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

David Roberts

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THOMAS BETTERTON

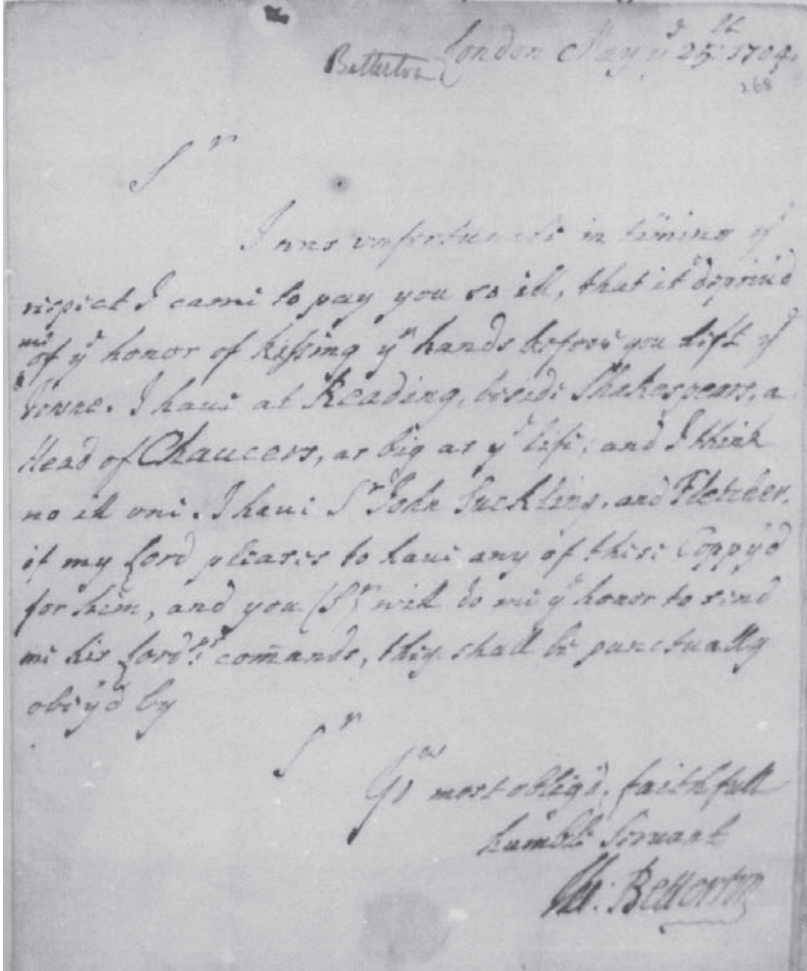
Restoration London's leading actor and theatre manager Thomas Betterton has not been the subject of a biography since 1891. He worked with all the best-known playwrights of his age and with the first generation of English actresses; he was intimately involved in the theatre's responses to politics, and became a friend of leading literary men such as Pope and Steele. His innovations in scenery and company management, and his association with the dramatic inheritance of Shakespeare, helped to change the culture of English theatre. David Roberts's entertaining study unearths new documents and draws fresh conclusions about this major but shadowy figure. It contextualises key performances and examines Betterton's relationship to patrons, colleagues and family, as well as to significant historical moments and artefacts. The most substantial study available of any seventeenth-century actor, *Thomas Betterton* gives one of England's greatest performing artists his due on the tercentenary of his death.

DAVID ROBERTS is Professor and Head of English at Birmingham City University. His previous publications include *The Ladies: Female Patronage of Restoration Drama* (1989) and editions of Defoe's *Colonel Jack*, *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Lord Chesterfield's letters. His articles and reviews have appeared in leading journals including *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *The Review of English Studies*, *ELH*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *New Theatre Quarterly*.

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Letter from Thomas Betterton to Colonel Finch, steward to Thomas Thynne, Lord Weymouth, in Longleat House, Thynne Papers, vol. XXV (1700–9), f.268
The letter reads:

Sr

I was unfortunate in timing y^e respect I came to pay you so ill, that it deprived^{me} of y^e honor of kissing y^r hands before you left y^e [word unclear; perhaps 'Donne']. I have at Reading, beside Shakespeares, a Head of Chaucers, as big as y^e life, and I think no ill one. I have S^r John Suckling, and Fletcher, if my Lord pleases to have any of these Copsy'd for him, and you (S^r) will do me y^e honor to send me his Lord^{sh} commands, they shall be punctually obey'd by

S^r

Yo^{ur} most oblig'd, faithfull
humble Servant
Tho: Betterton

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To Fiona, Joe and Maddy

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in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, vol. 58, no.236 (November 2007), 473–81; part of Chapter 5 as ‘Caesar’s Gift: Playing the Park in the Late Seventeenth Century’, in *ELH*, vol. 71 (2004), 115–39; part of Chapter 11 as ‘Thomas Betterton, Private Tutor’, in *Notes and Queries*, N.S. vol. 54, no. 1 (March 2007), 56–7; and a section of Chapter 12 as “‘I Think No Ill One’: a Letter from Thomas Betterton Sheds New Light on the Chandos Portrait”, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, no.1550 (14 August 2009). My thanks to Oxford University Press, Johns Hopkins University Press and the *TLS* for permission to reprint this material.

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New-style dates are used throughout except where otherwise indicated. For performances of plays, including Betterton's, the date of the premiere or first performance by Betterton is used; dates for printed texts are indicated separately where appropriate. The availability of *Early English Books Online* and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* means that first editions are generally used for play citations. Where page references are missing in such early texts, the relevant EEBO or ECCO image number is given as (for example) 'EEBO 12'.