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978-1-108-06492-7 - *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble: Including a History of the Stage, from the Time of Garrick to the Present Period: Volume 1*

James Boaden

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Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble

Born into the theatre, though originally intended for Catholic holy orders, John Philip Kemble (1757–1823) made as great a name for himself on the English stage as his gifted older sister, Sarah Siddons. Known for his mastery of tragic Shakespearian roles, among which Coriolanus was deemed his finest, Kemble also distinguished himself as acting manager at Drury Lane under Sheridan. Described by Sir Walter Scott as 'grave, critical, full and laudably accurate', this extensive two-volume biography was the work of James Boaden (1762–1839), an author well acquainted with the foremost theatrical personalities of his day. Boaden's biographies of Sarah Siddons, Elizabeth Inchbald and Dorothy Jordan have also been reissued in this series, along with his edition of David Garrick's correspondence. Volume 1 of the present work covers Kemble's career through to his first season in charge at Drury Lane in 1788–9.

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VOLUME 1

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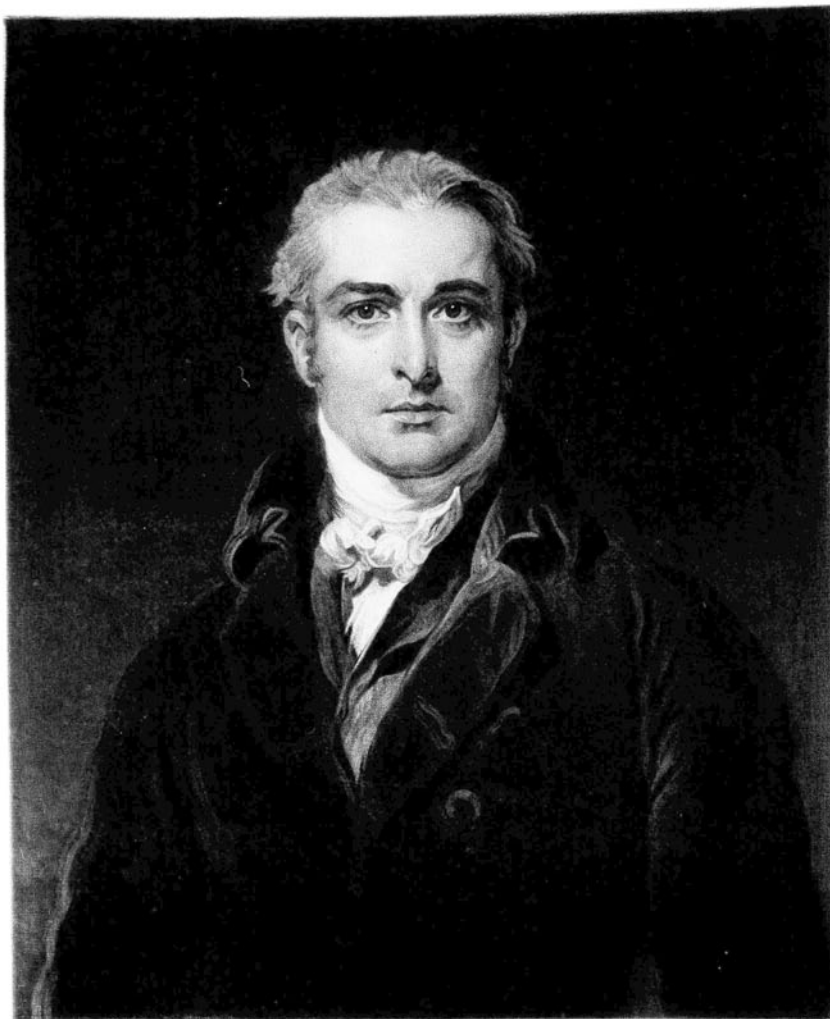
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*Painted by Sir Thos^o Lawrence, Principal Painter
in Ordinary, to His Majesty, P.R.A. &c &c &c.*

*Engraved by C. Turner, Mezzotint Engraver
in Ordinary to His Majesty.*

JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE,

*From the original Picture in the possession of
Rowland Stephenson Esq^r*

London, Pub^d Jan^y 1. 1825. by Mg^s Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, Paternoster Row.

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OF
THE LIFE
OF
JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE, Esq.

INCLUDING
A HISTORY OF THE STAGE,
FROM THE TIME OF GARRICK TO THE PRESENT
PERIOD.

By JAMES BOADEN, Esq.

“ Nihil metus in vultu : gratia oris supererat.
“ BONUM VIRUM faciliè crederes, MAGNUM libenter.”
TACIT. *in v. Agric.*
“ THIS was the *noblest* ROMAN of them all ! ” SHAKSP.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR
LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, BROWN, AND GREEN,
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1825.

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TO

THE KING'S

MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY.

SIRE,

YOUR MAJESTY'S favour to the subject of these memoirs has extended beyond his existence; even to the gracious acceptance of a very humble effort to do justice to his memory.

YOUR MAJESTY distinguished in Mr. Kemble, the scientific artist, the illustrator of our greatest poet, the improver of scenic representation, the scholar of elegant manners, the man of unblemished integrity and honour.

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DEDICATION.

Such were the qualities which, to all *sound* dramatic taste, pointed out Mr. Kemble as the consummate director of our most liberal amusement. But it is not for me to pursue this theme, on which the HIGHEST JUDGMENT has long since pronounced.

In the admired exercise of his abilities as a manager and an actor, Mr. Kemble became involved in a calamity, which threatened him with irretrievable ruin;—I mean the destruction by FIRE of Covent Garden Theatre. He had reached at this time a period of his life, which could not flatter him with hopes of any *very* lengthened continuance of his exertions.

But at this moment of severe affliction, the Royal Mind condescended to administer that PRINCELY CONSOLATION, which was dear indeed to a spirit such as his; and the accompanying mark of the ROYAL MUNIFICENCE became doubly precious to him, from the GRACIOUS LANGUAGE, by which its acceptance was rendered, not merely a duty, but a PRIDE.

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To the end of his highly-honoured life, the INTEREST which he had excited suffered no diminution ; and YOUR MAJESTY has deigned to express your royal satisfaction, “ that a permanent record of that life was in contemplation.”

For *myself*, so greatly favoured on this occasion, should YOUR MAJESTY indulgently consider what follows, as a *faithful* portrait of Mr. KEMBLE, and a *not* uninteresting view of the BRITISH STAGE, I shall indeed rejoice in a design, to which I owe this public expression of the veneration inspired by YOUR MAJESTY’S goodness, and of that sense of duty and attachment with which I must ever be,

SIRE,

Your Majesty’s

Most devoted subject, and

Most grateful servant,

JAMES BOADEN.

Jan. 1. 1825.

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I WAS occupied by an endeavour to ascertain the genuine portraits of our immortal Shakspeare, when I heard with infinite concern of the death of Mr. Kemble. I noticed that event in the following terms: and I quote them here, that the reader may be aware of the engagement I then contracted, and decide how far, by the present work, my pledge to the public is redeemed.

“While these sheets are passing through the press, I am shocked and grieved with the intelligence, that my excellent friend had departed this life, at an age that allowed a reasonable hope of many years of honourable retirement. At no very distant period, I hope to deliver to the public a work, the object of which is to record his progress in the art which he professed; and also to display his personal character, as it unfolded itself during an intimacy of near thirty years. Fortunately, the

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materials before me are at once abundant and authentic. It is my design to pay equal attention to the splendid talents of his sister, Mrs. Siddons : I cannot at all hope to do justice to the one, without embracing the other in my theatrical picture ; and even then the work would be imperfect, did it not notice the concurring, though not equal, merits of those who acted with these great performers during their ample professional course.”*

I have blended the *LIFE OF MR. KEMBLE* with the *History of the Stage*, because they throw light upon each other ; and I know not how they could well be separated. — What he *advised* was always referable to some system of management : — what he *acted* was always to be compared with the performances of others ; either aided by their skill, or injured by their want of it. I have therefore exhibited him as the central figure of my group ; as the “ observed of all observers ;” as the great artist of his time, as accomplished in theory as practice : — as one, in a word, whose countenance, figure, and gestures enabled him to convey what a mind of great *reflexion*, and studies of infinite *accuracy*, pointed out as the true objects of the tragedian.

In the almost childish season of life, I imbibed that fondness for the stage, which, shall I say, *compelled* me to attend to it with constancy and

* Note at pp. 17, 18. of Inquiry into the Authenticity, &c.

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passion ; — it constituted my *sole* amusement and principal *expense* — I studied, as though I had been to make it a profession. As I grew in years, I became known to a few of its most eminent professors. I had always good taste enough to look beyond professional skill in the choice of a *friend*; my prudence or my good fortune never associated me with one actor, whom I could not sincerely esteem as a man. I owe, therefore, to the profession, in public and in private, many of the most rational as well as most pleasing hours of my existence. When, at length, I ventured upon the stage as an *author*, I found the greatest kindness and support from the performers of three different theatres ; and I hope that their merits have been properly estimated in the present work. That I shall satisfy ALL who may have survived to read me, I cannot promise to myself ; but I am quite sure of my *intention* to be just ; and they may easily appease any ungratified portion of self-love, by imagining their critic “ walking, or talking, or per-haps upon a journey,” or (an *old* critical enormity,) that “ peradventure he *slept*, and could not “ be awaked.”

That Mr. Kemble chose to distinguish me by particular confidence and long friendship, I have always felt to be an *honour* to my name. I hope not entirely to discredit his choice. This detail about myself would be inexcusable, but that it shows the *position* of him who has taken upon

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him to observe ; and that I have not ventured to record, what I had not every opportunity to know, to see, and to examine.

It was to fill up the chasm of a few years in stage history, that I extended my design up to the time when we lost Mr. Garrick ; and I thus offer to the public a dramatic record from the death of his great predecessor to that of Mr. Kemble in the year 1823.

There are fortunately many very masterly efforts of the pencil, by which the person and expression of Mr. Garrick may be distinctly known. In private life there is the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, resting upon the hands clasped together ; composing, what in truth he could do with surpassing airiness and point — a *prologue*. It should be *re-engraved*, for the worn-out mezzotinto, common enough among the dealers, is detestable. But the ‘infinite variety’ of this great actor may be seen, at its highest and lowest points of expression, in the tremendous whole length of his *Richard the Third*, by Dance, and the equally perfect portrait of his *Abel Drugger* by Zoffanij. Mr. Reynolds has now completed his engravings of these invaluable works, and I congratulate the public upon their perfection.

Dr. Johnson, in his *Life of Smith*, among the English poets, with the tenderness that such a recent loss excited, did all perhaps for his fame that was just *then* required, and should not have waited

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the entreaty of Mrs. Garrick to do more. — The Life of Garrick, by Johnson, would have been a treasure.

“ Love is not love,
When it is mingled with *respects*, that stand
Aloof from the entire point.”

That stroke of death, “ which eclipsed the gaiety of nations,” occurred on the 20th of January 1779.

But “ the public stock of harmless pleasure” was first impoverished by his retirement from the stage: he had some consolation in the opening career of Sheridan, who, like another Congreve, seemed destined to raise our comic style to its former character. Garrick attended the rehearsals of the *School for Scandal*, and openly announced the brilliant diction of the play; with something of reasonable regret, that like his great model, the writer should have less nature than wit.

This first mention of Mr. Sheridan is a temptation to step a little back, for the object of noticing the succession of his dramatic efforts. His success was so *prodigious*, that one must have personally known Mr. Sheridan, to be able to conceive how he could so suddenly abandon a course of equal profit and fame, for another to which his nature seemed unsuited, and whose very elements were to be acquired during the exercise of his talents in the science. But as a politician, I have only to record, that his early efforts were discouraged by

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William Woodfall ; a man who stood equally divided, like himself, between the senate and the play-house ; equally competent to *report*, at least, his triumphs upon either scene. He told him, that he would never be an orator — “ It was the greatest mistake,” said my old friend, “ that I ever made.”

The *Rivals* was the first comedy by R. B. Sheridan, and acted at Covent Garden Theatre on the 17th January 1775. The play was rather roughly treated by the audience, and the author gratefully ascribed its ultimate triumph to the judgment and the friendship of Mr. Harris. If he was sincere in his declaration, no subsequent change of scene should have led him to rescind the printed acknowledgment. On the 21st of November, in the same year, he produced his *Duenna*. He seems then to have abated something of his speed of composition ; for not being yet ready with his *School for Scandal*, he brought out at Drury Lane an alteration of Vanbrugh's *Relapse* on the 24th February 1777, and followed it on the 8th of May by that brilliant effusion, which placed the *School for Scandal* before the *Plain Dealer*, which suggested it, and surpassed in *stage effect*, while it at least equalled in *wit*, the *Double Dealer* of Congreve.

The plan of the *School for Scandal* was said to have been derived from a MS. piece by a young lady, which was found in the presented stores of Drury Lane house. To grace the improbable by

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the *pathetic*, this prodigy of scenic invention died of a consumption at Bristol, and was the daughter of a merchant in Thames Street. Genius is superior to locality. *Don Quixote* was written in a prison, and the *Araucana* of Ercilla amid the often hasty marches, and insecure encampments of an army. But here there was known and acknowledged power in minds of the highest character — difficulty might even be friendly to production, as the flame bursts fiercer forth the more it is compressed. My youth was passed in the midst of the mercantile world, but we certainly never heard of this wonder of the river Thames — for I look upon the invention of the *screen-scene** in the *School for Scandal* as without a parallel in the drama.

* A friend of mine told me that, on this memorable evening, he was passing hastily through the passage of the Rose Tavern, in front of Garrick's Theatre, when, on a sudden, he heard a *roar* or *shout* beyond what he thought any scenic triumph could excite — more like to the exulting enjoyment in Milton of the whole Philistian multitude, when Samson was performing for their amusement feats exceeding human. It was excited by the *falling* of this screen in the 4th Act. What I myself heard, afterwards, was still beyond any sound I had witnessed previously in the theatre — though the *Duenna* excited very hearty merriment. It has only one little spot of incongruity in its management — *Joseph* should say nothing about his “opposite neighbour and her *anxious* temper,” when he is afterwards to place the very person, for whose concealment he draws the screen, between *that* and the *window*. The line too has no inference from it, and may therefore properly be omitted — and the direction to the servant stand thus; “Stay, stay; draw that screen before the window — that will do.”

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A slight hint for such a situation might, however, be conceived, from Fielding's novel of *Tom Jones*; in which the fall of a rug in the private apartment of Molly Seagrim, discovers the moral philosopher, Square, in a position very ill suited to the "eternal fitness of things." The probability of such a recollection is strengthened by the certainty that the Charles and Joseph Surface of the play, are but portraits modernised of the profligate but generous Jones, and the decorous hypocrite Blifil.

There is *absolute* proof that he found *some* aid in the genius of his own family. In the *Rivals* Falkland rushes into Julia's dressing-room, tells her that he has killed his adversary, that his life is forfeited, that he wishes first to call her *his*, and then that, without preparation, she would fly the country with him.—*Rivals*, Act V. Sc. 1.

In the *Memoirs of Sidney Biddulph*, written by his excellent mother, — the hero, a *Falkland* too observe, — enters to the heroine in the same perturbed state, — tells the same distracted story, and urges the same sacrifice from the lady. In the romance the story is true, in the play it is merely feigned to try the constancy of Julia. Compare the third volume of the novel from p. 240. of the second edition, printed 1761.

In the same volume, at page 102. the reader will see Warner trying the dispositions of his two cousins, as a *poor relation*; prepared by immense wealth to reward the liberal indigence of the one,

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and confound the arrogance and inhumanity of the other. Here is *certainly* the Sir Oliver Surface of the *School for Scandal*, who, in the disguise of old Stanley, sounds the hearts of his two nephews, with the same ability to reward and punish.

If, after all, it cannot be credited, that the great writer of *dialogue* should also possess the knowledge of *structure*, but that he must only embellish the edifices reared by other hands, — (and for such an hypothesis a better reason may be found in his indolence, than can be inferred from his powers,) I should then consider it more likely, that so much *stage effect* was the actual property of the author of the *Discovery*, with all the experience of old Sheridan to aid her; — THAT she might once have really dramatised incidents from her own romance; and thus have left among the family papers two, perhaps weak, comedies, for her son to embellish by his *wit*, as he afterwards graced the *Stranger* and *Pizarro* by his energy and pathos. Something more may be found in aid of this supposition — the *ingenuity* of her *Nourjahad* will not easily be paralleled.

The other productions of the stage between the death of Mr. Garrick and the arrival of Mr. Kemble in the metropolis, are but few in number, — I mean those of any lasting merit. Mrs. Cowley took firm possession of the town by her luxuriant farce called *Who's the Dupe?* acted the first time on the 10th of April 1779; and as her fancy had great fertility,

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the following February saw her *Belle's Stratagem* ranking with the happiest efforts of her sex.

Poor Reddish, on the 5th of May, had a benefit, and it was resolved to try whether he could not go through the character of Posthumus. He was now infirm, and upon the fund; in common occurrences imbecile, but to be excited by his former profession, or by nothing. That amiable *spectre* of Poet's Corner, the late John Ireland, gave an affecting detail of this attempt. He met his friend on this important evening an hour before the performance began. Reddish entered the room with the step of an idiot, his eye wandering, and his whole countenance vacant. Mr. Ireland congratulated him, that he was sufficiently recovered to perform his favourite Posthumus. "Yes," said he, "and in the *garden scene* I shall astonish you." "The garden scene, Mr. Reddish! I thought you were to play Posthumus?" "No, Sir, I play Romeo." His friend assured him, that Posthumus was the part he was to act — and he walked to the theatre, reciting *Romeo* all the way.

When dressed for Posthumus, and in the green-room, it was still hard to undeceive him — at length he was pushed upon the stage, to take the chance of former habits recovering him to the proper business of the night. Mr. Ireland, in anxious expectation, got close to the orchestra, and had a perfect view of his face. The instant he came in sight of the audience, his recollection

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seemed to return; his countenance resumed meaning, his eye became lighted up, he made the modest bow of respect, and played the scene as well as he had ever done. But *Romeo* again met him in the Green-room, and it was only the stage cue that had the power to unsettle this delusion; and *that* never failed to do it through the whole play. Mr. Ireland thought him, on this occasion, less assuming and more natural than he had seemed in the full enjoyment of his reason.

Dr. Kenrick, the foul asperser of Mr. Garrick, did not long survive him; he died on the 10th of June 1779. Dr. Johnson had the honour to be persecuted by him on many occasions — he assailed his dictionary, and his Shakspeare. But his petulance was greater than his power; and his contemporaries smiled when they read in the attack, that “Dr. Johnson’s *name* was much better known than the *merit* of his writings.” Kenrick was not without talent, and accordingly gave, what is now seldom done by translators, a readable version of two foreign works — the *Eloisa* and *Emilius* of Rousseau. As a dramatic writer, he has in *Falstaff’s Wedding* shewn a respectable power of imitation; a rather intimate perception of Shakspeare’s art of displaying character by a crowd of congenial images — if I dare use the term, a redundancy of wit.

The principle of association leads me here to notice another death connected with the works of

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Shakspeare — that of Mr. Edward Capell, one of his best editors. He was a man of laborious diligence, and perverse pedantry: — what he meant to say was commonly right; but his expression was often obscure, and always affected: — he published the poet's works unaccompanied by his notes; accurately pointed and tastefully printed.

Dr. Farmer and Capell at one time seemed to be closely united in the study of Shakspeare; but Steevens had given “medicines” to the master of Emanuel, and he soon after whistled off our *haggard* note-writer, “and let him down the wind to “prey at fortune.” But in the edition of Steevens, I think I sometimes discern a note of *Capell*, through the medium of translation. He died in possession of that amusing office, *deputy licenser* of plays, on the 24th of February 1781.

The 10th of May of that year witnessed the 1st performance of Macklin's *Man of the World*. It was indeed an agony for a man of ninety to stand before the audience as the author and actor of Sir Pertinax Mac Sycophant. The opposition was commensurate with the bitterness of the *satire*; but the veteran stood his ground, and the insidious artifices of success are now *taught*, while they are derided, from the stage.

As to the professors themselves, there is no great variety of incidents to attract us. In Sept. 1779, Mr. Henderson and Miss Younge left Drury Lane Theatre for that of Covent Garden; and on the

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26th of May, 1780, Mrs. Green, the original Duenna, quitted the stage in Mrs. Hardcastle.

But it is every way worthy of record, that, in the month of September 1782, Tom King became the manager of Drury Lane Theatre, and as a cause or a consequence of his management, that amazing tragedian, Mrs. Siddons, returned to the London stage on the 10th of October, after an absence of six years. And thus the few links are supplied which unite in stage history the death of Mr. Garrick with the appearance in town of Mr. Kemble the year following.

It will not be unamusing to the reader to have the actual condition of our theatres in former times brought authentically under his immediate inspection. He has heard of SPRANGER BARRY, of the grace and beauty of his figure, and the soul-subduing qualities of his voice. Judging of past things by the present, he will frame to himself no very mean notion of the theatre itself, which such an actor, in the capital of the sister island, enriched by his performances and those of Mrs. Barry. By the great kindness of an old friend of Mr. Kemble's, he will find, among the illustrations at the end of the present volume, an exact inventory of all the rare and *not* precious moveables, which were passed over to Mr. Ryder in the year 1776, with the theatre in Crow-street, the lease of which he will also now be enabled to peruse. The inventory will occasionally provoke a smile; — the

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lease will excite his astonishment, at the prodigious growth of the theatrical passion in Dublin. He will see Mr. Barry's theatre let at a rent of 450*l.* per annum, with two additional payments of 165*l.* to the subscribers and 188*l.* ground rent. — As an aid towards which, the government gave 120*l.* for four plays bespoke within the year.

He may then be told that upon Jones's refusal to come to terms as to the Crow-street house, it has been shut up these four seasons, and is now a mass of ruins; that Mr. Henry Harris, the patentee of Covent Garden Theatre, who is master of the revels in Ireland, obtained a renewal of the patent for 21 years to Jones, which had expired; that he purchased a building intended for the Dublin society in Hawkins-street, which cost 70,000*l.*, the altering and furnishing of which cost him 50,000*l.* more; and that such theatre is now let by him to Mr. Abbot, for seven years, at a yearly rent of FOUR THOUSAND POUNDS, and that the lessee has every reason to expect a very handsome *residue*, after fully satisfying his landlord! Surely, after such a fact, want of stage encouragement will not be deemed a feature of the Irish capital. The size of the theatre will be known, when I say that it holds 520*l.*, at 5*s.* for the boxes, and 3*s.* for the pit.

Nor is this disparity in the furnishings of the ancient and modern stages peculiar to Dublin. The memory of no very aged persons may present, if closely urged, some not very brilliant impressions

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of the miserable pairs of flats that used to clap together on even the stage trodden by Mr. Garrick ; architecture without selection or propriety ; a hall, a castle or a chamber ; or a cut wood of which all the verdure seemed to have been washed away. Unquestionably all the truth, all the uniformity, all the splendour and the retinue of the stage came in, but did not die, with Mr. Kemble. He provoked a demand, that will now constantly be made — he kindled a taste that may rest safely upon *his* measure for its indulgence, but which I hazard nothing in saying no power but some national calamity will ever extinguish.

To prove with what perfect truth this fame is attributed to Mr. Kemble, and to HIM alone, the reader will find in the present volume Mr. King, upon throwing up the management, to which Mr. Kemble succeeded, using these strong and very significant expressions : “ I had not even the liberty “ to command the *cleaning* of a coat, or adding, “ by way of decoration, a yard of *copper lace* ; both “ of which, it must be allowed, were *often much* “ *wanted.*”—p. 406.

It was only necessary for me to shew that Mr. Kemble introduced these improvements at Drury Lane ; because it necessarily followed that the rival theatre would be compelled into an adoption of similar propriety and splendor.

What remains for me to state in this introduction, is the pride I have in remembering the aid

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which I have received. I found that Mr. Kemble was *indeed* beloved by his friends, and that their zeal for his honour led them to anticipate my enquiries. The efforts of my own immediate FRIENDS may be best answered by private acknowledgment; they were made to serve and oblige ME : but there are OTHERS, whom it would defraud, to withdraw from them an expression of thanks, as public as the advantages derived through their kindness to the present work. Such, for instance, as the present Alderman WILSON, of York, and a Dublin correspondent whose name even is unknown to me — but whose record of Mr. Kemble, in the sister island, was of infinite use in the early period of the Life. As I owe this communication to the gentleman just named, he will be pleased to spare no scanty portion from my full measure of acknowledgment to *himself*, and honour me by conveying it to his friend. To EDWARD FITZ-SIMONS, Esq. of Sandymount, Dublin, my best thanks are due for the liberality, which imparted to me some most valuable documents relative to Barry's Theatre; and the goodness which left me to use his bounty at my own discretion.

Although I have long reckoned Mr. Charles Kemble in the number of my *private* friends, yet, as a public man, it is fit he should be known for that affectionate brother, which Mr. Kemble *merited* for his heir. He came to me, with infinite candour and solicitude; open to all my enquiries,

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and communicative even of private correspondence. My late friend's letters to him, upon some interesting events of his life, are, if I mistake not, entitled to general admiration.

For the portrait, which adorns the present work, my own opinion is — that it perfectly exhibits Mr. Kemble, at I presume the 45th year of his age; when his countenance had attained its finest power of expression, and before the muscular part of it *fell* at all, under the influence of time. Neither had he then discontinued the use of hair powder, which, from contrast alone, seemed to communicate additional brilliancy to his eye.

To myself the present work has given nothing but pleasure. I wrote it with the best likeness of my ever respected friend before me, and, therefore, as in his presence, describe him as he was. — On some few, a very few points, in the exercise of, I hope, a sound discretion, I have ventured to baffle the search of the malignant. It has sometimes happened to HIM, as to others, to utter, in convivial moments, incorrect opinions of persons and events: where I have subsequently found his *deliberate* and *settled* opinions in opposition to such *transient* notions, I have not told that he ever spoke *lightly* of any one; because I am sure, even the person touched by it could not feel more pain in the attack, than Mr. Kemble did upon mature consideration of its injustice.

Perhaps Cicero, when alluding to his great

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Roman predecessor, may best exhibit Mr. Kemble; and the following terms need no other change, or modification, than the insertion of the Briton for the Roman actor.

“ He was such an ARTIST, as to seem the only
“ one, fit to come upon the stage; yet such a MAN,
“ as to seem the only one unfit, to come upon it at
“ all. He had even more integrity than skill;
“ more veracity than experience; and the whole
“ people knew him to be a better man, than he was
“ an actor; and while he made the first figure on
“ the STAGE for his *art*, was worthy of the SENATE
“ for his *virtue*.”—PRO. Q. ROSCIO 6. 25.

J. B.

60, Warren-street, Fitzroy Square,

1st January, 1825.