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THEORY OF ACTING

II

FROM THE CHURCH FATHERS TO THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY*

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1. *Theatre as a Source of Irrational Impulses*

The theoretical positions that had emerged from Plato's *Ion* to the time of Quintilian and Plutarch were to quickly dissolve in the last years of the ancient world, not because the questions they raised had been solved, but because a new idea of the theatre was taking hold, one profoundly different from that which had guided theoreticians in the classical age. Thanks to this new idea, the very way in which the problem of acting was posed was to change radically.

As is generally known, between the second and fifth centuries Christian authors rigorously rejected the theatre. Their condemnation is explained not only by their critical attitude towards pagan culture, but also by the nature of the most widespread forms of theatre in the early centuries of Christianity. By the time of Quintilian and Plutarch performance of comedies and tragedies was already in decline and gradually heading towards extinction, but theatrical activity was by no means running dry. In the last centuries of antiquity it continued to be appreciated throughout the Roman Empire and were followed by large swathes of the general public with a passion that could border on frenzy. Not for nothing did the fifth-century Christian author Salvianus in his *De gubernatione Dei* describe the population of Carthage as 'going wild in the circuses' and 'running riot in the theatres' while the barbarians were laying siege to the city.¹

These were entertainments of a very different kind, which, unlike the comedies and tragedies of the classical period, were not performances of carefully written literary texts, but depended more on the immediate effects of stage action, exploiting the actors' ability and the crudity and violence of the images. In the circus, as Seneca recounted in the first century CE, the fights between gladiators were becoming more and more cruel and Martial could witness displays in which a criminal condemned to

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¹ Salvianus, *De gubernatione Dei*, VI,12.

death was forced to ‘act’ the part of a character who was to die, and was actually tortured and killed onstage.²

In this period mime artists reached the peak of their popularity. They had probably been performing as wandering actors in the Greek world since the fifth century BCE. Their activities were extremely varied: they appeared as jugglers, acrobats, contortionists, imitators and animal trainers. They worked in the squares, on market days and on public holidays, and were sometimes engaged to appear in private houses and at banquets. They could dance, sing and act out short scenes, largely or wholly improvised. During the imperial period some of them enjoyed particularly high regard, but their performances were considered as belonging to a minor genre, and as a social class they enjoyed little prestige. At various times special decrees were passed banning their performances and running the companies out of town, but this failed to stop them, enjoying as they did the support both of the general public and of the upper echelons of the society.³

Our sources agree in emphasizing the licentiousness of the mimes’ performances. The stories, the gestures and the dialogue were often obscene. In addition the companies included not only actors, who were traditionally the only interpreters of the ‘high’ theatrical genres like tragedy and comedy, but also actresses, who were often engaged in displays that would be counted as pornographic today. As early as the third century BCE, the celebrations of Flora included naked women onstage, and we know that later the mime plays sometimes involved absolutely realistic sexual display. In his *Secret History* Procopius of Caesarea has left us a description of the theatrical work of Theodora, a young and much admired porn-star, who later, as the wife of Justinian, became Empress.

However, what really characterized the popular performances in the late period of the ancient world was not so much the putative immorality. Aristophanes’ most famous comedies in the fifth century BCE oozed obscenity. The change taking place was rather different and modified the concept of what a play was. Unlike the classical forms of tragedy and comedy, which invited the audience to enter into the events of an imaginary world with imaginary characters, the new form of theatre revolved around the exhibition of the actor’s body, inviting a response from the audience either through the ability and skill of jugglers, acrobats, imitators and dancers, or through the immediate display of the physical, material reality of their bodies, aimed at stimulating the irrational and violently passionate impulses of the spectators. Whether it was the obscene acts performed by a naked actress onstage, or the sight of a man being tortured in the circus, who, Martial tells us, offered ‘his flesh to a Caledonian bear’ while his joints were ‘still alive’ and his limbs ‘dripped blood’, the aim was to provide extreme sensations, which dulled the audience’s intellectual and imaginative capacities and played on immediate and uncontrollable sense stimuli.⁴

² See Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, 7, 2-4, and Martial, *Liber de spectaculis*, 7, 8, 21.

³ See Gaston Maugras, *Les comédiens hors la loi*, Paris, Calmann Lévy Editeur, 1887, pp. 15-16 and pp. 23-26.

⁴ Martial, *Liber de spectaculis*, 7.

2. *The Condemnation of Christian Authors*

It was in front of this kind of entertainment that Christian writers were to condemn every form of theatre. The most famous work was probably Tertullian's *De spectaculis*: written in the late second century, it exercised an enormous influence over later authors, while the most pointed remarks are to be found in texts by Augustine, in particular in the *Confessiones*, written in the late fourth century, and in *De civitate Dei* from the early fifth century. The question had been tackled, however, by many other Christian authors in a series of observations, explanations and descriptions that were reproduced and repeated constantly and almost obsessively.

In all these anti-theatre comments we can identify some essential ideas that form a sort of theory of the play still alive and kicking in the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment. It was a theory based on a vision of human history as a battlefield in which Satan's activity is contrasted with the building of the Kingdom of God. The theatre was recognized as a weapon of the devil to create his dominion on earth.

Theatrical displays, explained the Christian authors, derived essentially from 'idolatry'.⁵ Their origins were linked to the cult of pagan divinities, and these were no more than 'filthy spirits', false simulacra of a religion beneath which was hidden the presence and action of the Evil One.⁶ Each element of the spectacle was linked to the influence of a particular divinity, and expressed its malefic power. The gestures and movements of the body, observed Tertullian, display the pernicious action of Venus and Bacchus, and reflect the depravity of the senses in the grip of an inebriating pleasure like that caused by wine, while the use of the voice, rhythm and music celebrated an inspiration attributed to the intervention and teaching of the Muses, Apollo, Minerva and Mercury.⁷

With these filthy spirits presiding, all theatrical performances had a destructive effect as they unleashed in the audience feelings, passions and irrational impulses that create 'a profound disturbance to the spirit', destroying the state of internal serenity that is proper to the just and holy man. God, explained Tertullian, has ordered us to behave 'with the greatest gentleness, and the greatest serenity', without 'fits of fury, bile, anger and grief', all of them impulses that 'cannot be reconciled with the moral law'. Indeed no one can be victim of a passion 'without falling into sin'.⁸ But the shows put on in the circuses produce a dangerous 'frenzy' in the audience, the performances of the mimes stimulate our desires through the 'foulness' of their gestures and their recourse to obscenity, and in any case, Augustine observed, all theatrical displays aim to 'excite' the audience, which only follows the performance 'with close attention and pleasure' when it is stirred.⁹

Now, it was certainly not a new idea that the theatre tended to arouse irrational feelings and impulses in its audience. All the ancient authors agreed on this point. The actor's ability to emotionally involve the audience might actually be proof of his artistic excellence, and so in this respect the Christian writers simply overturned the usual criterion of judgment: if serenity of mind was essential to a good and pious soul, arousing the passions was not a positive act, but a negative one.

⁵ Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 4.

⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, IV,1.

⁷ See Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. See also Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, VIII,17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16 and 17; Augustine, *Confessiones*, III,2.

However, their thought seems profoundly original when it analyses the manner in which the stage action manages to disturb and upset the minds of those watching. According to the Christian writers, to enflame the passions of the audience, the performances exploit the weakness of our senses, and our senses are genuine ‘windows on the soul’, through which vices penetrate, binding us to sin.¹⁰ Indeed, the pleasure that comes from perceiving any sensible form seemed so dangerous that Augustine not only wanted to refrain from enjoying the light and colour of even natural phenomena, but even questioned the advisability of accompanying religious functions with melody and song.¹¹ The theatrical spectacle is precisely a form of delight for the senses: the delight that comes ‘from gladiatorial combat, athletic competitions, the actions of mimes or the performance of plays’, observed St Jerome, is like that we obtain from ‘the splendour of jewels, clothes or precious stones’, and binds us in a net of sensory seduction that ‘captures our soul’, depriving it of its freedom.¹²

In this perspective the theatre seems an infernal mechanism expressly designed to involve the audience in a tissue of visual and sound incitements that penetrate the soul, disturb and upset it, and are so effective as to break even the most determined will to resist.¹³ There is a famous episode recounted by Augustine in Book VI of the *Confessiones*, where he describes the experience of his young friend Alypius, who felt profound disgust for the gladiatorial combats, but was dragged by his friends to the circus. Firm of will, Alypius decided to remain ‘as if absent’, closing his eyes. But he was shaken by a sudden cry from the crowd: the sound forced him to open his eyes and glance quickly at the arena, at which point his soul suffered ‘a wound more deadly than that received in the gladiator’s body that he had wanted to look at for an instant’. The effect is devastating:

Seeing that blood and drinking in the cruelty was the work of a moment: he did not look away, but fixed his eyes on the sight; unaware, he breathed in the mood of frenzy, delighted in that wicked fighting, drunk on the pleasure of blood [...] He watched, he cheered, hot with excitement; when he left he took with him a fever that drove him back there again, not only with those who dragged him there, but leading them and others.¹⁴

The Christian conception of plays as a system of images that arouse our sense perceptions, and so penetrate and overwhelm our soul, has some important consequences. First, if the attraction of any sensible form is a dangerous source of sin, then theatrical displays, expressly designed to entice and excite our senses, naturally multiply the power and effectiveness of the presence of evil. Anything performed onstage before an audience exalts its negative qualities and its power to corrupt. Whether it is a bloody gladiatorial combat, the appearance of a female body, or the representation of imaginary events through the gestures and movements of tragic or comic actors, the stage emphasizes its perverse and destructive dimension.

¹⁰ St Jerome, *Adversum Iovinianum*, II,8.

¹¹ See Augustine, *Confessiones*, X,23 and 24.

¹² St Jerome, *Adversum Iovinianum*, II,8.

¹³ See Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 15.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessiones*, VI,8.

The presence of actresses onstage is an exemplary case. If, says John Chrysostom, we can feel the stirrings of lust just by glancing at a woman walking down the street, or even praying in church, then still less can we remain immune in the theatre, where the appearance of women is deliberately exhibited.¹⁵ And in the *Liber de spectaculis* attributed to St Cyprian actresses performing onstage are actually considered more sinful and harmful than prostitutes, who at least ply their trade in private.¹⁶

But apart from the question of the presence of women, who in any case, whether in the theatre, the street, at home or in church, exercise a dangerous attraction, as the Fathers of the Church saw it, there can be no subject or character, no situation, no story, however pious or edifying, that does not project an inevitably sinful effect when staged, as soon as the details of the story are presented so as to strike the eyes and ears of the public. The only morally innocuous spectacle would consist of images without charm and interest, and so unable to attract an audience.

In addition, for the Christian authors the fictional character of theatrical events is also significant. If the play consists in displaying images designed to irresistibly strike the audience's senses, it is of no importance that the events represented are only inventions of the imagination and the actors only pretend to perform the actions of the characters, because, observes Tertullian, 'if tragedies and comedies are cruel and lewd, wicked and dissolute examples of crimes and lusts, no exaltation of something terrible or vulgar is better than the thing itself'.¹⁷

In short, simulation on stage does not have a weaker effect on our minds than that of a real event. Of course, when we are at a tragedy we know that it is a mere imitation, and not really happening. But that does not reduce the impression that it gives us, because this derives only from the solicitation of our senses, our visual and auditory perceptions, which are if anything strengthened and not weakened by the public display of the fact in the staging. When the mimes dress up, writes Lactantius, to simulate 'shameless women with indecent gestures', and 'show adulteries', not only do they induce the audience to perform real actions, but their example is particularly baleful because it shows how this behaviour might be 'observed with pleasure by all'.¹⁸

Finally, far from mediating and reducing the effect that a real event might produce on those watching, the theatrical simulation, according to some Christian authors, is a dangerous distortion that increases the negative quality of the stage experience. As Tatian writes in his *Address to the Greeks*, when the actor performs he is presenting a 'falsification', he is showing outside 'what he is not inside'. And this kind of falsification, explains Tertullian, is an extremely serious act in the eyes of God, who created the true. We absolutely cannot approve 'those who falsify their voice, their sex or their age, who solemnly simulate the display of love, anger, sighs and tears'.¹⁹ An actor who alters his features, dresses up, or simulates situations and states of mind, is performing an act of violence on God's creation.

In this way, by the sinful seduction of the senses and the wicked falsification of reality, the theatre not only excites the audience's irrational impulses, which is in itself

¹⁵ See John Chrysostom, *Homily on David and Saul*, III,1.

¹⁶ See St Cyprian, *Liber de spectaculis*, 6.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 17.

¹⁸ Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, VI,20.

¹⁹ Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 22; Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 23.

extremely serious, but excites them perversely. The emotions it produces imprison the spectator, who follows the performance spellbound, and, writes Augustine, ‘trembles for joy with the lovers when they enjoy each other indecently’, grieving ‘when they part’, and experiencing a perverted and unhealthy disturbance. This is clearly proved by the senseless pleasure we feel in watching the horrible and distressing events of tragedy.

Of course, observes Augustine, the painful events of tragedy can produce an impulse of pity in the spectator, and that is in itself a good and proper feeling, ‘which arises from the same vein as friendship’. But true, authentic pity induces those who feel it to intervene and bring help, while the pity aroused by theatrical representations invites those who watch ‘only to suffer’, and the greater the suffering, the greater the admiration for the actor who simulates these fiction. This makes it a deviant and distorted pity. Bringing out in its natural ways the emotional reaction of the audience, plays thus dissolve, annul and pervert the awakening of any potentially positive feeling, which ends up losing itself ‘in a torrent of boiling pitch, in great blasts of dark passion in which it willingly changes and deforms itself, diverted from its true course and corrupted from its heavenly clearness’.²⁰

3. *The New Image of Acting*

This vision of the theatre and its malign effect was important not only because it explains a condemnation that was to hang over acting for a long time, but above all because it radically shifted the viewpoint from which it was considered. That the actor onstage was in effect collaborating with the devil seemed beyond discussion. But that is not the point. Concentrating on the effectiveness of the network of sensations the play traps its audience in, and on the intrinsic falsity of the stage action, which distorts the reality of divine creation in a filthy falsification of gestures and features, the Christian authors no longer regarded the actor’s main task as being to depict a character, rendering his emotions precisely. In their eyes acting consisted rather in the ability to create images of any kind that were suitable for striking the senses of the spectators, through the exhibition of the actor’s body, his skill and his capacity to simulate. In short, they did not see an actor in a tragedy as engaged in representing a character and expressing his states of mind. Rather they saw a body in action, moving in front of an audience and capturing its attention by exhibiting its ability to change and perform actions that strike our senses.

In this way the traditional theory of contagion, by which the passions, authentic and real in the actor’s mind, effectively shape his expressions and are transmitted by their natural energy to the spectator’s mind, lost all meaning and became impossible. On the stage, which was the devilish territory of the inauthentic, of fiction and of pure incitement of the senses, the audience’s passions were stirred only by what struck their senses and by what was simulated and falsified. The actor’s performance was part of the lures and seductions of the stage, which offered an exalted version of gestures, forms and figures for the delight of the senses. The actor achieved his aim insofar as he displayed himself and his skill in performing all kinds of actions and in dissembling. A seductive physical presence and ability, and skill in feigning and

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones*, III,2.

distorting became the fundamental parameters of acting. The only emotional involvement that mattered was not that in the actor's inner self, which became irrelevant, but that in the audience who watched the actor perform onstage.

In addition, if the actor's fundamental task was to produce a strong impression on the audience through the display of his body, his physical skill and his abilities, then there was no longer any distinction between the mime who improvised licentious scenes, the juggler who displayed his skill, the dancer whose physical presence and movements excited the audience's desires, and the actor who recited the literary texts of comedies and tragedies. Actors, jugglers, dancers, tight-rope walkers, acrobats and contortionists merely produced images designed to strike the audience's senses, and so belonged one and all to the same indistinct category of entertainers, whose perverted and wicked function was directly inspired by the devil's action.

In later centuries it gradually became the norm to assimilate all these categories in a single grouping enjoying very low social consideration and sometimes extending to healers and beggars who made use of more or less sophisticated forms of simulation. In the later Middle Ages, however, did there start to emerge some attempts to distinguish low-level entertainers who worked through their mere physical ability and skill, from those with culture who also wrote the compositions they sang or acted, which had some literary qualities. In the twelfth century John of Salisbury contrasted the actors of the ancient world, 'more provided with decorum', who represented to the audience real or invented events, and made famous the works of authors like Terence, with the hordes 'of mimes, dancers, ballet-dancers, clowns, gladiators, strongmen, gymnasts and conjurors' that, now that tragedy and comedy had disappeared, offered 'vacuous frivolity' and 'foul entertainments' for those wallowing in sloth and trying to keep boredom at bay.²¹ Then, early in the next century a penitential of Thomas Chabham distinguished entertainers who 'transform and transfigure their bodies by unseemly positions and behaviour, both denuding themselves and wearing indecent masks', who were bound for damnation, from those who 'sing the enterprises of the barons and the lives of the saints, and console men in sickness and affliction'.²² Finally, the famous *Supplica* that Guiraut Riquier directed to King Alfonso XII of Castile in 1274, followed by the King's *Declaratio*, written by Riquier, contrasted the troubadour, whose verses telling of 'laudable enterprises to exalt the brave' may last in time, with the wretched activities of those who 'perform only conjuring tricks' or 'exhibit monkeys and marionettes', or 'imitate the call of birds or play instruments and sing for a few coins in low places'.²³ For the late mediaeval point of view it was the presence of a poetic text to pass on to the audience in the acting that seemed to be the premise for salvaging the actor's work in a form that could be appreciated and accepted.

In this way there began to emerge, at least theoretically, a sharp division between the forms of acting that exalted the actor's physical ability, his skill in using his body, his acrobatic virtues, and his ability to capture the audience's attention and amaze it with surprising and unexpected performances and inventions, and the forms of

²¹ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, I,8, ed. by K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, Turnhout, Brepols, 1993, pp. 53-54.

²² Thomas Chabham, in E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols., London, 1903, II, pp. 262-63.

²³ The text of the *Supplica* and the *Declaratio* can be found in V. Bertolucci-Pizzorusso, 'La supplica di Guiraut Riquier e la risposta di Alfonso di Castiglia', *Studi mediolatini e volgari*, 14 (1966). See F. Doglio, *Teatro in Europa*, 3 vols., Milano, Garzanti, 1982, I, p. 136.

acting that involved reciting finished literary texts, with the main function of giving full access onstage to the effects and power of an exercise of the imagination that had been given a carefully arranged verbal composition.

4. *The Humanist Ennobling of the Theatre*

However, so far as we know, in mediaeval documents on the actor there is no consideration of acting techniques. In the high mediaeval period there are very few comments on there being any actual theatrical activity in Europe, and it is mainly the church's repeated condemnation of *mimos, histriones et joculariores* that suggests the continuing existence of professionals or semi-professionals who made a living using their talent as public entertainers.

Later, between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a significant resumption of theatrical activity and a slow development of various dramatic forms, from the liturgical drama to religious drama in the vernacular, to cyclical dramas and plays with secular subjects, farces and morality plays. In some cases they were extremely complex: the play cycles, for example, might last several days, involve numerous stage effects and involve hundreds of performers. But for this later period too, we have only fragmentary information on acting, and nothing that is even remotely indicative of real acting technique.²⁴

In any case the acting of all these theatrical forms was mainly entrusted to occasional and amateur performers. At first, in the productions of liturgical dramas in the churches, it was the task of priests and deacons. Later the laity were involved, and in some cases they ended up organizing themselves into associations of amateurs involved in staging special kinds of plays. Of course, the professional entertainers who, individually or in small itinerant groups, made a living performing as musicians, singers, storytellers, acrobats and jugglers, might be hired for the productions of religious or profane dramas, but their activity did not enjoy sufficient prestige to be able to call attention to the more or less elaborate techniques they had to employ, still less encourage any theorizing. And so, after the texts of the Greek and Roman periods, thinking about the art of acting went into a long eclipse, and was taken up again only in the late sixteenth century as the result of a long process that began with the development of humanist studies.

As early as the fourteenth century the rediscovery of classical culture had reawakened interest in the plays of the ancient world. It was, however, a prevailingly literary interest among the learned and in the universities: once the works of the classics had been taken as models, the first Latin texts imitating the tragedies and comedies of ancient Rome began to appear in Italy. In the early fifteenth century some of these new plays were acted for a cultured audience, sometimes in the palace of some aristocratic patron, in a somewhat uncertain attempt to reproduce the styles of performance that the culture of the time attributed to the ancient world. Later,

²⁴ For example, a few instructions to the actors are included in the stage directions of the *Mystery of Adam*, dated around 1150, while in the *Poetria Nova* by Geoffroy de Vinsauf, who lived during the papacy of Innocence III (1198-1216), there are thirty-five lines that seem to prescribe rules for acting. Nevertheless, the work is a manual of rhetoric, inspired by the *Rethorica ad Herennium*, and they are rules concerning the *actio* (*Poetria Nova*, 2031-2065, in E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XII et du XIII siècle*, Paris, Champion, 1924, pp. 259-260).

progress in scholarly research, and above all the rediscovery of Vitruvius' *De Architectura* from the first century CE, which contained valuable indications on the structure of the theatres, gave a more accurate idea of Roman staging and opened the way to more careful and well-informed attempts.

Towards the end of the century interest in rediscovering Latin plays had now spread from the academy to the Italian courts. There was a performance of Plautus' *Menaechmi* at the court of Ferrara during the 1486 carnival. A little later the first comedies written in the vernacular appeared, imitating Latin comedies and tragedies. In 1508 Ariosto's *Cassaria* was staged at the court of Ferrara. Five years later at the court of Urbino, Bibbiena's *Calandria* was performed, one of the most popular and well-known comedies of the sixteenth century. In addition, plays written and performed on the model of the ancients spread from Italy to learned circles in the rest of Europe, where they were cultivated in the schools, courts and academies of the early sixteenth century. Furthermore, and more importantly here, this started as a cultural experiment that was the fruit of a literary operation. By its very nature, therefore, it invited theoretical thought, the essential tools of which were obviously to be found in the conceptual apparatus of the classical authors.

The scholars were mainly interested in two problems: defining a set of rules that could regulate the writing of texts, and designing a suitable performing space. Thus, in the second half of the sixteenth century a long series of commentaries and treatises appeared, using the ideas derived from Greek and Latin thought, and in particular from Aristotle's *Poetics*, to discuss the techniques of dramatic composition. In 1529 Gian Giorgio Trissino published the first part of his *Divisioni della poetica*, which was completed by the posthumous second part in 1562. In 1548 Francesco Robortello's Latin commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* appeared, followed by the works of Bartolomeo Lombardi and Lorenzo Maggi (1550), Giraldo Cintio (1554), Vettori (1560), Scaligero (1561), Minturno (1563), Castelvetro (1570), Bernardino Pino da Cagli (1572), Alessandro Piccolomini (1575), Viperano (1579), Segni (1581) and De Nores (1588), while Vitruvius' teachings inspired the study of theatrical architecture and stage design. The first indications of this kind could already be found in Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, written between 1443 and 1452, and published posthumously in 1485. A few years later Pellegrino Prisciani, a librarian at the court of Ferrara, illustrated and proposed in his *Spectacula* the building of a theatre in bricks and mortar. But the most famous and influential work appeared towards the mid sixteenth century. This was the *Secondo libro di prospettiva*, which Sebastiano Serlio published in Paris in 1545, describing a model for organizing the stage area with examples of the kind of stage design that was spreading rapidly through Europe.

5. Humanist Experiments and Court Performances

While treatises on writing texts and organizing the stage space continued to appear, the problem of acting went on being substantially ignored. Scholars had the models of Terence, Plautus and Seneca available to discuss the literary composition of comedy and tragedy, as well as the considerations in the works of poetics and rhetoric, and in the commentaries of the ancients. Vitruvius was a solid reference point for theory on theatre design. But no source could offer wide-ranging and exhaustive suggestions about acting.

Consequently ideas on the subject were inevitably very vague. According to a widespread theory of mediaeval thought, one still valued in the fifteenth century, the acting of comic and tragic texts was delivered by the ancient Romans as a sort of illustrated declamation: a *recitator* on a kind of pulpit read, or declaimed, the text to the audience, speaking the lines of all the characters. At the same time, or later, some actors mimed the scene with gestures and body movements, without the use of words.

This singular theory, which may have derived from a passage in the *Etymologiae*, written by Isidore of Seville in the sixth century, was based on a misinterpretation of an anecdote recorded by Livy.²⁵ It was expressed most clearly in a fourteenth-century commentary by the English scholar Nicolas Trevet on Seneca's tragedy, *Hercules Furens*:

Tragedies and comedies used to be acted like this: the theatre was a semi-circular area, at the centre of which was a small house in which there was a pulpit, on which the poet declaimed the songs and read his text aloud; outside there were the mimes who represented the expression of the songs, gesturing with their bodies, which they adapted to the character of whoever was being treated.²⁶

This idea, as we have said, was still accepted during the fifteenth century.²⁷ And an imaginary reconstruction of this kind must have influenced the first stagings of humanist comedies in Latin by amateurs – scholars, teachers, pupils – where the declamation of the work was entrusted, wholly or in part, to a single *recitator*. In various cases the performances were used in scholarly circles as exercises for the mastery of Latin and the techniques of eloquence, and so the *recitator*, whose task was to render the text effectively to the listeners, could only base himself on the principles of oratory, a discipline that was an essential part of scholastic teaching.²⁸

The rediscovery of ancient acting took the form, then, of the declamation of a literary text following the model of classical oratory. This stylistic choice was to be maintained when the humanist dramas began to be acted by two or more people, as in the performance of Francesco Ariosto's *In Isidis religionem elegia* at the court of Ferrara in 1444. The very composition of the text, which consisted of two long

²⁵ See Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, XVIII,43. According to Livy, in his old age the actor Livius Andronicus no longer sang the musical parts in the plays he acted in, but simply performed the gestures while others sang the words of the text (*Ab Urbe condita*, VII,2). This way of acting, in which the speaking of the words and the imitation of the gestures was entrusted to different people, was later regarded by mediaeval commentators as a general form that the Romans adopted in the performance of plays.

²⁶ Nicolas Trevet, *Nicolai Treveti Expositio Herculis Furentis*, ed. by V. Ussani jr., Roma, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, II, 1959, p. 5. Cited in S. Pietrini, *Spettacoli e immaginario teatrale nel medioevo*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2001, p. 233.

²⁷ See, for example, *De Politia litteraria* by the fifteenth-century humanist Angelo Decembrio which contains a discussion between learned men from Ferrara on the prologue to Terence's *Andria* (Basileae, Hervagius, 1562, II,21, pp. 143-151).

²⁸ Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and Cicero's rhetorical works, which had been rediscovered in their complete form by Poggio Bracciolini in 1416 and the Bishop of Lodi in 1421 respectively, were widely used in teaching, and Guarino da Verona, in his famous school at Ferrara, used them as manuals of precepts. The close relation between Latin performances of classical theatre and oratory was so close that Paolo Govio regarded the decline of these performances as responsible for the decay of oratory. See F. Cruciani, *Il teatro del Campidoglio e le feste romane del 1513*, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1969, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

tirades, first for one and then for the other character, encouraged a declamatory style of acting. But it was the learned character of the humanist experiments, which were works of literary composition inspired by the models of the ancients, that required in general a style of acting close to the declamation of a written text, suitably embellished, observing the principles of correct oral exposition taken from the treatises of the classical world.

In the late fifteenth century, however, when performances of Plautus' and Terence's comedies flourished, the figure of the *recitator* finally disappeared and the parts of the various characters were invariably entrusted to actors who spoke and moved. It was in this period, too, that the taste for staging comedies spread in the courts as a form of entertainment at carnival time, or on special occasions and celebrations. The play was a cultured diversion, and the centre of the attraction was no longer the literary elegance of the text, but the liveliness of the plot, the humour of the situations and in particular the splendour of the scenery.

The actors in these performances were still amateurs, coming from the environment of the court, and the only culturally guaranteed stylistic model available obviously remained that of poetic declamation and oratory. Moreover, the court of Ferrara, which saw the first staging of the classical comedies, was still imbued with the cultural tradition established by the school of Guarino da Verona, the preceptor of Leonello d'Este, a passionate scholar of ancient theatrical texts, the author of dozens of orations, and a famous master of rhetoric. The court festivities also involved university teachers, and Battista, Guarino da Verona's son and continuer of his school, was probably the translator of Plautus' *Menaechmi* which was performed in 1486. The model of learned declamation was therefore present and could not be ignored.

The particular context in which court performances took place in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries imposed a new requirement however. The custom had begun in the circle surrounding the prince, in an atmosphere of festive officialdom. This meant the forms of learned culture had to be mediated by the contiguous but different forms of the court, and so, in the presence of the prince and his guests the performance of the actors, who were mainly members of the prince's circle, inevitably associated the manners of poetic declamation and oratory with the display of manners typical of a courtier who knows how to move, speak and act in front of the nobility.

This led to experimentation with different styles of acting, which were to become current onstage in later years. It was no coincidence that the first writings on the actor's art, many decades later, contain hints on how to stand and act similar to the advice that Baldassarre Castiglione offered to the perfect gentleman who had to live in the court environment, in his famous work, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, first published in Venice in 1528.

Castiglione identified a basic quality in the courtier's behaviour, which is 'grace'. Grace should characterize every expression, gesture or movement, making them elegant and pleasing. It is a gift of nature, explains Castiglione, which must be developed with 'pains, industry and care' and with 'discipline'.²⁹ Grace is contrasted not only with coarse and unreflective behaviour that has not been corrected and

²⁹ Baldesar Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, I,24 (*Il libro del Cortegiano con una scelta di opere minori*, ed. by B. Maier, Torino, Unione Tipografica Editrice Torinese, 1981, pp. 124-125).

perfected by ‘art’, but also with ‘affectation’, or the ostentation of the care with which the gestures and words are carefully elaborated to appear beautiful and arouse admiration.³⁰

Thus along with grace the other indispensable quality is *sprezzatura*, or ease, which should give the appearance that ‘what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thinking’. True art, declares Castiglione, ‘does not seem to be art’. In this way the finest ancient orators, learned and expert, strained to give the impression that they had ‘no knowledge of literary art’, and ‘hiding their knowledge, they pretended that their orations were composed very simply and as if springing from nature and truth rather than study and art’.³¹ In the same way anyone who has to perform a physical action requiring careful exercise, like shooting an arrow from a bow or handling a sword, seems ‘most perfect’ if ‘he nimbly and without thinking puts himself in an attitude of readiness, with such ease that his body and all his members seem to fall into that posture naturally and quite without effort’. In short, the actions, gestures and movements of the perfect gentleman in his court appearances should be beautiful, pleasing and always marked by grace. They can become such only if they are the fruit of ‘study’ and ‘art’. But they should then be performed with absolute nonchalance, so as to appear simple, natural and true, and so spontaneous and as if ‘done by chance’.³²

Obviously, grace is also expressed in speech, when it has ‘ease and elegance’. But these two qualities alone are not enough.³³ When describing an incident, the perfect courtier should manage to describe things so effectively ‘with his gestures as with his words’, that ‘those who hear him seem to see what is recounted happen before their eyes’.³⁴ In addition, alternating where necessary ‘dignity and force’ with ‘simplicity and candour’, he will be able to arouse ‘those feelings that our souls have within’ and ‘kindle or move them as needed’, or ‘soften and almost intoxicate them with sweetness’.³⁵ Even this, though, is not enough. When the courtier speaks and expresses himself, he should be able to adapt his action to ‘the place where he is doing it, those present, the time, the cause that impels him, his age, his profession, the object he has in view, and the means that may conduce thereto’.³⁶

In short, this vision of behaviour, where gestures and actions are marked by grace, art and ease, includes a way of speaking that can evoke things and images, the ability to arouse emotions and passions in those watching and listening, and the need to behave ‘in situation’, selecting gestures, actions and movements, modulating them and regulating their intensity, adapting them to different circumstances, which are determined by the quality and character of the people we are addressing as well as our intentions: the characteristics attributed to good acting in late-sixteenth-century theory.

It is also worth noting what happens when the perfect gentleman has to dress up to take part in games or celebrations, or when he wants to imitate someone to amuse

³⁰ Ibid., I,26 (p. 127).

³¹ Ibid., I,26 (p. 128).

³² Ibid., I,28 (p. 132).

³³ Ibid., I,34 (pp. 144-145).

³⁴ Ibid., II,49 (p. 271). See also II,43 (pp. 261-262).

³⁵ Ibid., I,34 (p. 145).

³⁶ Ibid., II,7 (p. 204).

those present. Dressing up, observes Castiglione, ‘brings with it a certain freedom and licence’, but should never conceal the person’s true nature. If a youth disguises himself as an old man he should have ‘his garments open’ so as to show ‘his vigour’, and a knight dressed up as a ‘rustic shepherd’ should mount a ‘perfect horse’ and be ‘gracefully bedecked’.³⁷ Thus imitation should always be kept within certain confines, reveal the personality of the imitator, and never become a complete metamorphosis, or grace and loveliness would be destroyed. And this is all the more necessary when a real flesh-and-blood person is imitated for the amusement and entertainment of those present. In this case extreme caution should be used, without ever ‘descending into buffoonery, or going beyond bounds’.³⁸

On the other hand humour is in itself a danger that can compromise the grace and elegance of those who make use of it to amuse those present. In fact, laughter is almost always aroused by a ‘deformity’ or by ‘something unbecoming’.³⁹ How, then, should a gentleman behave who exhibits himself in court circles, evoking comic situations or imitating ridiculous characters? He should avoid the solutions used by professional comics, of pulling faces, ‘weeping and laughing, imitating the voices’, or even ‘dressing up as a peasant in the presence of all’. All this, says Castiglione, is unseemly. Rather he should ‘steal’ from the professionals these ways of imitating, and then reduce them and refine them, and so maintain the dignity of a gentleman. The excessive, instinctive and impudent style of entertainers like Berto, a famous jester in the papal court, or of the most cultured and admired professional actors, who were invited to perform in aristocratic circles, should be replaced with a more moderate style making use of the allusive potential of gesture, so by ‘making movements in such a way that those hearing and watching our words and gestures imagine much more than what they see and hear, and so fall a-laughing’.⁴⁰

6. Professional Actors and the *Commedia all’Improvviso*

Alongside the theatre, which had regained a kind of cultural legitimacy from the schools, the academies and the courts by the imitation of ancient models and the claims for the literary quality of dramatic writing, there was a galaxy of professional entertainers who earned a living exploiting their performing abilities. It was an extremely complex world that included court buffoons, mountebanks, acrobats, contortionists, story-tellers, musicians and street singers, as well as snake-oil salesmen and quacks who attracted an audience with short farcical scenes, imitations or stunts.

In the social consideration of the time these people were seen as hovering somewhere between beggars with some special talent and hucksters of dubious repute. Yet it also included some figures with a cultural background, itinerant scholars or men of letters, who had fallen from a more acceptable condition to that of street artist, like Poncelet de Monchauvet, who had once been a Carmelite friar, but who ended up in the early fifteenth century performing as a juggler and farce actor in the Parisian markets.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., II,11 (p. 210).

³⁸ Ibid., II,50 (p. 272).

³⁹ Ibid., II,46 (p. 266).

⁴⁰ Ibid., II,50 (pp. 272-273).

⁴¹ See P. Champion, *François Villon. Sa vie et son temps*, 2 vols., Paris, Champion, 1913, I, pp. 252-53.

However discredited and ostracized, professional entertainers were trustees of spectacular techniques with important characteristics designed to obtain easy and certain effects, able to attract an audience and hold its attention, surprising it with the skill of their stunts, capturing it with an effective patter that could be adapted to any circumstances, or making it laugh, whether with leaps, pirouettes and somersaults, or with imitations, saucy quips and dialogues, full of casual vulgarity and often gloriously obscene.

In short, they were performances that even in their crudest forms were founded on some essential elements extraneous to humanist oratorical acting or the assumptions behind court performances: the direct contact with an audience, the absolute freedom of expression that allowed recourse to obscene language and grotesque deformations of the body and physical appearance, the ability to change their voice and features in ridiculous, burlesque, caricatured imitations, and above all the lack of any hierarchy among words, movement and body language as forms of expression.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries this complex of techniques would compete with the theatrical forms that had arisen from the literary imitation of classical models. The world of the professionals had soon come into contact with the theatrical experiments that had been carried out in literary circles. In Venice, for example, around 1430, some 'histriones' had been performing the *Corallaria* by Tito Livio de' Frulovisi, a pupil of Guarino and a famous teacher of rhetoric, and it had given rise to some controversy. In the following decades, particularly in the early sixteenth century, the involvement of professional actors at events that included the performance of new plays as well as theatrical spectacles of every kind became more and more frequent. In this way some features of professional acting must have provided a sort of model that could, very cautiously indeed, be used by the amateurs involved in performing on the stages at court, in the academies or in some aristocratic homes. They were comic effects, characteristic forms of imitation of behaviour and gestures that the amateurs could adopt, or, in Castiglione's words, 'steal', filtering them and moderating them in the interests of an elegant and decorous spectacle.

Later, however, many of these precautions fell before the attraction that the various forms of professional acting seemed to exercise. In the end these were used fairly directly and freely by some groups, companies or academies of gentlemen, bourgeois or artisans, who began to take up the theatre for amusement as plays became more widespread in the early sixteenth century. Sometimes they acquired sufficient fame to be in demand for celebrations or meetings.

Among these, the most important figure was undoubtedly Angelo Beolco, known as Ruzzante, a bourgeois of both means and culture, who had created a company and wrote and acted his works at the small Paduan court of the aristocrat Alvise Cornaro and in the cultured, aristocratic circles of Venice. The very humour of his texts, which were violently grotesque, obscene and outrageous, required a form of acting very different from the legitimate ones, whose elegance and decorum was certainly accepted by an exclusive audience. In February 1525, for example, he performed in Venice, the guest of a lavish evening of theatrical entertainment, and one distinguished witness, the learned aristocrat Marin Sanudo, observed how the actor acted the part of the peasant 'most excellently', adding, however, that the

performance of the comedy, was ‘utterly lascivious and with filthy language’, and ‘was condemned’ by all.⁴²

While the methods of professional acting were creeping in to the performances of amateurs, professional actors found in the forms of comedy something that could attract a large and varied public that could include both aristocrats and commoners. This meant that they appropriated the dramatic offerings that had been developed in literary circles for their own commercial purposes, removing them from the ceremonies of court and university and offering them to a paying audience.⁴³ Thus in the second half of the sixteenth century some groups of actors were able to perform an extremely wide-ranging repertoire that included, alongside acrobatics, displays of skill, dance and song, productions of comedies written in accordance with rules that were now well-established. But, above all, they had now prepared a particular genre of play, in which the elements of literary comedy were elaborated and adapted to the abilities and procedures of professional acting.

This was the *commedia all'improvviso*, which had no finished, written text, but just an outline, or *scenario*, which did no more than indicate how the situation developed scene by scene. Each actor decided his lines, varying them as he saw fit in different performances. The action made equal use of the effectiveness of the words used by the performers, and of the poses, gestures and movements, which could also become games of physical ability, leaps, pirouettes and somersaults.

There was an essentially fixed typology of characters in the mature period of *commedia all'improvviso*. Along with the lovers, a couple of young people who acted without masks and with limited physical activity, there were also the *Maschere* (stock characters), each of whom wore a leathern half-mask and a specific set costume, whose features identified a typical character, each with their own highly characterized and caricatured way of speaking and gesturing. The *Maschere* included servants (the *zanni* among which were to emerge figures like Harlequin or Brighella or Scapino), who used a generally comic language complete with extravagant gestures and spectacular displays of agility. Other *Maschere* were those of characters representing different social figures, such as the Capitano (a caricature of a soldier who is both braggart and coward), Pantalone (a caricature of a Venetian merchant) and the Dottore (a caricature of a pedantic, self-important Bolognese man of learning). Each actor tended to specialize in just one of these figures all his life, assimilating its basic stage features (bearing, gestures, ways of speaking and expressing himself), and then developing it with his own personal variations.

Although it was known as *commedia all'improvviso* as the actors did not perform fixed parts following a written text line by line, the improvisation of the performers had very precise limits. Unlike amateur actors, who performed only on special occasions, the professionals were constantly onstage, with any number of repeat performances of the shows in their repertoire. Even though the lines were not established by a complete literary text, they tended to be fixed in the countless performances of the same scenes. Comic effects and particularly effective pieces of dialogue were codified by use and could be transferred from one comedy to another.

⁴² R. Alonge, ‘La riscoperta rinascimentale del teatro’, in *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, ed. by R. Alonge and G. Davico Bonino, 4 vols., Torino, Einaudi, 2000, I, *La nascita del teatro moderno*, pp. 33-34.

⁴³ See R. Tessari, ‘Il mercato delle Maschere’, in *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, I, *La nascita del teatro moderno*, p. 125.

It was also customary for each actor to have a repertoire of monologues, aphorisms, or at least verbal interventions (known as *generici*) adapted so as to be included in typical, recurring situations, like, for example, the lament of the betrayed lover, the praise of the loved woman, the retort of a spurned lover, the derision of an ancient suitor, the reflections of a traveller who arrives in a new city or returns to his native land, or the reproaches made to a wayward son, and so on.

This meant that the actor built up his part by combining long-established pieces from the repertoire that were reworked and memorized (*generici* changed depending on circumstances, lines that were known to work, or gestures and movements for particular situations), adapting them to the requirements of the character, making his own creative contribution.⁴⁴ Of course, there could be variations during the performance, but these were not so much extemporary inventions as reworked materials that were already known by heart.

The final result of this procedure led to a very special kind of acting. Gestures and verbal expressions were not confined to the limits of decorum, but could include freer, even vulgar and obscene language, and above all could amply exploit the resources of the actor's physical, acrobatic, mimic and imitative abilities. In addition, the character's personality and behaviour were not a mainly literary creation that was put onstage through the declamation of a written text, suitably decorated with appropriate gestures. It was something that had been constructed by the actor himself, who had over the years assimilated the characteristic features – ways of expression, attitudes, movements, vocal inflexions – of a particular figure, and then put them into action for the audience, showing his typical reactions to the different situations in which he found himself. All this was in perfect harmony with the interventions and inventions of the other actors, who were part of the same company. The expression of character was thus an immediate fusion of gesture and words, physical and verbal language, which had equal importance in the development of the action. And, no longer anchored to the words of a pre-existing literary text, this action seemed to have an immediate, improvised spontaneity.

The modes and figures of this type of comedy were to spread rapidly in Europe via the tournées of companies of Italian actors, and were to exercise a profound influence on the development of French, English, German and Spanish theatre. In Italy the particular character of this form of professional acting was perfectly perceived by the cultural consciousness of the time. Around 1550 Anton Francesco Grazzini, known as 'Il Lasca', celebrated in verse the virtues of a company of professionals led by a Florentine actor, Benedetto Cantinella, and insisted on the skill of their 'acts, ways, gestures, voice', contrasting their acting with that of actors who bored the audience by submerging them 'in long discourses without any pleasure'.⁴⁵

Men of letters, however, reacted with horror to the success of professional performances, precisely for fear that comedy as a literary work performed so as to bring out the verbal composition of the text would be replaced by a dangerous surrogate that attracted the audience by using tools extraneous to literature. 'Squalid and mercenary' people, wrote Giovan Battista Guarini in his *Compendio della poesia*

⁴⁴ On the use of stock characters in the *commedia all'improvviso* see Tessari's important reflections in 'Il mercato delle Maschere', pp. 162-165.

⁴⁵ Anton Francesco Grazzini, *Le rime burlesche*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1882, p. 521. See R. Tessari, *Commedia dell'Arte: la Maschera e l'Ombra*, Milano, Mursia, 1981, p. 31.

tragicomica, have ‘contaminated’ comedy, ‘taking here and there for filthy lucre excellent poems that once used to crown their authors with glory’, while Niccolò Rossi in his *Discorsi intorno alla Comedia*, of 1589, made quite clear that he would not consider the works acted by people who brought onstage *zanni*, Pantalone ‘and similar clowns’ as plays.⁴⁶ As for the specific forms of acting, the literary reaction stubbornly opposed the forms of professional acting with a style founded exclusively on the display of a written text, to the point that, as Pino da Cagli claimed in 1572, those performing a play should not be called ‘actors’, but simply ‘speakers’, able to entertain the audience with the fine way in which they expressed ‘the beauty of the speeches’.⁴⁷

7. The Revival of Religious Opposition and the Actor’s New Status

Towards the mid sixteenth century, performances of the humanist comedies by scholars, the custom of play-acting at the courts and aristocratic homes, and the development of professional theatre had, then, generated different forms of theatre acting, which partly conflicted with and partly influenced each other. Alongside the form of oratorical declamation inspired by the precepts of Cicero and Quintilian, there was acting based on grace, elegance and ease, following the models of court behaviour, while the professionals had developed a technique of acting disengaged from the written text, which exalted the actor’s creative resources and gave physical business, mime and gesture the same importance as the word.

In this complex context of inter-related acting techniques and trends, there was fresh thinking in the second half of the sixteenth century on the actor’s art. But in its early days the theoretical debate had already been influenced by a particularly important phenomenon that was to have a profound impact on the life of the theatre in the following centuries. In the first decades of the sixteenth century the theatrical profession had ended up attracting more and more cultured people from the bourgeoisie who had had experience of amateur theatricals, ex-students impoverished by the economic crisis that had hit Italy and were reduced to the trade of the comic actor, and also ‘honest courtesans’, high-grade prostitutes who had the entrée to sophisticated circles and were able to play instruments, sing and compose verse with equal skill.⁴⁸ At the same time the professionals began to set up groups with clear legal guarantees, and at least in the most fortunate cases they no longer found themselves in a state of beggary or uncertain, irregular earnings, but in the condition of an organized commercial business that could exploit the possibilities of the market that had been created as performances became more widespread.

⁴⁶ Giovan Battista Guarini, ‘Compendio della poesia tragicomica’ (1583), in *Il Pastor Fido e il Compendio della poesia tragicomica*, ed. by G. Brognoligo, Bari, Laterza, 1914, p. 246. Niccolò Rossi, *Discorsi di Niccolò Rossi vicentino intorno alla Comedia*, Vicenza, Agostin dalla Noce, 1589, capo V, p. 34. See F. Taviani, M. Schino (eds.), *Il segreto della Commedia dell’Arte*, Roma, Bulzoni, p. 483.

⁴⁷ Bernardino Pino da Cagli, ‘Breve considerazione intorno al componimento de la Comedia de’ nostri tempi’, in *Trattati di poetica e di retorica del Cinquecento*, ed. by B. Weinberg, 2 vols., Bari, Laterza, 1970, II, p. 644. In a philological note Weinberg says that the manuscript is dated 1572, but was published in 1578 in *Erofilomachia* by M. Sforza D’Oddo (Sforza Oddi), In Venetia, Gio. Battista Sessa, & fratelli, 1578.

⁴⁸ See S. Ferrone, Introduction to *Commedie dell’Arte*, 2 vols., Milano, Mursia, 1985, I, pp. 8-9.

Around the end of the sixteenth century, then, professional theatre had changed, the people working in it were not uneducated, and it was able to provide plays that had assimilated some of the elements of the standard comedy of the literary tradition. The actors in the most famous and prestigious companies began to aspire to claiming a social and cultural dignity for their profession.

This aspiration, however, came up against two obstacles. The literary men, as we have seen, saw dangerous competition in the spread of the professional performers, and were also absolutely determined to maintain their activity and their condition as scholars rigorously separated from a profession that had traditionally been stained by ill-repute. In addition, religious opposition to the diabolical art of the theatre, in the ferment of the Protestant reform and then in the Catholic counter-reform, had acquired new polemical vigour, retrieving many of the arguments used by the ancient Christian writers.

Actually, few authors, Catholic or Protestant, claimed that the theatre was absolutely illegitimate. Initially both had used it as a tool of religious propaganda against the other side, and while the Council of Trent, which ended in 1563, had taken a series of particularly severe measures to strengthen church discipline in the face of the spread of Protestant reform, it had expressed no condemnation of actors. Following Thomas Aquinas' teaching, the art of the theatre was regarded as 'indifferent' – good or bad depending on the individual case: reprehensible when it was used to attack or scorn morals or religion, but useful and praiseworthy when it celebrated or at least respected the values of Christian doctrine.⁴⁹

Thus, the attitude of the papacy in the following decades was broadly tolerant, refraining from any radical condemnation even in the periods of greatest rigour. It was no accident that the *Rituale Romanum* published by Paul V in 1614, defining the rules for excluding particular categories of sinners from the sacraments (like prostitutes, concubines, usurers, magicians, witches and blasphemers) made no mention at all of actors and actresses.

Among Catholics, however, opposition to the theatre had its stronghold in the diocese of Milan, where Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, who oversaw it from 1565 to 1584, took up an attitude of absolute intransigence, dusting down bans and condemnations of plays as the 'school of indecency and lust'.⁵⁰ He admonished magistrates to run out of town 'players, mimes and all other lost men of this kind' and to admonish 'innkeepers and anyone else' who gave them hospitality. Preachers were exhorted to use the arguments 'of Tertullian, St Cyprian Martyr, Salvianus and Chrysostom' to demonstrate 'the damage and disaster to the public' that 'performances and things of this kind' caused the people of Christ.⁵¹

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the liveliest opposition in the Protestant world came from the English Puritans, who saw in the attraction of theatres a reflection of the hated pomp of the Catholic liturgy, an agent to corrupt the faithful through the sensory wiles of Satan's displays, which contrasted with the rigour and

⁴⁹ See J. Dubu, *Les églises chrétiennes et le théâtre (1550-1850)*, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1997, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Carlo Borromeo, *Homily of July 17, 1583*, quoted in F. Taviani, *La fascinazione del teatro*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1969, p. 33.

⁵¹ Carlo Borromeo, *Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*, Milano, Officina typographica Pacifici Pontii 1599, quoted in F. Taviani, *La fascinazione del teatro*, pp. 11-13.

simplicity that should characterize the just and pure of heart.⁵² An authentically Christian rigour and simplicity of manner were also very obviously negated in the work of the actor, who concealed and distorted his true nature onstage, pretended and dressed up for the sake of dishonest gain.⁵³ No less important was concern that professional actors might provide formidable competition for preachers, particularly as all attempts to justify the theatre insisted on its capacity not only to delight wide sections of the public, but also to instruct them and correct their vices. Hence the scandalized insistence on at least banning plays on feast days as they threatened the presence of the faithful at religious ceremonies and might distract them from pious practices.

Yet theatrical performances were not only staged by mimes and strolling players who enticed the masses for the sake of gain. They were also to be found in the protected circles of the courts, which were hard to censure, and were used in schools and colleges to develop mastery of Latin and allow the pupils to practise the techniques of eloquence, both in Lutheran Germany and in England, France and Italy. In some cases, as in the Jesuit-run schools, theatrical activity was given particular care and attention.

Thus much of the anti-theatre propaganda was willing to admit clear exceptions. Silvio Antoniano, a friend and close collaborator of Carlo Borromeo, claimed that acting was useful for educating children – on condition, obviously, that the events depicted were of an edifying nature and women did not take part ‘apart from some old matrons of exemplary holiness’.⁵⁴ In England too some authors who raged against the theatre were willing to make allowances for it in particular settings and circumstances, as in schools, where a teacher might occasionally stage performances with his pupils, as long as he adopted all the necessary precautions: the text had to be in Latin, fine and showy sets were not allowed, and above all it was not to be performed in public, and still less made the occasion for gain.⁵⁵

These concessions for school recitals and amateur performances in strictly private places certainly did nothing to help the professionals however, who could not limit themselves to unpaid performances in Latin, with only mature ladies of exemplary virtue allowed onstage. Indeed, the admission of amateur and school drama ended up reinforcing the condemnation of every form of professional theatre. Plays were essentially the devil’s tool, aimed at seducing and depraving actors and audience. Handled with extreme caution by trained, virtuous people, it might also lose its perverted potentiality and be used for decent purposes. But those who exploited the

⁵² See C. Rice, *Ungodly Delights. Puritan Opposition to the Theatre*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 1997, pp. 17-36.

⁵³ The argument was used with great vigour above all by Stephen Gosson, ex playwright, in *Plays confuted in Five Actions*, London, Imprinted for Thomas Gosson, 1582, Sig E5. There is a detailed account of the perception of the actor’s art as one of counterfeiting, simulating and lying in the anti-theatre writings of Puritan authors in J. Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1981, pp. 90-96.

⁵⁴ Silvio Antoniano, *Dell’educazione cristiana de’ figlioli*, treatise of 1582, cited in Giovan Battista Castiglione, *Sentimenti di s. Carlo Borromeo intorno agli spettacoli*, Bergamo, Lancellotti, 1759, p. 124. See in this connection C. Bernardi, ‘Censura e promozione del teatro nella Controriforma’, in *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, I, *La nascita del teatro moderno*, p. 1037.

⁵⁵ See John Northbrooke, *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes, or Enterluds, with other idle pastimes, etc., commonly used on the Sabbath day, are reprovved by the Authoritie of the word of God and autient writers*, London, Imprinted by H. Bynneman for G. Bishop, 1577, Sig L2^v.

theatre only for economic gain were obviously going to encourage all its powers of attraction and temptation, reinforcing its destructive effects.

In the perspective of Catholic and Protestant culture, the professional comic actors were therefore involved in immoral activity that brought with it an immoral, indecent, scandalous and vagabond life, not unlike sexual promiscuity. Their performances were designed only to attract the public as easily and quickly as possible, were constantly obscene and scurrilous, and concentrated on reprehensible themes and situations, particularly love intrigues, providing a school in the arts of seduction. The onstage action also set off emotional reactions and passions that disturbed the minds of the audience, overcoming all moral resistance. One need only observe, wrote the future Bishop of Rheims and confessor of Cardinal Mazarin, Francesco Maria del Monaco in 1621, ‘the faces of the spectators, their eyes’, one need only interpret their ‘sighs and nods’ to realize how spellbound they were.⁵⁶

The presence of actresses contributed to all this. The mere appearance of flesh-and-blood women was clearly a manifest source of temptation, but it was their manner, their poses and gestures that ended up irresistibly ensnaring the audience. Another Catholic author wrote that their words ‘are also accompanied by movements of the person, glances, sighs, sneers, and (what cannot be said without blushing) embraces and more still that can be seen on the public stage from these infernal furies’.⁵⁷ It was no better if the actresses did not play amorous parts, but limited themselves to simple displays of skill. In his monumental work, *Della christiana moderazione del teatro*, of 1652, the Jesuit Gian Domenico Ottonelli declared that it was unseemly when ‘these young females’ in performing leaps ‘and many wonderful feats gracefully’ appear on the stage ‘bending, twisting and palpitating their bodies with lewd and extravagant gestures and positions, and occasion a thousand libidinous thoughts in the minds of the weak’.⁵⁸ The dexterity of the actresses’ art, combined with the allure of the performance, appeared such as to be able to change reality before the audience’s eyes, and by a trick traditionally attributed to the devil’s powers of temptation, actually made attractive what is repugnant. Significantly, even ‘old, ugly’ comic actresses posing ‘with grace and artifice’ could seem ‘beautiful’, and please so much as to lead to sinning ‘with consent in the theatre, and again outside the theatre in memory’.⁵⁹

Improving the professional theatre by suppressing its sinful aspects thus seemed a difficult if not desperate task, and the proposals to this end were extremely cautious and above all aware that a radical change would be required. It was absolutely necessary that comics assumed a decent and sober manner, and performed without recourse to obscene and vulgar words and gestures. Women were not to appear before an audience, Ottonelli wrote, but could just be mentioned. At most a female voice might be heard offstage, without the actress showing herself to the public.⁶⁰ It was also indispensable to subject comedies to painstaking censorship beforehand, of

⁵⁶ Francesco Maria del Monaco, *In actores et spectatores comoediarum nostri temporis paranaesis*, Padova, Typis Laurentii Pasquati, 1621, reprinted in F. Taviani, *La fascinazione del teatro*, p. 209.

⁵⁷ Cesare Franciotti, *Il giovane cristiano*, Venezia, Bernardo Giunti, 1611, reprinted in F. Taviani, *La fascinazione del teatro*, p. 178.

⁵⁸ Gian Domenico Ottonelli, *Della Christiana Moderazione del Teatro*, Firenze, Gio. Antonio Bonardi, 1652, reprinted in F. Taviani, *La fascinazione del teatro*, p. 385.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 333. See also p. 373.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

both the text and the actions, gestures and movements that would be used. This was clearly impossible for the *commedie all'improvviso*, and so it would be more advisable to ban them completely.⁶¹

To justify their human and professional dignity and the cultural value of their work in the face of opposition from literary men and religious condemnations, professional actors thus had to adopt a characteristic strategy. First of all they tried to make a rigorous distinction between the category of actors who could perform plays and works of quality, and the ill-famed race of low-level entertainers, clowns, street jugglers, and second-rate performers of crude, vulgar scenes, who lived from hand to mouth by attracting the credulous. In the words of the early seventeenth-century actor, Pier Maria Cecchini, one of the most representative actors of the time, they were 'the infamous players', who, claimed a little later Giovan Battista Andreini, another important figure in the theatrical scene of the time, 'utter a thousand vulgarities and indecencies', and stain 'the chaste ears of their hearers'. An actor worthy of the name should avoid 'filthy words', 'immodest and lewd acts', and any insult or mockery that might harm people.⁶²

To distinguish themselves from the clowns and mountebanks, then, they had first of all to eliminate all forms of obscenity from their acting, and then present their work as inspired by love of virtue. This also led to some involuntarily comic effects, as in the oration published by a famous actor, Adriano Valerini, on the death of the celebrated Vincenza Armani, in which we read that she had devoted herself to the theatre 'to purge corrupt people of their vices', depicting the ways men lived 'as in a mirror' that could reveal their errors and so inflame them 'to a praiseworthy life'.⁶³

But this was not enough. It was also necessary to demonstrate that the actor's ability is not inferior to that of the writer, and so in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries some famous actors set about publishing materials concerning their profession, speeches, prologues, dialogues and plays. Above all they justified the 'literary' quality of their acting. According to Adriano Valerini, when Armani improvised scenes on the stage 'the results were much better than those of the most expert authors who wrote after due consideration'.⁶⁴

There thus emerged an image of the actor dignified by his relation to the profession of the writer. Acting worthy of the name, freed of obscenity, but also of the tricks and expedients of street entertainers, tended to assume the mantle of oratory. Not only was Armani presented as a figure in full possession of the Latin language, but his main gift was that of eloquence, in which he surpassed all ancient and modern orators.⁶⁵ Imitating Cicero's eloquence', wrote Tommaso Garzoni in his

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 521. The impossibility of allowing professional performances, as their improvised nature made them uncontrollable, had already been underlined by Cardinal Gabriello Paleotti in *Scrittura fatta per suo ordine nella quale si pongono in vista alcune ragioni contro agli Spettacoli Teatrali*, sent to Rome in 1578. The document is reprinted in F. Taviani, *La fascinazione del teatro*, pp. 39-40.

⁶² Pier Maria Cecchini, *Discorso sopra l'arte comica, con il modo di ben recitare*, 1608; Giovan Battista Andreini, *Dialogo fra Momo e la Verità*, Ferrara, Vittorio Baldini, 1612. The two works are reprinted in F. Marotti and G. Romei (eds.), *La professione del teatro*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1991, where the quotations can be found on p. 68, p. 484 and p. 486.

⁶³ Adriano Valerini, *In morte della Divina Signora Vincenza Armani, Comica Eccellentissima*, Verona, Bastian dalle Donne, & Giovanni Fratelli, 1570, reprinted in F. Marotti and G. Romei (eds.), *La professione del teatro*, p. 34.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

Piazza universale, Armani ‘put the comic art in competition with oratory’.⁶⁶ When an actor performs, Andreini claimed shortly after, he is simply an ‘orator’.⁶⁷ The consequence is obvious. The low ‘players’, the category of entertainers which real actors must absolutely distinguish themselves from, were those who made use only of physical dexterity, use ‘their hands and their throats’, move ‘the mouth and other members in strange, distorted, changed ways’, while authentic acting ‘was wholly averse’ from ‘playing games’ and consisted wholly ‘in the beauty of the arguments and the beautiful manner of the speakers’.⁶⁸

In short it was the aura of oratory, the requirement to make a speech that could arouse the emotions of those present, maintaining a sober and elegant manner with restrained and rigorous gestures, that guaranteed the loftiness of the performance. And this requirement was to have a decisive influence on later developments in theory. The free and creative gestures, the resources of the acrobat, displays of dexterity, and ostentatious mimic ability in immediately effective comic effects that had characterized professional acting compared with the erudite style of the humanists and the gracious and elegant manner of the court amateurs – that kind of acting, in short, that the church had already identified centuries previously as the unequivocal tool of the devil – would be substantially suppressed for more than three centuries in reflections on the actor’s art.

At the same time many of the most famous performers from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century would continue to use these techniques bringing them to hitherto unknown levels of perfection.

⁶⁶ Tommaso Garzoni da Bagnacavallo, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo, e nobili ed ignobili*, Venezia, Gio. Battista Somasco, 1585, reprinted in F. Marotti and G. Romei (eds.), *La professione del teatro*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Giovan Battista Andreini, *La Ferza. Ragionamento secondo contra l'accuse date alla Commedia*, Paris, Nicolao Callemont, 1625, reprinted in F. Marotti and G. Romei, *La professione del teatro*, p. 496.

⁶⁸ Giovan Battista Andreini, *Dialogo fra Momo e la Verità*, pp. 482-483.