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Edmund Kean's Celebrity: Assemblage Theory and the Unintended Consequences of Audience Density

David Worrall*

Abstract: »Edmund Keans Berühmtheit: Assemblagetheorie und die unbeabsichtigten Folgen von Zuschauerdichte«. This essay will examine theatrical celebrity in early 19th-century England with particular reference to the actor Edmund Kean (1787-1833) and his first season at Drury Lane, 1813-14. His groundbreaking interpretation of Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* brought him overnight success. Using Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory as its main predictive model, the essay argues that celebrity is a category conferred by audience density. Archival records of Drury Lane's financial receipts, pay rates for actors and actresses, and names of individual occupants of box seats (including the novelist, Jane Austen) all provide sets of economic data which can chart financial aspects of celebrity. In short, in that first season Kean was only a middle to upper ranking employee as far as his remuneration was concerned. Furthermore, due to an over-extended season to capitalize on his celebrity, Drury Lane's receipts were 8% down on the previous year.

Keywords: Theatrical Assemblage, Assemblage Theory, Manuel DeLanda, Theatre, Edmund Kean, Gendered salary, Theatre financial accounts.

This essay will examine theatrical celebrity in early 19th-century England with particular reference to the actor Edmund Kean (1787-1833). Kean's celebrity, with its story of debauchery, alcoholism, chaos, and shortened working life, has proved attractive and problematic in roughly equal portions. Although he never met them, his lifetime's virtual coincidence with the British Romantic poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats provides a kind of overlapping, rather muddying, triple narrative around myths of erratic male brilliance and untimely ends. Kean was actually the latest in a founding stream of actor and actress celebrities, following performers such as Margaret 'Peg' Woffington, Catherine 'Kitty' Clive, David Garrick, and Sarah Siddons, themselves all the forerunners of both a more general literary celebrity and a wider public interest in cultural celebrity.

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Disentangling Kean's celebrity reputation from his actual performance achievements has proved problematic. Addressing his continuing iconic standing amongst modern performers in 1987, Leigh Woods usefully commented that "Edmund Kean stands in actors' biography as a prototype, one with which we are dealing still and will, I think, recurrently, for some time to come" (Woods 1989, 244). Tracy C. Davis's influential essay from 1995 pointed to an array of factors behind the apparent paradoxes of his career and reputation, including stage lighting, critical memory, and S.T. Coleridge's influential prejudices, all of which might need to be negotiated in order to isolate his actual acting history. For most of us, the dispassion of Peter Thomson's 2004 entry into the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) probably provides a good base from which to follow the stages of his career while Jeffrey Kahan's 2006 biography, drawing on an eclectic mix of sources, perhaps reinforces impressions of a turbulent life (Thomson 2004).

Instead of focussing on Kean's biography, the principal analytical methodology employed here is drawn from Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory. It will be argued that Kean's celebrity should primarily be treated as a feature of London's wider theatrical assemblage, the network of playhouses, performers, audiences, and institutional practices present in early 19th-century Britain.

The overall principle for analysing celebrity is that "the properties of the links cannot be inferred from the properties of the persons linked" (DeLanda 2006, 5). That is, Kean's celebrity was an attribute conferred by audience populations whose traces can be recovered and sequenced. As detailed below, audiences were present in their hundreds of thousands during Kean's first Drury Lane season of 1813-14. They can be assigned with nightly formations of density as part of an overall theatrical assemblage made up of many other material components. Working theatres, before the era of audio or visual recording, were essentially collections of individuals meeting at precise temporal and spatial locations where the majority of those individuals (the audience) listen and watch fictions performed in disguise by a minority of those collected together (the performers), before they all disperse after the show, networking after the event through gossip, reading reviews, or making return theatre visits.

For Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the so-called 'winter' playhouses, their operating systems can be easily described. Their seasons lasted for ca. 200 nights, with performances beginning at 18:00 and usually ending between 22:00 and 23:00. The night's entertainments comprised a 'mainpiece' (a comedy of manners or a tragedy) and an 'afterpiece' (a farce or a pantomime, the latter often exotic and/or topically political). Additional songs and dances were often performed between the shows. Kean, who was a Shakespearian tragedian, never acted in the Drury Lane afterpieces, but his presence can be correlated with precise audience quantities. Much of the evidence for the claims made in this essay derive from the financial records left by Drury Lane theatre. These

have provided reliable sets of data which can be sequenced and attributed with scale.

The immense material complexity of these contemporary theatres (based on two or three thousand people converging nightly on the same building) produced developments and outcomes counterintuitive in their nature, yet they can often be resolved using the theoretical model proposed here.

Assemblage theory is a particularly appropriate method because theatrical assemblages are made up not just of plays and performers but also of audiences and their networks. As DeLanda puts it (without directly referring to theatres), these are

populations of interacting entities (populations of person, pluralities of communities, multiplicities of organizations, collectivities of urban centers) and it is from the interactions within these populations that large assemblies emerge as a statistical result, or as collective unintended consequences of intentional action. (DeLanda 2010, 12, original emphasis)

Kean's rise to celebrity was very much a "statistical result, or [...] collective unintended consequence" of the unusually large audiences attending at Drury Lane to see him.

However, many of the "unintended consequences" are exactly that: unpredictable outcomes, registered at larger levels of scale, arising from activities operating at lower levels of scale. In the 1813-14 season, two principal "unintended consequences" arose.

The first is that Kean's celebrity failed to disrupt Drury Lane's normal employment practices, particularly with respect to his own pay. The underlying principle is that Kean, as an individual (an assemblage component operating a low level of scale) and despite his celebrity, failed to impact the remuneration of the rest of the company (assemblage components at higher levels of scale). His celebrity brought him nothing which can be financially quantified in any way capable of audit.

Throughout that first season, his wage compensation stayed below that of the theatre's highest paid performers. He remained a middle-to-upper earning employee, a celebrity without celebrity's financial rewards (or, at least, without any other monetary incentives which can be robustly verified). Secondly, despite increased audience numbers, the playhouse's revenue that season suffered a year-on-year loss. While Kean's pay rose only modestly, the playhouse recorded a significant (8%) drop in earnings. The theoretical model applied here, used in conjunction with the audited financial data, provides a method for explaining how these variant outcomes might inform our idea of celebrity. Paying Kean less money than his celebrity might have commanded was probably a contractual issue although, as discussed below, the likely terms of his contract do not suggest a contractual restriction. Nevertheless, if – as must have happened – Drury Lane inevitably conserved its revenues by not overpaying

him (while also ensuring he continued to play), then another explanation has to be found for the drop in revenue.

Methodologically, these problems of paradoxical financial outcomes and “unintended consequences” refer to issues of emergence. Assemblage theory is particularly well suited to isolating and analysing ontologies of emergence.

Early 19th-century theatres in Britain offer good historical examples of assemblages, not least on account of their relative simplicity of purpose and the fairly limited quantity of their associated contemporary media. London’s historical theatre sites are well known with good archives of infrastructure and personnel together with a reasonable range of economic data recording their activities. Theatre and performance history, as disciplinary areas, also benefit from reliable modern biographical scholarship capable of being used in conjunction with electronic databases of historical source material (e.g., play texts, newspapers).

Much of the scale of the contemporary theatrical assemblage can be fairly readily quantified. As well as the known physical sites of London’s theatres, their performance schedules (which changed daily) have also often survived on account of their programmes being advertised in newspapers and playbills.

Drury Lane, at the time of Kean’s ground-breaking interpretation of the role of Shylock in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* on the 26th of January, 1814, was a substantial, newly rebuilt building in the heart of London’s, equally new, West End district. Even by 1806 it seated 3,611 people.¹ At the beginning of the 1813-14 season, the theatre had 280 people on its payroll.² The hundreds of thousands of tickets sold in that first season (detailed below) permit us to estimate both the numbers of people attending Kean’s shows and their levels of intensity in doing so.

Assemblage theory’s applicability as a method for analysing the scale and physicality of London theatre is ultimately based on DeLanda’s foundational formulation that “the identity of an assemblage is not only embodied in its materiality but also expressed by it” (DeLanda 2011b, 200). London theatres had very specific material identities. Theatre buildings can usually be easily identified and architecturally distinguished, not least by their specialized physical construction aimed at orienting thousands of seated people around a single sight line. The destruction of Drury Lane by accidental fire in 1809, followed by its rebuild and reopening in 1812, prompted more thorough management techniques capturing valuable economic data about audiences and performers. These records have been important in gathering the sources for this essay. Crucially, individual performances can be correlated with data from box office receipts, salaries, and other financial records. There are also good, if very fragmented, sets of evidence for audience responses. These can be retrieved

¹ The European Magazine and London Review March 1806, p 169.

² Folger W.b. 316, Folger Shakespeare Library.

from reviews, diaries, and correspondence. There is even a level of institutional state intervention which can be mapped. As a unique restriction on writing in Britain at this period, all new texts for stage performance were subject to obligatory censorship by the Lord Chamberlain, the play manuscripts for this era being now archived at the Huntington Library, California. These substantial sets of documentation help us reliably reconstruct the materiality expressing the identity of that most ephemeral of things in a pre-electronic age, performance.

Assemblage theory is a theory of emergence, one particularly well-suited to modelling celebrity by ensuring a continuous methodological attention to materiality. DeLanda's definition of emergence, with its proposition of flat ontologies, is especially good at helping conceptualize theatrical performance, a cultural form based upon disparate collections of theatres, actors, actresses, and, of course, audiences:

a property of a whole is said to be emergent if it is produced by causal interactions among its component parts. Those interactions, in which the parts exercise their capacities to affect and be affected, constitute the mechanism of emergence behind the properties of the whole. (DeLanda, 2011a, 385)

In acting, where every Hamlet must speak the lines of every other Hamlet, it is difficult to qualitatively trace the reasons for the emergence of celebrity status. In the Hamlet example, 'parts' (also a theatrical word for a role) "exercise their capacities to affect and be affected" every time the piece is played in front of an audience. By examining theatre's underlying material infrastructure, including the economic activities of its predominantly human agents, assemblage theory can provide both a methodology and a rationale for disaggregating and sequencing the theatrical assemblage's components.

To clarify an immediate epistemological paradox, individual celebrity is a property of a network of interacting entities; it is not centred in a single individual. "All assemblages have a fully contingent historical identity" but, "because the ontological status of all assemblages is the same, entities operating at different scales can directly interact with one another, individual to individual." In other words, celebrities do not exist as isolated entities (for example, as specimens of 'genius') because, "at any level of scale we are always dealing with *populations* of interacting entities" (DeLanda 2010, 12, original emphasis). As DeLanda puts it, in a way which can be easily transposed to describing the structure of theatrical celebrity,

it is *the pattern of recurring links*, as well as the properties of those links, which forms the subject of study, not the attributes of the persons occupying positions in a network. (DeLanda 2006, 56, original emphasis)

First of all, it is important to grasp the size of London's theatrical assemblage and to appreciate the precision with which its scale can be calculated.

If by 1806 the Drury Lane alone had a seating capacity of 3,611 places, by 1812 the capital's overall audience capacity was estimated at 29,500 seats (although, due to varied seasonal opening patterns, not all of them were open at

the same time).³ At the end of the 1813-14 season, an ‘Assistant Treasurer’ at Drury Lane, auditing audience numbers at the end of Kean’s first season, found there had been 484,691 seat sales.⁴ When taken together with the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, the King’s Theatre (the opera house, on the site of the present day Her Majesty’s Theatre) and London’s other theatres (such as Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Coburg – now the Old Vic, opened in 1818), the capital’s total annual seat sales in the 1810s would have been around one million. Although the comparison is incommensurable, these seat sales neatly map over the capital’s population which stood at 1,096,784 persons at the 1801 Census, reaching a little over 1.4 million by 1815 (Landers 1993). During this period, London’s population more or less mirrored the annual number of theatre seat places available within it.⁵

In this theatrical assemblage, audiences decide performer celebrity in their interaction with other material properties in the links of the network. This is a modelling of celebrity emergence consonant with DeLanda’s important formulation that “the properties of the links cannot be inferred from the properties of the persons linked” (DeLanda 2006, 56).

In this case, the assemblage can be assigned with a precise scale. In the example of Kean, the simplest calculations relate to the number of seats sold (484,691) together with the intensity of audience theatre-going, a quantity measurable by the examining nightly receipts. Higher receipts meant higher levels of auditorium occupancy. Since 484,691 (the audience) and 1,096,784 (the London population) are genuinely incommensurable, it means either that some Londoners went to see Kean more than once or else significant numbers of people were drawn to the capital specifically to see him. The latter are difficult to identify but, as discussed below, the novelist, Jane Austen, would be one such example of an early provincial Kean theatre-goer. Repeat theatre-going (unfortunately, not easy to identify), together with the theatre’s overall attendance numbers are the best indicators of the assemblage’s intensity (and, therefore, complexity). As DeLanda puts it, “the main territorializing process providing the assemblage with a stable identity is *habitual repetition*” (DeLanda 2006, 50, original emphasis).

For theatre-going as a general contemporary cultural activity, the data on individual intensity is fragmentary. The following examples give an idea of its variability. Some people went to the theatre very often. The literary editor and

³ James Henry Lawrence, “Dramatic Emancipation, or Strictures on the State of the Theatres, And the Consequent Degeneration of the Drama” (1813, 380). Lawrence’s figures derive from an article in *Morning Chronicle* 29 February 1812. The number of seats is not related to the number of possible performances.

⁴ Edward Warren, August 1814, Folger W.a. 12, Folger Shakespeare Library.

⁵ Measuring theatre capacity as the number of annual ‘seats for sale’ is the methodology currently followed by the Society of London Theatre. cf. Society of London Theatre Box Office Data Report 2009, Figure 1.

book collector, Isaac Reed (1742-1807), could certainly be described as an habitual theatre-goer, attending London and provincial theatres 48 times in the 1781-82 season alone.⁶ His personal rate of theatre-going, no doubt facilitated by a good income and unmarried status is probably exceptional. While Reed seems mainly to have gone on his own, Samuel Curwen, an American refugee living in London during the War of Independence usually went in a party, variously with a male cousin, or with a friend and his wife. Between 1775 and 1784, he went to the theatre about ten times a year (Oliver 1972, 80). In Scotland, a diary kept between 1768-1772 by James Stewart, a printer, shows him attending the Canongate Theatre, Edinburgh, about once a month during their season, usually in company with friends.⁷ Interestingly, the diaries of Reed and Stewart make it clear they normally saw the whole of the evening's programme, carefully noting exceptions if they arrived late, missed part of the 'mainpiece,' or left before the 'afterpiece.' Stewart repeatedly records that he saw "every Thing expressed in the Bill," noting even a missed song. Similarly, Reed usually listened to, and named, the individual speakers of both the Prologues (conventionally men), and the Epilogues (conventionally women).

If these examples, both numerically and as testimonies of individual theatre-going, evidence '*habitual repetition*,' to these indicators of the stability of intensity within the theatrical assemblage must be added "*density*, a measure of the intensity of connectivity between indirect links," a term which can be equated with the populations of the assemblage (DeLanda 2006, 56, original emphasis). While Drury Lane's 484,691 seat sales, and the testimonies of Reed, Curwen and Stewart, contribute towards assigning a scale of both volume and intensity to the populations within the assemblage, the assemblage also had the further properties of an extensive material network.

Reed's ability to attend the theatre even when travelling outside London to visit his legal clients is a reminder of the existence of a national physical infrastructure, in place by ca. 1800, of provincial playhouses. This network was considerably enlarged subsequent to the 1788 Theatrical Representations Act, legislation which defined for the first time that local magistrates had powers to license theatre building, neutralizing opposition from the Church or gentry (Baker 2003). Provincial playhouses in the new manufacturing towns, cathedral cities, market towns, and, above all, ports were often based on touring 'circuits' involving companies ('strollers') moving between cities, towns, and villages in four to six week seasons. Many of these circuits, together with print illustrations of the theatres, are described in James Winston's *Theatrical Tourist ... With Brief And Authentic Historical Accounts Of All The Principal Provincial Theatres In The United Kingdom* (1805), an intended part work actually published as a book and aimed at helping would-be actors gain an entry to the profession.

⁶ Folger Ms. M.A. 125, Folger Shakespeare Library.

⁷ Y.d. 961, Folger Shakespeare Library.

The features of emergence Winston had so presciently identified were also assisted by actors' manuals. The best of these was (much plagiarized in both North America and Britain), Leman Thomas Rede's comprehensively titled, *The Road to the Stage; Or, The Performer's Preceptor. Containing Clear and Ample Instructions for Obtaining Theatrical Engagements; With a List of All the Provincial Theatres, The Names of the Managers and all Particulars as to Their Circuits, Salaries, &c. With A Description of the Things Necessary on an Outset in the Profession, Where to Obtain Them, and A Complete Explanation of all the Technicalities of the Histrionic Art!* (1827). Rede's book covered issues as varied as which Covent Garden tavern to go to find an agent, how to black-up and how to share an expensive pair of boots with a colleague.

This national built infrastructure provided the underlying material basis for theatrical celebrity in London. It really was, quite literally, a network. Actors and actresses travelled on, what were called, theatrical 'circuits' based on urban nodes (where the theatres were located) connecting remote outliers to the metropolitan centre and beyond. By 1818, for example, Edmund Shaw Simpson, manager of the Park Theatre, New York, crossed the Atlantic talent spotting in the provinces as well as in London, even witnessing the by-then-declining Kean playing Richard III ("a little dirty wretch [...] a croaky voice").⁸ Such intercontinental networks might easily span the celebrity phase of a performer's career. Just five years earlier, prior to his contract with Drury Lane, in November 1813 a desperately circumstanced Kean was eking out a living as an actor in the English provinces. In the midst of grief for his dead four year old son, Howard ("by [my] side a Corpse"), he wrote to Robert William Elliston (who had offered him a work at his soon-to-be-opened Olympick Theatre, Wych Street, close to Drury Lane), explaining that he only had work at the Dorchester theatre, Dorset, for nine nights, pleading, "I have told you that I am out of a Situation."⁹ Within two months, he was propelled to the metropolitan celebrity Shaw Simpson only witnessed in its decline barely five years later.

It is now time to examine these initial stages of Kean's emergence as a celebrity. As far as the theoretical modelling is concerned, to the 'habitual repetition' of performance activity and audience attendance must be added "density, a measure of the intensity of connectivity between indirect links" (DeLanda, 2006, 56, original emphasis), a term which, in turn, can usually be equated with qualities in the populations of the assemblage. Some general suggestions as to the intensity and density of contemporary theatre-going have already been made. In Kean's case there rapidly developed a set of networked responses which brought considerably increased numbers of people to the theatre to see

⁸ 25 May 1818, Diary of Edmund Shaw Simpson, T.a.5, Folger Shakespeare Library.

⁹ Edmund Kean to Robert William Elliston, 11 and 26 November 1813, Y.c. 400 (10-17), Folger Shakespeare Library.

him, responses which can be seen to have been channelled along the links of London's social, political, and military elite.

On Kean's first night, playing Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* on 26th January, 1814, it was recorded in the Box Keeper's book that Hon. Douglas Kinnaird was in attendance. As well as being a friend of the already celebrity Romantic poet, George Gordon, Lord Byron, Kinnaird was his unofficial literary agent and financial adviser as well as sitting on Drury Lane's management committee.¹⁰ Possibly tipped off by Kinnaird, Byron saw Kean act no later than 12th February, returning again on 19th February, both times to see him play Richard III. As revealed by the Box Book, which recorded persons taking the boxes, the theatre filled up quickly on Kean's nights. Attending on the 12th were John Adolphus (1768-1845), a prominent barrister and theatre historian, and Alderman Sir Matthew Wood (1768-1843), a significant figure in the Whig politics of London, its Lord Sheriff in 1809, and later Lord Mayor. At the performance of *Richard III* on the 19th was the philosophical anarchist novelist and occasional playwright, William Godwin, who went there with his second wife, Mary Jane Godwin (Clairmont née de Vial), after an afternoon spent in the company of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, the ex-London Corresponding Society activist Francis Place, and the writer, Joseph Hume.¹¹

Also part of this initial rush – though less well known at that time – was the novelist Jane Austen, who went to see Kean as Shylock in a party of six on 5th March, barely five weeks after his first appearance. Even though based in rural Hampshire, Austen had not only heard about Kean but, even by then, was finding it hard to get seats. She had written to her sister, Cassandra, “places are secured at Drury Lane for Saturday, but so great is the rage for seeing Keen that only a 3rd and 4th row could be got. As it is in a front box however, I hope we shall do pretty well.”¹² Only travelling up from the country the day before her visit, her brother Henry's name (misspelled by the Box Keeper as “Mr Austin[sic]”) was entered into the Box Book for their reservation.

The theatre-going of literary figures such as Byron, Godwin, and Austen is perhaps predictable, but Kean's audiences also often reflected abrupt gradations of class in networks composed of kinship and friendship. Further along the same tier of boxes on Austen's night was the ‘Marchioness of Headford,’ Mary Taylour [née Quin], Marchioness of Headfort (1758-1842), one of several Irish aristocrats fairly prominently present in the Box Book of Kean's per-

¹⁰ Drury Lane Box book, Folger Z.e. 16, Folger Shakespeare Library. The Box Book is a simple calendar of performances providing giving the name of the person taking the box that night. The names are in the Box Keeper's handwriting (and spelling).

¹¹ 19 February 1814, *The Diary of William Godwin*, ed. Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp. Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010. <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>> (Accessed October 22, 2019).

¹² Jane Austen to Cassandra, 2nd -3rd March 1814, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre le Faye. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 4th ed., 256.

formances. Extraordinarily, the marchioness had also gone to Drury Lane two days earlier (to see *Richard III* on 3rd March), sharing a box with Lady Mary Beauchamp-Procter (1760-1848), entered in the Box Book as 'Lady B Proctor,' famous as the subject of Benjamin West's marriage portrait of her adorning a statue of hymen (oil on canvas, 1778, Tate Britain). Also in the same tier of boxes on the 3rd was Lady Frances Caroline Wedderburn-Webster (1793-1837), signed in as 'Lady Wedderburn,' the friend, if not the lover, of Byron. On Austen's night, the first two rows of their box were taken by the party of Lady Cecil Copley (1770-1819), entered in the Box Book as 'Lady C Copley.' She was the divorced ex-Marchioness of Abercorn, married to Sir Joseph Copley (d. 1819). If divorce, then requiring an act of parliament, provides an explicit example of disrupted lives, so too did the presence on Austen's night of two conflicted royal navy admirals, Admiral (Sir) James Gambier (1756-1833), signed in as 'Sir J. Gambier,' and Admiral (Sir) Eliab Harvey (1758-1830), presumed as present on account of his readily identifiable wife, Lady Louisa Harvey, taking a box and giving their address ('Lady L. Harvey [3] Clifford St'). Gambier and Harvey had been separately court martialled in 1809 on account of an acrimonious dispute between them while in naval service, but with Harvey, surprisingly, re-instated the following year. The two cases, which revolved around attacks on each other's professional integrity, achieved sufficient notoriety, as Susan Valladares has shown, to become the subject of at least two dramas (Valladares 2015, 126). Luckily, they did not share a box.

This audience identification and profiling has two principal methodological characteristics. It materializes the intensity of the audience's individual experience of making theatre visits and allows us correlate this with precise economic data. Literary figures, not unexpectedly, responded rapidly, but so did everyone else. Difficulties had to be surmounted in obtaining seats; boxes were filled to capacity (there may have been 19 people in Jane Austen's box) and seat scarcity increased the possibility of facing socially awkward moments of recognition (including public visibility of the outcomes of the institutions of court martial and divorce). All of these factors became subservient to acquiring the opportunity to see Kean act.

Although these were fleeting and contingent identities, they can be readily decomposed and sequenced, all of them functioning as components within a specific theatrical assemblage quantifiable amidst Drury Lane's 484,691 seat sales that season. Other types of quantification can also be assigned to quantifying the degree of intensity of Kean's impact because, at the end of the season, the management worked out the cold economics of his popularity.

No doubt influenced by Drury Lane's chief financial advisor, Samuel Whitbread (1764-1815), the politician and scion of a highly successful brewing dynasty, the theatre ran an audit of Kean's impact on box office receipts at the end of the season. This is a crucial identifier of his absolute celebrity because the receipts denote the precise levels of economic activity associated with his

appearances at Drury Lane. Economic activities are particularly reliable indicators of movements within the overall assemblage. Edward Warren, an Assistant Treasurer employed by Drury Lane, estimated that, without Kean, box office receipts would have come to £49,820. However, because the actual total came to £68,329 by the end of the season, the “amount brought by Mr. Kean [was] £18,509.” Or, as Warren put it, choosing another way of expressing his financial impact, pre-Kean the theatre’s average receipts had been £212 per night (with the lowest single night taking only £74.18.0.). With Kean acting, the top three nights for box office receipts came in as £673.18.6. (*Othello*), £660.2.0. (*Hamlet*) and £655.13.6. (*Richard III*).¹³ Or, as calculated in another, apparently unofficial, Drury Lane document enigmatically inscribed “From the[sic] sincere friend & well-wisher to Edmund Kean” (presumably composed by Warren or, if not him someone with similarly comprehensive access to the theatre’s financial accounts), the ‘General Averages[sic]’ of receipts for Kean’s nights were £484.9.0.¹⁴

This quantitative evidence of the perceived standing of Kean’s acting reputation can serve as a proxy for levels of audience engagement. Theatre-going, after all, was a discretionary expenditure, not a staple of life. The theatre’s increased receipts on his nights (and its falling off when he was not playing) represents unequivocal evidence of the intensity of Kean’s personal impact. However, quite unexpectedly, soaring receipts brought no commensurate increase in either his personal earnings or in the profit margins of Drury Lane.

Despite the high receipt densities achieved by Kean, far above the £212 average, the playhouse’s total receipts for the 1813-1814 season were £6,913.14.0. *less* than in the previous season. As the management committee reported back to shareholder ‘subscribers,’ this ‘falling off’ of revenue occurred because the theatre had extended the season by 42 nights (bringing it up to 247 nights) but had incurred unanticipated ‘expenses.’ Drury Lane’s income from receipts that season came to £68,329.2.0., but expenditure was £74,505.2.6. These expenses would probably have included payments or special provisions made to compensate performers who would ordinarily (as a feature recognized within their contract) have toured outside of the London season under their own initiative, probably to Dublin or Scotland as well as the English provinces.¹⁵ At the very least, this exposes a lack of management foresight about how to effectively capitalize on theatrical celebrity.

However, when one examines the shape and structure of Drury Lane’s revenue, it could be plausibly argued that all of its performers were celebrities insofar as they were hired to work in a royal patent protected theatre holding

¹³ Folger W.a. 12, Folger Shakespeare Library.

¹⁴ Y.d. 359 (1), Folger Shakespeare Library.

¹⁵ Fifth Report to the General Assembly of Subscribers to the Re-Building of the Theatre-Royal, Drury Lane, September 2, 1814, 13.

the monopoly (along with Covent Garden) on the right to perform spoken drama. This should have given the patent theatres a huge financial advantage (as exclusive purveyors of the heritage of Elizabethan drama, for example) but, as has been shown, increased audiences did not necessarily translate into economic success. It is also undoubtedly the case that, because Kean was acting in one of only two London theatres permitted to perform Shakespeare, this was a major factor propelling his emergence as a celebrity.

However, despite those rapidly climbing receipts and increased critical attention, Kean's new status did not translate into increased pay. In that first season, the top level of the Drury Lane company performers continued to receive pay in excess of that received by Kean.

In such a labour intensive commercial enterprise as theatre, a considerable portion of the revenue was spent on personnel rather than on capital items. Anyone fortunate enough to be either a Drury Lane performer, or a member of the band, received a portion of the £30,470.2.6. which made up the theatre's highly gender weighted salary pool that season. The lion's share (£17,534.16.8.) went to male performers with a further £3,066.15.0. going to the all-male band. Female performers received salaries to a total of £9,868.10.10.¹⁶

One reason for Kean's poor pay was probably confusion over the circumstances of his initial hiring. Kean, who had been desperate – if not destitute – in Dorchester, seems to have accepted Drury Lane's employment offer, made by Samuel Arnold, while having already committed himself to a contract with Elliston at the Olympick. Peter Thomson's *ODNB* entry notes that this mix-up resulted in Kean paying a £2 per week penalty to Elliston for breach of contract. Suspecting that this would be how he would be treated, theatre insiders such as the veteran actor, William 'Gentleman' Smith (1730-1819), then living in rural Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, wrote to his friend, Thomas Coutts, on 28 February, 1814, "I do hope He has rec'd an adequate Reward from the Managers."¹⁷ Smith was right to be dubious.

At no point in the 1813-1814 season was Kean Drury Lane's highest paid performer. There was no direct relationship between Kean's celebrity status and his remuneration. Again, one returns to the theoretical parameter articulated in assemblage theory that "the properties of the links cannot be inferred from the properties of the persons linked" (DeLanda 2006, 56).

His first weekly wage was £8.0.0. on 29th January. His pay then initially decreased to £5.6.8. on 26 February, rose to £10.13.4. on 5th March, £13.6.8., continued going up to £20.0.0. on 19th March, then dropped back for several weeks to £16.3.4. or £16.6.8. a week before being restored to £20.0.0. on 25th June and finally finishing at £23.6.8. on 18th July, the final week of the extend-

¹⁶ W.b. 429, Folger Shakespeare Library.

¹⁷ 28 February 1814, W.b. 78, Folger Shakespeare Library.

ed season and the point of his highest pay. By contrast, in Kean's first week of employment in January, 'Miss [Sarah] Smith' and Rebecca Maria Davison both earned £25.0.0. In the last week of the season, Smith and Davison were earning £29.3.4., William Dowton, £23.6.8., and Joseph Shepherd Munden, £28.6.8.¹⁸ Although no copy of Kean's contract for this season seems to have survived, the Folger document endorsed "From the [*sic*] sincere friend & well-wisher to Edmund Kean" indicates that Drury Lane's intention was to continue paying him £20.0.0. per week or, as the document expressed it, £780.0.0. for 39 weeks.¹⁹ As a point of comparison, Thomas John Dibdin, the prompter (a post approximately equivalent to today's stage manager, although he also devised their pantomimes), earned a steady £10.0.0. per week.

It is possible, as William Smith may have surmised, that Kean was held at Drury Lane on a contract originally signed by him in Dorchester and which aimed to prevent him moving elsewhere (to Covent Garden, for example). However, the contemporary acting contracts that I have been able to examine, although usually including a breach of contract clause, should not have proved a barrier to Kean's jumping ship. The contracts were usually pre-printed with the details filled in by hand. Their formula phrasing usually went something like, "for the true performance of the several Clauses and Agreements hereinbefore [*sic*] mentioned and contained, the said Parties do hereby bind themselves..." with the penalty sum for breach of contract (applying to both parties) written in by pen. For example, the 1823 contract of the obscure Drury Lane actress, Elizabeth Blake (fl. 1820-23), included a "penal Sum," of £500 for a broken contract while that for the much more famous, William Oxberry (1784-1824), was for £1,000 of "lawful Money." If Kean's average nightly audience receipts were £484.9.0., and his new theatre reimbursed him, then it would only have taken Covent Garden (the most obvious rival employer) two days to clear the hurdle of Oxberry's penalty.²⁰ The issue is a potentially serious one because, if he had been unwittingly given a preventative contract to stop him moving, then Kean's Drury Lane celebrity was actually the outcome of a contractual restriction keeping him in place, artificially stabilizing the configuration of this area of the overall assemblage.

While this cannot be proven, it is clear that anomalous pay conditions already prevailed at Drury Lane. Consonant with the theoretical parameters of assemblage theory referred to above, it is noticeable that these pay differentials were both inversely gendered (by contemporary normative standards) and were not disrupted by Kean's celebrity. In September 1813, right at the beginning of the season and long before Kean's arrival, the highest paid male performer was

¹⁸ W.b. 360, Folger Shakespeare Library.

¹⁹ Y.d. 359 (1), Folger Shakespeare Library.

²⁰ Elizabeth Blake, 14 August 1823, Y.d. 22 (57); William Oxberry, 24 July 1812, Y.d. 867; Folger Shakespeare Library.

Elliston at £30.0.0. (although his duties seem to have included certain managerial responsibilities). Below him, the highest earning males, at £20.0.0., were Downton and Munden. Steep pay differentials with asymmetric gender structures were elsewhere pervasive at Drury Lane but not impacted by Kean's arrival. When he began working for Drury Lane, there were 51 'Men Performers' named in the theatre's weekly pay pool with £434.2.0. expended on their pay. By contrast, 'Women Performers,' of whom there were 44, were topped by Smith on £25.0.0. and Davison and Maria Dickons, both at £18.0.0., within an overall female pay pool of £220.15.0.²¹

This structural configuration of the highest paid female performers earning more than the highest paid males, but in the context of a pay pool which assigned higher amounts for male pay than for female pay, is a recurrent feature of performance remuneration in late 18th- and early 19th-century London. While these were not invariable practices, most theatre financial account books will provide evidence of such a structure.

From the beginning of the season to the end, notwithstanding Kean's celebrity and, as demonstrated in the end-of-season audit of the significantly increased average receipts on his nights of performance, his pay did not keep pace with his economic value to theatre, as identified in Warren's analysis. To some extent, performers could increase their seasonal earnings considerably if they opted to take a benefit. Kean's decision to play Luke in *Riches; or, The Wife and Brother*, an adaptation of Philip Massinger's *The City Madam* (1632), for his benefit on 25 May, 1814 brought him £636.15.6. (it is not clear whether, in Kean's case, Drury Lane made a house charge for the hire of the theatre). *Riches* was an unorthodox choice, far removed from his established pattern of successfully playing Shakespeare, but it seems to have paid off. Of this amount, £310.11.6. came from cash paid at the door and the 'Remainder tickets,' to the value of £326.4.0.²² 'Tickets' were special admittance revenues gifted to the benefit night player with no fixed price other than the amount actually paid and, therefore, a key indicator of popularity and standing. Audiences gifted more to players they liked rather than to players they did not like.

However, examined from a different perspective, although Kean's celebrity had not disrupted Drury Lane's normal pay policy towards its company of actors, it devastated the benefit night earnings of his colleagues.

Benefit nights, because they normally involved a hire charge payable to the theatre for the use of its auditorium, were a risky business for performers to undertake. Britain's unpredictable weather was at least one of the factors influencing audience turn-out. At the very least, benefit nights were a raw test of current popularity. Perceptions of popularity, usually indicated directly by existing pay scales within this particular market, were the deciding factors for

²¹ Folger W.b. 316, Folger Shakespeare Library.

²² Y.d. 359 (1), Folger Shakespeare Library.

choosing a benefit night date. The optimum strategy for a performer was to fix an early slot, usually starting at the end of April or beginning of May, lest audiences became so continually goaded by different performers soliciting ‘Tickets’ for benefits that they grew weary. As the highest paid performer, the optimum slot that season went to Elliston.

Elliston held his benefit on 2nd May, choosing to play in John O’Keeffe’s *Wild Oats; or, The Strolling Gentlemen* (1791), a repertoire staple and not nearly as intrinsically adventurous a choice as Kean’s *Riches*. Elliston’s total receipts were £204.13.6. but the house charge was £220.4.1. In other words, Elliston had worked for nothing, ending up ‘Deficient’ and owing Drury Lane £15.10.7.

On the next night, 3rd May, with Kean playing Richard III as part of their ordinary programming, the playhouse’s total receipts jumped back up to £588.1.6. Kean’s celebrity was clearly drawing audiences away from the established company. Worse was to follow. Sarah Smith chose Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d; or, A Plot Discover’d* (1682) for her benefit on 9th May. Her receipts were £183.4.6 but the charge was £212.2.6. meaning that ‘Miss Smith’s Deficiency’ was £28.18.0. Again, she had worked for nothing and now owed the theatre, effectively, money equivalent to more than a week’s wages. Kean’s impact on his co-workers continued until the end of the season. On Vincent De Camp’s benefit night on 17th June, playing in George Colman the Younger’s *The Surrender of Calais* (1791), the receipts were £218.0.6. but the house charge was £218.0.0. meaning that his pay for the night was sixpence. On the other hand, some of Kean’s colleagues learned rapidly. William Downton quietly opted to be paid £200.0.0., ‘in Lieu of Benefit’ on 14th May, a wise strategy ensuring he did not end up with a deficiency.²³

These micro adjustments recorded in specific cash transactions (whether for performer pay or audience receipts) provide an accurate and reliable method for analysing structures of economic activity in theatrical assemblages. Within institutions such as theatres, financial transactions are usually verifiably recorded in institutional procedures such as Treasurer Warren’s audit or the Box Book record of occupancy. This documentation allows assemblage activity to be precisely interrogated. As DeLanda puts it:

The identity of any assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process (territorialisation and, in some cases, coding) and it is always precarious, since other processes (deterritorialization and decoding) can destabilize it. For this reason, the ontological status of assemblages, large or small, is always that of unique, singular individuals. (DeLanda 2006, 28, original emphasis)

In the examples presented here, these assemblages of financial data function as proxies for historical human activity, specifically those activities relating to

²³ Folger W.b. 316, Folger Shakespeare Library.

individual theatrical celebrity. While these were the micro movements of cash which can be registered to precise dates in Drury Lane's public calendar of performances, it is also the case that the overall assemblage population can be assigned as properly audited quantities. In season, £68,329.2.0. in receipts generated from 484,691 seat sales.

Much of Kean's career at Drury Lane was consistent with the theoretical model detailed here. Processes of deterritorialization were inherent in Kean's rise to celebrity. With Kean having the same ontological status as Elliston or Sarah Smith, assemblage theory allows us to understand how, at different times of the season, these performers came to be both high earners during regular programming and low earners on their benefit nights.

As soon as audiences began to clamber for seats, processes of deterritorialization began to work their way through the assemblage. That season's benefit night receipts, particularly with its 'Tickets' system offering audience's the chance to demonstrate individual valuations, were unequivocal indicators of intensity within the assemblage's principal populations. The theory also allows us to isolate and analyse how, despite Kean having only low-to-modest pay, he destabilized the incomes of those earning higher than him. Again, DeLanda's theoretical modelling is helpful in describing this situation: "Once a larger scale assemblage is in place it immediately starts acting as a source of limitations and resources for its components" (DeLanda 2010, 12).

Whatever had happened at Drury Lane, there can be no doubting the difference Kean made. Writing to his banker friend, Thomas Coutts, on 10th January, 1814, scarcely more than a fortnight before Kean's spectacular debut, William 'Gentleman' Smith, considered that "Drury Lane is deep in the decline."²⁴ Kean halted that decline, if only temporarily. This essay has demonstrated how British theatre, and Drury Lane in particular, had become such complicated economic and social institutions by the early 1810s, that actor celebrity cannot be considered a straightforward quality. Celebrity arose directly from audience density. It meant that Kean carried on being relatively poorly paid even though, paradoxically, his reputation was such that it devastated the benefit night earnings of his colleagues, filled the auditorium to capacity, and caused Drury Lane an 8% financial loss. Or, as DeLanda puts it, "the properties of the links cannot be inferred from the properties of the persons linked" (DeLanda 2006, 56).

²⁴ William Smith to Thomas Coutts, 10 January 1814, W.b. 78, Folger Shakespeare Library.

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