



PLATE 1: Arlequyn actionist (Harlequin stockholder) from *Het Grootte Tafereel der dwaasheid* (1720), courtesy of The Guildhall Library

The Great Mirror of Folly

The Mississippi Bubble and South Sea Bubble financial disasters in France and England respectively in the early eighteenth century generated an extensive array of books, pamphlets and even playing cards. One of the most fascinating of these publications appeared not in the countries concerned but in Holland and is of considerable interest to the magic historian and playing card collector on account of some of the plates therein. This Dutch work of 1720, titled *Het Grootte Tafereel der Dwaasheid* or *The Great Mirror of Folly*, is of folio size and is made up principally of satirical plates, although the text does contain the charters of important companies which were floated in Dutch cities during the period of the Bubble mania.

The engraving of magical interest is reproduced as Plate 1, “Arlequyn actionist” (Harlequin stockholder) and is 7½ by 8 inches. This print is also listed as number 1651 in the *Catalogue of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Division 1:*

Political and Personal Satires (1873). (References to this Catalogue will subsequently be given simply as B.M. with the appropriate number.)

It is the frontispiece to a comedy of the same name and depicts the stage of a theatre with Arlequyn or “Bombario” and Scaramouche respectively at the sides, holding back the curtains to reveal the scene behind. The scene is of the Rue Quincampoix in Paris, the street of the stockbrokers where the Mississippi Bubble was finally pricked, and the shop for the sale of shares is in the background. The three men on the pedestal, which is inscribed in Dutch with “English fools’ caps” and “German fools’ caps,” are pouring coins through a victim via a funnel and he delivers from his bare posterior a paper inscribed with his name, “Laaun” [John Law of Lauriston (1671-1729), the Scots financier and gambler who played such an important role in the Mississippi scheme]. There is a wealth of detail in the background but it is the foreground which is of magical interest.

On the right is “Mercury imprisoned” in a large



Close-up view of foreground of Plate 1, Arlequyn actionist (Harlequin stockholder)

cage, weeping and saying “Oh deliver me,” while another man pumps wind into the cage. Mercury is apparently the prisoner of the conjurer who displays his cards, dice and apparatus on the ground whilst appealing to the crowd with “Who will gain?” An ape squats before him with bags of coins, and near Scaramouche is written “One fool makes many fools.”

The association of a monkey with Harlequin seems to have been a common feature of prints of this era. The illustrations to the poem “The Jugglers” in various editions of John Gay’s *Fables* (Dawes, 1964) furnish another example of this association. In passing, it is worth noting that John Gay was himself a substantial stockholder in the South Sea

Company and was brought to despair and misery when the collapse occurred; it was made all the more poignant by the fact that friends on various occasions had urged him to sell his stock but he had disregarded their advice.

The *Tafereel* is a fascinating book for the bibliophile and Professor Arthur Cole of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration uncovered some intriguing information about it. Not only are the identity of the compiler and place of publication unknown and the date of the original issuance uncertain, but even copies of approximately the same issuance date are not identical! The title page bears the date 1720 and Amsterdam has been presumed to be the place of initial





Detail of Plate 2, April-kaart of kaart spel van Momus naar de nieuwste mode (April card, or Momus' game at cards after the newest fashion)

publication. The engraved register calls for seventy-four prints but neither the textual material nor the engraved prints are always identical, nor do they always appear in the same sequence in the volume. Consequently different libraries holding apparently identical volumes may well find they have unique copies.

The *Tafereel* comprises six relatively distinct parts and Part 4 is of particular interest to the collector of playing cards for it describes a set which satirised the speculative activities. The deck is called "April-kaart" and a subsequent version "Pasquin's wind-kaart." Plate 2 represents the cards of the deck engraved on one plate, as intended for separation and pasting on to cardboard for use. It is listed as B.M.1642, which catalogue devotes over eleven pages to a description and explanation of the individual cards. The translated title of the print is "April Card, or Momus' Game at Cards

after the newest fashion." The later version, "Pasquin's Wind Cards of the Wind Trade in the Year 1720," is described under B.M.1643. Eight of the Bubble cards were reproduced in the Jackdaw Series of contemporary historical documents, No.19, *The South Sea Bubble*, compiled by John Langdon-Davies, and playing card collectors might like to secure this interesting packet of material on this account, and additionally because it contains two of Carrington Bowles' prints, "The Bubbles Medley," which also depict playing cards. No.1 of these prints carries a copy of an engraving of Rue Quincampoix taken from the *Tafereel*, although in reversed form. Jackdaw No.19 additionally includes a reproduction of William Hogarth's well-known "Emblematical Print of the South Sea Scheme."

The second engraving of playing cards is titled "Magic Card or Remedy for the Wind-breaking of the South-West and the Departure of Cartouche"

(B.M.1689). It carries twenty-four distinct designs on the same plate (14 by 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches), intended to be cut apart in the manner of playing cards, and another version (B.M.1690), with the same title, has the same designs re-engraved and combined to form thaumotropes. Since half of each card is omitted the plate is half the size of B.M.1689. The cards are particularly interesting to students of the allied arts for many depict mountebanks, posture masters, tumblers, tight-rope walkers and rope

dancers. One of these shows a mountebank teaching a performing dog to go through its feats, with a man rushing forward to take one of the pieces of paper the mountebank holds before the dog.

Bubble cards from the *Tafereel* and from other sources have an important niche in British history and information concerning them is to be found in works such as Willshire (1876), Hargrave (1930) and Mann (1966).

The Rich Cabinet Collection

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