

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY GINA BLOOM, WITH LEE EMRICH

Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala. By Natalie Crohn Schmitt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014; pp. xiii + 328, 4 illustrations. \$80 cloth, \$79.95 e-book.

The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage. By Rosalind Kerr. Toronto Italian Studies. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015; pp. xiii + 216, 25 illustrations. \$65 cloth, \$65 e-book.

Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean: Charting Journeys and Mapping 'Others.' By Erith Jaffe-Berg. *Transculturalisms, 1400–1700*. Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate [now Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge], 2015; pp. xi + 174, 9 illustrations. \$104.95 cloth, \$104.95 e-book.
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Reviewed by Domenico Pietropaolo, *University of Toronto*

The three books examined in this review are examples of renewed interest in the *commedia dell'arte* among North American scholars. Their authors focus on the early period of its history, roughly the last decades of the sixteenth and the first of the seventeenth centuries, and each brings to her study of *commedia dell'arte* insights that derive from intimacy with production work and from engagement with some of the great ideological and theoretical concerns of our own culture, including the issues involved in the construction of gender and ethnic identities. All three are concerned with problems and ideas that require them to reexamine primary sources, beginning with the earliest scenarios, and printed and archival works that document the early history of the *commedia dell'arte* in the entertainment industry of the late Renaissance.

Anyone who has taught a course on *commedia dell'arte* knows how difficult it is for students to read a scenario and get anything from it other than the most superficial sense of the dramatic action. Fooled by its brevity, students tend to read a scenario in a few minutes and are typically unable to summarize its action or determine what happens in a particular scene with any degree of precision. In *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala*, Natalie Crohn Schmitt proposes a method, reflected in the title, in which the reader consciously assumes an attitude of sympathy with the text, taking the author's intent seriously and interpreting the work under its guidance—a hermeneutic of trust rather than suspicion, seeking to help the text say for us what it said to the author's contemporary readers. The reading process thus becomes an analytical and integrative exercise designed to lead to a stageable reconstruction of the scenario in the aesthetic fullness it had for its own time. Following the explanation of her method, the author offers a reconstruction of four scenarios of Scala's *Il teatro delle favole*

rappresentative (days 6, 21, 25, and 36), displaying throughout considerable skill in dramaturgical analysis.

Schmitt's approach to Scala's scenarios is eminently sensible in its practicality and highly impressive for its pedagogical potential. Its validity is conditional upon the reader's ability to shake off the prejudice that a scenario has little to teach us and that, in its skeletal thinness, its substance varies with each reader. To uncover the prescriptive dimension of the scenario, it is necessary to subject it to a dramaturgically sensitive close reading and to interpret the details in the context of the cultural history of the time of composition. The dramatic relations among the characters, the social stereotyping, the perception of gender, the motivating emotions of the action—all of these, Schmitt shows, can be teased out of the text with relative ease by readers who are equipped with the necessary knowledge of cultural history and the right dramaturgical hermeneutics. A scenario, she argues, by inference and by example, is a work that, because of its textual thinness, requires much more preparatory research than regular playtexts. It contains stage directions, both explicit and hidden, the latter requiring to be teased out of the text. Only when that has been accomplished can the scenario be appreciated as a work of art.

Many scenarios in the repertoire concern the construction of female identities, which from around 1560 were conventionally acted by female performers. The introduction of female performers onstage was one of the most revolutionary innovations of the *commedia dell'arte*. It was clear to all from the beginning that women, rather than boys in women's clothes, added a high degree of market appeal to a play by suggesting that it had erotic potential. At first this convention amounted to a vulgar exploitation of female performers by the male members of the company, but the situation began to change very quickly. In *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage*, Rosalind Kerr traces the professionalization of the female performer in the *commedia dell'arte* of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, from the first appearance of women on the makeshift stages of mountebank street performers, to their rise to stardom as *virtuose* of the professional theatre and, finally, to their achievement of diva status, as exemplified best by Isabella Andreini, who was, without doubt, the first international diva of the European stage.

At the center of Kerr's argument is the idea that in the early commercial theatre, the rise of the actress to professional dignity and popular fame is inextricably bound up with the history of erotic fetishism. This led to the creation of forms of entertainment, at once consumeristic and aesthetic, in which the *virtuosa* of the stage figures both as a cultural commodity responding to the need for erotic titillation and as a great artist with a significant contribution to make to the aesthetic and semiotic development of performance conventions. Through this process, Kerr shows, the *commedia dell'arte* enabled great professional actresses to create a new style of performance, informed by a criterion of authentic verisimilitude in the representation of sexuality and the creation of female identities onstage. The style, however, was also designed to enable the actresses to reclaim and display ownership of their own gender identities as women—on the stage and off. Kerr's approach is rigorously historical, based as it is on a thorough study of

primary sources, drawn from histories of the theatre and of the institutions in whose gaze commedia dell'arte companies operated in their struggle for legitimacy in the new market economy of Italy. The result is a beautifully written and compelling critique of the nascent entertainment industry and of the society in which it developed. The author sheds much needed light on the construction of gender identities, in fiction and in reality, on to their use in the aesthetic satisfaction of erotic desires.

Erith Jaffe-Berg is instead concerned with the construction of cultural and ethnic identities. In *Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean*, she explores, in a brilliant expansion of the conventional field of research of commedia scholarship, the role and significance of Mediterranean foreigners in well-known scenario repertoires, studying them as vehicles through which performers ushered into their audiences' imaginations ideas and fantasies about people and cultures only vaguely familiar to them other than by name. These audience members may have been accustomed to visualizing the Mediterranean as a sea crisscrossed by soldiers, merchants, pirates, and missionaries waving the flags of different nations and speaking different languages. The commedia dell'arte companies recognized this fact early in the tradition and sought to give it presence in their plays, thus according their performance an exotic and romantic air, with fictional glimpses into cultures that concealed many secrets.

Importantly, the fantasies and fictions that could be generated by the actors on the basis of the scenarios analyzed by Jaffe-Berg were not a form of abstract theatricality. Plots that revolved around abductions, slavery, ransom, and other forms of aggression had a basis in reality, as such buccaneering was a routine by-product of the politics of hostility that characterized the Mediterranean in the centuries that coincide with the history of the commedia dell'arte. That such themes were viewed through the prism of comedy does not reduce their documentary significance as indirect and direct statements about contemporary Italian society and culture. Itinerant troupes of commedia actors could appreciate the relevance more than many other professionals of the time, for they could see aspects of the ethnic hostilities in a number of cities of Italy, where the population included sizable communities of Mediterranean foreigners. These included the Jewish communities of Rome, Venice, and especially Mantua, which, as Jaffe-Berg explains in a chapter dedicated to Mantua, had its own sophisticated theatrical tradition and a company organized like a commedia dell'arte one. Commedia performances with foreign themes and characters were bound to resonate with mordant realism, even through the filter of broad humor.

Jaffe-Berg studies this presence of Mediterranean foreigners in commedia drama in the context of contemporary history, and calls to her aid the imaginative suggestiveness of Renaissance cartography and the conceptual apparatus of phenomenology. She uses the first to examine how the human body, particularly the female body, could be figured as an allegory of the Mediterranean and the second in order to investigate the potential experience of contemporary audiences fantasizing the Mediterranean through the performance. The fictional representations and comic fantasies that could be generated by a talented actress—mimicking in the languages of the stage the semiotics of cartographers, who produced maps

in which the outline of the body of a woman was superimposed on a continent—can be used as a base from which to see just what exciting innovation was possible on the comic stage. Jaffe-Berg has identified an area of research in the performance conventions of the *commedia dell'arte* that is still a mystery to us and has indicated a highly fertile way of working in it.

As can be seen from these three excellent studies, contemporary research on the *commedia dell'arte* is on the upswing. Schmitt, Kerr, and Jaffe-Berg have each made a significant contribution to our knowledge of *commedia*, identifying exciting themes for future examination and indicating fruitful ways of approaching them.

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Remaking the Comedia: Spanish Classical Theater in Adaptation. Edited by Harley Erdman and Susan Paun de García. Monografias A. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer Ltd. / Tamesis, 2015; pp. xx + 303, 15 illustrations. \$90 cloth.

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Reviewed by John Slater, *University of California–Davis* and Rebeca Rubio, *University of California–Davis*

Costume dramas may still enchant television audiences, but as the editors of *Remaking the Comedia* point out, directors of Spanish Golden Age plays have had it with “museum piece[s]” (9). “Always seek newness” is the resounding call of this volume, nearly a manifesto on the way to stage *comedias* today (26). Harley Erdman and Susan Paun de García’s collection is a bracing work of polemic that combines an impassioned argument for the relevance of early modern Spanish drama with some very sensible notes of caution. Bringing together critics, literary historians, directors, dramaturgs, and translators, the volume achieves three notable goals: it analyzes recent performances of plays by seventeenth-century playwrights; provides abundant advice for directors and translators; and charts a course for the future of the Spanish *comedia* on English- and Spanish-language stages. The collection covers a range of subjects, from puppetry to cross-gender casting, and offers an important evaluation of the current state of the *comedia* in performance.

In order to combine as many voices and approaches as possible, *Remaking the Comedia* gathers together brief chapters by twenty-six authors. Their diversity of perspectives demonstrates that the life cycles of early modern Spanish plays have entered a new phase. Productions no longer reverentially commemorate departed playwrights; instead, the efforts of directors, critics, translators, and actors—coupled with the attention paid to this work by critics—are lending old plays new vitality. Spanish plays are gaining new vigor in the bodies of living actors.

The sense that the plays of Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, María de Zayas, and other playwrights have sprung to new life is reflected in Catherine Larson’s helpful chapter, “Terms and Concepts.” Larson adopts Julie Sanders’s idea that