Parliamentary Emotions: Edmund Burke's Experiment against a Monstrous Imperial System

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Abstract
This article looks at Edmund Burke's rhetoric of pathos and spectacular performance at the trial of the first Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings (1788-95). It considers how the acting style and the roles interpreted by contemporary celebrated performers – specifically, David Garrick and Sarah Siddons – had a considerable impact on Burke's speeches and exaggerated theatricality. Focusing on the "Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment", I argue that, within an already theatricalized matrix of public interest, Burke largely based his prosecution on emotions rather than on legal proofs.

Keywords: Edmund Burke, Oratory, Theatre, Emotions, Warren Hastings, David Garrick, Sarah Siddons.

1. Introduction

One of the most significant and controversial figures who embody the inventing and regulating tendencies of the eighteenth-century episteme is the politician and philosopher Edmund Burke (1729/30-97). The trial of Warren Hastings (1732-1818), Burke's "most Herculean and purgatorial labour" (Lock 2006: vol. 2, p. 177), may be regarded as a remarkable example of the orator's pursuit of imperial justice, as well as one of the most spectacular venues for experimentation in late eighteenth-century British culture. While the essential structure of Burke's prosecution was "derived from the oldest customs of the House of Commons" (Bullard 2011: 129), his tactics were in fact unconventional. Sacrificing accuracy for the sake of sensationalism, Burke did not conform to the practices of contemporary legal discourse but adopted, instead, a prosecutorial strategy more appropriate to the age of Cicero and Quintilian than to eighteenth-century England.

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The first Governor-General of Bengal between 1772 and 1785, Hastings was impeached before the House of Lords on twenty "Articles of Impeachment" which included, among other things, charges of murder, extortion and arbitrary power. The trial dragged on from 13 February 1788 until 23 April 1795, when Hastings was acquitted of all the charges, in spite of the vehemence and oratorical brilliance of Burke, who was the leading prosecutor. Starting with P.J. Marshall's seminal monograph (Marshall 1965), the proceedings against the Governor-General have attracted the attention of many scholars from a variety of backgrounds. Imperial historians have explored the political context of the trial, as well as eighteenth-century perceptions of empire (Bourke 2015; Dirks 2006; Pitts 2005: 59-85; Whelan 1996); cultural historians and literary critics have highlighted the ambivalences and anxieties intertwined with early colonial rule (Clark 2004; Suleri 1992). In recent years, scholarly publications have focused, in particular, on the sensationalism and theatricality that permeated the event (Ahmed 2002; Bolton 2005; O'Quinn 2005: 164-257; Peters 2006; Samet 2001). Significantly, Glynis Ridley has maintained that "the opening of the trial on 13 February 1788 was *the* social event of the season, and admission to the public seating was harder to obtain than any ticket for a West End play" (Ridley 2013: 177; italics original).

The trial took place in Westminster Hall, a venerable edifice for its symbolic resonances and connections with "the system", since it had been the setting of some of the most celebrated events of English history, including the trials of Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) and Charles I (1600-49). Yet, the charges against Hastings were made in rather unorthodox terms. Indeed, although a trial, particularly against a colonial Governor, required a substantial amount of legal proof, Burke, instead, largely based his prosecution on emotions, or – to put it in the words of David Musselwhite – "on universal sentiment and moral outrage" (Musselwhite 1986: 90). Commentators have repeatedly highlighted that, within the spectacular context of the impeachment, Burke's rhetoric often seemed fitter for the stage than for a grave parliamentary debate questioning the morality of the Empire, but aspects of the Anglo-Irish orator's bold experimentation in his orations against Hastings remain unexplored.

In what follows, I will first comment briefly on the melodramatic atmosphere in the courtroom and will then look at one of the most famous performers of the period, David Garrick (1717-79), whose naturalistic acting style reaped unprecedented success on the London stage from 1741 until 1776. It is against this theatrical background that I shall offer an analysis of Burke's performance of his orations. Specifically, I shall dwell on a section of one of the most spectacular and celebrated speeches delivered through the long years of the impeachment, namely, the "Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment". Like contemporary actors, Burke not only engaged in a rhetoric of pathos by means of an affecting verbal language, but he also utilized his body as a vehicle for passions[1].

2. A Theatrical Spectacle

> Her majesty, with the four elder princesses, sat in the centre of the duke of Newcastle's box. The queen was waited on by the duchess of Ancaster, lady Holderness, lord Aylesbury &c. She was drest plain without diamonds, and coming without state, the usual etiquette was dispensed with, and she suffered the ladies above mentioned, with the young daughters of lady Lincoln, to sit on the same seat with her. (*Annual Register* 1788: vol. XXX, p. 198)

Published in the columns of the *Annual Register* for 1788, this event does not refer to a court visit to the theatre or the opera. In fact, the correspondent is describing an outing to a trial – the trial of Warren Hastings. Between December 1787 and February 1788 Westminster Hall, the scene of this aristocratic entertainment, had been transformed into a huge auditorium with wooden stands. Just as Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres could accommodate upwards of 3,000 people by the 1790s, so was Westminster Hall made capable of holding about 2,000 spectators. Even though, unlike contemporary British playhouses, the spectacle of Hastings's impeachment was not socially inclusive – admission to the courtroom was restricted to the *crème*

[1] Classical orators and rhetoricians – Cicero and Quintilian, in particular – attached much importance to the body as a medium to convey the speaker's emotions. For an in-depth analysis of the influence of ancient rhetorical theory on Burke, see Rolli 2019: 69-84.

de la crème of British society and foreign representatives in Britain – the fashionable audience who entered the doors of Westminster Hall treated the trial as an evening at the theatre.

The juxtaposition between a contemporary satirical print depicting the chaos of buying tickets at the pit door of Drury Lane and the letter of a gentleman attending the impeachment of the Governor-General will prove how borders between politics and theatre often blurred. In *The Pit Door. La Porte du Parterre* (9 November 1784, BMC 1935,0522.1.41), men respectably dressed fight their way in, while a fainting woman in the crowd – she is in an erect position owing to the inordinate number of people assembling in front of the entrance – is being revived with smelling-salts. In the fight to gain entry to the theatre, some items of clothing are lost: two bonnets – the ribbons partly torn off; two lady's shoes, one green and one red, and the broken fragments of a shoe-buckle are visible in the foreground. If we read the trial of Warren Hastings in terms of a theatrical performance, it is not surprising that the future Lord Minto and Governor-General of Bengal, Sir Gilbert Elliot (1751-1814), wrote to his wife:

> It is not yet seven o'clock in the morning, and I expect Mrs. Morris to call every moment on her way to Westminster Hall, where I am to accompany her, by way of *saving some of her bones at the door getting in. She will have to mob it at the door till nine, when the doors open, and then there will be a rush as there is at the pit of the playhouse when Garrick plays King Lear.* […] Since writing the above I have been to the Hall. We stood an hour and a half in the street in the mob, and at last *the press was so terrible*, that I think it possible I may have saved, if not her [Mrs. Morris's] life, at least a limb or two. I could not, however, save her *cap, which perished in the attempt. Shoes were, however, the principal and most general loss. Several ladies went in barefoot; others, after losing their own, got the stray shoes of other people, and went in with one red and one yellow shoe.* (Elliot 1874: vol. 1,pp. 205-6; italics added)

This description refers to the thirty-second day of the trial (3 June 1788), when the playwright, manager of Drury Lane Theatre, and MP Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), delivered one of his most acclaimed speeches against Hastings[2]. A brilliant orator and himself an actor, Sheridan was already widely known in June 1788, and spectators flocked

[2] On Sheridan's June 1788 speech, see Lock 2006: vol. 2, pp. 188-89 and Taylor 2012: 80-8.

to see him. Sir Gilbert's vibrant account is fraught with details that are strikingly similar to the scene depicted in the aforementioned cartoon. In both cases, Londoners assembled and squeezed to get in, with some being injured or fainting in the "terrible" press of the crowd. In both, fashionable clothes – especially hats and shoes – were lost, damaged, and even destroyed, as Londoners surged forward to gain admission to Drury Lane Theatre and Westminster Hall.

Once inside the hall, the popular members of the British and foreign elite who attended the trial were not attentive and silent. On the contrary, spectators gossiped with their friends, as if they were at a playhouse. As Jeffrey N. Cox has reminded us, while we are used to a "solemn theatrical experience" in a quiet and dark space, at the time audiences "would have gone to large, noisy, constantly illuminated spaces", where they spent time in social conversations, laughed, rose to greet an acquaintance, yawned and looked around through opera glasses (Cox 1999:405). Significant evidence of this appears in the diary of the then Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, the novelist Frances Burney (1752-1840). The pages of her diary capture perfectly the social rituals of a distracted, vociferous audience who saw the impeachment of Hastings as a theatrical event. It is from this perspective that we should read, for instance, the conversation between Burney herself and a gentleman at the trial:

> "Well ma'am, what say you to all this? How have you been entertained?" cried a voice at my side; and I saw Mr. Crutchley, who came round to speak to me. "Entertained?" cried I, "indeed, not at all; it is quite too serious and too horrible for entertainment: you ask after my amusement as if I were at an opera or a comedy". (Burney 1842: vol. 4, p. 96)

Before turning, then, to the magic of Burke's eloquence and to the profound impact it had on the audience, it may be useful to add some brief remarks on the acting style of one of most celebrated theatre stars of the time, David Garrick, who – I want to argue – served as a model for Burke's performance at the trial.

2.1. Garrick and Burke

At the end of November 1790, in a letter addressed to the author of the monumental *Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (1790), Edmond Malone (1741-1812), Burke observed:

> An History of the Stage is no trivial thing to those who wish to study Human nature in all Shapes and positions. It is of all things the most instructive, to see, not only the reflection of manners and Characters at several periods, but the modes of making this reflection, and the manner of adapting it, at those periods, to the Taste and disposition of mankind. The Stage indeed may be considered as the Republick of active Literature; and its History as the History of that State. The great events of political History when not combined with the same helps towards the Study of the manners and Characters of men, must be a study of an inferiour nature. (Burke 1967: vol. 6, p. 181)

As this passage suggests, according to Burke, the stage provided ideas which helped the political statesman to understand political affairs. In other words, the "History of the Stage" was a useful means of understanding human nature and motivation. Burke's conception of politics as a theatrical as well as a dramatic arena is, indeed, crucial to illuminate his bold experimentation against the Governor-General.

In their perceptive study of Burke and the theatre, Paul Hindson and Tim Gray have shown how in Burke's dramatic theory of politics the stage was "a potentially powerful medium through which to convey the primacy of the prevailing ethical code. Whether for good or for evil, the stage had an ethical dimension" (Hindson and Gray 1988: 6-7)[3].This observation carries two important implications. The first is that the stage was "a mirror of the ethics of contemporary society" (p. 7). The second, and more important for our discussion here, is that contemporary professional actors were regarded as "moral instructors" to their audiences (p. 58).

In this respect, the distinguished actor David Garrick had emphasized the importance of representing human nature in a morally elevated fashion. As is well known, Garrick was highly esteemed by Burke, who not only called him "my ever dear friend", "the first of actors, because he was the most acute observer of Nature I ever knew" (Burke 1991: vol. 9.I, p. 73), but even suggested that Garrick should have a monument dedicated to him in Westminster Abbey[4]. Besides extolling the moral value of Garrick's work, Burke

[3] For a discussion of the importance that Burke attributed to the stage as a powerful instrument for communicating ethical messages, see also Guerra 2008: 195-99.

[4] Much valuable information concerning Burke's relation with Garrick may be found in Bryant 1939: 136-53.

also greatly admired the former's natural acting style, his lightness and liveliness, "which departed from the stately and cadenced acting that had characterized tragedy since the late seventeenth century" (McGillivray 2017: 5). It is, indeed, important to stress that Garrick's natural manner of acting elicited from his audiences unprecedented forms of sympathetic identification with the suffering character[5]. As I demonstrate in what follows, Burke's spectacular performances at the trial – most notably, on the occasion of the so-called "Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment" – were deeply influenced by Garrick's capacity to generate an affective bond between character and audience.

A significant example of how audience members were affected by the revolutionary acting style introduced by Garrick in the mid-eighteenth century appears in the *London Journal* by the diarist and biographer of Samuel Johnson, James Boswell (1740-95). In his commentary on Garrick's embodiment of Lear's suffering, Boswell noted: "I was fully moved, and shed abundance of tears"[6]. Tellingly, Boswell's tears are the tangible signs of the ability of the tragic actor to work upon the bodies of his spectators. On the other hand, as Jean Marsden has pointed out, "not only did audiences respond to Garrick's Lear, they came *prepared* to respond appropriately" – specifically, through highly visible tears (Marsden 2008: 35; italics original). This was also the case with the most acclaimed tragic actress of the time, Sarah Siddons (1755-1831). In a memorable passage from the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke himself would recall "the tears that Garrick formerly, or that Siddons not long since, have extorted from me" (Burke 1988: vol. 8, p. 132).

Although sobbing, tears, fainting fits and even hysteria had much to do with the eighteenth-century omnipresent obsession with sympathy and sensibility[7], the talent of the actor was nonetheless crucial to move the audience. Without the necessary identification, sympathy cannot be generated. Just as accounts of the emotions

[5] On Garrick's revolution in acting, see, in particular, Benedetti 2001.

[6] I take this quotation from Marsden 2008: 35.

[7] Among the many publications looking at sensibility in the eighteenth century, see Goring 2005 and DeMaria 2018: 188-92. For a discussion of sympathy in the acting of the period, see Woods 1984.

stirred by Garrick's moving performance of Lear are ubiquitous[8], similarly, Burke's theatrical description of the horrors perpetrated at Rangpur caused a sensation at the time and was commented on in the contemporary press, as well as in private journals and correspondence. By mediating the sufferings of the Indians through his own person, the orator succeeded in convulsing the audience, as well as in providing his auditors with an example of emotional response to imperial atrocities.

3. Burke's Experiment: A Theatre of Cruelty

When the widely publicized impeachment before the House of Lords started in February 1788, it was to follow the rules of evidence prescribed by common law. Yet, as Daniel O'Quinn has highlighted, the charges were drafted "not with an eye on the legal protocols, but rather with a sense of their capacity to figure forth Hastings's inhumanity" (O'Quinn 2005: 168). This comes as no surprise, if we remember that Burke and the managers of the impeachment were not lawyers but politicians[9].

No less importantly, Burke believed the Lord Chancellor and the judges to be biased in favour of the Governor-General. According to Burke, the hostility of the Lords could only be overcome by inflaming the audience: "if we proceed under the publick Eye" – he explained to Henry Dundas (1742–1811), one of the politicians who voted for the impeachment of Hastings, on 1 November 1787 – "I have no more doubt than I entertain of my existence, that all the ability, influence and power that can accompany a decided partiality in that Tribunal can [not] save our criminal from a condemnation followed by some ostensible measure of Justice" (Burke 1965: vol. 5, p. 357). From this perspective, attracting the continuous attention of the audience at large was crucial to the success of the impeachment. Were the charges against Hastings rendered into technical, legal language (that is, without a spectacular, highly emotional atmosphere), they would lose most of their appeal to the public.

During the first six months of 1788, Burke and his colleagues managed to put up what Tillman W. Nechtman has called a "staged"

[8] See Marsden 2008: 34-5.
[9] Burke did study law at Middle Temple, but never became a practising lawyer.

production, "carefully crafted to include dramatic gestures, well-timed fainting spells, feigned illnesses, and theatrical histrionics" (Nechtman 2010: 104). In this spectacular context, Burke's "Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment" (15, 16, 18, 19 February 1788) and, in particular, the account of the Rangpur atrocities (18 February 1788) – the most sensational part of the whole speech – constitutes a clear example of a "rhetoric more appealing to the public audience than to an adjudicating body" (Suleri 1992: 54).

In January 1783 John Paterson (d. 1809), a servant of the East India Company, had been commissioned to inquire into an outbreak of rebellion of farmers at Rangpur (a district in northern Bengal). Burke obtained a copy of the Company's records including Paterson's reports, which he copiously annotated[10]. In particular, he directed his attention to the shocking account of atrocities allegedly committed by revenue collectors during the administration of Devi Singh (d. 1805). Even though these reports where "somewhat tendentious documents"[11] – further inquiries proved that most allegations were unsubstantiated – Burke was determined to make full use of them. As he wrote to Hastings's bitter enemy, Philip Francis (1740-1818):

> Oh! What an affair – I am clear that *I must dilate upon that;* for *it has stuff in it, that will, if any thing, work upon the popular Sense*. But *how to do this without making a monstrous and disproporsion'd member*; I know not. At any Rate it must be done, and done early. We cannot risque the postponing it. *It goes full to the Bribery and pecuniary corruption* in his Sale of these provinces to Devy [*sic*] thro' Gunga Govind Sing. (Burke 1965: vol. 5, p. 372; italics added)

Penned a month before the beginning of the trial (*circa* 3 January 1788), this epistle is of particular interest for at least two reasons. To begin with, the orator anticipated the effect that Paterson's lurid and detailed descriptions would have "upon the popular Sense". Hence, the importance of dilating upon the episode. At the same time, though, the risk of "making a monstrous and disproporsion'd

[10] The copy of Paterson's reports heavily annotated by Burke is in the British Library (Add. MS 24,268).

[11] This comment is by P.J. Marshall and I take it from his commentary to Burke's "Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment". See Burke 1991: vol. 6, p. 413, n. 1.

member" out of it was considerable. Burke must have feared that the "remarkable prodigality of imagination" (Bryant 1961: 292), to which he owed much of his reputation, may overwhelm him. As we will see below, Burke's remarks were somewhat prophetic. The second reason why Burke's letter to Francis is noteworthy concerns Burke's personal integrity. The expression "it goes full to the Bribery and pecuniary corruption" bears witness to Burke's "unshakeable self-righteousness" (Lock 2006: vol. 2, p. 159) and firm belief in guilt by notoriety. A number of scholars, including Marshall and Lock, have contended that the Rangpur "affair" bore no relation to the charges. Lock has clearly explained that "even if all the allegations Paterson reported were true, Hastings neither committed nor authorized them, nor could he reasonably be held responsible for them" (p. 159)[12].

And yet, Burke's Rangpur speech was a huge success. In order to manipulate the feelings of his spectators and to arouse strong emotions in his audience, the orator made use of devices and tropes derived from contemporary theatrical practices. In what follows, I would like to concentrate on a specific aspect of Burke's rhetoric that has not yet been fully examined in the light of contemporary theatre: that is the relationship between parents and children.

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759), which Burke reviewed favourably for the 1759 issue of the *Annual Register*, Adam Smith (1723-90) commented on spectatorship and the importance of identification: "the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other" (Smith [1759] 2002: 26). As we have seen with Garrick's acting style, identification is crucial to generate sympathy. Notably, in his 1757 masterpiece, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke himself described sympathy as "a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected" (Burke [1757] 1958: 44)[13]. Eighteenth-century theatregoers were indeed accustomed to identifying the figures they saw on the stage with their own experience

[12] See also Marshall, 1965: 83-4.

[13] The bibliography on Burke's discussion of sympathy and sympathetic communication is extensive. On the role of sympathy in Burke's speeches at the trial of Hastings, see, in particular, Rudd, 2011: 26-55 and O'Neill, 2016: 107-10.

and circumstances. For instance, the audience's sympathetic identification with King Lear was not due to the protagonist's loss of a crown – a passion they could hardly identify with – but rather "to his position as wronged father": "'thankless children' were an all too common experience" (Marsden 2008: 35-6).

Similarly, in his impassioned speech on the tortures perpetrated at Rangpur, Burke paid particular heed to the torments inflicted on "innocent children" "in the presence of their parents". The repetition of words referring to the semantic field of kinship ("families", "children", "parents", "father and son", "father", "son", "son", parent") adds to the pathos of the scene:

> There are people who can bear their own torture who cannot bear the sufferings of their *families*. The *innocent children* were brought out and scourged *before the faces of their parents*; young persons were cruelly scourged, both male and female, *in the presence of their parents*. This was not all. They bound the *father and son* face to face, arm to arm, body to body; and in that situation they scourged and whipped them, in order with a refinement of cruelty that every blow that escaped the *father* should fall upon the *son*, that every stroke that escaped the *son* should strike upon the *parent*, so that where they did not lacerate and tear the sense, *they should wound the sensibilities and sympathies of nature*. (Burke 1991: vol. 6, p. 420; italics added)

Although the Indian victims described by Burke are very different from the audience sitting in Westminster Hall – the former were farmers, the latter, instead, members of the British and foreign elites – mothers and fathers in London had no difficulty in identifying themselves with Indian parents. In this sense, Burke's trenchant comment on the perpetrators' cruelty ("they should wound the sensibilities and sympathies of nature") does not only refer to Indian farmers, but may also be extended to the English spectators bringing home the suffering of the victims[14].

The tortures inflicted on fathers and sons were complemented by a catalogue of horrors perpetrated against daughters and mothers:

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[14] Frans De Bruyn has notably stressed how in his writings and speeches on India, Burke invokes literary paradigms – particularly, gothic sensationalism – "in an attempt to approximate events remote from his audience's understandings more closely to their immediate experience" (De Bruyn 1987: 434).

Virgins whose *fathers* kept them from the sight of the sun, were dragged into the public Court, that Court which was the natural refuge against all wrong, against all oppression, and all iniquity. There in the presence of the day, in the public Court, vainly invoking its justice, […] those *virgins* were *cruelly violated* by the basest and wickedest of mankind. It did not end there. The *wives* of the people of the country only differed in this; that they lost their honour in the bottom of the most cruel dungeons, where all their *torments* were a little buried from the view of mankind. They were not always left there […]. But they were *dragged out, naked and exposed to public view, and scourged* before all the people. […] But it did not end there. In order that nature might be violated in all those circumstances where the sympathies of nature are awakened, *where the remembrances of our infancies and all our tender remembrances are combined*, *they put the nipples of the women into the sharp edges of split bamboos and tore them from their bodies.* Grown from ferocity to ferocity, from cruelty to cruelty, *they applied burning torches and cruel slow fire* (My Lords, I am ashamed to go further). (pp. 420-21; italics added)

Burke's "spectacle of pain" (Clark 2004: 103) has drawn interpretations from literary critics as a remarkable example of the orator's sexualized and gendered rhetoric on India (Suleri 1992: 60-1; Franklin 1998: 53-6; Dirks 2006: 111-2). In my reading of this passage, I am rather interested in associating Burke's distressed Indian women with the female characters in contemporary tragedy. What I want to argue is that Burke's sensational representation of Indian daughters and mothers owed much to the eighteenth-century theatre and, especially, to the cultural power of Siddons's paradigm.

Laura Brown has shown how the early eighteenth-century rise of the "She-tragedy" subgenre marked, among other things, "an intense affective engagement with female suffering; a corollary and explicit interest in the female body and female sexuality" (Brown 1993: 65-6)[15]. Similarly, in the above passage, Burke's detailed account of sexual tortures (rape, scourging, mutilation and even slow burning of women's bodies) is so affective that – according to Michael J. Franklin – "even divorced from the theatricality of their original Westminster Hall presentation, these passages still have the power to disturb and dismay" (Franklin 1998: 54).

[15] For a survey of the development of English tragedy and of a new female prototype – passive, defenseless, and impotent – see Brown 1982.

In parallel with a keen interest in female sexuality, women started to appear more prominently as wives and mothers in eighteenth-century tragedy. Thus, it is not surprising that Burke chose to dwell on the tortures inflicted on married and unmarried women. From this perspective, it is also worth stressing that he resorts to evoking women's breasts and their attendant associations with procreation and motherhood: "where the remembrances of our infancies and all our tender remembrances are combined". In the 1780s, while Burke launched the impeachment against Hastings, Sarah Siddons achieved great fame in roles representing distressed wives and mothers, such as Jane Shore in Nicholas Rowe's *Jane Shore* and Isabella in Thomas Southerne's *Isabella, or The Fatal Marriage*. She even played Lady Macbeth not as an "unsexed" harpy but, as her comments to the tragedy indicate, as a woman "most captivating to the other sex, – fair, feminine, nay perhaps even fragile" (Campbell 1834: vol. 2,p. 11)[16]. As David Francis Taylor has highlighted, "Siddons's success not only inscribed a theatre of extreme sensibility and domestic pathos, but also foregrounded the politics of wife – and motherhood" (Taylor 2012: 103-4).

Interestingly enough, Sarah Siddons was sitting in Westminster Hall when Burke delivered the speech on the Rangpur horrors. She is said to have been so moved by Burke's gory details that she cried unceasingly, while Sheridan's wife, the celebrated soprano Elizabeth Ann Linley (1754-92), had to be carried out in a faint. Newspaper reports on the Rangpur Speech unanimously praised the orator's memorable performance. "It is impossible for us to give the public any idea of the influence of his description", the *London Chronicle* claimed. According to the reporter:

> The cruelties practiced on helpless people, so shocking to humanity, to modesty, and to every tender and manly feeling, convulsed and agitated the whole Assembly. The ladies were, throughout the whole Hall, in agony of grief, and the tear of compassion stood in the eye of the most veteran soldier present. (*London Chronicle*, 16-19 February 1788)

[16] Chelsea Phillips has commented on Siddons's performances of Lady Macbeth while in the late stages of pregnancy (Phillips 2013). A discussion of Siddons's gravid body on stage and motherhood can also be found in Buchanan 2007: 429-34 and West 1999.

The strong, physical effects that Burke's emotional delivery produced on the audience are extremely similar to the overpowering impression that "Sarah the Divine" – to use Claudia Corti's phrase (Corti 2010: 235) – made on her spectators when she appeared in the title role of *Jane Shore*. "I well remember (how is it possible I should ever forget?)" – her biographer, the playwright James Boaden (1762-1839), wrote in his *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons* (1827) –

> the *sobs*, the *shrieks*, among the tenderer part of her audiences; or those *tears*, which manhood, at first, struggled to repress, but at length grew proud of indulging. We then, indeed, knew all the LUXURY of grief; but the nerves of so many a gentle being gave way before the intensity of such appeals; and fainting fits long and frequently alarmed the decorum of the house[17]. (Boaden 1827: vol. 1, p. 327; emphasis original)

After delivering his impassioned denunciation of physical abuses inflicted in the district of Rangpur, Burke was seized by a sudden pain in his side: "My Lords," – he declared emphatically – "I am sorry to break the attention of your Lordships in such a way. It is a subject that agitates me. It is long, difficult, and arduous" (Burke 1991: vol. 6, p. 426). Just like a professional actor in a sentimental drama, Burke "collapsed into the arms of his colleagues, apparently overcome by his own affective investment in the peasants' condition" (Ahmed 2002: 44). Probably, the orator's illness was the result of "his drinking cold water and eating oranges" to soothe his throat, as the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* wrote (19 February 1788). However, within the theatrical context of the Hastings impeachment, Burke's sickness may be read as an extreme enactment of sympathy, the tangible sign of an overloaded sensibility struggling to detach itself from the horrific scene being portrayed[18]. More importantly, in providing an exaggerated performance of how the sentimental character reacts to imperial monstrosities, Burke offered his audiences a model of how they should act. Although the orator tried to resume his speech, he was in no state to continue and the session had to be adjourned.

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[17] Commenting on this passage, Christopher Reid has perceptively observed how "Boaden's account of this memorable performance could stand, almost without alteration, as a commentary on some of the most spectacular episodes in the impeachment of Warren Hastings" (Reid 1992: 16).

[18] On Burke's use of his body language in the Rangpur speech, see Rolli 2016: 55-7.

4. Conclusion

It has been observed that "a seven-year continuous run for a play is a sign of success – in a trial, it is a disaster" (Derochi and Ennis 2013:14). After the first few months of 1788, the novelty of the *cause célèbre* began to fade and the initial interest and galvanization of the public was replaced by a sense of increasing boredom. As Burke predicted, the loss of the audience's attention spelled the defeat of the prosecution of Hastings.

Refusing to accept that the trial was a process governed by canons of evidence, Burke engaged in a mode of discourse that can be described as histrionic *stricto sensu*. In particular, the "Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment" and, specifically, the Rangpur speech constitutes a remarkable example of exaggerated theatricality, "embellished by sensational material not relevant to any of the articles" (Marshall 1965: 78). As I have shown, Burke endeavoured to move his audiences by much the same means (an impassioned performance, sickness in the face of lurid tableaux and scenes of suffering) as those employed by Garrick and Siddons on the contemporary stage. It is not without a tinge of irony that, less than a year before the end of the impeachment, a reporter of the *Oracle and Public Advertiser* observed:

> Again Mr. Burke resumed his observations upon not only the matters of impeachment, but those by no means contained or referred to in the charges. We are so accustomed now to this desultory mode, that we attend not in the expectation of conviction – All the evidence has been produced that can be, but with the hope of instruction or amusement from digression (*Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 7 June 1794).

Although Burke's experiment to convict the Governor-General of Bengal by means of a rhetoric of pathos (and with little or no evidence) eventually failed, his orations against Hastings constitute a paradigmatic example of how, at the close of the eighteenth century, the language of feelings and emotions – heavily imbued with elements from the culture of sensibility and affective theatrical performances – figured prominently in parliamentary oratory as an experimental means to reconfigure the tone and terms of the ongoing political debate on the ethical foundations of the British imperial system.

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