

## From Lazzi To Acrobats: The Court's Taste After 1680

by  
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When gestures and movement or physical and visually important devices occur in French comedy, one reason sometimes advanced is the influence of the Italian company, with whom Molière shared a theatre.<sup>1</sup> From the work of the two playwrights who feature in this session, I might take as examples the exaggerated displays of cowardice involving the Marquis (Quinault, *La Mère coquette*, I, 4 and V, 2), the *manteau* scene (IV, 3), the hats scene (I, 4), and the “docteur de verre” wrapped in straw, (*La Comédie sans comédie*, III, 6); from Molière, Valère and Maître Jacques crossing and re-crossing the stage (*L'Avare*, III, 2); Harpagon extravagantly searching La Flèche (I, 3) and even himself (IV, 7) and beating Maître Jacques (III, 1); La Merluche crashing into Harpagon and knocking him over (III, 9); the antics of Argan with his stick (*Le Malade imaginaire*, passim), and so on. There is a distinction, however, between, on the one hand, such gestures which *catalyse* the humour, and, on the other, dramatically gratuitous visual action which amuses by its spectacular nature alone. Such action is likewise associated with Scaramouche and his company, including, especially, the acrobatic Biancolelli in the role of Arlequin. Pre-planned comic routines called *lazzi* could be incorporated anywhere in almost any play. Within the main narrative based on a plot idea called a *canevas*, these *lazzi* would be, perhaps arbitrarily, included.

*Lazzi*, then (many of which were sexually obscene or scatological), were independent stage business *interpolated* but not necessarily *integrated* into the narrative. A brief idea could provide several minutes’ worth of fun, which could be prolonged or truncated according to the audience’s response. One character chases another but both run on the spot, speeding and slowing, panting, lunging and ducking, and so on; a character rains blows on the wrong person; a character pretends to be an ass or a mule

and another rides on his back but then takes the joke too far and force-feeds his mount with leaves or hay.

The Italians fell from favour at court, and made fewer and fewer visits. In 1685, for example, they performed there twenty-one times, and in 1686 twenty-six (Scott 235), but in 1693 and 1694 they did not even go to the annual late-summer retreat at Fontainebleau (Dangeau IV, 262-263; V, 81). Now, in those two years, their absence was worthy of note, but by 1695 and 1696, when also they were missing, not even the meticulous Dangeau troubled to mention it. They also went more rarely to Versailles, where their last performance took place in December 1696, a play entitled *Arlequin toujours Arlequin*. (Scott 387, 405)<sup>2</sup> In the end, they were expelled, in May 1697, not only because their political and personal barbs were becoming too offensive, but also because their satire and their licence had displeased the more ascetic, *dévot* tastes of the court.<sup>3</sup>

It would be false, however, to assume that the Italians' colour, joie de vivre, verve, fantasy, and acrobatics were expelled with them things the classicalisers such as Boileau had sought to excise from the *French* theatre. So what does their expulsion reveal about court taste? Well, apparently not that the court disliked their spectacles *qua* spectacles. Thanks to their material and satirical licence, it would seem, the Italian actors themselves had become *personae non gratae*, but their *characters* survived at court, played by acrobats, as we shall see below, and even by courtiers.

Exceptionally, I have even found one example of this transplantation before they left. In 1685, "la Mascarade de Monseigneur le Dauphin representoit toute la Troupe Italienne. Ce Prince estoit vestu en Docteur [...]", and in addition, the comte de Toulouse appeared as Scaramouche.<sup>4</sup> (*Mascarade*, by the way, is not a *masquerade* in the sense of "masked ball", but often a ballet with a loose narrative thread.)<sup>5</sup> This choice of theme may be exceptional at that time I found no other early examples but the characters of Italian comedy subsequently became staple fare in court entertainments. At Marly in 1699,

At 11 o'clock we had the mascarades. The duc de Valentinois came dressed as a woman, wearing a huge floor-length cloak. As this woman reached the middle of the room, she threw open her cloak, and out sprang the very figures from the Italian comedy: Harlequin, Scaramouche, Punchinello, the Doctor, Briguelle and a Peasant [...]. Harlequin was Monsieur de Brionne, Scaramouche the comte d'Agen, Punchinello was my son [the duc de Chartres], the Doctor was the duc de Bourgogne, Briguelle the duc de La Valliere, and the Peasant was Prince Camille. My son looked just like the real Punchinello, and made us all laugh heartily.<sup>6</sup>

The following year, again at Marly,

... on vit paroître la mascarade de la comédie italienne, que la duchesse de Bourbon avoit inventée, et à la tête de laquelle elle marchoit avec sa soeur, la duchesse de Chartres. [...] Leur troupe [étoit] composée de princes, princesses, seigneurs et dames de cour [...], les habits étoient magnifiques, galants et bien inventés (Sourches 233-234; Dangeau 260; *Mercure galant* Feb. 1700, 226-231).

Such mascarades did not just feature the Italian characters, either. On another occasion the courtiers at Versailles enjoyed a “[mascarade] d’un marquis de Mascarille porté en Chaise” (*Mercure galant*, March 1685, 223, reporting 6 March 1685), evidently a little nugget extracted from *Les Précieuses ridicules*. This may have been a favourite, for some years later, in a mascarade at Marly:

On vit entrer une chaise à porteurs, dans laquelle étoit le duc de Chartres, vêtu en marquis de Mascarille, chargé de rubans, avec une perruque monstrueuse, dans laquelle il y avoit quatre livres de poudre. Les porteurs étoient le comte de Toulouse et le marquis de la Vallière. [...] Le duc de Chartres joua très bien son rôle de marquis de Mascarille. Il alla faire des

révérences au Roi avec des contorsions surprenantes; il couvrit Monsieur et Madame [his father and mother] tout entiers de la poudre de sa perruque, qu'il leur secoua au nez: il dansa d'une manière très plaisante, et termina sa danse par une culbute, à laquelle personne ne s'attendoit, à la réserve de Monseigneur [le dauphin], qu'il en avoit averti (Sourches, VI, 129-30, reporting 20 February 1699).

Sourches, the narrator, describes the costume and the acrobatics, not mentioning character, social satire, or verbal humour, because such things were absent from mascarades. Mascarille, after all, is a two-dimensional character (note the pairing *mascarille/ mascarade*) whom Molière created for sheer fun and later dropped, unlike the more reflective Sganarelle, who expresses opinions and exhibits “character” or truth to life ... and does not occur in mascarades.<sup>7</sup>

Besides the colourful costume, another celebrated feature of the Italian company was its acrobatic prowess, as noted earlier in respect of Biancolelli/ Arlequin. In another of the *lazzi*, for example, Arlequin teeters on the brink of falling, lurches back upright, and so on, eventually falling exaggeratedly and somersaulting and making great business of falling down and getting up again. I referred above to the duc de Chartres's somersault (by the way, this frolicsome duc de Chartres was to become the Regent): generally, though, courtiers preferred watching acrobatics to doing them. Meanwhile, at the seasonal Paris fairs (the Foire Saint-Germain and the Foire Saint-Laurent), the makeshift theatres that had been around for a couple of decades really began to flourish, filling the gap in the provision of public entertainment left by the departing Italians and exploiting the lowbrow end of the theatre market with verve, fantasy, and acrobatics. Companies of tumblers and tight-rope performers gave daring, breathtaking, apparently miraculous displays.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, they also included dialogue and musical “numbers”. The Comédie-Française sought to prohibit such performances, but the fairground entertainers always found ways of ignoring the decrees that were issued for instance, by persuading the Académie royale de

musique to extend to them its licence to feature singers, dancers, and changes of scenery, which consequently protected them from action by the Comédie.

At court, too, these tastes was catered for. The presence at Fontainebleau in the late summer of the Allard family, the foremost *sauteurs* and *danseurs de corde* from the fairs, became an annual occurrence just as that of the Italians had been formerly. In addition to their prodigious feats of acrobatics, the Allards performed mime and scenes from the repertory of the expelled Italians. Their legendary ability and that of their colleagues to circumvent the various injunctions laid upon them is perhaps not so surprising in view of their apparent indispensability at court.<sup>9</sup> Of the Allard family, Madame writes:

[Allard père] a voulu essayer de voler par l'air, et il fit une machine avec laquelle il se cassa le bras, et il dit que c'était pour n'être pas assez accoutumé à l'air qu'il n'avait pu voler, et il attacha ses fils à des moulins à vent pour les y accoutumer. Les pauvres enfants s'évanouissaient en l'air. Au retour il les faisait revenir avec du vin, puis les faisait encore tourner ... [Actuellement], les deux fils font après la comédie des sauts et escalades sur le théâtre, l'un habillé en Scaramouche, l'autre en Arlequin, et le fils de l'aîné des deux frères, qui n'a pas encore quatre ans, fait déjà des sauts périlleux (Van der Cruysse 209, Fontainebleau, 7 Oct. 1702).

For example, a year after the Italians' expulsion, "les Comédiens [français] représenterent la Mere coquette de M' Quinaut, qui fut precedée d'une Scene nocturne des deux fils du S. Allard, l'un en Scaramouche & l'autre en Arlequin, qui firent des saults merveilleux" (*Mercurie galant*, Oct. 1698, 269, reporting 19 October at Fontainebleau). In this report, notice again the purely factual record of the play, and the judgemental adjective colouring the remark about the Allards. The play is taken for granted: the acrobatics deserve comment, however brief.

Soon, the acrobatics came *between* plays: at Fontainebleau in 1700, Corneille's *Sertorius* was played with Dufresny's *Esprit de contradiction*, and "entre les deux Pieces, les trois Allard, pere et fils, executerent des Scenes Italiennes & Muettes, avec des sauts etonnans qui divertirent fort l'assemblée" (*Mercuré galant*, Oct. 1700, 255, reporting 14 October; see also Dangeau, VII, 395). Again the *comment* ignores the plays.

In fact, at Fontainebleau, court spectacles frequently featured the Allards before, between, or after ordinary plays.<sup>10</sup> Later in the same year, Madame writes: "Ce soir nous aurons la Comédie de Rodogune avec Allart, ses fils et leurs gambades", and we know from other sources that the Allards that evening performed between *Rodogune* and Molière's *Mariage forcé* (Jaeglé, I, 228, Fontainebleau, 3 Nov. 1700. See also Dangeau, VII, 408 and n.; *Mercuré galant*, Nov. 1700, 219). A few years later, after Corneille's *Menteur*, "plusieurs Scènes entre un Scaramouche & un Harlequin [...] divertirent beaucoup" (*Mercuré galant*, Oct. 1707, 309, reporting 14 October at Fontainebleau).

So important were these interpolations that acrobats were often summoned to Versailles, and were brought to Fontainebleau for the whole four-to-six weeks of the court's annual stay, and there fed and watered at the king's expense just so that they could contribute to the dramatic spectacles. So popular were they, that when they were not at court, members of the court travelled to see them in town. For instance (again from Madame): "Yesterday, we went to the faubourg St Germain, to see the rope-dancers. The show lasted from five o'clock till eight".<sup>11</sup>

Finally, many court performances of what we nowadays know as just spoken plays included music and dancing.<sup>12</sup> I do not mean *comédies-ballets* such as *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Le Malade imaginaire*, where modern scholarship has rehabilitated the musical aspect that had become devalued over time, but straightforward plays that were never conceived with music in mind: *Andromaque*, *Bajazet*, *Mithridate*, even *Polyeucte*. Typically, one or two singers, half a dozen violinists and oboists,

and some dancers were brought to court from the Académie royale de musique.

In general, musical entertainment, like acrobatics, seems to have occurred before or between plays. At Fontainebleau in 1684 between *Cinna* and a comedy called *Le Souper mal apprêté*, “Favier et Pécourt dansèrent la chaconne du dernier opéra”.<sup>13</sup> When the actors gave *Phèdre* with *Les Plaideurs*, “le sieur Balon dansa deux intermèdes entre les deux pièces” (*Mercurie galant*, Oct.-Nov. 1703, 1<sup>ère</sup> partie, 200). At other times, however, musical entertainment also occurred in the entr’actes within the plays themselves, a circumstance one can only postulate in respect of acrobatic displays but which must have met with official approval as it happened even in the presence of the king during his favourite play:

Le soir il y eut comédie française, le roi y vint et l’on choisit *Mithridate*, parce que c’est la comédie qui lui plaît le plus; madame la princesse de Conty, les duchesses de Choiseul et de Roquelaure et le comte de Brionne dansèrent dans les entr’actes (Dangeau, I, 67).

To sum up: all this suggests that plays steadily became excuses for other kinds of spectacle, whether participative or spectatorial. Whilst theatre historians know that the tumblers of the fairs continued the supply of acrobatic spectacle and musical “numbers” to the Paris public after the expulsion of the Italians, it has not been generally realized that within the supposed *lieu privilégié* of good taste, indeed its very arbiter (Brooks & Yarrow, *q.v.*), there occurred the same substitution. Although, today, we may consider the practice grotesque, the leavening of classical plays (comedies and tragedies, including the great masterpieces) by music and mime and dance and displays of acrobatics became an established and cherished feature of performances at court.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

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deliver a version of this paper at the annual conference of the Southeast American Society for French Seventeenth-Century Studies in Athens, GA, in October 1993. The paper is based partly upon research carried out in collaboration with Professor P.J. Yarrow in preparation for our book, *The Dramatic Criticism of Elizabeth Charlotte, duchesse d'Orléans, with an annotated chronology of performances of the popular and court theatres in France (1671-1722), reconstructed from her letters (q.v.)*

<sup>2</sup> On 29 December.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the proximate cause of their expulsion, see my forthcoming article, "Louis XIV's dismissal of the Italian actors: the episode of *La Fausse Prude* (q.v.)

<sup>4</sup> *Mercur galant*, March 1685, 206, reporting 17 Jan. 1685. See also Dangeau (I, 109).

<sup>5</sup> For example, the masquerade *Don Quichotte*, danced on 5 Feb. 1700, probably had a narrative thread.

<sup>6</sup> "Um 11. kamen die *masquen*. [The duc de Valentinois came dressed as a woman.] Diese dame hatte eine *mante*, die ginge bis aufm boden. Wie sie in der mitte vom saal kame, tat sie ihre *mante* auf, da sprungen lauter *figuren* von der *italienschen Comedie* heraus, ein harlequin, scaramouche, polichinelle, docteur, briguelle und ein bauer. [...] Harliquin war mons. de brione, Scaramouche le comte dayen, polichinelle mein sohn, docteur le duc de bourgogne, Briguelle La valliere, der bauer prinz Camille. Mein sohn stellte sich wie ein rechter polichinelle, machte uns alle von herzen lachen". My translation (von Ranke 165, Versailles, 8 Feb. 1699, reporting 5 February. See also Bodemann (355-56).

<sup>7</sup> Molière was not the only French author whose creations were celebrated in like manner. At Marly on 6 February 1699 the duc de Berry appeared as Poisson's *baron de la crasse* (Ranke 166, Versailles, 8 Feb. 1699; see also Bodemann I, 356).

<sup>8</sup> For further comment, see Isherwood (39-41).

<sup>9</sup> For a full account, see Albert (q.v.).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the accounts in the *Mercur galant* for October and/ or November for most years between 1698 and 1707.

<sup>11</sup> "Gestern [...] fuhren wir au faubourg St Germain, die



seiltänzer dort zu sehen; daß währte von 5 bis um 8 [...]” (Holland, I, 216) Paris, postscript dated Thursday, 24 Feb. [1701], reporting 23 February.

<sup>12</sup> This emerges from the work of Marcelle Benoît (*q.v.*), who lists the payments made to the performers.

<sup>13</sup> Dangeau, I, 62. The comedy was by Hauteroche. “Le dernier opéra” would have been *Amadis*, by Quinault and Lully. A similar pattern occurred when other plays were given, e.g. on 24 Oct. and 5 Nov.

<sup>14</sup> Retrospectively, then, had this been the main attraction of the Italians? Once they started to perform plots, and *a fortiori* to do so in French, had they outlasted their appeal? Perhaps they were just not sufficiently different from other performers to be worth inviting to court, especially after the death in 1689 of Biancolelli, their most famous Arlequin. If so, the well-known episode of *La Fausse Prude* (1697) looks like an example of the authorities using a pretext to get rid of a costly and boring anachronism, rather than, as has sometimes been suggested, a political act redolent of repressive censorship.

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