

Whim and Magic: Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's *Scherzi* and Brian Aldiss's *The Malacia Tapestry*

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Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's series of twenty-three etchings, *Scherzi da Fantasia* (c. 1743-1757) depicts scenes set in a desolate, autumnal version of an Arcadian landscape, involving apparent magic rituals (snakes burnt on an altar, a disembodied head seeming to speak from a pyre on the ground) presided over by figures often referred to in the literature as "magi." The exact iconography of the *Scherzi*, however, has never been settled. For art historian Charles Dempsey, writing in 1973, that iconography was rather straightforward: "The theme of the *Scherzi*," he wrote, "is magic, as has been almost universally recognized." After cataloging in the prints apparent magic amulets, snakes, and other pictorial details that hint at witchcraft and the demonic, he concluded that "the fundamental element unifying Tiepolo's assemblage of masculine magi... is Gnosticism" and identified the magi figures as "snake-worshipping Ophites." (The Gnostics as a whole, of which the Ophites constituted just one sect, had been seen since Irenaeus's writings in the 2nd-century C.E. as the first Christian heresy, and therefore had often been regarded as the earliest devil-worshippers and as the originators of witchcraft.) Michael Levey, on the other hand, in his 1985 monograph on Tiepolo, saw the *Scherzi* as a more ambiguous pictorial statement that did not lend itself to such a cut and dried iconographic reading. For Levey, Tiepolo "relished the freedom of creating in etchings a highly personal dream-world of fancy and musings, filled with favourite motifs of his, without the need to illustrate known scenes and incidents. These are his 'idee pittoresche' variations... on a theme of his own devising, with hints of the magical and the occult, though lacking in any linking 'story.'" The debate still hasn't been resolved. The contributors to the catalogue for the most recent exhibition of Tiepolo's prints (*Giambattista Tiepolo: tra scherzo e capriccio*, Udine, 2010) essentially threw up their hands, writing that the *Scherzi* "may almost be illustrations for a text book of magic or perhaps just 'games' without any enigmatic meaning or in the tradition of *capricci*" (Liliana Cargnelutti) or that "the meaning of these images still eludes any attempt to make their message explicit" (Vania Gransinigh).

In my paper I propose to reconsider this debate, not so much to try to settle it once and for all, but to investigate the theoretical allegiances that both sides bring to it—ideally a clearing of the air that will allow us to see the images anew and to consider them in the full complexity of their pictorial treatment and of the visual culture and art-theoretical climate in which they were created. To do so, I will discuss not only the arguments of Dempsey, Levey, and the authors of the 2010 catalogue, but also readings of the *Scherzi* by David Rosand (who, in the long chapter devoted to Tiepolo in his 2002 book, *Drawing Acts*, largely agreed with Levey, yet saw the *Scherzi* as arising particularly from a process of *graphic* invention), Antje Middeldorf Kosegarten (who in a 2007 article argued for that hypothetical "text book of magic" to which the *Scherzi* might have served as illustrations), and Roberto Calasso (who in *Tiepolo Pink*, 2006, tried to negotiate a middle path between the two interpretive extremes).

An effective way of approaching this dispute, I will argue, is to see that the two sides, while largely agreeing on the identification of iconographic details, disagree on the *Scherzi*'s referential status. Interpreters like Dempsey or Kosegarten approach the prints as if they functioned like history paintings, the narrative of which—as befitted their public installation context in a church or palace—was supposed to be clear and unambiguous. However, the very

title of the series, *Scherzi da Fantasia*, argues against such a reading. The title can be paraphrased as “pleasantries based on one’s imagination” or “of one’s own devising”—the term “*fantasia*,” when read according to its use in the period’s visual-arts practice, indicating specifically that the subjects, as opposed to the subjects of all proper history paintings, did not derive from pre-existing textual sources.

Rather, the *Scherzi* belong to the capriccio-print tradition. Capriccio images followed in the eighteenth-century a radically different iconographic and narrative logic than history paintings. Looking at definitions of the capriccio in the period’s art-theoretical writing, I will argue that it was a category established to include those images that did not fit in the academy’s hierarchy of genres (a hierarchy that, as I showed elsewhere, was based precisely on the pictorial genres’ varying modes of reference). The idea of the capriccio formed what Philippe Sollers called a “theory of exceptions,” standing in the period’s cultural landscape alongside the “oddness” (as Dr. Johnson saw it) of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* or the incessant rule-breaking of C.P.E. Bach’s “free fantasias” for harpsichord. Furthermore, in order to offer a coherent reading of the prints, Dempsey had to gloss over iconographic details that did not fit his interpretation, most importantly the figure of Punchinello that appears prominently in two of the prints— derived from the *commedia dell’arte* and comically out of place in the overall classical setting of the *Scherzi*. The presence of Punchinello, of course, reinforces the playful quality of the images.

And yet: while acknowledging that the *Scherzi* function in the more whimsical mode of capriccio referentiality, which tends to avoid the closure of meaning, we must admit that Dempsey’s reading still has much to contribute. Compared to Tiepolo’s previous print series, the *Varii Capricci*, which share the setting of the *Scherzi* and many of their personages, the *Scherzi* greatly increase the density of iconographical details that refer to the dark and the occult, including menacing owls, sculpted demonic heads, skulls and bones strewn through the landscape, and the figures of the magi themselves. Dempsey also correctly identified the Ophites’ symbol, the snake wrapped around a staff (derived from Moses’ brazen serpent as well as from the Ophites’ worship of the serpent in the garden of Eden) which appears in ten of the twenty-three prints. Such observations suggest that Tiepolo may still have intended the *Scherzi* to form some kind of statement—albeit a more open-ended one than would have been possible in history-painting mode—about magic or even satanism.

I will try to provide a full reading of the *Scherzi* in light of both their mode of capriccio referentiality and their iconographic focus on magic. My investigation will look into the possible sources of Tiepolo’s knowledge about Gnosticism and the Ophites’ (particularly Göttingen theologian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, who studied the Ophites in the 1730s and 1740s), and will place the *Scherzi* in the context of the so-called *polemica diabolica*, the debate about sorcery that arose in mid-18th-century Venice as a result of the 1749 publication of Girolammo Tartarotti’s *Il congresso notturno delle lammie*. I will also read the *Scherzi* as part of the increasingly “dark” turn of the capriccio tradition, which by the end of the century will lead to Goya’s *Caprichos*, then to the macabre visions in his *Disparates* and *Black Paintings* of about 1815-1824.

To conclude, I will analyze one last textual treatment of the *Scherzi*, one that does not claim the same historical validity as the studies I mentioned, but that perhaps has even more to tell us about Tiepolo’s prints: British novelist Brian Aldiss’s 1976 literary fantasy novel, *The Malacia Tapestry*, the story-world and narrative premise of which was derived directly from the *Scherzi*, and which was published with the *Scherzi* as illustrations. Aldiss’s text leaves little

doubt that he was familiar with Dempsey's interpretation. However, Aldiss expands Dempsey's take on Gnosticism from the level of subject matter to a larger art-philosophical perspective which (while proposed in a fictional mode) may help reconcile the two sides of the debate with which my paper will be concerned.