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MEMOIR OF MASTER BURKE.

————— “ O ’tis a parlous boy.”
————— “ I spare my praises towards him,
Knowing him is enough.”—*Shakspeare.*

JOSEPH BURKE is descended from one of the most respectable families in the county of Galway, in Ireland; his father being nephew to Sir John Blake, and consequently first cousin to Valentine Blake, Esq. who represented the above county for some years. Mr. Burke is also, as we are informed, first or second cousin to Sir John Burke, whose family once possessed considerable estates in the county of Galway; but, by adhering to the cause of Charles, they suffered in common with those, who having pledged the oath of allegiance to that monarch, refused to abandon his fortunes. The descendants, therefore, of the families who had been plundered of their possessions by Cromwell, were obliged to trust to their talents for the means of subsistence, which they employed, of course, in various ways.

We have given the above detail, because it so rarely happens that the candidate for histrionic fame can boast of the pomp and dignity of ancestry; for though all the followers of Thespis wish to bring themselves forward as “*ladies and gentlemen,*” there are very few indeed who, from birth, can claim that distinction. Our hero made his debut, when only five years old, on the Dublin stage, in the year 1824. The characters chosen for the occasion were Tom Thumb and Lingo. His success was so complete, as to prognosticate to his grateful friends the certainty of future fame. He shortly after appeared at the English Opera House and the Haymarket. At the latter theatre, he met with considerable applause in the characters of Dr. O’Toole, Lingo, &c.; he then quitted the metropolis, and took the general provincial tour, where the versatility of his genius gave not only unqualified satisfaction to the general admirers of the drama, but obtained the encomiums of those whose powers were of matured excellence. Among others may be noticed the venerable O’Keefe, who, as a tribute to his talents, presented him (in the year 1826, at Chichester,) with a pair of silver buckles, which he himself wore when a youthful candidate for public favour; he also gave him a lock of his hair, and requested that on his death it would be worn in a ring by him. We must now notice the theatre which may be termed the key-stone of his fame,—for by the excellent management of Mr. Elliston, opportunities have been offered of exhibiting Master Burke’s talents in every varied hue. His first appearance at the Surrey was in 1827; his principal character this season was in *The March of Intellect,*

which drew many crowded houses ; since that period, he has performed numerous parts in tragedy, comedy, opera, burlesque, and farce.

We have now to speak of Master Burke's professional attainments. On viewing him in the combined light of actor and musician, we certainly think we are warranted to declare that he is the most astonishing instance of precocious talent it ever fell to the biographer's lot to record ; for though there are many extraordinary* examples handed down to us of early genius being evinced in either of the above sciences, yet we believe they have never been so admirably united in one so young till now.

Although Master Burke is only in his twelfth year, he possesses as fine a power of observation and as correct an idea of genuine humour as any actor we ever saw. His attitudes, too, are astonishing, varied, easy and graceful : while his by-play, self-possession, and attention to the business of the scene, even in the most difficult characters, are no less curious than gratifying to witness.

Though his tragedy is by no means devoid of merit, we think that the bent of his genius is decidedly comic : there is a playful gaiety in his manner, and an archness and vivacity in his looks, all admirably adapted to the service of Thalia. Indeed, in some of his favourite performances, his acting was so easy, so utterly void of art, that the stage seemed his proper home, and the happiest imitation of the varieties of human life a part of his own nature. There is one character in particular which we will notice, for it induced us to make the above remark. It is in a farce called *At Home for the Holidays*, where Master Burke had to represent a young lad returned from school, who is allowed the absolute mastership of the family for one entire day. The glee he displayed when he compelled his old tutor to learn the lessons with which he had been teased during the past month was delightful ; and his audacious ease, but high good humour, when he ordered the servants about, was laughable.

Of his performance of Richard and Shylock we can only observe that he spoke the dialogue with great correctness, evidently appearing to feel the sentiments he uttered, and displayed, in some of the impassioned scenes that true energy which is as removed from the boisterous rant of certain actors we could mention, as the cool courage of a Henry differs from the braggadocia of a Pistol. We cannot better close this memoir than by the following extract from Mr. Stafford's very interesting *History of Music* :—" Master Burke is, at the age of twelve years, one of the finest violinists in the kingdom. The ease, the feeling, the brilliance and fineness of his tone, and the scientific acquirements of this mere child, are allowed, by all who have heard him, to be most surprising."

* In music, there are many astonishing instances of early proficiency noticed by Dr. Burney and others. Frederick Wynne, when six years old, executed the lessons of Scarlatti with precision. Mozart, at the age of four, was not only capable of executing lessons on the piano-forte, but actually composed some in an easy style and taste. William Crotch, without any previous instructions, played a popular tune on an organ, constructed by his father, when only two years and six months old, and a voluntary about a month after.