'ready apparrelled to begyn the play':
Collaboration, Text and Authorship
in Shakespeare's Theatre
and on the Stage of the *Commedia dell'Arte*

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Abstract

Comparative examinations of the *Commedia dell'Arte* and early modern English theatre (and Shakespeare in particular) have been directed mainly to the study of texts. These studies have argued convincingly that scripted and non-scripted comedies of the Italian stage and those of early modern English theatre developed similar themes, characters and conventions, constituting – in the words of Louise George Clubb – 'an international movement of playmaking recognizable as Renaissance Drama'. Less attention has been devoted to a study of the material organizational side of these (different but similar) theatrical enterprises. The article is a first attempt to consider, in a comparative perspective, what in both contexts happened 'behind the scene': in other words, how – in some cases similarly, in others differently – players and other professional figures collaborated in preparing the staging of plays.

Keywords: Collaborative Authorship, English Theatre, Italian Theatre, Staging Practice

1. *Introduction*

Kathleen Lea was the first to suggest competently a comparison between the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* and Shakespearean drama (1934). Her study was followed, years later, by an important book by Allardyce Nicoll (1963) and by other works, produced mainly in the field of Anglo-American scholarship.[1] These works discussed mainly the influence of the Italian *commedie* on Shakespeare, both in their fully scripted version (the so-called *commedie*

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erudite) and in the abbreviated version of *scenari* or *canovacci* that were the basis of the *improvvisa*. Their main concern, therefore, was textual in a broad sense: those elements that Clubb calls 'theatergrams', or 'reshuffleable pieces' which 'included types of characters, of relationships between and among characters, of actions and speeches, and of thematic design' (2010, 4).[2]

While its influence on plays has been convincingly supported, much less attention has been devoted to a comparative study of the material organizational side of these (different but similar) theatrical enterprises – to the way in which the fully scripted English dramaturgy and the stenographic outlines of *Commedia dell'Arte* scenarios were prepared for the stage.

Work by theatre historians has acquainted us with the distribution of tasks among the personnel that contributed to the staging of plays in the Elizabethan-Jacobean playhouses. Important reference works on these issues are, to name only a few, the four volumes of Chambers' *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923), the critical editions of Henslowe's *Papers* and *Diary* (Greg 1907; Foakes and Rickert 1961), the seminal books by G.E. Bentley (1971, 1984), the many contributions by Andrew Gurr (1980, 1996, 2004; Gurr and Ichikawa 2000) as well as a number of articles on more specific themes. Recently, attention has been devoted to rehearsal (Stern 2000), the distribution of parts to players (Palfrey and Stern 2007), or the ways in which the whole process was fragmented and collaboratively realized (Stern 2009). But in the case of the Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre, we have evidence on which to rely – not only Henslowe's papers, but also the plays themselves. Indeed, in the chapter entitled 'Staging in the Theatre', Chambers notes that to reconstruct 'the structural resources which were at the Elizabethan manager's disposal for the accomplishment of his task', he mainly relied on 'the numerous indications in dialogue and stage-directions' (1923, III, 70-71).

When we search for similar evidence as regards the preparatory steps that led to the staging of *Commedia dell'Arte* scenarios, we find an almost complete lack of documents. This is surprising, since the peculiar trait of the *improvvisa* was precisely the way in which comedies were staged. We may rely on the treatise Andrea Perrucci wrote in 1699, but Perrucci was a late witness; and the only direct documents we possess, the many letters from the *comici* themselves, nearly all of which are addressed to their noble protectors or to their protectors' secretaries, contain almost exclusively complaints about financial or logistical difficulties or the private troubles disturbing the harmony of the companies. The few hints at their material organization and task division concern the fact that the box office was manned in turn by one of the players,[3] that certain players were charged with props and costume

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[2] Clubb developed the concept of 'theatergram' for the first time in her 1989 book.

[3] There is a story about a player, Battistino, who was manning the box office while his company, the Gelosi, was performing in Paris. A gentleman, whom Battistino asked to pay

transportation, or that others were sent as ambassadors to the courts where their services were required in order to hear their employers' requests.[4] All we can glean from more than one thousand surviving *scenari* is a certain *ratio* of entrances and exits, as well as the positioning of the *zanni*'s comic interludes (usually announced by the formula 'X fa lazzi', which means 'makes jokes').

It is beyond doubt that, while in both cases we are talking about exceptionally successful commercial enterprises, the Elizabethan-Jacobean theatrical organization was incomparably more complex and professional than that of the Italian *comici*, much more 'domestic' and almost wholly internal to the group. This consideration allows us to outline an initial basic difference. While, in the case of English players, the authorship, so to speak, of staged plays was fragmented and distributed among a number of professional figures of which players were one of the components, in the case of the Italian *comici* the whole process seems to have been their exclusive creation. This meant a heavier weight on their shoulders, but also a closer control of the whole process and therefore a more direct authorial responsibility.

The aim of this article is to consider, in a comparative perspective, the practical steps which led to the realization of the two perfect machines that constituted the most innovative manifestations of European Renaissance theatre; what, in both cases, happened 'behind the scene' in terms of preparation and collaborative practices, from signing contracts, to the players' lives as communities sharing professional and personal interests, to the text readings and rehearsals that constituted the actual preparation of plays for the stage, to – finally – the side activity players performed, in both cases, to redeem their ill-reputed practice by trying to ascend the higher spheres of poetry and literariness.

A methodological premise appears necessary. What, in comparative treatments of the two phenomena as regards texts and themes, has been discussed in a perspective of influence, of kinship, or, at least, of 'resources in common' (the expression is in the title of Andrews 2014) is here meant as a comparison between means and methods employed in the two different contexts to reach the final aim of performing on a stage or in a room. The comparison, based on the few relevant documents we possess, shows similarities and differences; and it may help to initiate a debate on models of collaborative authorship as regards the activity of preparing (scripted as well non-scripted) texts for performance.

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for his ticket, beat him and said, 'I paid you with the money you deserve' (quoted by Schino in Taviani and Schino 2007, 280-281).

    [4] In a letter dated 28 August 1629, Pier Maria Cecchini informs his patron, Ferdinando Gonzaga, that a *comico* named Gallotta had just returned from the French court where he had prepared his company's tour (Ferrone *et al*. 1993, I, 286).

2. *Contracts and Agreements*

On Wednesday 25ᵗʰ February 1545, in Padua, eight men went before a notary. They desired to establish 'una fraternal compagnia' (a brotherly company) that should last 'in amor fraternal' (in brotherly love) between Easter 1545 and Carnival 1546 'without hate, rancour and dissolution'. They agreed to 'lovingly observe, as is good custom between good and faithful companions, all the following articles, under pain of losing the moneys disbursed'.[5]

Their names are 'ser Maphio ditto Zanini da Padova, Vincentio da Venetia, Francesco de la lira, Hieronimo da s. Luca, Zuandomenego detto Rizo, Zuane da Treviso, Thofano de Bastian, et Francesco Moschini'. Their agreement implied a bond of obedience to Maphio, who was acknowledged as the *capocomico* of the *compagnia*: the signatories committed themselves 'to do all he would command' as concerned 'the performing of *his comedies* in all places where they will be' (Schino in Taviani and Schino 2007, 184; my emphasis). Obedience was due to Maphio also as regarded 'the order of performing' (184); as F. Marotti explains, 'the distribution of roles, but also entrances and exits, that is, the whole assembling of the scenic actions' was 'the *capocomico*'s responsibility' (in Marotti and Romei, eds, 1994, xxvii). They also agreed that if one of them got sick, he would be helped with the money earned in common; that all the arrangements for travel would be made by Maphio; that the income from their communal work would be put in a *cassella* (little box) whose three keys would be held 'one by the said leader, the other by Francesco de la lira and the other by Vincenzo da Venetia' (Schino in Taviani and Schino 2007, 184); also, if while the company lasted any of the associates left the same, he would not have any of the money and would also be fined 'lire cento'. The confederates also agreed that the money kept in the *cassella* would be divided between the members of the company the following month of June, when they would again be in Padua (185).

This is the first of a group of documents that have survived from the dawn of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In other agreements, certain tasks or functions of individual *comici* are specified. For instance, in a contract signed in November 1549, again in Padua, there appears a certain Checo, a blacksmith, 'che fa da donna' or 'who plays women's roles' (190); it is stated that Moschin (Francesco Moschini) is charged to find a place for rent and, once found, 'to fit out the scene and do whatever is necessary' (190).

The formula for 'the performing of *his* [Maphio's] comedies' and the engagement of the signatories to follow Maphio's prescriptions 'as regards the

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[5] The contract was first published by Cocco (1915). This and the following contracts are quoted from the texts published by M. Schino in Taviani and Schino (2007, 177-204). Unless otherwise specified, translations are mine.

order of performing the said comedies' has raised doubts about the kind of 'texts' these actors meant to perform. This formula, however, is not repeated in subsequent agreements, where the expression *faciendi comedias* appears, and therefore any allusion to authoriality has disappeared.

A few documents allow us to follow the activity of this company up to 1553. Of those who signed the first agreement, only Maphio and Moschini are found; the others were substituted by different men who signed more or less the same articles, including – as the first agreement also states – 'recitar di loco in loco', which is to tour the country when and where the *capocomico* established. In 1553, following a brawl, Maphio was killed by a horse trainer; on 22nd September of the same year, again in Padua, Moschini established a new company in which he took the leading role that had been Maphio's. The formula expressing the signatories' basic obligation is 'ad faciendas comedias' (192). These contracts repeat in slightly different forms (with a mixture of Latin and Italian) the same obligations; but they say nothing about the ways in which performances were prepared, apart from the necessity to 'fit out the scene and do whatever is necessary'. No obligation, for instance, concerns the actors' attending any sort of rehearsal or any previous knowledge of any kind of text.

A contract signed in Rome on 10th October 1564 binds seven people, 'omnes ut vulgo dicitur Commedianti … super faciendis commediis'. This contract binds the signatories to be present 'at the usual times when comedies are played' (182). But the reason this particular contract should be mentioned is that for the first time a woman ('domina Lucretia Senensis') is one of the signatories with the same obligations that bind the male actors. The contract (a mark of regard to the woman?) was signed 'in domo dicte domine Lucretie Regionis Campi Martis' (182). We do not know whether the date on which this particular agreement was signed marks the inception of women's presence on the stage of comedies, for nothing allows us to glean from the text that we are in the presence of a new course.

Only one contract has survived among the documents relating to early modern English professional players. The agreement, dated 7th April 1614, was signed by Robert Dawes, actor, before Philip Henslowe and Jacob Meade.[6] Although this is a much later document, certain differences between the two kinds of agreement may be considered unaltered because they appear to be structural. The length of Dawes's engagement is not one 'season' as in the case of the groups of *comici*, but 'three yeares from the date hereof' (Greg 1907, 123), and the wages are going to be 'at the rate of one whole Share' (124). But one of Dawes' main commitments is that he 'shall and will at all tymes during

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[6] The original contract has not survived. As Greg notes, it 'was given by Boswell as among the Dulwich papers which he had from Malone' (1907, 123). Quotations are from Greg (1907, 123-125).

the said terme duly attend all suche rehearsall which shall the night before the rehearsall be given publickly out' (124); if he fails to appear, he will be fined.[7]

The article about rehearsal is unclear. The word 'rehearsall' appears twice in the same sentence, but it apparently refers to two different stages of preparation: a private repetition of the text which the players have memorized before the play is presented to the public and (probably) the very public performance. This formula has raised the question about what exactly 'rehearsal' meant. As Tiffany Stern argues, 'rehearse' may both 'refer to something that happens more than once' or simply mean 'to recite'; therefore, 'rehearsal did not necessarily signify a re-hearing or recurrent event' (2000, 24). The term, furthermore, also referred to non-theatrical situations, and, in the first place, to 'the school-room where children learnt to "rehearse", "repeat", or say over their lessons' (24; see also Guarino 2010, 86-87).[8] The very ambiguity of 'rehearsal' and 'rehearse' raises the problem of whether the company's rehearsing encounters were one or more. One might conjecture that only one collective, final rehearsal (usually called 'general') was the rule, unless serious blunders or memory failings suggested a second, either collective or individual, repetition.[9]

Again under pain of a fine, Dawes signed his commitment to 'be ready apparrelled … to begyn the play at the hower of three of the clock in the afternoone' (124). A fine was also applied if the player failed to appear or happened 'to be overcome with drinck at the tyme when he [ought to] play' and also if he failed to be present at the time appointed 'having noe lycence or just excuse of sicknes'. But the highest fine (40 pounds) was applied 'if the said Robert Dawes shall at any time after the play is ended depart … with any [of their] apparel on his body' or allow any other player to go out of the playhouse with any belongings of the company (125).[10]

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[7] Bentley states that fines 'in most companies would be paid not to the owner of the theater but to the company treasury' (1984, 50).

[8] Also private performances given before the town Mayor and Aldermen by the London companies when touring in the provinces were called 'rehearsal', although they were not a repetition, but a sort of *première* that only served to see whether permission to play might be given (Stern 2000, 26-28). The idea that the activity of rehearsing a play is similar to what happens in schoolrooms has also been exploited in treatments of the Italian theatre. Ferdinando Taviani quotes a passage by Evaristo Gherardi who, in 1700, contrasted the practice of improvisation with that of players who play a premeditated text saying that these are 'like students who trembling repeat a lesson they have learned word by word' (in Taviani and Schino 2007, 312). The Jesuit Giovan Domenico Ottonelli, in his *Della Christiana Moderatione del Theatro* (1646), talks admiringly about those players who either do not have a completely written text or, if they do, 'they do not learn [it] by heart as some boy players do, but simply learn the substance of the text' (quoted by Taviani, 316).

[9] Stern concludes that 'there is no evidence to indicate that more than one group rehearsal was normal', and adds that 'Partial rehearsals ... did also take place' (2000, 77).

[10] Particular items of apparel were owned by players. In his will, Augustine Phillips bequeathed certain costumes and props of his to some of his fellow players (Bentley 1984, 19-20).

No mention is made of what on the contrary appears as a vital engagement for the *comici:* the obligation to travel 'di loco in loco' as the *capocomico* will enjoin. Indeed, as is known, touring in the provinces was, for the London residential companies, an occasional event, a necessity mainly determined by the closing of the London theatres especially during plague epidemics, while it was a necessity for the *comici,* whose activity (and income) depended on the *signori* who asked for their services. A major disparity is the different overall organization that becomes apparent when reading these two kinds of agreement. By signing a contract, the Italian *comici* established a community that only depended to a certain extent on the *capocomico,* who was himself an actor. Robert Dawes' obligations (and maybe those of most English players), although he appears to have been a shareholder, were instead due to an outside *impresario* who financed the whole process, from text production to performance,[11] and therefore granted wages to a number of hired men (musicians, stage keepers, prompters, scribes, bookkeepers, etc.) that made up the backbone of the whole enterprise. The companies' organization, Andrew Gurr explains, 'was commercial, a core of shareholders and decision-makers, and a periphery of hired hands, backed in many cases by a theatre- and property-owning impresario who supplied ready cash in return for a share of the takings' (1980, 29).

We are, therefore, in the presence of two different kinds of commercial enterprise: in the first the whole profit was shared among the players to ensure their living by practising the Art, while in the second the entrepreneur must be granted an income large enough both to get his own profit and fuel the theatrical enterprise. But how far these general rules were followed is a different matter. The 'fraternal' companies of *comici* seem to have been, at certain times, not fraternal at all; and, as regards the English players, it can be imagined that the shareholders, certain distinguished actors, and probably also the playwrights made their influence felt on important matters.

3. *Communities*

But communal work and interests also imply a communal kind of life.

The dynamics governing the companies of *comici* appear clearly from the many letters which have survived.[12] 'Each player', Siro Ferrone argues, 'when admitted to be part of a company, lent to the common enterprise his or her personal store of experience and, at the same time, received a similar loan

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[11] As Bentley states, 'The contribution of capital as well as histrionic ability was a requirement for the sharers' (1984, 32).

[12] For a rich collection of letters, see Ferrone *et al.* (1993); for an English translation of a few of these, see Pugliatti (2014).

from the others' (1997, 9). Generally speaking, however, what the letters show is not the harmonious relationship 'without hate, rancour, and dissolution' that was wished for in the first contract; instead what prevails, apart from preoccupations about the many material difficulties to be met, are the feelings of rivalry, the meanness of envy and jealousy, the threats of abandoning the group, the gossip and hearsay. In them we read the vicissitudes occasioned by the instability of a vagrant, risky militancy, the pettiness of personal and contingent tribulations, the violent *jalousie de métier*, but also the energy of a 'collective mind'.[13] Ferrone maintains that, 'one may start from there to see how much their mean everyday vicissitudes may have given birth to their brilliance, their hyperboles and their artistic utopias' (1993, 15). Ferrone also gives us an idea of the difficult balance of the group dynamics:

Each player, by joining the company or by leaving it, produced immediate effects not only on the organization, but also on the nature of the *fabula* that was to be represented … If even one of its constitutive elements was changed (or lost), the *fabula* also had to be changed without altering the overall balance of the performance. (1997, 13)

All players, and especially the *capocomico,* were perfectly conscious of the risks represented by the instability companies experienced in their migrant life, but side by side with the anxiety about mutability and restlessness, their letters display a feeling of complete integration of individuals and their trade, as if nothing else existed for them outside the activity and creativity of playing and the professional pride of their militancy, a militancy that, as is well known, in most cases the *comici* transmitted by legacy to their children.[14] Their complete involvement in the *Arte* is shown, among other things, by the fact that in almost all their letters they refer to themselves not by their actual names, but by those of the characters they impersonated: Lelio, Florinda, Frittellino, Arlecchino, Cintio, Baldina, Bernetta, the Captain, Fichetto, and so on.

As regards the community of English professional players, Bentley remarks: 'An enterprise so popular and so allegedly profitable … inevitably developed certain standards or customs of organization, of procedure, of remuneration, of division of labor, of conduct, of hierarchy, of the acquisition of property, and even of providing for the widows of deceased members' (1984, 24-25). Raimondo Guarino, in turn, observes that 'beyond the adventurous and uncertain footprints of single players, there appear the marks of a collective identity' in that 'the world of the theatre becomes, in the age of Elizabeth, a world apart, recognizable and circumscribed'. Guarino notes

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[13] The expression is by Ferdinando Taviani in a private communication.
[14] The presence of family ties characterized the companies of *comici*, the most frequent being that of husband and wife.

that the concept of the 'microsociety of players' that has been formulated by recent scholarship as regards the Italian companies can be usefully applied to this other theatrical community as it emerges from the inextricable net of documents such as testaments and marriage contracts which 'reveal the intersection between family relationships and professional communities' (2010, 42-43).

For both groups, the feeling of community was also strengthened by the necessity to pen defences of their trade against detractors. The Italian *comici* had to plead especially about the charges of venality and scurrility as well as about the presence of women on stage; English players were obliged to legitimize the whole of their activity, including the facts that on the stage men played women's parts, thereby encouraging homoeroticism, and that plays kept people away from church services.

In both contexts, therefore, players were stimulated to establish a dialogue with their detractors. In certain cases, the defence produced extremely subtle reflections, as in the passage in which Heywood contrasts the 'descriptive', 'narrative', or 'pictorial' genres, to stage re-presentation: 'A Description is only a shadow receiued by the eare but not perceiued by the eye; so liuely portraiture is meerely a forme seene by the eye, but can neither shew action, passion, motion, or any other gesture to mooue the spirits of the beholder to admiration'; only in the theatre are characters presented 'as if the personator were the man personated' (1612, B3v).[15]

Certain defences, however, claim the superiority of one particular manner of acting against a different one and use the arguments elsewhere displayed by antitheatrical writers:

Our Players are not as the players beyond sea, a sort of squirting baudie Comedians, that haue whores and common Curtizans to play womens parts, and forbeare no immodest speech or vnchast action that may procure laughter, but our Sceane is more stately furnisht than euer it was in the time of *Roscius*, our representations honorable, and full of gallant resolution, not consisting like theirs of a Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie, but of Emperours, Kings, and Princes. (Nashe 1592, H3r)[16]

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[15] In the soliloquy he pronounces after meeting the players, Hamlet expresses a similar view about the impact of re-presentation when he plans to 'catch the conscience of the King' (2.2.601) 'by the very cunning of the scene' (2.2.586). Here and elsewhere quotations from *Hamlet* are from Jenkins, ed., 1982.

[16] The most famous defence of Italian theatre is *La supplica* that a *comico,* Niccolò Barbieri, wrote in 1634. In 1646, after Barbieri's death, the Jesuit G.D. Ottonelli, in his *Della Christiana Moderatione del Theatro* (1646), established a calm dialogue with Barbieri's book, criticising some of the *comico*'s arguments, but also acknowledging that there were virtuous instances of comedies which might even be attended with profit.

The rivalry and the *jalousie de métier*, it appears, were not only part of the groups' dynamics – they went beyond the sea, up to the point of borrowing the moralists' arguments that it was the players' effort to fight at home.

4. *Preparation*

4.1 *Play-Reading*

As regards the steps that led to the acquisition of plays by English companies, Bentley notes that 'There is enough evidence to show that the sharers often had to assemble to listen to the reading of a new composition and to pass judgment on it' (1984, 39); and indeed many items in Henslowe's diary confirm that this was a current practice. Henslowe, for instance, records a sum given to Ben Jonson for introducing a play to a company: 'lent vnto Bengemen Johnson the 3 desembz 1597 vpon a boocke wch he showed the plotte vnto the company' (Foakes and Rickert 1961, 85). In a letter dated 8 November 1599, a player named Robert Shaa recommends to Henslowe the buying of a book after 'hearing' it: 'm^r Henslowe we haue heard their booke and lyke it' (Greg 1907, 49). Years later, on 8 May 1613, Robert Daborne writes to Henslowe about a play he promises to deliver soon and asks him 'to appoint any howr to read to m^r Allin' (69). On 16 May, Daborne writes to Henslowe, again about reading part of a play he is writing: 'J will meet y^u & m^r Allin & read some …' (70). In a letter dated 9 December 1613, Daborne again announces a new play; the text, he says, 'shall make as good a play for ye publiq' howse as ever was playd … & J will vndertake vpon the reading it' (79).

From these documents, however, it is unclear whether the whole text of plays was actually read to the company (or to the shareholders), or only an idea of the plot was given (see 'which he showed the plotte', or the unclear expression 'heard their book', in the passages quoted above).[17] Bentley argues that it would have been impossible for shareholders to listen to a reading of the whole five acts of plays (1984, 40).[18]

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[17] The idea of a plot being read to the company raises a question about what is meant by 'plot'. A special kind of document, also called 'plot', was a stage memorandum for entrances and gave a few elements of what happens in each scene. Of these, only seven fragmentary specimens have survived. They were transcribed and published by Greg (1907) and later by Bradley (1992). For extensive treatments of these plots, see also Stern (2009, 8-35) and Pugliatti (2012). Other documents, also called 'plots', were meant as guidelines for the composition of plays (see *infra*, 5.2).

[18] In one of Leone de' Sommi's dialogues, the author, who was a playwright and *concertatore* (a position similar to that of *capocomico*), has one of his characters, Veridico, who represents Leone's own point of view, explain to his interlocutors how he presents his texts to the players. He first distributes the various roles according to his idea of each character, then

What we know for certain is that after the play was bought for staging, players were given their 'parts' to learn by heart. Parts were copied out by scribes, and each fragment of a player's part included the cue immediately preceding every speech, so that players might know where to enter in the dialogue (see Palfrey and Stern 2007).[19]

4.2 Scenario-Reading

Andrea Perrucci (1651-1704) wrote his treatise *Dell'arte rappresentativa premeditata e all'improvviso* in 1699, when the experience of playing *all'improvviso*, reciting a seemingly absent, or rather unwritten, text, had been rife in Italy for about a hundred and fifty years. What he says is more or less all we have to build up our knowledge of the way in which the *comici* prepared their performances. Obviously, the passage he devotes to this issue, and one furthermore set down by a late witness, cannot be generalized as describing a stable practice for all the companies from the start, but its verisimilitude has the support of what appears reasonable and even obvious.

The *comici* built their performances on the basis of scripts or *scenari*. 'The soggetto [*scenario* or plot outline]', Perrucci says, 'is nothing more than a fabric of the scenes on a given subject, which indicates, in outline form, what action is to be spoken or performed *all'improvviso* by the actor' (2007, 186). But the scene-by-scene subject has been read to them before by the director.[20] The reading of the subject was performed as follows: 'All the characters should gather in a circle to listen; they should not rely on already knowing the comedy by heart or having played it before, because it could be that different directors handle the plot in different ways, and the names and places might be different as well' (196). Then, 'Once they have listened to the directions about the *soggetto*, the actors should think about *how to use things they have already prepared*. These can either be made expressly for this play … or they can be general matters, learned by heart so that they can be applied to any comedy or story' (196, my emphasis). What was needed,

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gathers the group and gives each of them his part. He then makes them read the whole text, 'so that even the boys who have a role in it be instructed in its subject, or at least in the role that pertains to each, and that the quality of the character they must impersonate be impressed in their mind; then I dismiss them and give them time to learn their parts' (1968, 39). de' Sommi's dialogues were written between the end of the 1560s and the end of the 1580s.

[19] That of distributing parts to the actors when a play had to be learned by heart was a widespread custom in west European early modern theatre. In the case of the Italian academic plays, actors' parts were called 'parti scannate' (fragments from a marred text), in Spain 'papeles de actor', and in France 'rouleaux'. As documented by Palfrey and Stern (2007), a few parts for English professional players have survived.

[20] The English translation gives 'director' for *concertatore*.

therefore, was a perfect coordination between the characters acting in each particular comedy, which – Perrucci argues – was easily reached because 'Once the characters have heard what they are to do when entering, and when performing and concluding the scene, they can repeat the scenes with their fellow actors and come to an understanding about any new *lazzo* or jest, however they like' (195).[21]

The director's action is summarized as follows:

The director should interpret and explain the *lazzi* and the plot saying: 'Here we need such-and-such a *lazzo*, which is done like this, and here we need a scene of double meanings, here this metaphor, or that hyperbole, or irony', and so forth, with all the *lazzi* or jests, assisting the characters in whatever difficulties they face. (195)[22]

Perrucci also deals with technical issues, especially onstage traffic blunders to be avoided:

The characters should be careful not to run into each other when exiting, which is more easily handled in improvised plays than in scripted ones. This is because while an actor is speaking … he can see which wing is occupied by the character who is about to enter; and so avoid exiting by that wing, and go instead to where there is an empty one – though there is an inviolable rule to enter from the upper wings and exit from the lower ones, unless necessity requires something else. (195)

The dynamics of entrances and exits which appears to be, for the *comici,* part of their general professional training, could not be prescribed by means of general rules to those who played a scripted text, on account of the great variety of plots presented by scripted texts versus the simplified modular structure of the *scenari*. In the case of fully scripted texts, players should memorize their entrances and exits and also *when* to enter, as is shown by the fact that – at least in some cases – characters' entrances were set out, as a memorandum, in certain plot outlines

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[21] There is no evidence to support Stern's assertion that '*Commedia dell'arte* players had a single rehearsal before their (largely extemporized) performances' (2000, 56, n. 18).

[22] That special suggestions were made about the *lazzi* is explained by the fact that the *zanni* who performed them were the most unruly components of the group and therefore their interventions tended to be uncontrollable. Furthermore, when in a comedy there were two *zanni*, these had to coordinate their comic action and be careful not to interrupt the main plot improperly. In his *Discorso sopra l'arte comica* (1608), Cecchini states that the comic parts 'are pleasant but they sometimes break the plot of the comedy' and may run the risk of making the audience lose track of the events staged (Marotti and Romei, eds, 1994, 74). In his speech to the players, Hamlet similarly warns the comic actors about their tendency to overdo by improvising: 'And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them … though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered' (*Hamlet*, 3.2.39, 42-43); that is, they risk to break the plot of the play.

which were probably hung on the backstage next to the entrances (see note 17). As David Bradley maintains, 'It is not an exaggeration to say that the action of an Elizabethan play *consists* of entrances. They are the means by which the story is told; the controllers of the illusion of time and place; the sign-posts for the understanding of the plot' (1992, 23).

5. *Text*

5.1 *Shakespeare and Company*

That the Elizabethan-Jacobean production of plays was intensely collaborative has long been acknowledged, and Shakespeare scholars have accepted (and examined) the fact that even Shakespeare worked in collaboration. But the fact that a Shakespeare existed and that he wrote plays has conditioned the vision of that perfect collaborative machine that English Renaissance theatre must have been, for collaboration inevitably means a diminution of authoriality. Consequently, scholars have been induced to scrutinize his (suspect) texts in order to isolate other writers' hands and restore to posterity the genuine text created solely by his genius.

Recently, however, such terms as collaboration, co-authorship, joint authorship, or play-patching have gained fresh attention in a perspective which is, in part, new. Against distribution and attribution, this study trend tends to discuss the way in which plays were produced – from the first idea of a plot to its production on a stage – and to include or assimilate the various hands, discouraging the work of distinction, separation, and exclusion performed by attribution studies. More or less directly, the questions these studies raise are: in what terms can authorship be evoked? How can the very concept of Author be formulated? How can a Sole Author be isolated given that the hands which worked on the composition and transmission of a play are so indistinguishably entwined? How can a Sole Author be isolated given that each of those different writers working on the same text may have tended, for uniformity's sake, to conform to the style of other writers' hands, imitating them and adopting the co-author's writing habits and even way of thinking? Jeffrey Masten posits that in such a context collaboration should be viewed as 'a dispersal of author/ity, rather than a simple doubling of it' (1997, 19). In the final analysis, therefore, the suspicion arises that the presence of a Shakespeare and the consequent need to construct a strong and convincing personality/individuality structure may have acted against an accurate reconstruction of what collaboration in text-writing may have meant historically and conceptually, for Shakespeare as well as for his fellow playwrights.

These quasi-heretical positions represent the symptom of a certain uneasiness about – if not utter mistrust of – what attribution studies can tell us of the real conditions under which the Elizabethan and Jacobean

playwrights worked, of the real meaning of their being associates intellectually, personally, and materially, for they substitute the idea of Sole Author by an idea of 'corporate authorship'. A similar view of collaboration, when we talk of written texts (and of immensely worshipful written texts), may open up a black hole where all our convictions about authoriality (and, in particular, of the authoriality of Shakespeare's plays) risk being swallowed.

A similar kind of heresy was pronounced as early as 1913-1914 by E. Gordon Craig who asked how it was that no manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays have survived and answered by invoking what he thought was an utter instability of these texts precisely because they must have been inextricably collaborative: 'In my opinion the Dramas were created by Shakespeare in close collaboration with the Manager of the Theatre and with the actors; … and I believe that a glimpse of the manuscript of the plays would reveal a mass of corrections, additions, and cuts made in several handwritings'. To this, Craig adds the idea that following the 'newly formed dramatic art' that was the *Commedia dell'Arte*, much of the Shakespearean texts as we know them are the fruit of the players' improvisations (1913-1914, 163-165).

5.2 *Plots and Scenarios*

One of the issues which have been raised to affirm how impracticable it is to distinguish and apportion the intellectual property of texts produced in these circumstances is that of 'plots', those skeleton outlines which seem to have been prepared either before or during the composition of (some) plays, compiled, as it seems, by playwrights who were acknowledged as good 'plotters'.

From the only quasi-complete plot of this period which we possess, that of a play probably called *Philander, King of Persia,* published by J.Q. Adams (1946), we see that these must have been similar to the *scenari*, although they had an entirely different function.[23] Elements of these plots, as can be drawn from the one published by Adams, are indication of act and scene and, for each scene, characters and a brief summary of the scene's content.

This preparatory plotting seems to have been fundamental for the development of the text to be composed. Quoting the cases of Greene and Munday, who seem to have written plots for plays, W.J. Lawrence claims that 'An engrossing story, if well schemed, was then half the battle' (1937, 101). He then devotes a few pages to Ben Jonson as 'scenario writer' and notes that, as is witnessed by several passages in Henslowe's papers, for many of the plays in which Jonson collaborated he was simply the author of the plot.

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[23] About the bare outlines which recorded mainly the players' entrances and were probably hung in the backstage as simple reminders, see note 17. For a comparison between both kinds of plots and *Commedia dell'Arte scenari*, see Pugliatti (2012).

That some sort of preparatory work was considered necessary when preparing both premeditated and unpremeditated texts is witnessed by many sources.

Domenico Biancolelli, maybe the greatest Arlecchino of all times and a *comico* much loved by the French public, wrote down the scenic actions he performed in seventy-three of the comedies in which he played. In a form that is different from both that of the *scenari* and that of the English playwrights' plots, Biancolelli describes act by act and in the first person his own *lazzi,* also summarising the action of the other characters present in those particular scenes. Here is a fragment from one of his *scenari:*

Pantalone arrives and tells me he married Diamantina and shows her to me; I make *lazzi* (I would like to fall dead or swoon, but I don't succeed), then I take off my coat, move a little farther, lay on my coat and feign to be dead. Pantalone lifts me up and lays me against the wall, but when he turns away I rush out and when he again turns towards the place where he left me, not seeing me, is astonished. (Taviani and Schino 2007, 221)

Leone de' Sommi describes a different kind of plot, one that illustrates his activity as *concertatore* when preparing the staging of his plays. After compiling a list of all the props needed by each player, he compiles a different list in which, he says:

I note down all the scenes in the right sequence, with the names of the characters appearing in them, marking down the house or the street they must leave, and after what cue, with also the first words of their speech, so that with this governance the person who is in charge may at the right time direct all players to their place and push forward each at their cue and also remind them of the first words of their speech. (1968, 54)

Flaminio Scala ranges two kinds of plots for the same text in his *scenari* (1611), for each scene-by-scene summary is preceded by an Argument in which the action of the whole comedy is summarized.

When we consider the plots written by English playwrights in preparation of plays, the question arises about what distinct authorial weight should be attributed to the outline of the plot and what to the words of the finished play. Apart from the fact that we have the plays but not the plot outlines, how can we distinguish, at least in a theoretical perspective, so different and differently aimed forms of creativity, both converging onto the composition of one text? To whom is the sequence of actions – so important, for instance, in the case of plays inspired by an existing narrative text – to be apportioned? The creeping heresy hidden behind these questions embodies a radical revision of settled analytical procedures and, one may say, of a settled text-ideology, for it tends to consider plays as the product of a collective personality (as well as the intellectual property of a group) which it is impossible – and probably inappropriate – to dismember.

5.3 *'Improvisation Is Not Improvisation'*

'A famous Spanish comedian named Adriano, who came to Naples with other [actors] to put on their comedies, could not understand how one could produce a comedy by simply coordinating several characters and staging it in less than an hour' (Perrucci 2007, 101). Perrucci acknowledges the exceptional character of the enterprise and explains it as follows:

An undertaking as fascinating as it is difficult and risky, it should not be attempted except by qualified and competent people, who know what the rules of language mean, [who understand] the figures of speech, tropes, and all the art of rhetoric, since they have to accomplish *all'improvviso* what a poet does with premeditation. (101)[24]

If described as a comedy which may be put on 'in less than an hour', the *improvvisa* may appear a miraculous achievement to those who are not familiar with its methods and prerequisites. Indeed Perrucci rightly stresses some of its necessary implications in that those who practice that 'fascinating', 'difficult', and 'risky' way of acting should be equipped with exceptional knowledge of the language and with 'all the art of rhetoric' (101): that is, they must be so competent as to be able to do without a poet's oeuvre.

Perrucci then proceeds with a comparison between premeditated and impromptu comedies. The first, he says, 'win[s] esteem and appreciation' only 'because of the poet's effort in composing [them]' and owing to 'the help, effort, and toil of so many trial runs and rehearsals'. An impromptu comedy, on the contrary, continually runs the risk of blunders because an actor who is not completely in control of the language may pronounce on the stage *quidquid in buccam venit*. Later on, Perrucci explains what he meant by saying that players must know 'what the rules of language mean' as well as master 'all the art of rhetoric': actors who perform 'this attractive and unusual entertainment … should be armed with some general composition that can be adapted to every kind of comedy, such as *concetti* (literary conceits), soliloquies, and dialogues for the male and female lovers; or speeches of advice, discourses, greetings, speeches with double meanings, and some gallantries for the old men' (103).

Perrucci wrote his treatise when the rules of the *improvvisa* had been settled for a long time; therefore, they had probably also undergone deep

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[24] Some players, both in England and Italy, were praised for their ability in extempore rhyming. Adriano Valerini, in his *Oratione* in praise of Vincenza Armani after her death, states that the Academy of the 'Intronati' in Siena 'affirmed many times that this Lady succeeded much better in extempore talking than the most consummate Authors in thoughtfully writing' (1570, 8). Another famous actress, Isabella Andreini, was much praised for her extempore verse composition. In England, Richard Tarlton and Will Kemp were also praised for their talent in extempore versifying.

mutations since the start. But one particular rule among those he mentions had been exposed many years before, in 1628, by Pier Maria Cecchini, one of the *comici* who also wrote precepts for impromptu playing. Cecchini recommended to his colleagues that they frequently 'read uniformly elegant books, because in those who hear them remains such an impression of most pleasing sentences as, deceiving the hearer, they are believed to be the daughters of the speaker's wit' (1628, 19).

Perrucci's formula to describe this unusual practice of text-building is interesting: the *comici*, he says, 'have to accomplish *all'improvviso* what a poet does with premeditation' (2007, 101). Actors, in other words, *create* their texts having freed themselves of the tyranny of the Sole Author and of the stable and immutable text (but how stable and immutable?) which constrains them inside a pre-ordered chain of words. The passage implies they are no less authors than the poets, authors who have invented an extremely refined and sophisticated technique for creating their texts.

However, descriptions of the *Commedia dell'Arte* performance practice have fostered a view of improvisation as the equivalent of unregulated spontaneity and of free creative fantasy (Taviani in Taviani and Schino 2007, 312), an idea that was especially rife in the romantic period. On the contrary, the criteria according to which improvisation should be characterised have nothing to do with 'naturalness' or 'spontaneity'. 'Improvisation', Taviani concludes, 'is not improvisation', but only less premeditated acting, an acting less 'by heart'. The issue, therefore, is 'the composition of comedies after the manner of the *comici',* and the essential thing is what this manner implied, what was behind it, what substantiated 'the actors' dramaturgy' (322).

Actors, therefore, are authors. As Siro Ferrone says,

They permanently face the dilemma of how to compose, together with their fellow actors, the parts of the action of which each of them is the vehicle. Each time they pose to themselves fresh questions and adapt themselves to the others' responses, experimenting different solutions. They are, in the final analysis and to all intents and purposes, the authors of their performances'. (1993, xxii)

The relevant alternative, as regards the texts they created, is not the one that contrasts premeditated and unpremeditated production. The distinction to be made is, as Taviani argues, the one between written versus non-written dramaturgy, and in this case 'non-written' does not mean

anti-literary, gestural, mimic, but – on the contrary – a kind of theatre which downplayed the written text and sanctioned the composition of cases and actions, and that therefore could by no means be considered as theatre without a literary text, even though that text was produced in such a way as to appear only during performance. (in Taviani and Schino 2007, 330)

6. *Literariness and Emancipation*

Tomaso Garzoni (1549-1589), a Lateran canon from Bagnacavallo in northern Italy, was one of the most alert critics of mid sixteenth-century theatrical activities in Italy. He knew there was a continuity between mountebanks, charlatans, and *comici*; and, wishing to shield the reputation of the latter, he drew a sharp difference between certain second-rate players, the immediate heirs of mountebanks, and those *comici* who practised the *Arte* following the example of the famous Roscius (1996, II, 1180). Above all, he honoured certain actresses whose refined elocution and spellbinding speech revealed their literariness and made them accepted and indeed cherished in the high spheres of contemporary culture: 'The gracious Isabella [Andreini], honour of the stage, ornament of theatres, superb spectacle no less of virtue than of beauty'; 'the learned Vincenza [Armani] who, imitating Cicero's eloquence, has made the comic art vie with elocution'; 'the divine Vittoria [Piissimi], … that beautiful love-sorceress who, with her words, entices the hearts of a thousand lovers' (1182).

But Garzoni also goes a step farther when he admiringly alludes to the other activity of the *comici,* that of writing (and publishing). Those who write are to be praised both for comedies and tragedies because they 'have crowded their written works with most moral habits, keeping in mind the praiseworthy aim of teaching the art of living wisely, as is suited to all *comici'* (1185). Indeed it was their activity as writers that ended up by promoting the emancipation of *comici* from their traditional vile repute, and it is true to say that the furthering of this process was fuelled by the intellectual prestige which women players conferred on the profession. As Taviani says, the presence of women, the *meretrices honestae* who were poets as well as players, was not 'simply a matter of liberalization'; it rather meant

the engrafting, in the body of the male actors' professional playing, of a different cultural trend—academic, Petrarchan, classicizing, lyrical … The importance of actresses was not limited to their ability to charm and seduce audiences; their presence meant, above all, an enlargement of the companies' expertise, a broadening of their qualifications, and the inception of a new dramaturgical dimension. (in Taviani and Schino 2007, 340-341)

The theatrical activity of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights underwent an analogous process of emancipation. Not differently from the *comici,* they had noble protectors to whom they were attached as 'servants'; they wore their sponsors' liveries and depended for their playing activity on the central government as well as on the municipalities, both in London and when playing in the provinces. They were also subjected to censorship (although less strictly than might be imagined) and were attacked, more violently than Italian players, by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

It is therefore not surprising that, in an age of fierce antitheatrical prejudice, in England the emancipation of players and playwrights was also attained far from the stage. It was a process connected not only with writing but with publishing, and even a certain mode of publishing which had distinct characteristics of literariness. Bentley argues that 'the most tangible impetus to the slowly altering status of the players was the publication of the Jonson folio in 1616' (1984, 9). Guarino, in turn, believes the publication of the 1623 Shakespeare folio was the inception of a change in the social status of players and playwrights:

The outcome of the work of the theatrical companies of Shakespeare's time consists in a reversal of values: the literature of commercial theatres, an improper and defective instrument, achieved a consecration at the same time functional and absolute. The leading figure of the printing group that published the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare's dramatic works had published Montaigne's *Essais* and Cervantes' *Quixote*, the books which, together with Shakespeare's works, reshaped the European literary space. (2010, 10)

But we may go a step farther. Unlike most of his plays, that were published in cheap editions and often with no author's name during his lifetime and also after his death, both *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) bore Shakespeare's signature in the dedicatory letters, and the first edition of his sonnets (1609) was authored in the title-page as *Shake-speares*. But these were poems, not plays; they belonged to an indisputably dignified literary genre, not to the genre of ephemeral scribbled papers whose authorship and author-ity was an indifferent matter, for they served only to feed an ephemeral (and morally dubious) kind of entertainment. Similarly, the cultural promotion of the *comici* was not entrusted to the publication of the even more ephemeral *scenari* (the first collection of *scenari* was published by Flaminio Scala as late as 1611), but to the players' poems of various kinds, letters, pastorals, dialogues, or to their fully scripted plays composed *à la manière de* 'commedie erudite'.

As has been argued, the idea of immortality through writing can be said to link two player-writer personalities as distinct as Isabella Andreini and William Shakespeare (Pallotti 2003). Indeed, both for Shakespeare and Andreini (but also for Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe, as well as for Piermaria Cecchini or Francesco Andreini) gaining a higher reputation implied their (temporary) estrangement from the community of players. Shakespeare may have attended to the publication of his sonnets during what was one of the most prolonged and severe plague epidemics since the beginning of the century probably because he was forcefully kept away from the activity of playing and therefore owing to the fact that for a long time 'mony [was] not stirring' (Dekker 1609, B1v). Of Francesco Andreini, in turn,

we know that, after the death of his wife Isabella in 1604, he left his company and gave up playing to devote himself to the publication of his and his wife's works with intent to gain both, as writers, imperishable fame.

Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece* and his *Sonnets*, no less than Isabella Andreini's works, express the idea that poetry 'redeems' time and treasures fame, and, probably, that it also redeems the players' ill-reputed, volatile, and ephemeral art.

7. *Conclusion: A Possible 'Meeting'*

At the end of the speech in which he introduces the players, Polonius pronounces an enigmatic sentence: 'For the law of writ, and the liberty, these are the only men' (*Hamlet*, 2.2.397-398). Editors have acknowledged that the sentence has never been 'satisfactorily explained' (Jenkins 1982, 260). The current interpretation, however, is that Polonius is comparing plays written according to the classical rules with those written more freely, those that disregard the rules.

But the opposition between 'the law of writ' and 'the liberty' may also mean a distinction between two different ways of producing a text for performance and two different dramaturgies: 'the law of writ' can mean the theatrical activity in which the 'book' is a central element, and 'the liberty' the different way of text-construction, *à la manière de* the Italian *comici,* whose own dramaturgical contribution is unreadable because unwritten, but composed when and where it is delivered. This reading is strengthened by another expression Polonius uses in the same speech: the actors' versatility, he claims, is equal whether they perform 'scene indivisible, or poem unlimited' (2.2.395-396). This sentence, too, is usually interpreted with reference to the unities, 'scene indivisible' alluding to a play that respects them and 'poem unlimited' to one with a not-so-tight plot construction. But the relevant opposition here is that between 'scene' and 'poem', between a text that gives the illusion of being composed on the stage and one that relies on a poet's work for its scenic presentation.[25]

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[25] Louise Clubb was the first to deconstruct Polonius' speech in a sense that is similar to mine, noting that *Hamlet* editors have regularly forsaken the possible allusion to Italian drama: 'If the editors of the new Norton Shakespeare … gave more attention to Italian drama, they would not be satisfied with defining "the law of writ and the liberty" as a reference to "plays where classical rules are either observed or abandoned". The contrast is, in fact, between *scripted* five-act plays observing the rules (the "writ") and *improvised* three-act performances from a *canevaccio* or *scenario* ("the liberty"), also obeying some of the rules, sometimes' (2007, 15). Robert Henke, too, interprets Polonius' speech as alluding to 'the contrast between scripted five-act plays (the law of writ) and improvised performances (the liberty)' (2007, 69).

Furthermore, the company of players visiting Elsinore is, from the point of view of their material organization, nearer to those of the Italian *comici* than to that of the English players. They travel 'di loco in loco' in search of work, carrying the paraphernalia of their trade and stopping at court or, presumably, in other places where their performances are requested; they do not perform in regular theatres but in the halls of princes; they are ready to quasi-improvise by learning, for the following day, 'a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines' (2.2.535) to insert in *The Murder of Gonzago*, a play they have in repertory; in short, the authorship of their whole trade seems to be their sole responsibility. And should we really take for granted, as all editors do, that Hamlet's 'young lady and mistress' (2.2.421) is the boy actor who played the female parts?

But also *Hamlet* 3.2 may have other things to reveal in terms of reciprocal knowledge. In fact, certain passages from Cecchini's *Discorso sopra l'arte comica con il modo di ben recitare*, probably written in 1608 after a Paris *tournée* of the 'Accesi' (Marotti in Marotti and Romei, eds, 1994, 65), show striking resemblances to Hamlet's advice to the players.[26] In Paris, the company's performances were probably attended by Lord Herbert of Cherbury (Lea 1934, I, 179), who was a close friend of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones, as well as the cousin of Shakespeare's protector, the Earl of Pembroke. Did Herbert of Cherbury bring to Paris a copy of *Hamlet* as a present to someone who might be interested in reading a play that in 1608 was still the crucial cultural event in the *ancien régime* of Elizabethan theatre? If further explored, the hypothesis of such an ideal meeting may prove to constitute the only proof of a direct textual loan at the very top of the two theatrical enterprises I have tried to describe.

But this is matter for further research and reflection.

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[26] Cecchini's *Discorso* was kept as a manuscript in a Turin Library that was destroyed by a fire in 1904. Modern editions reproduce a handwritten copy made by Luigi Rasi in the early years of the twentieth century. For one of these resemblances, although not the most striking, see note 22.

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