

KEMBLE. It is in characters that are occupied with themselves and with their own importance, it is in the systematic and exquisite revenge of *Zanga* [in *The Revenge*], in the indignant jealousy of *Othello*, and in the desperate ambition of *King John*, that Mr Kemble is the actor. There is always something sublime in the sudden completion of great objects, and perhaps there is not a sublimer action on the stage than the stride of Mr Kemble as *Zanga*, over the body of his victim, and his majestic exultation of revenge. . . . Of [the] stage artifice, which is called bye-play, and which beguiles the intervals of action by an air of perpetual occupation, he is perfect master; he never stands feebly inactive, waiting for his turn to speak; he is never out of his place, he attends to every thing passing on the stage at once, nor does he indulge himself in those complacent stares at the audience which occupy inferior actors.

MRS SIDDONS. If Kemble studiously meditates a step or an attitude in the midst of passion, Mrs Siddons never thinks about either and therefore is always natural. . . . I have somewhere heard, that Mrs Siddons has talked of the real agitation which the performance of some of her characters has made her feel. To see the bewildered melancholy of *Lady Macbeth* walking in her sleep, or the widow's mute stare of perfected misery by the corpse of the gamester Beverley [in *The Gamester*], two of the sublimest pieces of acting on the English stage, would argue this point better than a thousand critics. Mrs Siddons has the air of never being the actress; she seems unconscious that there is a motley croud called a pit awaiting to applaud her, or that there are a dozen fiddlers waiting for her exit.

In speaking of the character of *Lady Macbeth*, we ought not to pass over Mrs. Siddons's manner of acting that part. We can conceive of nothing grander. It was something above nature. It seemed almost as if a being of a superior order had dropped from a higher sphere to awe the world with the majesty of her appearance. Power was seated on her brow, passion emanated from her breast as from a shrine; she was

tragedy personified. In coming on in the sleeping-scene, her eyes were open, but their sense was shut. She was like a person bewildered and unconscious of what she did. Her lips moved involuntarily - all her gestures were involuntary and mechanical. She glided on and off the stage like an apparition . . .

The first of these in tragedy is Mr. Kean. To show that we do not conceive that tragedy regularly declines in every successive generation, we shall say, that we do not think there has been in our remembrance any tragic performer (with the exception of Mrs. Siddons) equal to Mr. Kean. Nor, except in voice and person, and the conscious ease and dignity naturally resulting from those advantages, do we know that even Mrs. Siddons was greater. In truth of nature and force of passion, in discrimination and originality, we see no inferiority to any one on the part of Mr. Kean: but there is an insignificance of figure, and a hoarseness of voice, that necessarily vulgarize, or diminish our idea of the characters he plays: and perhaps to this may be added, a want of a certain correspondent elevation and magnitude of thought, of which Mrs. Siddons's noble form seemed to be only the natural mould and receptacle. Her nature seemed always above the circumstances with which she had to struggle: her soul to be greater than the passion labouring in her breast. Grandeur was the cradle in which her genius was rocked: for *her* to be, was to be sublime! She did the greatest things with child-like ease: her powers seemed never tasked to the utmost, and always as if she had inexhaustible resources still in reserve. The least word she uttered seemed to float to the end of the stage: the least motion of her hand seemed to command awe and obedience. Mr. Kean is all effort, all violence, all extreme passion: he is possessed with a fury, a demon that leaves him no repose, no time for thought, or room for imagination. He perhaps screws himself up to as intense a degree of feeling as Mrs. Siddons, strikes home with as sure and as hard a blow as she did, but he does this by straining every nerve, and winding up every faculty to this single point alone: and as he does it by an effort himself, the spectator follows him by an effort also. Our sympathy in

a manner ceases with the actual impression, and does not leave the same grand and permanent image of itself behind. His *Othello* furnishes almost the only exception to these remarks. The solemn and beautiful manner in which he pronounces the farewell soliloquy, is worth all gladiatorship and pantomime in the world. His *Sir Giles*<sup>7</sup> is his most equal and energetic character: but it is too equal, too energetic from the beginning to the end. There is no reason that he should have the same eagerness, the same *impetus* at the commencement as at the close of his career: he should not have the fierceness of the wild beast till he is goaded to madness by the hunters. *Sir Giles Mompesson* (supposed to be the original character) we dare say, took things more quietly, and only grew desperate with his fortunes. Cooke played the general casting of the character better in this respect: but without the same fine breaks and turns of passion.<sup>8</sup> Cooke indeed, compared to Kean, had only the *slang* and *bravado* of tragedy. Neither can we think Mr. Kemble equal to him, with all his study, his grace, and classic dignity of form. He was the statue of perfect tragedy, not the living soul. Mrs. Siddons combined the advantage of form and other organic requisites with nature and passion: Mr. Kemble has the external requisites (at least of face and figure), without the internal workings of the soul: Mr. Kean has the last without the first, and, if we must make our election between the two, we think the *vis tragica* must take precedence of every thing else. Mr. Kean, in a word, appears to us a test, an *experimentum crucis*,<sup>9</sup> to shew the triumph of genius over physical defects, of nature over art, of passion over affectation, and of originality over common-place monotony.

