Commedia dell'arte Actresses and the Performance of Lovesickness

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Abstract: In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there was a conjunction of interest in erotomania as a “real” medical condition and the representation of that condition in literature and on the popular stage. This period corresponds with the rise of the professional actress of the commedia dell’arte. This paper explores some instances of pazzia (madness) scenes in the scenarios of Flaminio Scala and contemporary accounts of commedia performances with a view to better understanding the role of the professional theatre and professional actress in shaping and reflecting cultural attitudes towards gender-based erotic “distraction.”

Disturbances in psychic and physical well-being caused by frustrations or disappointments in love is a subject that has occupied Western thought since the dialogues of Plato’s Symposium. The history of the idea of lovesickness -- its manifestations, causes, consequences and cures -- is a long and complex one derived of multidisciplinary cross-influence among philosophy, medicine, theology and literature. Throughout its evolution, the disorder, if it be such, has been variously attributed to demonic, divine and medical factors both somatic and psychological. The pervasive but elusive condition, variously termed “erotomania,” “melancholy” and “lovesickness,” apparently continues to plague us to the present day if we regard psychology and self-help sections of bookstores, popular magazines and Internet websites as reliable indicators of societal and individual health and concerns. Each February St. Valentine’s Day is anticipated with a surge of articles and commentaries in mainstream and popular media that seek to explain the causes of erotic desire and frustration through discourses ranging from astrology to neuro-psychology. As Donald Beecher’s detailed edition of seventeenth century French physician Jacques Ferrand’s A Treatise on Lovesickness shows, the history of erotic disorder is anchored in Platonic philosophy and early medical discourse but permeates and overlaps with other spheres of enquiry. Following from the Symposium’s discussion of earthly and divine love, Aristotle’s natural philosophy posited lovesickness as a physical disease. Hippocratic and Galenic medicine continued the discussion of lovesickness in the context of the humoral system; subsequently medieval Arab physicians developed their own theories and the translation of Avicenna’s works in turn influenced the medical schools of Salerno, Bologna and Montpellier in the later middle ages. As Beecher observes, it is difficult to judge whether this disorder, real or imagined, was more pervasive in Renaissance Italy than in other times or places;
however, it is clear that the subject of lovesickness reached a watershed of contributing and often conflicting discourses during the sixteenth century, following the treatises of Battista Fregoso and Marsilio Ficino which renewed the Platonic distinction between divine and earthly love in the context of Counter-Reformation condemnation of the detrimental effects of the earthly Venus. Fueling the philosophical discourses was a literary and cultural fashion that celebrated excess and suffering in love. The threads of philosophy, medicine, theology, and literature culminate in 1610, with the publication of the first edition of Ferrand’s treatise *De la maladie d’amour ou melancholie erotique*, whose subtitle declares it “An unusual discourse that teaches how to recognize the essence, the causes, the signs, and the remedies of this disease of the fantasy.” Comprehensive in its scope and influences, Ferrand’s treatise makes clear the links between expressions of erotic excess -- particularly among the upper classes -- and the literary “script” of the times, as Beecher describes:

Where did the young man learn his posture of suffering if not from the poetry and conventions of his class? Who taught Orlando in *As You Like It* to wander the forest carving Rosalind’s name on trees, and by what contrasting standards does she understand that he must be cured? Ferrand, himself, cannot make his case against pathologically eroticized love without also indicting the courtier and the cultural manners of the aristocratic classes.

While the medieval chivalric romance tradition as well as Petrarchan and novelle models generally cast the suffering lover as a young man, Ferrand’s book examines the effects of erotic melancholy on both genders and reflects an anxiety familiar to its time with the disruptive potential of female sexuality and the need to control and contain that unruly body. Citing literary exempla that caution readers about the results of excessive love, Ferrand writes, “Sappho, the poetess, forlorn in her love for Phaon, hurled herself from the Leucadian rock into the sea, for women are more frequently and more grievously troubled by these ills than are men.” He devotes a chapter to the condition of “uterine fury” and another to the question of “Whether love is greater and therefore worse in women than in men.” Here Ferrand cites Ovid’s Hero confessing to Leander that “I love with an equal fire, but I am not your equal in strength” and comments, “This opinion is confirmed by daily experience which reveals to us a greater number of women witless, maniacal, and frantic from love than men – for men are far less often reduced to such extremities, unless they are effeminate courtiers, nourished on a life of riot and excess and on the breast of courtesans.” Locating the source of women’s erotic fixations in her reproductive function, Ferrand concludes that women are more susceptible to excess in love than men, but allows that “… nature owes her some compensating pleasures for the suffering she endures during pregnancy and childbirth.”

Ferrand’s treatise, like that of his English contemporary, Robert Burton, represents the culmination of writings on the subject of erotic melancholy in a period prior to the developments of the seventeenth century that Foucault examines in *Madness and Civilization*: the Cartesian dismantling of mind and body towards a more polarized understanding of mental and somatic diseases. Duncan Salkeld describes the Renaissance and Baroque conception of the body and mind as follows:

The primary object of medical “knowlage” was naturally the body. But at a time when there was no practical or institutional difference between medicine and psychiatry as there is now, the body was also the object of psychiatric knowledge. Indeed, the body, as a site of personal identity and symbol of social order, was structural to the world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Leaving aside (modern) common sense preoccupations with the mind as a separate immaterial entity, it is possible to see that the conditions for understanding and representing madness in the Renaissance were to a large extent corporeal.
This conception of the body and mind as symbiotic is reflected in Ferrand’s description, quoted above, of lovesickness as a “disease of the fantasy.”

Contemporary with this watershed period of what might now be termed interdisciplinary interest in the subject of love-induced mental disorder is the rise of the professional theatre in Italy. The *commedia dell’arte* began to flourish in the middle of the sixteenth century and reached its fullest scale of Italian-based activity between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This form of theatre had its roots in the urban marketplaces of Renaissance Italy and the activities of mountebanks and charlatans. The early *buffoni* tradition and precursor to professional acting troupes centered around comic performances by the *zanni-magnifico* (servant—master) dyad. Recent scholarship has established that the emergence of the professional actress as part of organized commedia troupes was a central part of its development into a fuller, more complex form of theatre that could contain a wider generic range. The actress and her young male counterpart played the *innamorati*, the thwarted young lovers of the domestic plot of a typical scenario. These unmasked roles injected a comparatively realistic presence amidst the grotesquely exaggerated stock figures of the *senex*, clowns and braggart soldiers who made up the rest of the *commedia dell’arte* world. Henke’s study shows evidence of the range, breadth and style of the actress and how they introduced a new mimetic ideal into the previously farcical all-male genres of popular comedy: “For the actress, the arts of decorum and genre allowed her to develop a new form of sustained mimesis, which would increasingly be the standard against which acting would be judged – and the *buffone* critiqued.” In spite of this evolution toward verisimilitude for which the actress was in large part responsible, evidence of a performance sub-generic, the *pazzia* or mad scene, complicates our understanding of the more representational role of women onstage, since “The fiction of madness licenses a departure from the aesthetic of mimesis that the actress was largely responsible in bringing to the professional theatre.” This essay examines evidence of the *pazzia* in extant scenarios from an early seventeenth century anthology as well as in one contemporary audience account with a view to understanding the function and effect of this aberrant performance style, the reasons it attracted the attention of audiences and actresses and how it contributes to or complicates our understanding of love-induced madness in this period.

Plays of the *commedia dell’arte* genre survive not as full scripts but as scenarios designed as cues for elaborate improvisation. Among the surviving collections of scenarios of this early period is that of Flaminio Scala, an actor and company manager of the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century who worked with the first generation of the theatrical dynasty of the Andreini family. His collection of fifty plays, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, published one year after Ferrand’s treatise on lovesickness, is assumed to be a kind of idealized compilation of the commedia repertoire of the major companies of the time, particularly that of the *Gelosi*. The plays of Scala’s anthology centre around intergenerational family conflict, positioning the family as microcosm of social structures and hierarchies. Typically a scenario will begin with a thwarted love plot in which the *innamorati* are prevented from pursuing their relationship by the controlling older generation whose motives often spring from transgressive, inappropriate carnal interests. A typical plot trajectory moves from a crisis of thwarted or unrequited love, through chaotic carnivalesque inversion involving comic buffoonish subplots and ends with a reordering of the status quo in which the *senex* figures concede their egregious designs, fools are gently reprimanded and the two pairs of *innamorati* are married in the intended configuration. Such plots afford ample opportunities for scenes representing distraction wrought by frustrated love interests.

Two of Scala’s scenarios feature fully scripted mad scenes, *The Madness of Isabella* (*La pazzia d’Isabella*) and *The Mad Princess* (*La forsennata prencipessa*). Another anonymous version of *The Madness of Isabella* has attracted some critical examination due to a fairly detailed extant description by an
observer, Giuseppe Pavoni, of the performance by Isabella Andreini and the Gelosi troupe in 1589 at the wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinando de’Medici and Christine of Lorraine in Florence.\textsuperscript{21}

The \textit{dramatis personae} of \textit{The Mad Princess} comprises single fathers and their children, which is consistent with the comedies, but here the players are kings, princes and nobles and the plot trajectory follows that of a revenge tragedy.\textsuperscript{22} As the scenario begins, Tarfe, Prince of Morocco, has eloped with Alvira, princess of Portugal, to the kingdom of Fessa, where he promptly falls in love with Fatima, Princess of Fessa, and abandons Alvira.\textsuperscript{23} The king of Fessa soon becomes enamoured of the jilted princess. Meanwhile, Belardo, Prince of Portugal, kills Tarfe and presents his head to Alvira who goes mad from grief and drowns herself. The ambiguous and anti-heroic characters of the leader figures serve to focus the play all the more sharply on the actions of the women and their servants; this is a tragedy of two oppressed princesses and their oppressed followers. Alvira is driven mad by the cruelty of her brother who has pursued her with the intent to kill or punish her, but settles on tormenting her with the severed head of her unfaithful lover. Fatima and Pelindo each bravely face the wrath of the King who orders the murder of Pelindo and the torment of his daughter.\textsuperscript{24}

Presented by her brother with head of her treacherous lover, Alvira “expresses her grief for the death of her lover, and speaking many strange wild words, she becomes frantic, mad and delirious, tearing her hair and ripping her clothes. She turns to run out of the city towards the sea. The guards go in to tell Belardo.”\textsuperscript{25} Soon after she re-enters and in the presence of the king and her brother and continues her \textit{pazzia}. The prompt for the first mad scene in Act II reads:

\begin{quote}
At that moment, Alvira, mad, enters, doing and saying many mad things and all the time joking about the head of Tarfe and of his betrayal. She says to them, “I am not surprised that the water from the river is sweet and the sea is salt, because the salad is always together with its philosophical oil and with your Strait of Gibraltar or, as you will, Zibilterra, either one or the other name it comes to be called, even as you wish to your fatal destiny; that poor Ursa Major ties his boots with a pinching lace and goes to dig oysters and large muscles in the Gulf of Duckweed near Syria. A thing is or it isn’t. If you wish it, so it is, and it is an evil year when God grants it to you; and in your basket you will find an evil Easter; and in your accustomed manner you will reap evil always, for all from above is purposeful.” Pedrolino and Burratino laugh and improvise other nonsense in imitation of what she has said. Then she begins to beat them, so they run off along the seashore, and she follows. Here the second act ends.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

The second scene in the third act interrupts the climax of the military action in which the Prince of Portugal has been killed by the King of Morocco. The messenger and the court of Fessa are audience to Alvira’s second outburst, which takes place on a rock at the sea’s edge:

Suddenly Alvira appears upon a very high rock. After shouting a great deal of mad nonsense, she says at last: “Oh, what a magnificent mirror appears before my eyes. In this mirror I see the sun all aflame, ready to roast on the spit over a fire of ice that traitor, the Prince of Morocco, for stealing a hen from a cock at the inn of the Moor. Up, up cavalier of honour. It is from here one leaps the perilous river. This is the road to Mount Flagon. This is the true way of the menstrual flows and the dung heap. This is the famous chariot of Fusina, and this is the true caldron of the macaroni in which are to be found the breeches and gowns of the wisest philosophers. Farewell, farewell all, farewell.” Having said this, she jumps into the sea, drowns, and is soon no more. The King is deeply grieved by the death of Alvira.\textsuperscript{27}
The Madness of Isabella, a relatively uncomplicated scenario, prefaced by a contrastingly lengthy and detailed argomento, which describes how “a beautiful Turkish girl” comes to be the Isabella of the scenario. The setting here is an exotic marine voyage: the argomento tells us that Orazio, traveling Genova to be nearer Flaminia, is abducted by Turks and sold to a sea captain who is married to a beautiful young woman, with whom Orazio falls in love on sight. This Turkish girl converts to Christianity and kills her husband and two-year-old child in order to elope with Orazio and flees to Italy where she “becomes known as Isabella.” The action of the scenario picks up with Orazio having tired of Isabella and now planning to poison her to be free to marry Flaminia. When she discovers his plot “Isabella is struck dumb; then bursting out in a bitter volley of words against Orazio, against Love, against Fortune, and against herself, she finally falls into a mad frenzy.” Later she hears from her servant a false rumour of Orazio’s death, at which point “She goes completely mad, tears her clothes from her body, and as if pushed by some force, goes running up the street.”

The third act records Isabella’s mad monologue in some detail:

I remember the year I could not remember that a harpsichord sat beside a Spanish Pavana dancing with a gagliarda of Santin of Parma, after which the lasagna, the macaroni and the polenta dressed in brown, but they could not stand one another because the stolen cat was the friend of the beautiful girl from Algeria. Even so, it pleased the caliph of Egypt to decide that the following morning both were to be put in the stocks.

Although distinct in plot and genre, the two pazzi give us some insight into a similar performance practice: a three-part trajectory of linguistic confusion, disrobing and physical flight. In each play the madwoman speaks in apparently incoherent manner before disheveling her clothes to some extent and then running away. Although apparently incoherent and macaronic, the mad speeches as Scala has chosen to script them make clear certain themes. In each there are similar elemental and mythological references; zoological allusions and anthropomorphic descriptions of food; equation of philosophers with food and other Rabellian inversions; Isabella makes scatological references while Alvira equates menstruation and fertility with a dung heap and anthropomorphizes a constellation; Isabella appears to identify herself with a cat and Alvira a hen. Each refers to her place of origin from which she has been abducted by a feckless lover, and their physical exile is clearly parallel to their distracted mental states. The scenes are also similarly bracketed and metatheatrical. Alvira is watched in the first scene by the comic characters, Pedrolino and Burratino, who appropriate her pazzia as a basis for their own improvised parody, and later by the king and his court who witness her final “performance”. Isabella’s madness is also treated as a play-within-the-play, as the other characters witness her outbursts; in the final scene Franceschina enters shouting, “Run, run, if you want to see the madwoman!” The scenario repeats twice that she is “dressed as a madwoman” which further reinforces a standardized tradition of the pazzia in performances. Like a grotesque aria, the pazzia in each scenario is similarly set apart from the action of the play.

The professional actress had emerged with the major commedia dell’arte companies in the mid 1560s and was an established presence by the time Scala published his Teatro. By no means, however, were they universally accepted by all sectors of Post Tridentine Italy. At least part of the appeal of the pazzia for certain audiences was the risqué semi-nudity involved, which heightened the already transgressive presence of the real female body in the public space. The display of that body as a site of erotically induced madness made the actress highly visible but also conveyed ambivalent messages about the parameters in which the female body was allowed to enact itself and represent other identities. Giuseppe Pavoni’s description of Isabella Andreini’s performance of The Madness of Isabella at the Medici wedding in 1589 suggests there was something more or other than prurience
that captivated audiences who witnessed a pazzia, at least in a courtly setting. In this plot Isabella has been tricked by Flavio who, posing in the darkness as her intended lover, Fileno, tricks her into eloping with him. When she discovers she has been kidnapped she goes mad. Pavoni’s diary describes the performance:

Isabella, in that she found herself deceived by Flavio’s insidiousness, and not knowing how to remedy the harm he had done, gave herself over completely to sorrow and thus was overcome by passion. And allowing herself to succumb to rage and fury, she went out of herself and, like a madwoman, went running through the city, stopping now this one, now that one, and speaking now in Spanish, now in Greek, now in Italian, and many other languages but all without reason. And among other things she set to speaking French and also singing certain canzonettas in the French manner, giving such delight to the most serene bride that she could hardly express it. She then mixed in imitations of the languages of all her comedians, like that of Pantalone, of Gratiano, of Zanni, of Pedrolino, of Francatrippa, of Burattino, of Captain Cardone, and of Franceschina so naturally and with so much eccentricities that it is not possible to put into words the valour and virtue of this woman. Finally by the art of magic, with certain waters they gave her to drink, she returned to her original state and thus, with elegant and learned style explaining the passions of love, and the travails of those who find themselves in similar predicaments, she made an end to the comedy. Demonstrating in the performance of this madness her sane and learned intellect, Isabella leaving such a murmur and marvel in her audience, that while the world endures, her beautiful eloquence and valour will always be praised.  

Implicit in this account is a performance practice similar to those of Scala’s plays, particularly in the reference to linguistic confusion and physical flight. The Isabella of this performance extends the invented language of the mad speech to actual languages appropriate to her audience. Although he begins his review clearly within the fictional world of the play’s characters, Pavoni’s description and praise is centered primarily on the performance of Andreini the actress whose artistry he evaluates in Humanist terms, lauding her accomplishment in music and languages. Significantly, unlike in Scala’s play in which Alvira is imitated by the clowns, here the actress as madwoman claims control of the scene by mimicking her fellow cast members, which augments the metatheatric structure of the scene, drawing attention to the performance within the performance. Conspicuously absent is any hint of the ribald buffoonery or overt sexuality typically associated with commedia dell’arte performances and apparent in Scala’s scenarios. Most striking is the observer’s assertion that in the performance of madness, the actress demonstrates her “sane and learned intellect.”

In Scala’s tragedy Alvira succumbs to her madness and drowns herself, while in his comedy, the realm of averted threat, Isabella is eventually “cured” of her love-induced disorder by Doctor Gratiano’s “secret compound which heals all the senses.” In Pavoni’s account of the variant play, the madwoman is cured with a combination of magic and waters she is given to drink. Madness in this period, often called “distraction,” was understood as a temporary state distinct from “natural” foolishness, which was an inherent or endemic condition. The states of madness examined in the scenarios above are similarly induced by external forces having to do with the trials of the love plots. In these scenes the actresses perform the “real” madness of the character’s experience. Madness could also be feigned, as in Scala’s The Fake Madwoman (La finta pazzia), in which Isabella feigns madness in order to evade the marriage to Doctor Gratiano arranged by her father, Pantalone. This madness is more akin to the “antik disposition” of Hamlet, or the strategic raving of Poor Tom, in King Lear. In this heavily ironic scene, Flaminia, disguised as a male astrologer, diagnoses Isabella and recommends the “coital cure” that was a common remedy in medieval medical texts.
In *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, Carol Thomas Neely discusses the function of the various representations of madness onstage in the early modern period and how the performance of diagnosis influenced observers’ understanding of the condition and similar conditions:

Onstage and off madness is diagnosed by observers – first laypersons, then in some cases specialists. The period’s audiences participate with onstage watchers in distinguishing madness from sanity and from its look-alikes: loss of grace, bewitchment, possession or fraud. Madness is represented as a state of dislocation – separated in part from the self who performs and the spectators who watch – but not as a supernatural invasion. For theatre to reach its audience it must be readable. For this the stage develops a new form of speech, peculiar to the mad, and cues for how to read it. In doing so it makes itself popular and useful.42

The intersection Neely describes of medical discourse and the popular stage is clear in Scala’s scenarios in which the *pazzia* is bracketed from the action of the plot and often filtered through a metatheatrical structure that invites its audience not only to identify with the sufferer of lovesickness but also to participate in the evaluation of the condition. Victims of lovesickness are surrounded by characters such as the Dottore and the crone Pasquella, parodic representations of the realms of official and non-official healing arts. Although the performance of madness still mimics or invokes possession and is frequently interpreted by other characters as such, Neely discusses how the performance of madness as a medical condition on the professional stage in English drama of the period humanized it: “By discrediting supernatural explanation and rituals, these plays bring madness into the realm of the human. By representing diagnosis onstage they encourage it in their audiences.”43 Similarly, in the case of *commedia dell’arte*, although the appearance of madness is closely linked to supernatural explanation that remained a part of the climate of Counter-Reformation Italy, the ultimate revelation that it is curable or feigned (*finto*) places it in a secular realm. Cesare Molinari’s discussion of Andreini’s famous *pazzia* as recorded by Pavoni echoes Neely’s assertion that the performance of madness sharpens our focus on the fluidity of human identity, but allows that it does so partly through the suggestion or invocation of the demonic.44 He describes her use of other languages, not only the generalized “descort” of “disharmonious speech” and its association with possession, but also the imitation of the other characters in the play, by which she “metamorphoses” and loses any appearance of coherent identity.45 This metamorphosis is implicit in Pavoni’s assertion that in her madness Isabella goes “outside of herself” (*…al furore usci fuori di se stessa*…).46

The *innamorata*’s mad scene in Scala’s *Teatro* as well as in Pavoni’s contemporary account complicates our understanding of the repertoire of the actress in turn-of-the-century *commedia dell’arte*. The actress became a figure of literary refinement and injected a higher degree of representational playing style into the comedies; at the same time, her presence on the public stage was culturally transgressive and the *pazzia* licensed a degree of exaggeration in performance which pushed the boundaries not only of social hierarchy and gender decorum but of the integrity of the human psyche and subject itself.47 While the mad scenes undoubtedly broadened the performance repertoire of the actress, the question of audience reception and effect is less conclusive. Theatrical comedy thrives on trickery and ambivalence and the *commedia dell’arte* was a satiric form whose partial reliance on improvisation was designed to evade censorial control. The *pazzia* regendered the idea of lovesickness, locating it in the female body, a terrain that required strict social vigilance and enforcement.48 Confined in its temporary and fictional space, the performance of madness freed the actress and her character from that control and licensed a rare display of public sexuality; at the same time it displayed the curative power of medicine and its practitioners to return that unruly mind and
body to its proper social place and function. In this regard, the public stage could function to reinforce medical texts like Ferrand’s and join in the social regulation of love and its apparently damaging effects. Beecher writes:

[Ferrand’s] age was not only one of learning, of idealizing the past, of celebrating rarified beauty, of rendering the conduct of the courtier into a work of art, of refining the appetites for transcendental pleasures through the appreciation of mortal objects but it was also an age of regulation and controls, of dynastic and mercantile goals that limited personal freedoms, an age of religious censorship and repression, and of strict civil codes.”

Pavoni’s account of Isabella Andreini’s virtuoso pazzia sublates the transgressive potential of the representation of lovesickness into a corrective display of “sanity” and superior humanist erudition. Laudng and emphasizing the actress’s accomplishments, Pavoni effectively effaces the character’s experience and elides the representation of a temporary departure from social control into a triumph of controlled artistry. However ambivalent temporary or apparently incoherent, actresses of the early commedia dell’arte gave madness a language and material body that contributed a significant dimension to the cultural discourses surrounding lovesickness in the Baroque period.

Notes


3 Ferrand, 215.

4 Ferrand, 155.

5 Dawson discusses the shift in the gendering of lovesickness from male to female during the Renaissance, p. 3. See also Chapter 3 “Beyond Ophelia: The Anatomy of Female Melancholy” for her revision of the dominant critical model of female lovesickness as located primarily in the body and male melancholy as a psychological or mental state.

6 Ferrand, 229.

7 Ferrand, 263, 311.

8 Ferrand, 311.

9 Ferrand, 312. See also Dawson, 92-93.

10 Sawday also discusses the coexistence of body and soul in this period. See chapter 1, “The Renaissance Body” 16-22.

11 Salkeld, 56.


15 Henke, 98.

16 Henke, 104.

17 Henke, 181-2.

18 Henke, 185.

19 There is a pervasive animus throughout Scala’s plots toward the powerful older male generation, which no doubt reflects real social conditions of the time that disempowered young men. Much has been made of the prolonged adolescence of males in the Italian Renaissance. See Laura Giammetti, and Guido Ruggiero, “Introduction” in *Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: John’s Hopkins, 2003): xi-x. Michael Rocke, writes “Denied economic
autonomy under their fathers’ patriarchal rule, and forbidden significant civic roles, young men lived in a state of prolonged and powerless adolescence.” (152) Chojnacki examines in detail through legal documents the convoluted and shifting family and gender allegiances that resulted from marriage and property law in early Renaissance Italy. The issue of dowry-inflation particularly produced competing interests between fathers and prospective husbands: “The social interventionism of the early fifteenth-century state produced official definitions of the roles of men and women in society, fashioning a prescriptive gender structure that hardened the differences between husbands and fathers (and by silent exclusion highlighted the otherness of unmarried male adults), and gave official standing to the variations and nuances of womanhood by vocation, age, marital status and social class.” (84) The opening dialogue of Scala’s Isabella’s Fortune centers around a quarrel between Gratiano and his two sons who feel their father should be trying to find them wives rather than pursuing Franceschina. Pantalone suggests to the young men that it is better to marry when old than when young. The Dentist opens with Pantalone making plans to send his son Orazio away, fearing that he a rival for Isabella’s love. See Flaminio Scala, Scenarios of the Commedia dell’arte, trans. Henry F. Salerno (New York: New York University Press, 1967): 23, 85.

20 There are several prompts in Scala’s collection that refer to the innamorato playing a mad scene. These, however, are brief and not elaborated with quoted dialogue or description as are those of the women. 21 MacNeil cites Pavoni’s description in translation, 50-51. The original diary excerpts are quoted in Marotti and Romei. As Scala’s collection is assumed to be a retrospective collection based on the Gelosi’s repertoire during his career, it is reasonable to assume these are variants of a similar source play. 22 Although generally referred to as comedies in English, the plays of the commedia dell’arte even at this early stage in fact reflect the more broad meaning of commedia as a play. The generic content was wide-ranging; Scala’s collection includes one tragedy and nine variations on the opera and pastoral.

23 North African and Middle-eastern settings are common in Scala’s scenarios, another feature borrowed from contemporary romances. Deanna Shemek attributes many plots or parts of commedia plots to Ariosto’s phenomenally popular l’Orlando Furioso: “Even outside the bounds of the printed page, Ariosto’s poem generated texts. Staged versions of episodes from the Furioso were sufficiently popular in the commedia dell’arte to constitute the basis of substantial careers for actresses and female playwrights in the later Cinquecento, women whose beauty and professional travels evoked for their audiences all the charming errancy of the characters they played.” See Deanna Shemek, Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1998): 10.

24 The scenario contains a lurid parallel subplot to Alvira’s story, in which Fatima, the princess of Fessa is tormented by her father who discovers her love for her page, Pelindo, The King orders the murder of Pelindo and has his heart presented to his daughter who performs a version of a pazzia that is more contained in setting and has no scripted “mad” language, but is similarly witnessed by her maids and a messenger as a performance within the play. The story is adapted from Boccaccio’s tale of Tancredi, Prince of Salerno. (Boccaccio 4.2)


28 Generally, although not invariably, it is the innamorata rather than her male counterpart who is exoticized either by origin or association with the east: “The actresses’ extended their range to the circum-Mediterranean “other” when they assumed roles such as a gypsy or an Arab astrologer, and further demonstrated their international range when they spoke foreign languages, especially French.” (Henke 101) The multi-lingual capacity is stressed in Pavoni’s description of Isabella Andreini’s performance. 29 The infanticide reference is enigmatic in that it is not mentioned again in the scenario, and it appears to have no relevance other than to heighten the transgressive savagery of the exotic girl who will become the madwoman in the action of the scenario. The extreme violence seems out of place in the comic context. That it is contained to the argomento suggests a referent or precedent in romance or scripted tradition. Her violent actions are continued in the action of the second act when she stabs Flavio, but since he survives and forgives her, the act remains within the parameters of comedy. Elsewhere Scala shows a concern with maintaining generic decorum: the 42nd scenario, “The Comical, Pastoral and Tragical Events” is in fact three separate mini-plays disguised as a three-act scenario. Labeled “A Mixed Opera” it is more precisely three separate short works.

30 Scala, 288. 31 Scala, 289. 32 Scala, 289.

33 Henke’s examination of the allusions in the pazzia prompts finds a fair degree of clarity. Henke, 102.

34 Anne MacNeil, Music and Women in the Commedia dell’arte (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003): 59. MacNeil writes: “The abduction or removal of the submissive partner from his or her usual surroundings is, in itself, an allegory of the
displacement of the individual’s mind from sanity to lunacy” (59). MacNeil also comments on Ficino’s understanding of the correspondence of abduction and dementia in his Commentary.

35 Scala, 290. Carol Neely discusses the common portrayal of mad characters being introduced, watched, explained or commented upon as a mechanism that secures or invites audience empathy with the mad character, e.g. Isabella’s maid in The Spanish Tragedy. Carol Thoman Neely, Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004): 50-1.

36 My comparison of the mad scene to an exaggerated aria is derived from Sophie Tomlinson’s description of another Isabella’s mad scene. In the subplot of The Changeling Isabella feigns madness in an attempt to deflect the attentions of Antonio: “Unlike Ophelia’s madness and that of the Jailer’s Daughter, which extends through several scenes, Isabella’s madness is contained within an aria-like speech which demands a bravura performance from the actor. This early Stuart development anticipates the later theatrical fashion whereby mad scenes, specifically mad songs, came to function as a Restoration actress’s showpiece.” (130) Tomlinson’s study looks at the interrelated performances of women’s sexual passion and madness and how these “allowed Caroline playwrights to broaden the repertoire of theatrical femininity.” (129) See Sophie Tomlinson, Women on Stage in Stuart Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 129-30. Salerno observes parallels between the subplot of The Changeling and another scenario, The Fake Madwoman, discussed below.


38 Pietropaolo, 13.

39 MacNeil, 49-51.

40 Neely’s study shows that prior to the 18th century, when madness becomes reconceived as an incurable pathology, there were perceived to be wider variants: “…distraction, madness, melancholy and lovesickness are excesses of the human, and temporary curable disruptions of health.” (4)

41 Donald Beecher discusses Ferrand’s objections on moral grounds to the prescription of therapeutic fornication. The practice nevertheless remained an established one in medical theory of the time. See Ferrand, A Treatise on Lovesickness, 125.

42 Neely, 49.

43 Neely. 49. Neely goes on to argue that “C.L. Barber has suggested that the Elizabethan theatre is a place apart, a space where the sacred is reconstituted in the human (Whole, 20ff.) In the discourse of madness, this reconstitution is especially visible. The characters’ madness does not make them non-human or inhuman, but, however disruptive, might be said to represent them as excessively human. It enlarges their expressiveness and emotional range, allowing for intense articulations of rage, betrayal, guilt, and, above all, loss … It gives to the theatre the opportunity to perform resonant and theatrical rituals such as Ophelia’s flower distribution, Lear’s mock trial, and Edgar’s mock exorcism as well as to include italicized social critique and still evade censorship” (66).

44 Neely, 122.

45 “Di Isabella invece abbiamo visto che il parlare è descort, come scordato e disarmonico è il diverso intrecciarsi di dialetti, di maschere, di costumi fra loro non solo diversi, ma incongrui, di tutta la commedia. In piú, la commedia dell’arte è spesso il regno del travestimento, dell’assunzione di una forma occasionale e mobile. Ora Isabella, smarrendo il proprio ruolo, e con esso la forma specifica del suo comportamento, del suo gestire contenuto, del suo parlare racchiuse nelle forme codificante della retorica, mostra anche lei, con più pregnante metafora, l’impossibilità della netta definizione dell’individuo.”

46 MacNeil, 31.

47 McGill’s essay centres on the theory of women’s “oral culture”, particularly that of the early commedia actresses and their association with oneste meritrici. This idea supports the actress’s facility in performance practice’s such as the pazzia.

48 The publication of texts devoted to personal improvement, deportment and presentation thrived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Castiglione’s Il libro del cortegiano remains the most widely known, but Bell’s survey shows the popularity of the genre. See Rudolf Bell, How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

49 Ferrand, 157.
Bibliography


