

Orality and Literacy in the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the Shakespearean Clown

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Although rarely considered in such terms, Renaissance theater provides particularly salient examples of interactions between oral and literate modalities. Renaissance playwrights, dramatic theorists, and antitheatricalists themselves viewed theater through the prism of orality and literacy, if using different terms. The relationship between orality and literacy was highly charged, variously characterized by conflict, competition, accommodation, or, very often, interaction. Improvisation in the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and in the Shakespearean clown offers an especially interesting and controversial locus of oral-literate interaction, and will be our chief object of scrutiny. I am less interested in compiling a detailed list of oral characteristics in these two areas—so long as the presence of residual orality can be demonstrated—than I am in exploring the cultural valences of orality and literacy. The relationship between orality and literacy offers the most generative point of comparison between the two professional theaters, about which surprisingly few comparative studies have been made.¹ If comparative study of Renaissance drama has largely abandoned traditional and positivistic source and influence mapping, the negotiation of orality and literacy in theaters of independent yet parallel development provides an important cultural homology: the most fruitful kind of topic for comparative inquiry.

A rich combination of oral and literate modalities may be seen in both the *medium* of theater and in the *period* of the Renaissance. There appears to be a historical if not inherent paradox in regard to orality in Western theater. Delivered and apprehended without texts, at least in the performance event, theater might seem to be the most oral of “literary” media. But the ancient Greeks, who awarded the prestigious prizes at the

¹ Most comparative studies have investigated the English use of the *commedia* character types. See the bibliographic entries in Heck (1987:148-59), and cf. Grewar 1993 for a recent comparative examination.

City Dionysia to playwrights and not to actors, highly esteemed the dramatic script. For Walter J. Ong, theater was the first medium to be principally governed by writing because of the prominence of the script and because of the influential Aristotelian codification of a logical, linear plot shaped by the spatial consciousness of writing (1982:148). Compared with the auditor of extended narratives delivered over many sittings, the theatergoer may more easily apprehend the trajectory of dramatic plot in the two or three hours' traffic of the stage.²

On the other hand, the commonplace that dramatic texts can only be fully understood in performance points to the insufficiency of the scripted word alone in theater, and to the dramatic script's dependence not only on visual manifestations but also on dynamics similar to those of oral performance. Now compared with oral utterances, written texts tend to be more explicit and self-contained about their meaning, even if one takes into account various poststructuralist complexities attending writing (Olson 1977:258). And compared with written texts, oral utterances depend more on prior knowledge, performative contexts, and the simultaneous transmission of paralinguistic, bodily, and gestural signals (Tannen 1982:9). Dramatic speech, it will readily be seen, is concrete, relatively explicit about its meaning, and context-free, as writing tends to be, but is uttered in an oral context that fully exploits paralinguistic and non-verbal meaning. Dramatic speakers are usually subject to the give-and-take of oral performance, both in relation to those sharing the stage and to those in the audience. Language in drama often constitutes an action, a dynamic speech performance.³ And because of the compressed, rapid nature of dramatic dialogue, drama often privileges not narrative or epic forms, but short conversational speech genres such as proverbs, exemplary tales, riddles, taunts, curses, and prophecies—genres that may be easily integrated into writing, but that tend to be shaped by orality.⁴

As a period, the Renaissance was liminal in regard to orality and literacy. If the alphabetic revolution and the spread of literacy did not immediately eradicate orality in classical Greece, neither did the printing

² Eric Havelock (1982) has stressed the persistence of orality in classical Athens and argued that Greek drama was produced in an age of continuous tension between oral and written modes.

³ Among others, Keir Elam (1980:156-70) has applied the speech-act theories of Austin and Searle to the ways in which speech in drama functions as action.

⁴ For a study of oral conditions in the performance of "conversational" genres, see Abrahams 1976.

revolution nor the humanist literary program altogether efface orality in the Renaissance. The classical and medieval practice of reading aloud persisted into the Renaissance, so that works like Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Rabelais' *Gargantua* continually refer to a fictional but specific and collective audience similar to those of oral performances (Nelson 1976). Despite its textual center, Renaissance humanism actually displayed many oral features. It championed genres that are modeled on speech situations like the adage, the dialogue, and the oration. It advocated the conversational style or *sermo humilis* over the grand style. The cultivation of "copiousness"—variation and amplification in written composition—was meant to equip its practitioners with the kind of rich and abundant verbal flow required in oral performance; in a famous example, Erasmus turns myriad variations on the sentence *tuae litterae me magnopere delectarunt* ("Your letter pleased me very much").⁵ Humanists such as Erasmus and Montaigne elevated the pedagogical role of Roman comedy to what now seems an inordinate degree because of the desire to render Latin a spoken language, at least within academic confines. Written composition did not appeal to anything like romantic inspiration, but employed techniques analogous to those of oral-formulaic composition: a kind of "rhapsody," or collecting and stitching together of literary commonplaces, culled mostly from Greek and Roman literature, which was conceived as an encyclopedic storehouse of wisdom (Ong 1965:149). Either drawing from written commonplace books or from the verbal storehouse of the mind furnished by humanist education, Renaissance writers often proceeded by piecing together ready-made themes, situations, and expressions—a process highly relevant, I shall argue, to improvisatory performance in popular Renaissance theater.

We should expect to find the theater of the Renaissance, then, characterized by a rich interplay between orality and literacy. Oral modalities are especially prevalent in the popular and professional theaters of Italy and England, which at about the same time achieved their most developed forms in the *commedia dell'arte* and in the theater of Shakespeare.⁶ Both theaters drew on audiences of a wide socioeconomic range, including those who could read and those who could not. Even for

⁵ Walter J. Ong (1965) has identified humanistic copiousness as an example of residual orality in English Tudor culture. For a text of Erasmus' *De Copia*, first published in 1512, see Thompson 1978; for the example mentioned above, pp. 348-54.

⁶ Spanish golden age theater, especially in the plays of Lope de Vega, is heavily indebted to a medieval performance tradition and also contains significant oral residue.

literate theatergoers, the oral element figured importantly on the popular stage, a relatively bare space compared with the visually ornate stage of courtly theater. The predominance of orality in popular Renaissance theater is also suggested by the language people used to talk about theater: actors were often considered “orators,” and one went to “hear” rather than to “see” a play. And as I hope to show here, the *commedia dell'arte* and the English clown provide especially important (although far from exhaustive) loci of orality in Renaissance drama.⁷

The *commedia dell'arte* should be intrinsically interesting to students of oral culture, because it was not performed from set scripts but instead used as a basis for improvisational performance a system of established character types and a rough plot outline (the scenario or *canovaccio*) that keyed the actors to set scenes and situations.⁸ Furthermore, actors (at least the literate ones, who made up the majority⁹) typically prepared for performance by studying both canonized and popular works of literature as well as manuscript and printed *generici*, or collections of speeches appropriate for certain characters. Some *generici* organized a character's speeches according to rhetorical action, locutionary situation, and emotional

⁷ For other studies of orality and literacy in Renaissance drama, see Trousdale 1981 and Potter 1990. Documentary and literary references suggest that English contemporaries sometimes associated their clown figure and the *commedia dell'arte*. Will Kemp, the first known clown of Shakespeare's company, made two trips to Europe where he probably came into contact with *commedia* players, in 1586 with Leicester's Men and around 1600 in Germany and Italy (Wright 1926). A 1590 pamphlet links Kemp with the Italian professionals, as well as John Day's 1607 play, *The Travailes of Three English Brothers*. Ben Jonson's *Volpone* includes several references to the *commedia* as part of its Venetian detail. And the part of the grotesque dwarf Nano, who in the mountebank scene poses as a *zanni* and sings a song to warm up Scotto's audience, would have been played by Robert Armin, a short man who offset his artificial wit with a grotesque body that evoked the natural fool. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio explicitly connects the two figures with his reprimand of Feste's supporters as no better than the “fool's zanies” (I.v.88)—a remark which imagines the *zanni* as the clown's assistant.

⁸ This study was completed before I was able to consult Fitzpatrick 1995. The interested reader is encouraged to review this excellent analysis of extant scenarios for written notations of oral performance processes. Whereas Fitzpatrick argues that *commedia dell'arte* performance entailed almost purely oral processes comparable to those underlying Homeric or South Slavic epic poetry, I argue for a roughly equal balance between orality and literacy in the Italian professional theater.

⁹ Working from surviving scripted dialogue that probably reflects actual *commedia* practice, Richard Andrews (1993:175-85) has hypothesized a structure of dialogue—the “elastic gag”—that would have been congenial to illiterate actors.

comportment, categorizing various speech genres such as “council,” “persuasion,” “curse,” “farewell,” “hope,” “prayer,” “reproof,” “tirade,” “salutation,” “desperation,” and “jest.” For each of these speech genres, it is not hard to imagine codified gestures, motions, and paralinguistic indications, such as were anatomized by the occasional playwright Giovanni Bonifacio in his 1616 *L’Arte dei cenni* (*The Art of Signs*). A character in one of Domenico Bruni’s 1621 prologues who is the servant of her fellow actors shows how *commedia* actors used literary works, *generici*, and commonplace books, as she complains of being an overworked librarian:

This morning the Prima Donna calls me “Riccolina, bring me Boccaccio’s *Fiammetta*; I want to study it.” Pantalone asks me for Calmo’s letters, the Capitano for *Le bravure di Capitano Spavento*, the Zanni for *Bertoldo’s Jests*, the *Book of Pastimes* and *The Hours of Recreation*, Graziano for the *Sayings of the Philosophers* and for the latest Anthology; Franceschina wants the *Celestina* to help her play the Bawd, and the Lover calls for Plato’s Works.¹⁰

The heterogeneity of the *comici*’s library—the dialogue collection of the ridiculous Capitano stacked on top of Plato—bespeaks a certain indifference to cultural hierarchy (if one eventually belied by the actors’ cultural ambitions), the *commedia*’s willingness to pilfer from “high” and “low” culture alike.

If romantics like Goethe and Maurice Sand projected the myth of improvisation *ex nihilo* onto the *commedia*, positivistic critics reacted against this misinterpretation, claiming that the professional comedy improvised practically nothing.¹¹ Whereas this may have been true for the mediocre actors, there are many contemporary testimonies to the *commedia*’s capacity for extemporization, and so we must consider the bookish preparation indicated in the Bruni quote in the light of humanist “rhapsodic” composition, as discussed above.¹² As for the humanist-trained writer, the *generici* and commonplace books equipped the actor with a

¹⁰ I quote from Marotti and Romei 1991:388-89. Translations from the Italian are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ For an example of the latter, see Bartoli (1880:lxvii, n.1). See also Tessari’s discussion of these two critical poles (1969:223-24).

¹² For example, in 1582 George Whetstone described from his continental travels a group of *commedia* actors from Ravenna “not tide to a written device, as our English Players are, but having a certayne groundes or principles of their owne, will, Extempore, make a pleasant show of other men’s fantasies” (Lea 1934:II, 346).

repertory that would ensure ready and abundant verbal production. *Commedia* improvisation actually fell somewhere between the positivists' theory of rote memorization and the romantics' notion of creation *ex nihilo*, varying according to the skill of the actors. It was rather a kind of *composition*, a stitching together of moveable parts or formulae culled from classical literary works, commonplace books, and everyday speech (Tessari 1969:224). The actor composed by responding to the demands of the scenario, the speech genre, and the particular character, organized according to the decorum of a given diction and lexicon.

The most detailed commonplace book, which gives the most precise notion of how *commedia* composition might have actually worked, is the 1699 treatise *Dell'arte premeditata ed all'improvviso* (*On Scripted and Improvised Art*), written by Andrea Perrucci, an amateur actor and poet who published works both in Italian and in his native Neapolitan. Given the persistence of oral and improvisatory techniques handed down from actor to actor, the excerpts provided by Perrucci as typical *commedia* speeches, which stylistically and substantially resemble earlier, less detailed extant speeches, probably approach the actual practice of the Italian professional theater during its "golden age" of 1570-1620.¹³ The second half of Perrucci's work, devoted to improvisatory performance, provides many examples of speech genres organized according to particular characters, and also offers formulaic principles shared by all of the *maschere*. For example, the continued metaphor builds by repetition and elaboration on certain key words or concepts, as in the "First Exit of a Disdained Lover": "E sopra qual base fondai l'edificio delle mie speranze? In qual erario depositai il tesoro della mia fede? Sopra qual nave caricai la merce de'miei affetti?" ("And on what base did I found the edifice of my hopes? In what bank did I deposit the treasure of my faith? On what boat did I load the mercy of my affections?" [Perrucci 1961:168]).

Almost all *commedia* speech is characterized by stock epithets commonly relied upon in oral composition: the Dottore (foolish pedant) speaks of *matrone putte . . . serve ruffiane . . . giovani scapestrati* ("whorish matrons . . . pandering servants . . . dissolute youth" [199]). Paronomasia is practiced by all of the characters, from the more elegant word play of the lovers ("Nume solo di nome, per cui più non spero, ma spiro"; "Oh power [of love] only in name, for which I no longer hope, but breathe" [194]) to

¹³ Ludovico Zorzi (1990:210) similarly defends the use of an even later *commedia* collection, the 1734 *Selva overo Zibaldone di concetti comici* of Placido Adriani, arguing that such documents are relevant to preceding periods because of the oral, actor-to-actor nature of *commedia* transmission (*idem*).

the puns typical of popular discourse, to the sound-equivocation practiced especially by the Dottore, which Perrucci cautions must be used with discretion, lest it destroy the literary integrity of the play (209):

Wanting to say that someone is good, he will say “bù, bù,” so that one does not know whether he wants to finish by saying “ox,” “Bucefalo,” or “buffoon” [“bue,” “Bucefalo,” o “buffone”]. Or he will say, “co,” “co,” “co,” and one will not know whether he wants to finish by saying “content,” “consoled,” “comfort,” or “cuckolded” [“contento,” “consolato,” “conforto,” or “cornuto”] or something else, so that those playing the ridiculous roles can get a laugh with equivocation. But one should not too often practice such malapropisms, because it generates tediousness and repulsion, especially when the plot is unfolding, because it slows down the resolution of the story, and dissipates one’s curiosity.

The kind of copious variation and amplification advocated by Erasmus seems to have found a very practical outlet in the *commedia dell’arte*, so that a given speech genre could be expressed in a variety of ways; the Capitano *maschera* (braggart soldier), described by Perrucci as “abundant in word and gesture” (210), was skilled in such copious dilation as “Quegli occhi, che vibrano saette hanno pertugiato, succhiato, bucato, perforato il cuore” (“Those eyes, that brandish arrows, have bored through, sucked out, pierced, perforated my heart” [212]). Copia allowed the *commedia* actor to compose speeches of great verbal virtuosity while maintaining the illusion of immediate oral delivery.

Although Shakespeare’s actors worked from scripts and may have felt pressured to have had “letter-perfect” memories because of their insecure social status, improvisational and oral modalities seep into the scripted English theater, especially through the clown.¹⁴ The three most famous English actor-clowns were Richard Tarlton (?-1588), a founding member of the Queen’s Men in 1583; Will Kemp (?-1608), a member of Leicester’s Men in the 1580s and of Shakespeare’s the Lord Chamberlain’s Men from 1594-99; and Robert Armin (1570-1615), who took over for Kemp in Shakespeare’s company and appears to have acted with them until at least 1610. The improvising of these clowns must have been widespread, judging by the frequent reprimands it provoked, the most famous of which is delivered by Hamlet in his speech to the players (*Hamlet* III.ii.1-45).

Ample evidence suggests that these reprimands were based on fact. Francis Meres’ praise of Tarlton’s “extemporall wit” in the 1598 *Palladis*

¹⁴ Potter (1990) has discussed the connection between English Renaissance actors’ memories and their changing social status.

Tamia, *Wit's Treasury* refers to the clown's practice, at the end of plays during which he had performed scripted roles, of extemporaneously composing rhymes in response to provocative themes issued to him by often hostile audience members. *Tarlton's Jestes*, a collection of anecdotes published in 1600 and designed to preserve the memory of the famous clown after his death, records an instance when Tarlton improvised a rhyme in the middle of a play after being pelted with an apple by a boisterous audience member (Halliwell 1844:13-14). The jest-book also records an extemporaneous rhyming exchange between Tarlton and Robert Armin as a young boy (conveyed, interestingly, through writing), which suggests Armin's assuming the mantle of the older clown (22-23). In fact, Armin's *Quips Upon Questions*, published in 1600, depicts Armin improvising after the manner of Tarlton. A riddling question is read to the clown, or perhaps offered up from the audience, which provokes a series of "changes"—possibly exchanges between Armin and the audience but more probably between different voices of Armin himself. Finally, the clown delivers the concluding "quip," or "moralizing metamorphosis," often a hostile riposte directed back at the riddler or at the subject of the question.

The clowns' "extemporall wit" was not limited to rhyming, although rhyme was their chief practice, and we know less about how non-rhyming improvisation actually worked with the English clown than we know about *commedia* prose improvisation. Nonetheless, Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (probably first performed in 1592) depicts a fictional Will Summers, Henry VIII's famous jester, improvising at the expense of the other script-bound actors. And John Day's 1607 *The Travailes of Three English Brothers* portrays Will Kemp, who probably traveled to Italy, discussing the improvisatory performance of a *commedia dell'arte* play with an Italian Harlequin. Kemp claims that he is not good at memorizing scripted plays but says that "if they will invent any extemporall merriment ile put out the small sacke of witte I ha' lefte in venture" with the *commedia* players (Bullen 1963:370).

Furthermore, the substantial body of writing published by Robert Armin is saturated with oral residue. David Wiles (1987:137) has opposed the literary Armin to the improvisatory Kemp, stressing the tortured, complicated syntax of the former, but Armin's texts are difficult because he directly applies oral discourse to a written medium without subjecting it to the kind of subordinating, logical structure common to literate communication. A major difficulty of *Quips Upon Questions* results from scarce and indifferent punctuation, which makes it very hard to discriminate among the various "voices." Many other features of orality as enumerated by Ong, Goody, and others may be discerned in Armin's writings:

antagonistic tonality, non-autonomous discourse, a tendency towards additive rather than subordinate construction, redundancy, copiousness, and the mnemonically convenient use of rhythm and balanced syntactical patterns.¹⁵

The improvisational practices of the *commedia dell'arte* and the English clown, then, preserved a strong trace of orality in Renaissance drama. But it is also true that the humanist movement's attempt to reconcile dramatic practice with the literary principles of neoclassical theory fundamentally shaped popular as well as courtly Renaissance drama. This was true not only in Italy and France, where the neoclassical influence was strongest, but also in England and Spain, where neoclassicism contended with a stronger inheritance of native medieval theater. Chief among these neo-Aristotelian, literate principles was that of the well constructed, logical, and complex plot. Leone De' Sommi, a Jewish theatrical impresario who straddled the professional and amateur arenas of mid-sixteenth-century Mantuan theater, cogently analyzes the linear plot: "The first act of a well-woven comedy should contain the argument and exposition, in the second one should see various disturbances and obstacles, in the third some adjustment should be made, in the fourth ruin and disaster must threaten, while in the fifth one must completely resolve things, bringing to all a joyous and happy ending" (Marotti 1968:32). Such an intricate structure requires the backward scanning made possible by writing. And in arguing that the Roman five-act structure is based on the divisions of the human body into five extremities and the world into five zones, De' Sommi conceives of plot in spatialized, or writerly terms (30-31).

For neoclassical commentators, writing a play was increasingly construed as a virtuosic exercise in wresting unity—a perceptible structure—out of complexity. It was largely attention to decorum—or the generically codified fittedness of diction, subject, character, and action—that produced structural coherence.¹⁶ The neoclassical principle of verisimilitude gave a theoretical underpinning for the *explicit* nature of the dramatic text: the dramatic text was seen to mirror reality, with which there

¹⁵ My hypothesis that Armin's prose demonstrates features of orality draws on the distinctions between oral and literate discourse elaborated by Ong (1982:31-77) and Goody (1987:263-64). Almost any page of *Foole Upon Foole* will demonstrate these characteristics.

¹⁶ Decorum is a complicated notion, which may be either seen in spatial, writerly terms (it provides a coherent structure of person, speech, action, and genre), or as an organizing principle of orality, constituting the appropriate repertory of a given character as discussed above.

existed a perfect correspondence. Lodovico Castelvetro, an influential sixteenth-century commentator on Aristotle, founds the principle of verisimilitude on an anti-Platonic view of realistic artistic representation: "Truth existed by nature before verisimilitude, and the thing represented (*la cosa rappresentata*) before the representation (*la cosa rappresentante*)" (Bongiorno 1984:3). The responsibility of the actor, according to the doctrine of verisimilitude, would lie in delivering a faithful reproduction of the dramatic text and in giving due attention to the literary qualities of the script.

In Renaissance drama, literate and neoclassical ideals continually confronted the realities of oral performance, and lines of force moved both ways. The scripted English theater was significantly affected by improvisatory performers like the clown. At the same time, the non-scripted Italian theater was significantly shaped by the amateur *commedia erudita* of Ariosto, Bibbiena, and Machiavelli, a mainly literate phenomenon.¹⁷ By the late sixteenth century, *commedia* actor-writers influenced by the claims of neoclassicism and the persecution of post-Tridentine antitheatricalists began to exercise control over the improvisational excesses of the more buffoonish characters. The scripted English theater, then, accommodated orality and improvisation, and the non-scripted Italian theater was significantly influenced by writing and its attendant forms of consciousness.

In the *commedia dell'arte* and in the English clown, the relationship between orality and literacy could range from conflict to competition to accommodation to, most importantly, a productive interaction. Two texts, one English and one Italian, both issuing from connoisseurs of the theater who are concerned about the excesses of the oral performer, may introduce a discussion of a *conflictual* relationship between orality and literacy, a relationship expressed in very similar terms in the two theaters.

For example, in a well known speech, Shakespeare's Hamlet huddles with the traveling players just before they are about to perform a scripted play ostensibly designed to function as a verisimilar mirror of Claudius' fratricide. Whereas the speech, as critics have often argued, does not neatly represent Shakespeare's own views on theatrical practice, it is too compelling to be merely dismissed as the conventional or naive opinions of the scholar-prince. It should rather be seen as a dramatization of internationally disseminated theatrical concepts—concepts of which

¹⁷ One could, however, also examine the relationship between oral and literate modalities in early sixteenth-century humanist theater, which Siro Ferrone has seen as a capacious genre capable of assimilating oral elements of medieval performance (1985:I, 7).

Shakespeare was more aware than is commonly assumed. The speech opposes the principles of scripted, neoclassical drama to the theatrics of the popular, largely oral performer, and is worth quoting at length. Hamlet enjoins the players to

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it. . . . Be not too tame either, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. . . . And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them—for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it... (*Hamlet* III.ii.1-14, 16-24, 38-45)

The players are not to improvise but to “speak the speech”—and presumably the very lines of a play originally written in “very choice Italian”—exactly as Hamlet pronounced it to them. High standards of rhetoric and diction (“trippingly on the tongue”) differentiate the accomplished player’s speech from the “mouthing” of the town crier—an improvisatory, oral performer—and guarantee that due attention will be paid to the literary merits of the script. “A kind of temperance” maintains a right relation between speech and gesture, word and action violated by the grotesque gesticulations (“saw the air . . . tear a passion to tatters”) often required in oral performance, as gestural and paralinguistic supplements to the verbal text (cf. Tannen 1982). Word, action, and passion must be guided by the neoclassical principle of decorum. If, as I will argue, the presentational theatrics of English clowns like Richard Tarlton and Robert Armin continually violated the mimetic and verisimilar representation of a self-contained illusion, the “mirror up to nature” tag must also be

considered an implicit rebuke to the clown. The unifying concern of the writer (“some necessary question”), guaranteed by the integrity of the script, must never be obscured by the “pitiful ambition” of improvisational clowns like Will Kemp, used to solitary performance as well as repertory acting.¹⁸ The player must strive to please the skilled, “judicious” audience rather than the plebeian “groundlings,” who prefer spectacle and sound.

Of course, several ironies suggest that orality and literacy were much more connected for Shakespeare than for Hamlet in this speech. The “antic disposition” donned by Hamlet in the course of the play renders him, in relation to the court, the disruptive, chaotic clown who swerves from the necessary question of the revenge tragedy dictated him by his father.¹⁹ He declares himself to Ophelia the “only jig-maker,” frequently interrupts the play within the play as he has enjoined the clown not to do, and is reprimanded by sober characters like Rosencrantz to observe the spatial dictates of literate consciousness—to “put [his] discourse into some frame and start not so wildly from [my] affair” (III.ii.300-1). And in the so-called “bad quarto” Hamlet ends the speech to the players by citing a long series of clown jests, ironically perpetuating the very thing he critiques:

And then you have some again that keeps one suit of jests, as a man is known by one suit of apparel, and gentlemen quotes his jests down in their tables before they come to the play, as thus: “Cannot you stay till I eat my porridge?” and “You owe me a quarter’s wages,” and “My coat wants a cullison” and “Your beer is sour,” and blabbering with his lips, and thus keeping in his cinquepace of jests when, God knows, the warm clown cannot make a jest unless by chance, as the blind man catcheth a hare.²⁰

Within the fiction of the play, Hamlet here out-clowns the clown by rapidly and rather impressively recalling stock expressions from a rich verbal repertory. His skill is matched only by the delight he takes in reeling off four clownish formulae, surely more than is necessary to make the point. By negatives, he suggests that the accomplished clown worked with copious and flexible storehouses, or “suits” of jests, duly memorialized in writing by

¹⁸ Many Shakespearean critics have in fact read the speech as a rebuke to Kemp, who left Shakespeare’s company in 1599 and was in Germany or Italy when *Hamlet* was first performed in 1600 or 1601.

¹⁹ Robert Weimann (1978) provides an excellent discussion of *Hamlet* in the tradition of popular clowning.

²⁰ For the speech, see Jenkins’ edition of *Hamlet* (1982:499).

gentlemen admirers of the clown. One might conclude that the *conflictual* relationship between orality and literacy professed by Hamlet the neoclassicist is revealed by Hamlet the actor as a relationship of *contamination*.²¹

Despite his illumination of improvisational techniques, Perrucci often bifurcates orality and literacy in terms very similar to those of Hamlet. Early in the second half of his treatise, he fulminates against the debased oral techniques of the street performer (1961:20):

The most vulgar ruffians and mountebanks get it into their heads that they can draw crowds and entertain them with words, and like so many bumptious Hercules in golden chains they try to perform improvised plays in public squares, mangling the *soggetti*, speaking off the point, gesturing like lunatics and, what's worse, indulging in a thousand scurrilities and obscenities, in order to extract a sordid income from the purses of the spectators.

Perrucci's objects of attack resemble those of Hamlet: the popular performer who appeals to the lowest instincts of his plebeian audience, improvisation that is "off the point," wild and undisciplined gesticulation, and the departure from the main narrative or thematic line of the play. Perrucci's solution is to create a hierarchical relationship between literary and oral modalities, a relationship reflected in the very structure of his treatise, the first half of which is devoted to script-based acting and the second to improvisation. For Perrucci, because improvisatory acting is much more difficult than acting from scripts, it must be "regulated" by literary, rhetorical principles. If the single, unifying writer of the literary text is replaced with a plurality of improvisatory actors, they cannot say "whatever pops into their mind," but must function like authors. They must further be instructed by the leader, or *corago*, who like Hamlet gathers with the actors before the play to review the scenario and insure that no individual performer gets carried away with virtuosic *lazzi* (verbal or physical gags). As the very binary structure of the treatise suggests, the improvisatory actor models his verbal compositions on scripted theater: he must know "the rule of language, rhetorical figures, tropes, and all of the rhetorical art, having to do *all'improvviso* that which the poet does by

²¹ In an article that considers the possibility that Shakespeare's actors may have used *commedia*-like improvisatory techniques, Andrew Grewar (1993) links Richard Burbage (the actor who played Hamlet) with the *commedia dell'arte* via a production in the early 1590s of *The Dead Man's Fortune*, which employed *commedia* characters and possible *commedia* techniques.

premediation" (159). Each actor, especially those playing the dignified parts of the *innamorati*, should study good authors and build up a literary storehouse for improvisation. Good diction, especially when practiced by the Tuscan-speaking lovers, ensures that the literary qualities of the play will be sufficiently appreciated.

Orality, then, was controversial, besieged both by apologists for a literary-based theater and by antitheatricalists. Most obviously, oral improvisation was considered dangerous in both Italy and England because of its imperviousness to censorship. A 1574 Act of the Common Council of London forbade the production of "anie playe, enterlude, Commoditye, Tragidie, matter, or shewe, which shall not be firste perused and Allowed in suche order and fourme and by suche persons as by the Lorde Maior and Courte of Aldermen for the tyme beinge shalbe appoynted" (Chambers 1923:IV, 274). In the 1590s, the perusal of dramatic scripts prior to performance became the office of the Master of the Revels.²² Italian authorities voiced the same concern about the license of improvisatory actors. G. D. Ottonelli, a seventeenth-century Jesuit who was a moderate critic of the professional theater, tolerated scripted over improvised theater because the latter could not be scrutinized in advance for scurrilousness and impropriety. Ottonelli laments the fact that when charged with an obscene remark, the improvisatory performer could always say, *Mi è scappata* ("It just escaped from me" [Taviani 1969:521]).

Neoclassical commentators opposed the ways that the buffoonish *zanni* and the clown violated the spatial and writerly principle of decorum. Sir Philip Sidney complains that the clown is "thrust in by head and shoulder, to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion" (Mann 1991:54). Inheriting the tradition of the "natural" fool (as opposed to the self-conscious "artificial" fool), Robert Armin brandished his grotesque physical presence, said to be sufficient cause for laughter. In twentieth-century theater terms, the "presentational" theatrical pleasures served up by the clown conflicted with the "representational" bias of neoclassical theorists. In his 1600 *Foole upon Foole*, an anecdotal account of six natural fools, Armin begins by emphasizing their ludicrous bodies, one indecorously described both from the head down and from the rump up. In the case of the *commedia dell'arte*, decorum supplied for Perrucci the principle for hierarchically structuring the acting company. He accords the buffoonish parts a certain amount of nonsensical sound-play and

²² Of course, his control of improvisation in performance probably was not absolute unless he had a perfect memory, as Lois Potter has argued (1990:87).

presentational theatrics but continually expresses concern lest they breach decorum.

In particular, the English clown and the Italian buffoon's violation of mimesis came under attack.²³ Richard Tarlton and Robert Armin were famous for moving in and out of fictional roles. Tarlton donned the persona of the rustic clown and broke the dramatic illusion in order to answer audience hecklers; the short and ill-shapen Armin staged the persona of the natural fool and used his truncheon, or slap-stick, as a speaker in his multivoiced impersonations. For Robert Weimann, Tarlton's juggling of roles in *The Famous Victories of Henry V* amounts to a significant destabilization of the mimesis principle (Weimann 1978:187-91). Nicolò Barbieri, an actor-writer who wrote a neoclassical defense of the stage in 1634, considered the same problem in negative terms. According to Barbieri, whereas the polished actor is capable of moving in and out of many self-enclosed fictional worlds, a buffoon is someone who is not capable of the refined art of mimetic representation: "the buffoon is always the same both in name and appearance and in action, and not just for two hours of the day, but for his entire life, and not only in the theater, but in his home and in the piazza" (Taviani 1971:24). Barbieri goes on to reprove the buffoon for equivocal speech that obscures its own referential objects: "metaphorical propositions, stinging equivocations, and scolding jokes" (25). The buffoon's speech is not explicit, as writing ideally is, but depends for its meaning on the paralinguistic, gestural, and kinetic signs common to oral performance. The clown destroys the simple relationship postulated by neoclassical theorists like Castelvetro between signifier and signified, *la cosa rappresentante* and *la cosa rappresentata*, and thus threatens the doctrine of verisimilitude. The rich repertory of speech genres deployed by Robert Armin as the Fool in *King Lear*—including riddles, proverbs, exemplary tales, prophecies, taunts, and jokes—constitute an equivocal and destabilizing discourse worthy of Barbieri's reproof, if paradoxically more trustworthy than the most obvious incarnation of literacy in the play: the overdetermined, misinterpreted, or deceitful letters frenetically passed from hand to hand.

The prologue to Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* suggests a *competitive* relationship between orality and literacy.²⁴ As the

²³ Indeed, in England the term "zanie" came to indicate a degraded form of mimesis, a mere "aping." In verses prefixed to Thomas Coryate's *Coryat's Crudities*, Michael Drayton speaks of "apes and zanies."

²⁴ See also Potter's discussion of this play (1990:87-88).

playscript records it, the clown playing the role of Will Summers is apparently checked in his initial improvisations by the prompter, who calls "Begin, begin." Although of course we have no way of knowing how faithfully Nashe's playscript records the actual performance event, the clown dramatizes the relationship between scripted and improvised performance, declaring that he will "set a good face on it, as though what I had talked idly all this while were my part." In other words, the clown's improvisation is so skillful that he can make it pass as scripted.²⁵ Then Summers issues a challenge to the script-bound actors (Fraser and Rabkin 1976:441):

I'll sit as a Chorus, and flout the actors and him at the end of every scene. I know they will not interrupt me, for fear of marring of all; but look to your cues, my masters, for I intend to play the knave in cue, and put you besides all your parts, if you take not the better heed. Actors, you rogues, come away; clear your throats, blow your noses, and wipe your mouths ere you enter, that you may take no occasion to spit or cough when you are *non plus*. And this I bar, over and besides, that none of you stroke your beards to make action, play with your codpiece points, or stand fumbling on your buttons, when you know not how to bestow your fingers.

Summers interjects into the scripted performance the antagonistic tonality common to much oral discourse, a tonality that can be readily perceived in the rhyming exchanges that Tarlton and Armin carried on with their audiences. By signaling the haplessness of script-bound actors, whose linguistic-gestural repertoire is limited to grotesque noises and obscene fumbblings, Summers implicitly indicates that the improvisational practice of the clown operated something like that of the *commedia* actors: deployment of a rich and varied verbal and gestural storehouse.

Such power as Summers boasts was unusual for the English clown; more typical is the reprimand of the clown by Shakespeare's Hamlet or by Marlowe in the prologue to *Tamburlaine*, in which he announces his intention to replace the clownish foolery popular on the English stage with drama of higher decorum (Fraser and Rabkin 1976:208): "From jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits / And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay. / We'll lead you to the stately tent of war." As David Wiles has argued, there was a "tension between a neoclassical aesthetic which could not accommodate the clown and a performing tradition in which the clown was

²⁵ That these terms were often inverted suggests a complementary relationship between improvisational and premeditated theater; Leone De' Sommi argues that amateur actors working from scripts should appear to be improvising (Marotti 1968:42).

central” (Wiles 1987:43). This relationship was only imperfectly resolved in the plays of the “university wit” Marlowe himself, for in a prefatory note the printer of the 1590 octavo edition of *Tamburlaine* laments the contamination of the original text by clownish improvisations.²⁶ But according to Wiles, in the 1590s the tension between the script and the clown was finally resolved in the form of the jig performed at the end of the play. The jig provided a formal legitimization of the post-play rhyming exchanges practiced in the 1580s by Tarlton—exchanges that could easily break out in the middle of dramatic performance, as we have seen. As developed by Will Kemp, the jig featured the clown and combined improvisation, rhyming, and dancing, constituting an entire dramatic action of its own. By placing the jig after the end of the play and affording the clown a completely autonomous entertainment, the Elizabethan stage achieved a successful *accommodation* of the increasingly rationalized script and potentially wayward orality. The conflictual relationship between orality and literacy was resolved by institutionalizing a popular genre.

As I have already suggested, however, despite the controversial and ideological weight borne by orality and improvisation, the relationship between orality and literacy in Renaissance drama may most frequently be characterized as mutual *interaction*, or *negotiation*. And this is true even where one might expect a “pure” version of orality, as in the Venetian piazza performers frequently proposed by recent theater historians as the preliterate precursors of the *commedia dell’arte*. In particular, the charlatan or mountebank is seen to anticipate the *commedia* actor, because he and his assistants would often warm up his unstable and ambulatory audience to his snake oil harangues with theatrical routines employing *commedia*-like masks and tropes—an overtly commercial use of theater that anticipated the professional *commedia*.²⁷ Contemporary eyewitness accounts do suggest that the mountebank’s long tirades were quintessential oral performances. In his 1611 work *Coryate’s Crudities*, the English traveler Thomas Coryate describes the oral practice of Venetian mountebanks that he had observed during a 1608 trip (Coryate 1905:I, 411):

²⁶ Harper’s edition of the two parts of *Tamburlaine* contains the printer’s note (1971:3).

²⁷ In a 1610 set of etchings commemorating various Venetian public rituals made by the artist Giacomo Franco, there is a depiction of a charlatan and his assistant performing in the Piazza San Marco with two *commedia dell’arte* characters and a man disguised as a courtesan playing a lute. See Tessari 1981:31-47 for a discussion of charlatans and the *commedia dell’arte*.

Truely I often wondred at many of these naturall Orators. For they would tell their tales with such admirable volubility and plausible grace, even *extempore*, and seasoned with that singular variety of elegant jests and witty conceits, that they did often strike great admiration into strangers that never heard them before: and by how much the more eloquent these Naturalists are, by so much the greater audience they draw unto them, and the more ware they sell.

As an oral performer, the mercenary mountebank is enabled by the kind of verbal storehouse (“elegant jests and witty conceits”) that we have seen as a mark of later *commedia* improvisers, one that empowers him to be a virtuoso of copiousness. A sixteenth-century charlatan song exhibits some salient characteristics of oral performance (Pandolfi 1957-61:I, 123-30). A rhymed *frottola* form often privileges sound over sense, as in “chi vuol di me l’esperienza fare / vedra senz’ altri *impiastri pesti o pisti*” (emphases mine). Continual and insistent audience address (“pregovi ch’ascoltate, stare attenti” [“I beg you to listen, be attentive”]) and invitations to try his services (“ognun la sperimenti, ognun la provi” [“Every one of you, test it, try it”]) maintain close performer-audience contact, if also suggesting that the charlatan only tenuously held his auditors, and doubtlessly needed to enlist the *energeia* of oral performance to keep them involved.

But the mountebank actually negotiated oral and written cultures in interesting ways. In order to sell his product, he needed to establish his authority, and it was a humanist rhetoric that he enlisted for self-legitimization. And so he curiously melded mercenary and classical discourses. In the Venetian song, the charlatan appeals to the second book of Galen as the *locus classicus* for his miraculous recipe, one that will cure a fever and that he offers for a mere pittance. The writings of Avicenna and Macronius legitimate other nostrums. And the charlatan’s products themselves materially derive from classical sources. Ben Jonson’s mountebank Scoto of Mantua, probably based on an actual figure and on eyewitness accounts of Italian entertainers personally relayed to him by Fynes Moryson and John Florio, ascribes an elaborate east-to-west classical lineage to his powder, a kind of comic version of the *translatio imperii*. It was given by Apollo to Venus in order to render her a goddess, was passed to Helen, and was unfortunately lost at the sack of Troy. But according to Scoto, “now, in this our age, it was as happily recovered, by a studious antiquary, out of some ruins of Asia, who sent a moiety of it, to the court of France (but much sophisticated) wherewith the ladies there now color their hair” (*Volpone* II.iii.240-44; see Brockbank 1968). The rest has been fortunately kept by Scoto himself. Like the classical manuscripts unearthed

by Renaissance humanists, the powder has been rediscovered and now can be disseminated throughout Europe, in popular and courtly venues alike.

As a semi-legitimate humanist who indiscriminately stitches together pieces of learning, the mountebank is succeeded by the Bolognese Doctor figure of the mature *commedia*. Dressed in academic gown, the Doctor shores fragments of classical erudition against his ruin, loosely stitched together in an additive manner typical of oral discourse (Oreglia 1968:87-89):

By stumbling I might have broken my head, by breaking my head the physician would have come and prescribed me some medicine; medicine is made out of drugs, drugs come from the Orient and from the Orient comes the philosophy of Aristotle; Aristotle was the tutor of Alexander the Great, who was the master of the world; the world is supported by Atlas and Atlas has great strength. . . .²⁸

This is rhapsodic composition in its crudest form. The Doctor perhaps provides the most striking combination of literate and oral modalities, in that he adds to his virtuosic pseudo-learning a penchant for almost purely oral sound play, entertainment deemed “low” enough by Perrucci to merit censure. As Pietro Spezzani has shown in his detailed linguistic study of *commedia* language, the Doctor, the Captain, and the Lovers employ the detritus of courtly language. The fragmentary and debased learning of the Doctor, the mythological onomastics of the Captain, and the Petrarchan conceits of the lovers all provide the combinatory formulae of a secondary orality, one dependent for its material on literary discourse but largely following the compositional techniques of oral performance. Comparable to the secondary orality of the Doctor is that of Mark Twain’s charlatan Duke Bilgewater, who “pieces together” an oral version of Hamlet’s soliloquy from several different Shakespearean tragedies. If Bilgewater’s rhapsody offends Shakespeareans, it certainly impresses Huck, who declares that it “knocked the spots off any acting ever I see before” (Twain 1996:179).

The popular entertainers of the Italian cities, as well as the English clown, were seen both by themselves and their nostalgic public as embodying oral traditions transmitted from generation to generation via both orality and writing. *Tarlton’s Jests*, as we have seen, represents the young Robert Armin inheriting the “clown’s suit” of the older, legendary

²⁸ The speech, it may be objected, is not without subordination, but its simple syntax does not relate the major clauses together. The translation is that of Lovett F. Edwards.

performer. And as Thomas Nashe saw it, Kemp was “jest-monger and Vice-gerent to the ghost of Dick Tarlton.”²⁹ Whether or not Hamlet’s Yorick explicitly represents Richard Tarlton, the “infinite jests,” “gibes,” “gambols,” “songs,” and “flashes of merriment” (*Hamlet* V.i.183-84; see Jenkins 1982) powerfully invoked in their ghostly absence suggest a repertorial performative tradition potentially available to new generations of clowns, if tragically unavailable in the dark world of *Hamlet*. In the early part of the sixteenth century, a group of famous professional buffoons that included Domenico Taiacalze and Zuan Polo were at the center of Venetian theater, especially in banquet entertainments and in the *intermezzi* performed in the middle of regular plays. By mid-century the friends, sons, and rivals of the earlier entertainers (such as Zan Cimador, Marcantonio Veneziano, and Giovanni Tabarin) had formed a new generation of buffoons, self-consciously and nostalgically perpetuating a tradition.³⁰ One of their favorite genres was the oral and associative form of the genealogy. And we should not be surprised to find, in pieces like the “Genologia Di Zan Capella,” a thoroughly classical genealogy, with the eponymous buffoon ultimately descending from the “illustrious blood of Troy.”³¹

As a final example of oral-literate negotiation, let us consider the memorialization of the oral performer in print, a cultural phenomenon strikingly homologous in Italy and England. If the Italian mountebank and buffoon longingly pointed back to the medieval *guillari* (and perpetuated some of their techniques), the English clown nostalgically evoked late medieval performers who were becoming almost completely extinct: the professional minstrel, the Lord of Misrule, and the Vice of medieval drama.³² The nostalgic appeal of these ephemeral performers to Renaissance audiences gave rise to the same form in both Italy and England: the “facetie” or “jest-book”—a collection of the witty sayings and deeds of the buffoon or clown. In addition to the anonymous jest-book that memorializes Tarlton, Kemp provides his own memorial reconstruction of his virtuosic oral and athletic morris dance from London to Norwich. His *Nine Daies Wonder* records rhymes improvised by Kemp’s associates in the course of the journey (usually to record colorful folk figures encountered

²⁹ The quotation, from Nashe’s 1590 *Almond for a Parrat*, is cited by Wiles (1987:11).

³⁰ See Povoledo 1975 for a discussion of these Venetian performers.

³¹ Also collected in Pandolfi 1957-61:I, 253-57.

³² See Wiles 1987:17-23.

by Kemp in his dance) and witty retorts of Kemp himself. Kemp writes the pamphlet, he declares in the prologue, to correct false oral memorials of his feat produced by “lying Ballad-mongers.” Robert Armin’s literate rendering, in *Quips Upon Questions*, of the multivoiced rhyming improvisation that legend had him inheriting from Richard Tarlton delicately negotiates orality and writing in its frequent audience addresses, its indifferent punctuation, and its oral cadences. While touring England between 1595-97 with the Lord Chandos company, Armin studied village idiots and “natural” fools retained in noble households, and then summarized some of his findings in *Foole Upon Foole*. Of course, Armin’s purpose in publishing literary accounts of natural, illiterate fools was not folkloric and archival but intended to help negotiate an upward social transition from goldsmith’s apprentice to a gentleman of letters. As such, Armin’s publishing is comparable in aim and function to that of famous *commedia* actors like Francesco Andreini, founding member of the prestigious Gelosi troupe, who memorialized his improvisations as Capitano Spavento in the 1607 commonplace book *Le bravure del Capitano Spavento*. And yet the oral-literate negotiation does not move simply and in one direction from the improvisational stage to the premeditated page, because the 1621 Bruni passage cited above shows that Andreini’s commonplace book was frequently used by subsequent actors as a basis for improvisational composition, the kind of formulaic and residually oral rhapsody practiced by the *commedia* and the clown. Orality and literacy are negotiated in the never-ending oscillation of verbal formulae between page and stage.

The similarities I have begun to trace between the Italian and English professional theaters do not arise from direct influence, but from the presence of striking cultural and historical homologies in the two theaters. In both Italy and England, the revolution in consciousness wrought by the printing press did not suppress—and perhaps even fostered—a great nostalgia for the oral performer, a nostalgia that also resulted from the decline of agrarian festive traditions. The Italian *zanni* and the English clown are urban representations of rural figures, and descend from oral rather than literate traditions. Their principally oral natures fit uneasily into a drama largely governed, even in England, by literate modalities. The relationship between these oral figures and the literate drama could manifest itself, alternatively, in outright conflict (expressed by Hamlet in his speech to the players), competition (the *agôn* between Will Summers and the

script-based actors in *Summer's Last Will and Testament*), accommodation (the institution of the jig outside of the main plot), or, most often, a precarious but productive negotiation.

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