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VERBAL LAZZI IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Did William Shakespeare ever attend a performance by players of the *commedia dell'arte*? Drusiano Martinelli, a celebrated *capocomico*, 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 did not arrive in London until about 1585, and there are no records of *commedianti* appearing there at that time or later. However, Italian culture and civilization were very influential in Elizabethan London.² 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 Kemp, who played Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, was in Rome about 1600, and the English writer Thomas Nashe describes meeting with "that famous Francatrip Harlicken" in Venice in 1589.⁴ The *zanni* inquired if Nashe knew "the signor Chiarlatino Kempino," and was gratified to learn that he did.⁵ 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. Kemp agrees to "extemporise a merriment" with an Italian Harlequin.⁶ A German scholar has suggested that Shakespeare as "an adventurous youth" may have visited Paris and seen the *Gelosi*.⁷ But this speculation has never been confirmed.

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.⁸ It has been suggested that he knew the language, since he drew upon Boccaccio and other Italian writers for plots.⁹ But he might equally well have heard such things recounted by someone else who knew the language. 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 *comici* 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.¹⁰ Examples of the latter (verbal) kind are more difficult to trace, but a number can be offered here.

Our main difficulty in examining the *scenarii* of the *commedia* which have survived is, of course, the fact that they are no more than a relatively brief plot upon which the *comici* improvised dialogue and action. The best-known collection and the first to be printed is that of Flamineo Scala "detto Flavio," entitled *Il Teatro delle Favole rappresentative...* (Venice, 1611).¹¹ These fifty *scenarii* 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 *comici* started this useful and time-saving device is not clear, but it may have been relatively early in the development of the *commedia* itself. Andrea Perrucci's *Dell'arte rappresentativa premeditata ed all'improvviso* (first printed in Naples in 1699¹²) 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).¹³ To be sure, both collections were late, but they assist in reconstructing what the *comici* 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...* (Venice, 1634).¹⁴ 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...¹⁵

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"¹⁶ which seems to have marked the performances of the *comici*. 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*.¹⁷ These choices indicate a high degree of literary taste, and we know that many of the *commedia* players were indeed cultivated individuals.

Shakespeare's characters refer, on occasion, to the use of considerably less sophisticated collections. Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*, II, i, 119) is accused of having her "good wit out of the *Hundred Merry Tales*," a collection of feeble anecdotes first published in 1526.¹⁸ Slender (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, I, i, 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 as “a mongrel form of wit, half wit and half malapropism.”¹⁹ With “malapropism” an anachronism, the phrase “misplaced word” used by Escalus (*Measure for Measure*, II, i, 84) is more suitable. Graziano, also known as il Dottore, il Pedante, Tartaglia, Guillot Gorju, il Notaio and il Farmacista,²⁰ was noted for “misplaced words,” dialect, the *lingua maccheronica*,²¹ grotesquely long words, tirades introducing pedantic, usually fanciful, etymologies, and puns. All these *lazzi* are echoed in Shakespeare's plays.

Graziano boasts that he is “sovra tutt bon grammaticch, mior humanista, perfett retorich, sottill logich,” etc.²² He uses on occasion “un linguaggio bastardo, misto di veneziano e di bolognese italianizzato,”²³ 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 *scenarii*—composed his *Li Diversi linguaggi* (Venezia, 1609), which presented ten characters, each speaking a different dialect (“Veneziano, Romanesco, Ceciliano, Bolognese, Napoletano,” etc.).²⁴

Many of Shakespeare's characters use dialect, usually for comic effect. The speeches of Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), contain dialectical 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” (I, i, 38ff.), and “Seese is not good to give putter; your pelly is all putter” (V, v, 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 sall be vary gud, gud feith, gud captains bath” (Jamy).

Edward (*King Lear*) 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 chud ha ' bin zwaggering out of my life ' twould not ha ' bin zo long as ' tis by a vortnight," etc. (IV, vi, 231ff.). Katherine (*Henry V*) speaks a mixture of broken English and French: "Datis as it sall please le roi mon père" (V, ii, 247ff.). And many other examples from the plays might be quoted.

III

Graziano's *spropositi* include *idiotismi lessicali*²⁵ such as *anibali* for *animali*, *pictor* for *pastor*, *orrore* for *amore*. Shakespeare's Elbow (*Measure for Measure*) speaks of "two notorious benefactors" (Angelo corrects him to "malefactors" [II, i, 49ff.]). Had his wife been "cardinally" (carnally) inclined, she might have been "accused in fornication" (II, ii, 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" (II, ii, 65ff.). Dull, the constable, and Costard (*Love's Labour Lost*) use misplaced words: "I myself reprehend [apprehend] his own person" (I, i, 183) and, of Armando's letter, Costard says, "The contempts thereof are as of touching me" (I, i, 303ff.). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Launcelot declares, "Tears exhibit my tongue" (II, iii, 10) and "my young master doth expect your reproach" [approach] (II, v, 20). There is a possibility that these and other instances of "misplaced words" were, in fact, improvised verbal *lazzi* introduced by the clown Will Kemp 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 Kemp.²⁶ In any case, Hamlet's advice to the Players (III, ii, 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, and did his best to prevent it.

Tirades, studied in advance and copious 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'ar-spundrò, perchè *sapiens dominatur astris* ..." ²⁷ 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 pome-water, who now hangeth like a jewel in the ear of *coelo*, the sky ..." (IV, ii, 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" (IV, ii, 102-3). Costard remarks of Holofernes and Armando that "they have lived long on the alms-basket of words," and constructs the "longest word extant" (as J. Dover Wilson calls it) ²⁸: "honorificabilitudinitatibus: (V, i. 41). However, Graziano's "certificabilitudinitissemamient" has 31 letters, Costard's a mere 27.

IV

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. ²⁹ Those used in Shakespeare's plays range from the trivial and threadbare to the bawdy, and sometimes the incomprehensible. Like their contemporaries in the *commedia dell'arte* companies, Elizabethan players 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." ³⁰

Shakespeare does not use puns only for comic effect. Hamlet utters more puns than any other character in the plays. He vents his hostility towards the Court in the Play scene, and Lear's Fool attempts to relieve the king's sufferings by a series of puns. 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."³¹

* * *

This study has considered one aspect of the improvisational art as practiced in two of the most popular theatres of the late sixteenth century.³² Influence cannot be ruled out, the more so as Italian players of the *commedia* and Elizabethan players were certainly in contact in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, if not in England. Coincidence is always possible in literature. But practical pressures exerted by the circumstances of the historical moment were assuredly present, and cannot be discounted, though they are too complex to be adequately unravelled here.

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¹ K. M. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy* (New York, 1962), pp. 352 ff. Although first published in 1934, this remains the standard work in English. Miss Lea's documentation is especially thorough.

² This topic has been frequently studied. See, for example, Piero Rebora, *L'Italia nel dramma inglese 1558-1642* (Milan, 1925) and David Orr, *Italian Renaissance Drama in England before 1652* (Chapel Hill, 1970).

³ Vito Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'arte. Storia e testi*, V (Florence, 1957-61). Pandolfi's is the standard work in Italian on the *commedia*, and is likely to remain so.

⁴ Thomas Nashe, *An Almond for a Parrat* (reprinted by R. B. McKerrow, London, 1904-10), III, p. 342.

⁵ Quoted by Lea, *op. cit.*, II, p. 350.

⁶ J. Payne Collier, *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London, 1841), p. 92.

⁷ Otto Wolff, "Shakespeare und die *Commedia dell'arte*," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* XXVI (1910), p. 3.

⁸ See, for example, Ferdinando Neri, *Scenarii delle maschere in Arcadia* (Città di Castello, 1913), *passim*.

⁹ Mario Praz, "Shakespeare's Italy," *Shakespeare Survey* 7 (1954), p. 98. See also Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources* (London, 1957), p. 7. But 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." These remarks follow fifty pages 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).

¹⁰ Jack U. Violi, "Shakespeare and the *lazzo*," Diss. Columbia Univ. 1956.

¹¹ Reproduced by photography by the MLA (New York, 1935) and published in English translation as *Scenarios of the Commedia dell'arte* by Henry F. Salerno (New York, 1967).

¹² Reprinted with an introduction by Anton Giulio *Bragaglia* (Florence, 1961).

¹³ See the study by Suzanne Thérault, *La Commedia dell'arte vue à travers le zibaldone de Pérouse* (Paris, 1965) and Alessandro Cervellati, *Storia delle maschere* (Bologna, 1954), p. 27.

¹⁴ Reprinted with critical apparatus by Ferdinando Taviani (Milan, 1971).

¹⁵ Barbieri, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Joseph S. Kennard, *Masks and Marionettes* (New York, 1935), p. 48.

¹⁷ Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 169. Bruni's prologues were printed as *Le fatiche comiche* (Paris, 1623). Pandolfi, *op. cit.*, reprints this one as "Miserie dei comici" in IV, pp. 55-6.

¹⁸ Reprinted in 1840 and again in 1866, with a facsimile edition by Scholars' Facsimiles (Gainesville, 1970). See also P. M. Zall, "English Prose Jest-books in the Huntington Library," *Shakespeare Research* 4 (1968-69), pp. 78-90 and John Lievsay, *The Englishman's Italian Books 1550-1700* (Philadelphia, 1969), with comments on possible Italian sources for this kind of material.

¹⁹ K. M. Lea, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁰ Alessandro Cervellati, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

²¹ Pietro Spezzani, "*L'Arte rappresentativa di Andrea Perrucci e la lingua della Commedia dell'arte*," *Quaderni del circolo filologico-linguistico padovano* 2 (1970), p. 367.

²² Alessandro Cervellati, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Vito Pandolfi, *op. cit.*, III, p. 26.

²⁵ Pietro Spezzani, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

²⁶ Austin K. Gray, "Robert Armine the Foole," *PMLA* XLII (1927), p. 674.

²⁷ Pietro Spezzani, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

²⁸ J. Dover Wilson, ed., *Love's Labour Lost* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 156.

²⁹ K. M. Lea, *op. cit.*, I, p. 24.

³⁰ Robert Weimann, "Shakespeare's Wordplay," *Shakespeare* 1971 (Toronto, 1972), p. 232.

³¹ See Helge Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (New Haven and London, 1953), pp. 53-160, for a detailed study of Shakespeare's use of puns. For proverbs, see Morris Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950).

³² Valentina Capocci, *Genio e mestiere: Shakespeare e la Commedia dell'arte* (Bari, 1950), although ingenious and interesting in some respects, cannot be taken seriously in Shakespeare studies. Mario Praz accused her of "jumping to conclusions" (*Shakespeare Survey, op. cit.*, p. 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, without realizing that passages of verse are sometimes printed as prose, and vice versa, as a close reading of the text would have shown her (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.