







**Skenè Studies I • 8**

Anglo-Italian Renaissance Studies Reprints • 3

*Italian Theatrical Traditions and  
Shakespeare's Drama.  
Selected Essays*

Richard Andrews

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# AIRSR

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(Cesare Ripa, *Allegory of the Printing Press*, 1645)



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## Introduction

It is a great compliment, and a surprise, to be invited to re-issue a selection of my academic essays composed over a period of more than forty years. The flattering initiative comes from the Skenè Research Centre of the University of Verona.

The Skenè Centre proclaims in its website ‘a particular focus on the relation between Classical and Early Modern English drama’. The word ‘Classical’ is used there to indicate ‘ancient Greek and Roman’. In this volume, the relation which is addressed most frequently – particularly in the essays placed in Part 3 – is that between English drama and Italian theatrical precedent. Playtexts from Italy in this period can be called ‘Classical’ in a sense different from that intended by Skenè. My most recent (probably final) monograph, published in 2022, in fact uses the word to denote a genre of Early Modern comedy which consciously reflected ancient theatre, and which I see as having been produced continuously over nearly three centuries, in Italy and in France. Because of the existence of that recent volume, the essays chosen for this anthology pay less attention than they might have done to the ‘French connection’; though I have been reluctant to censor out all references to Molière.

When I first started reading Italian comedies printed in the sixteenth century, there was one which immediately leapt to my eye: *Gl’ingannati* (The Deceived), composed collectively in Siena by the Intronati Academy and staged by them during the Carnival of 1532. I was impressed to start with by its dramatic clarity and fluid dialogue. I came later to discover how insistently influential this play became in later decades, both within Italy and beyond. By coincidence I had already conceived a special attachment to the city of Siena – it is where I learned the Italian language properly, and made friendships which still endure. It gives me pleasure therefore

that the structure of this collection allows me to start the volume, and then to conclude it, with *Gl'ingannati* and the Intronati. (The Accademia Senese degli Intronati is still flourishing, and it is poised to celebrate its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the year 2025.)

My studies of Italian Renaissance comedy have been motivated from the start by identifiable principles. I have always tried to treat a script or a scenario, conceived to be performed in a theatre, in a different way from a text composed just for reading. A literary text is complete on the page: once an accurate version has been established, nothing needs to be done to it before it is placed before its reader. By contrast, a theatre script is arguably not so much a text as a set of instructions: it tells us what should be said, and sometimes what should be done, in order to realise a work of art on stage. Every time a dramatic speech is delivered, its effect will be newly conditioned by a fresh actor and a new occasion. As historians and critics studying playscripts from the past, we are caught between two parallel but distinguishable aims. We want to determine, or guess, what might have been the effect of a play when it was first performed. Then we want also to judge which of its qualities are more permanent, which of them might still work in a similar way when revived by new actors, in new places, for audiences whom the dramatist could never imagine. On both levels, the concept of the play's 'effect' is paramount: for me, the 'output' of a work of art, its relationship with those who perceive and absorb it, has always taken priority over its authorial 'input'. What happened (we ask) when the lines of this playscript were spoken on stage, and thus became events as well as words? What can still happen even now, when those words then lead the way into dramatised feelings, interactions, and relationships – which for an audience are all also events? Unfortunately we were not there when the events were first staged; and for theatre performed earlier than the twentieth century there exists no recorded or filmed evidence to consult. It is fascinating, and fun, to embark on the deductions and speculations which theatre history involves, but we should always be aware of inevitable limitations. As I argue in essay no. 3 of this volume (*Printed Texts and Performance Texts of Italian Renaissance Comedy*), we need from the start to recognise what it is that we do not and cannot know.

As well as making that point, the essays grouped here in Part 1: *Dramatic Content and Dramatic Structures* mostly investigate components and structures in Early Modern Italian comedies which relate to, and may dictate, the effect which a performed script will have on an audience. It makes much more difference to a spectator than it does to a reader if a pair of twins is played by the same actor (no. 1: *Gl'ingannati as a Text for Performance*); if a solo speech is set deliberately apart from the dramatic action which surrounds it (no. 2: *Rhetoric and Drama: Monologues and Set Speeches in Aretino's Comedies*); if a dialogue is constructed out of rhythmic repetitions, rather than being what musicians would call 'through-composed' (no. 4: *Scripted Theatre and the Commedia dell'Arte*). The perceptions contained in that essay, about 'modular' dialogue structure and the 'elastic gag', have informed a significant proportion of my work since I first formulated them in 1991.

It also matters how and by whom a performance was created: on that level the 'output' of a play is directly affected by its 'input', and it would be counter-productive to insist on separating them. On Italian Renaissance stages, theatre shows composed by dramatists, and memorised word for word, were contemporaneous with other spectacles created by improvising actors, what we now call *commedia dell'arte*. This parallel existence of two overlapping types of theatre created a unique range of expectations for audiences; so an equally special approach is required now from historians. The whole topic relates to a larger line of inquiry which has been developing fruitfully in Early Modern cultural studies: the general co-existence, even interdependence, of oral and written transmissions of ideas and texts. It is no coincidence that my essay no. 5 was published in a collection of 2016 which dealt generally with 'Interactions between Orality and Writing'. The items now included in Part 1 assume that although there are obvious differences between written *commedia erudita* and improvised *commedia dell'arte*, the two practices used similar comic material and overlapped more than was once thought. The distinction proposed years ago by Tim Fitzpatrick (1995) between 'theatre as product' and 'theatre as process' underpins this observation.

Part 2 of the anthology, *Women On Stage and Behind the Scenes*, has a subject which is self-explanatory but which may none the less

need some comment. In my view there are three lines of inquiry possible under this heading. Firstly: in a patriarchal age, how did Italian Renaissance dramatists and devisers of scenarios depict their female characters? Secondly: over what period, and through what successive phases, was the participation of women in Italian theatre established? Thirdly: do individual dramatic texts composed for all-male casts show detectably different tendencies from those written with actresses in mind? My essays in Part 2 address some of these questions better than others, but re-reading them now I am reminded of the critical context in which they first appeared.

When I began my researches into Italian comedies, around the year 1980, academic writers had paid little or no attention to any of my three suggested questions. The few scholars who studied Italian Renaissance scripted comedy never discussed the treatment of female characters as a category; nor did they ever wonder about the effect of their being embodied by male actors. The larger number of writers investigating *commedia dell'arte* rarely talked specifically about the genre's female participants – even though it was the *arte* which first introduced professional actresses to Europe, and thus to the wider world. Over subsequent decades, of course, the critical landscape has greatly changed – to the extent that my bibliographical references in these Part 2 essays may now look unhelpfully sparse. Even now, however, one might argue that the handling of female characters in *commedia erudita* has been treated more often by scholars writing in English or in French than by those from within Italy. However, after crucial contributions from Taviani and Schino (1982) and from Ferrone (2014), Italian scholars do now recognise the pioneering importance of *commedia dell'arte* actresses.

Now, as I read more recent scholarship, and as I supervise the occasional doctoral thesis, I observe a significant surge in such female-oriented studies from younger scholars of all nationalities (and of all genders). They are now exploring the major influence of actresses – who were sometimes also dramatists or producers – on scripts, on theatrical performance formats, and on the cultural preferences of their public. A previous tendency to focus almost exclusively on Isabella Andreini (a tendency shared by me, in this volume) is being corrected by studies relating to other theatrical

women.<sup>1</sup> If my essays in Part 2 now seem dated, then that is actually a fact to be welcomed. They may still possess some historical status; and I can still claim a modest precedence (no. 8: *Female Presences on Stage . . .*) in my attempt to link or compare the early histories of the dramatic actress and the operatic *prima donna*.

Part 3 of the collection, *Italian Theatre in Shakespeare and Elsewhere*, offers a series of attempts to insist that Italian Renaissance plays, comedies in particular, were known to dramatists outside Italy, and that they fed important concrete influences into the drama of Shakespeare in particular. I use the word ‘insist’ here, because — to judge by anecdotal evidence — insistence seems still to be necessary. Despite the pioneering studies of Louise George Clubb,<sup>2</sup> despite the volumes of essays vigorously edited in recent years by my present General Editor Michele Marrapodi,<sup>3</sup> and despite the publications of my colleagues in the ‘Theater Without Borders’ (TWB) research group,<sup>4</sup> there are still academics who resist the notion that Shakespeare and his English contemporaries had access to Italian plays, could understand them, and absorbed ideas and practices from them. Shakespeare is permitted by such people to have been influenced by Italian (and Spanish, and French) novellas and other texts for reading — especially if they existed in English translation — but not by Italian material written for the theatre.

There is also resistance, perhaps more understandable, to the idea that stories and performance practices used by the Italian *commedia dell’arte* could have been known to English dramatists via hearsay and an unwritten theatrical grapevine. It is true that *arte* actors themselves did not visit England much, if at all, after the 1570s. It is true that surviving printed and manuscript texts which inform us now about the *commedia dell’arte* date mostly from after 1610,

1 All these developments are now reflected in a monograph by Laiena (2023). It contains a comprehensive bibliography of previous relevant studies.

2 Most obviously Clubb (1989); preceded and succeeded by a number of other essays. See also the retrospective edition of Clubb’s essays (2024), published in this same series.

3 For example, Marrapodi 1998, 2007, 2010, 2014, and 2019 (which includes essay no. 16 in the present volume).

4 Two of my essays in this volume (nos. 13 and 15) appeared in ‘TWB’ publications.

so they cannot be seen as direct textual ‘sources’ for Shakespeare’s plays. There is a difference, however, between surviving texts which inform us now and sources of information which have not survived but which were available to Shakespeare. It is quite clear that the collections of Italian scenarios which we can now read, drafted in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, had the function of memorialising material which had been performed with success over several previous decades. What had been happening on *commedia dell’arte* stages during Shakespeare’s creative lifetime was being summarised, after the event, in those paper records available to us. In the words of my essay no. 15, there were ‘resources in common’ which fed separately into the work of English playwrights and into scenarios assembled by Italian actor-managers (*capocomici*). If Ben Jonson’s Corvino, in Act 2 of *Volpone*, could make detailed reference to *arte* masks and to a typical *arte* scene of marital jealousy, then Shakespeare would have known about those things too.

During my working life I have been salaried by the British public purse as a Professor of Italian, pursuing a chosen research specialism. Part of my job, as I have perceived it, has been to present to English-speaking readers as accurate an account as I could manage of similarities and possible influences between Early Modern theatre in our two countries — and also to note firm differences and divergencies, which are equally significant. In this collection, essays 12 (*Shakespeare and Italian Comedy*) and 16 (*The Italian Comici and Commedia dell’Arte*) were written most of all with such an aim in mind (and, as will be noted immediately below, they both sometimes say the same things). Essay no. 11 (*Shakespeare, Molière, and the Commedia dell’Arte*) is an attempt to align Italian improvising practices also with French dramaturgy, where similarities are much closer. That item stands as a sample of the larger project which eventually produced my monograph of 2022. Part 3 also contains three more detailed reflections on what is Italianate — and on what is definitely not Italianate — in some selected Shakespeare plays. And then we choose to conclude with the Italian and wider European influence of comedies written by the Sienese Intronati Academy.

When one assembles, or telescopes, seventeen articles written by the same person over a long period of time, there is a strong probability that the same things will be said in more than one essay.

Some of the items chosen here, especially in Part 3, certainly tend to echo one another. During past years, as I addressed academic readerships which were at least notionally different, as I wondered whether points that I had already made had actually been read and accepted, it sometimes seemed necessary to make those same points again. I did not know that the repetitions would one day be made more obvious by being gathered within the same few pages. An apology is due to readers who choose to peruse a number of these essays in quick succession. They may read a little too often about ‘modular’ dialogue structures and ‘elastic gags’. They may tire of being told that *commedia dell’arte* scenarios contain material borrowed from *commedia erudita*; they may become impatient at hearing more than once that the plot of Shakespeare’s *Tempest* is not original but Italianate; they may fidget at the reappearance of various other proposals which it would be tedious to list here yet again. I can only recommend that they read one item at a time, and take some time off between them. On one very blatant case I have made an editorial intervention. Essay no. 6 (*Anti-feminism in Commedia Erudita*) contained some paragraphs about the comedy *La Veniexiana*, and some detailed quotations from it, which were at the time of writing also being expanded into a whole separate article, now reprinted here as essay no. 7. That was now such a gross case of duplication that the relevant paragraphs have simply been removed from the essay. In addition, the essay on *La Veniexiana* appears here with a revisionist footnote no. 18 attached – it presents an alternative hypothesis about how the play might originally have been staged, a possibility which had not occurred to me by 1996.

In other respects, my main editorial intervention in this volume has been to include English translations of all Italian (and dialect) quotations, a resource which did not appear in the original printings. This makes some of the items longer than they originally were. I have also inserted a small number of more recent bibliographical references into essays from the more distant past; but any attempt to update the footnotes completely would have rendered them unmanageable.

In assembling this collection for print, I am particularly indebted to an anonymous External Reader who has given much appreciated support; to Professor Silvia Bigliuzzi, Director of the Skenè Centre;

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Richard Andrews  
Leeds, April 2024

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