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A Short Article on a Lively Subject: Geltruda Rossi, Sarah Siddons, and Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth à la Fuseli*

In the 1784-85 London season, there was a conjunction between Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and three of the most thrilling artists of the eighteenth century: the dancer, Geltruda Rossi; the actress, Sarah Siddons; and the artist, Henry Fuseli. They were thrown into a figurative proximity when a commentator on Rossi's performance wrote in the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*:

Madame Rossi, in *Lady Macbeth*, impresses one more with the recollection of Fuseli's [sic] *painting*, than of Mrs Siddons's representation – indeed comparison would be doing an injustice to our critical and admired *English* performer.

While we know much about the art of Siddons and Fuseli, we know little about Rossi's performances, which makes the *Morning Herald's* parallel worth exploring as an example of eighteenth century London *ballet d'action*.

Keywords: Rossi, Fuseli, Siddons, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, dance, ballet, pantomime, London, theatre

In the 1784-85 London theatrical season, there was a conjunction between one of the greatest tragedies ever written, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and three of the most dynamic and thrilling artists of the last decades of the eighteenth-century: the dancer, Geltruda Rossi (*d.* 1799), the actress, Sarah Siddons (1775-1831), and the artist, Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825). Fuseli, engaged with Shakespearean subjects for much of his career, produced in 1783 his *Lady Macbeth walking in her Sleep* (**Photo 1**) a work that circulated from January 1784 in the form

of an engraving produced by the accomplished printmaker, John Raphael Smith (1752-1812). Sarah Siddons, who had played Lady Macbeth in the provinces, chose the play and the role for her Benefit in February 1785 at Drury Lane. And for *her* Benefit in March of the same year at the King's Theatre, Geltruda Rossi danced the role of Lady Macbeth in the new ballet of *Macbeth*. The three artists were thrown into a figurative proximity when an anonymous commentator, on viewing Rossi's performance, wrote in the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* for 19 March 1785:

Madame Rossi, in Lady *Macbeth*, impresses one more with the recollection of *Fuseli's* [sic] *painting*, than of Mrs Siddons's representation – indeed comparison would be doing an injustice to our critical and admired *English* performer.

In uniting Rossi, Siddons and Fuseli, the writer has suggested a particular interpretation of the role by Rossi, one that contrasted with Siddons's apparent conception of the character in 1785 and one that we can try and establish through Fuseli's picture. And while we know much about Siddons, there is little, if any, pictorial representation surviving of Rossi's performances, which makes the *Morning Herald's* parallel worth exploring as an example of eighteenth-century London *ballet d'action*; it is her performance that is the focus of this article.

The story begins with the performances in 1785 of Lady Macbeth by Sarah Siddons, who would come to be considered one greatest actresses of the age; she had played the role in the provinces, but on 2 February, performed it on the London stage for the first time. Macbeth was played by William Smith, Banquo by Thomas Hull, and Duncan by John Hayman Packer, with the three witches played by the male actors William Parsons, John Moody and Robert Baddeley. To take Lady Macbeth onto the stage at Drury Lane was a formidable risk for Siddons, for the interpretation

of the role by the much-loved Hannah Pritchard (1711-1768), performed opposite David Garrick's Macbeth, was still the one the public knew well and admired. It was a performance which Fuseli had been inspired to capture in "Garrick and Mrs Pritchard as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: After the Murder of King Duncan" in 1766. As it happens, for Siddons the 1785 performances were, according to the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* for 3 February 1785, largely a success:

Lady Macbeth is, without exception, one of the noblest achievements of Mrs. Siddons. Her expressive countenance, which is ever so truly the index of her feelings, had in this play the most forcible influence on our feelings. Her deportment in the fine scene, where her inflexible nature elevates itself above the more conscientious ambition of her Lord, was a masterpiece of acting, and her manner of delivering arguments by which she subdued his wavering mind... was electrical in its effects on the auditory.

At this stage, then, Siddons played the character in a noble style, with emphasis on her expressive countenance. **(Photo 2)** A later assessment by the author of Siddons's biography in the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* suggested that

... it was the grandeur of her exhibition of the more terrible passions as related to one awful purpose that held them spellbound. In Lady Macbeth she found the highest and best scope for her gifts. It fitted her as no other character did, and as perhaps it will never fit another actress. Her extraordinary and peculiar physical endowments — tall and striking figure, brilliant beauty, powerfully expressive eyes, and solemn dignity of demeanor — enabled her to confer a weird majesty on the character which inexpressibly heightened the tragic awe surrounding her fate (Chisholm 1911, XXV).

As this suggests, the role became synonymous with Siddons' skills and style as an actress, so much so, in fact, that she chose it for her farewell performance on 29 June 1812, when her engaged and enthusiastic audience refused to let the play continue past the sleep-walking scene. The 1785 performance included the already well-known music by Richard Leveridge, at this stage in the century thought to be by Matthew Locke, or sometimes even by Henry Purcell, a piece of wishful thinking that linked the country's greatest playwright with its greatest composer.¹ On this occasion it was noted by the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* for 3 February 1785, that:

The music, which as we think we have already said is not the composition of Purcell, was never so successfully executed, and perhaps never will be so, unless it should be introduced in the Heroic Ballet on the subject of Macbeth, which is projecting at the Opera.

What is clear, then, is that the ballet's preparation at the Opera, London's venue for elite opera and dance, was clearly common knowledge, and there were doubtless some who looked forward to Rossi's benefit with anticipation. As we will see, the composer responsible for both the arrangement and the new music, François Hippolyte Barthélémon (1741-1808), did introduce the Leveridge music, although not as successfully as it seems to have been used in its more usual position in the play. (Highfill 1973, 365).² Why the commentator thought that the performance of the music would possibly be better 'executed' at the Opera is not clear; it may perhaps be a comment on the comparative musical standards between the playhouses on one hand, and the Opera House on the other.

Rossi's Benefit took place at the King's Theatre on 17 March 1785. The opera on the bill that night was *Il curioso indiscreto*, a two-act comedy of 1777, which had a story after an episode in *Don Quixote* and a libretto possibly by Giovanni Bertati

(1735-c. 1815), but perhaps by Giuseppe Petrosellini (1727-99): the 1777 setting was by Pasquale Anfossi (1727-97). Anfossi was musical director for the Opera at the King's Theatre from 1782 to 1786, and this was one of five operas of his own that he staged there; although it was not a newly composed work, *Il curioso* was new to London that season. As was usual, there were dances between the acts of the opera: between Acts I and II were two items, a divertissement and a dance entitled *The Cossack*. At the end of the evening came the "Grand new Heroic Ballet" *Macbeth*, "composed" – that is, choreographed – by Charles Le Picq (1744-1806). The evening was billed to end with *The Caledonian Reel*, a dance probably added in an attempt to compliment the "Scottishness" of the main ballet of the evening. There was, of course, nothing unusual about the layout of the programme; even the inclusion of a ballet on *Macbeth* seems less surprising in the context of a Benefit occasion, one on which we might expect to find a new, and often unusual, work performed. No printed scenario survives for the ballet – few of these survive for eighteenth-century London, in any case – but a trawl through the press suggests that the other dancers included Charles Le Picq, Pietro Angiolini, Monsieur C. Nivelon, Simon Slingsby, Monsieur Frederick, Carolina Angiolini, and Anne Dorival. The ballet included vocal parts, which were performed by Rachele Dorta, Luigi Tacsà, Angelo Franchi, and Vincenzo Bartolini. Charles Le Picq, in the role of Macbeth, partnered Rossi.³

It had been Le Picq, then just divorced from dancer Anna Binnetti, who had partnered Rossi on her London debut in November 1782, when she danced a *pas de deux* at the King's Theatre.⁴ Le Picq and Rossi either were, or were soon to be, having a liaison, which produced a daughter: whether he and Rossi ever married is open to doubt, although the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* does record that Le Picq went to Russia in 1786 with "Gertrude" his "new wife."⁵ Until then, Rossi danced regularly

and successfully in a variety of works including *Le Tuteur Trompé*, *Les Epouses Persanes*, *The Four Ages of Man*, and the 1784 *Déserteur*, in which her superb acting was noted in the *Public Advertiser* for 15 May 1784: her “fainting Fit, her Agitation preceding it, and her Revival from it” were matters for comment. She also danced in Jean-Georges Noverre’s *Les Ruses de l’amour*; in his *The Four Nations* in which Rossi and Le Picq represented the “Cosaque-Polonois”; and in the 1785 London staging of Gluck’s opera, *Orfeo*. Rossi’s performances in these works were well-received, and in noting that the dancers available to the Opera House were “almost equally admirable,” the commentator in the *Public Advertiser* for 8 December 1783 noted that “if Vestris and Theodore were more surprising, Le Picq and Rossi were more touching, [and] Slingsby more exhibiting.” Rossi giving a “touching” performance suggests the dancer showed the same sensibility reportedly seen in her interpretation of the role in *Le Déserteur*. She was also regarded by the *Morning Herald* for 20 August 1783 as a lively dancer, Rosine Simonet’s performance being said to blend “the elegance of Baccelli, with the sprightliness of Rossi...” She, too, was, for the writer in the *Public Advertiser* for 25 March, a consummate actress, one whose skills exceeded even the great dancers of Vestris and Baccelli. The author of the column in the 3 December *Public Advertiser* account of her 1782 debut commented:

Her very first step proclaimed her a perfect mistress in the art of pantomime.

Her dress was a manteau a la reine, lately imported by our travelling milliners.

The body, bones and trimming are puce, the sleeves and lower part of the garment a white gawse.

In fact, the two aspects of the staging mentioned in this short review - the “art of pantomime” and the garment of “white gawse” - have particular significance in the history of dance in London.

Firstly, the garment of white gawse, the “*manteau a la reine*,” perhaps better known as a “*chemise à la reine*” or a “*gaulle*,” the wearing of which by Rossi was an act that was significant in more ways than one. The garment was French, a fashion newly introduced by Marie Antoinette, who, while at the Petit Trianon, abandoned the uncomfortable and formal *robe à la française* and adopted the plain and simple *chemise á la Reine*, a piece of clothing unobjectionable in itself, but one which in context was subversive; it meant that courtiers could be mistaken for peasants. The garment became the subject of open scandal in 1783 when she chose to have her portrait painted wearing it; the outcry was such that the artist, Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755 –1842), in an effort to quell the chorus of disapproval, painted the Queen again in the same pose with many of the same details, but in more formal court attire.

(Photo 3) Such a subversion of courtly norms was interpreted as disloyalty to the French state. Further, not only was the gown made of Indian muslin “exotic,” but because the material was imported, the Queen was accused of undermining the French silk industry (Weber 2007, 156–175). Some of this background would have been known to members of the Opera House’s elite audience, many more would have identified the chemise as a French import, and still more would later adopt it as a style item as it became fashionable. And in the context of theatre dance, Rossi’s adoption of it was another step in a new “informality” in dance costumes, characterised by a “naturalness” and a growing desire to dress the character in a way that was appropriate to the role and not simply to use all-purpose dance costumes. Noverre, who was Ballet Master at the King’s in the 1781-82 season, had been very keen on the appropriateness of the dancers’ costumes: “when the scenery shall be adapted to the dresses, and *vice versa*, the effect of the representation will be complete”; “the artist who designs the dresses... should unite [with the other talents] in giving beauty and perfection to the

work”; and “Mademoiselle Clairon... was convinced, that by rejecting our customs, she would come nearer to those of antiquity; that her imitation of the personages she had to represent would become more natural; that her action, being animated, it would be in her power to enliven it still more, when disencumbered from the weight and shackles of a clumsy dress” (Burden and Thorp, 2014, 92, 147, 175-76). Noverre’s views circulated in London in the English translation of his works by Parkyns MacMahon which appeared in 1783, and his control over what the dancers wore was later acknowledged by Anthony A. Le Texier, who complained that (on among other occasions) he had “seen a ballet of Furies at Sadler’s Wells, wherein the first dancers had red stockings on, and the figurants wore at least black stockings,” and had commented that had “Noverre not directed himself the dresses of the women,” the ballets of the Opera would have been in disarray (Le Texier 1790, 35-36). And we can discount an accidental outing for Rossi’s *manteau a la reine*; Thomas Lupino had been in charge of costumes at the King’s Theatre since 1776 and as the *Morning Herald* for 13 December 1782 shows, his penchant for appropriate costumes was often remarked. Siddons’s own costume for Lady Macbeth – white, like Rossi’s – would also come under scrutiny in the *Public Advertiser* for 7 February 1782:

‘Why,’ say some of the critics, ‘should Mrs Siddons wear a white dress in her last scene of Lady Macbeth? She is supposed to be asleep, not mad’. What reason except custom can be given for a mad heroine appearing in white we know not. Yet there is an obvious reason why a person walking in their sleep should wear a white dress of the loose kind worn by Mrs Siddons... It is the nearest resemblance which theatrical effect will admit, to the common sort of night-dresses.

A prosaic conclusion perhaps, but also one demonstrating new assumptions that costumes should have a realistic effect, even when, as in this case, it has a loaded history. But the appearance of “mad” characters dressed in white on the eighteenth-century London stage was clearly a frequent occurrence. If it was not, then the satire in R. B. Sheridan’s *The Critic* would have been unsuccessful; the stage direction “Enter Tilburina stark mad in white satin and her confidant stark mad in white linen” assumes an audience’s automatic connection between such costumes and insanity (Sheridan 1781, 95).

Secondly, the *Public Advertiser* of 3 December 1782 presented Rossi not just as a skilled dancer, but as a skilled pantomimist: “Her very first step proclaimed her a perfect mistress in the art of pantomime.” The inclusion of “pantomime” – defined by Noverre, who was also Le Picq’s master, as “mute dramatic representation” – was essential to a perfect *ballet d’action* which was “a picture, drawn from life, of the manners, dresses, ceremonies, and customs of all nations” which should speak “to the very soul of the spectator.” Noverre saw these “two actions” – dancing and pantomime – as not being “at a very great distance from each other.” but also saw a balance between the two as central to an effective ballet. While it is not known whether “the mimed gestures replaced or supplemented the dance steps.” Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, commented in 1771 that “there is considerably more walking” in Noverre’s ballets “than dancing” and that there was dancing “only in the great movements of passion, in decisive moments.”⁶ Grimm’s comments suggest that a variety of techniques were used to express the drama found in the scenario, and Nye, citing the ballet *Il ratto della Sabine* in which Rossi danced the role of Ersilia, suggests that by 1780 “it was axiomatic in many people’s minds that it should be possible to integrate drama and dance as successfully as Metastasio integrated drama

and music.” and that it was a necessity to give the performers “enough stage time to develop psychological plausibility and to sensitise the spectator to their individual fates” (Nye 2011, 124). In *Il ratto della Sabine*, which Le Picq staged when he first arrived in London in 1782, Rossi was described in the *Morning Herald* for 13 December 1782 as “the most accomplished chef d’œuvre of dumb acting that ever graced heroic pantomime” and in the role was able to convey “her inward struggles between anger, love, and duty to herself and country.” These were the type of elaborate abstractions – thoughts, feelings and passions - that had only relatively recently become associated with ballet.

It seems that too much pantomime was the *Macbeth* ballet’s undoing; the writer in the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* for 21 April later remarked that “there was, indeed, but little dancing in proportion to the pantomime;” the *Public Advertiser* for 18 March had already published similarly negative comments:

We cannot think last night’s effort among the most successful [. . .] Lepicq and Rossi were the Macbeth and Lady—and considering the narrow boundaries of their art, which is *tongue-tied*, they discoursed “with most miraculous organs.” Still, however, the whole of the material questions of the scene were agitated with all the disadvantages of contrast with comparative inefficiency.

Lepic may have been influenced by Noverre, who by the time of *Macbeth*, had admitted that he was more interested in pantomime than dancing:

It has happened, indeed, that I have renounced all regard to the mechanical composition of dancing, in order to give weight and brilliancy to the pantomime: the *action* of the performers should *speak*; their thoughts should be intelligible from their gestures, and physiognomy.

Noverre went on to acknowledge that there were “beauties of description” that were “inexpressible by pantomime language.” and when that language was required to express “strong passions.” it became “merely a confused stammering.” Perhaps the perceived difficulties in *Macbeth* simply proved that it was impossible to escape from a desire to represent the subtleties and complexities of Shakespeare’s play.

In the wider history of ballet in eighteenth-century London, then, this ballet was at this point an oddity, for it combined singing and dancing; it contained “Grand Choruses.” and at least some of the Leveridge *Macbeth* music;⁷ and it had new dance music, here provided by Barthélemon who had compiled the whole score. The only sections of the music we have from the work are the overture and some dance tunes from Act I, music which owes its survival to its publication in keyboard reduction by Longman and Broderip as *Macbeth A Grand Ballet*; as it happens, the very fact of publication reflects the ambitious nature of the work, for such music – if it was published at all - usually came out in individual numbers or as individual movements in seasonal collections.⁸ Of the 14 movements included, three are credited as Scottish tunes - The Braes of Ballanden, The last time I came o’er the moor, and Tweed Side – all of which in the ballet are associated with action involving Duncan. All three tunes had already been circulating in England - early London publishing dates for the three tunes are 1770, 1670, and 1725 respectively – and although not necessarily known to members of the audience, they would certainly have been recognisable as folk tunes by style, and Scottish by association; they would have also suggested an appropriate air of antiquity. As can be seen from the table, Barthélemon’s score mixed these tunes with some new movements, and if the ordering in the Longman and Broderip score is correct, the action of the story filled the first part of the act, culminating in the pastoral movement for the figurants dancing as “Scotch Peasants bringing Fruits and

Flowers to Duncan.” This was followed by four untitled longer show-piece movements for the principal dancers which were extraneous to the plot. The act then ended with a return to the action, in a movement in which Macbeth conducted Duncan to the bedchamber, leaving the scenario of the first part of the ballet on an appropriate cliff-hanger, a positioning that suggests that the murder of Duncan took place between Acts 1 and 2. As far as the music of the *Macbeth*-related ballet movements is concerned, Barthélemon’s score reflects in some detail action that is implied by titles that appear in the printed source. For example, “The surprise of Macbeth after the witches prophecy” opens with two distinct musical gestures both of which are both closed off by a fermata over a rest, a musical representation of Macbeth’s “startlement” at the weird sisters’ prediction. Similarly, the pauses, articulation, overall tessitura, and above all, the comparatively extreme ranges of the intervals in “Macbeth and Lady Macbeth resolving to murder Duncan” capture their conspiracy in all its horror, the seriousness of their crime being summoned up by the closing calando phrase, with its gradual decrease in both tempo and volume. These indications – which we can interpret in the context of the general care used in the preparation of the printed music – allow us some insight into the possible organisation of the gestures that the dancers employed in the mime. It is impossible to be specific about what these were, but unlike gesture as static representation found in Fuseli’s *Lady Macbeth* (or for that matter, to be found as part of any ballet scenario), the score offers a plan for gesture as movement, even if that plan cannot be realised in its original form with any certainty.

Despite his obvious competence, today’s judgements on Barthélemon’s music have not been positive; his

compositions exhibit considerable charm, but lack originality or a clearly developed personal style... [which] never evolved much beyond the mid-century style of which his colleague J.C. Bach was perhaps the most celebrated proponent (Zaslaw and McViegh 2001, II, 782-84).

But as a performer, he was said in the *Journal de musique* for May 1770 to have “exquisite taste” and was renowned for his realisation of adagio movements, interpretations described by Burney as “truly vocal” (Burney 1789, IV, 682).

Burney’s daughter, the novelist Fanny Burney, took her heroine, Evelina, to Vauxhall Gardens, where she was inspired to describe Barthélemon as a “player of exquisite fancy, feeling and variety” (Burney 1794, II, 55). There is no doubt that Barthélemon’s playing was capable of every nuance suggested by the scores which seem to us to lie rather limp on the page (Burden 2010). Despite this, *Macbeth* was, in general, poorly received, the writer in the *Morning Herald* for 19 March commenting:

Mr *Barthelemon* has made a wretched assemblage of airs. Matthew Locke’s venerable mantle, by being trimmed with the *plaid* of light *Scotch Melodies*, and trifling jigs, appears sadly disgraced.

Other fundamental problems with the work, both in its structure and in its performance, were identified by others, such as the author of the following remarks from the *Public Advertiser* for 18 March:

The *Spectres* whose rise before Macbeth, and sing *Italian recitative*, by way of prophetic warning, produce the lost farcical effect, from their exclaiming in a foreign accent, “MACBET!” Their meaning should be conveyed in signs.

The witches should be *dancers*, and not *singers*; - a mythical dance would be a better substitute for the omission of *Shakespeare’s verbal charms*, than a translation, however faithful. The witches clearly have a new power

assigned them; it is demonstrated in a *subterraneous wood*, which appears growing at the back of their cave.

Not for the first time, artists' tangling with the Scottish Play came to grief; the "Locke" music was too well-known and too widely accepted to be placed alongside the lighter music of late eighteenth-century France and Italy; the witches were not only singing in the music of Italian recitative, but doing so with "foreign-sounding" pronunciation; and above all, the Opera House (as opposed to the playhouse) was meddling with Shakespeare. These problems had in fact been foreshadowed in the *General Advertiser* of 28 February in which one writer had remarked that the intended ballet had to be "executed with the greatest nicety, or the attempt will fail. One laugh destroys the whole." Ultimately, though, the main problem was that there was just not enough dancing; as the *Morning Post* for 18 March remarked:

On the next performance of this ballet we would recommend a greater variety in the dances, and, if it is beneath the dignity of *Macbeth* and his Lady to exhibit themselves, that some of their subjects and courtiers may be permitted to enliven the action with a larger mixture of comic dancing.

Even allowing that "comic dancing" may simply be non-serious, such a suggestion seems counter to everything that was written about the style of this "Grand new Heroic Ballet"; it does seem that the press wanted more comédie- or dramatic action-based dancing, rather than these lengthy Noverre-style mime scenes.

Macbeth was not, though, the only unusual work staged at the Opera House that season; the new opera, *Alina; o sia, La regina di Golconda*, had been staged on 18 March 1784; the new libretto, attributed to Antonio Andrei, was set by Venanzio Rauzzini (1746-1810). The opera had been advertised with ballets between the acts; those between Acts I and II appear to have been the usual plot-less assemblages of

dance routines, while the last, after Act III (which also closed the evening) was an elaborate new ballet by Theodore D'Auberval, entitled *The Four Ages of Man*, which was cast appropriately to present childhood, youth, manhood, and old age.⁹ Like the *Macbeth* ballet, the first performance was for a Benefit, this one for D'Auberval as composer of the dances. However, the advertisement in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* claimed that the opera would be “an entirely new species of entertainment, after the French style.” while the libretto claimed that the opera will be performed “With Dances analogous to the DRAMA, Interwoven with CHORUSSES and SONGS.” “analogous” because they addressed the subject of the opera, and were not introduced “without bearing the least relation to the Subject of the Drama, where, therefore, are far from answering the Purpose.” (Lockman 1747, v). The opera had seven distinct sequences of dances and choruses integrated into the three acts; the Act I, scene 4 sequence, for example, had a chorus “With dancing and cheerful voices.” followed by the chorus “Let the mariner repose in safety” during which the Indians and sailors dance, which is then interrupted by an air. (Andrei 1784, 14-17). The London audience kept the opera alive for eleven performances, but after that, the opera was shelved. Shelved it may have been, but it was not entirely forgotten: as late as the novel *Marston* published in 1835, Captain Norris chose gambling over being “wrapped in ecstasy at some entrechats of Mademoiselle Rossi in the beautiful ballet of *Macbeth*” (St Clair 1835, I, 29).

Both the ballet of *Macbeth* and the opera of *Alina; o sia, La regina di Golconda* offer different versions of the same narrative: the London audience wanted their dance without singing, and their opera without dancing, even if they did require the dancing as a bon-bon at the end of the evening of opera, serious or comic.¹⁰ But at least one later report, that in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* of 21

March 1785 which praised Barthélemon's own music for the *Macbeth* ballet, wondered why the score (from which it was suggested that "the hacked English Makabet, &c" could be omitted) had been given up after the single Benefit performance: with alterations "there can be no doubt of the Ballet acting with great attraction for several nights to come." After all, the columnist concluded, what "greater praise" could be offered a foreigner than to say that his music for "this subject of Shakespeare's" was some of the most pleasing and appropriate he had composed since his arrival in London?

In all this critical noise, however, it was Rossi, as Lady Macbeth, who clearly gave the most memorable performance of the evening, the performance that impressed the writer in the *Morning Herald* of 19 March "with the recollection of *Fusili's* [sic] *painting*." We first hear of Henry Fuseli's Lady Macbeth painting - which seems to have been begun in 1781 - in a letter dated to September 1783 in which the artist remarked:

It is now nearly finished and I would wish [to know if Your mind is altered since] Smith has just finished the Lady Macbeth. In some parts, considered as a whole of Light and Shade it exceeds my expectation, and the expression of the waiting woman only excepted (I think he has done me more than Engravers justice). (Weinglass 1982, 21).¹¹

He later refers to the print as a "very large mezzotinto... from a large Picture of mine representing *Lady Macbeth walking in her Sleep*." (Weinglass 1982, 22). The engraver, John Smith, of whom Fuseli seemed to approve, published his print on 6 January 1784. Fuseli's subject is taken from the play's Act 5, scene 1, and the print carries the legend: "one, two why then, 'tis time to't." The quotation – given Fuseli's comment above, we can assume that the artist agreed that it fitted his conception of

the picture – occurs immediately after the more famous phrase, “Out damned spot!.” the imagined stain of Banquo’s blood:

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!—One, two. Why, then, ’tis time to do ’t. Hell is murky!—Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard?

Lady Macbeth is, of course, sleepwalking, a condition acknowledged in the conversation between her gentlewoman and the doctor, in which this text is embedded: the doctor, on arriving sees that her “eyes are open.” but the gentlewoman, with the perception of the more intelligent servant, responds “Ay, but their sense is shut.” The doctor and the gentlewoman are both seen in the background of Fuseli’s picture. Lady Macbeth occupies the foreground, and holds aloft the taper that she has commanded be “by her continually.” These figures, together with the background, appear almost supernatural, for the light is thrown onto Lady Macbeth’s face at the centre of the canvas, and across her shoulders to the tip of her left-hand thumb and forefinger. Fuseli’s non-specific model for Lady Macbeth suggests that the gestures in the picture cannot be attributed to any individual actress, but his acquaintance with the theatre indicates that they can be given a specific theatrical interpretation. One source, Gilbert Austin’s 1806 gesture compendium *Chironomia*, is particularly useful in this context, for it is not a simple instruction manual but presents gesture in an historical continuum making it possible to consider Fuseli’s gestures within its framework. Here, Lady Macbeth’s left-hand thumb and forefinger create a gesture in which the fingers point upwards, with “the other fingers turned inwards contracted with force according to the energy of the speaker.” (Austin 1806, 337 and ill. 45, 66, and 67). At the same time, this is combined with the hand being held “perpendicular to the horizon, with the fingers pointing upwards.” (Austin 1806, 338 and ill. 64 and 74). Austin records this as a composite gesture as both one of aversion and

accusation, and its use by Fuseli suggests that he is representing Lady Macbeth's aversion to the killing of Duncan which she has effected, and an accusation directed at Macbeth for the subsequent murders he has undertaken to secure the throne. (Austin 1806, ills 100 and 101). Her pose is not dissimilar to that found in the gladiator drawing with which Fuseli's earlier study of the sleepwalking scene has been associated (Tomory 1972, 79 and plate 29). The dislocation experienced by the viewer is partly caused by the thrust forward figure with its missing slipper, flowing hair, and wild costume, but it may also be the result of what Marguerite Tassi has identified as the transfer of the heroic; the heroic character is here is the deranged Lady Macbeth, not a tragic male lead. (Tassi 2011, 64).

There appears to be no one actress used as a model for Fuseli's painting, nor does an identifiable performance appear to have inspired it (Smith 2010, 30-40), and in that, it is a product of the distinction made "between paintings derived from the literary text and those that originated in the theatre." This a distinction has been dated to the early 1780s when "Shakespearean subjects began to be painted in some quantity." and as Altick notes, "the former bore the more honoured credentials." (Altick 1985, 256). The artist Robert Edge Pine drew the distinction clearly in commenting that his series of pictures is "not meant to be representations of stage scenes; but will be treated with the more unconfined liberty of painting."¹² And Fuseli's work, such as the witches from *Macbeth*, is said be "dramatic, but it did not simply seek to draw on, or re-enact theatrical traditions" (Postle 1991, 13).¹³ Nevertheless, Fuseli does tie his painting to the play by the use of the epigraph, which was attached to the print already in circulation when, in the April of 1784, the picture, obviously now not an image new to the public, was exhibited at the Royal Academy

as item 66 (Weinglass 1994, 74-75). A report in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* for 27 April 1784, noted that:

Mr Fusali [sic] laudably perseveres in the pursuit of the higher departments of the art. His genius employs itself as heretofore on the turbulent passions of the soul. And in his *Lady Macbeth* he demonstrates very striking faculties.

The “passions of the soul” may have moved some members of the audience, but not Horace Walpole, who hated it: “execrable” was the adjective he used to describe it. (Whitley 1928, II, 377).

The strangeness of the picture echoed the strangeness of its painter. Born in Zürich, Switzerland, Fuseli was the son of the collector and writer on art, Johann Caspar Füssli (1706 -1782). His early career was that of poet, and when he visited England first from 1764 to 1770 with the British *chargé d'affaires* in Berlin, Andrew Mitchell (1708–1771), it was with the intention of promoting German poetry. His departure for Italy was with the encouragement of Joshua Reynolds whom he had met in 1768, and who persuaded him to follow a career as an artist. One success led to another, and Fuseli was elected to the Royal Academy in 1790, and as Professor of Painting there in 1799; he was described by one acquaintance as “an extraordinary and very entertaining character” (Weinglass 1982, 40). Benjamin Robert Haydon found his character to be “the most grotesque mixture of literature, art, scepticism, indelicacy, profanity, and kindness” (Paston 1905, 18).¹⁴ Fuseli’s pictures include *Satan Starting at the Touch of Ithuriel’s Spear*, *The Death of Dido*, and *The Mandrake, a charm*, the last described by Horace Walpole as “shockingly mad, madder than ever, quite mad” (Whitley 1928, II, 377). But it was a madness that appealed to the public; his *Nightmare* took London by storm.

It was, though, Fuseli's encounter with Shakespeare's works that was to provide a profound moment in the artist's career. His literary ambitions had introduced him to the plays on the page, and when he first arrived in London, it was the performances influenced by David Garrick that were on offer. Fuseli was a devotee of the theatre – Weinglass recounts that in "later life he often dismissed his classes at the Royal Academy early in order to indulge his passion for the playhouse" – and Shakespeare was, of course, a constant in the repertory (Weinglass 2004, XXI, 209 and Tomory 1972, 71). In seeking to describe the effect on Fuseli of seeing Garrick playing Shakespeare, Tomory claims that it was similar to Jacques Louis David's response in seeing Naples for the first time: the result was akin seeing the world after "an operation for a cataract" (Tomory 1972, 15).¹⁵

Fuseli had encountered the play of *Macbeth* in his early life, and had translated it while still in Zurich (Tomory 1972, 15). From his years in Rome in the 1770s, there is a reference to the now-missing painting *A Scene from Macbeth*,¹⁶ and to some designs for a Shakespeare Room in the manner of the Sistine Chapel.¹⁷ And from the mid-1770s comes an earlier drawing, a Roman-style depiction of "Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking," which includes two watching figures that Tomory traces to a mosaic by Dioscorides (Tomory 1972, 79 and plate 30). The drawing shows Lady Macbeth striding forwards in a manner that can best be described as "concentrated raving," and although it is in no way preparatory for his 1785 painting, it none the less presents his subject in an already recognisable interpretation. But it was in 1783 that he exhibited *The Weird Sisters* at the Royal Academy, a painting of which the commentator in the *Morning Post* for 29 April 1783 wrote:

We have already traced this Artist's pencil with success in pieces of deformed stature. In the present picture he is very successful, as the Weird Sisters

answer every description given of them by the creative imagination of Shakespeare.

Fuseli, as a purveyor of the monstrous, is here credited with following Shakespeare's text, but also following his own now already well-trodden path in depicting deformity.

The commentator mentioned above in whom Rossi's performance inspired a "recollection of *Fusili's* [sic] *painting*," did so in contrast to that of Mrs Siddons "our critical and admired *English* performer"; the actress was juxtaposed in the *Morning Herald* of 19 March with a much appreciated – but foreign – dancer. The unspecific reports of Siddons's interpretation do suggest that in these early performances, her style was more like that of Hannah Pritchard as painted in the role by Fuseli and Johann Zoffany. These two portraits date from around 1760-66 and 1768 respectively, and, as Shearer West has pointed out, in both cases:

Pritchard's Lady Macbeth is in full command of the situation – not displaying the after-effects of that moment of weakness that Montagu felt could be glimpsed in the character prior to the murder. (West 2013, 170).

Siddons would later describe her interpretation of the role, an interpretation that comes closer to the manner suggested by Fuseli's picture. But Siddons biographer, Thomas Campbell, claims that Siddons had not fully developed her ideas about the character until about 1815, ideas which led ultimately to her "Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth." brought out by Campbell in a chapter of his Siddons biography in 1834 (Campbell 1834, 3-39).¹⁸

Fuseli's *Lady Macbeth walking in her Sleep* represents what is a key scene for both the dancer and the actress. For Siddons, her own account of what happened back stage with R. B. Sheridan in her dressing room on the Benefit night, indicates that not

only did her interpretation consciously differ from that of Pritchard, but did so in one essential detail:

[Mr. Sheridan] told me that he had heard with the greatest surprise and concern that I meant to act it without holding the candle in my hand; and when I urged the impracticability of washing out that “*damned spot*,” with the vehemence that was certainly implied by both her own words, and by those of her gentlewoman, he insisted, that if I did put the candle out of my hand, it would be thought a presumptuous innovation, as Mrs. Pritchard had always retained it in hers. My mind, however, was made up, and it was then too late to make me to alter it; for I was too agitated to adopt another method [...] The scene, of course, was acted as I had myself conceived it; and the innovation, as Mr. Sheridan called it, was received with approbation. Mr Sheridan himself came to me, after the play, and most ingenuously congratulated me on my obstinacy. (Campbell 1834, 39).

It is the case that Siddons is later shown holding the candle in the engraving by Thornthwaite (**Photo 4**), and again in a drawing by the amateur caricaturist, George Murgatroyd Woodward (1760–1809),¹⁹ but it is possible, given Siddons’s emphasis on this point, that both artists added the detail of the candle based on their experiences and assumptions of the role as played by Pritchard. Siddons is not pictured with it again, even in the major 1814 painting by George Henry Harlow, in which she is wringing her hands without a candle-stick in sight. This light source is, though, a key element of Fuseli’s picture, where, far from being the Wee Willie Winkie candle-stick of Thornthwaite, it is a large scale, taper-like candle held aloft that emphasises the wild, primitive, and even supernatural nature of Lady Macbeth’s madness (Sillars 2006, 224-225).

Despite Siddons's gloss on her own performance in the sleeping walking scene, one of the most competent reviews – that in the *London Chronicle* for 1-3 February 1785 – was critical of her staging of this passage:

In the taper scene, she was defective: her enunciation was too confined, and her looks not exactly accommodated to what one must suppose to be her feelings at the time; the faces she made were horrid, even ugly, without being strictly just or expressive.

The “too confined” enunciation suggests a rather stately performance. Rossi's danced interpretation seems, in turn, to have been extravagant, one probably with gestures in the Italian mode, and more like Lady Macbeth as conceived by Fuseli: George Bell commented that Fuseli thought it an error in Shakespeare that when the cry of women marks the death of Lady Macbeth, she did not appear; “he would have had her struggling in death among white sheets” (Bell 1870, 126-7).

We can see through Bell's sarcasm to Fuseli's “struggling” character, one Rossi clearly played like a woman possessed: tortured, histrionic, and potentially out of control. And her performance came off well even when compared with Siddons, as the author did in the review from the *Morning Post* for 18 March 1785:

In the banquet scene, *Madame Rossi* fell short of *Mrs Siddons*, but in some of the others, was equal at least, if not superior to that admired actress.

As Siddons grew into the role it seems by her own account that her performance of Lady Macbeth became more like the image painted by Fuseli. But in 1785, Siddons's interpretation had a “solemn dignity of demeanor.” a “brilliant beauty.” and an “expressive countenance”; and it was Geltruda Rossi that “accomplished chef d'œuvre of dumb acting.” who dancing the role as devised by Le Picq, gave a deeply

“touching” performance, and brought a dramatic “sprightliness” to the part, *à la* Fuseli.²⁰

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¹ In fact, at least one advertisement correctly attributed the music to Locke; see the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 2 February 1785.

² Also see Highfill 1973, 365, for a discussion of Barthélémon's confused relationship with the King's Theatre during this period. The implication is that he had no work from the theatre, but in fact, the *Macbeth* ballet was only one of several projects with which his name can be associated.

³ For some of the cast, see the report in the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 18 March 1785.

⁴ Highfill 1991, 111, cites both Geltruda and Margherita as Rossi's Christian names, giving Winter 1974 as the source for the former, and the *dramatis personae* of Bertati 1778 for the latter. D'Amico 1954, VI, 1409-1410, says that Charles Le Picq went to Russia about 1786 with a "new" wife named "Gertrude", presumably a corruption of Geltruda.

⁵ D'Amico 1954, VI, 1409-1410. Highfill 1991, 112 says "In 1785-86 Mme Rossi was not at the King's Theatre, nor was her regular partner and (by then, apparently) lover, Charles Le Picq." In Lynham 1970, Derek Lynham, in speaking of "Madame Rossi (Madame Le Picq)," implies that Rossi was Le Picq's wife by November 1782.

⁶ See Harris-Warrick 2001, II, 576, for Grimm and a further discusses these issues.

⁷ For a discussion of the *Macbeth* music in the 18th century, see Cholij 1996 and Thelma Baldwin and Wilson 1997, xiii-xxvi.

⁸ This discussion is based on the copy at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, M1526.B17 Cage

⁹ An account of the ballet and its casting can be found in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 16 March 1784.

¹⁰ For an account of the whole season, and more on the music of *Macbeth*, see Price, Milhous, and Hume 1995, 501-506.

¹¹ Draft of a letter to an unknown addressee, dated to September 1783.

¹² Robert Edge Pine, newspaper article. This is an oft-used passage, which seems to have been quoted via secondary sources; its origin appears to be a newspaper cutting in V&A Scrapbook, I: 197, where it is dated in ms “11 May 1791.”

¹³ This is further discussed in Paulson 1982, 124-137.

¹⁴ Fuseli, described by David Hume described him “as mad as Rousseau himself” (Greig 1932, II, 136) is often reported making professional jokes: on hearing the artist John Opie was reported to be painting the Boar Hunt of Meleager and Atalanta from Dryden, “he asked Opie if he did not intend to kill his Pig at Christmas” (James Northcote to Prince Hoare, 24 December 1787; Weinglass 1982, 39).

¹⁵ This is misquoted in Weinglass 2004, XXI, 209, as “being according to David Garrick.”

¹⁶ Weinglass 2004, XXI, 209, believes this missing picture to have been probably *The Witches Show Macbeth Banquo’s Descendants*, that he sent to the Royal Academy in 1777, telling his correspondent to hold it back so that “it will ... produce a greater effect by coming unexpectedly upon the public.”

¹⁷ These are in the collection of the British Museum.

¹⁸ In Campbell 1834, the author comments – II, 44 – that he had seen a version of the “Remarks” “some nineteen years ago.”

¹⁹ Derbyshire Record Office, D5459/1/34/2 Siddons as Lady Macbeth, 1787.

²⁰ My thanks as always to Roger Savage, Jennifer Thorp, and Joseph Lockwood.

Movements in the Ballet of Macbeth
Copy used US-Folger M1526.B17 Cage

| No | Pn | Title | Tune | Performance indications | Dancer named |
|----|----|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| □ | 1 | Overture | □ | Allegro Maestoso-Andante | □ |
| 1 | 4 | March of Macbeth | □ | Allegretto | □ |
| 2 | 4 | Macbeth consulting the Witches | □ | Maestoso | Le Picq |
| 3 | 5 | The surprise of Macbeth after the Witches Prophecy | □ | Adagio | □ |
| 4 | 5 | For the coming of Duncan and his Courtiers | The Braes of Ballanden | Andante | □ |
| 5 | 6 | Lady Macbeth reading the Letter | □ | Andante poco lento | Geltruda Rossi |
| 6 | 6 | Macbeth telling Lady Macbeth of the intended visit of Duncan | Tweed Side | Andantino | □ |
| 7 | 7 | Macbeth and Lady Macbeth resolving to murder Duncan | □ | Andante - Calando | |
| 8 | 8 | Duncan with his Courtiers at Macbeth's castle. | The last time I came o'er the moor | Andante | □ |
| 9 | 9 | The Scotch Peasants bringing Fruits and Flowers to Duncan | □ | Andantino pastorale | □ |
| 10 | 9 | □ | □ | □ | M. Frederic and Carolina Angiolini. |
| 11 | 10 | □ | □ | Andantino | Louis-Maire Nivelon, Pietro Angiolini, Geltruda Rossi, Marie Dorival à Corifet |
| 12 | 11 | □ | □ | Allegretto | M. Frederic, Pietro Angiolini, Carolina Angiolini. |
| 13 | 13 | □ | □ | Andantino | Louis-Maire Nivelon |
| 14 | 16 | Macbeth conducting Duncan to bed. | □ | Poco Andante | □ |