John Rich as Critic: The Evidence of ‘Some Remarks on the Tragedy Call’d Agis’ (1754)

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John Rich has had a rather poor reputation as a theatre manager and creative artist. Certainly, his gifts in mime and dance were widely recognised even in his own time. John Jackson witnessed Rich enacting the scene of Harlequin hatching from an egg and described the performance as Harlequin as “a master-piece in dumb show” in which “every limb had its tongue, and every motion a voice”.1 Tom Davies remarked of Rich’s performances that “his gesticulation was so perfectly expressive of his meaning, that every motion of his hand or head, or of any part of his body, was a kind of dumb eloquence that was readily understood by the audience.”2 The creativity and ingenuity that went into Rich’s pantomimes, which featured numerous startling special effects such as a flying dragon which consumes Faustus in The Necromancer (1724)3 and a giant clockwork serpent that moved through the auditorium in Orpheus and Eurydice (1740),4 have also been readily acknowledged. Tom Davies observed that Rich was “a perfect master of every thing which related to theatrical effect from splendour of dress and magnificence of decoration”.5 Benjamin Victor Rich’s approach to staging was one in which “no Expence should be spared—it should be magnificent or nothing” (Victor 1771, 28-29).6 Yet Rich’s achievements in the realm of pantomime have actually been turned against him to undermine his critical reputation. Pantomime has often been characterised as an inferior dramatic genre, with pantomimes being dismissed in the eighteenth century as “ridiculous and paltry performances” and “light dumb insults upon common sense”.7 The prejudice has continued to the present day, with references to Rich having

1 John Jackson, The History of the Scottish Stage (Edinburgh: Peter Hill et al., 1793), p. 368.
3 An Exact Description of the Two Fam’d Entertainments of Harlequin Doctor Faustus (London: T. Payne [1724]), p. 35.
5 Davies, Memoirs, I:323.
introduced “cheap farce, pantomime, and vaudeville-like entertainment” to the stage and characterisations of Rich’s pantomimes as “inine entertainments”. The success of Rich’s pantomimes led to them displacing traditional main pieces in popularity, a development which resulted in Rich being characterised as lacking any interest in serious drama and lowering the standards of public taste in the name of profit. In his day, Rich was lampooned for undermining the dignity of the stage by promoting the “Smut and Profaneness” of pantomime over more worthy “Tragick Verse” and thus popularising his entertainments “to the disgrace of public taste”. This resulted in Rich gaining a reputation as a crude businessman with little regard for artistic creativity, being coarse of manner, ignorant, and even illiterate, treating his actors and authors with contempt. The managers of Drury Lane have often been presented as having had to dilute their interest in serious drama and resort to pantomime against their will in order to compete financially with Rich. Such is the readiness to present Rich as an enemy of serious drama, who lowered the standards of theatrical taste with low popular fare, that the Covent Garden production of The Necromancer can still be presented as having been “such a success that Drury Lane, the rival house, also put on a Harlequin Doctor Faustus, in an attempt to win back trade”; this despite the fact that Drury Lane’s Harlequin Doctor Faustus was staged several weeks before Rich’s version premiered.  

Part and parcel of the denigration of Rich has been a dismissive attitude towards his taste and judgment in evaluating plays and a view that his choice of repertoire had a negative impact on the theatrical culture of the time and “did great harm to the drama”. Rich was regularly lampooned for being solely motivated by profit and lacking interest in the artistic merits of drama, with a concomitant “disinclination to try new plays”. He has been accused of having scant regard for creativity, so that he would regularly dismiss authors who submitted new plays to him with no more than a curt “Sir, it will not do!”, and often not bother to read their works at all. Many critics accused him of being indifferent to the artistic merits of drama, so long as he pleased the town, and of lowering theatrical standards by valorising superficial spectacle and trifling entertainments over works of more substantial literary value: “Shakespear, Rowe, Jonson, now are quite undone, These are thy Triumphs, thy Exploits O Lan!” Recent criticism has started to correct these negative views of Rich. He is increasingly seen as a sophisticated and serious artist whose career as a theatre manager made a significant creative contribution to eighteenth-century theatrical culture, and whose practices as a manager, far from

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being unduly harsh towards those who worked under him, were much in line with those of other theatre managers of the time.\textsuperscript{19} However bluff a demeanour he may have cultivated, he was sociable and well-connected and there are numerous instances of his generosity towards actors and the tenants on his estates in Uxbridge that belie the claims as to his ill nature.\textsuperscript{20} He was clearly not illiterate, as several surviving documents written in his hand testify,\textsuperscript{21} and his pantomimes increasingly have been seen as introducing sophisticated developments in dance and music as well as producing an intelligent mixing of genres that questions the relationship between elite and popular cultural traditions.\textsuperscript{22} The claims that Rich lacked interest in promoting traditional drama have been contested, with Paul Sawyer noting that Drury Lane in fact staged more pantomime performances than Covent Garden during Rich’s tenure and that there was little difference in the number of Shakespeare plays produced at the two rival houses.\textsuperscript{23} With regard to Rich’s attitudes towards drama, however, there has been little material available to counter the accusations directed at his critical judgement and lack of interest in literary drama. The contents of a recently uncovered holograph manuscript by Rich, however, provide new insights into Rich’s criterion for assessing literary drama. “Some Remarks on the Tragedy Call’d Agis” is an analysis and rejection of John Home’s tragedy Agis.\textsuperscript{24} Agis is set in ancient Sparta and tells of the conflict between King Agis and the ousted King Leonidas, with prominent roles played also by Agis’s ally Lysander and his wife Euanthe. Agis was staged in 1758 at Drury Lane,\textsuperscript{25} but Home began writing the play in 1746, travelling to London in 1749 to present it to David Garrick. Garrick rejected it but Home, undaunted, revised the play in the following years and in 1754 he again sought to have it staged, this time presenting it to


\textsuperscript{18} Miller, Harlequin- Horace, p. 34. See also Frans Pieter van der Voorde, Henry Fielding: Critic and Satirist (New York: Haskell House, 1966), pp. 94-96.


\textsuperscript{23} Sawyer, “John Rich’s Contribution,” pp. 92, 98.

\textsuperscript{24} The manuscript is in the National Library of Scotland, MS 16747, fols 124-25. A transcript is available in McGinley, “A Newly Identified Holograph Manuscript,” pp. 423-25. All quotations and references presented here are from this transcript.

\textsuperscript{25} Agis premiered at Drury Lane on 21 February 1758 and ran for eleven nights. It was also staged on 23 January and 3 February in 1751 “By Command of his Majesty” in 1761. See G.W. Stone, Jr. (ed.), The London Stage [...], Part 4: 1747-1776, 4 vols (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960-68), III:647-53, 839, 841.
John Rich, who also rejected it as unsuitable for the stage.\(^2^6\) Rich’s rejection, however, in this instance amounted to rather more than “Sir, it will not do!” He wrote an analysis of the play of over nine hundred words in length, enumerating its deficiencies. Rich’s critique of *Agis* is among the papers of Lord Milton in the National Library of Scotland, suggesting that Rich may have been prompted to give a fuller account of his reasons for rejecting the play by the intervention of the Scottish peer, who was a patron of Home.\(^2^7\) The resulting critique of *Agis* is the only known first-hand evidence of Rich’s criteria for assessing a literary drama and it show Rich to have been an intelligent and thoughtful critic who judged plays according to clear and sensible aesthetic standards coupled with a sophisticated understanding of audience expectations.\(^2^8\)

A large portion of Rich’s objections to Home’s *Agis* focus on the integration of the play’s elements within a coherent plot. At the outset of his critique he objects to the fact that the play’s action “is rather huddl’d and confus’d” and that “There does not appear to me a Single Scene, that may be call’d so, nor scarce any One that can be said to be dependant on another” (p. 423). Rich goes on to note a number of features that show a lack of sound plotting. He notes a lack of explanation for certain incidents, highlighting the scene where “Lysander enters Victorious, but Wounded, you dont know how” (p. 425). Among these is the entrance of the character of Euanthe for no purpose other than to recount a disturbing dream she has had: “Euanthe’s coming only to tell her Dream, in a Soliliquy, & to go off also will appear ridiculous” (p. 424). The strong suggestion here is that Euanthe needs a valid reason within the causal structure of the plot for entering and providing this information. Without this, however striking or affecting the scene may be, Rich considers it “ridiculous”. Rich returns to this point of entrances and exits repeatedly. In discussing Act 1, he makes the general comment that “most of the persons quit the Stage for Similar Reasons, because they are going Somewhere or Somebody wants them” (p. 424). He elaborates on thus in his comments on Act 2: “Leonidas goes off to meet a Nominal person only, not One who is concern’d in the play and returns in an Abrupt manner, and you know not what has been the purport of his Conference with that Nominal p[er]son” (p. 424). Rich clearly disapproves of Home’s use of these anonymous appointments or summonses as a device for managing entrances and exits, and he expects that such mysterious trysts should have some “purport” that will be revealed in the subsequent action of the play. Rich’s critical standards thus, far from being low, are rather exacting, with his concern for coherence of plot extending to the devices for bringing characters on and off the stage.

Rich’s point about Euanthe coming onstage only to recount her dream also suggests that he considers the sensational effect of the incident to be no justification for intruding it into the play. Rich was certainly not against building sensational spectacle into literary drama. He considered the lavish funeral procession in the Covent Garden production of *Romeo and Juliet* in the 1750-51 season to be a main draw for the play, so that when Mrs Bellamy observed that her move to Covent Garden had brought many people there to see her perform as Juliet, he remarked that “it is owing to the procession.”\(^2^9\) However, it is clear from Rich’s observations in the “Remarks” that he expects such spectacle to be properly integrated within the plot of the drama. Thus Rich notes that “Lysanders coming in Disguise, which he mentiond as part of his Design, makes but an indifferent Figure, all that it amounts to is, that Agis undone, and then his Wife comes on to tell him that his Friends will prove false, & his Army give him up, w^ch is not so in the Event” (p. 424). Rich is here by no means dismissive of sensational effect: his observation that Lysander’s disguise was already “mentiond as


\(^{27}\) See McGinley, “A Newly Identified Holograph Manuscript,” pp. 416-17.

\(^{28}\) See also ibid., pp. 418-22.

\(^{29}\) George Anne Bellamy, *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy*, 3rd edn (London: J. Bell, 1785), II:194-95.
part of his Design” picks up on his earlier comment that Lysander’s plan “wou’d be much better reason’d upon when brought to Action, and might be Something of a Surprize to an Audience”. In this respect, Rich is advising on ways to heighten the sensational effect of the incident. Nonetheless, this does not override the need to have Lysander’s disguise advance the plot. Rich’s dismissive comment that “all that it amounts to is, that Agis undone” indicates that he expects such a scene to be supported by matter that has substantial and unexpected consequences for the narrative. His observation that the predicted betrayal of Lysander “is not so in the event” further indicates Rich’s concern that the scene needs to have greater consequence in terms of plot for it to be justified. Other affecting incidents are criticised for a lack of explanation: “Lysander enters Victorious, but Wounded, you dont know how” (p. 425). Again, while the spectacle of Lysander entering at death’s door may well be shocking and affecting, if it is not properly accounted for in terms of narrative causality, it appears to Rich to be superfluous.

Rich makes similar points about other incidents in the play. He comments that “a Short Scene between Lysander & Euanthe about his going […] has no Business there & contributes to no End” (p. 424), clearly indicating that he expects any given scene to have some narrative consequence. He notes that “The Bringing on Agis to a Tryal in Court, will be thought impertinent as it makes no Figure” (p. 424). The word “impertinent” suggests a lack of relevance in terms of the action of the play while the comment that “it makes no Figure” suggests that the scene lacks significance in the grander scheme of the play. The trial scene, Rich suggests, has been introduced as a grand scene that will have a sensational dramatic impact, but in his view it is rendered ineffectual by its irrelevance to the larger plot and its failure to substantially carry forward the narrative. Rich similarly objects to emotionally affecting scenes that make no sense in terms of plot. He notes that “A Messenger comes in Court, at the Tryal, sent from Rhinalces wth an Acc’: that Lysanders Army was routed & he Slain on the Spot, & in the Subsequent Scene, they are talking what shall be done wth him, & how he may be Oppos’d” (p. 425). The emotive force of the suggestion of Lysander’s death is for Rich no justification for the scene if it results in incoherence in the play’s structure. The suggestion that Rich “sought spectacle as an end in itself”, privileging it over the serious narrative and intelligent characterisation of literary drama is clearly belied by his comments on Home’s Agis. Spectacle and sensational effects undoubtedly have their place in drama for Rich, but they remain entirely subordinate to the coherence of the plot structure and are expected to advance the narrative in significant ways if their inclusion is to be justified.

Rich’s attitude towards audience response is similarly a far cry from the claims that he did “all in his power to debauch public taste”. In his closing remarks to his critique of Agis, Rich makes no mention of spectacle as a factor in pleasing the audience:

There are many things I believe will be thought wanting more than are above remark’d to Compleat this Tragedy such as, Plot, Sentiment, Diction, Incidents, Connection preparation and Consequently the passions to be Affected. (p. 425).

Rich clearly privileges plot as the key factors in impacting on the passions of the audience, highlighting it here as the first element that he mentions and giving strong emphasis to matters such as “Connection” and “preparation” which ensure that the narrative will form an integrated and coherent whole. Rich’s specific observations on audience response to the play confirm this. He observes near the outset that the “huddl’d & Confus’d” plot “will leave the mind of Auditors somewhat perplex’d” (p. 423), indicating that he views narrative coherence as a primary requirement for ensuring the good reception of the play and expects his audience to react negatively to any inconsistency or lack of clarity in the plot. He notes that the audience will surely find the trial scene “impertinent” and Euanthe’s entrance only to recount of her dream “ridiculous” (p. 124).

Rich also comments on elements of subplot and of character that he feels are not properly integrated within the play and interfere with its coherence. He

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notes that several characters serve little purpose in the narrative, commenting that Sandane “has very little to do in the play” (p. 423). Of a subplot concerning Sandane’s being in love with the soldier Rhinalces, Rich observes, “Sandane shou’d confess her Love to Rhinalces, whom she never sees more, I know not”, again stressing the need for connectedness and consequence in terms of the larger plot over anything that this subplot might contribute in terms of emotive impact. Of the characters of Lysander and Euanthe, Rich suggests that their prominence threatens to displace Agis as hero: “Lysander […] will be rather look’d upon as the Hero of the play than Agis & so may Euanthe”. Rich’s account of the final scenes of Agis stresses the confusion and dilution of dramatic force as the play closes in a muddle of deaths onstage and off:

Just as he [Lysander] dies, she [Euanthe] enters from the prison finds her Lord Dead; Stabs her Self & dies. Upon this Enters Agesistrata sees Lysander and Euanthe Dead, fears for her Son Agis, Inquires of the Soldiers whether he be living, & being inform’d of his Murther, desires the Soldiers to conduct her to his Remains upon wh’ch Sandane enters raving, complains in about a Dozen lines of the Loss of Rhinalces, & runs off, and Agesistrata then ends the Play.

In this, Rich echoes the observations of Home’s friends on Agis, who had advised him several years earlier that the subplot of Euanthe and Lysander, ending with their deaths, weakened the impact of Agis’s death. Home justified the conclusions thematically, arguing of the multiple deaths that “the greatness of their distress enforces the grand moral of the piece, which is, the necessity of good government” and noting that Sandane’s final seemingly inconsequential appearance was to satisfy poetic justice, showing “vengeance upon her actions”. For Rich, however, the thematic significance of the scenes cannot justify the lack of dramatic focus and structural coherence that they produce.

Rich at times does note that the play should be better adapted to the prejudices of the play-going public, but the issues he raises have nothing to do with the audience seeking only sensation and spectacle. Rather, he is concerned about their responses to certain types of character. Rich notes that Agis’s rival, the ousted King Leonidas, “will be thought a Strange Compound of Cowardice” and comments, “I wish the audience shall not think he’ll make a contemptible figure” (p. 423). Rich returns to this topic later in the “Remarks”, observing that Leonidas “meanly intercedes to Euanthe for his Life upon Lysanders being Conqueror” (p. 425). This observation indicates that Rich believes that the “contemptible figure” that Leonidas presents will make him appear ignoble and an unimpressive villain and will fail to engage the interest of the audience. Rich Similarly remarks upon a scene between Sandane, Agesistrata and Euanthe that appears to be an early version of a scene in the 1758 edition where Sandane presses Euanthe to take the villainous Amphares as a lover. Rich comments that this “will be thought I fear to be mean and low”. In this Rich was prescient, for it was commented upon in the Theatrical Review after the play was finally staged in 1758: “the author by putting this very strange piece of advice in the mouth of a queen, has, I think, made rather too free with her majesty: it would be much more decent to keep her idle than to give her such a disreputable employment.” Rich’s observations in these instances show that in considering audience taste, rather than being concerned to satisfy a craving for sensational stage effects, Rich is focused primarily on the class and gender expectations that audiences typically bring to their responses to plays, and that he has a strong practical grasp of how these can affect the reception of a play.

Far from catering to the lowest standards of public taste, then, Rich in fact had rather high expectations of audience response to literary drama. He was clearly attuned to the kinds of social attitude and prejudice that might affect a play’s reception and he also considered the play-going public to be more

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33 John Home to James Oswald, 1 August 1750. In Memorials of the Public Life and Character of the Right Honourable James Oswald, pp. 107-111 (pp. 108, 109).
concerned with coherence of plot and the proper correlation of the various incidents within the narrative than with admiring sensational scenes and impressive spectacles for their own sake. Rich’s critique of Agis shows him to have been concerned with ensuring such narrative cohesion in terms of the relations between plot and subplot, and of dramatic incidents being properly explicated and significant in terms of the larger narrative structure. He extends this concern down to basic dramatic mechanisms such the exits and entrances of characters, which he emphasises must be plausible and make sense in terms of the plot. The good judgement that Rich demonstrates in his comments on Home’s Agis are reflected in the fact that Home adopted almost all of Rich’s advice in revising the play for its staging in 1758, removing, for instance, the love plot between Sandane and Rhinalces, preserving Euanthe and Lysander alive at the end to avoid taking the focus away from Agis’s death, and excising the trial scene and Euanthe’s recounting of her dream. Even the exits and entrances would appear to have been better managed after Rich’s advice, with characters exiting because of their dislike of other characters or because they need to go to pray, reasons which are plausible and contribute to character development.\textsuperscript{35} Rich’s “Remarks” are a vindication of his reputation as a mere purveyor of spectacle and a harmful influence on literary drama in the eighteenth century. The evidence of the “Remarks” in fact suggests that even the “disinclination to try new plays” may not be, as Paul Sawyer has suggested, a consequence of Rich’s preference for reliable money-making productions over risky new theatrical ventures: \textsuperscript{36} rather, this feature of Rich’s management may well be ascribable to Rich simply having been a more exacting and discerning judge of literary drama than his rival managers. It should be hoped, then, that John Rich’s “Remarks on the Tragedy Call’d Agis” will help finally put an end to the denigration of Rich as a theatre manager and contribute towards a recognition of him as a sophisticated and intelligent dramatic critic whose good literary judgement was a significant factor in shaping the monumental influence that he exerted on eighteenth century theatrical culture.

\textsuperscript{35} For some further discussion of Home’s alterations, see McGinley, “A Newly Identified Holograph Manuscript,” p. 422.