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*ELH*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Jun., 1938), 127-145.

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*ELH* is currently published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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THE DEFENSE AND CRITICISM OF PANTOMIMIC  
ENTERTAINMENTS IN THE EARLY  
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By EMMETT L. AVERY

In every age there are critical people who are acutely sensitive to the dignity of the stage of their own day. This sensitiveness is likely to be more pronounced among individuals who find or fancy a decided contrast between the taste of their own theaters and audiences and the dramatic excellence of a preceding period. It is not surprising, then, that many theatergoers of the early eighteenth century were perturbed when they looked back upon the glories of Restoration comedy and then saw in their own theaters not only the Italian and ballad opera but also many supplementary entertainments of singing, dancing, and acrobatics given between the acts of plays, as well as after-pieces in the form of musical interludes and pantomimes presented evening after evening. Naturally, the rivalry between play and entertainments aroused spirited discussion, and the more firmly established the entertainments became, the more lively the discussion. Playwrights denounced the entertainments, and dramatic satirists ridiculed the follies of the stage; the managers of the theaters defended or excused their reliance upon pantomime; critics lamented the decline of taste and blamed the players, the managers, or the audiences; and writers for the periodicals, in addition to defending or condemning, tried to analyze the causes and predict the results of the change in taste. While the discussion was rarely upon a profoundly critical basis, it did reflect and focus the conflicting elements in the dramatic theory and practice of the day.

To some extent, those who praised the entertainments were on the defensive, for the bulk of critical opinion was unfriendly to pantomime and buffoonery. Consequently, although countless theatergoers apparently enjoyed the entertainments, those people who wished to say a good word for them in print often did so apologetically. Generally, they attempted to excuse themselves for attending, writing, or producing pantomimes, or

they pointed out the conditions which promoted entertainments and which made their expulsion from the stage difficult to achieve. Frequently they defended the entertainments, not by insisting upon their intrinsic worth, but by suggesting that, after all, perhaps they really did little harm to the stage or the audiences. At the same time there was a persistent attempt to understand why pantomimes were popular with many playgoers and why they continued to be presented in spite of the antagonism of the critics. By the time the defenders, the excusers, and the unsympathetic critics had stated their conflicting views and had replied to each other, few practical or theoretical aspects of the problem had been overlooked.

As the managers of the theaters were frequently blamed for the decline of dramatic taste, their opinions on the matter have a certain interest. As a theatrical manager, Colley Cibber was criticized more than once for Drury Lane's presentation of pantomimes, and perhaps his least satisfactory explanation for presenting the entertainments while personally condemning them was that he was too weak to live up to his convictions:

If I am ask'd (after my condemning these Fooleries myself) how I came to assent or continue my Share of Expence to them? I have no better Excuse for my Error than confessing it. I did it against my Conscience! and had not Virtue enough to starve by opposing a Multitude that would have been too hard for me.<sup>1</sup>

But this was obviously not a very substantial defense, and Cibber, again speaking somewhat apologetically, defended himself further by asserting that entertainments were not allowed to interfere with the better plays and were used chiefly to support the weak ones:

. . . we generally made use of these Pantomimes but as Crutches to our weakest Plays: . . . We had still a due Respect to several select Plays that were able to be their own Support; and in which we found our constant Account, without painting and patching them out, like Prostitutes, with these Follies in fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Although Cibber was to some extent speaking truthfully,<sup>3</sup> he

<sup>1</sup> *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, ed. R. W. Lowe (London, 1889), 2. 181-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Apology*, ed. Lowe, 2. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Not always, of course, was pantomime dominant, as is shown by this advertise-

was, one suspects, stating what he hoped was reasonably true rather than what was literally accurate. For after 1720 pantomimes were so greatly in vogue that no matter how popular the play, supplementary entertainments came close to dominating the evening's offerings. In fact, what might be considered the normal relation of play and entertainment became reversed: the pantomime began to have extended runs, evening after evening, with the play often changed nightly.<sup>4</sup>

There were other practices which Cibber may have had in mind when he tried to excuse his use of pantomime. For one, the pantomime usually disappeared, at least temporarily, when a new play was first presented. On January 20, 1731, for example, Drury Lane offered *The Lover*, written by Theophilus Cibber and previously unacted. For the first five performances it appeared without aid,<sup>5</sup> but on January 26, at the sixth performance, *Cephalus and Procris* reappeared on the bill, as it did on the seventh and eighth performances (January 28, 29). Apparently a new play was strong enough to attract a good audience unaided, but the pantomime returned at the first sign of weakness. Similarly, the supplementary entertainments were likely to be less numerous at the beginning of a new season in September or October. Possibly the townspeople, pleased to see the theaters open again after a summer of few or no plays, attended the theaters in large numbers without being

ment of Goodman's Fields Theater, January 10, 1730, for *Hamlet*, with the added note: "This Tragedy being so long, 'tis found necessary to drop the Entertainment during its success." *Daily Journal*, January 10, 1730.

<sup>4</sup> Drury Lane's advertisements for January 1731 (as printed in the *Daily Post*) reflect the practice at a time when pantomime was exceedingly popular. On January 2 the theater offered *The Orphan* and its latest pantomime, *Cephalus and Procris*. On Monday, January 4, the play was *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, followed by the same pantomime. On Tuesday the play was *Theodosius*, on Wednesday *Whig and Tory*, each supported by the pantomime. On Thursday, however, *Venice Preserved* alone was advertised; possibly it was one of the strong plays Cibber had in mind. But on the next two nights the pantomime reappeared as a support to *The Alchemist* and *The Man of Mode*. The program for the next week seems most completely to prove that Cibber was not wholly right, for the pantomime was given each night in addition to the following plays: *The Provok'd Wife*, *The Old Batchelour*, *The Tempest*, *The Way of the World*, *The Spanish Fryar*, and *Hamlet*. Surely this week's offerings could hardly be called a list of "weak plays."

<sup>5</sup> That is, the advertisements do not mention a pantomime, although one may have been performed; nevertheless, failure to mention the entertainment suggests a temporary ascendancy of the play.

offered added inducements. In 1727, for example, both theaters opened before the middle of September, and Drury Lane continued through the month without advertising supplementary entertainments although Lincoln's Inn Fields began introducing pantomimes once a week. It was not until the middle of October that the entertainments became conspicuous; they were frequent from then until January 28, 1728, when the long runs of *The Provoked Husband* in Drury Lane and *The Beggar's Opera* in Lincoln's Inn Fields banished entertainments for some time. Still another practice promoting, if not excusing, the extensive use of entertainments was the benefit performance for the players. As each performer wished to have a large audience and consequently as great profit as possible, numerous added inducements were advertised, many of them being songs and dances by the performer whose benefit it was, or by his friends.<sup>6</sup> The actor could show his versatility, and the audience could have quantity if not quality. Nevertheless, pantomimes were rarely given for benefits, possibly because the favored actor would not stand out among the many performers in the piece but probably because pantomimes were too profitable to be used for the benefit of an individual actor.

But underlying the whole situation, from the theatrical manager's point of view, was the fact that people were willing to pay well to see pantomime and other entertainments. In contrast to Cibber, John Rich, manager of the theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields, paid his respects to pantomime on a more practical basis, as shown in a foreword addressed to Thomas Chamber:

. . . it might, perhaps, seem an Affectation in me to detain you with the History of the antient *Pantomime* Entertainments; or to make a long Apology for the Revival of them at present. This much, however, may be said in their Favour, that this Theatre has of late ow'd its Support in great Measure to them. I own my self extremely indebted to the Favour with which the Town is pleas'd to receive any Attempts to entertain them in this kind; and do engage,

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<sup>6</sup> An example is M. Denoyer's benefit in Drury Lane, March 16, 1732. The play was *Wit without Money*. At the end of the second act Denoyer and Mrs. Booth performed a dance called *Le Chasseur Royal*; at the end of the third act he and Mrs. Walter did a "Comic Dance"; at the end of the fourth he and Mrs. Booth danced a minuet; and at the end of the play Denoyer alone gave a "serious dance." Added to all of this was an afterpiece, *The Jovial Crew*.

for my own part, that whenever the Publick Taste shall be disposed to return to the works of the Drama, no one shall rejoice more sincerely than my self.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of Rich's pious wish that the public would change its taste, pantomimes continued, for when one playhouse presented a pantomime successfully, the rival theatre found itself forced to meet the competition, usually by giving a pantomime similar to that of its competitor. Each playhouse, for example, had its Faustus pantomime (*Harlequin Doctor Faustus* at Drury Lane and *The Necromancer; or Harlequin Doctor Faustus* at Lincoln's Inn Fields), its *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, its *Apollo and Daphne*, and its *Perseus and Andromeda*. When Cibber spoke of his having "not Virtue enough to starve," he was probably thinking of this practical problem of facing competition successfully, for sometimes when three theaters were operating, all were giving pantomimes simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> Cibber and others thereupon asserted that pantomimes would not have been played so frequently if there had been fewer theaters and, consequently, less severe competition for profitable audiences. As Cibber said:

Could the Interest of both Companies have been united in one only Theatre, I had been one of the Few that would have us'd my utmost Endeavour of never admitting to the Stage any Spectacle that ought not to have been seen there; the Errors of my own Plays, which I could not see, excepted.<sup>9</sup>

In 1733 the *Grub Street Journal* saw the same condition as the cause of so many entertainments, especially those by foreign performers:

But it is as I expected, while there are many houses, they outvie each other in such performances, as not only tend in the least to

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<sup>7</sup> Foreword to *The Rape of Proserpine* (London, 1727). In the next decade, however, critics accused Rich of making few efforts to further a revival of true drama.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in February 1734 Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the New Theater in the Haymarket were presenting pantomimes simultaneously. During the week of February 4, Drury Lane offered a new pantomime, *Cupid and Psyche*; Covent Garden advertised *Perseus and Andromeda*; and the Haymarket gave a masque, *Dido and Aeneas*, and a pantomime, *The Burgo-Master Tricked*. (*Daily Post and Daily Journal*.)

<sup>9</sup> *Apology*, ed. Lowe, 2. 184.

the instruction and ornament of life, but necessarily increase the corruption of manners. NIVELON, ESSEX, and ARNE, are engag'd with the Haymarket, while GROGNET is brought from Paris to Drury-lane. Thus each side endeavour only to fortify themselves by singers and dancers, and indeed such an evil as this, is the natural consequence of many theatres.<sup>10</sup>

But the number of theaters in operation was not materially reduced until the Licensing Act of 1737 was passed.

There is no doubt that the presentation of entertainments brought increased returns to the theaters. Both Cibber and Rich acknowledged as much. That these financial returns were often exceedingly large may be seen in the day-by-day receipts given in the account books of Lincoln's Inn Fields for the seasons 1724-1725 and 1726-1727,<sup>11</sup> when pantomime was in great favor. The programs of September and October of 1726 are useful for a comparison of the relative receipts for the performance of a play without a pantomime and of one with an entertainment because both types were given frequently and because no one pantomime was, at the moment, overwhelmingly popular. At each of the first three performances in September a play was presented alone: September 9, *Hamlet*, with receipts of £45/10/6; September 13, *Beaux Stratagem*, £31/5/6; September 14, *The Recruiting Officer*, £29/9/6. Possibly the declining receipts prompted the addition of *The Necromancer* on September 16, when *The Busy Body* was given; the income that night jumped to £91/3/6, an increase which cannot be attributed solely to increased admission charges. The next three acting nights are much the same: September 19, *The Beggar's Bush* alone, £23/16/6; September 21, *Henry IV* alone, £37/2/6; September 23, *King Lear* and a pantomime, *The Sorcerer*, £103/17/6, again a remarkable increase.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in the receipts one may see the effect of the addition of a pantomime to a play which had begun to lose its attraction

<sup>10</sup> *Grub Street Journal*, November 8, 1733.

<sup>11</sup> F. T. Wood, "The Account-Books of Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, 1724-1727," *Notes and Queries* 164 (1933). 220-4, 256-260, 272-4, 294-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272. In spite of the fact that admission prices were generally raised when pantomimes were given and that weather conditions and other attractions affected the attendance, these figures seem to suggest definitely that pantomimes were financially beneficial, even though the accounts imply that expenses were greater when entertainments were given.

for the theatergoers. On December 14, 1726, *The Dissembled Wanton* made its first appearance, with receipts of £63/12/0; on the second night the returns dropped to £38/5/0. On the third night, the author's benefit, the receipts are listed as £50/0/0; but on the fourth night the play, aided by *The Sorcerer*, brought returns of £91/13/0, higher even than for the first or second performance of the play alone.<sup>13</sup> On January 16, 1727, another new play, *The Fall of Saguntum*, was given, with opening night receipts of £148/3/0, but on the second night they declined to £56/5/6. In the next eight performances the receipts ranged from £42/9/6 to £57/11/0. Then on January 28 it was given for the eleventh time but was aided by *Apollo and Daphne*, the receipts rising to £70/2/0, the highest since the opening night.<sup>14</sup>

Most remarkable, however, are the sums which a new pantomime could bring. In the early part of February 1727 Lincoln's Inn Fields gave a variety of plays, some with pantomimes, with varying but not sensational receipts. On February 13, the playhouse offered a new pantomime, *The Rape of Proserpine*; it and *The Cheats of Scapin* brought very large receipts, £261/12/6. On the next night the same two brought £203/19/0. Except for the author's nights, when the returns are not given in full, the pantomime with various plays held the receipts above £200 each night until February 28.<sup>15</sup> The high returns for these entertainments suggest how strong must have been the temptation for everyone to follow Rich's policy of frankly catering to public taste, and they help to account for the failure of the theaters to rid themselves of a type of dramatic production which received scant praise from the critics.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 295-6.

<sup>16</sup> Generally, the critics and the writers of articles for the periodicals took it somewhat for granted that pantomimes were of financial benefit to the theaters, although they were often certain that if pantomime were entirely banished from all the playhouses, plays alone would show a profit. An occasional writer, however, doubted that pantomimes were likely to produce high net returns. *The Prompter*, January 30, 1736, argued: ". . . it is certain that the extraordinary Number of *Pantomime-Persons*, together with their *Salaries, Dresses, Scene's, and Machinery* (all absolutely needless without Pantomime) increase the Expense of each Night 25 or 30 *l.* at a Medium. Now where the Difference as to Profit, whether a Manager acts to a 90 *l.* House at 30 *l.* Expense, or to an 120 *l.* House at 60 *l.* lies, I own, I can't see. I believe an 120 *l.* House to an Entertainment, thro' the whole of its Run, is a fair Computation, and a 90 *l.* House for *mere Plays*, as just."

Although these financial returns make clear the interest which both managers and audience had in the entertainments, they do not account for the popularity of pantomime among the theatergoers. Critics undertook, therefore, to understand why pantomimes had come into existence and why they continued to be enjoyed. John Dennis' analysis of the causes has been pointed out by Mr. Julian L. Ross,<sup>17</sup> an analysis which was three fold. According to Dennis, the eighteenth century audience lacked the ability to appreciate what the Restoration audience had enjoyed "because of the general change from an age of poetry to one of business"; secondly, the eighteenth century audience lacked the proper education for the enjoyment and judgment of the best comedy; and, thirdly, the eighteenth century audience lacked the necessary "application" and leisure to appreciate the best.<sup>18</sup> Still others attempted to account for the popularity of entertainments. A writer in the *London Journal*, April 3, 1725, developed the theory that the general state of manners and of learning is comparable to the state of the drama in that age; they flourish and decline together. The writer did not make perfectly clear which of the two was, in his opinion, the cause and which the effect, but he implied that the age was the stronger influence. He explained the trend after the day of Shakespeare and Jonson:

Soon after them the Times grew troublesome, and a terrible Civil War succeeding, it is no Wonder (as I have before observed) that the *Stage* disappeared, and a long interval of various Politicks alone took place. At the *Restoration* it revived, and the Muses looked up again; from which Time the Stage continued to improve for several Years, and produced, in that Space, all the *Writers* we have to boast of, in that way, except *Shakespear* and *Johnson*, *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*. In this flourishing Condition it continued till a few Years ago, when it took a different Turn; and after several fatal Revolutions (which all Things are subject to) it was reduced at last to that miserable Ebb, in which we now behold it.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Julian L. Ross, "Dramatist versus Audience in the Early Eighteenth Century," *Philological Quarterly* 12 (1933). 73-81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>19</sup> The *Universal Spectator*, April 10, 1731, seemed in partial agreement with this point of view when it stated that, generally speaking, "the Growth, at least, of this viciousness of *Taste*, may be, with the utmost Justice, imputed to the want either of Courage or Honesty of that Time wherein it prevails."

Aaron Hill, who often expressed indignation at the popularity of the entertainments, suggested, in a letter dated November 6, 1733, that the declining art of acting (a topic which Hill often treated) had been a fundamental cause in the change from drama to buffoonery. After exclaiming over the power inherent in good acting, he added:

Now all this power is lost; and we may sleep in the most alarming passages; because the actors are unnaturally *pert*, unmovingly *cold*, or elaborately tiresome, from a dull, dry, drawling monotony of declamatory stiffness.

Hence, all these light dumb insults upon common sense, the Pantomimes and Entertainments, which are become so shamefully necessary;—the people in the management of our theatres, have wanted *art* to form good actors; the want of good acting has pall'd and diminish'd the pleasure of going to plays;—and then, when these *mountebank* managers have physic'd us into a *lethargy*, they clap *Vinegar* to our noses, in hope to *twinge* us into a *recovery* of our senses.<sup>20</sup>

Hill was not alone in feeling that the managers should receive a considerable portion of the blame. A writer in the *British Journal, or Saturday's Post*, March 18, 1727, condemned the managements of the theaters for humoring the "vitiated Palate of the Town." Another commentator, seeing that "these Entertainments are become so popular, and are decry'd at the same Time, that they are universally follow'd,"<sup>21</sup> tried to analyze the whole problem. He found that although the people were generally pleased with pantomimes, there were constant complaints which pointed out

1st. That the Playhouses are servilely complying with a Depravity of Taste, to their own Ruin.

2ndly, That Wit and Sense are every Day in a greater Likelihood of being banished, and their Place usurp'd by dumb Farce and Absurdity.

And, 3rdly, That the Stage is prostituted to Things altogether unbecoming its Dignity and Institution.

If these complaints were true, the writer pointed out, those to blame for the situation were the managers, "those very Men who have signaliz'd themselves in *depressing Actors*, and *dis-*

<sup>20</sup> Aaron Hill, *Works*, 2nd edition (London, 1753), 1. 232-3.

<sup>21</sup> *Weekly Journal, or Saturday's Post*, January 23, 1725.

*countenancing Poets.*" After all, the writer continued, people want variety for their money, and the managers gave them only "the same dull Circle of Plays forc'd upon them over and over again." Finally, he was forced to consider whether the stage should present what critics consider good for the spectators or what the playgoers like; and in making a decision, he propounded his theory of the stage:

For my own Part, . . . I should conceive it the greatest *Art*, as well as *Duty* of a *Play-House*, to trace and dive into the *Taste* and *Bent* of its Audience, and those once found, to ply every Nerve, and employ every Machine, in gratifying and indulging them.<sup>22</sup>

There were a few, finally, who, seeing the pleasure the audience seemed to derive from pantomimes, appealed to precedent in their behalf on the ground that they were an ancient and respectable part of the theater, a fact demonstrated by the shining example of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Loyal to his own cause, John Weaver, the dancing master, stressed the perfection which dancing and mimic action had reached in early times and the esteem in which they were held.<sup>23</sup> James Ralph also pointed out that, although modern mimicry was not yet excellent, it had an honorable history:

Only POETRY, and this its dumb younger Sister, fly at a low pitch, in comparison with the high Flights of Their Ancestors.<sup>24</sup>

Still others argued that, although pantomime might be a prostitution of the stage's noblest aims, the dignity of the stage was no more lowered now than it had been in ancient time:

<sup>22</sup> The writer made the reservation, however, that the pantomime should always be a "supplement" to the play, not the "essential" entertainment of the evening. Another critic, in discussing that ever-present topic, the current state of the drama, agreed that "the same dull Circle of Plays" was threatening the welfare of the theater: "It is natural for Mankind to love Variety; and yet these Men expect the World shall run twelve or fourteen years together after Entertainments, which, tho' ever so delightful, must needs cloy after frequent Repetitions. To this Love of Novelty we owe the vast Indulgence which Silly *Harlequinades* have lately met with." (*British Journal*, November 26, 1726). Similarly, a writer in *Mist's Weekly Journal*, November 20, 1725, had complained of the "tiresome dull Round of the same Plays over and over again at both the Theatres," and had proposed that worthwhile new plays should be presented by subscription, since the managers were so apathetic.

<sup>23</sup> *An Essay towards an History of Dancing* (London, 1712), p. 8; *An History of the Mimes and Pantomimes* (London, 1728), p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *The Taste of the Town* (London, 1731), p. 100.

Admitting all these Instances to be true, as they cannot be denied; it may still be urg'd, that the STAGE is *prostituted* below its *Dignity*: I do not contend that part of the Argument; but only have endeavoured to demonstrate, as I proposed, that it is *no more* prostituted *now*, than it *has been* ever since a Theatre was built: And so long as that continues to be my Opinion, I shall excuse all my *Fellow-Subjects* for being *entertain'd* at PANTOMIMES, and the *Actors* likewise, for striking into this *Depravity* of the popular Taste.<sup>25</sup>

But it is possible to detect in some of these defences of pantomime an often unexpressed assumption that pantomimes in themselves do not justify much, if any, praise. They might be excused on practical grounds, by appeals to authority or to the ancients,<sup>26</sup> or by their popularity, but every defense was met by denunciations of the entertainments. Fundamental among these was the attempt to show pantomime in its true light by placing it on its proper level among the offerings of the theaters. The defenders of comedy and tragedy were prone to divide all stage productions into two classes: the rational and the irrational; and there was little disagreement as to the place of pantomime in this division. As a writer in *Mist's Weekly Journal*, January 14, 1727, pointed out, the rational entertainments "can be only *Tragedy* and *Comedy*," the irrational "*Operas* and *Rope-Dancings*, *Italian Theatres* and *Pantomimes*."

The fundamental distinction between the two was that the rational appealed to the mind and emotions through wit and poetry and that the irrational addressed itself only to the eye or ear, with its effect rarely penetrating to the mind. This analysis, which nearly every critic of entertainments stated at some time or other, was used early in the century by Betterton when he was lamenting the attention given to dancing and singing:

But in our Times (forgive so bold a Truth) the People of Figure, who in Reason might have been expected to be the Guardians and

<sup>25</sup> *Weekly Journal, or Saturday's Post*, January 30, 1725.

<sup>26</sup> Some who apparently admired the ancient pantomimes denied that the modern imitations were true pantomimes and thought them merely absurd. Thus, a writer in the *British Journal*, March 18, 1727, declared: "That these are truly Pantomime, I deny: There is neither Moral nor Fable in any of their *Raree-Shows*; what they aim at is most absurd and incongruous: To prove which, I appeal to the very Entertainments themselves. . . ."

Supporters of the noblest and most rational DIVERSION, that the Wit of Man can invent, which at once instructs and transports the Soul, were the first, nay, I may say, the only People, who conspir'd its Ruin, by prodigal Subscriptions for *Squeaking Italians* and cap'ring Monsieurs; and the more infamously to distinguish their poor and mean Diversions from those more noble of the Public, they would have no Play at all mingled with them, lest the World should think that they pay'd any Deference to Poetry, Wit, and Sense; or that their Satisfaction and Delight reach'd farther, than their Eyes and Ears.<sup>27</sup>

In discussing some French dancers, Betterton added that their dances might have been thought "more excusable" if they had been imitations of the ancient pantomimes which represented a story; but he was doubtful that even imitations of the ancient dancing would have been valuable:

In this indeed it might be pretended, that there was something to strike the Mind, and rationally entertain it, every Action depending on the other and all directed to one End. But to be fond of our modern Dancing is still to be Children, and fond of a Rattle, that makes perpetually the very same Noise. . . . But is that, or would indeed the *Roman Pantomimes*, be a sufficient Ballance for the Loss of the *Drama* to any Man of common sense?<sup>28</sup>

The *Spectator* papers took much the same point of view; the

<sup>27</sup> Charles Gildon, *Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton* (London, 1710), pp. 143-4. John Dennis made much the same criticism of operas (and he was not alone in doing so), for he said that the "Entertainment which we have from our Operas is a mere sensual Pleasure, which says nothing either to enlighten the Understanding or to convert the Will." (John Dennis, *Select Works* [London, 1718] I. 459). A writer in the *Freeholder's Journal*, February 7, 1722, was "very much out of humour" to see an audience so delighted with "some ridiculous Fooleries of Scaramouch and Harlequin," which he characterized and condemned as irrational.

<sup>28</sup> Gildon, *op. cit.*, p. 145. James Ralph argued, however, from the example of the ancients, that all such appeals to the senses were necessary, and sought to prove his point by the practice of earlier peoples: "They were sensible, that the Majority of all Audiences would never appear in a THEATRE, were they not more charm'd with the Beauty of the SCENES, the Surprize of the MACHINES, the Magnificence of the HABITS, and Variety of MUSICK and DANCING, than with the fine Language, the noble Sentiments, the Precepts, and divine Lessons contain'd in a TRAGEDY or COMEDY. Therefore the Poets, the Inventors, and the Magistrates, the Encouragers of the CHORUS, spar'd no Labour nor Expence to draw Numbers of People of all Ranks to their PLAYS, spite of themselves: For knowing that the Generality of Mankind are, naturally speaking, in a State of Infancy the greatest Part of their Lives; they were oblig'd to perswade them to swallow the black Potion of *Instruction*, by promising the Sugar-Plumb of *Delight*." (*Taste of the Town*, p. 130.)

issue for August 11, 1711, in discussing *The Lancashire Witches*, treated the appeal to the eye, ear, and mind in different types of performing:

In the present Emptiness of the Town, I have several Applications from the lower Parts of the Players, to admit Suffering to pass for Acting. They in very obliging Terms desire to let a Fall on the Ground, a Stumble, or a good Slap on the Back, be reckoned a Jest. These Gambols I shall tolerate for a Season, because I hope the Evil cannot continue longer than till the People of Condition and Taste return to Town. The Method, some time ago, was to entertain that Part of the Audience who have no Faculty above Eyesight, with Rope-Dancers and Tumblers; which was in a way discreet enough, because it prevented Confusion, and distinguished such as could show all the Postures which the Body is capable of, from those to which the Mind is subject.<sup>29</sup>

An amusing demonstration of the kind of appeal which the pantomimes made was given by the *Universal Spectator*. As an experiment, the writer took to the theater to see a play and a pantomime an old friend who, he knew, was a man of intelligence and taste. The friend was very much moved and pleased by the play, and the two stayed for the entertainment:

As there was a Pantomime Entertainment to be added to the Play, contrary to my usual Custom, I staid to see it, to observe what Effect those *Grotesque Buffooneries* might have on the Knight. It gave me not a little Pleasure to discern what a Contempt he show'd to the *Agility* of *Harlequin*, or the *Wit* of *Scaramouch*: The *Grimaces* of the *facetious* Mr. *Hippisley* were lost on Sir *Jasper*, tho' he had sufficiently commended him in the Play, when in the more natural Character of the avaricious *Carbaccio*. The little Tricks and Juggling of the ingenious *Harlequin* rais'd in him no other *Curiosity* than to ask me if that was the *famous* Mr. *Fawks*.<sup>30</sup>

At the close of the period under discussion, *The Weekly Oracle*, a question-and-answer periodical, stated more concretely why many people preferred pantomime to tragedy:

In *Pantomimes* no Attention was required; they are no Objects of the Understanding; Reason is not upon her Stretch to carry on the Chain of Incidents which are in a good Play: The Eye Only is necessary to behold *Harlequin* and *Colombine*; and if they, who are

<sup>29</sup> For similar attitudes, especially in reference to the opera, see *Tatler*, April 18, 1709; *Spectator*, March 6, 1711, and March 16, 1711; *Plain Dealer*, February 12, 1725.

<sup>30</sup> *Universal Spectator*, December 8, 1733.

captivated with these Entertainments, see *Punch* turned into a Wheelbarrow, the Surprize arising from them is Reward enough for their Money. Such Persons are not capable of entertaining those exalted Ideas which a *Lucius Junius Brutus* furnishes a Man of Taste with, when we behold him struggling with paternal Affection and the publick Spirit of a Patriot, when we see him giving up a much loved Son to publick Justice, and tearing his very Heart-strings for the Good of his Country.<sup>31</sup>

Although the tendency of pantomime not to appeal to the higher faculties of man was constantly stressed, it was not the only objection presented. The entertainments were censured on moral grounds, a disapprobation directed particularly at the dances. Possibly this was merely the traditional mistrust, but Betterton's judgment was strongly expressed:

But since there is no Man, who shall accurately consider the several Species of Dances in use among the Ancients, but will find, that they did not want the Order of Time, Reason, Proportion, and Musical Harmony, and therefore may be apt to think them not unlike the Hobby-Horse Dancing of our Days, which both Men and Women use for the promoting of Lust. . . .<sup>32</sup>

Pantomimes also occasioned some moral disapproval. In his *Absolute Unlawfulness of the Stage*, William Law analyzed the evils of *Apollo and Daphne*. He found that the scenes, the dialogue, and the introduction of pagan characters were all sinful and wicked, but, rather wearily, he concluded that this particular piece did not exceed "the ordinary wickedness of the Stage."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Weekly Oracle* (London, 1737), p. 216. The authors of this periodical told, in closing, the lamentable tale of what happened to a young lady who was contracted to marry a young man of fine appearance, estate, and intelligence. A few days before the marriage date, they attended a theater together, where he was so much affected by how little she was moved by a tragedy and Shakespeare and by how much she enjoyed Harlequin and talked of him that, on their return from the theater, "he took his leave, and could never prevail with himself to see her since."

<sup>32</sup> Gildon, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5. Sir Jasper, the *Universal Spectator's* friend from the country, disapproved of the immodesty of a French dancer, who, he thought, might not have been thought indecent in Paris but was "too gross" for the British audience.

<sup>33</sup> Second Edition (London, 1726), p. 32. A writer in the *Grub Street Journal*, January 8, 1736, felt that the entertainments too often suggested evil actions or taught wrong ideas. Some years before, *The Plain Dealer*, December 25, 1724, had objected to *Harlequin Shepard*, a pantomime based on the life of the highwayman Shepard, because it taught "the elegant Art of breaking Jail, by Way of Diversion and Improvement."

Although pantomimes were justified by some writers as a relief from the dull repetition of the same plays, others complained of the constant repetition of pantomimes and of their tedious subject matter and excessive length. A writer in the *Daily Post*, October 9, 1736, hazarded the opinion that they were "condemn'd by Men, not only of the best Sense, but by others of a moderate Understanding," as being "trifling and tedious." But the most thorough complaint on the length and dullness of the entertainments came from the "Occasional Prompter" of the *Daily Journal*, who, no doubt exaggerating purposely, gave a detailed account of an evening's program:

I had met you and our good Friends t'other Night at Nine, as I intended, but found myself unfortunately engaged at a Dish of — Mac'rel and incoherent Gooseberries; or, to speak out of Allegory, I mean at Mackbeth and *Harlequin Restored*; from which I did not break loose till half an hour after Ten; and then left a thousand or two of my honest Countrymen all agape at the aerial Flights of that admirable Mimick *Phillips*; who, I think, deserves better of the *Stage*, than to be sent back to his old little Tricks of *Bartholomew Fair* and *Sadler's Wells*. I wonder in my heart how the Managers of our Theatres can find their Account in producing our Diversions to such a Length, as to make them lose that Name, and become Punishments; and yet they certainly do, or they would hardly be such Idiots as to lay out fifteen hundred or two thousand Pounds upon a *Pantomime*. I never was in a Company where *Theatrical Entertainments* were the subject of the Discourse, but this Complaint was unanimously made by the whole Company. It spoils all Meetings after the Play at Taverns, to talk over and digest the Diversion of the Night; which used to be half the Pleasure of frequenting the Theatre; and which is now absolutely impossible, as it consists of so many *party-coloured* Patches of Sense and *Non-sense*, as no *Reason* can connect. . . .

The other Night we had *Macbeth*. . . . We had a *real Entertainment* between the Acts, by the *best Dancer in Europe* and the *best Romp* in the World. Now you, or I, *Jack*, or any other reasonable Play-hunter should think this a pretty good Pennyworth for our Penny; but this same Mr. Town is such an unconscionable Gentleman, that he is never to be satisfied with Diversions till he falls fast asleep in the midst of them. After this (which lasted till half an Hour after Nine) we had a *dumb Thing*, which the facetious Managers miscall the *Entertainment*; in which was introduced (because not tedious enough in itself) a long new Scene of many Words, which made a great Noise both upon the Stage and in the Galleries. . . . This was followed by Rope-Dancing and Tumbling;

and tho' I went out before it was finished, I was not at home till after eleven.<sup>84</sup>

Instead of relying upon attacks upon the irrational nature of pantomimes, their immorality, or their dullness, some periodicals sometimes devoted entire issues to demolishing every excuse which had been presented for the entertainments. One such article appeared in the *London Journal*, April 17, 1725, wherein three arguments for the existence of pantomime were refuted. The first defense was that pantomimes were popular and successful because there was a "*great Dearth of good Writers for the Stage,*" a condition which resulted in a few new or good plays. The writer admitted that this defense had some basis in truth, but he believed that good writers would appear if given encouragement, for

how can it be expected, that we should have *good Writers*, while Things stand as they do at present? for all Arts are kept up by the Encouragement which is given them: and *Poetry*, in a particular Manner, depends upon the Good-Will of the Town.

The second reason for allowing pantomimes was "*that a good Entertainment of this sort is better than a bad Play.*" In response to this argument, the writer wanted to know what was "*a good Entertainment of this sort,*" and asserted that he got ten times more pleasure from a play than from a pantomime. The third argument was one previously treated, simply that these entertainments were no innovation, "*but can be traced up to the first institution of the Stage.*" The writer's answer was, first, that modern pantomimes were apparently much inferior to the ancient, and, second, that even if they should be similar, "*Are we obliged to imitate the Antients in all their Absurdities, as well as their Beauties?*" Finally, there was the stock argument that "*they are agreeable to the Taste of the Town,*" the players asserting that it was "*their Interest to comply*" with that taste. The critic's reply was that the answer to the first point depended upon whether the taste of the town was represented by "*School Boys, City Prentices, and old Women*" or by "*Men of sense.*" To the second point, the author replied that he was sorry the players felt as they did

<sup>84</sup> "Occasional Prompter," No. 10, *Daily Journal*, December 29, 1736.

and that he wished the theaters were under the management of people who were "above promoting their own private Lucre."<sup>35</sup>

For some time the problem continued to be analyzed—frequently with the same arguments and replies—for the critics apparently still hoped to down pantomime by reason and argument. In 1736 *The Prompter*, a periodical always interested in the correction of the shortcomings of the stage, again surveyed the whole subject. In addition to the theoretical arguments advanced in favor of pantomime, *The Prompter* took notice of a practical one:

It is alledged in favour of *Pantomime*, that the Town requires it, as Experience has shown this Season, in the Case of the Gentleman at the Head of the New Theatre in *Covent-Garden*, who, excepting the Days Mrs. *Porter* perform'd, and the first of Mr. *Delane's* Appearance there, has acted to *Thin Houses*, or else has been obliged to *dismiss*, 'till Friday last, when he was agreeably pleased to find his Expectations confirm'd by an overflowing House, occasioned by *Pantomime* only.<sup>36</sup>

After attempting to answer some of these financial justifications for pantomime, *The Prompter* tried, once again, to banish the entertainments by emphasizing their evils. First, the pantomime, following the play, "whips away all the Impressions made by the Play, and leaves the Mind of the Auditor UN-BENEFITED." Secondly, since the stage has often been regarded as a school where people "may receive Lessons for their Conduct," it loses all its instructive value when the pantomime fails to produce "Pleasure mix'd with Monition." Thirdly, the entertainment "debases the Stage, and sinks it to the lowest Species of Entertainment." Fourthly, it reacts disastrously upon the actors, who, realizing that plays are losing their power of pleasing, will no longer exert their talents and will "become tame vocal Puppets." Finally, the vogue of pantomime injures dramatic authors, for a new play alone "cannot make Head against *Pantomime*."

In spite of all the defense, attack, and counter-attack, the question still remained: What was to be done about the cor-

<sup>35</sup> These arguments were repeated in almost the same words in *The Usefulness of the Stage*, second edition (London, 1738), pp. 5-14.

<sup>36</sup> *The Prompter*, January 30, 1736.

ruption of the stage? Perhaps a writer in the *Universal Spectator*, February 23, 1734, laid his finger on the roots of the whole difficulty when he said:

The *Taste* for *theatrical* Representations, is at present at a very low Ebb; but what is surprizing, everyone seems sensible of it; everyone complains of the *Depravity* of the *Stage* at the same time they themselves are contributing to it.

Others saw the same inconsistency. Another writer, noting that the taste of the town was low, came to the conclusion that "Our Taste in Matters of Pleasure" depended "on *Fashion* and *Example*."<sup>87</sup> The implication was that since the mass of the people fix their eyes upon leaders and follow their taste, the evil could be corrected if those whom the town looked upon as "*competent Judges*" would simply set the fashion. But that possibility was not likely to occur, the writer decided, for it seemed very probable that "the People of *distinguished Genius* have been on the Party of *Pantomimes*." Nevertheless, there were a few somewhat more concrete proposals. The *Weekly Journal, or Saturday's Post*, March 16, 1723, evidently believing that the management of Drury Lane was contributing less to the improvement of the stage than the operators of Lincoln's Inn Fields, felt that the first essential to a better stage was further encouragement of Lincoln's Inn Fields. *Mist's Weekly Journal*, November 20, 1725, had a more definite plan. The writer of the article, believing that new plays should be more encouraged, proposed a subscription to that effect. Four hundred people should subscribe half a guinea each on condition that a new comedy or tragedy would be presented during the next season. The play would be printed and delivered to the subscribers, who were to have a box ticket. The play should be performed at least three times, the house to get four shillings, the poet the rest. Aaron Hill at one time had the intention of "establishing an academical Theatre, for improving the taste of the stage, and training up young actors and actresses."<sup>88</sup> But little seems to have come from either of these plans.

<sup>87</sup> *Weekly Journal, or Saturday's Post*, January 23, 1725.

<sup>88</sup> Letter from Aaron Hill to "Mr. B——," Hill's *Works*, second edition (London, 1753), 1. 194.

Certainly, the age did not lack discussion of its theatrical shortcomings and its low taste. But discussion did not end the debasement of the stage and practical proposals proved somewhat futile; as a result, the tone and statements of some of the articles frequently suggest that their authors had begun to feel the futility of trying to drive out pantomime by argument and reason alone. The subject had been argued over and over. Nearly everyone who might have contributed to the decay of taste had been condemned, and numerous reasons for the decay had been advanced, analyzed, and refuted. There remained one other weapon in the hands of those who wished to reform the stage, and that weapon was satire. If the follies could not be reasoned off the stage, perhaps laughter and ridicule would be effective. Thus, there gradually developed, particularly after 1720, dramatic satire and ridicule in the periodicals against the enemies of true drama: pantomime and the supplementary entertainments. In the end, this attack upon the follies of the day enlisted one powerful adherent: Henry Fielding.

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