James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Siddons*, vol. 2 (London, 1827).

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It has been said that, since the Eumenides of Eschylus, tragic poetry had produced nothing so

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terrible and sublime as the Macbeth of Shakspeare. It may be said, with equal probability, that, since the happy invention of man invested dramatic fiction with seeming reality, nothing superior, perhaps equal, to the Lady Macbeth of Mrs. Siddons has been seen.

She had experienced much of the illiberality of criticism, to which it seems not to have suited her temper or taste through life to pay any court. The distributors of daily and monthly fame had not scrupled to assert, that the sagacious actress, conscious of the limits of her powers, had wisely avoided the boundless demands of Shakspeare, and devoted herself to the tender effusions of inferior spirits. That a melodious flow of declamation was a happiness but of the ear; a majestic person and an expressive as well as beautiful countenance, accidental advantages of nature; BUT that the burst of passion, the bold inspiration of positive genius superior to all precedent, and trammel and tuition, of *these* gifts she had positively NOTHING, and was of a temperament too cold and systematic ever to suspect even the want of them.

To use the language of the late Dr. Parr, when speaking of Warburton, on the 2nd of February, 1785, -- "from her towering and distant heights she rushed down upon her prey, and disdaining the ostentatious prodigalities of cruelty, de-

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stroyed it at a blow."<*> She acted Lady Macbeth on that night, and criticism, and envy, and rivalry sunk at once before her. The subject was as fortunate to her as to the GREAT POET himself, and from that hour her dominion over the pas-

sions was undisputed, her genius pronounced to be at least equal to her art, and Sir Joshua's happy thought of identifying her person with the muse of tragedy confirmed by the immutable decree of the public.

<* parr 1789:153>

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The first scene of Lady Macbeth is decisive of the whole character. She lets out in a few lines the daring steadiness of her mind, which could be disturbed by no scruple, intimidated by no danger. The occasion does not change the *nature* here, as it does in her husband. There is no struggle after any virtue to be resigned. She is as thoroughly prepared in one moment, as if visions of greatness had long informed her slumbers; and she had awaked to meditate upon every

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means, however dreadful, that could secure her object.

When Mrs. Siddons came on with the letter from Macbeth (the first time we saw her,) such was the impression from her form, her face, her deportment -- the distinction of sex was only external -- "her spirits" informed their tenement with the apathy of a demon. The commencement of this letter is left to the reader's imagination. "They met me in the day of success," shews that he had previously mentioned the witches. Her first novelty was a little suspension of the voice, "they made themselves -- *air*:" that is, less astonished at it as a miracle of nature, than attentive to it as a manifestation of the reliance to be built upon their assurances. She read the whole letter with the greatest skill, and, after an instant of reflection, exclaimed --

> "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor -- and SHALT BE
> What thou art *promised*."

The amazing burst of energy upon the words

shalt be, perfectly electrified the house. The determination seemed as uncontrollable as *fate* itself. The searching analysis of Macbeth, which she makes, was full of meaning -- the eye and the hand confirmed the logic. Ambition is the soul of her very phrase: --

> "Thou'dst have, *great* Glamis."

Great Glamis! this of her *husband*! metaphysical speculation, calculated estimate -- as if it had regarded Caesar or Pompey. He is among the means before me -- how is such a nature to be worked up to such *unholy* objects?

"Hie thee hither," says the impatience, which longs to begin its strife with the antagonist virtue -- "Hie thee hither,

> "That I may pour MY spirits in thine *ear*,
> And chastise with the *valour* of my tongue," &c.

But a different style of beauty was called forth by the hasty entrance of a servant, to announce the coming of the King that night into the very meshes she is about to spread for his destruction. Shakspeare alone, perhaps, would have written the daring compromise of all decorum, which bursts from the exulting savage upon this intelligence: --

> "Thou'rt MAD to say it."

Aware of the inference to be drawn from an earnestness so marked, he immediately cloaks the passion with a *reason* why the intelligence could not seem true. The actress, fully understanding the process, after the violence of the exclamation, recovered herself with slight alarm, and in a *lowered* tone proposed a question suited to the new feeling: --

> "Is not thy master *with* him ? who, wer't so,
> Would have inform'd for preparation."

The murmured mysteriousness of the address to the spirits "that tend on mortal thoughts," became stronger as she proceeded: --

"Come to my WOMAN'S BREASTS,
And take my *milk* for GALL, you murd'ring ministers."

A beautiful thought, be it observed; as if these sources of infant nourishment could not even *consent* to mature destruction, without some loathsome change in the very stream itself which flowed from them.

When the actress, invoking the destroying ministers, came to the passage --

"Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief,"

the elevation of her *brows*, the full *orbs* of sight, the raised shoulders, and the hollowed hands, seemed all to endeavour to explore what yet were pronounced no possible objects of vision. Till then, I am quite sure, a figure so terrible had never bent over the pit of a theatre; that night crowded with intelligence and beauty, in its seven front rows.

The salutation of Macbeth -- the remark upon the abstraction on his countenance, which follows

her brief intimation of all that is to be done -- all claimed notice.

"O never
Shall sun *that* morrow see."

Macbeth himself (Smith) sunk under her at once, and she quitted the scene with an effect which cannot be described; in short, the TRIUMPH of NATURE, rightly interpreted by the greatest writer and greatest actress that had ever laboured for the delight and instruction of mankind.

The following scene is the beautiful reception of Duncan at Inverness. The honoured hostess received his Majesty with all the exterior of profound obligation. She was too *pure* an actress to allow a glance of triumph to stray towards the spectators.

Macbeth, conscious of his design, is even neglectful of his duty as a host; he is absent from the royal banquet, and his absence provokes inquiry. His lady, bending steadily to her purpose, is equal to all occasions, and now breaks in

upon her husband's fearful rumination. He had determined to proceed no farther in the business, and she has again to revive the unholy flame which gratitude had quenched. She assails him with sophistry, and contempt, and female resolution, seemingly superior to all manly daring. She quotes his own bolder against his present *self*,

and urges the infamy of receding from so proud a design. Filled from the crown to the toe with direst cruelty, the horror of the following sentence seemed bearable from its fitness to such a being. But I yet wonder at the *energy* of both utterance and action with which it was accompanied: --

> "I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And *dash'd the brains out*, had *I so sworn* as you
> Have done to this."

There was no *qualifying* with our humanity in the tone or gesture. This really beautiful and interesting actress did not at all shrink from standing before us, the true and perfect image of the greatest of all natural and moral depravations -- a *fiend-like woman*.

The scene after the murder exhibits Lady Macbeth as bold in *action* as she had, during speculation, asserted herself to be. "Give ME the daggers," excited a general start from those around me. Upon her return from the chamber of slaughter, after gilding the faces of the grooms, from the peculiar character of her lip she gave an expression of *contempt* more striking than any she had hitherto displayed.

From the third scene of the second act Lady Macbeth has long been banished; so that we had

no opportunity of seeing how the highly-wrought agonies of Macbeth would have stood contrasted by the delicate affectation of his wife. But the natural exclamation of Macduff --

> "O Banquo! Banquo!
> Our royal master's murder'd,"

excites one from Lady Macbeth, which I should like, I confess, to have heard from Mrs. Siddons: --

"Woe, alas! what! in OUR house?"

"This," says Warburton, "is very fine. Had she been innocent, nothing but the murder itself, and not any of its aggravating circumstances, would naturally have affected her. As it was, her business was to appear highly disordered at the news. Therefore, like one who has her thoughts about her, she seeks for an aggravating circumstance that might be supposed most to affect her personally; not considering that by placing it there, she discovered rather a concern for herself than for the King. On the contrary, her husband, who had repented the act, and was now labouring under the horrors of a recent murder, in his exclamation, gives all the marks of sorrow for the fact itself."<*>

The introduction of Lady Macbeth in this scene,

<* warburton 1747 6:367>

must depend entirely upon the *credit* which the actress has with the audience. Coarse hypocrisy excites derision. Garrick would not trust Mrs. Pritchard with either the *astonishment* or the seeming *swoon*. Macklin thought Mrs. Porter alone could have been endured by the audience. I feel equally confident with regard to Mrs. Siddons. There Lady Macbeth ought most assuredly to be. She is the last of human beings to have absented herself on such an occasion as a night alarm, because her absence could not *fairly* be accounted for in the first place, and in the second, she had fully prepared her mind to act what she thought the occasion demanded. The upper gallery should never be the guide, where a manager is himself worthy of Shakspeare. What *he* shews may always be shewn; the temperaments of *person* and *manner* are all that the manager is to take care of. Liston, in the *Fool*, certainly could not be trusted by the side of King Lear, but Farren might. The *dryness* of the one actor would add to the effect of Lear's madness; the irresistible countenance of the other would confound all sen-

sibility in immoderate laughter.

By the second scene of the third act, we find that the possession of his object had rendered Macbeth moody and solitary. Their attention, while apart, seems to have been directed to the same object; for his Queen, on her entrance, im-

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mediately inquires whether Banquo be *gone from court?* She is ready to suggest the murder of that nobleman and his son. "In them nature's copy's not eterne." But she soon learns the mistake of the adage "nemo *repente* fuit turpissimus." The first crime in Macbeth hath the *greatest* extent. He has no prelude of insect destruction, like Domitian. For his own good "all causes" must give way. He would not leave a virtue alive. She recommends him to be *bright* and *jovial* among his guests that night at the banquet. To which scene we hasten, to look at the manner of our great actress. "Mrs. Pritchard," says Davies, "shewed consummate art in endeavouring to hide Macbeth's frenzy from the observation of his guests, by drawing their attention to conviviality. She smiled on one, whispered to another, and distantly saluted a third; in short, she practised every possible artifice to hide the transaction that passed between her husband and the vision his disturbed imagination had raised. Her reproving and angry looks, which glanced towards Macbeth, at the same time were mixed with marks of inward vexation and uneasiness."<*>

I should think Mr. Davies, from his minuteness of observation, must have figured there as one of the nobles, only a few covers from the royal state. But the truth is, a great deal of this is

<* davies 1785:167-8>

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impossible -- there has been *no time* for it -- the lords *observe* as soon as anything occurs to excite attention, as the text shews us.

> "*Macb.* -- The table's full.
> *Len.* -- Here is a place reserv'd, Sir.
> *Macb.* -- Where?

Len. -- Here, my good lord. - What is't that moves your highness?
Macb. -- Which of you have done this?
Lords -- What, my good lord!"

On Rosse's calling upon them to *rise*, his highness not being well, Lady Macbeth desires them to keep their seats -- explains his malady, which notice only augments; begs them to feed, and regard him not; and *then* coming down to Macbeth, endeavours to *baffle* his terrors. Davies closes the eulogium thus: "When, *at last*, as if unable to support her feelings any longer, she rose from her seat, and with a half-whisper of terror, said 'are you a man?' she assumed a look of anger, indignation, and contempt, not to be surpassed."<*>

This is very far from being clearly put; a half-whisper of *terror*, attended by a look of *anger*, *indignation*, and *contempt*, is a rather singular mode of encouraging *dismay*. The whisper is for concealment of what is said from others; but the words whispered are a reproach, and something *more*, incompatible with TERROR. She

<* davies 1785:168>

is so much mistress of herself, as even to assail him with ridicule. His conviction is "*proper stuff*," the "painting of fear" -- the "air-drawn dagger," "which, he *said*, led him to Duncan" -- Such *flaws* and *starts*, as became only a story told by a *woman* at a *winter's fire*, under the wise authority of a *grandam*. "When a*ll's done*, he look'd but on a stool." But so it is, without perfect re-collection of the scenes, praise is drawn from the imagination rather than the fact, and much is imputed which was never done by the actress; and if it had been done, would have merited no commendation.

The greater beauties of Mrs. Siddons's manner were to be found, I think, in the --

"Think of this, good peers,
But as a thing of CUSTOM: *'tis no other*;
Only it spoils the *pleasure* of the time"

And the rapidly cutting down: the question from Rosse -- "What sights, my lord?"

"*Lady M. -- I pray you speak not*; he grows *worse* and *worse*;
Question enrages him: *at once* good night:
Stand not upon the *order* of your going,
But go at *once*."

The address displayed here drew down a thunder of applause.

The task of Lady Macbeth is here finished; as

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the great tempter she has done her office, and her husband must now defend by military skill and bravery, the crown which his crimes have acquired and hazarded. But Shakspeare has one more terrible lesson to give; namely, to shew that, when the force of volition is withdrawn, the fancy becomes a dreadful victim to the images of past guilt: and she who waking can dispel her husband's terrors and her own, in sleep beholds her bleeding victims for ever present, and the circumstances of their fate passing continually in their original order./*

In the performance of this scene, Mrs. Siddons differed essentially from every other actress. I will explain myself. The actresses previous to herself seemed to consider such a perturbation as not possessing *full* power upon the frame; they, therefore, rather *glided* than walked; and every

/* SCHLEGEL just touches upon this scene, with a high compliment to the poet. -- "Shakspeare est peut-être le seul poëte, qui caracterise les maladies de l'ame, la melancholie, la folie, le *somnambulisme*, avec une parfaite verité; elle est telle, qu'un medicin pourroit s'instruire a cette ecole."
Cours de Literat. Dram. vol. 2. p. 379.<*>

I prefer the French translation for two reasons; because it is that by which alone the author *consents* to be judged; and that there is a hardness in the English translation, and, from keeping too literally to the German arrangement, an obscurity as to the meaning, which is never observable in its Gallic rival.

<* schlegel tr necker de saussure 1814 2:379>

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other action had a *feebler* character than is exhibited by one awake. Their figure, too, was kept perpendicularly *erect*, and the eye, though open, studiously avoided motion.

But the theory of somnambulism is somewhat

at variance with the *stage* exhibition; and if the doctor of physic, who attends upon Lady Macbeth, had been very profound in his art, he would have considered the *eyes being open* as the most extraordinary part of the scene before him. The cases quoted in our books all state the sleep-walker to have his eyes *closed*. It is only when any object of his fancy has been removed from its expected place, that the eyes are feebly unclosed, as if to find the position of it, and are immediately shut, to leave the fancy to controul entirely its own operations. It has been observed that the iris on such occasions appears fixed, and the eye *dim*.

Mrs. Siddons seemed to conceive the fancy as having equal power over the whole frame, and all her actions had the wakeful vigour; she laded the water from the imaginary ewer over her hands -- bent her body to listen to the sounds presented by her fancy, and hurried to resume the taper where she had left it; that she might with all speed drag her pallid husband to their chamber. The excellent Dugald Stewart, thinks that "in the *somnambuli*, the mind retains its power over the limbs, but possesses scarcely any over

the body, excepting those particular members of it which are employed in walking."/*<*> A larger reign must be allowed to the fancy, however, if the actions of gathering and eating grapes, or climbing trees, or composing exercises for the school, can be performed, "yet all this while in a most fast sleep."

Although the general effect of Mrs. Siddons was what I have stated, one idle cavil crept out against her manner in this noble scene. People cant about originality, and yet dote upon precedent. "When she sets down the candle, who does not perceive she varies from her predecessors, only that her hands may be more at liberty to imitate the process of ablution."<†> That her hands are more at liberty, for *all* purposes, by setting down the light, will be readily conceded; but here the waking process must be followed, and who, bearing a taper from one apartment to another, does not set it upon a table when the room contains one? Who about to wash the hands retains any thing in them? The critic was

too purblind to perceive that the real trick was in *retaining* the light to shew unconsciousness of what the sleeper was doing -- whereas all the habits of life are by the somnambulist done mechanically.

/* Elem. of the Philos. of Mind, p. 347. ed. 1802.

<* stewart 1802:347> <† european magazine 7:143>

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The quantity of white drapery in which the actress was enveloped, had a singular and striking effect -- her person, more truly than that of Pierre, might be said to be "lovelily dreadful," but extremely majestic both in form and motion -- it was, however, the majesty of the *tomb*; or as Shakspeare, in a previous scene, expresses it: --

> "As from your GRAVES rise up, and walk *like sprites*,
> To countenance this horror."

Perhaps her friend, Sir Joshua Reynolds, might have suggested the almost *shroud-like* clothing of this important scene. I saw him on this occasion in the orchestra, with great pleasure, sitting "all gaze, all wonder." She was in truth so strongly articulate, that I have no doubt he heard every syllable that *breath* made up, for she hardly allowed the voice any portion of its power.

There is a mezzotinto print in existence of Garrick and Mrs. Pritchard in the scene after the murder of Duncan. The ridiculous (not because inaccurate, but) because unpicturesque costume of Garrick does all that dress can do to defeat the startling terrors of his countenance; but the Queen is a kind of angry Hecate, rather than Lady Macbeth, and however terrible was much lower in the scale of being than her sublime successor. It is difficult to imagine how such a consummate

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artist as Garrick could play Gloucester, Richard the Third, who lived in the year 1480, in what is called a shape, and yet act Macbeth, who I think murdered Duncan 440 years earlier, in a general's uniform of the reign of George the Second. However the fact is unquestionable, and he so acted it

all his life.

I will not, at this distance from the performance, endeavour to describe the Macbeth of Smith. In its outline, I suppose him to have given what he remembered of Garrick; -- he *walked* the character; but, though much in earnest, he never *looked* it. The perpetual strain upon his features reminds me of an absurd reading in this very part; and the multitudinous *passions*, in his expression of them, at the wafting of his *hand*, became *incarnardine*, or as Murphy would say -- ONE RED. How so sensible a man, as Smith certainly was, could endure the heavy monotony of his tragic utterance, with all the variety of nature by his side, would surprise, if any self-delusion could surprise one acquainted with human nature. A great actor, who spoke in a key much higher than any performer existing who speaks at all, told me once seriously, that his voice was a *deep bass*.

With one comprehensive remark of the learned German author whom I have already quoted, I shall close all that Macbeth has suggested to me.

"Rien n'est comparable à la puissance de ce tableau pour exciter la terreur. On frissone en se rappelant le meurtre de Duncan, le simulacre de poignard qui voltige devant les yeux de Macbeth, l'apparition de Banco pendant le repas, l'arrivée nocturne de Lady Macbeth endormie. De pareilles scenes sont uniques. Shakspeare seul en a pu concevoir l' idée, et si elles se presentoient plus souvant sur la scene, il faudroit mettre la tête de Meduse au nombre des attributs de la muse tragique."<*>

"In the excitement to TERROR, this picture cannot be equalled. We shudder in recalling the murder of Duncan -- the air-drawn dagger, which waves before the eyes of Macbeth -- the appearance of Banquo at the feast the night progress of the sleeping Queen. Such scenes stand alone. Shakspeare only can imagine such things, and were they oftener presented on the stage, we must place the head of Medusa among the attributes of the tragic muse."

Their Majesties, in conformity with the gracious design of seeing every performance of Mrs. Sid-

dons, commanded a repetition of Macbeth, on the 7th of the same month. Tragedy, perhaps, suffers, as much as comedy gains, by the proximity of royal personages. In sitting to a tragedy, they weaken the effect by necessarily dividing the attention of the spectators; their silent admira-

<* schlegel tr necker de saussure 1814 3:73>

tion inspires nothing to others; -- but, in comedy, the royal enjoyment gives a fashion to laughter; the actor does not spare his efforts in the presence of royal patrons, and I believe the late King has led some of the loudest applause that was ever heard in a theatre.

The audiences of this period were sufficiently decorous to be trusted with a scenic display of regal assassination. His Majesty's government reposed upon the revenue improvement of the GREAT MINISTER -- and nothing stirred in town but the Westminster scrutiny, which in eight months absolutely struck off 105 bad votes from the poll of Mr. Fox, and 87 from that of Sir Cecil Wray. This gave a reasonable prospect, that the whole of the votes might be examined thoroughly, and decided fairly, in the *short* compass of TWO YEARS, the gentlemen of the bar receiving no unusual portion of subtlety, or its synonime, *fees*. Some little feeling for the unrepresented condition of Westminster warmed our galleries, even in the *theatre*, at this time -- but a speech of Mr. Dundas, in the House of Commons, covering Mr. Pitt from a personal attack by Mr. Fox, alone merited the notice of all times.

The character of Lady Macbeth became a sort of exclusive possession to Mrs. Siddons. There was a mystery about it, which she alone seemed to have penetrated. Future, and not distant times

might supply a better Macbeth. The ingenuity of decoration might add greater truth and reality to the scene, and the chorusses might be rendered yet more overpowering by singers, more exact, and a band more numerous. All this we shall see done. Did it shake at all the supremacy of this great

performance? By no means. Looking the other way, did it increase the grandeur, or the terror of her first exhibition? Not in the least. With all great efforts of genius, it seemed disdainful alike of help or hindrance -- and every audience appeared to wonder why the tragedy proceeded further, when at the final exit of the Lady Macbeth its very *soul* was extracted.

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On the last day of the month,<*> Mr. Kemble was permitted to play Macbeth for his own benefit. We had now, therefore, a Glamis who could respond to the alarming incentives of the lady; and an early indication of the effect of such intelligence was the manner of his saying at their meeting, in reference to the going of Duncan --

"To-morrow -- as he *purposes*."

Kemble appeared to shrink from the quick glance which his sister turned upon him. -- Though his hopes had depraved his imagination, he seemed unprepared then for the maxim "*be it thought and done*," implied in her instant determination --

"O never shall sun *that* morrow see."

Her acting throughout, on this occasion, was of the very highest quality. And here let me state, without undertaking absolutely to account for it, a fact peculiar, as far as I know, to Mrs. Siddons -- I mean the very slight inequality in her numerous performances of the same character. In her brother's acting it might be truly observed, that very frequently he was utterly below himself. He was cold and formal, paraded

<* 31 Mar 1785>

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his person and his dress, and would walk the cha_
racter about, as if teaching how it should move through the business, and logically pronounce its

sentiments. In his sister I never saw any thing like this: it must have happened to her, as to every other being engaged in the concerns of life, to feel depressed by care, or absent by the rumination over probable occurrences. But on the stage, I never felt the least indication that she had a private existence, or could be any thing but the assumed character. An argument, I should think, of a very powerful imagination.

A friend of mine, to whom upon most occasions I should gladly defer, thinks that "she was so various in her art, as hardly to act the same character *twice alike*." I am much more inclined to say -- She was so profound in her art, that her judgment settled *once* and *for ever* all the great points of the character -- and not changing her view of *what* she had to convey, there was little difference to be detected, that did not arise from *noise*, among what should have been audience, or the occasional assaults of personal indisposition. Indeed, how should the conception remain, and the execution differ? or what is the judgment which is in frequent mutation? FIRMNESS of thought is the parent of all vigorous action and utterance.

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