In this article, I examine how two English theatrical phenomena used stage technology to produce illusions for certain political ends. The two phenomena of interest are the court masque of the early 1600s and the illegitimate genres of the late Georgian London theatre. My focus will be on the latter, through an examination of the pantomime *The Picture of Paris* – opening at Covent Garden in 1790.

Whereas a political reading of the court masque is well established in theatre studies, the same cannot be said regarding a political understanding of the theatre culture of the late Georgian period. Furthermore, those who have focused on the political aspects of this theatre culture have not been interested in the role played by stage technology. This is where this article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

Although the court masques and the illegitimate genres used much of the same stage technology, they differed in how they used it and to what political ends. Whereas the masque could be understood as a conservative statement of royal power, asserting their right to rule, the illegitimate genres approached the governing powers and policies in a more subversive manner.

Late Georgian cultural politics, censoring the spoken word on stage and patenting the performance of tragedy and comedy, gave rise to new theatrical genres where visual aspects – by legal necessity – took centre stage. The resulting spectacular theatre of action and visual image was exempt from government censorship, making possible a special kind of political freedom of expression in these genres. It was during performance, through their use of dumb shows, setting, stage machinery and special effects that government criticism could unfold within these genres.

Keywords: stage technology, court masque, late Georgian pantomime.

ABSTRACT

The Power of Illusion

ELLEN KAROLINE GJERVAN

In theatre history, the use of stage technology has frequently been associated with spectacle, which again has been connected with courtly indulgence and later on with cheap thrills. However, stage technology has also been used to produce powerful illusions to political ends. In the following, I will delve into the power of illusion as seen in two instances of theatre history. The first phenomenon of interest is the court masques of James I and Charles I – the Jacobean and Caroline masques – a theatrical expression frequently associated with courtly indulgence. The second phenomenon of interest is the so-called illegitimate genres of the late Georgian London theatre, genres frequently associated with cheap thrills. My focus will be on the latter.

In this article, I will examine how two theatrical phenomena used stage technology to produce illusions for political ends. The renaissance masque will be used as a baseline for how a theatrical phenomenon produced spectacular illusions to express royal power by the use of sophisticated stage technology. Inspired by this political reading of the masque, I will extrapolate a similar relationship between technology, stage illusion and political expressions in the illegitimate genres of the late Georgian theatre. These were genres that by legal necessity were restricted to other modes of expression than the spoken word. In order to investigate what kind of illusions that could be produced here, and to what political ends, I will examine the pantomime *The Picture of Paris* – opening at Covent Garden in 1790.

Whereas a political reading of the court masque is well established in theatre studies, the same cannot be said regarding a political understanding of the late Georgian theatre culture. In 2000, Jane Moody reinvestigated the emergence of this theatre culture in a study offering new understandings of the cultural politics of Georgian times as well as a critique of the position theatre has been given in studies of Romanticism. Furthermore, in the 1990s several historians and literary scholars interested in the long eighteenth century began exploring the radical political culture of Georgian England and its relationship with popular theatre. David Worrall, in two publications from 2006 and 2007, embeds this theatre culture within its political context of censorship. Both Moody and Worrall’s arguments and examples have contributed to my understanding of these genres as having a political content.

However, none of the scholars mentioned has focused on stage technology’s role in the production of stage illusions for political ends. This is where this article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. By focusing on stage technology and stage illusion, I approach theatre history as a history of a visual medium. With the aim of examining how illusions have been used for certain political ends, I approach theatre performances as being cultural expressions embedded in the social and political environment in which they occur.

BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Karoline Gjervan is a research fellow at the Department of Art and Media Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), where she is a part of the research project “Performing arts between dilettantism and professionalism. Music, theatre and dance in the Norwegian public sphere 1770-1850” (http://www.ntnu.no/parts/). In this project, Gjervan focuses on itinerant mate genres of the late Georgian London theatre. My focus will be on the latter, through an examination of the pantomime *The Picture of Paris* – opening at Covent Garden in 1790.
THE ILLUSIONS AND STAGE TECHNOLOGY OF JACOBEAN AND CAROLINE COURT MASQUES

In *The illusion of power* (1975), Stephen Orgel analysed the English renaissance masque as political art and aestheticized politics and found that these court theatricals were perceived as statements of royal power. According to Orgel, the masques projected an image of how the monarch understood his own place and power in the world through their use of lighting equipment and stage machinery: "The marvels of stagecraft – the ability to overcome gravity, control the natural world, [...] are the supreme expression of Renaissance kingship."18

The stagings of Jacobean and Caroline masques were influenced by contemporary, continental theatrical developments aimed at harnessing the rules of perspective – i.e. how to create an illusion of three-dimensional objects on a flat surface – to theatrical ends. Beginning in Italy in the fifteenth century, perspective settings were used to establish beautiful backgrounds to performances.19 By the mid-sixteenth century, scenic change had become the issue – by the use of diverse machinery operating clouds, trapdoors and waves.20 In addition the scenery itself became changeable.

The Jacobean and Caroline court masques were mainly performed at Whitehall Palace, in the hall of the Banqueting House. The hall had no permanent stage as it was a multi-purpose room and the staging of a masque happened only once a year during James I's reign – twice under his successor's. Prior to their reign, the masques had taken place on the floor of whichever room it was performed in – with the devote-scattered around the room in mansion-like structures.21 As Inigo Jones became the chief designer of English court masques from 1605 onwards this was to change. Jones was well informed regarding the various Italian solutions to produce the special effects and rapid changes of scene that was in demand. With Jones in charge, a stage was erected for the occasion at the very end of the hall and all the scenery was placed upon it – together with machinery for special effects.22 The floor between the stage and the audience was now fed up for the all-important final dance, which involved players and audience members alike.

Orgel points out that when perspective settings were introduced in England in 1605, they were used only at court or with a monarch present.23 Why were these settings considered so exclusively suitable at court? The perspective settings made the monarch the centre of the theatrical experience in a new way, as there was only one place in the auditorium from which the illusion achieved its full effect – and that was where the king sat.24 Thus the king was the only one seeing the whole picture from its proper perspective. Roy Strong finds no coincidence that the introduction of perspective scenery at court happened as the theory of the Divine Right of Kings was introduced. "Perspective made the rules the emblematic and ethical centre of every court production and emphasised the hierarchical gradations of court life."25

Orgel also points out that the new scenery and machinery were introduced in a form that at the time was not perceived as a kind of drama. The masque was rather perceived as a mode of expression essential to the court, as "their allegories gave a higher meaning to the realities of politics and power, their fictions created heroic roles for the leaders of society."26 A central notion in Renaissance ideas of kingship was the sovereign as a role model. "The image of the monarch was crucial and the appearance of virtue was of the essence, whether the semblance coincided with the inner reality of the sovereign was of less importance." Thus the king would be allegorized as someone with control and power, and his allegorical embodiment on stage had to appear virtuous.

Still, the masques were not compliments offered to the monarch, but rather direct political assertions made by him.27 When the god Mercury restored nature by his powers in *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (1615) it was also a statement on James I's powers, as he perceived them. A vision of nature controlled by the human intellect was a central way of expressing the sovereign's place in the Renaissance universe.28 Thus the stage machinery producing special effects, such as thunder and lightning, would be put to good use so the allegorical royal powers could be displayed, for instance, in making a storm appear or disappear on command. The court festivals of James I, Charles I and other Renaissance rulers, in this way, became spectacles of state and assertions of power, producing tableaux “in which the harmonious structure of the cosmos was conjured up as a mirror of the absolutist state and extended outwards to embrace its onlooking audience through dance.”29

THE ILLEGITIMATE GENRES OF THE LATE GEORGIAN LONDON THEATRE: SPECTACULAR AND POLITICAL

The court masques were dependant on sophisticated stage technology for creating their illusions of power, a dependency that frequently has been understated as courtly indulgence. As shown above, it would be a limiting perception of the Renaissance court masque if it were understood merely as such. The same, limited perception could be the result regarding the illegitimate genres of the late Georgian London theatre.30 The stage technology employed in these genres is often understood as merely producing cheap thrills for an illiterate audience – resulting in popular entertainment rather than high, theatrical art.31 However, in a period with strong censorship of dramatic texts, the subversive, political potential of these visually explicit genres has tended to be overlooked. In the following, I will attempt a more rounded investigation of these genres’ use of stage technology, with a special interest in how it was used to create illusions for political ends. I will then focus on one pantomime production, in order to look more specifically at how illusions could be produced for political ends within an illegitimate genre. However, some historical context is needed in order to better understand what these genres were and how they came about.

The Licensing Act of 1737 regulated theatre activity in Britain by limiting theatre performances – understood as spoken drama – to the provincial Royal Theatres, and to two patented theatres in Westminster, London. In addition, it introduced a system for dramatic censorship that would last until 1968. According to Jane Moody, there were both expressions of the aims of stage illusion began to change from around 1760 when "the passion for the real and the actual was taking the place of delight in the theatrically splendid". Whereas the court masques largely revolved in mythical and allegorical dramas, the illegitimate genres would over time promote the use of familiar locations from near and far as an upsurge in tourism increased the public’s awareness of the characteristics of different places.32 The growing interest in tourism, as well as in landscape and archaeology, found an outlet in the theatre.
One of Rich's inventions was a particularly English Harlequin: "a silent figure of wit and magic who performed picturesque transformations in which palaces and temples turned into huts and cottages, men and women into wheel barrows." The magical and transformative power of Harlequin was largely situated in his slapstick, i.e. a wooden bat, which was used to bring about alterations of the stage. These transformations, so essential to the English pantomime, relied on a technology and technique different to the one mentioned so far in this article. Harlequin would hit the scenery with his bat and change the scene by knocking down hinged flaps. As these flaps fell down, the motif on the scenery where the flaps were placed would change and transform the whole stage picture with it. A woodland scene could instantly become the outside of an inn, for instance, due to ingenious paintwork on and under the flaps in question. In a German theatre encyclopedia from 1841, a similar technique for changing scenery is referred to as Klap-p(a)-theater – "flap-theatre". This is explained as consisting of a painted cloth stretched over a frame, with a crosswise seam on each motif. A string would pull down the uppermost half of this cloth, the flap, and a new motif would appear. This is quite similar to how changes of scene were brought about in the English pantomime.

The Licensing Act attributed the authority of licensing and censoring all kinds of plays to the Office of the Lord Chamberlain by their Examiner of Plays, but how could censorship be enforced upon performances for which no text existed? Government control came up short against the illegitimate genres. The speechless dramaturgy of these genres thus made possible a special kind of political freedom. As an example of what kind of political freedom that was open to these genres, I will look at the pantomime The Picture of Paris, opening at Covent Garden on 20 December 1790. Charles Bonnot and Robert Mentry had written the piece, while William Shield provided the music.

On 11 December 1790 the Examiner of Plays, John Larpent, dated his copy of the script. As only text was requisite for inspection, the pantomime action was omitted from his copy. Thus dumb show, settings and stage machinery could be used to express sentiments that would have been censored if put into words. The play given the Examiner seems quite harmless. David Worrall sums up its plot: after the dissolution of religious houses in France, an English gentleman seeks his beloved who has been put out of his reach by her family making her join a nunnery. Now that the monasteries are dissolved, he is eager to find her and secure her. What could possibly be politically charged about this story of two lovers? There are huge differences between Larpent's copy and the play as it appears in print. Worrall finds that the silent pantomime represented the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789 in ways that Larpent could not have imagined based on the copy given to him. He concludes that Larpent only got the sub-plot and that under these conditions of censorship pantomime might be understood as "one of the most forward means of staging political commentary." What political commentary was staged in this pantomime? What was the main plot?

The full title of the play is The Picture of Paris. Taken in July 1790. On 14 July 1790, the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille was celebrated on Champ de Mars, outside Paris. The event, Père de la Fédération, involved a meeting of the National Assembly at which the King swore allegiance to the Constitution. This celebration of the constitutional monarchy was witnessed by foreign envoys and their British audience, a chance to witness the event as well, as the bulk of the three printed versions of the play here discussed revolve around the preparations for and proceedings of this celebration. The playbill printed in The Times at the day of the première, promised the audience an exact representation of the grand procession to the Champ de Mars. The pantomime was to culminate with a faithful representation of the ceremony where the King swore allegiance to the new, short-lived constitution. The audience of the play perceived this ceremony as the core of the play and perceived it politically, even subversive, is reflected in newspapers of the day. King George III’s visit to the performance was, for instance, chronicled in newspapers such as The Times, and “[t]he representation of a monarch as merely the delegate of the National Assembly did not, according to ‘The Times’ at least, pass muster with George III’s idea of his relationship to Parliament.”

According to the stage directions, much of the play unfolds at Champ de Mars. This location is presented from different angles during the play. We are first given a partial view of this location. Later, there is a scene showing a perspective view of the place – taken from the village opposite – and as the play approaches its conclusion, the stage picture displays the triumphal arch erected at the entrance to the Champ de Mars. Through this arch, there then appears a procession and a re-enactment of the actual event ensues. It is not only the scenes with views of Champ de Mars, which display specific locations in this play. Just within the first ten pages, the stage directions mention five Parisian locations. It seems to me that the success of the pantomime and its political message hinged on the audiences’ ability to recognize the stage pictures displayed on stage as the real life locations they purported to be.

The question then arises as to how this play was staged, as it was quite common at the time to use stock scenery. If these were used in this production as well, it would work against any recognition of the stage picture as Parisian locations. The fourth edition of the printed play lists fourteen scenes painted specifically for the production. The majority of these sets of scenery were also listed on the playbill – at least for the first nine performances. Among the custom made sets of scenery listed are the three scenes displaying Champ de Mars from different points of view. The accuracy regarding the settings was also advertised in advance of the première. The Public Advertiser communicated on 16 December 1790, that Covent Garden on the following Monday would produce a new pantomime – The Picture of Paris, which had been long in preparation and whose scenery was made "from Drawings taken on the spot." A similar comment was made in a report from the premiere, published in the January edition of The Gentlemen’s Magazine 1791, which also found that the piece was “enriched with some of the most excellent scenery; that, per-
haps, ever adorned a stage”. The magazine then continued to comment on the accuracy of the scenery and singled out some of the scenes for particular commendation.

The plot presented to the Examiner of Plays revolved around a gentleman seeking his beloved ex-nun. In the three printed versions of the play that are available to me, this is barely mentioned. If there is another plot besides the preparations for and arrangement of the Fête de la Federation in the printed plays, it is rather one concerning Harlequin and Columbine.

The printed plays all open in a Marquis’s Hall where Harlequin – a Silversmith – and some workmen execute the court masque. The scene changes to the Marquis’ daughter, Columbine. Where Harlequin’s powers.

In the three versions of the script, we instead reconvene with Harlequin inside several galleries. The printed plays all open in a Marquis’s Hall where Harlequin – a Silversmith – and some workmen execute the court masque. Here, he meets the Marquis’ daughter, Columbine. Where Harlequin’s powers.

In two of the three versions, we meet Harlequin in a scene giving a view of a grand assembly with its members in debate and visitors in several galleries. The location is then transformed by Harlequin’s powers. In the third version of the script, we instead reconvene with Harlequin inside a Coffee Room as he rescues Columbine “by fixing the attention of her Pursuers to a change in the Fire-place, over which Harlequin leaps in order to avoid being himself taken.” In two of the three versions, we meet Harlequin one last time in Champ de Mars. Here he is reunited with the Marquis, who bestows Columbine to him.

Whereas previous scholarship, such as Jon Mee (2008) and David Worrall (2007), has discussed the subversive potential of The Picture of Paris by way of its politically risky pantomime re-enactment of the Fête de la Federation, other aspects of the pantomime have not been discussed in this light. I will in the following argue that a political reading may also apply to Harlequin’s transformative powers.

During the first instance where Harlequin exerts his special powers, on Columbine’s request, he transforms three magistrates “into emblematical Figures of Justice, Mercy and Truth”. Some plebeian women have just threatened the magistrates’ lives because they did not pass the death sentence upon a person whom these women forcibly resented. It is not stated whom this is, but from what follows it seems most likely to have been Columbine and/ or her father. Later in the play, Harlequin changes the grand assembly, where he all of a sudden is to be found, into “THE TEMPLE OF CONCORD”. Here the first act comes to a conclusion with a song and dance, and the “Goddesse seated on her Throne receives the offerings of her attendant Votaries.”

Whereas the first transformation could be understood as a stage in Harlequin’s courtship of Columbine, the second cannot. A political reading of the first transformation could be to the effect of showing that even after a revolution, truth, justice and mercy are still present and in force. The second transformation could be understood as accentuating the current governance of France as a desirable form of governance, providing concord rather than strife. These positive renditions of current affairs in France were not necessarily in accord with the British official response to the Revolution. Jon Mee points out that the British government’s alarm at the spread of French ideas meant that the play was unusual in representing French events so directly.

I find it interesting that it is Harlequin who is the one wielding these transformative powers. Traditionally in commedia dell’arte, Harlequin and Columbine are both servants. In the English pantomime, these two characters had become “the inno cent lovers so strangely evolved from the Bergamask clown and the wanton Colombina.” In this transformation, Columbine became the master’s daughter, here even a noblewoman. She is still pursued by Harlequin, here an artisan, whom she prefers to her socially more equal suitors. When the figure invested with the power to transform locations and command nature is of Harlequin’s character, a common citizen mastering the universe, the resulting subversive potential of this character should be subjected to a more minute, political analysis of his transformative powers than has been the case so far. In the court masque it was the king, or his allegorical embodiment on stage, who wielded these powers. In the English pantomime, it was Harlequin. The fact that on-stage realities were commanded and changed by a citizen rather than a king, in a play celebrating the French Revolution, might have been a point not lost on the spectators of The Picture of Paris.

THE ILLUSION OF POWER – THE POWER OF ILLUSION

In this article, I have examined how two theatrical phenomena used stage technology to produce illusions to certain political ends, focusing on the late Georgian pantomime. Based on my argument, I claim that the illogical/gene of the late Georgian London theatre, just as the Renaissance court masques, relied on the use of technology to project their worldview. It was in performance, through the use of, for instance, special effects, that the possibility of government criticism unfolded – and also as it was Harlequin, rather than a royal representative, that controlled the cosmos of the play.

Theatrical, illogical forms “invested that which is seen and made visible with a moral power which far outweighed that of words.” This power could be used to subversive political ends, just as the masques in their time had employed the same power for their purposes. The illusions produced by stage technology in these two instances of theatre history were thus used to oppose political ends.

The illogical/gene of late Georgian London have been understood as less interesting objects for theatre historical study than the legitimate ones, allegedly due to the poor literary quality of the plays as well as due to their reliance on spectacle. The genre’s reliance on spectacle has often been blamed on the illustrate urban working class, but “delight and concern for the spectacular and the pictorial have much deeper roots which cuts across the classes in which the theatre played its traditional leading and following role.” That the visual spectacle was of interest beyond the urban working class is demonstrated by the patent theatre’s eagerness to purloin any technological, visual, spectacular focus on theatre history and an understanding of theatre cultures as embedded in the social and political environment of which it occurs opens up for a re-reading of a theatrical era and a reassessment of the role played by stage technology in enabling theatres to produce illusions of power.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Christopher Bough, Theatre Performance and Technology, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2005, p. 7. That Aris-
totle found spectacle – i.e. aux, to be the least important factor in a tragedy has been a contributing factor to how spectacle has been discussed in theatre and literary stud-
ies (see Ter Troche, “Scenografien plus foundehun av det moderne teater: Opst om analytisk begreber” in Deu

2. I will explain the historical context of these genres later in the article.

3. By stage technology I will, in this article, refer to machinery and scenery used to establish and change the setting on stage as well as the use of machinery to produce spe-
cial effects. The machinery and scenery are technologies in as much as they are results of the application of sci-
enific knowledge for practical purposes, the knowledge being such as the harnessing of the rules of perspective to theatrical ends. The focus of the article is however not on the technical details of the technology in question, but rather on how the stage picture and special effects produced by the current stage technology fabricated illu-
sions for certain political ends. I am thus more interested in the output of stage technologies, the illusions, than in the technology itself.


5. See David Worrall, Theatre Revolution, Oxford Univer-

6. For more on this approach to history, see William H. Eisen, “The concept(s) of culture in Beyond the cultural

7. Stephen Orgel, The Theatre of Power, University of Cali-

8. Ibid., p. 58.

9. As Sebastian Serlio would point out in Architecture (1534), the maximum effect of a perspective setting was achieved by using gradually diminishing sets towards the back of the stage – and the stage itself should be made with an increasingly sloping angle (Sebastian Serlio, “The Straits” in The Renaissance Stage, Barnard Hewitt, ed., University of Miami Press, Coral Gables Florida 1958, p. 25).


11. Oscar Brockett, History of the Theatre, 6th ed., Allyn and

12. Ibid., pp. 184-5.


1984, p. 156.


17. Ibid., p. 42.

18. Ibid., p. 52.

19. Ibid., p. 54.

20. Strong, op. cit., p. 43.

21. The illegitimate genres, found their shape due to legal necessity. They all had to avoid vocalization, as this was not permitted them. Worsevall discusses all the resulting genres as burlettas; as musical dramas, and points out that any play staged outside the patent theatres had to be a burletta in order to legally be performed (see Worsevall, op. cit., 2007, p. 20). Other genres that are discussed as illegitimate ones are pantomimes, opéra comique vaudeville, the farce/interregnum and melodrama. Plays presented within these genres could also be presented at pantomed theaters, and were then free to use the spoken word. Whereas pantomime was founded on the presence of 1752, which meant that places of entertainment in the output of stage technologies, the illusions, than in the technology itself.

Bacon, London 1966, p. 84.

Bacon, London 1966, p. 84.

Bacon, London 1966, p. 84.

Bacon, London 1966, p. 84.

Bacon, London 1966, p. 84.
this incoherent jumble of ideas does not mean to affirm that the Revolution in France is founded on any of these godlike virtues.” (The Times, 30 December 1790 in Mee, op. cit., p. 42).

64 Ibid., p. 46. Mee’s observation is probably correct regarding the patent theatres. However, at Sadler’s Wells – a non-patent theatre – they had already in August 1790 presented a new performance in two parts called The Champ de Mars; or, The Loyal Federation (playbill 13 August 1790 in V&A Theatre Collection: Production Records Sadler’s Wells 1773-1812). The playbill states that the scenery for the play was “correctly drawn from the actual observation of proper persons appointed to attend at Paris for the purpose” (ibid.). The Parisian event was thus already familiar to London theatregoers, although how directly the political event was presented in this production is unknown to me.


66 It could also be of political importance that the pantomimes are comedies. In traditional comedy the dominant social order is always challenged, although to what effect differs. The genre itself has thus a built-in subversive potential, although many comedies end with the restoration of the same order that was in operation at the beginning of the play.

67 Moody, op. cit., p. 88.
69 Moody, op. cit., p. 5.
70 The Gentleman’s Magazine, op. cit. p. 86. The similar register for February lists the pantomime as being performed six times that month (ibid., p. 287).
72 Moody, op. cit., p. 244.