

# Reading Aloud in Britain in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century: Theories and Beyond

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## *Abstract*

Thomas Sheridan, actor, theatre manager and elocutionist, had been dead for eleven years, when *The Reader or Reciter* was published, targeting those who had already followed Mr. Sheridan's instructions about elocution and reading, but who still found themselves 'deficient of that attractive power to engage the attention, and afford gratification to [themselves] and those who are [their] hearers'. The occasions for reading aloud evidently were still quite numerous if the anonymous author(s) of *The Reader* thought of publishing this Do-It-Yourself guide to shared reading. The article investigates the late eighteenth-century cultural milieu within which a booklet of this type was produced, mainly the elocution movement and its principal exponents, i.e. Sheridan himself and John Walker, and their theoretical production. Then a series of books are analysed, printed towards the end of the century in order to guide those people who wanted to practice reading aloud on the various occasions offered by genteel British society, in order to attain efficacious and pleasurable standards in their performances. The issue of the difference, if any, between communal reading and theatre is also taken into consideration.

*Keywords:* Britain, Eighteenth Century, Elocution, Reading, Thomas Sheridan

Mr. Hay is an auditor, for he is not able to read aloud.  
Elizabeth Montagu, 1741

## 1. *Introduction*

The words used by Mrs. Montagu when writing to her sister from Bullstrode in October 1741 show that reading aloud was a greatly appreciated skill in



eighteenth-century English society.<sup>1</sup> Far from being a naïve way of reproducing a written (printed) text orally, reading aloud appears to have been an accomplishment expected of members of the middle- and upper-classes. Even when most people were still illiterate, ‘Reading aloud helped to draw everyone into the ambit of the written word’ (Fox 2000, 37), and public places such as taverns, barber shops and, especially, coffee-houses offered the illiterate the opportunity to listen to somebody reading aloud the various printed materials available in these venues. Further occasions should also be added which gave the illiterate the chance of becoming acquainted with printed matter: church services, encounters with peddlers able to read ballads and newspapers, and schooling (both as education of the better-off, and as Sunday schools for the poor) at least since the seventeenth century (see Reay 1998, 36-70). The growth of the reading public, at least in the middle- and upper-classes, also meant a parallel growth of women readers, a fact that certainly encouraged writers to construe plots and narratives for this readership (see Barry 1995, 86). Among the factors which possibly bore upon the creation of printed narratives, but also poetry, the social occasions during which readings took place must be taken into account as well, given that family reading aloud was one of the most widespread forms of entertainment. Examples of this type are to be found both in personal documents (and the epigraph from Mrs. Montagu’s *Letters* bears witness to it), and in fiction. For example in Fanny Burney’s *Camilla* the chapter entitled ‘A Raffle’, after introducing an ‘elegant young man’ reading ‘Thomson’s Seasons’ by himself, but unable to curb his emotions, presents him while reading to the onlookers, who are deeply impressed, especially by the young man’s delivery:

even Indiana [one of the protagonists of the novel], though she listened not to the matter, was struck by the manner in which it was delivered, which so resembled dramatic recitation, that she thought herself at a play, and full of wonder, advanced straight before him, to look full in his face, and watch the motions of his right arm, with which he acted incessantly, while the left held his book. (Burney 1796, I, Book 2, Chap. V, 236-237)

Of particular relevance in this passage is Indiana’s interest in the reader’s elocution and gestures that – as the narrator notices – ‘so resembled dramatic recitation’. Reading together actually allows the bystanders to observe a ‘performer’ better than at the theatre, supplying them with ‘close-ups’ of the reciter, so to speak. Furthermore, Indiana’s imagination about watching a play introduces the problem of the relationship between reading a play

<sup>1</sup> The letter is not dated exactly, but it must have been written between 11 and 17 October 1741, respectively the days of the previous and following letters (Montagu 1809-1813, I, 301).

aloud and performing one (and the topic of the possible eighteenth-century dramatic schools).<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting piece of evidence, albeit later, comes from Jane Austen's *Emma*, chapter 4, when Emma and Harriet discuss Mr. Martin's character. Emma's question about Mr. Martin's reading is answered as follows by Harriet:

He reads the *Agricultural Reports* and some other books, that lay in one of the window seats – but he reads all *them* to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the *Elegant Extracts* – very entertaining. (Austen 1896, 22)

The relevance of this passage consists in its mention of a miscellaneous collection, the *Elegant Extracts* (compiled by Vicesimus Knox), which, printed first in the 1780s, was to become central to nineteenth-century education both in England and the US. It originated in the numerous anthologies of various genres printed throughout the second half of the eighteenth century: e.g. compilations of riddles and jestbooks (see Williams 2015),<sup>3</sup> but also stories for young people, the latter with an educational purpose.<sup>4</sup> The complete title of this anthology reads: *Elegant Extracts: Useful and Entertaining Passages in Prose Selected for the Improvement of Scholars at Classical and Other Schools in the Art of Speaking, in Reading, Thinking, Composing; and in the Conduct of Life*.<sup>5</sup> The title itself, therefore, clearly illustrates the purpose of the collection: its educational aim is first of all the 'Art of Speaking', followed immediately by 'Reading': in other words, the moral aims of the book – guaranteed by the selected passages – go hand in hand with training in (public) speaking and reading (aloud), which thus figure as the first tools in education. Before the end of the eighteenth century the elocutionists' movement (see section 2 below) seems to have succeeded, with a very general readership at least, in

<sup>2</sup> Because of the main focus of this article, only brief and cursory references are made to the authors of acting treatises such as Aaron Hill (1754) and John Hill (1750 and 1755). In a broader perspective, though, they should be considered together with the elocutionists when investigating the growing role of theories of passions and sensibility in eighteenth-century British culture (on these issues see Roach 1983; see also Goring 2005, esp. 127-135 for Aaron Hill, and 136-141 for John Hill). For brevity I refer the reader to an article by Lily Campbell (1917), which – although written a century ago – still sums up very well the situation of the London dramatic arts in the eighteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> For example *Yorick's Jest* (1770), *Sir John Fielding's Jest: New Fun for the Parlour and Kitchen* (1781), and *Fun for the Parlour: Or, All Merry Above Stairs* (1771).

<sup>4</sup> See Kilner 1780? and 1795?.

<sup>5</sup> The first edition in ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online) dates from 1784 (also the *ESTC – English Short Title Catalogue* – does not list a previous edition). Five years later, a similar miscellany was published, containing passages of poetry (Knox 1789). All eighteenth-century works cited here are quoted from ECCO.

stressing the necessity for the middle- and upper-classes to learn to speak their language well. Such compilations were indeed read aloud at school (but also in the family) in order to practice correct elocution, an issue much stressed by those who fought for decades to see their principles accepted.

Mr. Hay, though, according to Mrs. Montagu, had not practised enough, therefore his role in the Queen of Blues' house was limited to that of listener to somebody else's reading.

## 2. *Thomas Sheridan and the Elocutionary Movement*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following as the only definition of 'elocutionist': 'One who practises the art of elocution; a proficient in the art of elocution', while the fittest definition of 'elocution' for the present case is 'The art of public speaking so far as it regards delivery, pronunciation, tones, and gestures; manner or style of oral delivery' (def. 4). These definitions are clear and acceptable, but the former in particular does not historicise the term as connected principally to eighteenth-century rhetorics, lexicography, and theatre. In the eighteenth century, some people started thinking that English was not taught (and spoken) correctly, and tried to act in order to improve their countrymen's 'art of public speaking', which also implied – as the definition itself underlines – pronunciation and body language. Among the elocutionists Thomas Sheridan and John Walker were the most eminent ones.

### 2.1 *Thomas Sheridan*

Thomas Sheridan, who was to become the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan's father, was born in Dublin in 1719. He started early in his life to question the contemporary ways of teaching the English language to British natives, and to advance his own educational plans. In 1756 he published, both in Dublin and London, his most important book, according to Benzie (1994, 197), the long title of which best explains the author's intent:

*British Education: or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain. Being an Essay towards proving, that the Immorality, Ignorance, and false Taste, which so generally prevail, are the natural and necessary Consequences of the present defective System of Education. With an Attempt to shew, that a Revival of the Art of Speaking, and the Study of our own Language, might contribute, in great measure, to the Cure of those Evils. In three parts. I. Of the Use of these Studies to Religion, and Morality; as also, to the Support of the British Constitution. II. Their absolute Necessity in order to refine, ascertain, and fix the English Language. III. Their Use in the Cultivation of the Imitative Arts: shewing, that were the Study of Oratory made a necessary Branch of the Education of Youth; Poetry, Musick, Painting, and Sculpture, might arrive at as high a Pitch of Perfection in England, as ever they did in Athens or Rome.* (Sheridan 1756, title-page)

From this early work, indeed, all the following ones can be said to derive, from *An Oration, Pronounced before a Numerous Body of the Nobility and Gentry, Assembled at the Musick-hall in Fishamble-street, on Tuesday the 6th of this instant December* (1757), to *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762), from the *Lectures on the Art of Reading* (1775a and 1775b) to *A General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780). Actually, in *British Education* there are the foundations of Sheridan's ideas and plans, those for which he was also ridiculed by Samuel Foote in his play *The Orators* (premiered in the Haymarket in 1762; see Campbell 1917, 192-193), and by Dr Johnson (see Benzie 1994, 198). Sheridan was an advocate for a new, albeit rather idealistic and simplistic, method to solve British (and Irish) social problems by teaching the English language, which was to be grounded on the 'Art of Speaking'. The initial idea about all this occurred to him on a very special occasion, as he writes in his *Oration*:

That which chiefly gave my Mind this Turn, was a Conversation which I once had with Dr. *Swift* [Sheridan's godfather], soon after my Entrance into the College [Trinity, Dublin]: He asked me what they taught there? When I told him the Course of Reading I was put into, he asked me, Do they teach you English? No. Do they teach you how to speak? No. Then, said he, they teach you *Nothing*. (1757, 21-22)

It is clear from all his writings that by 'language' Sheridan mainly meant speech.<sup>6</sup> In the 'Preface' to his *Dictionary* he insists that one of the two causes of the poor state of English (the other being the excessive time devoted in schools and universities to learning Greek and Latin) is 'an utter inattention to the living language, as delivered to the ear by the organs of speech; from making the written, as presented to the eye by the pen, the sole object of instruction' (Sheridan 1780, A1v).

Sheridan's interest in the spoken word was also the major cause of his starting a career as an actor, albeit a minor one, especially when one thinks that he could not certainly compare with David Garrick, with whom – nevertheless – he shared the stage on some occasions (see Bacon 1964, 6 and 48-50).<sup>7</sup> Besides performing, he also tried to 'raise the standard of the Dublin theatre' (Thomson 2004; see also Brown 2016, 285-286). In the *Oration* he reveals that, being sure that '*Theory* alone would never bring me far on my Way; and that continual *Practice* must be added ... To obtain this, there was but one Way open, which was the Stage' (1757, 20-21). As well as acting, however, he also became involved in the management of Dublin's two theatres (in 1744; see Thomson 2004, and Brown 2016, 243-244), where he planned to open 'an oratorical academy', especially after Garrick's encouragement to do so

<sup>6</sup> 'Sheridan's emphasis was always upon the *spoken* word' (Goring 2005, 105).

<sup>7</sup> On Sheridan's career as an actor see Brunström 2011.

(Campbell 1917, 192). The project, like similar others in that century, failed in the end (even after a reiterated attempt in the late 1750s), but Sheridan continued training young actors, convinced that ‘the Theatre would become an admirable Assistant to the School of Oratory, by furnishing to the young Students constant good Models and Examples in all the different species of Eloquence’ (1757, 24).<sup>8</sup>

Sheridan’s tenets about the teaching of English (grammar, pronunciation, and correct elocution) are summed up in the ‘Preface’ to his *Dictionary* where he not only insists on the benefit of good elocution to the clergy, justice administrators and statesmen, but also to the people at large, and – particularly worth noting – with no gender divide.<sup>9</sup> When asking the reader some rhetorical questions about the usefulness of the ‘true art of oratory’ for the whole nation, he also wonders

Whether the first step necessary to the accomplishment of these points [the attempt at the creation of a standard language] be not that of opening a method, whereby all children of these realms, *whether male or female*, may be instructed from the first rudiments, in a grammatical knowledge of the English tongue, and the art of reading and speaking it with propriety and grace. (1780, B1r; italics mine)

This dictionary, therefore, is actually also a pronunciation dictionary, where particular graphic signs – though far from offering transcriptions according to the present International Phonetic Alphabet – are used to provide the reader with help in pronouncing words in the right way.<sup>10</sup> The author also declares

<sup>8</sup> Sheridan certainly knew the publications of acting theorists such as Aaron Hill and John Hill, but also of David Garrick himself to whom an *Essay on Acting* (Anonymous 1744) is attributed. Aaron Hill’s emphasis on the correct use of both voice and gesture (1754, 340), and John Hill’s insistence on the necessity of rules and study to guide and mould an actor’s natural gifts (1755, 5-6) do not differ much from Sheridan’s principles about efficacious reading. Similarly, Sheridan must have shared John Hill’s opinion concerning the use of the voice, in particular when the latter claims that ‘by force is not meant loudness, but energy’, and that another defect in delivery is monotony, i.e. ‘an eternal sameness of tone and pronunciation’ (Hill 1755, 146).

<sup>9</sup> Sheridan had already shown his interest in women’s education in his *Lectures on the Art of Reading. First Part* (1775a), in which the ‘Discourse II’ explicitly laments that the issues concerning women’s education ‘have scarcely been considered’ (316). In spite of his attitude towards women, not so different from his contemporaries’ in the end (see when he writes that ‘Man is formed for public, as well as for private life, woman for private life only’, 322), Sheridan highlights the cultural drawbacks of the ‘fair sex’ because of the lack of a proper education even though it ‘has been amply proved [that] several ladies ... have distinguished themselves as eminently in their spheres when they have had equal advantages of culture’ (317).

<sup>10</sup> Of course all our modern discussions and theories about the acceptance of multiple varieties of English and on the negativeness of prescriptive grammars are alien to Sheridan’s thought. However he appears to be a forerunner of many approaches to language teaching, for example when he assumes that one’s way of speaking coincides with a social mark or

that he was educated in the correct pronunciation of English by Jonathan Swift himself, because ‘for several months [I] read to him three or four hours a day’ when the famous writer was accustomed to ‘correcting them’ if he heard ‘any mistakes committed by his friends’ (B1v).

So far nothing has been said about the ‘art of reading’ in itself, but it should not be difficult to understand that being able to read well goes hand in hand with being able to speak well (actually, in the passage about children’s education quoted above, reading and speaking are considered together). In 1762 Sheridan published *A Course of Lectures on Elocution*, in which he expounded his theories about delivery, including not only pronunciation and grammatical correctness, but also everything that might contribute to effectiveness, i.e. emphasis, tones, pauses, pitch, gesture (see Benzie 1994, 198-199), all the tools a reader/speaker has in order to convey passions beyond literal meanings.<sup>11</sup> Besides being concerned with public speaking (and reading) in general (the senate and the bar), Sheridan appears to be particularly interested in church speaking (and in its positive or negative effects on congregations). For example, he – although being a high-church Anglican – observes the efficacy of ‘our methodist preachers’ and ‘the power which words acquire, even the words of fools and madmen, when forcibly uttered by the living voice’ (1762, xiii). Nevertheless, his lectures, which attracted a large attendance when delivered publicly (see xv), deal with aspects of interest to various kinds of speaker. A good reader/speaker, according to Sheridan, needs ‘a refined understanding, and delicate sensibility’, all this ‘to produce effects by the dead letter, which can never be produced but by the living voice’ (xii). The author is rather pessimistic when he starts ‘Lecture I’ by saying: ‘That a general inability to read, or speak, with propriety and grace in public, runs thro’ the natives of the British dominions, is acknowledged’. Then he insists even more on this topic when, soon afterwards, he asserts that ‘good public reading, or speaking, is one of the rarest qualities to be found, in a country [i.e. Britain], where reading and speaking in public, are more generally used, than in any other in the world’ (1).

The Mr. Hay Mrs Montagu considers a poor reader must have been among those who were ‘taught to read in a different way, with different tones and cadences, from those which we use in speaking; and this artificial manner, is used instead of the natural one, in all recitals and repetitions at school, as well as in reading’ (4), especially if we see him as a member of the literate

stigma, while it were desirable ‘to put an end to [this] odious distinction’ (1780, A2v). Among the many interesting points of this dictionary there is a list of subscribers, which also includes ‘David Garrick, Esq.’ (who died in 1779, evidently during the preparation of the volume), and ‘Mrs. Montague’ (who died in 1800).

<sup>11</sup> On the role of passions in eighteenth-century culture (and in the theatre in particular), see Roach 1983.

circle of such a famous hostess. But Sheridan does not seem to think much of such people when observing that ‘reading ... by means of the press, is become almost universal among us’ and that ‘the most bookish men are generally remarkable for the worst delivery’, therefore unable to really communicate to others (8). After these harsh remarks about his countrymen’s inability to read aloud, Sheridan offers his definition of ‘a just delivery’:

A just delivery consists in a distinct articulation of words, pronounced in proper tones, suitably varied to the sense, and the emotions of the mind; with due observation of accent; of emphasis, in its several gradations; of rests or pauses of the voice, in proper places and well-measured degrees of time; and the whole accompanied with expressive looks, and significant gesture. (10)

These words sound like a description of a theatrical performance, thus revealing one of the problems attached to reading aloud, in particular when the text being read is a play or a work of fiction. Sheridan himself mentions ‘comedians, whose profession it is, to speak from memory, the sentiments of others’ (13), a profession implying a lot of practice, that same practice that the author judges absolutely necessary to readers. It is clear, from what has been exemplified so far, that Sheridan’s theatrical activity merges here with his more general educational intents, even though he seems quite aware of the dangers and bad habits derived from what ‘is commonly called Theatrical Declamation’ (54), i.e. mechanical imitation and blaring noise.<sup>12</sup>

This is not the place to deal in greater detail with Sheridan’s theories of elocution/reading aloud. Suffice it to observe, though, that in Lecture VI and Lecture VII he lays great emphasis on body language and also on inarticulate sounds, which he considers essential to communicate passions and emotions: ‘The muscles, nerves, the blood and animal spirits, all are at work to shew internal commotion’ (114). Furthermore, after reminding his reader of the power of David Garrick’s eyes when performing (116), Sheridan reproaches his countrymen, so to speak, because ‘of all nations in the world, the English seem to have the least use of this language of signs’ (118). In the end, he insists on the need for practice, and, in some way, of training oneself, given the lack of proper educational institutions, thus suggesting a ‘Do-It-Yourself’ approach to the problem:

But the use of tones and gesture, as marks of our emotions, not having been established amongst us, by any such general compact; at least there being but very few that have any settled significance; each individual, has a proportional latitude, to adopt such as he thinks proper, for his own use. (125)

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to see that the passages used to exemplify the role of emphasis are mainly drawn from drama: Shakespearean plays (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*), and Dryden’s *All for Love*.

Besides *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* – which, as discussed above, includes a lot of advice for reading aloud –, in 1775 Sheridan published two volumes specifically devoted to the ‘Art of Reading’, one for prose and one for poetry (1775a and 1775b). ‘Discourse II’, devoted to women’s education, has already been quoted;<sup>13</sup> nevertheless, it is important to notice that at the end Sheridan addresses women directly as the best artificers of politeness in social encounters:

In short it rests upon you ladies to bring about this reformation. Nor can you in so doing be thought to step out of your sphere as the most perfect and critical knowledge of English could never be charged on you as an affectation of learning or female pedantry. (1775a, 329)

This involvement of ladies in the process of their own education (and the indirect defence of the so called ‘Blue stockings’ of whom Mrs. Montagu was one of the major representatives) should be based, according to Sheridan, on the skills of reading and reading aloud, because these ‘elegant arts ... can contribute to the happiness of social life or the delight of social converse’ (326).<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 *A Short Note on John Walker*

John Walker was born in England in 1732 and died in 1807. His career in many ways resembles Sheridan’s in that he was an elocutionist, a lexicographer and an actor. He was also a teacher: even if he did not found an academy such as Sheridan would have liked to do, he started a school in 1769. Later he became a teacher of elocution and, like Sheridan, gave lectures in Edinburgh, Dublin and Oxford (see Beal 2004). His *Elements of Elocution* was published in 1781, while his influential *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* appeared in 1791. From these dates it is evident that Walker’s works were issued later than Sheridan’s. In the long run, Walker was more influential, albeit more rigid and mechanical, than his contemporary and predecessor, so much so that whereas Sheridan’s dictionary was quickly forgotten, Walker’s became *the* guide to English pronunciation and was reprinted up to the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Benzie, Walker ‘became the leader

<sup>13</sup> See n. 9. This Discourse and the three others in the volume are enriched with the reading marks Sheridan invented in order to show his readers how to pronounce the texts (especially, perhaps, as a reminder for those people who had attended one of his ‘Attic Nights’ when he read his lectures live; see Bacon 1964, 36-37; Benzie 1994, 203).

<sup>14</sup> It is clear that Sheridan’s educational plans and works only include the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy (both male and female); this because for him ‘the stabilization of the English language was to be achieved through the careful education of the elite, whose polite linguistic and social practice should then function as a template for all classes’ (Goring 2005, 104).

of the “Mechanical” school’ (1994, 199), since he gave rules for delivery and also for gestures and body language in order to express emotions, to a certain extent in the wake of John Bulwer’s *Chirologia; or, The Naturall Language of the Hand* (1644).<sup>15</sup>

In his *Elements of Elocution* Walker offers rules to help speakers and readers towards correct pronunciation and delivery such as, for example, ‘Rule VI: ‘Whatever member intervenes between the verb and the accusative case, is of the nature of a parenthesis, and must be separated from both by a short pause’ (1781, I, 81). To the same prescriptive attitude the following ‘Rule XI’ can also be appended: ‘Whatever words are put into the case absolute, commonly called the ablative absolute, must be separated from the rest by a short pause’ (95). Actually, all the elements discussed in the two volumes (punctuation and inflexion of the voice mainly in volume I; accent, emphasis, and gesture in volume II) are ruled by norms. With a very modern attitude, though, Walker recognises the cultural bases of gestures, when he writes that

The common feelings of nature, with the signs that express them, undergo a kind of modification, which is suitable *to the taste and genius of every nation*; and it is *this national taste* which must necessarily be the vehicle of every thing we convey agreeable to the public we belong to. (II, 262; italics mine)

Then, since ‘An awkward action, and such as is unsuitable to the words and passions, is the body out of tune, and gives the eye as much pain as a discord does the ear’ (264), Walker proceeds to advise prospective readers on how to behave and ‘how to do things with one’s body’. It is a very detailed paragraph deserving a long quote:

When we read to a few persons only in private, it may not be useless to observe, that we should accustom ourselves to read standing; that the book should be held in the left hand; that we should take our eyes as often as possible from the book, and direct them to those that hear us. The three or four last words at least of every paragraph ... should be pronounced with the eye pointed to one of the auditors. When any thing sublime, lofty, or heavenly is expressed, the eye and the right hand may be very properly elevated; and when any thing low, inferior, or grovelling is referred to, the eye and hand may be directed downwards; when any thing distant or extensive is mentioned, the hand may naturally describe the distance or extent; and when conscious virtue, or any heart-felt emotion, or tender sentiment occurs, we may as naturally clap the hand on the breast. (266-267)

This passage is followed by the minute description (prescription) of how to speak ‘extempore’, and, in the following part (‘The Passions’), by a careful, long

<sup>15</sup> On Bulwer’s work and the development of treatises dealing with the ‘art of acting’ see Roach 1983.

list of passions each of which is described, commented upon and accompanied by the appropriate body language. Furthermore, each passion is exemplified by dramatic passages, generally drawn from Shakespeare. Indeed, this part of Walker's text best resembles a handbook for drama students rather than a series of instructions for 'simple' readers; suffice it to see how Walker introduces 'MALICE':

Malice is an habitual malevolence long continued, and waiting occasion to exert itself on the hated object. This hateful disposition sets the jaws, or gnashes the teeth, sending blasting flashes from the eyes, stretches the mouth horizontally, clinches both fists, and bends the elbows in a straining manner to the body. The tone of voice and expression are much the same as in anger, but not so loud. (364)

A single passage is printed under 'Malice': Shylock's monologue from *The Merchant of Venice* ('How like a fawning publican he looks', 1.3, 36-47), and really we seem to be taken to an eighteenth-century performance of this Shakespeare play, possibly with Charles Macklin playing Shylock, after the actor's revolution in the interpretation of this character (1741).<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned above, the influence of Walker on the teaching of elocution turned out to be more long-lasting in comparison with Sheridan's. Nevertheless, the anonymous *The Reader or Reciter* mentions the latter as its inspirer, even eleven years after Sheridan's death.

### 3. *Booklets in Sheridan's Wake*

#### 3.1 *Reading Miscellanies*

While scholars are still working at indexing the multifarious and rich production of British eighteenth-century miscellanies,<sup>17</sup> this article will take into consideration just some of them, i.e. some which are particularly interesting to the present research in so far as they contain guides to reading aloud. Indeed, all of them consist of collections of various passages selected for their moral and educational content, and for the literary value attributed to their authors. They are, in other words, anthologies that already show a sort of definition of the British literary canon, of course as it was accepted at the time. But, either in the form of prefaces or of preliminary chapters, they also include instructions on how to read aloud, which sound as if taken directly from the elocutionists' reading and speaking principles. Just to mention some

<sup>16</sup> On Macklin's acting and on his activity as a drama teacher see Campbell 1917, esp. 181-188.

<sup>17</sup> See the Digital Miscellanies Index project (DMI) at <<http://dmi.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>>.

of these volumes, there are the anonymous *A Museum for Young Gentlemen and Ladies: or, A Private Tutor for Little Masters and Misses* (1751?), *A Collection of Poems for Reading and Repetition. Selected from the Most Celebrated British Poets* (1762) by John Drummond, and *The Speaker: or, Miscellaneous Pieces Selected from the Best English Writers* (1774) by William Enfield, a volume to which a second book was added later, in order to enlarge the readers' possible choice. The selected authors go from Homer (via Alexander Pope's translation), to Cato, Livy, Addison, Bacon, Mrs. Barbauld, Cibber, Collins, Dryden, Goldsmith, Gray, Johnson, Milton, Shakespeare, Steele, Sterne, Thomson, Young. Enfield's book also tags its passages according to either genre (for example Book II collects 'Narrative Pieces' while Book VI is made of 'Dialogues'), or 'interpretative' and axiological labels, so to speak (e.g. Book III contains 'Didactic Pieces', Book VIII 'Pathetic Pieces'). On the other hand, *A Museum for Young Gentlemen and Ladies* appears to be more as a little encyclopaedia than an anthology, since it includes chapters like 'An Account of the Solar System', 'Rules for Behaviour', and 'Tables of Weights and Measures'.

All of them, though, offer their readers instructions about reading. *A Museum*, in spite of not being a literary anthology, presents an initial chapter entitled 'Directions for Reading with Elegance and propriety' addressed to 'Little Masters and Misses, how to Read well, to keep their Stops, and pronounce or speak their Words properly; which will make every Body delighted to hear them read, or talk in Company' (Anonymous 1760, 1). From these introductory words it is easy to understand that the preoccupations of the compiler are more or less the same as Thomas Sheridan's: good readers observe punctuation and, when reading, understand the different pauses a passage implies. At the same time, they follow some 'rules' in order to place emphasis and stress correctly.

To trace Sheridan's legacy in others' works, it is interesting to note that Drummond's *A Collection of Poems for Reading and Repetition* mentions the lectures Sheridan had given in Edinburgh just a year before the publication of the anthology. The book, the 'Preface' reads, 'among many other articles, contains most of the pieces that were read by Mr. Sheridan at his public lectures in Edinburgh' (1762, vii-viii).

It is William Enfield's *The Speaker* that contains the longest guide to reading with propriety. Enfield (1741-1797) taught elocution at the Warrington Academy, for the students of which the book was originally written. In 'An Essay on Elocution', which precedes the presentation of the various passages (1774, v-xxix), he explains that his purpose is to 'point out a practicable and easy method by which this accomplishment [good reading and speaking] may be acquired' (vi). On these premises, he proceeds to supply some rules, 'adapted to form a correct and graceful Speaker' (vii): they go from 'Rule I. Let your Articulation be distinct and deliberate' (viii), to 'Rule VI. In every sentence, distinguish the more significant words by a natural, forcible, and

varied EMPHASIS' (xvi), to 'Rule VIII. Accompany the Emotions and Passions which your words express, by correspondent tones, looks, and gestures' (xxiv). Enfield's book was published one year before Sheridan's *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, but the principles at the basis of this book had already been expressed in his *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762). Therefore Sheridan's ideas about speaking and reading were well known in the 1770s, so as to be accepted and adopted by other people. In *The Speaker*, though, there is something that appears to connect its author rather to Walker than to Sheridan, i.e. the stress given to rules, and the rejection of 'particular characters or marks' printed together with a passage in order to help readers, because – Enfield observes – 'they [these marks] mislead instead of assisting the reader' (1774, xviii). Sheridan, instead, relied much on these devices and published some of his own discourses with printed marks so as to show readers how to pronounce them. Nevertheless, Enfield's stress on the necessity to follow nature shows how much he adhered to Sheridan's tenets (see Benzie 1994, 204).

### 3.2 After Thomas Sheridan

The short list of books dealing with elocution mentioned in 3.1 lacks three titles that explicitly – either on the title-page or in a preface – cite the name of Sheridan. All were published after Sheridan's death: *Sheridan's Strictures on Reading the Church-Service; with the Notes, Regularly Annexed, and Proper References* by W. Faulkner (1789), *Sheridan's and Henderson's Practical Method of Reading and Reciting English Poetry ... A Necessary Introduction to Dr. Enfield's Speaker* (Anonymous 1796), and *The Reader, or Reciter: By the Assistance of which Any Person may Teach Himself to Read or Recite English Prose with the Utmost Elegance and Effect. To which are Added Instructions for Reading Plays on a Plan never before Attempted* (Anonymous 1799).

From its very title, *Sheridan's Strictures on Reading the Church-Service*, compiled by the Reverend William Faulkner, declares its target, i.e. the clergy. Actually it prints church prayers and services accompanied by footnotes explaining where stress and emphasis should be laid, how to observe pauses and how to avoid sounding disagreeable. Many words are italicised in the text to highlight them as emphatic; words in small caps and 'the letters marked with the grave accent of the Greek, 'Require to be dwelt on some Time' (1789, 8). The book is based on Sheridan's interest in the delivery of divine services and summarises Sheridan's paragraphs on similar issues. See, for example, pp. 9-14, where, the author guides the pronunciation of Psalm 143 – 'Enter not into Judgment with thy servant' – already commented upon by Sheridan in *Lectures in Elocution* (1762, 59-60), and again in *Lectures on the Art of Reading* (1775a, 183-185). Another example is offered by 'The Lord's Prayer', discussed by Sheridan in the latter book (207-215) and accordingly annotated by Faulkner in *Sheridan's Strictures* (1789, 16-20).

The second, in time, publication bearing Sheridan's name in its title is *Sheridan's and Henderson's Practical Method ...* (Anonymous 1796). Both 'authors' had long been dead (John Henderson, a young actor very good at comic roles, died in 1785),<sup>18</sup> but very probably the book was printed in remembrance of their 1785 very successful public readings. The mention of Dr Enfield's *A Necessary Introduction* also testifies to the cultural connection between Sheridan and Enfield. In the dedicatory letter to 'Morris Robinson, Esq.', the anonymous compiler claims that the purpose of the book is to give 'metrical compositions the force, harmony, and animation of which they are susceptible' (iii-iv), thus confirming what the title says about the miscellany including poetry on the one hand and, on the other, stressing the necessary features of a good poetical reading according to Sheridan's principles. In the 'Preface' (v-x) the author claims to be able to offer a method for reading, since those promoted in the past have failed because of their dryness and theoretical paraphernalia. No 'regular system' will ever be able to teach the 'simple graces of Expression, look, and manner'. By taking this stance, the writer takes sides against the 'mechanical' school, with Sheridan against Walker (but neither is mentioned here). The 'new plan', on the contrary, is based on a 'practical method' which will be implemented on passages that 'I have heard read or recited either in public or in the hour of social enjoyment' by Sheridan or by Henderson (vii). The first example in the text is Thomas Grey's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' which,

Being a plaintive, mournful Poem ... ought, of course, to be read with a *gravity* of look, and a *solemnity* of tone, suitable to the *sober melancholy* of the subject. A *low key* of voice is the most appropriate; for if we begin in a lofty tone, the mournful effect, intended by the Poet, is at once destroyed. (Anonymous 1796, 1)

The anonymous author discusses then how to read the first line, 'The curfew tolls the knell of parting day', advancing his own reading modelled on Henderson's example, this consisting of the introduction of a comma after 'tolls'. The actor, the book explains, delivered the words 'the knell of parting day' 'as if they were placed between a parenthesis' (2). Just to give another example of the way this book's author 'used', so to speak, the names of his two authorities, suffice it to say that for l. 22 of the 'Elegy' ('Or busy housewife ply her evening care') he proposes Sheridan's contraction of 'housewife' 'as if it spelt *hussif*, which has a much better effect than the other [the normally pronounced 'housewife']' given that this latter 'sounds rather clumsily on the ear'. Whether the readers of this book accept the suggested versions or not, they have in their hands the result of an interesting attempt at reproducing the

<sup>18</sup> An 'exquisite gift of mimicry clearly made Henderson one of the great Falstaffs of his time' (Bacon 1964, 45).

two public readers' performance, and at producing an *ante litteram* (written) recording of Sheridan's and Henderson's readings.

*The Reader or Reciter* was published at the very end of the century, in 1799. Like other publications, its title-page boasts of containing 'a plan never before attempted', but the real novelty of this text is that the anonymous author claims that, 'by the assistance' of this book, 'any person may teach himself to read or recite English prose' (from the title-page). After other manuals which, like those discussed so far, aimed at helping prospective readers, this at last declares its Do-It-Yourself perspective overtly. But what does this originality consist of? The volume is preceded by an 'Advertisement' which laments, like *Sheridan's and Henderson's Practical Method*, the failure of previous reading guides. The cause of this situation, according to the author, is that – while the role of punctuation has always been attentively highlighted in order to point out 'the emphatic word' – 'the spirit and animation of elocution are entirely neglected' (Anonymous 1799, iii). The result of previous manuals is the creation of 'uniformly accurate' readers who have learned to be correct, but who lack attractiveness and fail to transmit to their hearers 'the proper portion of animation which belongs to each Author' (iv). The 'Advertisement' goes on imputing to 'Mr. Sheridan, and others in the same way' the responsibility of these effects, while – of course – upholding the values of this 'small Volume' for readers who really want to 'afford gratification to [themselves] and those who are [their] hearers' (iv). The attack on the elocutionists in general seems to reveal on the one hand limited improvement of British reading abilities, notwithstanding at least half a century of insistence on the role of oral delivery in polite society, and on the other the still felt social need for good reading.

The author shortly introduces the first passage ('An Eastern Story' from Samuel Johnson's *The Rambler*), as possessing 'a peculiar harmony and smoothness of diction throughout most parts of it, and the different picturesque scenes and changes with which it abounds, if well marked in the reading, give infinite pleasure to a hearer' (1). He also apologises, so to speak, because of the 'intervening observations, which, conformably to our plan, we are compelled to introduce', thus anticipating his 'method', i.e. passages will be interspersed with annotations (in italics and between brackets) referring to tone of voice, mimicry, gestures. The 'small Volume' seems to address genteel readers more than other similar books, given not only the authors anthologized (actually not so different from other selections), but also because of the high register of the language used for the reading suggestions. Some examples will better illustrate this point:

OBIDAH, the son of Abensina, left the caravanser early in the morning, and pursued his journey through the plains of Indostan. (*Be now a little warm and animated in your expression.*) He was fresh and vigorous with rest; he was animated with hope; he was incited by desire; (*Now look as if you were viewing the scene described.*) he walked swiftly

over the valleys, and saw the hills gradually rising before him. (*You must glow with the writer, in your expression, as you proceed with this enchanting description.*) ... (*Let your tone be now more powerful, in order to create a contrast that follows, of great beauty. Mark particularly the word 'towering.'*) he sometimes contemplated the towering height of the oak, monarch of the hills; (*Here comes the contrast alluded to – Be peculiarly soft and gentle in your voice to the end of the colon.*) and sometimes caught the gentle fragrance of the primrose, eldest daughter of the spring; (*Conclude the sentence with a glow of satisfaction.*) all his senses were gratified, and all care was banished from his heart. ... He saw on his right hand, a grove that seemed to wave its shades, as a sign of invitation: he entered it, and found the coolness and verdure irresistibly pleasant. (*In descriptions be equally descriptive in your manner of reading them. When you mention the sun ... cast your eyes upwards; and give a look as if you discovered the grove, when you read, 'He saw on his right hand a grove,' &c Your fore-finger pointed at the same time will produce a good effect.*) (2-3)

At the end of Johnson's story, the author adds some final remarks advising the reader to give their language 'great smoothness and melody in the delivery', and just before introducing the second passage (again by Samuel Johnson), he suggests that it should be read 'with a clear, distinct articulation' (10).

When, commenting another Johnsonian passage that is considered to be 'pathetic' (the story of Misella, a prostitute, narrated in the first person singular), the author states:

(... *Throughout the whole of the relation itself, you must give it a considerable tinge of the melancholy, and occasionally you may melt into a strain of the most heart-rending pathos, with great advantage, in several of the following sentences.*)

Thus driven again into the streets, I lived upon the least that could support me, and at night accommodated myself under pent-houses as well as I could. At length I became absolutely penniless. (45)

It can be noticed how near these notes are to instructions for a performance. Indeed, this booklet, even if not targeting drama students, sounds as if it were prefiguring those who read aloud as actors. Actually, although not explicitly said, a sort of 'stage' is envisioned when, discussing 'The Strolling Player' by Oliver Goldsmith, besides observing that 'There must be a difference of voice in the dialogue parts to the others' (49-50), the author remarks: '*To give a proper life and spirit to this character [the player of the title], you ought to enter, in some parts, a little into acting them. Action, if well applied as you go on, may be frequently practiced with great effect*' (53). Nevertheless, from a further remark about another passage, it seems clear that the author is still addressing readers (or reciters, according to the title), and not actors in a theatrical situation, when he says that '*You must, by your manner of reading this, try to bring the very scene described before the mind's eye of your hearer*' (73). Put differently, a reader ought to create a 'stage' (a scene) in the hearer's

imagination, while actors perform on a stage whose scenery already shows places and venues to the onlookers. In a way, readers' responsibility is even greater than actors' when creating 'aural' settings, even though – according to John Hill's first version of *The Actor* – 'playing' is to 'common reading' 'what a finish'd picture is to a first rough draught in chalk' (Hill 1750, 317).

About a third of the text is devoted to drama (the reads that the volume also contains 'instructions for reading plays'). After stressing the difficulty for play readers to give voice to different characters, the author admits that he 'cannot commence this part of [his]work better than with Hamlet's well-known instructions to the Players' (Anonymous 1799, 139). Before the introduction of long passages from *The Merchant of Venice* and from *Othello*, we find a paragraph which, after condemning the monotony and uniformity of some readings, expressly encourages readers to peruse Shakespearean drama. But, the text adds,

*It will not be expected in the reader that he should enter into a theatrical exhibition of them [Shakespearean scenes] and give them that personation which we are used to see displayed on the stage. It is however necessary that he [the reader] should discriminate between several parts he has to read; give to each its peculiar look, voice, and manner; mark the transition from one sentiment to another; although the whole need not be so forcibly delineated, or painted with such strength of colouring, as a public dramatic display of the characters requires. (142-143; italics mine)*

The miscellany ends with a long (and of course commented) passage from *The Provoked Husband*, a play by John Vanburgh and Colley Cibber (1728).

Like other manuals for reading aloud, *The Reader or Reciter* always highlights the need for continuous practice: actually, all these anthologies collecting literary passages are reading exercise-books. All of them show the importance of reading aloud as a social practice in the eighteenth century, increasing the sociability of British drawing-rooms in middle-class homes.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, they run parallel to the growth and improvement of British theatrical performers, some of whom – like Mrs. Siddons and John Philip Kemble – attended with interest Thomas Sheridan's lectures (see Bacon 1964, 45), and possibly found many a connection between this author's theses and the principles outlined in the 'art of acting' manuals of the time.

#### 4. Conclusions

At the end of this research through the elocution movement and some publications embodying its principles, what has been said must also necessarily be briefly regarded in a broader frame. If we consider, with Roger Chartier,

<sup>19</sup> About the relationship between English literature and salon meetings, see Tinker 1915.

that ‘Works and discourses exist only when they become physical realities and are inscribed on the pages of a book, transmitted by a voice reading or narrating, or spoken on the stage of a theatre’ (1994, 7), the elocutionary production can be interpreted as a powerful way British society used to think of its own language and culture, and to refine the awareness of its national identity. In a certain way, the elocutionists also laid the foundations of the ‘art’ of teaching English to foreigners and not only to their countrymen (let us think of Walker’s *Pronouncing Dictionary*, and of Sheridan’s dictionary, whose full title claims to have the establishment of ‘a Plain and Permanent Standard of Pronunciation’ as a main and primary object).

Eighteenth-century British society lived through an era of vast improvement of literacy, especially in the middle class, and of female literacy, so that the century’s great novels were certainly written not only for silent reading but with an ‘ear’ to family and shared readings, when possibly illiterate servants might as well be present. The now nearly lost practice of reading aloud created and reinforced sociability, while – at the same time – allowing the illiterate to access literature and any other printed material.<sup>20</sup> British elocutionists had understood that reading aloud had the

dual function of communicating the written word to those who are unable to decipher it themselves but also of cementing the interlocking forms of sociability that are emblematic of private life in the intimacy of family circle, in worldly conviviality, and in literary circles and spheres of scholarly sociability. (Chartier 1994, 8)

But exactly because of the social value of shared reading and the pleasurableness of this practice when properly performed, the elocutionists invited unskilled readers to learn how to avoid dullness and the ‘cold inanimated manner usually adopted’ (Anonymous 1796, ix). To achieve these skills, easy-to-use manuals were printed as would-be guides for the various Mr. Hay(s) of those days, whose inability Mrs. Montagu stigmatises in her letter.

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<sup>20</sup> Recently, there appears to be a rebirth of the desire of and interest in shared reading: see the high number of web sites devoted to this. The possible influence exerted by the awareness of communal reading on eighteenth-century British writers is announced as central to Williams (2017). This volume, whose scope is much richer and broader than that of the present article, was still forthcoming when the latter had already been written; therefore it could not be made use of for this research, and all possible coincidences are simply due to the separate investigations of a common – or at least partly similar – cultural and literary corpus.

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