

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020). 120pp. ISBN 978 0 3670 8565 0.

Tom Roberts

Exeter College, Oxford

tom.roberts@exeter.ox.ac.uk

Transnationality is the lens under which scholars now interrogate the *commedia dell'arte*, a form of professional, semi-improvised performance practice that emerged from Italy in the sixteenth century to capture the imaginations of audiences across Europe. Such studies are typically concerned with the intellectual and cultural networks of exchange that underpin these migrations, with the often-implicit recognition that its ultramontane reach was made possible by certain 'transnational' performance practices. To carry this theatre across cultural and linguistic boundaries, and to express character, action, and intent to diverse audiences along the way, the players (or *comici*) must have crafted a method of play that clearly articulated something universal, or at the very least something that resonated across Europe's increasingly connected urban centres. *Performing Commedia dell'Arte, 1570–1630* takes this method as its subject, exploring the practicalities of *arte* performance, and the social, cultural, and political contexts of Italian professional theatrical production, during its sixty-year 'golden age'.

It is familiar material to Natalie Crohn Schmitt, Professor Emerita of English and Theatre at the University of Illinois at Chicago and author of the well-received volume, *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios*.¹ This much slimmer, 120 page 'Focus' volume, however, is just as rigorous in its analysis of what Schmitt identifies as the key, constituent parts of *commedia dell'arte* performance: improvisation, methods (or 'acting styles'), and masks. She draws on textual and iconographic source materials

¹ Natalie Crohn Schmitt, *Befriending the Commedia Dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

from three collections of manuscript and print plots (or *scenari*) that survive from the period in question, two of which (the Corsini and Locatelli manuscripts) have received little attention in English language scholarship, to historicise the emergence of this peculiar performance practice within a humanist culture that had permeated all aspects of spiritual, intellectual, and civic life by the Seicento. The opening chapter on improvisation sets the tone. Structured around three questions (why did the actors improvise? What was the nature of improvisation? And how did the actors improvise?), Schmitt argues that the kind of rehearsed spontaneity staged by the *comici* encapsulated the spirit of the classical revival. The ‘why’ grounds the chapter within a culture of self-fashioning and *sprezzatura*, or practiced nonchalance, that reached way beyond the confines of aristocratic and royal courts in the period. The notion of speech as a carefully curated form of expression, for example, trickled into the general consciousness through public performances of disputations, sermons, conduct manuals, songs, and stories. Spontaneity was in fact anything but, and in the ‘how’ section of the chapter, Schmitt focuses on the centrality of *memoria*, the ‘compositional art’ of classical oratory, to early modern extemporising. Of course, the reliance of the *comici* on principles of classical rhetoric to stitch together a play out of memorised speeches and routines has been covered in detail elsewhere.² Schmitt’s contribution is turning a performance scholar’s eye to *memoria rerum* in particular — the idea, lauded by Cicero as the more creative memetic art, of memorising the substance and choice words over exact phrasing. This, she argues, was more useful to performance when the dialogue of fellow actors was inconsistent, and maintaining this inconsistency was at the heart of performance. In Schmitt’s reading, *commedia dell’arte* improvisation was not only motivated by the increasingly stringent censures of the post-Tridentine church. Rather, the attraction of the *commedia dell’arte*, as explored in the ‘what’ section of the chapter, came from a heightened sense of inconsistency, and the continual possibility that the improvisation might fail. As the character spun more and more threads of deceit to achieve their goals, the actors worked to rescue the web from collapsing under the weight of its own ridiculous complexity. Of course, the players actively downplayed the level of structure and security that their memorised routines afforded as revealing the skill involved would have ‘diminished the sense of the performance’s immediacy’; the audience only saw the exasperated *comici* bend over backwards to save the drama, which resulted in a manufactured bond between audience and actors (p. 13). The entertainment, then, comes

² See Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Robert Henke ‘Border-Crossing in the Commedia Dell’arte’, in *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theatre*, ed. by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

from the former believing the latter were genuinely exerting their best efforts to avoid catastrophe.

The book's first chapter is a thought-provoking consideration of the actor-audience dynamics of a performance culture that leaves few material traces of content, and opens the door to further research on the nature of this relationship. If, for example, a degree of *sprezzatura* was a universally acknowledged part of public life, perhaps audience enjoyment was in the craft itself? The second chapter moves on to consider what Schmitt calls the 'acting styles', or methods, of the *comici*. A substantial amount of scholarship is consolidated here into three readable subsections on dialect, voice, and gesture. Each offers a measured reflection on the practical and dramatic possibilities and limitations of these methods to a type of itinerant performance practice with increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse audiences. Schmitt's own position is less visible at first; the subsection on voice begins with a thorough overview of Quintilianic instruction for vocal control before a recapitulation of Emily Wilbourne's recent 'bold ideas' on early modern Italian opera with little interrogation of these ideas or *commedia dell'arte* orality in general (p. 32). The subsequent discussion of gesture, however, the strongest section of the entire book, offers a sustained and original reflection on the rhetorical contexts of theatricality, in this instance the oratorical frameworks used to craft an on-stage kinesics. Building once more on the contemporary intellectual infatuation with Quintilian, Schmitt demonstrates how the *comici* crafted a non-verbal language steeped in the classical humanist learning by bringing textual and iconographic sources into dialogue in a productive and inspired way.

The third chapter turns to the most evocative aspect of the *commedia dell'arte* in the contemporary imagination — its peculiar use of masks (in the sense of *maschere*, or stock characters, rather than actual visors, which was not a part of every character's wardrobe). It offers separate insights into their utility for scenarists, actors, and audiences, historicising the persistence of the masks in *commedia dell'arte* performance in relation to the practicalities of stagecraft, the oppressive social contexts in which the *comici* often performed, and the relationship of the *arte* to other secular performance cultures. Some observations are well trodden; if an actor were to leave the troupe, for example, no major rewriting of existing materials was required. Rather, another lover, servant, or braggart could be found, and the routines adapted to accommodate their relative strengths and weaknesses. Elsewhere, Schmitt's commitment to contextualisation with an eye to performance theory shines; the masks not only permitted a degree of anonymity and license to fool, she argues, but they also became an object in which the sins of the character could

be embodied and separated from the actor. Crucially, Schmitt extends the traditional definition of *maschere* to include those less well-known or peripheral characters found in the surviving plots of tragicomedies and pastorals, such as gods, devils, and spirits (p. 54). It is a significant rejigging of approach that further grounds *commedia dell'arte* within other performance traditions, and offers exciting avenues for further research.

One issue concerns argument more broadly. Quoting Massimo Ciavolella, Schmitt opens with the statement that the *commedia dell'arte* was the 'basis for modern theatre in the western world' (p. 1). From the off, then, the reader knows that this is a volume that celebrates the transnational nature of the form as something with transhistorical significance, although this wider context turns out to be an unobtrusive presence until the final chapter. This takes the form of a coda that considers the presence of the building blocks, techniques, and essence of the form discussed so far in the make-up and practices of several contemporary troupes. The exaggerated character types found in the performances of the subversive San Francisco Mime troupe; the nationally funded Théâtre du Soleil of Ariane Mnouchkine inspired by Jacques Lecoq; the dynamics of performance and spectating during The Improvised Shakespeare Company shows in Chicago; all draw on the radical legacy of the professional, semi-improvised, subversive *arte*.

Schmitt is careful not to discount recent works on the 'myth' of the *commedia dell'arte* — those inherited assumptions about this elusive theatre propagated by performers and scholars. 'It is a myth that there is an unbroken line of *commedia dell'arte* continuing into the present day', she writes, before stating that a number of 'very long-lived troupes consciously continue to use aspects of *commedia dell'arte* performance resourcefully and successfully' (p. 104). The issue is whether all or any of the performance practices covered can be positively identified as belonging exclusively to the *commedia dell'arte*. Kathleen M. Lea perfectly articulated the collective frustration of early modern Italian theatre scholars in this regard: 'The *Commedia dell'Arte* will not keep still within the bounds of definition', but 'may be said to exist by virtue of a quorum of its characteristics'.³ Several decades later, Louise George Clubb recognised that this frustration stemmed from a misunderstanding of what the *commedia dell'arte* actually encompassed. Her work on theatrical intertextualities argued that the line between professional, improvised, popular *arte* and amateur, scripted, university *erudita* was artificial. Rather theatre, like literature,

³ K. M. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy: A Study in the Commedia Dell'Arte, 1560-1620, with Special Reference to the English Stage*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), I, p. 1.

was modular, pieced together from common interchangeable units that she termed 'theatregrams'.⁴ The significance of the *comici* then was not their innovations, but their migrations; they were, in Robert Henke's words, the 'perfect transnational machine', facilitating the distribution of these neoclassical theatregrams into the dramaturgies of disparate regions as they performed in cities and courts across Europe.⁵

Of course, Schmitt recognises this; 'its success must be largely attributed to the means of its performance', she writes, and while these building blocks were not unique to the *commedia dell'arte*, it was the *comici* who 'took full advantage of them and made them famous' (p. 2). However, there is still a residual sense in *Performing Commedia dell'Arte* that the form is easily discernible, separate, and therefore eternally relevant. The introductory chapter, for example, highlights the 'borrowing and adapting of earlier materials' by the *comici* explored in the work of scholars like Henke and Richard Andrews (p. 2). Both, however, are sure to stress that this was an ongoing rather than linear process. Scripted drama, marketplace entertainments, acrobatic routines, and prose and verse pamphlets did not develop from a common source in isolation but would continually intermingle and cross-fertilise over the period. More blatant connections of contemporary performance with historically situated theatre are found in references to the *scenari* as the 'world's first sitcoms' (p. 61), or in the volume's closing statement: 'The popularity and recognisability of the masks and the flexibility of improvisation greatly facilitated the spread of *commedia dell'arte* throughout Europe, making it there the dominant form of drama' (p. 85). Of course, as the remit, content, and purpose of this volume reminds us, the *commedia dell'arte* was not so much a form of drama, but a method of performance practice, and as such we cannot properly say that it was the 'dominant form' in Venice, London, Paris, or Madrid.

The notion of a pan-European revolution in theatre overlooks the more subtle negotiations that occurred when the *comici* encountered varying regional cultures on their travels. They were pedlars of Cinquecento innovation, facilitators of possibility, and it was the flexibility built into performance that enabled practitioners to negotiate cultural difference to create something that resonated across boundaries. Consequently, this flexibility also makes any attempt to write definitively of performance practice on a European-wide scale difficult, and the claims made in the introduction about the subversive nature of *commedia dell'arte* lose

⁴ Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (London: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁵ Henke 'Border-Crossing in the Commedia Dell'arte', p. 19.

weight. Even if improvisation offered ‘protected explorations of tensions’ that the Church sought to suppress, we cannot presume that the ‘deeply held beliefs about magic and astrology’ explored in the plays were as ‘rigorously forbidden’ by the Valois Court in France as the Church in the Papal States (p. 4). Perhaps a greater focus on the development of a pan-European urban culture marked by an increasingly powerful citizenry and quotidian cross-cultural encounters would lend credence to such claims. Of course, a slim volume can be afforded some generalisations, but the book could benefit from a narrower contextual scope, or simply reframing as exclusively a study of golden age performance without the transhistorical connection. As it stands, however, the actual implications of the *commedia dell’arte*’s international (or transnational) reach is lost amidst what is a well-researched but ultimately romanticised account of the form: a theatre that remains unencumbered and continually recognisable as it contorts itself to fit the horizons of experience, taste, and expectation of diverse peoples in disparate regions across time.

All the same, this does not detract from what are otherwise thoroughly researched chapters, the merit of each lying in Schmitt’s synthesis of performance methods and traditional historical source analysis. There is sharp awareness of the practicalities of early modern performance and the limitations and possibilities of the certain theatrical practices and spaces throughout. In the chapter on improvisation, she offers a more sustained engagement on the practical application of mnemonic systems for performance that makes a particularly thought-provoking point about group improvisation that draws on her knowledge of modern extemporised performance. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this volume is the engagement with extant iconography in the Corsini manuscript *scenari*. In centring Ciceronian and Quintilianic oratorical principles to *commedia dell’arte* performance, Schmitt considers a surviving watercolour frontispiece for the scenario ‘La pazza Isabella’ (The Madness of Isabella). The dishevelled dress and indecorous positioning of the hands suggests that the *attrice* (actresses) would subvert social decorum in the mad scenes (*pazza*, or *pazzia*) by inverting strict principles of oratorical kinesics. Later in the volume, during the discussion on pastoral masks, Schmitt engages with iconography again to highlight the significance of visual character cues as theatrical currency. Here, the watercolour frontispiece of the ‘Li trei satiri’ (The Three Satyres) scenario is cross-referenced with written plots and surviving images of satyrs from other, multi-genre works, such as the 1602 edition of Guarini’s *Il pastor fido* (pp. 71–75). It is a masterclass in synthesising often disparate sources, and speaks to the innovative nature of what is no doubt an important book that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of this elusive theatre.