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Investigating the Influence of Commedia Dell'Arte on Punch and Judy Shows and the Development of its Educational Aspect

Anna Chiara Savi

Punch and Judy is a British puppet show known for its comic use of violence, but is this the only factor that contributed to this show's durability? Looking at its socio-historical context, its influence from *commedia dell'arte*, and drawing on multiple theories, this paper explores Punch and Judy's development from a form of pure entertainment to educational entertainment. However, it also argues that while it contributed to the entertainment and educational landscapes of its period, its educational value is condemned in light of contemporary moral standards.

Introduction

Research into *commedia dell'arte* has frequently focused on its origins as an art form and on its characters, its development in the Italian context but also abroad with different practitioners borrowing and adapting characters and aspects of the *commedia dell'arte*. This paper will build on existing research focusing on the educational value of *commedia dell'arte* and its influence in the context of Punch and Judy, a traditional British puppet show featuring Punch and his wife Judy in scenes from their daily life. Through an analysis of the *commedia dell'arte* and Punch and Judy contexts, characters, and audience, this paper will discuss how, even if education was not the primary purpose of Punch and Judy shows, this aspect evolved in 19th century Britain.

Until the 1600s, *commedia dell'arte* was one of the predominant forms of theatre in Europe. However, in 1784, Friedrich Schiller delivered, and later published, an essay where he explores the moral and educational potential of theatre. This essay was influential in forging the concept of theatre as a moral institution and what constitutes "proper theatre", which is theatre that serves a vital moral function by allowing audiences to experience intense emotions such as pity

and fear, thereby achieving a cathartic release, while educating its audience's aesthetic taste.¹ Commedia dell'arte however, did not fit into that landscape, because the theatre reformers of the time believed that it had no moral or educational value. Therefore, some argued for its complete abolishment, while others believed that it could be 'reformed' to constitute new types of theatre, for example, Carlo Goldoni's or Carlo Gozzi's plays.

Theatre, in Western culture, is regarded as media that should both educate as well as entertain. This could originate directly from Greek theatre, where catharsis, the purging of passions, through the representation of hybris, any form of excess, was key; or it could be influenced by Horace's argument that all literature should instruct and delight. This tradition of associating theatre and education has been most explicit through applied theatre practices such as Theatre in Education, originating in 1965, specifically targeted to children. However, in my opinion, theatre can be considered inherently educational in the way in which it always looks at society through a critical eye, depicting it, praising or criticising it, and always having a message to communicate. This makes theatre intentionally educational in its creation and delivery, teaching the audience about morals and social behaviours to adopt or reject, as well as culture and history.

Commedia dell'arte, I would argue, is not so different from instructional theatre. Though it is commonly seen simply as a form of entertainment, the form it was born and developed as, looking back at it, its potential educational value is uncovered. Its teaching is still part of actors' training (exploring the use of masks, movement, and voice) or drama-therapy courses (at least in Italy), meaning that commedia dell'arte is retained to have educational value but only in practice-based disciplines. As a result, studying commedia dell'arte through an educational lens is largely uncommon as its primary function has been entertainment. However, by reflecting on carnivalesque, as well as this dissertation's case study, we will see how commedia dell'arte can be retained to have an educative purpose and how subsequent

1 Friedrich Schiller, *Theater Considered as A Moral Institution*, Schiller Institute, accessed March 19, 2024, https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/schil_theatremoral.html.

practitioners, even if they did not borrow every aspect of commedia, have all retained an educative purpose alongside the entertaining purpose.

Uncovering Commedia Dell'Arte's Educational Aspect

To contextualise this approach, I would like to start by providing an overview of commedia dell'arte, an art form that originated in the 16th century in what is now Italy. It was a form of street theatre heavily reliant on improvisation, the use of masks, and stock characters (also referred to as "Masks"). The stock characters, for which commedia dell'arte is most known, were caricatures of certain types of people or vices (for example Pantalone represented the avaricious Venetian merchant) and were easily recognisable by their speech (dialects), costumes, masks, and attributes. Basing a Mask on specific stereotypes and clichés allowed the actor of this Mask to specialise in their character, and develop a specific skill set (jokes, gestures, stock comedic routines) becoming easily recognisable to the audience. By seeing a character the audience knew who they represented and their role in the plot even without understanding the text, as the languages used, the Italian of the Lovers or the different dialects, were not necessarily spoken and understood by lower class people everywhere in current Italy.

Being based on stereotypes also meant that these characters never evolved and would have the same roles in intrigues, typically revolving around the Zanni (servants) helping the Lovers persuade their fathers to approve of their union. The Zanni's persuasion process was subversive in nature, as they would deceive their masters. Looking at this subversion through the lens of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, it can be seen as an educational tool insofar as it acts as a catharsis for the audience. Bakhtin contends that the presence of a Carnival allowed the authorities to maintain control over the masses by allowing them to dress up as figures of power and mock them. One of its aspects, which he calls "eccentricity", refers to the encouragement and acceptance of people dressing up and performing in strange manners and expressing themselves in any way, especially transgressive.² This

acquires a cathartic effect since people are allowed to let out their dissatisfaction with the authorities. In this way, commedia dell'arte performances become a form of perpetual Carnival where the Zanni's subversion of authority purges people of their frustrations against any form of authority.

However, I believe it is important to highlight that commedia dell'arte's primary purpose was entertainment and no text or testimony that has reached our time demonstrates an intentional educational objective, neither in its creation nor its development. This aspect is uncovered nowadays when looking back at the format of the plays, but also at the structure of a commedia company. One of the distinct characteristics of the commedia dell'arte company was the absence of a full script which subsequently led to the actors and actresses actively honing their creative abilities to generate new content and deliver an excellent performance. This, in turn, produced a strong need for cooperation among actors, eliminating any potential hierarchies between them as everyone's innovative ideas were acknowledged and embraced. In fact, creativity is an important skill from an educational point of view as it focuses on the development of alternative thinking and involves making mistakes.³ As a result, the structure and management of a commedia company and the importance of teamwork in a fully improvised setting, allowed actors to be treated with human-dignity and thus acknowledged as fully human.

Contextualising commedia dell'arte, identifying the lens of carnivalesque, and focusing on its structure allows us to read commedia dell'arte as educational for both audiences and actors. It will also provide a reading for our case study as similar elements allowed Punch and Judy puppeteers to vehicle their educational message to their audiences. While Punch and Judy are clearly related to commedia dell'arte characters and retain their carnivalesque subversion of authority and morals, their shows are also a product of 18th-century theatre reforms. Through the investigation of the

of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

3 "The Role of Creativity in Learning and Education", *TigerCampus*, 2023, accessed Jan 22 2024, <https://www.tigercampus.hk/role-of-creativity-in-learning-and-education/>.

commedia dell'arte's influence on Punch and Judy, as well as Britain's socio-historical context, this paper thus looks at how Punch and Judy shows gained their educational value.

Contextualising Punch and Judy

Punch and Judy is a traditional British puppet show featuring Punch and his wife Judy in a series of short scenes each depicting an interaction between Punch and another character who usually falls victim to his violence, but despite its violence, this show is still seen as comedy. Looking at this show, I will focus on the period from the Regency Era to the Victorian Era in Britain. The change of monarch in 1837 led to a change in morals, from looser morals (including gambling, the presence of obscene theatre, and street performances) to stricter morals dictated by the Evangelical faction of the Church of England. One of the changes implemented by the Evangelists was banning street performances, which caused Punch and Judy shows to move from a public to a private form of entertainment, from addressing a predominantly adult audience to addressing a children's audience, significantly changing the meaning of the violence they portrayed in their dynamic. Looking at the morals of both the Regency and Victorian eras, this case study investigates the puppet's change of sphere and how the role of the audience changed the use of violence in Punch and Judy.

Western puppets represent commedia dell'arte characters in miniature form. This has stemmed from the need to modify commedia performances to weather or actors' physical conditions in order for a company to still be able to put on a performance and earn their wages. The fact that they were easier to transport and put up for an audience, as a puppet stage is smaller than an actor one, may explain why this form spread more easily and widely than commedia dell'arte. Pulcinella for example is a commedia dell'arte Zanni and puppet whose popularity has perhaps grown the most, having many counterparts in Europe such as Polichinelle (France), Petrushka (Russia) or Punch (Britain), the last one being the focus of this chapter. Pulcinella embodies the figure of the trickster who rebels against all forms of authority, traits that Punch has

inherited. In his shows, he kills the Doctor, challenges state authorities and the Devil — the ultimate form of evil in Christianity — but also beats and kills his wife, which could be interpreted as a challenge to the institution of marriage. In *commedia dell'arte*, Pulcinella defies his master's authority by assisting the *Innamorati*. Similarly, Punch defies authority and morality by murdering characters and portraying a violent marriage. Although their goals are different, they both rely on the carnivalesque's reversal of roles to deceive authorities, defying their position as more powerful and intelligent than lower-class people. In both *Punch and Judy* and *commedia dell'arte*, these reversals are based on ridiculing the authority through verbal or physical wit and trickery. For example, Punch in Act II of *The Tragical Comedy*, or the *Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy* (the only full play text remaining of their shows), tricks the Doctor into believing he is badly hurt from his fall off a horse and later kills him, or in Act III a Constable and an Officer come to arrest him for the murders of Scaramouche, Judy, and their child but Punch ends up beating them until they finally arrest him. It is interesting to note that figures from the police are not killed compared to the other characters, showing that although *Punch and Judy* acted as a form of catharsis for the audience, puppeteers did not want to encourage rebellion against real life state authorities, which could have negative consequences in a period leading to (and later threatened by) the French Revolution.

Punch and Judy as Social Commentators of Regency Era Britain

In relation to the portrayal of a violent marriage, *Punch and Judy* evolve in a changing Britain where women started to work and earn wages, altering the patriarchal order. Prior to this evolution, men worked while women were confined to domestic duties. Working women gaining a form of financial freedom brought about a new family dynamic that seems to have given these women more confidence to stand up to their husbands instead of dutifully accepting their place in society. Rosalind Crone writes that literary men of the time observed that this new dynamic led to an “inevitable clash between sexes”,⁴ an elegant

4 Rosalind Crone, “Mr and Mrs Punch in Nineteenth-Century England,”

way to say that husbands were beating their wives in order to subdue them. Therefore, although the domestic violence depicted in *Punch and Judy* has comedic purposes due to it being exaggerated, it also takes on an anthropological role depicting working family norms of the time. It could be argued that using violence as a comedic tool is a lowbrow form of comedy, thus appealing to lower classes, while for higher classes, this lowbrow comedy could have cathartic purposes. While high-class men may have enjoyed *Punch's* violence, in line with ideas of misogyny, it could have encouraged them not to reproduce this domestic violence, as reproducing low-class customs would not be acceptable for their status.

During the Regency era, even though the Evangelist faction of the Church of England grew in power, it was not strong enough to control the habits of gambling and debauchery of the time. During this period, puppet shows were still street performances, which were much more common and less regulated, their audience consisting mostly of adults so their violence was more easily tolerated. Moreover, puppetry allowed for less criticism from society and authorities as the characters were wooden or glove figures that were not alive, thus no matter what they represented, it would still be considered a play. This ultimately allowed freer discussion of private matters in public. *Punch's* violence was also appreciated by his audiences as it allowed him to defy the morality of melodramas, a popular genre of the time, where the balance of good and evil or good triumphing over evil was portrayed. Instead, in *Punch and Judy* shows, the audience could celebrate *Punch* as an anti-hero prevailing over the positive figures (the Doctor and Constable for example). However, during the Victorian era, this violence was condemned and censored as it was deemed disrespectful. Indeed, during this period, the Evangelist faction gained significant power, allowing them to monitor society and morality. They advocated for various social changes such as the abolition of slavery and legislation against child labour for example, as well as control over one's sexuality, despite the fact that standards of proper sexual behavior varied between men and women, and a need

for cultivation for all classes of society.⁵ These new codes of conduct led to a decline in gambling, horse races, and obscene theatres, and although Punch and Judy were not obscene, they presented a violence that was now condemned by Evangelical morality. Therefore, puppet shows evolved from a public to a private form of entertainment, taking place mostly inside middle-class homes, the new and ever-growing class of Victorian society. Being moved to homes, they gained a new audience — children.

Punch and Judy as Children’s Entertainment and Educator

From the 18th century onward emerged, especially in high and middle classes, the concept of “childhood” and thus the need to provide entertainment for children. Punch and Judy, who were already well known, became the perfect candidates for this new specialisation. This is how Punch and Judy puppeteers modified and moralised their shows. Indeed, although Punch’s violence remained, it acquired a new moral and educational dimension. Punch would not beat his wife and other puppets to death, his child, although thrown off stage, would be later found alive, and in the end, Punch and Judy left the audience with an image of a happily married couple. Victorian society also placed great importance on marriage, family, and domesticity so “their conjugal life became a moral tale, designed to promote the ideals of compassionate marriage and prepare boys and girls for their future roles as men and women”.⁶ These shows would teach them about the respectability of marriage, the concept of separate spheres, and the necessary passivity of a wife. It would also teach boys to control their anger and grow to be caring fathers and compassionate husbands. During this period which placed a new focus on childhood and the development of toy manufacturing in Britain, Punch and Judy became commercial figures who were even turned into toys and protagonists of nursery literature. The authors of these nurseries decided that rather than portraying Punch’s violence, presented as rare, they would emphasise on the

5 “Conflict and Consensus: Morality and Ethics in the Victorian Period,” *Brewminate: A Bold Blend of News and Ideas*, 29 Aug. 2023, accessed 21 Dec. 2023 <https://brewminate.com/conflict-and-consensus-morality-and-ethics-in-the-victorian-period>

6 Crone, “Mr and Mrs Punch”, 1074.

portrayal of a happy marriage between the couple. Judy's character was also modified to portray her as a good and faithful wife who can easily control Punch's temper. However, these new traits implied a total submission to his violence, as evidenced by Frederic Weatherly's nursery: "After the show they perform together, Judy '[...] did not bear any malice for the blows. In fact, she had not felt them, and that is a great matter when you have to be beaten continually.'" ⁷ Thus, it could be said that in this way, the author teaches young girls that as wives they should be patient with their husbands and forgive their violence, even endure it, as it will hurt less and less as time goes, therefore giving the idea that a violent husband is a normal husband.

Regardless of this newfound morality, the shows maintained their comedic aspect as they still looked to be enjoyable both for children and adults. Indeed, the domestic violence was satirically depicted, with Punch wearing a jester costume and his beatings being exaggerated enough to encourage the audience to laugh. However, this goal was not always successful as it fed from and into the anxieties of married couples, such as a wife's negligence of her wifely duties, and there was a backlash from male audience members who failed to see this comedy. Indeed, they did not see Punch's violence as something to be reprimanded, rather something that is justified, accusing Judy of being the instigator of the conflict as she fails to fulfil her wifely duties, such as caring for and loving her husband. Throughout act I, scene 1, Punch calls for her: "Judy, my dear! Judy!" ⁸ multiple times while battling different characters until he finally asks "Judy can't you answer my dear?" ⁹ Her response "Well! What do you want Mr. Punch?" is harsh and distant, both because she replies from within the box and because she refers to her husband as "Mister", whereas Punch addresses her by her first name. When she enters the stage, Punch kisses her and she slaps him, presenting her as an unloving wife as she rejects his affection and later on beats Punch (although this is justified because he killed their baby by throwing him out of the window). I would

7 Ibid., 1077.

8 *Punch and Judy with twenty-four illustrations* (London: Bell & Daldy, York Street, Covent Garden, 1870), 66-69. <https://archive.org/details/punchjudy00colluoft/page/64/mode/2up>

9 Ibid., 69

argue that her defiance and beating could be read in line with the carnivalesque's defiance of authority - here defying the authority of the husband or patriarchy more generally - but as mentioned previously, the new position women acquired in the working class family led to a violent backlash from their husbands, so defiance of authority seems to be allowed only to Punch. Indeed, Judy's defiance leads him to sing a complaint ending with "For this [her unruliness], by and by, she shall pay, sirs.",¹⁰ that is to beat and kill her, which happens later on, without being criticised by the audience. On the contrary, he received praise for his character.

As a result, Punch and Judy shows would have been good educators for children as they portrayed misogyny, the acceptance of domestic violence and the patriarchal system, values that were very much ingrained and acceptable in Victorian society. However, although Rosalind Crone provides an objective evolution of the shows, their message and influence, constantly pointing out the comical purpose behind every element of the shows; seeing that some adult members of the audience misinterpreted their comical intention, I cannot help but wonder whether these shows not only sustained these values but perhaps even encouraged them, notably domestic violence. On the one hand, children were exposed to the portrayal of domestic violence presented as justified in some performances and even accepted by Judy in others. On the other hand, the absence of records around domestic violence (general opinion, frequency, harshness), especially from women, I cannot help but wonder whether Punch and Judy perhaps failed in their full comedic intent and instead promoted misogyny, women's passiveness and men's violence on their wives. Overall, from an educational standpoint, while Punch and Judy shows successfully sustained Victorian society values, from today's point of view, we can only condemn them as they portray values which are actively denounced and fought against.

10 Ibid., 70.

Conclusion

To conclude, commedia dell'arte's primary purpose was entertainment and not education. However, when looking back at it through Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque, as well as the structure of a commedia company, we uncover this educative aspect. That is how through the constant portrayal of reversal of roles, commedia dell'arte would create a perpetual Carnival on stage and allow catharsis for their lower-class audiences, and how through the absence of director and the equality between all members of the company, the actors' creativity was valued. Commedia dell'arte spread to different countries and evolved under the influence of different cultures, for example how Pulcinella evolved into Punch in Britain. Punch and Judy have inherited the commedia's use of carnivalesque, challenging different forms of authorities but has also taken an anthropological role, depicting working class family habits, that is, domestic violence. Violence against authorities in Punch and Judy shows could provide a cathartic effect on lower class audiences and domestic violence may have provided a cathartic effect on higher class audiences since this habit was associated with working class families, a class they could not resemble. However, with Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne, Punch and Judy moved to be a private form of entertainment, thus gaining its educational purpose as children became their main audience. Violence - domestic and not - retained its comedic aspect but also became a means to educate children promoting ideas of the time: misogyny, women's passiveness, men's violence on their wives. While Punch and Judy shows successfully sustained and promoted these values, from today's point of view, we can only condemn them as they portray values which are actively denounced and fought against.

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