

# Comedy in the OMAI Pantomime

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At Christmas 1785, the Theatre-Royal in Covent Garden produced the pantomime *OMAI: Or, A Trip Round the World*. Performed in sumptuous costumes, with scenery designed by Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg, and accompanied by the music of William Shield, John O’Keeffe’s libretto was a feast for the senses, which surpassed the expectations of an audience accustomed to the most exquisite dramatic art.<sup>1</sup>

The pantomime, a popular dramatic form which combined text, music and visual spectacle, and which followed on from another play, had become a theatrical event by the late eighteenth century. The first performance of *OMAI* followed *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* and the audience is said to have been so impatient for *OMAI* that it paid little attention to the main drama of the evening.<sup>2</sup> In terms of form, the pantomime was derived from the Italian commedia dell’arte, which had originally emerged in sixteenth-century Italy.<sup>3</sup> Arlequino or Harlequin, as he was to be known in English, became its unchallenged hero. The dramatic action of the harlequinade, or pantomime, was inspired by the caprices of an untamed sexuality and chiefly consisted of bawdy parodies of courtship rituals and farcical duels between a number of rivals.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of having Omai as the central hero of a pantomime came from David Garrick, one of London’s most celebrated actors of the eighteenth century. He proposed to revive the idea of the pantomime *Arlequin Sauvage* (first staged in Paris in 1721) in which an indigenous Harlequin unsparingly ridicules the follies and depraved customs of a civilised nation.<sup>5</sup> Garrick’s original plan was discarded. No overt satire of British culture was attempted and Omai, the exotic stranger, was given no scope to express himself as a native of Tahiti. The pantomime disregards all historical facts and portrays an idealised encounter between the British Empire and the Tahitians when it argues that Omai’s reason for coming to London was that of wooing a British maid. The laughter aroused by the conventions peculiar to pantomime, however, powerfully challenges the claim that this particular pantomime shows how effectively ‘Cook’s example’ had humanised the ‘new-found world’.<sup>6</sup>

Because he operates within the conventions of the harlequinade, Omai cannot be reduced to a mere spectacle of exotic otherness. The reason for this is that Harlequin and his ilk ridicule unsparingly the representatives of wealth and power. The *OMAI* pantomime, then, concentrates its interest on the

relationship between Britain and the inhabitants of the islands discovered by Cook. An absolutely intriguing feature concerns the resemblance between Omai, the central hero, and Harlequin, his servant. The libretto describes his costume as follows: The idea of his dress was taken from Cook's Voyages, where it is said that Omai, to make himself fine on his introduction to a Chief, dressed



Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg (1740–1812)  
*Otoo, King of Otaheite* 1785  
watercolour; 31.2 x 19.2 cm

himself with a piece of the habit of each country he had seen in his several voyages.<sup>7</sup> It thus projects him as a geographic motley, as opposed to the traditional motley that provokes laughter because he is stitched together with the cast-off rags of his social superiors.

Omai mimics Harlequin's behaviour. The fact that he does not take over his role, but instead serves as his double, makes the understanding of foreign identity problematic. Omai not only adopts the conventional behaviour of Harlequin; he also resembles him in terms of skin colour. The question of why Harlequin has a black facial mask is largely a matter of speculation but it is certain that from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, he was invariably played with a black mask.<sup>8</sup> When we search through the drawings of de Louthembourg, however, we are struck by the absence of a design for Harlequin's costume. While this may come across as an unfortunate omission, it also reminds us that it was not necessary because everybody knew what Harlequin looked like. On the other hand, Harlequin is also the intrinsically unfathomable jester, thus accounting for the audience's uncanny familiarity with him. When Omai is cast as his double, the duplicitous nature of Harlequin also clings to Omai, demanding that the audience should acknowledge its inability to understand who he is and what he stands for.

Over the centuries, Harlequin had of course undergone some changes, but he retained the role of exposing crude human instincts, particularly in figures of authority and learning. His characteristic gestures of revealing the pretensions of civilisation were strongly linked to his appearance, which was so familiar, precisely because, it was so utterly strange. When Omai acts alongside Harlequin—their faces similarly blackened by the help of mask and make-up—he acquires Harlequin's uncanny power to play with make-believe.

The *OMAI* pantomime paints an idyllic-escapist picture of both exotic and European worlds, and utilises laughter as a backdrop to an insistent sense of magic. Indeed, the first scene takes place in a temple or burial place in Tahiti—referred to as Otaheite—where Otoo, Omai’s father, implores the spirits of his ancestors to establish Omai on the throne. In an idyllic scene of pastoral harmony between human and superhuman characters, his sacrifice is received with favour and Towha, the guardian genius of Omai’s ancestors, appears—in the guise of a chief mourner—to grant the request.

While the significance of ancestral worship is an authentic feature of Tahitian culture and dramatises the accounts given both by Cook and the record ascribed to Omai, the successful invocation of Towha is a theatrical convention, inspired by the mythologies of the Pacific. Throughout there is a playful tension between accepting that Omai comes from a place which possesses secret powers and the underlying notion that this is no more than a story which is acted out, with all the potentials of theatrical make-believe. However, the realm of the imagination is by no means dismissed as an idle toy. Or rather, the pantomime illustrates the importance of the imagination for coming to terms with the historical significance of Cook’s discoveries. In this sense, the dramatic tension is not simply between a real and an imagined world, but between a world of the imagination and a reality, which had become strange. The pantomime, therefore, plays with the boundaries between reality and make-believe in an attempt to make sense of the new knowledge gained by Cook’s journeys of exploration.

The narrative circles around Omai and describes the successful union between Omai and Londina (and of their servants Harlequin and Colombine) and of Omai’s subsequent accession to the throne. Omai comes to

London to find his beloved Londina. He finds her, but is chased all round the world by his rival, Don Struttolando, until he finally returns to Tahiti. Omai’s comic flight, which acts out a complete tour of the world, turns into a dazzling pageant of the costumes worn in the foreign places, which had been discovered by Cook.

The pantomime’s finale invites the audience to pay tribute to the memory of Cook. An English Captain



William Hodges (1744–1797)  
*Otoo, King of Otaheite [i.e. Tahiti], August? 1773*  
chalk drawing; 54 x 37.8 cm

represents the British Empire, and Oberea—despoiled of her historical role as Queen of Tahiti and featuring as enchantress-protectress of Omai's rival for the throne—bows before the Captain as a sign that she welcomes the British presence in the Pacific. After he has installed Omai as the rightful ruler, the English Captain delivers an emotionally charged epilogue which insists that the peaceful outcome of the conflict was only possible because of Cook's efforts in teaching 'mankind how to live'.

A grand painting of Cook's apotheosis descends while the Captain and a chorus of Indians repeats the following lines as a recurring theme:

Mourn, Owhyee's fatal shore,  
For Cook, our great Orono, is no more!



after F. Maggiotto  
*Columbine, Harlequin, and a Venetian* (detail)  
reproduced from *The Italian Comedy* by Pierre Duchartre  
London, Sydney: G.G. Harrap, 1929

Owhyee—that is Hawaii—is the place where Cook was killed in a bitter conflict with the Islanders when the skills of negotiation, for which he was famous, failed him. The manner of Cook's death thus symbolised a moment of defeat, and exposed the meaninglessness of the civilisation, which Cook had supposedly brought to countless far-off lands. When the pantomime appeals to the 'chiefs of the ocean' to share in the mourning of Cook, however, it rewrites the story of his end and tries to erase the blemish from his authority posthumously. The eulogising speech by the English Captain refers to Cook as 'our great Orono', the title with which the Islanders honoured him, and which means a demigod, or hero. The all-embracing 'our' in 'our great Orono' appears to wipe out ethnic difference, or indeed utilises the indigenous hero-worship in order to bypass prevailing Christian doctrine, so that Cook could literally turn into an immortal demigod.

The fact that Omai is portrayed as a *commedia dell'arte* hero endears him to the audience and ensures that he receives their sympathy. They will undoubtedly laugh at the idea that he should lose his talisman and have to seek the assistance of a Justice of the Peace in order to receive it back. An important feature of the pantomime is also that in the colourful company of an old Water-Cress Woman, who claims to be his good fairy and a Raffling Toy-Shop-Man who hawks trinkets, cosmetic washes and quack-medicines, Omai does not come across as the odd one out. Not only does he mingle with the bohemian characters of the fairground; he also acquires their carnivalesque right to challenge hierarchies. By inhabiting an analogous role as Harlequin, therefore, Omai is not simply stared at as a curiosity but he gains the power of subverting expectations and conventions. This pantomime—

however strongly it differs from Garrick's original ideas—may have tried to subsume Omai into a celebration of Cook and, by extension, the British Empire. Omai's place among the commedia dell'arte characters, however, also makes him into a subversive presence who challenges the finale's statement concerning Britain's civilising influence on the Pacific.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the text of the pantomime, see John O'Keeffe, *OMAI: Or, A Trip Round the World*, in *The Plays of John O'Keeffe*. Vol. 2. Ed. and intro. Frederick M. Link. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981.)
- <sup>2</sup> For a report of the context of the first performance of *OMAI*, see E.H. McCormick, *Omai: Pacific Envoy* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 313–320). For a review and detailed description of the individual scenes of the pantomime, see *The London Chronicle* (20–22 December, 1785). For a discussion of the generic conventions of pantomime, see Daniel Mayer, *Harlequin in His Element: The English Pantomime 1806–1836* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).
- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the origins and history of commedia dell'arte, see Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964). See also Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell for The Shakespeare Head Press, 1990).
- <sup>4</sup> For a historical discussion of the harlequinade, see Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Louis François de la Drevetière Delisle's pantomime *Arlequin Sauvage*, see Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le Rêve Exotique dans la Littérature Française au XVIIIe et au XIXe Siècle* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1934, pp. 226–232). Compare Benjamin Bissell, *The American Indian in English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Archon Books, 1968), pp. 130–133.
- <sup>6</sup> Compare the overt claims in both the first and last scenes of O'Keeffe, op. cit., pp. 4 and 23.
- <sup>7</sup> See the description included in the list of characters, in O'Keeffe, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> Ulrike Reiss argues that Harlequin has his origin in the medieval understanding of the devil; see, *Harlequin: Eine Ausstellung im Oesterreichischen Theatermuseum* (Wien: Hermann Böhlau, 1984). Other speculations concerning his black face can be found in Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy: The Improvisations, Scenarios, Lives, Attributes, Portrait, and Masks of the Illustrious Characters of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Trans. Randolph T. Weaver. London: George G. Harrap, 1929, pp. 123ff). See also Thelma Niklaus, *Harlequin Phoenix or The Rise and Fall of a Bergamask Rogue*. (London: The Bodley Head, 1956.)



Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792)  
*Omai* 1775–76  
oil on canvas; 236 x 146 cm  
From the Castle Howard Collection