

Leading Lady of the Patent House: Harriet Siddons in Edinburgh

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Theatre, and in particular cases *theatrical institutions*, can contribute significantly to cultural change at key moments in history. When theatres have this effect, influential agents—business people, managers, artists, key supporters—typically drive these effects through patterns of decision making and business or aesthetic practices. Sustained ways of doing the work of theatre drive these effects, not usually one-off incidents.

Until fairly recently, theatre historians have typically viewed the business of theatre in much of the nineteenth century as men's work. There are good reasons for this, since many of the documents on which we base our knowledge about the financial and practical decision making surrounding theatre institutions bear the signatures and other traces of men. Even when women had demonstrable financial interests in theatrical institutions and were without question theatrical 'entrepreneurs', their roles are not as well documented as are men's by the admittedly partial archive of materials left behind about the business dealings of theatres.

Harriet (Murray) Siddons was one of a number of women theatre entrepreneurs in the first forty years or so of the nineteenth century in Britain who went beyond simply being employed in the theatre to involve themselves in a variety of different ways in developing theatrical institutions that ranged from patent theatres to minor houses and even their own careers as touring performers. A number of women emerged into a complex range of these kinds of roles in the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain—Sarah Baker, Jane Scott, Maria Foote, Harriet Waylett, Sarah Desmond Macready, and Harriet Murray Siddons, to name just a few. They claimed agency in a variety of ways, maintaining throughout awareness of how important it was for them and their families that they succeed. These women understood what most theatre entrepreneurs of this era did—it was good for business to create an aura surrounding a theatrical institution of cultural significance.

This essay examines Harriet Siddons' leadership role at the Edinburgh Theatre Royal during her tenure there. She and her husband Henry Siddons, son of Sarah Siddons, came to Edinburgh to manage the patent theatre there, supported in their initial application by Walter Scott. Much has been said about

the roles of Walter Scott and later Harriet's brother William Henry Murray in shaping the theatre's influence during the years before and after the death of Harriet's husband Henry Siddons in 1815. Christopher Worth describes Scott's role in arranging for the Siddons's management of the Theatre Royal in the years around 1808 and his continued role in the theatre's place in Edinburgh cultural life. Beth Friedman-Romell and Jeffrey Cox have outlined many of the details of one of the most interesting demonstrations of Scott's involvement in the theatre, his work behind the scenes in mounting the 1810 production of Joanna Baillie's *The Family Legend* and the production's reception.ⁱ Barbara Bell's more comprehensive work on the historical development of the 'National Drama' and its importance to the nineteenth-century Edinburgh theatre's financial success and cultural influence places the roles played by Scott and Murray in a broader context. My aim here is to delineate the role played by Harriet Murray Siddons alongside Scott and Murray in shaping the place of the Theatre Royal during a significant period of cultural transition in Edinburgh.

The context in which I want to make this claim is likely well known to many readers with an interest in this period of Scottish cultural history. Though Walter Scott initially sought—unrealistically—to involve Sarah Siddons in managing the Edinburgh theatre, his eventual advocacy on behalf of Henry Siddons taking on artistic management of the Theatre Royal stayed true to the idea of raising the Scottish stage from mere provinciality by importing theatre artists with significant London reputations. In writing the history of the development of a Scottish patent theatre that warranted the notice of British audiences, Scott's self-documentation has ensured that we can trace his involvement, whether working behind the scenes, advising on production elements, encouraging friends such as Joanna Baillie to write for the Theatre Royal, or lending his novels as material for Scottish National Dramas.ⁱⁱ Though W.H. Murray is said to have destroyed his personal papers (Bell 1998: 167), contemporaries such as James Dibdin and John Coleman, who told of their own experiences in the Edinburgh Theatre Royal, have provided details of his management, and Murray's published addresses to the theatre's patrons and exchanges in the newspapers on issues of management give us a detailed picture of his performance in the public role of manager.

What, then, are we to make of Harriet Siddons' influence on the development of a Scottish patent theatre that contributed to raising Edinburgh's cultural reputation among British critics and audiences

when there are so few artefacts that document the kinds of roles she played in Edinburgh? When Joseph Macleod researched and composed his unpublished memoir on the life of Harriot Murray Siddons in 1976,ⁱⁱⁱ he had access to family papers held by Harriet's great-great-granddaughter Elizabeth Budgen that included letters and a manuscript memoir. From these, Macleod constructs a compelling portrait of Harriet Siddons as a thoughtful, sophisticated, and sensitive practitioner of her professional craft and as an engaged and compassionate member of her community. Further, he reminds us to ask about the full human complexity of the experiences and thinking of someone such as her who was viewed as a person of substance in her time. However, the papers that Macleod consulted have been lost or at least are not readily available for our review, and the personal papers that W.H. Murray destroyed late in his career are also a significant gap in the historical record that could have shed light on his sister's role. My account of Harriet Siddons' role in Edinburgh is drawn from Macleod's memoir, published comments of contemporary theatre professionals and friends, Siddons' letters and other manuscript materials that are still available, and newspaper comments on Harriet Siddons's reputation. From these sources a number of features of her role in the Edinburgh Theatre Royal emerge.

First, as an artist, she achieved a kind of emotionally engaging realism and symbolic cultural significance in her performances. We get a sense of this from the commentary of reviewers and of those who knew her personally and professionally. One of the earliest markers of Harriet's skilled performance of her professional identity came when the Siddonses, urged on by Walter Scott, mounted the first performance of Joanna Baillie's play on Scottish themes, *The Family Legend* in January of 1810. The play's production brought to the Edinburgh stage a spectacle of legendary Scottishness through its costuming and scenery, and it also marked, as Barbara Bell notes, an important moment in the development of 'the national drama' (Bell 1998: 231). As she would throughout her career, Harriet performed the affective centre of the audience's experience of the play, in this particular role inviting them to constitute themselves anew as Scots within the British nation through empathy, remorse, and compassion for nobility of spirit. Though some Highland descendants of the Macleans reportedly took offence at their ancestors' representation, Scottish audiences identified (as Dorothy McMillan notes) 'with the virtues of Helen [played by Harriet Siddons] and the dashing courage of her brother, John of Lorne [played by Henry Siddons], without their being too upset by the behavior of the dastard Duart' (McMillan

2004: 77).^{iv} Baillie's play drew its audience into contemplation of larger questions about the relationship between Scottish and British affiliations, and Harriet Siddons's scenic predicament and acting were central to the meaning of Baillie's *The Family Legend* in Edinburgh in 1810. The 'Critical Analysis' published on 1 February 1810 of Baillie's play and the Theatre Royal production in the *Scots Magazine* praised the staging, noting 'The situation of Helen, left alone on this desolate rock and the waves roaring around her, and venting her despair at the view of her rapidly approaching fate, is one of the wildest and most singular that ever was presented to an audience' (Anonymous 1810: 105).^v Harriet was well suited to the role of Helen, a woman of noble feelings and graceful modesty seeking to survive a conflict between warring 'houses', manage unruly emotions anchored in the past, and yet draw forth from those around her a more peaceful way of feeling and being suited to a more modern Scottish sense of self. In this as well as other roles, Harriet's distinctive approach as an actor led her to project a kind of familiarity that invited the public to connect to her and thereby to the theatrical institution she represented. The nuance with which she embodied Helen in a particular moment of the re-emergence of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal, in relation to the family legends—both theatrical and political—of Kembles, Siddonses, and Murrays, and in dialogue with Scottish cultural figures such as Walter Scott and Joanna Baillie was a powerful factor in the Theatre Royal's ongoing negotiations of Scottish cultural identity. How people felt about Helen/Harriet's predicament as they sat in the Theatre Royal Edinburgh in 1810 has everything to do with what seemed possible to them as British citizens with Scottish affiliation going forward.

Looking a few years beyond the change in the Theatre Royal's management following the death of Henry Siddons in 1815, it is revealing to sample a series of reviews of Harriet Siddons's performances published in the short-lived *Edinburgh Dramatic Review* in 1822. Though this publication was often severely critical of other actors in the Theatre Royal company and occasionally of the theatre's management (aiming mainly at Murray), these comments reveal something of the kind of public discourse that surrounded Harriet Siddons's professionalism as an actor and her public persona. Over just one month of reviews of a number of different performances at the Theatre Royal, the *Edinburgh Dramatic Review* noted that through her performances Harriet managed to exert a number of different kinds of influence on the Edinburgh stage. For example, her performance as Juliana in *The Honey Moon* '[put] some sort of check on those little extravagancies that many of the performers indulge in at other times'

(22 Nov 1822: 122). In two commentaries on her performance of Lucy Ashton in the dramatisation of Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, it was noted that she 'seems to have studied her part from the Novel [...] and portrays the character with her usual discrimination' (26 Nov 1822: 133) and 'depends upon the true delineation of heart-breaking affliction, and proper knowledge of stage effects' (28 Nov 1822: 142). Further, the *Edinburgh Dramatic Review* notes that in playing Donna Violante in Susanna Centlivre's *The Wonder* Siddons 'was, throughout, all the authoress could have wished her' (9 Dec 1822: 182). As Lady Eleanor Irwin in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Every One Has His Fault*, Harriet showed that she is 'exactly suited' to her role and that there are 'few if any ladies now on the stage who can excel Mrs. Siddons in this particular line' (11 Dec 1822: 190). Perhaps most definitively, a review of her performance in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* notes that she 'is the Portia of Shakspeare. The whole of her trial scene cannot be too much praised' (23 Dec 1822: 38).

For this publication, and for many in Edinburgh, Harriet Siddons' public role as leading actor in the Edinburgh Theatre Royal company involved setting an example to other actors, establishing herself as one of the best in her profession, and fulfilling the aims of the authors whose work she represented. Through showing discrimination, emotional judgment, and knowledge of her craft, the suggestion was, Siddons was a noteworthy representative of her community. While we can read these published comments as merely opinions about the skill of her performing, it is surely also important to read them as claims about her importance to the quality and value of the leading Edinburgh theatre's work; Harriet Siddons spoke well for the value of the Scottish theatrical institution she represented.

In addition to noting how the style of Harriet's acting signified something to the public that conferred significance on the theatre as an institution, we can further imagine that her centrality to the theatre's reputation and particular style as a performer must have had some influence on the kinds of plays and playwrights that entered the Theatre Royal's repertoire. Her leadership as one of the company's most experienced performers also no doubt modelled and supported the meticulous rehearsal processes with which James Dibdin and actors such as John Coleman credited the theatre under the leadership of W.H. Murray.^{vi} While some might conclude that Joanna Baillie sought several times to have her plays staged in Edinburgh mainly because of Walter Scott's involvement, an equally compelling reason, arguably, for Baillie to approach the Theatre Royal was that the nuance and style that the

company brought to its work, modelled by Harriet and guided by Murray, was aesthetically in line with Baillie's vision of a psychologically intimate theatre. As one of the most experienced members of the company, Harriet's example set the standard for Murray's work in preparing the productions. Her role in this sense was critical to the artistic emergence of the Theatre Royal's professional approach.

Beyond her professional leadership, the second sphere of Harriet's influence was based on her reputation for intelligence and perceptiveness among her friends and acquaintances. Part of her role in shaping the reputation of the Theatre Royal involved being recognised widely as not just a player on the stage, but a thoughtful person in everyday life. We can glimpse how she was perceived in everyday life from a letter her doctor and friend Andrew Combe wrote to her to let her know of his safe return from a journey and share his perceptions of two travelling companions with her:

As companions on the coach on Sat I had a liberal Church of England clergyman who had been in the South voting for the liberal member & Wesleyan Methodist Minister who had been up voting in East Savoy and I think Leeds for the Conservatives because he considered the Church & the Bishops in danger from Lord Melbourne!! Was not this changing sides in an odd fashion? The liberal church Man said that if not improved the church would destroy itself & that to save it he voted for those who would reform it. Ask the Major if that is not a sensible man? (Ms. 1837: 3-4)

Combe's letter addresses his remarks about human character, politics, and religion to someone who he anticipates will be interested in and conversant with politics and the complexities of their influence on religious positions. Although this is only one example of familiar correspondence, it gives a telling example of how other intelligent Edinburgh citizens of the time viewed Harriet Siddons.

Through her public image outside the theatre in Edinburgh, Harriet did much to allow the Theatre Royal to position itself as a site of cultural significance. Admittedly, much of Harriet's image was created through the kinds of roles she claimed within the theatre, for she frequently articulated from within these roles a seriousness of ethics (Portia), a sense of refined but deep feeling (Desdemona, Viola, and Helen in *The Family Legend*), and a nobility of spirit (Jeanie Deans) that invited the public to see her as a kind of avatar of some of the attitudes and values they might aspire to. However, as Fanny Kemble wrote of daily life in Harriet's household, 'In Mrs. Harry Siddons's house religion was never, I think, directly made a subject of inculcation or discussion [...]. God's service in that house took the daily and hourly form of the

conscientious discharge of duty, unselfish, tender affection toward each other, and kindly Christian charity toward all' (Kemble 1883: 164). As a member of the theatrical community, Harriet regularly performed in support of other actors' benefits and on some occasions lent her personal popularity to performances raising funds for those in need of financial support. In short, Siddons did what actors often do now—she created a sense of her human connection to her community by enacting her concern and fellow feeling. If the style of her acting signified something about the Theatre Royal's professional ethos, the content of her performance both on stage and off illustrated that the character of a leading performer in the theatre could be embraced by the community as aspirational.

Harriet's broader reputation in the community was much commented upon. Fanny Kemble wrote, in her *Record of a Girlhood*,

Mrs. Henry Siddons held a peculiar position in Edinburgh, her widowed condition and personal attractions combining to win the sympathy and admiration of its best society, while her high character and blameless conduct secured the respect and esteem of her theatrical subjects and the general public [...]. (Kemble 1883: 142)

At the end of W.H. Murray's career as manager in 1851, a commentator said of Harriet Siddons that she gave a tone of refinement to our dramatic representations, and of high respectability to the profession, which elevated the character of our stage [...]. In private life, Mrs. Siddons was the model of all that was exemplary and amiable, pursuing the tenor of her domestic duties, contemporaneously with professional toil, with a quiet undeviating care, that rendered her not less beloved in her immediate circle than admired in the dramatic scene. (Anonymous 1851: 31)

James Dibdin, chronicler of Edinburgh stage history, wrote that Harriet Siddons, as a woman, was respected throughout her life by the first families in Edinburgh. As an Artiste, in her particular line, she was acknowledged to have had few equals and no superiors; and as a manageress, was one of the prime movers in raising the Edinburgh stage to the high moral and artistic tone for which it became famous (Dibdin 1888: 253-4).

Siddons created a particular kind of impression of herself and of the Theatre Royal through her way of playing her role as patentee. Though her role consisted of a blend of elements that together influenced public perception, the overall effect was to '[raise] the Edinburgh stage'.

The third sphere in which Harriet played her role within the leadership of the theatre is through participating in occasional enactments of her partnership with her brother before the theatre audience. One of the best examples is the season-opening mini-drama she and WH Murray enacted concerning his reenlistment as manager proper of the theatre on 4 November 1828:

(Enter Mr. Murray)

Mrs. Siddons: Come hither, manager. *(Mr. Murray bows respectfully.)*

Some hold opinion

You've lately failed in talents for dominion;

So now to skill and character depone,

Or else 'Othello's occupation's gone';

For if convicted here, beyond all doubt

I take the reins myself and walk you out.

Mr. Murray: Sister, I needs must think some better way --

Mrs. H. Siddons: I care not, William, what you think or say.

Answer this question -- Did last season pay?

No. -- Then, as like kings, the public do no wrong,

To managers, like ministers, belong

All faults and failures. But I'll talk no more;

These are your judges, as I said before.

(To the audience.) To your decision I refer his cause.

Guilty, a hiss; -- Not Guilty -- then, applause.

After a brief monologue by Murray (mimicking Othello's parting speech), the text suggests that Harriet Siddons invited the audience to cast their votes as previously instructed. Then, having staged the drama of re-enlisting the representative attending audience's unanimous support for her partner in management (and implicitly for herself), she said:

Mrs. H. Siddons: *Nem. Con.* 'tis carried; then I re-instate him,

And Generalissimo anew create him.

My hand shall sign, 'tis yours must set the seal, –

A kindness which I trust he'll never feel,

And, like myself, for ever keep in view,

He owes his All – to you – and you – and you.

(*To Gallery, Boxes, and Pit.*) (Dibdin, 1888: 493-4; also Murray 1851: 42-3)

The speech borrows from elements of the rhetoric of two of Harriet's more noteworthy roles opposite Murray, Viola (to his Sebastian) in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Desdemona (to his Cassio) in *Othello*, by enacting simultaneously her role as an emotionally clumsy man's emissary and her voluble ability to negotiate the Edinburgh theatrical landscape, as strange a land as Illyria or Cyprus to someone who had emigrated from the metropolis. Not only does Harriet herself enact her clever, sensible woman role, but Murray himself sends up his normally performed authority and volubility—both in the theatre and in print. The scene invites the audience to enjoy the by-play of these familiar characters, reminding them that both Murray and Siddons play roles in the theatre's leadership. Siddons' performance of this address provides an example of how a 'womanager'^{vii} learned to play her part in the changing theatrical landscape between 1737 and 1833, demonstrating that in some cases the soft science of women's theatrical entrepreneurship may have been so complex, adroit, and multi-directional that scholars will need new instruments to accurately take its measure.

The situation of Harriet Siddons in Edinburgh allows us to see how women's roles as theatrical managers of a variety of sorts reveal what individuals in the theatre do and participate in—not as auteurs but as entrepreneurs seeking to manage the dynamic interactions between cultural change, financial necessity, and aesthetic strategies for mediating public feeling. For Siddons, the roles of widow, partner in management, beloved community icon, and ultimately private citizen were skillfully enacted as part of the making of the Theatre Royal. Even the speech Scott wrote at Harriet's request for her retirement from the stage, though Macleod suggests it may have seemed to Siddons a bit too fulsome, demonstrated once again that her role in leading the theatre was an affective one informed by a rhetoric of cultural affinity by which maintaining a relationship between herself, the theatre, and the audience had been her central

managerial task. Her appeal on behalf of her brother and managerial continuity builds on the cultural emotion that was part of her own role in Edinburgh:

When I am far, my patrons, oh! Be kind
To the dear relative I leave behind;
He is your own, and, like yourselves, may claim
A Scottish origin—a Scottish name [...].

Her speech concludes by reworking *Twelfth Night's* bait and switch marriage resolution, suggesting that continued affection for her can endear brother Murray to his sister's beloved audience:

For as the brother moves before your eyes,
Some memory of his sister must arise;
And in your hearts a kind remembrance dwell
Of her, who once again sighs forth—farewell! (Dibdin 1888: 495)

Harriet's final curtain speech, written by Scott, blends cultural with familial affinity, suggesting that to continue support of Murray's Theatre Royal would demonstrate loyalty and appreciation for what Mrs. H. Siddons had come to represent to her public.

In a few of the papers that do remain, as in the passage cited below, we get a sense that Harriet Siddons gave considerable thought to her leadership role in the Edinburgh Theatre Royal throughout her time as patentee and even after she retired. Despite the fact that history has paid little attention to her role as a leader in the theatre, preferring instead to see her acting as her main role, Harriet's letters to Murray and other papers that remain behind give a glimpse of someone who understood her role to be much more substantial and recognised the importance of the finances of the Theatre Royal to her family's well-being. After her retirement from the stage, she still wrote encouragingly to her brother when he faced challenges in the theatre's management:

To steer our course with safety is all that can be hoped for some years to come in any pursuit and to do that will require industry, economy, and perseverance. You must not despair—neither regret the failure of any expenditure incurred for the Public amusement. It is so complete a lottery, as to what will or what will not attract, that catering for their tastes must ever be speculative. But it is altering a chandelier—fitting up a saloon, backs to seats, each alteration involving you in a

hundred or two pounds which produces no other effect than momentary approbation you must guard against. You must secure their comfort but luxuries only engraft the love of more and then are not felt as luxuries. (Siddons 1831)

While Harriet Siddons' words in this letter indicate both her continued support of her brother and her ongoing thought about matters of theatrical management, one further stray indication suggests that she remained preoccupied with the role she and her family had played in the management of an important public institution. A sentence she wrote at the beginning of her journal or weekly planner for 1832 suggests her continued thought on the subject: 'Existing rule is always in some degree unpopular: it seems to be a law in the moral as well as physical world that pressure should produce resistance and reaction' (Siddons 1832). This passage, copied out in Harriet's hand, is from *Report on the Province of Malwa, and Adjoining Districts* by Sir John Malcolm (Calcutta 1822), no doubt a text that her son Henry's involvement in the East India Company had led her to. Small details such as these give us a sense that Harriet Siddons thought quite a bit about the leadership role she had played in the Edinburgh theatre.

To consider Harriet Siddons' performance as manager more carefully, we must attune ourselves to the nuances of her persona and to her playful rhetoric and emotional rapport with the public. The persona she crafted made her an influential public figure, and it was understood by many that her influence was formidable, though her actorly public performance has come to seem no more than a feminine stratagem to some. But as we reconsider a woman such as Siddons as an influential manager of a theatrical institution in public space, we should credit her with finesse and mastery of her performance in a significant cultural leadership role.

As women found ways to claim agency in eras of cultural change and expansion of theatrical opportunities, they contributed in ways that we dare not neglect if we want to be accurate in our descriptions of the theatrical past. So if we want to account for how dramas based on Scott's novels had the effects they did on Scottish cultural perceptions in the 1810s and 1820s, we need to consider how a performer such as Siddons created the affective space surrounding the Theatre Royal in which those dramas did their work. The cultural work of women in the theatre should not be ignored because it was not authoritative, but instead sometimes responsive, dialogic and often balanced between economic with emotional management. Walter Scott and William Murray may have powerfully influenced culture and

theatre history, but without Harriet Murray Siddons as their partner, it is debatable whether their contributions in relation to the Theatre Royal could have had the effects they did. Choosing to see Harriet as comparable in her influence on the theatre to these noteworthy men requires us to reformulate both what kinds of historical influence we value and what procedures of investigation we engage in when reconstructing elusive, affective forms of power. Women who depended on the theatre to support themselves and their families understood very well that they were enacting their institutions through public and private performance. Figuring out how to play roles that created these institutions—and thus benefitted them and their families—is what entrepreneurs like Harriet Murray Siddons managed to do.

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Notes

ⁱBoth Friedman-Romell and Cox draw upon James C. Dibdin's summary of the production's development in *The Annals of the Edinburgh Stage*, which is based in part on Scott's letters to Baillie about the production's progress in development.

ⁱⁱ Bell ('Joanna Baillie' and 'The Nineteenth Century') has chronicled the emergence of the Scottish 'national drama' as both a cultural and economic factor in the history of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal in the 1800s.

ⁱⁱⁱ Macleod notes that she commonly spelled her name 'Harriot'.

^{iv} In performance, Helen's husband and his family were named Duart rather than Maclean.

^v Cole argues that 'Helen and Maclean's child is representative of a new kind of Scot [...]. In this play Baillie articulated the potential for a new Scottish identity that is of equal importance within the societies of Scotland and England: Great Britain' (104).

^{vi} Dibdin notes an example from 1829 of the Edinburgh theatre being closed to allow for rehearsals, 'a proceeding very uncommon in those days' (329). Dibdin further comments, 'One peculiarity of Murray's was that he insisted upon every member of his company *acting* at rehearsal exactly as they intended to do at night' (423). Coleman, who spent a significant part of his career in theatre in Edinburgh working with Murray, notes how much more rigorous actor study and rehearsal were 'in all the great provincial centres' than they were in London where he spent the latter parts of his career (693).

^{vii} The term was coined by Leigh Hunt in his review entitled 'Olympic Pavilion', *The Tatler*, 4 January 1831.