


## ***Commedia dell'arte* in *Othello*: a Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy**

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 close reading of *The Tragedy of Othello* in light of the popularity of improvised *commedia dell'arte* in Italy at the time the play was written suggests that *commedia dell'arte* strongly influenced the composition of the play, but this influence has not been fully appreciated by Shakespeare scholarship. If this interpretation of the literary and historical evidence is persuasive, the play becomes a brilliant, satirical comedy derived from *commedia dell'arte* but with a disturbing, tragic ending, not the traditional romantic tragedy that has puzzled commentators. The question then becomes when and where the dramatist learned so much about the Italian *commedia dell'arte* to be able to draw on it so extensively in *Othello* and other plays.

In this new reading, the seven principal characters, from Othello the general to Emilia the maid, have their prototypes in characters of *commedia dell'arte*. Much of the action reflects the rough comedy of *commedia dell'arte*; and Iago's gleeful, improvised manipulation of the other characters mirrors the improvised performances of *commedia dell'arte*. Arguably, this reading also offers readers, theater directors and playgoers the promise of a new and deeper appreciation of the play as a bitter satire of human folly that entertains, disorients and unsettles, denying the audience the Aristotelian catharsis of tragedy.

Although a few Shakespeare scholars have noted traces of *commedia dell'arte* in several plays, notably *The Tempest*, its influence on *Othello* has been almost completely ignored. It's not discussed in the many scholarly, single-volume editions, including those by E. A. J. Honigmann, Michael Neill, Kim Hall, Russ McDonald and Edward Pechter. Nor is there anything on it in the collected works of Shakespeare, such as the Riverside, Norton, Pelican, Oxford or most recently the RSC edition from Random House. The focus is on other sources and influences, principally Cinthio's

murder story, Vice of the morality plays and the comedies of Plautus.

At the same time, the seemingly inappropriate comedy in *Othello* and the strange manners and morals of the principal characters have frustrated critics, and provoked puzzlement, dismay, and even disparagement. A noted early critic called it a bloody farce. The comedy and carousing seem inappropriate for a tragedy. The male characters, especially Othello, often act in foolish ways. Iago's evil seems to be Coleridge's famous "motiveless malignity." The play makes light of serious issues, such as miscegenation, adultery, deceit, lying, cuckoldry, jealousy and loss of reputation.

In a well-regarded study, Bernard Spivack refers to "the mystery of iniquity" and a "hard and literal enigma."<sup>1</sup> In his edition of the play, Pechter says, "The critical tradition . . . has piled up a consistent record of appalled frustration."<sup>2</sup> Robert Hornback begins his article, "Emblems of Folly in the first *Othello*" by observing, "Critics have struggled to account for the disturbing comic elements in *Othello*."<sup>3</sup>

Philip C. Kolin, editor of *Othello: New Critical Essays*, compiles in his first twenty-eight pages a sampling of the critics' struggles and the unsettling effect of the play as performed.<sup>4</sup> Critics and audiences, Kolin writes, have been "perplexed through its magic web of tangled uncertainties and implausible outrages." It's a "riotous text disturbing readers'/spectators' peace of mind, frustrating their desire for closure." "A paroxysm of paradoxes." "Most problematic" is Othello himself. He has been "excessively glamorized....as a romantic figure." Desdemona "has been polarized, valorized as a saint or vilified as a strumpet. She is 'victimized' by her husband, but she has been assailed for 'a host of wrongdoings,' beginning with her disobeying her father. Her sexuality 'is a hotly contested issue,' and she has been maligned by critics who search for her culpability to the end."

"In large part because of Iago," Kolin continues, "*Othello* bristles with contradictions, paradoxes, seeming truths and seeming lies....Iago's amorphous, indeterminate status is the subject of a myriad of critical views about who he is and why he delights in villainy." He has been portrayed on stage as a "jolly, gleeful Puck" and "tarred as the jealous husband himself, the lustful misogynist." He's been labeled a paranoid psychopath, a creative artist identified with his own creator—Shakespeare—and, to the contrary, not so evil after all, replaced by Othello as the purely culpable character. In addition, there are the problems of scripted improvisations (a seeming oxymoron) and a white actor playing the "noble" Othello in blackface, makeup that to Elizabethan audiences often signified a foolish character.

These frustrating perplexities and difficulties may evaporate, however, if *commedia dell'arte* is considered to have been a significant influence on the author of *Othello*. The play can then be appreciated as the work of a genius who crafted a satiric comedy that brutally underscores the folly of mankind with its violent, disturbing ending.

An analysis of the characters in *commedia dell'arte*, their improvised performances and their similarity to the leading characters in *Othello* may serve to illustrate the importance of its influence. The distinguishing characteristic of the genre was spontaneous improvisation of dialog and action by performers in the

roles of stock characters enacting stock situations. They entertained their audience with improvised dialog, quick repartee, sham regional dialects, sly mockery, satire, obscene jokes and raillery, witty asides to the audience, pantomimes, lively jigs to music, slapstick fights, acrobatics, juggling, and other comic bits of theater, all known as *lazzi*. As Karl Mantzius puts it in his history of the theater, the performers “had to find the proper words to make the tears flow or the laughter ring; they had to catch the sallies of their fellow actors on the wing and return them with a prompt repartee. The dialog must go like a merry game of ball or spirited sword-play with ease and without a pause.”<sup>5</sup>

*Commedia dell'arte* was at the height of its popularity in Italy in the late 1500s, when the Shakespeare plays were being written. The leading troupes performed for Italian dukes and princes, who were usually their patrons, and often in public squares or in hired halls or theaters. One troupe was even summoned to Paris for a royal command performance in 1577.

Performers in *commedia dell'arte* did not follow an author's script. Drawing on a store of brief, narrative scenarios, wide reading, contemporary gossip and a well-developed imagination, they improvised the dialog and most of the action. The stock situations of the scenarios often involved disgraceful love intrigues, young lovers thwarted by their parents, ridiculous husbands being cuckolded, clever servants conning their masters, a bragging military officer being deceived by his servant, foolish old men being deceived by their wives or daughters, tricks to get money from simpletons, contrived eavesdropping episodes, beatings out of frustration, characters speaking comically at cross-purposes, mistaken identities causing comic confusions. Nearly all of these situations are found in *Othello*.

*Commedia dell'arte*, however, did not just portray the comical and the grotesque to amuse and delight. Its genius was to turn stock characters into recognizable humans by using comic deceptions and black humor that were, at bottom deadly serious satire exposing the folly of mankind. George Sand wrote that *commedia dell'arte* portrayed real characters in a “tradition of fantastic humor which is in essence quite serious and, one might almost say, even sad, like every satire which lays bare the spiritual poverty of mankind.”<sup>6</sup>

*Othello* probably had the same dramatic, satirical impact on its Elizabethan audience. Pamela Allen Brown of the University of Connecticut says, “*Othello* is painfully enigmatic now because it was originally closer to satire than tragedy. Time and critical tradition have effaced the satiric referents, but the mode of irony, mockery and attack still invades the play.”<sup>7</sup> She suggests that English audiences (especially aristocratic audiences, one might add) would recognize that the Republic of Venice was the target of the bitter satire because of Londoners' hatred of foreigners.

Among the principal stock characters in *commedia dell'arte* were the *Zanni*, the secondary *Zanni*, *Pantalone*, the *Capitano*, *Pedrolino*, the innocent woman, and her lady-in-waiting or maid. These seven stock characters are mirrored in the seven principal characters in *Othello*.

The *Zanni* was the most important character and the most disturbing. He was usually a servant who was ostensibly honest and trustworthy but was actually a cunning scoundrel who also loves making mischief for its own sake. He manipulates others with his ingenuity and devious insinuations. With improvised schemes, he drives the plot to advance his strategy. Witty and quick at repartee, he causes others to laugh but never laughs himself. He deceives everyone else with elaborate schemes for his advancement but at the end he usually gets his comeuppance.

Here's how leading *commedia* scholars describe the *Zanni*. Andrea Perrucci, who was an actor and writer, says in his *Treatise on Acting, from Memory and by Improvisation* (as translated) that the *Zanni* "should be amusing, quick, lively, witty, and able to devise intrigues, confusions and stratagems, which might deceive the world. He must be mordant, but not to excess, and in such a way that his witticisms.. ..are piquant, not oafish. His function is to devise the intrigue and to confuse issues."<sup>8</sup> Iago relishes his talent for intriguing and confusing. In *Italian Popular Comedy*, K. M. Lea says the *Zanni* "manipulates intrigues....content to run greater risks than the Roman slaves [in classical comedy]....is in charge of the love affairs....[and] has to invent the circumstantial lies with which one employer is to be played off against the other."<sup>9</sup>

In *Commedia dell'Arte, a Study of Italian Popular Comedy*, Winifred Smith finds that the *Zanni* was "usually a servant and confidant of a principal character, sometimes a rascal, sometimes a dunce, oftenest a complex mixture of the two, almost always the chief plotter, his main function was to rouse laughter to entertain at all costs."<sup>10</sup> Allardyce Nicoll describes the *Zanni* as an uncouth clown who "delights in cheating others," who bears grudges and who has a certain native wit but "displays no effervescent sense of fun."<sup>11</sup> Iago delights in deceiving others. The *Zanni* was "the most disturbing" in all Italian comedy, according to Pierre Louis Duchartre in his *Italian Comedy*; he was "extremely crafty [with]....mischievous ways....[and] ingenious and persuasive eloquence."<sup>12</sup> The *Zanni* in *Othello* is Iago.

The second *Zanni* in *commedia dell'arte* — an absurd, credulous buffoon — formed a contrast to the primary, clever *Zanni*. Perrucci says he "should be foolish, dumb and witless—so much so that he cannot tell his left hand from his right."<sup>13</sup> Pier Maria Cecchini, a *commedia* performer-manager who wrote the first "manual" for *commedia dell'arte*, says the second *Zanni* should be an awkward booby "whose pretence of not understanding anything that is said to him gives rise to delightful equivocations, ridiculous mistakes and other clownish tricks."<sup>14</sup> In *Othello*, he is the clueless Roderigo.

The *Capitano* was a boastful, swashbuckling mercenary, often a Spaniard, full of himself, who at times gets lost in a world of his own devising, and who tells tall tales about his military exploits, especially against the Turks. Iago addresses Othello as "general" and "captain," alluding to the *Capitano*, the braggart who is often duped in *commedia dell'arte*. As Duchartre puts it: "The Captain is a bombastic fellow and vastly tedious in his speech, but he manages to be amusing sometimes by virtue of his flights of fancy."<sup>15</sup>

Shakespeare scholar Frank Kermode notes “some celebrated criticisms of Othello’s generally orotund way of speaking, which may be regarded as a sort of innocent pompousness or, if you dislike it, a self-regard that is not so innocent.”<sup>16</sup> His voice, says Kermode in the Riverside edition, “has its own orotundity, verging, as some might infer, on hollowness.”<sup>17</sup> In an influential essay in his *Wheel of Fire*, G. Wilson Knight says that Othello’s “Where . . . chastity” speech (5.2.271-76) “degenerates finally in what might almost be called bombast” and that Othello “usually luxuriates in deliberate and magnificent rhetoric.”<sup>18</sup> “Othello’s transports,” says George Bernard Shaw, “are conveyed by a magnificent but senseless music . . . in an orgy of thundering sound and bounding rhythm.”<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the play Othello comes up with florid and grandiose figures of speech. In his *Shakespeare Quarterly* article, Russ McDonald says that there is no question that Othello is histrionic and self-dramatizing.<sup>20</sup> In his introduction to the Penguin edition, he says, “Shakespeare invokes the language, the imaginative delirium, and the furious motion of the comic type in his creation of Othello.”<sup>21</sup> He suggests that Othello has a “comic double” and cites the dramatist’s audacity at disorienting his audience by “confronting them with comic traits in a tragic environment.”<sup>22</sup>

Outlandish bombast is Allardyce Nicoll’s descriptor for the *Capitano*. He describes two sides to the *Capitano*. He could be “a handsome man, well set-up, neatly and elegantly dressed in military fashion, wearing or holding his sword in such a way as to suggest that he is thoroughly familiar with its use. . . a dignified and indeed impressive person.”<sup>23</sup> He could also be an officer “in whose boasting resides a kind of grotesque magnificence—the magnificence of a man who, well-versed in all the famous records of conflicts mythological and historical [as is Othello], lives in a grandiose world of his own imagining, a creature whose visions are his only true reality.”<sup>24</sup> A few pages later, Nicoll elaborates: “The *Capitano* is at one and the same time a military man who may fittingly be . . . husband of a heroine [Desdemona], and a dreamer who at times allows himself to become lost in an imaginary world of his own devising.”<sup>25</sup> As does Othello, persuading himself that Desdemona has betrayed him. He loses himself in his world of unfounded, jealous rage and revenge.

Iago and Roderigo are Spanish names, and Othello the Moor can be seen as a Spanish Moor, recalling the Moorish occupation of Spain for centuries up to 1492. Othello the Spanish mercenary brags to the senators about his military exploits and they send him to fight the Turks. In her article in *Shakespeare and Race*, Barbara Everett of Oxford University finds Othello’s Spanishness “of striking relevance because in Italian learned comedy (and in popular comedy [*commedia dell’arte*] after it) this braggart who is often the deceived husband is also most characteristically a new national type [in Italy], the Spanish soldier of fortune.”<sup>26</sup>

Winifred Smith also suggests that the *Capitano* character was inspired by the foreign mercenaries in Italy, and Duchartre says that “during the Spanish domination in Italy the Captain acquired the name of Matamoros,” that is, the Moor-Slayer. He was “decked out in an immense starched ruff, a wide plumed hat, and boots with scalloped edges at the top. His character was best delineated not so much by



physical traits as by his pretentiousness and indigence.”<sup>27</sup> The *Capitano* was a self-styled warrior and military leader but an outsider who is easily duped. Othello is also an exceptional commander but a social outsider in Venice, no doubt ill at ease in sophisticated Venetian society, easily duped and unaware of the impropriety, almost absurdity, of his eloping with the young daughter of his aristocratic friend, host and senator.

In their book, *Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, Kenneth and Laura Richards, drawing on Perrucci, describe the *Capitano* role as “one rich in words and gestures, boastful about beauty, elegance and wealth, but in reality a monster, an idiot, a coward, a nincompoop, someone who should be chained up, a man who wants to spend his life passing himself off as someone he is not, as quite a few do as they journey through the world.”<sup>28</sup> When Othello is unconscious in an epileptic fit, Iago alone, on stage with him, calls him a “credulous fool” (4.1.40). Iago never lies when he’s addressing the audience, even indirectly, as at this moment. And Emilia, the truth-telling maid, calls him a coxcomb and a fool at the climax of the play. A coxcomb was a fool or simpleton (OED obs.).

Othello the credulous fool would have been portrayed by a white actor in blackface, and in Renaissance England blackface was a laughable emblem of foolishness, madness and irrational folly. Hornback makes a persuasive case for this in *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*. He found that “a marked association between blackface and folly was, though hardly ubiquitous, fairly widespread in late medieval and Renaissance drama.”<sup>29</sup> He includes interludes, the comic playlets performed at aristocratic banquets and at court. The demeaning, early blackface comedy, he argues, associated blackness with outsiders and “with degradation, irrationality, prideful lack of self-knowledge, transgression, and, related to all these, folly.”<sup>30</sup> For Elizabethan audiences, Othello’s blackface makeup would have reinforced the character of Othello as an exotic outsider, the foolish *Capitano* of the play. In her edition of *Othello* in the Plays in Performance series, Julie Hankey says that “anyone going to a play about a Moor in the early seventeenth century would have expected the worst from this apparition.”<sup>31</sup>

Commentators on *Othello* often discuss the possibility of racial prejudice in the play, the mindset of the audience, and whether a black or a white man should play Othello, which was a role written for a white actor in blackface. They rarely address the dramatist’s mindset about race and what that might have meant at the time. In any case, the fact that Othello the Moor was in blackface makeup and the villain Iago is prejudiced does not mean that their creator was.

In contrast to modern sensibilities, Elizabethan audiences might very well have chuckled at the swaggering, boasting, irrational, and potentially dangerous Othello while wondering how seriously they were supposed to take this commander of the Venetian military who is an exotic, bombastic outsider in blackface who seems to be quite foolish. Hornback finds in Shakespeare and other Renaissance drama this “intriguing blend of seriousness and laughter.”<sup>32</sup> What was laughable in *Othello* to Elizabethans would later appear not funny, or even offensive to later audiences more sensitive to the evils of slavery and racial prejudice.

*Pantalone* was a foolish, talkative, old man, usually a rich Venetian merchant, who is duped by his wife or daughter. He is often the butt of the *Zanni*'s jokes. Sometimes he is called the *Magnifico*. In *Othello*, he is the senator Brabantio, the father of Desdemona and the butt of Iago's obscene jokes in Act 1. With barely veiled sarcasm, Iago calls him the *Magnifico*.

Andrea Perrucci says *Pantalone* "should be accomplished in the Venetian language, in all its dialects, proverbs and words, presenting the role of an aging old man who nonetheless tries to appear youthful." He should have a store of platitudes and banalities "to raise laughter at opportune moments by his [supposed] respectability and seriousness." He should be "all the more ridiculous" because as a person of authority he behaves childishly.<sup>33</sup>

*Pantalone*, says Smith, speaks Venetian patois and is "duped by young people." His role varies; he is "is sometimes the husband, sometimes the father, of one of the heroines." He can be "unmercifully baited by the hero and his servant."<sup>34</sup> As is Brabantio by Iago and Roderigo in Act 1.

Nicoll views *Pantalone* as an elderly merchant who is one of the more serious and upright characters, a noble Venetian, although sometimes he can find "himself absurdly cuckolded by sprightlier gallants."<sup>35</sup> "He can," says Nicoll, "prove himself stinging, avaricious and credulous on occasion, and often overdoes the advice which he freely imparts to others."<sup>36</sup> He can be so serious he's laughable.

The Richards describe *Pantalone* as "a Venetian merchant, middle-aged or elderly, a father and housekeeper," but they, too, note the wide range of scenario roles for the character "and the numerous possibilities offered for diverse interpretive emphases."<sup>37</sup> And what was true for *Pantalone* was true to a lesser extent for all the stock characters in *commedia dell'arte*. They were not rigidly fixed. They were stock characters, but they took on various roles in the many different scenarios. Lea says that *Pantalone*'s role "admits of many variations."<sup>38</sup> She says that if *Pantalone* has lost his wife, "he is an affectionate but an incredibly careless father. . . . He finds a marriageable daughter as perishable a commodity as fish." When he's a counselor, "he is less brief and more tedious than Polonius and has similar preoccupations."<sup>39</sup>

In her single mention of *Othello*, she sees Brabantio as a *Pantalone*. "The description of Brabantio as a *Magnifico* in *Othello*," she writes, "is appropriate without any thought of Italian comedy, but his position as a frantic father is so like that of *Pantalone* that we can hardly avoid the double allusion."<sup>40</sup>

The similar but differing descriptions of characters in *commedia dell'arte* are testimony to the ingenuity of the performers. They appeared on stage as stock characters in stock situations that their audience would recognize. Their artistic challenge was to entertain their audience with ingenious, improvised dialog, improvised bits of comic theater (*lazzi*) and probably topical satire. Nicoll says they were cultured, "truly learned."<sup>41</sup> The result was entertaining new twists to familiar old stories.

Scholars of *commedia dell'arte* find descriptions of character roles and improvisations in various 17<sup>th</sup> century sources: principally Flaminio Scala's book (1611) and Prologues (1619), anonymous manuscripts collected by Basilio Locatelli

(1615-20), two essays by Pier Maria Cecchini (1614-15) and Andrea Perrucci's book (1699). See Nicoll 224-26.

*Pedrolino*, a secondary figure in the 1500s, was also a trusted servant, usually portrayed as kind, personable and charming to the point of excess. He has a good and trusting nature; but he is naïve and is often easily tricked. He wears no mask but his face is powdered white. (In much later incarnations he will be famous as the French Pierrot, the whiteface mime.) Duchartre describes *Pedrolino* as having an "engaging simplicity and elegance," and when the *Zanni* induces him to play tricks on the other characters "he is inevitably the only one caught and punished."<sup>42</sup> In *Othello*, the good and trusting Cassio is trapped by Iago, who gets him drunk, and Othello punishes him by demoting him.

Nicoll says *Pedrolino* "is a servant always, evidently one who has been attached to his master so long that he is trusted implicitly....Although at times he indulges his sense of fun by cheating others merely for the sake of a joke, his intrigues usually are directed in the interests of his employer."<sup>43</sup> *Pedrolino* is fully aware of his abilities and at the end of a performance is often praised for his skill at stratagems. At the end of *Othello*, Cassio is made governor of Cyprus. Although initially surprising, this appointment makes sense since the position was more commercial than political or military. In Iago's opening speech, he scorns Cassio as a Florentine "countercaster," a bean-counter from Florence, a town known at the time for its expertise in commerce, not war.

The male performers were colorful, witty caricatures; they wore outrageous costumes and half-masks. The masks were not to hide the performer's identity but to suggest the particular character. The performers drew laughter with their satiric lampooning of the vices and foolishness of mankind, but they elicited no sympathy from the audience. "Emancipation from all sympathetic concern is the essence of the *commedia dell'arte*," says Lea,<sup>44</sup> and Smith says that the boasting *Capitano* chooses his *Zanni* "for an audience, unfortunately without finding the sympathy and support he might wish."<sup>45</sup>

As the female characters—which were played by women—were not caricatures and did not wear masks, the effect was to align themselves with the audience and against the usually ridiculous, male characters in masks.<sup>46</sup> The audience could sympathize with them. A few of the women performers, or *inamoratas*, became famous for their beauty, wit and erudition.

The *inamoratas* were long-suffering or outraged wives, rebellious daughters, fickle or flirting girlfriends, sometimes courtesans. Almost always young, they were often either seducing one of the men or the love object of one or more of them. They engage in romantic intrigues and are not shy about making their desires known and acting on them. They showed an independent spirit. To a large extent, they are reasonable and sensible, except when provoked beyond endurance. Lea says that in general the women have more courage and resources than the men.<sup>47</sup> Among their many characters—shrew, harridan, innocent, naïve—was a young, sweet, charming girl who gets caught in a love intrigue and tries to escape her father's control.



Contrasting the women and the men in the play, Carol Thomas Neely describes in detail how the five leading male characters are “foolish and vain,” preoccupied with “rank and reputation.” She endorses Emilia’s condemnation of Othello as a “murderous coxcomb . . . such a fool” in her last words before Iago stabs her. Neely’s incisive contribution to *Critical Essays on Shakespeare’s Othello* also details the play’s “pervasive and profound resemblances” to Shakespeare’s comedies, calling the play “a terrifying completion of the comedies.”<sup>48</sup>

Lea says that the behavior of the female characters “was to seem more modest, but their passions and their actions are quite as brazen” as those of practiced courtesans.<sup>49</sup> That’s Desdemona in her bawdy bantering with Iago in Act 2. Nicoll says *commedia* women are impetuous in their loves and hates and are more energetic than the men. Whether marriageable daughters or wives, he says, “they share that quality possessed by Shakespeare’s maidens of being more energetic and passion-wrought than their male companion” and suggests that they “exist in an independent world of their own.”<sup>50</sup> In *Othello*, Desdemona and Emilia do not understand the agonizing world that Othello has devised for himself—until the climax of the play, when tragically it’s too late.

Although she did not wear a mask, the maid or lady-in-waiting had a well-defined character trait in *commedia dell’arte*. She was almost always a bold, outspoken truth-teller. In *Othello* she is Emilia, Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s lady-in-waiting. Smith says that “the most outspoken in effrontery . . . was always the maid.”<sup>51</sup> Lea says that “no scruples or conventions restrict her wit and resource, so that in practical joking she scores more often than any other intriguer.”<sup>52</sup> For Nicoll, the maid “is intended to be a woman of ample experience of the ways of the world. . . . Light-hearted and loyal to her mistress she frequently ends by joining hands with *Harlequin* [a *Zanni*] or another.” *Othello*, however, turns tragic, and Emilia, loyal to Desdemona to the end, does not join hands with Iago the *Zanni* but exposes his conning of Othello, and he kills her for it. The joking truth-teller comes to a tragic end.

These are the seven characters in improvised *commedia dell’arte*, drawn in turn largely from the scripted Roman comedies, that were prototypes for the seven leading characters in *Othello*. Iago, in particular, reflects the essence of *commedia dell’arte* with his seeming improvisations that drive the plot forward. Each of them, of course, was enriched by the dramatist’s genius, making them more rounded, more human, and especially eloquent.

Several scenes illustrate the striking influence on *Othello* of the improvised style of *commedia dell’arte* performances. *Othello* begins as pure *commedia dell’arte* in a scene that would have been played for laughs in performances for aristocratic audiences in London. On a street in Venice, Iago (the scheming *Zanni*), whom Othello trusts as a loyal servant, and Roderigo (the secondary *Zanni* and witless, rejected suitor of Desdemona) wake up Brabantio (the foolish, old *Pantalone*) to taunt him at night from the street below his window. They shout obscene suggestions that his daughter, Desdemona (the innamorata), has eloped and is having sex in a bestial way with Othello the Moor (the mercenary, semi-Spanish *Capitano*).

The scheming Iago, who loves to make mischief to gain advantage, tells Roderigo to disguise his voice so that Brabantio will not recognize him. Seizing an opportunity for more mischief, Iago disguises his own voice, so that he, too, can shout obscene insults in a voice that could mimic Roderigo's disguised voice. When Roderigo stupidly identifies himself, Iago remains silent, unrecognized by Brabantio in the dark. Such elaborate, double trickery of fools was a regular feature of *commedia dell'arte*. The raucous humor of course depends on the actors' delivery and Iago's drive to amuse himself (and his audience) while practicing his deceptions. There's a great opportunity here for Iago to mug slyly at the audience in what might be called a "silent soliloquy" anticipating his later soliloquies that also take the audience into his confidence. Iago's quick-witted mimicry of Roderigo's disguised voice also primes the audience for his improvisations throughout the rest of the play and for the comic but sinister interplay between the two.

Minutes later, Iago, after having enlisted Roderigo as his ally in baiting Brabantio and in mock defense of Othello against Brabantio, turns on Roderigo, who must be astonished. A touch of *commedia dell'arte*. Othello stops any actual fighting, as Iago would have anticipated, but the aristocratic audience would have been amused to see the clever, courtier-soldier Iago start a brawl, betraying the clueless courtier Roderigo, in order to persuade Othello, falsely, of his (Iago's) allegiance.

In his orations to the Senate justifying his eloping with Desdemona, Othello is Duchartre's boasting *Capitano* as a bombastic fellow given to flights of fancy. Othello boasts of his battles, sieges, escapes from perils and adventures in "antars vast and deserts idle. . . . And of the Cannibals that each other eat,/ the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.140-45). Kermode writes of Othello's "archaic grandeur (as in the long speeches to the Senate in 1.3)"<sup>53</sup> and Stephen Greenblatt refers to "Othello's rhetorical extremism."<sup>54</sup>

In Act 2, Iago the mischief-maker, and Desdemona, the young but not-quite-so-innocent, sophisticated, Venetian aristocrat and Othello's bride, engage in quick repartee of bawdy banter that is just like the improvised repartee of *commedia dell'arte* and is sure to draw laughter from audiences. At one point, Desdemona challenges Iago to show how he would praise women, and Iago responds with the famous passage:

Come on, come on. You are pictures out of doors. [From a French vulgarity, *vieux tableau*, for an aging, painted lady, a streetwalker.]  
 Bells in your parlors, [From hunting, alluding to the belling, or calling of stags in heat.]  
 Wild-cats in your kitchens,  
 Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,  
 Players in your housewifery, and housewives [pronounced "hussies," that is, loose women] in your beds. . . .  
 You rise to play and go to bed to work.

(2.1.109-12, 115)

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Shakespearean actor Edwin Booth said, “These lines should be spoken as though composed on the spur of the moment; not glibly as though studied beforehand.”<sup>55</sup> The passage is simulated improvisation, scripted by the dramatist and sounding very much like the unscripted improvisation that is the hallmark of *commedia dell’arte*.

Later in Act 2, the cheerful, scheming Iago gets the personable Cassio drunk. Cassio, the trusting *Pedrolino*, is easily tricked. Iago then incites Roderigo to lure Cassio into a street fight that will disgrace him and, Iago lies, will clear the way for Roderigo to win Desdemona. While Iago and Montano are talking, Roderigo runs onstage pursued by an outraged Cassio shouting “You rogue! You rogue!” (2.2.122). The drunken courtier-soldier chasing and fighting a foolish fop of a courtier, the noise drawing Montano, the sober, upright governor of Cyprus, into the nighttime melee, would draw laughs from audiences. The dramatist leaves it to the actors to improvise the fight scene, which is not detailed in the stage directions or dialog and was probably a slapstick fight, a regular feature of *commedia dell’arte*.

Iago, the scheming, quick-witted *Zanni*, has instigated the fighting, but as soon as it starts he immediately improvises, seizing the opportunity for even more mischief. He pulls his sidekick Roderigo out of the fighting and tells him to “go out, and cry a mutiny,” thus summoning Othello and others to see the drunken, brawling Cassio and advance Iago’s scheme to get Othello to demote Cassio, Iago’s rival, for being drunk on duty (2.3.131).

At the start of Act 3 Cassio has hired street musicians to awaken the newlyweds Othello and Desdemona with the traditional French *aubade* serenade. Instead, their music is the tuneless, raucous, “rough music” of England, *charivari* in France. (A marvelous opportunity here for some *commedia* burlesque music.) Rough music was traditionally played under a newlyweds’ bedroom window to interrupt their nuptial night and denounce their marriage as inappropriate.

One of Othello’s servants, a Clown, interrupts the music with bawdy slurs about their wind instruments and flatulence. He asks them if they have been to Naples because their music sounds nasal. In Italy, the Neapolitans had a reputation for their accent, a drawling nasal twang.

The Clown may also be alluding to syphilis, which sometimes attacks the nose. The Venetians called syphilis the Neapolitan disease. In *commedia dell’arte*, a Neapolitan clown, *Pulcinella*, often wore a half-mask with a big nose and spoke with a nasal twang. The dramatist certainly knew about the Venetians’ scorn of Neapolitans for their accent and for their reputation for contracting syphilis with their “instruments.” The bawdy intent of this short, comic scene is to condemn as inappropriate the marriage of Desdemona, a teenage Venetian aristocrat (played in London by a boy), and Othello, a much older, black Moorish warrior-general, with bawdy humor. The naïve Cassio seems unperturbed that the serenade he ordered turned into an insulting *charivari*.

For Edward Pechter, this Clown-*charivari* scene, unusual for a tragedy and often omitted in performances, is “an explosion of sexual and scatological puns.”<sup>56</sup> Such an explosion would be typical in *commedia dell’arte*, although Pechter, editor of

the Norton Critical Edition of *Othello*, does not mention it.

In Acts 3 and 4 Iago begins to work on Othello's naiveté and lack of self-confidence under pressure. "As everyone has noticed," says McDonald, "Othello's language throughout Acts 3 and 4 is extreme; he simultaneously laments and exults in 'the pity of it.' Comparison with comic figures here is inescapable."<sup>57</sup>

In Act 3 a scene of simulated improvisation heightens Othello's frustration to the point of rage, a familiar *lazzi* of *commedia dell'arte*, which often climaxed in a comic beating. Iago (the *Zanni*) has set up Othello (the *Capitano*) by asking him whether Cassio knew Desdemona when Othello was courting her.

**Othello.** O yes, and went between us very oft.

**Iago.** Indeed.

**Othello.** Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that? Is he not honest?

**Iago.** Honest, my lord?

**Othello.** Honest. Ay, honest.

**Iago.** My lord, for aught I know.

**Othello.** What dost thou think?

**Iago.** Think, my lord?

**Othello.** "Think, my lord?" By heaven, he echo'st me . . .

(3.3.103-9)

Othello turns a traditionally comic exchange that would end in a harmless, slapstick beating into bitter frustration that will culminate in fatal violence.

In Act 4 the manipulating *Zanni* Iago sets up Othello to eavesdrop on a conversation Iago will have with Cassio. He cleverly stages it so that Cassio thinks they are talking about his mistress, Bianca, while the foolish Othello, stuck in his suspicion of Desdemona, thinks he is overhearing them talking about Desdemona. Iago thus reduces the noble but credulous Othello to a farcical *Capitano* duped into ignominious eavesdropping to learn whether he has been cuckolded (4.1.89-150). Although Cassio laughs and laughs about Bianca, and although the eavesdropping scene could be right out of *commedia dell'arte*, Othello's predicament is no longer funny. The play now begins to turn tragic; the tragic begins to emerge from behind the comic.

The pressure on Othello mounts when Desdemona innocently but naively tells Lodovico in Othello's presence that she wants to reconcile him with Cassio "for the love I bear to Cassio." Othello, suspecting her adultery with Cassio, becomes enraged and, unrestrained by Lodovico or anyone else, strikes her (4.1.203-13). "In comedy," says McDonald, "the audience would be roaring with pleasure at the fool's futile attempt to pummel his wife, as Shakespeare is well aware. But Othello succeeds, and the effect is chilling."<sup>58</sup> He describes the so-called "brothel scene" (4.2) that follows as a "masterpiece built with familiar comic materials, but the effect here is excruciating."<sup>59</sup>

At the start of Act 5, in a scene of satiric comedy turned brutal, Iago quickly

takes advantage of a nighttime encounter to stage-manage a brawl. He has incited Roderigo to ambush Cassio and kill him, but Roderigo botches the ambush, which starts out as another slapstick brawl typical of *commedia dell'arte*, but quickly turns vicious as Iago improvises to further his scheme. In the dark, he tries to kill Cassio and make it appear the work of Roderigo, but only wounds him. Then he fatally wounds Roderigo, his foolishly loyal sidekick who could expose his scheming. Iago the *Zanni* sows confusion, brilliantly manipulating everyone in this scene, including Othello and Lodovico, and even making himself the hero. The swordplay, the cries for help in the darkness, the confusion about who did what to whom—all improvised by the cunning Iago—draw on the mock melees and the *Zanni's* improvised scheming of *commedia dell'arte*.

These episodes, influenced by *commedia dell'arte*, are not comic relief interludes, as is, for example, the Porter scene in *Macbeth*. *Commedia dell'arte* is integral to the play. It's as if the dramatist was thinking, "I'll make you laugh at these foolish, misguided people and the cheerful, scheming, psychopath Iago, but you'll see that it's no laughing matter for someone like Othello, an outsider, to believe insinuations that he has been cuckolded and to fear that he will be made the laughing stock of the army and the sexually sophisticated Venetian aristocrats."

At the end of the play, Othello wants someone to tell him why Iago "ensnared my soul and body" (5.2.299). Iago answers with his last speech: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak a word" (5.2.300-01). As in *commedia dell'arte*, Iago, the witty, entertaining, scheming *Zanni*, gets his comeuppance and comes to an ignominious end. His clever manipulations of all the main characters got out of hand, and he's been exposed by his own wife, the truth-telling maid.

Even when Othello, baffled and in despair, finally learns that Iago has tricked him into killing his innocent wife, themes from *commedia dell'arte* recur in a minor key, like the theme music in a tragic opera when the hero or heroine dies. In Othello's final moments before his suicide, he stills thinks of himself in the grandiose terms of the *Capitano*, showing only a self-centered concern for his reputation and excusing himself for loving "not wisely but too well" (5.2.342). He expresses no regret that he killed Desdemona through stupidity and his unfounded suspicion that he had been cuckolded and his reputation ruined.

T. S. Eliot says, "What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this [farewell] speech is cheering himself up. He is endeavoring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself." <sup>60</sup> Especially for a self-deluded fool. The Irish theater critic Fintan O'Toole says bluntly in his essay on *Othello*, "He is not tragic, merely pathetic." <sup>61</sup>

Othello's lofty farewell speech disturbingly recalls him as the Spanish *Capitano* of *commedia dell'arte*, the mercenary who serves the state and who boasts about his military exploits, especially against the Turks. Othello says, "I have done the state some service, and they know it....Speak of me as I am....," concluding:



And, say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
 And smote him—thus.

(5.2.337-54)

Othello the boasting *Capitano* mercenary, born a Muslim like the Turks but now a loyal Venetian mercenary who has foolishly just killed his Venetian bride, identifies himself with the malignant Turk he killed in Aleppo while defending a Venetian, and then kills himself in the same way—“Thus.” In a few words, the playwright dramatizes Othello’s absurdly pitiful plight. *Finita la commedia*.

The seemingly strange comedy throughout *The Tragedy of Othello*, satiric comedy that is much more than comic interludes, has long been noticed by Shakespeare commentators. They are usually puzzled by the comedy in what they consider a romantic tragedy, a domestic tragedy, or a tragedy of intrigue, but not a mixed-genre play. There may be two reasons for their puzzlement. As in classic tragedy, the hero dies at the end (and so does the heroine). That climax and the word “tragedy” in the title may have caused their perplexity and even outrage about the pervasive comedy in the play. In the earliest extended commentary on *Othello*, Thomas Rymer, the royal historian, drama critic, and Bardolator of the late 1600s, deplored the comedy that permeates the play and sensed *commedia dell’arte* behind it, but did not follow up.

He mocked the play scene by scene and found it “fraught with improbabilities” unworthy of the immortal Bard.<sup>62</sup> He looked in vain for the “true, fine or noble” thoughts in *Othello*.<sup>63</sup> Othello’s “love and jealousy,” he said, “are no part of a soldier’s character, unless for comedy;” and Desdemona was a “silly woman.”<sup>64</sup> He concluded that “there is in this play, some burlesque, some humor and ramble of comical wit, some show and some mimicry to divert the spectators; but the tragical part is, plainly, none other than a bloody farce, without salt or savor.”<sup>65</sup> Shakespeare scholars generally have been nonplussed by this assessment of a tragedy. They quote “bloody farce” as a curiosity and move on.

T. S. Eliot, however, agreed with Rymer, saying that he “makes out a very good case.”<sup>66</sup> Echoing Rymer a century later, George Bernard Shaw, himself a deft practitioner of comedy and farce, called *Othello* “a pure farce plot.”<sup>67</sup>

Rymer glances indirectly at two characters from *commedia dell’arte*. Actors in *Othello*, he says, use “the Mops and Mows [grimacing], the Grimace, the Grin and Gesticulation. Such scenes as this have made all the World run after *Harlequin* and *Scaramuccio*.”<sup>68</sup> The *Harlequin* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century descended from the earlier *Zanni*, and *Scaramuccio* from the *Capitano*.

In the most recent, fully annotated edition, E. A. J. Honigmann fully recognizes the comedy in the play: “In *Othello* the debt to comedy is pervasive, since Shakespeare so frequently falls back on comic routines.”<sup>69</sup> He suggests that the eavesdropping scene (4.1.76) derives from Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus* (*The Braggart*

*Soldier*). He says that “classical comedy and its derivatives [no doubt Italian comedy and *commedia dell’arte*] influenced *Othello*....[and] enriched the tragedy” of the play and that Iago’s character owes much to the deceitful, gleeful slaves of Plautus and Terence. He calls the dramatist “a master of emotional chiaroscuro [who] knew that the conventions of comedy can tone in with tragedy, a ‘mingle’ that enriched his work in many plays.”<sup>70</sup> In a footnote to this passage he cites without comment Barbara Heliodora’s article in *Shakespeare Survey* 21, “*Othello*, a Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure,” in which she describes the *commedia dell’arte* in the play in considerable detail, but Honigmann does not mention either *commedia dell’arte* or her interpretation.

Honigmann also footnotes Susan Snyder’s *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, which argues that in *Othello* and in three other tragedies “traditional comic structures and assumptions operate in several ways to shape tragedy....I have in mind relationships more organic than that implied in the notion, much attacked of late but indestructible, of ‘comic relief.’”<sup>71</sup> And, she continues, “comedy can become part of the tragedy itself, providing in its long-range leveling, anti-individual perspective the most radical change to heroic distinction.”<sup>72</sup> She does not mention *commedia dell’arte*. Citing “several critics,” including Snyder, Kim Hall says in her Bedford/St. Martin’s edition, that *Othello* “structurally begins as a comedy and turns into a tragedy,” and that Brabantio and Roderigo “are figures imported from classical comedy,” creating what she calls “generic hybridity.”<sup>73</sup> Again, no mention of *commedia dell’arte*.

Robert S. Miola also sees the comic structure in *Othello*, finding it strange. In *Shakespeare’s Reading*, he discusses *Othello* not in his chapter on the tragedies but in the chapter on the comedies, where he writes, “The classical comic conflict between father and lovers sets in motion tragedy as well as comedy, though here it undergoes stranger transformation still.”<sup>74</sup>

Bucking the conventional view, Michael Bristol of McGill University reads the play “as a seriocomic or carnivalesque masquerade,”<sup>75</sup> and *Othello* not as a valiant and noble hero but as “an abject clown.”<sup>76</sup> Iago is a mirthless improviser who is very witty but whose “aim is always to provoke a degrading laughter at the follies of others.”<sup>77</sup> In his article, “Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection,” Bristol says that *Othello*, played by an actor in blackface, would probably have been seen as “comically monstrous,”<sup>78</sup> and that Desdemona’s being played by a boy actor would render “his/her sexuality as a kind of sustained gestural equivocation.”<sup>79</sup> His interpretation of the play as a “carnivalesque masquerade” is entirely consistent with *commedia dell’arte*, although he doesn’t cite it; and carnivals and masquerades were popular entertainments in Venice in the 1500s.

Today’s readers and theatergoers, he suggests, find it difficult to withdraw their empathy for *Othello* and Desdemona because of the way they have come to know the play. They should set aside their idea of *Othello*, Desdemona and Iago as individuals with personalities and recognize what Bristol calls the “absurdly mutual attraction between a beautiful woman and a funny monster.”<sup>80</sup> Bristol’s description of *Othello* identifies him as a “natural fool,” by nature a naïve buffoon who draws laughter with his foolishness and is exploited by others, not the fool who is the court

jester and wise, witty, satiric commentator, such as Touchstone and Feste.

*Othello* editors and commentators often approach what seems to be the influence of *commedia dell'arte* in the play but then back off. In the Oxford edition of the play, Michael Neill reflects the tentative approach to this issue often found in traditional scholarship; he cites Bristol and Snyder among others in a footnote but without any comment on their bolder interpretations. He postulates, "If Brabantio is a figure whose antecedents can be traced back through Italian *commedia dell'arte* to Roman New Comedy, the same is true of Roderigo."<sup>81</sup> He leaves the "if" hanging, apparently unwilling to follow up on the trace of *commedia dell'arte* he sees in the play. He suggests that "contemporary criticism has been more sympathetic to what it sees as Shakespeare's deliberate manipulation of comic conventions."<sup>82</sup>

Russ McDonald endorses studies suggesting that the author of *Othello* made extensive use of the conventions of "[Roman] New Comedy, Elizabethan and romantic comedy and *commedia dell'arte*."<sup>83</sup> He recognizes the comic framework of act 1 and suggests that Brabantio behaves like the comic *senex iratus* of Roman comedy or *Pantalone*. For McDonald, Iago is the comic intriguer of mixed ancestry, descending principally from the Vice of the morality plays. Other "figures from romantic comedy," he says, "are Emilia, the bawdy serving woman and Bianca the *meretrix* [prostitute or courtesan]."<sup>84</sup> He wants to situate *Othello* somewhere between a self-deluded cuckold of comic satire and a genuinely dignified hero of tragedy. Shakespeare, he says, "created comic imaginary cuckolds to dramatize the peril and absurdity of the misdirected imagination. . . . But in *Othello* such a figure becomes the hero of a tragedy, and the conventional reaction, scornful laughter, is inadequate. Shakespeare thus contrives to disorient his audience. . . . In the tragic environment of the play, folly is transformed into crime, laughter into horror."<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, he also suggests that "if we regard *Othello* initially as a bombastic self-deluded clown . . . we cannot understand the value of what is lost."<sup>86</sup> McDonald comes very close to recognizing that *commedia dell'arte* was an important influence on the author of *Othello*, while seeming to want to retain *Othello* as a tragic figure throughout.

Five commentators not only appreciate the comedy in *Othello* but argue for *commedia dell'arte* as the most significant influence on the play's composition. None, however, is a Shakespeare editor or prominent critic, perhaps freeing them from the powerful tradition that the play is preeminently a romantic tragedy. Three are from the theater world, which may have disposed them to be receptive to the influence of the Italian improvised theater. Two are professors trained in comparative literature, perhaps facilitating their productive "crossover" studies linking Shakespeare plays and Italian theater.

Barbara Heliadora C. de Mendonça is a Brazilian theater critic, translator and her country's leading Shakespeare authority. In her article, "*Othello*: a tragedy built on a comic structure," in *Shakespeare Survey 21* (1968), she describes all of the principal roles in the play as having been inspired by stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*, except for *Othello* as the *Capitano*. *Othello*, she offers, has a passion for moral absolutes and an implacable sense of justice, and "the very essence of the conflict lies in the fact that he is not a super-subtle Venetian."<sup>87</sup> She may have a point,

but it is not incompatible with the view that Othello is the naïve, simplistic *Capitano* who gets lost in a moral world of his own devising. She suggests that Shakespeare (of Stratford) was at Court for the queen's command performance in 1602 by *commedia dell'arte* performers from Italy, although there is, of course, no evidence for this most unlikely presence.

Louise George Clubb, professor emeritus of Italian and comparative literature at UC-Berkeley, has written widely on Italian comedy. For *Othello*, she says, the dramatist "employed the *dramatis personae* of a standard Italian scenario" [of *commedia dell'arte*]: Iago is the clever, scheming servant, "who creates the illusion in Othello's mind that his situation is a stereotypical comedy of adultery, complete with stock figures and himself as the cuckold." Othello is the *Capitano*, "here transformed in that his eloquent female-fascinating stories of military prowess are all true... Cassio and Roderigo are suitors, worthy and foolish," and Bianca is a courtesan.<sup>88</sup> Desdemona is the *inamorata* and Brabantio the *Pantalone*. "Shakespeare," she aptly concludes, "propels this farce into tragedy."<sup>89</sup> Clubb astutely suggests how the dramatist transformed the stock characters of *commedia dell'arte* into larger than life actors in their own scenario.

Clubb sees *Othello* not as a tragedy but as one of the "mixed genres" plays, such as *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, that have generated much study and debate. She describes *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* (both Italianate plays) as "structures of comic units, movements and patterns, which are thwarted into tragedy."<sup>90</sup> Although several Shakespeare plays are termed "tragicomedies," this mixed-genre description almost always refers to plays that have tragic or even brutal elements but happy endings. *Othello* moves in the other direction, from comedy to tragedy, with unsettling results.

Pamela Allen Brown, professor of English at the University of Connecticut, who earned her MA and PhD in English and comparative literature at Columbia, reads *Othello* as a brutal, satiric, parody of *commedia dell'arte*. "On the level of literary genre," she writes in her article, "*Othello* Italicized," the play is an elaborate, though far from benign, parody of familiar Italian forms, the *commedia dell'arte* and the tragic *novella*.<sup>91</sup> She goes on to suggest that the dramatist "chose to deploy stock devices from Italian comedy," creating an obscene farce for the original, and xenophobic, audience with a play that "shows much indebtedness to *commedia* situations and speeches."<sup>92</sup>

Provocatively, she argues that the satirical *Othello* "is multiply [*sic*] cannibalistic, wreaking havoc with the masks and roles of the Italian *commedia* players and mutilating the Italian literary forms from which the play is constructed."<sup>93</sup> Othello's character, she suggests, blends aspects of the blustering *Capitano* at the start, the fearful *Pantalone* in the middle and a black-masked *Zanni* who kills himself at the end. Iago the *Zanni* is exposed and led away to be tortured. The *inamorata* Desdemona elopes with a black foreigner and is destroyed by him. Brabantio is a *Pantalone* who dies of grief (or shame). Roderigo is Iago's foolish sidekick (second *Zanni*) whom Iago kills in cold blood. Whether the dramatist parodied, cannibalized and mutilated *commedia dell'arte* may be debatable, but Brown

astutely points to the unexpected and disorienting fatal violence at the tragic climax of the play.

Graduate student scholars seem to have been especially open to the largely unexplored connections between *Othello* and the Italian *commedia*. Teresa J. Faherty was a graduate student at UC-Berkeley in 1991 when she published “*Othello dell’Arte*: The Presence of *Commedia* in Shakespeare’s Tragedy,” in *Theatre Journal* 43. She found the influence of *commedia dell’arte* “broad and deep. . . Shakespeare indeed borrowed from *commedia* in writing *Othello*, and, moreover, he did so in a nuanced and consistent way.”<sup>94</sup> She details the parallels: Iago the trickster *Zanni*, Othello the *Capitano*, Desdemona the *inamorata*, Brabantio the *Pantalone* et al. Of Iago she says, “Almost all of his scripted actions seem to unfold impromptu,” adding that “lies and improvisation are a predetermined and fixed behavior” of both the *Zanni* and Iago.<sup>95</sup> Another graduate student of theater and performance, Irene Musumeci, explores the connection in an Internet blog essay, “Imagining *Othello* as *Commedia dell’arte*.”<sup>96</sup> Her 2002 essay stemmed from her work with an Italian actor-director, Solimano Pontarollo, who produced *Othello* as *commedia dell’arte* in Verona, Italy. Musumeci is a PhD candidate at the University of Kent.

Regrettably, these interpretations of *Othello* as a play drawn from *commedia dell’arte* have received little or no attention from Shakespeare editors and commentators. Occasionally, they glance at *commedia dell’arte* as a possible influence, but do not discuss it further. Their focus is on the source for the plot, the other intertwined and overlapping influences on the dramatist, and the comedy that seems to be pervasive in the play. There is general agreement that principal source for the skeletal plot of *Othello* was Cinthio’s grim tale of a Moor and his ensign who arrange to murder the jealous Moor’s Venetian wife, called “Disdemona.” The story was one of a hundred tales in Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*, published in Venice in 1565.<sup>97</sup> It was translated into French in 1584, but not into English until 1753. In addition, details of Othello’s murder of Desdemona reflect a wife-murder in Bandello’s *Novelle*, published in 1554 in Italian.<sup>98</sup>

For the principal influences on the composition of *Othello*, traditional scholarship propounds the Vice figure of the morality plays, the Devil of the mystery plays and the Roman comedies of Plautus. Vice was the leading character in the morality plays, which developed from the Devil of the Roman Catholic mystery plays. He was the villain, the devil’s disciple, a mischief-maker and a comic entertainer whose role was to tempt the Everyman figure into sin. His comic side presumably was intended to draw audiences for an uplifting theatrical experience. Morality plays, performed well into the 1500s, used allegorical figures personifying virtues and vices as a way to entertain while preaching the need to resist temptation and seek redemption from sin.

The Vice figure is mentioned in several Shakespeare plays. He was often named for a sin, as in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Richard, Duke of Gloucester (not yet king), says in an aside, “Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word” (3.1.82-83). In 2 *Henry IV*, Falstaff ridicules the skinny Shallow as a liar, lecher and “Vice’s dagger [i.e. comically thin and wooden] become a squire” (3.2.319).



See also Feste's song to Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (4.2.120-31).

McDonald gives Iago a mixed literary ancestry but calls the Vice figure "his most important ancestor," followed by the witty intriguer of "contemporary comic modes."<sup>99</sup> Both Iago and the witty intriguer, he says, descend from "the tricky servants of Roman and Italian comedy [presumably including *commedia dell'arte*] and Vice of the English morality [plays]."<sup>100</sup> Honigmann also gives Iago a mixed ancestry, including the Devil, Vice and the "clever slave of classical comedy" (32-33). For Miola "Vice enlivens some villains, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Edmund in *King Lear*, and Iago in *Othello*."<sup>101</sup> For Maurice Charney, "the tremendous amiability of the villains in Shakespeare . . . is the true heritage of the Vice of the morality plays."<sup>102</sup>

The Vice figure's chief rival as Iago's ancestor is the Devil. Frank Kermode says in the Riverside collected works that "over the ancient figure of the Vice—a familiar shape for abstract evil—Iago wears the garb of a modern devil."<sup>103</sup> "Iago... bears some affinity to both Vice and the devil," writes David Bevington.<sup>104</sup> Walter Cohen calls him a devilish figure derived from the Vice.<sup>105</sup>

John Cox on the other hand describes both Iago and Richard III as "Vice-derived human beings" and exempts them from his study of *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642*.<sup>106</sup> Leah Scragg, however, argues in her *Shakespeare Survey 21* article that "the Devil's claim to be Iago's forefather is at least as good as that of the Vice."<sup>107</sup> In point of fact, Othello himself at his moment of terrible realization looks at Iago's feet half-expecting to see the devil's fabled, cloven hoof and then calls Iago "that demi-devil" (5.2.283, 298).

A long list of ancestors and siblings for Vice is suggested by F. P. Wilson in *The English Drama 1485-1585*, including the domestic fool or jester, the comic characters in secular folk plays, the devils of the earliest morality plays, assorted fools and clowns, "the medieval sermon . . . its jests and satirical bent," and the plotting servants of Plautus and Terence.<sup>108</sup>

Although Vice of the morality plays, his many relatives and the Devil may well have been in the dramatist's mind when he was writing *Othello*, the Vice figure cannot be considered as the sole or even the principal influence. He was primarily allegorical, depicting what Kermode terms "abstract evil" to encourage good morals. Bevington recognizes this aspect when he writes that despite his resemblance to Vice Iago "is no allegorized abstraction."<sup>109</sup> Vice lacked the complexity of Iago and even his humanity, twisted though it is. Iago's role is not to provide a bad example of sin in a drama preaching the need to live a moral life; his role is to entertain himself and expose the folly of mankind, and perhaps to enjoy a measure of revenge for having been, as he suspects, cuckolded.

As for the influence of Vice's supposed improvisation, it's not at all clear from the scant records of performance that it was much more than an actor's ad-libbing incidental to the scripted plot. Scholars of the Vice figure do not suggest improvisation in the morality plays that is in any way similar to the improvisational tone of *Othello* and other Shakespeare plays. Moreover, Vice's perceived influence is limited to one of the principal characters in the play, Iago. The rough comedies of Plautus appear to have had at least an equal influence on the personae and their interaction in *Othello*.

Scholars cite the comedies of Plautus (and Terence to much lesser extent) as an influence on several Shakespeare comedies and even on a few tragedies. In *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, George E. Duckworth finds traces of Plautine influence in nine Shakespeare plays, including two tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, but not *Othello*.<sup>110</sup> The title of Miola's 1994 book is *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy: the Influence of Plautus and Terence*. In his final chapter, "Heavy Plautus," he explores its influence on *Hamlet* and *Lear*, but not on *Othello*.<sup>111</sup>

The author undoubtedly knew his Plautus. His *Comedy of Errors* is an adaptation and elaboration of Plautus's *Menaechmi*. In *Hamlet* Polonius says "Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light" (2.2.400-01). Francis Meres paired Shakespeare with Plautus: "As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage."<sup>112</sup>

Educated Elizabethans well versed in Latin literature had access to Plautus' plays. Twenty were available to Elizabethans and many of them were performed in Latin at Oxford and Cambridge from 1564 to 1578.<sup>113</sup> His plays were also performed by students at the Inns of Court, where young aristocrats studied law and produced plays in Latin for their own entertainment. There are no records, however, of Plautus being performed in English in the public theaters, such as the Rose and the Globe.

The only plays translated into English were *Amphitruo* (1562-63 rev. 1600) and *Menaechmi* in 1595, a year after it had been performed at one of the Inns of Court.<sup>114</sup> The Latin of Plautus was not easy for Elizabethans to grasp and appreciate. Plautine comedy required a sophisticated knowledge of early, colloquial Latin. His vocabulary, grammar and syntax are considered very colloquial and idiomatic, with puns and coined words; it is not standard Latin and not easy to translate. In his *Literary History of Rome*, J. Wight Duff says "Plautine emendation is one of the hardest fields to work in Latin,"<sup>115</sup> and "Plautine prosody is notoriously hard"<sup>116</sup> (200).<sup>117</sup>

The Elizabethan grammar schools, where Latin grammar and rhetoric were the core curriculum, taught Plautus and Terence, but Terence was given priority. His later and much more refined Latin was considered the standard. In his article, "What Did Shakespeare Read?" Leonard Barkan expresses the consensus view: "Terence formed one of the bases for Latin instruction all over Europe because his dialog was thought to give the fullest expression of the way classical Latin was actually spoken; but....there is small trace of Terence in Shakespeare and far more of Plautus, who was decidedly less popular in the schools."<sup>118, 119</sup>

It's a challenge to unravel the overlapping, multiple strands of literary influences and try to judge their relative importance. As the Richards put it in their history of *commedia dell'arte*: "The close inter-relationship between some of the materials of the Italian drama *a soggetto* [improvised] on the one hand, and those of the Italian cinquecento scripted drama and the classical comedy on the other, makes identification of influences and borrowings virtually impossible."<sup>120</sup> Miola describes Plautus and Terence as "possessors of a comedic gene pool that shapes in various mediated ways succeeding generations" and suggests that "exploration of these

lineages can be rich and fruitful” while cautioning that “the lines of transmission from antiquity are...impossible to trace definitively.”<sup>121</sup> The difficulty has not deterred scholars from devoting great efforts to try to trace them. T. W. Baldwin for example wrote an exhaustive, two-volume study solely on the probable influence of the Latin curriculum of a grammar-school education in Elizabethan England on the plays of Shakespeare.

The influence of Roman comedy in Latin, the Vice figure, the Devil, early English comedy, Italian comedy and *commedia dell'arte* must all be considered as having been of greater or lesser importance, in whole or in part, on the composition of *Othello*, but are usually viewed as separate influences that are mingled and difficult to disentangle so that one or the other can be identified as the primary or only influence. If, however, *commedia dell'arte* is seriously considered as a significant influence, it may well emerge as not only the primary influence of the satiric comedy in *Othello* but as perhaps the *only* credible influence of the improvisational elements that Shakespeare scholars find in the play.

No one can doubt that the author of the Shakespeare plays knew a great deal about *commedia dell'arte*. Two characters from it, the *Zanni* and *Pantalone*, are mentioned by name in four plays; and scholars have suggested that its influence on the composition of several plays was significant, although they are unsure how it happened.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne describes “some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight zany . . . who knows the trick to make my lady laugh” (5.2.463-36). The zany of this play parallels the *Zanni* Iago, the trickster “carry-tale” who concocts up rumors of cuckoldry to vex Othello and jokes with Desdemona to make the lady laugh in 2.1. The OED gives this 1588 use of “zany,” derived from the Italian, as the earliest usage in English; it turns up next in plays by Thomas Lodge and Ben Jonson. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio refers to “zanies” (1.5.86).

*Pantalone* is mentioned in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *As You Like It*. In *Shrew*, Lucentio says he “will beguile the old Pantaloon” (3.1.37). Jaques in *As You Like It* says about the seven ages of man that “the sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloon” (2.7.156). The names *Pantalone* and *Zanni* are not in Plautus or Terence; they are from the dramatist’s knowledge of *commedia dell'arte*.

Significantly, his offhand mention of “slippered” suggests that he had seen a *Pantalone* wearing slippers on stage.<sup>122</sup> If the fact that *Pantalone* wore slippers on stage in Italy appeared in the records in England aside from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the mention that has escaped notice.

The fourth age of man in *As You Like It* sounds very much like the *Capitano* (and Othello): “Then a soldier / Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard [a whiskered panther or tiger (OED)], / Jealous in honor, sudden, and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon’s mouth” (2.7.149-53). The soldier Othello is jealous of his honor and reputation.

But the author of *Othello* knew much more about *commedia dell'arte* than just the character names and types. In *The World of Harlequin* (1963), Allardyce Nicoll says *commedia dell'arte* “left a strong mark on Shakespeare, Lope de Vega and Moliere.”<sup>123</sup>

He finds traces of it in *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and in *Romeo and Juliet*, the only tragedy on his list. Nicoll was chair of the English department at the University of Birmingham and founding director of the Shakespeare Institute there. His is the only book-length study of *commedia dell'arte* by a Shakespeare scholar.

Nicoll is most impressed by *The Tempest*. He suggests that it derives from several pastoral scenarios of *commedia dell'arte* that include a shipwreck, a magus-magician, spirits, and two rustic clowns that seem to have been prototypes for Stephano and Trinculo.

Then he tries to account for the influence of *commedia dell'arte* on *The Tempest*. "It is virtually impossible," he says, "not to believe that Shakespeare had witnessed the performance of an improvised pastoral of this kind."<sup>124</sup> He doesn't say how or where. And in the last paragraph of his book, he backpedals, concluding that "whether Shakespeare [of Stratford] actually witnessed any performances given by the Italians we cannot say with certainty....but with assurance we can declare that the inner spirit of his early comedies closely approaches that of *commedia* scenarios, and we can reasonably guess that *commedia dell'arte* performances would have appealed to him."<sup>125</sup>

Lea had found *commedia dell'arte* in three of the Shakespeare plays that Nicoll would identify later in his work. They are *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Tempest* and what she calls a dramatic parallel in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Although *Errors* is generally taken to be the most Plautine of the Shakespeare plays, Lea argues at length that the Dromio twins are based on the servants of *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>126</sup> She speculates that for *Merry Wives* the dramatist might have picked up the idea for the main intrigue in that play "by asking friends who had more Italian than he; or . . . the hint of a tavern anecdote would have been sufficient."<sup>127</sup> This kind of unfounded speculation is typical.

In 1926, Winifred Smith, the first to write a book in English on *commedia dell'arte*, suggested the possibility of its influence on Shakespeare. Although she warned against giving *commedia dell'arte* "too prominent a place among the influences forming the English drama," she added, "On the other hand it will not do to discount entirely the importance of the improvised plays in London."<sup>128</sup> In the final sentence of her book, however, she declared that *commedia dell'arte* "spurred on Moliere's genius and left not even Shakespeare untouched."<sup>129</sup>

Similarly ambivalent are the historians of *commedia dell'arte*, Kenneth and Laura Richards. Apparently stymied by the difficulty of determining how the dramatist learned so much about *commedia dell'arte*, they go so far as to conclude that it had no influence on him, even though they see "striking" details of it in three plays, including *Othello*. In their history of *commedia dell'arte*, they contend that "some extravagant claims have been made for Shakespeare's knowledge and use of *commedia dell'arte* materials and techniques," but they argue that the "faint similarities and correspondences can be accounted for without reference to the work of the Italian actors"<sup>130</sup> Then, granting that in a few plays, such as *Othello*, *The Tempest*, and *The*

*Merchant of Venice*, “some details are indeed striking,” they conclude nevertheless that “in no respect are they conclusive as evidence that Shakespeare knew and used” *commedia dell’arte*.<sup>131</sup>

As noted above, Clubb recognizes how *commedia dell’arte* influenced the writing of *Othello*, but she can only speculate on how it could have happened. Without offering evidence, she asserts that the dramatist “had access to printed plays, to accounts of the *commedia dell’arte* from Italians in London and Englishmen who traveled on the Continent, among them his colleague Will Kempe; and to who knows how many actual performances.”<sup>132</sup> She does not, however, identify the printed plays, presumably in Italian; or name the Italian visitors or English travelers, except for Kemp but without specifics; or describe any of the “many actual performances” in England, which would support her argument, if there were any that the dramatist might have seen. It is all conjectural.

The title of Ninian Mellamphy’s article in *Shakespearean Comedy* summarizes his endorsement of *commedia* as a Shakespearean source: “Pantaloons and Zanies: Shakespeare’s ‘Apprenticeship’ to Italian Professional Comedy Troupes.”<sup>133</sup> As did Lea, he argues that Italian improvised comedy was an important influence on *The Comedy of Errors*, whose main source was Plautus’s *Menaechmi*.<sup>134</sup> He says that scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century “showed that Shakespeare in his apprenticeship to the craft of comedy was able to avail himself of the well-established convention of Italian professional troupes.”<sup>135</sup> He suggests that Shakespeare (of Stratford) could have heard about *commedia dell’arte* scenarios, perhaps from the actor Will Kemp, who traveled on the Continent, and that he probably learned from the Italian “masters of improvised comedy when most he needed to,”<sup>136</sup> but he supplies no supporting evidence.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar (and forger) John Payne Collier was the first to note a possible allusion to *commedia dell’arte* in *Hamlet*. When Polonius is speaking about the visiting “best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy...,” he concludes, “for the law of writ and the liberty, these are the only men” (2.2.337). He probably means best for scripted performances that are “writ,” i.e., *commedia erudite*, and for unscripted *commedia dell’arte*, in which liberties could be taken to improvise dialog.<sup>137</sup> The passage is usually glossed as possibly referring to a district in London called the Liberty, but Polonius was referring not to topography, but to “actors....men,” that is, Italian performers in *commedia erudite* (“writ”) and in *commedia dell’arte* (“liberty”).

“Liberty” is also used in a theatrical context in *The Comedy of Errors* to describe the unscripted performing of jugglers, mountebanks “and many such-like liberties of sin” (1.2.112). The OED cites the line in its definition of liberty as “being able to act in any desired way...without restraint.” See also Clubb in *Stories*, 36.

In the same passage in *Hamlet*, the dramatist may be alluding to some complex, mixed-genre scenarios of *commedia dell’arte* when he has Polonius praise the visiting actors as best for “tragical-comical-historical-pastoral.” See Nicoll, 117-18.

Barbara Everett sees a chain of inheritances for the comedy in *Othello*: “Roman comedy bequeathed to Italian learned comedy (which in time passed them on to the more popular *commedia dell’arte*) some of the most important elements we recognize in *Othello*.”<sup>138</sup> In his article on “Iago and the *Commedia dell’arte*” in *The*



*Arlington Quarterly*, Richard B. Zacha states, “There is an enormous body of evidence that in his vocabulary, in his characterization and plots, Shakespeare owes a major debt to the improvised comedy as practiced by the Italian players.”<sup>139</sup>

Eugene Steele, professor of Italian at the University of Benghazi, identifies verbal *lazzi* from *commedia dell’arte* that are found in Shakespeare’s plays. These include misplaced and made up words, pedantic and fanciful tirades, laborious puns, malapropisms and especially dialects, one of the main features of *commedia dell’arte*. “All these *lazzi* are echoed in Shakespeare’s plays,” says Steele, noting especially the Welsh dialects of Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Fluellen in *Henry V*.<sup>140</sup>

Steele begins his article on “The Verbal *Lazzi* in Shakespeare’s Plays” in the literary journal *Italica* with the key question: “Did William Shakespeare ever attend a performance by players of the *commedia dell’arte*?” He notes that Shakespeare (of Stratford) did not arrive in London until about 1585 “and there are no records of *commedianti* appearing there at that time or later.”<sup>141</sup> After some speculation that the few English actors traveling on the Continent could have encountered *commedia dell’arte* there, he says that “although our initial question must remain unanswered, Shakespeare’s knowledge of Italian literature is well documented....But he might equally well have heard such things recounted by someone else who knew the language.”<sup>142</sup> He does not cite any of this historical documentation that describes the improvised *commedia dell’arte* in Italy, or suggest the identity of Shakespeare’s supposed informants. He asks the right question, but for an answer he, like other commentators, can only conjecture.

The difficulty in accounting for the *commedia dell’arte* in *Othello* that has bedeviled scholars results from a biographical conundrum, expressed by Steele, Nicoll, the Richards and others: how could the dramatist, without going to Italy, have seen any *commedia dell’arte* or acquired enough knowledge to appreciate its improvisational nature? There are no records of *commedia dell’arte* performances in England from the 1580s into the early 1600s when he was supposed to be writing the plays, except one command performance by a visiting troupe for Queen Elizabeth in 1602.

Italian performers were in England in the 1570s, when Stratford’s Will Shakspeare (as it was spelled there) was six to fourteen years old, but not in the 1580s or 1590s. During the 1570s, Italians were paid for performances in several provincial towns and once at court. A Revels Account of 1573-74 reports that “Italian players” traveled with the Queen’s Progress to Windsor and Reading and “made a pastime.”<sup>143</sup> In 1575, an Italian acrobat performed at the Kenilworth festivities, with “feats of agility in goings, turnings, tumblings, castings, hops, jumps, leaps, skips, springs, gambols, somersaults, caperings, and flights; forward, backward, sideways, downward and upward, with sundry windings, gyrings and circumflexions; all with such lightness and easiness.”<sup>144</sup> The visiting Italians were usually described as tumblers and dancers who provided “pastimes.” The records give no indication that the pastimes might have been improvised *commedia dell’arte* as performed in Italy, and if there had been any dialog it probably would have been in Italian dialects difficult if not

impossible for most of the English to understand.

The last record of Italian performers in England in the 1570s was in 1578. Drusiano Martinelli's troupe received permission to perform "within the City and the liberties" of London before Lent.<sup>145</sup> Drusiano's troupe was the last in England for more than a century, with the single exception of Flaminio Curtesse's troupe brought over from France for a single performance at court in 1602.<sup>146</sup>

The Richards conclude that there was probably no *commedia dell'arte* in England when the Shakespeare plays were being written. They say that "apart from the visit of one Flaminio Curtesse in 1602, the visiting Italian players of the 1570s may well have been the last between them and the closing of the theaters in 1642, for no concrete evidence of their presence later has come down."<sup>147</sup> Writing about *The Comedy of Errors* as farce or comedy, Arthur Kinney of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst refers bluntly in passing to *commedia dell'arte* as "a contemporary form of comedy in Italy—but one posterior to Shakespeare in England."<sup>148</sup>

*Commedia dell'arte* in Italy was mentioned in three booklets published in England. In 1581, Thomas Alfield belittled the acting of the Earl of Oxford's secretary Anthony Munday, saying only he would "omit to declare how this scholar new come out of Italy did play extempore."<sup>149</sup> George Whetstone, on his return from Italy the following year described "certain comedians of Ravenna . . . who are not tied to a written device, as our English players are, but having a certain ground or principles of their own, will, extempore, make a pleasant show of other men's fantasies."<sup>150</sup> Whetstone showed an exact knowledge of improvised *commedia dell'arte* in Italy but did not write about any in England, which would seem natural if there had been any.

The pseudonymous pamphleteer Cutbert Curry-knave, writing in 1590 on his return from Italy in epistle dedicatory to "Monsieur du Kempe," relates meeting in Bergamo an Italian Harlequin performer who asked if he knew "Signior Chiarlatono Kempino," and replying that he had "been oft in his company."<sup>151</sup> This was no doubt the comedian Will Kemp, who had toured on the Continent, but Curry-knave provides no information on what Kemp may have learned of the *commedia* or what he did with it. Kemp's talent seemed to be mainly for jigs and other stage business [see Smith (171) and the Richards (263)]. Two years later Thomas Nashe contrasts the English players with those "beyond the sea....a sort of squirting, bawdy comedians that have whores and common courtesans to play women's parts" and whose performances include "a pantaloon, a whore and a zany."<sup>152</sup> It's possible these brief mentions by Alfield, Whetstone, "Curry-knave," and Nashe indicate some slight working knowledge of *commedia dell'arte*. More likely, the writers were merely mentioning it as a novel theatrical technique in Italy.

Louis Wright of the Folger Shakespeare Institute suggested that the author of the Shakespeare plays learned about *commedia dell'arte* from Kemp, who "came under the influence of *commedia dell'arte* clowns and probably added *commedia dell'arte* tricks to his repertoire of native clownery."<sup>153</sup> To cite just the physical "tricks," however, falls short of *commedia dell'arte*'s distinctive pattern of rhetorical improvisation, and thirty-seven years later the Shakespeare scholar Allardyce

Nicoll would conclude that “we cannot discern any change in histrionic style within England itself consequent upon the players’ experience abroad.”<sup>154</sup> Under scrutiny, it is difficult to give much weight to the arguments that an untraveled author of the Shakespeare plays would have gained enough knowledge in England of Italian *commedia dell’arte* and its distinctive improvisatory style to have influenced the writing of *Othello*. Moreover, even critics who acknowledge the central role of *commedia dell’arte* in *Othello* have overlooked or ignored the fact that Stratford’s Will Shakspere was not yet fifteen when Italian performers were in England. They do not provide historical evidence putting him anywhere near a *commedia* performance, nor is there any evidence that he traveled on the Continent.

Shakespeare scholars have found simulated improvisation, the hallmark of *commedia del’arte*, in many plays, most notably *Othello*. In the opening sentence of her article, “Shakespeare’s Rhetorical Riffs,” Jane Freeman observes that “in play after play, Shakespeare’s characters demonstrate their wit through various forms of rhetorical improvisation, and their improvisational skill is often highly admired and explicitly evaluated by characters who witness it. . . . [in] scenes of seemingly spontaneous wordplay.”<sup>155</sup> Her focus is on the scripted improvisations in Shakespeare that were written so well that the actors could make them seem spontaneous. She quotes John Barton in *Playing Shakespeare*: “The words must be *found* or *coined* or *fresh-minted* at the moment you utter them. . . . they must seem to find their life for the first time at the moment the actor speaks them.”<sup>156</sup> *Othello* has many such scripted improvisations that the actors, especially Iago, can make appear to be spontaneous.

Leading Shakespeare scholars stress not only the improvisation in the play but also how the dramatist made it central to the action. Harold Bloom of Yale says that “improvisation by Iago constitutes the tragedy’s heart and center” and that Iago has “a genius for improvising chaos in others.”<sup>157</sup> He describes at length Iago’s improvisations but without mention of *commedia dell’arte*. Nor does Stanley Wells, when he says that Iago is “a surrogate playwright, controlling the plot, making it up as he goes along with improvisational genius.”<sup>158</sup>

Maurice Charney of Rutgers University describes Iago as a perfect *Zanni*-like improviser: “Iago’s mind is idle and improvisatory. He is not at all diabolical in the sense of having a fixed purpose that he executes with relentless energy. . . . He is someone who plays games and who is intent on winning each round as it comes up. He is an innovator, a sleight-of-hand man who depends on the inspiration of the moment.”<sup>159</sup> Charney argues that Iago’s debt is to the allegorical Vice figure of the morality plays, but this debt is outweighed by the close and precise parallels he limns to an improvising *Zanni* in his description of Iago.

Russ McDonald also notes the importance of improvisation in *Othello*: “The comic intriguer thrives by means of the same methods that Iago—or the Vice—displays . . . above all else, improvisation.”<sup>160</sup> Although he traces it to the comic intriguer of Plautus, to the Vice figure, to the morality plays and to Roman and Italian comedy, he does not provide any evidence or examples.

Stephen Greenblatt of Harvard says about *Othello* that “violence, sexual anxiety, and improvisation are the materials out of which the drama is constructed. . . . Shakespeare goes out of his way to emphasize the improvised nature of the villain’s plot. . . . What I have called the marks of the impromptu extend to Iago’s other speeches and actions through the course of the play.”<sup>161</sup> The chapter title of his book is “The Improvisation of Power,” which he calls “a central Renaissance mode of behavior” with *Othello* “the supreme symbolic expression of the cultural mode.”<sup>162</sup> Neither the comedy in *Othello* nor the *commedia dell’arte* in it has any place in Greenblatt’s cultural mode of improvisation.

Walter Cohen says that Iago, like the Vice figure, displays “improvisationally manipulative acting skills.”<sup>163</sup> and Mellamphy says hopefully that “Shakespeare probably learned from the art and craft of masters of improvised comedy when most he needed to.”<sup>164</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Edwin Booth, who played Iago, sensed that Iago’s bawdy bantering with Desdemona in Act 2 should be as if on the spur of the moment, not scripted. His view, of course, was theatrical, as were those of Heliodora, a theater critic, and Faherty, who published in *Theatre Journal*. The theatrical perception of the improvisation in *Othello* reinforces the academic view of its significance.

Improvisation is mentioned in three Shakespeare plays. The author calls it playing extempore. In *1 Henry IV*, when Falstaff is using his wit to deflect jibes, he calls on his tormenters to exercise good fellowship: “What, shall we be merry, shall we have a play extempore?” (4.2.279). And in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Snug asks for the script for the lion’s role, Quince tells him, “You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring” (1.2.68-69). In the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra fears that she and Antony, if captured by the Romans, will be held up to scorn and ridicule in Rome. She says, “The quick comedians extemporally will stage us . . . and I shall see some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness in the posture of a whore” (5.2.16-21).

Finding solid evidence for improvisation in English Renaissance drama beyond that in Shakespeare has challenged scholars. Commentators who suggest that Iago was derived from the Vice figure ascribe improvisation skills to the Vice but do not provide much supporting evidence. A few scholars acknowledge this shortfall. In the foreword to his anthology, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Timothy J. McGee refers to “the paucity of detailed information which is the result of the very nature of the topic,” information that he calls “ephemeral” and that “often appears to be confused or even contradictory.”<sup>165</sup> Clifford Davidson’s article in this anthology is entitled, “Improvisation in Medieval Drama,” but he concedes that “improvisation is the most ephemeral aspect of performances from half a millennium ago and also the most vexed scholarly question.”<sup>166</sup> In his analysis of clowns’ antics, David Mann observes that “there is a double irony in attempting to put together written evidence of an unwritten tradition of clowning which is both highly physical and often dependent on the immediate humorous possibilities of a particular moment.”<sup>167</sup> All three, of course, are describing works in English about the drama in England, while the works in Italian on *commedia dell’arte*, all later than

1611, are rich in descriptions of its stock characters and their improvised dialog, action and music.

The author of the Shakespeare plays was not writing in a vacuum. His sources and the influences on his writing were multiple, varied and not easy to rank in importance. The comic Vice figure and the comedies of Plautus certainly seem to have influenced him. A close reading of *Othello* and the literature of the *commedia*, however, suggest that the most significant influence on the composition of *Othello* was probably *commedia dell'arte*, not only for its characters as models for the seven leading characters in *Othello*, but especially for the simulated improvisation in the play.

Improvised performing, which defines *commedia dell'arte*, could only be fully appreciated if seen in performance. By definition it was not scripted, not written down, not published to inspire playwrights, leaving nothing for scholars to emendate. Only by seeing performances of it in Italy could a dramatist such as Shakespeare have fully appreciated the subtleties and power of improvisation that leading Shakespeare scholars find in *Othello*. Improvisation drove the plot forward in *commedia dell'arte*, and Iago's improvisation drives the plot in *Othello*. Considering the influence of *commedia dell'arte* and studying it in more detail could make a world of difference in reaching a clearer understanding of this and other plays.

In his article on "Shakespeare and Italian Comedy," independent researcher and editor Kevin Gilvary surveyed Italian comedy, including *commedia dell'arte*, and considered how Shakespeare might have known about it. After considering translations and adaptations, the early visits by Italian performers, and the possibility of second-hand knowledge from English travelers to Italy or from the bilingual John Florio, he concluded that "no satisfactory explanation for the depth of Shakespeare's knowledge of Italian comedy emerges from traditional biography."<sup>168</sup>

Oxfordians can point out that the English playwright whose profile fits the author of *Othello* was not Will Shakespeare of Stratford but Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, and that the improvised *commedia dell'arte* that pervades the play may well be among the most persuasive evidence marshaled by Oxfordian scholars. Oxford had easy access to the comedies of Plautus in print and at performances of them in Latin at the Inns of the Court in London, and the characters and plots of the Plautine comedies inspired *commedia dell'arte*.

Editions of Plautus were in the library of Oxford's tutor, William Smith, and in the library of William Cecil Lord Burghley, his guardian during his teenage years and then his father-in-law.<sup>169</sup> T. W. Baldwin in *Smalle Latine and Less Greeke* found it significant that the playwright's knowledge of Plautus is "frequently colored by the commentaries" in the Latin edition of it published in 1576 by Lambinus, a Parisian Latinist.<sup>170</sup> It is perhaps equally significant that the Lambinus edition was in the library of Oxford's guardian.

One of the leading characters in *commedia dell'arte* was the *Capitano*. In the Shakespeare play he is Othello, who is enraged by false reports that he had been cuckolded and his reputation ruined, as was Oxford on his return from Italy. The striking parallel between Oxford's life and Othello's predicament is discussed in



the edition of the play by Ren Draya and this writer in the Oxfordian Shakespeare Series.<sup>171</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, Oxford was able to absorb the techniques of improvisation by stock characters in stock situations when he was in Italy, where performances of *commedia dell'arte* were popular not only in Venice, but in other northern Italian cities. He could hardly have missed seeing performances. He lived in Venice and traveled in northern Italy for about five months in 1575-76 when he was in his impressionable mid-20s and when *commedia dell'arte* was flourishing there.<sup>172</sup> He had ample opportunity to see *commedia* performances in the public squares and in the palaces of the rich and the nobility.

Oxford even figures in a *commedia dell'arte* performance in Italy. A scenario in a rare collection of *commedia* skits describes a performance that satirized his skill at tournament jousting. It's a real-life topical allusion, although pure fiction, in a scenario called "Tirata della Giostra" ("Tirade on the Joust"), reported by Andrea Perrucci. In an exuberant tirade, the stock character *Dottore*, who often mangled names for comic effect, pretended to describe the tournament costume and sword of "Elmond Milord d'Oxford" and invented a tilt with "Alvilda Contessa d'Edemburg," perhaps an allusion to Scotland.<sup>173</sup> The topical allusion suggests that an audience of Italian aristocrats would have known about Oxford's travels in Italy and appreciated the satire. For Oxfordians, it's tempting to imagine that the Earl of Oxford was in the audience.

If the influence of *commedia dell'arte* on the composition of *Othello* were to be seriously considered and explained by editors of the play, readers and theatergoers might well enjoy a greatly enhanced appreciation of the author's intention and design for this disorienting comedy gone wrong. The perplexing aspects of the comedy throughout *The Tragedy of Othello* would disappear. The mystery of Iago's evil and his motivation would be dispelled. Othello's naïve inability to see through Iago's lies and scheming would make sense.

With a more realistic understanding of the play, *Othello* could be read and performed as the author probably intended, as a bitter, satirical comedy with a disturbing, frustrating, tragic ending that denies the audience its expected catharsis—a play inspired by satirical *commedia dell'arte* performances in Italy, instead of a romantic tragedy about a jealous military hero, who is black, and his aristocratic Venetian bride, who is white.

Othello, no longer a glamorized noble hero, would be understood as a boasting, insecure, delusional fool, the *Capitano* of *commedia dell'arte*, Michael Bristol's "abject clown." This reading purges the play of the sentimentality of traditional interpretations, which have been a disservice to this tough-minded dramatist. It would lead to a more rewarding appreciation of *The Tragedy of Othello*, *the Moor of Venice* as one of his greatest commentaries exposing the folly of mankind through laughter and the abrupt shift to the tragic shock of two murders and a suicide at the climax of the play.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil, the History of Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains* (New York: Columbia UP, 1958), 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward Pechter, ed., *Othello: Authoritative Texts, Sources and Contexts, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2004), ix.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Hornback, "Emblems of Folly in the First *Othello*: Renaissance Blackface, Moor's Coat and Muckender," *Comparative Drama* (March 2001), 1. Hornback, professor of comparative literature and theater at Oglethorpe University, offers evidence not only for blackface fools on the Renaissance stage but also for the resemblance between a Moor's costume and a fool's coat and for a satiric contrast between Othello's handkerchief and the nose-wiping muckender of the fool's costume.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip C. Kolin, *Othello: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-28.
- <sup>5</sup> Karl Mantzius, *A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times*, trans. Louise von Cossel. (London: Duckworth, 1904), 2:213.
- <sup>6</sup> George Sand, "Preface" to *Masques et Bouffons (comédie italienne: texte et dessins)* by Maurice Sand (her son), (Paris: Michel Levy, 1860), vii. Quoted in Duchartre, 17.
- <sup>7</sup> Pamela Allen Brown, "Othello Italicized: Xenophobia and the Erosion of Tragedy," in *Shakespeare, Italy and intertextuality*, ed., Michele Marrapodi. (Manchester UP, 2004), 145.
- <sup>8</sup> Kenneth and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'arte, a Documentary History* (Oxford UK and Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwood, 1990), 135. Kenneth Richards is research professor of theater history at the University of Manchester.
- <sup>9</sup> K. M. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy, a Study in the Commedia dell'arte, 1560-1620, with Special Reference to the English Stage* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1934), 2 vols., reissued 1962 in 1 vol., 61-62.
- <sup>10</sup> Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'arte, a Study in Italian Popular Comedy* (New York: Columbia UP, 1912), 194-95. She also notes mention of *commedia dell'arte* characters in Jonson's *Volpone*, set in Venice and performed in 1606,

approximately two to five years after the traditional dating of *Othello's* composition. Smith offers no evidence for Jonson's knowledge of *commedia dell'arte*.

- <sup>11</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin, a Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge UP, 1963), 84.
- <sup>12</sup> Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (London: Harrap, 1929; reprint, Mineola NY: Dover, 1966), 124, 161-62. Trans. by Weaver from the French edition c. 1924 by Librairie de France, Paris.
- <sup>13</sup> Richards' trans., 135.
- <sup>14</sup> Lea's trans., 63.
- <sup>15</sup> Duchartre, 227.
- <sup>16</sup> Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 180.
- <sup>17</sup> Frank Kermode, Introduction to *Othello*, Riverside Shakespeare, textual ed., G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 1198.
- <sup>18</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 115, 116.
- <sup>19</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Anglo Saxon Review* (March 1901), quoted in *Shaw on Shakespeare*, ed. Edwin Wilson (New York: Dutton, 1961; reprint, New York: Applause, 2002), 156.
- <sup>20</sup> Russ McDonald, "Othello, Thorello, and the Problem of the Foolish Hero," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30:1 (1979), 62. Thorello is the married hero of Boccaccio's tale of "Thorello and Saladine" in the *Decameron* (10-9), a copy of which was in the library of William Cecil Lord Burghley.
- <sup>21</sup> Russ McDonald, ed., *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) 1. His introduction grapples with the comedy in the tragedy.
- <sup>22</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Nicoll, 101.
- <sup>24</sup> Nicoll, 98.
- <sup>25</sup> Nicoll, 103.
- <sup>26</sup> Barbara Everett, "'Spanish' Othello: The Making of Shakespeare's Moor," *Shakespeare Survey* 35 (1982); reprint in *Shakespeare and Race*, eds. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge UP, 2001), 76.
- <sup>27</sup> Smith, 229-30.
- <sup>28</sup> Richards, 133.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2009), 42.
- <sup>30</sup> Hornback, *English Clown*, 26.
- <sup>31</sup> Julie Hankey, *Othello* (Bristol UK: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), 14. A theater historian, she is co-editor of the Plays in Performance series.
- <sup>32</sup> Hornback, *Emblems*, 172.

- <sup>33</sup> Richards, 132-33.
- <sup>34</sup> Smith, 7.
- <sup>35</sup> Nicoll, 50.
- <sup>36</sup> Nicoll, 51.
- <sup>37</sup> Richards, 118.
- <sup>38</sup> Lea, 19-21.
- <sup>39</sup> Lea, 20-21.
- <sup>40</sup> Lea, 378-79.
- <sup>41</sup> Nicoll, 32.
- <sup>42</sup> Duchartre, 251-52.
- <sup>43</sup> Nicoll, 89.
- <sup>44</sup> Lea, 65.
- <sup>45</sup> Smith, 8-9, 47-48.
- <sup>46</sup> Richards, 113.
- <sup>47</sup> Lea, 117-18.
- <sup>48</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, "Women and Men in *Othello*," *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello*, ed., Anthony Gerard Barthelemy (New York: Hall, 1994), 71-78.
- <sup>49</sup> Lea, 118-19.
- <sup>50</sup> Nicoll, 112.
- <sup>51</sup> Smith, 49.
- <sup>52</sup> Lea, 121.
- <sup>53</sup> Kermode, *Riverside*, 1200.
- <sup>54</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 235.
- <sup>55</sup> Horace Howard Furness, *Othello* by William Shakespeare (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1886), 109. The actor Edwin Booth, who played Iago, gave Furness notes on his stage "business" in *Othello*, which Furness used for several footnotes he mistakenly attributed to J.B. Booth, Edwin's brother. In his Preface, however, Furness spells out Edwin's name as the source.
- <sup>56</sup> Pechter, 51, fn 3-10.
- <sup>57</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 63.
- <sup>58</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 63.
- <sup>59</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 65.
- <sup>60</sup> T. S. Eliot, *T. S. Eliot Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932, rev. ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1950), 111. See p. 121 for his footnote on Rymer that is quoted more often. Both footnotes appear to be strongly held asides in Eliot's essays on different topics. Each footnote is the only one on its page.
- <sup>61</sup> Fintan O'Toole, *No More Heroes* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1990), rev. ed. *Shakespeare Is Hard But So Is Life* (London: Granta, 2002), 69.
- <sup>62</sup> Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (London: 1693; reprint *The Critical Works of*

Thomas Rymer, ed. Curt Zimansky (New Haven: Yale UP, 1956), 134.

<sup>63</sup> Rymer, 136.

<sup>64</sup> Rymer, 135.

<sup>65</sup> Rymer, 165.

<sup>66</sup> Eliot, 111.

<sup>67</sup> Shaw, 156.

<sup>68</sup> Rymer, 149.

<sup>69</sup> E. A. J. Honigmann, *Othello* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2002), 77. First published by Thomas Nelson, 1999.

<sup>70</sup> Honigmann, 75-77.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear* (Princeton UP, 1979), 4. She never mentions *commedia dell'arte*, or Heliadora's "comic structure" in the latter's 1968 article.

<sup>72</sup> Snyder, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Kim Hall, ed. *William Shakespeare, Othello, the Moor of Venice: Texts and Contexts*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 16.

<sup>74</sup> Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Reading*, (Oxford UP, 2000), 94.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Bristol, "Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*," *Renaissance Drama* NS 21 (1990), reprint, in the Norton Critical Edition of *Othello*, ed., Edward Pechter (New York: Norton, 2004), 352.

<sup>76</sup> Bristol, 356.

<sup>77</sup> Bristol, 359.

<sup>78</sup> Bristol, 351.

<sup>79</sup> Bristol, 357.

<sup>80</sup> Bristol, 350.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Neill, ed., *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (Oxford UP, 2006), 28.

<sup>82</sup> Neill, 5.

<sup>83</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 57.

<sup>84</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 57-58.

<sup>85</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 52.

<sup>86</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 59.

<sup>87</sup> Barbara Heliadora C. de Mendonça, "Othello, a Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure," *Shakespeare Survey* 21, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge UP, 1968), 36. For a biography, see *Encyclopedia Itau Cultural: Teatro* at [www.itaucultural.org.br](http://www.itaucultural.org.br). Her article was the first to detail the parallels between *Othello* and *commedia dell'arte* and its stock characters; it prompted the present article and informed our Oxfordian edition of the play. She also published "The Influence of *Gorboduc* on *King Lear*," in *Shakespeare Survey* 13 (1960).

<sup>88</sup> Louise George Clubb, "Italian Stories on the Stage," *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge UP, 2002), 43.

<sup>89</sup> Clubb, *Stories*, 45.



- <sup>90</sup> Louise George Clubb, "Shakespeare's Comedy and Late Cinquecento Mixed Genres," *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Maurice Charney (New York Literary Forum, 1980), 135.
- <sup>91</sup> Brown, 148.
- <sup>92</sup> Brown, 149.
- <sup>93</sup> Brown, 150.
- <sup>94</sup> Teresa J. Faherty, "Othello dell'Arte: The Presence of *Commedia* in Shakespeare's Tragedy," *Theatre Journal* 43 (1991), 179-94.
- <sup>95</sup> Faherty, 184.
- <sup>96</sup> Irene Musumeci, "Imagining *Othello* as *Commedia dell'arte*" (2002). Found with an Internet search for "Solimano Pontarollo Othello," last viewed March, 2011. The performance she describes was perhaps the first informed by *commedia dell'arte*.
- <sup>97</sup> Giraldi Cinthio, The seventh *novella* in *Hecatommithi* (1565), English trans. in Honigmann pp. 368-86 from Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 7:241-52.
- <sup>98</sup> Naseeb Shaheen, "Shakespeare's Knowledge of Italian," *Shakespeare Survey* 47 (2002), 164.
- <sup>99</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 57-58.
- <sup>100</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 58.
- <sup>101</sup> Miola, *Reading*, 71.
- <sup>102</sup> Maurice Charney, "Comic Villainy in Shakespeare and Middleton," *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed., Maurice Charney, (New York Literary Forum, 1980), 169.
- <sup>103</sup> Kermode, *Riverside*, 1200.
- <sup>104</sup> David Bevington, Introduction to *Othello*, *Complete Works of Shakespeare* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 1119.
- <sup>105</sup> Walter Cohen, Introduction to *Othello*, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997), 2093.
- <sup>106</sup> John Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642* (Cambridge UP, 2000), 3.
- <sup>107</sup> Leah Scragg, "Iago—Vice or Devil?" *Shakespeare Survey* 21, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge UP, 1968), 64.
- <sup>108</sup> F.P. Wilson, *The English Drama 1485-1585*, ed. G. K. Hunter (New York: Oxford UP, 1969), 62.
- <sup>109</sup> Bevington, *Complete*, 1119
- <sup>110</sup> George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, 2d ed. (Princeton UP, 1952), 415-17.
- <sup>111</sup> Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy: the Influence of Plautus and Terence* (Oxford UP, 1994), 16-17.
- <sup>112</sup> E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: a Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford UP, 1930), 2:194.

- <sup>113</sup> F. S. Boas, *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (1914) (reprint New York: Arno Press, 1978), 18, 93, 109.
- <sup>114</sup> Duckworth, 412.
- <sup>115</sup> J. Wight Duff, *A Literary History of Rome from the Origins to the Close of the Golden Age* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1909), 162-3 fn 8.
- <sup>116</sup> Duff, 200.
- <sup>117</sup> See also A. W. Hodgman, "Verb Forms in Plautus," *The Classical Quarterly* 1.1 (1907), 42-52.
- <sup>118</sup> Leonard Barkan, "What Did Shakespeare Read?" *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, eds. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge UP, 2001), 34.
- <sup>119</sup> See also T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana IL, University of Illinois Press, 1944). Plautus is not mentioned in volume I, chapters XIX, "The Small Schools Under Queen Elizabeth," or XXII, "The King's Free Grammar School in Stratford."
- <sup>120</sup> Richards, 263-64.
- <sup>121</sup> Miola, *Shakespeare*, 16-17.
- <sup>122</sup> Nicoll, 44.
- <sup>123</sup> Nicoll, 9.
- <sup>124</sup> Nicoll, 119.
- <sup>125</sup> Nicoll, 223.
- <sup>126</sup> Lea, 438-43.
- <sup>127</sup> Lea, 432.
- <sup>128</sup> Smith, 198-99.
- <sup>129</sup> Smith, 239.
- <sup>130</sup> Richards, 263.
- <sup>131</sup> Richards, 264.
- <sup>132</sup> Clubb, *Stories*, 35.
- <sup>133</sup> Ninian Mellamphy, "Pantaloons and Zanies: Shakespeare's 'Apprenticeship' to Italian Professional Comedy Troupes," *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Maurice Charney (New York Literary Forum: 1980), 141. Mellamphy is professor emeritus at the University of Western Ontario.
- <sup>134</sup> Mellamphy, 146-47.
- <sup>135</sup> Mellamphy, 141.
- <sup>136</sup> Mellamphy, 143.
- <sup>137</sup> John Payne Collier, *The History of English Dramatic Poetry in the Time of Shakespeare* (1879) (Chestnut Hill MA: Adamant Media, 2010), 3:399.
- <sup>138</sup> Everett, 75.
- <sup>139</sup> Richard B. Zacha, "Iago and the *Commedia dell'Arte*," *The Arlington Quarterly* (autumn 1969), 104.
- <sup>140</sup> Eugene Steele, "Verbal *Lazzi* in Shakespeare's Plays," *Italica* 53:2 (Summer 1976).

- 217.
- <sup>141</sup> Steele, 214.
- <sup>142</sup> Steele, 214.
- <sup>143</sup> Lea, 352-33.
- <sup>144</sup> Robert Laneham, *Letter to a friend describing entertainments for Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth in 1575* (London: J. H. Burn, 1821), 26.
- <sup>145</sup> Lea, 356.
- <sup>146</sup> Nicoll, 169.
- <sup>147</sup> Richards, 263.
- <sup>148</sup> Arthur Kinney, "The *Comedy of Errors* and the Nature of Kinds," *Studies in Philology* 85 (winter 1988), 30.
- <sup>149</sup> Thomas Alfield, *A True Report of the Death and Martyrdom of M. Campion* (London: 1582). For his report on Munday acting extempore, quoted in M. A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia, a Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 2006), 43.
- <sup>150</sup> George Whetstone, *Heptameron of Civil Discourses* (London: Iones, 1582), ff.Rii.r, Riii.v.
- <sup>151</sup> Ronald B. McKerrow, ed. "An Almond for a Parrot" (1590), *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed., (London: Bullen, 1905), 3:42.
- <sup>152</sup> McKerrow, ed., "Pierce Pennyles His Supplication to the Devil" (1592), 1:215.
- <sup>153</sup> Louis Wright, "Will Kemp and the *Commedia dell'Arte*," *Modern Language Notes*.41:8 (Dec. 1926), 517, 520.
- <sup>154</sup> Nicoll, 160.
- <sup>155</sup> Jane Freeman, "Shakespeare's Rhetorical Riffs," *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Thomas J. McGee (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2003), 247. She is a professor at the University of Toronto and a member of the board of governors at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival.
- <sup>156</sup> Freeman, 255.
- <sup>157</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 454-55. See chapter 24 on *Othello*.
- <sup>158</sup> Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare, a Life in Drama* (New York: Norton, 1995), 248-49.
- <sup>159</sup> Charney, 169.
- <sup>160</sup> McDonald, *Othello*, 58.
- <sup>161</sup> Greenblatt, 232-33.
- <sup>162</sup> Greenblatt, 229, 232.
- <sup>163</sup> Cohen, 2093.
- <sup>164</sup> Mellamphy, 143.
- <sup>165</sup> Timothy McGee, ed., *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2003), x.
- <sup>166</sup> Clifford Davidson, "Improvisation in Medieval Drama," *Improvisation in the Arts of*

*the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed., Timothy McGee (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2003), 194.

- <sup>167</sup> Mann, David. *The Elizabethan Player: Contemporary Stage Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 68.
- <sup>168</sup> Kevin Gilvary, "Shakespeare and Italian Comedy," *Great Oxford: Essays on the Life and Work of Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, 1550-1604* (Turnbridge Wells, Kent UK: Parapress, 2004), 124.
- <sup>169</sup> Eddi Jolly, "Shakespeare and Burghley's Library," *The Oxfordian* 3 (2000), 10.
- <sup>170</sup> Baldwin, 673.
- <sup>171</sup> Ren Draya and Richard F. Whalen, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (Truro MA: Horatio Editions-Llumina Press, 2010). The introduction to the play and the line notes describe the many correspondences between Oxford's life experience and the play, including the influence of *commedia dell'arte* throughout.
- <sup>172</sup> Anderson, chapters 4, 5.
- <sup>173</sup> Ron Hess, pers. email comm. for "Tirade on the Joust" from *A Treatise on Acting, from Memory and by Improvisation*, compiled by Andrea Perrucci in 1699, trans. by Colin Wright, Concetta Thibideau and Hess, forthcoming in Hess' *Dark Side of Shakespeare*, vol. 3, app. H.

