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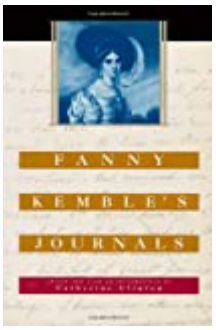

Catherine Clinton, ed. *Fanny Kemble's Journals.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. xv + 210 pp. $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00440-5.

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Fanny Kemble and the Problems of Art, Autobiography, and Social Observation

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The actress and writer, Fanny Kemble, is best known for her *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* (1863), one of the most important records documenting relations between antebellum white Southerners and their slaves. Describing her brief months on her husband's vast plantation, Kemble is at once an outsider, capable of incisive insight into an environment she never comfortably inhabits, and the plantation mistress who is necessarily implicated in a racial hierarchy she despises. For example, when a pregnant slave asked her to request a lighter work load from Kemble's unyielding husband, she describes beautifully her feelings of powerlessness: "I had to tell them that, if they had already spoken to their master, I was afraid my doing so would be of no use, but that when he came back I would try; so, choking with crying, I turned away from them, and re-entered the house, to the chorus of 'Oh, thank you, missis! God bless you, missis!' " (p. 142). That combination of outsider observation and interior conflict made it powerful to readers then and now.

Kemble's life and writings include far more than her account of a few unhappy months in Georgia. This collection, which contains excerpts from Kemble's six published journals, exhibits her observations and emotions as she inhabits multiple roles and new worlds–as actress, writer, wife, mother, and divorcÃ©e. Since all the passages were written for publication, they display a polished literary style and Kemble's sense of attractive subject matter for a reading audience. If self-conscious, her writing also reveals a remarkable intellect and a troubled personal and professional life. Framed by an excellent and concise introduction by Catherine Clinton (who also recently published a full-length biography, *Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000]), this volume is an excellent introduction to Kemble's life and work, as well as a window into the social world of the fifty years surrounding the Civil War.

Frances Anne Kemble was born in 1809 into a family of prominent English actors including, most famously, her aunt and uncle, Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble. She attained instant acclaim for her first appearance as Juliet at age twenty, and earned an international rep-

utation following her American tour three years later. She retired from the stage after only four years of acting to marry Pierce Butler, the heir of the second largest series of plantations in Georgia. Following the birth of their second daughter in 1838, the family moved south for the winter so that Butler could oversee his estate. Much to his chagrin, Kemble's experience there confirmed her strong anti-slavery sentiments and led to a more open animosity in their already-troubled marriage. When they left Georgia several months later, they were estranged and, despite occasional reconciliations, they never achieved a happy relationship. She left him for the last time in 1845 and divorced him four years later. Kemble returned to the stage and to writing to support herself. She died in 1893 in London, where she had lived sporadically since the mid-1870s.

Kemble's writings mirrored her life and, as Clinton's introduction notes, so did the context of their publication. Before, during, and after her marriage, she published widely–her work included plays, journals, poems, and novels. She published her first play the same year she entered the stage and, in the years following, she could count on her reputation as a public figure to sell books when she needed the extra income; she used the income from her first travel journal to assist an invalid aunt. She published her Georgia Journal in 1863 (fifteen years after her unhappy winter there) for expressly political reasons: she hoped that an honest portrayal of the horrors of slavery would discourage the British from supporting the Confederacy during the war. But the publication also led to a rift between Kemble and her youngest daughter, who followed her father and strongly identified with the Southern cause. Her daughter eventually published her own more sentimental memoir of life on the plantation.

As the writings in *Fanny Kemble's Journals* reveal, Kemble could be a smart, perceptive, and careful observer of her world. Like other foreign commentators, she articulated many of the contradictions of American culture–those concerning race, class, family life, society, cultural life, and regional differences–that usually only outsiders were willing to see. For example, she composed particularly damning reports on the circumstances of American women. She wrote that they "ripen very early, and decay proportionately soon," looking haggard before their time in part because of Americans' tendency to marry so early. And married life, she declared, was unforgiving: "Married women are either house-drudges or nursery-maids, or, if they appear in society, comparative cyphers; and the retiring, modest, youthful bearing, which among us [the British] distinguishes girls of fifteen or sixteen, is equally unknown" (pp. 47, 52).

Her personal charisma, which pervades these pages, was famous; Washington Irving commented that "the nearer one gets to her face and to her mind, the more beautiful they both are" (p. 2). She could also be acerbic. After visiting the Shakers in western Massachusetts, she wrote: "Their dress is hideous, and their worship, to which they admit spectators, consists of a fearful species of dancing, in which the whole number of them engage in going round and round their vast ball or temple of prayer, shaking their hands like the paws of a dog sitting up to beg, and singing a deplorable psalm-tune in brisk jig time. The men without their coats, in their shirt-sleeves, with their lank hair hanging on their shoulders, and a sort of loose knee-breeches–knickerbockers–have a grotesque air of stage Swiss peasantry.... The whole exhibition was at once so frightful and so ludicrous, that I very nearly went off in hysterics, when I first saw them" (p. 89).

Such comments could also veer toward snobbery, moments that provide some of this volume's richest material for interpretation. Her observations could be pretentious and self-serving, as when she dismissed Americans' "absolute absence of all taste in matters of ornamental cultivation," or when she described the Indian leader and orator, Red Jacket, as "the great palaverer" (pp. 82, 63). The combination of feminine sentiment and self-conscious literary style sets her apart from many more self-abnegating women writers of the period. Rather, Kemble displays her increasing sense of mastery in a world oriented to books, society, fashion, and theater.

And yet Kemble's youthful affectations are sharply contrasted with the excerpts from the *Georgia Journal*, which Clinton describes as "Kemble's most enduring literary contribution," and which provides the most compelling excerpts for this collection (p. 14). Here, Kemble is no longer a public figure or a member of the literati but a woman stuck between the rock of her husband and the hard place of their slaves, and she has few resources from which to draw. Her observations are heartbreaking. When she asked a slave if he would like to be free, "a gleam of light absolutely shot over his whole countenance, like the vivid and instantaneous lightning; he stammered, hesitated, became excessively confused, and at length replied, 'Free, missis! what for me wish to be free? Oh no, missis, me no wish to be free, if massa only let me keep pig!' " Kemble recognized the slave's long-trained "desire to conciliate my favor even at the expense of strangling the intense and natural longing that

absolutely glowed in his every feature," and she sorely regretted the question (pp. 113-14). At every turn, she shows the reader the problems of her circumscribed role, her sympathy, and her hopeless naivetÃ© of the rules of Southern social and race relations. Near the end of her stay, she confesses that she wishes merely "to be delivered from my own share" of slavery, and that her misery only rarely allows her to think of slavery as a whole. It is brilliant writing, brilliantly selected by its editor.

In addition to introducing readers to her life and writings, *Fanny Kemble's Journals* would make a good choice for an advanced undergraduate course in women's history or the early Republic, or for a course that uses autobiographical writings as a major component of class readings. This is an outstanding collection of the writings of a fascinating life.

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