

## ***Death and Resurrection in the English Folk Play and Italian Comedia dell'Arte***

### **Introduction**

There are several threads that link the *Commedia dell'Arte*, with its origins in Italy, and the *English Folk Play* (or *Mummings Play*). Some of these connections, it has to be admitted, are rather tenuous – or ‘thematic’ rather than ‘real’. In my last talk to this group I was concerned with looking at the possible influences of the ‘professional’ performance of the ‘English Pantomime’ (a genre which flourished during the whole of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) on the essentially amateur performances of the Folk Play that emerged rather later in that century. This time I would like to explore a more thematic connection – the idea of ‘Death and Resurrection’ as it appears in both commedia and in the Folk Play, not only as part of the drama itself, but also in the way that other artists have used these dramatic forms (ie. commedia and folk play) as a way of exploring the notion of Death and Resurrection in a wider context. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the work of Domenico Tiepolo – not only because he provides us with some rather wonderful graphics with which to illustrate our talk, but also because of the way he himself pushes the theme of Death and Resurrection into the wider socio-political arena.

The English Folk Play emerges during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although its origins may go back well before this time, there appears to have been a burst of interest during the last quarter of the century.<sup>1</sup> This, it must be remembered, was a time of considerable political and social turmoil – the French Revolution was in the offing, while England was undergoing the disruption of agrarian reform, land enclosure, urban migration and an emerging Industrial Revolution. Venice meanwhile was slowly falling into decline as a trading empire and was soon to be dramatically terminated as an independent state by the invasion of Napoleon. This is also the context in which Tiepolo was working on his great series of Commedia drawings entitled (perhaps with intentional irony) *Divertimenti per li Regazzi* (or *Entertainments for the Children*). Before looking in detail at the context of commedia dell'arte in this period let us recapitulate for the Folk Play.

### **The Folk Play in context**

What was happening in England at the time of the emergence of the Folk Play around the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century? In other words, what was the socio-political context of the Folk Play? Firstly, it

seems to have been a largely rural rather than urban phenomenon; it does not seem to have featured much, if at all, on the streets of London or any of the other major cities.<sup>2</sup> The equivalent performance in the urban context is probably to be seen in the Punch & Judy shows or, earlier in the century, by the marionette theatres and fairground puppet shows.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Folk Plays these were a form of professional theatre whose practitioners depended for their livelihood to a large extent on the performance. For this reason they needed to be compact and economically efficient. Just two persons in the case of Punch and Judy: the puppeteer and his 'bottler' who was also responsible for carrying the booth and playing any accompanying music, generally on panpipes and drum. Nor were they seasonal – it was only much later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Punch and Judy, following the railways, migrated to the seaside as an entertainment for summer holidays.

The Folk Play, in contrast, was rural, seasonal and much less restricted in the number of personnel involved in the performance. Although the plot required a core of just three (hero, his opponent and the doctor) or perhaps four if we include the maiden (a non-active role), the king, or the dragon, it could be extended to include any number of peripheral figures (though clearly this entailed a sacrifice of individual earnings). The implication is that it was not primarily an income-generating project, but intended more as a social ritual, perhaps to cement relationships between the performers and their community audience. In a world that was rapidly changing, this became ever more significant, acting as a bulwark against the tide of decline and depletion of the rural population. Perhaps the best representation of this situation is given by Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* of 1770, in which he describes the abandoned traditional landscape following its enclosure to form the estate of some anonymous landed gentry.<sup>4</sup>

It is from this context of turmoil and decline that the Folk Play emerges. That is not to say that its origins may not lie much deeper and further back in time, perhaps in the sort of seasonal ritual that the early folklorists seemed to favour, but what evidence we have points to a surge of interest in the performance of these 'ritual' plays at around this time (i.e. last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup>).

## **Commedia in Context**

The term *commedia dell'arte* appears to have been first used by the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni in the 1750s, but the theatrical style that it denotes goes back much further, at least to the 15<sup>th</sup> century – though many would argue that, like the English Folk Play, its true origins lie in a very dim and distant pagan Dionysian past of fertility cults and seasonal rituals. By the mid-eighteenth century it had fallen into decline (at least in Italy) and Goldoni's original involvement was as a script-writer for one of the few remaining commedia companies in Venice. His best-known work *The Servant of Two Masters* was, in its first version, a commedia script for the company of Antonio Sacco, who performed in the traditional masks representing the characters of Harlequin, Pantelone, Il Dottore, etc., and space was allowed for the actors to improvise. Only in the later version (which we know today) did it become fully scripted and maskless – the characters now being 'real' persons, but with commedia names: Harlequin, Pantelone, etc. This was the basis of Goldoni's projected reforms of Italian Theatre. There was, however, strong opposition in Venice to this supposed 'reform'. Led by the writer and aristocrat Carlo Gozzi, they sought to reinstate the traditional masked characters and their improvised style of commedia. In face of this opposition Goldoni's project broadly failed – at least in Venice – and he went off in a huff to live and write in France, where he remained until his death in 1793. This is all somewhat ironic for, these days, Goldoni is revered as the founder of modern Italian comedy – with a dedicated museum in Venice – and Gozzi, along with Venetian commedia, is largely forgotten.

This is part of the context in which *commedia dell'arte* found itself in Venice in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Like the English countryside at this same time, Venice could be seen as in terminal decline, no longer with a powerful trading empire, but simply the haunt of idle aristocrats and tourists (many from England on their Grand Tour, spending their wealth following the successful enclosure of their estates in the home country!). There is thus a close parallel at this time between the situation of the English countryside – with its loss of power through industrialisation – and Venice, the epitome of urbanisation – with its loss of its trading base. The great symbol of this situation is, of course, Carnival.

Carnival goes back even further than commedia – and possibly even further than the Folk Play. In Venice, its ritual function had long been established and formal boundaries set as to what was viewed

as permissible behaviour. It was, in fact, a controlled expression of community cohesion. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, it had come to symbolise Venetian decadence.<sup>5</sup>

Carnival meant masks, and among the most popular at this time was that of Punchinello. A mainstay of the commedia, Punchinello derived his character from the Neapolitan low-life figure of Pulcinella – supposedly named because of his chicken-like gait or cock-like arrogance and stupidity. The description of Punchinello from Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* gives a good idea of his character as seen by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Englishman:

Punchinello is droll by being the reverse of all elegance, both as to movement, and figure, the beauty of variety is totally and comically excluded from this character in every respect; his limbs are raised And let fall almost altogether at one time, in parallel directions, as if his seeming fewer joints than ordinary, were no better than the hinges of a door.<sup>6</sup>

### **Domenico Tiepolo**

Punchinello is the character illustrated in Tiepolo's series of 104 drawings *Divertimento per li Regazzi* (or *Entertainments for Children*) executed between the mid-1790s and the artist's death in 1804. This remarkable collection of drawings lay virtually undiscovered until it was auctioned off as a set in Paris in the 1920s, then broken up and individual drawings sold, many to American museums and collections.<sup>7</sup> The work as a whole has recently been the object of a very interesting PhD dissertation by Sophie Bostock.<sup>8</sup> The approach taken there is that of the art historian, looking into considerations of how they came to be made, etc., and of their importance as examples of an artist's 'late works'.

My interest here, however, is in their significance as a document about commedia in Venice during the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The only other iconographic representation of similar significance is the series of drawings by Jacques Callot (1592-1635) almost two hundred years earlier, published under the title *Balli di Sfessania*. Unlike Callot's, however, Tiepolo's drawings are not simply representations of standard commedia scenes, but use the character of Punchinello to comment on the world around him.

### **Death and Resurrection in Tiepolo**

Tiepolo was, for much of his life, primarily a religious painter. Beginning with an important commission to do a series of *Fourteen Stations of the Cross* for the Church of San Polo at the age of 21, he worked as part of his father's workshop (the rather better known Giambattista Tiepolo) for around 25 years on large-scale history and religious paintings, both in Italy and Spain. It is tempting therefore to see in his *Divertimento* opus an underlying religious theme, with Punchinello perhaps as a Christ-figure. The visual references are there, to be sure, but they are far from explicit. A ladder propped strategically against the wall in the burial scene stands as a good promise of later ascension. His firing squad execution by fellow Punchinelli is a reasonable analogue of Christ's death at the hands of his compatriots (and references a similar scene by Goya).

The fresco paintings that he executed on the walls and ceiling of the family villa near Venice frequently depict Punchinello (usually in multiples) and several are remarkably like the earlier 'ascension' paintings created in the workshop of his father – showing Punchinello high on a swing, for example (again with ladders strategically placed). It is tempting to see this period of his work as a secular negation of all that he had created or even believed in his earlier life. This may be going too far. A more likely interpretation is to see this whole series of paintings and drawings as a commentary on the decline of Venice itself, with the 'ascension' as an expression of hope that even the humble Punchinello 'everyman' might finally emerge from the decay. To seek the 'real meaning' of such works is rather like trying to find the 'real meaning' of the Folk Play – both are open to numerous interpretations, but both are essentially the creations of the world in which they find themselves.

Among the more enigmatic of Domenico's work is *Il Mondo Nuovo (1791) (The New World)* in which a crowd is gathered around a hidden showman displaying some object of considerable interest to the audience. A Punchinello figure stands off to one side, unable to see or comprehend whatever might be attracting the audience's interest – it is indeed a 'new world' in which the old characters of the commedia may have no place. In this sense it stands as a metaphor for the 'death' not only of commedia, but of a whole way of life that is soon to pass. With Napoleon's invasion of 1797, the Venetian Republic finally collapses.

The value of Tiepolo lies in the fact that he creates a series of powerful visual metaphors based on the commedia character of Punchinello. While on the one hand his Punch is an everyman indulging in very ordinary things – eating, drinking, dancing, going to the zoo – on another level he is quite alien: he is born from an egg; he is imprisoned for unknown crimes, executed by fellow citizens and finally buried, only to rise again as a terrifying skeleton. Punchinello transcends the human to become humanity as a whole – the character stands not for an individual, but for a specific aspect of all individuals, or of society.

### **Death and Resurrection in Commedia**

There are a number of scripts from traditional commedia in which Punchinello does indeed get ‘killed’. It is the nature of commedia however, that the character as represented by the mask is assumed to be immortal – unlike the characters in Shakespeare, say, where they are representations of ‘real’ individuals and therefore mortal. This is another parallel with the Folk Play – St George does not represent a person, but a ‘character’ (in this case the mask of ‘hero’) and is therefore easily restored to life by aid of the Quack’s medicine. One example of this from the commedia repertoire is the script that supposedly formed the basis of the Stravinsky ballet *Pulchinello* (from an early 18<sup>th</sup> century Neapolitan manuscript):

Punchinello is extremely attractive to all the girls of the village (for unstated but imaginable reasons). The other lads are jealous and plot to kill him. They all dress as identical Pulcinelli (perhaps to confuse the girls, who might be expected to fall for them once the real Pulcinello is out of the way). A ‘friend’, whom Pulchinello persuades to stand in for him, is beaten up and killed by the village boys. But the death is only feigned and Pulchinello, as magician, resurrects him. All is forgiven, relationships are resolved, couples re-united and they live happily ever after.<sup>9</sup>

That, at least, is the ballet version. I suspect that the original commedia version was both much darker and much ruder. Sexual voraciousness was certainly a part of the Punchinello ‘character’, as attested by Duchartre:

The Neapolitan Pulcinella found his way into England at the end of the seventeenth century, and there he proceeded to give rein to all the cold-blooded ferocity which he had stored up in his nature. His irony then took on an English tone, and he developed into a great seducer of the young girls of

the people. A ballad of the eighteenth century affirms that his ardour became so intense that he required at least 22 women to keep him satisfied.<sup>10</sup>

From this description it would appear that the ballet version was heavily sanitised for the consumption of a more squeamish audience. The English Mr Punch was probably not all that different from his Neapolitan ancestor, or even his Venetian counterpart.

Many of the illustrations in Tiepolo's Punchinello series have a clear Christological resonance with several referencing the death and resurrection of Christ, such as the sarcophagus/altar, which appears in the frontispiece. Other examples, often in the form of parody, are Punchinello at supper which evokes *The Last Supper*, Punchinello collapsing by a villa wall, in which Domenico has arranged the figures to suggest a *Lamentation of Christ*, and of the drawings depicting the death of Punchinello, the hanging scene evokes *Calvary*, and Punchinello's ghost emerging from the tomb is reminiscent of *Christ's Resurrection*.

In modern literature, a number of authors have created important work exploring the inter-relationship of 'Death, Venice and Commedia'. One of note is the extended poem *Punchinello in Chains* by the well-known American poet William Logan. This is also based (and serves as a poetic commentary) on Tiepolo's Punchinello drawings.<sup>11</sup>

## **Death and Resurrection in the Folk Play**

We return finally to the Folk Play. The first thing to note is that, as in commedia, the characters are 'masks' rather than representations of 'real' people. This does not mean that they should wear masks, though some performers, of course, do. It does follow that the plays and characters are open to a similar semiotic analysis as those of the Venetian commedia discussed earlier and developed in more detail by authors such as Michael Quinn:

"Stage figures are two kinds, unique and conventional. Most contemporary figures are new creations, conceived to meet the demands of a particular production and designed to refer to a dramatic character conceived as an individual. But there are innumerable conventional figures,

which may refer not to a specific individual but to a socially discriminated type, to a concept of personality in the social rhetoric of identity. These can be created in many ways through various kinds of referential sign relations, but by far the most influential and well-known conventional western figures are the stage images of the *commedia dell'arte*.”<sup>12</sup>

Death in the Folk Play, unlike the *commedia*, is central to the plot – the hero (or anti-hero) always dies. In *commedia*, on the other hand, it is frequent, but not obligatory. In both forms resurrection by magical means always follows (though *Il Dottore*, being primarily a lawyer by trade, is not usually the agent of this transformation, unlike *The Doctor*). A ‘mask’, unlike a real person – or their fictional counterpart – cannot die. In this sense, the deaths in *Hamlet* are real, while that of *St George* or of *Punchinello* is not.

Death in *commedia* is usually representative of something else, and the same might be said for the Folk Play. This is why the latter is often interpreted as signifying ‘fertility’ or ‘seasonal rebirth’. On a less dramatic level, it would not be unreasonable to view the re-enactment of ‘death and resurrection’ as a gesture of hope for the renewal of a desecrated countryside, both in the 18<sup>th</sup> century emergence of the Folk Play and in today’s revival. While there is an undeniable element of nostalgia in the modern-day revival of Mummings, it would be wrong to see this as no more than nostalgia and would underestimate its significance as metaphor.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

By broadening the discussion of the Folk Play to include comparisons with other theatrical forms, and in particular the Venetian *commedia*, it is hoped to shed further light on its cultural significance. The contextual parallels are strong: on the one hand we have a city state in terminal decline, and on the other a countryside suffering a similar transformation. The personal links are also significant: throughout the long 18<sup>th</sup> century English aristocrats with their home roots in this same declining countryside make obligatory visits to Venice as cultural tourists. Finally, to assert that Europe’s greatest centre of historical art might yet offer worthwhile models for the study of one of its least

noticed forms is what I hope might be the mildly provocative message of this paper! Perhaps the next Mummings Unconvention might be held in Venice?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Millington, *The Origins and Development of English Folk Plays*, Ph.D. Thesis. Sheffield University 2002 [[http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/13/1/MillingtonP\\_Thesis\\_with\\_hyperlinks.pdf](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/13/1/MillingtonP_Thesis_with_hyperlinks.pdf)]

<sup>2</sup> An exception to this is that the masked and disguised attendees at masquerades in places like London's Ranelagh Gardens seem to have been called 'mummings'. This information comes from Washington Irving, *A Biography of Oliver Goldsmith* [<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7993>]

<sup>3</sup> George Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*, London, 1955

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village* (1770)

[<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/GolDese.html>]

<sup>5</sup> James H. Johnson, *Venice Incognito – Masks in the Serene Republic*, University of California Press, 2011

<sup>6</sup> William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (ed. Ronald Paulson) Yale UP, p.110

<sup>7</sup> Adelheid Gealt, *Domenico Tiepolo: The Punchinello Drawings*, George Braziller, New York, 1986. See also: Linda Wolk-Simon, *Domenico Tiepolo: Drawings, Prints and Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* [<http://www.metmuseum.org/pubs/bulletins/1/pdf/3269143.pdf.bannered.pdf>]. Many of the images from *Il Divertimento* discussed here are available directly online, by simply typing the keywords 'Domenico Tiepolo' and 'Divertimento' into a search engine.

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Bostock, *The Pictorial Wit of Domenico Tiepolo*, PhD Thesis, Warwick University, 2009 [[http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/3144/1/WRAP\\_THESIS\\_Bostock1\\_2009.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/3144/1/WRAP_THESIS_Bostock1_2009.pdf)]

<sup>9</sup> The story of Massine's discovery of a manuscript from around 1700 containing the commedia story of *les quatre polichinelles* (on which the ballet *Pulcinella* is based) can be found in Leslie Norton Leonide Massine and the 20th Century Ballet, McFarland & Co Inc, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (1929), Dover Reprint, p224

<sup>11</sup> William Logan, poem 'Punchinello in Chains' from the collection *Macbeth in Venice*, Penguin 2003

<sup>12</sup> Michael L. Quinn, The Comedy of Reference: The Semiotics of Commedia Figures in Eighteenth-Century Venice, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), pp. 70-92: The Johns Hopkins University Press

<sup>13</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*, Manchester University Press 1993