HOW THE *COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE* ACTRESS REVOLUTIONIZED THE EARLY MODERN ITALIAN STAGE

ROSALIND KERR

Summary: The first actresses who joined the previously all-male the *commedia dell'Arte* in the 1560s are credited with making it a commercial and artistic success. This article explores the evidence to document their multi-faceted contribution and influence on the birth of early modern European theatre. My article will use Tommaso Garzoni's prophetic observations about certain early actresses to frame an inquiry into how their novel female presence changed the nature of theatrical representation to create a new more "realistic" medium. It will interpret the documents to reveal how they achieved celebrity status through the great personal appeal and technical mastery they exhibited. It was through this winning combination that they were empowered to create unforgettable female characters who became part of the western dramatic canon. In addition to showing how successfully the Italian actresses challenged masculine privilege in their famous transvestite performances, I will show how their iconic influence travelled not only across the continent but also to England, even though actresses remained excluded from the professional stage there. Inevitably their presence on the western stage provided examples of female characters negotiating their sex/gender identities and thus modeled such behaviours for women in the larger society.

Tommaso Garzoni in his giant compendium, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (1585), noted that a few outstanding actresses were the saving grace in lifting this dubious profession from its buffoonish roots to a respectable art form.¹ The praise he lavished on four female performers: Isabella Andreini, Vincenza Armani, Lidia da Bagnacavallo, and Vittoria Piissimi singles out their great beauty and eloquence to explain how they captivated their audiences. Since Garzoni for the most part condemned the new commercial theatre for its vulgarity,

¹ Garzoni, *La piazza*, 754, excerpt in Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte*, 12–13.

it is important to carefully weigh his unqualified praise for these individuals. The first great diva, Vincenza Armani who, although she had died tragically fifteen years earlier, had a foundational influence because in “imitando la facondia ciceroniana, ha posto l’arte comica in concorrenza con l’oratoria” (in imitating Ciceronian eloquence, she has raised the art of comedy to the level of oratory).² Andreini, only twenty-five at this time, was already acclaimed for her stage career as a “spettacolo superbo non meno di virtù che di belle zza” (a superb spectacle no less of virtù than of beauty) whose reputation for eloquence was already sealed for eternity.³ For Lidia da Bagnacavallo, Garzoni was seized with envy that the love she performed on stage was reserved for another, a testimony to her ability to draw in spectators.⁴ Finally, in his praise for Vittoria Piissimi, he brings together all the criteria used for the others to name her “a compendium of the art”: “quella dolce sirena ch’ammaglia con soave incanti l’alme de’ suoi divoti spettatori” (that sweet siren who bewitches with pleasing incantations the souls of her devoted spectators). Behind this mass appeal are her multiple charms:

avendo i gesti proporzionati, i moti armonici e concordi, gli atti maestrevoli e grati, le parole affabili e dolci, i sospiri ladri e accorti, i risi saporiti e soave, il portamento altiero e generoso, e in tutta la persona un perfetto decoro, qual spetta e s’appertiene a una perfetta comediante.

(with her proportioned gestures, smooth and harmonious movements, masterful and pleasing actions, sweet and affable speech, roguish and cunning sighs, sweet and spicy laughter, tall majestic bearing,[who has] in her entire person a perfect decorum that looks and belongs to a perfect actress.)⁵

If Garzoni is to be believed, the level of eloquence required to raise the profession to respectability was probably supplied mainly by the actresses, since his brief mention of the great merits of the Gelosi and Confidenti, two of the most famous acting companies, for their witty dialogue, “piene di motti arguti e

² Garzoni, in Marotti and Romei, 12.

³ Garzoni, in Marotti and Romei, 12.

⁴ Garzoni, in Marotti and Romei, 12.

⁵ Garzoni, in Marotti and Romei, 12–13.

di bellissime facezie" (full of clever maxims and most beautiful witticisms),⁶ does not make up for his generally scornful attacks on the tawdry, vulgar, rag-tag performances of most of the touring companies. The evidence indicates that the *commedia dell'Arte* existed along a spectrum where the great professional companies gradually emerged to distinguish themselves from their less talented charlatan and mountebank counterparts. In the beginning the troupes were all male as the earliest records from 1545 of the formation of troupes of players signing a contract to cover their touring arrangements indicate.⁷ The standard roles for Pantalone and Zanni would indicate that the shows followed a buffoonish style of performance developed in the marketplace. The first female entertainers who appeared on the mountebank stages seemed to have been there as sideshow attractions to sell the products. Gradually they came to take roles in the dramatic interludes as part of the entertainment package to draw the crowds.

By 1560 it was considered that female performers had become part of the troupes. The apocryphal date arises from a remark made by Pier Maria Cecchini, and probably reveals that women had been on the circuit for some time.⁸ As Garzoni notes, these early actresses raised the level of the *commedia dell'Arte* performances by bringing their rhetorical skills to the troupes and making it possible to perform classical literary and dramatic materials. Such women, as Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino have argued, were probably drawn from the same class as the *cortegiane oneste* ("honest courtesans") who emerged to supply the market demand for elegant city companions to noble male courtiers.⁹ While resisting any absolute statements about the influx of these gifted salon performers into the troupes as a result of the new laws enforced by the Council of Trent, Taviani contends that

le grandi attrici, nel panorama culturale, *si trovano al posto delle* "meretrices honestae," ne ereditano la cultura e l'arte di tradursi in pubbliche figure. Esse gettano sul mercato vasto della gente disposta a comprare teatro quella stessa cultura, quelle stesse specializzazioni che erano precedentemente riservate a circoli ristretti capaci di mantenersi

⁶ Garzoni, in Marotti and Romei, 13.

⁷ Cocco, "Intorno all *commedia dell'Arte*," 507–9.

⁸ Cecchini, "non sono cinquant'anni che si costumano le donne in scena," (*Brevi Discorsi*, 9).

⁹ Taviani and Schino, *Il segreto*, 336.

le proprie etère. In compenso possono liberare dal commercio la propria private persona.

(the great actresses, in the cultural panorama, *found themselves* in the position of the “honest courtesans,” inheriting the culture and the art of translating themselves into public figures. They rushed into the vast market of persons disposed to buy the theatre of this same culture, these same specialties that had been previously reserved for restricted circles capable of supporting their own courtesans. In return, they were able to free themselves from selling their own private selves.)¹⁰

What occurred then was a revolution in the appearance of high-end female entertainers who had not been previously seen outside the private salons of the cultured patrons who could afford their services. Now performing before a larger public, they were not necessarily required to provide sexual services for their audience members, but could instead sell their art. Initially what the actresses brought was not so much the ability to improvise theatrical scripts, but their *facondia* (eloquence) as improvisers of lyric love poetry. The praise accorded to several of the first great actresses for their *virtù* in the practice of this erudite art form shows that they transferred it into their stage performances, appearing “come poetesse in azione, come professioniste dell’arte della parola nell’atto di improvvisare” (like poets in action, like professional composers of improvised speech.)¹¹ This tradition of poetic composition was a highly sophisticated technology aimed at seducing its intended audiences into contemplating the mysteries of love. Delivered with great oratorical skills by the actresses, these improvised speeches were embellished with passionate emotional flourishes that captivated spectators by bringing the action to life.

Like the great salon performer before them, the actresses became known to their audiences as public figures. Since the appearance of women on the public stage had been forbidden throughout the ages and opposed by the antitheatricalists as dangerously immoral and illicit, actresses were treated as exceptional in several respects. In breaking certain taboos, they acquired a certain notoriety that is reflected in the fact that the public called them by their first names or the names of the *innamorate* whose roles they played. The sense of “public intimacy”

¹⁰ Taviani and Schino, *Il segreto*, 336–7.

¹¹ Taviani and Schino, *Il segreto*, 341.

they created when they appeared on stage — dressed in the beautiful and often revealing costumes of court ladies — gave spectators the illusion that they were accessible because of their visibility and proximity. This “illusion of availability” derived from their “public intimacy” is the first quality that Joseph Roach outlines as necessary for a celebrity to possess in his study of the rise of celebrity on the eighteenth-century English stage.¹² Another essential quality of celebrity is “synthetic experience” — the way in which audiences share vicariously in the actors’ embodiment of actions and feelings — is also present in the eyewitness accounts we have of the impact which the actresses had.¹³ Roach’s third and most important, if ephemeral quality, was possession of the “It-Effect (personality-driven mass attraction)” which could only be discerned when the celebrity had become a *role-icon* or someone whose identity had acquired larger-than-life proportions.¹⁴

The records of the performances given by Flaminia of Rome and Vincenza Armani during the summers of 1567 and 1568 in Mantua portray these actresses as well-established artists and company directors, who quickly became the centre of attraction in the city. It is probable that both actresses were touring widely during the early 1560s: Vicenza’s wide circuit included Rome, Florence, Siena, Lucca, Milan, Brescia, Verona, Vicenza, Padova, Venice, Ferrara, Mantova, Parma, Piacenza, Pavia, and Cremona.¹⁵ In the commentary documenting their activities, there is proof that they fulfill the criteria of celebrity as outlined by Roach. They acquired the “public intimacy” that gave their audiences the illusion that they were close to them, evidenced by the fact that they were referred to by their first names, as if they were intimately known. By appearing on stage, actresses made themselves emotionally accessible to their audience members as they revealed the intimate feelings of the characters they were portraying. For example, in theatre impresario Leone de’ Sommi’s description of Flaminia’s “unique” stage performance, she is portrayed as connecting directly with each audience member through her expressive speech and actions:

When she is on the stage the audience gets the impression not of a play composed and finished by an author, but rather of a series of real

¹² Roach, *It*, 3.

¹³ Roach, *It*, 3.

¹⁴ Roach, *It*, 3, 12.

¹⁵ Valerini, *Orazione*, in Marotti and Romei, 6.

events taking shape before them. She so varies her gestures, tones, and moods in accordance with the diverse nature of her scenes that everyone who sees her is moved to wonder and delighted admiration.¹⁶

In fact, each of these two actresses acquired a group of followers who were so ferocious in their loyalties that the city was split into rival camps, leading juriconsult Antonio Ceruto to report that all that people could say to each other was “*Io sono della parte di Flaminia: et io della Vincenza: et tutte due le case si empiono di brigate*” (*I’m for Flaminia, and I’m for Vincenza: and both houses are filled with parties of friends*).¹⁷ The devotion that these actresses inspired in the crowds has been described in sociologist Chris Rojek’s important study *Celebrity* as part of a new phenomenon that emerged in secular society where the connection to the sacred had been weakened. In place of the worship of Holy figures, celebrities often become objects of cult worship, inspiring intense “feelings of recognition, awe and wonder.”¹⁸ The ducal secretary, Luigi Rogna, describing the excitement generated at performances of the two rival companies on 1 July 1567, comments on their need to outdo each other in attracting a larger crowd:

Hoggi si sono fatte due comedie a concorrenza: una nel luogo solito, per la sig.^{ra} Flaminia et Pantalone, che si sono accompagnati colla sig.ra Angela, quella che salta così bene; l’altra dal Purgo, in casa del Lanzino, per quella sig.ra Vincenza, che ama il sig. Federigo da Gazuolo. L’una et l’altra Compagnia ha avuto udienza grande et concorso di persone: ma la Flaminia più nobiltà, et ha fatto la tragedia di Didone mutata in Tragicommedia, che è riuscita assai bene. Gli altri, per quel che si dice, sono riesciti assai goffi. Andranno seguitando costoro a concorrenza, et con un certo no so che d’invidia, sforzandosi a fare di aver maggior concorso, a guisa dei Letori, che nelle città de’studi si industriano di aver più numeri di scolari.

¹⁶ De’Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi*, 44–5, translation in “The Dialogues of Leone di Somi,” in Nicoll, *The Development of Theatre*, 268.

¹⁷ D’Ancona, *Origini*, 2:452.

¹⁸ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 54.

(Today two plays were performed in competition with each other: one in the usual place by Signora Flaminia and Pantalone, who were accompanied by Signora Angela, the one who jumps so well. The other in the Purgo (near San Andrea) in Lanzino's house, by Signora Vincenza, the lover of Signor Federigo da Gazuolo. Each company attracted a big audience and huge crowds of fans; but Flaminia, more of the nobility, and she did the tragedy of Dido, adapted into a tragicomedy and brought it off quite well. The others, from what I've heard, were pretty lame. They will keep up this competition with a certain amount of jealous rivalry, in an effort to see who can bring in the larger crowds, much like professors in university towns vying for the greatest number of students.)¹⁹

Rogna's account captures the sense of "public intimacy" with which the actresses were regarded, even naming Armani's lover.²⁰ He makes it clear that both had mass appeal, but also has the insider knowledge to identify Flaminia's fan base as coming from a higher class than Vincenza's. More specifically, Rogna's knowledge that she appealed to "gentilhuomini e gentildonne, giudici, procuratori, dottori, ecc." (gentlemen and women, judges, lawyers, doctors and so on) shows the extent to which the public scrutinized them.²¹ In this particular run, it seems that Flaminia's company did succeed in drawing the bigger crowds, since Vincenza's company left for Ferrara on 15 July, while Flaminia's remained until September.²²

Rogna's discussion of Flaminia's "genius" in adapting Dido into a tragicomedy recognizes that she and her troupe were both knowledgeable about current erudite versions, and proficient enough to adapt them. Playing Dido as an *innamorata*, Flaminia would have been able to reinterpret her both to engage her audience's emotions and to show off her technique. Similarly, Flaminia composed and performed her own tragic material from the Marganorre episode of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, in an extreme portrayal of the avenging heroine Drusilla.

¹⁹ D'Ancona, *Origini*, 2: 449.

²⁰ Armani's relationship with Gazuolo was of sufficient public interest that the details of a street fight that broke out between them made it into the records. See D'Ancona, *Origini*, 2:452–3.

²¹ D'Ancona, *Origini*, 2: 447.

²² D'Ancona, *Origini*, 2:453.

Non hieri l'altro la Flaminia era comendata per certi lamenti che fece in una tragedia che recitorno dalla sua banda, cavata da quella novella dell'Ariosto, che tratta di quel Marganorre, al figliuolo sposo del quale, la sposa, ch'era la Flaminia, sopra il corpo del primo suo sposo, poco dianzi amazzato in scene, per vendetta diede a bere il veleno dopo haverne bevuto anch'essa, onde l'uno et 'altro morì sopra quel corpo, et il padre, che perciò voleva uccidere tutte le donne, fu dalle donne lapidato et morto.

(The day before yesterday Flaminia was praised for some *lamenti* that she performed in a tragedy with her troupe, extracted from Ariosto's story that treats of Marganorre. The bride, played by Flaminia, over the body of her first husband who had been murdered in the previous scene, took her revenge by giving her new husband, Marganorre's son, poison to drink after having drunk it herself, whereupon they both died over the dead husband's body. And the father, who wanted to kill all women as a result, was then stoned and killed by the women.)²³

Their close proximity and daily appearances provided a basis for audiences to become fully engaged in weighing the merits of each actress' performance. While these opinions might alter depending on which actress outshone the other on a particular occasion, they indicate that audiences were knowledgeable about the level of skill the actresses exhibited and awarded their praise accordingly. The kind of celebrity status that Flaminia and Vincenza inspired fits best into the category of what Rojek describes as *achieved* celebrity, which is awarded by the public to individuals who "possess rare talents or skills," where such talents have been put to the test of open competition and measured according to certain standards.²⁴ *Achieved* celebrity, unlike the celebrity *ascribed* to nobility and royalty because of their bloodlines, has to be earned, and is all the more volatile because it is measured by the public and depends on keeping ahead of the competition.²⁵

Rogna's commentary applies just such a measurement when, in judging Vincenza's tragic performances to be less successful, he restricts his praise to her

²³ D'Ancona, *Origini*, 2:451.

²⁴ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 17–18.

²⁵ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 17–18.

musical abilities and beautiful costumes. However, he pays equal attention to the dazzling technical effects that each company put forth to create their scenic splendor in their *intermedi*. Avoiding deciding in favour of one, he concludes that audiences were so impressed with both “tal che hora altro non si fa nè d’altro si parla, che di costoro. Chi lauda la gratia d’una, chi estolle l’ingegno dell’altra: et così si passa il tempo a Mantova” (so that now no one can do anything else other than talk only about them. Some praise the gracefulness of the one, while others extol the genius of the other, and that’s how we pass the time in Mantova).²⁶ The accounts of Flaminia and Vincenza indicate that they were highly regarded artists who exhibited their versatility and ingenuity in improvising a range of different characters to suit a variety of genres. Through the very process of measuring the success of their performances, their audiences acknowledged that they were in the presence of creative artists whose highly valued, elusive originality has been referred to by Walter Benjamin as giving off an “aura.”²⁷ We experience this “aura” as a transcendent quality that signals we are in the presence of something singular but unreachable. Cultural anthropologist Alfred Gell further explains this “auratic” quality as emanating from artists who have the power to enchant us. He proposes that the magical qualities we attribute to them arise from the awe we experience in the face of their transcendent technical mastery — a mastery that eludes our comprehension. Since we are unable to fathom the magical ways in which artists transform the materials they work with, we come to grant them supernatural powers and to view them through a kind of “halo-effect.”²⁸

Known to the crowds as the leading *prime donne* and chief performers of their companies, Flaminia and Vincenza acquired reputations that extended beyond their existence as private individuals, as “images” of them circulated among their fans. Although such “images” may have existed in the imaginations of their audiences more than in printed materials, they had become what Roach labels as “abnormally interesting personae” in the public eye.²⁹ Beyond their private selves, they had been transformed into *role-icons* in the sense that their fans had preconceived ideas about them that extended beyond any specific role they might play. As a result they come to be regarded as mythic figures who could not be extinguished

²⁶ D’Ancona, *Origini*, 2:451.

²⁷ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 221–3.

²⁸ Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment,” 51–2.

²⁹ Roach, *It.*, 12.

by death. Such was the case with Armani, who was reputedly poisoned at the hands of a rival or jealous lover in Cremona on 11 September 1569, when her lover and fellow actor Adriano Valerini wrote her *Orazione* to immortalize her.³⁰ Delivered shortly after her death, it captured the contribution that Armani had made to shaping the *commedia dell'Arte*, and, as such, provides a valuable information for our understanding of the importance of the early actresses' contribution. In praising her ascent to the divine as arising from her sublime eloquence, Valerini uses language that is similar to that of Roland Barthes several centuries later when he described the greatness of Garbo: "her nickname, *the Divine*, probably intended to suggest less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where things are formed and finished with the greatest clarity."³¹ Like Garbo, Armani was in possession of the magical "It-effect" or *charisma*, as Max Weber named the unique qualities that are vested in certain individuals, giving them miraculous powers to influence, inspire, and heal others.³²

For Valerini, Armani's extraordinary personal qualities, such as her natural beauty and great intellectual accomplishments, are legendary and made her into an object of worship. Her classical humanist education in the liberal arts included the canonical male curriculum of grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, and sculpture. She was fluent in both Latin and Tuscan, with an artistry in speaking and composing that was in his estimation exceptional. Ultimately, her talents and skills take on a supernatural quality: Valerini remarks that her greatest talent of all, the "lume immortale de chiara Eloquenza" (eternal light of her luminous Eloquence)³³ exceeds any use of language before or since. Eloquence, with its alchemic power to transform listeners, is the source of Armani's supernatural appeal. While Valerini returns many times to praise her now silenced eloquence, drawing attention to her special gift of improvising: "O immensa forza d'eloquenza, o rara grazia d'accorte maniere, o ineffabil soavità d'armonia" (Oh great power of speech, oh rare gift of witty delivery, oh ineffable harmonious sweetness).³⁴ This, too, is a mark of her extraordinary skill, as the Academy of the Intronati credited her as being better

³⁰ Valerini, *Orazione*, in Marotti and Romei, 31–41.

³¹ Barthes, "The Face of Garbo," 56.

³² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 244.

³³ Valerini, *Orazione*, in Marotti and Romei, 33.

³⁴ Valerini, *Orazione*, in Marotti and Romei, 35.

at improvising her speeches than the greatest writers who had thought out their words beforehand.

Valerini comes closest to capturing the supernatural quality of Armani's stage performances when he describes her ability to transfix her viewers. In the following passage, he recalls her different treatments of Comedy and Tragedy, and remembers how she enchanted the audience so that they felt everything she felt:

Se nella Comedia facea veder quanto ornamento abbi un dir familiare, dimostrava poi differentemente nella Tragedia la gravità dell'Eroico stile, usando parole scelte, gravi concetti, sentenze morali degne d'esser prononziate da un Oracolo; e se occorreva sopra di qualche suo Amante o parente, di vita spento, lamentevolmente ragionare, trovava parole e modi sì dolorosi che ognuno era sforzato a sentirne doglia vera, e ben spesso anco lagrimare, benché sapesse certo le lagrime di lei esser finte.

(If in Comedy she made visible how much ordinary speech is embellished, she then demonstrated differently the gravity of the heroic style in Tragedy, using appropriate words, weighty conceits, moral judgments worthy of being pronounced by an oracle; and if it was necessary to deliver a lament over a dead lover or relative, she found words and ways so sad that everyone was forced to experience genuine grief listening to them, and frequently to also be moved to tears, even though they knew for certain that her tears were false.)³⁵

He saves his deepest praise for her contribution to the new pastoral genre, describing her performance as transformative in creating an illusionary world. His commentary indicates that Armani's performances were made believable by her ability to suit her acting style to the rules of the different genres. Henke has noted that Armani's attention to the rules governing the genres is what made her acting verisimilar. This ability to create believable characters who conform to the expected norms of Comedy, Tragedy, and Tragicomedy actually heralds a revolution in acting that Robert Henke calls "mimetic," in contrast to the "virtuosity" of the buffoon style, which was also practiced by the actress.³⁶ Valerini brings this mimetic quality

³⁵ Valerini, *Orazione*, in Marotti and Romei, 36.

³⁶ Henke, "Virtuosity and Mimesis," 70–1.

to life even more so in his recounting Armani's every glance, gesture, blush, and nod in her pastoral performances. That quality translates into a live performance that made an indelible impression on her spectators:

Che dirò delle Pastorali da lei prima introdotte in Scena, le quali da così vaghi avvenimenti intesseva che di troppo meraviglia e dolcezza ingombrava gli ascoltanti; e se di trovar qualche limpido fonte mostrava esser bramosa per estinguer la sete ardente, induceva a gli uomini il medesimo desio di bere, e di riposo se di qualche arbore bramava l'ombra per riposarsi, e se, per gustar i liquidi cristalli, all'ombra assisa chinava le labra, chinavano anch'essi il capo, accompagnando i suoi movimenti, come se del suo corpo fossero stati l'ombra, tanta forza avean le parole con che ella descriveva or questo or quell'affetto.

(What shall I say of the pastoral plays that she was the first to introduce on the stage, which she spun out in such charming incidents that she also engulfed her spectators with a superabundance of sweetness and astonishment? And if, on finding some clear fountain, she demonstrated a yearning to slake her burning thirst, she induced her audience to have the same desire to drink, and to rest, if she yearned to take a rest under some shady tree, and if, to taste the crystal liquid, she sat in the shade and bent her lips over to drink, the spectators also bent their heads down, accompanying her movements, as if they had been her shadow. Such was the force of the words that she used to describe this or that affect.)³⁷

All of the evidence cited above affirms the greatness of Vincenza and her rival Flaminia as charismatic artists. Celebrity theorist Richard Dyer argues that the charismatic quality that marks a celebrity can only be accorded to persons known to us as flesh and blood mortals in their offstage existence. To authenticate a star's fame we must recognize a living person behind the superhuman qualities.³⁸

³⁷ Valerini, *Orazione*, in Marotti and Romei, 36.

³⁸ Dyer defines authenticity as "both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies. It is the effect of authenticating authenticity that gives the star charisma." (*A Star Is Born and the Construction of Authenticity*, 133.)

Michael Quinn develops this theory further in “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting” when he explains that the transcendent effects occur because of the illusion of “absolute presence” that celebrities are granted by their audiences.³⁹ What this means is that stars never disappear completely into any role they play, so that when we watch them we are always aware that their private selves are also present at the same time as the characters they are representing. In this way they acquire a larger-than-life existence, appearing to have full knowledge of what is happening on stage, and hence, are godlike in comparison to their desiring fans. As the upper echelon of actresses became well known for embodying the female roles with their improvised eloquence, their reputations could not be confined to identifying them solely with the characters they played, but was always extended to refer to the actual actress who had interpreted them.

Building on the accounts cited above referring to Flaminia and Vincenza, I argue that actresses, who were unmasked, played their roles by bringing their rhetorical training to bear in embodying their characters’ emotional plights through their movements, gestures and words. Borrowing from the rules of ancient oratory, they set out to persuade their listeners of the merits of their arguments by leading them to experience the same emotions their characters were feeling. In those moments when they appeared to be completely identified with the characters they were “personating,” they brought female characters to life as subjects with a certain agency. In doing so they could claim to be offering their audiences persuasive examples of how to deal with moral dilemmas through their learned and virtuous discourse. It was this argument that the *commedia dell’Arte* apologists advanced in support of the vehement opposition they encountered from the anti-theatricalists against the previously taboo appearance of the actress. Among them, Isabella’s famous actor/theorist son, Giovan Battista made it clear that without women, who represented half the population there could be no verisimilitude on the stage: “Non vedi che ci levi il verisimile?” (Don’t you see that you take from us the verisimilar?).⁴⁰

³⁹ Quinn, “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” 157.

⁴⁰ Andreini, *La ferza*, in Marotti and Romei, 510. On the important and particular iconographic relations between the visual arts and the *commedia dell’Arte*’s actresses, and on great actresses as models for sacred subjects such as *La Maddalena Penitente*, see Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari*, chap. 6. Ferrone places the relations between *commedia dell’Arte*-visual arts also within a wider ‘project’ of self-promotion set by the Andreini family, in particular Giovan Battista, but also by his mother (see also Taviani, “*Bella d’Asia*”), Isabella Canali Andreini, whose ‘memory’ was

The battle that raged against the revolutionary appearance of women on the stage after a ban of so many centuries indicates the importance of the change it brought. What we are witnessing here is the birth of a new theatrical medium: the improvised romantic comedy as performed by the *commedia dell'Arte*. Media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, looking back as far as the Renaissance and the invention of representational media, have argued that each time a new medium appears it claims to be improving on existing forms by offering greater realism. The new medium thus claims to offer an “immediate” experience where the other media used to create the effects are not as obvious and hence the experience is “transparent.”⁴¹ With real women impersonating the different female roles, audiences could experience greater “immediacy” and “transparency” by connecting to living actresses and the roles they were playing. But a new medium is also representing “reality” by “remediating” the earlier forms it inevitably draws upon and references. If the *commedia dell'Arte* apologists insisted that their form of comedy deserved to be considered the best because it was truer to life than the official theatre offerings, they did not deny that they were borrowing heavily from them. Bolter and Grusin note that “immediate transparency” is inevitably counterbalanced by a referencing of the many other media that are necessary to the representation.⁴² This “logic of hypermediacy,” as they point out, also reminds us of our elusive desire for immediacy and creates other levels of artistic tension between the representation and reality.⁴³ The actress’ embodied presence can be read as a new medium of its own within the “hypermediacy” of the *commedia dell'Arte* with the many sources it constantly referenced from buffoonish grotesqueries, popular entertainment, classical literary and dramatic figures. Actresses themselves remediated salon-style performers, reminding the public of their “honest courtesan” ties, on one hand, but also of the court ladies they were impersonating. Transforming themselves into divas further connected them to their mediatized appeal as objects of worship in competition with other rival performers.

As the theatrical institution that eventually became the Italian professional theatre, the *commedia dell'Arte* served as the main vehicle through which the

made legend by her husband (Francesco Andreini, “Capitan Spavento”), and her son Giovan Battista (“Lelio”).

⁴¹ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 21–24.

⁴² Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 31.

⁴³ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 41.

literary, dramatic, and theatrical models of the Italian Renaissance were dispersed across Europe. Once they had joined the troupes, the actresses were able to adapt important female roles developed in the all-male academic theatre to fit the trademark *commedia dell'Arte* romantic comedy, as well as to play tragic and epic classical heroines in the other genres. With women taking the parts, "women's roles could enjoy far greater scope than ever realized in erudite comedy" as Douglas Radcliff-Umstead has noted,⁴⁴ The actresses, along with the other members of the troupes, participated in producing the basic modules called "theatregrams" (characters, plotlines, actions, topoi, dialogic structures, speech-acts, etc.) which were then endlessly recombined to produce new dramatic forms and theatrical practices.⁴⁵ Primarily the "actresses enlarged the role of the *innamorata* ... with their reserves of memorized material chosen for lyrical, dramatic, and emotional effect."⁴⁶ They were often the central figures in the scenarios playing the "figure of the woman desired and desiring" as the sought-after bride.⁴⁷ Flaminio Scala's famous collection covering scenarios from the late 1580s to the early 1600s features the *prima* and *seconda donna* roles playing different female characters from — the ingénue, the mad woman, the exotic foreigner, learned astrologer, pilgrim, male page in the comedies — to the Amazonian warrior, tragic queen, and enchantress in the tragi-comic pastorals.⁴⁸

As well as creating memorable female characters, the actresses also challenged notions of sex/gender differences through their "remediation" of the transvestite heroine roles developed in the all-male theatres. Nowhere does their technical mastery show to greater advantage than in their skill in transcending conventional gender roles. More transgressive than those who played the *prima donna* roles, the actresses who exhibited their skills as male impersonators challenged the sex/gender boundaries that privileged male over female identities. Since female transvestism remained closely associated with the courtesan practice of wearing men's breeches,⁴⁹ actresses who appeared on stage dressed as male court-

⁴⁴ Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, "The Erudite Comic Tradition of the *commedia dell'Arte*," 47.

⁴⁵ Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, 6.

⁴⁶ Clubb, *Italian Plays (1500–1700) in the Folger Library*, xxii.

⁴⁷ Clubb, "Theatregrams," 27.

⁴⁸ Scala, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 2 vols., ed. Ferruccio Marotti.

⁴⁹ Cesare Vecellio depicts the Venetian prostitute's common practice of wearing male breeches to signal her trade (*Habiti antichi*, qtd. in Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans*, 20).

iers intentionally evoked a range of desires in their spectators. During this period, when young people of both sexes found themselves circulating in the new urban marketplace, transvestism served as a code for sexual ambiguity that extended the erotic possibilities for imagined couplings with same- and opposite-sex partners. Having “real” women breaking the social codes that kept them subservient to men proved to be enormously popular, as female transvestite roles flourished on the stage throughout the centuries to come, despite the increased disapproval of the practice after the Council of Trent.⁵⁰ Strong evidence of the popularity of female cross-dressing and transvestite disguise can be found in Scala’s collection where over one-third of the scenarios feature female cross-dressing or transvestite disguise as an important plot device. Of special note are the number of scenarios which showcase Isabella Andreini as her male persona Fabrizio. In her sustained transvestite impersonations she deliberately references her namesake, the absent male twin from the famous Siennese drama by Gl’Intronati, *Gl’ingannati* (*The Deceived*), calling attention to her ability to transcend gender roles and challenge male privilege.

As the reputation of the greatness of the actresses spread across Europe where the troupes travelled, most of the continental countries followed suit by admitting female performers onto the professional stage. In the 1570s their considerable fame resulted in a number of invitations to Italian troupes with actresses to perform in England, mostly in court settings. For certain reasons probably stemming from competition, the *commedia dell’Arte* troupes never did establish a regular presence in England, with the result that English audiences were not familiar with the Italian actresses and knew them only by reputation, however notorious. At the same time, since Italian literary and dramatic models and improvisational techniques were very much in evidence on the English stage, scholars have made a strong case for the influence that the phenomenal Italian actresses must have had on changing the way that female characters were portrayed by the boy actors who continued to play their parts. By the 1590s, as Pamela Brown notes, when

⁵⁰ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park note that female transvestite disguise was becoming increasingly associated with hermaphroditism, tribadism, and female presumption, as male fears about the challenge that early modern women presented to male authority culminated in the cultural construct of the monstrous mannish woman. In particular, Daston and Park observe that sexual behaviours considered to be impediments to marriage, including impotence, masturbation, and sodomy, especially on the part of women, came under increasing scrutiny after the Council of Trent (“The Hermaphrodite,” 430–1).

the Italian actresses were reaching the apex of success, English playwrights were writing major female roles demanding similarly great acting skills and rhetorical mastery but without actresses to perform them.⁵¹ Such an emphasis on female parts indicates that the missing actresses had made a great imprint on the English stage, and that in an effort to compensate for their absence, Shakespeare created them in *simulacra* for the boy actors to play.⁵² One of her striking examples of a counterfeit diva is Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*, who “revels in artifice and theatricality [...] displays wit, daunting eloquence, a shrewd head for plotting, skill at cross-gender disguise, and obvious pride in her acting and directing [...] acts suspiciously like the celebrated *innamorata* of the Italian acting troupes.”⁵³ The notion of *simulacra* is an essential diva quality, proof that the celebrity has acquired an existence in the minds of followers that cannot be extinguished even by death. This supernatural quality meant that even without their actual presence, the divas lived in “effigy” in their transnational representations across the English channel.⁵⁴

If the “actress gap” remained an issue, the answer as to how the boy actors succeeded in addressing it may be found in their similar approach to creating their characters by speaking directing to their spectators, inviting them to accept their artifice as impersonators, and then drawing them in to believe in the emotional truths of the female characters they were performing. The Italian divas, as recognized stars, spoke from strong subject positions, improvising to bring their fictional characters to life, but always drawing attention to their playmaking abilities and virtuosic acting. The boy actors, who were for the most part unknown, since their short careers and inferior status as apprentices made it difficult for them to make a name for themselves,⁵⁵ had to find ways to capitalize on their youthful androgyny to simulate their diva models, often by drawing the spectators’

⁵¹ Brown, “Cattle of this colour: Boying the Diva in *As You Like It*,” 145. For actual line counts to show how much these parts grew, she references the appendix in David Mann, *Shakespeare’s Women: Performance and Conception*.

⁵² Brown, “The Counterfeit *Innamorata*, or, the Diva Vanishes,” 408.

⁵³ Brown, “The Counterfeit *Innamorata*,” 411.

⁵⁴ Roach, *It*, 43–4.

⁵⁵ However, Roberta Barker names a few and questions the assumption that they were never big names, especially boy-actresses who went on to play men’s roles. “‘Not One Thing Exactly’: Gender, Performance and Critical Debate over the Early Modern Boy-Actress,” 475.

attention to their obvious gaps in doing so. Michael Goldman has described how Shakespeare responded to address the perceived gap in the boy actor's abilities in the example of role of Cleopatra by noting how the style of her dialogue and the emotional qualities it reflects change throughout the play. As she moves from one style of self-presentation to a more demanding one, the boy actor who speaks her lines is shown moving beyond the limits of his art.⁵⁶ In identifying with his efforts to stretch as far as he could, spectators might actually believe that Cleopatra's greatness had been captured. Since English audiences also knew that Italian divas were performing such roles with the full tragic range they deserved, the simulacra effect may also have helped them to partially fill in the gaps.

Shakespeare captured the great artifice of the Italian divas by having his boy actors bring unforgettable female characters to life through similarly enticing "oscillating" layers of disguise.⁵⁷ Boy actors typically drew attention to their physical immaturity, puny stature, and changeable voices as a kind of running metatheatrical joke that prepared the spectators to accept their "personations" of the female characters they were playing.⁵⁸ This mimetic technique, which we have already seen being practiced by the Italian actresses when they identified with their characters, was aimed at convincing spectators of the emotional plausibility of what they were witnessing. Moreover, it was also made more enticing because the boys were always in transvestite disguise. If the Italian actresses had remediated the role of the cross-dressed heroine from the all-male academic theatre, the English boy actors taking these roles were also required to play them with regard for their Italian female models. Italian actresses played their male disguises with self-reflexive virtuosity, constantly drawing attention to their skill in deceiving the other characters. Above all they reveled in their transgressive successes in attracting the love of another woman, unable to penetrate their disguise.

When the plot of *The Deceived* was refashioned in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Rachel Poulsen notes the debt to both the cross-dressed heroine who sparks the love of another woman formula, and to the iconic Italian actress for her "desirable beauty, verbal agility, and rhetorical skill."⁵⁹ In the opening scene of *Twelfth*

⁵⁶ Goldman, *The Actor's Freedom: Toward a Theory of Drama*, 142.

⁵⁷ Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages*, 7.

⁵⁸ See Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 2nd ed., 98.

⁵⁹ Poulsen, "Women Performing Homoerotic Desire in English and Italian Comedy: *La Calandria*, *Gl'Ingannati* and *Twelfth Night*," 171.

Night, both the *prima donna*, Olivia, and the cross-dressed heroine, Viola/Cesario, pay tribute to the Italian actresses' reputation for both gender disguise and rapid improvised repartee. When the dramatically veiled Olivia urges the attractively costumed page to go off his script, and speak extemporaneously to her, the tour de force exchange between them that follows once her veil is removed can only end with her falling madly in love with him. Shakespeare was also capitalizing on the erotic attraction of the transvestite disguise, which carried extra significance by referencing the offstage sexual availability and questionable social status of both the actresses and the boy actors.⁶⁰ In both cases, in the dramatic fictions where they use their transvestite disguises to insert themselves into the early modern household, the fear of discovery of their actual sex seems to be less a concern than using their renegade sexual appeal to win a place for themselves in the social hierarchy.⁶¹

As Katherine Kelly describes it, "the Shakespeare of the comedies ... in foregrounding gender as a cultural performance by relating it metaphorically to the actor's art, not only refused to reinforce the prevailing view of women as fixed and stable entities in the Elizabethan social hierarchy but invited a critical reading of gender roles as permanent designations of womanhood and manhood."⁶² Thus, Shakespeare's referencing of Italian stylistic techniques from the actresses' subversively erotic male impersonations suggests that he created his "breeches' parts" to similarly expose "gender roles as performed fictions "put on" by actors for the sake of a viewing public."⁶³ His other cross-dressed heroines: Julia/Sebastian in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Portia/Balthazar in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind/Ganymede in *As You Like it*, and Imogen/Fidele in *Cymbeline* are all crafted so that

⁶⁰ Actresses in transvestite disguise suggested their close association with prostitutes and courtesans who wore breeches in public to attract customers. The boy actors were also considered to be sexually vulnerable as apprentices who were the property of the actors' who owned them and could be rented out or sold accordingly.

⁶¹ Lisa Jardine argues that the *dependency* governing the practice of transvestism in the marketplace was mirrored in the stage representation of the transvestite who enters into private service in a household. Both dependent youths and dependent women were expected to submit to their masters, unless they could negotiate a more equitable relationship by using their sexual appeal. "Twins and Travesties: Gender, Dependency and Sexual Availability in *Twelfth Night*," 28.

⁶² Kelly, "The Queen's Two Bodies: Shakespeare's Boy Actress in Breeches," 82.

⁶³ Kelly, "The Queen's Two Bodies," 92.

we see both the skilled boy actor and his female persona superimposed on each other for the maximum theatrical effect. Brown offers the following explanation: “diva envy generated pressures that were highly productive for English drama, leading Shakespeare and others to create, for the first time, complex, articulate, and agential female roles that combined the Italianate glamour and methods of the foreign actress with the skills and distinctive identity of the English boy player.” In response he created “a hybrid marvel forged under pressure — neither Italian nor English, neither boy nor woman, but a boy diva.”⁶⁴

To conclude, the early Italian actresses earned a place in theatre history by bringing their great skill as performers to the creation of sustained dramatic action on the *commedia dell'Arte* stage. With their addition, the troupes developed their signature style combining improvisation with literary and dramatic models to create a new form of romantic comedy reflecting the new importance of the *prima donna* as a central figure. A wide range of new female roles were developed featuring unforgettable characters often in control of the action. A new professional class of actresses emerged who earned diva status through their great artistry. Intimately known both as individuals and as stars, the characters they created also became famous in the theatrical repertoire. Taking over the cross-dressed heroine roles developed in the official academic theatre, they made female transvestism into one of the most popular and successful theatre devices across not only Italy but other European countries where the actress was embraced. In England, the actresses' transnational influence was reflected in the boy actors' parodic imitations. Such was the reputation of the Italian actresses that Shakespeare and other English dramatists wrote many memorable female roles reflecting an awareness of their great emotional range and virtuosic technique. Outstanding Shakespearean heroines: Juliet, Ophelia, Portia, Rosalind, Viola, Beatrice bear strong resemblances to their Italian counterparts and continue to remind us of the far-reaching influences the Italian divas had on shaping early modern drama. As for the divas themselves, such as Isabella Andreini, they continue to be remembered as the great artists they were.

University of Alberta

⁶⁴ Brown, ‘Cattle of this colour’: 159–160.

CITED WORKS

- Andreini, Giovan Battista. *La ferza contra l'accuse date alla commedia*. Paris: Nicolao Callemont, 1625. Excerpt in Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte*, 489–534.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Face of Garbo." In *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, 56–7. London: Paladin, 1985.
- Barker, Roberta. "'Not One Thing Exactly': Gender, Performance and Critical Debate over the Early Modern Boy-Actress." *Literature Compass* 6, no. 2 (2009): 460–481.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, 217–51. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000.
- Brown, Pamela Allen. "'Cattle of this colour': Boying the Diva in *As You Like It*," *Early Theatre* 15, no. 1 (2012): 145–165.
- . "The Counterfeit *Innamorata*, or, the Diva Vanishes," *Shakespeare and Italy*. Ed. Holger Klein and Michele Marrapodi. Shakespeare Yearbook 10, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999, 408–426.
- Cecchini, Pier Maria. *Brevi discorsi intorno alled comedie, comedianti, e spettatori*. Naples: Roncagliolo, 1616.
- Clubb, Louise George. *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- . "Theatregrams." In *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*, edited by Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella, 14–33. Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1986.
- . *Italian Plays (1500–1700) in the Folger Library*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1968.
- Cocco, Esther. "Una compagnia comica nella prima metà del secolo XVI." *Giornale storico dell letteratura italiana* 65 (1915): 55–70.
- Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. "The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature: Sexual Ambiguity in Early Modern France." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 4 (1995): 419–38.
- D'Ancona, Alessandro. *Origini del teatro italiano*. 2 vols. Turin: Loescher, 1891 Reprint. Rome: Bardi, 1971.

- de' Sommi, Leone. *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*. Edited by Ferruccio Marotti. Milan: Il Polifilo, 1968.
- . "The Dialogues of Leone de' Sommi." In Allardyce Nicoll, *The Development of Theatre*, 251–78. Revised 5th ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966.
- Dyer, Richard. "A Star Is Born and the Construction of Authenticity." *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, 132–140.
- Ferrone, Siro. *Attori mercanti corsari. La commedia dell'Arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento*. Torino: Einaudi, 1993.
- Garzoni, Tommaso. *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*. Venice: G.B. Somascho, 1585. Excerpts in Marotti and Romei, 11–19.
- Gell, Alfred. "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 40–63.
- Goldman, Michael. *The Actor's Freedom: Toward a Theory of Drama*. New York: Viking Press, 1975.
- Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage*, 2nd Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Henke, Robert. "Virtuosity and Mimesis in the *Commedia dell'Arte* and *Hamlet*," *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning*. Ed. Michele Marrapodi. Aldershot: Hampshire, Ashgate, 2005, 69–81.
- Jardine, Lisa. "Twins and Travesties: Gender, Dependency and Sexual Availability in *Twelfth Night*." *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*. Ed. Susan Zimmerman. New York and London: Routledge, 1992, 27–38.
- Kelly, Katherine E. "The Queen's Two Bodies: Shakespeare's Boy Actress in Breeches," *Theatre Journal* 42, no.1 (1990): 81–93.
- Lawner, Lynne. *Lives of the Courtesans*. New York: Rizzoli, 1987.
- Mann, David. *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Marotti, Ferruccio and Giovana Romei. *La Commedia dell'Arte e la Società Barocca: La Professione del Teatro*. Vol. 2. Rome: Bulzoni, 1991.
- Poulsen, Rachel. "Women Performing Homoerotic Desire in English and Italian Comedy: *La Calandria*, *Gl'Ingannati* and *Twelfth Night*," *Women Players in England, 1550–600: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, 171–191.

- Quinn, Michael L. "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting," *New Theatre Quarterly* 6, no. 22 (1990): 154–161.
- Radcliff-Umstead, Douglas. "The Erudite Comic Tradition of the *commedia dell'Arte*." *The Science of Buffoonery: Theory and History of the Commedia dell'Arte*. Ed. Domenico Pietropalo. Toronto: Dovehouse, 1989, 33–58.
- Roach, Joseph. *It*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion, 2001.
- Scala, Flaminio. *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 2 vols., Ed. Ferruccio Marotti Milan: Il Polifilo, 1976.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Shapiro, Michael. *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Taviani Ferdinando. "Bella d'Asia. Torquato Tasso, gli attori e l'immortalità." *Paragone. Letteratura* 408–410 (1984): 3–76.
- Taviani, Ferdinando and Mirella Schino. *Il segreto della commedia dell'Arte. La memoria delle compagnie italiane del XVI, XVII e XVIII secolo*. Florence: La Casa Usher, 1982.
- Valerino, Adriano. *Oratione d'Adriano Valerini Veronese, in morte della divina signora Vincenza Armani, comica eccellentissima*. Verona: 1570. In Marotti and Romei, 31–41.
- Vecellio, Cesare. *Habiti antichi e moderni di tutto il mondo*. Venice: Damiano Zenaro, 1590.
- _____. *Vecellio's Renaissance Costume Book*. 1598. New York: Dover, 1977.
- Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Vol. 1, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, translated by a number of scholars. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.