# Alexis Piron: Arlequin-Deucalion [Harlequin-Deucalion] (3127 words)

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- Ed. by Síofra Pierse, University College Dublin, Jenny Mander, University of Cambridge
- *The Literary Encyclopedia.* Volume 1.5.2.04: *Eighteenth-Century French Writing and Culture: the Enlightenment*, 1700-1800.


The history of the two major Parisian fairs of Saint Germain (which ran for a few weeks around Easter) and Saint Laurent (which ran during August and September) can be traced back to the twelfth century, but they were particularly successful in the latter part of the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries. They featured, amongst other things, performing animals, marionettes, acting troupes, and acrobats, who sometimes also incorporated dramatic elements into their displays to give them a sense of unity. When the old Italian theatrical troupe, who had been resident in Paris during much of the seventeenth century, was banned by the king in 1697, the Fair actors saw a gap in the market and began to supply comedy in the style of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. This gave rise to a strange hybrid: home-grown French comedy which nevertheless used the archetypes of Italian theatre, chief among them Arlecchino (Arlequin in French and Harlequin in English). However, this was not the only feature shaping the theatre of the Fairs, for the established theatres of Paris held monopolies on the types of theatre they performed: the Théâtre Français held the monopoly on dialogue in French; the Italian troupes (a new Italian company returned to Paris in 1716) held the monopoly on dialogue in Italian; the Opéra (or Académie Royale de Musique) had the monopoly on song and dance. These monopolies were not rigid, the Italians performed in French, and they and the French included song and dance in many of their plays, but the official theatres were enthusiastic in their use of them to suppress the Fair theatres. This led to the Fair troupes seeking various ways of trying to perform without being closed down for breaking the law, such as plays in monologue form, mime plays, or plays in nonsense languages. Particularly inventive were the *pièces à écriteaux* [placard plays] in which the dialogue was written on placards lowered from the flies, and the audience sang it to well known tunes (this technique of writing new words to existing tunes is the original meaning of the term *vaudeville*). Negotiations with the Opéra, culminating in 1714, allowed the actors themselves to sing, which led to the creation of *opéra-comique*: sung drama, mainly in *vaudevilles*, with as much spoken dialogue between the musical numbers as the actors dared to include. (Later in the century *vaudeville* would be replaced by original music.)

This did not stop the attacks on the Fairs by the established theatres, and in 1718 they were closed down completely. There was a tentative reopening in 1720, but in 1722 another attack was made, and most of the troupes resorted to performing *opéra-comique* with marionettes, since the puppets were not covered by the ban. Only the acrobat Francisque, who had just arrived at the Fair with his troupe in 1722, insisted

on performing himself, and, in order to do this, he resorted to an old Fair staple for avoiding the law, the monologue, asking Alexis Piron to provide the text. Piron's friend Rigoley de Juvigny recounts in his "Vie d'Alexis Piron" [Life of Alexis Piron] which introduces the complete works of Piron that he published in 1776, that Francisque gave Piron an advance of 100 écus with a promise of more if he fulfilled the commission. Piron completed the play in two days, but returned the 100 écus with the manuscript, telling Francisque that he should pay him only if the work was good, and he should burn the manuscript if it was not. Francisque gave him 200 écus (Rigoley de Juvigny I.38-43). The work was entitled *Arlequin-Deucalion* [*Harlequin-Deucalion*], a title typical of the Fairs which indicates that the archetype Arlequin is playing the mythological Greek Deucalion, a combination which results in a version of the classical figure who displays all the traditional character traits of the *commedia* character: Arlequin is greedy, lustful, and self-serving, as well as being cowardly, but he is also contemptuous of authority and pomposity.

Piron's play is based on the Greek flood myth, perhaps best known in the retelling by the Latin author Ovid in Book 1 of his *Metamorphoses* (ll.253-415). Zeus (Jupiter or Jove for Ovid), angry at the wickedness of men, sends a flood to destroy them. When he sees that the only survivors are the virtuous couple Deucalion and Pyrrha, whose boat has landed on Mount Parnassus, he brings the flood to an end. The goddess Themis instructs them to veil their heads, loosen their clothing, and throw the bones of their great mother behind them; Pyrrha is confused, but Deucalion understands that their great mother is the Earth, and her bones are rocks. They follow the instructions: those rocks thrown by Deucalion become men and those thrown by Pyrrha women, and so the world is repopulated.

The first act of Piron's play begins with Arlequin arriving on Parnassus alone, not in a boat, but astride a wine barrel. He has lost Pyrrha, whom he believes dead: we later learn that he was swimming through the water having placed Pyrrha on a kite and tied the string around his neck. When he spotted the barrel and tried to swim towards it, the wind was pulling the kite in the opposite direction and threatening to strangle him, so, his attraction to the wine in the barrel exceeding his loyalty to his wife, he cut the string. (This bizarre narrative is typical of Piron's sense of fantasy.) While musing on his situation, he hears a voice off-stage and enters into an argument with it, only to discover it is a parrot. (Given that a real parrot would be unlikely to be able to deliver its cues accurately, the fact that the audience never sees it but only hears it from the wings suggests that it was impersonated by an actor, thus breaking the monologue rule, but could anyone have proved this?). Melpomène [Melpomene], muse of tragedy, enters uttering tragic exclamations. Arlequin proposes marriage to her, but she ignores him and departs. Next Thalie [Thalia], muse of comedy, enters. Arlequin reflects that she will be unable to keep silent, so puts his hand over her mouth. She flees in anger, and an acrobatic display by sylphs leads to the second act. Pyrrha arrives on the back of Pegasus, who then leaves; she weeps, believing herself the sole survivor of the flood, then falls asleep. Apollo finds her, and, struck by her beauty, plays on his flute a well known aria; the audience would have been able to supply the words themselves. Arlequin arrives, complaining, but eventually spots Apollo and, recognizing his wife as the object of his attentions (he too knows the

words of the aria), chases him from the stage with his slapstick. (This weapon carried by comic characters of the *commedia dell'arte* is the origin of the modern term for vigorous, or violent comedy.) He discovers that Pyrrha has been stuck dumb by fright. Understanding from her signs that she was rescued by Pegasus, he goes to fetch him. Pegasus being a symbol of literature, this version has donkey's ears and turkey's wings to represent the current state of the art; after an extended satire on this subject, Arlequin decides to go to the temple of Themis to discover how to repopulate the world, and a ballet leads to the third act.

Arlequin rants about the impenetrability of the goddess's advice: to veil themselves and throw the bones of their grandmother behind them (it is characteristic of the Fairs that the mythological "great mother" should become the more prosaic "grand'mère" [grandmother]). Apollo tries to help, singing the tunes of familiar *vaudevilles* and speaking the refrains, but, when this fails, Arlequin once again chases him from the stage. Having already established that the barrel does not contain wine, as he had hoped, he decides to examine its contents, and finds various things that remind him of, and cause him to reflect on, the wickedness of the old world, including a gun and money. Finally, he pulls out a puppet, Polichinelle [Punch], who introduces himself as Momus, explains the goddess's instructions, then asks to be thrown into the sea, as he has become ashamed of talking nonsense; Arlequin duly obliges. In accordance with Momus's explanation of the oracle, Arlequin and Pyrrha throw rocks over their shoulders, and give birth to a farmer, a craftsman, a member of the military nobility, a member of the legal profession, and a composite figure who represents all aspects of the clergy. The five men, who are accompanied by only four women, immediately begin to fight, and have to be separated by their father. Arlequin reflects on the injustice of the fact that the others will look down on the farmer; tells the craftsman to resist the corruption of the towns; tells the soldier to show respect and not to be proud; expresses displeasure at the lawyer; and rails against the corruption of the clergy, who do not need a female mate to propagate their race (hence the need for only four women). The play ends with another ballet.

The three-act structure stresses the virtuosity of both the author and the actor in sustaining a play in monologue form on such a scale, but another aspect is perhaps more surprising. We would normally consider that the most obviously virtuosic element in writing a monologue is the author's ingenuity in confining himself to a single speaking role. And yet Piron introduces actual dialogue with both the parrot and the puppet, Melpomene utters tragic exclamations, and Apollo speaks some short phrases from *vaudevilles*, all aspects which could be said to compromise the author's display of skill. However, we need to consider that Piron was writing in monologue form not because he chose to, but because the law forced him to, something which is stressed even in the play itself, where the *commissaire* [police commissioner], who was present in the audience waiting to bring the performance to an end if the law was broken, is actually addressed in the text. So, for Piron, the virtuosity lies in flirting with the boundaries between what was legal and what was not, pushing them to the limit: animals and puppets were not covered by the laws against dialogue; Melpomene never says anything that makes enough sense to constitute dialogue (her conventional but meaningless exclamations could perhaps be compared to the use of

nonsense languages in some other plays); and presumably he got away with Apollo's pronouncements because they were so brief and belonged to the *vaudeville* tradition. Still, the fact that the dialogues with the parrot and the puppet are both so brief is clearly intended to prevent them from compromising the overall sense of the virtuosity of the monologue.

One of the common themes of the Fair repertoire was satire or parody of the established theatres, and the association of the Deucalion myth with Parnassus, a mountain sacred to Apollo, god of (amongst other things) poetry and music, and the muses, allows him to introduce characters who represent the repertoire of the French and Italian theatres, and the Opéra. (Although the French theatre performed comedy as well as tragedy, here Melpomène, muse of tragedy, represents them, while Thalie represents the Italian theatre, and Apollo the Opéra.) More unusual is the introduction of Momus, god of ridicule or mockery and presiding deity of the Fairs, for through him Piron satirizes even the Fair theatres themselves; the precarious position of the Fairs meant that it was usual for them to use their work to defend themselves, but in Piron's play their representative is thrown into the sea. The play also contains punning put-downs of two of the three principal writers for the Fairs, Fuzelier ("Que d'ici à la fin des temps on n'entende plus parler de pistolets, de fusils, ni de Fuzilier" (III.3), Rigoley de Juvigny III, 48) and Lesage ("Pourquoi le Fou […] ne diroit-il pas de bonnes choses, puisque Le Sage […] en dit de si mauvaises?" (III.4), Rigoley de Juvigny III, 53-54): presumably the third, d'Orneval, escaped only because of the impossibility of creating a pun based on his name. It is as if Piron and Francisque are standing alone defending the Fair tradition and the use of live actors when the writers of *opéra-comique* have capitulated by resorting to the use of marionettes.

Nevertheless, despite this attack on the Fairs, in this *Arlequin-Deucalion* play Piron makes use of a whole range of techniques that were typical either of the Fair actors' strategies for avoiding prosecution or of the Fairs more generally: performing animals, puppets, mime, acrobatics, *vaudeville* and, of course, monologue itself. The fact that this attack on the authors and performers of *opéra-comique* and their marionettes is simply a stance adopted for this particular play, and the circumstances in which it was written, is proved by the fact that playwright Piron went on to write many more plays for the Fairs, all *opéras-comiques*, some of which were performed by marionettes.

Satirical commentary on other theatrical troupes is not the only satire found in *Arlequin-Deucalion*. The third act, in particular, is rich in social satire: for example, where Arlequin comments both on what he finds in his barrel and what he thinks of his offspring. Again, some of this is characteristic of the Fairs: the legal profession and certain members of the clergy were traditional targets, but Arlequin's comments that the farmer is the most necessary member of society and that he will nevertheless be despised by his fellows, his disparagement of the arrogance of the soldier, the representative of the prestigious *noblesse d'épée*, and the criticism of guns and money were all more unusual, and perhaps even quite daring in the case of the criticism of conventional social hierarchy.

The historical tendency to value high art over popular culture, as well as its fondness for topical satire, means that Fair theatre was a largely ephemeral genre. It is true that

Lesage and d'Orneval attempted to preserve the best of the repertoire in their valuable nine-volume *Théâtre de la Foire; ou, L'Opéra comique* (with a tenth volume edited by Carolet) (1721-37), but this did not prolong the performance history of the works. In any case, this collection included only one of Piron's plays (in abbreviated form), and the fact that *Arlequin-Deucalion* was not an *opéra-comique* put it outside their scope. Fortunately, this play was published after Piron's death, along with fifteen of his *opéras-comiques* written for the Fairs, in the edition of his complete works compiled by his friend Rigoley de Juvigny (1776). Nevertheless, it was his best comedy for the French troupe, *La Métromanie*, that kept his reputation as a playwright alive during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. Hence, when Jacques Truchet published a small selection of Fair plays, including *Arlequin-Deucalion*, in volume one of his two-volume anthology of eighteenth-century theatre (1972-1974) it was a revelation for many readers. Two anthologies devoted entirely to the Fair repertoire followed in the next two decades (Lurcel, 1983; Connon and Evans, 1996). Despite being the only text in any of these publications not taken from Lesage and d'Orneval's collection and also the only one not in *opéra-comique* form, *Arlequin-Deucalion* was the only text to be included in all three anthologies. Another sign of the renewal of interest in this repertoire was found in two key publications of the 1980s: Michèle Venard's *La Foire entre en scène* (1985) and Robert M. Isherwood's *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (1986). Fair theatre had found a new audience, and *Arlequin-Deucalion* was generally judged to be one of the best of its products. Part of its success is quite simply the result of Piron's wit and virtuosity in handling the monologue form, but much of its cleverness also resides in the fact that, despite its satirical attacks on the whole of contemporary theatre, including the Fairs, it also comprises almost an anthology of the various techniques used over the years by the Fair theatres to circumvent the monopolies of the established theatres. When it comes to the possibility of performance in the modern theatre, *Arlequin-Deucalion* suffers from the same problem as the Fair repertoire in general: the topicality of much of the material means that a modern audience is unlikely to get the point of many of the jokes: there are many more topical references in this play than in most plays of the Fair repertoire. Performances of some *opéras-comiques* have been mounted in recent years by the musician Jean-Luc Impe, and here the music helps, even if the familiarity of the tunes for the original audiences has been lost, but none of these plays is likely to have a significant future on the contemporary stage. However, they do give great pleasure on the page, and, furthermore, they provide a fascinating picture of theatrical activity in the early eighteenth-century beyond the confines of the established theatres. In political terms, plays from the Fair repertoire such as Piron's *Arlequin-Deucalion* can even be seen as an illustration of people's determination to fight against unreasonable restrictions, underlining the strength of actors" need to act, despite the obstacles put in their way.