

*Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios.*

Natalie Crohn Schmitt.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. xiv + 328 pp. \$80.

---

Natalie Schmitt's "befriending" Scala's *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* (The theater of representative plots, 1611) offers valuable insights into this rare print collection. Recognizing its foundational importance to the commedia dell'arte's golden age

(1570–1630), she sets out to correct certain misconceptions. To counter Tim Fitzpatrick's schematic treatment of the scenarios as skeletal and Richard Andrew's literary translations as rearrangements of existing materials, she wants to prove their unique artistic merits. Paradoxically, her decision not to acknowledge, as Andrew's outstanding collection does, that Scala's inventiveness is firmly located in his imagined reconstruction of scenarios for a dream team of all-star performers makes it more difficult for her to reveal the most original features of this ensemble art form. Although she notes in chapter 4 that Scala left the creation of the individual theatrical moments to the performers who supplied their own dialogue and impromptu plot twists, her choice to champion Scala's character types over their interpretation by individual performers means that she rarely examines their brilliant moments of spontaneous invention and self-reflexive expression. Her research instead informs us about the range and substance of his masterful plots, effective staging, and virtuosic rhetorical embellishments.

Part 1 draws examples from the forty comic scenarios to reveal how character relationships and street settings reflect social realities — as great comedy does. Chapter 2 examines different power dynamics, showing how the tensions between patriarchs, their children, and servants fighting over such crucial issues as love, friendship, marriage, dowries, and service provide the conflicts that drive the plots and often challenge the status quo. Chapter 3 explores how the staging conventions representing the public street provided the perfect space to show characters from all walks of life interacting with one another. Regarding the frequent use of the cross-dressed female role, Schmitt notes its potential challenge to gender restrictions, but is unsure what Scala's private position was.

Chapter 4 defends Scala's great artistry through his implementation of imitation, copiousness, and variety. She pinpoints his inventiveness as arising from his carefully segmenting the action into scenes that allow characters effective exits. Copiousness offers rich examples of great theatrical devices such as doubled or tripled plotlines, framing devices to double consciousness of fictional cities and incidents mirroring actual locations and events, compression, repetition and contrast — all coordinated to create a multiple unity. Variety is found in the kinds of complicated twists, tricks, and reversals that extend the romantic-comedy model to feature topics such as sorcery, madness, and revenge.

In part 2, Schmitt puts her methodology into practice, illustrating Scala's playmaking in meticulously researched dramaturgical readings of four scenarios that highlight his originality. Chapter 5 revisits the well-known "Day 6: The Jealous Old Man," providing a wealth of background information and bringing attention to Scala's ingenuity in tight plotting, motivated exits to facilitate the illicit sexual encounters, and the satiric depictions of lustful old men. "Day 21: The Fake Sorcerer" provides an example of a Carnavalesque topsy-turvy world featuring pregnant bodies, feasting, clowning, magic, death, and madness as motifs running through all three acts until the young women's fathers can be fooled into marrying them off. In "Day 25: The Jealous Isabella," in which the plot turns on Isabella's playing both herself disguised as a man and her long-lost brother Fabrizio, Schmitt stresses originality over its relationship to *Gl'ingannati*.

Showing how the careful plotting keeps the mistaken identity trick running until the end, she praises the actress' male impersonation, but ignores Andrew's note that the part was written for Isabella Andreini. Chapter 8 treats "Day 36: Isabella [the] Astrologer" as a *commedia grave*, noting its unusual combination of city business with international trade. The difficult fates of the enslaved disguised protagonists and their dependence on the astrologer and ruler for their lives keep the subject matter serious.

Overall, Schmitt leaves us with a rich dramaturgical document to foster our respect for Scala's *commedia dell'arte*, while also alerting us to some of the difficulties in capturing its performative brilliance on the page. Her deep appreciation of Scala shines through.

ROSALIND KERR, *University of Alberta*