

Anti-Rhetorical Strategies in Early Modern Images of Comic Actors: Harlequin's Iconography and its Surviving Medieval Features

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The *Compositions de Rhétorique* by Monsieur Don Arlequin was published by Tristano Martinelli in 1601 as a wedding present to Maria de' Medici.¹ Martinelli was at the time one of Maria de' Medici's favourite players and the book was completed during the company's journey between autumn of 1600 and spring of 1601, following the future queen, who was to be married to Henry IV.² *Imprimé Dela Le Bout du Monde*, the book, had been conceived during the period of Maria de' Medici's engagement to the king of France, while the Italian troupe the *Accesi* was staying in Lyon with the French court. Martinelli resorts to a clearly provoking procedure, since the title of the book evokes the most prestigious art of literary tradition, but these *Compositions de Rhétorique* are in fact composed of blank pages interposed with images. One of the pages shows the famous actor in the typical Harlequin's patchwork costume, a spear in his hand and a pannier with three little Harlequins and some tools on his back (Figure 1).

The reference to the noble art of rhetoric is an ironic trick which accompanies the iconographic strategy: the pages of the book contain a sort of parade of *comici* presented in the characteristic attire of their types: it is a promotional book to be browsed in order to celebrate and make memorable their successful stage performances. The ironical reference to rhetoric points out the diversity and alterity of players: while the *litterati* use words and sentences, the *comici* employ their expressive

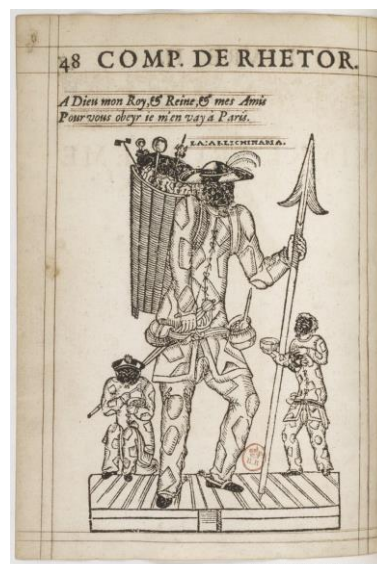


Figure 1 Tristano Martinelli, *Compositions de Rhétorique de Monsieur Don Arlequin*, Lyon, 1601, p. 48 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Réserve Yd. 922)

bodies and gestures: a popular visual strategy counterpoised to that of the dominant culture.

The (anti)rhetorical strategy of Tristano Martinelli does not explain some puzzling attributes of his image, in particular the three little Harlequins in the basket on his back and the spear in his hand, details which I will dwell upon later. A figurative document presenting a certain resemblance to this bizarre iconography is nevertheless worth mentioning right now. An engraving in the *Recueil Fossard*, one of the first iconographical documents concerning a *commedia dell'arte* troupe, shows Harlequin carrying the sons of Franceschina to their actual father, Pantaloon, holding some of them by the hand and others, once more, in a basket on his back³ (Figure 2).



Figure 2 *Recueil Fossard*. Stockholm, Drottningholms Teatermuseum.

In this case, the situation is part of a dramatic context, but the recurrence of the basket full of little Harlequins is not to be dismissed as a simple coincidence. It appears again, for instance, in a 1667 *scenario* by Domenico Biancolelli.⁴ As I will illustrate with the help of some examples, the basket and other elements re-emerge in different contexts, until the climactic period of *commedia dell'arte*, the 17th century. Has the figure of Harlequin perhaps inherited the attributes of a more ancient tradition, moulding them into a new comical pattern?

As is known, the question of Harlequin's origin is still a subject of investigation for scholars. Numerous pages have been written since the 1904 publication of Otto Driesen's study,⁵ which tried to demonstrate the devilish nature of Hellequin, gradually remoulded into a comic form.⁶ Beginning with the evocative name,⁷ some sources clearly show a link between Harlequin and the folkloric re-elaborations of the demonic. The existence of a possible link cannot be denied, even if the invention of *commedia dell'arte* masks has to be attributed to the creative imagination of some audacious performers rather than to a popular

tradition of entertainment such as the carnival (which probably featured an early example of comic types conceived on the rudimentary stages erected in market places).

At any rate, as already pointed out, some popular medieval roots of the most renowned mask, Harlequin, can be seen in iconography, especially if we look at a spectacular ritual form widespread in medieval popular culture: the *charivari*. Through a ritual staging of disorder and inversion of hierarchy, the burlesque procession of *charivari* is motivated by an anthropological need for social control, and its persistence is confirmed by the numerous interdictions from civil and religious authorities, repeated over and over even after the late Middle Ages⁸. The *charivari* was organized by the members of a community to stigmatize and mock socially improper behaviour, such as the second wedding of a widow or the marriage of an old man with a young woman, probably doomed to infecundity. It is impossible not to think about the recurring misadventures of Pantalone, wooing his son's fiancée or someone just as inappropriate to his age. Of course, at the end of the story he will be ridiculed, cuckolded, beaten and obliged to economic loss (which also has the function of counterbalancing his proverbial avarice).

This underlying thematic convergence of *commedia dell'arte* subjects and the *charivari* has already been thoroughly explored.⁹ What has not been sufficiently investigated is the medieval tradition from which these kinds of suggestions draw their inspiration. They are in fact a sort of branching tree, with many shoots growing in different directions: some of them dry up and die, while others give birth to new foliage, perpetuating a continuously transformed tradition, ultimately enduring into

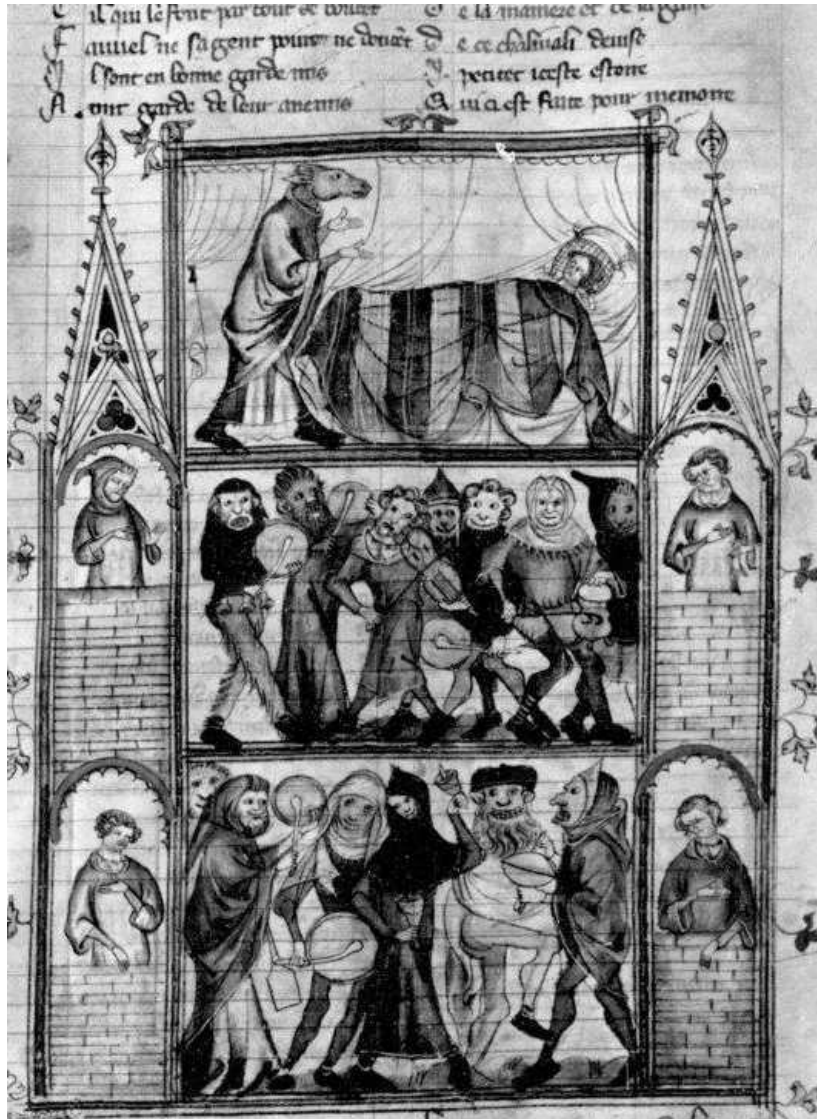


Figure 3 *Roman de Fauvel*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 146, f. 34

modern folklore. A larger investigation of medieval iconography related to the world of entertainment could cast a new light on the complex network of interpolations and juxtapositions from which Harlequin seems to emerge. The problem is that the focus on Harlequin's infernal connotations, partly faded but re-emerging in many different ways, has obscured one side of the question: the multifaceted conception of the comic in the early modern period.

Having its roots in the medieval connection between folly and sin, comicality is frequently linked to the demoniac, in an attempt to exorcise something terrible through the power of laughter. In order to reduce alterity to something no longer fearsome, it is necessary to soften it through a shift from the monstrous to the grotesque. Beginning in the 16th century, this need begins to fade away, together with the strong religious predominance over popular imagery. Of course, the belief in an

ultramundane reality crowded with devils, sinners, angels and saints, continued to be widespread, but laughing was not anymore considered the indispensable means to fight these evil forces. This process was obviously gradual and partial, but it clearly affects the attitude towards the comic that characterises the early modern period and the later centuries.

If we consider the question from this point of view, the *zannis* of the *commedia dell'arte* release themselves from a possible ancient heritage, which nevertheless tends to reappear in some specific elements and attributes. Devoid of their original sense, these attributes acquire ironic connotations hinting to a sort of rhetorical strategy which aims at a further ridiculing and taming of Harlequin's figure.

In this article, I will try to trace the possible origin of some details that have not yet received all the attention they deserve, the first of which is the basket carried on Harlequin's back, containing his offspring. I will analyse later the tools in the pannier in Martinelli's engraving, focusing on the model's possible origin: an eccentric figure (Harlequin) with a stick-like instrument (a spear) and a pannier. As I will demonstrate, the little Arlequins that appear in Martinelli's engraving and in the Fossard scene are probably a fanciful re-elaboration of the original iconographical pattern: a pannier full of children carried on the back of devilish figures.

A basket full of little sinners

What could be the meaning of this iconographical motif, the carrying of children in a basket? A manuscript of the *Roman de Fauvel* – the satirical poem written by Gervais du Bus around 1310-14 that narrates the adventures of the eponymous ass, who embodies the worst

human vices – contains two bizarre illustrations¹⁰ that constitute the most striking iconographical evidence of this folkloric rite. The two illustrations are divided into three levels: in the upper one we can see the circumstance causing the scandal, the ass Fauvel and his new bride in bed, while the other two depict a mock serenade (Figure 3). The other miniature represents three *charivari* scenes (Figure 4).

In the upper panel, among the participants in the noisy performance, appears a man with a feathered wing on his head carrying a child on his back; in the central one a hooded wild man drives a cart containing two children, while in the bottom one a man dressed as a monk pushes a barrow containing a naked, bald-headed man. In the central frame, a little barrow is pushed by a hooded man dressed in a bearskin and playing a drum. Another of the manuscript's illustrations shows a tall man wearing wings on his head, driving the wheels of a cart containing numerous children (Figure 5).

The figure wearing wings on his head is the demon Hellequin leading the hellish brigade (*Hellequin / et toutes les autres sa maisnie*).¹¹ In the *Roman de Fauvel*, the *mesnie Hellequin* is in fact mentioned as a comparative term to describe the rattling and clanging *charivari*'s horde.¹² It is worth remembering that besides assuming a licentious character, the *charivari* implies disguise through animal masks or sexual inversions, unseemly dance and making music with improper instruments such as pots and pans, apt to produce cacophonous sounds instead of a pleasant melody. The noise caused by the use of common objects like pots and cowbells also has the purpose of summoning the attention of the inhabitants of the village where the comical procession takes place.



Figure 4 *Roman de Fauvel*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 146, f. 36v

The figure of Hellequin makes his first literary appearance in Orderico Vitale's chronicle, dating to the first half of the 12th century. The author recalls an event that has been described by a young cleric, who in the last night of the year 1091 happened to face a sort of giant with an enormous club, accompanied by a host of devils, monsters and tortured infernal sinners. The chronicler concludes that it is certainly the *familia Herlechini*.¹³ The vision of the cleric is a reinterpretation from a Christian point of view of a very popular myth belonging to the folklore. This myth seems to have some specific elements and characteristics in common with the *charivari*, such as the metallic noise of rings and everyday instruments, which in

Orderico's chronicle are carried by some beasts preceding the hellish procession. The fact that the two brigades have a different connotation, the one being hellish and the other burlesque, does not exclude a convergence of signs, since in medieval imagery the comical and the fearsome can often mix, giving birth to the typical grotesque that can be seen in many reliefs and miniatures of the manuscripts' margins.

The name of Hellequin clearly suggests the realm of Hell (Hell-quin) and in fact his etymology has been the object of some debates.¹⁴ The figure of Hellequin has been considered by some scholars the hellish ancestor of Harlequin.¹⁵ In the miniature, the figure identified with Hellequin drives a barrow



Figure 5 *Roman de Fauvel*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 146, f. 34v

crowded by odd little creatures. According to the tradition, the mesnie Hellequin carried the children who died before being christened.¹⁶ According to Henry Rey-Flaud, the brood depicted in the miniature are illegitimate and abandoned children adopted at the moment of their death.¹⁷ In this case, the reference would be more precisely to a social behaviour deserving to be stigmatized with a burlesque procession.

An engraving by Jacques Callot shows a riding of an ass backward, an iconographical subject deriving from the medieval tradition of scornful attitudes, related to the widespread category of *obscena* and adopted also during the feasts of fools.¹⁸ Also the *osculum infame*, that is the scornful kissing of the ass, is a *topos* in medieval iconography and it frequently

accompanies parodied ridings in iconography. In fact, it is more often shown in satirical and blasphemous images in the margins of gothic manuscripts.¹⁹ Even more frequent is the anal threat, with someone pointing a sharp tool towards someone else's bottom²⁰. Callot's engraving combines the backward riding and a menace to the ass's anus performed with bellows. Though not very characterised, the figures belong to the types of *commedia dell'arte* – the rider being recognizable as Pantalone by his hat and pointed beard. On his back, the rider carries a basket containing indefinite black figures, most probably two cats. A very fascinating analogy has been traced between this depiction and a painting extremely derisive to the point of blasphemy, by Niccolò Frangipani, *Charivari e Sacra Famiglia*.²¹ Here, an old Saint Joseph wearing a buffoon's cap is nourishing a cat representing Christ, held by a cheerful young Maria. The scene is very crowded, since the not-so-holy family is surrounded by coarse, laughing and gesticulating men, one of them lifting a frying pan over the cuckolded presumed father.²² Dating to the 16th century, the painting is certainly part of a tradition of parody re-elaborations, whose success is partly due to the scenes re-launched by *comici dell'arte* in their exhibitions and sometimes surviving in iconography, such as an anonymous 17th century painting showing a Columbine holding a cat-child, a possible Pantalone riding an ass, and a Harlequin with a menacing stick in his hand.²³ Such echoes of an enduring tradition of scorn and derision enrich the fruitful breeding-ground from which *commedia dell'arte* stems.

If the cat-children clearly belong to the context of mockery, though possibly not forgetful of the alliance between this ambiguous animal and evil forces, the presence of unbaptized dead children seems to hint at a different tradition: the return from hell of human souls in the form of visible ghosts (*revenants*). This is apparent mostly in the *charivari* miniatures and re-emerges in some *commedia dell'arte* elements (according to some scholars, beginning from the primitive *zanni*'s white costume, evoking the chthonic divinities.²⁴)



Figure 6 York Hours, London, Private Collection, f. 76



Figure 7 Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Laud. Lat. 84, f. 227

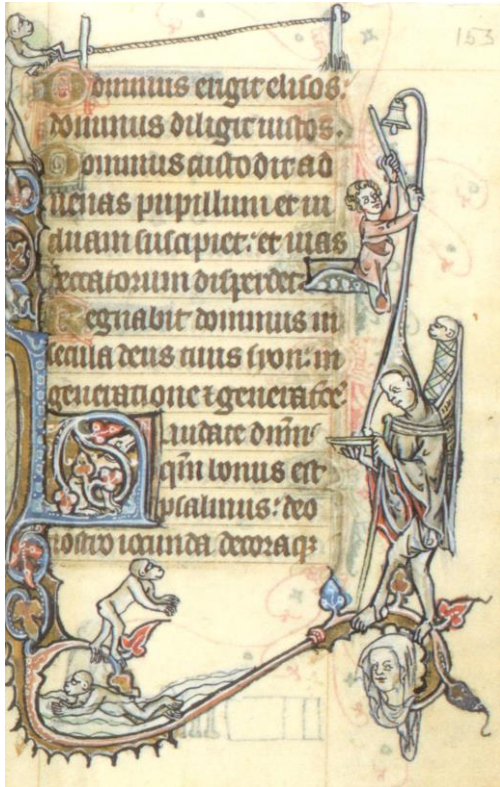


Figure 8 Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Douce 6, f. 153

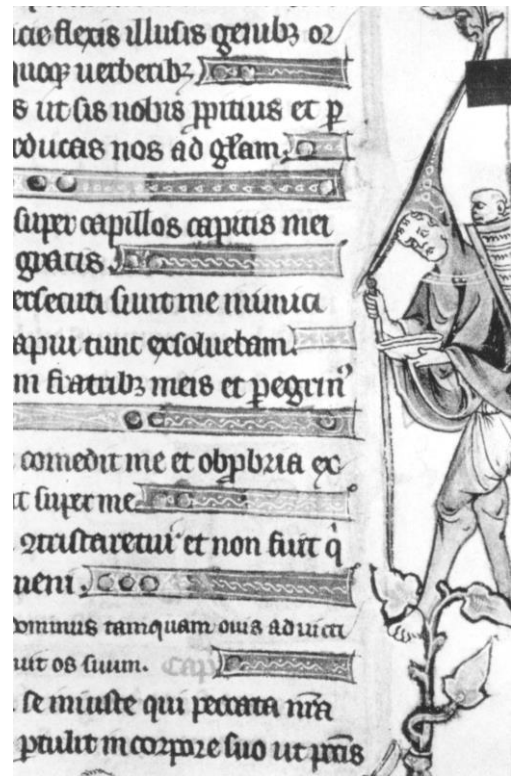


Figure 9 Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, ms. 82, f. 207

Literary echoes of a psycho-pomp Harlequin can be found in some later *pièces* and pamphlets, such as the 1585 *Histoire plaisante des Faict et Gestes de Harlequin Comedian Italien*. Here, in the form of a monologue, the narrator, naming himself the dare-devil comedian Arlequin Roi, narrates his descent into hell, where he is admired for his dancing by the infernal King Pluto, to whom he grants the souls of a prostitute and her son.²⁵ But in fact the subject has its roots, once again, in medieval literary sources. In the *Jeu de la Feuillée* by Adam de la Halle, from about 1262, for instance, Hellequin (*Hielekin*) is a demon («leader of the furious host»): in love with the deadpan fairy queen Morgue, he sends his attendant Croquesos to woo her.²⁶ The context is the May feast for celebrating the cycle of the year and the signal of

the *maisnie Hielekin's* arrival is the metallic sound of bells («*mainte clokete sonant*»).

Is the basket carried on Harlequin/Hellequin's back to be interpreted as a sign of his prerogative of passing through the two different worlds? If we return to medieval iconography, we discover some occurrences of the pannier full of creatures, once again in the context of entertainment. The 13th and 14th century miniatures of jesters carrying children in a basket on their backs are rather frequent in western manuscripts. We can remember that Christian writers mention the entertainers mostly as negative examples of sinful behaviour and jesters' iconography clearly show the signs of these moral condemnations (they are often associated with monstrous or devilish creatures). Despite its recurrence, the subject of jesters carrying a basket on their back does not become a real



Figure 10 © London, British Library Board, Stowe 49, f. 220

topos, as the variety of depictions and their several variants clearly show. In the *York Hours*, a manuscript dating 1280-90,²⁷ the jester wears the typical tight hose tied under the feet, probably very useful for acrobatics, and a long hood, replicated on the child he wears in a basket on his back (Figure 6).

The contiguity with beggars is sometimes the most striking feature. In a manuscript containing the narration of Saint Denis' life, among the workers around a Paris bridge on the Seine, we can see a beggar with an offering plate and a stick²⁸. He wears a red mantle with a hood and brings on his back a child wearing the same kind of hat. The kid is not in a basket but inside a sheet, with the flaps tied to form a sort of bag. Even more frequent, mostly in Franco-Flemish

14th century manuscripts, are depictions of jesters carrying apes (Figures 7-9).

The presence of "realistic" details strengthens the impression that the artists have possibly drawn their inspiration from actual contemporary life. In a bizarre marginal drawing of a *Legenda aurea* by Jacques de Voragine manuscript, compiled in England around 1260, the jesters complain in word balloons about hunger and cold,²⁹ realistic details revealing a kindly satirical attitude toward these outcasts (Figure 10). In the *Rothschild Canticles*, the jester is partly naked and only wears a short blue mantle, while the ape he carries in his basket has a long red fool's hood (Figure 11).



Figure 11 *Rothschild Canticles*. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, ms. 404, f. 188.



Figure 12 © London, British Library Board, Yates Thompson 8, f. 269



Figure 13 *Roman d'Alexandre*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Bodley 264, f. 133v

We can find the basket containing children also in some images satirically hinting at the world of entertainment and the upside down world, such as in a breviary that belonged to *Marguerite de Bar* dating to the beginning of the 14th century, where the basket full of children is carried by a wolf talking to a stag (Figure 12). Another miniature of the manuscript (f. 263) shows a man with a stick and the typical basket

on his back, in this case not containing apes or children but two rabbits, one of them playing a trumpet. We can find suggestive re-elaborations of the theme also in the best known manuscripts of the 13th and 14th century. In a miniature from the *Roman d'Alexandre*, for instance, a man with a traveller's staff carries two children in a basket, while a buffoon with a stick and a typical offering plate is carrying two little buffoons in a

basket on his back (Figure 13). Perfectly replicating their father's attire, they also wear a cap with long horns. While common men give birth to children, buffoons can only breed little specimens of their kind, carrying them along in their wanderings and making a show of their descendants just as they exhibit their skills. In addition, on the left side of the *folium* margin we can see two apes playing with a barrow. Depictions of ape trainers carrying the animals on their backs are also very frequent, with the combination of realistic details and decorative re-elaborations typical of medieval imagery. We may remember that entertainers are often assimilated to the ape, an animal mimicking everything and understanding nothing, but also a sinful and morally disgusting animal frequently associated with the devil.³⁰

The image of the buffoon-children would also be employed in later periods, in different depictions but with an interesting connotation, pointing out the idea of the replication and perpetuation of folly. In an engraving taken from a German text on the corporation of folly (*Schelmenzunft*), dated 1512, a buffoon is sowing another little specimen of himself (Figure 14).

Through an almost mythical, although prosaic and parodied view, the origin of



Figure 14 Thomas Murner, *Schelmenzunft*, Augsburg, 1513

entertainers is linked to the idea of the never-ending flow of human stupidity. The birth of folly is a theme that can be found also in the depiction of the *Mère-folle* nourishing many buffoon-children, depicted for example in the relief on a stall in the French church of Saint-Spire, at Corbeil. With some variants, the subject was re-launched in iconography at least until the 16th century. In an engraving by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, for instance, Mother Folly is nursing her offspring.³¹ On the right, we can see two of her young looking after their little brothers and on the left two adult buffoons, one playing and the other clumsily dancing (Figure 15).



Figure 15 Pieter Bruegel The Elder, engraving. Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, Cabinet des Estampes.



Figure 16 Fresco, Castel Coira/Churburg, Sluderno (Bolzano).

Even more interesting is a fresco made around 1580 in the walls of the inner balcony at the Castle Coira at Bolzano, in Alto-Adige (Italy), belonging to the Count Trapp and housing a

large collection of ancient armours. Here we can see a scene revealing the permanence of the birth of folly theme, repurposed in a fanciful variant: the little buffoons spring out from the

eggs nursed by an adult buffoon (Figure 16). Later on, they grow up playing joyfully and amusing themselves, until the moment in which they are caught, measured with a rule and put all together in a bag, probably in order to be carried on to some court, where they will be employed for the entertainment of the aristocrats.

These illustrations of the theme, present a common feature even in their variety: the connection of folly to mere stupidity, and the discarding of the previous tradition, which associated it with sin. After the humanistic re-evaluation of folly, things could no longer be the same. The prevailing line is the comic one, diverging from the gloomy view still dominating Bosch's paintings and reinterpreting folly as a mere category of the comic. In spite of all the considerations on the infernal attributes enduring in 16th century iconography of Harlequin, it is a matter of fact that the character places himself on this side: he is foolish only in the sense of being silly, constantly misinterpreting words and facts, deeply rooted in the material world and making himself ridiculous. Even his sinful behaviour comes out from an almost carnivalesque prevalence of base appetites (for food, luxury and money). Just like Falstaff, his incontinence, falseness and cowardice are more laughable than sinful. At

any rate, the medieval demoniac connotations of Harlequin's *ancestors* move in that same direction, making the primitive alliance with evil forces dissolve into a faded vagueness, often a mere pretext for recalling his diversity.

Returning to the point, the carrying of children in the *Roman de Fauvel* represents a common iconographical pattern, belonging to the world of entertainment and misery: it evokes on the one hand wandering jesters carrying trained apes and on the other beggars carrying their children. If in depictions of entertainers the basket could have a mere practical function, in the miniature from the *Roman de Fauvel* this element seems to have polysemic connotations. Within this net of iconographical references it can be considered a sort of link between the underworld of marginal figures such as jesters and beggars – often affected by some physical deformity which ideally corresponds to a spiritual degeneration – and the infernal world of demons. In a French manuscript of the *Histoire de Fauvain*³², a probable source of inspiration for the *Roman de Fauvel*, a devil holding a stick in his hoofed hand and sporting a second face on his belly, both evoking his feral nature, carries on his back a basket containing a horse, that is, the sinful protagonist, and some children (Figure 17).



Figure 17 *Histoire de Fauvain*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 571, f. 150v

A pannier with children is also to be found in the depiction of a devil in the *Roman de la Rose* manuscript illuminated by da Richart e Jeanne de Montbaston around the mid-14th century (f. 71).³³ This miniature shows a punishment inflicted on sinners, who are boiled in a cauldron; the action is performed by two horned demons with burning eyes: one of them, crouched, is poking the fire, while the other is standing and carries a child in a basket on his back. Such depictions of the infernal world are more parodic than dreadful, but their comic connotations did not exclude a probable function of moral admonition. The child represents the poor souls of the unbaptised, doomed to remain in hell, and reminds its observers of the dangerous powers of evil forces. Also the above quoted image of the wolf

carrying a basket full of children in the *Marguerite de Bar* manuscript acquires new connotations if we reconsidered it in relationship to the satirical iconography of infernal creatures, clearly shifting towards a comical-grotesque meaning. On the other hand, within the context of the medieval consideration of earthly entertainments and hellish punishments, images like these cast a sinister light on similar depictions of men carrying apes or children in their baskets.

This tradition must have been very deeply rooted, as indicated also by the fact that some echoes of it have reached our time. In the Alpine regions of Europe, St. Nicholas is sometimes accompanied by an odd figure, Krampus, a hellish counterpart of Santa Claus who has the function of punishing naughty children. Usually represented as a devil with cloven hooves and horns, he carries a basket in which he will put abducted children. Krampus appeared in the 19th century and it still survives in the popular rites preceding St. Nicholas' Day.

Is therefore the Harlequin carrying a basket to be ultimately linked to the demons, with the image of jesters and trainers as a sort of morally connoted *trait d'union* between the two typologies? The superposition of signs is evident, even if tracing a direct analogy and line of continuity would be just a little far-fetched. At any rate, it is true that during the 13th century devils begin to lose their original monstrous character for a decisive shift toward the comic and the farcical, while entertainers often acquire devilish or beastly connotations. Harlequin has

probably absorbed the traditional traits common to both contexts, living as he was in the outsiders' land of entertainment, disorder and sinful behaviour.

What has probably been overestimated is the persistence of negative connotations linked to this iconographical pattern. To make a comparison, just as the Shakespearean fool escapes the heritage of the Vice, limiting himself to sporadically recall it and pursuing his way to wit and to the unmasking of appearances,³⁴ so Harlequin sometimes wears the old attributes of his infernal ancestry as a means of ostentation, a rhetorical emblem of a diversity more and more reabsorbed by its merely comic role. Since stupidity is one of the main marks of his character, his infernal eccentricity can only be ridiculous, a sort of pretence of an old sovereignty on the realm of evil. In fact, in *commedia dell'arte* there is no place for real evil forces in the moral sense of the term, since even conflicts deriving from sexual impulses, greediness, or boasting are conceived merely as human weaknesses to be defeated by laughter.

Seen from this point of view, the controversial question of Harlequin's infernal nature acquires quite another connotation as a deliberate ironic strategy, to safeguard a sort of mysterious appeal to a character destined to become more and more civilized. The basket carried on his back certainly hints at a folkloric tradition, which nevertheless could have been conceived as a sort of pretence, a sign and not an index, a rhetorical discourse within the context of an upside-down world.

Let's analyse the frontispiece image of the *Compositions de Rhétorique* (Figure 1) in greater detail. Why does Harlequin carry such a long and menacing spear? He seems willing to present himself as a fighting warrior, when we

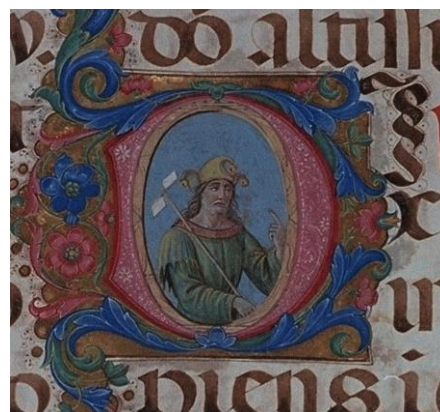


Figure 18 New York, Columbia University, ms. 2, f. 17.

know perfectly well that one of the recurring traits of his character is cowardice. And what utility have all the instruments carried on the basket on his back? One of them is clearly a pinwheel, an attribute of folly to be found in various other contexts. In a 15th century Florentine manuscript, the *insipiens* traditionally illustrating the Psalm 52 is depicted as a richly dressed buffoon who holds a pinwheel, alluding to his foolish carelessness and thoughtlessness (Figure 18).³⁵ A pinwheel (*girella*) is also mentioned by Cesare Ripa among the attributes of *madness* and *foolishness*.³⁶

Harlequin has certainly lost the negative moral connotations of medieval foolery to show a plainer silliness, provoking laughter because of his behaviour and attitudes. Together with other tools, the pinwheel is an instrument of his trade, carried in the rhetorical purpose of reminding us of his foolery, while his silly offspring are at his feet, engaged in the everyday occupations of satisfying their perpetual greed and begging money (two attitudes equally typical and thus employed rhetorically as means of characterisation).

The black mask entirely covering his face – quite unrealistic since, as everybody knows, the

comici usually wore a typical half mask – could be interpreted as a hint of devilish connotation, but more as an ironic reference than as a reminder of a hellish origin. The figure's menacing dangerousness clashes with the instruments carried in his basket, pinwheels and spoons rather than weapons. Seen in this perspective, even the spear acquires the sense of an ironic hint at the domesticated otherness of the character, interested in satisfying his basic appetites rather than in fighting. The two little bags hanging from his ankles clearly confirm this hypothesis, one of them probably having the function of a purse and the other, with the spoon containing food, also used to nourish his hungry little children.

Tristano Martinelli resorts to some medieval elements alluding to folly within the context of a rhetorical iconographic purpose, aiming at an ironic domestication of the figure in which the devilish connotations are but mere survivals of a fading tradition. This mixture of different attributes confirms the heterogeneous nature of his invention, Harlequin's mask, summing up some of the old features of folly but also adding a specific character to the type. This is the result of a well-balanced mingling, where we can recognize faults such as folly, greed and cowardice. While folly is a reminiscence coming from the medieval tradition, with its old association with sin becoming an ironic hint, the other two vices are new features, which will be shared by another important comic figure, the Shakespearean Falstaff. In Harlequin's figure these signs coexist in a very well balanced way, without becoming a unique feature. This is the result of a rhetorical strategy in the construction of the character, whose climax can be seen in Martinelli's engraving. Let's briefly analyse one of these primary faults. The amplification of

cowardice as a comic sign is an invention by *comici dell'arte*, in particular with the figure of Capitan Spaventa, the character conceived and performed by Francesco Andreini. Harlequin shares this feature in many *canovacci*, but in fact he displays this characteristic more rarely and to a lesser degree, and Martinelli's iconographic appearance clearly confirms this point. Revealed by some iconographic hints (pinwheels and spoons rather than weapons), that is, through an ironic discourse alluding to many years of stage practice and well-known plots, Harlequin's cowardice is a sign re-proposed within a rhetorical frame in which iconography replaces words. This is just the beginning of a strategic use of figurative allusions and signs. Another very effective rhetorical strategy, though aiming at an opposite purpose, would be pursued by Giovan Battista Andreini, the son of Capitan Spaventa's inventor, around 1600, when for his portrait by Domenico Fetti he chose to hold a mask in his hand, an emblem of his profession just as much as a book in the hands of *literati*.³⁷

If Martinelli seems more interested in the mingling of elements from different traditions than in strongly featuring his character, the reason cannot be seen as a weakness of conception, but on the contrary as making Harlequin a sort of iconic pivot or crossroads of suggestions, which other types are to develop and show to the extreme, becoming caricatures. Martinelli's Harlequin comes from *le bout du monde* that is hell and diversity, but his infernal origin is rescued by the paradise of the comic context, putting him on a sort of detached level in which all signs may converge and coexist to build up a refined strategy aimed at the survival of his figure through the deliberate use of ambivalent and heterogeneous signs. Only the definition of indefinite suggestions may hope to

survive the wear and tear of the everyday re-proposition of types on the stage. And in fact Harlequin will survive, but with a gradual loss of this charming heritage and display of signs, and will ultimately become the well-known domesticated figure wearing a *patchwork of devised pieces* and devoting himself more and more to courtly activities such as wooing (a trend which later on will be exemplified in Watteau's paintings). Tristano Martinelli's Harlequin carrying his offspring is indeed a last great rhetorical issue combining ancient heritage with contemporary suggestions, where an anti-rhetorical, ironic point of view wittily foreshadows the end of a tradition.

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¹ Tristano Martinelli, *Compositions de Rhétorique de Monsieur Don Arlequin* (Lyon, 1601), 48 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Réserve Yd. 922).

² See Siro Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari. La Commedia dell'Arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993), 191-192.

³ Recueil Fossard. Stockholm, Drottningholms Teatermuseum. See Margaret A. Katritzky, *The Recueil Fossard 1928-88: a review and tree reconstructions*, in *The commedia dell'arte from the Renaissance to Dario Fo. The Italian origins of European theatre*, VI, ed. Ch. Cairns (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 99-116.

⁴ Domenico Biancolelli, *La Hotte*, in Stefania Spada, *Domenico Biancolelli ou l'art d'improviser* (Napoli: Istituto Orientale, 1969).

⁵ Otto Driesen, *Der Ursprung des Harlekin. Ein kulturgeschichtliches Problem* (Berlin: Duncker, 1904).

⁶ See for instance Lucia Lazzerini, *Preistoria degli Zanni: mito e spettacolo nella coscienza popolare*, in *Scienze credenze occulte livelli di cultura*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Firenze, 26-30 giugno 1980 (Firenze: Olschki, 1982), 445-475; Ileana Florescu, "Harlequin, nom de comédien," *Biblioteca Teatrale*, n.s., 4 (1986), 21-59; Delia Gambelli, *Arlecchino a Parigi I. Dall'inferno alla corte del Re Sole* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1993); Bent Holm, *The Hellequin Figure in Medieval Custom*, in *Custom, Culture and Community in the Later Middle Ages: A Symposium*, eds. Th. Pettit – L. Sondergaard (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 105-124, especially 114-115.

⁷ See Alessandra Mignatti, *Nome, omen! Riflessione sull'etimologia dello Zanni*, in *Zani mercenario della piazza europea*, ed. A.M. Testaverde, Giornate Internazionali di Studio, Bergamo, 27-28 settembre 2002 (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 2003), 29-63.

⁸ See François Lebrun, *Le charivari à travers les condamnations des autorités ecclésiastiques en France du XIV^e au XVIII^e siècle*, in *Le Charivari*, eds. Jacques Le Goff – Jean-Claude Schmitt, Actes de la table ronde organisée à Paris (25-27 avril 1977) par l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales et le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris-La Haye-New York: Mouton, 1981), 221-228.

⁹ See especially Ambrogio Artoni, *Le radici medievali e folcloriche della maschera zannesca*, in *Zani mercenario della piazza europea*, 15-28.

¹⁰ *Roman de Fauvel*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 146, ff. 34, 36v. The allegorical poem *Roman de Fauvel* or *Fauvain* consists of two books, the first dated to 1310, the second to 1314. The protagonist, Fauvel, is an antihero who is a horse (or an ass) who has acquired a certain prominence in the French royal court.

¹¹ According to Schmitt, they are cock's feathers, a bird traditionally associated with Mercury, a god in which he sees a sort of Harlequin's alter ego: Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Le masques, le diable, les morts dans l'occident medieval,"

Razo, *Cahiers du Centre d'Études médiévales de Nice*, 6 (1986), 87-119. At any rate, as observed by Bent Holm (*The Hellequin Figure in Medieval Custom*), in late medieval iconography feathered wings are a typical element of demons and the torturers of Christ and the saints.

¹² "Je crois que c'estoit Hellequin, / Et tuit li autre de sa mesnie, / Qui le suivent toute enrage," cit. in Carlo Ginzburg, *Charivari, associations juveniles, chasse sauvage*, in *Le Charivari*, 133.

¹³ Orderico Vitale, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae libri tredecim*, cit. in Holm, *The Hellequin Figure in Medieval Custom*, 106. On the *mesnie Hellequin* described in Orderic's chronicle and on the other literary documents in which it is mentioned, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les revenants. Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris : Gallimard, 1994), 115-145. Hellequin's club has been associated with the weapon typically carried by the wild man by some scholars, such as Robert Lima, *Stages of Evil. Occultism in Western Theater and Drama* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 61.

¹⁴ Starting out from a study by Hermann M. Flasdieck, "Harlekin. Germanischer Mythos in romanischer Wandlung," *Anglia*, 49 (1937), 225-340, Jean-Claude Schmitt proposes a derivation of the term from *Heer*, meaning *host*, and *thing*, a sort of free men association (*Les revenants etc.*, 122). Carlo Ginzburg associates the burlesque procession with a demonic savage hunting, making the term derive from *hourvari*, a hunters' shout to recall the dogs: Ginzburg, *Charivari, associations juveniles, chasse sauvage*, 135-136.

¹⁵ See in particular Gambelli, *Arlecchino a Parigi. Dall'inferno alla corte del Re Sole*, 83-125, who agrees with Driesen's hypothesis of an infernal origin of the figure, with a passage from folklore to theatre.

¹⁶ Holm, *The Hellequin Figure in Medieval Custom*, 113.

¹⁷ Henry Rey-Flaud, *Le charivari. Les rituels fondamentaux de la sexualité* (Paris: Payot, 1985), 89-90.

¹⁸ During these rituals performed by clerics in the churches during the first day of the year, the youngest member of the group was elected the bishop of fools, mounting an ass backward and approaching the altar. See Jacques Heers, *Fêtes des fous et carnivals* (Paris: Fayard 1983) and Claudio Bernardi, *Agenda aurea. Festa, teatro, evento* (Pisa-Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2012), 41-70.

¹⁹ See Jean Wirth, *Les marges à drôleries des manuscrits gotiques (1250-1350)* (Genève: Droz, 2008).

²⁰ See some examples in Pietrini, *I giullari nell'immaginario medievale*, 212-230 and 281-283. On the *obscaena* in late medieval iconography, see Christoph Daxelmüller, *Das Fromme und das Unfromme. Der Körper als Lernmittel und Lernbild in der spätmittelalterlichen Volksfrömmigkeit*, in *Mein ganzer Körper ist Gesicht. Grotteske Darstellungen in der europäischen Kunst und Literatur des Mittelalters*, eds. K. Kröll – H. Steger (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1994), 107-129 and, in the same volume, Jan Svanberg, *Glauker und Blasphemiker in der gotischen Kunst Schwedens*, 357-372.

²¹ Artoni, *Le radici medievali e folcloriche della maschera zannesca*, 25.

²² Nantes, Musée de Beaux Arts.

²³ Roma, Biblioteca e Raccolta Teatrale del Burcardo.

²⁴ Paolo Toschi, *Le origini del teatro italiano* (Torino: Einaudi, 1955), 196-208.

²⁵ See Frances K. Barasch, *Harlequin/Harlotry in Henry IV, Part One*, in *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning*, ed. M. Marrapodi (Padstow, Cornwall: TJ International, 2007) 27-38, 33.

²⁶ As Bent Holm has pointed out, Morgue could be a variant of Morgan, a fairy figure linked with the mythical hero Arthur, another *wild huntsman*, sometimes designated by the name Hellequin (and in fact the *maisnie Hellequin* is mentioned by Étienne de Bourbon as *familia Aliquini or familia Arturi*): Holm, *The Hellequin Figure in Medieval Custom*, 110.

²⁷ *York Hours*, London, Private Collection, f. 76.

²⁸ *La Vie de monseigneur saint Denis, glorieux apostre de France*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 2091, f. 111.

²⁹ See also Wirth, *Les marges à drôleries etc.*, 240.

³⁰ See Horst Woldemar Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance* (London: Frankfurt, 1952).

³¹ Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, Cabinet des Estampes. The image is accompanied by an inscription, which I transcribe as reported in Louis Maeterlinck, *Le genre satyrique dans la peinture flamande*, in *Mémoires couronnés et autres mémoires publiés par l'Académie Royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique*, XLII (Bruxelles : Hayez, février 1903), 1-372, 270: "tis al sot, soo men wel mach anschouven hier / Ouer sots bestier, broeyt jonghe sotkens dees oude sottinne, / Soo douden pypen en singhen, oock dese jonghe sotkens hier / Ouer het eyhen danssen, seer liche van sine".

³² On the manuscript see Margherita Lecco, *Testi strutture immagini in tre manoscritti francesi del XIV secolo* (Milano: LED, 2009).

³³ *Roman de la Rose*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 25526, f. 71.

³⁴ About the Vice, see for instance Lysander William Cushman, *The Devil and the Vice in the Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare* (1900) (London: Halle, 1970).

³⁵ New York, Columbia University, ms. 2, f. 17. The miniature illustrates Psalm 13.

³⁶ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia ovvero descrizione di diverse imagini cavate dall'antichità, e di propria inventione* (1593), ed. E. Mandowsky (Hildesheim-New York: Georg Olms, 1970). Madness is described as a man who laughs and rides a stick-horse, holding a in his right hand "a paper pinwheel, an pleasing instrument and a toy of the children who with great care make it spin in the wind" (381), while Foolishness is a poorly dressed woman "who laughs at a pinwheel held in her hand, like those that children make spin in the wind" (445).

³⁷ See Ferdinando Taviani - Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della commedia dell'arte* (Firenze: SES, 1986²), 13.

