

ROBERT HENKE

*PERFORMANCE AND LITERATURE IN THE "COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE"*

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In *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*, Robert Henke argues that in its golden age, roughly 1545 to 1625, the richness of the *commedia dell'arte* lay in the tension between oral performance traditions and literary techniques and practices. This dynamic is achieved because, according to Henke, "even an antagonistic relationship could be generative" (p. 1). This well-focused thesis, meticulously researched and thoughtfully argued, sets Henke's work apart from previous studies that focus specifically on either oral or literary aspects of the subject, and makes a meaningful contribution to the existing scholarship on *arte* history, theory and practice. The overall design of Henke's book, organized with great care into eleven chapters, serves as a chronological examination of select *arte* players and the various texts they produced as well as those contiguous to the players and their roles. These texts, which are more numerous and diverse than has been previously assumed by theatre scholars (p. 5), consist of actors' contracts and letters to patrons, patrons' letters to actors, loose-leaf and compiled *arte* speeches and dialogues, memorializing poems and orations, entries from court diaries, accounts of performance from poems, scenarios, manuals on the art of acting, and treatises composed in response to anti-theatrical critiques.

Henke undertakes the vexing task of introducing the non-specialist reader to all of the intricacies of *arte* practice in the first two chapters, beginning with a multileveled definition of the term. While *commedia dell'arte* traditionally refers to organized professional companies, Henke points to an adjacent culture made up of *buffoni*, mountebanks and dilettante actors who performed dialogues and monologues based on traditional *arte* roles in banquet and urban *piazza* contexts. Cross-fertilization between these cultures contributed to the richness and multi-layered textures of Italian theatre practice (p. 6). Henke's informative discussion of *arte* organization, contractual and other business practices, and the day to day exigencies of performance is followed by a useful summary of the main features of *arte* improvisation and its attendant character system.

Henke frames his central presupposition in chapter 3: the *commedia dell'arte* was rooted in the residually oral context that characterized early modern Italy while mediating the transformative effects of the revolution of print and the rapid diffusion of literature (p. 39). What follows is a lucid analysis of the general features of orality as they relate to *arte* discourse: rhetoric, memory and decorum of character, the players' use of *generici*, *opuscoli* and high literature, and the potent interaction of *generici* with the

emergence of printed loose-leaf dialogues, poems, riddles, sermons and popular songs being sold willy-nilly in the marketplace (p. 45). Henke's argument is convincing. This convergence of high and low literary culture and resources provided *comici* with endless combinations of forms and material to exploit while giving early *arte* playing its distinctively rich flavour.

The theatre of early 16th century Venice, germane to the development of *arte* practice, is the focus of the next chapter, "Venetian buffoni". Henke traces the formative activities of Angelo Beolco (c. 1502-1542), Andrea Calmo (c. 1510-1571) and lesser-known *buffoni* often glossed over by English-speaking scholars, such as Domenigo Taiacalze (d. 1513) and Zuan Polo Liompardi (d. 1541). In full agreement with the groundbreaking scholarship of Daniel Vianello, Henke challenges the popular assumption that the Venetian *buffoni* was the predecessor of the *arte* player (p. 52), concluding that while the "*buffoni* do not 'anticipate' the professional comedy in a linear way, [they do] represent a parallel and lingering tradition" (p. 53). A good part of the discussion here is devoted to the various intersections of the improvisatory methods of the *buffoni* and *arte comici* in light of extant memorializing texts.

In chapter 5, Henke engages in an exhaustive analysis of documents from the 40's and 50's consisting of contracts, records of performance, letters and poetry, including the well-documented notarial texts of the company of Ser Maphio, dating between 1545 and 1553, which point to an exclusively male and predominantly oral theatrical tradition. This is followed in chapter 6 by an illuminating discussion of the shift that occurred in *arte* performance and practice once the professional actress made her appearance in Mantua, between 1566 and 1568. Henke's examination of primary documents, including Scala's famous *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* (1611) and the lesser-known *Oratione D'Adriano Valerini Veronese, in morte delle divina signora Vincenza Armani, Comica Eccellentissima* (c. 1569) by actor Adriano Valerini, illustrates the ways in which the professional actress added literary dimensions to the well-established male-centered farcical theatrical tradition reminiscent of the Venetian *buffoni* (p. 85). Primary attention is paid to Flaminia (n.d.) and Vicenza Armani (d. 1569) who presumably led their own troupes and competed actively for audiences, drawn from both popular and learned segments of society (p. 87). Henke demonstrates successfully that Flaminia and Armani were fully responsible for introducing into the professional theatre a wider range of dramatic genres (p. 100), and that they made substantive use of both dramatic and non-dramatic literature to create complex, "nuanced" young heroines: courtesans, gypsies, exotic astrologers, *innamorata* and *Francheschina* roles. This discussion of the professional actress and her influence on *arte* repertoire and performance style ends with

an analysis of the virtuosic ‘mad scene’ or *pazzia*, aptly described as a perfect synthesis of mimetic and anti-mimetic traditions (p. 101). The *pazzia* was codified in print in Scala’s collection of *favole* and made famous in performance by the formidable *innamorata*, Isabella Andreini (1562-1604) who, as evidenced by ample documentary material from which Henke draws, consciously promoted herself as a symbol of high culture while distancing her art from charlatans, *buffoni* and other *piazza* performance traditions and practices (p. 105).

Chapters 7 and 8 are centred upon a miscellany of early texts, much of it previously unexamined, representing the *zanni*, the *Dottore* and *Pantalone*. Henke’s assessment of this material is clear, concise and insightful. The *zanni* texts, the most prominent of which is *Lacrimoso Lamento* (1585), a poem written in a Bergamask dialect memorializing the famous *primo zanni*, Simone da Bologna of the *Gelosi*, illustrate striking creative links between oral performance traditions and literature, suggesting contiguity between the *zanni* and the literary revolution advanced by the *innamorata* (p. 110); the range of this extant material reveals the *zanni* shared significant dialogical contact with his fellow *maschere* (136). The *Conclusioni* (1587) is a lively discourse composed for Duke Ferdinand II of Florence by the famous *Dottore* of the *Gelosi* Company, Lodovico de’ Bianchi in which he shares “un poco de la mia scienza [a bit of my knowledge]” (p. 138). This publication displays the *lingua grazianatoria* typical to the mask; it functions as a quasi performance, anticipating the lively *Compositions de Rhetorique* (c. 1600) by the first Arlecchino, Tristano Martinelli (p. 138). The poetic and dialogic compositions that constitute the *Pantalone* texts, including *Caprici et nuove fantasia alla venetiana di Pantalon de’ Bisognosi* (1601), demonstrate unequivocally that *Pantalone* not only shared dialogic territory with *zanni*, the *Dottore* and other *maschere* (p. 149) but was more generically and tonally versatile than before the appearance of the professional actress (p. 152).

Henke turns his attention to the career of Martinelli in the next chapter, exploring the conflicting yet fruitful ways in which this formidable buffoon negotiated traditional practice with “the new desideratum of mimesis” (p. 153). Henke’s description of Martinelli’s strategic use of the new medium to at once commemorate and “perform” Arlecchino on the page (pp. 167-69) is thoroughly engaging. This thread of complementarities between performance and literature leads Henke to an analysis of texts by the great Francesco Andreini and Flaminia Scala, and by players and theorists of the subsequent generation of actor-writers in chapters 10 and 11. The two-part collection of dialogues between Spavento and his servant Trappola, *Bravure del Capitano Spavento* (1611/15) by Andreini and the grand collection of Scala’s scenarios, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* represent overt attempts to legitimize *arte* practice. The numerous plays and scenarios, theoretical

treatises and technical manuals on acting of later *arte* actor-writers, among them Pier Maria Cecchini, Nicolo Barbieri, Domenico Bruni, Giovan Battista Andreini and Francesco Gabrielli, who are also the central concern of the last chapter, resonate with a deep awareness of the growing ecclesiastical attacks on the status of theatre. Henke's sensitive analysis of these publications shows the ways in which these writers address, either directly or indirectly, the moral opposition to the theatre while at the same time codifying, theorizing and commemorating the venerable accomplishments of their predecessors (4, p. 197).

What is impressive about *Performance and Literature in the "Commedia dell'arte"* is the assured manner in which Henke guides the reader, particularly the generalist, through a maze of dense scholarship and documentary material. Henke's argument is always clear and lucid. His reading of well-known texts is refreshing; his assessment of unexamined texts, thought-provoking. Rich in detailed notes, illustrations and a useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources, this study will be of enormous value to students and scholars of the *commedia dell'arte* and theatre history and to those of the *Cinquecento* and *Seicento*.

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