

Chapter One



On Paddington Green in West London, near where the actress Sarah Siddons was buried in 1831, there stands a memorial statue erected in her honor (fig. 1). Sculpted by Leon Chavalliaud and unveiled by Henry Irving in 1897, the marble Siddons looks out over the Harrow Road at the point where drivers merge onto the Marylebone flyover in a blur of speeding cars and delivery vans. On the day I visited, several years ago, a trio of teenagers, sonically remote from both the traffic's hum and the statue's marmoreal stillness, cut across Paddington Green wielding a boom box as if it were a public address system. The pedestaled Siddons wore a toga and a noncommittal expression, her eyes focused on a point far above the candy wrappers piling up against her plinth.

No better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it,



Fig. 1. Siddons statue at Paddington Green, London.

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someone once said, and no better way for a scholar to spend an afternoon than to seek out a resonant cemetery and snap photographs.¹ The graveyard visit was a pro forma attempt to reel in the distance separating Siddons's world (turn-of-the-nineteenth-century British theater) from my world (turn-of-the-twenty-first-century American academe). I sought, somehow, to diminish my sense of alienation from Siddons's fame, which was of the excessive nature now reserved for celebrity babies and feckless rich girls. If you read the diaries and letters of nearly any Siddons contemporary—the reminiscences of statesmen, poets, painters, hangers-on—you inevitably come across a breathless account of a Siddons sighting. Joseph Severn, the painter and Keats aide-de-camp, counted the near-death experience of being trampled by Siddons fans as a transformative moment. Having often heard of “the superb acting of Mrs. Siddons,” according to William Sharp, the compiler of his letters, Severn pressed toward the overcrowded pit of the Drury Lane theater to see Siddons play Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*.² When he stumbled and fell, he was knocked unconscious; by his own account, his inert body was “flattened out like a pancake,” and the pancake was then lofted over playgoers' heads in an early instance of mosh pit transport (12). (Mob scenes, it should be noted, are as common in Siddons reminiscences as bowers are in Keats poems—Anna Seward, too, recalled “struggling through the terrible, fierce, maddening crowd into the pit.”)³ For three-quarters of an hour, Sharp writes, the concussed Severn “remained insensible, and scarcely shewed signs of life,” until Mrs. Siddons stepped out on stage, whereupon he regained his senses and sat “as one entranced and conscious of some new and vital influence in his life.” From that day, “when the power and magic of Art was borne in upon him,” Severn resolved to live the life of an artist. Looking back decades later, he would recall “with vivid speech and gestures his emotions of that far-back night” (13).

Circling the Paddington Green memorial statue, I could summon none of the wonderment that Severn described. Even though I had written about Siddons and planned to write about Siddons again, I had no accurate sense of what Severn was going on about. Siddons's ability to evoke overheated responses formed the basis of her celebrity (fig. 2). The barrister Thomas Erskine complained that Siddons failed to garner the applause she deserved because her audiences were so gobsmacked by her acting.⁴ Siddons's biographer details, at length, her

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fans' ululations: "I well remember, (how is it possible I should ever forget?) the *sobs*, the *sbrieks*, among the tenderer part of her audiences; or those *tears*, which manhood, at first, struggled to suppress, but at length grew proud of indulging. We then, indeed, knew all the *luxury* of grief; but the nerves of many a gentle being gave way before the intensity of such appeals; and fainting fits long and frequently alarmed the decorum of the house, filled almost to suffocation."⁵ Luxury of grief! If I was honest I would have to admit that on many, if not all, of those occasions when I watched a play being performed on stage, my emotional response was limited to a faint disappointment that it was not over at intermission. When Sarah Siddons played Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene for a benefit in 1812, four years before Severn's conversion experience, the ovation ended the play then and there. No Birnam Wood removing to Dunsinane, no revelation that Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped, no final battle scene, no flourishing of Macbeth's severed head. The curtain went down after the sleepwalking scene, and when it rose again, Siddons delivered a farewell address. Her fans had achieved my dream of a drastically shortened play, but not because they were getting antsy and wanted to go home and check their e-mail. They weren't thinking of all the things they'd rather be doing than watching a woman wring her hands on stage. They were enthralled by seeing (not for the first time) Siddons pretend to wash her hands in a bold departure from theatrical tradition, since Mrs. Pritchard, the actress who had previously owned the role, played the scene while carrying a candle. They stopped the play with their applause because they didn't want their peak experience diluted by watching lesser actors perform lesser scenes, not because they were looking forward to eating frozen yogurt. Or at least that's how Siddons lore would have it. By 1867, an unsigned account in *Every Saturday* magazine was recalling that when Siddons rubbed her hands during her farewell performance, "the house shuddered with an ague fit of horror and of pity." And the "frantic and ungovernable" applause that followed her departure from the stage, the shouted requests that the performance might close—these were the responses of persons "dreading an anti-climax."⁶

Siddons fan hysteria was so extreme that it invited parody. After one Siddons performance, a waggish newspaper writer reported, "One hundred and nine ladies fainted! forty-six went into fits! and ninety-five



Fig. 2. John Boyné, *For the Benefit of Mrs. Siddons* (1787), © Trustees of the British Museum.

had strong hysterics!” The mock casualty count continued: “Fourteen children, five old women, a one-handed sailor, and six common-council men, were actually drowned in the inundation of tears that flowed from the galleries, the lattices, and boxes, to encrease the briny pond in the pit.”⁷ The line separating history and hyperbole grew indistinct. Decades after Siddons’s death, Edmund Gosse earnestly claimed, “Her audiences lost all command over themselves, and sobbed, moaned, and even howled with emotion. She could sometimes scarcely be heard, so loud were the lamentations of the pit. . . . Fashionable doctors attended in the theater with the expectation of being amply occupied throughout the close of the performance.”⁸

I walked around the Siddons statue a few more times, pausing to examine the face that peers out from behind the skirt of Siddons’s Grecian drapery. The mask of tragedy recalled Joshua Reynolds’s iconic 1784 portrait *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, which served as a model for Chavalliaud’s sculpture (fig. 3). In Reynolds’s painting, Siddons, festooned in ropes of pearl and a copper-colored, satin-sheened dress, sits on a throne with the figures of tragedy and comedy looming out of the darkness over her shoulders. The painting was exhibited by Joshua



Fig. 3. Joshua Reynolds, *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784), Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.

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Reynolds in 1784, two years after Siddons made her second London debut. She had first appeared on the London stage in 1776, as David Garrick's protégé, but she met with weak reviews and was overshadowed by Garrick himself, who was bidding an attenuated farewell to the stage. When she reemerged on the Drury Lane stage, playing Isabella in *Isabella; or, The Fatal Marriage* in 1782, she awoke to find herself famous—after six years of waking to find herself semifamous in the provinces. The Reynolds painting became part of a proliferation of Siddons paintings and drawings, both hagiographic and demonic, that multiplied over the course of her subsequent three-decade career. More recently, it has become a totem of Siddons studies, inspiring a 1999 exhibition at the Getty Museum. The exhibition, in turn, generated a volume of essays devoted to Siddons and her portraits, and one of the exhibition's curators, Robyn Asleson, went on to edit a second volume of essays, *Notorious Muse* (2003), focusing more generally on the actress in British art and culture, but repeatedly and productively circling back to Siddons.

Asleson's two anthologies direct attention to Siddons's physical appearance, both because the lavishly illustrated volumes reproduce a panoply of Siddons portraits and caricatures and because they have led renowned theater historians to reassess several aspects of her visual presentation. In essays gathered in *Notorious Muse*, Aileen Ribeiro discusses Siddons's costuming, Frederick Burwick analyzes Siddons's use of gesture, Shearer West shows how Siddons got conflated with plastic works of art, and Joseph Roach reveals how Siddons's person became associated with images of sacral monarchy.⁹ But even before Asleson's estimable anthologies made their way into print, Siddons scholars had been using Reynolds's portrait to highlight her formidable physical presence. Pat Rogers's influential 1991 essay, "Towering Beyond Her Sex," ushered in a wave of Siddons scholarship that used Siddons portraiture (which is helpfully cataloged at the end of the Siddons entry in Philip H. Highfill's *Biographical Dictionary of Actors*) to discuss Siddons's stage persona.¹⁰

Standing in Paddington Green, looking up at the Siddons statue which was supposedly modeled after the iconic Reynolds portrait, I was not thinking about the visual turn of recent Siddons scholarship. It was only later that I began to consider how this emphasis dominates theater history in general, and also romantic studies, which has also taken a

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strong visual turn in recent years.¹¹ No, looking at the Siddons memorial, I was thinking only of the similarity of gesture between the Reynolds portrait and the statue. In both portrait and statue Siddons raises her left hand, signaling that she is about to speak.¹²

Many less flattering Siddons portraits, I began to recall, also depict the actress as if she is about to speak. A caricature dating from 1786 depicts her as “Queen Rant,” glaring in profile with hair blown back as if by the force of her orations (fig. 4). In Thomas Rowlandson’s drawing of Siddons rehearsing (fig. 5) and in a theatrical portrait from the *Attic Miscellany* (fig. 6), Siddons has one arm thrust out and the other placed before her bosom, in what was for her a favorite stance. In a painting of Siddons performing in the same play that poleaxed Severn, George Henry Harlow’s *The Court for the Trial of Queen Katharine*, Siddons is poised in midspeech, her right arm thrust out in an accusatory gesture (fig. 7).

The memory of all those poised-to-speak Siddonses, and the silence of the statue amid the traffic noise of Paddington Green, suddenly underscored an obvious point: I had no idea how Siddons sounded. This explained why I could read about Joseph Severn’s life-altering Siddons encounter without really understanding why he was so moved. Severn especially admired Siddons’s portrayal of Queen Katherine’s dying scene, in which she was “altogether changed from what she had been, save for that deep touching voice whose tones, whether loud and impassioned or soft and pathetic, were like the finest music.” Siddons’s voice, according to Severn, “thrilled the air with melodious tones, and at the same time touched the heart with such deep pathos that the audience seemed to think it a merit to shed tears and thus appropriately accompany such sublime acting” (qtd. in Sharp, 14n). I had no way of apprehending how Siddons’s “deep touching voice” sounded, since I would never hear Siddons speak.¹³

It was more than a little absurd that I stood in a cemetery in London thinking about how Siddons might have sounded, since, as a general rule, I was a notoriously bad listener who regularly finished sentences for my children. Once, while being interviewed on a radio show, I responded to everything the host said with the word “right.” Right! . . . Right! . . . Right! I meant to communicate chummy agreement, but the word sounded like Khrushchev’s shoe descending, like a peremptory attempt to hustle things along.



Fig. 4. "Queen Rant," detail of
"The Caricurers Stock in Trade"
(1786), Courtesy of the Lewis
Walpole Library, Yale University.



Fig. 5. Thomas Rowlandson,
*Mrs. Siddons, Old Kemble,
and Henderson, Rehearsing
in the Green Room* (1789),
Courtesy of the Huntington
Library, Art Collections,
and Botanical Gardens, San
Marino, California.



Fig. 6. “How to harrow up the Soul—Oh-h-h!” (1790), TS 931.2F, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



Fig. 7. George Henry Harlow, *The Court for the Trial of Queen Katharine* (1817), Walter Morrison Collection, Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, Gloucestershire.

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No matter. Right then and there, three miles from the Drury Lane theater where Severn saw Siddons perform, a stone's throw from the cemetery where Siddons is buried, within shouting distance of a woman sharing her sandwich with two mottled pigeons, directly below the Siddons memorial statue that was being passed daily by thousands of motorists, some obliviously honking—I resolved to discover how Sarah Siddons sounded.