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THOMAS HAMBLIN AND  
THE BOWERY THEATRE

The New York Reign of  
“Blood and Thunder” Melodramas

*Thomas A. Bogar*



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Thomas A. Bogar

# Thomas Hamblin and the Bowery Theatre

The New York Reign of “Blood and Thunder”  
Melodramas

palgrave  
macmillan

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*The Bow'ry, the Bow'ry!  
They say such things,  
And they do strange things  
On the Bow'ry! The Bow'ry!  
I'll never go there anymore!*

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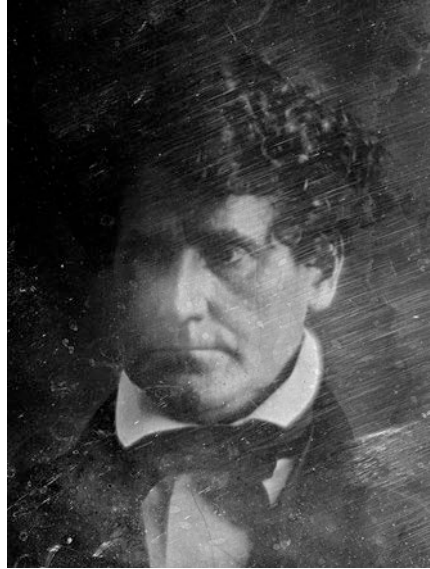
## Introduction

Behind this face (Fig. 1.1) lived two men. One was a talented Shakespearean actor, a savvy, ambitious theatre manager who persevered against daunting odds. The other was an arrogant sensualist who handily captured the hearts of married women and starry-eyed ingénues, despite an unceasing barrage of public outrage. One day he performed Hamlet to critical acclaim, the next he haunted the brothels of New York, selecting the teen-aged daughters of prostitutes to become favored protégées. Under his tutelage some of them became celebrated actresses; three died in their early twenties under questionable circumstances.

Few figures in American theatre were as polarizing. Everything he did was extolled or excoriated. To his admirers (and there were many), he was a “noble Roman” who commanded the stage, a hero of the city’s burgeoning working class, a philanthropist willing to help those in need. To his detractors (and there were more), he was an utterly unprincipled libertine, a narcissist who brooked no opposition, a ruthless Machiavellian who destroyed the careers and lives of anyone who stood in his way.

He was Thomas Souness Hamblin, granted by nature with tremendous advantages. Well over six feet tall—at a time when the average male stood at five feet eight inches—he maintained a commanding demeanor. Atop his imposing head a profusion of dark curly hair spilled over a broad forehead, with piercing, dark hazel eyes set in a ruggedly handsome face. A large Roman nose overshadowed a stern, narrow mouth above a square,

**Fig. 1.1** Thomas  
Souness Hamblin  
(Source: Library of  
Congress)



fleshy, cleft chin. “He was by all odds the handsomest Hamlet I ever saw,” observed one contemporary. Recalled another, “Tom Hamblin! Ah! He was THE looker! [Edwin] Forrest as Coriolanus was great in the region of the calves, but Tom Hamblin was great all over.”<sup>1</sup>

But nature had shortchanged him with a pair of unshapely tree-trunk legs and an incongruously high-pitched and asthmatic voice. And he lacked refinement, resembling “a country wagoner,” as one observer opined, covered up with an affected theatrical dignity. He wore clothes to great advantage, especially costumes of classical tragedy, and appeared at all times to be posing for a formal portrait. Some saw him as a grand piece of “animated machinery” or a “speaking statue.”<sup>2</sup>

Hamblin carried himself with supreme confidence, leading with his expansive chest and muscular upper arms. His stride was regal, as if crossing an imaginary stage when a real one was unavailable. Said one reviewer, “he could not ask ‘How do you do?’ nor even blow his nose, without a flourish of trumpets.” “He believed in himself,” recalled a fellow manager, “with an abiding faith that were it not for him the legitimate drama would go to the bow-wows.” Overbearing and imperious, he suffered no fools. “Woe betide the poor dog who dared to bark” against him, recalled one

of his actors. If anyone persisted, “the managerial monarch threw back his leonine head, drew himself up to his full height, and glared down at the applicant with such effect that, awed and frightened, [he] oozed out as it were from the lordly presence and troubled him no more.”<sup>3</sup>

Never a star of the first magnitude like Forrest or Junius Brutus Booth, he was a dogged, workmanlike performer rather than an inspired one, falling short of genius, that gold standard of the Romantic Age. Employing facial expressions which were not particularly flexible or communicative, along with wooden gestures, he personified the outdated “[John Philip] Kemble School” of acting, not the fiery style of Edmund Kean and Booth, nor the “heroic,” declamatory style of Forrest. When critic William Winter at the close of the nineteenth century enumerated the luminaries of two centuries of Shakespearean acting on the American stage, he omitted Hamblin entirely.

When a scene called for majesty or dignity, Hamblin was fine, but was somewhat at sea when tenderness or love was required. Noble Romans were his forte, and he drew applause by striking a noble pose and (except when asthma assailed him) delivering a grandiloquent, inspirational speech: “To see him dressed for Brutus, Coriolanus, or Virginius was study for a painter.” These were his best roles, along with Tell, Macbeth, Othello, Faulconbridge, and Rolla. Curiously, he often chose the brooding, philosophical Hamlet to open his engagements; the excessively ambitious Macbeth would have been more apt.<sup>4</sup>

Still, he remained a popular success, one of the best-known actors in America during his lifetime, with John R. “Jack” Scott close behind. No figure in nineteenth-century American theatre was more truly *sui generis*. Those who appreciated his performances the most were neither aesthetes nor aristocrats. He was “a sure card with the East-side patrons [who] could bellow with the best, ‘tear a passion to tatters, to very rags,’ ‘split the ears of the groundlings,’ and thus made himself a hero with men and boys who doted on caricature.”<sup>5</sup>

As a manager, Hamblin was fiercely, inventively competitive. Defying the prevailing norm of aristocratic theatregoing as exemplified by the nearby Park Theatre, he wooed and won the b’hoys and g’hals of his Bowery Theatre pit and gallery, and his vision and instincts were keenly attuned to their expectations. His three tenures at the helm of the Bowery—a combined seventeen years—showcased a kaleidoscope of sensational, often gory, “blood and thunder” melodramas, leading it to become known as the “Bowery Slaughterhouse.” He was arguably more

responsible for the popularity of spectacular melodrama in America, especially among the working class, than any other theatrical figure. As Bruce McConachie has noted, Hamblin “pioneered the innovations that established working-class theatre as a separate form of entertainment.”<sup>6</sup>

This was largely achieved by the exertion of Hamblin’s monumental ambition and commensurate pursuit of adulation, which were unsurpassed in his era. His ancillary need for respectability, however, remained unfulfilled. To meet the needs of his new working-class audience, he dished up plenty of pulchritude, lavish apocalyptic spectacles, patriotic homages to historical events, classical tragedies, farcical afterpieces (but few comedies), and—anticipating vaudeville by half a century—novelty acts gyrating from minstrelsy to elephants to equestrians to dogs. Eschewing the star system except for heroic figures like Forrest and Booth who appealed to his targeted audience, Hamblin developed a native American stock company to carry productions in which the ensemble, the special effects, and the blatant themes of egalitarianism and virtue triumphant compensated for the lack of a major star. His actors were in general not the most talented, but his selection of popular scripts and their spectacular staging ensured that his theatre generally remained full. And, significantly, he readily adapted to his adopted nation. Despite living the first thirty-eight years of his life as a native Englishman, he flourished as a nativist American manager.

Each time that he struck success, often with a thrilling adaptation of a recent popular novel, he launched it into a groundbreaking long run. A few extraordinary successes he milked for years. No one, with the exception of the incomparable Phineas T. Barnum, kept himself and his theatre so consistently in the public eye. In this, Hamblin served as a prototype for such impresarios as John T. Ford, Augustin Daly, David Belasco, and (especially) Florenz Ziegfeld.

But Hamblin’s hallmark, which stamps him indelibly as worthy of historiographical consideration, was a resilience which carried him past any obstacle, any setback. The overriding arc of his life was his determined battling back after repeated severe—almost biblical—trials. Considering the vicissitudes of theatrical management in the 1830s and 1840s, it is a wonder that he kept his Bowery Theatre afloat through exceptionally parlous times, especially in the wake of riots and the Panic of 1837. Season after season, he frantically juggled attractions and—despite a proclaimed aversion to the “star system”—enough stars to keep the Bowery going.

Manager Francis Wemyss, who knew Hamblin well, watched him “struggling undismayed against reverses which would forever have

prostrated common men.” “Surely ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have caved in and gone through under half the misfortunes which have assailed him,” observed William T. Porter, editor of the *New York Spirit of the Times*. A “man of untiring industry,” Hamblin remained utterly unflappable, upheld throughout his unceasing financial and marital travails by loyal male friends. Numerous accounts tell of his animated camaraderie, throwing back many a drink and swapping many an anecdote (often ribald). True, he also generated “some implacable enemies; but the public almost universally followed his footsteps and supported him liberally.”<sup>7</sup>

Hamblin’s contemporaries—mainly in eulogies—spoke glowingly of his loyalty to his actors (often unreciprocated) and his honor in business dealings (glossing over the manifold instances of his failing to pay bills on time). His generous donation of time and effort in eleemosynary causes was unquestioned; by some accounts he offered his theatre and/or talent (or that of his company) for 160 benefits. He was also clever enough to find, and to depend upon the efforts of, dedicated subordinates, chiefly men like Thomas Flynn, George Stevenson, and H. E. Stevens. In a never-ending shell game mingling his personal and professional funds, he skirted and contorted fiduciary rules and ethics to keep his theatre afloat and enrich himself.

His dedication to discovering and nurturing new talent, for whatever artistic, altruistic, or amorous reasons, was legendary. “The American stage is more indebted to Mr. Hamblin for discovering and fostering native dramatic talent, than to all his contemporaries,” asserted Wemyss. Notable among those whose careers Hamblin nurtured were T. D. Rice, George Hazard, David McKinney, J. R. Scott, E. L. Davenport, Lester Wallack, Edward Eddy, Ann Duff Wallack, Charlotte Cushman, Maggie Mitchell, Naomi Vincent, Josephine Clifton, and Louisa Missouri Miller.<sup>8</sup>

The troubling aspects of his relationships with these last three actresses drew the greatest opprobrium from detractors who could not overlook his infamous pursuit and conquest of young women, especially those under his tutelage. Many regarded him as an unprincipled libertine, “a licentious character quite unfit to appear before the pure and unspoiled denizens of a metropolitan [theatre].” “He fancied that every woman that once looked upon his manly form was fascinated” (and many were). Yet his perception of women, and his behavior toward them, epitomized the “sporting man” of his age, who answered to no one else’s code of morality and indulged in affairs that tarnished lives and marriages. Hamblin was, said one journalist, “a

man of wonderful beauty, and one of the most successful corrupters of the youth of both sexes that ever lived in this city.” But the young women drawn to his power and talent and the opportunities he provided them, as well as his male protégés, never stayed with him very long.<sup>9</sup>

As the matriarch of the Drew-Barrymore family, Louisa Lane Drew, summarized, “Mr. Hamblin was a splendid-looking man and a very good actor. I don’t think he could ever have been called ‘great.’ ... No man was better known in the thirties and forties in New York than Tom Hamblin, and his fine Roman head and strongly marked face were familiar [wherever] men loved to congregate.”<sup>10</sup>

Recent theatrical scholarship has focused increasingly on twentieth-century developments and mores, rather than those of the nineteenth century. Furthering this marginalization, and a significant cause for the lack of a Hamblin biography to date, is the nearly insurmountable difficulty presented by the lack of any Hamblin diary or memoir and the paucity of extant Hamblin correspondence or records of the Bowery Theatre’s operation. Hence, one must sift through contemporaries’ accounts of his dealings, doings, and utterances, often tainted by the envy of a rival, the bitterness of a spurned supplicant, the opprobrium of a moralist, or the jaundiced view of a critic.

The work which follows attempts to assess these perceptions on balance and provide an unvarnished, nonjudgmental portrait of this complex figure who in many ways would be right at home in the twenty-first-century world of reality TV, celebrity worship, and pandering to the lowest common denominator of primal sentiment.

## NOTES

1. Charles Gayler, “Tom Hamblin’s Days,” *NYDM*, Sept. 24, 1885; *Clipper*, Feb. 19, 1887. Hamblin’s middle name has been repeatedly and erroneously cited as Sowerby, a last name adopted by his half-brother Frank upon arrival in New York, but Hamblin’s christening lists him purely as Thomas Souness. His common-law wife Louisa Medina, in a June 1837 biographical sketch, identified him as Thomas Souness Hamblin. He signed his name with only the middle initial “S.” The first mention of a “Thomas Sowerby Hamblin” was by T. Allston Brown in the *Clipper*, Nov. 22, 1862, from which subsequent historians have drawn.
2. Mary Carr Clarke. *A Concise History of the Life and Amours of Thomas S. Hamblin, Late Manager of the Bowery Theatre, as Communicated by his Legal Wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Hamblin, to Mrs. M. Clarke*. New York: n.p.,



- n.d., 12; James H. Hackett. *Notes and Comments upon Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare, with Criticisms and Correspondence*. New York: Carleton, 1863, 124–25; *Augusta (GA) Chronicle*, Feb. 12, 1828.
3. (Boston) *Dramatic Mirror*, Feb. 19, 1829; “Old Fashioned Managers,” *NYS*, July 3, 1876; Maud and Otis Skinner. *One Man in His Time: the Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player, 1845–1863*, 145.
  4. *HNYS*, *op. cit.*
  5. Abram C. Dayton, *Last Days of Knickerbocker Life in New York*. New York: G. W. Harlan, 1882, 284–85.
  6. Bruce McConachie, “American Theatre in Context: Commercial Performance, 1830–1870,” *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*. 3 vols. Eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998–2000, I:155.
  7. Francis C. Wemyss, *Twenty-Six Years*, 106–7; *SotT*, March 29, 1851; *New York Tribune*, Jan. 10, 1853; *NODP*, Jan. 23, 1853.
  8. Wemyss, *Twenty-Six Years*, 106–7.
  9. “The Hermit in New York” in *Troy (NY) Weekly Times*, Dec. 19, 1868; *NYT*, June 19, 1887; Joseph H. Tooker. “Booth at the Old Bowery,” *NYT*, June 19, 1887.
  10. Louisa Lane Drew. *Autobiographical Sketch of Mrs. John Drew*. New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1899, 50–51, 179.

## “He Is Yet Very Young, Both in Years and Practice”

Hamblin acquired his love of spectacle at an early age, primarily from productions at Sadler’s Wells Theatre, a few hundred yards from his childhood home on Wynyatt Street in Pentonville, just to the north of London. Born May 18, 1800, he never knew his biological father, who died or disappeared before Hamblin turned two. His mother, Ann Roger Hamblin, quickly took up with—or was already involved with—an established ship broker named John Souness, whom she wed in August 1805. Hamblin was christened on February 21, 1802, in old St. James’s Church, Pentonville, as Thomas Souness, and did not reclaim the surname Hamblin until adolescence. In 1809 he acquired a half-brother, John, and three years later a half-sister, Ann, called Nancy.<sup>1</sup>

Typical of the Sadler’s Wells spectacles he enjoyed was *The Siege of Gibraltar*, a staged naval encounter with authentically scaled galleons firing working armaments, “manned” by neighborhood boys. Conquered vessels sank beneath the roiling waves of a water tank which filled the stage. In rare cases, boys only a little older than Hamblin were invited to deliver dramatic speeches before paying audiences. Such an opportunity had ignited the acting career at age eleven of Edmund Kean, and Hamblin dreamed of the same sort of fame.

At Sandford’s Academy in Pentonville, he watched fellow student “J. S.” Grimaldi, son of “Joey” Grimaldi, father of circus clowning, debut at Sadler’s Wells in 1814, further prodding his ambition. Later, at Gray’s

Inn School, near his stepfather's office, Hamblin studied Latin, Greek, mathematics, literature, and oratory. There, barely into his teens, he made his first appearance on any stage, as the ghost of Hamlet's father. Praised for his oratorical skill, he began to devour and love and spout the words of William Shakespeare. But at age fourteen, with the birth of another half-brother, Frederick, called Frank, his parents apprenticed him to a merchant in Threadneedle Street in London.

The idea of a more exciting future led him in the summer of 1815 to seek an audition from the manager of Sadler's Wells, Charles I. M. Dibdin, a tireless, convivial playwright-composer-showman. Dibdin's "aquadramas" were losing their appeal, and he was open to new tricks and new talent. When actor John Sloman offered a slot on his benefit night to Hamblin, Dibdin endorsed the request. (Years later, Hamblin would return the favor.) So, from the stage of Sadler's Wells one evening Hamblin delivered Rolla's inspirational address to the Peruvian army from Act II of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Pizarro*. Emulating Shakespeare's Henry V's St. Crispin's Day speech, the lengthy oration was a mouthful, exhorting "brave associates, partners of my toil, my feelings, and my fame" to "die with hope of bliss beyond the grave." Neither Dibdin nor Hamblin recorded the extent of his success, but Dibdin offered nothing further.<sup>2</sup>

A few months later, apparently with parental blessing, Hamblin left his apprenticeship. An unidentified "old hand" recommended him to manager John Scott at the Sans Pareil Theatre in London, just around the corner from the vaunted Drury Lane Theatre. Scott, who had opened the theatre to stage his daughter's plays, hired Hamblin as a dancer/supernumerary for six shillings a week. On October 30, 1815, the season's opening night, he played a peasant in a melodrama, *Asgard, The Daemon Hunter*, which ran for eighteen nights. Following that he was a pastry-cook in a pantomime, and an Indian hunter and a smuggler in two more melodramas. On March 23, 1816, Scott chose Hamblin to deliver Othello's Act V dying speech between acts of the main piece. No reviewer noted Hamblin's success, but this time the manager kept him on. By the end of the season he had performed in most of Scott's twenty-three productions.

The following year, his ambition already evident, Hamblin made it around the corner to the Drury Lane, a magnificent edifice seating over three thousand. Despite its reputation, it had fallen on hard times. Its management had accrued excessive debt and resorted on occasion to the same gimmicks as Sadler's Wells: one production featured a live elephant

on stage (a stunt Hamblin later replicated). Hired as a supernumerary, he learned stage technique from acting manager Thomas Dibdin (Charles’ son) and stage manager/actor Alexander Rae, observing from his spot in crowd scenes such established stars as Kean and Booth.

Kean was as unrestrained in his private life as in his acting—behavior not lost on the teenaged Hamblin. A profligate adulterer who drank to excess, with a reputation for bacchanalian nights, Kean would, noted a fellow actor, “spend days and weeks in a den of vice and depravity.... When intoxicated, he was diligently coarse, and vulgar in the extreme.” One can only imagine the impression on supernumerary Hamblin when Kean announced that he had “frequently three women to stroke during performances” and that “two waited while the other was served.” Booth, only four years older than Hamblin, had been thrust into the spotlight at twenty in Brighton, taking over for an “indisposed” Kean. He was equally uninhibited in his performances and his consumption of alcohol. Legendary for his unpredictability—which would later infuriate Hamblin—and for his dynamic Shakespearean characters, Booth was an audience favorite.<sup>3</sup>

But their impassioned style was not for Hamblin. He would emulate the more reserved, stately—and increasingly outdated—classical style of the Kemble school. It was not in Hamblin’s nature, even from this impressionable age, to indulge in the emotional, “heroic” grandstanding. For him, correct interpretation trumped passionate delivery.

At Drury Lane, Hamblin befriended actor James William Wallack, six years older and already playing important roles. Their friendship would carry across the ocean, where they would act together and compete as managers. From Wallack, Hamblin learned the necessity of paying one’s dues in the provinces while developing a repertoire. He may also have sought advice from Wallack, who similarly suffered from asthma, about ways to compensate for its effect on voice and stamina.

Most importantly, in the summer of 1817 Hamblin met at Drury Lane the young actress he would soon marry. Elizabeth Walker Blanchard, the daughter of respected Covent Garden comedian William Blanchard, was poised, beautiful, and intelligent. A few months older than Hamblin, she was born on November 15, 1799, to Susanna Wright Blanchard, a pretty provincial singer-actress, who died in 1806. Two years later her father remarried, to the much younger Sarah Harrold Blanchard, who formed Elizabeth into a confident, well-rounded, circumspect young woman. An aspiring actress, she had already apprenticed in Dublin,

**Fig. 2.1** Elizabeth  
Blanchard Hamblin  
(Source: Extra-Illustrated  
Ireland, HTC,  
Houghton Library,  
Harvard University)



notably in breeches roles. Soon after meeting Hamblin, she had her portrait sketched by Rose Emma Drummond. It reveals a clear, direct gaze, aquiline nose, and knowing half-smile, atop an ample décolletage, in a plain white Empire dress. Her dark hair falls in stylish ringlets to her shoulders (Fig. 2.1).<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth debuted at Covent Garden at eighteen as the serious Miss Blandford in Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough*. Soon after, she was accepted into playwright-manager George Colman, Jr.'s company at London's Haymarket Theatre. There, from her first entrance and curtsy, she became a charming favorite in light comedies and melodramas. Critical attention came easily (far more so than it would for her future husband). Praised for her tasteful, sprightly performances, she was anointed a "theatrical goddess" who "will rise to eminence."<sup>5</sup>

Fortuitously, one influential figure did notice Hamblin in June 1818. The Royal Theatre of Edinburgh was performing in London that summer, and Hamblin filled in as Romeo. In the audience was Edmund Shaw Simpson, co-manager of New York’s Park Theatre, recruiting actors. He liked what he saw in this young leading man, but postponed bringing him to America. Hamblin, he recorded, “displayed some force of feeling. He is yet very young, both in years and practice, and if he is not spoiled by his present association [the unpolished Edinburgh company], may at some future period vie to eminence.”<sup>6</sup>

But Hamblin burned with an ambition bordering on presumptuousness, seeking eminence rather than waiting for it to be bestowed upon him. In July, in Brighton, he won from manager Thomas Trotter such supporting roles as Richmond in *Richard III*. Within a month he received an offer from Rae, now managing the East London Theatre in Goodman’s Fields, to join its company in the fall. Hired for “utility parts,” Hamblin sought leads. Remarkably, he gained them: the witty Reuben Glenroy in Morton’s *Town and Country*; the noble Lothair in Matthew Gregory Lewis’ medieval tragedy, *Adelgitha*; and Pescara, the sinister governor in Richard Lalor Sheil’s gloomy Moorish tragedy, *The Apostate*. Hamblin would play Pescara or Hemeya, that play’s tragic young lover, for much of his life. *Apostate*’s female lead, Florinda, would be enacted opposite Hamblin by a host of actresses over the years, at least three of whom he would become romantically involved with, fathering children by two.

In late December, Drury Lane manager Stephen George Kemble contacted him. An actor had fallen ill, and Hamblin was recommended. This presented him with a typical actor’s dilemma: to accept an offer to return to a larger, more respected, royally licensed theatre within London to play supporting roles, or to continue in leading roles where he was. He leapt at Kemble’s offer. Unfortunately, the Drury Lane had hit an exceptionally bad patch. The kindly Kemble was an ineffective manager, unable to dismiss aging performers whose pitiful performances were a drain on the treasury. Attendance ebbed and debts mounted as the building’s condition deteriorated. Actor Joe Cowell, who also would remain friends with Hamblin for years, rued its “indifferent company ... playing to literally empty benches.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Hamblin came on board for £3 (about \$180 today) for a four-performance week. (Cowell received £5, Kemble himself £12, leading actress Fanny Kelly £25, and Kean £30.) Hamblin debuted in a speaking role on December 26, 1818, as the allegorical Trueman, loyal friend to protagonist George Barnwell, in George Lillo’s *London Merchant*.<sup>8</sup>

That season, Hamblin's noble demeanor led to his being cast as a string of loyal, upstanding characters. In Thomas Southerne's *Isabella; or, the Fatal Marriage*, he was the hero's best friend. In *Flodden Field* (adapted from Walter Scott's narrative poem by Kemble and his son Henry), he played the heroic Sir Ralph De Wilton. In Edward Moore's *The Gamester*, he was "honest Mr. Lewson," who vainly intercedes to prevent his friend's ruin from gambling. In *Hamlet*, Hamblin's Laertes met death at the hand of Kean's tragic Dane. In Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*, he played Vernon to Kean's Hotspur. But due to Kemble's feckless efforts, business remained poor, and by February 1819 the entire company, including Kean, had to take a one-third pay cut, not restored until April.

That month, in a new tragedy, Charles Bucke's *The Italians*, Hamblin was assigned a minor role to Kean's lead, Albanio. But Kean pronounced it "the worst of the bad" and refused to play the part. So, Kemble brought back Rae to replace him. As soon as the curtain went up on opening night, the cast was met by a barrage of laughter, catcalls, and hurled fruit from a nearly all-male audience largely comprised of Kean's followers, known as his "wolves." In an afterpiece, Hamblin was chased off the stage by more missiles. When *The Italians* was repeated a few nights later with only minor revisions, a near-riot ensued until the audience, on someone's signal, rose and walked out. The "only two individuals who obtained anything like a hearing" were Rae and Hamblin.<sup>9</sup>

By mid-June the building had deteriorated to the extent that the company took up residence at the Haymarket. By August the theatre was £90,000 in debt, with numerous lawsuits pending. Kemble was fired and management turned over to actor and provincial manager Robert W. Elliston, the man who more than anyone else would model for Hamblin how to conduct his professional and personal life. Not all of it was admirable. Yet under Elliston, Hamblin's career would flourish.

An immensely popular, critically acclaimed comedian usually playing charming rakes, the portly Elliston possessed a face better suited for comedy than tragedy. Beneath a high forehead and arched eyebrows rested warm, alert eyes. A long, straight nose, full cheeks, a mouth perpetually about to smirk, and a deeply dimpled chin created a sense of impending fun. He was a delightful companion—if one agreed with everything he said. A ready brawler, he brooked no tavern insults and could be astonishingly petty, nursing grudges for years. His vanity, cockiness, energy, and indomitable ego ensured that acclaim and contempt were heaped in equal measure upon his head. Detractors derided his "quackery, impudence,

mendacity, and ignorance.” As a teenaged utility player, he had (like Hamblin) demanded major roles and outsized contracts. It was said of “Lord High Elliston,” the “Napoleon of the drama,” that “if thrown overboard in rags from one side of a ship, he would appear, before his tormentors could turn around, upon the other side of the deck dressed as a gentleman.”<sup>10</sup>

A heavy drinker, Ellison was known, especially when playing Falstaff, to perform drunk. His nightly debauches with prostitutes—readily available a block to the west of Drury Lane—and his habitual gambling would eventually ruin him physically and financially. He was, asserted his acting manager, James Winston, “frequently so drunk he was irrational and threatened suicide.” He routinely compromised the virtue of young actresses whom he made minor stars.<sup>11</sup>

As a manager, Elliston ruthlessly controlled everything, tolerating no opposition, even from shareholders. Always on the lookout for novelty, he concocted pie-in-the-sky schemes and thrilling special effects to attract audiences. Reviews meant nothing to him if audiences attended in droves and roared their approval. The only function of newspapers, as he saw it, was “puffing” his theatre; if he felt they had wronged him, he took his case to the public via paid notices. He tirelessly sought out and nurtured new playwrights and young performers, but once they were under contract, he turned demagogue, driving out any who carried “unconscionable expectations.” To keep actors sharp, he pitted them against each other, even bringing in other stars to keep Kean on his toes. And yet, as Hamblin would find out, Elliston could reward those who expended extraordinary effort.<sup>12</sup>

He boasted of his close relationship with the Prince Regent, soon to become King George IV, who was an ardent theatregoer and a flamboyant hedonist, with numerous friends and mistresses in the theatre. (When finally crowned in 1821, the king gave Elliston permission to stage a facsimile of his coronation at Drury Lane. Elliston famously paraded across the stage in full regalia, raising his hand to bless “my people.”<sup>13</sup>)

Within days of taking over the Drury Lane in August 1819, Elliston closed it for renovation and to clear out dead wood among the personnel. On the former he expended nearly £30,000 (the following year spending another £6000 and in 1821, £22,000 more—a combined outlay of over \$4,000,000 today), personally supervising all details. He fired forty people, proclaiming that his theatre was not “intended as a hospital for invalids.”<sup>14</sup>



Under contract with Elliston for fall, Hamblin spent the summer of 1819 acting with Elizabeth in Brighton. On the strength of a few good reviews, he wrote to Winston seeking a better contract: £5 per week, playing “second or third tragedy.” Winston replied that Elliston would approve £4, for six performances a week, and Hamblin accepted. Nothing was mentioned about the types of roles he would play, an issue that would fester. He returned to London in late September, and Elizabeth headed to Bath to win greater acclaim.

On the morning of September 30, 1819, Elliston assembled his Drury Lane company in the grandest of the theatre’s three greenrooms, positioning himself to advantage beside its thirty-eight-square-foot mirror. He and Winston would decide all casting of the season’s tragedies, histories, and comedies, especially Shakespeare’s, as well as melodramas, comic operas, and farces. Hamblin was disappointed to learn he would be performing in comedies and farces, not the tragedies and melodramas he had specified. Major roles in those would be played by Kean and others. For the time being, Hamblin would comply, but disliked what he perceived as the wrong “line” for him.

At eight o’clock that evening Elliston threw open the theatre to the press and invited guests for a special preview. Rapturous comments in newspapers over the next few days identified similar features of the renovation, using identical phrases, suggesting Elliston had distributed “talking points.” Such well-orchestrated showmanship did not escape Hamblin’s notice. In handbills distributed before opening night, October 4, he saw his name listed tenth out of sixteen men who would portray comic roles. Elliston, of course, topped the list and would play that evening’s leading role of Rover in John O’Keeffe’s comedy, *Wild Oats*. Hamblin’s part was considerably smaller, among a troupe of actors in a play-within-a-play.

For two weeks he chafed in minor roles in comedies and farces. On October 16, he played a slightly larger role in John Tobin’s *The Fisherman’s Hut*, fighting for the hand of a countess confined in a cave, rescuing her from a series of perils. He merited “some claims to distinction,” but the production drew poorly and Elliston quickly withdrew it. For three more weeks nothing better materialized, and Hamblin remained mired in small parts in frothy scripts. All attention centered on Kean’s eagerly anticipated return on November 8 as Richard III.<sup>15</sup>

That morning, John Souness wrote angrily to Elliston, demanding to know why his son was not receiving the kinds of roles specified in his

August correspondence with Winston. Had his son not returned to Drury Lane, Souness asserted, he could have accepted (perhaps a bluff) “a far more advantageous offer” to perform leading roles in tragedies, which “you Sir, as a Man of Honor ought to consent to let him” play. The parts his son had been given so far were “not only degrading, but highly detrimental to his future prospects.” He threatened to withdraw Hamblin, still a minor, from the company.<sup>16</sup>

Elliston compromised. He now cast Hamblin in tragedies, but still as minor characters, such as Catesby, councilor to Kean’s Richard, with Elliston himself as Richmond. Next, he cast Hamblin as the rapist Sextus Tarquin in John Howard Payne’s *Brutus*; Kean played the title role, which he had originated. Hamblin was subsequently Malcolm to Kean’s Macbeth and Horatio to his Hamlet. (One jaundiced theatregoer recorded that “a wretch, one Hamlin [sic], played Horatio—a very scarecrow disreputable to the company.”)<sup>17</sup>

Hamblin then played Cominius to Kean’s Coriolanus, the role he vowed to make his own. It had been while watching Charles Kemble perform Coriolanus that Hamblin had determined to become not just an actor, but a star. Now, he studied the interpretation Kean gave the role, sneaking into the gallery to watch him when not needed on stage. (He said later that while playing Coriolanus he sometimes looked up into the gallery and imagined a similar youth watching his performance.) His noble mien was grossly unsuited for his next role, the Knight Templar in George Soane’s *The Hebrew*, who among other heinous acts tortures a Jew for his money. Hamblin’s sole notice damned him with faint praise as “respectable.”<sup>18</sup>

On January 29, 1820, mad King George III died, and theatres closed for three weeks. Elliston cut everyone’s salary, even his own £20, by two-thirds (except for Kean’s £30, which was only reduced to £20). In spring Elliston partially restored these, but everyone pulled double duty; Hamblin was required to perform in farcical afterpieces as well as tragedies.

Discontent mounted among the company over inadequate compensation and Elliston’s repressive “sick list” policy, which docked performers who could not prove dire illness. They threatened a strike, then produced a flurry of medical certificates. Even Kean became “indisposed”—said to be an ankle injury, but more likely delirium tremens—just before his announced performance as Hamlet on April 6. Hamblin played Horatio that night to Kean’s understudy, a feckless actor who acted with good reason under a stage name. The performance was a debacle, with the

replacement subjected to shouts of derision and a thorough drubbing in the press. The next morning the man feigned illness, and Elliston expelled him from the company.

However, *Hamlet* had already been announced for that evening, and Kean still felt “too much agitation” to perform. Hamblin decided to make his own luck. He buttonholed Winston and Elliston to assert that he could with confidence enact the melancholy Dane. So, without a single rehearsal—or so he and Elliston claimed, although the afternoon was likely crammed with coaching—Hamblin that night filled in for Kean.

Stage Manager S. T. Russell beseeched the audience’s indulgence for this young, untried Hamlet. But scene by scene, Hamblin succeeded, creditably portraying Hamlet in the Kemble style, more sedate and melancholic than Kean’s. Not only did the audience applaud him warmly, but critics responded favorably. That he had (implausibly) done it without rehearsal “excites not only admiration, but amazement,” offering “laudable proof of zeal, talent, and alacrity.” Although he clearly needed deeper study, he appeared ready for tragic leads. Reviewers encouraged him to do so outside of London, to build his repertoire. One went so far as to urge Hamblin to fill a “leading man” opening in Bath.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, at age nineteen, Hamblin had successfully performed the most challenging role in the Shakespearean canon at the most famous theatre in the kingdom. The following morning, Elliston uncharacteristically called the company together to laud Hamblin’s accomplishment, presenting him with a gold snuff box or toothpick case (accounts vary) and a letter of lavish praise, wishing him “increasing advancement in his profession” and offering an “earnest endeavor . . . to promote that advance.”<sup>20</sup>

Within the week, Hamblin’s father, capitalizing on his son’s new status, wrote again to Elliston. Certainly, Souness averred, such an accomplishment merited a new contract with a higher salary. He proposed slightly over £14 per week (more than trebling his son’s current pay). Furthermore, Hamblin should perform no less than second-tier roles in tragedies, along with “some of the firsts.”<sup>21</sup>

Elliston opted to deal directly with Hamblin, and the two spoke privately. Hamblin reiterated his father’s demands, yet Elliston did not cave. The upshot was a salary increase, but only to £5, and a promise of better roles. This failed to mollify Souness, who wrote anew, again insisting that his son play no less than second-tier characters, “if he is engaged at all at Drury Lane.” He added a curious “special endorsement”: that his son “upon no emergency whatever act Iago.” Doing so “should damn him forever.”<sup>22</sup>

This, at least, was easy for Elliston to fulfill. But his “earnest endeavor” to promote Hamblin’s career did not materialize. Hamblin continued to play the hero’s sidekick and later that month an outright villain: in a highly publicized, magnificent production of *King Lear* starring Kean, Hamblin was cast as the illegitimate Edmund. For years *Lear* had been banned in England because of the uncomfortable parallels it suggested with the nation’s delusional late monarch. Now, Elliston, Kean, and Winston determined, this would be a *Lear* for the ages. They used Nahum Tate’s expurgated version, but at Kean’s insistence restored Shakespeare’s ending.

The production was as much spectacular melodrama as tragedy, employing all new scenery and a powerful storm apparatus. The piece de resistance, observed Cowell, was the storm scene: “Trees were made to seesaw back and forth, accompanied with the natural creak! creak! [and] every infernal machine that was ever able to spit fire, spout rain, or make thunder, together were brought into full play.... Overhead were revolving prismatic coloured transparencies, to emit a continual-changing supernatural tint, [so that] King Lear would one instant appear a beautiful pea-green, and the next sky-blue.... Every carpenter who was entrusted to shake a sheet of thunder or turn a rain-box was determined that his element should be the most conspicuous,” with the result that “not a word was heard throughout the whole of the scene.” Special-effect smoke billowed into the audience, obscuring the actors.<sup>23</sup>

The production sold out for twenty-six performances despite mixed critical response. Hamblin went practically unnoticed, except for a mention of his Edmund being “creditable,” but inferior to that of William Charles Macready. The focus and fame were to be Kean’s alone. As William Hazlitt observed, “all the rest are supernumeraries.... No one would ever cross the threshold to see ... Mr. Hamblin.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps from shouting through thick smoke to overtop the din, Hamblin fell ill—likely from asthma—and on May 8 sought a leave of absence. “After acting four nights last week with a violent sore throat and hoarseness,” he wrote to Russell, “I am not recovered. I scarcely slept ten minutes last night, my cough was so violent. My hoarseness is certainly much better, but I feel it would be dangerous to act tonight.” Within two days he felt he would be better, “but if my word is not to be taken, you must stop my salary and I suppose I must abide by it.”<sup>25</sup>

Russell acquiesced, but on May 22 Hamblin tested the limits of his contract. He accepted an offer from the Covent Garden to play a lead, albeit in a comedy: the smarmy Joseph Surface in Sheridan’s *School for*

*Scandal*. Russell easily replaced Hamblin as Edmund, but at Elliston's direction yanked him back to Drury Lane and into a continuing series of supporting roles. Hamblin as a manager would later exact a harsher retaliation on renegade actors.

In Elliston's next production, *Virginus*, a new Roman tragedy written specifically for Kean by James Sheridan Knowles, Hamblin played Claudius, his confidant—another “Horatio.” It played well into June, and the title role became a staple in the repertoire of tragedians for decades, Hamblin included.

The disgruntled Hamblin was further eclipsed at the end of May when Elliston brought forward his newest protégée, the shapely Lucia Elizabeth Vestris, whom he paid a salary equal to his own, in a revealing breeches role. (One reviewer gushed, “What a breast, what an eye! What a foot, leg and thigh!”) On nights when she appeared, box office receipts leapt £300. Although Hamblin never shared the stage with her, the degree to which he later paraded his own actresses in breeches shows how well he paid attention now. By mid-June, still among the lowest-paid actors at Drury Lane, Hamblin gave Russell notice that he intended to leave at the end of the season. Neither Russell nor Elliston protested, and they kept Hamblin in minor roles.<sup>26</sup>

Departing Drury Lane, Hamblin recalled Wallack's advice. He spent six months acquiring experience at provincial theatres, playing the leads he felt he should have been given by Elliston. That summer, back in Brighton, crowded houses and good reviews welcomed him through mid-August.

When he learned that Elizabeth had joined the company at Birmingham, he secured a berth there, but traded leads for love: they would both be playing only supporting characters, primarily in comedies. His salary was a meager £3 a week. The theatre was far from fashionable, and its mediocre stock company attracted rowdy, lower-class audiences. The manager was Alfred Bunn, infamous for exploiting actors. Stingy, vainglorious, and imperious, he was a “rascally opportunist” and a “prevaricator” with a hair-trigger temper. His solution for one recalcitrant actress was “Kick her arse and send her back [onstage].” A preening poseur, he was “uncultivated; his language and manners were coarse, and his taste deplorable. [He] offended everybody, and liked nobody.” He was “the presiding genius of ... managerial quackery,” whose management was “sheer gambling of the most wretched description.” Often absent, he left day-to-day details to his stage manager.<sup>27</sup>

Soon after the season opened on August 14, Hamblin and Elizabeth began to look for other positions with more prestigious roles under a more supportive manager. Hamblin, whose only decent role was Cassius in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, was particularly frustrated. By November, perhaps recalling the earlier advice, or Elizabeth’s having shared her perceptions of Bath, he left her behind and traveled there next. Its manager, William Dimond the Younger, was a gentleman, albeit a tight-fisted one. He assigned Hamblin not leads, but important supporting characters. As the semi-mad Octavian in Colman the Younger’s *Mountaineers*, Hamblin got to save the life of a young Moorish girl after reuniting with his own long-lost love, Floranthe. Edgar in Nahum Tate’s *Lear* provided him greater versatility than he had had as Edmund. Among comedic leads, he played the strong-willed Duke Aranza in Tobin’s *The Honeymoon*.

On December 1 he won the part he had ached to perform since his adolescent recital: Rolla, in a costly new production of *Pizarro*. It allowed him to convey a range of emotions: manly generosity (stepping aside when his best friend, Alonzo, loves the same woman, Cora); patriotism and courage (leading the Peruvian forces against the tyrannical Pizarro, taking the place of the captured and condemned Alonzo, then escaping); and nobility (sacrificing his life to rescue Alonzo and Cora’s kidnapped child). Throughout, he discoursed eloquently, culminating in a gasped-out dying speech as he hands the child over to its jubilant parents, who vow to exalt his name.

But Hamblin looked only upward. Even greater leading roles drew him next to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He took Elizabeth with him—against her father’s wishes. A 300-mile coach journey brought them there just in time for the season’s opening on December 26. The competent, lighthearted Newcastle manager, starting his third season, was Vincent De Camp, an accomplished comedian with powerful connections to the extended Siddons–Kemble dynasty. He awarded Hamblin a welter of leads, whether he was ready for them or not: Othello, Richard III (Colley Cibber’s), Hamlet (David Garrick’s), Coriolanus and Macbeth (Thomas Middleton’s). In a melodrama, J. R. Planché’s *The Vampire*, Hamblin played the title role, Lord Ruthven, with Elizabeth as his victim, Lady Margaret.<sup>28</sup>

By early 1821 a pattern of critical response had begun to emerge: Elizabeth, who played Desdemona and Ophelia opposite Hamblin, fared far better than he. Some reviewers were harsh: Hamblin was “by no means competent to take the first business of a Theatre Royal.” He was criticized for his inexperience, his cold, stiff, overly dignified stage presence, and his