MASTER BETTY AND THE PORTRAIT MINIATURE AS MATERIAL EVIDENCE OF 'BETTYMANIA'

APRIL 23, 2025



Covent Garden has been at the centre of theatre culture for centuries. In 2025, theatregoers had the chance to watch Tom Hiddleston (b.1981) in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. In December 1804, they had the chance to watch the young William Henry West Betty (1791-1874) at the Covent Garden Theatre. Much like Tom Hiddleston, this was not the actor's first rodeo. Much like Tom Hiddleston, he was greeted by hundreds of adoring fans. Much unlike Tom Hiddleston (who turned 44 this year), 'Master Betty[1]' was only twelve.

A few months ago, I was presented with a miniature of Betty that had been acquired by The Limner Company (fig.1). The miniature in question was painted by George Engleheart - a new attribution, making it a recent addition to his *oeuvre*. It depicts Betty in profile, against a brown background. The reverse of the miniature is glazed, underneath which there is a significant

amount of intricate hairwork (fig. 2). Such decoration was commonly used in miniatures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and could, in some cases, be made from the hair of the portrait's sitter. It cannot be confirmed whether this is the case here. The miniature itself is circular, with a 45mm diameter, making it small enough to sit in the palm of the owner's hand.

The obsession that surrounded Betty, his acting, and largely just his presence, has since been coined 'Bettymania'. It has also been the subject of numerous studies, including multiple by scholar (and Betty expert) Jeffrey Kahan. Since beginning research into this portrait miniature depicting the young actor, and becoming engrossed in these studies, it could be said that I have been overwhelmed by a sense of 'Bettymania' myself. His story is one that has been told many times, as with those of other famous actors of this period. Nevertheless, I will repeat it here, with a focus on how this particular portrait reflects the fame that this young boy experienced.









Fig. 1: GEORGE ENGLEHEART (1750-1829), William Henry West Betty (1791-1874), ‘The Young Roscius’; circa 1804-5, for sale with The Limner Company





Fig. 2. Verso: GEORGE ENGLEHEART (1750-1829), William Henry West Betty (1791-1874), ‘The Young Roscius’; circa 1804-5, for sale with The Limner Company

Theatre and art in London

Britain has been the home of numerous historical acting legends- from Nell Gwyn (1650-1687) to David Garrick (1717-1779), to Sarah Siddons (1755-1831). Other than a brief break during the English Civil Wars[2], the culture of theatrical performance and drama had played a consistently important role in both the lives of those at court and ordinary citizens.

It is not surprising, then, that many portraits and artistic depictions of these actors exist. Nell Gwyn was famously depicted by both Simon Verelst and Peter Lely, and features naked in many of her portraits, some of which were commissioned by King Charles II (1630-1685), of whom Nell was a mistress. Coming closer to the time in which Master Betty was acting, both David Garrick, actor and producer, and Sarah Siddons, famed tragedienne, were painted numerous times. Many of these portraits remain within public collections today, including miniatures of both David[3] and Sarah[4].

To have a miniature portrait of this young actor, then, is not surprising. He comes from a long line of famed actors to have been immortalised in paint. In fact, there are larger-scale oils of him, by John Opie (fig.4) and James Northcote (fig 3). A large number of sculpted busts of the young boy may have also provided inspiration for this particular miniature, given the isolated format that Engleheart has painted his head in. To gain fame in the theatre was to become known visually across society at this time. People could watch you on stage, but having a portrait painted was the only way to visualise you outside of this sphere.





Fig 3: JAMES NORTHCOTE (1746-1831), William Henry West Betty (1791–1874), ‘Master Betty’, as ‘Young Norval’, 1804, National Trust, Attingham Park, 608962

William Henry West Betty

Before he became known as Master Betty, William Henry West Betty spent some of his childhood in Ireland. He had moved there in 1796, following five years living in Shrewsbury. Betty’s father was Irish and owned a small fortune, but had fallen into debt. In Ireland, his parents ran a linen factory, however, this soon began to fail. It seemed that another income was needed for the family to get by. As Betty gained fame, it was his income that allowed the family to survive.

There are many different stories about the reasons for why the young actor first took to the stage. The majority of these come from unofficial biographies written in the first years of the nineteenth century[5]. As one story goes, he was taken to see Sarah Siddons on stage, and from this performance was infatuated with the idea of becoming an actor. Given that Kahan is the main scholar on Betty, however, it seems sensible to recall the story that he provides in the young actor’s biography. According to him, it was Betty’s father who first taught him anything about acting. Betty had copied his father directly following a (sort-of) performance of Cardinal Wolsey’s Lament Upon his Fallen Greatness (from Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*) [6]. Not only had he remembered all the words, but also all the actions that his father had accompanied his reading with. Then, in 1802, he was taken to the theatre by his father. The performance, at the Theatre Royal Belfast, was of *Pizzaro* (1799), a tragedy written by Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816). Betty was given a copy of the play, and a slippery slope of obsession with becoming an actor followed.

His parents had recognised his talent, and Betty was soon returned to Ireland to meet with the Royal Theatre’s manager. Upon reciting a speech from Pizzaro, he was told that he had great potential. So much so, it seems, that William Hough, the theatre’s prompter[7], immediately left his role at the theatre to become the young prodigy’s coach.

Making a break: Betty’s first performances

Betty first appeared on stage in Belfast as Osman in *Zara*, Aaron Hill’s (1685-1750) 1735 adaptation of Voltaire’s (1694-1778) *Zaïre*, in August 1803. The crowds weren’t large, but this was understandable. Dublin was in the midst of the Emmet Rebellion, which had broken out only a month before. Tensions between English and Irish loyalists were high, and here, a young boy, speaking in a British Accent, was taking to the stage at the Theatre Royal, funded by the British Crown. It had been promised that ‘God Save the King!’ and ‘Rule Britannia’ would both be performed during the show. The theatre had been closed in 1803 because of the political atmosphere, but for Betty, its managers had petitioned for a re-opening. Kahan highlights the fact that this was meant to be a patriotic event for British Loyalists[8].

Following a few more performances in Belfast, Betty was taken to Dublin. His performances had been accompanied by a specially granted extended curfew, which did encourage some violence. Still, Betty’s nights in the theatre were seen as a great success. Clearly, audiences were more confident in attending the performances than they had been at first in Belfast. Betty was earning over £100 a night at the theatre, ten times more than was usually expected, which prompted the theatre to offer him a ten-year contract. However, his father had already signed him up to go to Cork. After more successes, he travelled across the Irish Sea to conquer the stages of Scotland. Betty performed as the titular character in both *Douglas* and *Hamlet*, stepping onto the stage in the former in a kilt (Fig. 4). As with Ireland, there were tensions surrounding national identity and English involvement in this period. The statute banning Scots from wearing kilts had only been lifted in 1782, and here was a young English boy wearing one on stage to perform. At one of his performances, the playwright of *Douglas* himself, John Home (1722-1808), stood up and personally congratulated Betty’s performance. Though he had done this for other young men playing the same role, it implies that there must have been something in Betty’s skill.

It can be seen, then, that though Betty's early performances did become popular, this may have been somewhat influenced by a certain political atmosphere in the places where he was performing. It was, after all, partially because of his British accent that he was allowed to open a show past curfew in theatres in Ireland. As we follow Betty's career through England and towards London, it is important to keep this in mind.



Fig. 4. JOHN OPIE (1761-1807), William Henry West Betty, 1804, National Portrait Gallery, NPG 1392

Towards London

Moving to Birmingham, where he was engaged for thirteen nights. The profit of his performances here was stratospheric, averaging at £69.55[9] a night, almost £8,900 today[10]. At the same time, Thomas Harris (d.1820), the manager of Covent Garden Theatre, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, of Drury Lane, were participating in a scramble to claim Betty's London debut. Betty's father appears to have played the two theatres against each other, remaining in communication with them both.

After a legal battle, the decision was settled- Betty would perform at both theatres throughout the season. At Covent Garden, he would only be referred to as 'Master Betty', and at Drury Lane, as 'The Young Roscius'. On December 1, 1804, he debuted at Covent Garden. When the doors of the theatre opened, it is said that crowds rushed in, and some were injured in the process. They even clambered into the Royal Box, where it is assumed that the Prince of Wales was not that night. Wherever they ended up sitting, they were there to see Betty.

Now that Betty had conquered the capital, he was truly reaching the height of his fame. People wanted to see him because his name was known, and they believed from reviews that Betty was a brilliant new addition to the acting scene. Even other famous figures of the day, including politician Charles James Fox[11] and Lady Elizabeth Foster[12]. Writing to her son, Augustus, in 1804, Elizabeth (or Betty, as she was also known), claims: '…in short, he has changed the life of London; people dine at four, and go to the Play, and think of nothing but the play[13].' This alone captures the level of fame that Master Betty was experiencing. Even one of the most famous women of the time was singing his praises.

What was it about Betty?

Throughout his (short) career, Master Betty was able to maintain a strong following and seemed to reap the benefits of such a large level of fame. This was not to last forever, but while it did, it was particularly intense. But why him? Firstly, he was a good actor. This was repeated by numerous audience members who recorded their experiences of seeing him in the theatre, including Lady Elizabeth Foster. Despite all of the criticism he faced, and any analysis which insists this must have been a cultural phenomenon, there must have also been a certain amount of skill in the way that Betty acted.

Still, other political and social circumstances meant that Betty was in luck when it came to audiences. Firstly, and as has been mentioned, the theatre had a good grounding. And, at this point in time, there weren't really any other great young actors. Betty had some vacant shoes to step into, given that Garrick was dead, and Siddons was getting old. Secondly, Britain was at war and needed something to keep its spirits up. This theme is discussed extensively by Kahan and is worth further reading[14]. To put it simply, Britain was sending troops and resources to fight Napoleon, and this was making some members of British society anxious. Having a young man to watch jumping around the stage as Hamlet, then, would help to take their mind off things. It could also help to promote a national spirit, as we have already seen was partially the intention of his performances in Belfast, Dublin, and Scotland.

At the end of the day, Master Betty was also loved because he was a charming young boy. It is for this reason that Schweitzer suggests so many miniature pieces of paraphernalia were created of him[15], and that Kahan suggests people saw him as one of their own, or a young relative whose life they had become invested in[16]. It is for this reason that the creation of this specific portrait miniature is so interesting and relevant in the history of miniature painting.

Betty's relevance in the history of miniature painting

If you are familiar with the work of The Limner Company, then you are probably familiar with some elements of the history of portrait miniatures. In Britain, they first appeared in the sixteenth century. Their small format meant that they could be painted as intimate portraits, not intended for display, like other larger portraits. In many cases, this meant that they were worn on a person's body. By the early nineteenth century, this form of portraiture was still enjoying a large amount of popularity. Instead of being painted on vellum or parchment, they were now often painted on small pieces of Ivory, in watercolour, or in some cases using enamel on different metals.

Commissions for portrait miniatures could come from loved ones or family members. After all, being intimate portraits, it would make sense that it was someone close to the sitter who wanted to own something like this. However, there have always been cases of people either owning or commissioning portrait miniatures of and for people who were not close to them[17]. The exact origin of this miniature of Betty is not known. However, we do know that whoever commissioned it paid good money for it, given that it was painted by George Engleheart (1750-1829), one of the most sought-after miniature painters of his day. Alongside other artists like John Smart (1740-1811) and Richard Cosway (1742-1821), he was responsible for painting some of the most important members of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British society[18]. We also know that whoever the owner of the portrait was, they at least partially defined Betty by his acting. He is painted in the guise of Roscius, a character he became known for playing. However, they also regarded him as a 'Kindred love', according to the inscription on the reverse, whom they would forever be able to look at with 'Affection's glistening eye'[19].

Whether they were related to Betty or not, it seems that whoever had this portrait created did see him as a member of their family, in some way. At least they felt this intimacy enough to justify having a portrait usually reserved for an intimate relationship painted. This relates back to Kahan's point about people seeing Betty as their own, to possess. When Betty became ill in December 1804 (probably due to exhaustion), fans demanded that they be given updates on his health. Again, this story shows that the term 'Bettymania' is not an exaggeration, and people were really obsessed with him. These feelings towards the young actor make an intimate piece of material evidence of his fame, like this, make sense.

Coda: The fall of Bettymania

Betty's last performance in London was in 1806. He had truly experienced fifteen minutes of fame. At the age of 17, he retired from acting and began attending Cambridge, presumably with a healthy fund. Maybe the intensity of acting had worn him out, or maybe to the audiences, his talent really was just a phase, limited to when they could see him as a cute and childish figure.

This is interesting, given that many of his critics attacked him for his age. It seems that, even as an adult, they would not appreciate his work, and that Bettymania really was just a cultural phenomenon. Still, this was a phenomenon that had its material evidence, including this miniature by Engleheart. Just as Siddons and Garrick before him, Betty will forever be remembered for a certain image, in this case that of his youth, which was also the only image he gained fame for.

Today, it is easy for people to purchase images of K-pop stars to hang on their bags. Similarly, it was easy for fans to purchase snuffboxes with Betty's face on them, which appear to have been produced en masse. With this miniature by Engleheart, however, a deeper sense of obsession and possession over the young boy, characterised by the term 'Bettymania', has been immortalised. Even from a three-year career, the love that fans felt for Betty would be remembered more than a lifetime.

[1] William Henry West Betty has had a few different historical monikers. These include 'Master Betty' and 'The Young

Roscius'. Here, I will largely refer to him as Betty.

[2] The Theatres closed for 18 years during this time, to avoid public disorder.

[3] For example, the miniature attributed to Horace Hone, Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 420808.

[4] For example, the miniature by Richard Cross, Victoria and Albert Museum, P.146-1929.

[5] At least seven biographies were published in 1804, all of which are listed in J. Kahan, Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture, Bethlehem, Lehigh University Press, 2010, p.53.

[6] Ibid., p.30.

[7] As the title suggests, this was the role given to the person in charge of reminding actors of their lines whilst on stage.

[8] Kahan, 2010, p. 35.

[9] Calculated by Kahan, 2010, p. 46.

[10] Calculated here https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1804?amount=69.55.

[11] He is quoted: 'Everybody here is mad about this Boy Actor…We go to town to-morrow to see him, and from what I have heard, I own I shall be disappointed if he is not a prodigy…', Kahan, 2010, p.55.

[12] The subject of another portrait currently for sale with the Limner Company, also by George Engleheart.

[13] From a letter written by Lady Elizabeth Foster to Augustus Foster, December 5, 1804. Reproduced in V. Foster, The Two Duchesses, London, 1898, p.192.

[14] Kahan, amongst other scholars, has written extensively about the life of Master Betty and the significance of his career. See J. Kahan, Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity culture, Bethlehem, Lehigh University Press, 2010 for a good overview.

[15] Marlis Schweitzer, 'Consuming Celebrity: Commodities and Cuteness in the Circulation of Master William Henry West Betty', in The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness, 2017.

[16] For a further discussion of this phenomenon, see J. Kahan, 'Bettymania and the Death of Celebrity Culture', in Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement, No. 32, Supplement: Celebrity's Histories: Case Studies & Critical Perspectives (2019), pp. 139-164.

[17] For example, Charles II and his many miniatures painted by David des Granges.

[18] For more information on Engleheart, see the catalogue note for this miniature.

[19] The inscription on the reverse refers to the hairwork, and to the relationship the owner felt they had with Betty: 'Through all life's varied scenes preserved/ Endear'd by kindred love most true,/ This simple braid, with fond regard,/ Affection's glistening eye shall view.'