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on

Osorio and Sheridan's Duel

IN 1797 RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN, THE OWNER of Drury Lane Theatre, rejected Coleridge's manuscript tragedy, *Osorio*. Coleridge was surprised and aggrieved by this response: Sheridan had invited him to submit a play for production. Furthermore, Sheridan's alleged objection to the play – according to Coleridge, Sheridan faulted the 'obscurity of the last three acts' – is itself rather opaque (CL I 358). That *Osorio* was successfully staged under new management at Drury Lane in 1813, retitled *Remorse* but without extensive revision to the script, intimates that there may have been personal reasons for Sheridan to object to the work. I believe that Sheridan took offence at the play's denouement, details of which resemble a notorious incident in Sheridan's youth.

Sheridan was near-fatally wounded in 1772 in a duel with Captain Thomas Mathews (1742–1820). Although Mathews was already married, he thought himself Sheridan's rival for the affection of the actress Eliza Linley (1754–92). In fact, Sheridan and Linley had married secretly in France; the two fled overseas when the frustrated Mathews threatened to smear Linley's reputation. Bath society was scandalised that Sheridan and Linley eloped and travelled France together, as it appeared, unmarried. Enraged, Mathews placed an advertisement in the *Bath Chronicle* for 9 April 1772, in which he outlined his grievances against Sheridan: 'I cannot longer think he deserves the treatment of a gentleman'. While Sheridan defeated Mathews in the ensuing duel, Mathews bragged publicly that he had spared his contestant. Hence, Sheridan demanded a second duel. On this occasion, both protagonists were intoxicated, and broke their swords. Mathews gained the upper hand, and stabbed Sheridan in the stomach with the remnant of his blade. *The London Magazine* reports that 'they mangled each other for some time with their broken swords; and S—n having received some dangerous wounds was left on the field with few signs of life'. [1] Fintan O'Toole describes a detail of the famous tableau in which Mathews stood triumphant over the fallen Sheridan: 'Rather poignantly, in the midst of this fracas, a locket that Sheridan had round his neck, containing a picture of Eliza, was torn off and left on the blood-stained ground'. [2]

The popular Eliza Linley's love life attracted a great deal of public interest. Prior to Sheridan's amorous involvement with Linley, Samuel Foote's comedy, *The Maid of Bath*, premiered in Haymarket in 1771. Foote's play depicts the January-and-May relationship between Linley and another of her unwelcome suitors, a local squire named Walter Long (1712–1807). While Long is portrayed as Sir Christopher Cripple, the character of Major Racket is based on Mathews. Sheridan himself capitalised on the exchange with Mathews in *The*

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[1] *London Magazine*, 41 (1772), p. 408.

[2] Fintan O'Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p. 61.

Rivals (1775), a comedy that makes light of Linley's admirers. Yet the play contains no allusion to Sheridan's humiliation and near death in the second duel with Mathews. Coleridge, however, appears to refer to this duel in *Osorio*.

Albert, the protagonist of *Osorio*, is presumed dead at the hands of bandits. In fact he survived an attempt on his life that was orchestrated by his brother Osorio, who was jealous that Albert won the heart of Maria. In the play, Albert returns home after an interval of some years. Disguised as a sorcerer, he intends to confront Osorio. While Albert, in the capacity of magician, promises his family communication with the 'dead' Albert, instead he reveals a painting that illustrates Osorio's attempt on his life. The image of the would-be assassin over the wounded Albert faintly recalls the famous tableau of Sheridan's second duel with Mathews. The resemblance is intensified with a flash of phosphorous in which appears a locket, containing a portrait of Maria. 'My picture?' Maria exclaims. 'He grasp'd it when he died' (III.i.116–17).

A lover's locket, a moving element in accounts of Sheridan's ill-fated duel with Mathews, is also the crux of Coleridge's drama. In *Osorio*, the locket is evidence that Albert's disappearance was not due to a chance encounter with bandits, but the machinations of a love-rival. While he remained obscure in his judgment on Coleridge's play, it may be that Sheridan detected a sly allusion to his own past that he disliked. Hence Sheridan rejected *Osorio.* He did not, at least, demand satisfaction of the young poet.