

Blackwell Encyclopedia of Romanticism

Proposed Entries

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Pantomime (c. 5,000 words)

The pantomime was not only one of the Romantic period's most popular forms of entertainment, but also, as Leigh Hunt called it, its "best medium of dramatic satire." Dandies, the Napoleonic wars, religious tolerance, the poor, travel, technology, city and country life, and even the conventions of the theater all fell under its satiric eye.

The pantomime followed a fairly conventional format. The opening presented a fairytale or legendary story in which the hero or heroine is put in peril. The peril is brought to an end by the intervention of a benevolent agent – spirit, god or fairy – who changes the main actors of the story into the conventional figures of Harlequin (the hero), Columbine (the heroine), Pantaloon (the father), Dandy Lover and Clown. What follows is a series of adventures in which Pantaloon, Lover and Clown pursue Harlequin and Columbine until finally the benevolent agent reappears and brings the lovers together.

But this conventional format belies a wealth of improvisational follies. Harlequin's power to transform objects with his magic bat mirrored the marvels of modern technology, as the characters speed in coaches, rise in balloons, view objects through telescopes and sicken and cure each other through medical innovations. Even the benevolent agents' magnificent power to change events signals the political, social and technological transformations of the age. The pantomime also reflects the era's fascination with travel, as the characters go to China and Egypt, visit Sultans' Palaces, go tiger-hunting in Asia and bullfighting in Spain.

The harliquinade itself was also undergoing transformation in the Romantic period. Essentially a heroic story in which the middle-class trickster Harlequin defeats the establishment forces of Pantaloon and the Dandy Lover, because of the genius of actor Joseph Grimaldi the Romantic pantomime came to focus on the follies of Clown. Grimaldi greatly expanded the pantomime's satiric possibilities. Where before Clown had been a simple, dull-witted country bumpkin, under Grimaldi Clown transformed into a bright creature with gargantuan appetites and passions -- getting drunk, assaulting watchmen, poking his head into dark spaces, constantly distracted by food. In many ways, Grimaldi's clown is the embodiment of the titanic appetite of Romantic ambition, defeated by the simple English wit of Harlequin, but nonetheless stealing the show.

But while the pantomime was an essential part of British cultural satire, it was also a moving factor in theatrical innovation. Many of the spectacular innovations of the Romantic drama came from or were used in pantomime: spectacular sets and costumes, aquatic spectacles, techniques for representing moving vehicles and ships, trapdoors and techniques for presenting ghosts and spirits. The pantomime also played a crucial role in satirizing theatrical conventions – the fashionable comedy, the gothic. But more than that, the pantomime's instant transformations, its shifts from miniature to gigantic and

back again, its showcasing instruments that changed their viewers' perspective on the world all represented the experience of a popular audience engaged in viewing magnificent spectacles not only on the stage but in the world. In many ways, the pantomime mirrors the 20th century postmodern. It takes its audience through a fragmented world of shifting changes, where the audience's own perspective is dwarfed and magnified at the whims of the producers.

The pantomime also played a role in the development of the novel: Dickens and Thackeray both admired it and frequently attended. But after the death of Grimaldi, the pantomime would never have the satiric force that it wielded in the Romantic period.

The pantomime brought the energy from street life and fairs into the legitimate and illegitimate theater, threatening to eclipse the pretensions of Shakespeare and the legitimate dramatists. Its conventional plots, coupled with its innovations in character and spectacle, came to define the Romantic stage for many of its contemporaries.