THE LIMNER COMPANY



GEORGE ENGLEHEART (1750 - 1829)

Portrait miniature of William Henry West Betty (1791-1874), 'The Young Roscius'

Circa: Circa 1804/5

Circa 1804/5

Watercolour on ivory

Circular, 45 mm (1 ¾ in) diam.

Gilt metal frame with hairwork reverse

Inscribed in verso:

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.[1]

William Henry West Betty, known as 'Master Betty' or 'The Young Roscius' gained sudden fame between 1804 and 1805 as one of Britain's greatest actors. As a twelve year old, he had debuted to audiences in Belfast, and was soon swept on a tour across Britain. In Scotland, he was first referred to as 'The Young Roscius', a reference to the famous actor from Ancient Rome. Following appearances across the country, Betty first appeared in London in 1804. Here, he played at both Covent Garden and Drury Lane, the two largest competing theatres in the city.

This profile portrait - suitable in its neoclassicism to portray 'The Young Roscius' - was likely painted by Engleheart in London in 1804. His London performances of this year were infected by 'Bettymania,' with stories of audiences trampling the royal boxes being well-recorded. The young actor began to earn up to £1200 a night for his performances, with the nation so infatuated with the young boy that, when he fell

ill after his first London season, there were demands for daily updates on his health. Multiple memoirs of the life of the actor soon appeared, which have resulted in a somewhat confusing narrative of his life, given that none were official. However, the quantity of information that Betty's fans craved reflects the level of interest in the boy's life. Not only were people interested in seeing him perform, but also in understanding his beginnings and learning more about who he was as a person.

The phenomenon of 'Bettymania' has been the subject of much debate. Though Master Betty was seen as a talented actor, it has also been said that people's obsession with him, across the country, came from a sense of knowing Betty, as if he were a member of one's family.[2] Engleheart's miniature is clearly in a different league from much of the merchandise produced around the child star, suggesting that it was either commissioned by a particularly wealthy fan, or by a member of Betty's family. The bust format may relate to one of the many sculptures created in the wake of Betty's sudden celebrity. In 1805, two portraits of 'The Young Roscius' were displayed at the Royal Academy exhibition, by John Opie (1761-1807) and James Northcote (1746-1831). Unlike this miniature, these are both full-length portraits, and present Betty in costume.

Comparable examples of Engleheart's work include his unfinished drawing of Sir Robert Abercromby (1784-1855) and numerous examples of his portraits of women in profile.[3] One of Engleheart's most important commissions was in profile - that of Napoleon I (1769-1821), Emperor of France 1804-1814/1815, as First Consul 1799-1804, painted circa 1801.[4]

Though the picture painted here may seem one of unfailing praise, Betty was not without his critics. Some of the most famous actors of the preceding period, including David Garrick, and Sarah Siddons (who is often quoted as being the first influence for Betty's acting), refused to perform opposite him. Though it may seem unfair to show disdain towards a young boy, he was becoming popular at a time when both of these actors were becoming older and less exciting than them. Between 1804 and 1806, Betty performed over 100 shows in London.[5] In many of these, he played Shakespearean roles, including Hamlet, Romeo, and Macbeth. Betty's fame was, however, short lived. Two years after his debut, in 1806, he was received on the stage of Drury Lane by a hostile audience who booed him.[6] Two years later, in 1808, he would 'retire' at the age of 17.[7]

[1] This inscription notes the hair held in the reverse of the miniature, presumably that of Master Betty's and greatly valued by the recipient of the miniature, who notes the 'kindred love' with the sitter.

[2] J. Kahan, Bettymania and the Death of Celebrity Culture, Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement, No. 32, Supplement: Celebrity's Histories: Case Studies & Critical Perspectives (2019), p.146.

[3] Previously with The Limner Company.

[4] Sold Christie's, London, Centuries of Style, Silver, European Ceramics, Portrait Miniatures and Gold Boxes, 26-27 November 2013, lot 142 (the version which was likely retained by the artist).

[5] J. Kahan, Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture, Bethlehem, 2010, p. 157-163.

[6] Ibid. p.103.

[7] Betty returned to the stage later, aged 20, though this was not a great success.