

This article was downloaded by: [Woo, Celestine]

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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 788268160]

Publisher Routledge

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European Romantic Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713642184>

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To cite this Article Woo, Celestine(2007) 'Sarah Siddons's Performances as Hamlet: Breaching the Breeches Part', European Romantic Review, 18: 5, 573 – 595

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10509580701757219

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509580701757219>

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Sarah Siddons's Performances as Hamlet: Breaching the Breeches Part

Celestine Woo

Sarah Siddons performed the role of Hamlet nine times over thirty years, reviving this early role once she was an established star, and playing it till the age of fifty. Yet this occurrence has hitherto drawn scanty analysis that has often been rife with contradiction and inaccuracies. For an actress of such stature to have played a role so central to the Shakespeare canon deserves deeper scrutiny and clarification. I read her choice of costume as an encapsulation of how she foregrounds and complicates gender. The costume Siddons designed for the part, neither conventionally male nor female, resists the inevitable sexualization that was then associated with breeches parts, and instead, indicates Siddons's radical choice to play Hamlet without breeches. The boldness of Siddons's choice of both role and costume lies in the distinction, little discussed, between traditional breeches parts and cross-gendered roles. She prompted James Boaden and Ann Radcliffe, among others, to an inchoate recognition of the exteriority and constructedness of gender. I particularize current discussions regarding Siddons's manipulations of and contributions to gender discourse, and situate Siddons's performances within the history of theater, gender, and Romanticism.

One of the most annoying gaps in English dramatic criticism is the lack of any account of Mrs Siddons's *Hamlet* ... (Tynan 41)

Scattered within theater history and Romantic theater scholarship lie sundry references, some speculative, some bemused, to Sarah Siddons's having played the role of Hamlet. Until recently, this occurrence has usually been dismissed as an oddity, relegated to a footnote, having only transpired in the provinces and never at the legitimate playhouses, and inaccurately assumed to have exclusively taken place prior to the flowering of her career. The issue is dropped—or never picked up. Yet for an actress of such stature to have played a role so central to the Shakespeare canon, so

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pivotal within Romantic thought, and so invested with cultural capital then and now, surely deserves deeper analysis. Herein, I establish the sustained nature of her performance and plot the dates and locales of her performances as accurately as possible, which has never yet been done, and which is challenging given the many inaccuracies and contradictions within the scholarship. I argue that her choice of cross-gendered costume provides an alternative to and a refutation of the ideology of the breeches part, and demonstrate how her portrayal of Hamlet both prompts Romantic-era critics to consider gender constructedness and broadens our current understanding of her theatrical achievement.

Recent theater critics and historians have been intrigued by Siddons's performance of Hamlet, considering it some sort of benchmark even while they have been uncertain whether it actually transpired, or what her performance dates were. Despite many errors of fact and contradictions within critical discussion, Siddons has proven an inspiration to many later female Hamlets, as well as to scholars studying them; as Laurence Senelick quips in his recent discussion of the history of women playing male Shakespearean roles, "Hamlet has proven to be irresistible from Sarah Siddons on" ("Cross-Dressing on the Stage"). Yet the fascination that Siddons's having acted Hamlet has provoked has remained relatively superficial in analysis. Part of this lack of deeper scrutiny is due to the dearth of information, but part is due also to the assumption that these performances were oddities and curiosities, nothing more, and thus not in need of greater analysis. It is crucial to establish the sustained and conscious nature of Siddons's repeated performance of this role, in order to clarify the misperceptions perpetuated even by notable performance scholars such as Senelick.¹

Senelick asserts, with regard to actresses who have played male Shakespearean roles:

What is seldom noted is that most of these were "freak" performances, offered once or twice as sensational attractions, and usually not at the main metropolitan playhouses. (Mrs. Siddons confined her Hamlet to Worcester.) Their occurrence in the provinces was due, more often than not, to the lack of men in the company ... Or it might stem from the whimsical or overreaching choice of an actress mounting a benefit. (*Changing Room* 270)

Besides the fact that Senelick is wrong about Siddons's only having performed in Worcester, he also does not realize the extent to which Siddons's performances were deliberate and sustained, if sporadically, over a period of three decades. Siddons's performance run as Hamlet was a much more serious endeavor than critics have acknowledged.

Sarah Siddons debuted as Portia in *Merchant of Venice* at Drury Lane in 1775, unsuccessfully. She withdrew to the provincial theaters until 1782, when she appeared again on the legitimate London stage to great acclaim and launched her career. Between these two débuts, she played Hamlet in Worcester in 1775, and then in Manchester opposite her brother John Philip Kemble as Laertes, on 19 March 1777.² In the Bristol theater, which was owned by the same party that owned the theater in Bath where Siddons had already become beloved, she played Hamlet on 27 June 1781.³ She went on to repeat the role in Liverpool.⁴ In Dublin, she played Hamlet during the season of 1802–3,⁵ and once more in 1805. She proposed that last performance to her friend and fellow actor

William Galindo as a revival of their successful 1802 performance, with herself as Hamlet and Galindo as Laertes. This 1805 revival production made enough of an impression to be caricatured in *The Dublin Satirist* five years later in 1810 (Figure 1).⁶ Far from a one-off curiosity, as has often been supposed, Siddons played Hamlet repeatedly, if irregularly, for three decades, always in the provinces and never in London, until she reached the age of fifty. Surely it is fair to consider her portrayal of Hamlet as something important to her, to which she devoted a certain amount of thought and dedication.

Other than the persistent linkage of the erratic nature of these Hamlet performances with the assumption of their insignificance, another factor in their historical elision consists of contemporary gender assumptions that disparaged the seriousness of Siddons's endeavor by reading it according to the ideology of the breeches part. The boldness of Siddons's choice of both role and costume lies in the distinction, little discussed, between traditional breeches parts and cross-gendered roles. A "breeches part" refers to a female character who during the course of the dramatic narrative, dresses as a boy or a man, and almost always returns to her normative feminine garb by the end. The appeal of breeches parts lay partially for the (heterosexual male) viewer in the titillating opportunity to leer at women's legs, ordinarily invisible underneath voluminous skirts.⁷ Ever since the Restoration, plays featuring breeches parts had

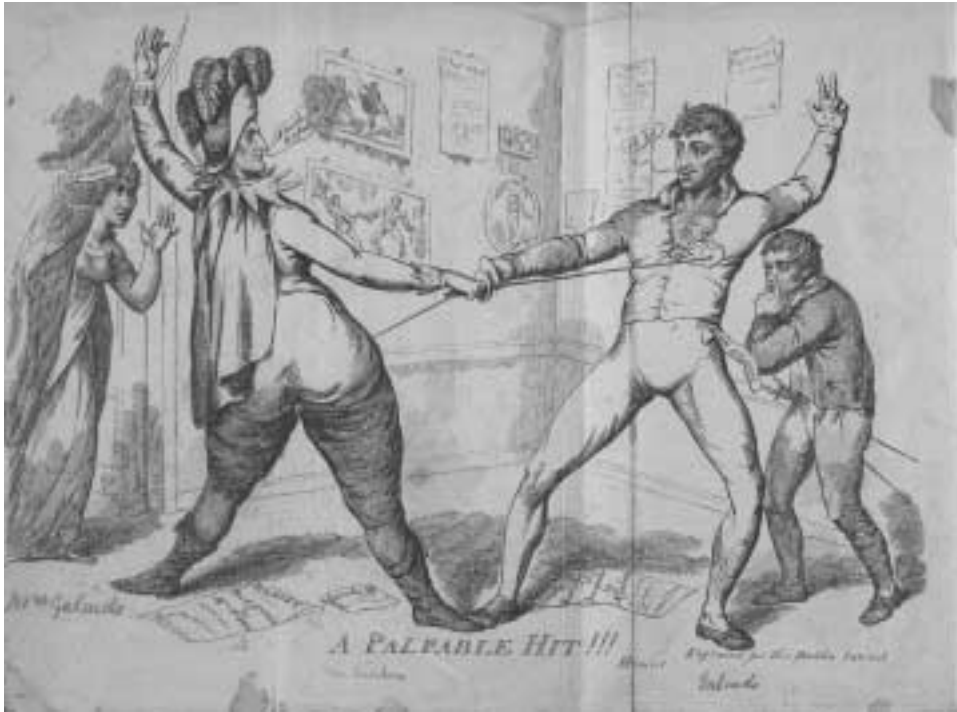


Figure 1 "A Palpable Hit!" *The Dublin Satirist*, Jan. 1810. The Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.

grown tremendously in popularity, particularly *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* among Shakespeare's works. Cross-dressing for breeches parts occurs as a feature of the narrative, and as a decision by the character; these plays' popularity lay in the convenient opportunity they provided to show off an actress's figure on stage. The choice by a manager or a player to mount a play featuring a breeches role was therefore primarily an economic and sexualized one: the play and the breeches role were chosen for the sexual attraction and entertainment value, anchored in a physical and visible body, which resulted in monetary profit.⁸

By contrast, the decision by a player of whatever gender to portray a character of the opposite gender is a choice exterior to the narrative and plot. Such a performance would inherently foreground the actor's decision to cross-dress, not the character's. Presumably, a cross-gendered role would be generally more difficult and demanding than a breeches role, since the player would need to sustain the illusion more thoroughly and for the whole duration of the play, as opposed to a breeches role which only lasts for a portion of the storyline and for which part of the amusement stems from the character's imperfect success at representing the opposite sex. Hence, playing a cross-gendered role is a chosen stance, likely to be critical, theoretical, or ideological in nature. While certainly some entertainment value and thus financial gain might accrue from the curiosity of the practice, a cross-gendered role invites reflection on the part of the spectator as to why an actor would portray the opposite gender, to a greater extent than a breeches part, which at best prompts reflection on why the *character* cross-dresses—a question with a ready answer provided by the plot.

Siddons's very choice of Hamlet inherently implies an active and deliberate decision in attempting such an unusual and sustained role—Hamlet being the protagonist of such a major and lengthy eponymous play, with the most lines of any character in the whole of Shakespeare's oeuvre. A major difference between playing Rosalind as Ganymede, for instance, versus playing Hamlet is that since it is Rosalind's decision to cross-dress, any actress playing Rosalind would know that this role entails wearing male attire.⁹ In the case of Hamlet, though, the Dane does not elect to cross-dress. Thus, the decision of Siddons to play Hamlet first draws attention to itself as a choice exterior to the play, and second, features the actress cross-dressed throughout the performance, not just for a few scenes before being restored to the normative heterosexual attire and desire with which most plays with breeches parts usually conclude.¹⁰

Siddons's costume design for Hamlet seems to have had two impulses as catalysts: the desire to evade the wearing of breeches, and the desire to experiment with the connotations evoked by the trappings of gender. An early costume adopted for Ganymede adumbrates Siddons's later experimentation with the Hamlet costume. Siddons pieced together an ambiguously gendered outfit for the part of Rosalind disguised as Ganymede—an outfit that gleaned her nothing but scorn. *The Morning Herald* jibed, "The dress of Mrs. Siddons was demi-feminine, demi-masculine, and therefore we may properly call it the *habit neuter*. She appeared in half a petticoat and half a pair of breeches that seemed to disagree like an ill-matched man and wife" (Pearce 85).¹¹ *The Morning Chronicle* termed her costume "most absurdly perverse," and expostulated, "Why wear a Tavistock Street frippery female hat with the swashing

martial boots of some of Vandyck's portraits, or the stage dress of Falstaff? If it was prudery that led into this absurdity it was preposterous—because, why want such disguises more than heretofore in the days of the Silent Woman, Portia, nay the breeches of Prince Hamlet himself?" (Pearce 84). The *Chronicle* writer is aghast at the seeming incongruity of Siddons's mixing of gender markers; furthermore, he implies that the way Portia has been traditionally attired (cross-dressed as Shylock's judge) has been sufficient, and there is no need for Siddons's excessive embellishments. The somewhat obscure reference to Hamlet seems to hold the character of Hamlet up as some sort of standard of theatrical decency or normalcy. *The General Advertiser* printed similar complaints about Siddons's guise as Ganymede, and speculated that her reluctance to wear breeches sprang from a consciousness that "Her figure is totally unfit to appear out of petticoats" (Pearce 85). We may draw two conclusions from these carping reviews: first, that Siddons's garb as Ganymede indicates an early attempt at mixing the trappings of gender that she improved upon later when designing her Hamlet costume, and that these bizarre costume choices were deliberate decisions on her part. Second, many reviewers tended to react to Siddons's manipulations of gender by attributing physical explanations for her actions—that is, that Siddons was too overweight by then to bear close scrutiny—thus missing the deeper implications for an interrogation of gender.¹²

Siddons's putative counterpart, Dorothy Jordan—the Comic Muse to Siddons's Tragic—was well known for her breeches roles. Siddons was considered a mediocre comedienne, and her performance as the breeches-clad Ganymede earned her ridicule and unfavorable comparisons to Jordan. Apparently, then, when essaying Hamlet, Siddons consciously eschewed the lascivious allure of breeches, together with their attendant connotations of flirtatiousness and associations with other actresses more talented at coy dimpled appeal than the regal Siddons. Although there were some who thought Siddons in fact commanded "a very good breeches figure,"¹³ the costume she selected for Hamlet demonstrates her radical decision to don neither a skirt nor breeches.

It is my contention that Siddons's choice of a cross-gendered role as opposed to a breeches role adopts an inherently critical and theoretical stance, and constitutes a decision more deliberated and nuanced than the mostly economic and sexualized aspects of accepting breeches parts. By taking this step, Siddons invited her critics and audiences to consider her with a seriousness normally denied the players of breeches parts. She also invited an androgynous consideration of the qualities of her character and of human nature, and prefigured her own methodological interest in exploring the progress of human emotion. Throughout her career, Siddons, like her brother John Philip Kemble, was increasingly admired for her ability to explore and represent the meticulous development and nuances of a single emotion, such as maternal love and grief (Constance in *King John*), sorrow (Isabella in Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*), or dignified loss (Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*). Most famously, her ruminations on Lady Macbeth plumb the character's motivations and offer a radical reading of the celebrated villainess as a supportive and loyal wife. Her taking on the role of Hamlet, therefore, the Shakespearean character most famous, especially in the Romantic era,

for embodying human emotion in the form of the melancholy temperament, is in keeping with her dramatic priorities.

When Siddons played Hamlet in Dublin in 1802 and again in 1805, an avid fan named Mary Sackville Hamilton came to see Siddons repeatedly in many plays, and she eventually created a sketchbook of watercolors (now in the British Museum) depicting Siddons's costumes in a wide range of parts and many of her characteristic gestures (Figure 2).¹⁴ For her 1802 role as Hamlet, Siddons chose to wear a rather odd outfit, which Hamilton depicts: a black toga-like garment that was neither conventionally male nor female. Siddons's deliberate choice of this manner of attiring him illustrates and concretizes what we increasingly understand as her active manipulation of her audience's gendered assumptions, in order to prompt a greater awareness of how gender informs theatrical interpretation.¹⁵ Her choice of costume signals her refusal of the sexualization of her body, yet conversely an acknowledgement of her physicality; moreover, it represents her attempt to design an appropriate and respectable costume for a cross-dressed non-comic role, and betokens her ongoing thought about the discursive resonances of gender markings.



Figure 2 Siddons's Hamlet Costume. © The British Museum. Register No. British 201b.10 PV.

We can infer with reasonable certitude the actual use of, and accuracy of the appearance of, Siddons's numerous costumes as depicted by Hamilton because of several features of the sketchbook: the consistent omission of Siddons's face; the attention paid to clothing detail and gesture at the expense of bodily detail; and the care taken to identify each portrait with a particular scene, dramatic action, and/or line of dialogue. The sketches all rather intriguingly omit Siddons's face—even the three in which other people are depicted with faces drawn in—and represent her hands and fingers only crudely. They instead depict in careful and even affectionate detail the fall of fabric folds, the effect of a darker fabric seen through lace, and the lines and angles formed by fingers, arms, and hems. Hamilton seems to have been far more captivated by Siddons's movements onstage than by her facial expressions, which so many others admired. Perhaps too, Hamilton refrained from sketching Siddons's face because she did not wish to compete with the craze then prevalent for portraits of Siddons. At any rate, Hamilton chose to represent particular dramatic moments, in which Siddons strikes an artful pose or adopts a tender gesture, and/or in which a resonant line from the text is spoken. She was thus not merely interested in the costume itself, or she would have depicted moments of comparative stasis, when she could paint the costume draped clearly, as on a mannequin. Instead, what we see from these features of the sketchbook is that Hamilton was endeavoring to record, meticulously, moments from theatrical performances that she wished to remember, as well as details of the costumes that apparently captured her fancy. She was not a professional portraitist embellishing actual sights onstage with her own artistic vision, like Fuseli; nor was she a costume designer envisioning costumes that were never actually produced or worn, as the informal, incomplete nature of her sketches testifies.¹⁶ She depicted Siddons as a faceless costume in motion, and her idiosyncratic and private project has proven intriguing to many scholars.

The Hamlet costume consists of a black cloak with black fringe, and black lace detail at neck, cuffs, and hem. White lace is visible at the neckline, with a red tunic visible underneath. This tunic is worn over a white undershirt, as is evident from the sleeve, which shows a white cuff extending from underneath the red sleeve. She wears a white cross at her breast, and a sword. Her left leg is visible from the knee downwards; her right leg only reveals her ankle. Her stockings are grey, and her shoes are black with bows. A bit of brown hair sticks out from beneath the rim of her black hat, on which is a white flower-shaped brooch anchoring several large gray feathers. Below the picture is a hand-lettered inscription that reads, "Mrs. Siddons's Dress as Hamlet. Act Ist Scene II. 'Aye, Madam, it is common.' July 27th, 1802."

Siddons's decision to eschew breeches as the expected marker of masculinity is in keeping with her consistent consciousness of gendered representation. Although there is no direct evidence that Siddons designed or commissioned the costume that Hamilton sketches, we may suppose, as critics have always done, that her deliberate choice propelled the design of the costume, because of the extent to which she has been shown to have been actively conscious of her public image.¹⁷ The occasion is well known of her asking Reynolds to heighten the pallor of her complexion in his celebrated portrait, in order to better approximate the appearance of Melancholy (Siddons 17–18).¹⁸ Less

well known is a snippet from one of Siddons's letters, quoted in Thomas Campbell's biography of her, in which she asks an artist named Hamilton (a professional portraitist, not Mary Sackville Hamilton) to design another cross-dressed costume for the part of Imogen. She requests, "if he would be so good as to make her a slight sketch for a boy's dress, to conceal the person as much as possible" (Campbell 2: 104). Here, we have an occasion during which Siddons contacted an artist, requested a costume sketch, and expressly wished for her apparel to be "concealing," presumably to draw the viewer's attention not to her body but to the character she would be playing. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to imagine that she had similar concerns with Hamlet, and that these concerns were exacerbated by the greater seriousness with which Hamlet was considered in contrast with a minor character like Imogen.

Throughout her career, she consciously embraced the gender implications pervading her public persona, such as in the Three Reasons episode, or in her crafting a reputation as the portrayer of long-suffering wives and mothers—a reputation arising from her personal life. In attempting Hamlet, Siddons again chose to emphasize gender matters, but in a way unusual for its intellectual depth and its adherence to propriety. Her costume choice ensured that the audience would interpret her performance vis-à-vis gender, for only a woman would play Hamlet *without* breeches. She thus foregrounds her sex and simultaneously complicates it.

Her costume, with its multiply-gendered connotations, reflects her attempt to design an appropriate outfit for a *serious* cross-dressed role—certainly an unusual undertaking at a time when cross-dressed actresses were viewed either as sex objects or as comical would-be men, evoking tolerant chuckles as would children playing dress-up, or dancing dogs. Her refusal to don leg-hugging breeches, and her choice of a neoclassical costume that did not cling sensuously to her person but instead hid its contours, disallowed the fetishization of the female body that rendered female cross-dressing ineluctably comic,¹⁹ discouraging intellectual consideration of an actress's interpretation in favor of a voyeuristic objectification of her body. Yet at the same time, Siddons allows a bit of leg to show—albeit clothed with stockings—and so preserves a hint of the risqué. Her costume is gendered ambiguously by its absence of breeches juxtaposed with the sword, a clear marker of masculinity. The outfit also contains somewhat feminine details: the white lace at the collar, the feathered plume and floral brooch in the hat, the soft-looking fringe on the cloak, and even arguably the splash of red underneath Hamlet's celebrated inky cloak. Siddons seems to refuse, then, either to fetishize or to deny her gender. Instead, she foregrounds the issue of gender trappings, refusing sexualized breeches but embracing more respectable markers of femininity.

Respectability was a crucial component of Siddons's desired public image. She strove to elevate her reputation as a professional and as an individual citizen, woman, wife, and mother. The Hamlet costume accords with her desire to project an image of respectability, and also acknowledges her physical body: aware that she had no girlish figure to sport in breeches, and that she appeared to best advantage in loose-flowing neoclassical robes, she sensibly chose this look for her appearance as the prince.²⁰ Siddons's sterling reputation and upright behavior, her origins from the respected

Kemble dynasty, and her well known dedication to the Shakespearean text prevented her visual appearances and representations from easily attaining immoral or dubious connotations. Hence, her viewers had to grapple with the implications of her costume and role without any facile distractions.²¹

The brashness of Siddons's choice lay not in being a woman choosing to attempt a male role—this was a recurring fashion²²—but rather, in reversing the ideology of the breeches part. By refusing breeches, Siddons intrudes into the heart of male dramatic territory, approaching Hamlet seriously before and while critics were discovering that fascination with the character that would so mark Romantic theatrical writing. I contend that Siddons's choice of Hamlet as a role invites an androgynous consideration of the workings of the human mind and emotion; moreover, fuller acknowledgment of her having played Hamlet serves to broaden our understanding of Siddons's dramatic achievement, in that this role provides an important counterexample to the many instances when she took a rather essentializing approach toward gender. Though reviews of her achievement were mixed, the positive, more reflective ones saw in her performance the trademark seriousness and depth of character development that she would be famed for in other roles. Siddons thus expands the intellectual possibilities for the actress. Far from gaining her theatrical power solely from “rendering women, on stage and off, passive,” as Jeffrey N. Cox asserts (38), Siddons empowers acting women by destabilizing the rigidity of gendered norms.

Although it is not known either what Siddons thought of Hamlet—the character or the play—or to what extent she was versed in Romantic dramatic criticism, her choice of the part cannot be fully appreciated without contextualizing it in relation to the growing obsession with the Danish prince. In England, both the play and its eponymous protagonist were written upon extensively by the three major theatrical critics of the era, Hazlitt, Lamb, and Coleridge.²³ The French and German Romantics were likewise captivated by Hamlet: major writers who analyzed Hamlet include Goethe, Schlegel, Tieck, Herder, and Hugo (and of course Freud later on). Coleridge notoriously averred, “I have a smack of Hamlet myself” (*Table Talk*, qtd. in Bate 161), and deeply influenced interpretation of Hamlet ever since by presenting the Dane as an exquisitely delicate and sensitive embodiment of the effect of an overbalance of imagination.²⁴ Coleridge's interest in associationism informed his reading of Hamlet as a man stymied by dint of the over-rapid workings of his mind. In all the analyses of Hamlet feverishly circulating throughout Siddons's career, discussion centered on Hamlet as a symbol of the human mind. In defense of Hamlet against eighteenth-century critics who saw the character as a deeply flawed, poor excuse for a hero, the Romantics read him as a marvelous example of Shakespeare's genius at creating an incarnation of the complex workings and machinations of the mind, and an exploration of the relationship between thought and action. It is to the Romantics that we owe the conception of Hamlet as the icon of melancholy, an icon whose function is to demonstrate the power of mental wrestling rather than a character who fails to fulfill his duty. By reinterpreting Hamlet in terms of mental and rhetorical dynamics rather than plot and action, the Romantic critics recuperated his reputation from the prevailing eighteenth-century views.

David Garrick, who had been Siddons's mentor, may have prompted Siddons to reflect on the minutiae and progression of Hamlet's emotions. Garrick was famed particularly for his striking facial mobility, which he used to great effect in depicting rapid changes of emotion. The trademark "points" he developed to display this talent arose from his contemplating the character's emotions deeply, from moment to moment, thus heralding Siddons's proto-Stanislavskian approach to acting. Although his Hamlet was, as Kalman A. Burnim quips, "still a man of action, no unmanly prince paralyzed by the tragic flaw of irresolution" (155), nevertheless, Garrick moved Hamlet in the public mind toward the cult figure he would become for the Romantics by playing him with greater seriousness than had been the norm.²⁵ He deemphasized Hamlet's madness, which in the earlier half of the eighteenth century had often contained farcical elements, and instead focused on highlighting the reasonable nature of Hamlet's emotional responses; for example, Garrick was frequently praised for naturalistically portraying Hamlet's reaction to his first vision of the ghost. Possibly, Garrick's inclination to take Hamlet quite seriously influenced Siddons's desire to do the same.²⁶

Hazlitt's critique of Hamlet destabilized traditional gender categories in relation to the character. Hazlitt wrote, "Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be" (*Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, qtd. in Bate 325), and notes certain conventionally masculine qualities in Hamlet, such as the desire to enact revenge, while juxtaposing them with more feminized aspects, such as when he states, "Yet he is sensible of his own weakness" (qtd. in Bate 325). Hamlet, as an object of scrutiny and analysis throughout the Romantic period, grew increasingly ambiguously gendered, paralleling the growing discursive conviction of Shakespeare's genius inhering in his masterful ability to apprehend and represent the gamut of human behavior, both male and female. The Romantic Hamlet was beginning to take on that protean quality, unmoored from conventional gender demarcations, that would eventuate in Sarah Bernhardt's impudent remark in 1899, "The things Hamlet says, his impulses, his actions, all indicate to me that he was a woman, and it is recorded that the story from which Shakespeare drew his inspiration made her a woman."²⁷ She even stipulated in the same article that Hamlet should be played *only* by a woman.

Siddons's engagement with Hamlet was a harbinger of that protean, ambiguously gendered Hamlet to come: her performances prompted a few critics of her day to examine gender assumptions. Conversely, the fact that she limited her performance of Hamlet to the provinces indicates that Siddons intended no overt statement about Hamlet to be broadcast to London audiences and critics. Her choice therefore seems to be less about Hamlet and more about her own priorities and methodology. Her acting was increasingly characterized by active reflection and exploration of the processes of the human mind and heart. Known for her powerful and compassionate portrayal of suffering women and their range of sentiments, Siddons perhaps chose to act Hamlet as a sensible way to both maintain her interest and talent in enacting highly wrought emotional moments, as well as to push beyond the boundaries of her usual repertoire. Perhaps she wished to keep her mainstream image and reputation traditional, focused upon acceptable representations of women, whereas in the outskirts of the theatrical world, she could attempt more experimental roles.

Though the sum total of contemporary critical response to Siddons's performances as Hamlet is quite small, James Boaden's is the lengthiest. He begins with a note of whimsical amusement, as others do, but proceeds on to a brief analysis that ends with encomium. He writes in 1827:²⁸

It may hardly be suspected by the followers of her maturer efforts that one of her most applauded parts at Manchester was the character of Hamlet. I can imagine that Garrick, when he heard of it, repeated his accustomed 'Eh! that's bold. What! Hamlet the Dane?' I do not imagine on our larger stages, upon which the performer walks so much, that Mrs. Siddons was ever desired in that or any other male character ... (167)

Here, Boaden seems to imply that he never himself witnessed Siddons playing Hamlet, and while first musing upon the occurrence, thinks it nothing but an oddity. Yet he reflects:

The conception would be generally bolder and warmer, not so elaborate in speech, nor so systematically graceful in action. Where Horatio and the rest describe the appearance of the spectre, I should think the real feminine alarm at such mysterious seeming would carry up the expression of countenance higher than it has perhaps ever illumined the powerful features of Kemble ... I conceive her breathless attention to the spirit during his disclosure, again benefited by sex itself, would, as before, be transcendent. (167–168)

As he considers the concept of Siddons as Hamlet in the abstract, Boaden imagines the way her gender might have enhanced her rendering of the Dane. Boaden's term "real feminine alarm" implies that alarm is a trait more natural, or innate, to women than men, and as such, would embellish Hamlet's reaction to the Ghost and even make this moment transcendent. Significantly, the elements he imagines her gender to adduce to the role are not easily categorizable as conventionally male or female: boldness is ordinarily considered masculine, whereas warmth is feminine; gracefulness is usually feminine, but here, "graceful[ness] in action" is a masculine trait that she would lack. (Boaden presumably is thinking of the fencing scene; as a matter of fact, he is wrong: Siddons was noted for her impressive fencing, by her surprised audience!)²⁹ Siddons's performance, then, even as a mere concept and not actually witnessed by Boaden, prompts her biographer to muse on the consequences of melding gendered qualities, and to envision the cross-gendered actress as an amalgamation of aspects from both sexes.

After his dig at Kemble, Boaden returns to considering the gendered implications of Siddons's performance:

Perhaps a few more points might be safely affirmed in her favour, but the unconstrained motion would be wanting for the most part; modesty would be sometimes rather intractable in the male habit, and the conclusion at last might be, 'were she but man, she would exceed all that man has ever achieved in Hamlet.' (168)

What is startling is that ultimately, though hampered by his essentializing of gender, Boaden allows that a woman *can* play Hamlet, at least *mentally*. He identifies *physical*

obstacles that would hinder her: the inability to move “unconstrainedly,” and the unsuitability of male attire for proper modesty. But if these were hypothetically removed, he concludes that a woman could render Hamlet as well as, or rather better than, a man. Siddons has prompted Boaden to differentiate between the mind and the body in his ponderings on gender. In this way, despite his essentialism, he gains an inchoate sense of gender’s exteriority, through considering Siddons’s performance as Hamlet.

What may be the earliest extant review of Siddons as Hamlet appeared in *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*, on 23 June 1781. The reviewer announces Siddons’s upcoming performance in Bristol, after having seen it himself twice elsewhere. The review reads in its entirety:

The lovers of dramatic exhibition may be congratulated on the nouvelle entertainment they are going to receive at our Theatre on Wednesday next, when Mrs Siddons is to play the part of Hamlet. The Writer of this paragraph confesses himself an admirer of that Lady’s performances in general, but was never better pleased than by seeing her in this arduous task, which he had the good fortune to do in two capital Theatres—and can confirm, that tho numbers might go merely out of curiosity, yet never were audiences more agreeably disappointed, or better satisfied, with an attempt of that nature.

The reviewer recognizes that ordinarily, the appeal of such a cross-gendered part lies merely in its “curiosity,” and that no doubt some who will attend for this reason will be “agreeably disappointed” and others “better satisfied” at the actress’s success at this “arduous task.” We can guess that what rendered the performance so surprisingly satisfying was the intelligence, seriousness, and emotional intensity that Siddons was later lauded for infusing into her acting. Ann Radcliffe, for instance, perceives in Siddons the qualities of tenderness and sensibility, which I discuss further on.

After the performance, the same Bristol paper recorded a week later, “Wednesday evening Mrs Siddons perform’d the part of Hamlet at our Theatre, and went thro’ the character to the entire approbation of a numerous and polite audience” (*Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*, 30 June 1781). Evidently, the performance was received respectfully. Years later, Thomas Campbell, in his biography of Siddons, remarked, “At Manchester one of her most applauded characters was *Hamlet*, which she performed many years afterward in Dublin, though she could never be prevailed upon to play it in London” (1: 78). Campbell corroborates that her early Manchester performances were well received, and implies that there were some who desired Siddons to perform the role in London. If this is so, then we may conclude that her refraining from playing Hamlet in London was not due to lack of popular support, but was her conscious choice.

These positive reviews and commentaries are striking when considered in the context of the contemporary attitudes and questions regarding morality and propriety that informed many other responses to cross-gendered or cross-dressed actresses. In 1822,³⁰ a piece entitled, “On Females Enacting Male Characters” by “H.J.” appeared in *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine* that calls this phenomenon “[t]he prevailing passion of the managers of our theatres” and objects to the fact that “libertines and highwaymen, &c, are the very characters [actresses] are called upon to personify, and from

which a female mind ought to shrink with abhorrence.” H.J. implies that for an actress to undertake an identification with, and communication of, the mind of a criminal is objectionable, more so than for a male actor. He also says that the women are “called upon,” presumably by their managers, to enact these roles, implying he also objects to managers using their female players in what he considers a crass fashion to attract audiences. H.J. continues, “although the public may admire the spirit with which these ladies sustain their characters, yet a British audience cannot drive from their recollection, that the persons . . . are female.” He concedes that these parts may be well acted, but concludes that an awareness of the player’s gender differing from that of her character is an insurmountable obstacle to true appreciation of the performance.³¹ Leigh Hunt makes a similar, if more amused, remark about Dorothy Jordan: “if [an actress] succeeds in her study of male representation she will never entirely get rid of her manhood with its attire” (qtd. in Senelick, *Changing Room* 260). Senelick eloquently characterizes this statement as “Hunt’s atavistic belief in sartorial magic” (*Changing Room* 260), and points out the prevalence of the belief that cross-dressing somehow contaminated femininity. The danger, then, for cross-dressing actresses consisted of the risk of losing a portion of their femininity, of what made them women. Writers who shared the attitudes of H.J. and Hunt responded to cross-gendered productions by rehearsing now-predictable arguments over gender roles and responsibilities.

In discussing Siddons and the sublime, Pat Rogers wryly notes, “Siddons had committed a category error in presenting female identities on the stage and achieving an effect grander than pathos or virtue in distress” (57). In other words, as the reviewer in *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal* admits, many including himself were quick to attend a performance of Hamlet by Siddons expecting either amusement at a woman’s laughable attempt to convey a difficult male role, or charm at the highlighting of female qualities such as what Rogers terms “pathos or virtue in distress” that the actress’s gender would provide. Instead, they were surprised by the efficaciousness and thoughtfulness of Siddons’s representation of the Danish prince.

As usual, the debate on cross-dressing was especially pointed when pertaining to Shakespeare. Julie Carlson has pointed out that “in the case of Shakespeare, rejection of embodiment also—and especially—dictates evaluations of male characters, most frequently of Hamlet, Lear, and Othello” (“Impositions of Form” 169).³² These three characters in particular were increasingly viewed as difficult to embody successfully onstage—for Hamlet, because of the degree to which he embodied the human mind and/or the genius of Shakespeare. Thus, Siddons’s return to Hamlet in 1802, after a many-year hiatus, signals her daring engagement of the discourse surrounding gender roles and behavior, the value of theatrical representation, and the relation between the physical body and the mind.

A complementary testament to the success of Siddons’s performances lies in the reviews that do *not* dwell on gender, for these demonstrate the willingness of some observers to consider the performance on its own merits, without being unduly distracted by the gender of the lead player. Siddons’s performance prompted not only Boaden but also Ann Radcliffe to consider the exteriority and constructedness of gender, as well as the aspects of human and theatrical behavior that cross-dressing

highlights. Radcliffe speculates, "I should suppose [Siddons] would be the finest Hamlet that ever appeared ... she would more fully preserve the tender and refined melancholy, the deep sensibility, which are the peculiar charm of Hamlet, and which appear not only in the ardour, but in the occasional irresolution and weakness of his character" (147).³³ The actress crafted her image in such a way as to enable her critics and admirers to consider her roles and their implications with the same degree of thoughtfulness and depth that Siddons brought to them herself.

An anonymous observer who attended Siddons's Dublin performance of 27 July 1803 recorded his reactions in a diary. After noting that the unusual bill of fare drew such crowds that the house "groaned under the weight of spectators," he reflects on the Ghost scene:

After the first expression of astonishment at the relation, the character remained lost in thought; you might trace in imagination the progress of his wonder, and his half formed suspicions, till roused from his reverie ... he declared his purpose to his companions—from this scene on Mrs. Siddons enters with wonderful judgment into the various feelings of this very difficult character. (qtd. in Clark 110)³⁴

Notably, the writer refers to the character as "he," demonstrating his ability to think beyond the physical fact of Siddons's gender. Siddons thus prompts this viewer with her trademark psychological insight to think deeply about the character's emotional interplay. He feels that her acting suffered from "the awkwardness of the dress and the feminine gait, which was sometimes ludicrous," but then concludes that if she were to address these flaws, "she would be an unrivalled Hamlet" (qtd. in Clark 111). Like Boaden, the diarist finds himself bemused, put off initially by the gendered awkwardness of the attempt, but able eventually to think beyond the oddity to envision Siddons as a Hamlet equal or even superior to that of men.

Neither the anonymous reviewer included in Hamilton's sketchbook nor the biographer who was reviewed seem to find Siddons's cross-gendered role particularly astounding. The writer reviews a biography of the Kembles by Percy Fitzgerald, and quotes Fitzgerald describing Siddons's costumes as follows: "when she played a gloomy or highly-tragical character [she] appeared in black velvet or black satin ... As Hamlet she wore a black fringed cloak, draped about her like a lady's shawl, and the general effect was that of a burly ill-formed man."³⁵ Fitzgerald is amused by Siddons's unwieldy costume; beyond this, however, he apparently does not deem the cross-gendering worth further comment: he simply introduces the role paratactically with "As Hamlet." This is part of a long paragraph describing her costumes with little commentary; Fitzgerald chronicles first Siddons's major Shakespearean parts, then other famous parts (e.g. Belvidera, Isabella in Southern's *Fatal Marriage*), then lesser-known ones, then Hamlet, then minor roles. His listing order implies that he considers her Hamlet a minor role, but that it is not so unusual as to merit omission or special mention separate from her female roles (Hamlet was the sole male role Siddons played). In turn, the fact that the reviewer quoted this passage at some length implies that he also saw nothing too ridiculous about Siddons's performance as Hamlet to exclude it from mention along with her recognized star performances.

A friend of David Garrick's, Henry Bate, recognized the significance of the serious, if brief, consideration Siddons's performances received. Bate wrote to Garrick in August 1775 that Siddons assumes "a very good breeches figure," presumably referring to her appearance as Rosalind and disagreeing with the critics who ridiculed her, and adds, "Nay, beware yourself, Great little Man, for she plays Hamlet to the satisfaction of the Worcestershire critics."³⁶ His warning to Garrick hinges on the possibility, however whimsical, that a woman could rival his own ability to play Hamlet.

Another whimsical response to Siddons appeared in the form of a caricature in *The Dublin Satirist* in January 1810.³⁷ Prior to its appearance, a scandal had erupted: a Mrs. Galindo, a fellow player, had published an open letter in 1809 in which she objected publicly to Siddons's behavior with her husband, William Galindo, also an actor. Siddons had suggested the revival of her Hamlet role with Galindo as Laertes; Galindo had acquiesced, trained Siddons at fencing, and the production took place in Dublin in 1805. The caricature shows Siddons with her back to the viewer, an enormous *derrière* encased in trousers,³⁸ fencing with Galindo as Laertes. The caption below reads, "A Palpable Hit!!!" Hovering behind an arras is a woman with a speech bubble stating "Judgement." Galindo says "A hit," and Siddons replies, "A touch I do confess."³⁹ The presence of the caricature indicates that the cartoonist believed that enough of his readers would recognize the Hamlet performance.

Siddons's decision to play Hamlet was both daring and diffident. No one knows why she never played the role in London: after all, if modesty or self-consciousness prevented her from presenting Hamlet on the legitimate stages, this cannot then explain her willingness to perform in Dublin, Manchester, and Bristol, all major theatrical venues. If the policy of the patent theaters forbade it, no one has yet noted this. One reason for the lack of critical attention hitherto paid to her Hamlet performances, I surmise, besides the scarcity and obscurity of the known facts, is that her boldness is veiled by what strikes us today as timid: that is, her reluctance to play in London, and her characteristic modesty that prevented her wearing of breeches. Boaden's outmoded gender biases no doubt have disinclined more contemporary thinkers from further analyzing her achievement.

Siddons's choice of this particular male character suggests some interesting connections with the public's discussion of her mind and "masculine" attributes. Not only was the concept of human intellect gendered male, but Siddons's acting style was frequently characterized as masculine due to its intellectual depth, authority, and dignity,⁴⁰ and so her embodying of Hamlet's intellect becomes masculinized on several levels. She was quite conscious of the masculine overtones to her public image, and insisted, for her female roles, on performing her "male" intellect in an inescapably female guise, by conflating both her private and stage roles as suffering women, as in the Three Reasons episode. By embodying Hamlet in a guise that so foregrounded an awareness of gender trappings, Siddons invested the prince with a concrete physicality.

Siddons actively crafted her public image on and off stage⁴¹; she embraced what were read as the masculine traits of strength of mind and will, and united them with quintessentially feminine tropes to produce the monumentally affective figure adored

throughout the Romantic era. Her approach to gender and her engagement with aesthetic, theatrical, and political discourse were complex and nuanced.⁴²

Scholars have explored Siddons's machinations with her "masculinity," illuminating the many ways Siddons crafted her public image, and the dynamism of her engagement with and impact upon her society's discourse and ideology. Pat Rogers discusses how the discourse of sublimity and heroism were applied to Siddons; Michael S. Wilson argues similarly that her performance style integrated the male qualities of dignity and authority into the domain of the female (118).⁴³ Laura J. Rosenthal applies Claudia L. Johnson's discussion of Hamlet as embodying a "sentimental masculinity" that is itself a reshaping of forms of femininity, in order to characterize Siddons's approach as a conscious deployment of both the masculine and the maternal. We now see that Siddons crossed gender boundaries in a variety of ways; as assessment of her achievements increasingly permeates Romanticist scholarship, we need to integrate an acknowledgment of her performances as Hamlet into our understanding of the growing centrality of the figure of Hamlet within the period.

Two recent critics have been audacious and perceptive enough to draw linkages between Siddons's Lady Macbeth, by far her most famous role, and her Hamlet. Laura J. Rosenthal, whose article presents the only extended analysis to date of Siddons as Hamlet,⁴⁴ asserts, "Siddons's performance of the role of Hamlet, which might be understood as the most extreme version of her performance of masculinity in general (and thus potentially dangerous in its obviousness), exceeds simple cross-dressing" (61). Rosenthal rightly perceives here the extremity of Siddons's choice to perform Hamlet, but does not delineate its implications in detail. In her conclusion, Rosenthal posits, "Siddons's Lady Macbeth comes to resemble the sentimental conception of another of the actress's famous roles: Hamlet" (76), thus making a somewhat radical move of her own: comparing the widely discussed Lady Macbeth to the little discussed Hamlet. On a similar note, Frederick Burwick writes, "Siddons, who had also dared to play Hamlet, chose to transgress the gender demarcations in playing Lady Macbeth" (138), perceiving both that playing Hamlet was a daring move, and that both these roles necessitated a crossing of gender boundaries.

Siddons's decision to play Hamlet was a conscious choice and a repeated and deliberate exploration she continued to develop. It was bold for its seriousness in taking on a tragic lead instead of some comic or outré "libertine or highwayman," and for being executed with her characteristic meticulous attention to affective detail. Finally, it was considered by several reviewers of her time to be a worthy and successful performance rivaling those by men. Without a doubt, recent explorations of Siddons's savvy and active engagement with the discourse of her day enable us to read her performance of Hamlet as a concrete example of her powerful fusing of her "masculine" intellect and feminine feelings, and of her inspiring critics to interpret Shakespeare and human behavior through the lens of gender. It is thus likelier than has been recognized that Siddons did instantiate new ways of thinking about the gendering of Hamlet, the human mind, and the performing body.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge with much appreciation the input, advice, and feedback I have received in the process of writing this article. In particular, I have benefited from the comments of Jonathan Mulrooney, Jane Moody, Tracy C. Davis, Kevin Gilmartin, and Colin Harris.

Notes

- [1] To this end, see my note in *ANQ (American Notes and Queries)* entitled, "Sarah Siddons as Hamlet: Three Decades, Five Towns, Absent Breeches, and Rife Critical Confusion," in which I detail at greater length some of the evidence discussed herein, as well as representative inaccuracies within theater scholarship.
- [2] For evidence regarding Worcester, see my discussion of Rev. Henry Bate's letter further on: the letter indicates that Siddons played Hamlet in that town prior to Bate's writing the epistle in August 1775. The Manchester production also featured Elizabeth Inchbald as the Queen and her husband as the King. The Harvard Theatre Collection houses a reproduction of the Manchester Playbill of 19 March 1777, listing the Inchbalds in these roles. The playbill also indicates that the production was of Garrick's adaptation of *Hamlet*; that this was Siddons's second appearance as Hamlet; and that her husband, William Siddons, appeared in the afterpiece.
- [3] This is corroborated by two Bristol reviews that I discuss further on.
- [4] I have not been able to discover exact dates for Siddons's performances in Liverpool. However, it seems likely that she played here in the years before her second London debut in 1782. Roger Manvell mentions her Hamlet production there on page 47, and refers to Siddons's own mention of it in a letter to Elizabeth Inchbald (Manvell 50). Yvonne French mentions the performance but does not provide sources or dates, although she implies that Siddons's Hamlet performances in these cities took place prior to her relocating to London. (See her p. 37 and *passim*: she mentions Manchester and Liverpool, respectively, and Siddons's performance as Gertrude in Bath in 1778.) If these confirmed dates are plotted (see Appendix) and one believes F.W. Price's assertion that her 1781 performance of Hamlet was her sixth (167), then this likely posits two performances in Liverpool, and probably two in Manchester also.
- [5] Thomas Campbell, Siddons's biographer, states that she performed in June and July of 1802 (316). Mary Sackville Hamilton's inscription provides the date Tuesday 27 July, 1802. W.J. Lawrence claims Siddons performed Hamlet twice in June.
- [6] This caricature refers to the scandal that erupted when Galindo's wife released an open letter in 1809 charging Siddons with misbehavior toward her husband, and currently resides in the Harvard Theatre Library. This letter is discussed in Campbell.
- [7] For more in-depth discussion of breeches parts, see Kristina Straub and Lesley Ferris. For an older source, see A.S. Turberville.
- [8] This tradition in England dates back to Nell Gwynn, the famous actress and mistress of Charles II. Peg Woffington and Dorothy Jordan were famed for their breeches roles in Siddons's time, and were the models against which Siddons's had to measure her own standing in breeches.
- [9] Incidentally, it is apt to compare Rosalind with Hamlet because firstly, Rosalind remains cross-dressed for the majority of the play (*As You Like It*, Acts 2 to 4), and secondly, she is Shakespeare's most long-winded female character, speaking more lines than anyone other than Hamlet. *Twelfth Night* is unusual in that Viola, the cross-dressed heroine, does not in fact ever return to female garb, although this fact does not prevent the majority of

productions from bowing to traditional expectations and closing the play with Viola again in her “woman’s weeds” (*Twelfth Night* 5.1.273). All Shakespeare citations are taken from the Riverside edition.

- [10] The paucity of information regarding Siddons as Hamlet extends to the circumstances initiating this particular choice of role. In the early instances (i.e. prior to 1782), it is possible that Siddons, an unknown ingénue who had failed her first attempt at a London début and retreated ignominiously to the provinces, and who therefore possessed no clout, was instructed by a director or manager to take on the role as a curiosity, as was not uncommon. However, I make the assumption that certainly, by the time she acted Hamlet in 1802, Siddons was enough of a star to dictate which roles she wished to take on, and where and how. She certainly had a great deal of control over her roles in London.
- [11] Reviews from *The Morning Herald* and *The Morning Chronicle* are quoted in Pearce’s *The Jolly Duchess*, a miscellany of theatrical anecdotes. Peace does not provide the exact dates of either review, but he does say that they were in reference to the performance at Covent Garden on 10 February 1785, so presumably both were written in 1785.
- [12] The writer of *The Jolly Duchess* calls it “a consciousness of personal defects” (86). This attitude has sometimes been passed down through theater history, as when Kenneth Tynan says in 1953 that she wore “a curious shawl-like garment to mask her bulk” (41).
- [13] Rev. Henry Bate; I discuss this quotation further on.
- [14] Of Mary Sackville Hamilton herself, we know very little. She was the daughter of the Right Honourable H. Sackville Hamilton, who served as Under Secretary in the Civil Department, Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant, and Commissioner of His Majesty’s Revenue in Ireland—the last of which presumably explains their presence in Dublin. He also seems to have been a theater enthusiast. Mary’s book of sketches was bought, according to the British Museum records, at the “sale of Mary Hamilton’s effects” by R.B. Bennett (who later sold the book to the British Museum, where it currently resides)—implying that Hamilton was unmarried at the time of her death, and that presumably, her sketches were not commissioned or designed as a gift, but meant simply for her own satisfaction.
- [15] Because of the scarcity of factual information available pertaining to Siddons’s performances as Hamlet—there is no indication of whether the costume depicted by Mary Sackville Hamilton was Siddons’s standard choice for the role, or whether her costume varied over the years—I will solely discuss her costume as sketched by Hamilton, which Siddons wore during her Dublin performances from 1802 to 1805. However, my discussion of the implications of her playing Hamlet will consider the entire span of her performances, from 1775–1805.
- [16] Another sign of the affectionate nature of this book of memorabilia is the fact that Hamilton includes at the beginning two frontispieces: a notice announcing Siddons’s upcoming final reading on 16 March 1803 as a benefit for a hospital, and a review of a biography of the Kemble family.
- [17] Recent times have seen an explosion of critical interest in Sarah Siddons. Following the 1999 art exhibition at the Getty Museum devoted to portraits of Siddons (*Cultivating Celebrity: Portraiture as Publicity in the Career of Sarah Siddons*. July 27–September 19, 1999. Curated by Robyn Asleson), two collections of essays, edited by Asleson and largely focused upon Siddons, have featured the work of noted scholars such as Robyn Asleson, Joseph Roach, Frederick Burwick, Heather McPherson, Aileen Ribeiro, and Shearer West. Their insights, together with those of other Siddons scholars such as Pat Rogers, Michael S. Wilson, Kristina Straub, and Laura J. Rosenthal, have shaped today’s understanding of the celebrated actress as a savvy and conscious participant within the gender discourse of her day.
- [18] Unfortunately, Siddons’s memoirs do not contain any mention of her portrayal of Hamlet.
- [19] Senelick, Tynan, and others discuss the comedic aspects of male cross-dressers as well as female.
- [20] By way of contrast, Gill Perry points out that visual images of Mary Robinson and Dorothy Jordan employed sexual ambiguity to play on notions of class mobility (63).

- [21] See Shearer West, "Body Connoisseurship," for a discussion of the growing focus of theater critics on the bodies of actors, both male and female (154).
- [22] See H. J., "On Females Enacting Male Characters," which I discuss further on. Also, Elinor Hughes, writing for the *Boston Herald* in 1937, seems in fact sick and tired of women playing Shakespearean men. She exclaims with exasperation, "This history of our stage gives case after case of feminine Romeos and Hamlets, Shylocks and Cardinal Wolseys, but, barring a return to Elizabethan days the boy Juliets, Ophelias and Portias are as dead as the dodo. Just why Sarah Siddons wished to play Hamlet, what inspired Charlotte Cushman to try her hand at Romeo—with her sister, Susan, as Juliet—what prompted Lucille La Verne to play Shylock in London a few seasons ago ... are questions that it is amusing to ask and impossible to answer." Once again, we have a response that considers Siddons's effort at Hamlet to be chance and curious, gotten up for a thrill, and not presumably as "serious" as acting Juliet, Ophelia, or Portia would be.
- [23] In addition, Mary Shelley possibly wrote a fascinating dialogue entitled "Byron & Shelley" that records a conversation between these two about Hamlet. The dialogue appeared anonymously in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1830. See Bate 574n11.
- [24] See Bate 135.
- [25] In his infamous adaptation of Hamlet, for instance, Garrick eliminated the grave diggers, but audiences responded poorly to the loss of these beloved comic characters. See Burnim. Garrick also played Polonius with an unaccustomed dignity, which Thomas Davies claims "appeared to the audience flat and insipid" (3.42). Audiences in his era apparently preferred the doddering dotard.
- [26] Rev. Henry Bate's letter to Garrick, which I discuss further on, seems to hint at a homologous interest in Hamlet shared by Siddons and Garrick.
- [27] Untitled article, January 21, 1923. See the reference list at the end of this article, under "Bernhardt." The article reports that Bernhardt made the above remarks after her performance as Hamlet on May 20, 1899.
- [28] All quotes from Boaden are taken from his *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons* except for the quote in a later footnote from *Mrs. Sarah Siddons*. He wrote the *Memoirs* in 1827; I cite the 1896 edition.
- [29] William Smith Clark notes, "Siddons had practiced under [Galindo, a master fencer] so successfully that she astonished the Dublin *cognoscenti* with her skillful exhibition" (111).
- [30] This was well after Siddons's run of Hamlet performances, but the attitudes expressed herein typify the terms of the debate about proper feminine behavior, on and off stage, that began with the appearance of women onstage after the Restoration and continued in full force throughout the Romantic and Victorian eras.
- [31] For a defense of cross-dressing in the same journal appearing a year later (1823), see "Female Actors." The anonymous writer argues with William Prynne, the fiery antitheatrical Puritan of Shakespearean times who spoke so stridently against acting at all. Not surprisingly, Prynne objected to cross-dressing. This writer's reference to Prynne indicates how alive and ongoing the debate continued to be throughout the Romantic period.
- [32] Carlson develops this point at length in her book, *In the Theatre of Romanticism*.
- [33] F.W. Price presents the possibility that Radcliffe may even have seen Siddons in the part. Radcliffe's wording above seems to imply she has not seen Siddons enact Hamlet, but if Radcliffe had seen Siddons in other plays, she would then have been familiar with Siddons's strengths and abilities as an actress, and been able to extrapolate them to form her interpretation of Hamlet.
- [34] William Smith Clark quotes this anonymous unpublished diarist, whom he identifies as "a twenty-one year old [sic] Dame Street solicitor (name now unknown)" (108).
- [35] The review indicates the following bibliographic information in a footnote: Fitzgerald, Percy, M.A., *The Kembles: an Account of the Kemble Family, including the Lives of Mrs. Siddons, and her brother John Philip Kemble*, London: Tinsley Bros., 1871. It notes that Fitzgerald is "author of the Life of David Garrick &c, 2 vols." but provides no page number.

- [36] Qtd. in W.J. Lawrence. The implication here is that Siddons acted Hamlet in Worcester that year.
- [37] Heather McPherson, in her study of caricatures of Siddons (“Picturing Tragedy”), examines the role of caricature in shaping cultural and political debate. She does not, however, discuss this particular caricature.
- [38] This depiction may hint that Siddons did in fact attire herself differently for this final performance of Hamlet than in Hamilton’s costume sans breeches. It is however impossible to say for certain with such slim and dubious evidence.
- [39] Pencil-drawn onto the copy of the caricature at the Harvard Theatre Collection are the words “Mrs. Galindo” underneath the woman at the arras, and “Galindo” under the man. There are portraits of fencers shown on the wall, and a side caption reads, “Engraved for the Dublin Satirist.”
- [40] Boaden speaks of “her unexpected powers of almost masculine declamation” (*Mrs. Sarah Siddons* 1: 28); Hazlitt avers that the “spirit” of Siddons is “more masculine” than that of Sir Walter Scott [qtd. in Wilson 139, 142]; and many critics at the time employ similar language. See for instance Pat Rogers’s mention of George Ticknor’s reaction to Siddons (Rogers 52–3).
- [41] See Heather McPherson, “Picturing Tragedy,” for a discussion of Siddons’s familiarity with the marketplace aspects of her public image.
- [42] See Rogers, Wilson, Roach, McPherson “Painting,” both articles by West, Asleson, and Burwick. Ribeiro and Burwick have explored how Siddons used costume and gesture to craft her desired image, and several scholars, particularly West and McPherson, as well as Shelley Bennett and Mark Leonard in their joint article, have analyzed portraits of Siddons and their resonance within and impact upon the aesthetic and artistic worlds.
- [43] See also Gill Perry, who discusses the “unfeminine” and therefore socially dangerous aspects of cross-dressing (72–3).
- [44] F.W. Price did complete a relatively thorough amount of research on this topic in 1976, which he then published in *Notes and Queries* as a study of Ann Radcliffe and Siddons. He cites a study by Naomi Royde-Smith that mentions Siddons’s playing Hamlet in Liverpool; Royde-Smith writes of Siddons that “encouraged by [Tate] Wilkinson, she played Hamlet, as she had played Rosalind, in a costume of the most inconvenient modesty” (qtd. in Price 167). So Siddons’s performance of Hamlet did excite some interest a few decades ago, but produced no in-depth critical analysis.

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Appendix: Siddons's Performances as Hamlet

Siddons's two London débuts took place in 1775 and 1782.

| City | Year | Date and/or Month(s) |
|------------|---------------|---|
| Worcester | 1775 | prior to August |
| Manchester | 1777 | 19 March ["second appearance"] |
| Liverpool? | Prior to 1782 | twice? [Holmes claims 1777; <i>Oxford Dictionary of Nat'l Biography</i> claims 1778.] |
| Bath?? | 1778 | ? [according to Holmes] |
| Bristol | 1781 | 27 June [sixth appearance according to Price] |
| Dublin | 1802–3 | at least twice, June–July 1802 |
| Dublin | 1805 | ? |

Siddons thus performed the role of Hamlet a minimum of nine times over thirty years.