Chapter 6

Reading the Actress in Commedia Imagery

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There is a venerable tradition of scholarship on the pioneering actresses of the early modern Italian stage. But mainstream theater history has been slow to absorb its findings, and many studies of the commedia dell’arte focus primarily on its comic male “masks.” Only recently has emphasis on the colorful and distinctive stock roles given way to wider recognition that studying female roles and players is not an intriguing sideline, but essential to understanding the importance of the commedia to Western theater.¹ The spectacular success of early prima donnas created a radical change in theatrical gender dynamics that transformed the art of the comici, profoundly influenced the English theater before the advent of actresses, and paved the way for the modern professional stage.

Women had been performing in Europe and England long before the commedia dell’arte created the first female stars.² Nonetheless, commedia troupes are rightly credited with pioneering the systematic promotion of

¹ This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Howe, whose contribution to the history of women on the stage is an inspiration to her former colleagues and students in the Literature Department of The Open University, and to theater historians worldwide. I wish to thank Pamela Allen Brown for motivating, and radically shaping, this adaptation of several sections of my 1995 DPhil thesis, and the Trustees of the Elizabeth Howe Fund for research support during the period 2002–2004. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine. The author of this chapter has made every effort to contact the copyright holders of the photographs here reproduced.

² Modern scholarship dates the introduction of actresses into Italian troupes to the early 1560s, often citing the remark by renowned actor Pier Maria Cecchini in 1614 that “it was less than 50 years ago that women appeared in costume on stage” (Lea 114; Falconieri 1954, 41; MacNeil 2003, 2). Amateur all-female acting had a long tradition in European convents. Vigil Raber, director of the 1514 Bolzano Passion Play, assigned virtually all its female roles to local women amateurs (Katritzky, 2004, 105–106). Neither were amateur actresses unknown in sixteenth-century
professional actresses as celebrity performers. By the 1560s, prima donnas were a star attraction of the Italian companies, contributing significantly to their tremendous audience impact. The reconstruction of these women's contributions through written documents is far from straightforward, however, and the surviving visual material can greatly extend our understanding of early actresses and female roles. The commedia's transitory nature, with its reliance on improvisation, non-verbal entertainment, and scenarios or plot summaries, in addition to plays based on fully written-out scripts, makes visual records particularly important. Until comparatively recently, "the systematic codifying, dating and interpretation of the prints, drawings, paintings and frescos relating to the [commedia]," which are fundamental to assessing how far the visual record reflects early modern stage practice, had "barely begun" (Heck, 293). This essay examines commedia dell'arte actresses in the context of the pictorial record. Still under-researched by comparison with the textual documentation, these images indicate that the advent of the women player was a key catalyst in the expansion of the commedia beyond its dual roots in theater, especially humanist comedy, and in popular culture, including mountebank activity and carnival ritual. The visual record, which depicts female comici in a rich diversity of performance types and places, vividly suggests the widening impact of female stage roles and women's increasing integration into the acting profession.

The earliest formal record of an Italian actress joining a professional troupe is a Roman contract of 10 October 1564, in which Lucretia of Siena and six men agree to form a company to perform comedies (Re, appendix). Mixed gender troupes such as Lucretia's burst onto the mid-sixteenth-century European stage with a hybrid vigor and fertile creativity achieved by fusing the disparate skills of amateur actors, professional fools and buffoons, carnival revellers, courtesans, and street performers, such as mountebank troupes, acrobats, musicians, and dancers (figs 6.1–6.7). Although improvisation is often singled out as the defining characteristic of commedia dell'arte players, they presented fully scripted plays, intermedii and other musical theater by leading writers and composers, in addition to fully or partially improvised comedies, pastorals, tragedies and melodramas, shorter buffonarie and nonarie, and set pieces based on instrumental music, singing, mime, dancing, and acrobatics.

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England in cycle drama, Lord Mayor's shows, and elsewhere (Bevington 166; also see essays in Part I of this volume). French professional actresses are recorded from 1545, when Marie Ferré [or Faire] first trod the boards (Scott).
6.4 A masked woman flanked by two men in Zanni costume (1596).

6.5 Freund sein khan nit schaden [it can't hurt to be friends], from the friendship album (1583–1601) of Hans Jakob Wintholtz (c.1583).
6.6 Joseph Heintz II (c.1600-70), Carnaval in Venetié (detail: dancing Zanni and woman on a mountebank stage).

6.7 A fete, by or after Marten de Vos (1532-1603).
6.8 A commedia dell'arte performance, an arrangement of eighteen woodcuts from the Recueil Fossilé.

6.9 Harlequin disguised (late sixteenth century)
6.14 Title pages to two commedia scenarios in the early seventeenth-century manuscript *Raccolta di scenari più scelti* [...].

6.15 Scene from the Italian comedy (c. 1600?).
Actresses competed for the part of the innamorata, the literary, educated, agile, beautiful, elegant, and performatively skilled romantic heroine, capable of declaiming, singing, dancing, jesting, miming, and memorizing (figs 6.8-6.11). Talk and action soon vied with actors in all theatrical spheres, as performers, leading stage attractions, and sometimes even as the writers and troupe leaders responsible for the major artistic and business decisions governing their companies. Vittoria Pisimi of Ferrara, who took the stage name “Fioretta,” followed Vicenza Armani of Venice (fatally poisoned in 1569) as prima donna of the Gelosi troupe, and combined acting with a highly successful career as a troupe leader. Thamos Porcacchi praised Pisimi in 1574 as “a most unique woman,” and a decade later Tomaso Garzoni called her the “divine Vittoria, a compendium of all the arts, a perfect actress.” While that encomium would seem hard to outdo, Garzoni reserves his highest praise for “the gracious Isabella,” referring to Isabella Andreini of the Gelosi (Baschet, 61; Garzoni, 753–4). Adding to the luster of Isabella’s stage persona was her literary talent; her polished literary output gained her international renown as a playwright, poet and correspondent (see fig. 7.1 in Julie Campbell’s essay, this volume). Like Vittoria, Isabella’s daughter-in-law Virginia Andreini (“Florinda”) and Drusiano Martinelli’s wife Angelica Alberghini led early troupes. From the 1580s to at least 1605 Diana Ponti of Ferrara – one of several actresses who took the stage name “Lavinia” – led the Desiosi troupe, whose actresses so impressed Montaigne that he visited them in 1581 after their shows in Pisa, and arranged for them to receive presents of fish (Lea, 269).

Seeing women play women quickly became fashionable at the upper reaches of society. When Henri III of France came to Venice in 1574, he expressed the wish to see “the woman named Vittoria” act with her troupe, the Gelosi (Baschet, 57–8). Soon the comici were drawing Italian audiences away from the amateur players of the regular comedy, who always used males for women’s roles. Their popularity made it commercially viable for them to earn a year-round living from performing, at court, in private houses, in the stanzze they rented for semi-public performances, and in the new theaters then being built. Despite this temporal expansion, carnival remained their most profitable season, creating such demand that even the nobility often had difficulty in persuading their favorite troupes to serve them. Even dukes routinely experienced refusals that would be hard to imagine at the equivalent social level.

3 See Brown, 403. Taviani and Schino speculate that early commedia actresses were learned courtisans with skills suited to theater (438). Thamos Porcacchi, by McGill, who argues women may have acquired performance and improvisation skills orally (59–61), and Scott, who proposes a multiplicity of models for the emergence of actresses (152).

4 In 1580, the Duke of Ferrara had trouble luring the best Gelosi players back from the Venice carnival, and Vittoria Pisimi and her husband Giovanni Pelegrini wrote him letters of apology for being unavailable to entertain at two court weddings, including the Duke’s own to Margherita Farnese (Soleri and Lanza, 165, 168). In 1583, Francesco Andreini wrote to Vincenzo Gonzaga, apologizing on behalf of himself and his wife Isabella for declining the Duke’s invitation to perform at his forthcoming wedding to Eleonora de’ Medici. Andreini cites prior obligations, being “bound by faith to the Gelosi, and in particular to Sig. Alvise Michiel, patron of the hall in Venice” (Lea, 308; MacNeil 2003, 6–7, 272–3).
Harlequin, the role he was to create around the year 1584 (Schrickx, 798). The troupe’s three women, noted but not named by the documents, preceded the official sanctioning of actresses on post-Restoration London stages by over eighty years (Howe, 20). Although the personnel of troupes often fluctuated rapidly, Spanish documents of the following decade are pertinent to the identities of Martinelli’s actresses, who are significant for being among the first, and perhaps the first, women to feature in full-length plays on the English stage. These records are special licenses of 1587 allowing Drusiano, his wife Angelica Alberghini, his brother Tristano, their companions Angela Salomona and her (unnamed) husband, and “La Franceschina” to perform in Madrid (Falconi, 1597, 74–5). In doing so, they identify the women of “Los Confidentes Italianos” as the first actresses in full-length plays on the Spanish stage—and their troupe as including veterans of the English tour of 1578.

Humbler female players also left their mark on foreign audiences. Prince Ferdinand of Bavaria was greatly impressed by the tumbling skills of a “young girl aged eleven or twelve,” the star of a troupe of four Italian acrobats who performed for him in Trent in 1565 (fols. 42v–43r). Several years before Drusiano’s troupe came to England, Italian women acrobats crossed the Channel to perform, scandalizing Thomas Norton, who in 1574 inveighed against “that unnecessary and scarsiile honeste resorts to plaies ... and especialie the assemblies to the unchaste, shamelesse and unnaturall tumblinges of the Italian Woemen” (Lea, 354). English writers generally treated female players, regardless of whether they had speaking parts, with mocking contempt, degrading them by associating them with prostitutes. Thomas Nashe famously dismissed the celebrated Italian actresses as “whores and common Curtizens” and reduced their plays to the antics of “a Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie” (Nashe, 215; see figs. 6.3 and 6.7 for such trios). The actor and troupe leader Dionisio, who, as “Scoto of Mantua” conjured, and possibly performed with a troupe, before Queen Elizabeth I in 1576 (Herford and Simpson, 704), is branded by Ben Jonson’s Corvino as a “damed mountebank ... a common rogue ... fiddling in ... the osteria,” his actress as a “tumbling whore,” and their repertoire as “forced tricks” (Volpone, II.6, 10–16). John Marston’s 1599 reference to a “nimbling tumbling Angelica” is taken by some as evidence for Angelica Alberghini’s presence during the Martinelli brothers’ 1578 English tour, or even as an indication of an otherwise undocumented later British visit by the troupe (110). More relevant to the presence of Italian actresses in Elizabethan England is a passage in John Day’s The Travallers Of The Three English Brothers, a play of 1607 that draws on the

overseas adventures of Anthony, Robert, and Thomas Shirley. In a muchquoted scene, Sir Anthony Shirley, to whom a visit by the English stage clown William Kemp in Rome is historically documented for 1601, invites Kemp and “an Italian Harlaken” to improvise a performance at his Italian residence (Lea, 350). The two clowns launch into an extended dialogue—with sexual innuendo robust enough to suggest that pictures such as figure 6.5 may have more than tenuous links to actual stage practice:

KEMP. Now, Signior, how many are you in companie?
HARL. None but my wife and my selle, sir.
K. Your wife! Why heare you, wil your wife do tricks in publique?
H. My wife can play.
K. The honest woman, I make no question ... Your wife plaid the Curizan.
H. True.

(Nicolli 1931, 280)

English travelers’ accounts of European performances emphasize the rarity of women performers back home. Actresses are treated as a newlywoven attraction and a significant innovation that was changing the theatrical landscape of early modern Europe. Fynes Moryson, who went to Italy in the 1590s, reports that “in Florence they had a house where all the yeare long a Comeddy was played by professed players once in the weeke and no more, and the parties of women were played by wenmen, and the cheefe Actors had not their parts fully penned, but spake much extemporary or upon agreement betweene themselves, especially the women, whose speeches were full of wantonnes, though not grosse baundry” (631). In 1608 Lord Herbert of Cherbury noted as a novelty that Italians performing in Paris featured “women [who] play boys” (Lea, 179). That year, in Venice, Thomas Coryat “saw women acte, a thing that I never saw before, though I have heard that it hath beene sometimes used in London, and they performed it with as good a grace, action, gesture and whatsoever convenient for a Player, as ever I saw any masquiline Actor” (386).

For some actresses, superb musical gifts and a phenomenal ability to memorize quickly were the graces underpinning their success. In 1574, Vittoria Pisini starred—at a week’s notice—in the most demanding singing role of the Gelosi’s production of Cornelio Frangipani’s Tragedia (MacNeil 2003, 11–12). In 1608, the professional singer Caterina Martinelli, engaged for the title role of Monteverdi and Ottavio Rinuccini’s opera Arianna, died just before the Mantuan wedding festivities of Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy, for which the opera was written. Her replacement was Virginia Andreini, the prima donna of the Fedeli troupe, already engaged to perform in Giambattista Guarini’s scripted drama L’idropica, the main play of the festivities. She mastered this demanding additional role in the astoundingly short span of six
days. Virginia ("La Florinda") had performed well under pressure before, having achieved a stunning success in the title role of her husband Giovanni Battista Andreini's 1606 play La Florinda, which includes an elaborate sung lament. Her performance of Arianna's lament represents both a key date in the development of opera and a defining moment in the history of women on the stage. Arianna cemented her international reputation and became a routine feature of the repertoires of professional actresses.

Despite these successes, the mixed-gender troupes did not meet with universal acceptance. Their welcome varied widely from nation to nation. Even within the borders of Italy, the leading companies could be lionized in one region and shunned in another. Plays continued to be performed in which the lovers stayed off-stage entirely, and even in commedia dell'arte troupes, men played some female servant roles well into the seventeenth century. As late as 1588, for example, Diana Ponti's Desiosi troupe was licensed to play in Rome only without women (Lea, 270). Often this patchwork pattern of acceptance and exclusion arose from clerical opposition to theater in general and to actresses in particular. Scandalized by the growing power and success of the professional troupes and their intriguing actresses, prelates and theologians denounced the commedia's introduction of women onto the stage. In calling for a ban on all theater in 1578, Cardinal Gabriello Paleotti of Bologna specifically targets the comic's "infamous women of ill repute," censoring actresses for earning their living through skills that exert a devastating effect on the morals of their audiences, and especially married men who fall for their charms (Taviani 1969, 39). Nonetheless, by the end of the century actresses were a standard feature of the professional Italian stage, inclusively implicated, racket-hounded out, in Juan de Pineda's 1599 long-winded denunciations of the theater as a "devil's workshop" (Taviani 1969, 122). Five years later the Dominican monk Domenico Gori made renewed attempts to rid the stage of "the obscene antics" of the "commedie di Zanni." He warns men of the grave spiritual dangers of marrying an actress, and reminds actresses who perform in lewd comedies that their public words and gestures are as morally sinful as the private deeds of prostitutes (Taviani 1969, 136–43).

Despite continuing clerical fulminations, there was no going back. The visual records chart the growing confidence of actresses in terms of costume and roles, sphere of action, and stage presence, and confirm the increasing indispensability of women performers at every level of theatrical activity.

6 According to MacNeil, in this performance "the combination of ... rhetoric, gesture, secondo pratica music, and commedia dell'arte performance results in a radically new style of music theater that is representational in all its aspects" (2002, 403).

7 A prime example is the famous "Bayeux painting," showing a crowded stage scene, which traditionally but erroneously has been held to record one of the first northern tours of the comic, to France in 1571 and 1572. An unreliable post-sixteenth-century caption identified some of its figures as ten members of the French royal family in the early 1570s collaborating with members of a commedia troupe (Duchartre, 86; Katritzky Thesis, 108–11; Leik, 190–6).
Among the best-known images of early actresses are those of the Recueil Fossard. The surviving sections of this dispersed and largely lost collection of miscellaneous early modern prints, now mainly in Scandinavia, include a much-reproduced sixteenth-century series of eight woodcuts of Harlequin with his Italian troupe of actors and actresses. Elsewhere I discuss the reasons for arranging these eighteen woodcuts to reflect episodes in the three acts of a particular commedia performance (Katritzky 1989). In total, nine male and five female characters, all named, are featured in these eighteen prints (fig. 6.8). My own reading of the plot tentatively distributes these fourteen characters between the household of the two older men, as follows: Segno: Pantalon has two male servants, Harlequin and Zany Cornetto; the female characters are his maid Francisquina (top, second from right; also in bottom row), and his wife, Dona Lucretia (center row, last on right). Donna Cornelia (bottom right) could be their daughter or a courier; such ambiguity of status is frequent in the iconography. The other older man, Segno Doutour, has two menservants, Francatirpa and Philipin; his maid is Liciaetta (third row, first image). Donna Lucia, either an immorata or a courier, is courted illicitly by Pantalon (top, second from left), and officially by Segno Horacio, the friend of Capitan Cocodrillo. Like practically all the males, the Doctor's son, Segno Leandro, dailles with Francisquina, but his wooing of a more credible marriage partner, his social equal Donna Cornelia, in the final picture seems to suggest that this performance will end, as many did, with a marriage. Of the fourteen parts, four are featured in all three acts, and only one of these, Francisquina, is a female role. The other three are principal masks, Pantalone and his comic servants Harlequin and Zany Cornetto. Luca, who is depicted in acts 1 and 2, could double with Cornelia and Liciaetta, who feature only in the last act. Pantalon, Harlequin, and Zany take part in all three acts, and Leandro in the last two, but the other five male roles could be doubled by three players. Over a third of the players in this performance -- five out of fourteen -- are women. More significantly, the maid Francisquina is one of four major roles, and women feature in over half of the eighteen pictures which make up this series.

Two prints by the Milanese artist Ambrogio Brambilla represent a compact print series offering valuable visual evidence concerning the gender make-up of commedia dell'arte troupes. One shows five commedia characters in a kitchen, making preparations for a wedding (fig. 6.12). In the second, six newcomers join three of them, namely the comic manservant Burati, Doctor Gratian, and Nepola, in a celebratory wedding dance (fig. 6.13). The six men are three comic servants, two old masters, and a German captain who plays the pipe and tabor. It is harder to categorize the five young women, but they are possibly two maids, Nepola and Balzarina, and three courtesans, Filomena, Venturina, and Franceschina. Five of the eleven characters are women, and they are central to the narrative (Katritzky 1987). The best-known series of commedia-related colored drawings is in the undated (probably early seventeenth-century) Corsini Album manuscript collection of commedia dell'arte scenarios, probably the working collection of a troupe, or plots poached from the professional stage by some amateur. Whatever its exact theatrical status, it is unique in that each of its 101 scenarios has been provided with its own individual illustrated title page, depicting one scene, or composite scene, from that scenario, enabling the roles of many of the depicted actors and actresses to be identified (fig. 6.14). Another significant, if much less well known category of colored drawings, in the half-century from around 1570 to 1620, is found in albums of a very different type. Genre scenes of mountebank and carnival activity in series of plates depicting Venetian costume were produced for manuscript costume books and alba amicorum, pocket-sized friendship albums in which friends and patrons could be requested to enter their names and titles accompanied by short texts, and sometimes suitable illustrations (figs. 6.4, 6.5; also see Mirabella, this volume, fig. 5.2). To create such images, early illustrators looked to sources in art, as well as on the stage itself, to build up their own increasingly strong iconographic traditions and conventions.

While many attempts have been made to identify specific actresses with depictions of performers, only a few sources have any claim to reliability. One of them is McGill University Library's Featherbook. This unique album contains pictures painstakingly built up c.1615-18 in mosaic fashion, using small pieces of feather, by the Duke of Milan's head gardener Dionisio Milione. Many feature birds and other natural history subjects, but there are also twenty-six human subjects, including fourteen pictures of comici. Seven show one actor, two feature two actors, one is of one actress (" Florinda") and four show an actor and an actress (labeled "Trastulo, Ricolina," "Mario, Flavia," "IJchapin, Spineta," and an uncaptioned pair). The named women bear the stage names of commedia actresses. "Rizzolina" was taken by at least two early actresses, Angela Lucchesi and Marina Dorotea Antonanzoni. "Florinda" is Virginia Andreini; "IJchapin, Spineta," are Francesco Gabrielli and his wife Maria Teresa Gabrielli; and "Flavia" is perhaps Margherita Garavini (Corrigan).

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8 Another important series (c.1576-9) survives as fresco paintings on the thirty walls of a winding staircase at the Castle Trausnitz in Landshut, Germany. Many scenes feature women players. Sixteen commedia scenes were also depicted on a ceiling fresco which has been destroyed by fire (Katritzky 1986, 137).

9 The website http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/featherbook.html depicts all the Featherbook pictures in color.
Such identifications are far more reliable than those made for some of the better-known paintings featuring commedia actresses. Early modern images of actresses labelled “Isabella” cannot always be identified as Isabella Andreini, who popularized this stage name for female lovers, sharing it with, for example, the Uniti’s Vittoria degli Amorevoli. The routine association of the woman standing in the foreground in figure 6.10 with Isabella Andreini remains conjectural. Accepted images of Andreini, possibly dressed in her stage role of the innamorata Isabella, include the portrait busts on the title-page woodcut of the 1601 edition of her Rime (see Campbell in this volume, fig. 7.1) and the commemorative medal struck after her death in 1604, and a full-length likeness in the right-hand background of a fresco depicting members of the Medici court, formerly in Sta Annunziata, Florence.¹⁰

**Women’s Stage Roles in the Visual Record**

Portraits or assumed portraits of commedia players are vastly outnumbered by pictures showing unidentified performers, both on- and off-stage. Analysis of the visual record has the potential for clarifying the players’ costumes and stage presence and their contribution to the dramatic effect at hand. The task is more difficult for actresses than actors, for several reasons. On the all-male stage, the presence of men playing women was conventionally limited to a minimum. Men playing men dominated the stage, and their roles were distinguished by easily recognizable stage costumes. Male stock roles rapidly developed stylized stage names, costumes, masks, and other distinguishing characteristics which aid their identification in pictures, even where the context is not obviously theatrical. In contrast, early actresses honed their skills in arenas in which overtly theatrical costume was rarely worn, such as the marketplace, oral tradition, and festivity. Depictions of female carnival masks and mountebanks suggest that even in stage contexts, female performers habitually wore less stylized costumes than men (figs. 6.2–6.4, 6.6). The visual and textual documentation suggests considerable overlap in the names, costumes and social classes of early modern female stock roles, both with each other and with the real-life types they represent. Perhaps because visual recognition is less straightforward for early female players than for actors, there are no detailed studies of female commedia costume comparable to those of its male roles.

For basic classification purposes, my reading of the visual evidence identifies four main categories of costume, none of which is foolproof as a sorting device. They are the elegant upper-class garments worn by the fashionable young innamorata and the respectable married woman; the servant’s simpler and plainer outfit, worn by most maids, nurses, and crones; the provocative and showy costumes of courtiers; and the exotic, usually “Oriental,” garb of the foreign or disguised woman. As with male roles, the majority of female commedia roles fall into the category of servant or served. Often imperious as a mistress to servants and suitors, the innamorata featured large in most commedia dell’arte plots, and the actress playing her often dominated the stage and eventually the troupe itself. Typically, the innamorata was a marriageable young daughter of Pantalone, Dottore, or other old masters of the commedia. Many plots concern her complicated, but ultimately successful, search for appropriate marriage partners. Although the innamorata generally wore opulent gowns in the height of court elegance, no other ornate mark may be used to separate her role from those of other young females, unlike the distinction between menservants and their masters. The innamorata’s costume was particularly flexible, spanning a wide range of garments from the everyday wear of maids and elegant gowns of respectable upper-class women, to the overt stage costume of professional entertainers, such as exotic acrobats, dancers, and musicians, including the dancing, singing cantarina (figs. 6.7, 6.8). It is also hard to tell innamoratas apart from female mountebanks, who wear elegant gowns in images depicting them playing “respectable” stringed instruments such as violins, in contrast to male musicians on mountebank stages (usually theatrically dressed as commedia menservants and depicted playing many types of instruments) (fig. 6.6; also see Mirabella, this volume, fig. 5.2). This type of gown is worn by many of the Corsini women whose roles can be associated with named female lovers, by reference to the scenarios they illustrate; the appearance of these, with their occasional appropriate to pastoral plays, and in the Corsini illustrations, Flaminia, Doralice, and Isabella, while in standard innamorata gowns, betray their madness through wild gestures and unkempt hair.

Female servants are as essential to commedia plots as the ubiquitous menservants, typically attending the lovers, performing household chores, transporting messages and objects, or fending off unwanted attentions of the zanni and the old men. Maids are more often depicted with props, such as a purse, scissors, dish of food, basket of vegetables, or spindle, that powerfully evoke their sphere of domestic activity and indicate potential or actual stage action. The maids Nespola and Balzarina in figure 6.12 are depicted in their kitchen, one preparing food at a table, the other tending a pot over the fire while repelling a manservant with a draining spoon, actions that suggest their involvement in extended comic stage business, or lazzi. Identified by their aproned dresses with neck-ruffs and head-cloths, maids are often depicted hovering behind their mistresses (figs. 6.9, 6.10). Its underplayed theatricality makes the stage maid’s costume especially hard to identify where actresses are not explicitly depicted in performance contexts, or

¹⁰ MacNeil 2003, 30–1, 48–50, 117–20, reproduces all three, and several derivative images.
contextualized by male companions in the strikingly distinctive costume of commedia menservants.

Whether courtesans or not, the stage costume of female lovers was more dependent on context than on role. In the public arena, even the innamorata whose reputation is not respectable may wear a respectable, elegant gown (for an innamorata who could be a courtesan or a respectable woman, see Donna Cornelia in fig. 6.8, bottom right). The plot summary of scenario 15 of the Corsini Album suggests that the female depicted on the right of the title-page illustration is Cintia, a widow who became a courtesan before remarrying. Bare-headed and unmasked, she wears an elegant gown typical of those worn by female lovers of the Corsini Album, as does Goltzius’s “Venetian Courtesan,” (fig. 6.3), whose performative context is given by her male companions Magnofigo and Zanni, stock commedia roles. This depiction is particularly valuable in specifying the exact profession associated with the depicted woman’s costume, and in giving a detailed impression of the type of stage costume associated with the courtesan at a given date, in this case 1581. Notable are the high plumed bonnet, light full-face mask, high, sheer collar, waist sash, richly brocaded floor-length gown, short cape, gloves, and ample range of jewelry. The wide range of dates of related depictions of similar women, evidently also courtesans, by much less gifted friendship album artists, from the 1570s onwards (fig. 6.4) suggests that Goltzius’s courtesan is based on a still earlier joint iconographic antecedent. They also demonstrate the difficulty of dating images of this type, because of the longstanding popularity of this costume, originally adapted with only minor modifications for the stage, but increasingly removed from the typical outfit of real-life courtesans as it became a surrogate stage costume. Nudity is sometimes associated with the courtesan role, as with Franceschina’s exposed breasts or legs (figs. 6.8 [top row, fifth scene], 6.13), but more often with that of the courtesan, especially in conjunction with opulent clothing, jewelry, or elaborate hairdressing, such as the bleached, curled styles favored by Venetian courtesans (figs. 6.2, 6.5, 6.7).

Despite its popularity in art, it is unclear how much nudity there was on the commedia stage itself. By its nature far less easily identified in pictures, cross-dressing (another form of erotic clothing) was certainly a significant stock-in-trade of the comici. Although the visual record is especially hard to interpret in this respect, it is well known that actresses, no less than genuine courtesans, frequently and elaborately disguised themselves as men. “The Harlots called Cortisane,” as Fynes Moryson notes, “commonly wear dobblets and Breches under their wemen’s gownes, yea, I have seene some of them goe in the Company of young men to the Tennis-Court in mens Apparrell ... most commonly wearing dobblets and Hose of Carnation Satten, with gold buttons from the Chine round to the waste behinde, and silke stockings, and great Garters with gold lace both of the same color” (628–9). In figure 6.2 the courtesan, with elaborate horned Venetian hairdo, wears breeches under her dress, as does many an innamorata in the scenarios. In the invaluable Corsini Album, the plot spelled out in the text of L’Innocente Rivendata (scenario 61) makes possible the identification of a cross-dressed actress on stage (fig. 6.14, left). Doralice, the boyish, diminutive innamorata at the right, has exchanged clothes with the Turk next to her. She wears typical male Turkish costume (slippers, loose knee-length, long-sleeved robe gathered in at the waist, white undershirt, and simple turban). He wears Doralice’s dark-sleeved gown with high collar, but betrays himself visually by his beefy physique.

Exotic Dress: “Turks” and “Gypsies,” with Caveats on Reading Iconography

Turkish costume was more usually associated with stage or carnival disguise by both men and women than a stock type in its own right. A frequent disguise, especially for female lovers and maids, was some form of exotic stage dress of more or less Eastern flavor, often Turkish- or gypsy-inspired (fig. 6.1). In addition to its purely visual appeal, Turkish costume carried vivid military and religious connotations. The Corsini illustrations demonstrate the popularity of orientalizing costume in a performance context. While costumed slaves, gypsies, and Turks of both genders are depicted, these pictures show that these costumes are also favorite disguises of female lovers. Doralice’s assumed “Turkish” costume in figure 6.14 is similar to that worn by the innamorata Elisa after her capture by the Turks; it is also similar to the garb of Covello’s daughter, an innamorata masquerading as the slave-girl Turchetta, whose even shorter version of the “Turkish” tunic is further dramatized with an iron neck-collar (Corsini scenarios 53 and 98).

Artists also used the Turkish look for showy, exotic costumes for comic female types in depictions of outdoor parades and carnivals. The curious raised headgear of these women often resembles the Turkish kashbasti, introduced to the Turkish harem by European concubines in the mid-sixteenth century and featured in the highly influential late sixteenth-century costume plates of Cesare Vecellio (Kratitzky Thesis, 194). Pictures such as figure 6.1, which shows nine performers, all masked, in exotic costumes with an unmistakable Oriental flavor, suggest that such disguises raise questions that are not adequately addressed by dismissing them as amateur carnival revellers. Where such players appear to be members of a troupe, performing in the open or parading to publicize their skills, it seems plausible to consider the possibility that these women have, as a publicity exercise, substituted exotic disguise for

11 Comedians who experienced the Turkish threat at first hand include Isabella Andreini’s husband Francesco, who spent seven years in Turkish captivity before starting his acting career (Duchartre, 231).
the costumes appropriate to their stage roles. Exotic costume would have been the most gorgeous and eye-catching garments possessed by the troupe. By raising more interest with the public than the commonplace costumes of respectable female lovers and maids, while fitting in with the constraints of public decency better than courtesan costume, it would have effectively fulfilled the aims of the parade or open-air performance, which was to attract custom. But even if the comic types depicted are based on real troupes, the artists may have seen them years, even decades, before depicting them. The commedia dell’arte characters featured in such works follow iconographic precedents, sometimes resembling each other down to their individual groupings, gestures, and costumes. Thus, even fairly precise dating of these paintings on stylistic grounds does not always enable the players themselves to be accurately dated.

By the mid-sixteenth century, gypsies were popular stage characters. The illustration to Corsini scenario 21 resembles depictions in costume books of the period. But the appearance of gypsies alongside commedia dell’arte stock types in another painting may have a less straightforward explanation, demonstrating some of the complications involved in using early modern depictions of comic types as documentary information (fig. 6.15). It depicts two Zanni, a ragged child, and three women whose flowing, fringed cloaks and loose, striped robes and circular headdresses from chin-cloths correspond to the traditional costume of the female gypsy. The exotic look and the symbolic, allegorical, and moral possibilities of gypsy culture attracted late Renaissance artists. Renowned for their skill in entertaining, fortune-telling, and cheating the gullible, gypsies were pagans who (according to legend) refused to help the Holy Family on their flight into Egypt, then thought to have been their country of origin. It is in Carriera’s influential early seventeenth-century painting, The Gypsy Fortune-Teller, the gypsy plies her craft, using a flirtatious gesture to cover up the fact that she is subtly teasing a young soldier’s ring from his finger. Figure 6.15 also shows a gypsy simultaneously telling and illicitly diminishing the fortunes of her client. Its modern title, Scene from the Italian Comedy, has been accepted without question as being an appropriate and adequate description of its subject by the many art and theater historians who have written about it. Barry Wind, who mistakenly identifies the central Zanni as a Pantalone, cites this painting as direct evidence for “the popularity of the fortune telling theme in the [commedia]” and interprets it as depicting “the gulling of Pantalone by a gypsy” (32).

Investigation suggests a more complex link with the late Renaissance stage. The possibility that the painting constitutes a documentary record of an actual stage performance cannot be entirely discounted. The outfits look authentic, so the question of whether they are real, carnival, or stage gypsies is not resolved on the basis of costume. I would argue that rather than illustrating a dramatic episode played by costumed actors and actresses, the artist may have combined disparate elements from different sources as a suitable vehicle for his visual message. The painting can be closely associated with a number of interrelated allegorical and popular messages. It comments on Fortuna, the goddess of fortune, and her well-known fickleness. The child holds the whipping rod to a spinning top, associated in Dutch emblem books both with sloth and with the spinning wheel of fortune, also indicated by the central activity of the fortune-telling gypsy women. They dupe the Zanni by their outrageous flirting, which is a cover-up to rob him, thus paradoxically diminishing his fortune in the very act of telling it. Religious, allegorical, and popular, as well as dramatic, readings of the picture are possible. They are not necessarily equally valid, mutually exclusive, or incompatible with the possibility of a relationship between figure 6.15 and the professional stage. The ambiguity of its subject makes this work a particularly clear example of a painting whose use as a visual source for the history of performing women is far from straightforward, despite depicting recognizable stock types and costumes associated with the commedia dell’arte.

Masks Worn by Actresses

Richards and Richards are among many theater historians who suggest that the women of the commedia dell’arte were only rarely masked in performance (112). Examination of the iconographic material, however, reveals that a significant number of early female commedia characters are depicted with their faces wholly or partially covered by a veil or mask (figs. 6.1-6.4, 6.7). With the male characters, masks are predominantly worn by the old masters and their apprentices. Women of the female characters, too, their range appears to be confined largely to particular types, although unlike the males, the female masked types are by no means exclusively depicted masked, and the wearing of masks appears to be dependent on performance situation as well as role. No masked females are depicted, for example, in Recueil Fassard woodcuts or Corsini illustrations, and only very few in peasant or servant dress. In general, the female types depicted with face masks wear the type of rich clothing associated with the innamorata or courtesan and appear in outdoor or informal, private indoor settings rather than on the public dramatic stage. At its most discreet the female stage mask is, like the loup, little more than a black eye-mask (fig. 6.2), prompting arguments that such masks are not genuinely theatrical. According to Duchartre, “the tiny black velvet mask, or loup, which the women of the commedia dell’arte sometimes wore cannot be considered a true mask, for it was used outside as well as inside the theater. The loup was as much a part of a woman’s dress as her brocade and lace” (266). But the visual record shows that some actresses wore masks that differed from those worn by other richly dressed women. The theatrical mask often covered considerably more of the face than the loup. In numerous pictures the females wear types of black three-quarter masks, more substantial than the elegant loup, typically
covering the nose as well as the eyes, sometimes also extending over the cheeks and upper lip, and often with a moustache attached to it (see fig. 6.4). Although its uneasy contrast to the feminine gown of its wearer provides the modern eye with gender-ambiguous cues, these "twiskes of downy or woolly stuff covering their noses" (Coryat, 386) may have been intended primarily as germ filters.

More difficult to distinguish in the iconography than black face-masks are pale or flesh-colored face-masks (6.1-6.4, 6.8), and the most discreet form of mask depicted, the veil. Numerous images depict commedia actresses in a full or three-quarter-face flesh-colored moulded mask, veil, or thick make-up, although it is not always easy to distinguish between such facial disguises. In figure 6.1, the women’s pale full-face moulded masks are secured by tapes running under their noses, the right hand woman’s additionally looped below her ears. Others are fastened with tapes tied behind the ears (figs. 6.2-6.4). Courtesans frequently sported masks and veils. The exposed breasts and explicit gestures of the female in the middle of the left-hand performing trio of figure 6.7, who wears a full-face veil, mark her out as a courtesan. Textual records suggest actresses wore veils for their sexual allure, and were found provocative on stage. Members of the Confidenti troupe sent a plea to Ferdiando de’Medici in 1581 to waive certain laws regarding forbidden props and items of costume, and to release one of their actresses, arrested for wearing silver-colored veils, from prison (MacNeil 2003, 210).

Conclusion

The pictorial record both broadly supports textual evidence that women’s participation varied widely from troupe to troupe, with between a third and half being women, and confirms the increasing prominence of the prima donna over the course of the sixteenth century. In erudite comedy, female parts were always played by boys and men, and the plays written for these all-male casts generally held to the convention that wits and romantic heroines should appear as little as possible during a performance, with much of their action related at second hand by maids and servants. Playtexts indicate that the respectable female roles only rarely break free of this convention before the advent of the commedia dell’arte. If they appear on stage at all before the mid-sixteenth century, female characters tend to hover well in the background, preferably framed by a window or door of their own private domestic interior. This theatrical device was extensively developed by commedia dell’arte actresses. Despite Church opposition, they turned the same doors and windows that had marked boundaries for their cross-dressing male colleagues into stepping stones onto center stage (Tylus). On the late sixteenth-century professional stage, although some maids continued to be played by men, key scenes involving the innamorata were increasingly no longer reported at second hand by the maid, but conducted in full view of the audience.

Commedia dell’arte actresses consolidated their on-stage presence by developing sophisticated strategies for circumventing the prejudices against women, and especially against women in public, on the late Renaissance stage, and for overcoming the challenges posed by the heritage of a theater dominated by the need to minimize on-stage female roles. Women players reinforced an increasingly vital and compelling stage presence through audience-pleasing devices such as improvised rhetorical set-pieces, musical virtuosity, and alluring costumes, and by developing a wide variety of both stock and occasional roles, whose costumes, gestures, and theatrical action are reflected in the pictorial record. As the commedia dell’arte prima donna became an essential stage presence, artists began to make actresses the focal point of theatrical compositions (figs. 6.9, 6.10, 6.14). Regardless of how closely male artists’ focus on beautiful innamoratas reflected the priorities of stage practice, it is clear that the rise of the commedia dell’arte and its actresses promoted the emergence of female stage roles from the margins to the center of theater. Italian women of abundant talents, equal to the challenge of wholeheartedly grasping and exploiting these new theatrical opportunities, stepped triumphantly into the limelight of public acclaim. The visual record complements the textual documentation in confirming that commedia dell’arte actresses became increasingly adept in deploying youth, beauty and talent to successfully negotiate their fair share of the early modern stage.

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Women Players in England, 1500–1660
Beyond the All-Male Stage

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ASHGATE
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