

BRUNO FORMENT & CHRISTEL STALPAERT (eds)



Theatrical Heritage

Challenges & Opportunities

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MECHANICAL RULES VERSUS ABNORMIS GRATIA

Revaluing Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* (1806) as a Source for Historical Acting Techniques

Jed Wentz

Chironomia, the Rev. Gilbert Austin's (1753-1837) copious compendium of rhetorical gesture, was published in London in 1806.¹ The work contains many observations on the proper use of the voice and physical movement in the pulpit and on stage. It also joins these aural and visual components together in a novel and ingenious system for notating, with great precision, the actor-orator's art—both the gestures performed and their temporal relationship to the spoken words they delineate. Austin intended this notational system to be used not only to record but also to teach gesture. Yet, despite the book's remarkable qualities, neither unequivocal critical success nor uniform condemnation has been *Chironomia*'s lot.

If reproduction and transmission can be seen as signs of popularity and approval, then *Chironomia* was certainly a success: it appeared in Germany in an abridged version as *Die Kunst der rednerischen und theatralischen Declamation* (1818), and it was further reprinted throughout the nineteenth century, in either abridged or paraphrased form, in various works on declamation by American authors.² *Chironomia* also achieved contemporary critical success: in London, *The British Critic* gave it a glowing review in 1808, praising it variously for “the most luminous precision,” and for its “very judicious observations” as well as its “taste, erudition, and feeling”; in fact, the reviewer, who found *Chironomia* “extremely curious and amusing,” felt that

1 Its full title reads: *Chironomia, or, A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery: Comprehending Many Precepts, both Ancient and Modern, for the Proper Regulation of the Voice, the Countenance, and Gesture*. In 1644 John Bulwer published a bipartite work on gestures entitled *Chirologia or the Naturall Language of the Hand ... Whereunto is added Chironomia: or, the Art of Manuall Rhetoricke*. Bulwer's work, which Austin does not mention in his treatise, is not directly relevant to the current argument and will not be further referred to here.

2 See, for example, Barber 1831; Comstock 1841; Bacon 1875.



“nothing can be more valuable” than Austin’s remarks on reading the liturgy, while his “remarks on stage delivery are dictated by sound judgment and accurate taste.”³

Counterbalancing such signs of approbation are condemnations of Austin’s method and gestural style dating from as early as 1807, when a scathing article in *The Annual Review* declared Austin to be “liable to the suspicion of an affected taste in art, of a disposition to find pretences for gesticulation at every metaphor of phrase, and, instead of delineating and corroborating the main impression of sentiment, of attempting to paint words, and to accompany oral language with an hieroglyphic or picturesque interpretation.”⁴ More criticism followed in 1809, when an extensive article in *The Monthly Review*, though admitting that *Chironomia* generally “is strongly marked by predominating good sense,” condemned Austin’s proposed gestures to accompany John Gay’s fable *The Miser and Plutus* (see below) as “much too solemn and vehement,” while regretfully dismissing his newly-invented gestural notation as “cumbersome, complicated, and ill adapted to its purpose.”⁵ Criticism of Austin and his notational system continued into the twentieth century, exacerbated no doubted by general changes of taste concerning oratorical and acting styles. Thus the editors of the facsimile edition of *Chironomia*, published in 1966, implied that its illustrative plates could “evoke a smile from teacher and student because Austin’s system of gesture, happily, is not applicable to the teaching of speech today.”⁶ Indeed, one writer has recently gone so far as to claim that, “[t]o attempt to follow one of Austin’s annotated extracts from canonical texts ... is to become, inevitably, a clumsily articulated automaton, a mechanized monster of crippling self-consciousness.” And the same author warns his readers of the “confusion and exhaustion that awaits any reader rash enough to put the system to the test.”⁷

Despite such warnings, the revolutions in musical taste that have occurred since the 1960s, spurred on by the success of the Early Music movement, have ignited not only a curiosity as to what historical acting may have looked like, but even the desire to present reconstructions of its techniques on the modern stage. The importance of *Chironomia* as a source for such attempts has not been overlooked. In the 1970s, for instance, Dene Barnett used Austin’s book as a basis for the reconstruction of historical stagecraft. Barnett saw in *Chironomia* a veritable Rosetta Stone for understanding past acting styles, which he believed had remained constant over a

3 British Critic 1808, 596-602.

4 Annual Review 1807, 554.

5 Monthly Review 1809, 246 and 249.

6 Robb & Thonssen 1966, xviii and xxi.

7 Dillon 2007.



great geographical area for a long period of time.⁸ Barnett put his ideas into practice when he co-directed a production of Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* for the English Bach Festival in July of 1978: Jean-Claude Malgloire conducted an orchestra playing on authentic instruments, while Barnett, Michael Holmes, and Belinda Quirey arranged the Baroque staging and dance. A contemporary review of the performance gives an impression of the staging having had an emotionally cool tone:

For a modern audience the highly stylized movements and postures inevitably place the work's passionate and tragic scenes at a distance, but it is surprising how easily one's responses adapt to them. The eye movements I found more disconcerting. Often they seemed to suggest an incongruous circumspexion ...⁹

It was, in part, the cool tone and distancing effect of Barnett's realizations that recently led one theater historian to brand rhetorical sources in general as potentially misleading when mined as a source for historical stage practices. Virginia Scott criticized the work of Barnett and his followers as representative of an "unresisted" temptation "to overuse theoretical writings—along with certain kinds of visual information—to create templates for eighteenth-century acting."¹⁰ For Scott, Barnett's "system," based on theoretical and didactic works like *Chironomia* and currently perpetuated by various "disciples," is "designed to encourage the most formal and formulaic sort of acting imaginable."¹¹ Scott's own work places emphasis on the fact that French historical sources repeatedly praised the actor's fire, which Scott defines as "ardour and vehemence," and which she points out was "much prized in the actor, when tempered with *goût*:"¹²

8 Barnett (in Barnett and Parker 1980, 67) felt that the "French style may be taken as a paradigm" for historical acting generally.

9 Boyd 1978. It should be noted that Barnett began his research into gesture in 1969 and had produced Rameau's *Pygmalion* in Australia in 1972, a production in which his research served "to ensure that it was French Rococo, not only in the music, but in the costumes, scenery, candle-lighting and above all in the gestures, posture and actions of the singers" (Barnett 1973, 2-3).

10 Scott 2010, 201. In 2008 the author had the good fortune to enjoy an extended e-mail correspondence with Scott concerning passionate acting, Gilbert Austin and Dene Barnett. Of the latter's work she was skeptical: "I fear the Barnett system always smells of the study." Much of the current article is the result of the long-term effects this discussion had on the author's own research, and he notes Virginia Scott's passing with regret.

11 Eadem, 202.

12 Eadem, 199.





“An actor without *feu* in the tragic and without vivacity in the comic is a body without a soul,” says Dumas d’Aigeuberre ... an observation that those who teach Barnett’s method might want to keep in mind. Since, however, almost no French tragedies written between 1680 and the Revolution are produced currently, this Art of Gesture has been primarily inflicted upon students wanting to sing Baroque opera.¹³

Scott was aware that Barnett leaned heavily on *Chironomia* in order to create the “method” she so strongly criticized. Indeed, the well-documented relationship between Barnett’s work and Austin’s precepts means that any attack on the former could easily be read, unless otherwise specifically qualified, as disapprobation of the latter, at least within the scholarly community.¹⁴

Thus, since its publication in 1806, Austin’s *Chironomia* has been praised and perpetuated by some, criticized and ridiculed by others. Given these conflicting evaluations, as well as current interest in reconstructing historical staging techniques in productions of Baroque opera, it seems expedient now to re-examine *Chironomia* carefully and critically. This could in turn stimulate us to rethink our approach to historical acting and to search for a new ‘method’ that, unlike Barnett’s, incorporates both Austin’s precepts and Scott’s source material on the much-praised thespian fire. In order to facilitate such a re-evaluation, the following questions will be addressed here: What qualifications did Austin have to write on theatrical gesture? Can an examination of *Chironomia* offer insights into Austin’s goals and didactic method? Are the various criticisms of Austin’s book justified when viewed in the light of these didactic methods and goals?

AUSTIN AS CLERGYMAN, PRECEPTOR, AND SOCIALITE

Chironomia is, as has been noted, a didactic work aimed at all who wish to speak well in public. However, the all-encompassing nature of gesture promoted by Austin in his book, embracing religious, judicial, political, and theatrical performances,

¹³ Eadem, 203.

¹⁴ Barnett himself stated, despite his avowed intent to focus on French acting styles, that the study of *Chironomia* “constitutes our best means of understanding and re-creating the 18th century art of gesture.” (Barnett 1987, 479). It would be unfair, however, to suggest that Barnett’s knowledge of acting sources was limited to Austin: the bibliography in *The art of gesture* remains a monument to its author’s impressive scholarship.





should in no way be seen as prejudicial to its usefulness in reconstructing an exclusively theatrical *actio*. There was, after all, a close link in Europe between gesture on the stage and in the pulpit at this time.¹⁵ Furthermore, Austin, who was himself a clergyman, differentiated clearly between sacred and theatrical styles, so that his book can be used to reconstruct either style exclusively.

Austin was, moreover, highly respected as a preceptor. James Grant Raymond, in his *Life of Thomas Dermody* (1806), describes Austin as “a clergyman of great worth and learning, who at that time kept a school of deservedly high repute in Dublin.”¹⁶ Raymond’s “at that time” was 1789, when Austin took the precocious young poet Dermody into his home and offered the boy a place in his school. Raymond makes clear that Dermody thus

had the opportunity of acquiring the most polished manners, from the elegant company of both sexes resorting to the house of Mr. Austin; of forming connections, though not numerous, among the sons of some of the first families in the kingdom placed there for their education; and of cultivating his taste for literature under a kind and able preceptor.¹⁷

Furthermore, Austin’s wife Charlotte was described as being “a leading woman of fashion” who “received the elite of the fashionable world at her house in Bagot Street.”¹⁸ It was there that she requested the young Dermody to recite his poems “to all the literary and fashionable society during the Dublin season,” and it seems hard to imagine the boy would not have accompanied his recitations with the appropriate gestures; his *actio* would surely not have been so prominently displayed, had it not served as a calling card for Austin’s teaching methods.¹⁹

Thus, Austin is painted as an accomplished instructor with an enviable social network; and indeed, *Chironomia* is dedicated to Francis William, 2nd Earl of Charlemont, who studied at Austin’s school at the same time as Dermody.²⁰ Another of Austin’s powerful aristocratic connections was William FitzGerald, 2nd Duke of Leinster, and his son, the soon-to-be 3rd Duke of Leinster:

15 This connection has been noted by numerous scholars, e.g. Chaouche 2001, and is advanced in Austin 1806, 134-135.

16 Raymond 1806, I, 82.

17 Ibid., I, 92-93.

18 Morgan 1863, I, 75 and 77.

19 Raymond 1806, I, 83-84: “Mr. Austin considered himself peculiarly happy in having the opportunity of cultivating and displaying such wonderful talents.”

20 Ibid., I, 93.



With the late Duke of Leinster, he [Austin] was an especial favorite; his Grace placed his only son, the present duke [Augustus FitzGerald, 3rd Duke of Leinster], under the care of Dr. Austin; and the best proof we can give of the esteem the young nobleman felt for his learned preceptor was, that soon after he had succeeded to the dukedom, he presented him to a very valuable living which had then become vacant.²¹

Indeed, the *General Plan* of the curriculum Austin offered at his school for the year 1800 shows the course to have been far-reaching and rigorous: lessons in maths and sciences were “all frequently illustrated by Experiments with an extensive Apparatus,” while the humanities included English, French, Latin, and Greek, as well as history, rhetoric and elocution.²² The Rev. Travers Hume, writing to the Earl Macartney in 1802, expressed his belief that Austin’s school was better “for young Boys than any other in Ireland from the temper and disposition of the Master ... & some of his pupils now at the University are amongst the most distinguished there.”²³ Hume had placed his nine-year-old son George in Austin’s school in October 1802, and by January of 1803 he could already happily inform the Earl that the boy had “received some advantage having overcome that childish diffidence which was natural to him & is improved in other aspects beyond what I could have expected for the time.”²⁴ Could it have been Austin’s course in elocution and gesture that so quickly helped George to overcome his “childish diffidence?”

The importance of the fact that Austin taught gesture to “a limited number of the sons of the higher classes in Ireland” can hardly be overestimated: He himself admitted that he first created his notational system in order the better to instruct his pupils in the art.²⁵ Since *Chironomia* thus is clearly related to Austin’s teaching practice, the vital question in terms of the current revaluation is: what style of acting is preserved in its notation? Did Austin have access to actors whose performances would have been deemed worthy of being imitated by the flower of Ireland’s aristocratic youth?²⁶

21 Taylor 1845, 439.

22 Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland [BPRONI], D572/8/123a.2: *Terms and General Plan of the School at Woodville, near Lucan, under the Direction of The Rev. Gilbert Austin, A. M.*, 2.

23 BPRONI, D572/8/123b: letter from Travers Hume to the Earl Macartney, 5 October 1802.

24 BPRONI, D572/8/125: letter from Travers Hume to the Earl Macartney, 14 January 1803.

25 Austin 1806, 438. For the relationship between Austin’s notation and his teaching see *Ibid.*, iv.

26 It is not really remarkable that theatrical *actio* should be used to train orators who did not aspire to the stage: Michel Le Faucheur had advised seventeenth-century preachers to train their voices by often reading aloud “comedies, tragedies, dialogues and other works by authors whose style most closely resembles the theatrical.” (Chaouche 2001, 99-100).



AUSTIN AS OBSERVER OF THE STAGE

In *Chironomia*, Austin recorded, through illustrations as well as notation, specific gestures used by two particularly famous actors, John Philip Kemble and his sister, Sarah Siddons.²⁷ Sometimes the information thus presented was second hand: for instance, the book's well-known illustrations showing the attitudes of Mrs. Siddons were based on information that was passed on to Austin by "a young lady, who has taste to be charmed by the truth and dignity of her [Siddons'] action, and who posses talents to record it".²⁸

However, not all of the gestures recorded in *Chironomia* came to Austin indirectly: some were notated first-hand in the theater, jotted down on the spot as he witnessed the actors in the heat of performance.²⁹ For instance, Austin recorded the different attitudes of Kemble and Siddons in their various interpretations of the role of Hamlet, at the iconic moment when the Danish prince sees the ghost. Austin would have had ample opportunity to observe Kemble play the part in Dublin before the publication of *Chironomia* in 1806. The actor often performed it there during his career, most intensively between 1781 and 1783 (fourteen performances), and he thrice appeared as Hamlet in the years immediately preceding the publication of *Chironomia*: on 30 May and 16 June 1800, and on 7 April 1804. Siddons, on the other hand, rarely played the part, and only twice in Dublin: on 27 and 29 July 1802.³⁰ Austin's notations of the gestures of both Kemble and Siddons, therefore, could easily date to the period 1800-1804. His notation facilitates recreations, in static 'snapshots,' of the famous actors' work: Kemble kept his hands in front of his body, a classic pose, while Siddons threw her right hand out and away from her torso (plates 3 and 4).³¹

It is clear, however, that Austin need not have witnessed *Hamlet* in Dublin, for he was in London on more than one occasion. A letter written to the 3rd Duke of Leinster on 4 May 1832 demonstrated his plain knowledge of the city's layout and entertainments: in it he cast his mind back to his youth and recalled seeing Guido Reni's *Aurora* in Northumberland House "in the year 1775 when I first went to

27 Thanks are due to Iain Mackintosh for his enlightening comments on Kemble's neoclassicism.

28 Austin 1806, 495 and figures 116-122.

29 See *Ibid.*, 391n. 3.

30 See Greene 2011, IV, 3183, 3186 and 3316-3317; Greene 2011a, 2101-2102 and 3355.

31 See Austin 1806, 421.



London.”³² Austin would more than once have had the opportunity, therefore, to see famous actors on the London stage. Indeed, in *Chironomia*, he speaks with authority of the performances of Elizabeth Billington and Josephina Grassini in Peter von Winter’s *Il ratto di Proserpina*, an opera that premiered in 1804 at the King’s Theatre and that did not travel to Dublin.³³ Further indications of possible London sojourns are the remarks made in *Chironomia* concerning portraits of Kemble and Siddons by Sir Thomas Lawrence that hung in Kemble’s house, the implication being that Austin had seen them there.³⁴ This, in turn, suggests a degree of intimacy between the actor and the Irishman, and, indeed, it is worth noting that Kemble owned a copy of *Chironomia* at the time of his death, richly bound in “russia” leather.³⁵ It is not inconceivable that Austin, who moved in Dublin’s highest social circles, would have met both Kemble and Siddons sometime during their Irish tours, and subsequently engaged with them socially in London.

However, if there is a good deal in *Chironomia* that suggests Austin well knew the work of the greats of the London stage, there are also hints of other connections to theatrical life. For instance, he came close enough to gossiping performers to have overheard “two distinguished dancers condemning very loudly the late celebrated Marmontel [Jean-François, 1723-1799]”.³⁶ Austin himself also contributed to at least one vocal stage work, penning the words for additional songs in the opera *Psyche* that were set by the Irish composer John Andrew Stevenson; a resulting, “much admired trio,” *Prepare ye Nymphs, Prepare*, was published in 1813.³⁷

In fact, Austin on at least one occasion even acted himself, albeit in a private production. Samuel Whyte’s *Poems on Various Subjects* gives a cast list for a performance of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* in which a youthful Gilbert Austin took the role of Bardolph. The play was given on 5 January 1773 “at Drumcree, the hereditary seat of William Smith, Esq. representative for the county of Westmeath, who played Falstaff.”³⁸

All of this suggests that Austin was on rather easy terms with ‘theater people,’ some of them real ‘stars,’ that he had enjoyed and even participated in theatrical events in various capacities at different times, and that he therefore could speak

32 BPRONI, D3078/3/22/10: letter from Gilbert Austin to the 3rd Duke of Leinster, 4 May 1832. This copy was probably by “Masuccio, a scholar of Carlo Maratti”; see Anonymous 1805, 268. Thanks are due to Jennifer Thorp for her help in locating the archive of the 3rd Duke of Leinster.

33 See Austin 1806, 247-248. The author wishes to thank John C. Greene for his assistance.

34 See *Ibid.*, 280n.17.

35 Anonymous 1971. Thanks are due to Andrea Cawelti and Annette Fern for their help in locating this.

36 Austin 1806, 258n.15.

37 See the advertisement in *The Morning Post*, 17 July 1813.

38 See Whyte 1795, 57 and ii.



with some authority on the topic of theatrical *actio*. Perhaps it was the Reverend Austin's profession that led him, throughout *Chironomia*, to imply, rather than to explicitly state, his close proximity to the stage?³⁹

AUSTIN'S DIDACTIC GOALS AND METHOD

Austin's main objective in writing *Chironomia* was the explication of his novel system of gestural notation. This is important to bear in mind, as Austin's four main exemplary texts—*The Miser and Plutus* from John Gay's *Fables* (1737), Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1742-50), the 'Brutus speech' from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599?), Act III, scene 2, and Edward Young's poem *Night Thoughts (The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality, 1742-8)*—were specifically chosen and annotated by him with a didactic purpose in mind. Austin states quite clearly that his annotated gestures are not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, they demonstrate the proper implementation of his notational system: "The manner of delivery is such as occurred, and might have been varied in a thousand ways: it is to be considered as an example, merely for illustrating the system."⁴⁰ A few pages later Austin is even more explicit:

It is requested to be understood that the various passages, which are marked with the notation, are intended merely to illustrate the foregoing [notation-al] system: and that among the innumerable methods of possible delivery, that which is chosen and represented is to be considered as one method only, how far soever [sic] removed from the best. It is one property of this system of notation, that whilst it furnishes the means of recording each person[']s ideas of gesture it does not presume to dictate. It is a language, which may be used to express every variety of opinion.⁴¹

The texts were, however, chosen and annotated with a preceptor's care: Austin expected students to practice the notated gestures, to experiment with them, even to change them; in short, to learn from them. With this in mind he placed the texts in progressive order, according to the kind of gestures each required, as well as their

39 It is interesting to note, in this context, that the 1792 printing of Whyte's cast list (in Whyte 1792, 57) indicates that Bardolph was played by "Rev. G- A-".

40 Austin 1806, 362-363.

41 Ibid., 368.





vehemence in performance.⁴² For instance, he thus explained the logic behind his progression from the first text, Gay's *The Miser*, to the second, Gray's *Elegy*:

I have chosen to illustrate this art [of gestural notation], first by a simple fable [*The Miser*], aided both by engraved figures and notation. A descriptive poem, such as that which here follows [*Elegy*], appears to be the next exercise in progressive facility: because the delineations of natural description suggest a variety of gestures, the propriety of which is easily conceived. And I have chosen a serious poem of this kind, because the changes of gesture are made slowly, and are therefore more suitable for practice and experiment.⁴³

Austin thus justified his progression from a short excerpt taken from Gay's fable to a longer excerpt from Gray's elegiac poem: the *Elegy* offered Austin ample opportunities to notate a wealth of varied gestures, to be performed at a suitably measured pace. His didactic intentions were further developed in the third text, Shakespeare's 'Brutus speech,' which demanded yet another style of movement. Austin explained that:

In Brutus' harangue, on the contrary, the gestures will principally be the suspended and emphatical suited to the vehemence of the speaker's manner, which seeks no ornament, but hastens to produce the main impression on his hearers by the most direct method.⁴⁴

Thus the slower, descriptive gestures Austin had notated in the *Elegy* were superseded in the Shakespeare text by simpler, more emphatic, and more vehement ones. This speeding up of the gestures, and the transitions between them, reached its climax in the last of Austin's exemplary texts, taken from Young's *Night Thoughts*:

The peculiarities of Young's style, especially in his *Night Thoughts*, renders his poetry particularly difficult for recitation. ... The difficulty arises chiefly from the multiplicity of the images, and the brevity of the expression; consequently if the speaker is not careful to pronounce every passage with due deliberation, his gesture makes only confusion, and gives an air of mummerly to his recitation. ... To give force and variety, and at the same time simplicity and gracefulness to gestures so heaped on each other, is attended with no inconsiderable difficulty.⁴⁵

42 Austin proposes various categories of gesture: commencing, discriminating, auxiliary, suspended, emphatical, and terminating, see *Ibid.*, 390-392. The vehemence and amplitude of the gesture were meant to correspond to the emotional intensity of the text; see, for instance, *Ibid.*, 334-335.

43 *Ibid.*, 522.

44 *Ibid.*, 392-393.

45 *Ibid.*, 546.





It should be clear, therefore, that Austin intended his four main annotated texts as a series of graduated gestural etudes: he nowhere suggested that they were unimpeachable examples of the actor's art. As he said of his annotated *Elegy*: "As these gestures may be varied, it may be said, infinitely, so there can be no fixed standard, as to the manner of delivering this or any other poem or oration, which should be considered exclusively appropriate."⁴⁶ Austin also never claimed that his annotations represented a record of the performance of any particular actor.⁴⁷ He did, of course, notate specific gestures associated with Kemble or Siddons in his text; and, given his admiration of their acting, his own style of gesture was probably in their manner. However, there is no reason to believe that Austin intended to create monumental records, or fixed templates, or to reduce acting to the small compass of four annotated didactic examples.

AUSTIN'S CRITICS ANSWERED

It is not difficult to answer some criticisms of *Chironomia* using Austin's own words. For instance, the various animadversions of Austin's gestures for *The Miser* should be seen in light of his avowed didactic purpose. In general, he justifies his use of "the bolder gestures" as being "on account of their greater precision and distinctness, and also on account of their greater difficulty of execution: if a speaker is able to execute gracefully the grand gestures, he will find no difficulty in performing the colloquial."⁴⁸ This could explain the choice of gestures "much too solemn and vehement" (according to *The Monthly Review*) for *The Miser*; while the "disposition to find pretences for gesticulation at every metaphor of phrase" (of which the *Annual Review* complained) also probably reflects Austin's didactic intent. Surely the student could profit from a rich variety of gestures with which to experiment? At any rate, though the *Annual Review* censured Austin's style ("we admire his ingenuity, without always sympathizing with his taste"), it warmly praised the practical value of his treatise:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 539.

⁴⁷ It would be tempting to see in Austin's annotated 'Brutus speech' a record of Kemble's own famous performance of the role. However, Kemble did not take up the part until 29 February 1812. See Shattuck 1974, IV, introduction to *Julius Caesar*, i.

⁴⁸ Austin 1806, 459n.20.



To have done so much toward a classification of the phænomena of corporeal rhetoric, is itself to have increased the power of the orator: it will stock his imagination with an inexhaustible handful of illustrative and pathetic expressions, and will enable him to render taciturnity itself, subservient to the purposes of speech.⁴⁹

Indeed, one must not forget that Austin fully expected his notated gestures to be moderated and altered by the performer: “If upon trial and consideration, the gestures marked on any of the following pieces should appear too numerous, they may be omitted; or if they appear in any instances incorrect, they may be altered at pleasure.”⁵⁰ Moreover, in his chapter entitled “On the Frequency, Moderation, and Intermission of Gesture,” Austin clearly underscored the fact that the orator had to respect conventional boundaries when performing in public:

The knowledge of the extreme bounds also to which decorum should allow a speaker to proceed according to his situation ought to be familiar to his imagination. So that even in the “tempest and whirlwind of his passion” he shall be still in possession of himself, and never abandon himself to undue extravagance. All that energy, brilliancy, or pathos can require, may, in the pulpit, in parliament, and at the bar be kept within such bounds, as shall better produce the intended effect, than the most licentious indulgence. Even on the stage itself, where more is permitted ... temperance should be strictly observed. If it should be transgressed wantonly and audaciously, the outrage is sure to produce derision instead of applause.⁵¹

If, however, Austin’s chosen style can be defended by referring to his avowed didactic intent, critics of his notational system have a more legitimate complaint: his presentation of the system—the application of letters, numbers, dashes, and dots to particular lines of text—certainly seems ill-judged. Austin overestimated the ease with which his notation could be learned without the aid of a skilled preceptor when he wrote: “the whole plan of the notation ... may easily, I should think, be understood in an hour or two; and may instantly afterwards be put to the trial with the assistance of the tables and the plates.”⁵²

While a global understanding of the system can indeed be gained after a few hours’ study, it is when it is “put to the trial” that things become more difficult. As is clear from the many criticisms of Austin’s notational system (“cumbersome,

49 Annual Review 1807, 555.

50 Austin 1806, 223.

51 Ibid., 444–445.

52 Ibid., vii.

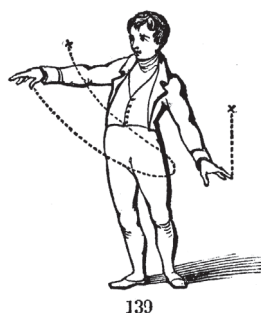
complicated, and ill adapted to its purpose” according to *The Monthly Review*), Austin chose, in *The Miser*, too difficult a text with which to introduce the student to its practical realization. Moreover, Austin’s presentation of the poem’s opening lines sows confusion through a number of seeming and actual discrepancies between the notation and the accompanying engraved illustrations. The most problematic of these is the notation “pdb ad–” above the word “silent” in the third line, which indicates that the right hand is prone, downwards and back, and which therefore is incompatible with the motion shown by a dotted line in the accompanying plate. Followers of Austin mostly ignored this confusing discrepancy: for instance, two later versions of *The Miser* (Austin, 1818; Jonathan Barber, *A Practical Treatise on Gesture*, 1831) reproduce the notation (“pdb ad–”) and the incongruous plate unchanged; however, one version (in Andrew Comstock’s *A System of Elocution*, 1841) changes the notation to “pdc ad–” in an attempt to make it more closely correspond to the illustration (figs. 4a-b and 5).⁵³

However, when evaluating the significance of such problems for modern reconstructors, distinction should be made between the presentation of the materials on Austin’s part and the notational system itself, which, even given the admitted difficulties and obstacles, is still much easier to learn and to apply practically than either standard Western musical notation or Beauchamps-Feuillet dance notation.



Figures 4a and b. Two figures from Austin’s *Chironomia* (left): the right hand in the position pdb (prone, downwards, backwards); (right) the position pdc (prone, downwards, across).

53 Comstock’s attempt was, however, misguided, for “ad” and “pdc” are themselves incompatible: it is probably the plate that must be corrected. See Austin 1806, 344 for Austin’s description of “ad” (“Advancing”).



F *pdc ad* ———
Along the silent room

——— *phq* ———
he stalks; |
a R2

Figure 5. In Andrew Comstock's *A System of Elocution, with Special Reference to Gesture* (1841) Austin's annotation on the word "silent" was altered to "pdc."

A final point, inherent in Virginia Scott's criticism of Dene Barnett, will be examined here: can Austin be accused of promoting a system "designed to encourage the most formal and formulaic sort of acting imaginable?" That is to say, would Austin recognize the emotionally cool work of Barnett as the legitimate offspring of *Chironomia*? In order to answer this, a search must be made for traces of thespian 'fire' in Austin's treatise. Scott's definition of fire as "ardour and vehemence" suggests an emotional engagement on the part of the actor discernable in his performance: his affect and gesture would be immediately, and even violently, linked. Austin noted in *Chironomia* that muscle tension in the actor's body correlates directly to his emotion (or 'passion'), and this, it could be argued, is essential to what the French called *feu*:

If the nerves and muscles assume the degree of tension suited to any passion, the mind will sympathize with the bodily action. And if the mind is affected by a particular passion either involuntarily or by choice, as when actors endeavour to conceive it strongly; the muscular action and nervous sensibility excite to the expression of gesture: such is the effect of their mutual sympathy. Hence ... fine or forcible gestures without a correspondent elevation or energy of feeling are most incongruous.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ibid., 294n.2.

If this passage is taken *au sérieux*, then the larger and more violent gestures notated by Austin would have to be performed with a concomitant level of emotional intensity, or ‘fire.’⁵⁵

Moreover, Austin makes clear that all gestures, even small ones, could be performed more or less energetically in concordance with the speaker’s variation in emotional intensity. For instance, an extraordinary spreading of the fingers could be notated “x” (for “extended”): “The fingers in this state, whatever may be the general position of the hand, are separated from each other with energy in proportion to the excitation of the speaker.”⁵⁶ Luckily for us, this insistence that gesture and intensity must be linked in performance makes it possible to reconstruct the intended energy level from the notation itself: where Austin notated energetic gestures he must, following his own logic, have intended an equally vehement delivery. Hence gestures notated with an “n” for “noting” were less energetic (being performed “with a gentle stroke”), than those notated with “st” (“striking”), which were performed “with a degree of force like a stroke that is arrested.” Similarly energetic were those notated “sp” (“springing”), which “[flew] suddenly up ... like the blade of a pocket knife,” and those notated “w” (“waving”), which were made “by a smart motion of the elbow and wrist, [when] the hand is flung upwards into a verticle position.”⁵⁷ If we compare the number of gentle gestures (“n”) to energetic ones (“st”, “sp”, “w”) in the three main texts annotated by Austin we find an increasing use of the latter: in the *Elegy* the two performance styles are in near equilibrium, eleven gentle and thirteen energetic gestures are notated; in the ‘Brutus speech’ there are ten gentle and twenty-three energetic notations; and in *Night Thoughts* there are seven gentle and twenty-six energetic notations. This suggests that Austin was training his students not only to deal with ever more complex texts and ever more frequent gestures, but also more generally to perform with increasing energy (“vehemence”) and intensity of feeling (“passion”).

Elsewhere in *Chironomia* Austin writes explicitly of “the absurdity of using gesture without feeling,” noting that without emotion “the performances must be miserable acting.”⁵⁸ To prove his point he quotes Jean-François Marmontel’s entry on “Geste” from the *Encyclopédie*:

55 See also *Ibid.*, 379.

56 *Ibid.*, 336-337. For the extended foot position see *Ibid.*, 301. See also “Holding” and “The index,” *Ibid.*, 337.

57 *Ibid.*, 342-344.

58 *Ibid.*, 318n.7.

The actor who feels nothing, and who sees the gestures of others, thinks that he can equal them at least by movements of the arms, by steps forward, and by coldly drawing back; these idle movements, always gauche in the theatre, chill the action and make the actor insufferable. Never are the movements of these tiresome automatons animated by the soul, which is entombed in a deep lethargy: routine and memory are the nuts and bolts of the moving, talking machine.⁵⁹

It should therefore be clear that no matter how mechanical his rules for learning gestures may seem, Austin never intended their *performance* to be mechanical, but rather “animated by the soul,” and full of feeling. Thus, for Austin, what Scott might call thespian fire was essential to a successful performance; and here is where *Chironomia* and Barnett seem at disagreement. The latter, in describing his working method for a 1972 production of Rameau’s *Pygmalion*, gave a summary of “the general features of Baroque acting” that included, among others, the following ‘bullet points’: Baroque acting “was rather formal and often symbolic,” and in it, “it was considered more important that the actor consciously know the appropriate gesture and posture than that he himself should feel the passions strongly.”⁶⁰ To be fair, Barnett noted that, as far as the latter was concerned, “there was controversy on the point.” It is, however, clear on which side of the controversy Austin found himself: gesture without feeling produced “miserable acting.” Therefore, any lack of fire in the ‘Barnett system’ cannot rightfully be attributed to *Chironomia*.

CONCLUSION

Chironomia deserves to be taken seriously as a source for historical acting techniques. It transmits precious glimpses of the theatrical *actio* associated with the stages of late eighteenth-century London and Dublin. Though not himself a professional actor, Austin witnessed performances of the greatest players and opera

59 Ibid., 381n.7. In the original, Diderot & d’Alembert 1751-1772, VII, 652: “L’acteur qui ne sent point & qui voit des gestes dans les autres, croit les égaux au-moins par des mouvemens de bras, par des marches en avant & par des froids reculemens en-arrière ; par ces tours oisifs enfin toujours gauches au théâtre, qui refroidissent l’action & rendent l’acteur insupportable. Jamais dans ces automates fatigans l’ame ne fait agir les mouvemens ; elle reste ensevelie dans un assoupissement profond : la routine & la mémoire sont les chevilles ouvrières de la machine qui agit & qui parle.”

60 Barnett 1973, 10.



singers of his day, observed their gestures with a practiced preceptor's eye, and sometimes even notated them whilst still in the theater.

As to the style of his annotations: the sometimes seemingly exaggerated gestures that he applied to his exemplary texts can, at least in part, be justified by their didactic purpose, and may, by Austin's own admission, be varied and moderated as the performer sees fit. Such experimentation on the part of the student would undoubtedly be useful, and would include the search for the muscle tension appropriate to the requisite affect: for gesture without feeling, Austin makes clear, must result in "miserable acting." Thus, no performance of Austin's gestures should ever lack fire. The enflamed actor must express his passions through the notated gestures, or become a merely cold and tiresome "moving, talking machine." As Joseph Roach noted of historical acting techniques in general: "[a]n oratorical gesture, a prescribed pattern of action, serves as a pre-existing mold [sic] into which ... molten passion can be poured."⁶¹ Such an approach is supported by the review *Chironomia* received in 1808 in *The British Critic*, which, in more generally praising Austin's precepts, could not resist remarking that

The rules which he [Austin] has laid down, if duly and attentively observed, would in many instances wage successful war against absurd and vicious gesticulation, and would substitute grace for awkwardness, and elegance for deformity. But much is yet to be left to the genius and abilities of the pupil. He may perhaps very safely adopt the whole of Mr. Austin's elementary principles, but he must consider them only as principles; he must go on to greater and nobler things. If he would attain to the highest pitch of an orator's glory, he must leave at a distance those mechanical rules, which although to a certain point explicit and even necessary, will not accompany him into his more sublime and elevated sphere—What rules of artificial measurement can take the altitude of a thought, or note the angle of incidence of an eye-glance? What symbol, however ingenious, can pourtray [sic] the ardent look which darts into the recess of the soul—the impassioned gesture which knows not the trammels of art—the untaught and unteachable elegance, the indescribable expression, the *abnormis gratia*, which scorns didactic precept, and triumphs over cold definition?⁶²

Given *Chironomia*'s endorsement of theatrical fire, one can only imagine that with this the Rev. Austin himself would have had to agree.

⁶¹ Roach 1985, 55.

⁶² *British Critic* 1808, 605.

