



**Kerr, Rosalind. The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century  
Commedia dell'Arte Stage**

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the commodities in play are dyes and inks, tools of dissimulation and deceit, and the Hellespont, as a result, “is a heavily policed and regulated space” (24). Both poets used the nexus of Ottoman-inflected words, things, and places to reframe the classical literary heritage and the relationship of English writing—itsself marked by its “own barbarous past” (187)—to early modernity.

The orientation towards the Ottoman East that provides the backbone of Jacobson’s argument waned with the development of the western empire in the Americas. Nonetheless, as she writes in the conclusion, the unmooring of the national literature from particular classical times and spaces, and the complex relationships between things, words, and poetry that Levantine trade subtended, had persistent effects in later English literature.

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**Kerr, Rosalind.**

***The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell’Arte Stage.***

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. xiii, 216 + 25 ill. ISBN 978-1-4426-4911-8 (hardcover) \$65.

Kerr traces the presence of women on the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte* stage from the 1560s through the early seventeenth century, describing how their roles evolved with the infusion of *commedia erudita*’s tropes into their popular performance genres and how the infusion catalyzed a concomitant evolution in audience perception of the woman performer from titillating acrobat to awe-inspiring diva. Drawing on performance and feminist theory, Kerr sees the process beginning when the magic of theatre filled the void created by “the loss of belief in the sacred” (4), a characterization that could be disputed by some scholars of religious life. According to Kerr, the new presence of women, first in piazza performances and much earlier than in other European countries, resulted in the subsequent “fetishizing” of female bodies through their display in the service of material commerce (5). It also provoked the resentment of ecclesiastics by adding the very erotic element excluded from Christian ritual.

The transition to diva was aided by the *cortegiana honesta*, whose artistic accomplishments and restraint of her erotic activities made her a more

respectable figure. Writing from the perspective of the actress and of Joseph Roach's *It* (Ann Arbor: University Press, 2010), Kerr demonstrates that the public's response to the new role, played by Isabella Andreini and Vittoria Piisimi among others, acquired a more psychological appreciation based on illusory amatorial, cultural, and social aspirations (8). Moreover, audiences valued the fact that the actresses brought to them refined literary entertainment previously the preserve of patricians, nobles, and kings; one might add that perhaps such entertainments allowed them the illusion of joining the upper class. Kerr's analysis of how actresses used their skill at recitation to capture the public is very fine, as is her account of their personal rivalries and those of their followers (68–69).

Missing from Kerr's study are the theatrical, literary, and historical contexts. Actorial celebrity and combination of real person and super person (102–03) began in the early sixteenth century with such male figures as “il famosissimo Ruzante” who, together at times with his Venetian patrician sponsors, also opened the performance of comedy to a larger public (as the instructions “Verso el popolo” in one manuscript of Ruzante's *Betia* indicate) and charged admission. Ruzante's performance troupe included women, attested from 1529 but likely occurring earlier. Many of the comic tropes attributed to the later period by Kerr, from cross-dressing, to the switching of gendered figures, to open marriages, to the inclusion of elements of street comedy and magicians, find their sources in Bibbiena's *Calandria*, Machiavelli's *Clizia*, and Ruzante's *Prima oratione*, *Betia*, *Lettera giocosa*, *Bilora*, *Moscheta*, *Anconitana* and *Vaccaria*. Andreini's Paduan origins are likely to have made her especially aware of Ruzante's texts and stage usages. Consideration of other potential social factors is absent: with the restriction in numbers of marriages and the choice of spouse by fathers as a means of preserving patrimony (see, for example, James C. Davis) came increasing numbers of unmarried adults, only-child female heirs, and the lament of the unloving bride. Neglected too is the flowering that women's writing manifested in the late sixteenth century, that included figures such as Chiara Matraini, Giulia Bigolina, Modesta Pozzo, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti and involved lyric and epic poetry, pastorals, and letters, all the subject of much recent scholarly research. Nor does Kerr ask why the governing authorities of Italian states—who in the period were imposing restrictions on social, political, and economic behaviour—would have been more permissive toward women as performers. Were female images offered to appease the large number

of unmarried males in urban populations? To avoid social unrest by distracting them from their dwindling power and resources? To assuage anxiety about masculinity after the conquest of the peninsula by international powers in the Italian Wars? To cope with the growing importance of women's dowries and work in a stagnant economy? To subvert the increasingly repressive power of the Church?

Lack of historical context and lack of precision particularly affect one important claim. According to Kerr, "Marino Sanuto wrote that there were 11,654 prostitutes in a city of 100,000," citing Marino Sanuto, *I diarii*, ed. Rinaldo Fulin et al., 58 vols. (Venice: Deputazione Veneta di Storia Patria, 1879–1903), 8:414. Sanuto instead gave the total population as 300,000 and used the term *femene da partito*, the same as *giovanetta da marito* (137), or "young woman of marriageable age" with the additional distinction of *femena*, i.e., a woman of the working classes and contrasted with *donna* ("lady" or "patrician"). Moreover, the passage was written after the Venetian defeat at Agnadello (1509), when large numbers of rural dwellers sought refuge in Venice from the war. And the census quoted was generated by the Signoria for defence purposes. Thus it groups the population as "Homeni e done, vechij, puti e pute [...] anime 300 milia; Homeni da anni 8 fin 60 numero 160 milia; Homeni da fati 80 milia; Femene e puti 48 milia 346; Femene da partito XI milia 654; senza li frati e monache" (Men and ladies/women, old people, male and female small children [...] 300,000 souls; men from 8 to 60 years 160,000; men capable of bearing arms 80,000; women and small children 48,346; unmarried young women 11,654; excluding friars and nuns). Old men and women, ladies, and small children could not participate in defence. Men of the ages of eight through sixty could be active in various functions; arms-bearing men (even patricians were then being trained in warfare) would be even more useful. Working-class women with children had to care for them, but unmarried working-class women could pass buckets of materials and cook, etc. Monica Chojnacka gives a much smaller number of prostitutes later in the century (*Working Women of Early Modern Venice* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001], 22–24), although she also discusses reasons why her sources might have underestimated their number.

Thus Kerr's study opens this area to the English-speaking public and provides valuable insights while also inviting further contextualization.

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