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Richard Andrews

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Introduction: Italy in the sixteenth century

There was of course no political state called Italy in 1500. From the time of Petrarch, in the fourteenth century, a small educated class had made claims for an 'Italian' cultural identity with a Roman heritage superior to that of the 'barbarians' beyond the Alps. But such common ground as did exist between communities in Italy was balanced by an equal amount of diversity: from one city to another Italians spoke different vernaculars, obeyed different governments, and were far more used to viewing each other with mistrust and hostility than to pursuing aspirations to any kind of unity. The southern half of the peninsula in particular, a monarchy with a landowning aristocracy and an increasingly backward economy, had very little in common with the urban trade-based civilization of the north and centre. Even those who spoke eloquently of Italian values made no proposals for an Italian state – there had never been such a thing, and in the middle ages it was impossible to imagine one.

In popular cultural history the term 'Renaissance' is often linked with concepts of liberation from repressive 'medieval' structures (mental, cultural, religious, political). That there were profound changes in this period is beyond question; however, a close look at what was happening to Italian states and society between 1450 and 1600 offers little support for an image of shackles being cast off. Collective committee government characteristic of the city commune was giving way to control by monarchs and princes. Economically too the power was being concentrated at the centre, so the cultural patronage of competitive groups within society was yielding to that of the ruler, court or state. The pace and details of such changes varied in different centres, but the history of Italian Renaissance comedy has to be seen always in a context of decreasing enterprise and increasing constraint. On the largest scale, one can

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hardly characterize as ‘liberating’ the two most obvious trends in sixteenth-century Italy: conquest by foreign powers, and the increasing autocracy of a reformed Church.

It was in the 1490s that two successive French kings brought invading armies into Italy, testing their opportunistic claims to the Kingdom of Naples and the Duchy of Milan. (The earliest comedies which will be discussed in these pages appear in the next decade, 1500–10.) From then on, for fifty years or more, the peninsula was a rich prize for predators, and a symbolic battlefield on which larger European powers disputed their primacy. These powers soon resolved into two: the Kingdom of France (notably under François I, reigned 1515–47), and the formidable accumulation of dominions which had fallen dynastically into the Habsburg hands of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (1519–56), King of Spain (from 1506), ruler of Burgundy and of Austria. By legal precedents dating from Charlemagne, the Empire included all of Italy, except Venice, north of the Papal State; and in the south the Aragonese or Spanish had ruled Sicily since 1416 and Naples indirectly since 1435. It was in fact the Empire and Spain which finally triumphed, and at the end of the century most of Italy was part of the international Catholic hegemony created by the Habsburgs. Part of that hegemony involved a greater religious control over art and culture, imposed by Church decree and by an altered climate of opinion.

The Italian Wars, and the shifts of political alliances and prejudices which accompanied them, sometimes provide a background to comic plots and texts. A very brief outline will indicate, if nothing else, certain key dates which may be cultural as well as political watersheds.

In 1469 (accession to effective power in Florence of Lorenzo de’ Medici, ‘il Magnifico’), there were five Italian states seen as major powers within the peninsula. The Duchy of Milan and the Kingdom of Naples were monarchic and centralized. The Papal State was a kind of federation in which certain centres, notably Urbino, had their own character, and where the city of Rome itself was only slowly becoming a centre of economic and artistic activity. Florence was a republic in theory, but its committee procedures were manipulated by the Medici family, who were princes in all but name. Venice continued stable under its peculiar but successful structures – a republic, but with an elected constitutional monarch in its Doge; a state administered exclusively by its aristocracy, but retaining full

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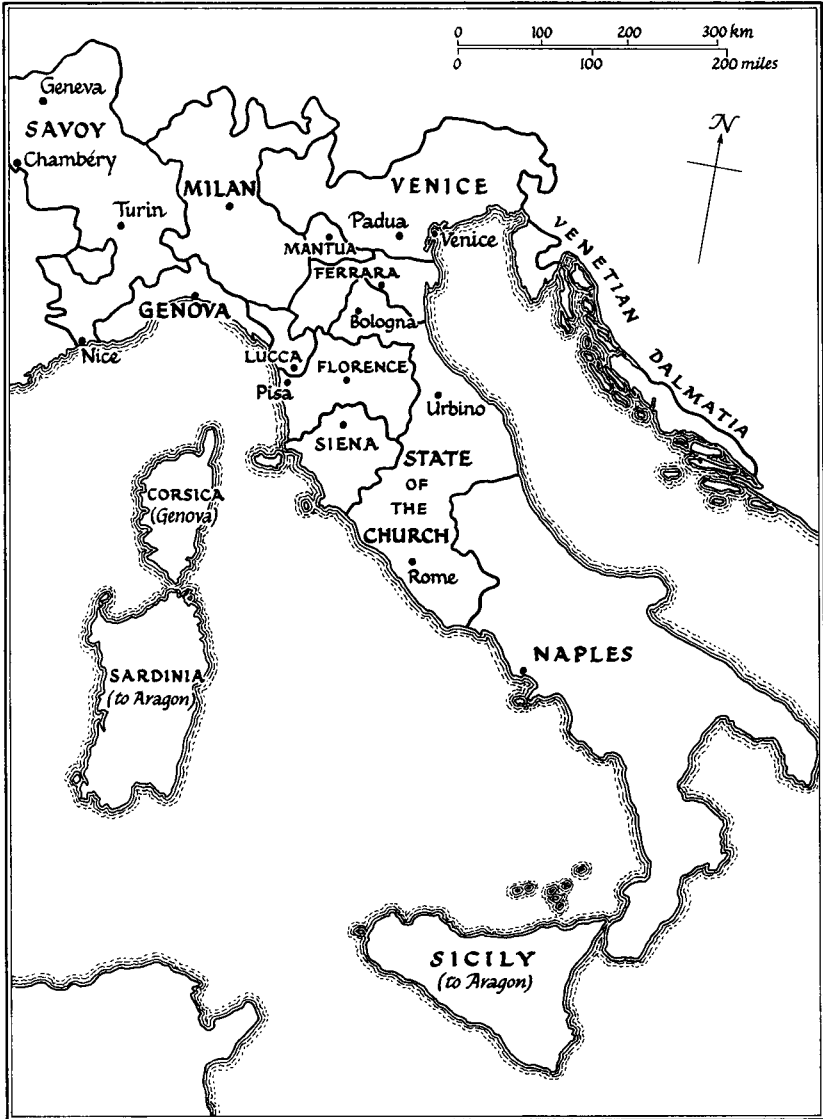
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Map 1 *Italy in 1492* (death of Lorenzo il Magnifico).

Only Venice, Genova, Florence, Siena and Lucca were republics. All the other states were kingdoms, lordships, or under some other form of 'monarchical' rule. Only Sicily and Sardinia were under direct foreign rule; though the kings of Naples were a cadet branch of the Aragonese royal family, and Spanish (or, more strictly, Catalan) culture predominated.

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Map 2 *Italy in 1559 (Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis).*

Only Venice, Genova and Lucca were nominally republics, and Genova owed its existence to French protection, and later to Spanish/Imperial protection. Shaded areas belonged to the Austro-Spanish Habsburg Empire set up by Charles V.

Dotted areas were to some extent Habsburg protectorates.

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popular support. Of these major centres, Venice, Florence and Rome were to play significant parts in the development of the new comedy, though the role of Florence was less pioneering than the city had been earlier in art, architecture and neoplatonic philosophy. Equally important, and more innovative, in theatrical history were some of the smaller centres: the twin Duchy of Ferrara and Modena ruled by the Este family, Mantua ruled by the Gonzaga, and the obstinately resistant Tuscan republic of Siena. Precisely because these states were small and threatened, they sought to enhance their image and prestige by cultural statements, and in Ferrara and Siena in particular such statements employed the medium of theatre.

The first French invasion of 1494 had led directly to the expulsion of the Medici from Florence. For nearly twenty years, until 1512, that city turned its back on its unofficial princes and tried to fight its corner as a genuine republic, while Italian states in general were juggling with the competing forces of France, Spain, Austria and the Swiss. Milan lost its ducal family and its independence in 1500, and from then on changed hands with bewildering frequency. The exiled Medici established a power network outside their native city, and with two Medici Popes in Rome (Leo X 1513–21, Clement VII 1523–34), Florence was obliged to accept their dominance and become a junior partner in an axis between the two cities. It was under Clement VII, however, that in 1527 Spanish and Imperial troops sacked Rome with great brutality, gave Italians a crisis of confidence from which they never really recovered, and persuaded the Papacy that its future role was one of partnership, not rivalry, with Imperial and Catholic Spain and Austria. Florence's republican illusions were crushed (after a three-year rebellion) by the creation of a Medici duke under Habsburg protection, and from 1530 the city, like most other centres, had a princely court offering artistic patronage and control. At a second stage, in 1557, Florence swallowed Siena (as it had been trying to do for centuries) with Imperial help, creating a new Grand Duchy of Tuscany. In 1597 the direct Este line died out, and Ferrara (but not Modena) reverted to the Papal State where Popes had always thought it belonged. Venice alone retained its autonomy, identity and constitution into the seventeenth century and beyond.

The chief significance of these changes for theatre history is that the organization of performed spectacle varied according to whether

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there was a central court or a more loosely structured republic, and whether a city was autonomous or subject to another. By 1600 the major Italian centres were once more Naples, Florence, Milan, Rome and Venice; but only the last two of these could claim to have maintained the political identity of 1469, and the ideological character of Rome had changed beyond recognition. Naples (from 1503) and Milan (from 1535) were ruled directly by Spain. Florence was no longer a city republic but the ducal capital of Tuscany, dependent first on the Habsburgs and later on France. Smaller centres of culture were provided by Mantua (especially active in music), Modena, and the brand new Duchy of Parma. Ferrara and Siena had been absorbed.

Throughout all this, there was one social and cultural constant which had distinguished northern and central Italy from the rest of Europe since at least the thirteenth century. All notions of culture, progress and civilization in Italy were city-based, and were felt always to have been so. 'The City' was not a new social and ideological problem for Italians, as it was in England in the time of Jonson, but an environment taken absolutely for granted. Republican or princely, bourgeois or aristocratic, these were thoroughly urban societies – one of the many reasons why they took over so easily the theatrical plots and models of the ancient cities of Athens and Rome.

LANGUAGE AND DIALECTS

The break-up of the Roman Empire had left behind innumerable varieties of colloquial Latin speech: in an age of poor communications every region, indeed every village, spoke a slightly different Latin-based vernacular. The emergence of national languages – French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian – was a political or a cultural process, or both, by which the dialect of one region in particular was given over-riding status (Castilian, in Spain; the speech of the region round Paris, in France). In the sixteenth century this process had at least begun in the emerging national states beyond the Alps; but in Italy, with no national state, the position was more complex.

Two hundred years previously, three major writers had produced widely diffused masterpieces all in the Florentine dialect: the *Divina Commedia* of Dante (1265–1321), the lyric poems of Petrarch (1304–74), and the prose works, in particular the *Decameron*, of

Boccaccio (1313–75). Florentine was a dialect which was central not just geographically but also linguistically, with the advantage of having lost or distorted fewer sounds from the Latin roots, so the educated and literate found it more accessible whatever their own mother tongue. After Petrarch and Boccaccio, there was a period during which Latin was preferred for most serious written communication. The sixteenth century, with which the present book deals, is characterized by a drive to make *fourteenth-century* Florentine, as found in the three ‘canonical’ writers, the basis of a literary language which would be accepted throughout the peninsula for written cultural communication. There was rather less attempt (because it was harder, and more controversial) to identify this same Florentine ‘Italian’ as a medium of *spoken* communication for the educated and courtly upper classes, who met and mingled across state boundaries.

The policy of turning back to fourteenth-century Florentine as a literary model was begun by the Venetian Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) and continued later in the century mainly by Florentines (who could claim a spurious cultural leadership from the fact that it was their own dialect, albeit in an older version, which was being favoured). It was probably the only practical linguistic solution in a politically divided peninsula, but it remained nevertheless artificial. The mother tongue of the vast majority of Italians was different from Florentine – as different, say, as Spanish was, and indeed Spanish was probably no more difficult to understand. Literary ‘Italian’ (often referred to as ‘Tuscan’ at this time) was something which had to be deliberately learned.

This presented relatively few problems for texts intended to be read: those who could read at all were a minority, and were usually prepared to make the necessary efforts to understand. For theatre the difficulties were potentially more serious, if one accepted at all (as some writers probably did not) that stage language should bear some relation to living speech. All popular theatre, including that with serious religious content, had previously been written in a local vernacular for local consumption. The ‘regular’ comedy based on Latin models, which is the subject of this book, was initially offered to a very restricted audience and could afford to use (and in fact to promote) literary ‘Tuscan’ for the educated spectator. But comedy thrives on the down-to-earth, on realism, on robust caricature of authentic behaviour and language. Audiences, especially less sophisticated ones, like to be appealed to by constant reference to

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who and what they are, which includes acknowledging the way they speak. Sooner or later, in one way or another, the existence of a multiple range of spoken vernaculars was going to have to be recognized on the comic stage. The rather tortuous way in which this necessity was faced in Italy forms one of the strands or episodes of the story told in this book.

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CHAPTER I

Precedents

SOME DEFINITIONS

This book deals with performed ‘regular’ comedy in Italy, principally between 1500 and about 1555. In defining the boundaries of our topic, we shall mostly be accepting sixteenth-century definitions of what constituted ‘comedy’, definitions which depended in their turn on what it was thought *comedia* had meant in classical Latin. In the medieval period the term had been used in ways which did not necessarily imply either theatrical performance or the intention of provoking laughter. In the Renaissance, however, the Latin word *comedia* was applied to a genre of theatrical writing. It was defined in ways which usually did not list laughter as an essential component, but in practice most Renaissance comedies were also meant to be funny. In discussing them, therefore, we shall be unable to avoid using the words ‘comic’ and ‘comedy’ with the primary meaning which they possess in modern English conversation: they will apply to an artefact or performance intended to make people laugh. Words such as ‘satire’ or ‘farce’, when used at all, will be seen as sub-species of the category ‘comedy’, or *comedia* in Latin, not as contrasting categories. (The Italian word *commedia*, on its own, will be avoided in these pages: it is confusingly used by many English-speaking scholars as a synonym for *commedia dell’arte*, an important but specialized phenomenon which will be discussed in Chapter 5.)

In describing comedy as ‘regular’, a term actually used at the time, we mean that it conformed or at least alluded to formats derived from the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence. In the period we are discussing, many other sources and styles were also

progressively introduced; but a continuous tradition can always be traced back to dramatists who were consciously reviving and imitating the Roman models. Initially the use of such models was programmatic, even revolutionary; and the discussion of any phenomenon which appears or claims to be new has to be introduced by some allusion to what has gone before. In our case, this means things which preceded and influenced 'regular' comedy, but equally the practices which it chose to reject. This chapter will discuss both the continuity and the discontinuity between 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' drama in Italy, in terms of content and structure.

Before even doing that, however, we must also say something about the 'comic', in the modern sense of the 'laughable', in both the life and the art of the period leading up to 1500. It is intended in these opening pages to offer some orienting observations on laughter, particularly as it functioned in the medieval Italian culture which preceded and therefore introduced 'regular comedy'.

USES OF COMEDY

There are great pitfalls in the way of any attempt to relate the physical act of laughing to a single emotional attitude or judgement. No matter what theorists tell us is, or should be, the essence of laughter, some aspect of people's real behaviour will soon provide an awkward exception, and every proposition can be countered by its opposite. The unthinking assumptions which people hold on the subject can be quite contradictory, as an anecdotal example shows. During the early 1980s, two separate complaints were made to the BBC, in the form of letters to the *Radio Times*, about different TV programmes both of which happened to deal with the Second World War.¹ One was on the long-running series *Dad's Army*, which had been about a motley group of Home Guard volunteers who displayed comic inefficiency in a succession of increasingly fanciful situations. The complainant said, more or less, that it was disgraceful to offer such a demeaning picture of what in reality had been a serious and dedicated body of men. A second correspondent objected to *Private Schultz*, a six-week drama serial in black comedy vein in which an amoral con-man survived the period of the Third Reich in Germany. The complaint this time was that the Nazis were too horrifying to be laughed at. Thus the first correspondent was