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# Keats on Kean: An Early Version

W. H. Bond

ON 18 December 1817, at the request of John Hamilton Reynolds, John Keats went to the theater at Drury Lane to see and criticize Edmund Kean as Luke Traffic in *Riches, or the Wife and Brother*.<sup>1</sup> The play was an adaptation, generally acknowledged to be weak, by Sir James Bland Burges of Massinger's *City Madam*. Keats's review was published in the *Champion* of 28 December, in a manner not altogether to his liking, for it was "so badly punctuated that, you perceive, I am determined never to write more without some care in that particular."<sup>2</sup>

Keats wrote and published only two more pieces of theatrical criticism — one of a play so bad that it offered scope for little more than a summary of the plot and a measure of ridicule, and the other of a pantomime of which he remarked, "be it good or bad, a child should write a critique upon it."<sup>3</sup> The article on Kean, although brief, is his most substantial essay in the field. It is of incidental interest that Keats echoes Coleridge's "Christabel" — "a thing to dream of, not to tell" — only a year after its publication.

A draft of the article has survived in Richard Woodhouse's book of manuscript transcripts of Keats's letters, formerly in the Crewe Collection and now in the Houghton Library through the gift in 1970 of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. It is evidently an early version, shorter than that published, and it appears to have escaped attention hitherto. While it affords no great revelations, anything of Keats's is worth observation during the period of its evolution, especially when he has expressed dissatisfaction with its printed appearance.

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, 1958), I, 191.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, I, 196.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of John Keats* (Hampstead Edition), ed. H. Buxton Forman (New York, 1939), V, 256. The review of Kean appears in the same volume, pp. 227-232; of John Dillon's *Retribution, or The Chieftain's Daughter*, pp. 247-251; and of *Harlequin's Vision, or The Feast of the Statue* (entitled by Forman *Don Giovanni*, of which it was a burlesque), pp. 252-256. An article from the *Champion* on Kean in *Richard Duke of York*, reprinted on pp. 233-246, is not by Keats.

No doubt he was particularly sensitive about such matters, because in the review itself he maintained that "the very letters and points of charactered language show like hieroglyphics of beauty."<sup>4</sup> However, it may seem ironic that his complaint was directed against the punctuation, for as all who have dealt with Keats's autograph will testify, his punctuation tends to be ambiguous, with one point looking like another and a dash often serving for all. Woodhouse's transcript is probably faithful in this respect, and can hardly be said to take us much closer to Keats's intention. But we may suspect that at least one sentence in the *Champion* version was an editorial addition, and perhaps the tinkering went still further; for example, in the first sentence did the editor urge Keats to change the arresting adjective *paperchamber'd* to the less vivid *delicate*? In many ways the earlier version seems the stronger.

The text from the *Champion*<sup>5</sup> and that from the Woodhouse letter-book are here printed vis-a-vis for comparison. The Woodhouse transcript is in the hand of an amanuensis. As usual, Woodhouse has inserted revisions and corrections in his neat hand, using red ink; I have preferred the text as he emended it, noting the discarded readings of the amanuensis below. The few errors of transcription corrected by the amanuensis himself have been silently ignored.

Mr Kean [Woodhouse version]

"In these our unimaginative days" *habeas corpus'd* out of all Wonder, uncertainty, and fear, the fire side, paper-chamber'd<sup>a</sup> gilded days—these un-dangerous, puny<sup>b</sup> merely comfortable days—Kean in an old play makes us very grateful to him.<sup>c</sup> He is a relict of Romance: a piece of<sup>d</sup> posthumous<sup>e</sup> Chivalry: and always seems just arrived from the Camp of Charlemagne—In Richard he is his Swords dear Cousin—In Hamlet his footing is germane to the Platform—

Mr. Kean [*Champion* version]

"In our unimaginative days"—*Habeas Corpus'd* as we are, out of all wonder, uncertainty and fear;—in these fireside, delicate, gilded days,—these days of sickly safety and comfort, we feel very grateful to Mr. Kean for giving us some excitement by his old passion in one of the old plays. He is a relict of romance;—a Posthumous ray of chivalry, and always seems just arrived from the camp of Charlemagne. In Richard he is his sword's dear cousin; in Hamlet his footing is germain to the platform. In Macbeth his eye laughs siege to scorn; in Othello

<sup>4</sup> Hampstead Edition, V, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Here reprinted from the Hampstead Edition.

Therefore was he greeted with enthusiasm on his reappearance in Richard — therefore his Sickness will ever be a public misfortune. His return was full of power; he is not the Man to "bate a jot." On Thursday Evening he acted Luke, as far as the stage will admit, to perfection: the <sup>s</sup> Hypocritical self-possession; the <sup>a</sup> caution, — and afterwards the Pride, Cruelty, and selfishness — Luke appears to us a Man incapable of imagining to the extreme heinousness of Crimes, to him they are mere magic Lantern horrors: he is at no trouble to deaden his conscience.

Mr Keans two characters of this week, comprising the utmosts [*sic*] of quiet and turbulence, invite us to say a few words on his act<sup>s</sup> in general.

Amid his thousand excellencies, that which at this moment most weighs upon us is the elegance gracefulness and music of his elocution — a melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual: — the spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted Language show like hieroglyphics of Beauty; the mysterious signs of immortal free masonry! — "a thing to dream of, not to tell!" The sensual Life of verse comes warm from the lips of Kean; and to one learned in Shakespearian hieroglyphic — learned in the spiritual portion of those lines to which Kean adds a sensual grandeur, — his tongue must be the "honey of Hybla".

he is welcome to Cyprus. In Timon he is of the palace — of Athens — of the woods, and is worthy to sleep in a grave "which once a day with its embossed froth, the turbulent surge doth cover." For all these was he greeted with enthusiasm on his reappearance in Richard; for all these, his sickness will ever be a public misfortune. His return was full of power. He is not the man to "bate a jot." On Thursday evening, he acted *Luke* in *Riches*, as far as the stage will admit, to perfection. In the hypocritical self-possession, in the caution, and afterwards the pride, cruelty, and avarice, Luke appears to us a man incapable of imagining to the extreme heinousness of crimes. To him, they are mere magic-lantern horrors. He is at no trouble to deaden his conscience.

Mr. Kean's two characters of this week, comprising as they do, the utmost of quiet and turbulence, invite us to say a few words on his acting in general. We have done this before, but we do it again without remorse.\* Amid his numerous excellencies, the one which at this moment most weighs upon us, is the elegance, gracefulness, and music of elocution. A melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual. The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty; — the mysterious signs of an immortal freemasonry! "A thing to dream of, not to tell!" The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean, and to one learned in Shakespearian hieroglyphics, — learned in the spiritual portion of those lines to which Kean adds a sensual grandeur: his tongue must seem to have robbed "the

There is an indescribable *gusto* in his voice — by which we know that the utterer is thinking of the past and the future, while speaking of the moment — When he says in *Othello* “put up your bright swords, or the dew will rust them —” we feel that his throat had commanded, where swords were thick as reeds, from eternal *risque*, he speaks as though his body were unassailable.

“Be stirring with the Lark to morrow, gentle Norfolk” comes from him, as through a morning Atmosphere towards which he yearns. We could cite a volume of such like *passages*, and dote upon them with our remarks, — but as an end must come, we will content ourselves with one more syllable —

In those lines of impatience to the night, who “like a foul and ugly Witch, doth limp so tediously away”. Surely this intense power of anatomizing the passion of every syllable — of taking to himself the wings of verse — is the means by which he becomes a storm with such fiery decision; — And by which, with a still deeper charm, he “does his *spiriting* \* gently” — Other Actors are continually thinking of their Sum-total effect throughout a play; Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without the shadow of a thought about anything else. —

Hybla bees, and left them honeyless.” There is an indescribable *gusto* in his voice, by which we feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and the future, while speaking of the instant. When he says in *Othello* “put up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them,” we feel that his throat had commanded where swords were as thick as reeds. From eternal risk, he speaks as though his body were unassailable. Again, his exclamation of “blood, blood, blood!” is direful and slaughterous to the deepest degree, the very words appear stained and gory. His nature hangs over them, making a prophetic repast. His voice is loosed on them, like the wild dog on the savage relics of an eastern conflict; and we can distinctly hear it “gorging, and growling o’er carcass and limb.” In Richard, “Be stirring with the lark to-morrow, gentle Norfolk!” comes from him, as through the morning atmosphere, towards which he yearns. We could cite a volume of such immortal scraps, and dote upon them with our remarks; but as an end must come, we will content ourselves with a single syllable. It is in those lines of impatience to the night who, “like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp so tediously away.” Surely this intense power of anatomizing the passion of every syllable — of taking to himself the wings of verse, is the mean[s] by which he becomes a storm with such fiery decision; and by which, with a still deeper charm, he “does his *spiriting* gently.” Other actors are continually thinking of their sum-total effect throughout a play. Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of a thought about any thing else. He feels his being as deeply as

Although so many times he has lost the Battle of Bosworth field, we can easily conceive him really expectant of Victory, and a different termination to the Piece — Yet are we like Moths about a Candle in speaking of this great Actor —

We will say no more. — Kean! Kean have a carefulness of your health; and

cheer us a little in these days; for romance lives but in Books; the Goblin is driven from the Heath, and the Rainbow is robb'd of its mystery —

*Note.* W = words corrected by Woodhouse; A = text by amanuensis before Woodhouse marked deletions.

<sup>a</sup> *paperchamber'd*] W.

<sup>b</sup> *undangerous, puny*] W.

<sup>c</sup> *makes us feel very grateful to himself*] A.

<sup>d</sup> *piece of*] W.

<sup>e</sup> *a posthumous ray of Chivalry*] A.

<sup>f</sup> *Platform — In Luke his Smile is prologue to all that follows —*] A.

<sup>g</sup> *In the*] A.

<sup>h</sup> *In the*] A.

<sup>i</sup> A. misspells as *indescribable*.

<sup>j</sup> *like*] W.

<sup>k</sup> A. misspells or misreads as *spiriting*.

Wordsworth, or any other of our intellectual monopolists. From all his comrades he stands alone, reminding us of him, whom Dante has so finely described in his Hell:

“And sole apart retir'd, the Soldan fierce.”

Although so many times he has lost the battle of Bosworth Field, we can easily conceive him really expectant of victory, and a different termination of the piece. Yet we are as moths about a candle in speaking of this great man. “Great, let us call him, for he conquered us!” We will say no more. Kean! Kean! have a carefulness of thy health, an in-nursed respect for thy own genius, a pity for us in these cold and enfeebling times! Cheer us a little in the failure of our days! for romance lives but in books. The goblin is driven from the heath, and the rainbow is robbed of its mystery!

\* Surely an editorial addition.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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MARY HYDE is a member of the University Library Visiting Committee of the Harvard Board of Overseers, a Trustee of the Pierpont Morgan Library, a member of the Council of the Friends of the Columbia University Libraries, and a member of the Yale Library Associates; some of her other activities as author and collector have been mentioned in the "Contributors" department for January, April, and July 1972.

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