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# Siddons's Ghost: Celebrity and Gender in Sheridan's *Pizarro*

Selena Couture

"And it was a necessary condition of the successful hegemonic control of the theatre . . . that women's work within the public space should be disguised, discounted or appropriated to male control; and therefore entertainment, embodied as female, became the Other of the 'National Drama' of male genius."  
—Jacky Bratton<sup>1</sup>

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, playwright, longtime Member of Parliament, and manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, was in desperate financial straits in 1799. It had been twenty years since his last play, *The Critic*; he had not paid his lead actors for many days and was in need of a hit show to bring in money.<sup>2</sup> He decided to adapt August von Kotzebue's *Die Spanier in Peru*, a popular German melodrama. Sheridan's adaptation was called *Pizarro* and he wrote it with the Drury Lane company in mind. He had John Philip Kemble to play the Peruvian hero Rolla and Sarah Siddons to play Pizarro's Spanish mistress Elvira. The production was a huge hit, running for over thirty nights, solving Sheridan's financial troubles and reminding the public of his power as a writer.<sup>3</sup> In Sheridan's oeuvre, however, the play is known for its melodramatic plot and bombastic style. Considering his biting satire of this type of theatre in *The Critic*, it is often judged an embarrassment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>2</sup>Heather McPherson, "Caricature, Cultural Politics, and the Stage: The Case of *Pizarro*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2007): 612.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 607. The play brought in almost one-fourth of the revenue of the 1798/99 Drury Lane season.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Anonymous, *A critique on the tragedy of Pizarro, as represented at Drury Lane Theatre with Such Uncommon Applause, to which is added, a new prologue, that has not yet been spoken*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Miller, 1799), available at Eighteenth Century Collections Online, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?type=search&tabID=T001&queryId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28BN%2CNon%2C7%29T059167%24&sort=Author&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&version=1.0&userGroupName=ubcolumbia&prodId=ECCO>; and Samuel Argent Bardsley, *Critical remarks on Pizarro, a tragedy, taken from the German drama of Kotzebue, and adapted to the English stage by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, With incidental observations on the subject of the drama* (London: T. Cadell, Jr., and W. Davies, 1800), available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101036889150>.

*Pizarro* is also known for a speech that was borrowed from Sheridan's own parliamentary career and given to Rolla. The speech was part of one that Sheridan gave during the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of India. It was about a charge concerning the unjust seizure of land from two women rulers (Begums) for debts owed by a prince of their family in Oudh to the British East India Company. At one point during the speech, Sheridan appealed particularly to the public's moral sentiment by highlighting the British mistreatment of the mother and grandmother of the family. The charge regarding the Begums was the fourth of twenty-two brought against Hastings. Sheridan's speeches during the affair (one six-hour speech in the House of Commons on 7 February 1787, and another before the Lords at Westminster Hall over four days, on 3, 6, 10, 13 June 1788) were renowned at the time for their length, passion, and rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> After a lengthy trial, Hastings was acquitted in 1794, and although Sheridan's speeches had a strong effect while he gave them, in the end, they did not help to convict Hastings of any criminal offence.

Eleven years later, when he was adapting Kotzebue's play, Sheridan returned to these speeches. Why he returned to them and how we might consider his insertion of them into a piece of theatre is the subject of much of the existing scholarship on *Pizarro*. John Loftis, for example, explains the enigma of the play in Sheridan's oeuvre by linking Rolla's speech with Sheridan's parliamentary career and political goals.<sup>6</sup> Sara Suleri relates the play to the Hastings trial, terming it a "politically significant document [that] disseminates . . . colonial guilt" and contrasting Rolla's speech with the text from the fourth day of Sheridan's second speech at the trial.<sup>7</sup> Julie Carlson's article gives the historical and political context of the Begums speech, considers the positioning of familial ties in making the foreign familiar, and focuses on considerations of translation and adaptation in the eighteenth-century context of British anxieties about a French invasion by Napoleon. David Francis Taylor considers Sheridan's use of theatricality and the conventions of eighteenth-century tragedy in his Hastings speeches, and how the acquittal then affected Sheridan's faith in the power of rhetoric, which Taylor views as one of the main points of *Pizarro*.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I will build on this earlier research and also correct a considerable oversight in all except Taylor that results from a primary focus on Rolla's speech as the main performative act being broadcast in the play and that consequently disregards the influence of a powerful combination of gender and celebrity in the performance. The term "performative" here refers to the audience's experience of the production, as opposed to a reading of the published script, as well as to Joseph Roach's definition of performance in *Cities of the Dead* as that which "stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace."<sup>9</sup> My analysis of Sarah Siddons's contribution as a performer will show that in *Pizarro*, Sheridan used her celebrity as an actor and her status as a national icon and symbol of British womanhood to respond to the simple patriotism of Rolla's speech and to articulate a more complex, self-reflexive understanding of British responsibility for colonial abuses.

<sup>5</sup>David Francis Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition: Empire, Revolution, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 67–71.

<sup>6</sup>John Loftis, "Whig Oratory in Sheridan's *Pizarro*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8, no. 4 (1975): 454, 460.

<sup>7</sup>Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 69, 72–73.

<sup>8</sup>Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, 119–54.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

### *Pizarro* and the “Emotional Heritage of the Stage”

Responses to *Pizarro* in 1799 and through the subsequent years support Jacky Bratton's theory, proposed in *New Readings in Theatre History*, that theatre history's “grand narrative,” which focuses on the literary male genius at the expense of the experiences and dynamics of the actors onstage and the response of audiences to their work, solidified with the 1832 Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Laws Affecting Dramatic Literature. As Bratton asserts,

from this point onwards, . . . the theatre was increasingly appropriated to the middle-class voice in Britain. . . . [A]necdote, inherited wisdom, professional interest in the box office—all the material and emotional heritage of the stage—was viewed merely as the context which helped (or more often hindered) the realisation of the written dramatic text. . . . [O]ther histories survived and survive, but their status has been suspect throughout the Modernist period.<sup>10</sup>

Bratton's uncovering of theatre histories focuses not on the literary, but on actors' methods of transmitting history—for example, Charles Mathews's monopolylogues, through which he asserted “a kind of living history, by serious mimicry, that preserved the art of theatre.”<sup>11</sup> She asserts the importance of considering a play not simply as a literary text, but as a time of “intertheatricality,” which she defines as including “an awareness of the elements and interactions that make up the whole web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players, a sense of . . . knowingness, about playing that spans a lifetime or more, and that is activated for all participants during the performance event.”<sup>12</sup> By contrasting the responses of critics of *Pizarro* at the time it was originally performed to those of recent theatre scholars, we will be able to see how the pre-modernist methods that Bratton identifies focused on intertheatrical meaning and the body of the performer.

Carlson states that Rolla's speech is what Romantic-era critics, as well as recent theatre scholars, “identify as the play's most powerful passage.”<sup>13</sup> Reaction to the speech in Sheridan's time was undoubtedly strong—it was reprinted in all the newspaper reviews and extensively discussed<sup>14</sup>—and yet two contemporary critics insisted that it was not the most powerful part of the play. As the anonymous author of *A Critique on the Tragedy of Pizarro* stated of Rolla's speech: “I could find little to admire in this flaming harangue, except the comparison of the vulture and the lamb, which I thought, and still think, a very fine image.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, this critic focused his attention on Pizarro's mistress Elvira, as played by Siddons: “The mixed dignity and tenderness of Elvira is well supported, and her character, with the exception of now and then lapsing a little too much into the virago, is by far the best in the piece.”<sup>16</sup> In *Critical Remarks on Pizarro*, Samuel Bardsley similarly commented that “Elvira stands prominent among the group of Personages in this Drama. The Author seems to have bestowed no common pains, to render her an object of Sympathy and Interest. Her sentiments are lofty, her

<sup>10</sup> Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Julie Carlson, “Trying Sheridan's *Pizarro*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38, nos. 3–4 (1996): 359.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>15</sup> *A critique on the tragedy of Pizarro*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–40. Approximately one-sixth of this book and Bardsley's concerns Elvira.

language energetic, and the virtuous struggles of repentance and remorse are forcibly depicted."<sup>17</sup> For these critics, there was clearly much more to *Pizarro* than Rolla's speech.

Recent scholars have considered the significance of the actors in a limited way. Heather McPherson, for example, has chronicled the varied responses to *Pizarro* through her analysis of publications of satirical caricatures, describing *Pizarro* as "morally and politically ambivalent, . . . a perfect vehicle for caricature, in which the ambiguities and ideological tensions were played out visually."<sup>18</sup> McPherson acknowledges the contributions of Siddons and Kemble as actors, but does not take into account how their status may have influenced the meaning of the performance. Dana Van Kooy has considered the staging of ambivalence relating to the colonial project in *Pizarro*, analyzing how melodramatic aesthetics encouraged multiple focuses that could, in turn, enable multiple ways of thinking about colonial actions, and suggesting that Elvira, whose personal journey enacts the seduction of colonial adventure, is the moral compass of the play.<sup>19</sup> Taylor connects Siddons's celebrity embodiment of tragic femininity, which "foregrounded the politics of wife- and motherhood,"<sup>20</sup> with Sheridan's rhetoric at the Hastings trial, and briefly mentions the incongruence of Siddons's status with the character of Elvira, while thoroughly analyzing the significance of the character's vocal subversion of gender norms and the unspoken spectacle of her silent presence at the death of Pizarro. Yet, although McPherson, Van Kooy, and Taylor acknowledge the importance of the stage, they do not consider Elvira's final speech as an answer to Rolla's patriotism nor the significance of Siddons's appearance in the role.

The scholarly focus on Rolla's speech, which is unquestionably a fascinating repeating text, makes sense on many levels, particularly for those concerned with the playwright's artistic and political lives and how they intertwined. Examining the cultural phenomenon of *Pizarro* through visual means, as McPherson and Van Kooy do, is a step away from literary-based theatrical history. What this approach excludes, and what the Romantic-era critics who responded to the performance were aware of, was the importance of the performers' bodies onstage. This response to the physicality of the actors may be because the Romantic-era critics were viewers of the performance, or it may be, as Bratton has theorized, that their way of viewing theatrical performance was more open to the "emotional heritage of the stage." Focusing on the significance of Siddons's performance of Elvira, the fact that Sheridan adapted the part for her acting style and celebrity, and, most importantly, how Elvira's/Siddons's final speech functions as a companion to Rolla's will give further insight into the possible meanings of the play for its original audiences.

### Siddons as Celebrity Ghost Onstage

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson analyzes how the "recycled body of an actor . . . evoke[s] . . . the ghosts of previous roles."<sup>21</sup> In considering how celebrity actors'

<sup>17</sup> Bardsley, *Critical remarks on Pizarro*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> McPherson, "Caricature, Cultural Politics, and the Stage," 621.

<sup>19</sup> Dana Van Kooy, "Darkness Visible: The Early Melodrama of British Imperialism and the Commodification of History in Sheridan's *Pizarro*," *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 2 (2012): 191–92.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 8.

performances affect audiences, he draws on Michael Quinn's observation that celebrities have "an overdetermined quality that exceeds the needs of the fiction, and keeps them from disappearing entirely into the acting figure or the drama. Rather, their contribution to the performance is often a kind of collision with the role."<sup>22</sup> Carlson agrees with Quinn that "celebrity works against the illusion of theatrical naturalism," but he contends that if a celebrity actor's fame is congruent with the role that he/she is playing—for example, if an actress playing an ingénue has also "just won the Miss America beauty contest"—then it would be no more disruptive than being typecast.<sup>23</sup> Carlson also addresses Siddons's type of celebrity when he considers performances by great actors of a theatre generation. Such actors, he writes,

gradually take on a special aura of achievement, becoming in a sense indexes of the art itself, celebrity, if you will, but celebrity of a particular kind, based not so much on public notoriety but on a reputation for theatrical achievement. . . . Once such actors have established themselves at the pinnacle of their profession, their appearance in each new role, or in each major revival, is ghosted not only by memories of specific past performances but, perhaps even more important, by a general audience awareness of the significance of the achievement represented by those performances. This effect is, of course, further heightened when the artist is nearing the end of a distinguished career.<sup>24</sup>

Compare this description of the effect of a great actor's performance with William Hazlitt's assessment of Siddons performing the role of Lady Macbeth in 1817, near the end of her career: "It is nearly twenty years since we first saw her in this character, and certainly the impression which we have still left on our minds from that first exhibition, is stronger than the one we received the other evening. The sublimity of Mrs Siddons's acting is such that the first impulse which it gives to the mind can never wear out."<sup>25</sup> Siddons first performed *Lady Macbeth* in London in 1785. The part stayed in her repertoire until her retirement from the stage in 1812 (it was her final performance), and she returned to it periodically from retirement.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on Carlson's concept of celebrity-actor ghosting, I argue that, in creating the role of Elvira for Siddons, Sheridan decided to make the character more congruent with Siddons's fame, using that fame to enhance not only the commercial success of his play, but also its political resonance.

When *Pizarro* was performed, Siddons (1755–1831) was 44 years old and her daughter Maria had died seven months earlier at the age of 18. This was the third death of a child for Siddons: Frances had died in 1781 and Eliza in 1788. Sally would die four years later, in 1803.<sup>27</sup> As Siddons was so famous, her maternal grief was public knowledge and enhanced her status as a great actress. Hazlitt described her as "tragedy personified"; she was called "The Tragic Queen" by playwright Joanna Baillie; and Joshua Reynolds's 1784 painting *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse*—one of eighteen portraits of Siddons to be exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1780 and 1797—was hailed as a masterpiece.<sup>28</sup> As Jeffrey Cox has noted, by being always known as "Mrs Siddons,"

<sup>22</sup> Quinn, qtd. in *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 86–87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> William Hazlitt, *A View of the English Stage* (London: John Warren, 1821), 446–47.

<sup>26</sup> James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Siddons, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Actors*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1827), 129–30, 378–81.

<sup>27</sup> Lindal Buchanan, "Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 25, no. 4 (2007): 428.

<sup>28</sup> Heather McPherson, "Picturing Tragedy: *Mrs Siddons as the Tragic Muse* Revisited," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 3 (2000): 405–6.

the actress maintained a respectable social status by foregrounding her identity as a wife and mother and rejecting a “sexualized identity” offstage while deploying emotional and sexual power onstage.<sup>29</sup> Both Ellen Donkin and Lindal Buchanan have discussed Siddons’s womanhood and visible motherhood, each speculating on how she used this power. Her maternal persona, Buchanan argues, allowed her to “subvert gender norms and enact a new variant of public womanhood.”<sup>30</sup> There is no direct reference to women in the speech that Sheridan gave to Rolla in *Pizarro*, yet the public sentiment that he had invoked in his speech against Hastings regarding the mistreatment of vulnerable women in a domestic sphere was part of the wider context of the play’s production and reception. Siddons’s status as a respected public representative of maternal womanhood connected her to *Pizarro* and to the Begum women whose mistreatment Sheridan had condemned in his argument against Hastings.

While Siddons’s public persona as a famous mother connected her with the Begums, her skill as a tragic actress engaged her public and enabled her to stand as an icon of British womanhood. Shearer West provides insight into the physical details of Siddons’s acting that elicited such a strong response from her audiences: “[r]eviews of Siddons’s early acting style show that she drew upon the ‘points’ of her predecessors, but she furthered the emotional effect of the action by moving rapidly between passions or endeavoring to convey several passions simultaneously.”<sup>31</sup> This ability to rapidly portray a diversity of emotions was also noted by Hazlitt in describing her performance in *The Gamester*: “The look, first of incredulity and astonishment, then of anger, then passing suddenly into contempt, and ending in bitter scorn, and a convulsive burst of laughter, all given in a moment, and laying open every movement of the soul, produced an effect which we shall never forget.”<sup>32</sup> There are numerous portraits of Siddons both in and out of character, and West uses these portraits to argue that Siddons represented idealized British womanhood.<sup>33</sup> She could be recognized as a national heroine, for example, when she dressed up as Britannia to celebrate George III’s recovery from illness in 1789. In her study of eighteenth-century British actresses and celebrity, *Fashioning Celebrity*, Laura Engel cites Siddons’s memoirs and Reynolds’s painting of her as Tragic Muse to assert not only that she was “a true representation of British femininity,” but also that she deliberately styled herself as such through her emphasis on noble dignity and loyal domesticity.<sup>34</sup> From Engel’s and West’s research, it

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox, “Baillie, Siddons, Larpent: Gender, Power, and Politics in the Theatre of Romanticism,” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790–1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37–38.

<sup>30</sup> Buchanan, “Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History,” 429.

<sup>31</sup> Shearer West, “Public and Private Roles,” in *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraits*, ed. Robyn Aleson (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999), 16. The term “points” refers to a technique whereby actors delivered the “high points” of a passage “with great vehemence,” “[seeking] and expect[ing] to receive applause as they made ‘points’ throughout the play”; see Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, “English Theatre to 1800,” in *History of the Theatre* (Boston: Pearson, 2008), 221.

<sup>32</sup> Hazlitt, *A View of the English Stage*, 47. It should also be noted that when Drury Lane was rebuilt (as it had been at the time of *Pizarro*), it accommodated over 3,500 audience members. Siddons had to change her acting style in order to broadcast to the cavernous house, relying less on facial detail, wearing simpler costumes, and emphasizing the physical lines of her statuesque body; see James Boaden, Siddons’s contemporary biographer, qtd. in Patricia McLoughlin McMahon, “The Tragical Art of Sarah Siddons: An Analysis of Her Acting Style” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1972), 154.

<sup>33</sup> West, “Public and Private Roles,” 29.

<sup>34</sup> Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: 18th-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 22, 26–58.

is clear that Siddons was a powerful woman who carefully manipulated her celebrity in order to be seen not only as a superbly talented, ambitious actress, but as the ideal British woman.

Echoing Carlson's theory of celebrity ghosting, Judith Pascoe explains in her evocative book *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files* that "anyone who went to the theater in the romantic period [had] a vast dramatic repertoire filed away in [their brain]. . . . Siddons made . . . the audience resonate like harp strings."<sup>35</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote the eighth of his series of "Sonnets on Eminent Characters" to Siddons—"Ev'n such the shiv'ring joys thy tones impart, / Ev'n so thou, SIDDONS! meltest my sad heart!"<sup>36</sup>—while Charles Lamb, in his essay on whether Shakespeare's tragedies should be performed, confessed his pleasure and gratitude at seeing her perform, but also used her celebrity as part of his argument against the performance of Shakespeare, stating that when "[w]e speak of Lady Macbeth, . . . we are in reality thinking of Mrs. S."<sup>37</sup> Siddons's presence onstage in any performance was ghosted by her public status, as well as her famous roles; these ghosts clearly added meaning to her characterization of Elvira in *Pizarro*.

### Sheridan's Adaptation of *Pizarro*

The plot of *Pizarro* revolves around the return of the Spanish explorer to Peru following his defeat when his comrade Alonzo joined with the Peruvian warriors to fight against him. Alonzo has married and had a son with a Peruvian woman, Cora, who was formerly betrothed to the Peruvian warrior Rolla. Rolla selflessly gave up his claim on Cora so that she might be happy. The play opens with Pizarro planning to attack the Peruvians while they make sacrifices at the Temple of the Sun. During the first battle, Alonzo is captured and condemned to death by Pizarro. When Elvira learns that he intends to kill Alonzo, she turns against Pizarro and decides to enlist Alonzo's help to assassinate him. Meanwhile, goaded by Cora, Rolla has secretly taken Alonzo's place in captivity. Elvira finds Rolla in Alonzo's cell and together they agree to murder Pizarro. They sneak into his tent, but Rolla cannot kill a sleeping man; he wakes Pizarro and consequently Elvira's plot is revealed. Pizarro condemns her to death and frees Rolla. Alonzo and Cora are reunited, although Spanish soldiers kidnap their son. As Rolla is leaving the Spanish camp he meets the soldiers with the child and rescues him, but is shot during the escape. He lives long enough to return the boy to Cora and Alonzo and then dies. Pizarro attacks shortly afterward and Elvira enters while he and Alonzo fight, distracting him so that Alonzo can kill him.

Julie Carlson describes Rolla's speech to the Peruvian warriors as they prepare for battle in the temple scene as having been cast "into an otherwise faithful translation of Kotzebue" and as "[t]he most 'original' contribution of Sheridan's to *Pizarro*."<sup>38</sup> Com-

<sup>35</sup> Judith Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 103.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Sonnets on Eminent Characters," in *The Poetical and Dramatic Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1877), 140. Coleridge possibly collaborated with Charles Lamb on this poem, which has also been attributed to him.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Lamb, "(On the) Tragedies of Shakespeare," BiblioBytes (n.d.), eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), 3, available at [http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2008523&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ppv=EB&ppid=pp\\_COVER](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2008523&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ppv=EB&ppid=pp_COVER) (accessed 31 January 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Carlson, "Trying Sheridan's *Pizarro*," 359, 360.

paring *Pizarro* with Kotzebue's *Die Spanier in Peru*, it is quickly evident that this claim is not accurate. Sheridan did not read German and so was dependent on a translator for his adaptation,<sup>39</sup> but the question of which translation he used is a matter of some debate.<sup>40</sup> Matthew "Monk" Lewis had originally collaborated with Sheridan on the idea to produce *Die Spanier in Peru*, and his translation was a result of that intention. Lewis eventually became irritated with Sheridan, however, calling him "vexatious and uncertain" and ended the collaboration, publishing his own translation during the same year as Sheridan's adaptation. Sheridan did not give Lewis credit for his work on the production<sup>41</sup> and Lewis's translation may not have been the one that Sheridan used,<sup>42</sup> but it is the most literal and retains Kotzebue's *dramatis personae* and "the original act and scene divisions."<sup>43</sup> For the purpose of comparing Sheridan's *Pizarro* to *Die Spanier in Peru*, I will therefore use Lewis's version.

There are many differences between Kotzebue's play and Sheridan's adaptation. To begin with, Sheridan's is about a third shorter, even though he added speeches and scenes. The text of the original Kotzebue scene into which Sheridan cast Rolla's speech includes fewer than forty words:

ROLLA: Our enemies fight for plunder, we for our native land.

ALONZO: They follow an adventurer to battle; we a monarch [Ataliba], whom we love.

ATALIBA: And a God, whom we adore!—Come, my friends, let us perform our sacrifice.<sup>44</sup>

At over 300 words, Sheridan's version of this scene is much expanded, employing various rhetorical methods of persuasion. Rolla begins his speech by doubting that his words are necessary to inspire the troops, and then makes repeated use of the words "they" and "we" as he expands on the nature of the difference between the Spaniards' greed and the Peruvians' righteous defense of their homeland:

They boast, they come but to improve our state, enlarge our thoughts, and free us from the yoke of error!—Yes—THEY will give enlightened freedom to *our* minds, who are themselves the slaves of passion, avarice, and pride.—They offer us their protection—Yes, such protection as vultures give to lambs—covering and devouring them!—They call on us to barter all of good we have inherited and proved, for the desperate chance of something which they promise.—Be our plain answer this: The throne WE honour is the PEOPLE'S CHOICE—the laws we reverence are our brave Fathers' legacy—the faith we follow teaches us to live in bonds of charity with all mankind and die with hope of bliss beyond the grave. Tell your invaders this, and tell them too, we seek no change; and, least of all, such change as they would bring us. [*Trumpets sound*]<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 77.

<sup>40</sup> Jack Davis Durant, *Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 136.

<sup>41</sup> Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis*, 77.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor's recently published *Theatres of Opposition* (2012) mentions that Sheridan's manuscript of *Pizarro*, held in the Harvard Theatre Collection at the Houghton Library, has a translation attached to it, but he does not provide details about the translator. According to Harvard Theatre Collection curatorial assistant Dale Stinchcomb, the translation is anonymous (personal correspondence, 23 January 2013); as my essay goes to press, I have not yet received my copy of the translation.

<sup>43</sup> Myron Matlaw, "English Versions of *Die Spanier in Peru*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1955): 65.

<sup>44</sup> August von Kotzebue, *Rolla; or, The Peruvian Hero: a tragedy in five acts. Translated from the German of Kotzebue*, trans. Matthew Gregory Lewis, 2nd ed. (London: J. Bell, 1799), 27–28, available at [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft\\_id=xri:ilcs:ft:drama:Z200097073:2](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft_id=xri:ilcs:ft:drama:Z200097073:2) (accessed 14 December 2011). (Subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.)

<sup>45</sup> Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *Pizarro: A Tragedy in Five Acts; as performed at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane: Taken From the German Drama of KOTZEBUE; and adapted to the English Stage by Richard Brinsley*

With its description of the throne as the "PEOPLE'S CHOICE" and its reuse of the metaphor of vultures and lambs, Sheridan's adaptation of the original Kotzebue scene clearly functioned as political commentary on the struggle for a more democratic and less corrupt governing process in Britain, which may explain why it was reprinted so many times during the run of the play and again in 1803, as "Sheridan's Address to the People," during the threat of French invasion.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond Rolla's speech, Sheridan made further additions to Kotzebue's play while at the same time reducing its overall length. Kotzebue's text includes the character of Elvira, and much of the plot that concerns her remains the same in Sheridan's version, except that her speeches are expanded and focus is placed on her at the end of the play. Kotzebue's Elvira makes her final appearance in act 4, scene 13, when she fails in her assassination attempt on Pizarro and guards take her away to be tortured (85); the play ends about twenty-four pages later, with Rolla's death after returning the child to Cora (108). Sheridan expanded Elvira's speeches at the end of acts 1 and 3 and added a two-and-a-half-page scene in which she appears at the end of the play. As a result of the intense critical focus on Rolla's speech, the implications of Sheridan's changes to Elvira's character have not been sufficiently considered. Julie Carlson mentions Elvira only a few times and concludes that "[s]he is never given the words to tell her story and occasions no one's pity,"<sup>47</sup> but Elvira *does* tell her story, even if not in great detail, and Rolla forgives her, as does Alonzo when he invites her to stay in Peru after Pizarro has been killed. Elvira is certainly "given words"—very powerful ones—including the speech that ends the play.

In Kotzebue's version of act 3, scene 3, Elvira's motives in pleading for Alonzo's life seem mixed: she is attracted to Alonzo, yet she also offers to seduce him so that he can be in Pizarro's power through her. Sheridan changed this scene considerably. In his version, Elvira repeatedly demands that Pizarro act heroically and therefore prove worthy of her love: "Hold!—Pizarro!—Hear Me! If not always *justly*, at least act always *greatly*" (43; emphasis in original) (fig. 1). In Kotzebue, Elvira's monologue is concerned mainly with her reasons for switching allegiance from Pizarro to Alonzo and with her scorn for what she considers to be Pizarro's cowardice: "Alonzo shall live!—Elvira shall love him!—Not for that the bloom of youth and his form's fair proportions have for my eyes the charms of novelty; no, 'tis that I find the idol, whom I worshipped in Pizarro, is but a perishable soulless image. . . . Ha! Pizarro, I could have pardoned thee, hadst thou been faithless to obtain a throne; but thou art cowardly, and mean—and thou hast lost Elvira for ever!" (63). In Sheridan's expanded version of this monologue—almost double the length of Kotzebue's—Elvira moves from humility and embarrassment ("'Twas fit I should be rebuked—and by Pizarro"), to tearful self-admonishment ("Fall, fall, ye few reluctant drops of weakness"), and then to growing anger as she steels herself to hate Pizarro ("How a woman can love Pizarro, thou hast known too well—how she can hate, thou hast yet to learn"). She next moves through an exciting list of all the trials she has seen him overcome: "thou didst bestride a fragment of [a] smoking wreck—to wave thy glittering sword above thy head—as thou wouldst defy the world in that extremity!" She then ends with a threat uttered in fury: "Come, fearless man—now meet the last and fellest peril of thy

*Sheridan*, 3rd ed. (London: James Ridgway, 1799), 22–23. (Subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.)

<sup>46</sup> Carlson, "Trying Sheridan's *Pizarro*," 373.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.



Figure 1. Mrs Siddons as Elvira in "Pizarro" (1799) by Robert Dighton. (Source: British Museum, Prints & Drawings. Copyright © The Trustees of the British Museum.)

life—meet! and survive—an injured woman’s fury, if thou canst” (48). This expanded version of Elvira’s speech seems designed to exploit the emotional range and ability for quick transitions that were distinctive features of Siddons’s acting; it also foreshadows Sheridan’s changes to the play’s ending.

In both versions of the play, Pizarro acknowledges Elvira’s bravery. See, for example, Kotzebue’s “Woman! woman!—Oh, why were not all my men, this day, women like

thee!" (53) and then Sheridan's "Woman! Elvira!—Why had not all my men hearts like thine?" (39). In both texts, Elvira also urges Pizarro to manliness. Kotzebue's version is: "A tear?—Oh, shame thee! None but monks and women weep" (53); and Sheridan's: "I would have thee cold and dark as the night that follows the departed storm; still and sullen as the awful pause that precedes Nature's convulsion" (39). Kotzebue's Elvira seems much like Lady Macbeth, and perhaps this similarity gave Sheridan an idea to ghost Lady Macbeth in another way in the play. In his version, after Rolla dies there is another fight scene between Pizarro and Alonzo. Alonzo loses his shield and seems about to be killed, at which point stage directions indicate that Elvira, released from captivity by Pizarro's soldier Valverde, enters "habited as when Pizarro first beheld her—Pizarro, appalled, staggers back.—Alonzo renews the Fight, and slays him" (75). In Sheridan's adaptation, as her last request before death, Elvira asks for her "noviciate habit" from when she was in the convent (73). At this moment of her entry, she is dressed as a nun, a visual image consistent with the reflective tone of her final speech, but that might also have resonated with audiences in another way. In Siddons's famous portrayal of Lady Macbeth, the actress wore a flowing white gown and headdress in the sleepwalking scene, as represented in George Henry Harlow's painting "Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth" (fig. 2). Siddons's performance in the sleepwalking scene was described by Hazlitt as "an event in everyone's life, not to be forgotten,"<sup>48</sup> and so her appearance as Elvira dressed as a nun might have brought her performance as Lady Macbeth to spectators' minds. Elvira's uncanny appearance unnerves Pizarro and causes his death, but the parallel between Siddons's portrayal of Elvira and her celebrated Lady Macbeth—a character driven mad by guilt—may have lent even greater power to Elvira's final speech in which she expresses remorse.

Sheridan also drew on Siddons's status as an icon of British womanhood to enhance his characterization of Elvira, as becomes evident in the character's final speech. After Pizarro's death, when Alonzo asks her to stay in Peru, Elvira responds:

Alonzo, no!—the destination of my future life is fix'd. Humbled in penitence, I will endeavour to atone the guilty errors, which, however mask'd by shallow cheerfulness, have long consum'd my secret heart—When, by my sufferings, purified, and penitence sincere, my soul shall dare address the Throne of Mercy in behalf of others,—for thee, Alonzo—for thy Cora, and thy child,—for thee, thou virtuous Monarch, and the innocent race you reign over, shall Elvira's prayers address the God of Nature.—Valverde, you have preserved my life. Cherish humanity—avoid the foul examples thou hast view'd.—Spaniards returning to your native home, assure your rulers, they mistake the road to glory, or to power.—Tell them, that the pursuits of avarice, conquest, and ambition, never yet made a people happy, or a nation great—[Casts a look of agony on the dead body of Pizarro as she passes and exit] [Flourish of Trumpets] (76)

Elvira's speech follows the pattern of Rolla's earlier speech in that she mentions the monarch and God, but her remorse and hope for the future contrast with Rolla's invocation of these higher powers to remind soldiers of their common bonds before fighting. Rather than rousing the troops for battle, she is sounding a retreat. Where he speaks of "we" and "they," she talks of "I" and "you," but when she talks of "you/thou," it is to pray for, rather than vilify, those whom she addresses. In her speech, "they" refers to the Spanish rulers. She instructs the soldiers to tell their rulers to give up their ways, not including herself among them, but instead saying "assure *your* rul-

<sup>48</sup> William Hazlitt, qtd. in Linda Kelly, *The Kemble Era: John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons and the London Stage* (London: Bodley Head, 1980), 49.



Figure 2. Mrs Siddons as *Lady Macbeth*, sleepwalking scene, Act V, from *Macbeth* by Shakespeare (1814) by George Henry Harlow. (Source: The Garrick Club / The Art Archive at Art Resource, New York.)

ers, *they* mistake." Yet Elvira is supposed to be a Spanish character and they are her rulers too. If the speaker is not Spanish and they are not her rulers, then where is she from? At this point, the character Elvira and the actress Siddons aligned to function as the personification of Britain speaking about remorse.

The flourish of trumpets at the end of Elvira's speech is also significant. Why would trumpets flourish at the moment when Pizarro's mistress makes this speech? The stage direction "*Trumpets sound*" also ended Rolla's speech at the Temple of the Sun, after which the assembled warriors made a solemn sacrifice before going off to battle (23). The final scene takes place at the end of the battle that Rolla's speech opened (74). After Elvira's speech and the sounding of the trumpets, the Spanish soldiers exit carrying Pizarro's body and then Alonzo initiates a solemn tribute to Rolla. Instead of a celebration of the Peruvian victory, then, the play concludes with a moment that matches Rolla's speech and the sacrifice at the temple.

In the final speech of *Pizarro*, Sheridan thus had Siddons moving between speaking as Elvira and as an ideal figure of British womanhood, while at the same time ghosting her most famous role, Lady Macbeth, at the moment when the character was overcome by guilt. Whereas Rolla's speech might be perceived as being about Spain/

Peru, Britain/France, and/or Britain/India, Elvira's speech, as performed by Siddons, was much more stable in its allegorical meaning. Referencing Britain's colonial project, her words were addressed not only to herself as Pizarro's Spanish mistress and to the defeated Spanish soldiers, but also to the British people: "Humbled in penitence, I will endeavour to atone the guilty errors. . . . [A]ssure your rulers, they mistake the road to glory, or to power.—Tell them, that the pursuits of avarice, conquest, and ambition, never yet made a people happy, or a nation great" (76).

The epilogue that follows the final scene and that was spoken by Mrs. Jordan, who played Cora, muses on the voice that drives all the characters to be honorable: "A voice proclaims thee, that we must believe, / A voice, that surely speaks not to deceive." It was this voice, according to the epilogue, that spoke to Cora, Alonzo, and Rolla:

That voice ye hear—Oh! be its will obey'd!  
'Tis Valour's impulse and 'tis Virtue's aid—  
It prompts to all Benevolence admires,  
To all that heav'nly Piety inspires,  
To all that Praise repeats through lengthen'd years,  
That Honour sanctifies, and Time reveres. (78–79)

As Pascoe has made clear, Siddons's voice provided "ecstatic listening opportunities,"<sup>49</sup> so her final speech must still have resonated for audiences as Mrs. Jordan spoke this epilogue, thus underscoring the effect of Siddons performing the voice of the ideal Britain.

The 1799 performance of *Pizarro* was a haunted one. Following Marvin Carlson's formulation about celebrity and ghosting, Siddons's celebrity was congruent with Elvira's character in the dignity and honor that she develops over the course of the play. As well, Siddons's status as a mother was, as Julie Carlson and Taylor point out, congruent with Sheridan's focus on the abuses of the Begums in the Hastings trial.<sup>50</sup> If we consider Siddons's performance in relation to communications theory, whereby any communication act consists of a triangle of content, transmitter (or medium), and audience, then we can question what her status did to the weighting of the elements in this triangle. Pascoe notes that "for Marshall McLuhan, famously, the medium (transmitter) is the message (content)," and she contends that it is possible that "Siddons's voice as transmitter overwhelmed the content it conveyed."<sup>51</sup> It is certainly clear that the actress's performance in *Pizarro* added to the meaning of the text. Some of the ghosts I have identified as having been both absent and present on the stage when Siddons was performing as Elvira were the grieving mother, idealized British womanhood, Britain itself, and Lady Macbeth, who is mad with guilt.

Finally, the importance of Elvira's speech is clear. Rolla's speech is a rallying battle cry to defend his nation against an unjust enemy; Elvira's is a response from the enemy's side with remorse and contrition, calling for withdrawal. This final scene that Sheridan added to his adaptation of Kotzebue's play is as significant as his addition of Rolla's speech, some of which was already in the original text. Sheridan's addition of the appearance of Elvira and the death of Pizarro was an essential aspect of his adaptation of the political message of Kotzebue's play. The corrupt leader of the enemy

<sup>49</sup> Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files*, 68.

<sup>50</sup> Carlson, "Trying Sheridan's *Pizarro*," 368–69; Taylor, *Theatres of Opposition*, 104–5.

<sup>51</sup> Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files*, 52.

must die, but the people who have followed him must then be seen as people who feel remorse and can make restitution in order for there to be a lasting resolution to conflict. This emphasis on remorse was closely linked to the advent of Romanticism, which *Pizarro* might be seen to signal. Consider, for example, the critical and popular success of Coleridge's 1813 tragedy *Remorse*, as well as the new kind of Romantic subject—not a male enlightenment subject whose actions are dictated by reason, but a more complicated androgynous subject who is at once authoritative and remorseful.<sup>52</sup>

Discounting Siddons's ghosts on the stage while she played Elvira is only possible if one neglects to take into account the performance of Sheridan's text. Bratton's call to uncover theatre histories that include the "emotional heritage of the stage" allows new meanings of the play to emerge. It is significant that Sheridan knew he was writing Elvira for Siddons to perform: as an experienced and skilled dramatist, he could make full use of her abilities and status to communicate his views. *Pizarro* has rightly garnered the attention of scholars attempting to understand the theatrical and cultural contexts of late-eighteenth-century Britain, and accounting for the powerful element of Siddons's performance reveals a thicker event for analysis. Although Sheridan clearly recycled his Begums speech in *Pizarro*, Siddons's performance of Elvira, ghosted by her image as the ideal British woman and the remorseful Lady Macbeth, stabilized the interpretation of the play, making it much more clearly a critical commentary on Britain's colonial project in India. This interpretation is particularly significant given how popular the production was, playing for over 100,000 people in its initial run, including the king and queen at a command performance on 5 June 1799.<sup>53</sup> That such a popular play revealed doubt at the center of the Empire and called for a self-reflexive criticism on the part of colonial governments weakened the monolithic nature of the British colonial project. Although the end result of that project was harmful to indigenous people, it was not done with the unambivalent support of the British public or even British elected officials. This debate was staged through Sheridan's *Pizarro* as a performative event that aspired both to embody an ideal of Britain and to uncover the ugliness of colonial violence.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer comment on Coleridge's play *Remorse* and its connection to the era's politics in their edited volume *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003), xix–xx. Thanks also to Alexander Dick for this insight on remorse and the Romantic subject.

<sup>53</sup> Van Kooy, "Darkness Visible," 180.