

# SARAH SIDDONS, THEATRE VOICES AND RECORDED MEMORY

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Romantic era theatregoers left behind a comet's trail of praise for the dramatic brilliance of Sarah Siddons. The accolades include Hazlitt's hyper-ventilated tribute to 'a being of a superior order [who] had dropped from a higher sphere to awe the world', and Mary Robinson's effusive description of the actress whose 'soul beam[s] through every veil of fiction . . . making art more lovely than even nature in all its fairest adornments'.<sup>1</sup> I take these testimonials at face value, while privately nursing a grudge against Siddons. When Mary Robinson sought out the actress, Siddons refused to meet her, citing the impossibility of an association which, 'however laudable or innocent, would draw down the malice and reproach of those prudent people who never do ill'.<sup>2</sup> My Sarah Siddons is a bit of a prig, and all Hazlitt's declarations of the power seated on her brow or the passion emanating from her breast never overshadow the cautious woman holding her skirts out of Robinson's path for fear of damaging her own reputation.<sup>3</sup> I began to think about Siddons's voice out of a desire to understand, at a visceral level and as a corrective to my prejudice against her, what made Siddons so great. I think it might be possible, by analysing the acoustic culture of Siddons's vocal performances in key roles, to re-animate a romantic era dramatic repertoire long derided by critics as consisting of mangled versions of Shakespeare's plays and long-forgotten theatrical set-pieces.<sup>4</sup> To 'hear' Siddons's voice – insofar as it is possible to hear the voice of a dead woman – one has to take into account the acoustic transformation of the romantic era theatre, the rise of the elocution movement, and the ways in which the voice

was being mediated and 'recorded' in advance of sound recording technology. In his meditation on the sound of David Garrick, Peter Holland notes, 'We have strikingly failed to develop a vocabulary to record in prose (unlike recording on audio cassette) precisely what an actor sounded like.'<sup>5</sup> Still,

<sup>1</sup> 'Macbeth' in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* in P. P. Howe, ed., *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (London, 1930–4), vol. 4, p. 189; Mary Robinson to John Taylor, 13 October 1794, in A. W. Thibaudau, ed., *Catalogue of the Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents Formed . . . by A. Morrison*, 6 vols. (1891), vol. 5, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Siddons to John Taylor, 5 August 1793, in Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs Siddons*, 2 vols. (1834), vol. 2, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Mrs Siddons' in *A View of the English Stage* in *The Complete Works*, vol. 5, p. 312. The proper Siddons inspires less affection than her more profligate rival Dorothy Jordan, as renowned in comedy as Siddons was in tragedy. Jonathan Bate links Siddons to the rise of a 'defensive middle-class Shakespeare' that resulted from favouring the tragedies over the comedies or romances, *Macbeth* over *Twelfth Night*. Bates concedes 'My argument here has been somewhat pro-Jordan and thus implicitly anti-Siddons', and then goes on to restore a balance by acknowledging the difficulty 'of "reading" the theatre of the era before the advent of audio and video'. Jonathan Bate, 'Shakespeare and the Rival Muses: Siddons versus Jordan' in Robyn Asleson, ed., *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776–1812* (New Haven, 2003), pp. 100–1.

<sup>4</sup> 'It is not to be denied that the great mass of late eighteenth-century plays make today but dull reading', writes Allardyce Nicoll in *A History of English Drama 1660–1900*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1966), vol. 3, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Holland, 'Hearing the Dead: The Sound of David Garrick' in Michael Corder and Peter Holland, eds., *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance, 1660–1800* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 248–70.

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## JUDITH PASCOE

much can be learned from the failed attempts of romantic era theatre fans to capture Siddons's voice on paper.

Since there are plenty of images of Siddons on stage, we can see Siddons perform, at least in freeze frame, in dozens of paintings and drawings. Henry Fuseli's kinetic oil painting 'Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers', provides something close to live-action footage. Static images cannot entirely re-animate the actress who, as Hermione in the statue scene of *The Winter's Tale*, astonished one rapt viewer with a mere sudden movement of her head, but they do give us a sense of what Siddons looked like as she performed. The portrait catalogue appended to the Siddons entry in Philip Highfill's *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, et al.* provides an encyclopedia of Siddons iconography, encompassing both grand portraiture and kitsch: Joshua Reynolds's monumental *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* and Josiah Wedgwood's chess queen.<sup>6</sup> And Robyn Asleson's gorgeous essay anthology, *A Passion for Performance*, makes Siddons portraits readily available to those who cannot travel to London (where portraits by Thomas Lawrence, Thomas Gainsborough and Gilbert Stuart reside), or who are unable to storm the fortress of Bob Jones University (where George Henry Harlow's *Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth* hangs in an administrator's office, or so I've been told).<sup>7</sup> It has never been easier to 'see' Siddons perform, although that does not necessarily make it possible to assess her dramatic brilliance.

Siddons's voice, in contrast to her visual presence, is a moving target. The manner in which actors spoke lines changed over the course of her career. Dion Boucicault, in his 1882 *The Art of Acting*, notes the shift in acting styles – and the attendant voice alterations – that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> How Siddons sounded to her fans was altered further by romantic era theatre enlargement, which situated more audience members further away from the stage. Siddons's long career also meant that she spoke with a number of different voices – her longstanding fans could compare the voice of a youthful Siddons performing Lady Macbeth to the voice of the middle-aged

actress reprising her most famous role. However, even as the quality of Siddons's voice was altered by the vagaries of changing acting styles, acoustic conditions and physical decline, it maintained a distinctive Siddons-ness that inspired playwrights and enflamed audience members. When Thomas Sedgwick Whalley sent Anna Seward a copy of *The Castle of Montval* in advance of its 1799 staging at Drury Lane, he insisted that she read one part as if it were being spoken by Siddons, 'as written for her manner of speaking, and for her's alone'. Siddons had so imprinted her voice on the aural memories of her fans that Seward could easily comply. She wrote, 'If [Siddons] had any other singularity, except that of being the most perfect speaker that can be heard, she would not be the transcendent actress which she is invariably found in tragedy.'<sup>9</sup>

Siddons's voice is partly recuperable from the written accounts of those who heard her. Her voice was 'clear and good', according to Horace Walpole, but 'deep and dragging' if you trust the report of Frances Burney.<sup>10</sup> Many of those who recall listening to Siddons speak emphasize the size and power of her voice; unlike her brother, who 'had constantly to struggle against a teasing irritation of the

<sup>6</sup> Philip H. Highfill, Jr, Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, eds., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, 16 vols. (Carbondale, 1991), vol. 14, pp. 37–67.

<sup>7</sup> Robyn Asleson, ed., *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists* (Los Angeles, 1999). See also the essays in Asleson's *Notorious Muse*, most of which focus primarily on visual representation. Martin Postle discusses Joshua Reynolds's actress paintings, Frederick Burwick analyses gesture manuals, Shearer West explores body connoisseurship, Heather McPherson analyses political and theatrical caricature, and Joseph Roach attends to Siddons's painted skin.

<sup>8</sup> Dion Boucicault, *The Art of Acting* (1882; New York, 1926), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Seward to Revd T. S. Whalley, 7 June 1799, *Letters of Anna Seward: Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1811), vol. 5, pp. 240–1.

<sup>10</sup> Horace Walpole to Lady Ossory, 3 November 1782, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence with the Countess of Upper Ossory*, ed. W. S. Lewis and A. Dayle Wallace, 3 vols. (New Haven, 1965), vol. 2, p. 359. Frances Burney, Journal Letter to Susanna Phillips, 15 August 1787, in Peter Sabor and Lars E. Troidé, eds., *Journals and Letters* (London, 2001), p. 251.

SARAH SIDDONS AND RECORDED MEMORY

lungs', Siddons 'was never balked by deficiency'.<sup>11</sup> According to her biographer James Boaden, Siddons made audiences tremble when, with 'a voice that never broke nor faltered in its climax', she denounced a tyrant in 'striking tones' (186). We can't hope to recreate Siddons's voice by means of written descriptions alone, but by attempting to do so we will learn a great deal about the way in which that voice was cultivated, rehearsed, consumed and memorialized. Walter Ong, who warns against conceiving of oral traditions as if they were nascent versions of a more familiar literary milieu, cautions that literacy 'consumes its own oral antecedents and . . . even destroys their memory', but he goes on to concede that, because it is 'infinitely adaptable . . . [literacy] can restore their memory too'.<sup>12</sup> Siddons spoke lines that had been inscribed on a page, but her delivery transformed these lines into something new and distinctive. Her biographer Thomas Campbell, among others, credited her performances with granting importance to otherwise forgettable works. 'Mrs Siddons's *Margaret of Anjou*', he wrote, 'persuaded half her spectators that Franklin's "Earl of Warwick" was a noble poem'. Campbell went on to write, 'The reading man, who had seen the piece at night adorned by her acting, would, no doubt, next morning, on perusal, find that her performance alone had given splendour to the meteor: but the unreading spectator would probably for ever consider "The Earl of Warwick" a tragedy as good as any of Shakespeare's'.<sup>13</sup>

We can use the texts of Siddons's plays, as well as narrative descriptions of her voice as it spoke the words of those plays, to fashion an imperfect, but still revealing, approximation of her vocal virtuosity, especially if we keep in mind Ong's warning against thinking of a heritage of oral performance as some variant of writing.<sup>14</sup> Siddons's performances left a textual residue in the playscripts on which her acting was based, but it was what her audience members heard – the manner in which she spoke the written lines – that inspired declarations of awe and efforts to preserve her performances. In the pages that follow, I'll discuss one attempt to document Siddons's vocal nuances in writing – the

Scottish law professor George Joseph Bell's notes on what he heard when she played Lady Macbeth – as a means of considering how sound recording came to seem both imperative and perilous. Before turning to Bell's endeavours, however, I will consider briefly the romantic literary fascination with the voice. Romantic poetry in general, and Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' in particular, dramatizes the anxiety that was generated by the thought of voices being detached from bodies, the signal innovation of sound recording technology.

WILL NO ONE TELL ME WHAT SHE SINGS?

The voice, as we know, fascinated romantic era writers. Siddons's rise to dramatic power roughly corresponded with the full flowering of the Gothic novel, an echo chamber of mysterious sounds and alluring voices. The mysteries of Ann Radcliffe's 1794 *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, consist largely of voices and music transmitted through the air by unknown broadcasters. Romantic poets, too, were fascinated with the voice's potentiality, its authenticity and its possible replication. In his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth laid out his plan to describe incidents in the 'real language of men', and to replicate the voices of ordinary folk who, 'being less under the action of social vanity . . . convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions'.<sup>15</sup> We might also recall the crucial role reading aloud played in romantic poets' writing processes. Wordsworth wrote poems in his head while walking, and he performed the results of these walks for his companions.<sup>16</sup> Shelley's

<sup>11</sup> James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Siddons* (Philadelphia, 1893), p. 131; hereafter cited in text.  
<sup>12</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; repr. New York, 1988), p. 15.  
<sup>13</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs Siddons*, vol. 2, p. 5.  
<sup>14</sup> Ong compares this habit of thought to thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels. *Orality and Literacy*, p. 12.  
<sup>15</sup> Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) in W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds., *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 118, 124.  
<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the theatricality of these Wordsworthian performances, see my 'Performing Wordsworth' in *Romantic*

## JUDITH PASCOE

habit of reading everything aloud so infuriated his friend Thomas Hogg that he grabbed a book out of the poet's hands and threw it out the window.<sup>17</sup>

The voice was for romantic poets the marker of something authentic and integral, which explains their fascination with bird song – bird voices are even more innate and mysterious than human ones since they are unmediated by language. Leslie Brisman identifies the two great motivating powers behind the romantic movement as ‘the desire to know correctly a state which no longer exists, and the desire to express one's awareness of the fictionality of such a state’.<sup>18</sup> Keats's ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, Shelley's ‘To a Skylark’ – the romantic fascination with lost origins gets most fully articulated in poems inspired by bird song. But human voices, too, come to stand in romantic poetry for some fundamental aspect of being, fleeting and irrecoverable. When the narrator of Wordsworth's ‘The Solitary Reaper’ encounters a woman singing, he creates for her song an imagined lineage and content, but it ultimately eludes him. ‘Will no one tell me what she sings?’ he cries peevishly, before launching into a final effort to place her song.

Written into ‘The Solitary Reaper’ is a desire to capture the voice and carry it away, to pin it to the page so that it can be reconsidered at a later date. The poem was composed after Dorothy and William Wordsworth saw reapers working in the Highlands of Scotland, but it was inspired by Wordsworth reading a sentence in Thomas Wilkinson's *Tour in Scotland*. Whether William and Dorothy ever themselves witnessed a solitary reaper is left unclear by Dorothy's note on their travels. She introduces a copy of William's poem by describing the ‘small companies of reapers’ they had witnessed and goes on to write, ‘It is not uncommon in the more lonely parts of the Highlands to see a single person so employed.’<sup>19</sup> Dorothy's observation makes the poem, hazily, the result of multiple possible sightings of single reapers and, more definitely, the result of her brother's reading of Wilkinson's ‘beautiful sentence’, a sentence William had transcribed in his commonplace book: ‘Passed by a Female who was reaping alone, she sung in Erse

as she bended over her sickle, the sweetest human voice I ever heard. Her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious long after they were heard no more’ (*Poetical Works*, 3:444–5).

I rehearse these familiar details of the poem's composition in order to emphasize the several ways in which the girl's voice, as experienced by Wordsworth, was mediated or fictionalized. Wordsworth's poem recalls the voice of a girl heard by Thomas Wilkinson and known to Wordsworth by a line from Wilkinson's as yet unpublished *Tour*, a line that he had read or heard read aloud. Or, perhaps, Wordsworth imagined the girl's voice as a composite of the several possible experiences of reapers to which Dorothy alludes. Either tale of origin makes Wordsworth's repeated emphasis on the singularity of the girl in the first stanza of his poem more striking. She is described as ‘single’, ‘solitary’, ‘singing by herself’ and ‘Alone’ in the poem's opening lines (*Poetical Works*, 3:77).<sup>20</sup> And the second

*Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, 1997), pp. 184–243.

<sup>17</sup> Hogg writes of Shelley reading Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir*: ‘He would read it aloud, or to himself sometimes, with a tiresome pertinacity. One morning, I went to his rooms to tell him something of importance, but he would attend to nothing but *Gebir*. With a young impatience, I snatched the book out of the obstinate fellow's hand, and threw it through the open window into the quadrangle.’ Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (St Clair, Michigan, 1970), p. 127. See also David Perkins, ‘How the Romantics Recited Poetry’, *SEL* 31 (1991), pp. 655–71.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca, 1978), [11].

<sup>19</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952–9), vol. 3, p. 444; hereafter cited in text as *Poetical Works*.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Manning's essay on ‘The Solitary Reaper’ takes up Michael Cooke's discussion of Wordsworth's emphasis on the reaper's singularity. Cooke recalls how Frederick Garber uses this emphasis to characterize the reaper's independence and uniqueness, but Cooke asks us to consider the social overtones of her reaping and singing, and to pay more attention to the origin or character of the ‘community of response’, since ‘it is *not* based on a consensus, on a reliable orthodoxy, but rather on spontaneous evocation’. Manning writes, “‘Spontaneous evocation’ and the notion of an “infallibly efficacious object”, however, are really two aspects of the same abstraction: both assume that reactions to experiences



SARAH SIDDONS AND RECORDED MEMORY

stanza further advertises her singularity by emphasizing her voice's distinction from other memorable voices, those of the nightingale and cuckoo-bird. By comparing her voice – favourably – to the voices of these two musical birds, Wordsworth makes the reaper's voice seem especially singular and alluring.

We should note also the change Wordsworth works on Wilkinson's inspiring sentence in the last lines of the poem. Wilkinson claims the tender and melancholy strains of the female singer 'felt delicious long after they were heard no more'. Wordsworth, by contrast, writes, 'The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more' (*Poetical Works* 3:77). Wilkinson's line holds out the hope that the woman's voice could still be experienced in a visceral and satisfying way even after it was out of hearing range. Wordsworth claims that he carried the voice away, preserved in his heart, but the voice seems like a burden, something he 'bore', rather than the sensual experience Wilkinson describes. Wordsworth's poem stands as a record of the woman's voice, or the record of Wilkinson's record, but the narrator's final unsatisfying status as the receptacle of a song that he can no longer hear even though he claims to carry it away, suggests that a record is a poor substitute for the original thrilling experience of hearing the woman's song.<sup>21</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum describes early phonograph records as 'tokens of disappearance and comeback', and describes listening to the opera singer Adelina Patti in an archive after getting to see her shoe: 'I wish I could say I heard the curtain rise to reveal Patti's voice in its original splendor. But I still heard the intervening ninety years, the curtain, the turntable, the hiss of reproduction. It sounded as if Adelina Patti were whispering something I could not understand, or as if the medium of reproduction itself were whispering instructions, codes, opacities.'<sup>22</sup>

We might share Koestenbaum's experience by listening to a cylinder recording of Sarah Bernhardt intoning lines from Racine's *Phèdre* (<http://tinyurl.com/j6f27>). Bernhardt's 'voix d'or' (golden voice) thrilled theatre audiences in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and she was the first Greatest Actress of All Time to

have her voice preserved by recording technology. But Bernhardt's tremulous declarations, her high-pitched quavery tones, which we can still hear (thanks to the Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara), cannot convey what Victorian audiences experienced when they heard her perform. If anything, the sound recording enhances the listener's acute awareness of temporal distance from the performing woman. Wordsworth's plaintive question – 'Will no one tell me what she sings?' – documents the narrator's alienation from the language in which the reaper sings. But it also dramatizes the plight of a 'listener' who only has access to the woman's song in the written form of Wilkinson's sentence, a listener who possesses a record rather than the original of that song, and who, in making the secondary recording that is his poem, becomes overwhelmed by the opacities of recording media.

Wordsworth wrote this poem far in advance of the sound recording innovations of Thomas Edison, but not so far in advance of Edison's crucial precursors. The first decades of the nineteenth century represent a turning point in the history of recording technology since new ways of conceptualizing sensory perception made it possible to generate the earliest mechanical attempts to transport, amplify and preserve visual or aural experience. Jonathan Crary suggests that a new observer

or texts are universal and unmediated.' Peter J. Manning, "'Will No One Tell Me What She Sings?': "The Solitary Reaper" and the Contexts of Criticism', *Reading Romantics: Text and Context* (New York, 1990), p. 254. Following Manning, but in a different direction than the one he pursues, we might read the poem as a dramatization of mediation, particularly of the newly imagined forms of mediation that would soon make it possible to store a voice and carry it away.

<sup>21</sup> In his reading of the poem as the product of a wartime England 'divided by momentous questions of foreign policy and by shifts of economic power that disrupted the traditional alignment of the classes', Manning draws our attention to the two-year gap between the Wordsworths' Scots tour and the writing of the poem, a gap which replicates '[t]he uncrossed barrier between the speaker and the girl'. "'Will No One Tell Me What She Sings?'" , pp. 266–7, 255.

<sup>22</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (London, 1993), pp. 50, 83.

## JUDITH PASCOE

took shape in Europe during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In advance of the development of photography, optical experience was abstracted and reconstructed by new forms of mass visual culture, such as the stereoscope. These devices, according to Crary, blurred the distinction between internal sensation and external signs, and made it possible to imagine the frozen and transportable image produced by photography.<sup>23</sup>

Crary's postulation of a new observer, one who was newly able to imagine the novel kinds of visual experience that photography unleashed, is matched by sound historians' identification of a new kind of listener who evolved decades in advance of, and served as a necessary precursor to, Edison's efforts to capture sound. John Durham Peters turns our attention to the long tradition of physiological investigation that understood the human nervous system as an extension of media. Peters writes, 'To understand the origins, subsequent trajectory, and larger cultural significance of the recorded voice and assisted hearing, we should look not only to Edison . . . but also to the science of the sense organs that emerged a generation before Edison, and whose greatest representative was Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–94).'<sup>24</sup> As Peters explains, Helmholtz showed that the diverse tone qualities of voices (and of all sounds, for that matter) derive from a combination of fundamental tones and harmonic upper partial tones, evident in the phenomenon of sympathetic vibration or resonance. This understanding made it possible to view all sounds as synthesizable; for Helmholtz, according to Peters, 'sound is sound is sound', and the body organs that produce or perceive these sounds become the equivalent of other types of machine that could carry out the same tasks (184). Peters writes, 'To fathom the voice in the age of its technical reproducibility, one must appreciate the ways that it was already externalized before it was mechanized' (179). Jonathan Sterne points to R. T. H. Laennec's 1816 discovery that a tube of rolled paper applied to the chest of a patient could amplify the sound of the heart as an early instance of 'mediate auscultation' or listening to the body's internal workings through the means of an aid. Sterne

argues that this development changes the relationship between a listening doctor and a patient's body, and also lays out the basic tenets of audile technique decades before they would be realized in the form of headphones.<sup>25</sup> In amplifying the beating of the heart, Laennec's paper-tube stethoscope broadcast this sound from the exterior of its owner's chest. By conceptualizing the distinctive qualities of a particular voice as the product of a series of upper partials that could be reproduced by mechanical means, Helmholtz untethered the voice from the body to which it had always been bound.

'Every theory has its historical a priori', writes Friedrich Kittler, who repeatedly reminds us of how technology gets imagined far in advance of the moment when it actually comes to exist.<sup>26</sup> Kittler writes, 'In order for styles and works of art to even appear, epistemological knowledge must first have established the field of their colors and forms.' He goes on to say, '[I]t was Wilhelm and Eduard Weber [who, in 1836, published "Mechanics of the Human Walking Apparatus"]', and neither Marey nor Muybridge, neither Edison, nor the Lumière brothers, who programmed the program which goes by the name of film.<sup>27</sup> Kittler and other media historians continuously cast backward to the span of years we call the romantic period in order to discover the moment when some not-yet-imagined mode of technology makes a preliminary, uncooked, foray into the public sphere. We might read the many romantic

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), pp. 6, 19.

<sup>24</sup> John Durham Peters, 'Helmholtz, Edison, and Sound History', in Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil, eds., *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture* (Durham, 2004), p. 179; hereafter cited in text. See also John M. Picker's lucid explanation of Helmholtz's discoveries in *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 84–8.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, 2003), p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Kittler, 'Man as a Drunken Town-Musician', *Modern Language Notes*, hereafter *MLN* 118 (2003), pp. 639, 648.

SARAH SIDDONS AND RECORDED MEMORY

works that worry over the ephemerality of the voice as part of a larger culture whose concerns would make sound recording technology conceivable. In this context Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' becomes a poem that grapples with the more troubling aspects of the newly imaginable means of replicating and transporting the voice. The singing reaper performing for the appreciative audience of first Wilkinson and then Wordsworth was an inadvertent member of a corps of romantic-era performers whose fragile and impermanent voices lent urgency to the task of devising mechanical means of recording sound.

HER VOICE IS SOMEWHAT BROKEN  
SINCE LAST YEAR

'Pity it is that the momentary beauties flowing from an harmonious elocution cannot, like those of poetry, be their own record!' wrote Colley Cibber, going on to mourn '[t]hat the animated graces of the player can live no longer than the instant breath and motion that presents them; or, at best, can but imperfectly glimmer through the memory or imperfect attestation of a few surviving spectators' (Boaden, *Memoirs*, viii). Cibber, writing in advance of the romantic period, depicts poetry as a Janus-genre encompassing both elocution and inscription, as a self-creating archive.<sup>28</sup> His longing for a means of recording the player's ephemeral graces resonated louder than ever during Siddons's reign. Despite the difficulty of converting a live performance into a textual representation, there was no shortage of efforts, well in advance of sound and visual recording innovations, to preserve Siddons's star turns in print, none more impossibly ambitious than Gilbert Austin's 1806 *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*. Austin set out to produce a language of symbols 'so simple and so perfect as to render it possible with facility to represent every action of an actor throughout the whole drama, and to record them for posterity, and for repetition and practice'.<sup>29</sup> He used letters to indicate the position of a body part, combining these symbols in elaborate equations to mark tandem motions. The letter 'x', for example, stood for 'extended' and,

combined with a series of other letters, could signal an arm's full range of movement (359). The first letter relayed the position of the hand, the second the elevation of the arm, the third the transverse situation of the arm, and the fourth the motion or force of the gesture (360). By this logic, the notation 'phfd' would indicate 'prone horizontal forward descending' (the motion of one arm), and could be teamed with other strings of letters that indicated the corresponding movements of other body parts (360). The system was so complicated that an actor attempting to follow it would have to take several minutes to achieve one stance in a performance composed of thousands of distinct poses. However misguided the scheme, its ingeniousness suggests the strength of the desire to freeze an actor's performance in time and to render it available for replication.

Austin set out to mark an actor's 'awkward energies, and so bring into the contemplation of posterity the whole identity of the scene' (286). He sought to make it possible for future generations to witness a facsimile of a dead actor's performance. A novice actor, Austin wrote, 'might light his talents at the perpetually burning lamps of the dead, and proceed at once by their guidance towards the highest honors of the drama' (287). The new actor could, in this way, reproduce an old one, so that 'the transitory blaze' of an actor's fame would no longer be 'the subject of just and inevitable regret both to the actor and his historian' (287).

The subject of actors ageing out of their ability to perform at peak effectiveness surfaces repeatedly in romantic era memoirs and diaries. 'One of the

<sup>28</sup> Cibber's comments might be read alongside recent work on romantic era media history: Celeste Langan's 'Understanding Media in 1805: Audiovisual Hallucination in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', *Studies in Romanticism* 40 (2001), pp. 49–70; Peter J. Manning's response to Langan's essay in the same issue, "'The Birthday of Typography': a Response to Celeste Langan", pp. 71–83; and Kevis Goodman's *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (London, 1806), pp. 274–5. Hereafter cited in text.

JUDITH PASCOE

most affecting things we know is to see a favourite actor take leave of the stage', wrote William Hazlitt upon the occasion of John Bannister's retirement.<sup>30</sup> Sarah Siddons's inevitable decline inspired the most extensive hand wringing. Writing of Siddons in 1811, Henry Crabb Robinson lamented, 'Her advancing old age is really a cause of pain to me. She is the only actor I ever saw with a conviction that there never was nor ever will be her equal.' On another occasion, after witnessing a diminished Siddons perform in one of her most famous roles – as the heroine of *Venice Preserved* – Robinson wrote, 'Her performance delighted me with a mingled sentiment of pain at the certainty of so soon losing her altogether. Most likely I have seen her Belvidera for the last time.'<sup>31</sup>

Robinson lamented the loss of Siddons's voice most of all. In 1812, after seeing Siddons play Mrs Beverley in *The Gamester*, Robinson commented that although in most respects her acting was not inferior to her former performances, '[h]er Voice appeared to have lost its brilliancy (like a beautiful face through a veil)' (45). After watching her play Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII* for an 1816 Charles Kemble benefit that brought Siddons out of semi-retirement, Robinson wrote, 'Mrs Siddons is not what she was – It was with pain that I perceived the effect of time on the most accomplished of persons – This was more audible to the ear than visible to the eye – There was occasionally an indistinctness in her enunciation and she laboured her delivery most anxiously as if she feared her power of expression was gone' (71). Hazlitt, too, wrote regretfully of witnessing the progress of Siddons's decay: 'Her voice is somewhat broken since last year; her articulation of some words, particularly where the sibillant consonants occur, is defective; and her delivery of the principal passages is unequal, slow, improgressive, and sometimes inaudible.'<sup>32</sup> Siddons's weakened voice foreshadowed its ultimate silencing by death.

George Joseph Bell seems, at first glance, an unlikely recorder of Siddons's fading voice. Born the third son of a Scottish Episcopal clergyman in 1770, he made his notes on Siddons's performances around 1809, by which time he was known as the

author of a treatise on the laws of bankruptcy in Scotland. His Siddons observations (preserved amid the holdings of the Folger Shakespeare Library) are contained in three leather-bound volumes which each have 'Siddons' embossed in gold on the spine. Bell annotated printed plays, using slash marks to indicate the rise or fall of Siddons's voice, and underlining to mark words she spoke with special emphasis. His notes on Siddons in the roles of Lady Macbeth and Queen Katharine were transcribed and published in 1878 by H. C. Fleeming Jenkin (1833–85), an electrical engineer who worked on the development of the telegraph cable. The Jenkin transcripts were reprinted in 1915 by the Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, with an introduction by Brander Matthews.

Bell's status as a recorder of Siddons's vocal nuances, although seemingly removed from his legal endeavours, accords with the combined artistic and scientific propensities of his siblings. Bell's older brother John, a surgeon and anatomist, opened a lecture theatre in Edinburgh and drew the illustrations for his treatise *The Anatomy of the Bones, Muscles, and Joints* (1793–4). George Bell's younger brother Charles, a physiologist and surgeon, attempted to explain the anatomical basis for the artistic representation of emotion in his 1806 *Anatomy of Expression*. All three brothers gave lectures, and so George Bell had a professional interest in the way in which Siddons declaimed her lines.

Bell devoted his most detailed note-taking to Siddons's performance in *Macbeth*, which is understandable given the acclaim she received for that role and the many times she reprised it over the course of her career.<sup>33</sup> Siddons took over the role

<sup>30</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On Actors and Acting', *The Round Table, Complete Works*, vol. 4, p. 155.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Crabb Robinson, *The London Theatre 1811–1866*, ed. Eluned Brown (London, 1966), pp. 35, 44; hereafter cited in text.

<sup>32</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Mrs Siddons's Lady Macbeth', *Complete Works*, vol. 18, p. 232.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Jacobus notes that *Macbeth* became particularly charged in the romantic period because of the way in which it mirrored the theatrical and political concerns being enacted in the French Revolution – it became for romantic writers



SARAH SIDDONS AND RECORDED MEMORY

of Lady Macbeth from the celebrated Hannah Pritchard and made it her own. When John Philip Kemble became acting manager of the Drury Lane theatre, he began regularly performing the role of Macbeth alongside his sister and, in 1794, he opened the newly rebuilt theatre with a spectacular production of *Macbeth* that included rolling thunder, flying witches and a large chorus. When Kemble moved to Covent Garden Theatre in 1803, he staged *Macbeth* seven times during his first season, and the play was also used in 1809 for the opening of that theatre after it was rebuilt. Sarah Siddons played Lady Macbeth nine times during her 1811–12 farewell season, and the role occasionally lured her out of retirement.<sup>34</sup>

One of the reasons why the play provided such a showcase for Siddons's vocal powers is that it takes the female voice as a subject of fascination from its very first scene. *Macbeth* opens with the gathering of witches whose gnomic observations set the course of the events that follow. Their vocal exoticism was highlighted in Kemble's version of the play; cat and toad sounds were conveyed from stage right and stage left in advance of the witches' scripted responses to their unseen animals ('I come, Graymalkin' and 'Paddock calls').<sup>35</sup> (That the ostensibly female witches were played by male actors also drew attention to the oddity of their voices.) Lady Macbeth herself conjures up an animal voice when she anticipates the arrival of the king in Act 1 by saying, 'The raven himself is hoarse, / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan.'<sup>36</sup>

Bell begins his commentary on Siddons by describing the first words Lady Macbeth speaks after she reads Macbeth's letter in Act 1, scene 5. He notes that when Siddons spoke the line 'Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be, / What thou art promised', she did so in 'Exalted prophetic tone, as if the whole future were present to her soul', and he adds that she displayed 'A slight tincture of contempt thruout'.<sup>37</sup> Although Bell does not focus on the way in which Siddons spoke to the exclusion of other performers' speeches – 'Kemble speaks this well', he writes after a line of scene 7 of Act 1 (47) – he dwells most often on the nuances of her voice's volume, speed or

tone. 'Voice changes to assurance and gratulation', he writes of the last line of the speech in which Lady Macbeth advises her husband to compose his face (44). (The speech ends, 'He that's coming / Must be provided for: and you shall put / This night's great business into my dispatch; / Which shall to all our nights and days to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.') At the opening of Act 3, scene 2, when Siddons spoke the line 'Is Banquo gone from court?', Bell notes that she did so with 'Great dignity and solemnity of voice; nothing of the joy of gratified ambition' (57). A few lines later, Lady Macbeth says, 'Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content: / 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.' In Siddons's delivery, the lines were 'Very mournful' (57).

Bell, in contrast to the author of the *Chironomia*, seems most intent on preserving what it felt like to see and hear Sarah Siddons perform rather than on making it possible for future actors to replicate her performance. He sometimes discusses actors' strategies in terms of specific technique, most notably when he takes Kemble to task for his enactment of the dagger scene. 'There is much stage trick and very cold in this scene of Kemble', he writes, going on to describe the actor as he walks across the stage, starts at the sight of a servant, renews his walk, 'throws up his face, sick, sighs, then a start theatric, and then the dagger' (50). 'Why can't he learn from his sister?' Bell grumbles, then recalls Charles Bell's view that Kemble should have played the scene less stridently. Bell writes, 'Mrs Siddons in reading "Hamlet" showed how

'a paradigm of their own unease about the power of the imagination'. '“That Great Stage Where Senators Perform”: *Macbeth* and the Politics of Romantic Theatre', *Romanticism, Writing and Sexual Difference* (Oxford, 1989), p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Introduction to *Macbeth* in *John Philip Kemble Promptbooks*, ed. Charles H. Shattuck, 11 vols. (Charlottesville, 1974), vol. 5, pp. i–ii.

<sup>35</sup> *Macbeth*, *John Philip Kemble Promptbooks*, vol. 5, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Macbeth*, *John Philip Kemble Promptbooks*, vol. 5, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> H. C. Fleeming Jenkin, *Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth and as Queen Katharine* (New York, 1915), p. 39; hereafter cited in text.

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## JUDITH PASCOE

inimitably she could by a mere look, while sitting in a chair, paint to the spectators a horrible shadow in her mind' (50). For Bell, the theatregoers' response to this bit of stage business is of paramount interest; he is more intent on capturing what evoked this response than on suggesting how future actors could replicate a Siddons or Kemble moment. Bell frequently describes not merely how Siddons said something but also how her articulation made him feel. In his annotation of the banquet scene, Bell writes of Siddons, 'Her anxiety makes you creep with apprehension: uncertain how to act. Her emotion keeps you breathless' (62).

Brander Matthews, in his 1915 introduction to Fleeming Jenkin's two essays on Siddons, makes the surprising claim that Bell's efforts at preservation surpassed the productions of the new recording technology. 'In the future', writes Matthews, 'the phonograph may preserve for us the voice of an honored performer; and thus supply material for opinion about the quality of his tones and the justice of his readings.' However, Matthews continues, 'At best, these will be but specimen bricks, and we shall still lack the larger outlines of the performance as a whole.' Matthews believed that there was a 'phenomenal value' in the record that Jenkin preserved of Bell's experience 'while he was actually under the spell of Mrs Siddons' enchantment'.<sup>38</sup> Matthews favours Bell's notes over a phonograph recording because Bell tried to convey what it felt like to hear Siddons perform as well as to describe the quality of her voice as she acted in particular scenes. In calling the phonograph recording a specimen brick, Matthews alludes to the tale of a man who attempted to show what his house looked like by providing one brick. The phonograph record, Matthew feared, removed the voice from its several contexts: from the actors' movements, from the reactions of other actors on stage, and from the audience members' responses. A similar fear suffuses Wordsworth's effort to preserve the voice of the solitary reaper; his poem's many levels of disconnection from the woman's song stoke doubts about the faithfulness and authenticity of the

version of the woman's voice that the poem's narrator attempts to carry away.<sup>39</sup>

Bell's notes stand as one point on a trajectory of efforts to create a written recording of the voice in advance of the moment when a phonograph stylus would 'write' the vibrations of the voice onto a wax cylinder. George Joseph Bell may have been an ancestor of Alexander Bell (1790–1865), a Shakespeare scholar and public reader of Shakespeare's plays, who insisted that his grandson, who became the famous inventor Alexander Graham Bell, memorize great swaths of Shakespeare's plays, including passages from *Macbeth*. Alexander Graham Bell's father, Alexander Melville Bell, devised an alphabet for recording the sounds of all languages and he enlisted his son to serve as his assistant when he gave public lectures on his system of Universal Alphabetics. While the young Bell was out of the room, audience members were encouraged to make strange sounds which Bell senior translated into this system of symbols. When Alexander Graham Bell returned to the hall, he would, on the basis of his father's notations, reproduce a sound that he had never heard. The younger Bell recalled, 'I remember upon one occasion the attempt to follow directions resulted in a curious rasping noise that was utterly unintelligible to me. The audience however, at once responded with loud applause. They recognized it as an imitation of the noise of sawing wood, which had been given by an amateur ventriloquist as a test.'<sup>40</sup> John Peters writes, 'This is the primal scene of the supersession of presence by programming' (190). The graphic representation made it possible to replicate a voice without having ever heard the original. Austin's *Chironomia* had attempted something

<sup>38</sup> Brander Matthews, 'Introduction' to H. C. Fleeming Jenkin's *Mrs. Siddons as Lady Macbeth*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Sterne argues that it is the very attempt to reproduce sound that introduces the concept of an 'original' or 'authentic' sound: '[T]he original is itself an artifact of the process of reproduction. Without the technology of reproduction, the copies do not exist, but, then, neither would the originals.' Sterne, *The Audible Past*, p. 219.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Graham Bell, 'Prehistoric Telephone Days', *The National Geographic Magazine* 41 (March 1922), p. 228.