Working Mothers on the Romantic Stage: Sarah Siddons and Mary Robinson

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Working Mothers on the Romantic Stage
Sarah Siddons and Mary Robinson

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1 March 2013
A smooth black band drawn over an impossibly white neck, a luminous bust barely concealed under fashionable *dishabillé*, powdered locks set off by a black hat profuse with feathers—these focal points, and many others, are common to two of the Romantic-era’s most famous celebrity portraits: Sir Joshua Reynolds’s “Mrs. Mary Robinson” (1782) and Thomas Gainsborough’s “Sarah Siddons” (1785). (See figure 1.) Despite both drawing on modish iconography in their choice of composition, pose, and costume, Reynolds and Gainsborough manage to create disparate tones. Siddons awes as a noble matron, whereas Robinson oozes sexuality with a “come hither” stare. The paintings’ contrasting tones reflect and promulgate the popular perceptions of these two Romantic-era actresses from the playhouse and the media. In the early 1780s Siddons was routinely referred to as a “queen” or a “goddess,” whereas Robinson was unceremoniously maligned by her detractors as a “whore.”¹ Current scholarship on Siddons and Robinson devotes considerable attention to how these women’s semi-private sexual lives had major influence over their respective characterizations. By most accounts, Siddons maintained marital chastity until she allegedly indulged in extra-marital dalliances in middle-age once her reputation was solidified.² Robinson, on the other hand, spent her early adulthood as the mistress to a series of wealthy and influential men, including the Prince of Wales, Banastre Tarleton, and Charles James Fox, with the tacit support of her profligate husband. (In “Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens,” Thomas Rowlandson even depicts Mr. Robinson acting as procurer for the Prince’s affair with Mary.) The differences between Siddons’s and Robinson’s early sexual histories are meaningful. Yet, this article seeks to trouble these dominant narratives of public perception by examining how the narratives evolved as Siddons and Robinson managed their images in response to life-changing events and alterations, including childbirth, motherhood, aging, and illness.
As the similarity between the Gainsborough and Reynolds portraits suggest, these two stage mothers were not so terribly different. Each married an employment-averse husband, worked through multiple pregnancies and births, and supported her family over a lifetime through a variety of public performances. The first part of this article explores how, in the early 1780s period when both young mothers came on to the London scene, Robinson chose to promote her stage career by her role as the mistress to royalty—a proven public relations strategy pioneered in the Restoration by figures such as Nell Gwynn—and to elide the material reality of her motherhood in her self-representation. In contrast, Siddons, worked to recast the conversation about what an actress-mother could and should be. Promoting herself as a legitimate artist, Siddons leveraged the respectability of motherhood through a series of brilliant public relations moves to naturalize her appearance on stage and to authorize her celebrity.

Despite their opposing reputations, Siddons and Robinson used the same tools, including portraiture, self-reflexive writing, and role play to make the rhetorical space necessary to manage their celebrity personas. Over the course of their careers, these actress-mothers balanced their sexuality and maternity in order to create and to maintain public identities, justify their fame and professionalism, and maintain the public’s interest. The public, of course, pushed back on these efforts at self-fashioning, and each woman was the target of ridicule in the popular media. In the early 1780s Siddons was more successful than Robinson in using her celebrity to gain financial security and social status. Yet, as time marched on and both women’s bodies suffered the effects of multiple pregnancies, illness, and aging, Robinson’s public relations strategies evolved in response to these changes. By the early 1800s, the relative balance of maternity and sexuality in their public identities reversed course. Despite her hard-won status as respectable matron, Siddons was increasingly criticized for displaying her aging body, especially when she attempted
roles that depended upon sexual allure. Robinson, who had long traded on her celebrity identity as a desirable and desiring mistress, moved away from circulating her sexualized image and instead refashioned herself through print.⁴ Although the more vicious media outlets continued to harp on her early sexuality long after she was completely disabled and living alone, in the later part of her life, Robinson successfully created a competing vision of herself as a long-suffering mother and Romantic artist largely through her writing. Mary’s poetic and biographical masquerade allowed her to take on new personas, whereas Siddons’s continued recourse to formal portraiture exposed her aging and expanding body to degrees of ridicule or disgust. This shifting balance is vital to our understanding of the available strategies employed by actress-mothers to negotiate the competing concerns of motherhood and celebrity and to make public fame ideologically compatible with having children.

As Toni Bowers, Ann Mellor, Jane Spencer and, more recently, Jennie Batchelor have demonstrated, the discourse surrounding motherhood went through several important changes over the course of the Enlightenment and the Romantic era. Authors deployed motherhood’s rich metaphoric potential to construct ideologies surrounding everything from nationalism to authorship.⁵ In addition, the biological reality of motherhood morphed into a status or vocation that was romanticized, known as the “cult of motherhood.” Not only did the idealization of motherhood provide opportunities to control and to surveil women’s behavior, as Julie Kipp suggests, it also enabled a discourse in which women’s “natural” role in creation offered a ready model to discuss women as creators of art.⁶ Reconciling motherhood and work, though, becomes increasingly complicated when one factors in the visibility of celebrity actresses. Brenda Weber’s recent PMLA article demonstrates how motherhood and celebrity have been viewed as “incompatible” from the nineteenth century onward. Her discussion of pilloried
reality TV star Kate Gosselin underscores “the discursive punishments heaped on mothers who seek fame as well as the discursive strategies deployed by famous mothers to make their celebrity and their children ideologically compatible.” My discussion traces the intersection of motherhood and celebrity back to an earlier historical moment, suggesting that much about performance, self-fashioning, and discursive practice can be learned by examining how Siddons and Robinson launched multi-media campaigns to harmonize their careers as public performers with the material and social realities of female embodiment.

Robinson and Siddons are not unique among their peers for being stage mothers. Most of the actresses of this period performed during and after pregnancies. However, I contrast their two examples because they both maintained high profiles over a long period of time—a feat that required great public mediation to achieve. Although the women had no social relationship—Siddons even snubbed Robinson because of the taint her acquaintance might confer—their biographies have important similarities that suggest they probably faced similar domestic and professional struggles in their early employment. Both began their London stage careers at about the same time in the 1780s when they were already married mothers. Most important, both women saw themselves as artists whose creative abilities transcended the stage. Robinson was a professional writer even before she became famous. She published her *Poems by Mrs. Robinson* in 1775, and from 1788 on wrote prolifically and successfully in verse, prose, and non-fiction forms. Siddons also wrote verse—some of which she performed on stage—and actively practiced sculpture.

Despite the fascination these women hold as individuals, this article intervenes in a larger discussion about the role intertextuality plays in creating the rhetorical space for women to represent themselves as theatrical working mothers. Actresses had to manage several competing
representations of motherhood. First, as discussed by Gill Perry, Shearer West, Laura Engel, and others, the public felt (much as they do today) that they “knew” the actresses personally, a phenomenon indebted to the proliferation of print ephemera and the vogue for celebrity watching. Actresses, in turn, were aware of the public’s interest in and knowledge of their “real life” and attempted to influence the perception of that “reality.” On stage, eighteenth-century actress-mothers regularly performed maternal roles with stage children. For both Robinson and Siddons, there is an enormous amount of slippage between the real and the theatrical concerning this phenomenon. This slippage extended to the spectators’ lives as well. Through reading and recitation, consumers interacted in private with the version of the characters that actresses produced in public. As readers revisited plays, a loved star’s portrayal was relived in the imagination. Charles Lamb notes this phenomenon in a letter, claiming that “We Speak of Lady Macbeth, while we are in reality thinking of Mrs. S[iddons].” In addition, the rise of amateur theatrical clubs allowed women to embody their favorite actresses in their most well-known parts. Like high profile actresses, society ladies commissioned their own theatrical portraits such as Daniel Gardner’s “The Three Witches from Macbeth” (1775) and even Queen Charlotte indulged having her children painted while engaging in amateur theatricals. Thus elite women had the opportunity to “play” at being theatrical stars in addition to playacting dramatic roles. Siddons and Robinson prove keenly aware of the many layers of performance and intertextuality they must negotiate to achieve their desired persona. Yet, I want to stress here that for these women playacting was serious business that provided the salary upon which their families’ well-being depended, an economic reality never to lose sight of as one thinks about performance.
This economic reality was particularly pressing when the two young mothers were attempting to break into the highly competitive London patent theatres. Undergoing multiple pregnancies and caring for several dependent children could be viewed as a career liability. Consider Garrick’s famous exchange with scout and agent Henry Bate in which both men write of their concern over Siddons “big belly” before initially contracting her for Drury Lane.\textsuperscript{14} Yet, as Julie Carlson notes, Siddons “capitaliz[es] from the start of her career on the power of motherhood to sanction professional ambitions.”\textsuperscript{15} Nowhere was this strategy more effectively employed than in her transition from the Theatre Royal Bath to Drury Lane during her London “comeback” season in 1782. Much depended on this comeback. After a disastrous London debut in 1775, Siddons retreated to the provinces. Having perfected her craft in Bath, she was rehired by Sheridan for the 1782 season. London meant more money, fame, and prestige, but Siddons needed to tread carefully--alienating her Bath audience would make a second retreat impossible.

To quell any resentment about her move, Siddons invoked a vision of a particular type of sacrificial motherhood through both role play and her own direct poetic address to her audience. For her final Bath benefit night, Siddons played Andromache in \textit{The Distrest Mother} (1712), a heroine renown for her faithful widowhood and maternal virtue. In the play, Andromache accepts the unwanted marriage proposal of her enemy captor, Pyrrhus, in order to save the life of her son, Astyanax. (Pyrrhus is ready to cede Astyanax to the Greek ambassador, who plans to assassinate the boy, if Andromache will not wed him.) Unwilling to break faith with her dead husband, Hector, she plans to kill herself after the marriage ceremony, thus securing a protective “father” for Astyanax without having to consummate her marriage with Hector’s erstwhile
enemy. Her contemplated suicide is only pre-empted by Pyrrhus’s murder. A model widow, Andromache emphasizes how she only lives for her son and Hector’s memory:

Andromache will not be false to Pyrrhus, / Nor violate her sacred love to Hector. / This hour I’ll meet the king [Pyrrhus]; the holy priest / Shall join us, and confirm our mutual vows. / This will secure a father to my child: / That done, I have no farther use for life: / This pointed dagger, this determined hand, / Shall save my virtue, and conclude my woes.¹⁶

Despite its setting, the play lauds a more contemporary conception of maternal virtue over the classical ideal of virtue that emphasizes courage and justice. Andromache’s plan hinges on a willingness to put her son’s well being above considerations of family and national honor. By marrying (however briefly) Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, she would ally herself with her Trojan people’s greatest enemy and make the son of Hector’s murderer Astyanax’s stepfather. Although she claims she “will not be false to Pyrrhus,” her plan to commit suicide just after taking the marriage vow also reveals her acting in bad faith. Yet, the play’s denouement authorizes Andromache’s decision to choose family love over patriotism and suggests that her maternal solicitude is heroic, rather than dishonorable. Her enemies--both Pyrrhus and the Greeks--serendipitously annihilate each other. With her son safe, Andromache expresses “an ecstasy, that mothers only feel,” concluding the play with the following lines: “When prest by dangers, and beset with foes; / The gods their timely succour interpose; / And when our virtue sinks, o’erwhelm’d with grief, / By unforeseen expediens brings relief” (46). Here she acknowledges that her fear of Astyanax’s possible murder has “sunk” her classical “virtue,” yet the “gods” reward her prioritization of narrow concerns--a mother’s love trumps all.
Siddons underscores the play’s themes about the glory of maternal love when she gives her famous “Three Reasons” speech immediately following the play. When the visibly pregnant Siddons brings her three children on stage to plead forgiveness for abandoning Bath, the audience is being asked to draw a parallel between the “distrest” Andromache and the distressed actress. While Andromache is beset by the unwanted attentions and threats of Pyrrhus, Siddons portrays herself as equally pressured by the demands of her growing family. Siddons denies any personal ambition and claims that the move to London is in support of her children. In her own words, she concedes that a mother should remain “content” and not take “risks” for “gain.” Yet, she argues that the overwhelming needs of her three (and potentially four) children have outstripped her earning power at Bath. As other critics have noted, the rhetorical power of this speech, coupled with the spectacle of her pregnant body and three small children make it difficult for audiences to resent her move. In addition to evoking sympathy, the speech and spectacle also shrink the barrier between the workaday audience and the star in ways that allow for the pleasurable participation in her “private” life that I discuss in this article’s introduction.

Inspired perhaps by the rhetorical success of her “Three Reasons” speech, when Siddons arrives in London, she chooses to play another distressed widow, Isabella, in Thomas Southerne’s *Isabella; or the Fatal Marriage* (1694) for her first comeback performance. Rather than bringing her children on stage in an afterpiece, she incorporates her son Henry into the play itself, having him play opposite her as Isabella’s son. This moment in theatrical history encapsulates many of the points I want to make about intertextuality and performativity in relation to mothers on the eighteenth-century stage. Because so much depended on her success, Siddons released a full arsenal of discursive strategies to promote this performance, exploiting the audience’s desire to participate in the “private” life of the public figure; the emotional impact
of seeing a “real” mother play opposite her son; and the self-marketing opportunities available via portraiture.

The theatrical portrait provided a powerful means for Siddons to craft her public persona, and her maternal *coup de théâtre* is immortalized in William Hamilton’s “Mrs. Siddons and Her Son in the Tragedy of Isabella” (1783). Images of Siddons, Robinson, and many other actresses deluged the 1780s marketplace and included everything from formal portraits by the masters (Gainsborough, Hoppner, Lawrence, Reynolds, Romney, et al.) to stipple engravings and mezzotints, to vulgar caricatures. Although one could argue that these portraits represent a male artist’s vision of an objectified female, by their own account, the actresses had a fair amount of agency in constructing their visual narratives. Robyn Asleson, Lindal Buchanan, and others have demonstrated how the *Isabella* portrait does several types of rhetorical work, including bolstering Siddons’s self-fashioning as a dignified matron working tirelessly to support her children and advertising Siddons’s exceptional talents as a heroine of sentimental tragedy. The performance and its accompanying portrait worked almost too well; because of *Isabella*’s success, Siddons’s frequent casting in sentimental, maternal roles in plays such as *The Tragedy of Douglas* (1756) and *The Regent* (1788) made her wary of typecasting in her early career.

Hamilton’s portrait, now best known by its derivative engraving by James Caldwall, ostensibly depicts the moment in the play in which Isabella refuses to surrender guardianship of her son to her father-in-law, Count Baldwin, claiming she would rather beg than be parted from her son. (See figure 2.) In response to Baldwin’s request, Isabella exclaims: “What! take him from me / No, we must never part. / I live but in my child / No, let me pray in vain, and beg my bread / From door to door, to feed his daily wants, / Rather than always lose him.” In Siddons’s contemporary moment audiences interpreted this speech as a display of maternal...
virtue. Isabella would rather remain penniless and together with her son than surrender the child to his rich grandfather. Such an interpretation reinforces the exact image that Siddons is trying to convey, that of a mother ready to do anything to remain close to her children. When read more cynically, however, the lines also suggest Isabella’s, and by association, Siddons’s selfishness. She declares that her psychological existence is dependent upon the boy—“I live but in my child”—and that she would rather he barely subsist than she “always lose him.” Her fears of abandonment take precedence over his physical well being. Examined carefully, Isabella is a mixed character, who incorporates both maternal devotion and narcissism, a mixture echoed in Siddons’s decision to drag Henry onstage to secure her success and future earnings.

At this early moment in her career, however, the Hamilton portrait tapped into a very real audience need to consume the sentimental mother in all her forms. In terms of marketing Siddons’s celebrity, the portrait also bolsters audience members’ memories of the performance by keeping the real/stage mother in the visual field long after the ephemeral performance has vanished. While Siddons playing opposite her son was highly effective during Isabella’s run—“there was scarce a dry eye in the whole house, and the two Ladies in the boxes actually fainted”--that emotional intensity erodes over time and exposure to new images. Yet, being able to revisit the scene via portraiture refreshes a fan’s enthusiasm in ways that mutually support both portrait and performance. When discussing the avidity with which fans sought out the exhibited portrait, Siddons’s early biographer notes: “Carriages thronged the artist’s door; and, if every fine lady who stepped out of them did not actually weep before the painting, they had all of them, at least their white handkerchiefs ready for that demonstration of their sensibility.” The many layers of performance here are noteworthy. The ladies have an opportunity to perform “their sensibility” while viewing an artistic rendering of an actress’s
performance of a performance of her real motherhood. Although I am separating these multiple layers of performativity here, at least one contemporary diary testifies that fans felt that there was an unexamined “naturalness” to these types of interactions. Society lady Mary Hamilton writes for 1 April 1783, “Saw a picture of Mrs. Siddons in the character of Isabella in ‘The Fatal Marriage’ . . . we also went to see Mrs. Siddons picture by Hamilton . . . My cousin and self went to see the Play, saw Mrs. Siddons in the character of ‘Calister’ [sic] in the ‘Fair Penitent.’”

Because it was handled so deftly, Siddons’s highly visible maternal performance paradoxically authorized her to work more. Through Isabella, she naturalized the performance of motherhood onstage and in life, making her continued public work not only acceptable, but highly desirable.

There are costs associated with Siddons’s willingness to highlight her maternity both on and offstage, however, that other treatments of the “Three Reasons” speech and the Isabella portrait have yet to discuss. By parading her brood and her pregnant body on stage, Siddons draws attention to her active sexual life. Playing characters such as Andromache and Isabella, who staunchly remain faithful to their husbands’ memories, and Siddons’s own dignified deportment, often evoked a sense of awe in audiences. Yet, as the audience also knows, Siddons is not a widow, but a married woman. Her obvious pregnancy and the existing children provide incontrovertible evidence that she has most likely felt desire and has not been above the desire of others. She is not, in reality, the “captive queen” or destitute widow she plays on stage.

Awareness of this rhetorical cost is important in evaluating the sexually degrading caricatures of Siddons that circulated during her early career and became increasingly vicious as she aged. Although Siddons was never treated with the kind of violent misogyny that Robinson endured, she was not as untouchable as some critics have suggested. In “The Rival Queens of Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres” (1782) a bare-breasted Siddons and Mary Anne Yates
duke it out for the status of leading lady, suggesting that neither actress is above using her body advantageously to further her ambition. Also of note is James Gillray’s “Melpomene” (1784), usually read as an indictment of Siddons’s rapacity after she plays Lady Macbeth in her third trimester. Less discussed is the highly sexualized imagery Gillray employs to make this indictment, some of which is not immediately evident until one looks at the full-size, original print. With her breast almost completely exposed, Siddons gestures toward a money bag cleverly suspended over the Devil’s phallic pitchfork in a way highly suggestive of testicles. Thus, Siddons reaches not only for filthy lucre, but also a diabolical set of male genitalia, reinforcing the stereotype of actress as prostitute. The caption, which reads, “Famish’d & spent relieving others woe, Your poor devoted suppliant only begs, This morsel for to buy a bit of Bread,” openly mocks Siddons’s rhetorical strategy in the “Three Reasons” speech. Gillray’s text also resonates with Isabella’s expressed willingness to go begging in support of her son while at the same time suggesting disbelief about the real Siddons’s contention that she works just to support her growing family. Here, motherhood, money, and sex are conflated in ways that Siddons’s own self-fashioning had continually tried to guard against.

Some of this conflation can be attributed to the sub-text of the roles, such as Andromache and Isabella, that Siddons so effectively chose. As the earlier sections detail, these roles help to valorize motherhood but they also leave Siddons open to association with the less savory stereotypes about widowhood. The most famous of these is the depiction of the Ephesian Matron in the Satyricon of the late first century AD. Although renown for her chastity and faithfulness to her husband even after death, the Matron is eventually seduced by a soldier within her husband’s very tomb. The narrator offers the tale as proof of “how quickly they [women] forgot even their children” and “that there was no woman so chaste that she could not be
distracted to the point of madness with lust for some stranger.”  This tale retained its force within the popular imagination and was frequently reinterpreted for eighteenth-century audiences in a variety of genres. For example, Eliza Haywood’s eponymous heroine in Fantomina (1725) draws on this legend to craft one of her seductive personas. Thomas Dibdin staged a comic opera, appropriately named The Ephesian Matron, needling women on this theme at Ranelagh Gardens in 1769. The captive Andromache and the penniless Isabella are beautiful, sexually-initiated women who have no patriarchal protection, either through a husband or father. These characters are, by inference, rendered available to sexual advances either through force or persuasion. That both Andromache and Isabella entertain second marriage proposals, despite their faithfulness and concern for their children, testifies to just how vulnerable these female characters really are. So while being perceived as or playing a good mother shields Siddons from some types of criticism, it also highlights her status as a sexually active woman.

Mary Robinson too had to negotiate her appearance on stage with the material reality of her pregnant body. Robinson attempted to downplay the link between sexuality and motherhood after she began her affair with the Prince of Wales in 1780. Yet early on in her career, she chose roles and marketed herself in ways compatible with maternity. Such a strategy makes sense, given that Robinson had one living daughter (Maria Elizabeth) by the time she had her London debut. She would experience the death of another (Sophia) in infancy and suffer at least one miscarriage by the time she left the stage. Unlike Siddons, Robinson was perpetually cash-strapped due to her husband’s profligacy and her own interest in the high life. For her benefit night in 1777, Robinson wisely chose to play the part of a pregnant “Fanny” in The Clandestine Marriage (1766). Eight months into her pregnancy, Robinson’s material body fit the needs of the part. The dialogue makes reference to Fanny’s attempts to hide her expanding belly and puns
on the notion her growing body as a “tell-tale” sign that will expose the clandestine marriage eventually. The spectacle of Robinson’s real pregnancy also creates a visual sub-text that drives home the expectant mother’s need for the proceeds of this benefit. The audience responded to this strategy, and Robinson earned £189 in one night. Indeed, as the playbill announced, Robinson even sold the advance tickets herself from her home at “19 Southampton Street, Covent Garden.” Those calling on Robinson to purchase for the benefit night could thus “preview” the maternal body in anticipation of the performance, making it easier to conflate mother and character into one embodiment.

As with Siddons’s portrayal of Isabella, Robinson’s Fanny suggests the ways in which actresses actively collapsed the distinction between art and life. Just four years earlier, Robinson had made her own secret marriage to Thomas Robinson. Thomas convinced Mary and her mother to keep the marriage private ostensibly because he was afraid to reveal it to his “uncle” (who turns out to be his natural father) before he had finished his professional training. Mary’s Memoirs describe these events as if they are the plot to a play, using terms that mimic Coleman’s and Garrick’s title. “These circumstances were repeatedly urged in favour of the union. Still I felt an almost instinctive repugnance at the thought of a clandestine marriage.” Mary recounts fears of her first pregnancy being detected before the marriage is announced, echoing Fanny’s lamentations on the same subject in the first two acts of the play. A comedy, The Clandestine Marriage ends with happy lovers. Mary’s life, however, was more on the order of a tragedy. Thomas Robinson’s father refused to settle money on him once he learned about his comparatively poor and pregnant daughter-in-law. In fact, Mary gives birth to Maria Elizabeth just prior to a stint in debtor’s prison. While the audience might not have known Mary’s history, Garrick, a long-time friend, must have seen her suitability to interpret the part. Subsequently,
this performance suggested the language that Mary used to interpret the duplicitous origin of her marriage and stage herself as Thomas’s victim in her *Memoirs*.

This slippage between the theatrical and biographical mother disappears after her fateful performance in December 1779 as Perdita in Garrick’s *Florizel and Perdita* (1756). The Prince of Wales (later George IV) became so enamored after seeing Robinson in this role that he instigated a very public, scandalous affair with her. Awed by her beauty on stage, the Prince created an elaborate sexual and romantic fantasy around that role. He began writing to Robinson by addressing her as “Perdita” and signing in the name of that character’s lover, “Florizel.” Once the letters’ content was leaked, Mary was henceforth known as “Perdita” or as “Mrs. Perdita Robinson” even long after the affair ended. (Reports of the affair’s length vary. The physical component began around June of 1780 and ended at the earliest in December of 1780 and at the latest in August of 1781.33) Using a pseudonym allows the Prince to maintain his anonymity, but it also underscores how easily spectators conflated an actress’s stage persona with her person. The Prince extended his playhouse fantasy into the bedroom, and the popular media used this private fantasy to characterize Robinson’s public reputation for many years. The affair even spawned two epistolary novels that claimed to be the genuine correspondence of Florizel and Perdita.34 Robinson was not a passive victim of this new version of private/public role play. In the play, Perdita is, of course, not a young mother but a maiden princess living incognito as a shepherd girl. In order to maintain the Prince’s interest and the public’s enthusiasm about the romance, Robinson elided her status as mother and wife during the height of her stage career in order to promote herself within the fashionable world.

Like Siddons, she used portraiture to promulgate the feminine image with which she most desired to be associated. Her most famous early portrait, Gainsborough’s “Mrs. Perdita
Robinson” (1781), emphasizes the sexual, rather than the maternal function of her body and promotes the Perdita fantasy by commemorating the real Robinson’s affair with the Prince. (See figure 3.) The timing of the affair is important to reading the portrait. Ann Mellor suggests that Gainsborough painted it for the Prince in 1781.35 Read in that context, Gainsborough’s memorialization of sexual role play seems less problematic; his audience is Perdita’s Florizel. In her exhaustive biography of Robinson, Paula Byrne offers a more complicated scenario, demonstrating that the Prince paradoxically commissioned the portrait during a period in which he was trying to rid himself from the real Robinson.36 Byrne suggests that this seeming contradiction can be understood by considering the portrait as a “souvenir,” which eventually hung at the Prince’s residence: Carlton House (155). One can also consider a third possibility in which the affair has already ended and Robinson’s choice to be depicted as Perdita seems to be much more a calculated public relations strategy than a memento for a lover.

The Gainsborough portrait uses body and costume to send a complicated message to the public. Robinson looks invitingly at the viewer who, at the same time, gets to linger over her blushing cheeks, white bosom, and exposed foot and ankle. There is an intimacy with the viewer denied in Siddons’s “Isabella” portrait, in which the main emotional connection is shared between the heroine and her son. Robinson holds the Prince’s recognizable miniature portrait in her hand, a gift he had given her months before, creating a lasting visual symbol of the short affair. As others have noted, the dog suggests her constancy in love and perhaps, in panting, her urgent desire for the Prince.37 Much in the way that the “Isabella” portrait reminds audiences of Siddons’s moving performance, the Gainsborough portrait keeps Robinson’s royal associations fresh in the public mind. The image belies reality. Robinson moved on to other powerful “patrons” and friends of the Prince (Lord Malden and Colonel Banastre Tarleton) in quick
succession soon after the breakup. Yet, the portrait characterizes Robinson as a martyr to an unwise passion, rather than as an opportunist or fortune hunter, which many believed her to be.

In 1783, Robinson fell prey to a catastrophic fever, possibly from rheumatism or a miscarriage, which partially paralyzed her, hastened her death, and rendered it difficult for her to continue marketing herself as a sex symbol. Michael Gamer and Terry Robinson have discussed at length how Robinson then re-invented herself as an intellectual and mother over a period of several years. Soon after her illness, she attempted to adapt her proven visual strategies to accommodate her changed physical condition. Because she could not walk easily, she paraded around London in luxurious carriages to still appear as one of the *beau monde*. By persisting in the suggestion of her physical availability and desirability, Robinson left herself open to ongoing ribald caricatures, including “Perdita upon her Last Legs” (1784) and “The Adventure of Prince Pretty Man” (1784). Perhaps shocked by these cruel images, Robinson eventually realized that literary, rather than visual, marketing strategies provided the most effective means of re-invention. Through her role as a Della Cruscan poet, sentimental novelist, and journalist for the *Morning Post*, she recast the conversation about her image. As Gamer and Robinson note, Mary Robinson’s posthumous 1801 *Memoir* presents her embodying a variety of personae including a devoted mother, a sentimental heroine, and an artistic genius. The diversity of these roles can be seen in her many alias, including “Sappho,” “Laura,” and “Tabitha Bramble”--names that associated her with an array of artistic and literary types. Print allowed Robinson to masquerade in ways that her disabled body precluded.

While Robinson’s sudden public embrace of motherhood in this period invites a degree of cynicism, several facts about how the *Memoir* was published and vignettes contained within it suggest that Robinson was a strong and devoted mother in real life. First, the *Memoirs* are the
creation of a mother-daughter authorial team. Robinson began to write the Memoirs in January 1798 and continued to work on the project until her death in 1800. Her daughter, Maria Elizabeth, completes the last third of the narrative as her “editor.” In the advertisement, Maria acknowledges that some might find her notorious mother’s biography in bad taste, yet she deflects criticism by insisting that she is obeying “the solemn injunction” of and fulfilling “the promise pledged” to her dying parent (emphasis original). 40 As a minimum proof of affection, Maria Elizabeth is prepared to brave social sanction to fulfill her filial obligations. Yet, her expressed attachment to her mother goes well beyond duty. In a display of extreme emotion, Maria waxes poetic in the third-person voice, suggesting that Mary Robinson was a saintly mother in need of justification:

. . . added to the sacred obligation imposed upon her, it is impossible that she [Maria Elizabeth] can feel indifferent to the vindication of a being so beloved, and ever to be lamented, whose real character was little known, and who, in various instances, was the victim of calumny and misrepresentation. If a Daughter has erred in fulfilling the desire of the most affectionate and tender Mother, she must appeal from the severity of criticism, and the malevolence of prejudice, to a higher tribunal!--The sympathies of nature will plead her excuse. Dear sainted PARENT!--You are now obeyed. (xv, emphasis original)

Maria’s use of religious language--“sacred,” “higher tribunal,” “sainted”--attempts to create an inviolate barrier around her mother’s memory and suggests that it is sacrilege to criticize the deceased Robinson. One can partly explain the advertisement’s histrionic tone by recalling the fashion for sensibility and recognizing Maria Elizabeth’s very real grief. Yet, even stripped of
its italics, capitalizations, and exclamation points, the content suggests that a strong mother-daughter bond existed in life that Maria Elizabeth wants to advertise to the public.

The Memoirs themselves give some indication of how that strong bond was forged. By Robinson’s own account, she prioritized motherhood from the time she was pregnant with Maria Elizabeth. Before her confinement, she describes her first act of maternal self-sacrifice. An admitted clothes-horse, Robinson converts her own finery into baby clothes: “my finest muslin dresses I converted into frocks and robes; with my lace I fondly trimmed them” (65). Unlike other women of her station, she executes the mundane tasks of childrearing (feeding, bathing, dressing) in an unassuming way. She claims that this is the only responsible course of action: “I had too often heard of the neglect which servants show to young children, and I resolved never to expose an infant of mine either to their ignorance or inattention” (77). Yet, several demands divide her attention. In one vignette, she recounts correcting proofs of her Poems while Maria slept “in a small basket near [her] chair” (77). She nursed Maria Elizabeth for a much longer period than social convention demanded (two years) and continued while pregnant with her second child, Sophia. Rather than lauding her maternal devotion, she recounts fears that the demands of nursing and pregnancy will jeopardize her success at Drury Lane because the physical stress has hampered her appearance. When Sheridan, scouting for Drury Lane, comes to visit, Robinson feels abashed by her dowdy and careworn appearance:

I was then some months advanced in a state of domestic solicitude, and my health seemed in a precarious state, owing to my having too long devoted myself to the duties of a mother in nursing my eldest daughter Maria. . . . I was overwhelmed with confusion: I know not why; but I felt a sense of mortification when I observed that my appearance
was carelessly *dishabillé*, and my mind as little prepared for what I guessed to be the motive of his visit.\(^{42}\)

The always vain Robinson, who takes pains in the *Memoir* to illustrate exactly what she wore on every important occasion, seems uncharacteristically vulnerable here. Rather than sporting a fashionable *dishabillé* costume, as she does in the first Reynolds portrait, here the *dishabillé* functions as a type of eighteenth-century equivalent to a sweatsuit. She is “mortified” to be seen as unattractive by the very person she most wants to impress, Sheridan. Her concern, however, goes beyond simple vanity. In a profession in which physical beauty is highly valued, Robinson’s unflattering appearance can severely constrain her ability to earn a living, an ability that becomes of greater value now that another baby is on the way.

While Robinson was refashioning her image for posterity in print, Siddons still enjoyed an active stage career. As she aged, however, Siddons had to contend with the same concern over diminished physical beauty that Robinson writes about in relation to pregnancy and nursing. By the 1790s Siddons’s face reflected her middle age and she had gained a considerable amount of weight. Even Siddons’s supporters, including Frances Burney, Leigh Hunt, and Thomas Campbell felt that her continued playing of ingénue roles such as Rosalind, Belvidera, and Hermione was unsettling or even slightly ludicrous.\(^{43}\) Siddons, however, chose to remain in the public eye. She did not retire until 1812 (age 57) and continued to perform occasionally both in London and the provinces until around 1816 (age 61). Thomas Lawrence, Sir William Beechey, and Henry Perronet Briggs all painted her in middle and advanced age: 49, 58, and 75 respectively. Siddons’s unusually long career provides an interesting opportunity to examine public attitudes about celebrities’ aging, fertility, and sexuality. In one sense, Siddons’s longevity testifies to the strength of her star power. Other famous contemporaries, such as
Frances Abington and Dora Jordan, retreated from public view once their lithe bodies expanded and youthful faces faded. Shearer West makes a compelling case for how Siddons’s aura of queenliness helped her circulating image to retain interest when other actresses became irrelevant. He argues that Siddons’s association with Queen Charlotte in the popular imaginary, her role play of queens, and her appearance in nationalistic tableaux (such as Britannia in 1789), rendered it almost patriotic to love the aging Siddons as a British institution.44

West, who has done the most work on Siddons and aging, also demonstrates that there was critical backlash to Siddons’s continued image-making through portraiture from the 1790s onward. For the purposes of this essay, I am most interested in how this backlash focused on Siddons’s menopausal body, suggesting that her lack of fertility precluded thinking of her as desirable and should prevent her from expressing any form of sexuality. Thomas Lawrence’s “Sarah Siddons,” first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1797, represents this phenomenon. In his critique of the Lawrence portrait, John Williams, writing as “Anthony Pasquin” sneers: “We have here youth, flexibility, of features and an attempt at the formation of beauty, to denote a lady who is . . . so far from being young that her climacteric will be no more.”45 On the most basic level, “Pasquin” critiques the artist’s overly-sympathetic portrayal of his subject. Yet, there seems to be something more sinister going on here. His bizarre mention of Siddons being past menopause, her “climacteric,” reveals an underlying belief that the loss of fertility necessarily means the loss of beauty and desirability. The portrait is in bad faith, attempting to allure a viewer with a subject who, by Pasquin’s own standard, has no business being sexual. Once divorced from its reproductive function, Siddons’s sexuality repulses rather than attracts.

Because Siddons depended so much on matronly dignity to shield her from sexual ridicule, that she became separated from her husband in 1804 and was past child-bearing age left
her vulnerable to increasingly bawdy and bodily satire. Salacious gossip linked her to her long-
time friend and sympathetic portraitist Lawrence around 1808. The most vicious attacks on her
sexuality, however, appeared in response to her relationship with her fencing master Peter
Galindo. A lesser-known print from *The Dublin Satirist*, “A Palpable Hit!!!” (1810) lampoons
Siddons’s reputed affair with Galindo. (See figure 4.) Siddons is depicted ostensibly practicing
her craft--learning to fence in order to play Hamlet--but in truth using the opportunity to seduce
Galindo. That is, she uses work not to support her family, but as a cover for illicit sex. With the
misogyny common in caricature, the print mocks Siddons’s middle-aged body (she is now 55)
and her prodigious backside, ridiculing her willingness to still play sexualized “breeches” parts.
Yet, despite her less than flattering appearance, Siddons still enthralls the notorious gigolo,
Galindo, whose eyes are riveted upon hers. As her épée pierces his heart, he cries “A hit.”
Accompanying the print is an anonymous article discussing Mrs. Galindo’s recent allegation that
Sarah Siddons was having an affair with her husband. The *Satirist* concedes that, in relation to
the affair, “it is true that a few people of fashion did indulge themselves in observations, not very
credible to *Mrs. Siddons*” but that “her transcendent talents, and her supposed private virtues . . .
soon dissipated the . . . calumny that would have enveloped her”46 (emphasis original). *The
Satirist* highlights the degree to which Siddons’s attempts early in her career to promote herself
as a respectable matron and devoted mother could partially inoculate her from scandal. Yet, the
image’s juxtaposition alongside the tactful text suggests that now that her marital and maternal
circumstances have changed, Siddons is vulnerable to being characterized as the dirty old
woman, a type with a literary history stretching back to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath.

For both Siddons and Robinson, their self-fashioning can be seen as a constant attempt to
evade being pigeon-holed as one misogynist archetype after another--the harlot, the Ephesian
Matron, the Wife of Bath—through regulating images of their maternal and changing bodies on stage, on canvas, and in print. Although these two women were largely successful in maintaining their relevance in popular culture, the constant pushback they received testifies to the ease with which these archetypes can be deployed and the powerful rhetorical force they maintain. In her book, *Rival Queens*, Felicity Nussbaum makes a compelling argument that Romantic-era audiences judged an actress’s “virtue” on a wider range of criteria than just her chastity, including her deportment, acts of charity, motherhood, and treatment of lovers, among other qualities.\(^4\) By that standard, despite always contending with ridicule, Robinson and Siddons both maintained a profound sense of virtue in very different ways. Yet, as this discussion suggests, the two actresses’ choices about how to portray themselves as mothers and lovers at different times of the life cycle had an enormous impact on the judgments the public formed about them.

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10 Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*; Gill Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre, 1768-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Shearer


20 See Robyn Asleson, “She Was Tragedy Personified,” 52-6 and Lindal Buchanan, “Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History,” 428-430.

21 Robyn Asleson, “She Was Tragedy Personified,” 55.


24 Quoted in Robyn Asleson, “She Was Tragedy Personified,” 52.

25 Quoted in Robyn Asleson, “She Was Tragedy Personified,” 53.

26 Quoted in Robyn Asleson, “She Was Tragedy Personified,” 47.


28 See, for example, Lisa Plummer Crafton, *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 130.


31 Paula Byrne, *Perdita*, 74.


35 Mellor, “Making an Exhibition of Her Self,” 278.


37 See Mellor, “Making an Exhibition of Her Self,” 278.


40 Mary Robinson and Maria Elizabeth Robinson, *Perdita*, xv.

41 Byrne, *Perdita*, 66.

42 Mary Robinson and Maria Elizabeth Robinson, *Perdita*, 86.


