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Introduction

At the beginning of February 1886, the *Birmingham Daily Post* carried an advertisement for the Theatre Royal pantomime, the central feature of which was an extended quote from *Theatre*:

> 'Robinson Crusoe' at the Birmingham Theatre Royal is, in my estimation, far and away the best of the provincial pantomimes in general excellence of scenery, costumes, and acting, to say nothing of its music, which surpasses that in all other productions in point of melody and liveliness. Let me advise such of my readers as care to see a brisk, well-constructed, amusing, and thoroughly enjoyable pantomime, to lose no time in finding their way to Euston, and travelling thence by the well-ordered, fast, and punctual trains of the London and North-Western Railway to Birmingham, there to see 'Robinson Crusoe' at the Theatre Royal. I will answer for it that the pantomime at the Birmingham Theatre Royal is the best to be seen in the country this year.[1]

The *Theatre* reviewer engaged a metropolitan audience in his promotion of a regional pantomime. His 'estimation' of the quality of the pantomime prepared the visitor for certain standards of production, and his list of requisite elements, of 'melody and liveliness' in a 'brisk, well-constructed, amusing, and thoroughly enjoyable pantomime', neatly summarised aspects of the performance for potential audiences. The trains out of London are as brisk as the pantomime and those of the metropolis who venture beyond Euston are guaranteed an efficient journey and gratifying theatrical experience. The potential local and regional audiences of Birmingham and the Midlands may have espied other promotional aspects in their regional newspaper previews: the status of the theatre locally (not the 'Theatre Royal' of a London paper, but the familiar 'Royal'); the reputation of the manager and his author; and a range of references that

could be appreciated by a local audience. The Theatre Royal manager chose to include this review in the context of local theatrical competition and the history and identity that he had established for his theatre. For the London critic and reader this review would not have carried those inferences. The foregrounding of scenery, costumes, acting and music in the quotation does not give a true sense of the nature and variety of provincial pantomimes; there is an implicit assumption that, essentially, all pantomimes are the same, albeit produced to different standards. For many years, theatre historiographers regarded Victorian provincial pantomime in a similar light: they focused on London, in particular giving preference to the histories of the patent theatres and, to an extent, assuming homogeneity of those productions that occurred beyond Euston station. In this book I intend to redress this imbalance and to examine pantomime productions in the three urban centres of Birmingham, Nottingham and Manchester in order to establish the variety and traditions that characterised provincial pantomime. In particular, I will illustrate how the managers of each theatre appealed to their audiences by reflecting specific aspects of regional and local identity in the annual production.

The prevalent assumption regarding provincial homogeneity arguably has its foundations in the relatively small quantity of material that has been published on the Victorian pantomime. Whilst, until now, it has not been the sole subject of an academic work, our understanding of the developments and structure of the pantomime after the 1830s owes much to Michael R. Booth's *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. v: *Pantomimes, Extravaganzas and Burlesques* which, together with *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* and *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, dominates studies of the genre.[2] Victorian pantomime has tended to attract greater attention in relation to ideological concerns with, for example, empire in the late nineteenth century, gender roles, and sexuality,[3] but Thomas Postlewait's recent reminder of the value of empirical work, in *An Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (2009), foregrounds the fact that although the cross-dressed, music-hall influenced Victorian pantomime has attracted ideological debate, little new empirical evidence has emerged on which to found new discussions. It is instead the pantomime of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that has tended to attract greater comment, dominated by David Mayer's 1969 work, *Harlequin in His Element: English*

Pantomime 1806–1836, together with John O'Brien's *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment 1690–1760* and Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770–1840*, which have provided a broader contextual base for the pantomimes of Georgian London.[4] There has been a fascination with the silent harlequinade: in 'The State of the Abyss: Nineteenth Century Performance and Theatre Historiography in 1999', Jane Moody made a crucial point when she stated that, 'It is disconcerting to realize that many of the authoritative surveys of theatrical forms, published over three decades ago, have never been succeeded, let alone challenged.'[5] Foremost amongst those surveys, she argued, was Mayer's *Harlequin in His Element* and yet her proposed extension to the range of genres studied did not promote the exploration of pantomime beyond the time range established by Mayer.[6]

Whilst the early history of pantomime is fascinating and the work by Mayer and O'Brien in particular has established and developed valuable evidence for our understanding of the genre, the absence of an extensive body of work on the Victorian pantomime has been perturbing. I would suggest that much of the critical reluctance to address the range of later pantomimes stems from an uncritical acceptance of nineteenth-century judgements about the genre. Clement Scott, for example, in 'The Lost Art of Pantomime' mourned the harlequinade that he thought 'lost for ever'. He remembered the Georgian pantomimes of his youth and, in particular, he recalled the acting of Grimaldi, who had revitalised the role of Clown in the early part of the century.[7] Scott was not alone in recalling Grimaldi's acting talents. In 1872, J.R. Planché had also recalled the early pantomimes: 'there was some congruity, some dramatic construction … and then the acting! For it was acting, and first-rate acting.'[8] Planché was quoted by Leopold Wagner in *The Pantomimes and All About Them* in 1881, the latter additionally perceiving the acting of the harlequinade as good training for the 'legitimate drama'.[9] Finally, J. Wiston, who had been a manager of Drury Lane Theatre in the early nineteenth century, commented that 'Grimaldi was a better clown. He made it a more intellectual performance.'[10] National and local newspaper articles of the nineteenth century reiterated the concept of the 'lost pantomime', recalling Grimaldi and finding his performance superior to those in the later harlequinades.

The focus on Grimaldi's performance can be linked to contemporaneous debates regarding the status of drama. In *New Readings in Theatre History*,

Jacky Bratton succinctly outlined the nineteenth-century concept of the 'decline of the drama' and the critical separation of popular theatre and dramatic literature in the early nineteenth century. Bratton acknowledged that such divisions can still influence theatre history, identifying melodrama as having been particularly susceptible to dismissal by exponents of the dramatic integrity of theatre.[11] Further, Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack in *English Drama: A Cultural History* referred to the redefinition of pantomime in the eighteenth century as an art form.[12] They argued that the specifics of mime and its inheritance from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* lent pantomime an historical and cultural authenticity, and it is, I argue, this perception of authenticity which underlies the reminiscences by Scott, Wagner, Planché and the innumerable nineteenth-century essayists, about Grimaldi's acting abilities. The incorporation of spectacle and song after the 1840s epitomised for many critics not only the perceived degradation of theatre but also, and crucially, the degradation of the genre, an attitude which seems to have influenced modern studies of the genre.[13] In particular, J.R. Planché's despair at the increasing emphasis on spectacle inaugurated by the transformation scene, and E.L. Blanchard's condemnation of the perceived abuse of his scripts by theatre managements, plus the critic William Davenport-Adams's disgust at the importation of music-hall stars, instilled a sense that Victorian pantomimes offered little beyond glitter and morally dubious music-hall songs.[14] By contrast, pantomime producers have always accepted the intrinsic variations of the genre. Indeed its survival throughout three hundred years has hinged on its adaptability and on theatre managers' awareness of changing tastes and expectations. O'Brien has highlighted the fact that such manoeuvrings had been at the root of pantomime's success a hundred years earlier, and Gerald Frow, writing in 1985, observed that 'pantomime has *never* been what it was'.[15]

In addition to the influence of nineteenth-century judgements about artistic worth, I would also suggest that Victorian pantomime has been regarded in much the same critical light that for many years fell on melodrama and the music hall. In the light of judgements based on the literary worth of drama, those genres were disregarded for many years, to be rediscovered and re-valued as a result of the post-1960s developments in cultural studies; they have since claimed what David Mayer in 1977 perceived as 'academic respectability'.[16]

However, Victorian pantomime – and more especially the provincial productions – has been largely excluded from that momentum. There is a sense perhaps that productions at established cultural centres, such as the Theatres Royal, have a more limited research value when set alongside the dynamic politics of the working-class music hall. In 1997, Peter Holland referred briefly to a possible and influential 'cultural contempt for the [pantomime] form in contemporary society'.[17] There exists therefore a curious tension: of pantomime being interpreted in the nineteenth century as commercial, popular (vulgar) and inartistic, and a later twentieth and twenty-first century interpretation of it as popular (mainstream) and therefore politically uninteresting. It has effectively been caught in a cultural and critical pincer movement.