The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness

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Consuming Celebrity: Commodities and Cuteness in the Circulation of Master William Henry West Betty

Marlis Schweitzer

On a shelf in the vaults of the Folger Shakespeare Library sit several snuffboxes bearing the image of Master William Henry West Betty, the child actor who dominated the British stage between 1803 and 1806 (figs. 1 and 2). Small, pretty, and delicate, these snuffboxes are undeniably “cute,” in keeping with the association of cuteness with fragility, empathy, and desire (Merish 187). Like other cute objects, they invite human touch despite their vulnerable materiality, as if to say, “Hold me carefully or I will break.” The tiny portraits painted onto the ivory lids enhance the boxes’ cuteness by depicting the “Young Roscius” in his most famous roles, from Shakespeare’s Romeo to the character of Norval in John Home’s Douglas. In turn, the skillful miniaturization of Betty’s image amplifies the cuteness of the boy himself, whom audiences admired as much, if not more, for his physical charms as for his convincing stage impersonations.

It may seem anachronistic to apply the term cute to objects created in early nineteenth-century Britain since the word cute did not enter common parlance until the mid-1800s, when it
Nevertheless, a study of Master Betty and the commodities produced to celebrate him reveals that both the concept of cuteness and the triangulation of cuteness, commodities, and children were well underway in Britain decades before the word itself took hold.² By focusing on Betty’s popularity with male audiences and detailing the various performances of masculinity that arose in response to him, this chapter also advances new

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1 According to Steinberg, the word *cute* first appeared in the 1700s as a derivation of acute and was typically used as a synonym of “clever, keen-witted, sharp, [and] shrewd.”

2 On cuteness as a mid-nineteenth-century development, see Merish 188 and Ngai 59.
understandings of the social functions of cuteness, pushing beyond tendencies to associate cuteness with maternal care.

As one of the first child celebrities of the modern era, Master Betty circulated within an evolving economy of cuteness wherein he was valued for his size, charm, and vulnerability, especially when he was ill or otherwise indisposed. Audiences admired Betty’s physical appearance and collected biographical pamphlets, caricatures, and a range of souvenirs bearing his likeness out of a desire to commemorate his performances and engage with him socially in form if not being. Such objects were central to the production of what we now recognize as celebrity culture, as they mediated the relationship between Betty and his audience in both public and private spaces.

Although some historians see celebrity culture as a distinct phenomenon of late capitalism, Simon Morgan insists that celebrity needs to be understood “less as a somewhat arbitrary status assigned to this or that individual, and more as a cultural and economic formation which plays a wider role in society as a whole” (98). In Morgan’s equation, individuals become celebrities in the moment when “a sufficiently large audience is interested in their actions, image and personality to create a viable market for commodities carrying their likeness and for information about their lives and views” (98). Celebrity culture thus emerged in tandem with the rise of capitalism, and both were enhanced by the production of cuteness. Indeed, as Charles Harmon contends, “from the broadest vantage, cuteness can be seen as instrumental to the stabilization of capitalism itself” (133–34). Put bluntly, the cute keeps the wheels of capital turning. “Cuteness might be regarded as an intensification of commodity fetishism’s kitschy phantasmatic logic but also as a way of revising it by adding yet another layer of fantasy,” Sianne Ngai writes (62). When the cute object entices onlookers

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to hold, caress, cuddle, and care for it, it “speaks to a desire to recover what Marx calls the ‘coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects’ that becomes immediately extinguished in exchange” (63). Far from passive, innocent, or amoral, the cute can issue “surprisingly powerful demands” as it stirs intense feelings of desire and longing (64).

Historically, children have been aligned with commodities through their performance of cuteness, while miniature commodities have in turn been associated with children through their apparent vulnerability and fragility (Merish 186; Stewart 43). For Lori Merish, this link between commodities and children often provokes a maternal or feminized response in those who encounter the cute: “[T]he cute always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother and is constructed to generate maternal desire; the consumer (or potential consumer) of the cute is expected […] to pretend she or he is the cute’s mother” (186). This association of cuteness, children, and deep maternal longing can be traced to the groundbreaking work of the zoologist and ethnologist Konrad Lorenz, the “father of modern cuteness research,” who in the 1950s observed that “the perpetual pattern known as cuteness […] was a sign stimulus which served as an ‘innate releaser’ of the human caregiving response” (Sherman and Haidt 248). For Lorenz, cuteness in animal and human babies awakened dormant responses in adult parents, compelling them to devote special care to their young.

While Lorenz’s work continues to inform cute studies, recent research has complicated his understanding of the biological function of cuteness and its association with caregiving and the maternal. In a 2011 article, psychologists Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt assert that “[c]uteness is as much an elicitor of play as it is of care. It is as likely to trigger a childlike state as a parental one” (248). Moving away from Lorenz’s suggestion that cuteness releases caregiving, they maintain that cuteness “releases sociality” in humans and invites a broad range of what they term “affiliative behaviors,” which include various forms of social interaction that range from touching and cuddling to teasing and playing (249). Caregiving might arise from these af-
filiative behaviors, but it isn’t immediately released, nor is it necessarily the primary response to cute entities, whether human or nonhuman.

Sherman and Haidt’s theory helps to explain one of the most troubling and paradoxical aspects of cuteness: cute objects can simultaneously provoke caretaking urges as well as intense feelings of disgust or anger (59–73). Indeed, for Ngai, the materiality of cute objects, namely “their smallness, compactness, formal simplicity, softness or pliancy,” can “call up a range of minor negative affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency” (64–65). Daniel Harris similarly identifies cuteness as an “aesthetic of deformity and dejection,” citing the popularity of the blundering Winnie the Pooh with his snout in a honey pot or the fully equipped “Vet Set” that allows caregivers to bandage a wounded (stuffed) puppy and other imaginary pets (6–7). Cute commodities and cute children thus activate much more than an “erotics of maternal longing” (188). They release diverse forms of sociality that include both tenderness and harm.

As this chapter demonstrates, Master Betty and the cute commodities created in his image prompted a range of complicated social and antisocial responses, from declarations of love and admiration to vicious attacks on his image and reputation. This is not to deny the importance of maternal longing to Betty’s appeal but rather to suggest that Betty and the objects that constellated around him provoked “affiliative behaviors” that extended well beyond maternal caregiving to include the desire to hold, possess, occupy, and dominate.4 To explore these behaviors, this chapter traces Betty’s rise to fame and follows fan efforts to gain access to him through biographical pamphlets. It then turns to caricatures of Betty’s performances and offstage life as evidence of artists’ attempts to package the child actor’s cuteness for public consumption. More than documenting the

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4 In her study of cuteness in Japanese culture, Anne Allison observes that while girls were primarily associated with cute commodities in the 1970s and 1980s, cuteness as a commodity is now desired as much by men and boys as by women and girls (40–41).
boy’s celebrity, however, these images point to the anger, disgust, and threat of violence that erupted in response to Betty’s cuteness. Finally, I look to several commemorative objects, notably the series of Betty snuffboxes discussed above, to consider how audiences consumed and quite literally inhaled the boy.

Bettymania

William Henry West Betty was born in 1791 in Shrewsbury and raised on the outskirts of Belfast. According to contemporary biographers, the boy fell in love with the stage after attending a production of *Pizarro* starring the celebrated actress Sarah Siddons in the role of Elvira. Siddons’s performance apparently made such a strong impression on young Betty that when he returned home he set about learning all of Elvira’s speeches “in imitation of Mrs. Siddons” (12), and begged his father to let him pursue a theatrical career, to which his parents acceded (Harley 13). Curious to know whether their son had potential, Betty’s parents approached Mr. Atkins, manager of the theater in Belfast, and his “ingenious and experienced prompter, Mr. Hough,” for advice (13). The men agreed that with proper training Betty might be a success, and Mr. Hough became the boy’s tutor.

In August 1803, several weeks shy of his twelfth birthday, Betty gave his first public performance in Belfast, playing the role of Osman in Aaron Hill’s *Zara*. Surprised and delighted by the boy’s portrayal of the tragic hero, the audience responded “with universal admiration […] and tumultuous applauses” (Harley 15). Betty’s next performances, as Young Norval in *Douglas* and Rolla in *Pizarro*, drew increasingly larger crowds. Following this success, Betty embarked upon a series of provincial tours, performing in Dublin, Cork, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Birmingham, Sheffield, and Liverpool. According to biographer George Davies Harley, audiences were “delighted and astonished” by Betty in the role of Richard III: “a higher opinion

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5 See also Kahan, as well as Slout and Rudisill, for details of Betty’s earliest performances.
cannot be conveyed of his imitative powers, than that a mere child should convey the justest conceptions of the character, although his voice and appearance so little correspond with the spectator’s idea of the crook-backed tyrant” (72). Here it is the miniaturization of Richard III — the juxtaposition of a juvenile voice and figure with the words and actions of a tyrant — that renders Betty both cute and astonishing. This cuteness took on a decidedly erotic turn when Betty as Richard wooed Lady Anne; according to Harley, his address “never fail[ed] to gratify the female part of his audience” (72), who presumably felt something much stronger than maternal desire for the actor.

As this account suggests, Betty’s growing fame and delightful cuteness invited audiences and would-be audiences to display a range of “affiliative behaviors” that, in Haidt and Sherman’s terms, included “attempts to touch, hold, pet, play with, talk to, or otherwise engage” him (249). Some fans were satisfied with a glimpse of the actor; for example, en route to Birmingham, his chaise was surrounded by hundreds of curious fans “who seemed perfectly happy in the opportunity of viewing the theatrical prodigy” (Bisset 37). Hotels and coach companies likewise benefited from the surging “Bettymania” as “families of distinction” traveled from London to gain access to the young boy and learn what all the fuss was about. At the Doncaster Races, a special “Theatrical Coach” conveyed passengers from the racing grounds to Sheffield where the Young Roscius was playing (47).

As the Betty hype intensified, a growing number of authors published competing accounts of the actor’s early life, drawing on biographical details, critical essays, and poetry to sing the young boy’s praises — or in some cases, to challenge those who were mesmerized by the child. Collectively, these pamphlets demonstrate how cuteness in a child “releases sociality” and arouses the desire to hold or engage the cute subject. Indeed, the number of Betty pamphlets in circulation between 1804 and 1805 provides evidence of a market hungry to consume details and images of the young boy and the recognition on the part of male pamphleteers that claiming affiliation with Betty would
yield significant financial rewards, if not some degree of personal satisfaction.\(^6\)

One of the earliest publications was *Strictures upon the Merits of Young Roscius*, written by J. Jackson, a theater manager in Edinburgh and Glasgow who “had the honour of first introducing Betty to the notice of a British audience” (qtd. in Harral 35). Despite his enthusiasm, however, Jackson lacked the insider knowledge asserted by later pamphleteers. By contrast, when J. Bisset of Birmingham published his *Critical Essays on the Dramatic Excellencies of the Young Roscius*, he claimed to provide “the most authentic information respecting every particular of this wonderful Child of Thespis,” since “the account of the birth and commencement of his theatrical career” had come directly from “the Parents of his juvenile Hero” (“This Day” 71). And certainly Bisset’s compilation of Betty criticism, letters to the editor, and excerpts from Hough’s correspondence with theater managers offers a wealth of detail about the juvenile actor’s early performances. Like other pro-Betty biographers, Bisset positioned himself as a caring surrogate father figure dedicated to upholding Betty’s reputation. At the same time, the biographer’s physical and emotional proximity to the child actor presumably enhanced his own social status and performance of gentlemanly conduct.

Not to be outdone, Harley declared that his *Authentic Biographical Sketch of the Life, Education, and Personal Character, of William Henry West Betty, the Celebrated Young Roscius* was superior to others because it included Betty’s “correct Portrait, engraved from an original Sketch” (“Mr. Harley’s” 71).\(^7\) Like Bisset, Harley boasted about his access to the young boy and to artists who had accurately captured his likeness. “I have undertaken to

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6 Not all pamphleteers and critics had favorable things to say about Betty. Between 1804 and 1805, at least twenty Betty pamphlets entered circulation — some complimentary, others skeptical.

7 Harley’s claim points to disagreements among artists who asserted that their portraits of Betty were superior to those of their competitors and accused others of misappropriating their work. See “The Young Roscius” 27 Dec. 1804, and Betty.
pen the following pages of authentic matter,” he wrote, “presuming that an intimate knowledge of him both on and off the stage, together with the documents which I have had an opportunity of procuring, may enable me to form a more accurate account of his talents” (5). By emphasizing the authenticity and accuracy of their accounts, Harley and Bisset fed the growing economy of cuteness that surrounded Betty, offering readers the kind of imagined access to that they already enjoyed (or so they claimed).

Betty in London

On 3 December 1804, Betty gave his first London performance at Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, in the role of Achmet (Selim) in Barbarossa, John Brown’s tragedy about the Algerian ruler. Curious to see if the boy was really all that others claimed him to be, a huge crowd gathered outside the theater hours before the doors opened, making it impossible for those closest to the entrance to move. The situation went from bad to worse, as a journalist recalled:

In this state, the heat and pressure, after a time became so intolerable, that a variety of persons fainted, and others were in danger of suffocation, and other injuries, from the weight and force of the numbers from without, who could not be prevailed upon, by the representations or the shrieks of the people confined within, to desist from attempting to force their passage.

The danger at last becoming extreme, the guards were almost unanimously called for, by the terrified persons who were included between the inner and outer doors, and who could not make good their retreat. (“Covent Garden Theatre” 72)

This account vividly documents the intense desire that Betty’s name and presence aroused in the London audience. Primed by circulating pamphlets, newspaper accounts, and images, the men and women gathered outside the theater could no long-
er contain their yearning to see and potentially touch the boy. Significantly, however, the urge to engage with Betty produced a kind of sociality that was destructive and self-serving rather than loving and tender. “[A]ssembled with the same intention” (i.e., to encounter the child), the Betty-crazed crowd paid little heed to those suffering around them.8

While audiences were somewhat more restrained in the weeks following Betty’s debut, large crowds continued to flood Covent Garden and Drury Lane in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the boy. His admirers included the Prince of Wales, the Duchess of York, and other members of the royal household, as well as the prime minister and members of Parliament.9 Throughout this period Betty continued to whet the public appetite with a diverse repertoire, resuming his celebrated personations of Young Norval in Douglas, Romeo in Romeo and Juliet, and Frederick in Lover’s Vows, alongside more ambitious portrayals of Hamlet and Richard III, miniaturizing and thereby cutifying roles that were typically associated with mature male actors. For many fans the diversity of these parts testified to Betty’s uncanny virtuosity, though some critics observed that he was much less convincing as a romantic hero like Romeo (“Covent Garden” 70) and suggested that he was overstretching the limits of his talent as Hamlet (“Drury Lane Theatre” 81). Against such criticism, Betty’s friends and fans sprang to his defense, protecting him from attacks they considered unwarranted and unjust (A Sincere Friend 82).

8 The critical response to Betty’s London debut was largely positive. London critics praised his technical skill, his “bold, correct and graceful” attitudes, his “striking and elegant” posture, and his convincing portrayal of strong emotion (“Young Roscius” 73).

9 In February 1805, Betty visited the House of Commons with his father, where he chatted with several representatives and dined with the Duke of Clarence (“Master Betty accompanied” 77).

10 See also Bisset 50–63.
These responses to Betty criticism point to the ways that fans expressed their devotion to the boy and sought contact with him both inside and outside the theater. “The attraction of the young Roscius is not limited to the stage,” claimed one report, “for he cannot walk along the streets without drawing crowds, who naturally press after him to see the most extraordinary pickpocket that the Theaters ever knew” (“The attraction” 75). Although the author’s description of Betty as a “pickpocket” — presumably a reference to the boy’s salary and inflated ticket prices — alludes to a more skeptical view of his talents, most theatergoers saw Betty as a precious object. Indeed, the writer’s description of crowds surrounding and “naturally press[ing] after” Betty in the streets recalls the incident when hundreds of fans surrounded the boy’s carriage. Here the desire to hold, touch, and possess the cute child gave rise to social behavior that stretched beyond love and admiration to include more physically threatening behavior. According to another account, those unable to acquire tickets to see him at Covent Garden or Drury Lane went so far as to wait in the street outside the front door of Betty’s Southampton row house, hoping to catch “a peep before his drawing-room curtain!” (“Some people” 75). Pushing beyond public space into private space, the crowds pursued Betty with a hunger tinged with the threat of violence — just how far would they go to catch “a peep” of him in his own home, this account seems to ask, and what would happen after that? The harder it became to access Betty’s physical person, the cuter he became to those privileged enough to catch a glimpse of him on the stage, in the street, or behind closed curtains.

These accounts of close encounters with the cute child gesture toward the entanglement of cuteness with access. Inaccessibility amplifies cuteness and enhances desire, fueling a capitalist economy of cuteness that can be directed toward the acquisition of surrogate objects that carry similar attributes. When individuals are thwarted in their desire to touch and hold the cute, they become susceptible to other forms of sociability, which can intensify and take on less desirable aspects, including negative affects such as anger, disgust, and violence.
Often, though, the desire to hold and touch Betty’s body manifested in displays of concern for Betty’s health and physical well-being. Before the actor’s first move from Covent Garden to Drury Lane, manager Richard Sheridan announced: “Master Betty shall not perform more than three times a week, and that he shall not be brought forward even so often, if it shall appear to be in the slightest degree inconvenient to his health or feelings” (“We are happy” 73). Carefully timed, this announcement positioned Sheridan as a benevolent, fatherly manager anxious about jeopardizing his star’s health, while emphasizing the exclusivity of a Betty performance. When Betty became ill and had to withdraw from a scheduled performance, audiences were so overcome with worry that the Drury Lane management published a notice with letters from Betty’s father and doctor verifying the young boy’s illness, complete with vivid details of “bilious vomiting” and “cold and hoarseness” that rendered his voice barely “audible in his room” (“The Young Roscius,” 19 Dec. 1804, 76). In the days that followed, London papers published regular updates on Betty’s progress with graphic accounts of the specific treatments administered (e.g., enemas, bloodletting). For their part, Betty’s family posted notices outside their door to address the “numerous and incessant enquiries of the Nobility and Gentry” (“The Young Roscius,” 22 Dec. 1804, 76).

Such extreme reactions to Betty’s ill health highlight the role of vulnerability, weakness, and distance in accentuating cuteness. Although, as Merish asserts, “[w]hat the cute stages is, in part, a need for adult care” (187), the cute also invites feelings that are less about caring than about possession and domination. When Betty became sick, his already-attractive body became the focus of intense public scrutiny and heightened desire, a desire aroused in part by his sudden inaccessibility. Hidden in the inner sanctum of his bedroom, Betty was literally untouchable, even by members of the nobility and gentry, which only made him seem more fascinating, more defenseless, and in need of greater care. In other words, Betty’s forced withdrawal from the stage made him cuter through his association with “the diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate” (Ngai 53). At the same
time, the public’s intense interest in Betty—their demand to know *everything* that was happening to his body behind closed doors—highlights the distressing flipside of maternal longing—longing to the point of obsession. Here, Emmanuel Levinas’s reflections on need, desire, and the consumption of others seem particularly relevant. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas distinguishes between need and desire, asserting that with need, “I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one’s teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me” (117). Betty’s fans consumed pamphlets, objects, and information about the boy in their urge to get closer to him. But this consumption only fueled desire as they failed to sink their teeth into his being.

**Picturing Master Betty**

The sociability released through Betty’s circulation extended to the work of London’s caricaturists, many of whom created satirical images of the young boy, his father, and the managers who competed for his talent. As one might expect, most of these images accentuate Betty’s vulnerability, size, and cuteness, showing him in close physical contact with the adults who surround him. For example, in William Holland’s caricature from December 1804 (fig. 3), Betty as Young Norval (Douglas) sits on the lap of the actress Mrs. Harriet Litchfield as Lady Randolph, Young Norval’s mother. Holland’s exaggerated use of scale, with a miniaturized Betty and a round, fleshly Litchfield, enhances the tenderness of this scene, a reunion of a mother with her long-lost adult son. Betty looks like a small, delicate child in his mother’s arms, hardly the brave warrior of Home’s play; indeed, the juxtaposition of Litchfield’s ample bosom with Betty’s small head seems to be a play on typical Madonna-and-Child tropes. The poetic caption in the upper-right corner of the page hails Betty as “Nature’s own sweet little fellow,” emphasizing his “genius,” “charm,” and delightful cuteness. And certainly Litchfield’s tender glance at the child and her soft touch on his waist and arms amplifies his apparent need for adult care.
Yet the caricaturists also hint at longing that falls well outside the realm of maternal care. In figure 4, published on 30 November 1804, four days before Betty’s debut, the caricaturist R. Ackermann imagines the frustration of adult managers and actors forced to contend with Betty’s celebrity status and his childish whims. Dressed in turquoise with a yellow sash waving, the young actor playfully leaps over the grumbling Covent Garden theater manager John Philip Kemble, costumed as Hamlet. Paraphrasing Ophelia’s lines, Kemble bemoans his fate: “woe is me / Seeing what I have seen / Seeing what I see!! / Oh Roscius!” Again, Betty appears much younger than his thirteen years, while Kemble seems dismayed that the rambunctious child has reduced him to a glorified governess, a mere shadow of his authoritative male self. Indeed, whereas “Lady Randolph and Douglas” associates caretaking with women, Ackerman’s “Theatrical Leap Frog” alludes to the dangers of cuteness for men who come into contact with it. Through touch, Betty transforms all adults into his playthings — he cutifies others through his cuteness, thereby destabilizing hierarchies of gender and releasing feelings of anxiety and frustration alongside tenderness and love. In fact, the caricaturist’s depiction of “leap frog” may have been a sly reference to
same-sex desire and sexual congress; in 1772, a slanderous poem published in the *Public Ledger* accused the celebrated actor–manager David Garrick of “play[ing] at length that hateful game *leap frog*” (qtd. in Thomson 128). This reading of the caricature’s sexual undertone gains credence considering the accounts of the many men who admired Betty, sought his company, and purchased goods bearing his image.

Other caricatures point more explicitly to cuteness’s ugly underbelly, especially where subjectivity is concerned. In the caricature titled “The Young Roscius Weighing the Manager’s Gold” (fig. 5), Betty’s status as a desirable commodity is made explicit. Bound by gold chains to Sheridan, manager of Drury Lane, and Thomas Harris, representing Covent Garden, Betty questions the value of the gold on offer, observing that it “appears to be sterling on both sides.” Sheridan, on the right, promises that his offering is “true Pizarro gold brought by my slaves from the mines of Peru” (an allusion to the play *Pizarro*), while Harris assures him that his gold is pure. Although Betty appears to have the upper hand in these negotiations, his enchained body implies that the child actor has more in common with Sheridan’s Peruvian slaves than his lucrative contracts would suggest. As the two managers grasp the gold chains, they look as though they might tear the
boy apart in their efforts to possess him. Through its alignment of cuteness with Betty’s commodity status, the image not only “aestheticizes powerlessness,” in Merish’s terms (187), but also aestheticizes the violence (or the threat thereof) arising from efforts to dominate the supposedly powerless commodity. The result of such aestheticization, Ngai claims, is enhanced cuteness: “If aestheticization is always, at the bottom line, objectification […] the latter in turn seems epitomized by cutification” (65). In other words, objects become cuter and therefore more desirable through the symbiotic processes of objectification and commodification.

Consuming Betty

Within days of Betty’s London debut, entrepreneurs flooded the market with medals, fans, paper dolls, cups, “Norval caps,” “Achmet turbans,” and snuffboxes commemorating the young boy’s performances. Collectively, these commodities anticipated the full flowering of a “culture of commemoration,” Asa Briggs’s

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11 See various clippings in Collectanea, especially those on 75.
term to describe the British desire to celebrate all manner of battles, coronations, births, lectures, and celebrated individuals through the production and consumption of an array of material goods, from high art to cheap. Not surprisingly, these objects invited and endorsed diverse social behaviors. For example, some commodities, like a set of paper dolls now housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library (fig. 6), encouraged Betty fans — presumably but not necessarily children — to put themselves in the role of the young actor and of his many adult male characters simultaneously (“Young Albert,” Ziegler), to identify with the cute boy as they held and manipulated his effigy. Here, as with most Betty commodities, the miniaturization of the boy actor is critical to the promotion of his cuteness. Indeed, these paper dolls highlight the importance of toys for the promotion of cuteness as a privileged aesthetic category. As Harris observes, children are taught to be cute by “recogniz[ing] and enjoy[ing] cuteness in others” (13). By playing with cute toys, the child learns “the dual roles of actor and audience, cootchy as much as he is cootchy-cooed” and comes to appreciate “the nature and value of cuteness” (13, 14). Not all Betty objects were intended for children, however. Other objects, like the “Roscius Dance Fan,” appealed directly to women, encouraging them to perform their

Figure 6. Master Betty “paper dolls.” Courtesy: Folger Shakespeare Library.
femininity through the mediation of the young Roscius, whose image they presumably carried in their hands as they moved across the dance floor (“The Young Roscius — New Fans”). But of all the Betty memorabilia produced at the height of the boy’s popularity, snuffboxes invited the most personal, even intimate, encounter with the actor, or at least his image.

Snuff is ground-up and distilled tobacco, often scented with jasmine, rose, bergamot, lemon, or other strong scents, and is inhaled directly through the nostrils. Snuff takers carried their snuff around with them in small boxes from which they removed small pinches at a time, sometimes as frequently as every ten minutes. In the early eighteenth century, one observer described entering a London coffeehouse where a “Fluttering Assembly of Snuffing Peripatetiks” had gathered. “[T]he Clashing of their Snush-Box lids, in opening and shutting made more noise than their Tongues,” he remarked snidely (qtd. in Hughes 15).

Snuff’s enduring popularity among the social elite and emergent middle class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries expanded the market for lavish snuffboxes, including ones ornamented with miniature portraits that were painted onto vellum and then ivory with watercolors. Many gentlemen turned to collecting snuffboxes as a hobby, as well as a means through which to perform class and gender identity. Both Lord Byron and Beau Brummel were known for their extensive snuffbox collections and the Earl of Harrington was rumored to possess enough snuffboxes for every day of the year, with specific boxes designated for morning, afternoon, and evening use (Hughes 17). Portrait subjects included famous individuals, loved ones, and even family pets — treasured subjects that, in the process of miniaturization, became cuter and more portable, and therefore easier to possess and display.

The symbiotic relationship between miniaturization, cutification, and commodification becomes immediately apparent when looking at the Folger snuffboxes of Master Betty (Harmon 133–34; Stewart 37–69). These snuffboxes vary in size and design, and their miniature portraits provide different glimpses of the boy actor, offering evidence of the number of men who
made up Betty’s fan base. Some highlight Betty’s attractive facial features and curly mane of hair, while others show him in character. Interestingly, the thick lace ruff on Betty’s shirt in figure 7 connotes softness and delicacy; the lace leads the eye where we might expect to see some décolletage if Betty had been a woman. By contrast, the snuffbox in figure 8 places less emphasis on the child’s physical features (though the artist depicts a very active body) than on his skill and talent as an actor. Another pair of finely detailed snuffboxes represents Betty in the role of Romeo (a lover) and Douglas (a warrior) (figs. 1 and 2). Their similar designs indicate that they may have been part of a set produced to appeal to fans’ collecting instincts. In some cases, the snuffbox illustrations are reproductions of frontispieces or other artists’ portraits of the actor, a practice not uncommon at the time.

As objects of devotion and affiliation, these snuffboxes offer insight into the collectors’ desires, their intimate, embodied relationship—imagined or otherwise—with the “Young Roscius,” and their distinct performances of masculinity. Size is an important factor in this: as small, transportable objects, snuffboxes were typically “carried in the left hand waistcoat pocket from which [they were] withdrawn with the right hand and passed to the left hand” (Hughes 16). In other words, a snuffbox was an everyday accessory for most gentlemen, a crucial part of the wardrobe. Held in the hands or worn in the waistcoat pocket, it was concealed between the outside world and the snuff user’s body. In this respect, the snuffbox invited a form of “pocket intimacy” between the male user, the snuffbox, and the cute, miniaturized body represented on its cover (Allison 45), a distinctly masculine form of intimacy amplified by the snuff taker’s habitual touching and opening of the box. This intimacy took on a public dimension whenever the male owner took

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12 Some boxes in the Folger collection may have been used for other purposes, such as holding jewelry or other small tokens. Women did consume snuff, but the practice was typically gendered male.

13 Compare the illustration on the snuffbox in figure 8 with the frontispiece to Authentic Memoirs of the Young Roscius.
snuff in public, as many did at coffeehouses and theaters. Amid the noisy clatter of opening and closing lids, the flash of a box lid identified the snuff taker as a Betty fan and alluded to other, unarticulated queer desires.

But more than this, the snuffbox carried material (snuff) that its owner ingested into the body through the nasal passageways—an action, following Levinas, of consuming or “transmuting” the other into the self (111). One can imagine, then, a tangled web of erotic associations that male theatergoers may have felt as they paused for a pinch of snuff (meeting a need), glanced at a miniaturized image of Betty on the snuffbox lid (stoking desire), and then looked up from their snuff-taking to watch the child actor playing miniaturized heroes onstage (consuming without satiation). By this I’m not suggesting that taking snuff was an inherently sexual act or that it prompted same-sex desire. Nevertheless, one can imagine that there was something decidedly queer about the sensual combination of the cute boy,
the cute snuffbox, and the delicious rush that apparently followed the act of taking snuff. Through the act of ingesting snuff, audiences consumed cuteness and breathed the other into their bodies.

This reading of Betty’s cuteness complicates Merish’s observations about the “erotics of maternal longing” and the way that “[c]uteness performs the de-sexualization of the child’s body, redefining that body from an object of lust (either sexual or economic) to an object of ‘disinterested’ affection” (188). Far from desexualizing Betty, the miniature snuffbox and the material it held accentuated the boy’s cuteness and his erotic appeal, releasing a form of sociality that was anything but disinterested or maternal. Rather, the sociality freed through the consumption of cute objects and the cute child was closely bound up with public performances of masculinity and male consumption.

My interpretation of the complex, queer, and sensual—if not sexual—dynamic between Betty and his male fans is supported by accounts of the number of men who attended the young boy’s performances and swarmed the pits to get close to him. At Betty’s first appearance at Covent Garden, for example, the crush in the pits was so intense and the air so stale that several men passed out and had to be lifted to the boxes to safety. “We have not heard of any fatal accident,” commented the Morning Herald, “but the fainting, bruises, and minor contingencies are beyond all enumeration (“Theatre” 72). This account challenges assumptions about the link between cuteness and benevolent care, demonstrating how the sociality released by cuteness can also provoke violent, self-destructive acts. Theatergoers’ desire to gain access to Betty and inhale the air around him resulted in physical injury and fainting. No softness and cuddles here, but bumps, bruises, and enumerable aches.

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14 Early nineteenth-century British audiences were quite diverse with respect to class and gender. The feminization of theater audiences that Merish and others describe was a later development.
Conclusion

Despite all the hype that surrounded his first performances, Master Betty’s career was short-lived. Audience desire for the child prodigy, while intense for a season, waned the following year as the limitations of his vocal and physical range became apparent. After performing for several more seasons, Betty officially retired in 1808 at the age of seventeen (Kahan 129). Nevertheless, something of Betty and his cuteness lives on in the many Betty commodities that reside in archives today. These pamphlets, caricatures, paper dolls, cups, and snuffboxes continue to “mak[e] surprisingly powerful demands” on those who encounter them (Ngai 64). “Touch me, hold me, want me,” they seem to say. And the willing historian yields: the cute is irresistible.

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15 Betty attempted to return to the stage in 1812, 1815, and 1818, but he would never regain the critical and popular approval he enjoyed earlier in his career (Kahan 134–37).
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