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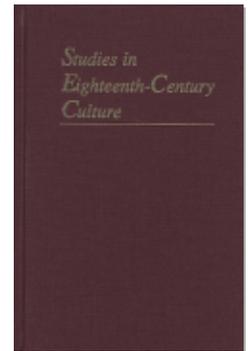
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Fandom: Enthusiastic Devotion, Religious and Theatrical Celebrity

MEGAN E. GIBSON

In a review of the “Progress of Religion” in Britain, one *Public Advertiser* author condemns “Clergymen, who thus attempt to win proselytes by moving the passions, instead of convincing the judgment, or awakening the conscience.”¹ He goes on to argue, “Were such arts necessary in preaching the Gospel, the office of the ministry ought to be performed by the women, whose voices are in general far more pathetic and persuasive than those of men, and Mrs. Siddons would then gain more hearers than the whole clergy of England put together.”² Meant as an insult to Methodist preachers and their enthusiastic followers, the pathos performed by both Whitefield and Siddons, along with the enthusiastic reactions of their followers, reflect a significant similarity in the devotional practices of both figures’ fans.³ While devotion is largely considered to belong to the realm of religion, the eighteenth century marked a time of transition in which religious devotional practices were transferred to the secular realm. Both Whitefield and Siddons were masters of moving the passions of those who saw and heard them. Devotional response to these celebrated figures includes panegyrics and elegies as well as physical demonstrations of emotion at their performances. In comparing these instances of religious and apparently non-religious fan activity, we learn more about the views, beliefs, and feelings of the writers and spectators than we do, perhaps, of the celebrities themselves.

More than other Methodist preachers of his day, including John Wesley, George Whitefield elicited strong and emotional reactions from his congregation. His fans regarded him not only as a famous preacher whose spiritual influence would bring them closer to God but also as a figure worthy of devotion himself, a devotion characterized by attention to physical display, emotion, and raptured attention. Poetic verse written in praise of Whitefield refers to him in superlative, even divine terms often linked with the performance of his theatrical sermons.⁴ One poet proclaims that Whitefield “command[s] Divine perswasion,” joins “Celestial meekness with such ardour,” and sends “Divine enchantments” to “every heart.”⁵ Later, this poet attends to the physical display, emotion, and raptured attention of Whitefield’s fans, marveling, “With how much eagerness the list’ning throng / Gaze on his eyes, and hang upon his tongue. / On them his words like heavenly lightning dart, / They leave the body sound, but melt the heart.”⁶ Another poet writes, “How deep the silence, while the prophet speaks! / What list’ning crouds in eager numbers gaze! / Th’ attentive boy, the lisping infant weeps, / And Britons pay their tribute of amaze.”⁷ While such texts are grounded in a Christian context, they sometimes appropriate classical (or secular) forms for the praise of religious subject matter, as in one poet’s opening: “Inspire my muse, O Holy God of Heaven, . . . To write in praise of Mr. George Whitefield.”⁸ Whitefield’s connection to the divine is fitting given his role as a preacher, and praises of Whitefield are intrinsically bound up in Christian devotion. Many writings praising him interpret his affecting sermons, his missionary efforts in America, and even his fame as tools to bring people closer to God. Nevertheless, there is a part of such performances devoted to Whitefield that slips into the realm of celebrity devotion, paving the way for later and more secular forms of devotion based on deep, visceral responses to moving performances and great physical displays of tears and emotion.

In the later eighteenth century, devotional responses to actress Sarah Siddons, including panegyric poetry and both factual and fictional accounts of people’s encounters with her captivating performances, are strikingly similar to the devotional responses of Whitefield’s fans. With Siddons, though, the specifically Christian context of devotion has been succeeded by a more secular form of fan worship. In the early 1780s, a plethora of panegyric poems were published that paint Siddons both as the “Tragic Muse,” the moral compass whose performances will save the British theater and perhaps the nation at large from debauchery and ruin, and as a professional performer whose pathos and acting skills are unrivalled. The prelude to “The Tragic Muse” begins: “ACCEPT, fair Siddons! this spontaneous Lay, / Which Feeling bids me, as a tribute, pay / To that new Queen . . . Sublimely seated

on the Tragic Throne.”⁹ The poem goes on to raise Siddons to prominence within the history of the English theater by describing her performance in specific roles and then discussing her fame. These and similar examples mix classical poetic traditions, rational exposition and explanation of her greatness, and an organized catalogue of her roles. One apparent effect of these writings is an alignment of Enlightenment thoughtfulness with the elevation of emotion as a legitimate means of experience for theater-goers and the British nation at large. Other responses to Siddons involve more visceral forms of devotion to her celebrity, concentrating on the affect and experiences of her fans. While newspaper accounts of the tears in the audience after a performance by Siddons may seem trite, novels offer a more personal glimpse into the individual fan experience. In Helen Maria Williams’s *Julia* (1790), the narrator comments that Mrs. Siddons’s “power over the human passions . . . is far more easy to feel than to delineate.”¹⁰ In *Helena*, an anonymously authored novel published in 1788, the eponymous heroine’s feelings “were wrought up to agony, and visibly paid that tribute to the merit of Mrs. Siddons, she so well deserves.”¹¹ In these cases, the heroines’ devotion to Siddons is marked by their full attention to her stage performances as well as the strong feelings they experience at the theater. The true or correct fans pay tribute to Siddons by offering their full attention to her performances and by being overwhelmed by the feelings that she provokes.

Read against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, the prioritization of feelings and the physical expression of emotions provide an alternative means of viewing the self and the world through celebrity, one legitimized by fans of both Whitefield and Siddons. While Whitefield’s celebrity is inextricably tied to Christianity and Christian devotion, his theatricality and ability to move the passions were perceived by many as theologically or ecclesiastically threatening. In contrast, Siddons’s cultural status as divine “Tragic Muse” and her perceived influence on morality through tragic performance and virtuous private life was viewed as a national triumph. The divergent critical reception of these qualities in different contexts suggests an unease with the slippage between the secularization of religious devotion and the sanctification of theatrical devotion.

NOTES

1. Anon., “Review of the Progress of Religion in Britain, during 1782,” *Public Advertiser* (London: Printed by H. S. Woodfall, 13 January 1783), n. p.

2. Anon., “Review of the Progress of Religion,” n. p.

3. While fan and fandom are modern terms, the eighteenth century represents the moment in which consumerist impulses to identify with or express a kind of ownership of celebrities begin to take shape. It is my aim, therefore, not to create anachronism but to trace the emergence of modern fandom to this moment of its secular/religious shift.

4. George Whitefield’s association with theater and theatrical talent have long been discussed. David Garrick admired his performativity, famously commenting that he “would give a hundred guineas if [he] could only say ‘O!’ like Mr. Whitefield.” Quoted in Joseph Beaumont Wakeley, *The Prince of Pulpit Orators: A Portraiture of Rev. George Whitefield, M. A.*, 2nd ed. (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1871), 226. More recently, scholarship exploring the connections between George Whitefield and the theater or theatricality includes Harry Stout’s biography of George Whitefield, which highlights the ways in which Whitefield’s life was shaped by the theater and the natural dramatic gifts that he possessed and applied, with great success, to his evangelistic efforts both in England and America. The complex relationship between Whitefield and the theater are further explored in Misty Anderson’s work, which discusses the persistence of anxieties bound in Whitefield’s theatricality and the ways in which he was seen “as an actor poaching his audience from the theater” (132). Brett McNelly’s overview of recent work on Methodism, Whitefield, and theatricality, among other Methodist topics, also shows the ways in which scholars are beginning to complicate our understanding of religion in the enlightenment era. See Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991); Misty G. Anderson, “‘Our Purpose is the Same:’ Whitefield, Foote, and the Theatricality of Methodism,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 34 (2005): 125–49; and Brett C. McNelly, “Writing the Revival: The Intersections of Methodism and Literature in the Long 18th Century,” *Literature Compass* 12 (2015): 12–21.

5. Anon., *A Poem, Occasioned by hearing the late Reverend George Whitefield preach* (Boston, 1771), n. p. Other examples abound in writings of the period. Phillis Wheatley, for instance, wrote an elegy to Whitefield that begins “Hail happy Saint on thy immortal throne!” and talks of his “unrival’d friendship,” and his “unequal’d accents.” See Wheatley’s *An elegiac poem, on the death of that celebrated divine, and eminent servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and learned George Whitefield* (Boston, 1770), 5, 6, 5. One fan biography from 1739 followed suit, painting him as “larger than life” and drawing subsequent criticisms of “blowing up [Whitefield’s] Character to an undue Size.” See Frank Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 101.

6. Anon., *A Poem, Occasioned*, n. p.

7. Anon., *An Elegiac Poem; Sacred to the Memory of the Rev. George Whitefield* (Boston, 1770), 5.
8. Anon., *An Elegy on the much lamented Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield* (London, 1761).
9. William Russell, *The Tragic Muse: a Poem. Addressed to Mrs. Siddons* (London: G. Kearsley, 1783), 5.
10. Helen Maria Williams, *Julia*, 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell, 1790), 1: 34.
11. Lady of distinction, *Helena* (London: W. Richardson, 1788), 31.