

## COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE AND ITS CHARACTERS: INFLUENCES ON MOLIÈRE'S WORK

*A COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE e suas personagens: influências na obra de Molière*

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze, first, the *commedia dell'arte*, popular and improvisational theater that emerged in the early sixteenth century. Next, the study focuses on the approach to the characters, with emphasis on the costumes that are crucial elements for their physical characterization and social positioning. Finally, emphasis is given to the question of the influence that these characters and this theatrical typology had in the French theatre of the seventeenth century, especially in Molière's work.

### Resumo

Neste estudo visa analisar-se, em primeiro lugar, a *commedia dell'arte*, teatro popular e de improviso surgido no início do século XVI. Seguidamente, o estudo centra-se na abordagem dos caracteres ou personagens, com evidenciação dos figurinos que são elementos cruciais para a sua caracterização física e de posicionamento social. Por fim, dá-se relevo à questão da influência que estes caracteres e esta tipologia teatral exerceram no teatro francês do século XVII, mormente, na obra de Molière.

**Key-words:** *Commedia dell'arte; characters; 17th-century French theatre; Comedy; Molière.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Commedia dell'arte; Personagens; Teatro francês do século XVII; Comédia; Molière.*

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## COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

*Commedia dell'arte* is a theatrical typology that emerged in the early 16th century and designates a popular branch of Renaissance theater in Italy, a country that, at the time, also kept alive the cult literary theater, the erudite theater inspired by Antiquity and guided by Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle, 2004).

The *commedia dell'arte* developed with the advent of the Renaissance and, later, arrived in France where it was resumed under the name of "Italian comedy" (Lotha, 2013, s/p.), having remained until the 18th century, when its period of decadence occurred (Zuber, 1998). In the words of Rodrigo Morais Leite,

The end of the *commedia dell'arte* is usually marked as the end of the 18th century, when, in 1770, the presentations of non-written comedies were forbidden at the Teatro San Carlino, in Naples. Another significant fact in this sense would be the closing, in 1780, of the Comédie Italienne, a kind of headquarters of Italian comedians in France (Leite, 2020, p. 54).

The presence of this theatrical modality in French dramaturgy and its influence in the theater of the 17th century, namely, in Molière's work, is undeniable. As Paul André recognizes in his article "Molière et les italiens", Molière has a special admiration for Fiorilli, the actor who played the character of Scaramouche in the *commedia dell'arte*, and shared a show room with him for several years:

l'influence de la *commedia dell'arte* sur Molière est si bien remarquable sur ses œuvres que l'on peut sans contester que ce dramaturge français a contribué à l'histoire de ce genre. Se partageant d'abord la salle du Palais Royal en 1658, Molière et les Italiens vont longtemps se fréquenter. Molière vouera une admiration extraordinaire pour Tiberio Fiorilli, interprétant le personnage de Scaramouche (André, 2003, s/p)<sup>4</sup>

*Commedia dell'arte* is a type of improvisational theater, where a few actors come together and take over the scene, without having to rely on the canonical writers of the dramatic text supported by classical ideals (Sampaolo, 2017; Chopra, 2011). The companies are itinerant, present their repertoire in various cities, and have a family scheme structure, exceptionally hiring a professional. This model should be understood

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<sup>4</sup> The influence of *commedia dell'arte* in Molière is so perceptible in his works that it can be said without a doubt that this French playwright contributed to the history of this genre. From the beginning, in 1658, and for a long time, Molière and the Italians shared and worked together in the theater hall of the Palais Royal. Molière will dedicate an extraordinary admiration to Tiberio Fiorilli, who played the character of Scaramouche" (André, 2003, s/p).

as a way of reacting to the erudite model theater, which is no longer appreciated by the public. This theatrical typology brings back pantomime, ridicule, and also vulgarity, ingredients that were already used in Greek (and later Roman) comedies, considered by Aristotle "an imitation of inferior characters, not however in all their vileness, but only in that part of vice which is ridiculous" (Aristotles, 2004, p. 45-46). Prescinding from a prefigured, closed text and without the detailed prescribed plots and dialogues the *commedia dell' arte* is a theater whose comic effects are sustained "in resources such as peripecies, trickery, equivocations, exchanges of identity, disguises, and so on; in substance, the same ones found in the Latin comedy, the French farce or other modalities of popular theater identified throughout history" (Leite, 2020, p. 55).

In *commedia dell'arte*, plays are performed in public places, in streets or squares, and the stages and the whole performance scheme is based on improvisation and spontaneity of the actors. For this reason, *commedia dell'arte* is also known as *commedia all'improvviso* (improvisational comedy), because everything is spontaneous, created on the spot, according to circumstances.

Many theater companies were successful with the *commedia dell'arte*, not only among the popular classes, but also attracting the audiences of Italian and French high society. Among the companies that stood out the most were *Confidenti*, *Fedeli* and *Gelosi*, whose repertoire was to inspire Molière. After the *commedia dell'arte* conquered the higher social classes, the best companies moved from the street to the stage and the outdoor space was replaced by the interiors of palaces, resulting in a dignification of this theatrical modality.

## **ACTION**

As far as conflict or action is concerned, in *commedia dell'arte*, performances follow a repertoire of constant situations, only modified by the actors' improvisational skills. Thus, the traditional script is centered on the figures of the *innamorati*, the lovers, and the main action is aimed at their desire to marry. However, one *vecchio* (old man) or several, *vecchi* (old men) want to prevent the marriage and, to that end, they involve as adjuvants one or more of the *zanni* (servants). In the end, all ends well, with the marriage of the *innamorati* and the forgiveness of all iniquities. Despite this fixed outline, there are numerous variations of the story.

## PERSONS

In *commedia dell'arte*, the type characters, with a functional value, are played by versatile actors who sing, dance, act and juggle. Besides the colorful costumes, most of them wear masks: "masqués, ils savent danser, chanter et faire des acrobaties" (Combeaud, 1999, p. 8). The only people who reveal their identity, without wearing masks, are the *innamorati*, the protagonists and those responsible for the main plot, around whom the adventures are generated.

The characters are divided into three groups: the lovers (*innamorati*), the servants (*zanni*), and the old men (*vecchi*). These characters are stereotyped and caricatured, representing a social group or an age group. Only the *innamorati* are true lovers, willing to marry, and do not have a comic posture; the servants are of lower status, lower class and popular; the old men are upper class, aristocrats or bourgeois.

The costumes, adjusted to the social condition of the characters, are fundamental elements for the social and physical characterization of the types that are distinguished by carnivalesque, extravagant, and cheerful models.

To illustrate the relevance of the characters, this study includes the drawing, from its own source, for the registration, creation, and diffusion of the stage costumes or figurines of the *commedia dell'arte*, which identify and project the characters throughout time.

The Harlequin or *Arlecchino* in Italian, is a typical character of the *commedia dell'arte* that appeared in the XVI century in Italy, whose costume is made of multicolored lozenges that represent the many facets of the Harlequin, as well as his poverty, being a relevant and revisited figure in the French XVII century, Louis XIV's time, as mentioned by Moureau in the work *De Gherardi à Watteau: présence d'Arlequin sous Louis XIV* (Moureau, 1992). His mask contains a low forehead with a wart. He is usually a servant of *Pantalone*, sometimes of *Dottore*.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1-** Harlequin [Own source- Drawing by A. Araújo].

Appearing in many *commedia dell' arte* plays, the Harlequin is an essential character for this theatrical modality. His function is that of a comic servant, known for his buffoonery. He shows little intelligence, and is often characterized as stupid, hungry, naive, and lazy. One of the attitudes that characterizes him is the permanent search for food, and to find it he is capable of inventing all kinds of stratagems, acrobatics and pirouettes. As for the rest of the time, he spends it mostly sleeping and tries to avoid any effort. He is often depicted with a bottle in his hand, which means that the viewer should not take his words into consideration, as they are worthless (Delbouille, s/d, p.105-131). In the opposite pole of Harlequin, although he also represents the figure of the *zanni*, Brighella is the correct and faithful servant. Not infrequently, however, he takes on other psychological features, appearing as cynical, cunning, or even aggressive, concealed, and selfish.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2 -** Brighella [Own source A.A.]

*Pierrot* is the representation of the faithful servant. He wears baggy clothes and a scarf around his neck. Dressed in white like *Pulcinella* in the *commedia dell' arte*, he is called *Pedrolino*. He is a very significant comic character in this theatrical typology and, like the Harlequin, is a figure that has multiple revisitations and reinterpretations over time until the present day. The lunar Pierrot that we know as naive, loving and dreamy in today's imaginary (represented, not infrequently, with a tear on his face) only appeared in the nineteenth century and has a characterization far removed from that which draws him in the *commedia dell'arte*, maintaining some psychological traits such as naivety.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3 - Pierrot** [Own source A.A.]

In the plays, he appears characterized as an honest, naive servant who is in love with Columbina. On the other hand, he is also a coward. His greatest flaw is probably distraction, causing most of the *commedia dell' arte's quiproquo*. He enjoys the game, is gluttonous and farcical, not infrequently dressing up as a woman. He also often cries, but the more he cries, the more he eats, creating the comic of situation and character.

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4 - Columbine** [Own source- A.A.]

*Columbina* is also a *zanni* (servant). She is the female counterpart of Harlequin. Usually portrayed as intelligent and skillful, she is one of the most emblematic characters of *commedia dell' arte*.

In the group of *vecchi*, *Pantalone* or Pantaleon is an old nobleman, avaricious and eternally deceived. He has a black cloak over a red garment as physical characteristics and appears, not infrequently, as an opponent figure of the protagonist(s). According to Graça M. Clara, "he is characterized by a black mask with an aduncated nose, suggesting Jewish ancestry [...] thick eyebrows and a wrinkled forehead, as befitted his age" (Clara 2018: 50).

Figure 5



Figure 5 - Pantalone/ Pantaleon [Own Source]

The *Dottore* is the oldest and richest of the *vecchi* and gives the false impression of an intellectual man. He is usually interpreted as pedantic, stingy, and unsuccessful with women. He wears a black toga with a white collar, a tight black hood under a black hat with the wide brims turned up.

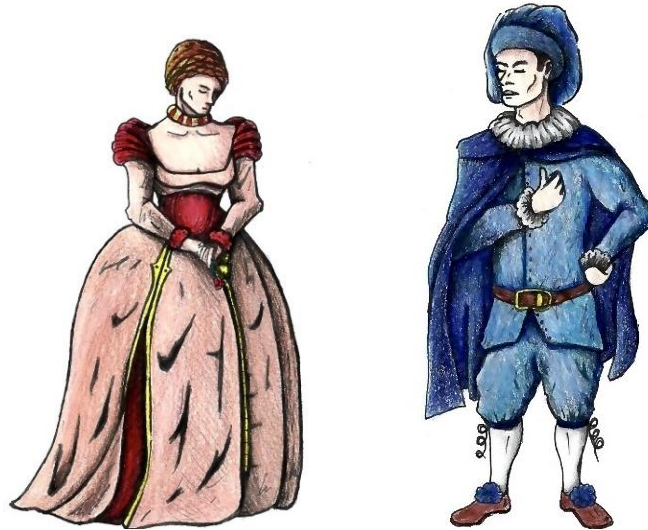
Figure 6



Figure 6- Dottore - one of the vecchi [Own source A. A.]

*Innamorato* and *innamorata* have many names. *Isabella* is the most popular name for *innamorata*. *Innamorata* are young, virtuous and hopelessly in love with each other. They have the most beautiful clothes and wear no masks, a fact that highlights the truthfulness of their identities and the feeling that unites them.

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** - *Innamorata* and *innamorato* [A.A.'s own source].

*Pulcinella*, also known as *Punch*, is the weird, feather-inspiring, vulnerable and usually disfigured. It is often depicted with a hump and a large, curved nose.

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8** - *Pulcinella*/ *Polychaete* [Own source- A.A.]



*Pulcinella*, in Portuguese, *Polichinelo*, is a buffoon, ridiculous, nonsensical, and naive.

*Scaramuccia* or *Scaramouche*, portrayed as a teller of lies and a coward, is a buffoon. He wears a mask, clothes, and a black velvet hat.

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9** - Scaramuccia or Scaramouche [Own source- A.A.]

Other secondary characters fill many plays of the *commedia dell'arte*, and here we have highlighted only the most significant ones that became universal and were projected through time in multiple receptions not only in the theater but also in other forms of expression (Clara, 2018, p.22). In fact, it can in short be said that the behavior of these characters fits a standard model: the amorous, the naive old man, the soldier, the braggart, the pedant, the cunning servant, etc., which are representations of social types.

## RECEPTION IN MOLIÈRE

Scaramouche, Brighella, Isabella, Columbina, Punchinello, Harlequin, Captain Matamoros and Pantalone are characters celebrated and eternalized by the *commedia dell'arte*, who spread throughout Europe, especially in the French theater of the 17th century. In fact, Molière reinterpreted many of these figures, under the monarchy of King Sol, a great lover of comic theater:

La faveur royale ne compta pas moins pour Molière que celle du public... Louis XIV a aidé Molière opportunément et intelligemment...il a été le protecteur fidèle de celui qui lui apportait une distraction de choix. Il aimait le théâtre; il aimait ce théâtre que lui offrait Molière, brillant, fastueux parfois, galant et surtout gai (Bray, 1992, p.134-135)<sup>5</sup>

The formation of an aristocratic theater-loving public comes from the practice of meetings and parties that were always accompanied by various performances. In fact, high society and Louis XIV himself were noted for their taste in theatrical spectacles, performed during the grand and pompous court evenings. After the performance of the play *Le Docteur amoureux* (1651), a Molière text now lost, "le roi se diverti si bien qu'il accorde à Molière de s'installer à Paris: il partagera avec les italiens la salle du Petit-Bourbon" (Combeaud, 1999, p. 8)<sup>6</sup>. At that time, Molière shared the show room with the Italian company directed by Tiberio Fiorilli, the great interpreter of the character Scaramouche (Cf. **Figure 9**), significant in the *commedia dell'arte*, a theatrical typology revisited by Molière (Combeaud, 1999, p. 8).

In France, since the 16th century, companies of actors have been touring the country, but it is in the 17th century that theater will find its performance spaces, its audience, its authors, and theater will become a profession, a social entertainment and an art. The companies seek the protection of patrons capable of giving them a pension. It is in this context that Molière's company emerged between 1632 and 1650, taking the name of his patron, the "Duc d'Epéron" and, from 1653 to 1656, the name of the next patron, the "Prince de Conti", finally becoming the "Troupe du Roy", under the direct tutelage of King Louis XIV, in 1658.

Molière, author of the comedy of society and human comedy, is inspired by the *commedia dell' arte* for the creation of some social types, namely, the figure of the *Zanni* (the servant). In Molière's plays, the servant is usually *Sganarelle* and, as in the Italian *commedia dell' arte*, his plays end with a happy ending:

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<sup>5</sup> Trad. "Royal favor was no less important to Molière than that of the public.... Louis XIV helped Molière opportunely and intelligently... he was the faithful protector of the man who provided him with a choice distraction. He loved the theater; he loved this theater that Molière offered him, brilliant, sumptuous at times, gallant and above all joyful" (Bray, 1992, p.134-135).

<sup>6</sup> Translation. "the king is so amused that he determines Molière to settle in Paris: he will share with the Italians the Petit-Bourbon theater" (Combeaud, 1999, p. 8).

Molière, dans ses pièces, va montrer sa parfaite assimilation [de la commedia dell'arte] de leur technique, de leur répertoire, mais surtout, ses pièces se finissent toujours bien. Rappelons que c'est ici l'une des caractéristiques principales des pièces italiennes. Tous les malheurs qui peuvent s'abattre sur les personnages ne sont qu'éphémères, et il vaut mieux en rire, car, tôt ou tard, un retournement de situation est toujours possible (André, 2003, s/p)<sup>7</sup>.

*Sganarelle*, from the Italian *sganare* (to choke) appears in multiple Molière's plays, namely, *Sganarelle ou le cocu imaginaire*; *Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre*; *Le médecin malgré lui*; *L'école des maris*; *Le mariage forcé*, among others. In all of them, *Sganarelle* is the decal of the Harlequin image (André, 2008, s/p), although with new attire. *Sganarelle* is often dressed in the various representations with shorts, a gibbon, a cap and hat of the same color, and a tight collar with ruffles. This is a man of the people, a servant, instrumentalized by Molière to create the comic of character, of situation, and of language, also in the lineup of Harlequin in the *commedia dell'arte*.

As for the plays influenced by the *commedia dell'arte*, among the thirty-two that Molière wrote (Forestier, 2010), we highlight five: *La Jalousie du Barbouillé* (before 1654) and *Le Médecin Volant* (1654), *Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire* (1660), *Le Mariage Forcé* (1664) and *L'Amour médecin* (1665). As literary critics have recognized him,

*Sganarelle, ou le cocu imaginaire...* Molière a bâti son acte sur un canevas italien: *Il Ritratto ou Arlecchin o cornuto per opinione*, que sa troupe jouait peut-être, autrefois en commedia dell'arte (Thoorens, 1964, p. 117)<sup>8</sup>

Although they are called comedies (and, in the case of *L'Amour Médecin*, a comedy-ballet), these Molière plays are farces stemming from the French tradition, whose plot is modeled on an Italian-influenced scheme. In fact, they are hybrid genre texts with which the French dramatic tradition is renewed by the influence of the *commedia dell'arte*. Similarly, two comedies in three acts, *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1671) and *Le médecin malgré lui* (1666) also have characteristics of farce.

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<sup>7</sup> Molière, in his plays, will show his perfect assimilation [of commedia dell'arte] of its technique, of its repertoire, but above all, his plays always end well. Let's remember that this is one of the main characteristics of Italian plays. All the misfortunes that may befall the characters are only ephemeral, and it is better to laugh at them, because sooner or later a reversal of the situation is always possible" (André, 2003, s/p).

<sup>8</sup> Transl. "*Sganarelle, or the imaginary cornudo...* Molière built his play on an Italian canvas: *Il Ritratto or Arlecchino cornuto per opinione*, which his troupe may have performed in the past in the commedia dell'arte" (Thoorens, 1964, p. 117).

The latter *Le Médecin malgré lui* and *Le Médecin volant*, for example, recover various burlesque scene games from the *commedia dell'arte*, with the protagonist of these Molière plays (as in the *commedia dell'arte*) being characterized as a false doctor (Doutrepoint, 1933, pp. 141-188), grotesque and buffoon.

## CONCLUDING

The influence of the *commedia dell'arte* in the French classical theater, namely in Molière's comedies, is a factual reality that can be seen both in terms of the characters and the structure of the plays themselves. From 16th century Italy to 17th century France, comedy moved from the street theater to the palace, with the company *L'Illustre Théâtre* de Molière being assigned the *Richelieu* Room at the *Palais-Royal* by King Louis XIV in 1680, now known as the *Comédie Française* or *La maison de Molière*.

To conclude, it can be said that Molière's plays combined politeness with vivacity, high comedy with *commedia all'improvviso*, and his characters, namely, the figure of the zanni was imitated and reinterpreted, with rare insight, in the character of the servant - sometimes faithful, sometimes cunning - Sganarelle (Dandrey, 1998).

From the above, it can be said that the *commedia dell'arte* was reinvented in France, with a new spirit, by Jean Baptiste Poquelin.

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