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# All Sorts of Hamlets

*From the scholarly art of John Philip Kemble  
to the ripped sable hose of Edmund Russell*

By HAROLD SETON

This article was originally published in [Theatre Magazine](#), Vol. 29, No. 7. Ed. Arthur Hornblow.  
New York: Theatre Magazine Company, 1919. p. 8.



THE recent success of two distinctly different interpretations of "[Hamlet](#)" has once more opened the old Shakespearian controversy: Was the Melancholy Prince insane, or merely simulating madness the better to trap the murderer of his kingly father? The discussion revives memories of the great Hamlets that have crossed the world's mimic stage and of others who were not so great.

[Richard Burbage](#) was born in 1567 and died in 1619. He was the best known actor of the Elizabethan stage, and played the principal parts in [Shakespeare](#)'s pieces. By a curious coincidence, the actor, like the author, was born in the little town of Stratford-on-Avon. At an early age he appeared as a player, and by the time he was twenty, had established a reputation. During the next dozen years his fame steadily increased. With his brother,

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Cuthbert, he built the Globe Theatre, in London, celebrated for its connection with Shakespeare. This theatre was a summer playhouse, the one at Blackfriars, which was roofed in, being utilized in winter. In this venture Burbage had Shakespeare as a partner, both being members of the Lord Chamberlain's company of players. Burbage created many famous rôles, and, from "A Funeral Elegy," of which several versions exist, it seems certain that he was the original Hamlet, Othello, and Lear.

Says the elegiast--

*He's gone, and with him what a world is dead,...  
No more young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,  
King Lear, the griev'd Moor, and more beside  
That lived in him have now forever died.*

And Austin Dobson has a rondeau in which we are reminded that--

*When Burbage played, the stage was bare  
Of fount and temple, tower and stair;  
Two backwords eked a battle out;  
Two supers made a rabble rout;  
The Throne of Denmark was a chair!  
And yet, no less the audience there  
Thrilled through all changes of Despair,  
Hope, Anger, Fear, Delight, and Doubt,  
When Burbage played!*

WHAT a fascinating subject to contemplate! Yet how incongruous to imagine "the melancholy Dane" playing opposite a "female impersonator"! There were no women on the stage in Shakespeare's time and the part of Ophelia was created by a boy with a falsetto voice. When the lads' voices "changed," they relinquished feminine rôles for masculine ones. Juliet became Romeo, Portia became Shylock, and Ophelia became Hamlet. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction!



[Thomas Betterton](#) was born in 1635 and died in 1710. He was apprenticed to a bookseller who subsequently organized a theatrical troupe. In this way the young man was transferred from a shop to the stage. In 1661 he was a member of Sir William Davenant's company, at the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, and soon became a favorite, despite the natural disadvantages of a low voice, small eyes, and an ungainly figure. The best contemporary judges, such as Steele, Cibber, Pepys, and Pope, enthusiastically proclaim the excellence of his interpretations. His repertoire was an extensive one, including many of Shakespeare's plays, Hamlet being especially admired. Early in his career he was sent to Paris by Charles II, to study the French theatre, with a view to improving the English, this visit familiarizing the young actor with the work of [Molière](#). When he played the part of Alvaro, in "Love and Honor," the king graciously lent his coronation robes. And yet, such were the standards of the day, at no time in his stage career did Betterton receive a larger salary than four pounds a week! To us the thought of a "twenty dollar Hamlet" seems preposterous. But *autre temps, autre mœurs!*

[DAVID Garrick](#) was born in 1717 and died in 1779. His first appearance was at the Goodman's Fields Theatre, where he at once attracted attention. In fact, he created a furore. Gray declared that the town was "horn-mad" about Garrick. After a time, the actor assumed the management of Drury Lane Theatre, and, during a connection that lasted twenty years, he produced a great variety of plays, including twenty-four by Shakespeare. Many of these pieces were "altered" and "adapted" to suit the convenience or conceit of the "star." For instance, Garrick added a dying speech to the text of "[Macbeth](#)," played the part in modern dress and took great liberties with "The Merchant of Venice." Tate Wilkinson wrote that Garrick's production of Hamlet, in 1773, was well received at Drury Lane Theatre, even by the galleries, "though without their favorite acquaintances, the grave-diggers!" Pitt declared that Garrick was the best actor the English stage had

ever produced. Pope avowed that Garrick had no equal, and would have no rival. Horace Walpole added that there were a dozen dukes of a night to see Garrick's performance. Grimm extolled Garrick as the first and only actor who came up to the demands of his imagination. Johnston said, in his "Lives of the Poets," that the death of Garrick had eclipsed the gaiety of nations, and impoverished the public stock of harmless pleasure. The famous actor was buried in Westminster Abbey, at the foot of Shakespeare's statue. But think of Hamlet without the grave-diggers! Every bit as bad as Hamlet without the Ghost!

JOHN Philip Kemble was born in 1757 and died in 1823. He was the eldest son of Roger Kemble, and was a brother of Sarah Siddons. He was educated for the priesthood, but, at the completion of a four-year course, he turned from the pulpit to the playhouse, adopting the stage as his profession in 1776. Gradually he made a name for himself as a capable performer, and this combined with the great fame of his sister, led to an engagement at Drury Lane Theatre, where he made his first appearance in 1783, as Hamlet. He was well received, but it was not until 1785, when he played Macbeth, that he actually shared in the honors bestowed upon Mrs. Siddons. Brother and sister appeared together as King John and Constance, and as Othello and Desdemona, being hailed as the greatest actor and actress of the day. His elocutionary art, his fine sense of rhythm and emphasis enabled him to excel in declamation, but physically he was incapable of giving expression to impetuous vehemence and searching pathos. One of his greatest triumphs was in his own version of "Coriolanus," the character of "the noble Roman" being especially suited to "the noble Kemble." His appointment as manager of Drury Lane Theatre, in 1788, enabled him to clothe the characters with less respect for tradition and more regard for correctness. Up to that time actors had appeared in contemporary costumes, and Kemble himself enacted Hamlet and Macbeth in satin knee-breeches, and a powdered periwig. The word "anachronism" was unknown in those days--apparently!

WILLIAM Henry West Betty was born in 1791 and died in 1874. He lives in theatrical history as "The Infant Roscious." From early childhood he was remarkably precocious. He manifested an aptitude for memorizing dramatic verse, and this accomplishment was encouraged by his talented mother. Witnessing a performance by Mrs. Siddons, he resolved to become an actor, and so, in 1803, when he was twelve years of age, he made his stage début. During his first month in the theatre he played four different parts, each the principal rôle in a production. One of these was Romeo. His success was extraordinary, and he added Hamlet to his repertoire! These appearances were at Belfast and Dublin, and in 1804, when he was thirteen years of age, he made his London début, at Covent Garden Theatre. The troops had to be called out to preserve order, so great was the crush to obtain admittance. Ireland had been enthusiastic, but England went into ecstasies. Covent Garden engaged Master Betty for twelve performances, at fifty guineas each. Immediately afterward, Drury Lane engaged him for twenty-eight performances at seventy-five guineas each.

SUCH salaries were without precedent. During the Drury Lane engagement the gross receipts amounted to more than seventeen thousand pounds. George III presented him to the queen and the princesses. On one occasion the House of Commons adjourned in order to be in time for the performance of Hamlet. The town lost its head completely. A provincial tour was followed by a London reappearance, in 1805, when twenty-four performances were divided between Covent Garden and Drury Lane. In 1808, he made his last appearance as a boy-actor. After studying at Cambridge University, Betty returned to the stage, in 1812, meeting with merely moderate success in London, although he continued to tour the provinces until 1824, when he retired to enjoy the fortune acquired during the early popularity. We "moderns" can only marvel that a thirteen-year-old Romeo and Hamlet could ever be taken seriously, or regarded as anything but a "freak" exhibition, like "the Living Skeleton," etc...

[SARAH Berhardt](#), noted delineator of exotic heroines, also presented herself as--Hamlet! Audiences were attracted out of sheer curiosity, and criticisms were penned more in sorrow than in anger. Facetious fellows declared that the title-rôle should be changed to Hamlette or Hamletina, wondering if the next impersonator of the Prince of Denmark would be--Vesta Tilley! But Bernhardt was not discouraged or dismayed, and proceeded with other masculine parts, including L'Aiglon and Shylock, playing the latter rôle with a beard, which was ridiculed as being "literally, the last straw!"

A most remarkable performance of Hamlet was given some years ago in London, when J.C.M. Bellew, an English clergyman, father of Kyrle Bellew, the well-known actor, entertained an audience of invited friends with a presentation of the Shakespearian tragedy, in which the actors played their parts in pantomime, while the revered gentleman sat in the place generally reserved for the leader of the orchestra, and recited all the lines of the characters!

During the height of "the aesthetic craze," while [Oscar Wilde](#) was hailed as "the high priest" in England, Edmund Russell resolved to become "the high priest" in America. He gave lessons in deportment, teaching people how to sit down and stand up in an aesthetic manner. He was taken up by smart society, and became a fashionable fad. But he sighed for new worlds to conquer, so announced an appearance at Wallack's Theatre. He was to be an aesthetic Hamlet! When the star appeared, the friends applauded and the foes hooted, but before long the whole house united in laughing outright, for Mr. Russell bent over and ripped his tights, at the same time almost losing his toupée! As a wag remarked at the time, Edmund Russell split more than "the ears of the groundlings!"

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