Women Who Act: Performance in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* and

Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter*

BY

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WOMEN WHO ACT: PERFORMANCE IN ELIZABETH INCHBALD'S *NATURE AND ART* AND MARY ROBINSON'S *THE NATURAL DAUGHTER*

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Abstract

Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796) and Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter* (1799) reveal the preoccupation with distinguishing between "natural" feeling and social artifice in the late-eighteenth century. Their works, written as the novel was still in its early stages, show the importance of theatricality as a dominant mode of discourse, both on the stage and in the everyday experience of individuals in the culture of sentimentality. Inchbald and Robinson show this theatrical bodily expression of sentimentality through the bodily performances of their female characters. Using novelistic conventions such as narrative perspective and free indirect discourse, these authors stage performance scenes with the aim of moving their audiences to reflect on the society that misinterprets, misunderstands, and ignores the complicated bodily signs of women's culturally-constructed gendered performance.

"Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*." –Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (193)

In his 1798 satirical piece "The Unsex'd Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of The Pursuits of Literature," Richard Polwhele expresses his concerns about the rising prevalence of women writers and the change he perceives in the positive public response to these women, which he feared was becoming comparable to that of men.[1] Polwhele portrays a new breed of women who pose a threat to "Honor, Virtue, Truth" by pursuing literary careers (6). He asks his reader to "Survey with me, what ne'er our fathers saw, / A female band despising NATURE's law, / As 'proud defiance' flashes from their arms / And vengeance smothers all their softer charms" (6). Although criticizing these women's intellectual pursuits, his satire notably emphasizes changes in their physical appearance and demeanor. For Polwhele, this band of women rejects "nature's law," their proper position as subjugated females, and their "vengeance" reduces their natural feminine appeal. Later in the poem, however, he suggests that these "natural" qualities may be, in fact, as artificial as their

[1] In a footnote to his poem, Polwhele criticizes the change he perceives in the way critics comment on female writers' works, noting that, "at the present day, indeed, our literary women are so numerous, that their judges, waving all complimentary civilities, decide upon their merits with the same rigid impartiality as it seems right to exercise towards the men." He further explains that this treatment negatively affects women by taking away their "veil of affected timidity" and encouraging them to act confidently: "The crimsoning blush of modesty, will be always more attractive, than the sparkle of confident intelligence..." ("The Unsex'd Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature," 1798. In: Gina Luria, ed. *The Feminist Controversy in England 1788-1810.* New York: Garland, 1974), 16.

newfound position as successful authors. Predicting the disintegration of proper womanhood he writes,

> Ere long, each little artifice discard,
> No more by weakness winning fond regard;
> Nor eyes, that sparkle from their blushes, roll,
> Nor catch the languours of the sick'ning soul,
> Nor the quick flutter, nor the coy reserve,
> But nobly boast the firm gymnastic nerve... (Polwhele 14-15)

Polwhele's seeming contradiction between nature and artifice breaks down. Ultimately, he suggests that women are naturally artful. Praising women's "artificial charms" in favor of active physicality, "the firm gymnastic nerve," he claims that women's capacity to attract the opposite sex is what makes them women. In his mind, the elimination of this "artifice" signals their downfall. Polwhele's concerns reflect deeper fears that women will fundamentally *transform*—changing from artful, passive playthings to active, "unsex'd females."

Exploring the artifice of cultural markers such as bodily gestures, Polwhele's satire reflects pressing concerns about women's public roles and the differences between natural and artificial behavior. In the late-eighteenth century, these concerns about women's roles in society and debates about authentic behavior often converge in sentimental writing and theatrical performance. Male and female artists alike commented on the role of women at a time in which female behavior was highly scrutinized. They debated proper female behavior through the dominant language of

sentimentality, a "bodily rhetoric," as one scholar has termed it,[2] because outward signs such as physical mannerisms, gestures, and speech were considered crucial in communicating emotion. Exalting the ideal connection between a person who expresses "natural" feeling and a moved spectator of that feeling, sentimental artists questioned and challenged ideas about changing women's roles by asking what constituted "authentic" feminine feeling and "natural" womanhood.

Sentimental novels and sentimental drama, both forms of popular art considered less respectable than "high art" such as poetry, provided relative freedom for artists to play with ideas about gender. Thus cultural debates about authentic behavior addressed in female characters often took on more experimental and provocative forms. As one historian has argued, the late-eighteenth century, which predated a modernist understanding of "self" and the increasingly fixed gender roles of the Victorian age, was more open to gender-bending than other eras.[3] Even so, historical evidence shows that proper gender roles were defined and reinforced, and it is likely this gender exploration was more accepted in the fictional realm of the theater or the novel rather than in real life, where ambiguous gender or cross-dressing is likely to be perceived as an actual threat to accepted cultural norms.[4]

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[2] See Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).

[3] See Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self* for an extensive discussion on the ways British people in the late-eighteenth century conceptualized gender and race (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004).

[4] Judith Butler described this phenomenon in an example of a transvestite appearing on a stage and on a bus. On stage, Butler argues that the transvestite's "difference" is acceptable to audiences. In real life, however, transgressing accepted gender norms is more likely to be perceived as a threat. See "The Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988), 527.

Stressing the inherent liminality of all performance, Jon McKenzie notes that the "spatial, temporal, and symbolic 'in-betweenness'" of performative activity "allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed" (50). Yet, he also stresses that liminal activities serve to "normalize" members of a culture and enforce traditional values (McKenzie 50-51). This understanding of liminality may help explain the seeming contradiction in this era between experimental theater and the increasingly predominant separate spheres ideology that kept many women confined to the home. Responding to theorists who have used Victor Turner's influential idea of the "liminal" to emphasize the experimental nature of performance, McKenzie notes that Turner's notion of liminality includes the idea that within a "social drama," such as a child's initiation into adulthood, a later stage of reintegration into society usually occurs (McKenzie 50-51). Just like an initiate in a rite of passage may break from the values and conventions of the community and later uphold the traditions of the society they broke away from, late-eighteenth-century audiences may have accepted challenging and troubling ideas about gender difference and social change within plays or novels but rejected these potentially subversive ideas in their daily lives. Yet as Polwhele's concerns about the influence of women writers show, attitudes toward acceptable female behavior were changing. Many artists, responding to this social change as well as helping to incite it, clearly intended to push audiences to grapple with fears about women's increasingly active role in society and to challenge the subscribed boundaries of proper womanhood.

The rich connection between the theater and the representation of women's performance has recently interested scholars of the Romantic period who have done important work to recover women's writing and to re-evaluate historical assumptions that largely left out women's voices. Much work remains, however, in examining the theatrical modes of women's performance and the ways it either conforms to or resists the notions of authenticity being worked out in the culture of sentimentality. In this paper, I seek to uncover the ways two novels, Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796) and Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter* (1799), subscribe to and challenge expectations for women's behavior in a culture concerned with the proper bodily expression of emotion. Inchbald and Robinson, like other writers of their time, sought both to instruct and persuade their readers to empathize or reject characters through the physical language of sentimentality. Through the often "theatrical" performances of their characters who act out roles such as lover, mother, and artist, these writers further challenge assumptions about gender in evocative and sometimes subversive ways. (In fact, Polwhele targets Mary Robinson's novels specifically in "The Unsex'd Females.") The interest in these authors' novels, I want to suggest, lay within the complex ways women's performance connects with the larger debate about natural and artificial behavior in sentimental culture.

The ongoing work of defining the theatrical in Romantic literature, in part through the recovery of women's writing such as that of Inchbald and Robinson, remains a fascinating project and one that has uncovered important distinctions between contemporary views of male and female performance in the Romantic

period. Beginning with Jerome J. McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), which scrutinized the uncritical acceptance of Romantic ideology based on the canonical poets' representations of their own poetics (1), scholars have challenged the view that Romantic art was an inherently solitary, introspective, and thus "anti-theatrical" enterprise. Examining the theatrical contributions of Coleridge and Wordsworth, for example, Julie Carlson has shown how these poets were interested in engaging political and social debates through the medium of the theater, despite the theater's "low" reputation. In fact, these writers used the theater's association with the "bodies of 'shameless women'" to address concerns about acceptable roles for women and proper interaction between the sexes (Carlson 2-3). Further, their work reveals a split between antitheatrical masculine poetics and the active bodily performance of women. According to Carlson, Romantic writers tended to disparage "light entertainment" such as pantomime and spectacle because they felt it made poetic language less vital to the theater. They also associated this "low" theater with women, because women performers on these stages often had important leading parts. Carlson argues that the male canonical poets, whose "criticism treats actresses as bodies not minds," satirize these "light" forms of theater by including women in plays that "ascribe action [or gesture as mime] to female characters, poetry to males" (21). Recent scholarship on women's theatrical performance and writing suggests, however, that women artists may have taken advantage of audience's increasing acceptance of women as "active" performers, using their bodies and worldly

circumstances to engage with their audiences in direct and self-aware ways.[5] A study of women dramatists' contributions to Romantic theater, including the prolific dramatic work of Inchbald, has revealed that women playwrights, like their male counterparts, expressed political consciousness through their writing.[6]

Not surprisingly in light of the connections between the theatrical writing and performance, Inchbald and Robinson were both well-known actresses before establishing successful public writing careers. In addition to writing numerous popular and well-received plays, Inchbald wrote theater reviews, essays, and two novels. A critically acclaimed poet [termed an "undoubted Genius" by Coleridge (Byrne 355)], Robinson also wrote plays, novels, and even a feminist political tract. Perhaps because these authors were familiar with manipulating the highly dialogical relationship between physical performer and audience in late-eighteenth-century theater, they could easily transition to communicating in narrative with literary audiences. Whether their early experiences as famous actresses had any bearing on their perception of women's performance might be considered inconsequential; as participants in the performative culture of sensibility, their acting extended beyond the confines of the stage and infused every aspect of their life. What their acting backgrounds may suggest, however, is that these women were aware of social

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[5] Groundbreaking scholarship from Stuart Hall and others on author Charlotte Smith has identified women's "public" engagement with the audience through self-promotion and direct appeals to the audience. Recent editions of other female Romantic authors' works, including Inchbald and Robinson, have likewise revealed a "public" persona of these writers that challenges the notion of Romantic writing as solely private, introspective, and "disinterested."

[6] See Catherine Burroughs' *Women in British Romantic Theatre* (2000) for a collection of eleven essays on women's impressive dramatic accomplishments, including Elizabeth Inchbald's important and prolific achievements (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

"artifice" on many levels: from the display of dresses and codes of conduct of their aristocratic patrons to the perceptions of the female body exposed in public. Furthermore, because of the striking contrast between lingering conceptions of the theater as low, feminized art and its increasing role as a means to instruct a growing middle-class about proper sentimental responses, Inchbald and Robinson had a privileged view into the contradictions and hypocrisies of their culture.

In this discussion of the theatrical in Romantic writing and women's performance, I hope to show that the performative aspects inherent in the culture of sentimentality obscure the border between the theater and real life. Because the private sphere of the home was considered to be the acceptable domain for women and public roles for women were discouraged, women's appearance on the stage provided viewers with the rare opportunity to see women perform and watch others react to this performance (Bolton 27-28). Thus, the stage's instructive purpose also included lessons on responding to women's behavior. For this reason, I believe examining the role of women in theater during this period offers insight into the ways women may have been perceived in everyday life. The reason I have chosen novels, rather than plays or other art forms, to explore issues of women's performance warrants further explanation, however. The popular form of the novel, like the theater, offered artists a stage on which they could present emotional performance and ideal responses to it. However, unlike plays that required government approval before they could be performed and involved many players including managers, actors, and audiences with competing visions for the production, novels offered

authors relative freedom of expression. Instead of an instantaneous response like that of theatergoers, which in this period could force actors off the stage and even end a night's performance, [7] (Richards 35) novelists could expect the slower, more private reading experience to delay readers' reactions. Further, novelists could shape reader responses, staging scenes of performance with the purpose of modeling ideal responses for their readers. In an 1807 essay on novel writing, Elizabeth Inchbald compared the experience of writing plays with that of composing novels:

> Whilst the poor dramatist is [...] confined to a few particular provinces; the novel-writer has the whole world to range, in search of men and topics. Kings, warriors, statesmen, churchmen, are all subjects of his power. The mighty and the mean, the common-place and the extraordinary, the profane and the sacred, all are prostrate before his muse. Nothing is forbidden, nothing is withheld from the imitation of a novelist, except—other novels. ("To the Artist" 166)

Inchbald's description of the wide array of material she can draw from as a novelist makes clear the nearly limitless possibilities of the novel for staging characters and performing events. The novelist arranges actors, sets the scene, and presents the material in a way that directs the response of readers. This power, wielded by a female novelist for an instructive purpose, I believe, has fascinating implications for

[7] In *The Rise of the English Actress*, Sandra Richards calls the audiences of the eighteenth-century theater "tyrannical taskmasters" who could make or break an actress's career. The notoriously fickle responses of theatergoers affected manager's casting choices. Actresses were even attacked by audiences for leaving acting because of pregnancy. As Richards recounts, the popular actress Dora Jordan was once hissed off the stage when she returned to the stage after having a baby (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 35, 57.

the way women's performance is portrayed within a sentimental novelistic tradition that emphasized the emotional connection between the character and the reader. Before exploring the novels themselves to show the fascinating ways they address women's social performance within the nature/art debate of culture of sentimentality, I will first examine performance within the larger context of the culture of sentimentality with its interest in natural and artificial behavior and then will discuss the useful ways female performance on the stage can be seen as a metaphor for women's social performance within the novel.

Performance and the Culture of Sentimentality

In Elizabeth Inchbald's essay on novel writing, she also humorously pokes fun at the sentimental performance ubiquitous in novels at this time and instructs the aspiring novel-writer to avoid overdoing these conventions:

> Examine [...] the various times you have made your heroine blush, and your hero turn pale—the number of times he has pressed her hand to his 'trembling lips,' and she his letters to her 'beating heart'—the several times he has been 'speechless' and she 'all emotion,' the one 'struck to the soul;' the other 'struck dumb.'
>
> The lavish use of 'tears,' both in 'showers' and 'floods,' should next be scrupulously avoided; though many a gentle reader will weep on being told that others are weeping, and require no greater cause to excite their compassion. ("To the Artist" 162)

Inchbald's satire shows that audiences do respond to and sympathize with the emotions of characters: "many gentle a reader will weep on being told that others are weeping." However, at the same time, Inchbald suggests a limit to the extent to which readers will accept the emotional display of characters. This balance between the performance of too little and too much emotion, in fact, seems to be at the heart of the debate between natural and artificial sentiment. Inchbald suggests that too excessive or misplaced sentiment is artificial, while proper restraint of emotion is "natural" and thus, worthy of the audience's response in turn.

Inchbald's satire, employing the language of the culture of sentimentality, surely resonated with audiences familiar with discussions and debates throughout the late-eighteenth century about acceptable behavior. In this period of increasing wealth and leisure for a developing middle class, numerous critics, philosophers, and writers articulated and defined proper sentimental conduct. In an important work on the period, Paul Langford has argued that as English society became commercialized, notions of politeness became increasingly important for the "middling sort" who sought to model themselves after their aristocratic "betters" and distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Politeness became a desirable and important characteristic of this national, commercial culture, and the controlled expression of emotion became a visible sign of refinement[8] (Langford 4-7). The proper means of showing sympathy likewise interested writers and thinkers whose works, addressed to

[8] See *A Polite and Commercial People*. Langford argues that the growing middling sort can be characterized by their increased leisure time, "polite manners," and interest in material possessions (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

literate middling and upper classes who had the time and money to obtain them, reinforced ideas about acceptable behavior. In light of this theory of social improvement based on early pre-capitalist economic growth, it seems fitting that years before writing his seminal economic treatise, *A Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith wrote his observations on sympathy and its moral implications in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1769). In this lengthy treatise comprising numerous short individual reflections, Smith defines sympathy as a physical exchange that occurs between an "affected" person and a spectator:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation [...] Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations [...] It is our impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (11-12)

For Smith, sympathy is dependent on the imagination of the spectator and occurs because the spectator imagines with his "own senses." The similar feeling the observer experiences "though weaker in degree" is nonetheless an actual bodily physical response. Proper sentimentality, according to Smith, shows self-restraint and propriety and does not overstate an emotional response:

> We are disgusted with that clamorous grief, which without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations. But we reverence that reserved, that silent and majestic sorrow, which discovers itself only in the swelling of the eyes, in the quivering of the lips and cheeks, and in the distant, but affecting, coldness, of the whole behaviour. It imposes the like silence upon us. (29)

Thus, Smith contrasts the sentimental feeling evoked by an improperly emotional individual with that elicited by a person who shows self-control.

Smith's description of proper sentimentality reveals the fine distinctions between proper and improper expression of emotion conveyed from one person to another. As Paul Goring has argued, the body provided an excellent means for communicating emotion, or "the passions" in the parlance of the eighteenth century, because it is able to "bestow authority through the persuasive rhetoric of 'nature'" (19). In other words, sentiment in cultural or social interaction assumes a "natural status" because it is communicated through the body. In the culture of sentimentality, reading bodily codes, such as those Smith describes, defined polite responses for

eighteenth-century audiences and made up an important part of conforming to social expectations as well. Thus, in an era concerned with issues of authenticity and naturalness, the body provided a means of sifting authentic from false sentiment that often, ironically, communicated constructed notions about proper behavior. As both Smith and Inchbald suggest, the body's display of "unnatural" expressions shows a disregard for reasoning and self-control. It follows then that the "natural" display of emotion requires focus and determination, which seems to contradict the idea that "natural" feeling is solely spontaneous and instinctive. For these authors, each well-known because of their accurate observations of and sharp commentary on the pressing issues of their time, proper expression of sentiment constitutes both self-awareness and social training.

Lessons on proper sentimental behavior were often presented on the stage, where actors modeled scenes of performance like those both Smith and Inchbald describe and the approbation or scorn of audiences communicated how the behavior should be received. In the late-eighteenth century, increasingly diverse audiences along gender and class lines and the popularity of actors and actresses—despite the stigma associated with the stage—show the power the theater had over audiences in this era (Bolton 13). Presenting a contemporary account of the most famous actor of the day, David Garrick, Goring argues that audiences modeled their own behavior on actors' gestures and expressions. Garrick presents a particularly fascinating case because the actor was credited with introducing this more "naturalistic" style to the

eighteenth-century stage. Goring cites Joseph Pittard's *Observations of Mr. Garrick's Acting* (1758), which recounts Pittard's experiences seeing:

> ...little Garrick, then young and light and alive in every muscle and in every feature, come bounding on the stage...heavens, what a transition!—it seemed as if a whole century has been swept over in the transition of a single scene; old things were done away, and a new order at once brought forward, bright and luminous, and clearly destined to dispel the barbarisms and bigotry of a tasteless age, too long attached to the prejudices of custom, and superstitiously devoted to the illusions of imposing declamation. (qtd. in Goring 119)

Although with little detail of the actual performance, Pittard's recollection of Garrick's acting suggests that the actor radically overturned a stiff, conventional style and brought an active, physical youthful style to the stage. Garrick did "naturalize" acting by modulating the tone of his voice and using his body expressive ways, which had not been customary at the time he entered the theater. Prior to the changes in acting brought about because of Garrick's influence, actors delivered lines in a kind of "musical recitation" and rarely moved around the stage (Price 14-15). However, Pittard's description of "natural" behavior should be recognized within the social and historical context of the eighteenth century. Like Smith's descriptions of "swelling of the eyes" and "quivering of the cheeks," Garrick's acting was most certainly affected and constructed to seem "natural" to late-eighteenth-century audiences.

Garrick's "natural" acting style raises important questions about the constructed nature of both "natural" and "artificial" behavior in the eighteenth century. The extent to which acting and cultural behavior influenced each other can never be determined exactly, but clearly the stage reinforced cultural values and behavior, and in turn, these values influenced acting. Pittard's description of the promise of Garrick's new style, "destined to dispel barbarisms and bigotry of a tasteless age," suggests a visible cultural shift, reflected in life as well as art. As part of this culture, women reflected this turn toward "naturalistic" acting as well in life and on the stage. Because of the confinement of many women to the "private sphere" of the home in this era, these changed values and perceptions of behavior may be best reflected on the stage, where gender relations were often depicted in surprising ways. Thus the eighteenth-century theater offers a useful starting point for understanding social expectations for women's natural and authentic performance.

Women's Acting and Performance

Judith Butler famously described gender as an "in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (519). Butler shows gender is a culturally constructed and proscribed series of acts *performed* by individuals rather than an identity located within them. Yet, as she points out, gender identity formation is not a simple process of taking on "roles." The

"self" is not left pure and untouched and "acts" put on like clothes.[9] Rather, women enter into an ongoing play of gender performance that shapes their identity, and this identity is negotiated through the acts women perform through life.

This formulation of gender proves useful in looking at late-eighteenth-century performance when so much of gender identity was defined and contested on and through the body. Although gender identity cannot be solely understood as a matter of outward performance, the ways women performed their gender publicly can show the way culture perceived women and how women themselves incorporated or challenged the dominant ideology of their time in the rituals and repeated acts of life. Because theater literally shows women "acting" gender, it reveals the fascinating ways women's fulfillment of or resistance to gender expectations were received in the culture.

The history of women's performance on the stage shows the complicated and sometimes contradictory ways gender expectations are negotiated. The late-eighteenth-century theater portrayed and objectified women in often striking ways, which may have been the result of women's early roles on the stage. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the first actresses, often prostitutes, slowly took over female roles previously acted by boys. As theater historian Sandra Richards argues, acting's gender-bending past paved the way for the late-eighteenth-century audiences' fascination with "breeches parts," roles in which women wore male clothing that allowed men the rare and titillating experience of viewing a woman's

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[9] Butler stresses the importance of the interplay between a person's interior "psychic world" and the culture in the preface to her book *Gender Trouble* ("Preface" New York: Routledge, 1990), xvi.

leg in public (3-4). The association made between actresses and prostitution may have also led to the common assumption that actresses were disrespectable and immoral people who were unfit company for respectable ladies. Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, plays took on a didactic purpose, instructing audiences about proper behavior. Particularly in popular sentimental comedies that often dramatized the advantages of maintaining respectability and virtue, audiences could see actresses modeling positive female behavior (Bolton 25). However, many other roles showed women as immoral and extravagant, setting up actresses as easy targets for criticism and satire (Richards 7, 38).

As the interest in breeches' parts and the close scrutiny of female behavior on the stage shows, the body played an important part in communicating conflicted messages about women's social performance. The physical presence of the body on the stage itself reflected a momentous change in the way women were perceived. As Julie Carlson argues in her discussion of women's active roles in the plays of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, communication through the body constitutes a political act with the potential to transform culture. Carlson suggests that the late-eighteenth-century stage, portraying women as active bodies, promised a "more fully democratized and feminized nation to come" (11-12). Indeed, by the late-eighteenth century, women made up a large part of acting companies and theater audiences. In contrast with the theater of the seventeenth century, women actively participated in the experience, creating an interaction between actresses and other women in the audience that changed the old dynamic of women performing primarily

for men's entertainment. Also, the relationship between men and women seems to have changed, with actresses such as Sarah Siddons garnering respect comparable to male actors for their acting skill.

These changing relationships between actresses and audience suggest that actresses served an important function in reflecting and challenging accepted roles for women in a socially turbulent time. In light of the news from France, where women were actively revolting in the streets and a highly visible Queen was violently and publicly executed, British people were increasingly concerned about the public role of women (Colley 251-253). As Linda Colley notes, more women in Britain were also participating in social and political causes outside of the home, which she argues was possible because of "separate spheres" ideology that paradoxically allowed women publicly to defend female propriety and morality (262-263). Yet these changes could and did create anxiety for men, particularly when they perceived women's public participation as too bold (Colley 258). Attacks from the press against Georgiana the Duchess of Devonshire because of her support of a male political candidate, reveal the climate of uncertainty surrounding proper gender relations. One satire of the Duchess shows half of her face and half of the candidate's melded into one image. As historian Dror Wahrman has argued, the image suggests that her active role in the campaign was literally breaking down gender lines, masculinizing her and feminizing

the candidate[10] (265). The presence of women on the stage addressed these concerns and contributed to the wider public debate about the accepted roles for women.

In an account of one woman's acting life in the eighteenth century, the actress Charlotte Charke describes the difficulties she faced working in both famous London theaters and among less respected provincial "strolling" acting troupes. Written in 1755, her narrative addresses the stigma against actresses that persisted through the century but also the sense that audiences, and the actresses themselves, increasingly judged women's performance by the same standards of craft as those perfected by David Garrick. That is, audiences and actresses looked to the body for natural and convincing displays of emotion. Recounting her experiences working with a group of male and female actors in Bath, Charke criticizes male actors whose talent would have been as equally suitable "on the Stage, than upon a Post or a Brick-wall." She does not explain in detail why the actors fail to live up to her standards, saying only, "I have often thought, when I have wrote the Word PERFORM'D, it would have been no Error to have changed it to DEFORM'D" (247). However, when she turns to describing an actress whom she praises for her "very great and uncommon Genius," Charke reveals what she considers effective acting to be: "She not only drew the Audience into a most profound Attention, but absolutely into a general Flood of commiserating Tears; and blended Nature and Art so exquisitely well, that 'twas impossible not to feel her Sorrows, and bear the tenderest Part in her Affliction" (247). Through her blending of natural emotion and acting skill, revealing the

[10] See Dror Wahrman's *The Making of the Modern Self* for a fascinating analysis of the satire "Cheek by Joul or the Mask" (1784) (New Haven, Yale UP, 2005).

naturalization of the craft that Garrick epitomized, the actress conveys the character's sadness so well that the audience experiences a like-response in turn. Charke's description of the actress reveals the similarities between Smith's description of the feeling person and the spectator as well as the relationship between the eighteenth-century actress and her audience. Furthermore, she alludes to a fascinating exchange occurring within the audience. Sharing the common experience of watching the actress, audience members seem to be looking to one another to determine and reinforce their proper responses to the scene, creating "a general Flood of commiserating Tears." These connections between the actress and audience and among audience members suggest that that the bodily language of sentimentality was not only the language of the stage but also a social language, guiding individuals' responses to one another in everyday life.

The novels of Elizabeth Inchbald and Mary Robinson, showing the everyday life of women, reveal the fascinating ways this sentimental bodily language was performed, blurring the boundaries between theater and society. Exploring the popular debate about the advantages of "natural" education sparked by Jean Jacques Rousseau in influential works such as *Émile* (1762), Inchbald's *Nature and Art* centers on the outcomes of two boys who grow up in different environments: the "savage" wilds of Africa and refined upper-class society in England. Although the novel focuses mostly on the male characters throughout the first half of the book, female characters' performance takes a prominent role throughout and serves a major purpose in the novel's second half. Addressing themes of seduction, illegitimacy, and

immorality, Inchbald creates interest in her female characters and instructs her reader how they should be viewed by showing the superiority of the natural language of sentimentality over the artificiality of upper-class social conventions. Robinson's *The Natural Daughter* tells the story of an independent and strong-willed woman who resists the constraints of marriage and experiences numerous troubles for following her own moral code. As in *Nature and Art*, Robinson intends for her reader to see the characters' natural behavior as superior to accepted, artificial social standards. Notably, Robinson's main character seeks out the professions of acting and writing, creating literal scenes of performance that show the usefulness of the theater as a metaphor to describe the transformative and sometimes subversive effects of women's public performance. Because of the way Inchbald focuses on defining natural behavior in terms of sentimental culture, I will first discuss *Nature and Art*.

"Knowing How to Feel": Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art*

As a sentimental novel addressing themes of authentic feeling and artifice, *Nature and Art* is very much a novel of its time. The novel's central plot, comparing the upbringing of a boy raised in refined English society with a boy raised in Africa, presents a "natural" model for children's educational and social development influential at the time (Maurer 17-18).[11] Likewise, the novel's secondary plot, recounting the ruin of a seduced girl, tackles a common trope in the sentimental

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[11] In her introduction to the Broadview edition of *Nature and Art*, Shawn Lisa Maurer notes that Inchbald shared her Jacobin contemporaries' interest in examining the possibilities of education for effecting social change ("Introduction" *Nature and Art.* Toronto: Broadview, 2003).

novelistic tradition: the seduction of a lower-class woman by an aristocratic man.[12] Showing the differences between natural and artificial feeling through characters' bodily restraint of emotion, *Nature and Art* exemplifies the era's preoccupation with feeling and its connection to the body. Further, the novel expresses a common idea in sentimental literature that "natural" expression of emotion is more virtuous than self-serving displays of sentiment, and that impoverished men and women who "feel" are nobler than those hardhearted "betters" of the upper class.

The idea that true sentiment can be found among the uneducated and unrefined raises issues about social inequality that are further complicated when these "naturally" sentimental lower-class individuals are women. The experiences of lower class women, who are more publicly visible because they must work,[13] demonstrate the tensions that occur when women "act" publicly. Showing the wide variety of responses toward women's sentimental displays of emotion, *Nature and Art* reveals the disparate, unsettling, and contradictory ways female performance, and responses to them, are constructed and reinforced in terms of naturalness and artificiality. In fascinating scenes of performance, the novel conveys the ways "natural" performances in lower-class women are often misread and misunderstood. They show, as Butler suggests, that women "come into" their gender identity and

[12] From Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) through the end of the eighteenth century, writers used the theme of seduction to appeal to create dramatic tales, which also had the didactic purpose of cautioning men and women to maintain moral decency and avoid sexual impropriety. See R.F. Brissenden's *Virtue in Distress* for a discussion of this trope in the sentimental novel (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

[13] Paul Langford comments that the rise of the "middling sort" was increasingly domesticating England's women, keeping them from public employment, even in traditionally female occupations such as seamstress and midwife (*A Polite and Commercial People*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 110-111.

continually "act" it in response to daily situations. Further, social, economic, and political factors place women in certain positions from which they must make choices about how to perform. Just as late-eighteenth-century actresses were subject to the interpretation of the audience, and this interpretation could be misinterpreted, Inchbald's heroines form their identities and are scrutinized for them in ways they often cannot control.

Inchbald's novel offers three distinct scenes that are fascinating for examining these issues of performance. Part of the seduction plot of the novel, these scenes convey the range of responses to women as they are confronted with sexual advances, rejection, and accusations of misdoing. Before examining these individual scenes, however, it will be helpful to understand the ways Inchbald sets up these scenes of performance for her reader in the larger context of her theme of "natural" and "artificial" sentimentality. Inchbald's depiction of the brothers Henry and William and their sons, also named Henry and William, for example, offer definitions for the terms "nature" and "art" used throughout the novel. Likewise, the character of Lady Clementina, an example of particularly "artificial" womanhood portrayed in the first half of the novel, is also worth examining in detail in order to see the ways her behavior contrasts with the heroines of the seduction plot.

Underscoring the importance of performance in the novel, the experiences of the elder Henry, a violinist, show the differences between his "natural" artistic expression and the "artificial" behavior of his aristocratic audience. Describing the effect of music on the nobility, Inchbald shows the way natural feeling conveyed

through music can be misunderstood. The narrator relates, "Henry's violin had often charmed, to a welcome forgetfulness of his insignificance, an effeminate lord; or warmed with ideas of honour, the head of a duke, whose heart could never be taught to feel its manly glow" (45). Showing that Henry's aristocratic patrons do not know how to "feel" the emotions in their own hearts, Inchbald contrasts authentic emotional performance with the constructs of artifice that lead upper-class patrons to desire musical entertainment. The novel satirizes aristocrats by suggesting that music helps the patrons escape their own lack of "significance" and "honour," implying that their appreciation of the music is artificial.[14] Like Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Inchbald suggests that emotions that are appropriately and movingly expressed will result in a properly sympathetic response. The failure of Henry's music to move his audience reveals a breakdown in communication between those with natural sentiment and those whose sentiment has been warped by social training and refinement. Thus the proper emotional exchange between persons required by sentimentality collapses.

In the central plot of Henry's son, also named Henry, the novel reveals that artificial behavior is learned, an idea that becomes crucial in the scenes of women's performance later in the novel. Henry is raised in Africa after his mother dies because his father wants to distance himself from the prejudices of his brother

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[14] In a footnote to the Broadview edition to *Nature and Art* (2005), Shawn Lisa Maurer connects this scene to a statement Inchbald made about the music-loving aristocrat in the play *A Bold Stroke for a Husband:* "The part of Don Vicenzo was certainly meant as a moral satire upon the extravagant love, or the foolish affection, of pretending to love, to extravagance—music. This satire was aimed at so many, that the shaft struck none. The charm of music still prevails in England, and the folly of affected admirers" (*Nature and Art*. Toronto: Broadview, 2003), 45.

William, who disapproves of the violin-player's marriage to another artistic performer. Notably, in light of the notions of gendered performance explored in the latter part of the novel, the family disdains "the public singer," a term that notably stresses both her gender and her public presence outside of the home. Arriving from Africa at thirteen years of age, the younger Henry is completely ignorant about English culture. The questions he poses to his aristocratic uncle William, his aunt Lady Clementina, and cousin William, reveal the highly symbolic and often arbitrary meanings behind social codes and class distinctions. Inchbald emphasizes the constructed nature of these class markers when Henry asks his uncle about the purpose of wigs:

> 'Why do you wear such things?'
>
> 'As a distinction between us and inferior people: they are worn to give an importance to the wearer.'
>
> 'That is just as the savages do; they hang brass nails, wire, buttons, and entrails of beasts all over them, to give them importance.'
>
> The dean now led his nephew to Lady Clementina, and told him 'She was his aunt, to whom he must behave with the utmost respect.'
>
> 'I will, I will,' he replied; 'for she, I see, is a person of importance too—she has, very nearly, such a white thing upon her head as you have!' (58-59)

Applying his new knowledge of English customs, Henry makes the choice to bow to the dean's wig instead of the dean, and after learning the "great worth in glittering appearances," he also reveres his aunt's earrings (61). However, interestingly, Henry is not ignorant of the meaning of social distinctions. When he remarks about the items worn by the "savages," he shows knowledge of distinguishing marks of status. It is in fact his awareness and direct statements of what he sees that make his commentary irritating to the other characters.

Asking her reader to look through Henry's eyes, Inchbald uncovers the "truth" behind these English class distinctions, setting up a binary between nature and artificiality that she defines in specific and gendered ways. Similar to the Romantic theater in which women often performed "active" parts and men "thinking" ones, Inchbald suggests that the education associated with men focuses on mental faculties, while that associated with women centers on the display of physical attributes. Describing the younger William's English education, for example, the narrator contrasts the kind of instruction from teachers assigned by his father to that of the teachers assigned by Lady Clementina. The tutors provided by his father, she explains, "taught him to walk, to ride, to talk, to think like a man—a foolish man instead of a wise child, as nature designed him to be." However, his mother's teachers "did him less mischief; for though they distorted his limbs and made his manners effeminate, they did not interfere *beyond the body*" (my italics) (53). By describing William's education in this way, Inchbald may want only to emphasize Lady Clementina's foolishness in contrast with the intellectual interests of the dean.

However, the narrator's commentary associating education provided by women with the body seems important in light of the emphasis she places throughout the novel on the role of women as physical actors.

Lady Clementina, the exemplary "artificial" woman in the novel, communicates through her physical mannerisms, dress, and speech, outward signs of performance that can be helpfully understood through Erving Goffman's concept of "personal front." Goffman separates "front" into two categories, "appearance" and "manner." According to Goffman, "appearance" tells the spectator of a performance the social status and identity of the performer and his or her relation to the performance, for example whether the performance is formal, informal, or whether the performer is in a particular life-stage. A performer's "manner" conveys what the spectator can expect and how the spectator should react (24). This same effect of personal front on the audience occurs in the character of Lady Clementina. The narrator describes her appearance as "fantastically fashionable." Her manner is "affected in all of the various passions of youth," and her speech is "embellished with accusations against her own 'heedlessness, thoughtlessness, carelessness, and childishness'" (49). These characteristics show that Lady Clementina dresses her body to show her awareness of the cultural trends of fashion and effects her speech to suggest she is younger than she really is. As the narrator suggests, Lady Clementina has a high opinion of herself, and so her self-deprecating tone is literally a "front" that projects her need for others' approval.

Lady Clementina's "personal front" reveals that she purposefully and consciously constructs her performance as an aristocratic woman. Goffman remarks on the structured way activities are defined to convey social status:

> When a group or class is examined, one finds that the members of it tend to invest their egos primarily in certain routines, giving less stress to other ones which they perform [...] It is upon this issue that some writers have chosen to distinguish groups with aristocratic habits (whatever their social status) from those of middle-class character. The aristocratic habit, it has been said, is one that mobilizes all the minor activities of life which fall outside the serious specialties of other classes and injects into these activities an expression of character, power, and high rank. (33-34)

Directing her routine in precisely this way, Lady Clementina seems to meet the criteria of an aristocratically-minded person who demands that her audience act accordingly. She focuses her individual activities on her physical deportment and conducts her activities with the idea that others find her every act fascinating because they express wealth and power. She contemplates, for example, how she will benefit most from others' opinions about her treatment of her nephew when he first arrives from Africa. She considers, "in what manner it would most redound to her honour to receive him; for her vanity taught her to believe that the whole inquisitive world pried into her conduct, even upon every family occurrence" (57). Later, she wonders, "how amiable her conduct would appear in the eye of the world, should she

condescend to treat this destitute nephew as her own son,—what envy such heroic virtue would excite in the hearts of her particular friends, and what grief in the bosoms of all those who did not like her" (60). Lady Clementina's behavior, tailored to a particular audience, performs the values of her upper-class society. This manner of presentation is what Inchbald suggests is indicative of "artificial" performance. Lady Clementina not only seems insincere, but also is devoid of feelings; she performs emotions solely for an audience's approval.

While Lady Clementina's performance can be understood solely in terms of class, gender is an equally important to recognize because it undeniably affects the way performers are perceived. The similarities between Goffman's language of performance as "certain routines" or "habits" and Butler's discussion of a "stylized repetition of acts" reveal that both class and gender identity are constructed in light of audience expectations. Lady Clementina's interest in the latest fashions and her desire to appear to be a generous caretaker suggest qualities associated with female gender. Inchbald also specifically describes Lady Clementina's vanity as a feminine characteristic, equivalent to the vice of pride in males. Thus, while Lady Clementina fulfills class expectations, she also constructs the artificial presentation of herself in terms of gender.

Lady Clementina's performance corresponds with gendered acts such as those associated with women's fashion in the late-eighteenth-century theater. Fashion played an important role in highlighting actresses' beauty and increasing the visual spectacle of the performance (Byrne 70). Actresses also often wore contemporary

clothes anachronistically in period plays to show off the latest fashions and create new trends (Byrne 81), which reinforced the cultural construction of female beauty. Moreover, fashion offered audience members the chance to "perform." Because aristocratic women sometimes donated their dresses to actresses to wear on stage, they had the opportunity to see their own fashion sense displayed publicly in an almost vicarious performance in front of a large audience (Byrne 70).

Thus, through gendered "acts" such as fashion, the theater allowed the opportunity for audience members to see and be seen. Emphasizing the diversity along class lines in eighteenth-century audiences, Betsy Bolton notes that prologues, epilogues, and commentaries often addressed these different class groupings, which she suggests had the affect of unifying the whole in a common national experience (13-14). This open exchange between actors and audience also clearly made the audience an active part of the performance. Like an actress or audience member in the theater, Lady Clementina "performs" for others. Her performance also reveals the insincerity of some performance. Perhaps in this way Lady Clementina reflects the self-absorbed audience members of the theater who enjoyed their own company more than the show.

As an author directing her audience, Inchbald and her narrator seem to take the position of an actress or playwright, presenting commentary for understanding the performance similar to the way Bolton describes prologues and epilogues operate in the theater. For example, Inchbald directly addresses the reader as a "reader of superior rank" when she directs her readers' attentions to the lower-class female

protagonists of the novel. She tells this reader, "if the passions which rage in the bosom of the inferior class of human kind are beneath your sympathy, throw aside this little history, for Rebecca Rymer and Hannah Primrose are its heroines" (80). Although using the language of class, "superior rank," the rhetorical maneuver of addressing persons as "superior" suggests that readers can also be divided into different categories of "feeling": those who will read about the sufferings of the lower class and those who will not. What happens to the audience in this rhetorical move is worth noting: it puts the readers who choose to identify themselves as "superior" (and who wouldn't?) in the position of sympathetic spectators of the important scenes of performance that follow. Witnessing the heroines' emotional responses to seduction, rejection, and prejudice, superior readers are expected to interpret these women's emotional displays—for example, tears and blushing—and experience a sympathetic reaction in turn.

The audience's first major test of their superior sentimental response occurs when Inchbald's "heroine," Hannah, is introduced. Hannah, the beautiful and beloved child of hard-working villagers, is seduced by William, the novel's "artificial son." Ironically, Hannah is doomed to fall for William because her own natural virtue raises her above her social rank:

> [She] was formed by the rarest structure of the human frame, and fated by the tenderest thrillings of the human soul, to inspire and to experience real love—but her nice taste, her delicate thoughts, were so refined beyond the sphere of her own station in society, that nature

> would have produced this prodigy of attraction in vain, had not one of superior education and manners assailed her heart [...] he was a miracle! (81-82)

This passage clearly shows that Hannah is a "natural" heroine. The "structure of the human frame" suggests Hannah's bodily virtue, displayed in those sensitive qualities of feeling "to inspire and to experience real love." Yet, Hannah also seems especially vulnerable to seduction and ruin because, living in the country and barely able to read, she does not have access to cultural material such as literature or the theater that would model the proper and safe expression of feeling. The narrator explains that Hannah as "the only child of two doating parents, she never had been taught the necessity of resignation—untutored, unread, unused to reflect, but knowing how to *feel*..." (85). Because Hannah has not learned to restrain her feelings through reading or reflecting on her own experience, her feelings are literally displayed in the novel as unrestrained bodily displays of emotion that heighten the sense of tragedy for the reader and elicit the same kind of sympathetic exchange between audience and actress found in the theater.

The first example of this dramatic exchange between a character and the audience occurs in the first major scene of performance in the novel. After William seduces Hannah and returns to the city, she receives a letter from him that he has promised to write her months before. Because she is nearly illiterate and also because she wants to treasure William's words, the process of reading becomes a dramatic and prolonged process both for Hannah and the novel's reader, who

experiences her responses to the letter through vivid descriptions of her bodily reactions. Inchbald sets up the scene both visually and dramatically, as if Hannah is an actress on a stage in front of her audience:

> Her father and her mother were still absent. She drew a chair, and placing it near to the only window in the room, seated herself with ceremonious order; then, gently drew forth her treasure; laid it on her knee; and with a smile that almost amounted to a laugh of gladness, once more inspected the outward part, before she would trust herself with the excessive joy of looking within. (86)

Each moment of the scene unfolds slowly; each action, creating its own sweet pleasure for Hannah, develops dramatically because Hannah contains her excitement and delays her gratification. Hannah's body conveys subtle changes in emotion. Her smile "almost" becomes a "laugh of gladness," but she stops herself from giving in to "excessive joy." In the same way Smith describes a spectator appreciating tempered grief, (29) the reader is led to see the virtue in Hannah's restrained joy. Notably, like the typical presentation of actresses in the late-eighteenth century, her actions, rather than her thoughts, take center stage.

When Hannah responds to the utterly disappointing contents of the letter, Inchbald's use of narrative perspective and free indirect discourse allows the reader to visualize these bodily symptoms while also being aware of the reasons Hannah is experiencing them. Rather than an expression of his love, William's concise and unemotional letter says that he has been prevented from writing because of business.

He describes his health since they have parted, wishes her well, and ends with a troubling line for Hannah: "With gratitude for all the favours conferred on me." Despite the letter's "cold civility," the narrator suggests it is important because it conveys the "magic of [Hannah's] own passion." The narrator also relates that her great effort to decipher the letter should be seen as "amazing" because of "the right, the delicate, the nicely proper sensations with which she was affected by every sentence [the letter] contained" (87). The last line of the letter, especially, evokes an emotional response in Hannah that, although at first extreme, is tempered into "nicely proper sensations." The reader learns as if from Hannah's perspective that the words, "gratitude for all the favours conferred on me," affect her more than the letter's absence of warm feeling because the euphemism insults her, shaming her with the realization that her lost innocence has been acknowledged only with a cold, business-like "thank you." Then, as if viewing the scene from outside her body, the reader learns that "she could not read the line, without turning pale with horror," and because of the business-like transaction the words suggest, without "kindling with indignation" (87). In the same way joy and suffering are conceived by Smith and Inchbald as more sympathetic when they are expressed through the body in a tempered form, Hannah's pain seems to become more tragic, and probably more affecting to a late-eighteenth-century audience, as it progresses from shock, readable in the paling of her face, to a deeper, more internalized anger. Her bodily response is controlled in a way that allows the reader of the novel to sympathize with her.

Certainly, Inchbald is not innovative in sentimentalizing the theme of an innocent woman seduced by a predatory man. However, she complicates the seduction narrative by showing the wider effects of the seduction on the community, and particularly its women. Specifically, she uses the character of Rebecca, who is completely blameless, to show the way women's guilt is often presupposed when suspicions of impropriety are raised. Further, she suggests the ways these accusations place women in the precarious situations of having to defend their innocence without appearing too bold and exhibiting "unbecoming" conduct in an age when women were expected to be modest and publicly inconspicuous. As in the performance scene of Hannah reading the letter, Inchbald's depiction of Rebecca relies on bodily language to convey sentiment.

In this scene, Rebecca's physical reactions, ignored or misunderstood by her family as signs of guilt, reveal the ways natural signs can be misread. The scene begins after her sisters discover that Rebecca has been caring for a baby in secret, and suspect that she has mothered the child. The child is actually Hannah's, whom Henry gave to Rebecca after he discovered the child abandoned in the woods. To discover the truth of the situation, Rebecca's father, Reverend Rymer, dramatically confronts her in front of her sisters. First appearing before them as "timid, gentle, oppressed," Rebecca falls "trembling on her knees," and asks for her father's forgiveness. He will not forgive her, however, until she tells him the identity of the child and its mother, which Rebecca will not divulge. Responding to her silence and unsatisfactory

answers with increasing impatience and vehemence, the Reverend causes her to shake "in every limb," which only confirms his suspicions:

> I understand the cause of this terror! It confirms your sisters' fears, and your own shame [...] I never loved you like my other children—I never had the cause—you were always unlike the rest—and I knew your fate would be calamitous—but the very worst of my forebodings did not come to this—so young, so guilty, and so artful! (102)

Instead of listening patiently to Rebecca, the Reverend eagerly attempts to prove his daughter's guilt. Ironically, her natural reactions—falling to her knees, shaking in every limb—stem from the fear of her authoritarian parent and her reticence to implicate Henry. Yet, the Reverend reads these signs as evidence of "artful" behavior.

In the interaction between Rebecca and her father, Inchbald shows that emotional communication can be hampered by social assumptions about the behavior of women. This scene suggests that restrained bodily responses are preferable to verbal or spoken expression in communicating a woman's "natural sentiment." Yet, effective communication through this bodily language depends upon the capacity of a spectator to view visual cues properly. As this scene shows, misunderstandings frequently occur. At every turn in the scene between the Reverend and Rebecca, the Reverend misinterprets the meaning of Rebecca's physical actions. Because he is quick to judge his daughter as "artful" and conniving, he cannot understand his daughter's meaning. However, Inchbald suggests that if the Reverend were able to

understand Rebecca's timidity and "trembling" as signs of her true and natural sentiment, the damage from miscommunication would be avoided. For the reader who knows Rebecca is innocent, this miscommunication serves to prove the Reverend's false sensibility.

Inchbald stages a drama between the Reverend and Rebecca that illustrates the disruptive and potentially transformative effects of liminality, a concept Victor Turner elaborated in many of his works (Carlson 17). Turner develops Arnold Van Gennep's three-phase model of rites of passage, "separation, margin (or limen), and re-aggregation" and examines the effects on individuals in both tribal societies and potential "large-scale civilizations" (36). Turner is interested particularly in the ways individuals in the middle stage of a cultural transition, which he terms "liminaries," are "in-between" figures, "neither-this-nor-that, here-nor-there, one-thing-not-the-other" (37-38). This "in-betweenness," Turner argues, offers possibilities for individuals to assess their cultural values as "outsiders;" after separation has occurred in a ritual or liminal state, the liminary can see, in a critical light, what they have previously understood to be natural (38).

Placing Rebecca in a scene of conflict in which she is outcast from her society, Inchbald allows her reader to experience the same sense of "in-betweenness" that offers an opportunity to assess what it is accepted as natural in the culture. Turner argues that in "posttribal" societies, the liminal[15] function of social drama has

[15] Turner categorizes this artistic liminal experience in posttribal societies the name "liminoid" to distinguish between these cultural activities and tribal ritual, but other scholars have used the terms "liminal" and "liminoid" interchangeably.

been transferred from real-life rituals to literature, theater, and other art forms (43). In these genres, he notes, the "elements of culture" are "pulled apart" and reassembled in "often random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, sometimes deliberately experimental combinations" (43). In *Nature and Art*, Inchbald also tears apart her culture, and while the result is less extreme as Turner suggests is possible, she does present a scene that is outside of many persons' daily experience, thereby challenging readers to think about women's performance in new ways. Like the women on the late-eighteenth-century stage, Rebecca is a woman who acts in front of an audience, a rare sight to behold in the late-eighteenth century. Thus through the novel, readers have the opportunity to see women responding to cultural values accepted as "natural." Further, with Inchbald guiding the scene, the potential is great that the reader will side with the liminary figure, Rebecca, and be moved to sympathize with her struggle.

Best conveying the theatrical aspect of social performance in *Nature and Art* is a scene of performance at the end of the novel that vividly conveys Hannah's downfall. After Hannah reclaims her baby from Rebecca, Hannah openly accepts the fate assigned to unmarried mothers at the time: shame, poverty, and disgrace. Because the novel shows the difficulties of meeting gender expectations, particularly when women are without cultural support such as literature to instruct them, Hannah's imprisonment for a crime of check-forging and the resulting trial shows the typical tragic outcome of a seduced feeling woman. The effect of this terrible

outcome is heightened because the judge who sentences Hannah is William, the seducer whom the narrator suggests leads Hannah to her irrevocable downfall.

In a classic courtroom scene, Inchbald uses the performative aspects inherent in the formalities and role-playing of the legal process to heighten the drama that occurs when the language of sentimentality is misunderstood. Hannah, who is convicted under an alias, does not divulge her identity to her former lover. In fact, she worries that "some well-known glance of the eye, turn of the action, or accent of speech," will prove that William recognizes her, reminding her of the shame she feels for the acts she committed as a result of their affair (136). However, ironically, she realizes that he does not recognize her because he speaks to her kindly, which is not "as when William last addressed her; when he left her undone and pregnant and vowing 'never to see or speak to her more.'" Rather, his tone is the "effect of practice, the art of his occupation" (137). In the same way Butler describes the formation and reinforcement of gender identity through ritualized acts, William practices his "art," fulfilling his role as a powerful judge. Also, like Lady Clementina, William shows an artful and purposeful tailoring of his words and behavior to meet the perceived expectations of his audience.

As the narrator points out, his tone toward Hannah is meant not "for the consolation of the culprit, but for the approbation of the auditors" (137). These auditors are important because they comprise an audience of which the reader is also a part. Emphasizing the importance of the audience's role in effecting change, the narrator notes the absence of an audience when Hannah was first seduced: "There

were no spectators, Hannah, by your side when last he parted from you—if there had, the awful William [would have] been awed to marks of pity" (137). Inchbald creates drama by suggesting there might still be hope for Hannah because William and the jury will have the opportunity to see Hannah's suffering and feel pity for her. However, when the audience is unable to understand the signs that convey her pain, the reader alone is left to sympathize with Hannah.

Like Rebecca in front of the Reverend, Hannah resists defending herself verbally. Therefore, understanding the meaning of Hannah's suffering depends on making a connection between bodily displays of emotion and feeling, which William and the spectators in the courtroom fail to understand. When William demands to know if she has any witnesses to defend her character, "all vital power" leaves her, and she cannot utter a word. Repeating the question and receiving silence in return, William, with the firm but cool demeanor of a judge demands to know, "What have you to say?" Although her physical actions, "a flood of tears" followed by "a second gush of tears," reflect her innocence to a sympathetic reader, William does not read these physical displays as signs of innocence. He presses his questions further, and does not recognize the effects of his words. He does not see her "stagger with the deadly blow" with each question. When he pronounces the jury's sentence of "guilty," and she cries out, "Oh! not from *you*!", most of those in the audience do not hear the words (137). However, Inchbald suggests that the meaning is lost even on those that do hear them and misinterpret them. They think she cries out only because she is afraid of death. By making Hannah's last desperate attempt to be understood

yet another moment of ineffective communication in the novel, Inchbald suggests that when women actively speak out, their audiences often misinterpret their meaning.

Although Hannah's verbal outburst is direct, this kind of act in women is rare in the novel, suggesting that Inchbald is most comfortable depicting women as quietly affecting rather than verbally communicative. In fact, her characters act in passive ways that would seem to meet Polwhele's approval. However, in the context of the novel, these "passive" acts communicate a much different meaning than that Polwhele condones in "The Unsex'd Females." Hannah has the qualities of "nice taste" and "delicate thoughts," when she first charms William. Likewise, Rebecca's "timid, gentle, oppressed" demeanor suggests submissiveness and passivity. Yet, Inchbald suggests that these behaviors show "natural" sentiment and opposes them with acts purposefully and "artfully" intended to affect an audience. Polwhele, on the other hand, sees women's passivity as "artful" and constructed for the benefit of attracting men. Further, Inchbald shows the possibilities for change effected through women's presence in public. Although she shows the instability of the body as a vehicle for effective communication, she also suggests that a properly sentimental reader may understand these women's situations and sympathize with them. Bringing the reader into the social drama and using the dominant discourse of sentimentality, Inchbald creates the opportunity for readers to better understand women's conflicted position in society and consider the possibilities for change.

A final moment in the novel demonstrates this transformative potential. Reading a sheet of paper "accidentally thrown in his way," William discovers a short

history of Hannah's life and the circumstances of her death. Notably, the confession is a circulating text that makes its impact on William individually through the reading experience. William is moved by the confession, which describes that "she prayed devoutly during the last hour" and recounts the effect on "a crowd of spectators [...] most of whom returned weeping at the recollection of the fervency with which she prayed, and the impression which her dreadful state seemed to make upon her" (140). Calling out to the "spirit of Hannah," the narrator emphasizes William's changed feelings: "look down, and behold all your wrongs revenged! William feels—*Remorse*" (140). Like many morally didactic novels and drama at the time, the piece of paper serves as a shared cautionary tale that moves audiences to think because it dramatizes moral issues. Inchbald suggests that written narratives, guided by the voice of the narrator, are more reliable and effective performances of sentiment. In the same way William's realization occurs through the reading process, Inchbald presents a narrative that provides the reader with the opportunity to reflect on the society that condemns "feeling" women. Through the novel, Inchbald also reveals the possibilities for transforming readers' attitudes through the guided presentation of sentimental performance. I will discuss the author's role in this presentation of feeling in more detail in my examination of Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter*.

The Acting Woman in Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter*

Mary Robinson's 1799 novel *The Natural Daughter,* like Inchbald's *Nature and Art*, addresses social prejudice toward women through the theatrical discourse of sentimentality. In her central plot about a strolling actress's daughter, Robinson

explores the same issues surrounding cultural stigma toward unmarried motherhood and illegitimacy that Inchbald addresses in *Nature and Art.* Robinson also shares Inchbald's interest in distinguishing "natural" and "artificial" behavior, which her title reflects. One can read the "natural daughter" of the title in multiple ways, as the story's illegitimate child, a "natural daughter" who later turns out to be a legitimate, legal daughter and as the novel's main character, Martha, who is set up as a "natural" heroine in contrast with her "artificial" sister, Julia.

Unlike Inchbald, however, Robinson creates heroines that more actively defy those who are prejudiced against them by pursuing independent means of supporting themselves and seeking respect in public careers. She shows Martha, for example, taking the consequences of public employment rather than submit to her husband's will. By contrast, Inchbald's characters such as Hannah show less agency in choosing their fate. Robinson also presents Martha as a confident defender of her rights, which is unlike Inchbald's portrayal of Rebecca as a fearful innocent subjected to Reverend Rymer's tyranny. As Judith Pascoe has argued about Robinson's use of poetic pseudonyms, Martha may be Robinson's means to vindicate herself from her reputation as a "fallen woman" (178). In fact, Robinson makes a similar statement about prejudice and injustice toward women in *The Natural Daughter* as she does in her tract *A Letter to the Women of England*, which was also published in 1799. In this tract, which is strikingly similar in theme and tone with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A*

Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792),[16] Robinson declares women's right to "the participation of power, both mentally and corporeally" (41). Martha, who performs publicly, notably as an actress, dramatizes these possibilities for women both to achieve intellectually and challenge their subscribed physical confinement to the domestic sphere. Yet, as the novel shows, this assertion of "corporeal power" is complicated. Because of the flexibility of interpretation of bodily signs and symptoms of emotion, women's communication marked as inherently "natural" often misses its mark and at times is even misread as artifice.

Butler's formulation of gender formation helps to show these complicated negotiations between a woman acting her gender and the culture that interprets it. Stressing that gender is neither an individual choice nor a passive receipt of cultural regulations, Butler argues that gender performances are historically and culturally contingent ("Performative Acts" 526). Individuals perform their gender according to the norms of the time and culture they are born into, and continually construct their genders in front of audiences whose responses reinforce accepted parameters for the "stylized" presentation of the body. Butler aptly describes gender performance through a theatrical metaphor: "Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of

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[16] Robinson acknowledges Mary Wollstonecraft's landmark work but pointedly notes that she did not imitate it. She argues her piece is needed because "it requires a legion of Wollstonecrafts to undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence." *A Letter to the Women of England* and *The Natural Daughter* (Toronto: Broadview, 2003), 41.

already existing directives" ("Performative Acts" 526). Applying her concept to a late-eighteenth-century context, one can see that gestures such as weeping or blushing have cultural meaning, but these gestures can change, not only because of the instability of the body as a "readable" text but also because of the variability of factors affecting the performance, including the location in which it takes place and the performer's aims.

Robinson's construction of Martha as an "active" protagonist who interprets the "scripts" of wife, actress, and writer will be the focus of my examination of performance in *The Natural Daughter*. First, I will evaluate Robinson's interpretation of "nature" and "art" through the contrasting types of the "natural" heroine Martha and her "artificial" family members, especially her sister, Julia. Second, I will explore two scenes of performance that connect the theater of the late-eighteenth century with the bodily performance of sentiment and show Robinson's use of narrative perspective to guide the reader's responses. Finally, I will evaluate Robinson's response to attitudes toward the novel and her affirmation of the possibilities for the genre to evoke "true" feeling.

In numerous scenes in the beginning of the novel, Robinson establishes Martha's difference as a "natural" heroine, which is the first aspect of performance in the novel that I will discuss. In the opening scene, for example, Robinson contrasts the characters of Martha and Julia as they travel in a carriage of their father, Peregrine Bradford. Martha, reunited with her family at the age of 22, has been separated from her family and educated in the country since she was a child, while Julia has been

educated in the family's home by a French governess. In an example of the novel's contrast between city and country, Robinson shows that women's natural sensibility is more likely to be bred outside of London society than within it. Martha is witty, caring, and shows genuine concern when in the midst of an accident, her father falls out of the carriage. Julia, on the other hand, says little on the journey (Robinson in fact, devotes none of the dialogue to her), and responds with a fit of tears and a fainting spell following the accident. Showing the way society privileges Julia's displays as proper gendered behavior, Robinson's narrator comments that Julia is viewed admiringly "as a model of feminine excellence," while the "unsophisticated" Martha is seen "as a mere masculine hoyden" (93). Robinson suggests that society categorizes Martha's behavior not only as inappropriately feminine but also as masculine. Like the targets of Polwhele's poem, Martha is marked as unfeminine because of her active spirit and absence of superficial "charms."

In another important scene, Robinson uses the typically sentimental convention of the "travel vignette" to further construct the disparate sensibilities of the two women.[17] As the journey to Bath continues, the Bradfords encounter a wounded soldier, a common figure in the period's literature, including William Wordsworth's poem that appears in *The Prelude*, "The Discharged Soldier"[18] Similar to her contemporaries, Robinson uses the figure to draw her reader to recognize social ills such as poverty and express the nationalistic aim of praising the heroism and

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[17] In *Virtue in Distress,* R.F. Brissenden discusses the common structure of the characters' encounters with a series of figures on a journey in the sentimental novel. His analysis of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), for example, stresses the importance of the "journey" in showing the growing moral awareness of characters (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 222.

[18] William Wordsworth, "The Discharged Soldier," in *The Prelude* (1805), 400-504.

rustic simplicity found in the country. She directs her reader toward these conclusions through Martha, who responds to the soldier charitably, while Julia reacts to the soldier dismissively. In fact, Robinson makes their feelings toward the soldier explicit when Mr. Bradford asks why the man appears to be more contented than he is. Julia answers that the poor must be happy "because they have no feelings." Martha, in sharp contrast to the sentiments of her sister, responds that they have "rather feelings of the right sort," and says that man's seeming contentedness stems from his noble simplicity (101).

Robinson further displays the sisters' bodily reactions to the soldier, which emphasize the cultural importance of the body as a means of communication. When the man exposes his wounded arm, Julia shuts her eyes and shudders, whereas Martha gives him a shilling, believing, unlike her family, that the man is honest and his wound a sign of his valor (101-102). Robinson uses the typical sentimental vocabulary of tears and shudders when she describes Julia's reactions, but privileges Martha's "sensible" attitudes about poverty, suggesting that she wants to critique conventional depictions of sentiment. Julia's self-centeredness makes her inaccessible both to the soldier and the novel's audience. She tells her family she cannot eat because of the sight of the man's arm and tells the family the next morning that she spent the night dreaming of his suffering (103). Martha, however, reaches out to the man and thus, the novel's audience. Robinson shows that Martha puts the soldier up in lodging at an adjacent inn, and further connects her sentiments with the

reader by displaying a poem in its entirety that Martha writes after a night of "wakeful rumination" (103-104).

Martha's poetry reflects another important means for Robinson to convey her heroine's natural sensibility. Interestingly, many of the novel's poems, most of which are attributed to Martha, were published separately under Robinson's own signatures, again supporting Pascoe's notion that Robinson may vindicate herself through fictional personas.[19] Martha's poems offer one example of her many artistic "acts" and show the performative possibilities of writing in general, which I will discuss further when I discuss Robinson's attitudes toward the novel. Robinson suggests that literature and other artistic forms move feeling women to sympathy, whereas women without true sensibility view literature and art only as a means to increase their social status, which she relates in her description of Julia's talents:

> Julia dedicated all her hours to elegant acquirements. She drew with taste and skill; she sang correctly and pleasingly; she had made a considerable progress in the polite languages; and her memory being retentive, she could repeat most of the best passages in the English poets. Her mind was tinctured with romantic propensities, which appeared, at times, more extraordinary than natural; while her person improved in delicacy, and her temper seemed soft even to the excess of sensibility. (127)

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[19] As Sharon M. Setzer notes, the poem first appeared in the *Morning Post* the same month and year that the novel was published, August 1799 (Toronto: Broadview, 2003), note 1, 104.

Showing that acquirements have merely "tinctured" Julia's mind with "romantic propensities," Robinson suggests that the "extraordinary" sensibilities admired among the wealthy are empty and without feeling. Martha's work about the soldier, on the other hand, expresses the important issue of the unjust treatment of countrymen returning from war, a theme reflected in the last lines of the poem: "To know, the laurel he has won / Twines round the brow of FORTUNE's son / While HE, when strength and youth are flown, / Shall die UNKNOWN" (104). Applying this poem to her narrative, Robinson emphasizes that Martha engages with the world and recognizes social injustices; her explanation of Julia's recitations of poetry show only that the young woman has a "retentive" memory. Setting up Julia's interaction with literature and art as a culturally-reinforced behavior, Robinson challenges the reader to question the society that values this behavior while it ignores or misunderstands Martha's "natural genius."

Robinson points out the ways Martha's "natural genius" is misinterpreted as both "artlessness" and "artifice" through the character of Martha's husband, whose analysis of Martha's character echoes the terms of the nature/art debate in the late-eighteenth century. After Mr. Morley discovers that his wife has been leaving the house and visiting a baby, he concludes that she has tricked him into marrying her to cover up the scandal of an illegitimate child. He reflects on the hopes he had for Martha as a wife: "Why [...] did I select a girl of Martha's unpolished manners? because I thought that she possessed also a simplicity of character which would render her the domestic companion, the artless friend" (136). Through this comment,

Robinson suggests that signs reflected in the body can be interpreted as their opposites when patriarchy is challenged. Because Martha does not make a "trainable" companion by showing that she is submissive to Mr. Morley, her husband changes his initial opinion of her "artlessness" and believes that she is fact artful. Like Polwhele in "The Unsex'd Females," Mr. Morley conceives "artlessness" as a sign of "unnatural" artifice when Martha fails to be molded to his standards of womanhood. Martha actively "performs" through literature and art instead of learning to develop physical charms or social acquirements to appeal to men. When Mr. Morley forces her to leave the house because she will not reveal the identity of the baby's mother, Martha notably uses her perceived "artlessness" to become an actress.

Robinson's portrayal of Martha's career as an actress, linking the bodily performance of sentiment with the theatricality of the stage, is the second aspect of performance I want to discuss. Her choice to make Martha an actress is not surprising because of the position of women in the theater and Robinson's own notorious acting career. Martha joins the provincial acting troupe of a woman named Mrs. Sedgley, who turns out to be the mother of the baby she has been protecting. On the stage, Martha proves her natural acting talent:

> She was the pupil of Nature; her feelings were spontaneous, her ideas expanded, and her judgment correct. She scorned to avail herself of that factitious mummery, that artificial, disgusting trick, which deludes the senses by exciting laughter at the expence of the understanding.

> She was lively and unaffected: her smiles were exhilarating; her sighs were pathetic; her voice was either delicately animating or persuasively soothing: she neither giggled convulsively nor wept methodically: she was the thing she seemed, while even the perfection of her art was Nature. (179)

Robinson's description of Martha's acting is fascinating because it suggests that Martha is an effective actress because she has learned to perfect her natural sensibilities. Resonating with Butler's concept of the "repetition of stylized acts" that make up gender, Martha's acting is a controlled performance. She has practiced to become "the thing she seemed." Paradoxically, "Nature" *is* acted. Breaking down the boundaries between nature and art, Robinson shows that nature, while different from "that artificial, disgusting trick" (such as Julia's effusive social display), is nonetheless constructed and performed.

Martha's performances reflect the skills of respected actresses of the day and reflect the accounts of Garrick's acting and that written by Charlotte Charke. Robinson makes this connection explicit between her contemporaries and the two strolling actresses of the novel. The narrator compares Mrs. Sedgley's skills to David Garrick's most famous protégée, Sarah Siddons.[20] Martha, the comic star of the two women, is likened to the beautiful Elizabeth Farren and Dora Jordan, who was known as the "Child of Nature" for her natural acting delivery (Richards 52).

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[20] Sandra Richards describes Sarah Siddons' perfection of an affecting bodily gesture: "an arm gradually raised in time to the cadence of speech, with the stroke of the hand or wrist on the accented syllable of a word." According to Richards, Siddons' gesture was inspired by the stiffly straightened arms and clenched fists of Egyptian statues (*The Rise of the English Actress,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 76.

Importantly, Robinson shows that Martha chooses the profession of acting because she desires independence and fame, (159-160) downplaying the perception of acting as a disreputable profession of "last resort" for women with no other options. Robinson's own acting career was almost stifled because her father, despite his own morally-reprehensible behavior of abandoning his wife and children and leaving them in financial straits, felt strongly enough against the profession to demand forcefully that Mary's mother keep their daughter from pursuing acting[21] (Byrne 16). Of course, Robinson pursued the career anyway and became one of many actresses from families who were mired in debt. Her father's concern may have stemmed from the profession's association with actresses' liaisons with noblemen, who often supported actresses financially in exchange for sexual relationships. Robinson herself had a notorious reputation throughout her acting career as a mistress of some of England's most famous men including Lord Fox, the war hero Colonel Banastre Tarleton, and the Prince of Wales, whom Robinson captivated during an adapted version of Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*. Using the name of the character she played in the performance, the Prince addressed his love letters to "Perdita," a moniker by which Robinson was known until the time of her death.[22] Other actresses, however, did

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[21] Recounting Mary's description in her *Memoirs*, Robinson's biographer Paula Byrne notes that Mary's father Nicholas Darby insisted that Mary not be allowed to pursue her interest in the theater, which she developed at school. Before traveling overseas, where he led unsuccessful fishing ventures and acquired a mistress, Mr. Darby reportedly told Mary's mother, "Take care that no dishonour falls upon my daughter. If she is not safe at my return I will annihilate you" See *Perdita* (New York: Random House, 2004), 9-10, 16.

[22] Robinson captivated the Prince during a royal performance of *Florizel and Perdita* in 1779, when the Prince was 17 and Mary was 22. At the time she met the Prince, Mary had been already married to her unfaithful and financially irresponsible husband Thomas Robinson for seven years. As Paula Byrne recounts, the Prince told his current mistress about Robinson's effect over him in a letter he wrote to break off their affair: "I was delighted at the Play last Night, and was extremely moved by

escape the association with sexual impropriety. Inchbald, for example, tried to protect her reputation by marrying early in her career, a decision she made after a lascivious manager sexually propositioned her (Grice 56-57).

Significantly, Robinson places Martha in a strolling acting troupe among performers who historically lived hand-to-mouth traveling in provincial theater circuits.[23] Strolling acting had a particularly bad reputation, which came from its history as an illegal and underground practice in the early part of the eighteenth century. In 1737, a ban of all theatrical events other than those licensed and performed in one of London's few "patent" theaters, forced provincial acting troupes to risk prosecution and to perform in makeshift theaters wherever they were able. By the mid-eighteenth century, restrictions eased and patent theaters were built all over England (Rosenfeld 1-2). However, the theaters continued to be associated with poverty, unscrupulous managers, and unsophisticated productions compared to those in London, a reputation that persisted through the late-eighteenth century (Rosenfeld 9,16). Despite their reputation, however, strolling theater companies launched many famous actresses' careers, including Inchbald's.

Beginning her own career in London's patent theaters, including the famous Drury Lane and Covent Garden theaters, Robinson herself refused to perform on

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two scenes in it, especially as I was particularly interested in the appearance of the most beautiful Woman, that ever I beheld, who acted with such delicacy that she drew tears from my eyes, she perceived how much of my attention was taken up with her, not only during her acting but when she was behind the Scenes, and contrived every little innocent art to captivate a heart but too susceptible of receiving every impression she attempted to give it...Her name is Robinson, on or off the stage for I have seen her both, she is I believe almost the greatest and most perfect beauty of her sex." See *Perdita* (New York: Random House, 2004), 25, 101.

[23] For an excellent account of the life of strolling actors, see Elizabeth Grice's *Rogues and Vagabonds: or The Actors' Road to Respectability* (Lavenham: Terence Dalton, 1977).

provincial stages, which makes her depiction of Martha as a strolling actress that much more intriguing.[24] Robinson uses the scenario to emphasize the injustices such actresses experienced. Making Martha the least respected type of actress strengthens the contrast between Martha's "pure talent" and the common perception of the theater:

> Mrs. Morley had to struggle against the all-potent tyrant Prejudice. She had engaged in a profession which vulgar minds, though they are amused by its labours, frequently condemn with unpitying asperity. She was engaging, discreet, sensible, and accomplished: but she was an actress, and therefore deemed an unfit associate for the wives and daughters of the proud, the opulent, and the unenlightened. (181)

Robinson shows that despite Martha's embodiment of the "engaging, discreet, sensible, and accomplished," qualities respected in a woman, she is judged solely because she is actress. Thus her mastery of "Nature" is irrelevant. Yet, even before Martha acquires the "actress" title, she is judged by "the proud, the opulent and the unenlightened," suggesting that strolling acting serves as a metaphor for injustices toward all "feeling" women. The few scenes of acting that actually appear in the novel and the fact that her reputation as a strolling actress remains long after Martha is forced out of acting support this reading.

In the first of two scenes I would like to explore in order to illustrate the striking similarities between social and dramatic performances in the novel, Martha

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[24] See the *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself, with some posthumous piece in verse*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Robinson, 4 vols. (London: R. Phillips, 1801), 2:12.

"performs" in front of a group of stagecoach passengers on her way to seek new employment. While dining with the group, she sees Mr. Morley outside of the window. Martha lets her feelings overtake her completely "for the first time in her life," (199) retroactively revealing that all of her previous performances on stage and in society have been conscious efforts to influence an audience. She evaluates her appearance before mustering the courage to approach her husband:

> She felt a faint flush of shame diffusing itself on her cheek, while her eyes, bent downwards, contemplated her half-soiled gown, of the coarsest muslin; her once white gloves, which had served for many a scenic exhibition; and her worn out veil, through whose more than woven transparency her tears were visible to every observer. (199)

Robinson conveys the sense of Martha's inward emotional state, "she felt a faint flush of shame diffusing itself on her cheek" and also allows the reader to visualize Martha's body and clothes from the outside. The reader knows that Martha's shame comes from her recognition that her soiled dress and gloves will convey her poverty and misfortune to her husband. Looking in on the scene as an outsider, the reader sees that the transparent veil reflects this poverty and symbolizes the idea that she can no longer hide her emotions through the "veil" of clothes and gestures because of the intensity of her feelings.

Robinson shows that, as in the theater, power lies with the audience to condemn or exalt women on the basis of their physical presence. The inn's landlord is the next to judge Martha's appearance, remarking that she is a person of "no

consequence" who has no excuse for holding up his other dining patrons by looking out the window (199-200). Storming outside because of the landlord's remark, Martha feels emboldened to approach her husband. The other stagecoach passengers take her place at the window and judge the scene they see framed within it:

> Mrs. Morley attempted to articulate, 'Do you not know me?' but her lip quivered, and her tone of voice was scarcely audible. A loud laugh from her fellow passengers, who had placed themselves at the window to watch the result of her extraordinary conduct, augmented her distress, while she leant against the wheel of her husband's carriage, overpowered and feeble. Mr. Morley descended; and raising her veil, beheld a countenance that would have softened a soul of adamant. Her eyes were closed, her lip was colourless, her dark brows were convulsed, and the tear still glistened, as if the coldness of her cheek had frozen it. (200)

Framing the scene in layers, Robinson shows Martha moving into the scene she was previously witnessing; Mr. Morley becomes part of the performance as well. The spectators who laugh loudly at the "extraordinary conduct" they see from the window suggests that they share the same feelings as the inn's landlord who judges Martha as an inconsequential "nobody." They cannot properly read the meaning in her face and do not recognize or care that they are contributing to her emotional distress. Interestingly, Mr. Morley's response to Martha is vague. When the tear first appears on Martha's cheek, the narrator does not provide Mr. Morley's reaction directly but

suggests that his sensibilities are not fit to the task of interpreting it. The narrator comments, "no heart but such a one as Mrs. Morley's could have resisted its persuasion." Similarly, when Mr. Morley lifts her veil, he sees "a countenance that *would have* softened a soul of adamant" (my italics) (200). The suggestion is that Mr. Morley's soul was not moved, but fascinatingly, the phrase implies again that someone like Martha would have been. Further, because of the way Robinson cultivates the reader's sympathy, the reader is brought into the scene as one of those who feels like Martha. Thus, Robinson also implies the possibility for the reader to feel sympathy.

Another pertinent passage of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, notably referencing the theater, provides insight into the responses of the landlord and the other spectators. Acknowledging the disparate responses to the dramatic spectacle of joy and grief, Smith argues that audience members affect one another's reaction to a performance. Noting that individuals are more willing to reciprocate a performer's joy than grief when other spectators are around, he writes:

> When we attend to the representation of a tragedy, we struggle against that sympathetic sorrow which the entertainment inspires as long as we can, and we give way to it at last only when we can no longer avoid it: we even then endeavour to cover our concern from the company. If we shed any tears, we carefully conceal them, and are afraid, lest the spectators, not entering into this excessive tenderness, should regard it as effeminacy and weakness. (56)

Complicating his notion of the sympathetic exchange between an "impartial spectator" and a performing individual, Smith suggests that multiple performances occur in any scene. Spectators are aware of their own performances even while they are watching an affecting spectacle. The audience both reinforces the proper response and has a moderating effect. The presence of others tempers the effusive outpouring of emotion, both of the performer and of the spectator.

Borrowing Jacques Mayoux's phrase "reciprocal witnessing," Goring refers to notes the importance of these scenes in both novels and theater as a way of presenting moral instruction through drama (153). Although similar to a dramatic performance on the stage in that the viewer can judge a scene of which they are not directly a part, novels model these scenes slightly differently. They provide the narrative background that increases a sympathetic response. Smith suggests that too effusive emotion repels the spectator, but this reaction can change if the viewer knows the affected individual's background. Discovering the answer to the question, "What has befallen you?" opens the possibilities for sympathy to occur (Smith 14-15). In the same way, Robinson's narrative brings the reader closer to her heroine. Further, the more private experience of reading a novel compared with watching a theatrical performance allows readers to visualize this scene without the presence of other audience members watching *them*. One might assume from Smith's idea of the audience as a moderating force that private novel reading is an immoderate and indulgent expression of emotion, which in fact many critics in Robinson's time argued.

The second scene I would like to examine because of what it shows about theatrical elements and Robinson's direction as an author takes place when Martha reads a poem to seek the patronage of a wealthy lady. The scene perhaps most effectively shows Robinson's awareness of the potential for the novel as a way to model the responses of the audience. The audience of her poetical performance includes the wealthy lady, who doesn't read but relies on her lower-class servant to make her decisions about whom to patronize, a "flippant girl of fashion" and a "male sprig of nobility" (234). Only one judge, a "nobleman, of polished and amiable manners," (236) seems sympathetic to Martha and qualified to assess her poetic talents.

The reading of the poem produces a physical response in both the speaker and the audience, suggesting an emotionally and socially charged relationship between poet and audience that is unique to this kind of performance. In fact, Robinson suggests that the public act of sharing poetry to seek patronage is more akin to prostitution than an artistic performance. Robinson depicts an artistic woman who attempts to maintain her pride despite the "vulgar" behavior of spectators. Again, bodily signs play a crucial role in communicating Martha's feelings, which her audience does not properly interpret. For example, when Martha is first asked to read, she feels "her face redden deeply" (235). Likewise, she experiences trembling hands and cannot manage to articulate the words. After hearing the poem, which the aristocratic lady perceives as a direct attack on the rank and wealth, she comments that she "could have pitied her obscurity" but Martha's open expression of her

feelings constitutes inappropriate "presumption" (237). Despite the noble male reviewer's favorable assessment, the lady recognizes only Martha's impertinent act of speaking up.

Robinson increases the effect of this scene by emphasizing the shame the aristocratic circle produce in Martha after they recognize her as a "strolling actress." After the group taunts Martha, demanding that she "act a scene" and "make us laugh," they reject her artistic accomplishment and offer her five guineas for her trouble. Robinson suggests that the aristocratic group treats Martha like a prostitute. While her bodily reactions show her shame, they also confirm that she is dignified in not giving into their attack: "Mrs. Morley's pulse beat high: her proud heart throbbed with indignation. She sunk upon the carpet, and fainted" (237). Again Robinson allows the reader to know Martha's experience of bodily symptoms such as the beating pulse and throbbing heart from the "inside," but then "pulls away," showing the sight of Martha "sunk upon the carpet." Her faint, a loss of consciousness, effectively closes down the scene, leaving the reader the sense that Martha reacted as any "feeling" woman would under such unjust treatment.

Contrasting Martha's genuine artistic skills with artificial social performance, Robinson notably emphasizes the possibilities each type of performance allows for social advancement. For example, describing the female stagecoach passengers who had scorned Martha because of her career as a strolling actress, the narrator remarks: "...shame on the false morality of the age! Such women, with no *mental* passport to respect, with no claim excepting the ill-acquired wealth which they unblushingly

display, receive the countenance even of the most fastidiously virtuous" (205). Robinson's use of the word "passport" in this passage is intriguing because it suggests that women concerned with social artifice can fool even "the most fastidiously virtuous," winning their favor through their display of wealth, whereas women like Martha can gain others' notice through their intelligence.

"Passport" is, in fact, a frequently repeated term in the novel. Because it denotes circulation, travel, and permission to move forward, the word reflects what has social currency in the culture. Women perform the "script" of gender in their own ways according to their circumstances, and their displays have a value and can be exchanged for social favor. The novel's distinction between the gendered behavior of Julia and Martha through the term "passport" makes this clear. The narrator relates that Julia:

> ...wore that external *passport* to indiscriminating minds, which is so often mistaken for genuine sensibility. She was practised in the languishments of romantic softness; she could adapt her smile or fashion her tear, to touch that chord which vibrates in bosoms unenlightened by the finely organizing hand of nature. (my italics) (197)

Martha, on the other hand, seeks another means of advancement through "her pen [...] that *passport*, which was the only one she could obtain, to those who by rank and fortune were far removed from the sorrows which annoyed her" (my italics) (226). Julia notably practices her art of deception on those who cannot recognize true

sensibility, whereas Martha, whose natural sensibilities are not recognized by most of society, performs by writing as a poet and as a novelist.

I would like to explore one final aspect of performance in *The Natural Daughter*: Robinson's own reflection on her novelistic project, which fascinatingly mirrors Martha's "modern experiment" of writing a novel. When acting and poetry fail her, Martha writes a novel that she feels has excellent qualities: a melancholic tone, realistic characters, and an intriguing title (208). When she finally finds a publisher that will take her work, however, her hopes are dashed. The publisher, Mr. Index, tells her his warehouses are filled with unsold sentimental novels and they "only sell for waste paper" (208). He offers her ten pounds for the piece anyway and a bit of advice for writing her next novel:

> If you have any talent for satire, you may write a work that would be worth purchasing: or if your fertile pen can make a story out of some recent popular event, such as a highly-fashioned elopement, a deserted distracted husband, an abandoned wife, an ungrateful runaway daughter or a son ruined by sharpers [...] or any thing from real life of equal celebrity or notoriety, your fortune is made; your works will sell, and you will either be admired or feared by the whole phalanx of fashionable readers; particularly if you have the good luck to be menaced with a prosecution. (209)

Ironically, Mr. Index's point about "talent for satire" and his catalogue of sensationalistic subject matter refer directly to Robinson's own satiric skills and the

dramatic elements of her own plot, suggesting that her novel, too, is meant to entertain. Through Mr. Index's advice, Robinson plays with her reader's expectations, and yet by commenting on them this way, she suggests that she is doing more with her novel. Although she does seem to be having fun at her reader's expense, Robinson also suggests that the reader should be critical of her purposes as a novelist and question the value of novels in general.

The sensationalistic elements of *The Natural Daughter* are exemplified in a scene at the end of the novel in which Mr. Morley threatens to the drop the child Martha has been protecting off a cliff in an attempt to get his wife finally to reveal the mother's identity. When Mrs. Sedgley sees the horrifying scene, she reveals the shocking revelation that Mr. Morley is the father of her child, and the girl is in fact a "natural daughter," conceived after a hasty marriage during the Terrors following the French Revolution. The child is saved, but Mr. Morley falls off the cliff to his peril, and only dies after a melodramatic performance in which he begs for Mrs. Sedgley's forgiveness, clutches his wife to "his convulsed and bleeding bosom" and reveals that he helped Julia murder another one of his children (293-294).

While these final scenes and the other shocking events in the novel may suggest that Robinson's purpose is to sell her work, the scenes of performance in the novel present a different reading. Almost like the split between the "natural" and "artificial" characters in the novel, her novel's incongruous plot twists and ridiculous characters create a performance too over-the-top to be reciprocated by the reader with any "natural" sentiment. The scenes of performance in *The Natural Daughter*,

however, seem to be expressed in a more tempered and quietly pathetic way, and thus suggest the potential for a more sympathetic response. In these scenes of sentimental performance, Robinson achieves what Anna Letitia Barbauld explains in an 1810 essay is the most important element of novel writing: "the power exercised over the reader's heart by filling it with the successive emotions of love, pity, joy, anguish, transport, or indignation, together with the grave impressive moral resulting from the whole..." (377-378). Framing her female protagonist's performances to support her moral about the unjust treatment of women, Robinson elevates her entertaining page-turner to a morally-edifying sentimental narrative.

Conclusion: "What Has Befallen You?"

One additional reflection from Smith from his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is worth considering because it connects many themes concerning the performance of women in sentimental culture. Smith writes:

> The reserve which the laws of society impose upon the fair sex, with regard to this weakness, renders it more peculiarly distressful in them, and, upon that very account more deeply interesting. We are charmed with the love of Phædra, as it is expressed in the French tragedy of that name, notwithstanding all the extravagance and guilt which attends to it. That very extravagance and guilt may be said, in some measure, to recommend it to us. Her fear, her shame, her remorse, her horror, her despair, become thereby more natural and interesting. All the secondary passions [...], which arise from the situations of love,

> become necessarily more furious and violent; and it is with these secondary passions only that we can properly be said to sympathize. (40)

Smith has a somewhat surprising response to heightening effects of laws on women's "weakness" and the dramatic depiction of these effects. He writes that the spectacle of women's weakness is "deeply interesting." For Smith, beholding the weakness of the tragic figure in Jean Racine's play *Phèdre* (1677) almost borders on the guiltily extravagant, but he seems to say that the shock and horror, which show a "natural" intuitive response, serve to spark the spectators' attention only. Smith clarifies in a later passage that love inspires "even in the weakest minds" some "graceful" or "agreeable" qualities, which helps to explain that he views the "secondary passions" as the more complex emotions related with love that inspire true sympathy (40-41). He also suggests that knowing the story behind these emotions make them more affecting. For Smith, knowing what has befallen women, namely the emotions that come from their weakness, makes their expression of love more pitiful to behold.

Smith's reflection resonates with Inchbald's and Robinson's work in numerous ways. His comment about the "reserve" that is placed upon women is comparable to Inchbald's characters Hannah and Rebecca, whose tempered responses to prejudice seem to be constructed and performed because of gender norms. While Inchbald and Robinson would most certainly not affirm their female characters' "natural" weakness, they would be likely to admit the tragedy coming from this subjected state. Smith's description of the first furious and violent emotions he sees

in Phædra brings to mind Martha's automatic responses to her husband when she is with the stagecoach passengers. In the same way Smith suggests that emotions become more sympathetic when they are depicted in a situation of love, so Martha's reactions to her Mr. Morley seem to be more pathetic because the main spectator of her sorrow is her husband.

Perhaps most illuminating, however, is the connection between Smith's comments and these novelists' works reflected in his observation that the depiction of a woman's performance of tragedy is "deeply interesting." Unarguably, Inchbald and Robinson create powerful dramas that move the reader because of their depiction of sentimental performance, and the interest in their work draws upon the same idea of the guilty pleasures of viewing tragedy to which Smith refers. Yet, Inchbald and Robinson's novels are also compelling for reasons that Smith probably would not ever consider. These authors' works seem intended to influence the audience so that they will recognize the subjugation of women and maybe even feel compelled to effect social change.

As I hope to have shown, *Nature and Art* and *The Natural Daughter* draw upon theatrical modes of discourse (of which both novelists were aware as famous actresses and their participation as members of the culture of sentimentality) to construct scenes of female performance in their novels. Inchbald, concerned with defining "natural" and "artificial" behavior shows the often class-based divide between those who "feel" and those more concerned with displaying their wealth than their emotions. Inchbald further illustrates the many ways the unstable vehicle of the

body can affect the interpretation of performance, often leading to women's further subjugation at the hands of male judges who do not recognize the signs of women in distress. Robinson also is interested in exploring the nature/art binary, and yet her novel goes even one step further to show the difficulty in defining these categories as fixed. Robinson shows continually throughout her novel and effectively through the metaphor of acting that nature is in fact as constructed as artifice.

These instability and flexibility in constructing and interpreting gender through the body opens the way for Inchbald and Robinson to create social critiques in their novels. They show that despite the cultural importance placed on gestures such as tears or a blush, these signs are not "fixed." Tears may mean sadness or a ploy to get attention; a blush could be misconstrued as guilt even while it comes from shame. These authors depict the dramas of their characters' lives and use them not to exploit the spectacle of suffering but to guide their readers' emotional responses. Even more than that effect achieved through theater, these authors elicit sympathy because they use the possibilities of the novel to show what has happened to the character from multiple perspectives, from both within the character's mind and outside of her body. By answering the question, "What has befallen you?" these authors open the way for sympathy to occur. And for the reader, the effect is deeply interesting.

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