

Remaking Sarah Siddons's Hamlet Costume

by

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Abstract

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This honors thesis examines Sarah Siddons's role as Hamlet. I consider the historical period and cultural climate in which she performed, her performances and their receptions, and how she influenced 19th-century theatre and ideas of gender and sex. To aid my research, I re-create the costume that she wore for her 1802 performance, as depicted by Mary Sackville Hamilton in her diary sketch. By wearing this costume myself I gain insight into how Sarah Siddons appeared on stage to her audiences and how the costume may have affected her ability to portray a male role.

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Part One

Chapter One: Who was Sarah Siddons?

Long before Maxine Peake or Ruth Negga took the stage as the titular character in *Hamlet*, the late 18th-century and early 19th-century actress Sarah Siddons was playing Hamlet in the provincial theaters of England and what is now Ireland. She is one of the first actresses known to have played Hamlet on a professional stage. Actresses cross-dressing on stage was exceedingly common (Rosenthal 56). However, Siddons's Hamlet differed from these cross-dressed roles (usually called "breeches parts," such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*) significantly. Siddons was able to not only play Hamlet seriously, she also helped expand 19th-century ideas about gender and sex.

Sarah Siddons was born in 1755 in Wales. She was part of the well-respected "Kemble dynasty," which included her brother, John Phillip Kemble, who also famously played Hamlet (Woo 10). Siddons made her acting debut in 1775 in Drury Lane as Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*. This performance was unsuccessful, and Siddons withdrew from the London mainstage to the provincial theaters. There, she steadily built her reputation as an actress until 1782, when she re-appeared on the London stage with great success. Perhaps this period away from the London mainstage allowed her the freedom to experiment a little, as this is when most of her Hamlet performances took place. Twenty-year-old Siddons played Hamlet for the first time in Worcester in 1775, and then again in 1777 in Manchester, alongside her brother John as Laertes. In 1781 she played Hamlet in Bristol and again in Liverpool. She did not re-appear as Hamlet after

launching her career in London until 1802, when she played Hamlet in Dublin for the 1802-3 season and a final time in 1805.

Chapter Two:

Women Cross-dressing in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Theatre

The reality of cross-dressed actresses in the 18th and 19th centuries may seem surprisingly progressive to the modern theater-goer or thespian. Actresses did not merely cross-dress on stage on occasion, it was *expected* of them. This is what Sarah Siddons's biographer and friend, James Boaden, was referring to when he said, ". . . the ladies on our stages. . . appear by troops in male attire" (2:119). This popularity is not so surprising. Celestine Woo writes in her essay that "breeches parts" appealed to largely heterosexual and male audiences because they provided the rare opportunity to ogle women's legs in skin-tight stockings. She defines a breeches part as ". . . a female character who during the course of the dramatic narrative, dresses as a boy or a man, and almost always returns to her normative feminine garb by the end" (575). Breeches parts became enormously popular in Restoration era England, during which women were given license to act on stage. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* were especially popular, and they featured the breeches parts Rosalind and Viola respectively. Breeches parts were usually comic roles, with most of the comedy stemming from the female character's poorly attempted masculinity and the problems that arose as a result of her disguise. These narrative problems, naturally, are resolved only when she returns to her proper feminine attire. Thus, while breeches parts may seem progressive at first glance, they served to enforce strict gender roles.

Chapter Three: Siddons's Prior Cross-Dressed Roles

Sarah Siddons played Portia and Rosalind before Hamlet, both of which were traditionally breeches parts. These roles constituted, according to Rosenthal, some of her “very few lukewarm receptions in her career,” which may seem odd given the demand for cross-dressed actresses (56). However, according to James Boaden, Siddons’s “. . . unexpected powers of almost masculine declamation” made her ideal to play Portia, but ultimately an uninteresting cross-dresser (1:28). Similarly, her performance of Rosalind was undercut by the nontraditional costume she chose, which was deemed distracting.

Siddons refused to wear a traditional breeches costume for the portion of the play where Rosalind is disguised as Ganymede. She instead mixed masculine and feminine costuming elements together, resulting in a more androgynous outfit. This earned her criticism from her contemporaries. British Romantic poet Anna Seward saw Siddons as Rosalind, and although she praised Siddons’s ability as an actress, she said that her costume for Ganymede was “. . . injudicious. The scrupulous prudery of decency produced an ambiguous vestment, that seemed neither male nor female” (qtd in Campbell 70). A review from *The Morning Herald* complained that her outfit was “. . . demi-feminine, demi-masculine, and therefore we may properly call it the *habit neuter*. She appeared in half a petticoat and half a pair of breeches that seemed to disagree like an ill-matched man and wife.” Another review from *The Morning Chronicle* called her costume “most absurdly perverse” (qtd. in Woo 57). Here the problem seems to be that the costume was both too modest and too androgynous. A review from *The General Advertiser* speculated that Siddons did not wear breeches because she did not have the right figure (Woo 577). Even Boaden, who was usually sympathetic to Siddons’s cross-

dressing endeavors, wrote that her costume for Rosalind “. . . more strongly reminded the spectator of the sex which she had laid down than that which she had taken up.” Boaden chalks Siddons’s Ganymede costume up to her “modesty” and wanting to avoid “unnecessary exposure” (2:119).

Woo argues that Siddons avoided wearing breeches on purpose, aware of the sexualization she would receive if she did. Siddons attempted to create a costume that would serve the play and allow her to dodge the sexualized image of the breeches part. There is evidence of this intentionality. She apparently commissioned her Rosalind costume from a “Mr. Hamilton.” In the same letter that she thanks Mr. Hamilton for creating her Rosalind dress, she asks him, “if he would be so good as to make her a slight sketch for a boy’s dress, to conceal the person as much as possible.” The letter then says, “The dress is for *Imogen*, but Mrs. Siddons does not wish to have it known” (Campbell 104). Siddons’s conscious decision to hide her figure as she did as Rosalind and Imogen was again repeated in the costume she wore for Hamlet in 1802. Although the only depictions of Siddons’s Hamlet that exist are from her later performances, it is likely that she attempted to cultivate the same androgyny in her earlier performances as she did for Rosalind and Imogen.

Chapter Four: Siddons's Hamlet

Hamlet was fundamentally different from a breeches part because Hamlet was a male role, not a female character cross-dressing for a portion of the play. Her choice to cross-dress for the role exists outside of the play's narrative. Her costume, therefore, would need to be both durable enough to last and flexible enough to allow for the movement required by her role. It would also need to be masculine enough to preserve Siddons's illusion of maleness throughout the play. The challenge was to do this in a way that her audiences would not find laughable or distracting, as comedic female cross-dressing was the script they were used to.

The following picture from Mary Sackville Hamilton's sketchbook is one of the few images in existence of Siddons as Hamlet. Hamilton was a fan of Siddons's, of no relation to the Mr. Hamilton who designed Siddons's costumes for Rosalind and Imogen. She painted this watercolor image after seeing her 1802 performance in Dublin.



Celestine Woo breaks down Siddons's Hamlet costume, as depicted by Hamilton, thus:

The Hamlet costume consisted of a black cloak with black fringe, and black lace detail at neck, cuffs, and hem. White lace is visible at the neckline, with a red tunic visible underneath. The tunic is worn over a white undershirt, as is evident from the sleeve, which shows a white cuff extending from underneath the red sleeve. She wears a white cross at her breast, and a sword. Her left leg is visible from the knee downwards; her right leg only reveals her ankle. Her stockings are grey, and her shoes are

black with bows. A bit of brown hair sticks out from beneath the rim of her black hat, on which is a white flower-shaped brooch anchoring several large gray feathers. (579)

Siddons was 47 at the time of her Dublin performance. She had borne several children, so she was physically heavier than she was when she began playing Hamlet in her 20s (Muse 140). It is possible that this may have influenced her choice in costume—she may have felt it necessary to cover her body more fully to keep an androgynous figure. Regrettably, there are no depictions of Siddons in her younger portrayals of Hamlet to which to compare her 1802 costume.

Chapter Five: Reception

Rosenthal writes that audiences were unusually “ambivalent” about Siddons’s cross-dressed roles, including her Hamlet, “given the frequency. . .eighteenth century drama demanded that actresses sport male attire” (56). Her costume for Rosalind and her cross-dressed Hamlet were both risky in that they could have removed Siddons from respectable femininity in the eyes of the public. Attracting sexual suspicion could have been disastrous to her career. Siddons however, managed to largely avoid scandal as a result of these performances.



Harvard University, Houghton Library, htr_thr_489_3_29_engraving_a_palpable_hit

The only notable scandal resulting from her performance of Hamlet arose out of her revival performance alongside her fencing teacher, Galindo, in 1805. Galindo’s wife accused Siddons of using her role as Hamlet to secure private lessons with her husband, and assumedly, to seduce him. Five years later *The Dublin Satirist* published a comic that

caricatured the 1805 performance (Woo 575). This comic is the only other depiction available of Siddons as Hamlet—and it is a rather unflattering one. She is dressed similarly to her 1802 costume, but the artist depicted her in form-fitting breeches and with an exaggerated backside. Galindo's wife is shown peeking out from behind a curtain with a scandalized expression while Galindo and Siddons spar. Siddons's sword is pointed towards Galindo's heart, and Galindo's sword is aimed between Siddons's legs (Boatner-Doane 217). The innuendo is clear.

Outside of the Galindo scandal, Siddons had a remarkably morally upright reputation. Rosenthal calls it “strenuously heterosexual,” as she was especially noted to be a doting mother to her children (63). Drawing from Judith Butler's definition of gender as a performance rather than an inherent identity, Rosenthal suggests that Siddons played the mother both on stage and off (58). Siddons was best-known in her time for her roles as tragic wives and mothers. Her role as a mother in her personal life was possibly an equally prominent part of her image. She performed far into her pregnancies and gave birth to her second child after going into labor on stage (57). Before she left her theater in Bath for Drury Lane, which would offer her higher pay and more exposure, she promised her audience at her farewell performance that she would give them her three reasons for leaving after the play. These three reasons turned out to be her three children, who she brought on stage with her (64-5).

Indeed, Siddons's reputation of moral virtue no doubt played a part in allowing her to avoid sexual suspicion for most of her career. Siddons was keenly aware of the way the public perceived her, as evidenced by her asking Joshua Reynolds to make her face paler in the *Tragic Muse* portrait, “in order to better approximate the appearance of

Melancholy” (Woo 579). While Siddons no doubt loved her children, her image as a mother as she presented it to the public may have been finely calculated on her part. This was very effective in combating any suspicion that might have risen regarding her femininity.

Curiously, where Siddons’s apparent masculinity undermined her ability to play traditional breeches parts, her *femininity* in some ways helped her excel as Hamlet. Boaden never saw her Hamlet, but he imagines what it may have been like, and compares her to her brother:

Where Horatio and the rest describe the appearance of the spectre, I should think the real feminine alarm at such mysterious seeming would carry up the expression of countenance higher than it has perhaps ever illuminated even the powerful features of Kemble. . . so I conceive her breathless attention to the spirit during his disclosure, again benefitted by sex itself, would, as before, be transcendent. The famed soliloquy, ‘To be, or not to be,’ from the quality of her own organ, would be more like audible rumination than Kemble’s, who declaimed it in the higher tones of his voice, and lost the cast of thought that the galleries might catch the words he uttered. (1:258-9)

Boaden imagines here that Siddons’s femininity would have made her a better Hamlet than her brother, because it gave her a more subtle and tender expression compared to Kemble, whose masculinity seems to limit the effectiveness of his performance in this case. Boaden then seems to retract this statement, almost regretfully,

as he concludes, “. . . were she but a man, she would exceed all that man has ever achieved in Hamlet” (2:259).

An anonymous playgoer in Dublin wrote in their diary about her 1802 performance. They seemed to share Boaden’s sentiment that acting-wise, she was an exceptional Hamlet, but that her womanhood kept her from being considered the best of her age. This viewer saw her femininity as more of a detriment to her performance than Boaden did, but they were nonetheless impressed with her ability. They wrote:

. . .The House groaned under the weight of spectators & on the 1st appearance of Hamlet, the applauses were excessive—In this 1st Scene she seemed oppressed by the novelty of her appearance. . . her voice was weak, & I expected a very indifferent performance of the character, but she soon recovered herself & the audience was rapt in admiration of her excellence; her superiority even to her brother was first discernable where the secret of the Ghosts [sic] appearance is disclosed to Hamlet. . .The Fencing scene in the last Act was capital; Galindo who is a master of the art, was put into the character of Laertes purposely for an Exhibition & Mrs. S. had practiced under him so successfully that she astonished the cognoscenti of the audience—Notwithstanding the very fine acting of the character, the effect was considerably injured by the awkwardness of the dress & the feminine gait, which was sometimes ludicrous—if Mrs. S.—could correct these, she would be an unrivalled Hamlet. (qtd. in Highfill 14:26)

Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe wrote about Sarah Siddons's Hamlet in her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry*. This essay was published in 1826, after Siddons had retired. It is unknown whether Radcliffe had seen her perform as Hamlet, but Radcliffe certainly knew of her and her performances. One of the characters in Radcliffe's essay praises Siddons's Hamlet, once again citing her femininity as a trait that would have made her a more compelling Hamlet.

I should suppose that she would be the finest Hamlet that ever appeared, excelling even her own brother in that character; she would more fully preserve the tender and refined melancholy, the deep sensibility, which are the peculiar charm of Hamlet, and which appear not only in the ardour, but in the occasional irresolution and weakness of his character—the secret spring that reconciles all his inconsistencies. . . Her brother's firmness, incapable of always being subdued, does not so fully enhance, as her tenderness would, this part of the character. (147)

Chapter Six: Influence

The question of Hamlet's gender—not of the actor or actress playing him, but the actual Hamlet—occupied late eighteenth and nineteenth century thought. Ideas about Hamlet's character in the sphere of literary criticism and theatre began to shift dramatically as European thought took a more Romantic bend. In prior centuries, Hamlet was thought to be too afflicted with so-called “feminine” qualities of moodiness and indecisiveness, and these qualities made him a failed hero. With the emergence of Romanticism, these qualities which had been attributed to weakness in character before became associated with the ideal of the artistic man.

Sarah Siddons, along with other actresses who played Hamlet, may be partially responsible for molding this new, Romantic Hamlet. Amy Muse argues just this in her essay “Actresses and the Making of the Modern Hamlet”. She cites Ann Radcliffe's essay in which her characters discuss Siddons's performance of Hamlet and conclude that her femininity made her a more complex and believable Hamlet than her brother. Radcliffe's essay was published after Siddons had retired, but her performances were still fresh in the public's memory. Muse writes that Radcliffe's essay reflects how ideas about Hamlet had begun to shift, especially after Siddons's performance as Hamlet in 1802 (141-2).

Muse also cites the anonymous playgoer who wrote about Siddons's 1802 performance. She argues that although they thought her costume was “awkward,” because it was ambiguously gendered, the costume's androgynous quality helped her portray the more universal Hamlet she later helped define (qtd. in Highfill 14:26). She

writes that “. . . masking the contours of her body may be in part an attempt to erase the body from the spectators’ gaze and render Hamlet purely a mind.” Additionally:

Because she has not costumed him in the fashions of the moment, her Hamlet has an ageless or ‘classic’ quality. Since 1782 Siddons had become known for her fondness of wearing classical drapery; it flattered her large body, but, even more, it made her appear more like a timeless figure of art than a temporal player who would be out of fashion in a decade. (141)

Mrs. Siddons may have been partially responsible for the upsurge of actresses taking on leading male roles, especially Hamlet, in the century following her last *Hamlet* performance. Notable actresses who played Hamlet following Siddons in the 19th century include Charlotte Cushman, Alice Marriott, and Sarah Bernhardt. Wadsworth wrote that Hamlet “exerted a strange, compelling force upon nineteenth century actresses. A list . . . of professional actresses appearing as the Prince between 1802 and 1809 contains almost fifty names” (130). The practice of actresses playing leading male roles such as Hamlet, Romeo, Othello, and Richard III became something of a trend in the 19th century. While no doubt some actresses were attracted to these roles simply because they were eager to hop on the bandwagon, most actresses treated these roles as serious artistic endeavors. Audiences already familiar with Siddons’s and Powell’s performances in the beginning of the 19th century were eager to welcome these new female Hamlets and Romeos.

Part Two: Costuming

Chapter One: The Hamlet Costume – Broken Down

The first layer consists of the white undershirt, the ruff, grey stockings, and black shoes with small bows. The second layer is a red tunic overtop the white undershirt and ruff. The third layer is the black coat and belt overtop the tunic. The fourth and final layer is the black cape draped sideways, a cross necklace, a feathered hat, and her sword and sheath.



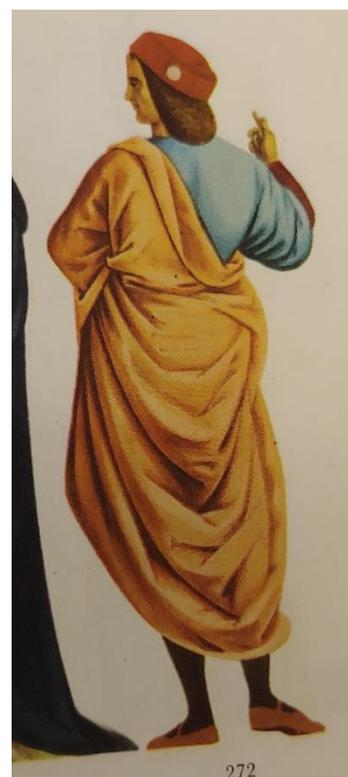


Chapter Two: Materials

The end of the 18th century in Europe brought the shift from Georgian fashions to the Greco-Roman inspired First Empire styles. This period, beginning roughly in 1790 and ending around 1815, was characterized by a more natural appearance compared to the highly stylized clothing and hair of the Georgian era. Popular materials during this period included wool, cotton, linen, silk, satin, lutestring, cashmere, nankeen, twill, and moleskin. After 1800 slightly more formal styles came into fashion, and silk and velvet became more popular. Wool was popular across social classes, with upper-class gentlemen wearing broadcloth and lower-class men wearing coarse wools. Men's coats tended to be solid colors, with "brown, snuff-color, burgundy, plum, bottle green, black, and . . . a very bright strong blue" being popular choices (Barton 375-6).

Chapter Three: My Process

To begin my costume-making process, I first had to have some idea of what kinds of patterns and accessories to look for. Very little is known about how Sarah Siddons chose the costume she wore in 1802. It is likely she commissioned it, as she did for her Ganymede and Imogen costumes. I soon found in my research on historical costumes that stylistically, her Hamlet costume is not firmly rooted in any one era. This made the process of finding patterns a bit tricky. However, she does appear to have drawn influence from both the Renaissance and Elizabethan eras, in terms of the costume's overall shape and her accessories. Perhaps Siddons wanted to look the part of a classical and timeless hero, as Muse suggests her costume made her appear. She may have chosen Elizabethan and Renaissance costuming because they were far enough removed from 19th-century dress to give this effect.



Left: Two men wearing tunics and stockings that resemble Siddons's coat and stockings. Right: A man wearing a toga-like cloak, which resembles Siddons's cloak.

Hansen, Henny H.
"Costumes and Styles"
pp. 48-9.



Two coats resembling Sarah Siddons's coat. Both original images are dated to the 1530s, right before the Elizabethan era technically started.

Hansen, *Costumes and Styles*, pp. 54.

Her coat and cape appear to have been inspired by Renaissance jerkins and cloaks. Jerkins during this period were worn over a doublet (Sarah Siddons wore an undershirt and tunic instead) and were, “. . . frequently sleeved. . . The jerkin had a skirt . . . either to the knee or a little above. . . Around the waist went a metal belt, a sash, or a ribbon girdle knotted in front, from which, at the left side, hung a dagger” (Barton 189). If the jerkin covered the thighs, Renaissance men may have worn only hose on their legs. Upperstocks, which Barton calls “virtually breeches” did not come into fashion until the latter half of the Renaissance (189). This created a silhouette very similar to Siddons's coat and hose.

Her hat appears most like an Elizabethan tall hat, although it is difficult to tell from Mary Sackville Hamilton's picture. An Elizabethan tall hat was a round-brimmed hat that was often decorated with feathers or plumes. It was usually worn by women. It is difficult to tell whether Siddons wore a small ruff or simply a ruffled collar, the difference being that the ruff would have likely been detachable.

Some costume pieces, like the tights, shoes, ruff, and hat, I was able to purchase online. I bought thermal grey tights for her stockings and a silver rosary from Amazon. The hat and ruff are both from Etsy. The hat is a custom-made Elizabethan tall hat I ordered from FyneHatsByFelicity and the ruff is a detachable lace ruff I ordered from mademoisellemermaid. Both stores create historical replicas or historically inspired pieces for Ren Faires and cosplay. For the shoes I ordered 1680 – 1760s French Court shoes, as they were closest to the shoes in my reference image. The shoes are from American Duchess, an online store that sells historical and theatrical shoes.



Thermal grey tights.



Simple silver rosary.



White lace ruff.

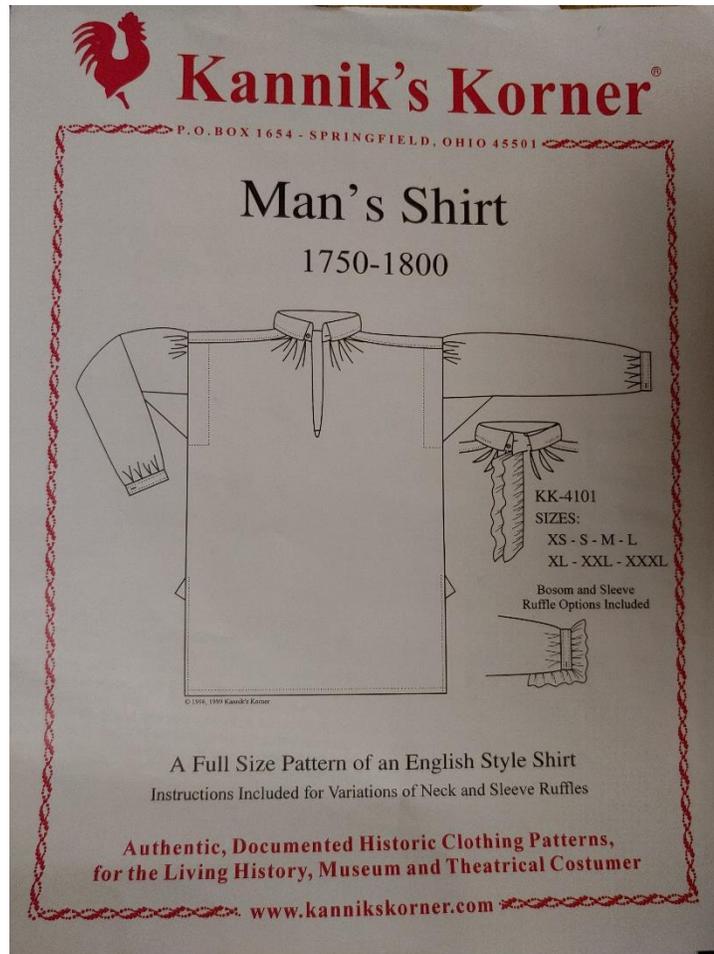


Black French Court Shoes.



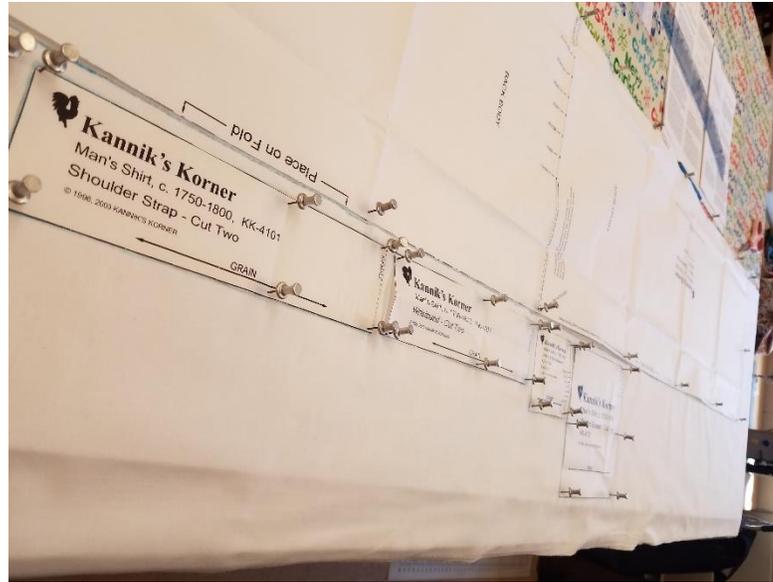
Black Elizabethan tall hat with black feathers.

I began the costume-making process with her undershirt. I used the undershirt for my Intro to Costumes course final so that I could have Professor Macon watch me and offer direction. His advice and guidance proved to be invaluable when I was working on the other costume pieces over the summer as well.



Sarah Siddons wore a white undershirt with a ruffled collar and wrist cuffs. For this I selected a plain men's undershirt pattern from Kannik's Korner. The pattern is based off English sewing instructions from the late 1700s and early to mid-1800s. I bought approximately 3 yards of white linen to use from JOANN's Fabrics, per the

Kannik's Korner instruction booklet's recommendation. Bleached or partially bleached (cream) linens were in common use in Siddons's time period ("Man's Shirt" 2).



As this was the first garment I constructed, it was the one I approached with the most trepidation. I followed the pattern as closely as I could but made many mistakes along the way. I was also nervous about departing from the pattern's instructions, so the shirt ended up being much too large for me. After finishing the shirt, I cut several inches off the bottom to make it fit. In hindsight, I could have made the collar narrower so that the ruff could attach with some snaps, instead of being tied around my neck. Attaching it that way may let the ruff sit more naturally. Detachable ruffs were practical for everyday use because they were easier to wash, and I imagine that would have been the case for theatrical clothing as well.



The collar of the undershirt.



Final undershirt with ruff.

I based the pattern for Siddons's red tunic on a simplified version of the undershirt. I used red cotton fabric I purchased from JOANN'S. After tracing the outline of the body of the undershirt over the red fabric, I cut out two pieces and sewed them together at the sides, leaving holes for the sleeves. I measured my arm length and width, my elbow (bent), and how large I wanted the armhole (the hole for the sleeve) to be. I then traced my sleeve pattern on my fabric, cut it out, and stitched the sleeves into the shirt.



Tunic body with sleeve pinned into armhole.

After attempting to hand-stitch the tunic over the summer, I started going into the costume shop at least once a week when either Professor Macon or Amy Hipp, the

costume shop supervisor, were there to use the sewing machines. My hand stitches were coming apart and my initial sleeves were too tight, so I took the shirt apart and re-stitched it on a machine. With Professor Macon's help, I also used my spare fabric to measure out and sew gussets into the sleeves. This widened the circumference of my armhole and allowed the sleeves to fit more comfortably.



The original, hand-stitched tunic.



The tunic after fixing the seams and sleeves.



The finished tunic over the undershirt and ruff.

I based the black coat off McCall's M5214 costume pattern, which is a renaissance-inspired doublet with an optional belt and cape. It is a costume pattern, but it had the right shape for what I needed. I used 3 ½ yards of dark mixed gray wool broadcloth purchased from the Wm. Booth Draper online store, which specializes in selling broadcloths, mostly for civil war re-enactment costumes. Broadcloth was also popular among wealthier gentlemen in the eighteenth century, and wool broadcloth is heavy and matte, which is why I chose this fabric.



The McCall's costume pattern. I used pattern A in the top right corner.



The McCall's pattern laid out on wool broadcloth.

I opted to leave out some of the details in the McCall's pattern, like the cap sleeves, which Sarah Siddons's coat does not appear to have. First I sewed the main body piece. I followed the pattern and used fusible interfacing to add a bit of stiffness to the front lapels. I think the interfacing I chose was too flimsy, as it did not make much of a difference in the lay of the fabric. I found, however, that my fabric was thick enough that doubling it up had a similar effect as interfacing would have. I then added two darts into the front and back of the coat and sewed the shoulders and sides together.



With Professor Macon's help I shortened the sleeves so they fit my arms and to allow the red and white under-layers to be seen. The finished product is still quite bulky, but it will need to be to produce a more masculine shape.

Initially I did not have black fringe lining the bottom of the coat. My original image of Mary Sackville Hamilton's sketch was much smaller and blurrier than the one I have now, so I could not see the finer details of the costume. I reached out to Dr. Celestine Woo to ask her how she obtained her copy, and she was kind enough to send her images from the British Museum to me. The image of the coat below reflects my original version without the fringe, but I put the fringe on for the final photos.



The finished coat over the tunic, undershirt, and ruff.

Finally, I made the fringed cape. For this I bought 2 ½ yards of black velveteen fabric and some black fringe from JOANN's. I measured how long I wanted the cape to be at its longest point and traced a semicircle on my fabric. I then cut that out and used a serger to roll the hem. Then I sewed the fringe to the edges, stopping about 6 inches down from the top of the cape on either side. To finish, I sewed the opposite ends of the cape (the parts without fringe) together, so that it made a loop.



The finished cape.

Chapter Four: Wearing the Costume

My impression when I first donned the costume was that it felt wonderfully androgynous, even with all its lace and fringe. The cape does a great deal to bring the costume together and keeping this androgynous effect. Without it the costume looks more masculine, and quite a bit less interesting. The cape adds an interesting fluidity of shape—depending on how the wearer is standing it could accentuate or create curves by sitting at the hip or obscure curves by hiding the chest.

I see only a few minor reasons that this costume may have inhibited Sarah Siddons's movement as some reviewers have suggested. One likely was not an issue for Mrs. Siddons, and the other would have been easily remedied. The first problem I had when wearing the costume was the heeled shoes. This likely would not have been an issue for Mrs. Siddons, because she would have been accustomed to wearing heels of that style, and I am not. The second issue I believe may have been the cape. The cape is rather long, and I found that I had to take special care not to trip over it. An easy solution would have been for Mrs. Siddons to take the cape off before scenes that required quick movement, like the duel with Laertes. It is also possible that my cape is simply longer than Mrs. Siddons's. In this case, Mrs. Siddons may have had no trouble fencing with the cape on. It is also important to remember that she was known to be an accomplished fencer trained by the Master Galindo. Additionally, she would have been accustomed to wearing the voluminous and flowing skirts of the Directoire and First Empire styles, so movement in the Hamlet costume may have been a piece of cake in comparison.

Mary Sackville Hamilton's diary sketch of Siddons only shows her with the cape, and we do not know if she wore the cape for the entirety of the play. If not, she may have removed the cape at pivotal scenes, like the duel between Hamlet and Laertes in Act 5 Scene 2. This would have emphasized Hamlet's commitment to the duel and allowed Siddons more freedom of movement. The cape would have also provided Siddons with the ability to whip it around her as she stormed about the stage—perhaps during a soliloquy or confrontation. She also could have drawn it around her like a shroud during a scene like the confrontation with the King's ghost.











Conclusion

The costume Sarah Siddons used for her 1802 performance was a brilliant choice on her part. On one hand, the costume obscured her female form—but it did not render her exclusively male either. Her choice to represent Hamlet in both androgynous and antiquated clothing removed Hamlet from his specific identity as a Danish male. In this way her performance contributed to the Romantic reshaping of Hamlet's character into a more universal exploration of the human psyche. Simultaneously, both her choice to cross-dress and the way she did it forced her audiences to think about the implications of a woman playing Hamlet. Hamlet is not written as a cross-dressed role, so she made a deliberate choice to play him that way. Furthermore, she did not wear breeches, which were both customary male attire and what cross-dressing actresses would usually wear. This was likely for modesty's sake—to avoid sexualization and to present her Hamlet as the serious artistic endeavor that it was.

While her Hamlet was incredibly successful in her time, reviewers tended to complain that her costume's unconventionality distracted them from her performance. They also cited her female body as preventing her from portraying Hamlet as well as the men of her time. Many repeated the conclusion that *if* she were a man, she would have been the best Hamlet. By wearing her Hamlet costume myself, I can see that the costume likely would have presented little to no problem for an actress as capable as Mrs. Siddons. The only situation in which it may have held her back would have been if she felt uncomfortable in the costume, as the anonymous reviewer in Dublin suggested. This is possible, as Siddons was always exceptionally aware of how the public perceived her, and her costume was indeed unconventional. Playing Hamlet the way she did could have

been risky; it was likely only due to her good reputation that she was able to do it successfully.

Her contributions to the Romantic Hamlet, and indeed to the *modern* Hamlet, can only be appreciated in hindsight. I believe that her chosen costume was integral to shifting perceptions of Hamlet. Had she gone with a traditional breeches costume, I doubt her performances would have made such an impact. If it were not for Mrs. Siddons and other actresses like her who insisted upon playing Hamlet seriously, he may still be thought of as a “male-only” role. All modern actresses who play the Dane have Sarah Siddons to thank for paving the way.

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