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FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
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Guest editors: *Marco Canani* and *Valentina Varinelli*

Rassegne

"In the evening, go to the Theatre of the Marionetti". Claire Clairmont, the Shelleys, and Gerolamo de la Crina

Anna Anselmo
Università degli Studi di Milano

The Shelley party not only went to La Scala, but also enjoyed a performance at Milan's only puppet theatre, Teatro Fiando. This article provides the title of this puppet show and offers evidence of the play-text, one version of which is found in the archives of the world-famous Milan-based puppeteers, the Colla family. Furthermore, the article speculates as to the Shelley party's peculiar and considerably specific interest in puppet shows, which is read as a sign of potential awareness of the political import of and critique implicit in them, and especially in the history of the puppet they saw on stage, Gerolamo, as well as evidence of a sustained interest in movement, gesture, and the body.

Gli Shelley e Claire Clairmont trascorsero la sera del 13 aprile 1818 al Teatro Fiando, il teatro di marionette di Milano. In questo articolo si forniscono il titolo dello spettacolo cui assistettero e una versione del copione reperita presso l'archivio dei marionettisti Colla. Inoltre si indicano due potenziali motivi di interesse che avrebbero potuto condurre gli Shelley e Claire Clairmont al Teatro Fiando: la consapevolezza del potenziale politico del teatro popolare e delle marionette, in particolare di Gerolamo, la marionetta protagonista della scena milanese, e la poetica della meccanica delle marionette, che suscita riflessioni sul movimento, il gesto e l'uso espressivo del corpo.

Keywords: Claire Clairmont, Shelley, puppetry, puppet theatre, Teatro Fiando

1. *The "traffic of our stage"*

Claire Clairmont arrived in Milan on 4 April 1818 with Percy and Mary Shelley. The party were to leave on 1 May, barely a month after their arrival. Claire wrote two letters in those weeks, both to Byron[1]. Her journal entries grow increasingly scanty and sparse as the day approaches when she must relinquish her daughter Allegra to him, namely, 28 April. In what follows, another important element of Claire Clairmont's Milanese days is sketched: the presence of the theatre. The Shelley party not only experienced La Scala, the most cultivated and sophisticated performative space in Milan, within which the rich cultural (and counter-cultural) life of the city flourished, but also enjoyed a performance at Milan's only

[1] C. Clairmont, *The Clairmont Correspondence*, M. Kingston Stocking ed., 2 vols, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1995, Vol. 1, pp. 113-115.

puppet theatre, Teatro Fiando[2]. Claire Clairmont's one-line journal entry mentioning the string puppet performance is worth interrogating in depth. I provide the name of the show that the Shelley party attended on 13 April 1818. I further provide evidence of the play-text itself, one version of which is found in the archives of the world-famous Milan-based puppeteers, the Colla family[3]. I also speculate as to the Shelley party's peculiar and considerably specific interest in the puppet show. I take it as being a sign of potential awareness of the political import of and critique implicit in puppet shows and, specifically, the history of the puppet they saw on stage, Gerolamo; as well as evidence of a sustained interest in movement, gesture, and the body.

To Claire Clairmont, Milan was a mixed blessing at best: on the one hand, it was suitably cosmopolitan, the centre of a lively artistic life. On the other hand, the time spent in the city was a painfully long farewell to her daughter: the walks along the Corsia de' Servi[4] and the intense, layered relationship they established were counterpointed by the painful anticipation of separation and the all-consuming doubt it might be definitive. The experience of Milan's intense theatrical life may have been both an opportunity for intellectual growth, as well as a welcome distraction from impending personal tragedy.

2. *Theatre-going in Milan and Claire Clairmont's Milanese readings*

Milan was an eminently theatrical city: in terms of prestige, diversity of the shows presented, and sheer number of theatres[5], it was the Italian capital of stage performance. At the beginning of the nineteenth century it counted two state or 'royal' theatres (La Scala and La Canobbiana); several independent theatres (e.g. Carcano, Teatro Re, Santa Radegonda), owned by private entrepreneurs who had managed to secure a license to perform; and two major daytime amphitheatres (Giardini Pubblici and Stadera). A struggle over legitimacy[6] is implicit in such a diverse picture: while no theatre in the city was technically illegitimate, a hierarchical order was firmly set in place. Royal theatres enjoyed privileges, and could severely affect both the revenue and the day-to-day operations of their minor competitors, as

[2] The actual name of Milan's puppet theatre owner: Giuseppe Fiando. The theatre came to be known as 'Gerolamo' after its main protagonist, the Piedmontese puppet Gerolamo.

[3] Parts of a play-text and cataloguing documentation included in the present article belong to Compagnia Marionettistica Carlo Colla & Figli / Associazione Grupporiani Fondo Eredi Colla. They are here reproduced with the express authorisation of Compagnia Marionettistica Carlo Colla & Figli.

[4] Claire calls it *Corso* in her journal. The Milanesi at the time used the word to refer to the main streets in the city, but, above all, to the customary carriage promenade that was the standard afternoon pastime of the very wealthy and not very wealthy alike, and which ran every afternoon from two to four. The main street Claire walked with Allegra, today's Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, was then called Corsia de' Servi.

[5] Enrico Bordogna writes of a veritable proliferation of theatres in Milan in the first half of the nineteenth century (E. Bordogna, *Il Sistema Teatrale a Milano*, http://www.ordinearchitetti.mi.it/it/mappe/itinerario/29-il-sistema-teatrale-a-milano/saggio (last accessed April 28, 2019)).

[6] See J. Carlson, *Theatre, Performance and Urban Spectacle*, in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, J. Chandler ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, pp. 490-506 (p. 492).

well as waylay potential requests the latter might make the authorities[7]. More than that, the theatre system in Milan was conceived in order to account for and perpetuate, to a degree, social differences. La Scala targeted the aristocracy, both local and foreign, as it was a major tourist attraction[8]. Stendhal called it "the focal point of the entire city; [...] the universal *salon*, the hub of society, which is here and here *only* [...]"[9]. Canobbiana enjoyed the same target, but differed in terms of repertoire, for it was essentially devoted to spoken drama. Other establishments targeted the middle classes and, unable to compete too openly with the two state theatres, became the protagonists of great generic innovation, importing the French *mélodrame* for instance. Amphitheatres, for their part, provided popular entertainment (e.g. acrobatics, scientific shows and demonstrations) and were intended to allow the less wealthy to afford performances; they were granted the right to perform during the day, and state theatres demanded they finish before the start of evening performances, so as not to hinder attendance.

Such vibrant theatre life Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys found when they arrived in Milan in 1818. It was not too different, after all, from the one left behind in London: there, too, the struggle over legitimacy was a staple of theatre life, even more so, for only three theatres (Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and Haymarket in summer months) were officially allowed to perform spoken drama; all other, illegitimate, "performances [were given] at venues (often designated 'minor') where spoken drama, especially tragedy and comedy, [was] officially proscribed"[10]. In London, too, competition was fierce; fiercer than in Milan perhaps, because illegitimate venues had to go to great creative lengths in order to circumvent the prohibition of using words on stage. They had to resort to "nonverbal appeals to ear and eye – pantomime, harlequinade, melodrama, burlesque, extravaganza, equestrian spectaculars, burletta"[11]. In London, differences between legitimacy and illegitimacy became intensely porous in terms of dramatic genres: "patent and minor theatres in this period constitute overlapping and interconnected, rather than opposing, cultures with benefits from that overlap accruing to both sides of the official division"[12]. And so it was in Milan, where laws prohibited the opening of new theatres, as well as the (generic and literary) repurposing of existing ones, for fear they might present too strong a competition for La Scala and Canobbiana[13]. All the while, La Scala consistently dealt in repurposing: the summer months of 1816, for instance, were devoted to spoken drama, and, therefore, saw the Comica Compagnia of Paolo Belli-Blanes on the stage[14].

Upon their arrival in Milan, Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys would only naturally direct themselves to La Scala. Jacqueline Mulhallen lists five attendances, on 5 (the day

[7] Fiando's requests to perform with real actors were insistently waylaid and eventually refused. See L. Sanguinetti, *Teatro Gerolamo*, Ufficio a Stampa del Comune di Milano, Milano 1967, pp. 26-30, 34-35.
[8] J. Black, *The British and the Grand Tour*, Routledge, London 1985, p. 14.
[9] Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence*, 2 vols, Delaunay, Paris 1826, Vol. 1, p. 4.
[10] J. Carlson, *Theatre*, p. 493.
[11] *Ibidem*.
[12] *Ibidem*.
[13] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 26.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 34.

after arriving), 7, 20, 21, and 29 April[15]. The party witnessed two ballets choreographed by Salvatore Viganò (*La Spada di Kenneth*, three times, and *Otello*, twice), as well as two operas (*Etelinda*[16] and *Il rivale di sé stesso*, twice and three times, respectively). Claire Claimont's journal entry for 8 April details the journey from Calais to Milan, and ends with a concise comment on her first time at the Milan opera-house: "Go to the Opera. A most magnificent Ballet Pantomime of <Othello> [*sic*] the story of Othello"[17]. Claire was more emphatic in her description in a later journal entry:

> The Venetian dance embodies the idea I had formed of the ancient dances of the bacchantes. It is full of mad and intoxicating joy, which nevertheless is accompanied by voluptuousness. Maria Pallerini, the Desdemona, is a lovely creature. Her walk is more like the sweepings of the wind than the steps of a mortal, and her attitudes are pictures[18].

Claire Clairmont's words of appreciation echo her stepsister's and her brother-in-law's. Mary Shelley writes that *Otello* was "infinitely magnificent"[19]; she also describes La Scala, the habits of theatre-goers in Milan, as well as the talent of the opera singers[20]. Shelley was equally enthusiastic[21]. The three all seem to share a strong appreciation of ballet, at this time, which is consistent with both Percy and Mary Shelley's sustained interest in the embodied quality of artistic performance and scientific research, respectively. The former's interest in the physicality of drama, specifically *commedia dell'arte*, this most 'embodied' theatrical form, was complemented by his preoccupation with health, dietary requirements[22], and the

[15] J. Mulhallen, *The Theatre of Shelley*, OpenBook Publishers, Cambridge 2010, p. 250.

[16] Mary Shelley claims they did not, in fact, hear anything: "For the people did not like the opera which had been repeated for every night for these three weeks so not one air was heard" (M. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, B.T. Bennet ed., 3 vols, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1980-88, Vol. 1, p. 64).

[17] C. Clairmont, *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, M. Kingston Stocking ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1968, p. 89.

[18] Quoted in E. Dowden, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., London 1886, Vol. 2, pp. 194-195. Claire Clairmont's journal entries from 23 April to June 1818 are in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle at the New York Public Library, and Kingston Stocking seems to have had no access to them, therefore they are not reported in her edition of the journals.

[19] M. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 64.

[20] *Ibid*., pp. 64, 67. The opera singers she mentions are Giovanni Davide (1789-1851 ca.) and Violante Camporese (1785-1839).

[21] "But the Ballet, or rather a kind of melodrama or a pantomimic dance, was the most splendid spectacle I ever saw [...]. The manner in which language is translated into gesture, the complete & full effect of the whole as illustrating the history in question, the unaffected self-possession of each of the actors, even to the children, made this choral drama more impressive than I should have conceived possible. The story is *Othello* & strange to say it left no disagreeable impression" (P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones ed., 2 vols, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1964, Vol. 2, p. 4).

[22] See T. Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994; M. Canani, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Vegetarian Poet*, in *Not Just Porridge. English Literati at Table*, F. Orestano – M. Vickers ed., Archaeopress, Oxford 2017, pp. 57-68.

sensory experience of the elements[23]; Mary's interrogation of the wonders and dangers of *techne* was exemplified in her focus on the body monstrous. Claire's passionate and reckless personality was complemented by the prolific intellectual exchange with both Shelleys, therefore her appreciation of the intensity of the dancers' body, the performing body, is perfectly aligned with that of her travel companions.

At this point, the theatrical focus of Claire Clairmont's Milanese days is obvious, and receives even more poignancy through her reading at this time, which points to a strong interest in comedy rather than the tragic music of the opera house. It is in Milan that Claire's only recorded reading of Molière takes place[24]. Such intense interest is likely connected to the attendance at the "Theatre of the Marionetti [*sic*]"[25], as well as the prolific intellectual exchange she enjoyed with her stepsister: in fact, Mary herself started reading Molière at about this time[26]. Molière, who was, incidentally, deeply influenced by *commedia dell'arte* (and shared his own theatre with *commedia dell'arte* companies for years)[27], may have drawn both Mary Shelley and Claire to Fiando's theatre, as puppeteers were often known to rework stock characters by the French playwright. Fiando himself was known to deal in adaptation and remediation[28]. Another key influence could have been Percy Shelley's exploration of Greek comedy (i.e. Aristophanes), *commedia dell'arte*, street hand-puppet shows (Punch), and pantomime (which, incidentally, is the word Claire uses in her first description of the Milanese *Otello*)[29]. Although Shelley's reading in Milan was veering towards the tragic[30], it stands to reason that he might have suggested attending Teatro Fiando himself.

3. *13 April 1818:* Girolamo e Argante nell'isola incantata dalle streghe di Benevento

During her daily walks in the centre of Milan, a sign in Piazza del Duomo would have caught Claire Clairmont's eye: when facing the cathedral, she would have found the Coperto dei Figini, a fifteenth-century roofed promenade, on her left. Hanging on its outside, there would have been notices of puppet shows at Teatro Fiando (figures 2 and 3). Angelo Inganni's 1838 painting, *La Piazza del Duomo a Milano verso il Coperto dei Figini*, shows Giuseppe Fiando openly advertising his puppet shows as early as 1810. Theatre advertisements in Milan had started appearing in the press in 1806 during the Cisalpine Republic, at the express request of Beauharnais[31], and Fiando's enterprise had started figuring alongside La Scala, Carcano, Cannobiana and Santa Radegonda in the "Giornale Italiano", the Government newspaper. In 1818, Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys would

[23] See A. Wroe, *Being Shelley: The Poet's Search for Himself*, Vintage, London 2008.
[24] See Claire Clairmont's reading list in Ead., *Journals*, pp. 501-517.
[25] *Ibid*., p. 91.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 90.
[27] J. Mulhallen, *Theatre of Shelley*, p. 220.
[28] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 16.
[29] J. Mulhallen, *Theatre of Shelley*, pp. 210-234.
[30] Shelley was reading Dante's *Purgatorio*, but was primarily focusing on Tasso because he intended to write a drama on the Italian poet (see R. Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Flamingo, London 1995, p. 417).
[31] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 12.

have seen the proto-billboard in Piazza del Duomo, or they might have found news of the shows performed daily in the "Gazzetta di Milano", the (newly-restored) Austrian regime's equivalent of the "Giornale Italiano". On 13 April 1818, the "Gazzetta" reports that Fiando would perform *Girolamo e Argante nell'isola incantata dalle streghe di Benevento* (see figure 4). This is the performance Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys attended. Mulhallen reports the puppet show in the list of performances the poet attended in his lifetime, but does not mention a title, citing Claire Clairmont who gave none. In the present article, the puppet show the Shelley party saw in Milan is finally unveiled.

Locating a puppetry play-text is no easy feat. Roberto Leydi, co-editor of the first collection of Italian puppetry scripts, describes them as generally similar in look and structure: thick paper, ruled (the lines faded and drawn by hand), at times bound in brown paper; the cover bears the title, potential subtitle, hand-written notes reporting details of past performances, good and bad ones, stage props needed, and whatnot. If one turns the page, the script begins[32]. I have as yet been unable to locate the script Fiando had his puppet Gerolamo perform on 13 April 1818, but I started a correspondence with the world's most celebrated puppeteers, the Colla family, who managed Teatro Fiando, which by then had definitively become Teatro Gerolamo, from 1911 until 1957. What they shared with me is the closest script to the *Gerolamo e Argante* that Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys saw (see figure 5).

Some basic differences are obvious: Fiando's Gerolamo and his master Argante were on an enchanted island, as the title indicates, in the hands of Benevento[33] witches; in the Colla version, Gerolamo is no longer the servant, having been replaced by Arlecchino; the island, for its part, has disappeared in favour of an enchanted forest. The curator of the Colla archives, Monica Franchi, has speculated that the script might date back to the second half of the nineteenth century[34], but, in fact, the paper documenting its first cataloguing confirms that the script bears no date (see figure 6). Franchi has also suggested that the script in the Colla archives might be an adapted version of the one Claire Clairmont saw, at least plot-wise, for it is in the very nature of puppet play-texts to maintain incidents and general basic plots.

Most puppeteers lived on the road and performed in the North of Italy, from Veneto through Lombardy to Piedmont. A practical consequence of performing for quite different audiences was that well before the age of marketing, the art of localization was a must: using Goldoni's Venetian Arlecchino suggests the company had the servant speaking a dialect that was understandable to the audience of the place in which they were performing, that is, that the script was likely a version of the play-text to be performed in Veneto. Changing the island to a forest was not necessarily a deeply meaningful choice: both island and forest are symbols of social counter-order; both are conventionally carnivalesque places, in the Bakhtinian sense, places of topsy-turvy, in which magic and resistance to the hegemonic discourse of power, traditionally located in the city, thrive. Both island and forest

[32] R. Leydi – R. Mezzanotte Leydi, *Marionette e burattini*, Collana del "Gallo Grande", Milano 1958, p. 31.
[33] A town in the South of Italy.
[34] Private conversation, 2 April 2019.

are obvious Shakespearean places[35]. I am not suggesting that locations in the play-text were chosen to make overt reference to the English playwright, but I am suggesting that Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys would have recognised the basic plot and relational patterns in Fiando's performance that night: they would have recognised the island as a place of magic (potentially evil or, at the very least, vindictive); they would have realised that the main characters were being drawn to an enchanted island by subterfuge (another Shakespearean echo); they would have understood the tragi-comic tone of the piece (Shakespeare, again).

The script in the Colla archives has a simple enough plot (see figure 7 for the list of characters): the witch Armida ostracises the marriage between Argante and Elena, a beautiful couple. In order to seduce Argante, the witch has spirits kidnap Elena on her wedding day and a trusted messenger – a fortune-teller Argante is known to trust – relate to him that he must go into the forest and save Elena. Argante leaves the city bringing his faithful, and extremely cowardly, servant, Arlecchino, along. After several misadventures and thanks to the help of Ismeno, a wizard who is in love with Armida but has been betrayed and rejected, Argante frees Elena and the two live happily ever after.

A subplot includes Arlecchino, of course, who finds himself alone and terrified in the enchanted forest and momentarily falls for Armida's servant Colombina, only to realise she is as evil as her mistress and eventually run as far as he can from her. It is not unlikely that Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys may have attended a performance along these lines: the facts of the plot are so plain, the magic tricks are so obvious and potentially spectacular, and the comic element so recognizable, that they would have understood the highlights of the performance with relatively little effort.

4. *The five Wh's of placing Gerolamo: who, what, when, where, and how*

Gerolamo (or Girolamo, depending on the newspaper and the writer) is the staple Milanese puppet, despite not being of Milanese descent. Its origins can be traced back to Piedmont in 1630, its alleged inventor was Gioanin d'Osej, a carpenter. Gerolamo started out as Girone and later took on its definitive name. The puppet pops up again in the second half of the eighteenth century in the expert hand of puppeteer Giovan Battista Sales. It was in Genoa that Gerolamo and its master ran into trouble with the authorities for the first time; it was thus in Genoa that Gerolamo's career as a politically incorrect, seditious puppet began: the doge of the city was Girolamo Durazzo, and he did not take too well to his wooden namesake. Sales had to flee to Piedmont, but there, too, he and his puppet were frowned upon by the authorities and eventually expelled. In fact, one of Bonaparte's brothers was named Gerolamo. People in the streets gathering round a portable stage and witnessing a Gerolamo getting as good as he gave did not sit very well with Bonapartists. It

[35] For a perspective on the representation and symbolic value of Shakespeare's island in Derek Jarman's *The Tempest*, see A. Anselmo, *Images and Words:* The Tempest*, Film and the Classroom*, in *Shakespeare, Our Personal Trainer: Teaching Shakespeare in Secondary Schools*, M. Rose – C. Paravano – R. Situlin ed., Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne 2018, pp. 201-220.

was at the end of the eighteenth century, then, that Gerolamo found its way to Milan and to Giuseppe Fiando[36].

The "Giornale Italiano" spoke highly of Gerolamo's character, a crafty, but pleasant rustic from Piedmont; he may have been a little curt and all too frank, but his clumsiness and dialect made him a success and much loved by the Milanesi[37]. The public's enjoyment, so claims the journalist, came from being exposed to a neighbouring culture through Gerolamo's dialect[38]. In her celebrated travelogue, Lady Morgan's argument is diametrically opposed to that of the "Giornale Italiano", and she describes Gerolamo's distinctiveness as follows:

> [He] speaks Piedmontese, and makes stupid mistakes to please the inhabitants of Milan, and to feed their municipal prejudices against their neighbours; exactly as the Milanese *Menichino* [sic] performs for the amusement of the rest of the north of Italy, and as honest Pat is travestied on the London stage to flatter the cockney prejudices of John Bull[39].

Charles Magnin's 1852 pioneering monographic study on the history of puppetry reports the account of a certain Monsieur Bourquelot, who saw Gerolamo in 1841 and found him extremely funny. Gerolamo was thus still the main protagonist of the Milanese puppet scene, performing across kindred genres such as farces, parodies and satirical pieces with great ease[40].

The first mention of Fiando performing in Milan dates back to 1806, even though there is archival evidence he was active in the city before then, perhaps as early as 1795[41]. Like his puppet, he, too was from Piedmont. He thus spoke the dialect perfectly and could best be Gerolamo's voice. After performing for some time at a private venue, Dazio Grande in Piazza del Duomo, he moved to Piazza del Tribunale, today known as via Mercanti. In 1806, Fiando was granted use of the Bellarmino oratory[42], which was the precursor of the *bona fide* theatre in which Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys spent an evening in April 1818. Going to see Fiando's Gerolamo would have amounted to seeing a unique piece of Milan, a landmark for all intents and purposes, for Teatro Fiando is one of the oldest resident puppet theatres in the world[43], and the place that put an end to Gerolamo's wandering days. After receiving it as a gift from the local authorities, Fiando had the oratory repurposed according to architect Luigi Canonica's design; the façade was conceived by Tazzini and decorated with statues by Pompeo Marchesi (see figure 8).

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[36] Giovan Battista Sales, for his part, remained in Milan but gave up Gerolamo in favour of the safer Gianduja. He would eventually join puppeteer Bellone in 1814 (E. Monti, *Il Gerolamo: C'era una volta un Teatro di Marionette...*, Strenna dell'Istituto Ortopedico Gaetano Pini, Milano 1975, p. 23).

[37] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 14.

[38] Quoted in *Ibid*., pp. 34-35.

[39] Lady Morgan, *Italy*, 3 vols, Galignani, Paris 1821, Vol. 1, p. 153.

[40] C. Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*, Michel Lévy Frères, Paris 1852, p. 87.

[41] L. Guicciardi, *La Maschera di Gerolamo*, "La Martinella di Milano", maggio 1958, pp. 225-232.

[42] E. Monti, *Gerolamo*, p. 22.

[43] A. Calzoni, *Per la storia di alcuni teatri minori milanesi*, Presso l'Autore, Milano 1932, p. 39.

Claire Clairmont thus found herself in the very first theatrical space specially conceived for puppet shows, in many ways a miniature La Scala. Magnin's Monsier Bourquelot proves useful once more in his description of the theatre's interior: he mentions a lovely parterre and three levels of wooden boxes[44]. Advertisements in the "Giornale Italiano" following the month of June 1806 announced not only the varied repertoire at Fiando's disposal, which was common in the comedy business, as re-runs were extremely rare and due only to outstanding success, but also the technical and visual virtuosity of Fiando's stage, with frequent news of scenery changes[45]. Lady Morgan, despite showing no real interest in or appreciation for Gerolamo and his (mis)adventures, confirms the beauty and surprising technical advancement of the theatre: "The scenery and decorations are really very pretty, and there is great ingenuity exhibited in the transformations, of which this little stage is rendered susceptible"[46]. In his 1836 guide to Milan and its surroundings, specifically targeted at English travellers, Marcello Mazzoni would describe Teatro Fiando rather diminutively, and yet presented it as a local landmark. He, too, would focus on ingeniousness and the beauty of the scenery:

> Comedies and ballets are here almost daily performed by means of puppets, whose easy motions are so ingeniously contrived as to deserve a moment's notice from travellers. The decorations of this puppet-show are really superb[47].

By the mid-nineteenth century, Magnin could claim that Teatro Fiando had become as famous as the Duomo and that as many foreign travellers visited it[48].

When Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys found their way to the Milanese puppet show, Fiando had grown to manage his theatre programme much as the spoken drama theatres did, and repeated the performance of *Il Diluvio Universale* (the Deluge) several times that April, before moving on to *Girolamo e Argante* mid-month.

5. *Why puppets? Gesture, music and politics*

Two main features of Fiando's work would have had special appeal for Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys: firstly, its immanent political connotations; secondly, the pervasive presence of music and, interestingly, dancing.

The politics inherent in popular art forms hardly need to be supported by evidence: comedy, specifically, and all art forms that can be traced back to *commedia dell'arte* have a history of carnivalesque role-reversals, regime critique and semi-seditious content. The relative lawlessness of street and fair performances, as well as the very nature of the *maschere*,

[44] C. Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes*, p. 87.
[45] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 16.
[46] Lady Morgan, *Italy*, Vol. 1, p. 154.
[47] M. Mazzoni, *The Traveller's Guide of Milan with a Sketch of the Environs and a Description of the Lakes*, Sonzogno, Milano 1836, p. 60.
[48] C. Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes*, p. 84.

the actors transcending their individuality in order to wear a mask, imply a distance between the actor and the acted, the *sayer* and the said. This is one of the many paradoxes in both puppetry and *commedia dell'arte*: the masks the *commedia* actors wear are obviously meant to hide their identity and transform them into recognizable stock characters, but, at the same time, they need to be built specifically for the actor who is going to wear them, and they are traditionally made of leather so that the skin can breathe through the material, and the leather can absorb sweat and literally mould itself on its wearer's features, becoming one with the actor[49].

The distance and its paradoxical consequences are even more obvious in the case of puppets, whose materiality virtually obliterates the motion-maker and can thus drive performances further towards the inflammatory. More than their hand-operated counterparts, string puppets come to represent one of the paths humanity has travelled in order to construct its own reflection[50]: the recourse to the ultimate other, the (puppet) object endowed with human-like features and motions, and infused with human-like life, constitutes an act of both idolatry[51] and potential sedition. If idolatry is defined as both an issue of representation (in that it offers a grossly inadequate picture of the divine) and agency (as it identifies human creativity with divine creation), then the puppet is inherently idolatrous. Sedition, for its part, hinges on the same problematic co-existence of representation and agency. The (puppet) object does not exist without its motion-maker/actor, and yet the two are distinct: the human voice is rent from the embodied object, the movement and expression of the embodied object are rent from the all too human emotion and interpretation. It is within this distance, this interstice that will not be mended, that the puppet object can be made into a counter-cultural and counter-political symbol, an embodied sign amplifying human agency precisely because it transcends the human despite depending on it.

Within this ontological framework for the reading and interpretation of the puppet theatre, Gerolamo's arrival in Milan must be understood, and the persistence of its perceived political potential contextualised. This for several reasons: the first is Gerolamo's great appeal to a popular audience. It is no coincidence that an eager reader wrote a letter to "Giornale Italiano" in 1806 to lament the lack of attention paid to a character so close to the hearts of the people; while this might have been a genuine request from a *bona fide* admirer, it was also a relatively friendly request for more focus on a character and a theatre which held sway over a large number of people: "puppets that speak to the people every day", the reader claimed, "are not beneath the wise man's interest, or undeserving of attention from the friends of order and morality"[52]. Quoting from this reader's letter in his *Principj morali del teatro*, Pietro Schedoni commented on the undeniable political import of the art of puppetry: its omnipresence in the squares of small towns and big capitals alike,

[49] Private conversation with Eugenio De' Giorgi, comedian and *commedia* expert, July 2012.
[50] Cf. A. Cipolla – G. Moretti, *Storia delle marionette e dei burattini in Italia*, Titivillus, Pisa 2011, pp. 24-25.
[51] S.C. Shershow, *Puppets and "Popular" Culture*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1995, pp. 22-42.
[52] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 12. My translation.

its appeal to large audiences made up of impressionable and uneducated people thus exposed to all sorts of depravities and corruption, represented a metaphorical powder cake[53].

Years after 1806, once both Beauharnais and Napoleon were (not so) distant memories, Gerolamo posed the potential problem of its language: for one, the Piedmontese dialect may have been incomprehensible to the Austrian authorities, therefore fostering doubt as to the contents of Fiando's performances. More than that, puppet shows were known for their volatile and unpredictable nature, the average play-text being always open to localisation, a *canovaccio* incorporating the foundational element of improvisation, meant as a guideline rather than a finished piece. As for Gerolamo, there was a further complication: Piedmontese was the dialect of the fledgling patriotic efforts of the *Carbonari*, which would affect the North of Italy in 1820. Censorship was in place under Austrian rule, and therefore puppets, too, were routinely investigated, their language and their adventures gone over with a fine toothcomb. In a theatre such as Fiando's, in which performances became more standardised due to repetition and the settled nature of the puppet master's business, scripts became relatively stable, but were still looked upon with suspicion, and thus played only after being authorised by the censor's office. Alberto Lorenzi mentions the realistic possibility that a puppet from Piedmont might transcend its own comedic materiality and index the impending call for independence[54]. Eventually, both Gerolamo and Fiando became active protagonists of the Milan riots of 1848[55].

Music was no news in the world of puppetry: hand-puppet street shows implied the presence of a *musico* of sorts. In his history of English puppetry, George Speaight points out the presence of the so-called "pardner" at street puppet shows in England; the pardner "played the drums and pipes before the show, carried the frame from pitch to pitch, and took up the collection, and also filled the ancient role of 'interpreter'"[56]. The drums and panpipes of early nineteenth-century English shows were more rudimentary than the small orchestra Fiando had secured for daily performances at his theatre, the director of which was Giovanni Ricordi, a violinist, who would go on to become the first and greatest music publisher in Italy. These musical elements, common to puppet shows across Europe, points to Percy Shelley's childhood memories of street shows, which, in turn, may have informed expectations that music would complement the puppet action on the stage that evening of April 1818 in Milan. Mulhallen speculates Percy Shelley might have had access to Punch and Joan (later Judy) shows when he was a child in the late 1790s; a Punch and Joan show was also performed in Brighton in 1804, very close to Percy's Horsham. In the years he was living in or often visiting London, street puppet shows were extremely popular[57]. It is

[53] A. Cipolla – G. Moretti, *Storia delle marionette*, p. 43.

[54] Reference is here made to C.S. Peirce's definition of "index". See *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/ (last accessed April 20, 2019).

[55] A. Lorenzi, *Milano: un secolo*, Bramante, Milano 1965, p. 84.

[56] G. Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*, de Graff, New York 1955, p. 211. Interpreters may have been needed to translate puppet shows performed by Italian or French companies. In time they became a permanent fixture of puppet shows as the puppeteers' trademark nasal delivery made understanding performances difficult (*Ibid*., pp. 66-67).

[57] J. Mulhallen, *Theatre of Shelley*, p. 224.

possible to speculate that Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont might have witnessed street puppet shows in London themselves, and would thus also be familiar with the co-presence of rudimentary music and puppetry.

One more staple feature of Fiando's performances was dancing: as early as 24 July 1806 Fiando advertised the evening's programme as a comic piece followed by a dance. The "Giornale Italiano" was characteristically ready to deal out praise through the description of the beauty and proportion of the puppets dancing on Fiando's stage: "quick", "graceful", and "exact" are the adjectives used by the journalist[58]. An enthusiastic French review of a dance at Teatro Fiando was published in an 1823 issue of the literary journal "Le Globe". It confirms gracefulness and exactness, as well as stating the superiority of puppet dancers to real ones:

> Such was the perfection of the movements of these small actors; their bodies, their arms, their head, everything works with such moderation and in such perfect accordance with the feelings expressed by the voice [...]. I wish Opéra dancers, so proud of their arms and legs, could see these wooden dancers, copy all their attitudes and possess the same gracefulness[59].

Crisafulli has excellently documented Percy Shelley's interest in embodied music as exemplified by the trope of the dancer. She quotes from the poet's essay "On Love", and convincingly argues that

> music embraces social values (patriotism), human ties ("one beloved singing to you alone"), spontaneous and sympathetic emotions ("bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes"), an animistic and anthropomorphic view of nature (eloquence in the tongueless wind), and also a previously unthinkable knowledge of the self ("inconceivable relation to something within the soul"). For Shelley the aim of music is not so much to express particular or individual feelings as to reveal to the soul its own identity, being time rather than space its essential element [...][60].

As mentioned above, Claire Clairmont, Percy and Mary Shelley were all struck by Viganò's choral drama. In their letters, the Shelleys emphasise gesture: Percy's interest is in how language can be turned into gesture without losing any of its semantic potency, while Mary's focus appears to be the dancers' ability to move organically and present the audience with a quasi-sculptural spectacle[61]. Claire Clairmont's journal entry quoted above deserves repeated attention because of the remarkable conceptual closeness to both Percy's and Mary's remarks: on the one hand, Claire emphasises voluptuousness and the rapture of the senses

[58] L. Sanguinetti, *Gerolamo*, p. 16.
[59] Quoted in C. Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes*, p. 84 (my translation).
[60] L.M. Crisafulli, *"A Language in Itself Music": Salvatore Viganò's* Ballet en Action *in Shelley's* Prometheus Unbound, in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, L.M. Crisafulli – F. Liberto ed., Rodopi, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 135-159 (p. 138).
[61] M. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 64.

by referring to the dances of the Bacchantes, which Crisafulli clearly sees in Shelley's "On Love"[62]; she further refers to the lightness of the dancers' gestures and uses the wind as an explanatory metaphor. This, too, is an echo of Shelley's "On Love". On the other hand, Claire mirrors Mary in her association of Viganò's choreography with the visual arts, not sculpture this time, but painting. This testifies to the intensity of the intellectual attunement of the three.

The missing link between choral drama and puppetry is provided by Mulhallen, who ingeniously complements Crisafulli's argument of Shelley's fascination with choral drama with the translation of language into gesture, and music as being 'embodied'. I have argued that Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont shared this viewpoint to a certain degree, both showing enjoyment of Viganò's choreography in terms of both physical and more aesthetic/artistic criteria. Mulhallen argues that Shelley's lifelong interest in *commedia dell'arte* can be connected to his "dislike of unevenness in performance" and

> the fact that he was to write in *A Defence of Poetry* of the "partial and inharmonious effect" of a company of actors without masks, suggests that he would have admired the unity which is characteristic of *commedia dell'arte* companies as well as their wearing of masks[63].

Mulhallen rightly uses *commedia dell'arte* as a portmanteau term including puppetry under its semantic umbrella. However, I would argue that their common origin does not warrant their identification *tout court*, and that Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys attended Fiando's theatre not merely out of scholarly interest in the *commedia*, but because of a specific interest in puppetry itself. Mulhallen's insight into Shelley's search for evenness and order is extremely more valuable if one considers the specificity of puppetry and the puppet as the absolute abstraction of the human body. The puppet is the perfect paradox: it is unique in the detail of its characterisation (dialect spoken, dress, comedic identity), but it is a *maschera*, endlessly repeated and repeatable within its idiosyncratic linguistic and character framework of reference. Its motions are highly formalised because of the materials out of which it is built, and because it exists within a theatre that is entirely made up of constraints and virtuosity[64]. While these characteristics appear to be in line with *maschere* in the *commedia*, puppetry implies constraints that the *commedia*, relying on live actors, does not; more than that, puppets are not bound to the use of *grammelot* like some characters in the *commedia* are, and they are not in any stable way associated to an animal counterpart.

Claire Clairmont's and the Shelleys' love for Viganò's impressionistic art was inspired by the choreographer's unique ability to combine music of diverse origin (the music for his *Otello* came from Rossini, Brambilla and Carafa[65]) and impassioned, highly individualistic gesture. Yet uniformity and homogeneity in the performance were perceived: Claire

[62] L.M. Crisafulli, *"A Language in Itself Music"*, p. 138.
[63] J. Mulhallen, *Theatre of Shelley*, p. 222.
[64] For a detailed account of the use(s) of 'motion' in puppetry see G. Speaight, *English Puppet Theatre*, pp. 54-69.
[65] L.M. Crisafulli, *"A Language in Itself Music"*, p. 149.

mentioned visualising a clear picture; Mary Shelley wrote of a statuesque quality of the ensemble, and Percy Shelley perceived unity in gesture rendering language unnecessary. It is the same kind of uniformity that could be enjoyed at Giuseppe Fiando's performances, in which his puppet's motions were standardised and yet natural, limited in scope and yet infinite (superior to real Opéra dancers!). In the 1950s Roberto Leydi wrote that puppets are not defined by an abstract desire for poetic expression and creativity; quite the opposite. As material objects, they are bound to their materiality and can thus only find expression in their lines and their gestures. Here, too, gesture is everything; and these wooden bodies, animated by strings and a hidden master, are a door to infinity and transcendence.

6. *Curtain calls*

Roberto Leydi explains the formalism inherent in puppetry by referring to the structured nature of play-texts and, especially, the importance of gesture. Puppetry is subsumed under a strict preconceived order: its dramatic language can appear misleadingly poor, schematic, naïve, perhaps childish, but is in fact solid, practical, extremely poetic and, most of all, truly universal[66].

It has been my aim in this article to present the reader with a series of interconnected pictures: the first saw Claire Clairmont undergoing arguably the most traumatic event of her life during her stay in Milan, and complementing it with the intense intellectual and artistic fervour with which, in spite of all, her Milanese experience was infused. The second picture showed the detail of a seemingly irrelevant leisurely evening the Shelley party spent at a puppet show in Milan: the performance they attended, a potential version of the play-text they saw, a portrait of the quintessentially Milanese (yet Piedmontese!) puppet, of its first great puppet master, Giuseppe Fiando, and of the theatre that gave meaning to the lives of both puppet and puppeteer. Finally, a potential, yet essential, connection between the Shelley party's emotional and intellectual investment in Viganò's choral drama and their interest in attending a puppet show, was interrogated. While considering this possibility, remarkable similarities in perspective and vocabulary in the reactions of Percy and Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont to Vigano's choral drama emerged: this led to emphasising the intensity of their intellectual exchange and to speculating on the possibility that such exchange may have led to consensus regarding puppetry as well.

[66] R. Leydi – R. Mezzanotte Leydi, *Marionette e burattini*, pp. 15-16.

Figure 1 - *Fiando's Gerolamo*

Figure 2 - *A. Inganni,* La Piazza del Duomo a Milano verso il Coperto dei Figini*, 1838 (Museo di Milano, Palazzo Morando)*

Figure 3 - *A. Inganni,* La Piazza del Duomo a Milano verso il Coperto dei Figini*, detail. The date concerning the notice advertising a performance at Teatro Fiando is visible: 1810*

Figure 4 - *The "Gazzetta di Milano" listing the shows on 13 April 1818*

SPETTACOLI D'OGGI.

I. R. Teatro alla Scala. Si rappresenta l' opera semiseria *Ettinda*, musica del M.° De-Winter. Balli: 1.° *Otello*, composto dal sig. Salvatore Viganò; 2.° *Il paggio*, composto dal sig. Bertini.

Teatro Re. Dalla comica comp. Marchionni e comp. si replica *La gazza ladra*.

Teatro dalle marionette (detto Girolamo) si recita *Girolamo e Argante nell' isola incantata dalle streghe di Benevento*.

Figure 5 - Argante ed Arlecchino nella selva incantata dalle streghe di Benevento*, MS copy*

Argante ed Arlecchino

nella selva

incantata dalle streghe di Benevento

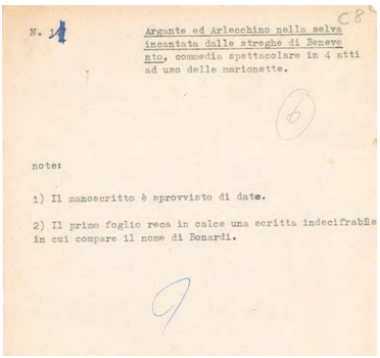
commedia spettacolosa

in 4 atti.

ad uso

delle Marionette

Figure 6 - *Cataloguing documentation from the Compagnia Marionettistica Carlo Colla & Figli / Associazione Grupporiani Fondo Eredi Colla*


N. 4

Argante ed Arlecchino nella selva incantata dalle streghe di Benevento, commedia spettacolare in 4 atti ad uso delle marionette.

note:

1) Il manoscritto è sprovvisto di data.

2) Il primo foglio reca in calce una scritta indecifrabile in cui compare il nome di Bonardi.

Figure 7 - Argante ed Arlecchino nella selva incantata dalle streghe di Benevento*, MS copy. List of characters*

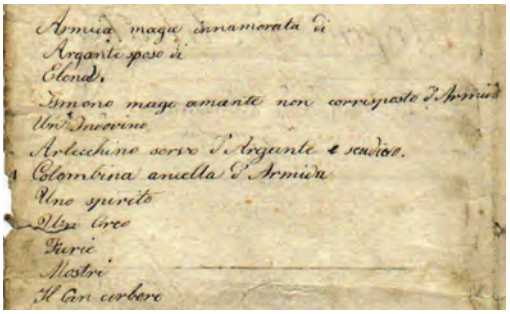

Armida maga innamorata di
Argante sposo di
Elenda.
Ismeno mago amante non corrisposto d'Armida
Un Incevino
Arlecchino servo d'Argante e scudiero.
Colombina ancella d'Armida
Uno spirito
Una furie
Furie
Mostri
Il Can cerbero

Figure 8 - *Luigi Cherubini's etching of Teatro Fiando*

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