
VERBAL COMIC GAGS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS FROM ADLIBBING ITALIAN COMEDIANS *

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ABSTRACT

The Italian flavour of Shakespeare plays is strong and consistent and is hardly accounted for by standard explanations. One of these flavours, perhaps subtler than the others, is the influence of the Commedia dell'Arte. Despite the landmark work of K.M. Lea, Ferdinando Neri, Allardyce Nicoll, Winifred Smith, and others, the case for the influence of the Commedia dell'Arte on the plays of Shakespeare is weakened by the relative paucity of documented visits of the troupes/actors to London. However, Shakespeare's texts as we have them are full of extraneous verbal elements such as puns, topical allusions and songs in the manner of the verbal lazzi of the Commedia dell'Arte. After all, Shakespeare's context is the London commercial theatre and the professional troupe of players. From 1576-1642 the London stage was an arena of vigorous and innovative theatrical activity. Moving in theatrical circles as he did, Shakespeare would most certainly have been aware of (documented) visits of the Italians.

Key Words: Commedia dell'Arte, Renaissance Drama, Shakespeare.

Introduction

How many attempts have there been to answer the vexed question of how William Shakespeare became so familiar with things Italian? Several? Hundreds? Did Shakespeare, for instance, ever attend a performance by players of the Commedia dell'Arte? After all, Drusiano Martinelli, a celebrated capocomico, had appeared in London in 1578, although what or where he performed, and even the constitution and size of his troupe, are not known.¹ Shakespeare himself, however, was still in Stratford in his early teens and did not arrive in London until about 1585, but after that there is no evidence of their appearance until a performance in 1602 for Queen Elizabeth, and none after that until the 1700s.

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However, we do know that Italian culture and civilization overall were very influential in Elizabethan London.² It also seems that English troupes did not confine themselves to touring in England. Contacts were made between companies of English and Italian travelling players, especially in Paris, where the company known as the Gelosi spent considerable periods of time.³ The English clown, William Kempe, who played Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Noth-ing*, was in Rome around 1600, and the English writer Thomas Nashe describes meeting with “that famous Francatrip Harlicken” in Venice in 1589 (Nashe 342). The zanni inquired of Nashe if he knew “the signor Chiarlatino Kempino,” and was gratified to learn that he did (Lea 350). Later evidence exists of the familiarity with Italian theatrical methods of improvisation in the play *The Travailes of the Three English Brothers* (1607) by John Day and others, which is set in Venice. In it, Will Kempe agrees to “extem-porise a merriment” with an Italian Harlequin (Collier 92). A German scholar has even suggested that Shakespeare as “an adventurous youth” may have visited Paris and seen the Gelosi (Wolff 3).

Although our initial question must remain unanswered, Shakespeare’s knowledge of Italian literature is well documented. Italian sources for plots and characters have been found (Neri, *passim*). It has been suggested that he knew the language, since he drew upon Boccaccio and other Italian writers for plots.⁴ But he might equally well have heard such things recounted by someone else who knew the language.⁵ All the same, moving in London’s theatrical society, Shakespeare almost certainly heard accounts of the Martinelli visit only a decade earlier. The effect of the Italian players on London audiences cannot be underestimated, though we have no exact measuring stick to go by.

I.

A special feature of the *Commedia dell’Arte* performances was the use of *lazzi*, or improvised comic business, either visual or verbal. Examples of the former kind (beatings, comic horseplay and the like) to be found in many of Shakespeare’s plays have been exhaustively listed by Violi. Examples of the latter (verbal) kind are more difficult to trace, but a number can be offered here.

Our main difficulty in examining the scenarios of the *Commedia dell’Arte* which have survived is, of course, the fact that they are no more than a relatively brief plot upon which the players hung their improvised dialogue and action. The best-known collection and the first to be printed is that of Flamineo Scala “detto Flavio,” entitled *II Teatro delle Favole rappresentative...* (Venice, 1611).⁶ These fifty scenarios are rarely more than a few pages long, and we never know precisely what any given character actually said during a performance.

In time, however, the players began memorizing set pieces (prologues, tirades, entrance and exit passages, love poems) for use at appropriate moments in the action. These connections were handed down from one generation to the next and were often worn out in the process.

Exactly when the players started this useful and time-saving device is not clear, but it may have been relatively early in the development of the *Commedia dell'Arte* itself. Andrea Perrucci's *Dell'arte rappresentativa premeditata ed all'improvviso* (first printed in Naples in 1699 and reprinted with an introduction by Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Florence 1961) describes lazzi as "concetti, disperazione, spropositi, tirate" and provides examples. These are of a verbal nature, as are the "soggetti, scene, prologhi, poezie, tirate da Dottore, e ogni altra cosa necessaria per ben recitare all'impronto," which Placido Adriani collected and printed in his *Selva, ovvero Zibaldone di concetti comici* (1734).⁷ To be sure, both collections were late, but they assist in reconstructing what the players said during performance.

The earliest collection of this kind of material is less informative, though it indicates that the method of proceeding was already in use as early as 1634, when Nicolò Barbieri (also known as Beltrame) published his treatise *La Supplica. Discorse familiare... dirette a quelli che scrivendo o parlando trattano de comici*.⁸ he wrote:

I comici studiano e si muniscono a memoria di gran farragine di cose, come sentenze, concetti, discorsi d'amore, rimproveri, disperazioni e delirii, per averli pronti all'occasioni, ed i loro studii sono conformi al costume de' personaggi che loro rappresentano. (23)

All these "sentenze, concetti," etc. are — properly speaking — verbal lazzi.

Domenico Bruni's set of prologues gives still more evidence of "the conspicuous literary element" which seems to have marked the performances of the *Commedia del'Arte* (Kennard 48). Born in 1580, Bruni was a prolific writer of prologues. In one written for a *servetta*, he sheds light on how the players prepared for a new production: the *prima donna* calls for Boccaccio's *Fiammetta*, *Pantalone* for Calmo's *Letters*, the *Capitano* for *Le Bravure di Capitano Spavento*, *Graziano* for *The Sayings of the Philosophers*, and the *primo amante* for *Plato's Works*.⁹ These choices indicate a high degree of literary taste, and we know that many of the players were indeed cultivated individuals.

Shakespeare's characters refer, on occasion, to the use of considerably less sophisticated collections. *Beatrice* (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.1.119) is accused of having her "good wit out of the *Hundred Merry Tales*," a collection of feeble anecdotes first published in 1526.¹⁰ *Slender* (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1.1.184-7) exclaims, "I had rather had forty shillings I had my *Book of Songs and Sonnets* here," and asks *Simple*, "You have not the *Book of Riddles* about you, have you?" He would draw on both in courting *Mistress Page*.

II.

Verbal lazzi, or the flights of bravura acting "all'improvviso" to which reference has already been made, include the *spropositi*, defined by Cervellati as "a mongrel form of wit, half wit and half malapropism" (Lea 25).

Since “malapropism” is an anachronism, the phrase “misplaced word” used by Escalus (*Measure for Measure*, 2.1.84) would seem more suitable. Graziano, also known as *il Dottore*, *il Pedante*, *Tartaglia*, *Guillot Gorju*, *il Notaio* and *il Farmacista*, (*Cervellati* 121) was noted for his “misplaced words,” his use of dialect, his *lingua maccheronica*, (*Spezzani* 367) his grotesquely long words, his tirades introducing pedantic, usually fanciful, etymologies, and puns. All these verbal *lazzi* are echoed in Shakespeare’s plays.

Graziano boasts that he is “*sovra tutt bon grammatic, mior humanista, perfett retorich, sottill logich,*” etc. (*Cervellati* 121) He uses on occasion “*un linguaggio bastardo, misto di veneziano e di bolognese italianizzato,*” (*Cervellati* 121) e.g., “*dopp haveir camina bein l’Univers / Con la gran lus della mia intelegenzia...*” Of course, the use of dialect in *Commedia dell’Arte* performances was always one of its main features. Indeed, Vergilio Verucci—one of the most industrious writers of scenarios—composed his *Li Diversi linguaggi* (Venezia, 1609), which presented ten characters, each speaking a different dialect (“*Veneziano, Romanesco, Ceciliano, Bolognese, Napoletano,*” etc.). (*Pandolfi* 26)

In the changing linguistic landscape of early modern English, in common with many dramatists of the period, Shakespeare uses dialect, from the North, South, East, West, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, usually for comic effect. The speeches of Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), contain dialectal peculiarities of Welsh speakers of English—e.g., “p” for “b” and “t” for “d.” He declares, “It is petter than friends in the swort; and there is another device in my prain, which peradventure prings goot discretion” (1.1.38ff.), and “Seese is not good to give putter; your pelly is all putter” (5.5.136-9). In *Henry V*, Fluellen, Macmorris and Jamy each has his own dialect: “By Cheshu, I think a’ will plow all up ... look you ... Captain Jamy is a marvellous falorous gentleman” (Fluellen); “By Chrish, la! tish ill done; the work is give over, the trompet sound the retreat ... O tish ill done, tish ill done” (Macmorris); and, “I say gud-day ... I sail be vary gud, gud feith, gud captains bath” (Jamy). In *King Lear*, Edward suddenly breaks into what can only be described as “stage Somerset” dialect, unexplained by the commentators: “Chill not let go, zir, without vurther ‘casion ... let poor voke pass. An child ha ‘bin zwaggering out of my life ‘twould not ha’ bin zo long as ‘tis by a vortnight,” etc. (4.6.231ff.). Katherine (*Henry V*) speaks a mixture of broken English and French: “Datis as it sail please le roi mon père” (5.2.247ff.). And many other examples from the plays might be quoted.

III.

Graziano’s *spropositi* include *idiotismi lessicali* (*Spezzani* 370) such as *anibali* for *animali*, *pictor* for *pastor* and *orrore* for *amore*. Shakespeare’s Elbow (*Measure for Measure*) speaks of “two notorious benefactors” (Angelo corrects him to “malefactors” [2.1.49ff.]).

Had his wife been “cardinally” (carnally) inclined, she might have been “accused in fornication” (2.2.77ff.). Elbow cries, in the same scene, “O thou varlet ... O thou wicked Hannibal!” which appears to be an echo of Graziano’s *anibali/animali sproposito* just mentioned. Mistress Quickly (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) speaks of “alligant terms,” “a fartuous modest wife,” and “a marvellous infection to the little page” (2.2.65ff.). Dull, the constable, and Costard (*Love’s Labour Lost*) use misplaced words: “I myself reprehend [apprehend] his own person” (1.1.183) and, of Armando’s letter, Costard says, “The contempts thereof are as of touching me” (1.1.303ff.). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Launcelot declares, “Tears exhibit my tongue” (2.2.10) and “my young master doth expect your reproach” [approach] (2.2.20). There is a possibility that these and other instances of “misplaced words” were, in fact, improvised verbal *lazzi* introduced by the clown Will Kempe and taken down in performance by a scribe or reporter. Neither *Feste* (*Twelfth Night*) nor *Touchstone* (*As You Like It*) uses this *lazzo*. The latter parts were probably taken by the clown Armin, a more sophisticated player than Kempe (Gray 674). In any case, it must be admitted that Hamlet’s advice to the Players (3.2.36ff.) “let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them ...” suggests that Shakespeare himself disapproved of the custom of improvising during a performance, had little patience with it and did his best to prevent it.¹¹

Tirades, studied in advance and peppered with *la lingua maccheronica*, were a feature of the *Commedia dell’Arte* and characterized the speech of Graziano, e.g., “Ma son altessum d’Intellett, bunessum d’persouna, constatessum d’feid ... v’arspundrò, perchè sapiens dominatur astris ...” (Spezzani 370). Holofernes (*Love’s Labour Lost*) is described as a “schoolmaster,” and utters several tirades which include macaronic passages: “The deer was, as you know, sanguis, in blood, ripe as the pomewater, who now hangeth like a jewel in the ear of coelo, the sky ...” (4.2.3-7). He employs Latin and Italian tags: “Twice sod simplicity, bis coctus!” “*damosella virgin ...*” “I will ... undertake your *ben venuto*,” and “*Venetia, Venetia, /Chi non ti vede, non ti pretia*” (4.2.102-3). Costard remarks of Holofernes and Armando that “they have lived long on the alms-basket of words,” and constructs the “longest word *ex-tant*” (Wilson 156): “*honorificabilitudinitatibus*: (5.1.41). However, Graziano’s “*certifieabilitudinitissemamient*” has 31 letters, Costard’s a mere 27.

Conclusion

Puns and proverbs were another source of verbal *lazzi*. *Pantalone* in *La Fiamella* was celebrated for his collection of puns, which sufficed to last for a page-long tirade at the rate of two puns per line (Lea, I, 124). Those puns used in Shakespeare’s plays range from the trivial and threadbare to the bawdy, and sometimes the incomprehensible.

Like their contemporaries in the Com-media dell'Arte companies, Elizabethan players, and audiences, evidently delighted in verbal pyrotechnics, "juggling with rhyme, alliteration and meaning," such as occur in medieval drama and Tudor moralities, and which were "firmly embedded in the basic process and structure of the popular theatre" (Weimann 232).

Shakespeare does not use puns only for comic effect. Hamlet, for instance, utters more puns than any other character in the plays. He vents his hostility towards the Court in the Play scene with fierce punning, and Lear's Fool attempts to relieve the king's sufferings by a series of puns, whilst Hotspur's father refers to him as 'Coldspur' on learning of his death. We cannot, of course, estimate the extent to which verbal lazzi such as puns were accompanied during performance by "gestures of winking, by deliberate pausing before or after the crucial word or phrase, by changes in tempo, pitch and volume."¹²

This study has considered one aspect of the improvisational art as practiced in two of the most popular theatres of the late sixteenth century.¹³ As things stand, influence cannot be ruled out, the more so as Italian players of the Commedia dell'Arte and Elizabethan players were certainly in contact in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, if not in England - coincidence is always possible. But practical pressures exerted by the circumstances of the historical, theatrical moment were assuredly present, and cannot be discounted, though they are too complex adequately to be unravelled here.

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Notes

¹ See Lea. Although first published as early as 1934, Lea remains a standard work, at any rate in England, though its critical apparatus has been questioned.

² This topic has been frequently studied in both English and Italian. See, for example, Rebora and Orr.

³ For further information on the travelling troupes of Italian players around Europe, see Pandolfi, which is the standard work in Italian on the Commedia dell'Arte. The Italian players travelled well and extensively. Judith Cook is "stunned" to find a tradition in Gdansk, Poland that Shakespeare's plays had been performed there before the end of the sixteenth century, and, indeed within a century or two the English players were to be seen all over Europe. See also Steele, "The Commedia dell'Arte in Eighteenth-Century Poland and Russia."

⁴ See Praz 98. Anyway, as Horace Howard Furness pointed out in 1899, "We really gain nothing by reading and rummaging among the material of which Shakespeare made use for his plays. It makes the poet no whit better or worse, or more comprehensible." Oddly enough, these remarks follow fifty pages from Furness deriving the plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* from Ariosto, Bandello and other Italian writers, including the Commedia dell'Arte (Appendix to Furness' edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* [repr., New York, 1964], pp. 295-343). See also Muir 7.

⁵ This would be John Florio. Those who believe that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote under the pseudonym of William Shakespeare point to de Vere's knowledge of Italian, his residence in Italy, particularly in Venice and other Italian cities 1575-76, at the height of the popularity of the Commedia dell'Arte. Thus, the question of whether Shakespeare knew Italian is solved in one fell swoop!

⁶ Scala is reproduced by photography by the MLA (New York, 1935) and published in English translation by Henry F. Salerno.

⁷ See the study by Thérault, and by Cervellati 27.

⁸ Venice, 1634, and reprinted with critical apparatus by Ferdinando Taviani, Milan, 1971.

⁹ See Nicoll 169. Bruni's prologues were printed as *Le fatiche comiche* (Paris, 1623). Pandolfi, reprints this particular prologue as "Miserie dei comici" in IV, pp. 55-6.

¹⁰ Reprinted in 1840 and again in 1866, with a facsimile edition by *Scholars' Facsimiles* (Gainesville, 1970). See also Zall, 78-90 and Lievsay, with comments on possible Italian sources for this kind of material.

¹¹ Will Kempe has been credited, perhaps wrongly, with being the original of the actor criticized by Hamlet. Of Shakespeare's three regular clowns, Richard Tarlton, Will Kempe and Robert Armin, probably the enormously popular, personable Tarlton was more inclined to stray outside the confines of the set script in the manner of the Italian comedians. See also Steele, "Shakespeare, Goldoni and the Clowns."

¹² For a detailed study of Shakespeare's use of puns, see Kökeritz 53-160. Admittedly, these verbal japes have always been a part of English literature since Cynewulf. Shakespeare himself so loved punning that he put about 3,000 of them into his plays. For proverbs, see Morris Tilley.

¹³ Talking drivel about the *Commedia dell'Arte* and its influences on Shakespeare is a staple of the field, an example being Valentina Capocci's volume. Although ingenious and interesting in some respects, Capocci has not been taken seriously in Shakespeare studies. Mario Praz accused her of "jumping to conclusions" (98). One of the main arguments of her work is that the "incoherencies," "empty verbosity" etc. in many of the plays are interpolations by actors, not the work of the poet. Another argument of Capocci is based on the apparently incomprehensible alternation of verse and prose in the plays, without realizing that passages of verse are sometimes printed as prose, and vice versa, as a close reading of the text would have shown, as shown by (see W. W. Greg, *The Editorial Problems in Shakespeare* [Oxford, 1951], *passim*). In any case, we are not concerned here with whether Shakespeare wrote the verbal lazzi or not. The fact remains that they are in the texts as we have them.