DOMENICO PIETROPAOLO

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE ELEMENTS
IN GOZZI'S *TURANDOT*

When we pick up a copy of Gozzi's *Turandot* and read in the list of characters that Pantalone is now the Secretary of State of the Chinese Empire, that Tartaglia is its High Chancellor, that Brighella is the imperial Master of the Pages, and that Truffaldino is the Head Eunuch of the Royal Seraglio, we have no doubt that the stock characters of the commedia dell'arte have come a long way. Immigration has been very good for them. It has brought within their reach economic and political opportunities which could never become available to the likes of them in their own country. As we read on, we soon find out that they have acquired the manners of their new homeland, accepted its fashion, assimilated its customs, trained themselves in its special protocols, and, without losing any essential aspects of their former selves, such as their identifying costumes, their native language, and their inclination to coarseness, they have become sufficiently refined to rise to the highest offices possible for anyone other than the emperor himself. The journey begun two centuries earlier by the ancient Zanni from Bergamo, who, in the performances of the first actors and in the minds of the first popular audiences of commedia dell'arte, had first immigrated to Venice in pursuit of opportunity, seems finally to have found a utopian end in the sardonic imagination of Count Carlo Gozzi – fierce ideologue of the counter-enlightenment, reactionary aristocrat, and devoted revivalist of the commedia tradition, obliged, as the saying goes, by his nobility to become the generous patron of a company of actors especially committed to its survival in the professional theatre. If not in aristocratic Venice, which even Pantalone, himself a native Venetian, but, alas, a merchant rather than an aristocrat, had found necessary to leave, in the exotic never-never land of Gozzi's imaginary China the pot of Gold was theirs for the taking.

Life could hardly be better – were it not, as Chancellor Tartaglia intimates in a momentary lapse into his pre-immigration coarseness, were it not “for that little pig” (*per quella porchetta*) of *Turandot*, who has to spoil everything by confusing men with her riddles and then chopping off their heads as if they were pumpkins, keeping all of China in a constant state of mourning

and anxiety: it would be better to take her to the temple and offer *her* in sacrifice to the gods rather than the hundreds of animals that are sacrificed on her account. She is a real bitch (*cagna*) in coming up with riddles that no one can figure out, observes in the same tone Secretary of State Pantalone. As the minister closest to the Emperor, Pantalone is the one who should advise him on the course of action that he should take, but in this case he is at a total loss, since, as he points out to the emperor, in Venice, where he comes from, there are no girls who hate men, nor, for that matter, men who would rush to get their heads chopped off for a pretty face. Master of the Pages Brighella, entrusted as he is with the education of the young men at court, is profoundly concerned not only by Turandot's incomprehensible cruelty towards her suitors, but also by her general rejection of the institution of marriage, without which, it seems to him, legitimate procreation is not possible, and by the fact that to go against her wishes, as he would like to do, would surely mean putting his own head at risk. Consequently he and his fellow ministers, as he says in Venetian at one point, find themselves in a "in a hell of a situation" (*semo a una cattiva condition*), when all they wanted from these jobs was to be able to save a little money for their old age (Gozzi II, 2; IV, 5). Only Truffaldino is cheerful, for he, having made the ultimate sacrifice in order to become head eunuch in Turandot's seraglio, sees no advantages whatsoever in the institution of marriage, which is furthermore based on the lie that marriage is necessary for procreation: his mother, he points out, was never married, and yet he had no trouble coming into the world. Besides he knows opportunity well enough when he sees it: he serves the princess with devotion because every time that she manages to chop off another man's head she is very generous to her faithful number one eunuch.

This is an image of princess Turandot as seen through the eye holes of a commedia mask, which like the funny mirrors in amusement parks, can violently twist the shape of reality into comic forms that quickly debunk whatever myths we may have liked to entertain about it. From her own self-presentation, however, we learn that she is not naturally cruel but is forced to be so by men who, intoxicated with her beauty, pursue her relentlessly against her will, and that she finds the very idea of becoming someone's wife absolutely repulsive, wishing only to live in seclusion with her women companions and her eunuchs. She has no desire to give herself to a man, despite how unnatural her stance may be considered by others, including her father, and so she devises an institutional mechanism capable of making her celibacy immune to the aggressiveness of marriage, by entitling her to behead

would-be husbands who cannot outwit her in a test of riddles. The play is the story of her defeat by conversion, in the name of what is regarded as the natural order of society. It is cast in the form of an averted tragedy, and it is meant to be shown to the audience through a prism capable at once of causing reflection on the seriousness of the story and of inducing laughter at it.

The commedia characters who provide the laughter-inducing filters of the play are not the ones usually found together in the tradition prior to Gozzi. Opposite Pantalone, we would normally expect to see the Dottore rather than Tartaglia, the canonical combination of masked characters in the contemporary repertoire being, on the one hand, the two servants Brighella and Arlecchino, or, as in our case, Truffaldino, who is a simple variant of Arlecchino, and, on the other hand, the two old men, Pantalone and Dottore. Playwrights of the time very rarely call for Tartaglia, and, as a rule, do not do so as a replacement for the Dottore. Immigration brings together all kinds of strangers, one would be tempted to say in coming up with a thematic reason for the replacement, were it not for the fact that Gozzi's exceptional stance has a very simple explanation: the company of Antonio Sacchi, whose alliance Gozzi had secured in his program for a systematic revival of commedia, did not include an actor trained in the role of the Dottore – Roderigo Lombardi, the company's last Dottore, had died in 1749 and had never been replaced – while it did include an excellent Tartaglia in the person of the accomplished actor Agostino Fiorilli. There is, of course some similarity of function between Tartaglia and the Dottore, in that Tartaglia is also a pompous know-it-all, but he stutters and is from Naples rather than Bologna, and he has a totally different costume and mask. For these reasons, the presence of Tartaglia and the absence of the Dottore made Sacchi's company unique among the 160 or so which were active in northern Italy in the second half of the eighteenth century (Giardi 26).¹ Having elected to work with Sacchi, Gozzi had therefore no choice but to pair Pantalone with Tartaglia rather than the Dottore.

The fact that the composition of the company was the chief conditioning factor in script production lends itself to the important observation that casting precedes play writing, rather than reverse, which is normal for us, and is in any case the responsibility of the playwright rather than that of the company manager. Professional playwrights of this period worked as scenario and script writers for particular companies and were therefore expected to write plays that could be successfully performed by their actors. Students of eighteenth-century commedia are familiar with the compositional implications of this idea from Goldoni, who leaves no doubt that, even in plays writ-

ten after his rejection of *commedia*, his own developmental procedure was to begin always with an analysis of the "nature", that is to say the physique, emotional disposition, and skills of the actors in the company, including their linguistic abilities, and then to invent characters that presupposed those very qualities, both physical and emotional, and that required those precise skills in the actors for their realisation on stage. Only then he could devise actions of which such characters might be the likely agents.² Therefore it would be definitely more correct to say that for him and for the professional playwrights of his generation the actors are part of the prime matter from which the playwright fashions his characters rather than instruments for the realisation of character autonomously created from nothing in his imagination. Even at the level of pure script, before any staging process actually begins, the writer and the actor are engaged in a form of authorial collaboration which is logically implied by the idea of theatre-making that informs the contemporary professional stage and which consequently is legally called for by the contract that binds them in partnership.

In Gozzi's *Turandot* this type of collaboration is especially evident, since, despite what one might infer from some popular translations and adaptations of *Turandot* (Schiller's included),³ Gozzi actually left a considerable part of the play to be improvised on stage by the actors performing it. His familiarity with the tradition of improvisation and the guidelines that he supplies in the script were sufficient to enable him to write a play that is not fragmentary in the least. There are two kinds of improvisational scenes in *Turandot*: In the first type, no actual speeches are given, though the basic content of the episode is provided in a point-form narrative with a call for appropriate stage business. This is the case of the *lazzi*-studded monologue by Truffaldino who, on behalf of Turandot – who, having been riddled out by the mysterious prince, stoops to cheating – attempts to discover Calaf's identity, that is to solve his riddle, by interpreting the movements that he makes in his sleep as if they were letters of the alphabet and as if his body were unconsciously spelling out his name. It is also the case of the lively altercation between Truffaldino and Brighella, the one, as is to be expected of the head eunuch, defending Turandot's right not to marry and to prefer the company of women and eunuchs to that of sex-driven men, and the other, as might be equally predictable of the High Chancellor, defending the right of the state to demand that she marry someone, since its very survival as a patriarchy depends on Turandot's acceptance of a husband, who will one day inherit the throne. The second type of improvisational scene includes an episode in which the speeches of Truffaldino are sketched out

in scenario form, the exact words being left for the actor to produce *ex tempore*, while those of his several dialogue partners are given in full.

We are before a very complex model of play, in which some scenes are fully scripted, other scenes are described in the traditional commedia dell'arte manner for impromptu performance, and others still are given in a form that is a logical hybrid of the other two. The story of *Turandot*, which, as a narrative nucleus, comes to Gozzi ready-made from several traditions is, quite naturally, consigned to the fully scripted scenes. Being a vehicle for very precise messages – which range from the suppression of lesbianism and intellectual prowess in women to the imposition of marriage for the protection of the patriarchal order of society,⁴ as legitimated by a political interpretation of the contemporary metaphysical idea of the great chain of being, which assigned to everything a fixed place in a hierarchy that stretched from inanimate matter to God – the dramatic action of the taming of *Turandot* could not be exposed to the risks of improvisation. As a channel for ideological discourse, script comes with guarantees that improvisation cannot offer. But the comic view that one can have of the story through commedia clowning – an action which is meant to reinforce the ideology expressed in the serious part of the script by exacerbating the effects of *Turandot*'s hostility to marriage – is entrusted to the skill and experience of the actors impersonating the stock characters.

This heterogeneous model of play script leads us to an important observation. You may have noticed that in my references to the play I have not used the term *text* and that I have always spoken instead of script and writing. My reason for avoiding that category is quite simple. The usual concept of text, linked as it is to works that are endowed with verbal closure, is a theoretical category which is not fully applicable to Gozzi's play because the play, even when it is regarded as verbal stuff, is deliberately constructed as an incomplete entity. Text in the case of true commedia dell'arte plays, which are by definition based only on a scenario for improvisation, can refer only to text-as-performance, the scenario being little more than a story line and an elaborate set of stage directions. In the case of fully scripted plays, text refers to the verbal substance which, though meant to be acted out on stage, is endowed with autonomous existence as a complete linguistic, perhaps even literary, object. Gozzi's model makes use of both ideas, but it cannot be reduced to either of them. His dramatisation of the story of *Turandot* has a built-in fluidity that partakes both of the notion of text as performance, as found in the pre-Goldoni commedia dell'arte tradition, and of that of text as a script to be performed, as upheld by Goldoni in opposition to the per-

former-based compositional practices of commedia companies, and as accepted in part by Gozzi as an apparatus for ideological discourse. Although it is much more complete than a scenario, it is also much less complete than a literary text. It therefore cannot be assigned to either category. It will become a complete text only when the actor's improvised parts are added to the playwright's scripted ones; however, at that point it will not be a literary but a performance text, since improvisation occurs only in performance.

Before performance Gozzi's play can be described only as a text in a state of becoming, enjoying a form of public existence, that is to say existence in print, as an incomplete dialogical object, a status which is denied to pure commedia and is logically unavailable to scripted comedy. Conceptually it comes into being when the closure of script is broken by the intrusion of improvisation. This, I believe, is an obvious theoretical fact, but it is something that needs to be stated with a certain degree of emphasis, because too many scholars and translators, accustomed to working in national traditions that have not been significantly shaped by *ex tempore* compositional practices, force Gozzi's play into the category of the scripted text, concealing from view that part of it which, even at the level of verbal material, cannot come to the work from anywhere other than the performer, who must therefore be related to the playwright by aesthetic solidarity and ideological complicity.

It is no accident that, of all the companies available to him, Gozzi should have chosen to work with that of Antonio Sacchi. The most renowned Truffaldino of his generation, in 1745 Sacchi had improvised with the skill of a great virtuoso *The Servant of Two Masters*, on a scenario that he had commissioned from Goldoni and which Goldoni later (in 1753) turned into a scripted play, incorporating as much as he could remember of the material created on stage by the actor. But Sacchi had left Italy, going first to Russia and then to Portugal, when Goldoni's call for an anti-commedia form of theatre practice began to threaten the future of actors trained in the *impromptu* comic style. Gozzi saw in Sacchi a formidable champion of the *commedia dell'arte* and invited him to join forces with him in a strategy designed to slow down the development of bourgeois drama by neutralising the effects, social and dramatic, of Goldoni's reform. Sacchi had everything to gain from this alliance, since Gozzi's vision of drama was based on the survival of his type of company. He therefore gladly served Gozzi's aristocratic ideology since, it must have seemed to him, *commedia dell'arte* could not possibly survive without the patronage that it offered. And so, just as

Goldoni had advanced his idea of scripted drama in partnership with the company of Girolamo Medebach, who, having accepted Goldoni's program of social and dramatic reform, retrained his actors in the new style of performance required by scripted drama. Gozzi carried out his revival of commedia in alliance with Antonio Sacchi, who continued to believe in the validity of the old style and therefore could have no use for an ideology that would do away with it.⁵

Through his partnership with Sacchi, Gozzi sought first of all to inject new life into traditional commedia conventions, and there is no denying that he was successful in his attempt. With respect to content, he did so by incorporating the masks into works with a clear and serious ideological lesson to impart. With respect to form, he did so by producing first a commedia dell'arte scenario (*L'amore delle tre melarance*) and then scripted and partly scripted plays. *Turandot* is the most famous of the *Fiabe* in which he fused together the scenario and the scripted form, and the one in which his idea of a natural social hierarchy is expressed in the most basic terms, concerning as it does the place and self-understanding available to women in an androcentric world, and is hence of great relevance to later periods of history. It is a play in which the scenario form, retrieved from within the written play, introduces a visibly foreign presence which endorses with calculated buffoonery the same vision of ideal womanhood that is more soberly proclaimed in the scripted part. In becoming wealthy and powerful denizens of a Chinese empire in a state of crisis, Truffaldino, Brighella, Pantalone and Tartaglia have not shed all the traits by which the commedia tradition had previously signified their social classes, their trades, and their regions of origin. These distinctive features are first of all visual. When Gozzi says that they are costumed "in the Chinese manner" he means, of course, that the actors impersonating them wear the formal dress of Chinese state officials over their commedia costumes, but in such a manner as to leave the latter sufficiently visible to enable the audience to identify their wearers as the traditional stock characters of Venice, relocated in an oriental court. Although as new members of this society they have mastered its protocol and can play at being Chinese officials in a manner that seems perfectly natural to the other characters, they have not ceased to be who they were before immigrating to China. In the commedia tradition, a costume cannot be separated from the character's skin without dissolving away the substance under the costume. When a commedia character is made to impersonate someone else, verisimilitude, to say nothing of realism, psychological or otherwise, is automatically out of the question.

In the scene in which Turandot's law of the three riddles is publicly proclaimed, the Secretary of State and the High Chancellor perform, with what they, but not the audience, regard as great seriousness, a complicated ritual on stage in the presence of the Emperor and the High Council, while remaining throughout identifiable as Pantalone and Tartaglia. The actors were here required to play Pantalone and Tartaglia in the process of acting as Chinese officials who were themselves performing state rituals, making full use of a visual rhetoric capable of magnifying and deflating the meaning of stage action at the same time, and hence of drawing the attention of the audience onto the narrative flow of the action performed and onto the artificial nature of the performance itself. Sacchi was a perfect ally in this type of theatre, because under his direction his company had acquired very valuable experience in using the substance of one aesthetic product as the form through which to view the substance of another, without having recourse to the fiction of illusion. As early as 1739 Sacchi's company had produced with great success a commedia dell'arte version of the famous pastoral *The Faithful Shepherd (Il pastor fido)*, in which the visual and linguistic identity of the impersonating commedia characters, some of whom, like Truffaldino, played more than one role in the pastoral play, remained deliberately conspicuous throughout (Molinari 189), thereby constantly intruding the world commedia into that of the pastoral. It is because of the disruptive effect (dare we say alienating effect?) of this type of intrusion that in 1920 Puccini had his librettists remove the commedia characters from the plot of *Turandot* and replace them with a trio of more authentically Chinese figures, in order to eliminate what he called "the artificiality" of the situation (Weisstein 284).⁶ On the other hand, in elaborating the aesthetic concept for his epoch-making production of *Turandot* in 1922, Vakhtangov emphasised that artificiality by extending to all the characters and by further magnifying an aesthetic principle already explicit in Gozzi's conception of commedia masks performing Chinese roles.⁷

The visual reminder of the intrusion of Venice into China is strengthened linguistically. All the non-commedia characters speak Italian verse in the unrhymed hendecasyllabic metre of tragedy, on the aesthetic fiction that this is the language of China, which Tartaglia, whose name means "the one who stutters" and who is the linguistically least competent character in the entire commedia tradition, has almost totally mastered, speaking as he does fairly elegant literary Italian prose. But on the fiction that the Chinese and Tartar characters do not notice any difference, Pantalone, Brighella and Truffaldino speak only colloquial Venetian, though it is likely that, in his improvisations

Sacchi would lace his Venetian with Bergamese inflections, in accordance with contemporary practice, in which Truffaldino, largely as a result of Sacchi's own portrayal of the character in Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*, was regarded as a naturalised Venetian originally from Bergamo who, unlike his compatriot Brighella, had not been able to acquire a perfect accent.⁸ The most Venetian member of the group, Pantalone, turns the matter of his Venetian background into a thematic motif. When Calaf declares that the solution to Turandot's third riddle – the riddle of the invincible animal, winged and four-footed, resting on sea and sand at the same time, and tirelessly protecting all the land – is the lion of Venice, Pantalone cannot contain his happiness and embraces him, bursting with a pride so intense as to transform his immigration into a form of exile from his beloved city.

In their approach to the relationship between popular culture and society, sociologists find it useful to ask whether a given work is an expressive or an instrumental aspect of culture, a description of community values or a prescription of what those values ought to be. To be sure, both aspects are always present, description and prescription being dialectically connected (Goodlad 3-7). Before Turandot's conversion, Gozzi is clearly describing, through the allegory of China, tensions present by implication in Venetian society and culture. But after Turandot's change of heart, when the great chain of being has been fully restored and life in China is allowed to return to its natural rhythm, Gozzi is clearly presenting an ideal model of society which he believes his audience should try to realise, and in this sense his work is fundamentally prescriptive. Since this utopian state of society is the teleological end of the story of Turandot, and therefore the informing principle of every scene of the play from beginning to end, we may say that Gozzi tipped the relationship very heavily in favour of prescription, all the while pretending to describe a scheme of things that naturally obtained in actuality. He was convinced that the social and aesthetic forces that were increasingly attacking the world he represented were minor and could be easily subdued. History has shown that he was a myopic observer of contemporary trends and that he was wrong on all counts, but it has rewarded him by granting enduring fame to the play in which he very likely recorded his vision with the greatest force and clarity.

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NOTE

¹ The company's Pantalone was Giovanni Battista Roti, while its Brighella was Atanasio Zanoni and its Trufaldino was, of course, Sacchi himself (Giardi 257). On Lombardi and Fiorilli see Gozzi 1124.

² Goldoni describes his method of composition in various pages of his *Memoirs*, of the *Teatro comico*, and of the introductions to the volumes of the Pasquali edition of his works (1761-1777). For the English version of these pages see Van Steenderen 516-537.

³ On Schiller's omission of impromptu scenes and on the general relationship between his and Gozzi's versions see White 123-140. Improvisations in *Turandot* have been scripted out by Gozzi's most recent English translators John Louis DiGaetani, Albert Bermel and Ted Emery. Jonathan Levy retained the impromptu scenes in his translation *Turandot: A Tragic-Comic Fable for the Theatre*, in Bentley's *The Genius of the Italian Theatre*.

⁴ For a lucid reading of Gozzi's play as an anti-lesbian work see Smith 242-284.

⁵ Gozzi describes the beginning of his collaboration with Sacchi in *Ragionamento ingenuo e storia sincera dell'origine delle mie dieci fiabe teatrali* (Opere 1085-1086) and in his *Appendice al ragionamento ingenuo* (Opere 1124-1125).

⁶ Cf. *The Essence of Opera*, Ed. Ulrich Weisstein, 284, and the second chapter of William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini's Turandot: The End of the Great Tradition*.

⁷ On Vakhtangov's production see Ripellino 236-239, 248-259 and Taviani-Schino 74-87.

⁸ On Truffaldino's linguistic evolution in this period see Folena 4-28.

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