# Performance and print culture:
# Two eighteenth-century actresses and their image control.

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The lapsing of the printing laws in 1695 led to an unprecedented development in the publishing of printed matter during the following century.[1] By the second half of the eighteenth-century an increasing number of newspapers and periodicals fed a growing public appetite for news and comment, with particular interest in details of the private lives of public figures: politicians, the military, actors and actresses, as well as the aristocracy.[2] The London theatres quickly understood the advertising potential of widely distributed daily publications, and thus theatrical performance and performers took regular space in these newspapers. This chapter discusses how two actresses, Sarah Siddons and Mary Robinson, both came under the spotlight of intense scrutiny from the press, and the different ways in which they attempted to mitigate its effects.[3] For Siddons this was the bginning of a glittering career, building a reputation as one of thegreatest actresses of the English stage. For Robinson her moment in th limelight was to end in a life of obscurity as a minor poet, her life on the stage largely fogotton until the late twentieth-century.

In the autumn of 1782 Mrs Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) and Mrs Mary Robinson (c1757-1800), returned to London for the beginning of what was to prove an especially stellar theatrical season.[4] Mrs Siddons joined the acting company at Drury Lane at the request of the manager Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), and Mrs Robinson took up residence in the audience, having retired from the stage the previous season, after her disastrous affair with the Prince of Wales. Their progress was followed in detail by the newspapers, led by the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* with its column of 'Theatrical Intelligence'. Both women had cause to be wary of the press, and made efforts to control their portrayal in print, by attempting to construct a public sense of their self, that might bring social acceptance to their chosen way of life. In the late-eighteenth century, the number of women with financial independence, or independence of

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[1] The Licensing Act of 1662 gave a legal monopoly on printing and publication to members of the London Stationers Company. This Act lapsed in 1695. See J. Brewer *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London Routledge, 1997) 114-116.
[2] M. Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation and Image Control in late Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Visual Culture in Britain* 7 no2 (2006) 69.
[3] Shaughnessy, Robert. 2008 "Siddons [née Kemble], Sarah (1755–1831), actress." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Retrieved 29 Sep. 2018.
http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-25516.
Levy, Martin J. 2008//www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9781758? 1800), "Robinson [née Darby], Mary [Perdita], author and actress." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Retrieved 29 Sep. 2018.
http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-23857.
[4] M. Gamer and T. F. Robinson, 'Mary Robinson and the Dramatic Art of the Comeback', *Studies in Romanticism* 48 no2 (2009), 219.

action, were few, but elite women could exercise limited autonomy of action, as their wealth and status protected them, providing their actions did not bring unwelcome attention to their family. Prostitutes and courtesans, with whom actresses were often conflated, might be perceived as earning a living, but were, in effect, in thrall to the whims of their paramours. Thus women who earned money through acting were a subject of fascination, and those few who earned enough through their profession to achieve real autonomy, were doubly so.

For Mrs Siddons, this was her second appearance at Drury Lane. Her original debut in 1775 for David Garrick (1717-1779) had not gone well, and she had spent the intervening years making her name as an actress in the provinces, especially at the theatre in Bath. Her return to London saw her burst upon the theatre scene as a huge star, with an acting style and talent unlike any other actress of her generation, and this inevitably brought with it the critical eye of the press. Growing up as part of a peripatetic theatrical family, she was acutely aware of the prevailing attitude to actresses as prostitutes, and Mrs Siddons cultivated an off-stage persona as wife and mother devoted to her children. Professional woman she might be, but this was always in service of the needs of her family and she took calculated steps to keep this motivation in the front of the public mind.

Mrs Robinson already held notoriety as the first mistress of the Prince of Wales, later George IV (1762-1830). In December 1779 at the Drury Lane theatre, their relationship had blossomed in public, as the audience watched the seventeen-year-old Prince watching Mary Robinson play Perdita, in Garrick's adaption of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Afterwards their affair developed, but was over by the end of 1780, leaving Mrs Robinson disappointed and deeply in debt.[5] She fled to France, returning in January 1782 after a sojourn among fashionable society in Paris, to fight for money from the Royal family and to set herself up as an icon of fashionable dress. By the autumn opening of the 1782-83 season she had secured a financial settlement from the King and a new lover, Colonel Banastre Tarleton (1754-1833), a man of ambiguous social status. Tarleton had earned the nicknames 'Butcher Tarleton' and 'Bloody Tarleton' while fighting in America.[6] Despite his arrogance, he was immensely popular with his men, but a figure of hatred for the American rebels after seeming to encourage a massacre where his regiment took no prisoners. Like Robinson, he was trying to repair his public image through positive press reports and the commissioning of portraits.

[5] P. Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 127-142.
[6] Byrne, *Perdita,* 181.

Robinson set about presenting herself on the stage of London society. She was no longer employed as an actress, but used the theatre auditorium as her stage, renting a theatre box for the season and decorating it with drapes and mirrors in the French style, as a backdrop for the performance of her life. Generally depicted as a courtesan and referred to by the press as Perdita, her wish was to re-brand herself as an accepted member of society. As will be seen, the name Perdita, her stage persona when first spotted by the Prince, was to haunt her and thwart these attempts for many years to come.

Both actresses were followed by a press anxious to supply their readers with details of the lives of public figures, from different points of view and using increasingly sophisticated methods. Daily papers such as the *Morning Herald* provided short reports, and periodicals used longer and more detailed columns, varying from the gossipy *Town and Country Magazine*, to the salacious details provided by the *Rambler's Magazine*.

The 1780s saw a high point in the visibility of actresses and courtesans in print, both written and visual, and this chapter examines the different ways in which Mrs Siddons and Mrs Robinson attempted to use print to manipulate their public image. These two female performers responded to the increasingly sophisticated ways in which the media represented women who stepped outside convention, and their response points to a moment of change in attitudes to, and expectations of, women in the public eye.

**Private v public – the actress in society**

For both women life had become a performance. As urban women, popular actresses engaged with the world and were among the first of their sex to achieve any social agency and personal autonomy.[7] This prominence and social mobility was largely brought about by the growing proliferation of print media that fed a public interest in the activities of public figures. For actresses, this attention highlighted their struggle to reconcile economic agency with feminine virtue, which were seen as incompatible. By the late 1760s these individuals, members of the elite, including politicians, actors and actresses, had become a form of public property, whilst traditional forms of social deference were disappearing.[8] A form of celebrity culture developed around the activities of certain individuals, over which they had no control.

[7] F. Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 7.
[8] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 70.

In 1737, the Licensing Act, which restricted the performance of spoken plays to the two theatres holding a royal patent, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, focussed attention on the relatively small number of actors who made up their companies. The most accomplished of these, both male and female, became part of what can be seen as a theatrical star system, part of a growing celebrity culture.[9] However, while male actors such as David Garrick (1717-1779) and John Philip Kemble (1757-1823), undoubtedly possessed magnetism and stage presence, as men they could also commanded greater social acceptance.[10] Recent research suggests, however, that actresses, in their compromised social position, wielded the greater erotic power, and exercised a great fascination for the public, fed and encouraged by comment in the press.[11]

Garrick, the greatest actor of his age, was adept at harnessing the interest created by press publicity, using the power of both written copy and imagery to further his mission to establish acting as a legitimate and serious profession. For female actors there was always ambivalence in the attitude of the audience, to the display of their bodies as part of their trade; even if their skill and ability to draw a crowd was arguably greater than that of the men. Married or not, domesticity was not the main driver in the life of an actress, much of which was lived in public. In order to survive and deflect the focus of the public, actresses constructed, according to Felicity Nussbaum, an 'enabling fiction of a knowable self, an effect of performance, but that personhood also took on an economic reality in the marketplace where it became a valuable commodity'.[12]

The division between a public and private life was not a recognisable phenomenon in the eighteenth-century. While women might be expected to restrict their world to that of the family and domesticity, an actress defied that expectation by parading her body on the stage and demonstrating personal agency through her ability to earn a living. As a group, the easy conflation of their lives with those of prostitutes was a denial of the abilities and skills that brought some actresses to the top of their profession and gained them enormous popularity and public approbation. The mimetic skills of the accomplished actress allowed her to create characters by transforming herself into different personas in the service of the most important

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[9] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 69.
[10] Thomson, P. (2008, January 03). Garrick, David (1717–1779), actor and playwright. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Ed. Retrieved 29 Sep. 2018, from http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10408.
Thomson, Peter. 2008 "Kemble, John Philip (1757–1823), actor." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Retrieved 29 Sep. 2018. http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15322.
[11] Nussbaum, *Rival Queens,* 17.
[12] Nussbaum, *Rival Queens,* 16.

element, the text, which she interpreted and vocalised.[13] She used her art to hold up a mirror to the world outside reflecting the realities of life for the women in the audience. Those for whom this reflection was uncomfortable could dismiss actresses as dubious whores, but for many, especially other women, the veracity of their performance demonstrated an understanding of the reality of women's lives.[14] Theatrical scripts almost universally depicted woman acting as men would wish them to, however, an actress's performance, the inflections of her voice and movements of her body, could subtly undermine that ideal.[15] This tension within the performance provided the potential for danger, a glimpse of female subjectivity, the powerlessness, anger, humour and contradictions, when seen from that perspective. It was the women in the audience, as much as the men, who provided the impetus for the production and consumption of gossip around favourite actresses and the conduct of their lives.

**Gossip and innuendo v puffs and propaganda**

The *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* was the first newspaper to understand the power of gossip, with its column entitled 'Theatrical Intelligence'. By interpreting 'theatrical' to encompass performance in fashionable society as well as on the stage, it was able to provide snippets of gossip that included reports on fashion and the activities of the elite as well as performers. By the 1782-83 season its method of juxtaposing unrelated facts to create a new narrative in the mind of the reader, had become a general style among fashionable papers.[16] The editors could rely on a sophisticated readership that understood and appreciated the hierarchies presented to them in the newspaper columns. An example of two adjacent paragraphs in January 1783 demonstrates how the *Herald* set up conjunctions for its readers. The first takes issue with an article from a previous edition suggesting that the charms of 'the lovely Perdita' were waning, declaring that 'So far from approaching her *horizon'* she was actually at the 'very zenith'. The following paragraph discusses the behaviour of the Prince of Wales at the theatre the previous night, the progression of his visits to various boxes, 'giving still the preference to those Ladies whose pretensions were the most extensive – The *Duchess of Rutland* appeared to have the pre-eminence on this occasion.' The first paragraph refers to a salacious advertisement for the first issue of the *Rambler's Magazine*, printed in the *Herald* on Saturday, which positioned Mrs Robinson in the persona of 'Perdita' alongside some of the more

[13] M. B. Gale and J. Stokes (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 1.
[14] K. Crouch, 'The public life of actresses: prostitutes or ladies?', in H. Barker & E. Chalus, (Eds.) *Gender in Eighteenth-century England,* (London: Longman, 1997), 61.
[15] E. Donkin, 'Mrs Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theater', in J. G. Reinelt and J. R. Roach (eds.) *Critical Theory and Performance,* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 319.
[16] Gamer and Robinson, 'Dramatic Art of the Comeback', 230.

notorious and well-known courtesans of the day. However, to add emphasis to her situation, as the rejected woman, this is followed by a completely unrelated report on the Prince of Wales' activities at the Opera, as he paid attention to various women in the audience. The article reminds its readers of Mrs Robinson's position as the spurned lover of the Prince through the juxtaposition of the two paragraphs, implying a position for her as the innocent party in the case. It is unnecessary for the writer to name Mrs Robinson, 'Perdita' is enough to conjure for the reader the whole unhappy saga, indeed for many years to come the name Perdita or Florizel could be attached to any activity of the actress or the prince, however unrelated, bringing their brief liaison to the surface once more.[17] The *Herald* could be relied on to provide a supportive narrative for Mrs Robinson, through its proprietor and editor the Rev. Henry Bate Dudley (1745-1824) and his wife Mary White, sister of a Shakespearian actress, who provided the *Herald* with its theatrical gossip.[18] However, reference to Perdita, thus identifying her with the scandal of her affair with the Prince of Wales, demonstrated an ideological position on the part of the author which undermined any respectability she may have wished to establish.[19]

Mrs Siddons was not immune from such imputations in the construction of gossip in the press. As one of the highest paid actresses of her age, speculation about her contract and salary were frequent. On 1st March 1783, a column in the *Morning Herald* combined three unconnected stories in an effort to imply an unfeminine greed on the part of the actress. It began by complimenting Mrs Robinson on the '*neatness* and *decency*' of her dress, suggesting that women would do well to follow her example. The '*Perdita*', it stated had improved her appearance such that she was unrecognisable from her former self, 'chiefly owing to her appearing more *en bon point,* than she formally did!' Next came a comment on the activities of the *'yellow-hammer* of Covent-garden' an accomplished member of the 'frail sisterhood'. Finally, a description of the 'generosity' of the Drury lane managers in allowing Mrs. Siddons to fix her own salary in future, said to be at the 'rate of *twenty pounds* per week'. In one swoop, the column had taken the reader from reports on the dress and voluptuous body of Mrs Robinson, in the persona of Perdita, with all the connotations that came with that name, through an irrelevant comment about the yellow-hammer, a notorious courtesan, to Mrs Siddons and her monetary remuneration. In so doing it effortlessly set up for the reader connections between the ways in which women are paid for their services, without actually impugning any of the women individually. The *Morning Herald* might be relied on to give Robinson a reasonably favourable press, but other publications were not so forgiving. The *Rambler's Magazine*, in its exhaustive

[17] The character of Florizel was Perdita's suitor in *The Winter's Tale,* the play in which the Prince of Wales first saw Mary Robinson.
[18] Byrne, *Perdita,* 139.
[19] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 75.

coverage of Mrs Robinson and her activities provided the strongest example of the correspondence between theatrical and printed space.[20] The first issue in January 1783 had in its first pages a frontispiece image entitled *Perdita, Dally the Tall, and the Bird of Paradise, preparing to receive company.* The three women are shown in various conditions of undress, and in the corresponding article they discuss the relative value of each 'puff' in the newspapers. The implication being that a mention in print had a commensurate monetary value. The use of the print by the periodical highlights how imagery was a potent ingredient to the construction of celebrity, as an image added embodiment to the words.

**The power of the visual – a proliferation of prints**

In 1769, the monthly *Town and Country Magazine* began publishing a *tête-a-tête* column, headed by two oval portraits of a man and a woman, whose illicit affair was detailed in the ensuing text.[21] This unique combination of graphic and written satire, which ran for more than twenty years, with its realistic depiction of the persons featured, is considered a watershed moment in the development of a celebrity culture.[22] The editors fully understood the power that these visuals added to the story, as the *tête-a-tête* often appeared on the front page as an inducement to buy the publication.[23] Illustrations were excluded from newspapers as they were expensive to produce, and were rarely seen in periodicals, so this innovative format brought a new intensity to the scrutiny of the lives of those who featured.[24]

The oval portraits, which literally set the two head-to-head, were often copied from family portraits and echoed the popularity of marriage portraits and miniatures. The titles beneath employed pseudonyms or initials to protect the editors from accusations of libel, but the editors could be sure that their metropolitan audience would know the people described. The *tête-a-tête* series provided an interesting social commentary on attitudes of the time, as its subjects were drawn from a wide spectrum, including politicians, the military, aldermen, clergymen, actors and dancers, but especially male and female aristocrats.[25] Couples were chosen for the amusement of their unexpected coupling, or to highlight the poor judgment of a member of the elite, but the underlying target was to point to the hypocrisy of those in positions of authority. The focus of the writing was the man, the interest was in his mistress, and each article ended

[20] Gamer and Robinson, 'Dramatic Art of the Comeback', 224-5.
[21] C. McCreery, 'Keeping up with the *Bon Ton*: the *Tête-a-Tête* series in the *Town and Country Magazine*', in H. Barker and E. Chalus (eds.) *Gender in eighteenth-Century England,* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), 208.
[22] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 71
[23] McCreery, 'Keeping up with the *Bon Ton',* 214
[24] McCreery, 'Keeping up with the *Bon Ton',* 215
[25] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 73

with speculation on the likely duration of the relationship. It was good publicity for a husband to appear as the subject of a column, but for a wife it was a disaster.[26]

The fact that Mrs Robinson featured in two *tête-a-tête* columns with different men, is an indication of her high social visibility.[27] The fact that the two articles appeared within nine months of each other highlighted her dubious social position. In May 1780, she was the 'dramatic enchantress', alongside Lord Malden (1757-1839) and in January 1781 'Fair Ophelia' opposite the Prince of Wales. The visual image of her in the oval, with its echoes of the elegant family drawing room, set against the description of a woman clearly perceived as a courtesan, echoed the dichotomy of her position. It also indicated that however much she might have wished to be accepted by the public, the press always considered her as the mistress who, having been rejected by the Prince of Wales, swiftly moved on to other conquests.[28]

As the century progressed, images appeared more frequently in periodicals. Alongside the growing interest in purchasing engravings based on the portraits of popular figures, was an increase in the proliferation of visual images, providing the opportunity for the general public to possess pictures of prominent people through individual prints. The print-shop window, with its display of images designed to tempt the buyers, provided another occasion where seemingly random juxtapositions took control away from their subjects, as it placed reproductions of portraits alongside caricatures of the same figures. The popularity of caricatures whose humour ensured that they would outstrip the serious portrait in popularity, brought a new element of personal satire, and a further reduction in deference towards leading figures.[29]

The fashion for printed portraits was also derived from another new social phenomenon that gave primacy to the visual: the public exhibition. The annual Royal Academy exhibition, begun in 1769, brought with it a revived interest in the power of the portrait to provide a marker for posterity. By 1782 the summer exhibition had become part of the social diary, and as the winter theatre season closed attention moved to Somerset House where figures of interest could be seen in painted form.[30] For a public figure faced with an onslaught of publicity in the press, a portrait allowed for an element of choice on the part of the sitter, and the opportunity to decide how the audience might interpret the person depicted. Both actresses used portraiture as a way

[26] McCreery, 'Keeping up with the *Bon Ton',* 220
[27] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 74
[28] T. Mole 'Mary Robinson's Conflicted Celebrity', in T. Mole (ed.) *Romanticism and Celerity Culture,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 186-7.
[29] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 75
[30] G. Perry, 'The Spectacle of the Muse: Exhibiting the Actress at the royal Academy', in D. H. Solkin (ed.) *Art on the Line: The royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836,* London: Yale University Press (2001), 111.

of influencing public perception, not least because the image could then be spread to a wider audience through the production of prints. Mrs Siddons had her portrait painted more often than any actress before her, and as a result of their dissemination via the print shops, these were a potent force in the creation of her persona as a powerful and professional woman. In 1784, two years after her triumphant arrival on the London stage, Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) painted her as 'The Tragic Muse': a commanding stage presence that still resonates today[31]. She clearly understood the power of the image over words as while ensuring her role as wife and devoted mother was emphasised in the text, visual representations were always of her as an actress, in role or in person.[32]

For Mrs Robinson, no longer performing on the stage, images of her physical presence was all she had to keep public attention while she struggled to regain an acceptable social reputation. In 1782 Robinson chose Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) to paint her in the pose of a rejected but faithful woman. He showed her sitting outside among the trees, holding a miniature that the Prince gave her, with a dog, a signifier of faithfulness, at her side.[33] The intention was for the portrait to be exhibited at the Royal Academy that summer, cementing her position as a wronged and innocent woman. However, her careful planning came to nothing as the portrait was withdrawn before the exhibition, to make way for Gainsborough's portrait of the Prince.[34] The random hanging of paintings in the gallery had the potential to set up unexpected and unwelcome conversations between their subjects and this could not be risked in the case of the heir to the throne and his former mistress.

While a portrait had the potential to survive for posterity, it was the daily press that provided the current narrative. For Mrs Robinson, given the vicious attention she was receiving from the cartoonists, press attention had greater focus. The images of her presented in the *tête-a-tête* series during 1780 and 1781 showed her as a respectable woman, with the accompanying account giving a straightforward description of the man with which she was paired. Any intimation of moral censure was wholly in the mind of the reader. However, when she became partnered with Tarleton the images of her in the press became progressively less respectful. He was a controversial figure, waging his own fight to restore his reputation through portraits by both Reynolds and Gainsborough, and a long account lauding his career published in the March 1782 edition of the *Westminster Gazette*. In a particularly vicious caricature entitled *The*

[31] 'Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse' is now in the Huntingdon Art Gallery, San Marino, California. A replica, painted by Reynolds in 1789, can be viewed at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.
[32] R. Asleson, *Notorious Muse,* New Haven: Yale University Press (2003), 5.
[33] This portrait is now in the Wallace collection in London, and can be viewed online at Art UK: https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mrs-mary-robinson-perdita-209444
[34] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 76.

*Thunderer*, published by Gilray as a riposte to the *Gazette* article, Robinson became collateral damage to the activities of the men in her life. Published in August 1782 two of her amours, Tarleton, depicted in imitation of his Reynolds portrait, and The Prince of Wales, indicated by a head made of feathers, are shown respectively as 'Bobadil' the idle fanciful adventurer from Ben Johnson's *Everyman in his Humour*, and 'Stephen', the vain country fool who sought to imitate Bobadil's posturing and bravado.[35] They stand before the 'whirligig chop house' which boasts a sign in the form of an obscene representation of 'Perdita'. Any deference that might have been shown previously towards Robinson was gone, replaced with viciousness towards her person, life style and choice of companions. Encapsulated in this image was the growing loss of deference for all those who might be seen as public figures, including royalty.

Branded by society as a courtesan, and depicted thus in the press, Robinson reinforced her campaign by using her box at the theatre as a stage for the performance of herself. Having rented a box for the season she was at liberty to decorate it as she chose, and during the spring of 1783, the progress of these decorations covered many column inches, particularly in the *Morning Herald*. Once again by referring to Robinson as 'Perdita', a name inextricably linked with her affair with the Prince of Wales, and imagining the 'envy' from the 'frail sisterhood', a popular shorthand for prostitutes, they effectively countered her attempts to move away from her past. The paper highlighted her refurbishment of her box in the 'Parisian taste', remarking on the pink satin used for the furnishings and the mirrors on the walls,[36] and mused on what payment might be exacted from the 'beau' or 'hero' who might wish to 'behold himself there at full length'.[37] It also brought its readers up-to-date on the real purpose of the mirrors, placed '*not* for the benefit of those *in* the box, but for the convenience of seeing the *stage* from every part of it'.[38]

Robinson's use of her theatre box, with mirrors that reflected her as much as the happenings on the stage, made her the most prominent audience member at the theatre, and manifested the interplay between theatrical and real life performance in eighteenth-century London. The practice was soon widely adopted, if only because in a practical sense the mirrors allowed those at the back of the box to enjoy a much better view of the stage.[39] Robinson put herself on show for the viewing pleasure of actors and audience alike, recalling the seats for prominent persons on the side of the stage from earlier in the century (now banned), and reviving that blurring of

[35] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation', 76.
[36] *Morning Herald,* 20th February 1783
[37] *Morning Herald,* 22nd February 1783
[38] *Morning Herald,* 24th February 1783
[39] Gamer and Robinson, 'Dramatic Art of the Comeback', 227-8.

the boundary between stage and audience that Garrick worked so hard to erase. Inevitably, she would also brought herself into the sight of the Prince and Royal family when they visited the theatre, setting up a frisson of expectation for the rest of the audience that there might be a reaction, or even some sort of conversation, for everyone to watch.

For Mrs Siddons, the most depicted actress of her age, it is interesting to consider the visual images she choose not to present. She is often remembered for her portrayal of the eponymous hero of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for which she appeared in breeches, but this production was only ever seen in the provinces and never brought to London.[40] While her role as a mother was written about, reinforcing her personal probity as a woman, she shied away from visual depiction of this side of her persona because images of her as a devoted wife and mother potentially diminished her presence as an actor: Lady Macbeth could not be a gentle mother. [41] Words gave an idea for the imagination, but pictures would have cemented this into a reality, thus diluting the power of the tragic muse.

**Conclusion**

The working lives of Mrs Siddons and Mrs Robinson came at a moment of change in attitudes towards women in the public eye. Growing pressure to conform to society's demands for domesticity and propriety, left less leeway to accommodate those who chose a different path.[42] How we remember them, one an actress of great power, the other virtually removed, until recently, from the record demonstrates how history at the turn of the nineteenth-century chose to record them. Mrs Siddons had a strong and visible presence as a professional woman well into the nineteenth century, whereas Mrs Robinson, socially more dubious was lost from view.

Sarah Siddons is best remembered as an actress of great power and professionalism. Her persona was created largely in response to constant attention from the press, an interest she managed to channel in a direction acceptable to both her professional and personal aims, actively using publicity to further her career. In her stage career Siddons revolutionised the ethics and aesthetics of the British stage through her innate sense of dignity and the moral integrity that she brought to her dramatic roles.[43] By concentrating public attention on her probity as a wife and mother, she built a persona around her own abilities as a professional

[40] C. Woo, 'Sarah Siddons as Hamlet: Three Decades, Five Towns, Absent Breeches, and Rife Critical Confusion', *American Notes and Queries,* 20:1 (2007), 38.
[41] Asleson, *Notorious Muse,* 4-5
[42] D. Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 13.
[43] Asleson, *Notorious Muse,* 3

actress and, to some extent kept, her private life separate.[44] Siddons constructed a new template for an actress, one based around conformity to society's expectations of women, while also enabling them to enter the public sphere without damaging their reputations in the process.[45]

In comparison Mary Robinson seems a character from the previous age: a woman defined by her male companions, and often subject to attack because of their doings rather than her own. Once she had left the stage after her affair with the Prince she had no profession to rely on and her personal life became a performance, using the press for her public relations campaign, in order to retain some respectability and resist definition as a courtesan. Later, in 1783, illness forced Robinson to retire from public life and re-fashion herself as a writer, publishing novels and verse in the popular and sentimental Della Cruscan style, and editing poetry for the *Morning Post*.[46] Until recently this is how she was remembered, her acting career and subsequent affairs largely forgotten. A 1990s biography of George IV and the women in his life omitted her altogether, in spite of the fact that he remained in touch with her until she died.[47] The new age prefaced by the career of Mrs Siddons removed such dubious figures from the public memory.

The 1782-83 season fell during a period of heightened celebrity, bringing a close surveillance of those in the public eye. Faced with such unprecedented attention from the press and visual media both women took charge of their own lives, and negotiated a path that enabled them to fashion their own image and exercise some agency in their personal conduct.

[44] Nussbaum, *Rival Queens,* 281.
[45] Asleson, *Notorious Muse,* 3
[46] In the 1780s, the Della Cruscans were a popular group of sentimental poets led by Robert Merry who called himself 'Della Cruscan' after the Florentine Accademia della Crusca founded in 1583 to purify the Italian language. Their style was flowery, effusive and artificial. See: C. Knowles, 'Hazarding the Press: Charlotte Smith, the *Morning Post* and the perils of Literary Celebrity, *Romanticism,* 20.1 (2014), 31.
[47] C. Campbell, *The Most Polished Gentleman: George IV & the Women in His Life*. (London: Kudos, 1995).