

## CHAPTER I

*Dramatic Transition***A Faustus for the Theatres**

In the winter of 1723, the best-known transitions were those of the pantomime. Two versions of *Harlequin Doctor Faustus*, one at Lincoln's Inn Fields and one at Drury Lane, had 'met with such prodigious success' that 'there are scarce any in the Country, especially young People, who have had but a bare mention of it, that do not long as much for the Sight of the Doctor, as a French Head, or a new Suit of Cloaths'.<sup>1</sup> Those who did attend a performance at Drury Lane would see the doctor enter, studying his infernal contract 'with the greatest Inquietude' but – 'after several Pauses, and Shews of Anxiety' – eventually signing it 'with Blood drawn from his Finger by a Pin which he finds on the Ground' (p. 1):<sup>2</sup>

Lightning and Thunder immediately succeed, and *Mephostophilus*, a Daemon, flies down upon a Dragon, which throws from its Mouth and Nostrils Flames of Fire. He alights, receives the Contract from the Doctor, and another Daemon arises, takes it from him, and sinks with it. The Doctor earnestly endeavours to get clear of the Fiend, but he soon stops his Flight, and by a caressing Behaviour quickly dissipates the gloomy Consternation that he painfully labour'd under; and now the Doctor, fill'd with unusual Gladness by every Action, shews his rising Joy. (pp. 1–2)

The anonymous author of this *Exact Description* here presents the spectacular opening dumb show of the pantomime (for few had speaking parts) as a series of transitions. Faustus moves from 'Inquietude' to terror to 'unusual Gladness' and 'rising Joy'. Those transitions structure a series of dynamically iconic moments that veer between the minutiae of a mimed pinprick to the descent of Mephistopheles upon a dragon. While such a sequence was particularly striking, other pantomimes also offered similar opportunities for transition. John Weaver's *The Loves of Mars and Venus* (1717) has, for example, Vulcan expressing 'his Admiration, Jealousie;

Anger; and Despite' in a dance with the goddess of love, while she 'shews Neglect; Coquetry; Contempt; and Disdain'.<sup>3</sup> Such traces of transition are significant because, as Darryl Domingo has argued, 'pantomime and poetics came to share a critical vocabulary' in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> This chapter builds upon Domingo's observation to examine the 'shared vocabulary' of transition specifically, demonstrating how Aaron Hill attempted to purify this feature of the pantomime and so crystallised a set of aesthetic norms around transition whose influence can be traced throughout the 1700s. Yet for all Hill's efforts, the debt that his approach to drama owes to Harlequin can never be quite erased, and certain writers remained ready to find the lowbrow spectacle of pantomimic surprise in the artful transitions of a tragic actor.

The development of dramatic transition must begin with the recognition of the effectiveness of pantomime, and the Faustus entertainments of the early 1720s are the most striking examples of the form's appeal. John Thurmond's production, with its fire-breathing dragon, was so successful that it soon inspired a rival version of the same story from Lewis Theobald and John Rich at Lincoln's Inn Fields. This pantomime also yokes extremes of emotion: an infernal spirit tempts Faustus, played by Rich himself, into signing his contract by summoning the spirit of Helen of Troy, yet the doctor's love-struck gaze turns with a 'start' into surprise and disappointment when she and the demon both vanish (p. 25). Later, the doctor uses his new powers to play tricks on others: his servant 'with the utmost Shew of Pleasure' prepares to drink a glass of his master's wine, only 'to his unspeakable Terror and Surprize, the Bottle flies out of his Hand, and the Wine vanishes in a Flash of Fire'. His joy has become 'the greatest Dread and Perplexity', and the slapstick comedy of the moment turns on this transition (pp. 28–29).

Rich and Theobald's *The Necromancer, or Harlequin Doctor Faustus* surpassed Thurmond's entertainment to become one of the most frequently performed works of the eighteenth century, with over 300 recorded performances between 1723 and Rich's retirement thirty years later.<sup>5</sup> Like all pantomimes, the looseness of the form allowed for considerable variation between each staging, with the addition or subtraction of episodes to cater for new fashions or scenic capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Such popular and variable entertainments brought pantomime to the centre of English theatrical culture.<sup>7</sup> For the theatre aficionado Aaron Hill and many others, such success was not a welcome development. Hill wrote sarcastically, in the seventy-seventh issue of his *Plain Dealer* periodical, of having found a 'new, and unbroken Mine, of Theatrical Treasure!' in an obscure

German tome, which he is certain will work in ‘the Contention of our Rival Stages’ as ‘the never-to-be-forgotten, the Triumphant *FAUSTUS HIMSELF* was of Happy *High German* Original!’<sup>8</sup> Having sketched out a parodic plotline about a peasant raised ‘*among Beasts*’, then tamed by a ‘Dwarf’ to perform acrobatic impersonations of squirrels, cats, and apes, Hill concludes with a dark vision of the future pantomimes such a tale will spawn.

By the second Week, after *Christmas*, we shall see a Dozen or two, of Bull-Dogs round the Tail of *Shepherd*, on *Drury-Lane-Stage*, without being able to *bite him*, while he *curvets* and *barks* with his *Back up*, and wheels safe, in *their Center*; — And *Mr. LUN*, at the other House, crawling up the Edge of one of his Scenes, and *sticking to the Roof*, like a *Spider* over the Heads of a *shouting Pit!* where he will *spin* himself into their good Graces, ’till their Necks are half broke, with the *Sublimity* of their Entertainment!<sup>9</sup>

This image of Rich (as ‘*Mr. LUN*’) turning himself into a spider and breaking the necks of his fascinated audience is perhaps the strongest but by no means the only attack made by Hill on pantomime. Having worked briefly as a manager himself at Drury Lane (1709–10) and the Haymarket (1710–11), Hill would have known how attractive a popular pantomime must have been to the perpetually cash-strapped theatres, but his writings testify to his belief that repeated staging of such entertainments came at a high cultural price.<sup>10</sup> Numerous articles in *The Prompter*, a periodical Hill produced with William Popple, take up this argument. A letter from ‘Verax’ in issue thirteen reported that the sender had saved a ‘poor, lean, ragged Phantom’ by the name of ‘*Common Sense*’ and heard her lament her departure from a stage where ‘Pantomime *introduced her constant Attendants*, Absurdity, Noise, Nonsense, and Puppet-Show’.<sup>11</sup> On 13 December 1734, Hill wrote of a recent visit to the theatre as though he were entering the wreck of English civilisation.

METHOUGHT, I found myself amidst the *Ruins of Palmyra, in the Desert*; in a solemn, pompous VOID; with here and there, a *broken Column*, an unburied *Pediment*, or tottering *Arch*, in Prospect; to remind me, that, tho’ over-run with *Weeds*, and nested-in, by *Insects*, This Empty Scene of Desolation, Horrid, as it now appear’d, had, *heretofore*, been grac’d with *Majesty*, and envied for its *Elegance*.<sup>12</sup>

This apocalyptic vision is all too easy to interpret. Hill had begun his article with the observation that ‘In a Nation, which is declining to its *Period* [. . .] *There*, the *STAGE*, will be the first, to *feel*, and *manifest*, the Infection.’ Pantomime (and Hill’s other frequent target, Italian opera) were the

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symptoms of a broader social and cultural malaise. In a letter to David Mallet in 1733, Hill spoke of how, given the recent programming choices of theatre managers, 'our *minds*, are like *sick men's stomachs*, too weak, to digest what is not minced and put into our *mouths*, by those, whose *taste* must prescribe for us'.<sup>13</sup>

The theatre had sold itself to the devil: making money from spectacular pantomimes at the expense of the nation's spirit. As Ned Ward put it in *The Dancing Devils* (1724), works like the Faustus entertainments were 'Fit only for the Approbation | Of Mortals in the lowest Station'.<sup>14</sup> Yet Hill was not without hope. He wrote to James Thompson on 5 September 1735 and wondered whether a certain way of acting and scriptwriting, one as full of surprises as a pantomime, might not reverse the decline of the English stage.

I know, indeed too well, that nothing *moral* or *instructive*, is expected or desir'd, by the modish frequenters of a Theatre; But is it therefore, impossible, they should be *surpriz'd* into correction? — The *passions* are the *springs* of the *heart*; and when powerfully struck out by the *writer*, and imprinted as strongly, by the *actor*, in their *representation*, can *force* their way over the *will*. (Hill, *Works*, II, p. 127)

The hope that Hill expresses here is by no means particular to him. Nearly forty years earlier, in the wake of Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), John Dennis and Charles Gildon, among many others, had argued that, through the performance of the passions, the stage could educate and improve the nation.<sup>15</sup> Yet Hill will be my focus in this chapter because, of all those writing about the stage in the first half of the eighteenth century and before, none provide so wide-ranging an example of thinking about the theatre. In his periodicals (both *The Plain Dealer* and *The Prompter*), his poetry, and his private letters, Hill considers almost every aspect of the theatre, from its current deplorable state to its potential for redemption and from the details of a particular performance to the specific techniques an actor would need to master in order to perform. Of course, as Christine Gerrard has shown, Hill's extraordinary career stretched far beyond the theatre too, and Brean Hammond has gone as far as calling this man 'the cultural glue that held the age together'.<sup>16</sup> By focusing only on Hill's writing about the theatre, I do not wish to deny his status as 'cultural glue'; rather, I consider Hill's remarkable breadth of interests as one of the reasons why his writing about acting was so comprehensive. Hill was alive to many, indeed most, of the intellectual movements of his day, and he found in the theatre an arena

where lots of them met. It is striking, for instance, that while his periodical *The Prompter* began as a venue for general social commentary (able to offer prompts to ‘every Performer, from the Peasant to the Prince, from the Milk-maid to her Majesty’), its coverage of attempted theatre reform in 1735 swiftly led the periodical to focus directly on the English stage as a microcosm of the nation.<sup>17</sup>

Hill’s letter to Thompson, dreaming of a style of acting that would surprise an audience ‘into correction’, which is to say, into morally correct behaviour, in fact recapitulated an idea that had already surfaced earlier that year in *The Prompter*, as part of the publication’s new focus on theatrical matters. When writing publicly, however, Hill had made the striking choice to employ terms that betrayed his vision’s debt to the very pantomimes attacked elsewhere in its run as the scourge of English cultural life.<sup>18</sup> In an issue that observed the poor quality of many contemporary actors (and the social good that was thereby lost), Hill sketched a culturally redemptive art of acting, which, through spectacular performance of the passions, would make the imagination into a new, and better, ‘FAUSTUS for the Theatres’.<sup>19</sup> Hill reasoned that ‘THE whole, that is needful in order to impress any Passion on the Look, is first, to CONCEIVE it, by a strong, and intent Imagination’. A performer then had only to ‘recollect some Idea of SORROW’ and ‘his EYE will, in a Moment, catch the Dimness of Melancholy: his Muscles will relax into Languor; and his whole Frame of Body sympathetically unbend itself, into a Remiss, and inanimate, Lassitude’. Thus transformed by the exercise of his mind, ‘let him attempt to speak HAUGHTILY; and He will find it impossible. – Let the Sense of the Words be the rashest, and most violent, ANGER, yet, the Tone of his Voice shall sound nothing but Tenderness’. A transition into anger would instead require a new intellectual effort, ‘conceiving some idea of Anger’ to ‘inflare his Eye into Earnestness, and new knit, and brace up his Fibres, into an Impatience, adapted to Violence’. The spectacle thus produced, the assumption of sorrow and the transition from sorrow to anger, is as compelling as anything in the pantomime.

All, recovering from the LANGUID, and carrying Marks of the Impetuous, and the Terrible, flash a moving PROPRIETY, from the Actor, to the Audience, that communicating immediately, the Sensation it expresses, chains and rivets, our Attention, to the Passions we are mov’d by. THUS, the happiest Qualification, which a Player shou’d desire to be Master of, is a Plastic Imagination. – This alone is a FAUSTUS for the Theatres: and conjures up all Changes in a Moment.<sup>20</sup>

The 'FAUSTUS' of this paragraph is no Harlequin, but rather the trained power of the actor's mind, which, as it acts, stirs the performer's passions into an emotional spectacle as capable of holding audience attention as any of Rich's or Thurmond's antics. Attention, Hill knew, was key: his letters record a belief that, in drama, '*attention* [...] ought, with all possible *art*, to be kept *fixed*, by the author' (II, p. 125), and it is such dangerously rapt absorption that his *Plain Dealer* article targets when it imagines Rich half-breaking theatregoers' necks as they try to follow his spidery movements. Once the audience's attention has been captured, then the theatre can, as Hill wrote to Thompson, attempt to surprise its clients into correction, letting the passions, or '*springs of the heart*', 'force their way over the *will*'.

Hill's writing combines references to the pantomime with language that makes performers and their publics seem like machines: their passions are '*springs of the heart*', and a performance 'chains and rivets' consciousness as actors' muscles '*relax*', their frames '*unbend*', and their minds '*new knit and brace up*' the nervous fibres of their bodies. Joseph Roach considers such language as evidence of Hill's debt to Cartesian physiology, especially its understanding of the body as a machine that operated 'under the mind's direction with high efficiency and in a predictable manner'.<sup>21</sup> Hill himself writes, for example, of the '*mechanic* [...] NECESSITY' that ensures your 'Voice shall *sound nothing but Tenderness*' when you '*recollect some Idea of SORROW*'.<sup>22</sup> In some respects, Hill's combination of Cartesian thought and pantomime practice is an easy one to make, since Harlequin's adventures also exploited both the machinery of the theatre and the Cartesian machinery of the performer's body. The Faustus entertainments make demands of trapdoors and of trapezoid muscles, of sliding flats and of swift reactions; although we now separate such mechanical and organic processes, such a distinction, as Roach argues elsewhere, was nowhere near so firm 300 years ago, before Romanticism and Darwin.<sup>23</sup>

It is the proximity between Cartesian understandings of the body and pantomime's practical reliance on the material affordances of Drury Lane and Covent Garden that helps to support Hill's dreams of a new Faustus for the theatre to recapture audience attention. John O'Brien introduces another key element when he describes such dreams as an effort to imagine 'how the power of *transformation* that had been thematized as an external force in the Faustus pantomimes of the 1720s could be internalized' (emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> In the Faustus pantomimes alone, a salesman transforms into a woman, Harlequin morphs into a bear, and the dead return to

life. Other transformations, of humans into things and of one object into another, were common, and they helped pantomimes exercise what one reviewer called ‘an enchanting fascination that monopolizes the mind to the scene before it’.<sup>25</sup> Such moments of metamorphosis are behind Hill’s own explanation for why an actor’s ‘*Plastic Imagination* [. . .] is a FAUSTUS for the *Theatres*’: because it ‘conjures up *all Changes*, in a Moment’. Of course, the changes that Hill has in mind are not the vulgar surprises of the polymorphous Harlequin but those described earlier in his article, the changes from one passion to another, the mental work required to cross Cartesian categories and go from the ‘passive Position of *Features*, and *Nerves*’ found in ‘SORROW’ to the active power of ‘*Anger*’ convincingly. Although the process is still a mechanical one, the agent here is the imagination, which Hill calls ‘*Plastic*’, in Samuel Johnson’s sense of the word as ‘having the power to give form’ – the power, in other words, to reshape the body in the image of a passion.<sup>26</sup>

Quite how extensive that power is, though, only appears in the continuation of Hill’s article.

THUS, the happiest Qualification which a *Player* shou’d desire to be Master of, is a *Plastic Imagination*. – This alone is a FAUSTUS for the *Theatres*: and conjures up *all Changes*, in a Moment. – In one Part of a *Tragic Speech*, the conscious Distress of an Actor’s Condition stamping *Humility* and *Dejection*, on his FANCY, strait, His *Look* receives the Impression, and communicates Affliction to his *Air*, and his *Utterance*. – Anon, in the same Speech, perhaps the Poet has thrown in a Ray or two, of HOPE: At This, the Actor’s *Eye* shou’d suddenly *take Fire*: and invigorate with a *Glow of Liveliness*, both the *Action*, and the *Accent*: till, a *Third* and *Fourth* Variety appearing, He stops short, upon *pensive* PAUSES, and makes *Transitions*, (as the Meanings *vary*) into *Jealousy*, *Scorn*, *Fury*, *Penitence*, *Revenge* or *Tenderness*! All, *kindled* at the *Eye*, by the Ductility of a *Flexible Fancy*, and APPROPRIATING *Voice* and *Gesture*, to the very *Instant* of the *changing Passion*.<sup>27</sup>

As before, Hill describes a change of passion. This time, however, the emphasis falls not so much upon the mechanical process by which the performer goes about ‘stamping *Humility* and *Dejection*, on his FANCY’ but rather on how such a process brings the author’s script to life through a sequence of theatrical metamorphoses. Indeed, no sooner has the actor mastered one passion than Hill hypothesises that he may be required to launch into another, shifting from ‘*Dejection*’ to its polar opposite, ‘HOPE’. Accordingly, ‘the Actor’s *Eye* shou’d suddenly *take Fire*’, with the speed of this change bringing a ‘*Glow of Liveliness*’. This is not, however, the end of

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the process, and the actor, Hill makes clear, will continue to perform his Cartesian conjuring, as ‘a *Third* and *Fourth Variety*’ appear and he, like Proteus, ‘makes *Transitions*, (as the Meanings vary) into *Jealousy*, *Scorn*, *Fury*, *Penitence*, *Revenge* or *Tenderness*!’

When Faustus came to Drury Lane in the winter of 1722–23, he showed theatregoers the power of pantomime to create enthralling popular spectacles. Some of those in the audience, however, found the price of such performances to be too high. Aaron Hill – a man with interests in many parts of eighteenth-century society – saw in Harlequin’s triumph nothing less than the debasement of English culture and said so, loudly and frequently, in his periodicals and letters. Yet Hill also saw an opportunity. The actor’s imagination could supplant the tricks of the pantomime and become a new, but equally attractive, Faustus for the theatres. This was not as radical a move as it may now seem. In accordance with Cartesian physiognomy, the imagination of the actor would operate on the performer’s body with the same mechanical precision as the stage technology that Harlequin’s magic relied on. Such operations would transform the actor before the eyes of the audience: not from man to woman or dead to living (as in the work of Rich, Theobald, and Thurmond) but from jealous to scornful, furious to penitent, and enraged to tender. These emotional transformations, called transitions and occurring either ‘suddenly’ or in ‘*pensive PAUSES*’, promised to redeem the English stage, supplanting the pantomime Faustus of 1723 with a sorcery of feeling, exercised by the actor’s plastic imagination and capable of such affective magic as would reinvigorate tragic speech and surprise a stultified audience into correction.

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All, *kindled* at the *Eye*, by the Ductility of a *Flexible Fancy*, and APPROPRIATING *Voice* and *Gesture*, to the very *Instant* of the *changing Passion*.<sup>28</sup>

This sentence recapitulates the process of performance described in the rest of *Prompter* 66. Referring back to the actor’s ‘*Transitions*’, it reminds us how such physical transformation owes its genesis to the protean powers of the imagination, or ‘*Flexible Fancy*’. On top of this, however, Hill is also searching here for a way of understanding why this type of performance would fascinate. His formulation of what the actor is aiming for, the fit of his performance to ‘the very *Instant* of



the *changing Passion*', is his attempt to capture the peculiar tensions of a style of acting that relies on emotional transformation for stage effect. On one hand, the kind of performance Hill describes places great emphasis on the discrete and forceful rendition of a passion as it appears in 'the very *Instant*' (when hope replaces dejection or joy eclipses anger). On the other hand, however, the force of that iconic moment and its ability to engage an audience for any duration is predicated on the sense that no passion is simple or permanent but is instead dynamic: one emotional transformation will succeed another, each influences our understanding of those around it, and even a single passion is a complex and unstable entity. The passion, in Hill's words, is thus always '*changing*'. By writing of 'the very *Instant* of the *changing Passion*', Hill seeks to describe a multidimensional union of arresting moment and temporal flow, forceful impression, and vivid instability. This productive tension constitutes the motor of compelling spectacle, and so what actors and authors must aim for. To achieve these ends, the combination of the iconic and dynamic, they require not just the true Faustus of imagination but rigorous analysis of the ebb and flow of emotion within a text.

Hill himself was aware of this. As early as the third issue of *The Prompter*, he attacks Colley Cibber for his inability to render 'the rapid, ungovernable Impetuosity, of a *Hotspur*', the 'sanguinary, and disdainful, Subtleties' of Richard III, and even, at the other end of the spectrum, 'the dignified Inflexibility of a *Cato*'.<sup>29</sup> In short, Cibber is but one more proof that 'IT is a Prodigy to see an Actor, *General*, *Plastick*, and *unspecificate*': he, like so many others, cannot shape his mind and body to follow the emotional nuance of his role (unless, as Hill points out, Cibber was playing a fop).<sup>30</sup> Hill, in later issues of his periodical, gives examples of such nuances, displaying remarkable sensitivity to the text in order to do so. In issue 103, Hill offers a comparison of Tamerlane and Bajazet, with attention to how each part should be performed. Tamerlane, for example, contains as much 'Fire' as Bajazet, but 'That of *Tamerlane* shines, *inclos'd*, and *defended*'.<sup>31</sup> To prove his point, Hill offers several close readings.

"I WARN thee, to take HEED. ————— I am  
 a MAN:  
 "And have the Frailties, common to Man's Nature.  
 "The fiery Seeds of WRATH are in my TEMPER:  
 "And may be blown, up so FIERCE a BLAZE,  
 "As Wisdom CANNOT RULE.

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COU'D it have been *possible*, in plainer Words, to shew the *Struggles*, the *Restraints*, the active labour'd *Glowings*, of a *suppress'd Indignation*, painfully *withheld* by Recollection?<sup>32</sup>

Much of the work of Hill's analysis here is done in the body of the quotation, where small capitals, italics, and a dash make visible what he calls 'the active labour'd *Glowings*' of Tamerlane's mind. These markings are typical of Hill's quotation practice (and, in places, of his prose style too) and are worth considering in relation to recent work on the history of typographical markings. Dashes, in particular, have been analysed by Anne Toner as one of a group of what she calls 'ellipsis marks'.<sup>33</sup> Although she does not mention Hill in her study, his insertion of a dash at this point illustrates what Toner observes to be a crucial element of such a mark: that it 'in its essence yields to the performance of others'.<sup>34</sup> Hill's addition of a long dash to the original text of Nicholas Rowe's *Tamerlane* (1701) opens it up, revealing a place where the author's writing will yield to the actor's art. As Toner puts it elsewhere, such 'Ellipsis indicates to varying degrees, the submission of the text to external definition', and Hill's writing here carries out such a process on the behalf of the performer.<sup>35</sup> Of course, the dash is just one tool in Hill's arsenal of typographical techniques, whose usage aims to mark everything that a printed script elides but that the apprentice performer needs. What Toner's writing shows so well is that Hill's quotation practices are double-edged: on one hand, they illuminate the nuances that performance can give to written speech; on the other, they are – as a combination of capitals, italics, and dashes – more prescriptive than a single ellipsis mark, forcing the script into a carefully defined, submissive position.

Having thus worked over Tamerlane's speech, Hill goes on to point out the consequence of its newly visible pauses and emphases for the performer: 'shall an *Actor* be permitted to suppose, He *reaches This*, by smooth, untouching *Indolence?* the round, and easy *Oiliness*, of Utterance without *Mark*, or *Meaning?*'<sup>36</sup> In other words, the stage rendition of this passage must mark out the contours of its suppressed intense emotions with the same clarity as Hill's typographical innovation has done upon the page. Five further examples of Tamerlane's fire are then given before Hill clinches his argument with one final ingenious example.

HEAR him, when he *releases* the *Turk*, in Compliance with the Prayer of *Arpasia*.

"Sultan,—*be SAFE*-----REASON RESUMES *her Empire*

"*And I am, COOL, AGAIN.*

AND, here, *I think*, we may *Sum up the Evidence*. —Since *Reason* cou'd not RESUME, an Empire, which she has not LOST: nor cou'd *Tamerlane*,