

Preface

This book is about the literature and philosophy of action during the last half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, the period that begins roughly with Hobbes and Rochester and ends roughly with Hume and Richardson. It features works that examine what happens when someone acts, when someone writes a letter or lifts her feet or kills or kisses, and so on. For many, the difference between actions and other kinds of events turned on the presence of mental states. Someone writes a letter because she *wants* to communicate information and *intends* for her reader to understand her. Her desire for the one or intention for the other causes physical movements of various kinds. And yet how does a mental state like desire or intention cause the body to move? This simple question was of vast significance for all kinds of writers during the period, and opened up literary and philosophical problems for our time as well as theirs, from how a work of writing can represent thought on the page, to how matter can be the locus of consciousness, to whether minds actually cause anything to happen after all.

Writing about the mind during the period took many forms and has been the topic of much important work in literary and intellectual history. The relation between mind and actions, however, remains relatively untapped and points in a number of unusual directions. For example, although this book is above all interested in the language of mental states, it does not make an argument about the growth of inwardness or interiority or the psychological subject during the period. Rather, considering actions leads in a different

direction. Minds were understood to do many kinds of things—from represent objects, to work through equations, to grieve—but when they caused someone to act, they were understood to blend in some fashion with the rest of the world. For some, this kind of causal relation meant that minds were at bottom like everything else in nature. When these writers considered actions, they were often led to unexpected or unsettling conclusions: that the will might not be free, that all matter might be sentient or nothing sentient at all, that states of mind extend outside the head. For others, the topic of actions provided an occasion to block just these sorts of conclusions and to distinguish the place of mind and mental causes from other parts of the world.

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century was indeed a lively time for the consideration of actions, with the combined emergence of empirical philosophies of mind and new literary forms designed to feature experience in often startling ways. Against this expansive backdrop, I follow the problem of actions from the cultures of Restoration-era science to mid-eighteenth-century social theory, from worries about political authority to the consideration of a commercial society. While I place importance on what we might call externalism, I also watch notions of the external shift from physical bits of matter in motion to the elaborate networks of law and exchange. My goal has not been to follow a single perspective as it grows to dominance, however, but rather to examine competing models of mind and action across the period and into ours. I thus examine writers who have been integral for literary studies along with those whose ideas might challenge our expectations on a number of topics: from where seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers looked to find the sources of actions to what kinds of entities they considered to be conscious.

Actions and Objects has been generously supported throughout by Rutgers University. In the early stages, I received fellowship help from the NEH, the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, and the Huntington Library. At the end, I was the beneficiary of a

wonderful year at the Stanford Humanities Center, which saw the completion of this manuscript and the start of another. As I tried out some of these arguments and readings, a few appeared in print. Early versions of sections of Chapters 3 and 5 appeared in *ELH* and a very different version of a section of Chapter 4 in the *Yale Journal of Criticism*. They have now been completely reconsidered and rewritten, but trace sentences remain.

One pleasure of taking some time to finish is accumulating so many debts of gratitude. I've been extremely fortunate to test some of these arguments among a superlative group of graduate students over the years. I could simply not have written a word without their questions, responses, and quarrels. My period cohort—Lynn Festa, Paula McDowell, and Michael McKeon—has provided invaluable feedback and conversation. Also at Rutgers, I've had the pleasure of working with Billy Galperin, Colin Jager, Meredith McGill, Jonah Siegel, Henry Turner, and Rebecca Walkowitz. The “Mind and Culture” seminar at the Center for Cultural Analysis provided a burst of intellectual energy and renewal just when I needed it most; our many guests and fellows will find their promptings and ideas scattered over these pages.

The same is true for the crew at Stanford, old friends and new: John Bender, Terry Castle, Denise Gigante, Joshua Landy, and Blakey Vermeule. It has come to seem that the broader eighteenth-century world is an expansive set of fascinating interlocutors, including Helen Deutsch, Sarah Ellenzweig, Marcie Frank, Jody Greene, Sandra Macpherson, John Richetti, Helen Thompson, and others who have listened to me talk about actions and minds over the years and who have helped to shape the argument in ways they might not realize. Parts of this book were delivered to audiences at Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Rice, Stanford, UCLA, the University of Chicago, and Yale, where audiences were curious and receptive and challenging in the best ways. James Kierstead, Mike Gavin, and my editor Emily-Jane Cohen all made it possible for this book to come together in the end.

It gives me great pleasure finally to thank those whose continued intellectual presence in my life I consider a tremendous gift: Jared Gardner, Elizabeth Hewitt, Jonathan Goldberg, Adela Pinch, Michael Trask, Michael Warner, and Bliss Kern. Bliss read the entire book and made it better.