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Renaissance Theatergrams: from Italy to England

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Edizioni ETS

SKENÈ. Texts and Studies (https://textsandstudies.skeneproject.it/index.php/TS)
Supplement to *SKENÈ. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*

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www.edizioniets.com
Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)
Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN (pdf) 978-88467-6970-1
ISBN 978-88467-6971-8
ISSN 2464-9295

AIRSR
Anglo-Italian Renaissance Studies Reprints

General Editor: Michele Marrapodi

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(Cesare Ripa, *Allegory of the Printing Press*, 1645)

Acknowledgments

This volume owes its existence and bears my warmest thanks to Michele Marrapodi, who launched it, Robert Henke, who filled its sails, and Matthew Mason, who brought it into port.

LGC
Berkeley, June 2024

Contents

Introduction

Robert Henke

The twelve essays of Louise George Clubb collected in this volume comprise a body of work that has transformed our understanding of Renaissance theatre. Her books and essays, published over fifty years, have changed the ways we think about sources and influences, provided a new comparative methodology, and resituated Shakespeare not as an isolated, meteoric genius but as a figure belonging to the international, and not just English, theatre of the age. Collaboration and collective creation has marked the process, material, and result of her research. In regard to process, the work derives from both individual, steady persistence and deep absorption of Italian scholarship on Cinquecento theatre. Her material extends the clearly collaborative nature of commedia dell'arte "composition" to Italian Renaissance theatre – and Shakespeare – at large. And the result is that a generation of scholars, including the present author, has found the theatregram method extremely productive, as will generations to come. If Clubb argues that Renaissance theatre was made, in large part, out of theatre, considerable research has been made of her research.

For Clubb's reassessment of Italian Renaissance theatre, her reappraisal of what constitutes a "source", and her innovative comparative methodology that realigns Shakespeare within an international context all stem from her generative concept of the theatregram: a modular theatrical unit or microstructure that, by "fission and fusion" as she puts it, is transformed and combined with other modules in myriad ways. Types of modular units include character, character relationships, actions, dialogues, themes, topoi, gestures, moves, stage places, props, linguistic units, and more. Theatregrams can pertain to dramatic concepts, such as plot, and also to the physical and embodied stage. In the Della Porta essay

collected here, she deftly links discreet places on the Renaissance stage to appropriate actions: "windows and balconies lend themselves to love duets, serenades and deceitful masquerades; doors and corners invite eavesdropping; roofs facilitate slanging matches between combatants on different levels; while groundfloor rooms (usually specified as *camere terrene*) are useful for imprisonment, hiding lovers or exchanging identities" (122). This analysis makes clear the self-generating nature of Renaissance theatre in Clubb's picture, as theatregrams of place generate theatregrams of action. As Clubb has shown us over the course of her distinguished career, Renaissance theatre is structured like a language, at once conceptual and embodied, spoken by Ariosto, the traveling *comici*, and Shakespeare.

The essays collected here, reflecting Clubb's expertise as both *italianista* and *comparatista*, divide into two sections: the first on Italian drama and the second on the English reception of Italian Renaissance theater.

If Clubb's craft-based insight into the "technology" of Renaissance theatre were limited to the arenas of improvising actors and actor-writers such as Ruzante and Shakespeare, it would be interesting enough. But in reading hundreds of scripted Italian plays, she shows that not only the more recognizable Italian Renaissance playwrights (Ariosto, Bibbiena, Machiavelli) but a galaxy of *commedia erudita* and *commedia grave* writers made up this system, and that it was from them that the *comici* took their plots, characters, and actions. What's more, as Clubb illustrates, late Cinquecento playwrights such as Della Porta got as well as they gave, cycling *Arte* characters and gags back into their own scripts. As Richard Andrews has demonstrated in *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy,* scripted theatre and the kinds of plays performed by the often highly literate *commedia dell'arte* actors formed one system. And just as mathematical formulas offer endless variations, the modular and formulaic repertory Clubb identifies in Renaissance scripts and scenarios abounds in variety and plenitude. Witness the diverse types of characters that range throughout Della Porta's plays: "Moors, Neapolitan criminals, charlatan magicians, medical doctors, boastful Spanish captains, Latinizing pedants, and seagoing foreigners from the Croatian port of Ragusa" (118).

As Clubb elucidates the rich modular repertory of Italian Renaissance theatre, we appreciate the innovative, avant-garde, and generative contributions of an art form that has been undervalued when compared to the conspicuous achievements of Italian Renaissance painting, sculpture, architecture, philology, and humanistic inquiry. Clubb demonstrates the influential role of ancient theatre for the *commedia erudita*; it was a "luminous clue" (Clubb 1989, 6) for humanist playwrights reviving the dramatic texts of Plautus, Terence, and Seneca. Clue and inspiration, but not blueprint: the ancients alerted Italian Quattrocento and Cinquecento humanists to the idea of dramatic form and structure that they believed was lacking in medieval *feste*, *farse*, *sacre rappresentazioni* and *favole mitologiche*. Ancient theatre offered instead a theatrical model with coherent principles, a technology of playmaking, and a commitment to controlled verisimilitude and the representation of reality. And the Italians ran with it. What emerges in Clubb's work is a magisterial study of Renaissance *imitatio* beyond the more familiar cases of lyric poetry and romance epic. For Quattrocento humanists, the twelve plays of Plautus discovered by Nicholas of Cusa in 1428 were like the ancient texts "disinterred" by Petrarch in Thomas Greene's study (1982) of Renaissance imitation – creative prompts. One can even say that Clubb excavates the excavators, as her voluminous and attentive reading introduces us to neglected playwrights such as Girolamo Bargagli, Raffaello Borghini, Cristoforo Castelletti, Pietro Cresci, Bernardino Pino da Cagli, Antonfrancesco Grazzini, Luigi Groto, Angelo Ingegneri, Luigi Pasqualigo, Orlando Pescetti, Alessandro Piccolomini, and Sforza Oddi. Unconstrained by the regionalism of many Italian theatre historians, she provides both national and international perspectives. No theatrical genre is neglected: the harder-edged *commedia erudita* of the early Cinquecento, the invention of romantic comedy as epitomized by *Gl'ingannati*, the structurally tragicomedic *commedia grave*, tragedy, rich strands of religious drama, and of course pastoral. As the essays on Ferrara and "Italian Renaissance Theatre" here demonstrate, Clubb gives due attention to canonical figures like Ariosto and Bibbiena, along with their political and cultural contexts. But she goes well beyond them, providing a dioramic view of Italian theatre, from Ferraran court experiments in the 1470s to the early Seicento.

Many of the salient theatregrams of Italian Renaissance drama – and Shakespearean comedy – revolve around a sexual center, infused by medieval *novelle* and romances, that was alien to Plautus and Terence. (The eponymous female character in Plautus' *Casina* never sets foot on stage.) First, Bibbiena in his groundbreaking 1513 *Calandria* splits the twins of Plautus' *Menaechmi* by gender, with each sibling either choosing to or constrained to cross-dress – thus creating a new theatregram by "fission". Then, some twenty years later, and drawing on medieval romance and earlier plays such as Pollastra's *Parthenio* (an edited edition of which Clubb has published [2010]), the Sienese Accademia degli Intronati develops the theme of romantic pathos with the cross-dressed heroine Lelia of *Gl'ingannati*. A romantic heroine needs a confidante, and this theatregram of character alignment generates both modules of situated action, such as the mocking review of the suitors (e.g., Portia and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*) and theatregrams of language, as the *innamorata* now has someone before whom she can articulate her pathos. In this way, Italian theatre develops a new stage technology for interior expression. A "neo-classical" theatre, to be sure, but one that used Plautus and Terence as "invitations to form" (Guillén 1971) as it went well beyond classical comedy to develop romantic comedy and as it experimented with mixed genres unknown to the ancients.

Many of Clubb's reflections on Italian Renaissance theatre correct unhelpful binaries mostly introduced by romantic and/or Marxist-tilting critics: classical/romantic, learned/spontaneous, conservative/progressive, and elite/popular. In fact, as Clubb shows, Italian Renaissance theatre was both neo-classical and romantic; drew from careful humanist study and created an enduring improvisatory theatre; conserved the legacy of classical drama and also innovated; and was developed in courts and academies even as it integrated performance traditions from street and piazza.

Another of Clubb's unique contributions is to weave Italian Renaissance drama into its cultural contexts, especially that of humanism, as is particularly clear in this volume's essay on Castiglione. The endeavor of "*nova commedia*", she astutely observes, was part of a humanist, project intent on making Ferrara, Florence, Rome, or even "Italy" an international cultural vanguard, just as with the other arts. In the "Staging Ferrara" essay, the work of humanist

excavation and imitation begins in the Estense court of the 1470s: the Plautine texts are collected, edited, translated, and performed, which sets the stage for Ariosto's breakout *La Cassaria* (1508) and *I suppositi* (1509). The Medici pope Leo X, who was tutored by the humanist Poliziano, is shown to be a powerful catalyzing force for theatrical production, whether in Florence, Ferrara, or Rome – the latter the site of the famous 1514 performance of Bibbiena's *La Calandria*. Clubb goes on to link the project of the new drama with the paradoxical, serio-ludic spirit of humanism itself. It is an "an art that tries to have it both ways" (102) – an art both ancient and modern, conservative and avant-garde, native and foreign.

The second section of essays in this volume examine the deep and pervasive effect that Italian Renaissance theater had on the English, particularly Shakespeare. In addition to demonstrating the innovation, the richness, and the plenitude of scripted and improvised Italian Renaissance theatre, Clubb points us to a new understanding of source and influence, and a new comparative methodology. Clubb does not discount the gains of traditional, positivistic *Quellenstudien* in the arena of Italian and English Renaissance theatre; in fact her work provides probably the most detailed catalogues available anywhere of one-to-one, Italian-to-English "influence", conventionally understood. Her choice of Giovanni Battista Della Porta for her first book may have been prompted by the fact that he was the Italian playwright most translated in England, whether in English or Latin. But she soon realized the limitations of traditional source study. Her expansive reading of Italian dramatic scripts, *Arte* scenarios, and Shakespeare's plays led to the striking conclusion that, if one considers modular structures, these worlds are strikingly the same – one essay of hers, not included in this collection, is titled "How Do We Know When Worlds Meet?" (2011). If traditional, play-to-play source study emphasizes difference (the brilliant *Twelfth Night* dwarfs any single Italian 'source', so one argues), the theatregram method italicizes similarities. And since theatregrams tend to sort by genre (though they can spark from one to another, particularly from comedy to tragedy), dramatic genre becomes the salient unit of comparison rather than the individual play. The modular units deployed in Italian and Shakespearean comedy and pastoral are

revealed to be remarkably consonant. Strikingly, for what is in each case a controlled and selective representation of reality, they share exclusions as well as inclusions. What emerges is a "kinship", a shared repertory, a common system. The "influence" of Italian drama on Shakespeare is, as Clubb aptly puts it, "the more pervasive for being unspecific" (1989, 2).

The method leads to surprising and interesting turns. Della Porta's *Gli Duoi Fratelli Rivali* certainly bears comparison with *Much Ado about Nothing*: they each are dramatic adaptations of a Bandello novella (for Shakespeare, probably through Belleforest's French translation). Similarities are duly noted, though of a wider-angle view than those normally favored by source hunters. What Clubb emphasizes instead are structural and generic features: the play's tragicomedic structure and mode, the mixing of high and low. But *Gli Duoi Fratelli Rivali*'s comparative importance goes beyond *Much Ado About Nothing*: its modular units appear elsewhere in Shakespeare, as with the mobile structure of "the balcony or window scene combined with lyric evocation of the beloved as sunlight" (319), which Clubb traces through a Flaminio Scala scenario, *Fratelli Rivali* (2.2), and of course *Romeo and Juliet* (2.2). Analysis by modular unit, rather than from play to play, leads to comparative studies of the heroine-confidante relationship, the mocking review of the suitors, and extraordinary connections between Italian pastoral drama and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As You Like It* ("Pastoral Jazz from the Writ to the Liberty"). What is important, when looking at the Italians, is not the individual author, but the overall, collective production. This is easy enough to see for the commedia dell'arte collectives, and for the academies like the Intronati who wrote plays collaboratively, but it also rings true for all Italian Renaissance playwrights. Shakespeare's unique artistry comes into even clearer focus when one comes to know, after reading Clubb, the modular repertory that he absorbed from the Italians.

Without annulling the idea of authorial agency, especially regarding Shakespeare's deft deployment of Italian resources, Clubb offers us trans-authorial intertextuality in practice. Less a new theory of intertextuality, as if we needed one, than intertextuality from the ground up, and emerging from the facts. Renaissance

theatregrams belonged to no one in particular, as the traveling players knew so well. Influence is not linear and traceable, from Shakespeare play back to a single Italian script or scenario. If a filmmaker creates a work with cynical heroes, stark lighting effects, frequent flashbacks, and intricate plots, it may be both unnecessary and unhelpful to identify a particular film noir as the influence.

Fresh interpretive insights abound in these pages—when before has *Merry Wives'* final episode in Windsor Park been so elegantly interpreted in the light of Renaissance pastoral? ("Pastoral Jazz from the Writ to the Liberty") – but Clubb's self-professed central project is to uncover *what is there*. The work is inductive, and rigorously so: the data is collected from reading and assessing hundreds of Italian plays and scenarios along with Shakespeare's plays. Throughout her career, Clubb has both benefitted from and invited, in print and in person, collaborative endeavor of the kind that scientists practice every day. Some of Clubb's closest colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley have been scientists; when she describes theatregrams being created "by fission and fusion" we may catch a whiff of Berkeley science. And in "A Magic Book of Renaissance Shows", a portrait of Clubb the sleuth complements that of inductive scientist. Encountering, in the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library, a strange codex of 115 watercolors featuring hunchback farces, *commedia dell'arte*-style performances, jousts, tournaments and landscapes, she works through and past the received view that the codex served to advertise the repertory of a *commedia dell'arte* company. A combination of persistence and serendipity led her to the rare book collection at the Getty Research Institute, where she examined a modern magic book by the magician and historian of magic Ricky Jay as well as similar books from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to a meeting with Jay himself. The conclusion: rather than being a sample book for a *commedia dell'arte* company, the odd codex was a magic "blow book": a magic prop, divided by tabs into different categories, by which one can flip through the text displaying to the viewing only the images in a given category. Reading between the lines of this delightful essay suggests the joy – and even fun – that Clubb (a delightful conversationalist as well as accomplished pianist) has received from her research.

Reading hundreds of plays and scenarios offers an interesting third alternative to two contrasting reading methods associated with comparative literature. In what was in its day considered a kind of disciplinary Bible, Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* conducts close, rhetorical readings that radiate outward into broader historical discussions. More recently, digital humanities has proposed various forms of "distant reading", using units of measurement such as book titles, or word phrases. In her own way, Clubb incorporates both the near and the far. The *attentiveness* of Clubb's reading allows her to assess the pulse and shape of dramatic form within a given play. At the same time the *range* of her purview provides an ample data base for modular repertories.

In addition to linking Italian Renaissance theatre to the intellectual movement of humanism, Clubb demonstrates its capacity to absorb both elite and popular forms and practices. The *novella* presents an interesting case. On the one hand, the role of Boccaccio, Giraldi, Ser Fiorentino, and Straparola in Shakespeare's work is obvious enough, and has been duly examined by Geoffrey Bullough and other source critics. But scholarly emphasis on the low-hanging fruit of *novella*-to-play influence has obscured the more important resonance of Shakespeare's theatrical peers in Italy, whether they are playwrights or actors or both, like Ruzante. Clubb's Shakespeare, far from being a solitary romantic genius, was a collaborative theatre technician, who was keen to know how the Italians themselves adapted the *novella* to the stage. Both Italian playwrights and Shakespeare ransacked the Italian stories (in fact, many of the same *novelle*), but they needed to transform this *materia* into dramatic form, which among other things involved fleshing out the relatively limited character alignments of Boccaccio and Giraldi for what suited an Italian or English acting company. Without allowing the *novella* to eclipse the formative resonance of Italian theatre for Shakespeare, Clubb specifies its importance in fresh ways. *Commedia erudita* plays such as *La Calandria*, which at points reads like a commonplace book for the *Decameron*, emerge from the fruitful marriage of medieval narrative (including epic romance) and a useable ancient theatre. Clubb tellingly notes that the Boccaccio stories chosen by both the Italian playwrights and Shakespeare tend to center on the romantic heroine (e.g., *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Cymbeline* and their

Boccaccian sources). The *novella*'s importance for Shakespeare is decentered to some extent, but italicized in its particularity. Beyond the *novella*, Clubb shows how permeable Italian Renaissance theatre was to various performative and extra-dramatic practices.

In her accounts of the particular *novelle* selected by Renaissance dramatists, the emergence of romantic comedy from *Parthenio* to *Gl'ingannati*, "woman as wonder" (Clubb 1977) in *commedia grave* and in plays such as *All's Well that Ends Well* or *Measure for Measure*, and the famous actresses of the *commedia dell'arte*, Clubb brilliantly evokes the central role of women in both fictional and actual theatrical worlds. Here, the underrated and understudied plays of the *commedia grave*, whose heroines are as intrepid as they are introspective, contribute richly to the picture. Furthermore, the famous *commedia dell'arte* actresses, most notably Isabella Andreini, provide a case in point for Clubb's argument, most fully developed in *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, that scripted Italian Renaissance theatre cannot be separated from improvised. Andreini herself published a pastoral play, *Mirtilla*, and in the collections of her stage monologues published by her grieving husband Francesco after her death indicate, she rhapsodically stitched together *pezzi* from Petrarch, Plato, and other authors for her on-the-ground stage "compositions".

A generation prior to Isabella Andreini, the Intronati academy had praised the professional actress Vincenza Armani for her literary acumen in stage improvisations that they deemed equal to that of male-scripted drama, singling out her proficiency in the arts of genre: her capacity to shift deftly between the decorums of comedy, tragedy, and pastoral. If the "luminous clue" for early Cinquecento humanist playwrights was the rediscovery of ancient dramatic forms, genre became both organizing principle and conceptual prompt. Clubb does not share the humanists' belief in genre as a natural form, but she understands, in her quest as theatre historian, how the humanists, playwrights, and professional actors did think about genre in their time.

The Italians certainly transformed comedic form, but Plautus and Terence had given them a good starting point. The gradual reveal of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Cinquecento illuminated tragedic form, which then could be modified, following sound Aristotelian

principles, in Giraldi's *tragedie di fin lieto*. But the ancient clues for a possible third genre, from Horace's remarks on the satyr play and the single extant example of Euripides' *Cyclops*, were less clear. The intriguing indeterminacies of the emerging form thus prompt Clubb's career-long investigation of pastoral drama as it unfurled in the course of the sixteenth century. This is precisely where the close-but-wide reading method yields significant data, as she goes well beyond the canonical pastoral dramatists Tasso and Guarini, reading outliers such as Ruzante, a wide range of late Cinquecento and early Seicento dramatists, and the *commedia dell'arte* pastoral plays that have long been recognized as a deep source for *The Tempest*. What emerges are the modular units of Italian dramatic pastoral, as identified in "Pastoral Jazz from the Writ to the Liberty":

> a country setting, forest, wooded island or a pleasance near shepherds' cottages; the presiding figure of Hymen, and/or Venus, Cupid or Jove decreeing mass weddings; courtly shepherds and nymphs; at least one satyr; an enchanter, *mago/a*; sprites, super/subhuman beings; spells and magic potions; dreams and sleep onstage; Ovidian transformations; wild beasts; clown-bumpkins, defining class differences in Arcadia between *pastore* and *villano*, *pecoraio* or *capraio*, who is lustful and coarse but not a rapist like the *satiro*; and clown-visitors from the city, favored especially in the *commedia dell'arte* scenarios (289).

It's a perfect example of the superiority of the theatregram method as comparative instrument: even a quick glance at the above list reveals a much greater kinship between the Italians and Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Tempest*) than between Shakespeare and Lyly. Reading beyond Tasso and Guarini, who both hold to the neo-classical principles of verisimilitude, takes us into the world of Ovidian transformation and magic shared by plays such as Luigi Pasqualigo's *Gl'intricati* (posthumously published 1581) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Clubb thus uncovers Shakespeare's deep kinship with Italian pastoral drama.

Clubb has an intellectual, and one might even say contemplative interest that singles out the pastoral genre for special consideration. The spatial and mental distance from city or court fundamental to

the pastoral idea, whether imposed or chosen, becomes a "fictive room to contemplation" (128) for Clubb, a place for debate, reflection, and in its amatory focus an avenue of interiority, of exploring the human heart at levels that had not been plumbed in Cinquecento comedy and tragedy. And pastoral, whether in the Italians or Shakespeare, nicely illustrates the kind of artistic creativity enabled by Renaissance theatregrams, which Clubb likens to jazz in its continual recycling and reshaping of musical motifs. "Composing" from this rich repertory with a pen or on one's feet is itself like jazz composition, argues Clubb. Literary pastoral itself "is to comedy and tragedy as jazz is to classical music" (292). *Commedia dell'arte* pastoral riffs off of scripted pastoral, and Shakespeare, "the jazziest of all, knew and improvised on the whole repertory of Renaissance theatregrams" (293).

Clubb's own repertory of critical concepts revolving around the theatregram method, collected in these pages, provides a generative legacy for us today and for future scholars. It is at once a deeply learned understanding of Italian Renaissance theatre and Shakespeare, and a rich, and eminently useable, basis for critical and creative work. Perhaps one could even speculate that future work, recycling and transforming Clubb's own critical concepts, might bear some similarity to the creative process that she sees in jazz.

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Finito di stampare nel mese di agosto 2024