

AFTER THE LAUGHTER DIES DOWN;  
MIDDLE EASTERN "FOREIGNERS" IN THE  
COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Italian theatre form known as the Commedia dell'Arte, traveling "foreigners," made ubiquitous appearances. The individual "foreigner" is often indistinguishable as one or another type of Levantine or Middle Eastern character – most commonly an Arab, Armenian, Jew or Turk. This grouping suggests that the characters were interchangeable in the minds of the audience, functioning as Mediterranean merchants, lower-rung political intermediaries, exotic elements in the performance, and sometimes, threatening alien forces. In addition to the Middle Eastern characters I have mentioned—Levantine (Arab and Jew), Armenian, Turks—this broad group of "foreign" characters also included Greeks and Gypsies. Because of the recurrent presence of the characters, as well as the staple functions that they performed within scenarios, I will consider the possibility of this as another "type" within the Commedia dell'Arte cast of *vecchi* (old people), *innamorati* (lovers), *capitani* (captains or soldiers), and *zanni* (servants).<sup>1</sup> In some ways, the foreign types resembled the Capitano character, who represented the foreign soldier, often a Spaniard, German or Swiss, and reflected the audience's apprehension for "alien" mercenary armies invading and occupying their land. On stage, this feared foreigner was transformed by comic refraction into a coward whose name, often Capitano Spavento (Captain Fear), ironically indicated a less than brave habit of running at the first sign of danger.

In this essay, I will analyze the extent to which foreign characters were derided in Commedia dell'Arte, in varying degrees, as reflected by their power or powerlessness as merchants and low-rung political intermediaries within the context of an emergent mercantile state. While identifying recurrent elements that unite these different national and cultural characters, I will make note of the distinctive functions the Middle Eastern characters held as compared with their foreign counterparts. Indeed, in important ways reflective of their function within

---

<sup>1</sup> These foreigners are related to other exotic and alien characters who sometimes appear in these plays, such as characters from the Far East and the New World; however, in this paper my purview will be focused on the trans-Mediterranean and Levantine characters who share certain functions.

early-modern Mediterranean mercantile economy, the Armenians, Turks, Jews and Arabs had distinctive powers and status, and this differential was marked in the comic performances I will mention. Clearly, the topic is vast and requires much more attention; therefore, in this essay I will only touch on a few salient examples in which the characters' function may indicate their importance as a separate type within the menagerie of *Commedia dell'Arte* types.

### Studies of Levantines in *Commedia dell'Arte*

Comparative studies of Arab/Turkish performance traditions and *Commedia dell'Arte* have resulted in a number of essays.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, there are several works available on the social and cultural life of Jews in Renaissance Italy.<sup>3</sup> However, these studies often only mention in passing the degree to which the social and cultural function of Levantines in the Italian peninsula was "staged" in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Whereas much attention has been focused on the representation of Jews and Muslims, for example in the plays of Shakespeare or in later English and French plays, the subject has been neglected in the important context of *Commedia dell'Arte*.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the importance of

<sup>2</sup> See Al-Naisavuri, Abi al-Qasim 'Auqalaa al-Majanin' (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut 1970); Khurshid, Farouq. *Al-Judhur Al-Sha'biyya lil-Masrah al-'Arabi* (Al-Hayaa al-Misriyya al-'amma lil-kuttab, Al-Qahira 1991): 137. On the character of Juha, see Faraj, 'Abd al-Sattar Ahmad. *Akhbar Juha* (Maktabat Masr, Al-Qahira 1967). In English, see John Rudlin on Pulcinella's relation to the Turkish Karagös characters. *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994) 138. Also see Metin And, *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey* (Ankara, 1963). The theory linking *Commedia dell'Arte* characters to the Near Eastern puppet tradition assumes a common classical heritage in the Roman *Attellanae* farces. On this see Kenneth and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Basil Blackwell for The Shakespeare Head Press: Oxford and Cambridge, 1990)14.

<sup>3</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, A. D'Ancona's important three-volume work on Italian theatre dedicated a whole chapter to the Jews of Mantua and their theatrical productions. *Origini del teatro italiano* (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1891) pp. 398 – 436. More recently Ferruccio Marotti ignited interest in the work of the Mantuan Jew Leone de' Sommi, sometimes known as Leone Ebreo, dramatic theorist, playwright and writer of what can be argued to be the first treatise on directing. In addition Don Harrán has studied Jewish musical production and the contribution of Leon Modena, among others. See Harrán, "Jewish Musical Culture: Leon Modena" in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, Ed. Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001)."

<sup>4</sup> See a dissertation on the topic by Esin Akalin, presented for the University of Toronto Drama Centre, 1999, for example.

Commedia dell'Arte for these same writers in England or France cannot be underestimated.

Specifically in terms of the Commedia dell'Arte, few studies are available. Among those is an article about Eastern influences in the Commedia dell'Arte by Enrico Fulchignoni.<sup>5</sup> Fulchignoni's focus is on Eastern influences within Commedia dell'Arte more than on actual representations of Eastern or Levantine characters. Another article by Robert C. Melzi goes into some detail about the presence of Jews within *Commedia dell'Arte* and in Renaissance theatre.<sup>6</sup> Melzi's article on Jews and Marranos in an Italian Renaissance Comedy does provide a study regarding the appearance of Jewish characters within Renaissance comedies, though these are fully scripted plays, not necessarily Commedia dell'Arte pieces. Ultimately, Melzi is interested in arguing against the cultural historian Peter Burke, who states in his study, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), that the characters depicted in these types of plays were stereotypes created for theatrical purposes. Melzi makes an important corrective to Burke by suggesting that it is possible to use plays as historical documents. From the specific vantage point of Renaissance comedies, he argues that the characters could be seen to reflect actual historical circumstances and not only exaggerated characterizations.<sup>7</sup> While the distinction Melzi makes is important in light of the present essay, his analysis centers around Renaissance comedies (that are fully texted) and not necessarily the performances of Commedia dell'Arte. Melzi's is the only study of specifically Jewish characters. However, his study focuses on one non-Commedia dell'Arte play in relation to how Jewish *conversos* or Crypto-Jews in the play reflect on social circumstances of ostensibly

---

<sup>5</sup> Enrico Fulchignoni, "Le influenze orientali sulla Commedia dell'Arte: Per una ipotesi di ricerca" in *Le theater italien et l'Europe XVe - XVIIe siècles*. ed. Irene Mamczarz, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983). pp. 125 - 139.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert C. Melzi "Ebrei e Marrani in Italia in una commedia rinascimentale" in *Sefarad: Revista De Estudios Hebraicos, Sefaradies Y De oriente Próximo* (Madrid, 1995) 313- 325. For the specific references to the materials consulted, see 315-316.

<sup>7</sup> "Il noto storico britannico, Peter Burke, suggerisce che, oltre che dei documenti sinora utilizzati, gli studiosi se servano di drammi rinascimentali come strumenti storici; il Burke, però, avanza un'opinione, che io non condivido, che cioè la letteratura non possa mai riflettere direttamente la realtà sociale e che i caratteridelle commedie siano sempre stereotipati". (314).

(The noted British historian, Peter Burke, suggests furthermore that scholars may make use of Renaissance dramas, as historical instruments: however, Burke advances the opinion, that I [Melzi] do not agree with, that is, that literature can never directly reflect social reality and that the characters of the comedies will always be stereotypes.)

Christian but secretly Jewish immigrants from Spain and Portugal to Italy.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, the actual studies of the Levantine characters in *Commedia dell'Arte* are relatively limited; Turkish and Arabic influences are mentioned mostly in relation to the historical development of *Commedia dell'Arte* and its shared influence with Karagoz and shadow plays in the Muslim context. About Armenians in *Commedia dell'Arte* very little is written at all. A recent essay by Domnica Radulescu on gypsy types begins to address this vast area of study in *Commedia dell'Arte*, but only initiates what is likely to require a full manuscript's attention.<sup>9</sup>

An important recent anthology, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, edited by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson, resulting from an international collaboration among scholars, initiates what will hopefully be many additional studies in this under-explored area.<sup>10</sup> Two essays in the book, Robert Henke's "Border-Crossing in the *Commedia dell'Arte*" and Jacques Lezra's "Translated Turks on the Early Modern Stage", are of significance to the issue of "foreigners" in *Commedia dell'Arte*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Henke makes the interesting observation, supported by commentary from the theatre scholar Siro Ferrone, that the *Commedia dell'Arte* troupe actors themselves functioned as "foreigners" when they traveled from one region to another within the Italian peninsula.

And on the fractiously divided Italian peninsula of the Sixteenth century, transregionality was tantamount to transnationality. Itinerant actors crossing from one duchy or republic or state into another were considered to be 'foreigners'; they required a letter from a ducal secretary or the like as a passport, and were subject to the same kinds of control and surveillance that other 'foreigners' were. Siro Ferrone has argued that the location of the Baldracca theater in Florence on the second floor of a customs house is not accidental, and provided in fact a

---

<sup>8</sup> Melzi's important article eventually goes on to study one untitled play published in Florence in 1574.

<sup>9</sup> Domnica Radulescu, "Performing the Female Gypsy—*Commedia dell'arte's* 'Tricks' for Finding Freedom" in *"Gypsies" in European Literature and Culture*, eds. Valentina Glajar and Domnica Radulescu (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 193–216.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Henke, "Border-Crossing in the *Commedia dell'Arte*," 19–34 and Jacques Lezra, "Translating Turks on the Early Modern Stage" 159–180 in *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*.

perfect theatrical venue for these habitual crossers of boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

This observation suggests interesting implications regarding shared dilemmas and possible collaborations that may have ensued amongst the figurative and actual foreigners on and off stage within the Italian peninsula, but these are left to a future research project.

Finally, Jacques Lezra's work on Turks in the Early Modern theatre reflects on the ways in which the Turk fulfills different roles within what he terms the European imaginary:

Today's picture seems appealingly nuanced: in each European society the representation of the Turk (who in turn stands in, willy-nilly, for Ottoman society of the time) fulfills a slightly different role, and his difference differs from national stage to stage, from court to court, from language to language. *El Turco* doesn't work in quite the same way as *le Turc* or as the 'malignant and . . . turbaned Turk' Othello claims to be; how each of these fulfils, condenses or disappoints one or another culture's fantasies varies in turn across the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, [ . . . ] Turks, moreover, are never *just* Turks: they are Americans, Jews, Spaniards, Barbary pirates and *moriscos*—and vice versa, they are Lutherans, Moroccans.<sup>13</sup>

This shape-changing quality of the so called Turk within the European imaginary presents, as Lezra relates, a near-impossible task.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, with reference at least to Spanish Golden Age theatre, Lezra pursues the study of the stage Turk or the "theatergram of the Turk," borrowing from theatre scholar Louise George Clubb's concept of a "theatergram," a flexible and modular unit of signs that can be affixed and transferred within various geographic and cultural contexts.<sup>15</sup>

Like silk, spice, sugar, salt, books, wool and so on, Turks translated across stages accrue or lose value as they travel from language to language, from one market to the next, serving not only as cultural commodities, but also and relatedly as the principal early modern figure for the translatability of theatrical tropes in the Circum-Mediterranean. Stage Turks allow us to understand the extent to which the prin-

---

<sup>12</sup> Henke, "Border-Crossings in the Commedia dell'Arte" 21.

<sup>13</sup> Lezra 160.

<sup>14</sup> "Now a full study of this circuit of translations and mediations would be a hopeless undertaking, in any practical sense – but it is methodologically even harder to carry out, for the idioms that cultural critics approaching the stage Turk have at their disposal are manifestly inadequate." (161-2).

<sup>15</sup> Louise George Clubb developed the idea of "theatergram" in relation to Italian drama and its conveyance and influence within English theatre, particularly Shakespeare. See for example her *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven, Connecticut, US: Yale UP, 1989).

...process based on the contamination of sources, genres, and accumulated stage-structures, or theatergrams' is driven by the emergent logic of the European commodity markets, a logic they to some extent also embody.<sup>16</sup>

Although Lezra does not specifically cite examples from *Commedia dell'Arte*, I will build on his useful analysis in my consideration of how Turks figure in these scenarios.

### Foreigners in Flaminio Scala's *Commedia dell'Arte* Compilation

Even a cursory look at Flaminio Scala's well known book of scenarios, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, compiled and published in 1611, reveals several recurrences of Turkish, Armenian, Jewish and Arab characters in the comic scenarios as well as in the operatic and tragic works that together make up the fifty days pieces included. In fact, a closer look at the forty comic scenarios in the compilation reveals the following variations of the character types: three Armenians (sometimes described as *Levantini*), one Arab (from Syria or *Soria*), three Jews (sometimes described as *Levantini*) and eight Turks. There are also at least four scenarios that include gypsies, who oftentimes spoke a mixture of Arabic and other languages. It is striking that the Armenians in the collection appear along with the Jews, although members of the other groups are not necessarily paired. The number of Levantine characters increases when the remaining ten "mixed operas" and tragedies are taken into account. In these we find mentioned Moroccans, Egyptians, Persians, and Cypriots as well.

Whereas both the Armenians and the Jews appear as merchants, a reflection of the function they often fulfilled in the mercantile economy based on trading between Europe and the Middle East, only the Armenian in scenarios such as "The Old Twins" (*I vecchi gemelli*) is considered a friend. In fact, in the scenario it is Hibrahim, the Armenian merchant, (the name is somewhat odd because it suggests an Arab or Muslim rather than a Christian) who has rescued Pantalone and Tofano, now known as Ramadan and Mustaffa, who were enslaved by Turks. Hibrahim has ransomed them (5). The acts of enslaving and ransoming are based on historic circumstances and indicate both the belligerence of the European states with the Turks as well as the relative fluidity with which captives were traded through the Armenian intermediaries. Whereas historically we know of a common practice by which Italian Jews taken by the Turks were automatically ransomed by the Jewish

---

<sup>16</sup> Lezra, 162.

community and released (because of the relative tolerance of the Ottoman Empire towards Jews),<sup>17</sup> it was left to the Armenians, fellow traders, to ransom Italian Christians.<sup>18</sup> This may explain the favorable light with which Armenians were portrayed even within a comic frame.

In another scenario, "The Fake Madwoman," (*La finta pazza*) Oratio, a male lover, and Pedrolino, a *Zanni* or servant type, are dressed as "Levantines," an unclear designation since we are not sure of whether they are Armenians, Muslims or Jews (61). It is interesting that in that scenario, though Hungarian costumes are specified in the list of props, Levantine dress is assumed and not marked in the text, indicating perhaps a greater familiarity and availability and a less distinctive marking of the "Levantine" appearance. The Jew and Armenian were often simply titled *mercanti* (merchants) or *mercanti Levantini* (Levantine merchants) or sometimes simply *Levantini*, the epithets being interchangeable except on the occasion I have mentioned earlier. Their partnership reflected an historic similarity, both communities being part of the Ottoman Empire, having lived in Near-Eastern areas that were taken by the Ottomans under the Ottoman Dynasty, which included Western Armenia at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century when Bayezid I of the Ottomans conquered it and parts of eastern Armenia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century under

---

<sup>17</sup> On Jews and their circumstances in the peninsula, see Davis and Benjamin Ravid, *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*. See that work for a specific reference to a group of Jews licensed to exit the ghetto in order to perform in a comedy (213). Also see Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620*; for his references to Jewish performers, see p. 553. David Malkiel also mentions Jewish performers in *A Separate Republic: The Mechanics and Dynamics of Venetian Jewish Self Government, 1607-1624* (Jerusalem, 1991), 231. For the circumstances of Jews at the time, see also Benjamin Ravid "Curfew Time. . ." in *Medieval and Renaissance Venice*, ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Thomas F. Madden (Urbana, 1999) 246 - 147. Don Harrán has done much to elucidate the contribution of Jewish musicians and performers within Mantua and other locations, see his "Madama Europa, Jewish Singer in Late Renaissance Mantua" in *Festa Musicologica: Essays in Honor of George J. Buelow*, ed., Thomas J. Mathiesen and Benito V. Rivera (Stuyvesant, NY 1995) 197 - 231.

<sup>18</sup> In the Ottoman period, Armenians emigrated first to Aleppo in the second part of the sixteenth century. For more on this emigration or exile, see Avedis K. Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria Under Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1965) 46. Sanjian writes: "The preeminent position of Aleppo among the Armenian communities of northern Syria stemmed primarily from its significance as one of the most important centers of international trade, as well as its emergence as a center of intense Christian, especially Catholic, missionary activity." (47). Armenians, by trade agreements between French and Ottoman and English and Italian States and Ottomans, were allowed to engage in commercial activities (47).

Mehmet II (Sanjian, 31). When in 1516 Sultan Selim I was victorious over the Mamelukes, Syria, Palestine and Egypt were also subsumed within the Ottoman Empire. Aleppo, a part of Syria and a key trading post, was included. Under the Ottomans, the millet system prevailed, allowing laws to be maintained by communities organized under religious rather than national or racial units (32). Thus, a fair degree of autonomy was permitted to Jews and Armenians within their Levantine communities and furthermore, with the permission of Armenians to trade with Christian nations (England, France and parts of Italy), Jewish merchants became intermediaries interacting with the Armenians in trading by importing eastern raw materials and spices and exporting to the Levant European produced goods (Sanjian 47). The port city of Livorno that was modernized by Ferdinando, Archduke of Florence in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, holds special importance to Armenians at this point. And it is interesting that Livorno is mentioned in the scenario "The Old Twins", as the obvious place to which Flavio or Oratio must go to for business dealings. In fact, Livorno's historic importance is that the city accepted a large population of Armenians exiled from the key trade city of Julfa in Armenia, a juncture point for trade between Persia, Armenia, Anatolia, the Caucasus and Russia. The town had a tragic story and held symbolic importance because, due to its strategic location by the end of the sixteenth century, it had grown increasingly susceptible to aggressions between Turkey and Persia, both of which coveted it. The situation had grown so unbearable that merchants had begun leaving the town, until 1605, when it was destroyed by Shah Abbas the Great of Persia, its remaining population of Armenians taken by force to Persia, mostly to Ispahan. Meanwhile, those members of Julfa who had managed to seek refuge before this destruction included a sizable mercantile community of exiled Julfaians who had re-settled in Venice, Livorno and Amsterdam where they were able to trade in relative peace (Sanjian, 48). Therefore, not only does it make sense that Livorno is mentioned within a scenario involving Armenians, but it is also relevant that Armenians in this scenario are presented within a favorable light, indicating a degree of sympathy with their plight as exiles.

Turks, as indicated, did not fair as favorably as the Armenians, nor as neutrally as Jews or Levantines in Scala's *scenari*. Reminding ourselves of the fact that Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, that by the 1530s Sultan Suleiman had moved up through the Balkans close to Vienna,<sup>19</sup> the unfavorable light indicates a high level of threat felt by

---

<sup>19</sup> John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1993) 39.



Europeans. Yet, despite these Ottoman incursions, Venetians for one and other Christian nation states as well accepted the Ottomans with a degree of ambivalence, because they did permit Christian pilgrimage to the holy lands, which the Ottomans controlled (Hale 39-40). Furthermore, European incursions toward other lands, as historian John Hale argues, meant that: "[. . .] as Christian conquerors increasingly imposed their presence on overseas lands that did not want them, the more difficult it became to deny the Turk his rights of occupation" (39-40). Still, within the comic frame, the Turks fell into harsher representations. The caveat being Turks who had Christianized, as is the case in "Flavio's Fortune" (Day Two), in which the son of a Pasha in Constantinople meets and befriends Flavio, son of the Venetian Pantalone, and is seduced by Flavio's descriptions of Rome to the extent that the Turk decides to convert and escape for Italy. He is embraced by Pantalone and even permitted to marry Pantalone's daughter. A similar fate befalls Isabella in the famous scenario, "The Madness of Isabella," (*la pazzia d'Isabella*) which was performed in a different version than the one printed in Scala by Isabella Andreini herself on the 1589 celebration of the marriage of Christine of Lorraine and Ferdinando de' Medici in Florence. In "The Madness of Isabella," Isabella is also a converted Turk whose transformation is marked by her Christian new name of Isabella.

More often, though, we find references to Turks who seize and capture Italian lovers, preventing them from uniting with their loves and providing the conflict in the plots. Here too, we must remember that Francesco Andreini himself, the head of the *Gelosi* company which performed these *scenari*, was himself captured by the Turks and enslaved for more than a decade.

In Scala's scenarios, then, Armenians are presented in a particularly positive light through an amiable frame. Jews and Armenians are both present but almost negligible for comedic purposes, whereas Turks do not actually appear on the stage but are commonly referred to in the *argomento* which proceeds the scenario and indicates a spoken introduction performed for the audience before the action began. In the introduction Turks are often key catalysts for the action always in negative terms. Their actual appearance on stage, though, is not through an actual Turkish character in the sense that the Spanish Capitano may appear on stage – a stabilized object of derision, who is made ridiculous as a means of confronting the audience's feelings about the aggressing force he represents, the threat being mitigated by laughter as soon as the Capitano is literally laughed out of the play, disabled from his amorous pursuits, for example. Instead, Turkish characters appear on stage in guise – they are usually either actually Italian, and just disguised as Turks because of being held in captivity; disguising themselves as Turks to achieve certain aims or, most commonly, they are Christianized Turks

like Isabella in "The Madness of Isabella" who are included by the community but still comic because of traits—excessive passion, aggression and madness—that can be interpreted as associated with their "Turkish" past.

Arab characters, like the Turks, are either mentioned in the *argumento* or, when included in the action, they are present linguistically, when Arabic is fused with other dialects in the languages of the many female gypsies which overwhelmingly recur in the scenarios of Scala, and even in written plays such as Gigio Artemio Giancarli's *La Zingana* (published in 1544 and 1545 and performed as part of the 1589 nuptial ceremony for Christine of Lorraine and Ferdinando de' Medici along with "The Madness of Isabella"). In *La Zingana*, as performed by Vittoria Piissimmi, Isabella's fellow company member for a time in the Gelosi and her purported rival (they both vied for the right to play the main roles), Piissimi enacted the gypsy with a combination of languages. Analyzing the play, Richard Andrews writes that her language "is said to contain Berber and Semetic vocabulary", but Ireneo Sanesi adds that it contains Hebrew and Arabic.<sup>20</sup> In a modern edition translating Giancarli's multilingual play into modern Italian, Lucia Lazzerini meticulously undertakes a linguistic commentary that identifies the specific references within the gypsy's language—Arabic is present, as is Berber, as are a number of corrupted Arabic words that suggest the writer was approximating Arabic, presenting a theatricalized language that was commonly integrated within Commedia dell'Arte performances. For example see the Cingana (the spelling by which she is noted in the text) explaining to Medoro, a young boy she stole 15 years earlier, how she recognizes his house. (The cultural assumptions about gypsies stealing are clearly evident here). In the text she says: ". . . *Insala! . . . mi no saber serta, perche mi passata campstaser sene, chindez ani, che sercata tanta tanta, che mi no ricorda ninta sarta. Mo se mi trobar *el-beith*, el casa , unde mi rubata tia, pur che non star mudata el so faza, mi conoscer."* Here, the words "Insala!" "el beith" and later "f'il beith" are obviously Arabic words meaning "God Willing," "the house" and "in the house" In addition, there is a macaronic fusion of languages in which the attempted language is uttered incorrectly as is evident in her inability to pronounce certain sounds and her replacement of them with a pronunciation more common in Arabic. So, *questa* (this) is pronounced *chista*; *certa* (certain) is pronounced *serta*; and *vesta* (clothing) *besta*. In addition, conjugation is accomplished improperly, the ending

---

<sup>20</sup> Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP 1993) 144-145. Sanesi, *Storia dei generi letterari Italiani: La commedia Vol I* (Milan: Casa Editrice Dottor Francesco Ballardi, 1911).

(*conoscere*) is abrupt (*conoscer*) and the language is in other words splintered. In this way not only are the gypsy's actions predictable, her language is stereotypical and infantilized.

Though in Scala's scenarios Arab characters appear as members of the ruling class, often in an idealized form as kings, great astrologers or pashas, in other scenarios and plays, such as Giancarli's *La zingana*, Arabic is used to reference much more pedestrian and lower class characters. In the cases in which Arabic is used it is amalgamated, as we have seen, linguistically with other languages and appears as a denigrating comic device marking the character with a lack of linguistic proficiency that is often indicative of a moral or ethical lack as well.

A similar offense is found in the treatment of Jewish characters in scenarios outside of Scala's collection. In fact, the Andreini's son, Giovan Battista Andreini, writing in a slightly later period of time, provides a good example of the representation of Jews in *lo schiavetto* (the slave), written in 1612.<sup>21</sup> In this play, which was well received and performed in different places (Falavolti 48), four Jewish characters are presented. As Laura Falavolti, the editor of the collection, suggests, the play reflects an uncanny level of comprehension of Hebrew that Andreini must have had. Like the proximity Francesco, his father, had with Turkish, Andreini derives a familiarity with Hebrew from his acquaintance with Jews at the time (in fact, we know he and his wife, Virginia Ramponi, worked with Jewish musicians and composers such as Salamone de' Rossi, Effrem and Guivizanni, among others) (49). In fact, he is able to capture sarcasm while using Hebrew, not a small feat!

When the character Leone finally arrives among his congregation, dressed excessively well, he is greeted by Sensale: "*Alla fè, messer leone, che si' stat molt charif.*" (Hey, there Leone, you're looking sharp!) and another character, Scemoel also asserts: "*Baruchaba miser Leon*" (Welcome to you, Leone). Yet, despite the linguistic proficiency which allows Andreini to arrive at such subtle theatrical differentiations in tone, the depiction of Jewish characters is once again derisive in the sense that the incorporation of Arabic and the representation of Turks is derisive.

The main Jewish character in *Lo Schiavetto* is known as Scemoel, a common Jewish name, yet one that is comically exercised by Andreini when he has his characters pronounce *Scemoel* (Samule) not as *Samuele*, as Italians would pronounce it, but as Scemo el. In Italian *Scemo* connotes "stupid." Falavolti discusses this play on the character's name at some length (110-113). The pun here is simplistic but in other ways the comic is all the more biting, because it reflects a high degree of proxim-

<sup>21</sup> Andreini, *Lo Schiavetto* in *Commedie dei comici dell'arte*, ed. Laura Falavolti (Turin: Unione Tipografico-editrice, 1982).

ity and knowledge of the linguistic and cultural habits of its objects of derision. Giovan Andreini's Jews are linguistically marked like the Dottore who is given to speeches and bumbles his Latin. The Jewish characters similarly are portrayed through rote linguistic parroting. They quote "sayings," as when the character Sensale peppers his every comment with something someone else has once said (110). They berate themselves with exaggerated pronouncements, such as "*Io sono il più rovinato Hiechodi*" (I am the most devastated Jew) (110). Finally they myopically and obsessively refer to Rabbis, their synagogue and their congregation and seem constantly preoccupied with what others in their congregation think. In this sense, through their language, they are self-parodying characters. The parodic element of the staging of the Jew culminates in the most comic (and vituperative) of all the scenes involving the Jews. In this scene, Fulgenzio, the Italian Catholic character, is attempting to impersonate a Jew in order to trick a fellow rival. In attempting to speak Hebrew he addresses himself to the group of Jews:

FULGENZIO: . . . ma non sapendo parlare ebraico fingero il mutolo. Ba, ba,ba, ba?

LEON: Questo è muto e ne salute, per quanto ne dimostra il gesto cortese; edi più convien che sia forestiero, non l'avendo qui giamai in Pesaro veduto.

SENSALE: Lasciate, ch'io l'intenderò, c'ho lingua muta, e in quel linguaggio parlo molto bene.

CAINO: Tu mi vuoi far ridere; che lingua muta?

SENSALE: Che lingua muta? O state a sentire. Be, be, be, be?

[. . .]

FULGENZIO: Barau, babbù; gnau, gnargnau, ganu ganu?

SENSALE: Oh? Vedete, questa è mo lingua gattesina, con la mutosina mescolata. (114- 115).

Here, the characters refer to a "mute" language, perhaps a reference to what Dario Fo terms *grammelot* or onomatopoeic, imaginary or nonsense language that was often enacted within the *Commedia dell'Arte* performances.<sup>22</sup> Mute or "muta", referring to a mute language or to a language that does not speak or express, a kind of nonsense language. The characters laugh at the Christian Fulgenzio's attempts to emulate Hebrew, which, as Sensale points out, ends up sounding like a language of cats, the entire segment is played against a highly stereotypical imi-

---

<sup>22</sup> For more on *grammelot*, see Dario Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade*, trans. Joe Farrell, ed. Stuart Hood (London: Metuen Drama 1991), especially 57-8. See also my own study of the etymology of *grammelot*, Erith Jaffe-Berg, "Forays into *Grammelot*: The Language of Nonsense" in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Vol. XV, N. 2, Spring 2001, 3- 15.

tation of Hebrew based on variations of *ba* and *be* sounds. Probably this results from repetitions of the common prayers in Hebrew which generally begin with "*Baruch Ata . . .*" in Hebrew for "blessed be he . . .". At the same time, one may argue that Andreini self-reflexively refers to the theatrical representation of Jews on stage through this linguistic frame. That is, in staging the ridiculing of Hebrew, Andreini is confronting his audience with prejudices they hold regarding Jews. But this may be a bit far-fetched, especially for a play written in the spirit of *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Linguistic characterization is an interesting commonality shared, it seems, in the comic depictions of many of the foreign characters presented within the *commedia* frame. Whereas relatively positive "foreigners", such as the Armenians, are literally mute on stage, their characters never actually speaking their language, gypsies speaking amalgamations of Arabic and Jews speaking Hebrew and Hebrew *grammelot* appear quite frequently within the performances. Whereas these linguistic enactments present a high degree of familiarity with the language and character of these people, the linguistic aping also mocks the same materials it fuses within its performance. Hence, the enactments are paradoxical, reflecting a degree of familiarity and a certain lack of exoticism or foreignness these characters have while at the same time reifying their estrangement, mocking them out of comprehensible communication in a way that further distances these characters empathically from the mainstream audience.

University of California, Riverside

### Works Cited

- Al-Naisavuri. *Auqalaa al-Majanin*. Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut: 1970.
- Andreini. *Lo Schiavetto in Commedie dei comici dell'arte*. Ed. Laura Falavolti. Turin: Unione Tipografico-editrice, 1982.
- Andrews, Richard. *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1993.
- Esin Akalin. Presented for the University of Toronto Drama Centre, 1999.
- Faraj, Abd al-Sattar Ahmad. *Akhbar Juha*. Maktabat Masr, Al-Qahira 1967.
- Fo, Dario. *The Tricks of the Trade*. Trans. Joe Farrell, ed. Stuart Hood. London: Metuen Drama, 1991.
- Fulchignoni, Enrico. "Le influenze orientali sulla *Commedia dell'Arte*: Per una ipotesi di ricerca" in *Le théâtre italien et l'Europe XVe – XVIIe siècles*. Ed. Irene Mamczarz. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Frances, 1983.
- George Clubb, Louise. *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1989.
- Hale, John. *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*. New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1993.

- Harrán, Don. "Jewish Musical Culture: Leon Modena" in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*. Ed. Robert C.
- Davis and Benjamin Ravid. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- Harrán, Don. "Madama Europa, Jewish Singer in Late Renaissance Mantua" in *Festa Musicologica: Essays in Honor of George J. Buelow*. Ed. Thomas J. Mathiesen and Benito V. Rivera. Stuyvesant, NY: 1995.
- Henke, Robert, and Eric Nicholson. *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008.
- Jaffe-Berg, Erith. "Forays into *Grammelot*: The Language of Nonsense" in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Vol. XV, N. 2, Spring 2001, 3- 15.
- Khurshid, Farouq. *Al-Judhur Al-Sha'biyya lil-Masrah al-'Arabi*. Al-Hayaa al-Misriyya al-'amma lilkuttub, Al-Qahira: 1991.
- Lezra, Jacques. "Translating Turks on the Early Modern Stage" in *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008.
- Malkiel, David. *A Separate Republic: The Mechanics and Dynamics of Venetian Jewish Self Government, 1607-1624*. Jerusalem: 1991.
- Melzi, Robert C. "Ebrei E Marrrani in Italia in Una Commedia Rinascimentale" in *Sefarad: Revista De Estudios Hebraicos, Sefaradés Y De oriente Próximo*. Madrid: 1995.
- Metin And. *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey*. Ankara: 1963.
- Pullan, Brian. *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971.
- Origini del teatro italiano*. Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1891.
- Radulescu, Domenica. "Performing the Female Gypsy – *Commedia dell'arte's* 'Tricks' for Finding Freedom" in "Gypsies" in *European Literature and Culture*. Eds. Valentina Glajar and Domnica Radulescu. Palgrave: Macmillan, 2008.
- Ravid, Benjamin. "Curfew Time. . ." in *Medieval and Renaissance Venice*. Ed. Ellen E. Kittell and Thomas F. Madden. Urbana, 1999.
- Richards, Kenneth and Laura. *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*. Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Press, 1990.
- Rudlin, John. *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Sanjian, Avedis K. *The Armenian Communities in Syria Under Ottoman Dominion*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1965.
- Sanesi, Ireneo. *Storia dei generi letterari Italiani : La commedia Vol I*. Milan: Casa Editrice Dottor Francesco Ballardi, 1911.