

Shakespeare and the Star Actress on the Eighteenth-Century Regional Stage

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The importance of Shakespeare to the London stage in the long eighteenth century (the period roughly encompassing the reopening of the theatres in 1660 to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the State of the Drama in 1832) has been well documented in recent years, but scholars have devoted less attention to Shakespeare's role in theatrical production outside of the capital. Women shaped Shakespeare's reputation in the period through their work as actresses, critics and audience members,¹ but their contributions to the thriving theatrical culture of the rest of Britain remain underexplored. This paper constitutes a first step in determining women's influence on Shakespeare in the regional theatre in the long eighteenth century. Focusing on two of the most important sources for the study of the provincial stage, regional manager Tate Wilkinson's accounts of the Yorkshire circuit found in his *Memoirs* (1790) and his *Wandering Patentee* (1795),² I will explore the significance of Shakespeare to the regional careers of Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) and Dorothy Jordan (1761-1816).

Siddons and Jordan were two of the leading London actresses of the day, famed for their Shakespearean roles. Both actresses began their careers in the provinces and returned to regional stages as touring performers after they had become stars in the capital. I examine both what the regional performance experience was like for these two Shakespearean actresses and the part that Shakespeare played in their repertoires outside London. In her 1939 work *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765*, still the most comprehensive study of theatre outside London in the period, Sybil Rosenfeld claims that audience taste in the regions

followed that of London, particularly as far as “the widespread popularity of Shakespeare” was concerned.³ But the evidence from Yorkshire suggests that this expectation regarding repertoire was not necessarily the case for Siddons and Jordan. My aim in this paper is to develop a fuller picture of the careers of these two important actresses, as well as to begin to understand more about Britain’s vibrant performance culture outside the capital.

Both Jordan and Siddons began acting in the regions and Wilkinson sheds light on both of their early careers. Whereas Jordan became known primarily as a comic actress in London, performing Shakespearean parts such as Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, as well as the title role in *The Country Girl*, David Garrick’s adaptation of William Wycherley’s Restoration comedy, when he auditioned her for the Yorkshire circuit, Wilkinson initially envisioned her as a tragic actress: he saw “not the least trait of comic powers” in her.⁴ Indeed, Wilkinson had the actress debut as Calista in Nicholas Rowe’s tragedy *The Fair Penitent* and local man of letters Cornelius Swan later trained her as Zara in Aaron Hill’s play of the same name.⁵ Jordan impressed her tutor, who pronounced her equal in the role to Susannah Cibber, the leading tragedienne of the previous generation. As for the role of Peggy in *The Country Girl*, which was to become such an important part of her repertoire across the country, Wilkinson tells us that Jordan’s inspiration to perform the part (and others like it) came not from any London actress but from a fellow regional performer: “I do believe that seeing Mrs. Brown play Peggy and several of the principal girls’ characters, was what luckily, I may say for her, drew her attention to such parts, which have turned out so greatly to her credit, fame, and rapid fortune.”⁶ Jordan made her London debut as Peggy at Drury Lane in 1785. According to the actress’s modern biographer, *The Country Girl* had been a flop when Garrick staged it fifteen years earlier but Jordan achieved great success in the part.⁷ It is significant that the actress chose to differentiate herself from her London predecessors for her debut but followed the role selection of a regional actress. This choice suggests that the theatrical taste of the capital was not as widely followed as Rosenfeld suggests.

Siddons’s first recorded role was Shakespearean: she appeared as Ariel in *The Tempest* at Coventry in 1766.⁸ She was eleven years

old at this time and Ariel was probably a common part for children to play in the regions. But it was the part of Belvidera in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* that led Lord Bruce to recommend the actress to Garrick as suitable for the London stage, after he saw her perform the role at Cheltenham in 1774. Siddons debuted at Drury Lane in 1775 in a Shakespearean part, that of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, but did not succeed. Wilkinson records the opinion of a Mr. Woodfall, who claimed that although she "spoke sensibly" as Portia, "her powers were unfit for a London stage and were only calculated for such small places as she in the country had been accustomed to."⁹ Wilkinson takes her failure as "proof that a London audience, though beyond doubt the true criterion, is not always infallible, any more than the most eminent physician" and notes that Siddons went on to achieve success in Manchester and Bath, where her "real fame and confirmed reputation, mixed with wonder, attention, and unceasing applause, restored her to London, where they have embraced and locked her fast."¹⁰

Siddons first appeared at York in 1777 and, according to the manager, "all bowed to her shrine."¹¹ But Wilkinson suggests that Shakespeare was not a major part of her repertoire at this time: he lists her parts this season as Rosalind, Matilda, Alicia, Lady Townly, Lady Alton, Indiana, the Irish Widow, Arpasia, Horatia and Semiramis (the latter for her own benefit).¹² When she returned to Drury Lane in 1782, it was in the title role of *Isabella; or, the Fatal Marriage*, Garrick's adaptation of Thomas Southerne's Restoration she-tragedy, and not in a Shakespearean play; it seems that the choice of dramatist was less important than the ability to evoke an emotional response in the audience. Siddons apparently overcame the problems of scale in the London theatre suggested by Woodfall's comment on her 1775 performance: Wilkinson writes of seeing *Henry VIII* at the Haymarket in 1792 that Siddons "though lessened by the distance, looked most majestically."¹³

Regional performance remained important for both of these actresses, even after they had become celebrities on the London stage. Wilkinson points to a shift that he sees occurring towards the end of the eighteenth century which led to the increasing importance of tours outside the capital to the careers of London performers. He writes that

thirty years ago Mr. Barry or Mrs. Cibber would not have disgraced (as they at that time judged) their current London stamp for being paid in July in Birmingham coin on any account: Indeed such would have been thought by their London patrons a most disagreeable and disgraceful exploit: And the Londoners will be astonished to be truly informed, that *now* Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Jordan, and others, make their true golden harvest on their summer excursions out of the metropolis.¹⁴

From the 1750s and 1760s onwards, there was a boom in construction of new theatres in the regions and many were given royal patents.¹⁵ The establishment of fixed playhouses in the provinces had the effect of making the regional theatre scene more respectable: casual itinerant troupes were replaced by established companies operating regular seasons on official circuits; inn yards, booths and town halls gave way to venues dedicated to theatrical performance. The growing legitimacy of the regional theatre scene encouraged many performers to tour outside the capital: “Great theatrical personages, who formerly used to look upon a city or town as a *bore*, now, on the contrary, in the summer grant they are commodious, respectable, and even alluring; and with great good manners, compliance, and condescension, will consent to trifle away a few nights at such insignificant places.”¹⁶

The motivation for performing outside London was of course primarily economic. Wilkinson implies that such tours could be even more profitable than stars’ performances in the capital: for Jordan, regional appearances “yielded great profits, silver medals and subscriptions falling at her feet in plentiful showers.”¹⁷ Siddons and Jordan were able to exploit the increasing respectability of the regional theatre and capitalize on their novelty value outside London by using summer tours of the country to add to their earnings. Regional managers such as Wilkinson benefited in turn from these tours as London stars could draw playgoers to the theatre. Wilkinson remarks that “it is and ever will be difficult to draw a run of full houses at Wakefield out of the time of fashionable resort, unless Mrs. Siddons, that powerful theatric engine, or something wonderful, or esteemed as most wonderful, is to be seen” and that the same is true everywhere else on his circuit.¹⁸

Wilkinson suggests that such tours simply involved actresses reprising their most famous roles from the capital: “London performers, when in the country, have only the trouble to repeat their tasks like young scholars sent for a six weeks vacation, who for the credit and pride of their papas and masters are expected to return perfect, and repeat when sent back to school.”¹⁹ But other evidence presented in his works suggests that roles popular on the London stage did not always go down well in theatres elsewhere. Although she learned the role of Peggy in *The Country Girl* from a regional actress and achieved fame with it in London, the Yorkshire audience did not enjoy Jordan’s appearances in the part. Wilkinson describes the play as “coarse” and notes that “to the credit of Yorkshire, that comedy has never been classed as a pleasing play, even when Mrs. Jordan performed the part of the Country Girl.”²⁰ Some exception could be made for Jordan’s star status but the Yorkshire audience could never entirely approve: “though the Country Girl might fill the houses in London, it was *not* held by the ladies of York in estimation, but termed rude and vulgar, which no performer could induce them to wish to see, but the fashion of Mrs. Jordan excepted.”²¹ That the opinions of Yorkshire playgoers could diverge from those of their London counterparts is also suggested by their preference for Harriet Esten over Jordan as Rosalind in *As You Like It*, one of Jordan’s most famous roles on the London stage (although Wilkinson notes that audiences deemed Jordan’s rendition of the Cuckoo song in that part superior): he writes of Jordan “not receiving plaudits” as Rosalind, whereas Esten “received wonderful approbation at York in that character.”²² Esten does not seem to have been considered better than Jordan in the capital, however, although she regularly performed the part on the London stage.

As for Siddons’s regional repertoire, Wilkinson describes the actress’s sensationally popular visits to Yorkshire in 1786 and 1789 and gives some details of the parts she played. These included tragic roles such as Isabella, Zara, Belvidera, Euphrasia, Elwina, Calista and Margaret of Anjou.²³ The Shakespearean parts for which Siddons had become famous on the London stage—Lady Macbeth, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, Constance in *King John*, Desdemona, Rosalind and Ophelia—were apparently not repeated in the regions, apart from her most significant Shakespearean role

in this period, and indeed of her whole career, Lady Macbeth, which Wilkinson notes she also performed on his circuit. In 1789, Siddons returned to Yorkshire and again Wilkinson records her repertoire: Garrick/Southerne's Isabella, Belvidera, Jane Shore, Euphrasia, Dianora, Mary Queen of Scots, Calista and Lady Macbeth.²⁴ She also recited "an Ode on his Majesty's Recovery, with the character of Catherine."²⁵ Again, Shakespeare constituted only a minor part of her selection of roles in the regions.

It is important to note, however, that both actresses did have some opportunity outside the capital to tackle Shakespearean parts that they did not perform on the London stage. Jordan performed Lady Anne in *Richard III* and Catharine in *Catharine and Petruchio* (Garrick's version of *The Taming of the Shrew*) at the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin and Emilia in *Othello* for Wilkinson's company in the early 1780s. Once she had achieved star status, she later played Mrs. Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by royal request at Cheltenham in 1788.²⁶ Similarly, we know that Siddons performed Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* at Bath in 1778 and 1781.²⁷ Even more significantly, Siddons tackled the role of Hamlet on the regional stage. She first performed this part at Worcester in 1775 and repeated it at Manchester in 1777 (opposite her brother, John Philip Kemble, as Laertes) and at Bath, Bristol and Liverpool before making her name at Drury Lane. After she had become famous she tackled the role again several times at Dublin in the early nineteenth century.²⁸ However, she never performed this male role on the London stage. Thus it seems that while Shakespeare did not make up a substantial part of the regional repertoires of these two celebrity actresses, Siddons's and Jordan's appearances outside London did offer them the possibility of testing out new Shakespeare parts on occasion, although these interpretations rarely migrated to the capital.

Wilkinson's suggestion that London performers like Siddons and Jordan needed only to repeat the parts they played in London to please regional audiences and that tours of the country were an easy way to make money is problematized by what he relates of the actresses' experiences on his circuit. Siddons apparently told him "that acting Isabella out of London, was double the fatigue; for there [in London] the applause on many of the striking passages, not only invigorated her whole system, but the space

it occasioned, assisted the breath and nerve.”²⁹ Without such encouragement from the audience, the actress tires more quickly and her mind “chills and deadens” so that she sinks into herself and away from the character.³⁰ Siddons’s comments suggest that she saw the London audience as more sophisticated in its ability to appraise the drama and to recognize the “striking passages.” Or perhaps playgoers in the capital had simply become accustomed to reacting in a certain way after seeing Siddons in the role multiple times, a luxury that regional audiences would not have had.

The Yorkshire manager also writes of the difficulties he had with Jordan when she acted for him in 1791. He advertized her for an upcoming performance as Nell in *The Devil to Pay* but she “positively *refused*” to act the part.³¹ Wilkinson was upset “as Mrs. Jordan in 1786 would have sung two or three songs in addition, had it been requested; but Mrs. Jordan of 1791 said her health was in so dangerous a state, and her spitting of blood from exertion was so frequent, that she would not play Nell on the Monday,” despite the disappointment it would cause the audience.³² Jordan’s performance schedule was a punishing one and so it is entirely plausible that she had either made herself ill by overdoing it on the London stage or by other regional performances before she arrived in Yorkshire. Her exhaustion came across to the playgoers as indifference, however, and Wilkinson’s audience would not accept second-rate performances. When Jordan failed to live up to their expectations as Rosalind their reaction to her was only lukewarm, which further exacerbated the situation: “When the applause sank into more and more languor, she fell into a feeble vapour, and merely got through the part, very little better than would an actress of less renown . . . so that when the night’s entertainment was over it would have been a moot point to have decided whether the audience or the actress were the most tired.”³³ Audiences outside London were certainly no pushovers.

Despite such difficulties, regional tours remained important to both Siddons and Jordan throughout their careers. However, the cases of these two performers and the evidence presented about them by Wilkinson do not substantiate Rosenfeld’s claim that Shakespeare’s works were as important in the regions as they were in the capital, at least not as far as these star actresses were concerned. Rather than desiring them to repeat their famous

Shakespearean parts in the regions, it seems that audiences outside London were interested in the other roles that made up their repertoires. Perhaps the Shakespeare performances were seen more as stock plays that the regional companies could perform regularly and with little difficulty (Rosenfeld repeatedly emphasizes the importance of Shakespeare to the repertoires of companies outside the capital) so that these audiences preferred to see star actresses in more novel roles. Further research on Siddons's and Jordan's performances in other parts of the country is necessary in order to draw more detailed conclusions. A more challenging task (because of the lack of evidence available) is to examine the repertoires of actresses who performed on regional circuits but did not achieve London fame. Rosenfeld notes that "in Shakespeare's plays especially, the large number of characters constituted a difficulty for travelling companies and frequently necessitated a resort to the practice of putting women in minor male roles."³⁴ She highlights the case of a Mrs. Sunderland, active on the Norfolk circuit, who tackled many male characters in Shakespeare, including the Provost in *Measure for Measure*, Benvolio and Paris in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Usher in *King Lear*, one of the witches in *Macbeth*, Lorenzo (with songs) in *The Merchant of Venice*, a Gentleman in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Osric in *Hamlet*.³⁵ It seems that further research may yield surprising insights into the status of Shakespeare in the regions in the long eighteenth century but that Shakespeare's power outside London did not rest with celebrity London performers.

Notes

1. See Fiona Ritchie, *Women and Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

2. Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee; or, a History of the Yorkshire Theatres, from 1770 to the Present Time: Interspersed with Anecdotes respecting Most of the Performers in the Three Kingdoms, from 1765 to 1795*, 4 vols. (York, 1795); Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life, by Tate Wilkinson, Patentee of the Theatres-Royal*, York & Hull, 4 vols. (York, 1790).

3. Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 10.

4. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:135.

5. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:136, 2:145.

6. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:185.

7. Claire Tomalin, *Mrs Jordan's Profession: The Story of a Great Actress and a Future King* (London: Penguin, 1994), 50.

8. Robert Shaughnessy, "Siddons, Sarah (1755–1831)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25516>.

9. Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 4:103-4.

10. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 1:206-7.

11. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 1:254.

12. The plays in which these characters appear are as follows: *As You Like It*, Richard Cumberland's *The Carmelite*, Nicholas Rowe's *Jane Shore*, John Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife*, George Colman the Elder's *The English Merchant*, Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*, Christopher Bullock's *Woman is a Riddle*, Nicholas Rowe's *Tamerlane*, William Whitehead's *The Roman Father*, George Ayscough's *Semiramis*.

13. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 4:23.

14. Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 4:95, emphasis Wilkinson's.

15. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, 1-2.

16. Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 4:95, emphasis Wilkinson's.

17. Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 4:95.

18. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:65, emphasis Wilkinson's.

19. Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 4:96-97.

20. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 1:164-65.

21. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:238, emphasis Wilkinson's.

22. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:266, 3:241.

23. The plays in which these characters appear are as follows: Garrick's adaptation of Southerne's *Isabella*, Hill's *Zara*, Otway's *Venice Preserved*, Arthur Murphy's *The Grecian Daughter*, Hannah More's *Percy*, Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, Thomas Francklin's *The Earl of Warwick*.

24. Dianora appears in Bertie Greatheed's *The Regent* and Mary Queen of Scots is the title character of a play by John St John.

25. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:77-78. It is unclear to which Catherine Wilkinson refers.

26. This information is taken from Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, "Jordan, Dorothy, née Bland, sometimes Miss Phillips and Miss Francis, 1761-1816, actress, singer," in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973-93), 8:254-64 and the "Appendix: Mrs Jordan's Roles" in Tomalin, *Mrs Jordan's Profession*, 333-39.

27. For details of Siddons's roles, see Roger Manvell, *Sarah Siddons: Portrait of an Actress* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), especially 353-55.

28. For an exploration of these performances, see Celestine Woo, "Sarah Siddons's Performances as Hamlet: Breaching the Breeches Part", *European Romantic Review* 18 (2007): 573-95.

29. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:102.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:237, emphasis Wilkinson's.

32. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:237-38.

33. Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 3:242.

34. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, 247.

35. Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, 76, 79, 82, 85.