

Kahan, Jeffrey. *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*. Bethlehem, Penn.: Lehigh University Press, 2010.

Jeffrey Kahan clearly has a penchant for analyzing quirkiness within theater and performance history. A scholar of British Romanticism as well as of Shakespeare, Kahan has authored monographs on Edmund Kean, the enfant terrible of Shakespeare acting history (2006), and on William Henry Ireland, the notorious Shakespeare forger (1998). He has edited Ireland's poetry (2004a) and a multi-volume set of *Shakespeare Imitations, Parodies, and Forgeries, 1710-1820* (Kahan 2004b).

In *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*, Kahan presents the first book-length analysis of a colorful character named William Henry West Betty, whom one might dub the "Shirley Temple" of the British Romantic era. Master Betty, as he was known, was all the rage, taking Scotland, Ireland, and eventually London by storm as a theatrical wunderkind. A "tween" in contemporary parlance, Betty was marketed as the "Young Roscius," a deliberate reference to David Garrick. He made headlines for successfully playing many Shakespearean parts, including Hamlet, Macbeth, and other roles surprising for a child actor.

Kahan's excellent study goes well beyond mere biography and presents a cohesive, accessible analysis of the Betty phenomenon from a cultural studies vantage point. Kahan argues that "Bettymania" reflected political attitudes as well as the rise of consumerism and of a celebrity culture that is quite recognizable in today's terms: a culture of wild fan behavior and sophisticated Public Relations. The back cover blurb highlights one of Kahan's most brilliant points: that "the disintegration of Betty's popularity was not a sign of celebrity culture's failure but of its appropriate function. One idol must be replaced with another."

Kahan's analysis joins the growing body of Romanticist scholarship on celebrity, such as Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody's *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain: 1660-2000* (2005), Ghislaine McDayter's *Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* (2009), and Tom Mole's *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (2007). Mole has also edited a collection, *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850* (2009). Richard Dyer's seminal work, *Stars* (1979), inaugurated much of the current fruitful work on stars, fandom, and celebrity. Kahan's analysis furthers the work that Julie Carlson has begun in her article on Master Betty (Carlson 1996).

In *Bettymania*, Kahan provides an important contribution to Shakespeare scholarship, as well as to Romanticist discourse, theatre history, and cultural studies. His work on Master Betty differs from classic actor studies such as Kalman Burnim's *David Garrick: Director* (1961), which presents meticulous archival research and simple biographical narrative, with little overarching argument. Kahan's approach is more akin to that of scholars who have analyzed Shakespeare's afterlife and continuing cultural meaning, such as Barbara Hodgdon (1998), Péter Dávidházi (1998), Graham Holderness (2002), Richard Burt (2002), and myself (Woo 2008). Kahan's work strikes me as most reminiscent of Marc Baer's book-length analysis of the Old Price Riots in the early 1800s (Baer 1992); like Baer, Kahan trains his focus upon a relatively short and outrageous theatrical phenomenon, and analyzes its significance with verve and insight.

The wit and humor that Kahan displays throughout his study attest to his enjoyment of his subject matter, and make his book a pleasurable and accessible read. Copiously researched, *Bettymania* shows Kahan's flair for nosing out amusing anecdotes, which he shares with relish, as well as for making incisive commentary. For instance, his chapter on "Kemble's Revenge," which relates how the haughty and resentful John Philip Kemble cleverly and subtly retaliated against the upstart Betty, is rife with lively tales that support Kahan's convincing and compassionate analysis of the adult actors' psyches.

Kahan begins his study by observing the techniques that Garrick employed to promote himself, arguing that his self-marketing efforts, successful as they were, paled in comparison to the "businesslike media machine" that Betty ran, "which sought public endorsements, paid critics for positive notices, issued daily health bulletins, leaked private correspondence for press release, repackaged the boy actor for regional markets, and profited directly from official or souvenir merchandise" (2010, 17). Besides this very contemporary-sounding Public Relations apparatus, Betty's stardom owes a debt to Wordsworthian notions of childhood and innocence, as Kahan points out (2010, 24-25).

The first chapter of *Bettymania* considers why Master Betty was branded differently in Scotland, Ireland, and then England. His narrative is highly spirited and entertaining. Drawing analogies to "Garrick Fever," when a young sprightly Garrick heralded the professional demise of his predecessor, James Quin, Kahan argues that Bettymania was a "decidedly nostalgic and thus conservative enterprise" (2010, 59). He characterizes the fad as reliant upon a "Romantic adherence of innocence and ignorance" which resulted in "a kind of pretzel logic, twisted and half-baked" (59). His parsing of the convoluted and overdetermined meanings superimposed upon the star serves to illumine various strands of the era's sociocultural discourse (again resembling Baer's 1992 analysis of Kemble and the Old Price Riots). Additionally, Kahan's detailed discussion of actors' contracts

and salaries, the workings of benefit performances, and the spate of child performers that arose in Betty's wake is immensely useful: careful and clear in presentation.

Kahan's positioning of Betty as an influential and hitherto unrecognized figure within the development of Romantic discourse, and of Shakespeare's impact within that discourse, is his most provocative assertion. Analyzing the gendered resonances of the sensibility ascribed to Betty, Kahan argues that Betty's Hamlet was deeply admired because of the contrast between his and Kemble's approach to the Dane, Kemble being famed for his stoic, dignified, and sublime characterizations. Betty occasionally used his youth to excellent effect, playing Hamlet with a feminine delicacy and tenderness that an older man perhaps could not have carried off, and highlighting his filial relationship with Gertrude.

Kahan makes note as well of moments when Betty's choices as an actor made a virtue of necessity: unable to intimidate the full-grown woman playing Ophelia to his Hamlet, Betty chose to showcase Hamlet's delicacy and sensitivity (2010, 109). Kahan argues that Betty's Hamlet probably influenced subsequent Hamlet actors, including Sarah Bernhardt. Here, Kahan's point is thought-provoking but rather underdeveloped: it would be worthwhile indeed to speculate further upon the interaction between Betty's Shakespearean interpretations and the Romantic obsession with Shakespeare, and with Hamlet in particular. Even the figures who abhorred Betty, including Coleridge, Kemble, and Siddons, may owe some portion of their views on Shakespeare to their negative reaction against the Betty craze.

Kahan does miss several opportunities to draw fruitful connections with other discussions within Romantic scholarship, such as the proliferation of studies on Sarah Siddons and the maternal sensitivity she was known for evincing. A discussion of sensibility on stage, in relation to the evolving understanding of "Romanticism," would productively tie his study with the several fields he already engages with: Romanticism, theater history, and Shakespeare studies. Moreover, he might have positioned his monograph in relation to other studies that argue for more serious critical attention to be accorded to actors, such as the *Players of Shakespeare* series released by Cambridge University Press in the 1990s, and more recently, Jonathan Holmes's study of the Royal Shakespeare Company (2004) and Tony Howard's *Women as Hamlet* (2007).

By the same token, Kahan's discussion of Betty's perceived transvestitism, the obsession of some of his fans with his biological gender and physical body, and the related phenomenon of the Chevalier d'Eon's cross-dressing is quite brief. Kahan reads Betty as "liberated to traverse the boundaries of class and clothing" (2010, 115) without contextualizing his interpretation within the copious scholarship on cross-dressing.

Throughout, Kahan presents his reader with nuanced and thoughtful analyses of the Betty fad, delineating the myriad reasons for Master Betty's meteoric rise to fame as well as his downfall, and using Bettymania as a case study for a greater understanding of today's celebrity obsession. The voyeurism, mystification, and idealization that were projected onto the child star resemble what today's superstars encounter, not to mention the fickle and transitory loyalty of their once-adoring public.

Overall, Kahan's study would have benefited from more references to other critical strands, such as discussions of Garrick, since Betty was billed as a new Garrick, and the two were mystified in similar fashion. Kahan's use of actor memoirs also led me to think that his points would have been strengthened with more theorizing of the nature of these memoirs, such as has been done by several scholars studying eighteenth-century actresses. Nonetheless, Kahan's *Bettymania* is a marvelous and memorable analysis of a phenomenon not likely to be taken too seriously until now. He closes with a potentially powerful rumination on the interplay between social civility and celebrity, eloquently concluding, "Though Bettymania only lasted a season or two, modern celebrity culture, nourished by the evanescent thoughts and dreams of millions, has proven to be the center that continues to hold" (Kahan 2010, 156).

The continued appearance of studies related to celebrity attest to the timeliness of Kahan's book, and to its place within a dynamic scholarly conversation on celebrity culture and theatrical "marketing."

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