I have never written but for the solitary reader—and require no experiments for applause beyond his silent approbation. . . . I claim my right as an author to prevent what I have written from being turned into a Stage-play.—I have too much respect for the Public to permit this of my own free will.—Had I sought their favour it would have been by a Pantomime.¹

In this excerpt of a letter from Ravenna, Byron complains about losing control of *Marino Faliero*, thus documenting both his authorial intentions and the frustrating limits of those intentions. Byron had heard from John Murray that the closet drama was to be taken out of the closet and produced for the stage. This he vehemently opposed; instead he put forth a highly Romantic formulation of his ideal reader—as “solitary” and wholly apart from the collective “Public” who went to plays. That amorphous mass, he suggests, would be best reached (if that were one’s goal) through that most popular of all popular and spectacular theatrical forms, the pantomime. The “Public” has a taste for the masks, big heads, type characters, slapsticks, pursuits, pratfalls, and illusionistic stage tricks of the form. Byron means that he is above such pandering. In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* he had bemoaned the popularity of pantomime and other popular forms, including farce and sentimental tragedy, in this apostrophe to Richard Brinsley Sheridan:

If aught can move thy pen,
Let Comedy assume her throne again;
Abjure the mummery of German schools;

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¹ S. E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* © Steven E. Jones 2000
Leaf new Pizarros to translating fools; 
Give, as thy last memorial to the age, 
On classic drama, and reform the stage. 
Gods! O’er those boards shall Folly rear her head, 
Where Garrick trod, and Siddons lives to tread? 
On those shall Farce display Buffoon’ry’s mask, 
And Hook conceal his heroes in a cask? 
Shall sapient managers new scenes produce 
From Cherry, Skeffington, and Mother Goose?

(ll. 580–91)²

Thus in 1809 Byron affects Popean horror at what it has all come down to: Mother Goose, the central figure in one of the most popular of all popular pantomime plots by Thomas Dibdin. He goes on to see the proof of this “pollution” in the taste for an Italian import, the ultimate source for pantomime in turn being the commedia dell’arte, just recently experiencing a revival in Italy:

Degenerate Britons! Are ye dead to shame, 
Or, kind to dulness, do you fear to blame? 
Well may the nobles of our present race 
Watch each distortion of a Naldi’s face; 
Well may they smile on Italy’s buffoons, 
And worship Catalani’s pantaloons, 
Since their own drama yields no fairer trace 
Of wit than puns, of humour than grimace.

(ll. 610–17)

These are conventional enough complaints about sensationalism and the debased national taste. But Byron’s characteristic ambivalence, a form of which runs throughout this maiden satire, reveals itself in his own more amused note to the lines: “Naldi and Catalani require little notice; for the visage of the one, and the salary of the other, will enable us long to recollect these amusing vagabonds. Besides, we are still black and blue from the squeeze on the first night of the lady’s appearance in trousers.”

This gossipy note is a reminder that Byron was there among the crush, and Byron himself participated in the fashion for popular theater. As Peter W. Graham points out, quoting a fascinating account, Byron later recalled actually going onstage at one pantomime at Drury Lane in 1815–16.³ This particular performance, Harlequin and Fancy; or the Poet’s Last Shilling, staged an imitation of a masquerade held in 1814 at which Byron had been present. At the pantomime, Byron and Douglas Kinnaird went onstage, “amongst the [hoi polloi]—