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“Subverting” the Neoclassic Constraints:
The Presence of Magic in Early Commedia Dell’arte

Dedicated to Papa Walkling

Yangzhou Bian

Abstract

The project is an initiating discussion about the dramatic function and social-ideological implication of magic and magical elements in the surviving corpus of the Italian improvisational theater *commedia dell'arte* scenarios from the early seventeenth century. The essay begins with a cursory exploration of the position of *commedia dell'arte* amongst other notable theatrical forms blossoming across the European continent in the late renaissance. The study then focuses on eight plays selected from the 1611 Scala Collection to further examine the use of magic by *commedia* performers, followed up by individual analysis of plot construct and dramaturgical theories in practice. Finally, observations and connections made from the performance “script” to magic’s presence in the larger context of life in the early seventeenth century bring the paper to its conclusion. Nonetheless, investigations will need to carry on to flesh out a more comprehensive picture of the significance of the miraculous intrigues in early *commedia dell'arte*.

1). *Commedia dell'arte* of the Early Seventeenth Century: A Black Horse Galloping Across the Continent

During the years 1550 to 1650, European theater was deeply intermingled in the “political, religious, economic, and cultural upheavals” brought about by the Renaissance, which feeds on the “resurrection”, or rather, the adaptive reimagination of Greek and Roman classics that had been reworked into authoritative guidelines to be followed by theater producers (Nellhaus 185). Mainly devised upon Aristotle’s *Poetics*^[1] and sections from *Art Poetica* by Horace, these rules urged the new generation of thespians to closely observe the concept of verisimilitude, decorum, and the unities of action, time, and space as the proper way to develop worthy dramas (Nellhaus 202, 203). Though its degree of influence varied across Europe, the neoclassical principles more or less made their impact on particularly the high end of the social strata. Being closely bound to absolutism, the royal and noble households of France, Spain, Italy, and England found these prescriptive requirements favorable to justify and buttress their prestige, eventually culminating in a mammoth body of works bearing the watermark of neoclassicism.

It was indeed interesting that sharing the flowering bed of Italy with the aforementioned neoclassical theories, *commedia dell'arte*^[2] the improvised theater rooted in the everyday life of the people, quickly became a prominent jewel on the crown of early modern performative activities. Following its unique set of devising and performative formulas unlike its contemporary counterparts, *commedia dell'arte* knavishly threw a pebble at every window of the grand neoclassic façade as it felt fit. By doing so, not only did this idiosyncratic theater practice gather an enormous cohort of zealous fans amongst tradesmen and craftsmen functioning at the base of the social construction mapping the expansion of the European continent but later in the mid-seventeenth century the most successful *capocomicos*^[3] and troupes under their charge even made their ways into the French and English palaces and venues under ducal sponsorship through regal reference and special invitation (Scott 38). *Commedia dell'arte*’s hosts penetrating influence upon the preeminent playwrights like William Shakespeare, Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, Moliere, and the successors who were

inking their feather pens from its rich repertoire and unconventional traditions such as lazzi, formulaic love plot, stereotypic characterization, and ingenious buffoonery. From a scholastic perspective, there would be little dispute to acknowledge commedia dell'arte and the different sets of performative ideologies as a matching wrestler ^[4] against the wholesale of neoclassical philosophy. The contest was about rules, about the pliability and unchallenged authority of rules, and ultimately, how and who, and what was to determine the proper way to stage. Not to undercut the significance of the rival party, compared to the problematically defined forms and genre under the neoclassic umbrella that was stretched out by theorists such as Julius Caesar Scaliger, Lodovico Castelvetro, and the like, commedia dell'arte was veritably a black horse ending up a prize-winning celebrity by circumventing the landmarks as necessary. Highlighting the achievements of commedia dell'arte was not to put down the dedication of neoclassical acolytes. Instead, the aim was to point out the flaw of those regulations and caution against the purported perfectionist and accredited rationale the neoclassicists of the dramatic world tried to impart. The extant portion of *Poetics* on verse drama was a mostly reflective examination of Hellenistic tragedy prevalent in the fourth century BCE, while the main corpus on comedy ^[5], chalked as the lowbrow and the bawdy embodiment was for centuries missing (Heath viii, lxii). Basing a universal module on only half of Aristotle's holistic theoretical sphere was by no means an adequate approach to regenerate prescription to all contemporary theatrical creations. By happenstance and by virtue, commedia dell'arte with its comic aura and awe-inspiring plasticity intuitively filled the vacancy through practical endeavors by closely tracing vignettes from pre-modern life where treatises and histories were powerless. Magic, though somehow viewed as an interchangeable concept with trickery and superstition from today's perspective was an integral part of contemporary European society and in many circumstances accessed as a valid and scientific means of problem-solving. This essay attempts to dissect the use of magic in early commedia scenarios as an example to further expound on the absorptive capability and mechanical viability of this engrossing theatrical form.

2). Potions, Spells, Wizards, and Enchantress: Scenarios from the 1611 Scala Collection

In 1611, Flaminio Scala published 50 commedia dell'arte scenarios in the compilation named *The Theater of Tales for Performance (Il Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative)* (Andrews vii). The collection was believed to be a mostly impartial recollection of the performances that Scala was part of earlier in his career and had been treated as an authoritative source for studying attributes of early commedia dell'arte (Fitzpatrick 189). Magicians and magical power were important devices for plot construction in many of the scripts. The partiality to secret potions, possession, spells and evil spirits served the functional purpose that could be evaluated as an alternation of *Deus ex machina* ^[6]—the happy ending was not brought out by god but the result of “human contrivances”, or more so, the urgency of creative self-help supported by the community of friends and servants under the awe-inspiring guise of mysticism. Secondly, magic presence could also be seen as the secular modification of the emerging tradition *meraviglia*, or wonder. At the beginning of the seventeenth century,

when the emphasis on reason and evidence was still incubating, a critical mass of Europe was still firmly holding on to the idea of “diabolism” as a factual residence (Bever 264). The audiences’ co-witness of the other-earthly encounters of the stage characters could plausibly evoke what Andrew Walkling would describe as “diegetic supernaturalism” [7], a favored theatrical tool that would make the experience “more astonishing and dramatically compelling for the audience” (Walkling 21). At the same time, the twist of the plot and comic aura were meant to contrast and unsettle the consensus perception, challenging the viewers to note down for themselves the nature of the regard. To put aside the realistic credibility for a moment, magic was also a unique selling proposition for repertoires that inherited pastoral settings or were re-investing into the mythological characters. Six out of the fifty scenarios of the Scala collection dealt with nymphs, bears, shepherds, and shepherdesses [8]. Magic was an inextricable element in five of these arrangements. To push the exploration even further, it is not too bold to argue that pastoral favored magic and magical presence. The theme-bound pictorials offered a distinctive set of intrigues such as rituals, potions, incantation, spells, conjuring of spirits that necessitated idiosyncratic sets, make-up, costumes, acting, and directorial possibilities apart from the mundane. As a result, many audiences would be happy to open their wallets. This could be understood as the commercial potential of mysticism which thrived upon the mesmerizing power of incomprehension and unfamiliarity.

The examples of magical presence were found in the scenarios of Day Twelve *The Dentist*, Day Twenty-one *The Fake Magician*, Day Twenty-eight *Flavio the Fake Magician*, Day Thirty-three *The Four Fake Spirits*, Day Forty-three *Alvida*, Day Forty-four *Rosalba, Enchantress*, Day Forty-six *The Bear Part I*, and Day Forty-nine *The Enchanted Wood* [9]. The following section will dissect each play and analyze how magical elements fulfilled these aforementioned dramatic functions.

2.1 Day Twelve *The Dentist*

Day Twelve *The Dentist* was a three-act play about how Oratio had triumphed over his father Pantalone in competition for the same hand, assisted by his sweetheart and their house servants using a secret formula that caused madness. Knowing his son to be the rival in courtship to Isabella, Pantalone was determined to send Oratio away. In act one, Pantalone struck and beat his servant Pedrolino for arguing in favor of Oratio. Pedrolino swore revenge, asking everyone to tell Pantalone his breath stinks. In act two, knowing Oratio was to be dispatched, Isabella’s friend Pasquella offered to solve their conundrum by using a secret drug she possessed. Pedrolino made fools out of everyone by getting some of them to dress up as other people. In act three, Pantalone was in despair that Oratio and Pedrolino were acting frightfully abnormal after ingesting the candies that caused insanity. Learning about Isabella’s ability to cure, Pantalone granted her two wishes. Both men were remedied by another candy formula. Pantalone consented to Isabella and her brother’s marriages to his two children and Pedrolino was forgiven for his tricks.



In this play, the first act set the scene in preparation for the main plot of “incurring madness” that ensured the eventual union of the innamorati. Though there was no mention of the magic portion till the beginning of the second act, the opening of *The Dentist* concretely laid in all necessary background information as to interpersonal relationships, the degree of involvement of each dramatic personnel in the affair, their sides, stances and motivations, and most importantly, the urgency of the situation being the fuse to the magic contrivance. Act two and act three were built upon the dissemination and effect of the secret potion produced in the form of candy. Act two was composed of subschemas such as Isabella’s friend Pasquella offering the magic candies; Isabella sending her servant Arlecchino to Pasquella’s house to fetch the candies; Isabella generated the promise from Oratio that he will eat the candies before he leaves. In act three, Arlecchino gave boxes of candies to Isabella, amongst which she kept the untainted ones and bid Arlecchino send the rest to Oratio. Arlecchino gave the candies to Pedrolino who kept some candies for himself before he parted the box to Oratio. As a result, both men went out of their wits. This concerned Pantalone profoundly that he went to Isabella after learning from her brother Flavio that Isabella could make them recover. After procuring desired marriages for herself and Flavio, she refreshed them both.

In this scenario, the magic candies that both curses and cures were an indispensable property that carried along with the major storyline. Furthermore, being an “unnatural assistance” or the Mephistophelian variant of “*Deus ex machina*”, the

dreadful and at the same time miraculous aftereffect granted the right hands to two pairs of young lovers. Secondly, the play was selling on “diegetic supernaturalism”, namely pasquinading the believability of the dramatic device. In this particular play, the characters were all responding as if the magical effect of the candies was real. Used in combination with colloquial oral intrigues and virtuoso physical humor, this forward gullibility glossed an additional coating of merry satire. To what degree the audiences may take it as realistic would for certain depend on personal belief. However, it was worthy to note that in the early seventeenth century many people were firm believers in dark magic and “diabolism” as well as the effect of concocted potions for curing disease (Bever 264). Though in most cases the main body of appraisers of early commedia dell’arte were civilians with comparably simpler educational backgrounds, yet by pursuing magic as a serious study, the intellectuals were by no means too different in opinion regarding supernatural activities (Adams 6). Nonetheless, one may be assured of the presence of those more critical stances that were to align this theatrical experience as a gadget of comedy. Marvel or dupability, either would work for the audiences’ enjoyment regardless of personal take.

Despite these possible attitudes, the gender dynamic exhibited through the magic candies plot was rather compelling. In *The Dentist*, instead of the men, it was the women who were assigned supernatural power or the “magical ability” to manipulate, rebel, and rectify the misfortune successfully. This in itself was a daring comment on the patriarchal construct represented by ancient Greek democracy for which women weren’t granted equal rights as their male counterparts. In a larger context, the intentional allocation posed questions about the passive and submissive roles females were expected to conform. Yet from another angle, one may still glimpse the stronghold of the tradition of subjugation and the long-established sense of masculine superiority. In a male dominant society, these magical candies in essence symbolized female sexuality as illogical, mysterious, and irresistible. Under its influence, men forgo their ration and lose their senses. However, the remedy also signified the reluctant awareness of the indispensability of womanhood and its power in healing, reassurance, and restoration of happiness. This complicated representation of femininity in *The Dentist* un-accidentally coincided with intensifying searches for diabolic cults and witch hunts (Bever 264).

2.2 Day Twenty-one *The Fake Magician*

In Day Twenty-one *The Fake Magician*, Flaminia, and Isabella, the unmarried daughters of Pantalone and Gratiano tried to conceal their pregnancies by feigning dropsy and being possessed to avoid suspicions. Working towards matrimony with their beloved ones, the young men dressed up one servant as a magician and another as Mercury, the messenger of God. The fathers were persuaded by the elaborate exorcism showcase and consented immediately to the marriages.

The most interesting thing about this play was the clear succession of events that all revolved around the purported abnormality of several major characters as a temporary guise for the ladies’ enlarging bellies. The drama started with this delicate standstill during the tug-of-war between the patriarchal guardians and enamored kids. The fathers sought to uncover the cause by hiring a real medical professional, while the children worked vigorously to mystify the situation with the aid of a fake magician. After a series of conjuring tricks, the fathers were confined into circles on different sides of

the stage, with the young men showing up as spirits going round and round scaring out the meager remains of their guts, if not wits as well. Mercury was summoned who interpreted “the god’s decree” on the daughters’ marriages. Desperate to be out of harm’s way, the fathers immediately agreed to whatever the “divine power” saw fit, thus the play closed with joy for all.



Similar to the story of magic candies, the hiring of a magician functioned as a miraculous solution. Bearing a higher stake though was in this script the juxtaposition of the fake magician and the certified professional, particularly the triumph of one over the other. This pinned a huge question mark directly on the puissance and again “credibility”. Both characters were well aware of the real circumstance and willing to assist the wretched lovers. Whatsoever, the physician, being the more trustworthy out of the two, was overly bound by professionalism and code of practice to effectively roll the steering wheel in a positive direction. Instead, he was able to vaguely suggest giving the patient’s hand to whomever she wishes or “otherwise is to suffer, very soon, sorrow and dishonor” as the diagnosis of the sickness (Salerno 154). This also speaks to a more complex module of “diegetic supernaturalism”. Unlike the plot of the previous play, the contrivance worked not because in the world of the play there was real magical power, but the unexplainable experience the costumed magician had conjured beguiled Pantalone and Gratiano as if it was the doing of veridical expertise. Thirdly, it’s certainly refreshing to go beyond the typical kitchen sink scenes or double-layered interior-

exterior street window repertoire of early commedia dell'arte. The costumes of a magician, Mercury, and raging spirits for sure added handsomely to the visual experience. The circles drawn on the ground provided a more intricate floor pattern. The circumferences delineated the shield against evil and instantly demarcated the outside as the territory of otherworldly existence. Most of all, in *The Fake Magician*, that magic proffered concrete thematic building blocks that were to craft out the functional moments of each subschema through both action and language such as devising a legible plan and recruiting “willing accomplices” to prevent the immediate crisis of exposure, thwarting parental suspicion and extracting consent for the destined unions.

2.3 Day Twenty-eight *Flavio the Fake Magician*

Day Twenty-eight *Flavio the Fake Magician* was a scenario with a large cast of thirteen actors that had woven into multiple lines of convoluted romantic relationships bound by two plot lines. Franceschina, the wife of Burattino, was desired by all the males of the older generation. At the same time that among the young innamorati, Flavio and Cinthio were burning for Flaminia and Isabella respectively. Yet the ladies had already bestowed their favor upon Captain Spavento and Oratio. To make the impossible possible, Flavio dressed up as a magician from an unknown land and promised all assistance in their amorous pursuit. This prompted their obedience to all his commands. Through Flavio's cunning designs, Flavio and Cinthio won the ladies as their lawful wives and accidentally resulted in the mirthful reconciliation of Franceschina and Burattino.



Day Twenty-eight shared a lot of similarities with Day Twenty-one. While Isabella and Flaminia were settled in their affection for Oratio and Captain Spavento, the play opened at the point where there was no place for Flavio and Cinthio's yearning to stand. Yet characteristic of commedia dell'arte, stereotypical young lovers never passively accept their heart's longing to bear another's family name. Nor would they gently offer a "bless you" for they understood well that "God's design" was as man-made as the notion itself. Flavio and Cinthio cleverly snatched the social consensus of honor and the epoch's penchant for the power of magic to insert themselves into the boudoirs of their muses. The guise of a magician spontaneously gave Flavio authority. Along with his cool judgment, effective persuasion, and superior acting skills, the young man was able to maneuver the astonishing overturn where conventional courting practices were doomed to fail. Again, the theme of faking, or assuming an identity untrue to one's own for other than stage purposes as in both cases the make-believe of otherworldly prowess had successfully stirred fate to the auspicious end. Here "*Deus ex machina*" was a magician's outfit and the executants' ability to sell his borrowed ascendancy of command. Worthy to repeat, magical influence and the devotees of the wizard's cult provided a plausible backdrop for the unreasonable segments to seamlessly appear within the coherent logic of pre-modern everyday people. For instance, the lazzi of Flavio casting a series of spells on a bat and Pantalone trying to beat other characters to their opposite gender as assured by the fake magician; or Oratio trying to change Franceschina to Isabella by a blindfold kiss would flow merrily along with the laughter from off stage rather than harvesting doubts and cynicism with a full cast acting as out of logic as out of the norms. In act three, the most thrilling was all twelve other characters became the tenable marionettes operated under Flavio's massive technical layout. According to scholars of magic in medieval and early modern Europe, the scenario had absorbed the use of what Ioan P. Couliano described as "Collective mental manipulation", a frequently visited device from medieval magicians' tool set (Adams et al. 2). Being "the remote ancestor of 'applied psychosociology and mass psychology'", the competent magicians were capable of puppeteering through human fear and desire, hooded under the use of bewildering rituals, confounding tricks, and mystifying incantation which assured its effectiveness (Adams et al. 2). No simple agreed-upon conspiracy, not even feigned madness, but the bounding spells could operate on such a scale, with its effect over the full cast without riding over the edge of audiences' comprehension.

2.4 Day Thirty-three *The Four Fake Spirits*

Day Thirty-three *The Four Fake Spirits* was another play in which sham magicians played a central part. Against the wish of his father Pantalone, Oratio fell in love with a girl left under Pantalone's custody named Isabella. At the same time, his friend Flavio's courtship of Flaminia was also impeded by Flaminia's father Gratiano. To keep the situation under control, Oratio acquired Gratiano's consent for Flaminia's hand while Flavio obtained Pantalone's approval as Isabella's prospective husband to exclude the threats from other rivals. Oratio pretended to be possessed. Pantalone, being in great despair, accepted the offer from a magician to cure him. The magician declared he was troubled by "a lustful spirit that will not leave Oratio's body until his body was joined with the body of Isabella" while all the characters were gathering

around (Salerno 247). Immediately, Isabella and Flaminia embodied the same symptoms, each proclaimed her cure to be Oratio and Flavio respectively. The two fathers granted those wishes at once and the magician revealed himself to be disguised Flavio.



Within pages from one another, the three encounters of magicians from the 1611 Scala collection seemed to point that commedia dell'arte of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century were more inclined to resort to magic power than calling for the assistance of gods. In contrast to deities' almost omnipresence and omnipotence in the regal and courtly productions border by same time frame, one might even extrapolate as far as to question the folksy attitude towards religiosity given the fervid reception whenever and where commedia troupes were arriving. Commedia dell'arte as a performance style was being clapped for its profound tackling of sensuality, bawdiness, and roughish trickery which perverted the rules and toppled social hierarchy, emphasis on the gratification of bodily satisfaction rather than the insistence of puritanic spirituality. Prominent yet not outspoken, this statement manifested itself latently as the overarching production principle. The ideological discrepancy made it less likely for commedia dell'arte to turn to religious figures as the ultimate solution. Even if arrangements of said nature were attempted, it would be hard to ignore the high resolution of incompatibility—for the gangsters always go to their con man and police seek help from their superintendent. By the end of the day, no one hardly ever crossed

the border. If being left to the priests, instead of aids, the young lovers would be sure to receive but lecture biased by the dogged observance of doctrines. On the other hand, magicians would come in handy as the ideal savior as they were bound by no moral prescriptions other than the motivation of material gain. In other words, magic and magicians had a higher hirability than summoners. The scarce presence of religious figures from Scala's collection may also have to do with professional sensitivity to intentionally avoid being dragged into the hot water of disputes amongst different branches of Christianity since the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century. Unlike regional theaters that thrived in their responsiveness to local culture, commedia dell'arte troupes were constantly rotating from place to place, mapping their performance all around Europe. Varied spaces had varied positions concerning the irreconcilable divide between Catholicism and Protestantism. On the surface level, whenever the church was to be portrayed in plays, the purpose and circumstance would automatically impart a certain stance or opinion. It was impossible to simultaneously satisfy two contrasting views, each of which umbrellaed several mildly disagreeing subsects. While the central dispute was if "individual believers should be less dependent on the Catholic Church, its pope and priests for spiritual guidance and salvation", it would become very problematic for commedia troupes to paint these arbitrary intermediaries as the almost thaumaturgical solution to all romantic and familial conundrums if to involve religiosity ("The Protestant Reformation"). The dramaturgical decision of incorporating one such character was in essence advocating against "independent relationship with God" and "taking responsibility" for one's faith in however dire situations but a bow to unquestioned submission to church staff and subscription to its constitution ("The Protestant Reformation"). Though directly pleading the favor of gods might seem to be the panacea, the overlay of laughter and buffoonery would expose the thespians to the potential and consequent trouble of misinterpretation. Also, combined with consideration of the civic devotion of the growing bourgeois audiences, it was not too surprising such arrangements shall need to be bowdlerized. Unlike the activist groups of the modern era that sought theater as an effective path to bring issues to public recognition, the primary concerns of commedia troupes were commercial success and profitability. This was already achieved by its current repertoire and management system. Moreover, it was rather unsafe to suggest the affiliating officials of the church were swindling frauds or ready impostures that served unholy aspirations. Slightly later in time, the preeminent French dramatist and producer Moliere's ill-fated *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan* of 1664 and 1665 respectively were blacklisted by the devout people as "wholly injurious to religion and capable of having very dangerous effects" for reference to religious hypocrisy (Landolt 756). Even the unprecedented favor and support from the paragon of absolutism Louis XIV the Sun King was not enough to preserve the playwright and his works from disgrace and banishment. Wherefore, casting divine interference either directly or indirectly was not only gratuitous but counterproductive; and practical commedia troupes would by logic refrain from the risk of persecution without the promise of benefits. Being shrewd business operations aiming to make their way smoothly in and out of the intricate social and political currents, to commedia dell'arte that magic and magician no doubt became the go-to substitute for execution of "*Deus ex machina*". As in the case of *The Four Fake Spirits*,

whether or not under pretense, the suggestion of the clergy wearing the same pants with the lustful souls would arouse scandalous sentiments.

2.5 Day Forty-three *Alvida*

Day Forty-three *Alvida* was a royal play in which the magician was the weaver of all happenings. *Alvida*, the Princess of Egypt married Silandro, the prince of Persia in secret and was about to give birth. Her disgraceful act enraged the King and he ordered them both to be put to death in hands of different executioners. Fortune preserved both yet these two ended up separated in a distinct part of a forest where Pedrolino, his wife Laura, and their foster child Brandino resided. The family assisted *Alvida*'s safe delivery, conservation of Silandro's life, their reunion with the newborns, and freeing Silandro's father the Sultan from death by a magician's dispersed orders as well as his distribution of remedies and equipment. In the end, the magician pulled up another royal match for Brandino who was revealed to be the Sultan's long-lost daughter Hermione.

In this scenario, the magician was the vital character who foresaw and manipulated the sequence of events into their proper order of happening. His first appearance was noted down at the top of act two, entering "riding on a chariot drawn by four spirits", affirming to the audience the coming of the two kings and wondrous things that were to take place (Salerno 338). He informed Pedrolino and Laura of their past and presented the couple with a liquid to be used for curing a great prince. The magician then sent out a lion and a bear. The animals offered to milk *Alvida*'s babies and brought the children to their maternal grandfather. This resulted in grandpa's acknowledgment of their lineage and forgiveness to the parents. In act three, the magician showed up again comforting Brandino of his unrequited love for Silandro and armed the lad with a sword and a buckler, telling Brandino he was to defend his father from the sickle of death. Finally, during the moment of reconciliation, the magician surged once again, explaining his role in the marvels, pleaded for the pardon of Pedrolino and Laura's past misdeeds, and attended by his art another royal marriage for Brandino/Hermione.

The scenario brought the hand of God to the front stage by exposing the contrivance of the magician and putting his prophecy side by side with the occurrence of the fore-told affairs. The fulfillment of utterance and its patterned repetition enkindled awe for witnesses both on and off stage. The predictability and confirmation further accentuated the power of theurgy as being superior to the mundane procession. The magician's prescient verdicts regarding the fate of the royal households had placed the authority of the magician in a dimension beyond the political and moral adjudication of sovereignty. Also, while befitting the stage realm of wizardry, the prestidigitation of taming wild beasts as well as the exotic setting and luxurious habits were all drawing spots for pre-modern European audiences. Consulting the lengthy property list, the exquisite scenic description, and its placement in the collection, *Alvida* might have been one of the later productions when Flaminio Scala's troupe was gaining ground in status and accumulating more access to resources, so to be able to carry out performances with more advanced requirements and cater for viewers with elevated taste and expectations. At the same time, speaking of audience appreciation, the magician and his ever-present supervision worked as reassurance against the dense bloodshed and

violence portrayed through this peculiar scenario. Knowing events were bound to turn out well served as an emotional buffer and mammoth relief that negated the dire impact of cruelty when the characters were still cluelessly navigating amidst the unrelenting thick and thin.



In *Alvida*, the merit of white magic and its potential were again born out to be victorious in light of plot construction and commercial perspicacity.

2.6 Day Forty-four *Rosalba, Enchantress*

Being a story of the fantasy world, Day Forty-four *Rosalba, Enchantress* was a very unique scenario in Scala's collection. Nerina, the princess of the Island of the Sun was sent by her father to Rosalba, the magician and mistress of the Happy Island to remedy her deep melancholy. She was enamored by a beautiful youth Hyacinth who was dearly attached to Rosalba. Meanwhile, Rosalba fell for Almonio, the son of her bitter enemy Arimaspo, who came in disguise with a burning passion for princess Nerina. Concurrently, the servants Burattino, Arlecchino, and Rosalba's captain of guard Ormonte were vying for the hand of the waiting-maid Pratilda. To fulfill Nerina's wish, Rosalba used her art to free Hyacinth from his devotion to herself. Yet her skills failed to grant her desire. Arimaspo took his son away and cast a spell making everyone sing and dance as if out of their senses till upon his arrival that Nerina's father pleaded

for their release. Arimaspo revealed Hyacinth to be Rosalba's lost sibling and this series of contrivances aimed to gain Rosalba's forgiveness as he was responsible for the death of their father. The two magicians reconciled, and each lady wed the man of her heart.



This scenario made clever use of creating a tenable vessel that was pliable enough to house orchestration, singing, dancing, legerdemain as well as the introduction of mythical figures such as the four spirits, four nymphs, and four dwarfs in customized outfits. The magical realm tied together these otherwise independent spectacular elements and made excellent applications allowing each to carry out its particular function in the actualization of the holistic vision. Taking music as an example, there were several occasions that the acoustic flow added to the identification and development of a distinct ambiance. In act one “trumpets and drums within” played for Nerina’s arrival at the Happy Island, and then again “trumpets and drums sound for joy” was delivered when she caught sight of Hyacinth at the end of the act, featuring the merry mood for love and friendship (Salerno 344). In act two, “shepherds enter, playing on different instruments” for Rosalba’s court social as the background entertainment, waiting on the scene of playful teasing and jealousy (Salerno 345). Also, in act two when spatially the shift was made ready for the night, “immediately there can be heard within the palace the music of many instruments” that signaled everyone for entrance (Salerno 346). Then in act three, when everyone was singing and dancing as if out of

their wits, the sudden sound of trumpets and drums brought the cacophony of madness to a standstill, indicating Arimaspo and Alicandro's appearance; and again "trumpets sound for joy" were blown for the celebration of the satisfactory conclusion (Salerno 348). Here not only did music contribute to the precision of each functional moment, by introducing another layer of acoustic polishing, but the melodious sound effects also enhanced the audience experience. If confined to the quotidian, a question mark would be raised for the variety of instrumentation, the frequency of maneuvering, and the scale of presentation about stringent neoclassic "verisimilitude". By the same token, invocation and stage manifestation of spirits and demons, the fire of truth that consumed the dishonest and flames that chased people around in front of the audiences' eyes, spell-bound characters suddenly burst into laughter, singing and dancing fanatically could hardly be sold to the public without otherwise burdensome justifications. Worthy of reiteration, *Rosalba, Enchantress* was a fine example in Scala's collection of detailed records about sound, lighting, props, costumes, and the use of space. From the evidence, it could be inferred that later scenarios from Scala's collection exhibited an upper level of sophistication by being responsive to the trend of variety entertainment and the shift to technical theater popular in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century that was drizzling down from the top of the social strata. It was likely some of the virtuoso troupe members had at least witnessed if not directly participated in grand occasions such as the "Gesamtkunstwerk" Florentine festival celebrating the 1589 Medici Wedding and possibly indirectly exposed to the continually evolving court masque traditions climaxing in the latter part of the sixteenth century to the early seventeenth century renowned for its choreographed dances and spectacular effects ("History of the Masque Genre"). As to commedia dell'arte practitioners, magical islands and their thaumaturgical enchantress were an ideal ground for trying out these new techniques in the process of borrowing which would benefit smooth assimilation into later works that were more reality-bound.

2.7 Day Forty-six *The Bear Part I*

In Day Forty-six *The Bear Part I*, Sileno, the prince of Cyprus fell in love with a nymph in his dream. Urged by the soothsayers, he went to Arcadia in the hope to have his wish fulfilled. Disguised as a young shepherd, Evrilla, the princess of Passo followed the prince along for the prince unknowingly harbored her affection. Upon their arrival, the priest of the Temple of Pan was stressing over his dream in which he saw his daughter Dorinda "being led about by a dark cloud that then submerged itself under the ground", fearing for the loss of his child (Salerno 359). The prince took Dorinda as the nymph of his dream. At the same time, being mistaken for a shepherd from a foreign land, Evrilla caught Dorinda's sight. Unexpectedly, a giant bear lumbered into the field and carried Dorinda off. Believing Dorinda was extinguished by the beast, the whole village was to avenge the poor nymph by killing the bear. Pan, the god of woods and shepherds stopped them and commanded it was god's will Dorinda shall couple with the bear to bring to the world heroes and demigods. As for Sileno, Evrilla was truly the decreed spouse being brought to his vision. Then the scenario concluded with Sileno and Evrilla's wedding and celebration of the rites of Hymen.

Though there were no magicians in this scenario by strict standards, the three acts were built upon two prophetic dreams as the plot was unveiled. The prince's

vision was attained by the princess while the priest's dream manifested in the abduction and conjunction of Dorinda by and to the bear. In the dream, the fierce animal had been interpreted as "the dark cloud". The latter part of the omen whence "grew a tree with beautiful fruit" amongst which one was crowned foretold the procession of the story in *Day Forty-eight The Bear Part III* when Ulfone, the son of Dorinda and the bear became King over three kingdoms. First of all, without these dreams, Pan's exposition at the end of act three would not only be abrupt but may even fail in its authority and effectiveness. By reaffirming the future, these visions succored as evidence for Pan's credibility, giving grounds to his ability to appease the outrage of the people and bidding the would-be mob to observe the will of God to have the bear spared. Secondly, the relevance of the three parts of *The Bear* from *Day Forty-six* through *Day Forty-eight* would instantly weaken and be reduced to the mere chronological collection of mystical reimagination if no such bonding guidelines penetrated the diegesis from the very beginning. To



vertically line up the chain of events, Sileno's dream opened the play and the priest's dream provided the backbone for the body and conclusion. The prince pursuing his dream, the princess pursuing him, and their attendants pursuing their masters had brought the key characters to Arcadia, the designed stage. In *Day Forty-seven The Bear Part II*, seeking his friend Sileno, Trineo, the Prince of Amatunta arrived in Arcadia and killed the bear during their encounter. In *Day Forty-eight The Bear Part III*, Ulfone, the

son of Dorinda with the bear besieged Amantunta to avenge the death of his father. This three-day performance ended with Ulfone triumphing over his enemies, being crowned the king of Arcadia, Algiers, and Denmark to the wishes of the gods. It was a clear chain reaction. Sileno's dream was the first piece of the Dominos and the priest's dream was delineating where the last piece of the stack was to lay. In the meantime, the soothsayers from Day Forty-six and Day Forty-seven used their foresight and influence to keep the progression from deviating from the initial design of the Gods. Again, by exploiting a pastoral variation of "diegetic supernaturalism" through the God Pan, this scenario, or the sequence of three scenarios took advantage of visionary power supernatural to the physical world to buttress the dramatic congruence of narratives that was epic in scale.

2.8 Day Forty-nine *The Enchanted Wood*

Day Forty-nine *The Enchanted Wood* was a confusing "love triangle" or a love hexagon. Fillide was in love with Sireno who had lost his memories and forgotten all about her. Seeing Fillide's reflection in the fountain, Corinto the shepherd was immediately submerged by sweeping tender feelings. Yet his pipe and songs of a lover's sentiments captured the heart of Clori who was courted by woodsman Selvaggio, and Selvaggio was pursued by Timbri, his previous sweetheart. The servants' blandishments further complicated the amorous entanglement which led to a series of strange and tragic happenstance. It turned out to be all that mishap was through the art of Sireno's uncle Sabino the magician. By bringing the characters in and out of misfortune, he made them realize and cherish their meant-to-be partners.



Skimming through the plot for the first time, one would be instantly enraptured by the miraculous spectacles proffered by thaumaturgical props, changing scenery, and magical transfiguration. There were “two copper goblets filled with scented fire”, a grotto that shot out flames, the prospect of painted woods that vanished in an instant, and amidst which appeared “a sea shore on one side of the stage and a tree” that bore beautiful apples on the other (Salerno 380). Then chased by the savage, Clori transformed into a tree and later back into her human shape right in front of the audience while the magician turned Arlecchino into a crane for blaspheming love. For once the reality of the audiences and the reality of the play were brought together by the dual exemplification of magic. Cohorts on and off stage were concurrently enthralled by the primary exposure of magical arts for which productions bound to neoclassic verisimilitude, decorum and unities would never be able to achieve. Even for immersive theater, with the characters initiating, and the participants responding, the simultaneity of perception would at best be wielded on different levels if the partakers were superb at being proactive to make up for the time lag. To the characters, the magic realm was their default regularity. To audiences at large, the money was meant to buy the belief, or purchased “diegetic supernaturalism” rather than investigating the mechanical meticulousness of how such and so had been achieved. Yet for certain, there was dissimilarity as the scenario dictated the roles to be obliging to the magician’s prowess and superiority while the audiences always had the option to deem their coins to be between the mystical and the scientific at degrees that pleased them.

However, a close examination of the scenario brought to question the process of the scenario’s creation. There was no clear motivation for Sabino to have Sireno and then Fillide forget, nor strong justification for Selvaggio and Clorinto giving up their passion and taking the ladies who were running after them other than observing the magician’s will which was not specified by the scenario. Though the two wretched nymphs sacrificing themselves might be valid as intrigues, there was no adequate explanation or development that may contribute to the lads switching their commitment. Following the trend of thought, rather than sealed in the hands of a single playwright, the play might have been devised by a group of actors, playing off possibilities that the stage crafts offered. Then later rehearsals and performances consolidated the current shape as Scala jogged down. Though the marvels were worthy of their cost, from the stance of the dramaturg that Fillide consuming the fruit of oblivion, Clori turning into a tree, and Timbri stabbing herself by the seashore would not all be mandatory but born the suspicion of making occasion for bringing forth the scenic elements. In other words, there were doubts that *The Enchanted Wood* might have overworked the power of magic to the extent that outbalanced the plot. The theatrical construct reminded the readers of the forward-and-backward chase of the four Athenian lovers from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* induced by the magical flower “love-in-idleness”. Hermia and Lysander were eloping under the guise of the night to be wedded while being followed by Demetrius, the rightful groom appointed by the lady’s father, who was in turn pursued by Helena, his previous lover. Out of mistake, both Lysander and Demetrius were made to be enamored with Helena until the fairy king corrected the wrong application, restored Lysander’s senses, and left Demetrius in his spellbound passion. In contrast, there was a comprehensible motive behind the magical enterprise and a detailed explication of erroneous happening as to how and why the characters were made to

confuse their hearts' desires. Yet in *The Enchanted Woods*, as unfathomably as its title suggested, things happened and resolves out of the blue. A certain part of the play was decreed by the magician's momentary wit while others were the impromptu maneuver enabled by the mysterious environment. Nonetheless, the semblance and refinement observed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could have suggested a connection between Shakespearean playwriting and the magical intrigues of commedia scenarios. Yet further studies would be needed to confirm whether *The Enchanted Woods* was a direct inspiration or whether the two stories were coincidentally sampling from the favorable themes of the time. To abstain from imposing contemporary standards on pre-modern dramatic styles, it should be acknowledged by incorporating magic, commedia dell'arte had harvested a lot of creative and lucrative potential.

3). Hook or Crook: Magic and Its Presence in Early Modern Life

As generations of scholars had noted, commedia dell'arte was a performance form highly receptive to its time. Its language was distilled from "works that literate people compiled and consulted for personal edification and as inspiration for writing essays and speeches in this period...from commedia erudita to the latest jokes circulating in the city-state" (Nellhaus 161). The improvisational procedure was bound to salability determined by fashion and the ideological consensus of the prospective audiences. The prevalence and popularity of magical elements in Flaminio Scala's publication indeed raised the interest in how was magic conceptualized and received in early modern society. This historical background would assist in better comprehension of the rationale and function beyond this phenomenal proclivity. While regarding magic as a valid preternatural source parallel to laws and principles evinced by scientific methods was marked as superstition by today's standards, in *Thinking About Magic in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Tracy Adams pointed out that transposing this attitude to pre-modern European society was far from accurate (Adams et al. 6). In fact, "evidence available to early modern thinkers, theoreticians of magic in Renaissance Europe were entirely rational, in the sense of being responsive to evidence and argument" (Adams et al. 6). In actuality, the notion of magic hosted a much broader boundary than the mystical occurrence in which plausible explanation failed. Back in the time of Flaminio Scala, magic was an umbrella term referring to both the study of natural science such as astrology, alchemy, and medicine, as well as the cryptic applications associated with the demonic cult and perverted intentions. The distinction between the two was through the respective designation of "white magic" and "black magic". Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), an acclaimed German physician, legal scholar, astrologer, alchemist, and magician active during the Renaissance explained "that the practitioner of magic is highly educated in fields" "such as mathematics, and in the aspects and figures of the stars" which "modern readers would not hesitate to describe as rational" (Adams et al. 6). Furthermore, theologians of magic were entirely cogent "in the sense of being responsive to evidence and argument" (Adams et al. 6). In his book *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Lynn Thorndike, an American historian of medieval science and alchemy went as far as postulating that the hermetic transition had made science possible, given magic's "practical attitude towards the world" that chaperoned "the development of the experiment as a means of proof" (Adams et al. 6). English scholar Frances Yates even presented the theory

acknowledging “the animistic universe operated by magic” being the first phase of the scientific revolution (Adams et al. 7). Although these views should not be taken as authoritative delineation of the position of magic in pre-modern Europe, it was certain that magic operated beyond the sphere of the “obscure and impenetrable”, and the common notion at that time towards magic was more neutral than negative (Adams et al. 6). The condemning views which led to frenzied witch hunts spanning from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century were more specific about external use rather than internal properties of the practice. Whether being utilized for good or for evil or the results that the mystical procedures generated were the determinant for persecution. At the same time, the universities began to mark down studies of the occult on the ground as being “standing in direct opposition to long-established Aristotelian conceptions of the natural world and its operation” rather than bifurcating from emerging scientific proof (Adams et al. 11). These pixels of proof helped to re-establish a fair view of magic in pre-modern Europe as varying in degrees of dubiety than one-sided denunciation.

Consciously or unconsciously, Scala’s collection had faithfully preserved the ambiguity on point of view concerning magic independent from the circle of intelligentsia which aimed at bringing their rework of the Aristotelian principles to the forefront to turn them into the standard. The magician’s centrality in all eight plays discussed thus far betrayed the era’s immanent fear and awe. Whether purported or bona fide, the magicians were usually immediately enshrined for as much for his ability to save as to the dread he could bestow. These magic dealings of commedia dell’arte stood for the unadulterated representation of the frame of mind of the civic body awakening in preparation for enlightenment. While smelling the threat of the growing significance of the bourgeoisie around the 1560s, the ruling class with their entourage sorted out the ancient Greek classics and devised around it the set of neoclassical principles and aesthetics to justify and consolidated the absolutist power (Nellhaus 145). These two trends of thought were veritably acting for the “royalists” aiming to default the old ways to push back the advance for change from the foundation of the society and the germinating doubts and realizations beginning to call for its representation. However, being at the early stage of power transition from monarchical absolutism to constitutional democracy, instead of confrontation, the weaker end found their expression deviously through overlooked means such as popular performance that was more enduring and efficacious than bouts of violence. The traveling troupes of commedia dell’arte saw into and manifested through its absorptive encounter of regional cultures across the European continent this need for representation, providing a platform for expression and a flower bed for the sprouting of new ideas.

Protected by its comic guise, through the amalgamation of magic and magicians in its scenarios, commedia dell’arte circuitously voiced its objection to the dictating regulations imposed upon theater as one out of the many divisions of arts. The affinity to the magical variant of *Deus ex machina*, the predilection of effectuating “diegetic supernaturalism” and the practical emphasis on commercialism was without exception pointing the middle finger right into the face of the neoclassical ideal of “processional logical coherence”, “verisimilitude”, and the unity of time, place and plot in the case of its rendering of mystical pastorals. More dashing was the commedia magicians’ challenge towards the artificiality of “decorum” and the absurdity of “poetic justice”, enabling the personnel of less advantageous status to successfully override the decree of authorities

and collaboratively yield a satisfactory ending. In the scenarios, the magician or the leading figure who took the pretense of the sorcerer was indeed the initiator of revolutionary visions such as respect for individual fulfillment and common human needs rather than passively giving in to the patriarchal hierarchy, or unquestioned obedience to the fathers and masters—whether as the head of the household or head of the states. Clever servants were frequently outwitting their dumb gvnors, sons thawing the foisting from their fathers, and female characters actively pursuing, enchanting, and exerting control over their male counterparts—all of which possessed justified intentions and through artful devices had generated positive results. This was again upholding the ideas of a non-violent diffusion of power from its vertical top-bottom division to an embracing coverage, allowing each individual the capability to make decisions and take responsibilities for themselves despite their footing on the social mapping; and the happy endings served as a confirmation or reassurance of the plausibility of shared governance and contribution from each member joined to the household. During this time, the neoclassic reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* asserted that burlesquing the kingly presence, devaluing parentage, ratifying feminine prowess, and elevating the position of servitude was not only improper but intolerable to be bespoken in apt plays. Though how the varied strata of European society received these notions was subject to individual instances, commedia dell'arte was certainly effective in disseminating and creatively circulating the novel views. As to "poetic justice", in the world of magic, instead of good people harvesting good results and the villains getting horrible ends, all sorts of things were falling upon all sorts of people—the stock characters didn't even attempt to sustain a singular moral stereotype. This trait was sharply contrasting the "refurbished" Aristotelian ideal of prioritizing the "likelihood" or ration of happenstance instead of observing the diversity and illogicality that reality housed. In other words, to the neoclassicist schools, what they classified as the better drama was a "clean version", ideologically and aesthetically distilled through the streamline of prescribed composition that reinforced the convention and eminence of the princehood. The political reward of loosening up the hold of the church and divine influence over their subjects could not be ignored as a keen motivation of the sovereign's half-hearted advocacy of humanism. The underline was to strip the power from the church and to reestablish the grand dukes and the kings as the humane embodiment of the truly tangible presentation of holiness as well as the sole subject for awe and admiration. The rules and their unspoken functions were a precautionary fence against further inspection towards freedom and equality. Instinctively rather than by intention, the early seventeenth-century commedia dell'arte and its proximity to civic life, exploration of magical interpretation, and popular reception sufficiently proved the existence of propensity building towards the age of enlightenment as a critical step transitioning into modernity. Represented through Flaminio Scala's collection that commedia dell'arte of this particular time the pronounced "magicality" of many celebrated scenarios was betokening the advance of discussions about religious tolerance, diversity of perspectives, feminism, parenting style, and the relative roles of science and superstition in modern society. Through this preliminary study, the magical plays of commedia dell'arte averred the intrinsic human need to thrive and to be happy. As a side note, these plays also challenged the scripture of morality as no character was innately evil that deserved affliction and eternal condemnation. Through make-

believe and contrivances, the maneuver of magicians and magic tricks affirmed the power of faith and agency through the production concept of “diegetic supernaturalism”, “*Deus ex machina*”, and commercial practicality. By hook or by crook, whether as characters layered upon the theatrical illusion or for the commedia thespians and audiences conducting through their lives in reality, all’s well that shall not end sickly.

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[1] The intention of these scholarly discussions was set to “update and improve upon” the “Aristotelian principles” as the scale and guideline to distinguish “excellent and lesser” plays. In essence, the construct of Neoclassic rules for dramatic composition was largely the appropriation of the authority of the Greek philosopher, drawing in “actually very little from the text of *Poetics*” (Nellhaus 202).

[2] Commedia dell’arte was “a form of street theater that originated in Italy during the 1540s”. The troupes were often composed of eight to ten professional actors each specializing in one or two stock characters donning “grotesque half-masks and specific dialects” (Nellhaus 596). Commedia was a “scriptless” theater improvised upon scenarios strung together with a baseline of story, renowned for pre-arranged comic skits, virtuoso physicality, and vivid costumes. It was heavily invested in familial relationships and building upon the day in and day outs of the commoners’ life laying upon the Neo-Roman plays and other popular genres (Nellhaus 596).

[3] A capocomico is the leader or charge person of an Italian theater company that usually assumes managerial roles, overseeing the aesthetic vision of the team as well as commercial success.

[4] In the early 1600s, there were also well-established playwrights voicing objection to the “Neoclassic rules” such as Lope de Vega, Alexandre Hardy, and English playwrights before 1660 who were advocating a broad technical embrace and motivated by audience response rather than the decree of theoreticians (Nellhaus 203). Yet due to the scattering styles and approaches, their spattered influence was far less illustrious than commedia dell’arte against the overwhelming Neoclassicism, thus the Italian theater was chosen as the torch bearer representing the more inclusive and less discriminating methodology.

[5] In *Poetics*, Aristotle divided the art of poetry into verse drama, lyric poetry, and epic. His appraisal of dramatic composition was further split into comedy, tragedy, and satyr plays (“*Poetics* (Aristotle)”). His commentaries on comedy and satyr play were not available to readers since the sixth century (Watson 1). Though the specific dates remained unclear, most likely the neoclassic pedants were generating the referential framework based on incomplete sources.

[6] The meaning of the Latin word “*Deus ex machina*” is “God from the machine”. The phrase refers to a plot device “whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem is suddenly and abruptly resolved by an unexpected and unlikely occurrence” in which the most common presentation was the interference of gods. The literary use was derived from the practice of ancient Greek theater where the impersonator of deity was brought out by a crane or a riser through trapdoors (“*Deus ex machina*”).

[7] In his book *English Dramatick Opera, 1661-1706*, A. Walkling explained it was the conviction rather than de facto occurrence which justified the thrill the witnesses of unexplainable phenomena underwent. In other words, “if I truly believe I have seen a ghost, that is, I can ascertain no natural explanation for what I have experienced, that in itself is sufficient to radically alter the nature of my regard” (Walkling 20).

[8] The pastoral plays in Scala’s collection include *The Comical, Pastoral and Tragic Events; The Forty-fourth Day Rosalba, Enchantress; The Forty-sixth Day, The Bear, Part I; The Forty-seventh Day, The Bear, Part II; The Forty-eighth day, The Bear, Part III* and *The Forty-ninth day, The Enchanted Woods*, together making up 12% of the Scala scripts.

[9] The essay uses the 1967 translation of Henry F. Salerno’s as authority text while cross-referencing the 2008 translation of the collection by Richard Andrews.