"Othello dell' Arte": The Presence of "Commedia" in Shakespeare's Tragedy
Author(s): Teresa J. Faherty
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3208215

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms
Othello dell’ Arte:  
The Presence of Commedia in Shakespeare’s Tragedy

Teresa J. Faherty

Othello and Arts of Improvisation

Improvisation is something many of us associate with Othello since Stephen Greenblatt’s provocative and influential reading of Iago’s “improvisation of power” in Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980).1 There, Greenblatt argues that the main characters in Shakespeare’s play evince a modern-minded sense of imagination and opportunism as they create their “selves” and present them to the world. Iago’s extraordinarily “mobile sensibility” (225), according to Greenblatt, enables him to “improvise” further on the rather rigidly scripted identity of Othello, who adopts the European mode of self-representation with relative ingenuousness.

Greenblatt’s dazzling analysis of Othello is theatrical insofar as both self-fashioning and improvisation relate to acting. But although he emphasizes the innovative and iconoclastic aspects of improvisation, he overlooks the fact that it was also a defining feature of a major Renaissance theatrical tradition. In this essay I will consider Othello as a performance before a theatrically-versed Renaissance audience, for whom Iago’s and Othello’s improvisational modes, in conjunction with the stylization of the major characters, plot developments, and texture of the language, would have enforced an illusion of the play as a performance of Italian commedia dell’arte’ dell’improviso, a popular theatrical form contemporaneous with Shakespeare’s. From the opening scenes of the play, in which a Venetian zanni figure mocks a “Magnifico” and begins plotting to wreck the marriage of an old foreign captain and a vivacious young woman,

Teresa Faherty is a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. She is writing a dissertation on the influence of Ovid’s representation of rape on Shakespeare and other Renaissance writers.

My thanks to Norman Rabkin, Janet Adelman, and David Almond for their helpful comments, and especially to Kerry Walk for the same and for the title.

1Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 222–54. All other references to this work will appear in the text.

Othello looks very much like commedia, a resemblance I do not think a Renaissance audience could have failed to notice.2

In this essay I will consider how the vaguely obvious presence of Italian comedy (it seems such a paradoxical phenomenon) produces a strange and contradictory experience of Shakespeare’s play, which is, after all, a tragedy. The characters’ analogous relationship to a commedia dell’arte ensemble also raises questions about the meaning of improvisation in the play, the context in which Greenblatt situates it. Greenblatt argues for the characters’ conscious ability to create themselves through their own improvised discourses. But, by virtue of their resemblance to the chronically improvising stock figures of commedia, Shakespeare’s characters also and unexpectedly appear as representations of human beings that are oddly pithy, unchanging, and unchangeable in nature. Improvisation in Othello appears at once as the prerogative of the modern, self-defining individual, and as the predictable permutations of commedia-like stock figures.

How and what might Shakespeare’s audience have known about commedia? In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Italian professional improvised comedy was at its zenith. Troupes and individual actors of commedia toured the court capitals of Europe.3 Although specific references to performances by traveling commedia dell’arte troupes are rather few in extant English theatrical records, the many references to commedia characters by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights indicate that it was also performed in London in this period, or else well-known through travelers’ reports.4 By virtue of his own professional interests, it is likely that Shakespeare would have gone to see some of these brilliant Italian performances. In Jacques’s “ages of man” speech in As You Like It, commedia’s Lover and Captain are both shadowed forth, and in the sixth age, the old Venetian merchant Pantalone is vividly conjured by name:

---


4Lea, in Italian Popular Comedy, mentions passim specific references to commedia roles by Elizabethan and Jacobean writers: “Franceschina,” in Jonson’s Volpone (1607); “Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie,” in Nashe’s Piers Penniless (1592); “Doctors, Zawnys, Pantaloones, Harlakeenes,” in Heywood’s Apology for Actors (1612), and allusions in Middleton, Massinger, Shakespeare, and others.
The sixt age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound.

The passage reveals a subtle and detailed knowledge of the look and sound of commedia—as well as a sense of its potential for pathos. The sheer conventionality of this particular speech, moreover, implies the Elizabethan audience's familiarity with the commedia types.

Since commedia, with its colorfully drawn stock characters, typical though impromptu plots, and bent for sexual and bodily humor, is rarely performed today, it may be useful to outline its chief qualities. In traditional commedia, actors read a plot outline posted in the wings by the company director some time before performance. On stage, wearing the masks (or in the case of the women characters, the make-up) unique to their characters, the actors improvised their speeches and actions, drawing on an ingrained knowledge of their character's behavior, body movements, and peculiar repertory of jokes (concetti) and autobiographical asides. The roles of commedia were preserved through generations, so while an actor might inflect his rendition of Pantalone, for example, commedia as a whole was highly traditional; in some-cases, roles even passed from parent to child. Most actors performed just one character throughout their careers. The actor-role relationship in commedia, as P. L. Duchartre observes in his excellent, richly illustrated book on commedia, was such that "the most individual actor so submerged himself within [his role] that he became an integral part of the character he portrayed," a requirement enforced by commedia's traditional, grotesque half-masks.

This compression of actor and role is sustained within the character itself, where identity and action are inextricable. Each commedia character is driven by the dictates of his or her own peculiar affections, disaffections, habits, and body. The Bolognese Dottore, for example, dressed in his black academic robes, was born pontificating in mangled Latin; his nose is big—the better to poke into other people's business—and his red face attests to his special fondness for eating and drinking. Pugnacious Pulcinella, with his enormous stomach (or sometimes humped back) is cruel and gluttonous, cantankerous but also capable of searing wit. In the integrated, though grotesque, roles of commedia, self-consciousness, the ability to have perspective on one's action, is absent. This is a principal trait of commedia, and the improvisational mode depends on it: because of the predictability of personages in the microcosm

---

5 All Shakespeare quotations are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
6 P. L. Duchartre, The Italian Comedy, trans. Randolph Weaver (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 34. In this essay I quote often from Duchartre's encyclopedic work, which includes many translated quotations from commedia scenarios and commedia actors' comments on their theater.
of commedia, their interactions, while always differently improvised, are also always the same. In Allardyce Nicoll’s phrase, “Once a Pantalone, always a Pantalone.”

Unlike the contained allusions to commedia in As You Like It, commedia’s influence on Othello is broad and deep. A list of all possible links between Othello and commedia would be too long to develop, but the commedia analogies of the major characters and of some of the minor ones in Shakespeare’s play are worth sketching out in some detail. Individually these examples support the idea that Shakespeare indeed borrowed from commedia in writing Othello, and, moreover, that he did so in a nuanced and consistent way. All together, they suggest his intention of conjuring to the Globe stage not only commedia’s local colors, but an illusion of its microcosm and its rules. A main effect of the wholesale importation of commedia into Othello, as I hope to demonstrate, is the generation of quite specific comic expectations about characters and events, which then become doubtful or seem to be at odds with contrary desires.

Othello’s Analogous Characters and Plots

Iago is an ensign by title, and in Cinthio’s Hecatommithi, Shakespeare’s narrative source, handsome and aristocratic besides (“his appearance and his lofty, elegant language so masked the evil of his heart that on the surface he seemed a Hector or an Achilles”). But in the scene with Roderigo that opens the play, Iago invites us to see him in the distinctly plebian light of a trickster servant, secretly working for his own advancement while pretending to serve his master. After grousing that Othello overlooked him for the lieutenantship, he answers Roderigo’s logical advice to a mercenary—“I would not follow him then” (I.i.40)—with a perverse but familiar enough reason for staying on:

O, sir, content you;
I follow him to serve my turn upon him.
We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly follow’d.

[I.i.42–4]

And after sneering at “duteous knaves” in service, he adds:

Others there are
Who, trimm’d in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
And throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them; and when they have lin’d their coats,
Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul.
And such a one do I profess myself.

[I.i.49–55]

9I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Catherine A. Judd, “The Trickster-Valet: A Theatergram of Character,” for first pointing out to me the detailed similarities between Iago and Brighella.
Iago emphasizes that his master, yet unnamed (it is not clear for some time that he is talking about Othello) is bombastic, self-important, and, in this streetwise Venetian's opinion, stupid. Perhaps because this dark, urban scene lacks the elements of Shakespearean "green world" or "holiday spirit," Susan Snyder does not mention it in her analysis of other comic promises this play makes in its early phase. She argues that in Act One, Othello and Desdemona's differences in race, culture, and age are presented as blocks to their marriage, and that the couple's reunion in Cyprus (II.i) appears as the triumphant conclusion of a comedy, which leaves the remainder of the play a "post-comic" situation. But the opening scene with Iago and Roderigo launches another comic potential, one which manages to stay on course until almost the end of the play: the clever, disgruntled servant working in opposition to a gullible master who will be, both in commedia tradition and in Othello, the last to know it.

Shakespeare did not find the trickster-servant in Cinthio, but the Italian theater is crowded with them. In commedia, where quick wit prevails, and the ability to improvise on a restrictive or unfavorable state of affairs within the plot is the sine qua non of success, tricky valet roles (zanni) are the most numerous. According to folk etymology, their lazzi (interpolated bits of comic business), are the snares or knots that hold the total performance together.

One of commedia's tricky servants bears a particular resemblance to Iago. Among the zanni (Arlecchino, Francatipri, Bertoldo, et al.), Brighella is defined as "the Intriguer," the plot-mover and schemer on the commedia stage. Toward the latter part of the seventeenth century, Duchartre observes, Brighella's character softened, but in the period contemporaneous with Othello it could still be said of him that "of all the characters in the Italian comedy, Brighella is without doubt the most disturbing":

Brighella is always on hand if there is any intrigue afoot, or secret to be laid bare, or debauch to be organized, or dagger to be planted between the shoulders of a political rival; but it is best never to pay him until his work has been done and verified, for he owns not the lightest instinct of professional honour.

The calli and ports of Venice are Brighella's haunts, and although not a merchant himself, he embodies the mercenary spirit. It goes without saying that nothing is sacred to Brighella; he offers his assistance in getting anything and everything his paying customer might want. He is in his element when he can manage to serve more than one master at a time, just as Iago promises Desdemona to Roderigo, reinstatement to Cassio, Othello's renewed affection to Desdemona, vengeance to Othello. Like Iago, he is the supreme double-croesser. As Duchartre suggests,

Brighella's spine is so flexible that he can insinuate himself into any sort of nook or cranny and disappear completely, like his competitor, the rat. He is not restricted to the expedients of a mere thief; he is a man of infinite ingenuity, and he knows to within a hair's breadth how to make the most of every occasion—a quality which some people would be apt to call good luck.

---

106 Susan Snyder, The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies, 75.
One thinks of Iago slinking away in the night before Brabantio recognizes him. He not only steals Desdemona’s handkerchief but plants it in Cassio’s room. He stabs Roderigo and returns to the scene as a samaritan. Like Brighella, he is the improviser’s improvisor, knowing “to within a hair’s breadth how to make the most of every occasion.” In Shakespeare’s text, as often noted, almost all of his scripted actions seem to unfold impromptu:

Let me see now:
To get his place and to plume up my will
In double knavery—How? How?—Let’s see—

[I.iii.392-4]

“Tis here; but yet confus’d,
Knavery’s plain face is never seen til us’d.

[II.i.311-12]

Now, whether he kill Cassio,
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
Every way makes my gain.

[V.i.12-14]

Like the skilled commedia performer skirting the Scylla of chaos and Charybdis of predictability, Iago manages to entertain his audience without losing its faith in his ability to keep the plot afloat.

The Brighella mask is olive-tinted with a hook nose and full, sensual lips. Its expression, in Duchartre’s words, is “bizarre, half-cynical, half-mawkish” (161). His two invariable accoutrements are a large leather purse and a dagger, without which it is likewise impossible to imagine Iago. As one might imagine, Brighella is no Petrarchan lover, and Iago’s relationship with Emilia, although grimly naturalized seems patterned on his model. “Women rarely like this strange scoundrel,” Duchartre remarks, “but they fear and respect him. They tolerate his insolence because they are afraid of his claws and mischievous ways, and they yield only too often to his cajoling and his ingenious and persuasive eloquence” (162).

Although Emilia seems overmatched by Iago—at least until the final scene—her very submissiveness relates her to commedia’s male trickster’s counterpart, the Servetta. Like Iago, Emilia (listed in the dramatis personae as simply “Wife to Iago,” and drawn from Cinthio’s “lovely and honorable young girl,” Desdemona’s friend) is déclassé in the play, acting as Desdemona’s personal maid, just as Servettas Columbine and Franciscina often waited on the Innamoratas. Indeed, Emilia and Iago’s low comedy marriage, juxtaposed with the high comedy romance of Desdemona and Othello, creates an on-going “upstairs-downstairs” motif.

Duchartre notes that “the servant-confidantes” “were sometimes crafty and nearly always of doubtful morals” (278). Other critics call Columbine (the Servetta’s most famous incarnation) the original “Material Girl.” Othello himself becomes convinced

11 Cinthio, Hecatommithi, 431.
that Emilia is playing the go-between for Desdemona and Cassio; and although she herself disavows that function, her character also seems to encourage the association. Her bits of advice to Desdemona about men and sex are always worldly and vaguely corrupting (III.iv.103–6; IV.iii.59–105). However innocent the context, she does act to bring Cassio and Desdemona together:

Cassio: Give me advantage of some brief discourse
With Desdemon alone.

Emilia: Pray you come in.
I will bestow you where you shall have time
To speak your bosom freely.

[III.i.52–55]

Her resemblance to commedia’s crafty Servetta is brought closest to the surface in the scene in which she steals Desdemona’s handkerchief (III.iii), something she does not do in the source. For what motivation beyond being a trickster-servant (and all commedia servants are tricksters) does one need to steal a coveted handkerchief from a careless mistress? In this scene, Emilia is presented as identifying more with Iago, along class lines, than with Desdemona out of personal or gender loyalty. Shakespeare models her character with greater psychological individuality so that the audience can still puzzle over her trickery the way it would not over an actual Servetta’s, but the point is that Emilia’s action can transpire unquestioned (at one level, at least), thus creating a double awareness in the theater audience of a familiar bit of comic stage business being enacted in an increasingly ominous context.

For tricksters to thrive there must be masters, and while the Innamorata is sometimes one, by far the most durable of commedia’s straightmen is “the lean and slipper’d pantaloon.” The play’s opening scene of Iago shouting up to the half-dressed Brabantio that thieves have taken “[his] daughter, and [his] bags” (I.i.80), is a classic encounter between the joking, obscene Brighella and the excitable miser.13 Like Pantalone, running into jokes made at his own expense, Brabantio rubs his hands together and wails, “O heaven! how got she out?” (I.i.169), and later demands of Othello, “O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow’d my daughter?” (I.ii.62), unable not to think like a merchant even in the midst of a family crisis. Older versions of “the Magnifico” show him not only to be greedy but lascivious, in constant pursuit of young women who always turn out to be whores or gold-diggers. But in the course of the seventeenth century, Pantalone acted the foolish suitor less often than the deceived father. Luigi Riccoboni (1675–1753), a commedia historian and the son of a famous Pantalone, recounts how his character

changed into a respectable head of the family, extremely particular about his word of honour and a strict disciplinarian of his children. He retains several of his more pronounced failings, however, for he goes on being tricked by every one he knows; he is still either duped into spending money that he does not intend to spend, or fooled into marrying his daughter to her lover in spite of other matches which he makes for her.14

14Quoted in Duchartre, The Italian Comedy, 185.
Brabantio's failed efforts to marry Desdemona to one of the "wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (I.ii.68), his ignorance of the fact that she and Othello were trysting under his roof, and his eager credulity regarding mountebanks are all stock touches of the comic Pantalone. It is possible to see Shakespeare exploiting the psychological opportunity of Pantalone's transition from boyfriend to father, making Brabantio's possessiveness of Desdemona, as some critics have noted, hint at incest. In recognizing Pantalone in Brabantio, however, the audience finds a clown who is largely drained of his humor. For instance, when Pantalone is treated peremptorily on the commedia stage, it is an occasion for laughs. Here, when the senators, Desdemona, and Othello refuse to take his hysteria over the marriage seriously, Brabantio's solitary stance gives him an air of dignity and self-righteousness, and later we learn that the "match was mortal to him, and pure grief / Shore his old thread in twain" (V.ii.205–6). Unfunny, moribund fools are a staple of Shakespearean drama, and here a new one is created out of the well-known material of a rival theater, a figure whom a Renaissance audience would have expected to find purely comical.

Roderigo and Cassio, even though rather bland, help flesh out Othello's recreation of the commedia world. At first glance, these two might seem cut from the same cloth as Bertram and Orlando, but in their peculiar brand of Petrarchan dandyism, they more specifically evoke the commedia's Lovers—the Lelios, the Giglios, the Orazios—who, Duchartre observes, all reveal a fatal trace of fatuity. Though their protestations would melt a heart of stone, there always seems to be a comic side to everything they say. . . . Whatever the names of the Lovers in the commedia dell'arte . . . they had no other trait as "characters" than that of being in love. Their function was to depict a state of mind rather than to paint a personality. The Lover had to play with dash and be able to simulate the most exaggerated passion. He had to be young, well set up, courteous, gallant even to the point of affectation—in short, a blade and dandy. He used perfume and was "prolific of sonnets." . . . [He] has few compunctions about an occasional amour with a kitchen wench. [286-7]

The "daily beauty" in Cassio's life that arouses Iago's antipathy and Bianca's love, his exaggerated chivalry at the quay before Emilia and "the divine Desdemona," his indifferent treatment of Bianca, and his dissipation—all are features which identify him closely with the gallant denizen of the commedia universe. In subtle distinction, Roderigo, with his antic lovesickness, gullibility, and prodigality with his money and land, seems inspired by the "new style of lover," whom Duchartre, perhaps inaccurately, claims was ascendent in the later seventeenth century (287). An "Orazio" is more emotional than the original Lover, less refined, more prone to fight and to throw money around, and it is he who seems in fact to be the model for Roderigo, from whom Shakespeare teases out something desperate and a bit sad.

The Lover's counterpart is the beautiful, capricious Innamorata, whose role Desdemona, particularly at the outset of the play, seems to take up. "Isabella," the most enduring Innamorata, was invented by Isabella Andreini (1562–1604), a celebrated player of the Gelosi troupe of commedia performers. Her original Isabella was an "idealized type of woman in love," but also famed for her skill at repartee. Over

\[15\text{Ibid., 272.}\]
time Isabella developed from "a tender, loving woman" to "a flirtatious young miss, ruling both her parents and admirers with an iron rod. She possessed, moreover, a somewhat masculine turn of mind. . . ." Desdemona, in fact, seems to embody both the coquettish girl and the "idealized type of woman in love," in uneasy combination. Like Isabella, Desdemona seems to "recoil before nothing to disembarrass herself of the fetters imposed upon her by the paternal will." Her scandalous elopement, defiant stance before her father and the senators, taste for adventure, provocative verbal sparring with Iago on the quay—and her simultaneous ability to inspire other characters' rhapsodies about her goodness and purity—enforce her likeness to the Innamorata. But while the latter's beguiling ways are a predictable part of her charm, the fact that Desdemona "deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I.iii.293), as Brabantio warns Othello, resonates on Shakespeare's more patriarchal stage as a troubling potentiality, especially given the sudden ubiquity of the male Lover analogue, who would be a real Innamorata's natural choice.

But Othello—Desdemona's husband in Shakespeare's play—does he have a commedia counterpart? Would a Renaissance audience have recognized in him a stock character of Italian comedy? He would clearly be the riskiest character to treat comically in this tragic play. Barbara de Mendonça, in her article on Othello's relationship to commedia, suggests that he alone among the characters does not have a match in the commedia schema, and that Shakespeare isolates him in this way in order to emphasize his foreign status in Venice, his unfamiliarity with the Italians' practices and values, especially as celebrated in commedia dell'arte. To the theater audience, she argues, Othello looks as out of place among the Venetian-style commedia characters on the stage, as he is alien in the world of the play.

But within the commedia microcosm there does exist a personality, unconsidered by de Mendonça, who is by definition an alien among the Venetians. Mercenary captains, according to Duchartre, now fighting for Venice, now in the hire of an enemy city-state, were roundly loathed by the unarmed population who feared their ruthlessness in battle and brutality in times of peace. Even as their efforts helped Venice amass its Eastern treasures, mercenary captains were merely necessary evils in the economy. Duchartre notes that "in this condition of affairs, it was only natural that the civil populace of the time should have created an extravagant caricature of the condottiere, whom they had quickly learned to hate" (228). The Venetians' scorn for the soldiers who performed their dirty work took the form of Capitano on the commedia stage—a swaggerer and braggart, a sword-brandisher and insufferable bully, and deep down a coward and a fool. Capitan Giangurgolo (Big-Mouth), Il Vappo (The Blusterer), Capitan Matamoros (Slayer of Moors), and Capitan Cocodrillo (Crocodile) were some of the more famous captains of commedia whose original was the invention of Francesco Andreini (1530–1624). Andreini began his career as a soldier, was captured by Turks and enslaved for seven years, and finally returned to Venice where he bestowed his brain-child, Capitan Spavento della Valle Inferna (Captain Fearless of Hell Valley), on the theater.

16Ibid., 276.
Andreini’s Spavento, setting the style for all future Capitanos, speaks only in hyperboles, and his rhetoric, like his name, has an orotundity that begs to be deflated. Capitano “styles himself the son of the Earthquake and the Lightening, cousin of death and intimate friend of Beelzebub: he is valiant enough to pierce a mountain with his sword and to hurl the moon against the sun.” Capitano is overbearing to women and servants but fancies that far from being irritated, they are enthralled by his bravura. He imagines that they hang on every fantastical detail of his battles with gods, giants, Death herself (who, as he recounts in one scenario, was originally “Lady Life” until he choked her to death) to which adventures there are no available witnesses present. Women adore him, he modestly admits, but frankly it would interfere too much with his work. This strain of sexual insecurity is exploited when, for instance, a mocking flirt flatters Capitano, capturing his interest, whereupon he immediately becomes a fool for love. When she begins to show her true feelings toward him, Capitano rails and threatens her impressively, right up to the appearance of her real lover on stage. Then, he quickly affects indifference and scuttles off in fear and bewilderment, mocked by the lovers’ hoots and the laughter of the audience who were in on the joke all along.

It may seem perversely reductive to highlight Capitano’s fundamental presence in Othello’s much larger character, but I would argue that the play is deeply interested in their relation. Suspending for a moment Othello’s sympathetic qualities, his commedia traits (not all of which are rendered unsympathetically) appear quite prominent. G. Wilson Knight, for example, points out Othello’s “over-decorative” and “slightly strained” style, even as he admires “the Othello music.” In a speech like

for know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea’s worth . . .

[I.ii.24–28]

the egocentricity and hyperbole of Capitano’s style, though transmuted into a confessional, even humble expression, is still audible. Moreover, voices within the play (mainly Iago’s) strive to make his resemblance to the braggart captain seem exact. Iago scoffs at the adventure stories with which Othello wooed Desdemona (“Of hair-breadth scapes i’th’imminent deadly breach, / Of being taken by the insolent foe . . .,” of “hills whose heads touch heaven,” of “Cannibals” and “Anthropophagi”) as mere “bragging and telling her fantastical lies” (II.i.223–4). Greenblatt points out the likeness between Othello’s tales and travelers’ literature, and suggests that it

20Smith, The Commedia dell’Arte, 93.
21In La Locandiera (performed 1753) Carlo Goldoni, who drew from commedia characters and plots, although working to reform Italian theater, employs virtually this plot, which is hatched by a young woman, Mirandolina, out of spite for the misogynist and boastful Capitan Ripafratta who lodges at her inn. Some of the similarities between Goldoni’s play and Othello are so very striking (particularly Ripafratta’s mad speeches when he discovers he has been the butt of her joke) that Goldoni’s play seems a conscious response to Othello. La Locandiera, however, ends in the old commedia spirit.
shows how Othello Improvises on the materials of popular European culture as he creates his own discourse of self. But to a Renaissance audience, this set-piece may have also, and perhaps more immediately, seemed open to Iago's interpretation precisely because of its echoes of the stock concetti of Capitano, whose overstatement and tales of the fabulous are a fixed part of his character. The sense of Othello working to invent his own discourse must compete with his resemblance to a familiar character who is by definition "all talk."

It may be that Capitano's endlessly creative and vainglorious discourse is what attracted Shakespeare to the idea of writing a commedia-style play with him as the hero—or so it is tempting to speculate. In A. C. Bradley's words, Othello "is the greatest poet of . . . all [the tragic heroes]," and many critics, in addition to Knight and Bradley, observe Othello's exotic, high-blown vocabulary and coinages: Cannibals, Anthropophagi, agnize, speculative and officed instrument, indign and base adversities, close dilations, exsufflicate and blown surmises. But the hints of vanity in Othello's language and character which identify him with commedia's Capitano, seem at least as great a foible as his jealousy. Othello's poise in the face of Venetian hostility on the night of his elopement seems basically impressive:

Iago: Those are the raised father and his friends.  
You were best go in.  

Othello: Not I; I must be found.  
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly. . . .

[I.ii.29–32]

But just as Capitano's bravado is finally exposed as sexual compensation, so Othello's self-confidence seems more and more affected as he begins to doubt his wife's loyalty to him. The patent absurdity of his speech is (almost) comic, as he struggles to imply that faithless females are all just part of a day's work for men like him:

Yet 'tis the plague of great ones,  
Prerogativ'd are they less than the base;  
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.  
Even then this forked plague is fated to us  
When we do quicken.

[III.iii.273–7]

Yet, the frankness of the preceding lines—"She's gone, I am abus'd, and my relief / Must be to loathe her" (III.iii.267–9)—gives ironic pathos to what would seem like transparent bravado on a commedia stage, just as the frustration in "O that the slave had forty thousand lives! / One is too poor, too weak for my revenge" (III.iii.442–3) dominates the note of heroics. With "Othello's occupation gone!" (III.iii.357), Othello indeed implies that his military identity has been a stratagem to protect himself against the abuse of women. But while Shakespeare mitigates most of Capitano's excesses in Othello, some of the former's comic traits, namely bullying and pusillananimity, seem newly disturbing in their Shakespearean incarnation:

I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!

[IV.i.200]

You heard her say herself, it was not I.

[V.ii.127]
Both in Shakespeare's play and in Iago's play-within-the-play, Othello's identification with Capitano, for better or worse, circumscribes his role. First, Shakespeare sustains Othello's resemblance to the Capitano by giving him a lieutenant/servant who despises him for his supposed pride, and sets out to make him "egregiously an ass." Then, within the perimeters of this primary trickster-servant plot, Iago's method of destroying Othello is precisely to conjure up for his consumption another commedia-style scenario: the outlandish, naive Capitano is being deceived by the sexy and willful Innamorata who really favors another. This self-conscious overlapping of commedia scenarios within Othello seems to point to Shakespeare's interest both in the trickster-servant as the primum mobile of commedia theater, and in the way in which that theater can be both self-generating and self-consuming.

**Commedia, Othello, and Parodic Engenderment**

The Brighellan impulse to humiliate one's master, and, moreover, to humiliate him sexually exemplifies commedia's ambivalent kind of creativity, and specifically its sense of humor about reducing the lofty and spiritual to an earthly and bodily realm. Extant scenarios and Renaissance commentary on commedia (some by scandalized Englishmen) all indicate the affinity between commedia and what Mikhail Bakhtin, in Rabelais and His World describes as "grotesque realism." There, Bakhtin alludes to commedia as an example of the Renaissance's sophisticated and literate reprisal of medieval folk humor which took the Church's hierarchal system, one that valued the spirit over the body, the perfect over the mutable, and inverted it. Recent scholarship has convincingly identified commedia's origins in Greek and Roman comedy (as Renaissance writers themselves thought to be the case), but the early modern aesthetic that Bakhtin describes is one in which commedia clearly participates.

Grotesque realism flaunts the repression of the body and its functions in Christianized aesthetics, by turning defecation, pregnancy, digestion, and so on, into subjects worthy of artistic attention. Its humor is radical in that it degrades what claims to be stable, perfect, ideal, and privileged to a biology. But, Bakhtin argues, this is not merely destruction but "parodic engenderment":

> to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place.

As evident from even a cursory glance at scenarios and jokes, or at pictorial representations of scenes, commedia is clearly interested in affirming rather than denying the "lower bodily stratum," the digestive and reproductive parts. Pantalone's bad breath and uncontrollable erections, Harlequin's growling stomach and the indigestion that follows his gourmandizing, Pulcinella's potbelly are all commonplaces in commedia performances. Pantalone's "Last Will and Testament" exemplifies the corporeal bent of commedia humor—"I bequeath to my valet twenty-five sharp lashes

---

24See, for example, Louise Clubb, Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time, 31.
with a good whip for having bored a hole in the bottom of my chamber-pot and made me wet the bed”—and shows how a solemn legal moment can turn scatological. The Dottore provides occasions for wild discussions of illnesses and remedies, pregnancy cravings, and for jokes about someone’s ulcer or pimple, or kidney stone that gets sold as a gem. Harlequin’s salutation to a lady’s ghost couches a compliment in homely and violent images:

Your cheeks, which were once of a vermillion as beautiful as the backsides of a newly whipped child, are now so pale and gaunt that they seem like two dried codfish.

In contradiction to Petrarchan conventions, Harlequin avails himself of the physical and mundane as his preferred frame of reference. He renders the lady ghost funny by using language which, to use Bakhtin’s phrase, “degrades and materializes” her.

In Othello, of course, Iago is the most vocal about wanting to make the lofty low, the extraordinary common, the ethereal earthy. His candid characterization of his own mind epitomizes “parodic engenderment”:

... my invention
Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze,
It plucks out brains and all. But my Muse labors,
And thus she is deliver’d. . . .

[II.i.125–28]

Iago uses this violent image, with the extra association of murdered birds, as a metaphor for his creative process. Something fresh (his quip in response to Desdemona’s riddling query) is born out of destruction. He is the gross materializer, who at the sight of Cassio kissing his fingers to “the divine Desdemona” degrades his courtly gesture: “Would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!” (II.i.176–7). Roderigo, walking into his death, is a “young quat [pimple],” rubbed “almost to the sense” (V.i.11). Love “is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will” (I.iii.334–5); “The wine [Desdemona] drinks is made of grapes” (II.i.251–2).

In Edward Snow’s psychoanalytic reading of the play, the implicit loathing of (especially) female sexuality that Iago fosters primes the stage for the tragic deaths in the final scene. But in the context of commedia humor, Iago’s disgusting and disturbing imagery must also be recognized as having, at least initially, a positive, comic charge. Iago reminds Brabantio, the blocking authority figure, of his own body while breaking the news about Desdemona’s elopement: “For shame, put on your gown!” (I.i.86), and later, in his drinking song about King Stephen, he again focuses on the lower bodily stratum of authority: “His breeches cost him but a crown / . . . ‘Tis pride that pulls the country down” (II.iii.90 . . . 95). In similar discourse, he announces his idea of destroying Othello through jealousy:

25Quoted in Duchartre, The Italian Comedy, 192.
26Ibid., 145.
I have’t. It is engend’red. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light.

[1.iii.403-4]

“Hell and night,” things negatively valued and associated with death in Christian culture, are valued by Iago as midwives. “Monstrous birth” also looks back to Iago’s earlier projections about Othello and Desdemona’s physical union (their children will be horses). Greenblatt points to this line as signaling Iago’s intention of exploiting Othello’s anxieties about his sexual desire for Desdemona in what the Moor believes ought to be a lustless Christian marriage (241ff). But this and other examples of Iago’s imagery also register him as the vulgar trickster of the play, who unhesitatingly refers to sex and procreation. To an audience familiar with commedia, Iago’s insistently sexual language would seem, at least initially, like part of a comic impulse to degrade a master’s self-righteous ascetism and control, more than an anti-comic threat to marriage. In this light, Iago’s idiom and tendencies signal an awareness of biological necessity in the play, which is pitted against what may seem like Othello’s reluctance to have sexual intercourse, to procreate at all—his cold stars, alabaster, and “entire and perfect chrysolite” (V.ii.145).

Shakespeare ultimately ironizes this destructive aspect of commedia humor, just as he ironizes the audience’s expectations of the “comic” characters. The comic view of the grave, “a womb which yields new life,” is here checked by the absolute deaths and images of sterility that fill the last scene. The audience’s expectations, one could even say their comic prejudices, subtly piqued throughout the play, are confounded in the final scene where death claims the “Innamorata,” the “Columbine,” the “Pantalone” and even the death-defying “Capitano.” It is noteworthy that so few critics (Thomas Ryder may have been an exception)\(^{28}\) have connected Othello with commedia. This may be because to recognize a broad infusion of comedy in a tragedy, especially one with such deep racist and misogynist overtones, is anathematic or indecorous. Yet, Susan Snyder offers an excellent discussion of how Shakespearean tragedy often carries comic values to extremes, whereupon they become their opposites. Along the lines of her argument, it is possible to see in Othello an exploration of the cruelty, prejudice, and violence imbedded in commedia humor.

**Commedia’s Effects on “Self-Fashioning” in Othello**

I began this essay with a summary of Greenblatt’s argument about the significance of improvisation in Othello: Othello’s and Iago’s “improvisational” performances within the world of the play imply a consciousness of the power to create one’s public image and very self out of cultural materials and opportunities at hand. In Iago’s deceptions and contradictory self-representations (“I am not what I am”), Greenblatt reads the “absolute vacancy” of modern subjectivity—which language

---

\(^{28}\)“Whence comes it then, that this [III.iii] is the top scene, the scene that raises Othello above all other tragedies on our theaters? It is purely from the action; from the mops and mows, the grimaces, the grins and gesticulation. Such scene as this have made all the world run after Harlequin and Scaramuccio. . . .” From A Short View of Tragedy, excerpted in Othello, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: New American Library, 1963), 193.
continuously attempts to fill out and personalize—an essential baselessness of identity that Iago teaches Othello to experience himself.

But in the interminability of Iago's lies, the inventiveness of Othello's autobiographical speeches—in the idioms and manners of all the major characters in the play—echoes of the stock discourse of commedia dell'arte contend with the illusion of the speakers' self-fashioning abilities. Iago's genius at manipulating other characters' perceptions of him, and at exploiting the foibles of their own self-representations is circumscribed by his resemblance to commedia's trickster, for whom lies and improvisations are a predetermined and fixed behavior: does Iago lie because he knows he can, or only because he must? In the light of commedia's presence in the play, Greenblatt's definition of improvisation as 'the ability to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario' (227) must be reconsidered, for in commedia, a scenario cannot be considered 'one's own'—even if one is Brighella—because roles irresistibly suggest actions, even when they do not dictate them.

Similarly, while Greenblatt convincingly argues for Othello's progressive "loss of himself" (244), I propose that what he diminishes himself to is not simply a state of desire, but a construction of being analogous to that of the commedia character whom he always resembles. Othello is horrified at the ignominious role Iago's improvisation pressures him to take up ("the pity of it"), but even so, his earlier substantiation of the vain Capitano changes to a simpler and closer correspondence with his analogue who, like all of commedia's more mechanistic characters, lacks self-consciousness, and the attendant experience of alienation:

Lodovico: Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?
Iago: He is much chang'd.
Lodovico: Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?
Iago: He's that he is.

[IV.i.264–70]

By absorbing commedia roles into his more free-styled characters, and by imposing a commedia-style shadow plot (via Iago), which his characters seem unable to entirely subvert, Shakespeare seems to entail by his superficial borrowings from commedia its notion of characterological determinism, the convergence of body, mind, reputation, and action, which constitutes a profound resistance to the possibilities of free will. This is not to argue, of course, that Shakespeare's play is commedia: the Lord Chamberlain's Men were not the professional Italian players who often studied their roles from childhood, and presumably in Shakespeare's production the actors were not wearing masks. It is to argue that the modern subjectivity evinced by Shakespeare's characters is partly brought about by the audience's dual perception of their subtle and fine-spun characterizations, and of the compressedly constructed comical "twins" yet imminent in them. The play's emphasis, arguably, is on the power of the tautological nucleus of commedia characterology: jealous souls are "but jealous for they're
jealous” (III.iv.161); “He’s that he is” (IV.i.270); “Nobody, I myself” (V.ii.124); “What you know, you know” (V.ii.302). In Othello, Shakespeare gives us characters, including Iago, whose ability for self-determinism seems ultimately immobile, and locked in an infrastructure composed of other highly expressive but inert identities, comparable to those both expressed and concealed by the half-masks of commedia which, to use Roland Barthes’s phrase, imply “the theme of the secret.”