

# MRS APHRA BEHN AND THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

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The history of England in the seventeenth century is characterized by sharp shifts from one extreme to the other, both on the political and social levels. These changes are also reflected in the history of the London theatres during the period, to the extent that all theatres were closed during the Commonwealth, and again for a year after the death of Charles II. The same extremism appears in people's actions and attitudes. People from all walks of life were wholeheartedly devoted to one cause or the other, and in many cases paid for their efforts with their lives.

Aphra Behn was no different to the people of her time. An ardent royalist, she proved her loyalty to her king by going on a spy mission to Antwerp. She paid dearly for her pains by returning to England impoverished, only to be thrown into a debtor's prison. This experience taught her to depend only on herself and her talents, which she defended tooth and nail, becoming the first professional female playwright in England, and one of the rare women whose literary capabilities were recognized and acknowledged by the predominantly male literary circles of the time. Her plays cover a wide range of styles and interests – pseudo-heroism, romance, farce. Her writings show her to be receptive to the different trends influencing her society.

Court society at the time of Charles II was very open to French influence. The king had spent many years of his exile at the court of his cousin, Louis XIV. His sister, Henriette, was married to the Sun King's brother. At the time, France was swiftly growing to be one of the most important nations of Europe. Its court was definitely the most magnificent and extravagant on the continent, its pomp and pageantry taking on theatrical proportions. Much of its sumptuousness relied heavily on Italian art and skill. Italian painters and craftsmen helped shape Versailles. Giovanni Battista – better known as Jean Baptiste – Lulli dominated the

French musical scene until his death, especially opera and ballet. The best stage machinists in Europe. Torelli and Vigarani, were in the king's pay. Italian actors, whose fame as 'maschere' in the Commedia dell'Arte had spread across Europe, settled in Paris. They were first placed under the patronage of Monsieur, and dedicated most of their plays to his wife, Henriette. Later, they became Les Comédiens Italiens du Roi and the best paid and most successful actors in Paris.

Charles II, a great lover of the theatre, certainly heard of the Italian actors through his sister, and probably watched them at the French court or in their theatre, the Palais Royal. During his reign, members of the Italian troupe from Paris, as well as actors from Italy, came to England on several occasions. Some of the most renowned actors in the Commedia dell'Arte entertained the king at Court. His protection towards them reveals his liking and appreciation for their theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Like all those who frequented court circles, Mrs. Aphra Behn must have watched the Italians perform. Besides, Mrs. Behn was very familiar with what went on in Paris. Maureen Duffy confirms her knowledge of the French language, which can also be attested by her translations of French works, and affirms:

'I believe she did go to France from time to time'.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, she does not specify on what grounds she bases this belief.

Whether in Paris or in London, Mrs. Behn most certainly watched the greatest Italian actors of the time, and was able to appreciate their qualities. In fact it is possible that in 1678 – 79 she started working with the Italian troupe from Modena.

The Italian actors had been sent to England by the Duke of Modena for the benefit of his sister, Maria D'Este, who was married to the future James II. Unfortunately, the troupe arrived at a very wrong moment, when the Court was taken up by the Popish Plot, and the denunciations by Titus Oates. Maria writes to her brother on the 19th December 1678:

...Li poveri commedianti Italiani non potevano venire nel peggior tempo perchè nessuno non ha voglia di comedie e così non guadagno niente...<sup>3</sup>

Aphra Behn had just triumphed with her play *The Rover*, the year before, in 1677. The sequel to this, *The Rover (Part Two)* or *The*

*Banished Cavaliers*, which included the characters Harlequin and Scaramouche, was presented at the Dorset Gardens in 1681. Ms Duffy states that the events of the time:

...affected her choice of a new play for the winter and its prologue. The epilogue was written by 'a person of quality' who claimed that Aphra Behn had written the play in five days.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that though the play was presented to the general public in 1681, it may have been shown at Court in 1678. The epilogue, as well as the prologue contain specific references to events in 1681,<sup>5</sup> but they do not constitute the core of the play and may have been written afterwards. In fact, a particular reference to the events of the Popish Plot, which admittedly, was still being discussed in 1681 because of the Jury's positive verdict could, however, place the actual play much earlier. In Act III scene I, just after Harlequin ushers in Hunt as a giant, we find the following comments:

Fetherstone: Good Lord! I wonder what religion he's of.

Blunt: Some Heathen Papist, by his notable plots and Contrivances.<sup>6</sup>

A more important detail lies in the fact that it would be more logical to write a sequel to *The Rover* the next year, in the wake of its success, rather than four years later. Besides, the play is dedicated to the Duke of York, whose wife was responsible for bringing the Italian actors to England. This could be an indirect tribute to Maria d'Este, as nobody, including Mrs Behn, would have dared mention her name at the time, because of her catholic religion.

Another important indication is given in the *Dramatis Personae*, which includes the names Harlequin and Scaramouche. We must not forget that the Duke of Modena's actors had no work, and therefore no money. This would have made them very eager to collaborate with anyone who offered them a part in an English play.

The name Scaramouche appears only once in the play itself. He is mentioned in a didascaly in Act II Scene I,<sup>7</sup> when he appears in a typical *Commedia dell'Arte* setting: a little stage with a pavilion is mounted on one side of the stage, and Scaramouche enters, following Wilmore who is dressed as a 'mountebank' selling fake remedies. No mention is made either of him speaking or moving, in fact we do not know exactly what he does on stage, nor when or how he leaves it. His silence could be explained by the fact that

the actor could not speak any English, and therefore would have resorted to a gestual act, even though we are not supplied with any information regarding this matter.

Harlequin is announced as 'Wilmore's man' and appears five times in the play. In Act II scene I, he comes on stage with Scaramouche, yet unlike the latter, he participates directly in the action and manifests the technical abilities the Commedia dell'Arte actors were so famous for, thus providing entertainment through movement. In this scene, he gives proof of the healing powers of Wilmore's quack potions by means of a 'lazzi': Harlequin stabs himself and 'falls as dead' and rises only when the potion is poured into the wound.<sup>8</sup> Later, he leads a horse from between Don Carlo's legs, causing the latter to fall down.<sup>9</sup> In Act V Scene III, he swallows a pearl from a necklace, goes into a clock case and shows Fetherstone how to stand in it, and plays tricks with Shift.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with the Commedia tradition, Harlequin sings and plays the guitar.<sup>11</sup> Harlequin does speak in the play, but his lines are always preceded by the words 'in Italian', or 'in Italian still speaks'.<sup>12</sup> This is a clear indication of the actor's origin. The only other lines he utters are in French.<sup>13</sup>

The names of the actors playing Harlequin and Scaramouche are not mentioned, so if we are to take it that the two 'masks' belong to the Modena troupe, we must try and guess at their identity. This is all the more difficult because in the list, provided by A.L. Bader, of the actors constituting the Modena Troupe in England<sup>14</sup> there is no Harlequin or Scaramouche. Yet we know that two of the actors mentioned in the list went on to join the Troupe des Comediens Italiens du Roi in Paris, where one of them took up the part. Giuseppe Tortoriti, entered the Paris troupe in the role of Pasquariel, (the same type he acted in England) but took on the role of Scaramouche after Fiorilli retired in 1694 and became known as 'Scaramouche le Jeune'. Things are less straightforward as far as Harlequin is concerned. Two 'zanni' appear on the list of the Modena company: Andrea Cimadori (Finocchio) and Costantino Costantini (Gradellino). The latter played the same role in Paris as from 1687 but was expelled from the country probably after 1696. D'Origny states in his *Annales*:

On reconnoit qu'il ne manquait ni d'intelligence, ni de chaleur. Probablement ces qualités lui auraient valu les suffrages du Public, mais il eut la maladresse de l'indisposer par une chanson dans laquelle la nation Francaise etoit fort mal traitée.<sup>15</sup>

In France, Costantini was in charge of all the musical parts of the plays. In Behn's play, Harlequin plays and sings on stage but perhaps behind the scenes, the actor gave a helping hand with the music scores and the dancing.

Unfortunately, there are no records to show who acted the two parts in 1681 at the Dorset Gardens, and no trace of Italian presence at the time has yet been found.

Aphra Behn's next connection with the *Commedia dell'Arte* is in her last play, *The Emperor of the Moon*, produced in 1687. The title resembles that of *Arlequin Empereur dans la Lune*, published in Gherardi's *Recueil*, which had been acted by the Italians in Paris three years before.<sup>16</sup> Mrs Behn's play, which was the author's first try at comic opera, was so successful that it was acted well into the eighteenth century. Fidelis Morgan speaks about its success in these terms:

[It] was regularly performed for foreign dignitaries visiting London, among them the Moroccan ambassador, an African prince, and his Excellency Hodgha Bawhoom, envoy from the Great king of Persia, who could enjoy jokes which were primarily visual rather than verbal; it was also popular with the English royal family. It was often chosen for performances which fell on Friday 13th because it never failed. This was the last of her plays that Mrs Behn was to see performed.<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting to note that Mr Underhill, who in the *Banished Cavaliers* plays the comic role of Ned Blunt, is the Dr Baluardo in *The Emperor of the Moon*. The actor had definitely met Giovanni Antonio Lolli in 1678. In Bader's list the Italian actor's stage name is Dr Brentano,<sup>18</sup> and he is the Dr Balouardo of the play shown in Paris. The Harlequin in Mrs Behn's play is Thomas Jevon, credited in the satire of the time with 'heels of cork and brains of lead'.<sup>19</sup> I.K. Fletcher maintains that the actor must have watched the Italian Harlequin in the *Banished Cavaliers* and affirms:

The two actors, Hayns and Jevon, came together at the Dorset Theatre in 1687 in the production of Mrs Behn's *The Emperor of the Moon* based on Biancolleli's great success . . . Jevon played Harlequin and Hayns had the distinction of appearing as himself . . .

Jo Haynes is not mentioned in the *Dramatis Personae* of the edition by Montague Summers, but if what Fletcher affirms is true, there would be an even stronger link with the Italian comedians. The English actor had met and actually worked with the Italians at the

court of Louis XIV in 1670 and 1672. He most certainly saw the great Domenico Biancollelli and Tiberio Fiorilli at work, and observed their legendary skill and technique. However, in a Commedia dell'Arte play, it was impossible for an actor to appear as 'himself'. In Gherardi's *Recueil*, there is no mention of Biancollelli ever having done so, even though Gherardi admits to having done this in his preface to the play *Le Divorce*:

Si j'étois homme a tirer vanité des talents que la nature m'a donnés pour le théâtre, soit à visage decouvert, ou à visage masqué, dans les principaux rôles sérieux ou comiques, ou l'on m'a vu briller avec applaudissement . . . j'auois ici un fort beau champ à satisfaire mon amour-propre. <sup>20</sup>

Gherardi appeared on the French stage two years after Mrs Behn's play was produced. Perhaps Jo Haynes took the liberty of appearing as himself because English audiences were not as familiar with the codes of the Commedia dell'Arte as the Italians or even the French. It would be interesting to know exactly what the actor did in the play, but the fact that he is not mentioned in the text would lead one to believe that his role was based on his physical abilities.

The part of 'Scaramouche' is played by 'Mr Lee', or rather, Anthony Leigh, 'one of the king's favourite actors' who, according to Colley Cibber, could make even the most boring characters appear funny on stage. <sup>21</sup>

There are four female roles both in the Franco-Italian play and in the English one. The names in Mrs Behn's work are reminiscent of the play shown in 1684. The female lover, Elaria, would correspond to the part Eularia played by Ursula Cortezzi. Cortezzi relinquished her role of Prima Amatora to her daughter, Françoise Biancollelli, known on stage as Isabella, in 1691. The latter had been playing the roles of second lover since 1683. Her other daughter, Catherine, played Colombine the servant, the Mopsophil of Mrs Behn's play. The fourth female, Florinda in the English version, would correspond to the Parisian Olivette. Even though Eularia is the Doctor's niece in the 1684 version and his daughter in Mrs Behn's, the relationship of daughter and niece are maintained.

The date of presentation of Mrs Behn's play is given as March 1687, that is three years after the Italians had put up their play in Paris, in March 1684. However, M. Willson Disher states that it may have previously been performed in England as is suggested by the lines in the last part of *Hudibras* published in 1678, the year of the Modena troupe's presence in the country:

But what, alas! is it to us,  
Whether i'th' moon men thus or thus  
Do eat their porridge, cut their corns  
Or whether they have tails or horns? . . .  
Can they make plays there that shall fit  
The public humour, with less wit?  
Write witty dances, quainter shows,  
Or fight with more ingenious blows?<sup>22</sup>

Since there is no trace of an Italian troupe in England after 1678, we could perhaps wonder if a version of the play was shown in England by the Modena troupe, yet there is no historical proof of this.

Whatever the case, it is certain that Aphra Behn must have been familiar with the play performed by the Italians. She cannot have read the printed version, because there is no known printed edition before 1694 (which only contains four scenes) and Mrs Behn was already dead at the time of its appearance. The final version by Gherardi, published in 1700, contains only eight unconnected scenes. Working copies of plays did travel around Europe, but we cannot know if such a one existed for *Arlequin Empereur dans la Lune*, and if it did, whether Mrs Behn had read it, and whether it gave an exhaustive description of visual elements. In fact, the details contained in Aphra Behn's play give us better insight as to what the Italians' play must have looked like, because except for the ending, Gherardi's scenes are all more or less included in her play. This is a strong indication of the fact that the English author had probably seen the Italians' version of the play, either in London or in Paris.

There are of course important variations. In the Parisian play, it is Harlequin who is the emperor of the moon and he is unmasked by the Chevaliers du Soleil. In the English play, the emperor is Cinthio, the lover. However, the name Cinthio was the stage name used by Marco Antonio Romagnesi who played the first lover in the Italians' theatre in Paris. The role of the second lover, Aurelio, was played by Ranieri who left the troupe in 1689 to join the priesthood. In Mrs Behn's play, the second lover bears a French name: Charmante, the Prince of Thunderland. The role of Scaramouche in the English play covers parts of Pierrot's and Harlequin's roles in the Parisian version.

When we compare the two plays, we can see that Aphra Behn has retained the gist of the Italians' story, as well as the funniest and most spectacular bits. The humour in her play is based upon more or less the same physical actions and transformations as that of the Italians. They are the parts anybody watching the play would remember after leaving the theatre. One such scene is that where Harlequin tries to commit suicide by tickling himself to death which is common to the two plays. In fact, in his edition, Gherardi states that:

Ceux qui on vu cette scene conviendront que c'est l'une des plus plaisantes qu'on ait jamais joué sur le theatre italien.<sup>24</sup>

In both plays Harlequin appears in female dress as a 'Fille de Chambre' and has the same jokes. The 'changements a vue' in the Parisian version are also included in Mrs. Behn's play, such as the scene where Harlequin changes back and forth from a baker driving his cart to a gentleman in his calash, or that when a sedan chair transforms itself into an apothecary's shop. In fact, Mrs Behn provides more information as to how this change occurs. Harlequin in Gherardi's version, and Scaramouche in Mrs Behn's who play the role of apothecary, both use the same type of pompous, high-flown language. The illustration which precedes the play as a frontispiece in Gherardi's final edition of 1700 seems to have no connection to the play itself. Yet, it can be understood to depict a scene of the play through Mrs Behn's description of the setting for the final scene of her play, written thirteen years before. In fact, she provides us with a better picture of the spectacle provided by the theatre machines, which the Italian theatre in Paris was renowned for.

Why is Aphra Behn so attracted to the Commedia dell'Arte? This is certainly due to the popularity of this theatre; but I feel there is a more valid reason for the link between her theatre and that of the Italian 'maschere', which has to do with the very essence of comedy. Although the enseign outside the theatre of the Comediens Italiens du Roi bore the motto: 'Castigat ridendo mores', the Italians had taught Moliere that 'L'art de la comedie est celui de plaire'. Aphra Behn strongly shares this view. In her preface to *The Dutch Lover* she affirms:



...I take it Comedie was never meant either for a converting or a confirming ordinance. In short I think a play is the best divertisement that wise men have...I studied only to make this as entertaining as I could.<sup>25</sup>

Aphra Behn's aim, like that of the Italian actors, is primarily to entertain. Moreover, because of her sex, Mrs Behn, had to struggle to defend her status as a writer during the whole of her artistic career: This may have disposed her favourably to a theatre which had had to fight for its existence because it had been the first to go against social convention and dare put women on the stage.

The Commedia dell'Arte's versatility is attested by the fact that it plied itself to suit the tastes of the people of each country it was exported to. Aphra Behn, herself a versatile author, recognized this trait, and adapted it to her style, and her London public. She 'englishized' the Italians' theatre, by starting out from its characteristics: its character types, their physical expressivity, and the spectacular elements which captured so many different audiences across the continent. These ingredients proved to be successful, to the extent that her play *The Emperor of the Moon*, is still today considered her masterpiece. Thus, the Commedia dell'Arte helped pave the way to Mrs Behn's lasting fame.

## Notes

1. There are several examples of this, of which the most remarkable is the fact that the king had even agreed to make his courtiers pay for court performances, in order to watch Tiberio Fiorilli, the famous Scaramouche, who had asked for an exorbitant fee. Cf. I.K. Fletcher, 'Italian Comedians in England in the Seventeenth Century', *Rivista di Studi Teatrali*, no. 9/10, 1954, p. 127.

2. Cf. Maureen Duffy, *The Passionate Shepherdess*, London 1977, pp. 120, 157.

3. A. Obertello, 'Su una compagnia di comici italiani a Londra nel 1678 - 79', *Rivista di Studi Teatrali*, no. 9/10, 1954, p. 140.

4. Cf. M. Duffy, op. cit., p. 203.

5. As pointed out by M. Duffy, op. cit., p. 204, the prologue is written after November 23rd [1681] since it refers to Shaftesbury's release.

6. M. Summers, *The Works of Aphra Behn*, New York 1967, Vol. i, p. 159.

7. M. Summers, op. cit., p. 142.

8. M. Summers, op. cit., pp. 142 - 3.

9. M. Summers, op. cit., p. 145.

10. M. Summers, op. cit., pp. 201 - 203.

11. M. Summers, op. cit., p. 188.

12. M. Summers, op. cit., p. 189, p. 200.

13. M. Summers, op. cit., Act V Scene III, p. 200, Harlequin says: 'Qui est la?'

14. A.L. Bader, 'The Modena Troupe in England', *Modern Language Notes*, June 1935, p. 368.

15. D'Origny, *Annales du Theatre Italien depuis son origine jusqu'a ce jour*, Paris 1788, p. 23.
16. Evaristo Gherardi, *Theatre Italien, ou le receueil général de toutes les comedies et scenes francaises jouées par les Comediens Italiens du Roi*, Genève 1969.
17. Fidelis Morgan, *The Female Wits: Women playwrights on the London Stage 1660 - 1720*, London 1981, p. 19.
18. A.L. Bader, op. cit., p. 368.
19. *Oxford Companion to the Theatre, 1967* entry: Thomas Jevon, p. 515.
20. I.K. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 134.
21. *Oxford Companion to the Theatre, 1967* entry: A. Leigh, p. 522.
22. M. Willson Disher, *Clowns and Pantomines*, London 1968, p. 77.
23. E. Gherardi, op. cit., Vol II, p. 182. There are in fact three plays where Gherardi specifies that 'Arlequin apparait a visage découvert': *Les Filles Errantes*, *La Fille Scavante*, *Les Deux Arlequins*.
24. E. Gherardi, op. cit., p. 131.
25. M. Summers, op. cit., p.223