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Identifying a Troupe of Italian Players in England in 1574

This note identifies a previously unknown document in the Rye archive of the East Sussex Record Office. The document is a letter of safe passage for a group of twelve Italian men and women written by the English ambassador to France, Valentine Dale, in June 1574. Based on the names and other details Dale provides in the letter, this note argues that the group was a troupe of Italian performers touring to England—most likely the same troupe that entertained Queen Elizabeth at Windsor and Reading in July 1574 and the people of Dover in September or October 1574.

One of the most active periods for foreign performers touring to England came between 1573 and 1578 as Italian players and tumblers entertained audiences in London, at court, and across the provinces. Not until the visits of the French performers of the 1620s and 1630s would England experience such a concentrated rate of visitation from foreign performers all from a single country. Previous studies have discussed most, though certainly not all, references in English records to these Italian performers and their effects on English drama; unfortunately, rarely do these records provide detailed information about who, precisely, any of these performers were.¹ A hitherto unidentified document in the East Sussex Record Office may partially fill that gap by naming several people who seem to have been part of a troupe of Italian players touring to England in June 1574.² The document may thus provide important new information about the performances by a troupe of Italian actors before Queen Elizabeth at Windsor and Reading in July 1574 and before public audiences in Dover and London that fall.

The earliest appearance in England of Italian players in the historical records during this period occurred on 14 July 1573, the same day Elizabeth departed London for the first stop on a progress that would last until late September, when her privy council wrote from Greenwich to London's Lord Mayor John Rivers, instructing him 'to permitte libertie to certein Italian plaiers to make shewe of an instrument of strainge motiones within the Citie'.³ While at Croydon on 19 July,

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the council members were surprised to learn that Rivers had ignored their original instructions and had, apparently, prevented the Italians from performing: they again ordered the lord mayor 'to graunt libertie to certein Italians to make shewe of an instrument there, merveling that he did it not at their first request'.⁴ Frances Barasch assumes 'they must have performed [at court] before receiving the permit to play in public'.⁵ Possibly the Italians had indeed performed for and managed to secure friends on the council, though no record of such a performance exists. We do not know the precise nature of their 'instrument of strainge motiones', though the phrase suggests some manner of puppetry or a clockwork mechanism.⁶ The nineteenth-century historian of Italian puppetry Pietro Ferrigni assumed that the performers mentioned in the privy council's letters had decided 'to settle in the city and to carry on their strange motions as in the past and from time immemorial'.⁷ Beyond court musicians, however, no reference to Italian performers residing in London appears in any of the subsequent returns of strangers — the periodic censuses of immigrants in London and its suburbs. Possibly they were not settled in London at all but were, rather, travelling the provinces in search of new audiences: they may be the same 'Italyans' who were paid 'for certeyne pastymes that they shewed' before the mayor and other town officials two months later at Nottingham on 1 September 1573.⁸

E.K. Chambers speculated that this troupe was a company of comedians and tumblers led by Antonio Soldino of Florence and Anton Maria of Venice.⁹ Soldino and Maria's company had performed before Charles IX at Blois in March 1572 and in Paris in June 1572, when the earl of Lincoln — in France from 8–22 June for diplomatic purposes — saw at the Louvre 'an Italian playe, and dyvers vauters and leapers of dyvers sortes verie excellent'; Chambers took that interaction as possible evidence that Lincoln subsequently invited the troupe to England, though nothing in the records associated with any of the Italian troupes in England specifically links them to either Soldino or Maria, nor is there any evidence that Soldino and Maria's company employed the kind of 'instrument[s] of strainge motiones' referenced in the privy council's letter of 14 July 1573.¹⁰ There are other reasons to doubt Chambers's identification of the 1573 troupe in England with Soldino and Maria; for example, as Pamela Allen Brown notes, the *Gelosi* also entertained Charles IX and English ambassadors in 1572, and other troupes — such as those of Zan Ganassa and the Martinellis — may have performed in Paris that summer.¹¹

On 19 June 1574 an Italian tumbler received payment for performing before town officials at Ipswich, though this was likely a solitary entertainer and not related to the company (or companies) in England the year before.¹² Later that

year, when Elizabeth travelled to Windsor from 11–12 July and then to Reading from 15–22 July, she was accompanied by, among others, a troupe of ‘Italian players’ who performed both acrobatics and pastoral plays.¹³ These performers may have been the ‘Italian tumblers or players’ who entertained a public audience at Dover about two months later, in September or October 1574.¹⁴ They may have still been in the country the next month, in November 1574, when Thomas Norton, city remembrancer of London, wrote his famous complaint to the new lord mayor, James Hawes, about the ‘assemblies to the unchaste, shamelesse and unnaturall tomblinge of the Italion weomen’.¹⁵

While these records provide some idea of where and when Italian performers appeared in these years, as well as, occasionally, how much they were paid and what their performances might have involved, none names the performers, and nothing establishes for certain that the performers in late 1574 were not the same as those who had been in England in 1573. The document in the East Sussex Record Office, however, provides new evidence that appears to confirm that the Italians in England in the fall of 1574 were a new troupe. In addition, this document provides names for these possible actors and verification that — as Norton indicated in his November 1574 complaint to Hawes — their ranks included at least two women.

On 18 June 1574 in Paris, Valentine Dale, who had been the English ambassador to France since April 1573, issued a letter of safe conduct to a company of twelve Italians:

Valentine Dale Doctor of Lawe and Ambassador resident for the
 Quenes *Maiestie* with the frenche Kinge to all Maiors Sheriffes
 Baylifes Constables and all other the Quenes *Maiesties* officers
 to whome in this case it shall appertaine wheras the bearers
 hereof Francesco Giuliano Francini florentine and Imperia his
 wyfe Thomas de Nicolao florentine, Vincentio Siciliano, ffrancesco
 Brandini, Giacomo Gatamomole and his wyfe, Barnardino
 Cherubini of Cremona, Donato da Lecce Marcantonio of
 Ancona & Golpino da Talliccio and his *servaunt* with
 thar pistolles \leftrightarrow and haquebuses to the number of ix are desirouse
 to repaire to the Courte [^]rabout¹ their private affaires theis are to
 require you to *permit* them to passe without any *your* lett
 or *interruption* And this Fare ye well. At Parris the
 xviiith daie of June / 1574.

Valen: Dale¹⁶

Dale's letter does not indicate what specifically brought these Italians to the English court. Several clues in the document, however, support the idea that they were a company of players. Most importantly, two of the names in Dale's letter — Marcantonio and Imperia — intersect with the names of two known Italian performers who toured to France in these years.¹⁷ Marc Antonio Scotivelli was part of a troupe of comedians, referred to variously as '*Italianos Nuevos*' and '*Los Corteses*', that performed before Henry of Navarre at Nérac in 1578; possibly, along with Massimiano Milanino, he was a co-leader of the troupe.¹⁸ (Luigi Rasi conjectures that this company was under the patronage of the king of Naples and may have included some disaffected members of the *Gelosi*, though we lack any explicit evidence supporting these claims.¹⁹) Notably, by October 1582, Scotivelli had married 'Maria Imperia': in that month, Imperia and Scotivelli were named, as husband and wife, as executors for the estate of Milanino, who had been killed in a brawl in Madrid.²⁰ If the Imperia who married Marc Antonio Scotivelli is the same 'Imperia' who had been married to the 'Francesco Giuliano Francini' identified in Dale's letter, perhaps Francini had passed away at some point between 1574 and 1582 and Imperia had decided to marry 'Marcantonio of Ancona', her former companion from the same troupe. Taken on their own, the similarities between the names 'Marcantonio of Ancona' and Marc Antonio Scotivelli as well as 'Imperia' and 'Maria Imperia' may not be sufficient evidence that the people in Dale's letter were Italian actors; a number of other factors support such an interpretation, however.

First, Dale notes that the travellers hail from cities and provinces all across Italy: Florence, Cremona, Lecce, Ancona, Taleggio, and possibly Sicily. This geographic range spans the entirety of the Italian peninsula. While a trade delegation or party of religious refugees, for example, would likely comprise people drawn primarily from just one particular region or city, companies of touring Italian players almost always consisted of performers — themselves highly itinerant individuals — drawn together from diverse places across the country; for example, the most famous troupe, the *Gelosi*, included performers from Pistoia, Padua, Roe, Padua, Bologna, Bergamo, and Verona.²¹ In addition, the size of the group — nine men (ten including Golpino's servant) and two women — aligns precisely with the composition of most touring *commedia dell'arte* troupes throughout the period and would allow for a complete casting of *commedia* characters; again, taking the *Gelosi* as the best known example, its ranks usually included seven men and three women.

Several other aspects of Dale's letter suggest that the individuals named in it were itinerant performers. As a kind of negative evidence, almost no other Italians

appear in the archives of Elizabethan Rye, where Dale's letter was apparently surrendered to local authorities by the travellers; nearly all non-English people in the town's records are French, Flemish, Dutch, Spanish, and, occasionally, Portuguese. Furthermore, the fact that none of the names in Dale's letter corresponds with those of any known individuals at court or in the various returns of strangers suggests that they did not settle in London or Westminster. Perhaps most importantly, however, Dale indicates that the group was making their way to court for their 'private affaires', as opposed, for example, to the public affairs that would be the concerns of an official embassy. Conducting private business at court would not necessarily exclude carrying some kind of diplomatic objective — indeed, throughout the period, many performers touring abroad served both cultural and political diplomatic functions, as well as, at times, intelligence-gathering purposes. One would expect Dale to make note in the passport, however, of any official ambassadorial role or protection the group enjoyed, such as the name of a foreign patron. Similarly, he would presumably make note if the group was coming to England for religious protection or, to use the euphemistic phrase most often deployed in lay subsidy rolls and other so-called 'returns of strangers' to describe Protestant refugees from the continent, 'for religion'. The phrase 'private affaires' implies a personal business matter that was, given the wording of the letter, shared by the collective. Finally, most touring troupes of players who did travel to England from the continent made their journey there by way of France, where it would stand to reason that a cautious company would secure safe passage from the English ambassador.²²

The diverse company of Italians described in Dale's June 1574 passport as travelling to the English court for 'private' affairs may, then, have been the company of Italians that entertained Elizabeth during her passage from Windsor to Reading one month later, in July, and that went on to entertain the people of Dover in September or October 1574 and, based on Norton's complaint to Hawes, London in November 1574.²³ Significantly, the troupe included at least two women: the unnamed wife of Giacomo Gatamamole and Imperia, wife of Francesco Giuliano Francini of Florence. As a name, or possibly a stage name, for an Italian actress, 'Imperia' had particular importance because of its links with the famous early sixteenth-century courtesan 'Imperia' di Pietro Cognati.²⁴

The records of the Revels Office provide some details about what the troupe's performances for Elizabeth involved. An account of the 'sundry Implementes & occasions' paid for by the Revels 'for the Italyan Players at Wynsor & Reding' details that Thomas Blgrave expended 8 pounds, 15 shillings, 4 pence on, among other items such as food, drink, lumber, storage, transport, and labor from

tailors, smiths, carpenters, and carters, 'Iron woorke for A frame for A seate in a pageant', painted and garnished 'Ladles & Dishes to beare the lightes at wynsor for the Italyans', and, at Reading, a telling list of properties and costumes, including 'Golde Lether for cornetes', 'Thred & sheperdes hookes', '8. Lamskynnes for Shepperds', 'Horstayles for the wylde mannes garment', 'Arrowes for Nymphes', 'Lightes and shepperdes staves', 'Hoopes for Garlandes', '6 Plates for the Candlestickes', 'Wyer to hang the lightes', 'Bay Leaves & flowers', and 'A Syth for saturne'.²⁵ This list includes several particular characters — shepherds, a wildman, nymphs, and Saturn — that imply a pastoral drama in a classical setting. Albert Feuillerat suggests that the play performed was Torquato Tasso's *Aminta*, which had premiered at the court of Ferrara in 1573, though, as Chambers points out, there were other Italian pastorals that could have used all of the materials described in the Revels record.²⁶

Dale's letter may explain one of the peculiar mysteries that has lingered about this famous inventory. The tremendous outlay of expenses for so many props, costumes, and set pieces suggests that, though the Italians had come to England intending to perform, they came with relatively few materials for those performances.²⁷ No doubt this lack of cargo simplified transport for an itinerant troupe — particularly as it made its way overseas — but it also points to the possibility that they commenced their journey anticipating that their performance before the crown would be supported by the industry (and funding) of the Revels. Dale's letter may indicate, then, that the players had coordinated with Blagrave or others back in London who would have been responsible for arranging for the queen's entertainment during her progress. In other words, the appearance of the Italians before Elizabeth in 1574 was not a coincidence or fortuitous confluence of events: it had been orchestrated.

The activities of early modern English performers touring to the continent have received considerable attention. Scholars of theatre history have paid less attention to the numerous itinerant continental performers who entertained English audiences at court and in public, in London and the provinces. In part, this neglect may stem from an assumption that such performers did not exist or were highly rare. Hopefully having yet another document attesting to the presence of foreign performers in early modern England will help counter such assumptions. That this document gives names to some of these figures may also help recover them, in some small way, from their usual status as anonymous ghosts whose existence is only registered in records of payments made to individuals identified merely in terms of their status as 'strangers'.

Notes

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- 1 See, for example, K.M. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy: A Study in the Commedia Dell'Arte, 1560–1620, with Special Reference to the English Stage*, 2 vols (New York, 1962) and Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven, 1989). On early modern Italian performers abroad in France, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, the Low Lands, England, and elsewhere, see, for example, John Lester, 'Italian Actors in Scotland', *Modern Language Notes* 23.8 (December 1908), 240–2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2916500>; Willem Schrickx, 'Italian Actors in Antwerp in 1576: Drusiano Martinelli and Vincenzo Beladno', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 50.3 (1972), 796–806, <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.1972.2925>; Siro Ferrone, *Arlecchino: Via e avventure di Tristano Martinelli attore* (Rome, 2006), esp. chapter 1; Anna Maria Testaverde, ed., *Zani mercenario della piazza europea* (Bergamo, 2003); Umberto Artioli and Cristina Grazioli, eds, *I Gonzaga e l'Impero: Itinerari dello spettacolo* (Florence, 2005); María Del Valle Ojeda Calvo, *Stefanelo Botarga e Zan Ganassa: Scenari e zibaldoni di comici Italiani nella Spagna del Cinquecento* (Rome, 2007); Robert Henke, 'Border-Crossing in the *Commedia dell'Arte*', in *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, ed. Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (Aldershot, 2008), 19–34, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315549880-12>; M.A. Katritzky, 'Zan Bragetta a Jean Potage: divadelní kočovníci v raně novověké Evropě', *Divadelní revue* 21.2 (August 2010), 48–61; Erith Jaffe-Berg, *Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean: Charting Journeys and Mapping 'Others'* (Farnham, 2016).
- 2 East Sussex Record Office, Archive of Rye Corporation, RYE 47/6/34. Partially transcribed in *Historical Manuscripts Commission* 13th report, part 4 (London, 1892), 33.
- 3 John Roche Dasent, ed., *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, vol. 8 (London, 1894), 131.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 132. E.K. Chambers also refers to a 22 July 1574 letter commending 'Italian players' to the lord mayor, but gives no citation for this record and it does not appear in the privy council's council book (*The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols [Oxford, 1923], 2.262); possibly this is an error for either the 14 July or the 19 July 1573 letter.
- 5 Frances Barasch, 'Shakespeare and the Puppet Sphere', *English Literary Renaissance* 34.2 (May 2004), 157–75, 162, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0013-8312.2004.00040.x>;

see also George Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre*, 2nd edn (Carbondale, 1990), 55.

- 6 Barasch asserts with some certainty that these performers were *marionettisti* and that it “seems safe to say that [they] brought to London the same double repertoire they had devised for public audiences at home and on the Continent: neoclassical comedy and Christian moralities” (‘Shakespeare and the Puppet Sphere’, 162–3). While this assertion is plausible, and perhaps the most likely conclusion, it remains speculation.
- 7 Trans. Barasch, *ibid.*, 162.
- 8 Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 2.261–2; John Tucker Murray, *English Dramatic Companies 1558–1642*, vol. 2 (London, 1910), 374.
- 9 Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 2.263.
- 10 Later, while visiting the king at the palace of Château de Madrid in Neuilly, Lincoln remarked that the king ‘had some pastyme showed him by Italian players, which I was at with hym’ (*ibid.*, 2.261).
- 11 Pamela Allen Brown, ‘The Traveling Diva and Generic Innovation’, *Renaissance Drama* 44.2 (Fall 2016), 249–67, 252, <https://doi.org/10.1086/688691>.
- 12 *Malone Society Collections*, vol. 2, part 3 (Oxford, 1931), 269.
- 13 Albert Feuillerat, *Documents Relating to the Office of the Revels in the Time of Queen Elizabeth* (Louvain, 1908), 225, 227–8. On these performances before Elizabeth, see Pamela Allen Brown, *The Diva’s Gift: The Italian Actress and the Shakespearean Stage* (Oxford, 2022).
- 14 James Gibson, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Kent*, vol. 2 (Toronto, 2002), 470.
- 15 Quoted in Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 1.282. Norton’s reproachful remark and its accompanying anxiety about the sexualized display of foreign female bodies has attracted much scholarly interest, though peculiarly the crowds Norton implies left no other footprint in the historical record or in literary references.
- 16 East Sussex Record Office, Archive of Rye Corporation, RYE 47/6/34.
- 17 One other name in the passport also has associations with the theatre, though much later in the period: Bernardino Cherubini appears in a 1663 list of individuals associated with Siena’s ‘Congrega dei Rozzi’ — an association of artisans who supported literature, drama, and the arts and who in 1531 erected and ran that city’s Teatro dei Rozzi — where he is given the nickname ‘*Incapriccito*’ (‘crazed’ or ‘incompetent’), which might indicate that he played comic parts such as buffoons or clowns (Curzio Mazzi, *La Congrega dei Rozzi di Siena nel secolo XVI*, vol. 1 (Florence, 1882), 457). Given how much later this appears, however, the name is either a coincidence or, possibly, the 1574 Cherubini’s son or grandson.
- 18 Baschet, *Les Comédiens italiens*, 87.

- 19 Luigi Rasi, *I Comici italiani: Biografia, bibliografia, iconografia*, vol. 2 (Florence, 1897), 531–2.
- 20 Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy*, 1.261.
- 21 Information on the composition of the *Gelosi*, here and below, comes from John Rudlin and Olly Crick, *Commedia Dell'Arte: A Handbook for Troupes* (London, 2001), 14.
- 22 As noted above, there were at least three Italian companies entertaining Charles IX at Blois and appearing at Paris in 1572 and 1573: the famous *Gelosi*, a company of twelve led by Antonio Soldino of Florence, and a company of ten led by 'Anthoine Marie' (Anton Maria) of Venice, though they did join forces at least once for a royal entertainment (Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy*, 1.258, 305); on these troupes, see Armand Baschet, *Les Comédiens italiens*, 29–50; Angelo Solerti, *Ferrara e la corte Estense* (1900), 93; and Winifred Smith, *Italian Actors of the Renaissance* (New York, 1930), 31–2. Notably, Dale's letter is dated only two weeks after the death of Charles IX; if the group of people named in Dale's letter are some of the Italian players who had so pleased the French king, perhaps their patron's death prompted them to use that goodwill to secure a passport from the English ambassador as they decided to move on to new territory. Unfortunately, neither Soldino nor Maria, nor any of the known members of the *Gelosi*, is named in the letter, though the troupe feasibly split or re-formed in a new combination following the king's death in May 1574 — the passing of a patron was certainly the kind of traumatic event that often led to changes in a company's fortunes and personnel.
- 23 Given that Dale's letter is dated at Paris on 18 June, the Italian tumbler at Ipswich on 19 June was not likely part of the same company. Possibly the three references from July through November 1574 point to three separate groups, rather than just one, but given the expense and risk involved with travelling to England, the simplest conclusion would be that all three reference a single troupe that was, for about six months, touring England in search of audiences. Records associated with other itinerant foreign performers in England point to this practice, such as the Turkish or Hungarian tumbler who travelled about, usually with the Queen's Men, from autumn 1589 through December 1590.
- 24 On Imperia di Pietro Cognati, see Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500–1650* (London, 2016), 97–118.
- 25 Feuillerat, *Documents*, 227–8.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 458; Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 2.262. The fact that most of these materials were only purchased for use at Reading indicates that the Italians had performed some other play at Windsor — something requiring just one prominent property: a

pageant seat in an iron frame so elaborate that it had to be built in Southwark and transported to Windsor for the occasion.

- 27 Related to this, two of the final expenses in Blagrave's list are for 'The hier of A Trunk' and 'Cariage of Stuf from Reding', implying that all or most of the materials Blagrave had paid for went back to the Revels office in London; if the Italians were to perform elsewhere, they would have to make do without those items.