When *The Merchant of Venice* featured in Garrick’s retirement season, staged on 29 December 1775, it was a very different performance than the 1747 event that had marked the beginning of Garrick’s managerial career. Kitty Clive had long since retired, and Charles Macklin, still acting, still vital, had moved over to act with Garrick’s rivals at Covent Garden.\\(^1\) Garrick, who never played Shylock, didn’t appear as he had in 1747 to speak the prologue, and his new Shylock, the uninspiring actor Thomas King, could only “remind the judicious of what was wanting.”\\(^2\) Whereas a savvy Garrick would have anticipated this criticism—as Macklin, against whose memory no actor could compete, had revived his Shylock at Covent Garden just months before—the fact that he didn’t, or even that he did and yet proceeded, suggested to some contemporaries that with the prospect of retirement his attentions were shifting from managerial toward more personal concerns.\\(^3\)

If the nature of these concerns remains speculative, the news of Garrick’s imminent retirement undoubtedly resurrected questions central to this book. How does an actor’s aging influence the characters he or she chooses to represent? Who commemorates the actor once he or she retires—and who now stands in for the characters, texts, or authors that the actor once portrayed? How can a living monument commemorate anything if the monument itself can disappear? These questions, vital for Garrick throughout his career, came to a head as he prepared to leave it. And they would emerge again, at the turn of the century, when the actor
who had inherited his mantle as the century’s preeminent Shakespearian performer also prepared to leave the stage.

It was this same successor, in the twilight of her career, who suggested that Garrick’s looming retirement had compromised his managerial skills. Sarah Siddons, who had spent the early 1770s garnering attention in the provincial theaters, had (as noted in chapter 4) made her disastrous London debut under Garrick’s management, as Portia, in the 1775 production of *The Merchant of Venice* mentioned above. Years later, in the *Reminiscences* she composed just before her death, she dwelt with resentment on the failure of her performance, which she attributed to Garrick’s miscasting. Portia was, as previously quoted, “a Character in which it was not likely that I should excite any grand sensation,” and as such a character in which she had been set up to fail. Lest such a charge seem to contradict Garrick’s managerial self-interests, Siddons reminds readers of his impending retirement. “The interests of the Theatre grew I suppose rather indifferent to him,” she reflects. “He was retiring from the management of Drury Lane and I suppose chose at that time to wash his hands of all its concerns and details.”

The accuracy of Siddons’s accusation is less an issue in this final chapter than the implications of retirement, and the resulting patterns of inheritance, that her accusation brings to light. As she indicates, her debut coincides with Garrick’s exit; her first performances coincide with Garrick’s last. At such a time for Garrick, the managerial concerns of Drury Lane may well have paled beside those related to his own farewell performances, or the progressive kidney failure that would, less than three years from his retirement, lead to his demise. Whatever Garrick was thinking, these competing concerns would have served—for himself and others—as poignant reminders that the art of acting is always, in the words of William Hazlitt, “setting out afresh.” Garrick, in his final season, yet aspired to be a living monument to himself, and Siddons’s unprepossessing debut wasn’t likely to have made either her or Garrick think his challenger was literally waiting in the wings. Yet the types of publicity that accompanied Garrick’s retirement also reminded him and his audiences that soon another actor would have to take his place.

Siddons inherited this truth from Garrick, just as she inherited his dressing room and, in many ways, his career. But she and Garrick handled the fact of retirement very differently, and these differences would affect the reputation of the playwright on whom each actor had founded a career. While Garrick spent his final season preemptively drawing power from his imminent disappearance, Siddons engaged in a series
of postretirement performances that wore away audience memories of her greatness and fostered critiques of performance’s commemorative powers. At the same time, Siddons entertained companies with a series of postretirement “staged readings” that earned her praise just when her acting abilities were attracting fire. While Garrick’s eighteenth-century Shakespeare continued to gain vitality through performance, Siddons’s nineteenth-century Shakespeare found new vitality in a medium freed from the requirements of the stage.

As this chapter explores, this shift from Garrick and Siddons thus seems to support a trajectory, one endorsed in certain statements made by Romantic critics, away from performance and toward a growing preference for a Shakespeare who was read and not staged. As yet as this chapter also explores, this preference was nowhere near as universal, or unequivocal, as certain antitheatrical critics of the period would claim. Many cultural factors influenced the backlash against performance; for example, the more general Romantic privileging of the imagination (often summoned by Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in their responses to Shakespeare), and the association of imaginative freedoms with that which was read rather than seen, coexisted with the progress of the French Revolution and the ultimate execution of the royal family, a political event that played an equally significant role in arguments against the performance of certain, now newly controversial, regicide-focused Shakespearean plays.

The bias against theatrical spectacle that emerged in the Shakespearian critiques of writers such as Coleridge and Lamb also emerged from a love of Shakespeare on the stage: during the 1794–95 season at Drury Lane, a Shakespeare play was still performed on average one night out of every eight, and Coleridge and Lamb frequented such productions. John Philip Kemble, brother of Sarah Siddons and Garrick’s successor in 1788 as the manager of Drury Lane (in 1803 he became manager at Covent Garden), continued to draw huge crowds through the opening decades of the nineteenth century with his classically inspired Coriolanus and gothic, historically “authentic” Macbeth, and though Kemble is today perhaps the least remembered of the famous eighteenth-century Shakespearian actors, in his own day spectators found that his skill, coupled with the timing of his theatrical debut and his later managerial roles, made him an obvious successor for Garrick. (A 1798 retrospective on Kemble’s rise to fame, published in the *Monthly Mirror*, notes, “it is a circumstance worthy of observation, that just about this period Garrick retired from the public scene, and it should seem as if nature
took the stage under her immediate protection, by thus early endeav-
orning to atone for the loss it had recently suffered.”) The spontaneous
and hotheaded Edmund Kean would amaze crowds toward the end of
Kemble’s career, delivering in 1814 his sympathetic reinterpretation of
Macklin’s Shylock and his highly physical Richard III (a role in which
Garrick remained known as the precedent, as it was a role in which Kem-
ble had not excelled), and for the next few years Kean would continue to
impress the likes of Coleridge, Lord Byron, and John Keats.

Siddons was another performer who was instrumental in populariz-
ing Shakespearean performance through the early decades of the nine-
teenth century, and her postretirement readings drew potency from,
even as they stood in contrast to, this prior acting career—just as her
acting career drew potency from, even as it stood in contrast to, that of
Garrick. If the aging Siddons ultimately pleased her fans more when she
gave them an experience of Shakespeare provided by a reader rather
than an actor on stage, responses to these readings also show that hear-
ing Siddons read Shakespeare was embraced by spectators as a theatrical
experience, and one far more gratifying than the experience of reading
Shakespeare alone. Examined closely, the retirements of Siddons and
Garrick thus expose continuities as well as tensions: in how Shakespeare
is summoned by actors to offset eighteenth-century anxieties about eva-
nescence, and in how eighteenth-century artists, throughout the cen-
tury, used the literary immortality of Shakespeare to mediate their own.
These accounts also suggest that the turn-of-the-century “preference” for
reading Shakespeare might not represent a turning away from perfor-
manace, but a reapplication of its commemorative ideals.

Garrick’s Farewell

While Macklin’s final days onstage ended with a whimper, Garrick,
unsurprisingly, went out with a bang. In January 1776 it was announced
that Garrick had “put the finish hand” to the sale of his portion of Drury
Lane, and that a syndicate consisting of James Ford, Thomas Linley,
Simon Ewart, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan would take control of the
theater “in June next.” As a result, “The public may now . . . depend . . .
that this will be the last season of Mr. Garrick’s performing.” Ever the
showman, Garrick made sure that knowledge of his exit circulated in a
variety of ways. On 18 January 1776, the evening that the sale conclud-
ed, Garrick played Abel Drugger in Ben Jonson’s The Alchymist. Asked
by another character whether he has “credit with the players,” Garrick emended Drugger’s scripted response, stating, “I believe I had once but I don’t know if I have now or not.”\(^\text{17}\) The man of consummate theatrical influence here wields it once more to mock the fact of his declining powers, but the true joke was that Garrick increased his influence by publicizing his willingness to retire. “He is one of those summer suns,” writes his contemporary Hannah More, articulating a sentiment shared by many during this final season, “which shine brightest at their setting.”\(^\text{18}\)

Such an effect was far from guaranteed. Macklin, as the prior chapter concludes, became memorable for performing long after he should have retired, and the accounts of his final onstage lapses accentuate the hubris of staying too long in the public eye. His biographer William Cook likens him unflatteringly to one of Jonathan Swift’s aging Struldbrugs, and it seems as if some spectators made his lapses an object of sport.\(^\text{19}\) Sarah Siddons, whose retirement features later in this chapter, experienced similar criticisms at the end of her career, which (as described in chapter 4) her successes as Hermione only partly offset. Though, then as now, criticisms of aging actresses seemed more common and often more vicious than those directed at men, the response to Macklin shows that the aging of male actors could also be subject to critique.\(^\text{20}\) Garrick, correspondingly, was resolved not to stay onstage “to be pitied instead of applauded.”\(^\text{21}\) He would retire (apparently) from desire, not necessity, and all his energy in his last months went into crafting performances meant to cement his “ageless” reputation in the public mind.

Shakespeare predictably played a key role in this project. Though Garrick acted a wide variety of roles in this final season, an emphasis on Shakespeare pervades. He revived *The Jubilee*, the afterpiece-version of his rained-out Shakespeare tribute discussed in chapter 4, for the “first time these 6 years,” and it was performed “with still greater splendor” for a total of thirty-four nights.\(^\text{22}\) As a result, many of Garrick’s non-Shakespearean final performances in mainpieces were followed by gestures toward the playwright on whom Garrick had founded his career. Garrick also brought back his best-known Shakespearean roles in his final weeks. “About a fortnight or three weeks previous to his taking his final leave,” his biographer Thomas Davies notes, “[Garrick] presented [the public] with some of the most capital and trying characters of Shakespeare; with Hamlet, Richard, and Lear.”\(^\text{23}\) Hamlet he had performed twice in the fall, on 29 November and 8 December 1775, but Lear and Richard he withheld until less than a month of his performance season remained. Richard in particular was advertised on the playbill as being
Garrick’s “first Appearance in that Character these 4 Years.” A week later it would be advertised as his very last.

The appeal and challenge of commemorating novelty, documented in chapter 2, is thus bookended in this final chapter by the appeal and challenge of commemorating disappearance. Garrick titillated audiences by reprising, in his final months, some of his most famous roles, all the while emphasizing that the chance to see his Drugger, or Ranger, or Lear, or Richard would never come again. The result was an audience reaction in which the anticipation of experience was intensified by the anticipation of that experience’s loss. “The eagerness of people to see him is beyond anything you can have an idea of,” writes More, though this eagerness now draws potency from more than just Garrick’s fame. She continues, “The more admirable [Garrick] is, the more painful it is to reflect that I am now catching his departing glories.”

Garrick almost certainly strategized this reaction. He had employed a similar strategy back in 1763, the first moment at which he had started to contemplate retirement. He instead left for a European grand tour, which would absent him from England until 1765, the purpose of which, as his biographer Thomas Davies asserts, was to make audiences miss him and want him to return. (One goal of the trip was “the desire of increasing his importance, by not being so often seen.”) In his retirement season he inverted this approach, in effect whetting the audience appetite for what he was about to take away. Roles, such as his Lusignan in Aaron Hill’s tragedy Zara, are glossed by reviewers as being “played finely” in the fall, and then, when he repeats it in March 1776, accentuated as being performed “by particular Desire” and “as Garrick’s last time performing the character.” Other repeated roles that met with similar publicity include Sir John Brute in John Vanbrugh’s The Provok’d Wife, Abel Drugger in Ben Jonson’s The Alchymist, Benedict in Much Ado About Nothing, and Hamlet in Hamlet. While Garrick’s spring repertoire doesn’t duplicate his fall repertoire exactly—he adds a few new roles to the ones listed above, including Lear and Richard III—every role he performs in the fall is one that he reprises in the spring.

Audiences responded by mobbing the theater, accentuating in a range of ways how the allure of performance hinges on the knowledge that it cannot remain. Garrick’s autumn appearances as Benedict in Much Ado About Nothing, for example, occurred while London was in the grip of a severe influenza, yet the chance to see Garrick overrode for spectators the threat of death. “Not withstanding the plague sweeps us away by dozens,” writes George Cumberland to his brother, of a November Garrick
performance, “the house was so full you could not have thrust your little finger in.” This excessive display of adoration itself posed a risk, for, as one Mr. “Stock Fish” subsequently notes, Garrick’s popularity in this final season led to audiences regularly exceeding theater capacity, and thus, through the fact of overcrowding, putting all their lives in peril.

While audiences wagered their own mortality to see an actor about to vanish from the stage, Garrick worked tirelessly to disguise signs of physical weakness in himself. Those who risked infection to see his Benedict came to see an actor who seemed immune to all physical harms. “It cannot be a matter of surprise,” notes one review of Garrick’s influenza-proof Benedict, “that Roscius should have escaped the infection . . . his spirits and constitution seems [sic] proof against the attacks of age itself . . . after above thirty campaigns, [Garrick’s] ardour and execution appears [sic] rather to increase.” Watching Garrick perform Hamlet in his final season, Friedrich Gunderode comments with amazement that though he was “then over sixty years of age” (Garrick was at the time fifty-eight), “he played the part of a young man of twenty with all the verve and sensibility of youth.” Such a sentiment was echoed, though a bit more analytically, by Garrick’s biographer Thomas Davies. “He was determined,” states Davies, hinting at the effort behind the “ageless” quality of Garrick’s final campaigns, “to give the publick proofs of his abilities to delight them as highly as he had ever done in the flower and vigour of his life.”

In reality, Garrick’s final season was extremely taxing. He was often wracked by pain from the kidney stones that would end his life, and his autopsy, which again revealed that he had been born with only one kidney and that his remaining kidney had become but a “cyst full of pus,” retroactively exposed the effort that must have gone into these final roles. (His biographer Arthur Murphy reflects with amazement how healthy Garrick had seemed to him upon their encounter some two months before his death—his “degree of vivacity” masking completely the truth of what his autopsy subsequently revealed about his “inward frame.”) Garrick amazed audiences in his final season—and Garrick himself felt that he had never “play’d better” than he did in some of these parts—but it was coming at the expense of his health. His loyal prompter William Hopkins noted on 29 November 1775 that Garrick was “never better” in Hamlet, but Garrick writes ominously after the performance that “I was . . . dead—dead—dead.”

In truth, Garrick’s acting had long taken a physical toll. “Whose face has experienced so much wear and tear as his?” Samuel Johnson had
famously quipped, in response to the extreme facial malleability that Garrick regularly displayed onstage.\(^{39}\) The very quality that contributed to his success onstage had long made him a challenge to those portrait painters who would preserve his image, and a long-circulating anecdote describes either Reynolds or Hogarth or Gainsborough giving up on a Garrick-portrait in exasperation, after the joking actor kept subtly adjusting his expression midpose.\(^{40}\) Perhaps Garrick tortured all these artists in the same manner, at once inviting and frustrating their attempts to capture the actor’s greatness in the static medium of visual art. A nineteenth-century caricature preserves in turn the painter’s frustration, as Hogarth in this case discards image after image of Garrick in a desperate attempt to keep up, in real time, with what the actor represents.

But if Garrick’s talents transcend, in this anecdote, those of the
painter he confronts, these same talents, as Johnson’s remark indicates, threatened to wear the actor down. Kidney disease aside, years of engaging in what Charles Burney dubs “an unremitting play of expression” had left Garrick’s face “the martyr of time.”  

Like Hermione’s in chapter 4, Garrick’s wrinkles attested to the realism of his art, yet they also, according to Burney, threatened that effect: “When [Garrick] found neither paint nor candle-light, nor dress nor decoration, could conceal those lines . . . he preferred to triumph, even in foregoing his triumphs, by . . . heroically pronouncing his Farewell!” Though ultimately many factors, including the prior death of his partner and co-patent holder James Lacy, contributed to Garrick’s decision to retire, Garrick’s physical stamina had certainly decreased. At the height of his career, he might have performed in the course of one season over a hundred nights; in his final year, Hannah More saw him perform only twenty-seven times. Accounts started to circulate that he had lost his “Voice and Articulation,” along with his old “fire and spirit.” (Significantly, Benedict, the part that he appeared in most frequently in this final season, in the processional of Shakespearean characters in The Jubilee, was a nonspeaking part.)

Ironically, the very Shakespearean roles that immortalized Garrick threatened to contribute most to his physical decline. Garrick notably avoided Shakespeare for his very last performance, as on 10 June 1776 he took his last bow as an actor as Don Felix, in Susanna Centlivre’s play The Wonder. According to several sources, however, he had wanted to end his career as Richard III. States one commentator, “Garrick naturally felt that nothing could round off his career so artistically as to set, so to speak, in the west, in the part in which he had first shone.”

Richard III was the role in which, at Goodman’s Fields, he had in 1741 made his first, stunning London debut, and by playing Richard once more he could reembody for viewers the Garrick of their youth. Of his 27 May 1776 performance, his prompter Hopkins notes that “he never wanted Spirit or Voice thro’ the whole part and Convinced the Audience that those Amazing powers he has always possess’d are now as brilliant as ever.” Indeed, his “Spirit and Voice” were so strong that his Lady Anne—played by the novice Siddons, rounding out her unsatisfactory first season under his guidance—was impressed by his performance with such “terror” that she “hung back a little when they advanced together from the back of the stage” and would subsequently reflect that “the glance of reproach that he threw at her, was distressing long after to her recollection.”

Yet for a grand finale, the part of Richard required Garrick to end
with a fight and a fall, and “he thought that after the fatigue of so labo-
rious a character . . . it would be out of his power to utter a farewell
address.” The speculation was borne out when Garrick, who did act
Richard III several times in his final weeks, was compelled to add an extra
performance at the king’s request. His 3 June performance, advertised
as his last, was followed by another unplanned one on 5 June, advertised
as by royal command. “It will absolutely kill me,” he writes to Hannah
More, of the request, “what a Trial of breast, lungs, ribs & What not.”
Though Garrick rose to the occasion, the effort of playing Richard on
almost-back-to-back nights so fatigued him that the company was “led . . .
to abandon further performances until Saturday 8 June.”

But if Shakespeare exhausted Garrick, he used this fact to good effect.
In Garrick’s case, performing his frailties also seems to have counteract-
ed them, just as publicizing his departure helped ensure that he would
be immortalized in the public mind. He used his last performance of
Hamlet, for example, to generate proceeds for “a fund, for the relief of
those who [like Garrick] from their infirmities shall be oblig’d to retire
from the stage.” The Drury Lane Theatrical Fund, as it was formally
known, had been established by Garrick in 1766 (to complement a simi-
lar fund established by Covent Garden), but in his final season Garrick
made extra efforts to have it protected by an act of Parliament. Con-
temporaries also referred to it as the “decayed actors’ fund,” and Samuel
Johnson at least saw Garrick’s philanthropy as motivated by self-interest.
“Alas!” Johnson is rumored to have quipped, “he will soon be a decayed
actor himself.”

Instead, Garrick encouraged audiences and actors to remember him
by accentuating the realization that memories of him would soon be all
that remained. Even the roles that focused on his aging thus worked to
highlight Garrick’s prowess. In contrast to Macklin’s final failed attempts
to reprise Shylock, for example, Garrick chose for his last Shakespear-
ean role and next-to-last performance (delivered on 8 June 1776) the
part of Lear. Performing an “Old . . . Weak Man,” in a part he had first
popularized when he was twenty-four, allowed Garrick somewhat ironi-
cally to show off the consistency of his physical and emotional power.
Whereas as a young actor Garrick had amazed audiences with his ability
to perform, convincing, an infirm yet violent man (though infamously
Garrick’s first performance of Lear, on 11 March 1742, had been under-
whelming, and he rallied in the part only after coaching from Macklin),
the elderly Garrick amazes audiences not for the part’s symmetry to his
own age, but with a stamina that links these later performances to his
youthful ones. “The curse at the close of the first act [and] his phre-
nhetic appeal to heaven at the end of the second... were two such enthusiastic scenes of human exertion that they caused a kind of momentary petrefaction [sic] through the house,” the London Chronicle states of one of his final performances of the part; “he never appeared so great in the character before.”59 These last performances of Lear moved audiences to “Cr[y] out Garrick for Ever” and moved “the unfeeling Regan and Goneril” to tears.60 “The little dog made it a chef d’oeuvre,” reflects his former mentor Macklin, on Garrick’s sustained success as Lear, “and a chef d’oeuvre it continued to the end of his life.”61

And yet, watching Garrick perform this part for the final time, these weeping audiences seemed to bewail more than just the loss of Garrick. “Within these three weeks,” writes Hannah More on 12 May 1776, “[Garrick] has appeared in Brute, Leon, Drurger, Benedict, Archer, etc. for the last time; and it appears like assisting at the funeral obsequies for these individual characters.”62 For his contemporaries, Garrick transcended emulation— “[Garrick] gives us not resemblances, but realities; he does not exhibit, but creates,” asserts Thomas Wilkes—so that the loss of Garrick meant the loss of the very characters he played.63 And thanks to Garrick’s calculated and career-long association with Shakespeare, the loss went deeper still. “For Garrick, the master of passion, retired, / And Nature and Shakespeare together expired,” lamented Charles Burney later, on the occasion of Garrick’s death.64 His lament would anticipate sentiments later articulated by Romantic critics of the stage, in that having Garrick so central to the memory of Shakespeare could, with the loss of Garrick, kill Shakespeare and not revive him. On some level, Garrick seemed to cherish this fact. As the biographer James Boaden records, once “Mr. Garrick had quitted the stage... he loved to read that Shakespeare and Jonson and Fletcher had retired with him.”65 Mobilizing his physical infirmities in performance, Garrick created a scenario in which his audiences, like those earlier audiences of Macklin, saw him as key to how the playwright was preserved. Regardless of the printed texts of Shakespeare (or Jonson or Fletcher) that continued to circulate, without the actor or the act of performance, these authors remained beyond reach.

Siddons, Offstage

But as the memory of Garrick faded, and new actors—and actresses—took to the stage, this attitude would shift, and one particular actress had much to do with these changing ideals. Though the response to
Macklin showed men as well as women being criticized for aging before the public eye, Garrick’s strategic retirement shows that an actor could turn his longevity to his advantage, transforming, with a part such as Lear, his infirmities into strengths. Women, by contrast, remained much more likely to be critiqued for “rendering the footsteps of time traceable,” and the fact that one of Garrick’s main Shakespearean successors was a woman would have a significant impact on cultural ideas about how Shakespeare should be preserved. Old age in the eighteenth century “was presented as a woman’s source of shame, something to be covered over,” a fact reflected perhaps in John Philip Kemble’s choice to cut the reference to Hermione’s wrinkles in the version of *The Winter’s Tale* that his sister, Siddons, would perform. Even Siddons’s successes with Hermione, as discussed in chapter 4, could not compensate for the criticisms that the visibility of her aging, in other parts, was starting to accrue. Siddons drew upon performance for its reanimating properties, but she could never deploy Garrick’s strategy of preemptively announcing, onstage, her aging or the fact of her departure.

Instead, and again unlike Garrick, Siddons committed her last reflections—her *Reminiscences*—to the page. She was seventy-five years old, fatally ill, and perhaps because of her illness, her remarks are short—only forty-four quarto pages. She bequeathed them to her chosen biographer, Thomas Campbell, with orders that he give “elegance and grace” to what she calls, quoting *Othello*, a “round unvarnished tale.” “My memory . . . is very fallible,” Siddons writes, and “therefore I shall not attempt a regular succession of events.” What she does narrate comprises mainly the early part of her career, or the period, according to her modern editor, that must have “stood out in her memory with greatest clarity and significance.” Of her retirement, in 1812, she says little. “I thought it due to myself to retire before I should find the world grow[ing] weary of me,” she briefly concludes.

The world, however, didn’t see her adhering to this resolution. She suffered, her biographer Percy Fitzgerald writes, from a deep ennui once she had left the stage, perhaps one factor “to draw her back again to the public life she had quitted.” While she made her “final” theater appearance in 1812 at the age of fifty-seven, she continued to give command and benefit performances until 1819—a few appearances in London in 1816 at the command of Princess Charlotte, and a last performance, in the role of Lady Randolph in John Home’s play *Douglas*, in June 1819 for the benefit for Charles Kemble. Though many of these performances were given at popular request, responses were mixed. “Mrs. Siddons
retired once from the stage, why should she return to it again?” queries
her sometime-admirer Hazlitt, in an essay written four years after Siddons had officially left the stage. “Has she not had enough of glory? . . . Is she to continue on the stage to the very last, till all her grace and all her grandeur gone, shall leave behind them only a melancholy blank?”

Hazlitt’s condemnation stands in stark contrast to, even as it draws
upon, his memories of her prior performances, when he had found
her to be “tragedy personified . . . the stateliest ornament of the public mind.” For him, the role that had come to epitomize Siddons’s achievements best accentuated this decline. “If we have seen Mrs. Siddons in Lady Macbeth only once, it is enough,” Hazlitt claims in 1817, in a critical response to her choice to revive the part onstage. She had used this role for her official retirement performance, on 29 June 1812, and spectators on this night stopped the performance with applause after her famous sleepwalking scene and lamented her subsequent exit as “almost a withdrawing of the character itself from the stage.”

On her closing night at least, criticism of the fifty-seven-year-old Siddons was in abeyance. Yet the “dignity of the Siddonian form” could not be permanently maintained. As indicated in chapter 4, Siddons’s aging had led to performances that increasingly strained audience credulity, and this reaction was intensified when Siddons agreed to revive Lady Macbeth in command performances after she had retired. “The voice seems too ponderous,” states Hazlitt, in response to an 1816 revival of the role, “there is too long a pause.” In particular, he finds her rendition of “the sleeping scene” a poor imitation of what it once had been: “There was none of this weight or energy in the way she did the scene the first time we saw her, twenty years ago.”

Referencing his first sighting of Siddons, Hazlitt illustrates how the postretirement performance stimulates the memories of Siddons that it simultaneously threatens to efface. Gone are the links between reenactment and immortality aspired to by Othello, and embraced by Garrick and by Sterne. Siddons’s “after-experiments . . . only serve to fritter away and tamper with the sacredness of the early recollection.” Far from cementing her reputation, Siddons’s continued performances only “remind us of herself by showing us what she was not.”

And yet, critical as Hazlitt and others were of seeing a retired Siddons resume her place on the stage, other contemporaneous performances of hers were being met at this very moment with praise. During her career she had sporadically entertained audiences with staged readings, and she continued to do so—both at home and in public venues such as
the Argyll Rooms, a privately owned venue on Little Argyll Street—with some frequency after she had retired. These readings channeled, as well as departed from, conventions she’d become accustomed to during her prior theatrical career. As the artist Benjamin Haydon would note, describing an 1821 reading that she gave for her friends at her home on Upper Baker Street, even her more “private” readings were far from informal occasions:

While we were all eating toast and tingling cups and saucers, she began again. It was like the effect of a mass bell at Madrid. All noise ceased; we slunk to our seats like boors, two or three of the most distinguished men of the day, with the very toast in their mouths, afraid to bite.

The sudden segue between the casual and the staged leaves her guest Sir Thomas Lawrence, famous portrait painter and intimate of the Siddons family, in particularly dire straits. Continues Haydon:

It was curious to see Lawrence in the predicament, to hear him bite by degrees and then stop for fear of making too much crackle, his eyes full of water from the constraint; and at the same time to hear Mrs. Siddons’s: “Eye of newt and toe of frog,” and then to see Lawrence give a sly bite, and then look awed, and pretend to be listening.  

As the anecdote illustrates, these ostensibly intimate gatherings produced conflicting audience expectations, as Siddons disrupts the signs of intimacy and domesticity—a tea service, a general mingling—with the seemingly unannounced dramatic declamation that refuses to sanction quotidian noises of toast being chewed.

Siddons at these events read from a range of texts, among them Paradise Lost, and the poems of Thomas Gray, though her readings at home, given in the final years of her life, were, according to her biographer Thomas Campbell (and as indicated in the anecdote shared by Haydon), all drawn from Shakespeare. These readings, identified by her spectators as theatrical events, yet satisfied her audiences in ways that her postretirement stage performances did not. “I have called it Acting for so it is rather than reading,” the playwright Joanna Baillie asserts after one of Siddons’s readings, and Hester Thrale Piozzi singles out “Mrs. Siddons’s power of amusing five hundred persons, without help from fellow-actors, stage, or scenery” as “a stronger proof than anything in
her previous career of the mighty actor she was.” Her biographer Percy Fitzgerald describes the readings as “remarkably successful,” and many other observers found them free from the flaws they perceived onstage. Baillie, in reference to Siddons’s reading of *Hamlet*, claims she “would rather go to [a reading] once than go to three plays in a large Theatre where [Siddons] herself acted,” while Anna Jameson, in her 1831 obituary to Siddons, reflects that “no scenic representation I ever witnessed produced the hundredth part of the effect of her reading *Hamlet*.”

Her audiences’ pleasure at these events seems related to the way that, just as an aging Garrick found in Hamlet or Lear or Richard something of “the flower and vigour of his life,” Siddons found in these readings a fountain of youth, or at least a venue in which her aging coded more positively than it did upon the stage. Baillie, who heard Siddons read at home and in public, comments that spectators at the Argyll Rooms were “struck with [Siddons] appearing both younger & handsomer tho’ seen so much nearer than she has appeared for some years past on the Stage.” Siddons’s biographer Boaden notes that she used at these readings “a quarto volume printed with a large letter” to compensate for her failing eyesight, and relied periodically upon spectacles, “which she waved from time to time before her, when memory could not entirely be trusted.” But the spectacles and memory loss that onstage would have supported calls for her retirement now counted as adornments, the eyeglasses “handled and waved so gracefully, that you could not have wished her to have been without them.”

Maria Edgeworth, who heard Siddons read from *Henry VIII* at home, found the play “peculiarly suited to her time of life, and to reading,” as there was “nothing [in what she read] that required gesture or vehemence incompatible with the sitting attitude.”

At the Argyll Rooms, Siddons’s readings were even more formal affairs, advertised in advance and presented to a much larger, and paying, audience. Spectators paid a half-guinea to hear Siddons read, and six performances there in 1813 would bring her a total profit of £1,300. The rooms themselves were fitted up in a style of great magnificence, complete with Corinthian pillars and gilt lamps. Siddons read in front of the orchestra, at the far end of the grand saloon, an oblong room containing three tiers of boxes, draped in scarlet, and illuminated with chandeliers. She stood for the whole reading, and was led in to the reading desk by a gentleman, most often her nephew Mr. Twiss. Fitzgerald emphasizes that her “dark hair . . . [and] wonderful eyes” combined to produce “a surprising effect,” one no doubt encouraged by “a large red
screen” that lit Siddons from behind. Such a background accentuated “the figure of the charming reader”; for the aging actress, backlights, as opposed to footlights, were kind. Thomas Lawrence’s 1804 portrait of Siddons as a reader, for example, while it doesn’t disguise her weight, is nonetheless far more flattering than a roughly contemporaneous caricature of Siddons, which critiques her Dublin performances of Hamlet, the role that audiences subsequently so enjoyed hearing her read.

Lawrence’s ability to maintain the dignity of Siddons as a reader probably owed much to the fact that, unlike theater audiences, who came to
see actors impersonate a specific character, audiences at her readings came to hear Siddons perform all the parts. This requirement presented its own challenges, and Boaden underlines the potentially awkward effect of “an elegantly drest female[‘s]” in assuming “the vehement passions, coarse humors, and often unguarded dialogue of every variety of manly character.” Yet for Siddons, celebrated often throughout her career for her masculine force, this required fluidity worked to her advantage. Of her reading from *Hamlet*, Baillie asserts that “the part of Polonius she gave admirably . . . I thought she excelled more in Polonius than in any other part.” An 1831 essay in the *New Monthly Magazine* singles out as particularly strong her reading of Ophelia, a character she had played but once in her stage career, and of Hamlet (the part in which Siddons’s appearance, when she had played the role in Dublin in 1802 and 1805, had been so unflatteringly portrayed), George Joseph Bell commented that Siddons could, in reading, “paint to the spectators a horrible shadow in her mind.” In each instance, audiences may appreciate and contrast her delivery of multiple roles, and they judged the
resulting experience to be “like a fine composition in painting” in which “the parts for effect [were] raised and touched by a master’s hand.” Freed from the necessity of portraying an individual character, Siddons as a reader was free to rise above the constraints of her physical form; her age and characteristics were no longer held up against those of the individual character she portrayed.

She was also free, in the process, to stimulate a new type of imaginative freedom among those who attended. “The ideal can have no place upon the stage,” Hazlitt would assert, in his treatise on the *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays*, a work composed during the time period that Siddons was still reading aloud; “the boards of a theatre and the regions of fancy are not the same thing.” Yet “fancy” could be activated for listeners when hearing Siddons read. Of her reading from *Macbeth*, for example—the play in which she’d so excelled, and the performances for which, in recent years, she’d been most critiqued—her biographer James Boaden emphasizes exactly this effect. “On the stage,” Boaden reflects, “where the Wierd [sic] Sisters are necessarily consigned to actual persons and positive habiliments, the charm is dispelled; for the imagination has no picture to paint, no mystery to develop.” When read aloud by Siddons, however, Macbeth’s witches become “poetical creations . . . beings resolving ‘into air, into thin air’ . . . whose language seems to wander from that element alone.” As a reader, Siddons could represent to perfection those parts that defied embodiment; as a reader, Siddons offered her listeners the chance to “flesh out” for themselves that which the body of an actor could misrepresent.

And yet Siddons’s readings weren’t detached completely from the conventions of the stage. “Oh, that we could have assembled a company of young people to witness this,” states one admirer, of one of Siddons’s very last domestic readings, “that they might have conveyed the memory of it down to another generation!” Without Siddons, the statement implies, the readings won’t have the same impact, nor can their effect seemingly be preserved in prose: the live experience, plus the memory of the multitude, are required. As in theatrical performance, too, the physical presence of Siddons remained important, and viewers came to these readings with their visual judgment of Siddons yet engaged. Though her aging codes more complimentarily in this venue, it remains something that spectators note. Edgeworth, again, appreciates that Siddons’s readings were “peculiarly suited to her time of life,” and Baillie notes that her weakening voice made her better able to convey in read-
ing a sentiment shared by the young Hamlet and the aging Siddons alike: “the pity and tenderness . . . of one who had lost dear friends, and expected to go to them soon.”

Such responses to Siddons show that while Garrick’s concept of the actor as living monument to Shakespeare remains potent, it is yet in flux. Like Garrick in his best achievements onstage, Siddons at these readings is lauded for channeling, not the psyche of a particular character, but that of the author himself. According to Boaden, Siddons, in her Shakespearean readings, was able to “divin[e] a meaning in the poet beyond his words,” while her biographer Thomas Campbell states, of the effect of the same, “No acting I ever witnessed, nor dramatic criticism I ever read, illustrated the poet so closely and so perfectly.” Edgeworth similarly observes after a reading, “I had never before fully understood or sufficiently admired Shakspeare [sic], or known the full powers of the human voice.” But in this case, and as articulated most explicitly by Anna Jameson, Siddons’s ability to channel Shakespeare emerges from differences between what she does as a reader and what she (or Garrick) had done as an actor on the stage. As Jameson reflects, if Siddons on the stage had been “a perfect actress,” her readings exhibited “a more astonishing display of her powers than her performance of any single character”; as a reader, Siddons is no longer an actress but “a priestess . . . full of the god of her idolatry.”

Jameson’s styling of Siddons as priestess channels Garrick, as her tribute, which comes originally from *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet urges Romeo to swear by “thy gracious self, / which is the god of my idolatry” (2.2.113–14), had as its most recent context Garrick’s “Ode to Shakespeare” that he composed for his Jubilee: “’Tis he! ’Tis he! / The god of our idolatry!” Jameson recycles Garrick’s tribute in a manner that reflects performance’s patterns of renewal and decay, applying Garrick’s phrase to a new Shakespearean worshipper, and, by extension, a new mouthpiece for the poet. But the mouthpiece now is not, or not only, a “perfect actress,” but one who unlike Garrick must exceed this role to function as a living representative for the playwright’s mind. Siddons’s aging, in this context, represents much less of a threat: it becomes something that adds to her gifts and something that renders her, somewhat paradoxically, according to Baillie, “an unconquerable creature, over whose astonishing gifts of nature time had no power.”

In contrast then to Garrick’s Shakespeare, who could by decaying always “rise again,” Siddons’s readings model a Shakespeare, and a representative of Shakespeare, who seems poised to escape the cyclic nature
of death and succession. And it is this possibility, as articulated by Baillie, that starts to explain why in some circles a shift away from the actor as the receptacle of Shakespeare’s reputation might have taken place. If the Romantics felt at times compelled to speak out against the stage or the actor as the privileged site to commemorate Shakespeare, they were not consistent in these assertions, and their motivations in making them are more complicated than the claims, anticipated a century before by Behn and reiterated in places by critics such as Hazlitt and Lamb, that a human actor will inevitably fail to capture or represent a poetic ideal. Instead, while Garrick’s model of commemoration always involved loss—as loss, in the theater, is necessary for the actor or his persona to be born again—Siddons’s readings, if not Siddons herself, offered the fantasy that loss might be eschewed: that the “priestess” of Shakespeare could be someone whom time would not affect; that life could be everlasting; and that, when relegated to the imagination, a performance need never end. And, as the final section of this chapter reveals, the critics who came to espouse this fantasy were moved to do so in no little part because of the pain they felt at the passing of Siddons and Garrick. The Romantics were in mourning for performance.

Mourning Performance

Come like shadows, so depart.  
—Macbeth, 4.1.133

In 1826, well after the death of Garrick and the retirement of Siddons, William Hazlitt composed a fanciful piece for the New Monthly Magazine. Titled “Of Persons One Would Wish to Have Seen” and prefaced with a poignant epigraph from Macbeth—“Come like shadows—so depart”—the essay describes a group of friends (and the indicated interlocutors likely include Hazlitt’s contemporaries Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge) debating whom among the ghosts from their past they wish they could have seen and known. Many well-known names, Shakespeare’s among them, are raised only to be shot down (“I have seen so much of Shakespeare on the stage and on book-stalls, in frontispieces and on mantle-pieces,” [said B——], “that I am quite tired of the everlasting repetition”), but one name in particular is singled out: “Of all persons near our own time, Garrick’s name was received with the greatest enthusiasm,” Hazlitt states.
If Garrick’s name was put forward with general enthusiasm, Hazlitt’s enthusiasm soon emerges as especially potent:

What a sight for sore eyes that would be! Who would not part with a year’s income at least, almost with a year of his natural life, to be present at it? Besides, as he could not act alone, and recitations are unsatisfactory things, what a troop he must bring with him—the silver-tongued [Spranger] Barry, and [James] Quin, and [Ned] Shuter and [Thomas] Weston, and Mrs. [Catherine/Kitty] Clive and Mrs. [Hannah] Pritchard, of whom I have heard my father speak as so great a favourite when he was young! This would indeed be a revival of the dead, the restoring of art.117

Hazlitt’s encomium adds a personal tone to the Romantic ethos of belatedness: born just shy of his idol’s death (10 April 1778, for Hazlitt’s birth; 20 January 1779, for Garrick’s death), Hazlitt must draw upon the testimony of his father, along with “the speeches of [Edmund] Burke, the portraits of [Joshua] Reynolds, the writings of [Oliver] Goldsmith, and the conversation of [Samuel] Johnson . . . [all of which] confirm the universal testimony to the merits of Garrick,” to recreate what it was like to see Garrick on the stage.118 But such testimony, for Hazlitt, is not sufficient—nor would be mere “recitations,” despite the favor bestowed on Siddons’s, and despite the imaginative free-play offered up by one reader reciting lines onstage. “For one, I should like to have seen and heard [Garrick] with my own eyes and ears,” Hazlitt insists, and could there be such a possibility, a performance peopled by the dead actors who have flitted through this book, “Who would not part with a year’s income at least, almost with a year of his natural life, to be present at it?”119

Such a response to Garrick seems in keeping with those recorded throughout this book, even as such a response from Hazlitt seems very different from his “antitheatrical” attempts to push Shakespeare away from the stage. And yet this essay is far from the only piece in which he waxes eloquent about the actors he has loved. In his 1817 essay “On Actors and Acting,” he identifies the actor’s “fleeting and shadowy essence” as what leaves the stage open to originality, and what inspires the art form to be always “setting out afresh.”120 But even as he acknowledges that the void left by past actors will always be filled, and even as he acknowledges the absolute necessity of seeing who is currently on the stage—a nostalgic playgoer “may extol Garrick, but he must go to see [Edmund] Kean”—Hazlitt slips, again, into fantasy mode:
If, indeed, by any spell or power of necromancy, all the celebrated actors, for the last one hundred years, could be made to appear again on the boards of Covent Garden and Drury Lane . . . what a rich treat for the town. . . . We should certainly be there. We should buy a ticket for the season . . . We should not miss a single night. . . . We should then know exactly whether. . . . Macklin was really “the Jew that Shakespeare drew,” and whether Garrick was, upon the whole, so great an actor as the world would have made him out!121

Hazlitt’s fantasy contains a tinge of skepticism. Maybe, he hints, Garrick wasn’t so great; maybe the popular imagination retroactively elevates to greatness a man who in reality was “little better than a Bartlemy-fair actor, dressed out to play Macbeth in a scarlet coat and laced cocked-hat.”122 But that skepticism soon rings hollow: “Certainly, by all accounts, if any one was ever moved by the true histrionic æstus, it was Garrick.”123 Hazlitt’s skepticism emerges as a veneer for his unrequited desire, an almost childlike petulance that he cannot “have seen and heard” such excellence “with my own eyes and ears.” Garrick is gone, and for all the cyclic nature of performance, for all of Hazlitt’s optimistic assertions about acting’s “setting out afresh,” Hazlitt mourns, deeply, the fact that he will never see Garrick act.124

That Hazlitt—and perhaps to an even greater extent his contemporaries Lamb and Coleridge—also felt frustration with the stage, and with the staging of Shakespeare’s plays, is not in doubt. Hazlitt’s treatise *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* (1817) is full of such ripostes, including his claim that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is singularly unsuited to the stage. If the play was read, he asserts, the mind would have free play; but onstage, “That which was merely an airy shape, a dream, a passing thought, immediately becomes an unmanageable reality . . . Bottom’s head in the play is a fantastic illusion . . . on the stage it is an ass’s head, and nothing more.”125 For many of the Romantic critics, the idealism of Shakespeare’s characters meant that they could never be performed. “Shakespeare’s characters from Othello or Macbeth down to Dogberry are ideal,” Coleridge believed. “They are not the things but the abstracts of the things which a great mind may take into itself and naturalize to its own heaven.”126 Lamb often framed this idealism as an insurmountable boundary to performance, such that “the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted . . . the play is beyond all art”; Hazlitt, similarly, insists that the reader of the plays of Shakespeare “is almost always disappointed” in seeing them performed.127 In such statements, Shakespeare’s characters’
qualities can only be “realized” (as it were) in the fevered workings of an inspired reader’s brain. “It is we who are Hamlet,” Hazlitt asserts, as for readers it is the act of imagining, prompted by the disembodied text, that allows Shakespeare’s characters to achieve an unrealizable complexity and nuance.\textsuperscript{128}

And yet these more critical accounts share space with the same writers’ undeniable love of theater. Their fascination with the imaginative potential offered by individual reading shares space with their use of self-consciously theatrical personae (the Elian essays, for Lamb), lifelong interest in theater, and (largely unsuccessful) attempts at writing plays.\textsuperscript{129} Hazlitt’s critiques, then, when read in the context of his paeans to the theater, emerge less as an aesthetic deprecation of performance than as a personal way of coping with loss. “We miss the favourites, not of another age, but of our own,” Hazlitt opines in an 1820 essay titled “On Play-going and on Some of our Old Actors,” now reflecting on the great actors he has had the privilege to watch:

We cannot replace them by others . . . Who shall give us Mrs. Siddons again, but in a waking dream, a beatific vision of past years . . . who shall in our time (or can ever to the eye of fancy) fill the stage, like her, with the dignity of their persons, and the emanations of their minds? . . . Who shall walk in sleepless ecstasy of soul, and haunt the mind’s eye ever after with the dread pageantry of suffering and guilt? Who shall make tragedy once more stand with its feet upon the earth, and with its head raised above the skies, weeping tears and blood? That loss is not to be repaired.\textsuperscript{130}

Powerful as the imagination may be, even “the eye of fancy” cannot replicate the wonder that Siddons was onstage. Performance in this instance is painful not because it threatens to constrain the imagination, or because bad actors do an injustice to a Shakespearean “intention” that readers are more likely to reclaim, but because there are those actors—Siddons, in Hazlitt’s experience, and, he suspects, Garrick, in a prior age—who achieve such heights of artistry, and move us to such depths of passion, that to lose them does us an injury “not to be repaired.”

Hazlitt’s lament presents a new way to imagine the legacy of Shakespeare, and of Garrick. In this model, the Romantic retreat into the imagination, the growing emphasis on mind over body seen in everything from the Romantic critiques of a staged Shakespeare to the valorization of poetry and the novel over the stage, becomes a response to the expe-
rience of evanescence imparted by the great actors of the eighteenth-century stage. “The life of a favourite performer,” Hazlitt writes, “glances a mortifying reflection on the shortness of human life.” If the closet became for Hazlitt the privileged locus for the playwright, it is at least in part because it supports a self-contained aesthetic experience existing painlessly outside the natural progression of decay. The closet offers a space in which Shakespeare’s works can be “permanent and accumulating” and in which those who love his work need never experience what Hazlitt feels in watching Siddons leave the stage. The closet also offers a space in which Hazlitt may fantasize about the revival of dead actors, among all the other dead poets and politicians that he and his friends can conjure up, and it is this revival that he singles out, in the essay with which this section opened, as “indeed . . . a revival of the dead, the restoring of art.” The poet or the painter who leaves behind his works is never truly dead and therefore never truly needs to be restored. But the actor, whose artistry is in his liveness, tortures us when he leaves with a far more visceral sense of loss. This is why, for Hazlitt, it is the revival of actors, more than any other figure from the past, that represents what it means to him more generally to “revive” or “restore,” and why it is this fantasy to which in his writings he repeatedly recurs. This, then, is the final legacy of Garrick’s loss: this fantastic desire, impossible to fulfill but also constantly recreated, that what Garrick and Siddons had done for Shakespeare through performance, Hazlitt could now, in the interstices of his imagination, do for them.