Australia's Worst Actor? The Life, Art and Business Practices of Mr. Henry Kemble of Drury Lane, Monopolylogist

Robert Jordan

Henry Kemble is a figure on the margins of theatre history who has taken on a legendary quality. Like most figures of legend, he is remembered not in any detail but in terms of a few salient facts (or fictions)—as a particularly bad actor who built his career out of performances of Shakespeare in which he played all the roles while his audience obtained their pleasure from howling him down and pelting him with eggs, vegetables and other missiles. Central to this picture is Kemble's bizarre presentation of a scene between the African Othello and the European Iago with one side of his face painted black and with the actor swivelling from side to side to present the black or white profile to the audience, depending on whether he was speaking as Othello or Iago. These abiding images are vivid, but clearly they leave much to explore. Who was Henry Kemble? What were his performances actually like? How bad were they?

When Kemble married in Sydney in 1849 the church registry recorded him as "John Matthews, alias James Harding alias Henry Kemble."[1] It was in fact under the second of these names that he had come to New South Wales twelve years earlier. He arrived, moreover, as a convict, already advanced in years, and a scoundrel given to wildly histrionic displays.

On 2 May 1837 at the Marlborough Street Police Office in London, James Harding, "an elderly man of genteel appearance," was charged with stealing a gold watch. This he had borrowed from a gullible watchmaker, claiming he intended to buy it as a present for a young lady but needed to show it to her to be sure it was acceptable. Once secured, the watch was promptly pawned at a nearby shop and Harding disappeared. The watchmaker quickly located the watch and, a year later, stumbled across Harding in the street and had him arrested. Unfortunately for Harding his "young lady" was drawn into the police investigation and told a different story:

> She said she had accidentally become acquainted with Harding, who, finding that she had some property, pestered her with his addresses, and offered to marry her, telling her that a female could not manage her property so well by herself. He had several times applied to her to put the title-deeds of her property in his possession, but she refused. She had since discovered that he was a married man. During the time he visited her he had forced her to accept of some trifling articles of jewellery, which, immediately upon her ascertaining the fact of his being married, she returned to his wife, accompanied by the letters he had addressed to her. She had broken off all connexion with him. … The prisoner's wife, a lady-like-looking young female, &

[1] State Records of New South Wales (hereafter SRNSW), 5/4072, vol. 96, entry 307.

> who, it was stated, is in possession of a considerable annuity in her own right, was in the office during the investigation, and appeared deeply affected at the disclosures that were made relative to her husband's proceedings.[2]

Harding was committed for trial on 11 May at the Central Criminal Court, where he was described as a "respectable looking man."[3] Understandably, he chose not to call his lady friend as a witness. On this occasion, instead of her revelations, it was his own behaviour in the dock which attracted journalistic attention:

> The prisoner then, in an affected manner, addressed the jury at considerable length, declaring that he was horrified and astonished at the charge, and that it was utterly preposterous to suppose that he took the watch from the prosecutor's shop with a felonious intention. He then went into a long and rambling statement, with a view to show that he was prevented from returning the watch according to promise in consequence of his own illness and that of his mother.

The jury, unimpressed, found him guilty "without the slightest hesitation," but, when he was called up for sentencing, he made one last throw:

> [He] requested that he might be again allowed to address the Court in mitigation of sentence. He then from a written paper proceeded to descant upon the evil consequences of gaming, to which he ascribed his present unfortunate situation. His father died in the year 1828, and left him an ample fortune, which he expended in forming a picture-gallery, but the speculation failing, he resorted to gaming to retrieve his fortune. He implored the Court not to consign him to the society of the depraved and miserable beings within the walls of Newgate, with whom he had been compelled to associate for the last 14 days, and he begged as a mercy that the Court would sentence him to solitary confinement, which would afford him the opportunity of atoning to his God for the frailties and errors of his youth.
>
> The RECORDER told him that the jury had most properly found him guilty of the offence charged against him, and from the address and ingenuity he had displayed it was quite evident to the Court that he was not a safe person to be allowed to remain in this country. He must be aware that the present was not the first time he had been called upon to answer an offence of this description. The sentence of the Court was that he be transported beyond the seas for the term of seven years.
>
> Prisoner.—I have to thank Mr. Phillips for this. He has acted most unhandsomely towards me.
>
> The prisoner was then led from the bar.
>
> Mr. C. PHILLIPS, who remained in court during the trial, said, that all he knew about the prisoner was, that he had the misfortune of defending him seven years ago, when he was charged with an offence nearly similar to the present, but the circumstances never escaped his lips until after the Recorder had summed up the evidence to the jury.

[2] *Observer*, 8 May 1837, 4. See also *The Times*, 3 May 1837, 5.
[3] *Old Bailey Session Papers*, 1837, 58-60 provide the formal details of the case.

> The prisoner, it appeared, on the occasion alluded to by the learned counsel, went into the shop of a silversmith and purchased 12 silver spoons, but came back to the shop about a quarter of an hour after, and, pretending that the spoons were not of the description he required, begged to return them; but on examining the parcel it was found to contain 12 spoons of Britannia metal, of the same size and pattern. Other facts of a similar description were also alleged against the prisoner, who, although but a young man [*sic*], is said to have had three wives.[4]

On 8 June 1837 Harding sailed from Spithead on the convict transport *Charles Kerr*. The printed indent described him as aged 39 on conviction, able to read and write, a Protestant, married with one child, born in Herefordshire and a wool-sorter by trade. One former conviction of six months was listed, and he was given as 5 feet 4½ inches tall, with a dark sallow complexion, brown hair and grey eyes.[5]

The *Charles Kerr* arrived in Sydney on 9 October 1837, and on 24 October Harding was ordered aboard a steamer, *William the Fourth*, for conveyance to Port Macquarie.[6] While it had long ceased to be a major penal settlement, this outpost still had something of its function as a dumping ground for highly literate convicts, or "specials" as they were called, the idea being to keep them in a remote area where they could cause the minimum of trouble. A convict memoir of life at Port Macquarie contains a brief description of Harding's methods of coping with a prisoner's life:

> H— was the name of one of these "specials," and when using the spade he stood as upright as a yard of pump-water; but when the overseer spoke to him, he had the appearance of a goose looking down at a bottle. When this fellow became free he went to Sydney, and used to walk about with a gold-headed cane selling eye-lotion.[7]

It is the last sentence which guarantees that "H—" is Harding. The image is one of a man doing as little work as possible (standing upright with his spade) but making a great show of activity, or obsequiousness (bent over) when the overseer came near.

In late 1839 Harding applied for a ticket of leave and was refused. Since tickets were normally available only after five years of a seven-year term, the application looks like an impertinence. On 9 January 1843 a James Harding of the Port Macquarie ironed gang received 25 lashes for an unspecified offence.[8] If this is our man, one might expect it to have put paid to any hopes of a ticket of leave, but this was not necessarily the case. His sentence was due for completion in May 1844, but at a trial in November 1852 he claimed to have been resident in Sydney for ten years.

[4] *The Times*, 12 May 1837, 6.
[5] SRNSW, X640, 153.
[6] SRNSW, 4/3684, 207.
[7] "Woomera", *The Life and Experiences of an Ex-Convict in Port Macquarie* (Sydney: K. Delaforce, 1984), 31–2.
[8] SRNSW, 4/3687, 382 and 4/2624.6, no. 43/4366.

This could place his arrival there in 1843. Certainly the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 27 August 1843 listed, among the minor local offenders, "Henry Kemble, for being drunk and assaulting a constable, fined 5s." (2). Only Kemble the performer is known by that name in mid-nineteenth-century New South Wales. The disorderly drunk is almost certainly James Harding. If it is, this is his earliest recorded use of that alias in Australia. Even though his first appearance on the Sydney stage was over two years away, its adoption indicates he was already thinking of himself in theatrical terms and may have been contemplating a career on the stage. The name was designed to conjure up the image of John Philip Kemble, one the greatest of England's recent actors. John Philip's actor parents had been prolific and many of their children and grandchildren had gone on the stage, making Harding's appropriation of the name that much more plausible, though none of Australia's journalists were to be taken in by it.

A theatrical appearance under the name Henry Kemble, however, was not a new departure for James Harding. In an advertisement in the *Melbourne Morning Herald* many years later (22 August 1855) he claimed to have acted his solo *Richard III* with "much sensation in London, Paris, and the United States" (1). His frequent claims in the colony to have performed at Drury Lane were universally dismissed as fraudulent, and the Melbourne advertisement is the only mention he makes of Paris, but in his first request for a performing licence in Sydney he mentioned not only Drury Lane, but also the Federal Street Theatre, Boston, USA.[9] Moreover, in a letter in *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 11 March 1846, he quoted a glowing review of a Boston presentation from a newspaper of 16 April 1821, twenty-five years earlier (3). In fact, the Boston newspapers of 1821 record at least six performances by Kemble, the first five of which were medleys containing virtually the same material he was to offer in similar programmes in Australia.[10] It was only the programme of 12 July which "set competition at defiance" by offering a solo performance of the whole of *Richard III*.

It was Kemble's good fortune to have been in Boston at the very time that the brilliant but turbulent English actor Edmund Kean was touring the United States. Kean's American visit, which created a sensation, had started to very mixed reviews, the hostile ones probably due to discomfort at his innovative performance style, disapproval of his personal life, or Yankee jealousy at the cultural dominance of the English. Kemble unblushingly attempted to cash in on the furore. In the advertisement for his first show he announced he would introduce imitations of the celebrated Mr. Kean. For his second performance he proclaimed that "the histrionic resources of the celebrated MR. KEAN, will be scientifically developed." For his third he described himself as "the determined rival of the celebrated Mr. Kean." In this situation it suited some of the critics to praise Kemble, mockingly, at the

[9] SRNSW, 2/8026.4, no. 45/6994, unnumbered attachment.

[10] *Columbian Centinel*, 22 March 1821, 3; *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 2 April 1821, 3; 31 May, 2; 12 July, 2.

expense of Kean, and the review Kemble quoted in 1846 was undoubtedly shaped by this agenda. It was even more fortunate for Kemble that the campaign against Kean was turned to frenzy by the latter's behaviour in Boston itself. On the third evening of his second season there (which was to be of *Richard III*) Kean, angered at the small attendance, refused to perform. As the *Columbian Centinel* of the following morning (26 May) described it:

> Mr Kean took it in his head that the audience was unworthy of his merit, bolted from the theatre, announcing to the Manager that he should play no more, and that he was preparing to leave town. The audience received this specimen of rude supercilliousness [*sic*] with marked contempt; and many called out for the substitution of the eccentric Kemble, (who was in the pit) for the fugitive Kean.

In the version offered by the *Boston Commercial Gazette* of 28 May,

> "some ten voices" or more, disposed to have their own way in the affair, clamorously vociferated "Kemble or no play"—evidently for the purpose of bringing this "determined rival" of Kean upon the stage, as a sort of revenge upon the conduct of that performer. (2)

The manager chose to ignore this proposal. Instead he promoted a member of the stock company to fill the role, and the performance went ahead, leaving Kemble to report the occasion a quarter of a century later as if the call for him had been entirely sincere. Kemble's own performance of *Richard III* followed this debacle, and in the advertisement for it he unctuously praises the Bostonians for rebuffing Kean and congratulates himself on having then "no longer to contend with Rivals or with Fugitives."

Kemble's earliest recorded attempt to perform in Australia dates from September 1845. It is a request for a theatrical licence to present his miscellany of great speeches and scenes from the tragic heroes (Shakespeare's Richard III, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Payne's Brutus from *Brutus; or, The Fall of Tarquin*). The performance was proposed for the Long Room at the Royal Hotel, Sydney, on 23 September. The Colonial Secretary's Office wrote to the Lord Mayor's Office asking for information about Kemble, only to be told that "His Worship … knows nothing of the person alluded to and has not been able to discover his address." What crippled the plan, however, was not this, but the authorities' disinclination to license a Sydney hotel for a theatrical performance, "as it might be a precedent, and abuses might arise."[11]

It was six months before Kemble overcame this setback. His solution was to turn to a theatre which was already licensed, so that his performance would not require an individual permit from the authorities. The Royal City Theatre was a small but

[11] SRNSW, 2/8026.4, no. 45/6994, unnumbered attachment.

attractive playhouse which had been unable to sustain a regular company and so was hired out for one-night stands and public lectures and meetings. The presentation, announced for 4 March 1846, was to consist of

> his first great and unparalleled performance (without the assistance of a second player) of the whole of Shakespeare's Tragedy, in five acts, (and without the slightest curtailment) of
>
> KING RICHARD III
>
> In which the dramatis personae, consisting of nineteen (19) different characters, (for which, see programme), will be sustained entirely by himself!!![12]

The most curious thing about the advertisement is its claim that the performance was under the patronage of the acting governor and the military establishment. The claim could hardly have been made in the local press if it were not true, but that the stiff and humourless Sir Maurice O'Donnell allowed himself to be gulled in this way is astonishing. Lies about Kemble's connection to the great acting family, coupled with his genteel manner and appearance, probably did the trick.

Most of the press ignored Kemble's performance, but Thomas Revel Johnson, editor of the racy and not entirely respectable *Bell's Life in Sydney*, rose to the occasion with a withering attack on both Kemble's acting and his presumption (2 March 1846, 2). Kemble's response was one which was to become a feature of his career, a long letter to the press, on this occasion (as on many) as a paid advertisement. It appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 11 March 1846, and unlike most subsequent examples it was signed, not in Kemble's own name, but as "FAIR PLAY" (3). Central to his letter were the above-mentioned claims of his brilliant success on the Boston stage. This was followed by an admission that the attempt to perform all the characters in a stock play was a mistake and that "by the impersonation of one of any of his own characters, he might have gained a hundred voices in his favour, for every single one he has gained now." Revel Johnson promptly responded and, in a column even longer than his original review, mockingly questioned the identity of "FAIR PLAY" and the genuineness of the Boston review, challenged the letter-writer's claim that Kemble was a stranger to the town, and argued that the actor should be condemned, not excused, for the folly of his project.[13]

By 24 March, Kemble had bounced back, with another prominent advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, announcing his next performance on the following evening. He may have learned caution from Johnson, for this show was much less ambitious. It consisted of excerpts from a range of plays, mostly golden moments from Shakespeare, and many of them apparently dramatic monologues or soliloquies. Some, however, required two or more speakers, such as Iago and

[12] *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 2 March 1846, 1.

[13] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 14 March 1846, 2.

Othello, while the grand climax had Kemble performing "(by particular desire) the whole of the Tent and Battle scenes from RICHARD III, in costume."

One of the features of *Bell's Life in Sydney* was its establishment of a menagerie of public figures whom it made the subject of recurrent attacks and running gags. By now Kemble had joined this body, though it meant he was in august company—Henry Parkes, John Dunmore Lang, the Lord Mayor of Sydney and a prominent police inspector among them.[14] It was Kemble's second performance that brought on the most devastating of Johnson's attacks on him, on 28 March 1846:

> We, on Wednesday evening last submitted, for a short period, to the infliction of witnessing this gentleman's cool and deliberate murder, amongst others, of some of the cherished offspring from the brain of the immortal bard … One sentence in Hamlet's Soliloquy on his father's murder—"Oh what an ass am I"—seemed to give infinite satisfaction to the audience, which they expressed by shouts of laughter, and cries of "bravo Kemble!" (2)

But for the reviewer "*the* feat of the evening" was the scene between Iago and Othello, with one side of Kemble's face blackened to represent Othello. By this time he was so rattled by the "sneers" of the audience that

> the redoubtable gentleman—who certainly did not appear to be at all deficient in the article of confidence or self-possession—was quite "put out," and shewed Othello sometimes with a black profile, and sometimes with a light one; and to use his own words, he got so confused owing to the aforesaid sneers, that he found it necessary to retire, in order to recover himself; when he would reappear and give the matter "right."

Kemble was so stung by this attack that he responded in a way he was to regret. On 15 April the actor, "whose histrionic name has acquired a somewhat eccentric fame in the city of Sydney of late," appeared in the police court charged with libelling Johnson in a poster which poured abuse on him for his review and attacked him in his private life, notably for his "bacchanalian orgies" in Windsor. Kemble made no defence and was committed for trial, but the outcome of the case is not recorded.[15] Having satisfied himself by giving the actor a fright, Johnson may have abandoned the prosecution.

Though most newspapers had not mentioned Kemble's performances, he had clearly become a well-known figure, both by word of mouth and thanks to *Bell's Life in Sydney*. Accordingly, when he was involved in another indiscretion a few days

[14] These sallies continued into his later career as a hawker (see *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 23 March 1850, 2; 4 January 1851, 2; 17 January 1852, 2) and the early days of his imprisonment (13 November 1852, 2; 27 November 1852, 2). For his grand inter-colonial tour the journal contented itself with reproducing reviews and reports from the press of towns in which he had performed (1 September 1855, 2; 17 November 1855, 2; 24 November 1855, 3; 1 March 1856, 2).

[15] *SMH*, 16 April 1846, 2.

after his committal on the libel charge, several newspapers noted it, identifying him as the actor in facetious terms.[16] The most robust of these accounts (and hence, no doubt, the least accurate) was in the Parramatta newspaper, the *Cumberland Times*:

> TRAGEDY IN REAL LIFE.— On Monday, a female named Mary Atkinson, was committed for trial at the instigation of Mr. Henry Kemble, "the man wot does know how to act," under the following circumstances:—Mr. Kemble, it appeared, met Polly on Saturday night at the rear of the military barracks, and being both geniusses [*sic*] of a very taking character in their various ways, an acquaintance almost instantaneously sprang up between them, and though the back of the barracks was rather a dark spot, nevertheless, as they were stars it served for a display. Mr. Kemble did a bit of the pathetic and Miss Atkinson something of the touching, for when she left he found his pupil being "sharp as a needle to his instructions," had walked off with a breast-pin. Mr. K. followed, seized the fugitive, and a row ensued; the police coming up, the lady was given in charge. Mary protested Kemble had given her the article in admiration of her abilities, and that he told her it was for a keepsake, and that he would make her Mrs. K., but as he denied the impeachment the case was sent to the sessions to test the validity of the promise.[17]

On 22 April, Kemble's third show at the Royal City Theatre was announced. Once again the presentation was to consist of excerpts from several tragedies, but this time other inducements were offered. Initially, the pieces were to be performed in the styles of various great actors, from Garrick to Kean and Talma. There is no mention of this in later advertisements: instead the programme is varied by the addition of *tableaux vivants* of classic Greek and Roman statues as well as "some first-rate vocalists."[18] Both imitations of great actors and *tableaux vivants* were well-known variety acts in England and had already been seen in the colony—Sydney Smith, for one, providing imitations of actors in August 1826, and Joseph Simmons offering tableaux in April 1836.[19] Kemble claimed that his tableaux were to be performed by the brother of Alexander Ducrow, the man who had made the genre famous. This is presumably a lie.

Kemble's advertisements for this show are notable for another reason also. Those for his first performance, with multiple exclamation marks and talk of it as a "great and unequalled undertaking," employ an inflated rhetoric which sits awkwardly with the *gravitas* of tragedy. For this third presentation, however, all restraint is abandoned and he plunges into a jocular rodomontade that is more the voice of the tent-show spruiker than the dignified tragedian:

[16] *SMH*, 21 April 1846, 2; *Sentinel,* 23 April 1846, 2; [Sydney] *Age,* 25 April 1846, 2. *Will o' the Wisp*, 29 August 1846, 3, still remembered the story on the occasion of Ms. Atkinson *alias* M'Cann's next brush with the police.

[17] *Cumberland Times*, 25 April 1846, 3.

[18] *SMH*, 22 April 1846, 1; 4 May 1846, 1.

[19] *Monitor*, 25 August 1826, 114; *Australian*, 8 April 1836, 3.

> MR KEMBLE
> (*From the Theatre-Royal, Drury-lane*)
> HAS the honour of announcing to the Public of Australia, that he purposes making shortly his first GREAT RAILWAY DASH in one night (whereby you may go from Sydney to Bathurst in two hours, and from Maitland to Tamworth in four), on every leading and most popular tragic character (whether Shaksperian or otherwise) to be *found in the whole rounds of the drama*.[20]

On 4 May, the railway metaphor, to describe his rapid dash through the tragic heroes, was continued: "[H]e will do himself the honour of making His Third GREAT RAILWAY (MARCH OF INTELLECT!) IMPROVEMENT Single BOW to them in the following characters from the Tragic Drama" (1). At the end of it, however, with wild incongruity, appeared a sober little essay on the dignity of the drama.

After at least one more performance of his medley (6 May 1846) came his final show at the Royal City Theatre, on 8 July 1846. For this, amazingly enough, he had once again managed to secure "DISTINGUISHED PATRONAGE," that of the officers of H.M.S. *Castor*. As the ship had been in port since 10 June,[21] its officers should have known better. Were they simply being facetious? For this occasion, moreover, Kemble reverted to his original model, the solo presentation of a complete play, in this case *Macbeth*. The advertisement took a new direction, emphasising the vast feat of memory involved and inviting spectators to bring their children to be inspired in their studies by his example. The style of the advertisement was even more outrageous than heretofore:

> MR KEMBLE,
> ON WEDNESDAY EVENING, 8th instant, will stand on the topmost Pinnacle of the highest Mountain in the World—unlock the Fountains of the Deep below him, from which a thousand streams shall gush forth—and drop from his hand before a wondering and admiring audience the GREAT PLUMB-LINE OF THE GLOBE, (not of matter but of MIND), and in the interesting development of the amazing extent to which, by a proper discipline, that mightiest Engine of Intellect—denominated "MEMORY"—may be carried—will appear on the boards of the above establishment.

The advertisement ends by promising that "good order (during the Personification of so many Characters by himself!) will be preserved in the Theatre from first to last."[22]

A brief version of the advertisement appeared on 8 July, with a note at the end that hinted at trouble: "Gentlemen leaving the Theatre from necessity, will greatly

[20] *SMH*, 22 April 1846, 1.
[21] SRNSW, 4/5230, 214.
[22] *SMH*, 6 July 1846, 1.

oblige Mr. Kemble by not parting with their *cheques* to boys" (1). There are references in later years to members of the audience leaving early, through dissatisfaction and boredom. The handing over of their admission checks to boys meant that respectable playgoers were replaced, as the evening wore on, by a much more turbulent group.

Kemble's season, if it can be called that, must have involved him in considerable expense. While the price of admission steadily dropped during much of the season (box places from 3s. 6d. to 3s., then to 2s. 6d. and then back to 3s. for *Macbeth*), he was presumably making a profit of some kind, though the increasingly extravagant advertisements may indicate an effort to broaden his audience base by appealing to a less polished clientele.

By July, it can be assumed, the Sydney audience was sated. From the very beginning of his metropolitan season, however, Kemble had been contemplating a tour of the country towns of New South Wales,[23] and it was to that project that he now turned. By the 1840s wandering entertainers were a common feature of colonial life. These were chiefly magicians, equestrian troupes, puppeteers and the like, but some were solo performers with artistic pretensions, such as Miska Hauser, the eminent violinist, and Ali Ben Su Ali, a Scot or Irishman disguised as an Arab playing an exotic collection of "oriental" instruments. Like Kemble, he was a charlatan, but apparently one with some talent. Theatrical performers were supposed to be licensed by the central authorities for every town in which they wished to perform, and accordingly the Colonial Secretary's records contain numerous applications from Kemble and their approvals. Kemble seems to have been cavalier with his applications, making some of them at extremely short notice, or in the wrong format, and performing outside the dates specified on the licence. Between November 1846 and November 1847, however, he received licences for Maitland, Campbelltown, Goulburn, Berrima, Moreton Bay, Parramatta and Bathurst.[24] The visits were not arranged as a circuit, but as a series of forays from Sydney: many of his applications are dated from that city. All of these visits probably took place, but the only ones that have been verified are those to Maitland, Parramatta and Bathurst.

The Maitland visit was Kemble's first recorded foray into the country.[25] The review, in the *Maitland Mercury*, 30 December 1846, was dismissive, and the audience numbered only thirty (2). That same night the *Maitland Mercury* announced a repeat of the programme (*Richard III*) as a benefit for the Maitland hospital (3). The results are unknown, but, faced with what appears to have been a faltering project, Kemble hastily scribbled off letters to the Colonial Secretary's Office, requesting licences for performances at Morpeth and Newcastle on his return journey to Sydney. It was

[23] SRNSW, 4/2732.1, no. 46/2449.
[24] SRNSW, 4/5784, 79, 81, 82, 83, 91 (*bis*), 92.
[25] After a great deal of confusion, a license to perform in Bathurst was allegedly prepared on 9 November 1846, prior to the Maitland visit, but no such license was entered in the register, and it may not have been taken up. See SRNSW, 4/2732.1, no. 46/7829 and 46/8343.

evidently an attempt to recoup his losses at Maitland,[26] but the notice was too short and clearances from the local magistrates were not available in time. No performances took place.

By April 1847, *Bell's Life in Sydney* had a competitor in the field of gossipy and impertinent journalism, *Heads of the People*, and on 24 July 1847 it reported on Kemble's doings (15). It pictures him wandering the countryside on foot with all his belongings in a handkerchief tied to a stick over his shoulder and accompanied by his "corps dramatique"—Mr. Diddler with his cracked three-string violin and a black bare-foot tambourinist, Mr. Simmons. The picture, of course, is pure fantasy. Jeremy Diddler, an impudent cheat, is a famous comic character in James Kenney's farce *Raising the Wind*, while Mr. Simmons is undoubtedly Joseph Simmons, Sydney businessman and actor, who was popular in minstrel shows, in which one of the end-men was a tambourinist. What this piece of frivolity reveals, however, is the way in which the legend was building.

If Maitland was a disappointment, Parramatta may have been a near disaster, in terms of Kemble's *amour propre*, if not his pocket. The town was close enough to Sydney for its citizens to be fully acquainted with his reputation and to come looking for trouble:

> On Wednesday last, hearing that a strolling player intended to treat the Parramattonians to his performance of "King Richard III," all the characters to be sustained by himself, I was induced to pay a visit to the room for the purpose of hearing the nincompoop endeavouring to *astonish the natives*!
>
> On entering, I found the audience almost "breathless and still," admiring the graceful proportions of the "*cove* what meant to hact King Dick." On looking round, I found they consisted of only a few children and a venerable looking old man, who has for a number of years taught the young … in Parramatta; next to him sat the Chief Constable (a particular friend of the aforesaid worthy); and further on, anticipating a full house, sat the *lion* of the night, in his regal chair, fixed and immovable, while his anxious glance was (to speak *poetically*) ever and anon directed towards the door. Presently—tramp, tramp, tramp, was heard upon the stairs; those joyous sounds animated the countenance of the hitherto almost *in*animate expectant. Clear the way for the sodgers!

After the soldiers came the local young men, till the room was crowded:

> The generality of the persons present remained quiet until the end of the first act, when the performer declared he would not proceed further until he partook of a little refreshment in the shape of a glass of Hayes's XXX. During the pause the Chief Constable and the venerable old schoolmaster expressed their *entire* approbation of the ability of their pal. … By this time there was another call for the hero of the night to commence, but no sooner had he done so than he was received with groans and hisses. The schoolmaster looked wrathful—the CHIEF looked *ropeable*. "Down

[26] SRNSW, 4/2770.5, no.47/295 and 47/325.

> with the humbug!—put out the lights!" shouted the delinquents. During the noise the schoolmaster impressed upon the soldiers that it was part of their duty to defend the man "*what* personated royalty"; the soldiers, through a mistaken notion of *loyalty*, declared their intention to clear the room, but the native youths, determined to show their valour and their taste, still shouted "Down with the humbug—down with the impostor—out with the soldiers!" The military, finding themselves rather in a fix, adopted the *wisest* plan and remained quiet.[27]

Heads of the People, 20 November 1847, offered much the same report, in its own quirky style, but added that "the go-a-head people of Parramatta thought that Mr. Kemble didn't go-a-head fast enough, when some of them determined to send him a-head through the window" (44). It was Kemble who, fearing personal danger or general chaos, asked the Chief Constable to restore order, leading to the unfortunate interposition of the soldiers.

While there is evidence of general hubbub and laughter at the Sydney performances, there is no indication of any physical violence prior to the Parramatta affair. It could well have taken place, but it may be that Parramatta saw a dangerous shift in the conventions surrounding a Kemble performance. There is also the possibility, as we shall see, that the accounts of events at Parramatta were grotesquely exaggerated.

No details of the Bathurst presentation have been located: here it was a personal misfortune which found its way into the press. While Kemble was sleeping in his inn-room after a performance, intruders broke in and stole jewellery and banknotes valued (he claimed) at nearly one hundred pounds. Kemble had a weakness for adorning himself with jewellery, as was evident in his encounter with Mary Atkinson behind the barracks. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 1848, carried a sober report of the theft, as well as Kemble's advertisement, offering a reward and giving details of the jewellery (chiefly a watch and its appurtenances) (3, 1). *Bell's Life in Sydney* was predictably unmoved:

> THE AUSTRALIAN "KEMBLE" … This illustrious "Strolling Star," while illuminating the Bathurstonians, was despoiled, on the night of Thursday week, of no inconsiderable portion of his JEWELLERY(?) and a bundle of bank notes—the identical bundle, it is supposed, he took so much delight in flourishing before the envious eyes of the minor satellites of "The Victoria," whenever he condescended to promenade in the same atmosphere with such insignificant fry. "He who steals my purse steals trash"; —poor thief! we opine that not only the purse, but the watch, chains, seal, key, dog, elephant and castle, and all, will turn out little better.[28]

In a petition of 1853 Kemble was to claim that the Bathurst robbery left him destitute, so that

[27] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 20 November 1847, 3.
[28] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 11 March 1848, 2.

> he was obliged to have recourse on his return to Sydney to a private subscription for relief … and that such was his embarrassment in consequence of the loss of his paraphernalia, that the iron hand of necessity forced him to relinquish the Theatrical Profession.[29]

The subscription did, in fact, take place, since one of the subscribers was the chairman of the Sydney Quarter Sessions, who provided a covering letter for Kemble's petition, but the affair did not abruptly terminate Kemble's rural perambulations. Visits to Penrith and Patrick's Plains, early in 1848, may have been abandoned, but licences were subsequently granted for Richmond (August 1848), Campbelltown (December 1848) and the Windsor and Richmond district (January 1849).[30] Some forty years later William Walker remembered Kemble's visit to Windsor, where the Court House, not an inn, was the performance venue, and the evening a matter of roars and hisses, clamour for money back, and Kemble's precipitate escape to Sydney pursued by the local roughs.[31]

The Windsor performance marked the end of Kemble's country touring in New South Wales. A few months earlier what may have been the last of his Sydney presentations also took place. It was a private performance in an inn. The remorseless *Bell's Life in Sydney* (5 August 1848, 2) left a mocking record of the event, which seems to have been attended mainly by lawyers and other gentlemen, who ironically cheered Kemble onwards.

On 26 November 1849, "John Matthews, alias James Harding alias Henry Kemble" married Alice Lake. Though he listed the aliases in the register, he signed in the name Henry Kemble.[32] At about this time he also abandoned his theatrical career, either because of the marriage or as a belated consequence of the misfortune at Bathurst. Instead he became a licensed peddler. As a Sydney street hawker he was to earn almost as much notoriety as he had as an actor—certainly his performance was just as remarkable. Francis Brewer offers the best-known account:

> Kemble was of gentlemanly appearance, and dressed well, but was loud in rings, wore a massive gold chain, and carried a gold-headed malacca cane; his face was clean shaven and well featured, with dark piercing eyes, the forehead being very lofty. Passing him in the street, you would say he was a "swell" in the sere. He wore a very tall hat, in the crown of which he carefully placed about two dozen boxes of wax matches with variegated tops, which at that time sold at sixpence a box. His mode of disposing of his wares was unique. Strolling along, he looked out for a customer, and, introducing himself—if to a gentleman with great sang-froid; if to a working man, with condescending familiarity—he made some casual remark, entered into

[29] SRNSW, 4/3206, no. 53/7149 and enclosure.
[30] SRNSW, 4/5784, 95, 99, 112, 117 (*bis*).
[31] William Walker, *Reminiscences (Personal, Social and Political) of Fifty Years' Residence at Windsor* (Sydney: Turner and Henderson, 1890), 18.
[32] SRNSW, 5/4072, vol. 96, entry 307.

conversation which ultimately turned to the relative merits of matches, and ended in his producing a sample from his hat, expatiating on their excellence, and finally selling one or more boxes. To ladies he was extremely polite.[33]

Brewer's description gives an impression of a lively and cheerful audacity, a chutzpah worthy of Jeremy Diddler himself. This accords well with the outrageousness of the theatrical advertisements from his Royal City Theatre days, but another extended account of him suggests something sadder and shabbier. Early in April 1851 a German visitor encountered him:

I suddenly heard myself saluted in another name, in a most kind and friendly manner, by an old gentleman, with a rather thread bare, but clean and decent dress-coat, a thick gold watch-chain, a large heavy seal, and a brown silk umbrella … I thanked him, and told him that he had been under a mistake in the person, for my name was not Wentrow, or any thing of the sort … —No! Well, but since he had addressed me, and consequently taken up some of my most valuable time, he wanted to give me an equivalent for the loss, and this was as follows: Only a few days before—and he took me at the same time by one of my buttons, and pulled me into the nearest entrance—he had received a small lot—unfortunately, only too small—of galvanic—the reader must excuse me, but I have really forgotten the most terrible Chaldaic name that ever grated upon my ears—and he felt exceedingly pleased at being able to let me have one of them. The price of it was a mere trifle—only 3*s.* 6*d.*—and not worth talking of; and if I would allow him, he would show me a specimen of it …

I was perfectly right in thinking it sal ammoniac … [but I] inquired very anxiously the nature and qualities of this little bottle.

I had lit upon a fortune. There existed at this present time really no known sickness, even deadly fractures not excepted, able to withstand this thing with the galvanic monster name—it subdued them all; … You had only to smell, according as your sufferings were of a deeper or slighter nature, stronger or more gently at the bottle, and away they went. There was a remedy for you, and only at 3*s.* 6*d.*! …

I was perfectly charmed at the medicine—it was a blessing for the human race—for the world; but the little gentleman commenced growing impatient—I was too credulous. Nobody had yet asked him such a quantity of questions, or had been louder in the praise of that little bottle, I am sure, and still no money. We might have been standing about three quarters of an hour in the entry, when he tried to come to a point, and, pressing the little bottle upon me, wanted the cash. The rest is soon told. I felt very sorry indeed at not having at this minute either toothache, or inflammation of the lungs, or any such disagreeable affliction, but assured him most sincerely that I would call on him at the first symptom. Bless my soul! he did not want to sell the bottle for his own sake—he only wanted to accommodate me, and if he could not do it for 3*s.* 6*d.*, he'd do it for half a crown. In vain. I was really not in any pain. For two shillings?—No. For eighteen-pence? the face with which he pronounced the

[33] Francis Campbell Brewer, *The Drama and Music in New South Wales* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1892), 2–3.

> latter sum was really the personification of "I'm very sorry to utter such a sum—" but nothing would do; and I left him, thanking him most heartily for his interesting and instructive conversation.[34]

On 7 April 1855 the *People's Advocate* republished this account, identifying the chapman as "Henry Hawker Kemble, Esq.," and heading it "A GREAT STREET ACTOR." (4)

While Kemble undoubtedly sold matches, and was frequently mocked for it, his miraculous smelling salts excited even greater laughter. Something of his routine, and other aspects of his trade, was caught when he charged Richard Kinner, or Kennar, a countryman, with stealing one of his rings, which he valued at £7. *The Empire* provides the most detailed account:

> Mr. Kemble was formerly a great tragedian, but "Othello's occupation's gone!" he is at present a licensed hawker. The court was crowded to excess during the investigation of the case … Mr. Henry Kemble was sworn, and deposed as follows: "I am a dealer, not particularly in rings, but I sell anything I can turn a penny by."[35]

Nearly half a column is then taken up with what purports to be a transcription of Kemble's account of the affair, which is a bizarre mixture of inflated prose and a racy demotic sprinkled with slang, some of which left the presiding Police Magistrate bewildered ("What do you mean by namassed?" Prosecutor [i.e. Kemble]: "I mean that he bolted.") Then,

> the prosecutor rambled on with astonishing volubility of speech, until Mr. Nichols, who was in attendance for the defendant, enquired if Mr. Kemble was charging a jury. The Police Magistrate replied that there were not many cases on the lists, and therefore they might as well permit Mr. Kemble to proceed with his rehearsal.

When he was finished, he was cross-examined by Nichols:

> I am a general dealer—you have good reason to know it; I did sell defendant a smelling bottle on Wednesday, but as to the nature of its contents, I do not feel disposed to make Mr. Nichols acquainted with the secrets of my business. The liquid in the bottle has a galvanic effect upon the physical system. I am sole patentee of the galvanic bottle. I sold him the bottle produced for half-a-crown. The Police Magistrate expressed a wish to look at the galvanic bottle, when Mr. Kemble took the opportunity of recommending some to his worship, and launched out into praises of the wonderful contents, which he alleged were a certain cure for the headache, toothache, earache, heartache, and every other ache. Mr. Kemble also stated that the

[34] Friedrich Gerstaecker, *Narrative of a Journey Round the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 382–84.

[35] *Empire*, 20 October 1851, 3.

> Lieutenant-Governor of the Auckland Islands had favoured him with his patronage and custom.

Kemble lost the case, and his ring. Hitherto *Bell's Life in Sydney* had been contented with brief squibs at his current career, but his appearance in the police court resulted in a parody of a verse tragedy which spread over nearly two full columns, under the heading "The Great Kemble Tragedy; or, the Nicker Nicked." This follows the *Empire*'s account of the trial, including a much elaborated description of the difficulties over slang.

The Kinner case turned on Kemble's attempted sale of his gold ring to Kinner and a dispute about whether or not Kemble had actually accepted an offer of £1 10s. Almost twelve months later he was involved in another dispute over one of his gold trinkets, but this time he was the defendant and the outcome was far more serious. An Afro-American sailor, Henry Wilson, charged that Kemble had sold him a gold chain, which turned out to be base metal. When accused of the fraud Kemble's alleged reply was: "I've paid dear for my learning, every man must do the same."[36] In the dock, however, he offered a different story, claiming that Wilson was the cheat. The argument failed, and Kemble was sentenced to a year's hard labour in Parramatta Gaol.[37] The preliminary police court hearing had provided *Bell's Life in Sydney* with the subject for another two-column parody of a verse tragedy, "The Kemble Tragedy; or, A Chain of Events":

> [Kemble]—What says the sage? "Rash mortal wait thy time,
> And stuffed thou shalt be to thy heart's content!"
> I hail the presage! lo! a darkey comes
> To turn my gloomy shadows into light …
>
> *Enter Henry Wilson, an American Nigger gold digger; he seems in a hurry.*
>
> Ah! chequered board of varied human life—
> But black or white with the neither have I strife.
>
> *He accosts Henry.*
>
> How do'st Othello?
> Henry—Dat is not him name.
> Kemble—What's in a name?[38]

And so forth.

Some nine months later, from Parramatta gaol, Kemble petitioned the Colonial Secretary seeking a remission of the remainder of his sentence.[39] The petition described the disaster at Bathurst, which had reduced him from actor to peddler, and then recounted the recent death of his "late devoted Wife … leaving a helpless

[36] *SMH*, 5 November 1852, 2.
[37] *Empire*, 12 November 1852, 2; *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 13 November 1852, 3.
[38] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 6 November 1852, 3.
[39] SRNSW, 4/3206, no. 53/7149 and attachment.

family destitute, and dependent upon Strangers, and your Petitioner to bemoan the sad and forlorn prospects of those that are most dear to him."[40] In addition there was a reprise of the sentiments that he had offered at his trial in England:

> however reprehensible his former conduct may have been, a reformation has taken place in his moral views and feelings, and such an one, as will, he trusts, teach him his duty for the remainder of his life, both to Society, and to his GOD!

The chairman of the Sydney Quarter Sessions, before whom Kemble had been tried, was asked his opinion:

> Some of the circumstances stated in the Petition I believe are correct but the doubtful character of the prisoner is so well known in Sydney and in the absence of any sufficient testimonials of amendment I cannot in justice of the Public recommend any mitigation of sentence.[41]

Kemble would have been released from gaol in early November 1853. His crime probably cost him his peddler's licence, and how he supported himself is not known. On 6 December 1854, however, he married Winifred Leigh of Sydney, a spinster aged twenty-five. Kemble described himself as a widower (which was true, unless one of his English wives was alive), but gave his age as forty-two, not the fifty-six which other records would suggest.[42] The *Sydney Morning Herald* duly recorded the marriage of "Mr. Henry Kemble, the tragedian, of five-act-tragedy celebrity (Solus!) to the beautiful and no less highly talented artiste, Miss Winifred Leigh, of High Holborn, London."[43]

Six months later Kemble moved to re-establish his theatrical career. At the time, the visiting British actor, Gustavus Vaughan Brooke, was receiving extensive newspaper coverage and was being touted by his promoter, George Coppin, as the finest Shakespearean actor of the age. Kemble's response was a letter in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, published, as usual, as a paid advertisement. In it he questioned Brooke's claim to pre-eminence and then, outrageously, proposed a competition between the two, in which they were to perform on alternate nights any or all of a list of fourteen "tragic" characters. Alternatively, Brooke could

> embody in his own person, *monopolologically* … the integration of the *Dramatis Personae* of either of the foregoingly named tragedies (all *Five act ones*, and some of them in Sydney, so represented by myself, already) … the share of popularity each

[40] No death certificate for Kemble's wife has been located, but the family left destitute, according to the visiting justice at Parramatta Goal, comprised his wife's aged father and a child of about eleven years, presumably his late wife's offspring by her previous marriage (SRNSW, 4/3206, no. 53/7149, attachment).
[41] Ibid.
[42] SRNSW, 5/4113, vol. 73, entry 1499.
[43] *SMH*, 7 December 1854, 8.

> *debutante* for public favour acquires for himself in the *contest* carrying more argument than all that can be said or written, whether about the one or the other, from the present time until doomsday.[44]

Brooke, of course, did not bother to reply, and the press completely ignored the letter.

Within a few months Kemble the tragedian was on his travels, accompanied by his wife, who collected the ticket money. This time his target was the other colonies. In the smaller towns he necessarily performed in inns, concert rooms, court houses, masonic halls and mechanics' institutes, but even in towns which boasted theatres his venues were usually of the same kind, and where he performed more than once in a large town he moved from location to location. Thus, in Adelaide he appeared at Neale's Exchange, at the Gresham Hotel, at the North Adelaide Masonic Lodge, and at the Pantheon. In Melbourne his four performances took place successively in the Mechanics' Institute, at Astley's Amphitheatre, at the Protestant Hall, and at the Junction Hall, St Kilda.[45] Only one of these buildings, Astley's, was primarily a theatre, and it was designed for equestrian performances and circus acts. It was available only because the resident company had recently collapsed and, as with Sydney's Royal City Theatre, the space was being let out to casual hirers.[46] The theatres at Port Adelaide and Hobart were among the few conventional playhouses in which he performed. This often meant that he was overshadowed by the performers working in the more glamorous venues—the Wizard Jacobs in Adelaide, G. V. Brooke and Miska Hauser in Melbourne, and the child prodigy, Anna Maria Quinn, in Ballarat. There was also the minor complication that another Kemble had appeared on the colonial circuits, Mr. Kemble Mason who, like Henry, claimed a connection with the illustrious family of English actors. On his first performance at Port Adelaide Kemble had, in fact, been mistakenly reviewed as Kemble Mason, and in Geelong he claimed a much more damaging confusion of the two had taken place. Mason, he said, had been hissed off the stage of Sydney's Victoria Theatre whereas he himself "never had as yet, the honor of being connected in anyway whatever with any theatre [company] in the Australian colonies."[47]

On this inter-colonial tour Kemble's promotional methods were varied. Usually, but not always, he advertised in a local newspaper, but these advertisements were often brief and never of the length and extravagance of those from his later days at the Royal City Theatre. Playbills and posters were clearly significant. At Geelong there is reference to posters distributed around the town at 1:00 p.m. on the day of performance, and a playbill has been preserved from his visit to Ballarat. It is one he

[44] *SMH*, 5 June 1855, 1.
[45] See note 52 below.
[46] Mimi Colligan, "Circus in Theatre: Astley's Amphitheatre, Melbourne 1854–1857," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 35 (October 1999): 39–40.
[47] *Geelong Advertiser*, 10 November 1855, 3.

evidently carried with him for use anywhere—the town, venue and time are inserted by hand.[48]

Beyond this, Kemble put an inordinate amount of energy into personal solicitation. The *Geelong Advertiser*, which referred to him on 9 November 1855 as "scraping subscriptions all over the town" (2), had actually warned the locals against him, in terms which make it clear he was employing the skills he had honed as a hawker:

> BEWARE!—A very gentlemanly gentleman indeed, who goes about leaving his card, for which he expects five shillings, has been victimising the Geelongites for the last week. He may be known by an exuberance of rings, chains, &c., and a "very familiar indeed" style of address. He professes to play many parts … but we think some of his victims owe it to society to make his tricks public by summons for obtaining money under false pretences.

The *Hobart Town Advertiser* described how "*The* Mr Kemble had been very assiduous in disposing of his tickets, and had visited nearly every house in the city, to induce the occupants to honor the performance with their presence."[49] The process is described in more detail in a long doggerel poem in Launceston's *Cornwall Chronicle* (28 July 1858, 5), which ends by describing what seems to have been a thoroughly nasty riot in the hall. At Longford, near Launceston, where a similar riot took place, Kemble's own version of events has a group of young gentlemen he had been cultivating as the ring-leaders in the event. Characteristically, he goes on to declare that the bulk of the audience of two hundred and fifty were "the most influential members of the township" and received the performance with "approbation."[50]

Beyond these techniques for building an audience, there is the simple fact that Kemble's notoriety had usually preceded him. His fame was enough to attract the curious and the mockers:

> The far famed Australian Kemble, the celebrated monopololoquist [*sic*] has arrived … So well known as he is in Hobart Town, Melbourne, Sydney and the Victorian diggings—so many critiques of his unexampled performances having appeared throughout the Australian Press—as well as the accounts of the reception he has ever met with … that we shall attend his performance in anticipation of great enjoyment.[51]

His frequent letters to the press became another method of building up interest.

Throughout this period Kemble concentrated on his solo performances of *Richard III* and his evening of set passages from several plays, coupled with the Iago/Othello

[48] The original playbill is held by the Gold Museum, Ballarat. I am grateful to Dr. Margaret Williams for making a photocopy of this playbill available to me, and for offering valuable advice on other points in this essay.
[49] *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 21 April 1859, 3.
[50] *Launceston Examiner*, 14 September 1858, 3.
[51] *Cornwall Chronicle*, 21 July 1858, 5.

temptation scene and the final scenes of *Richard III*. The playbill which has survived from Ballarat enables us to identify the specific speeches he delivered, as well as providing us with another dose of his hyperbole: the Iago/Othello duologue, with its alternating profiles, was "a thing never yet attempted but by Mr. KEMBLE!", while Brutus's speech from John Howard Payne's *Brutus; or, The Fall of Tarquin*, is "as played by Mr. KEMBLE to overflowing houses, at Drury Lane, for 50 consecutive nights."

It has not been possible to reconstruct Kemble's complete itinerary, and it would be tedious to detail the various reviews and news items relating to him. Most, but not all, are scathing; many report disturbances in the theatre, and some offer brief insights into his production and performance methods. Suffice to say that he was in Melbourne and its environs for four performances in August, September and October 1855, at the Crown Hotel, Geelong, in November and at the Victoria Theatre, Hobart, in December. In January 1856 he performed at the Port Adelaide theatre and at Adelaide itself, and from there proceeded to a number of small centres (Glenelg, Mt. Gambier, Burra Burra and probably beyond) before returning to Adelaide for a final show at the beginning of April. Thereafter he seems to have toured the Victorian goldfields. Certainly he was at Ballarat on 22 October 1856.[52]

I have been unable to trace Kemble's moves for the next two years, but on 26 July 1858 he gave his first performance at Launceston, followed by presentations at Patterson's Plains[53] and Longford, and no doubt at many other small towns as he pursued his march upon Hobart, where he performed on 19 April 1859. Since he had already appeared in the town four years earlier, since his reception at Launceston had been reported in the Hobart press, and since his exploits elsewhere in Australia were well known, it is no surprise that he received what had become the commonest response to his presentations. The *Hobart Town Advertiser* provides the most detailed account. The programme was his sequence of passages from the tragic heroes, which began to "hurraing, yelling, and cat-calls." When he emerged as Brutus the audience, "excited by the appearance of a red dagger," stepped up the attack with "a slight shower of rotten apples and eggs." With Hamlet, "apples flew, eggs crashed, and turnips and carrots descended in profusion." With Shylock the cascading fruit became "a perfect avalanche." But the wildest outburst was reserved for Othello:

> No sooner did the sable Chief appear (half black half white) than the enthusiasm of

[52] For his Melbourne itinerary see Kemble's letter in *Geelong Advertiser*, 10 November 1855, 3; *Argus*, 23 August 1855, 5; and *Age*, 23 August 1855, 6. For Geelong, see *Geelong Advertiser*, 9 November 1855, 2. For Hobart, see *Hobart Town Courier*, 12 December 1855, 3 and *Colonial Times*, 12 December 1855, 3. His South Australian itinerary has been pieced together from *South Australian Register*, 16 January 1856, 3; 21 January, 1; 26 January, 4; 12 February, 1; 25 February, 4; 26 February, 1; 8 March, 1; and 2 April, 1. For Ballarat, see *Ballarat Times*, 23 October 1856.

[53] *Launceston Examiner*, 27 July 1858, 3; *Cornwall Chronicle*, 14 August 1858, 5 and 8 September 1858, 4.

> the audience exceeded all bounds. A paper-bag of flour narrowly missed the black side, and raised a cloud about him, a pat of butter grazed his cheek, eggs broke on all sides, and fruit and vegetables, "cum multis aliis," hurtled through the darkened air.[54]

At this point Kemble beat a hasty retreat, abandoning the rest of the performance "to avoid a further demonstration which his admirers were preparing for him—thus shewing the retiring modesty of a great genius."[55]

I have quoted this review, partly because it is the last reference to Kemble that I have discovered. He may have continued on his way around the colonies, with diminishing publicity, for many years.[56] He may have returned to England. Or, as Brewer claims, he may have "made sufficient to embark in a small money-lending business, and eventually married a widow with some money."[57] By the time of his last appearance in Hobart he would have been about sixty-one and feeling the strain of touring. The church registers of the Australian colonies prior to 1900 record no marriage of a Henry Kemble subsequent to that of 1855, nor do they record the death of any person of that name. Kemble simply vanishes.

It remains to look in general terms at Kemble's performances. The first thing to be said is that to some extent he worked in an established tradition. In the public theatres, actors frequently gave variety performances consisting of dramatic monologues, anecdotes, songs and recitations of poetry, and both motherland and the colonies were familiar with what Elizabeth Webby describes as "portmanteau" or "sampler" evenings.[58] These often consisted of a medley of scenes from Shakespeare's plays (with a star actor supported by minor players) or they comprised a series of dramatic monologues drawn from those plays, with a single actor performing them all. Much of Kemble's programme of excerpts from Lear, Macbeth, Payne's Brutus, Massinger's Overreach and so on does not go beyond this model. But, while few performers in this mode may have attempted Kemble's further feat of enacting all the characters in a scene or play, this also has its precedents. One source of inspiration here is clearly indicated by the title Kemble bestowed on his works: they are "monopolylogues." The word is not a fantastical neologism spawned by Kemble himself to stun the locals. It was in use at least as early as March 1819, when the

[54] *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 21 April 1859, 3.

[55] For another lively account, see *Mercury*, 20 April 1859, 3.

[56] I have consulted Bill Dunstone, who kindly went through his records and advised me there was no evidence of a performance in Western Australia. The staff of the Turnbull Library, Wellington, were also extremely generous with their time, but after a search advised me they could find no record of his presence in New Zealand.

[57] Brewer, of course, muddles the sequence of Kemble's activities. The widow with some money may have been his first antipodean wife, Alice Lake, whom, as we have seen, he married at the time he commenced his career as a hawker.

[58] Elizabeth Webby, "Shakespeare in Australia: The Early Years, c. 1830–50," in *O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage*, ed. John Golder and Richard Madelaine (Sydney: Currency Press, 2001), 47–48.

most famous of English solo performers, Charles Mathews, announced his "At Home," entitled *A Trip to Paris*, the third part of which was a "Mono-poly-logue, descriptive of LA DILIGENCE, in which Mr Mathews will sustain nine different characters."[59] Thereafter, the term became particularly associated with Mathews, with monopolylogues such as *A Christmas at Brighton*, *The Poly Packet*, and *All Well at Nachitoches* gracing his "At Homes" in later years, and with the characters involved sometimes including animals—a pug-dog, a poll-parrot or, in the case of *The Poly Packet*, the poultry in the ship's hold.[60]

There are, however, differences between the monopolylogues of Mathews and Kemble. Mathews was a comic performer, and his pieces were comic in intent. Moreover, while Mathews may have impersonated eight or nine characters in most of them, these characters, to a large extent, were represented sequentially. There was only limited switching between parts as characters engaged in dramatic dialogue and on most occasions these exchanges were between two persons only.[61] The same seems to be true of a Melbourne example of 1858, when the Anglo-American actress Emma Stanley won rapturous applause for her "Monopolylogue," *The Seven Ages of Women*, involving characters such as the motherly nurse, the professional flirt, and (as the last age) the dignified old lady.[62]

There are, however, precedents even more relevant. Recitations of prose, poetry and dramatic speeches were a standard feature of home entertainment and sometimes centred on an individual reading aloud the entire text of a play. Ellis Bent did precisely this for the Macquaries on the long voyage to Australia.[63] In the 1820s a Mr. Smart, as a commercial enterprise, gave solo performances of extended sections and complete Shakespearean plays on Thursday evenings at his house in Leicester Square, London.[64] The editor of *Bell's Life in Sydney* even claimed to have seen a performance of the Othello/Iago temptation scene, as Kemble attempted it, many years before, and presumably in England.[65]

Even in the colonies it is not clear that Kemble was breaking new ground. Though the evidence is ambiguous, his solo performance of dramatic scenes in which he played all the characters may have been anticipated at Campbelltown in June 1844 and matched at Parramatta in March 1846.[66] The performer, James

[59] *The Times*, 8 March 1819, 2.

[60] *New Monthly Magazine*, n.s., 52 (1838), 69–79.

[61] Mathews's pieces were written specially for him, and most are built around a simple situation such as a random group of people travelling together, with the individuals arriving one after another. See Richard L. Klepac, *Mr. Mathews at Home* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1979).

[62] *Age*, 4 May 1858, 1. For a preliminary puff describing the show see *Age*, 23 April 1858, 5, where *The Times* is quoted describing her as possessed of "the highest class of comedy acting."

[63] Ellis Bent, "Journal of a Voyage from England to the Cape of Good Hope being part of a voyage to New South Wales …" [1809], National Library of Australia, MS 195/3, 47–8, 53, 54, 58.

[64] *Observer*, 1 February 1824, 3 and 18 April 1824, 3.

[65] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 28 March 1846, 2.

[66] SRNSW, 4/2654.5, no. 44/4454 and 4/2732.5, no. 46/2150.

Frederick Reynolds, was an ex-naval surgeon, and his amateur status was stressed. He was a resident of Parramatta, and his season there extended into April. The local paper, the *Cumberland Times*, reviewed him enthusiastically on 28 March:

> This talented Amateur has during the past week, been giving a series of Histronic [*sic*] Recitations, at the Emu Inn, Church-street, and has been favoured with full audiences, who expressed their gratification, with the warmest approbation. Mr. R's nunciation [*sic*] is both correct, spirited, and expressive, and his action and attitudes natural and startling; but his rapid transactions from opposite characters is his masterpiece. His readings have been chosen from Shakespeare, Home[,] Lillo, and other eminent writers, and the evening entertainments is [*sic*] worthy of the patronage of the townsmen, as the pieces and extracts selected, are not only the best specimens of British Poetry, but free from the slightest impropriety.

The paper's enthusiasm may owe something to the performer's status as a local and a gentleman. Unfortunately, on 9 April 1846, Reynolds became embroiled in a dispute with the police when his show was associated with after-hours drinking at the Emu Inn. The case was dismissed, but when he applied for another licence, in December 1846, the application was rejected.[67] Kemble was left with the field to himself.

What kind of performer was Kemble and how bad was he? Though he appropriated the name of John Philip Kemble, his repertoire suggests a greater debt to Edmund Kean. His programmes of excerpts included the non-Shakespearean characters of Brutus in John Howard Payne's *Brutus; or, The Fall of Tarquin*, Philip Massinger's Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, and Sir Edward Mortimer in George Colman the Younger's *The Iron Chest*. John Philip Kemble never performed Payne's Brutus, had failed dismally as Sir Edward Mortimer, and was an unexciting Overreach. All three parts were among Kean's most spectacular successes and were included in his first Boston season, one of the occasions on which Kemble could have witnessed him.[68] Similarly, Henry Kemble's preferred Shakespearean part was Richard III, one of Kean's most pyrotechnic displays and one in which John Philip Kemble had little success. A Melbourne critic noted Henry Kemble's smile during the Richard/Lady Anne wooing scene, which he found disconcerting.[69] Such a smile had been a feature of Kean's performance of the role. Whatever his influences, the other Shakespearean roles were more or less inescapable, but it may be worth noting that Lear and Othello were parts in which Kean was much more successful than John Philip Kemble and that Henry Kemble did not include one of his namesake's greatest roles, Coriolanus. In Boston,

[67] *Cumberland Times*, 25 April 1846, 2; SRNSW, 4/2740.6, nos. 46/9057 and 46/9136.

[68] The oddity in Henry Kemble's non-Shakespearean repertoire was Orestes in Ambrose Phillips's *The Distrest Mother*, since both Kean and Kemble had failed in this role and thereafter avoided the play. However, Oreste, in Racine's *Andromaque*, Phillips's source text, was one of Talma's favourite and most celebrated roles.

[69] *Argus*, 23 August 1855, 5.

Kemble had sought to cash in on a current sensation by offering performances in the style of Kean. His aim seems to have been chiefly to mock, but at the same time he could have been powerfully influenced by the man he denigrated.

Much of the criticism of Kemble in the Australian press was of a generalised nature—he "murdered" Shakespeare, his was "the most ridiculous exhibition of himself … that we ever remember to have witnessed," and so on.[70] John Philip Kemble had been noted for statuesque poses and sonorous elocution (a much-praised aspect of acting); Kean was noted for a much more tortured delivery and physical action. Henry Kemble seems to have favoured physicality, throwing himself on the stage for the death agonies of Richard III and engaging in fierce sword-fights with himself. The result was seen as overacting, ham. According to the *Geelong Advertiser*, he "stamped, roared and grinned," while the *Cornwall Chronicle* referred to his "impudent ranting."[71] In his early days *Bell's Life in Sydney* advised him to "study elocution for a period, and … strive to remedy those defects of gesture … which quite unfit him at present for the higher range of drama."[72] The multiple impersonations also gave rise to unintentional comedy: the dead Richard leaping up to become the living Richmond, the confused actor showing the wrong profile in the Othello/Iago scene, and Shylock coming on still wearing the hat of Othello.[73]

Much more insistent, however, were the criticisms which were levelled at his verbal delivery, and in particular at his pronunciation. The *Age* declared that "Mr. Kemble (?) is not merely guilty of taking a great name in vain, but he breaks the sixth commandment, and murders—atrociously murders—the Queen's English." The *Hobart Town Advertiser* lamented his "aspirations, emphasis, pronunciation," while *Bell's Life in Sydney* sniped at his pronunciation: "We particularly noticed the words 'decissive,' and 'harrand,' for 'decisive' and 'errand.'"[74] Of all his verbal infelicities it was his use of the intrusive or elided "h" that caused most amusement. The *Hobart Colonial Times* declared that he "exasperated at once his H's and his audience," while *Bell's Life in Sydney* mocked the way Hamlet's advice to the audience became "Do not saw the hair" and then went on to counsel him "to dispose wholesale of an unprofitable stock of the eighth letter of the alphabet, which he is in the habit of retailing in a manner most offensive to correct ears." In a later number it ridicules his version of Richard's cry, "A norse! a norse! my kingdom for a norse!"[75]

For decades it had been standard to sneer at the uncouth pronunciation of lower-

[70] *Age*, 23 August 1855, 5; *Colonial Times*, 12 December 1855, 3; *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 28 March 1846, 2.

[71] *Geelong Advertiser*, 9 November 1855, 2; *Cornwall Chronicle*, 8 September 1858, 4.

[72] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 28 March 1846, 2.

[73] *Mercury*, 20 April 1859, 3; *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 28 March 1846, 2; *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 21 April 1859, 3.

[74] *Age*, 23 August 1855, 6; *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 21 April 1859, 3; *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 7 March 1846, 2.

[75] *Hobart Colonial Times*, 12 December 1855, 3; *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 28 March 1846, 2 and 5 August 1848, 2.

class amateur performers such as apprentices in exactly these ways.[76] On occasion Kemble's critics extended this attack, making his pronunciation evidence that he was uneducated: "he betrayed by his diction, that his educational acquirements were of a very inferior order," declared the *Hobart Town Courier* on 12 December 1855 (3). However, unlike the tortured grammar of his advertisements, the fluency of Kemble's letters and their show of erudition suggest that this comment is unfair, even if what we are dealing with is self-education rather than a stint at Eton. What the comments on his pronunciation and education reveal is that process of turning Shakespeare from popular theatre into elite cultural institution, a subject to which I will return later.

Ultimately, however, the most dangerous criticism of Kemble was his alleged inability to maintain difference of character and passion when transforming himself from one character to another. The results were boredom and monotony. *Bell's Life in Sydney* described his first performance as

> a person reciting monotonously the whole of the dialogue in the play, speech after speech, and in most instances without the slightest clue to inform the audience which one of the nineteen dramatis personae was supposed to be speaking.[77]

Most of the auditors were reduced to listening "to a series of sentences couched in beautiful language, and delivered in a manner by no means calculated to afford entertainment or even satisfaction." Luckily for Kemble, this point is only rarely made, but made it is.

To a large extent Kemble's reputation was set in stone from those early days in Sydney. Indeed, he may have been doomed before his first appearance. The idea of a social nonentity securing vice-regal patronage and putting himself forward as a serious actor "from Drury Lane," the transparent fraudulence of his name, the hyperbole of his initial advertisements—these would have been enough to send the editor of *Bell's Life in Sydney* along to his first performance in a highly critical frame of mind. *Bell's* set the tone for the subsequent newspaper reports. It was a case of the press feeding off itself as much as off Kemble's actual performances. In this way his reputation went ahead of him, and he entered a town as a marked man. Much of the audience attended expecting a bad performance and with a pre-established pattern of response—laughter, interjections, missiles, an invasion of the stage. The local press then tried to out-do the reports from elsewhere, possibly with little reference to the facts. Kemble often complained that minor interruptions were inflated by the newspapers into major disturbances. Obviously, he is a self-interested witness, but it is worth noting that, a week after *Bell's* gave its vivid report of the riot at Parramatta, the Colonial Secretary wrote to the police magistrate there asking

[76] Robert Jordan, *Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788–1840* (Sydney: Currency House, 2002), 18–21.
[77] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 7 March 1846, 2.

for details. That gentleman declared that "there was no disturbance further than a little noise occasioned by three or four lads expressing their disapprobation of the performance."[78] Since the Police Magistrate is made to look like a fool in *Bell's Life in Sydney*, he may have had good reason to play down the seriousness of the disturbance, but his statement is remarkably like those of Kemble's in later years and leaves one cautious of press reports in which comic effect is a clear preoccupation.

And yet, in spite of the ridicule, not all the critics were wholly dismissive of Kemble. In South Australia there were some respectful reviews, though they tended to emphasise his feat of memory, and one or two conceded the result was monotonous.[79] While the *Cornwall Chronicle*, like the other Launceston paper, was generally merciless, after his first performance it protested:

> We are bound to say that Mr. Kemble did not receive fair play upon this occasion, and exhibited a most wonderfully retentive memory, reading what we could hear of the text to the letter. We have seen many men take leading characters in stock companies who acquitted themselves much worse.[80]

The Melbourne *Argus* was almost entirely positive, even praising him in areas where others had found major deficiencies:

> Mr. Kemble displayed a remarkable power in the management of his voice,—varying its tones instantaneously, and in a very natural manner, from the fierce passion of Richard to the plaintive warbling of the Lady Anne, and the childish prattle of the Duke of York. He was less successful in the management of his countenance, which bore what looked very like a good-humoured smile while he was uttering some of Richard's most fiendish sarcasms.[81]

On the same day the *Age* was witheringly critical (6), and on the day following exposed the actor as the Sydney street "vendor of matches and bottles of smelling-salts, gold trinkets made of brass, and silver watches made of pewter" (5).

There is also some evidence of audience support for Kemble. The review in the *Maitland Mercury* on 30 December 1846, though dismissive, conceded that the audience "on some occasions loudly applauded the actor" (2), while the more favourable, but still slightly critical, report in the *South Australian Register* on 16 January 1856 did the same, adding that his Richard III managed to "overcome the prejudices against him of many who were present, and to win the applause of all" (3).

[78] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 20 November 1847, 3; SRNSW, 4/2776, no. 47/9401 and enclosure 47/9205.

[79] Positive South Australian reviews include *Adelaide Despatch,* 19 January 1856, as reprinted in *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 1 March 1856, 2 and the *South Australian Register*, 16 January 1856, 3 and 26 January 1856, 4. These two reviews, of different performances by different hands, both indicate a degree of monotony in the performance.

[80] *Cornwall Chronicle*, 21 July 1858, 5.

[81] *Argus*, 23 August 1855, 5.

Another Adelaide newspaper wrote of this performance "eliciting repeated bursts of applause," while a later performance was received with "repeated expressions of approbation."[82] The account of the Parramatta fracas in *Bell's Life in Sydney* turned on the fact that at least some members of the town's elite supported him to the end, including the schoolteacher, who had brought his pupils to this improving occasion. There is, then, the lurking possibility that Kemble was not as bad as so many of the newspapers proclaimed.

These comments invite a broader consideration of the nature of the audience response at a Kemble performance. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Shakespeare and a substantial body of English "classic" dramatists (Mrs. Centlivre, George Farquhar, Ben Jonson, Nicholas Rowe, George Lillo, etc.) were the heritage of both the great and the humble, part of a shared public culture which certainly did not extend into all fields of activity, but existed for much theatre and drama. The great may have sneered at the coarse understanding of this shared culture among the lower orders and assumed that their real passion was for side-show performers and crude buffoonery, but they did not deny those lesser folk an enthusiasm for the "legitimate" drama.[83]

In an influential analysis, Lawrence Levine has argued that, in the United States, this unified culture had begun to break up by the 1850s. In Levine's view this break-up was a product of the appropriation of Shakespeare by a cult of high art, coupled to bardolatry, which involved changes in the methods of producing the plays and the imposition of forms of audience behaviour and dress which gradually alienated the lowly. Shakespeare became part of the hegemonic apparatus of the ruling elite.[84]

However, caution is necessary here. Bardolatry, and a sense of the high dignity of theatre, were alive and well in the latter part of the eighteenth century. More significantly, even if Levine's analysis is true of the United States, it is not necessarily true of other English-speaking cultures. In particular, Richard Waterhouse has analysed the place of Shakespeare in Australia and found a continuation of his role in popular culture, noting that "the two decades from the mid-1850s to the mid-1870s witnessed a golden age of Shakespearean production in Australia" and that "the traditions of Shakespearean performance within popular conventions lingered through the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century."[85] This

[82] *Adelaide Despatch*, as reprinted in *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 1 March 1856, 2; *South Australian Register*, 26 January 1856, 4.

[83] Jordan, *Convict Theatres*, 18–21.

[84] While Levine presents the Astor Place Riot of 1849 as a symbolic watershed, he is clear that it was not until the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century that the complete severance of high art and popular culture was firmly in place. Similarly, he is fully conscious that the basic elements of high-art ideology were to be found in some quarters by the beginning of the nineteenth century. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 64–66, 224–25.

[85] Richard Waterhouse, "High Culture and Low Culture: The Changing Role of Shakespeare, 1833–2000," in Golder and Madelaine, *O Brave New World*, 24, 26.

continuation of a "popular" Shakespeare in 1850s Australia is best exemplified in variety entertainments such as that offered by the Empire Minstrels, advertised in the *South Australian Register*. The programme included West singing "Bluetailed Fly," White and West in their "Challenge Dance" and, in the middle of it all, Lee and West in their Shakespearean readings. Lee was well known for his performances on the legitimate stage, including Shakespeare, but was even more popular for variety acts, notably his work with performing dogs and his celebrated banjo solos.[86]

The impression one receives, moreover, is that minstrel shows, ventriloquists, magicians, acrobats and the like appealed to the higher (or at least the richer) levels of society as well as to the lower classes. The box-prices alone suggest this. While some might sneer at these "illegitimate" forms, the quality press, like the rest, was gushingly supportive. This is not popular culture in the sense of "belonging to the lower orders"; it is popular culture as "belonging to the whole community," unified culture.

But while there was vigorous life in Shakespeare as part of a shared public culture, there is no doubt that the worship of Shakespeare as an embodiment of spiritual and moral values, as an educational tool, a nationalist icon and as the ultimate exemplar of high art was powerfully present in the thinking of the educated classes in Australia by the mid-nineteenth century. To a large extent, Kemble formally identified himself with this elite vision. His claims for the educational value of his performances and his lyrical encomiums on the greatness of Shakespeare and of art point in this direction. So also does his genteel manner and his solicitation of the social elite in any town he visited, as well as his response to disruptions of his show. Apart from the one at Longford, the disturbances are interpreted as the product of small numbers of rough and uncouth people who are insensitive to the beauties to which a substantially elite and respectable audience are responding. That he did not altogether turn his back on the broader audience may be inferred from those extravagant early advertisements, which are so like the promotional material of the magician Wizard Jacobs. But to some extent those advertisements are an aberration. For most of his career he chose to present himself as the serious and dignified tragedian.

When one turns, then, to that section of the audience which took Kemble seriously, are we dealing with a sensitive response to his work or a group misled by the propaganda of high art? Was this group subscribing to the idea of Shakespeare as icon of the educated and not expecting to be genuinely entertained? Was the boredom mentioned at some of his performances proof of his high art credentials—theatre as a church service? For all their social status were these admirers parvenus, fundamentally ignorant and gullible? As the Parramatta reporter for *Bell's Life in Sydney* said of one of Kemble's supporters, "his knowledge of elocution is about as great as a pig's is of Euclid."[87] For all their aspirations, were the sensibilities of this

[86] *South Australian Register*, 3 August 1858, 1; 30 July 1858, 3; *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons with Victoria Chance (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 325.
[87] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 20 November 1847, 3.

group actually geared to the "low" popular values of rant and grimace, and was this what Kemble was offering them in the guise of high art?

If newspaper reports of the riots at Kemble's shows are to any extent accurate, then Kemble's claims to the dignity of high art and the honorific title "tragedian"[88] were not accepted by a large part of those in attendance. Allegedly, most of his respectable audience came expecting a bad performance and with the aim of mocking. Others came in all innocence, were quickly alienated, and either left early or stayed to join the mockers. Is this a case of a self-regarding elite basking in a sense of its own cultural and social superiority, and endorsing the values of high art by ridiculing an entertainment it identifies with the worst of the popular tradition—melodramatic gesture, inept and "incorrect" vocalisation, bombast and gaucherie?

Ironically enough, the audience behaviour which resulted from this spirit of mockery was of a kind which is characteristic of much of the theatre of the lower orders. To its admirers, as well as its detractors, that type of popular culture was partly defined by an audience that was boisterous, noisy and interactive, as opposed to "respectable" theatre's move towards a reverential hush and well-dressed politeness. In 1913 Marinetti wrote enthusiastically that the variety theatre "destroys the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious, and the Sublime in Art with a capital A."[89] Was Kemble's work, however unintentionally, achieving a similar effect? The socially unified popular theatre of his own time, after all, was inordinately fond of crude parodies of Shakespeare, burlesques of the bard. Were Kemble's shows a carnival release of this kind, an escape from bardolatry and the growing claims of high art and "the tragedian"? If so, this was an attitude available to the "respectable" and the lower orders alike.

Given the modern vision of a theatre audience as deeply fragmented, a collection of individual sensibilities, values and preoccupations rather than an organic whole which responds as one, many of these questions may have no answer. If there is a motivation that predominated in the most active members of Kemble's audience it may well have been that most primitive manifestation of "low" popular culture —stoning the village idiot.

And what of Kemble himself? What was his motivation, and what was his own view of his activities? The *Hobart Colonial Times* gave the common outsider's view:

> A Thorough Swindler.—We would caution our readers in town and country against the specious impositions of a Mr. Campbell or Kemble just now in town, who is, we have reason to believe, a thorough-paced swindler.[90]

[88] Kemble frequently described himself as "tragedian." For an entertaining account of the import of the word, see Harold Love, "'Sir, I am a Tragedian': The Male Superstars of the Melbourne Stage, 1850–70," in Golder and Madelaine, *O Brave New World*, 56–71.
[89] Jordan, *Convict Theatres*, 16–18; Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Variety Theatre," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umberto Apollonio (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 129.
[90] *Hobart Colonial Times*, 4 December 1855, 3.

Kemble threatened a law-suit, which did not eventuate, but other papers were nearly as forthright: Kemble was "an impudent pretender" and an "arch impostor." The imposture, however, was mutually satisfactory—"the audience went to be hoaxed, and were hoaxed accordingly. The great KEMBLE flatters himself that he has the best of the joke; the audience have had their laugh, and he pockets the affront in the shape of their cash."[91]

This is, no doubt, largely the truth, but the enterprise was a dangerous one. It involved high risks of physical injury, not only from missiles hurled at him, but from the likelihood that a baying audience would leave their seats and attack him during the show. There is evidence that Kemble took what precautions he could. At Parramatta, Launceston, Longford, and probably in many other towns, he secured the police magistrate as a patron, which guaranteed the services of the local constabulary in an emergency. This was not always successful, and there seem to have been occasions when no help was available, as at Geelong:

> The platform was rushed, and Mr Monopolylogue was dragged out … Richard the Third, after much search, was produced in his shirt sleeves and "pants," looking more troubled than in the "TENT SCENE." Serve him out! cried the audience! Ladies and gentlemen! exclaimed Richard the Third. Bonnet him! cried the malcontents … Richard was brought up standing. Stand nobblers round! was the cry. Gentlemen, said the "crooked-backed tyrant"—I concede to the general wish. Landlord! Landlord! nobblers round to my friends! I have no immediate cash, my financial deposits being elsewhere, said Richard the Third, majestically. The landlord refused the royal dictum. Public indignation was worked up to high pressure, and burst the valve. Richard disappeared, clambered to a window, dropped outside the hotel, and again fell into the hands of the Philistines, who got a chair, clapped Richard in it, and were about to duck him in the Bay, when prudence over-ruled desire for mischief, and Mr. Kemble made off.[92]

If Kemble's version of events is to be believed, his wife was also attacked, with a group of three or four ruffians attempting to seize the cash-box from her. She fought them off with "spirit and determination," but her arm was "considerably injured" in the affray. Kemble claimed the disturbance was the work of "some half dozen ruffians or so, the very refuse and scum of the town," and this in an audience of five to six hundred, many of whom found the show exceeded their "most sanguine expectations."[93] Kemble was a liar, but many newspaper accounts of the riots may also be heavily embroidered. Even so, the dangers were real enough. Would mercenary considerations alone have been sufficient for anyone to have taken those risks?

[91] *Launceston Examiner*, 27 July 1858, 3; *Empire*, 7 August 1858 as reprinted in *Cornwall Chronicle*, 25 August 1858, 5. See also *Age*, 23 August 1855, 6. For the threatened lawsuit, mentioned above, see the *Colonial Times*, 5 December 1855, 3.

[92] *Geelong Advertiser*, 9 November 1855, 2.

[93] *Geelong Advertiser*, 10 November 1855, 3.

Kemble's letters to the editor raise similar questions. As I have suggested, it is easy to see these letters as part of a calculated publicity drive: the insults, many of them hurled at the offending editors, would certainly have entertained the locals, as would their general extravagance.[94] But on occasion Kemble gives the impression of a genuinely idealistic and distressed artist:

> why have you been so ungenerous to an unoffending stranger, and the first, Sir, on record that has tried to enter a new era of dramatic effort? To recite *histrionically* from memory an entire play of Shakespeare demands a higher order of intellect than to perform any single part in it. It requires a profound study of the work, and a thorough comprehension not only of the design and scope of the whole, but of the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of every individual character … Make allowance, Sir, for the fact, that in the efforts I make, I have had no model, and that I have consequently been left to my own unaided resources; that there are some points so eminently dramatic, and some so far from being theatrical, that they require the genius of the actor and the prestige of his reputation (why, therefore, try and deprive me of it?) to carry them safely through. Here is indeed the actor's triumph: that he can soar above the conventionalities of the stage and gain a decided success for a difficult situation, and one so sacred in its attributes that the religious sentiment of an audience is touched and trembles along the line of impulse.[95]

That Kemble in part took himself seriously is suggested by his reactions to the early attacks in *Bell's Life in Sydney*. His FAIR PLAY letter could have been a coolly calculated play for public sympathy, but the reckless publication of the poster defaming the paper's editor looks much more like loss of control—the blind anger of someone who feels genuinely affronted. On the other hand, the comical extravagance of his subsequent Sydney advertisements suggests someone who had come to see that his success depended in part on playing the buffoon. It is a strange combination of self-infatuation and calculation, a mixture sometimes found in the genuine eccentric. In the words of "The Great Kemble Tragedy; or, the Nicker Nicked":

> [Detective Constable] Lawless—[….] He's a very peculiar man.
> [Defending Counsel] Mr Nichols—Rather flash, I think.
> Lawless—Rather.
> Mr Nichols—Like a great many other very cunning men; one part flash and three parts foolish.[96]

Whatever the jumble of attitudes in his head, the game paid off to the extent that he is remembered far more vividly than most of the "serious" actors who graced the

[94] For some representative letters, see *Geelong Advertiser*, 10 November 1855, 3; *Launceston Advertiser*, 3 August 1858, 2; 24 August 1858, 2 and 14 September 1858, 3.
[95] *South Australian Register*, 29 January 1856, 1.
[96] *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 25 October 1851, 1.

Australian stage in the nineteenth century. Walter Montgomery and Francis Nesbitt are footnotes in theatre history: Henry Kemble is a legend.[97]

University of New South Wales

ROYAL CITY THEATRE.

MR. KEMBLE'S every-where-inquired-after Railway (Company's) project (*in prospectu*) and great master-piece Performance will take place, at the above Establishment, on Wednesday Evening, the 10th proximo; on which occasion, to illustrate more fully what the Company aforesaid will ere long bring about by their united energies, to the incalculable gain of all concerned therein. Mr. Kemble, whose "COMPANY" is comprised in his own person, will sustain individually ALL the characters composing the *dramatis personæ* (as cast in their order originally at Drury-lane) of that universally admired, and most touching Historical Tragedy, in five acts, of BRUTUS; OR, THE FALL OF TARQUIN:—and without that prejudice to any part of it which would necessarily arise out of the omission of a single line.

	London, 1826. (At this period no Railway at all existed.)	Sydney, 1846.
Lucius Junius Brutus	Mr. Kean....	Mr. Kemble
Titus	Mr. Wallack ..	Mr. Kemble
Sextus Tarquin..	Mr. Mercer ..	Mr. Kemble
Aruns	Mr. Penley ..	Mr. Kemble
Claudius........	Mr. Comer....	Mr. Kemble
Collatinus	Mr. Archer ..	Mr. Kemble
Valerius	Mr. Young....	Mr. Kemble
Lucretius	Mr. Power....	Mr. Kemble
Horatius	Mr. Thompson	Mr. Kemble
Celius	Mr. Fenton ..	Mr. Kemble
Flavius Corunna	Mr. Webster..	Mr. Kemble
Centurion—Messenger—1st, 2nd, and 3rd Roman..................		Mr. Kemble
Tullia	Mrs. Bunn ..	Mr. Kemble
Tarquinia	Mrs. W. West.	Mr. Kemble
Lucretia........	Miss Smithson.	Mr. Kemble
Lavinia.........	Miss Carr	Mr. Kemble

Figure 1. Mock advertisement for a Kemble performance, Sydney Morning Herald, *25 May 1846, p. 1c.*

[97] My friend John Golder added to my many debts to him by helping me to prepare this article for publication.