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Article abstract

This article argues that eighteenth-century theatrical reviews and biographical descriptions equate the physical decline of the aging actress with the loss of her identity. It analyses disappearing selfhood through an investigation of the intersection of gender and age in William Hazlitt's essays on retiring players: namely, "Miss O'Neill's Retirement," "Mr. Kemble's Retirement," and "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth." In these essays, Hazlitt suggests that the actress only maintains her public identity through an early departure from the stage. This is enforced by societal understandings of normative and desirable femininity as youthful. To emphasize the feminine loss that accompanied aging, Hazlitt and his contemporaries would often juxtapose a player's physical body with those of younger players, as well as with the memory—or ghost—of its own younger form.

Banished Bodies and Spectral Identities: The Aging Actress in William Hazlitt's Retirement Essays

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In eighteenth-century theatrical documents, the language of youth and feminine beauty is accompanied by the language of their potential loss. For actresses, whose careers relied on delivering performances using their physical bodies, this equation was detrimental to their public reception. In her 2013 monograph on cultural gerontology, *Fashion and Age: Dress, the Body and Later Life*, Julia Twigg states: "Normative femininity is youthful, and this means that the changes in appearance that occur with age erode the status of women in a much more direct way."[1] Though Twigg is discussing the twenty-first century, this construction of normative femininity is not new. Theatrical history of the long eighteenth century offers insight into how female players confronted these societal expectations of normative youth and femininity. As the earliest female actresses on the London stage, these women were the first to navigate the public's reception of the aging female body. To emphasize the feminine loss that accompanied aging, the authors of performance reviews and biographical descriptions of aging actresses would often juxtapose the player's physical body with those of younger players, as well as with the memory of its own younger form. I argue that, in these comparisons, the actress's physical decline is accompanied by the loss of her former identity; to this end, I will investigate the intersection of gender and age in William Hazlitt's

1. Julia Twigg, *Fashion and Age: Dress, the Body and Later Life* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 20.

essays on retiring players: namely, "Miss O'Neill's Retirement," "Mr. Kemble's Retirement," and "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth." In these essays, Hazlitt suggests that the actress only maintains her public identity through an early departure from the stage.

Memory work is inherent to the theatre, and Marvin Carlson's 2001 monograph, titled *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, considers the theatre as a space of remembering. Carlson defines "ghosting" as "the identical thing that [the audience has] encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context."[2] He discusses the varied forms in which ghosting can occur, including the ghosts that the audience encounters when confronted with "the appearance of an actor, remembered from previous roles, in a new characterization."[3] The memories of the audiences could also include layered experiences of an actor in the same role; in her 2015 article "Mourning the 'Dignity of the Siddonian Form,'" Lisa Freeman describes a modified form of ghosting wherein Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth competes "with the audience's memories of her own performances."[4] This is a rivalry that Felicity Nussbaum similarly acknowledges in her introduction to *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (2010), albeit without using Carlson's terminology: "As aging actresses, they even found themselves competing with earlier performances and younger versions of themselves."[5] Eighteenth-century players incarnated their celebrated roles over the course of years, and sometimes decades. In *Apology for the Life* (1785), George Anne Bellamy states that "the possession of parts at that time (except when permitted novices for a trial of their theatrical skill)" was "considered as much the *property* of performers, as their weekly salary."[6] Taking this into consideration, Freeman's depiction of Siddons is not unique to Siddons, but would have been a common experience for any aging player: the ghost of the actress's younger self was always also on stage

2. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 7.

3. Ibid., 8.

4. Lisa A. Freeman, "Mourning the 'Dignity of the Siddonian Form,'" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 27, nos. 3–4 (Summer 2015): 604.

5. Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 26.

6. George Anne Bellamy, *Apology for the Life* (London: J. Bell, 1785), 1.108, quoted in Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, 161.

with her, especially when she played a role she had previously interpreted in her youth. Theatre critics and reviewers in the long eighteenth century frequently summoned these ghosts when asserting that aging actresses should either retire or not return to the stage. These memories were both cultural and personal: the cultural memories were those recreated in print, periodicals, and paintings that were associated with the player's public identity, while the personal memories were the individual recollections summoned by specific reviewers and audience members.

Memory similarly comes into play with the performances of male players, but it is not harnessed in the same way in eighteenth-century theatrical criticism. There are two main reasons for this. First, the accepted transitional age (the boundary when old age began) for men was sixty, but social discourse on female aging skewed younger, around age thirty.[7] As Susannah R. Ottaway comments in *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*, "the significant transition for women is the shift past youth to middle age, from their potential to marry rather than simply from their reproductive capacity. In fact, the critical transition for female aging was often tied to middle, rather than old age; to the loss of youth, rather than to the onset of decrepitude."[8] Secondly, there were more capital parts for older men than there were for older women. Remarks on aging in John Hill's acting manual, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (1750), demonstrate that Ottaway's comments on women's aging are equally applicable to actresses on stage. Hill explicitly critiques aging actors who remain onstage, and he maintains that their physical bodies are unappealing to their audiences and unsuited to their craft:

> The players of both sexes, we have said, ought always to remember that on the stage every thing disgusts us, in a very sensible manner, which calls to our remembrance the defects and infirmities of human nature; as we never fail of bringing every reflection of this kind home to our selves. In general when a person is become, thro' age or other infirmities, an object more fit to excite melancholy and compassion, than joy and pleasure, the stage is no longer his proper scene of action, and he ought wisely to retire…. Indeed nothing less than some singular and

7. Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

8. Ibid.

> inimitable excellency, can make us bear with a performer, whose decays in person, voice and features remind us continually of the fate that attends ourselves.[9]

Hill thus states that, for the sake of their audiences, elderly players should retire, since being confronted with an aging spectacle forces audiences to face their own fears of aging. The audience members do not want to see themselves reflected onstage, but are seeking, instead, something they can view as their potential: the perfect, idealized version of a human body. Hill's claims reverberate through Hazlitt's "Author's Preface" to *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, where the latter critic admits that "[w]hile we are talking about [players], we are thinking about ourselves. They 'hold the mirror up to nature.'"[10] In his various essays, Hazlitt clearly delineates between genders, a demarcation also performed by Hill in his text: "Men may continue the profession of playing to an advanced age much better than women. The reason is evident, that as this more robust sex bears the attacks of age much better than the other, it also presents it to our view in a less afflicting and less disagreeable manner."[11] He continues on to say that "[a] well made man may possibly be decently gay at threescore, but the wrinkled face of a woman" described as beautiful would be absurd.[12] What is interesting about Hill's description of the aging player—as well as most critical in imagining the spectral contrast between a performer and his or her ghosted past self—is that the description of the physical alteration accompanying age is not seen as a gradual change, but as an abrupt and complete loss. The physical body of the player is portrayed as having been transformed into a different older form, as opposed to a modification of the previous younger body. Hill declares that older players "have no longer the same eyes to view [the passions] with,"[13] suggesting that it is not a case of inhabiting their former characters less believably, but rather that their physical

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9. John Hill, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London: R. Griffiths, 1750), 84.

10. William Hazlitt, "Author's Preface," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage* (London: G. Routledge and Co., 1851), viii.

11. Hill, *The Actor*, 85.

12. Ibid., 87.

13. Ibid., 125.

bodies have become so removed from their former selves that they cannot play those roles anymore.

The description of the younger and older versions of the player's body as two distinctly separate bodies echoes the picture of the female "afterlife" that Jill Campbell describes in regard to *The Tatler*: the "long period of female adult life, after the loss of beauty and youth" which "may encompass her late twenties, her eighties, and everything in between."[14] Campbell asserts that this conception of ageing imagines identity as "essential and static (a young woman *is*, in the common parlance, 'a Beauty') until a sudden snap of discontinuity occurs and she enters a new, perhaps long, but undifferentiated period of the 'afterlife' of 'female age.'"[15] It is significant that this afterlife is relegated specifically to women, and Hazlitt's essays present a similar vision of it. In his reviews of Siddons's and Kemble's later performances, the former actress is depicted as separate from her earlier self, while the latter actor's identity exists upon a continuum: he is older but still clearly the same individual.

Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth O'Neill, and John Phillip Kemble make an interesting trifecta for thinking about the treatment of retiring players and how they were received in the press, particularly in comparison to each other and their past selves. Siddons was widely considered the strongest tragic actress on the eighteenth-century stage, and audiences were less critical of aging tragic actresses than of comic ones, who had to represent desirable romantic leads. As Shearer West perceptively assesses, Siddons's "towering reputation remained stable despite changes in her body caused by pregnancy, ageing, obesity and illness, which were all too visible on the stage but were rationalised by the imaginations of her audience and critics, the skill of the artists who represented her, and her own manipulation of her image."[16] Sarah Siddons's brother, John Phillip Kemble, was another highly acclaimed player, who, like David Garrick, retired with a celebratory

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14. Jill Campbell, "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the 'Glass Revers'd' of Female Old Age," in *"Defects": Engendering the Modern Body*, ed. Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 222–23.

15. Ibid., 223.

16. Shearer West, "Siddons, Celebrity and Regality: Portraiture and the Body of the Ageing Actress," in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 192.

public banquet.[17] While his older sister was widely considered to be the superior player, it is telling that she did not receive the same public ceremony at her retirement.[18] Comparing the reception of these highly regarded theatrical siblings offers a space for considering the role of gender in audience reception. The third subject in this analysis, Elizabeth O'Neill, retired at age twenty-eight after five years on the London stage. Her departure at her theatrical prime distinguishes her from Siddons and Kemble; and reviews for the young actress—including those written by Hazlitt—consistently connect her to the former player in their praise for her tragic talents.

Hazlitt is a self-reflexive author, aware of his own and the public's obsession with youth as well as conscious of the bias against older players. In his essay titled "On Play-going and on Some of Our Old Actors," he admits that "[w]e offer our best affections, our highest aspirations after the good and beautiful, on the altar of youth."[19] While Hazlitt recommends that both male and female players retire before their powers are entirely decayed,[20] he advises actresses to marry young and to retire even earlier than their male counterparts. In his essay "Miss O'Neill's Retirement," originally published in *The London Magazine* in February 1820, he explicitly instructs actresses to marry and retire early, as "[t]here is no marriage for better and for worse to the public…. No such thing is even thought of: they must be always young, always beautiful and dazzling, and allowed to be so; or they are instantly discarded, and they pass from their full-blown pride, and the purple light that irradiates them, into 'the list of weeds and worn-out faces.'"[21] His ominous warning to aging actresses showcases his, and perhaps a larger audience's, theatrical opinion: actresses should retire early so that the stage is only populated with youthful, feminine figures. Heather McPherson refers to Hazlitt as the "first modern historiogra-

17. Heather McPherson, *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 175.

18. Ibid., 176.

19. William Hazlitt, "On Play-going and on Some of Our Old Actors," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, cited above, 42.

20. William, Hazlitt, "Mr. Kemble's Retirement," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, cited above, 289. Here, Hazlitt commends Kemble for retiring before it is "*necessary* for him to retire" (289).

21. William Hazlitt, "Miss O'Neill's Retirement," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, cited above, 306.

pher of fame," and a critic who distinguishes between immortal fame and fleeting celebrity,[22] which is reflected in his consideration of the appropriate time to retire in order to ensure a lasting and meaningful reputation.

Hazlitt's collection of essays frequently engages with the motif of ghosts in the theatre, attesting to a familiarity with the memory of departed celebrated players still inhabiting the theatrical space after their retirement. In *Shakespeare and the Legacy of Loss*, Emily Hodgson Anderson attributes Hazlitt's contemplation of loss to Garrick, because of "how potently Garrick urged his spectators to sense the loss inherent in performance long before the celebrated actor actually retired or passed away."[23] Indeed, in his 1817 essay "On Actors and Acting," Hazlitt laments the inability of audiences to watch plays performed by "the departed ghosts of first-rate actors" and contends that "the lover of the stage" may "extol [the deceased] Garrick, but he must go to see [the currently performing] Kean."[24] In the case of Siddons, while Hazlitt never directly comments on the ghost of the player's younger self, he clearly differentiates between the older player and her younger self.

The essay "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth" was a response by Hazlitt to the celebrated actress's 1816 return to this role for two performances at the behest of Queen Charlotte. Siddons was sixty years old at the time, and had formally retired four years earlier.[25] Hazlitt is not subtle in his opinion that Siddons should have remained off-stage and that her 1816 performance is inferior to her previous renditions. The separation that the essay describes between these two selves both belonging to Siddons is so extreme that they are portrayed as separate entities. The first is the younger Siddons, who "embodied to our imagination the fables of mythology, of the heroic and defied mortals of elder time. She was not less than a goddess, or than a prophetess inspired by the gods. Power was seated on her brow, passion emanated from her breast as from a shrine. She was tragedy personified. She was the stateliest

22. McPherson, *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons*, 10.

23. Emily Hodgson Anderson, *Shakespeare and the Legacy of Loss* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 2.

24. William Hazlitt, "On Actors and Acting," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, cited above, 8–9.

25. Freeman, "Mourning the 'Dignity of the Siddonian Form,'" 603.

ornament of the public mind."[26] As evidenced by the line "tragedy personified" and by the past tense verbs that Hazlitt uses, Siddons, or at least her younger self, should be considered to be beyond any actress—she was acting itself. She was not just a singular tragic actress, but the whole genre of tragedy itself. Moreover, with respect to aging and the physical human body, she is figured in this passage as mythological and immortal. Yet the language employed by Hazlitt unequivocally paints a past Siddons. Even though this is an 1816 review, he is not describing the then sixty-year-old actress, but her former self; Siddons was only immortal when she was young. In fact, in his description he goes so far as to immortalize her younger body, transforming it, in his portrayal, into an abstract immaterial object of mythic proportions. Nevertheless, if the memory of the young Siddons becomes the "stateliest ornament of the public mind," what possibility does this leave for the material, living body of the aging, still acting Siddons?

Recent scholarship on Siddons has discussed what her older physical body offered her audience. McPherson has suggested that Siddons's celebrity increased alongside her aging and "ballooning body," and she became "a venerable theatrical monument, touted as one of London's obligatory sights."[27] Freeman, in her engagement with Hazlitt's text, argues that the actress's older body became a "living effigy of the self" through which Romantic audiences filtered their concerns with "mortality and the aging self."[28] She suggests that Siddons's decline was experienced by her audience "both as a betrayal of the earlier impressions in memory that she had engendered and as a deeply felt and grievously mourned loss."[29] These representations acknowledge that Siddons's older body was unable to maintain her previous public identity and instead acted mnemonically to remind audiences of her former power.

After all, Siddons's older body is qualified according to what it is not, and Hazlitt describes her later performance as only serving to illustrate this loss: "To have seen Mrs. Siddons was an event in every one's life; and does she think we have forgot her? Or would she remind

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26. William Hazlitt, "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, cited above, 272.

27. McPherson, *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons*, 178.

28. Freeman, "Mourning the 'Dignity of the Siddonian Form,'" 599.

29. Ibid., 603.

us of herself by showing us what *she was not*? Or is she to continue on the stage to the very last, till all her grace and all her grandeur gone, shall leave behind them only a melancholy blank?"[30] Hazlitt suggests that the older Siddons is no longer Siddons "herself" and her presentation is what "*she was not*." In other words, the older Siddons is no longer Sarah Siddons. The devastating contrast between the sixty-year-old Siddons as Lady Macbeth and the memory of her earlier performances in a younger body heightens the loss of feminine power that comes with age. Conversely, her ghost is rendered exceptional in comparison to her sixty-year-old self; it is "not less than a goddess, or than a prophetess inspired by the gods," as we read above. As it is a spectral contrast, one that can only ever be envisaged and never actually seen, the imagined distance between the two performers is infinitely expanded, with one embodying "The Siddons," and the other, the blank. It is one thing for the audience to remember the younger Siddons while reflecting on the years that have passed and the change that has occurred between the two performances, but Hazlitt is doing something more detrimental than that, as evidenced by his language concerning selfhood. He is asserting that the younger Siddons was a "truer" Siddons and that her age has not just transformed or weakened her performance, but that it has robbed it of its very "Siddons" quality. For Hazlitt, Siddons's public identity—like the public identity of other celebrated players—rested in her youthful presentation. The ageist narrative of Hazlitt's review suggests the critic's belief in a theatrical feminine power that only exists in youth. As he observes in the opening, "[players] not only die like other people, but like other people they cease to be young, and are no longer themselves, even while living. Their health, strength, beauty, voice, fails them; nor can they, without these advantages, perform the same feats, or command the same applause that they did when possessed of them."[31] Hazlitt clearly expresses his belief that age inflicts a break in the player's identity (as they "are no longer themselves") and argues that this weakens their relationship with their audience (as they cannot "command the same applause").

30. Hazlitt, "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth," 272–73.
31. Ibid., 271.

Anderson states that the end of a player's career, whether it was a result of retirement or death, was often "treated by critics and practitioners as something to be mourned."[32] According to the critic, Garrick viewed "retirement and death as equivalent."[33] In the case of Siddons, however, the actress had neither retired nor died. In his essay, Hazlitt thus prefigures the death of the actress's public identity before her aged afterlife. By rhetorical means his essay suggests that this is just as significant a death, as the original performer no longer exists. It is reasonable, then, to discover that for Hazlitt, as well as the audiences sharing his perspective on the aging player, a ghost emerges after this metaphorical death: the ghost of the young, *true* Sarah Siddons.

This separation of the actress's younger and older selves exists in other eighteenth-century reviews, which suggests a broader societal perception of the effect of age on identity. A review of William Congreve's *The Old Bachelor*, published in *The St. James's Chronicle* from November 30–December 3, 1776, described Sophia Baddeley, at age thirty and in poor health, in the following terms: "Poor Baddeley is the beauteous Ghost of what she was; her acting, now, is according to Jacque's [*sic*] Description of Age, *Sans Eyes, Sans Ears, Sans every Thing*."[34] The review references a famous Shakespearean monologue in *As You Like It* (1603), which details the stages of the life course, and it applies the last stage to the thirty-year-old actress. Like Siddons, who might become a "melancholy blank," Baddeley has lost "*every Thing*."[35] Though the Shakespearean quotation lists specific physical attributes that Baddeley no longer possesses, there is the suggestion that she is not just engaged in a physical degradation. The characterization of "the beauteous Ghost of what she was," reminiscent of what Siddons *was not*, implies that Baddeley, too, is no longer herself. While the review applies the spectral terminology to the present Baddeley, the meaning remains consistent with what we read in the essays evaluating Siddons's performances. The paper mentioned above describes the older performer as not living up to the memory of her past self—she is no longer in possession of the Baddeley identity but merely recalls it.

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32. Anderson, *Shakespeare and the Legacy of Loss*, 14.

33. Ibid.

34. Review of William Congreve's *The Old Bachelor*, *The St. James's Chronicle*, November 30–December 3, 1776.

35. Ibid.

In this review on Baddeley's interpretation and the others pertaining to Siddons's performances, there is just enough of the women's past selves left to demonstrate how much has been lost. Both women are figured in the moments before the "melancholy blank" takes hold: no longer Siddons and Baddeley, but able to evoke the memories of those figures.

The memories that Hazlitt's text—and writings like it—summon are both personal and collective; they are the reader's memories of earlier performances that have been manipulated both by the collective cultural consciousness and this critic's authoritative narration. The segment on which this review—and in fact, without exaggeration, all reviews of Sarah Siddons's Lady Macbeth—focuses most is Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene.[36] This was the scene that had had the most impact on audiences from the time the actress first performed the role in February 1785.[37] Instead of describing in objective terms the inadequacies of Siddons's 1816 performance, Hazlitt describes the show in relation to the audience's expectations: "In the sleeping scene, she produced a different impression from what we expected."[38] This creates the opportunity for the palimpsestic performances that Freeman theorizes, which, in the case of Siddons, produce "a disturbing and even painful kind of cognitive dissonance in the contrast between what was seen in the mind's eye of memory and what was seen on the stage."[39] Hazlitt textually recreates the highlights of past performances against which to compare Siddons's recent enactment. These recreations—presumably based on Hazlitt's own memories, stories he heard, and productions he attended—are represented as collectively shared and infallible:

> In coming on formerly, her eyes were open, but the sense was shut. She was like a person bewildered, and unconscious of what she did. She moved her lips involuntarily: all her gestures were involuntary and mechanical. At present she acts the part more with a view to effect. She repeats the action when she says, "I tell you he cannot rise from his

36. See also Leigh Hunt, "Mrs. Siddons' Farewell Performance," *Dramatic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 69–74.

37. Anderson, *Shakespeare and the Legacy of Loss*, 99–100. Siddons's impact in this role was instant and enduring. On February 24, 1785, the *Public Advertiser* characterized the sleepwalking scene as "the greatest act that has in our memory adorned the stage."

38. Hazlitt, "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth," 274.

39. Freeman, "Mourning the 'Dignity of the Siddonian Form,'" 607.

> grave," with both hands sawing the air, in the style of parliamentary oratory, the worst of all others. There was none of this weight or energy in the way she did the scene the first time we saw her, twenty years ago. She glided on and off the stage almost like an apparition.[40]

This description relies on the reader's memories, both personal and cultural, as evidence of the actress's younger, more agreeable figure and performance, but those recollections are simultaneously influenced by Hazlitt's narration of Siddons's performance. He first creates the image of the superior Siddons's performance in order to contrast it with her current reiterations. This image is powerful and compelling, but it is not focused on observable actions and sounds; instead, it describes the effect of her performance. When Hazlitt narrates that her "gestures were involuntary and mechanical," he is suggesting that her skill was so immense that it gave him the impression that she was truly bewitched and acting unwillingly. Since the memory of an ephemeral art form cannot be but inherently faulty, the description of Siddons's performance as "bewildered" and "involuntary" encourages readers to remember the acting with these qualifiers, even if they originally did not believe it to be the case. This is particularly effective as the performance to which Hazlitt is referring is twenty years in the past. Readers are encouraged to create this idealized image of the younger Siddons in performance, in a construction of an event that they might have never actually seen or interpreted in this specific way. Moreover, by employing the first-person plural form "we," Hazlitt is presenting his memories and opinions as collective and authoritative, rather than personal and subjective.

Hazlitt's description of Siddons's last performance, by comparison, is more concrete and relies less on an intangible feeling. The description of Siddons "sawing the air" and speaking in the style of "parliamentary oratory" suggests that she has regressed in her older age and in the process has lost the natural ease of her youthful style; her words and style thus give the impression of being affected and artificial. This is a powerful comparison precisely because it is a familiar one. It echoes the criticism of antiquated styles of acting in the face of fresh new talent opting for more modern choices. In particular, it recalls the reported contrast between the naturalness of David Garrick's theatrical

40. Hazlitt, "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth," 274–75.

talent when he emerged onstage in the 1740s and James Quin's antiquated declamatory style dominant in the period. Garrick's style was considered almost revolutionary at the time, and it is frequently described in those terms in current theatrical scholarship. In his *Memoirs* (1806), Richard Cumberland describes Quin's performance in language remarkably similar to Hazlitt's depiction of the older Siddons: "very little variation of cadence, and in a deep full tone, accompanied by a sawing kind of action, which had more of the senate than of the stage in it."[41] Like the description of the older Siddons, Quin's performative style is stately, heavy, and unnatural. When Cumberland's text introduces Garrick—new to the stage and twenty-four years younger than Quin—he is described as "bounding on the stage," and "bright and luminous," in contrast to Quin's darkness.[42] Garrick is not weighed down by the heaviness and stiffness that characterizes Quin's performance. The language that critics previously employed to differentiate between the tired old actor and the fresh new upstart is reintroduced in Hazlitt's essay, but what is fascinating in this case is that both fresh newcomer and hackneyed elder player are the same person: Sarah Siddons.

Hazlitt's critiques of the older Siddons are determined by her gender and focused on her decision to continue acting. In contrast, his essays on John Phillip Kemble's and Elizabeth O'Neill's retirements are more complimentary, because these actors are leaving the stage and allowing their younger bodies to maintain power in the public memory. Kemble, especially, is excused many performative defects. In comparison to Kemble's younger self, Hazlitt decrees that "[i]t is near twenty years ago since we first saw Mr. Kemble in the same character—yet how short the interval seems!"[43] While Siddons, twenty years into her career, is described as a different performer entirely, Hazlitt maintains that the temporal distance between Kemble's two performances is negligible. He even argues against critiques of Kemble that perfectly echo his own critique of Siddons: "to say that Mr. Kemble has quite fallen off of late—that he is not what he was: he may have fallen off in the opinion of some jealous admirers, because he is no longer in

41. Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs* (Boston: David West and John West, 1806), 35.

42. Ibid.

43. Hazlitt, "Mr. Kemble's Retirement," 287–88.

exclusive possession of the stage: but in himself he has not fallen off a jot."[44] Almost the exact same language employed in critiques of Kemble is used in the essay on Siddons, where Hazlitt states that the older actress's performances display what "*she was not*."

By comparison, Hazlitt decrees that critics who say Kemble is "not what he was" are simply envious, as the actor is still "himself." The older male player is allowed to maintain his identity and his selfhood as he ages. He does not fade into the "melancholy blank," nor is his earlier self mythologized, even though Hazlitt explicitly provides evidence of the older Kemble's frailty and faults. He admits that "Mr. Kemble's voice seemed to faint and stagger, to be strained and cracked, under the weight of this majestic image," but he argues that this is merely because "we know of no tones deep or full enough to bear along the swelling tide of sentiment it conveys; nor can we conceive any thing in outward form to answer to it, except when Mrs. Siddons played the part of Volumnia."[45] Hazlitt makes excuses for Kemble's faults and insists that he is the same player that he has always been. Coincidentally, in his argument—published a year after his critique of Siddons's aging body—he posits the actress as the stronger, superior player, but only in reference to her younger self—the one he deems worthy of maintaining the status and professional identity of Sarah Siddons. The older Siddons was not allowed this indulgence, nor was she granted the same support that the older Kemble was given in Hazlitt's essay; this contrast is particularly arresting seeing that Kemble and Siddons were siblings, and she was only two years his senior. The pair of players thus had similar physical characteristics. But instead of the older Siddons receiving the same laudatory reception as the older Kemble, the younger Siddons, a separate player, is summoned, and she glides "on and off the stage almost like an apparition." This contrast is reflective of how the older woman is doubly marginalized, both by gender and age.[46] While the comparison between Siddons and Kemble demonstrates how the actress's reception is influenced by her gender, the comparison to O'Neill highlights the impact of her age on her post-retirement narrative.

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44. Ibid., 289.

45. Ibid., 290.

46. On this subject, see Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age, Performing Gender," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 162–189, and Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," *The Saturday Review*, September 23, 1972, 29–38.

Hazlitt pens a review of Elizabeth O'Neill's London debut as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as an essay on her retirement. These essays bookend each other as they serve as Hazlitt's first and last impressions of the young actress. However, his initial 1814 review immediately transforms into an ode to Siddons's tragic performances. Hazlitt explains that: "We have, we believe, been betrayed into this digression, because Miss O'Neill, more than any late actress, reminded us in certain passages, and in a faint degree, of Mrs. Siddons."[47] Though Hazlitt is critical of several aspects of O'Neill's performance, he bestows this weighty compliment on her as he believes that "Mrs. Siddons was the only person who ever embodied our idea of high tragedy."[48] In depicting O'Neill, he describes the natural style and statuesque qualities she possesses that tie her, in the public's imagination, to Siddons. Interestingly, the last section of this review is on the character of Juliet, who is described as "a pure effusion of nature" with "all the exquisite voluptuousness of youthful innocence."[49] A defining characteristic of Juliet is her youth, and Hazlitt's commentary on the play suggests that its events can only occur in this phase of life. Indeed, Hazlitt's description of *Romeo and Juliet* in his 1817 essay titled *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* focuses on the "buoyant spirit of youth in every line,"[50] and even qualifies the play as being "Shakespear all over, and Shakespear when he was young."[51] This perspective is also reflected in Hazlitt's review of O'Neill's early performances in 1814. Though he does take note of her faults, he also describes her potential, stating that she "will probably become a favourite with the public."[52] This review was written two years after Siddons's retirement, and it suggests O'Neill's potential to fill the space left in Shakespearean tragedies.

Hazlitt's retirement piece on O'Neill complements his first essay on the actress: it suggests the fulfillment of her potential, and similarly digresses into discussions of other players. This piece was published in

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47. William Hazlitt, "Miss O'Neill's Performances," *Criticisms and Dramatic Essays of the English Stage*, cited above, 299–300.

48. Ibid., 298.

49. Ibid., 302.

50. William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (London: C.H. Reynell, 1817), 135.

51. Ibid., 136.

52. Hazlitt, "Miss O'Neill's Performances," 300.

1820, after Siddons had made several returns to the stage; unlike Siddons, O'Neill never came back to perform after her retirement. The essay opens by stating that "[t]he stage has lost one of its principal ornaments and fairest supports, in the person of Miss O'Neill."[53] This initial line suggests the culmination of Hazlitt's predictions, and conveys the success of O'Neill's five years on the London stage. Hazlitt's essay immediately moves away from its focus on O'Neill and contemplates the state of the declining player in the current theatrical climate. He brings attention to the multitude of players who are discarded by the theatrical public through no fault of their own: "How many old favourites of the town—that many-headed abstraction, with new opinions, whims, and follies, ever sprouting from its teeming brain—how many decayed veterans of the stage do we remember, in the last ten or twenty years, laid aside 'in monumental mockery.'"[54] Hazlitt admonishes the public for their changing whims and fleeting loyalty, and suggests that players should prioritize their own needs, which in this case involves leaving the stage before they are left behind. In his discussion of O'Neill's theatrical skills, he again outlines her talents in relation to Siddons: O'Neill's "excellence (unrivalled by any actress since Mrs. Siddons) consisted in truth of nature and force of passion."[55] This comparison is explicitly drawn from both Siddons's and O'Neill's "naturalness," and later it is implicitly conjured through Hazlitt's praise of the latter actress's fair complexion and comparison to a "marble statue."[56] O'Neill's place next to Siddons is further cemented when Hazlitt states that "if she was not indeed the rightful queen of tragedy, she had at least all the decorum, grace, and self-possession of one of the Maids of Honour waiting around its throne."[57] The rightful queen that this imagery conjures is unquestionably the tragic muse, Sarah Siddons. References to O'Neill's pale complexion evoke Siddons's "tragic pallor,"[58] and her comparison to a marble statue recalls the

53. Ibid., 305.

54. Ibid., 306. Naturally Hazlitt employs a Shakespearean quote in his writing—from Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602).

55. Ibid., 309.

56. Ibid., 310.

57. Ibid., 311.

58. See McPherson, "Staging Celebrity: Siddons and Tragic Pallor," *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons*, cited above, 101–26.

latter actress's statuesque performance style.[59] Through its digressions on Siddons and the abandoned "old favourites" of the town, Hazlitt's essay both commends O'Neill on her decision to retire and warns her away from returning. The O'Neill who debuted onstage in 1814 is the O'Neill who left the stage—and remained as such in the public imagination—in 1820.

Siddons, though, is not allowed this same cohesive public identity. The older Siddons is left out of the construction of "The Siddons," and exists as a secondary, and even illegitimate, figure in Hazlitt's work. The immortality attributed to the younger Siddons initially appears to be complimentary, but it casts a negative shadow on the reception of the material body of the older actress. In his review of Kemble, both the younger and the twenty-years-older actor are figured as the same man. By contrast, Hazlitt's depiction of Siddons suggests that even while her physical body ages, "The Siddons" (the Tragic Muse, the greatest Lady Macbeth) refers only to the woman of the 1780s—that this age-specific representation persevered past its temporal boundaries. The dominance of the younger Siddons does not leave space for an older representation of the actress. In her 1999 article "The Seductiveness of Agelessness," Molly Andrews convincingly argues against the rhetoric of "agelessness" in the growing field of age studies.[60] She suggests that this rhetoric results in an "erasure of the years lived … as it strips the old of their history and leaves them with nothing to offer but a mimicry of their youth."[61] While Andrews is not looking to the eighteenth century, her ideas can be adapted to the experience of these aging actresses who struggled to sustain careers in the older age. Being ageless, in eighteenth-century theatre criticism, is synonymous with maintaining youthfulness. "Ageless" is an adjective used to describe older women who maintain characteristics of their youth and appear unchanged by time. The immortality of the younger Siddons functions similarly to the "agelessness" of the modern actress: it freezes the

59. Shearer West, "Siddons, Celebrity and Regality: Portraiture and the Body of the Ageing Actress," 193. See in particular West's comment: "By the end of the eighteenth century, Siddons' acting style had changed dramatically, becoming more studied and statuesque and involving a more careful manipulation of visual effects such as costume and stage procession." (193)

60. Molly Andrews, "The Seductiveness of Agelessness," *Ageing and Society* 19 (1999): 301–18.

61. Ibid., 316.

public image of the female player and denies the experience of the older woman. The terms "immortal" and "ageless" are framed as complimentary physical descriptions, but they are promotions of youthful bodies that necessarily erase an older self. Siddons is never able to transition organically into an older life stage once her younger self is culturally figured as "immortal." Hazlitt's review suggests that this immortal Siddons haunts the older Siddons's every movement on stage. As in the model put forth by Andrews, Siddons repeats the actions of her youth by performing her earlier roles in her older body, but the physical dissimilarity only serves to accentuate her age. The only way for her physical body to convey agelessness would be for Siddons to retire and remove herself from the public sphere in order to protect the audience from being reminded of the difference between the two bodies; the younger, immortal self would thus have absolute reign. This is the only way in which, according to Hazlitt, Siddons could remain the "stateliest ornament of the public mind"—by removing herself from the stage and only occupying the public's imagination.

Unsurprisingly, Hazlitt is in support of Siddons's retirement. A year later, sections of "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth" were reworked into his 1817 book of dramatic criticism, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, from which I previously quoted. It is interesting to discover that descriptions of Siddons's later performances were omitted and what remained was a laudatory assessment of her Lady Macbeth. In clear prose Hazlitt now writes:

> In speaking of the character of Lady Macbeth, we ought not to pass over Mrs. Siddons's manner of acting that part. We can conceive of nothing grander. It was something above nature. It seemed almost as if a being of a superior order had dropped from a higher sphere to awe the world with the majesty of her appearance. *Power was seated on her brow, passion emanated from her breast as from a shrine; she was tragedy personified. In coming on in the sleeping-scene, her eyes were open, but their sense was shut. She was like a person bewildered and unconscious of what she did. Her lips moved involuntarily—all her gestures were involuntary and mechanical. She glided on and off the stage like an apparition. To have seen her in that character was an event in every one's life, not to be forgotten.*[62]

62. Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, 20–22 (emphasis added).

The republication of the lines from "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth" in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* performs the same immortalization of the younger Siddons found in the original essay. All of the italicized lines are reproduced exactly and this repetition promotes a static, original memory of the younger Siddons, as opposed to a dynamic performance that is adapting over time for an aging body. In Hazlitt's view, Siddons might have had ownership over Lady Macbeth for twenty years, but after her initial performance, it was the younger Siddons who took hold of the role and never relinquished it.

The passage opens with the ageless, mythological Siddons presented to the mortal theatrical world. As a being of a "superior order," she and the memory of her performance are unaffected by the passing of time. The same is suggested by the following repurposed line: "She glided on and off the stage like an apparition." Both of these characterizations of Siddons suggest that her performance, or at least the memory of it, is a rigid, stationary entity, unchanged by time and as definitive as "The Siddons's" Lady Macbeth performance. Obviously, Siddons repeated the performance and each ephemeral performance was necessarily different, but Hazlitt constructs a cultural memory of the performance as unchangeable and definitive. Instead of interpreting the audience's experience, he denies future performances in this construction. As he decrees later at the close of "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth," "if we have seen Mrs. Siddons in Lady Macbeth only once, it is enough. The impression is stamped there for ever, and any after-experiments and critical inquiries only serve to fritter away and tamper with the sacredness of the early recollection."[63] Hazlitt presents this decree as necessary for protecting the "sacredness" of the prized memory—again mythologizing the younger Siddons—but it also serves to censor future portrayals from the aging actress. Instead of merely upholding the original performance, Hazlitt now goes further and threatens it. Not only will the older Siddons's subsequent performances as Lady Macbeth not result in the same audience applause and commendation as those of her younger self, but here they even menace the acclaim the actress has already garnered. To prove his point he adds: "[Siddons] speaks too slow, and her manner has not that decided, sweeping majesty which used to characterise her

63. Hazlitt, "Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth," 276.

as the Muse of Tragedy herself."[64] Hazlitt is clear: only the younger incarnation of the actress is the Muse of Tragedy; the older Siddons no longer fits this profile. Since she is no longer the Muse of Tragedy, she is no longer Siddons. While 1817's *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* reiterates Hazlitt's claim that Sarah Siddons "was tragedy personified," the quotation's original source makes it explicit that this is a past designation. Hazlitt's repetition of this exact phrasing merely reinforces that the dominant cultural memory of Siddons's Lady Macbeth is that of her younger body. The later performances have been necessarily excised and omitted in order for her apparition to remain sacred and unchanged.

In his essays on the retirement of celebrated players, William Hazlitt represents himself as the arbiter of fame. He articulates how these performers ought to be remembered, and he canonizes particular representations that reflect their enduring public identities. John Phillip Kemble is permitted an extended and cohesive identity that encompasses his long career on the London stages—a feature that is not available to the older actress. Instead, Elizabeth O'Neill is praised for retiring at the height of her power, before the dreaded female "afterlife" takes hold. Hazlitt does not grant Sarah Siddons the agency of either O'Neill or Kemble in maintaining her public identity into her older age, even though she is praised for exceeding both players in terms of her performative power. Instead her older body is severed from her younger identity, relegated to the category of "not Siddons." The older actress is described as having lost her previous professional identity. As Hazlitt proclaims, players "not only die like other people, but like other people they cease to be young, and are no longer themselves, even while living."[65] What Hazlitt neglects to admit, however, is that this designation is not universal, and is, in its practice, entirely gendered.

64. Ibid., 277.
65. Ibid., 271.