English Early Eighteenth-Century Afterpiece – A Turn to the Popular

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Early eighteenth-century London theatre was characterised by growing theatre competition which, in turn, led to growing commercialization and popularization of theatre programmes. Theatre managers experimented with new genres, and in order to make the playbills as attractive as possible for their audiences, theatre programmes were divided into mainpieces, entr’acte entertainments and afterpieces. Especially afterpieces (predominantly musical masques, farces, ballad operas and pantomimes), which brought a considerable degree of serious and comic dances, buffoonery and ballads on stage, transformed the established theatrical hierarchies of the period to the extent that period commentators complained about English theatre’s degradation into frivolous entertainment. By focusing on selected afterpieces (such as ballad operas *The Fashionable Lady or Harlequin’s Opera* (1730) by James Ralph and *The Author’s Farce* (1730) by Henry Fielding), and selected period commentaries, this paper will explore the English theatre’s shift to the popular in the first part of the eighteenth century.