.

There was an essentially fixed typology of characters in the mature period of *commedia all’improvviso*. Along with the lovers, a couple of young people who acted without masks and with limited physical activity, there were also the *Maschere* (stock characters), each of whom wore a leathern half-mask and a specific set costume, whose features identified a typical character, each with their own highly characterized and caricatured way of speaking and gesturing. The *Maschere* included servants (the *zanni* among which were to emerge figures like Harlequin or Brighella or Scapino), who used a generally comic language complete with extravagant gestures and spectacular displays of agility. Other *Maschere* were those of characters representing different social figures, such as the Capitano (a caricature of a soldier who is both braggart and coward), Pantalone (a caricature of a Venetian merchant) and the Dottore (a caricature of a pedantic, self-important Bolognese man of learning). Each actor tended to specialize in just one of these figures all his life, assimilating its basic stage features (bearing, gestures, ways of speaking and expressing himself), and then developing it with his own personal variations.

Although it was known as *commedia all’improvviso* as the actors did not perform fixed parts following a written text line by line, the improvisation of the performers had very precise limits. Unlike amateur actors, who performed only on special occasions, the professionals were constantly onstage, with any number of repeat performances of the shows in their repertoire. Even though the lines were not established by a complete literary text, they tended to be fixed in the countless performances of the same scenes. Comic effects and particularly effective pieces of dialogue were codified by use and could be transferred from one comedy to another. It was also customary for each actor to have a repertoire of monologues, aphorisms, or at least verbal interventions (known as *generici*) adapted so as to be included in typical, recurring situations, like, for example, the lament of the betrayed lover, the praise of the loved woman, the retort of a spurned lover, the derision of an ancient suitor, the reflections of a traveller who arrives in a new city or returns to his native land, or the reproaches made to a wayward son, and so on.

This meant that the actor built up his part by combining long-established pieces from the repertoire that were reworked and memorized (*generici* changed depending on circumstances, lines that were known to work, or gestures and movements for particular situations), adapting them to the requirements of the character, making his own creative contribution. 44 Of course, there could be variations during the

44 On the use of *generici* in the *commedia all’improvviso* see Tessari’s important reflections in ‘Il mercato delle Maschere’, pp. 162-165.
performance, but these were not so much extemporary inventions as reworked materials that were already known by heart.

The final result of this procedure led to a very special kind of acting. Gestures and verbal expressions were not confined to the limits of decorum, but could include freer, even vulgar and obscene language, and above all could amply exploit the resources of the actor’s physical, acrobatic, mimic and imitative abilities. In addition, the character’s personality and behaviour were not a mainly literary creation that was put onstage through the declamation of a written text, suitably decorated with appropriate gestures. It was something that had been constructed by the actor himself, who had over the years assimilated the characteristic features – ways of expression, attitudes, movements, vocal inflexions – of a particular figure, and then put them into action for the audience, showing his typical reactions to the different situations in which he found himself. All this was in perfect harmony with the interventions and inventions of the other actors, who were part of the same company. The expression of character was thus an immediate fusion of gesture and words, physical and verbal language, which had equal importance in the development of the action. And, no longer anchored to the words of a pre-existing literary text, this action seemed to have an immediate, improvised spontaneity.

The modes and figures of this type of comedy were to spread rapidly in Europe via the tournées of companies of Italian actors, and were to exercise a profound influence on the development of French, English, German and Spanish theatre. In Italy the particular character of this form of professional acting was perfectly perceived by the cultural consciousness of the time. Around 1550 Anton Francesco Grazzini, known as ‘Il Lasca’, celebrated in verse the virtues of a company of professionals led by a Florentine actor, Benedetto Cantinella, and insisted on the skill of their ‘acts, ways, gestures, voice’, contrasting their acting with that of actors who bored the audience by submerging them ‘in long discourses without any pleasure’.45

Men of letters, however, reacted with horror to the success of professional performances, precisely for fear that comedy as a literary work performed so as to bring out the verbal composition of the text would be replaced by a dangerous surrogate that attracted the audience by using tools extraneous to literature. ‘Squalid and mercenary’ people, wrote Giovan Battista Guarini in his Compendio della poesia tragicomica, have ‘contaminated’ comedy, ‘taking here and there for filthy lucre excellent poems that once used to crown their authors with glory’, while Niccolò Rossi in his Discorsi intorno alla Comedia, of 1589, made quite clear that he would not consider the works acted by people who brought onstage zanni, Pantalone ‘and similar clowns’ as plays.46 As for the specific forms of acting, the literary reaction stubbornly opposed the forms of professional acting with a style founded exclusively on the display of a written text, to the point that, as Pino da Cagli claimed in 1572, those performing a play should not be called ‘actors’, but simply ‘speakers’, able to

entertain the audience with the fine way in which they expressed ‘the beauty of the speeches’.47

**The Revival of Religious Opposition and the Actor’s New Status**

Towards the mid sixteenth century, performances of the humanist comedies by scholars, the custom of play-acting at the courts and aristocratic homes, and the development of professional theatre had, then, generated different forms of theatre acting, which partly conflicted with and partly influenced each other. Alongside the form of oratorical declamation inspired by the precepts of Cicero and Quintilian, there was acting based on grace, elegance and ease, following the models of court behaviour, while the professionals had developed a technique of acting disengaged from the written text, which exalted the actor’s creative resources and gave physical business, mime and gesture the same importance as the word.

In this complex context of inter-related acting techniques and trends, there was fresh thinking in the second half of the sixteenth century on the actor’s art. But in its early days the theoretical debate had already been influenced by a particularly important phenomenon that was to have a profound impact on the life of the theatre in the following centuries. In the first decades of the sixteenth century the theatrical profession had ended up attracting more and more cultured people from the bourgeoisie who had had experience of amateur theatricals, ex-students impoverished by the economic crisis that had hit Italy and were reduced to the trade of the comic actor, and also ‘honest courtesans’, high-grade prostitutes who had the entrée to sophisticated circles and were able to play instruments, sing and compose verse with equal skill.48 At the same time the professionals began to set up groups with clear legal guarantees, and at least in the most fortunate cases they no longer found themselves in a state of beggary or uncertain, irregular earnings, but in the condition of an organized commercial business that could exploit the possibilities of the market that had been created as performances became more widespread.

Around the end of the sixteenth century, then, professional theatre had changed, the people working in it were not uneducated, and it was able to provide plays that had assimilated some of the elements of the standard comedy of the literary tradition. The actors in the most famous and prestigious companies began to aspire to claiming a social and cultural dignity for their profession.

This aspiration, however, came up against two obstacles. The literary men, as we have seen, saw dangerous competition in the spread of the professional performers, and were also absolutely determined to maintain their activity and their condition as scholars rigorously separated from a profession that had traditionally been stained by ill-repute. In addition, religious opposition to the diabolical art of the theatre, in the ferment of the Protestant reform and then in the Catholic counter-reform, had

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acquired new polemical vigour, retrieving many of the arguments used by the ancient
Christian writers.

Actually, few authors, Catholic or Protestant, claimed that the theatre was
absolutely illegitimate. Initially both had used it as a tool of religious propaganda
against the other side, and while the Council of Trent, which ended in 1563, had
taken a series of particularly severe measures to strengthen church discipline in the
face of the spread of Protestant reform, it had expressed no condemnation of actors.
Following Thomas Aquinas’ teaching, the art of the theatre was regarded as
‘indifferent’ – good or bad depending on the individual case; reprehensible when it
was used to attack or scorn morals or religion, but useful and praiseworthy when it
celebrated or at least respected the values of Christian doctrine.49

Thus, the attitude of the papacy in the following decades was broadly tolerant,
refraining from any radical condemnation even in the periods of greatest rigour. It
was no accident that the Rituale Romanum published by Paul V in 1614, defining the
rules for excluding particular categories of sinners from the sacraments (like
prostitutes, concubines, usurers, magicians, witches and blasphemers) made no
mention at all of actors and actresses.

Among Catholics, however, opposition to the theatre had its stronghold in the
diocese of Milan, where Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, who oversaw it from 1565 to
1584, took up an attitude of absolute intransigence, dusting down bans and
condemnations of plays as the ‘school of indecency and lust’.50 He admonished
magistrates to run out of town ‘players, mimes and all other lost men of this kind’
and to admonish ‘inkeepers and anyone else’ who gave them hospitality. Preachers
were exhorted to use the arguments ‘of Tertullian, St Cyprian Martyr, Salvianus and
Chrysostom’ to demonstrate ‘the damage and disaster to the public’ that
‘performances and things of this kind’ caused the people of Christ.51

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the liveliest opposition in the Protestant
world came from the English Puritans, who saw in the attraction of theatres a
reflection of the hated pomp of the Catholic liturgy, an agent to corrupt the faithful
through the sensory wiles of Satan’s displays, which contrasted with the rigour and
simplicity that should characterize the just and pure of heart.52 An authentically
Christian rigour and simplicity of manner were also very obviously negated in the
work of the actor, who concealed and distorted his true nature onstage, pretended
and dressed up for the sake of dishonest gain.53 No less important was concern that
professional actors might provide formidable competition for preachers, particularly
as all attempts to justify the theatre insisted on its capacity not only to delight wide

49 See J. Dubu, Les églises chrétiennes et le théâtre (1550-1850), Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de
50 Carlo Borromeo, Homily of July 17, 1583, quoted in La fascinazione del teatro, ed. by F. Taviani, Roma,
Bulzoni, 1969, p. 33.
51 Carlo Borromeo, Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis, Milano, Officina typographica Pacifici Pontii 1599,
quoted in La fascinazione del teatro, pp. 11-13.
52 See C. Rice, Ungodly Delights. Puritan Opposition to the Theatre, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 1997,
pp. 17-36.
53 The argument was used with great vigour above all by Stephen Gosson, ex playwright, in Plays
confuted in Five Actions, London, Imprinted for Thomas Gosson, 1582, Sig E5. There is a detailed
account of the perception of the actor’s art as one of counterfeiting, simulating and lying in the anti-
theatre writings of Puritan authors in J. Barish, The Antitheatrical Prejudice, Berkeley, Los Angeles,
sections of the public, but also to instruct them and correct their vices. Hence the scandalized insistence on at least banning plays on feast days as they threatened the presence of the faithful at religious ceremonies and might distract them from pious practices.

Yet theatrical performances were not only staged by mimes and strolling players who enticed the masses for the sake of gain. They were also to be found in the protected circles of the courts, which were hard to censure, and were used in schools and colleges to develop mastery of Latin and allow the pupils to practise the techniques of eloquence, both in Lutheran Germany and in England, France and Italy. In some cases, as in the Jesuit-run schools, theatrical activity was given particular care and attention.

Thus much of the anti-theatre propaganda was willing to admit clear exceptions. Silvio Antoniano, a friend and close collaborator of Carlo Borromeo, claimed that acting was useful for educating children – on condition, obviously, that the events depicted were of an edifying nature and women did not take part ‘apart from some old matrons of exemplary holiness’.54 In England too some authors who raged against the theatre were willing to make allowances for it in particular settings and circumstances, as in schools, where a teacher might occasionally stage performances with his pupils, as long as he adopted all the necessary precautions: the text had to be in Latin, fine and showy sets were not allowed, and above all it was not to be performed in public, and still less made the occasion for gain.55

These concessions for school recitals and amateur performances in strictly private places certainly did nothing to help the professionals however, who could not limit themselves to unpaid performances in Latin, with only mature ladies of exemplary virtue allowed onstage. Indeed, the admission of amateur and school drama ended up reinforcing the condemnation of every form of professional theatre. Plays were essentially the devil’s tool, aimed at seducing and depraving actors and audience. Handled with extreme caution by trained, virtuous people, it might also lose its perverted potentiality and be used for decent purposes. But those who exploited the theatre only for economic gain were obviously going to encourage all its powers of attraction and temptation, reinforcing its destructive effects.

In the perspective of Catholic and Protestant culture, the professional comic actors were therefore involved in immoral activity that brought with it an immoral, indecent, scandalous and vagabond life, not unlike sexual promiscuity. Their performances were designed only to attract the public as easily and quickly as possible, were constantly obscene and scurrilous, and concentrated on reprehensible themes and situations, particularly love intrigues, providing a school in the arts of seduction. The onstage action also set off emotional reactions and passions that disturbed the minds of the audience, overcoming all moral resistance. One need only observe, wrote the future Bishop of Rheims and confessor of Cardinal Mazarin,


55 See John Northbrooke, A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine plays, or Enterluds, with other idle pastimes, etc., commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reproved by the Authoritie of the word of God and antient writers; London, Imprinted by H. Bynneman for G. Bishop, 1577, Sig L2’.
Francesco Maria del Monaco in 1621, ‘the faces of the spectators, their eyes’, one need only interpret their ‘sighs and nods’ to realize how spellbound they were.56

The presence of actresses contributed to all this. The mere appearance of flesh-and-blood women was clearly a manifest source of temptation, but it was their manner, their poses and gestures that ended up irresistibly ensnaring the audience. Another Catholic author wrote that their words ‘are also accompanied by movements of the person, glances, sighs, sneers, and (what cannot be said without blushing) embraces and more still that can be seen on the public stage from these infernal furies’.57 It was no better if the actresses did not play amorous parts, but limited themselves to simple displays of skill. In his monumental work, Della christiana moderatione del teatro, of 1652, the Jesuit Gian Domenico Ottonelli declared that it was unseemly when ‘these young females’ in performing leaps ‘and many wonderful feats gracefully’ appear on the stage ‘bending, twisting and palpitating their bodies with lewd and extravagant gestures and positions, and occasion a thousand libidinous thoughts in the minds of the weak’.58 The dexterity of the actresses’ art, combined with the allure of the performance, appeared such as to be able to change reality before the audience’s eyes, and by a trick traditionally attributed to the devil’s powers of temptation, actually made attractive what is repugnant. Significantly, even ‘old, ugly’ comic actresses posing ‘with grace and artifice’ could seem ‘beautiful’, and please so much as to lead to sinning ‘with consent in the theatre, and again outside the theatre in memory’.59

Improving the professional theatre by suppressing its sinful aspects thus seemed a difficult if not desperate task, and the proposals to this end were extremely cautious and above all aware that a radical change would be required. It was absolutely necessary that comics assumed a decent and sober manner, and performed without recourse to obscene and vulgar words and gestures. Women were not to appear before an audience, Ottonelli wrote, but could just be mentioned. At most a female voice might be heard offstage, without the actress showing herself to the public.60 It was also indispensable to subject comedies to painstaking censorship beforehand, of both the text and the actions, gestures and movements that would be used. This was clearly impossible for the commedie all’improvviso, and so it would be more advisable to ban them completely.61

To justify their human and professional dignity and the cultural value of their work in the face of opposition from literary men and religious condemnations, professional actors thus had to adopt a characteristic strategy. First of all they tried to make a rigorous distinction between the category of actors who could perform plays

56 Francesco Maria del Monaco, In actores et spectatores commediarum nostri temporis paranuesis, Padova, Typis Laurentii Pasquati, 1621, reprinted in La fascinazione del teatro, p. 209.
57 Cesare Franciotti, Il giovane cristiano, Venezia, Bernardo Giunti, 1611, reprinted in La fascinazione del teatro, p. 178.
59 Ibid., p. 333. See also p. 373.
60 Ibid., p. 395.
61 Ibid., p. 521. The impossibility of allowing professional performances, as their improvised nature made them uncontrollable, had already been underlined by Cardinal Gabriello Paleotti in Scrittura fatta per suo ordine nella quale si pongono in vista alcune ragioni contro agli Spettacoli Teatrali, sent to Rome in 1578. The document is reprinted in La fascinazione del teatro, pp. 39-40.
and works of quality, and the ill-famed race of low-level entertainers, clowns, street jugglers, and second-rate performers of crude, vulgar scenes, who lived from hand to mouth by attracting the credulous. In the words of the early seventeenth-century actor, Pier Maria Cecchini, one of the most representative actors of the time, they were ‘the infamous players’, who, claimed a little later Giovan Battista Andreini, another important figure in the theatrical scene of the time, ‘utter a thousand vulgarities and indecencies’, and stain ‘the chaste ears of their hearers’. An actor worthy of the name should avoid ‘filthy words’, ‘immodest and lewd acts’, and any insult or mockery that might harm people.\(^62\)

To distinguish themselves from the clowns and mountebanks, then, they had first of all to eliminate all forms of obscenity from their acting, and then present their work as inspired by love of virtue. This also led to some involuntarily comic effects, as in the oration published by a famous actor, Adriano Valerini, on the death of the celebrated Vincenza Armani, in which we read that she had devoted herself to the theatre ‘to purge corrupt people of their vices’, depicting the ways men lived ‘as in a mirror’ that could reveal their errors and so inflame them ‘to a praiseworthy life’.\(^63\)

But this was not enough. It was also necessary to demonstrate that the actor’s ability is not inferior to that of the writer, and so in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries some famous actors set about publishing materials concerning their profession, speeches, prologues, dialogues and plays. Above all they justified the ‘literary’ quality of their acting. According to Adriano Valerini, when Armani improvised scenes on the stage ‘the results were much better than those of the most expert authors who wrote after due consideration’.\(^64\)

There thus emerged an image of the actor dignified by his relation to the profession of the writer. Acting worthy of the name, freed of obscenity, but also of the tricks and expedients of street entertainers, tended to assume the mantle of oratory. Not only was Armani presented as a figure in full possession of the Latin language, but his main gift was that of eloquence, in which he surpassed all ancient and modern orators.\(^65\) Imitating Cicero’s eloquence’, wrote Tommaso Garzoni in his *Piazza universale*, Armani ‘put the comic art in competition with oratory’.\(^66\) When an actor performs, Andreini claimed shortly after, he is simply an ‘orator’.\(^67\) The consequence is obvious. The low ‘players’, the category of entertainers which real actors must absolutely distinguish themselves from, were those who made use only of physical dexterity, use ‘their hands and their throats’, move ‘the mouth and other members in strange, distorted, changed ways’, while authentic acting ‘was wholly

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\(^{63}\) Adriano Valerini, *In morte della Divina Signora Vincenza Armani, Comica Eccellentissima*, Verona, Bastian dalle Donne, & Giovanni Fratelli, 1570, reprinted in *La professione del teatro*, p. 34.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 35.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., pp. 33-34.


averse’ from ‘playing games’ and consisted wholly ‘in the beauty of the arguments and the beautiful manner of the speakers’. 68

In short it was the aura of oratory, the requirement to make a speech that could arouse the emotions of those present, maintaining a sober and elegant manner with restrained and rigorous gestures, that guaranteed the loftiness of the performance. And this requirement was to have a decisive influence on later developments in theory. The free and creative gestures, the resources of the acrobat, displays of dexterity, and ostentatious mimic ability in immediately effective comic effects that had characterized professional acting compared with the erudite style of the humanists and the gracious and elegant manner of the court amateurs – that kind of acting, in short, that the church had already identified centuries previously as the unequivocal tool of the devil – would be substantially suppressed for more than three centuries in reflections on the actor’s art. At the same time many of the most famous performers from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century would continue to use these techniques bringing them to hitherto unknown levels of perfection.

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68 Giovan Battista Andreini, Dialogo fra Momo e la Verità, pp. 482-483.
III
THE EARLY ITALIAN TREATISES
AND THE THEORETICAL ACTING MODEL

The Academicians Establish the First Rules of Acting. Giraldi Cintio’s “Discorsi”

The first sketch of a theory of acting was not to originate from the professional comic actors but in the academy, where in the mid-sixteenth century debate was developing on Aristotle’s *Poetics* and attempts to fix the rules of composition for literary works were multiplying. In 1554 there appeared the *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi* and the *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie* by Giambattista Giraldi Cintio, an eminent intellectual and the author of various tragedies, who held a prominent position in Ercole II d’Este’s court at Ferrara. Like many of his colleagues Giraldi Cintio too combined the writing of theatrical texts with theoretical thinking, and this had two results. The works composed could be exhibited as concrete examples demonstrating the validity of the rules developed from Aristotle, and these were the most effective tool the author had to justify and defend his literary works from adverse criticism.

From this viewpoint, judging the worth of a comedy or tragedy obviously did not require seeing how effective it was onstage. It was enough to evaluate it on the page to check its perfection in the light of the established rules. Giraldi Cintio himself had staged his tragedy, *Orbecche*, at Ferrara in his own home in 1541. But he was firmly convinced of the absolute artistic autonomy of the theatrical text: the written work should produce all its effects on the reader without need of help from the staging. It should possess, he claimed, ‘by its words alone, a hidden capacity that can move the feelings of the reader even without being performed’.

Yet, unlike most of the men of letters, Giraldi Cintio did not think that this meant that a theatrical performance was without interest. It was rather a form of aesthetic experience close to that of the literary enjoyment of the text, but of a different kind. Its effectiveness depended essentially on the correct use of the tools of the stage, which included acting – to the point that, he claimed in a passage that became canonical among scholars of sixteenth-century theatrical theory, if we consider our experience of performances, ‘it is better for a well performed story of inferior quality to appear onstage, than an excellent one with cold and mediocre actors’.

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3 Ibid. The passage is obviously a new take on Quintilian’s reflection that a fine performance of a mediocre text has an effect on the audience far superior to a badly acted performance of an excellent text (*Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,4-5).
But what were the rules that made for effective acting? Here Giraldi Cintio had no choice. The foundations of these criteria could be found only in the existing, widespread theoretical apparatus, which meant Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the similar doctrine of Horace’s *Ars poetica*, and the treatises of Cicero and Quintilian. But in the cultural climate of the time the *Poetics* was the basis for the rules for literary composition, while the works of Cicero and Quintilian dealt specifically with oratory. This had two important consequences. The theory of acting could only be the application in a different field of the same principles that regulated the creation of the literary text, and to discuss the specific tools of the actor – the use of body, gestures and voice – one could only take as one’s model the orator. This created the premises that stage professionals would then exploit towards the end of the century to justify the nobility and cultural quality of their art.

In fact Giraldi Cintio’s rules regulating the conception of characters, in the sense of types representing precise political, generational, social, economic or professional categories, were rigorously Aristotelian. Each type corresponded to a series of features, certain traits of character, and a range of passions and behaviour that belong to it. These data, coherently connected for each figure, seem fixed in a pre-ordained and constant typology that could not be deviated from.

Kings and Queens should be full of majesty […] shepherds should be rough, shepherd girls simple and artless, youths shrewd and cunning […] servants generally pusillanimous and fraudulent, maidens bashful and shy, soldiers brave and threatening.

An experienced captain should be brave and courageous, and a woman timid and modest […] If a captain is presented as cowardly and timid, and a woman as brave and fierce, it will be improper, and an example of ill-breeding, because it will be outside the nature of both of them.

The features of a character’s personality also determine his way of acting and speaking, to the point of defining the natural connotations of his voice:

Let the young speak like the young, the old like the old […] A low-born young man and one of royal blood will speak differently, and the prudence of an old King will be different from that of a father.

[If the actor recites] the love scenes with rough, harsh and unpleasing voice, he will not arouse the compassion of the listeners, but will offend their ears.

The actor’s task is thus to render onstage a typical figure, with the appropriate manners and behaviour, and in this sense his ‘gestures, movements, voice and, last of all, action must be suited to the part he is playing’. He should also, however, be able to act ‘in situation’, modelling the behaviour and expressive manner of his character in relation to his particular circumstances, the intentions that move him in the

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4 Ibid., p. 6.
7 Ibid., p. 95
8 Ibid., p. 117.
9 Ibid.
various scenes of the play, and the other characters he addresses. All these elements, without obscuring his essential character, determine its various forms of expression.

Because one speaks to a King in one way, and to a gentleman in another. And a King will reply differently to another King than to his vassal, or to another minor prince. And he will speak differently with his soldiers to rouse them to battle, differently to calm a people that has taken up arms. And a captain will speak differently to another captain, and so it will be with other kinds of person, according to blood, honour, dignity, the authority they have, and according to place and time.10

And here arose, at least in theory, a first difficulty. A stock character has a precise and limited range of passions and expressive forms. When he deviates from them he betrays his exemplary ‘nature’: a captain cannot be timid, nor a woman brave, and still less fierce. What happens then when the situation is such as to require of the character behaviour and emotional reactions that do not belong to how the rules describe his figure? When, in short, observes Giraldi Cintio, ‘accidents’ intervene that ‘make the fierce become humble, the lewd temperate, the timid bold and the bold timid’?11 Achilles is an example: in the last book of the Iliad his terrible, cruel nature seems to change, and become compassionate towards Priam, who has come to ask for Hector’s body. In actual fact, however, there is no solution. The only expedient is to let the character remain for a short while in the emotional disposition that is not his, bringing him quickly back to the behaviour that characterizes his nature.12 The rigidity of the typology that assigns each character a predetermined series of emotional reactions does not allow exceptions.

Yet in the Discorsi the problem essentially concerns the poet and must be solved in the writing of the play. It does not concern the actor, who should merely reproduce onstage the distinctive features of the character, depicting each time as clearly as possible the different emotional reactions and behaviour proper to the situations in which he is placed. If he performs this task suitably, his performance seems to have ‘grace’ and ‘decorum’, which ‘is no more than what suits the places, times and people’ and ‘the nature of who is acting, and who is speaking’.13 Decorum in this sense was for Giraldi Cintio the fundamental principle of acting. Violating it meant compromising the effectiveness of the action and courting disaster, as happens, for example, in the performance of tragedies when the actor is unable to assume an elevated tone and a manner suited to the particular nature of the character, tries to make the audience weep and instead ‘provokes laughter where he should be causing tears’.14 It was the same criterion – respect for decorum – that justified the condemnation of the ‘zanni and other foolish persons’ who sought to provoke mirth acting ‘with lewd and filthy manners, impertinences, indecent acts and

10 Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, Discorso intorno al componere dei romanzi, p. 75.
11 Ibid., p. 77.
12 See ibid. and Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, Discorso intorno al componere delle comedie e delle tragedie, p. 92.
13 Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, Discorso intorno al componere dei romanzi, p.74, and Discorso intorno al componere delle comedie e delle tragedie, p. 91. The need to suit the gestures, actions and expressions of the characters to the imaginary situations of the play also require, as Cintio explains elsewhere, that when the actors perform they ignore the audience, behaving as if it were not there (Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, Scritti contro la Canace: Giudizio ed Epistola latina, ed. by C. Roaf, Bologna, Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1982, pp. 112-113).
14 Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, Discorso intorno al componere delle comedie e delle tragedie, p. 117.
words, and with other unseemly behaviour'. These acts and gestures were not only unbecoming in themselves, but above all ‘forced’ and introduced inopportune into the story being acted, while all the elements of the performance should be ‘unsought, unsolicited, unaffected’, but produced ‘by the thing itself, with such ability and so delicately as to seem natural’.15

Finally we need to consider the specific tools of the actor, who represents the character and his behaviour, using voice, gestures and movements – as Giraldi Cintio says, everything that Cicero describes as ‘the eloquence of the body’.16 Acting in this sense was simply the actio of ancient oratory, following the rules in Cicero and Quintilian. Voice and movements had to be articulated with particular attention to ‘measure’, the effects that could be obtained by raising and lowering the tones and varying the rhythms.17 He mentions the passage in which Cicero recalls how when Gracchus delivered a speech, he used to keep a musician hidden near him who gave him the necessary note with his instrument to regulate the tonality of his voice. In our day, adds Giraldi Cinto, ‘I too have known preachers who had companions in the pulpit, and with the pitch of the notes they showed them how to raise and lower the voice for the pleasure of those who heard them’.18

What mattered above all, however, was the golden rule of classical oratory. The actor had to depict in himself the passions he wanted to impress on the audience, using ‘decorous movements of the back, the hands and the whole body’: otherwise the expressions he assumed would remain inert, ‘cold’ and ‘ineffective’, and it would be impossible to obtain the essential effect of ‘feigning’ the characters and their actions so effectively, so ‘delicately’, that ‘they seem real’.19

While Giraldi Cintio was the first of the men of letters to concern himself with acting, all his thoughts on the subject were limited to a few passages, almost incidental reflections as part of a piece on composing the literary texts of comedies and tragedies. The full perception of theatrical performance as something worthy of careful and detailed study developed in the cultivated circles of the courts and academies only in the following decades. In 1570 Ludovico Castelvetro was the first to criticize a passage of Aristotle’s Poetics in his Poetica di Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta, claiming that theatrical performance was necessary, as only onstage could the written play be fully effective.20

In the literary text, wrote Castelvetro, ‘performance is not an additional factor, but a necessary part of it’, and tragedy cannot be fully effective ‘if we do not see the action’, because the tragic composition ‘was designed to delight and be understood by the judicious and by the ignorant: which it does very easily when it is performed

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15 Ibid., p. 116 and p. 119.
16 Ibid., p. 57. See also Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi, p. 181.
17 Ibid. See Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, IX,4,10-13.
18 Ibid. See Cicero, De oratore, III,225.
19 Ibid., p. 110.
20 It was the famous passage in which Aristotle claims that the theatrical ‘fable’, quite apart ‘from the effect of seeing it performed onstage, must be constructed in such a way that even those who only hear the facts of the events being narrated receive from the sequence of these facts a shiver of terror and a sense of pity’ (Poetics, 1543b).
with all its devices’. A mere reading not only is not understood by the ignorant, but cannot even exercise its full effect on the cultivated members of the audience.  

The consequence is clear. If performance is the most suitable way of bringing out the full effect of a theatrical piece, then when the poet writes a comedy or tragedy, he should bear in mind the requirements of staging. If he does not, he compromises the result of his work. And so, towards the end of the century, another man of letters, Angelo Ingegneri, in his treatise *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche*, published at Ferrara in 1598, could assign a precise duty to those who were exerting themselves to compose theatrical texts:

> It would therefore be good that the poet who writes a dramatic work first of all imagined the scene before his eyes, establishing the buildings, the perspectives, the streets and all that is required for the event he intends to imitate; and that he imagined it so well that no character could enter without the author seeing where he comes from, nor make a move or speak a word without the author seeing it or hearing it in his mind.  

Thus, in the very act of writing the text, the poet must imagine how it would be performed onstage, and ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the actors moving and speaking as they interpret the characters. Ingegneri, moreover, had thought deeply both about literary composition and stage performance. Man of letters and academic, he had directed the performance of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* that had inaugurated the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza in March 1585. The inauguration had been a genuine cultural event, carefully prepared and organized by a group of intellectuals interested in every aspect of the art of theatre. This experience, as well as the intense polemics that had raged for years on the forms and genres of dramatic composition, led to the reflections that Angelo Ingegneri set down in his treatise of 1598.

The title, with its proclaimed intention to discuss both representational poetry and ‘the manner of representing’ stage fables was in itself a novelty and demonstrated the increased interest in thinking about the problems of staging. But the greater importance attributed to the performance did not in itself change the way of theorizing about acting. The conceptual apparatus that Giraldi Cintio had set out almost half a century earlier remained more or less intact and the sources were still the same: Aristotle on the one side, and on the other Cicero and Quintilian.

For Angelo Ingegneri too, the actors must represent typical figures distinguished ‘by sex, age, condition and profession’.

23 They must also use all the physical means available – voice, gestures and movements – carefully following the precepts of oratorical *actio*. Facial expressions became particularly important, and so, as Cicero had already suggested, the use of masks was to be avoided.  

As for the voice, Ingegneri then explains that it should vary in quantity and quality, depending on what is to be expressed, ‘full, simple and joyful’ in prosperity, ‘forthright’ in dispute, ‘terrible, broken and harsh’ in anger, ‘pleasant and subdued in satisfying others’, ‘firm


23 Ibid., p. 29.

24 See ibid., p. 28. See also Cicero, *De oratore*, III,221.
and sweet’ in promising and consoling, ‘pliant and faint’ in commiseration, ‘swollen and splendid’ in the grand passions – all of them suggestions taken wholesale from a passage in Quintilian. 25 The description of the gestures is also codified by the simple transcription of some passages of the *Institutio oratoria* that underline the need to suit the gesture to the word, the importance of the gaze, and the importance of eyes and gestures following the same direction, except in cases when the character condemns something or expresses repulsion. 26

Lastly, in following these rules the actor must never fall into affectation ‘which is always bad’. And his expressions, gestures and manners must not only be well regulated, natural and ‘credible’, but also able to display the character’s impulses of passion, ‘as the player cannot move the spectator’s soul without them’. 27

So far, Angelo Ingegneri was not departing from the previous positions of Giraldi Cinto. The only novelty in his *Discorso* – and a very important one – concerned an aspect of character portrayal, which should be both realistic and idealized. If, he says, the stage presentation closely follows the facts of the real world, the effect on the audience is greater. That is why the sets should reproduce as far as possible authentic, recognizable places: a tragedy set in Rome should ‘show the Campidoglio, the Great Palace, and the main temples and buildings’, a comedy, the Pantheon, the Tiber ‘and something else indicated that identifies the city’ – because ‘the closer things are to the truth’, the greater the audience’s emotion. 28

The same principle also applies to acting, which should avoid anything contrary to the most obvious customs of real life. It is unacceptable for a character to remain inert with nothing to say or do, and to stand for an hour in front of the audience ‘without speaking, or listening to the others who speak’. 29 In the same way a character who has to recite a soliloquy, and so has to speak for a long time alone onstage, is a nuisance. It is permissible only in very few cases, strictly justified by the circumstances of the story: when, for example, the character must pretend to be mad, or when he is struck ‘by some powerful passion’. 30

Yet the theatre should represent things not as they actually are, but as they ought ‘fittingly to be’, explains Ingegneri, which means how nature would have formed them if it had not been in some way ‘impeded’ by the accidental nature of the real world. A prince who has been given the power to ‘dominate others’ should ideally be an excellent person in every respect and of special virtue, and excellence of soul should be visibly reflected in the features of the body, which would thus appear ‘the most beautiful, the tallest and the best formed of all’.

Now, even though this happens relatively rarely in life, onstage the character of a prince must in any case seem to fit the ideal of a prince, and, to do this, it is best to use all the artifices available. When the actor is too short one can, for example, use particular footwear, or ‘clogs’, to raise his stature. Indeed, it would be better to use clogs to make the height of all the characters proportionate with the dignity of their condition, scaling their stature from the most distinguished figure to the most

26 See ibid., p. 31. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,2,67 and 70,75.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., p. 8.
29 Ibid., p. 18.
humble. In this way the theatrical representation would reflect a correct, perfected image of reality, bringing out for each character the features of the ideal type in all their precision.\textsuperscript{31}

In this perspective the gestures and manners of the actor – whatever the part he is playing – should appear precisely regulated, filtered and polished in relation to the behaviour of people in daily life. Otherwise it could not render the superior ‘exemplary nature’ of the theatrical figure compared with the simple individuals that populate the human world. And it is the ability to regulate voice and gestures so as to reproduce adequately onstage the ideal perfection of the image represented that generates the decorum that makes the actor’s performance beautiful and pleasing. Decorum, claims Ingegneri, ‘is so powerful, that, when it is there, it renders things wonderfully pleasing, even those that are by nature ugly and disgusting; and where it is lacking, it makes even the most beautiful and honoured things displeasing and unwelcome’.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Leone de’ Sommi’s “Dialoghi” and Theory Based on Stage Experience}

The writings of Giraldi Cintio and Angelo Ingegneri, then, show how acting theory in the late sixteenth century developed around two basic convictions: the need to depict characters as ideal types representing various human categories, and the identification of the actor’s work with the \textit{actio} of classical oratory. We find these convictions again, at least in part, in the first real treatise on acting, written by Leone de’ Sommi, a Mantuan Jew and author of poems, pastoral fables and comedies, a member of the Accademia degli Invaghiti, and above all producer of plays and festivities at the Court of the Gonzaga family, where there was a company organized by the Jewish community. His familiarity with the world of professional theatre is certain: in 1567 he asked the Duke of Mantua to obtain the exclusive rights to provide a space where ‘those who act for payment’ could be seen. In exchange he promised to supply two sacks of wheat each year ‘to the poor of the Misericordia’.

On a date that was also probably in the late 1560s de’ Sommi wrote his \textit{Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche}. The third dialogue was entirely on ‘precepts on acting, and costumes, and all that generally pertains to the players’.\textsuperscript{33} And while Giraldi Cintio and Angelo Ingegneri were directly influenced by the idea of tragic acting in their reflections, de’ Sommi dealt explicitly with the performance of comedy and showed a cautious openness towards the more free-and-easy ways of professional theatre. He thus allowed the possibility of recourse to ‘a few lewd remarks’ that might immediately involve the audience and ‘keep awake those who fell asleep’ when ‘learned saws’ and ‘exemplary speeches’ were pronounced onstage, and also regarded it as essential for those playing the part of a servant to be able, when

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., pp. 28-29.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 31.
\textsuperscript{33} Leone de’ Sommi, \textit{Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche}, ed. by F. Marotti, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1968, p. 5. All the available information on de’ Sommi and his work, and on the dating of the \textit{Dialoghi}, which another theory regards as being written around the 1580s, can be found in the critical apparatus to this edition, edited by F. Marotti (see the three sections of the ‘Introduzione’, pp. xv-1xxiii and the ‘Nota sulla datazione’, pp. 77-79).
necessary, to ‘make an elegant leap’. But the underlying theoretical outlook did not change.

For de’ Sommi too the characters are representative figures who should indicate the qualities natural to their ‘age, degree and profession’. Each of these figures has precise traits of character. A servant should be shown as ‘mischievous and astute’, a maidservant as ‘self-assured and cunning’, an old man as ‘suspicious and avaricious’, while it would be unacceptable to apply these qualities to a young gentleman or a well-born student. It was also necessary to show onstage images of the characters not as they might be in real life, but, ‘as Aristotle says’, as they should be, as perfectly as possible. Yet a few exceptions were allowed. It might seem ‘delightful’ to introduce a doctor who was more interested in money than in his patients’ health, or a lawyer who betrays a client, and so on.

In this way the typology of characters became more flexible than the rigid rules fixed by Giraldi Cintio: the recurrent figures, representative of social, professional or generational categories, and the underlying moral qualities might be combined in different ways, on condition, of course, that both seemed exemplary. The doctor would have to be depicted according to the set, external image of the doctor, with his characteristic physical features, and the way of speaking and moving traditionally attributed to him, just as greed would have to be shown as clearly greed, with the gestures and expressions that the audience had always imagined it as having. On the other hand, at least as regards the physical features of the characters, de’ Sommi does not seem to allow exceptions: their appearance must imitate as perfectly as possible ‘the status’ that they represent, and so the lover must be handsome, the soldier ‘brawny’, the parasite ‘fat’, the servant ‘quick-witted’, and in the same way an old man’s voice cannot have a youthful tonality, or a woman’s be deep. And when the actor’s physical features do not correspond to the typical way the character is represented, one can, at least to a certain extent, use make-up, ‘dying a beard, painting a scar, adding pale or yellow cheeks, or creating an appearance of vigour, ruddiness, weakness or darkness’.

Thus prepared, the actor must then perform onstage, and once again there is the canonical reference to Cicero and his definition of the actio of oratory as ‘eloquence of the body’. But unlike Giraldi Cintio and Ingegneri, Leone de’ Sommi does not simply set down a few precepts from the De oratore or the Institutio oratoria, but bases himself mainly on his own observations and experience of the stage. As regards the voice, for example, he does not bother to repeat the theory of varying the tonality taken from Giraldi Cintio or the list of the different qualities of voice in Quintilian, later reproduced by Ingegneri. Instead, he is, much more practically, interested in fixing the requisites that an actor’s voice must have for his words to be understood by the audience.

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34 Ibid., p. 35 and p. 41.
36 Ibid., p. 19.
37 Ibid., pp. 39-40.
38 Ibid., p. 47. At this point de’ Sommi also takes up a passage in the Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi, by Giraldi Cintio (p. 181), which he must have known, along with the Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie.
The actors should have ‘a good pronunciation’, and also speak ‘firmly’ without ‘shouting’, making their voices ‘clearly audible to all the spectators’. They should also ‘speak very slowly’, expressing all the words ‘very deliberately’. De’ Sommi denies that this might make the acting seem unnatural, and too unlike how people speak in real life. The audience should ‘understand the poet’s ideas easily, and relish his precepts’, and, as they understand everything that is said onstage it will seem that the actor is speaking ‘at great speed’, however slowly he utters the lines.

The gestures, postures and movements should above all bring out the typical nature of the character and the emotional reactions that are his. In this way we can see a sort of code, which was probably defined by stage use, which de’ Sommi seems to sketch in a few lines. Characteristic gestures of the miser, for example, are ‘always keeping his hand on his purse’, or constantly checking that he has not lost the keys of his coffer; of the simpleton, ‘catching flies, searching for fleas, and suchlike’; of the maidservant, ‘tossing up her skirts in a vulgar way’, or ‘biting her thumb in scorn’, and so on. At the same time these gestures must also be varied and blended with other forms of expression, so as to render the characters’ reactions to the various situations in which they are involved. Thus the actor playing the part of a miser must be able to render his frenzy when he realizes his son has stolen his money, and that of a servant to express grief by ‘tearing a handkerchief with his teeth’, or tearing his hair when he is in despair. A full list of all the gestures appropriate to each character and the various situations is not possible, however, as much of the stage action is in any case left to the actor’s invention: ‘those who properly understand their part, and have talent, also find the appropriate movements and gestures’.

Apart from these gestures, which can be depicted with greater or lesser ability, there are also the most effective and precise expressions of the sentiments, which seem to require the actor’s actual emotional involvement. On this, de’ Sommi recalls Plato’s Ion, but does not take up the theory of divine possession. Rather, like Aristotle, he regards the ability to actually share the character’s feelings as a gift of nature: ‘these things do not lend themselves to teaching, and are impossible to learn, if they do not come naturally’. In short, there is no rule, trick or expedient to fall back on, and only the ‘born’ actor can succeed. Those who possess this gift can then produce extraordinary effects, and can even turn pale, for example. De’ Sommi cites a series of actors of the time, and in particular Flaminia, a Roman actress who was able to change ‘gestures, tones and moods, as the circumstances require’, moving to wonder ‘anyone who sees her’.

However, as the canons of behaviour in Castiglione’s Il libro del Cortegiano required, it was essential for all acting to be always marked by ease, accompanied by elegance or ‘grace’. The actor ‘ought always to have a lithe body, with free-moving limbs, not stiff and awkward. He must place his feet on the ground appropriately when he speaks, and move them easily when the occasion demands’. He should also avoid

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39 Ibid., pp. 39-40.
40 Ibid., p. 41. And so an essential idea emerges for the first time. The ‘verisimilitude’ of the acting does not derive from its direct relation with real behavior, but lies in the mental image that the actor’s action produces in the audience.
41 Ibid., pp. 41-42.
42 Ibid., p. 46.
43 Ibid., pp. 43-44.
44 Ibid., p. 47.
walking while speaking, except in very special cases, when it is absolutely necessary. And he should never turn his back on the audience.45

One last rule: the actors should always perform at the edge of the stage, as near to the audience and the centre as possible. In this way their voices will reach the audience more easily, and above all, the ‘natural’ effect of painted perspective sets will not be ruined:

it is always good to speak at the centre of the stage and at the front of it, both so as to be as close as possible to the audience, and as far as possible from the painted sets in perspective, because the closer the actor is to them the more he ruins their effect:46

All the rules and prescriptions, the whole complex mechanism of regulations, customs, tricks and inventions that made up acting – from the need to adopt only gestures and movements that strictly adhered to the typical nature of the characters and the situations in which they are involved, to the need to render perfectly their emotional expressions, or the requirement to place the actors on the edge of the stage – aimed at just one, essential, decisive effect: creating the illusion that the action, which is feigned and imitated, rehearsed and repeated, should appear real and true, spontaneous and improvised. The actor’s ‘gestures and movements’ are appropriate in that they managed to make the part played seem ‘something true’.47

The voice should vary and be articulated so that ‘what is spoken’ seems ‘familiar talk that happens without forethought’.48 The ability to render the most immediate emotional expressions with a wonderful change of face, gestures and tones, leads the audience to believe ‘they are not seeing something prepared or feigned being represented, but so well as to see something true taking place that has happened unexpectedly’.49 So that the actor’s final task consists precisely in ‘trying his utmost to deceive the spectator into believing that what he sees happening on stage is true’.50

45 See ibid., p. 55. The principle by which the actor must not walk while speaking seems to have been widespread and general towards the end of the sixteenth century. It can also be found in a scene from the anonymous English play, The Return from Parnassus, acted at Cambridge between 1598 and 1603, where two actors, Burbage and Kemp, give some advice to two young students who intend to take to the stage (the dialogue is reproduced in Actors on Acting, ed. by T. Cole and H. Chinoy, New York, Crown Publishers, 1970, p. 84). The principle originates in the model of the oratorical style and was illustrated by Quintilian, who advised the orator to walk only during the pauses of the speech (Institutio oratoria, XI,3,126). The other rule, which was universally accepted down to the late nineteenth century, forbidding the actor to turn his back on the audience also originates in the oratorical model (on this see also Angelo Ingegneri, Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole soniche, p. 19). Quintilian reminded his readers that it is usually improper for the orator to show the judges his back when he moves. The rule was one of the precepts for good conduct in society, where it was disrespectful to turn one’s back on the person one is talking to, and so, for the actors to do so to the audience during a performance, not only when they are speaking their lines, but also when they are moving on the stage without speaking (Institutio oratoria, XI,3,127

46 Ibid., p. 55.

47 Ibid., p. 46.

48 Ibid., p. 48. See also p. 38.

49 Ibid., p. 44.

50 Ibid., p. 38.
The Writings of Pier Maria Cecchini

Similar thoughts can also be found some time later in the first systematic writings on acting to come from the world of professional actors, written by Pier Maria Cecchini, who was an active member of various groups of comici and later a stable member of the company of the Accesi. Particularly keen on justifying the dignity and morality of his profession, in 1601, while on a tour in France, Cecchini published his Trattato sopra l’arte comica, cavato dall’opere di San Tomaso, e da altri santi. Aggiuntovi il modo di ben recitare.51 The second part of the work was later revised with a few variants and a new title, Discorso sopra l’arte comica con il modo di ben recitare, and again reworked and published in his Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisì a chi le recita, which appeared in Padua in 1628.52

Most of Cecchini’s experience was connected with acting in the commedia all’improvviso and on this he provided some clear observations. For example, he advised those playing the comic roles not to intervene too much and beside the point, with extemporary jokes and witticisms that might distract attention from the main development of the action, and also regarded gestures as being particularly communicative, able to compensate for any shortcomings in the verbal expression.

But apart from these sporadic indications, Cecchini’s thoughts do not imply any fundamental difference between the representation of a written text and the performing of a scenario. Naturally, when he mentions the characters Cecchini refers to the stock characters of the commedia dell’arte, and so gives a brief description of the figures of Graziano, the first and second servant, Pantalone, the Capitano and Pulcinella. But his way of conceiving the character is no different from that of Leone de’ Sommi, Giraldi Cintio or Angelo Ingegneri: for Cecchini too each figure who appears onstage must be depicted with his permanent, pre-determined features, which involve character, typical forms of expression, and the language or dialect he must speak.

The concrete experience of the stage that Cecchini had acquired in his daily work as a professional emerges in his insistence on the practical, essential requisites that acting must possess. Still more than de’ Sommi, Cecchini underlines the need for the actor above all to ‘come across’, both in the sense of being heard and being understood. This is what dictates the rules for the use of gestures, which must be coordinated with the words, preceding them, and even be so clear and immediate as to compensate for any inadequacy in the actor’s verbal communication with the audience.53

However, to be really effective, the actor’s words too must be immediately understood by the audience, which is why his pronunciation should be perfect and the phrases not spoken ‘quickly’.54 The volume of the voice should also be regulated in relation to the size of the auditorium, so that the whole audience can hear what is being said without effort, and are not deafened by constant shouting:

51 Pier Maria Cecchini, Trattato sopra l’arte comica, cavato dall’opere di San Tomaso, e da altri santi. Aggiuntovi il modo di ben recitare, Lion, Roussin, 1601.
52 Pier Maria Cecchini, Discorso sopra l’arte comica con il modo di ben recitare, held in a late-nineteenth-century manuscript copy at the Biblioteca del Burcardo in Rome; Pier Maria Cecchini, Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisì a chi le recita, Padova, Guaresco Guareschi, 1628. The two texts can be found now in La professione del teatro.
53 Pier Maria Cecchini, Trattato sopra l’arte comica, p. 15.
54 Ibid., p. 16.
those speaking should regulate the volume of their voices depending on where they are, in a small place they should not use the full power nature has given them, but should sweeten their voices, restraining them, and give them only enough strength to fill the place where they are acting.55

There are some who, though Heaven has given them such a powerful voice that they can easily be heard, perversely and absurdly insist on never speaking loud enough to be heard, even when they are requested to.56

Once the volume has been regulated, one must then adapt the voice to the various situations involving the character and the different emotional states he experiences.57 In any case, the actor can never speak directly to the audience because theatrical convention requires that the only persons present are those onstage. It will also be necessary to coordinate the tempi of the speech with the stage movements. When a character enters, the person speaking should at once fall silent, just as an actor should never come onstage while another actor is speaking.58 It is also desirable that two actors never speak at the same time, 'so as not to create confusion, which is irritating to the listeners and not right for the speakers'.59

Lastly, voice and gestures should be completely unaffected. Yet the whole performance should seem graceful and elegant: the forms of expression – the words, but also the gestures and movements – should have a certain elegance superior to that found in the real world, and so the pronunciation should be ‘softened’, and made ‘mild to the listener’s ears’, and the voice of the speaker appear ‘like a loving and well-fashioned equerry who, with polite and civil manner, prepares the entrance for the Majesty of the speech’.60

The Theoretical Model of Acting. Flaminio Scala and the Decline of the Early Treatises

Now, in all the writings on acting, from Giraldi Cintio to Cecchini, some of the remarks certainly seem perfectly obvious, like the rule obliging the actors not to speak their lines at the same time onstage, and other rules seem to be set down unsystematically, if not casually. In actual fact, however, all these works and the reflections they express led to a precise methodological model for describing the actor’s art that was to dominate the debate down to the nineteenth century, and that still persists more or less latently to this day.

According to this model, theatrical acting is determined in every detail by three sets of different requirements. The actor onstage must respond to all these requirements, finding a point of balance between them, and so manage to produce the overall and basic effect of acting, which consists in inducing the audience to

55 Ibid., p. 21.
56 Pier Maria Cecchini, Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita, in F. Marotti and G. Romei (eds.), La professione del teatro, p. 81.
57 See Pier Maria Cecchini, Trattato sopra l’arte comica, p. 21.
58 See ibid., pp. 23-24.
59 Pier Maria Cecchini, Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita, p. 82.
60 Pier Maria Cecchini, Trattato sopra l’arte comica, pp. 15-19; Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita, pp. 81-82.
perceive and experience as real the figures and events represented, even though they know quite well they are simulated.

The first requirement is ‘theatrical’ and concerns the concrete conditions of any staged play, which establish how the actor must perform. He acts in a defined space, facing an audience that must see and hear him, understanding everything he does. This determines the rules concerning the volume of the voice, the need to speak slowly, the arrangement of the actors on the stage area to make it easier for the audience to see and hear them, the coordination of the tempi of entrances and exits and the speaking of the lines so that they are not superimposed, creating confusion. These aspects of acting precede any other later choices and must in any case be maintained, whatever character the actor must interpret, and whatever action he must perform.

The second requirement is ‘aesthetic’, and concerns the need for the people and events represented by the actors to reflect people and events in real life, but made ‘more beautiful’, corrected and perfected. To this end the gestures, expressions and movements must not only be ‘exemplary’ – able to show absolutely clearly the ideal aspect of each character and his way of behaving – but also possess elegance and grace. Hence the suggestions for making the actor’s voice, gestures and movements beautiful and pleasing, and hence too de’ Sommi’s remarks on how the actor should position his feet, the ban on speaking while walking, and the need to enunciate, as Cecchini desired, so that it is ‘mild’ to the audience’s ears.

The last requirement is ‘dramaturgic’, and concerns the actor’s essential task: delineating the characters as typical figures, representative of general categories, displaying as clearly, convincingly and effectively as possible the persistence of their basic (physical and psychological) traits, and at the same time acting in the situation, expressing the variety of their emotional reactions in the various circumstances in which they find themselves.

Finding and maintaining a point of balance between these requirements was far from easy. One need only consider de’ Sommi’s rule that the actor must always speak slowly to make himself understood by all, in the name of a typically theatrical requirement, and imagine a moment in which the character, for the dramatic requirements of the situation, must express himself frantically, brokenly, or gabbling the words; or the need to maintain elegance of gesture in performing hopelessly comic and grotesque parts; or the difficulty of preserving the rigidly established constant features of the stock character as well as his various reactions in the extreme variety of situations he meets, which sometimes seem to require the display of feelings and attitudes extraneous to the pre-fixed characteristics of his ‘nature’.

Finding the point of balance determines the final – and essential – effect of acting: ensuring that all the images and actions represented, which are feigned and carefully developed, are so well depicted, as both Giraldi Cintio and de’ Sommi write, as to seem ‘true’. And for that to happen it is obviously indispensable to avoid any form of affectation and to act naturally, so as to simulate the appearance of perfect spontaneity. Only then will what is ‘prepared and feigned’ seem authentic and to have ‘happened unexpectedly’.

The contents of a methodological model of this kind can obviously vary. In practice, it is a question of identifying precisely the ways in which the actor can respond to the three different types of requirement, find a balance between them,
and give an effect of ‘reality’ to the character and his actions, and here we can recognize two attitudes in the line passing from Giraldi Cintio down to Cecchini. While Giraldi Cintio and Ingegneri sought the rules of acting in Cicero’s and Quintilian’s thoughts on *actio* and transferred their precepts wholesale to their own theories of acting, de’ Sommi and Cecchini tended to make more use of their practical experience of the stage, taking from it a limited number of rules, still extremely schematic and simple, which they prescribed to the actors.

This tendency to theorize starting from the experience of the stage is explicit in the Prologo to the comedy *Il finto marito* (1618) by Flaminio Scala, a representative figure of the professional theatre of the time, an actor-manager in the company of the Confidenti between 1614 and 1621. The Prologo contrasts the opinions of a ‘foreigner’, who thinks it indispensable to stage comedies written by literary men who know how to apply the rules established by the ancients, and the objections of an actor, a spokesman for Scala, who not only sees the literary quality of the texts to be staged as relatively unimportant, but also excludes the possibility of finding rules for writing and performing them in the ancients.

The essential element in any play, when it is staged, claims Scala, is not the literary text, but the actor’s gestures, movements and performance. However learned, profound and elaborate the verbal expression may be, in itself it cannot produce important effects, because onstage ‘every gesture timed properly and with the right emotional force will have greater effect than all Aristotle’s philosophy’. Movements and actions are much more effective than mere words: ‘anyone with a mind, and even the animals, will take more notice and move when faced with someone who raises a stick than someone who raises his voice’. Lovers, he continues, are moved much more ‘by a little tear, by a glance or a kiss’, than by the words ‘of a great moral philosopher, who with well-crafted phrases, perfect concepts and great eloquence’ exhorts them to virtue, ‘persuading them to leave sensuality aside’.

In addition, as regards the performance of comedies, ‘actions are closer to actions than narrations are’, and comedies consist essentially ‘in actions’. Thus, anyone wanting to perform a comedy, and so ‘imitate actions’, must rely more on the actor’s activity onstage than on the words of the text.

It obviously remains to be seen if something useful for good acting can be found in the treatises of the ancients. The foreigner claims that precepts should be taken ‘from the good authors who wrote the poetics’. If we need to introduce ‘the expression of happiness or grief, fear or daring’ in what is said, then it is ‘the orator and the philosopher’ who will teach us how it should be done. But Flaminio Scala counters all this with a radical argument: all rules and suggestions derive from experience alone.

Who can know better the precepts of the art than the comic actors themselves who every day put them into practice by exercising them? […] Experience makes art, as

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63 Ibid., p. CXIV.
64 Ibid., p. CXIII.
many acts repeated make the rule, and if we draw our precepts from experience, then from these actions we discover the true rule.65

At this point the road that leads to a theory of acting dictated by experience and stage practice seems to lie wide open. But in this respect Flaminio Scala’s position bore no fruit. Stage practice remained to all intents and purposes merely practice, and the tendency to describe and discuss ways of acting based on the concrete experience of actors produced only the simple suggestions provided first by de’ Sommi and then by Cecchini.

There are two essential reasons for this lack of development. On the one hand, there were no indispensable cultural references for translating the comic actors’ wealth of stage experience into a clear and systematic theory of acting, making it clearly impossible to go beyond reflections on the volume of the voice, how the actors were placed on the stage, and the need to vary the behaviour of the characters in the various situations, trusting above all, as de’ Sommi suggested, to the actor’s personal inventiveness. On the other, as we have seen, the justification of the actor’s dignity against the condemnation of the Church and contempt of men of letters, and his aspiration to the status of intellectual, led him, whenever he described his activity, to take as his model the images of the orator and the author of texts that were written and, preferably, printed. It thus seemed absolutely inadvisable to extend his reflections to the areas specific to acting, where it could no longer coincide with oratory, thus underlining its specific diversity from the celebrated and recognized expressive forms. That is why when Flaminio Scala justified stage practice as the only source of rules for the actor, he avoided setting down those rules. In exchange, in 1611 he had an extensive collection of scenarios published in Venice in an elegantly bound volume, with a title that gave the writings a respectably literary aura.66 As a result, the need to appropriate the figure of the intellectual in the ways allowed by the culture of the period blocked any attempt to develop a theory of acting based on the specific requirements and characteristics of the actor’s work.

65 Ibid., p. CXi.
THE WORLD OF ORATORY. PERRUCCI, GRIMAREST AND GILDON

The Theatre Controversy

The clearly-felt need of actors to have their work acknowledged as part of the official cultural scene continued to grow throughout the seventeenth century as theatre gradually managed to put down solid economic and juridical roots in many European countries. Venues for theatre had multiplied in the late sixteenth century, and a number of particularly prominent companies had partly abandoned life on the road, settling in urban areas where a sufficient audience was guaranteed. In the England of Elizabeth I, various companies were already operating in London: Shakespeare’s Players regularly used the Globe Theatre, built in 1599. Shortly afterwards French companies tried to establish themselves in Paris, the Comédiens du roi managing in 1629 to obtain exclusive access to the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Five years later another company, under the protection of Cardinal Richelieu, established itself at the Théâtre du Marais. In 1658, Molière’s company took over the Petit Bourbon, alternating its own performances with those of an Italian commedia dell’arte company. Lastly, in 1680, at the request of Louis XIV, the Comédie Française was established, the first national theatre in Europe to operate under the direct control of the Monarchy.

At the same time comic actors were performing increasingly in France and England, with the double benefit of Crown support and administrative regulation. The norms introduced offered protection for the actors’ work, while the rigid control they simultaneously imposed made this a mixed blessing. In England, in 1572, an edict of Elizabeth’s Counsel of State assigned the Master of the Revels, the superintendent of court entertainment, complete jurisdiction over companies operating in London. Two years later a new edict obliged all travelling companies to place themselves in the service of a member of the nobility, whose livery they were to wear. Only then were they authorized to perform tragedies, comedies, and stage performances of any kind for the entertainment of the royal subjects and the Queen’s own pleasure. Nine years on, a further decree arrogated for the Crown total control over all theatre activity, to be regulated strictly by special authorisation conceded to the single company. Across the Channel, the French Crown had protected and financed various groups of players from the sixteenth century onwards. In 1641 a formal declaration on the part of Louis XIII had legitimised the profession of actor with the proviso that the plays should be morally acceptable, devoid of all excess and ‘equivocal or lascivious’ words or actions.¹

This support for the companies, however, often met with the opposition of political organisations using anti-theatre sentiment as a stick with which to beat

¹ For the text of the declaration see Gaston Maugras, Les comédiens hors la loi, Paris, Calmann Lévy Editeur, 1887, pp. 90-91.
centralised power. The London Town Council, like the Parliament in Paris, used its powers to limit performances as far as possible, thereby entering into direct conflict with the King’s authority. In 1577 the arrival in Paris of the Compagnia dei Gelosi, invited by Henri III, sparked off a fierce legal battle, played out through royal authorisations and parliamentary prohibitions.\textsuperscript{2}

A situation of the kind was ideal for broadsides for or against the theatre. In England the opposition of the Church became increasingly dangerous after the death of Elizabeth, during the reign of James I and his successor Charles I. The 1618 Royal Decree, the \textit{Declaration of Lawful Sports}, aimed at authorising a series of recreation activities on public holidays, provoked such a virulent reaction on the Church’s part that James was forced to stop its application. Three years later, in direct opposition to the authority of the Crown, Parliament passed a law forbidding a number of recreations listed in the \textit{Declaration}, while the King quickly stepped in to veto the decree, thereby annulling it. When Charles I attempted to pass the \textit{Declaration} again in 1633 he met with fierce and open opposition.

In the same year William Prynne’s \textit{Histriomastix} came out, a monumental anti-theatre polemic which constituted the most violent attack on the stage ever to appear in England, and extended to court entertainments in which the nobility and even the Queen herself performed.\textsuperscript{3} Government reaction was immediate. Prynne’s sentence was severe: imprisonment, a hefty fine, and the chopping off of his ears; but it had no effect whatsoever on Puritan opposition to the stage. In 1642, during the Civil War which was to lead to defeat and death for Charles I, Parliament declared the closure of all theatres; they were re-opened only in 1660, with the Restoration of the Monarchy under Charles II.

In France, hostility to the theatre had increased in the last decades of the sixteenth century, above all in Protestant circles. It exploded with particular force in the second half of the following century, when a number of members of the nobility and the Catholic Church began to show increasing irritation at the attempts of Cardinal Mazarin and subsequently Louis XIV to promote the professional stage. The French Church drew particularly on the condemnation of theatre delivered by Carlo Borromeo, proclaimed saint in 1606, going so far as to persecute actors by adding professional players to the categories of persons excluded from the sacrament in the version of the \textit{Rituale Romanum} used in many French parishes.\textsuperscript{4} Even Molière, who enjoyed the King’s direct protection, was only buried in holy ground after endless difficulties, and then at night, almost in secrecy, after specific authorisation from the Archbishop of Paris.\textsuperscript{5}

In religious circles polemics were heightened by prevailing Jansenist tendencies considering austerity, simplicity, and above all control of self and the passions to be the hallmarks of Christian behaviour, as against all forms of exhibitionism, ostentation, and emotivity: everything, in short, which constituted the essence of the

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp. 77-79.
\textsuperscript{3} William Prynne, \textit{Histriomastix: the Player’s Scourge or Actor’s Tragedy}, London, Sparke, 1633, Sig 5Qv.
\textsuperscript{5} The most meticulous reconstruction of the episode is to be found ibid., pp. 164-169, while the text of the authorization is given in Paul Olagnier, \textit{Les incapacités des acteurs en droit canonique}, Paris, 1899, pp. 179-180.
theatre, where the public was seen as indulging its baser instincts through empathetic involvement in the scenes represented. Throughout the 1660s, then, the question was debated by the major exponents of the French stage, from Corneille and Molière to the young Racine, while opposition to the theatre was most effectively expressed in the *Traité de la comédie et des spectacles* of Armand de Bourbon Prince de Conti, belonging to the highest nobility in the land, and *Traité de la comédie* of the Abbé Nicole is probably the outstanding anti-stage pronouncement in seventeenth-century France.⁶

Far from abating in the following decades, the opposition acquired fresh vigour towards the end of the century, when Louis XIV appeared to lose interest in theatre. The anonymous publication in 1694 of the *Lettre d’un théologien illustre* produced an extremely violent reaction, although its measured defence of the theatre was very much along the lines of those of the Council of Trent.⁷ The Theology Faculty of the Sorbonne drew up a ‘decision’ reiterating a condemnation of theatre, and the author of the *Lettre*, Francesco Caffaro, superior of the Paris branch of the Theatine Fathers, was severely punished. Bossuet, tutor to the Dauphin and one of the most eminent French bishops, expressed his position both in a long letter to Caffaro and then in his publication *Maximes et réflexions sur la Comédie*, in which he deployed a range of doctrinal evidence to denounce the heinous evils of the stage and definitively condemned the whole of contemporary French theatre.⁸

*The Horizons of Oratory*

The determination of late-sixteenth-century players to affirm the dignity of their profession took on a different dimension within this wider polemical context. Distancing themselves from street entertainers and claiming the role of orators was not simply a tactic to ensure recognition as professionals and intellectuals: it was also the only means possible to ensure the survival of the theatre and its economic and organic development. To distinguish between the actors, working scrupulously to offer entertainment consonant with the canons of official culture, and the licentious mountebanks scraping a hand-to-mouth existence in the more disreputable piazzas was certainly indispensable if they were to counter the attacks from religious circles.⁹ But it was equally the main principle in the policy of support for the theatre on the part of organised power. In England the protection offered to actors was subsumed under the vagrancy laws regulating any attempt to scratch a living by a public performance not commensurate with the tastes of a nobleman, or the requirements

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⁷ The ‘Lettre d’un théologien illustre par sa qualité et par son mérite, consulté par l’auteur pour savoir si la Comédie peut être permise ou doit être absolument défendue’, published in *Pièces de théâtre de M. Boursault*, Paris, Guignard, 1694, can be found in *L’église et le théâtre*, ed. by C. Urban and E. Levesque, Paris, Grasset, 1930, with all the literature ensuing from the controversy.


to enter his service. In France, Louis XIII’s declaration proclaiming the legality of the profession of players opened by anathematizing and condemning ‘dishonest’ actors, who were threatened with heavy sanctions and roundly branded with infamy.

The distinction, it should be added, not only encouraged an ethical stand among actors, facilitating their gradual entry into the official fabric of society, but also slowly had the effect of determining the nature of theatre production itself. Centralised power revealed an interest both in overseeing the ethical standards of the performances and in requiring that they met officially recognised and approved criteria, toeing a line which was possibly drawn with rather greater rigour than the players themselves desired. Significantly, when in 1637 Corneille’s *Le Cid* was performed in Paris to enormous acclaim, accompanied, however, by polemics among the literati who deplored the text’s putative violation of dramatic canons, Richelieu referred the question to the Académie Française, founded two years previously.  

Molière’s Company, like that of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais, which in 1629 had been granted the privilege of establishing themselves in Paris, all concentrated mainly on canonical drama based on a written script. The group of *commedia dell’arte* Italian actors, the Comédie Italienne which had operated in the capital for many decades, had similarly ended up by ‘normalising’ their productions, staging plays written for them by French playwrights.  

Two events of the last years of the century assume particular significance in this context: the institution of the Comédie Française, the official stage for texts of exemplary literary virtues, and the expulsion, in 1697, of the Italian players, only in part ascribable to contingent factors and demonstrating above all an institutional loss of interest in their particular type of acting. French canons of dramaturgy and acting almost inevitably had a trickle-down effect on the English stage in the period immediately following the re-opening of the theatres, if only on account of direct Court influence on playwrights and companies.  

The tendency to bring theatre in line with the aesthetic canons of establishment culture inevitably meant aligning it in some measure with the art of oratory. This meant removing from the very notion of recitation all the gesturality and body language at variance with the contained and elegant declaiming of a verbal composition: excluding, that is, the most original and experimental aspects of acting as developed in the professional theatre between the sixteenth and seventeenth century. At the same time, however, considering the actor from the perspective of oratory also meant, in the cultural context of the period, creating the basis for a new perception of his expressive range in speaking and moving, opening up to different stylistic possibilities of interpretation, and developing precise criteria against which to evaluate them. It meant, in a word, constructing the basis for a mature theory of acting.  

In the seventeenth century the doctrine of oratory subsumed an extremely varied range of sub-disciplines. It included the analysis of textual composition (either written, simply inserted within a dialogue, or improvised orality) and all the forms in

12 For a detailed reconstruction of the episode see ibid., pp. 25-27.
which it was concretely delivered. It constituted, then, the theoretical base for a formal poetics and literary criticism, but also a comprehensive overview of the techniques required for religious instruction, the legal profession, a career in Parliament, and more simply the art of discourse and elegant conversation, thereby determining the proper code of behaviour in polite society. And since contemporary communicative practice involved the use not just of the voice but also of gestures, eye-movements, the use of the facial muscles, and body language, the art of eloquence extended to the domains of painting and sculpture, suggesting the cross-fertilisation of poses and expressions in the figures to be represented.

For European culture of the century, acting could only be a form of oratory which, in its turn, conferred efficacy, aesthetics, and perfection on all forms of verbal and gestural expression. ‘In the substance of external action for the most part orators and stage-players agree’, Thomas Wright stated at the beginning of the century, analysing ways of embodying the different passions. One of the earliest English statements on acting, a passage by John Webster, underlines how the ‘excellent actor’ must possess all the skills of oratory, since ‘whatever is commendable in the grave orator, is mostly perfect in him’. His colleague Thomas Heywood, in his Apology for Actors, similarly praises the virtues of the theatre in terms of the art of oratory. Interpreting comedies and tragedies, Heywood stated, constituted an excellent exercise for learning rhetoric, which taught how to regulate breathing, assume the correct posture, and avoid wrong movements of the face, eyes, and body when pronouncing a speech. Some time later, in his Short Discourse on the English Stage, Richard Flecknoe praised Burbage, underlining how, as a great actor, he possessed ‘all the parts of an excellent orator’. In France, a text of 1655 presented the actor as the orator favoured by the tragic muse Melpomene, while Marin Mersenne, in his Traitez de la voix et des chants considered even a singer as an orator.

Then, curiously, for the rest of the seventeenth century, after the publication of Cecchini’s Frutti delle moderne commedie et avisi a chi le recita, all theories of acting would appear to have disappeared, judging from the available literature, although in actual fact they were simply subsumed under the art-of-eloquence debate. In a word, there certainly existed in the contemporary consciousness a system of codified rules for

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14 This constituted the beginning of the well-documented influence of oratory treatises on painting and sculpture. The influence was reciprocal, see e.g. Francesco Sansovino, L’arte oratoria secondo i modi della lingua volgare, Venezia, Giovanni dal Griffo, & fratelli, 1546, p. 52, where the orator is advised to follow the example of painting and sculpture.
15 The statement is to be found in Thomas Wright’s additions to the second edition of his The Passions of the Minde in General, London, 1604 (first edition London, Burre, 1601). Quotes here are from the edition by W. W. Newbold, London and New York, Garland, 1980, p. 215. Wright marks only one difference between the actor and the orator: the former ‘pretends’ while the latter ‘is in earnest’: a distinction taken from Cicero’s De Oratore (III,214).
both prescribing and evaluating the actor’s performance: namely, all the techniques of eloquence considered de rigueur for any kind of public speaking, from the preacher, teacher, and lawyer to the lecturer, politician, and actor.

Given the isomorphism, a number of researchers have attempted to use the various treatises on oratory to reconstruct acting forms and styles then in vogue on the stage.18 Useful and significant as they have been, however, the results inevitably contain an element of surmise. Besides the inevitable shortfall between doctrinal theory and actual practice, the contemporary stage almost certainly hosted an enormous range of acting and gesturality, from a declaratory and slightly pompous delivery to the agile and more cavalier style inspired by the Italian players, or from the directly mimetic, from-the-life approach to create a particular character, to the upstaging affectation of a Bellerose, the famous leading actor in the Hôtel de Bourgogne Company.19 It would have been extremely difficult for the general categories of oratory to encompass the varied specificity of the actor’s work on stage, and the complexity of attendant issues.

The doctrine of eloquence was, we know, traditionally articulated in five parts: invention, disposition, memory, elocution, and expression (vocal and gestural), the last element, actio, constituting the basic nucleus for all reflections on the art of the actor. Not all treatises on oratory included it, although it is dealt with, for example, in Antoine Fouquelin’s Rétorique Française and Abraham Fraunce’s Arcadian Rethorike, both inspired by the teachings of Peter Ramus who had promoted a substantial reform of rhetoric in the mid sixteenth century.20 It was given particular prominence in a series of works on ecclesiastical oratory, from the prime text, Erasmus of Rotterdam’s Ecclesiastes, through the writings of Louis de Granade, Ludovico Carbone, Carlo Reggio, Nicolas Caussin, and, in 1620, Louis de Cressolles’s Vacationes autunnales, some six hundred pages comprising a virtual encyclopaedia of vocal and gestural expression, accompanied by a series of considerations and quotations from orators, poets, classical philosophers, Fathers of the Church, and the works of humanism, listing all the expressive possibilities of the head, eyes, mouth, neck, arms, legs, and feet.21 This concentration on actio appeared to spread and intensify in the later seventeenth century, as attested by a series of works dedicated

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19 Bellerose’s style was apparently particularly affected in love scenes where, according to a contemporary, he gave the impression of carefully selecting ‘where to throw his hat in order to avoid spoiling the feathers’. See Gédéon Tallemant des Reaux’s testimony in Historiettes, 9 vols., Paris, Monmarqué, 1854-1860, VII, p. 175.
exclusively to this particular aspect of oratory, such as the Traité de l'action de l'orateur by Michel Le Faucheur, a Protestant preacher, Jean Lucas's Actio oratoris, or René Bary's Méthode pour bien prononcer un discours et pour bien l'animer.22

The various observations in literature of the kind merged, in seventeenth-century culture, with the knowledge collated from numerous specialist figures studying physical features, gestures, expressions, human typologies, and the complexity and dynamics of the passions, drawing on physiognomy, medical science, and philosophy, or, from a different slant, developing the rudimentary elements of a semiotics of the gestures and signs used in communication between the most widely divergent human categories.

A fundamental text on physiognomy, devoted to the correlation between external features and character traits in the individual, was Della Porta's treatise De humana physiognomonia, which appeared in 1586.23 Then in 1601 Thomas Wright, in The Passions of the Minde, analysed different human attitudes and expressions according to the theory of the humours subscribed to by medicine of the period. A substantial volume by Giovanni Bonifacio, published in 1616, presented a study of gestures read as a natural and universal language, and listed a comprehensive category of expressions and bodily movements contextualised within an ample range of sources, from ancient and modern literature, works of oratory, the Bible, and documentary evidence of customs and habits.24 In 1644 Bulwer's Chirologia and Chironomia was published in London, describing the language of the hands in terms of unalterable natural laws. Bulwer presented a long catalogue of gestures and movements demonstrating how natural gestures were regulated by the conventions of rhetoric, drawing from this a series of observations he considered useful for preachers, teachers, and lawyers. Five years later his Pathomyotomia applied the same method to facial expressions.25

In France, a series of works of a different scope – François La Mothe le Vayer's Discours de la contrariété d'humeurs qui se trouve entre certaine nations, Pierre Le Moyne's two-volume Peintures morales, and Gérard Pelletier’s Palatium reginae eloquentiae – extended the typologies to the traits and characteristics of different peoples and nations, even describing the character and behaviour of mythological heroes and literary figures; while Pilet de La Mesnardière, in his La poétique, described in minute detail the characteristics of each individual figure in correlation with age, profession and social rank, and moral disposition and passions.26 Lastly, the vast number of

23 Giovan Battista Della Porta, De humana physiognomonia libri IV, Vici Aequensis, apud Cacchium, 1586.
24 Giovanni Bonifacio, Arte de' cenni, Vicenza, Francesco Grossi, 1616.
26 François La Mothe le Vayer, Discours de la contrariété d'humeurs qui se trouve entre certaine nations, Paris, 1638; Pierre Le Moyne, Peintures morales, 2 vols., Paris, Cramoisy, 1641 and 1643; Gérard Pelletier, Palatium reginae eloquentiae, Paris, Camusat et Sonnias, 1641; Hyppolyte-Jules Pilet de La Mesnardière, La poétique, A. De Sommaville, 1639. An essential text on the subject is M. Fumaroli’s L’âge de l’éloquence (pp. 343-354 and pp. 381-391).
studies on the passions – divided into simple or elementary, and complex, i.e. derived from a combination of the former – were all intent on meticulously analysing the dynamics of the human mind and the mechanisms determining its states and mutations, considered of enormous interest for both the art of oratory and the figurative arts. In 1640 the first of five volumes appeared of Marin Cureau de la Chambre’s *Charactères des passions*, the last one coming out in 1662. However it was above all Descartes’s essay, *Les passions de l’âme*, published in 1649, which proved the determining influence on the subject. The relation between facial expressions and specific passions was treated in great detail by Charles Le Brun, court painter and director of the *Académie de Peinture et Sculpture*, in a lecture given at the Academy, printed posthumously in a volume which was widely read in France, England and Italy.

By positioning itself within the discipline of oratory, then, which systematically extended to all the branches of expression and communication, the theory of recitation gradually broadened its own horizons and sources of knowledge. While early Italian treatises on acting gave no more than sketchy indications as to characters, passions, and their characteristic modes of expression, oratory and its concomitant disciplines was compiling an impressive and increasingly sophisticated catalogue of human figures, emotions, modes of behaviour, inflexions, and gestures. The task of the actor began to appear as a considerably complicated, multi-faceted art, and the need grew for more precision in representing the character, defining its interior impulses, and deciding on expressions and emotional nuances through which to enact them.

**Recitation: the Mysterious Difference**

By the end of the seventeenth century, then, in keeping with cultural canons of the time, the actor and the orator were seen as essentially very similar figures, as evinced in the number of writers who had carefully underlined the shared need of actors, teachers, and lawyers alike to study gesturality and voice intonation, and the basic similarity between the oratorial techniques of preachers and those of the stage.

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28 Charles Le Brun, *Conférence de Monsieur Le Brun, Premier Peintre du Roy de France, Chancelier et Directeur de l’Académie de Peinture et Sculpture sur l’expression générale et particulière des passions*, Enrichie de figures gravées par B. Picart, Paris, E. Picart, 1698. Published posthumously, this gives the text of Le Brun’s *Conférence* to the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture in 1668. The great interest in oratory theory for the analysis and description of the passions is attested by, among other texts, Caussin’s *Eloquentiae sacrae et humanae parallela* which dedicates one of its sixteen volumes to the subject, and Étienne Dubois Bretteville’s *Éloquence de la chaire et du barreau* (Paris, Denys Thierry, 1689), in five sections, the longest dedicated exclusively to a study of the ‘science of the heart, namely the art of arousing and correcting the passions’.
In many respects however this correspondence of role seemed little more than a statement of principle. That acting and oratory corresponded at many points in the ancient world, and that orators could usefully exploit the arts of the stage, was a given. Matters were considerably different for the modern world. An actor’s repertoire, de Cressolles pointed out, no longer possessed ‘an honest style of gesture and a fashion of pronouncing words worthy of a liberal education’. And several authors underlined some of the more undignified gestures of the stage, to be avoided, such as striking their brow, waving their arms, extending syllables to confer exaggerated gravitas, etc. The orator, it was concluded, had at this point little to learn from acting.

This perception of the defects of actorly behaviour in actual fact concealed an awareness that the actor’s technique was essentially different from other forms of oratory, and had its own specificity which was very clearly observable within the stagecraft of the period. Theatre companies, for example, included the figure of the ‘orator’, generally one of the older or more prestigious actors whose job it was to preface the performance with an address to the audience, or pronounce a well-rehearsed set-piece when the venue was the town or country-house of an important family. It was also received knowledge, in the world of the players, that a formal address required very different skills from those required to interpret a character in a play. In 1674 Samuel Chappuzeau, in a fundamental text on French theatre of the period, extolled Molière, for years the orator of his company, for uniting three gifts of a very different nature, in being simultaneously ‘a fine poet, fine actor, and fine orator’, thereby constituting ‘the true Trismegistus of the theatre’.

It was of course precisely the fact that the actors’ gesturality and delivery were particularly unsuited to the pulpit or the bar, according to the treatise writers, which made them so successful on the stage. During a stage performance, as the Prince de Conti observed in his Traité de la comédie et des spectacles, the actor’s declaiming and gesticulating could move the audience much more than an orator giving a speech. In this way the basis was established for separating the specific characteristics of acting from the technical abilities common to the art of eloquence in its entirety.

The problem, however, still seemed insurmountable. That a difference existed was obvious: in what it consisted was less clear. The actor-preacher comparison, for

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30 In the unnumbered ‘Praelusio’ of the Vacationes Autunnaliae.
32 See James Arderne, Directions Concerning the Matter and Style of Sermons, London, Spencer Hickman, 1671, p. 95.
33 Samuel Chappuzeau, Le théâtre français (Lyon, Michel Mayer, 1674), Plan de la Tour, Editions d’aujourd’hui, 1985, p. 105.
34 See Prince de Conti, Traité de la comédie et des spectacles, pp. 201-202.
example, produced observations which today appear singular to say the least. It was more difficult, Andreini wrote in 1627, to act on the stage than to preach in church, since the preacher in his pulpit was only ‘visible from the waist upwards’, while the actor’s whole body was seen, from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head.35 The difference, then, in this reading, lay exclusively in the difficulty of working with the whole body; and if acting emerged on the whole as the more complex art, any essential specificity denoting its difference from oratory failed to emerge.

Unsurprisingly, the nature of acting’s specific technique was more clearly defined in the considerations of playwrights. According to the poetics of the time, poetry too, like recitation, based its norms on the doctrine of eloquence whereby the writing and oral transmission of a text were two strictly-interconnected moments in the same process of composition. For this reason, as the completed literary product generally comprised both a written and performed text, the author was expected to be able to recite his own work effectively.36 But when it was a question of enunciating a theatre text, the art of the actor seemed to encompass a separate, exclusive skill which lay beyond the writer’s abilities. Corneille had no problem in conceding that only the technical excellence of the actor, on stage, could breathe adequate life into the playwright’s script; and not because he reproduced in performance the forms and content implicit in the poet/playwright’s lines, but because he ‘added’ to the author’s work something which only the specific skills of stage-acting could produce.37 Georges de Scudéry, commenting on the published version of Le Cid after its success at the Théâtre du Marais, expressed all his perplexity. The script appeared to have no beauties beyond those ‘lent’ it by the masterly skill of the actors, Mondory and Villiers. In a word, Le Cid on paper was a very different matter from Le Cid on stage.38

The most cogent observation however is from a seminal text from the mid-seventeenth century, La pratique du théâtre, by François Hédelin d’Aubignac, a member of Richelieu’s circle. D’Aubignac analysed the question of theatre composition through an extensive series of examples from contemporary plays, and insisted on a fundamental difference between drama and all other literary genres. A poem, a speech, or piece of narrative prose, he declared, acted on the public through the images the words created in the mind. In the theatre, on the other hand, the public is immediately presented with vital images and materials which pass concretely

35 Giovan Battista Andreini, La ferza. Ragionamento secondo contra l’accuse date alla commedia, p. 497.
before our eyes in the shape of the characters embodied by the actors, and it is these images – concrete, fleshly, external to ourselves – which strike and move us. The function of the word is transformed, then: no longer a trigger to evoke imagined visions, as in a story or speech, but an element of the real and present figures walking the stage. What the actor pronounces is effective not in being ‘beautiful’, the evocative and articulate expression of profound ideas, ornamented with rhetorical, imagination-firing devices, but in enacting the immediate reaction of the character to the circumstances created by the plot-development.

If we consider tragedy in its own nature, it implies so much action, that it seems not to have any room left for discourse: indeed, it is called a Drama, which signifies an action, and the persons concerned are called actors and not orators, precisely as those that are present are named spectators, and non listeners. Indeed all the discourses of tragedy ought to be as the actions of those that appear upon the stage; there, to speak is to act, and no speeches exist inserted by the poet to show his eloquence.39

D'Aubignac admits that this is far truer of comedy, since tragedies tend to evolve more verbally and diegetically, through pronouncements frequently narrating off-stage events.40 But in general it is possible to establish criteria for distinguishing the actor’s recitation from the orator’s actio. The orator’s task consists in using his voice and movements to enhance the efficacy of his words, the resonance of the figures evoked, the elegance of the text’s rhetorical devices, and the perspicacity of the precepts laid down, in order to fire the public’s imagination. The actor’s skill, on the other hand, is concentrated on reproducing the words, expressions, and gestures which flesh out the living, concrete actions of the character before the spectators’ eyes, in the different situations presented to the character. The orator has reached his goal when through the power of the words pronounced he has evoked sufficiently vivid images in the minds of the audience; the actor moves his spectators when he embodies and ‘impersonates’ the behaviour of a specific character, in a given situation, through his way of speaking, reacting, and articulating.41 What distinguishes recitation from oratory, in brief, is the need – essential for an actor but secondary and incidental for the orator – to pronounce his words and perform his gestures so as to (re)present above all his character in action, with the specific passions as they pass through his mind.42 The need, according to the model of the early Italian acting

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40 See ibid., p. 285.
41 The task of the perfect orator, d'Aubignac underlines in *Discours académique sur l'éloquence*, is to use words to ‘thrust into the mind of the listeners all images able to please’. When the imagination is ‘replete’ with pleasant images, his ‘judgment’, unable to apply itself to other objects, loses all autonomy and can be guided by the orator to his own ends (François Hédelin d'Aubignac, *Discours académique sur l'éloquence prononcé en l'Hostel de Monsieur le Marquis d'Hernault, le 12 Iuillet 1668*, Paris, Pierre Colin, 1668, pp. 11-14).
42 An occasional and secondary requirement for the orator, of course, although the rhetorical figure of prosopopeia, or personification, formed part of the training of any orator. This consisted in conceiving and declaiming the speech as if it were pronounced by a character from history, by someone already deceased, or generally by a figure other than the orator. Quintilian illustrates it in the *Institutio oratoria* (III,8,49-54), and also mentions the necessary difference between the declamation of prosopopeia and that of the theatre generally (ibid., I,8,3).
theory, to satisfy first and foremost the ‘dramaturgie’ requirements of his public and his profession.

The New Treatises. Andrea Perrucci, Recitation, Oratory and Commedia all’Improvviso

D’Aubignac’s observations, however, produced no follow-up, and the late seventeenth century continued to consider oratory and recitation as essentially the same thing, albeit with little courage of its conviction. At the same time the sum of observations and awareness accumulated over the century had gradually raised the curtain on a more articulate and complex view of the actor’s art, and the more educated spectators had begun to develop a greater sensitivity requiring a more nuanced and sophisticated interpretation and character-rendering. Recitation remained squarely within the discipline of eloquence but clearly required a more than ordinarily complex understanding and actorly competence. What seemed called for was a system of rules for actors, looking back to the doctrine of oratory but simultaneously forward to the specific requirements of the stage.

A new series of works on the norms of theatre recitation, then, began to appear at the turn of the century. The first, Andrea Perrucci’s Dell’arte rappresentativa premeditata, ed all’improvviso, published in Naples in 1699, analysed all aspects of theatre production, from the choice of script to costume design, with considerable emphasis on the actor’s art. In 1707 appeared Jean-Léonor Le Gallois de Grimarest’s Traité du récitatif, and in 1710 The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, attributed to Charles Gildon. It is in the dialectics of these treatises, with all their evasive verbal somersaults, that the issue gradually began to emerge, with the dramatic force it was to have on the debate of the following decades.

What characterised them was the obvious tension between the urge to keep recitation within the bounds of oratory, and the need to focus directly on the work of the actor, analysing all the specific stage difficulties which had little or nothing to do with the performance of a lawyer in court or a preacher in the pulpit.

This basic dichotomy emerged forcefully in the work of Andrea Perrucci, a Sicilian man of letters and member of various academies, who in 1678 was engaged as playwright and adapter of existing plays by the San Bartolomeo Theatre in Naples. He had also acquired great experience as a semi-professional actor and performance director, both at San Bartolomeo and in various other venues including the court theatre.

On the nature of recitation Perrucci entertained no doubt whatsoever: the arts of acting and oratory are indistinguishable, as the beginning of the treatise states clearly. Before talking about the theatre in general he feels bound to underline the conventional distinction between the ‘honest, decorous actors’ whose art merits serious analysis, and the ‘dishonest and shameful’ street entertainers, distinguishing between the two categories however through a concept which by the late seventeenth century had outlived its usefulness, that of the ‘mercenary’. These are disreputable players who, he explains, tread the boards for ‘sordid wages’, as a mere job, ‘to eat one’s bread so that one gorges oneself at the expenses of others’, while ‘honest and decorous’ are those who perform simply to offer ‘delightful
entertainment’. Branding as mercenaries all actors who lived by their profession was certainly questionable, particularly at the precise period when the professional theatre had gained full establishment recognition, and indeed Perrucci ends up rather inconsistently praising Isabella Andreini, the most famous Italian professional actress of the sixteenth century who, he declared, had plied her trade ‘with good repute, virtue, and decorum’.

Clearly, the distinction between ‘honest’ actors and disreputable mountebanks had to be sought elsewhere, in the area of cultural and professional dignity. To be shunned, Perrucci declared, are the players who represent the texts ‘poorly or sordidly’. But the cultural dignity of the performance can only be guaranteed by respect for the rules of oratory, ‘an art of revealing the inner soul with suitable gestures, voice, energy, and style’, that is, ‘to convey to the listener the sentiments of the soul through declamation, gestures, and actions, with style and refinement’. Oratory is thus the basic art of expression, and its norms are indispensable not only to actors but to ‘men learned in sciences and liberal arts’, academicians, ambassadors, and lawyers, and to generals who ‘have accomplished more with persuasive speeches to their soldiers and to their enemies than they have with military strength’; even, Perrucci goes on, to doctors since ‘it matters greatly that a doctor know how to console his patient with well-expressed explanations, and to give proof of his talent among his peers’.

In actual fact the eloquence of ambassadors, doctors, and generals was not of the slightest interest to the ‘poet’ of the San Bartolomeo Theatre, a semi-professional actor and organiser of entertainments. His concern was to draw on his long years of experience to provide norms and precepts for anyone wanting to act on the stage; and he was very aware of the ‘novelty’, as he himself put it, which the attempt represented in the extensive catalogue of treatises on eloquence. But if recitation came within the general category of eloquence, how to write a work of oratory, of use both in general and to all public speakers, dedicated exclusively to actors? Perrucci’s expedient was to present recitation as the paradigm of oratory: oratory at its most emblematic zenith. The norms of theatre recitation offered the best lesson in expressing the soul and moving the sentiments of the listener, whether in law-courts, churches, academies, or political assemblies. ‘Though there are differences between the gestures of an orator and those of an actor’, Perrucci explained, ‘it seems that the nearer an orator approaches the style of an actor, the more highly is he regarded’.

The basic premise of seventeenth-century treatises was thus reversed. The actor was no longer an ambiguous declaimer who, while following the general guidelines for all public speakers, inevitably, in meeting the needs of the theatre, fell into excesses which users of the more refined art of eloquence would do well to avoid.

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44 Ibid., p. 7.


46 Ibid., pp. 3-4.


48 Ibid., p. 3.
On the contrary, he now constituted the model for all those who had to externalize their thoughts and feelings, and theatre norms now appeared ‘helpful’, as the title of the treatise implies, not just for actors but for any other kind of orator.49

Even from this new perspective, however, the doctrine of oratory remained as the basis for any theory of recitation, blurring to an extent any clear lines as to the actor’s specific skills, which of course were self-evident in any experience of the stage. On this point Perrucci’s explanation of recitation by improvisation was exemplary.

His work is divided into two parts (each composed of a Proemio and fifteen ‘rules’), the first dedicated to a production ‘acted by memory’, i.e. composed by a ‘poet’ who has decided on the subject, plot, and lines; the second to a production in which the author provides the subject and the actors decide on the lines. This second part devotes page after page to the commedia dell’arte characters (subdivided into Lovers, Fathers and Old Men, Capitani, Zanni, Maidservants and Old Women, and Procurreuses), also listing an ample repertoire of generici (‘general compositions that can be adapted to every kind of comedy’, Perrucci glosses).50 One of the most important and detailed sources available for our knowledge of recitation by improvisation, it has made Perrucci’s work justly celebrated.

Now the difference between recitation by improvisation and from memory, particularly the different stage-effects, were quite clear to a minimally trained eye, and, we know, were immediately perceived by those of Perrucci’s contemporaries who were interested in the theatre. Around 1667 Charles de Saint-Evremond, observed, for example, that the performance of commedia dell’arte players, unlike that of actors accustomed to playing totally scripted parts, was based on spontaneous, natural, and vivid ‘action’ rather than the enunciation of a speech.51 And in 1694 Evaristo Gherardi, an actor in the Italian company based in Paris, also claimed the superiority of recitation by improvisation. Drawing on the actor’s imagination and ingenuity rather than mere memory alone, it encouraged a spontaneous link between word and gesture, and an immediate and almost automatic ensemble acting among those on the stage. Actors reciting from memory, on the other hand, Gherardi insisted, were so intent on remembering and repeating their lines that there was no energy left for acting them or paying attention to their own gestures and those of their fellow actors.52

49 Dell’arte rappresentativa presmeditata, ed all’improvviso. Parti due. Giovede non solo a chi si diletta di Rappresentare, ma a’ Predicatori, Oratori, Accademici, e Curiosi (On the Art of Acting from Memory and by Improvisation. In two Parts. Helpful not Only to Those Who Enjoy Acting, but Also to the Preachers, Orators, Academics, and the Curious).
50 Andrea Perrucci, A Treatise on Acting, from Memory and by Improvisation, p. 103.
52 Evaristo Gherardi, Le théâtre italien ou le Recueil de toutes le scènes françaises qui ont été jouées sur le théâtre italien de l’Hôtel de Bourgogne, Paris, De Luynes et Gherardi, 1694. Comparisons between actors who acted their parts from memory (the French players), and stammering ‘schoolchildren’ who ‘trembled in acting out their carefully-learned lesson’ was prudently moderated in the 1700 edition where it was acknowledged that a number of ‘illustrious actors’, particularly skilled and gifted, succeeded in ‘concealing art with art’, and though acting a text learned by heart, ‘charmed the audience with the beauty of their voice, the variety of their gestures, the adept flexibility of tone, and the graceful, easy, natural air which accompanied all their movements, and which they infuse into all that they pronounce’. See the opening ‘Avertissement’ in the six-volume edition of the Théâtre italien ou le Recueil général de toutes le comédiens et scènes françaises jouées par les comédiens du roi pendant tout le temps qu’ils ont été au services, Paris, Cusson et Witte, 1700.
The merits of recitation by improvisation were not lost on contemporary commentators, then – the vivacity, the natural fusion of word and action, and the immediate interrelation among the actors present on the stage, all of which seemed extremely difficult if not impossible when the actor was reciting a script. This empirical awareness, however, was to vanish in Perrucci’s treatise which, in the name of the general requirements of rhetoric, was intent on reducing all differences between the two styles of acting.

In the case of recitation by improvisation, Perrucci noted, the actors had to effect a series of operations before the audience – not least inventing their lines and co-ordinating the dialogue. In acting from memory these are for the most part taken care of by the playwright who, Perrucci continues, can take his time, without distractions of any kind, working, reworking and perfecting a draft; while the actor is working and processing ‘in real time’, there on the stage. In both cases, however, the same operations are required, involving above all the arts of eloquence, ‘rules of language, the figures of speech, tropes, and all the art of rhetoric’ to invent and articulate lines and speeches. If it is undoubtedly more difficult to perform a play by improvisation than to interpret a fully-elaborated script, the final result is basically the same: to give a rounded and co-ordinated performance.

The rules to be followed for recitation were the same, and no difference exists ‘as regards costume, voice, delivery, memory, gestures, and actions’. Only respect for the norms of recitation governing a scripted literary text will save improvising actors from the horrors of the ‘charlatans and mountebanks’ who appear on stage ‘mangling the plots, talking nonsense, gesticulating like madmen’. In a word, recitation by improvisation is essentially recitation from memory, to which is added the task of composing the lines, which normally belongs to the playwright. The two acting styles overlap to such an extent that the techniques of improvisation can be adopted in a performance from memory, completely unperceived by the audience, to obviate accidents and contingencies (not least lapses of memory), or when time is too short to study parts and perfect the performance.

**Experience, Rules and the Insufficiency of Actio**

Once all significant difference has been eliminated between the two types of acting, there remains the question of agreed rules for the actor’s stage performance. Here Perrucci finds himself in the same position as the first Italian treatise writers, Ingegneri, de’ Sommi, and Cecchini. He too compares the actor’s work with *actio oratoria*, generally defined ‘eloquence of the body’, since the use of the voice and gesturality had to follow the dictates of Cicero and Quintilian, studied and copied with great precision. Like them, too, he takes from the classics all the details as to the expressive meanings of gestures and movements, and the voice and its defects – in

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54 Ibid., pp. 101-102 and pp. 104-105.
55 Ibid., p. 102.
56 Perrucci particularly recommends that the improvising actor compile a personal collection of rhetorically unexceptionable passages, to be learned by heart and inserted into the performance (ibid., p. 103 and p. 105). The second part of the treatise consists mainly in a detailed collection of *generici* adaptable to the different characters and situations.
57 Ibid., p. 74 and p. 186.
short the basic repertoire of tones, stances, and attitudes to be used on-stage.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 51-56, pp. 58-62, p. 64 and p. 70. For Perrucci’s scrupulousness in copying classical norms, see particularly pp. 60-62. The whole treatise evinces considerable erudition; apart from the canonical Cicero and Quintilian Perrucci also cites, in a wide variety of context, scores of classical authors (Horace, Svetonius, Seneca, Juvenal, Macrobius, Strabo, Gellio, Valerius Maximus, Vitruvius, Lucian, Demetrius Phalerus, Pollux, Athenaeus, etc.) and moderns (Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Minturno, Tasso, Guidobaldo Bonarelli, Piccolomini, Bibbiena and Caro through to Samuel Pufendorf).} And again like them he offers the most appropriate solutions to the three types of issues characterising recitation. Firstly theatrical requirements, pronouncing lines so as to be perfectly understood, regulating the volume of the voice according to the size of the premises and number of spectators; timing, so as to avoid overlap in delivering lines; and strategies as to entries and exits.\footnote{See ibid., pp. 42-43, pp. 54-57, p. 63, p. 69, p. 82, pp. 103-104, p. 118, pp. 130-132, pp. 134-136, pp. 144-145, pp. 147-148, pp. 149-150, pp. 154-155 and p. 159.} Secondly aesthetic requirements, prescribing elegance and grace of movement and proscribing anything more than the slightest indication of gestures (such as a lovers’ embrace) which if realistically rendered could be deemed immodest.\footnote{Ibid., p. 64.} Lastly, dramaturgic requirements, orienting the interpretation of character according to minutely-predetermined moral, generational, professional, social, and national categories, and imposing a precise and efficient rendering of the various human passions and attitudes elicited by the specific situations and circumstances in which they find themselves.\footnote{Ibid., p. 55.}

The result should be to make the representation, while of course ‘feigned’, seem ‘real, extremely real to the spectators’, which is only possible if the players’ actions appear spontaneous and natural.\footnote{Ibid., p. 66.} The recitation must on the one hand reproduce as closely as possible the features of normal behaviour, so that, for example, in speaking the lines the actor must avoid any sing-song, cadenced elocution which would be ‘inappropriate, since one should recite just as one speaks’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 64.} On the other, care must be taken that all the players’ words and actions, though rehearsed and repeated, should seem casual and not artificially delivered. Similarly, ‘prearranged jests are to be spoken as if they were not prearranged, but arose by chance’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 176.} And if an actor has to fall down on stage, ‘this must to be done in such a way that it seems to be accidental, not premeditated and false’, however elaborately studied to avoid unsuitable movements, ‘in such a manner that the actor does not turn his shoulders or back to the audience’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 66.} And if the actor is required to perform improbable gestures or actions, such as interrupting a dialogue to make an aside, it is necessary to act ‘with courtesy and without affectation, as if it were happening by chance and not by design’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 64.} The very basic requirement of a good memory is in this respect essential, both because on stage the actor must concentrate on the action of the play, and not on the prompter, but also because unless he remembers his actions and words effortlessly they will be totally lacking all spontaneity and naturalness. ‘One must
memorize one’s part extremely well, as to both expressions and actions’, Perrucci insists, since they should come together not only ‘like twins’ but ‘unexpectedly’.67

Perrucci, however, has developed the model of the earlier Italian theoreticians to an extraordinary extent, exploiting both the reflections on oratory and gesturality which developed throughout the seventeenth century and his own very wide and varied experience of the stage. He devotes a significant amount of space, for example, to the category of nationality in constructing a character. This becomes a criterion not simply for determining the actor’s costume, which should be ‘in the style of the country in which the work is supposed to take place, that is, Romans should dress in the Roman style, Hebrews in the Hebrew style, Persians in the Persian style’, (with considerable praise for the meticulousness of the Spanish players).68 It also defines the gestures to accompany repeated situations, such as removing the hat in greeting:

Removing one’s hat should be done with grace and nobility, accompanied by a bow, but following the custom of the character’s homeland. For example, a Spaniard should bring his hat to his breast with the opening to the inside, so that he will not seem to be begging for alms, and when crossing his legs to bow, he should move the right foot in a circle toward the left heel when bowing to Heaven, and the left foot toward the right when bowing to men, always keeping his head and chest straight. In the French manner, one should stand with one’s feet still, or slightly draw one foot back after the other, then doff the hat and bring it to the chest, while bending the head and waist toward the person to whom one is bowing. In the Italian manner, one mixes the two usages according to personal inclination. In the Asian manner, without taking off one’s turban, one brings the hand to the chest, bowing the head69

What is more significant, however, is that given the wealth of notes, comments, and advice dictated by concrete stage experience, the precepts and repertoire of gestures and attitudes suggested by actio oratoria now appear less than satisfactory. They are insufficient to cover the range of behaviour and movements required for basic recitation. Perrucci is thus able to offer consolidated teachings based on Cicero and Quintilian when treating the expressive significance of the positions and movements of parts of the face and body (eyes, eyelashes, nose, lips, chest, hands, etc.), or the gestures and attitudes to be avoided as inelegant (it is unacceptable, for example, ‘to twist, purse, [or] bite’ the nose and lips, to raise the hands above eye-level, to move them away from the body beyond the breadth of the shoulders, to use the left hand without the right, to begin a speech positioning the left foot before the right, or to twist and turn the head, mouth, and shoulders).70 However, he then has to define other gestures and modes of behaviour which are extraneous to this particular tradition but a necessary component of acting before an audience. The pronouncing of a prologue, for example is preceded by an action which is indispensable in the theatre but out of place in an orator. To silence ‘the noise of the

67 Ibid., pp. 48-50, where Perrucci gives advice to the actor learning the part. The best time to learn by heart is the evening, and if the speeches are too long he recommends breaking them down into shorter sections and learning them separately.
68 Ibid., p. 20.
69 Ibid., p. 57.
70 Ibid., pp. 57-60, p. 62 and p. 73.
people finding their seats’, Perrucci advises the player ‘to walk about the stage a little’, before beginning the prologue.71

In the same way the basic principles of *actio oratoria* create a series of difficulties when applied to the theatre. The norm whereby the orator must always face the audience is problematic in a dialogue. Perrucci maintains that the actor must at all times be attentive to the words and actions of his interlocutor, but must equally always turn his face and body towards the public. Perucci’s advice is that the actor should assume a rather curious attitude and ‘remain standing with his chest to the audience, only tilting his head toward his companion while [the latter] is speaking, and turning his chest slightly’.72 The same audience-facing norm requires particular care when the actor has to kneel. If to the left of the audience, they should kneel on the right knee; if to the right, the left, ‘so that one’s chest always faces the audience’.73

But it was above all reasons of theatre performance which dictated the need for gestures and actions not contemplated in the repertoire of traditional *actio*, some of which require great care to avoid physical damage to the actor. Fainting, for example, has its own detailed rubric:

Fainting should be done in such a way that the actor seems gradually to lose his senses. There should be something to lean on, a chair indoors, or some kind of support on the street. With a trembling foot, with laboured breathing, with palpitations of the chest, the swoon should come over him little by little, as he seeks something to lean on, or there could be someone to support him or her.74

With so many varied aspects of body language to cover, the player clearly requires a behavioural code well in excess of that of *actio*. A system of rules has to be added to those of oratory, contemplating situations more physically detailed and demanding than those of delivering a speech. One possibility which Perrucci suggests is to follow the manuals advising on behavioural norms in the various areas of daily life which inevitably have to be represented on the stage. His recommendation is Giovanni della Casa’s *Galateo*, published in 1558, where the actor will find instructions on performing a range of everyday actions – blowing one’s nose, or simply eating – which at some point he will inevitably be required to perform on stage.75

There remain, however, the more extreme events, ‘dreadful’ and ‘horrible’, which no *Galateo* would take into account and which were once only recounted diegetically in a long monologue. In the modern world, Perrucci insists, they should be shown: experience teaches that the public is more readily moved on seeing the horror reproduced before their eyes. In any case, an actor’s skill is tested far more by enacting an event than by recounting it: all the more reason to emphasise that

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71 Ibid., p. 87.
72 Ibid., p. 62.
73 Ibid., p. 63.
74 Ibid., p. 66.
75 See ibid., p. 59, p. 70 and p. 76. The citing of the *Galateo* also gives a significant indication of what was considered good stage behaviour by at least a part of the actors of the age. If on the one hand the actor was recommended to behave elegantly in every situation, and should be able to wield a stick ‘with grace’, it was also necessary to remind him not to yawn, belch, or spit on stage ‘unless it be into a handkerchief’ (p. 59).
‘wounding, being wounded, killing, and dying on stage must be done with skill’. There then follows advice on this last typology, death on stage, which is obviously beyond the remit of any of the traditional tasks of oratory:

Let the death of tyrants, however, be accompanied by desperate and violent acts; and in the final throes let it be laboured, with thrashing, rolling the eyes, and anguish. Let the death of the innocent be discreet, except to the extent that we feel a natural repugnance at the destruction of a living being, and let it show forth a peacefulness and holy endurance that can move the devout to tears and joy for such a happy death. In the case of the death of lovers or various others, let it be accompanied by the gestures with which a deeply moved soul would usually accept death, whether by his own will, out of despair, or by the power of an enemy’s weapon.

The doctrine of oratory, Perrucci’s treatise makes clear, will always be an inadequate tool for describing recitation, given the concrete nature of the theatre. Whatever the theoretical declarations, the art of the orator and that of the actor are at variance, and the system of norms is constantly undermined by the far-from-minimal exceptions. Having established the rule of elegance and decorum, the occasions for breaking it, at least in part, have to be acknowledged – in the role of the buffoon, for example. Then there are the characters who defy any precise categorisation, such as magicians or necromancers, to be interpreted a capriccio: ‘however one likes’. Even the norms regarding stage entrances have to allow for exceptions, ‘to adjust the action to what is happening’. In short, the rule has to be established along with its breach, since ‘not all rules are absolute; they have their exceptions’.

At the end of his long treatise Perrucci’s pragmatic conclusion is that, in the art of recitation, ‘I cannot deny that practice is more effective than theory’. This would seem to be repeating what Flaminio Scala had stated some eighty years earlier, but it now takes on a new significance. Theory, Perrucci adds, is still necessary because practice alone is ‘like walking blind’, and the best results are obtained ‘when both are joined together’. It is not a question of rejecting theory, but of adapting it to match practice: of describing and guiding the actor’s concrete activity on stage, determining the problems, and suggesting solutions. All this was beyond the reach of a theory extrapolated from the doctrine of oratory when applied to the vast accumulated experience of late-seventeenth-century actors.

**Grimarest**

Eight years later a fresh attempt was made to analyse recitation subsumed under the norms of oratory by Grimarest, who put the problem in clear and peremptory terms, the result of the particular circumstances in which the treatise arose. Was it or was it nor possible, he demanded, to establish a series of rules to evaluate an actor’s

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76 Ibid., p. 67.
77 Ibid., p. 68.
78 See ibid., p. 61 and p. 71.
79 Ibid., pp. 147-148.
80 Ibid., p. 71.
81 Ibid., p. 92.
82 Ibid., p. 199.
83 Ibid.
performance? And if these rules were those of oratory, how were they to be applied to the stage?

Grimarest was a teacher of French, playwright, and dilettante actor, the author of a number of prose works including a volume on military skills, and an occasional guide for foreign travellers passing through Paris. In 1705 he had published the first biography of Molière, in which he praised his style of acting. Molière, Grimarest maintained, acted with a perfection unknown among actors of the new generation, who no longer knew the basic rules of their art. The pronouncement immediately drew down the wrath of an anonymous reviewer who denied that any such stage rules existed. Actors, he sentenced, were individuals of scant culture who would never have been able to study them anyway; moreover the inexistent rules would have improved no-one’s acting since it was often the most illiterate of a company’s actors who were the best on stage. Acting was ‘a gift of nature’ which, the reviewer went on, ‘experience shapes with no rule beyond that of adapting to the tastes of the audience’. What’s more, he added, since a number of actors in the Comédie Française were appreciated at least as much as Molière in his own day, no-one could sensibly maintain that acting standards had degenerated, concluding with a doubt as to whether Grimarest himself, for all his confidence that such rules existed, would be able to explain them.

The basic issue concerned of course the status and dignity of the actor, which could only be assured, in the viewpoint of the period, if the profession required mental abilities, serious study, and a solid culture: in a word, the gifts of an orator. The key point now however was the matter of rules. Without rules to follow, the intellectual side of acting vanished completely and the actor’s art was reduced to an innate gift, open to the uneducated and the illiterate. It required neither study nor preparation, which put it beyond the reach of any competent and well-founded judgment beyond that of simple, spontaneous audience-satisfaction. It left no room for the opinion of experts and connoisseurs, and in short was little more than a private manifestation of no cultural substance or interest whatsoever.

Grimarest published a short reply. The principles of recitation, he repeated, did indeed exist: those of oratory; and if acting required natural gifts, such as a resonant voice and agile body, it was also necessary to use them according to accurately-studied norms. Certainly it was necessary to distinguish the comédien, who followed the rules in a rough and ready manner, from the acteur who interpreted them with elegance and intelligence, putting into his acting ‘all the truth and delicacy which nature demands’. Anyone, however, who had studied the precepts of oratory and

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85 *Lettre critique à Mr. de *** sur le livre intitulé, La vie de Mr. Molière* (Paris, Claude Cellier, 1706), now in Grimarest, *La vie de M. de Molière*, pp. 137-138.
86 The rules apply equally, he emphasises, to the actor and the preacher. Indeed, a good preacher would give an excellent rendering of a passage from a play, and the actor should therefore be considered ‘as an orator pronouncing in public a speech composed to touch the heart of the auditorium’ (Jean-Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, *Addition à la vie de Monsieur de Molière, contenant une réponse à la critique que l'on en a faite*, Paris, J. Le Febvre et P. Ribou, 1706, now in *La vie de M. de Molière*, ed. by G. Mongrédien, p. 162 and p. 165).
87 Ibid., pp. 163-164.
understood the script would be able to move the audience – the prime aim of acting.\footnote{Ibid., p. 165. Grimarest again returns to the distinction between comédien and acteur in the \textit{Traité}, adding however that only the acteur can perform skilfully on the stage, while the comédien will always end up being ‘ridiculous’ (Jean-Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, \textit{Traité du récitatif}, Paris, J. Le Febvre et P. Ribou, 1707, pp. 188-189). But a knowledge of the norms, and sound understanding of the text remain the cardinal factors of acting; any playwright with a grounding in oratory will recite his own text better than an actor ‘since he is able to miss no inflexion of the voice nor gesture, in order to express his required action’ (Jean-Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, \textit{Addition à la vie de Monsieur de Molière}, p. 125).}

It was now a question of stating these precepts. At first sight, given that the actor applied only the rules of oratory, Grimarest could have confined himself to citing some of the very many works on oratory in circulation. The reviewer however had challenged him to state the rules which were indispensible for concretely appraising the actors’ performance on stage; and the \textit{Journal des savants} had quickly entered the fray by putting the same question to Grimarest.\footnote{In an anonymous article of 22 March 1706 now in S. Chaouche, \textit{Sept traités sur le jeu du comédien et autres textes}, pp. 379-381.} The only way out of it was to recognize recitation as one of the types of oratory, with which it shared the ground rules while applying them in specific ways, according to its specific needs. It was these needs that Grimarest wanted to address in the \textit{Traité du récitatif}.

The \textit{Traité} divided oratory into four essential types: ‘reading’ (subdivided into ‘simple’ and ‘moving’), ‘public action’ (speeches pronounced in a court of law, before a prince, or before an assembly), ‘declamation’ (both preaching and theatre recitation) and ‘song’. These four types are distinguished by two basic criteria: the level of passion to be invested in the delivery of the text, and the varying degree of bodily movements and expressions which can accompany the words. Hence ‘simple reading’ differs from ‘moving reading’ in that it is concerned with simply rendering the denotation of the text, its logical meaning and the organisation of the discourse, while the second seeks to solicit emotions in the listener; to the norms of simple reading it adds some of the rules of declamation, though communicating only through the voice, without the addition of gestures or movements. If when expressing passions the reader inevitably moves the face or arms in any way, the movements must remain circumscribed, involuntary, or in any case not intentionally used as a means of communication, since ‘as a principle gesture must play no part in reading’.\footnote{Jean-Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, \textit{Traité du recitative}, pp. 77-100.}

The same rules of simple reading also apply to ‘public action’: any speech on an official occasion which however draws minimally on gesturality. Marks of solemnity are to condition every expression: while gestures are to be limited to slight arm movements, the voice must be ‘sonorous, serious, and imposing’, its variations, while necessary, ‘imperceptible’, and at the points where the orator changes his tone to reawaken his public’s interest he must proceed ‘gradually and imperceptibly’: all exclamatory force would be unseemly. He should similarly avoid all emphasis designed to play on the audience’s emotions, not simply in formal speeches, but equally in lawyers’ speeches – anyone pleading a case and trusting to a judge’s
impartiality, Grimarest insists, must convince through the rigour of his arguments, and would appear ‘ridiculous’ if he attempted to appeal to their passions or feelings.91

‘Declamation’ is the type of oratory aimed at ‘touching the listeners’ hearts’, and its norms serve both preachers and their congregation, and actors and their audiences. Grimarest states that he will be concerned only with actors, and starts from the consideration that on stage the voice, tone and accent are in the service both of transmitting the content and also of expressing and arousing the passions.92 Gesture and word then combine ‘to confer greater veracity to the action’.93 It would be ‘bad taste’, however, Grimarest continues, to state the rules governing gestures in excessive detail, and limits himself to a few notes on varying facial expression to match the different passions, and the difficulty of moving the arms with elegance and delicacy.94

On the question of voice, Grimarest devotes considerable space to tone and the different nuances suited to the different passions. He reprises, though without citing it, Bary’s Méthode pour bien prononcer un discours (1679), addressed to preachers, even examining the vocal range covering the different mental states and the subtlest of their combinations.95 The passion of love, for example, can produce ‘sweetness’, ‘joy’, or ‘pain’ and should be reproduced in their corresponding tones: respectively ‘tender and caressing’, ‘gay’, or ‘insistent and mournful’. In expressing hate, accompanied by an attitude which is ‘rough, harsh, and pitiless’, the voice should take on, in different emotional conditions, the tones of ‘harshness’, ‘reproof’, or ‘firm severity’, etc.96

‘Song’, his last element, is, as the term implies, a form of declamation associated with music, and from this point of view the art of the singer is more complicated since, Grimarest concludes, it has to combine the tempo and tonality of music with those of declamation, which alone is able to express the passions and transmit them to an audience.97

Having embarked on a laborious classification of the forms of oratory on which to base recitation, Grimarest in the end achieved a singular result. He had managed to distinguish the actor from the lawyer, but only by comparing him with the preacher – and within a very circumscribed definition of oratory, essentially limited to the art of delivery. If the use of gestures was the criterion separating the reader and the lawyer from the preacher and the actor, the analysis of recitation came down to the study of vocal expressions, relegating gesturality to five of the two hundred pages of his text. But the treatise also evinced traces of a new sensibility, above all in the parts where Grimarest adapts Bary’s precepts to actors and sets out to define not only the tonality of voice for the different passions, but the variations in tone matching the

91 Ibid., pp. 102-107 and pp. 111-117.
92 Ibid., p. 123.
93 Ibid., p. 183.
94 Ibid., pp. 184-187.
95 On Grimarest’s extensive and unacknowledged use of Bary’s text, see S. Chaouche, Sept traités sur le jeu du comédien et autres textes, p. 329 (note 66). In addition to Bary, Grimarest also draws on Le Faucheur’s treatise and Etienne Du bois de Breteville’s L’éloquence de la chaire, et du barreau, selon les principes les plus solides de la rhétorique sacrée et profane. See also Peter France, ‘Autour du Traité du récitatif de Grimares. Précepts et problèmes’, XVIIe siècle (July-September 1981).
97 See ibid., pp. 196-197 and pp. 221-225.
nuances of each passion in combination with different emotional conditions. The
seventeenth-century typologies of vocal expression available to the actor were thus
honered, refined, and extended. Similarly, remaining within the perspective of
recitation based essentially on the use of the voice, Grimarest was intent on
prescribing a highly-detailed characterisation of the tonal inflexions proper to the
different characters, listing a new series of criteria for reproducing on the stage a
series of stock figures, and not only the ubiquitous ‘old man’, ‘servant’, ‘peasant’, etc.,
but also the ‘précieuse’, the ‘Norman’, the ‘Gascon’, the ‘Fleming’, ‘the Swiss’ and so
on.98

The whole operation of fully fleshing out a character began to take on a different
perspective, at least in some detail or emphasis. For Grimarest this meant not simply
reproducing the external features and attitudes, with the appropriate voice inflexions:
the actor must ‘enter into the spirit of the part’ and ‘study the character’ in depth to
avoid accepting roles uncongenial to his own personality. An actor, he insists, ‘may
well be suitable to play a king’ but ‘be unable to enter into the part of a young prince
athirst with love or glory; or play the part of a confidante, with its humbler actions
and feelings’.99 Not only the physique du role, then, but the inner physiognomy of
the actor’s own character was becoming an essential element to play the part
satisfactorily. And here theory begins to develop an awareness of the psychological
dimension of the actor’s art.

**Gildon**

The third attempt to elucidate the rules of recitation from the standpoint of oratory
came from the English man of letters Charles Gildon, tragedian, drama expert, and
Shakespeare scholar. His *The Life of Mr. Betterton* is certainly less linear, not to say
confused, than Grimarest’s work, but at the same time it is considerably more
complex and sophisticated. Despite the misleading title, it is not a biography of
Betterton, who died in 1710 and had been the most important English actor of the
previous fifty years. Some scant information on his life is given in the first few pages,
followed by a description of a visit Gildon had paid him the year before his death,
with a long explication of rules and observations allegedly made by Betterton on that
occasion. Basically, however, this was an expedient. Gildon, as he himself explains,
used Betterton’s name and prestige to give more authority to his own ideas, just as
Plato and Xenophon, he pointed out, had used the figure of Socrates.100

With or without Betterton’s blessing, Gildon’s aim was clear: to provide a ’system
of acting, which might be a rule to future players’, since in addition to natural gifts ‘a
studious application’ is also required, and must be lifelong.101 Formulating the rules
of such a system was far from easy however, Gildon proudly claimed to be the first
to attempt it in English, but recognised his debt to French treatises on oratory which,
he recalled, had in their turn drawn on Quintilian and other ancients whose doctrine

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98 Ibid., pp. 179-183.
99 Ibid., p. 80 and pp. 128-129.
101 Ibid., p. 15, p. 17 and p. 33.
they had extended to the conditions of the modern world. As a result his text is
top-heavy with explicit or tacit references to Latin and Greek sources: Cicero, Virgil,
Horace, Quintilian, Lucian, Plutarch and modern writers such as Thomas Wright, de
Cressolles or Le Faucheur, evincing considerable knowledge of the whole debate
around the principles of *actio*, expression, and gesturality. All such knowledge,
though, Gildon emphasises, must go hand in hand with direct experience of the
stage; and he proceeds to accompany his ancients with innumerable references to
contemporary English actors and actresses: Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Bradshaw, Robert
Wilks, Cardell Goodman, Benjamin Johnson, etc.

The dividing line between the two domains, however – the doctrine of oratory
and the practice of recitation – remained hazy and problematic. The majority of his
examples, Gildon admitted, came from oratory, but only, he immediately explained,
because his treatise was obliged to take into account the professional needs of
lawyers and preachers, although this in no way excluded the possibility of a new work
dedicated exclusively to the stage.

The reasoning is less than convincing and the format of the treatise would seem
better explained as an astute publishing strategy, to appeal to as many readers as
possible. The point, however, is rather different. If a text specifically dedicated to
acting is put off until a later date it is because, for Gildon too, only oratory can
provide the necessary basis for a system of acting. The actor’s performance, the
lawyer’s pleading, and the preacher’s sermon belong in any case to the same domain,
and what distinguishes them, Gildon states, is just the greater importance of the
word in church and the law-court, where the discourse functions by reasoning and
proof. In the theatre greater significance is given to facial expressions, body
movements, and the rhythm and intonation of the voice: the theatre thus requires a
‘more strong, vivid and violent’ gesturality, but is also the place where *actio* can reach
perfection.

Gildon’s position, then, shares two basic premises with, respectively, Perrucci’s
(recitation constitutes the most perfect and effective form of oratory) and
Grimarest’s (what distinguishes the actor from other orators is the more extensive
and accentuated use of gesture), and at first glance there seems to be no further way
of distinguishing the actor’s work from that of the lawyer and preacher. The treatise
is thus mostly dedicated to illustrating the gestural and vocal code of *actio* along
traditional lines. Gildon repeats the principle whereby every inner attitude finds its
natural sign in the expressions of the body and voice, which however comprise an
immediately comprehensible universal language. He goes into some detail over the
positioning and gestures of the body, head, face, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, shoulders,

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102 See ibid., p. vi and p. ix. Betterton knew neither Greek nor Latin, and in the imaginary dialogue
with Gildon, justifies his various observations from the ancients as taken from a manuscript, procured
by a friend, containing the wisdom of a ‘learned Jesuit’ (p. 43). A manuscript (though not the same
one) is also mentioned at p. 17 and p. 45. Among the modern texts in Latin the treatise draws
generously on de Cressolles’s *Vacationes autumnales*, and among French authors Le Faucheur, *Traité de
l’action de l’orateur*, an English translation of which appeared in 1680 (*An Essay upon the Action of an
Orator*).

103 See ibid., p. x.

104 Ibid., p. 25, p. 57 and also p. 79, p. 112 and pp. 137-138.

105 See ibid., p. 50.
arms, and lastly hands, hand-movements being ‘more copious and various, than all the other parts of the body’, before going on to the placement of the voice.\textsuperscript{106}

The simple language of natural expressions always has to be nurtured by art, however: nothing should disturb the eye or ear of the audience, since in that case ‘will his person be less agreeable, and his speech less efficacious to both, by wanting all that grace, virtue, and power’.\textsuperscript{107} This leads into the aesthetic requirements of gesturality and vocality, limiting any overly-realistic actions such as ‘bending a bow, presenting a musquet, or playing any musical instrument, as if you had it in your hands’,\textsuperscript{108} and imposing their own norms which forbid, for example, inclining the head on the chest or towards the shoulder as this would create an inelegant and unnatural pose.\textsuperscript{109} Aesthetic requirements also reinstate the canonical ban, originally sanctioned by Quintilian, on the use of the left hand and leaving the right inactive, or raising the hands above eye-level, while as regards the use of the voice all the mistakes listed in Iulius Pollux’s \textit{Onomasticon} are dwelt on in detail.\textsuperscript{110} To correct anything which could compromise the elegance of his movements, Gildon advises the actor to practise in front of a full-length mirror, at the same time reminding him that the studied expression or gesture must never become affectation, which is inevitably annoying and ridiculous.\textsuperscript{111}

The modulation of voice and gesture must also of course meet theatrical requirements: the public has to be able to hear and understand what is happening onstage, which becomes an additional element for the actor to factor into his choice of tone and attitude. If he modulates his voice according to ‘a just observation of the common discourse’, selecting an intensity, tone and stress consonant with the natural reaction of a real-life person to a given situation (offence, grief, etc.), he should raise his voice in proportion to the distance from the audience and conditions in the auditorium.\textsuperscript{112} He should equally regulate the speed of delivery – a point already made by de’ Sommi – to allow the audience time to follow and fully process his words, avoiding any sudden rush or change of tempo and rhythm.\textsuperscript{113} So far so traditional: but the treatise also contains a number of points and contentions pointing forwards to a profound transformation of the perception of acting. Gildon pitches at far more than Grimarest’s scrupulous observation of the norms of oratory. First of all, the fundamental notions on which the rules are based seemingly evade any clear and commonly-accepted definition. Everyone insists on taking nature as the guide for regulating the intensity and type of expression, but, as Gildon points out, there is no consensus as to what is meant by ‘nature’.\textsuperscript{114} Then the rules are hardly accessible to everyone, in that to follow and indeed even to understand them takes genius.\textsuperscript{115} Normativity works, then, only with the added value of talent and the personal experience of the actor; originality thus becomes a sine qua non.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 57.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p. 78.
\textsuperscript{109} See ibid., p. 58.
\textsuperscript{110} See ibid., p. 74, p. 76 and pp. 89-91.
\textsuperscript{111} See ibid., pp. 53-54.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p. 85 and p. 105.
\textsuperscript{113} See ibid., p. 105 and p. 108.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 88.
\textsuperscript{115} See ibid., p. 57.
some had advis’d the learner to have some excellent pattern always before his eyes, and urge, that [the orator] Hortensius was so to Roscius and Aesopus, who always made it their business to be present at his pleadings with that attention as to improve themselves so far by what they saw, as to carry away is fine actions and gestures, and practice afterwards on the stage, what they had seen at the bar: yet can I not allow of this imitation in acting; for when a very young player conceives a strong opinion of any one received authority on the stage, he at best becomes a good copy, which must always fall short of an original.  

The importance of personal initiative, a fundamental component of the actor’s art, regards first of all the script to be interpreted. Gildon clearly considers respect for the text as indispensable; it must be studied and learnt scrupulously: an actor who needs to be ‘supported by loud prompting’ or, worse, who makes any sort of addition, subtraction, or modification to the playwright’s words is seriously compromising the effectiveness of his own acting. Respect for the text should also extend to the playwright himself, whose views and suggestions can be precious: the great Mrs. Barry, Gildon points out, would always consult ‘the most indifferent’ of the authors she was interpreting. But for full immersion in the work, the actor has to exploit his own talent and personal culture. If the characterisation of, for example, a heroic figure is textually inadequate, the actor should draw from his own reading and consider how the same figure has been treated by other writers. He should also be versed in moral philosophy, to be able to grasp the textual interrelations between the different passions, their dynamics and external manifestations. Some knowledge of rhetoric would be desirable, as would familiarity with the visual arts. A cultural grounding of the kind will improve the staging of even a mediocre writer, and of plays which ‘to read would turn a man’s stomach’.  

Through this complex process of interpretation, while the actor is learning the script, entering completely into the part and enhancing it with his cultural awareness, the contours of the character gradually emerge with more clearly-defined precision. This is then the criterion deciding the stage use of the tools of oratory, orienting the choice of gesture and movement contained within the code of actio. 

the player is to consider, that it is not every rude and undesigned action, that is his business [...] what he represents is man in his various characters, manners, and passions, and to these heads he must adjust every action; he must perfectly express the quality and manners of the man, whose person he assumes, that is, he must know how his manners are compounded, and from thence know the several features, as I may call ‘hem, of his passions. A patriot, a prince, a beggar, a clown, etc. must each have their propriety, and distinction in action as well as words and language.  

There is a further complication. The effort of ‘assuming’ the character throughout the play tends to extend the confines of the code infinitely, and require increasingly subtle and sophisticated forms of expression, to reproduce particularly complex emotional combinations and states of mind. To preach in church or plead at the bar

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116 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
117 Ibid., p. 16 and p. 38.
118 See ibid., p. 36.
119 See ibid., p. 36 and pp. 138-139.
120 Ibid., p. 16 and p. 39.
121 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
requires the passions suited to the subject matter, and the effective communication of them effectively to the listeners; but here the range of feelings to be expressed – compassion, indignation, perplexity, anger, etc. – is relatively reduced and less nuanced. All the other subtleties and variants categorised in the doctrine of eloquence are required not in preaching or pleading but in representing a character in the complexity of his inner being, externalised by his own character and his interaction with other characters and situations.122

The courage of Aeneas, for example, of itself was sedate and temperate, and always attended with good nature; that of Turnus join’d with fury, yet accompany’d with generosity and greatness of mind. The valour of Mezentius was savage and cruel; he has no fury but fierceness, which is not a passion but habit, and nothing but the effect of fury cool’d into a very keen hatred, and inveterate malice.123

The countenance in the expression of this passion [love] is extremely various, participating sometimes of the transports of joy, sometimes of the agonies of grief; it is sometimes mingled with the heats of anger, and sometimes smiles with the pleasing tranquillity of an equal joy […] grief is to be expressed according to its various degrees of violence, hate has the peculiar expression composed of grief, envy, and anger, a mixture of all which ought to appear in the eye.124

Lastly, a further, essential application of the resources of oratory is required for the actor to ‘assume’ a character, namely, the use of the different facial expressions to transform his physiognomy. The actor only has the one face, Gildon points out, and unless he can change it substantially for the different roles, the audience has to strain its imagination to visualise a different character. However he can change his face by changing expressive signs; ‘by raising, or falling, contracting, or extending the brows; giving a brisk or sullen, sprightly or heavy turn to his eyes; sharpening or swelling his nostrils, and the various positions of his mouth’ he will obtain results similar to those achieved by the use of masks in classical theatre, or, indeed, improve on them. Masks cancel all facial movements in exchange for the rigidity of a fixed expression, while an actor has to draw on all the expressive means at his command, not least the vivid emotions of the face, if he is to record the lights and shadows of the passions passing through the character.125

Interpreting a character, however, is not simply a case of exploiting the most advanced forms of oratory and putting them to unexpected uses. It also has the opposite, negative effect of breaking with innumerable norms codified within a longstanding tradition which however remain intangible for lawyers and preachers. Speech rhythms, for example, it was established, were not to alter too rapidly or unexpectedly if the audience was to be able to follow clearly. Stage action, though, Gildon immediately adds, often requires frenetic delivery and very pronounced speech variations.126 In the same way actorly affectation, at best irritating and at worst absurd, becomes desirable and even indispensable when it is a component of the part

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122 See ibid., p. 40.
123 Ibid., p. 35.
124 Ibid., p. 64.
125 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
126 See ibid., p. 108.
he is playing. Even those actions and attitudes which compromise the elegance of the actio can all be rehabilitated:

The mouth must never be writh'd, nor the lips bit or lick'd, which are all ungenteel and unmannerly actions, and yet what some are frequently guilty of; yet in some efforts or starts of passion, the lips have their share of actions, but this more on the stage, that in any other public speaking, either in the pulpit, or at the bar; because the stage is or ought to be an imitation of nature in those actions and discourses, which are produc'd betwixt man and man by any passion, or on any business which can afford action; for all other has in reality nothing to do with the scene.  

Equally, the rules of oratory forbid holding the head up too high, ‘which is the mark of arrogance and haughtiness’, but ‘an exception to this rule will come in for the player, who is to act a person of that character’. By the same logic ‘to shrug up the shoulders be no gesture allow’d in oratory, yet on the stage the character of the person, and the subject of his discourse, may render it proper enough’.  

The compulsory violation of the code of actio on-stage ultimately measures the distance between recitation and other forms of oratory, and is all the more excusable, Gildon has it, the greater the deviancy of theatre discourse from that of preaching or pleading. This is clear from the two theatrical genres, tragedy and comedy. It is comedy which permits all possible transgressions, Gildon maintains. A number of gestures forbidden in the name of elegance and sobriety, and yet acceptable in comedy, remain for Gildon as inadmissible in church or at the bar as on the tragic stage. Conversely, a series of guidelines regarding the use of the voice, which initially would seem more suited to the sermon or legal pleading than to the actor’s monologue, he admits, are actually extremely useful to the actor, particularly in tragedy. This is true not only because tragedy draws more on solemnity and dignity of tone, but because greater space is generally accorded to narrative, dialogue, and introspective monologue. All the differences and modifications which distinguish the actor from other orators, then, are reduced when on stage the narrative and evocative function of the lines outweighs that of the immediate rendering of a character in action.

From the formal criterion in Gildon’s treatise which distinguishes recitation (the fact that the actor has to use a more marked and energetic gesturality than other orators) there also emerges, then, deliberately or otherwise, a more effective principle which is to become decisive. Stage oratory takes on such different and unique characteristics because the actor shows a character in action, expressing their passions and feelings variously aroused by plot-developments. It is dramaturgic requirements, prevailing over all others, which mark the distinction between the

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127 See ibid., p. 53.
128 Ibid., pp. 72-73.
129 Ibid., p. 58.
130 Ibid., p. 73.
131 See ibid., p. 73 and p. 112. As already stated by d’Aubignac, La pratique du théâtre, p. 283, Grimarest, for his part, saw the distinction between tragic and comic acting in the different placement of the voice: ‘sublime and pompous’ for tragic characters, and ‘ordinary and natural’ for comedy. In addition, vocal characterisation of the characters was to be emphasised in comedy and limited in tragedy. This could make tragic acting seem more difficult (Jean-Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, Traité de récitatif, pp. 177-178).
performance of the actor and that of the lawyer or preacher. On this point Gildon is extremely clear: among the thousand talents and qualities required of the actor, ‘the most necessary’ is the ability elegantly to enter into a role and endow the character, caught in all the complexity of their inner workings and sentiments, with the characteristics and habits most proper to them.132

At this point, with final awareness of what it is that separates it from its preaching and pleading cognates, recitation can look for new models on which to mould itself. Grimarest had emphasised how actors’ expressive needs were characterised by a greater use of gestures and body movements; and Gildon, as seen above, is in agreement. His treatise gives the point decisive weight and significance however. Action, in the sense of gesture and movement in space, is ‘the support of nature’ and ‘life’ itself, which is why the eye is immediately attracted by everything that moves, and eschews all that remains inactive and immobile.133 Whence the cardinal rule for the actor:

This natural power of motion or action is the reason, that the attention of the audience is fixt by any irregular or even fantastic action on the stage of the most indifferent player; and supine and drowsy, when the best actors speaks without the addition of action.134

Such is the effect of movement on the observing eye that even when the action is simply represented in a painting, it can often arouse passions and impress itself on the mind with a far greater force than words.135 A painting of moving figures thus becomes the prevailing model for the actor: the model which actors should aim at when they wish to give stage action its own, specific characteristics. Paintings of historical subjects can provide models for variety and nuances of physiognomy,136 and Gildon cites two famous examples, Jacob Jordaens’s The Descent from the Cross and The Sacrifice of Jephte’s Daughter by Antoine Coypel, to show how the same feeling, here pain, can transform into so many different combinations in the gestures and expressions of all protagonists.137

This is not the only lesson to be learnt from paintings of historical subjects. They also demonstrate how each character has to seem concentrated on the action taking place – clearly essential for an actor. Unlike a lawyer who is ‘on stage’ only when haranguing or pleading, and virtually ceases to exist for the public when others begin to speak, so can wear any expression he chooses, the actor has to remain intent on whatever is happening on stage, and whoever is speaking. By appearing distracted, ‘gazing about’ or, worse, ‘whispering to one another, or bowing to their friends in the pit’, the cast completely ruin the whole stage effect; and this happens, Gildon reports, all too frequently. Here a useful lesson can be learnt from historical paintings such as

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132 Ibid., pp. 33-34 and p. 139.
133 Ibid., p. 25.
135 See ibid., p. 51.
136 See ibid., p. 63.
137 See ibid., pp. 36-37.
Le Brun’s famous *Alexander and the Family of Darius* where all the characters, of every rank and role, seem to share in the grief of the main protagonists.\(^{138}\)

The actor’s participation in stage events requires a different use of the eyes from the lawyer or preacher. Received wisdom requires every orator to ‘cast […] his eyes’ on the listeners, ‘turning them gently from side to side with an air of regard, sometimes on one person, and sometimes on another’.\(^{139}\) To appear natural and plausible the actor, on the other hand, while not disregarding the audience, should also continuously take his fellow-actors into account, and train his gaze in the direction of the action.

No man is engaged in dispute, or any argument of moment, but his eyes and all his regard are fixt on the person, he talks with; but not but that there are times according to the turn or crisis of a passion, where the eyes may with great beauty be turn’d from the object we address to several ways, as in appeals to Heaven, imploiring assistance, to join in your address to any one, and the like.\(^{140}\)

In composing the ‘picture’ represented on stage and directing his expressions, then, the actor maintains a double focus: the eye of the spectator and, simultaneously, the character(s) he is addressing.\(^{141}\) Again it is painting which sets the examples to be followed, both positive and negative:

in the *Psyche and Cupid* of Coypel, her eyes are directed to him as he descends on the wing, and his to her glowing with love and desire, and yet all this is seen in him by those, who view the picture. Titian has drawn the same story, I mean the loves of Cupid and Psyche; but as she lies on the bed naked, we see nothing but her back-parts, the Cupid advances his knee to the bed, with the eyes fixt on her face, which are turn’d from the spectator. I know not what the Italian’s fancy was, to imagine that the back-parts of the mistress of love should be more agreeable, than her face.\(^{142}\)

The classical figure of the orator as axiomatic example to the actor at this point seems to waver. Demosthenes and Cicero certainly retain their places in the actors’ pantheon: but there are new examples to emulate. The actor, Gildon opines, should be as conversant with the figurative arts as ‘a Raphael, or Michelangelo’, no less.\(^{143}\)

This link between painting and the stage was not actually new. It had been widely explored in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Francesco Robortello, for example, in his *Explicationes* from 1548 had analysed the difference between the concept of imitation in the theatre, painting, and sculpture.\(^{144}\) Other writers had underlined the aspect of immediacy distinguishing theatre and painting from poetry, while the problem of creating a unified and cohesive composition in painting, distributing a number of subjects across the surface of a canvass, had been compared with questions of staging. More particularly, the late seventeenth century had

\(^{138}\) Ibid., p. 37. This need for the actor to appear continuously engaged in stage action when only listening to his interlocutor is also present in Perrucci and Grimarest. Here however Gildon goes further: the engagement is to apply to the whole of the stage action and its emotional atmosphere.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., p. 65.

\(^{140}\) Ibid., p. 66.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., p. 67.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., pp. 67-68.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., p. 139.

\(^{144}\) See Francesco Robortello, *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes*, Firenze, L. Torrentino, 1548, p. 11.
examined in some detail painting’s ability to reproduce the effect of movement and action through fixed images, and had taken it as their criterion for placing paintings of historical subjects at the top of the hierarchy of painting typologies.145

The seventeenth century had equally considered the similarities between the actor and the painter, as in Webster’s description of Richard Burbage, or Richard Baker’s in the review *Theatrum triumphans* which defined the actor as a ‘speaking picture’.146 Gildon was doing something different however, centring on painting as the immediate, concrete model to show the actor how to interpret a character, express his personality and inner being, and position him within the crowded canvas of the stage. And while the figure of the orator was gradually beginning to lose its prominence as role model in the visual arts and literature, a new, direct, and mutually-beneficial rapport was being established between acting and painting. In a number of theoretical statements for painters, Antoine Coypel, repeatedly cited by Gildon, lists endless precepts from traditional oratorial doctrine. Above all, however, he is careful to recommend that all those who would be great painters and sculptors should go to the theatre, recalling that classical painters would make a point of taking as their close study the stage, the dance, and pantomime.147

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THE BIRTH OF EMOTIONALISM

The Dramaturgic Function of Recitation

In the early eighteenth century the debate on recitation changed completely in both nature and scope, assuming an international dimension. Perrucci’s work was published in Naples; Grimarest embodied the cultural dialectics of Paris; The Life of Betterton was the first essay on acting to come from Britain, and a little later, in 1727, the Dissertatio de actione scenica, written in Latin by Franz Lang, a German Jesuit, was to appear in Munich. Within a few decades theoretical considerations began to be animated by the awareness that European theatre had branched into a considerable variety of acting styles: budding traditions which it was necessary to compare, evaluate, and emulate, or conversely to criticize as the basis for concrete discussion of technical choices open to the actor. Observations on the different nations’ styles of acting began to emerge in publications such as Du Bos’s Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture, or Luigi Riccoboni’s fundamental Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différents théâtres de l’Europe.

Paris and London theatre, with the animated discussion that often accompanied it, gradually came to form two important points of reference for any reflection on the art of the actor. Essays, treatises, and contributions of varying nature circulated among scholars, men of letters, and actors, and, with the ensuing responses and reactions, developed an intense debate which echoed around the theatres and intellectual circles of Europe. It sought out models on the contemporary stage, filling in its conceptual canvas with biographies, correspondence, and variously-reliable anecdotes while gradually working towards a clear, complete, and rigorously plausible picture of all the issues surrounding acting and the stage.

What particularly marks the early eighteenth-century acting theory is the covert tension which emerges from Perruci, Grimarest and Gildon as they sought to apply the doctrine of oratory to acting, a phenomenon which seemed refractory to models applying to general discourse, pleading at the bar, or preaching. They all three found it difficult to separate acting from oratory generally, though when they attempted to pinpoint the specific needs of the theatre, found themselves unconsciously following Aubignac’s guidelines. Basically, then, they were transforming the theory of acting precisely by assigning increasing significance to the dramaturgic needs of the actor’s performance.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the attention paid to the dramaturgic aspects of recitation – the ability to embody a figure living out the imaginary events of the play – was to become an increasingly prominent factor in appraising an actor’s performance. Central to his role was the ability to transform himself into a character different from himself, almost dissolving his features into those of the character to appear on the stage. In the late 1720s, in London, Luigi Riccoboni was amazed when he realized that an old man with a ‘tremulous, broken voice’, perfectly presented on
the stage of Lincoln’s Inn Field, was in actual fact a young actor of no more than twenty. His surprise was so great that he refused to believe it until all the paints, dyes, and make-up time had been explained to him in quantified detail; this capacity for extreme transformation became his benchmark for determining the superiority of the ‘true’ and ‘painstaking’ English actors. If ‘after forty-five years of theatre I may express an opinion’, Riccoboni declared, ‘I should dare to venture that the best of Italian and French actors are inferior to the English’.

The anecdote was published in 1738. Ten years later, the ‘total metamorphosis’ of the interpreter, and his transformation into ‘another person’, had become common formulae in English and French criticism of the stage. Garrick, who became the paradigm for much of the European stage, was celebrated for his ability to transform into so many wildly varying characters, of every age, type and appearance, as to be unrecognisable as the same actor.

One night old age sits on his countenance, as if the wrinkles he had stamped were indelible; the next, the gaiety and bloom of youth seem to overspread his face, and smooth even those marks, which time and muscular conformation may have really made there. Of these truths no one can be ignorant, who has ever seen him in the several characters of Lear, or Hamlet, Richard, Dorilas, Romeo or Lusignan; in his Ranger, Bayes, Drugged, Kiteley or Benedick. In a word, there never existed any one performer, that came near his excellence in so great a variety of opposite characters.

Under the entry Déclamation théâtrale in volume four of the Encyclopédie published in 1754, Marmontel analyses the art of Baron, Molière’s famous pupil who returned to the stage in 1720. His skill, he explained, consisted in inducing the spectator to forget the actor, who must completely vanish into the character: a stage character has to be total and absolute, with no residue of the ‘foreign body’ of the actor whose physique, voice, gestures, and expressions are being used.


2 The Life of Mr. James Quin (London, Bladon, 1766), London, Reader, 1887, pp. 37-38. This talent of Garrick’s was mythical, to the extent that, despite the implausibility, he was taken for the young actor of Lincoln’s Inn Fields described by Riccoboni. See Charles Simon Favart’s anecdote, in a letter of December 1760, in Mémoires et correspondance littéraires dramatiques et anecdotiques (Paris, L. Collin, 1808), 3 vols., Genève, SLatkine Reprints, 1970, I, pp. 119-120. In actual fact Garrick’s professional debut was in London in 1741, three years after the publication of Riccoboni’s account.

3 See under Déclamation théâtrale, volume four of the Encyclopédie, in Jean-François Marmontel, Oeuvres complètes (Paris, Belin, 1819-1820), Geneve, Slatkine Reprints, 1968, t. IV, p. 317. The actor’s ability to morph recognisably into the living character was eventually taken as a general benchmark for a fully successful performance and complete realisation of technical possibilities. In 1753 Clairon tried out a new type of gesturality, first in Bordeaux, then at Versailles, where she played Roxane in Racine’s Bajazet. Marmontel, in terms characteristic of the debate, declared the results extraordinary, beyond the rosiest expectation: ‘it was no longer the actress, but Roxane herself, whom the public believed itself to be seeing and hearing’ (Jean-François Marmontel, Mémoires d’un père pour servir à l'instruction de ses enfants, in Oeuvres complètes, t. I, p. 153). An actor was considered convincing, then, if s/he immersed him/herself in the part completely. And if this means relatively little in concrete terms, and is a given in theatre criticism across the ages, the frequency with which it was mentioned in the early eighteenth century signals the specific importance of dramaturgic ability which was beginning to be demanded from the actor.
The whole of a character, however, has to be more than the sum of these constituent parts, all declaring personality, social position, and nationality. All these must be meshed into a fully-formed new being who has to remain plausible for the entire duration of the play, and react consistently through the varying emotional states of mind. The image produced by the actor, then, is effective and convincing in proportion to the precision and detail with which each single expression reflects the specific situation of the action. Here the seventeenth-century studies of the passions and humours proved invaluable, with their meticulous analyses of simple and complex impulses and their corresponding physical expression, all of considerable help when portraying complex states of mind in their subtlest nuances, not least in vocal inflexion, facial features, and even variations in skin colour.

In an important essay from 1730, Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre praised Baron’s acting in that it expressed what is ‘particular’ to every passion, and managed not only to distinguish it from other passions but to distinguish it in its own specificity, according to ‘the thousand circumstances proper to the characters’. The precision of expressive detail had to be honed down to capture the subtlest movements of the volume of the voice, the facial muscles, and nuanced shades of skin colour. Colley Cibber launched into an extensive and meticulously-detailed attack against the trend of building bigger theatres; increasing the distance between the public and the actors, he pointed out, made it difficult to catch, for example, ‘a voice scarce rais’d above the tone of a whisper’ which however was indispensable for communicating tenderness or resignation, as effective and essential as the stronger, louder passions. Du Bos, in his Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture deplored the actors’ use of rouge which had become standard over the previous twenty years, since it tended to conceal facial ‘changes of tone’.

In 1747 Samuel Foote similarly observed, of Quin’s and Spranger Barry’s Othello, that any thorough analysis was impossible, due to the layer of blacking which blurred the movements of the facial muscles. In reaction, when Ducis put on his adaptation of the play in Paris in 1792 he replaced blacking with a ‘copper’ tone which, he explained, smacked of Africa while concealing nothing of ‘the play of the passions’ over the face of the actor.

As important as the nuanced degrees of feelings is the enactment of mixed or contrasting motives and states of mind – not least, for Marmontel, the switch from the emergence of a feeling to the impulse to hide it. It is here that the actor’s art reaches the zenith of expressive potential.

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4 Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre, Seconde lettre du souffleur de la comédie de Rouen au garçon de café, ou entretien sur les défauts de la déclamation, Paris, Tabarie, 1730, pp. 28-29.


8 Jean-François Ducis, Othello ou le More de Venise, tragédie par le citoyen Ducis, Paris, André, 1799, p. VI.
which the poet supposes these shadings to be perceived by the spectators alone, hidden from the penetrating glance of the other characters.9

But the need to render the character in action goes beyond a range of expression unknown to other forms of oratory. It also transforms the application of an essential stage rule: that the speaker must be absorbed by the emotion expressed. While it can suffice other orators to actually feel the emotions, the actor must also adapt them and regulate them to the character portrayed. If, d’Aigueberre observes, in playing the part of a king or hero the actor abandons himself ‘unreservedly’ to the passion tout court, and is intent ‘only on the feeling he would communicate’, ‘forgetting’ the figure represented, then the spectator will recognize neither a king nor a man in the sway of his passions, but merely ‘an actor who seeks to be admired’.10

In this way dramaturgic needs assumed a central position in the actor’s art, gradually becoming the predominating factor in evaluating stage action. The need to represent plausibly and effectively the changing emotional states of the characters justifies breaking the rules of propriety of the gestural code, as Gildon had underlined, to the extent that even in tragedy it became when the character is in the throes of ‘fury’ or other ‘vehement passions’.11 In the same way, anything not strictly relevant to the personality of the characters and the specific conditions they are experiencing is to be considered spurious or deleterious: any superfluous gesture compromises the plausibility of the performance by revealing a glimpse of the actor beneath the character.12 Longstanding stage conventions and poetics are here called into question, with a view above all to creating a gesturality which is deft, elegant, and unselfconscious. One such convention was the use of the ubiquitous fans and handkerchiefs which fluttered across the scene of comedies and tragedies alike, and against which d’Aigueberre wields an ironic pen:

An actress would never appear on stage without a fan or handkerchief […] Electra and Andromaca, who weep unceasingly, must be ever ready to dry their tears, but this is not the case of the princess who is afflicted only towards the middle or even end of the play. Yet we must suppose her to possess a presentiment of pain to come, and to wish to adopt the necessary precautions prior to the catastrophe, while, symmetrically, her confidant likewise prepares for that of which she should be entirely unaware.13

But fans and handkerchiefs were a minor matter. The new perception of the art of the actor turned a critical ear on the sing-song diction already lambasted by Perrucci and Grimarest.14 While the rhythms of verse drama invited a lilting and cadenced delivery, it seemed pure affectation compared with normal speech and circumstances, particularly when it became a consolidated technique in seventeenth-century France’s declamation of tragedy, which was soon imitated in England and other parts of

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9 Jean-François Marmontel, Déclamation théâtrale, pp. 324-325.
10 Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre, Seconde lettre, p. 27.
12 See Colley Cibber, An Apology, p. 73.
13 Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre, Seconde lettre, pp. 68-69.
Europe. Luigi Riccoboni declared that the French cantato ‘disfigured’ nature, ‘disgusted’ any foreigners hearing it for the first time, and left any Frenchmen of ‘genius and taste’ indignant – a harsh judgment which however was quickly to prevail. Baron’s contemporaries comment that he ‘broke up the measure of the verse’ in order to conceal ‘the unbearable monotony’, and never delivered its ‘rhythm’ but its ‘situation and sentiment’. Mademoiselle Duclos, who was famous for the stylized lil of her delivery, held sway at the Comédie Française in the first two decades of the century but began to fall out of favour with the rise of Adrienne Lecouvreur and her more natural diction. Years later, the ‘musical’ nature of her performances were to be severely criticized in Dorat’s Déclamation Théâtrale. In England, Mrs Cibber, who appeared with Quin and later Garrick, was initially much appreciated for the almost semicanto, but in time the changing tastes of the public considered the marked, unvaried monotony of her delivery dated and retrograde: ‘when she had once recited two or three speeches’, a contemporary author observed, ‘I could anticipate the manner of every succeeding one: it was like a long and legendary ballad of innumerable stanzas, every one of which is sung to the same time, eternally chiming in the ear without variation or relief’. By mid-century acting had lost the declamatory nature once de rigueur for tragedy and as John Hill explained, was no longer ‘a kind of singing’.

While fans, handkerchiefs and accentuated verse rhythm were being swept off the stage, any curious and novel detail, even accidental, was immediately appreciated and justified if it harmonized with the circumstances of the action and that action’s reflection on the character’s behaviour. In his first performance of Macbeth, Garrick appeared on stage after Duncan’s murder with a button of his waistcoat undone. This was completely accidental, but the critics read it as an extremely effective symbol of the disorder in the murderer’s mind. At other times the expressive detail was intentional to the point of being highly contrived. To communicate Hamlet’s terror when the ghost appeared, Garrick wore a special wig, connected to a small pump mechanism. This was operated by pressing his arm, when the hair on his head would stand up straight. Some actors would add naturalistic detail to poisoning by chewing China bark and then opening a ‘poison’-blackened mouth in a rictus of agony. Simpler and more common was the trick used to make the actor pale at

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22 See K. A. Burnim, David Garrick, Director, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1961, p. 160.
precisely the required moment, by passing a chalk-impregnated handkerchief quickly across his face, unseen by the audience.23

The examples are, if not always extreme, extremely gauche: but they exemplify the growing tendency to take acting away from simple textual declamation accompanied by the relative expressions of emotion and towards concrete action rooted in the effective situation on which the character is operating. The French stage put up some resistance, and Du Bos, for example, described with horror a scene in which a tragic hero of the status of Scipio was seen smoking a pipe and drinking from a tankard of beer inside the tent where he was studying his battle strategy against the Carthaginians, although he could console himself with the idea that this was the acting style of a foreign country, far removed from the aesthetic proprieties of French theatre.24 But in time even the Comédie Française fell into the temptation of occasionally introducing often quite singular props suggested by the circumstances of the action. When Marmontel’s Cléopâtre was staged in 1750 an ‘automatic asp’ was created which would wriggle like a real snake when pressed to the actress’s breast.25

The occasional prop apart (and the French stage in particular used them sparingly), what marked the turning-point in eighteenth-century acting was a considerably increased and more varied gesturality. Baron himself had been criticized as being ‘prodigal with embraces’, dispensing them ‘beyond all reason’,26 but it was Garrick in particular whose repertoire of gestures appeared to many as strange and over-insistent.27 The general trend of extending the use of gestures and movements, however, grew out of and was justified by the desire to represent as precisely as possible the combination of circumstances in which the character moved, at every phase of the action. Of interest here is the description (attributed to Macklin) of Garrick and Spranger Barry respectively playing Romeo in the famous balcony scene. Barry enters ‘as a great lord, swaggering about his love’, and speaks so loudly that the servants of the Capulets, unless ‘almost dead with sleep’, would have rushed out and ‘tossed the fellow in a blanket’. Garrick’s Romeo, on the other hand, aware that he is entering enemy territory, ‘enters creeping upon his toes’, ‘whispering his love, and cautiously looking about him, just like a thief in the night’.28 Barry is clearly maximising the lines and is interested in nothing beyond communicating the appropriate emotional expression; Garrick models his behaviour, voice, gestures, and movements to the actions of a person in that given situation.

In contrast, then, with seventeenth-century practice which had the actor enter the part only when his turn came to speak, before becoming an indifferent bystander

25 Jean-François Marmontel, Mémoires, p. 115.
28 Henry Angelo, Angelo’s Pic Nic, or Table Talk including Numerous Recollections of Public Characters, London, John Ebers, 1834, pp. 36-37.
once more, the focus is now on the actor’s ability to live within the events of the play, within the actions and reactions of the characters on stage, and interact with what is being said and done. In France, in 1720, it was noted that Baron ‘always listens to he that speaks with him’, while actors normally pay ‘scant attention’; above all, ‘his listening is accompanied by such movements of the countenance and body as are demanded by the nature of the speech uttered’. Marmontel, in the Encyclopédie, extrapolates the following norm: ‘each character introduced into a scene must appear interested, all that which interests him must move him, all that which moves him must be seen to do so in his features and in his behaviour’. Garrick, for his part, was from the start appreciated for the attention paid to every word and gesture of his fellow-actors, and his total absorption in his character. Soon after the middle of the century, attention also began to be paid to the expressive potential of the pauses, when the action demands that an actor remain silent. These were found to be effective in proportion to the actor’s emotional involvement in his character’s reaction to the events on stage. If his attention wanders, the actor tends to fill the pause with empty gestures, such as ‘fumbling in his pockets’ or with ‘a shrug or two of the shoulders’; whereas if he remains concentrated within his character, then ‘his feet, his hands, his eyes, his face, his every attitude, would all be full of expression, and give eloquence to silence’.

Natural Recitation

In the new perception of the actor’s art a definition emerges of the ‘natural’ nature of the recitation eighteen-century theorists and critics now appeared to require. Two elements in particular are axiomatic. Firstly, in line with the principle already established by the early Italian theorists, what the actor says and does must seem spontaneous, and in no way rehearsed and prepared. Secondly, everything the actor says and does must be consonant with his character, and reflect extremely precisely the situation in which he finds himself. Fans and handkerchiefs waved excessively and inappropriately; a sing-song delivery, where the rhythm of the verse prevails over the sense; glances and greetings aimed at the public; incongruous behaviour of any kind; any lapse in attention towards the situation on stage, and even feelings and passions rendered generically and inadequately: all these make for an unnatural performance and staging.

At the same time it would be a mistake to take this as a movement in favour of realism of recitation. Although a sing-song delivery was criticized, verse drama continued to be written and produced, and the most celebrated actors, well-advanced in old age and infirmity, had no qualms at playing the part of a young hero – with sometimes disconcerting results. The seventy-year-old Baron, playing the part of

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29 Elena Virginia Balletti Riccoboni, Lettura, p. 7.
30 Jean-François Marmontel, Déclamation théâtral, p. 325.
33 See, e.g., Leone de’ Sommi, Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche, p. 48.
Rodrigue in *Le Cid*, kneels as required before his beloved Chimène. He then continues to kneel, for long moments, while Chimène implores him to rise, but to no effect; and it is only when the seeming excess of courtesy is recognized as stiffness of joints that two court attendants are sent to help him back onto his feet. 34 Garrick, for his part, was still being acclaimed as Hamlet in 1776, when he was fifty-nine; it was only towards the middle of the century that voices began to be more audibly raised against the habit of many illustrious old Thespians of continuing to tread the boards they could barely climb onto. And if Macklin prepared his famous interpretation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, staged February 1741, by frequenting the London Stock Market and Jewish community, it was not so much to inject his character with real gestures and reactions as to find a new interpretative slant for a part traditionally played as exclusively comic. 35 Any increased realism in eighteenth-century changes to acting was thus an optical illusion, created by the retroactive perception of the stage among the scholars and theatre experts of a later period. Some insight into the real state of things is furnished by mid-century attempts to rethink theatre costumes, introducing interpretative elements which directly signalled the condition, nationality, or period of the character. In a Leipzig production of Gottsched’s *Der Sterbende Cato*, in 1741, Caroline Neuber’s company of players wore clearly Roman-type tunics, but had covered their legs with pink breeches which created hilarity in the audience. 36 In a 1747 Paris production of Nivelle de La Chaussée’s *L’amour castillan*, Marie-Justine-Benoît Favart wore Spanish dress, and in 1753, in *Les amours de Bastien e de Bastienne*, a rough woollen peasant dress and clogs, her arms naked; while in *Trois sultanes* her Turkish costume had been made in Costantinople of Turkish fabric. 37 Her colleague Clairon, in *Bojazet*, appears dressed as a sultana, and in Crébillon’s *Electre* as a slave, with an airy chiton-like tunic and her arms chained together. 38

None of these costumes was exactly realistic, however, but, as the documentation shows, all were clever creations in which token references to status and provenance had been stitched into refined and aesthetically-pleasing stage garments. Reference, then, not realism was what mattered: allusions to the period, circumstances, and nature of the events represented. When Voltaire was working on the production of *Orphéline de la Chine* in 1755 he was intent on costumes suited to the setting, and asked his costume designer, Claude Joseph Vernet, to make them somewhat Chinese but also French, with the result that Lekain appeared as Gengis Khan, in the portrait which has come down to us, decked in a turban, earrings, and a rococo lace-collar. 39

What these seeming contradictions come down to is the fact that no commentator of the period had any doubt that the stage needed to offer an alternative to reality, or

37 See Charles Simon Favart, *Mémoires et correspondance*, I, p. 120.
a version of it which was finer, more elegant, consistent and complete, not to mention more decorous. If dramaturgic needs were paramount, aesthetic requirements still needed to continue to exist, and undiminished, which posed the serious problem of revisiting and remodelling them in line with the new sensibility. In some cases it was simple. The importance accorded the imposing, sweeping stage gesture tended to be reduced in favour of a movement which was clear, simple, and precise in detail. In terms of voice, there was unanimous criticism of actors trusting more in lung power than in the modulation of tone and volume in the play’s different developments. Other cases presented near-insoluble problems however. A number of aesthetic conditions existed, established by traditional poetics, which were seemingly impossible to jettison although clearly in conflict with new dramaturgic requirements – for example dignity and decorum, characteristics of tragic acting which distinguish it from comedy. Slight misgiving and suspicion thus undermined full admiration for the new poetics and the great innovators. Baron’s style came under scrutiny: his acting, while so ‘natural’ even in tragedy, at times appeared ‘not wholly consonant with the subject’.

Furthermore, the requirements of tragedy seemed at variance with a more natural and immediate diction:

Monsieur Baron affirms, and many spectators find this a merit in him, that he does everything in his power for the rhyme not to be apprehended. I likewise approve of this, but cannot agree that a tragic actor, while seeking to conceal the rhyme, should also seek not to have the line perceived, by lowering it to the accents of more common familiarity. If the line be one of the aspects of the tragedy, surely conferred on it to sustain the discourse and render it more majestic, thereby distancing it somewhat from the ordinary and over-natural discourse of the vulgar, why then do we wish to hide it, and render tragedy in all things like to comedy?

Some solution began to be looked for, not without difficulty. There are tragedies which centre on the ancient heroes: Achilles, Agamemnon, Pyrrhus, etc., and others which concern figures from more recent periods, such as the Cid, Bajazet, or the Earl of Essex. Less removed from us in time, we perceive them as less ‘majestic’ in status, and thus ‘persons not so entirely tragic’. Baron’s style seemed more suited to this last category, and therefore entirely suited, by the same logic, to comic acting. Other critics preferred to solve the matter by making a distinction between ‘naturalness’ and

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41 Ibid., p. 9. Perrucci too considered tragedy ‘better suited to verse, which undoubtedly gives it greater majesty’ (Andrea Perrucci, *A Treatise on Acting, from Memory and by Improvisation*, p. 40). Of interest in this regard is Cibber’s insistence on the possibility in specific circumstances of opening tragedy up to comic scenes and situations, and how in that case the actor should not assume excessive austerity and dignity and spoil the amusement of the audience (see Colley Cibber, *An Apology*, p. 72).
‘simplicity’. The first consists in the full transformation of the actor into the character, with a detailed reproduction of the states of the character’s mind. The second however implies a ‘lessening’ of the ‘gravity of the buskin’ and of the ‘majesty of monarchs’, removing some of the ‘splendour’ of voice and gesture normally attributable to such characters. In Baron, whose acting style it marked, this was not to be considered a fault, but was to be strongly discouraged in all other actors.43

Some years later, Garrick’s own ability to maintain the dignity of the character in all circumstances began to be questioned. At a number of points in Hamlet, while appearing extraordinarily natural, he failed to conserve all the young prince’s regal dignity.44 The extremely perceptive critic John Hill interestingly commented that although Garrick was more than able to maintain the dignity of a tragic figure such as a king or hero, he gave way ‘to thoughts of another kind’, to the point of frequently compromising this aspect of the character.45 It is not hard to imagine of what ‘kind’ these ‘thoughts’ were – an awareness of the dramaturgic need to render the characters as they reacted consistently but variously to the ever-changing circumstances of the play: a requirement which then clashed with the need to colour every gesture, movement and intonation, at every moment, with the unwavering “native hue” of dignity: a sort of homogeneous patina which covered the figure of the tragic hero. Precisely as Colley Cibber had observed some time earlier, comparing comic acting with tragic, where the characteristic ‘dignity’ and ‘solemnity’ tend to restrict interpretations to a more uniform and less varied standard:

The decency too, that must be observ’d in tragedy, reduces, by the manner of speaking it, one actor to be much more like another, than they can or need be suppos’d to be in comedy: there the laws of action give them such free, and almost unlimited liberties, to play and wanton with nature, that the voice, look, gesture of a comedian may be as various, as the manners and faces of the whole mankind are different from one another.46

**The Beginnings of Emotionalism**

While the traditional comparison between oratory and recitation was beginning to appear irremediably compromised, within the various tensions outlined above there began to form a fundamental split in theory which, in different phases, was to mark the conception of acting in contemporary thought, from the early eighteenth century until well into the twentieth. At the same period in which recitation acquired an identity of its own in Western thought, as an autonomous object of study, there evolved a contraposition between an emotionalist and anti-emotionalist vision of the stage.

From the Romans on, a principle established by the authority of Cicero and Quintilian had remained fundamental: that the lawyer, the preacher, the politician, or the actor had to actually experience the feelings they externalized in their speech and at the same time use a carefully-studied code of intonations, gestures and attitudes.

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43 Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre, *Secoude lettre*, pp. 36-37.
44 See *The St. James’s Chronicle*, no. 1717, February 20-22, 1772.
46 Colley Cibber, *An Apology*, p. 82.
This emotional empathy immediately gave rise to the appropriate expressions, charging them with special energy and force which projected them onto the audience, empathetically involved in their turn. The code, on the other hand, guaranteed that the passionate impetus behind the different expressions would be restrained and communicated with clarity, precision, and decorum. This emotional involvement and code constituted the two components of actio, and the orator’s skill lay basically in gauging and merging the two.

A debate later emerged within the doctrine of oratory between those who ranked spontaneity, directness, and inspiration as the fulcrum of an effective delivery, and those who privileged a more scientific approach drawing on a consolidated technique and the advantage of study and practice. Regarding acting specifically, various ecclesiastical exponents of the anti-theatre polemics had emphasised empathy as the essential component of the actor’s art, and the source of irremediable corruption. This was one of Nicole’s arguments, later taken up by Bossuet:

 Men and women appear on the stage to there represent the passions of hatred, anger, ambition, revenge, and most especially love. It is necessary that these be expressed in the most vivid and efficacious manner possible, nor could they succeed were they not to be excited by those same passions themselves […] It behoves, then, he who represents the passion of love to feel it while so representing it, and it is not to be thought that this impression, voluntarily aroused, may then be cancelled from the spirit, and that it shall not leave within us a strong disposition towards this same passion.47

The importance of emotional involvement had also been foregrounded in the considerations on painting,48 and had encouraged reflections on techniques available to the orator to induce in him the requisite feelings, i.e. the devices of the imagination as theorized by Quintilian.49 This was not limited to evoking, as vividly as possible, images of the events narrated in such a way that they acted concretely, as tangible objects, on the actor’s sensibility; he was to re-evoke, within the secrecy of his soul, Le Faucheur explained, real events and scenes which he found particularly touching, however different from the events and subjects treated in his lines:

 If touched by a vehement anguish at your ills, or by great pity for those of others, this will bring tears to your eyes. It was for this that the actors of old were at such pains to acquire the faculty of moving their imagination to the point of being able to shed tears

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47 Pierre Nicole, Traité de la comédie et autres pièces d’un procès du théâtre, p. 37. See Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Maximes et réflexions sur la comédie, p. 180. The fundamental importance of ‘full immersion’ in acting had also been underlined by a pro-theatre author like Georges de Scudéry, Apologie du théâtre, p. 85.

48 See, e.g., Federico Borромеo, De pittura sacra (Milano, 1624), now in Quaderni del Seminario di Storia della Critica d’Arte, ed. by B. Agosti, Pisa, S. N. S., 1994, p. 34. In the early eighteenth century Roger De Piles advised painters to examine the passion to be represented, consider how they would react if they experienced it personally, and once they had embodied it, to put themselves in the place of the person in prey to it (see Roger De Piles, Cours de peinture par principes, Paris, J. Estienne, 1708, pp. 165-166). Antoine Coypel advised painters wishing to conjure up in their imagination the gestures to be painted to enact them themselves and then transfer them onto the canvas (see Antoine Coypel, Discours prononcés dans les conférences de l’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, p. 156).

49 The procedure illustrated by Quintilian was reported in detail in seventeenth-century treatises. See, in particular, the meticulous description given by Sforza Pallavicino in Del bene libri quattro, In Roma, Appresso gli Eredi di Francesco Corbelletti, 1644, now in Trattatisti e narratori del seicento, ed. by E. Raimondi, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1960, p. 251.
in abundance, and succeeded so marvellous well that actors have been seen to leave the theatre with their countenances covered with tears. To this end they used different means, though the most efficacious was to secretly turn their imagination to real subjects which were close to their hearts, in the place of those fantastical subjects they represented, and which moved them not at all.50

Gildon, for his part, had returned to the Le Faucheur passage and placed it at the centre of his treatise. But apart from attention to emotional involvement, the concept of *actio* as point of convergence of its two traditional components had remained a stable and incontestable point in oratory. Le Faucheur, for example, emphasized the importance of this emotional empathy only after dwelling on the means and external forms of vocal expression, and Gildon considered it essential to state the canonical code of expressions to adopt, to be perfected in front of a mirror.51

The slant given in Perrucci's, Grimarest's, and Gildon's new treatises had focused on two basic points of difference between oratory and acting. The actor required a comprehensive series of actions and behavioural attitudes, listed by Perrucci, which had nothing in common with the traditional *actio* code and, as Gildon had pointed out, sometimes actually needed to violate it. He also had to represent such a vast range of feelings, passions, emotions, and states of mind, in such subtle combinations and interactions, as to require an almost infinite series of attitudes and expressions which, as shortly become clear, would be impossible to describe.

It was implausible, then, to put acting and oratory in the same category since the expressive code of *actio* was inadequate, over-general and hardly applicable to the stage. The next inevitable step was to construct a theory of recitation which eschewed any pre-established code of tones, gestures, and movements and based itself around *actio*'s other component, the orator’s emotional empathy.

In actual fact the seventeenth century had already attempted to apply emotional involvement not just to produce greater actorly dynamism and spontaneity, but also to define the details and nuances of assumed expressions, a function traditionally attributed to the gestural code. This was again a consideration of Aubignac's. There are three essential inner attitudes the actor has to be able to render when he walks on stage, which vary according to his lines: an attitude which is moderate and ‘devoid of emotion’, one which is passionate and ‘impetuous’, and an intermediate one which may be defined ‘semi-passionate’. The first two are relatively easy to render: ‘moderate’ corresponds to the actor’s natural state of mind at the beginning of a performance, before entering into the part; the second belongs to the standard techniques of an actor who ‘out of experience’ knows ‘to what degree the voice and gestures may be raised to express strong and violent agitation’. The third, ‘semi-passionate’, is no simple matter, exceeding ‘natural tranquillity’ but stopping short of ‘extreme violence’. However a solution exists:

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50 Michel Le Faucheur, *Traité de l’action de l’orateur ou de la prononciation et du geste*, pp. 204-205. The actor maintaining a tear-stained face is a clear reference to Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*, VI,2,35), as is the use of the imagination (VI,2,31). Le Faucheur, however, suggests applying imagination not so much to imaginary subjects, as to real emotive subjects which concern the person of the actor directly, even if they have nothing to do with the story represented.


The problem may be solved [...] by resorting to a system I have observed applied by the principle actor of our time, Mondory, who in cases of the kind, before speaking would walk for some time around the stage, as if daydreaming, sometimes seeming agitated, at others letting his head roll about, raising and lowering his eyes and assuming different attitudes according to the sentiment to be expressed. He did so, I believe, to animate himself somewhat and prepare to express appositely a semi-passion, removing some of the natural reserve with which one enters the stage himself applying the necessary brake so as not to be too violently transported.53

In d’Aubignac’s opinion, then, there exist more obvious expressive attitudes which can be rationally constructed by technique alone, and others which are more mediated and nuanced and can only be adequately produced by the actor’s actual state of mind, and which no mere technique or code can supply. Aubignac’s treatise simply glances at this, but in the early eighteenth century the function of emotional involvement is suddenly extended, to the exclusion of any study of gestural and expressive codes. In 1710 Steele observed in the Tatler, the London review, that for a correct performance the actor had no need to study gestures: ‘the behaviour’, Steele explained, ‘would follow the sentiments of the mind [...] If the matter is well conceived, words will flow with ease: and if the actor is well possessed of the nature of his part, a proper action will necessarily follow’.54

The next, decisive step was taken by Jean Poisson, an actor from a celebrated theatre family. In 1709 an intellectual review, Histoire des ouvrages des savants, published his short article, ‘Quelques Réflexions sur l’Art de parler en public’, later extended into Réflexions sur l’Art de parler en public.55 Poisson began with the customary conceptual acrobatics to strait-jacket oratory and acting into the same definition, while taking care to emphasize the importance of acting. The subject of his article is actio oratoria – the use of the voice, the face, and gestures of all those preaching from the pulpit, pleading in court, teaching in schools, speaking in political assemblies or simply reading aloud or speaking in conversation. All these activities, however, Poisson explained, are ‘subsumed in theatre’, so that the technique they require may be defined art de réciter, the expression used among actors.56 Indeed, an actor possessing all the skills of his profession constitutes a model for all who need to express themselves through words and gestures.57

This art of public speaking requires both physical gifts (‘natural graces of the body’) and spiritual (‘memory’ and ‘intelligence’), and not everyone possesses them in sufficient measure.58 Study and practice, however, will at least partly overcome physical defects such as a weak voice, and reinforce the spiritual faculties. But one innate gift can never be nurtured by any amount of practice: ‘sensitivity of mind’, which confers its own particularly effective grace to orators’ and actors’

53 Ibid., p. 281.
54 The Tatler, no. 201 (July 22, 1710).
56 Jean Poisson, Réflexions sur l’Art de parler en public, pp. 5-6 and p. 12.
58 Ibid., p.14 and p. 35.
performances. And, more even than this, Poisson emphasises, lies at the core of the art of acting, gradually eroding the norms of a time-honoured doctrine:

All the rules of Cicero and Quintilian, and of the illustrious moderns who have written on declamation are of no avail to the orator, unless he follow the first, namely, to understand what he must say, and feel it vividly himself [...] When touched by the words pronounced, the countenance, voice and gesture all adapt in conformity with the inner movements [...] And only through this, with little searching, is it possible to please and to persuade, which is the only end of eloquence.

‘Sensibility’ then makes redundant everything in the gestural code defining the external expressions of the different passions: it becomes superfluous to state ‘that the proud man raises his glance while the humble man lowers it; or that the disdainful and the irate turn aside, because it is the very nature of that passion which occasions this, and no advice on this point is needed’. Norms regarding elegance and decorum remain valid: Poisson lists the usual solecisms (raising the hands above the head, banging the fists, using the left hand without the right, etc.) but adds that these may be permissible in comedy or even tragedy when justified by the nature of the feeling to be expressed, such as ‘fury’ or other ‘vehement passions’.

Having placed sensitivity at the centre of recitation, the maximum attention then went to all psychological obstacles to the actor’s emotional sensors. The major one was inevitably ‘timidity’, or the stage-fright which normally affects those speaking in public. This lessens with experience and habit, but rarely disappears. One practical tip given was to ‘modestly contemplate the listeners’ before beginning to speak, in order to ‘calm oneself, and get one’s breath back, so to speak, thus gaining the time and means of reassurance’. Above all, it was essential to avoid the idea of being at the centre of attention of people gathered there expressly to hear the speaker. The further fear of forgetting one’s lines could actually cause a physical reaction: ‘it alters the face, disturbs physical action, lowers the voice, and causes the orator to perspire’. No remedy exists, Poisson admits, beyond possessing a sound memory which must be trained from youth and exercised as much as possible.

Psychological tensions and their psychosomatic effects apart, the orator’s/actor’s sensibility can also be compromised by a failure to regulate the emotional reactions towards the text declaimed. An excess of passion means that the voice is ‘suffocated’ or ‘lost’, and ‘memory itself may be disturbed’. Here a number of specific techniques are required, tricks of the orator’s trade. Often, for example, by declaiming with uncontrolled passion the orator finds himself unable to stop and take breath, and reaches the end of his lung-capacity before the end of his speech. He must then get his breath back through ‘near-imperceptible’ micro pauses which enable him to recite a period quickly and seemingly in one breath, with the emphasis

59 Ibid., pp. 35-36.
60 Ibid., p. 34.
61 Ibid., p. 29.
62 Ibid., pp. 31-32.
63 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
64 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
65 Ibid., p. 25.
of slight end-weight creating ‘a fine effect’ in the theatre, and eliciting the spectators’ applause.66

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**Luigi Riccoboni. Acting by Improvisation**

The first complete formulation of the emotionalist theory of acting came some years later in the form of a brief treatise in verse by Luigi Riccoboni, alias Lelio, actor-manager who had grown up in the world of the *commedia dell’arte*. Between 1706 and 1715 Riccoboni and his wife, the actress and poet Elena Balletti, alias Flaminia, took the decision to introduce a public used to *commedia all’improvviso* to scripts from the great French tragedians, adaptations of Corneille and Racine. They then moved to tragedies from the Italian sixteenth century, then contemporary Italian playwrights, culminating in the success of *Merope*, written by Scipione Maffei for Elena Balletti and performed in Modena in 1713 and in Venice in 1714.

A similar experiment in comedy had been less successful. After the acclaim which had greeted his Molière adaptations, Riccoboni had wanted to look at a sixteenth-century comic script from Italy, and had opted for Ariosto’s *Scolastica*. But it had been a failure, and Riccoboni accepted the French Regent Filippo d’Orléans’s invitation to bring Comédie Italiennne back to the Hotel de Bourgogne eighteen years after the expulsion of the players decreed by Louis XIV. Life was not easy for the Comédie Italiennne, however, and Riccoboni left Paris for a spell in London before returning and applying himself exclusively to the study of the European stage and a project of reform for contemporary theatre.

In 1728 he published his essay on acting, *Dell’arte rappresentativa* (preface and six chapters in verse), which followed his *Histoire du théâtre italien*, published in the same year with the *Dissertation sur la tragédie moderne*. Almost a decade later he wrote *Observations sur la comédie et sur le génie de Molière*, published in 1736; *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les differens théâtres de l’Europe* (1738); *Pensées sur la déclamation* (1738), and lastly *De la réformation du théâtre* (1743). His very important *Discorso sulla commedia all’improvviso*, which he had written, revised, extended, corrected and recorrected for more than twenty years, from 1721 to 1743, only appeared more than two centuries later, in 1973.

*Dell’arte rappresentativa* marks the beginnings of modern acting theory independent of any cross-references to oratory. It is intended exclusively for actors: preachers, lawyers, and orators generally are not so much as mentioned, and Riccoboni was at no pains to establish any links or cross-fertilisation of advice. His aim was to give his ‘young and inexpert’ colleagues the rules they were lacking. This, he explained, was a completely new venture. Poetics and literary theory had abounded since Aristotle, but the rules of acting had been disregarded.67

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67 Luigi Riccoboni, *A’ Lettori*, preface to *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, n. pag., and chapter I, pp. 3-5. Riccoboni obviously could not know Leone de’ Sommi’s still unpublished *Quattro Dialoghi*, and seems unaware of Cecchini’s works on acting, although he cites his *Brevi Discorsi Intorno alle Comedie, Comedianti, & spettatori* (Napoli, Gio. Domenico Roncaglio, 1616), Grimarest and Gildon. On the other hand he claimed to have read *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche* by Angelo Ingegneri, which disappointed him in dealing with scenery, machinery, but with no mention of the actors themselves.
Ricoboni’s perspective is particularly important, and is briefly outlined in the preface which takes up the theses recently expounded in the *Histoire du théâtre italien*. His perspective is dictated by the concrete problem posed by Italian theatre compared with theatre in the rest of Europe; in this way the customary premise of the general decline of present-day stage and the need to improve both acting standards and audience discernment lost much of the tone of generic complaint it had in Grimarest and Gildon, and takes on the contours of a precise diagnosis orienting the theory to be evolved.68

The basic problem, in Ricoboni’s opinion, was the crisis in Italian theatre. The sixteenth century had been able to count on a solid repertoire of scripts of literary value, while the professional companies were equally adept at staging both written texts and improvised.69 The invasion of ‘bad’ Spanish comedies and tragi-comedies in the following century, however, had driven any ‘good’ ones from the stage, ushering in quite the opposite of a golden age for play writing.70 Tragedy as a genre was unprofitably contaminated, and scripted comedy, ‘perverted and reduced to scenarios for acting by improvisation’, was left to the special skills of the Italian actors, appreciated in the whole of Europe and in great demand in the most important foreign courts.71 Around 1680 however they too seemed to lose their touch, ceding the stage to all the endemic dangers and defects of improvisation, and the professional product on offer ended up having little to recommend it.72 The time was thus more than ripe for serious, searching reform, and Riccoboni decided to undertake it. His idea was to look for creditable scripts, tragedies and comedies, and present them to the public in carefully-conceived performances staged according to the criteria elaborated over recent years.

The problem of recitation seemed at this point strictly linked to an evaluation of the various elements of comedy by improvisation, the habits and defects it tended to impose or encourage, and its general influence on actorly practice.

Improvised comedy, as Riccoboni realized, had served the stage well for a considerable period. It required, however, actors who were highly-cultured, with great powers of language and expressiveness – qualities to be shared by the whole company, since the best actor in the world can do little to maintain tension and immediacy against a colleague who interrupts at the wrong moment, or misses his cue.73 Improvisation, left to its own devices, reduced the plays to a heterogeneous collection of monologues and *generici*, a repertoire of portmanteau speeches for all occasions, peppered with maxims, with no organic interaction or tenor. Fine and eloquent speeches would often be followed by rather stale and banal improvised lines, in compensation for which the actors would offer up a disproportionate number of stock gags and facetious quips with no bearing on the subject of the play to which, however, it was eventually necessary to return with some strained line or

68 See Jean-Leonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, p. 54; Charles Gildon, *The Life of Mr. Betterton*, p. 15; and Luigi Riccoboni, *A’ Lettori*, n. pag.
70 Ibid., p. 57.
71 Ibid., p. 57 and p. 72.
72 See ibid., pp. 73-74.
73 See ibid., p. 62.
strategy. Actors used to working like this will inevitably find difficulty when faced with a text which imposes its own lines and specific technical difficulties, as much of the best drama did. Verse drama presented particular problems, as Riccoboni wryly admitted:

"Actors no longer possessing the habit of reciting in verse became ridiculous, indeed insupportable, when called upon to do so. Either they exceeded in emphasis, degenerating into a tedious sing-song, or the rhythm was so erroneous that half of the sense was lost."

Once improvisation had lost its remit, however, well-written and effective scripts by competent playwrights were the only way of avoiding the vulgarity and mistakes it produced, and of going some way towards concealing the general shortcomings of the actors.

With their customary habit of performing comedies by improvisation, the Italians are obliged to complete the scene with their own ideas, so that if the player is ignorant, this is immediately apparent [...] When poets offering good, sound plays appear, it will be seen that these actors of modest talent will be replaced by worthy men who most gladly enter a profession which, if it now inspires them with horror, would however attract them by the hope of good pay and good reputation.

But the ability to cover for the actors’ ignorance is only one of the virtues of the written script. Even more important is the fact that, if studied and prepared with care, it actually improves and refines the mode of acting. As noted by Pier Jacopo Martello, one of the contemporary playwrights Riccoboni staged, when Lelio and Flaminia selected ‘solid, well-constructed’ tragedies for their companies, they were interpreted ‘in a lively and confident fashion’. Improvised acting, then, was open to criticism on all sides and could seemingly be buried with few regrets, yet there was considerable ambivalence. ‘No one more than myself’, Riccoboni stated in his Discorso sulla commedia all'improvviso, ‘detested the extraordinary habit of reciting by improvisation, and no one took more advantage of it’. While easily degenerating into vulgarity and generalisation, it had the advantage of training the ‘sound and diligent’ actor to ‘speak well and improve his education’. Moreover, if alternated with the performance of non-improvised plays, it extended an actor’s range and offered a repertoire of characters not otherwise accessible.

An Italian company never has more than eleven or twelve actors or actresses [...] Yet when they must recite a tragedy with innumerable characters, everyone takes part, even Harlequin, his mask removed, and all declaim their lines in good Italian: this practice

74 See ibid., pp. 63-66. See, too, his comments on German theatre in his Réflexions historiques et critiques sur le différents théatres de l'Europe, Its ‘total’ decadence, he notes, may be attributable to the introduction of improvised comedy, following the Italian model (p. 162).
75 Luigi Riccoboni, Preface to L'Artaserse, tragedia di Giulio Agosti, Venezia, G. Tommasini, 1714.
76 Luigi Riccoboni, Discorso sulla commedia all'improvviso e scenari inediti, ed. by I. Mamczarz, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1973, pp. 11-12.
77 Pier Jacopo Martello, Della tragedia antica e moderna over l'Impostore, dialogo (1715), in Opere, Bologna, Lelio dalla Volpe, 1735, I, p. 178.
78 Luigi Riccoboni, Discorso sulla commedia all'improvviso e scenari inediti, p. 30. Tessari reads this statement as presenting improvisation as a fluency exercise for the actor (see R. Tessari, Il teatro del Settecento, Bari, Laterza, p. 13).
making them able to transmit the most sublime of the playwrights' concepts, and equally to imitate the most extraordinary aspects of nature […] In the companies of other nations, which never number less than thirty actors, each actor recites only those parts congenial to his natural gifts and his art, and it is exceptional to meet one or two able to interpret works or characters different in type.\textsuperscript{79}

Improvisation also possessed one last, fundamental quality:

The actor acting by improvisation does so more naturally and with more spirit than he who recites a part learned by heart: everyone feels more deeply, and thus pronounces better, that which he himself produces, than that which he borrows from others with the assistance of memory.\textsuperscript{80}

Though the funeral notices were ready, then, the patient stolidly refused to die, conserving two points of strength of great value for the new perception of the actor’s art then affirming itself on the European stage. It taught flexibility and the ability to produce any number of totally different roles, and lent all action immediacy and spontaneity, deriving, Riccoboni underlines in a fundamental passage, from the actor’s ‘feeling’ what he is performing, rather than simply repeating words and sentences written by others and learned by heart.

To summarize Riccoboni’s position at this point, ideal recitation should, paradoxically, combine improvisation with the use of a written script which alone can purge the method of its inevitable vulgarity, excesses, and shortfalls in performance. The solution seemed clear: if improvisation improves acting skills in eliciting ‘feeling’ from the actor, and if more ‘feeling’ produces better acting, then the best of both worlds can be obtained, and the benefits of improvisation can be transferred to acting from a script if the actor’s immediate emotional response to the words and actions of the text are placed squarely at the centre of everything done and said onstage. In the light of this principle, Riccoboni set about evolving the theory expounded in his Dell’arte rappresentativa.

**First Formulation of the Emotionalist Theory**

Riccoboni starts from a basic premise, already concretely consolidated by the early Italian theorists of the sixteenth century: when acting the actor must remain anchored to ‘truth’, so as to persuade the audience that what is ‘fake’ is not, however, ‘false’.\textsuperscript{81} This will be impossible, Riccoboni immediately observes, if he draws on gestures and expressions which are studied and calculated, thereby easily becoming excessive and superfluous, producing ‘five or six movements for each word’.\textsuperscript{82}

In real life, gestures and movements arise spontaneously, from the immediate situation, and express our state of mind quite naturally, without any calculation of the “natural” position of hands and feet.\textsuperscript{83} On stage the actor needs to proceed in the same way. He must ‘forget’ about his limbs and concentrate solely on ‘feeling’

\textsuperscript{79} Luigi Riccoboni, *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur le différens théâtres de l’Europe*, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{80} Luigi Riccoboni, *Histoire du théâtre italien*, pp. 61-62.
\textsuperscript{81} Luigi Riccoboni, *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 14.
\textsuperscript{83} See ibid.
emotionally what he is acting. Gestures and expressions will follow immediately, enacting the feelings which animate the character.

How is it to be managed, to follow the natural instinct and move spontaneously? It is necessary to forget about our four limbs, and possibly even the fifth, the head, and to attempt instead to feel that which we are saying, and to make believe the matter concerns oneself, and not some other person. If you feel in your heart the pains of love, of indignation, and of jealousy, or even should you be possessed by demons like Orestes, you will feel affinity with that love, indignation, and even with Beelzebub himself, and you will move spontaneously, and with no artifice your arms and legs, feet and hands, and I would dare wager that no-one will be found who would criticize you if you allow your heart to regulate your movements.\(^{84}\)

In a process of this kind the traditionally-recommended expedients of rehearsing in front of a mirror clearly have no point.\(^{85}\) A mirror inevitably encourages a studied and artificial pose, and by scrutinising himself from head to toe, the actor is entirely concentrated on the body and limbs and forgets that it is the centre of the face, head-on, between the chin and the forehead, on which the audience’s eyes are fixed.

Imagine a thread connecting the eyes of each person to the point on which their glance is directed. On which part of the body would we expect it to land? On the face, and on no other part. Stare into the eyes of the audience and you will observe that each of them is hanging on your glance, your eyes, as if rapt by love.\(^{86}\)

Facial expression and glance are thus the focal point, and must be co-ordinated with the voice, otherwise the spoken word will be to all effects ineffectual and the actor’s silence and pauses lose all effect.\(^{87}\) The glance of those on stage has to be able to communicate the entire range of feelings, in all their nuances; and to be successful in this, the actor, again, has only one recourse: truly to feel what he has to express.

You feel fear, and your eyes, timorous, will express it; you feel fury, and it will rage within them: shame will communicate a horror to them, irony a contrived gaiety, which would defy the brush of any painter. Love will confer a sweetness more winning than all other, tedium a melancholy devoid of all pain, indifference an indefinable quality; and all that disgusts or attracts you, whether joy or pain, will, if experienced, be perceived in your glance.\(^{88}\)

From gestures and bodily movements – hands, arms, and legs – to facial expressions and flickers of the eye to be co-ordinated with the modulations of the voice, the basic rule, then, is to trust to the immediate, living sentiment. This, Riccoboni underlines in the last line of his treatise, is the cardinal principle, the ‘General Rule’ of acting.\(^{89}\) Having placed empathy as the cornerstone of acting Riccoboni then goes on to define the area in which technique, the calculated action and effect, can be desirable or even mandatory. He pinpoints two issues destined to become fundamental in the succeeding debate. True empathy, Riccoboni, is virtually

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\(^{84}\) Ibid., pp. 17-18.
\(^{85}\) See ibid., p. 14.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 28.
\(^{87}\) See ibid., p. 31 and p. 59.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 60.
\(^{89}\) Ibid.
impossible when the actor is required to represent states of mind or characters which are inimical or extraneous to his own personality, as in the case of his extreme example of the devil. Furthermore, while it is perfectly spontaneous, in real life, ‘at home or in the piazza’, to feel the sentiments naturally elicited by the situation, it is less easy to elicit them on the stage, when playing a role before a large public. The actor’s inner empathy can then reveal itself as inadequate, inactive, or non-existent, and in that case, Riccoboni admits, although the ‘great art’ of the actor lies in ‘feeling’, it will here be necessary to draw on ‘external artifice’ and fake it, imitating the characters and expressions we observe in real life. Moreover, when conjuring up the apposite appearance, behaviour, and gestures of his character the actor must in any case take into account the immediate theatre conditions and stage requirements, whereby, for example, the volume of the voice and amplitude of gesture will need to be regulated so as to reach the farthest rows while not appearing excessive to the nearest spectators.90 And a bottom-line maxim, as Riccoboni states in the Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les differens théâtres de l’Europe, is that all ‘action should be slightly overplayed’: ‘totally simple, pure’ nature would be ‘cold’ on the stage:

A statue to be placed at a distance must perforce be larger than natural size, that the audience, however far off, see it in its just proportions […] English actors possess the art of, so to speak, enlarging the truth, exactly as much as is necessary to make it visible from a distance, so as to make appear as pure truth that which they represent.92

Aesthetic requirements then follow. Nature creates imperfect products, hunchbacks and cripples, individuals disfigured from their birth, and human gestures are frequently clumsy, graceless, and excessive. For this reason the stage must not show all that we see in our daily life, warts and all: or, as Riccoboni puts it, if nature mixes ‘gold with mire’, the theatre should remove the mire and reveal a version which is ‘beautiful’, showing its products in perfect and exemplary forms.93 In real life, Riccoboni elucidates, a prince may possess a body or bearing ill-conforming with the dignity of his rank, but none of this must appear on the stage, where the character’s aspect must always reflect the dignity representing his condition iconically:

Whether you represent a prince, a king, or an emperor, bear always in mind that you must please the persons of the lowest condition just as those in the highest. Never make the character of such stature that a prince may not see himself therein, or believe at least that he would behave in like fashion, and present him as the plebeian would imagine him, eschewing a form so strange and uncustomary that it throws doubts on the character you are representing.94

Let us reveal him as comely, and never deformed. Let the king assume a bearing in conformity with his rank: if a king assume a bearing more debased than is seemly, we yet should reveal him as comely, and never out of keeping with what he should be.95

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90 Ibid., pp. 19-20 and p. 33.
91 See ibid., p. 26.
92 Luigi Riccoboni, Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les differens théâtres de l’Europe, p. 135. See also Pensées, p. 262.
93 Luigi Riccoboni, Dell’arte rappresentativa, pp. 6-8 and p. 25.
94 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
The actor’s physical appearance must always, then, be adequate to the part he is playing. In general an actor should be ‘well-fashioned in his limbs’, to be able to interpret royals or young lovers. If ungainly in appearance, he can at most represent a specific type of person, to comic effect.  

He should also exclude all attitudes which, though realistic, are not in keeping with the exemplary physiognomy of that particular character. A king, Riccoboni explains, in a very transparent reference to Baron’s over-casual style in tragic scenes, if seated before his counsellors and sentencing his rebel son, can hardly sit with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, nor receive a foreign ambassador sitting with his legs crossed and ‘chewing his glove’. And if comedy allows more freedom in interpreting characters and forms of behaviour, tragedy remains ‘a lady of great regard’, unable ever to forget the ‘majesty’ which is hers by right.  

In three cases, then, technique can be indispensable to the actor: when the part calls for particular expressions to be conjured up ‘in cold blood’ – either because the role is too far from the actor’s own personality, or because the artificial conditions of the theatre thwart their easy and spontaneous appearance; when, for stage logic, voice and movements have to be calibrated but must still be seen and heard by the back rows without appearing hyperbolical to the nearest; and when gestures and attitudes have to be corrected to meet the aesthetic requirement of presenting nature in its best light, in exemplary rather than average or flawed figures.

Techniques also exist for specific problems: ‘fake tears’, for example, when a young flirt has to feign distress to fool her lover, and cry in a way which fools him but must appear clearly false to the audience. The solution is to cry naturally, but give some rapid sign such as a glance or hidden smile.

The weeping must appear real to him [the lover] and false to the audience, and the deceit must be perceived both in unison with and distinct from the truth. Yet I have seen such affected means of conveying this, that the lover could never have been persuaded by the deceit […] To show that you are false, a glance will suffice, or a sidelong smile, to the public, and then show oneself as true and natural.

By-play also requires careful technical skill. When silently reacting to the words of his interlocutor the actor must limit his expressions, to avoid distracting the audience’s attention from the speaker. Lastly, similar skills allow the actor to

96 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
98 Luigi Riccoboni, *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, p. 25.
99 Ibid., p. 35.
100 See ibid., pp. 52-54 and p. 57. On by-play see also *Pensées*, p. 258.
carefully gauge the amount of passion a scene requires, and build up to it convincingly:

If from the start you are agitated by great fury, your words will end by having less effect. If then you would have the feeling grow in strength, reduce the rhythm and movements and proceed by degrees.¹⁰¹

Neither the actor’s spontaneous emotional commitment nor technical resources will serve however if the character’s behaviour is incongruous in the specific situation. This is often the fault of the actor, as when, Riccoboni explains (repeating a norm which quickly became canonical in the literature of the period), he pays more attention to his public than to the action unfolding onstage.

In the art of acting the first rule is to suppose you are alone even though before a thousand spectators, and that the actor engaged in dialogue with you is the only person you should address.¹⁰²

Effectiveness is also lost by a habit passed down from one generation to the next: that of a sing-song delivery resting leadenly on the rhythm of the line. Riccoboni was the fiercest of its critics among contemporary theoreticians. The habit, he observed, grew out of an attempt to emulate ancient tragedians who were believed to have sung the lines to a musical accompaniment.¹⁰³ The resulting delivery was ‘strange’, and destroyed any willing suspension of disbelief, any illusion of real people, and not actors, speaking and moving in front of our eyes. In Italy, where it survives in the academies, ‘it kills, enervates, and exhausts’ its listener with a ‘bewildering concert’, of tones, and in France, where, with the honourable exception of Adrienne Lecouvreur, it remains the most common form of delivery in tragedy, it produces ‘headache and hiccups’.¹⁰⁴ Not that this means that the delivery of a tragic hero should be that of the common man, Riccoboni quickly adds: tragic characters possess a particular dignity and greatness, and in any case speak in verse. They require a style of acting which is both ‘majestic’ and ‘natural’, although it is near-impossible to legislate as to the perfect delivery, which must be entrusted to the ear, to common sense, and to the actor’s restraint.¹⁰⁵

At other times, incongruent behaviour by the character depends not on the actor but on the playwright, as when, for example, the character’s words are out of keeping with the emotional situation. French tragedy, Riccoboni observes, often has a hero who ‘in the turmoil of the most vehement passion’ will think and speak ‘with sentiments of the highest metaphysical nature’.¹⁰⁶ It is then up to the actor to compensate as best he can:

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 58-59.
¹⁰² Ibid., p. 53.
¹⁰³ See ibid., p. 40.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 42-44. See also Pensées, p. 266.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 46.
If you must pronounce an elevated sentence, albeit it is not your fault [but the author’s], you must seek to make it adequate through the tone you adopt.\(^{107}\)

A further, more serious mistake concerns the range of types of characters and emotional tones, which must be so varied as to avoid all monotony. If tragic characters must all perforce be majestic, with the risk of making them uniform, it is necessary, Riccoboni advises, to make a clear distinction, at least, between the Greeks (great and fierce) and the Romans (great and human), and then further distinguish them on the basis of their rank, nationality, education, and social circle. He returns again and again, and at length, to this point, criticising the habits of French tragedians:

All actors in French Tragedy, be they hero or confidant, speak in the same fashion, and think with equal elevation of thought. Furthermore, on all their Heroes, whether Greek or Roman, do the French confirm the same character, though there be none that does not know the different character of the two nations. Caesar, Alexander, Pompey, Mithridates, Augustus, and Achilles all seem born in the same clime, and raised in the like manner of thinking and living. And I would venture so far as to say that the characters of these most famous Heroes are in no way differentiated by the French Tragedians.\(^{108}\)

Even though the playwright has failed to make a clear distinction between the characteristics of the different groups and individuals, the actor has to use his expressive skills and attempt to render them.\(^{109}\) And it was not enough to give the general character traits of each: the actor should also be able to flesh out the habits, attitudes, and gestures proper to the varying emotions the character would feel in the course of the play. The character’s individual aspects and the manifestation of various passions are interwoven, then, in a tissue of particularly complex expressive variations, as in the paintings of a ‘wise artist’, in Riccoboni’s comparison, where ‘one feeling of pain’ manifests itself very differently in the hundred figures populating the scene.\(^{110}\) Riccoboni returns to this meshing of character and passions in his *Dissertation sur la tragédie moderne*, in a detailed and painstaking explanation:

Each man, and most especially each hero, possesses a dominant characteristic, the force behind all his ways of thought […] If at times there come upon him the passions common to all men, it must not be believed that they are entirely transformed: the same passions do not make men alike, but on the contrary the different characters of men do make that same passion unlike in each man: all men may be in love; but each man is in love in his own fashion, and that fashion depends on the character dominant within him, which is altered to varying degrees by these accidental passions, according to whether he be more or less predisposed to resist their influence.\(^{111}\)

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\(^{107}\) Luigi Riccoboni, *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, p. 22.

\(^{108}\) Luigi Riccoboni, *Dissertazione sulla commedia all’improvviso e scenari inediti*, p. 23. See also *Dissertation sur la tragédie moderne*, pp. 301-303.

\(^{109}\) See Luigi Riccoboni, *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, p. 49.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., pp. 29-30. Riccoboni like Gildon cites the example of painting and, specifically, a representation of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, observing the very different reactions to the atrocity on the part of the various bystander. The specific painting Riccoboni refers to has not been identified.

\(^{111}\) Luigi Riccoboni, *Dissertation sur la tragédie moderne*, pp. 303-304.
And there are further nuances to consider. The same passion not only assumes different forms in the various characters, but modulates in different forms and degrees of intensity within the same character in the course of the action, so that the series of expressive attitudes to be mastered by an actor is virtually incalculable. Gildon’s observations as to the expressive range and complexity required is thus taken to their extreme consequences, the radical conclusion to which, within an emotionalist perspective, is elucidated in Riccoboni’s *Pensées sur la déclamation*.

I shall not illustrate in detail the immense variety of inflections to which the voice is susceptible […] I believe it may be in vain to furnish rules since, speaking in general, these inflections are infinite and possess no certain rules, if each individual, following his own natural disposition, serious or light-hearted, vary them in proportion […] How can it be imagined that one may prescribe certain and suitable tones of voice to so many millions of human beings, each of which possesses his own voice, and uses it according to his own natural disposition?

The traditional code of pre-established expressions, hitherto mandatory for representing the various passions precisely and vividly, clearly had its days numbered. If Poisson considered it superfluous, for Riccoboni it was simply impossible. The infinite range of characters, inner workings, permutations of passions and attitudes, and variations of intensity and expressiveness which comprise the actor’s rendering of a character made it absurd to so much as imagine any regulation possible – even supposing it to be useful in the first place; whereas from the emotionalist perspective, any code could only be harmful, concentrating the actor’s attention on his movements and gestures and hindering the free, spontaneous, ‘natural’ expression of his inner workings.

For this reason Riccoboni jettisoned both the repertoire of expressions corresponding to the different passions and, to all intents, the traditional list of gestures and movements compromising the elegance and style of the acting, simply by not mentioning it, while Poisson continued to observe it. Aesthetic requirements could no longer be guaranteed by objective, specific, and pre-established aims, which ensured the grace and decorum of the performance by including a number of precise and scrupulously-described poses and attitudes, and excluding others. These now depended on the actor’s technical skill, guided by his good taste and common sense, all working in conjunction with his immediate emotional empathy to ensure the elegant perfection of the performance on stage.

The above represents the essential core of the emotionalist theory of acting as elucidated in the *Arte rappresentativa*. Ten years later, Riccoboni attempted to extend its principles to the doctrine of oratory, without, however – and this is the most significant aspect of the operation – returning to the canonical comparison of oratory and acting. In the *Pensées sur la déclamation* the actor’s art is only glanced at en passant, and its autonomy seems guaranteed. Acting is still listed in the long list of forms of public speaking, but the treatise is concerned with the declaiming of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ orators, i.e. ecclesiastical and civic, and the theatre is only mentioned at three points, as an example, to underline the importance of facial expressions, of adapting voice and gestures so as to reach the entire public, and the need to avoid the

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112 Luigi Riccoboni, *Dell’arte rappresentativa*, pp. 30-31.
mistake, typical of ham actors in tragedy, of falling back on unnatural and forced modes of declamation in the place of a sincere and intimate conviction of what is being said.114

Riccoboni’s aim is to establish emotional empathy as the basis of oratory. If the art of declamation requires study and exercise, to the extent of discouraging beginners from exposing themselves in public and advising the setting up of special schools, it is also true that no codes need to be learnt, nor gestures and expressions imitated.115 All expressiveness, the theory goes, lies within us, and is evoked when through deep concentration we slip our moorings, leaving the material world of the senses and entering the state of rapture and ‘enthusiasm’ well known to the poets, in which the innermost workings of our soul are clear and obvious, with the ways and forms and expressions which will reveal them.116 Only through this kind of concentration can the orator enter the state required to pronounce his speech:

There is no orator who, after greeting his listeners, does not remain for some seconds immobile, without pronouncing a word; frequently he will close his eyes, and is generally believed to be giving his listeners time to settle and compose themselves, the better to attend to him. I similarly believe that the majority of orators does so for this reason, though it is an error on their part. Those moments the orator allows himself must be used solely to collect himself and in a moment to forget nature in its entirety, filling himself only with his subject.117

When the orator then re-opens his eyes to begin to speak, he looks at the public but sees no one face in particular. The ability to avoid distraction and concentrate exclusively on what he has to say must be absolute; this is the only way to ‘feel that which he is saying’ and thereby ‘convince his spectators to believe that all that he tells them, he himself believes in that same moment’.118

Riccoboni’s whole argument evinces traces of on the one hand the classical platonic theory of Ion, and on the other Quintilian’s procedure, taken up by Le Faucher and then Gildon, whereby the orator uses concentration to evoke living images from within himself and produce the emotions needed to animate his expressions. Similarly, in the art of the orator who appears to be saying what has thought in that same instant because he ‘feels’ it, we apprehend the same effect of immediate spontaneity of improvised comedy, which, in the Arte rappresentativa, the procedures of emotionalism manage to introduce into the recitation of the written script.

The emotionalist principle as applied to oratory is not of course without consequences. Firstly, it allows no recourse to a pre-established expressive code. All expressions not spontaneously produced by a real, present feeling, like any attitude deliberately studied or held in check, inevitably leads to a distortion in its external manifestation. In the case of weeping, for example, if the tears come naturally they should not be checked, whereas if they fail to come, there is no point forcing them and producing a series of alarming or ridiculous grimaces.119 The same applies to

117 Ibid., p. 253.
118 Ibid., pp. 263-264.
119 See ibid., p. 256.
variations in facial expressions accompanying the drift of the speech: they come from within or not at all.

Body movements, in particular of the arms, are able to add grace and emphasis to the orator’s performance but are generally less important. Grace in movement, in any case, Riccoboni insists, is a gift of nature, and if not possessed cannot be acquired: ‘all the efforts in front of a mirror, and any amount of study, would produce mere affectionat’ and should be avoided. The solution is for the orator simply not to worry about his arms, and hold them still. If, then, in the course of his speech he is gripped by real ‘enthusiasm’, they will move spontaneously, and if the enthusiasm is unable to confer grace, it will at least confer strength, and avoid any hint of contrivance.

The emotionalist position, then, reaches complete definition in Riccoboni’s work, from the precise exposition in the Arte rappresentativa to the final comments in the Pensées sur la déclamation. It originated at the moment when the theory of acting parted company with that of oratory by placing dramaturgic functions at the centre of the actor’s art, rejecting an expressive code of pre-established movements, and established emotional empathy as the most effective mechanism for rendering the character in action on the stage. Theatrical and aesthetic requirements then became secondary, the concern of the actor’s technical skill guided by good taste and common sense, which should regulate both the extent of gestures and the volume of the voice, rejecting expressions and attitudes which could compromise the beauty and elegance of the character represented. Technique should also be applied to refine gestures, movements, and specific actions such as ‘fake tears’, and avoid any by-play over-acting; it should also gauge the expressive intensity of feelings according to the requirements of the part.

Criticism of Riccoboni. Reform of the Code and Franz Lang’s Treatise

The innovatory quality of the theory in the Arte rappresentativa was not however appreciated. Initial reactions were all taken up with rebutting the various criticisms levelled at French acting and tragedy in general and Baron’s performances in particular by not just the treatise but also the Histoire du théâtre italien and the Dissertation sur la tragédie moderne. Riccoboni, as outlined above, accused French tragedy of using profound philosophical language even for characters working under violent passions; of declaiming with a sing-song delivery which overly foregrounded the metre and rhyme, and of producing basically identical tragic characters; while Baron, according to Riccoboni, “demoticized” and socially levelled his tragic patrician figures.

The reactions differed considerably in tone. Levesque de La Ravalière, a man of letters, was briskly proscriptive: ‘No importance should be given’, he decreed, ‘to a short poem in verse, Dell’arte rappresentativa, recently published by an Italian actor’. Guyot-Desfontaines, a well known important journalist and writer, published an

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120 See ibid., p. 259.
121 Ibid., pp. 259-260.
122 Pierre Alexandre Levesque de La Ravalière, Essay de comparaison entre la déclamation et la poésie dramatique, Paris, La Veuve Pissot et Jean-François Tabarie, 1729, p. 18.
analysis which was as ironic as it was meticulous. While Jean Baptiste-Rousseau, a talented poet and rather less successful playwright, mixed a number of exquisitely courteous appreciations with some carefully-pondered objections, answered by Riccoboni with equal politeness. The diversity of opinion and tones apart, all the responses are curiously alike, centred on the solution of the identical problem: how to guarantee the aesthetic dimension of acting with respect to dramaturgic requirements, now generally recognized as primary and essential. Here positions varied and solutions were uncertain. Guyot-Desfontaines justified the rarefied register of tragic heroes, even at the height of passion, since ‘there is little worth in having a hero speak if he is to pronounce but common sentiments, such as those we hear every day in the quotidian matters of life’, and what he says must be ‘elevated and noble’, so that the public is struck by the ‘beauty’ of his speech. He equally defends the marking of rhythm and rhyme since it gives a sort of intimate beauty to the sentence, although he admits that it must remain decidedly ‘intimate’ and barely ‘glimpsed’: all ‘good French actors’ are concerned to ‘cancel it as near as possible from their declamation’. On the question of the uniform nobility and grandeur of tragic heroes, whom Riccoboni considers may be distinguished by dividing them into two types, fierce Greeks and more human Romans, Guyot-Desfontaines is quick in pointing out how conventional, abstract, and even erroneous the distinction is. Greek history is full of very human heroes, and no evidence is lacking of fierce Roman same; such formal, pre-established sub-categories will then be less than helpful as a distinction.

Rousseau’s observations on Baron as actor are even more interesting. What makes his gestures and attitudes superlatively effective, for all their lack of dignity and majesty, when interpreting regal roles, is the situation the character finds himself in. Having to meet dramaturgic needs influences the norms which should guarantee elegance, beauty, and the aesthetic, ‘ideal’ dimension of the performance in general. ‘The greatest monarch in the world’, Rousseau writes, ‘in such a violent state of mind will have no thought of his dignity’, and the stronger passions remove all differences between king and simple gentleman. Significantly, in his answer Riccoboni uses precisely the same argument to counterattack and repeat his accusations, citing Baron’s many mistakes in the fourth act of Inés de Castro.

A king in a similar situation is already aware of what is about to happen. We may presume that before entering his council he shall have shut himself up in his cabinet in privacy, and shall have wept, and torn his hair, and lastly shall have succumbed to all the anguish to which nature may force a father; but in that moment when he presents himself in public, he will so far have composed his spirits as to astonish and elicit tears from all his courtiers.

123 According to Jean-François-Augustin Janvier de Flainville, the French acting profession asked Guyot Desfontaines to reply to Riccoboni; in return he was to receive various gifts and free entry to their plays (see Jean-François-Augustin Janvier de Flainville, Lettre d’un comédien de Paris à un de ses amis, comédien en province, au sujet d’un article des “Observations sur les écrits modernes”, Bruxelles, 1742).
124 Pierre-François Guyot-Desfontaines, Lettre, p. 31.
125 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
126 Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Lettre, p. 20.
There is one case, Riccoboni admits however, when a monarch may abandon the majestic composure his position dictates: when taken by surprise, mid-action, by some unexpected and appalling news:

Theseus, who believes in the guilt of his own son, receives the news of his death and his innocence at the acme of his rage against him. I pardon him all the tears to which he abandons himself, and would not know how sufficiently to praise that actor who renders his grief in its most extreme forms.128

The aesthetic dimension of acting, the quality that makes it ‘more beautiful’ than behaviour in normal life, is defended, then, through dramaturgic requirements (if a king may lose control in private, he will obviously recompose himself when in public), and is dropped when dramaturgic conditions substantially change (if a king is taken by surprise, no self-control will be possible). But this is not quite the point. The aesthetic dimension, interpreting the character as an ideal figure, can no longer be guaranteed by a pre-established selection of gestures and modes of behaviour, whether fine and decorous or ugly and indecorous. The same ‘low’ or ‘over-familiar’ action, Rousseau observes, will provoke laughter if performed by an average actor, but where the actor is excellent and able to infuse ‘grace and nobility of delivery’, it will please the eye and heart of the spectator.129 In a word, it is simply the actor’s style, and nothing to do with the classification of gestures and expressions he adopts, which guarantees the aesthetic quality of what he does on stage. Categories of gestures and sub-categories of characters now seem irrelevant and ineffective. It was this conviction which marked a swift end to any pre-established code regulating the art of the actor.

All these problems however were marginal compared with the basic question posed by the Arte rappresentativa, which, in acknowledging the crisis of the expressive code of actio had to all intents sanctioned the autonomy of acting when formulated in emotionalist terms. The need to establish the characteristic features and specific ‘rules’ of acting was more or less consciously surfacing in the theories of the late 1720s. A good example was Pierre Rameau’s dance treatise, Le maître à danser, published in 1725 with the declared intent of providing the rules of dance in print, for the first time.130 And significantly, in dismissing Riccoboni’s work, Levesque de La Ravalière regretted the lack of texts setting out the norms specific to acting.131

Of significance here are two very different works: Franz Lang’s De actione scenica, published in Munich in 1727, and Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture, by Du Bos, published in Paris in 1719 and finished in the early 1730s. Lang was concerned with illustrating the rules of acting, but predicated strictly on the discipline of oratory – unsurprisingly, since he was a Jesuit who taught rhetoric. Lang worked on theatre productions in German schools run by the order, where acting was used to develop

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128 Ibid., p. 39.
129 Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Lettre, p. 20.
130 Pierre Rameau, Le maître à danser, Paris, Jean Villette, 1725, p. vi. In actual fact Rameau’s treatise was not the first: besides the various Italian treatises of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jean Tabourot, Canon of Langres’s Orchesographie had appeared in 1589 (Thoinot Arbeau, anagram of Jean Tabourot, Orchesographie, Lengres, Jehan des Preyz, 1589).
131 See Pierre Alexandre Levesque de La Ravalière, Essay de comparaison entre la déclamation et la poésie dramatique, pp. 16-17.
abilities in Latin eloquence and to teach students physical presence and elegance of movement and gesturality to deliver a more efficient message.

These physical elements of acting particularly interested him since he considered classical rhetoric to be concerned with voice and inflection at the expense of bodily movements, positions, and attitudes; although a series of norms had been extrapolated by various commentators, these were of no specific relevance to theatre action. The range of their work needed also to cover physical expressivity as applied on stage.

The treatise therefore extended the frame of reference both to classical authors, particularly Cicero and Quintilian, and to other Jesuit contributions to the theory of actio: Cipriano Soarez, Jean Voel, and Nicolas Coussin, down to Joseph Jouvancy’s Ratio discendi et docendi and the celebrated Paulus Ecclesiastes by Father Amedée de Bayeux. He also includes eight engravings illustrating mistakes to be avoided and the correct positions of feet and hands, the use of gloves, stage entrances, the correct way of turning the upper body towards other actors and the face towards the audience, the position of hands, arms and face to express sadness, and the position to assume in dialogue.

This was all part of the attempt to formulate more specific rules of acting to compensate for the shortcomings of actio as regarded the theatre, while remaining strictly within the discipline of oratory. This in no way meant opening acting up to movements and gestures other than those used by the preacher or the lawyer, whatever the demands of stage action. Lang is careful to reiterate the canonical norm excluding the use of hands, arms, and body to carry out excessively concrete and material actions such as wood-cutting, digging, hitting an object with a stick, or drawing a bow. All this must be merely alluded to by the actor, as an orator would generally have done.

The gesturality of the actor is basically the expression of passions, emotions, and states of mind. Like the playwright adapting the words to fit the various characters’ feelings, Lang elucidates, so the actor shows the inner workings through a measured use of the body. These modes of expression imitate nature but are refined by art, which, fine-tuning their elegance and precision, delights the audience while arousing their emotions.

Terms of the kind obviously considerably erode the difference between the gesturality of the actor and that of the lawyer and preacher, and at first glance the treatise seems to offer relatively few norms specifically concerning acting. Such as they are, they centre on how to make an entrance (with body and face turned towards the audience, to inform them immediately of his state of mind); how to kneel (men falling on one knee and decently arranging their costume, women always falling on both knees), and how to move about the stage (remaining visible to the audience while not upstaging the other actors). It further reminds the actor that he must never let his attention wander towards the audience, but keep it wholly on the dialogues taking place on stage, to maintain the correct reaction to what is being said.

132 See Franz Lang, Dissertatio de actione scenica, cum figuris eandem explicatibus, et observationibus quibusdam de arte comica, Monachii, Typis Mariae Magdalenae Riedlin, 1727, pp. 5-6.
133 See ibid., pp. 35-36. Less conspicuous and more dignified practical gestures such as opening a letter, writing, signing, or counting money were however acceptable (p. 32).
134 See ibid., p. 12, p. 16 and p. 51.
and done. Then there is the problem of the dialogues themselves, and how the actor can address his interlocutor while keeping face and eyes towards the public to allow them to read his state of mind. Here two solutions are offered: either a single movement of the upper body and head, as illustrated in one of the eight engravings, or a positioning of the two actors on the stage whereby the character speaking is towards the back of the stage, facing both the public and his interlocutor on the forestage, reversing the positions when the other begins to speak. Lastly, when an actor is about to reply he should anticipate in his expression what he is about to put into words, retaining something of it in his features when he has finished speaking.

Certainly, there is little that is ground-breaking here. Its importance lies elsewhere, in the importance given to the actor’s body. The movement of the body in space, movements over the depth of stage, physical positions, and the positioning of the limbs all become the dominant characteristic of acting. Lang is careful to establish the barycentre of dynamic equilibrium in the actor’s body, fixing it in the lumbar region, the ‘prime seat of movement’, regulating all bodily variations and therefore all the figures the body can produce. This throws light on Andreini’s observation a hundred years previously, that the difference between actors and other types of orators, such as preachers, consists in their having to operate with the whole body, and not just the upper part, the only part visible from the pulpit. Lang was in complete agreement: the difference is indeed essential within a perspective which considers bodily movements and their expressive possibilities as the cornerstone of acting.

At this remove from a sermon or speech, the characteristics of acting begin more to resemble those of dance. And indeed Lang begins his advice on stage attitudes and expressions with a close study of the starting positions for the feet, then arms, elbow, and hands. A wrong position, he explains, can compromise the dynamics of the action. He then immediately illustrates foot movements which will allow the actor to move as effectively as possible in the confines of the stage: an opening which is singularly similar to the attack launched by Rameau’s *Le maître à danser*. Rameau dedicates his first chapter to the base position the dancer must adopt, from feet to head, in order to be ready ‘to walk, to bow, or to dance’, and the following one to the correct way of taking steps in order to move in the neatest and most correct fashion. These dance steps, with minimal choreography, correspond closely to the movements with which Lang instructs his actors to move across the stage, from the way of starting, stopping, and proceeding, which he defines the *crux scenica*, with particular instructions for the successive movements of the right and left foot, down

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135 See ibid., p. 20, p. 24, p. 27, p. 40 and p. 42.
136 See ibid., pp. 44-47 and pp. 55-56.
139 Franz Lang, *Dissertatio de actione scenica*, p. 11.
140 See ibid., par. 4; and Pierre Rameau, *Le maître à danser*, chaps. 1-2 (*De la manière de se poser le corps* and *De la manière de bien marcher*). Rameau’s work, it should be remembered, appeared in 1725, the year Lang died. Lang’s treatise was published posthumously two years later, making any direct influence virtually impossible.
to the *passus scenicus*, a tacking movement, three or four steps in one direction, then the other, which Lang suggests be marked on the stage and visible to the actor.141 After this advice as to improving the general aesthetics and grace of stage movement Lang then moves on to prescribe not only gestures imitating concrete actions, but any which might appear gross or inelegant: and not just the more obvious – the actor should avoid examining his hands, cleaning or rubbing them together, cleaning his nails, and scratching his head or any other part of the body – but even gathering the fingertips towards the thumb, as if writing, or stretching the fingers out too widely.142 A description then follows of permissible gestures, accompanied by an extremely detailed analysis of possible positions and movements of the different parts of the body, one by one: how to use them, stretch them, and position them, from the feet to the knees, loins, arms, elbows, hands, fingers, head, face, and eyes. Each part has its own expressive potential, so every detail should be visible, and masks, sumptuous costumes, and even gloves, Lang explains at exhaustive length, are decidedly to be avoided: the actor should not even hold them in his hands.143

What emerges is a clear and precise manual of how to stage-manage emotions, states of mind, and passions in the most elegant and efficient way possible. Revisiting Coussin, Voel and Amedée de Bayeux, Lang illustrates, for example, the positions and movements of the hands to express admiration, anger, repulsion, supplication, pain, exclamation, blame, disapproval, encouragement, interrogation, repentance, and fear. But the total expression of the different feelings is produced above all by the combination, in movement, of the different parts of the body, limbs and face. Anger, to give an example, requires the use of the forehead, lips, teeth, hands, and fingers, all painstakingly described by Lang; sorrow, illustrated in an engraving, involves the actor’s hands, fingers, head, face, and arms.144

Obviously, the clearer and more precise the expression to the public, the more they will be emotionally involved, although acting is not to be reduced to the acting out of a catalogue of predefined poses and gestures. The actor’s emotional involvement in the feelings to be expressed is mandatory, and his immediacy and spontaneity can suggest further variations. The tears streaming down his face, for example, can be the product of ‘nature’ or of ‘art’, and both are acceptable. There also exists a gamut of feelings like joy, love, and desire which express themselves simply through spontaneous buoyancy and happy chatter requiring no particular technique and therefore, Lang opines, no detailed explanation.145

In illustrating the rules of acting, then, Lang is actually substantially revising the code of *actio*. Beginning with a detailed analysis of the parts of the body and their movements, he goes on to provide a highly-specialized definition of increasingly complex forms of expression, and prepares the ground for a theory of acting based on the possibilities of the actor’s body and its physical equilibrium and displacement on the stage, in relation to the dynamics of the emotions and feelings to be embodied and represented.

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141 Franz Lang, *Dissertatio de actione scenica*, pp. 18-25.
142 See ibid., p. 38.
143 See ibid., pp. 31-33.
144 See ibid., pp. 36-37 and pp. 49-53.
145 See ibid., p. 49, pp. 51-52 and p. 58.
Jean-Baptiste Du Bos

For all its significance, Lang’s treatise was read by a limited public, while Jean-Baptiste Du Bos’s Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture rapidly became famous. Three sections of the first of the two volumes published in 1719 looked at problems of recitation; the third volume, published in 1733, contained a much more detailed series of considerations.146

Du Bos was the first scholar to contextualize acting within a more eclectic treatise covering painting, music, and poetry, thereby awarding the actor’s art full aesthetic and cultural status; similarly, the acting concretely observed in contemporary theatres, with its very specific and exclusive properties and demands, took its place in the official pantheon of the arts, as an indispensible instrument for correctly understanding a significant part of the cultural world of antiquity.147

His eye as regards actorly styles and techniques is particularly wide-ranging and perceptive. As early as 1719 he had noted the co-existence of the different countries’ styles. Du Bos appreciated and defended the sing-song recitation of French tragedy, understood the limits of the Italian approach, which barely differentiates between the acting styles of tragedy and of comedy, and noted the excesses of another country’s tragic actors in alternating ‘furious tones’ with ‘grim and morose arrogance’ and ‘flashes of fury’.148 He was among the first to emphasise the importance of specific details and technical nuances, such as variations in skin colour, or the way pallor should spread over the face; his, too, the fundamental observation that audience-perception of the actor is in reality a compound of visual perception contaminated by the imagination. ‘Imagination’, Du Bos writes, speaking of the use of the mask in classical theatre, ‘supplies all that is concealed from us; and when we see eyes which burn with choler, we believe that we see the entire face illuminated by the fire of this passion’, so that ‘we are moved as if we did truly see it’.149

Even more particularly, though, Du Bos has managed to rearticulate the entire grid of theoretical references of which acting is a part. On the one hand he is firmly anchored to the classical referents of oratory, Cicero and Quintilian, who appear in scores of quotations. On the other, however, rather than applying them to the developments of seventeenth-century oratorical theory, he cross-references them

147 Indicative of this is the reversal effected in section IX of the third volume of Réflexions. While reconstruction of Greek and Roman theatrical forms had long been the benchmark in any discussion of modern theatre production, Du Bos maintained that ‘to understand those passages wherein the ancients speak of their theatre performances’ it would seem necessary to ‘be aware of what is happening in modern theatres, and consult persons professing those arts having at least some connection with those of the ancients, the practice of which has been lost’ (Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, Réflexions critiques, Paris, Pissot, 1770, III, p. 158).
148 Ibid., I, p. 445.
149 Ibid., III, p. 213.
with another classical thinker, Aristides Quintilianus, thereby transferring acting within a different system, that of music.\textsuperscript{150}

Du Bos drew on the musical doctrine of the ancients to elaborate a theory of recitation founded on the intimate co-penetration of voice and gesture: a very natural combination, he points out, as can be perceived in the immediate reciprocal effects. It would seem impossible, he notes, ‘that the gestures of those who speak a language the pronunciation of which has become lively and accentuated should not likewise become more vivacious and frequent’; it is dictated by ‘the organisation of the human body’.\textsuperscript{151} And music as conceived and used in antiquity ‘teaches to regulate not merely all the possible inflections of the voice, but to regulate likewise the movements of the body’, setting them, as it were, ‘to a precise measure’.\textsuperscript{152}

As theorized by Aristides Quintilianus, music, Du Bos explained, subdivided into a series of techniques covering the production of instrumental effects, vocality and gesturality. The overall artistic effect was then the result of the co-ordination of sound, instruments, song and body movements. This co-ordination was guaranteed by the ‘rhythmic art’ which gave the same beat to the instrumental sounds and all vocal and bodily movement.\textsuperscript{153} The composing of such a complex musical product, though, required forms of ‘writing’ or ‘notation’ to set down a full ‘score’ of sound effects, vocal effects, and the actors’ physical movements. The ancients possessed such a form of notation, and had compiled what were virtually ‘dictionaries of the gesture’ which allowed ‘specialists’ to formulate the exact definition and succession of a work’s various elements in their reciprocal relations.\textsuperscript{154} The Romans had a professional figure responsible for ‘composing the declamation of works for the theatre’, as demonstrated, Du Bos points out, by the directions in Terence’s plays where, with the names of the playwright and manager of the company which had staged them, was also listed the name of the person ‘who had composed the declamation’.\textsuperscript{155}

This was what lay behind Du Bos’s proposal to reprise a figure of the kind, to perfect the acting by assuring perfect onstage co-ordination of tempo, tone, and gesture. It was not impossible, Du Bos guaranteed after consulting ‘several musicians’, to find a form of notation to ‘score’ the intonation to be applied. Inevitably it would initially be difficult to find people able to read ‘this quasi-music’ and ‘properly intone the notes’, but such figures could be trained. Fifteen-year-old youths ‘taught this system of intoning for six months would master it’, assisted by the fact that their organs would adapt ‘to this fashion of pronouncing the notes without singing them, as they adapt to the intonation of the notes of our music’.\textsuperscript{156} A method of ‘scoring’ the necessary gestures could similarly be elaborated. The ancients had managed to find notes and characters indicating all the bodily attitudes and

\textsuperscript{150} Aristides Quintilianus, variously collocated between the second and fourth century CE, author of the treatise \textit{On Music}. Du Bos knew the Latin version of the original Greek work by Marcus Meibomius, \textit{Aristidis Quintilianis De Musica libri tres, Marcus Meibomius restituit, ac notis explicavit}, Amstelodami, Apud Ludovicum Elzevirum, 1652.

\textsuperscript{151} Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, \textit{Réflexions critiques}, III, p. 179.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., III, pp. 8-9.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., III, pp. 10-12 and p. 22.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., III, p. 136.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., III, pp. 154-159.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., III, p. 164.
movements; and the present day, Du Bos pointed out, referring to Feuillet’s *Choréographie* published in 1700, had found a way of indicating dance steps and figures: ‘to learn from notes what gestures are required is no more difficult than learning from notes what steps and figures are required’.157

With these problems solved, every play would have a quasi-score by a *compositeur de déclamation* whose job it would be to transcribe an account of rhythms, gestures, and movements. Mediocre actors could then perfect their part, or at least improve it, removing most of the mistakes they make ‘in getting the wrong tone’, destroying ‘the specific effect of the lines’, or when they ‘fill with pathos steps which are unsuited to it’. A fixed score by an expert would also ensure co-ordination among actors. If each actor were able to compose the declamation of a tragedy ‘exactly as a master of that art’, the general declamation of a score composed by a single individual would inevitably be ‘better conducted and better pondered’ than one ‘wherein each actor plays his role as he sees fit’.158

Du Bos’s proposal, then, is clear: to construct a code of expression for the actor by combining the teachings of oratory with the musical doctrine of the ancients. Its shortcoming is that the basic characteristic of recitation seems reduced to the administration of tones, tempo, and measure. Instead of basing the new code on actual gestures from daily experience combined with a reasonably convincing theory of expression of the different passions, Du Bos opts for an abstract and formal system of reference which privileges the aesthetic dimension of acting rather than its immediately dramaturgic aspects. What becomes important is that the actor move and declaim comme il faut, following rules which guarantee the precision and co-ordination of gestures and vocalization and carefully-studied effects.

This foregrounding of the aesthetic influences Du Bos’s position on all issues of early eighteenth century acting, such as the ‘sing-song’ mode of declaiming. While Du Bos is at pains to demonstrate that recitation is to be read as ‘song’ in a very different sense from our general usage, since the ancients used the term to include the declaiming of a public speech or proclamation, he is however appreciative of a diction which evokes the seduction or characteristics of what we commonly intend by ‘song’ in standard usage, even if it makes for a more ‘laboured’ recitation compared with the simple, direct reproduction of natural conversation. For this reason he defends the characteristic style of French tragedy, which is not only ‘more elevated, grave, and sustained’, but assumes the sing-song aspect so fiercely criticized by any number of theorists,159 with particular praise for actors who, ‘when the sense permits’, choose the style of ‘declamation which is closest to musical song’.160

Perfect and functional recitation is not, then, the ability to produce onstage a perfectly realistic action. The major pleasure produced by acting is not a matter of ‘illusion’, Du Bos is quick to explain. Nothing we see and hear in the theatre, from the playwright’s lines to the staging and scenery and declamation of the actors, is

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159 Ibid., I, pp. 440-441.

160 Ibid., III, p. 146.
aimed at producing in the audience the impression of taking part in ‘the event itself’. Du Bos’s revolutionary proposal was however extremely fragile. Louis de Cahusac began the three volumes of his *Danse ancienne et moderne ou traité historique de la danse* declaring that Du Bos’s conclusions on music and dance in the classical world were completely unfounded. But it was his concrete ideas on recitation which appeared particularly sterile, seeming to privilege the aesthetic dimension of acting precisely when dramaturgic requirement were becoming predominant. They also posited the formulation of a code indicating accents, and vocal and gestural nuances to be elaborated by a ‘specialist’ charged with scoring the texts so as to produce directions for staging which were fixed and unequivocal. And at a time when the theory of recitation, fuelled by the nascent emotionalist movement, began to consider as impossible any exhaustive description of the infinite means and forms of expression available. When Riccoboni dismissed the possibility of prescribing ‘certain and suitable tones of voice’, given the ‘infinite variety of inflections to which the voice is susceptible’, the reference to Du Bos was unmistakable. Consensus to the objection was unanimous, from treatises on recitation such as Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s *Le comédien*, a cornerstone of emotionalist doctrine, to erudite studies like Charles Duclos’s ‘Mémoire’, which addresses the issue in its conclusions, consigned to the *Académie des Inscriptions*.

Having established that declamation and gesture were inseparably linked, Duclos deduced that it was never necessary to conceive the art of gestures as a separate, specific art. If the vocal expression is right, the right gesture will follow. But the declamation, he went on, follows the ‘affections’ or modifications of the voice when, moving from tranquility to agitation, the soul is moved by some passion or sentiment: ‘involuntary’ modifications of the voice which accompany both the natural emotions and those the actor experiences onstage when entering empathetically into a situation. In any case, Duclos concluded, a scoring-system of declamation ‘would have not the most minimal utility which choreographic annotations possess’. Even granting it were possible to express the tones of declamation through signs, these ‘would constitute so vast a dictionary that it would require several years of study’; and then, a procedure of the kind in studying recitation could only produce actors who were ‘cold’, damaging the expression the sentiment could inspire.

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163 Luigi Riccoboni, Pensées, pp. 249-250. See also Dell’arte rappresentativa, p. 40.
164 See the chapter *De la verité de la Récitation* (pp. 158-159) in Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, *Le comédien*, Paris, Vincent, 1749.
VI
THE CRITIQUE OF ACTING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONALISM
D’AIGUEBERRE, CIBBER, AARON HILL AND RÉMOND DE SAINTE-ALBINE

D’AIGUEBERRE AND THE FOUNDERING OF THE CRITIQUE OF ACTING

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the separation of recitation from oratory was accompanied by the birth of a new critical sensibility towards the actor’s performance. James Wright’s *Historia Histrionica* of 1699 had taken pains to document the parts played by various actors and to provide a certain amount of biographical information. Then, around 1710, the London periodicals began to publish occasional observations on the protagonists of the contemporary stage. Covering Betterton’s funeral, Richard Steele listed his most celebrated interpretations, a month later giving accounts of the equally famous Robert Wilks and Colley Cibber. In Spring 1711 Addison published an article on Nicolò Grimaldi, the famous Neapolitan opera-singer, citing him as a model for the great tragic actors on the English stage. Later, in France, Baron’s return and the success of Adrienne Lecouvreur occasioned a series of articles and long letters, real or invented, to friends and correspondents. And eventually in 1730 Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre, man of letters and magistrate in the Toulouse parliament, published the *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur de la Comédie de Rouen, au Garçon de Caffé*, to all intents marking the birth of the modern critique of recitation.

In July 1729 the Comédie Française had performed d’Aigueberre’s curious *Trois spectacles*, comprising a tragedy, a comedy and a pastoral. This had elicited a certain amount of criticism to which d’Aigueberre replied in his *Lettre d’un Garçon de Caffé au Souffleur de la Comédie de Rouen, sur la pièce des Trois Spectacles*, followed by the *Réponse du Souffleur*. He had then written a *Seconde Lettre* dealing specifically with acting. The *Lettre* gives a strikingly broad critical overview,

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2 See *The Tatler*, no. 167 (May 4, 1710) and no. 182 (June 8, 1710).
3 See *The Spectator*, no. 13 (March 15, 1711).
4 In addition to the above-cited Elena Balletti, Luigi Riccoboni, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau and Guyot-Desfontaines, see Léonor-Jean-Christine Soulas d’Allainval, *Lettre a Mylord *** sur Baron et la Demoiselle Lecouvreur*, Paris, A. de Heuqueville, 1730.
6 Jean Dumas d’Aigueberre, *Seconde Lettre du Souffleur de la Comédie de Rouen au Garçon de Caffé, ou Entretien sur le Défauts de la Declamation*. The *Seconde Lettre* had passed critically reviewed all the Comédie’s actors, and when injudiciously read out to them had created no small stir, as d’Aigueberre recounts in the premise. The reading appears to be a fact. The curator of the second edition of the *Lettre*, published in 1870, Jules Bonnassies, mentions a handwritten note among the contents of a police report conserved in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal stating that on 14 June 1830 the ‘approbateur des pièces’, one Abbé Chérier, had read the *Lettre* to the actors who had strongly protested, while one actress was in despair at not having been mentioned. The Comédie probably destroyed all the copies it could intercept, Bonnassies opines: hence the rarity value of the few extant same. See *Notice* (pp. 3-4) and *Avis du Garçon de Caffé au Lecteur* (pp. 6-8), in *Lettre a Mylord*** sur Baron et la Dlle Le Couvreur par George Wink (l’Abbé d’Allainval), *Lettre du Souffleur de la Comédie de Rouen au Garçon de Caffé (par du Mas d’Aigueberre)*, ed. by Jules Bonnassies, Paris, L. Willem, 1870.
analysing more than twenty performers on the Paris stage and going from the generation about to retire to the most recent actors to join the Comédie. It begins with Mademoiselle Duclos, followed by Beaubourg, Baron and Lecouvreur, also commenting on the merits and demerits of four member of the Quinault family (Jean-Baptiste-Maurice, Quinault Dufresne, his wife Catherine and his sister Jeanne-Françoise). The Lettre then moves on to Pierre Lenoir, or La Thorillère, Duchemin, Momménil, Charles-Claude Dangeville, Marc Antoine Legrand, François Arnould Poisson, Armand, Mademoiselle Dubocage, Mademoiselle Desmares and her pupil Mademoiselle Balicourt, down to Sarrazin and Grandval, who had made their début in 1729, and Mademoiselle Dangeville, the niece of Charles-Claude, who had recently joined the Comédie in March 1730.

The work’s importance lies above all in the premise in which d’Aigueberre posits the possibility of a critique of acting which is as rigorous and legitimate as critiques of other cultural activities. If a speech, book, or theatre script can be criticized, then so can the performance of an actor. All this is asked of the critic is to ‘keep to his subject’. The critique should analyze the actor’s art without interpolating extraneous factors regarding the person: character, behaviour, look, or general sympathy.7 In this way acting becomes a specific object of observation, the description and evaluation of the actors comprising an autonomous discipline, with its own criteria and values and with the same dignity as the most discerning literary criticism.

The Lettre follows a precise strategy in expounding the above. It rejects the possibility of evaluating the performance from the audience’s immediate reaction, since tastes vary and personal reactions are influenced by preferences and inclinations concerning the actor’s person and not his art. A solid, general criterion must be applied: to evaluate how the actor involves the spectator, ‘opening the heart, locking it once more and moving it’, and using art to imitate nature.8 D’Aigueberre follows three criteria in his analysis. He observes if and how the actor appears moved by the sentiments expressed; he gauges the effectiveness of gesture and expression, appraising the degree of emphasis and extent with which they are applied, and lastly evaluates how suited the actor naturally is to the role in which he is cast.

The exposition opens with a virtual phenomenology of emotive expressiveness as exemplified in the Comédie’s traditional pillars of excellence. Duclos, greatly celebrated in the past, ‘is inflamed, aggrieved, anguishd’ but, he objects, is never convincing, giving the impression of over-acting, producing ‘the necessary demonstrations’ of required feelings through ‘art, method and habit’, but never transmitting the emotions enacted on stage to the spectator. Only towards the end of the play, d’Aigueberre admits, when ‘the duration of the action’ begins to ‘heat’ and move her, can her acting be seen to improve and acquire convincing vigour.9

Beaubourg, for his part, is concerned with cramming every aspect of his acting with significance and sentiment. Each word is paired with its related ‘sigh, gesture, or particular movement’, to the extent that the character seems to identify not with the character, but with the poet bent on foregrounding and enhancing textual beauties:

Not content with lamenting or raging, [Beaubourg] abandons himself to his transports with the enthusiasm of an author when composing; he opens his mouth like him, underlines what he

8 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
9 Ibid., pp. 20-21.
pronounces, conveys the energy of his expressions and the brilliance of his thoughts, and exalts with emphasis the nobility of his sentiments.10

Beaubourg’s expressive intensity and excess end by removing all naturalness from the performance — all half-tones, nuances and variants. Every state of mind immediately becomes its histrionic extreme: pain is expressed as desperation as Beaubourg ‘moans violently, sighs furiously, clenching his teeth and compressing, as it were, his expressions like a man who suffers and dares not explode’. To express love he ‘enlarges his despairing shoulders, moans and weeps’, assuming an air which is ‘whining, naïve and infantile’, reducing to ridicule both actor and passion alike. In so doing, all difference of sentiment is eliminated, together with the different traits of the character who disappears behind the performance of a succession of over-intense and stereotyped, whatever the character or rank of the character expressing them.11

The faults in the acting of Mademoiselle Duclos and Beaubourg have a precise cause: the lack of ‘heart’, indispensable for ‘reaching sentiments that exist within nature’.12 An actor naturally requires esprit, d’Aigueberre concedes, to penetrate the dramatist’s script, grasp the character, recognize the personality and decide how to render it correctly and effectively. Without heart, however, esprit is to no avail and can even overforce a performance’s naturalness and plausibility. It is sentiment — the actor’s emotional empathy — which regulates the intensity of the performance and adds further articulacy and complexity, avoiding reducing the character’s states of mind to a limited range of stereotypes and allowing them to emerge in all their delicacy as the actor reveals all the hidden lights and shades. The finer differences of characterization are woven into this close texture of gesture, attitude and expression, in communicating which the actor gives each character its own idiosyncratic identity: that which distinguishes one tragic hero from another, or a princess of Colchis from a Greek queen.

This constitutes acting at its finest, as achieved by Baron and Lecouvreur, who could match the single passion with the character while sacrificing neither. The result was extraordinary. Not infrequently, d’Aigueberre reports, the audience was so enchanted by Baron as to be unable to applaud, but would sit immobile while a murmur of admiration gradually began to be heard in the theatre.13

The actor’s authentic empathy, however, extends beyond a more complex interpretation of character and state of mind; it also governs the succession of expressions, tones of voice, facial signs, gestures and movements, blending them into a cohesive whole and marking the variations and shifts from one state of mind to the next. Lecouvreur never went on stage without having clearly entered into the part: she was able to ‘dispose at her pleasure’ of ‘her heart and its sentiments’, and her acting ‘announced through her eyes what she was about to say’, she could pass effortlessly ‘from violence to perfect tranquility, from tenderness to fury, from instant fear to dissimulation’. Her face was variously ‘serene, troubled, submissive, proud, dejected, threatening, irate, or full of compassion’. The blend of expressions, the succession of different intensities of emotion, and the different states of mind swept the audience along totally, so that ‘they followed with no resistance’, and

10 Ibid., pp. 23-24.
11 Ibid., pp. 25-27.
12 Ibid., p. 22.
13 See ibid., pp. 28-29.
‘feared, moaned and trembled with her, even weeping before seeing her tears begin to flow’.14

Empathy in itself, though, is not enough, d’Aigueberre explains, examining the case of Pierre Sarrazin who replaced Baron in 1729. Sarrazin entered into the role and its emotional charge completely, but was only weakly and inadequately able to transmit this to his audience. The spectator is moved at his interpretation of an unhappy father while ‘feeling that something is missing from his sadness’, and that when ‘tears are about to appear in his eyes’ he has the time ‘to think again and hold them back’. The reason is that Sarrazin is deficient in feu: the fire and energy that courses through the empathetic actor, who is then able to transmit his feelings powerfully and convincingly. Feu can clearly carry all before it: united with a competent technique of expression it can take hold of the audience, surprise, amaze and disturb them, support the actor in all eventualities and generally hide a multitude of sins and mistakes. But its excesses can equally backfire. As demonstrated by the case of Quinault Dufresne, who d’Aigueberre cites in comparison with Sarrazin, feu can push the actor over the edge, making him lose ‘the sense of things’, and actually ‘stop him fromfeeling’. Without emotional empathy, the actor is then animated by energy and feu alone, and may please the spectators still, but never touch their soul.15

Having established these basic criteria, the Lettre goes on to a technical aspect of acting: the ability to accentuate gestures and expressions according to the character represented. The characters of ‘bas-comique’, for example, which are close to those of farce, demand an exaggerated gesturality and particular expressive force. This would explain the lack of success of an actor like Montménil, although his performance was otherwise unexceptionable. His physiognomy was too regular, d’Aigueberre observed: his characters are not sufficiently clear-cut, but are correctly and naturally represented, as their real-life equivalents would normally be portrayed onstage, while their function in this case is to amuse the public with coarse quips and gags.16 Armand on the other hand, originally from travelling companies, errs in the opposite direction. A lively and talented actor, with all the gifts to please and amuse, he would be ideal for grotesques, servants, drunkards, etc., but his professional origins leads him naturally toward buffoonery so that instead of becoming ‘a good actor’, he remains merely ‘a comedian of farces’.17

The same goes for interpreters of ‘rôles de caractères’: characters like the miser or the capricious female. Here too, obviously in quite different ways, the actor needs to bring out the distinctive features. In this context d’Aigueberre cites La Thorillière who with complete naturalness renders the hypocrisy of the religious hypocrite or the craft and ingenuity of a servant, concentrating in a gesture, movement, or wink the unmistakable trait of the character to be revealed. Too often, though, this degenerates into a series of smirks and grins which compromise the plausibility of the performance by simply playing to the pit.18

It is also possible for an actor with no consolidated technique or special qualities to acquit himself perfectly well if he possesses a repertoire of characteristics adapted to specific types of characters. Jeanne Françoise Quinault, for example, has her faults while possessing no particular compensating abilities: but her way of speaking, her obstinate

14 Ibid., pp. 31-32.
15 Ibid., p. 41 and pp. 42-44.
16 See ibid., pp. 44-45.
17 Ibid., pp. 49-50.
18 See ibid., p. 51.
rejoinders to anyone contradicting her, and an air of defiance and rebellion or simple vivacity in voice and gestures make her ideal for parts as a soubrette, the pert and knowing serving-girl, and excellent for similar 'rôles de caractères' requiring a brisk and animated performance. Even the faults an actor should correct but often cultivates can find their ideal application in the right role. The rather pompous airs of another of the Quinault, Jean Baptiste-Maurice, can make an excellent stage philosopher, just as a number of his cultivated gestures marvellously morph into the cruelty and rage of a tyrant or the secret ambition and evil of the villain.

This leads to a final consideration. Apart from the attitudes and characteristics, good or bad, which an actor can assimilate into his individual style, there exist actorly predispositions in favour of or against certain character-types. Cathérine Quinault inherited Lecouvreur’s roles and possesses undeniable gifts, but – d’Aigueberre notes – she has none of her temperament, stature or vocal range necessary for the violence of great passion. Grandval, completely at home with the transports of a lover, is ill-at-ease in the role of a headstrong and powerful hero such as Achilles: ‘his threats make no impression on us, his oaths fail to reassure, or his fury to terrify’. Balicourt, on the other hand, is perfect in the roles requiring fury, such as Medea, while her gestures, vocal range and vehemence make her unsuited to the ‘sweet and tranquil’ passions. A further example is Duchemin, the ‘very image’ of a trader or fat banker but most definitely out of place in tragic roles, or Legrand, a fine actor with a pleasing and sonorous voice and always well-rehearsed and perceptive but totally unsuited, on account of his stature, for major roles. And so on.

All this, d’Aigueberre concludes, explains the difficulty behind perfect casting. Often it is actorly caprice or self-importance which gets in the way of perfect casting, but there are other factors. Even when natural aptitudes are right they need honing and perfecting: the actor must work at eliminating the defects, even minimal, which erode the excellence of other gifts. This is where criticism comes into its own, as attentive and expert scrutiny. Its role is not so much to bring home to the public faults it had probably already spotted, or to pillory clearly incompetent actors, but to recognize the less obvious defects, ‘not apparent at first sight’, and to distinguish the good from the less good in the performances of actors who are not without merit.

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Cibber’s Autobiography and Garrick’s and Foote’s Essays

After its beginnings in d’Aigueberre’s Lettre, theatre criticism developed steadily in the following years and after 1730 attention to the actor’s performance became an increasingly important component in theatre culture. In France, at the end of his fundamental Recherches sur les théâtres de France, depuis l’année onze cent soixante-un, jusques à présent, Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps saw fit to draw up a list of actors, complete with short biographies and notes on their acting method. In Britain, the deaths of three eminent stage personalities, Anne Oldfield, Robert Wilks and Barton Booth, occasioned the publication

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19 See ibid., pp. 45-46.
20 See ibid., pp. 53-54.
21 Ibid., pp. 55-57 and pp. 61-62.
22 Ibid., pp. 58-60.
23 Ibid., pp. 64-65 and pp. 70-71.
of a number of biographies with comments on their performances; at the same time the
general interest of the periodic press in acting styles, techniques and individual
performances was becoming increasingly more evident. In October 1732, writing in the
Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer, Thomas Cooke described the qualities of the era’s greatest
stage presences. In March 1733 The Grub-Street Journal, the most widely-read periodical,
included praise for the leading lady, Jenny Johnson Cibber, in its review of Charles
Johnson’s Caelia, afterwards analyzing those of James Quin and Colley Cibber. It returned
to Cibber in 1736, locking horns with Aaron Hill and William Popple’s periodical The
Prompter. At the end of the same year The Prompter was at variance with the Daily Journal over
the merits of Susannah Cibber and Kitty Clive in John Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera. At the end
of the 1740s it was another periodical, The Champion, which published one of the most
important analyses of Garrick’s acting at a year from his London debut on the stage of
Goodman’s Fields.

The new critical sensibility was not of course confined to the pages of the periodicals. In
the History of the English Stage, from the Restauration to the Present Time by William Oldys, in
1741, long passages of acting theory taken from Gildon’s Life of Betterton were accompanied
by a selection of contemporary actors, with biographical summaries and assessments of
their interpretations. It was, however, above all the autobiography of Colley Cibber,
whose career on the Drury Lane stage spends more than four decades, from 1690 to 1733,
which consciously and conscientiously developed the practice of theatre reviewing. In the
pages dedicated to the work of his colleagues, Cibber expounded closely-argued theoretical
reflections with a series of references, examples and concrete evaluations which were the
result of the appraisal of a professional eye. His general considerations on the use of the
voice were then used to define the precise excellence of Betterton’s art, the stylistic
characteristics of Elizabeth Barry and Anne Oldfield, and the qualities and limitations of
Booth and Wilks; while the features of simple and natural acting served as benchmark


26 See Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer, no. 7 (October, 1732).

27 See Grub-Street Journal, March 8, 1734; October 31, 1734; and November 7, 1734.


29 See The Champion, no. 455 (October, 1742).

30 William Oldys and Edmund Curll, The History of the English Stage, from the Restauration to the Present Time. Including the Lives, Characters and Amours, of the most eminent Actors and Actresses. With Instructions for Public Speaking; wherein the Action and Utterance of the Bar, Stage, and Pulpit are distinctly considered. By Mr. Thomas Betterton. Adorned with Cuts, London, E. Curll, 1741. Containing information and appraisals of the most eminent actors of the period, it ends with some eighty pages dedicated to Anna Oldfield, Memoirs of Mrs. Anne Oldfield, an abbreviated version of the text by William Egerton (possibly a pseudonym of Curll), Faithful Memoirs of the Life, Amours and Performances of Mrs. Anne Oldfield.

against which to praise the skills of James Nokes, to assess the performances of Anthony Leigh and Cave Underhill, to celebrate Mary Betterton, to describe the style of Elinor Leigh, Charlotte Butler and Anne Bracegirdle, and so on.32

The figure of Betterton soon emerges as the central model in this growing body of theoretical reflections and critical observations, bringing into focus the most vital of the talents required onstage: the ability to create the character and to render it in a form beyond that of painting or literature:

*The most that a Vandyke can arrive at, is to make his Portraits of great Persons seem to think; a Shakespeare goes farther yet, and tells you what his Pictures thought; a Betterton steps beyond 'em both, and calls them from the Grave, to breathe, and be themselves again, in Feature, Speech, and Motion.33*

This ability, as it emerges in the Cibber’s comments on Edward Kynaston, William Montfort and his wife Susannah Montfort, is that of ‘transformation’ into the figure to be represented.34 And here there arises the problem of negative characters. Enacting them is particularly complicated, as illustrated by the case of Samuel Sandford, a short, somewhat stooping actor who therefore was the iconic ideal for malign and degenerate characters. Cibber deals with this complexity very acutely, underlining the skill necessary to earn the applause of the audience which is automatically more inclined to approve the creation of good characters, actually reading the successful enactment of evil as a quasi-endorsement of vice and immorality on the actor’s part.35

The personality of the interpreter, his ability to morph into the most diverse figures, and the human essence of the character thus enter into a complex equilibrium which determines the final plausibility of the performance; and here the actor’s private behaviour, or at least the public’s perception of it, inevitably weighs in the balance of the effect produced on the spectators. Cibber writes that he had seen expressions ‘of the most tender sentiment of love’ provoke laughter in spectators as they compared them with the actual private life of the actor impersonating them.36

The impersonation of the character clearly, however, extends beyond the actor’s transformation into the figure represented. It also requires an expression of the character’s feelings experienced in the course of the play, as elicited by the script. This called for extreme precision, as recognized by Richard Estcourt, an excellent actor with an extraordinary power of mimicry who, in his own copy of the script, would jot down ‘the true spirit of the humour’ of the character in correspondence with every speech, together with ‘voice, look, gesture’ to be adopted. Even this was not enough. At the end the effect onstage would still be ‘languid and unafffecting’.37 For full effect of pause, movement and expression, it was necessary to go to exemplary scenes of Betterton’s, such as Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost, analyzed by Cibber with awed admiration.38

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32 See ibid., pp. 82-90, pp. 93-94 and pp. 97-98.
33 Ibid., p. 63.
34 See ibid., pp. 73-74, pp. 75-76 and pp. 94-95.
36 Ibid., p. 138.
37 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
38 See ibid., pp. 60-61.
opinion, ‘the Talents’ that will ‘infallibly form an actor’ are ‘one of Nature’s Secrets’ and they alone can confer the ‘genius’ producing achieved art on stage.39

Cibber’s observations were reprised some years later by Anthony Aston, with the aim of revising the evaluations and adding details of actors’ performances of the period.40 In the meantime theatre reviewing was developing, concentrating above all on analyses of the characters’ psychological situation and the actors’ solutions. A welter of observations, criticisms and judgments were expounded with that lingering over minute detail which was to characterize the line of attack, defense and general evaluation of performances in English theatre reviews, in a debating climate which was always intense and polemical and often humorous and ironic.

In 1744 Garrick took on the role of Macbeth and, pre-empting possibly negative criticism given that his physique was not exactly du rôle, and therefore unsuited, by traditional canons, to a tragic hero, published a short, anonymous piece entitled An Essay on Acting. Writing as a pedantic and presumptuous reviewer, out to condemn ‘a certain fashionable faulty actor’, Garrick took up the more clichéd attacks that had been levelled at him before going on to a ‘short criticism’ of his interpretation of Macbeth. The first part is a provocatively meticulous study of two scenes, one comic and one tragic: the breaking of a urinal by Abel Drugger, a character in Ben Jonson’s Alchemist which Garrick had played the previous year, and Macbeth’s murder of Duncan. The “critic”’s method is exemplary. A minutely detailed inventory is given of the two characters’ internal reactions to his very different situation and the expressive means to be adopted onstage:

When Aber Drugger has broke the Urinal, he is mentally absorb’d with the different Ideas of the invaluable Price of the Urinal, and the Punishment that may be inflicted in Consequence of a Curiosity, no way appertaining or belonging to the Business he came about […] His Eyes must be revers’d from the Object he is most intimidated with, and by dropping his Lip at the some Time to the Object, it throws a tr embling Languor upon every Muscle; and by declining the right Part of the Head towards the Urinal, it casts the most comic Terror and Shame over all the upper Part of the Body, that can be imagin’d, and to make the lower Part equally ridiculous his Toes must be inverted front the Heel, and by holding his Breath he will unavoidably give himself a Tremor in the Knees

Now to Macbeth. When the Murder of Duncan is committed, from an immediate Consciousness of the Fact, his Ambition is ingulph’d at that Instant, by the Horror of the Deed; his Faculties are intensely riveted to the Murder-alone […] He should, at that Time, be a moving Statue, or indeed a petrifi’d Man; his Eyes must Speak, and his Tongue be metaphorically Silent […] his Attitudes must be quick and permanent; his Voice articulately trembling, and confusedly intelligible; the Murderer should be seen in every Limb, and yet every Member, at that Instant, should seem separated from his Body, and his Body from his Soul

Abel Dragger is then abandoned, in the second half of the essay, for an identical analysis of further scenes from Macbeth, directives as to how to act them and criticism of Garrick’s hypothetical mistakes.

Three years later Samuel Foote, an actor of some standing on the English stage of the time, reviewed the performances of four famous colleagues: Garrick as Lear, Quin and

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39 Ibid., p. 69.
42 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
Spranger Barry as Othello, and Macklin as Iago. This time the intention is wholly serious, with not a trace of parody or spoof. Foote’s eye is particularly sharp and his close textual analysis precise and perceptive. The procedure, however, is identical: after a short introduction to the various passions, he concludes that they are ‘so very different in different Men’, and presented in ‘so complicated and mixed’ a fashion as to thwart any exhaustive account of their interconnections or effects. He gives a scene-by-scene analysis of the characters’ inner attitudes, the complicated meshing of passions and states of mind, the means of expression to be adopted and the different actors’ solutions. His criticism of Garrick, for example, in the madness scene in King Lear (act IV) is as follows:

How then is this mad Monarch to be employed in picking Straws, and boyish Trifling, or in Actions more a-propos, more suitable to his imaginary Dignity, such as frequent Musings, with the Finger on the Brow, as if the Welfare of Kingdoms depended on his Cure […] if my Advice might be taken, every Motion, every Look, should express an Extravagance of State and Majesty; and when mad Tom is consulted as a learned Theban Lear should not […] pull his Rags, play with his Straws, or betray the least Mark of his knowing the real Man; but with great Solemnity, a contracted Brow, one Hand on Edgar’s Shoulder, his Finger on his Breast, or some Action that should denote Superiority, seem to consult him on a knotty Point, but no Sign of Equality, no Familiarity.44

Needless to say, Foote’s essay and comments on his colleagues did not pass unnoticed. Significantly, however, even the most polemical responses argued in identical procedural terms, based on a careful close-reading, with possibly a comment on the version to follow; a definition of the passions and observations on the actor’s gestures and expressions, evaluating if and how he managed to express them in relation to character and situation. All this was predicated on the principle which for the English contemporary stage was obvious and unquestionable: that the actor’s basic task is the perfect expression of the passions, to be extrapolated with maximum precision from a careful close-reading of the script. This is solemnly reiterated by Macklin in his opening to The Art and Duty of an Actor, an essay intended to introduce a series of lectures on the theatre, classical and modern, on Shakespeare’s plays and on acting, to be held at the British Inquisition, a sort of academy Macklin had founded in London in 1754.

It is the duty of an Actor always to know the Passion and the Humour of each Character so correctly, so intimately, and (if you will allow the expression) to feel it so enthusiastically, as to be able to define and describe it as a Philosopher; to give its operations on the looks, tones, and gestures of general nature, as it is ranked in classes of characters; and to mould all this knowledge, mental and corporeal, to the characteristic that the poet has given to the Character.46

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44 Ibid., pp. 20-21.
45 For reactions to Foote’s essay see [T. J.], A Letter of Compliment To the ingenious Author of a Treatise on the Passions, So far as they regard the Stage; With a critical Enquiry into the Theatrical Merit of Mr. G--k, Mr. Q---n, and Mr. B--N, & c. with some further Remarks on Mr. M--N. and a few Hints On our Modern Actresses, particularly Mrs. C---R and Mrs. P--D., London, C. Corbertt, 1747; and An Examen of the New Comedy, Call’d The Suspicious Husband. With Some Observations upon our Dramatick Poetry and Authors; To which is added, A Word of Advice to Mr. G--rk; and a Piece of Secret History, London, J. Roberts, London, 1747. For details as to the Shakespeare text used, see the Examen, particularly p. 26 and pp. 35-37.
46 Charles Macklin, The Art and Duty of an Actor, in James Thomas Kirkman, Memoirs of the Life of Charles Macklin, I, pp. 362-365. Macklin had expounded his own theory of acting in The Science of Acting, the manuscript of which was lost in a shipwreck in 1771. See also pp. 46-47 in the second volume.
Aaron Hill

The same conception lies behind the writings of Aaron Hill – poet, man of letters, journalist, playwright, director of Drury Lane, later manager of the Opera House, and the scholar responsible for the most cogent attempt at theorizing a system of acting in the 1730s and 1740s. His reflections are to be found in a collection of letters; articles published in The Prompter, a periodical co-founded with William Popple, which came out between 1734 and 1736; a first version of ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, a twenty-line poem on the subject of acting which appeared in The Prompter (December, 1735); a second The Actor’s Epitome, this time of eighty lines and uncertain date; The Art of Acting from 1746, and lastly, unfinished, An Essay on the Art of Acting published posthumously in 1753.47

A number of Hill’s points repeat long-founded convictions such as the actor’s need for grace and elegance of movement and expression but, at the same time, the need to violate formal prescriptions when the plausibility of the action requires it.48 He also reiterates the need for the actor to keep eyes and attention trained on the action and not on the audience,49 and to carry on acting, remaining within his stage character, even when he has no lines to speak and is simply silent.50 The example of a painting, particularly of historical subjects, is again reprinted to illustrate the proper disposition of the actors onstage, in a unified ensemble (‘one living group of figures’), each with his own expressive attitude ‘which would charm and animate the world by the force of passion and propriety’.51 More pondered attention is given to the length of pauses in speaking in accordance with vocal force, the meaning to give to lines, the overall expressive force of words accompanied by gestures, and the time to be accorded the mental processes of the actor and spectator.52

All these technical observations, however, are secondary to a general system which leads to a singular result, using the more radical instances of emotionalism within the precepts of a rigorously-defined code of expression. Hill’s observations are predicated on a clearly emotionalist conviction. The actor, he was already declaring in 1716, should forget himself and the audience, and put on both the character’s costume and its ‘nature’: the point is not to ‘act’ but to ‘really be’ the person he is representing.53 Later on he criticized those actors who attempt to reproduce the marks of the different passions on their faces by following painting manuals, which can only produce grotesques, ‘distorting their faces into a scholastic and technical confusion between the ridiculous and the horrible’.54 Even the expressive codes of the ancient oratorical tradition can be of no assistance. Actors are quite

48 See Aaron Hill, ‘The Actor’s Epitome’, The Prompter, no. 113 (December 9, 1735), vv. 1-12; and no. 64 (June 20, 1735), on the prohibition on lifting the arms above eye-level; no. 92 (September 26, 1735) on scenes in which the voice has to be ‘sharp and impatient’, the expression ‘disordered’, the action ‘precipitate and turbulent’; no. 95 (October 7, 1735), for the debate on the title role in King Lear (II, 4).
49 See Aaron Hill, Letter to Samuel Stephens (October 23, 1734), in The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, I, pp. 219-220.
50 See The Prompter, no. 62 (June 13, 1735).
51 The Prompter, no. 556 (May 23, 1735).
52 See Aaron Hill, Letter to Samuel Stephens (October 23, 1734), p. 219; The Prompter, no. 113 (December 9, 1735); and Aaron Hill, An Essay on the Art of Acting, in The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, IV, pp. 367-368.
54 The Prompter, no. 118 (December 26, 1735).
wrong if ‘instead of examining nature, they look into Quintilian’, who was establishing norms for pleading in the tribunal, and not for acting on stage.\(^{55}\)

Acting had to follow a completely ‘natural’ procedure, which Hill expounds in his *Essay on the Art of Acting*, taking as an example lines from Torrismond, the protagonist of Dryden’s *The Spanish Fryar*. In reciting them the actor was ‘to endeavour the effacement of all note or image of himself and forcibly bind down his fancy to suppose, that he is, really, Torrismond – that he is in love with Leonora, and has been bless’d, beyond his hope, by her kind declaration, in his favour’. To apply this, however, Hill realistically recognizes, is ‘most difficult’.\(^{56}\) Hence the need of ‘an easy and practical theory’ which was also universally valid, to give the actor all possible help.

The actor’s task is to ‘represent, to the eyes and ears of an audience, the whole diversity of passions whereby human life is distinguished’, requiring both a knowledge of these passions and ‘a power to put on, at will, the marks and colours which distinguish them’. But, Hill stresses, these marks are spontaneously sparked by inner processes which must be immediately retrievable as an automatic stimulus-response method. To externalise a passion in visible, physical form, it is enough to ‘recollect’ by means of a ‘strong and decisive’ imagination.

Let a man, for instance, recollect some idea of sorrow, his eye will, in a moment, catch the dimness of melancholy, his muscles will relax into languor, and his whole frame of body sympathetically unbend itself into a remiss and inanimate lassitude.\(^{57}\)

This entails a completely natural four-part process, Hill explains: the ‘strong idea’ of the passion is conjured through the imagination, then impressed on the face, before descending into the bodily muscles, at which point the exact expression of look, air, voice and action proper to the passion is produced.\(^{58}\) Quintilian’s procedure here becomes a mechanical operation in which spontaneity and expressive naturalness are transformed into a chain of transmission which is rigidly predetermined at each step.\(^{59}\) Hesitation, variation and uncategorised reactions are virtually impossible. Once the imagination has adequately conceived a ‘strong idea’ of sadness, an actor would be simply unable to produce an arrogant tone of voice because ‘the modification of his muscles has affected the organs of the speech’, so that whatever words are pronounced ‘his voice shall sound nothing but tenderness’.\(^{60}\) If the process is correctly set up, any error is out of the question and the exact and effective command of expressions, in principle, guaranteed; the actor has only to recognize the passions as they appear in his lines, and carefully distinguish subtle, moment-by-moment changes.\(^{61}\)

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55 *The Prompter*, no. 64 (June 20, 1735).
57 *The Prompter*, no. 66 (June 27, 1735).
58 See *The Prompter*, no. 118 (December 26, 1735); and Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting*, p. 356.
60 *The Prompter*, no. 66 (June 27, 1735).
61 Hill had assigned his nephew, neither the most experienced nor the most gifted of actors, the part of Osman in his tragedy *Zara*, staged at Drury Lane in January 1836. For all his uncle’s coaching the results were less than exhilarating and after the first night the would-be actor declined the role, which was read by a series of stand-ins until a new actor could learn it. For accounts of the young actor’s performance see the *London Daily Advertiser*, January 14, 1736; *The Prompter*, no. 129 (February 3, 1736) and no. 130 (February 6, 1936); and the *Grub-Street Journal*, April 1, 1736 and September 9, 1936.
Indispensable at this point is a systematic table of the passions, which Hill is at pains to provide, illustrating them and listing their components in various of his writings. The Prompter explains that there are six main dramatic passions which can be ‘strongly expressed’: joy, sorrow, fear, scorn, anger and amazement, each with its own expressive signature. There follows a series of ‘auxiliary’ passions such as jealousy, revenge, love and pity, produced through a combination of the six main ones. Jealousy, for example, is a mixture of fear, scorn and anger; love combines joy tempered by fear, etc.62

Subsequently, shame is added in the eighty lines of The Actor’s Epitome and finally, in An Essay on the Art of Acting, the dramatic passions become ten: joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder and love, all principal passions, each with its own set of distinctive characteristics.63 The expression of joy, for example, requires the forehead to be ‘open and raised, his eyes smiling, his neck stretched and erect, his breast inflated and majestically backed’.64 The characteristics of all ten passions and derivatives are painstakingly described in the ‘applications’ which constitute the body of the Essay.

What re-emerges, then, is the rather unwieldy presence of a pre-established expressive code to be learnt by heart. Certainly, the basic principle of acting remains the initial act of imagination: no actor wishing to express joy, Hill admonishes, must ‘upon any account’ attempt ‘the utterance of one single word till he has first compelled his fancy to conceive an idea of joy’.65 Command of the code, however, is necessary for the outcome. Once his imagination had done its job and he assumed the required expression, ‘naturally’, the actor should stand in front of a mirror. If the position and aspect of the forehead, neck, chest, arms and the rest of the body fail to correspond to expectation, then ‘he has too faintly conceived the impression’.66

Moreover, knowledge of the code ends up by influencing the inner workings of the expressive process, greatly to the actor’s benefit. The attitude assumed externally, Hill writes in a letter of 1733, not only influences the emotive reactions of the audience, but is a two-way process, and ‘actually warm[s] the player himself, into a real feeling of the passions he is acting’.67 While he fails to draw all the possible conclusions from this, Hill formulates some useful advice to obviate a possible lack of the imagination. When this is not sufficiently ‘ductile’ to conjure up a strong impression, the actor may help his defective idea, ‘by annexing, at once, the look to the idea, in the very instant, while he is bracing his nerves into springiness: for so, the image, the look, and the muscles, all concurring, at once, to the purpose, their effect will be the same, as if each had succeeded another, progressively’.68

All the more reason, then, for the actor to be able to reproduce the different passions ‘in cold blood’ as it were, with the assistance, again, of practice and a mirror. Even the best of actors should effect a mirror test at least once, Hill writes in a letter to Garrick, and should practise ‘till he has attain’d the habit, by ten great changes in his brow and muscles, to call out upon a moment’s warning, any picture of the passions’.69

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62 The Prompter, no. 66 (June 27, 1735).
63 Aaron Hill, An Essay on the Art of Acting, p. 357.
64 Ibid., pp. 360-361.
65 Ibid., p. 359.
66 Ibid., pp. 359-360.
So far so feasible: but the actor must also be careful not to possess over-delicate muscles and facial features, which an audience could hardly perceive at a distance, or dark eyes, the varied expressions of which would similarly not project from far-off in the candlelight. However with marked features, robust muscles and blue or brown eyes, the actor should have no problem properly rendering the passions his part demands – as long, of course, as he is able to distinguish them in the first place and memorize them faultlessly. Here, too, Hill has a method. His advice to Garrick was to mark the script in red and black beside his lines, put a progressive number in the margin, then transfer the numbers into a notebook, with related passions, poses, pauses and various aspects of delivery generally from which he could recreate the performance thereafter.

In the case of other actors Hill was happy to offer the service personally. In 1733 he offered the leading man of John Banks’s *The Unhappy Favorite* help with the script by inserting a series slips listing all required passions clearly marked, an offer he repeated for *Hamlet.* Susannah Cibber was apparently coached in the same way for her leading role in Hill’s *Zara,* staged at Drury Lane in February 1736.

In short, then, armed with a script marked passion by passion in red and black; trained in the stimulus-response mechanism linking the imagination with the facial and bodily muscles, the outcome of which has been duly verified in a mirror; groomed to produce, at the drop of a hat, the ten movements of the facial muscles which would elicit the required expression, and endowed with well-defined features, including the requisite eye-colour, clearly visible from the back rows, the actor is finally ready to tread the boards with some hope of success. The system is hardly one to leave space for creativity. Paradoxically, however, it was elaborated as a short-cut to the same results as those produced by the more direct method of the emotionalist acting technique.

**Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s Treatise**

The emotionalist theory reached full expression in mid-century in the work of Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, journalist, playwright and chief editor of the *Mercure de France,* his *Le Comédien,* published in 1747, was destined to become a compulsory touchstone in the whole European debate on the art of the stage.

The treatise had been preannounced by the publication of its *Préface* in the *Mercure* (October, 1745). The following issue contained the *Introduction,* the first part of the first book (*Des principaux avantages que les Comédiens doivent tenir de la Nature*) and the two chapters which were indicated as the third chapter of book one and the second of book two. When the work was finally published in November 1747, however, the paper was at pains to underline that the previously published excerpts had been considerably revised.

The treatise was in two parts, besides the *Préface* and *Introduction,* the first divided into two books (thirteen chapters in all and two *Réflexions* in appendix to the first book) and the second into nineteen chapters, the last acting as conclusion. A second, expanded edition

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70 See *The Prompter,* no. 66 (June 27, 1735).
came out in 1749, with an *Avertissement de l'Auteur*, three new chapters and a totally revised conclusion.73

Riccoboni’s influence is very evident. It is improbable that Rémont de Sainte-Albine actually knew *L’arte rappresentativa*, but they share a number of issues. Like Riccoboni he deplores the lack of a theory of acting, underlines the need for one, offers his own text as the first tentative but bold attempt, ignores any link with oratory, avoids any mention of gestures and expressions defined by a pre-established code, puts emotional empathy at the centre of interpretation, and envisages technique for solving specific problems and fine-honing details of expression. In parallel with Riccoboni’s conceptual substructure operate the notions expounded by d’Aigueberre on the subject, *esprit*, *feu* and *sentiment*, which Rémont de Sainte-Albine discusses at the very beginning of his treatise before treating a series of questions which are now the base-line of the critical tradition, such as the differences between comic and tragic acting, or exploiting an actor’s specific gifts when casting.

The theory of acting expounded in *Le Comédien* follows d’Aigueberre’s line in considering it a typically intellectual discipline, at some remove from the actors’ practical experience and any immediate accounts they might give. It is far from the case, Rémont de Sainte-Albine states, that to write about an art one should be able to practise it; and then, an actor’s comments on his trade are suspect to say the least: few of them would claim the need for any quality they themselves did not happen to possess.74 What the treatise claims to be is a study of the qualities required for acting, with a distinction between ‘natural’ or innate qualities and technical skills or ‘tools’ to be acquired through study and practice. Both are indispensable: only nature can provide the raw materials of an actor, while only art can develop and polish them.75

The natural qualities include both outer and inner gifts. The former concern above all voice and appearance, which have to suit the character and have marked features visible from a distance.76 Although the character is always to be conceived as an ideal figure, never identical to any actual human, the actor must possess characteristics which are more or less compatible with the image to be portrayed.77 The voice, then, for example, must be variously strong, weak, light, or flexible according to the part played, while an impressive appearance will better suit tragic heroes, an attractive and personable appearance the part of a lover, etc. In general no actor should play a character not suiting his own physiognomy.78

This inevitably feeds into the question of older actors and actresses who are still obstinately attached to roles of adolescents. Rémont de Sainte-Albine admits that the results can be embarrassing but fails to condemn it outright, explaining that youthfulness

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75 Ibid., p. 16.

76 See ibid., pp. 147-148.

77 See ibid., pp. 52-63 and p. 121.

can be expressed in other ways than appearance alone, and that a truly gifted actor can,
within limits, overcome the age-limit with results that can be more than adequate:

It is not sufficient to present Iphigenia devoid of wrinkles and Britannicus devoid of grey hairs.
The princess and prince must be exhibited to us with all the charms of youth. Actors who are
older than their characters are able to produce a yet more pleasing effect by uniting the art of
acting well their parts with that of eliminating the difference in age. And the more shall we
appreciate them, since they procure for us the pleasure of a double illusion.79

The character as projected, then, is a construction of the actor’s physical appearance
combined with his behaviour, gestures and bodily movements in performance: all forms of
expression able to condition audience perception of the actor’s natural traits.

Essential to the expressive forms which comprise the projection of a character however
are inner qualities, equally innate and natural. First among these is the ability to fully
penetrate the work. The actor, Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes, must of course
completely understand the script; but beyond this, he must grasp the requirements and full
potential of its staging. He must make the script tell him when the acting should become
impassioned, to what degree, the indispensable nuances and shifts of tempo, the points
where one state of mind morphs into another (fear into anger, for example), and of course
the variations in the character’s tone and action in relation to the changing scene-by-scene
situation. Hence the requirement for natural esprit, which directs the performance as ‘a
pilot’ guides ‘a ship’. Experience is not enough: the most expert actor, if he lacks esprit,
shipwrecks on the rocks of error and contradiction.80

Once the actor has touched the nerve of the part, with the help of esprit, another gift is
then required to enact it: sentiment, i.e. the ‘ability to feel in one’s own soul the passions to
which man is susceptible’, associated with the gift of ‘moving rapidly from one passion to
the next’. In the course of the same play – or even of the same scene – the actor is obliged
to act out ‘an infinity of impressions’, ‘the one immediately expelling the other, to be
expelled in its turn by a third’; and unless the actor actually feels the emotion, he can never
offer more than an ‘imperfect’ image. ‘Art’, Rémond de Sainte-Albine sentences, is never
able to replace sentiment. Without this, all the actor’s other gifts are in vain and he ‘remains
as detached from his character as is the mask from the face’.81 The passions should be
present and ‘real’ in his soul: the retrieved memory alone will never suffice.

The memory of past impressions is not enough to render them again to us […] To produce
this effect, it is necessary that the objects appear to us as they then were, yet we have not the
same eyes still.82

The actor’s sentiment remains inert, however, unless animated by feu, this inner energy
which galvanizes the expressive potential of the emotive condition. Passion is
indispensable, naturally, but constitutes an inner state which is effectively externalized only

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79 Ibid., pp. 125-126. This is an ability possessed more by actresses than actors, Rémond de Sainte-Albine
observes: an actress towards the end of her career can still create the impression of a young girl on stage (p.
127). This should never be abused, he adds: however gifted, no actor/actress is completely acceptable when
the gap between their face and the age of the character is too wide (see also pp. 74-77 and pp. 126-127).
80 Ibid., pp. 21-27.
81 Ibid., pp. 32-36.
82 Ibid., p. 108.
by the actor’s living "feu. ‘Feu’, writes Rémont de Sainte-Albine, ‘is for sentiment what a draft is for a flame’.83

These three essential inner qualities, esprit, sentiment and feu, correspond of course to the cardinal notions d’Aigueberre applies to analyze an actor’s performance. Le Comédien however is very specific, using them as technical terms and removing the ambiguity which in d’Aigueberre seems still to be linking esprit to the sometimes stultifying efforts of intellectual exercize, and feu to a kind of vivacity unsuited to the part. For Rémont de Sainte-Albine, on the other hand, they constitute gifts which are absolute, essential and specific components of acting; they can never come into conflict or be wrongly applied. Thus unlike d’Aigueberre, he maintains that the use of esprit can never be ‘excessive’, and potentially misleading, nor feu so intense as to reduce the actor’s ability to ‘feel’. As long as feu is not confused with expressive ‘vehemence’ and agitation producing unseemly excess, but is properly interpreted as energy creating impressions which are ‘immediate’ and ‘vital’, then an actor can never be accused of having too much, Rémont de Sainte-Albine observes, since ‘the impression can never be too immediate, nor too vital’.84

The performance is effective, then, when the three interior gifts, all equally necessary and perfectly compatible, converge. From this point of view sentiment has no special status, a fact which might undermine the reading of Le Comédien as the fundamental emotionalist text, although two famous pronouncements by Rémont de Saite-Albine are adduced in support of it: ‘art can never replace sentiment’ and ‘when an actor is devoid of such quality all other gifts of nature and of application are for him as nothing’.85 These, however, were general, canonical observations of the period and contain nothing which is specifically emotionalist.

Le Comédien’s emotionalist slant emerges in other ways, most significantly in two passages emphasizing the role of sentiment. It is by actually experiencing the passions to be expressed, Rémont de Sainte-Albine explains, that the actor finds the ‘measure’ to enable him to avoid excess.

It is necessary that the passions be depicted vividly on the face of the actor. Yet must they not be distorted […] We may at least and with reason demand that anger be not represented by convulsions, or affliction made to seem fearful instead of interesting. These errors are habitually incurred when we are not truly irritated or moved as the situation or the character requires. Do you strongly feel any one of these impressions? They will show effortlessly in your eyes.86

This empathy or involvement then not only spontaneously models the actor’s features, but ensures that expressions are correctly rendered onstage, with the right degree of intensity. In a second passage, reflecting on the actor’s need for esprit, and considering the cases of famous actors who instead appeared to possess only ‘instinct and sentiment’, Rémont de Sainte-Albine concedes that ‘in extremely sensitive souls, sentiment can at times become esprit’.87 And although this only happens in extreme cases, sentiment at its maximum potential takes over the functions normally supplied by another essential acting

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83 Ibid., p. 47.
85 Pierre Rémont de Sainte-Albine, Le Comédien, p. 32.
86 Ibid., pp. 148-149.
component. An actor deficient in sentiment, however much esprit he may possess, can never produce a satisfactory performance, although the opposite is not true.

The two passages, certainly, do no more than hint at Le Comédien's emotionalism, which emerges far more directly in a very different way, constituting the turning-point in the development of emotionalism and laying the foundations for the entire modern conception of acting. Until Rémont de Sainte-Albine, emphasis had essentially been on the correspondence between the actor's external features – physiognomy, carriage, gestures and movements – and the figure of the character, the actions to be performed and the expressions to be assumed. Character typology rigorously dictated the physical requisites of the actor and corresponding behaviour: tragic characters required imposing and dignified actors, their movements intense and solemn; lovers in comedies required graceful and pleasing interpreters, etc. What Rémont de Sainte-Albine does is to apply the same principle to the inner actor, which must correspond to the inner nature of the character: it is this which constitutes the essential and revolutionary principle of Le Comédien. The metamorphosis demanded of the actor to turn himself into the character no longer regards appearance alone, but the whole of his inner world. Two consequences derive, in part contradictory. On the one hand, where once actors like Garrick were appreciated for being able to take on the somatic and behavioral features of the character to such extent as to be unrecognisable, they were now required to transform their inner selves and reconfigure all their natural predispositions. The actor must have the gift of 'bending' their nature, transforming it unresistingly, like 'melted wax', into very different characters and personalities. If you are unable to undergo these metamorphoses', Rémont de Sainte-Albine warns, 'do not venture onto the stage'.88 On the other hand, the actor's psychological inclinations can be a significant help in interpreting particular character-types, just as his physical features, according to traditional doctrine, may be particularly suited to the external figure of a king but not a confidante, a mischievous maid rather than a sage widow, etc. To play a tragic hero the actor must possess 'an elevated soul',89 and only those 'born to love' can play the role of lovers,90 while to play a comic part the actor must be naturally predisposed to 'gaiety of temper': it would be too great a risk for an actor 'born serious of character'.91

This opens up a new exploration of the world of the passions and their enactment. Rémont de Sainte-Albine starts from the habitual binary opposition of tragedy and comedy. Tragedy requires a restricted range of passions:

The majesty of tragedy allows [the actor] to concern himself only with weighty actions, so that he is constantly obliged to furnish the forces most able to enact them. Principal of these are love, hate, and ambition. Thus works of tragedy offer little beyond tender lovers who are like to bathe with tears the road leading to the end of their ills; generous avengers who seek to appease parental hands or restore liberty to their homelands [...] famous criminals who trample over the most sacred duties to ascend a throne from which they in their turn will soon precipitate.92

88 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
89 Ibid., p. 85 and p. 255.
90 Ibid., p. 100.
91 Ibid., p. 79 and p. 82.
92 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
These passions are limited not only in number but in nature, and tend to conform to the expectations of tragedy by becoming generally ‘violent and melancholy’. The tragic paradigm, then, requires of the actor not so much the representation of varied states of mind as the ability to immerse himself with particular force and intensity in the feeling to be expressed. The intensity of this empathy elicits a like intensity in the audience: it is in interpreting tragedy that actors are turned into ‘sovereigns who dominate our souls as absolute lords’.

This is not the only aspect to condition audience-response however, which also depends on the quality of the passion manifested. The most contagious is sadness, which operates like ‘an endemic disease, the progress of which is as rapid as it is astonishing’. Other passions are less effective. We remain perfectly untroubled, Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes, when observing anger and serious before expressions of great joy.

The study of character-identification follows two parameters then: the intensity of the actor’s empathy and the properties of the passion expressed. The situation becomes more complex in the case of comedy. Here the actor’s natural inclinations are paramount; not only must he possess ‘gaiety of temper’ but with an extrovert’s wish to enjoy himself and be applauded.

When an actor plays a comic character without enjoying himself, he has the air of a mercenary who plies the trade of actor for lack of other resources. Conversely, when he shares the enjoyment of his audience, he is almost always certain to please. Gaiety is the true Apollo of the comic actor.

With this premise as ground rule, the comic actor must also be able to produce a far greater variety of emotions, if not with the intensity required of the tragic actor, certainly with considerably more speed, often changing his state of mind from one line to the next. There also exists a passion which more than any other demands full and immediate involvement: love. If the other passions reveal themselves in facial expression, ‘creating as it were an alteration of the features’, love ‘confers on the physiognomy a kind of beauty, and corrects its blemishes’. Consequently, it is possible to imitate the other passions ‘in cold blood’, albeit imperfectly, but not the ‘sweet inebriation’ of being in love: so that those acting a love scene must actually feel mutual attraction, if only momentarily. This is the reason why when, as often in comic plots, the male part in a love scene is played by a woman in disguise, the result is uninspiring and ‘insipid’.

**The Functions of Technique**

Having dealt with the actor’s natural qualities, from physical features to the use of esprit, sentiment and feu, the whole second part of *Le Comédien* looks at the technical skills to be developed with training and experience. Luigi Riccoboni had opined that technique became necessary when the actor had to impersonate a character too remote from his own

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93 Ibid., p. 34.
94 See ibid., p. 37.
95 Ibid., p. 92.
96 Ibid., pp. 92-93.
97 Ibid., p. 83.
98 See ibid., pp. 35-36.
99 Ibid., pp. 103-106.
personality, or if his empathy failed and theatrical sensitivity failed him. It was also required for silent acting, in by-play, or when a split reaction was called for, one for the audience and another for the stage partner (fake tears). It also conferred some of the elegance to meet the aesthetic requirements of the part and translate them into theatrical terms, with the requisite traits and expressions.

Similar considerations return in *Le Comédien*. The actor relies on technique for silent actions in by-play, or when more than one attitude is required at the same time:

Divers parts require yet more delicate treatment. These are those in which, while the character is moved by two different interests, the actor must needs exhibit to the audience an attitude at variance with that manifested to the characters acting with him.

For Rémond de Sainte-Albine, too, technique assists with aesthetic requirements: the character must resemble people of his condition, but must resemble them ‘for the better’, which calls for the ability to render ‘nature elegant even in her defects’. An interpretation which restricted itself to an exact imitation of nature would, in any case, appear ‘insipid’, so the actor should slightly over-emphasize some aspects of the character. Another function of technique is to prepare and regulate the different emotional states as they appear throughout the scene, and the passage from one to the other.

Technique in *Le Comédien* also has a very different and considerably more fundamental function however. Technique alone will enable the actor to meet the dramaturgic requirements of his role: suiting the character’s behaviour to ‘his age, his condition, his character, and his situation’ and his actions ‘to what he would or should do in each of the circumstances in which the playwright places him’. It is also through technique that the actor fine-hones the expression of feelings, varying them from character to character:

As actor intending to represent the effects of a passion should never, if acting truthfully, content himself with assuming those movements which the passion elicits equally in all men. It must take that specific form which distinguishes it in the subject whom the interpreter would copy.

Although emotional empathy produces the immediate expression of a sentiment, a feeling, it remains in a general form, Rémond de Sainte-Albine seems to suggest; technique must then differentiate it according to the characteristics of the part. An actress playing Phèdre, maddened by love, can call up and recite the requisite motions of the passion, but only technique can make it Phèdre’s passion, suited to her age, condition and situation, through meticulous study of the various typologies of age, character, condition and nationality:

In a young person love flares out in impetuous transports, but in an old one is like to contain itself with circumspection and greater regard. A high-ranking person will give to his regrets, his laments, his threats, a greater discretion and lesser impetus than an individual devoid of birth

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100 See ibid., p. 143.
101 Ibid., p. 144.
102 Ibid., p. 296 and pp. 301-305.
103 See ibid., pp. 216-226.
105 Ibid., pp. 136-139.
106 Ibid., p. 137.
and upbringing. The affliction at the loss of some treasure will show itself on the face of a miser in more vivid colours than on the face of a generous man, and a proud person will blush in quite other way than a modest person.\footnote{Ibid., p. 138.}

The stage would benefit greatly if actors attempted to study not merely differences of the kind, but those which distinguish the manners of men of different centuries and different countries. Generally, in our theatres Egyptians, Parthians, Germans, all have a French air.\footnote{Ibid., p. 261.}

The premise behind all the applications of technique to character and the passions is critical acumen regarding the text. To exercise his technical skills the actor must first have applied the closest of readings of inferencing, ambiguity and intratextuality, since the text for Rémond de Sainte-Albine is a grid of indications from which other elements can be deduced, all perfectly consistent and necessary, but as yet unexpressed.\footnote{See ibid., p. 142.} Even the most meticulous writer ‘is unable to think of everything’. This can derive from stylistic difficulties: the rhythm and metre may prevent him from ‘saying all that he feels’, and a missing word may come between a large section of the public and the subtlety of an idea, unless the actor ‘helps them to discover it’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 230.} Above all, the truly outstanding interpreter is able to ‘represent sentiments not expressed in the words of the text, yet consonant with the personality and situation of the character’. What ‘is missing from the dialogue’ is thus supplemented ‘by the acting’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 231.} An inflection, or variation in pronunciation of the words in a line, can tease out an aspect which is simply implicit in the text, while meticulously studied actions can complete the characterization of a part, or take it to a higher level of perfection.\footnote{See ibid., p. 232, p. 267 and pp. 270-273.} Rémond de Sainte-Albine gives the following examples.

You must represent a miser? Two candles are burning in the room. Naturally he must extinguish one. You must represent one who would be thought generous? He is forced to make a donation, and happens to drop some coins. He must pick them up and hurriedly put them into his purse.\footnote{Ibid., p. 265.}

The actor’s technique, however, goes beyond assistance in fleshing out and perfecting the work: it must also correct the defects. Technique can shorten an over-long and tedious speech by passing over parts of it very rapidly and then stressing the next lines.\footnote{See ibid., p. 243 and p. 246.} A pompous and over-wrought speech can be reduced to a semblance of greater directness and simplicity if delivered in a subdued, unemphatic tone, and textual inadequacy or redundancy in a particularly intense and tragic scene can be compensated through a studiedly emphatic and significant delivery.\footnote{See ibid., p. 256.} In Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s opinion ‘that error must be marked indeed which cannot be concealed’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 245.}

They are, however, numerous: and at this point the actor’s jurisdiction extends to direct action. Where necessary he may cut, even in the case of classics, such as in a number of Corneille’s plays, which contain obsolete expressions. Better to excise a line, Rémond de
Sainte-Albine opines, than expose it to a public which would find it ridiculous. But more drastic intervention might be called for, requiring the cutting of ‘a great number of empty declamations which make the scene drag, and weary the spectators’ or in some cases even excising a whole character.\textsuperscript{117} The actor’s task might even extend to employing ‘a poet’ to ‘correct several speeches which are faulty but necessary’ and ‘to cut dialogues at points where a character must naturally be interrupted by his interlocutor’.\textsuperscript{118}

For \textit{Le Comédien}, then, acting has taken a further step in being not only totally emancipated from oratory, but a directly creative activity in its own right. An interpreter in a more complete sense of the word, the actor assumes full responsibility for the character, from script to stage: interpreting the text, extrapolating its scenic potential, empathising with the role authentically and precisely, projecting it with direct energy and perfecting it with all the resources of an informed and systematic technique. He must never, Rémond de Sainte-Albine writes, ‘be content to follow the author faithfully’, ‘like an automaton’, or to ‘execute’ rather than ‘create’, but must use all proper means to become ‘an author himself’.\textsuperscript{119}

Study, practice and technique, far from being superfluous in this theoretical framework, are indispensible if the actor is to put this potential creativity onto the stage. What the \textit{Comédien} depicts is actually the activating of several functions resulting from the strict co-ordination of natural qualities and acquired abilities. At the centre is \textit{sentiment}, the dynamic impetus behind the whole acting process, directed by \textit{esprit} and animated by \textit{feu}. Together they draw on this co-ordination of qualities and abilities to perfect the rendering of the character and the final enactment.

\textbf{The Problems of Emotionalism}

A series of issues derive from Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s intricate meshing of capabilities and were destined to underscore the whole debate on emotionalism in following decades. The first was a very obvious objection. Emotionalism bases acting on real feelings, and argues the impossibility of a convincing performance without them. Yet in real life it is far from difficult to successfully communicate a faked emotion, citing the many actresses who fake for their lovers transports they are far from feeling. Rémond de Sainte-Albine demurs with disarming logic. It is \textit{amour propre} which makes the lover complicitous: love, apparently, is in the eye of the beholder, and the eye of a man who wishes to be deceived would be taken in by the most ham performance. In the theatre, on the other hand, the spectator observes the actress with a critical eye and considers it a point of honour not to cede to easy expressions of cheap emotion.\textsuperscript{120}

There also exists the opposite problem: that the actor will project his own feelings instead of empathising with those of the character. This is particularly likely when the character presents conflicting emotions, as happens with Chimène in \textit{Le Cid}, torn between love of the hero and anguish at the death of the father whom he has killed. Here it is easy for the actress to make the mistake of oversimplifying the situation by manifesting only one

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., pp. 243-244.  
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., pp. 244-245.  
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., p. 22 and p. 27.  
\textsuperscript{120} See ibid., pp. 39-40.
state of mind: the one which would come most naturally to her, were she to find herself in the same position.

Hitherto few actresses have made Chimène speak with her own tone of voice. In playing the part, some have privileged over-much love with regard to the natural sentiments, while others have privileged the natural sentiments over love. Chimène in their mouths has been only a woman in love, or not sufficiently so. In accordance with whether, in the selfsame situation, these interpreters would yield more to the passion for their lover, or to the tender respect for the memory of a father killed by that lover, do they make of their heroine an unnatural daughter or a cold mistress, in whom reflection regulates all the motions of the heart.121

Personal feelings, then, can be an obstacle for an actor projecting the whole of their emotional sphere onto the inner world of the character. In particular, every residual emotion not required for the part to be played can constitute a problem, and compromise the performance. This is equally true of reactions, negative or positive, to the events of daily life, which the emotionalist actor must suppress during his performance, exercising total control over his state of mind – no easy matter for an actor whose job-description requires an acute sensibility.

A man or woman of the theatre may not be too careful to ensure that events which occur, whether happy or unhappy, have the least effect possible on him or her. When they are too sensitive to the slightest motion of affliction or of happiness procured by private matters, then seldom will they seriously abandon themselves to the diverse impressions demanded by the part. With difficulty will they succeed in banishing the sentiment produced by personal affairs to take on those of the character.122

If, however, it is necessary to ‘banish’ any emotion extraneous to the part, it is indispensible to draw on all one’s inner emotional reserves which are cognate with the character. The ‘elevated soul’, ‘predisposition to happiness’, or ‘predisposition to love’, mandatory for the interpreters of tragedies, comedies and lovers’ parts, are all irreplaceable gifts in an actor, whose personal characteristics constitute the basis from which to steadily identify with the character. The consequences are immediately clear. An actor can only give a superlative performance in parts ‘which have the closest possible relation to his character’.123 His repertoire, then, is considerably restricted, in theory, reducing itself, if not to one single character, certainly to a very limited range:

it is necessary to conclude that a perfect performance may only be enjoyed only if almost as many [different] actors are available not only for each type of work, but also for each particular type of part. It is lamented that excellent actors, reciting an infinity of different parts to meet the needs of the theatre, fail at times to give convincing performances. We should conversely be astounded that, incessantly obliged as they are to study new parts, they should ever succeed in acting so well such a large number.124

Rémond de Sainte-Albine is also aware of another question which was to prove relevant to succeeding debates: the “mobility” of the performance founded on emotional involvement. The actor who expresses truly-experienced feelings will never reproduce

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121 Ibid., pp. 175-176.
122 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
123 Ibid., p. 323.
124 Ibid., pp. 323-324.
exactly the same performance in repeats. The inner sentiments evoked by the actor can never be completely stable and identical from night to night, and the intonation, movements and gestures dictated by the sentiments will equally vary.

This he considers an undoubted merit. It is not enough, he writes, ‘for the actors to change their performance when acting different but similar parts: they must equally change the performance when acting the same part’. It is precisely the lack of attention given to this matter which constitutes ‘one of the principle causes of our repugnance at seeing the same work on several successive occasions’. Emotionalist procedures, on the other hand, guard against this very monotony:

nothing is more insupportable than the constant habit actors have of utilizing the same inflections, gestures, and attitudes at the same moments [in the play]; it were as well to observe the return of the same movement at the same instant in a clock […] Men of the theatre are wont to be so uniform since they recite more from memory than from sentiment. When an actor who possesses feu is absorbed into the situation; when he has the gift of transforming himself into the character, he has no need of study to change. While obliged, in playing the same part, to appear the same person, yet does he find the way to appear ever new.125

There remain two further passages in Le Comédien which touch on central issues in emotionalist theory. The first concerns the evil character, the ‘baddy’, or at least the part which runs the risk of compromising the actor playing it. Colley Cibber had already noted how difficult it was for Samuel Sandford, an excellent interpreter of villains, to earn the applause of the public. Luigi Riccoboni had taken the vilest possible figure, that of the devil, as example of a character with which the actor would be unable to identify, and would therefore have to pretend. Rémond de Sainte-Albine merely glances at the issue, citing the figure of a ‘cruel’ character which a skilful actor would still be able to render, albeit ‘imperfectly’, without empathy.126 The problem however remains. It would seem to be impossible to identify with the whole category of vile and villainous characters who tread the boards of theatres. All the actor can do is resort to his ‘art’.

The second observation, conversely, concerns comic characters. We have seen that the actor is expected to have difficulty here unless animated by high spirits and a love of applause: but it is not necessary for his enjoyment to show in the expression of the character. It is ‘in the performance’ of the actors, ‘and not on their faces’ that we expect to perceive the high spirits generated by the part, Rémond de Sainte-Albine insists:

In the theatre a sad physiognomy is brooked with difficulty. Yet an actor who proposes to cheer us often appears more comic when trying to be serious. I would say to tragic actors, weep if you would wish that I weep. And to the other I would say, laugh but rarely, if you would that I laughed.127

A short-fall is realized, then, between the actor’s inner attitude and the character’s final expression. Two possibilities result from this and were to be explored, not without some difficulty, in the treatises of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The first is to recognize that the actor’s inner disposition is articulated on different planes and levels, in a complexity of attitudes which variously influence the final creation of the figure

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125 Ibid., pp. 293-294.
126 Ibid., p. 102.
127 Ibid., pp. 83-84.
represented. A basic attitude such as the pleasure and love of acting can be reflected in the whole stage presence of the actor, while the evocation of particular feelings and emotions can be projected into the single expressions of the character. The second possibility is simpler: to admit that the very nature of certain types of character elicits an unstated complicity between actor and spectator, as it were 'behind the character’s back'. This means that complete identification is impossible and limits the ability to identify with the comic effects produced.\textsuperscript{128}

There is one last question quietly underscoring the treatise: the problem of the characterization of the character's feelings and expressions. The actor's involvement produces the immediate expression of the necessary state of mind, but it is his technique which then refines it, differentiating it from part to part according to the characteristics of the category – moral, social, generational – to which it belongs.

At some points of \textit{Le Comédien}, however, the necessary distinctions would seem to exceed the divisions of the traditional typology. If the sentiment produced cannot be limited to general expressions (as it would appear in all human beings), then nor can it be reduced to those of a whole human category – old people, noblemen, misers, etc., alike. It must be unique and reflect all the singularity of one character.

It is this requirement which transpires from the reasons adduced against Du Bos's proposal to fix the tones and tempos of theatrical declamation within one precise notation. There cannot be one 'true tone' per sentiment, Rémond de Sainte-Albine objects: every individual possesses their own 'inflections' to express impressions received. He then proceeds with a consideration that closely reflects the argument Riccoboni had expounded in the \textit{Pensées sur la déclamation}.

\begin{quote}
Without doubt the diverse inflections arising from the same impression have something in common, but necessarily vary according to the different organs, just as the accent of a nation varies infinitely in the various persons which comprise it. Moreover, these vary according to their different characters.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

It is impossible, then, to treat the art of declamation methodically, which would require 'as many rules as there are diverse types of voice and different ways of feeling the same passion'.

\begin{quote}
It is nature which dictates those [forms of intonation] which are most suited, and it is only feeling which may teach the secrets of this eloquent magic of sounds, through which it is possible to excite in the listeners those movements with which it is desired they be agitation.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

The end result of the whole question comes with something of a surprise. The actor's emotional empathy serves initially to produce a feeling in its general form, common to all humans. Technique subsequently characterizes it, modeling it according to the traits belonging to the single categories, of which the character is then an adequate representative. Only the living feeling within the actor, however, can go on to generate a


\textsuperscript{129} Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, \textit{Le Comédien}, p. 159.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., pp. 160-162.
further, more specific and customized expressivity which can produce that unique trait which is the unique hallmark of the single individual. A circle, then, emerges, containing two different potential processes of empathy: to render a feeling in its most generalized form, shared by all humanity, or at the opposite extreme, to “reduce” it to the unique singularity of individual expression.
English Versions of “Le Comédien”

In 1750 Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s Le Comédien was known in England as an anonymous work entitled The Actor. Now attributed to John Hill, the translation “domesticated” the original with examples of actors and plays from the English stage. It was an immediate success and three new editions quickly followed: two in 1752 and 1753 respectively, no longer extant, and one in 1755.¹

The first edition stated that it was particularly aimed at the managers of the two London theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and extended the original’s critical comment on actors’ performances, though the general contents remained essentially the same, as did Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s theoretical analysis.² The 1755 edition introduced considerable changes: examples were updated and critical discussion further extended, while a number of additions, substitutions and interpolations undermined the emotionalist slant of the original.³

Acting, the new version maintained, is ‘a science’ and ‘is to be studied as a science’.⁴ Awareness of its norms is fundamental for both the actor to reach perfection and the audience to assess his performance precisely and impartially: indeed it is the existence of general, precise and consistent rules which indissolubly links excellence of performance and the validity of a critical judgment in a two-way process.

The better an audience judges, the better the performers will act: [...] When the number of those who judge with knowledge and candour is increased, then the performer will have the more spirit in submitting his endeavours to their determination:

² John Hill, Dedication, in The Actor. A Treatise on the Art of Playing, London, R. Griffiths, 1750. For the comments aimed at the actor-managers see pp. 91-92, pp. 253-254 and p. 298. On the detailed analysis of individual performances see, e.g., the examples about the physical inadequacy of the actor, the need to cast as lovers actors inclined towards love, or the need of appropriate dignity for tragic roles, with the Garrick-Quin comparisons, pp. 65-71, pp. 116-119 and pp. 169-176.
and when he knows by what rules they judge, he will also know those by which he ought to conduct himself, in his attempts to merit their approbation.\(^5\)

Once acting has been established as a science and the actor’s progress linked to the learning of its rules and acknowledgment of criticism, intellectual abilities move centre stage, as it were, as essential requisites for the actor’s performance, and the balance between the necessary inner qualities, as acknowledged by Rémont de Sainte-Albine, has shifted. Sentiment now gives way to esprit, translated as ‘understanding’ in the English version, as prime criterion: ‘among the advantages which a player must have from nature, an understanding is principal’. An explicit hierarchy is established: ‘An understanding has been established as the first requisite to the qualifying a man for the stage. The second is certainly sensibility’\(^6\).

Sentiment however retains essential characteristics. It is indispensable in performance in moving from one passion to the next, to enact a wavering passion fading or to adapt it to a particular character and their circumstances.\(^7\) To be utilizable, however, it must be disciplined, so that the actor’s ability to feel the different passions readily now becomes less important than knowing how to select them, measure their intensity and control them through an ‘understanding’ of what he is to express and how to do so. It is a matter not of ‘how much sensibility’ the actor possesses but how ‘it is regulated’, and only a ‘perfect understanding’ of the part will allow him to experience ‘true feeling’.\(^8\)

Empathy then becomes less important compared with other actorly resources, such as the gift of imitation. Rémont de Sainte-Albine conceded that the actor could render all human passions without feeling them with the exception of love, albeit only imitating the external expression, like ‘a mask’\(^9\). The 1755 edition returns to the subject but without the reservations as to the quality of the result. The passions, love apart, can all be ‘easily imitated’, with nothing added.\(^10\) There equally emerges a concern to eliminate all risk of the unexpected and thus the mistakes which could evade the most meticulous and methodical control. Rémont de Sainte-Albine’s appreciation of the improvised acting of the Italians is reversed: ‘The Italians throw in speeches of their own in comedy, and they please because new; but here we have a better judgment: nothing is, or ought to be so offensive as these interpolations’.\(^11\) Actorly creativity in general is strictly circumscribed. Acting is a question of the primary abilities of the ‘understanding’, after which the original script becomes the one solid base to guarantee safe and effectual results. The words of the source text poet must remain unaltered, and the passages in which Rémont de Sainte-Albine gave the actor textual license, both in modifying and cutting the author’s script, have been removed, while new ones are added underlining the sovereignty of the text and leaving no doubt that adding and altering is simply ‘abominable'.\(^12\)

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\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 2-4.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 18 and p. 48.
\(^7\) See ibid., p. 75 and p. 99.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 20 and p. 34.
\(^12\) See ibid., pp. 7-8 and p. 31.
Antoine-François Riccoboni’s “L’art du Théâtre”

The variants of the 1755 version of The Actor indicated a new problem. The gap left by the rejection of the gestural code of oratory could not be filled simply by the actor’s emotional empathy with the feelings to be expressed. Norms regulating the actor’s performance seemed also to have disappeared, together with the ability to adapt with elegance and efficiency the immediate manifestation of feeling to the passions of an imaginary character acting in a conventional place. Luigi Riccoboni and Rémont de Sainte-Albine had assigned sentiment the central role in acting, but also recognized that the actor’s immediacy and spontaneity required the assistance of ‘art’: hence the need to reformulate the theory of acting in terms which, if not exactly scientific, were certainly clear and objective, and left no space for the uncertain or the arbitrary.

Riccoboni’s son, Antoine-François, was the first to attempt a solution. He had followed in his father’s footsteps and had published L’Art du Théâtre in 1750, when he retired from the stage. The second edition of Le Comédien had only come out the previous year, and reviews of the new publication inevitably compared Riccoboni’s with Rémont de Sainte-Albine work. A particularly caustic notice appeared in the Mercure de France, probably the work of Rémont de Sainte-Albine himself. The author replied to the reviews in his Lettre de Mr. Riccoboni, fils, à Monsieur R*** au sujet de l’Art du Théâtre, claiming to have covered new ground with respect to Le Comédien. The basic issue was extremely simple: Le Comédien failed to give a single useful principle to anyone going on the stage. Rémont de Sainte-Albine, Antoine-François Riccoboni observed, stated that an actor must be natural, resourceful, graceful, interesting, delicate, lively, and surprising; he should be noble or pleasing, according to his part, his gestures should always be harmonious, and his voice pleasant. The public, however, was perfectly aware of all this, Antoine-François Riccoboni observed, and were thus perfectly equipped to watch a performance and form a judgment. The fact was that Le Comédien gave aspiring actors no indication of how to attain these different perfections.

In his opinion, it was not simply Le Comédien but the majority of the literature on acting which centred on considerations which were undoubtedly profound or acute, but seemed inadequate for establishing essential and objective rules for the actor. Even his father’s Pensées sur la déclamation, while full of ‘fine and delicate’ considerations, could not be understood without the preliminary competence which was indispensable for the most elementary approach to the stage. To attempt to

13 Antoine-François Riccoboni, L’Art du Théâtre à Madame ***, Paris, C. F. Simon & Giffart Fils, 1750. According to Riccoboni himself, it had been written some years earlier and only published in 1750 when he had retired from the stage considering it would be inelegant to publish it while he was still on the stage (see Avant-Propos, ibid.).
apply the principles of the Pensées without such knowledge would be like ‘wishing to paint without having studied drawing’.16

The completely practical rules of acting could be established, Antoine-François Riccoboni continued, in open dissent with Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s assertions, only by those who had direct experience of the stage, and should proceed from the material instruments available to the actor: the ability to use them is then the indispensable premise for a successful interpretation.

L’Art du Théâtre then begins with the position of the body, which should be erect but not excessively rigid, going on to indicate the exact way to bow while managing to balance harmoniously.17 It then looks at arm movements, with an exhaustively detailed description of how to move them gracefully:

When the arm is to be raised the upper part, from the shoulder to the elbow, should be the first to detach itself from the body, drawing in its wake the others which must only move after the first, and with no abruptness. The hand must thus be the last to move. It must remain palm down until the forearm has raised it to the height of the elbow; it will then turn upwards, while the arm continues its movement to that point at which it must stop. To descend, the hand must be the first to fall, the other parts following in order. Furthermore it is necessary to avoid holding the arms over-rigidly, in such guise that the line of the wrist and elbow are visible. The fingers should not be completely extended, but gently curved, following the extent readily observable in a partially closed hand.18

The voice then comes under scrutiny, with norms for correct breathing and maximum projection. The ‘mechanical parts’ of acting taken care of, Antoine-François Riccoboni moves on to rules governing the actor’s essential role, the representation of a character, its behaviour, and emotional reactions throughout the play.

Here Riccoboni is peremptory: the governing factor is ‘intellect’. Lines and speeches are to be pronounced following the sense of the sentence, avoiding the sonorous oratory-derived rhythms which had become conventional on the stage. But this is not enough. Also to be considered is the character, the character’s situation and the overall effect. All this is the work ‘of the intelligence’ which clarifies not only what the character effectively says but above all what relation the speech bears to the character and the circumstances of the action. Riccoboni explicates this with the famous example of the thousand ways of saying ‘good day’, the most simple of greetings:

There exist a thousand ways of saying good day, according to character and situation. A lover will wish his beloved good day with the gentleness and affection that manifest his feelings to the person greeted. A father will say it with tenderness to the son he loves, and with coldness mixed with melancholy to the son of whom he is discontented. A miser, even when wishing good day to a friend, must manifest preoccupation. A jealous man greeting a youth he is reluctant to receive manifests anger constrained by good breeding. A lady-in-waiting will say good day to her mistress’s lover in flattering and insinuating tones, but brusquely to an old man seeking her affection against her wishes. The dandy greets with affected pleasantness mixed with a note of pride, implying that if

16 Antoine-François Riccoboni, L’Art du Théâtre, pp. 3-4.
17 See ibid., pp. 5-9.
18 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
he is greeting you it is because he is magnanimous, but is in no way obliged to do so. The melancholy man says good day in afflicted tones. The servant who has played some trick on his master affects a sense of security from which fear however transpires. A trickster will salute whom he is about to cheat in a tone calculated to inspire his victim with confidence while revealing its hidden intention to the audience. 19

The practical rules then extend to ways of representing feelings and emotional attitudes (tenderness, strength, fury, enthusiasm, nobility, majesty, etc.), and the types of characters (from lovers to the roles of ‘haut comique’ and ‘bas comique’). They continue with instructions for silent acting and ‘jeu du théâtre’ in which internal feelings are revealed solely by facial expressions, gestures and actions, all mute, concluding with the need to co-ordinate the different actors’ performances into a cohesive whole, and with the use of pauses to mark the various characters’ reactions in a dialogue, carefully assessing both the nature of the speech and, above all, the spectator’s reaction time.

The treatise ends with a description of an actor’s basic training. It is advisable to begin, Antoine-François Riccoboni explains, by reading out a substantial passage as if in a room, in the presence of a few friends, then rereading it as if declaiming it first to a meeting of the Académie Française, then in court, like a lawyer, and in the pulpit, like a preacher. The speech will gain in intensity each time and the voice become louder, gradually assuming the emotional effects to be produced on the public. The final location is the stage itself, ‘which contains all these divers tones’. 20

In proceeding from the lowest level (reading to a few friends) to the highest (the stage), the actor makes no recourse to his own feelings. What is required to play a part and produce suitable emotions in the audience is intelligence, to understand the lines and recognize the nature and situation of the character; also useful are the ability to study and observe the ‘world’, combined with a gift for mimicry. 21 As L’Art du Théâtre makes clear, the problems the emotionalists solved by empathy can equally be dealt with by technique. An example given is the risk of contorting the features into a quasi-grimace in an exaggerated communication of feelings. For Rémond de Sainte-Albine the simple solution was to actually experience the feeling to be expressed. 22 For Antoine-François Riccoboni too the solution was ‘easy’ but very different: the ‘gentleness’ of the facial movements depends on habit which is ‘purely mechanical’. Instructions follow:

These features [of the face] must at every instant assume the expressive character required in that moment, which must never be so forced as to appear a grimace […] However, it is an easy matter to avoid such grimaces, and the gentleness of the facial movements depends on a habit which is purely mechanical. The upper part of the face must be continuously at work; the mouth and chin must never move unless to articulate the words […] It is with justice stated that the eyes are the mirror of the soul. It is they that depict all the inner movements, and it is thus necessary to possess eyes of a decided colour and vivacity visible from afar, operating in sensitive conjunction with the countenance. The movements of the forehead greatly assist those of the eyes. An actor must acquire, through practice, the ability to frown by raising his eyebrows and knitting the space between them by lowering the brows firmly. It is the different

19 Ibid., pp. 32-34.
20 Ibid., p. 100.
21 See ibid., pp. 61-62.
22 See Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, Le Comédien, p. 149.
gradations of creased forehead and knitted eyebrows, the eyes wide open, rounded or slanted, which marks the difference of expression. That part of the cheek located beneath the eyes can make its small contribution by being slightly raised or lowered; but movements of this part of the face must needs be moderate to avoid seeming forced. The mouth must make no movement other than to laugh, since they who turn down the corners of the mouth to weep in moments of affliction reveal a countenance which is greatly unseemly and not a little ignoble.23

The search for concrete and precise rules to be put quickly to practical effect seems, then, to concede no space to sentiment, and for obvious reasons. Sentiment is not a constant and permanent resource, but can be intermittent, so that in any moment of his stage presence the actor will have recourse to technique alone. Furthermore, emotional empathy is out of the question when no affinity exists between the character and the actor. And there are situations, Antoine-François Riccoboni, adds, in which emotional participation is clearly absurd, such as when, for example, the character must appear astonished by a phrase or snatch of conversation of which his interpreter was obviously well aware.24 Such a volatile resource as sentiment then, with such restricted applicability, should not be included in norms constituting the foundation of the actor’s art. One pragmatic solution, implied at the beginning of L’Art du Théâtre, when citing the Pensées sur la déclamation, would be to recognize the usefulness of sentiment associated with technical ability. Technique would then be the basis which the actor would improve on and sophisticate through the added use of sentiment when required by circumstance. In Antoine-François Riccoboni’s formula in part-defense of paternal doctrine, the actor would begin painting having mastered the art of drawing.

This, however, would appear to be illusory. Emotional empathy, as demonstrated by a key passage in L’Art du Théâtre, is incompatible with technique. In demonstration, Antoine-François Riccoboni develops a line of argument already present in the doctrine of oratory and again mentioned, albeit fleetingly, in the recent literature on acting. Quintilian had observed that when the orator improvised, emotion aroused by the subject matter could make him lose control of his voice. In the seventeenth century René Rapin, in his Réflexions sur l’éloquence de ce temps, had recalled a celebrated Parisian lawyer who would reach such a passion when speaking in court as to compromise not only elegance of delivery but clarity of diction, to the point of becoming incomprehensible.25 Grimarest too had glanced at the problem, commenting that the passion actually felt by a lawyer could alter his voice and distort his diction, while Poisson, as recorded above, had treated the issue in more general terms.26

The risk run by the sensitive orator when making his speech, in court or pulpit, becomes then certain and inevitable danger, according to Antoine-François Riccoboni, for the actor absorbed in the part he is playing. In the concentrated time-frame of a scene in the theatre the succession of feelings to be expressed is

23 Antoine-François Riccoboni, L’Art du Théâtre, pp. 76-77.
24 See ibid., p. 39.
considerably more rapid than in real life. The genuine empathy of the actor thus inevitably creates, always, an emotive build-up which undermines the actor's control over his various means of expression.

This accelerated succession of feelings on the stage is imposed by the reduced time-scale of a play which by precipitating events gives to stage action all the intensity it requires. If in a moment of tenderness the actor is carried away by his part, his heart will contract, his voice almost die in his throat, and if a single tear escape from his eyes, it will be impossible to pronounce a single word unaccompanied by ridiculous sobs.27

In this condition the actor will shift with great difficulty from one emotion to another – for example from tenderness to anger. Full of tender feelings, Riccoboni explains, he will attempt to escape from a state of mind which blocks him, a 'mortal chill' will possess his senses, and for some moments he will be unable to act other than 'mechanically'. He will find it impossible to render the nuances necessary to make all the feelings proper to the part seem 'linked', and 'born the one of the other'. If we have 'the misfortune' truly to feel that which is to be expressed, then 'we are no longer able to act'. The actor's empathy must therefore be totally replaced by the 'ability' to 'make the audience feel all the inner workings' by which he would 'seem' to be penetrated. Only in this way will he express the exact sentiments of a real individual in the same situation, and will create in the audience the 'illusion' of being actually moved by the passions manifested.28

It remains to be seen, however, according to Riccoboni's own standpoint, what the practical and precise norms might be which the actor should follow if he is to put this abilities fully into practice. And here Riccoboni returns to the old phantoms of oratory. The training recommended to the actor, as reported above, from the private reading of a passage through to public declamation, in the academy, lawcourt and pulpit, almost exactly mirrors that of Grimarest’s *Traité du récitatif*. The entire central section of *L'Art du Théâtre*, dedicated to dealing with expression, opens with what is virtually the usual list of feelings and with the acknowledging of the two dominant passions, love and anger from which the others descend.29 There even reappear the time-honoured prescriptions of gestures to be avoided, with the traditional indication of expressions and attitudes to assume to portray the different inner feelings.

It is necessary to avoid clenching the fist whenever possible, and especially shaking it at the actor one is facing, even in moments of extreme fury […] Rapid gesticulating is to be eschewed: indeed, the slower and gentler be the gesture, the more pleasing […] if the arm be extended with overmuch strength and rapidity the gesture is harsh; but in moving the lower half of the arm, the elbows remaining close to the body, then the zenith of unpleasantness is reached. In like fashion holding out the arms and bringing them to the same height is also to be avoided.

Timidity has a weak and halting voice, vanity, tones imbued with importance and irksome security; the vulgar person has a loud voice and marked articulation; the miser who passes the night in counting his gold should be near-hoarse.30

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28 Ibid., pp. 36-39.
29 See ibid., pp. 45-46.
At this point, having excluded recourse to the volatile sentiment of the actor in its search for certain and general rules of acting, anti-emotionalism would seem to have argued itself into an inevitable corner: the return to a pre-established expressive code, based on the traditions and norms of oratory.

*L'Art du Théâtre* however glances at an alternative solution, based on the physical possibilities of the actor’s body, able to control gestures and expressions through its own ‘sensibility’ rather than the emotive version which blocks, distorts and disturbs the correct rendering of the part. For Antoine-François Riccoboni a wholly physical sensibility allows the actor to be aware of the precision and efficacy of his expressions without studying them and regulating them from the outside: hence his advice to the actor, identical to his father’s, against using the mirror to rehearse gestures and movements. The mirror, he writes, ‘is the mother of affectation’ since ‘it is necessary to feel one’s movements and assess them without seeing them’. And in the name of this physical sensibility, which transforms the body from passive material for the external show of sentiment into an active component in creating the actor’s attitude and performance, Lessing, a few years after the publication of *L’Art du Théâtre*, was to attempt to re-orientate the critical demands of anti-emotionalism.

**Lessing’s Project**

Between the late 1740s and the early 1750s, marked by the publication of both *Le Comédien* and *L’Art du Théâtre*, more and more attention was being given to the way human expression was concretely realized through physical modifications and the body’s gesturality. In 1747 *Human Physiognomy Explain’d* came out, by an English medical doctor, James Parsons. Parsons reviewed physiognomy’s development from Aristotle to Della Porta, Bulwer and Le Brun, to show how ‘a particular bent or disposition of mind’ are manifested not by the complexion or bone conformation, but by the articulation of the facial muscles. The onset of a passion is revealed in this way, Parsons explains, because frequent recourse to the same passion, repeating the same muscular disposition, ends up by creating a pre-disposition eventually leaving indelible marks on the face. The treatise then minutely analyzes the anatomy of the different muscular conformations produced by inner attitudes, finally reaching the inevitable conclusion that the actor can assume the grimace suited to the character if he uses his muscles ‘artfully’.

The ability to assimilate an external attitude by repeating specific poses, gestures and movements again surfaces in *The Analysis of Beauty*, published in 1753 by the painter and caricaturist William Hogarth, who was a friend of Parsons. Hogarth’s perspective is considerably broader, taking in the whole action of the individual. Action, he observes, ‘is a sort of language’ which one day ‘may come to be taught by a kind of grammar-rules’. Having posited action as norm-based language, however, Hogarth is not concerned with drawing up the usual table of expressions corresponding to the different passions, constituting as it were the vocabulary: on the

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33 Ibid., p. 46.
contrary, he greatly doubted the usefulness of indications of the kind. As for acting, ‘action considered with regard to assisting the author’s meaning, by enforcing the sentiments or raising the passions, must be left entirely to the judgment of the performer’.  

Hogarth had other concerns, principally the grace of the gestures and the preparation of the limbs so as ‘to have an equal readiness to move in all such directions as may be required’. This can be done by developing the sheer force of habit through repetition exercises which will gradually confer ‘spontaneous’ grace and elegance. He gives as an example tracing with the hands a serpentine movement on a relief:

Gentle movements of this sort […] may be made at any time and any where, which by frequent repetitions will become so familiar to the parts so exercised, that on proper occasion they may make them as it were of their own accord […] Daily practising these movements with the hands and arms, as also with such other parts of the body, as are capable of them, will in a short time render the whole person graceful and easy at pleasure.

This use of studied repetition to create spontaneity and naturalness is made possible by the body’s own dynamics, which can be felt by a form of inner sensibility. For Hogarth, as for Antoine-François Riccoboni, we can be aware of the precision, elegance and efficacy of our gestures even without seeing them, without the use of a mirror:

true elegance [in the positioning of the head] is mostly seen in moving it from one position to another. And this may be attain’d by a sensibility within yourself, tho’ you have not a sight of what you do by looking unto the glass, when with your head assisted by a sway of the body in order to give it more scope, you endeavor to make that very serpentine line in the air, which the hands have been before taught to do.

A wholly physical sensibility able to assess the precision of movement is described in very similar terms in Johann Friedrich Löwen’s Kurzgefasste Grundsätze von der Beredsamkeit des Leibes, which amply quotes from both Riccoboni and Hogarth. The subject of the short treatise (some forty-eight pages) is how to improve the performance of orators and actors. The important element is constant practice under the guidance of an expert whose rules, like Löwen’s own, must derive from no pre-established code but ‘from experience’ and from ‘personal sensations’. 

After standard advice on understanding the script and using the voice, the second part concentrates on gesturality and external attitudes. Those of the preacher, who from the pulpit is only visible down to the waist, are more simple than the actor’s, whose gait must render the whole character, his condition and state of mind, and must differ on entry and exit. Above all, however, it is the hand movements which constitute the most important aspect of gestural eloquence. Löwen criticizes various

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., pp. 143-144.
38 Ibid., p. 145.
norms cited in *L’Art du Théâtre* for being imprecise or restrictive, such as the complicated procedure prescribed for raising the arms, with its articulating of the single parts and rotating of the hands. His own advice is to contain the movement of the fingers in moments of reflection or demonstration; avoid over-swift movements, and never raise the hands above the eyes unless it is to express modesty, etc., although in general there is no prescriptive norm to observe. The important point is for the actor to ‘feel’ his movements without studying them in a mirror.40

This is the context in which Lessing begins his study of acting, which was to last for some twenty years in parallel with his work as philosopher, theorist of art and literature, and above all dramatist (*Miss Sarah Sampson*, performed in 1755, and *Minna von Barnhelm* and *Emilia Gallotti*, in 1767 and 1772): he was also Dramaturg of Hamburg’s Nationaltheater. His interest in acting was already fully developed in 1750 when as a twenty-one-year old, with Christlob Mylius, he edited the *Beiträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, followed up by his work on the various volumes of the *Theatralische Bibliothek*, published between 1754 and 1758. From May 1767 onwards he worked on the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, following the programme of the Nationaltheater with the aim of producing a critical compendium of all performances and accompanying ‘step by step the poets and actors along their path’.41

Lessing was without doubt the most informed and aware scholarly voice of the period in the acting debate. In 1750, the same year it was published, he first reviewed Riccoboni’s *L’Art du Théâtre* for the *Berlinische privilegierte Zeitung*, then translated it for the *Beiträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*. In the *Beiträge* he also speaks highly of Rémon de Sainte-Albine’s *Le Comédien* (with a promise to publish a translation), and Luigi Riccoboni’s *Dell’arte rappresentativa* and *Pensées sur la declamation*. Lessing half maintained his promise a few years later, when he published a compendium from *Le Comédien* in *Theatralische Bibliothek* in which there also appeared his translation of Riccoboni’s *Histoire du Théâtre Italien* and the third volume of Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*. He also translated Diderot’s plays and works on the theatre,42 and with Johann Joachim Christoph Bode translated Noverre’s *Lettres sur la Danse*, equally finding time to review Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty*, which Mylius translated into German.43

Lessing combines all of the above with a careful and concrete observation of the actor’s work. His ideal model was Konrad Ekhof, the ‘German Garrick’ who in 1753 founded the first European Actors’ Academy in Schwerin (also drawing up the statute), and had a hand in founding Hamburg’s Nationaltheater. Ekhof is an ‘artist’, Lessing explains in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, who ‘creates exemplary models’ and

40 Ibid., p. 35.
42 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Das Theater Herrn Diderot*, Berlin, n. pub., 1760.
gives examples from which it is then possible ‘to seek to extrapolate general principles’. Ekhof’s ‘exemplary’ nature is underlined shortly afterwards in Lessing’s comment on the performance of Voltaire’s Zaïre at the Nationaltheater. Everything Rémond de Sainte-Albine observes in his Comédien, Lessing writes, is translated into practice by Ekhof ‘with such mastery as to make us believe that he alone must have been the model referred to by the critic in his considerations’.45

Lessing’s departure-point emerges in the ‘Vorrede’ to the Beiträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters. Acting is a ‘necessary part of dramatic poetry’ and has its own rules which concern not only the actor but ‘can be useful to all those who draw on the eloquence of the body’.46 Acting in relation to poetry then is judged in its own right, independent of the assessment of the author’s work. A critic demonstrates his true sensibility, he writes in the Hamburgische Dramaturgie, in his infallible ability to distinguish ‘which part of the pleasure or displeasure’ aroused by a performance ‘is to be attributed to the actor or to the author’. The actor should not only ‘think with the author’ but ‘think for him when he has committed some error, however excusable’. Lessing then pronounces unequivocal judgment when discussing a scene from the opening première of the Nationaltheater: the actor has conferred on the lines ‘a beauty’ for which the playwright ‘can arrogate to himself no merit’.47 It is precisely the ‘mediocrity’ of a text, he states, which can reveal the actor’s skills, just as, conversely, the qualities of a work of art can emerge against the mediocrity of a performance.48

What, in Lessing’s opinion, gives autonomous value to acting compared with poetry is the peculiarity of its language. If poetry is verbal and its rules those of the eloquence of the word, acting speaks a physical language and its rules are those of bodily eloquence. The task is precisely to locate these rules: ‘several modern writers’ have approached the task, Lessing writes; it is now a question of drawing on and continuing their work.49

Put in these terms, the whole line of research could be reduced to the extreme attempt to reconduct the actor’s art to within the rigid confines of actio oratoria. The originality of Lessing’s position, though, lies in the new conception of the actor’s body. Oratory and its gestural codes traditionally views the body as the material and physical instrument through which the concepts and sentiments elaborated within the individual’s inner self are made visible. For Lessing referring to ‘several modern authors’, however, the body has its own dynamics and sensibility which are able to regulate gestures and expressions, and immediately gauge their precision and effectiveness. In a word, the body becomes a pro-active interlocutor which interacts with the psychic dimension and has a part in actually creating the sentiments. It is in the light of this concept that Lessing reviews the essential questions of the actor’s art.

The first result is a criticism of emotionalist doctrine, revealed as partial and ineffectual rather than wrong: indeed, Lessing clearly agrees with the basic principle which recognizes empathy as an indispensable component in true perfection of the

45 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Hamburgische Dramaturgie, p. 41 and p. 87. Lessing is referring to Zaïre (IV, 6), analyzed in Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s Le Comédien, pp. 208-212.
47 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Hamburgische Dramaturgie, pp. 25-26 and p. 43.
48 Ibid., p. 25 and p. 118.
49 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Christlob Mylius, ‘Vorrede’, p. 29.
art of acting. He never wavers in the conviction, which re-emerges in *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* when he proclaims the supremacy of the actor who actually ‘feels’ the lines compared with another who merely understands them.

How great is the distance between the actor who merely understands the meaning of a passage and another who feels it at the same time! Words the sense of which has been grasped once and for all, and which the memory has mastered, may be pronounced correctly even while the mind is taken up with things of very different moment: it will then be impossible to express them with sentiment.\(^{50}\)

Empathy then is not deleterious, as Antoine-François Riccoboni would have it: and indeed Lessing had promised the *Beiträge* readers a German translation of Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s *Le Comédien* in 1750. He afterwards thought better of it and published only a compendium four years later, in volume one of the *Theatralische Bibliothek*, explaining that the complete text would be of little use since Rémond de Sainte-Albine had quoted, in explanation, from French works with which the German actors were unfamiliar, and technical considerations divorced from concrete examples and references were no more than a ‘beautiful metaphysics of acting’.\(^{51}\)

There was also a second, considerably more important reason. *Le Comédien*’s main principle could lead the reader into serious error. Rémond de Sainte-Albine maintains that ‘the external modifications of the body are a natural consequence of the inner essence of the soul’. This is true, Lessing concedes, when we express ourselves in daily life: but in the theatre it is not enough. The public has no desire to see on the stage an imperfect rendering of the feelings as any ordinary person would express them in the same circumstances. The public expects to see expressions realized ‘in the best fashion possible’ i.e. in an exemplary, ‘general way’ in that ‘each must discover in it something of his own expression’.\(^{52}\)

Stage expressions, then, must be controlled and fine-honed, and therefore require ‘a system of rules’: a grammar of body language. For Lessing this in no way compromises the spontaneity and naturalness of acting: not because, as Antoine-François Riccoboni would have it, the actor is able to create instant expressions so precise as to convince the public is he truly involved in what he is acting, but because the control and correctness of his gestures never imperils the “spontaneous” relationship between the actor’s inner self and its external manifestations. Bodily and mental sensibility are intimately interconnected in a dual relation. The process linking what we feel and what we reveal marks its own pace, like breathing, from inside to outside and vice-versa: just as the emotions are spontaneously projected into physical expression, in the same way expression modifies and models the mind of the individual concerned.

It is my belief that when the actor is able to imitate all the signals and external characteristics, all the changes to the body acquired by experience and which express a given aspect, then his soul, through the impression received by the senses, will of itself assume that state in its movements, attitudes and tones.\(^{53}\)

\(^{50}\) Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, p. 35.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., p. 249.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
Lessing returns to the same point later, in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Empathy can not only produce imperfect or unpredictable expressions, but can also be distorted or actually cancelled by inadequate physical and material instruments on the part of the actor. He may be gifted with ‘much sentiment’ yet display none because his features, face and natural voice possess characteristics we habitually associate with completely different passions and feelings.²⁴ In this case another actor would be preferable, possessing a harmonious body, muscles he can command, and all the necessary gifts of mimicry, so that he seems animated by the deepest feelings in the very parts he plays ‘not in accordance with his personal inspiration, but following a sound model’, since all that he says and does ‘is mere mechanical imitation’. This is ‘according to the principle whereby the modifications of the soul, when followed by physical modifications, are in their turn determined by the latter’, as exemplified by the actor expressing great anger:

if he perfectly imitates these characteristics, which can be successfully imitated if the actor so desires, then a dark sentiment of anger will inescapably take hold of him, and will infallibly be reflected in his person, therein generating those mutations which depend not on our will alone: his countenance will take fire, his eyes flash, and his muscles will contract; in short, he will truly appear an individual in prey to anger, albeit without being it, and knowing no reason why he should be so.²⁵

In Lessing’s opinion then bodily language can be learnt and perfected through study and the application of a system of rules which, however, are not as yet formulated or available: hence the need to study it to perfect the art of acting. Lessing wasted no time in setting about it. All his energies, he stated in the introduction to *Le Comédien* compendium, were trained on the writing of ‘a short work on physical eloquence’, and indeed around 1754 he began on a treatise, *Der Schauspieler*, in which Hogarth’s influence is unmistakable.²⁶

The project remained incomplete, however, probably due to a mistaken premise: on the one hand, the need to formulate a grammar of physical expression based on the new principle of the dual dynamics between inner sentiment and outer expression, and on the other, the impossibility of separating acting intended as ‘eloquence of the body’ from the traditional terms of *actio oratoria*, with its freight of expressive codes all founded on the principle of the unidirectional action of sentiment on our outer manifestations. All oratory’s accumulated knowledge thus becomes, from Lessing’s perspective, an indispensable point of reference which is simultaneously impracticable, giving rise to a perception of the grammar of bodily eloquence as a lost science, possessed by the ancients but extant only as an inapplicable fragment. The science had to be rediscovered, or even reinvented, since what was truly useful, or even indispensable for the proposed study, was precisely the part which was lost, such as the study of hand movements which, according to the outline in *Der Schauspieler* seemed to constitute a relevant part of the proposed treatise.²⁷ Lessing returns to the question later, in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 35-36.
²⁷ See ibid., pp. 478-480.
Little is known of the chironomy of the ancients, as it is termed, namely the set of rules they had prescribed for moving the hands; but we know for certain that they had elevated the language of the hands to a degree of perfection which our orators are unable so much as to suggest to us. It would appear that we have conserved but an inarticulate cry from this language: merely the ability to make movements but without conferring a stable meaning on them, or be able to link them together.

A theory of acting as bodily language was revealed then as an impossible task, reduced to a statement of indispensable need which could not however be satisfied. At the end of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* we find only a lapidary acknowledgment: ‘we have actors, but lack a dramatic art’. ‘If it ever existed’, Lessing concludes, ‘we no longer possess it; it has been lost, and must needs be entirely recreated’.

**Sticotti and Diderot**

Antiemotionalist criticism found its extreme formulation in the early 1770s in Diderot. The occasion was the publication of a treatise by Michel Sticotti, *Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois*, which Diderot vitriolically reviewed in the *Correspondance littéraire*, a literary and philosophical revue, circulated in handwritten form among the cultured aristocracy of the time. The work, Diderot declared, was ‘written in a style which is obscure, tortuous, verbose and laden with commonplaces’.

Sticotti’s work was in actual fact a reworking of the 1755 edition of *The Actor*, translated, as the prefacing *Avertissement* announced, ‘with much freedom’ to illustrate how English actors ‘were able to apply to the customs of their own country the principles of nature and of all nations’. It was basically a treatise of acting with anecdotes and examples taken from the English and French stage, and Sticotti seemed to have no idea that the *The Actor* was in its turn derived from Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s *Le Comédien*. This was possibly because the theoretical approach was calqued faithfully on that of the 1755 English version, which had changed the emotionalist slant of *Le Comédien*, altering the balance between the different faculties involved in acting.

*Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois* is not, though, without typically emotionalist considerations. However well-prepared, an actor ‘enters on stage “a l’improptu”, so to speak’, Sticotti writes, and his talents ‘depend on the momentary disposition of his mind’. Even the most expert actor ‘when he faces the public is unable to guarantee the finer details of his performance’. Paradoxically it is this ‘uncertainty’, despite which the actor manages to ‘hold the mirror up to nature’ and paint the passions,

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59 Ibid., p. 410.
which at the creative moment itself ‘elevates him to the stature of a great author’.62 An emotionalist aspect is also behind Sticotti’s insistence that the actor’s personal character should possess no strong traits which get in the way of the emotions required for the various roles:

If the actor possesses no particular passion, then his heart will absorb them in their entirety; he will feel them as the author felt them, and with certainty will reach the degree of perfection attained by Garrick in such diverse parts. But this kind of sensitivity, like intelligence, is one of the superior qualities which must be naturally possessed and which all the strivings of art cannot supply.63

This type of consideration apart, however, the general drift of the treatise is considerably different. For Sticotti, too, dramatic art ‘is a science, and thus to be studied as a science’.64 Intelligence is ‘without doubt’ one of the natural gifts which is useful to an actor, and sensibility comes ‘immediately after’.65 If the truly sensitive actor is able to arouse his own passions in the public, nature alone, without intelligence to regulate the sentiment, can only guide ‘a blind man’, who will become inappropriately unruly or calm.66

Diderot had been interested in the theatre for many years by the time Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois was published. At twenty-one he had written a play, Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?, and in Bijoux indiscrets, a novel from 1748, he had enumerated all the defects of the French stage.67 In 1757 he had published the five-act Fils naturel, staged the same year in a private theatre, then fourteen years later by the Comédie Française, where it was a flop.68 Then in 1758 he had written a third play, Le Père de Famille, performed in Marseilles and then in Paris in 1761.69 This play, restaged in 1769, was a success and was greatly influential in Germany, above all on Lessing and his generation, in Italy and in Austria.

More particularly, Diderot had formulated a proposal for a theatre reform, illustrated in the Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel, which prefaced his play, and in De la poésie dramatique, published as an appendix to his Père de Famille. What Diderot aimed at was a sort of ‘bourgeois tragedy’, between traditional tragedy and comedy, reflecting the habits and concerns of the middle classes. The characters were to represent the individuals peopling our daily life, reproducing their social status and milieu. The three unities were to be loosely respected, without constituting a construction of any kind. The sets were to change considerably, becoming more natural, with furnishings and objects from daily life. Costumes were to change in the same way, and ‘natural’ was the byword for acting too, which was to be modeled on

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62 Michel Sticotti, Garrick ou les Acteurs Anglois, p. 40.
63 Ibid., pp. 71-72.
64 Ibid., p. 19.
65 Ibid., p. 61.
66 Ibid., p. 43.
67 Denis Diderot, Les Bijoux indiscrets, 2 vols., [Paris], Au Monomotapa, [1748].
68 Denis Diderot, Le Fils naturel, ou les Épreuves de la Vertu. Avec l'histoire véritable de la pièce, Amsterdam, M. M. Rey, 1757.
69 Denis Diderot, Le Père de Famille: comédie and 5 actes and en prose; avec un Discours sur la poésie dramatique, Amsterdam, 1758.
everyday behaviour. The actors were to use the whole stage, not simply centre-front, and expand their gestural range, which was to increase in importance, accompanying and sometimes replacing the words.

There is nothing which happens in society which may not be staged. Let us then imagine two men, uncertain whether they be discontented or satisfied the each with the other, who wait for a third to make the situation clear: what shall they say to each other while awaiting the arrival of the third? Nothing. They will come, go, reveal impatience but they will remain silent. They are in no danger of saying things they might regret. This is an example of one scene almost the entirety of which is mimed: and so many more could be cited!

The stage directions in *Fils naturel* and *Père de Famille* are concrete examples of this view of the scene and action. They begin with two detailed directions:

The scene is a sitting-room. A clavicord, some chairs and game-tables are visible; on one of these there is a tric-trac; on another, various leaflets; on one side, a loom for tapestries, etc. At the back, a sofa, etc. Dorval, alone. He is seated in an armchair next to a table on which there lie a number of leaflets. He appears agitated. After a few brusque gestures, he leans against the arm of the chair, as if to sleep. He immediately rouses himself. He takes out his watch and states: ‘It is just six o’clock’. He leans against the other arm, but immediately straightens up saying ‘How can I sleep’. He opens a book, at leisure, closing it almost immediately saying ‘I am reading but understand nothing’. He rises and walks about.

At the front of the stage, the head of the family walking slowly, his head down, his arms folded and with a preoccupied look. A little further down the stage, near the chimney along one wall of the room, the Commander and his nephew play at tric-trac. Behind the Commander, slightly closer to the fire, Germeuil sits comfortably in an armchair, book in hand. He breaks off his reading every so often and looks tenderly at Cécile when she is absorbed in the game and cannot see him. The Commander guesses what is happening behind his back. His suspicions create great anxiety in him, communicated through his gestures.

The reform project met with difficulties however, much criticism coming from theatre people themselves. One such was Marie-Jeanne de Laboras, actress then writer of some standing, and wife of Antoine-François Riccoboni, who in a letter to Diderot explained that the innovations contained in the *Père de Famille* were at variance with the practical demands of theatre, both acoustic and visual. An actor who is performing at some distance from centre-stage and turns to the side will be neither heard nor properly seen by the whole audience. In a position towards the back, she goes on, ‘three feet from the lights’, an actor ‘no longer has a face’, while on many occasions ‘a glance’ or ‘a slight movement of the head’, a smile or simple eye movement can be charged with essential significance. Lastly, stage action without words requires some time to be fully understood by the audience. And if a character

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71 Ibid., p. 378.
attracts attention by moving but remains mute, ‘a chill’ descends, interest wanes and the spectators become impatient.74

Diderot replied by simply restating his position more forcefully: if the presence layout of the theatre made correct action impossible, then the theatre and not the action was at fault. The distance and visibility factor were soon overcome: spectatorly habit and imagination would supply whatever the eye denied. It was only necessary to see an actor ‘some ten times at most’, Diderot declared, ‘to feel the acting at the farthest distance’. If then the imagination is engaged, the spectator will see even ‘further’, and what he does not see ‘will guess’. In any case, an actor should never act with his countenance alone, but with the whole person. Lastly, as regarded the time of the action, no time, ‘if it be true’, can ever be too long or miscalculated.75

Artistic Creation

The above, then, presents Diderot on practical questions. His theoretical comments on acting had been, evincing a general conception of an emotionalist aesthetics. The mechanisms, formulae and stylistic variations used by the actor, he reiterated on various occasions, are aimed at eliciting the emotive reactions of the public, and the “poetic” nature of the work of art is precisely its highly-charged passion, forcefulness and emotive intensity.

In general, the more civilized and genteel a people, the less are its customs poetic; gentility is a weakening process. When is it that nature furnishes art with models? When the children tear their hair at the bedside of a dying father; when a mother bares her breast and begs her son in the name of that which nourished him; when a friend cuts off his hair and strews it over the body of his friend; when he who has supported his head and led him to the stake then gathers his ashes and encloses them in an urn which he then, on certain days, wets with tears; when dishevelled widows tear their cheeks with their nails […] I do not say that such customs are good, but that they are poetic.76

If these are the scenes to be reproduced in a work of art, it will clearly needs to possess a high emotional charge to produce an equivalent effect in the recipient. This is obviously even more true of a play: hence the terms exhorting the dramatists.

Oh dramatic poets! The true applause you should aspire to is not the clapping of hands at the end of some particularly striking line, but the deep sigh from the soul, bringing it relief, after a long silence. There exists a yet stronger emotion, which you could imagine if you were truly born for your art, and had fathomed all its magic: that of, as it were, torturing a group of people. Then shall the spirits be shaken, uncertain, indecisive, bewildered; and your spectators, like those whom in an earthquake see the walls of their dwelling tremble and the earth escape from under their feet.77

Indeed all the features Diderot’s reform envisaged as desirable were tailored to provoke an intense emotional reaction. The performance was to create a total effet de

74 Lettre de Madame Riccoboni à Monsieur Diderot (November 18, 1758), in Œuvres complètes de Diderot, VII, pp. 395-397.
75 Réponse à la lettre de Madame Riccoboni (November 27, 1758), in Œuvres complètes de Diderot, VII, pp. 398-405.
76 Denis Diderot, De la poésie dramatique, p. 370.
77 Ibid., p. 314.
in the public: the illusion that the places and action reproduced were actually real. When speaking of the Marseilles performance of *Père de Famille*, Diderot observed with satisfaction that before the first act was over, ‘the spectators believed they were part of the family and forgot they were at the theatre. These were not backdrops, but a private house’. The language was not to be ‘musical’ and artificial, the effect produced by scansion and rhyme, but should break off and be taken up again like natural speech. And lastly, as seen above, the gesture should accompany and sometimes effectually replace words, as happens in real life: all aspects which convince a spectator that he is taking part not in an illusion but in an actual scene to which he will react with the appropriate emotional reactions.

If a play tends to create intense reaction in the public, it remains to be seen of course if this extends to the playwright while writing it and the actor while performing it, or whether catalyst-like they are able to convey the emotion while themselves remaining untouched and lucidly able to operate all the technical skills necessary to work on the feelings of the observer.

Diderot had long maintained that emotional participation was an indispensable component of artistic creation, in all its forms. Of the author he had written that ‘the soul alone’, and not ‘art’, must produce the word, feature, or idea able to produce the necessary effect. If an author is consciously aware of creating an effect, he will inevitably be unsuccessful, and if a poet is unable to exalt his reader it is because he has failed to exalt himself. Poetry is produced ‘by a tormented soul, a violent spirit, a strong and ardent imagination’. Before sitting down to create, the artist ‘should have started from his sleep, arisen during the night, and run in his nightshirt, bare-footed, to fix his glimmers of ideas down on paper in the light of a lamp’.

As regards the actors, in his *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* Diderot had actually affirmed in a passing comment not simply the primacy of feeling over reflection but the possibility that sensibility could perform tasks normally entrusted to the intellect.

An actress of limited judgment and average penetrative powers but considerable sensibility will grasp a psychological situation with no difficulty […] poets, actors, musicians, painters, first-class singers, great dancers, tender lovers, the truly devoted, all this company, enthusiastic, passionate, feels keenly and reflects but little.

Later, in a series of letters to a young actress, Mademoiselle Jodin, Diderot maintained the need to join ‘sensibility’ and ‘judgment’ when acting, since ‘an actor who possesses but sense and judgment is cold’, and he who possesses only sensibility is ‘crazed’. Moreover, acting must not be based on a series of studied gestures and effects, predisposed and skillfully calculated: ‘when inspiration comes from the soul’, the actor ‘is never aware what he will do, or in what way he will pronounce his lines’. Only the combination of ‘sense, reflection and reason’ with ‘passion and sensibility’

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78 Letter to Mademoiselle Volland (December 1, 1760), in Œuvres complètes de Diderot, XIX (1876), p. 40.
will allow the actor to reproduce on stage all the most effective details of performance.82

Only three years later however, by the time Sticotti’s treatise had been published, Diderot’s position would appear to have changed radically.83 While continuing to reiterate that soliciting the emotions of the spectator was an essential aim of a performance, he now declared that the actor’s sensibility and ability to actually feel the sentiments to be communicated was deleterious, and impeded the precision and accuracy of gestures, intonation and movement. Sensibility was to be considered an enemy of study and reflection. All that Rémont de Sainte-Albine and Sticotti had affirmed as to the need to associate sensibility and reflection when interpreting a character (convictions seconded, repeatedly, by Diderot himself) is therefore false.

From this point of view Diderot was giving a considerably reductive reading of Sticotti. If the aim was to demonstrate the negative effects of sensibility, it hardly mattered that Sticotti had insisted on the need to conjugate it with reflection, to the extent of declaring (following the last version of The Actor) the primacy of intelligence over sentiment. It was more useful to consider Sticotti an absolute emotionalist – a non-existent figure, incidentally –, who reduces acting to the simple exercising of sensibility and preaches the uselessness of technique.

This, however, was Diderot’s position. The review in the Correspondance littéraire provided the opportunity to list all the reasons for excluding emotionalism from the actor’s creative repertoire, and produced the germ for the subsequent extension into Diderot’s Paradoxe sur le comédien.

The “Paradoxe” and its Reasoning. The Characteristics of Sensibility

The Paradoxe was written over the 1770s and underwent various modifications before it was finally published in 1830, fully forty-six years after Diderot’s death.84 It centres on the notion of artistic creation as imitation and representation, along the prevalent aesthetic lines of the eighteenth century. In his pictures, poems, sculptures, etc., the artist is not concerned with reproducing only the real, but flawed, world of the five senses, where ‘gold’, as Luigi Riccoboni observed, is mixed with ‘mud’. The artist must produce forms which are of absolute beauty and perfection.

He perceives immediate reality, extrapolates an ideal model through the imagination, and then imitates or represents this model in his work. Art is thus

82 Denis Diderot, Lettres à Mademoiselle Jadin, written between 1765 and 1767, in Œuvres Complètes de Diderot, XIX, pp. 389-390 and p. 392.
84 Denis Diderot, Paradoxe sur le comédien, ouvrage posthume de Diderot, Paris, A. Sautelet et C. Libraires, 1830. The first phase of composition is to be found in the ms. ‘Lepinasse’, conserved at the Voltaire Foundation (University of Oxford), which gives the text of the Observations with variants which were then integrated into the Paradoxe. The first available version of the Paradoxe is in the ms. ‘Nageon’ in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and is datable to around 1773, with corrections and additions from after the summer of 1777. A successive version, with minor variants, is contained in a manuscript conserved in St. Petersburg, on which the fourth manuscript now available is based, and which was discovered in the Vandeul Collection. See J. Marsh Dieckmann, Des «Observations» au «Paradoxe», in Denis Diderot, Paradoxe sur le comédien, ed. by J. Marsh Dieckmann; G. Dulac; J. Varloot; Paris, Hermann, 1995, pp. 3-24.
mimesis: imitation, in different forms, in poetry, painting, sculpture, dance, of a paradigm which the artist has imaginatively conceived and perfected, purifying it of ‘mire’.

In the case of acting, Diderot explains in the Paradoxe, the artistic process develops through several stages. The playwright observes the forms of reality and imaginatively defines an ideal model (the plot and characters), then imitates and represents them in the lines of the script and possibly in the stage directions indicating the sets, gestures and attitudes.

When the poet has given his dramatis personae the most suitable characters […] and possesses some imagination, it is my belief that he must necessarily form images of them […] These images, formed on the basis of the characters, will then influence the lines and stage movements; not least if the poet evokes them, sees them, and fixes them before him, emphasizing the various changes.\(^8\)

The actor gradually extracts the figure of the character as he reads and studies the script. The script alone however will be insufficient for the character’s transfer onto the stage. The actor must then give the correct intonation to the lines, insert pauses, perform certain gestures and assume appropriate expressions. Even when the playwright’s directions are long and detailed, gaps remain which only the actor’s art can fill:

There are points which it is almost better to leave to the actor […] The voice, tone, gesture, action: these belong to the actor; and it is this which most strikes us in the representation of the great passions.\(^9\)

The actor in his turn also draws his inspiration from reality to complete the script with the correct intonation, gestures, expressions, movements, pace and rhythm. He forms his own ideal image of the character, ready to be projected onto the stage. On occasions this ideal figure imagined by the actor is more perfect and successful than that imagined by the author; at other times, inferior. This depends on the respective skill of the one and the other. The greatest of the poets, Diderot declares, is he ‘who leaves least to the imagination of the great actor’,\(^10\) although the great actor can still manage to surpass him:

and there is nothing truer than Voltaire’s exclamation, when he heard Clairon in a piece of his, ‘Did I really write that?’ […] Anyhow, at that moment the ideal type in the speaking of the part went well beyond the poet’s ideal type in the writing of it.\(^11\)

Once the ideal figure is fixed in his imagination, the actor imitates it in his own body and voice in front of the audience. But to succeed convincingly he must not actually feel the passions he represents.

To demonstrate all of the above, Diderot accumulates throughout the Paradoxe a mass of very varied observations with more urgency than clarity. Two main lines

\(^8\) Denis Diderot, De la poésie dramatique, p. 360.
\(^9\) Denis Diderot, Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel, pp. 105-106.
\(^11\) Ibid., p. 55.
emerge however: the first concerning the characteristics of sensibility, the second the differences between stage representation and how we experience real events as they happen to and around us.

To truly feel the emotions of his part, Diderot observes, the actor must possess a mind which is readily moved and reacts immediately to the images and situations in the script. In other words, he must possess an acute ‘sensibility’, a gift of some complexity.

[Sensibility is] that disposition which accompanies organic weakness, which follows on easy affection of the diaphragm, on vivacity of imagination, on delicacy of nerves, which inclines one to being compassionate, to being horrified, to admiration, to fear, to being upset, to tears, to faintings, to rescues, to flights, to exclamations, to loss of self-control, to being contemptuous, disdainful, to having no clear notion of what is true, good and fine, to being unjust, to going mad.89

From an emotionalist viewpoint the actor should then possess a sort of ‘emotive hyperactivity’ which escapes the control of the will and rational reflection and acts according to its own, largely unpredictable dynamics. Our emotional reactions emerge in spontaneous and generally unexpected forms, and with an intensity it is impossible to pre-establish.

For this reason, acting based on sensibility would be above all inconsistent and uncontrollable. The actor might appear sublime and superbly effective in a number of scenes when in the apposite emotional state at the right time, but could equally appear weak and flat as soon as the inner drive inexplicably flags. A perfect example is that of Mlle. Dumesnil, the celebrated representative of emotionalist acting and co-protagonist of the Paris stage with Mlle. Clairon. She arrives on stage ‘without knowing what she is going to say; half the time she does not know what she is saying’, even if then ‘she has one sublime moment’.90

Moreover, emotional reactions tend to ‘consume themselves’ when the conditions stimulating them are frequently repeated, and it is impossible for the actor to maintain the same pitch and intensity of performance in subsequent repeats: ‘full of fire at the first performance, he would be worn out and cold as marble at the third’.91

With no control over the dynamics of his inner reactions, the actor is then unable to regulate the swift changes of emotional states, from joy to calm, calm to surprise, amazement, sadness, terror, desperation, etc. required by many parts.92 Equally important, trusting to his sensibility, and perceiving acting as reproducing the character’s separate states of mind from moment to moment, the actor would be incapable of grasping the part in its complex entirety, ‘to arrange its lights and shades, its forts and feebles’ so as to render ‘the broad effect’.93 Lastly, given his acute emotive reactivity, the actor is in no way able to avoid interference from the inner responses and motions elicited by his own daily life. The actor will have ‘a father, a mother, a wife, children, brothers, sisters, acquaintances, friends, a mistress’,

89 Ibid., p. 56.
90 Ibid., p. 12.
91 Ibid., p. 8.
93 Ibid., p. 95.
and ‘harassed and struck like us with an infinity of troubles’ would have mighty few days ‘left to devote to our amusement’.

This over-responsiveness poses such a threat that the actor must be wary not only of his own natural sensibility, possessed in varying degrees by all flesh-and-blood beings, but similarly of the ‘fake’ brand of actorly sensibility. When on stage, interpreting a part, pronouncing the character’s lines and performing his actions, it is easy for the actor to succumb to a strange, actorly sensibility which picks up all the echoes and spectres of the character’s “own” emotions: a distorted and slightly febrile form of artificial emotion.

This fact of stage action generating its own heat and energy had already been noted by d’Aigueberre. Aaron Hill opined that even assuming the poses required by the part produced a strongly-braced tension in the nerves of the neck, arms and feet which could “warm” the actor and prime the emotive sphere. For d’Aigueberre and Hill, however, this was a decided plus. Antoine-François Riccoboni had also commented on it, considering it neither positive nor negative but a physiological ‘extraordinary motion of the blood’ due to the effort required to represent passions the actor did not actually feel.

Diderot on the other hand considered fake sensibility as harmful. If the actor gives in to it, he will fall into ‘mannerism and monotony’, and must ‘strip it from him’, imposing ferocious abnegation ‘with a head of iron’, expelling any forms of interior emotion from his interpretation.

Diderot is careful however not to maintain that the whole creative process is exclusively lucid and rational. When the author or actor are constructing their ideal model, they can be guided by inspiration at various points, such as, for example, when the eyes of their imagination are suddenly confronted by unexpected traits and characteristics which are perfect, even essential, for the figure they are conjuring up. It is impossible to say who the “prompter” is, so to speak: ‘they are a sort of inspiration’. But inspiration has nothing to do with febrile emotive passion. Inspiration arises, in Diderot’s opinion, in moments of ‘cool reflection’.

Lastly, the range of emotions and states of mind which an actor can actually experience is limited. Acting based on emotionalist principles would allow an actor to perform only parts similar to his own character, since he would actually be unable to feel passions and states of mind inimical to his own personality, restricting his repertoire unacceptably.

If by some impossible chance an actress were endowed with a sensibility comparable in degree to that which the most finished art can simulate, the stage offers so many

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94 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
96 Antoine-François Riccoboni, L’Art du Théâtre, p. 41. In Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s Le Comédien this ‘fake warmth’ takes on a different meaning and is the negative result of overplayed gestures and shouts on the part of the actor to compensate his lack of ‘feu’ (pp. 41-42). See also Claude-Joseph Dorat, La déclamation théâtrale, p. 79.
different characters for imitation, one leading part brings in so many opposite situations that this rare and tearful creature, incapable of playing two different parts well, would at best excel in certain passages of one part; she would be the most unequal, the narrowest, the least apt actress you can imagine.99

The actor, then, would have only a limited range of characters at his command, and companies would either have a great number of actors, or accept the idea of offering sub-standard performances of the majority of plays.100

Real Life-Theatre Difference. Actors and Characters

So far Diderot’s critical line is basically analogous to that of Antoine-François Riccoboni: emotivity disturbs and impedes a correct interpretation of the part since expressive control is essential to acting. If the sound of the voice is ‘raised or lowered by the twentieth part of a quarter of a tone’, Diderot insists, ‘they would ring false’, and need ‘laborious study’ if they are to solve ‘a given problem’. Then the actor must know ‘exactly when to produce his handkerchief and shed tears’.101

Control and consistency – the actor’s ability to reproduce and repeat exactly and in the smallest detail the part he has rehearsed for so long – thus become the essential requisites for performance. On the other hand, he can only improve and fine-hone his performance if this is consistent and self-aware: year after year, as regards his personal technical ability, and evening after evening as regards the single part to play.102 Mlle. Clairon is the example of the perfect actress in this sense:

What acting was ever more perfect than Clairon’s? Think over this, study it; and you will find that at the sixth performance of a given part, she has every detail of her acting by heart, just as much as every word of her part. Doubtless she has imagined a type, and to conform to this type has been her first thought […] When, by dint of hard work, she has got as near as she can to this idea, the thing is done. To preserve the same nearness is a mere matter of memory and practice.103

In parallel to this nucleus of arguments runs a strictly interconnected series of considerations which follow Lessing’s line of distinction between real-life experience and stage representation. In real life we express ourselves through external manifestations spontaneously dictated by our state of mind. If, though, we transfer the same real process onto the stage, the results are unconvincing and ineffectual: art operates within its own system of rules and conventions, which do not coincide with those of reality, so that ‘nothing happens on the stage exactly as it happens in nature’.104 This is why the expressiveness of real life jars on stage, just as expressivity tailored to the stage would jar in daily life:

You give a recitation in a drawing-room; your feelings are stirred; your voice fails you; you burst into tears. You have, as you say, felt and felt deeply. Quite so; but had you made up your mind to that? Not at all. Yet you were carried away; you surprised and

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99 Ibid., p. 94.
100 Ibid., p. 24.
101 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
102 See ibid., p. 8, p. 27 and p. 29.
103 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
104 Ibid., p. 5.
touched your hearers, you made a great hit. All this is true enough. But now transfer your easy tone, your simple expression, your every-day hearing, to the stage, and I assure you, you will be paltry and weak. You may cry to your heart’s content, and the audience will only laugh.105

It is first and foremost the space in the theatre, Diderot explains, which prohibits the use of the expressions of real life. The space of the theatre is ample-to-vast, which is why a débutante actress may perform very successfully in a private house before a restricted audience, but may be booed in a theatre, despite giving an identical performance:

in her ground-floor room […] all was in proportion to the audience and the space; there was nothing that called for exaltation […] On the boards all conditions were changed: there a different impersonation was needed, since all the surroundings were enlarged. In private theatricals, in a drawing-room, where the spectator is almost on a level with the actor, the true dramatic impersonation would almost have struck you as being on an enormous, a gigantic scale, and at the end of the performance you would have said confidentially to a friend, ‘she will not succeed; she is too extravagant’.106

It is not simply a question of space however. The fundamental difference is the distance between a dramatis persona and a flesh-and-blood individual. In his Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel Diderot had divided characters into two separate categories, comic and tragic. In comedy, protagonists are types, each representing a large number of people, while tragic figures are single and singular: out-of-the-ordinary heroes like Attilius Regulus, Brutus or Cato.107 But whether types or individuals, as characters they are distinct from human beings. The figures of tragedy possess a greatness and force which is infinitely superior to that of real people, and experience extreme passions which require expressive means onstage which are disproportionate if compared to real-world counterparts. It logically follows that the natural expression of feelings as experienced by the actor would be weak and inadequate: just as the movements, poses, cries and gestures suited to the Cleopatras, Merops and Agrippinas of theatre scripts, ‘the vain images of poetry’, would ‘raise laughter in society’.108

The stature of comic characters on the other hand is very similar to that of normal human beings, but the comic character is a type-cast figure, paradigm of a whole category of humankind:

Billard, the clerk, is a tartufe; Grizel, the abbé, is a tartufe, but he is not the Tartufe. Toinard, the banker, was a miser, but he is not the Miser. The Miser, the Tartufe, were drawn from the Toinards and Grizels in the world; they contain their broadest and most marked features, but there is in them no exact portrait of an individual109

The onstage communication of feelings actually felt by the actor as a single individual would then again be inadequate for the expressive dimensions of a stage

105 Ibid., p. 18.
106 Ibid., p. 81.
107 Denis Diderot, Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel, p. 138 and p. 140.
109 Ibid., p. 49.
character, to the extent that while for an emotionalist a character-actor affinity was an advantage, for Diderot it becomes an obstacle.

A sure way to act in a cramped, mean style is to play one’s own character. You are, let us say, a tartufe, a miser, a misanthrope; you will play your part well enough, but you will not come near what the poet has done. He has created the Tartufe, the Miser, the Misanthrope.110

The Problems of the “Paradoxe”

Of course the most famous pages of the Paradoxe are undoubtedly those concerning the characteristics of sensibility and its incompatibility with the demands of acting, but the essay’s importance probably lies firstly in its definition of acting’s creative process. The actor forms an image of the character in his mind, elaborating on that created by the playwright, and then imitates it through the physical instruments of the outer movements and expressions of the body. The actorly process thus works in a completely analogous way to the mechanisms of literary creation, and the actor is an artist on a par with the dramatic poet. His creative ability is no longer measured by the right to cut or modify the words of the script. All this becomes a secondary problem. Creativity is guaranteed by recognizing that his art consists of forging an image according to the power of his personal imagination, an exclusive product which is very different from the image of the same character created by any other colleague, and able to supersede the figure delineated by the playwright. Dramatist and actor are both, equally, artists in being able to conjure up powerful, immediate, and effective images of the fancy.

This conception of the actor’s art opens up a new way of eliminating the gestural code. Emotionalism had already done so by trusting in the actor’s real feelings, able spontaneously to produce their own emotions. Anti-emotionalism, having dismissed this route, had sought for norms and a grammar able to define and regulate the production of external expressions according to the requirements of the stage. Antoine-François Riccoboni had remained entangled in the old patterns of the code of oratory. Lessing had planned a grammar based on the dual dynamics of physical expression and the emotive sphere. In the Paradoxe, however, the code no longer applies, since the actor’s primary task is not to represent feelings, but to project a figure formed in his fantasy, according to his personal creative gifts. Rather than “studying” the most effective gesture to depict the emotions taking hold of Meropé, Cleopatra, or Agrippina at different points of the play, the actress “watches” the character in action and imitates it. It is no accident that for Diderot as for Luigi Riccoboni an expressive code of the passions is impossible: the variables and nuances to take into account would be infinite – or at least excessive.

I would naturally speak to you of the accent proper to each passion. Yet this passion is modified in so many ways; is so labile and delicate an entity, that I know none other so able to make us aware of the poverty of all languages in existence […] One may combine words that are ponderous and acute, rapid and slow, sweet and strong; but the mesh of the net remains too wide, and retains nothing.111

110 Ibid.
111 Denis Diderot, Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel, p. 107.
Having posited the creation of the image of the character as the essence of the actor’s task, the problem of the function of sentiment arises. For Diderot of course it is indispensable to exclude it from the actor’s onstage operations, since he could find it a distraction while concentrated on regulating the gestures and expressions of the figure he is evoking and creating. More difficult though is the exclusion of feeling from the previous phase of acting, while the actor is studying the part and imaginatively developing the figure. Feeling, the time-honoured tradition has it, is the very element which fires and directs the imagination in shaping its figures. By excluding it, the Paradoxe fails to pronounce on the processes of character-creation, the key moment in the whole of the actor’s art. What takes its place is a somewhat mysterious function, inspiration, presented in an unusually “chilled” version, which occurs at “unexpected” moments but is favoured by the absence of any emotive tension. More than this it is impossible to say.

But far and away the most important topic in the Paradoxe is the distance separating theatre from real life, one of the two central arguments in the attack on emotionalism. Yet while this distance is painstakingly explained and repeated, Diderot was working to reduce it by moving towards a hypothetical confluence of scene and daily life. All aspects of theatre reform proposed in the Entretiens and the Poésie dramatique, from the use of space to that of sets, furnishings, and costumes to the actors’ movements and gestures, tend as far as possible to abolish exclusively theatrical conventions in favour of a more convincing reproduction of reality.

This applies equally to the characters. Those of tragedy, we have said, differ from real individuals in being singular and extraordinary, and those of comedy in being exemplary type-casts of entire human categories. The characters of the new bourgeois drama projected and promised by Diderot however possess neither of the characteristics to any clear degree: they are ‘often’ to be generic as in comedy, but always ‘less’ singular than in tragedy. They inhabit, as it were, an ‘intermediate zone’.112 In a word, or a few words, the conventions of the stage and the construction of the play mark a difference between the stage and daily life which condemns emotionalist acting. Near-paradoxically however, the more the theatre moves in the direction Diderot considered desirable, and the more the stage-action ‘gets nearer to one’s own time and country’, the further we recede from these conventions,113 preparing the way for a rehabilitation of emotionalist procedures.

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112 Ibid., p. 140.
The Late Eighteenth Century: a Profusion of Treatises

A number of important works appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century besides those of Lessing and Diderot. In 1760 Noverre published his *Lettres sur la danse*, followed in 1772 by d’Hannetaire’s *Observations sur l’Art du Comédien*, and in 1774 by Prince de Ligne’s *Lettres à Eugénie*. Last and most importantly, in 1785 Engel published his fundamental work, *Ideen zu einer Mimik*.

Particularly striking is the sheer number of articles, essays, letters, treatises and volumes to appear on actors and acting. The authors belong to several quite different categories. They were playwrights, journalists, academics, a refined and cosmopolitan intellectual like the Prince de Ligne, who expounds his ideas on acting in the form of advice to a young actress, a brilliant lawyer such as Hérault de Séchelles, author of the *Réflexions sur la DÉclamation*, and of course actors: d’Hannetaire, Dazincourt, Préville and Iffland. Acting becomes a subject for literature and various pieces are actually in verse: for example Dorat’s *La Déclamation Théâtral*, Robert Lloyd’s *The Actor*, and Charles Churchill’s *The Rosciad*, which were particularly popular in Britain.

The authors, in their different ways and from different viewpoints, were all debating similar topics within similar theoretical and conceptual horizons. Despite opposition between the actors, who like Antoine-François Riccoboni arrogated to themselves the exclusive right to pronounce on aspects of actual performance, and the authors, like Rémond de Sainte-Albine, who considered acting a wider discipline, to be analyzed from the outside, with greater impartiality, there was no real divergence in approach. Lekain maintained that only an actor, and a great actor at that, such as Baron, was authorized to write a treatise on acting. D’Hannetaire, on the other hand, despite apparently agreeing with Antoine-François Riccoboni that

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2 French-language works in verse include Pierre-Marin Blondel de Brizé, *L’Art du Théâtre, ou le Parfait Comédien*. *Poème en deux chants*, [Paris], 1744; Michel Sticotti, *L’art du théâtre, poème didactique, historique et moral*, Berlin, Jasped and Bourdeaux, 1769; Levacher de Charnois, *Conseils à une jeune actrice, avec de notes nécessaires pour l’intelligence du texte*, n.p., 1788; and in English Kelly Young, *Thespis or, A critical Examination into the Merits of all the Principal Performers belonging to the Drury Lane Theatre*, London, G. Kearsly, 1766 (the second part was published the following year by the same publisher); Thomas Young, *The Siddoniad: A Characteristical and Critical Poem*, Dublin, R. Marchbank, 1784; and the anonymous *An Essay on the Stage; or, the Art of Acting: A Poem*, Edinburgh, John Yair, 1754; *The Modern Stage Exemplified, in an Epistle to a Young Actor*, London, W. Flexney, 1788.

those who personally practise an art are better judges than those who simply preach
the theory, maintained that the superlative approach was to collect the concepts of
writers who had ‘reasoned’ on acting, from Rémond de Sainte-Albine to Marmontel,
integrating them with personal observations.  

The concrete and practical value of the literature seems to depend less on the
actor’s direct experience onstage than on the attention to detail and precise example.
Works to appear so far, Prince de Ligne stated, from *Le Comédien* to the writings of
Riccoboni, Sticotti and Dorat contain only obvious and general observations, and as
such are worthless. Their writers resemble army officers who, determined to see
themselves in print, produce treatises on military tactics proclaiming ‘that a general
must know the country, and have spies’, that ‘mountain warfare is more difficult than
that on the plain, and that fording rivers is dangerous’, and like platitudes.  

The need for concreteness is answered by examples from the stage. D’Hannetaire
considers them indispensable, even where the author is himself a practitioner.  Prince
de Ligne’s *Lettres à Eugénie*, to take one instance, are full of examples, often in the
form of anecdotes. The anecdotes underpin Diderot’s reasoning in Sticotti’s review
of the *Garrick* and consequently in the *Paradoxe*. D’Hannetaire’s treatise is punctuated
with anecdotes throughout. In 1775 three volumes of *Anecdotes dramatiques* appeared,
by Jean Clement and Laporte. And Thomas Davies uses anecdotes to great effect in
his very successful *Dramatic Miscellanies*. What the treatises most draw on however are
indicative scenes from the better-known plays and characteristic performances by the
best-known actors, opening the debate to the problem of different national
repertoires and acting styles.

One of Lessing’s reasons against publishing the complete text of Rémond de
Sainte-Albine’s *Comédien* was that many of the examples were from plays unknown in
Germany and thus incomprehensible to *Beiträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theater*
readers. Diderot had gone one step further. He considered Sticotti’s *Garrick* confused
and pointless because it provided its French readership with only terms and notions
from the English stage. The same words used in the setting of the Comédie Française had a different meaning inside the London theatres, Diderot insisted, rather over-stating his case since in 1750 Hill had expounded Rémond de Sainte-
Albine’s concepts to an English public with no difficulty or misunderstanding.  Sticotti had exported them to France without Diderot’s realizing their ancient origins; and Diderot himself had cited Garrick’s actorly gifts to propound the theses of his
*Paradoxe*. The same terms, concepts, and criteria of evaluation circulated among the
treatises of Europe, and it was precisely the existence of a shared fund of concepts
which made it possible for international similarities and differences in acting styles to
emerge – hence the succinct grid comparing French, English, Italian and Spanish

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4 See d’Hannetaire [Jean Nicolas Servandoni], *Observations sur l’Art du Comédien* (Paris, 1772), Paris, Aux
dépenses d’une Société typographique, 1774, p. 15, p. 34 and p. 38. The *Observations* reviews the
preceding literature, from Luigi and Antoine-François Riccoboni to Rémond de Sainte-Albine,
Sticotti, Marmontel, Caillava d’Estandoux (*Art de la Comédie*) and Prince de Ligne (*Lettres à Eugénie*,
published 1774, the manuscript of which d’Hannetaire claimed to know).
6 See d’Hannetaire, *Observations*, p. 34.
actors drawn up by Prince de Ligne, citing Luigi Riccoboni’s Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différents théâtres de l’Europe.\(^8\)

A further factor requiring at least a semblance of objectivity was the description and evaluation of the actors themselves, strictly interconnected with the theoretical criteria expounded in the various treatises. The anonymous author of the *Theatrical Review* appreciated the evaluations of French actors in *Le Comédien*, but criticized John Hill’s appraisals of their English colleagues in *The Actor* because ‘without method or meaning’ and based on personal ‘likings or resentments’ alone.\(^9\) Thus after evaluating twenty-four Drury Lane and Covent Garden actors, he proposed a ‘scale’ of points out of twenty for each essential actorly gift: five tragic gifts (genius, judgment, expression, action and voice) and four comic (genius, judgment, vis comica and variety). Garrick, as tragic actor, obtained a score of 17 for “Genius”, 18 for “Judgment”, 17 for “Expression”, 18 for “Action” and 18 for “Voice”. The others followed in descending order.\(^10\)

Critical attention to actors also took another direction. A growing need was felt for full and accurate biographies of the most famous set within the context of a faithful reconstruction of the world of the theatre. This was met by Thomas Davies’s two volumes on Garrick, published in 1780, which quickly became exemplary.\(^11\)

*The Work of the Author, the Creation of the Actor*

A number of themes emerge with insistence from the various topics covered. The first of these is the relationship between the actor and the work to be interpreted. Rémont de Sainte-Albine had been foremost in acknowledging the actor’s creative contribution, arrogating for him the right to cut or even verbally modify passages from the text. Not everyone agreed with this. Louis Charpentier, in his *Causes de la Décadence du Gout sur le Théâtre*, takes direct issue with *Le Comédien* and defines the actor a ‘servile copier’ whose job is to develop the author’s ideas step by faithful step: any nuance or gesture to be effectively enacted must already be present in the script.\(^12\) A few years later Mercier complained that ‘the labourer obeys the architect’ and ‘the violin the composer’ while actors rebel against playwrights and the public quite wrongly appears to respect the interpreter more than the poet.\(^13\) Wilkes too, in *A General View of the Stage*, condemned attempts to tamper with the author’s lines and the actors who indulged in such license.\(^14\)

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\(^10\) Ibid., pp. 45-46. The “scales” used for actors is explicitly based on the scales for painters proposed by Roger de Piles in *Cours de peinture par principes*, pp. 489-493.


In the majority of treatises, however, the actor's creativity is amply acknowledged and approved. For Dorat his art reaches its peak in silent acting, where the actor often has to 'create' in order to obtain a 'better interpretation' of the playwright's work. 15 Llyod speaks of the 'blended skills' of author and actor, while consigning the lion's share of the merit to the latter. 16 D'Hannetaire appreciates, within limits, interpretative touches on the actor's part, and with Rémond de Sainte-Albine allows the actor to cut loosely-written, flabby text or to rewrite details. 17 Nougaret goes so far as to warn the playwright against giving the actor too many directions. 18 Prince de Ligne concedes the odd actorly reworking of a line or detail, 19 and Lekain has no qualms about presenting two detailed lists of passages from Corneille with due corrections and suggested variants. 20

The actor's role as regarded the script however, emended or otherwise, was obvious to everyone. According to the long-standing conviction of public, actors and critics, acting consisted in representing the character and enacting the vicissitudes of the plot in the most efficient and convincing way possible. The tendency therefore remained to abolish any element underlining the difference between the figure of the actor and the image of the character; and the removal, for example, of any unsuitable aspects of costume met with unanimous consensus. Noverre praised Mlle. Clairon's innovatory rejection of the panier, 'an ornament as ridiculous as it is embarrassing': the actress decided that Medea, Electra and Arianna 'had nothing of the air, tone, gait and apparel of our bourgeois ladies' and realized that, in eliminating the uses of the present time, she made 'more real and natural' her imitation of characters from antiquity. 21 In his Lettres sur l'état présent de nos spectacles, Nicolas Bricaire de La Dixmérie rejoices that the protagonist of Corneille's Horace is no longer seen stabbing his sister in a pair of dazzlingly white gloves. 22

Simultaneously there was growing attention to the details of the action. La Dixmérie, again in his Lettres, expresses appreciation of a performance of Racine's Iphigénie in which the Greek camp is seen at night. Agamemnon's tent illuminates the hero from within it as he folds a letter, goes out, fumbles around for the servant sleeping at the entrance, shakes him awake, and finally pronounces his opening lines. Day then breaks and we see the soldiers waking and taking up their positions, 'all

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15 See Claude-Joseph Dorat, La Déclamation Théâtrale, p. 46 and p. 72. This includes an extended version of the already-published Essai sur la déclamation tragique (Paris, 1758) and two more cantos dedicated to La comédie and L'opéra, followed by La danse (Paris, Sébastien Jorry, 1767).
17 See d'Hannetaire, Observations, pp. 178-179 and pp. 120-123.
19 See Prince de Ligne, Lettres à Eugénie, pp. 20-21.
with exact verisimilitude’. Even the most consolidated and accepted stage habits are criticized in the name of the absurdity of behaviour they impose. Wilkes even expresses doubts as regards opera’s use of song: ‘Who is there, in his right wits, that ever sung out his commands to his servants? or imparted, in that manner, a secret to a friend?’

This was not so much a new pro-realist tendency as the felt need to construct a more precise and articulated action, slanted so as to reinforce effects onstage. In comedy, requiring the representation of daily life, the actors must of course be ‘natural’. But if they are really natural, Prince de Ligne objects, there is no good reason why the public should pay to go and see them; and in no case should realistic details of the action be exaggerated, creating tableaux ‘so charged with plausibility’ that they ‘stopped being plausible in the effort to seem so’. By straining to be real, they end up being simply over-detailed.

Representation should, then, show “modified” reality. If, Noverre stresses, nature provides up with imperfect models which need correcting, this does not mean making them perfect and pleasing, but organizing the representation so that it acts like a sort of magic on the soul of the spectator:

as happens in painting so the ballet demands a perfection even more difficult to attain in being conditioned by a faithful imitation of nature, and it is arduous, if not impossible, to grasp this kind of seductive truth which removes the spectator’s illusion, transports him in an instant to the place in which the action is taking place, and places his soul in that selfsame situation in which he would be did he see the true action of which art furnishes the imitation […] It is as dangerous to render one’s model more beautiful as it is to render it more ugly; these two errors are equally opposed to similitude, the one exaggerating nature, the other degrading her.

Similarly, William Cooke, in his *Elements of Dramatic Criticism*, maintained that it was a question of ‘heightening or depressing nature, as painters do, to create the illusion of truth’.

**Performing the Part. Study, Observation and Imitation**

The writers of the late eighteenth century were also largely in agreement as to the means towards interpreting a part successfully. The process was complex, beginning logically enough by carefully studying the script to understand the character, the situations he will find himself in, and the passions he will feel. After this the actor must ‘enter’ the character and situation, and produce suitable expressions.

This ‘entering’ or ‘penetrating’ the part is the essential moment, and the two terms recur constantly. It would be wrong, though, to read this in an emotionalist key: the

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actor’s emotional empathy is a far more nuanced question in treatises of the period, though it is true that Mlle. Dumesnil and Mlle. Clairon, perceived as models of emotionalism and antiemotionalism respectively, are constantly compared, and it is always clear which camp writers belong to. Dorat and Noverre are decidedly pro-Dumesnil, and Prince de Ligne pro-Clairon, although everyone recognized the extraordinary stature of both, and the revolutionary innovations introduced into their acting practices: Dumesnil when she raced across the stage in Voltaire’s Mérope, and Clairon who dared to laugh when acting a tragic role.29

Theoretical formulations, then, avoid taking clear sides in the emotionalist vs. antiemotionalist controversy on which Diderot had decisively pronounced. Few people were unambivalent. For some, the question was relatively simple, and inherited from a traditional tenet of oratory: lively and sincere empathy is what distinguishes the actor from the preacher. The former can pretend to be moved by what he says; the latter must be moved.30 Acting, then, is characterized by antiemotionalist techniques. Charpentier similarly maintains that the actor simply pretends, using the social skill we all necessarily possess to convincingly reproduce feelings we do not experience. He quotes Antoine-François Riccoboni and takes up a number of his arguments.31

No-one else however holds such a firm position. D’Hannetaire seems to be antiemotionalist, and underlines the need for study and reflection, but then admits that the actor’s inner disposition inevitably influences his acting. Commenting on Le Comédien he admonishes: if it is useful for the actors of a love-scene to have some mutual inclination, it is absolutely essential that they should at least not detest each other.32 Walker repeats the classic warning that excessive emotion can block the actor’s expressive capacity, and appreciates Aaron Hill’s An Essay on the Art of Acting for having ‘made a bold attempt to such a description of the passions as may enable an actor to adopt them mechanically’, but then goes on to repeat Cicero’s and Quintilian’s advice to arouse in the soul the feelings to be expressed.33 Noverre supports the use of emotive empathy without rejecting the assistance of technique and conscious control of the action.34 Dorfeuille, in his Éléments de l’Art du Comédien,

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28 Cf., e.g., Antoine Maillet Duclairon: the actor should be ‘bien pénétré de la situation’ (Essai sur la connaissance des théâtres français, Paris, Prault Pére, 1751, p. 15); Theophilus Cibber: the actor is ‘thorough master of his art […] having clearly conceived, and entered into the spirit of the sentiment and expression’ (Cibber’s Two Dissertations on the Theatres. With an Appendix, in Three Parts, London, Printed for the Author, 1756, First Dissertation, p. 57); and Louis de Cahusac: ‘pénétrez-vous alors, jusqu’à l’enthousiasme, du sujet que vous avez à représenter’ (La danse ancienne et modernes ou traité historiques de la danse, p. 168).

29 See Claude-Joseph Dorat, La Déclamation Théâtrale, pp. 57-59; Jean-Georges Noverre, Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets, p. 186; and Prince de Ligne, Lettres à Eugénie, pp. 67-68, with praise for Clairon’s laughter. On Dumesnil’s running across the stage in Mérope and the effect produced, see among others Nicolas Bricaire de La Dixmérie, Lettres sur l’état présent de nos spectacles, pp. 59-60.


32 See d’Hannetaire, Observations, pp. 172-173.


34 Among a number of passages cf., e.g., Jean-Georges Noverre, Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets, p. 36, on walk-ons who must take part in the action ‘with as much art as control’.
condemns Clairon for reducing all acting to art, pities the actor who endorses the same opinion, claims the primacy of sentiment, but then states that if trusting completely to technique is dangerous, ignoring its resources is limiting. 35 Basically, empathy, technique, and reflection are all elements in the creativity of the actor, and vary according to his prevalent attitude. Nor does it appear essential to decide which should assume primary importance, but rather to recognize the function exploited by each.

Study is obviously necessary at the beginning of the process, when the actor is still entering the part and trying to understand the character. As Le Bauld de Nans explains, the actor is unable to ‘fill’ himself with the character before he has completely analyzed the part. If he contents himself with learning the lines and clarifying a few basic points, the performance will be sketchy and superficial. 36

In analyzing the character’s different aspects, the actor must make sure they are not contradictory, and remain consistent throughout the play. A contradictory character, Gottsched states, is ‘a monster’ who has no existence in nature; from his first appearance on stage a character must make his inclinations, virtues, and vices very clear, so that the spectator can hazard a guess as to his future actions. 37 Pickering has it that the character is denoted by essential traits which must remain in all circumstances, 38 while for Nougaret characters ‘must never contradict themselves’, and if presented as sly, wicked, enamoured, good, or cruel, must not then assume different vices or virtues, and it is a mistake to allow the characters to end up better than they have been in the course of the action. 39 Diderot admits that in real life unity of character is ‘a chimera’ but considers it necessary in the theatre. 40 Lessing has no doubt whatsoever:

There must be no contradiction in the characters; they must remain constantly uniform, always equal to themselves; must show themselves now more decisive, now less, according to the circumstances operating on them, but none of these circumstances should have such a decisive weight as to make them change radically in an instant. A Turkish sultan must remain just that, even when in love. And the Turk, knowing only rough and sensual love, can allow himself none of those refinements which only the sick fantasy of European colleagues connect with him. 41

Indeed, Lessing points out, it would be impossible to play a character denoted by passions manifested through contradictory signs such as pride and delicacy. Pride requires a full, sonorous voice, a fiery glance, and rapid, resolute movements, delicacy a soft expression, harmonious voice, and graceful, dignified movements. An actor would be forced to render one of the two aspects and relegate the other to a secondary characteristic. 42 Larive, who inherited Lekain’s tragic roles, condemns

36 Claude-Etienne Lebauld de Nans, Lettre à M. D., pp. 368-369.
38 See Roger Pickering, Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy, p. 13.
40 Denis Diderot, Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel, p. 155.
42 See ibid., p. 119.
actors who try to unite all the passions in one part ‘where often they have but one to express’.43

Which essential aspects the character must possess is quite obvious. Traditionally, they should correspond to general categories based on moral qualities, social status, nationality, etc.44 Less important, though, than the list of traits is the overall vision of the character as composed of general qualities, representative of precise human categories.45 If, in the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*, Diderot had proposed a distinction between comic characters (represented as types), and tragic same (represented as ‘singular’ figures), Lessing dedicated a good number of pages of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* effectively proving that the distinction was in actual fact somewhat obscure and difficult to sustain.46

Having decided on the characteristics of his character, the actor then studies his reactions to the plot-situations in which he finds himself. While consistently representing these characteristics onstage, he must ‘give variety to his manner of acting’ in order to express the varied states of mind that follow.47 There then follows an analysis of the expressions to use. Fundamental importance is given to clarity and precision. The treatises in general emphasize that the actor’s features must be precise enough to be clearly visible to the farthest rows of the audience. The *Theatrical Examiner* maintained that without ‘marking and strong features’, all the physical qualities of an actor, however superlative, were ineffectual. The *Theatrical Review* appreciated ‘the dumb eloquence of [Spranger Barry’s] eyes’ when, in the role of Othello, ‘their colour […] becomes capable of conveying his soul’s meaning to the most distant spectator’.48 D’Hannetaire observed that some actors have a face lacking the energy to express the passions with sufficient energy – no small problem.49 In some cases this can depend on the movement of the muscles not being clearly impressed on the face, so it is best for the actor not to be ‘plump-faced’, the layer of fat between skin and muscles not allowing the passion to transpire.50 The importance of muscular flexibility and visibility was such that in Mercier’s opinion the ancient Greeks could not have used the full, rigid masks generally attributed to classical theatre: they must, he insists, have been of thin, delicate skin on which the actor’s muscle movements would have been imprinted.51 And Hérault de Séchelles testified that to all those admiring her ability to express every nuance of a full range of passions, Mlle. Clairon would readily explain that she had studied anatomy to know precisely which muscles should be variously activated.52

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43 Larive [Jean Mauduit], *Réflexions sur l’art théâtral*, Paris, Rondonneau, 1801, p. 16.
45 This is the conception which is most clearly expressed in Jean François Caillaha d’Estandoux’s fundamental *De l’Art de la Comédie*, 4 vols., Paris, Didot aîné, 1772. See in the second volume pp. 253-503.
51 See Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, p. 353.
'Marking and strong features’ once established, study and reflection are again applied in the choice of expression. Some writers reproduce the usual advice revolving around a prescriptive code establishing the physical expressions and their corresponding passions. Dorat first declares the precepts of art to be arbitrary, but ends up by indicating the most suitable expression of the eyes, the lines of the forehead, and the tone of voice for the ‘dark mood’ of Molière’s Misanthrope protagonist.53 Wilkes reiterates Quintilian’s code to the letter,54 while the anonymous author of the Sentimental Spouter lists the correct gestures for rendering hope, jealousy, anger, pain, etc., and John Palmer follows suit in the New Spouter Companion.55 Burgh begins The Art of Speaking with An Essay; in which are given Rules for expressing properly the principal Passions, and Walker dedicates pages of the second volume of the Elements of Elocution to the subject.56

At the same time a good number of writers consider indications of the kind useless: and not, or not only, because it is enough to experience the feeling and the requisite expressions will follow. Their objections follow another line of argument. According to Maillet Duclairon, it is the infinite variety of characters and situations which makes any pre-established code impossible: ‘each character and situation requires different movements’. Noverre opines that there are too many passions and variants, and that we would require as many precepts as there are possible modifications.57 In Cooke’s opinion, taking up the line of Luigi Riccoboni’s Pensées sur la déclamation, it is the individuality of the voice and the tones of the individual actor which put any codification of vocal expressions out of the question. Then as regards external bodily attitudes and facial expressions, he examines Aaron Hill’s suggestions and finds them rigid and mechanical, pronouncing: ‘he writes more like a Martinet on Tactics than a philosopher in the investigation of the human passions’. Sheridan for his part insists on the individual modulation of tones and gestures, and so on.58

In a word, the infinite variety of characters and their passions on the one hand, and the actor’s individual traits on the other make it virtually impossible to reduce expressivity to predetermined forms and formulae to be studied and reproduced. It also appears to compromise the existence of rules to follow. Both Noverre and Prince de Ligne fail to see any use in norms or principles. Once rules have been established, Noverre roundly insists, they should be ‘broken and rejected at every turn’.59 As Prince de Ligne puts it, one does not become an actor ‘as one becomes an accountant’.60 This begs the question as to the usefulness of creating schools of acting. Prince de Ligne is against them: more useful by far would be for the actors of

53 Claude-Joseph Dorat, La Déclamation Théâtrale, p. 70 and p. 72.
54 See Thomas Wilkes, A General View of the Stage, pp. 139-142.
59 Jean-Georges Noverre, Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets, p. 264.
60 Prince de Ligne, Lettres à Eugénie, p. 113.
a company to get together and, with the guidance of an expert director, brainstorm all aspects of the parts and the play.\footnote{See ibid., pp. 113-114.}

Diffidence towards rules and codes however means all the more need to think through the role and the expressions it requires. A very different route, one advised by Enfield, would be to work from nature, and ‘observe the manner in which the several passions and feelings are expressed in real life’.\footnote{William Enfield, \textit{Essay on Elocution}, in \textit{The Speaker}, London, J. Johnson and others, 1808, p. 26 (first edition 1786), followed by (and quoted in) \textit{The New Theopian Oracle}, London, Bentley; Roach, 1791, p. 18.} No written rules then, but a careful selection of models from daily reality; not to evolve a new, possibly more authentic and effective code, but to inspire the actor to exploit his creativity and individuality and produce all the attitudes and expressions he feels the part requires.

Observing and imitating a model, however, would be a mechanical operation, devoid of all the value ascribed to imitation in the late eighteenth-century theory. From his \textit{Theatralische Bibliothek} to the \textit{Hamburgische Dramaturgie}, Lessing had underlined how a passion’s physical expression stimulates genuine symptoms of it in the mind. Within English theory, a similar theory had been advanced by Aaron Hill,\footnote{See Aaron Hill, Letter to Marshall (24 October 1733), p. 158; and \textit{An Essay on the Art of Acting}, pp. 361-362.} resurfacing in Burke’s celebrated essay on the sublime, published in 1757:

\begin{quote}
when the body is disposed, by any means whatsoever, to such emotions, as it would acquire by the means of a certain passion; it will of itself excite something very like that passion in the mind [...] I have often observed that on mimicking the looks and gestures, of angry, or placid, or frighted, or daring men, I have involuntarily found my mind turned to that passion whose appearance I endeavoured to imitate; nay, I am convinced it is hard to avoid it; though one strove to separate the passion from its correspondent gestures.\footnote{Edmund Burke, \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful}, R. and J. Dodsley, London, 1757, pp. 123-125.}
\end{quote}

For good measure Walker then reiterated both Hill’s and Burke’s observations in his \textit{Elements of Elocution}.\footnote{See John Walker, \textit{Elements of Education}, II, pp. 278-280 and pp. 288-290.}

From the perception of this double linkage between the outer expression and inner feeling the new function of imitation was born. By imitating the observed expression, the actor assimilates it with the emotional reverberations created within him and then shapes it to his requirements and personality, while adapting it to the part to be acted. This is the basis of d’Hannetaire’s distinction between ‘copying’, or mechanically reproducing an external form, and ‘imitating’, making a model one’s own through assimilation.\footnote{D’Hannetaire, \textit{Observations}, p. 6.} Linked to the two-way dynamics of the muscles and the inner faculties, imitation loses any aspect of mechanical reproduction and authorizes the teaching of acting as the imitation of models. Useless, d’Hannetaire insists, to have students study nature and seek for truth, or to order ‘more fire’ or ‘more soul’: the instructor should present his student-actors with his own direct examples of how to render a character.\footnote{Ibid., p. 2.} Imitating models previously evolved by another actor then loses any taint of a bad or at least clumsy copy, and far from necessarily blocking
creativity, can inspire and guide it. Out, then, go abstract and general norms: in come effective examples from a great actor on a real stage. And these are not only taken from the life, but actually reproduced, as Francis Gentleman explains in the *Dramatic Censor*, suggesting that a series of prints to be made and sold catching Garrick’s various expressions in his various roles would be considerably useful.68

**The Functions of Sentiment**

The function of sentiment is probably the most problematic of the actor’s creative processes. From the first approach to the part, the script fires his imagination and feelings, which then process it in hours of reflection and study. Once the character’s identity is clear to him, and the nature of his situations and actions understood, emotional participation is essential if he is to enter the part and externalize it in suitable gestures and expressions. This is the key moment in the role of sentiment, and it raised a whole series of questions to which late eighteenth-century literature found no simple solution.

For an actor to produce the range of feelings required by multiple roles he needs extreme flexibility and the ability to mould himself like ‘soft wax’, as Rémont de Sainte-Albine puts it. ‘Any peculiar turn of mind which is only a partial sensibility, is rather an hindrance than an advantage to him who would excel as an actor’, Hill warns. He later cites Susannah Cibber in the role of Andromache in Ambrose Philips’s *Distressed Mother* (act IV). Of two successive speeches, one is delivered satisfactorily, ‘the melancholy and plaintive turn of her mind helping her in expressing the affliction’, whereas the second, requiring ‘a fire and feeling of a more exalted kind, mingling itself with the grief’ fails to convince. ‘The same natural turn of mind, which before assisted her so happily’, Hill writes, ‘prevents her from equalling our own sensations’69 – hence the conviction, reiterated by Wilkes, that the actor, ‘to do justice to his character’ must ‘make a temporarily renunciation of himself and all his connections in common life’ and ‘forget, if possible, his own identity’70.

An identity devoid of any specific determination, however – a state of mind so open, with a sensibility so reactive to the most diverse stimuli – risks leaving the actor vulnerable and exposed. Onstage he is inundated by currents of emotion, of various sorts and sources. Firstly, those produced by fake sensitivity born of the heat of action, which in itself can be beneficial; but also by the reactions of the public, which is also open to the influence of extraneous conditions, down to the temperature in the theatre or the size of the audience. When it is large, Prince de Ligne observes, it is also ‘warmer’ and more attentive.71 This then reflects on the actor who, if faced with a distracted audience, will be disheartened and, as d’Hannetaire puts it, ‘will lose the fire which should animate him in the part he acts’, while an attentive audience produces the necessary ‘warmth of applause’ to ‘kindle

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the performance and the actor. Duly warmed, Larive adds, the actor’s innermost being ‘exalts’ and incites him in a way ‘that the most profound study could never have procured him’.

To this is to be added the emotional charge the actors, as an ensemble, receive from each other onstage. Frequently an actor will ‘receive and communicate unlooked for impressions from and with those on stage with him’. If his colleagues are sensitive to these impressions, the ‘inspired’ actor becomes sublime, abandons himself to the flux of passions, and ‘the soul of the audience is at one with his’. The actor’s onstage being is then a highly-sensitized zone crossed by a number of currents: not just those of the character he is creating, but also those interconnecting him with the public on the one hand and his colleagues on the other. Lastly, there are the concerns of daily life which are inevitably exacerbated in the sensitive and impressionable actor, and disturb and enervate him at the moment in which he should be absorbing the emotions demanded by the part. The actor, Maillet Duclairon declares, should never bring the problems and concerns of daily life to the theatre – no small matter. The only solution, in d’Hannetaire’s opinion, is to so study and analyze the part that it is clear to the actor in every detail, and so stably fixed in his mind that any passing concern will produce nothing more than light turbulence, ‘slight distortions imperceptible even to the eyes of the audience’.

This stability is then of great importance, to the extent that, in d’Hannetaire’s opinion at least, there is one perfect interpretation alone for every play, which ideally should be perceived, realized, and then immutably replicated. When the dramatist writes his play ‘he has but one single idea for each thing’. Then why, when acting, ‘desire to produce several and diverse?’ Different interpretations of the same part by two excellent actors is no virtue: one of the two will inevitably be better, and among thirty different ways there will always be one which is the best of all. A part should not, then, only remain stable throughout the repeat performances of the same actor: it should remain immutable, once perfection has been reached, across time and generations.

What inconvenience could there be, if the means of reciting a play were constantly identical, and handed down the one to the other as by tradition when once it has been decided which of these ways was the best? True beauty is of all centuries, and is ageless.

D’Hannetaire’s is a radical position, although for the majority of actors a stable role, endorsed by tradition, is a precious certainty, and any variant should be introduced with extreme caution. In A General View of the Stage Wilkes recounts the disastrous results of an actor determined to give an alternative interpretation of Hamlet. Others, like Pickering, look at the advantages of varying a performance in a long series of repeats. ‘A judicious variant’ can refresh it, although the danger is not

72 D’Hannetaire, Observations, pp. 165-166.
74 See Antoine Maillet Duclairon, Essai sur la connaissance des théâtres français, p. 19.
75 D’Hannetaire, Observations, p. 25.
76 Ibid., pp. 16-22.
so much a cold and mechanical performance on the actor’s part as déjà-vu in a jaded audience, when a play has run for several nights successively. But the actor should tread carefully, and every change must be made ‘only in those more refined parts of action, which struck us most at first; whose impression upon us becomes weaker by a long repeated sameness’. Yet even the stability of a part which has been studied, checked and repeated is no guarantee against an on surge of emotions extraneous to the character. It will help, certainly; but the essential element is psychological, and consists in the effort of concentration the actor needs before acting. Charpentier is firm on this point:

It has always astonished me that, in their own interests, actors have not thought of retiring to some quiet and reserved place before a performance, to cement themselves in their parts and enter into the proper state. These moments of quiet collection bring great advantages. The actor would pass in review the whole development of the play, would activate his senses, and rather than seeming a part of the jostling cheer of the foyer, would seem taken up in the concerns and thoughts of the characters throughout the action.79

Hérault de Séchelles reports that Lekain would walk around the theatre for an hour before the performance, taking great strides in order ‘to fill himself with the ghosts of the tragedy’. Concentration can begin even earlier: Noverre reports of Garrick that he would close himself away and hide in the days before acting an important part, and would already be bound up in a melancholic and unhappy situation twenty-four hours before the première. As to Voltaire, when he acted at the Ferney Theatre he would rise and dress in the costume of the character to be played in the evening, Larive reports, maintaining that in stepping into the costume, he stepped into the part.

Engel’s Treatise
Read in its entirety, the critical literature of the late eighteenth century takes on a singular aspect. It appears to be concentrated on a considerable number of concrete problems without ever actually managing to solve any of them. It perceives the functions of feeling, study, reflection, observation and rehearsing in the actor’s creative trajectory, but never explains how these functions operate together, without undermining, overlapping, or interfering with each other. The general consensus was that the actor had to lay aside self and personality and take on the feelings of the character, but it is not then clear how to assess the originality and excellence of his individual performance. The need for concentration is so obvious as hardly to need stating: but retiring to a secluded place a few minutes before the performance, assuming as far as possible a mindset and mood like that of the character’s for the preceding twenty-four hours, or putting on the costume early in the morning to go

78 Roger Pickering, Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy, p. 61. Prince de Ligne shares his view, while favourable to the inevitable transformation of roles in the course of time and changing generations of audience and actors (see Lettres à Eugénie, pp. 119-120 and pp. 126-127).
80 Hérault de Séchelles, Réflexions sur la Déclamation, p. 173.
81 See Jean-Georges Noverre, Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets, pp. 212-213.
82 See Larive, Réflexions sur l’art théâtral, p. 52.
about daily matters are all quite a different thing, and reflect a different perception of the relationship to establish with the character. Other questions arise from the proposed usefulness of imitating an expression taken from real life, or already pre-figured by an actor-model, operating a rigid distinction between imitating and copying; and so on.

The many topics discussed are clearly predicated on a number of questions which the late eighteenth century was failing to put, and certainly not for lack of theorists. The difficulties surely lie in the instruments at their disposal. Once acting had been distinguished from oratory, it was then necessary to assess it according to categories of its own. The initial solution of emotionalist theory in place of the rejected expressive code actually obscured the problems linked to the physical tool of the body. Antiemotionalism had rehabilitated this aspect but by excluding sentiment had created a break between the various functions involved in expressivity which the theory of oratory had always considered interrelated.

This then was the task facing the theory of acting in the second half of the century: to rethink the expressive procedures inherited from the doctrine of eloquence and connect them with the aims of acting: in a word, to flesh out a complete character. Oratory had studied the direct expressive means to convince, teach, praise and convert. What is was now necessary to understand was how the actor could represent a stage character using all the resources of body and voice. The whole theory of expression, from the function of real feeling within the orator to the use of voice and gestural modes to be learnt and adopted, needed to be revised in the light of the relationship between actor and character. This is the essential element, the basis for any possible explanation of how the actor should move, communicate, express himself – in a word ‘act’ successfully on the stage.

The question was never openly defined however, and the literature of the period veered from the actor’s immediate, concrete onstage problems, debated with a wealth of examples, anecdotes and detailed analyses of specific passages, with relative interpretative solutions and their success or otherwise, and a broad, theoretical approach to problems of expression which however seemed unable to position them in an even broader and more detailed perspective.

A case in point is Engel’s two-volume Ideen zu einer Mimik published in 1785 and 1786 and comprising some seven hundred pages of imaginary correspondence with a hypothetical addressee. This is organized into forty-four letters with sixty illustrations and a substantial apparatus of state-of-the-art references to the debate on acting, dance, aesthetics, philosophy, physiognomy and the visual arts.

Its aim is to produce a theory of acting as a grammar of bodily eloquence. Engel takes his cue from precisely the passage in the Hamburgische Dramaturgie where Lessing deplores the lack of such a theory. He is at pains to demonstrate that Lessing considers it in no way impossible: indeed, Lessing’s criticism of Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s emotionalist doctrine constitutes the premise behind the theoretical construction of the Ideen.

Expression as the spontaneous result of some inner impulse is unsuited to the stage, Engel states, since it can render the passions ‘in the manner in which they manifest themselves in individuals in their daily life’, while the theatre requires expressions which are perfect, although this does not mean gestures which are
‘simply elegant and pleasing’. Antone-François Riccoboni’s complicated instructions for harmoniously raising an arm and moving a hand, or Hogarth’s advice for producing elegant gestures can do nothing but harm. The only sound advice to the actor is to avoid any pedantic imitation of nature and to moderate the imitation of real-life expressions and gestures so as not to offend decency or exceed in effects which would end up being anything but ‘special’. The movements of a dying man for example must be dictated by a scrupulous observation from life, but then moderated or simply hinted at in the concrete enacting. The same is true of passions like anger, which are easily over-stated.

Engel’s position regarding actorly elegance actually had a very precise motive. It was time, he stated, that the truth ‘hitherto sacrificed to beauty again came into its own’. For this reason, he went on, ‘I intend only to concern myself with the former and pay no heed to the latter’. The ‘perfection’ required of acting then lies in its ‘truth’, meaning reproducing according to universal and ideal rules the modes and expressions which in real life are vitiated by individual variants and occasional contaminations. The first thing needed, then, is knowledge of the norms governing human expressions.

Expressions, Engel explains, depend on the activity of the soul revealed through the muscles. It controls ‘every single muscle’ and often ‘works on each simultaneously’ although more easily and frequently through those parts of the body with particularly mobile muscles ‘namely through the expressions of the face and above all the eyes’. The actor must therefore be completely aware of his own face and habitual way of moving or positioning the different parts of the body, so as to correct any misuse or defects which would compromise a perfect externalization.

When studying the part, the actor should be concerned not only, in general, in expressing each passion in such a way as to conform to truth, but in asking himself specifically to what extent a given expression uses that part of his body of which he has become aware of being most greatly deficient through a certain degree of introspection, namely the judgment of friends: the actor must practise as much as possible, until the correct use of that part of the body becomes habitual, and while he acts on stage, he must attend to that part with all the care conceded him by the passion enveloping him.

This preliminary measure taken, it is then important to establish what modifications of the soul can be expressed through the body, then recognize the constant and universal features involved in manifesting each of them. Here real-life study is essential, particularly of people with little formal education whose habits and behaviour are relatively direct and unadulterated.

Education makes man doubly mendacious; it teaches them to dissipulate the true force of certain sentiments and flaunt the false force of others […] the populace, children

84 See ibid., p. 76 and pp. 74-80.
85 See ibid., pp. 47-49 and pp. 212-213.
86 Ibid., p. 78.
87 Ibid., p. 61 and p. 64.
88 Ibid., pp. 314-315.
89 See ibid., p. 27.
and savages – in a word, the uncultivated – are ideal subjects for those needing to study
the expressive forms of the passions, if our interest be limited to the strength and truth
of these passions, and not their beauty.90

The constant and universal expressive features are above all to be perceived by
studying the ways the single modification of the soul is expressed in different
individuals and circumstances: the common element will always emerge. From this
Engel develops a detailed analysis of the expressions, applying on the one hand a
comparative study of the affections and on the other a definition of the different
classes of bodily movements, divided into ‘mechanical movements’, such as the
shortness of breath of a person running, and ‘movements dependent on activities of
the soul’, the second category to be subdivided into ‘pictorial’ and ‘expressive’, which
in their turn can be ‘intentional’, ‘imitative’, or ‘involuntary’.91

He concedes that a limited part of these means of expression involve the actor’s
emotive participation. It is impossible, for example, to turn pale or blush through
simple muscle control, so the actor will need to draw very carefully on the classical
techniques of empathy, calling up images which are particularly moving, as advised
by Quintilian.92 In other cases, the perfect expression will be the result of study,
observation and imitation.

In the course of the two volumes of the *Ideen* articulating the complex
phenomenology of expression, Engel offers a number of fascinating reflections such
as the hypothesis that the succession of ideas passing through the mind determines
how people walk, ‘now more slowly, now faster; now more resolutely, now more
hesitantly’, their gait ‘deriving from the obscure ideas which tacitly govern the will’.93
He is very interesting on the transition from one inner state to another, and on the
tempo and rhythm of the different passions as they are externalized.94 What concerns
the present analysis, however, is the general slant of the treatise, whereby everything
relevant to the search for universal rules, indispensable for an effectual theory of
acting, produces results which have little or no useful application to the concrete
work of the actor.

The first objection Engel comes up against is the wealth and diversity of material
to deal with, to the extent that the number and variety of inner modifications
(expressed by the body) would seem to exclude the possibility of establishing any
rules which could be universal. Engel gives this very short shrift, distinguishing the
limited number of ‘pure and simple’ sensations for which it is possible to give the
corresponding expressions from the ‘compound’ sensations which are combinations
of the former group, and as such only require an analysis of the rules of
combination.95

Matters then get more complicated with the multiplications of the same passions
or inner disposition according to the character, rank, nationality and historical period
of the individual manifesting it: but all this is equally of little importance, Engel
hurries to explain. A theory of gestural action, he writes, should limit itself to the

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90 Ibid., pp. 176-177.
91 Ibid., p. 46, p. 59 and pp. 96-99.
92 See ibid., pp. 102-103 and p. 197.
93 Ibid., p. 98.
94 See ibid., pp. 209-219, pp. 239-244 and pp. 256-258.
95 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
essential: ‘basically, to what is left when all the differences between man and man are set aside, without taking into account all that is excessively particular’. The totality of these infinite particulars would be the object of a ‘historical type of knowledge’ which is beyond the brief of ‘extrapolating principles of a general character’, conferring ‘on the knowledge thus acquired something of the scientific’, and ‘elevating it into a system’.96

But this is not enough. The expressions of the different passions also vary according to the relationship between the passion’s subject and object. In expressing ‘desire’, the movements, gestures and attitudes depend on the subject’s knowledge of the object, the distance between and dimensions of their bodies, and the senses – touch, sight, sound – involved in the attraction or repulsion, and so on.97 The interconnected variants in the area potentially containing constants of the expressive system therefore ramify further, and the combinations of inner states and outer attitudes seem to extend infinitely.

The craving for knowledge and the remaining affections of the intellect can first of all interconnect amongst themselves, then connect with the affections of the heart; desires can connect with other desires and with the products of contemplation; again, these last can join amongst themselves; and the expressions of diverse bodily sensations can join with all these expressions of inner spiritual sensations; lastly, once more, all pictorial and indicative gestures can interconnect with the multitude of expressive gestures. To this we must add the different possible degrees of each affection, the different possible combinations of affections, and the different possible proportions in the combination of the various affections, since in one case it is one feeling, and in another a different one which is the livelier and pre-eminent.98

There are also the equally different ‘affections’ revealed through expressions sharing constant and universal traits, such as envy and malice, or hatred and jealousy.99 It would be impossible, Engel maintains, to distinguish them on the basis of a theory of inner expression intended as a science. Some inner aspects such as respect, on the other hand, manifest themselves in a variety of expressions evincing no recognizably shared traits.100

A fracture, then, becomes visible in the Ideen. The rigorous and defined system of universal rules, all possible variants accounted for, ends up as a set of schematic instructions which are of no particular use to the actors. It is no great help, for example, to know that desire is manifested through ‘the oblique inclination of the body’ and through ‘the straight line’ denoting a movement towards the desired object.101 What the actor does need to know, however, is everything concerning the whole uncertain territory of all these possible variants which cannot be reduced and organized within a precise set of norms. Engel dwells on the variants at length, although he is always at pains to state that the ideas he expounds on the subject are in any case extraneous to a scientific theory of acting.102 But these variants constitute

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96 Ibid., pp. 39-40.
97 See ibid., pp. 154-161 and pp. 169-172.
98 Ibid., pp. 329-330.
99 See ibid., pp. 231-234.
100 See ibid., pp. 274-275.
101 Ibid., p. 163 and p. 165.
102 See ibid., p. 120.
the actor’s very sphere of action. What Engel defines the ‘historical type of awareness’ of behaviour and expressivity is indeed ‘indispensable to the actor’, whose job it is to suit the expression to the type of character, according to personality, age, social status, nationality and period in history,\textsuperscript{103} and to reproduce considerably complex states of mind:

What is frequently most difficult is to decide on the correct mixture of feelings, and within the mixture, the correct proportion: but of course this is not the task of the analyst of body language who assigns the proper expression to each feeling; it is the task of the actor himself, who when studying his part must diligently reach into its furthest depths until he reaches what characterizes it.\textsuperscript{104}

In short, in the attempt to formulate a grammar of bodily eloquence, acting comes down to the juggling of infinite variants; and while these strictly concern the work of the actor and all that he must do to render emotions, states of mind, and the actions natural to the character – his situation, period, nation, and so forth –, they still lie outside any “scientific” organization of the universal rules of expression.

**Boswell and the Levels of Interiority**

The work which most advanced the eighteenth-century debate on the art of acting, with all its converging and diverging opinions, was not Engel’s celebrated Ideen, for all its impressiveness, but two slimmer and much less famous texts. One was an article by Boswell, the other a short, virtually unknown treatise, its attribution uncertain. Together they opened up the perspective which the nineteenth century was to make its own.

Boswell was one of the most representative figures in English culture of the period, and best-known for his monumental Life of Samuel Johnson. His various other publications however also included three short essays, published in 1770 in the London Magazine under the joint title ‘Remarks on the Profession of a Player’.\textsuperscript{105} The first considers the low regard in which the profession of actor was traditionally held, and the gross injustice of this, given the gifts, training and dedication required for the stage. The third reviews the many works on acting written in England and argues the need for detailed reviews to chronicle the acting styles and details of the most interesting interpretations. It then goes on to the human, moral and, finally, mortal aspects of the actor: the end of all his art when he retires from the scene and subsequently dies.

The most important essay however was the second one. It grew out of occasional remarks Boswell had jotted down in his diary between 1762 and 1763, often after conversations with Thomas Sheridan. A frequent topic between them was Garrick’s performances, here recorded by Boswell in two short notes focusing on Garrick’s emotional empathy onstage. He quoted the opinion which held that Garrick never felt the emotions of the part but imitated them perfectly through his art, adding the

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., pp. 36-41.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 339.

\textsuperscript{105} The three essays, which appeared in The London Magazine in September, October and November 1770, were collected and republished in 1929 in a volume entitled On the Profession of a Player (London, Elkin Mathews and Marrot).
much-abused commonplace that in this way the actor could never touch the hearts of his audience. But that Garrick did was beyond all doubt, Boswell himself breaking down in tears at his interpretation of Lear. However the question was not that simple. If the actor abandoned himself to the part, Boswell admitted, he forgot himself and lost control over his performance. Empathy and expressive control would once again, then, seem to be in irreconcilable conflict.

The 1770 essay returns to the problem but this time in different terms. For the actor to take on particular feelings is not so much a question of creating the emotions and passions in himself as of being able, ‘at a certain hour, to change himself into a different kind of being from what he really is’. And controlling the expressions means ‘regulating’ the feelings so that they correspond to the part to be played, which means that the actor ‘enters into’ the character. This puts the difficulty of associating empathy and expressive control in a different light: that of establishing a real relationship between the actor’s own personality and the character’s identity. Boswell is then able to put the question from a new angle, retrieving an apparently secondary aspect touched on by various writers but always en passant and without any clear focus or debate: the need to portray evil characters on the stage.

This was clearly not an issue in the doctrine of oratory. There was no question of the orator or preacher having to present themselves as figures of corruption or vice. Quite the reverse was true: the orator had to pronounce his speech with all the dignity and authority of his role, and the preacher with a profound belief in his exhortations. Any perceivable shortfall between the person and the projected image would have been disastrous. It was infinitely desirable, then, for the orator to be truly sound, serious and erudite in his private life, and the preacher to be good and devout. If they happened not to be, however, it was still necessary for no-one to be able to doubt them, since it was to be excluded that a clearly immoral preacher could preach convincing sermons from the pulpit.

In the theory of acting the rule had been used as advice to actors and above all actresses to live a blameless life. A notoriously “easy” actress, for example, as Colley Cibber observed, could only provoke gales of laughter if she attempted the part of a modest and prudish young girl. Playing evil, deplorable characters was a different matter however. If playing them successfully meant deploying all actorly resources, including empathy, then to play a villain the actor would have to actually experience the feelings of a villain, at least in the time spent onstage.

Rémont de Sainte-Albine had simply glanced at the issue. D’Hannetaire had concentrated on the relationship between the character and the actor’s public image, reaching the solomonic conclusion that to interpret every kind of character, virtuous or vicious, it was enough to be neither too virtuous nor too vicious, or at any rate, not to appear so. Prince de Ligne also considered the question briefly, but

107 See ibid., pp. 256-257.
108 See ibid., p. 109.
109 See ibid., On the Profession of a Player, p. 12.
dismissed it nonchalantly if inconsistently. Discussing whether or not the actor should be the person he plays, he opined, is a waste of time: no-one wants to pass for a murderer. On the other hand, he admitted that actually being in love, and known to be, was a help when interpreting a love-scene.\(^{113}\) John Hill took a curious position: an honest man is able to assume the aspect of a villain and a gentleman that of a peasant because these are ‘inferior’ beings, less than what he himself is. It would be impossible however to convey the aspect of a superior being, so that a mean-spirited actor could never successfully play the tragic hero: his natural disposition would show in his performance and reveal the factitious, artful aspect.\(^{114}\) Pickering used a similar argument. An honest man is able to interpret a character he would detest in real life, while a churl or libertine could never act out a delicate love-scene however great their powers of pretence or imitation.\(^{115}\) Charpentier had a radical solution. The fact that the same actor can play such a range of good and bad characters proves that acting is simply pretence, and calls for no real empathy with the feelings expressed.\(^{116}\)

In his essay Boswell faces the issue squarely, placing it at the centre of the problem of identification. The main refutation of the need for empathy and identification in a successful performance is precisely the fact that it is perfectly possible to play a miscreant, or even a criminal.

If […] Garrick believes himself to be every character that he represents he is a madman and ought to be confined. Nay, sir, he is a villain, and ought to be hanged. If, for instance, he believes himself to be Macbeth, he has committed murder, he is a vile assassin; who, in violation of the laws of hospitality, as well as other principles, has imbrued his hands in the blood of his king while he was sleeping under his roof. If, sir, he has really been that person in his own mind, he has in his own mind been as guilty as Macbeth.\(^{117}\)

Boswell’s solution lies in a surmised layering of the human personality, allowing the co-existence on different levels of consciousness of very different inner realities:

He [the actor] must assume in a strong degree the character which he represents, while at the same time [he] retains the consciousness of his own character. The feelings and passions of the character he represents must take full possession as it were of the antechamber of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess.\(^{118}\)

An honest person will therefore ‘retain’ his own moral qualities, and not become a murderer when he represents Macbeth or Richard III. The point, though, is another. In Boswell’s conception the human personality is subdivided into different inner levels, and allows a dynamic interpenetration of different and traditionally separated


\(^{115}\) See Roger Pickering, *Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy*, pp. 5-7. Pickering cites as example the part of Jaffier in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserved*.


\(^{118}\) Ibid., p. 18.
functions and components. When we all, in daily life, pretend to feelings we are far from possessing, simply because they seem suited to the occasion, we are actually ‘adopting’ convenient feelings at the superficial, ‘antechamber’ level, without relinquishing our true feelings in the ‘innermost recess’.

Did we discover to our companions what we really think of them, frequent quarrels would ensue; and did we not express more regard for them than we really feel, the pleasure of social intercourse would be much contracted. It being necessary then in the intercourse of life to have such appearances, and dissimulation being to most people irksome and fatiguing, we insensibly, for our own ease, adopt feelings suitable to every occasion, and so, like players, are to a certain degree a different character from our own.119

Simulation then is always associated with a superficial adopting of suitable feelings. The classic contraposition between acting seen as simulation, where the actor uses well-rehearsed techniques to imitate, in cold blood, passions he does not feel, and acting as emotional empathy spontaneously transformed into external expression thus emerges as non-existent. It is simply a matter of the different inner levels at which the actor locates the feelings suited to the character: a more superficial level in cold acting, a more profound one in empathetic acting.

Furthermore, in the course of acting the weight of a function or emotive component can change its level of intensity. Proof of this is given in the lawyer who even as he is becoming heated in his client’s defense can at the same time be perfectly aware to the point of not even wishing to win the case. Then, while pleading, his actual state of mind is ‘laid over with a temporary glaring varnish, which flies off instantaneously when he has finished his harangue’.120

Lastly, the inter-level dynamics, from the most profound (the seat of the true personality), to the most superficial (the location of induced emotions) can vary from individual to individual. Some individuals, generally those of relatively weak character, are particularly disposed towards deep emotional shifts; others maintain their own, solid personality, receiving induced emotional attitudes as ‘colours’ rather like those produced by rays of light passing through a prism. There are also special, unusually stolid personalities able to assume an ‘external’ character without this affecting their own.121

Boswell’s essay, then, produces an important result. In perceiving the essence of the problem of acting to lie in the connection between the personality of the actor and of the character, it points to the articulation of the actor’s personality and the dynamic emotional levels used onstage as the key which can make the relationship effectively viable.

**Touron**

Twelve years later *L’art du comédien* appeared, attributed to Touron (or Tournon) de la Chapelle, member of the Académie d’Arras and author of a number of works

119 Ibid., p. 19.
120 Ibid., pp. 18-19.
121 Ibid., pp. 20-22.
on French language and spelling; he also published a novel.\textsuperscript{122} The author of \textit{L’art du comédien} was relatively au fait with the various treatises in French, citing Antoine-François Riccoboni, Rémond de Sainte-Albine, Dorat and d’Hannetaire, but knew nothing of the English and German authors.\textsuperscript{123}

Touron’s work makes a decisive break with canonical emotionalist texts. While Luigi Riccoboni and Rémond de Sainte-Albine based acting on the actor’s immediate and unfiltered participation with the character’s feelings, they also acknowledged the need for art in the form of conscious technique which was necessary not only to help the actor when empathy failed or was impossible, but also to obtain calculated scenic effects which were indispensable for a correct and effective representation of the part. Touron, on the other hand, devotes little space to the subject, and considers that the actor’s conscious control of stage action is basically a question of harmonious ensemble work, regulating the individual performance to that of everyone else on the stage.\textsuperscript{124} Of course for him too acting requires a series of faculties and gifts which the actor should exercise carefully, but these regard studying and understanding the part, and forming a precise idea of the character: all aspects preliminary to the actual performance and indispensable for a complete penetration of the part, the basis in its turn for a concrete realization on the stage.\textsuperscript{125}

He is careful not to limit himself to stating that an actor’s inner qualities, his character and temperament, are essential in determining the choice of suitable roles, as emotional tenets would have it. He even goes so far as to say that a lack of physique du rôle can, within limits, be overcome if there is psychological empathy with the character.

A lover of pleasing aspect and most interesting figure can never succeed on the stage unless gifted also with a great sensibility; conversely one sees young women, of mediocre aspect but greatly sensitive, succeeding in the part of lovers beyond all expectation, since in these roles the greatest sensibility is required.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{122} In the \textit{Dictionnaire des ouvrages anonymes} Barbier states Ersch’s original attribution of the work to Tournon, and excludes the possibility that this was the political essayist, author of \textit{Résolutions de Paris}, who was guillotined in 1794, citing the author by surname only, Tournon (Paris, Daffis, 1872, I, p. 288). There existed a Tournon de la Chapelle, member of the Académie d’Arras, who had written on the French language and spelling, to whom the work is generally attributed (cf., e.g., S. Chaouche, \textit{Écrits sur l’art théâtral 1753-1801}, I, Spectateurs, p. 681). The Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue files three copies in three different ways: the first giving no author; the second a simple ‘Touron, d’après Barbier’; the third attributing it to Alex Tournon de la Chapelle. The \textit{Nouveau Supplément à la France littéraire} (IV, first part, Paris, La Veuve Duchesne, 1784), gives on p. 302 \textit{L’art du comédien} attributed to Tournon de la Chapelle together with \textit{Les Promenades de Clarisse et du Marquis de Valcéz, ou nouvelle Méthode pour apprendre les Principes de la Langue et de l’Ortographe Françoise, à l’usage des Dames} (Paris, Cailleau, 1784-1787).

\textsuperscript{123} Touron includes Garrick among the authors of ‘learned treatises’, but probably had no first-hand knowledge of his \textit{An Essay on Acting}, and was not familiar with Aaron Hill and John Hill, who for the most part are ignored in the whole French debate.

\textsuperscript{124} Only a dozen or so words are dedicated to the recourse to ‘art’ when ‘the impulses of the soul’ might lead the actor ‘astray’ (Tournon, \textit{L’art du comédien, vu dans ses principes}, Amsterdam et Paris, Cailleau et La Veuve Duchesne, 1782, p. 119). On the need for the actor to work in synchrony with his colleagues, with co-ordinate entries and exits, see pp. 124-127 and pp. 130-134.

\textsuperscript{125} See ibid., pp. 107-116.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., pp. 75-76.
Moreover the ‘beauty’ and ‘fascination’ of the figure of the actor on stage actually depend on his inner aspect and precision in capturing the spirit of the character, together with the ‘truth’ with which he follows the impulses of the heart.\textsuperscript{127}

In a viewpoint of the kind, the criticism of antiemotionalist acting is not limited to the usual denunciation of cold delivery and the failure to truly move the spectator – although Touron underlines it with meticulous insistency – but is particularly acute and perceptive. The end result of a perfect technical representation on the part of a consummately skilled actor is certainly praiseworthy, but instead of producing the public’s emotional involvement and the illusion of truth, it burns itself out, Touron remarks, in spectatorly amazement and admiration for a bravura performance.

One part of the actors have relied on imitation; in long, laborious work they have imitated the tones, accents, gestures, expressions, and generally all that which should comprise the character they represent; in the end, by force of art, they succeed in giving an exact copy of nature; and they have amazed and surprised us, leaving us in a state of admiration.\textsuperscript{128}

An actor amply possessed of the art is able to seduce my ears and my eyes but not my heart, […] and the only pleasure left me will then be that of admiring the art he adopts to deceive me.\textsuperscript{129}

What constitutes the real importance of \textit{L’art du comédien}, however, are not so much the extreme positions he strikes in the emotionalist debate as the emergent sketch of a new vision of character and the actor’s creative process.

For Touron the assumption behind acting lies in the inner relationship between actor and character in the name of their common human condition. If in the grandeur of his figure a tragic hero like Voltaire’s Bruto ‘were no longer a man’, he would be unable to rouse our admiration and would fail to make us feel the contradictory emotions tearing him apart. And if in a tragedy we are touched by the misfortunes befalling a hero, ‘it is because he is a man, and not because he is a king’.\textsuperscript{130} On the other hand it is precisely the actor’s ability which allows him to sound his own human depths and find there the motions, passions, attitudes and states of mind of his character: if an actor ‘succeeds in knowing himself, he will equally know others’.\textsuperscript{131}

The figure of the character, defined in its real dimension of human being, tends to assume particular complexity. That of the tyrant is a case in point: cruel and ferocious, on the stage he is often ‘denatured’ and distorted into a monster. He is perceived, Touron says, as a wild animal and not as ‘a man’, the end result of which is a ‘cold and monotonous’ performance. Once returned to the dimensions of a ‘cruel man’, he can be portrayed as a figure of basic evil overlaid with ‘a mask of sweetness and goodness’, as pitiless and ruthless individuals are in real life.\textsuperscript{132}

The depths of the character are directly correlated in the complexity of analysis an actor needs to fully grasp them. It is not enough to define the range of passions

\begin{footnotes}
\item[127] Ibid., pp. 81-82.
\item[128] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
\item[129] Ibid., pp. 43-44.
\item[130] Ibid., p. 16.
\item[131] Ibid., p. 104.
\item[132] Ibid., p. 119.
\end{footnotes}
belonging to the human category he represents, and recognize his innate tendencies and how he will react emotionally to the situations he is exposed to. It is also necessary to distinguish what his natural dispositions are as opposed to his secondary same, determined by habit and contingency, and ask oneself if the character will manage to ‘challenge prejudice’ and ‘defy social expectations’ and, above all, grasp ‘the interest’ and ‘purpose’ moving his action in the course of the drama. The character is then transformed from a simple conglomerate of passions solicited by the events of the play into an active subject within specific situations which determine the character’s personality but can also be modified in their turn.

The actor’s work now emerges as a complex strategy of approach to the character, articulated in phases which gradually activate all his different faculties until he is completely involved. It begins with (understanding and) memorizing the part, to be conceived from the beginning as a natural process rather than a mechanical operation. He begins by carefully reading the script, trying to understand what the author intended, the single figures in the overall composition, and his character’s exact place in the action, together with those of his interlocutors. From this growing understanding of circumstances, characters and their interrelations he then moves on to the actual words his character speaks, and the dynamics which produce them:

We begin to reread the text from the first line, and in the most simple way possible; we begin to act, naturally, without the least effort, particularly seeking to clarify the author’s ideas […] Most of all, no pre-established habit, no studied tone […] but in compensation perception and sound judgment, positioning the character without failing to lend ear, or rather, observing the reasoning of his interlocutors, the better to respond; to enter into the sphere of interests of the character, adopting his passions, penetrating his state of being, following him and speaking in his place as if we were him, without ceasing to be ourselves.

This is repeated for some days until securely committed to memory. Then the actor stops, and for a fortnight or so tries not to think about the play or his character, partly to rest his memory but above all so as to shed any ‘useless or false’ traits which might have inserted themselves while learning the part. Successively he rereads the script, reassessing the idea he had formed of the character and analyzing it carefully in the light of all the conditions and circumstances which could influence the character’s personality and chosen actions.

With a clear idea of the part he then tries ‘to become this imaginary person if possible’, adopting his ‘character, passions, and interests’. To do this he has to ask himself the important question: ‘What would I have done? What would I have thought? How would I have expressed myself in such a circumstance, if I had been Mohammed, if I had been Vendôme?’ The answer comes by as full an immersion as his imagination allows in the same situation as the character:

I am Vendôme; I see Adélaïde: there is Nemours; I speak, they reply; I see only them. I adore Adélaïde! I would do anything for her; I idolize her!… The enemy approaches!… I run into battle; my people, my army await me: but Adélaïde! My subject, yet so dear to

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133 Ibid., pp. 114-115.
134 Ibid., pp. 109-111.
135 Ibid., pp. 113-114.
my heart! She I have done everything for, who dares to disdain me! And my brother loves her! And he alone is loved!136

This last phase is clearly derived from Quintilian, and the idea that the images vividly evoked in the orator’s mind by his words elicit the corresponding feelings. In the same way the ‘vision’ of the theatrical situation and of the protagonists and their interrelations – Adélaïde, Nemours, the enemy, the battle – all promote identification with the character.

Quintilian’s procedure was taken as canonical in treatises on oratory, but had been modified by an essential variant, very clearly expounded by Le Faucheur in his Traité de l’action de l’orateur. The images the orator evoked in his mind do not necessarily have to correspond to the scenes, facts, and situations described by his words. They should simply be effective, as effective as possible, and stimulate the required emotions, the tacit rule being that the closer they are to the orator’s own situation and experience, the more they will inevitably affect him.137 In actorly terms this basically means that onstage he can have his mind on anything he wishes – any deep-seated personal inclinations or obsessions – as long as it produces the required emotions.

Touron combines the two possibilities: using both Quintilian’s original procedure, and the actor’s own, real experience. On the one hand it is the actor’s innermost personality which must come into play, so it is essential that the situations and images in the play affect him deeply. This is made possible by the common human condition he shares with the character, which allows him to ask and answer the question: what would I do in that situation? On the other hand, the images must refer rigorously to the character and his personal history, and the process of identification depends greatly on the precision the actor has brought to understanding and defining the figures, situations and events in the plot. To succeed in this, the actor ‘should have been born with great sensitivity’ and at the same time be able ‘to judge correctly’, which means both ‘conceiving perfectly’ and ‘feeling deeply and reacting strongly’: for this the stage calls for ‘sensibility’ together with a ‘faculty of quick understanding’ and ‘a lively imagination’.138

Touron’s three components of identification essential for a successful interpretation are, then, a perfect reconstruction of character and situation, its translation into precise and lively inner images, and the actor’s personal participation in the imaginary events of the play. The consequences on a theoretical level are important because they change the concept of identification. This is less a question of the ability to feel analogous or identical feelings to the character’s, than of being able to penetrate and participate in his precise situation, with all the weight and urgency of the actor’s own inner life. It means imaginatively merging with the character, with the full force of the actor’s personality, in every event and experience of the character’s life.

136 Ibid., pp. 114-118. References are to Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète and Adélaïde du Guesclin by Voltaire.
137 See Michel Le Faucheur, Traité de l’action de l’orateur ou de la prononciation et du geste, Paris, Courbé, 1657, pp. 204-205.
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1798 produced the memoirs of Mlle. Clairon and Mlle. Dumesnil. The two actresses clearly disagree about almost everything, and on one point in particular: on how to render the same passion in different characters.

For Dumesnil the problem is non-existent. The passions remain the same, whoever is feeling them and in whatever circumstance.

The difference in periods, places, customs and habits [...] All this has no more influence on the great features of nature which feed the tragic fire, such as love, jealousy, revenge, ambition, and maternal and filial love than the difference in the languages in which tragedies are written. The great passions of the soul are the same from pole to pole.¹

There do not exist two ways of loving and hating then, but only different combinations of general passions. Two tragic characters, Arianna and Dido, love in the same way. The only difference lies in the fact that Arianna feels the pangs of jealousy as well as love:

Two princesses worthy of the name undoubtedly have but the same way of loving: it is a passion of the soul. Here Arianna also feels the torments of jealousy [...] another passion of the soul.²

With complete symmetry Clairon, the living symbol of antiemotionalist acting, underlines the difference in passions from one character to the next, and the need to base the acting on the different ‘nuances’ of feelings, requiring long ‘study’, as opposed to the immediacy of identification acting:

What study must needs be made [...] before succeeding in depicting love, hate, ambition, and all the feelings to which man is susceptible; and all the degrees through which these feelings reach the full expression?³

As regards the figures of Arianna and Dido:

Dido is a widow and absolute queen; her experience and habit of command put assuredness into her glance, impressiveness into her voice, anger into her reprimands. Arianna, a fugitive girl, supplicates and lowers her eyes to say: ‘I love you’; her reprimands are expressed in a soft and timorous voice; modesty must appear to check her outbursts of desperation [...] In accordance with these differences in character it is necessary to arrange her physiognomy, bodily posture, proud or gentle gestures, and the

¹ Mémoires de Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, en réponse aux Mémoires d’Hyppolite Clairon, Paris, Dentu; Carteret, VII (1798), pp. 17-18. Published under the name and with the permission of Dumesnil, it was actually the work of Charles-Pierre Coste d’Anorbat.
² Ibid., p. 28.
imposing or modest gait which all these character-differences impose. And in good faith, can all this be reached without art?4

The two positions reflect the problem already examined by Rémond de Sainte-Albine. If empathy spontaneously and immediately creates the vibrant expressions to be used onstage, they then have to be directed to the different characters, and it is the task of ‘art’ to then configure them to a queen, a woman of the people, a young or old man, etc., which is why, as an exponent of sentiment-based acting, Dumesnil tends to overlook this aspect, while Clairon underlines it.5

In the end, however, art too seems insufficient. The details, nuances, and variants in expression are infinite, as Luigi Riccoboni had observed in the Pensées sur la déclamation. Each individual has his own inflections in expressing feelings, and no parameters exist which can safely direct art. The same argument had animated the criticism of Du Bos in Le Comédien, had moved theory back towards emotive empathy to help identify expressions more precisely, and then in the late eighteenth century had fed opposition to the possibility of establishing codes and rules which could truly be of use to actors. If, then, art could be of no help, even the most delicate of nuances apparently had to be entrusted to emotional participation in the role to be played.

But the problem did not simply concern the expression of passions, feelings, or states of mind. It was a far wider question which went to the very conception of character as it had gradually developed through the long process of multiplying the categories the character had to represent onstage, from the simply typology of sixteenth-century literature to the complicated construct of moral, historical, national, geographical, social and cultural determinations which had accrued in the doctrine of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. In the increasingly complex cross-referencing of exemplary traits, the character had gradually assumed a potentially very specific physiognomy. If various aspects were necessarily common to a vast category of humanity, their specific combination turned out to be, if not unique, certainly far from general.

The process was destined to gain momentum. At the beginning of the nineteenth century François Boisquet’s Essai sur l’art du comédien chanteur attempted to codify the types of characters with their characteristic passions and corresponding gestures, and had ended up creating a typology based on the distinctions and contaminations of three basic geographical and climatic regions, seventeen classifications of nationalities, four political regimes, six age categories, fifteen of social rank and profession, some thirty defined by ‘heart’ and ‘ésprit’, and so on.6 This ongoing subdivision of categories was inevitably destined to destroy any possibility of fixing a character as a typical representative of a precise class of humanity. August Wilhelm Schlegel’s Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur, from 1808, the most influential history and theory of the theatre from the Romantic period, carefully analyzed the new approach introduced by Shakespeare who ‘characterized characters

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4 Ibid., p. 254.
5 Dumesnil was equally convinced that this specific configuration belonged exclusively to the technical sphere, although she relegated the reproduction of particulars to a secondary phase, of little relevance to the art of the actor. Cf. Mémoires de Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, p. 29.
with a depth and precision which no longer made classification by general type possible’, since they were ‘individuals of a highly specific nature’. At the same time English theatre criticism noted ‘the wonderful variety and perfect individuality’ of Shakespeare’s characters as opposed to figures from French classical dramaturgy ‘where only the class is represented, never the individual’.8

As the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth the profile of characters conceived as individuals became articulated in new, more mobile and dynamic forms, with connotations previously considered unacceptable in being considered too ambiguous and contradictory. If for Gottsched or Nougaret a character’s distinctive traits were to remain stable from the beginning to the end of the play, and for Lessing it was impossible to play a character whose passions were coded in contradictory signs, Touron deplored the standard performance, cold and monotonous, of the figure of the tyrant represented exclusively as ruthless and fierce, and tried to argue for the presentation of evil behind a mask of meekness. Some time later, when discussing the character of Franz Moor in Schiller’s Räuber, Iffland criticized ‘the erroneous conviction’ that anyone acting a villainous character ‘needed to be evil from beginning to end of the performance’.9 In 1814 Hazlitt made particular note of Edmund Kean’s extraordinary Iago since while ‘actors in general have been struck only with the wickedness of the character’, Kean made Iago ‘appear throughout an excellent good fellow, and lively bottle-companion’.10 The same need to dig deep inside the character for the elements which resist any reducing to type reappears in several nineteenth-century treatises. In 1867 Charles William Smith, in The Actor’s Art, criticized actors who ‘frequently, from want of study and perception of character, or viewing a character in the wrong light, play what is properly only a phase of the character, throughout the part’.11 Macready on the other hand was ready with a very precise definition of the actor’s task:

But to fathom the depths of character, to trace its latent motives, to feel its finest quiverings of emotions, to comprehend the thoughts that are hidden under words, and thus possess oneself of the actual mind of the individual man, is the highest reach of the players art, and is an achievement that I have discerned but in few.12

The gradual transformation of the character from a type to a complex individual is reflected in the literature’s constant recommendation to actors to apply extensive ‘study’ in preparing their part. The eighteenth century still had not completely jettisoned the idea that an actor could perform from talent and inspiration rather

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10 William Hazlitt, Examiner (July 24, 1814), in Hazlitt on Theatre, p. 40.
11 Charles William Smith, The Actor’s Art: its Requisites, and how to obtain them; its Defects, and how to remove them, London, Thomas Hailes Lacy, 1869, p. 19.
than by any tiresome exegetic energy. All he had to do was understand the lines. Not
that this was always the case however: Lesage, in *Gil Blas*, repeats the criticism of an
actress, probably Duclos, who ‘did not appear too well to comprehend what she was
saying’.13 Theatrical circles of the period resonated with anecdotes, humorous and
otherwise, of actors misunderstanding the script. In any case, understanding the
character’s lines would seem to be sufficient: d’Hannetaire notes in his *Observations sur
l’Art du Comédien* that even ‘profoundly ignorant’ actors are able to play their part in a
completely satisfactory way.14

This is a minority view however: generally the literature insists the actor must be
reasonably cultured. Gildon requires some knowledge of moral philosophy, no less,
to follow the changing passions and attitudes in the character. Wilkes advises the
actor to study the customs of the different nations in the modern and classical world,
and Dorfeuille similarly prescribes a sense of history.15 But these are all tips to help
the actor more easily assess his character’s type-category, so that if the actor is to
study history, it is only to understand the habits and behaviour of the various peoples
and epochs of the stage characters.

In parallel to this question of the actor’s cultural level lies a different, more
specific one. Boswell for example demands at least some notion of law, medicine and
religion, according to the part to be interpreted. Penetration of the character, then,
requires some approach to the character’s professional sphere.16 Demands of the
kind – analysis of the age and conditions in which the character developed –
increased as the century wore on. In 1823, in an essay entitled *A mon fils au moment des
ses débuts dans la carrière théâtrale*, Jean François Dubroca diligently lists the cultural
requirements for an actor, stating in succession the moral and philosophical studies
which give understanding of ‘the human heart’ (recommending, in this context, the
works of La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld), then the observation of society, and to
complete the study of history, he lastly insists on detailed knowledge of one people in
each of the different periods: the initial phase, civilization, revolution and
decadence.17

Even all this however – moral, philosophical and diachronically and
synchronically wide-ranging historical study – was soon considered insufficient. True
grasp of the character has to come from concrete experience of the character’s life, it
was decided, following the idea expounded by Goethe around 1777. The protagonist
of *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* plans to stage Hamlet, but he finds that the title
role eludes him, his interpretation remaining complex and unconvincing.

Lastly, when he [Meister] had sufficiently elaborated the single passages, he desired to
take them together, and then discovered many aspects which failed to function: now
the character appeared contradictory, now the expression: and our friend found it near-

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17 Jean Francois Dubroca, *A mon fils au moment des ses débuts dans la carrière théâtrale, sur les lois, les
convenances et les conditions de son art, et sur les bienséances d’honneur et de morale qui doivent le guider dans sa
profession*, Paris, Delaunay, 1823, pp. 52-58.
impossible to resolve on a tone for the entire part, with all its deviations and its chiaroscuro contrasts.

At last Meister found the answer:

He reviewed the whole work solely to see if any clue could be evinced from Hamlet’s character before his father’s death, and soon believed he had found the right solution.18

This was to imaginatively create the character’s entire history, from his earliest childhood and youth. The figure which emerged fleshed out the lines and passages of the play which first had seemed to resist interpretation. Above all, as Goethe observed, the character took on an extreme complexity which evaded even the consciousness which had created it. To understand the character in its complete three-dimensional reality and then enter the part convincingly it is essential to attribute to the author ‘a finality and design of which he had never conceived’.19

This is not simply a question of the actor completing the lines with gestures and expressions which are not part of the author’s remit, but it is something quite different: here the actor is perceiving depths within the character which go beyond the playwright’s conscious awareness, which fail to emerge in the events and situations revealed through the plot, and which can be reconstructed by hypothetically reliving the whole course of the character’s personal experience, from birth onwards.

Goethe’s suggested procedure is found in more schematic terms in the literature of the early nineteenth century. Larive states that ‘remembering’ the attitudes and emotional experiences of the character’s past life should always be a consideration in the actor’s interpretation.20 Iffland considers it necessary to ask oneself ‘in what way, in response to what predisposition, privation, preoccupation, or humiliation the character had come to act in this way and not otherwise’.21 A short time later François Boisquet reiterates that the actor should consider not only the character’s age, condition and emotional state but also ‘the actions which he had performed before the events narrated in the play’.22

Once the character has been perceived as an individual rather than a human category, with all the baggage and complexity of his personal biography, the experience and past history of the actor become indispensable for him to fully penetrate and enact the part. When Quintilian’s procedure has to be used to evoke the required feelings, it is far better, Walker writes, to avoid imaginary scenes or inventions of the imagination, however vivid and effective, in favour of personal memories and real-life experiences.23 No ‘sensation’ can be reproduced faithfully, Larive explains, unless it has been experienced. Memories are thus the actor’s limitless resource, and the reason the mature actor has greater talent: he has

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19 Ibid., p. 390.
20 Larive, Cours de déclamation, I, p. 147.
21 August Wilhelm Iffland, ‘Über Darstellung boshafter und intriganter Charaktere auf der Bühne’, p. 89.
accumulated all the sensations in all their degrees.24 This is a point Hunt returns to in 1808. A young actor, he observes, is simply not able to enact the subtler and more nuanced states of mind: his experience has not yet stretched to them, and he will successfully convey only the more general passions and emotions.25 In his Réflexions sur Lekain et sur l’art théâtral, Talma stresses that the tragic actor can always put his own problems, disappointments and painful memories to good use.26 While Hyppolite Tisserant, an actor at the Gymnase and the Odéon, observes that when preparing his part the actor must first establish the historical, religious, philosophical and social background and setting of the play, then ask himself where he fits into it, and to what extent, and how, he himself will be able to collaborate in the final outcome.27

Interpreting the part seems to turn on the coincidence of the respective inner being and dynamics of actor and character. This was basically the point of arrival for the nineteenth century in its central debate on the theory of acting. Different ideas continue to emerge during the century of course. In a celebrated essay Kleist focuses on the actor’s bodily dynamics and the superior expressive capacity of marionettes.28 Delsarte radically overhauls the theory of expression as applied to eloquence and acting; Lamb and Coquelin debate at some length the requirements of a type of acting which consciously limits or actually excludes the effects of identification, and so on.29 What continued to constitute the central issue in the period, however, was the concept of acting as an intimate relationship between actor and character: a character conceived in the image of the human individual.

The result of the century’s enquiries from this point of view are to be found in an essay by Tommaso Salvini, considered the greatest tragic actor of the age. Intervening during a momentary but animated break in the ceasefire between emotionalists and antiemotionalists, he stated that the actor’s essential task was to represent the character as a full-blooded, complex individual, down to his most intimate ‘inner nature’.30

The character’s most essential aspect, Salvini underlined, is his uniqueness and the specific nature of his inner world: of ‘supreme importance’ then was ‘the mental and spiritual differentiation of the character from those around him’, while the actor could initially afford to ignore a decision as to the ‘outward characteristics’, which he defines ‘trifles’. This perceiving of the character’s specific inner nature is not an exclusively intellectual process, but involves the whole being of the actor, who must first feel a spontaneous ‘sympathy’ for the being created by the playwright. This is his

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24 Larive, Cours de déclamation, I, pp. 71-73.
26 See François-Joseph Talma, Quelques réflexions sur Lekain et sur l’art théâtral, in Mémoires de Lekain, précédés de réflexions sur cet acteur, et sur l’art théâtral, par M. Talma, Paris, Ledoux, 1825, p. LXIV-LXV.
30 Tommaso Salvini, ‘Some Views on Acting’, The Century Magazine (December, 1890).
starting-point for the gradual penetration of the character’s individuality, to be undertaken using means which escape any merely rational understanding.

As to how I actually attain this object, I can speak in no way that could be clearly understood by my readers, for I do not clearly understand the process myself. It is perhaps at this point that what we are wont to call inspiration comes to my assistance, and helps to elevate the artist above the artisan.

Having grasped the deep and unique individuality of the character, by whatever intuitive and mysterious means, the actor then proceeds ‘by slow degrees to an understanding of how he would speak and act in the various situations in which he has been placed by the dramatist’. This is not simply a question of calling up the same feelings as those of his character, but a sort of emotional isomorphism of the actor’s and character’s inner being: a process of assimilation which involves the actor’s entire self and all his faculties. It is not enough for the actor to feel with the character’s feelings, ‘to cry with him and to laugh with him’, to love ‘with his love’ and ‘to hate with his hate’: he must also ‘think with his brain’. Only then, when he has assimilated the character’s inner core and has established a complete, personal and “reciprocal” harmony and resonance can the actor ‘be the character and take on the voice, gestures, gait, everything constituting the character’s outward appearance.

Actor and character can now face the public, though the process of understanding, assimilating and creating – the meeting between the personality of the actor and the individuality of the author’s creature – is not yet over. A still ‘further completion’ of the character comes from the performance aspect. This is never the reproduction of a ready-prepared product, served cold, but a phase in a process of understanding and assimilation which goes from preliminary preparation through to rehearsals, première and repeat performances, continuously perfected through the actor’s unwavering, total participation.

There is no question, then, of concern that the actor’s emotional identification onstage will disturb his performance and destabilize his interpretation of the character, introducing changes from one performance to the next. In Salvini’s opinion actorly empathy is never simply letting the sentiment take over. Sentiment is but one component in a complex proceeding presupposing total actorly participation, and not only in the sense of reproducing emotions but in the sense, too, of applying rational control and awareness. Above all, as stated above, the process considers each public performance as a stage in a single journey through the part, from the first reading to the last night, guaranteeing consistency and continuity in the actor’s interpretation.

Salvini’s essay establishes four basic principles as a guide to the actor’s art. First of these is the idea that the basic task of acting is to grasp and render a character as a highly specific individual, constitutionally akin to the individuality of the interpreter. Secondly, the conviction that the actor’s whole personality and biography – all the wealth of his faculties and experience – is involved in this process of interpretation, which consists in understanding and assimilating the character in the light of the actor-character affinities. Thirdly, the awareness that all the external details of a person’s behaviour are expressions of an individual and unique inner self, and therefore that the actor will never be able to render an external attitude effectively onstage without having first interiorized the individuality the attitude expresses. And
lastly a perception of the seamless, unending nature of the interpretative process, the actor continuously perfecting the character from the first reading of the script through rehearsals, performance and each successive repeat.

The long trajectory of the modern theory of acting, from the early eighteenth century to the beginnings of stanislavskian theories, ends here: shortly before the turn-of-the-century avant-garde movements radically deconstructed the conceptions of the actor's art, dissolving the notion of character into a myriad figures, each incompatible with the other.