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Commedia dell'Arte: The Mechanisms of Othering

By Olly Crick

Abstract: Although the popular image of *commedia dell'arte* persists as a comic form, full of multi-colored diamond-pattern clad servants, elegantly outwitting older and stupider masters, its comic engine room is far more robust, focusing on differentials in social class, geographical region, and perceptions of physical beauty. One's initial reaction, unmediated by other dramatic agencies such as plot or devices such as disguise, depends on social class, geographical origin, and aspirational self-image of the spectator. Part of the comic mechanism here focuses on who is being "othered," why, and to what end. Commedia as a form, I propose, has as one of its dramatic strengths a system of stock characters that together represents a societal spectrum. Each stock character comes from a region and displays that region's distinctive performative characteristics, its perceived social class, and represented either humanist virtue or the grotesque. As the areas these roles represented were all in close proximity, and Italy being a country that foregrounds regionality over nationality, a fair amount of local rivalry came with the territory. My chapter compares the role of the second Zanni, known as Harlequin, with the second actress, in Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*, here called Clarice. Juxtaposing these two on stage creates an oppositional binary: manual labor versus leisure; entitled resident versus immigrant; lower class versus upper class and male grotesquerie versus feminine virtue. Pairing up its stock roles always reveals an immediate difference or contrast, based on class, region, and beauty. A commedia performance is a society at play, seen through the lens of class in action, with the upper classes always winning. It is only in the 20th and 21st centuries, with the Dell'Arte players, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Dario Fo, for example, that commedia servants have been allowed a voice.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, Commedia dell'Arte, dramaturgy, local theater

Although the popular image of *commedia dell'arte* persists as a comic form, full of multi-colored diamond-pattern clad servants, elegantly outwitting older and stupider masters, its dramatic engine room is perhaps more complex, focusing on differentials in social class, geographical region, and perceptions of an inescapable present, a longed-for future, and notions of physical beauty. As a form that originated in Italy and whose stage “set” was generally a locally positioned located street or piazza that remained unchanged during each performance, its performers were acutely aware of the surrounding geopolitical world surrounding them, as defined by the Mediterranean (Jaffe-Berg 2016, 111–19). The comic mechanisms it presents are situated within competitive attitudes between different Italian regions and, also, but to a lesser extent, their surrounding world. While regional diversity was seen in Italy after WWII as a necessary and positive reaction to fascism and was one of the catalyzing forces present in *commedia*’s 20th-century recreation, in the Renaissance these regions were independent states and fiercely competitive. Regional antipathy is a defining feature of *commedia* and is present in the rivalries between the *dramatis personae*, and, as such, can be seen as a locally positioned form of racism. Within the professional life of a touring *commedia* troupe, however, this pattern of comically purposed victimization, again, by necessity, did not become static. For peripatetic and self-financing secular theater troupes to seem as outsiders wherever they travelled must have been their daily reality, as was the most likely survival strategy: making their comic targets those othered by the inhabitants of each town and venue they performed in.

Commedia does not present a single target for its professionally executed comic othering, but a complex pattern of relative othering, dependent on their audience, their geographical location, and social class. Its dramaturgic edifice, as far as it can be accurately reconstructed, evolved to contain highly adaptive and flexible performance structures, capable of entertaining a wide range of audience types and switching its comic targets and target audience. The survival of *commedia dell'arte* as Europe’s first secular genre of theater should be seen a model of constantly performed mediation: between the constructed and gestically charged fixed social types that populated its stage (Pantalone, Harlequin, Il Capitano et al.), and the locations the troupes found themselves in. There is a strong case to be made for the practice of performance improvisation, reputedly one of the defining features of *commedia*, being how this mediation was carried out. The actors literally changed their text, and comic targets, depending on where they were and for whom they were performing. Although many troupes had aristocratic benefactors (see Smith [1968] for

translations of correspondence between the troupes and their patrons) the actors' first allegiance was to their troupe, as it literally provided their means of survival and sustenance. The troupe, and its associated business practices, therefore, became the point from which this flexible othering issued forth.

Any study of *commedia dell'arte* needs to keep in mind that there are two entirely separate iterations: the historical form, originating in the late Renaissance and lasting until approximately the French Revolution, and contemporary reinventions starting around 1946. The latter was underpinned by both pre-WWII artistic avant-garde theater practices and anti-fascist notions of popular theater. Both iterations, though containing recognizably the same ingredients, are highly culturally specific, so although the structures of ancient and modern may be similar, and their mechanisms of delivery, embodied in its stock characters, apparently identical, the effect or meaning, as it lands in the audience's perception, has different purpose. *Commedia*, ancient and modern, others in different ways and for different reasons. I make the case here that both the structure of the original *commedia* and the debated practice of improvisation were vital to *commedia's* ability to be flexible in performance. Through the practice of adapting their own private storehouses (*zibaldone*) of character- and situation-appropriate texts in the moment of performance, within the culturally placed practice of rhetoric, each actor within a troupe had the ability to fashion their performance according to how they read the audience. A *commedia* actor had the ability to place their role either "with" the audience's sympathies or "against" it. The virtuoso skills embodied within such a performer allows them to play with notions of otherness and adapt to circumstances.

The actors of the original *commedia* were, therefore, self-fashioning individuals, existing as outliers and practitioners of humanism. Their secular subject matter set them against hegemonic Catholic Europe, fixated on the primacy of mankind's relationship with God. Humanism, as a movement or new way of thinking, saw the world in terms of human achievement, hope, and ambition, rather than merely as a manifestation of God's will on earth. The development of secular drama required secular subject matter, and what entertained a secular audience was not always, in the eyes of Mother Church, good for the salvation of one's eternal soul. Vito Pandolfi (1969) places the development of improvisation as *commedia's* *modus operandi* to avoid the censorship of the church. Simply put, if there was no written text, then censoring a text became problematic, and for the censor to do their job (maintaining the morals and spiritual well-being of their flock) became a

matter of interpreting the intent of a performance. Cardinal Paleotti was well aware of this, and in 1578 at the Papal Curia said:

It is not enough to say that these comedies will be reviewed beforehand, and evil removed, because in practice it does not work, because words and phrases that have not been written down are always added, in fact all that is written down is a summary or argument, and the rest is improvised. (quoted in Jordan 2014, 176)

The relationship between a fluid and self-generated performance text and the fixed social types portrayed by the actors becomes the precise area where *commedia's* adaptability comes to the fore, and where these arguments about intent occurred. Not only did the *comici* improvise to adapt to different audiences, but they were forced to do so in order to avoid possibly fatal visits from the inquisition.

Matt Cawson (2013), in addition, places the opposition of the church within the realm of *commedia's* emphasis on corporality in performance: The church foregrounded the soul as the major element in existence, while the actors, including women in their casts, performed corporally, displaying bodies on stage engaged in sinful activities. I speak in the widest sense of sin, I might add, not always concupiscence. Cawson successfully argues that *commedia dell'arte* as a form operated as a performative antithesis to the Catholic Church's entrenched stance on anti-corporealism, which he describes as "the rejection of the body in favour of the mind or soul" (27). *Commedia dell'arte's* emphasis on corporeality, virtuosity in performance, and the presence of women on stage, together with its neo-classical underpinning—structurally, educationally, and thematically—also made it a performative embodiment of humanism (26).

Commedia became positioned, therefore, both as being in opposition to the church's stance on public morality, but also as an embodiment of the humanistic challenge to the church's philosophy. The church, led by the self-appointed scourge of actors Cardinal (and later Saint) Borromeo, whose stated aim was to rid the world of "that invention of the devil they call comedy," attacked the actors' intentions by saying they placed women onstage as an invitation to sin, thus presenting temptation to the audience (quoted in Jordan 2014, 141). Flaminio Scala, former *Innamorato* of the *I Gelosi* troupe, published his collection of sin-inducing scenarios in 1611, somewhat cheekily opening with the statement "[t]hat virtue which renders men amiable is disastrous to our souls" (1967, xxv), paying lip-service to the ecclesiastical authorities. The acting profession, to protect itself, had found a voice to argue against the church's hostility within the rapidly expanding medium of print and printed didactic texts (Marjorana 2018, 134). In 1611,

actor Nicolò Barbieri (stage name Beltrame) published his *La supplica* (The Plea) in which he argued that actors could not be accused of sin, as it was the characters the actors played on stage who showed sin, and the actors themselves were good Christians (146). It is worth quoting Bernadette Majorana (2018) in full to understand the complex position the actors were putting forward:

For the *comici*, skill and technical prowess represented not moral failings but, on the contrary, demonstrations of human qualities and social competence. Skill referred to virtue, in the double meaning of moral and technical virtue: It was a new way of conceiving roles—on stage, socially and personally—without escaping the human condition of the actor, but by means of it. Giovan Battista Andreini ... capocomico and playwright ... attributed to the theatre of the Commedia dell'Arte a quality of revelation, believing it could offer glimpses of the divine. The quest of the actor towards perfection mirrored and depended on the Christian subject's path towards truth and awareness. (47)

It is clear that the new profession of acting used both humanist terms and the church's own words to justify its own existence and to give it respectability. No one won the argument for good, and the church kept complaining that women onstage incite sinful thoughts in the audience. G.B. Andreini wrote that performances with women would lack plausibility and grace (Marjorana 145), and Taviani (1969) quotes the counterargument from the Dominican monk Domenico Gori who said that comedies are done "in preparation for lasciviousness" so that "when the performing female enters, one has become so weak that it is morally impossible to resist" (136).

How a performer reacts to or interacts with a scene's subject matter is as important to an audience as what the subject matter is. A commedia scenario's sketched outline allows an actor to play to the action and let the plot unfold as they see fit in the context of the audience immediately before them. The corporality of performance and improvisational nature of the dialogue, albeit with a fixed scenario, create the possibility of subversive or counter-hegemonic performance. Before we think that commedia was a counter-cultural historical theater form, we should note that the troupes were commercial operations and needed support from secular power in order to survive—the secular power here being the humanist-inclined aristocracy of Northern Italy who desired both to be entertained and also to increase their power base at the expense of the church. Princes, popes, and priests were all, by common consent, not present within the commedia cast list. Politically, the commedia troupes were in the position of avoiding the church's censure in order to prosper. Publicly the actors agreed with the church and in performance presented the other cheek entirely to their sponsors and protectors, the secular dukes.

The actors created for themselves a position serving their audiences but staying on the move between their various patrons, crossing dukedoms and kingdoms in search of fame and

fortune. Isabella Andreini (1562–1604), one of the primadonnas of the Gelosi company, made the claim that she, “by the generosity of the Supreme Maker [was] sent to be a Citizen of the World,” and with the self-supporting nature of the troupes, may have created the blueprint for the myth of the travelling actor. And commedia, after all, as Carlo Mazzone-Clementi (1974) said, “is not a theatrical form, it’s a way of life” (64). The actors, by occupying the ground between clerical and secular powers, by maintaining a flexibility in performance, and by not being tied to a locality or one master, fashioned for themselves a new way of life and way of looking at the world.

The flexibility of commedia, relating to alterity, is also directly connected to the relationship of the Masks and their geographical origin. What was the commedia cast list then? Briefly: Old men, lovers, and servants. And why were these fixed types so dramaturgically effective during the Renaissance? Again, briefly, we must compare historical cultural knowledge with a knowledge set we hold quite deep and often secretly within us: our own cultural prejudices, often expressed as a “types” or “the type of person who,” which (letting us off the hook slightly) can be referred to as cultural shorthand (as Prava Agyarwa [2020] conveniently suggests).

Below is the map showing the geographical proximity of the four significant areas in Northern Italy where the Masks originated. The Lovers came from Turin; Pantalone from Venice; the Doctor from Bologna; and the Zannis from Bergamo and the Po Valley, stretching from the Adriatic coast south of Venice inland as far as Turin. There is also the Spanish Captain, but blame that on the Spanish Borgia Popes (Callixtus III and Alexander VI), who found their fellow countrymen more amenable to command than the locals.



Figure 1. Map of Northern Italy, indicating proximity of geographical areas that gave birth to Pantalone (Venice); Bologna (Il Dottore); Bergamo (Harlequin and Brighella) and Turin (the Lovers). For further details see Table 1.

One can see from this that the roles originate from areas geographically adjacent to one another. Taking as an assumption that Italy’s regions were as proud of themselves during the

Renaissance as they are today, it might not be a too far stretch of the imagination to say that one region might have an attitude to another, especially the ones closest to each other. Regional rivalries nowadays expressed through allegiances to sports teams may have found a historical outlet through the improvisations of *commedia dell'arte*.

Many *commedia* commentators have noted that the roles embodied regional characteristics, in terms of dress, accent, and occupation. To this we can add social class, with its attendant economic power, or lack of it. An indicative list is to be found in Table 1.

Name of Role	Renaissance Social Class Represented	Place of Origin and Accent/Dialect
First Actress	Aristocracy	Turin
First Actor	Aristocracy	Turin
Pantalone	Mercantile Bourgeoisie	Venetian
Il Dottore	Academic Bourgeoisie	Bolognese Macaronic
Second Actor	Unmarried and dependent child of the bourgeoisie	Venetian trying to talk Turin
Second Actress	Unmarried and dependent child of the bourgeoisie	Bolognese trying to talk Turin
The Spanish Captain	Professional military or mercenary operating away from their country of origin	Spain / Spanish / Bad Italian
First Servant, Brighella	Professional servant from the working classes who has hit the glass ceiling, long-term resident in the city	Venetian / Bergamese
Columbina	Working-class servant, long-term resident in the city	Bergamese / Venetian
Second Servant, Harlequin	Working-class servant, recent arrival in the city	Bergamese

Table 1. *Commedia* roles showing differentials of social class and regional origin.

To this table one can add people who come from outside Italy. The Spanish Captain was, in the golden age of *commedia*, a figure of both fun and awe: a foreign mercenary simultaneously terrifying and foolish. He exists both as an embodiment of comic satire. He is a powerful figure (through martial strength) and, as such, the *comici* can “punch up” to him. He is seen as a legitimate target for all manner of disgraces, as he both unwanted, a member of the military elite, invading (us), and potentially violent. There are other nationalities mentioned in Flaminio Scala’s scenarios,

such as Moors, Turks, Levantines (Lebanese from the Mediterranean's eastern seaboard), Jewish merchants, and Armenians (Jaffe-Berg 2015, 112–13). She presents these minor nationalities as representative of a Mediterranean frame surrounding the Italian peninsula, indicating that commedia was by no means a parochial and inward-looking form but geopolitically aware of its role as a trading hub. Any judgements about whether the portrayal of minor characters was racist can only be circumstantial, as commedia was performed from a scenario there are no surviving full texts to interrogate. Many of the foreign nationalities existed performatively as disguises (as noted in Flaminio Scala's props list attached to the beginning of each scenario), so wore "stage" versions of national dress, so needed to be easily recognizable. The implications of this are, of course, dehumanizing, as they reduce a nationality to a comic disguise and clichéd physical characteristics. The analysis of accents, class, and dress applied to the Italian regions must therefore also apply to other nationalities. These clichés are not necessarily comically reductive, as there are scenarios where the *Innamorato* Flavio has returned home after being a prisoner in a Turkish galley ("Flavio's Fortune, Day 2," Salerno 1967, 11–21), or, as in the Day 38 scenario, a Turkish princess vows to become Christian so she can marry the captured Flavio. The more one comically undercuts suffering and love, the weaker the drama becomes, so one, as a reader, is caught between interpreting these scenarios as light comedy or else tragedy. There were both martial and trade wars at various times against the Turks and Moors, so one can assume that the *comici* did not always portray them in a particularly sympathetic light.

A spectrum exists from a position where each Mask positively represents a region and its way of life, to that where the Mask is seen as an embodiment of all that is ridiculous about that area. Further possibilities are opened up by the fact that, dramaturgically, it is possible to present both views simultaneously on stage: that a Mask standing up for their embodied region takes themselves very seriously but is seen as ridiculous and worthy of laughter or mockery by the other Masks or audience. Even speaking a different language or dialect opens a character up as different. Marvin Carlson (2009), quoting from Jerry Blunt's introduction to his book on stage dialects affirms that: "A stage dialect is a normal dialect altered to the requirements of theatrical clarity and dramatic presentation" (11). He frames this comment within Roy Harris' definition of "integrational linguistics" as coined in his book *The Language Myth* (1982): "this approach stresses the improvisatory and indeterminate nature of every speech act"; following it with a direct quote from Harris: "language is continuously created by the interaction of individuals in specific communication

situations” (Carlson, 2009: 2–3). A commedia stage, therefore, is aurally populated by a range of accents and regional dialects.

Applying these formulations to the context of regionally accented dramatic roles in commedia dell’arte suggests that the language spoken by each Mask, therefore, was not the pure dialect of the region, but a performatively comic version. A conscious theatrical remodeling of the original’s accent, rhythm, and lexis, seems highly probable. A performer would alter the verbal delivery of a routine or slice of the overall story arc to suit each regional audience and do so even more when faced with comprehensibility issues caused by historically extreme variations within and between dialects. Given that a performer’s skill base is likely to include the ability to respond to different levels of engagement and sympathy, depending on location, this variation in delivery can be seen as one part of the matrix that may have made up commedia improvisation. It is within this genre that an actor may play an Other one moment, and, in the next, appeal to the audience’s sympathy. This ability, arguably the high point of a commedia actor’s skill, is often bundled ignominiously under the simplified label of virtuosity. Perhaps one could look at the actor’s ability, not just as learned technical skills, but as a class of mediums learned in order to be able to portray themselves as both different from the audience, and secondly as the same. The troupe needs to socially fit in but perform difference.

As one method used to overcome this comprehensibility shortfall, it is not surprising that commedia also adopted a highly visual and gestural means of communication (which is allied to bodily expressivity previously noted as “corporality”) in tandem with the regionally focused spoken voice. Dramaturgically, these regional voices were being consciously altered in the moment of performance (analogous to Harris’ conception of a speech act) to cope not only with the existential second-to-second unfolding of a performance but also with how they felt they would best entertain and respond to a variety of different regional audiences.

Taking ridiculous positions very seriously is, arguably, one of the most effective performative agencies of good comedy, so assuming that the performers were trying to squeeze every audience-pleasing performative possibility from the characteristics of their roles, it is not at all unreasonable to assume that the aural and tonal possibilities of each role (expressed as regional dialect, accent, meter, pitch, tone, and song) were also pushed toward comic and even grotesque extremes. Investigating how the actors spoke became part of reinventor Giovanni Poli’s (1917–1979) approach.

If, in performance, one pushes the actors' voices to the same extremes as Giovanni Poli did with his actors' bodies, then aesthetically we are moving toward extremes of vocal stylization (1957 RAI broadcast). It may be as one aspect of this stylization that accents were parodied and distinctive sounds emphasized for comic or dramatic effect, but that can never be conclusively proven. Poli's own sonic stylizations, within his neo-commedia practice, though tending toward the choric and the poetic, also made use of the wide variations in dialect present within spoken Northern Italian. It certainly appears that regional accents, however purposed or theatrically manifested, are an integral part of the commedia dell'arte matrix. It should follow, therefore, that, when approaching an analysis or aesthetic definition of the dramaturgy of neo-commedia, a Mask's regional dialect and its attendant functions should be considered of great importance. If you are from Northern Italy, then the chances are you will have at least one character speaking in your local dialect, and many who are different, speaking a different one.

What does exist in the period immediately before the golden age of commedia, evidencing use of conscious dialect, literary, and sonic experiments, are the monologues and plays of the Paduan playwright and comic performer Angelo Beolco (1494–1542), whose stage name was Il Ruzante (the Peasant). Ruzante scholars Nancy Dersofi (1978), Linda Carroll (1990), and Ronnie Ferguson (1996) all agree that Beolco's use of stage dialects is skillful, deliberate, and directly related to both the purpose of each of his comedies and the geographical placing and social position of each role. This is, again, one of the key characteristics of commedia dell'arte. Beolco demonstrates written versions of peasant Paduan accents in *La Moschetta* and *Parlamento de Ruzante* (1530s); adds both Venetian and Bergamask to *Bilora* (1530s); and then refined Tuscan to *L'Anconitana* (contested date, 1522–34). The vocabulary he employs is very rich in dialect, which makes finding contemporary cultural equivalents to the words he does employ, as well as adding their embodied geographical location and its relationship to power and social relationships, a major challenge for translators. Nancy Dersofi (1996) wrote a paper simply on the problems of translating his oaths and vulgar peasant colloquialisms. Even Ronnie Ferguson (1996), author of a linguistic history of Venice, in his translation of *Parlamento de Ruzante* evades the implicit issue of regional specificity and chooses to translate the text to a regionally non-specific general English vernacular (66).

It is precisely because regional dialects and idiolects are so rich and distinctive that Ruzante has consistently challenged translators. It is this issue that indicates further that a major aesthetic

feature of *commedia dell'arte*, derived or learned from its predecessor *Ruzante*, is the strong divergence in spoken dialect between the Masks. Winifred Smith (1968) notes that Giambattista Andreini, the actor son of Isabella Andreini, “believed in the use of dialect as a method of characterization as well as for humorous appeal” (103).

Ultimately the question of whether a Mask or role is held in comic contempt or esteem by the audience may be (or was) decided by the somewhat intangible factors of location and plot: that of which the audience is comprised, where (geographically) a particular performance occurs, and the role of the Mask within a particularly purposed plotline or story structure. Although there is, therefore, a high degree of overall fluidity in how an audience may react to this regional aspect of a *commedia* Mask, what is clear is that they did react. Nathalie Crohn Schmitt (2014) notes the antipathy of the (largely Venetian) bourgeois characters in Flaminio Scala’s scenarios (published on his retirement from the stage in 1611) to the servants, largely peasants from the Veneto or from the town of Bergamo (47–51). Scala’s scenarios’ dramatization of the servant underclass, according to Crohn-Schmitt, is a world away from the cheeky successful servants of a more populist conception of *commedia*: They are treated as the bourgeois audiences Scala was selling his book to would have treated their servants. The aural and tonal landscape of *commedia dell'arte* and, by forward extrapolation, of neo-*commedia* too, requires great dialect or lingual contrasts between the Masks. Consequently, I suggest strongly that whether the performance aims toward a positive or a comically reductive model of each region, the performative accent stays. It is an intrinsic part of the historical dramaturgy and needs to be considered as part of the neo-*commedia* frame.

To sum up, the *commedia* troupes of the golden age functioned as independent autonomous families, dependent on secular patronage for income and for protection from the censorious Catholic church, pushing them into a political position of alterity. Their income was generated by a flexible performance method that played with notions of locality and belonging, creating patterns of local identification that could be both played up to or subverted.

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About the Author

Olly Crick has been interested in commedia for a long time and first trod the boards as Pedrolino in a Barry Grantham show in London in 1987. Since then, he has worked with the Unfortunati (as the Doctor), TAG Teatro di Venice (as Captain Spavento in Venice Carnival in 1990), taught at RADA and LAMDA, co-authored two books, and co-edited another three on Commedia. He completed a PhD at Edge Hill University on the dramaturgy and aesthetics of contemporary Commedia dell'Arte in 2019 and is currently collaborating on a book on Carlo Boso for Routledge's European Directors series.