Midway through Klaus Mann’s *Mephisto* one of the novel’s supernumeraries finally gets a purchase on its central figure: ‘I think I have his number’, he exclaims, ‘He’s always lying and he never lies. He believes in everything and he believes in nothing. He is an actor.’ The context makes this definition all the more disquieting since it describes an actor justly celebrated for his performance as Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*, who is in turn a character based on the great German actor and director, Gustaf Gründgens, a chameleon-like figure whose ability at assuming whatever role was required of him enabled him to move with apparent conviction from the left-wing agitational theatre of Germany in the 1920s to the directorship of the Berlin Staatstheater, where he survived the Third Reich. Indeed, so ably did Gründgens survive that in 1959, Bertolt Brecht invited him to direct the premiere of his play *St Joan of the Stockyards*. This quotation serves as well as any as an approach to the nature of the actor’s skill, on which Diderot deliberated with such provoking insight in *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien* of 1773. It helps define the actor, while both testifying to his demonstrable skill and suggesting some of the disturbing paradoxes to which his figure gives rise. In what follows I shall explore some variations on this theme, with the contributions of Lars Gustafsson and Chris Bigsby in mind, primarily through the medium of a fragmentary babel or collage of other voices. That is to say, I shall quote frequently and sometimes at length, but usefully so, I trust, in order to establish a number of reference points for a consideration of what it is an actor actually does. Our attention has already been directed towards several of the underlying causes of the widespread hostility that the theatre so frequently arouses. As Chris Bigsby suggests, this deeply ingrained anti-theatrical prejudice may be variously identified with an ontological queasiness in the face of someone who (like Mann’s Mephisto) is at once both there and yet not there, who is or seems to be everything and nothing. Particularly, but not only, where identity is concerned, the theatre questions established notions of fixity, continuity, stability, and coherence. To a Puritan critic like William Prynne, in his *Histriomastrix*, integrity or constancy of character admit ‘no variableness, no shadow of change’, and each man can play ‘one part only’ if social order is not to give way to a licentious multiplication of roles. ‘Men should be what they seem’, as that master of dissembling, Iago, remarks (*Othello* III.iii.126). Complexity spells impurity,
instability, distemper, and acting a part lays one open to what Lionel Trilling calls ‘the attenuation of selfhood that results from impersonation’.3 (It is instructive, however, that all those critics of the theatre who, like Trilling, suggest that playing a role such as Iago or Richard III endangers the moral integrity of an actor, since s/he may assume the attributes of those s/he impersonates, do not extend this notion of imprinting through impersonation to any virtues a character might have.) The actor is therefore certainly transgressive, as Chris Bigsby also points out, and not only because his ambivalent, equivocal, multiple, carnivalesque nature on stage has the ability to confound all distinction and discrimination, whether sexual, social or political. Indeed, the element of transgression already exists as a possibility in the encounter which the theatre sets up between the exciting, strange, and on occasion aggressive – almost animal – energy of the actor and the audience that is on the receiving end, an energy that has frequently been identified with the theatre at its most compelling, whether it be Olivier’s celebrated physical magnetism as Othello or Rachel in Racine, who was described by the English philosopher and analyst of acting, George Henry Lewes, as a ‘panther’, by Charlotte Bronte as a ‘tiger’, and by her French critic and admirer Jules Janin, as a ‘pythonses’.4 Such physical, adversarial, even erotic aspects of live performance are sometimes to be caught in the slang which actors use (at least in English) to describe their relationship with an audience: ‘bowling them over’, ‘knocking them out’, ‘socking it to them’, ‘slaying them’, or even ‘laying them in the aisles’.5 Sexuality, the transgression of gender boundaries, and an ill-defined but tantalizing link with the idea of prostitution are therefore assuredly bound up with our notion of acting. The significance of this parallel has been explored in spectacular fashion by modern dramatists, the metatheatrical investigation of specular images and social and staged identity by Genet in _The Balcony_ is an obvious example, while theoretically we might ponder not so much the commonplace associations between the two occupations as the way in which the actor allows him or herself to be used by a variety of texts, any one of which would seem to be as good as another for his or her purposes. Nevertheless, in Britain, the theatre has, ever since the acceptance of the actress on stage during the Restoration, frequently been associated with an act in which women routinely violate polite conventions of dress, make-up, and gesture while exposing themselves, in later years by flickering gaslight, in order to solicit the concupiscent male gaze, a desire that in the two domains of prostitution and stage performance may, as Tracy Davis suggests, be gratified by ‘women whose identity, sincerity, and appearance were illusory but whose success relies on not giving away the hoaxes of the consumer’s control of full reciprocity or enjoyment’.6 One might add, however, that in the theatre at least, the actor does not normally divulge the skills whereby this illusion is created, any more than does a conjurer, since in the dominant conventions of western theatre, the art of the performer consists in concealing that there is any art at all, although in _The Gay Science_, Nietzsche was prepared to see such behaviour as characteristic of women in general: ‘Reflect on the whole history of women’, he noted, with misogynic satisfaction, ‘do they not have to be first of all and above all else actresses? ... love them – let yourself be ‘hypnotised by them!’ What is always the end result? That they “put on something” even when they take off everything’.7