


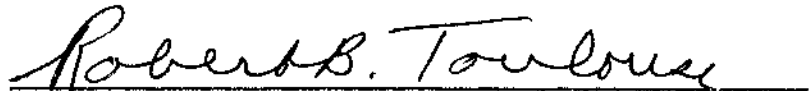
AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACTING CAREER
OF EDMUND KEAN

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The early decades of the nineteenth century in England experienced an innovation in literature. There developed an increasing urgency to express life in its natural state, to move from the imitation of a passion to passion itself. The classicism of the eighteenth century, with its highly formalized rules and restraints, gave way to a bold permissiveness that was romanticism.

As an actor, Edmund Kean expressed the sentiments of the romantics. His style of acting was violent and sporadic, but he was also honest in his emotion. Because his personal life was as tempestuous as his characterizations, Kean was for his contemporaries the physical embodiment of romanticism.

Edmund Kean was born in Gray's Inn, London, on November 4, 1787. He was the illegitimate son of a young man whose name he bore and of a young girl named Ann Carey. He was actually reared by Charlotte Tidswell, who tutored him in the dramatic arts. Edmund was an enthusiastic pupil of the theatre, but he was temperamentally a difficult child and habitually ran away from home. At the age of fifteen he joined a traveling company of actors.

After years in the provinces as a strolling player, he made his London debut at the Drury Lane Theatre on January 26,

1814, in the role of Shylock. His success was immediate. The audience welcomed his fresh and explosive interpretation of Shakespeare. Other triumphs followed; his Richard III, Hamlet, Othello, and Iago were electrical in their impact. His success was not limited to the tragic characters of Shakespeare, for he played Sir Giles Overreach in Philip Massinger's A New Way to Pay Old Debts with equal distinction.

There were, however, limitations in his repertoire. Romeo was the character to which his powers were the least suited. His audiences flocked to see his exhibition of passion, not his romantic sentiment. Another role in which Kean was surprisingly unsuccessful was Macbeth. It was a vigorous interpretation, but it was also impulsive to the point of losing the smoother, more poetic strains within the character.

Kean had several famous admirers during his brief career. Lord Byron was a staunch advocate of Kean's rough, romantic style, and William Hazlitt, drama critic for London's Chronicle, was perhaps more lavish than anyone else in his praise of Kean.

The characterizations of Kean mirrored the deprivation which he suffered as a child, as well as his wild and volcanic nature. It is difficult in a study of Kean to divorce the actor from the man, and the man from the actor. This thesis concludes that each of these two aspects of this genius of the English stage exerted a profound influence upon the other.

Kean's success as an actor was a direct result of his own personality, and his personality in turn, seemed to take on the violent and romantic traits of the characters he portrayed. Although Kean seldom spoke of the techniques by which he developed his manner of execution, his life-style spoke for him. He spilled his life out upon the stage and charged his characterizations with all the fire and turbulence of his own existence.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACTING CAREER
OF EDMUND KEAN

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
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For the Degree of

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INTRODUCTION

The early decades of the nineteenth century in England experienced an innovation in literature. There developed an increasing urgency to express life in its natural state, to move from the ostentatious to the unadorned, from complexity to simplicity, and from the imitation of a passion to passion itself. The classicism of the eighteenth century, with its highly formalized rules and restraints, gave way to a bold permissiveness that was romanticism. An energetic freedom was born that modified the literary arts.

The literature of the period reflects an attitude of restlessness and rebellion, which sought to dispel the precedents set in former decades. The mood was sometimes violent, blustering, and sporadic; this frantic spirit pervaded the dramatic arts as well as the literature, and a list of those who contributed to the Romantic Movement, such as Byron, Coleridge, and Keats, should also include Edmund Kean.

As an actor, Kean expressed the sentiments of the romantics. His style of acting was innovative and inspiring. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey, John Keats remarked, "One of my ambitions is to make as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean had done in acting."¹ Kean was

¹John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, edited by Maurice Buxton Forman (London, 1948), p. 71.

dynamic and forceful in his impact, yet he was honest in his emotion. Because his personal life was as tempestuous as his characterizations, Kean was for his contemporaries the physical embodiment of romanticism.

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD

Edmund Kean was born in Gray's Inn, London, on either March 17, 1789, or November 4, 1787. There is no evidence substantial enough to indicate that either date is correct, but of the two the second is the more likely. The first date is based upon Charlotte Tidswell's account of his birth, but has been doubted for several reasons, among which is the simple fact that Kean looked too old for it. Kean favored Miss Tidswell's report, but the truth is that he himself probably did not know just when he was born, for the date which he assigned to his birth was known to fluctuate. In his book of biographies, A Century of Great Actors, Cecil Ferard Armstrong places the birth on the earlier date, and as far as there seems to be any weight of opinion in the matter, the scales lean toward November 4, 1787.¹

Kean was the illegitimate son of a young man whose name he bore and of a young girl named Ann Carey. His mother called herself an itinerant actress and street hawker, but these were actually sidelines to her chief occupation in life, that of a prostitute. There is no

¹Cecil Ferard Armstrong, A Century of Great Actors (London, 1912), p. 146.

record of how many children Ann really bore, but besides Edmund, she certainly gave birth to a daughter and to a son whose father's name was Darnley; and as late as 1830, when she was but three years from her grave, she still had a young boy in her charge. Ann Carey's greatest histrionic triumphs were made after her son had achieved success and was able to exert influence on her behalf. In 1817 at Kean's instigation, she was engaged to walk on at the Surrey Theatre, but had not previously risen above playing small parts in the poorest of traveling companies. Any dramatic talent which she might have possessed was probably inherited from her father, George Saville Carey. As an author, composer, and public lecturer, he provided music hall and theatre audiences with a type of light entertainment popular at the time. His lectures consisted of humorous talks and imitations of contemporary actors, politicians, and statesmen. Although no scholar, he was intellectually more acute than most of his colleagues, for he was the son of Henry Carey, well-known lyricist and writer of burlesques, whose song "Sally in Our Alley" is considered uniquely representative of its period. Henry Carey is also credited by many with having written England's national anthem, "God Save the Queen." He was a talented and productive young man, but in the prime of his song-writing career and indeed his life, he committed suicide and was discovered to be penniless.

George Saville Carey followed closely in his father's footsteps. Although he earned considerable prestige, he

left little of monetary value for his daughter Ann. She, in turn, proved to be as irresponsible a parent as her father and grandfather.

Edmund Kean Sr. was still in his teens when he paid his first attentions to Ann Carey. He was an ambitious young man whose goal was to become an architect. He also possessed quite a flair for histrionics. At school he entertained his fellow pupils with recitations and later assisted his brother Moses, a professional entertainer of some note. Moses Kean was actually the same type of performer as George Saville Carey, and it is a fact that they did perform together on several occasions. Uncle Moses was a favorite with his young nephew, Edmund Jr., and although he was around during only the first three years of the boy's life, it was probably Moses who imparted an instinct for mimicry to the young boy. Edmund Sr. imparted nothing of value to his son, for he was temperamentally unfit to be a father, and it was perhaps fortunate that he survived his son's birth by only three years. He developed a mania for alcohol which hastened the end of his promising career. He was reduced from surveyor's apprentice to the degraded position of copying clerk. He later became a deranged and useless member of society. At the age of twenty-two, a few months after the death of his brother Moses, he ended his life by walking off the parapet on the roof of his house.

The son of Ann Carey and Edmund Kean could scarcely have entered upon a more wretched inheritance, as the bastard

son of a strumpet and a simpleton. He was actually reared by Charlotte Tidswell, a secondary actress at the Drury Lane Theatre and a constant companion of Uncle Moses. It is to Miss Tidswell that we owe the following account of his birth.

On March 17, 1789 at half-past three in the morning Edmund Kean, the father, came to me and said, 'Nance Carey is with child and begs you to go to her at her lodgings in Chancery Lane.' Accordingly I and my aunt, Mrs. Byrne went with him and found Nance Carey near her time. We asked if she had proper necessaries. She replied, 'No, nothing.' Whereupon Mrs. Byrne begged the loan of some baby clothes, and Nance Carey was removed to the Chambers in Gray's Inn which her father occupied, and it was there that the boy was born.²

The instincts of motherhood were not predominant in Ann, and she would often abandon him, to pursue her own interests. Charlotte Tidswell again intervened, rescued Edmund from his negligent mother, and after the death of her beloved Moses, devoted most of her attention to the child. Although Edmund was later to claim that Miss Tidswell was in reality his mother, he was taught at an early age to call her Aunt Tid. She never achieved renown as an actress, playing only bit parts and walk-ons; but because the theatre was the only life she knew, naturally Edmund was to be instructed in the dramatic arts.

Through her association with the Drury Lane Theatre, she was able to have Edmund taught singing by Incedon, dancing by D'Egenville, and fencing by Angelo, who in their particular

²Giles Playfair, Kean (New York, 1939), p. 11.

crafts were masters at the theatre. Charlotte herself, after ten years' experience, was able to tutor the boy in acting and was the first to expose him to the works of Shakespeare. He was not generally receptive to school lessons, but he was fascinated with the characters in Shakespeare and eager to memorize passages from the plays. Aunt Tid recognized this talent for memorization and encouraged him to express the emotions behind the words.

She occasionally acted scenes with him, and, as he remembered afterwards, taught him to say 'Alas, poor Uncle!' instead of 'Alas, poor Yorick!' when repeating Hamlet's speech to Horatio above the new-made grave of Ophelia, training him in this manner to throw feeling into his voice.³

It is only natural that Aunt Tid should have chosen Uncle Moses as a substitute for Yorick, the court jester, for their occupations were not dissimilar, and Edmund would have recalled fond memories of his uncle's "infinite jest." In addition, Aunt Tid "used to place him before a portrait and tell him to talk to it, in saying his speeches. He was never to recite; he was to speak to someone."⁴ In so doing, she was laying the very foundation upon which his naturalistic style of delivery was built.

Although no records survive, Edmund is said to have made his first stage appearance at the age of three.

³J. Fitzgerald Molloy, The Life and Adventures of Edmund Kean, 2 vols. (London, 1888), I, 17-18.

⁴Helen Ormsbee, Backstage With Actors (New York, 1938) p. 116.

Michael Kelly, the leading Irish tenor in an operatic version of Cymon, claims to have chosen young Edmund from a number of children to appear in the opera as Cupid because of his fine pair of black eyes. The opera, which was based upon an earlier ballet, was produced on December 31, 1791.

By the time he had reached his fifth birthday, Edmund was already something of a prodigy and had appeared in several small parts on the Drury Lane stage, where he was ultimately to make his greatest triumphs. He developed into an enthusiastic pupil of the theatre and was always anxious to recite or perform, but he was temperamentally a difficult child and in Charlotte's own words, "active, forward, prone to mischief, and neither to be led nor driven."⁵

A new theatre building for Drury Lane was opened on Monday, April 21, 1794, and a special production of Macbeth⁶

⁵Playfair, p. 16.

⁶William Shakespeare, Macbeth, in The Plays of William Shakespeare, 10 vols. (London, 1785), IV, 451-644. Prefaces and notes by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens, usually referred to as "Johnson edition." Most evidence leads to the likely assumption that this is the edition most frequently used by Kean, especially as he studied under John Philip Kemble, a prominent member of "Dr. Johnson's Club." See George Sherburn, "Dr. Johnson," in A. C. Baugh et alia, editor, A Literary History of England (New York, 1948), pp. 993 and 997, and also Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello (Los Angeles, 1961), p. 67. From the Johnson edition, plays discussed in this thesis are The Merchant of Venice, Richard III, Hamlet, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, and Macbeth. Subsequent references are to this edition of the plays and are textually documented by volume and page as well as act, scene, and line numbers. Cecil Ferard Armstrong, in A Century of Great Actors (London, 1912), p. 181, states that William Hazlitt indicated disappointment with the Nahum Tate version of King Lear [see below, p. 48]. This seems to be Kean's only deviation from the use of the Kemble editing of the Johnson edition.

was staged to celebrate the occasion. In the leading roles were John Philip Kemble and Sara Siddons. Young Edmund is reported to have been among the crowd of boys engaged as goblins to attend the weird sisters. It was to be an elaborate spectacle meticulously staged by Mr. Kemble himself, who by nature would have insisted upon the proper execution of every scene. When the curtain rose, Edmund either accidentally or intentionally stepped out of line, falling against the demon in front of him, who in turn knocked down his neighbor, and they tumbled one upon the other until the entire band of goblins lay on the floor. Kean was later fond of relating the incident. He said they fell "like a pack of cards,"⁷ and we can presume that it occurred much to the wrath of Mr. Kemble. This incident is significant in that it marked Edmund's debut with John Philip Kemble, the actor whom he would one day replace as England's leading tragedian.

The unfortunate mishap did not ostracize him from the company, for he later played the part of Robin in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor (Johnson edition), as is proved by the existence of a playbill dated June 8, 1796. He is listed as "Master Kean," and in the margin are written the words,

⁷Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, Edmund Kean (New York, 1933), p. 14.

"Edmund Kean aged 9 years."⁸ This is the first known instance of the appearance of his name on a playbill.

Although Edmund's appearances on stage were often brief and unnoticed, they were supplemented with performances in the green room. He would entertain a spirited audience of actors and stagehands with his increasing repertoire of imitations, songs, and monologues, of which his most requested was Richard III. Mrs. Charles Kemble, wife of the famous actor, tells of witnessing one such impromptu performance.

One morning before the rehearsal commenced, I was crossing the stage when my attention was attracted to the sounds of loud applause issuing from the direction of the green room. I inquired the cause and was told that it was 'only little Kean reciting Richard III in the green room.' My informant said that he was very clever. I went into the green room and saw the little fellow facing an admiring group and reciting lustily. I listened, and in my opinion he was very clever.⁹

His cleverness was not always appreciated though, for on one occasion John Philip Kemble caught him amusing the stagehands with a parody of the great actor's own mannerisms.¹⁰ Edmund probably considered Mr. Kemble's stylized gestures too exaggerated, and therefore funny, but it should be assumed that Kemble, a man with little sense of humor, again found the boy extremely tiresome.

⁸Ibid.

⁹F. W. Hawkins, The Life of Edmund Kean, 2 vols. (London, 1869), I, 25-26.

¹⁰Playfair, p. 17.

Edmund was in essence a wildly impulsive child. But Miss Tidswell was patient and continued in her efforts to instill within him a sense of discipline, until something happened which made all of her attempts seem futile. Ann Carey showed up to reclaim her son.

Edmund was around the age of nine when he left Aunt Tid to travel with his mother, and he quickly learned the hardships of life as a vagabond. Ann's ulterior motives were quite clear; she realized the material assistance Edmund could give her, and her supervision over him increased. He was forced, therefore, to exhibit his talents for profit, performing at barns, taverns, and fairgrounds. His mother selfishly spent what little money he earned, but the young boy received something far more important, training in various tricks of his trade, which later proved of tremendous value. He became an expert at tumbling, clowning, fighting, and bareback riding. He became as adept at amusing an audience as Harlequin as he was at terrifying them with Iago. Later, during his days as a strolling player in the town of Waterford, "he played the hero in Hannah More's tragedy of Percy, and after the tragedy gave a specimen of tight-rope dancing and another of sparring with a professional pugilist."¹¹

In addition to receiving the earnings of her talented son, Ann sold assorted perfumes and face powders from door

¹¹J. A. Hammerton, The Actor's Art (London, 1897), p. 106.

to door. One of her customers was a Mrs. Clarke, who was very much impressed with Edmund's abilities and offered to take him into her home and provide a respectable education. The first encounter Edmund had with his benefactress is told in an anonymous manuscript, undated and written on letter paper in a feminine hand. It is an important document, for within the story we find our first physical description of young Edmund.

About the beginning of June, she (Mrs. Clarke) was sitting in her back drawing room when an irregular tremulous but rather loud knock at the street door struck her ear. It was opened; she heard it shut again, and in a few seconds her old man servant came in with a sort of smile on his face. He said 'Master Carey ma'am is below and wishes to speak to you.' 'Master Carey?' 'Yes ma'am, he belongs to Miss Carey, that brings perfumes.' 'Tell him to send up his message.' 'Ma'am I did, but he says he must speak to you.' 'Well show him up.' Charles shut the door, presently threw it again wide open and in the centre of the threshold stood Master Carey, a slender, pale, diminutive boy, really eleven years of age but not taller than nine--in a jacket and trowsers shabby almost to raggedness, one leg supported by an iron--his whole appearance that of half starved poverty, but redeemed by a most superb head of hair full of rich though tangled curls and a pair of eyes larger, more beautiful, more brilliant even than those of either his mother or his grandfather. Holding a fragment of a hat in his little thin hand, he presented himself with the bow and the air of a Prince.¹²

The reference in the manuscript to his leg being supported by an iron has generated much speculation. One of Kean's biographers, Bryan Waller Procter, states that the irons were the result of the carelessness of a nurse.¹³ Kean himself

¹²Hillebrand, pp. 352-353.

¹³Ibid., p. 12.

later told the story of being severely handled by the posture master at Drury Lane,¹⁴ but more likely the answer to the irons is that he fell from a horse while riding in a circus at the age of six or seven and broke both of his legs.¹⁵ Whatever the cause, his necessity to wear leg irons may be in part an explanation for his early success in the role of Richard III. Richard III was by far the character with which his early audiences were the most fascinated, and it can be supposed that he assumed the role physically as well as vocally. F. W. Hawkins in his biography, The Life of Edmund Kean, declares that the boy was "capable of instantaneous adaption to the most surprising attitudes and contortions."¹⁶

Richard III was also the role with which he first impressed Mrs. Clarke. She became immediately aware of his remarkable potential and was generous enough to take him into her home and expose him to at least a semblance of family life. However, his comfortable stay there was far from ordinary, for he was constantly called upon to perform for her acquaintances. In return for his renditions, he received food, clothing, and a special bed with a floral-designed cover, which he fondly referred to as his "bed of roses."¹⁷

¹⁴Armstrong, p. 147.

¹⁵Hillebrand, p. 12.

¹⁶Hawkins, I, 8.

¹⁷Ibid.

Edmund's stay at Mrs. Clarke's lasted about two years and was abruptly ended one day when some guests visiting the Clarkes were arranging a theatre party. Little Edmund was mentioned as being one of the number, and an indignant guest remarked, "What! Is he coming with us!"¹⁸ Edmund immediately left the room, proceeded out of the house, and was not seen again for several days.

Opinions vary as to where he strayed. J. Fitzgerald Molloy in his book, The Life and Adventures of Edmund Kean, states that he walked to Bristol and offered himself as a sailor,¹⁹ and Giles Playfair has a similar version of the story with Portsmouth as the destination,²⁰ but wherever he went, his running away was very much in accord with a persistent nomadic drive. The legends are numerous of his wandering. F. W. Hawkins is quite explicit in his description of Edmund's arrival at Portsmouth one day where he "shipped himself as cabin boy on board a ship bound to Madeira."²¹ Another account tells of his journey with a migratory tent theatre run by a man named Richardson.²² Perhaps he was unconsciously making desperate attempts to escape the uncertainty and confusion of his past, or perhaps merely

¹⁸Armstrong, p. 149.

¹⁹Molloy, I, 32.

²⁰Playfair, p. 22.

²¹Hawkins, I, 13.

²²Hillebrand, p. 21.

expending the energy of a Bohemian spirit, but despite the motivations, he was preparing himself for the difficult itinerant years which followed, traveling with circuses and fairs throughout the provinces of England as a strolling player.

Ten days after Edmund's dramatic exit from Mrs. Clarke's home, he was found lying on a muck-heap in a near-by stable. He was delighted to find himself once again in his "bed of roses," but soon it was decided he could not remain at the Clarkes' any longer.

The next one hears of him, Edmund was in the charge of a Captain Miller who had packed him off to Windsor. This period of his life is clouded with mystery. Much of his adolescence lies buried in an obscure mixture of legend and fact. Even in Kean's own time, the story concerning his past was vague. He himself was quite capable of elaborating on his experiences to the point that they retained little of their validity. His activities at Windsor are a good example. Cecil Armstrong asserts that Kean recited and gave entertainments in the royal town which culminated in a command performance before King George III, "receiving a guinea from that close-fisted monarch."²³ It is also said that he performed for the young men at Eton College. These visits gave rise to the belief that Kean was once educated at Eton. As Armstrong states, "it was an assertion that he, after his

²³Armstrong, p. 150.

rise to fame, was always slow to contradict."²⁴ There is also indication that at this time he presented at the Rolls Rooms in London, a completely memorized reading of the entire play The Merchant of Venice, in which he portrayed all of the characters.

The accounts of side-show and music hall performances are plentiful, and his career began to mirror the pursuits of his Grandfather Carey and his Uncle Moses; and in the tradition of so many of his ancestors, he was during this period without any permanent residence. It is probable that he drifted frequently back to Aunt Tid and to his mother when he was not engaged on the road. His visits to Aunt Tid reassured her that he was continuing in his study of Sheakespeare. He was fourteen when it is recorded that, after he had entered upon the study of Shylock, he remarked to Miss Tidswell, "The devil is not so black as he is painted, and Shylock is not such a devil as black-looking Mr. Kemble would have us believe."²⁵ His time, however, was not all spent in research; it was now divided between the studious atmosphere of Aunt Tid's and the vagrant excursions of his mother. Playbills reveal that he not only performed with, but for the benefit of his mother. In his biography, Kean, Giles Playfair cites a playbill dated March 17, 1801, which announced,

²⁴Armstrong, p. 150.

²⁵Hammerton, p. 105.

The celebrated Theatrical Child, Edmund Carey, will for one night only for the benefit of his mother at the Great Room, No. 8, Store Street, Bedford Square, give his inimitable performances which have been received by Nobility and Gentry with uncommon approbation. Talents so rare in so juvenile a frame were scarcely seen before. Part I. To open with an Address, Pizarro, and Bluebeard. Part II. King Richard III. etc.²⁶

In the spring of the following year, Edmund recited at Covent Garden. Biographers and playbills unanimously agree upon this performance date as May 18, 1802. The playbill states that between the comedy and the farce were offered, "By particular desire, and for this night only, Recitations by the celebrated Master Carey."²⁷

The performance at Covent Garden marks an important transition in Edmund's life. Up until this time it would appear that Edmund was still very much under the influence of his mother, for at the age of fifteen, he is consistently presented by the playbills as "Edmund Carey" and "Master Carey." Also it was after this performance that he embarked upon his long and desperate journey as a strolling player. He could no longer continue under what little supervision his mother had provided, and because of his age, he could no longer hold any claim as a child prodigy.

Although her influence upon him diminished, Ann would continue to be for Edmund, a reminder of his past, and despite the heights to which he rose, Kean was never able to escape the stigma of his disreputable inheritance.

²⁶Playfair, p. 24.

²⁷Hillebrand, p. 21.

His childhood reads like a romance. Upon reaching his fifteenth birthday, Kean could look back to years of tramping and starrng with his mother, being jostled from one home to another, fragmentary training--years of tumbling, singing, dancing, horseback riding, mimicking, reciting--learning Richard III, Hamlet, the complete Merchant of Venice--a brief interlude of decorum under Mrs. Clarke's wing, running away to migratory tent theatres, and culminating in meager fame as a prodigy. From these precarious origins, he came to be known as one of the greatest actors of the nineteenth century, but also as one of its most tragic figures. The former distinction was won in spite of the odds placed against him. The latter was the result of the sad fact that he proved himself, in many ways and instances, a true Kean and a true Carey.

CHAPTER II

ROLES

Kean began his weary career as a strolling player, performing in the open air and dreaming of the day when he would force his way to the footlights of Drury Lane. "If I succeed I shall go mad," he often said after disappointments,¹ which occurred frequently in the next twelve years of his life. But an indomitable spirit was characteristic of the little man whose motto, as he later told the Drury Lane committee, was "Aut Caesar aut nullus."²

There are accounts of his running from one traveling company to another and from town to town. It was during these years that he perfected his art. "He used to mope about for hours, walking miles and miles alone, with his hands in his pockets, thinking intensely upon his characters. No one could get a word out of him. He studied and slaved beyond any actor."³ He was accustomed to acting before only a handful of spectators, but it was upon these rural audiences that he tested his ideas and shaped his fiery impersonations.

¹J. A. Hammerton, The Actor's Art (London, 1897), p. 105.

²Cecil Ferard Armstrong, A Century of Great Actors (London, 1912), p. 156.

³Hammerton, p. 105.

He must have also been conscious of his own limitations during these province years, for he refused the offer of an engagement from Stephen Kemble to appear in London in 1807, on the ground that his powers had not then arrived at maturity.⁴

Once while in Belfast, during a tour of Scotland and Ireland, he had the honor of acting with Mrs. Siddons, playing Osmyn to her Zara in Mourning Bride. The part, which Kean had to play at a very short notice, did not suit him at all, and Mrs. Siddons was disgusted with her support, calling him a "horrid little man."⁵ But later, when she saw him play Jaffer and follow that with Norval, her opinion was changed.

At a performance in Birmingham, William Charles Macready, then a school boy home for the holidays, was present, but was not the slightest bit impressed by the acting of the future genius. Many audiences failed to be impressed with Kean because of the new style of acting which he was in the process of developing, and even his Hamlet and Richard III were treated with scorn. The audience seemed to take the naturalness and spontaneity of his style as an insult. Once while being hissed in the role of Richard, Kean turned his back upon the audience and continued to perform as if unconscious of their presence, but this apparent disregard made them all the more furious. Kean, stepping out of the scene, came down to the footlights

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Armstrong, p. 151.

and hurled at them the lines, "Unmannered dogs! Stand ye when I command!"⁶ It is easy to understand why they were not impressed.

On July 17, 1808, Kean married Mary Chambers at Stroud. Mary, who was nine years older than Kean, had been a governess but had joined the company of players at Gloucester. Though she was not talented herself, she believed in Edmund's ability and was a devoted wife and mother. She traveled with Edmund, and on one occasion walked a hundred and fifty miles to the town of Swansea about a month before her first child was born.

Kean acted with the companies of Sheerness, Kent, Gloucester, Stroud, Cheltenham, Birmingham, Swansea, Dorchester, and Exeter. On the night of November 14, 1813, Kean was appearing at the Olympic Theatre at Dorchester as Octavian in The Mountaineers. The house was almost empty, but there was a gentleman in one of the stage-boxes who appeared to know something about acting, and it was to this man Kean played. The gentleman turned out to be Mr. Arnold, the Stage manager of Drury Lane, and the result of Kean's performance was a three-year contract at Drury Lane.⁷

Upon his arrival in London, Kean rented a room in Cecil Street, Strand.⁸ He reported to Mr. Arnold, and at the end of the week drew his first salary of eight guineas, most of

⁶Ibid., p. 154.

⁷Ibid., p. 155.

⁸Ibid.

which had to be sent to his wife to enable her and his son, Charles, to join him. But the following week it was discovered that Kean was still under contract to Mr. Elliston of the Olympic Theatre in Dorchester. Naturally Mr. Arnold would have nothing to do with him while he was still the property of another theatre. Kean wrote Elliston one of his characteristically pungent letters denouncing his contract with the Olympic and declaring his fixed intention of never setting foot on stage again. This situation was at last resolved, but it is far from likely that Kean's letter had anything to do with it. It seems more feasible that Dr. Drury, who was a close and respected friend of both Elliston and Arnold, assisted Kean in securing the release of his Olympic Theatre contract. It was arranged that on the condition that Kean paid the weekly salary of two pounds to the actor who took his place at the Olympic, he should be allowed to fulfill his new engagement at Drury Lane. This agreement seemed to satisfy everyone involved. Kean now possessed a three-year engagement at the Drury Lane with a rising salary of eight, ten, and twelve guineas per week, but his problems were not over.

He now had to be interviewed by the committee composed of Drury Lane directors. Along with so many of his previous audiences, they were disappointed with his appearance. He had little to recommend himself apart from his large and penetrating black eyes, and they thought it would be wiser

for him to begin by appearing in some lesser characters. Kean was furious. He insisted that the original agreement had called for him to play leading roles. They reluctantly conceded, and on the twenty-sixth of January, 1814, he made his debut in the role of Shylock from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. The committee's reluctance to entrust Kean with a major role is understandable, for the heavy debts which Drury Lane had incurred were no doubt preying upon their minds, and a new and unknown actor was indeed a risk.

Kean had one rehearsal before the performance. Few of the other actors even showed up for the run-through, and Kean merely walked through his part to familiarize himself with the set. But even this uninspired reading was enough to reveal that this was to be no traditional Shylock. He was severely criticized by some of the older actors present and told that his interpretation would never do.

Shylock was usually played with a severity which frequently turned to savage sneers as his hopes for justice were dashed. Kean's conception was quite innovative for the nineteenth century. Basing his decisions upon years of analysis and his conclusion that Shylock was not so evil as Mr. Kemble would have us believe, he created a fresh and unique interpretation of the Jew. He stripped the character of its traditional despicable traits and revealed, beneath the "Jewish gaberdine," a living, breathing, human being.

Long before his famous debut in London, Kean had played the traditional Shylock in the provinces, and by 1814 he might have grown stale in the role. Only a true artist could have conceived an original view of the character after so many years of routine acquaintance with the part.

When first we went to see Mr. Kean in Shylock, we expected to see what we had used to see, a decrepit old man, bent with age and ugly with mental deformity, grinning with deadly malice, with the venom of his heart congealed in the expression of his countenance, sullen, morose, gloomy, inflexible, brooding over one idea, that of his hatred, and fixed on one unalterable purpose, that of his revenge. We were disappointed, because we had taken our ideas from other actors, not from Shakespeare . . . a man of genius comes once in an age to clear away the rubbish, to make it fruitful and wholesome.⁹

The factors which contributed to Kean's new conception were varied. Prior to his London debut, Kean had never been free of the enveloping shadow of poverty. The long quest for approval and patronage, the memory of a miserable childhood, and the humiliation of being a bastard child, though hardly ingredients of self-confidence, did much to give Kean insight and sympathy. He was willing to see in Shylock what no one before had seen--the tragedy of a man. After witnessing a second performance of Kean's Shylock several months after the debut, William Hazlitt remarked that surely here was "the Jew that Shakespeare drew."¹⁰

⁹William Hazlitt, "A View of the English Stage," in The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, edited by A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 12 vols. (London, 1903), VIII, 295.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 296.

It was heralded as a vigorous and brilliant performance, but as far as Kean was concerned, it had been a do-or-die struggle for existence. It was a matter of making a spectacular showing at once, or of ending what had seemed until then, a miserable career. Shylock was a wise choice of roles for an actor who had suffered for years the disapproval of many an audience in the past, and his line, "For sufferance is the badge of our race" (III, 111; I, iii, 108), must have expressed much conviction.

Kean was at this time small and thin, with an intense face and piercing eyes. An 1814 engraving shows his Shylock as a strong, handsome man with a short, trim beard, a cross on his left sleeve, and in his right hand, a butcher's knife.¹¹ Kean has been lauded much praise for his bold use of a black wig for Shylock; however, this utilization may simply have been the result of Kean's status at Drury Lane, which was so precarious that he had to provide his own wig and costume. It was an innovation, however, which was to be rigorously followed in years to come. There is no information that Kean owned a red wig, which had been traditional for Shylock. He probably wore one during his earlier province days, but his frequent trips to the pawn shop raise a question as to the extent of his costume wardrobe by 1814.

There were other technical aspects of his performance which made Kean's Shylock innovative. Anne Margaret Reid

¹¹Toby Lelyveld, Shylock on the Stage (Cleveland, 1960), p. 41.

suggests that one clue to the success of his interpretation was Kean's use of laughter. Kean recognized the fearful quality which laughter might possess.

He capitalized upon its power to communicate a kind and degree of villainy. The line, 'An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven,' was tinged with humor, not sly, wry humor but a tone of humor which verged upon the ludicrous. It was the bitter, ironical joke of a man sure of his darling purpose, and as he thought just about to triumph in his iniquity. The extreme irony of this interpretation was felt in the playing of 'I cannot find it, 'tis not in the bond,' for here Kean gave a transported chuckle. His inmost heart seemed to laugh that no obstacle now remained to the completion of his murderous purpose.¹²

Kean did not rely entirely upon laughter to reveal his mind and heart, for there was expressiveness in all his features, and his whole body seemed to think. His technical innovations never caused him to lose sight of the main passion by which Shylock is actuated, but rather they enhanced the over-all effect.

Kean's interpretation was not without criticism. Some felt that his character had too much vigor for its age. It is interesting to note that Kean seemed to assume a greater appearance of age and feebleness on the nights following his premier. Although he modified his conception to appease

¹²Anne Margaret Reid, "An Analysis of the Acting Styles of Garrick, Siddons, and Edmund Kean in Relation to the Dominant Trends in Art and Literature of the 18th Century," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1944, cited in Dissertation Abstracts, XXIX, 3254-A, by microfilm, University Microfilm Services, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

the critics by taking on more age, his Shylock was never the malignant old man of former days. The Shylock of Kean had a vigor and elasticity of spirit, a fire and animation which marked his performance with originality. But his most significant contribution was his presentation of Shylock's humanity. This quality was most clearly visible in the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech. There was a crescendo in the trial scene where it is reported that he dropped the weighing scales with a clang before whispering the line, "Is that the law?" (III, 145; IV, i, 310) In the final speeches of the play, by the pathos in his voice, he changed the audience's attitude toward Shylock from hatred to pity. His entire appearance seemed to change within his last lines. He paused in uttering "I am--content" (III, 147; IV, i, 388), as if almost choked by the words. By the time he reached his final exit, he took with him the full measure of the audience's sympathy.¹³

Kean's success was immediate, and although the audience was sparse, they were estatic. During the curtain call, it was wondered "how so few of them could kick up such a row."¹⁴ He saved the theatre from financial ruin, and at the age of twenty-seven had become the foremost actor of the English

¹³Lelyveld, p. 45.

¹⁴Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, Edmund Kean (New York, 1933), p. 110.

stage. The theatre presented Kean with a bonus of fifty pounds,¹⁵ and after a third performance of Shylock he was sent for by the committee to ratify his contract. The directors were curious to see how he would behave. He was willing to abide by the original agreement, but they awarded him a new contract offering twenty pounds per week. Moreover, he was discharged from his obligation to pay his substitute at the Olympic Theatre.

The critics were as enthusiastic in their praise of the new actor as were the audiences. William Hazlitt, representing London's Chronicle, was a lover of the drama and preferred to see it acted passionately rather than impassionately. He had been for years a rebel against the acknowledged authority of John Philip Kemble and welcomed the electric shock which Kean brought to the stage. After witnessing Kean's Shylock, he commented,

For voice, eye, action, and expression, no actor has come out for many years at all equal to him. In giving effect to the conflict of passions arising out of the contrast of situation, in varied vehemence of declamation, in keenness of sarcasm, in the rapidity of his transitions from one tone and feeling to another, in propriety and novelty of action, presenting a series of striking pictures, and giving perpetually fresh shocks of delight and surprise, it would be difficult to single out a competitor.¹⁶

¹⁵Armstrong, p. 159.

¹⁶Hazlitt, VIII, 179.

In disclosing himself to the London public, Kean was indeed shrewd. The role of Shylock is short and packed with theatrical opportunities. The Jewish gaberdine also served to conceal his small frame, which might have provoked ridicule in another role. But after the town had been won and their curiosity aroused, he was able to dazzle them with the display of his full range of talent.

His second role at Drury Lane was Richard III. In a way, it was a more formidable test than his debut because an actor's reputation is usually built upon his versatility. The London critics were now present in full force. Kean realized that an actor's position could never be secure. It had been a long and painful climb to the top, but it could be easy to slip back into obscurity. His reputation was risked every time he set foot on stage. His confidence was shaken by the fact that he had developed a bad cold. He realized in addition that the audience which had gathered on February 12 would be more critical than usual, for they harbored doubt as to whether the new actor was all that his admirers said he was.

All of the doubts soon vanished. The performance was a triumph from the opening soliloquy to the death scene. The little tragedian swept through the gamut of moods, throwing his audience into fascination; his technical dexterity alone was amazing. There was nothing of noble dignity or the statuesque and measured declamation of Kemble. Here were thunder and lightning, storms and bursts of sunlight, the

colors of the rainbow, and the dark shadows of death; here in a word was nature in all her variety. Even the hoarseness of his voice was said to have aided him in bringing Richard to life.¹⁷ In The Life and Adventures of Edmund Kean, Molloy says that the audience was aware of the genius it had witnessed, and stood in shouting approval.¹⁸ In two weeks, Kean had made himself king of Drury Lane.

In his critique of this performance, Hazlitt wrote

It is possible to form a higher conception of the character of Richard III than that given by Mr. Kean (not from seeing any other actor, but from reading Shakespeare), but we cannot imagine any character represented with greater distinctness and precision, more perfectly articulated in every part . . . He is more refined than Cooke; more bold, varied, and original than Kemble in the same character. In some parts he is deficient in dignity, and particularly in the scenes of state business, he has by no means an air of artificial authority. There is at times a sort of tip-toe elevation, an enthusiastic rapture in his expectations of attaining the crown . . . His courtship scene with Lady Anne was an admirable exhibition of smooth and smiling villainy. The progress of wily adulation, of encroaching humility, was finely marked throughout by the action, voice, and eye. He seemed, like the first tempter, to approach his prey, certain of the event, and as if success had smoothed the way before him . . . Mr. Kean's attitude in leaning against the side of the stage before he comes forward in this scene, was one of the most graceful and striking we remember to have seen. Mr. Kean did equal justice to the beautiful description of the camps the night before the battle, though, in consequence of his hoarseness, he was obliged to repeat the whole passage in an under-key. His manner of bidding his

¹⁷Playfair, p. 105.

¹⁸J. Fitzgerald Molloy, The Life and Adventures of Edmund Kean, 2 vols. (London, 1888), I, 150.

friends good night, and his pausing with the point of his sword, drawn slowly backward and forward on the ground, before he retires to his tent, received shouts of applause.¹⁹

Other critics were as equally taken by him. Lord Byron, who became a staunch advocate of Kean's romantic style, was in London during Kean's triumph and after seeing him wrote in his diary, "Just returned from seeing Kean in Richard. By Jove! he is a soul! Life, nature, truth, without exaggeration or diminution. Richard was a man, and Kean is Richard."²⁰ Some of Kean's naturalistic gestures made quite an impression upon Byron. In particular, Hazlitt's reference to Kean's pausing with the point of his sword, drawn slowly backward and forward on the ground, was perhaps more vivid in Byron's mind than he realized. Whether consciously or not, he echoes it in a stage direction in the first scene of Act V in Werner: "Siegendorf first looks at the Hungarian, and then at Ulric, who has unbuckled his sabre, and is drawing lines with it on the floor--still in its sheath."²¹ This peculiar transference of the actor's art to the dramatist's is both fascinating and significant. It offers some

¹⁹Hazlitt, VIII, 181-182.

²⁰George Gordon Noel Byron, Byron, Selections from Poetry, Letters, and Journals, edited by Peter Quennell (London, 1949), p. 657.

²¹George Gordon Noel Byron, Werner, in The Works of Lord Byron, edited by Richard Henry Stoddard, 16 vols. (Boston, 1900), VIII, 253.

circumstantial evidence of the influence of acting on Byron's work and of Kean's romantic style upon the literature of the period.²²

Richard III, more than The Merchant of Venice, startled the public with its daring simplifications and familiarities of the commonest everyday life. Again, Kean introduced innovations. The fearful quality of laughter was also present in Richard, as in Shylock, and the audience delighted in a character who laughed when he was most villainous. Kean's delivery of the line, "Off with his head" (VII, 90; III, iv, 75), where Richard speaks of Lord Hastings, was one of Kean's most striking. In the past, the line was usually spoken with much pomp and ferocity. Kean, who understood that Richard could feel only contempt for such a wavering character as Hastings, delivered the order in a way which showed that he actually despised his victim. He laughingly spoke with a matter-of-fact air which made his command all the more terrible. He accompanied his speech with a familiar tap on the shoulders of his subjects, very much in accord with his false affection.

For all of those theatre goers who had long since become accustomed to seeing villainy knitting his brows and guilt grinding his teeth, here was a reformation. His

²²P. W. Thompson, "Byron and Edmund Kean--a Comment," Theatre Research, VIII (1966), 1, 17-19.

reading of the early passages was either in a style of devilish but calm calculation or with a horrible assurance of his purpose, seemingly hugging himself and enjoying it as a joke. Many critics believed that Kean surpassed all men in the expression of malignant joy.²³

As successful as Kean was in the roles of Shylock and Richard III, after several weeks of performing these characters, the public was ready to see him in a new part. He opened in Hamlet on March 12, 1814,²⁴ two months after he had electrified London with his Shylock. Kean always considered Hamlet one of his best impersonations, but it was not as well received as he had expected. Tenderness to Ophelia, reverential awe of his father's ghost, and a fixed resolution to fulfill the mission accorded him by that spirit, were the prominent motives of his Hamlet; his earnestness throughout the play and the tender vibration of his voice when speaking to the ghost were of special note.²⁵

Mrs. Garrick took such an interest in his performance that she induced him to alter his reading of the closet scene. Kean played this with a kind of distant tenderness, but Davy, as Mrs. Garrick called her deceased husband, was more severe

²³Henry Robinson, in Playfair, p. 117.

²⁴Austin Brereton, Some Famous Hamlets (London, 1884), p. 33.

²⁵Ibid.

in his treatment of the Queen.²⁶ Kean tried adopting the well-intended suggestion, but the new reading went against his convictions, and after two or three nights he played the scene as he had previously done.

Of the many new readings which he introduced into the part, two in particular impressed the critics as having peculiar beauty. In addressing the Ghost at the line, "I'll call thee, Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane" (X, 302; I, iv, 45-46), he breathed the word "father" with melting pathos, which immediately threw the audience into sympathy. It was an intuition of truth and perhaps one of those "flashes of lightning" which astonished Coleridge.²⁷

Many of Kean's departures from tradition appeared so natural that they seemed to spring from impulse, but his motivations arose from careful analysis. At the end of the scene with Ophelia in Act III, he made an indelible mark which proved his insight into motivation. After the words "To a nunnery, go" (X, 379; III, i, 155), he walked slowly from Ophelia's side and across the stage; just as he was about to exit into the wings, he turned and gradually advanced back to Ophelia. He caught her by the hand, tenderly kissed it, and then hurried off. The business had

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Table Talk and Omniana, edited by T. Ashe (London, 1884), p. 25.

never been done before and was extremely successful. Actors imitated the movement for years afterward. To Hazlitt it was "the finest commentary that was ever made on Shakespeare. It explained the character at once (as he meant it), as one of disappointed hope, of bitter regret, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the distraction of the scene around him!"²⁸

Although the immediate reaction to Kean's Hamlet was triumphant, and certain parts of it were considered unequalled, it was less perfect as a whole than his other roles. William Hazlitt even thought Kean's general delineation of the character wrong.²⁹ It was a strong and pointed portrayal, but Kean implied a severity which approached harshness even in his common observations and replies. Hamlet is a gentleman and a scholar, and he is less theatrical by nature than Richard III. Kean was probably not very convincing in Hamlet's intellectual reflections as he thinks aloud, but it would be quite easy to envision Kean playing to the hilt Hamlet's feigned madness. As Hazlitt said, "There is no one line in this play, which should be spoken like any one line in Richard III; yet Mr. Kean did not appear to us to keep the two characters always distinct."³⁰ Hazlitt accused Kean of displaying more energy than was necessary for the melancholy Dane.

²⁸Hazlitt, VIII, 188.

²⁹Ibid., p. 187.

³⁰Ibid.

With Hamlet, Kean began a custom of delivering certain passages with a particular style which he continued to employ in later plays. In some of the longer narratives he would consciously restrain himself in order to surprise an audience with sudden outbursts of passion. This technique was particularly true of Othello, but it seems to have begun as early as Hamlet. Kean was not slighting these speeches, for they were often eloquently spoken, but they somehow lacked the exuberance for which Kean was noted. "Hamlet's speech in describing his own melancholy, his instructions to the players, and the soliloquy on death, were all delivered by Mr. Kean in a tone of fine, clear, and natural recitation."³¹ This statement would tend to suggest that at these points he saved his powers, and chose to electrify his audience when they least expected it.

Kean's representation of Hamlet was far from being a failure, but it may have seemed to fail in the eyes of Hazlitt simply because his expectations were too extravagant. But even he was able to overlook the deficiencies and acknowledge Kean's powerful handling of the role.

High as Mr. Kean stood in our opinion before, we have no hesitation in saying, that he stands higher in it (and, we think, will in that of the public), from the powers displayed in this last effort. If it was less perfect as a whole, there were parts in it of a higher cast of excellence than any part of his Richard.³²

³¹Ibid., p. 188.

³²Ibid., p. 187.

On Thursday, May 5, 1814, Kean appeared as Othello.³³ He lacked the massive physique and dignity which assert Othello's nobility, but he sustained the character throughout by the fierce intensity of his passion. Kean's Moor took shape in a series of explosions of passion, but the violence which he incorporated into his characterization was as much a result of thought as of emotion. It is said that he united himself with the character until he possessed it so completely that it possessed him.³⁴ If he was faced with the obstacle of playing against a strong Iago, he simply strengthened his Othello. Critics had trouble finding words for the terrifying imagery he projected. Some felt it to be his most powerful role.

Kean achieved many of his climaxes in Othello by slackening his pace before a sudden pounce, in the same manner that he had begun to do in Hamlet. An example of this technique is found in his delivery of the senate address, which had been regarded as an opportunity for actors to exhibit their rhetorical powers. It was a favorite with John Philip Kemble. Kean spoke the words in an almost conversational tone and saved the impact for the sudden, sharp irony of "This only is the witchcraft I have

³³Ibid., p. 189.

³⁴Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello (Los Angeles, 1961), p. 62.

used" (X, 574; I, iii, 184). He was known in this way to startle an audience into applause.

There was pathos as well as passion in his early love for Desdemona, a quality which made the last act all the more overwhelming. It was in this act that ladies in the audience were so overcome by his passion that they fainted.

According to the majority of scholars and dramatists, the jealous, possessed Moor was Kean's physical and visual triumph. The emotion was said to be visual as it spread through his frame and tinged every look, every movement, and every word with unspeakable horror. In some speeches he was clearly moved and appeared to be holding back tears. In others, the battle within his mind was distinctly conveyed to the spectator. "One of the finest instantaneous actions was his clutching his black hand slowly around his head as though his brains were turning, and then writhing round and standing in dull agony with his back to the audience."³⁵

Kean's Othello was not without some of his vocal tricks and inflections. The laugh was again employed. In the latter part of the passage, "I had rather be a toad, and live upon the vapour of a dungeon, than keep a corner in the thing I love for others' uses" (X, 653; III, iii, 301-304), Kean gave a snarling, sardonic laugh, but remained remarkably

³⁵F. W. Hawkins, The Life of Edmund Kean, 2 vols. (London, 1869), II, 209.

quiet.³⁶ In his repetition of the word "blood" (X, 666; III, iii, 518), the very utterance sounded stained and gory.

Unique as was his portrayal of Othello, Kean was content to follow the text of the then standard Kemble editing,³⁷ but his great break with the past showed in his genius for compensating the cuts which had been made. He brought back barbarian mannerisms and vocal modulations which had been absent in Othellos for many years. Kemble had tried to fill in gaps of motivation with a surface of dignity. Kean did it with dash, passion, lightning, and thunder. He could not be merely tender. He dropped the air of sophistication from Kemble's Othello and bore the audience on pure romantic surges past any doubt of the Moor's nobility. His was another kind of dignity, the dignity of native humanity helpless in emotion.

It was this dignity of nature which so attracted Byron, Keats, and Coleridge. Kean was the embodiment of man in his natural state, subject to the sway of his emotions. As his success increased, Kean began to rub shoulders with a polished society which was fascinated with his unmannered temperaments. These circumstances were not unlike Othello's, and Kean's personal acquaintance with the situation must have contributed to his effectiveness in the role.

³⁶Rosenberg, p. 64

³⁷Ibid., p. 67.

Hazlitt observed that in Othello, Kean revealed the virtues as well as the same vices which he had displayed in former characters. It was Hazlitt's contention that Kean's voice was still harsh and dissonant, and that he again failed to sustain his passion throughout the play. But he redeemed himself in the final act, according to the critic, and in spite of his defects rose to new heights in his career. "There were . . . repeated bursts of feeling and energy which we have never seen surpassed. The whole of the latter part of the third act was a masterpiece of profound pathos and exquisite conception, and its effects on the house was electrical."³⁸

Two days after he appeared as Othello, Kean played the part of Iago, and for several performances thereafter, accomplished the remarkable feat of alternating the roles. This accomplishment required a tremendous amount of mental as well as physical energy. The consistency which he lacked in Othello was gained in Iago, perhaps the most uniform and entire of his performances. He created an accomplished hypocrite; beneath the cordial manner of a confidant, there lurked a villainous monster. He preserved the character so completely and carefully that the part seemed to be of shorter duration than usual.³⁹ Iago was probably Kean's most subtle creation. One can assume that his lines were delivered with the familiarity and ease of one's best friend.

³⁸Hazlitt, VIII, 189.

³⁹Ibid., p. 190.

Many of the lines of Iago call for a style of delivery which is almost comic in nature and timing. These Kean rendered flawlessly. In fact, the criticism which did arise blamed him for not being grave enough.

Actors in general have been struck only with the wickedness of the character, and have exhibited an assassin going to the place of execution. Mr. Kean has abstracted the wit of the character, and makes Iago appear throughout an excellent good fellow, and lively bottle-companion. But though we do not wish him to be represented as a monster, or a fiend, we see no reason why he should instantly be converted into a pattern of comic gaiety and good humor. The light which illumines the character, should rather resemble the flashes of lightning in the mirky sky, which make the darkness more terrible. Mr. Kean's Iago is, we suppose, too much in the sun.⁴⁰

He often strayed from the script, but as many of his admirers realized, a verbatim rendering was not always desirable. Kean's greatest moments sprung from generous interpretations.

Mr. Kean is not a literal transcriber of his author's text; he translates his characters with great freedom and ingenuity into a language of his own; but at the same time we cannot help preferring his liberal and spirited dramatic versions, to the dull, literal, commonplace monotony of his competitors. Besides, after all, in the conception of the part, he may be right, and we may be wrong.⁴¹

After seeing the human qualities with which Kean endowed Shylock and Richard, the public was sure he would bring forth in Iago a pure and motiveless villain.⁴² But again he

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 215.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 190.

⁴² Reid, XXIV, 3254-A.

blended his theatrical instincts with life, and rather than a wicked stereotype of melodrama, he presented them with a living character.

The discussions of Kean's roles thus far have been limited to the tragic characters of Shakespeare. Kean's reputation could rest on those roles alone, but he quite often played parts outside of Shakespeare with equal distinction. The character of Sir Giles Overreach in Philip Massinger's A New Way to Pay Old Debts is a usurer who knows no remorse, alongside of whom Shylock dwindles into an amiable businessman. The play is best described as a literary melodrama. It is powerful and gripping and contains many fine poetic passages, which have persuaded some critics to rank Massinger as second only to Shakespeare among Elizabethan dramatists. But its success on the stage depends entirely upon the interpretation of the leading character, Overreach, who, ruthless with ambition and without one spark of kindness, robs the poor, persecutes his relatives, schemes for his own gain, and finally runs headlong into a catastrophic downfall. It is a part which only an actor of extraordinary force can make credible or even interesting. The part of Sir Giles belonged exclusively to Kean from the moment he first played it.

The play begins on a very low key but sweeps along with increased tension, exposing Sir Giles' swelling moral deformity. Then, in the final scene when he is thwarted, he becomes wild

in his rage of frustration and falls to the floor, raving and foaming at the mouth. One critic said

When Edmund Kean clothed himself in these horrors and became the mouthpiece of these rabid intensities, he encompassed the most sensational success of his meteoric career. At the denouement the house, as has been told, just rose at him. The pit leapt up as one man at the magician; women in the boxes went into hysterics; seasoned actresses fainted on the stage; Lord Byron had a convulsive fit; tumult and cheers reigned for many minutes; behind the scenes and in front everyone was bewitched, dismayed.⁴³

Whether or not the reaction was as grandiose as the review would lead one to believe, there is no doubt that it was vehement. For many generations to follow, Kean became exclusively identified with the part.

We cannot conceive of anyone doing Mr. Kean's part of Sir Giles Overreach so well as himself. We have seen others in the part, superior in the look and costume, in hardened, clownish, rustic insensibility; but in the soul and spirit, no one equal to him . . . He was not at a single fault . . . The conclusion was quite overwhelming.⁴⁴

With Sir Giles, Kean reached the pinnacle of his histrionic achievement. It was in many ways his greatest part. Perhaps the best way to discover the reasons behind Kean's success would be to note Hazlitt's remarks concerning the faults of Mr. Kemble's Sir Giles. Kean's approach to the role was in direct opposition to that of Mr. Kemble's,

⁴³A. E. Snodgrass, "The Storm and Stress of Edmund Kean," The Cornhill Magazine, New Series, LXXIV, No. 443 (May, 1933), 514.

⁴⁴Hazlitt, VIII, 285.

and for every failure of Kemble, Kean was victorious. The detrimental remarks of Hazlitt concerning Kemble seem to be inversely true of Kean.

We never saw signs of greater poverty, greater imbecility and decrepitude in Mr. Kemble, or in any other actor: it was Sir Giles in his dotage . . . Mr. Kemble wanted the part to come to him, for he would not go out of his way to the part. He is, in fact, as shy of committing himself with nature, as a maid is of committing herself with a lover. All the proper forms and ceremonies must be complied with, before 'they two can be made one flesh.' Mr. Kemble sacrifices too much to decorum. He is chiefly afraid of being contaminated by too close an identity with the characters he represents. This is the greatest vice in an actor, who ought never to bilk his part. He endeavors to raise Nature to the dignity of his own person and demeanor . . . Sir Giles hath a devil; Mr. Kemble has none. Sir Giles is in a passion; Mr. Kemble is not. Sir Giles has no regard to appearances; Mr. Kemble has . . . He is the very still-life and statuary of the stage; a perfect figure of a man; a petrification of sentiment, that heaves no sigh, and sheds no tear; an icicle upon the bust of Tragedy.⁴⁵

Although Kean's series of triumphs during his first season at Drury Lane were stunning, he was not able to play every role chosen for him. On the second day of January, 1815, Kean appeared in the role of Romeo. He played the part at the committee's instigation and strongly against his own inclination. If he had any skepticism as to his effectiveness in any role, it was probably this one; Romeo was totally different from any he had yet played at Drury Lane. In more instances than one, his misgivings were justified; his

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 303.

performance revealed no new insights or unlooked-for beauties in the part.⁴⁶ He did, however, display the same extraordinary energies which were a part of all his characterizations; it was, after all, his exhibition of passion which audiences flocked to see, and not romantic sentiment. "We go to see (what he never disappoints us in) great spirit, ingenuity, and originality given to the text in general, and an energy and depth of passion given to certain scenes and passages, which we should in vain look for from any other actor on the stage."⁴⁷ Romeo was the character to which his powers were the least suited. He failed in a general truth of conception,⁴⁸ and he was unsuccessful in sustaining interest. The character of Romeo must possess youthful enthusiasm, tender melancholy, and romantic thoughts and sentiments. These qualities were not evident in Kean's portrayal. According to Hazlitt, his Romeo had nothing of the lover in it.⁴⁹

One of the most important scenes of the play is the balcony scene. There is virtually no action in the dialogue, but the scene is essential in establishing the romantic sentiments of the two main characters. David Garrick acted it as if he would jump up to the lady; and Spranger Barry, as if he would make the lady jump down to him.⁵⁰ Kean

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 209.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

produced neither of these effects. He was cold, tame, unimpressive, and stood like a statue of lead. The deficiencies of his Romeo were partially redeemed by his handling of the death scene. He writhed at the workings of the poison in his body, and made desperate attempts to speak. His body stiffened in an abrupt spasm of pain and then sank into a lifeless form. It was magnificent in its realism, but even a stupendous death scene was not enough to recover the mistakes he had made in the rest of the play.

Mr. Kean's imagination appears not to have the principles of joy, or hope, or love in it. He seems chiefly sensible to pain, or to the passions that spring from it, and to the terrible energies of mind and body, which are necessary to grapple with, or to avert it. Even over the world of passion he holds but a divided sway: he either does not feel, or seldom expresses, deep, sustained, internal sentiment,--there is no repose in his mind: no feeling seems to take full possession of it, that is not linked to action, and that does not goad him on to the phrenzy [sic] of despair. Or if he ever conveys the sublimer pathos of thought and feeling, it is after the storm of passion, to which he has been worked up, has subsided.⁵¹

Another role in which Kean was surprisingly unsuccessful was Macbeth. Just as there were times when his Romeo resembled his Hamlet, Kean's Macbeth was not always distinguishable from his Richard III. Playfair suggests that his Macbeth was much too tight and compact. Kean seemed too decisive and sure of himself, and not at all baffled by the supernatural, as Macbeth must appear.⁵² He was also

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 209-210.

⁵²Playfair, p. 127.

accused by Playfair of long and unnecessary pausing within the speeches. He looked as if he were studying the part rather than performing it, striving to make every word more emphatic than the last. Hazlitt asserts that Kean again delivered the text inaccurately.

Kean's Macbeth was a disappointment for several reasons. According to Playfair, everyone had wanted to see him in the role, not only because it was one of the most famous and difficult in Shakespeare, but also because Kemble's acting of it had served as the model in recent years. The public was looking for a new interpretation which would be vigorous and individual and provocative.⁵³ If anything, Kean's rendition was simply vigorous.

There were certain aspects which characterized his Macbeth. It was robust and potent enough to dominate the stage. It was also eager, and impulsive to the point of losing the smoother, more poetic strains within the character. His Macbeth assumed more credit for the idea of murdering Duncan than did former Macbeths.⁵⁴ For example, in reply to Lady Macbeth's question concerning Duncan "And when goes hence?" (IV, 497; I, v, 62), Mr. Kemble replied indifferently, "To-morrow, as he purposes" (IV, 497; I, v, 63); but Kean, with a hesitating glance, as if divulging a secret, whispered, "To-morrow, as he purposes." By means of a pause, he thus

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 128.

gave the impression that the idea had already occurred to him. From then on he appeared not the pawn of his wife's ambition, but the master of his own destiny.⁵⁵

One reason that Kean was more effective in the role of Richard than Macbeth may be that Richard III is structured as a one-man show; Richard is constantly the center of interest on stage, and other characters are always subordinate in his presence. Macbeth is more of an integral part of the action of the play and often shares the spotlight with other characters. In some instances, it is even necessary that he give the center of interest to another, as to Lady Macbeth in several of her speeches (Act I, Scene vii, for instance). Kean was always in command of the stage and demanded to be the center of attention. This desire was not purely egotistical, for it was the way his audience liked and expected to see him. But it was perhaps detrimental to the production of Macbeth.

Kean's costume may also have contributed to the failure of his representation, for it was too garish for the gravity of the character. His movements were too agile and swift, and he fought more like a modern fencing master than a Scottish chieftain of the eleventh century.⁵⁶

It seems somehow incongruous that the most fiery and dramatic actor of the nineteenth century was said to be

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Hazlitt, VIII, 207.

inadequate in a role for which an instinct for theatricality is essential. Kean was compelling in one particular scene, and Hazlitt calls it one of the two finest things Kean ever did. It was the segment just after Macbeth has murdered Duncan. Mr. Hazlitt says

it was heart-rending. The hesitation, the bewildered look, the coming to himself when he sees his hands bloody; the manner in which his voice clung to his throat, and choaked [sic] his utterance; his agony and tears, the force of nature overcome by passion--beggared description. It was a scene, which no one who saw it can ever efface from his recollection.⁵⁷

It would be hard to determine what was considered to be Kean's greatest role. For many, his Othello was the finest piece of acting in the world; for others, he never surpassed his Richard. There are even some votes in favor of his Lear. When Kean appeared in New York in 1820, the box office receipts increased with each of these four representations: Richard III, The Merchant of Venice, A New Way to Pay Old Debts, and King Lear.⁵⁸

Lear was one of his most controversial characterizations. Whereas some roles were clear-cut victories and others distinct failures, opinions concerning Lear are divided right down the middle. On April 24, 1820, he played the role for the first time and generated much excitement.⁵⁹ Many critics were enthusiastic, but several were not, and curiously

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Reid, p. 118.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

enough Hazlitt, who had been his greatest fan, was among them. Mr. Hazlitt was disappointed in the Nahum Tate version of the script, which Kean used,⁶⁰ and in addition, it was his theory that a successful execution of the play was next to impossible. The performance of Lear was thought to be the most genuine of his Shakespearean roles, the most unaffected, and the most untheatrical. His admirable points included staggering in with Cordelia in his arms in the last scene, and showing symptoms of light returning to his mind.

One of the more important secrets of an actor is in the ability to conserve energy and to give the audience the feeling that there are greater surges of passion to come. Richard Dana sensed that power in Kean's enactment of Lear. Dana says that in "his highest-wrought passion, when the limbs and muscles are alive and quivering, and his gestures hurried and vehement, nothing appears ranted or over-acted; because he makes us feel that with all this, there is something still within him struggling for utterance."⁶¹

⁶⁰Armstrong, p. 181.

⁶¹Richard Henry Dana, Poems and Prose Writings, 2 vols. (New York, 1850), I, 391.

CHAPTER III

ACTOR AND MAN

It is difficult in a study of Edmund Kean to divorce the actor from the man, and the man from the actor. Each of these two aspects of this genius of the English stage exerted a profound influence upon the other. Kean's success as an actor was a direct result of his own personality, and his personality, in turn, seemed to take on the violent and romantic traits of the characters he portrayed.

Edmund Kean was a man of many varied moods which were subject to change with little or no provocation, and the quiet introspection which suddenly burst into fits of rage was as famous off stage as it was on stage. He brought to each role a carefree spirit of adventure and romance which appeared to stem from his own background and personal experience. It was as if the character on stage was merely one projection of the polygonal character, Edmund Kean.

Once Kean achieved success in a part and became identified with a certain role, it seemed to be more difficult for him to let go of the character after a performance. William Cotton in his book, The Story of Drama in Exeter, states that Kean was once observed

between five and six o'clock in the morning presumably on his way home from some orgie [sic], staggering through the street, still clad in the costume of Richard III, in which character he had

appeared the previous night. He was always ready for his part when called, although not unfrequently he had to be fetched from some neighbouring inn, and revived by¹ an outward and unmeasured application of cold water.

In each of his roles Kean made definite statements about himself. He apparently based his conception of characters upon prior experiences. "His own quick, passionate sympathy saw effects where other actors had seen nothing."² The stubborn defiance of Shylock was the culmination of years of his personal acquaintance with rejection and suffering. He conceived the character with his own background in mind, as a persecuted martyr who, through the force of circumstances, became an avenger. His debut at Drury Lane was an act of revenge against all of the taunts and failures he had endured. Kean was relentless in his insistence on the representation of a dogmatic Jew in the spirit of an eye for an eye. He conveyed this spirit so realistically that it appeared to be his own philosophy and led a number of writers to insist that Kean was himself a Jew.³ They felt that no one but a Jew could so infuse Shylock with the terrifying majesty of his race.

¹William Cotton, The Story of Drama in Exeter (London, 1887), p. 28.

²Alice Ferry Wood, The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard the Third (New York, 1909), p. 121.

³Toby Lelyveld, Shylock on the Stage (Cleveland, 1960), p. 53.

Kean appeared to have first-hand knowledge of the personality traits and temperments of many of his characterizations, and the public was constantly amazed that with each new role, he spoke the lines not as if memorized from a page, but as if they sprung from personal convictions. His obsession with a certain character was infectious. Audiences became more engrossed with Kean's character than with the play as a whole.⁴ During his first American tour, The Merchant of Venice was a featured presentation, but the play was billed as Shylock.⁵ It had become a starring vehicle for Kean.

Kean has been called the first great "star" of the English stage,⁶ for after his debut as Shylock, entire productions were built around him; he became the focal point whether the play was Romeo and Juliet or Richard III. He was accused of having undertaken Shakespearean roles only for the purpose of exhibiting his own talents and also of abbreviating scenes in which he did not appear.⁷ But when one compares Kean's treatment of the plays with the usual liberties taken in the juggling of scenes, the omission of characters, and the alteration of endings (for example, Garrick's version of King Lear⁸), one must conclude that Kean

⁴Lelyveld, p. 54

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 53.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Cecil Ferard Armstrong, A Century of Great Actors (London, 1912), p. 67.

handled his scripts reverently and was not totally concerned with glorifying himself. In his production of The Merchant of Venice, only those characters which appeared in Act V were present at the final curtain.⁹ Shylock did not take a bow. But this absence is not as humble and praiseworthy as it may sound. More than likely, Kean left the theatre before the final act in order to beat the audience to the local tavern. This explanation would be a reasonable one.

Kean's drinking habits were established early in his life; one can assume that he, while rambling in the provinces, frequented the taverns along the way. His wife Mary became accustomed to his coming home in a stupor in the early hours of the morning.¹⁰ Quite often he would remain inebriated all day and be unfit for an evening performance. Mr. Cotton gives another incident which occurred in Exeter not long before his London debut:

Kean, as was unfortunately too frequently the case, had imbibed more stimulants than were compatible with a proper appearance on the stage, and a Mr. Hughes had to take his part. During the performance, Kean took possession of a private box, and at uncertain intervals, and always at the wrong time, interrupted the performance by shouting in his mocking, searching voice, 'Bravo! Hughes!'¹¹

⁹Lelyveld, p. 53.

¹⁰Giles Playfair, Kean (New York, 1939), p. 52.

¹¹Cotton, p. 30.

Kean's Richard was a restless and theatrical exhibition, a faithful picture of a man intoxicated with ambition, swaggering and scowling at everyone around him, and not unlike one of Kean's own drunken binges. It seemed at times as if he were playing Richard off stage and Kean on stage.

His personal life showed signs of a mad and adventurous temperament. He was passionately fond of horses and was a magnificent rider.¹² After he had achieved fame, he bought a horse which he named "Shylock." According to Armstrong, he would ride the animal up the steps of the Drury Lane Theatre late at night or very early in the morning and went for midnight gallops in the country, jumping over fences and trampling gardens.¹³

Kean was also wildly extravagant and recklessly generous. He spent a quarter of a million pounds in a little over ten years.¹⁴ His wasteful habits were probably a reaction to the poverty of his childhood. He lived well, but never in great style; he never had an imposing house and many servants as Garrick did.¹⁵ Being a "bohemian," Kean cared little for the refinements of the aristocracy.

After having worked his way to the top of his profession, Kean began to come into contact with the elite of society,

¹²Armstrong, p. 162.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁵Ibid.

but ironically it was this group that he so fervently detested. Unlike Garrick, he hated the tables of the great and noble; the only one whom he could tolerate was Byron.¹⁶ And even Lord Byron had to play second fiddle to a company of prize fighters. It was the cultured aristocrats who had raised Kean from a servile status to England's leading tragedian, but he preferred the unpretentious companionship of rogues and vagrants. Kean was not the only Englishman dismayed with the artificiality of society. John Keats, in a letter to his brothers, spoke of the pomposity of some gentlemen with whom he had dined:

They only served to convince me, how superior humor is to wit in respect to enjoyment--These men say things which make one start, without making one feel; they are all alike; their manners are all alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating and drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter--They talked of Kean and his low company--Would I were with that company instead of yours, said I to myself!¹⁷

On the fifth of May, 1815, the famous Wolf Club was founded as a bohemian haunt for actors and others interested in the drama.¹⁸ Kean, who felt comfortable among such a group, was instrumental in its creation. At first, it was an innocent gathering of artists, but it rapidly developed a sinister reputation. It was rumored to be a thieves' kitchen,

¹⁶Armstrong, p. 173.

¹⁷John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, edited by Maurice Buxton Forman (London, 1948), p. 71.

¹⁸Armstrong, p. 167.

according to Armstrong, where plots were hatched to frustrate any possibilities of successful rivalry to Kean. No member of the aristocracy was permitted to enter its portals, with the single exception of Byron, who is said to have been shocked at the divergences which took place there.¹⁹

Kean insisted upon being unconventional; it was useless to expect him to behave otherwise. Anyone who understood his genius was the first to recognize this eccentricity. During one of his visits to London, the great French tragedian Talma witnessed one of Kean's performances and said, "Polish and round him off, and he will be a perfect tragedian!"²⁰ But it was precisely this quality of the magnificent, unperfected gem which made Kean all the more brilliant.

Kean was endowed with many inadequacies as an actor. He was short, physically unimpressive, and had a strident voice.²¹ He was erratic, impudent, and given to impulsiveness. He was often violent and would rage at the slightest irritation. His vanity and ambitiousness were well known, and he scandalized the public when charged with immorality.²² He was not a great actor in spite of his vices, but rather because of them. In a review of Kean's performance as Zanga in Young's The Revenge, Hazlitt remarked, "The very vices of

¹⁹Ibid., p. 167.

²⁰Ibid., p. 178.

²¹Ibid., p. 214.

²²Percy Fitzgerald, A New History of the English Stage (London, 1882), p. 410.

Mr. Kean's general acting might almost be said to assist him in the part."²³ His inferior size and voice, his uncivilized and mischievous nature, and his questionable lineage contributed to his successful career.

The Romantic Age was not looking for the perfect figure of a man or a beautiful vision of life; it sought life as it is and man in his natural state. Kean provided this view in a kaleidoscope of passion, and more importantly, with total and unqualified honesty. Much of Kean's prosperity as an actor can be summed up in his sincerity. Hazlitt wrote, "He was like a man stung with rage, and bursting with stifled passions. His hurried motions . . . his wily caution, his cruel eye, his violent gestures, his hollow pauses, his abrupt transitions, were all in character."²⁴ When asked his opinion of Kean's acting, John Philip Kemble said, "Our styles of acting are so totally different, that you must not expect me to like Mr. Kean; but one thing I must say in his favor--he is at all times terribly in earnest."²⁵

An actor who seeks an honest interpretation of a character must be sensitive to the character's every emotional sensation, and beneath the arrogant veneer of Kean, there lay a profound sensitivity to life. Armstrong states that Kean claimed to be sensitive enough to see or feel a sneer across

²³William Hazlitt, "A View of the English Stage," in The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, edited by A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 12 vols. (London, 1903), VIII, 228.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 227-228. ²⁵Wood, p. 115.

Salisbury Plain.²⁶ This hypersensitivity, which was the cause of much of Kean's suffering, was also responsible for much of his proficiency, for it enabled him to sympathize with a variety of human conditions. Kean did not lose himself in order to become another person; he used himself in a role and called upon experiences from his past to convey emotions.²⁷

According to Playfair, Kean, like Garrick, never depended on the inspiration or the emotion of the moment for his effects, but everything was the result of careful planning and logic. He would work for hours on a single line. It seems inconsistent that a man who was so undisciplined off stage could be so disciplined on stage. Mr. Playfair provides an explanation. He states that Kean was industrious when working on something he enjoyed, but had no patience outside his art.

Kean loved his art, but more than his art, he loved himself.²⁸ An exorbitant pride, coupled with his sensitive nature, made him quick to take offense. When invited to the homes of nobility he refused to go and, as he put it, "be stared at like a wild animal."²⁹ His false pride led him to behave irrationally and even insult his audience, as

²⁶Armstrong, p. 210.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., p. 211.

²⁹Ibid., p. 212.

at Birmingham when, as Sir Giles Overreach, he gave his daughter's hand to her lover, with the words, "Take her, and the Birmingham audience with her."³⁰

While performing at Guernsey during his years as a strolling player, Kean became so enraged at the derision of the audience, that he turned his back on them out of spite and continued to act. This reaction made the spectators only more perturbed.³¹ But later in his career, the same technique of facing away from the audience (notably executed in Othello),³² was heralded as being an ingenious touch of naturalism.³³

Armstrong states that the actor was a portrayer of moods and passions rather than of character,³⁴ and seemed incapable of reproducing emotions which he himself had not experienced. His inadequacy in the closet scene in Hamlet is a good example. He had never known what it was to have a mother's love, or to care tenderly for a mother, and in this stirring scene he spoke to her in harsh anger rather than in the terribly sad necessity which bids Hamlet speak and emphasize the truth.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 154.

³² Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello (Los Angeles, 1961), p. 66.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Armstrong, p. 165.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 215.

He also had difficulty in delivering a line out of context and on the spur of the moment, as was illustrated in an incident which occurred during Kean's first American tour.

John Neagle, the artist, had received a commission to paint portraits of certain distinguished actors in New York . . . he was invited to a dinner party at the house of Mr. Foot . . . a number of gentlemen were present, and after the cloth had been removed, it was proposed that Mr. Kean should give Neagle a sitting, the artist having taken his materials with him for that purpose. The character chosen was Richard III, and the passage to be illustrated was 'I can smile and smile, and murder while I smile.' [sic] The artist was placed immediately opposite him at the dinner table, that he might have an opportunity of studying the countenance of the great tragedian. Kean called his servant to unstrap his trunks and get out his dress and ornaments for the character. Meanwhile, Neagle had prepared his paints and canvas, and asked Kean to have the goodness to call up a look expressive of the sentiment of the part. With every desire to aid the artist, Kean felt great embarrassment at the emergency, declaring that he could not do it, and saying to Neagle, 'Let us have a glass of brandy and water together.' After which, he made an effort or two, and failing, he remarked: 'I'll be d----d if I could ever stand up like a school-boy and recite a passage unattached from its meaning or connection.'

Neagle seemed surprised at this, and observed: 'Sir, you have been accustomed to face immense houses in Europe and in this country; what is the reason you cannot call up the requisite expression in this small circle?'

The actor replied: 'It is not affection, sir; the simple truth is, I cannot express what I do not feel. Let us have more brandy and water.'³⁶

Several conclusions can be drawn from the fact that Kean could not express what he did not feel. His statement indicates that he was actually experiencing the passions

³⁶Thomas Fitzgerald, "John Neagle, the Artist," Lippincott's Magazine, I (May, 1868), 481.

which he displayed on stage; he was not merely acting his roles, but he was re-enacting emotions and experiences from his past. The sudden outbursts of feeling were not all stage technique; they were the way in which Kean himself released his repressed emotions. In a way, Kean was the mouthpiece for a generation whose emotions had been repressed during the classicism of the eighteenth century. Kean's statement also concludes that because of the variety of his roles, he himself was acquainted with a wide range of emotional climates.

He knew the malignant joy of Richard III's entrance as well as the hopeless despondency of Shylock's exit. For example, in Richard's opening soliloquy, the line "Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths; Our bruised arms hung up for monuments" (VII, 4; I, 1, 5-6) was charged with the sincerity of an actor who had worked all of his life for an opportunity to shine and was at last reaping the benefits of his struggle. The numerous defeats which Kean suffered as an actor before his London debut made him well acquainted with Shylock's despair and enhanced his reading of the line, "I am not well" (III, 147; IV, 1, 150).

One learns even more about Kean from what he was not able to express or feel. His failure in the role of Romeo indicates an inability to feel romantic sentiment or true affection. Kean experienced a number of infatuations in his life, but never a permanent love. He was always more infatuated with himself. It might even be argued that Kean

was more successful in portraying characters who were enamored with little outside of themselves. Kean was less than triumphant in Macbeth because he constantly demanded to be the center of interest on stage. He was simply expressing the attitude in which he felt the most secure. One can assume that off stage as well, he was most comfortable when he was the center of attention, as with his companions at the Wolf Club. Kean's delivery of an aside, such as Macbeth's response to the appointment of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, "That is a step, On which I must fall down, or else o'er-leap, For in my way it lies" (IV, 489; I, iv, 54-56), provided an excellent opportunity for Kean to "take the stage," and it can be assumed that he spoke directly to the audience, as opposed to letting them overhear his thoughts.

Kean was able to recognize and connect the thoughts within the printed words of Shakespeare, and he could convey these thoughts because of their close association with the emotional tides in his own life. In the fourth act of King Lear, Gloucester says, "O, let me kiss that hand" (IX, 565; IV, vi, 149), to which Lear responds, "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality" (IX, 565; IV, vi, 150). Kean's own knowledge of humanity made the line ring with a truth that no other actor could have imparted.

Kean must have had little trouble in being able to feel the emotional tensions which permeate Othello. The stormy passions that charged his acting of the Moor troubled Kean's

private life, where the play seemed to haunt him. He became tragically involved in a sensational sexual scandal. Mrs. Cox, a woman of society and the wife of Alderman Cox, caught Kean's attention by fainting during a performance of his Othello.³⁷ He later pursued her so overtly that her husband finally sued Kean for criminal conversation with her. Kean lost. He was disgraced as an adulterer. His wife separated from him and never rejoined him, although in his failing days he begged her to return. Often drunk, and with health running out, he had to act for his very life. After his trial for adultery, audiences at first found Othello's laments on a wife's unfaithfulness mocking in Kean's mouth, and they jeered and hooted.³⁸ He beat them down with the sheer smash of his personality and played on until his death.³⁹

Kean had little to say about his art and gave few insights into his methods of approaching a role. Hawkins states that on one occasion, during an interrogation by philosophers and critics whom he met in Edinburgh,

He maintained that Shakespeare was his own interpreter, by the intensity and wonderful genius of his language. Shakespeare, he continued, was a study, his deep and scrutinizing research into human nature, and his sublime and pathetic muse, were to be comprehended only by a capacity alive to his mighty purpose. He had no rhetorician's laws to expound. If a higher estimate was at any

³⁷Armstrong, p. 190.

³⁸Rosenberg, p. 68.

³⁹Ibid.

time placed upon his performances than upon those of some others who fulfilled the severe calling of the actor, he thought it might be due in part to the devotion which he bestowed on the author, and the conceptions engendered by reflection. I have overlooked, he said, the schoolmen, and while assume no lofty claims, I have thought more of intonation than of gesticulation. It is the utterance of human feelings which rises superior to the rules which the professor of rhetoric enjoins. It is the sympathy of mental impression that acts. I forgot the affectations of the art, and relied upon the emotions of the soul. It is human nature that gives his promptings.⁴⁰

Hillebrand cites a review of Kean, written by a man named Betterton, which appeared in the Philadelphia National Gazette in 1821. In Hillebrand's opinion, it is the most valuable description of Kean's method to be found anywhere.

Nature has endowed Mr. Kean with a vigorous genius, . . . He can penetrate himself thoroughly with his part, and seem engrossed by it, so as to counterfeit a perfect abstraction from the audience. In every character which I have seen him impersonate, he furnishes at least some specimens of what is called brilliant execution; some felicities of conception and expression; some manifestations of superior power and consummate skill, that have an electric effect, and give universal satisfaction.

He is eminently successful in situations which admit of intense fire and vivacity of action; inarticulate passion, or rapid alternations of countenance and tone. Sudden and strong vicissitudes of feeling are admirably portrayed in the movement of his features. His eye conveys the most opposite meaning and sensation with singular quickness of transition and versatility of eloquence.⁴¹

⁴⁰F. W. Hawkins, The Life of Edmund Kean, 2 vols. (London, 1869), I, 96-98.

⁴¹Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, Edmund Kean (New York, 1933), pp. 367-371.

Kean's ability to convey quick and distinct emotional transitions is evidence of an extraordinary control and flexibility. In light of Kean's statement concerning the fact that he can express only that which he feels, the conclusion can be drawn that his emotions were as subject to abrupt changes off stage. One approach of the Romantic Movement was to shock an audience from the stagnant complacency of eighteenth-century standards. Kean's spectators were paralyzed by his stops and starts, and they marveled at the precision and sincerity of his transitions.

The alternation of the roles of Iago and Othello on consecutive nights suggests that Kean had an uncanny aptitude for immersing himself in a personality, and then promptly dissolving it. In order to accomplish this alternation of characters with the sincerity for which Kean was noted, he had to employ two very different extensions of his personality. This leads to the conclusion that there were possibly multiple extensions of Kean's own personality.

Kean possessed many habits and traits which were incorporated successfully into his characterizations. Playfair states that one mannerism of Kean was "a peculiar motion of his lips, as if he was chewing or swallowing."⁴² In the second scene of Act four of Richard III, Sir William Catesby remarks, "The king is angry; see, he gnaws his lip"

⁴²Playfair, p. 38.

(VII, 113; IV, ii, 28). This is conclusive evidence that Kean's personal habits assisted him in conveying the frustrations and idiosyncrasies of his characters.

The following account of another conversation between John Neagle and Kean provides further knowledge of the actor's techniques.

In conversation, on another occasion, on Kean's style of acting, particularly in Othello, Neagle said: 'Allow me, sir, to ask you why you make yourself so monotonous in your soliloquies? I know you have a reason for it, and wish you would give it to me.

His reply was: 'Shakespeare never intended that those soliloquies should be great points in the hands of the actor. A play is like a picture-- you as an artist, know that: the same principles govern both. I see, from your own pictures, you do not put everything in bright light. I ask you, sir, do you not require bright lights for some portions, lesser lights for others, and obscurity for others?

The artist said: 'Yes, no pictorial effect can be produced without attention to these important principles.

Kean then resumed: 'I know the compass of my voice; I know the notes that are good, and those which are indifferent; were I to throw the whole power of my voice upon those soliloquies, which are often merely explanatory, I would certainly fail when I arrived at some leading point of the author; for an author must give his principal characters, and secondary characters, and supernumeraries to make a whole. So also, does he give you principal parts of a principal character, which should receive the brightest lights, and secondary parts to be under some subordination of light, with portions also to be thrown into partial obscurity. These bright lights are the proper emphasis to produce an effect. We should cease to be astonished at the thunder if it thundered all the time.⁴³

Although Kean seldom spoke of the techniques by which he developed his manner of execution, his life-style spoke for

⁴³Fitzgerald, p. 482 - 483.

him. He spilled his life out upon the stage and charged his characterizations with all the fire and turbulence of his own existence. He brought to the roles of Shakespeare a brilliance and an urgency that stunned the nineteenth century. He helped establish a naturalistic style of acting throughout the burgeoning Romantic Movement. He may have been, as Cecil Armstrong suggests in his book, A Century of Great Actors, "the greatest actor that ever trod the English boards,"⁴⁴ and one thing remains certain. If he was electrical in his impact as he blazed across the stage, he was every bit as passionate and fiery in real life, and his death was as tragic as his characterizations.

Kean's final exit from the stage had the drama of Othello's own tragedy. His last performance was in the role of the Moor, playing opposite his son Charles' Iago. Marvin Rosenberg, in The Masks of Othello, quotes Barry Cornwall's account of the event.

The evening of the play, Charles went to his father's dressing room and found him shivering and exceedingly weak. 'I am very ill,' he said; 'I am afraid that I shall not be able to act.' But he went on. After the first scene . . . [he] was very feeble . . . brandy and water was administered to him . . . He held up until the celebrated 'farewell,' but on concluding it,--after making one or two feeble steps towards his son and attempting the speech, 'Villian, be sure,' etc., his head sank on his son's shoulder, and the tragedian's acting was at an end. He was able to groan out a few words in Charles' ear, 'I am dying--speak to them for me;' after which (the audience refusing in kindness to hear an apology), he was borne from the stage.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Armstrong, p. 218.

⁴⁵Rosenberg, p. 69.

APPENDIX

A CHRONOLOGY OF KEAN'S ROLES

| Year | Role | Play | Author |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1791 | Cupid | <u>Cydon</u> | David Garrick adaptation |
| 1794 | goblin | <u>Macbeth</u> | William Shakespeare |
| 1796 | Robin | <u>The Merry Wives of Windsor</u> | William Shakespeare |
| 1797 | page | <u>Love Makes a Man or The Fop's Fortune</u> | Colley Cibber |
| 1805 | Octavian | <u>The Mountaineers</u> | George Colman, Jr. |
| | John | <u>The Spoiled Child</u> | Isaac Bickerstaffe |
| | Wilfred | <u>The Iron Chest</u> | George Colman |
| | Jerry Sneak | <u>The Mayor of Garrat</u> | Samuel Foote |
| | David | <u>The Rivals</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan |
| | Henry Moreland | <u>The Heir at Law</u> | George Colman |
| | Dermot | <u>Poor Soldier</u> | John O'Keefe |
| | Sir Philip Madelane | <u>A Bold Stroke for a Wife</u> | Susanna Centlivre |
| | Osmyn | <u>Mourning Bride (with Sara Siddons)</u> | William Congreve |
| | 1806 | Norval | <u>Douglas</u> |
| fifer | | <u>The Battle of Hexham</u> | George Colman |
| John | | <u>The Heir at Law</u> | George Colman |
| Peter | | <u>The Iron Chest</u> | George Colman |
| country servant | | <u>John Bull</u> | George Colman |
| young goatherd | | <u>The Mountaineers</u> | George Colman |
| Warner | | <u>The Poor Gentle- man</u> | George Colman |
| Carney | | <u>Ways and Means</u> | George Colman |
| Dibbs | | <u>Review</u> | George Colman |
| Peiro | | <u>Tale of Mystery</u> | Thomas Holcroft |
| clown | | <u>Fortune's Frolic</u> | John Till Allingham |
| fiddler | | <u>Speed the Plough</u> | Thomas Marton |
| landlord | | <u>Prisoner at Large</u> | John O'Keefe |
| Trueman | <u>Clandestine Marriage</u> | George Colman, Sr. | |
| countryman | <u>Five Miles Off</u> | Thomas J. Dibdin | |

| Year | Role | Play | Author |
|------|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1806 | Rosencrantz | <u>Hamlet</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Alguazil | <u>She Would and She</u> <u>Would Not</u> | Colley Cibber |
| 1807 | Gratiano | <u>The Merchant of</u> <u>Venice</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Lieutenant of the Tower | <u>Richard III</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Major Fitzharding | <u>The Iron Chest</u> | George Colman |
| | Hephestion | <u>Alexander the</u> <u>Great</u> | Nathaniel Lee |
| | Lenox | <u>Macbeth</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Bob Acres | <u>The Rivals</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan |
| | Caleb Quotem | <u>The Review</u> | George Colman |
| | Frederick | <u>Lovers' Vows</u> | Elizabeth Inchbald |
| | Dr. Lenitine | <u>The Prize</u> | Prince Hoare |
| | Double Jug | <u>The School for</u> <u>Friends</u> | Marianne Chambers |
| | tailor | <u>Catherine and</u> <u>Petruchio</u> | Garrick's version of S. |
| | Hastings | <u>Jane Shore</u> | Nicholas Rowe |
| | Florian | <u>The Young Hussar</u> | William Dimond |
| 1808 | Henry | <u>Speed the Plough</u> | Thomas Marton |
| | Don Leon | <u>Plot and Counter-</u> <u>plot</u> | Charles Kemble |
| | Joseph Surface | <u>The School for</u> <u>Scandal</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan |
| | Alonzo | <u>The Bridal Spectre</u> <u>or Alonzo and</u> <u>Imogene</u> | Thomas J. Dibdin |
| | Frederick | <u>School of Reform</u> | Thomas Marton |
| | Durimel | <u>The Point of</u> <u>Honour</u> | Mercier (trans. by Charles Kemble) |
| | Sir John Loverule | <u>The Devil to Pay</u> <u>or The Wines</u> <u>Metamorphosed</u> | Charles Coffey |
| | Count Egmont | <u>The Siege of St.</u> <u>Quintin</u> | Theodore Hook |
| | Cleveland | <u>The School for</u> <u>Authors</u> | John Tobin |
| | Harold | <u>Peeping Tom of</u> <u>Coventry</u> | John O'Keefe |
| | Lord Austencourt | <u>Man and Wife or</u> <u>More Secrets</u> <u>Than One</u> | Samuel James Arnold |
| 1809 | Noodle | <u>Tom Thumb</u> | Henry Fielding |
| | Pawantowski | <u>La Perouse or The</u> <u>Desolate Island</u> | John Fawcett |

| Year | Role | Play | Author |
|------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 1809 | Megrim | <u>Blue Devils</u> | George Colman |
| | Scruple | <u>Ways and Means</u> | George Colman |
| | Mandiville | <u>The False Friend</u> | J. C. Cross |
| | Petruchio | <u>Catherine and Petruchio</u> | Garrick's version |
| | Dan Carlas | <u>Lovers' Quarrels</u> | Thomas King |
| | Captain Seymour | <u>The Irishman in London</u> | William Macready |
| | Edgar | <u>King Lear</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Friday | <u>Robinson Crusoe</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan |
| | Faulkland | <u>The Rivals</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan |
| | 1810 | Young Sadhay | <u>The Young Quaker</u> |
| Tekeli | | <u>Tekeli</u> | Theodore Hook |
| Lealto | | <u>False and True</u> | Rev. Moultru |
| Daran | | <u>The Exile</u> | Frederick Reynolds |
| Chimpanzee | | <u>La Perouse or The Desolate Island</u> | John Fawcett |
| 1811 | Job Thornberry | <u>John Bull</u> | George Colman |
| | Frederick | <u>The Poor Gentle- man</u> | George Colman |
| | Leo | <u>Leo or The Gipsy</u> | James Sheridan Knowles |
| | Sylvester Daggerwood | <u>Sylvester Daggerwood, or The Dunstable Actor</u> | George Colman |
| 1812 | Rosenberg | <u>Ella Rosenberg</u> | James Kenney |
| | Frederick | <u>Of Age To-morrow</u> | Thomas J. Dibdin |
| | Kajah | <u>The Savages or Love and Hatred</u> | (unknown) |
| | Don Felix | <u>The Wonder</u> | Susanna Centlivre |
| | Beverly | <u>The Gamester</u> | Edward Moore |
| | Harry Darnton | <u>The Road to Ruin</u> | Thomas Holcroft |
| | Malvogli | <u>The Doubtful Son</u> | William Dimond |
| | Reuben Glenray | <u>Town and Country</u> | Thomas Marton |
| | Gossamer | <u>Laugh While You Can</u> | Frederick Reynolds |
| | Doricourt | <u>The Belle's Strategem</u> | Hannah Cowley |
| | Young Marlowe | <u>She Stoops to Conquer</u> | Oliver Goldsmith |
| | Count Belino | <u>The Devil's Brigade</u> | Samuel James Arnold |
| | Tristram Fickle | <u>The Weathercock</u> | John Till Allingham |
| | Don Christoval | <u>The Student of Salamanca</u> | Robert Francis Jameson |
| | Mr. Ferment | <u>School of Reform</u> | Thomas Marton |

| Year | Role | Play | Author | |
|---|--------------------------|---|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 1812 | Rugantino | <u>Rugantino</u> | Monk Lewis | |
| | Young Rapid | <u>Cure for the Heartache</u> | Thomas Marton | |
| | Brouzely | <u>Wines As They Were and Maids as They Are</u> | Elizabeth Inchbald | |
| | Don Alvar | <u>Remorse</u> | Samuel Taylor Coleridge | |
| 1813 | Charles Surface | <u>The School for Scandal</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan | |
| | Cato | <u>The Savages</u> | Joseph Addison | |
| | Fitz-Edward | <u>The Sons of Erin</u> | (unknown) | |
| | George Barnwell | <u>The London Merchant or George Barnwell</u> | George Lilla | |
| | Harlequin | <u>Harlequin's Choice</u> | (unknown) | |
| 1814 | Jaffeir | <u>Venice Preserved</u> | Thomas Otway | |
| | Charles I | <u>The Royal Oak</u> | William Dimond | |
| | Shylock | <u>The Merchant of Venice</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| | Richard III | <u>Richard III</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| | Hamlet | <u>Hamlet</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| | Othello | <u>Othello</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| (All of Kean's Shakespearean roles were performed earlier in the provinces, but are listed here in the chronological order of his London debuts.) | Iago | <u>Othello</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| | Luke | <u>Riches (City Madam)</u> | Philip Massinger | |
| | 1815 | Macbeth | <u>Macbeth</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Romeo | <u>Romeo and Juliet</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| | Penruddock | <u>The Wheel of Fortune</u> | Richard Cumberland | |
| | Zanga | <u>The Revenge</u> | Edward Young | |
| | Abel Drugger | <u>The Tobacconist (from The Alchemist)</u> | Ben Jonson | |
| | Richard II | <u>Richard II</u> | William Shakespeare | |
| | Egbert | <u>Egbert</u> | Wilmot | |
| | Leon | <u>Rule a Wife and Have a Wife</u> | Beaumont and Fletcher | |
| 1816 | Bajaret | <u>Tamerlane</u> | Nicholas Rowe | |
| | Duke Aranza | <u>Honeymoon or How to Rule a Wife</u> | John Tobin | |
| | Gaswin | <u>Beggar's Bush</u> | Beaumont and Fletcher | |
| | Sir Giles Overreach | <u>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</u> | Philip Massinger | |
| Sforza | <u>The Duke of Milan</u> | Philip Massinger | | |

| Year | Role | Play | Author |
|------|-----------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1816 | Bertram | <u>Bertram</u> | Charles Robert Maturin |
| | Timon | <u>Timon of Athens</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Manuel | <u>Manuel</u> | Charles Robert Maturin |
| | Sir Edward Martimer | <u>The Iron Chest</u> | George Colman |
| | Oroonoka | <u>Oroonoka, The African Prince</u> | Thomas Sotherne |
| | Selim | <u>Bride of Abydos</u> | William Dimond |
| | Eustace de St. Pierre | <u>Surrender of Calais</u> | George Colman |
| | Kitely | <u>Every Man in His Humour</u> | Ben Jonson |
| | Gadwin | <u>The Merchant of Bruges</u> | Beaumont and Fletcher |
| 1817 | Virginius | <u>Virginius</u> | George Soane |
| | Barabas | <u>The Jew of Malta</u> | Christopher Marlowe |
| | Norval | <u>Doublas</u> | John Home |
| | King John | <u>King John</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Alexander the Great | <u>Alexander the Great</u> | Nathaniel Lee |
| | Brutus | <u>Brutus or The Fall of Tarquin</u> | John Howard Payne |
| | Richard | <u>Richard Duke of York from Henry VI</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Omreah | <u>The Carab Chief</u> | Horace Twiss |
| | Malvesi | <u>The Dwarf of Naples</u> | George Soane |
| | Rolla | <u>Pizarro</u> | Richard Brinsley Sheridan |
| | Eugene | <u>Switzlerland</u> | Jane Porter |
| 1818 | Orestes | <u>The Distressed Mother</u> | Ambrose Philips |
| 1820 | Coriolanus | <u>Coriolanus</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | De Montfort | <u>De Montfort</u> | Joanna Baillie |
| | Sir Pertinax | <u>The Man of the World</u> | Charles Macklin |
| | Earl Osmond | <u>Castle Spectre</u> | Matthew Gregory (Monk) Lewis |
| | Wolsey | <u>Henry VIII</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | Paris | <u>The Roman Actor</u> | Philip Massinger |
| | Isaac | <u>Isaac of York</u> | George Soane |
| 1821 | Tom Tug | <u>The Waterman or The First of August</u> | Charles Dibdin |
| 1822 | Lothair and Guiscard | <u>Adelgitha</u> | Matthew Gregory (Monk) Lewis |
| | Jaiffer and Pierre | <u>Venice Preserved</u> | Thomas Otway |

| Year | Role | Play | Author |
|------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1822 | Alexander and Clytus | <u>Rival Queens</u> | (unknown) |
| | Posthumus and Iachimo | <u>Cymbeline</u> | William Shakespeare |
| | (alternated with Charles Young) | | |
| | Owen | <u>Owen, Prince of Powys</u> | (unknown) |
| 1824 | Masaniello | <u>Fisherman of Naples</u> | George Soane |
| | Ben Nazir | <u>Ben Nazir the Saracen</u> | Colley Grattan |

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