



THE A C T O R.

ADDRESSED TO

BONNELL THORNTON, Esq;

BY THE SAME.

ACTING, dear Thornton, its perfection draws
 From no observance of mechanic laws :
 No settled maxims of a fav'rite stage,
 No rules deliver'd down from age to age,
 Let players nicely mark them as they will,
 Can e'er entail hereditary skill.
 If, 'mongst the humble hearers of the pit,
 Some curious vet'ran critic chance to sit,
 Is he pleas'd more because 'twas acted so
 By Booth and Cibber thirty years ago ?
 The mind recalls an object held more dear,
 And hates the copy, that it comes so near.
 Why lov'd we Wilks's air, Booth's nervous tone ;
 In them 'twas natural, 'twas all their own.
 A Garrick's genius must our wonder raise,
 But gives his mimic no reflected praise.

Thrice happy Genius, whose unrival'd name
 Shall live for ever in the voice of Fame!
 'Tis thine to lead, with more than magic skill,
 The train of captive passions at thy will;
 To bid the bursting tear spontaneous flow
 In the sweet sense of sympathetic woe:
 Through ev'ry vein I feel a chilness creep,
 When horrors such as thine have murder'd sleep;
 And at the old man's look and frantic stare
 'Tis Lear alarms me, for I see him there.
 Nor yet confin'd to tragic walks alone,
 The comic muse too claims thee for her own.
 With each delightful requisite to please,
 Taste, spirit, judgment, elegance, and ease,
 Familiar nature forms thy only rule,
 From Ranger's rake to Druggers vacant fool.
 With powers so pliant, and so various blest,
 That what we see the last, we like the best.
 Not idly pleas'd, at judgment's dear expence,
 But burst outrageous with the laugh of sense:
 Perfection's top, with weary toil and pain,
 'Tis genius only that can hope to gain.
 The play'r's profession (tho' I hate the phrase,
 'Tis so mechanic in these modern days)
 Lies not in trick, or attitude, or start,
 Nature's true knowledge is his only art.
 The strong-felt passion bolts into the face,
 The mind untouch'd, what is it but grimace?
 To this one standard make your just appeal,
 Here lies the golden secret; learn to FEEL.

Or fool, or monarch, happy, or distrest,
No actor pleases that is not possess'd.

Once on the stage, in Rome's declining days,
When Christians were the subject of their plays,
E'er persecution dropp'd her iron rod,
And men still wag'd an impious war with God,
An actor flourish'd of no vulgar fame,
Nature's disciple, and Genest his name.
A noble object for his skill he chose,
A martyr dying 'midst insulting foes ;
Resign'd with patience to religion's laws,
Yet braving monarchs in his Saviour's cause.
Fill'd with th' idea of the secret part,
He felt a zeal beyond the reach of art,
While look and voice, and gesture, all express'd
A kindred ardour in the player's breast ;
Till as the flame thro' all his bosom ran,
He lost the actor, and commenc'd the man :
Profest the faith, his pagan gods denied,
And what he acted then, he after died.

The player's province they but vainly try,
Who want these pow'rs, deportment, voice, and eye.

The critic fight 'tis only grace can please,
No figure charms us if it has not ease.
There are, who think the stature all in all,
Nor like the hero, if he is not tall.
The feeling sense all other want supplies,
I rate no actor's merit from his size.
Superior height requires superior grace,
And what's a giant with a vacant face ?

Theatric monarchs, in their tragic gait,
 Affect to mark the solemn pace of state.
 One foot put forward in position strong,
 The other, like its vassal, dragg'd along.
 So grave each motion, so exact and slow,
 Like wooden monarchs at a puppet-show.
 The mien delights us that has native grace,
 But affectation ill supplies its place.

Unskilful actors, like your mimic apes,
 Will writhe their bodies in a thousand shapes;
 However foreign from the poet's art,
 No tragic hero but admires a start.
 What though unfeeling of the nervous line;
 Who but allows his attitude is fine?
 While a whole minute equipois'd he stands,
 Till praise dismiss him with her echoing hands!
 Resolv'd, though nature hate the tedious pause,
 By perseverance to extort applause.
 When Romeo sorrowing at his Juliet's doom,
 With eager madness bursts the canvas tomb,
 The sudden whirl, stretch'd leg, and lifted staff,
 Which please the vulgar, make the critic laugh.

To paint the passion's force, and mark it well,
 The proper action nature's self will tell:
 No pleasing pow'rs distortions e'er express,
 And nicer judgment always loaths excess.
 In sock or buskin, who o'erleaps the bounds,
 Disgusts our reason, and the taste confounds.
 Of all the evils which the stage molest,
 I hate your fool who overacts his jest:

Who murders what the poet finely writ,
 And, like a bungler, haggles all his wit,
 With shrug, and grin, and gesture out of place,
 And writes a foolish comment with his face.
 Old Johnson once, tho' Cibber's perter vein
 But meanly groupes him with a num'rous train,
 With steady face, and sober hum'rous mien,
 Fill'd the strong outlines of the comic scene.
 What was writ down, with decent utt'rance spoke,
 Betray'd no symptom of the conscious joke ;
 The very man in look, in voice, in air,
 And tho' upon the stage, appear'd no play'r.

The word and action should conjointly suit,
 But acting words is labour too minute.
 Grimace will ever lead the judgment wrong ;
 While sober humour marks th' impression strong.
 Her proper traits the fixt attention hit,
 And bring me closer to the poet's wit ;
 With her delighted o'er each scene I go,
 Well-pleas'd, and not asham'd of being so.

But let the generous actor still forbear
 To copy features with a mimic's care !
 'Tis a poor skill, which ev'ry fool can reach,
 A vile stage-custom, honour'd in the breach.
 Worse as more close, the disingenuous art
 But shews the wanton looseness of the heart.
 When I behold a wretch, of talents mean,
 Drag private foibles on the public scene,
 Forsaking nature's fair and open road
 To mark some whim, some strange peculiar mode,

Fir'd with disgust, I loath his servile plan,
 Despise the mimic, and abhor the man.
 Go to the lame, to hospitals repair,
 And hunt for humour in distortions there !
 Fill up the measure of the motley whim
 With shrug, wink, snuffle, and convulsive limb ;
 Then shame at once, to please a trifling age,
 Good sense, good manners, virtue, and the stage !

'Tis not enough the voice be found and clear,
 'Tis modulation that must charm the ear.
 When desperate heroines grieve with tedious moan,
 And whine their sorrows in a see-saw tone,
 The same soft sounds of unimpassioned woes
 Can only make the yawning hearers doze.

The voice all modes of passion can express,
 That marks the proper word with proper stress.
 But none emphatic can that actor call,
 Who lays an equal emphasis on all.

Some o'er the tongue the labour'd measures roll
 Slow and delib'rate as the parting toll,
 Point ev'ry stop, mark ev'ry pause so strong,
 Their words, like stage-processions, stalk along.
 All affectation but creates disgust,
 And e'en in speaking we may seem too just.

Nor proper, Thornton, can those sounds appear
 Which bring not numbers to thy nicer ear :
 In vain for them the pleasing measure flows,
 Whose recitation runs it all to prose ;
 Repeating what the poet sets not down,
 The verb disjointing from its friendly noun,

While pause, and break, and repetition join
To make a discord in each tuneful line.

Some placid natures fill th' allotted scene
With lifeless drone, insipid and serene ;
While others thunder ev'ry couplet o'er,
And almost crack your ears with rant and roar.

More nature oft and finer strokes are shown,
In the low whisper than tempestuous tone.
And Hamlet's hollow voice and fixt amaze,
More powerful terror to the mind conveys,
Than he, who swol'n with big impetuous rage,
Bullies the bulky phantom off the stage.

He, who in earnest studies o'er his part,
Will find true nature cling about his heart.
The modes of grief are not included all
In the white handkerchief and mournful drawl ;
A single look more marks th' internal woe,
Than all the windings of the lengthen'd oh.
Up to the face the quick sensation flies,
And darts its meaning from the speaking eyes !
Love, transport, madness, anger, scorn, despair,
And all the passions, all the soul is there.

In vain Ophelia gives her flowrets round,
And with her straws fantastic strews the ground,
In vain now sings, now heaves the desp'rate sigh,
If phrenzy fit not in the troubled eye.
In Cibber's look commanding sorrows speak,
And call the tear fast trickling down my cheek.

There is a fault which stirs the critic's rage ;
A want of due attention on the stage.

I have seen actors, and admir'd ones too,
 Whose tongues wound up set forward from their cue ;
 In their own speech who whine, or roar away,
 Yet seem unmov'd at what the rest may say ;
 Whose eyes and thoughts on diff'rent objects roam,
 Until the prompter's voice recal them home.

Divest yourself of hearers, if you can,
 And strive to speak, and be the very man.
 Why should the well-bred actor wish to know
 Who sits above to-night, or who below ?
 So, 'mid th' harmonious tones of grief or rage,
 Italian squallers oft disgrace the stage ;
 When, with a simp'ring leer, and bow profound,
 The squeaking Cyrus greets the boxes round ;
 Or proud Mandane, of imperial race,
 Familiar drops a curt'sie to her grace.

To suit the dress demands the actor's art,
 Yet there are those who over-dress the part.
 To some prescriptive right gives settled things,
 Black wigs to murd'ers, feather'd hats to kings :
 But Michael Cassio might be drunk enough,
 Tho' all his features were not grim'd with snuff.
 Why shou'd Pol Peachum shine in satin cloaths ?
 Why ev'ry devil dance in scarlet hose ?

But in stage-customs what offends me most
 Is the slip-door, and slowly-rising ghost.
 Tell me, nor count the question too severe,
 Why need the dismal powder'd forms appear ?

When chilling horrors shake th' affrighted king,
 And guilt torments him with her scorpion sting ;

When keenest feelings at his bosom pull,
 And fancy tells him that the seat is full ;
 Why need the ghost usurp the monarch's place,
 To frighten children with his mealy face ?
 The king alone shou'd form the phantom there,
 And talk and tremble at the vacant chair.

If Belvidera her lov'd loss deplore,
 Why for twin spectres bursts the yawning floor ?
 When with disorder'd starts, and horrid cries,
 She paints the murder'd forms before her eyes,
 And still pursues them with a frantic stare,
 'Tis pregnant madness brings the visions there.
 More instant horror would enforce the scene,
 If all her shudd'ring were at shapes unseen.

Poet and actor thus, with blended skill,
 Mould all our passions to their instant will ;
 'Tis thus, when feeling Garrick treads the stage,
 (The speaking comment of his Shakespear's page)
 Oft as I drink the words with greedy ears,
 I shake with horror, or dissolve with tears.

O, ne'er may folly seize the throne of taste,
 Nor dulness lay the realms of genius waste !
 No bouncing crackers ape the thund'rer's fire,
 No tumbler float upon the bending wire !
 More natural uses to the stage belong,
 Than tumblers, monsters, pantomime, or song.
 For other purpose was that spot design'd :
 To purge the passions, and reform the mind,
 To give to nature all the force of art,
 And while it charms the ear to mend the heart.

Thornton,

Thornton, to thee, I dare with truth commend,
 The decent stage as virtue's natural friend.
 Tho' oft debas'd with scenes profane and loose,
 No reason weighs against it's proper use.
 Tho' the lewd priest his sacred function shame,
 Religion's perfect law is still the same.

Shall they, who trace the passions from their rise,
 Shew scorn her features, her own image vice?
 Who teach the mind it's proper force to scan,
 And hold the faithful mirror up to man,
 Shall their profession e'er provoke disdain,
 Who stand the foremost in the mortal train,
 Who lend reflection all the grace of art,
 And strike the precept home upon the heart?

Yet, hapless artist! tho' thy skill can raise
 The bursting peal of universal praise,
 Tho' at thy beck applause delighted stands,
 And lifts, Briareus' like, her hundred hands,
 Know, fame awards thee but a partial breath!
 Not all thy talents brave the stroke of death,
 Poets to ages yet unborn appeal,
 And latest times th' eternal nature feel.
 Tho' blended here the praise of bard and play'r,
 While more than half becomes the actor's share,
 Relentless death untwists the mingled fame,
 And sinks the player in the poet's name.
 The pliant muscles of the various face,
 The mien that gave each sentence strength and grace,
 The tuneful voice, the eye that spoke the mind,
 Are gone, nor leave a single trace behind.