

'A Performance of *Julia and Agnes*' (1800)*

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD (1787–1855)

It has just occurred to me that when a young girl, some eleven years old or less, I went with my father to the pit of one of the theatres – Drury Lane, I believe; yes, Drury Lane – to see a tragedy from *The Monk* (Sotheby's *Julia and Agnes*, 1800). Kemble played the hero, and Mrs. Siddons the heroine. *She* had to go into a dungeon where a frail nun had produced an infant, or rather she had to come out of a small door on to the stage, with the supposed baby in her arms. The door was what is technically called 'practicable,' that is to say, a *real* door, frame and all, made to open in the scene, and to sustain the illusion of a dungeon, as well as in that huge stage such an illusion can be sustained – for, paradoxical as it sounds, so many are the discrepancies in the present ambitious state of scenery, that I am quite convinced that in the days of Shakespeare, when all was trusted to the imagination of the spectator, the fitting state of willing illusion was much more frequently obtained than now – however, to make the scene as dungeon-like as possible, the door was deeply arched, hollow and low; and Mrs. Siddons, miscalculating the width, knocked the head of the huge wax doll she carried so violently against the wooden framework that the unlucky figure broke its neck with the force of the blow, and the waxen head came rolling along the front of the stage. Lear could not have survived such a *contretemps*. The theatre echoed and re-echoed with shouts of laughter, and the tragedy being comfortably full of bombast, not only that act, but the whole piece, finished amidst peals of merriment unrivalled since the production of *Tom Thumb*. I remember it as if it were yesterday.
