

PERFORMANCE AND
LITERATURE IN THE
COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

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Introduction

As with the theatre of Shakespeare, the strength of the *commedia dell'arte* between 1545 and 1625 lay in its omnivorous capacity to absorb widely diverse forms, practices, and cultural strains. In particular, the Italian professional theatre melded orality and literature: the oral forms, linguistic patterns, and techniques of early-modern piazza and banquet performers; and the literate forms, verbal structures, and modes of consciousness disseminated by manuscript and the print revolution into the script-based theatre of the court and the academy. Historically, the theatre emerged in a transitional period: the print revolution was distributing writing to an increasingly wider public, but many oral techniques and habits of mind persisted, even in the ways that people read and wrote. At the heart of the *commedia dell'arte* was the structural tension between the linear, well-constructed plot based on a literary model and the centrifugal improvisations of the stand-up performer. Dramatic composition itself, which in the case of this improvisational theatre was based on the actor rather than the playwright, similarly blended orality and literacy: it employed techniques of oral composition, but the usually literate actors used literature as raw material for improvisation. Even the business practices of the professional comedy, as we shall see, were liminal in this regard: the actors used both oral agreements and written contracts, and alternatively exploited new uses of print and the late Renaissance nostalgia for the oral performer.

In the early-modern period of the Italian professional theatre, oral and literate modalities were of roughly equal weight, and the relationship could vary between that of coexistence, mutual influence, and antagonism. This study argues that the richness of the *commedia dell'arte* in this golden age lay in the balance between orality and literature, for even an antagonistic relationship could be generative. With its characters structured by a system of binary pairs, *commedia dell'arte* performance was shaped by physical, verbal, and emotional exchanges or duels

between contrasting and often antagonistic pairs: father and son, servant and master, Magnifico and Dottore, lover and beloved.¹ The most fundamental exchange of this theatre, this study contends, was that between oral performance traditions and new uses of literature.

PLAN OF STUDY

Here we will examine orality and literature not only at the verbal level but at the cultural level as well, considering things such as actors' letters functioning as "performances" for potential patrons, the status that writing acquires when a notary draws up company contracts for semi-literate actors, the actress' oral reshaping of Petrarchan poetry, popular poems dramatizing *arte* characters that could both prepare and memorialize performance, the actors' opportunistic use of published literature, and their oral exploitation of manuscript and printed "commonplace books": collections of speeches, maxims, proverbs, and riddles. As all of these cases suggest, we will be particularly interested in the interface and interaction of oral and literate forms and practices. Our field of inquiry shall be not only the organized, famous commedia dell'arte companies patronized by northern Italian courts, but what might be called the circumambient "culture" of the commedia dell'arte, extending from the court performer to the piazza mountebank.

A central theme, throughout the book, will be the nature and legacy of the '*buffone*' (buffoon), the '*zanni*' (the servant figure in the commedia dell'arte troupe), and related underworld figures such as the charlatan. These figures performed in solo piazza or banquet performance and were also incorporated into regular company performance under various guises. They dramatize the encounter between orality and literature in particularly salient ways. On the one hand, as virtuosic solo performers, they drew heavily on oral traditions and practices. On the other hand, the buffone and zanni became both the subjects and producers of popular literature. When the organized companies emerged in the mid-sixteenth century, buffone-type actors were incorporated into the troupes, usually as the zanni character, and were largely responsible for their success. At the same time, by the end of the sixteenth century they ran into increasing resistance from actors and troupe leaders (*capocomici*) who invoked literary principles such as the well-made plot to rein in the centrifugal energies of the virtuosic one-man show. The handstands of Arlecchino (a famous variant of the zanni figure) do not advance the plot (see Figure 1).

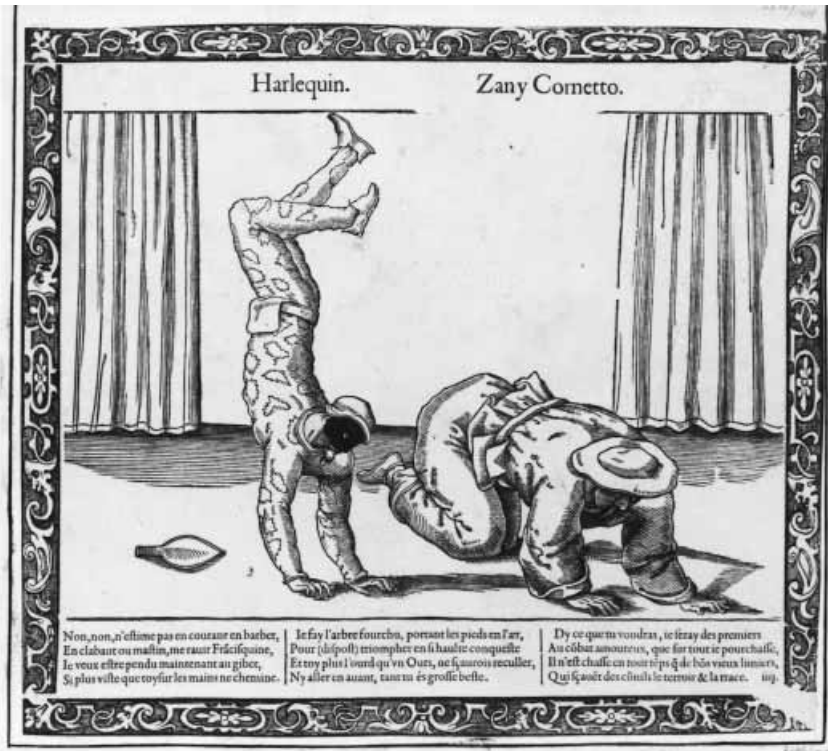


Figure 1 This woodcut print, along with those of Figures 3–6, 8–11, and 17, comes from the so-called “Recueil Fossard,” a collection of prints assembled in a bound volume now held in the National Museum, Stockholm. Probably originally assembled by a certain “Sieur Fossard,” a musician in the court of Louis XIV, the prints appear to date from the 1570s or 1580s. (See M.A. Katritzky, “A Renaissance Commedia dell’Arte Performance.”) Here, in a dispute over who will conquer the servant girl Franceschina’s affections, Harlequin (Arlecchino) attempts to demonstrate his superiority to Zany Cornetto by performing a handstand.

The first two chapters will introduce the commedia dell’arte to the non-specialist reader. This chapter will examine its business practices, and Chapter 2 its method of improvisation and system of characters. Chapter 3 will address some general features of orality as they relate to early-modern theatrical performance, and examine relevant early-modern contexts, considering such phenomena as memory and rhetoric. Chapter 4 analyzes orality and literature in the performances and publications of early sixteenth-century Venetian buffoni. Chapter 5 addresses extant documents regarding early all-male troupes active in the 1540s

and 1550s, and the legacy of all-male performance through to the 1580s. The summers of 1566–1568 saw in the city of Mantua the first well documented appearance of the actress: the subject of Chapter 6. Through an analysis of Vincenza Armani, we shall see that the actress significantly redirected the repertoire and style of the professional troupes in a more literary and courtly direction, even as she retained many techniques of oral composition.

As some of the most famous organized companies emerged between 1570 and 1585, the zanni figure achieved significant development. Chapter 7 examines a large body of popular zanni poems written in the 1570s and 1580s that demonstrate how the zanni integrated oral and literate cultures; these texts also provide some idea of the zanni's repertoire. Along with the zanni, other male roles were profoundly affected by the literary revolution wrought by the actress, and forged a response that incorporated elements of popular culture. Chapter 8 examines texts dated between 1576 and 1601 featuring the Dottore and the Pantalone characters. Chapter 9 then examines the first Arlecchino, Tristano Martinelli, who brought the buffone tradition into a conflictual but generative relationship with organized company activity.

By the end of the sixteenth century, two phenomena significantly affected the professional actor: an attack on the moral status of theatre mounted by ecclesiasts and municipal officials (comparable to the twin salvos on the English theatre by Puritans and London officials), and the practical use of literary and dramatic theory by playwrights in the courts and the academies. In part to defend their art against the antitheatricalists, in part as a project of upward cultural mobility, and in part to advertise their theatrical wares, a few professional actors at the turn of the century began to publish theoretical treatises, scripted plays, and collections of their stage speeches, as we shall see in Chapters 10 and 11. In Chapter 10, we shall examine the pivotal figures of Francesco Andreini and Flaminio Scala, who between 1607 and 1624 published and edited works that both memorialized performance tradition and sought to meld it with literary discourse. The final chapter treats the subsequent generation of *arte* actor-writers – Pier Maria Cecchini, Nicolò Barbieri, Domenico Bruni, and Giovan Battista Andreini – who theorized, moralized, memorialized, and eulogized the achievements of this great theatre.

We proceed chronologically and provide a historical structure, but the chief interest of this study is the examination of select actors as case studies, as we analyze both the texts that they produced and those culturally adjacent to the actors and their roles. These texts are much more

numerous and diverse than has commonly been assumed, consisting of actors' contracts; actors' letters to patrons; patrons' letters to actors; short publications from actors aimed at advertising imminent performance; popular poems related to performance; actors' literary redactions of stage discourse; published collections of *arte* speeches compiled by dilettante groups, orations and poems commemorating recently deceased actors; printed plays; scenarios; actors' treatises on the art of acting; accounts of performance from poems; court diaries; antitheatrical attacks; encyclopedic books regarding popular culture; and more. We concentrate on the relative origins of theatrical characters and practices, devoting considerable attention to pioneers of different *maschere* ["masks" or *commedia dell'arte* roles that persist from play to play and actor to actor] whose careers spanned the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: early interpreters of the *zanni*, the male and female lovers, the *Capitano*, the *Dottore*, and *Pantalone*.

DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

The term "commedia dell'arte" can be traced to the eighteenth century but may well have been in circulation before then.² In the medieval and Renaissance period, an "arte" was an economic and political corporation organized by one of various crafts or professions, and thus the term primarily designates the most striking aspect of certain actors from around 1545 on relative to their medieval predecessors: the fact that they were organized into professional companies to perform not merely on religious and political festival occasions, but all year round for their principal livelihood. The term, historically accurate even if belated, thus could mean "theatre of the profession." Correlatively, "arte" signified the technique requisite for belonging to a craft or profession, and indeed the actors became particularly conscious of their technique, in part as one defense against the various attacks levied on the new professional theatre by ecclesiastical and municipal authorities in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

The terms that described Italian professional actors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were either neutral or slightly pejorative: *commedia d'istrioni* ("istrioni": pejorative for "actors"), *commedia mercenaria* ("mercenary" comedy, with a pejorative tone), *commedia di zanni* ("zanni": the servant role), and *commedia di gratiani* ("gratiano": the pedant role). Alternatively, the terms *commedia improvvisa*, *commedia italiana*, and *commedia a braccio* (the last a slightly negative expression for extempore

delivery) referred to the fact that the troupes were known for performing improvised plays structured by codified plot outlines and informed by individual repertoires. All five of these latter terms, it should be noted, emphasize acting and performance rather than the literary text.

At its core, “*commedia dell'arte*” usually refers to organized professional companies, a few of them famous internationally as well as in Italy, that performed mainly improvised drama beginning in the mid-sixteenth century. It should be noted, however, that the professional actors quite often performed scripted plays, especially after the advent of the actress around the mid-1560s (until that point, the troupes appear to have been all-male). An extensive “culture” of the *commedia dell'arte* existed adjacent to the famous organized companies: stand-up performers (*buffoni*) and semi-professional actor-playwrights in Venice in the early sixteenth century; mountebanks who anticipated the professional actors in their mercenary use of theatre; dilettante actors who performed in the style of the *commedia dell'arte* and left important textual traces; and entertainers who performed, in banquet or piazza situations, poems, monologues, and dialogues based on *commedia dell'arte* roles. There was continual cross-fertilization between these areas: stand-up performers joined organized companies, professional actors significantly influenced dilettantes, and company actors, such as Aniello Soldano, published and probably also performed short printed works (see Figure 2).

THE BUSINESS OF PLAYING

Not unlike the London companies in Shakespeare’s time, which were nominally under the protection of aristocratic patrons but still explored new urban markets, professional Italian actors were situated between neo-feudal and emerging bourgeois business practices.³ Although no single linear theory explains the historical development of *arte* business practices between 1545 and 1625, several distinct business models may be distinguished. The business of playing is not the chief theme of this book (the reader is referred to the magisterial work of Siro Ferrone), but still carries distinct interest for us because it engages questions of orality and writing.

The Piazza Tradition

At the simplest end of a spectrum, piazza buffoons, zanni, mountebanks, and *cantastorie* usually required no contract to arrange their performances in the public arena, just the power of their presence and voice, and the

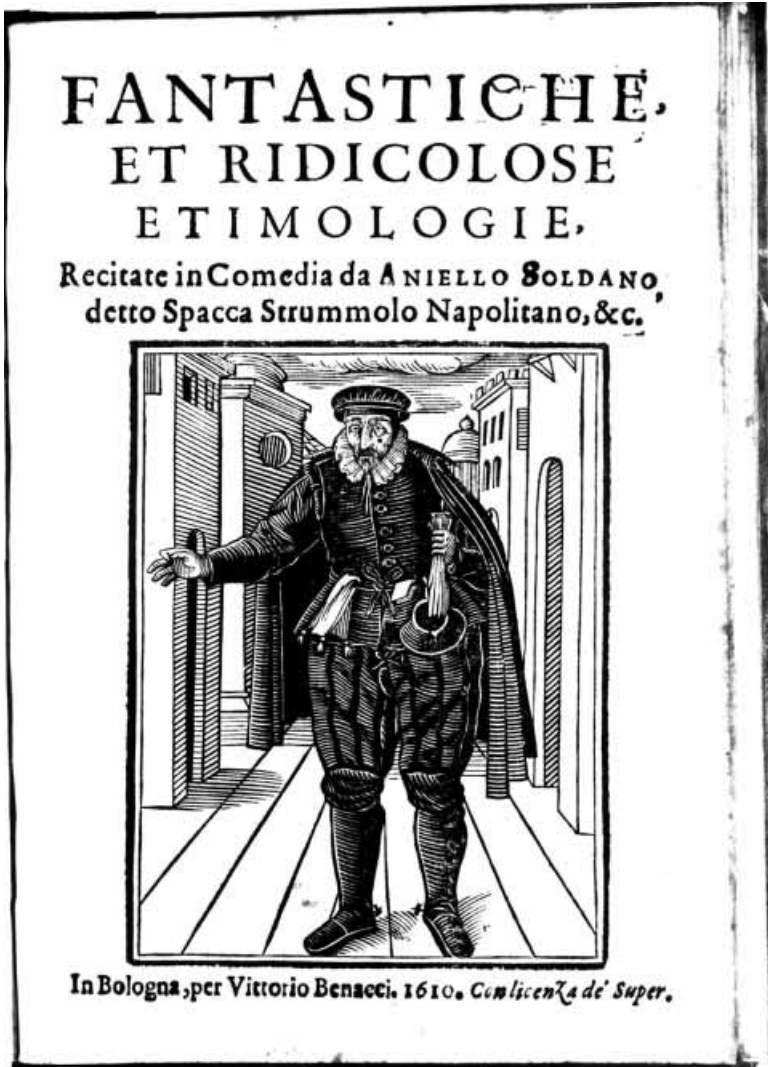


Figure 2 The frontispiece to the *Fantastiche et ridicolose etimologie recitate in comedia da Aniello Soldano*, published by Aniello Soldano, a Neapolitan Dottore figure (Bologna, Vittorio Benacci, 1610). This perspectival urban décor may be taken in two ways. On the one hand, it is like a typical comic scene used in the *commedia erudita*, which Soldano might well have performed as an organized company actor. On the other hand, the image can also be taken to represent Soldano's solo performance and selling, in an actual urban piazza, of a short work such as the *Etimologie* itself.

audience's oral memory of a performance tradition in the immediate past, usually at a designated time and place. Because of his mercenary use of theatre in a year-round, rather than merely occasional, context, the mountebank has been identified as an important precursor of the professional actors.⁴ Surprisingly little documentation confirms piazza performance by the established companies, although such activity is usually unrecorded by history. Still, ample iconographic and archival evidence records an eclectic range of popular, itinerant performers – storytellers, ballad-singers, carnival performers, buffoni and mountebanks – holding forth in piazzas, taverns, and fairs, in a tradition of oral performance issuing back to the medieval *giullari* and beyond.

Oral Agreement Between Buffoni and Sovereign

The buffoni who performed at northern Italian courts usually negotiated purely oral accords, based on a kind of neo-feudal model of service that drew on traditions of past performance. The agreements were as dependable or as precarious as was the direct relationship of the buffone with the Duke. Many buffoni performing at court or at aristocratic banquets (e.g., in Venice where there was no court) worked with other actors in a flexible and expandable manner: they could perform alone; in dual arrangements often shaped by the master-servant relationship; in groups of four or more; and with extra musicians, dancers, singers, and courtesans. The likelihood is that these “companies” were formed – and dissolved – by oral agreement rather than by written contract.

A Written Contract for a “Fraternal Company”

Several notarized contracts and other documents regarding a Paduan-based actors' company and dated between 1545 and 1553 suggest a more rationalized and collective level of business organization than the buffone's oral agreement, as we shall see in Chapter 5. Notwithstanding the preeminence of a certain “Ser Maphio,” this “fraternal company” operates on a fairly egalitarian, even socialistic basis. Writing directs – one might even say creates – the company, but the contract does contain interesting traces of oral exchange between the company members.

Court Patronage

By the 1570s, northern Italian courts begin to patronize entire companies. The model is neo-feudal, as with the buffone's pledge of service

to the sovereign, but oral agreements between company leaders and sovereigns are supplemented by writing: not the notarized contract but letters passing between *capocomici* and the court. For the actors, letters with the ducal seal functioned like passports, as the itinerant actors negotiated the sometimes perilous boundaries between the various duchies, states, and republics of Italy. But the letter was not as public and as objectively governed by writing as a contract; it was personal and rhetorical, and like an oral agreement subject to misunderstanding.⁵ Perhaps actors' concerns about the undependability of letters caused the anxious suppliants to make them a kind of oral performance in their own right, which could both display the neo-feudal rhetoric of vassilage and "perform" the actor's stage role at the same time. The letters written by the actor Lodovico de' Bianchi to the Florentine court (Chapter 8) and by Tristano Martinelli to the Mantuan court (Chapter 9) constitute virtuosic performances in the context of neo-feudal courtly patronage. Not accidentally, they exhibit salient characteristics of oral composition.

Certainly court patronage could make or break a troupe's success, but their power over the actors was not absolute. The northern courts were held together by a delicate network of diplomatic and matrimonial alliances (some cross-courtly negotiations were actually assisted by visiting *arte* troupes), which could not survive traumatic events such as the sack of Mantua in 1627. Court sovereigns could certainly recruit and even raid actors from other troupes, but their own troupes could be raided as well. The notion of fraternal alliance to one's own company certainly outlasted Ser Maphio's early troupe, and several letters document actors' polite but firm refusals of court invitations in deference to their own company's integrity.

Stanza Performance

Although in some cases the companies needed court approval to secure these venues, they could achieve some measure of courtly independence by performing in halls, or *stanze*: large indoor rooms not designed for theatre but adapted for the purpose. From the very "beginning," in Ser Maphio's 1545–1553 troupe, indoor performance was crucial, which refutes the romantic, evolutionary argument that companies first performed in piazzas and then moved indoors. Relative to outdoor performance among chaotic and centrifugal mobs, indoor performance made it easier to collect money, control and retain a crowd, and operate rudimentary scenic and lighting devices.⁶ One of the most important of the *stanze* was the Teatro di Baldracca in Florence, a room located upstairs

from the customs house and named after the infamous Baldracca Street on which it gave: a site of taverns and houses of prostitution. The Teatro di Baldracca public, which documents suggest to have been rather rowdy, probably ranged from the mercantile (with perhaps scattered craftsmen) to the patrician class.⁷ As difficult as the *stanza* public was to control (there are reports of actors' complaints), it was crucial for the actors to cultivate this extra-courtly market.

Proto-Bourgeois Models and Entrepreneur-based Companies

When actors performed in the *stanze* to extra-courtly crowds, they were attempting to earn their livelihoods by playing the public market. One of the most important early theoreticians of the commedia dell'arte, Pier Maria Cecchini, advertised theatre as a mercantile art, one whose technical standards were on a par with any urban trade, and a product that would provide moral and even economic benefits to the city. Cecchini's implicit proposal, to replace the neo-feudal system of court patronage with a new bourgeois model conditioned by market forces was premature, for Italy was still a long way off from a capitalist economy. But there were successful business models that competed with the neo-feudal networks of Mantua and Florence, and did employ a more market-driven approach. In particular, Venice after 1580 provided patrician entrepreneurs occasions to create profitable theatrical enterprises, as they drew up contracts with actors.⁸ The entrepreneur-led theatres were not fully market-based, but they offered to the actors a modicum of the financial opportunities available to the Italian actors' more fortunate counterparts in England.

The Capocomico Model

The other major alternative to absolutist court patronage developed when the *capocomico* achieved a significant measure of control and independence relative to the ducal patron. In his long leadership of the Fedeli, Giovan Battista Andreini provides the supreme example of this.

Notwithstanding a persistent myth, actors frequently changed companies, and often shifted roles as well. They might be raided or recruited by a patron, entrepreneur, or *capocomico* of another troupe. They might choose to seek a situation they deemed more advantageous, such as Pier Maria Cecchini did when he went outside the network of northern patronage to explore, at various points in his career, markets in Naples and Venice. Then, as now, actors' egos were notoriously mercurial and easily

offended. Conflicts regarding company divas were particularly charged and frequent, and sometimes dictated personnel changes. Even if the academic-style names of the companies showed a remarkable persistence over time, companies might dissolve, such as the *Gelosi* after the tragic death in childbirth of their leading performer, Isabella Andreini. Often pan-Italian, “all-star” casts were formed for special court occasions, combining actors from different troupes. In this theatre of masks, actors intensely invested in particular roles, some for their entire lives. At the same time, beginning in the 1570s there were certain actors who were influenced by the aesthetic of mimesis and could change roles, if sometimes as a virtuous necessity in old age when they could play lovers no longer.

Even the most successful actors did not have an easy life. From their stage earnings, a few were able to achieve the ultimate acquisition for an actor (in Italy as in Shakespeare’s England): the purchase of land. Many, however, needed to supplement their performance incomes with mercantile enterprises such as the silk trade or perfumery, and some died penniless. In contrast to their professional counterparts in Shakespeare’s England, the Italian actors had to travel continuously, as a structural requirement and not merely as a recourse in the case of emergencies like the plague. Italy, of course, lacked a national urban center with the demographic volume of London that could support a permanent theatre such as the *Globe*. Moreover, the repertoire of the Italian players, though more diverse than has commonly been supposed, was not sufficient to entertain one urban public all year round. But the professional actors were anything but provincial. Coming from Venice, Padua, Florence, Mantua, Ferrara, and other northern cities, they quickly became accustomed to travel, notwithstanding their frequent complaints about it. Except for occasional ventures to Naples and Rome, the major itineraries between 1570 and 1630 were northern, comprising such cities as Venice, Verona, Mantua, Bologna, Florence, Turin, and Genova.⁹ The actors were creatures of the road, of boundary crossings, and it is no accident that they occasionally used customs houses as performance venues.¹⁰

Business agreements, therefore, ranged along a spectrum between purely oral accords and authoritative written contracts. Most often playing arrangements were negotiated through letters, a form of writing with insistent oral features. As we now examine the practice of improvisation within a rather subtle and flexible character system, we shall again witness the interaction of orality and writing.