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978-0-521-19584-3 - Thomas Betterton: The Greatest Actor of the Restoration Stage

David Roberts

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

From the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 to the rise of David Garrick in the 1740s, Thomas Betterton was widely regarded the greatest of English actors. Long after his death in 1710, his name was a by-word for precious commodities: emotional logic over barnstorming effect; substructures of feeling not superficial reactions; the ability to transcend age and physique in search of a character's passions. Appreciating Betterton as a performer and a person also meant suspending conventional judgements about his profession's social status, so high were the standards he observed when dealing with fellow actors, managers and writers.

'Fellow', because Betterton himself was all those things. He created well over 100 roles, some of which help constitute today's core Restoration repertory.¹ He was a great exponent of Shakespearean tragic roles, encouraging future generations to conceptualise an English theatre tradition. The most successful theatrical manager of his period, he adapted plays and commissioned much of its best work.² An innovator in stage technology, he earned the friendship of major writers and arbiters of taste. Restraint, intelligence and mastery of the repertoire made him, in the richest sense of the term, the first *classical* actor. Early in his career he received the ultimate accolade from those discerning playgoers, Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys: 'he is called by us both, the best actor in the world'.³ For three generations it stuck, and as late as 1756 he was cited as the 'English Roscius'.⁴

Yet Betterton remains the least written about and recognised of the male actors who constitute the 'great tradition' of English performance. Garrick, Kean, Kemble, Macready, Irving and Olivier have been amply served by modern biographers.⁵ By contrast, while there have been essays on his acting, an expert study of his managerial career and an unpublished thesis on his influence, the last time anyone attempted a biography of Betterton was in 1891. Even then R.W. Lowe's study was commissioned by William Archer as part of a series on 'Eminent English Actors', as if tradition were

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at issue rather than the man.⁶ From sketches of that tradition Betterton often gets excluded. Albert Finney once said that he ‘wanted a great career, like Garrick and Kean and Irving, in that tradition’.⁷ His mentor Laurence Olivier described as ‘great volcanoes’ the quartet of ‘Burbage, Garrick, Kean and Irving’.⁸ Quartet becomes trio of ‘Garrick, Kean and Irving’ in the hands of Anthony Holden, and even academic critics are prone to citing the same holy trinity.⁹ In 1712 it was otherwise: an unspoken prologue would be by the delivery of an unnamed actor ‘have equall’d *Roscius, Allen, Burbage* or *Batterton*’.¹⁰

The reasons for Betterton’s relative neglect merit a separate chapter, but they start from who he was and what he left behind. Physically unremarkable and staunchly respectable, he justifies Judith Milhous’s memorable verdict: ‘an obstinately shadowy titan’.¹¹ Unlike his successors, he left no Flaubert’s parrot of a wig, sword or chair that might connect us to him; a solitary letter has recently come to light to take its place alongside a few legal documents as witnesses to the private man.¹² So shadowy is he that he is hard to accommodate not only in the acting tradition but in the art of biography, at least as defined by one of its finest contemporary exponents. Richard Holmes detects the origins of the form in the ‘calm, noble culture of Augustan Enlightenment’ which declared the proper study of mankind to be man.¹³ Biography accordingly affirms ‘the possibility and the desirability of knowing our fellow man and woman – how we “really are” (beyond the masks of fame, “success”, obscurity, or even ordinariness) ...’¹⁴ Holmes’s intellectual godfather is Boswell, whose 1791 *Life of Samuel Johnson LLD* has both ‘epic scale’ and ‘relentless, brilliant intimacy’; the Johnson who emerges from it is at once titanic and sunlit. Titanic, shadowy Betterton wears every mask in sight over and above his myriad performances – fame and success, ordinariness and obscurity, all rolled in together. He offers the epic scale of tragic art but combines it with fleeting chinks of intimacy. Nor is he ripe for what Holmes calls ‘anti-hagiography’ or ‘polemics as unreliable as panegyrics’. No student of Betterton can be ‘a type of predator, grave-snatcher’, or ‘gossip driven by commercial instincts’.¹⁵

But the elusive, private centre of Betterton’s life should encourage curiosity about why his life really mattered – why, that is, he was such an important figure for those who knew and watched him. As Guy Davenport observed of Picasso, his ‘*life* is there on the canvas; all else is lunch’.¹⁶ Knowledge of Betterton does not comprehend much that could be called ‘lunch’, although Milhous’s work on his managerial decisions discloses a much sharper sense of the man’s mindset and nose for business

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than any other study. His extensive collection of books and paintings, catalogued in 1710 by Jacob Hooke as *Pinacotheca Bettertonaeana* but ignored by most previous studies, tells its own array of stories. But the most significant narratives lie elsewhere. While Betterton left no archive of letters, journals or personal reminiscences to complement his library, there is the enormous, oblique, still more inviting treasure chest of raw material constituted by the 264 manuscript plays and parts in his possession when he died.¹⁷

Few other subjects allow such certainty about the words they spoke professionally. Betterton's roles occupied a huge portion of his life. Some he learned and dropped in a matter of weeks, some he may not have learned very well at all.¹⁸ Others were successes at key points in his career or in the nation's history, while a few, like Hamlet, he returned to over several decades. Some roles engaged palpably with national or company politics: as well as Hamlet, Henry VIII; an early and defining success, Marullo/Pisander in Massinger's *The Bondman*; the succession of libertines diplomatically overlooked by early biographers. It is a risky topic, naturally. Actors merely act their roles; his Bondman might masquerade as the evidence of the Bettertonian self it is supposed to reflect. But Betterton worked in a tightly organised repertory system where casting patterns both reflected and generated layers of 'text' that went beyond the published word: a system geared by commercial imperatives to catching and redefining the mood of the moment. Old plays were as likely as new ones to generate subtexts in the act of performance.

One thing about Thomas Betterton is certain. He lived through the fortunes of late Stuart London just as surely as he acted them. If biography 'offers a shapely doorway back into history, seen on a human scale', Betterton spent his days creating images of history's grandest chambers, formed by the period when Britain killed its king, restored one of his sons and then banished the other, and finally settled on a form of government in which the theatre, having been an arm of royal policy, became a form of bourgeois entertainment.¹⁹ A boy in Interregnum London, Betterton owed his career to the Restoration; he helped stage the capital's changing landscape, planned his first major project as a manager in the wake of the Great Fire, acted for the signatories of the Treaty of Dover, mounted political plays during the Popish Plot crisis and survived the Glorious Revolution. He played figures from ancient history that allowed dramatists to disguise reflections on the modern state.²⁰ A famous man at the refracted centre of public life, his burial in Westminster Abbey was a minor public event, as

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much the interment of a real king as his actor-imitator if we are to believe his friend, Richard Steele:

While I walked in the Cloysters, I thought of him with the same Concern as if I waited for the Remains of a Person who had in real Life done all that I had seen him represent ... I could not but regret, that the Sacred Heads which lie buried in the Neighbourhood of this little Portion of Earth in which my poor old Friend is deposited, are returned to Dust as well as he, and that there is no Difference in the Grave between the Imaginary and the Real Monarch.²¹

The exact location of Betterton's grave, probably beneath one of the worn stones between Aphra Behn and Anne Bracegirdle in the East Cloister, has not been precisely determined, and any visitor can puncture Steele's encomium by observing that his friend shared his final resting place with musicians, painters and the church plumber.²² But the symbolism is more important than the topography. For a cognate thought, see the photograph of Laurence Olivier's admission to the House of Lords. Flanked by the squat figures of the noble members whose task it is to present him, Olivier *wears* his robes; the rest are smothered by them.²³ The difference is that Betterton, actor of kings in an age wary of them, impersonated ideals his culture struggled to accommodate.

This book has two aims: to reconsider Betterton's significance for Restoration London, and to show how his public profile was rooted in the particulars of his personal life. Like any biography it has to tell a story; like most stories, it blends the uncontentious with the unfamiliar. It draws with critical gratitude on the three peaks of Restoration Theatre scholarship: *The London Stage*, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors* and the *Register of English Theatrical Documents 1660–1737*, as well as on Milhous's invaluable studies of the actor.²⁴ But because a biography should interpret facts, not list them, there is no attempt to chronicle every known moment of a long career, and there are necessarily occasions when inference and circumstantial evidence feature. While this study is organised according to phases in its subject's life, and while it does find a place for every one of Betterton's known roles, chronology often defers to themes.

A theatrical biography can do an actor no greater service than to help readers understand what it was like to watch him at work, so this study begins by evoking Betterton's performance of a role which, for five decades, he made his own. He played his first Hamlet in the aftermath of Charles II's 1661 coronation, his last well into the reign of Anne, in 1709. The performance was a landmark in the formation of an acting tradition, not only a bridge with the Renaissance but a normative interpretation for

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the future. Chapter 3 broadens the question of Betterton's legacy by examining the development of his biography and representation in popular culture. While early studies served, especially in the wake of a work assumed to be by Charles Gildon, to restrict interest in the real range of his achievement, they succeeded in capturing his social background and trajectory.²⁵

Just how is outlined by linked chapters on Betterton's upbringing in Civil War and Commonwealth London. Chapter 4 pieces together the clues that explain why and with whom he became a bookseller's assistant in post-regicidal London; Chapter 5 highlights changes to the environment in which Betterton grew up, their representation in some of the comedies in which he later appeared and their impact on his contribution to the newly fashionable comedy of manners. The working environment of his early career, from 1659 to 1663, is the subject of Chapter 6. It takes in his first two theatre companies, the social backgrounds of his fellow actors including the first generation of English actresses, and management styles and repertory in the wake of the Restoration. For all their success, the early years of the Duke's Company saw tensions arising in the shape of Betterton's fellow leading actor and later co-manager. Henry Harris was a painter by training whose social habits suggest aspirations more elevated than Betterton's, and Chapter 7 reads the Duke's Company's repertory from 1661 to 1664 through their contrasting stage and private identities.

Harris's grievances dissipated and in 1668 he and Betterton assumed joint managerial responsibility after the death of Sir William Davenant. Chapter 8 considers their different duties, their relationships with actors and playwrights, and the opening of the new Dorset Garden Theatre in 1671. This was the setting for a show that exemplified a new breed of spectacular entertainment, the 1673 *Macbeth*. The chapter takes in recent work on the nature of Restoration rehearsal methods, so offering an opportunity to take a close look at the working conditions of Betterton's life while focusing on a performance that had a distinctive significance in the 1670s.²⁶ For the best part of his career Betterton worked in the service of the man who became the country's most prominent Catholic: the heir to the throne, James, Duke of York. Chapter 9 explores the implications of the Duke's public profile and wider Catholic politics for the company repertory in the 1670s and early 1680s.

When, in 1682, Betterton assumed control with William Smith of the united Duke's and King's companies, he led London's only significant theatre company at a time of successive political crises. He worked with Dryden on the acme of Stuart spectacle, the last court masque of the seventeenth century, *Albion and Albanius*, which served in 1685 as both a

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memorial to Charles II and a paean to his newly crowned brother. Chapter 10 reviews the circumstances leading to the performance and the development of new repertoire in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. The most difficult period of Betterton's career saw him in conflict with United Company shareholders and forced to form a new company in 1695, all in the context of a personal financial crisis. Returning to the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre which Davenant had first occupied in 1661, he attempted to match older working methods to a younger generation of performers and writers. Recent work has attempted to diminish Betterton's centrality to this new company but it sits uncomfortably with the evidence superlatively mined and explained by Milhous, to whose work Chapter 11 is particularly indebted.²⁷

Four months after Betterton's death his books, prints and paintings were auctioned by Jacob Hooke, whose sale catalogue offers an invaluable glimpse of the late actor's interests. Surprisingly for a man widely held to be a link in the chain that connected Restoration performance to the practice of the King's Men, there are barely any Shakespearean items. But the Longleat letter provides almost certain proof that Betterton owned the celebrated Chandos Portrait for a period of up to forty years after Davenant's death, and Chapter 12 examines its significance for the actor's life and career. With a career high point for Shakespeare and Betterton alike, this book begins.

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CHAPTER 2

Look, my lord, it comes: Betterton's Hamlet

Saturday 24 August 1661 was for Samuel Pepys a day of two prodigies. In the morning he was called away from business ‘to see the strange creature that Captain Holmes hath brought with him from Guiny’ – ‘a great baboone’, so uncannily human that Pepys doubted it was ‘a Species’ rather than ‘a monster got of a man and a she-baboone’. He thought it understood English and ‘might be taught to speak or make signs’. After a liquid lunch he went ‘straight to the Opera’ for a second epiphany. He saw *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, done with Scenes very well’. But the novelty of stage pictures was not the highlight when ‘above all, Batterton did the Prince’s part beyond imagination’.¹

It was no commonplace adulation. Pepys regularly mulled over the difference between stage and page, sometimes attempting both at once – disliking Shakespeare’s *1 Henry IV*, he reflected that ‘my having a book I believe did spoil it a little’.² Peter Holland has shown how his viewing habits improved with exposure to live theatre, and Betterton’s Hamlet was a milestone on the journey.³ ‘[B]eyond imagination’, it was less *fore-seeable* than hours with the text had suggested. Illuminating previously unseen meanings, it compelled reassessment of what any performance could achieve. Opposed in linguistic competence to Holmes’s ‘baboone’, Betterton’s Hamlet helped transform Pepys’s appreciation of another suspect ‘Species’, when a mere actor could out-do the best efforts of the gentleman reader. By 1668, Betterton’s Hamlet was so impressive that it collapsed any taxonomy that distinguished text from performance: ‘mightily pleased with it; but, above all, with Betterton, the best part, I believe, that ever man acted’.⁴

So what was it like? Any answer is risky in terms of medium and selection. Hamlet was one role among at least 183, and Milhous regrets the ‘natural ... tendency to stress Betterton’s Shakespearean parts’, as if they were his best vehicle.⁵ The best evidence creates the agenda; it is only the rich accounts of his Shakespeare that allow us to understand his life’s

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work. Yet such may have been his own preference. In his last complete season, four of the six known roles he forced his gout-ridden body to play were cornerstones of the modern classical repertory: Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello and Lear; the latter three he had also played the previous season, with Falstaff.⁶ The great fringe roles such as Timon and Angelo also interested him, as did less significant parts: Edward IV in *Richard III*, Duke Humphrey in *Henry VI* and Bassanio in George Granville's adaptation, *The Jew of Venice*.⁷

How to write about past actors is a less tractable problem. Even if there somehow existed a film record of Betterton's 'best part' it would generate 'a misplaced confidence that [could] actually block our understanding', such is the inadequacy of film in representing theatrical impact.⁸ Written records, alternatively, preserve the observer's wonder, but all theatre criticism is subject to the paradox John Carey detects in its parent genre. The writer of reportage attempts to bring us close to lived experience with a set of tools that encodes our divorce from it, so that he or she is forever battling the 'inevitable and planned retreat of language from the real'.⁹ Jane Milling turns the screw even tighter. What evidence there is represents only the 'rhetorical and declamatory' Betterton of his twilight years evoked for a genteel readership, not the 'exacting, physical' actor who in August 1661 had played Hamlet 'beyond imagination'.¹⁰ When Alexander Pope characterised Betterton's style, it was as the 'grave Action' of someone who 'dignify'd' the least blotted lines of Shakespeare; Steele recalled him behaving 'with suitable dignity' even during scene changes.¹¹ Judith Milhous puts the problem differently. The 'concentration of very late evidence' for his acting style means that the best accounts are tainted by adulation of the 'Living Legend' that was Betterton at seventy, when he would give one-off performances after handing the roles on to younger men.¹² Overall, there is insufficient data about Betterton to support a study such as Holland's on the sound Garrick made.¹³

It is possible, Milhous adds, for the modern scholar to over-compensate by assuming that for more than just his benefit show in 1709 Betterton was the 'feeble old man tottering through a gallant but embarrassing performance ... with the literal support of his two leading ladies', since to do so would be 'a grave injustice to a man of remarkable energy and durability'.¹⁴ Replacing declamatory old Betterton with vital young Thomas might even betray an historically insensitive prejudice against the style he had always practised. He did, after all, scale down his acting commitments later in life in order to perform signature roles with something of their original shape and force.¹⁵ For his last known appearance as Hamlet he still managed to

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appear through the force of 'manner, gesture and voice' as 'a young man of great expectation, vivacity, and enterprise'.¹⁶

After the performance archaeologies of Joseph R. Roach and Dene Barnett, such talk may seem profoundly mistaken. Roach's Betterton is the last major performer to act to the tune of classical rhetoric and Galenic physiology, with its motley science of the 'bodily incarnation of the inward mind'.¹⁷ Even his legendary self-discipline was calculated to keep humours from thickening. His capacity for swift mood changes groups him with Burbage and Alleyn, while the custom-free and rational style of Garrick condemned to obsolescence his 'oratorical' stylistic legacy.¹⁸ Barnett similarly stresses the eighteenth-century science of gesture as an external embodiment of passions.¹⁹ Besides recycling the pre-determined judgements of theatre history, such categories sit ill with the best evidence of Betterton's acting – not rhetorical or medical texts, but the eye-witness records left by Colley Cibber which outline an act of critical embodiment beyond biomechanics. Galenic Betterton is historicised only in the paradoxically abstract, sub-structural way that often characterises readings of the body, reducing the actor to an amalgam of redundant discourse, the thespian double of an author re-buried. It cannot explain how the actor performed in time, in individual roles, for his times and with the full range of theatrical resources at his disposal (performance wasn't just about *his* body, after all). That is as much as to affirm that the meaning and value of the canon of acting should be susceptible to the same questions that have been asked of the canon of literature. An institutionalised selection determined by prevailing genres and social practices? Or, despite all the evidential problems, a discourse of value underpinned by shared observation and judgement that might just inform future interpretations? The truism that every age experiences its best actors as astonishingly natural does not authorise the fallacy that its conceptions of what is natural are doomed, like actors, to expire.

How to write about such acting can be answered pragmatically. Even the sceptical reporter must combat the retreat of language from the real and attempt, in Carey's words, 'to isolate the singularities that will make his account real for his readers – not just something written, but something seen'.²⁰ Early accounts of Betterton's acting yield that quality enough to overcome even the misplaced confidence of film and to sketch, in Stanley Wells's words, 'not simply what [his Hamlet] sounded like, or what [it] looked like, but what it meant to be present at [it]'.²¹ Accordingly, the following account takes the measured risk of blending academic analysis with a discourse his Hamlet helped initiate: that of theatre criticism. It

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starts with an impressionistic, present-tense exposition designed to evoke live performance while respecting the evidence of it; to understand why Betterton's Hamlet was beyond imagination, we must imagine for a while. But the performance was also a cultural focal point, a means of crystallising social and political questions as well as aesthetic ones, so the ultimate purpose of evoking it here is to indicate the manifold worldly contexts it helped illuminate.

In imagination, then, it is mid-afternoon on 24 August 1661, four months and a day since the coronation. Thomas Betterton, leading man of the Duke's Company and just turned twenty-six, waits for his cue:

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son.²²

It is a long wait. After the tension of the first scene, centre stage is taken by Claudius. I.ii takes its mood from the reception he gets, but the spectator's eye is drawn to the figure in the corner who flaunts his inky cloak.

The audience of the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre can see him up close. There are perhaps 600 squeezed into the former real tennis court, squinting in candlelight one scholar reckoned equivalent to a 100-watt bulb; later that day, the August heat will break into a storm.²³ In Hamlet, the 600 see someone not naturally cut out for heroic roles: a shortish, stocky young man with an imposing chin and nose, and resolute, bold eyes – among Hamlets of recent times, a Simon Russell Beale rather than a Samuel West.²⁴ 'Not exceeding the middle stature' is how Cibber would remember him; 'inclining to the corpulent' but with 'limbs nearer the athletic than the delicate proportion'.²⁵ Anthony Aston was even less flattering:

Mr Betterton (although a superlative good actor) laboured under an ill figure, being clumsily made, having a great head, a short thick neck, stooped in the shoulders and had fat short arms which he rarely lifted higher than his stomach ... He had little eyes and a broad face, a little pock-fretten, a corpulent body and thick legs with large feet.²⁶

But as with Russell Beale, the unromantic physique draws eyes to the intensity and intelligence of the performance: beyond imagination partly because it is in excess of immediate sense impressions.²⁷

His look disarms caricature – 'a serious and penetrating aspect'. Eyes have been upon him since Claudius began to speak. 'Upon his entrance into every scene,' continued Cibber, 'he seemed to seize upon the eyes and ears of the giddy and inadvertent.'²⁸ He is, as the text demands, clad in a customary suit of solemn black; if a Boitard illustration in Rowe's