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Glamour is the shimmer of the unfamiliar available to the quotidiant: the famous foreigner who is half-known and half-understood, untranslatable but still imitable, and because of her exoticism, desirable. Fame can cross borders independently of famous bodies; it can also vanish utterly within a few generations. I would like to argue that the glamour of the foreign actress shadowed the English all-male stage, the one national theater that excluded her, and that her talents were subject to creative adaptation by dramatists. In Shakespeare's Venetian plays, the vanished glamour of the actress helps explain the seemingly disparate pattern of off-notes in The Merchant of Venice, and the conversion of comic structure to tragic outcome in Othello. Both stem from a satric appropriation of all things notoriously Italianate, including Venetian sexual mores, the cortegiana onesta, Italian touring companies — and the enormously celebrated innamorata.

Studies of links between the Italian and English drama focus almost exclusively on the masks of the commedia dell'arte, which are all male, and on written plots. Digging in the skeletal remains of the scenarios, Shakespeare scholars rarely consider what Louise George Clabb has called the "living, endlessly expanding megatext" of Italian performance traditions and genres, or the highly trained actors that made the masks and scenarios live. As a result, the possible impact of the most famous comic on English drama has been largely ignored. Yet the presence of women was the most noted, even notorious, feature of the Italian companies. Some innamorata were the star attractions and often directors of their companies, and were courted by the crowns of France, Spain and Italy. Some wrote and published poems and plays, and composed their own speeches of love, madness, and jealousy to supply the various needs of their companies, which presented — in addition to the improvisatory comedies featuring Pantalone, Arlecchino, Zanni and the other masks — scripted pastorals, classical comedies, tragicomedies, and tragedies. Furthermore, the literary establishment lavished praises and honors on the most accomplished. No less a figure than Montaigne took pains to see the Desiosi play in Pisa, sent presents to the prima donna afterward, and noted his pleasure in his journal.2

The innamorata drew audiences through her beauty and high fashion, wit, physical grace, fluency in foreign languages, and literary skill. She could dilate endlessly on love and jealousy in lofty Petrarchan paradoxes and Ariostan concetti, or banter endlessly with her lover in a display of teasing wit. Vittoria Pissini led the Gelosi, succeeded by the poet and player Isabella Andreini, Diana Ponti led the Desiosi, which had Roman cardinals and Spanish dukes as protectors; and the Martinelli troupe had "La Angelica", whose husband Drusiano was content to call himself "il marito d'Angelica". Most famous of all was Isabella Andreini, who rose from "obscure beginnings" (possibly as a cortegiana onesta) to international acclaim.3 Applauded by kings, queens, and poets as "la divina Isabella", she wrote a pastoral play, La Mirtilla, which sold out immediately upon publication in 1588, and she was sought out by Henry IV of France and Marie de' Medici, among others. She was renowned for her mad scenes, tirades of comic jealousy (tiratti), learned love speeches, and her skill in lovers' debates (contrasti). At the height of her success she saw her poems into print (Rime, 1601), but died three years later in childbirth while on the road in Lyon, and was buried with extravagant splendor. Marini and Guarini wrote ardent eulogies, and her husband and stage partner gave up the stage to devote himself to publishing her works, including a collection of her dialogues, Fragmenti.4 The fame of la divina Isabella far exceeded Shakespeare's:
The Counterfeit Innamorata

Isabella, like her close contemporary William Shakespeare, was called the wonder of her profession and of her age, and, unlike Shakespeare, was called so in her own time. Private correspondence and printed encomia attest to the regard she commanded from the Italian nobility, from French royalty, and (most gratifying of all to the Andreini and most telling for cultural history) from the literary establishment. Tasso wrote verses on Isabella as actress and poet, the Academy of the Intenti elected her a member and crowned her effigy with laurel as heir of Petrarch and rival of Tasso himself. 5

The English were not immune to all this celebrity. Diplomats, travellers, and actors sent home word about the Italian companies and their women players, and Italian actors and entertainers were regularly called to the courts of Elizabeth, James, and Charles. Italian women acrobats appeared at Elizabeth's court in 1566; Italian players at court collaborated with Ferrabosco on a comedy in 1576; Angelica Martinelli and her husband Drusiano and their company performed before Elizabeth in 1577-8; a Masque of Amazons was translated for Italian players in 1579; and Italian troupe toured England in 1577-8 and again in 1603; among other instances. French troupes with women players appeared at the Blackfriars, Red Bull, and Fortune in 1629, and at the Phoenix in 1635. 6 "By 1591", as Kathleen Lea remarked, "the visits of Italian comedians were evidently common enough for spies to choose the habit of tumblers as a disguise." 7

In Coryate's Crudities Thomas Coryate expressed his wide-eyed delight at first seeing women perform while abroad in Venice, and assured his readers that they were as good as English actors. Fynes Moryson wrote in detail of comedies in Florence, in which

[T]he partes of wemen were played by wemen, and the cheefe actours had not their parts fully penned, but spake much extemporary or upon agreement between themselves, especially the wemen, whose speeches were full of wantonne, though not grosse baudry (which the Italians like, but neede no such provocation) and their playes were of amorous matters, never of hystories, much less of tragedies, which the Italian nature too much affects to imitate and surpass. And one Lucinia a woman player, was so liked of the Florentines, as when shee dyed they made her a monument with an Epitaph. Also not only in Carnivall but all the yeare long, all the markett places of great Cittyes are full of Montebanks, or Ciarlatanes, who stand upon tables like stages, and sell their oyles, waters and salves, drawe the people about them by musike and pleasant discourse like comedies, having a women and a masked foole to acte these parts with them. 8

Moryson adopts a judicious tone toward the women players, numbering them among the company's "cheefe actours", stressing their special skills at collaborating and acting extempore "or upon agreement", and refuting the assumption that they always engaged in scurrilous speech and gesture. After a standard dig at Italian murderousness, Moryson moves on to the marvelous detail about "one Lucinia, a woman player" who was so loved by the people of Florence that they built her a "Monument with an epitaph". As if to counterbalance this troubling glimpse of an alternate universe in which mere actresses can achieve something resembling lasting fame, Moryson hastens to point out the lowly origins of the great companies and their divas: the trestle stages of mountebanks in public squares, where female ciarlatane jested, acted, tumbled and sang.

The gorgeous female player was counted among the enticements of Venetian luxury, as was the eloquent courtesan with whom she was strongly identified. Coryate was filling an appetite for the erotics of female self-display - a prime allurement of "the myth of Venice" - when he linked his account of seeing masked and veiled courtesans at the theater with his famous passage about attending a play with women actors: 9

I was in one of their Italian play-houses where I saw a Comedie acted. The house is very beggarly and base in comparison of our stately Play-houses in England; neyther can their Actors compare with us for apparrell, shews and musicke. [...] I saw women acte, a thing that I never saw before [...] and they performed it with as good a grace, action, and gesture, and whatsoever convenient for a Player, as ever I saw any masculine Actor. 10

In contrast to the generally positive reports of Moryson, Coryate and others who had seen women players, English plays featuring the exotic foreign woman are a lurid parade of insatiate countesses, White Devils, "curtezans", and bawds.
Such representations suggest a prurient ignorance on the part of audiences, and a willingness on the part of the playwrights to feed both their prejudices and their curiosity. Citations in plays concerning the Italian actors per se indicate more malign envy than open admiration. Some writers called Italians farceurs and clowns; others, like Thomas Heywood, heaped scorn on all Continental plays: "those that frequent are in Italy & France, even in these days, Compared with ours, are rather jigges than Playes."12

Despite such alleged disdain, Italian comedy transformed, and was transformed by, the English stage. "The English may have disparaged the Italians, but they made good use of them", observes Marvin Herrick. "By 1590 or thereabouts the English writer had so thoroughly absorbed the methods and some of the humours of the Italians that he was hardly conscious of imitating either learned or popular comedy."13 Commedia masks, gestures, lazzis, and techniques became bywords: playwrights and pamphleteers referred freely and frequently to "Harlakeens", "Zanies", "innamorates", and "Franceskinas". Indeed, the superabundance of casual citations shows that the "performance characteristics and techniques of the improvising players were familiar enough to make such references immediately meaningful".14

Few spectators in Shakespeare's public theater audiences would have seen the Continental players perform, however, partly because they were not welcomed in England to the degree they were elsewhere. While Leo Salinger and Louise Clubb have painted a fairly benign picture of unproblematic commonality between Italian and English player-writers,15 Kenneth and Laura Richards discern a far more hostile climate. Explaining why Italian players triumphed in every capital of Europe but rarely crossed the Channel, they list "social, religious and professional impediments, like English anti-Catholic prejudice and hostility to actresses".16 Economics as much as national pride mobilized this hostility: "London was already dominated by highly efficient, organized and competitive native companies resistant to the incursions of foreigners", and it was this resistance that led dramatists to caricature commedia as "vulgar low comedy, while its practitioners were stigmatized as much of the same status as buffoons, mountebanks, and street entertainers".17 The distortions that the English projected reflect not so much "a chauvinistic contempt for the foreign, but professional expediency."18

Such a perspective helps explain Heywood's dismissal of Italian plays, and Thomas Nashe's rancorous comparison between Italy's scurrilous buffoons and England's many player-playwrights:

Our Players are not as the Players beyond the sea, a sort of squiring baudie Comedians, that have Whores and common Curtizens to playe womens partes, and forbeare no immodest speech, or unchast action that may procure laughter, but our Scene is more stately furnisht than ever it was in the time of Roscius, our representations honorable and full of gallant resolution, not consisting of theirs of a Pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie, but of Emperors, Kings and Princes, whose true tragedies [...] they do vaunt.19

Nashe's attack on "whores and common Curtizens" may also be read as a sardonic admission of the high "recognition factor" of such Italian divas. If most spectators did "take boys for women", some players and playgoers knew that others (such as the King of France) did not have to. As Nashe's shrillness suggests, the glamour of the leading actresses, who at this time were reaching heights of fame and artistic accomplishment, could not be excorised with the tired epithet "whore". The tone is at base defensive: after all, the English stage had zanies and pantalouns galore. The only spectacle it could not offer (but which could be seen abroad and at court) was the professional woman player.

Faced with these formidable Continental counterparts, Shakespeare learned and imitated - a strategy subtler and more productive than Nashe's. Shakespeare kept abreast of the very latest in theatrical fashions from abroad, and showed a keen awareness of these companies, their chief players and their repertoires. Word of mouth from returning players such as Will Kemp, Thomas Pope and George Bryan and from Italian acquaintances in London; access to Italian plays performed in London and at universities; and reports from merchants, courtiers and scholars
were more important to this knowledge than literary texts. Most important were contacts with Italian actors:

Shakespeare's main channels of information about European theatrical fashion, perhaps established by direct encounters but more probably by masses of second-hand accounts, were more likely to have been his Italian counterparts: the professional actors, both Sidney's "ordinary players" and those who like Shakespeare himself, played to kings as well as groundlings and of whom he must have known much. These were the comic, sellers of theater. 20

While Shakespeare's comedies have been scrutinized for correspondences to scenario plots and for analogues to mask characters, possible allusions to leading female comici have been largely ignored. My work on his Venetian plays have convinced me that there is a strong strain of satire in his depiction of Venetian innamorata, and that those fictions blend together aspects of the actress and the courtesan. Because satire is so topical, the referents often become invisible over time. A few works, such as those in the Shakespeare canon, undergo interpretive practices that proclaim their "universality" and "timelessness". In this way the referents of professional rivalry and Italphobia fade from view. Yet in certain plays the rival players across the Channel, objects of curiosity, projection, and wonder, are both represented (in Burke's sense of "creative adaptation") and deliberately misunderstood. Singling out the most noted aspect of those troupes, Shakespeare created simulacra of the diva for audiences that couldn't hope to see her.

Both Merchant and Othello combine diminution with extravagant praise and imitation; the satire is sometimes obscured by masks of altered geography, and often operates as irony that undercuts the encomia. Self-display, mobility, verbal artfulness, and foreignness distinguish the women as Venetians in those plays, but a similar effect occurs in some plays that are not set in Italy. While representation of the innamorata gua player could be comparatively benign – as with Perdita's bashful portrayal of the Sheep-Shearing Queen in The Winter's Tale – a glamorous

foreigner with "language in her eye, her cheek, her lip" (Troilus and Cressida 4.5.55-6) was more often a whorish "spectacle of strangeness". Troilus, Antony and Cleopatra, and Othello all contain an intensely performative, sexualized foreign innamorata: Cressida, Cleopatra, Desdemona. The portrayal of the transgressively theatrical foreigner by English boys marked the resulting spectacle as seductive yet degraded, "buying" her greatness. Whether Greek, Egyptian, or Venetian, the counterfeit diva was suspicious or even whorish to a generally xenophobic, anti-actress, and anti-Catholic England.

In his comedies, on the other hand, Shakespeare shows less derogation than appropriation. Indeed, as some scholars have suggested, the impressive comic skills of the foreign actress during the "golden age" of commedia (roughly 1590 to 1650) may help account for the sudden appearance of the witty, willful, and elegant Beatrice, Rosalind, and Viola. 21 The new commedia companies began to use women players around 1560, while Italian professional and amateur groups continued to use boys for women's roles in scripted plays. The innovation meant "women's roles could enjoy far greater scope than ever realized in erudite comedy". 22 In the first decades of the new commedia all'improvviso, "professional actresses enlarged the role of the innamorata [...] with their reserves of memorized material chosen for lyrical, dramatic and emotional effect", and the ingénue "became a more articulate, heroic, generally noteworthy figure than her prototype in early commedia erudita". 23 A similar expansion took place on the Elizabethan stage at this time. In the later years of Elizabeth's reign, just as Isabella Andreini, Angelica Martinelli, and Diana Ponti were playing leading roles with elaborate speeches, cross-dressing as shepherds, judges, and magicians, feigning death, and going mad, or pretending to be (e.g., "The Fake Madwoman", "The Madness of Isabella", "Isabella the Astrologer", and "Isabella's Trick"), Shakespeare was writing As You Like It, Twelfth Night, Much Ado About Nothing, Merchant and Hamlet. 24
Merchant of Venice: "Fair Portia's Counterfeit!"

Even in the comedies, however, signs of professional rivalry and anxiety about Italian cultural superiority appear, especially in passages about the Circean dangers of art and rhetoric. Italianate theatricality and duplicity haunt paradisical Belmont, where outsiders rarely match interiors, men's desires reduce them to fools, and professedly obedient brides dress as men for their next roles, while pretending to pray at holy crosses.

In most of The Merchant of Venice, Portia seems picture-perfect, playing the serene and lofty blonde virgin of Venetian civic iconography — accepting tribute from every nation, raining jewels and ducats from her hands, praying heaven to have mercy on her plagued citizens. But the portrait has hairline cracks. In her firs scene, Portia mocks the English to their faces:

Nerissa. What say you to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?

Portia. You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him. He hath neither Latin, nor French, nor Italian, and you will come into the court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth in the English. He is a proper man's picture, but alas, who can converse with a dumb show? How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behavior every where.

(1.2.66-76)

Some in the London audience may have laughed indulgently at the new-fangled Englishman who cares for no tongue but his own. Those in the audience who resembled Falconbridge may have winced. Knowing Italian was a big asset at court, where the Queen prided herself on her Tuscan, showed favor to those who could converse with her in that tongue, and welcomed and employed Italian advisors, musicians and actors. Others may have hissed at the foreign woman's taunt, which so neatly matches John Florio's warning: "What a shame it is, therefore, that an Englishman, in the company of strangers, should be unable to speak to them, and should thus stand dumb, mocked of them and despised of them all." Anti-Italian feeling was growing in 1590s London, where preachers raged against Italian vices, books, and plays, and anti-foreigner riots threatened Italian craftsmen and merchants. The Italians' haughty attitude toward the less cultured English rankled Nashe, who exhorted his fellow wits to strike back: "For shame, bury not your spirits in beef-pots! Let not the Italians call you dull-headed tramontani."28

Now the hairline crack: Why does rich, virtuous, witty Portia confess that she has little English? This little slip may be a clue that all the praise heaped on her is not to be taken absolutely literally. Ressentiment toward Venice and Italy propels the play, producing off-notes even in Belmont. Portia's English deficiency undercuts her mockery of Falconbridge, and shows her up as a bit of hypocrite, a word derived from the Greek for "actor". A "supersubtle Venetian" indeed, Portia revels in artifice and theatricality, however virtuous; she displays wit, daunting eloquence, a shrewd head for plotting, skill at cross-gender disguise, and obvious pride in her acting and directing. The "lady richly left", whose "sunny locks / hang on her temples like the golden fleece" (1.1.161, 168-9) successfully stages her own wooing, the trial scene, and the confrontation over the rings, in all of which she stars. She guards her reputation carefully, despite all her mobility, her satiric tongue, and her public fame. In fact, the "mortal breathing saint" (2.7.40) acts suspiciously like the celebrated innamorata of the Italian acting troupes.

The guilty pleasures of all this artifice for an English viewer surface at the very instant of Bassanio's victory. Nudged by Portia's hints, Bassanio chooses the casket with her portrait: "Fair Portia's counterfeit!" (3.2.115). As the play's many references to doubles and substitutes suggest, Bassanio unwittingly speaks true. Fair Portia is indeed a counterfeit, a fiction composed of parts as disparate as those in Bassanio's blazon about the painting, which follows hard on his triumph. He focuses on the artist's dangerous skill: "The painter plays the spider" to weave hair that traps men's hearts like "gnats in cobwebs" (122-3), building to a grotesque conceit on a single eye whose Medusan beauty should have blinded the artist to "leave itself unfurnished!" (125-6). Just as Bassanio moves from wonder at Italian artistry to morbid tropes of dismemberment, the play displays and anatomizes the
artistry of those who counterfeit "fair Portias" — a very busy group whose members include portrait artists, English boys, and Italian actresses.

As suits her actor's temperament, Portia measures each suitor by the standards of the stage, using the *lazzo* of the list. She rates each according to his acting ability — his performing style, speech, costume, stage presence, and gestures. Like the professional actress, she is in the extraordinary position to judge lovers as actors and peers, while choosing among princes who shower her with gifts, offers, and invitations, just as the royal admirers of the living divas did. Indeed, Shakespeare's 'creative adaptation' encompasses both actor and role. For example, the most celebrated divas, such as Andrei and Ponti, were dramatists capable of writing their own material for scenes in which they posed as learned judges, magicians, and doctors; so is Portia, who needs no prompting for her flamboyantly learned performance as Balthasar. Some divas directed their troupes, and as characters "directed" action in many plots. Like a director, Portia moves Lorenzo, Jessica, Balthazar, and Nerissa around like pieces on a chessboard, and her pride in her talent at cross-dressing fills the scene in which she plots the secret trip to Venice. After arranging for their passage with the practiced air of the frequent traveler (which, of course, every *innamorata* was), Portia brags that she'll surpass Nerissa as an actor: "I'll hold thee any wager, / When we are both accoutered like young men, / I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two, / And wear my dagger with the braver grace" (3.4.63-6).

As others have noticed, this scene points up sophisticated gender ambiguities put into play by the cross-dressing of the boy actor. It also evokes the competitive world of those actors, directing attention and perhaps applause to the specific boy-Portia speaking these lines. Yet for those who had seen or heard of the Italian divas, perhaps the scene also glanced at the celebrated and frequent gender switches they performed; indeed, the *innamorata* cross-dresses in roughly half the surviving scenarios. A worldly Italianate Englishman could even read the scene as a witty challenge to the Italian troupes: in essence, you Italians cannot match the greater appeal and virtuosity shown by English actors who play women who turn to youths and back to women. Not even Isabella, such an interpretation would run, could prove a prettier fellow than a 'real' boy actor, or manage such a feat of gender reversal.

In other scenes, Portia indulges in set pieces with Bassanio very like the *contrasti* of rapidly traded conceits written by the actors playing the *innamorata*, and recorded in *zibaldone*. Such exchanges punctuate the casket scene:

*Bassanio.* Let me choose,
For as I am, I die upon the rack.

*Portia.* Upon the rack, Bassanio! Then confess
What treason is mingled with your love... (3.2.24-7)

This duet sets off a speech in which Portia shows off her ability to launch into elaborate comparisons, pointing out her own literariness with such phrases as, "That the comparison / May stand more proper, my eye shall be the stream / And wary deathbed for him" (3.2.45-7). Yet she tops herself in the speech in which she wishes herself a thousand times more fair and more rich for him (3.2.149-74). In its heady hyperboles about wifely submission and its multiplication of generosity, her rhetoric certainly outdoes the halting words of thanks and wonder uttered by Bassanio, who is finally silenced by her generous outpouring of words and riches: "Madam, you have bereft me of all words" (3.2.175). Very much the grande dame, Portia promptly acts just as she pleases as soon as he is out of sight. Despite such signs of insubordination, Portia has often been read as quasi-divine, the embodiment of mercy, functioning like the Virgin in medieval mystery plays, who interceded to bestow heavenly grace on sinners.31

That sort of identification is hard to maintain in the face of the events of Act 5, when Portia and Nerissa play out the trick with their wedding rings on their new husbands. Here the wonder woman shows signs of becoming the more shrewish, troubling and transgressive 'woman on top'. The comic, familiar relationship of the two women, who act a lot like Lucy and Ethel on one of their escapades, resembles the bonds between some women in *commedia* and in gossips' literature. The two women gossip together, travel together, playact together, and trick men
together, very much like the pairs of women who played the first and second innamorate in the leading troupes, and who often acted in league in comedies. Exulting over the prospect of outwitting their husbands with the ring trick, they caw "But we'll outface them and outswear them too!" (4.2.17)

Their encounter in Venice with their errant husbands resembles a commedia plot as well: the innamorata or serva masks as another woman to track down her faithless lover, only to have him make overtures to her disguised self. In plots in which the jealous innamorata switches genders, however, the innamorato rarely expresses erotic interest in the female page, as the innamorato does in Twelfth Night and Merchant. Allusions to male same-sex desire in commedia are generally limited to travesties of same-sex coupling among the mask characters, and to Turks and pirates. Arguably, the same-sex desires articulated in the act of Bassanio and Gratiano's giving of their wedding rings to young males were rendered laughably familiar by placing them in Italy, where sodomy was supposedly as common as poisoning.

Some troupes boasted a third woman, in addition to the first and second innamoratas, who could play a third ingenua, or a serva, nurse (balia), go-between (mezzana), or courtesan (meretrice), and who excelled at the physical lazzi demanded by the more hyperkinetic plots. This demanding role is filled by Jessica in Merchant. While Nerissa imitates and assists Portia, Jessica is a comic parody of the "lady richly left". Cross-dressed, with ducats raining from her hands, she escapes a father's will literally, just as Portia escapes it figuratively. Leaping down from Shylock's window in the guise of a boy, Jessica enters a group of maskers and goes off on an illicit adventure abroad with her lover, which involves much expense, including her purchase of a monkey with her father's turquoise ring: a sly caricature of Portia's betrothal and her secret and masked trip to Venice, and Bassanio's gift of her ring to Balthazar. Many commedia stagings featured women being handed from upper windows and huddled away in disguise, just as Jessica escapes from her house. Later on, as they gaze up at Belmont, Jessica and Lorenzo engage in a contrasto that lugubriously calls up the icons of cuckoldry while they vow eternal love and try to outdo each other in their rhetorical flash—just as the "serious" innamorato did. As Jessica says, "I would out-night you, did nobody come" (5.1.23).

In her outsider status, her ambition, and her comic social and physical mobility, Jessica perhaps offers a glimpse into the carnival roots of the Italian professional companies and their brilliant divas. Commedia had risen amazingly quickly to international fame from the carnival and from the trestle stages of the piazza, where pretty girls of uncertain origins sang, danced, and tumbled to draw people to the antics of the saltimbanchi and vagabondi. The lowly street entertainer, strumming a guitar or turning a somersault, had preceded the proud innamorata as the female player in the public eye. Merchant presents the major types in synchrony, and just as in the comic scenarios, the desires of the clever female characters are fulfilled.

Othello: "I took you for that cunning whore of Venice"

Merchant ends well because the women who propel the plot are excellent actors. The paired women 'players' in Othello are far less adept, and like Hamlet, "lose the name of action". Desdemona and Emilia do little to help each other or extricate themselves, while the playtext throws up increasingly ominous parallels between the general's lady and the ensign's wife. To put it bluntly, both are slow learners. "It is a common thing", Iago says, "to have a foolish wife" (3.3.302-4), voicing the opinion that dominates this most disturbing play.

Note that his venom is directed not at English wives, but at Italian ones. Othello presents "a tale of two wives" similar to many found in Italian novelle and in the plays and merry books that descend from them. In commedia, plots are often based on a parallel conflict besetting two women—an unwanted suitors or marriage, an allegation of incontinence, an abduction. When they are not rivals, the women often join forces to confound their unwanted suitors, jealous husbands, or obnoxious fathers. Othello's "comic matrix" spawns tragedy from such
The two wives are suspected, bewhored, and killed by their husbands. As Clibb says, Shakespeare "begins with comic commonplaces and allows their farthest imaginable psychological weight and consequence to overpower the scenario and subvert all the theatergrams. [...] The design of the adulterous trickery plot, with jealous cuckold, malmaritata, young innamorato, and the rest, is transferred to Othello's mind, evoked by Iago", and, maddened by this design, Othello turns the "obscene farce" to tragedy.

Building on Clibb's perception, I would argue that the play transferred the obscene farce of an "Englised" commedia plot to the original audience's mind as well. These comic types were all familiar to spectators, as was the "comic matrix" set into motion by the charivari of the opening scene. Marking the female characters as Venetian, and therefore suspiciously theatrical and full of willful desire — "supersubtile", in fact — would demote them in English eyes even before Othello's mind is infected. The plot's brutal sexual dynamics are italicized: stressed while being perceived as Hyper-Italic. As Margo Hendricks writes, "Behind Desdemona stands the duplicitous Venice, behind Iago the cunning Machiavel, and behind Othello the irrationality of Italian masculinity", associations enforced by the "myth of Venice".

Myths tend to deform, just as mockery tends to exaggerate. The Italian innamorata was always alert, versatile, and resourceful, taking on disguises, faking death, or sneaking lovers through locked doors with every new scene. These characteristics were stable; players did not change identities except for purposes of disguise and plot twists, and then at their own choosing. This perpetual return to a baseline character was vital to the improvisational style and collaborative nature of the arte. The noted actresses had to be especially adept at thinking more quickly than their bodies or their tongues.

In contrast, the figure of Desdemona is riddled with contradictions that have occupied generations of critics. In my analysis, this effect of a ruptured self is deliberate, producing satiric distancing and tragic complication. She is cobbled from stereotypes of the naive Italian virgin, kept under lock and key, the dangerously eloquent cortegiana onesta, and the bantering innamorata of the public stage, while the hapless Bianca represents the lower echelon of the meretrice. In Emilia the crucial fantesca role is a shadow of itself, reduced from that of the witty and resourceful maid who keeps all the plots spinning her way, and who usually serves as a vital ally to the innamorata, to the unfaithful servant and loose-talking wife who is kept in the dark by her husband and who witlessly unleashes chaos.

Clibb, Barbara de Mendonça, and Theresa Falhery have ably traced the distorted shadows of commedia in the roles of Othello and Iago. In my view, Othello bears more than the marks of intertextuality and contaminatio; it amounts to a travesty of the arte as (mis)understood in England. The travesty offers the requisite innamorata with multiple suitors paired with an aging cuckold (a term applied to the horn-mad as well as to the betrayed), high-flown speeches by noble lovers, a scheming serva, a trance scene, verbal bawdry, and an exotic locale. The external referent of physical violence between spouses, so boringly everpresent in everyday English life, is excitingly projected onto a Moor who is exposed as a fool or moria. At first Othello bears the hallmarks of a proud and fantastical Capitano Spavento (a role created by Isabella's husband Francesco), tormented by Iago's leering Brighella, but in my view Othello deteriorates into a "mur'trous coxcomb" closer to Arlecchino, known for his lustfulness and his black mask. Furthermore, commedia plots were full of comically dangerous or amorous Turks and Moors, and in one a Turk turns Christian and successfully woos the innamorata. Most obviously, Othello also includes a scolding courtesan (one of the few in all of Shakespeare's plays); a wife who says she'd commit adultery if the price is right; and a chaste wife who is bewhored by a jealous husband, in a scene that appears to allude to the brothel theatrics of commedia, with its ruffiana and meretrice (4.2).

In a provocative essay Michael Bristol argues that from the first scene outside Barbaricco's house, Othello and Desdemona are targets of charivari mockery, and that Iago directs the play as a cruel "comedy of abjection" which
"aims to provoke a degrading laughter" against the couple, who are reduced to a "blackface clown" and a transvestite effigy of a bride. Desdemona's femininity is specially "boyed" by the transvestite pose demanded of the charivari bride-figure, so that "his/her sexuality as a kind of sustained gestural equivocation, and this corresponds to [Desdemona's] exaggerated and equivocal rhetorical [...] self-presentation".44 By the third act, Othello is horn-mad and writhing on the floor, with Iago crowing above him. He is past youth, his skin is the wrong color, his enemy is a zany Machiavel, and his stage gestures — spying and swearing, holding his head, staring, running mad — reproduce exactly the lazziti of the aged horn-mad husband. This creature would have been a dangerous or ridiculous fool, but hardly a tragic hero to audiences who disliked foreigners and believed that fair skin spelled virtue. The reaction may well have been what Nicholas Brooke calls "horrid laughter", neither respectful or sympathetic, but harsh, cruel, and xenophobic.45

Ethnic stereotyping and distancing of audience empathy are key to this process. One of the means of stereotyping is the extended comparison between the two Venetian wives, and the means of distancing include establishing their distinct foreignness, their un-Englishness. When Iago says

I know our country disposition well:  
In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience  
Is not to leav'e undone, but keep't unknown (3.3.201-4)

the audience knows Othello is wrong to distrust his wife. But it is not expected to doubt this bit of lore about Italian women in general, which was repeated so many times by the cognoscenti, the travelers who had all read the same books about Venice, and retailed such proverbs in their own reports. The wives are to be read as Italians, and therefore actresses by nature: "For the English audience, as for the stranger Othello, Italian women are represented as instances of lust and desire who [...] manage to keep up the façade of virtue even though everyone expects it to be a façade", as Andreas Mahler observes.46

The two wives possess traits viewed with fascination in England as peculiarly Italian. Desdemona is the bride of a Moorish captain and the daughter of a powerful magnifico who has kept her sequestered, while Emilia is the wife of a viciously Machiavellian lower-ranked officer who wants promotion. Desdemona's outspoken desire combined with blushing naiveté makes her behavior suspicious to audiences expert in sponging out any irregularity in wifely conduct. She speaks boldly and eloquently in the Senate, yet is childishly squeamish in private; she elopes disobediently, yet vows she respects her father; she abhors the word "whore" yet says it (4.2.118, 161-2). Emilia behaves even more suspiciously, hypocritically behawing another woman (5.1.121) just after proclaiming herself ready to commit adultery if that would make herself rich and her husband "a monarch", a statement reeking of realpolitik (4.3.71-6). In taking the fallen handkerchief and giving it to Iago, her status plummets to that of the untrustworthy servant who, in popular texts, was continually suspected of pilfering and disloyalty.

Both wives maintain a façade of obedience. Desdemona deceives her father into believing she is dutiful, and Emilia deceives her mistress into believing she is loyal. Both evade questioning on this point. When Brabantio asks her to whom she most owes obedience (1.3.178-9), Desdemona finds an answer that ignores the fact of her subterfuge. She is just as dutiful, but her duty is no longer to him, but to her new husband: "so much I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor, my lord" (1.3.188-9). In an odd echo, Emilia is challenged by Iago — "Hast sto'n it from her?" (3.3.310) — and she answers with similar sophistry, saying she did not steal the handkerchief, but only took it after it fell. Her justification is the same as Desdemona's: her first duty is to her husband (3.3.299).

As Desdemona and Emilia wait for Othello to arrive on Cyprus, Iago again launches into a set piece concerning Italian women, repeated in many English travel journals: "you are pictures out a'doors, / Bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens, / Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, / Players in your huswifry, and huswifes in your beds" (2.1.109-12).47 Note that the proverb glances at pictorial artifice, Catholic saints, and female playing, all closely associated with
Italy; the link between female acting and whoring is explicit in Iago's coda: "You rise to play, / And got to bed to work" (115). Desdemona cannot be deeply offended, because she quickly changes the subject to herself, initiating badinage with a coquetish query that could have come straight out of an ingenue's zibaldone: "What would you write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?" (2.1.117-18). Iago courts her with would-be witty answers to her questions, and gets little for his pains. Her reaction is teasing censure: "O heavy ignorance!" (143). Hearing finally that a good woman is fit only to breed fools, she turns to Emilia and Cassio to widen the ridicule and preach shrewishness: "Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband. What say you, Cassio? is he not a most profane and liberal counselor?" (161-4).

In this scene, Desdemona runs through virtually all of the characteristics of the innamorata: flirtatious and satiric, she teases men; vain, she tries to elicit praise; haughty, she parries the words of two admirers, one of whom has called her the "divine Desdemona" in a hyperbolic economium (2.1.73) and another who has proclaimed his intention to seduce her. As she seeks more compliments, she turns to give a telling aside: "I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" (2.1.122-3), which inevitably evokes the way she beguiled her father. Such statements and behavior italicize her theatricality, so that Iago does not need to manufacture evidence about it, speaking only the truth when he says to Othello, "She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, / She lov'd them most" (3.3.205-8).

The conflation of the cortegiana and the actress, apparent in Coryate's account of his first sight of female players, associates female self-display with sexual looseness. This same association haunts the conflation that is Desdemona. Othello's despairing list of her virtues could be applied to either a courtesan or an actress: "O, the world hath not a sweeter creature! She might lie by an emperor's side and command him tasks [...] an admirable musician! O she will sing the savageness out of a bear. Of so high and plenteous wit and invention!" (4.1.183-90) When she bests her own father before the Senate, and then argues to be allowed to accompany Othello, she exhibits the "Rhetorical tongue" of a cortegiana onesta like the renowned Veronica Franco (who did lie by a king's side), or an actress-writer like the prodigious Isabella. Her suasive skill and bold speech mark her as a woman who is not to be contained within walls, as she has already escaped in a gondola from her father's house; and she desires to keep moving, going to sea with her husband, much as the married innamorata did in the leading troupes, which were constantly on the road. Her dangerous voyage - to a remote Mediterranean island with mythic associations, through a sea full of storms and Turks, while separated from her husband - describes the adventures of many an Isabella in the scenarii. Believing she is protected by her marriage and her husband's status, she lands safely, fully confident that she can take on another role, that of advocate for Cassio. Buoyant, she tells Emilia that she plans to act it to the hilt. She is thoroughly unaware that the genre has shifted, as if the players' scenario had been suddenly switched on its nail backstage. To her immense shock "the divine Desdemona", like la divina Isabella, dies miserably on the road, in a foreign city that had ecstatically greeted her.

Emilia, too, is clueless. The fantesca was supposed to be agile, witty, bawdy and lively, with a great sense of timing and a stock of biting repartee with Arlecchino, il Dottore, Pantalone, Brighella, and the zanni, who often played her suitor, husband, or lover. The fantesca was a key platea character with a close relationship to the audience; her character as it has been handed down is a past hand at plotting for herself and her mistress. No matter her misdeeds, she usually contrives to engineer a happy ending. In stark contrast, Emilia sets a plot in motion without thinking it through, stealing a key prop and then giving it to Iago: "What will he do with it? / Heaven knows, not I; / I nothing but to please his fantasy" (3.3.297-9). Furthermore, she does nothing to alter events once she realizes her deed has made Othello horn-mad and placed Desdemona in danger. When her mistress lies dead, she realizes she has fatally dropped a cue: "O villainy! / I thought so then. I'll kill myself for grief" (5.2.190-1).
In the final scene, Emilia is dazed and confused, slow on the uptake. She has to be told several times before she believes that her husband is behind it all, a lugubrious performance of shock that exasperates Othello. Her language returns with stunned iteration to the imagery of fools and devils, of farce and death: "villainy has made mocks with love!" "O mur'drous coxcomb! what should such a fool / Do with so good a wife?" (5.2.152, 233-4). Othello invokes comic stage devils when he should not be joking ("I look down towards his feet – but that's a fable") (5.2.286), and throws out a line that could have been Arlecchino's in a self-pitying moment: "I am not valiant neither, / But every puny whisperst gets my sword" (5.2.244-5).

Othello criticism has not dealt adequately with the grim humor and rough music of the play, which insist that we see the virtuous perish and the outcast made into a fool who is tricked and tortured. The passion and fate of the "blackface clown" (in Bristol's words) and the Venetian bride played by a boy are meant to be both supremely foreign and sensationaly bizarre, but these harsh outlines have been blurred by centuries of interpretation that sees Othello as a noble Moor to the end, and Desdemona as a pure victim from the beginning. The uncomfortable fact (as Bristol has so brilliantly argued) is that the play exhibits their status as fragmented effigies, subjected to a brutal charivari that ends only in death. As I have tried to show, in this macabre play echoing with cruel laughter, Shakespeare also bewrays a mystic Venice and its glittering women, and confronts the awesome threat of a rival theater by parodying its chief players and their trademark roles.

Notes


7 Lea, II, p. 357.


9 On the sexual aspects of this mythic Italy see Andres Mahler, "Italian Vices: Cross-Cultural Constructions of Temptation and Desire in English Renaissance Drama", in Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama, ed. Michele Marrapodi, et al. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993), 49-55; Ann Rosalind Jones, "Italians and Others", Renaissance Drama, 18 (1987), pp. 101-119, observes that Corryat's "symptomatic association of ideas" linking actresses and courtesans produces "an interplay of pleasure and danger".


11 On the "unstable mixture of admiration and loathing" Italy stirred in English psyches, emerging in plays such as Webster's White Devil, see Jones, "Italians and Others".

12 From Heywood's Prologue to Challenge for Beauty, quoted in Lea II, p. 380.


14 Richards and Richards, The Commedia dell'arte: a documentary history, p. 263.


16 Richards and Richards, p. 264.


18 Richards and Richards, p. 57.
The Counterfeit Innamorata


20 Cluett, Italian Drama, pp. 279-80. On the constantly crossing paths and rivalries of Italian and English troupes on the road in Europe, see Lea II, pp. 342-58, Cluett, Italian Drama, pp. 179-80. English players and the Gelosi troupe were both in Paris performing at court in 1604, for example, just before Isabella's death.


23 Cluett, Italian Plays, pp. xvii.

24 Isabella was renowned for her mad scenes in La pazzia and La finta pazzia a decade before Hamlet's very similar speeches by Ophelia. Cluett sees it as "family resemblance owed to the repertory that theatrical professionals shared, even if separated by the English Channel", Italian Drama, p. 266.


28 Pierce Pennilessse, p. 32.


32 An example is "Columbine's Betrayal", excerpted in Ducharte, pp. 278-83.

33 For same-sex desire by a Turk, see "Flavio's Fortune", Scala, p. 11; by a pirate, see "The Innocent Persian", Scala, p. 349. In the tragedy "The Mad Princess", Scala, p. 313, a father and daughter both fall for the same woman, who is disguised as a page, and all eventually die.

34 For an intriguing thesis on the carnivalesque body of the Italian actress and the revolutionary impact of her advent on stage, see Rosalind Kerr, "The Actress as Androgynne in the Commedia dell'arte Scenarios of Flaminio Scala", Phil. Diss., University of Toronto, 1983.

35 In "The Two Faithful Notaries" (Scala, p. 142) Isabella, Flaminia and Franceschina maneuver to pair off the innamoratas with their lovers, and to stave off the lecherous Capitano and Gratiano, who have charged the women with infidelity and whoresonship.


37 Cluett, Italian Drama, p. 25.


39 Indeed, Kathleen McGill theorizes that women played an "originary role" in improvisatory techniques because they were practiced in socially collaborative forms and steeped in oral culture (Women and Performance, p. 69).

40 For one study of Desdemona's disturbing theatricality and "rationality" see Timothy Murray, "Othello, an Index and Obscura Prologue to the History of Fool Generic Thoughts", in Shakespeare and Deconstruction, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and David Bergeron (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), pp. 213-43.


42 Faherty shows that in his martial adventures, enslavement by the Turks, and rhetorical style Othello strongly resembles the famous "Capitano Spavento" created by Francesco Andreini; and de Mendonça argues for the Iago-Brighella connection, pp. 187-8.

43 See "Flavio's Fortune", Scala, p. 11.

44 Michael D. Bristol, "Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in Othello", Renaissance Drama, 21 (1990), pp. 3-20; esp. 11, 14.


46 Mahler, in Shakespeare's Italy, p. 60.

47 Fynes Moryson and Peter Heylyn also cite the proverb, but only Iago's version stresses the term 'players.' Compare Moryson's "They are Maggays at the door, Saints in the Church, Gostes in the garden, Divils in the house, Angells in the street, and Syrens at the window." Marnopodi, Shakespeare's Italy, p. 3.

48 "Although thou wilt find the Venetian Cortezan (if she be a selected woman indeed) a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discoursor, so that if she cannot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay thy constancy with her Rhetorical tongue", Coryates Crudities, p. 405.
Franco had a liaison with Henry III of France, which added to her fame. See Anna Rosalind Jones, "City Women and Their Audiences", in Rewriting the Renaissance, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1987).


While bawdy and mischievous, the Italian fontesca is clever and "always quick to give a helping hand to the lovers", according to Giacomo Oreglia, The Commedia dell'Arte (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 123. (For an example, see "The Husbands", Scala, p. 142.) Shakespeare's witless fontesca, Mistress Quickly of Merry Wives, is "a caricature of the species", argues Ronald Huebert in "Levels of Parody in Merry Wives of Windsor", English Studies in Canada 3:2 (Summer 1977), pp. 136-52; 149. My point is that Emilia, too, shows all the failings and few of the strengths of the role.

On 16 February, 1587 an extraordinary event took place in London: the funeral of Sir Philip Sidney, the hero of the battle of Zutphen, and the most accomplished courtier, scholar, soldier, perfect gentleman and knight of the Elizabethan Age. It was a solemn celebration with a splendid train of aptly attired soldiers and gentlemen. Sidney's bier was followed by the knight's battle steed mounted by a page bearing a broken spear, and by the knight's tournament horse, whose rider bore a battle-axe. It was a mournful as well as a sensational happening to be remembered together with the memory of the loved one for many years to come.1 Shakespeare was very likely in London at that date, and, as a late nineteenth-century biographer of Sidney wrote, he must have kept somewhere in his mind, if not Sidney, at least the exemplum, the model of perfect noble life literally shaped by Spenser's various dedications, and the explicit, or implicit references to his noble friend and patron, "the president/ Of noblesse and chevalere,"2 "the most noble and valorous knight" of Spenser's 1595 Pastoral Elegie,3 the very mirror of courtesy, Sir Calidore in Book VI of The Faerie Queene (1596)4. So - writes Fox Bourne - Ophelia's definition of Hamlet somehow seems to mirror the English Renaissance myth of the courtier identified with Sidney in historical reality:5

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th' observ'd of all observers.(3.1.150-3)

Actually, Sidney's Christian and heroic death had been followed by a somewhat embarrassing accident. The perfect gentleman had left behind him an incredible