

A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists

Robyn Asleson

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The eighteenth century English actress Sarah Siddons has once again taken the stage. Appearing first at the Getty Museum this summer in an art exhibition of ten portraits of her in various roles, she now stars in a volume of essays organized and written by four of the people who researched and developed the exhibition.

Using rich sources of material such as diaries, letters, eye witness accounts and theatrical critiques, as well as delightfully elaborate visual material such as prints, painting and sculpture, the authors have created a vivid view of the Georgian era culture in which Siddons lived. Her public and private life is revealed to us through the eyes of her contemporaries.

“Beginning as a timid and unknown provincial player, Siddons ended her career as a household name, an object of cult worship ...” writes Shearer West in the first essay in which she demonstrates the difficulties Siddons overcame to achieve this stellar status. In developing her acting craft, Siddons interpreted Lady Macbeth contrary to the tendency to demonize the character. One artist, however, still chose to paint Siddons in the role as a formidable avenger, while another responded to Siddons’ sensibility by painting her in an ethereal white costume looking tragically helpless.

In the essay, *Crafting the Siddons Legend*, Robyn Asleson probes the phenomenon of creating celebrity in eighteenth century England. Public appearance was required, but Siddons knew that art was also an excellent means of being visible. She wrote in her memoirs that she stole time from “imperious affairs” to sit for various artists. She went to “extraordinary lengths to accommodate the artists who applied to her.” Citing many examples of portraits of Siddons “performing” a particular role, Asleson charts the course of the actress’ career, which culminated in her triumph as Melpomene, the Tragic Muse.

The painter Sir Joshua Reynolds is featured in the third essay. Two authors collaborate on a lively account of Siddons sitting for his masterwork, *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*. Artists of Reynolds’ stature operated elaborate studios, opulently furnished for the client’s comfort, and often the painter at work provided a kind of entertainment for friends and art lovers. The finale is a detailed comparison of this painting and a copy Reynolds made five years later.

Even though the volume is a scholarly work and includes an extensive chronology of Siddons’ life, plus copious notes following each essay, the authors have succeeded admirably in presenting the life and times of a legendary actress for a general audience.

JOYCE MOORE (November / December 1999)

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