

NEWSLETTER  
of  
The American Handel Society

---

Volume XXIII, Numbers 1-2

Spring/Summer 2008

---

## ORATORIO À LA MODE

In spring 2007, I published a curious calendar from 1732 that wonderfully captured Handel's production of *Esther* in the heat of its triumph.<sup>1</sup> The document, as well as my report, placed the oratorio in the broad context of London's buzzing life. It made palpable that, for the newsroom in May 1732, *Esther* overcame its theatrical milieu to join in visibility the chief political and social events of the day.

Published on May 16, the calendar is also the first printed commentary on *Esther's* reception, predating *See and Seem Blind* by two weeks. This last, written in late May<sup>2</sup> and published on June 8,<sup>3</sup> remains the only description of the oratorio as theatrical craze. I am pleased to pair it with a new source from late June, which further supports and expands this claim.

"*Reflections on some modern Plays*" appeared in the short-lived (and now very rare) periodical *The Comedian, or Philosophical Enquire*<sup>4</sup> and establishes a new link between the *Esther* craze and Henry Fielding's *The Modern Husband*, also produced in early 1732. I reprint it here for the first time from the copy at Harvard's Houghton Library.

### *Reflections on some modern Plays.*

I Lately payed a Visit to a Yorkshire Gentleman, just come to Town, who told me that several in the Country entertain a Suspicion of the Booksellers presuming to publish bad Plays which were never performed on any Stage, and to print them as acted at the Theatres in *Drury-Lane, Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, &c.* with the Names of the Players opposite to the Names of the Characters; and this Art, say'd he, they are [12] supposed to use as an Imposition on their Customers who live at a great Distance from *London*; some of which buy every Play that is acted. I wonder, continues he, why the Managers of the Theatres will suffer themselves to be abused, in such a Manner, by the Chicane of Booksellers, if the Law has any Redress for them.

He was going on in the same invective Strain, taking the Facts for granted, till I interrupted him by asking his Reasons for suspecting the Booksellers guilty of such Frauds.

My Reasons! says he. Can any Man of common Sense (and here he began with a Tone of Indignation and Contempt) read the dramatic Pieces which have been printed within these few Years, such as the Tragedy of

*Timoleon, Periander, Medea, the Ballad-Operas of Sylvia or the Country-Burial, the Devil to pay, and the long Catalogue of Rubbish* published these last three Winters, under the Denominations of Tragedys, Comedys, Farces, and Ballad-Operas, and suppose the Managers of the Theatres would affront their Audiences with the Representation of such Stuff? Can any one read the comical Incidents in the Tragedys of *George Barnewell, and Injured Innocence*, and the dismal Passages in some late Comedys not to be rival'd, and imagine that the two *Cibbers*, who are reputed Judges of Something more than Action, and the few other good Actors of that House, would ever burden their Memorys with such an Heap of indigested Trash, or condescend to be the Spokesmen of such Nonsense?

Here I interrupted him again, and assured him, notwithstanding his great Surprise, that all the Plays which he had named had been performed in *Drury-Lane, and Lincoln's-Inn-Fields*; but, as I have been neither a Spectator nor Reader of [13] any of them, I told him I could not judge of the Justness of his Censure; and that my Opinion of his good Taste and Understanding will keep me from reading them. One Play I mentioned to him as not liable to the Censure which he had passed on the rest; which is the modern Husband. I own, says he, that is a Comedy which gave me Pleasure, tho it is not entirely conformable to the Rules of the Drama.

By the Rules of the Drama, says I, you mean, I presume, the Rules of Critics, who have no Right to impose Rules: the antient Writers of Tragedy and Comedy divided their Plays into five Acts, in which we have generally followed their Example; and I know no other stated Rule to be observed; and that may be departed from sometimes without any Disadvantage. Unerring Reason is the only Guide in Tragedy and Comedy, tho a Man who is merely a reasonable Man, and no more, is not qualified to write either, particular Talents being requisite for both, under the Conduct of Reason; and that Poet who wants any other Rule besides Nature or Reason mistakes his Province when he attempts to write. The *modern Husband* I acknowledge to have some Scenes independent on the main Busyness of the Play, and some Expressions the Omission of which would be no Detriment to the Work; yet it has

Wit, Humour, Satire, and moral Reflections not unworthy the Pen of the best Stoic. If indeed the Author had made every Scene conducive to the principal Design, to the Plot of the Play, and as dependent one on the other as every Link in a Chain, and every Expression as necessary as every Scene, he would have produced a more perfect Piece than it now is: and I doubt not but that he, who is capable of writing so entertaining a Play as it [14] now is, is ingenuous enough to confess these Truths, and to acknowledge that his Intent was to expose particular Vices and Follies, to make these ridiculous and those odious, to give his Audience Pleasure and himself Profit, and that he had not Leisure to make it otherwise than it now is, and that he laughs, without Anger, at those who expose themselves by a fruitless Endeavour to expose him.

My Friend, who now thought it his Turn to speak again, asked me what I thought of the Character of *Lady Charlotte*, some Objections to which he had seen, he said, in a poultry weekly Journal in March last, the Title of which he had forgot. I own the Possibility, continued he, of such a Character, tho I never met with one like it, which I attribute to my living chiefly in the Country, and not conversing much with Ladys in Town. To whom I replied, you speak like a reasonable Man; and the ignorant *Thing*, who published his Objections in the poultry weekly Journal of which you before spoke, discovered himself to have no Notion of Humour, and that his Conversation was not among Persons of superior Rank, especially the Ladys; for, if it was, he must have met with more than one *Lady Charlotte*, or at least with some who partake of that ridiculous foolish Alertness, and Volubility of talking Nonsense, joined to an extraordinary Opinion of themselves, and a Fondness for Gaming and every fashionable Folly, all which constitute the Character of *Lady Charlotte*: so whether the Follies represented in her meet in one real Person, (as I am certain they often do) or are divided among several, and she made a Compound of them all, she is a proper Character for Comedy. As I was proceeding in my Remarks [15] on this Character a young Lady came in, and, immediately addressing herself to my Friend, occasioned the following Dialogue.

*Lady.* Mr. *Manly*! Where have you been these fifty Years since last Summer?

*Manly.* Where, Niece, have you learn'd this Manner of talking within these few Months? Who do you keep Company with?

*Lady.* My Companions, Sir, are all Persons of the *Beau Monde*, who have not their Equals at Hazard, and who never stay from a Masquerade or Opera.

*Manly.* I hope, Madam, the Masquerade has no Charms to you.

*Lady.* The Masquerade! I have been at a hundred this Winter. Ha'n't you seen the *Oratorio*, Sir?

*Manly.* I have read it.

*Lady.* Read it! But the Music! O! I cou'd sit a thousand Years to hear it!

*Manly.* I wou'd not be a Slave, Cousin, to what ought to be the Amusement of but a few Minutes.

*Lady.* And ha'n't you really been at the *Oratorio*? All the World is fond of the *Oratorio*.

*Manly.* Then all the World is fond of Nonsense.

*Lady.* Well, you are the strangest Man still that ever was. I have five hundred Visits to pay this Morning, and have made but fifty of them yet. Mr. *Manly*, your Servant.

[*The Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer* 3 (June 1732): 11-15.]

Anything but "reflections" (and clearly not on "some" plays), this is a shrewdly constructed defense of *The Modern Husband*, Fielding's best theatrical work. Originally composed in summer 1730, the comedy premiered on February 14, 1732 at the Drury-Lane theatre. Its commercial success (14 performances, including a Royal command) brought nearly £1000 to Fielding,<sup>5</sup> but also generated strong criticism in the Opposition press, if only for its dedication to Robert Walpole.<sup>6</sup>

The "poultry weekly Journal" mentioned above was *The Grub-street Journal* of March 30, 1732 (no. 117), which reserved its entire front page for an attack on the play signed by "DRAMATICUS." Fielding was charged with disrespect for the rules and dramatic aims of comedy, for stuffing the plot with redundant characters and endangering its coherence. Nearly a third of the critique centers on Lady Charlotte, an "impertinent" character of Fielding's "own invention."<sup>7</sup> Although the *Modern Husband* disappeared from the stage after March 18, it had already been available in print and attacks on its dramatic merits continued through the summer. On June 29, again on the front

page of the *Grub-street Journal*, "PROSAICUS" asserted that the play "betrays want of judgment" and shows "hasty writing."

*The Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer* was one of few publications to support Fielding, and its publisher (Thomas Cooke) settles score with the *Grub-street Journal* by way of dramatization. He uses narrative and dialogue, and deploys two antithetical characters to unfold his argument. The bait here is a sour country gentleman with conservative tastes and even leanings to conspiracy theory. Aptly named "Mr. Manly," he laments the capital's falling theatrical standards and offers a blanket condemnation of recent plays (though he curiously remembers several of them by name).

From this low point, the author gradually begins to advance his case. He proposes the *Modern Husband* as a bright exception and, after securing Manly's partial consent, he goes on to support Fielding's anti-classicist stance. Nature and reason, instead of ancient models, should guide the dramatist's pen; and moral objectives (attacking vice, for instance) may override the need for structural integrity.

Only in the third section do we learn about the actual target of the piece: DRAMATICUS's attack on the portrayal of Lady Charlotte. Just when Manly questions the plausibility of such a character, the author delivers his coup. He has a fashionable lady accosting Manly and switches gear to direct speech. The concluding dialogue seems to have been lifted from Fielding's play. Compare the lady's rhetorical mannerisms and exaggerated tone with some of Lady Charlotte's statements: "I thought it impossible for any one to be alive, and not be at the Rehearsal of the new Opera. [...] Oh! ev'ry Body was there; all the World"; "I have not above fourteen or fifteen Places to call at."<sup>8</sup> *The Modern Husband* mirrors reality itself, seems to be the author's punch line. Years later, Fielding himself would recall that a Lady "of the first Rank [...] very eminent for her Understanding, declared [Lady Charlotte to have been] the Picture of half the young People of her Acquaintance."<sup>9</sup>

The piece may be a response to criticisms from March 1732, yet it seems to have been written after the publication of *See and Seem Blind* (June 8). The lady's enthusiasm for the oratorio reflects similar statements in the pamphlet:

This being a new Thing set the whole World a Madding; Han't you been at the *Oratorio*, says one? Oh! If you don't see the *Oratorio* you see nothing, says t'other; [p. 15]

Ha'n't you seen the *Oratorio*, Sir? [...] And ha'n't you really been at the *Oratorio*? All the World is fond of the *Oratorio*.

The *Esther* craze among fashionable ladies justified Fielding's portrayal of Lady Charlotte in the *Modern Husband*. The evocation of the oratorio madness a full month after *Esther*'s last performance (May 20) indicates the strong radiance of the new genre. Alas, its novelty obscured any appreciation of its content, dramatic and moral. It says a lot that both the "Reflections" and the poetic diary from May 16, fail to mention *Esther* by name. Lady Charlotte helps us understand this point: "I never know [what the Play tonight is]. [...] I saw four Acts the other Night, and came away without knowing the Name. I think, one only goes to see the Company."<sup>10</sup>

In view of Fielding's later support of Handelian oratorio – we recall a full chapter in *Amelia* set during an oratorio performance – we should take good notice that in 1732 the genre (or rather *Esther*) stood the furthest away from a moral entertainment. The reversal of its cultural polarity in the decades to follow had less to do with structural improvements and more with a shifting social context and function.

— Ilias Chrissochoidis

(Endnotes)

1 "A 'fam'd *Oratorio* ... in old *English* ... sung': *Esther* on 16 May 1732," *The Handel Institute Newsletter* 18/1 (Spring 2007): [4-7].

2 [?Aaron Hill], *See and Seem Blind: Or, A Critical Dissertation on the Publick Diversions, &c. Of Persons and Things, and Things and Persons, and what not. In a Letter from the Right Honourable the Lord B— to A— H— Esq* (London: H. Whitridge, [1732]; repr. with introduction Robert D. Hume [Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 1986]), iii-iv.

3 *The Grub-street Journal*, no. 129, Thursday 22 June 1732, [3].

4 Its nine issues ran from April 1732 to April 1733 and were written by Thomas Cooke.

5 *See and Seem Blind*, 8.

6 For discussions of the play, see Martin C. Battestin with Ruthe R. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 127-33; Robert D. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728-1737* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 121-29; and Peter Lewis, *Fielding's Burlesque Drama: Its Place in the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), 132-34.

7 Battestin, *Fielding*, 131-33.

8 Henry Fielding, *The Modern Husband. A Comedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. By His Majesty's Servants* (London: J. Watts, 1732), 26, 30.

9 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, 4 vols. (London: A. Millar, 1749), 2:180 (Book 8, Chapter 1).

10 *The Modern Husband*, 36.