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Harlequin Britain: Pantomime And Entertainment, 1690-1760



Synopsis

In the fall of 1723, two London theaters staged, almost simultaneously, pantomime performances of the Faust story. Unlike traditional five-act plays, pantomime—a bawdy hybrid of dance, music, spectacle, and commedia dell'arte featuring the familiar figure of the harlequin at its center—was a theatrical experience of unprecedented accessibility. The immediate popularity of this new genre drew theater apprentices to the cities to learn the new style, and pantomime became the subject of lively debate within British society. Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding bitterly opposed the intrusion into legitimate literary culture of what they regarded as fairground amusements that appealed to sensation and passion over reason and judgment. In *Harlequin Britain*, literary scholar John O'Brien examines this new form of entertainment and the effect it had on British culture. Why did pantomime become so popular so quickly? Why was it perceived as culturally threatening and socially destabilizing? O'Brien finds that pantomime's socially subversive commentary cut through the dampened spirit of debate created by Robert Walpole's one-party rule. At the same time, pantomime appealed to the abstracted taste of the mass audience. Its extraordinary popularity underscores the continuing centrality of live performance in a culture that is most typically seen as having shifted its attention to the written text—in particular, to the novel. Written in a lively style rich with anecdotes, *Harlequin Britain* establishes the emergence of eighteenth-century English pantomime, with its promiscuous blending of genres and subjects, as a key moment in the development of modern entertainment culture.

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A good read for even the most casual theater historian. (Choice) A complex, rich work... an original, important contribution to the history of the body and to political culture. (American Historical Review) This well argued text on pantomime offers a fascinating investigation of a subgenre of British theater. (Scriblerian) He develops his micro-history of the growth and changes in British life with finesse and precision and a rich grasp of detail. (David Mayer Theatre Notebook) A good example of how to write cultural history today. (Jacky Bratton Journal of British Studies) For readers who share O'Brien's intellectual priorities, this book may well come to be regarded as an important contribution. (David A. Brewer Modern Philology) John O'Brien's Harlequin Britain is an original and provocative study of the ways in which pantomime, entertainment, and modernity are entwined in English culture. It adds significantly to our understanding of the role of the theater in the early eighteenth century and makes a compelling case for the significance of theatrical performance to the emergence of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere. (Robert Markley, University of Illinois)

John O'Brien is the NEH Daniels Family Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Virginia.

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