“AN ALARMING STATE OF AFFAIRS:” RHETORIC, RESISTANCE AND THE NATION IN RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN’S SPEECH OF 20 APRIL 1798

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Abstract: On 21 April 1798 the *Morning Post* printed a speech, given the night before, by the Foxite politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Sheridan had sought to rouse the nation against threatened French invasion. The French must be resisted at all costs, he insisted, and he explained why: “*What is it they want? Ships, commerce, manufactures, cash, capital, and credit*; or, in other words, they *only* want the sinews, bones, marrow, and heart’s-blood of Great Britain.” Such passionate rhetoric contained a change of argument. Sheridan had previously opposed British warmongering and had maintained a liberal sympathy for France and the cause of reform. The *Morning Post*’s account of Sheridan’s speech confirms its importance to a liberal audience, but what is equally remarkable is that several other newspapers carried similarly extensive but politically different versions of what Sheridan had said. By confronting this contested mediascape, this article examines Sheridan’s speech, analysing his arguments and rhetoric but also appraising the competing ways in which the speech was reported. The article thereby raises broader questions about the status of printed transcriptions of parliamentary speeches, the dissemination process and the methodological problems of studying different versions of a famous speech.

Keywords: House of Commons, press reporting, politics, rhetoric, print culture, 1798 invasion scare, Loyalism

Late in the evening of Friday 20 April 1798, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, playwright, theatre manager, and opposition MP, reached a crescendo in his speech before a packed House of Commons.[1] After five years of war, Britain’s security was threatened by invasion. Sheridan wished to explain how the French should be repelled. He had much still to say, but wanted to make it clear that he would never align himself with William Pitt's government. He pledged, indeed, "eternal separation from His Majesty's Ministers." The only "unanimity" he would tolerate was "against the French," as it was "the only unanimity which can be successful."[2] When Sheridan made these claims, Pitt's ministry had already marshalled resources and sought greater powers, passing new legislation and embodying militia units. While the Ministry prepared to resist the enemy, they were equally anxious to repress protest at home.[3] The King's willingness to conflate advocacy of reform with treasonous support for France had been reiterated in his message from the Throne with which the Secretary of State for War, Henry Dundas, opened the debate that evening.[4] This article explores how Sheridan responded, focusing on how he urges the nation to defend itself. It also examines how Sheridan's speech was subsequently printed, showing how that dissemination process shaped the way his words were understood, and even what those words were.

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[1] This article draws on earlier versions presented in York, Oxford and London. It contributes to the wider Sheridan Project at the Universities of Leeds and Bristol. I am grateful to my

This dual concern requires acknowledgement of the diverse and frequently hostile political context and mediascape in which Sheridan spoke, and in which his speech appeared in print. By the late 1790s Sheridan's position was precarious. Most of the Whig faction to which he belonged had followed their leader, Charles James Fox, in seceding from Parliament in late 1797. Their departure left Sheridan as the almost-solitary voice of liberal opposition. He had continued to challenge what he saw as Pitt's attempts to curtail protest, defending the principle of constitutional change.[5] Despite the pressure exerted by the declaration of war in February 1793, Sheridan still encouraged fellow politicians to hope that the French republic might bring peace as well as liberty to Europe.[6] With French invasion

collaborators Martyn Powell, Rachel Sulich and Alexis Wolf. We are editing *The Political Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* for Oxford University Press.

[2] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

[3] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1737-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 285-91. See also Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London: Macmillan, 1979); J.E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Mark Philp, ed., *Resisting Napoleon: The British Response to the Threat of Invasions, 1797-1815* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

[4] *The Parliamentary Register: or, History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons*, 45 vols. (London: J. Debrett, 1781-1796), 6:4-5.

[5] L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 141-44; and Fintan O'Toole, *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London: Granta, 1998), 297-307.

[6] J.E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 138-40.

seemingly imminent, Sheridan needed to shift his position, advocating war with France yet maintaining his place as the voice of opposition, still sympathetic to reform and no less sceptical of increasingly presumptive executive power. Fear of invasion, though it would animate him, would not make him abandon these long-cherished principles. Sheridan's speech, dextrous in these respects, was rhetorically powerful, meriting comparison with Churchill in 1940, or Elizabeth I at Tilbury. Sheridan would have had in his mind the great exhortations of Roman history, such as Scipio's address to his soldiers in Polybius's *Histories*, when the need to resist a dangerous enemy is powerfully articulated.[7]

London's newspapers were enthusiastic reporters of Sheridan's speeches. Witty and persuasive, he made for good copy. He was without question one of the superlative orators of an age that included Burke, Fox and Pitt. Sheridan's speech on "the Present Alarming State of Affairs," as it was later called, was prominent on the pages of the *Morning Post*, edited by Daniel Stuart, a well-known liberal of reformist instincts.[8] The *Post* presents Sheridan's doubled stance best when it reports him assert that: "without retracting any one opinion which I have ever held, I do not conceive that there ever was any period of our history, in which the conquest of the kingdom by a foreign power would bring such total ruin upon it, as the conquest of Great Britain by the present French Republic." Sheridan developed his argument quickly, drawing on the contractualist assumptions of popular monarchism, which held that all parts of the state had roles (or duties) which they must enact but not transgress.[9] Crucially, French invasion justified no new powers:

> I trust there is no one who does not know that in cases of peril out of the ordinary course and contemplation of the law, the King is armed with full powers to call out the whole energy of his kingdom. In domestic outrages, this is in the power of a common constable; undoubtedly then it is not supposed by the Constitution, that in the danger and apprehension of a foreign invasion the King is to be a mere looker on. In that respect […]

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[7] Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W.R. Paton, 6 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1922), 2:155-57.

[8] See Paul Magnusson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 72-73. See also Wilfred H. Hindle, *The Morning Post, 1772-1937: Portrait of a Newspaper* (London: Routledge, 1937); and Lucyle Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press, 1772-1792* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1963).

[9] Henry J. Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom 1780-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 90-92.

> I think that whatever service any man may give, he will do no more than he is bound by his allegiance to do.[10]

Sheridan makes two related claims: France must be resisted, the "situation of the country" demands it; but no new powers are required. The Crown should summon the "allegiance" already "bound" to it. Sheridan's new-found commitment to war had not changed his politics (as a sceptical George III grasped).[11] Crucially, Sheridan claims that it is insufficient simply to organize existing powers and resources. The national spirit must be animated: "I wish superadded," he declares, "a superior zeal to animate the country; a zeal which it is not in the power of any Minister to call forth. […] in times like these, a common spirit will not do." The idea of raised national spirit focuses the remainder of the speech.

Advocating an undefined but profound "superior zeal," Sheridan performs a rhetorical and political feat, seizing the imperative to prepare and to arm, which the Ministry had understood either in terms of troop movements, road clearances and other practical measures, or as an opportunity to mobilize counter-revolutionary Loyalism. Translated into an animating principle, the need to resist the French escapes the control of Ministers, who lack the power either to induce or to compel it. The spirit of the people, united in defence of the nation, becomes the ground on which Sheridan stands, and from which he could castigate his opponents. To a degree this argument was a re-statement of long-held Whig opinion, familiar from the work of Sir William Jones among others, which held that political virtue, and hence national security, lay with free citizens, who in times of crisis should bear arms.[12] Comparable views had been advocated recently by Major John Cartwright, who had argued in his *Commonwealth in Danger* (1795) that the nation's best defence lay in unleashing what he called its "republican energies": "I know of no line so unexceptional, so constitutional […] as that of arming every taxed householder." Such an enrolment would ensure that France was defeated on English soil: "Men with a free constitution in their hearts, and swords in the hands, are not to be conquered."[13]

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[10] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

[11] O'Toole, *Traitor's Kiss*, 338.

[12] Sir William Jones, *The Principles of Government: In a Dialogue between a Scholar and a Peasant* (London: Society for Constitutional Information, 1783).

[13] Major John Cartwright, *The Commonwealth in Danger with an Introduction Containing Remarks on Some of the Late Writings of Arthur Young* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), 43, 83, 86-89, 16. See also Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 127-30.

To make these connections is to place Sheridan's argument at the heart of analysis of his speech. Ian Harris has claimed that newspaper reporting was primarily concerned with recording what he terms the "practical reasoning" required for policy.[14] If this were the case, then we might expect such connections to be apparent when parliamentary debates appear in the newspapers. However, this would be to overlook the force of how Sheridan expressed his point, and his skill in separating, rhetorically as well as politically, the demands of Loyalism from a more inclusive ideal of patriotic engagement, one which might appeal best to those (in parliament and without) who understood themselves as precisely the kind of free citizens Cartwright had praised so warmly.

Textual and Political Conditions

To understand the importance of newspaper publication and the wide readership it brought, arguably more important than the audience in the Commons, requires attention to the multiform conditions in which Sheridan's words were taken down and then printed. This must include an understanding both of where Sheridan spoke and was first heard – in the scarcely ideal acoustics of a crowded House of Commons, where journalists scribbled down his words – and of the subsequent appearance of those words in print. Historians of the period have tended to rely on seemingly authoritative texts such as the *Parliamentary Register*, but its volumes rely, unacknowledged, on a single instance of print journalism. In the case of Sheridan's speech on 20 April, the *Parliamentary Register* took its text with only minor amendments from the *Morning Chronicle*.[15] Despite the encouraging claim on its title page that it contained material "*Corrected by Himself*," the posthumous *Speeches of the Late Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (1816) in turn derives straightforwardly from the *Parliamentary Register*.[16] There is thus a traceable line of transmission from "live" in the chamber via a single newspaper to what seems an authoritative record. This will not suffice.

To provide an alternative account, as this article seeks to do, it is necessary to reconstruct what might be termed, following Jerome McGann, the "textual condition" of each parliamentary speech.[17] This should comprehend the co-productive interaction between verbal utterance, made in a specific auditory setting, the interests and abilities of scribes, and print practices and technologies. As Christopher Reid observes of the dialogic cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, accounts of it survive because of the efforts of journalists, who had their own motives for taking down speeches and their own unique capacity to do so.[18] Dror Wahrman has explained that press coverage of the House of Commons – his example is Pitt's proposal to raise the rate of assessed taxation in late 1797 – reveals that different papers reported different things; speakers are reported using very different words. Wahrman's argument underlines the challenges of reading debates in parliament. Most of all, he contends it is possible to read the taxation debate as producing a new language of class, though it is primarily in the opposition-favouring newspapers where this emphasis is most apparent.[19]

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[14] Ian Harris, "What Was Parliamentary Reporting? A Study of the Aims and Results in the London Daily Newspapers, 1780-96," *Parliamentary History* 39, no. 2 (2020): 255-75.

[15] *Parliamentary Register*, 6:5-16.

[16] Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *Speeches of the Late Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan: Several Corrected by Himself and Edited by a Constitutional Friend*, 5 vols. (London: Patrick Martin, 1816), 4:464-80.

[17] See Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); also D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

The 1790s were a decade of robust political and cultural argument, reflected and exacerbated in several forms of print media.[20] The press was divided and antagonistic on almost all issues, with liberal papers such as the *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post* on one side and the Loyalist *True Briton* on the other. Journalists working for these papers (more so their editors) would not have understood Sheridan in the same light and would have appreciated what he had to say with different emphases. The potential for politically motivated divergence, in addition to all other potential grounds for difference, is critical when considering Sheridan's speech of 20 April 1798. Although newspapers were united in the view that the speech was important, they diverged in what they reported Sheridan as having said. Sheridan's speech appeared in seven distinguishable print versions: *Morning Chronicle*, *Morning Herald*, *Morning Post*, *Oracle*, *London Packet*, *Times* and *True Briton*.[21] These newspaper versions gave rise to all subsequent publications, including the pamphlet *Speech of Mr. Sheridan, in the House of Commons, on Friday the 21st of April, 1798, on the Motion to Address His Majesty on the Present Alarming*

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[18] Christopher Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons 1760-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[19] Dror Wahrman, "Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s," *Past and Present* 136 (1992): 83-113.

[20] See Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Simon Andrews, *The British Periodical Press and the French Revolution 1789-1799* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); and Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[21] *Morning Chronicle* (21 April 1798); *Morning Herald* (21 April 1798); *Morning Post* (21 April 1798); *Oracle* (21 April 1798); *London Packet* (20-23 April 1798); *Times* (21 April 1798); and *True Briton* (21 April 1798).

State of Affairs, which descends from the *Morning Post*, though it omits (perhaps suppresses) an ambiguous passage on the situation in Ireland, then very tense.[22] Further records appeared in the *Evening Mail*, *Express and Evening Chronicle*, *General Evening Post*, *London Chronicle*, *Observer*, *Star* and *Whitehall Evening Post*. These were followed by the weeklies such as *Bell's Weekly Messenger* and the *Mirror of the Times*. Reports later appeared across the British Isles, including the *Belfast Newsletter*, *Chester Chronicle*, *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, *Finn's Leinster Journal*, *Hereford Journal*, *Northampton Mercury*, and the *Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette*.[23] Each of these derivative texts stemmed from one or other of the seven versions already listed, but with the chosen text variously trimmed, finessed, altered and amended.[24] Crucially, parliamentary speeches are not texts versions of which could be arranged diachronically. They are synchronous and politically rivalrous productions which must be read and understood as such.

Reading and Recruiting

Most papers were impressed with Sheridan's performance, understanding it as a hugely significant intervention. The *Morning Post* enthused that "there never was a speech delivered with more animation, heard with more attention, more in unison with the feelings of every man who heard it, or received with more enthusiastic approbation."[25] Their positive response should not, however, make the *Morning Post* a uniquely authoritative source, even if there is, as David Fairer has pointed out, a clear correlation between the arguments made by Sheridan on 20 April and the "editorial leader" printed in that paper on 14 April.[26] The *Post*'s version is the liberal reformist account of Sheridan's speech – crucial for that reason, but equally partial and selective for that reason too. To elaborate this point, it is worth examining what Sheridan is reported to have claimed in other newspapers on the morning of 21 April 1798. Sheridan's calibrated position, as reported in the *Morning Post*, urging effort but restricting new powers, is not quite what appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*:

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[22] Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *Speech of Mr. Sheridan, in the House of Commons, on Friday the 21st of April, 1798, on the Motion to Address His Majesty, on the Present Alarming State of Affairs* (London, 1798).

[23] *Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette* (23 April 1798); *Hereford Journal* (25 April 1798); *Belfast Newsletter* (27 April 1798); *Chester Chronicle* (27 April 1798); *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* (28 April 1798); *Finn's Leinster Journal* (28 April 1798); and *Northampton Mercury* (28 April 1798).

[24] *Bell's Weekly Messenger* (22 April 1798); *Evening Mail* (20-23 April 1798); *Express and Evening Chronicle* (19-21 April 1798); *General Evening Post* (19-21 April 1798); *London Chronicle* (19-21 April 1798); *Mirror of the Times* (14-21 April 1798); *Observer* (22 April 1798); *Star* (21 April 1798); and *Whitehall Evening Post* (19-21 April 1798).

[25] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

[26] *Morning Post* (14 April 1798); David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 291-92.

> We all know, that in cases of great and alarming emergency, his Majesty is armed with the power of calling forth all the strength and energy of his subjects; and if in any ordinary riot and confusion, a constable may call for assistance from every one around him, can it properly be supposed, that on an occasion of extreme and general peril, his Majesty would be contented to be a mere looker on? – And when his Majesty feels it necessary thus to arouse and exert all the strength and resources of his Kingdoms, however we may co-operate – whatever service we may afford on such an occasion, we only fulfil that duty which, by the oath of allegiance, we are bound to perform. But however penetrated the Country may be with the sense of the danger that awaits us, however ardent the spirit that now begins to arise, yet I cannot but breathe a wish, that something were superadded by this House to kindle the zeal and animate the courage of the people.[27]

Terms and phrases are shared between the papers, including the reference to a "mere looker on" and the much-needed "energy." The comparison between the King and a constable appears, but more is expected of subjects. The House of Commons is given a distinct role. The claims made for the due bounds of ordinary allegiance are stretched wider. Agency is differently disposed. The King ought to act as a constable should. Mere looking on has become a failing. The *Morning Herald* went still further: when "the kingdom," their Sheridan says, "was menaced by a foreign foe, it was not to be supposed that the King should tamely look on, and wait new powers. No! he was bound to call forth the united force of his people, and the people were bound by their allegiance to give him every support."[28]

The *Morning Post*, *Morning Herald*, and *Morning Chronicle* diverge most when it comes to how Sheridan weights the roles of Parliament, the people and the King. The pro-Ministerial *True Briton* does not depart from this sense of Sheridan's speech, but has him say: "In a time of domestic outrage […] the Civil Officer could demand the assistance of the People at large, and should it be supposed, that the King was to be a mere looker-on, while a Foreign Foe was carrying havoc and destruction through his dominions? Whatever measure, therefore, was brought forwards, which had for its object to render our situation more secure […] would meet his warmest support."[29] The *Oracle*, with which Sheridan maintained a relationship, provides a unique alternative:

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[27] *Morning Chronicle* (21 April 1798).

[28] *Morning Herald* (21 April 1798).

> The operations of that Bill […] had nothing in it to excite any opposition on the part of the most zealous friend of liberty; for it conferred not the least additional power on the Crown, which was already armed with necessary and unlimited authority over the fortunes and persons of the people, whenever the Sovereign was endangered and threatened by either foreign or domestic enemies. This power or authority was not certainly, it was true, conferred or strictly defined by the laws, nor was it necessary that they should, as the Constitution, from time immemorial had left their interest in the Crown, under circumstances of crisis and of danger. But without any distinct description of their power, no Englishman could stand a tame and silent looker-on when the Nation was threatened with destruction; and Parliament did no more than their duty in employing every endeavour to excite a superior spirit and zeal in the people, which would animate them to such exertions, and would render them worthy of their ancient renown.[30]

The responsibilities which other papers assign to the King, in accordance with the contractualist view of the nation, are devolved here to every "Englishman," not to further their citizenship as such, but to insist upon their duties as subjects. On this account, even more than in the *Morning Post*, the language of patriotism, widespread at the beginning of the war with France, has been separated from the claims of Loyalism and carefully radicalized.[31]

Sheridan evidently said something rhetorically powerful as well as important on 20 April 1798. He retained the ideal of liberty which he associated with France and with the reasonable aspirations of liberal reformers, while urging war against France. This move was accomplished by separating the liberal principles of the French Revolution from the actions of the now-militarized Republic, which had recently attacked Switzerland and now threatened Britain. This conscious re-alignment required not just deft balancing, but invective. Sheridan is bloodcurdling in his depiction of the horror of any French invasion, again most vividly in the *Morning Post*:

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[29] *True Briton* (21 April 1798).

[30] *Oracle* (21 April 1798).

[31] McCormack, *Independent Man*, 148-54.

> But let Gentlemen look to the constitution and practice of the Republic of France. Do they not see that their tree of liberty is planted in the garden of monarchy, and that it bears the same luxuriant fruit? Are they not eager for all the luxuries and refinements to make their capital the school and mart of elegance for the world? What do they want? Glory? They are gorged with it. Territory? They have more, perhaps, then they will be able to retain. *What is it they want? Ships, commerce, manufactures, cash, capital, and credit*; or, in other words, they *only* want the sinews, bones, marrow, and heart's-blood of Great Britain – (*Loud and universal cries of hear! hear! accompanied with clapping of hands*).[32]

The "universal cries" confirm Sheridan's rousing success but equally the Ministry's dominance of the Commons. It was not hard to get backbench Loyalists to applaud such dire warnings. Yet it is possible to mark a distinction between conventional Loyalism and what Sheridan says. Sheridan does not focus on the threat to domestic peace. An appeal to national vulnerability has been modified to appeal to more than one audience. As John Barrell suggests, Loyalist imagery in the 1790s invested heavily in a reassuring image of the English cottage, even if that image was inherently unstable: threats to national security became the locus of Loyalist outage.[33] Sheridan avoids the familiar script of burned cots, murdered yeoman, and grieving babes. British commerce is the avowed target of his French marauders. This emphasis means that Sheridan argues for the defence of mercantile, not rural Britain. He was consequently required to negotiate with those anti-commercial ideologies that lingered in almost any political discourses in the period.[34]

If luxury had to be denounced, then it mattered greatly whose luxury was targeted. On this point newspapers differ considerably, indicating the presence of the diverse and divisive languages of class, which as Wahrman notes, created, rather than merely reported, the debates in the Commons.[35] Sheridan's reproduction in newspapers, with their particular readerships and political allegiances, accounts for some variation. Here it is important to accept that sympathetic reporters might make changes, exchange phrasings or alter emphases as freely as hostile journalists. Equally, while some papers were ready to approve injunctions against manufacturers, others preferred to see the idle rich denounced. Moralizing discourses against luxury were inflected differently, with different objects of denigration, depending on the intended addressee. It was the readers of the opposition papers, "anti-war liberals" as one historian calls them, that Sheridan most wished to rouse in defence of the nation (but without supporting Pitt).[36] It was to them he exclaimed, at least in the *Morning Post*: "it is childish in any person to say that they will wait till the French have effected a landing. In God's name, if the enemy are to be resisted, let us do it effectually."[37]

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[32] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

[33] John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 220-22, 242-44. See also Harriet Guest, "The Consequences of War in the Winter of 1794-95," in *William Hodges, 1744-1797: The Art of Exploration*, ed. Geoff Quilley and John Bonehill (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 61-70.

[34] See Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and E.J. Clery, *The Feminisation Debate in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Literature, Luxury and Commerce* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[35] Wahrman, "Virtual Representation," 91-97.

To make his act of patriotic interpellation effective, Sheridan makes non-participation in the nation's defence a form of personal deficiency. He wished to see active recruitment:

> There are many matters of detail connected with this measure, to which, undoubtedly, Ministers will turn their minds. Without making large masses of idle men, there are great bodies who might produce a considerable force. To these the attention of Government should be immediately directed. It is idle to see persons asking what will become of us, with two hulking fellows behind their coaches.[38]

The "hulking fellows" merit comment, as do the "large masses of idle men" who "might produce a considerable force." The *Morning Post* hardly mentions this suggestion (perhaps disdaining it), but the *True Briton* expanded it: "there were many matters of detail in the prosecution of this measure," their Sheridan reflects:

> When there were bodies of men in this town they should not be unemployed in the use of arms; all great manufactories, Breweries, &c. should have the men trained and armed – There was another set of potential recruits to which there could be no objection: It was ridiculous on a Sunday to see two Hulking fellows behind a carriage – he thought there could be no objection to their being trained – They might assemble in their several streets and squares, and deposit their arms at night in the houses of their respective

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[36] Cookson, *Friends of Peace*, 15-22, 27-29.

[37] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

[38] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

> Masters. – He trusted if there should be a necessity, that not even a single company of Guards would be left, but that HIS MAJESTY would entrust himself with the Voluntary Corps.[39]

While the possibility that brewers were harbouring potential soldiers was reported elsewhere, the greater detail provided by the *True Briton* is striking, as their Sheridan both points a finger and provides a solution.[40]

Did Sheridan make these recommendations? He might well have done. He may have intended by reflecting on brewers' men (employees of worthy manufacturers) to expand who was obliged to bear arms and who, consequently, could claim citizenship: as noted above, the connection between bearing arms and citizenship was a well-understood axiom which was being radicalized in the 1790s.[41] The deployment of such engrossed troops, the *Oracle*'s Sheridan claims, would ensure that "such an animated spirit of unanimity be roused as should present to the enemy the formidable and irresistible front of an armed nation."[42] The *True Briton* declined any connection between a British *levée en masse* and better national security, preferring to understand Sheridan as offering only an injunction to manly exertion without concomitant development of rights. Their "Voluntary Corps" are devoted to defending "HIS MAJESTY." Whatever the purpose or planned recruitments of these troops, their presence in some papers and not others, means that despite claims by the *Morning Post* that it had "endeavoured to give a faithful report," the newspapers not only could not but did not want to achieve such fidelity. They had a stake in the debate, and consequently adjusted what they reported Sheridan saying accordingly.[43]

Such considerations highlight the challenge faced by editors when preparing texts of speeches for the Oxford edition of *The Political Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*. Our task is not simply to determine the best account from amongst the newspapers (Sheridan left few manuscripts of his speeches), but to ask to whom, or to what, each paper might be considered "faithful," and to present them accordingly. The speech Sheridan gave on 20 April 1798 might have contained many of the most divergent passages discussed in this essay (and there are many more). They are not exclusive or alternative to one another. They might even be arranged sequentially, if an "eclectic" text were sought. But there is equally material that cannot be reconciled: different versions with competing statements, indicative of a divergent and often adversarial mediascape. Harris suggests that reporters determined what to record, and what to print, based on the pertinence of what was said relative to their "sense of the debate," as if this was obvious or neutral.[44] Something more ideological or at least party-political is determinant in the reporting of this speech; one reporter's sense of a debate is not always shared. If this was always true, then it was especially so in times of national emergency when party lines were acute.

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[39] *True Briton* (21 April 1798).

[40] *London Chronicle* (19-21 April 1798); *Observer* (22 April 1798); and *Oracle* (21 April 1798).

[41] J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Volume One – The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 104.

[42] *Oracle* (21 April 1798).

[43] *Morning Post* (21 April 1798).

When they omitted specific recommendations, liberal newspapers did not reveal their mistaken understanding of Sheridan's argument. Liberal newspaper editors wanted to emphasize those moments when Sheridan, in order to make a wider critique, castigated, as many opposition politicians had before, the reckless effeminacy of the upper classes. This is evident from the text in the *Oracle*, where Sheridan complains that it is "ridiculous to see people of fashion in their coaches complaining of the dangers of invasion, and having at the same time two pampered *hulky fellows* stationed at their back."[45] The weeklies enjoyed this passage too: *Bell's Weekly Messenger* gave its readers "a couple of skulking fellows behind a gentle lady's coach."[46] The lady is uniquely the paper's creation. It is unclear whether "hulking" has become "skulking" due to mishearing or because "skulking" was considered more deviant. The latter is plausible, as Sheridan rests his complaint on the familiar denunciation of upper-class effeminacy dear to opposition groups.[47] The *Morning Chronicle* has Sheridan complain that there "is another class I would also beg leave to allude to; and those are young gentlemen of high rank, who are daily mounted on horses of high blood. They surely at this perilous moment might be better employed than in foraging in fruit shops, in blockading Bond Street and Piccadilly, or taking the field in Rotten Row."[48] Sheridan conceded that his "line of argument would not exactly suit my own line of conduct, nor am I an enemy to their amusements – on the contrary – but their mornings might now be more usefully employed […] for sure I am they possess a spirit that will not permit them to sculk and hide from the storm."[49]

It should now be clear that press reporting of Sheridan's speech differs on several points and matters of emphasis. In the specific material circumstances in which newspaper reports were produced, it is not hard to see how this came about, given the challenges of the Stranger's Gallery, and later of editors' offices as copy was decided upon. Differences which result from difference in scribal notation, printing and re-printing of the speech abound and are multiform. Traditional textual scholarship might denominate many of these distinctions as variants, incident on the descent of a text. Judged from a more sociological or politically attentive position of the kind sketched out here, the newspapers produce what are better termed versions than variants. On the more complex matters connected with the operation of an anxious British polity in time of war, the newspapers provide politically cogent rival accounts. The several accounts printed on the morning of 21 April 1798 do not descend from each other, or even from Sheridan himself (though his relations with individual newspapers will bear further examination). The reports appeared in parallel, as the distinct perspectives characteristic of the papers which produced them.

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[44] Harris, "What Was Parliamentary Reporting?" 264, 272.

[45] *Oracle* (21 April 1798).

[46] *Bell's Weekly Messenger* (22 April 1798).

[47] Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[48] *Morning Chronicle* (21 April 1798).

[49] *Morning Chronicle* (21 April 1798).

Amidst this separation, we still get a clear enough sense of what Sheridan said, while also gaining access to the more contested sense of what he was heard to say, and what, moreover, it was useful for different papers to report that he had said. In the *Morning Post* Sheridan appears more clamorous perhaps but also more nuanced. The *Post*'s report was meant to be taken as a fair representation of what Sheridan claimed while also giving an indication of Sheridan's performance. The most publicly available version of the speech, widely consumed, might stand, in the absence of anything obviously superior, for that performance (with which it might broadly coincide). This is the judgment taken for the forthcoming edition. To accept the *Morning Post* version is to promote Sheridan's political surefootedness and persistent radicalism. This is not a question of copy-text, but of ethos. The choice between versions is not a decision about preferred text, but one of political character. It is a judgement on Sheridan.

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