PERFORMANCE AND LITERATURE IN
THE COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE

This book explores the commedia dell’arte: the Italian professional theatre in Shakespeare’s time. The actors of this theatre usually did not perform from scripted drama but improvised their performances from a shared plot and thorough knowledge of individual character roles. Robert Henke closely considers hitherto unexamined commedia dell’arte texts to demonstrate how the spoken word and written literature were fruitfully combined in performance. Henke examines a number of primary sources including performance accounts, actors’ contracts, letters, popular poems, memorials of deceased actors, scenarios, and printed plays. He analyzes the character system in the commedia dell’arte, individual roles, and Venetian buffoni, and provides detailed case studies of early actors and actresses. While previous studies have concentrated on either the oral or the literary aspects of commedia dell’arte, this is the first book to consider how these two elements might have worked together to create this rich and fascinating theatre.

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PERFORMANCE AND LITERATURE IN THE COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE

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Washington University
For my son Nicholas, who was born when this book was begun

All my exercise, my mirth, my matter...  
He makes a July's day short as December.
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