

SHAKESPEARE'S HARLEQUINADE: SOME ITALIAN
ELEMENTS IN THE EARLY COMEDIES

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AN ABSTRACT

Investigation into the possible sources of Shakespeare's inspiration as he approached the writing of his dramatic masterpieces has traditionally been undertaken by men whose interests have been chiefly literary and who have paid little attention, if any, to the influence of purely theatrical considerations on the work of the great poet-playwright. This essay shows that the importance of theatrical traditions is by no means slight if we are fully to appreciate Shakespeare's technique in the composition of the early comedies, for there is convincing evidence that he was extensively indebted to the stage-traditions developed by the professional actors of Italy during the second half of the sixteenth century. These actors formed small companies that travelled not only throughout Italy, but also abroad, bringing to the countries of western Europe a special form of entertainment—improvised comedy. Since detailed knowledge of the conventional character-types and stage-techniques of the commedia dell' arte—as the genre was later to be called—is not widespread, our introductory chapter outlines the history of its development, the quality of its entertainment and its relation to Italian literary drama in the cinquecento. The second chapter records the presence of Italian player-troupes in England in the two decades before Shakespeare began his career as a playwright. It refers to private letters,

official documents and to the literature of the period to show that English dramatists and the public in general were familiar with the traditions of the commedia dell' arte. The four remaining chapters deal sequentially with The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love's Labour's Lost, The Comedy of Errors, and The Taming of the Shrew, indicating, in the case of each play, striking resemblances to the characterization, plot-development, stage-techniques and even the language of improvised comedy. These resemblances are frequent and detailed; they convincingly suggest that Shakespeare, who constantly borrowed ideas from the treasury of European literature, drew upon the successful traditions of the Italian professional theatre to answer the promptings of his dramatic genius. His adaptations of literary sources show that he never borrows merely to imitate. This essay shows that the same is true in his use of commedia dell' arte elements in the early comedies, for Shakespeare transcends the limitations of the Italian genre, giving to its generic figures a depth and to its stage tricks a dramatic purpose which the comedians from the South, in their improvised plays, could never have achieved.

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CHAPTER I

THE COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE: ITS SUBSTANCE

AND DEVELOPMENT

One of the most interesting phenomena in the history of European theatre is the flourishing of improvised comedy in sixteenth-century Italy. Appearing as a distinct theatrical genre in the decade following 1550, it was soon to win great popularity at home and abroad and to exert considerable influence on occidental dramatic life for over two centuries. Its demise in the days of Goldoni is as curious as its dynamic growth in the cinquecento, because this phenomenon uniquely belongs to those few hundred years. Though in our own time improvisation is an intrinsic part of pantomime, of vaudevillian entertainment, and of most forms of popular comedy, it is not by any means the central component of dramatic expression for our comic actors. We are familiar with the art of ad-libbing, the entertainer's departure from a well-conned text in the interest of topical humour. The artiste in improvised comedy had a very different point of departure; he worked from a meagre plot-outline that indicated the possible business of each scene in the play and had to improvise all the dialogue and much of the action in which he was involved. He became, spontaneously, his own author and director, and consequently faced challenges to his imagination and acting skills such as no player in any other medium has had to face.

There are many historical facts that tantalize the modern scholar because documents and other manuscripts that might account for them have been lost or destroyed. This is especially true of the origins of the

commedia dell' arte. Ever since the publication of Maurice Sand's Masques et Buffons in 1856,¹ there has been an abundance of critical and historical books on the characteristics and influence of this form of comedy. Yet no individual or school of thought has provided us with any conclusive information. Sand, following the example of eighteenth-century commentators such as Luigi Riccoboni²—who, in his turn, continued the tradition of the classicists of the previous century—wished to give the commedia dell' arte an aura of respectability by tracing its genesis to the mimic Atellanae of Augustan times. Though records of Atellan comedy are at best scant and fragmentary, we know that it had fixed characters such as Maccus, a beak-nosed, humped yokel; Buccus, a companion rustic; Pappus, a pot-bellied, bald, decrepit oldster, and Dossenus, a cunning, hunchback clown.³ We also know that these characters wore masks and that pieces of stage-business called tricae were not dissimilar from the lazzi of professional clowns in the commedia dell' arte, but the sum of the evidence that makes the ludi Atellani a putative father of cinquecento improvised drama cannot establish any facts from these few superficial analogies, and cannot, certainly, explain why there is no historical evidence whatever to suggest the survival in any form of Atellan farce throughout the Middle Ages. There may be some grain of truth in this theory, but perhaps it is best to ascribe the similarities to the constant and instinctive disposition to mime and the natural propensity to parody reality of humanity in general, and of the Italian

¹Vito Pandolfi, La Commedia dell' Arte: Storia e Testo (Firenze: Edizioni Sansoni Antiquariato, 1958), Vol. I, p. 9.

²Author of Histoire du théâtre italien (Paris, 1727).

³Kathleen M. Lea, Italian Popular Comedy (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc. 1962), I, 226

people in particular, rather than cling to hypotheses of a definite, linear, historical continuity that are too full of improbabilities and contradictions.

In Der Mimus⁴ the German scholar Hermann Reich states that while all traces of the Roman mimes died out in Western Europe during the Dark Ages, some forms of primitive mimes were preserved in the East and were reintroduced into Italy by way of Venice when scholars and groups of players began an exodus westward after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Here, he implies, is the new blood that mingled with indigenous farce and led to the conception of the commedia dell' arte. This seems quite likely until we discover that one of Reich's strongest arguments is the similarity between the Turkish puppet Karagöz and the character of Pulcinella—a Mask which we know did not originate until the early 1600's, when the commedia dell' arte had already been thriving for at least half a century.⁵

Critics of another persuasion, determined to trace the origins of the new comedy to Medieval rather than classical dramatic traditions, have championed legends that give the title of "father of improvised comedy" to individual playwright-actors of the early sixteenth century such as Angelo Beolco, popularly known as "Il Ruzzante," or Andrea Calmo. Both of these men did much to fuse popular and classical themes and techniques, and in blending romantic story with satirical characterization provided later comedians with a wealth of histrionic material from which to draw:

⁴Hermann Reich. Der Mimus: Ein litterar-entwicklungsgeschichtlicher Versuch (Berlin, 1903).

⁵Allardyce Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1933), pp. 214-215.

un-Arcadian shepherds and shepherdesses, various stupid swains and clever rustic rogues, amorous old misers, licentious pastors, ridiculous pedants and parasitic servants.

The tradition inherited by Beolco and Balmo was rich and varied. The popular plays of the fifteenth century can be roughly divided into religious drama (rappresentazioni sacre), rustic farces, and humanistic comedies in Latin. The rappresentazioni sacre dramatised Bible stories, lives of saints, and folk tales suitable for religious instruction. They correspond to the mystery and miracle plays of England, but were much more polished in style, many of them written in ottava rima, though in the later 1400's many were in unrhymed verse or prose. Though chiefly didactic, many of these plays include lively, boisterous scenes whose obvious purpose is sheer comic entertainment. The rustic plays were simple in structure. Those called contrasti were mere debates involving two or three characters often caught up in the hilarious haranguing of the timeless eternal triangle situation. The maggi (May plays) were spring fiesta fare, involving clowns, masked actors and other carnival characters. The humanistic plays were academic in origin, quite pagan in tone, imitating the spirit of Terentian and Plautine comedy, but free rather than well-knit in form, and drawing upon contemporary rather than classical situations in their mockery of love and pedantry. The rediscovery of the commentaries of Donatus on Terence in 1433, however, taught the Italians the classical form of comedy, and when Ariosto began writing after the turn of the century, educated dramatists had espoused the Roman form. By 1480 Latin comedies such as Terence's Andria and the Menaechmi of Plautus were frequently acted in all the big cities of Italy. Since audiences found Roman life somewhat foreign and therefore dull, entre-actes, called intermedi or intermezzi, became a regular feature

of these performances. In these scenes the popular delight in pantomime, pageantry, dance and song was indulged, and the emphasis was mainly placed on spectacle and slapstick. When playwrights such as Ariosto, Machiavelli and Pietro Aretino presented their comedies of sixteenth century Italian life, based upon Latin models, the intermedio was a commonplace of dramatic presentation, and though dramatists deplored such extraneous amusement, we can see from the presence of the same elements in the commedia dell' arte that popular taste prevailed over artistic disapproval.⁶

The comedy of Beolco followed the pattern of neo-classical drama but retained many features of the medieval farce.⁷ Insisting on naturalness, he consistently made use of dialect and of rustic characters as a fundamental of his art. His most famous invention was Il Ruzzante (The Rustic), a clumsy, cowardly, deceitful and delightful peasant rogue—a role which he himself interpreted in play after play. Because of establishing this fixed character, because his comedy depends greatly upon established stage-tricks, and because his dramatis personae use dialect, Beolco has been credited with founding the commedia dell' arte. This, however, is not a warrantable claim.. His plays were fully written and recited by his actors; there are a very few allowances for improvisation in his scripts. Though the character of Ruzzante does not change from one play to the next, no mask in the commedia dell' arte inherits his peculiar characteristics. Even Beolco's use of dialect differs from that of the attori all' improvviso:

⁶ For a detailed description of a number of intermezzi, cf. Marvin T. Herrick, Italian Comedy in the Renaissance (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), pp. 62-64.

⁷ Herrick, 43.

The radical difference between the use of dialect by Ruzzante and the 'comici dell' arte' has a modern parallel in the contrast between the use of a brogue by the Irish Players which has an artistic value, and the pseudo-Irish of the music-hall anecdote which is a comic handicap. Beolco is the J. M. Synge of the Playboys and tinkers of north-east Italy.⁸

Andrea Calmo was as famous for his playing of old men as Beolco was for his portrayal of Ruzzante, (a name that has become synonymous with his own). Calmo went beyond Beolco's use of the Paduan dialect, giving each character a different patois. Both of them obviously influenced the development of Italian comedy in certain aspects, but to claim that either of them is founder of the commedia dell' arte is to mistake a reflection of facets for an imitation of the whole. There are other factors which were of great significance in the development of that new genre; not the least of them is the historical-cultural situation in Italy in the middle of the sixteenth century.

The rediscovery of twelve forgotten plays of Plautus in 1429, the unearthing of Donatus on Terence in 1433, the printing of comedies of Terence in 1471 and the publication of Aristotle's Poetics in 1498 are famous milestones in the history of Italian comedy. Growing interest in Terentian and Plautine comedy led to a rich neo-classical movement in drama in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Dramas studiously based on classical models but thoroughly Italian in scene and spirit were typical of this movement which we now know as the commedia erudita (learned comedy). Lodovico Ariosto, then employed by Ercole I of Ferrara to stage the comedies of Plautus and Terence, wrote a rather dull prose comedy entitled La Cassaria in 1508. He uses the techniques and situations which we associate with his Latin masters, but La Cassaria is not indebted to any

⁸Lea, Italian Popular Comedy, I, 236.

single play, and indeed has a far more complicated double plot than any of them.⁹ His I Suppositi, based upon the Captivi of Plautus, and Il Negromante, a free adaptation of the Hecyra of Terence, are better known today, the former especially, because it is the source of George Gascoigne's Supposes (1566), the first prose comedy of the English Renaissance. Ariosto was the first great figure of the commedia erudita, but other illustrious playwrights were soon to follow in his footsteps. Machiavelli's La Mandragola ("The Mandrake"), written late in the second decade of the century, is one of the finest comedies ever; characterized by its vivid picture of Florentine life, its crisp, ultra-economical, colloquial Italian, and a masterful achievement of liaison-des-scènes, it is a model of classical structure. Ten years later, Pietro Aretino, whose Marescalco ("The Horse Doctor") probably influenced Jonson's The Silent Woman, had already emerged as a naturalistic dramatist with little regard for classical decorum and restraint but with the ability to blend loose medieval plotting with Plautine situations. In 1531 appeared Gl' Ingannati ("The Deceived Ones"), a comedy by some unknown Siennese academician, a member of the Intronati; this play had some influence on Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. The list of other writers of comedy and their chief works in the next half-century would form a lengthy bibliography. It is sufficient for our present purpose to state that there was a remarkable flowering of dramatic talent in Italy in the first half of the cinquencento, a flowering that is best illustrated by reference to the remarkable wealth of similar genius in England in later Elizabethan and early Jacobean times.

The commedie erudite were composed by men of academic training and were presented by amateur actors for the entertainment of learned and

⁹Herrick, Italian Comedy in the Renaissance, p. 67.

aristocratic audiences in the palaces of Italian nobles. By the middle of the sixteenth century the demand for comedy was so great that famous actors formed travelling companies which could capably meet this demand by providing the novelty of a wide repertoire and the satisfaction of a more efficient and polished performance. The beginnings of the commedia dell'arte strikingly coincide with the formation of the early professional companies. Though in 1545 a comedy-troupe, led by Maphio di Re, known as Zanini, was already well established, there is no evidence to suggest that improvised comedy was already in existence at that date. Yet, by 1568, the year of the earliest definitive document describing such a comedy, the tradition seems already well established—the principal characters already well defined and the antics characteristic of this type of entertainment throughout the next century at least very much in evidence. The document referred to is the journal of Massimo Troiano,¹⁰ a professional musician at the court of Bavaria, who describes a performance given on March 8 of that year, on the occasion of the wedding of Duke William of Bavaria with Renata of Lorraine.¹¹ It is one of the ironies of history that Troiano's enthusiastic and carefully detailed record of what we might call a typical professional performance describes the acting of a group that was mainly amateur.

¹⁰Un discorso degli trionfi, Giostre, Apparati, e delle cose più notabile nelle sontuose Nozze dell' Illustrissimo et Eccellentissimo Signor Duca Guglielmo, Primo Genito del Generosissimo Alberto Quinto, Conte Palatino del Reno e Duca di Baviera alta e bassa nell' anno 1568 a 22 de Febraro, ecc., ecc., di Massimo Trojano da Napoli, Musico dell' Illus. ed Ecc. Signor Duca di Baviera. In Monaco . . . MDLXVIII.

¹¹The text of Troiano's description is fully translated in Winifred Smith's The Commedia dell'Arte (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), pp. 104-109, and in K.M. Lea's Italian Popular Comedy, I, 7-11.

What differentiates professional comedy from the commedia erudita is its characteristic mode of presentation. The term commedia dell' arte is an unsatisfactory and indeed an anachronistic label.

In the first place, we note that this phrase does not appear before the eighteenth century, when it seems to have been used in the sense of 'professional comedy,' as opposed to amateur or literary comedy. According to this description, arte means 'the special art of playing these pieces,' just as the phrase 'the profession' is used in theatrical parlance today to signify 'the special profession of acting.' Maurice Sand, indeed, takes it in the sense of 'artistic perfection,' but the other view seems at once more in accordance with the facts and more favoured by students of the subject. Commonly, in earlier times, the words commedia a soggetto were employed to designate this type of theatrical art, and these perhaps have more truly the air of definitive exactitude than the vaguer term by which the Italian Comedy is known today. Both suggest that this special form of theatrical activity is distinguished by the fact that the actors improvise their words (all' improviso) and work only from a plot, theme, or subject (a soggetto).¹²

We might best translate the expression then as "the comedy of professional skill," and in view of what was demanded of the actor, it seems a good description as well as an apt definition. Traditional drama is basically literary, and from the point of view of the thespian studying his part, is dogmatically prescriptive. Each role is, basically, absolutely defined by an individual dramatist who is responsible for the content and phraseology of dialogue, and who solely determines the scope, procedure and outcome of the action. The actor who assumes a particular role, if he is to be creative, must be so within precise limits; his genius is exercised in the interpretation of the dramatist's intentions and in recognising the possibilities of the author's essential concept of the meaning and function of that particular character. The commedia dell' arte actor had no such authoritative text.

¹²Nicoll, Masks, Mimes, and Miracles, pp. 215-216.