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## Abstract

This dissertation examines representations of monstrosity and physical deformity in Italian Renaissance texts and how such images opposed an Idealism advocated by Neoplatonism. The texts examined concentrate specifically on three aspects: disease, gender, and the supernatural, all of which affect the body in ways considered ugly and repulsive. Renaissance Idealism found its greatest expression in treatises that placed emphasis on beauty; however, there existed a divergent yet equally important vein in this period that was fascinated with pervasive images of a monstrous, ugly and altered body, and its function in the social and political context of society.

Chapter One examines syphilis in Girolamo Fracastoro's *Syphilidis sive de Morbi Gallici*. Influenced by a renewed interest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Fracastoro uses myths to explain the disease's origins and to develop his own theories about contagion. While portraying the ugliness of syphilis through poetry, Fracastoro's main goal is to show that sexual intercourse is the catalyst for the gruesome physical transformations that affect the body. Chapter Two considers monstrosity and ugliness in regards to gender and the female figure. By analyzing the works of Giovan Battista Verini, Pietro Aretino and the misogynistic poetry of Lorenzo and Maffio Venier among others, I argue that male authors targeted women, specifically courtesans and prostitutes, as sources of disease and ugliness as a reproach for female encroachment on traditionally male social and literary circles. I also trace the use of the Danae myth and its evolving portrayal of the female figure. Chapter Three analyzes the Burlesque poetry of Francesco Berni and his challenge to the established Petrarchan love lyric. By portraying transgressive figures such as the ugly woman and the sodomite, he destabilizes the figure of the female beloved that was so venerated

in the Renaissance. In addition, his use of common household objects as protagonists of his poetry produces grotesque imagery that offers rich interpretive meanings and linguistic variants. Chapter Four discusses the portrayal of the supernatural in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggiero*. I contend that these two works show opposing attitudes towards the roles of angels and demons and how they appear to humans on earth.

This dissertation evaluates the importance of monstrosity, metamorphoses and physical deformity in Renaissance society in opposition to established Neoplatonic ideals of beauty.

## Introduction

One of the defining themes of the Renaissance was the search for ideal beauty that led to the contemplation of a higher truth and spiritual elevation. The beautiful body, especially the beautiful woman, represented the means by which to achieve this deeper clarity. Such a path was not sexual driven; in fact, sexuality often distracted the soul from ascending to the divine. Simultaneously, however, there also existed an equally important vein in the Renaissance that valued and was fascinated with the monstrous, deformed, and ugly body and its function in the social and political context of society, most importantly as a direct opposition to the idealism advocated by Neoplatonism. The interest in the monstrous derived from a fascination with human existence and representations of the physical and vulgar body. Scholars reveled in the body's ability to transform, mutate, and above all, to elicit *meraviglia* [wonder] in its viewers.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the fifteenth century, the renewed popularity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose various editions, interpretations, and imitations circulated widely, and the rediscovery of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, inspired poets and philosophers to focus on the process of alteration that the body underwent and its final outcomes, irrespective of whether they were morally good or evil.<sup>2</sup> Epidemics such as syphilis and the plague, and foreign exploration allowed for new conceptions of the body. The monstrous body challenged the notions that advocated for the spiritual and rational contemplation of the intelligible world. The monstrous

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive study of the marvelous in the Early Modern period, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* was rediscovered by Poggio Bracciolini in 1418 and later published by Niccolò Niccoli in 1473 with numerous editions to follow. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* underwent numerous publications and interpretations, including the Christian *Ovid moralisé*. In addition, the science of teratology, which has a long history from antiquity to the Middle Ages, also became very popular. By the end of the sixteenth century, treatises on monsters and other natural phenomena abounded. Some famous examples are Benedetto Varchi *Della generazione de' mostri* (1548) in his *Lezioni*, Ulisse Aldrovandi's *Monstrorum Historia* (published only in 1642 but written at the end of the sixteenth century) and Ambroise Paré's *Des Monstres et prodiges*, published in 1573.

body was constantly in flux: dissolving, changing, unstable. Monsters belonged to the material world, perceived by the senses and essential to human existence.

“Like generates like”- In his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle describes monsters as those beings who do not resemble their parents, “Some take after none of their kindred, although they take after some human being at any rate; others do not take after a human being at all in their appearance, but have gone so far that they resemble a monstrosity [. . .]” [767b5-10].<sup>3</sup> In fact, the word monster itself derives from the Latin *monere* (to warn) and so monstrous humans, whether born or made, became a symbol or omen of past vices or future events.<sup>4</sup> The monstrous signaled a source of irrationality, for society could not comprehend its existence or relate to it emotionally; at the same time, it provoked wonder. In Renaissance Italy, the term ‘monster’ described anyone who deviated from the norm in a broad sense, since white men often represented conventional ideas of normality.<sup>5</sup> And so, the idea of the “other” encompassed not only physical appearance but also gender, nationality, even social practices.<sup>6</sup> Society denied monsters a space in humanity and often times they became the scapegoat for society’s ills as well as a means of political and social propaganda.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however; the monstrous or abnormal also became a source of attraction because it exemplified the extraordinary powers of Nature and God.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1942), 401.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters, An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>5</sup> As I will discuss ahead, the monstrous can imply the extremes on both sides of the scale of what is considered ‘normalcy’. Hence, an extremely beautiful woman can be as “monstrous” as a physically deformed human because both can elicit wonder and both rarely appear in nature.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term “other” to denote anyone that is foreign to and outside of the traditional concept of Christian man in the Renaissance. This includes gender, race, religion, physical appearance, and social practices.

<sup>7</sup> For example, artists depicted Martin Luther as a deformed monster in popular broadsheets to fight against heresy. Practices that were deemed monstrous or against nature, such as sodomy, were also used as weapons to degrade political and religious opponents. For a detailed study on Renaissance monstrosity and broadsheets, see Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).



This dissertation examines the monstrous body and its various representations in Renaissance Italian literature as a challenge to Humanism and Renaissance Idealism, which excluded monstrous beings and women in an effort to strengthen the dignity of man. Under the broader umbrella of monstrosity, I will look at deformity and even ugliness, how these states manifest themselves through disease, deformity, gender, and the supernatural, and finally both their positive and negative affects on the body and how those bodies were accepted by the society in which they lived. I believe that the monstrous body was equally if not more important in Renaissance culture than was the beautiful one because the monstrous body allowed for the development of various interpretive possibilities in both art and literature. Monstrosity was in direct opposition to an established and unchanging canon of beauty, influenced by Neoplatonic philosophies. Monstrosity, deformity and metamorphoses did not simply concentrate on the body per se, but also what the body could become and signify- it fascinated and at the same time terrified because it showed the fragility of man and mutability of the body.

The main question that this dissertation attempts to answer is why should we study concepts such as ugliness and deformity in the Renaissance? Scholars placed a great emphasis on beauty. The physical body, if beautiful, was the first step that led to a higher spiritual contemplation of God and paradise. Writers and philosophers examined every aspect of physical appearances and created canons of beauty that strictly followed Petrarchan examples. Gender was strongly tied to beauty because it was the most obvious visible difference between the sexes. Treatises of love became the highest expression of beauty since philosophers described love as a search for beauty. Woman, and by consequence, her physical body, became a means by which to reach a goal, spiritual contemplation. She was not equal in love as man.

However, the concept of beauty could not exist unless there was something to compare it to. Monstrous bodies, including those that were deformed and even ugly, balanced the idea of beauty. To understand beauty, we must also examine its absence. By considering beauty in the Renaissance, we are also forced to face what is not beautiful. And so, without the monstrous, there is no true appreciation of beauty. These states are not necessarily opposites; rather, they can exist as aspects of the same. As Tullia D’Aragona states in her treatise, *Della infinità di amore*, ugliness is simply the deprivation of beauty.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the opposition between ugliness and beauty is crucial to reveal an appreciation for beauty in the Renaissance, to understand the role of monstrosity and to reveal how society considered aesthetics.

In addition, physical metamorphoses and their outcomes, such as deformity, came not only to represent wonder but at times functioned as a punishment for specific groups such as women and outsiders. Metamorphosis could signal both a loss of identity and a means to finding a true self. The importance of monstrous transformations lay in the process as much as the result that materialized. The extent of the monstrous is clearly evident across genres in Italian literature and appears everywhere from burlesque poetry to broadsheets to epics and medical treatises. The impact of the monstrous, the deformed and the ugly has been largely undervalued as it affects poetry and literature.

People associated monstrosity with class, rank, poverty, morality, and therefore, it encompassed a rather large group. Beauty was linked to goodness while ugliness linked to evil. Ugliness and monstrosity were often a visible manifestation of unspoken desires and unchecked

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<sup>8</sup> *Contrari privativi sono quelli che non significano due nature diverse, ma uno significa una qualche natura e l’altro la privazione di quella natura. .[.]Tullia D’Aragona, Della Infinità di Amore, Trattati d’amore del Cinquecento, a cura di Mario Pozzi, (Bari: Laterza, 1975), 231.*

promises. While beauty could represent a visual representation of desire, the monstrous often signaled a manifestation of a desire or a passion that went horribly wrong and was out of control.

Both beauty and monstrosity elicited emotions. Beauty should elicit pleasure and contemplation of God and paradise. Monstrosity elicited emotions of curiosity, disgust, wonder, fear, as well as attraction. In his work, *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes bodily materiality as grotesque realism, and associates it with Carnival and the literature of folk humor. He explains this movement as degradation, “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, lowering of all this is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”<sup>9</sup> Monstrosity and deformity signaled a dissolving of boundaries between the high and low culture.

The body and its various parts are the subject of discourse and representation that span various forms in the Renaissance. The deformed or even grotesque body offers insight into an everyday reality for society, but for some poets, it also represented a challenge to the ideal beauty praised in vernacular poetry especially the *Petrarchismo* movement, where the ideal body was itself ultimately unattainable but rather simply a combination of the best and most beautiful features. In the end, it created a chimera, a beautiful but mythical monster that was composed of disparate parts and could not exist in reality.<sup>10</sup>

In this work, I will also seek to emphasize the role of gender in regards to the portrayal of monstrous bodies. Society long considered women as a primary source of monstrosity. Classical authors including Aristotle and Galen held that women were biologically incomplete or defective

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<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Cropper, “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style”, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 58, no. 3, (Sep., 1976), 376.

males. Women sought completion through sexual intercourse because the presence of a uterus increased their desires.<sup>11</sup> As successors to Eve, women atoned for the original sin in the Garden of Eve through bodily transformations such as childbirth, menstruation, and lactation, all processes of an ‘open’ body that indicated filth and putrefaction. According to Aristotle, women were imperfect (when compared to men) and they were a ‘necessary’ monstrosity or deformity that occurred in nature.<sup>12</sup> Natural biological functions that changed the body carried the stigma of uncleanliness and the need for purgation of an internal evil. The sexual act, whether consensual, forced, or supernatural, was the direct catalyst for the monstrous deformities analyzed in this dissertation.

While society lauded women for their beauty, it also chastised them if they were ugly. Old women became hated characters and called extremely lascivious and greedy. Above all, men considered them sexually depraved because they were no longer able to attract with their appearance. Poems berating old women expressed highly misogynistic views and derided them as profoundly transgressive figures. However, at the same time, writers took advantage of the characters of old women to disrupt traditional concepts of female beauty in an effort to criticize the unrealistic bodily expectations so praised in the Renaissance.

In order to understand the importance of monstrosity, deformity and ugliness in the Renaissance, it is first vital to look at what society considered beautiful. Sixteenth century treatises written on both love and beauty continued an aesthetics that was most famously

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<sup>11</sup> Naomi Yavneh, “Dante’s “dolce serena” and the Monstrosity of the Female Body”, in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, edited by Keala Jewell, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 112.

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle, 461.

advocated by the vernacular poetic tradition and Francesco Petrarca.<sup>13</sup> Love treatises were the highest expression of this view and expressed love as the search for beauty that could ultimately lead to spiritual enlightenment. Although the treatises stressed that one must look beyond the corporeal to find such spiritual contemplation, they nonetheless advocated specific physical ideals.

In *Sopra lo amore ovvero Convito di Platone* (1469), Marsilio Ficino described love as the desire for beauty and beauty as a harmony of all body parts.<sup>14</sup> Ugliness is the opposite of beauty because it represents a deprivation of beauty [*privazione di bellezza*]. Ficino defines love as the search for beauty. Lust and vulgar desires exist on the contrary. Similarly, while ugliness and deformity are attracted to each other, Ficino writes that deformity and beauty are opposites.<sup>15</sup> Love is in the middle between beauty and the lack of beauty: *Così lo amore tiene il mezzo tra la Bellezza e la privazione di quella*.<sup>16</sup> But according to Ficino, a beautiful soul can make a body more attractive while a beautiful body makes a soul more attractive.<sup>17</sup> Leone Ebreo, in his *Dialogo d'amore* (1535), reiterates the idea that love is the search for the beautiful.<sup>18</sup> Ebreo

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<sup>13</sup> During the sixteenth century, treatises on female beauty abounded and were closely tied to treatises on love. The most important treatises on beauty of this period were: Giangiorgio Trissino's *I ritratti* (1524), Agnolo Firenzuola's *Delle bellezze della donna (Il Celso)* (1548) and Federico Luigini's *Il libro della bella donna* (1554).

<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Guido Casoni, in his *Della magia dell'amore* (1591), describes the beauty of the body and its members as musical 'harmony'. He compares the love ignited by beauty to music that arises in the lover's heart. Guido Casoni, *Della Magia dell'amore*, a cura di Armando Maggi, (Palermo: Sellerio, 2003), 123-125.

<sup>15</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Sopra lo Amore ovvero Convito di Platone*, a cura di Giuseppe Rensi, (Milano: SE, 1998), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ficino, 91. Ficino cites Diotima who calls love a 'daemon' because it acts like an intermediary between celestial and earthly spirits.

<sup>17</sup> Ficino, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Most likely, Leone Ebreo wrote the *Dialoghi d'amore* at the beginning of the sixteenth century while residing at the court of Naples. The popular work circulated in manuscript form before being published posthumously in 1535.

writes that grace and goodness make an individual beautiful because these qualities lead to love. However, if an individual lacks such qualities, they are not only ugly but also evil.<sup>19</sup>

While authors attempted to reject the notion that the body per sé was the chief seat of beauty, many of the most popular love treatises placed significant importance on particular physical features. In this way, they often mistakenly perpetuated the idea that possession of the body could lead to true knowledge, arrived at by rational choice rather than desire. As shown ahead, love treatises depict certain women mainly for their physical beauty, regardless of identity. Features such as hair, skin, lips, eyebrows, and teeth perpetuated the standard canon. Physical beauty was central to love theories and outer appearance directly reflected interior moral qualities, virtue and rank. Authors often chose a favorite beloved who conformed to their ideal of beauty. While beauty should always lead to spiritual contemplation, the reader should look beyond the corporeal to reach that higher contemplative ground.

In Federico Luigini's *Il libro della bella donna* (1554) characters gather together to discuss the beauty of women, both of the body and the soul. They begin of course with the exterior traits that influence the interior beauty of a woman. Luigini lists such characteristics as beautiful, blond long hair, a detail that is as important as any other because if a woman does not possess beautiful hair, the rest doesn't matter. The author uses examples of modern women to illustrate his goal of finding the perfect woman. Luigini catalogs the typical Petrarchan

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<sup>19</sup> *La bellezza è grazia, che diletta l'animo col suo conoscimento, il muove ad amare; e quella cosa buona, o persona, nella quale tal grazia si truova, è bella, ma quella buona ne la qual non si truova questa grazia, non è bella né brutta: non è bella perché non ha grazia, non è brutta perché non gli manca bontà. Ma quello al quale tutte due queste mancano, cioè grazia e bontà, non solamente non è bello, ma è gattivo e brutto, ché fra bello e brutto è mezzo, ma fra buono e gattivo non è ver mezzo, perché il buono è essere e il gattivo è privazione.* Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'Amore*, a cura di Santino Caramella, (Bari: Laterza, 1929), 226.

characteristic so common in treatises on beauty: small nose, small mouth, lips like rubies, teeth like pearls, all accompanied by references to the poetry of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. The second book continues with a discussion of the lower parts of the body such as the shoulders, arms, and hands, as well as the breasts and hips. The interlocutors also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using make up and perfume and come to the rather simple conclusion that women look best when naked.

Agnolo Firenzuola's *Delle bellezze delle donne [Il Celso]* (1541) recounts the overheard discussion of the main character Celso and a group of women regarding beauty. According to Celso, the most beautiful parts of the body are those that are not covered and the seat of beauty is the face. A beautiful face is described simply as the appropriate measurements of those particular features that belong to that particular face. Above all, what is most important is the harmony of all the features and that they belong to the order of nature. Everything must be in its proper place; otherwise, deformity occurs. While touching upon the discussion of androgynies and hermaphrodites from Plato's *Symposium*, Celso recounts the proportions and the correct measurements of women's body parts. He mentions especially the importance of the eyes, which are windows into the soul and the intellect. The eyes should be in the highest position, round, with pupils like sparks (*scintille*) because the eyes often reveal what is written in the heart. Celso also argues the influence of a bad conscience on physical appearance. Any sickness of the soul can bring about a sickness of the physical body and manifest itself mainly in the eyes and cheeks.

In one of the most famous Renaissance works, *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528) Baldassare Castiglione outlines the qualities of the perfect courtier and court lady.<sup>20</sup> Set in the court of

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<sup>20</sup> Castiglione wrote *The Book of the Courtier* between 1508-1516. After this period, the manuscript continued to circulate until it was finally published in 1528.

Urbino in 1507, the theme of visibility is crucial to the role of the courtier. He should not be flashy but his presence should be felt. His outer and inner appearance must demonstrate harmony. Talent, beauty, and nature make a courtier attractive although his outer facade is most important because it is the first quality that ones sees. A courtier takes care of his body but does not seem too feminine. His proportions follow the notion of *mediocritas*; they are neither too large nor too small and he is well built. He will not seek attention but he will be noticed, and his dress will reflect his inner appearances.

On the other hand, a woman of the court is held to higher expectations concerning beauty. According to one of the interlocutors, a woman who is ugly will be noticed immediately. Good looks are the most important quality of a court lady because a woman without beauty has nothing. Her movements must be graceful, her temperament modest and she should never give the impression that she is trying too hard. While the courtier is also able to establish his presence through non- physical qualities, beauty is the highest prerequisite for a court lady. Her eyes and beauty, if well proportioned, attract men and make them fall in love. However, a woman should never base her beauty upon the number of lovers she takes because this can be misleading. Every aspect of the court lady depends on how she portrays herself to others. Castiglione stresses the fact that outer beauty is a sign of inner goodness; the ugly are evil while the beautiful are good. The beauty of the body is an indicator of the beauty of the soul. Beautiful women, in particular, turn away from impurity and conduct themselves in a virtuous manner. Consequently, Castiglione argues that beautiful women are more chaste than ugly ones.

In the final section of his work, Castiglione expounds upon the theory of love and beauty through the voice of Pietro Bembo. Love is the longing to possess beauty. Man can desire beauty by the senses or the intellect. Beauty is located in the human body, especially in the face, which



should be well proportioned and a harmony of colors enhanced by light and dark shadows, and symmetry. Bembo reiterates the well-known theory that beauty enters through the eyes and impresses itself on the soul, inflaming it with desire. He warns however, that it is wrong to think that you will enjoy beauty by simply possessing the body. This type of love almost always brings anguish to the lover because his desire is either immediately satiated thus turning to hate and disgust, or he burns even more because he has not attained the goal he was seeking. Bembo stresses that sensual desire is the worst method of reaching true love, which can only be achieved through rational means. Castiglione portrays the role of the courtier towards his prince as that of a lover/beloved relationship. The courtier must win over the prince and the prince should fall in love with his courtier. Instructed in numerous arts, the courtier's role is to lead the prince to virtue and to teach him. He must love his prince and in return, be shown respect.

In her treatise *Dell'infinità d'amore* (1547), Tullia D'Aragona considers love as the search for a union with beauty or at least that, which seems beautiful to the lover. According to D'Aragona, beauty is the mother of love and the knowledge of beauty is its father. Benedetto Varchi, the main interlocutor, states that beautiful people are especially beloved because man's noblest sense is sight. Beauty and ugliness are considered 'deprived' opposites (*contrari privativi*); they are not completely different but one is considered a certain state of nature while the other is deprived of that particular nature. Hence, something that is not beautiful is neither necessarily ugly. When he or she is perfect, a lover is more privy to the knowledge of the beauty that they ardently desire. The originality of D'Aragona's dialogue stems from her argument that women are on par with men in regard to love. They are no longer just the first step to attaining a

higher spiritual state, but can be equal participants in honest and virtuous love. Women are no longer associated with simple physicality or sin.<sup>21</sup>

D'Aragona also argues that love is infinite. When one loves, it is a love without end because one is never satisfied and always desires more. Those lovers who see an end in sight are not truly in love. There are two distinct types of love. The first is called vulgar or dishonest love, in which the lover, after he has attained his goal (usually carnal), ceases to love any longer. The second type of love, honest love, is experienced by noble men and is generated by reason rather than desire. Its goal is to create a union with the lover so that both lover and beloved become one. The union is both carnal and spiritual but since two bodies can never truly physically become one, this union never arrives at its goal and is therefore called infinite.

Authors and artists also closely associated physical beauty to morality, virtue, and social rank.<sup>22</sup> Renaissance treatises on beauty and love set out very clear criteria and guidelines as to what is beautiful: mainly proportions and harmony. But not everyone embodied these beautiful physical proportions so they were thus considered lacking them and even, monstrous. When the body went wrong or against what was considered nature, deformity and ugliness occurred.

The body was also strongly tied to gender and physical appearance. Women, considered the weaker sex, were particularly vulnerable to being labeled monstrous and deformed. Society faulted not only ugly women but also beautiful ones. In general women were judged as uncontrollable in their bodily lust. In the opposition between flesh and spirit, woman occupied the side of flesh and therefore, she was also evil. Spiritual corruption also meant a physical body

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<sup>21</sup> Tullia D'Aragona, *Introduction to Dialogue of the Infinity of Love*, trans. Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Rogers, "The decorum of women's beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the representation of women in sixteenth century painting", *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 2 No. 1, (March 1988), 49.

dissolution. The propagation of misogynistic biblical and historical narratives continued the idea that women were lascivious and greater sinners than men.

Communities deemed many women, including old women, prostitutes, ugly women, and unmarried women, as monstrous since they did not fit into comprehensive sexual definitions or did not fall under the authority of a male figure. These women lived outside the boundaries of society so their bodies needed to be contained or even destroyed by male writers. They were independent, aggressive, and did not fulfill the roles commonly associated with women, such as childbirth.

As a rare natural phenomenon, beautiful women also risked categorization as monsters because they seldom appeared in reality and could tempt men to sin. The burlesque genre of poetry parodied the Petrarchan Laura, who never existed in full, but only appeared as a combination of her individual body parts. Thus, extremely beautiful women failed to follow the conventions of poetry because in effect they were not a true imitation of nature. Francesco Berni's early poetry uses the image of the disembodied old woman, who by losing her beauty also loses her sexuality, and thus becomes a nonentity in society, a target of scorn and revulsion. Berni's later phases deal with praising common objects lacking human bodies, in order to show the mutability of poetry and its different levels of meanings, often sexual, by using interchangeable parts. His praise of ugliness and commonality directly combated the literary stagnation created by *Petrarchismo* and he challenged the traditional concepts of beauty in order to show that such conceits were not immutable. He stressed that beauty was fleeting while ugliness was forever. Beauty was predictable while ugliness brought with it a certain variety.

In addition, writers often described beautiful women such as courtesans as monsters because they considered their morality and greed for money as attributes that made them ugly on the inside, despite their attractive façade. Courtesans kept a strict clientele and were considered willing to do anything for money. Furthermore, they entered male literary circles, angering authors because they were impeding on traditionally masculine spaces. Writing vituperations about women was as much a way of venting anger as it was also a rhetorical exercise as outlined in the *Ars dictandi*. In his *Dialogo contra i poeti*, Francesco Berni, made comparisons between courtesans and the writers they associated with. Berni characterized writers as ‘prostitutes’ because they also tried to sell their manuscripts to anyone that would publish them, praised anyone for money and moved from one literary circle and court to another in an effort to become famous.

Finally, I will also consider those beings that lack a body such as angels and demons and the forms they assume in order to appear to humans. When discussing physical metamorphoses, we must also take into account that the Renaissance period was also incredibly preoccupied with the human body’s relationship with the supernatural and with witchcraft. This leads me to also consider the ideas of embodiment and disembodiment, and that what constitutes a ‘body’ in the Renaissance was not always necessarily human, in the strict sense of the word. Church teachings stated that spirits such as angels and demons did not possess bodies but could appear to humans in assumed bodies made of condensed air. The bodies these spirits donned were similar to our bodies and easily recognizable and understood by those who witnessed them. The popularity of demonology and the persecution of witches during this period gave women the particular privilege of accessing demonic bodies through sexual intercourse and allowing for the birth of sub human or deformed offspring as a result. Witches, especially, became vital witnesses who

could communicate with supernatural beings and offer proof of the existence of the supernatural and ultimately, of God. The body, its appearance and its relationship to forms without conventional bodies, such as spirits, proposed the idea of a gradual connection that linked man, spirit and God.

My dissertation consists of four chapters that each deal with bodily monstrosity and metamorphoses across a variety of genres. In Chapter One, I will discuss Girolamo Fracastoro and his poem, *Syphilidis sive de Morbi Gallici* published in 1530. This chapter deals with the mutability and fragility of the physical body and Fracastoro concentrates on the physical effects of syphilis on a victims' body. The body is not a fixed, unchangeable entity but one that is in a constant state of flux whether through birth, growth, disease or the ultimate metamorphosis, death. I argue that as a physician, Fracastoro understood that the novel disease syphilis, which ravaged Italy at the beginning of the fifteenth century, spread primarily through sexual intercourse. As both a humanist scholar and medical doctor, he used Ovidian inspired myths to show that sexual intercourse was the main catalyst for the gruesome physical transformations that took hold of the body affected by syphilis.

Written in three books, the work deals with the author's theories of contagion and his ideas about how syphilis originally infiltrated Italian soil. While Europe experienced a golden age of syphilitic literature, theories abounded that syphilis arrived from the New World, but Fracastoro plants its origins firmly in Europe. In Book One while outlining the origins of the disease, the poet shocks the reader with a graphic description of the symptoms of syphilis, detailing the literal decay of the body, which became characteristic of syphilitic victims.

Fracastoro emphasizes these horrors by recounting the anecdote of a young Italian who was infected by a scorned lover in a cautionary tale that crosses both social and gender boundaries.

He later employs myths to underscore the sexual nature of the disease and reveal the origins of the two most popular treatments, mercury and guaiacum. Fracastoro elaborates on popular beliefs that syphilis arrived in Europe by way of explorers returning from America. The explorers contracted the disease from the natives, the original victims of syphilis, who were punished by the gods because of their uncontrolled sexual appetites and greed. Fracastoro did not limit his work on syphilis to poetry. His fascination with the marvelous disease continued in a lesser-known treatise on syphilis as well as his seminal work, *De Contagione*, an elaboration of his theory regarding disease spreading “seeds” [*semina*].

Chapter Two offers insight into the treatment of monstrosity and disease in the form of the female figure. I contend that male authors targeted women, specifically courtesans and prostitutes, because they threatened not only male social but also literary circles. Male authors degraded female bodies publicly by making women the source of disease so they could regain control of traditionally established boundaries. They denied women ownership of their own bodies and used those same bodies against women in order to portray them as monstrous, diseased beings both inside and out. In this chapter, I will examine works such as Giovan Battista Verini’s *Il Vanto e il lamento della cortigiana ferrarese* and Pietro Aretino’s *Dialogo* and *Ragionamento*, as well as the misogynistic literature of Lorenzo and Maffio Veniero and Sperone Speroni’s *Orazione contra la cortigiana*. The chapter will also examine the famous literary battle between Maffio Veniero and the Venetian courtesan, Veronica Franco, who successfully reclaims her reputation and body by means of her poetry. Simultaneously, I will also

trace the use of the myth of Danae as representative of the evolving views of the courtesan, from victim to provocateur.

Marginalized women, especially courtesans and prostitutes, became a source of disease and metamorphosis. They lived on the edge of society without clear male guardianship. Courtesans used their bodies for financial gain but also joined male literary circles where they wrote poetry and participated in debates. They became intellectual as well as sexual companions and participated in a patron/courtier relationship with their clients. Such women infringed on traditionally male spaces and angered many authors who decided to punish them publicly by destroying their bodies through literary works. Syphilis, the endemic disease of the moment, became a means to tarnish a woman's reputation and destroy her body publicly while scenes of gang rapes represented the effort to take back power and control from women (at least over their bodies, if not their intellects). Such works also became a warning for many courtesans to curb their excessive greed and hubris in regards to their male clients. In his poem, *Il vanto e il lamento*, Giovan Batista Verini, describes the rise and fall of the prostitute Beatrice, who ultimately becomes a grotesque caricature of herself after she contracts syphilis as punishment for her haughtiness. In Lorenzo Veniero's works, the author describes the rape of Angela del Moro, damaging her reputation by declaring her full of syphilis but also humiliating her in literary circles. Such public humiliation of a courtesan's person, and devastation of her body were the most effective means to hurt her both financially and personally. The male author destroys the carefully crafted fantasies that he himself has projected onto the courtesan for his own pleasure.

In his *Dialogo* and *Ragionamento*, Pietro Aretino employs the figures of Nanna and Antonia, two retired prostitutes to teach the art of prostitution to Nanna's daughter, Pippa. The

courtesan's greatest tool was dissimulation; she created a fantasy in her dress, speech, and home in order to satisfy her lovers. But in reality, it was the male client who projected his desires unto the courtesan and she carefully constructed her image to fit those needs. Most importantly, courtesans could make men feel as if they were dishonoring the honest women of the city. Later, in Sperone Speroni's *Orazione contra la cortigiana*, the author rails against courtesans as monsters, full of sin and duplicity, who only pretend to be refined but lack all courtly manners.

In Chapter Three, I will analyze the Burlesque tradition of poetry, looking at its most famous proponent, Francesco Berni. Berni challenged the established Petrarchan love lyric by using grotesque imagery in unconventional ways in order to expose rich linguistic variants and offer numerous layers of meaning to his works. His poems bring the beloved women down to earth and turn her into flesh, and by consequence, they deal with the lower bodily stratum.<sup>23</sup> Berni chooses to describe the unnatural and transgressive through both women and sexual intercourse, specifically old women and sodomy. The lustful and uncontrollable old and ugly woman destabilized social order and was a threat to the established literary canon. Simultaneously, the sodomite, described as an effeminate and animalistic figure, became the extreme opposite of the female beloved that was so venerated in the sixteenth century. The 'disordered passions' of sodomites and vulgar women created an ideal metaphor to counter the established literary norm that Berni so disliked.<sup>24</sup>

Berni was influenced by the comic realistic works of authors like Rustico di Filippi, Cecco Angiolieri and later, Il Burchiello. These authors parodied people and objects but also exaggerated many aspects of daily life. Comic realism used graphic descriptions of the body,

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<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Transgressive women were not 'protected' by the shelter of domestic life, they were not under patriarchal authority and this made them dangerous.



following what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed “the open body”; however, most of these depictions focused on women and advocated a highly misogynistic view.<sup>25</sup> Women’s open, emanating orifices constantly transgressed bodily confines. The result was a series of innovative sonnets that employed standard Petrarchan imagery to create an unconventional beloved with layers of ambivalent, sexual double-entendres that had a propensity for metamorphosis and various layers of meaning. His paradoxical encomium praising mundane, innocuous objects allowed the poet to create hidden meanings, many of them sexual in nature. Berni’s ingenious *capitoli* about fruit represented metaphors that expounded on his personal preference for homosexual relationships and advocated the notion that pederastic love brought more satisfaction. Although he was a member of the Papal court, he was anti-establishment in every way and his poetry and *Dialogo contra i poeti*, written anonymously in 1526, reveal his clear disdain for court life and the stagnant literary circles that encouraged a lack of originality.

In my final chapter, I will discuss two works of Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggero*, and how these works develop two differing attitudes towards the supernatural. The importance of the supernatural was particularly strong due to the rise of demonology, the most influential treatises of the time being the *Formicarius* of Johannes Nider and the *Malleus maleficarum* of the Inquisitors Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer. Such works demonized women while simultaneously attributing human forms to demons, and culminated in the persecution of witches in the sixteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, the influence of Neo-Platonism also remained strong, advocating the presence of good and bad daemons that

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, 26. Bakhtin describes the open and unfinished body as one that is not separate from the world but rather one that is constantly blending with it.

<sup>26</sup> Keala Jewell, *Introduction*, in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, edited by Keala Jewell, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 19.

mediated a link between man and God. Man searched for ways not only to contemplate God but to also feel closer to Him, and he could do so through supernatural spirits.

Torquato Tasso felt a strong need to rationalize the supernatural world and its relationship with the terrestrial world. In his epic work, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso demonstrates a clear distinction between angels and demons, outlining a traditionally Catholic view of the supernatural. The angels support the crusaders in their efforts to conquer Jerusalem and reclaim the Holy Sepulcher for the Christian faith. The demons, meanwhile, hinder the crusaders' efforts in any way possible, by using magic and corrupting hearts with evil and jealousy.

Tasso infused the *Gerusalemme Liberata* with marvelous verisimilitude, specifically the Christian marvelous, as outlined in his treatise *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*. Tasso attempts to give bodies to empty symbols and those spirits that are seemingly absent. His goal is to show that God and angels are present in human lives. Both angels and demons appear in human forms through the process of inspissation and to deliver divine messages or strike fear in the hearts of the crusaders.

Tasso harbored a deep religious anxiety that stemmed not only from the uncertain religious and political climate of his times but also from his personal battle with melancholy. As evidenced by his many letters, Tasso feared being a heretic and his *Gerusalemme Liberata* is a testament to his attempt to create a highly orthodox Christian epic. In addition to accusations of heresy, Tasso suffered from melancholy with fits of paranoia and outbursts of rage that eventually led to his imprisonment. During this time, his melancholy continued and he

experienced hallucinations and visions of spirits, which he would later describe in his dialogue *Il Messaggiero*.

Although he was a devout Catholic, Tasso also subscribed to Neo-Platonist philosophy and his need to rationalize the supernatural led him to compose *Il Messaggiero* while imprisoned in Sant'Anna prison. The short dialogue is a significant departure from his epic poem, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in that the author bases his ideas regarding the supernatural on mainly on the ideas of the philosopher Plotinus. The spirit that visits the fictive character Torquato in the early morning hours is neither good nor evil, but rather a messenger charged with helping Torquato realize how to access the intelligible and sensible worlds. The spirit dons a human body and his soul descends into the sensible world in order to become an ambassador. He shows Torquato that his own body hinders his ability to gain spiritual clarification.

Both the *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggiero* are very important works because they employ entities such as spirits, angels and demons and their visible manifestations to deliver messages not only from the supernatural realm but also concrete communications regarding social issues. While the epic poem delivers a more orthodox religious view of good and evil spirits and their role in regards to humanity, Tasso's *Il Messaggiero* tackles the supernatural from a philosophical standpoint that emphasizes the Humanistic spirit that was being suppressed by the Counter Reformation. These daemons act as intermediaries in order to explain man's place in the larger cosmos, his link to divinity and God's accessibility to man without violating the principles of reason.

In closing, this dissertation shows the wide-ranging influence of monstrosity and deformity in all areas of Renaissance literature and how those pervasive images opposed

Neoplatonic idealism advocated in its highest expressions, treatises on beauty and love. The fascination with the human body was not limited only to its positive accomplishments and feats, but also encompassed its negative processes such as its degradation, decomposition and ultimately, its death or absence. Monstrous bodies, whether fantastical beings or simply marginalized groups such as women or foreigners, were a direct challenge to the philosophical ideas that advocated for the body as a means to a higher spiritual and moral ground.

## Chapter One

### *Anima (non) sana in corpo (non) sano: Diseased Bodies in Girolamo Fracastoro's Syphilidis sive de Morbi Gallici*

“Morality is a venereal disease. Its primary stage is called virtue; its secondary stage, boredom; its tertiary stage, syphilis.” Karl Kraus (1874-1936)

#### Introduction

Man's sense of identity rests on the basic conception of the body. Once the body sustains change, whether good or bad, we are once again reminded of its fragility and mutability. The body is continuously vulnerable, porous and penetrable, and its seemingly endless subjection to change only intensifies our anxiety. That anxiety is characterized by a need to understand what is different and other, but also to discover what is self.<sup>1</sup>

Girolamo Fracastoro (1475-1553), a Veronese physician and poet, chose to write about syphilis in his famous poem *Syphilidis sive Morbi Gallici*. This chapter examines two important aspects of Fracastoro's work: the notion that Fracastoro was fully aware of the venereal nature of syphilis while he was writing the poem, and that although he never implicitly names sexual intercourse as a cause of syphilis, his use of Ovidian inspired myths and themes clearly illustrates how the sexual act was the catalyst for the physical transformations that accompanied the disease. In the *Metamorphoses*, bodily transformations often take place prior to or after the completion of the sexual act. The gods change into various animals/objects in order to have sex with their victims or transform their victims after they complete sexual intercourse (most often rape). Fracastoro demonstrates that sexual intercourse was the main cause of the physical

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 27.

transformation itself and that disease is the violence committed upon the body as a result of sexuality. The act of violence results in a literal reduction of the individual. The sexual act was punishable by disease but there was also a cure that consisted in purification and purgation, both moral and physical. The final section of this chapter will also analyze two prose treatises that Fracastoro was working on while writing the *Syphilidis* and their influence on his ideas regarding syphilis.

### **A history of syphilis in Renaissance Italy**

The origin and evolution of syphilis in early modern Italy is unclear. Although purported cases of syphilis were reported in antiquity, scholarly consensus of the Renaissance considered it a ‘new’ malady brought to Italy in 1494 during the French invasion of Charles VIII and henceforth called *mal francese* or *morbus gallicus*. A parallel theory attributed the arrival of syphilis in Europe as originating from America during Columbus’s expeditions. The disease made its way through Spain and France before finally infecting Italy. Some chroniclers specifically pinpoint Naples as the original port of entrance into Italy because of its commercial ties with Spain, giving it the specific title of *mal napolitano*. Nonetheless syphilis became a symbol of shame and it was used to cast aspersion on enemies.

Sigismondo dei Conti (1432-1512), a Roman chronicler, claimed that the Jews brought syphilis to Naples after they were exiled from Spain. According to dei Conti, the spread of syphilis directly mirrored the epidemic of leprosy that occurred after the Jews were driven out of

Egypt and provided a precedent for Jewish culpability.<sup>2</sup> Stigmatized and constantly on the move, the Jew was viewed as the internal Other<sup>3</sup>, the opposite of the Christian, in effect his enemy. Many Europeans characterized Jews as sexually over indulgent and their rejection of Christ made them a scapegoat easily associated with diseases such as leprosy and syphilis as punishment for physical and moral impurity. This concept of the “infected” Other would come to stigmatize many individuals who found themselves outside the norm of society whether because of physical appearances or religious beliefs.

As Anna Foa has pointed out, the arrival of syphilis adopted the already established iconography of leprosy. Although doctors clearly classified the two diseases as diverse, it was inevitable for syphilis to avoid the sickness=evil/sin equation because of its associations with coitus. The connection between leprosy, syphilis and sin, especially lasciviousness, fostered the reappearance of old stereotypes, particularly in regards to Jews. Many scholars linked the pig, an omnivorous and unclean animal, with susceptibility to disease. Because the consumption of pork was taboo in their religion, people believed that Jews were even more vulnerable to catching disease because of their ‘naturally inherent’ impurity<sup>4</sup>. This link to pork affected both leprosy and syphilis. As it became endemic at a cultural level, syphilis was incorporated into many myths and icons. It borrowed much of its iconography from leprosy, which made the disease more familiar and less frightening. Syphilitics even adopted Saint Job, the patron saint of lepers, as their own. Job, whose faith was tested by God, suffered with boils on his skin similar to those present during syphilis. The identification with Saint Job, though, also presents a problem; the

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Foa, “The New and the Old: The Spread of Syphilis (1494-1530)”, trans. Carole C. Galucci, in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Foa, 34. For a detailed account of the treatment of Native Indians by Europeans in the New World, see also Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper Row, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Foa, 37.

prologue and epilogue of the Book of Job portray him as an innocent and deeply devout man, suggesting that the calamities brought upon him were simply a test of faith. At other points, however, Job is portrayed as a disobedient and even blasphemous man, implying that his suffering was divine punishment for individual sin.<sup>5</sup> If this is the case, then only God can cure the disease that He himself has sent. A popular sixteenth century theory even attributed the origin of syphilis to the union of a prostitute and a leper, further cementing the association between illness and sexual sin as the basis of syphilis.<sup>6</sup> It was not a far leap to assume that any unnatural union (cannibalism, bestiality, etc.) could produce a monstrous outcome like syphilis.

The voyages of Columbus to the New World provided Europeans with yet another culprit: the external Other, the Native Indian. The Indian was completely removed from Christianity and in addition, was also physically incompatible with ideas of classical beauty. Travel literature created a space for the grotesque to emerge from the subconscious mind, often resulting in exaggerated accounts of this newly discovered race. The supposed miracle cure for syphilis, the guaiacum tree, originated in the New World and it reinforced the belief that syphilis was born in the body of the Native Indian, who did not know Christ and was completely sexually unbridled. It seemed logical that both disease and cure came from the same place.<sup>7</sup>

The numerous monikers accorded to syphilis (there are over one hundred recorded in literary sources) clearly place the disease in the quintessential “Other”, something or someone far removed from what was considered ‘acceptable’ society. The presence of the “Other”, whether French, Spanish, Jewish or Native Indian, in connection with the natural disasters and famines of

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<sup>5</sup> Jon Arrizabalaga, John Henderson and Roger Kenneth French, *The Great Pox: The Arrival of the French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 52-54.

<sup>6</sup> Foa, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Foa, 34.



the late fifteenth century, lay the foundation for theories about the transmission of this deadly new disease.

While castigating individual groups, diseases and other natural calamities were often viewed as punishments from God for the sins of a collective group or auguries of future events. Natural causes of disease included misaligned stellar constellations, changing bodily humors, witchcraft, and even miasmatic air. However, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, syphilis left no doubt as to its origin: carnal sin. It was spread by sexual intercourse (a sin if committed outside of the boundaries of marriage, without the specific purpose of procreation) and it was only appropriate that the sinner be punished by contracting the disease while committing his sinful action, and furthermore, that it should affect the instrument of that action. Syphilis was a sin of the flesh, punishing the flesh and clearly visible on the flesh. Doctors acknowledged other modes of transmission, such as kissing, breastfeeding and even breathing contaminated air but the venereal implication would by far remain the strongest.

The infected body quickly metamorphoses into the deformed body as disease begins its destructive course at the origin of infection, the genitals. Large sores appear, accompanied by fever, eventually bursting to release puss and ultimately to turn in to scabs. Victims experience excruciating joint pain and swelling, which grows worse at night and causes them to hunch over in agony. The sickness literally consumes the body, in particular the face and the nose, and darkening of the skin<sup>8</sup> and hair loss occur, all ailments difficult to conceal and which only attract further attention.<sup>9</sup> The body ‘rots’ from the inside out, disease ‘gnawing’ away at its flesh. The

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<sup>8</sup> Syphilitic rupia: ulcers that develop on the skin giving it a dark pigmentation. This condition is characteristic of secondary stage syphilis.

<sup>9</sup> The physical devastation that syphilis caused to the visible parts of the body, in particular the head/face, gave rise to the fashion of copper noses and wigs in the sixteenth century. The fact this fashion became accepted among society only emphasizes the widespread reach and endemic nature of the disease. It also associated disease with

putrefaction of flesh causes an obnoxious odor, itself considered a source of disease. Putrefaction was a general precondition for epidemics, especially among the poor; it was commonly believed that inadequate living conditions could cause rotting of the humours, leading, in turn, to infected air that could contaminate the rest of the population.<sup>10</sup> One of the theories that Fracastoro emphasizes in his works states that miasma play a role in the spread of contagion, which I will discuss in more detail ahead.

Syphilis began as an epidemic disease associated with a collective sin punishable by a vengeful God. When Girolamo Savonarola predicted the return of Christ in 1500, he warned that God would punish all sins. This fueled the populace's anxiety that syphilis was the aforementioned punishment. Over the years the disease became endemic and practically commonplace, and its fear quotient decreased since most people were now convinced that it was curable. Blame shifted from the group to the individual, particularly when the individual did not respond positively to popular treatments. The victims of syphilis became directly responsible for their own plight. As opposed to genetic physical deformities, which were often attributable to the sins of the parents or considered auguries of future events, a syphilitic's sin was his own, committed in his own lifetime and paid for in the first person. Syphilis isolated individuals, unlike the plague, which struck people of an entire community. It was not mysterious because it was a predictable consequence of sexual contact with an infected person but unlike other illnesses linked to certain character traits, there was no specific type of personality more susceptible to syphilis. Disease on the whole was seen as an instrument of divine wrath and given that syphilis was the consequence of a specific sexually based sin, it also had the potential

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disguise and consequently, deceit. See Margaret Healy, "Bronzino's London Allegory and the Art of Syphilis", *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1997), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Arrizabalaga et al., 25-26.

to provide its victims with redemption and the opportunity to become ‘better’ people as a result<sup>11</sup>. While physically debilitating, syphilis was also morally corruptive and demeaning to its victims. Susan Sontag refers to this phenomenon as blaming the victim for his or her illness but in the case of syphilis, it is literally the victims’ direct actions which causes them to contract the disease in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

### **Girolamo Fracastoro’s *Syphilidis sive de Morbi Gallici* (1530)**

Girolamo Fracastoro, published his work *Syphilidis sive de morbi gallici* in 1530, although he started working on his poetic treatment of syphilis much earlier<sup>13</sup>. Written in Latin, he dedicated the first book of the poem to Pietro Bembo (poet and secretary to Pope Leo X), whom he also consulted for suggestions. From a medical standpoint, syphilis fascinated Fracastoro because of its novelty and rapid dissemination in Europe. As a poet, however, he was intrigued by the desire to integrate his choice of depraved subject matter into the available resources of poetic language. Poetry’s goal by definition is to imitate nature and beauty, and therefore the poet must succeed in extracting beauty, even from a topic such as syphilis. As Horace writes in his *Art of Poetry*, though the topic may be familiar or even mundane/disgusting, it is the poet’s duty to extract from it something beautiful and irreproducible by common men.<sup>14</sup>

Fracastoro admired all things that exuded *meraviglia* (wonder), even disease. In a fragment of a letter written to Bembo, he called the theme of disease *tema nuovo e mirabile* [new and marvelous topic] and the wonder that syphilis evoked in him compelled him to write the poem: *Quae, sicut desueta, ita mira erupit in aria* (It burst into the air, a disease as marvelous as

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), 42.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, 56-57.

<sup>13</sup> Girolamo Fracastoro, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione, Libri III*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1930), xv.

<sup>14</sup> Horace, *Satires and Epistles*, trans. John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112.

it was strange) (Book I, v. 297)<sup>15</sup>. Fracastoro's poetic and medical discourses were all linked by this passion for the 'wonderful' and as Douglas Biow suggests, Fracastoro could consider himself a "physician of souls".<sup>16</sup> Just as his ancient predecessors had done before him, he searched for the hidden origins of things by means of both medicine and poetry.

Fracastoro's choice of genre stems from a long classical tradition. Ancient authors advocated the belief that poetry was educational. It was a didactic exercise disguised in a delightful and pleasurable fashion by means of lucid verse. Epic poetry was the most important, combining both moral instruction and practical information. Its goal was also to inspire its readers to acts of virtue and courage, and offer examples regarding how individuals should live their own lives by providing practical information.<sup>17</sup> Horace suggests that poets choose a theme that suits their abilities, allowing eloquence and clarity to come naturally to their writing. It is not enough for a poem to be beautiful; a reader must be able to identify with and quickly grasp its meaning. Characters should be well conceived and the passages ethical, with a strong moral sense. Horace also advises using everyday examples in the hope that poetry can confer some benefit or give pleasure in a brief, precise, but above all charming manner.<sup>18</sup>

During the classical period, the study of science fell under the general heading of philosophy or in the modern sense, "liberal arts". These subjects included not only the mechanical arts (painting, sculpture, etc.), literature, literary criticism, and theology but also biology and physics. Ancient scientists did not conduct experiments but based their work mainly on the observation of nature and speculative thought, hence their findings were often less than

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<sup>15</sup> Girolamo Fracastoro, *Scritti inediti*, ed. Francesco Pellegrini (Verona: Edizioni Valdonega, 1955), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors and Secretaries: Humanism and Professions in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 75-76.

<sup>17</sup> Monica R. Gale, *Lucretius and Didactic Epic*, (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2001), 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Horace, 114-115.

purely objective.<sup>19</sup> Classical works of science and philosophy constituted an important reference point for Renaissance physicians, who based much of their medical knowledge on the writings of Aristotle and Galen, among others. For Fracastoro, the expressive power of poetry provided a challenge when dealing with such an unappetizing subject as syphilis. It allowed him the freedom to portray his ideas in vivid description but simultaneously offered him a stage for practical medical advice. Above all, his choice of poetry was fueled by his admiration for two of the most important classical works in literature, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius.

The *Syphilidis* owes a great debt to the *Metamorphoses*. It can be argued that no other work from classical antiquity has exerted more influence on European literature. The *Metamorphoses* is a collection of stories loosely connected by themes, geography and contrasts, but above all, a work that deals with human suffering and the transformations associated with it. It is a particularly rich source for erotic love stories. Ovid is clearly interested in the process of storytelling and the organization of his stories allows him to use various literary genres in uniting them into a single work. He uses vivid, sensationalistic detail to recount the human experience, although he offers no clear cut vision of life other than the notion that everything is subject to change, nothing is permanent, except, of course, for art.

Ovid's myths were a rich resource not only for figurative language but also for classical allusions and similes. Renaissance authors often used Biblical stories, but they left little room for manipulation of meaning and for sexual love. Ovid describes nature as change, whether spontaneous or the product of divine intervention. It is mutable and pervaded by mystery, with supernatural and miraculous origins. His characters undergo bodily transformations caused by

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<sup>19</sup> Gale, 2.

excessive passions or appetites, evil actions or transgressions against the gods. Most individuals change into an image of their true nature, fixed and irreversible. As Christopher Allen points out, “A period as fascinated by symbolic codes and emblematic devices as the Renaissance could not but be drawn to a process through which an individual is corporeally changed into a emblem of himself.”<sup>20</sup>

Various manuscript and printed editions of the *Metamorphoses* continued to circulate widely in the Renaissance. The idea of transformative bodies and of nature as animate was especially poignant in the Renaissance; this was a period filled with scientific and geographic discoveries, but it also clung to continued beliefs in magic and the supernatural. The collision of the natural and supernatural worlds made for a ‘wonder’ full climate. The popularity of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the Renaissance explains a broader interest in the idea of the mutability of the body. Because no authoritative edition of the *Metamorphoses* existed, myths were open to various interpretations and re-workings under the idea of *imitatio* (imitation).<sup>21</sup> This was a key concept in the Renaissance that entailed not simply the copying of an original work but its transformation for present day use. Poets followed the examples of classical models by emulation. As Horace suggests, one should “either follow tradition or invent what is consistent.”<sup>22</sup>

Most notably, the god Apollo plays an important role in both Fracastoro’s work and personal life. The poet invokes Apollo to help in his task of writing and appeals for the immortality of his work, which only Apollo can grant. According to Monica Gale, the qualities of authority and seductiveness have long been associated with epic poetry. Laying claim to

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher Allen, "Ovid and art", in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 340.

<sup>21</sup> Goran V. Stanivukovic, ed., *Ovid and the Renaissance Body* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Horace, 109.

divine inspiration or appealing to muses was a means of creating a link to the divine. Poets were oftentimes seen as the medium for the gods, who most commonly spoke in epic hexameter, as in the case of the oracle at Delphi. The poet's duty was to write down the will of the gods.<sup>23</sup> In a sense, the poet emulates the gods because he has the power to transform his subjects. An artist's skill lies in his ability to create shape shifting and multiplicity. It is, however, important to keep in mind that Roman Catholic doctrine viewed most metamorphoses, especially those regarding the body, as heretical and demonic because only God has the power to create such change.

Apollo is certainly the favorite deity of Fracastoro and he appears prominently in the two myths that Fracastoro uses to explain the most popular treatment for syphilis. Apollo assumes many capacities; as the patron of poetry, Fracastoro invokes his help in undertaking the origins of the horrible disease. From an etymological standpoint, a connection between the name Apollo and the Greek verb "to repel" or "to destroy" has often been suggested.<sup>24</sup> He is responsible for the fate of Ilceus in Book II, who is punished with syphilis for offending Apollo's sister, Diana and for the suffering of the shepherd Syphilus in Book III. As the god of sudden death (particularly of the young) and god of disease, he takes the life of the Cenomani youth in Book I. In the Ovidian myth most associated with the origins of the word syphilis, Apollo eradicates Niobe's entire family as a punishment for her excessive hubris. As easily as he takes life, though, Apollo also acts as a healer and he is the god of medicine. In Book III, he cures Syphilus with the discovery of guaiacum. He is responsible for both the immortality of Fracastoro's work as well as the mortality of the victims of disease.

According to an epigram written by the scholar Giulio Cesare Scaligero (1484-1558), Apollo was also instrumental in two significant events in the poet's personal life. Scaligero

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<sup>23</sup> Gale, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, trans. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1994), 109.

describes how Apollo created a mouth for Fracastoro since his own mouth was so small and firmly closed at birth that it required an operation to open. As an infant, Apollo once again saved the life of the poet when his mother was struck by lightning while holding him.<sup>25</sup>

As this chapter will elaborate, Fracastoro borrowed not only content but also structure from Ovid's masterpiece. The *Syphilidis* itself undergoes numerous transformations. As Paul Barolsky states, "poetry that describes metamorphosis is itself metamorphosis."<sup>26</sup> It is at once didactic, myth and personal anecdote, seamlessly moving from a debate about the origins of syphilis in the ancient world to present day Europe and a personal account of a patient. Fracastoro even offers practical information regarding specific treatments (mercury and guaiacum) and proscriptions for living a healthy lifestyle. As Charles Segal states, bodily transformations mirror the poetic process itself; bodies (whether deformed or not) become aesthetic objects because the writer, just as nature, must give them form.<sup>27</sup>

Syphilis, itself, also evolves throughout the work. The disease moves from active to latent phases and brings with it various and violent physical transformations. The disfiguring sores and loss of body parts in its initial stages give way to less obvious internal traumas that render the disease chronic rather than acute. Perceptions about syphilis also change; in most instances, it is deemed curable and not a death sentence. The view of the individual who contracts the disease varies: the rich don't deserve it or are victims of witchcraft while the poor merit it through their actions. Social stigma, nevertheless, remains attached to it.

A second important work that influenced Fracastoro was Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. It enjoyed considerable fame during the classical period, although it was relatively unknown to

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<sup>25</sup> Fracastoro, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione, Libri III*, vii-viii.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Barolsky, "As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art", *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Summer, 1998), 467.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Segal, "Ovid's Metamorphic Bodies: Art, Gender, and Violence in the Metamorphoses", *Arion*, Third Series, vol. 5, no. 3 (Winter, 1998), 17.



medieval scholars until its rediscovery in 1418 by Poggio Bracciolini, who found the work in a monastery in Murbach, Germany. In 1437, he sent the manuscript to be copied by the humanist Niccolò de' Niccoli. Future manuscripts derive from Niccoli's copy and the first printed edition was published in 1473, followed by other editions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup> For most of the fifteenth century, the *De Rerum Natura* was confined to the Italian peninsula, particularly to Florence, where humanists such as Marsilio Ficino and Agnolo Poliziano studied and imitated the poem.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the poem enjoyed a wide circulation, even among those who lacked a humanist education such as the painter Sandro Botticelli. According to Erwin Panofsky, Botticelli depicted the Fifth Book of *De Rerum Natura* (v. 737-745) in his famous painting *Primavera*, attesting to Lucretius' popularity and influence in all circles during this period.<sup>30</sup> In 1509 Girolamo Fracastoro joined the *condottiere* Bartolomeo Alviano's humanist Academy at Pordennone in Friuli, along with other intellectuals including the Venetian noble Andrea Navagero, with whom he maintained a close friendship throughout his life. During his sojourn at Pordennone, Navagero was preparing his own manuscript version of *De Rerum Natura* as an editor for Aldus (Venice, 1515), giving Fracastoro ample means to explore Lucretius' poem in depth.<sup>31</sup>

Fracastoro took much inspiration from Lucretius' treatment of the plague that struck Athens in 429 B.C. (Book VI). Lucretius describes in graphic detail the course that the plague took among its victims, how their throats turned black and their tongues became swollen and

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<sup>28</sup> On the rediscovery of *De Rerum Natura* and its influence in Early Modern Europe, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve. How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Marco Beretta, "The revival of Lucretian atomism and contagious diseases during the Renaissance", *Medicina nei secoli*, v15, 2, (2003), 130-131.

<sup>30</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 192-193. See also Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love. Botticelli's Primavera and the humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24.

<sup>31</sup> Beretta, 138.

bloody. They wallowed in constant pain and suffered from an unquenchable thirst. The plague killed in one week but those who managed to recover did so slowly, oftentimes undergoing castration, amputation or blindness in the process. Lucretius describes Athens as a city filled with suffering, squalor and misery; people abandoned all signs of humanity, leaving the sick to die in the streets.

The aesthetic appeal of poetry conveys a certain quality of seductiveness upon its readers. Poetry could persuade readers that its message is absolute truth, no matter if the opposite is true. Lucretius' mentor, Epicurus, disapproved of poetry. He described the genre as "tricky" because it uses metaphors and other devices. However, its ultimate goal is to convey a message, even if it is veiled in beauty. In a famous passage from the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius, ironically, compares himself to a doctor who must convince a child to swallow a bitter medicine. He does so by spreading honey on the rim of the cup to "help the medicine go down easier". The physician Fracastoro uses this same 'trick' of poetry to administer his message about syphilis, honey coating his cup with delightful myths. He "illuminates" the reader to certain ideas about disease and invites him to accept those, which he might otherwise reject.<sup>32</sup>

As attested to by his own descriptions of syphilis, Fracastoro viewed Lucretius' work not only as a great source of poetic admiration but also one of scientific innovation. Lucretius advocated Epicuraneism, a system of ethics that encouraged a life of hedonism and pleasure, and that opposed the ideas of immortality and divine providence. For Lucretius, death simply signified the end of a cycle, a breakdown of both body and soul to its most basic atoms. Reality was ultimately an expanse of atoms moving in space and everything, including humans, was reducible to indestructible atomic particles. Epicureanism supported the notion that the human

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<sup>32</sup> Gale, 20.

and spiritual worlds were separate realms and neither influenced the other in any way. As a Christian, Fracastoro rejected the idea of Epicureanism but Lucretius' theory of atomism inspired his personal opinions about the spread of disease through natural causes, specifically the notion of *semina* or "seeds" that could travel through air and even attach to clothing to infect individuals.

The choice to write the poem in Latin reflects Fracastoro's desire to address it to an erudite audience, who probably considered itself untouchable by syphilis, and indicated Fracastoro's concern with the dignity of his poem. Historically, disease was long associated with poverty and substandard hygiene. It was the breeding ground for epidemics and initially, syphilis threatened to approach devastating levels, even among the higher classes. Written accounts support the widespread reach of syphilis, indicating that even members of powerful families such as the Este were afflicted. It did not discriminate between the rich and the poor.

Of course, Girolamo Fracastoro was not the first poet to treat syphilis as a poetic subject. In fact, the period between 1494-1498 is known by many as the 'golden period' of syphiographic literature. Agnolo Poliziano, best known for his *Stanze per la giostra*, composed a poem entitled *Sylva in scabiem*, in which he expresses in painstaking detail the devastating symptoms and progression of syphilis. Discovered only in 1954, it is believed to be the first poetic account of syphilis. Interestingly, Poliziano pursued research in both the fields of medicine and science as well as poetry; he owned a codex of *Lucretius' De rerum Natura*, his library contained twelve medical manuscripts and the works of Galen with a commentary by Niccolò Leonico. Leonico published the first scientific treatise about syphilis in 1493 entitled *De epidemia quam Itali morbum gallicum, Galli vero neapolitanum vocant*. Although the actual date of Poliziano's poem is unknown, historians believe that he contracted an acute

form of syphilis around 1494, which most likely killed him a few months later, at the age of forty.<sup>33</sup> Towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Antonio Cammelli, known as Il Pistoia, wrote a sonnet entitled *All'amica* (Sonnet XX) in which he describes himself as ‘a baron of France’ (*eletto fra i Baron di Francia*), referring once more to syphilis as a “French” disease (*morbo gallico, mal fancese, mal fanzoso*). His body is so completely covered in sores, giving the appearance that he is wearing the disease like an outfit. Both Il Pistoia and his son are believed to have suffered from syphilis. Poliziano and Il Pistoia’s works land squarely at the beginning of the epidemic of syphilis in Europe and precede the publication of Fracastoro’s poem by some thirty years. In 1519, Ulrich Von Hutten, a German scholar, wrote the text *De morbo gallico*, detailing his battle with syphilis. This work is regarded as one of the first patient narratives and advocates the use of guaiacum as a treatment. Later, Lo Strascino describes his personal struggles with syphilis in a work entitled *Lamento* (1525). They are but a few examples of syphilitic literature created during the end of the fifteenth century.

*Syphilidis sive de Morbi Gallici* or simply *Syphilidis*, the title by which the actual disease would come to be called, is a didactic poem written in hexameter, following a distinguished classical tradition of short epics that dealt with scientific themes while simultaneously imparting a moral lesson.<sup>34</sup> Fracastoro presents his readers with a work rife with nature, presenting specific, concrete information about disease while at the same time instructing his reader on how to avoid syphilis, or if he is already infected, conveying methods of treatment. Originally written as two books, the final version consists of three books which detail the symptoms and cures of syphilis

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<sup>33</sup> Beretta, p. 133. See also Angelo Poliziano, *Uno sconosciuto carne sulla lue*, ed. Giorgio del Guerra (Pisa: Casa Editrice Umberto Giardini, 1960), 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> Gale, 5.

as well as outlining its origins through two separate albeit very similar myths. In his dedication to Pietro Bembo, Fracastoro defends his unorthodox choice of subject matter:

Deus haec quondam dignatus Apollo est:  
Et parvis quoque rebus inest sua saepe voluptas.  
Scilicet hac tenui rerum sub imagine multum  
Naturae fatigue subestm, et grandis origo. (Book I, vv. 20-23)

[The god Apollo once dignified these matters: small things, also, often have within them their own particular delights. Be certain that beneath the slender appearance of this topic there lies concealed a vast work of Nature and of fate and a grand origin.]<sup>35</sup>

The ‘ slender topic’ is, in fact, full of botanical references that serve as treatments for syphilis and often resembles a “self- help” manual.

In Book I, Fracastoro explains his theories regarding contagion and more specifically, presents the readers with his own beliefs about the infiltration of the French disease onto Italian soil. In fact, the author is not convinced that syphilis is a new disease simply arriving from the New World because of its rapid dissemination in Europe:

Nece certe credere par est  
Esse peregrinam nobis, transque aequora vectam  
Contagem: quoniam in primis ostendere multos  
Possumus, attctu qui nullius hanc tamen ipsam  
Sponte sua sensere luem, primique tulere.  
Praeterea et tantum terrarum tempore parvo  
Contages non una simul potuisset obire. (Book I, vv. 56-60)

[Certainly it does not meet the facts to believe that the contagion is foreign to us and has been conveyed across the sea: seeing that in the first place we can show many who without touching anyone, with no intermediary, yet felt the effect of this same plague and have been the first to suffer. Besides a single contagion on its own could not have covered so much of the earth in such a short time.]

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<sup>35</sup> All subsequent Latin texts and English translations are from Girolamo Fracastoro, *Syphilis or the French Disease*, trans. Geoffrey Eatough (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984).

Fracastoro's choice of title, *De Morbi Gallici* attributes some of the blame to the invading French army of Charles VIII as the disseminators of the disease in Italy. However, where and when it originally appeared in Europe is still not clear: *In Latium vero per tristia bella gallorum irrupit, nomenque a gente receipt* [It burst into Italy with the unhappy French wars and took its name from that people.] (Book I, vv. 5-6). According to the poet, ancient Greek and Roman doctors were aware of syphilis although it was often misdiagnosed. Sparse records of this disease exist in ancient literature and so Fracastoro was partially correct; today we know that syphilis was present in the ancient world but the illness that afflicted Renaissance society came from a new strain of an already existent bacteria, *treponema pallidum*. The *treponema* bacteria was also responsible for diseases such as yaws, pinta, bejel; all of which carried very similar symptoms and were congenital or endemic rather than venereal. The strain which Fracastoro wrote about *was* new because it was transmitted by sexual intercourse.

The poet continues his scientific discourse by classifying diseases into two categories; those with basic structures whose origin and course are clear from the outset, and others, such as syphilis, which emerge rarely and only after long periods of gestation.

Ergo et morborum quoniam non omnibus una,  
Nascendi est ratio, facilis pars maxima visu est,  
Et faciles ortus habet, et primordia praesto.  
Rarius emergunt alii, et post tempore longo  
Difficiles causas, et inextricabile fatum,  
Et sero potuere altas superare tenebras. (Book I, vv. 90-96)

[Therefore, with diseases also, for there is not one process of gestation for them all, the greatest number are easy to observe, they have an easy birth and their basic structure is obvious. Others emerge more rarely and only after a long period of time are they finally able to overcome the difficulties of their origins and a fate hard to unravel and deep darkness.]

This passage is a clear example of the coexistence of both science and literature that permeates throughout the poem and an attempt to explain the pox's reawakening in Europe and

consequent rapid dissemination among countries, where ideal conditions already existed for the disease to take hold. Fracastoro states that the initial appearance of syphilis was so long ago that time has eradicated its existence and purged it from man's memory. He later argues in his treatise *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis e Eorum Curatione* (1545) that it can even lay dormant in mundane objects such as articles of clothing for years before reawakening.

As to the means of contagion, Fracastoro identifies the air as one of the main vehicles for the dissemination of infected 'seeds' (*semina*). As stated elsewhere, the idea of *semina* was nothing new, being first proposed by Lucretius' theory of atomism, but Fracastoro's innovation lies in his attempt to systematically and precisely expand on the role of seeds in order to explain natural phenomena, particularly in the realm of contagion. The novelty behind his theory is the concept that once infected *semina* enter the body, they can propagate indefinitely. In fact, the word *semina* appears as early as the first line of the poem and this idea that seeds carry disease will become a major foundation of his contagion theory, expounded upon in *De Contagione*. Here Fracastoro uses literary *topoi* taken directly from the *De Rerum Natura* by inviting the reader to direct observation so that he can come his own rational conclusion about the causes of syphilis<sup>36</sup>:

Quumque animadvertas tam vastae semina labis  
Esse nec in terrae gremio, nec in aequore posse,  
Haud dubie tecum statuas reputesque, necesse est,  
Principium, sedemque mali consistere in ipso  
Aere, qui terras circum diffunditur omnes,  
Qui nobis sese insinuat per corpora ubique,  
Suetus et has generi viventum immittere pestes.  
Aer quipped pater rerum est, et originis auctor. (Book I, vv. 119-126)

[And when you notice that the seeds of this vast destruction cannot be in the bosom of the earth or in the sea, you must undoubtedly decide in your own mind and reckon that the seat and origin of evil are firmly fixed in the very air, which pours in all directions round the whole earth, which infiltrates everywhere through our bodies, and is accustomed to

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<sup>36</sup> Beretta, 141.

send these diseases among the race of living creatures. For air is the father of all things and the author of their origin.]

The infected *semina* contribute to the putrefaction of the air, which if inhaled, consequently leads to the spread of the illness. Given the proper conditions, the air ('father of all things') becomes a catalyst for the dissemination of disease. This is, of course, all part of a metaphoric discourse since neither Fracastoro nor Lucretius before him actually observed these seeds. By comparing the seeds to other elements of nature, the poet familiarizes them but ultimately they are invisible to the eye.

Also prevalent among Fracastoro's theories regarding disease is the influence of sublime forces, specifically divine powers and planetary movements. Disease, war and famine are inevitable events in our lifetimes and portrayed as punishments doled out by vengeful gods. In the poem, these punitive measures are personified in a council of Gods, headed by Jupiter. Through nature, the gods create chaos as castigation. Renaissance culture relied heavily on *divinatio popularis*, the belief that a system of signs could be used to predict future events such as disease and war.<sup>37</sup> Fracastoro underscores this when he describes the varying effects of the Sun and Earth on the seasons, explaining severe winters, scorching summers, and floods. Nature is unpredictable and can cause *meraviglie* on Earth including monsters:

Ast insueti aestus, insuetaque frigora mundo  
Insurgent, et certa dies animalia terries  
Monstrabit nova, nascentur pecudesque feraeque  
Sponte sua, primaque animas ab origine sument. (Book I, vv. 174-177)

[But unusual heat and unusual cold will rise against the world, and the day appointed will show forth new creatures in the earth, cattle and wild beasts will be born spontaneously and take life from their primal source.]

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<sup>37</sup> Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), xiii.



Quae quum perspicias, nihil est, cur tempore certo  
Admirere novis magnum marcescere morbis  
Aera, contagesque novas viventibus aegris  
Sydere sub certo fieri, et per saecula longa. (Book I, vv. 182-185)

[When you consider these matters carefully there is no reason why you should wonder that at an appointed time the great expanse of air should grow languid with new diseases and that new contagions should affect frail living creatures under a destined star after the passage of long centuries.]

This association between gods and planetary movements helps to explain the general belief of the Renaissance that catastrophic events are somehow part of an individual's destiny; the gods punish people for their transgressions. In this regard Fracastoro's theories can be contradictory; he exculpates the individual and attributes blame for the spread of disease and horrible occurrences such as war and famine on forces outside of our control, regardless of whether these events are merited. These unnatural events act as portents of impending destruction or punishment. They bring to mind 'end of the world' scenarios, in which harmony ceases and 'unnatural things' begin to happen. Many people consider such catastrophes a moral 'wake up call'. From a purely medical standpoint, however, it is clear that Fracastoro does consider the individual as partaking of his own destiny and well being, and to do so he must refrain from specific behavior (whether sexual in nature or not) that could cause him to contract disease.

Book I culminates with a detailed description of the symptoms of syphilis. Fracastoro describes how the first clear signs of infection are felt four days after initial contact. The afflicted individual becomes lethargic and sluggish, and decay is born in the genitals (*Paulatim caries foedis enata pudendis*)[Book I, v. 330] eating away at the sexual organs. As night approaches, the victim suffers intolerable pains, which attack the joints, making sleep impossible. In an effort to expel the disease, the body propels contaminated matter to the surface, resulting in a gruesome spectacle:

Protinus informes totum per corpus achores  
Rumpebant, faciemque horrendam, et pectora foede  
Turpabant: species morbi nova: pustula summae  
Glandis ad effigiem, et pituita marcida pingui:  
Tempore quae multo no post adaperata dehiscens,  
Mucosa multum sanie, taboque fluebat. (Book I, vv. 349-354)

[Immediately unsightly sores broke out over all the body and made the face horrifyingly ugly, and disfigured the breast by their foul presence: the disease took on a new aspect: pustules with the shape of an acorn-cup and rotten with thick slime, which soon afterwards gaped wide open and flowed with a discharge like mucous and putrid blood.]

In this final section of Book I, we witness the ‘gaping’ body, emitting foulness from its various orifices and practically self- destructing. Limbs are stripped of flesh and the bones covered with scales. Teeth and hair fall out and the mouth becomes a hole. The nasal cartilage is literally eaten away, causing the nose to collapse like a “squashed fig”. Other organs are also affected; the decaying of the body and the emission of mucous and blood from the victims’ sores causes a foul smell; the trachea and uvula are destroyed and the palate is perforated, causing the victim to speak in a rasping voice.<sup>38</sup>

It is here that Fracastoro relays a personal anecdote to highlight the physical brutality of syphilis and to underscore a second means of contagion, physical (sexual) contact. He describes a handsome and desirable young Italian from Brescia, struck down at the prime of his youth. The boy is portrayed similarly to the figure of Narcissus; preoccupied with the pursuit of sports and the maintenance of his athletic physique while at the same time unaware of his own desirability to others. Although Fracastoro avoids specifically mentioning that the youth contracted syphilis through sexual intercourse, he blames a scorned lover for his death:

Illum omnes Ollique Deae, Eridanique puellae  
Optarunt, nemorumque Deae, rurisque puellae:  
Omnes optatos suspiravere hymenaeos.  
Forsan et ultores superos neglecta vocavit

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<sup>38</sup> Claude Quétel, *History of Syphilis*, trans. Judith Braddock and Brian Pike (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 69.

Non nequicquam aliqu, et votis pia numina movit.  
Nam nimium fidentem animis, nec tanta timentem  
Invasit miserum labes, qua saevior usquam  
Nulla fuit, nulla unquam aliis spectabitur annis. (Book I, vv. 392-399)

[All the goddesses of the Oglio desired him, all the maidens of the Po, the Goddesses of the woods, and the maidens of the countryside, all sighed over the marriage they desired. Perhaps one who had been spurned called on the avenging powers above, not in vain, and moved by her prayers the divine will to pity. For the poor youth, too self-assured, unaware of these great dangers, was seized by this plague, more savage than there has been anywhere or than will ever be seen at any future time.]

This leads us to believe that the illness is acting as an instrument of vengeance, possibly even as a curse fueled by witchcraft, for a sexual encounter and possibly, a negated promise of marriage. Historian Guido Ruggiero has documented many cases in which men tricked their female lovers into giving up their virginity in exchange for future marriage proposals. When the men recanted their promises, the female victims took them to trial, in an effort to reestablish their sexual honor and reputation, and force the men into a marriage. When legal avenues failed, it was a common belief that lovers could “bind” themselves to their love interests through magic. In an attempt to attract or keep their lovers, women often used *carte di voler bene* (written prayers), which to be effective, had to touch the lover. They also placed wax statues on church altars and even used the sacramental host. Ruggiero points out that using the host to bind a lover meant accessing the central mystery of the Catholic doctrine, transubstantiation. When ingested, the bread and the wine transformed into the body and the blood of Christ, creating love of God; in the case of binding magic, the host transforms into the body of the lover and therefore awakens love in its victim.<sup>39</sup>

When magic did not work to connect individuals to each other, it was often used as a form of punishment. The idea of the *martello*, or hammer, was a popular means of magic used

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<sup>39</sup> Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions, Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 93-94.

against the victim; he/she could be ‘hammered’ into obeying the lover’s will in order to avoid pain and suffering.<sup>40</sup> Witchcraft was blamed for many diseases, especially if they occurred suddenly in previously healthy individuals or were deemed ‘unnatural’. It was believed that most cases of syphilis could be cured by the conventional treatments at the time. Linking a disease to witchcraft could also protect the patient from associations with a sexual acquisition of the disease, which could breed further social stigmas.<sup>41</sup> In the poem, Fracastoro minimizes the youth’s culpability in the presumed sexual act that eventually caused his demise by placing the blame squarely on the scorned lover. Any complicity on the part of the young man in his own fate is minimal. The youth suffers two-fold; for committing carnal sin and for rejecting his lover. The inclusion of this personal anecdote emphasizes the fact that *Syphilidis* is not simply idyllic fantasy but also a harsh testament to a Renaissance reality. Fracastoro is a poet and a physician but equally, a chronicler of his times and an active witness.

Many treatises on the subject of syphilis acted as an outlet for moralizing or social satire and Fracastoro uses his poem as a cautionary tale. Even the young, beautiful and rich can suffer this horrific fate. Historically, disease was associated with the lower classes, but anyone could contract syphilis despite their social standing. Most people recognized the venereal nature of the disease, but they also believed that kissing and breastfeeding were modes of transmission. This again was due to the confusion between the different strains of disease that could be endemic and congenital. Some scholars have argued that physicians warned against sexual intercourse as a means of prevention not because they knew that it could spread venereally, but simply because they believed that physical exertion made the body weaker and more susceptible. Fracastoro intentionally downplays the disease’s sexual associations for the sake of poetry in order to avoid

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<sup>40</sup> Ruggiero, 71.

<sup>41</sup> Laura J. McGough, *Gender, Sexuality and Syphilis in Early Modern Venice, The Disease That Came to Stay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 145.

embarrassing the upper classes, but it is clear that he wholly acknowledges its venereal implications from the beginning and that he specifically links the disease to the sin of sexual lasciviousness.<sup>42</sup> This is especially true when we examine his other works which unequivocally point to sexual intercourse as the main mode of transmission.

Fracastoro does however indulge in some popular ideas about the influence of astrology and the divine power over disease. By doing so, he further diminishes the victims' culpability, blaming outside forces over which the victim has no control. Some Renaissance thinkers argued that fate causes the victim to contract such a deadly illness and their personal actions, whether honorable or not, are irrelevant. Admittedly, Fracastoro's theories can be discrepant at times but as a scientist, he ultimately believes that each victim plays a role in contracting disease, specifically through their participation in the mutual act of sexual intercourse. At the same time, disease acts as a metaphor for society's deepest anxieties and by blaming external forces whether they be gods, nature, or the quintessential "Other" which can 'infect' society, we deflect those anxieties and fears away from ourselves.

Fracastoro dedicates the second book of *Syphilidis* to Pope Leo X. During his papacy, Leo's influence was central to the expansion of the *Incurabili* hospitals in Rome. These hospitals, which were initially founded by Catholic confraternities at the end of the fifteenth century, specialized in treating the incurable poor, specifically those people now affected with the 'new' French disease. Their goal was threefold: to relieve the physical and spiritual suffering

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<sup>42</sup> During a series of disputes held at the court of Ferrara in 1497, Niccolò Leonicensi along with fellow humanists Sebastiano Dell'Aquila and Coradino Gilino had already concluded that syphilis was a sexually transmitted disease. Fracastoro was clearly aware of Leonicensi's theories as he references them in his own writings. See Jon Arrizabalaga, et al., 80. See also Francesco Pellegrini, ed., *Trattato inedito in prosa di Gerolamo Fracastoro sulla sifilide* (Verona: Tipografia Veronese, 1939), 21-22.

of the patients and to save them from damnation while ridding the city streets of the sight of these sick, deformed people.<sup>43</sup>

Book II lists the preventative measures and cures for syphilis at each stage of the illness. This is the most didactic section of the poem and though his writing may not earn him the laurel crown, Fracastoro feels worthy to receive a crown of oak.<sup>44</sup> In this section he describes the primary stage of disease and includes the first of two invented myths that outline the origins of the most popular cures for syphilis: mercury and the newly discovered guaiacum tree. Despite being wrought with disease and destruction, the age in which Fracastoro lives in is equally one of new discoveries especially in the field of medicine. He cannot however help but to credit some of these new findings to the supernatural: *Credo equidem et quaedam nobis divinitus esse inventa, ignaros fatis ducentibus ipsis*. [I believe indeed that some things too were discovered for us by divine help, the very fates guiding us in our ignorance.] (Book II, vv. 11-12)

The most important piece of advice that the physician/poet gives his readers is that they will fare much better if they detect the disease from its onset. Once syphilis takes hold of the body and increases in strength, corrupting all the members, the patient will suffer intensely trying to treat it. An individual can detect syphilis primarily by a visual examination since characteristic sores appear on the genitalia. Consequently, many poems and invectives of the period warn men to “investigate” their partners’ private parts for visible deformities to check whether they are infected or not. But the disease evolved and went through its latent periods, and so it became more difficult to detect whether someone was ill by simply ‘looking’ at them. Many writers used the threat of syphilis as an incentive to stay monogamous and to keep sexual relations within the acceptable confines of marriage.

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<sup>43</sup> Arrizabalaga et al., 149; 155.

<sup>44</sup> Oak leaves were a well known Galenic method for curing wounds and also represented the profession of medicine.

Idleness, heavy sleep and sad thoughts are at the top of the list of numerous precautions that syphilitics must take to stem their illness. Afflicted individuals should avoid sex, not only in an effort to stave off infections but also to avoid expending unnecessary energy. Moderate exercise and a good diet constitute a prescription for a healthy lifestyle. While patients must watch what they consume, they must also expunge any corruptions by means such as sweating and blood letting. The belief in purgation and the cleansing of disease or evil from the body was very common during the Renaissance. In fact, disease was often considered evidence of evil or sins committed by the victim, and therefore, it was only natural for the victim to cleanse himself not only physically but also morally in order to become ‘pure’ and ‘good’ again, a type of ‘moral hygiene’, if you will. As William Eamon argues, the idea of purgation acted as a ‘physiological exorcism’, comparable to a release from demonic possession because it was not only a spiritual but also a bodily experience.<sup>45</sup> Bloodletting ranked as an equally effective means of cleansing the body of malady. Renaissance physicians still upheld the popular ancient notion, first advocated by Hippocrates and later Galen, that an imbalance of humors in the body could propagate disease.<sup>46</sup> In order to create harmony and restore health, one must flush out the corrupt material by means of bloodletting, sweating and purging. Fracastoro adds numerous herbal concoctions that a patient can consume before blood letting. This portion of the work resembles a self-help guide rather than a literary exercise. The fact does not escape the poet as he underscores his primary intention:

Jamque aliud vocor ad munus, juvat in nova Musas  
Naturade nemora Aoniis deducere ad umbris:

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<sup>45</sup> William Eamon, “Cannibalism and Contagion: Framing Syphilis in Counter Reformation Italy”, *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 3 no. 1 (1998), 30.

<sup>46</sup> The Hippocratic theory, which advocated that the body was composed of four basic substances called humors, was a fundamental cornerstone of Renaissance medicine. The four humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood) corresponded to four temperaments that influenced human emotion and behavior. Diseases resulted from either excess or a deficit of the humors.

Unde mihi si non e lauro intexere fronti  
Serta violent, tantaque caput cinxisse corona,  
At saltem ob servata hominum tot millia, dignum  
Censuerint querna redimiri tempora fronde. (Book II, vv. 159-164)

[I escort the Muses from their Aonian shades into new groves of Nature: if they are not willing to weave a garland of laurel for my brow on this account and to encircle my head with this honorable crown, yet at least on account of the many thousands of men I have saved they might decree it fitting for my temples to be bound with oak leaves.]

At this point the epic poem itself transforms into detailed instructions and recipes that Fracastoro offers directly to his intended public. Much of the literature about syphilis in the Renaissance deals with prevention and cures although many authors also treated the disease as an outlet for moralizing and social satire. By embedding various remedies in works of poetry, authors provided an affective means of diffusing medical knowledge while protecting their patients. A sick person, especially one easily stigmatized by society, could purchase a book in which he could find remedies, many of which required only a visit to an herbalist for widely available plants. This offered a means of avoiding the shame of having to visit a doctor, who would undoubtedly ask about personal habits and behaviors. A high demand for printed information on how to treat syphilis existed because it was considered more authentic than word of mouth, and ancient medical texts contained little information about the disease. Commercial syphilis texts provided practical information regarding treatments but they also served a nefarious purpose; by revealing where they had contracted the disease, many writers also provided their audience with the location of prostitutes or clandestine sexual encounters. Fracastoro's poem, which targets a specific group of readers, provides a means of literary escapism because he does not implicitly mention the venereal aspects of syphilis in order to shield his readers' sensibilities.<sup>47</sup> By the mid 1520's syphilis became endemic and more widely accepted in society, transcending class

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<sup>47</sup> Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History. Disease, Power and Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 131.



barriers. Interestingly enough, when syphilis was viewed from a man's point of view, it often became a testament to a man's sexual conquests and was even called the 'gentleman's' or 'cavalier's' disease.

During the sixteenth century, perceptions about treatment of the disease also changed, as it was commonly believed that syphilis was curable by either guaiacum or mercury. As Laura J. McGough observes in her study of syphilis in Venice, the disease was no longer simply viewed as an imbalance of humors but as a specific entity, which did not necessarily mean that it had itself become weaker.<sup>48</sup> Fracastoro himself vacillates between the curable and incurable when making certain statements in his poem. When praising his patrons, he describes the disease as trivial, lacking importance and something which can be swept under the rug. At the same time, he insists on embodying the disease in a wealthy, handsome youth who ultimately suffers a horrible death as a consequence. While witchcraft in the form of vengeance could certainly have impeded the youth's recovery, we can be certain that sexuality was at the root of his infection. Syphilis frequently typifies two roles in the course of this work: for the rich, it is a regrettable, unjust and for the most part curable disease. For the rest of society however, it is a hideous and often warranted disease.<sup>49</sup> When traditional methods failed to cure a patient, blame fell on the patient himself. Doctors rarely questioned the efficacy of their treatments, assuming instead that the patient's own behavior was hindering their recovery. The attribution of guilt was important in cases of syphilis because it was part of the diagnosis.<sup>50</sup> A patient's behavior and personal habits were particularly scrutinized because sin was so closely tied to syphilis. They determined whether the disease came from natural causes, which were within a patient's control or

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<sup>48</sup> McGough, 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce Thomas Boehrer, "Early Modern Syphilis", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 no. 2 (Oct. 1990), 209.

<sup>50</sup> McGough, 97.

supernatural forces. Many believed that if a patient's moral failings exceeded his natural virtues, traditional medical treatments would fail and spiritual help such as confession and penitence were prescribed.<sup>51</sup>

In the second half of Book II, Fracastoro illustrates the origins of the mercury cure using a myth. Stephen Gould points out that the story of Ilceus acts as a warning to the “dangers of human hubris and the powers of salvation through knowledge” but Fracastoro’s use of Ovidian references also delves into a deeper meaning.<sup>52</sup> Ilceus, a shepherd in the Syrian valley, tends the gardens and animals of the gods. One day, he accidentally kills a sacred stag belonging to Diana, who by means of Apollo, sends a plague to torment him. This account mirrors Ovid’s myth of Adonis, who chases Diana’s sacred boar and is then wounded in the groin. I contend that the use of this myth as a subtext specifically highlights the venereal implications of syphilis, which primarily affected the genital region and not unlike leprosy, was closely associated with swine. While Diana does not literally wound Ilceus in the groin, it is rather a symbolic wound.

Ilceus, whose own name derives from the Greek words for ‘sore’ and ‘groin’, prays to the goddess Callirhoe for relief, offering her a sacrifice in return. The particular choice of character name only further demonstrates that Fracastoro closely connected sexual sin to the origin of syphilis. As Geoffrey Eatough observes, the fountain of Callirhoe was also historically important because Herod the Great bathed in it to stave off the illness with which God had punished him, an illness similar to syphilis because it procured gangrene in his groin.<sup>53</sup>

The myth evokes associations with physical as well as moral impurity. Callirhoe, brought to pity by Ilceus’ prayers and sincere repentance, agrees to cure the shepherd, giving him

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<sup>51</sup> McGough, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “Syphilis and the Shepherd of Atlantis”, *Natural History*, vol. 109 (October 2000), under “Page 4”, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1134/is\\_8\\_109/ai\\_65913170/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1134/is_8_109/ai_65913170/) (accessed March 4, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Girolamo Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 22.

instructions in a dream. No cure exists on Earth and Ilceus must sacrifice a black lamb to the goddess Ops and then descend into the underworld. Analogous to a trip into hell, Ilceus meets the goddess Lipare who leads him to his repentance:

Ilceu (namque tuum nec nomen, bec mihi labes  
Ignota estm nec, quid venias) jam corde timorem  
Exue, nequicquam non te huc carissima mitti  
Calirhoe: tibi parta salus tellure ub ima est. (Book II, vv. 365-368)

[Ilceus (for neither your name nor your shameful illness is unknown to me nor the reason for your coming), divest your heart of fear, our beloved Callirhoe does not send you here in vain; salvation has been devised for you in the earth's depths.]

The underworld is filled with precious metals and the nymphs who work them, as Lipare leads Ilceus to the sacred river of quicksilver, where he bathes three times to wash off the plague that torments him. Clearly, the ritual of bathing which Ilceus undertakes is comparable to a baptism, where man's sins are washed from his body. In fact, Fracastoro describes Ilceus' illness as a "malignant stain" and Lipare calls it "shameful" although the only crime he is really accused of is insulting the goddess Diana. Normally, baptism signifies the cleansing of sins whether they be personal or those of a society; by describing Ilceus's condition as 'shameful' and his skin 'dishonored', the poet indicates something more profound than the simple slaughter of Diana's sacred stag. Disease is a stain on his soul. Syphilis is punishment for the sin of carnality, which according to the poet can only be forgiven by repentance, the washing away of the shameful act through baptism. Consequently, the dead, scaly skin literally falls from Ilceus' body to reveal a new man, both morally and physically cleansed:

Hic tibi tantorum requies inventa laborum.  
Subsequitur Lipare, postquam ter flumine vivo  
Perfusus, sacra vitium omne reliqueris unda.  
Sic fatur, simul argenti ter fonte salubri  
Perfundit, ter virgineis dat flumina palmis  
Membra super, juvenem toto ter corpore lustrat  
Mirantem exuvias turpes , et labe maligna

Exutos artus, pestemque sub amne relictam. (Book II, vv. 409-416)

[Here is the relief found for your great tills, continued Lipare. After you have been steeped three times in the living stream, you will leave all this corruption behind in the sacred waters. As she spoke thrice she bathed him in the silver fount of salvation, thrice with her virgin hands she scooped the river water over his limbs, thrice she cleansed the body of the youth in its entirety: he marveled at the old dishonored skin sloughed off, his frame stripped of its malignant stain and the plague left beneath the flood.]

Ilceus resembles an epic hero who descends into the underworld only to resurface purified and renewed.

In fact, Book II utilizes such military terms such as ‘conquer’ and ‘combat’ to represent war as a continuous metaphor for syphilis. Victims should be stoic and maintain the discipline of soldiers in order to abstain from certain pleasures in life while they recover. Fracastoro employs the centuries old notion that disease is an enemy that must be fought; it is treatable and we can emerge victorious from it, even better people as a result. Of course, disease as a metaphor for war also encompasses the larger anxieties of Italians during a period in which foreign invasions were commonplace.

As Ilceus leaves the underworld in order to spread the news about the mercury treatment, Fracastoro concludes Book II with encouraging words for syphilitics. He urges them to use mercury, combined with other natural resins and oils, until they are cured. The mercury treatment is painful and unpleasant but if the victim perseveres, he can see its effectiveness in the amount of spittle and ‘corrupt matter’ that emanates from his body. Just as Ilceus did, he can emerge from the battle against syphilis, scarred but still alive.

Book III reveals one of the earliest poetic accounts of the voyages of Columbus to the New World and a detailed insight into the treatment of the Native Americans constructed through the myth of the shepherd Syphilus. Fracastoro received accounts of the New World from

his close friend Andrea Navagero, who served as an ambassador in Spain. During his sojourn, Navagero maintained direct contact with Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, whose *Decades* was published in 1511 and comprised eight books describing the geography and conquest of the New World. Fracastoro also corresponded with Oviedo y Valdes, author of *La Historia general de las Indias*, a summary of the Spanish colonization of the Caribbean, published in 1535. Valdes spent time in Italy as secretary to Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordoba, a Spanish general who fought during the Italian Wars. Peter Martyr and Oviedo y Valdes are considered two of the earliest sources of information about the colonization of the New World.<sup>54</sup>

Written as an epyllion, Book III details a new cure derived from the guaiacum tree, originating in the New World. Many scholars believe that Fracastoro wrote the first two books of the poem between 1510-1512 and the third book was added around 1526, to account for the new guaiacum treatment.<sup>55</sup> Fracastoro sent his original drafts of the poem for corrections to Pietro Bembo, who considered the inclusion of two similar myths in the poem as odd and recommended that Fracastoro remove the myth of Ilceus and concentrate solely on the more novel guaiacum story.<sup>56</sup> News of the guaiacum treatment arrived in Europe via Spain and Portugal towards the first decade of the sixteenth century. The earliest literary representations of the treatment come from Germany, most specifically von Hutten's treatise in 1519. It is unclear whether Fracastoro was familiar with guaiacum before 1519 but he derives most of his description of guaiacum's use from von Hutten.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Fracastoro, *Scritti inediti*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> G. L. Hendrickson, "The Syphilis of Girolamo Fracastoro. With Some Observations on the Origin and the History of the Word 'Syphilis,'" *Institute of the History of Medicine, Bulletin*, 2 (1934), 521.

Fracastoro needed to account for the origins of two cures so he ignored Bembo's advice and ultimately left both myths in place.<sup>58</sup> This lack of harmony between Book II and Book III highlights the time lapse between the two parts but as G.L. Hendrickson states, it may also be indicative of Fracastoro's resistance to re-working his poem, choosing instead to add a third book and allowing two versions of the origin of syphilis to coexist.<sup>59</sup> Similarly to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book II seamlessly transforms into Book III and both myths rely on an identical plot structure: men commit sins against the gods by killing animals, they receive punishment by disease, they attain salvation through sacrifice and repentance.

Essentially, the two myths in *Syphylidis* can also be looked at through a Christian framework. Both myths talk about the killing of animals (killing is a sin) and transgression against the gods and their divine authority. This results in anger and punishment by disease. The punished victims respond with fear, sacrifice and repentance. Even though Fracastoro uses science and natural phenomena to explain the origins of disease, he is still influenced by the belief that disease is the result of man's sin and therefore, a divine punishment.

In the first few verses, Fracastoro acknowledges the beauties of the New World and although he deems them worthy of poetry, he states that he will recount only the tale of the sacred guaiacum tree and no more: *Foelix, cui tantum dederit Deus. At mihi vires arboris unions satis est.* [Happy the poet to whom God has granted so much. But for me it is enough to recall the powers of a single tree and its use.](Book III, vv. 26-27). The discovery of America and its peoples was a transformative moment in history because it introduced a new "Other". It elicited

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<sup>58</sup> According to letters between them, Pietro Bembo suggested 111 corrections that Fracastoro should undertake in his poem, most notably discarding the Ilceus myth. Fracastoro adopted only 18 of those corrections in full and then added the second myth of Syphilus. See Fracastoro, *Scritti inediti*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Hendrickson, 522-523.

shock and horror but also wonder and an air of seduction in regards to unknown practices and especially new bodily forms.

As myth and reality co-mingle in this account, Fracastoro describes the European explorers lost at sea, praying for the sight of land. The goddess Phoebe hears their cries, turns into a mermaid and leads them to the shores of the New World. The explorers marvel at the paradise on which they arrive, full of lush greenery and exotic animals. They encounter colorful parrots, birds of the sun god Apollo, flying among the trees and the explorers introduce violence to this paradise by shooting the birds. The birds, in turn, prophesize dreadful retributions to be handed down on the explorers: war, shipwreck, mutiny, but most frightening, a disease that will ravage their bodies and can only be cured by a tree from the very forest they seek to destroy:

Ipsa inter sese vestras discordia puppes  
In rabiem ferrumque trahet: nec sera manet vos  
Illa dies, foedi ignoto quum corpora morbo  
Auxilim sylva miseri poscetis ab ista,  
Donec poeniteat scelerum. (Book III, vv. 188-192)

[Discord herself will drag your crews into mad and murderous disputes; and a day lies in wait for you, close at hand, when your bodies filthy with an unknown disease, you will in your wretchedness demand help of this forest until you repent of your crimes.]

As the explorers struggle to comprehend the punishment predicted upon them, the natives appear to greet their arrival. They are native Indians, but Fracastoro describes these people as a race with black faces and black hair (*nigrum genus ora comasque*), naked, seemingly innocent, and peacefully bearing gifts. From the onset, the natives are ‘tamed’ by their European counterparts. As they exchange gifts, the explorers clothe the natives in order to cover their nakedness. The Spaniards proceed to assimilate the Indians to their way of life by introducing them to European vices such as wine.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Todorov, 248.

Richard Frank suggests that this passage is particularly significant of a racial tradition commonly upheld in the Renaissance. The ‘black’ natives are contrasted with the white, occupying Spaniards. Many believed that the black race was particularly sexually licentious and had a greater sexual appetite<sup>61</sup>. The fear of the Other turns into a desire to control the Other as the explorers quickly cover the natives’ naked bodies, masking the source of their shame. In the role of the “Other”, the natives are not only stigmatized because of their race and religion but also their sexuality. As the parrots predicted, only repentance can save the explorers from syphilis and the same is true for the natives, whose sins and lascivious nature can only be forgiven through a conversion to Christianity.

The illusion of innocence on the part of the peaceful natives is shattered when it is discovered that they are the original victims of syphilis. During a feast day, the explorers witness a peculiar ceremony involving a group of people “scaly with scabs, flowing with pus” (*squallentes crustis omnesm taboque fluentes*) (Book III, vv. 238-239). As the natives begin to explain, the explorers realize that this affliction is exactly what the birds prophesized for them. Here again, Fracastoro recounts their illness through two separate stories that blur the boundaries between myths: the first account portrays the natives as the descendants of Atlantis. Following Ovid’s account of the destruction of the human race, he describes a once virtuous race of people dear to the gods that became corrupt through greed and power. To humble them, the gods devastated their island with earthquakes, floods and finally, afflicted the people with disease. The second story, which acts as an aetiological myth, has its protagonist a shepherd named Syphilus. Syphilus, in his anger against the very nature he is so close to, rejects the sun god Apollo whose

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Frank, “Fracastoro: Poetry vs. Prose”, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Spring 2003), 531.



scorching summer rays are killing his flocks of sheep. He decides instead to worship his king Alcithious who seems capable of satisfying all the earthly desires of his fellow citizens. Apollo, as revenge for this wrong, spreads a pestilence through the air that is destined to last forever:

Protinus illuvies terris ignota profanis  
Exoritur. Primus, regi qui sanguine fuso  
Instituit divina, sacrasque in montibus aras,  
Syphilus, ostendit turpes per corpus achores.  
Insomnes primus noctes, convulsaque membra  
Sensit, et a primo traxit congnomina morbis,  
Syphilidemque ab eo labem dixere coloni. (Book III, vv. 326-332)

[Straightaway an unknown pollution was born to flood the blasphemous earth. The first man to display disfiguring sores over his body was Syphilus, who by the shedding of blood institutes the divine rites in the king's honor and altars in the mountains sacred to him; he was the first to experience sleepless nights and tortured limbs, and from the first victim the disease derived its name and from him the farmers called the sickness Syphilis.]

Syphilus implores the nymphs for a cure. As expiation for his blasphemy, he must sacrifice a white heifer to Juno in order to restore the Sun god to his appropriate place of worship. Juno, in return, offers the people the healing tree of guaiacum to assuage their suffering. To keep the pestilence at bay, yearly sacrifices must be made to the Sun god and, Syphilus, appropriately, is chosen as the first victim because it was his original sin that brought the scourge upon his people. At the last moment, Apollo spares his life, accepting instead a bullock as a sacrifice. The tale recalls Christian symbolism. The Sun god represents Christ, while the goddess Juno, to whom a white heifer is sacrificed, depicts the Virgin Mary. The guaiacum tree, often called the "Tree of Life", is a representation of the Holy Cross<sup>62</sup>. Some people considered guaiacum holy wood (*lignum sanctum*) because they believed the cross on which Christ was

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<sup>62</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 24.

crucified came from the same wood. The holy aspect of guaiacum suggests that God is amenable to forgiving even the sin of sexual licentiousness.<sup>63</sup>

Undoubtedly, the natives are punished not only for their sexual intemperance but also for their lack of religion. The guaiacum tree represents a dual function; it is a treatment for syphilis but also the means by which the natives can attain salvation by converting to Christianity. The guaiacum acts as moral and physical cleansing. The natives, who pulverize the wood, boil and then drink it, guard the curative properties of guaiacum dearly. The concoction forces the body to purge the disease through sweat and the victim awakes to find all his sores and pains diminished. It is interesting to note that while guaiacum is an effective temporary treatment, Fracastoro underlines the fact that it is not a cure and that the disease will eternally plague the natives. The explorers themselves eventually contract syphilis and as they prepare to leave the New World, news arrives that this horrible disease has also struck Europe. Recalling the prophesy of the parrots, the explorers gather the guaiacum to bring back to Europe. Interestingly, Gonzalo de Oviedo, who wrote one of the first accounts of the New World and with whom Fracastoro often corresponded, had convinced Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to give him and the Fugger family of Augsburg a monopoly on the sale of guaiacum in Europe. The treatment was very expensive though not particularly effective, but safer and without the dangerous side effects of the more painful and cheaper mercury cure. It became a very lucrative business and yielded large profits.

The name 'syphilis' was adopted from this last myth. Its origin, however, remains unclear. The invention of the word "syphilis" is attributed to Fracastoro and there is no other record of this word being used prior to the publication of his poem. We encounter this name only in the last book of the poem, suggesting once again that Book III was a later addition and that

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<sup>63</sup> Watts, 130.

“syphilidis” was probably not part of the original poem or title, which consisted of only of two books. Some have suggested that Fracastoro was searching for a descriptive name for a universal disease without referring to a specific people as in the case of *morbis gallicus*.<sup>64</sup> As previously mentioned, there were over one hundred names to describe syphilis and others may not have been recorded. In 1533, Fracastoro wrote a letter to his friend Giovanbattista Ramusio, in which he refers to a prose treatise he was working on as *De syphilide morbo*. His famous medical treatise *De Contagione* frequently uses the term ‘syphilis’ to refer to the disease. This suggests that at least by 1546 the term was familiar enough to his readers that it required no explanation.<sup>65</sup>

As to the actual origin of the word syphilis, G.L. Hendrickson suggests that the clue lies in the fifteenth chapter of *De Contagione*. Here Fracastoro expounds on the various types of skin diseases discussed by Greek medical writers and includes a Greek term that he translates as ‘syphilis’. It is associated with an adjective that means “shameful, hideous, deformed and repulsive” and in some instances, specifically connected with deformity caused by an ophthalmia. In fact, iridocyclitis, an inflammation of the uvea, was a rare manifestation characteristic of secondary stage syphilis.<sup>66</sup> From the term syphilis, Fracastoro invents the character Syphlius in the myth of Book III of *Syphilidis*, which acts in an aetiological manner to explain the origin of the new treatment but simultaneously, also the origins of the disease. By doing this, he imitates the Roman poets that he so admired.<sup>67</sup>

A second popular source for the origin of the word syphilis comes directly from the story of Niobe in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Niobe considered herself more powerful than the goddess

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<sup>64</sup> Hendrickson, 525.

<sup>65</sup> Hendrickson, 531.

<sup>66</sup> J. F. Conway, “Syphilis and Bronzino’s London Allegory”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 49 (1986), 252. In his *Vita*, Benvenuto Cellini mentions the vision problems that he suffered as a result of contracting syphilis.

<sup>67</sup> Hendrickson, 533.

Leto because of her seven sons and seven daughters, compared to Leto's two children, Diana and Apollo. As a punishment for this affront, Leto sends Apollo and Diana to kill all of Niobe's offspring. Both Apollo and Diana are gods which are historically associated with sudden death, especially of the young. Niobe's entire family is struck down, including her second son whose name is Syplus. In Homer's *Iliad*, Apollo's arrows carried plague to the earth and the slaughter of the Niobids represented an allegory for epidemics.<sup>68</sup> As Niobe mourns her children, she is turned to stone and whisked away to the top of Mount Syplus, where she wastes away in eternal mourning. Although we find the name "Syplus" in this myth, there exists no real connection between the disease and Niobe's son of the same name. If anything, Fracastoro's shepherd Syphilus can be identified with Niobe, since both defy the gods and are subsequently punished for it. We can, however, look at the myth of Niobe as a general comment on the reduction of the individual and the important role, as mentioned above, that Apollo plays in Fracastoro's poetry. Niobe prided herself on fullness: wealth, beauty, and particularly, the fullness of her womb which produced so many children but Apollo reduces her to nothingness, an empty womb, negating her most primal function of motherhood.<sup>69</sup> She is punished by emptiness and becomes a stone figure, incapable of motion and lacking human characteristics. The same is, of course, true of disease; Fracastoro describes victims who are reduced to nothingness, to inhumanity by the onslaught of syphilis, their bodies literally wasting away, pieces falling off. Apollo is again instrumental in the poem because he punishes Syphilus with disease but in the end he also supplies the cure that revives Syphilus and allows him to return to humanity.

Some scholars have attempted to trace the etymology of the word 'syphilis' to the Latin words *sus-philos*, a lover of swine, *sym-philos*, one who makes love and *siphelus*, a skin disease.

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<sup>68</sup> Sheila Barker, "Poussin, Plague and Early Modern Medicine", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 4 (Dec., 2004), 673.

<sup>69</sup> Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh. Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 68-69.

These meanings could all support the underlying significance of the poem especially because of the venereal nature of syphilis and its suggested ties to leprosy and associations with swine<sup>70</sup>.

The symptoms of leprosy were similar to those of syphilis; skin lesions characterized the primary external sign and infection caused tissue loss, resulting in damage and deformity to the cartilage of extremities such as fingers and toes. The connection to leprosy again advocates the idea that the victim contracted the disease through some fault of their own, whether as a punishment of a specific, individual wrong that was committed or because of the alleged inherent evil of a people such as in the case of the Jews.

In a further analysis of the character of Syphilus, some critics have suggested that Fracastoro based him on Martin Luther, who was born under the same constellation that supposedly foreshadowed the arrival of the French disease. Luther was often represented as a deformed monster or pig in broadsheets of the sixteenth century. His religious beliefs were considered analogous to a 'disease' that was spreading through Europe. Fracastoro was a devout Catholic, who exhibited a deep knowledge of Church doctrine as evidenced from the many letters he wrote. He also served on the Council of Trent as a physician. We, therefore, cannot completely discount that the poet was making a covert comment on the religious upheavals that were occurring around him.

The connection between sexual intercourse and sin under the guise of blasphemy made Luther the perfect candidate for the role of the protagonist Syphilus. The relationship between syphilis and divine retribution stemmed from a long established tradition dating to the beginning of the fifteenth century, when Emperor Maximilian I issued an edict claiming initially that

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<sup>70</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 25.

syphilis was a punishment for blasphemy, thereby providing a moralized view of the disease.<sup>71</sup> As Ottavia Niccoli observes in her study of Renaissance broadsheets, one of the most popular rumors in Italy contended that Luther advocated sexual freedom. He became synonymous with moral deformity and it was not a far leap to connect syphilis to a punishment for lasciviousness.<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, syphilis became synonymous with the religious decline of the time. Filippo Scolari, in his edition of *Sifilide ossia del morbo gallico* (1842), hints that the character of Syphilus is, in fact, Luther, who defies his true God.<sup>73</sup> Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor from 1519-1556, is also cited as a basis for the character Syphilus. Although Charles condemned Luther and opposed the Protestant Reformation, he eventually legalized Lutheranism within the Holy Roman Empire. He was also known to suffer from syphilis.

Whether or not the character Syphilus is based specifically upon Luther, it is clear that Fracastoro's poem encompasses many Italian anxieties of the time, whether political, religious or sexual. The continuous wars waged by invading foreign armies, the corruption of the Catholic Church and the Protestant reformation, and the 'Other' not only as European but also arriving from the New World, only heightened Italian sense of fear and unease about the present and about their own identities, especially in regards to the body.

As a physician, Fracastoro's primary role is to educate the reader about curative solutions aimed to treat and prevent an already established disease from causing further damage. Using the myths in his poem he purposefully veils the underlying sexual nature of syphilis. His poetic treatment of the gravity of disease vacillates; on one hand, he renders the disease a past time, declaring it as a 'distraction' for Bembo from his political work. At times, he writes as if the

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<sup>71</sup> The edict, issued by Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I in August 1495, is accompanied by an engraving of the Emperor in knight's armor, receiving a crown from the Virgin Mary as a reward for his battle against sin. Victims of syphilis lay at his feet.

<sup>72</sup> Niccoli, 129-131.

<sup>73</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 26.

disease has already been cured. It is only when he needs to make his ‘slender topic’ attain importance that he resorts to embodying the disease in the wealthy youth of Book I. As Thomas Boehrer states, people believed that syphilis was a treatable ailment when associated with the rich. It was even considered regrettable and unmerited and perception indicated that person was not at fault or even responsible for their own actions (i.e. the young Brescian described at the end of Book I of *Syphilidis*). Blame fell on forces out of their control such as the vengeance of a scorned lover, the stars/planets or even witchcraft. The person inside the norms of society (rich beautiful, good) was being punished by external factors. Regarding the poor, however, many deemed syphilis an instrument of discipline and punishment and above all, one the poor deserved.<sup>74</sup> If a poor person contracted syphilis it meant that they were somehow impure or sexually aggressive. Syphilis was a poison or corruption of the body and it was the result of carnality, contracted directly through sexual intercourse and viewed as punishment from God for excess. Paradoxically, the person who finds himself outside of the boundaries of normal society (poor, ugly, non-Christian, ‘Other’) is punished by disease born from the inside.

As syphilis evolved, it became more difficult to identify its symptoms simply by external appearances. Although its initial means of contagion was a mystery, it did not discriminate according to class, gender or personality type and sexual pollution was always attached to the disease. Susan Sontag points out that, “in its role as scourge, syphilis implied a moral judgment (about off-limits sex, about prostitution) but not a psychological one”.<sup>75</sup> This did not, however, diminish the belief that it was literally as well as morally contagious.

The early modern period experienced a perception regarding disease that is different from what we understand today, particularly for those diseases whose means of contagion remained a

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<sup>74</sup> Boehrer, 209.

<sup>75</sup> Sontag, 39.

mystery. People considered disease as a release of excess emotion and specific individual traits made one more prone to contracting them. Oftentimes, it was viewed as a positive release of desire, desire of which the victim was usually unaware. In fact, creative types such as artists, musicians, and writers were considered more prone to disease and it, in turn, made them better performers. Too much passion or repression signaled symptoms of illness. The most common affliction was melancholy, better known as the “artists’ disease”, which affected the humours. The melancholic individual was sensitive, creative, and even superior to others. Disease expressed character and more than anything, it represented a mental state, a form of self-expression, which consequently, could also be cured by the mind itself. It could bring out the best or worst in its victim. Syphilis however quickly gained a negative reputation particularly because of its associations with sin and extra marital sex; it ultimately leads to shame, stigma, and the loss of love and friends<sup>76</sup>. It stood as an emblem for society’s deepest fears such as corruption, decay, pollution, and abnormality.

***Trattato inedito in prosa sulla sifilide and De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis e Eorum Curatione (1545)***

In 1533, Girolamo Fracastoro wrote a letter to humanist Giovan Battista Ramusio requesting the detailed descriptions of elephantitis and leprosy made by Paul of Aegina and Aetius. He needed the descriptions for a prose treatise that he was editing. It was Fracastoro’s second attempt at dealing with the subject of syphilis, however this time it was a purely medical work, offering an in-depth description of the principles of contagion that, according to him, other authors had largely ignored. The decision to write in prose allowed Fracastoro the range of depth needed to address the topic properly and afforded him more liberality. He admitted that his famous poem *Syphilidis*, published three years earlier, forced him to omit some of the more

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<sup>76</sup> Sontag, 41.



gruesome details about syphilis in an effort to preserve the dignity of his poetic work. Curiously, the prose treatise was never published and came to light only in 1939, when the scholar Francesco Pellegrini discovered it. It remains unknown when Fracastoro wrote the treatise although in it he makes reference to his text on contagion (published in 1545), while another section cites 1525 as the year in which he is writing. He also specifically references the name “syphilis” as being taken from his *favola* (story). As mentioned above, Pellegrini ascertains that the poet conceived his poetic treatment of syphilis between 1510-1512, and then sent it to Bembo for corrections in 1526, to be published only in 1530. According to this dating, it is therefore possible that Fracastoro worked on all three projects simultaneously in the years before 1530. His interest in syphilis spans decades and poses difficulties in the dating of all three texts; the years between writing, correcting and publishing offered the author numerous opportunities to amend his theories, specifically his ideas regarding the spread of contagions. In fact, Fracastoro would elaborate his theories not only on syphilis but also on contagions, in general, in his *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione*. It is important to remember that syphilis itself evolved as a disease during the years, moving from active to latent phases and losing some of its potency, which allowed Fracastoro the opportunity to amend some of his earlier theories.

Though mostly incomplete, the unpublished treatise consists of two parts written in Latin and dedicated again to Pietro Bembo. The second part of the unpublished manuscript, which describes elephantitis, leprosy and various other skin diseases is almost identical to sections of Books II and III of *De Contagione*.<sup>77</sup> We can ascertain that Fracastoro incorporated the prose treatise into his larger project on contagion instead of publishing it as an independent work. The prose treaty places emphasis on direct contact as the main mode of transmission of syphilis

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<sup>77</sup> Pellegrini, *Trattato inedito*, 9-10.

rather than the theory of noxious air that was proposed as a possibility in his poem. Although he avoids explicitly stating it in the poem *Syphilidis*, the unpublished treaty leaves no doubt that coitus is the primary mode of transmission. When *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis e Eorum Curatione*, a compendium of common contagious diseases, is published in 1545, he specifically advises his patients on several occasions to refrain from sexual intercourse as a direct deterrent to the spread of disease:

Principio igitur, quum is apud nos apparuisset, hae fere notae conspiciebantur in eo morbo: oriebatur in quibusdam sine ulla ab alio concepta contagione, in quibusdam (quae maxima pars erat) e contage excipiebatur, verum non ex onmi contactu, neque prompte, sed tum solum, quum duo corpora contactu, mutuo plurimum incaluissent, quod praecipue in coitu eveniebat, quo maxima mortalium pars infects fui . . .<sup>78</sup>

[In certain individuals it would arise without any contagion having been contracted from another person; in other cases, and these were the majority, it was contracted by contagion, but not from every kind of contact, nor readily, but only when two bodies in close contact with one another became extremely heated. Now this happened in sexual intercourse especially, and it was by this means that the great majority of persons were infected. . . ]

The *De Contagione* is of course meant to be factual rather than reprobationary and Fracastoro avoids a moral commentary on the sexual act. He continues to advocate the belief that while disease can be born from *semina* generated in the air due to various causes, it can also occur spontaneously in our bodies, for no particular reason. All of these events can be foretold by the conjunction of planets or other premonitory signs from the sky which warn us that putrefaction is occurring or has already done so. While revolutionary in his ideas about the transmission of diseases through ‘seeds’ of contagion, Fracastoro’s theories still remain hampered by the deeply ingrained beliefs of his age, which continue, at least in part, to attribute epidemics and disease to supernatural causes. The disease shifted from an epidemic one, in which a collective, moral failure on the part of society was to blame, disease being viewed as a

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<sup>78</sup> Fracastoro, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione, Libri III*, 134.

punishment from God, to an endemic disease, in which blame shifted to the individual and therefore ceased to inspire fear since it was a common occurrence.

The *De Contagione* is prefaced by the introduction *De Sympathia et Antipathia rerum*, which discusses the attraction and repulsion of like for like and unlike. Fracastoro based much of his medical knowledge on this concept of ‘selective affinity’, which explained why some people fell ill with disease for no apparent reason and others did not. He also invoked the generally held belief that nature can maintain harmony despite the presence of discordant elements.<sup>79</sup> Scholars, however, tend to ignore this section of the work claiming it lacks any real scientific value. The *De Contagione*, like his famous poem *Syphilidis*, is also divided into three books; the first deals with theories regarding contagions, the second talks about various contagious diseases and the last book discusses their cures. Fracastoro’s goal in short, as evidenced in his dedication to Cardinal Farnese, is to explain the nature of contagions, how they are generated and in what manner they infect us.

He begins by defining contagion as an infection that passes from one thing to another, differentiating between whether it is passed between two separate entities (true contagion) or between two continuous parts of the same entity (only a form of true contagion). Contagion is born in small imperceptible particles that evolve into a corruption of the whole:

. . . erit quidem contagio consimilis de uno in aliud transiens putrefactio, cujus seminaria actionis multae sunt, in forti ac lenta mistione constituta, ac antipathiam ad animal habentia non solum materialem, sed et spiritualem etiam . . .<sup>80</sup>

[. . . a certain precisely similar corruption which develops in the substance of a combination, passes from one thing to another, and is originally caused by infection of the imperceptible particles. . . ]

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<sup>79</sup> Biow, 90.

<sup>80</sup> Fracastoro, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione, Libri III*, 42.

Contagions can be categorized into three different types: the first includes those, which spread by direct contact with an infected body. The second type is transmitted by fomes (*focolai*), an intermediary inanimate object, such as clothing, to which the disease can attach itself and be transferred. Fomes must be a porous substance capable of absorbing and retaining contagions even over the span of years. The fomes are then responsible for carrying the germs from an infected person to another person. Lastly, contagion can also be transmitted at a distance, for example by air.

The transmission of contagion through direct contact consequently signifies the beginning of putrefaction in the body. Fracastoro uses the example of rotting fruit; if an infected apple touches another apple, then the contagion will be passed to the second apple and so forth. Putrefaction initiates rotting, which, as Fracastoro explains, is due to the evaporation of innate heat and moisture from the original body. The imperceptible particles, which are hot and sharp but moist in combination, are the cause of the contagion from one thing to another and eventually produce putrefaction. Fracastoro refers to these particles as the ‘germs of contagion.’

According to Fracastoro, all contagions consist of some form of putrefaction, and every putrefaction is contagious. Putrefaction itself was often times considered an illness. It consisted of a decomposition of the body in which a foreign heat broke down proteins. Fracastoro further divides putrefaction into two categories: foul and confined. Foul putrefaction is not superficial but rather deeply affects the whole organism. Confined putrefaction, on the other hand, does not emit forth from the body through evaporation and has viscosity. These theories regarding contagion were not completely original; he adapted many ideas from Lucretius but Fracastoro distinguishes his seeds as coming directly from a sick person and his altered organs. The novelty

of his theory lies in the belief that seeds can promulgate indeterminately inside the individual's body.

Diseases that travel by fomes, on the other hand, can last for long periods without alteration. The infected particles are strong because of their specific nature and resistance, and they have the qualities of hardness and viscosity. Only warm, tepid, and porous matter can act as fomes and these fomes can harbor infectious diseases for years. Contagion, which travels at a distance, is comprised of a different nature and principle, and Fracastoro categorizes many diseases as transmittable in this way. While he considers physical contact the primary means of transmission for syphilis, he cannot discount that the disease somehow traveled through the air to infect those who had no prior contact with it. Imperceptible bodies can carry disease in all directions and germs can be preserved at length in the air. Contamination (infection) can occur by various means, depending on the disease. For example, Fracastoro describes ophthalmia (an inflammation of the eye), which can be infectious simply by looking at the eyes of the afflicted person. Germs, which penetrate at a distance, can also multiply in numerous ways. Once a germ enters inside the body and attaches to the humors, it can propagate until it corrupts the entirety. This principle can also work from the outside in, when germs enter the body by inhalation and attract other germs, consequently infecting the blood vessels. Contagion is then easily diffused from the narrow to the large blood vessels until it eventually reaches the heart. The contagions, which infect at a distance, are more powerful since they form stronger combinations and embody more subtlety; they are the most dangerous and the most common means of transmitting disease. Air can spread disease but it can also spread the vapors that are responsible for contagion. Vapors are highly alterable and not as strong as germs but, they can cause obstructions of the

humors, provide a place for foreign heat and moisture, as well as making the humors unfriendly to organs thereby causing rejection and putrefaction:

. . . at quae ad distans faciunt contagionem, absente etiam primo perdurant nihilominus et in fomite, et in aere, quinimo de loco ad locum feruntur trans etiam maria, quod signum est corpus esse, quod et defertur, et perdurat, longe a primo se habens.<sup>81</sup>

[. . . whereas the factors that carry contagion to a distant object endure just as well even when the thing primarily infected is absent, and they endure in both fomes and in the air; nay more, they are carried from place to place even across the sea; this is proof that this something is a body that can be carried and endures even when far from its place of origin.]

The popular idea that infectious disease can be born spontaneously inside of us and that our humors cannot protect us from the putrefactions has been replaced by the modern germ theory of microorganisms. However, given the moral climate of the Renaissance, the former theory fits nicely into the concept that disease can be spurned from our actions (whether we are good or bad) and not solely from our physical health. By assigning blame to the victim, it places emphasis on an individual's moral rather than physical condition. How else could doctors explain a seemingly healthy individual who spontaneously, for no apparent reason, becomes deathly ill? The disease fits the patient's character just as the punishment fits the crime and it is suggestive of a moralized view of disease.

The idea that natural phenomena beyond our control are responsible for the spread of disease has also been discredited. This includes the conjunction of planets and stellar constellations, which Fracastoro suggests, produce ideal conditions for the outbreak of epidemics. The warming of heavenly bodies can produce heat and vapors that rise from the Earth and water, and create poisonous emanations. We must remember that syphilis (or a disease like it) was long predicted by astrologers. In fact, Fracastoro states that there are often premonitory

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<sup>81</sup> Fracastoro, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione, Libri III*, 24.

signs that contagions are either coming to us or have already arrived through the sky or the air. He emphasizes the idea that the earth itself undergoes a metamorphosis as a result of the conjunction of planets, which causes the first appearance of invisible seeds in the air. As they enter the body, the seeds begin to generate producing syphilis. As many scholars have noted, Fracastoro invokes a linguistic parallel here between sexual intercourse and the vapors caused by the negative conjunction of planets by using the term “coitus” to describe both events (*coitum et conventum syderum*) which give birth to disease and putrefaction.<sup>82</sup> Other extraordinary natural signs that signal disease include falling stars, comets, and auroras, which also signal the onset of putrefaction. Signs that can be found on land include flooding, resulting in marshy and muddy terrains and dead fish spanning the seashore as well as the birth of many insects, particularly locust, that signal inevitable putrefaction. Earthquakes and the exodus of animals from under the ground mark the earth’s own attempt at self-purgation of ill.

As he returns to the individual’s role in contagion, Fracastoro also considers a person’s body type as an instigating factor in the development of disease. If one is unclean, moist and has clogged pores, they are more prone to diseases that are born on the inside. A person who has open pores, is hot and moist is disposed to disease born outside of the body. Ironically, idle individuals are the least receptive to diseases. Here, Fracastoro chooses not to make any mention of the consequences of a patient’s personal habits or behaviors as basis for an effective course of treatment. Many people saw syphilis as literally contaminating the air but also viewed it in a metaphorical sense as a moral pollution.<sup>83</sup> In fact, the decomposition of the body and its humors was analogous to a moral perversion and degeneration.

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<sup>82</sup> Gould, under “Page 7”, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1134/is\\_8\\_109/ai\\_65913170/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1134/is_8_109/ai_65913170/). (accessed on March 4, 2011). See also Fracastoro, *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et Eorum Curatione Libri III*, 148.

<sup>83</sup> Jon Arrizabalaga et al., 35.

In the Second Book of *De Contagione*, Fracastoro describes in detail the three temporal stages of syphilis. The primary stage of the disease entails the small, genital sores which signal the beginning of infection. This is when the disease is at its most infectious. If untreated, the second stage involves small ulcers, usually filled with phlegm or mucous, which spread on the surface of the body affecting the bones as well as causing excruciating muscular aches, fevers and rashes, particularly at night. This may be accompanied by alopecia. Finally, the last stage is characterized by gummata (soft, rubbery tumors appearing on major organs), which destroy the flesh, bones and major organs, leading ultimately to death. Fracastoro testifies to the evolution of syphilis in the last decade, stating that the pustules and pains of the early stages have disappeared, only to be replaced by a dramatic increase in gummata. This is of course consistent with the three phases a patient will pass through if the illness is left untreated.

Syphilis itself clearly underwent a metamorphosis, as outlined in the *De Contagione*. Initially, Fracastoro insisted upon the conjunction of planets and contaminated air as the initial culprit for the transmission of disease. He explains that the bad conjunction of Mars, Saturn and Jupiter created a foul vapor which mingled with the air and was agitated in different ways, causing a putrefaction whose germs, characterized by a thick mucous, were then transmitted to humans. The transmission from air to human is more complex because of the viscosity of the germs in the air and therefore, a reciprocal heat is required to pass the disease from one human to another. This supplies nourishment to the germs and allowing them to propagate. At some point, transmission via the air eventually ceased and human contact became the primary means of contagion. Heat became a necessary variable for the multiplication of germs in the body but it was also vital to keeping pains at bay. For this reason, patients suffered greatly at night when the natural heat of the body and that of the sun decreased.



The final book of *De Contagione* deals with specific and detailed treatments for syphilis. Fracastoro begins by stating the obvious caveats- not all remedies are equal and neither are all patients. A treating doctor must take into account numerous factors regarding his patient before proceeding with an appropriate cure. This theory adheres to the medical attitudes previously mentioned which insisted that a patient's overall behavior was a potential source of disease. Fracastoro suggests that individuals never be idle, lazy or unoccupied. Too much sleep, worry, anxiety and any mental exertion should all be avoided. Because syphilis is born due to an infiltration of seeds, the most effective cure is to destroy the seeds through invasive treatments. What follows is a regimen that specifically concentrates on dealing with the phlegm and mucus emitted by the body. According to Fracastoro, this is the most dangerous aspect of the disease and therefore must be dealt with using various expurgatory means. He recommends evacuation by either ingesting various herbal concoctions or applying them directly to the body. Sweating is another popular means of purgation and china root, among other ointments and wraps, can induce it. Concoctions, which cause salvation, are suggested because they expunge disease through copious spitting, despite causing ulcers of the mouth. Fracastoro concludes this portion of the final book by explaining in detail how to prepare a guaiacum concoction and how to apply its froth as a lotion for ulcers. Of course, all remedies come with side effects, ranging from headaches to the loss of hair/teeth, by now synonymous with syphilis, for which he also recommends various treatments.

### **Conclusion**

Fracastoro's study of syphilis was a labor of love that endured most of his lifetime. He experimented with different literary genres in an effort to find the most effective and awe-

inspiring way to describe this new and horrific disease. He attempted to placate both the religious and scientific explanations of syphilis using natural means while at the same adhering to ingrained beliefs of the time, which gave credence to the direct intervention of the supernatural, whether good or evil. At times, these notions were contradictory. Medicine was meant to cure but oftentimes it was also aimed at *not healing* certain groups of undesirable individuals. His works are written in Latin and he aims to make them available to a specific public while at once, excluding the wrong sort of reader. His dedications to popes and bishops, and anecdotes about beautiful, wealthy young men as victims of syphilis, aim to protect an aristocratic society that feels threatened from the outside. It may even be suggested that Fracastoro's poem acted as a sort of catharsis in an effort to relieve anxiety about the disease.

Syphilis is a social disease contracted by physical contact and class stratification influenced perceptions of it that threatened social boundaries<sup>84</sup>. Disease is described as an unnecessary and unfair evil brought upon us from forces beyond our control but it is also a just punishment from God. The state of society is reflected in the image of the 'rotting' body whose putrefaction is brought on by physical as well as moral contagions. Syphilis was intrinsically connected to the moral perversion of the time and the breakdown of virtue and the basic principles of good and evil. Moral hygiene was equally as important as physical cleanliness in an effort to avoid disease. People monitored their food and drink intake as well as their personal behavior and social habits. Association with the 'wrong' type of people could prove deadly both physically and spiritually. Disease was a punishment for sinful behavior from a retributive God and so its remedies were to be found in spiritual as well as corporal treatments. Medicine alone

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<sup>84</sup> Boehrer, 200.

was not always enough; one must be in God's good graces and cleanse oneself through penance and confession in order to recover.<sup>85</sup>

Girolamo Fracastoro's poem is a reflection of the times both politically and socially in Italy. The manifestation of a novel disease such as syphilis created anxieties that were pinpointed specifically on to the body and the loss of identity. Moral failings (specifically sexual sin) are converted through disease into an outward manifestation of a deformed physical body.<sup>86</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, who has written extensively on metamorphoses, explains that metamorphosis is "two-ness" and involves narrative because we are essentially describing the transformation of one entity into another. For Fracastoro, this narrative encompasses the strong and impenetrable body that quickly changes into one that is vulnerable, delicate and prone to unimaginable mutations. Disease was unstoppable, maiming, disfiguring. As Bernard of Clairvaux states so poetically, transformations cause "little deaths" in all of us.<sup>87</sup> In regards to syphilis, these "little deaths" transform, deform but also re-form individuals, through penance and by means of an altered physicality. They lead us to question our own identity before we reach that immutable and fixed state of death, the ultimate metamorphosis.

The two explanations that Fracastoro proposes for the transmission of disease in his work create an interesting problem. Initially, he locates the origins of disease in the environment, specifically in the air. In this way, he adheres to common Renaissance beliefs about disease. Later however, he poses an alternative explanation which states that syphilis can only be transmitted by direct contact once it has been physically incorporated into its principal subject. This second theory, as Virginia Iommi Echeverria underlines, is born out of case studies and

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<sup>85</sup> Boehrer, 201.

<sup>86</sup> Segal, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Bynum, 30.

experience rather than from any assertion supported by medical theory and Fracastoro uses it to underline the different stages of syphilis while at the same time adhering to the fundamental elements of the medical tradition of the time.<sup>88</sup> While he never completely amended any of his theories, Fracastoro added to them, molding them to fit the available evidence of the period.

Fracastoro's poetry was deeply influenced by the bodily transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid depicts metamorphosis as the sexual act and it signaled a savage reduction of the individual.<sup>89</sup> The gods committed acts of sexual violence, which subsequently caused transformations in their victims; often the gods transformed themselves in order to perpetrate sexual violence. For Fracastoro, the body is the story and syphilis is the transformation that it undergoes. It is both violent and sexual in nature. Sex is the origin of life but as in the case of syphilis, it is also its termination, a path to certain death.

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<sup>88</sup> Virginia Iommi Echeverría, "Girolamo Fracastoro and the invention of syphilis", *Historia, Ciências, Saúde-Maanguinhos*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 17. N. 4. (Oct. -Dec. 2010), 4-5.

<sup>89</sup> Barkan, 66.

## Chapter Two

### *I mostri infelici*- The Role of Women as Source of Disease

#### Introduction

During the Renaissance period, there existed a strong belief that viewed women as the primary cause of many unnatural phenomena. Their physical constitutions and weak wills and minds made them easy scapegoats. Natural processes such as menstruation, childbirth, and lactation underscored women's divine punishment for their uncontrollable lust and lasciviousness. As Renaissance attitudes towards the body and syphilis evolved, many scholars also came to view woman as the source of disease and monstrosity. Women spontaneously generated disease inside their bodies, and gave birth to monsters, either by men or by animals. This ideology upheld many misogynistic beliefs that stemmed from the sin of Eve in the Garden of Eden.

While negative attitudes towards women persisted, many authors also advocated a positive vision of the female sex, proposing greater social and financial freedoms. There existed a long literary tradition of praising women which included authors such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Mario Equicola, and Baldassare Castiglione among others, who championed the female sex as not only virtuous and chaste but more importantly equal to men on all levels. Of course, the "feminist" cause was not only a male-authored movement, but also included women, for example Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinelli, who wrote defenses of their sex and represented the female voice in Renaissance society.

In this chapter, I will examine one competing view of women, in particular marginalized women such as prostitutes and courtesans, as the source of disease and consequently monstrous metamorphosis. As the sixteenth century progressed, women and in particular those who found

themselves on the edge of society became the specific targets of gynophobic assaults because they not only infected society physically but also corrupted it morally by leading men into debauchery and sin. I will look at syphilis, the epidemic of the time, and how perceptions of the disease changed to represent a punishment not simply for carnal sin but also for greed and lasciviousness. In addition, I will discuss how representations of Ovid's myth of Danae closely mirrored evolving notions of women in Renaissance society.

Misogynistic views of women had existed for centuries and find their roots in the Garden of Eden. Most scholars considered Eve, created from the rib of Adam, as a partial yet always inferior human being when compared to Adam, who existed 'fully'. As R. Howard Bloch states, Eve is a "degraded image of his second nature".<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, woman is inferior to man, from whom she is created. Once Eve yields to the temptation of the serpent, she catapults society into sin. St. Augustine viewed the original sin as a sexual one because both Adam and Eve covered their *pudenda* with fig leaves after eating the poisoned apple, feeling shame. St. Augustine argues that sexual intercourse is not in itself evil because it procreates the human race; rather, it is the passion that intercourse stirs within the soul, which then translates to the body and becomes a potential source of sin. In the *City of God*, Augustine calls this passion 'concupiscence' and it is man's willingness to sin that poses the greatest danger (Book XIII, Chapter 13).<sup>2</sup> The age-old connection between sex, sin and death is reinforced. God punishes Eve by making her the vessel of the birthing process: menstruation, childbirth and lactation. Because childbirth was exclusively a woman's biological right, many identified her with vileness, beastliness, feces, urine and other biological liquids that emanated from the body. Woman automatically tainted the child she conceived in her womb with sin, since sexual

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<sup>1</sup> R. Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny", in *Representations*, no. 20, Special Issue: *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, (Autumn 1987), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Augustine, *City of God*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 522.

intercourse could not result without passion (and therefore, with sin). According to Augustine, the body, specifically the male genitals, transmitted the hereditary original sin and therefore any child conceived through sexual intercourse was inevitably stained by it. Many scholars, of course, compared this image with its counterpart, the birth of Jesus Christ, who was conceived in the womb of a virgin by Immaculate Conception rather than by sexual intercourse, and therefore exempt from sin. In his works *De Nuptiis* and *Contra Julianum*, St. Augustine argues that generation comes from the male seed. Because Mary and Joseph refrained from sexual intercourse and no seed was passed between them, Christ was free from sin.<sup>3</sup> Church dogma also states that God spared Mary from original sin at her conception and therefore she could not pass sin to her child. Hence from the start, woman personified the sins of the flesh, transferring original sin through childbirth and eternally fostering evil. Marina Warner states this effectively when she writes, “Woman was womb and womb was evil”.<sup>4</sup> While male defects could only be attributed to nurture, woman was flawed by nature.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of ‘women as womb’ acquired another significance in the early modern period. Not only were women the source of monstrosity in procreation (and the birthing of sin) but most doctors classified women as harboring a constant need to fill their womb, whether through sexual intercourse or conception. This was purely a biological urge to satisfy their erotic needs. The female pathology underscored the belief that women were created incomplete and in fact, required intercourse.<sup>6</sup> If those needs were ignored, then illnesses, such as hysteria, whose

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, “Generation, Degeneration and Regeneration. Original Sin and Conception of Jesus in the Polemic between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum”, in *Generation and Degeneration. Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, edited by Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, (New York: Random House, 1983), 57-58.

<sup>5</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women on Top” in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, edited by Lorna Hutson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 156.

<sup>6</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, eds., *A History of Women. Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 362.

origin lay in the uterus, could cause diabolic possession or other diseases.<sup>7</sup> Society deemed women not only weak and frail but lascivious. For centuries, men characterized women as excessively greedy and consumed by an uncontrollable sexual lust. They were prone to libidinous thoughts and vulnerable to demonic influence. Women, in effect, were slaves to their sexual parts. Simultaneously, their uncontrollable nature made them susceptible to various physical and moral infections, oftentimes even exonerating them from blame for monstrosities because they were unavoidable as a result of woman's nature. This association between women, sex, and sin strengthened with the appearance of syphilis, only furthering the belief that it was woman's uncontained sexual desire that brought punishment upon society. Syphilis came to signify both monstrosity as well as sexual promiscuity.

New scientific discoveries regarding the spread of diseases created a larger need to locate the monstrous in women. While the Middle Ages viewed women as unclean physically, associating biological functions such as menstruation with contamination, disease and putrefaction, the early modern period went one step further in blaming women for both physical and moral corruption. In addition, women's 'open' bodies and 'leaky' orifices threatened to spill over well-defined male boundaries. Not only were women using their bodies for financial gain, but they were also crossing economic and social lines by writing books and entering into male social and literary circles. As women refused male control, men in turn projected their anxieties unto women making them monstrous.

Social perceptions regarding women continued to suffer by the few career choices made available to them as they reached sexual maturity. While sexual insatiability became women's main character trait, it also threatened the social order of Renaissance patriarchal society, which valued virginity and modesty above all. Marriage, sanctioned by the Church, became a man's

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<sup>7</sup> Davis et al., *A History of Women*, 65.



primary means of control over women, and ironically, the primary pinnacle for a woman to reach. Marriage placed women in an acceptable position in society and subjugated her to the realm of normal sexuality. Marriage could even help rape victims redeem their honor if they wed their rapist.<sup>8</sup> If they did not marry, many women lived their lives locked within convent walls, the only acceptable alternative.

Marriage created alliances between families and strengthened reputations as well as providing biological continuity.<sup>9</sup> Women had little choice of partners, and ideals such as mutual love and respect lacked importance. Most often, women married older men, who acted as father figures rather than husbands. Although the confines of marriage were intended to contain women's uncontrollable sexual desires, many women found little sexual or emotional gratification from their husbands. According to the "conjugal debt", an arrangement that first appears in the letters of St. Paul (I Cor. 7.4) and continues throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, husbands and wives were not in complete possession of their own bodies. They must yield to each other's sexual demands, and as a result woman became the sexual property of the man she married. The Church enforced this arrangement. Renaissance society viewed the marriage contract exclusively as a financial transaction rather than a covenant binding willing parties in a pact of love. Finally, virginity and thereafter, marital fidelity were the only way to ensure a husband legitimate heirs.

One of the most important financial institutions impeding women from marriage was the dowry system. Since women could not offer any real financial contribution to a union, the dowry system represented not only a means of social placement but most importantly, capital

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<sup>8</sup> This custom was called *matrimonio riparatore* and was literally intended to repair and restore the reputation of the woman and her family.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 31.

accumulation in a marriage.<sup>10</sup> Chastity had a monetary value but the explosion of dowry funds in the sixteenth century made marriage an impossible goal for many women.<sup>11</sup> Dowry prices reached unattainable levels for most families, prompting the creation of funds such as the *Monte delle doti*, an investment fund whose gains could alleviate some of the stress of collecting a suitable dowry. Local governments attempted to set limits on dowry funds, but many families ignored them.

On the negative side, the dowry system cast women as a threat to their families' patrimony and as a certain financial loss. The bride's husband received her dowry as well as accountability for her physical and sexual maintenance. This responsibility often extended after her husband died, when the deceased husband's family would take over. The fear over escalating dowry prices was counter balanced by the desire of families to maintain their patrimony intact. This led many families to practice primogeniture, or the marriage of only one son, in an effort to avoid the division of patrimony between multiple families. Such financial restrictions greatly limited the pool of prospective marriageable partners for Renaissance women and often left both women and men in undefined societal positions. Although it was acceptable for men to remain unmarried, single women often tread a dangerous social limbo.

For women who could not afford a dowry, the religious life provided an acceptable alternative. Religious authorities took over the responsibility of maintaining these women, who now entered into a marriage with Christ. Often women were forced to enter the convent by their own families. As the sixteenth century progressed, however, entrance into certain convents grew competitive and some institutions even required a dowry as an entrance fee. Many convents were

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<sup>10</sup> Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 12.

<sup>11</sup> King, 31.

quite exclusionary, even using beauty as a requirement. Ultimately, many convents became corrupt with lax laws, where sexual escapades regularly took place despite vows of chastity.

In one sense, women with no dowry or personal property had the most freedom to choose their sexual or marriage partners. These women occupied a rather precarious place in society precisely because they were not under any individual male or institutional control, but they also needed to contribute financially to society. It is in this grey area in which we encounter the sex industry. Considered by many as the oldest profession in the world, prostitution was a regulated state institution since the classical period. During both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, prostitution itself was both legal and encouraged. Sexual commerce not only represented a financial transaction but also a means for poor women to satisfy such basic needs as food and shelter. It provided many disadvantaged women with their only real means to 'get ahead'. Cities institutionalized prostitution by assigning specific areas in which the sex trade was practiced. Local governments controlled wages, and imposed sumptuary laws and dress codes to differentiate prostitutes from honest, married women. Prostitutes even paid taxes as their contribution to the overall welfare of society.

This seemingly 'open-minded' attitude about prostitution, however, did not stem from a 'liberal' point of view, but rather from an innate fear of homosexuality and sexual tendencies such as sodomy that were considered against nature. Of course, prostitution continued to provide men with a means of control over women's sexuality, but it also addressed the underlying problem of finding a release for male sexual energy. Many legislators felt that prostitution protected virtuous women and that it actually encouraged normal sexual practices, which then led to marriage and ultimately, procreation.

While societal conventions placed strict expectations on women, young males were not bound by any specific rules. Most men married some fifteen years later than women and therefore had a longer time frame in which they were single.<sup>12</sup> Prostitution therefore could satisfy male sexual desires without endangering the virtuousness or chastity of honorable and marriageable women. As Guido Ruggiero noted, young men passed through a long period of ‘indeterminate sexuality’ or *gioventù*, spanning from adolescence into their early thirties, during which involvement in passive (often homosexual) relationships was common. While marriage remained the ultimate goal, it directly contributed to the illicit sex trade because it excluded a large segment of the population, who for various socio-economic reasons, had to find their sexuality outside of the *status quo*.<sup>13</sup> In fact, any negative perceptions about prostitution usually stemmed from a woman’s transgression of accepted moral categories and *not* from her monetary gain from sexual intercourse. Ultimately, most theologians, including St. Augustine, considered prostitution a necessary evil.

In the sixteenth century, Italy experienced the rise of the courtesan. The honored courtesan (*cortegiana onesta* or *meretrice sumptuosa*), modeled on the female version of the courtier, and was not only beautiful but also ‘educated’. Her role was to be an intellectual as well as sexual companion to her male lover. Contrary to the *meretrice pubblica*, a term which encompassed not only professional prostitutes but also unmarried women with various sexual partners, the courtesan was privileged and wealthy, and unlike most women, educated in both literature and music, frequenting various literary and social circles.<sup>14</sup> The courtesan ideal stemmed from the image of the Greek *hetaera*, who took part in *symposia* regarding various

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<sup>12</sup> Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret F. Rosenthal, “Introduction” to *Poems and Selected Letters* by Veronica Franco (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2-3.

issues and whose opinions were respected and welcomed by men. Unlike common prostitutes, courtesans did not search out their clients; they enjoyed the luxury of a comfortable home and wealthy men who supported them, emulating a patron/courtier relationship.

While the courtesan was often a sought after societal figure who could ‘make or break’ a man’s social standing, the lower class prostitute (*meretrice pubblica*) was considered a parasite eating away at the honor and integrity of the city and its citizens. She was constantly on the edge of society, associated with other outcast groups. Both courtesans and prostitutes were associated with other vices as well, such as gambling, cheating and lying. A common theme of anti-prostitution Renaissance rhetoric considered these women as a disease destroying the moral fibers of society. This disease (prostitution and consequently, the passion it created) could drive men crazy (either through natural means or by magic), could cause them insomnia, starvation and loss of their fortunes. It is no wonder that many broadsheets printed during the Renaissance were geared towards warning men not only about the dangers of contracting syphilis from prostitutes but also about squandering away their inheritances/estates or being bound by black magic to their lovers. The only safeguard was to remain within the confines of a monogamous relationship, specifically marriage.

### **Woman as Source of Infection in Renaissance**

In the literary realm, syphilis was connected to prostitution as early as 1509, although blaming prostitutes stemmed more from a cultural product because it failed to accurately represent the true pattern of disease.<sup>15</sup> Many works written at the time attacked the prostitute (whether courtesan or *meretrice*) as a catalyst for the spread of disease and warned men to stay in

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<sup>15</sup> Laura J. McGough, *Gender, Sexuality and Syphilis in Early Modern Venice. The Disease That Came to Stay*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 46.

monogamous relationships for fear of contamination. As syphilis evolved from a sin affecting a specific group of people to one that struck the individual, its links to fornication and prostitution strengthened a larger misogynistic view of female otherness and sexuality. Disease ignited a general gynophobia and a fear of reprehensible sexual activities such as intercourse during menstruation or with women of dubious character. Women, long cast in the role of evil seductress, were now thrust into the part of disease carriers.

Historically, physicians connected the female sex to disease because of women's physical constitution and perceivably 'open body'. Women were more moist, humid and porous than men, and the production of bodily fluids (blood, milk, tears) was their primary function. In fact, menstruation, childbirth, and lactation all constituted a 'leaky' and uncontained body, always on the verge of overflowing and most female liquids were considered excremental, signifying a constant corruption of the body.<sup>16</sup> Males were hot, compact and dense, and therefore much more efficient than women, whose excesses constantly needed to be expelled from their body.<sup>17</sup> This theory dates back to Plutarch, who considered menstruation as excess that could potentially overheat a female if it was not flushed out from her body. Plutarch stated that menstrual blood, cooled down by women's nature, cannot be assimilated into the body and thus has the potential to become corrupt and diseased. Any fluids retained in a woman's body could putrefy and make her sick, and therefore expulsion was crucial.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Valeria Finucci, "Genealogical Pleasure, Genealogical Disruptions", in Finucci, *Generation and Degeneration. Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, edited by Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Clark, 770.

<sup>18</sup> Dale B. Martin, "Contradictions of Masculinity: Ascetic Inseminators and Menstruation Men in Greco- Roman Culture", in Finucci, *Generation and Degeneration*, 940.

Simultaneously, some scholars argued that female menstruation, in fact, attested to the efficiency of women's bodies, because they were able to evacuate superfluous matter. 'Vicarious menstruation' in men (genital bleeding, hemorrhoids, nosebleeds) signified a 'crisis' in bodily terms, because it represented a spontaneous effort by the body to remove excesses. Many doctors considered this a natural and healthy occurrence. While some crises occurred naturally, doctors induced others, such as bloodletting. See *Generation and Degeneration. Tropes of Reproduction*

Although doctors considered menstruation as a necessary function to restore the body's balance, pollution taboos persisted. In the Jewish tradition, menstruating women were considered unclean and required purification. Sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman was punishable by death, and anyone coming into contact with her, also needed purification. For most of the Middle Ages, people viewed menstruation and consequently the birthing process as an infirmity. Church authorities submitted women who had given birth to penitential rituals in order to eradicate the pollution of afterbirth.<sup>19</sup>

Continuing into the Renaissance, woman's inherent 'leakiness' was also connected to her constant search for sexual satiability. Interestingly, Diane Cady also links this quality of bodily incontinence to ideas regarding women's verbal excesses and their 'open mouths' (or constant chatter). She ties the idea of speech as a means of infecting society both morally and physically, especially in regards to foreigners and foreign languages that infiltrate society.<sup>20</sup> All of woman's bodily orifices characterized her as a constant source of potential infection not only of her own body but also of society.

One of the earliest theories to ascribe the origin of syphilis to women is found in the treatise *Dialogus de dolore cum tractatu de Ulceribus in Pudendagra evenire solitis* written by the Spanish papal physician Gaspar Torella in 1497. Torella claims that a leprous knight had sexual relations with a Spanish prostitute on his way to fight with Charles VIII's army during the Italian campaign of 1494. The Spanish prostitute then infected the French soldiers, thus causing the epidemic in Italy. As early as 1500, Torella advocated that authorities routinely check

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*in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, edited by Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies. Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 126-158.

<sup>20</sup> Diane Cady, "Linguistic Dis-ease: Foreign Language as Sexual Disease in Modern England", in *Sins of the Flesh. Responding to Sexual Disease in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Kevin Siena, (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 167-168.

prostitutes for signs of the pox and, if found to be infected, treat them in specially designated hospitals.<sup>21</sup> Later in 1536, Paracelsus, in his *Chirurgia Magna* (1536) echoed Torella by writing that syphilis was born from the union of a French leper and a prostitute with uterine sores.

In 1551 Ferrarese physician Antonio Musa Brassavola's treatise entitled *De morbo gallici curatione* inextricably linked the origin of the French disease in Italy with a female prostitute. Like his predecessors, Brassavola explained that a beautiful prostitute was on the front line of the French army as they invaded Italy. The disease first originated in her body in the form of a putrefying sore located on her genitals. At that moment, certain conditions such as climate changes, the mixture of different men's semen, the friction of sexual intercourse and the thin skin of the French soldiers' penises created an ideal environment for syphilis. Here again, one prostitute (a woman) was at the origin of syphilis and considered patient zero<sup>22</sup>. The idea that disease arose from the mixture of semen in one body closely followed monster theories, which proposed that the combination of numerous men's semen in one woman or worse, male and animal semen due to unnatural sex, could produce monsters. Brassavola's theory gained popularity in the sixteenth century as evidenced by the numerous Italian translations of the treatise. It was especially popular because it collectively combined all existing anxieties regarding women (and in particular prostitutes), foreigners and disease into one neat account. Brassavola even managed to attack French masculinity by including the particular detail about the soldiers' penises and disease, in general, came to signify military weakness.

The popularity of these theories is evident by their numerous re-workings. Pietro Rostinio elaborated Brassavola's theory in his *Trattato del Mal francese* in 1556, apparently with much success since it was reprinted in 1559 and again in 1565.

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<sup>21</sup> Jon Arrizabalaga et. al., *The Great Pox. The French Disease in Renaissance Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 34.

<sup>22</sup> McGough, *Gender, Sexuality and Syphilis in Early Modern Venice*, 68-69.



In 1561, the Bolognese Leonardo Fioravanti published his popular *Capricci medicinali*. The physician advocated a new origin of syphilis by claiming that it resulted from cannibalism. During the wars of the late fifteenth century, it was rumored that a lack of provisions, especially meat, forced soldiers to consume human flesh. These men consequently became so corrupted that syphilis was born inside their bodies. Although Fioravanti steers clear of blaming women as active infectors, he still advocates that disease can generate spontaneously inside the body.<sup>23</sup>

These medical theories signaled a decisive shift in blame when looking at syphilis. No longer did society blame stellar constellations, bad air, and marginalized groups but now women became the primary source of disease. Not only did their physical constitution make them inherently prone to producing disease but also women's sexuality, and specifically the dangerous and seductive powers of beautiful women, needed to be controlled by male society before they infected everyone.<sup>24</sup>

The *Incurabili* hospitals, originally created in the early fifteenth century as a means to treat syphilitics, also gave rise to specific institutions designated solely for women. The *Convertite*, a convent for repentant prostitutes, was an important institution in the battle to control the spread of disease in cities. The only entrance requirement was an immoral lifestyle and the convents quickly became known for the beautiful women residing inside them. In an effort at conversion, the convent exploited the image of Mary Magdalene, herself a repentant prostitute, who gave up her sinful ways to follow Christ. Mary Magdalene represented the dangers of feminine beauty, which instilled vanity in women and left their male suitors desirous of their sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> William Eamon, "Cannibalism and Contagion: Framing Syphilis in Counter-Reformation Italy", in *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 3 No. 1 (1998), 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> Laura J. McGough, "Quarantining Beauty in Early Modern Venice", in Siena, *Sins of the Flesh*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> McGough, "Quarantining Beauty in Early Modern Venice", 224.

Institutions such as the *Zitelle* and the *Convertite* served not only to reform prostitutes but also to enclose beautiful women in an effort to keep them from tempting men. Extreme beauty appeared rarely in nature and when it did, many considered it a deformity, hence a connection between beauty and vice. Beauty came to represent a source of disease. Beautiful women were dangerous not only because they could entice men but also because they were more easily seduced and therefore, more prone to sin and disease. Authorities felt the need to quarantine extreme beauty lest it become dangerous to the physical and moral health of their citizens.

Besides confining diseased prostitutes and beautiful women, any real syphilis prevention was exclusively geared towards men. Interestingly, many doctors believed that virgins could cure syphilis but they neglected to consider the consequences for these women who then became infected with disease.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, doctors deemed women the source *and* the cure for disease. Many treatises suggested post-coital treatments, for example a medicated cloth put on the penis immediately after sex, allowing men to have intercourse with a beautiful prostitute without fear of contracting syphilis. When female prevention is mentioned, it is usually in an effort to preserve prostitutes for their clients rather than purely for women's physical health.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, disease became the symbol not only for uncontained female sexuality but also uncontrolled masculinity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Many scholars believed that intercourse with Ethiopian women, who were believed to be particularly lustful, could cure syphilis without fear of passing on the disease to the female partner. For a discussion of the Ethiopian race as monstrous, see Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade. Masculinity, Paternity and Castration in the Italian Renaissance*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 143-148.

<sup>27</sup> Winfried Schleiner, "Infection and Cure through Women. Renaissance Constructions of Syphilis", in *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 24, issue 3 (1994), 502.

<sup>28</sup> McGough, *Gender, Sexuality and Syphilis*, 46.

## The Rise and Fall of the Courtesan- Syphilis as Punishment

In the poem entitled *Il Vanto e il lamento della cortigiana ferrarese* (1532)<sup>29</sup>, Giovan Battista Verini describes the rise and fall of the famous courtesan, Beatrice de Bonis. The author contrasts the wealth and pleasures attained by courtesan at the height of her career to the pain she suffers later in life due to syphilis. Ultimately, the moral of the poem states that wealth and beauty are ephemeral and that the courtesan pays dearly for her life of excess by finishing out her living days in poverty and disease.

Written by a man from a woman's point of view, the first part *Il Vanto* ("the Boast") calls all people to laud the beauty of the famous Beatrice. Verini begins with a description of the fifteen year old by emulating aspects of the Petrarchan canon; dark eyes (*due occhi più che corboneri*), subtle eyebrows (*ciglio ho raro ch'è stole e tratto*), coral lips (*labbro di corallo*), ivory teeth (*d'avorio i denti*), an alabaster neck (*la gola ho d'alabastro*). Even her private parts are worthy of praise, "Le parti ho poi secrete più che belle:/ Come ognun pensa tal dolcezza hanno,/ Che muor di voglia chi ben pensa quelle." Verini continues by devoting a large quantity of lines to Beatrice's material possessions, especially her household items, "un'altra non conosco a me eguale/ c'habbi la casa come me fornita/ si pane, legne, vino, olio e sale./ Una credenza ho d'argento forbita/ Le tavole, le mura, le panche e casse/ Di tappeti e d'arazzi ognun vestita." Not only is her house filled with luxurious furniture but her kitchen is also abounding in delicacies. In fact, Beatrice is wealthy enough to feed even her servants the same expensive foods that she herself eats:

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<sup>29</sup> The full title of this poem is: *El vanto della cortigiana ferrarese qual narra la bellezza sua. Con il lamento per esser redutta in la carretta per el mal frazese et l'amonitorio che fa alle altre donne*. In Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamento/Dialogo*, Antonia declares Aretino as the author of this poem. See *Giornata Terza* in Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamento/Dialogo*, (Milano: Garzanti, 1984), 187. Most scholars attribute it to Giovan Battista Verini. It has also been attributed to Mastro Andrea, a Venetian painter, friend of Aretino and author of *Il Purgatorio delle cortigiane*.

Una mensa da re ho tuttavia,  
Abbondante di quaglie e di capponi  
con pernice e fagiani in compagnia.  
Pollastri, fegati, torte e piccioni,  
Con savor bianchi e neri, e con guazetti  
Insieme con molti altri buon bocconi . . . ogni vil ragazzin piene ha le  
mani, ognia fantesca ed ogni servitore.

Beatrice's wealth is an indicator to her success as a courtesan. She is not only beautiful but has attained a high position in society, where princes and nobles fight for her: "Ognun per me si distrugge e divora, ciascun mi profferisce argento ed oro, l'alma e la vita offerendomi ancora." The description of the parties that Beatrice both hosts and attends highlights the importance of entertaining in the courtesan's line of work. Her main role is to fulfill male fantasies, whether through sexual intercourse or simply by her presence and conversation. Verini describes that being with Beatrice is tantamount to reaching heaven, not only because of her beauty but also because of her luxurious surroundings.

The second part of the poem, entitled *il Lamento* (The Lament), describes a now unrecognizable Beatrice and her rapid demise into poverty as a result of syphilis. No longer are kings and princes fighting over her, but it is syphilis that 'destroys' (*distrugge*) and 'devours' (*divora*) her. The title of this half of the poem explains that Beatrice has been thrown into the cart (*la carretta*) for having contracted the disease. This was a common punishment for syphilitic courtesans who were paraded around town for public derision. Humiliated and ridiculed, these courtesans ultimately finished their journey (and career) at the *Ospedale degli Incurabili*. Beatrice has not only lost her beauty but all of her possessions. She now worries about satisfying basic needs such as shelter, hunger and thirst, sleeping under a bridge and consuming plain bread and river water.

The contrast between Beatrice's former beautiful body and the deformed body she now possesses recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the grotesque body. The grotesque body, usually found in carnival culture, is open to the outside world, unfinished and constantly exceeding its own limits. Bakhtin specifically characterizes the grotesque body by its orifices and protruding parts: genitals, breasts, mouth, and nose.<sup>30</sup> Beatrice's grotesque body is constantly spilling over; her open sores cause hideous disfigurements, and instead of perfume, the foul odor of sulfur and mercury (used to treat syphilis) now emanates from her pores, "Già preziosi odor portavo addosso;/ Or solfo, argento vivo, empiastro al male/ Tal che appena soffereir nol posso" (vv. 13-15) Syphilis causes a putrefaction that also spreads to all of her possessions, "Foglie di cavol son il bel trinzale,/ Le perle son le bolle, gomme, e doglie/ E vado mendicando a lo spedale" (vv. 16-18). The inner moral corruption of the courtesan now manifests itself outwardly in her grotesque appearance, overturning the Renaissance belief that inner virtue was expressed through physical beauty.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Beatrice appeals directly to her peers, invoking the names of such famous courtesans as *Matrema non vole*, *Angela (Zaffetta)*, *Lorenzina*, *Cecilia*, and *Beatrice*.<sup>32</sup> She cautions them not to follow in her footsteps. Her rise and consequent fall due to syphilis are the punishment for the pride (*superbia*) that she showed as a courtesan. In fact, men attacked courtesans (both literally and figuratively) because they held the power to accept and deny clients at their discretion. This courtesan/client relationship mirrored the ideal of courtly love, in which the client (lover) served his beloved, who then could choose whether or not to bestow her

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<sup>30</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26-27. See also Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in *Rewriting the Renaissance. The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) for a specifically feminine take on the grotesque body.

<sup>31</sup> Tessa Storey, *Carnal Commerce in Counter Reformation Rome*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 28.

<sup>32</sup> Courtesans often took classical Roman or other famous names to give the appearance of importance and luxury.

favors upon him. Beatrice directly criticizes this dynamic by stating that courtesans should accept all clients, whether rich or poor, because beauty is fleeting and careers end quickly: “Si che degnative d’ogni persona; Non fate la signora in gloria o in gioco” (vv. 70-71). Syphilis is used as signifier of a larger reality; all things come to an end whether through disease or simply because of old age; beauty is temporal.<sup>33</sup> Beatrice warns: “E se non imparate la ricetta/ Ch’io v’insegnoo superbe cortigine/ Ponte Sisto e il spedal presto v’aspetta” (vv. 55-57). “The bridge or the hospital” were the worst punishment possible for a courtesan and signaled the end of her career. *Il Lamento* concludes by describing Beatrice, destitute and disease ridden, reduced to a monstrous version of her former self: “Raffrenate la gola e gale tante,/ Se non, qual io ritornerete un mostro” (vv. 83-84).

Similarly to *Il Vanto/Il Lamento*, contemporary broadsheets described the rise and fall of the courtesan from syphilis, which shifted its role of punishment for immoral sexual activity to punishment for haughtiness or pride in the client/courtesan relationship. In her study of prostitution during the Counter Reformation, Tessa Storey identifies three periods of courtesan literature. The first period centers on the descriptions of the pleasures and riches of the courtesan lifestyle as contrasted with the devastation of syphilis. In the second phase towards the end of the sixteenth century, authors concentrate on the “rags to riches back to rags” path the courtesan follows. Born into poor conditions, the courtesan is usually groomed by her mother or another female into the trade. After acquiring wealth and success, she falls from grace by either contracting syphilis or because she is rejected by her jealous lover who cannot bear to share her with other men. His jealous rage signals the disappearance of the financial means necessary to support her lifestyle and the illusion she must continually maintain. Ultimately, she spirals back into poverty. The last phase, characteristic of the seventeenth century, concentrates on warning

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<sup>33</sup> Storey, 29-30.

the courtesan about her spiritual rather than physical health. Although syphilis remains an important theme, these works tend to highlight the need for repentance in order to avoid facing punishments such as prison, exile or worst of all, eternal damnation.<sup>34</sup> Satirical texts of the sixteenth century described courtesans as trickster and thieves. In the seventeenth century, the roles were reversed and courtesans were cast in the role of pathetic victims, themselves easily tricked and robbed, and eliciting pity from the public.<sup>35</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the courtesan (*cortegiana onesta*) acted as a figure capable of bestowing a certain status to men and consequently, having the power to take that status away by rejecting them. As much power as these women wielded over men in private circles, ultimately, men held the power to humiliate them in public circles. By attacking their biggest weapon, their body, men were able to express their anger and jealousy over the courtesan's use of her sex as a tool. Satire was not merely moral outrage over a courtesan's use of her body, but also resentment over her rapidly acquired wealth due to immoral behavior and her apparent mobility in social status.<sup>36</sup> Courtesans, like many of the literary men they entertained, also vied for patronage and posed a legitimate threat to their male suitors. However, reputations could easily be destroyed, as the main character of Pietro Aretino's *Dialogo* warns: "Perché non ti mancherebbe altro se non che un tale ti facesse un libro contra, e che per tutto si bandisse di quelle ladre cose che sanno dir de le donne . . ." <sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Storey, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Storey, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Storey, 47-48.

<sup>37</sup> Aretino published two works, *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia fatto in Roma sotto una ficaia composto dal divino Aretino per suo capriccio a correzione dei tre stati delle donne* (1534) and *Dialogo di Messer Pietro Aretino nel quale la Nanna il primo giorno insegna a la Pippa la sua figliuola a esser puttana, nel secondo gli conta i tradimenti che fanno gli uomini a le meschine che gli credono, nel terzo e ultimo la Nanna e la Pippa sedendo ne l'orto ascoltano la comare e la balia che ragionano de la ruffiania* (1536) which are thematically linked and usually found together. See *Giornata Prima, Dialogo di Messer Pietro Aretino nel quale la Nanna il primo giorno insegna a la Pippa la sua figliuola a esser puttana, nel secondo gli conta i tradimenti che fanno gli uomini a le meschine che gli credono, nel terzo e ultimo la Nanna e la Pippa sedendo ne l'orto ascoltano la comare e la balia che ragionano*

One of the most merciless authors to write invectives against courtesans was Lorenzo Veniero (1510-1550). Veniero was a Venetian patrician and pupil of Pietro Aretino. He belonged to an illustrious family, which counted senators, ambassadors and Doges among its ranks. After a brief period of incarceration for assaulting another patrician, the young Veniero met Aretino in 1530 and quickly became a member of Aretino's circle, which included academics and patricians. Later in life, Veniero himself was thrice elected to the position of *Savio degli Ordini* in Venice and eventually became *Podestà* of Vincenza. His relationship with Aretino continued through the years and Aretino served as godfather to Veniero's first son.<sup>38</sup>

Veniero's early poem *La Zaffetta* (1531), written under Aretino's tutelage, makes public an alleged gang rape of Angela del Moro (known as *Zaffetta*), supposedly organized by the author himself as revenge for the courtesan's rejection of him. Venetian courtesans adhered to rules regarding their clientele; six or seven noble lovers kept a courtesan, each assigned one night of the week with her. In return, these men paid a monthly fee to maintain her lifestyle. A courtesan was free to entertain other lovers during the day, but if any man other than the pre-selected few wished to spend the night with her, permission had to be obtained beforehand.<sup>39</sup> According to some sources, *Zaffetta* disobeyed this rule by committing an *arlasse* in regards to Veniero.<sup>40</sup> She shut the door in his face and spent the night with another man.

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*de la ruffiana*, in Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamento/Dialogo*, edited by Nino Borsellino, (Milano: Garzanti, 2005), 238. For reasons of brevity, I will refer to these works as *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo*.

<sup>38</sup> Catelli, Nicola, "Nota biografica" in *La puttana errante di Lorenzo Venier*, (Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005), 21-26. Veniero's works include letters and poems published in various anthologies and collections, but his early works, *La Zaffetta* (1530), and *La puttana errante* (1530/1531) brought him the most fame.

<sup>39</sup> For an example of this courtesan/client agreement see Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* IV, 31. Bandello describes how six or seven Venetian noblemen support a courtesan by paying her a monthly fee for her services. Each man is assigned to spend a specific night with the courtesan, while her days are free to entertain "walk-in" clients and attend to other affairs. The tale ends tragically when a young Venetian, who falls in love with the courtesan, is rejected by her and commits suicide. See Francesco Flora, ed., *Le novelle del Bandello*, in *Tutte le opere di Matteo Bandello*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1942), 1687.

<sup>40</sup> *Arlasse*: shutting the door on a client who had been scheduled to spend the night with a courtesan.



In revenge, Veniero wrote the poem *La Zaffetta*, which recounts in over seventy verses the graphic details of the *trentuno reale*<sup>41</sup> that was inflicted upon Angela as punishment for her betrayal. Veniero coyly states that he was hesitant to write about the event, but later submitted to peer pressure. He deemed it pointless to refuse such a request since eventually someone would write about it: “Voi pur sapete s’un chiavar vi vuole/Ch’ei pur vi chiava e nel fesso e nel foro./ Dunque che pos’io far, se vuole, ogn’uno/Ch’io canti la novella del Trent’uno” (vv. 61-64). Veniero also writes the poem in order to declare that it was *he* and not Pietro Aretino who wrote *La Puttana Errante*, another satire directed at the courtesan Elena Ballerina. Later in the poem, Veniero admits that the poem is his vendetta: “Ne con spada o baston sfogò gl’amori/Anzi doppo l’arlasso in mente quadra/Di vendicarsi . . .” (vv.180-181).

Veniero uses his weapon, the pen, to attack Zaffetta’s weapon, her body, by submitting her not only to a literal gang rape but also one perpetrated in literary circles by tainting her reputation. The act of rape intended to subvert Angela while at the same time exposing her to the risk of contracting of syphilis from the numerous men involved, potentially ending Zaffetta’s career permanently. Threat of disease was an assault on Zaffetta’s reputation because it equated her with a common whore, who accepted all clientele. Veniero also calls into question her pride and loyalty to her clients. Zaffetta receives a blow to both her body (sexual abuse and possibility of disease) and to her character through Veniero’s poem intended to scar and ridicule her. By using satire, the rejected lover attempts to regain power over the courtesan, power that he originally provided her in an effort to create the illusion of an ideal and sexually liberal woman. But once the courtesan becomes too autonomous, her male patron must find the means to dominate her again. Syphilis was a means of gaining control over the courtesan’s body, reminding her that she was, if nothing else, a common whore who was paid for sex.

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<sup>41</sup> A *trentuno* was a rape by 31 men while a *trentuno reale* was a gang rape by 79 men.

In the poem, Veniero explains how Zaffetta is lured to Chioggia by her revenge-driven lover, and after a luxurious feast during which she literally stuffs her face, she is tricked into spending the night with her host. His intentions, however, are quite nefarious and sex becomes a question of pride and not simply lust: “che vendicar si vuol, non vuol chiavar” (v. 328). Zaffetta quickly grasps the gravity of her situation and what follows is a detailed description of the crime perpetrated by various men of Chioggia from different socio-economic backgrounds: “Che ben s’accorge che ‘l Trent’un vien via/ Per castigar la sua ribalderia” (vv. 367-368). After the brutal attack, Angela is shipped back to Venice in a cargo boat like common goods. News of the event is written all over the walls of Chioggia and Angela’s family is powerless to retaliate because of Veniero’s social standing.

In several instances in the poem, Veniero equates the act of the *trentuno* to contracting syphilis and both equally come to symbolize a punishment for a courtesan’s haughtiness: “Angela mia, dovete ben sapere/Ch’ogni Diva ha il Trent’uno o il mal francese,/ O tardi, o presto, ad ogni modo havere/ Che ‘l veggia et sappia ognun chiaro et palese.” (vv. 65-68) Veniero brands Zaffetta as an example to all courtesans; the moment they think of rejecting a lover, Zaffetta’s plight should come to their minds: “Se qualche gentil’huom vi vuol chiavar/Pensate de la Zaffa al dishonore/Dicendo voi di sì l’osservereste/E le vie d’ingrandirvi sarian queste.”(vv. 729-732) In fact, only by accepting all lovers will the courtesan attain fame and wealth in her short career. It seems quite a paradox that male writers choose to punish courtesans who reject lovers with a disease whose risk of contraction is much greater when intercourse is performed with numerous partners. According to Veniero, by swallowing their pride and accepting all lovers, courtesans avoid such a punishment. Men wanted a sexually free

woman to satisfy their fantasies but at the same time, they also needed to dominate her. The threat of syphilis was a means of control over a woman's body.

Veniero continues by stating that courtesans should fear the pox not only as punishment for rejecting lovers but also for robbery and betrayal: "E peggio ancor l'ingordo et importuno mal francioso, che a un tempo v'intratiene/Vi rubba in otto di quel che rubbate/ Ne la vostra fottuta e verde etate." (vv. 866-868) As they rob their clients of money, syphilis robs them of their looks and ultimately, their life. In the next verse, Veniero adds that syphilis is God's way of punishing the dishonorable courtesan lifestyle. This is the first instance in the poem in which prostitution is equated with sin and syphilis signifies divine punishment:

Ma sarebbe un piacer di paradiso  
Se 'l mal francese, ch'altr'è che la tossa,  
La robba so vi mangi all'improvviso.  
Mal cas'è che vi rode i nervi e l'ossa,  
E poi le man, l'orecchie, gl'occhi e 'l viso,  
Vi mangia il cuor, e v'invita a la fossa,  
Che cosi vuole Dio, che 'l tempo aspetta,  
Per far di vostr'infamie aspra vendetta. (vv.869-874)

Ultimately, Veniero imparts a moral directed at all prostitutes- avoid being picky and greedy. He describes the ideal lover, a woman who is discreet and shows *cortesia*. The reward for her behavior will be the love of a man who knows that his mistress is ready to serve him, without any betrayals, giving herself freely without asking for anything in return:

S'un che v'ama, superbe cortigiane  
Trovasse in voi punto di cortesia  
Discretion in bocca e nelle mane  
E stimare colui che vi desia,  
Con dire il vero ancuò come domane,  
E non fole e menzogne tutta via,  
Senza che le chiedeste, ei vi darebbe  
L'anima el cuor, e poco gli parebbe.

Saria pur un piacere a dire: Io amo  
Una donna ch'hà caro il mio servire  
La qual vien pronta a me quando la chiamo,  
Ne mi vuol ingannar ne far fallire,  
E senza lite ogn'hor d'accordo siamo.  
S'io le dò, piglia, e non ardisce dire:  
Dammi, fammi, se non ti facci o dico.  
Ne la taglia mi pon, come nemico. (vv.733-748)

Of course, the poet realizes that his request is futile because courtesans will never change their dishonest nature. He leaves us with the reality that courtesans have only two options: the bridge or the hospital: “Credeta hora al Venier: mutate vita,/Se non il ponte a star seco v'invita. . . S'elle fusser da ben, come v'hò detto,/Il di dietro n'andremmo a l'hospitale.” (vv. 843-844)

Whether or not the *trentuno reale* actually occurred is subject to debate. If it did, Zaffetta bounced back quickly because six days after the attack she was on her balcony, showing off her “goods” to passersby. In addition, she never publicly responded to the attack. Ultimately, Veniero’s invective against Zaffetta did little to sully her reputation as a courtesan. There is no evidence to suggest that she fell ill with syphilis, although *La Tariffa delle Puttane di Vinegia* (1535), a list of the most famous prostitutes of Venice and their prices, suggests otherwise.<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, even though the work was intended to degrade Angela and ‘put her in her place’, it increased her popularity and she was a favorite of Aretino, who addressed her in his *Lettere* and dedicated a sonnet to her in his *Ragionamento*.

As Courtney Quaintance points out in her study, the interplay between literary men and courtesans is based on a complex structure of power dynamic and jealousy.<sup>43</sup> A public humiliation of a courtesan’s person and especially of her body (the tool of her trade) was the

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<sup>42</sup> *La Tariffa delle puttane di Vinegia* (1535) has been attributed to G.B. Verini although both Pietro Aretino and Lorenzo Veniero were also once considered as its authors.

<sup>43</sup> Courtney Quaintance, “Defaming the Courtesan. Satire and Invective in Sixteenth Century Italy”, in *The Courtesan’s Arts. Cross Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 201.

most powerful way to harm her. The key to a courtesan's trade was dissimulation; everything a woman did, where she lived and how she carried herself, even her speech, was calculated to make her client feel luxury and sensual pleasure. She was a constant optical and psychological illusion, creating the fantasy of status and reputation. When authors introduced syphilis into the courtesan's world, they shattered this illusion by ruining her body physically and tainting her reputation and position as a woman who could bestow power and status unto men, in effect marginalizing her.<sup>44</sup> Lovers, on the other hand, felt great disappointment if a courtesan did not live up to their image, an image that they, in essence, created for her (and demanded of her). Ultimately, the courtesan was an extension of the lover, possessing the qualities that he lacked.<sup>45</sup> She was a carefully constructed creature, both physically and socially.

During this same period, Lorenzo Veniero wrote another work, *La puttana errante* (The Wandering Whore, 1530) in which he targeted the courtesan Elena Ballerina and cast her in a pornographic version of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The courtesan roams the Italian peninsula, copulating with whoever and whatever comes her way, including instances of bestiality. Towards the end of the poem, Ballerina participates in a tournament in which she challenges paladins, in reality lower class men riddled with syphilis, to a sexual duel. Veniero targets Ballerina because he claims she robbed him during one of his visits.<sup>46</sup> By writing this satire, he associates Ballerina with baseness and highlights her venality.

It is, however, Veniero's mentor, Pietro Aretino, who is most famous for his accounts of prostitutes and courtesans. In Aretino's *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo* (1534-36), Nanna and Antonia, two elder prostitutes recount their own experiences and debate whether Nanna's

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<sup>44</sup> Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage and Power at the end of the Renaissance*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 37; 47.

<sup>45</sup> Lynne Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans. Renaissance Portraits*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 74.

<sup>46</sup> Quaintance, 200.

daughter, Pippa, should follow in her mother's footsteps. This mother/daughter relationship parallels the master/pupil relationship so common among humanist scholars.<sup>47</sup> Written exclusively from a lower class woman's point of view, Aretino discusses the reality of women's situations in sixteenth century Italy. As dowries rose to exaggerated levels, women who could not afford to marry were left with only two career choices: nun or prostitute. The convent, however, provided little security for women because of widespread exploitation. Convents became synonymous with illicit sexual activities, whether among the religious orders themselves or acting as a brothel, which attracted men from the outside. Nanna, herself having experienced all three career paths (nun, wife, prostitute), recounts that it was in the convent that she first lost her virginity because of the corruption of the religious orders, which were only concerned with satisfying their bodily appetites rather than caring for their souls.

In her account of marriage, Nanna reveals that the 'honest' life of a married woman is not as virtuous as it seems. Nanna's mother, who 're-establishes' Nanna's virginity and virtuous reputation through a crafty ruse, arranges to marry her to an old man. Nanna, however, quickly discovers that her only chance for sexual gratification will come through adultery and she spends the next chapter describing the different means she uses to cheat her jealous husband. When he finally discovers her in bed with a lover and brutally attacks her, Nanna pulls out a dagger and kills him.

As a prostitute, Nanna lists the various tricks she used to rob her clients of clothes, or cheat them out of money in gambling. She even convinced numerous men to buy her the same crane, one that she kept returning to her butcher, eventually splitting the profits with him. She states, "Perché acquista grandemente una puttana quando può vantarsi di avere fatto disperare,

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<sup>47</sup> Storey, 53.

fallire o impazzire altrui.”<sup>48</sup> These tricks also include the use of black magic, whence courtesans use spells to bind their clients, making them fall hopelessly in love with them. Many times these spells include the consumption of potions. A courtesan, whose name Nanna deliberately withholds, made her lover drink a concoction made from her own syphilitic scabs in order to make him fall in love with her.

In a common accusation, both Nanna and Antonia describe the haughtiness and thievery exhibited by some prostitutes. Society no longer views syphilis as a punishment for fornication but rather for capital vices such as pride and greed or betrayal and theft. In fact, it is almost always the courtesan’s excessive pride that causes her downfall. As syphilis devours the body of the courtesan, it also became a popular metaphor to describe the greed and pride that consume her mind and soul:

La superbia di una puttana avanza quella di un villano rivestito; la invidia di una puttana è divoratrice di se medesima, come il mal francioso di chi lo ha nelle ossa. . . <sup>49</sup>

As her career comes to an end, the courtesan is again limited to menial occupations such as innkeeper, procuress, washerwoman, and worst of all, beggar. Her life is marred with physical reminders of her suffering, whether from syphilis or scars inflicted by betrayed lovers:

E con tante loro astuzie, appena si difendono dal vendere le candele; e spesso il mal francioso fa le vendette dei mali arrivati; ed è pur bello a vedere un’ache, non potendo più appiattare sotto al belletto, ad acque forti, a sbiaccamenti, a belle vesti e a gran ventagli la sua vecchiezza . . .  
. . . poi cantano la messa a San Rocco, al Popolo, in su le scale di San Pietro, alla Pace, a Santo Iovanni e alla Consolazione, marchiate dalla bolla con che san Giobbe segna le sue cavalle in sul viso, e anco da qualche fregetto fattogli da quelli che perdono pacienza nei tradimenti loro. . . <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamento Dialogo*, a cura di Nino Borsellino, (Milano: Garzanti, 2005), 160.

<sup>49</sup> Aretino, 170.

<sup>50</sup> Aretino, 151-152.

The endemic nature of syphilis became so commonplace in Renaissance society that even Nanna's co-interlocutor, Antonia, herself a courtesan, suffers from it although she does not know from whom she contracted it.

Nanna continues by describing the most important weapon in a courtesan's arsenal: the art of illusion. As she crudely states, "Le puttane non son donne, ma sono puttane."<sup>51</sup> The creation of illusion by lies, beautiful clothes, rich houses and servants was vital to maintaining the image of the courtesan. Illusion allowed men to believe that they were dishonoring the decent women of the city, and this was especially true for foreigners who could not distinguish courtesans from honorable women.<sup>52</sup> Authorities feared the visibility of prostitutes in public because they could damage the reputation (*fama pubblica*) of virtuous women and the city as a whole.

Such a fear led to male control over women's physical appearance. Sumptuary laws prohibited certain luxuries in dress such as silks, pearls, and gold. In a continued effort to keep prostitutes and courtesans under control, and most importantly, recognizable from honorable women, city officials forced them to wear specific colors as well as bells from their cloaks. Jewelry, such as earrings, could also suggest that a woman was sexually impure. Sumptuary dress was often considered a sign of concupiscence.<sup>53</sup> It was common practice to identify unwanted and foreign peoples, as in the case of the Jews, who were required to wear a yellow circle on their clothes. Courtesans, however, often avoided sumptuary laws because of their status amid the inner circles of the important men to which they catered. Most also failed to register with city authorities, as required, and did not pay taxes on their wealth.

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<sup>51</sup> Aretino, 175.

<sup>52</sup> John K. Brackett, "The Florentine *Onestà* and the Control of Prostitution 1430-1680", *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 279.

<sup>53</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs: Ear-Rings, Jews, and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City", *Past and Present*, no. 112 (August, 1986), 25.



In her work about distinguishing signs in the Renaissance, Diane Owen Hughes makes a connection between prostitution and Jewish usury, stating that government and ecclesiastical authorities considered both a drain on the city's citizens. Neither profession contributed to the general welfare and both groups became easy targets of government restrictions and Church sermons.<sup>54</sup> Oftentimes, authorities required that both prostitutes and Jews wear similarly colored signs on their clothing to distinguish them from Christians. Like usury, prostitution was a despised profession but a necessary one which provided a service to men by safeguarding them from homosexuality and protecting honorable women from losing their virginity outside the confines of marriage.<sup>55</sup> Of course, the fame of a courtesan could also bode well for the reputation of a city, as in the case of Henri III and Veronica Franco. The appearance of syphilis, however, created a larger aversion to prostitution, linking both to death.

Although many courtesans were forced into morally precarious situations, either by men or relatives, in order to obtain a profit, most did enjoy a certain amount of freedom because they could constantly change their image to satisfy their clients. However, men constantly subjected courtesans to both emotional and sexual servility.<sup>56</sup> For all of their thievery and betrayal, Aretino declares the profession of prostitute as 'transparent' and 'honest'. At the end of the day, the illusion is unveiled and a man knows that he must pay for a courtesan's favors as well as the power that she uses to (re)bestow honor upon him. Whores may be monstrous creatures because they are immoral predators but prostitution is the only way to transcend social limitations and according to Nanna, it is the only honest profession because a whore never conceals her need to make a profit:

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<sup>54</sup> Hughes, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Hughes, 37.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Rosenthal, "Introduction" in *Dialogues of Pietro Aretino*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, xix.

. . . perché la monica tradisce il suo consagramento, e la maritata assassina il santo matrimonio; ma la puttana non la attacca né al monistero né al marito: anzi fa come un soldato che è pagato per far male, e facendolo non si tiene che lo faccia perché la sua bottega vende quello che ella ha a vendere. . . Gli ortolani vendono gli erbaggi, gli speziali le speziarie, e i bordelli le bestemmie, menzogne, ciance, scandoli, disonestà, ladrarie, isporcizie, odi, crudeltade, morti, mal franciosi, tradimenti, cattiva fama e povertà. . . i vizi delle puttane son virtù.<sup>57</sup>

The most important vices are, in fact, deceit and flattery, because according to Nanna: “gli uomini vogliono essere ingannati; e ancora che si avveghino che si gli dia la baia e che, partita da loro, gli dileggi vantandone fin con le fanti, hanno più caro le carezze finte che le vere senza ciance.”<sup>58</sup> It is men who taught these vices to courtesans and ultimately, it is men who pay for the courtesan’s lifestyle and give her the ‘illusion’ of power that she can make or break their reputation. However, once she violates certain boundaries, it is man who quickly takes back control and relegates the courtesan to a common whore. In the end, a courtesan only lives the illusion of being a ‘picky’ mistress (similar to a court lady) who chooses the best and most worthy suitors with her manners, grace, intelligence, and wealth. It is ultimately the man who controls the illusion by placing the courtesan into wealth and society, and by snatching her from that state as soon as she breaks the rules. Courtesans, like courtiers, are expendable and easily replaced.<sup>59</sup>

Pietro Aretino, for his own part, wandered from court to court before finally settling in Venice, which provided him more of the literary freedom he so desperately sought. Unlike most writers targeting women, Aretino seems more sympathetic to women’s situations, and realizes that society is to blame for forcing women into this particular plight. In many respects, literary men and courtesans both fashioned public personas to serve their needs. They both vied for

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<sup>57</sup> Aretino, 203.

<sup>58</sup> Aretino, 245.

<sup>59</sup> M. Rosenthal, “Introduction”, in *Dialogues of Pietro Aretino*, p. xxi

patronage to maintain their livelihood but ultimately they lived under servility and the constant threat of poverty. Aretino not only criticized the courtesan/lover relationship but he also attacked the corrupt government and church officials who were all willing to ‘prostitute’ themselves for money and status.

### **Counter Reformation images of monstrous women**

#### **Sperone Speroni’s *Orazione contra le cortigiane* (1575)**

Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) was born to a noble family in Padua. After graduation from university in 1518, Speroni moved to Bologna where he became a pupil of Pietro Pompanazzi. During his long career, he held various civic positions both in Padua, Venice and Rome. He was a member of Domenico Veniero’s *Accademia degli Infiammati* and published his famous *Dialogues* in 1542. His famous *Dialogo d’amore* (Dialogue on Love) features Tullia D’Aragona, a famous courtesan, and Bernardo Tasso in central roles discussing the nature of love and its virtues while his *Dialogo delle dignità delle donne* (1542) is a defense of women. However, after the Counter Reformation and the restrictions imposed by the Index of Prohibited books in 1571, Sperone, at the urging of his patrons, published an oration denouncing courtesans. Although Speroni originally proposes the oration as an attempt to convert them, it is rather a scathing condemnation of courtesan culture.

Entitled *Orazione contra le cortegiane* (1575), Speroni addresses an imaginary courtesan with the intent of exposing her sins to his reading public. He explains that some honorable ladies requested him to write about courtesans (in reality, to humiliate them) in the hope that they will change their ways. Calling himself an “expert of the sins of courtesans” (*esperto de’ lor peccati*), Speroni begins the first part of his oration by listing various examples of women who personify

typical feminine virtues such as chastity, fidelity, and honor. These examples range from mythological to Biblical paragons, including virgins and martyrs who chose suicide to avoid dishonor.

Speroni speaks directly to courtesans in the second part of the work and attacks their way of life. He cites converted prostitutes such as Mary Magdalene and St. Mary of Egypt as examples to emulate, but he does not hold any illusions that his words will prompt change. He continues his tirade by questioning the etymology of the name ‘courtesan’, since these ‘unhappy monsters’ (*mostri infelici*) maintain no connection with courtly values:

Questo so bene, che cotai *mostri infelici* non sono degni di cotal voce; e che colui, che da prima le nominò cortigiane, o intendendo con tal vocabolo a lusingarle e lodarle, il che fu atto di parasito e roffiano . . .<sup>60</sup>

In fact, the court is a seat of virtue and courtesy (*cortesìa*), neither of which courtesans possess. According to Speroni, this vile profession has adopted the name courtesan to feign nobility and refinement, while most common people call them *meretrici*. Speroni states that they should simply be called *puttane* (whores): “che sei svogliata di tutti i beni, come tu sei, e piena essendo d’ogni lordura, tanto hai di gusto di bona fama ed onore che non puttana, ma cortigiana vuoi esser detta.”<sup>61</sup>

A courtesan’s motivations stem not only from her fear of poverty but from blatant vanity and greed. Her only intention is to feed her appetite for food and precious objects, making her a symbol of sickness and depravity, her soul rotting inside from excessive greed and bitterness. Again we see the courtesan described as a predatory beast, a monster concerned only with fulfilling her needs:

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<sup>60</sup> Sperone Speroni, *Opere di M. Sperone Speroni degli Alvarotti*, Tomo III (Roma: Vecchiarelli Editore, 1989), 214.

<sup>61</sup> Speroni, 225.

ma ella dura sì fatta pena per guadagnarsi da empier la gola di cibi e vini a sia scielta; e parte ancora per addobbari superbamente più che altra, cui porti invidia; e rode se dentro al cuore, se non l'avanza nel pompeggiare.<sup>62</sup>

These 'subhuman' women suffer internally but also externally from syphilis:

. . . così in questo al presente, mentre son vive, cioè mal vive, mai pur un poco non lascia in pace li corpi loro e le menti. . . . Già sa ognuno per udire dire, e molti il sanno alle spese loro, che, ancor non sono cento anni andati, dal mondo novo all'antico venne una specie d'infermità, la qual comunque sia nominata (perché del nome tra Spagna e Francia è contesa) pare esser pena da Dio mandata specialmente a' fornicatori . . . Dunque in sua vita la meretrice sempre è punita delle sue colpe. Che se ella ha tregua con questo male, non l'ha però col timore di dover tosto sentirlo . . .

Not only are courtesans' bodies disfigured by syphilis but also by pregnancy, which they desperately attempt to avoid in every way.

Unlike Aretino, however, Speroni shows little sympathy for the miserable creature (*miseria criatura*) that has chosen this profession, whether out of revenge for being dishonored by a lover or because her family forced her into it. Courtesans go against God and nature; they gamble, cheat and rob their clients without remorse, while encouraging others towards sin. In fact, Speroni states that even though a courtesan feigns to be Eve, she is much rather like the serpent that tricked Eve into committing sin:

Tu sei serpente in due modi; l'un che perseveri nel peccato, l'altro, che essendo tu peccatrice, tiri anche teco a peccare non più solo, ma mille Adami ingannati.<sup>63</sup>

He emphasizes her monstrous nature by claiming that sin turned her from woman into both beast and demon: "reo mostro meraviglioso, parte dimonio pien di peccati, e parte bestia senza ragione."<sup>64</sup> By comparing her to a serpent, Speroni highlights her bestiality and her defiance of God. The snake is the vilest animal not only because of its association with original sin, but also because of its slithery and sneaky nature, and its position low to the ground.

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<sup>62</sup> Speroni, 218.

<sup>63</sup> Speroni, 239.

<sup>64</sup> Speroni, 242.

Ultimately, the courtesan's beastly nature makes her a servant to man. She can never be a free woman or raise her status. The gold and silver that she receives in payment from her clients are really the chains that bind her to them:

Credi tu forse, che la tua vita licenziosa si debba dir signorile, perchè l'hai sciolta dalla ragione, e far di lei a tua voglia? Veramente troppo t'inganna questa credenza: perciocchè in tale e sì fatta vita ti non sei libera pur un poco, non che signora: ben sei tu serva e in prigione.<sup>65</sup>

The courtesan is a servant in every way; to her master, to her greed and to her diseased riddled body. Speroni does not spare her male clients either; the courtesan's master is enslaved, ready to satisfy his lover's every whim, even if it spells his financial ruin and eternal damnation. Speroni, like other authors before him, expresses his own anxieties not only about women using their bodies for money but also about patronage and women's invasion of male economic and literary circles.

### **Veronica Franco as source of disease in the poems of Maffio Veniero (1575)**

During the same period that Speroni wrote his oration, the famous Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco was involved in a *tenzone* (literary battle) with Maffio Veniero, a cleric and member of the Ca' Venier literary academy. Aside from her profession as a courtesan, Veronica Franco had literary ambitions and frequented the academic salon of Domenico Veniero, Maffio's uncle, who acted as her patron. Maffio Veniero (son of Lorenzo Veniero, author of *La Zaffetta* and *La puttana errante*) spent most of his life moving from court to court in search of patronage. Veronica represented a threat to him because of her literary ambitions as well as her social mobility. After a brief stint at the Medici court in Rome, Maffio returned to Venice in 1575 to find his natal city rife with corruption and greed, and brimming with anxiety about the outbreak of plague (1575-1577). Whether fueled by professional jealousy or personal anger for Franco's

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<sup>65</sup> Speroni, 236.

rejection of him, Maffio's anxieties led him to attack the courtesan in three famous sonnets, written anonymously and in Venetian dialect. Initially, Veronica Franco believed the sonnets to be written by her lover, Marco Veniero (Maffio's cousin and son of Domenico Veniero) with whom she had also exchanged numerous poems.

In the first of Maffio's sonnets to Veronica, entitled *Franca, credeme, che, per San Maffio* (Believe Me Franca, That By San Maffio), Maffio pretends to be in love, praising Veronica's beauty and the desire she ignites in him. He quickly, though, reverts in disgust because he must pay to receive even a kiss from her:

Dall'altra sè un carigolo boccon.  
Intendo che, quand'un ve vuol basar.  
Volè cinque o sei scudi e con fadiga  
Con i cinquanta ve lassé chiavar. (vv. 6-9)<sup>66</sup>

Although Maffio admits his desire for Veronica, lauding her good looks and manners, he is outraged that she charges such high rates:

No perchè vu non sié bella e pulia,  
Cara, dolce, gentil e costumà,  
Ma perchè mi ho st'umor, sta bizaria:  
Me tagiaràve el cazzo, e, desperà,  
De sti cogioni faria una fortà gia,  
Co' pagasse una volta, co' ho chiavà. (vv. 22-27)<sup>67</sup>

As Dolora Chapelle Wojciechowski underlines, Maffio is intent on preserving his bodily integrity and above all, his masculinity, which would be greatly damaged if he were to pay a

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<sup>66</sup> Manlio Dazzi, ed., *Il fiore della lirica veneziana: Il libro chiuso di Maffio Venier (La tenzon con Veronica Franco)*, (Venice: Neri Pozza Editore, 1956), 23. See also Maffio Venier, *Poesie diverse*, edited by Attilio Carminati, (Venezia: Corbo e Fiore Editori, 2001) for standard Italian translations of Venier's poems.

<sup>67</sup> Dazzi, 24.

courtesan for sexual favors.<sup>68</sup> He characterizes himself as a *valente servidor* (valient servant) who refuses to give anything except his heart in payment to his lover:

No se troverà mai teso né glosa  
Che vògia che l'amante diebba dar  
Altro che 'l proprio cuor alla morosa. (vv. 91-93)

Only the lowest rungs of society, such as pimps, common prostitutes, and servants, should receive payment for their services. In addition, Maffio does not spare the male lover in his poem, whose desperation to do anything for his lady's love, categorizes him with the likes of Judas, who betrayed Christ for money.

The second poem, *An fia comodo? A Che muodo zioghémo?* [Wouldn't you like that? What sort of game is this?], attacks Veronica's body and her greed, while simultaneously debasing her status as a courtesan. Maffio describes the various parts of her grotesque body: a face that frightens even itself [*viso da far paura esso a se stesso*], her head full of pustules and larceny [*un mare de bolle e de forfantiaria*], her face covered in wrinkles [*fronte tutto pien de grespe*]. Her eyes bulge out of her head as if she is partaking in an exorcism [*Ti ha po' quei occhi che, s'ti vuol vardar/ Ti i stravolzi che el par che te sij sotto/ El prete che te vògia sconzurar*] and her mouth is like rotten, corrupt mud [*la bocca è co' è un fango (marzo) corotto.*] Finally, Franco's breasts hang so low on her emaciated body that she can use them as oars [*Ti ha po' quelle tettazze maledette,/ Che ti va, intendo, a spasso in un albuòl/ Per canal, e (si) ti voghi cone le tette.*] Maffio clears up any confusion as to the courtesan's identity by naming her in the next lines:

Se disse, co una in ossi xe reduta,  
Che la somègia Veronica Franca,  
Che no ghe xe de ti la pi destrutta. (vv. 100-102)

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<sup>68</sup> Dolora Chapelle Wojciechowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier: Sex, Death and Poetry in Cinquecento Venice", *Italica*, vol 83, no. 3/4 (Fall-Winter, 2006), 375.



In this second poem, we can begin to see Maffio's associations of the courtesan with both a morally and physically diseased body. Her emaciated figure, filthy mouth, pustule-laden head all indicate signs of corruption, infection and putrefaction. In fact, towards the end of the poem, Maffio describes Veronica as "covered in sores and scabby, all bones, unable to even to realize she is infected with syphilis":

Ti xe tutta impiagà, tutta rognosa  
 Mo ti no die' sentire, se puol dir, niente  
 Né mal francese, né l'essere tegnosa  
 Perché, co l'osso è offeso solamente,  
 No se sente dolor: ti è mo tutt'ossi,  
 Ergo, nol te die' offender altramente. (vv. 121-126)

While other poets praised Veronica's beauty, Maffio's misogynistic verses attack her greatest asset, turning Franco into a diseased monster. This, of course, foreshadows Maffio's last poem, *Veronica, ver unica puttana* [Veronica, truly unique whore] in which he characterizes Franco not only as diseased herself but also as a contagion capable of infecting all of Venice.

The last poem of the series directed at the courtesan, *Veronica, ver unica puttana*, is itself a pun on another poem intended to laud Franco's beauty (*Veronica, vera, unica al mondo*). Maffio reverses this trend by describing Veronica Franco again as the epicenter of all diseases [*el summario d'ogni malatia*]; she is a monster in human flesh [*donna redutta mostro in carne humana*]. In a play on Petrarchan ideals of beauty, the poet describes each feature of her face: her green forehead, yellow eyes, mouth full of sores, rotten breath, and her white hair. In fact, she is so devastated physically that her only career options are to beg beneath a bridge or enter the *Ospedali degli Incurabili* for syphilitics. Franco is the daughter of syphilis [*No èstu del gran mal/ Francese la diletta fia adottiva, / Relita della quondam pellativa,/ Causa che tanti scriva?*] who sends so many men to the hospitals that the hospital sends her gifts in return. As Margaret

Rosenthal points out, this attack is not only directed against Franco but also against Petrarchan love lyric in general.<sup>69</sup>

At this point, Maffio's attack on Franco's body turns from an inward attack of her individual parts to an outward attack, rendering the whole courtesan as a disease capable of spreading to the rest of the city. He considers Franco as the mother of all contagion, a sea of disease, and represents her actions by combining medical and war terminology such as 'corrupt', 'fight' 'war', 'infect'.<sup>70</sup> She is a sickness for which no cure exists:

Quella che mantien guerra  
Contro la sanità, mare del morbo,  
Quella che venne al mondo con el corbo,  
Quella che rende orbo  
Sto seculo presente e che l'infetta,  
Quella contro de chi no val ricetta,  
Né medesina eletta [. . . ] (vv. 69-75).

Veronica Franco is the sum of all disease and a poison that infects the city, putting all of its citizens at risk of contagion. Even Franco's neighbors have moved away because of the putrefaction emanating from her house. Here again we see the poet rely on the theory that disease can be contained within the body of one woman, as the source of the infection. He ends his insults with casting the courtesan as a "cliff" (*un precipitio*), a "depth" (*un profondo*), an "abyss" (*un abisso*), and finally, as "chaos" (*un caos*) capable of swallowing, engulfing, consuming men and entire cities with her poisonous venom, just like syphilis. Maffio Venier circulated these three poems anonymously in the Ca' Venier during Franco's absence from Venice. Once Franco returned and discovered their true author, she felt compelled to respond,

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<sup>69</sup> Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan. Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth Century Venice*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 188.

<sup>70</sup> In her book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag discusses the common use of war terminology when describing the treatment of disease. See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 64.

not only in an attempt to preserve the integrity of her body, but also as a general defense of all women from misogynistic attacks.

Before responding directly to Maffio, however, Franco seeks advice from a friend (presumably her mentor Domenico Venier) in *Capitolo 23* of her collection *Terze Rime*. She refers to her friend as a valorous warrior (*guerrier sète di valore*) and an expert of war (*de la guerra esperto*). The courtesan proceeds to imagine herself as a warrior who intends to do physical not just literal battle with her adversary. She is willing to use her body and physical strength to fight him (depicting herself in the guise of a male) and even to kill her opponent in battle. As opposed to the frail and disease ridden image that Maffio portrayed of her, Franco envisions herself as a healthy, vigorous body capable of inflicting mortal blows with her bare hands. It is interesting to note that nowhere in her poetry does Veronica Franco actually deny being infected with syphilis although her profession obviously put her at a much greater risk of contracting the disease. Consequently, it would be very difficult to conceal signs of infection, especially in advanced stages. Maffio Veniero, ironically, contracted syphilis in 1580 during a stay in Constantinople and died of the illness in 1586.

Ultimately, the poetess decides that she will not lower herself to fight the vicious and unfair battle that Maffio started. She considers him a coward; capable of only spreading rumors about her in her absence and not man enough to confront her face to face. Franco attacks Maffio's masculinity in the battlefield, claiming that he would flee from her if challenged. In a reversal, she reveals Maffio's own infections (cowardice and malice):

Dunque commetterò sí gran diffetto  
Di bruttar di quel sangue queste mani,  
Ch'è di malizia e di viltate **infetto**? (vv. 172-174)<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Italian text and English translations from Veronica Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, edited by Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret Rosenthal, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Emphasis mine.

Franco's direct response to Maffio arrives in Capitolo 16 *D'ardito cavalier non è prodezza* [It is not a brave knight's gallant deed] where she declares that chivalry prohibits insulting women, especially those who are defenseless and unprepared, since women are timid and gentle creatures who only give pleasure to men. After the initial shock of Maffio's attack, Veronica will defend herself and all women from such misogynistic attacks. She vows to lead by example, explaining that women are just as agile and strong as men, if given the right training and proper weapons. In fact, she argues, it is men who keep women from achieving their potential and not women's weaker nature:

Quando armate ed esperte ancor siam noi,  
redner buon conto a ciascun uom potemo,  
ché manu e piedi e core avem qual voi;  
e se ben molli e delicate semo,  
ancor tal uom, ch'è delicato, è forte;  
e tal, ruvido ed aspro, è d'ardir scemo. (vv. 64-68)

Her praise of the female sex turns into a covert jab at Maffio's own reputed homosexuality:

E le donne a difender tutte tolgo  
Contra di voi, che di lor sète schivo,  
Sí ch'a ragion io sola non mu dolgo.  
Certo d'un gran piacer voi sète privo,  
A non gustar di noi la gram dolcezza;  
Ed al mal uso in ciò la colpa ascrivo. (vv. 79-84)

Franco's challenge to Maffio is now a literary battle fought with paper and ink and not swords. She leaves the choice of language (Venetian, Tuscan) and genre to her adversary, confident of her own skills in all realms of poetry. Specifically quoting Maffio's sonnet *Veronica, ver unica puttana*, she points out his misuse of the word 'unique', highlighting its positive connotations. She freely admits to being 'unique', even among *meretrici* and therefore endowed of grace and nobility of soul:<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Jones and Rosenthal suggest that Franco does not insist upon being called a courtesan so as to create a similarity between the words *meretrice* and *merito* (merit). See Veronica Franco, *Poems and Selected Letters*, 169.

Quella di cui la fama è gloriosa,  
E che 'n bellezza od in valor eccelle,  
Senza par di gran lunga virtüosa,  
“unica” a gran ragion vien che s'appelle. . . (vv. 148-151)

Many of Veronica Franco's works include passionate defenses of women and particularly, fellow courtesans. As vehemently as Franco tries to infuse her profession with virtue, nobility and honor, she reveals a harsher reality in *Capitolo 24* when she attempts to reason with an unnamed man who threatens to slash a courtesan's face out of revenge<sup>73</sup>. She urges him to return to chivalric values rather than resorting to violence. But her moist poignant description of courtesan life comes in *Lettera 22* of the *Lettere a familiari e diversi*<sup>74</sup>, when Franco addresses a friend who is considering the profession for her daughter. In order to convince her (she chooses a letter since her verbal pleas have been ignored), Franco offers spiritual/moral and financial aid, even securing her daughter a place in the *Casa delle Zitelle*. She stresses the need to safeguard her daughter's virginity in order to secure an honorable marriage, and questions her friend's decision to flaunt her daughter's body in public, as if she were merchandise. In a final attempt to change her friend's mind, the poetess admits that her daughter really isn't beautiful or charming enough to become a courtesan and therefore, should rely on the talents that she does possess to find a suitable and honest profession.

Franco describes courtesan life as one of misery, exposing women to all sorts of violence and contagious diseases, but mainly it is a life of complete and utter servility of body and soul. As Franco states, “to eat with another's mouth, sleep with another's eyes, move according to another's will, obviously rushing toward the shipwreck of your mind and your body- what

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<sup>73</sup> *Dare la sfregia*: to slash a courtesan's face as revenge for an inflicted wrong. This type of disfigurement would signal the end of a courtesan's career.

<sup>74</sup> Margaret Rosenthal has dated these letters to the 1570's although the collection as a whole was published in 1580.

greater misery?”<sup>75</sup> Above all, Franco targets society’s conventions, which essentially force women of low economic and social status into such a career path. The poetess, however, does not completely exonerate her friend, who as a mother should be acting to protect her daughter rather than lead her to the ‘slaughter’. As Margaret Rosenthal suggests, Franco’s condemnation of her friend’s decision reinforces a law passed in 1563 by the Council of Ten, one of Venice’s highest magistracies, which prohibited mothers from prostituting their own daughters.<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, Franco states that not only will her daughter come to resent her mother’s choice, but also they will both suffer eternal damnation for it.

### **Representations of women as Danaë**

Perhaps no myth more closely mirrors the perception of women, and in particular courtesans, than the story of Danae in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The *Metamorphoses* determined the subject matter of many literary works and influenced the treatment of nudes in painting. The myth recounts the story of Danae and her father Acrisius. An oracle once predicted that the child that Danae bore would kill Acrisius. To stop this course of fate, Acrisius locked his daughter in a tower to prevent her from marrying. Zeus, filled with pity as well as an immense desire for the beautiful Danae, came to visit her in a shower of gold and impregnated her. Once Acrisius discovered the child, he put both Danae and the infant in a chest and threw them into the sea. They were later rescued and the prophecy fulfilled when Danae’s son, Perseus, eventually killed his grandfather by accidentally striking him with a discus during an athletic tournament.

The Danae myth was a popular theme in early Christian theology. St. Augustine mentions Danae in the *City of God* as well as other works when describing the influence of lustful images

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<sup>75</sup> Franco, *Selected Letters and Poems*, 39.

<sup>76</sup> M. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 129.

on humans and scandalous stories about the gods. Metamorphosis and the examples set by the gods can inspire us to evil deeds. Man is easily corrupted and Augustine cites Terence's play *The Eunuch* as proof. The youth Chaerea, disguised as a eunuch, enters the house of a courtesan to see his beloved. Left alone in a room with the girl, he sees an image of Jupiter and Danae on the wall. Chaerea is aroused by the image and then follows the god's example by raping his beloved. He boasts of a divine precedent for his shameful behavior.<sup>77</sup> St. Augustine associated metamorphosis with multiplicity and immorality, which was proof of demonic power. Metamorphosis ran counter to the belief that man was created in the image of God because it implied confusion in the hierarchy between humans, gods, and animals. For Augustine, holiness signified singleness.<sup>78</sup> Augustine later specifically ties the myth of Danae to prostitution, writing that Jupiter's gold bought her chastity, therefore highlighting the miserable state of human nature.

In medieval interpretations of the myth, Danae became the epitome of Christian values such as chastity and modesty. She was beautiful and innocent, a naïve woman who was vulnerable to Zeus's advances and lustfulness. Danae was unaware of her own sexuality and the power it could have over men and she was not a willing participant in her de-flowering. In the widely read *Ovid Moralisé*, the golden shower which fell upon Danae was an allegory for the impregnation of the Virgin Mary and a prefiguration of the Annunciation.<sup>79</sup> The conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit was the highest form of metamorphosis.<sup>80</sup> During the Renaissance, however, the image of the Danae transformed to represent a woman whose greed drove her to do

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<sup>77</sup> Saint Augustine, 55.

<sup>78</sup> Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh. Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 96-97.

<sup>79</sup> Jane Davidson Reid, *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s*, vol. 1, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 319.

<sup>80</sup> Barkan, 116.

anything for money, including the selling of sexual favors. Giovanni Boccaccio advanced a negative view of Danae in his *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (II, xxxiii), which was also widely read during the Renaissance. Boccaccio connects Danae with avarice because she sold her chastity to Zeus for gold, but he also implies that Danae deliberately chose a sexual encounter with the god in order to escape the prison where her father held her.<sup>81</sup> Of course, images of a chaste Danae continued to appear in works such as the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* but the corrupt and greedy Danae prevailed in Renaissance thought.

The evolution of Danae's image in art clearly mirrors the perception of the courtesan during the early modern period. Some interpretations of the myth rely on a literal meaning of the encounter. Jupiter initially enters Danae's tower as a shower of gold but then transforms into human form and fornicates with her in exchange for gold.<sup>82</sup> This metamorphosis of the myth of Danae in the Renaissance portrays women as monstrous internally, with no morals and no conscience, ready and willing to do anything to satisfy their greed. In fact, over time Danae became less an innocent victim and more a complicit partner in Zeus' rape of her because she valued gold more than her chastity. The Danae myth also highlighted anxieties about the violability of self and the dangers of bodily transformations. Authors often compared courtesans to Danae in literary representations, as courtesans were the masters of metamorphosis, constantly changing their identities to suit their clients' needs.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, Volume 1, Books I-V, translated by Jon Solomon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 249. See also Madlyn Millner Kahr, "Danaë: Virtuous, Voluptuous, Venal Woman", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 60, no. 1 (Mar. 1978), 44.

<sup>82</sup> Cathy Santore, "The Renaissance Courtesan's Alter Ego", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 54. Bd., H. 3 (1991), 417.

<sup>83</sup> For examples of the Danaë/courtesan parallel, see Santore, "The Renaissance Courtesan's Alter Ego", 414, 416-417. Among others, Santore cites such texts as Joachim du Bellay's *La Veille Courtisane* (1558), Gervase Markham's *The Famous Whore or Noble Curtizan* (1609), and Francesco Pona's *La lucerna* (1625). For an example of a courtesan comparing herself to Danaë, see my analysis of Veronica Franco's sonnet to Henri III on p. 52.



Pictorial representations of Danae also became very popular during the Renaissance. Precisely because church authorities such as St. Augustine condemned them, representations of classical myths often served as subjects for erotic paintings. Patrons often feigned interest in the allegorical rather than the erotic aspect of the work and cited these myths as teaching examples of inappropriate behavior. Male patrons requested erotic paintings and exhibited them only in private spaces such as their bedrooms. The image of Danae served purely to arouse its viewers.

Fittingly, artists often chose courtesans to pose for the role of Danae. Courtesans often assumed the roles of mythological characters to become the bodily incarnation of an ideal beauty.<sup>84</sup> However, the new image of Danae transmitted only greed and lust; the princess now received a shower of golden coins as payment for her deflowering. Paintings often depicted women in various erotic postures, willingly accepting the money raining down from above directly into their lap or genital area. There was often a procuress seated by their side.

Titian, a close friend of Pietro Aretino, was one of the more prolific painters of Danae inspired subjects. Most of his paintings focused specifically on the act of Zeus' metamorphosis in Danae's room and the viewer witnesses a god entering the domestic scene of a Venetian boudoir. Danae became a symbol of sensuous love, which was so powerful that it could penetrate walls and attract gods.<sup>85</sup> This, of course, mirrored the beauty of courtesans, who could drive men mad and became the symbol of sensuality in Venice.

Titian produced many versions of the Danae painting, most famously in 1545 for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese and in 1554 for King Philip of Spain. The Farnese Danae is rumored to have the face of a certain Angela, the Cardinal's favorite courtesan.<sup>86</sup> In this work,

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<sup>84</sup> Georgina Masson, *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1975), 15.

<sup>85</sup> Barkan, 190.

<sup>86</sup> Eric Jan Sluijter, "Emulating Sensual Beauty: Representations of Danaë from Gossaert to Rembrandt", *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 27, no. 1/2(1999), 20.

we see a cupid sitting on the side of Danae's bed while in the Spanish Danae, an old hag replaces the cupid and the golden shower is exclusively directed towards Danae's thighs, with some gold dropping into the hag's apron. The hag sits with a loop of keys at her waist, usually the sign for a procuress, but as Cathy Santore explains, it could also allude to the word *chiavare*, which means 'to have sex'. In addition, Danae's outstretched middle finger signifies sexual intercourse. The inclusion of a little lap dog also identifies the female subject as a courtesan.<sup>87</sup> Dogs or other animals in a painting indicated the subject's lascivious or bestly nature.<sup>88</sup> The figure of the hag represents the transience of beauty as well as the contrast of youth and old age.

By showing the procuress in the background and coins falling from the sky, the Spanish Danae painting makes a clear connection with prostitution. The image of the hag was often associated with avarice.<sup>89</sup> By omitting any signs of Zeus, the viewer is able to imagine himself in place of the god. Other depictions show Jupiter entering the tower in the form of a golden shower but then changing into human form in order to have sexual relations with Danae, clearing demystifying the story of divine love into one of sex for gold. Madlyn Millner Kahr suggests that Titian is representing different aspects of the Danae story by including the procuress; on the one side, the beautiful female figure represents an eternal and divine love, while the procuress represents a temporal and earthly, fleeting love.<sup>90</sup> Representations of courtesans in the role of Danae only furthered their reputations as venal and willing to do anything for money. Danae was no longer a chaste victim but a greedy, lustful whore who invited Zeus into her bedchamber and

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<sup>87</sup> The inclusion of flowers, dogs, or monkeys in a painting usually identified the female subject as a courtesan. Roses, in particular, were considered the flower of Venus. As described in Ovid's *Art of Love*, it was a common practice to throw roses on the threshold of courtesans' homes. See Santore, 419-421. A woman's unbound hair also signified lust and sumptuary laws forbid women from appearing like this in public. See Roberto Zapperi, "Alessandro Farnese, Giovanni della Casa and Titian's Danae in Naples", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 54, (1991), 168.

<sup>88</sup> Kahr, 50.

<sup>89</sup> Santore, 417-419.

<sup>90</sup> Kahr, 50.

was consequently rewarded for it in gold. In Greek, the name Danae means “parched”, further reinforcing the notion that women were an empty womb waiting to be filled by men.

### **A Positive Image of Danae: Veronica Franco and Henri III**

While most people now viewed the image of Danae erotically because of its associations with courtesans, Veronica Franco used the image to describe a reciprocal exchange of values between herself and Henri III. While travelling to France in 1574, Henri III of Valois, King of France and Poland, stopped in Venice to enjoy the city’s delights. Among the pomp and festivities, he visited Venice’s most famous courtesan, Veronica Franco. Franco publicized this clandestine rendezvous in a dedicatory letter she wrote to Henri, accompanied by two sonnets, in her collection *Lettere familiari a diversi*.<sup>91</sup>

Franco uses the image of Danae in a positive light. She describes Henri’s visit as a favor that he bestows upon her humble home. Although she views the King as supreme and heavenly, as opposed to her own humbleness and poverty, their encounter is one of mutual respect and above all, reciprocity. Henri leaves with Franco’s portrait while the poetess in exchange experiences his virtues and valor. In the sonnet, she portrays his arrival at her home as one of surprise, like the descent of the god Zeus upon the mortal Danae. Henri takes a human shape and unlike the jubilee in Venice at his arrival, he comes to Franco’s house, unannounced with little fanfare, sneaking inside secretly:

Come talor dal ciel sotto umil tetto  
Giove tra noi qua giù benigno scende,  
E, perch’occhio terren dall’alt’oggetto  
Non resti vinto, umana forma prende. . . (vv. 1-4)

Veronica envisions herself completely open to accepting Henri’s virtues, her affection for him unwavering. As Margaret Rosenthal points out, Franco purposefully uses the image of Danae to

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<sup>91</sup> Arturo Graf, *Attraverso il Cinquecento*, (Torino: Loescher, 1888), 221.

reverse claims of venality and lasciviousness against courtesans; instead the exchange between the two lovers is characterized by the mutual ideals of equality and respect, as well as a sharing of intellectual values, rather than by a simple ‘sex for money’ scenario.<sup>92</sup> While it is appropriate that Franco would choose to represent herself as Danae, a figure most commonly associated with courtesans in the Renaissance, the poetess reverses the role commonly attributed to Danae by making herself and Henri mutual partners in a transaction.

## **Conclusion**

Renaissance society viewed women in many contrasting ways. One prevalent theory deemed women monstrous by nature, a belief that stemmed from Eve’s role in the Original Sin. Doctors associated women with basic bodily appetites and beastliness. Women became responsible not only for passing sin to their children but also for ‘birthing’ disease spontaneously within their own bodies. Their biological constitution and constant need to fill their wombs made them susceptible to illness and monstrous metamorphoses. Society viewed women as a constant source of not only physical but also moral contamination.

A lack of career choices and high dowries left many women in precarious sexual situations. Prostitution became a viable way for many women to improve their lives. Although tolerated by government authorities as a necessary evil, most people considered prostitution as a disease eating away at the moral fibers of society. The appearance of syphilis in the late fifteenth century caused many scholars to locate its origins in women. Disease became a symbol for uncontrolled femininity; however, sexual commerce put both women and men at risk of contracting syphilis. Authorities went as far as deeming single, beautiful women susceptible to temptation and consequently, disease, and quarantined them in an effort to protect society.

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<sup>92</sup> M. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan*, 107-108.

At the same time, the rise of courtesan culture in Italy threatened many men who saw their literary and economic spaces contaminated by women actively vying for patronage. Authors such as Lorenzo and Maffio Veniero used syphilis as a punishment for women they considered monstrous predators with no morals. Poets denigrated courtesans by attacking their bodies and tainting their reputations. Syphilis came to signify a punishment not simply for immoral behavior but it specifically represented the courtesan's greed and pride; sins that consumed both her body and soul.

The myth of Danae paralleled the shifting attitudes towards women in the Renaissance. No longer considered an innocent, chaste victim, artists now represented Danae in erotic poses, inviting both Zeus and the viewer to desecrate her body for gold. The metamorphoses of Danae's image closely mirrored the changing perceptions of women, particularly courtesans, in the sixteenth century as epicenters of not only literal disease but also of all-consuming vices that transformed them into monsters. Authors, in turn, used syphilis as a common punishment to corral courtesan behavior, threatening to ruin both womens' bodies and their reputations.

## Chapter Three

### The Monstrous and Paradoxical Metamorphoses of Francesco Berni's Burlesque Verse

#### Introduction

In Chapter Three, I aim to show how comic realistic poetry and the works of Francesco Berni challenged the established norms of the courtly love tradition through the use of grotesque imagery, specifically the old, deformed woman and the vice of sodomy. Courtly love tradition established the idea of a beautiful yet untouchable beloved. With the circulation of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, love poetry adopted an ideal aesthetic of beauty and a contained lexicon regarding the beloved's description. Comic realistic poets such as Rustico di Filippi and Burchiello, among others, challenged these ideals by turning to their extreme opposites in an effort to access new meanings.

Following the example of the comic realistic poets, Francesco Berni perfected the burlesque genre of poetry in the sixteenth century by exploiting original Petrarchan verses in an effort to expose rich linguistic variants and interpretive possibilities. Jaded by his own experiences in the Papal court, Berni rebelled against the vacuous and repetitive works of contemporary poets. Opposing the stale metaphors and language of the *Petrarchisti*, who upheld the Petrarchan lexicon as the ideal for both literary and linguistic identities in Italy, Berni used paradoxical metamorphosis to overturn the image of Laura, from an unattainable, idealized beloved to a concrete, real woman. At the same time, he succeeded in re-appropriating original Petrarch vocabulary in order to praise various innocuous and unconventional objects thus expanding the interpretive potential of his poetry.

The works on which I will concentrate in this chapter have one aspect in common: they describe the unnatural and transgressive through the image of women and sexuality. These descriptions assume various metaphors that act as a commentary of the cultural and literary environment in which their authors live. In an effort to counter balance the ideal beautiful woman, poets resorted to her extreme opposite, a woman who was not only old and physically grotesque but also lustful, uncontrollable and heretical when linked to witchcraft. She represented not only a threat to social order but spearheaded a revolt against the established literary canon.

Sexuality and in particular, sodomy also became an important thematic often used to destabilize conventional poetry. Characterized as an unnatural vice that went against nature and God, religious authorities deemed sodomy “unspeakable”.<sup>1</sup> Sodomy, which fell under the general heading of *luxuria* (lustfulness), was also linked to heresy and society portrayed sodomites as animalistic and effeminate. The sodomite, as both unmanned and seeking completion in men, became the extreme opposite of the female beloved. The ‘disordered passions’ and fleshy appetites of both sodomites and women made them the ideal metaphor for Berni’s revolt against conventional literary norms.<sup>2</sup>

### **Comic-realism and the Origins of the Burlesque in Italy**

Burlesque verse falls under the category of comic poetry. The term ‘burlesque’ implies both a trick as well as mockery of a subject. The purpose of such poetry was to ridicule a person, thing, place or even a literary movement (as we shall see further ahead with regards to Petrarchism). This type of poetry turned its back on conventional ideas of beauty and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Jordan, 35.

concentrated on life as a venture worthy of being mocked. That having been said, the burlesque also signified exaggeration and therefore, was not necessarily always a true reflection of reality or for that case, of an author's sincerity.<sup>3</sup>

In Italy, the burlesque found its roots in the comic-realistic poets of thirteenth century Tuscany. These poets wrote about an ironic world of caricature, using the vernacular to describe, an often times, vulgar earthly existence.<sup>4</sup> They concentrated on concrete, graphic descriptions of the body and its functions, details that were usually omitted from conventional poetry. These comic realistic poets, who opposed the idealization of the woman of the *Stilnovisiti* and depicted her in a completely opposite guise, were by default also perpetrating strongly misogynistic views of women.

Burlesque poets mainly used the *capitolo* form (modeled on the classical paradoxical encomium) or the sonnet in their works. Comic realism, parody and sexual double-entendres characterized this genre. While praising seemingly innocuous and oftentimes boring objects or even psychological states or social conditions, the poet described the subject matter through highly coded vocabulary. Hence there are often two (or more) levels of meaning embedded in the poetry (both innocuous and oftentimes obscene) that imbue burlesque poetry with deep levels of ambiguous language.

While descriptions of everyday life characterized burlesque poetry, one of its main goals was also to actively defy Petrarchan lyricism, later advocated by Pietro Bembo and others.<sup>5</sup>

Burlesque poets were not opposed to Petrarch and his poetry; on the contrary, many of them

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<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Laskier Martín, *Cervantes and the Burlesque Sonnet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Martín, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Parker, "Towards a Reading of Bronzino's Burlesque Poetry", *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 1022-1023.



lauded the poetic master, but they rejected the imitations of Petrarch that saturated sixteenth century poetry and created a stagnate literary environment. To counter such boring models, burlesque poets consistently parodied famous ‘Petrarchists’ in new and creative ways. As Deborah Parker explains, the popular use of erotic meanings in burlesque texts created “a level of allusive play that parodies other literary works and social practices”.<sup>6</sup> In fact, burlesque poets frequently assimilated other texts and by making only small changes, completely altered their meanings. The refutation of Petrarchan ideals also signaled the ridicule of the sublimation of desire for the beloved, who is usually absent in Petrarchan verse. For the burlesque poet, the beloved is always present, literally at arms length, and through his works, the poet advocates immediate sexual pleasure with her.<sup>7</sup> The poet seeks to satisfy his vulgar, sensual passions with his beloved; while, she on the other hand, has no interest in helping him reach any sort of spiritual elevation.<sup>8</sup>

In Italy, the most important precursor to burlesque poetry was Rustico di Filippi, also known as *Il Barbuto* (1230-1300?) As the first comic realistic poet to use the sonnet form, he concentrated specifically on a depiction of Florentine street life. One of his most famous sonnets, “*Messer Messerin*” (sonnet XIV) is a caricature of Albizzo (Messerino) di Caponsacchi, a Florentine noble. Rustico describes Messerino as a grotesque combination of bird, beast, and man:

Quando Dio messer Messerin fece,  
Ben si credette far gran meraviglia,  
ch’ucello e bestia ed uom ne sodisfece,  
ch’a ciaschedua natura s’apiglia:

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<sup>6</sup> Parker, 1022.

<sup>7</sup> Parker, 1020.

<sup>8</sup> All direct references to Petrarch’s poetry come from Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, a cura di Sabrina Stoppa, (Torino: Einaudi, 2011). See also Petrarch, *The Canzoniere or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, translated by Mark Musa, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

ché nel gozzo anigrottol contrafece,  
e ne le ren giraffe m'asomiglia,  
ed uom sembia, secondo che si dece,  
ne la piagente sua cera vermiglia.

Ancor risembra corbo nel cantare,  
ed è diritta bestia nel savere,  
ed uomo è sumigilato al vestimento.

Quando Dio il fece, poco avea che fare,  
ma volle dimostrar lo suo potere,  
sì strana cosa dare ebbe in talento.<sup>9</sup>

The poem begins in a high tone, praising God's power of creation but as we read further, the tone quickly changes once the poet begins to describe the deformed protagonist. Parodying court language, Rustico lists this strange beast's defects, choosing rather to praise the ugliness of the male Messerino rather than a standard female beloved. Rustico compares the nobleman's physical features to those of animals such as a duck, crow, and a giraffe. While ultimately stating that God created Messerino out of pure boredom, Rustico emphasizes God's ultimate power in his ability to concoct such a strange creature.

However, as some critics have noted, there exists a second level of meaning to this fantastically deformed man that actually describes a penis. In Jean Toscan's monumental work on sexual double-entendres in comic-realistic and burlesque poetry, the suffix *-ino*, as used in Messerino, is often associated with sodomy. In fact both *strana cosa* and the *maraviglia* that describe this man/beast are also indicative of sodomitic practices.<sup>10</sup> Further metaphors such as *gozzo* (scrotum), *cera vermiglia* (penis) and *vestimento* (from *vestirsi*, metaphorically

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<sup>9</sup> Rustico Filippi, *Sonetti satirici e giocosi*, edited by Silvia Buzzetti Gallarati, (Roma: Caroci editore, 2005), 166.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage. Le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello a Marino (XV<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, 4 vol., (Lille: Atelier Reproduction de Thèses- Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981), 378. See also Filippi, 107.

symbolizing penetration) all evoke phallic images. In the third verse, Messerino's voice is compared to a crow's, a bird that cannot sing (a further sexual double-entendre), and his chest is equated with a *diritta bestia* (upright beast) continuing the allusions to the male sexual member.<sup>11</sup>

Such ambiguous language, coded lexicons and references to specific social practices and cultural ideas are the hallmark of comic realistic poetry. Precisely because of these references, the sonnets are at times difficult to decipher because they are connected with the times and the city they were written in, and therefore many allusions are lost on the modern reader. For this reason, comic realistic poetry has received little attention from scholars. Despite their often-coded meanings, many sonnets replay a universal theme, such as Rustico's "*Aldobrandino*", (sonnet XI), in which the poet ironically mocks the cuckolded husband, Aldobrandino:

Oi dolce mio marito Aldobrandino,  
Rimanda ormai il farso suo a Pilletto,  
ch'egli è tanto cortese fante e fino,  
che creder non dèi ciò che te n'è detto.

E non star tra la gente a capo chino,  
ché non se' bozza, e fòtime disdetto;  
ma sì come amorevole vicino  
co noi venne a dormir nel nostro letto.

Rimanda il farso ormai, più no il tenere,  
ch'e' mai non ci verrà oltre tua voglia,  
poi che n'ha conosciuto il tuo volere.

Nel nostro letto già mai non si spoglia.  
Tu non dovei gridare, anzi tacere,  
ch'a me non fece cosa ond'io mi doglia.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Filippi, 163.

<sup>12</sup> Filippi, 117.

After the discovery of another man's doublet in their marital bed, Aldobrandino's wife attempts to convince her husband that their neighbor, Piletto, was simply acting out of courtesy and neighborly love towards her. She insists that she did not betray her husband, especially since Piletto did nothing that she regrets "ch'a me non fece cosa ond'io mi doglia", a statement with clear implications of a sexual relationship. Despite the embarrassing proof of an extra-marital affair, Aldobrandino's wife chides her husband for his inappropriate behavior in public, "Non star tra la gente a capo chino" and "Tu non dovei gridare, anzi tacere" while simultaneously praising Piletto as a courteous youth, "*cortese fante e fino*" and "*amorevole vicino*".

Rustico uses irony and ambiguity to describe the affair. The loving neighbor will not return again, now that he understands that his actions go against Aldobrandino's desires (*tuo voglia*). In addition, he has no need to return since he already "knows" Aldobrandino's wife in a carnal sense (*il tuo volere*). Rustico not only mocks Aldobrandino's naiveté but he purposefully overturns the ideals of courtly love when referring to Piletto as *cortese* [courteous] and respectful of Aldobrandino's desires (*il tuo volere*). The poet uses traditional courtly expressions to ridicule courtly love poetry. Hence, Rustico not only satirizes the betrayed husband but also the entire courtly tradition that always declared that passionate love could only be found outside the bonds of marriage.<sup>13</sup> Rustico mocks both courtly love language and Aldobrandino in particular since he is ultimately cuckolded under the pretense of courtesy.

Here again we see the use of sexual metaphors to underscore the extra marital affair between Aldobrandino's wife and Piletto. While Piletto is described as a "courteous" (*cortese*) youth, in burlesque jargon the term also assumes the meaning of someone who is sexually available and willing, in both homosexual and heterosexual encounters. Even the name Piletto

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<sup>13</sup> Martín, 9.

carries sexual connotations, as it derives from *pillo* (rammer) or *pestello* (pestle), a common phallic metaphor found in burlesque poetry.<sup>14</sup>

While many comic-realistic poets attacked the love lyric, they also specifically concentrated on ridiculing the physical and spiritual virtues of the beautiful lady, subsequently transforming their works into an attack on the ugly, old vulgar woman (the polar opposite). In fact, the old woman is the contrary of passionate love because she is incapable of attracting any man, although she is continually described as overly lustful, and resorting to make-up and dress in an attempt to look younger and more appealing. Vituperations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries portrayed the old woman not only as a figure incapable of sexually attracting a man, but also as a guardian figure who could impede a lover's access to a younger, beautiful girl who was under her care.

Many scholars view Rustico as the initiator of the *vituperatio vetuale* or vituperation of women in comic realistic poetry.<sup>15</sup> Vituperation stemmed from epideictic rhetoric as outlined in Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* in which he described vituperation as 'blame' and therefore the opposite of praise (*Rhetorica*, 1.9.41).<sup>16</sup> Rustico's sonnet *Dovunque vai con teco porti il cesso* is a prime example of such vituperation, taking as its subject the old, ugly hag who is the extreme opposite of the beautiful, young and virtuous beloved of the *Stilnovisti*. The poet attacks both the old woman's physical and moral attributes, while creating highly misogynistic overtones. In this poem, Rustico highlights the disgusting smell that emanates from the old hag, while specifically connecting those foul odors to the vulgar parts of her body:

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<sup>14</sup> Filippi, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Rustico composed as many love lyrics as he did comic poems, creating what Patrizia Bettella calls a *bifrontismo stilistico*. See Patrizia Bettella, *The Ugly Woman. Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 200), 20-23.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, edited and translated by Hugh Lawson Tancred, (New York: Penguin, 1991), 104.

Dovunque vai, conteco porti il cesso,  
oi buggeressa vecchia puzzolente,  
che qualunque persona ti sta presso  
si tura il naso e fugge immantenente.

Li dent'i le gengie tue menar gresso,  
ché li taseva l'alito putente;  
le selle paion legna d'alcipresso  
inver' lo tuo fragor, tant'è repente.

Ch'e' par che s'apran mille monimenta,  
quand'apri il cesso: perché non ti spolpe  
o ti rinchiude, sì ch'om non ti senta?

Però che tutto 'l mondo ti paventa:  
in corpo credo figlinti le volpe,  
ta lezzo n'esce fuor, sozza giomenta!<sup>17</sup>

This type of attack stemmed from a revival of classical literature in which the connection between age, olfaction and women was strong. For classical writers, sexual humor was a release of (male) aggressive feelings and disgust in regards towards specific body parts, particularly the female genitals, and the sex acts associated with those body parts. Ancient society cultivated male dominant and aggressive behavior in all areas of life, including the sexual realm. Men considered the female genitals as unclean and foul while male genitalia, although certainly threatening, was undefiled.<sup>18</sup> Female corporeality constituted a threat that could deprive man of power and presented the possibility of emasculation.

Masculinity was a valued trait and society encouraged dominant male behavior. Sexually, active penetration became the sign of masculinity while passivity and submission was reserved for women, slaves, young boys and foreigners. Society deemed males who took a passive role in

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<sup>17</sup> Filippi, 203.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus. Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 26.

sex as unnatural and a threat to the social order, equating them with women.<sup>19</sup> This idea of masculinity constituted a common part of literary life; respectable authors such as Ovid, Lucian, Martial and Juvenal, among others, all wrote vituperative and obscene poetry.<sup>20</sup>

The sense of smell was particularly important in invectives where uncleanness and contamination threatened from a far. Old women became relentless targets because they lost their attractive features and were no longer considered 'women'. They lacked sexuality because being a woman meant having sexual attributes; when those disappeared, women were no longer sexual entities; rather they were considered monstrous beings. Whereas the ageing process for men signified a move from one sexual state to another, an ageing woman experienced a complete annihilation of her sexual self. Old women represented a subject of loathing due to the metamorphosis of their physical appearance and consequently, sexuality moved from attractive to repulsive. They suffered rejection because they lacked beauty, and men deemed them filthy and obscene. Women past menopause were no longer capable of child bearing, a function by which society defined them, and therefore held a tenuous place due to their sexual neutrality.<sup>21</sup>

Fourteenth century poets mirrored classical invectives by touching upon four basic elements: a women's old age, her repulsive physical traits, her sexual insatiability, and finally the poet's rejection of her as a sexual partner.<sup>22</sup> Many poets also ridiculed old women's propensity for alcoholism. The poet cataloged the old woman's ugly features such as her teeth, wrinkled face, hanging breasts, flabby stomach, and crooked legs. In love poetry, these were usually

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<sup>19</sup> Véronique Mottier, *Sexuality. A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography. Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 52.

<sup>21</sup> Richlin, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Richlin, 109.

features used to praise beautiful women. Sexually, the old hag is incapable of arousing the poet and his impotence forces her to fellate him, in the process degrading herself.<sup>23</sup>

In Rustico's characterization of the old woman, the theme of bad odor was closely associated with lust and sin. The poet describes the stench coming from her mouth, due to her tartar-laden teeth and bad breath, while also mentioning the smell of toilets [*cesso, sello*], which lead the reader to make the connection to the woman's other "mouth", her genitalia.<sup>24</sup> This sense of smell in regards to sex stems from ethology, where animals in heat produce a smell to alert their partners of their desire for reproduction. The old woman emits an odor that signals her sexual lust and availability; however, men reject her because she is incapable of sexual gratification and can no longer bear children. The old woman occupies an animalistic, vulgar and almost irrational level.

As previously mentioned, the connection between the mouth and the genitals in classical literature was strong and the fear of oral/genital contamination was very worrisome. Medieval society often identified bad smell with sin and it was usually associated with transgressive figures such as the prostitute, whose lust was out of control.<sup>25</sup> Good smell can elicit attraction but bad smell can provoke repulsion, as is the case with Rustico's hag, whose breath reeks worse than chamber pots (*selle*), open tombs (*mille monimenta*), and whose body can only generate animals (*in corpo credo figlinti le volpe*).<sup>26</sup> These metaphors relate to the lower half of the

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<sup>23</sup> Richlin, 111. Women also become targets of satire when they assumed the role of the pursuer. The fear of the mysterious vagina also created the myth of the vagina *dentata* [toothed vagina], which could eat penises and was often characteristic of the old hag's genitalia. See Richlin, 68-69.

<sup>24</sup> Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 22-23. See also Filippi, 202.

<sup>25</sup> Classical examples of poetry addressed to "stinky" prostitutes are Horaces's epode 12 and Martial's epigram 93. See Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> In both folklore and mythology, the fox was commonly associated with deceitfulness and perfidy. See Angelo de Gubernatis, *Zoological Mythology: The Legends of Animals*, (London: Trubner & Co., 1872), 139-140. In *Purgatorio* XIV (v. 53), Dante refers to the Pisans as foxes because of their deceitfulness and cunning. Both foxes and wolves were later associated with witches because of their cunningness, nocturnal activity and, especially in the



women's body responsible for both defecation and reproduction, and characteristic of the grotesque, protruding body that straddles the confines of both the new and old body.<sup>27</sup> The associations with foxes and cows in the final lines of the poem underscore the woman's proximity to instinctive animal lust.

The use of the term *buggeressa* represents the women's lust and therefore, also classifies her as a prostitute or whore. Scholars associate the term *buggeressa* with sodomy, therefore making her ever more transgressive because she practices sex against nature and effectively imposes on a dominant, active position commonly attributed to men.<sup>28</sup> The old hag's advanced age makes her a walking 'tomb' because she elicits the smell of death from her mouth, which is continuously referred to as a *cesso*. Ultimately, she can only bring lust, sin, and death to whoever lays with her.

The stench of women also figures prominently in the sonnet, *Volete udir vendetta smisurata*, in which the main character, Acerbuzzo, in an effort to seek revenge for his wife's affair with his own brother (Cambiuzzo), looks to his sister in law for sexual gratification. However, once his sister in law disrobes, Acerbuzzo discovers that she smells worse than his own wife:

Volete udir vendetta smisurata  
c'ha ffatta di sua donna l'Acerbuzzo?  
La barba lunga un mese n'ha portata  
Orando, ché dovea far Giovannuzzo.

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case of wolves, their propensity to eat their own young. See Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers. Witchcraft, Sex, and Crisis of Belief*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 283-284. The Inquisitors Sprenger and Kramer also make the association between wolves and witches who were believed to abduct infants in "Question 10" of the *Malleus maleficarum [Hammer of Witches]*. See *The Hammer of Witches. A Complete Translation of the Malleus maleficarum*, translated by Christopher S. Mackay, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 209-210.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 316-317.

<sup>28</sup> Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 24. See also Filippi, 202.

Dio, com'bene le stette a la sciaurata,  
quand'ella soferia così gran puzzo!  
Per quella via ne va da la cognata,  
S'altra vendetta nonn-è di Cambiuzzo.

Dunque, ben n'anderà per quella via:  
che 'nmantimente fue passato il duolo  
ch'e' la dissotterrò, perché putia.

Almen faccia vendetta del figliuolo!  
Ma, per quell ch'io spero che ne sia,  
per un fiorin voglio esser cavigliuolo.<sup>29</sup>

In the end, Acerbuzzo abandons the idea of a sexual relationship with his sister in law due to her horrible smell but is urged on by the poet to seek revenge on her son, “Almen faccia vendetta del figliuolo!” We can interpret this advice as an accusation of impotence on the part of Acerbuzzo, who deems the rancid stench of both wife and sister in law as an excuse not to preform sexually with either woman. The pejorative suffix attached to the name Acerbuzzo also suggests his miserable and lacking sexual performance. The invitation to a relationship with a younger boy also implies homosexuality and possibly Acerbuzzo's role in passive sodomy.<sup>30</sup> In the final line, the poet himself offers to “finish” the job for a price, by using his own *cavigliuolo*, however it remains unclear whether he was referring to relations with the sister in law or the nephew.

Rustico's most famous contemporary was the Siense Cecco Angiolieri (1260-1313). Angiolieri's own *Canzoniere* is filled with 150 sonnets, many of which portray the poet as the object of his own *burle* [jokes]. The poems range from caricatures and parodies of contemporaries to complaints about Cecco's own personal disappointments and hardships in life,

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<sup>29</sup> Filippi, 101.

<sup>30</sup> Filippi, 98.

particularly poverty and his tumultuous relationship with his father. But most notably, Cecco represents himself as an unrequited lover who idealizes a woman named Becchina, to whom he addresses numerous poems. His idealization, however, works in reverse since Becchina, a foul mouthed, shrewd and carnal woman is exactly the opposite of Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Angiolieri negates any noble sentiments towards or spiritual contemplation of his beloved by exalting wholly mundane and material pursuits such as sex, food, and money. Becchina is hardly a guide to any sort of moral/spiritual elevation but rather a vulgar and crude woman, interested only in material things such as money and described in common terms. Her only *raison d'être* is for Cecco's consumption of sensual love.

In Sonnet XXII *Becchin' amor! Che vuo', falso tradito*,<sup>32</sup> Cecco uses dialogue to create a conversation between himself and Becchina. The use of direct discourse creates a dramatic effect in order to emphasize the expressive and concrete language that the poet employs. Each verse is characterized by a plea from Cecco and a rebuke from Becchina, who shows utter indifference and even anger towards the lovelorn poet and his suffering. Becchina's rude personality and violent rejections of the poet are a far cry from the refined yet unattainable beloved found in the poetry of the *Dolce Stil Novo*.

While Cecco creates an 'anti-Beatrice' in his characterization of Becchina, he also advances common misogynistic views about women, in particular the disgust at the use of make-up to attract men and the condemnation of marriage. In the sonnet, *Quando mie donn'esce la*

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<sup>31</sup> Brett Foster, translator of Cecco Angiolieri's poems, suggests that the name Becchina is a play on the term *battibecco*, which translates as "squabble" or "quarrel" in Italian. Brett Foster, *A Conversation with Brett Foster*, *Transom Journal*, Issue 7, accessed on 20 Jan. 2015, <http://www.transomjournal.com/issue7/Issue7.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Cecco Angiolieri, *Cecco: As I am and was: The Poems of Cecco Angiolieri*, translated by Tracy Barrett, (Boston: IPL, 1994), 65.

*man del letto*,<sup>33</sup> Cecco describes the unimaginable ugliness of his barefaced Becchina, who becomes attractive only after she begins to apply powders and other concoctions to cover her face, making herself desirable to other men. In fact, no man can resist her and thus, Cecco remains in a constant state of anxiety, forced to devote all of his attention to Becchina in order to keep her monogamous. Although Cecco initially has creative power of the poem by ridiculing Becchina's ugliness, in the end, it is she who gets the last laugh as she exerts a constant hold over Cecco and other men with her ability to metamorphose her own physical appearance with make up. Thus, both characters undergo a paradoxical metamorphosis: Becchina, who passes from ugly to attractive through artificial means, and Cecco, who ridicules her appearance, but in reality is constantly subjugated to the power she holds over him and other men. Cecco's only sense of control comes from his poetic ridicule of his beloved. The criticism of the use of make up in women can be traced back to classical literature where authors accused women of deception by covering their flaws with a 'disguise'. In fact, make up and clothing act as artifice because they are an unnatural means in attempting to improve God's creation. Using such embellishment signified pride that could potentially lead to concupiscence.<sup>34</sup> This misogynistic topos continued to remain quite popular in the Middle Ages as evidenced most famously in Giovanni Boccaccio's work, *Il Corbaccio*.

## **Il Burchiello**

Burlesque verse owes a great deal of literary gratitude to the fifteenth century poet Domenico di Giovanni, known as Il Burchiello (1404-1449), who perfected the comic-realistic genre. Burchiello was a Florentine barber whose shop in the Calimala section of Florence

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<sup>33</sup> Cecco Angiolieri, *Le Rime*, a cura di Antonio Lanza, (Roma: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1990), 245.

<sup>34</sup> R. Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny. Women as Riot", *Representations*, Issue 20, (Fall 1987), 12-13.

attracted many artists and literati, including Leon Battista Alberti. Although the Medici ruled Florence at the time, Burchiello strongly supported the Albizzi oligarchy and composed poems in their favor, leading to his eventual exile from Florence.<sup>35</sup>

It seems that Burchiello had no formal education (he could not read Latin) but he was a self -learned man with a deep knowledge of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Although Burchiello relied on the great poetic masters for his rhyme schemes, the content of his poetry came from Florentine street life. His barbershop became an ‘informal academy’ where men met to gossip and to write poetry in the vernacular style. In fact, in one of his most famous poems, *La Poesia combatte col Rasoio*, Burchiello struggles with his desire to dedicate time to poetry and his need to earn a living. The humble razor, the tool of his trade, addresses “lady poetry”, proposing a challenge that whoever loves the poet more can pay for his expenses. On a more significant level, the confrontation between the utilitarian tool and intangible poetry represent Burchiello’s critique of high humanistic culture and particularly his opposition to courtly love poetry.<sup>36</sup>

Burchiello became well know for his poetry in the *burla* fashion, a mix of joking vernacular poetry characterized by colloquialisms, ambiguous language and double entendres. In fact, most scholars consider Burchiello the greatest representative of fifteenth century burlesque poetry and Francesco Berni’s greatest influence. Burchiello received his nickname from his fellow poets, who felt that his writing *alla burchia* was enigmatic, bizarre and nonsensical. Burchiello’s poetry was obscure and made specific allusions to the environment in which he lived and the people which he frequented. He wrote about the hardships of daily life and

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<sup>35</sup> *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, volume 40, a cura di Alberto Ghisalberti, (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia italiana, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Dario del Puppo, “Where “High” and “Low” Meet: Text and Document in a Humanistic Manuscript of Burchiello’s Poetry (Pluteo XL. 48)”, *Text*, Volume 11, (1998), 210.

expressed political protests in his poetry. His poems read like “linguistic puzzles”.<sup>37</sup> He was the first poet to employ the *sonetto caudato* that was later often utilized by Francesco Berni.

Renee Watkins connects Burchiello’s poetry with the popular *frottola*, a loosely constructed series of phrases and proverbs connected by alliteration and rhyme schemes. Oftentimes, these poems do not make sense but rather, they reveal a witty play on words.<sup>38</sup> Burchiello’s works are autobiographical, dealing with popular themes such as the poet’s poverty or unrequited love, constituting what also became known as the *disperata* in the fifteenth century.

Burchiello left a considerable legacy and his poems were published in 20 editions, the latest dating to 1475. In 1553 Francesco Doni published the first commentary of Burchiello’s poem and called him the “poeta pittore di grottesche”.<sup>39</sup> Francesco Berni acknowledged his indebtedness to Burchiello in many of his own poems and Anton Francesco Grazzini (known as *Il Lasca*), edited an edition of Burchiello’s poetry in 1552 published by Giunti in Florence.

Burchiello’s poetry not only conveys a strong dose of realism but also show his disdain for the empty themes of traditional love poetry. His ‘nonsensical’ poems are in direct opposition to the strict, closed structure of the *Stilnovisti*. And as others before him, Burchiello attacks the idealized, untouchable woman of the courtly tradition (and later the Petrarchan tradition) with a paradoxical praise of his own stinky hag. Gone is the unattainable and pure beloved, only to be replaced by a carnal and deceitful woman who willingly succumbs to her earthly desires.

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<sup>37</sup> Renee Watkins, “Il Burchiello (1404-1448)-Poverty, Politics and Poetry”, *Italian Quarterly* 14, (1970), 24.

<sup>38</sup> Watkins, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Antonio Lanza, *Polemiche e berte letterarie nella Firenze del primo Quattrocento*, (Roma: Bulzoni, 1972), 341.

What is of particular interest is Burchiello's portrayal of female ugliness, particularly in regards to old age and the associations between ageism and witchcraft. Although Burchiello assumes a classical misogynistic stance characteristic of many *giocosi* poets, his paradoxical poems also create vituperations of old women now characterized in the new role of witches. The persecution of heresy was not novel in the Middle Ages; however, in the fifteenth century the witch became the main enemy of the Church because she (witches were mainly women) not only transgressed religious boundaries but also moral and sexual ones.

In the fourteenth century, the Church officially recognized the existence of witches, accusing them of heresy and sexual relations with the devil thus making witches a legitimate threat to religious doctrine. Witches became willing participants in the Devil's actions by choosing to have sexual intercourse with demons. They were no longer forced to such acts. Religious authorities pinpointed the year 1400 as a crucial period that initiated the final assault of the Anti-Christ and thus heresy and horror increased.<sup>40</sup> The circulation of the *Malleus maleficarum* [The Hammer of Witches], a guide for recognizing, curing and destroying witchcraft, written in 1484 by the Dominican Inquisitors Henrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger under a Papal Bull from Innocent VIII, only intensified the ever present fear of witches.<sup>41</sup> The Inquisitors also cited a significant increase in demon/witch copulations at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The resurgence of classical Latin poetry coupled with a new anxiety regarding the presence of witchcraft created a tense literary environment for the figure of the old woman in poetry. Of course, classical writers also wrote about the witch in a negative light but it was only in the fourteenth century that authors began to specifically associate the witch with old women,

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<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Institoris, *The Hammer of Witches. A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, translated by Christopher S. MacKay, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23.

<sup>41</sup> The *Malleus maleficarum* first appeared as early as 1486. There were fourteen editions between 1487 and 1520, and sixteen editions between 1574-1669. It was published in German, French and Italian. See *Introduction*, in *The Hammer of Witches*, 33.

prostitutes/procuresses and widows; all female types considered transgressive and not easily placed in common categories, such as virgin or wife.<sup>42</sup>

Before the dissemination of the *Malleus maleficarum*, people spoke of women as committing *maleficium* (harmful magic), and women were simply classified as heretics because there existed no official category of “witch”. Society viewed women as prone to superstition and consequently magic, especially as a means mainly of extolling revenge. Women were impressionable and talked a lot, unable to keep secrets.<sup>43</sup> Religious authorities connected heresy to the notion of women’s loose tongues; they considered heresy highly contagious, infecting the soul and linking it to sexual depravity.<sup>44</sup> Because of carnality and lust, stemming from the long held belief that original sin derived from Eve’s inability to control her desires, women were particularly prone to becoming witches. In fact the authors of the *Malleus maleficarum* proposed the etymology of *femina* as deriving from *fe* (faith) and *minus* making women “faithless”. The figure of the witch, who was defined by her sexual relations with the Devil, became the ultimate symbol of women’s sinful sexuality, which went against God and opposed spiritual perfection and salvation.<sup>45</sup>

Burchiello was active during this fervent period of witch persecution and the hag/witch persona comes to the forefront in his poetry. His poem *Vecchia ritrosa, perfida e maligna* condemns the old woman not only for her ugliness and unattractiveness, but also for her evil

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<sup>42</sup> Widows also found themselves on ambiguous ground since they were no longer under the supervision or control of their husband.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft. Theology and Popular Belief*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 170-171.

<sup>44</sup> Dylan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies. Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 154.

<sup>45</sup> Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews, Reflections on the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 92.



moral status and ability to upset social norms.<sup>46</sup> Burchiello clearly identifies the woman as witch [*strega*] and a devil [*diavol*] in opposition to the angel and psalmist of the third stanza:

Vecchia ritrosa, perfida e maligna,  
Inimical d'ogni bene, invidiosa,  
e strega incantatrice e maliosa,  
trista, stravolta, che se' pien di tigna.

Barbutta se' più folta che gramigna,  
gli occhi e 'l naso ti colan senza posa,  
puzzati el fiato, sdentata rabbiosa  
se ridi pari un diavolo che digrigna.

E tanto è velenosa la tua vista  
Che ciò che miri corrompi per paodo,  
Che . . . angel non . . . pua . . . salmista.

Ma io mi voglio di te un colabrodo,  
Che sempre mai t'ha fatto viver trista,  
E pagner. . . se m'hai fatto frodo.

E di questo mi godo,  
Perchè da te si fugge tutta gente,  
Per lo tuo marcio conno puzzolente.<sup>47</sup>

Burchiello continues by attacking the woman's body by using the word *puzza* and *puzzolente*, characterizing her by her stench. The foul odor emanates not only from her gaping mouth but also from her rotten genitals. Again we see the misogynistic tracts characterizing women by their orifices; in the case of the mouth, it is the woman's speech that can corrupt or pollute as women constantly talked and gossiped. The genitalia signified the woman's need for constant sexual gratification; the womb could never be filled.

Burchiello's description of the old woman's face, particularly her drippy eyes and nose, fits into Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the open body whose orifices are constantly emitting fluids

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<sup>46</sup> R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> Burchiello, *Sonetti editi e inediti*, a cura di Michele Messina, (Firenze: Olshki, 1952), 45.

and overflowing. Here we see specifically the nose and the eyes as protruding from the face and reaching beyond bodily confines.<sup>48</sup> The adjective *barbuta* (bearded) is a sign of masculinity but also signifies an extension of her open body and adds to her repulsiveness. We must remember that excessive hairiness signified lust, especially because it was associated with body odor, which could attract as an aphrodisiac or repel if too strong. Burchiello highlights the importance of the sight in regards to contagion: the mere sight of the woman can corrupt her viewers and the odors and fluids that emanate from her open body can be a source of poisonous contamination. The poet uses words such as *marcia*, *corrompere*, *velenosa* to describe the old hag. Also, her glance has the propensity to taint anything it is directed towards, (*ciò che miri corrompi*), recalling the ancient belief that a woman could inflict harm through her gaze, like a basilisk, especially during the time of her menses (*De insomniis*, 459b25-460a15).<sup>49</sup>

In a second sonnet against an old woman, *Ardati il fuoco, vecchia puzzolente* Burchiello continues the popular *topos* of the foul smelling old woman. He again refers to the woman as *vecchia puzzolente* in the first line of the poem, and ends it by citing the witch's genitals (*maladetta potta*). Linking foul smells with the old woman's genitals highlights her excessive and uncontrollable sexuality. The poet also refers to her as a procuress, thus linking her with prostitution and excessive sexuality<sup>50</sup>:

Ardati il fuoco, vecchia puzzolente,  
Che non ti resti mai di pensar male,  
Di resia seminando le tuo scale,  
Poiché moneta non trai dalla gente.

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<sup>48</sup> For Bakhtin, the nose also symbolizes the phallus. Bakhtin, 316-317.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *On Dreams*, in *Volume VIII: On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, translated by Walter Stanley Hett, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 356-357.

<sup>50</sup> The figure of the old procuress as witch comes from the classical tradition. One notable example is Ovid's description of the procuress Dipsas in *The Erotic Poems (Amores)*, Book I, 8,1-18, where she is described as both a "stinky" prostitute and a witch. See Ovid, *The Erotic Poems*, translated by Peter Green, (New York: Penguin, 1982), 97.

Cieca fai, Die ti facci dolente:  
Fussinti tratti gli occhi e messi in sale  
Et io fussi di te il micidiale  
Accioché fussin le tue fiamme spente.

Lupo curvier non ha il veder sottile  
Come tuo sottilezi raguardando,  
Né da sì piccolo buco tanto umile.

Pigliar diletto forte sospirando  
Per te agrizzando il volticel vecchile:  
Col barbottar mimarti lagrimando.

Al fuoco raccomando,  
o vecchia strega, o malitiosa ghiotta,  
ladra, ruffiana, maladetta potta.<sup>51</sup>

The poet makes a reference to the witch's eyes and the sharpness of her gaze as dangerous. She is in fact compared to a wolf, considered a stealthy, night animal, and who along with witches were also capable of eating infants.<sup>52</sup> He cites the common punishment for witches, having their eyes plucked from their heads and put under salt. As Walter Stephens illustrates in his book *Demon Lovers*, salt was a powerful weapon to combat both witches and demons.<sup>53</sup> While the current Zaccarello edition ends with the line *maladetta potta*, an attack on her sexual organs, two other editions conclude with the line *maladetta botta* and *ghiotta*, respectively.<sup>54</sup> The use of the term *botta* casts the old woman as a toad, also long believed to be an incarnation of the witch and an evil, poisonous and ugly animal.<sup>55</sup> Burchiello's use of both *potta* (vulva) and *ghiotta* (glutton) attack the woman's perceived lasciviousness.

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<sup>51</sup> Burchiello, *I sonetti del Burchiello*, a cura di Michelangelo Zaccarello, (Bologna, Commissione per i testi, 2000), 172-173.

<sup>52</sup> Stephens, 283.

<sup>53</sup> Stephens, 252.

<sup>54</sup> Burchiello, *I sonetti del Burchiello*, 172-173. See also Burchiello, *Rime del Burchiello commentate dal Doni*, a cura di Carlo Alberto Girotto, (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2013), 257.

<sup>55</sup> Bettella, *The Ugly Woman*, 71. See also Stephens, 253.

Burchiello's attack on the old woman is prompted by the heresy (*resia*) that she spreads among the people with her speech. Church persecution of heretics was in full swing in the Middle Ages and continued into the Renaissance, finding its main culprit in the form of the witch. In fact, the poet again represents the old woman in the figure of the witch, highlighting not only her grotesque physical appearance but also her immorality. Burchiello opens and closes his sonnet with the expressed desire that she die by burning. He destroys the witch's body just as real witches had their bodies destroyed on the stake. The work is no longer simply a rhetorical exercise but a verbal attack against a highly transgressive figure.<sup>56</sup>

### **Petrarchan poetics and *La questione della lingua*- Literary and Linguistic identities in Sixteenth century Italy**

Before discussing in detail the work of the most famous burlesque poet, Francesco Berni, it is crucial to look at the literary environment of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to understand what influenced burlesque poetry and how it evolved. Traditionally, the *Dolce Stil Novo* poets concentrated more on the abstract beauty of the beloved. The beautiful woman could lead to a higher spiritual contemplation but the poets never specifically commented on a detailed description of the woman. They were more concerned with the effects of their beloved's beauty on them. Physical beauty represented a symbol of moral virtue. In the Middle Ages beauty and ugliness were opposite categories and as I have demonstrated elsewhere in my dissertation, ugliness (whether inherent or associated with disease) signaled negative attributes such as sin, evil, and promiscuity.

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<sup>56</sup> Patrizia Bettella, "La vecchiaia femminile nella poesia Toscana del XV secolo", *Quaderni d'italianistica*, volume XIX, No. 2, (1998), 18.

From this literary environment emerged Francesco Petrarch, who wrote his *Canzoniere* or *Rime sparse*, a collection of 366 poems, composed during the span of his lifetime that lauded the beauty of his beloved Laura while at the same exalting his own search for literary glory. The *Canzoniere* is deliberately organized by its author to represent the life and death of Laura and Petrarch's divine love for her. It will become the quintessential work that all poets strive towards, and the descriptions that Petrarch uses to define Laura become the ideal aesthetic canon by which all beautiful women are judged.

The most fascinating aspect of the *Canzoniere* and that which will I believe inspires Francesco Berni most, is what Teodolinda Barolini refers to as "multiplicity". We witness a propensity for metamorphosis in every aspect of Petrarch's poems; his descriptions of Laura physical parts are never more than only pieces of an incomplete picture and she constantly transforms into other forms. Even her name undergoes change through various word plays (*Laura/l'aura/lauro*, etc).<sup>57</sup>

Petrarch also depicts time in various stages. We must remember that Petrarch wrote the poems of the *Canzoniere* over the span of a lifetime and although he meticulously and deliberately assembled them, they trace a loose narration consisting of a beginning, middle and end. This narrativity recounts aspects of the young Laura, an ageing beloved and finally, after her death, a woman speaking to her lover from Heaven.

The possibility of metamorphoses, both of language and physical form, is one of the most attractive qualities of Petrarch's poetry. A constant flux allows for different interpretations and layers of possible meanings in the poetry. Laura is not a fixed, beautiful form; on the contrary,

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<sup>57</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, *The Self in the Labyrinth of Time*, in *Petrarch, A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, edited by Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 36-38.

she herself is in flux, particularly her body, which surrenders to the process of time and ultimately death.

Laura's beauty inspires Petrarch's poetry. In *Canzoniere* 347, he refers to her as "*altero et raro mostro*" as Laura is far removed from any earthly woman. She is often presented as an icon to be worshipped; something that can never be reached or possessed. The reader never manages to see a complete image of Laura; she is quite the opposite than the sum of her parts, described most frequently by her hair, eyes, hands, and feet, which are constantly compared to precious stones and metals as well as other objects. In fact, as Nancy Vickers notes, this "fetishized body" set the stage for the development of a particular female aesthetic which was then widely distributed and easily accessible to imitation in the Renaissance.<sup>58</sup> Laura's physical beauty also represented her inner beauty that could lead the poet to a divine elevation. Petrarch valued Laura's moral virtues, most importantly her chastity, and this emphasis on the beloved's moral character and ability to elevate her lover's spirituality appealed to Neoplatonist sensibilities.<sup>59</sup>

It is also interesting to note Laura's lack of voice in the *Canzoniere*. There is never any direct discourse between the poet and his beloved, and although Petrarch frequently refers to Laura's wise words, the reader is really left without any content of her speech, rather only a description of the beauty of her words.<sup>60</sup> Only after her death, does Laura acquire a stronger voice. This is in stark contrast to characters such as Cecco Angiolieri's Becchina, Burchiello's old hag, and further ahead Berni's female characters, whose physical bodies are concrete and

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<sup>58</sup> Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme", in *Critical Inquiry*, volume 8 issue 2, Winter 1981, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Virginia Cox, *Attraverso lo specchio: le petrarchiste del Cinquecento e l'eredità di Laura*, in *Petrarca: Canoni, esemplarità*, a cura di Valeria Finucci, (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2006), 120-123.

<sup>60</sup> Cox, 119.

profane, and who can't seem to stop talking. This constant chatter of women represented their inability to control their appetites and their propensity to commit sexually depraved sins. Laura, meanwhile, remains chaste and more notably, quiet.<sup>61</sup>

For sixteenth century scholars, Petrarch represented the greatest Italian love poet. As Arturo Graf points out, love was a sentiment that threatened neither the standing of princes nor popes, and hence love poetry was expressed freely (and even encouraged) in Renaissance society.<sup>62</sup> Petrarchan poetry not only represented the poet as highly erudite but also characterized him as a hapless lover in the role of anti-hero. The complex personality revealed in Petrarch's works takes the reader on a psychological rollercoaster of experiences that navigate love and suffering for the beloved.<sup>63</sup>

Petrarchan poetics found an affinity with Neo-Platonism and the flourishing intellectuality of the Renaissance that espoused not only high ideals but rather a love that was pure and ethereal. Theories of love abounded, placing sensual/corporal love on the bottom rung of the ladder, marital love in the middle and ideal platonic love on top.<sup>64</sup> Petrarch became not only the authority in love but also in beauty and gracefulness [*leggiadria*]. The numerous treatises on love and the beauty of women produced in the Renaissance constantly cited Petrarch. His fame was not however limited to erudite men; courtesans quoted his poetry in conversation and both sexes walked about the city holding their *Petrarchino* [small format, elegant version of Petrarchan verses] and commissioned portraits with *Petrarchino* in hand.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Broedel, 170-171. See also Cox, 119.

<sup>62</sup> Arturo Graf, *Attraverso il Cinquecento*, (Torino: Loescher, 1888), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xiii.

<sup>64</sup> Graf, 21-22.

<sup>65</sup> Pietro Aretino, in his *Ragionamenti*, mentions the famous courtesan *Matrema non vuole*, who quoted Petrarch and often corrected her fellow courtesans' speech to make it conform to Petrarchan language.

The figure of Petrarch reached cult status in the Renaissance. By the sixteenth century, there existed 177 editions of the *Canzoniere*, as opposed to 34 in the previous century and 16 in the following one. This by far outweighs the popularity of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, of which only 15, 30, and 3 were printed in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. Petrarch's poetry continued to triumph through imitative forms. Horace, in his *Art of Poetry*, famously states, "Follow tradition or invent what is consistent" (*Ars Poetica*, 120)<sup>66</sup> and scholars, particularly Petrarch's greatest proponent, Pietro Bembo, placed particular importance on the lexicon of the *Canzoniere* that would define the evolution of the Italian language itself.

Intellectual and cultural life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries revolved around the court. As displayed in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, the court represented an idealized place that embodied the highest intellectual refinement. It was a place of conversation and intellectual exchange among the many courtiers and men of literary ambition. The princes governing the courts were also the patrons who financed and effectively controlled the literary and cultural fortunes of Italy. Literary men vied to enter into the service of a prince whether in Urbino, Mantova or Ferrara or to enter into the most powerful and influential court in Italy, the Vatican court, under the pontificate of Leon X.<sup>67</sup>

While this period was rife with literary achievements for Italy, the political strife in which Italy found herself also highlighted the age-old question of the unification of the peninsula and with it, the problem of a national identity and most importantly, a national language. The

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<sup>66</sup> Horace, *Art of Poetry*, in *Satires and Epistles*, translated by John Davie, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 109.

<sup>67</sup> The works of Pietro Aretino express a counterpoint to the idealized image of the court. His satires attempt to reveal the true nature of courtly life as false, corrupt, and competitive. Among others, Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso also wrote about their difficulties with court life.



vernacular, defined by its three crowns of Italy- Boccaccio, Dante, and Petrarch- had proven its ability to evolve and become refined when compared to Latin, but most importantly, people used the vernacular as spoken language. However, the *questione della lingua* remained- was it possible to find a unified spoken and literary language in Italy?

One side of the debate encompassed the spoken language used in the court, *la lingua cortegiana*, advocated by authors such as Mario Equicola, Giangiorgio Trissino and Baldassare Castiglione. The advocates of courtly language were not so much preoccupied with writing as they were with speech in a refined society. Spoken language was an integral part of the social behaviors and manners espoused by the court. As Riccardo Brusagli notes, the advocates of courtly language were not concerned about finding a unified language *per se* but rather about using a consistently refined and clean style.<sup>68</sup>

The counter point to the courtly language advocated by Castiglione and others was a literary language whose main proponent was Pietro Bembo. The primary endorsement for a vulgarized Tuscan came from Bembo's *Prose della vulgar lingua* (published in 1525 but circulated much earlier), a dialogue divided into three books whose main interlocutors, Bembo, his brother Carlo, Giuliano de' Medici, Federico Fregoso and Ercole Strozza discuss the development of the vernacular style and its descent from Latin. The humanists also deal with the influences of other languages such as Provençal on the vernacular and the history of literature. The second book deals with the development of an appropriate literary style and Bembo considers a literary language that can stand the test of time. In this book, the men analyze differing sounds and proceed to examine in detail Petrarch's first sonnet *Voi che ascoltate in rime sparse*. Bembo also includes an original sonnet dedicated to his brother, Carlo, which

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<sup>68</sup> Riccardo Brusagli, *Il Quattrocento e il Cinquecento*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), 79-80.

contains only fifteen words not included in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and only three words with origins in Dante.

The final book discusses the proper rules of grammar, mainly based again on Petrarch and Boccaccio as well as a catalogue of words to be used in writing. The lexicon highlights Bembo's advocacy of Petrarch as the supreme example to imitate, capable of displaying a range of emotions from gravity to pleasure from a rather fairly contained and easily imitable lexicon. The *Prose della vulgare lingua* becomes in effect the manual for writers on how to write poetry, especially for those writers who were not familiar with Tuscan.

In his work Bembo argues for the impracticality of courtly language, precisely because it is based on an extremely fragmented political system. Of all the courts in Italy, it would be least advisable to base the vernacular on the Papal court, which constantly changed Popes, and whose Popes were often foreigners with their own linguistic inclinations. In order to maintain a unified cultural identity, Bembo suggested instead the use of the literary language of the *Trecento*, particularly Petrarch for poetry and Boccaccio for prose, because of the fixed nature and stability of this type of language, making it therefore capable of conveying a cultural identity.<sup>69</sup> Thus Bembo advocated a vulgarized Tuscan, which although risky, was a form of language that was accessible to everyone and created a certain sense of unity in an Italy with no real national center or capital. Hence, the choice of Petrarch seemed a logical one.

Through his own works, particularly in the poetry in the *Asolani* (1505) and later in his *Rime* (1530), Bembo proved that the imitation of Petrarchan poetry was a true national and literary phenomenon. It not only created national unity but also unity among diverse social

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<sup>69</sup> Many Renaissance literary scholars, including Pietro Bembo, deemed Dante's language as "base". See Charles Sears Baldwin, *Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice*, (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959), 29.

classes who did not require a high education to be able to write a Petrarchan sonnet. The movement known as ‘Petrarchism’ was also able to include social groups such as artists and women, who were previously excluded from literature, precisely because it utilized language and themes that were fairly simple to learn. Many authors began to write and even re-write their own works in the language of Petrarch.

### **Francesco Berni- “Nimico de’ poeti”**

While the search for a unified literary language brought a certain sense of national equilibrium, it also risked turning into formalism rife with constantly overused and repetitive structures. In this regard, anti-Petrarchism gave rise to a counter movement that opposed and even parodied the constant imitation of stale themes and a limited lexicon. The burlesque movement, led by its most famous advocate, Francesco Berni, (later renamed ‘Bernesque’ in his honor) was adamantly against the codes of Petrarchism and ultimately became an alternative mode of stylized literature that denounced the vacuous formalism of Petrarchan imitators with its own strict forms and vocabulary.<sup>70</sup>

Francesco Berni (1497/98-1535) was born in Lamporecchio, Tuscany and moved to Rome in 1517 to serve in the Papal Court of Leo X as a secretary to Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, a distant relative of Berni. The Papal court was a bustling environment full of literary culture and social activity, given that Leo X was a great patron of the arts and surrounded himself by courtiers and artists. Berni’s own employer, Cardinal Dovizi, was the author of the

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<sup>70</sup> Essential to any study of Berni are the following works: Antonio Virgili, *Francesco Berni con documenti inediti*, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1881); Andrea Sorrentino, *Francesco Berni. Poeta della scapigliatura del Rinascimento*, (Firenze: Sansoni, 1933); Antonino Sole, *Il gentiluomo-cortigiano nel segno di Petrarca: modelli sociali e modelli etico- retorici in quattro autori del Cinquecento: Castiglione, Berni, Bembo, Della Casa*, (Palermo: Palumbo, 1992); Silvia Longhi, *Lusus. Il Capitolo Burlesco nel Cinquecento*, (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1983); all the works of Anne Reynolds but particularly useful was *Renaissance Humanism at the Court of Clement VII: Francesco Berni’s Dialogue against poets in context*, edited and translated by Anne Reynolds, (New York: Garland, 1997).

*Calandria*, a rather scandalous play about cross dressing, and maintained a court of poets around him. In 1523 Berni was briefly exiled to Abruzzo by his then patron, Angelo Dovizi (Bernardo's nephew) as punishment for a homosexual affair with a young boy. As suggested by some scholars, the sexual scandal was probably the tip of the iceberg since Berni's 1522 *Capitolo contro papa Adriano* also created tensions in the court, making Berni's removal from the city a strategic political maneuver<sup>71</sup>. Upon his return to Rome in 1524, he entered into the service of Giovan Matteo Giberti, datary to the new Medici Pope, Clement VII. After the sack of Rome in 1527, Berni followed Giberti to Verona where the latter became Bishop and then finished his career under Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici. Francesco Berni died in 1535 under suspicious circumstances, most probably poisoned by political enemies.

During his career in the Papal court, Berni encountered a blurred line between courtiers, clerics and poets. In his study of Berni, Andrea Sorrentino describes the literary environment of the time as "full of manipulators of poetry"<sup>72</sup>. In fact, the court was rife with 'poets' and there existed no distinction between the good and the bad ones. Due to the popularity of the *Canzoniere*, anyone could write poetry given Petrarch's rigid lexicon, and the ease of composing the sonnet form. Berni's literary production to this point was notable; although he published few works, his poetry circulated in Rome in manuscript form but was often deemed bizarre and incomprehensible.<sup>73</sup> The cutthroat and spirited environment of the court led Berni to write the

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<sup>71</sup> Francesco Berni, *Rime*, ed. Danilo Romei, (Milano: Mursia, 1985), 9. See also Francesco Berni, *Rime burlesche*, a cura di Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1991) and Francesco Berni, *Rime*, a cura di Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, (Torino: Einaudi, 1969).

All direct references to Berni's poetry in this chapter are from the Romei edition.

<sup>72</sup> Andrea Sorrentino, *Francesco Berni. Poeta della scapigliatura del Rinascimento*, (Firenze: Sansoni, 1933), 5.

<sup>73</sup> In his lifetime, Berni published the *Capitolo della primiera* (1526) and the *Commento al capitolo della primiera* under the pseudonym Pietropaulo di San Chirico, and the *Dialogo contra i poeti*, anonymously. All of his remaining works were circulated in manuscript or published posthumously. His burlesque poetry was first published in *Tutte le opere del Bernia* in 1538 in Venice by C. Nano. Thereafter followed *Il Primo libro dell'opere burlesche di M. Francesco Berni, di M. Gio. Della Casa, del Varchi, del Mauro di M. Bino, del Molza, del Dolce, et del Firenzuola ricorretto, et con diligenza ristampato*, edited by Anton Francesco Grazzini, (Firenze: Giunti, 1548)(Reprinted in

satirical *Dialogo contra i poeti*, published anonymously in 1526 and attributed to Berni only in 1537, in its third edition, two years after the poet's death.

Amidst the droves of imitators and 'professional' poets, it is vital to keep in mind that Francesco Berni did not oppose Petrarch himself; in fact, as I will discuss ahead he advocated Petrarchan poetry and its repertoire of numerous interpretative possibilities which he used in his own works to describe base things and people. Berni was, however, adamantly contrary to the Petrarchan imitators who exhausted empty rhetoric and lacked concreteness in their poetry. He despised the doctrines and literary practice that copied or even transplanted entire Petrarchan verses as their own, lacking originality. For Berni, the interpretative possibilities found in the Petrarch's verses allowed him to overturn the original model in order to write poetry that seemed ugly on the outside but could reveal different beautiful truths when probed more deeply. Poetry assumed the capacity for metamorphosis, a movement from ugliness to beauty because of the hidden meanings it could potentially reveal.

It is important to look at Berni's poetic output in the context of his satirical work, *Dialogo contra i poeti* (1525). Here Berni recounts a lively discussion between Giovan Battista Sanga (Cardinal Giberti's principal secretary and Berni's close friend), two unidentified men named Marco and Giovanni from Modena, and Berni himself. It is a rather scathing criticism of literary and courtly society in which Berni denounces his fellow 'poets' who are only concerned with praising other poets or their patrons. These so-called poets often use the same poems with

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1550 and 1552). The second volume was also published by Giunti in 1555, *Secondo libro dell'Opere burlesche di M. Francesco Berni, Del Molza, di M. Bino, di M. Lodovico Martelli, Di Matteo Francesi, dell'Aretino, et di diversi autori*. See *Storia della letteratura italiana*, v. 4, diretta da Enrico Malatto, (Roma: Salerno, 1994-2004), 1139-1142. See also Domenico Zanrè, *Cultural Non-Conformity in Early Modern Florence*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 26-27. For further reading about Berni's influence on the poetry of Anton Francesco Grazzini, see Anne Reynolds, "Francesco Berni e Anton Francesco Grazzini", in *Critica letteraria*, 9(1981), 453-464.

minor changes to laud various people for mostly minor and insignificant things. According to Berni, they are concerned primarily with fame and popularity and are simply aspirants.

To begin the dialogue, Sanga recounts how an unidentified poet subjected him to a reading of six sheets of bad poetry. He described this experience as worse than contracting syphilis, calling the poet *maladetto* (cursed, damned) and his verse as a *maledizione* (curse) from which Sanga desperately wanted to escape. Throughout the dialogue, Berni consistently compares poets to murders and beasts and poetry to a plague/disease (*peste*) and a curse (*maledizione*):

Questi traditori, nimici della quiete del mondo e della vita delli uomini, vanno liberi e securissimi per tutto, mostrando versi a questo e quello, col seno e con le mani piene di cartucce, e tal volta di volumi che sono tante ghiandusce, e non è chi dica lor niente. Anzi sono così prosuntuosi che par loro fare un gran giovamento alla generazione umana, e dovere essere accarezzati e adorati dalla gente, come se egli avessino racquistato Terra Santa e menato il Turco prigionie, e dicono che sono divini e che Iddio soffia loro nel cervello e falli cantare come fa la zuppa le cutte.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, his description reflect Berni's own situation at the Vatican court, where the line between poets and courtiers was so dubious that anyone capable of writing a sonnet considered himself a poet. The dialogue proceeds by calling poets "beasts that follow the heard" referring to the imitation of Petrarch and the popular Petrarchism canonized by Pietro Bembo. Berni admits that he, too, was himself a "beast" in the past, when as a boy he wrote some 'poetry' but thankfully, he considers himself cured of his disease.

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<sup>74</sup> Francesco Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, in *Rime, poesie latine e lettere edite e inedite*, a cura di Antonio Virgili, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1885), 226. See also Anne Reynolds, *Renaissance Humanism at the Court of Clement VII: Francesco Berni's Dialogue against poets in context*, edited and translated by Anne Reynolds, (New York: Garland, 1997).

The speaker recounts the uselessness of poets and their danger to society, morals, and even Christianity. Sanga criticizes classical Greek and Roman poets, particularly Ovid for his choice of profession and proceeds to scold modern poets for their use of pagan myths to describe God and the Virgin Mary, calling them heretics. Ultimately, both Berni and Sanga arrive at the conclusion that poets are merely bricklayers [*muratori*] who build verses with literary devices such as comparisons, illusions, and metaphors:

Vedete che chi ne ha fatti di dieci, chi di otto, chi di sei, secondo che erano più o meno poltroni, sin ad una galioffo che per estrema poltroneria andò a farne di due.<sup>75</sup>

Voi troverete, Berni, che tutti i poeti alla fin sono muratori o manovali.<sup>76</sup>

Ironically, in his 1532 *Capitolo al Cardinale Ippolito de' Medici*, Berni describes his own style as *un certo stil da muratore* (the style of a bricklayer)(v. 4) and in the same poem references Virgil when he claims that Apollo himself told Berni to stick with writing what he knows best: *Ma messer Cinzio mi tirò gli orecchi/e disse: < Bernia, fa pur dell'Anguille,/ ché questo è il proprio umor dove tu pecchi;/ arte non è da te cantar d'Achille:/ ad un pastor poveretto tu pari/ convien far versi da boschi e da ville>*(vv. 40-44).<sup>77</sup> This underscores Berni's own paradoxical relationship with poetry (Apollo) because Berni himself consciously rejected the established poetic norms and conventions of his contemporaries and followed an unconventional route to success as a poet.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 231.

<sup>76</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 232.

<sup>77</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 163.

<sup>78</sup> Reynolds, *Renaissance Humanism*, 22-23.

Furthermore, the dialogue declares that poets are only concerned with their own immortality and with the promise of immortality for others in their poems. Most probably with Pietro Aretino in mind, Berni declares:

. . . con la medesima impudenzia vi affrontaranno fin d'un par di calze vecchie, promettendovi in pagamento di mettervi nell'opra loro e farvi immortale. E tal volta saranno così maligni che, se voi state sodo al macchione, vi minaccieranno di scrivere contro e darvi il licambeo veleno, e cotali altre loro ineptie.<sup>79</sup>

The poets' main goal is to praise anyone they can for payment and for publication while constantly using and re-using the same verses and simply changing the names:

Ma che diremo della boria del far stampare? Può essere maggiore vanità al mondo di questa? Non ha prima uno messo insieme cinquanta sillabe che si consuma d'andare, come costoro dicono, in verga, ed esser portato per Roma, o per le sale di Palazzo quando è capella o consistorio, in cima d'un bastone, allegando il detto di quella bestia pazza di Persio, arciduca de' pedanti, che è bella cosa esser mostro a ditto, e che si dica, "il tale è ito in stampa", credendosi così dovere essere immortali.<sup>80</sup>

The harshest criticism of poets comes towards the end of the dialogue in which Sanga compares poets to marginalized groups such as Jews, who should be segregated from other citizens and stigmatized by wearing a physical marking. Berni suggests that poets wear a white armband (also worn by those with disease) so as to avert other citizens to stay away from them lest they, too, be infected, (whether morally or physically). The notion of masking or transforming one's identity with items of clothing or even masks balances this idea of deception, that characterizes poets in Berni's mind. Thus, all poets are deceitful thieves, prepared to take any measure to gain notoriety, including stealing others' material:

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<sup>79</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 234.

<sup>80</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 235-236.



Voi credete tal volta di abbattervi a qualche buon compagno e gallante, e darete in un poeta che vi ammazzerà. Or de l'omicidio de' poeti avemo detto, benché non a bastanza; pur basti che si sappi che sono ammazzatori d'uomini. Che sieno anche ladri non ne voglio altro testimonio che da lor stessi. Essi si tengono a Gloria il rubare, e lo portano per impresa, dicendo che chi non ruba non può essere buon poeta. Non miga che rubino cappe né altre robe (il che credo però che sia non per coscienza, ma perché son da poco e poltroni, e sanno che se ci fussino in tratto acchiappati, sariano carichi di bastonate), ma rubano li belli tratti e le invenzioni l'uno a l'altro.<sup>81</sup>

. . . dicono che niente si può dire che non sia stato detto prima. Venghisi poi ai nostri dolcissimi, che, per Dio grazia, ciò che scrivono o sono (come essi chiamano) centoni, cioè cose d'altri rappezzata e cucite insieme, o, se pur sono de lor testa, sono cose che non ne mangerebbono li cani.<sup>82</sup>

Berni is directly criticizing the Petrarchists operating in Rome at the time, for whom he felt great disdain because they fancied themselves poets simply because they could imitate Petrarchan sonnets. Berni condemns not only the practice of imitation but also the notion that poetry can somehow educate or inspire spiritual contemplation, especially considering his own particular situation where he has firsthand experience of the moral depravity of the court.<sup>83</sup> Through the voice of Sanga, Berni mentions specific poets, most notably Pietro Bembo, whom he describes as 'non- professional' and only capable of writing frivolous verse to pass the time.<sup>84</sup>

Sanga reiterates the idea of masking when he states that underneath all of the literary devices and other camouflage (*camuffatura*), poets are simply beasts. In fact, one must always search for the truth: "Ma levateli le prosopie e la nebbia con che adombrano e corrumpono le cose, e cercate la verità: vedrete che restaranno bestie."<sup>85</sup> Berni considers poets beasts because

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<sup>81</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 238-239.

<sup>82</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 239.

<sup>83</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 248-249.

<sup>85</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 244-245.

poets follow the heard, they have no capacity to think for themselves and they occupy a low rung on the social scale.

Berni must also defend himself when Sanga reminds him that he, too, was a poet, having written verses about peaches, eels, and the card game *primiera*. Berni counters by admitting that he was once a poet but has given it up. In fact, Berni calls his poems nothing more than “trifles” because they came easily to him, but most importantly they are not poems because they didn’t offend anyone. His poetry was not malicious and is subject to interpretations. In fact, his works are more inventive with deeper meanings than the poetry being written by imitators such as Petrarchists.

At this stage, it is necessary to discuss one of the more important exterior aspects of the *Dialogo contra i poeti* which is Berni’s use of an *impresa* to sign his work. We must remember that Berni published the *Dialogo* anonymously but certainly people close to him (especially his colleagues at the *Accademia degli Vignaiuoli* and other friends) were aware of Berni’s authorship. He chose to sign the dialogue with a device that was equally as important as his words because it allowed the reader to develop insight in regards to how the writer wanted the work interpreted. Authors commonly used an *impresa* to represent their work and we see this in the case of Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, which, similarly to the *Dialogo contra i poeti*, was also a reflection on the author’s contemporary court life. The *impresa* showcases the ideas of the author by means of a specific figure and allows the reader to grasp that message through ‘ekphrasis’. Sixteenth century court society commonly used the *impresa* to represent the undertaking of any action characterized by strong resolve or determination. Princes and other

leaders used devices to convey their political and military intentions.<sup>86</sup> In the Renaissance, however the *impresa* also quickly became a sign used by courtiers and writers alike to unlock the deeper, hidden truth behind their texts.

For the *Dialogo contra i poeti*, Berni employed an *impresa* representing the flaying of the satyr Marsyas by Apollo. Marsyas was often portrayed as a donkey figure, which was a traditional sacrifice to Apollo, the god of poetry and music. Ancient tradition viewed Marsyas as the inventor of the double flute who challenged Apollo to a musical contest. The contest, judged by the Muses, consisted of two parts; the first, purely technical part, was based solely upon skill and was won by Marsyas. However, in the second part of the contest, Apollo enhanced his musical performance by singing, something Marsyas could not do thus causing him to lose the contest. Apollo then flayed Marsyas alive for daring to challenge him.

What is interesting about Berni's choice of *impresa* is that it is representative of all of his poetry, not just the *Dialogo contra i poeti*. It symbolizes not only a mask for the author to hide behind but it also reflects the present reality in which the author lives. As Anne Reynolds has pointed out in her study of the *Dialogo*, the *impresa* functions paradoxically both as a screen and as guide to both the author and the truths which he wishes to convey.<sup>87</sup> Since the *Dialogo* was published without reference to its author, publisher, or date, the reader is forced to concentrate solely on the message of the work itself. As I will explain further ahead, Berni's choice of *impresa* for the *Dialogo* can be viewed as symbol for all of Berni's works because their

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<sup>86</sup> The *impresa* was born from a courtly love environment with the intention of its use in a literary project. As opposed to the *emblema*, which functioned primarily as a visual device, the goal of the *impresa* was to incite curiosity and garner attention due to its theoretical framework. See Guido Arbizzoni, *Un nodo di cose e parole, Storia e fortuna delle imprese*, (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2002), 151-152, 158-159. The term *impresa* derives from the word *imprendere*, which signifies the undertaking of any action with a strong resolve or with risk involved. See Anne Reynolds, "Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas: Francesco Berni and His First Published Work, *Dialogo contra i Poeti*", *Studies in Iconography*, volume 16 (1994), 193.

<sup>87</sup> Reynolds, "Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas", 195.

interpretive capacities are numerous and revealing more than a simple literal meaning. This existence of various analyses is what Berni thrives on and that is exactly why he admires the multi-faceted poems of Petrarch and scorns the Petrarchists.

Although readings of the Apollo/Marsyas myth are many, one of the most important treatments of this myth is found in Plato's *Symposium*. Here Alcibiades, commenting on Socrates, compares the philosopher to the satyr Marsyas by stating that Socrates' rough ways actually hide the beauty and truth of his discourse (*Symposium*, 215b-216b).<sup>88</sup> Socrates' words are his instrument and they have a profound effect on anyone who hears them whether from Socrates himself or secondhand. His outward ugliness contains an inner truth, but that truth can only be accessed by the select few who can penetrate its external surface.<sup>89</sup> Thus Socrates' ugliness and apparent ignorance act only as a disguise of an inward clarity and this two-fold nature essentially represents the nature of all men. Man's body covers and hinders his soul and thus needs to be stripped in order to reveal inner clarity.<sup>90</sup> Here, paradoxically to most Renaissance theories, ugliness represents an illusion that can hide beauty and truth beneath it.

The juxtaposition of the god of poetry, Apollo, and the flayed satyr, Marsyas, places the onus on the reader to search beneath the surface to discover the authors' real message. Marsyas, initially an earthly and outwardly ugly being, sustains purification by flaying; his skin is literally torn away to reveal an inner beauty and clarity, a divine Apollo.<sup>91</sup> Berni's poetry in essence epitomizes the myth of Apollo and Marsyas because its outward, even bizarre appearance can reveal a truthfulness to those readers who are not easily deceived by outward (superficial) appearances.

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<sup>88</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by Christopher Gill, (New York: Putnam Books, 1999), 53-55.

<sup>89</sup> Reynolds, "Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas", 203.

<sup>90</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968), 173.

<sup>91</sup> Reynolds, "Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas", 205.

Berni's identification with Marsyas conforms to his choice to write about lowly, realistic themes mainly in satiric and ironic forms. In ancient tradition satyrs were most commonly associated with sexuality and pleasure, and Berni's poetry consistently uses these topics to arrive at other, more complex meanings.<sup>92</sup> At the same time, many philosophers, including Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, viewed Marsyas as a potentially divine figure who represented the capacity to reveal the truth (embodied by Apollo) through the equivocal means of language. The truth could be discovered if one was capable of surpassing the senses in order to reach a superior mental and spiritual level.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, Berni can act as both Marsyas and Apollo, and his works can assert numerous truths, none of which has to be definitive. As evidenced by the *Dialogo* as well as Berni's burlesque verse, the author often portrays conflicting viewpoints without any real resolution.<sup>94</sup> His goal is not deceive the reader; rather, through his words, he helps the reader arrive at the truth.

Albeit he wrote the dialogue anonymously, there is ample evidence to suggest that most members of the Roman court society recognized Berni as its author. In fact, Berni commonly circulated works in manuscript and possibly for this reason, he did not feel an immediate need to publish his writing. In his *Commento al capitolo della primiera*, Berni directly accuses one of his main rivals, Girolamo de' Casio, of writing poetry for the sole purpose of becoming immortal.<sup>95</sup> Casio, in return, criticizes Berni in two pasquinades included in his work *La Clementina* (1526). Although not naming Berni directly, he addresses the pasquinades to the person who "condemns

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<sup>92</sup> Anne Reynolds, "Francesco Berni: The Theory and Practice of Italian Satire in the Sixteenth Century" in *Italian Quarterly*, 24 (Fall 1983), 6.

<sup>93</sup> In a letter addressed to Ermolao Barbaro, Pico della Mirandola references Alcibiades' discussion of the Silenus/Marsyas figure. See *Prosatori Latini del Quattrocento*, a cura di Eugenio Garin, (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1952), 813-815. See also Reynolds, "Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas", 205.

<sup>94</sup> Reynolds, *Renaissance Humanism*, 163.

<sup>95</sup> Francesco Berni, *Commento al Capitolo della Primiera*, in *Rime, poesie latine e lettere edite e inedite*, a cura di Antonio Virgili, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1885), 351. Girolamo de' Casio was declared Poet Laureate by Pope Clement VII in 1523.

poets” and criticizes Berni for his “*errore*” of hiding meaning behind his writings. Later in 1533, one of Berni’s patrons, Ippolito de’ Medici, mentions Berni as the author of the *Dialogo* in one of his *capitoli*. Referring to Casio’s comments about Berni’s works, Ippolito reprimands Berni for “*el mandare in maschera le muse*” and ironically demands enlightenment from the poet.<sup>96</sup> As noted by Anne Reynolds, we can see the challenge of Berni/Marsyas figure to the authority of Casio/Apollo, a challenge not only in regards to the common and accepted poetic norms of the time but also to Berni’s *errore*, as described by Casio, in using masks to hide the meaning in his works.<sup>97</sup>

### **Unmasking the Beloved- Representations of an Anti-Laura**

With the Apollo/Marsyas emblem as a representative for all of Berni’s poetic output, we can now examine Francesco Berni’s burlesque poems, not only to unmask or expose their meanings but also to view them in light of the poetic ideals that Berni espoused in regards to Petrarch and Petrarchism. Berni strongly believed in the interpretive depth of Petrarch’s poetics, and he despised the pedantic imitation of the Petrarchists, above all Pietro Bembo, with whom Berni also had a professional rivalry.

For Berni, the parody of the Petrarchan beloved partakes of the grotesque realism described by Mikhail Bakhtin. The beloved is brought down to earth and made into flesh. The degradation and debasement that are characteristic of such realism are linked with the lower bodily stratum and with acts such as sexual intercourse, conception, pregnancy, birth and

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<sup>96</sup> Reynolds, “Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas”, 19.

<sup>97</sup> Reynolds, “Ambiguities of Apollo and Marsyas”, 13

defecation. Thus once the subject is swallowed up, killed, degraded, it is not lost forever; on the contrary, it undergoes the process of a rebirth or regeneration to re-emerge in a new form.<sup>98</sup>

While discussing the works of Francesco Berni, I will look at his poetic career chronologically across his life. The first phase, shortly after Berni's arrival at the Papal court in Rome, will concentrate on the denigration of women, specifically through the literary genre known as the *noia* (annoyance). In these poems, we can feel the strong influence of Burchiello, who as discussed earlier, also wrote poetry regarding the vices of wives and women in general, and to whom Berni owed much of his creative process. Specifically, we can look at Burchiello's canzonetta *Fratel mio, non pigliar moglie* to see the influences that drove Berni's, *Sonetto contra la moglie*. The *noia* is a genre that is highly misogynistic and recounts the *doglie* (pains) that wives cause their husbands. In fact, we can highlight the main equation- *moglie* (wife) equals *doglie* by which the author provides a laundry list of annoyances and spites that wives confer on men:

Fratel mio non pigliar moglie,  
Se non vuoi tormenti, e doglie.  
Io ti voglio consigliare,  
Senza chiedere il consiglio:  
Non voler moglie pigliare,  
Se tu vuoi far il tuo meglio,  
Non entrare in tal periglio;  
Se vuoi star lieto e contento:  
Che non c'è il maggior tormento,  
Sotto 'l ciel che l'aver moglie.  
Fratel mio non pigliar moglie,  
Se non vuoi tormenti e doglie,  
Sai perchè lo fece Dio?  
Per degnarci al Paradiso;  
E questo era il suo desio,  
E per scamper canto e riso  
Che non s'ha, io te n'avviso,

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<sup>98</sup> Bakhtin, 21-22.

Quella Gloria senza pena:  
 E non c'è tal disciplina  
 Sotto il ciel che d'aver moglie.  
     Fratel mio non pigliar moglie,  
     Se non vuoi tormenti e doglie.  
 Vuò veder tu se gli è vero;  
 Pensa un poco al Padre antico;  
 Onde poi per tal mistero  
 Fummo in bocca al gran nimico,  
 Solo per mangiare del fico,  
 Per cagion di quella vana:  
 E non c'è cosa più strana  
 Sotto il ciel che d'aver moglie.  
     Fratel mio non pigliar moglie  
     Se non vuoi tormenti e doglie.  
 Io lo sò che l'ho provato,  
 E lo prove a tutte l'ore;  
 Che ho moglie e parentato  
 Di tormento e di dolore:  
 Vuo' tu far lo tuo migliore?  
 Non la torre o fratel mio,  
 Che io ti guiro in sè di Dio,  
 Che non c'è le maggior doglie.  
     Fratel mio non pigliar moglie  
     Se non vuoi tormenti e doglie.  
     Guarda come io ero grasso,  
     Trionfal, bello, e polito,  
     Ed or sono smagrito e lasso  
     Tutto quanto sbalordito:  
     Questo avvien che son marito;  
     Questo è bene il nome dritto,  
     Non marito, anzi smarrito,  
     Di qualunque piglia moglie.  
     Fratel mio non pigliar moglie  
     Se non vuoi tormenti e doglie.  
     Ella m'ha cavato il suco,  
     Ti so dir come sedei;  
     Che mai più non mi riduco,  
     Sì mal stan li fatti miei:  
     Ben peggior di morte sei,  
     Nè mi posso tener ritto,  
     Io stò lasso, e tutto afflito,  
     Pien di guai e pien di doglie.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Burchiello, *Rime del Burchiello commentate dal Doni*, 115-117.



In his *Sonetto contra la moglie* (1518?), Berni follows Burchiello's example by creating a series of paradoxes that neatly build upon one another. For example: to eat salty meat and not have anything to drink, to be tired and not to have a place to sit, to be in the month of January but be sweating as if it were August, etcetera. The list goes on until Berni reaches the greatest annoyance of all: having a wife. In fact, we can see that each verse develops upon the last one, expressing a succinct situation, until the reader reaches the epitome of *noie*, the *doglie/moglie* equation.<sup>100</sup> The author idealizes the wife in reverse, listing her shortcomings and essentially turning her into a caricature and exaggeration.

Cancheri e beccafichi magri arrosto,  
 e magnar carne salsa senza bere;  
 essere stracco e non poter sedere;  
 aver il fuoco appresso e 'l vin discosto;  
     riscuoter a bell'agio a pagar tosto,  
 e dar ad altri per dover avere;  
 esser ad una festa e non vedere,  
 e de gennar sudar come di agosto;  
     aver un sassolin nella scarpetta  
 et una pulce drento ad una calza,  
 che vadi in su in giù per istaffetta;  
     una mano imbrattata ed una netta;  
 una gamba calzata ed una scalza;  
 esser fatto aspettar ed aver fretta:  
     chi più n'ha più ne metta  
 e conti tutti i dispetti e le doglie,  
 ché la peggiore di tutte è l'aver moglie.<sup>101</sup>

Interestingly, the first verse of the sonnet begins with a reference to *beccafichi*, birds often associated with passive homosexuality and the adjective *arrosto*, as a reference to anal sex thus turning his tirade against wives into an invitation to homosexual relations. Although the

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<sup>100</sup> Martín, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 31.

*Sonetto contra la moglie* cannot be definitively dated to 1518, it reflects a misogynistic thread that can be traced through two other poems from that same year that also follow a similar thematic line. As Silvia Longhi states, these poems represent a “giocosa polemica sulle donne”.<sup>102</sup>

In the *Sonetto delle Puttane* (1518) (Appendix), Berni continues the schematic of the *noia* genre by outlining the annoyances that prostitutes confer on their clients. Berni’s apparent aversion to prostitutes is fueled by his own homosexuality, as can be seen in his *I’ ho sentito dir che Mecenate*, dedicated to a young boy with whom Berni had fallen in love and for which he was apparently exiled to Rosazzo as punishment in 1523.

The *Sonetto delle puttane* is very similar to the one composed about wives since Berni lists many of the same, contradicting annoyances that prostitutes bestow upon their clients. The entire sonnet seems to emphasize a distorted idea of ‘give’ and ‘take’, a list of the reciprocating gifts that clients and prostitutes exchange. However, the author (client) who constantly gives money, clothes, and other valuable material objects receives in return only harmful and worthless gifts such as syphilis, a menstruating woman or the characteristic stench of the prostitute, caused by her infinite sexual relations and her menstruating vagina. Berni describes prostitutes as diseased and following Burchiello, uses nouns indicative of the sense of smell such as *puzzo* (stench) and *cesso* (toilet) to characterize them: *un morbo, un puzzo, un cesso, / un toglier a pigion ogni palazzo / son le cagion ch’io mi men il cazzo*. The poet emphasizes the strong smell of the prostitute and localizes it in her vagina, the organ that is also connected to bodily fluids because it not only receives the semen of various men but is also capable of imparting disease

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<sup>102</sup> Longhi, 35-36.

[*morbo*] through blood and menses. Berni's ultimate conclusion is that it is simply better to masturbate rather than receive a prostitute's gifts.

Likewise, in the *Capitolo a suo compare* (1518) (Appendix) Berni addresses one of his patrons, Antonio da Bibbiena, with a warning about frequenting prostitutes. The chapter encompasses many of the themes previously seen in the *Sonetto delle puttane*. He advises his patron that prostitutes can only bring physical harm (syphilis) and financial ruin. Specifically, Berni uses the identical word combination, "*anello, veste e catene*" to describe how prostitutes can rob a man of all of his possessions while he receives nothing valuable in return. The author again describes prostitutes by referring to the *puzza* [stench] emanating from their genitals as a result of their numerous sexual partners. In fact, Berni himself has sworn off prostitutes and refuses to allow them take all of his possessions, including his life: "Prima mi lassarò cascara di foia/ che già consenta che si dica mai/ che una puttana sia cagion ch'io moia" (vv. 49-51). Here Berni echoes a verse of Petrarch: "Et quel lor inchinar ch'ogni mia gioia/ spegne o per umiltate o per orgoglio/ cagion sarà ch'nanzi tempo i' moia" (*Canzoniere* 38). It is a reversal of Petrarch's love for Laura, whose gaze (or denial thereof) was a cause of pain and voluntary emotional and even physical death for the poet. Berni literally refuses to let a prostitute kill him, whether through thievery or disease.

The poet does offer his patron a solution, which is to take advantage of homosexual love. In fact, he underlines that Bibbiena has numerous pages and other assistants available to him who are much more sexually attractive than prostitutes and who will neither steal his money nor infect him with syphilis: "Attenetvei al vostro ragazzino,/che finalmente è men pericoloso/ e non domanda altrui né pane né vino" (64-66). Once again Berni maintains that the safest course of action would be to abstain from women and simply masturbate in order to receive immediate

sexual gratification. This, of course, is quite the opposite of Petrarch and Pietro Bembo, who agonize over their beloved with no possible fulfillment of desire in sight.

These early poems, thematically similar and all reflective of the *noie* genre advocated by Burchiello, support a clearly misogynistic vein. Berni describes women, and in particular prostitutes, as thieves who can lead to financial, moral and even physical ruin. Undoubtedly, this poetry is a revolt against the mainstream verses advocated by writers such as Bembo, who praised the beloved in specifically Petrarchan terms. Although the early poetry regarding women distinctly advocated homosexual activity, whether implicitly or explicitly, it also refuted Petrarch's image of the beloved Laura, which had become the standard ideal for love poetry. For Berni, the author/lover does not receive any sort of divine inspiration or enlightenment of the soul from women; rather the women he describes are real and attainable, and they in return, provide immediate and tangible effects such as sexual gratification, syphilis and monetary ruin.

### ***Capitolo delle pesche- Secrets of the Unspeakable***

The second stage of Francesco Berni's poetry, starting in the early years of 1520, deals mainly with paradoxical encomium. Under the pretext of praising mundane, innocuous, and at times grotesque objects, there often lies a hidden meaning. These *capitoli*, written in *terza rima*, mainly include verses dedicated to fruit or utilitarian objects such as the chamber pot, eels, gelatin or the card game *primiera*. The encomium focus solely on objects and not people, as opposed to popular, conventional poetry.<sup>103</sup> However, the rather ridiculous verses also reveal a

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<sup>103</sup> For a discussion of the plural nature of reality in Berni, see Anne Reynolds, *Francesco Berni: Satire and Criticism in the Italian Sixteenth Century*, in *Comic Relations: Studies in the Comic, Satire, and Parody*, edited by Pavel Petr, (Verlag: Peter Lang, 1985), 129-137.

more elaborate literary game that is full of sexual double entendres created by the use of a highly codified vocabulary that can, in turn, reveal numerous interpretive possibilities.<sup>104</sup> This is perhaps Berni's greatest strength because he is able to extol objects not normally worthy of praise and give them second, third and fourth levels of meaning that are not immediately apparent. As Anne Reynolds states, "satirical and ironical masking is a *sine qua non* of Berni's writing, poetry or prose."<sup>105</sup> In actuality, the idea of the masking is rather important in Berni's works because not only are his verses infused with various meanings, but, he himself, assumes the mask of many characters not just the poet. The use of the mask allows Berni to place emphasis on his words and ideas rather than on himself as the author.

The *capitoli* written in praise of fruit or other household objects can be roughly dated to 1521/22, after Berni has spent almost five years at the Roman court. The series begins with *In lode dei ghiozzi*, and subsequent poems can be categorized in chronological order, each *capitolo* citing the previous one. I will concentrate on the *Capitolo in lode delle pesche*, dated to 1522, because it clearly exemplifies the interpretative possibilities Berni capitalized upon while simultaneously supplying the reader with various meanings.

The *Capitolo in lode delle pesche* (Appendix III) concentrates on the significance of outward appearances. Of course, the *capitolo* provides us with various levels of meaning. The first stratum is the amusing, almost innocuous description of a fruit. In contrast, the second, deeper level of meaning is entirely obscene. Deborah Parker accurately describes the relationship between the obscenities/signifieds and the signifiers/sexual euphemisms used in burlesque poetry, "The obscenity arises from a term's interplay with other words on the level of the

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<sup>104</sup> For further studies on the paradoxical encomium, see Paolo Cerchi, "L' encomio paradossale nel Maniersimo", in *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies*, 9:368, (1975). See also Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica. The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

<sup>105</sup> Reynolds, *Renaissance Humanism*, 19.

signifier. Obscenity is less a matter of certain words summoning specific sexual meanings than of language considered as a system working toward an erotic affect.”<sup>106</sup> While the signifieds in the *Capitolo delle pesche* are limited, the signifiers used to represent them are numerous. In fact, the unusual treatment of fruit foreshadows the metamorphosis it will undergo to attain deeper levels of meaning.<sup>107</sup>

The use of food in particular was a common method of constructing sexual metaphors in burlesque poetry. Not only did the aesthetic visual representation of food create an erotic picture (sausages and other foods which led to phallic images, etc.) but the sins of gluttony and lust were closely linked by the Church and in particular St. Augustine, who placed by them in close proximity in his *Confessions*.<sup>108</sup> As Laura Giannetti Ruggiero points out, literary works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries often employed the word *ghiotto* (gluttonous) and *ghiottone* (glutton) specifically to refer to sodomites.<sup>109</sup> Indulgence in both food and wine also tended to signal indulgence in carnal desires because both brought about bodily pleasure and a sensation of satisfaction. Therefore, gluttony triggered an insatiability that could extend from any bodily appetite whether sexual or gastronomical. Both eating and sexual intercourse represented the idea of incorporation of one object into another (a swallowing or ingesting) and thereby partake of that which Bakhtin characterizes as an “interaction with the world”.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Parker, 1023-1024.

<sup>107</sup> Longhi, 86.

<sup>108</sup> In Book X, xxx-xxxii, St. Augustine makes the connection between the pleasure of food and drink and its potential to lead to concupiscence. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin, (New York: Penguin, 1961), 234-236. For a discussion of women, food, and gluttony, see also Elliot, 101-102. Michael Rocke references the connection between gluttony and sodomy in *Forbidden Friendships, Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>109</sup> Laura Giannetti Ruggiero, “The Forbidden Fruit or The Taste for Sodomy in Renaissance Italy, *Quaderni d’italianistica*, volume XXVII, No. 1, (2006), 33.

<sup>110</sup> Bakhtin, 281. See also Ronald D. LeBlanc, *Food, Sex, and Carnal Appetite in Nineteenth Century Russian Fiction*, (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009), 37-38.

Fruit in general was considered a luxury and represented the dangers of abundance and the loss of self-control. The restrictions regarding which foods should be eaten encompassed the larger vision of restraint over bodily desires and temptations. While physicians continued to warn against certain fruits as harmful, Renaissance authors utilized these same fruits as erotic metaphors to represent illicit sexuality, specifically sodomy.<sup>111</sup> Peaches, in particular, straddled the ambiguous margin of good and evil. Interestingly, while some medical and literary texts considered them an aphrodisiac, others warned that peaches could putrefy in the stomach and cause bad humours to develop.<sup>112</sup> Peaches originated in the Middle East, a land that many Renaissance scholars often portrayed as full of licentious sexual customs, in particular sodomy.<sup>113</sup>

In his encomium to peaches, Berni uses the image of various different fruits to describe sexual body parts that can be attractive to individuals:

Tutte le frutte in tutte le stagione,  
Come dir mele rose, appie, francesche,  
pere, susine, ciriegie e poponi,  
son bone, a chi le piacen, secche e fresche;  
ma, s'i' avessi ad esser giudice io,  
le non hanno a far nulla con le pesche. (vv. 1-6)<sup>114</sup>

He also alludes to sexual intercourse by employing the adjectives *secche* (dry) and *fresche* (fresh/wet), denoting anal and vaginal intercourse. The author expresses his own sexual preference by stating that peaches are his favorite fruit. In fact, he argues that classical writers have long ignored peaches although for many years, they were considered the preferred food of

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<sup>111</sup> Giannetti Ruggiero, 40.

<sup>112</sup> Giannetti Ruggiero, 36-37.

<sup>113</sup> Giannetti Ruggiero, 40.

<sup>114</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 49.

prelates. The general public is only now discovering the pleasure of peaches. Of course, for Berni peaches are symbolic of sodomy as the shape of a peach represented a boy's bottom. Sodomy, although forbidden, was commonly practiced in the Renaissance.

Popular medical theory advised against peaches, but they continued to be a very desirable fruit, often found on Renaissance tables. In his encomium, Berni negates medical theories that warn about putrefaction: "Son le pesche apritive e cordiali,/ saporite, gentil, restorative,/come le cose c'hanno gli speziali" (vv. 43-45). As Danilo Romei points out, the characteristics described by Berni, such as *apritive* (laxative) and *cordiali* (stimulating) denote the fruit's healthy curative characteristics as well as creating the sexual metaphor between peaches and sodomy.<sup>115</sup>

Contrary to popular medical theories that banned eating peaches, some doctors recommended eating them before dinner in an effort to stave off the possibility of putrefaction.<sup>116</sup> With clear sexual connotations, Berni suggests that they be eaten at anytime, before, during or after dinner: "O frutto sopra gli altri Benedetto,/ buono inanzi, nel mezzo e dietro pasto; ma inanzi buono e di dietro perfetto!" (vv. 10-12)

In the next lines, Berni states that older men prefer peaches, making an allusion not only to homosexuality but also more specifically to pederasty:

Chi vuol saper se le pesche son buone  
et al giudizio mio non acconsente,  
stiasene al detto dell'altre persone,  
c'hanno più tempo e tengon meglio a mente,  
e vedrà bene che queste pesche tali  
piacciono a' vecchi più che all'altra gente. (vv. 37-42)<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 50.

<sup>116</sup> Giannetti Ruggiero, 37.

<sup>117</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 50.



With the advent of the Renaissance, came the revival of certain classical ideals, in particular pederasty, which initiated adolescents into sexuality. This type of sexual relationship involved an older, active male partner who instructed and initiated a younger, passive male partner and did not necessarily exclude sexual intercourse with women. Rather, it was a master/pupil relationship that prepared the younger partner for future sexual contact, be it homosexual or heterosexual.

Berni makes specific reference to the “secret” of peaches and that one can only learn to have peaches year round if he has the right teacher to help him:

ma non s'insegna tutti i grossolani;  
pur chi volesse uscir di questo affanno  
trovi qualche dottor che glielo spani,  
ché ce n'è pur assai che insegneranno  
questo secreto et un'altra ricotta  
per aver delle pesche tutto l'anno. (vv 55-60)<sup>118</sup>

Berni is perhaps also expressing his own preference for homosexual relationships and more precisely, the role of the passive participant in such a relationship. In fact in vv. 55-59, he states that not everyone can understand the mystery of peaches, but if they do want to discover it, they must find someone, more experienced, to explain it to them. Silvia Longhi highlights Berni's use of the words *secreto* (secret) and *insegnare* (to teach) that appear in other Bernesque poems. Because of their nature, hidden meanings are not available to just anyone, only those seeking the truth, but even those people need help to navigate their meanings.<sup>119</sup> Thus the combination of *secreto/insegnare* can likewise refer to pederasty, in which an older male initiates and teaches a younger male about sexuality. We can apply this phrase to Berni's own personal and professional situation because during his tenure in Rome, Berni was exiled for a relationship

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<sup>118</sup> Berni, *Rime*, 51.

<sup>119</sup> Longhi, 73.

that he had developed with a young boy. He addresses two Latin sonnets and the *Capitolo di un ragazzo* to his young lover in which he advocates homosexual love and the desire to “teach” young boys about the doctrines of the world: “aver un garzonetto che sia bello/ da insegnarli dottrina e da condullo!” (vv. 14-15). Finally, the poet’s reference to *beccafichi* in vv. 52-54, seen previously in his *Sonetto contra la moglie*, once again functions as a metaphor for passive homosexuality.<sup>120</sup>

For Berni, the secret represents sodomy and specifically, the passive sexual role. In fifteenth century Italy, sodomy became a symbol of modernity.<sup>121</sup> In my opinion, Berni’s references to what was considered a crime against nature can also be viewed as an opposition to the cultural and poetical forms of courtly love advocated by Petrarchists. By advocating the most unspeakable and shameful of vices, Berni vehemently revolts against not only the corruption of the Roman court but also the contemporary literary environment. Sodomy represents a mode of knowledge that reveals the truth about the current socio-cultural situation.<sup>122</sup>

On yet another level, we can also view Berni’s encomium to peaches as belonging to a larger debate of whether the love of women or boys brought more pleasure. This was very popular topic in the Renaissance and was part of a playful literary *tenzone* between Berni and Francesco Molza, who wrote an encomium dedicated to the fig, *Capitolo dei fichi* (a metaphor for the vagina) in which he referenced Berni:

Di lodar il Mellone havea pensato,  
Quando Febo sorrise e non sia vero,  
Che ‘l Fico, disse, resti abbandonato.

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<sup>120</sup> In modern speech, birds are commonly used to explain sexuality (“birds and bees”) and as a metaphor for the penis (“pecker”).

<sup>121</sup> Alan K. Smith, *Fraudomy: Reading Sexuality and Politics in Burchiello*, in *Queering the Renaissance*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>122</sup> Smith, 97.

Però se di seguire brami il senterio,  
Ch 'l Bernia corse col cantar suo pria. (vv. 1-5)<sup>123</sup>

Of course, the debate regarding the love of women versus the love of boys stems from classical literature, most famously, from Plutarch's dialogue *Eroticus*, in which male and female characters respectively advocate the love of women and boys. Both Berni and Molza, under the guise of fruit, playfully veiled their own sexual preferences.<sup>124</sup> Ultimately, with a nod to Petrarch, Berni admits that he cannot praise peaches as completely as he wishes to: *Vorrei lodarti e veggio ch'io non posso, / se non quanto è dalle stelle concesso* (vv.64-65).<sup>125</sup>

### **Petrarch in the *Sonetto del bacciliere* e *Chiome d'argento***

In this final section, I would like to discuss two sonnets that are clearly based on Petrarch's works but in the end manage to convey paradoxical meanings in unpredictable and mostly erotic ways. The first sonnet is the *Sonetto del bacciliere* (Appendix IV), dated most probably to 1522-23. From the opening lines of the sonnet, *Piangete, destri, il caso orrendo e fiero, / piangete, cantarelli, e voi, pitali,* we can see the influence of Petrarch's sonnet 92, dedicated to the death of Cino da Pistoia: *Piangete, Donne, et con voi pianga Amore, / piangete, amanti, per ciascun paese*. Using the first lines of a Petrarchan sonnet dedicated to eulogizing one of the greatest love poets of the Middle Ages lends a serious and learned tone to Berni's verses. In particular, he uses the noun *destri*, which can mean "noble people" and signals an air of gravity to the poem, but by the second verse the reader quickly realizes that Berni is

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<sup>123</sup> *Il primo libro dell' Opere burllesche di M. Francesco Berni, di M. Giovanni della Casa, del Varchi, del Mauro ... [etc.] ricorretto et con diligenza ristampato*, a cura di Antonio Francesco Grazzini, (Firenze: B. Giunta, 1548), 16.

<sup>124</sup> Will Fisher, "Peaches and Figs", in *Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy: practice, performance, perversion, punishment*, ed. Allison Levy, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 156-157.

<sup>125</sup> For example, Petrarch describes his task of praising Laura as *l'alta impresa* in *Canzoniere* 5.

employing a second meaning to *destri*, intended as “chamber pots”. In fact, Berni’s serious elegy quickly turns to parody in order to lament the loss of a rather ordinary, yet indispensable object in Renaissance society: the chamber pot. Where Petrarch lists all who suffer from the loss of Cino da Pistoia (women, love, Pistoia, poetry, etc.), Berni’s list is simply one of synonyms for the chamber pot (*destri, cantarelli, pitali, orinali, pentolino*).

By employing the image of the homely chamber pot, an object whose sole purpose acts as a receptacle of bodily fluids, we discover a further level of meaning in the sonnet: the loss of male virility. “Ché rotto è il pentolin del bacciliero” here *pentolino* expresses a metaphor for the virile member. The *bacciliero*, or young student, as demonstrated above can represent the passive homosexual in a homoerotic relationship. However further, we also discover that *bacciliero* also stands for string bean (*pisello*) therefore extending the common metaphor of fruits and vegetable which act as sexual metaphors, in this case representing the penis. Berni’s advocacy of the physical homoerotic relationship is a common topic throughout his poetry and it is interesting to see how he uses a serious Petrarchan sonnet to mourn the end of a physical sexual relationship. Hence, the only person truly suffering from the loss of the chamber pot is not the young student (*bacciliero*) but his sexual partner. The erotic implications of the poem are clear.

As Peter Hainsworth underlines in his work *Petrarch the Poet*, Petrarch’s original tribute to Cino da Pistoia is quite unimpressive. The sonnet is a short request asking a group of ladies, lovers, and Pistoia to weep for him. Although Pistoia had a significant literary influence on Petrarch (Petrarch was his student at the University of Bologna and they were literary friends) he receives a much less impressive elegy than the more minor poet, Sennucio del Bene, upon his

death.<sup>126</sup> Berni takes advantage of this disconnect between the subject, Cino da Pistoia, and the lackluster way in which he is praised in the sonnet by employing his own subject, the chamber pot, in an encomium regarding a subject which doesn't fit the way it is being praised.

Furthermore, the first *terzina* of the *Sonetto del bacciliere* also recalls the Petrarchan canzone 199, part of a series praising Laura's hand and the glove that conceals it. Berni asks, "Ecco, chi vide mai tal pentolino", describing it then as "Destro, galante, leggiadretto e snello". This echoes Petrarch's "chi vide al mondo mai sì dolce spoglie?" in which Petrarch describes the glove that covers Laura's hand as *candido*, *leggiadretto* and *caro*. Of course, Petrarch here is discussing both the glove and the hand that it covers simultaneously citing its function and beauty. The use of the hand/glove image was a popular theme in Petrarch's poetry. The hand functions as a utilitarian object, which also has a hold of the poet's heart. It is both praised for its beauty but also creates a sense of suffering in the poet because it represents the unattainable beloved. The chamber pot in Berni's sonnet functions in a similar manner; the poet praises the beauty and usefulness of the chamber pot, but it also emphasizes the unavailability of the poet's sexual partner, represented by the chamber pot.

By repeating the adjectives *candido*, *leggiadretto* and *caro*, Berni uses Petrarch's image of the glove to eroticize his own *pentolino*. Before *Canzoniere* 199, the idea of the glove and moreover, the veil, function as an impediment to the poet's view of his beloved. In 199, the glove becomes the fetishistic object that Petrarch desperately holds onto before later returning the glove to Laura in *Canzoniere* 201. The linguistic ambiguities of *Canzoniere* 199 allow for a

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<sup>126</sup> Peter Hainsworth, *Petrarch the Poet: An Introduction to the Rerum Vulgarium fragmenta* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 78-79.

number of interpretations for the hand/glove metaphor; a fact upon which Berni capitalizes in his sonnet in praise of the chamber pot.

### **Literary tensions between Francesco Berni and Pietro Bembo**

As mentioned above, Francesco Berni was not an advocate of Petrarchism and he was often at odds with its main proponent, Pietro Bembo. Besides Bembo's insistence upon the pedantic uses of poetry, Berni had many personal reasons to dislike Bembo. Returning to the *Dialogo contra I poeti* of 1526, which was in part addressed to fame seeking poets, Berni specifically calls Bembo a "non-professional" poet, capable of writing poetry only to pass time, "far delle bagatelle per passar tempo".<sup>127</sup> The rivalry between Berni and Bembo dates back to the early 1520's, while Berni worked as secretarial datary for Gian Matteo Giberti, Bishop of Verona, and Pope Clement. Of course, Bembo himself served in the Roman Papal Court, acting as secretary to Pope Leo X before retiring from Rome. Upon the election of Clement and the appointment of Giberti to the position of secretary, Bembo kept in constant contact with the Roman papal court, writing letters to Giberti in 1523 upon his appointment to datary as well as in 1524, when Giberti was appointed Bishop of Verona. Since both Giberti and Berni considered themselves humanists, their correspondences discussed literary matters as well as political ones.<sup>128</sup>

In 1524, upon the completion of his *Prose della vulgar lingua*, Bembo sent a manuscript of the work to Pope Clement with a dedication in an effort to gain the Pope's favors. That same year, Bembo also wrote the Latin poem *Benacus*, which he dedicated to Giberti as a celebratory piece for his appointment to papal datary. *Benacus* was an encomiastic work included in a small

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<sup>127</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 249.

<sup>128</sup> Anne Reynolds, "Francesco Berni, Gian Matteo Giberti, and Pietro Bembo: Criticism and Rivalry in Rome in the 1520's" in *Italica*, vol 77, No. 3 (Autumn, 2000), 301-302.

volume with another celebratory piece, entitled *Verona*, which was written by Agostino Beazzano. Both poems praised Giberti and probably circulated in manuscript form before being published. Berni, as secretary to Giberti, would have had first hand knowledge of the correspondence between Bembo and Giberti, and surely had access to the *Benacus* manuscript.<sup>129</sup>

The tensions between Berni and Bembo began to increase in 1526 when Bembo sent a second sonnet not only praising Giberti but also resorting to major self-flattery. This was exactly the kind of behavior that Berni condemned in his *Dialogo contra i poeti*. The sonnet entitled *Mentre navi e cavalla e schiere armate* (Appendix), written by Bembo just prior to the Sack of Rome, exhorts Giberti and Pope Clement to seek glory while trying to save Italy. In the following verses, Bembo writes about the leisure time he spends far away from the troubled Rome, writing and reading in his own search for eternal fame:

Intanto al vulgo mi nascondo e celo  
Là dov'io leggo e scrivo; e 'n bel soggiorno  
Partendo l'ore fo picciol guadagno. (vv. 9-11)<sup>130</sup>

The self-aggrandizement and disregard for the true peril of Italy's situation, surely incensed Berni because he responded to Bembo's sonnet with a parody, *Né navi né cavalla o schiere armate* (Appendix). In fact, as scholars point out, Berni's response reveals a stark contrast between Bembo's own leisurely position, far removed from the perils of Rome and Berni's own burdensome position characterized by many daily responsibilities in the midst of an unstable and war-torn Rome:

Onde al vulgo ancor m'ascondo e celo;  
non leggo e scrivo sempre e 'n mal soggiorno

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<sup>129</sup> Reynolds, "Francesco Berni, Gian Matteo Giberti, and Pietro Bembo", 304.

<sup>130</sup> All direct references to Bembo's poetry from Pietro Bembo, *Prose e Rime di Pietro Bembo*, a cura di Carlo Dionisotti, (Torino: UTET, 1966).

perdendo l'ore, spendo e non guadagno. (vv. 9-11)

The correspondence between Bembo and Giberti continued in 1527 as Bembo assailed the papal datary with letters concerning a certain benefice related to the Abbey of Rosazzo that he clearly expected to receive. By August of that same year, Sanga informed Bembo that he would not receive the benefice, prompting letters from Bembo that accused not only Giberti but also Berni and Sanga of deception, economic deprivation as well as ridicule. Bembo took the denial of the benefice personally because he viewed this as yet a further rejection and a personal attack stemming from the mockery of his celebratory poem *Benacus* in 1524. In fact, he describes Giberti's entourage (*famigliari*) as *i vostri Aristarchi domestici*. The reference to Aristarchus comes directly from Horace's *Art of Poetry* and refers to the figure of Aristarchus, the head of the library at Alexandria, who had a pension for criticizing the poetry of others (*Ars Poetica*, 445-453).<sup>131</sup> This is clearly a jab at Berni and Sanga, who surely had access to and opinions about Bembo's works.<sup>132</sup>

Of course, the most overt criticism of Bembo's work comes in the form of a parody written by Berni in 1530 entitled *Sonetto alla sua donna* or *Chiome d'argento fino, irte e attorte* (Appendix). This parody is a reaction to Bembo's sonnet for his beloved, entitled *Crin d'oro crespo e d'ambra tersa e pura* (Appendix). Bembo modeled his sonnet mainly after Petrarch's *Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi*, but elements of other Petrarchan poetry are also evident. Berni's main criticism of Bembo's work stems from its lack of creativity. In fact, returning to his *Dialogo contra i poeti*, Berni outright rejects the principles of *imitatio*, advocated most famously

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<sup>131</sup> Horace, 118.

<sup>132</sup> Reynolds, "Francesco Berni, Gian Matteo Giberti, and Pietro Bembo", 304.



by Aristotle, and deems all poets “lazy thieves” who are incapable of any original thoughts.<sup>133</sup> For Berni, poetry is a means of amusement and pleasure, not a serious matter, and therefore he shuns “professional” poets such as Bembo who meticulously appropriate themes, verses, even entire stanzas from others without even a hint of their own ingenuity.

Youth and beauty are the common features of courtly love. In his parody, Berni takes these characteristics and inverts them to reveal his beloved, a decrepit old hag. Whilst the hag is the extreme opposite of Laura and Bembo’s lady, for Berni she is a depiction of reality, an exaltation of mundane, everyday life where sensual love rules and physical needs can be met. Most importantly, the beloved provides pleasure and amusement while offering a unique possibility for further interpretation.

The first line of Berni’s sonnet begins with a head to toe description of the beloved. Immediately, we are confronted with the term *chiome* that comes straight from the Petrarchan lexicon. Petrarch consistently refers to Laura’s hair as blond, loose, untamed, and swaying softly in the breeze. Berni’s *chiome*, however, are silver rather than gold, a description that Petrarch also uses for Laura’s hair in *Canzoniere* 12, when he ponders the possibility of Laura ageing. The difference here is not the color of the old hag’s hair but the adjectives that describe the silver tresses as *irte e attorte/ senz’arte*. The hair is twisted and contorted to exaggeration just like Berni twists and contorts the interpretative possibilities of Petrarch’s ideals to their extreme in an effort to create his own picture of the beloved.

As Elizabeth Cropper notes, Laura is never described as a full woman, the reader only glimpses individual pieces and they must use their imagination to recreate the whole. In fact, the

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<sup>133</sup> Berni, *Dialogo contra i poeti*, 238-239.

individual body parts that appear show a woman of incredible beauty, who doesn't exist in nature and therefore can only be considered a "chimera" or monster.<sup>134</sup> Petrarch's image of Laura is mainly from memory and sightings of Laura; in essence, they are descriptions of a woman who is absent, and like most memories they are fragmentary. While the Petrarchan beloved is a beautiful monster that doesn't exist in nature, Berni's beloved is painfully real, present and literally monstrous but just as fragmentary in her deformed features.

Petrarch (as Bembo does after him) describes his beloved through metaphors that compare body parts to precious materials such as gold, pearls, ivory, ebony and to natural elements such as the stars, snow, and sun. The metaphors are recurring and always paired with the same body parts, thus creating a standard aesthetic tradition: Laura's hair is always gold, her teeth are pearls, her lips are rubies, eyes like stars, etc. Berni distorts this image by mismatching those same body parts and descriptions. He uses the standard elements such as hair, eyes, eyebrows, lips, hands and fingers but with a slight deviation of metaphors, creating a radically different picture of his beloved: a gold face, white eyebrows and lips, and black, sparse teeth. In essence, all of Laura's parts are moveable and do not have a fixed place on the image. Berni's distortion of Bembo's beloved ultimately reverts back to the real Laura portrayed in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Her various parts can fit together in numerous ways, but ultimately their final image, whatever it may be, conforms to an ideal. Although Laura is essentially a figment of Petrarch's imagination, his depictions of her convey a certain realism that Berni wholly espouses

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<sup>134</sup> Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 58, no. 3 (Sep., 1976), 376.

in his poetry. As Danilo Romei aptly states in reference to Berni's parody, the poet "smaschera la meccanicità alienata della versificazione bembesca."<sup>135</sup>

The use of color is important both in Petrarch's portrayal of Laura as in Berni's sonnet. Petrarch uses lively colors to describe Laura's features: black and white eyes, black eyebrows, blond hair, red lips, pearl white skin, hands and fingers. In fact Berni's beloved becomes a pastiche of vibrant colors, mismatched with the standard features. Berni's sonnet echoes those of Cecco Angiolieri, who also idealized his beloved Becchina in reverse, making her the extreme opposite of Dante's Beatrice.

Alternatively, Ernest Wilkins has suggested that Berni's *Sonetto alla sua donna* was also influenced by a second sonnet entitled *Crespe chiome d'or fin*, itself most likely modeled on Bembo's sonnet. The anonymous sonnet, which was later published in 1546 by the Venetian publisher Giolito, is found in the collection *Rime di diversi nobili huomini et eccellenti poeti nella lingua thoscana, Libro secondo*. The order of features in the anonymous sonnet is strikingly similar to both Bembo's and Berni's, while the unknown author adds eyebrows and cheeks to his list. The first feature in both Berni and the anonymous sonnet is *chiome* while Bembo uses *crin* and *crespo* to describe his beloved's hair. While both sonnets certainly influence Berni's parody, Berni surely aimed to return to the original Petrarchan descriptions.

When looking back at his imitation of Petrarch, Bembo ultimately fails to capture the essence of *Canzoniere* 157. Bembo imitates the aesthetic ideal but he does not deal with the function of poetry; Petrarch is describing an encounter with Laura from memory, the complete image is never revealed, and the emotions of that encounter are encapsulated in the sonnet,

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<sup>135</sup> Danilo Romei, "La strategia bizzarra di Francesco Berni", *L'Approdo letterario*, volume 77-78, giugno 1977, 165.

emotions that Bembo omits by simply describing the reaction to his beloved's beauty and not the capacity of the poem to recall the emotions felt in that encounter. Berni capitalizes on the vacuousness of Bembo's sonnet by exaggerating those elements of Bembo's poem that make his verse only a superficial imitation of Petrarch.

The burlesque style perfected and made popular by Berni was followed by many others authors who were tired of the status quo. Of particular note, Michelangelo experimented with his own burlesque verses when writing the sonnet *I'ho già fatto un gozzo in questo stento*. Michelangelo describes the physical metamorphoses that his body undergoes as he contorts his limbs in an effort to paint the Sistine Chapel.<sup>136</sup> In his *Capitolo a Fra Bastian dal Piombo*, Berni praises Michelangelo's work while simultaneously insulting Bembo, when in reference to Michelangelo he writes: *ei dice cose, tu dici parole* (v. 31), thus once again characterizing Bembo's poetry as empty and formulaic.<sup>137</sup>

## Conclusion

When examining Francesco Berni's oeuvre, we can see the heavy influence of comic realistic poets such as Burchiello, among others. These poets went against the fashionable trend of praising their beloved to create an alternative genre of poetry that represented the real world, where women did not conform to highly artificial aesthetic ideals and where passions could be satisfied immediately. At the same time, through seemingly trivial word play, they were able to express highly complex ideas and images hidden under various levels of meaning.

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<sup>136</sup> Michelangelo, *Rime*, a cura di Matteo Residori, (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 9.

<sup>137</sup> See also Robert J. Clements, "Berni and Michelangelo's Bernesque Verse", in *Italica*, vol.41, no. 3 (Sep., 1964), 266-280.

The advent of Petrarchism in the fifteenth and sixteenth century created a somewhat stagnate environment for love poetry in Italy. Petrarch had established a formulaic ideal that was obsessively followed by many after him. Imitators appropriated ideas and entire verses into their own works and thus love poetry became a repetition of empty themes through an artificial language. In the sixteenth century, Francesco Berni attacked the *Petrarchisti* poets for not remaining true to the original innovative possibilities of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, which he considered rife with interpretive potential. Berni challenged the disguise (*camuffatura*) of Petrarchism by using the images of transgressive characters not only to defy conventional and stagnate norms of poetry but also as metaphors or masks to convey different truths.<sup>138</sup> He advocated a re-examination of the original Petrarchan verses by employing the deformed, ugly, corrupt and sordid.<sup>139</sup>

Through his seemingly bizarre and non-sensical verse, Berni was able to convey various hidden meanings masked under witty word play. His *Dialogo contra i poeti* and his burlesque verses reveal his frustrations with court and literary life. While some poets used sodomy as a metaphor for political offenses, Berni's advocacy of sodomy, especially the passive role in homosexual relationships and pederasty, disclosed his own sexual preferences. At the same time, sodomy stood as a metaphor for meanings that were accessible only to an audience who was willing to peel back the layers of his poetry.

Burlesque poetry also capitalized on long held misogynistic views of women, portraying transgressive figures such as old women and prostitutes and attacking wives and the use of make-up. The female figure underwent a paradoxical transformation as poets praised female

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<sup>138</sup> Sorrentino, 167.

<sup>139</sup> Romei, *La strategia bizzarra di Francesco Berni*, 167.

bodies that were no longer capable of sexually attracting men and contradicted popular ideals of the beautiful yet unattainable woman. Burlesque poetry paved the way for Baroque poetry, which in the late sixteenth century continued to react against Petrarchism but also overturned female ugliness from purely paradoxical praise or vituperation to the praise of unconventional beauty in a high literary style.

## Appendix: Burlesque Poetry

Francesco Berni. *Rime*. a cura di Danilo Romei. Milano: Mursia, 1985.

I

### Sonetto delle puttane

Un dirmi ch'io gli presti e ch'io gli dia  
Or la veste, or l'anello, or la catena,  
E, per averla conosciuta a pena,  
Volermi tutta tôr la robba mia;  
    Un voler ch'io gli facci compagnia,  
Che nell'inferno non è maggioer pena,  
Un dargli desinare, albergo e cena,  
Come se l'uom facesse l'osteria;  
    Un sospetto crudel del mal franzese,  
Un tôr danari o drappi ad interesse,  
Per darli verbigrazia, un tanto al mese;  
    Un dirmi ch'io vi torno troppo spresso  
Un'eccellenza del signor marchese,  
Eterno onor del puttanESCO sess;  
    Un morbo, un puzzo, un cesso,  
Un toglier a pigion ogni palazzo  
Son le cagioni ch'io mi meni il cazzo.

II

### Capitolo a suo compare

Se voi andate drieto a quest vita,  
Compar, voi mangierete poco pane  
E farete una triste riuscita.  
    Seguitar di e notte le puttane,  
Giucar tre ore a' billi et alla palla,  
A dir il ver, son cose troppo strane.  
    Voi dite poi che vi duol una spalla  
E che credete aver il mal fanzese:  
Almen venisse il cancro alla falla.  
    Ben mi disse già un che se ne intese  
Che voi mandaste via quell'uom da bene  
Per peter meglio scorrere il paese.  
    O veramente matto da catene!  
Perdonatemi voi, per discrezione,  
S'io dico più che non mi si conviene:  
    Io ve lo dico per affezione,

Per . . . non so s'io più dica fame o sete  
 Ch'io tenga della vostra salvazione.  
 Che fate voi de' paggi che tenete,  
 Voi altri gran maestri, e de' ragazzi,  
 Se ne' bisogni non ve ne valete?  
 Riniego Dio se voi non siate pazzi,  
 Che lassate la vita per andare  
 Drieto ad una puttana che vi amazzi.  
 Forsi che voi v'avete da guardare  
 Che la gente non sappia i fatti vostri  
 E siavi drieto a l'uscio ad ascoltare?  
 O che colei ad un tratto vi mostri  
 In su 'l più bello un palmo di novella,  
 Da far ispaventar le furie e i mostri,  
 E poi vi cavi di ditto l'anella  
 E chieggivi la veste e la catena  
 E votive ad un tratto la scarsella?  
 Forsi che non avete a dar la cena  
 E profumar il letto e le lenzuola,  
 E dormir poi con lei per maggior pena?  
 E perché la signora non sia sola,  
 anzi si tenga bene intertenuta,  
 star tre ore appiccato per la gola?  
 O vergogna de' gli uomini fottuta,  
 dormir con una donna tutta notte,  
 che non ha membro adosso che non puta!  
 Poi pianga e dica le rene son rotte  
 e che ha perduto il gusto e l'appetito  
 e gran mercé a lui s'egli la fotte.  
 Ringrazio Dio ch'i' ho preso partito  
 che le non mi daranno troppo noia,  
 insino a tanto ch'io ne sia pentito.  
 Prima mi lassarò cascar di foia  
 che già consenta che si dica mai  
 che una puttana sia cagion ch'io moia.  
 Io ne ho veduto sperienza assai  
 e quanto vivo più tanto più imparo,  
 facendomi dottor per gli altrui guai.  
 Or per tornare a voi, compar mio caro,  
 et a' disordinacci che voi fate,  
 guardate pur che non vi costi caro.  
 Io vi ricordo che gli è or di state  
 e che non si può far delle pazzie  
 che si faceano le stagion passate.  
 Quando e' vi vengon quelle fantasie  
 di cavalcar a casa Michelino,



sianvi raccomandate le badie.  
Attenetevi al vostro ragazzino,  
che finalmente è men pericoloso  
e non domanda altrui né pan né vino.  
Il dì statevi in pace et in riposo;  
non giucate alla palla dopo pasto,  
che vi farà lo stomaco acetoso.  
Così, vivendo voi quieto e casto,  
andrete ritto ritto in paradiso  
e troverete l'uscio andando al tasto.  
Abbiate sopra tutto per avviso,  
se voi avete voglia di star sano,  
di non guardar le donne troppo in viso;  
datevi inanzi a lavorar di mano.

### III

#### Capitolo delle pesche

Tutte le frutta, in tutte le stagioni,  
come dir mele rose, appie e francesche,  
pere, susine, ciriegie e poponi,  
son bone, a chi le piacen, secche e fresche;  
ma, s'i' avessi ad esser giudice io,  
le non hanno a far nulla con le pesche.  
Queste son proprio secondo il cor mio:  
sàsselo ogniun ch'io ho sempre mai detto  
che l'ha fatte messer Domenedio.  
O frutto sopra gli altri benedetto,  
buono inanzi, nel mezzo e dietro pasto;  
ma inanzi buono e di dietro perfetto!  
Dioscoride, Plinio e Teofrasto  
non hanno scritto delle pesche bene,  
perché non ne facevan troppo guasto;  
ma chi ha gusto fermamente tiene  
che le sien le reine delle frutta,  
come de' pesci i ragni e le murene.  
Se non ne fece menzion Margutte,  
fu perché egli era veramente matto  
e le malizie non sapeva tutte.  
Chi assaggia le pesche solo un tratto  
e non ne vòle a cena e a desinare,  
si può dir che sia pazzo affatto affatto  
e che alla scuola gli bisogni andare  
come bisogna a gli altri smemorati  
che non san delle cose ragionare.

Le pesche eran già cibo da prelati,  
ma, perché ad ogniun piace i buon bocconi,  
vogliono oggi le pesche insino a i frati,  
che fanno l'astinenzie e l'orazioni;  
così è intravenuto ancor de' cardi,  
che chi ne dice mal Dio gliel perdoni;  
questi alle genti son piaciuti tardi,  
pur s'è mutata poi l'opinione  
e non è più nessun che se ne guardi.  
Chi vuol saper se le pesche son buone  
et al giudizio mio non acconsente,  
stiasene al detto dell'altre persone,  
c'hanno più tempo e tengon meglio a mente,  
e vedrà ben che queste pesche tali  
piacciono a' vecchi più che all'altra gente.  
Son le pesche apritive e cordiali,  
saporite, gentil, restorative,  
come le cose c'hanno gli speciali;  
e s'alcun dice che le son cattive,  
io gli farò veder con esse in mano  
ch'e' non sa se sia morto o se si vive.  
Le pesche fanno un ammalato sano,  
tengono altrui del corpo ben disposto,  
son fatte proprio a beneficio umano.  
Hanno sotto di sé misterio ascosto,  
come hanno i beccafichi e gli ortolani  
e gli altri uccei che comincian d'agosto,  
ma non s'insegna a tutti i grossolani;  
pur chi volesse uscir di questo affanno  
trovi qualche dottor che glielo spiani,  
ché ce n'è pur assai che insegneranno  
questo secreto et un'altra ricotta  
per aver delle pesche tutto l'anno.  
O frutta sopra l'altre egregia, eletta,  
utile dalla scorza infino all'osso,  
l'alma e la carne tua sia benedetta!  
Vorrei lodarti e veggio ch'io non posso,  
se non quanto è dalle stelle concesso  
ad un ch'abbia il cervel come me grosso.  
O beato colui che l'usa spesso  
e che l'usarle molto non gli costa,  
se non quanto bisogna averle appresso!  
E beato colui che da sua posta  
ha sempre mai qualch'un che gliele dia  
e trova la materia ben disposta!

Ma io ho sempre avuto fantasia,  
per quanto possi un indovino apporre,  
che sopra gli altri avventurato sia  
colui che può le pesche dare e tôrre.

#### IV

##### Sonetto del bacciliero

Piangete, destri, il caso orrendo e fiero,  
piangete, cantarelli, e voi, pitali,  
né tenghin gli occhi asciutti gli orinali,  
ché rotto è 'l pentolin del bacciliero.  
Quanto dimostra apertamente il vero  
di giorno in giorno a gli occhi de' mortali  
che por nostra speranza in cose frail  
troppo n'asconde el diritto sentiero!  
Ecco, chi vide mai tal pentolino?  
Destro, galante, leggiadretto e snello:  
natura il sa, che n'ha perduta l'arte;  
sallo la sera ancor, sallo il mattino,  
che 'l vedevon tal or portar in parte  
ove usa ogni famoso cantarello.

#### V

##### Sonetto del Bembo

Mentre navi e cavalli o schiere armate  
che 'l ministro di Dio sì giustamente  
move a ripor la misera e dolente  
Italia e la sua Roma in libertate,  
son cura della vostra alma pietate,  
io vo, signor, pensando assai sovente  
cose, ond'io queti un desiderio ardente  
di farmi conto alla futura etate.  
Intanto al vulgo mi nascondo e celo  
là dov'io leggo e scrivo; e 'n bel soggiorno  
partendo l'ore fo picciol guadagno.  
Cosa grave non ho dentro e d'intorno;  
cerco piacere a lui che regge il cielo;  
di duo mi duolo e di nessun mi lagno.

## VI

### Parodia del Berni

Né navi né cavalli o schiere armate,  
che si son mosse così giustamente,  
posson ancor la misera e dolente  
Italia e Roma porre in libertate.  
S'è speso tanto ch'è una pietate,  
e spenderassi e spendesi sovente:  
mi par ch'abbiamo un desiderio ardente  
di parer pazzi alla futura etate.  
Onde al vulgo ancor io m'ascondo e celo;  
non leggo e scrivo sempre e 'n mal soggiorno  
perdendo l'ore, spendo e non guadagno.  
Cosa grata non ho dentro o d'intorno,  
testimon m'è colui che regge il cielo;  
di me sol, non d'altrui mi dolgo e lagno.

## VII

### Sonetto alla sua donna

Chiome d'argento fino, irte e attorte  
senz'arte intorno ad un bel viso d'oro;  
fronte crespa, u' mirando io mi scoloro,  
dove spunta i suoi strali Amor e Morte;  
occhi di perle vaghi, luci torte  
da ogni obietto diseguale a loro;  
ciglie di neve e quelle, ond'io m'accoro,  
dita e man dolcemente grosse e corte;  
labra di latte, bocca ampia celeste;  
denti d'ebeno rari e pellegrini;  
inaudita ineffabile armonia;  
costumi alteri e gravi: a voi, divini  
servi d'Amor, palese fo che queste  
son le bellezze della donna mia.

Pietro Bembo. *Prose e Rime*. a cura di Carlo Dionisotti. Torino: UTET, 1966.

## VIII

Crin d'oro crespo e d'ambra tersa e pura,  
ch'a l'aura su la neve ondeggi e vole,  
occhi soave e più chiari ch 'l sole,

da far giorno seren la notte oscura,  
    riso, ch'acqueta ogni aspra pena e dura,  
rubini e perle, ond'escono parole  
sì dolci, ch'altro ben l'alma non vole,  
man d'avorio, che i cor dstringe e fura,  
    cantar, che sembra d'armonia divina,  
senno mature a la più verde etade,  
leggiadria non veduta unqua fra noi,  
    giunta a somma beltà somma onestade,  
fur l'esca del mio foco, e sono in voi  
grazie, ch'a poche il ciel largo destina.

## Chapter Four

### Supernatural Bodies and the Deformed Imagination in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggiero*

#### Introduction

The sixteenth century was a period in which man searched for new ways to understand the universe and find his place in it. These means of investigation involved orthodox religious beliefs but also included natural magic, astrology, alchemy and mysticism. Man pondered the sympathy between celestial bodies and searched for a rational means to access God, whether directly or through supernatural intermediaries. Encouraged by an undercurrent of Neo-Platonism, already present in the Middle Ages in the works of Church Fathers such as St. Augustine, the inquiry into the existence of demons and the supernatural continued into the Renaissance in the philosophy of authors such as Marsilio Ficino.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, demonology reached its pinnacle with the dissemination of the *Malleus maleficarum*, which created a wave of religious anxiety and an epidemic of witch-hunts that lasted throughout much of the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Instability and uncertainty characterized the religious climate of the period.<sup>3</sup> The Counter Reformation attempted to quell Calvinist and Lutheran propositions while eradicating heresy and the ideals of the humanist tradition so

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<sup>1</sup> Fabio Giunta, *Magia e Storia in Torquato Tasso*, (Milano: Edizioni Unicopoli, 2012), 10-13; 39.

<sup>2</sup> Before the publication of the *Malleus maleficarum*, Johannes Nider wrote the *Formicarius*, a treatise in the form of dialogue that dealt with demonology and witchcraft. The treatise was written between 1436-1438, and was published three times between 1472-1484, with five further editions between 1519-1692. The fifth chapter, which deals specifically with witchcraft, was a main source for the *Malleus maleficarum*. Ida Li Vigni, "La Genesis della *Strix* tra realtà storica ed elaborazione letteraria", in Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *La Strega, ovvero degli inganni dei demoni, Saggio introduttivo, traduzione e note*, a cura di Ida Li Vigni, (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), 33.

<sup>3</sup> B. T. Sozzi, "Torquato Tasso e il Manierismo", *Studi Tassiani*, anno 32, (1984), 118.

prominent in the first half of the century began slowly to fade away.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I will examine Torquato Tasso's views of supernatural corporality in works of two different genres, the *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggiero*. While both works attempt to make visible what is apparently absent, I will show how Tasso's dialogue, *Il Messaggiero*, takes the opposite approach to his earlier epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* by attempting first to question and then to rationalize, from a philosophical standpoint, the existence of the supernatural, its corporality and its relationship in regards to humanity.

Tasso was a devout Catholic and the *Gerusalemme Liberata* is an orthodox work that clearly defines a distinction between angels and demons, good and bad. Angels act as messengers of God while the devils of the pagan invaders infuse the soul and imagination with evil and penetrate the psyche of their enemies. On the other hand, *Il Messaggiero* relies heavily on Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, and the demonic/occult elements, and is concerned above all with showing the existence of spirits (daemons) and their role as intermediaries or ambassadors between man and God. These intermediaries explain man's place in the larger cosmos, his link to divinity and God's accessibility to man without violating the principles of reason. The gradual ascent between man and God was bridged by the supernatural (angel, demon, or daemon) but also by the witch, who acted as a living testament to the existence of the supernatural. The dialogue, influenced by the environment of its times, valued the importance of natural magic and daemonology, especially as proposed in the works of humanists such as Ficino and Pico della

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<sup>4</sup> Erminia Ardissino sees Tasso as a precursor to the baroque period, which was characterized by a sense of inevitable ruin and despicable human condition. She states that the religious instability and uncertainty of Tasso's own period could only be countered by redemption. Erminia Ardissino, *L'aspra tragedia, Poesia e Sacro in Torquato Tasso*, (Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1996), 32-33.

Mirandola.<sup>5</sup>

In examining Tasso's two works, I will also discuss Tasso's *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*, in which the poet expresses his literary theories regarding the use of marvelous verisimilitude, which takes the form of the Christian supernatural and is the source of miracles and other wonders in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*. I will also look at Tasso's letters and particularly his descriptions of the disease of melancholy, which affected Tasso for most of his life. As an illness linked to the imagination, melancholy was also connected to demonic influences and manifested itself in religious doubt and fears of heresy. For Tasso, both heresy and melancholy required purification and his letters, especially during his imprisonment in Sant'Anna, mirror Tasso's literary efforts to assuage his religious doubts by attempting to prove the existence of God and the supernatural through religious and philosophical means.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Il meraviglioso verisimile- The Marvelous in Tasso's works***

Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) was born into a noble family in Sorrento in 1544.<sup>7</sup> His father, Bernardo, was a poet of substantial fame, who earned his living working as a courtier.<sup>8</sup> As a young boy, Tasso followed his father to the most important courts in Italy, participating in the intellectual and literary debates that would eventually influence his own career as poet and

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<sup>5</sup> Fabio Giunta believes that scholars today tend to underestimate the influence and weight of magic and witchcraft on Renaissance artists and poets. Giunta, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches", *Annali d'italianistica*, Vol. 12. The Italian Epic & its International Context (1994), 182.

<sup>7</sup> For biographical information on Torquato Tasso, see Claudio Gigante, *Tasso*, (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2007), 13-51 and Matteo Residori, *Tasso*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 17-20. Also seminal is Angelo Solerti, *Vita di Torquato Tasso*, (Torino: Loescher, 1895).

<sup>8</sup> Bernardo's life work and his greatest achievement was *L'Amadigi di Gaula* (1560), a reworking of the *Amadi de Gaula*, a Spanish romance epic by García Rodríguez de Montalvo. Although Bernardo's *Amadigi* followed Ariosto's poem in its digressive romantic episodes, it ultimately failed to seriously rival the *Orlando furioso*. Margaret Ferguson, *Trials of Desire. Renaissance Defenses of Poetry*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 55.



courtier. In 1562, Tasso first presented his literary theories in the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*, which relied heavily upon Aristotle's *Ars poetica* and advocated the use of the marvelous verisimilar, specifically the Christian marvelous. These ideas not only contributed to the larger literary debate of romance epic versus Christian epic, but more importantly explained Tasso's use of supernatural elements in his greatest work, *Gerusalemme Liberata*.

Although Giorgio Valla first published a Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* in 1498 in Venice, the treatise did not gain widespread attention in the larger debate regarding epic poetry until Alessandro de' Pazzi published a revised Latin translation in 1536.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle focused his treatise mainly on epic and tragic poetry, but literary scholars attempted to transpose his ideas into the general discussion regarding the romance epic.<sup>10</sup> These ideas became the underpinning of Tasso's own narrative theories in his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*.<sup>11</sup> By the middle of the sixteenth century authors such as Fracastoro, Giraldi Cinzio, Minturno and others had also published works dealing with poetics.

Tasso experimented very early with epic poetry in works such as *Gierusalemme* (1559-1560), [consisting of one book and 116 octaves], and *Rinaldo* (1562), [consisting of 12 cantos]. His goal was to create an epic poem that could reach a general audience (*un pubblico mezzano*) by conveying a universal truth<sup>12</sup> and was based on historical facts and religious beliefs that spoke

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<sup>9</sup> Francesco Robortello published a full commentary of the *Poetics* in 1548. Other commentaries and literary theory treatises by various authors followed. Translations of the *Iliad* were published in 1544, 1563, and 1572 and the *Odyssey* in 1573 and 1582. The *Aeneid* and *Ars poetica* also enjoyed influence regarding literary theory in the second half of the sixteenth century. See C. P. Brand, *Torquato Tasso. A Study of the Poet and of his Contribution to English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 59.

<sup>10</sup> Guido Baldassari, *Inferno e cielo, Tipologia e funzione del meraviglioso nella Liberata*, (Roma: Bulzoni, 1977), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Although Tasso revised the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* as the *Discorsi del poema eroico* in 1594, his theories regarding the marvelous remained more or less the same.

<sup>12</sup> Residori, 20.

to a modern audience, an epic poem capable of competing with Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*.<sup>13</sup> Although Ariosto's epic poem was widely popular for its fantastic (*favoloso*) episodes and licentious plot lines, it did not conform to the popular classical Aristotelian ideals of epic and was a radically 'irregular' text. As Italy plummeted deeper into the Counter Reformation, literary scholars criticized Ariosto's poem more harshly. At the same time, the *Orlando furioso* did have its defenders, particularly the critics Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio e Giovan Battista Pigna who both published treatises in the work's defense, arguing that the *Orlando Furioso* could not possibly conform to Aristotelian principles because the ancients did not yet know of the romance genre.<sup>14</sup>

The literary controversy raised over the *Orlando furioso* and its continued popularity as well as its hybrid structure fueled Tasso's desire to defend his own belief in Aristotelian principles by writing the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*<sup>15</sup>. Dedicated to his protector and friend, Scipione Gonzaga, the *Discorsi* consists of three books, with sections devoted to the choice of topic, its form and arrangement, and finally, the style and diction of the poem.<sup>16</sup> The *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* are an important theoretical reflection that act as a direct prelude to the

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<sup>13</sup> A complete edition of the *Orlando furioso* was published in 1532.

<sup>14</sup> Giraldi Cinzio published *Discorsi intorno al comporre de' romanzi e delle commedie* (1554) and Pigna published *I romanzi* (1554). See Residori, 22.

<sup>15</sup> The *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e in particolare del poema eroico* were written between 1562-1564, but only published in 1587 without the author's permission. Tasso later revised his epic theory under the title *Discorsi del poema eroico*. See Torquato Tasso, *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e in particolare sopra il poema eroico*, in *Scritti sull'arte poetica, Tomo Primo*, a cura di Ettore Mazzali, (Torino: Einaudi, 1977). See also Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, volume II, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 646-53; B. T. Sozzi, "La poetica del Tasso", *Studi Tassiani*, Anno V (1955), 1428; Lawrence F. Rhu, *The Genesis of Tasso's Narrative Theory, English Translations of the Early Poetics and a Comparative Study of their Significance*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> The *Discorsi* may have consisted of four books instead of three. In two instances, Tasso mentions four books. See also Gigante, 77.

*Gerusalemme Liberata* and offer a helpful interpretation of Tasso's use of the supernatural and magic in his epic poem and other works.<sup>17</sup>

In the first book, Tasso discusses the need to base heroic poetry upon historical facts. By choosing a subject taken from history, the poet not only proposes verisimilitude but also adds veracity to his account:

La materia, che argomento può ancora comodamente chiamarsi, o si finge, ed allora par che il poeta abbia parte non solo nella scelta, ma nella invenzione ancora; o si toglie da l'istorie. Ma molto meglio è, a mio giudizio, che da l'istoria si prenda: perché dovendo l'epico cercare in ogni parte il verisimile ch'una azione illustre, quali sono quelle del poema eroico, non sia stata scritta e passata a la memoria de' posteri con l'aiuto d'alcuna istoria.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, the poet must 'deceive' (*ingannare*) the reader by not only making him accept the events as truth but also simultaneously making him feel as if he were present during those events through both sight and sound. The Greek term for this is *enargeia*, which allows the reader to become a witness, rather than a simple reader.<sup>19</sup> *Enargeia* encompasses the Greek *enargheia* (clarity) and *energheia* (efficacy), allowing the poet to create vivid images before the reader's eyes.<sup>20</sup> Tasso states:

Per questo, dovendo il poeta con la sembianza della verità ingannare i lettori, e non solo persuader loro che le cose da lui trattate sian vere, ma sottoporle in guise a i lor sensi che credano non di leggerle ma di esser presenti e di vederle e di udirle, è necessitate di

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<sup>17</sup> Sozzi, "La poetica del Tasso", 29.

While in Padova during 1560-1562, Tasso frequented the private study of Sperone Speroni, who influenced the young poet's ideas regarding epic theory. Scipione later accused Tasso of plagiarizing the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*. Gigante, 17; 79.

<sup>18</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> G. Zanker, *Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry*, in *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, Neue Folge, 124. Bd., H. 3/4 (1981), 297.

<sup>20</sup> Residori, 104.

guadagnarsi nell'animo loro quest'opinione di verità, il che facilmente con l'autorità dell'istoria gli verrà fatto.<sup>21</sup>

While history should serve as the subject of epic poetry, it must also allow the poet a certain degree of invention in characters and events. Past history is easier to change since events are much more far removed from memory and offer significant leeway for manipulation by the poet. Events can be altered to represent a universal truth, regardless of the veracity of any particular details.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Tasso suggests that historical subjects be not too modern nor too ancient so as to permit changes but also allow the reader to identify with customs and decorum not drastically different from his own:

Prendasi dunque il soggetto del poema epico da istoria di religione vera, ma non sì sacra che sia immutabile, e di secolo non molto remote, né molto prossimo a la memoria di noi ch'ora viviamo.<sup>23</sup>

The most important aspect that an epic poem should relate, and the one that concerns most my research regarding the supernatural in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, is Tasso's theory about the marvelous (*meraviglia*). In the *Ars Poetica*, Aristotle states that "awe is pleasurable" (1460a17), although poets should choose to depict the probable even if impossible, without resorting to the irrational.<sup>24</sup> For Tasso, the marvelous stems exclusively from the Christian supernatural, which can elicit wonder in its readers because it accounts for actions that exceed

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<sup>21</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi*, 5. Tasso alludes to the concept of *enargeia* again in Discourse Three, where he states: "Stando che lo stile sia un instrumento co 'l quale imita il poeta quelle cose che d'imitar si ha proposte, necessaria è in lui l'energia: la quale sì con parole pone innanzi a gli occhi la cosa che pare altrui non di udirla, ma di vederla". Tasso, *Discorsi*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> "e tutti i successi che si fatti trovarà, cioè che meglio in un altro modo potessero essere avvenuti, senza ripetto alcuno di vero o d'istoria a sua voglia muti e rimuti, e riduca gli accidenti delle cose a quele modo ch'egli giudica migliore, co 'l vero alterato il tutto finto accompagnando." Tasso, *Discorsi*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> "Things probable though impossible should be preferred to the possible but implausible. Stories should not comprise irrational components." (1460b26-28). See Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Stephen Halliwell, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 125.

the powers of man. The Christian marvelous is the source of miracles performed by God or entities such as angels, demons, witches, wizards, etcetera.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the marvelous must coincide with verisimilitude, or those actions that we deem true, would otherwise be ineffective.<sup>26</sup> Because poetry is imitation, it must therefore adhere to truth as well as to wonder that elicits awe in the public. Tasso considers both essential to epic and mutually compatible:

La poesia non è in sua natura altro che imitazione; e questo non si può richiamare in dubbio; e l'imitazione non può essere discompagnata dal verisimile, però che tanto significa imitare, quanto far simile: non può dunque parte alcuna di poesia esser separate dal verisimile . . . Ma bench'io stringa il poeta epico ad un obbligo perpetuo di servare il verisimile, non però escludo da lui l'altra parte, cioè il maraviglioso; anzi giudico ch'un'azione medesima possa essere e maravigliosa e verisimile.<sup>27</sup>

Thus on the surface, the marvelous is awe inspiring in itself but, when probed more deeply, it also adheres to the religious verisimilar because marvelous actions reflect the Christian faith, believed to be not only possible but as events that have happened many times and which are documented.<sup>28</sup> These events should adhere to reason and rationale:

Queste medesime, se si avrà riguardo a la virtù ed a la Potenza di chi l'ha operate, versimili saranno giudicate, perché, avendo gli uomini nostri bevuta nelle fasce insieme co 'l latte questa opinione, ed essendo poi in loro confermata da i maestri della nostra santa Fede: ciò che Dio ed i suoi ministri e i demoni ed i maghi, permettendolo lui, possino far cose sopra le forze della natura maravigliose, e leggendo e sentendo ogni di ricordarne novi esempi, non parrà loro fuori del verisimile quello che credono non solo esser possibile, ma stiano spesse fiate esser avvenuto e poter di novo molte volte avvenire.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Baldassari, *Inferno e cielo*, 26; 28.

<sup>26</sup> Baldassari, *Inferno e cielo*, 15-16.

<sup>27</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi*, 8-9.

<sup>28</sup> For Tasso, the marvelous and the verisimilar are ideas that coincide in the Catholic religion. Giovanni Getto, *Malinconia di Torquato Tasso*, (Napoli: Liguori, 1979), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi*, 9.

The marvelous under the guise of the supernatural is thus an essential component of the epic poem:

Attribuisca il poeta alcune operazioni, che di gran lunga eccedono il poter de gli uomini, a Dio, a gli angioli suoi, a' demoni o a coloro a' quali da Dio o da' demoni è concessa questa podestà, quali sono i santi, i maghi e le fate.<sup>30</sup>

The topic of epic therefore must be historical as well as religious, and it must create a sense of credibility in order to also emotionally involve the reader in the plot.<sup>31</sup> This is, as Annabel Patterson calls it, the “true fantastic”.<sup>32</sup> As Tasso points out, examples of the familiar and the similar are more likely to move readers than those of the strange and different. This type of reconciliation between the marvelous and the verisimilar allows Tasso to create a compromise between historical epic and the world of romance poetry, allowing for metamorphosis of both sacred and occult, which I will discuss in further detail ahead.<sup>33</sup> In fact, an important criticism leveled against Ariosto by his critics was that he often strayed from the Scriptures and included

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<sup>30</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Weinberg, 651.

<sup>32</sup> Annabel Patterson, “Tasso and Neoplatonism, The Growth of His Epic Theory”, *Studies in the Renaissance*, Volume 28 (1971), 127.

<sup>33</sup> Although he would write a Christian epic poem, Tasso was also influenced by the Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophies popular in the Renaissance, especially as expressed in the works of Marsilio Ficino, which I will discuss more in detail in my analysis of *Il Messaggiero*.

In the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso’s portrayal of the magician Ismeno, and particularly of the use of black magic, was not simply a literary trick but rather a reflection of a cultural phenomenon prevalent in the Renaissance and to which Tasso was not immune, as reflected in his other works. Natural magic, astrology, and demonology were important topics in Renaissance society as evidenced by the popularity, among others, of Giambattista Della Porta’s *Magia naturale* and Jean Bodin’s *Demonomania*, translated into Italian by Tasso’s friend, Ercole Cato, in 1587. Giovanni Getto, *Nel Mondo della Gerusalemme*, (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1968), 184. For general discussions of natural and demonic magic in the Renaissance, see: D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, (London: The Warburg Institute, 1958); Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964); Paolo Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance, From Ficino, Pico, Della Porta to Trithemius, Agrippa, Bruno*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

heretical, Lutheran, and Calvinist beliefs in his poem, something which Tasso vehemently opposed.<sup>34</sup>

What concern my work from Tasso's second discourse are his theories about the unity of plot and the variety of actions. As mentioned above, Tasso was competing with the popularity of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and he proposed unity of action, namely following one story although not necessarily omitting variety in his poem. As Aristotle states and Tasso reiterates almost verbatim, a poem should have a beginning, middle and end:

Tutta o intiera deve essera la favola perch'in lei la perfezione si ricerca; ma perfetta non può esser quella cosa ch'intiera non sia. Questa integrità si troverà nella favola, s'ella avrà il principio, il mezzo e l'ultimo.<sup>35</sup>

These moments should follow a natural pattern and should not be arbitrary.

The plot should consist of a composition of events, which have a clear resolution in the end.

Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* lacked an ending and Ariosto's *Furioso* was without a beginning.

Even though Tasso appreciates the artistry in both poems, he clearly states that one cannot consider them as separate entities:

Ma si deve come ho detto, considerare l'Orlando innamorato e 'l Furioso non come due libri distinti, ma come un poema solo, cominciato da l'uno, e con le medesime fila, ben che meglio annodate e meglio colorite, da l'altro poeta condotto al fine.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cecilia Coppola, *L'angelo custode e gli angeli del bene e del male nell'epopea di Torquato Tasso*, (Napoli: Longobardi, 2014), 84.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle states: "A whole is that which has a beginning, middle and end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow necessarily from something else, but after which a further event or process naturally occurs. An end, by contrast, is that which itself naturally occurs, whether necessarily or usually, after a preceding event, but need not be followed by anything else. A middle is that which both follows a preceding event and has further consequences. Well-constructed plots, therefore, should neither begin nor end at an arbitrary point, but should make use of the patterns stated." (1450b25-32). Aristotle, 55. See also Tasso, *Discorsi*, 22-23

<sup>36</sup> Tasso, *Discorsi*, 23.

Thus, Tasso refuses Ariosto's use of multiple plots because they can distract and confuse the reader. The size of the poem must be manageable; otherwise the reader risks forgetting the action, and the various episodes become many poems instead of a single one. Tasso criticizes the unnatural transitions between scenes that were so characteristic of Italian epics; poets frequently break the flow of the narrative to turn their attention to another episode. This maneuver again contradicts Aristotle who states that plot lengths must be reasonable so that the reader can remember them (1451a4-5).<sup>37</sup> Tasso emphasizes that a forced move from scene to scene emphasizes the boundaries between episodes even more, highlighting their artificiality, rather than being smooth and natural.<sup>38</sup> A storyline with multiple, unfinished episodes also allows for an interminable narrative while Tasso prefers a rigorous storyline.

While Tasso advocates unity of plot, he states that it can also have variety and multiplicity. A poet who can find variety in a single action is praiseworthy.<sup>39</sup> He compares the unity of plot with the example of the 'world', which is one entity but contains many different elements and therefore must maintain a discordant concordance (*discordie concordia*) to make them all work together.<sup>40</sup> Tasso rejects the multiplicity of plots in Ariosto's work, arguing that such variety equals heresy and that a single plot remains true to a Christian epic.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Rhu, 42-43.

<sup>39</sup> Before the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the greatest attempt to rival Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* came from Giangiorgio Trissino's *L'Italia Liberata da' Goti* (1547/48). Tasso considered Trissino's endeavor a failure: "Il Trissino, d'altra parte, che i poemi d'Omero religiosamente si propose d'imitare e dentro i precetti d'Aristotele si ristrinse, mentovato da pochi, letto da pochissimi, prezzato quasi da nissuno, muto nel teatro nel mondo, è morto alla luce degli uomini, sepolto a pena nelle librerie e nello studio d'alcun letterato se ne rimane." Tasso, *Discorsi*, 26. After Trissino, there were at least eight attempts at an epic to rival Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*: Alamanni's *Girone* (1548), Giraldis Cinzio's *Ercole* (1557), Pigna's *Eroici* (1561), Cattaneo's *Amor di Marfisa* (1562), Bolognetti's *Costante* (1565), Oliverio's *Alamanna* (1567). See A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), 180.

<sup>40</sup> The plot of the poem should be a "single action performed by a single agent composed of many members". Walter Stephens, "Metaphor, Sacrament, and the Problem of Allegory in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, volume 4 (1991), 246.



While Tasso's own choice of plot for the *Gerusalemme Liberata* came from a famous episode in history, it also reflected the ambitions and anxieties of the modern day political situation in Europe.<sup>42</sup> This is apparent in the tensions that were present between Europe (with Venice at the forefront) and the Ottoman Empire in regards to political and commercial control of the Mediterranean Sea. In 1571 Pope Pius IV created the Holy League, a collaboration of Catholic states with the intent to end the Ottoman control of the Mediterranean. In the famous Battle of Lepanto in 1571, the Holy League crushed the Ottoman fleet. And so Tasso's subject choice also represented a modern day example of the unification of a Christian/European people in response to a threat of a Turkish, and by consequence, pagan invasion.<sup>43</sup>

In Italy<sup>44</sup>, and in particular at the court of Ferrara where Tasso resided, the Counter Reformation created an environment of suspicion and fear, and tensions between the Papacy and the Este family were exasperated by the stay of Jean Calvin at the court of Ferrara in 1537 and the subsequent conversion of Alfonso d'Este's mother, Renata of France, to Calvinism.<sup>45</sup> With

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Tasso also criticized Ariosto for constantly using his own voice in the poem, which goes against the rules of Aristotle. Aristotle states that the poet should speak as little as possible in his own voice (*Poetics*, 1460a6-8). Aristotle, 123. He also rejects the adding of extra glosses to a poem that he felt were completely unnecessary. For Tasso, the poet/narrator is important but he must not introduce or interrupt the story in any way.

<sup>41</sup> Baldassari, *Inferno e Cielo*, 62. See also Sergio Zatti, "L'uniforme Cristiano e il multiforme pagano nella *Gerusalemme Liberata*", *Belfagor*, Jan. 1, 1976; 31, 388; Francesca Savoia, "Notes on the Metaphor of the Body in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*" in *Western Jerusalem, University of California Studies on Tasso*, edited by Luisa del Giudice, (New York, Out of London Press, 1984), 67.

<sup>42</sup> Tasso wanted to make his poem sound Homeric since Aristotle consistently cited the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* as examples of the rules he laid out in the *Ars Poetica*. Tasso chose an episode of history in which the Christian crusaders were aggressive and imperialistic. See Cavallo, 204.

<sup>43</sup> *The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume III, The Counter-Reformation and the Price Revolution 1559-1610*, edited by R. B. Wernham, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 252-253.

<sup>44</sup> The political and religious atmosphere of the mid sixteenth century was uncertain. Protestant factions challenged the Catholic Church's hegemony and the Church reacted by introducing the Roman Inquisition in 1542, the Index of Prohibited Books and the Council of Trent in 1545. Religious authorities began to slowly suppress the spirit of free thought that defined the early Renaissance. *The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume III*, 1-39. See also A. G. Dickens, *The Counter Reformation*, (New York: Norton, 1968), 107-119.

<sup>45</sup> *The Cambridge Modern History, Volume II, The Reformation 1520-1559*, edited by G. R. Elton, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1958), 261. Tasso was most likely affected by the reforms and Protestant attacks against the Catholic Church and its traditions, and this is evident in his writing, especially the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which attempts to safeguard the rituals of the Church. Ardisino, *L'aspra tragedia*, 71. The climate in Ferrara during Tasso's stay in court was one of suspicion and distrust. As a Catholic, Tasso did not want to

rising fears of heresy, Renata was forced to move back to France in 1559. The court of Ferrara attempted to become more orthodox in an attempt to appease the Papacy by maintaining an official image of Catholic piety and religious fervor.<sup>46</sup> As a feudal subject of the Papacy, Alfonso was under pressure to produce a legitimate heir in Ferrara under the threat of annexation to the Papal States.<sup>47</sup> Despite three marriages, Alfonso failed to produce an heir and Ferrara eventually came under the rule of the Papal States in 1598 during the papacy of Clement VIII.<sup>48</sup>

Tasso began his service in the Este court in 1565. It was during the years in Ferrara that Tasso composed what we now call the *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Initially dedicated to Luigi d'Este, Tasso changed the poem's patron to Alfonso d'Este, when he passed into Alfonso's service in 1571.<sup>49</sup> Originally entitled *Goffredo*, the poem glorified the Este lineage and cast them as champions of the Catholic faith. The final draft, ultimately abandoned in 1575, was the product of Tasso's earlier poetic attempts in the *Gierusalemme* and the *Rinaldo*.

In 1575, Tasso sent the *Goffredo* to Rome to Scipione Gonzaga, who had gathered a group of literary men in order to critique the poem on the merits of its morality, religion and literary value. The revisers consisted of Gonzaga, Sperone Speroni, Piero Angeli da Barga, Flaminio de' Nobilie and Silvio Antoniano.<sup>50</sup> Tasso was especially worried about the religious

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compromise himself and did not agree with his first patron's, Luigi d'Este, opinions regarding some religious doctrines. Giampiero Giampieri, *Torquato Tasso: una psicobiografia*, (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1995), 33. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Ferrara was also the seat of a number of Anabaptist and other sects, increasing the fears of heresy. Giampieri, 68.

<sup>46</sup> Residori, 36.

<sup>47</sup> From the twelfth century forward, the Este dynasty maintained power in Ferrara despite various illegitimate rulers. Eleonora Stoppino, *Genealogies of Fiction, Women Warriors and the Dynastic Imagination in the Orlando Furioso*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 76.

<sup>48</sup> *The Cambridge Modern History, Volume II*, 261-262.

<sup>49</sup> Tasso had a troubled relationship with his first patron, Cardinal Luigi d'Este. He accused the Cardinal of heresy because of his relationship with the Huegenots and disagreed with his opinions regarding some of the dogmas of the Catholic Church. In regards to personal matters, Tasso also accused Luigi d'Este of paying him poorly and causing many of his troubles. Giampieri, 32-33.

<sup>50</sup> It was not uncommon for authors to submit their works for revisions to readers with whom they could exchange ideas, and these groups of influential literary men were instrumental in gaining the permission to publish the work.

orthodoxy of his work and wanted to avoid any hint of heresy. This ultimately back-fired as the pedantic revisers could not appreciate the novelty in Tasso's poem. The correspondences between Tasso and the men and Tasso's efforts to explain and defend his poetic choices are all documented in numerous letters, and ultimately lead him to abandon the poem indefinitely in 1576.<sup>51</sup>

### **Bodies of Air- Angelic intervention and demonic deformity in the *Gerusalemme Liberata***

In Tasso's most famous work, the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the supernatural plays a fundamental role in the action. Tasso introduces the supernatural not only as a means of following classical epic examples, but also in an attempt to work through personal religious doubts that will manifest themselves more clearly in his letters and particularly in the dialogue *Il Messaggero*, which I will discuss ahead. The supernatural beings in the *Gerusalemme Liberata* are not abstract; they are real characters that advance and hinder the plans of their mortal counterparts. They are not only essential to the plot but also represent the manifestation of the beliefs of the Catholic Church at the end of the sixteenth century. When Tasso discussed the use of the Christian marvelous in his *Discorsi*, he was referring to the belief in and interaction with the divine and the demonic that was a daily reality in Renaissance society. The poetry of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* is the search for the absent, the need to show that God, Christ, and his

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<sup>51</sup> The letters between Tasso and the Roman revisers were published in 1587 without Tasso's permission in the *Lettere poetiche*, a compilation of some fifty letters. The *Goffredo* itself would also be published in 1581 without the author's permission under the new title *Gerusalemme Liberata*. See Torquato Tasso, *Lettere poetiche*, a cura di Carla Molinari, (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo/Ugo Guanda Editore, 1995).

angels are present and participate in humanity, and Tasso attempts to do so by give these seemingly empty symbols a body with which to represent a supernatural reality.<sup>52</sup>

The *Gerusalemme Liberata* represents a synthesis of fading Renaissance humanist ideals and the religious anxiety of the Counter Reformation. The angels of the poem are a symbol of God's love and support for the Christians. The devils, on the other hand, side with the infidels and empty the hearts of the crusaders, dissolving any positive feelings. Tasso is also responding to man's innate desire to connect with a higher, supernatural power and angels are a means by which to communicate with God. The goal of the poem is to show that God is not indifferent to man's suffering and that He is present in our lives.<sup>53</sup> The angels are an intermediary between man and God, a plausible interaction between the human and spiritual dimensions. Thus, Tasso is reasserting his Christian faith and his belief in the supernatural, and he is also not afraid to use magic in this endeavor.<sup>54</sup>

This innate desire to give bodies to the supernatural was as much a consequence of asserting reason as it was of Tasso's personal need to also distinguish between religion (true apparitions sent by God) and the disease of melancholy, which affected him most of his life. Tasso lives a constant anxiety regarding the supernatural and a feeling of being abandoned by God. His work represents the ideas of the late sixteenth century, which is often characterized as both a period of religious torment as well as one that is open to new conceptions of the supernatural.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ardissino, *L'aspra tragedia*, 30.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Stephens, "La demonologia nella poetica di Tasso", *Torquato Tasso e l'università*, a cura di Walter Moretti e Luigi Pepe, (Firenze: Olschki, 1997), 422.

<sup>54</sup> Coppola, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Ardissino, *L'aspra tragedia*, 16.

In the first canto of the *Liberata*, we immediately encounter divinity in the presence of God, who from high above on His throne in Heaven surveys the Crusaders in Jerusalem. God contemplates all of the important princes, reading the intentions in their hearts, and chooses Goffredo of Buglione as the head of His army. The initial appearance of a divine figure has important precedence in the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as earlier Renaissance epics, in which God is alerted to the plight of the Crusaders by an angel. In the *Liberata*, God appears in the first person four times in the poem and adopts human qualities. He is directly interested in and involved with the human plight in Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup> His presence creates an interesting tension between the epic narrative that Tasso wanted to imitate and the Christian theology that he so desperately wanted to rationalize and represent anthropomorphically.<sup>57</sup>

The first divine encounter between man and spirit in the *Gerusalemme Liberata* occurs in Canto I, with the appearance of the archangel Gabriel. Through Gabriel, God states that He has chosen Goffredo as the leader of the Christian camp. He chooses Goffredo because of his faith and zeal in the Christian religion, and his lack of desire for any mortal glory. God elects Gabriel to be his messenger and sends him directly to the Christian knight.

The hierarchy that exists in Heaven is now reflected in the army on earth. Goffredo, the zealous and pure hearted captain, is the head of the army, whose members, the errant knights (*i compagni errant*)<sup>58</sup> are distracted by individual agendas that prevent them from directly and quickly obtaining their ultimate goal, the conquest of the Holy Sepulcher. On a metaphorical

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C.P. Brand characterizes Tasso's constant revisions of his works and his need for absolution from the Inquisition as a sign of the age in which he lives, in addition to his own personal anxieties. Brand, 100.

<sup>56</sup> Tobias Gregory, *From Many Gods to One. Divine Action in Renaissance Epic*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 153. See also Tobias Gregory, "Tasso's God: Divine Action in *Gerusalemme Liberata*", *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, (Summer, 2002), 559-595.

<sup>57</sup> Giovanni Getto describes the discourses of Tasso's God as 'overly humanized'. See Getto, *Malinconia di Torquato Tasso*, 356.

<sup>58</sup> Canto I, 1, v. 8. Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a cura di Lanfranco Caretti, (Torino: Einaudi, 1993), 13.

plane, we can view God/Christ as the head and the Christians as the body. On the terrestrial level, Goffredo represents the head and his crusaders represent the body. There also develops a clear antithesis and a conflict between opposing ideological worlds: God versus Satan, a united Christian army (Christian truth) versus a multiform pagan army (heresy), the pious Goffredo versus his errant knights, etcetera.<sup>59</sup> The outcome of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* is never in question; the crusaders, with the help of God, will win the battle because the battle between Christians and pagans is ultimately a battle between God and Satan, good and evil.<sup>60</sup> All these themes feed into Tasso's arguments in the *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*, in that variety equals heresy and that the unity of plot (the communal goal to liberate Jerusalem) opposes the multiplicity of action (the romance episodes that hinder that goal). As Sergio Zatti illustrates, these opposite ideals also represent, on one side, the humanist and secular ideals of the first half of the fifteenth century against the repressive ideals of the Counter Reformation in the second half of the Renaissance.<sup>61</sup>

The choice to send Gabriel is seen as a logical one; as an archangel, Gabriel is historically known as a divine messenger. He appears in the Scriptures twice: the first time he helps Daniel to interpret a vision and then announces the coming of Jesus. In the Gospels, Gabriel brings the news of two births, that of John the Baptist and most importantly, he appears to Mary with the news of the Immaculate Conception and the birth of the Messiah.<sup>62</sup> Gabriel is

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<sup>59</sup> Zatti, "L'uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano", 388.

<sup>60</sup> Brand, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Zatti, *L'uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano*, 388. See also Sergio Zatti, *L'uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano*, *Saggio sulla "Gerusalemme Liberata"*, (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1983).

<sup>62</sup> The Gospel of Luke 1:11-23, 26-38. It is here that Mary utters the famous phrase "*sono l'ancilla tua*" which is repeated by Armida to Rinaldo as he leaves her garden in Canto XVI. Gabriel also appears in the Old Testament, Daniel 8:15-27, to explain a prophecy.

the messenger of prophecies and interventions.<sup>63</sup> His appearance to Goffredo imitates the Annunciation and establishes Goffredo's position as the leader of the Christian army, sanctifying the mission to conquer Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher as a mission backed by God himself.<sup>64</sup>

When Gabriel appears to Goffredo, he takes on a human form and appears to the captain at dawn (a time between sleep and wakefulness), while Goffredo is immersed in prayers (a state of higher consciousness perhaps, as if in a dream state).<sup>65</sup> Christian angels did not have a body so Gabriel dons a fictive one by compressing air into a physical form, resembling a human body.<sup>66</sup> Because angels are body-less, immortal and do not feel pain, Gabriel adopts a form that is not inherent to him in order to become visible to Goffredo. In fact, as we shall see ahead regarding the 'daemon' in Tasso's *Il Messaggero*, Gabriel assumes the body of a young, blond boy. This particular body is beautiful and pleasing, and adheres to the Renaissance ideals of beauty. It also a body that Goffredo can easily recognize and admire because it is human:

Così parlogli, e Gabriel s'accinse  
veloce ad eseguir l'imposte cose:  
la sua forma invisibil d'aria cinse  
ed al senso mortal la sottopose.  
Umane membra, aspetto uman si finse,  
ma di celeste maestà il compose;  
tra giovene e fanciullo età confine  
prese, ed ornò di raggi il biondo crine.  
Ali bianche vestí, c'han d'ore le cime,  
infaticabilmente agili e preste. (*GL, I, 13-14*)<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Rosa Giorgi, *Saints in Art*, edited by Stefano Zuffi, translated by Thomas Michael Hartmann, (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 140.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Stephens, "Saint Paul Among the Amazons. Gender and Authority in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*", *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, edited by Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 192.

<sup>65</sup> Dreams have traditionally been the means by which divine messages are delivered, both in Biblical writings and also in the classical tradition. See Carlo Noero, *Il Notturmo nella Gerusalemme Liberata, Studi Tassiani*, Anno XIV-XV, 1964-64, 35-39.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Stephens describes the assuming of a false body as "performativity". See Walter Stephens, "Habeas Corpus. Demonic Bodies in Ficino, Psellus, and Malleus maleficarum", in *The Body in Early Modern Italy*, edited by Julia L. Hairston and Walter Stephens, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 75.

<sup>67</sup> Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, 17.

Goffredo does not question the rationality of his vision; he accepts the appearance of the angel and his message unequivocally.<sup>68</sup> The captain is spurred to actively participate in the Crusade, ready to give his life in battle. Gabriel's appearance to Goffredo not only solidifies his position as captain, but more importantly, inflames Goffredo's heart with vigor and divine passion.<sup>69</sup> As we shall see ahead, the appearance of Gabriel is similar to that of the visitor in Tasso's *Il Messaggero*; however, the angel's presence, rather than merely inspiring curiosity or reasonable doubt, inflames Goffredo's heart with religious zeal and love. In Canto I, 18 Tasso specifically uses the verbs *bramava*, *infiamma*, *arde*, as well as the nouns *favilla* and *fiamma* to underline the concept of fire that is closely associated with angels. In fact, the angel resembles the sight of a beloved, whose image is emblazoned on the lover's heart and provokes a deeper contemplation of the spiritual, rather than a sexual desire.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, as will be evidenced in *Il Messaggero*, malignant spirits (daemons) also act as lovers but they are purely interested in a corporeal union with humans not a spiritual one.

People commonly believed in the appearance of angels in human form through the process of inspissation.<sup>71</sup> St. Augustine writes about certain demons in the *City of God*, who

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<sup>68</sup> Goffredo's new position as captain of the army does not inflate his ego; rather, it inflates his heart with a newly found vigor and religiosity. Coppola, 39.

<sup>69</sup> Coppola, 36. Gabriel is the angel most connected with fire. He is traditionally pictured with flaming wings and ignites divine zeal in the hearts of men. Angels are the closest beings to God and bring light and energy that lights fire and purifies the soul. In fact, the name seraphin from "seraf" also signifies burning and pious fire. Coppola, 39-40.

<sup>70</sup> In *Il Messaggero*, Tasso also mentions that the body with which spirits appear to men is so beautiful that it becomes impressed upon their imagination: "E ciò suole avvenire perché gli spiriti in sogno s'appresentano a gli uomini in forma bellissima e augusta e superior a l'umana, quale è quella ch' in me vedi, sì che la lor fantasia, quasi tenacissima cera, s'imprime d'una imagine di bellezza più che mortale . . ." Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 464.

<sup>71</sup> Inspissation is a condensing of air and vapors to form the semblance of a body. In his *Summa Theologica* I.51.art.2.ad3, St. Thomas Aquinas that angels can assume bodies by condensing air. See Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, volume I, (Chicago: Willaim Benton/Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 277. In regards to demons, aerial bodies are also discussed in the *Malleus maleficarum*, Part II, Question I, chapter 4. See also Stephens, "La demonologia nella poetica del Tasso, 417.



according to the Platonists were between man and gods; they belonged to the animal species, had a rational mind but were subject to the passions. Their body was made of air and their lives spanned an eternity (Book IX, 12).<sup>72</sup> Augustine also mentions *daemones* or *daemonia*, which always denote malignant spirits when cited in the Bible (Book IX, 19).<sup>73</sup> God utilized angels to interact with man on a creature level; He is visible through angels in human form but his message is always divine. Such angels are therefore a revelation of God himself by means of an indirect mode.<sup>74</sup>

The next important instance of a direct supernatural appearance occurs in Canto VII, when the older knight Raimondo volunteers to battle Argante in the place of the missing Tancredi. Before the duel, Raimondo prays to God, who answers him by dispatching a guardian angel for his protection. The angel, himself, prepares for battle by choosing a large, diamond shield from among a cache of divine weapons. As Argante bombards Raimondo with blows, the angel (called by Tasso a “messenger”) fends off a mortal blow with his shield and shatters Argante’s sword into small pieces<sup>75</sup>:

ma l’aiuto l’invisible vicino  
non mancò lui di quell’ superno messo,  
che stese il bracci e tolse il ferro crudo  
sovra il diamante del celeste scudo. (*GL*, VII, 92)

Of course, both Raimondo and Argante are unaware of the angel’s presence, as he does not assume a human form but remains imperceptible. Stunned at the turn of events, Argante

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<sup>72</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson, (New York: Penguin, 1972), 356. Augustine mentions again in Book XXI, Chapter 10 that demons have bodies made of thick, moist air.

<sup>73</sup> St. Augustine, 365-366.

<sup>74</sup> Coppola, 26.

<sup>75</sup> The etymology of the word *angelos* comes from the Greek for “messenger”. Oxford English Dictionary Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/7458?rskey=pdL1mR&result=1> (accessed February 26, 2016).

stands at a disadvantage. It is now the turn of demonic forces to intervene in the battle and the demon Beelzebub, also using inspissation, gathers cloud vapors to create a human form resembling the warrior Clorinda, in both body and speech.<sup>76</sup> Tasso describes this airy ‘double’ as both marvelous and monstrous:

Argante, il tuo periglio allor tal era  
Quando auitarti Belzebú dispose.  
questi di cava nube ombra leggiera  
(mirabil mostro) in forma d’uom compose:  
e la sembianza di Clorinda altera  
gli finse, e l’arme ricche e luminose . . . (GL, VII, 99)

The supernatural does not appear in first person but creates a second, fictive but familiar body in the form of Clorinda in order to deceive the archer Oladino. In the *City of God*, St. Augustine describes the deception perpetrated by devils as most effective when they appear in the guise of friends or other acquaintances and alter our perception of reality. Demons are most dangerous when they transform themselves into angels of light to deceive men.<sup>77</sup> This shade of Clorinda convinces Oladino to violate the rules of the duel by shooting Raimondo in the chest. Although the arrow pierces Raimondo’s hauberk and draws blood, his guardian angel intervenes and does not permit it to kill him. At this point both armies rush to battle and when the Christian forces seem to have the upper hand, they are again prevented from victory by devils that stir up a great storm ending the battle.

Tasso bases this episode closely on the duel between Paris and Menelaus in the *Illiad* (Illiad 3.25; 3.370); however, it is evident that the power struggle between the forces of good and

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<sup>76</sup> In Christian tradition, Beelzebub was a high-ranking devil and one of the three prominent fallen angels, along with Lucifer and Leviathan. Giunta, 59.

<sup>77</sup> St. Augustine, Book XXI, Ch. 6, p. 975

evil is unequal in the *Gersulemme Liberata*.<sup>78</sup> Although God gives Satan and his demons enough leeway to temporarily disrupt the goals of the Crusaders, it is evident that God is always in control and that such disruptions only occur because He permits them in the first place.<sup>79</sup> In fact, this is a problem that Tasso faces for the entire work; while Renaissance epics are based on the classical tradition, it is hardly adequate to substitute a Christian God and divine supernatural forms into the place of classical deities. While classical gods argue amongst each other and can even be deceived, the Christian supernatural acts under the authority of God, whose power is infallible, as is the final outcome of the poem.<sup>80</sup>

In Canto IX, Solimano attacks the Christian camp at night as God watches the action from above. He is seated on His throne, far away from the battle and Tasso describes Heaven as a place not only unattainable physically but removed from Reason, as man's senses cannot comprehend it:

Sedeà colà dond'Egli e buono e giusto  
dà legge al tutto e 'l tutto orna e produce  
sovra I bassi confin del mondo angusto,  
ove senso o ragion non si conduce;  
e de l'Eternità nel trono angusto  
risplendea con tre lumi una luce. (*GL*, IX, 56)

God is inaccessible and far from the action. Spontaneity rather than prayers spur Him to action, as He summons the Archangel Michael to his side. God directs Michael to help the Christians by ordering him to chase the infernal spirits that are interfering in the battle back to

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<sup>78</sup> See specifically Book 3.25 and 3.370 for the duel between Paris and Menelaus. Homer, *The Illiad*, translated by Herbert Jordan, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2008).

<sup>79</sup> In Canto VII, 114 the storm that the devils stir is a concession that God allows them, thus delaying the Christian victory. God grants a certain degree of leeway to the devils, expressed in the statement: "Sendole ciò permesso" (*GL*, VII, 114, v. 7).

<sup>80</sup> Gregory, 572.

hell.<sup>81</sup> Just as Gabriel before him, Michael literally spreads his wings and instantly appears in the sky above the battle. Although he is invisible to the warriors below, Tasso clearly describes the archangel as hovering above the battlefield with wings spread, in a crucial meteorological nexus in the sky, where fire (thunder and lightning) meets air (clouds and rain): “vien poi da’ campi lieti e fiammeggianti/ d’eterno di là donde tuona e piove,/ove se stesso il mondo struggle e pasce,/ e ne le guerre sue more e rinasce.” (*GL*, IX, 61, 5-8).<sup>82</sup> Michael wields a lance as he herds the devils back into Hell, reminding them that God has chosen the crusaders to win the battle for Jerusalem. Popular iconography traditionally portrayed Michael (whose name means “Who is like God?”) in full armor, leading God’s army of angels into battle against the devil in the Book of Revelations (Rev. 12.7).<sup>83</sup> Michael ultimately defeats Satan, often pictured as a dragon, and throws Satan and the fallen angels down to Earth.

Michael returns in Canto XVIII when he appears to Goffredo as the Christians make their final assault on Jerusalem. Clad in celestial armor, Michael is visible only to Goffredo and points out the celestial army which aids the Crusaders:

Drizza pur gli occhi a riguardar l’immenso  
essercito immortal ch’è in aria accolto,  
ch’io dinanzi torrotti il nuvol denso  
di vostra umanità, ch’intorno avvolto  
adombrando t’appanna il mortal senso,  
sì che vedrai gli ignudi spiriti in volto;  
e sostener per breve spazio I rai  
de l’angeliche forme anco potrai. (*GL*, XVIII, 93)

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<sup>81</sup> The Archangel Michael’s intervention helps the crusaders return to their original goal. His mission is to show man the way to good and to God. He is often represented as a warrior against evil and also holding a balance to measure a man’s soul. Coppola, 91;112.

<sup>82</sup> Michael is also patron of the elements and he can command the earth, sky, water as well as the forces of the cosmos. Coppola, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Giorgi, 274.

While Goffredo is able to see Michael, the Archangel must lift the cloud of humanity that obscures Godfrey's vision in order for him to see the angelic army, which Tasso describes as lacking bodies (*ignudi spiriti*). Michael acts as a soul's guide to the other side, the light.<sup>84</sup> This adheres to the basic belief of Christian theologians that states that angels, in their original state, are without bodies. Goffredo is thus privileged among other knights; he is the Captain and allegorical head of the army, and on a spiritual level, he directly interacts with both Michael and Gabriel, and is an eye witness to other angels, which most Christians do not see.<sup>85</sup>

Goffredo also comes into direct contact with unidentified angels (presumably his guardian angel, it is unclear whether he is an Archangel or not) in two other instances in the poem. In Canto XI, Clorinda wounds him in battle and the doctor's efforts to remove the arrow from Goffredo's leg are futile. His tormented cries are answered when his guardian angel descends to directly intervene in Goffredo's recovery. Although the angel does not appear in a distinctly recognizable body, the doctor Erotimo clearly senses the divine intervention: "L'arte maestra/te non risana o la mortal mia destra,/maggior virtù ti salva; un angiol, credo,/medico per te fatto, è scesco in terra,/ché di celeste mano i segni vedo." (*GL*, XI, 74)<sup>86</sup>

After Goffredo makes a speech to his troops before their final battle and the conquest of the Sepulcher, they raise the standard of the Crusaders and he is once again exalted by his guardian angel, who encircles him with his wings. The splendor of the angelic lights seems to create a luminous crown around Goffredo's head, visible for all of the knights to see. Following

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<sup>84</sup> Coppola, 91.

<sup>85</sup> Stephens, "La demonologia nella poetica di Tasso", 412.

<sup>86</sup> Goffredo's guardian angel is most likely acting under the authority of the Archangel Raphael, who was known as "God's doctor", because he healed both physical and emotional pain. Coppola, 100.

similar episodes in the *Aeneid*, the luminous crown is a foreshadowing of his future sovereignty (*GL*, XX, 20).<sup>87</sup>

In the portrayal of the battle between God and Satan/Heaven and Hell in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Satan and his devils appear much closer to earth than the angels of Heaven. Of course, the outcome of the battle is never in question and God allows the demonic forces only enough freedom to cause measured havoc in the epic plot. In fact, the demonic disturbances, of which there are many, make up the romance aspect of the narrative and are key in leading Goffredo's knights astray from their pious path.

The reader's first encounter with the Devil comes in Canto IV where Tasso gives a detailed view of Satan (*Plutone*) presiding over his infernal council. Some critics view this as the true beginning of the poem because Satan lays out his plan to stop the Christians and thus offers a detailed plot of the poem.<sup>88</sup>

Tasso describes Satan as sitting on his throne with a large scepter while the grotesque monsters of Hell gather at his feet. While Tasso never describes God physically, he does tell us that Satan is very tall, has a massive head with horns, large red eyes, a bearded mouth gaping with black blood, and a hairy chest. Even though he is monstrous, Satan has a human shape:

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<sup>87</sup> See *Aeneid*, Book II, 682-683 and Book VII, 73-74.

<sup>88</sup> Sia destin ciò ch'io voglio: altri disperse  
se 'n vada errando, altri rimanga ucciso,  
altri in cure d'amore lascive immerse  
idol si faccia un dolce sguardo e un riso.  
Sia il ferro incontra 'l suo rettore converso  
da lo stool ribellante e 'n sé diviso:  
pèra il campo e ruini, e resti in tutto  
ogni vestigio suo con lui distrutto. (*GL*, IV, 17)

Orrida maestà nel fero aspetto  
terrore accresce, e piú superbo il rende:  
rosseggian gli occhi, e di veneno infetto  
come infausta comet ail gaurdo splende,  
gl'involva il mento e su l'irsuto petto  
ispida e folta la gran barba scende,  
e in guisa di voragine profonda  
s'apre la bocca d'atro sangue immonda. (*GL*, IV, 7)

Tasso bases the variety and extent of monstrosity in the infernal council on the classical tradition. He manages to maintain a high stylistic register even in the description of these horrible monsters.<sup>89</sup> The demonic council is not a side note or distraction to the epic action; rather, it is an integral part of the plot. The vast gamut of monsters includes chimeras, harpies, hydras centaurs, sphinxes, gorgons and pythons and parallels the diversity and multitude of the different nations that make up the pagan army. For Tasso, this variety equals heresy and this is later clearly evidenced when Emireno attempts to address the pagans but fails to do so directly since they all speak different languages. Satan and his demons' debasement into animal shapes symbolizes their fall from grace.<sup>90</sup>

Satan begins his speech by extolling his own position and that of the devils in Hell in regards to their eternal plight. God deemed these demons rebel souls without the possibility of forgiveness. Satan curses mankind because God has privileged humanity above the demons (who were once celestial in nature), but God also defends mankind by bestowing forgiveness:

Ed in vece del dí sereno e puro,  
De l'aureo sol, de gli stellate giri,  
N'ha qui rinchiusi in questo abisso oscuro,  
Né vuol ch'al primo onor per noi s'aspiri;

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<sup>89</sup> Tasso's Infernal Council is not a completely new thematic- it imitates both Virgil's *Aeneid* (6.320-330) and Marco Girolamo Vida's *Christiad* (1.121ss) published in 1535. Remo Fasani, "Il Racconto di Armida: Dalla finzione all realtà", in *Torquato Tasso e la cultura estense*, a cura di Gianni Venturi, tomo I, (Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1999), 129. See also Baldassari, *Inferno e Cielo*, 42.

<sup>90</sup> Zatti, "L'uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano", 399- 400.

E poscia (ahi quanto a ricordarlo è duro!  
Quest' è quell che più inaspra i miei martíri)  
Ne' bei seggi celesti ha l'uom chiamato,  
L'uom vile e di vil fango in terra nato. (*GL*, IV, 10)

Satan urges his devils to empty the hearts of the crusaders and erase positive sentiments. In fact, he commands evil forces to extinguish (*ammorzare*) the religious zeal of the men, “questa fiamma crescente omai s’ammorze” (*GL* IV, 16, v. 6) by introducing a specific course of temptations and other obstacles, both physical and psychological, to lead the crusaders into perdition rather than salvation. The evil spirits erupt into the world to darken the sky and bring war, “vengan fuor de le natie lor grotte/ad oscurar il cielo, a portar guerra/a i gran regni del mare e de la terra”(GL, IV, 18, vv. 6-8). Here the use of the verb *oscurare* [to darken] is also representative of the battle between the light of knowledge and the darkness of repression.<sup>91</sup>

The discourse on the plight of demons brings the reader back to the question of supernatural corporality since many Christian theologians argued about the position of demons in regards to their eternal damnation. After the Fall of Mankind, angels remained in Heaven while demons resided in the lower and coarser air closer to the earth.<sup>92</sup> Demons suffer their punishment in a state that according to some scholars was more susceptible to the element of fire. Consequently, some Christian scholars also argued that God’s forgiveness of sins depended exclusively on an incarnate body, as God understood the vulnerability and frailty of the human body. Demons did not possess a body and therefore, could not receive forgiveness and were damned for eternity.<sup>93</sup> In the Middle Ages, Christian theologians believed that only God could truly be incorporeal thus by consequence, angels and demons must possess some sort of body.

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<sup>91</sup> Coppola, 54.

<sup>92</sup> Dylan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies, Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 128.

<sup>93</sup> Demons cannot derive pleasure from sins of the flesh because they lack real bodies. They can, however, suffer from the sins of pride and envy, as well as taking vicarious pleasure through humanity’s sins. Elliott, 135-137.



By the sixteenth century, however, religious authorities had concluded that both angels and demons were incorporeal.<sup>94</sup>

As Tasso describes it, the war between Heaven and Hell is to be decided on the battlefield rather than as result of morality. For the time being, God and his crusaders have the upper hand while Satan and his demons continue to fight with the intent to change the course of action, rejecting the notion that God has always ruled the Heavens. As Sergio Zatti points out, Satan frames his discourse in an anti-colonial manner, railing against the perceived imperialism of Heaven. As God rules in Heaven, banning the fallen angels to Hell, the Crusaders also expect to submit the citizens of Jerusalem into their control, without accepting a pluralistic society made up of different religions.<sup>95</sup> The plurality and liberty for which Satan argues is also reflective of the crisis in Renaissance society – it is depictive of a rebellion against the Counter Reformation and in favor of the intellectual freedom so common in the first half of the sixteenth century. Zatti claims that Tasso even appears to sympathize emotionally with the pagans/devils in the poem because their plight is symbolic of the modern day situation which Tasso lives- a moment in history in which the Catholic Church attempts to curb religious and individual freedoms.<sup>96</sup>

While demonic beings in the *Liberata* utilize shape shifting and a metamorphic nature (we recall Oradino deceived by the fictive Clorinda), they also possess the ability to distort men's imaginations. In Book XXI of *City of God*, St. Augustine discusses devils' ability to

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<sup>94</sup> Elliott, 129.

<sup>95</sup> The anti-colonial argument can be extended beyond Jerusalem to the conquest of the New World where European explorers attempted to 'tame' the Natives and thus bring order to an otherwise chaotic New World. In the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the East represents disorder and anarchy while the West symbolizes order and cohesion. See Sergio Zatti, "Dalla parte di Satana: Sull'Imperialismo Cristiano nella Gerusalemme Liberata" in *La Rappresentazione dell'Altro nei Testi del Rinascimento*, a cura di Sergio Zatti, (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, 1998), 146-147; 152.

<sup>96</sup> Zatti, "L'uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano", 405. Tobias Gregory has made the comparison between Satan and an outraged prince, who is lashing out against an incursion into his principality, a slight against his authority, and his perceived precedence over other rulers. This is also a reference to the rivalry between Tasso's patrons, the Este, and the Medici. See Gregory, *From Many Gods to One*, 166.

deceive men by breathing a secret poison into their heart and here the devils take pleasure in corrupting a man's soul.<sup>97</sup> In the pivotal episode of Rinaldo's exile from the Christian camp, we witness the knight Gernando incited to jealousy by a demon over Rinaldo's imminent promotion. The evil spirit enters into Gernando's heart to create chaos:

Tal che il malign spirit d'Averno,  
Ch'in lui strada sí larga aprir si vede,  
Tacito in sen gli serpe ed al governo  
De' suoi pensieri lusingando siede.  
E qui piú sempre l'ira e l'odio interno  
Inacerbisce, e 'l cor stimola e fiede;  
E fa che 'n mezzo a l'alma ognor risuona  
Una voce ch'a lui cosí ragiona. . . (GL, V, 18)

Gernando is literally possessed by the devil; his appearance changes, his eyes become red and infuriated, he swells with pride, and his perception of the situation at hand becomes distorted: "Al suon di queste voci arde lo sdegno/e cresce in lui quasi commossa face/né capendo nel cor gonfiato e pregno/per gli occhi n'esce e per la lingua audace." (GL, V.23.1-4) In fact, Gernando assumes Satan's attributes and his helpless body is temporarily consumed by a demon which spews a poisonous venom: "ché 'l reo demon che la sua lingua move/di spirito in vece, e forma ogni suo detto."(GL, V.25. 1-2).<sup>98</sup> Gernando's physical body becomes a vessel for the demon with which to move forward his plot to send into exile a major player in the epic. As a victim of demonic possession, Gernando is morally blameless.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Man is susceptible to corruption because of the taint of original sin. See St. Augustine, Book XXI, Ch. 6, p. 975

<sup>98</sup> Luisa del Giudice, "Armida: Virgo Fingens (The Broken Mirror)", in *Western Jerusalem, University of California Studies on Tasso*, edited by Luisa del Giudice, (New York, Out of London Press, 1984), 34.

<sup>99</sup> Coppola sees the possession and subsequent betrayal of Gernando originating in the story of Adam and Eve. Satan, disguised as a devil, tempts Gernando to sin. Although Gernando is already predisposed to jealousy in regards to Rinaldo, this final push by Satan sends him over the edge. Coppola, 68-69. The psychological aspects of this episode parallel in part Tasso's own life, where jealousies and criticisms in the court of Ferrara aggravated Tasso's already fragile mental state. Coppola, 83.

Rinaldo's killing of Gernando and his subsequent rebellion against Goffredo's authority also casts him as an image of Lucifer.<sup>100</sup> When Gernando accuses Rinaldo of pride and foolhardiness, Rinaldo responds by killing Gernando and thus he embodies those same characteristics present in Satan: pride and arrogance. Tasso elaborates this parallel in the final moments of the duel when describing Rinaldo: "Parve un tuono la voce, e 'l ferro un lampo/che di folgor cadente annunzio apporte." (*GL*, V.27.1-2). We can compare this to Jesus's portrayal of Lucifer in the New Testament, "I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky" (Luke, 10:18)<sup>101</sup> Rinaldo has a predisposition for evil and his instinctive and primordial reaction is representative of the eternal servitude by which the Devil is punished.<sup>102</sup>

In an ensuing episode in canto VIII, the demon Alecto deceives the knight Argillano with a false dream vision. After the armor and bloody torso of that whom is believed to be Rinaldo are found, the Italian Argillano spends a restless night tormented by the discovery. When dawn approaches, Argillano finally drifts off and it is precisely at this moment when the demon Alecto enters his mind. Alecto chooses his victim carefully; Argillano is already predisposed to evil and Tasso describes him as raised on hatred and scorn (*odio e sdegno*), a murderer, pillager and an exile of his own city, Ascoli, before joining the Crusade. Thus he is an easy victim for the demon to manipulate.

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<sup>100</sup> The conflict between Goffredo and Rinaldo is a conflict of religious and military orthodoxy versus heresy and individualistic dissension. Riccardo Bruscaagli, *Stagioni della civiltà estense*, (Pisa: Nistri Lisechi, 1983), 220.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Sherberg, "Aspects of Rinaldo's Conquest of Evil in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*", in *Western Jerusalem, University of California Studies on Tasso*, edited by Luisa del Giudice, (New York, Out of London Press, 1984), 100-101.

In the body metaphor that posits Goffredo as the 'head' of the Christian army (body), Rinaldo who is the right hand, literally takes action with his right hand as he murders Gernando. Rinaldo is the irascible part of the soul. In artistic representations, Satan is commonly figured with his right arm raised. See *A Dictionary of Symbols*, edited by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, translated by John Buchanan-Brown, (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 287.

<sup>102</sup> *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 288. Similarly, Argillano, who becomes possessed in Canto VIII, is described as having a predisposition for evil. See also Lucia Olini, *Dalla "Gerusalemme Terrena" alla "Gerusalemme Celeste"*, *Studi Tassiani*, anno 33, (1985), 78.

Instead of sleep, Alecto puts Argillano into a heavy stupor, deluding his sense of reason (“sono le interne sue virtù deluse”), and infusing his imagination with monsters (*larve*).<sup>103</sup> Argillano sees a phantasm of the dead Rinaldo, who urges him to mutiny against Goffredo. While the ghastly image he witnesses is real, Argillano remains unaware that it is a fictive body conjured by a demon and not an apparition sent from Heaven, as in the case of Goffredo in Canto I. While the dream is real, Argillano is unable to recognize the deception. Here again we can say that Argillano acts as one possessed; as a vulnerable (predisposed) man, the demon easily enters his imagination and quickly uses his body for his evil purposes.

Argillano’s call for mutiny against Goffredo is similar to Satan’s speech inciting the infernal council against God in Canto IV and the pagans’ call to arms against the Christians. The Italian knight mocks the French captain’s attempts to control the European army and chides him for his individualistic greed. We can see this rhetoric as yet another example of a perceived sympathy for the pagan side, which attempts to place individual freedoms above repressive institutional values.<sup>104</sup>

Consequently, in Canto XIV, Goffredo also receives a spirit while he sleeps.<sup>105</sup> Tasso describes the dream vision, sent directly by God, as if it were an angel descending on golden wings (*d’ali dorate*) into Goffredo’s mind. As the Captain admires the beauty and harmony of

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<sup>103</sup> In the *City of God*, St. Augustine cites Apuleis stating that upon leaving their bodies, the souls of men become *lares* if they have been good, and *larvae* or *lemures* if they have been bad (Book IX, 11). See St. Augustine, p. 355. Apuleis discusses the existence and nature of daemons in *De Dio Socratis* [*On the God of Socrates*]. Tasso mentions *larve* in Cantos XIII and XVIII of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* and in *Il Messaggiero*. See also Armando Maggi, *In the Company of Demons, Unnatural Beings, Love and Identity in the Italian Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13; 20.

<sup>104</sup> Zatti, “L’uniforme cristiano e il multiforme pagano”, 403.

<sup>105</sup> In a parallel episode in Canto IX, Solimano is visited by the demon Alecto disguised as his old counselor, Araspe. In Canto X, the sorcerer Ismeno appears to Solimano in a dream as an old man. He cures Solimano’s wounds and then transports him in a magical cloud to Jerusalem. This is an example of Tasso’s use of both natural magic and Christian beliefs.

the vision, a knight ringed with fire and light approaches him. Goffredo does not immediately recognize him but once the spirit speaks, he reveals himself to be Hugh, once leader of the Frankish army. As he moves to embrace the spirit, the image escapes him like shifting air (*aer vago*) and Hugh explains that he is simply an apparition and thus, matter without form:

Sorridea quegli, e:-Non già come credi,-  
dicea- son cinto di terrena veste:  
semplice forma e nudo spirto vedi  
qui cittadin de la città celeste.(GL, XIV. 7.1-4)

In his later dialogue, *Minturno, or On Beauty (Il Minturno ovvero de la bellezza)* (1593), Tasso discusses beauty as an image of the good, focusing precisely on the importance of form over matter. Thus, angels appear as beautiful despite their lack of a physical entity because their beauty is spiritual:

Oltre acciò, se vera fosse l'opinione di coloro che in questo modo l'hanno definita, gli angeli non sarebbero belli, perché ne la natura angelica la materia non è superata da la forma e non si trova corpo a cui sia partecipato l'onore de l'animo.(62)<sup>106</sup>

Hugh's message to Goffredo is to recall Rinaldo from exile, which leads us to the final important appearance of demonic incarnations in the Forest of Saron. When Hugh appears to Goffredo, he adopts the role of guardian angel because he delivers a message from God but is also acting to protect Goffredo. The dead, in fact, play a similar role to angels by appearing to humans and the crusaders maintain an advantage over the pagans precisely because they have God and angels who protect and support them against evil.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Il Minturno ovvero de la bellezza*, in *Dialoghi*, a cura di Ezio Raimondi, Tomo II, (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1958), 934

<sup>107</sup> Coppola, 116.

As indicated at the outset of Canto XIII, the Forest of Saron is already a well-known gathering place for demonic and supernatural forces even before the sorcerer Ismeno enchants it.<sup>108</sup> Tasso describes the forest:

Qui s'adunan le streghe, ed il suo vago  
con ciascuna di lor notturno viene;  
vien sopra i nemi, e chi d'un fero drago,  
e chi forma d'un irco informe tiene:  
concilio infame, che fallace imago  
suol allettar di desiato bene  
a celebrar con pompe immonde e sozze  
i profani conviti e l'empie nozze. (*GL*, XIII, 7)

The forest is the place where witches celebrate the Sabbath. The Sabbath, or “witches’ game”, represents a mass meeting of witches and demons, in which both parties engaged primarily in sexually perverse acts.<sup>109</sup> Witches normally fly to the Sabbath, either riding on animals or in animal form, highlighting the demonic propensity for shape shifting and metamorphosis. The first accounts of this nocturnal meeting date to the thirteenth century and the Sabbath developed as a ritual encompassing not only devil worship but also the desecration of the holy sacraments.<sup>110</sup> Tasso’s witches arrive specifically in the shape of a fierce dragon (*fero drago*) or a deformed goat (*irco informe*), animals typically representative of Satan himself. Satan lures these witches to the meeting by deceiving their imaginations (*fallace imago*) with desirable and alluring prospects.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ezio Raimondi characterizes the forest of Saron as an initiation rite that the Crusaders must overcome, following Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Ezio Raimondi, *Poesia come retorica*, (Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1996), 102.

<sup>109</sup> Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers, Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 18-19.

<sup>110</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Deciphering the Sabbath”, in *Early Modern European Witchcraft, Centres and Peripheries*, edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, (London: Clarendon Press, 1990), 123.

<sup>111</sup> Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 108; 281.

Although details of the Sabbath are not extensive in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, it is very important because Tasso once again highlights evidence of a real interaction between humans, particularly women, and demons. The demons become real, incarnate beings and have sexual relations with witches. Even Satan attends these meetings and acts as a human being by participating in intercourse.<sup>112</sup> The mention of the Sabbath is a prelude to *Il Messaggero*, in which Tasso further elaborates the physical relationship between humans and the supernatural as strong proof of the latter's existence.

Saron is already the ground of false images spawned by the witches and demons that meet there. The forest itself is the antagonist of Jerusalem, a place of utter terror.<sup>113</sup> When the magician Ismeno (a pagan convert) enchants it, he reinforces that evil by feeding on the Crusaders' individual passions and innermost fears arising from their subconscious, akin to a child's dream<sup>114</sup>:

Qual semplice bambino mirar non osa  
dove insolite larve abbia presenti,  
o come pave ne la notte ombrosa,  
imaginando pur mostri e portenti,  
così temean, senza saper qual cosa  
siasi quella però che gli sgomenti,  
se non che 'l timor forse a i sensi finge  
maggiore prodigi di Chimera e Sfinge. (*GL*, XIII, 18)

The demonic spirits in the forest are as much product of the Christian marvelous in that they represent the enemy as the Other, but they are also symbolic of the Crusaders' own internal

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<sup>112</sup> Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 19-20.

<sup>113</sup> Gianni Venturi, "Armida come un paesaggio", *Torquato Tasso e la cultura estense*, a cura di Gianni Venturi, (Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1999), 212.

<sup>114</sup> Ismeno and his opposing character, the magician (wiseman) of Ascalon, are symbols of demonic magic and natural magic, respectively. Giunta, 39.

conflicts.<sup>115</sup> The horrors that inhabit the forest are now created by nature and are no longer hidden by night but appear in the daytime, under the guise of human voices and hallucinations. The Forest of Saron resembles the Infernal Council of Canto IV but appears much more ambiguous and terrifying.<sup>116</sup> The forest is a symbol of another crisis in the Christian camp that can only be overcome by religion.<sup>117</sup>

Initially, the crusaders fail to conquer the forest. Demons appear as nymphs and use seduction to trick the crusaders. Tancredi is immediately overcome by remorse when he sees and hears Clorinda disguised in a bleeding cypress tree. In ancient society, the cypress tree symbolized death and mourning and was considered sacred to the underworld. Planted outside of a house, it represented a warning that one was entering a place corrupted by a dead body.<sup>118</sup> Even though Tancredi realizes that the image of his dead beloved is false (*falsa imago*), it is not fear but rather remorse that leads him to go crazy (*va fuor di sé*) and flee the forest.<sup>119</sup>

Contrarily, Rinaldo, after his purification ritual on Mount Oliveto, exhibits the staunchness and firmness of character that he demonstrated in leaving Armida's garden. Rather than representing Lucifer, he now represents a repentant Adam:

La prima vita e le mie colpe prime  
Mira con occhio di pietà clemente,  
Padre e Signor, e in me tua grazia piovi,  
Sì che 'l mio vecchio Adam purghi e rinovi. (*GL*, XVIII.14.5-8)

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<sup>115</sup> Giunta, 111.

<sup>116</sup> Franco Fortini, *Dialoghi col Tasso*, a cura di Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo e Donatella Santarone, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), 126-127.

<sup>117</sup> Giunta, 109.

<sup>118</sup> Del Giudice, 50.

<sup>119</sup> See *GL*, XIII, 45.5 [*Falso imago*] and *GL*, XIII, 46.4 [*va fuor di sé*].



He enters the woods and conquers the phantasms by breaking the spell in the tree disguised as Armida. The enchanted tree is a walnut tree, not a myrtle (symbol of Venus), and was commonly associated with witchcraft, dating to the thirteenth century and the witches of Benevento.<sup>120</sup> These women often reported participating in the Sabbath under a walnut tree and using walnuts as amulets.<sup>121</sup> While the other knights feared entering the forest, Rinaldo, instead, derives pleasure from it since it reminds him of the time enjoyed with Armida in her garden.<sup>122</sup>

The forest of Saron ultimately represents the world under the influence of evil. Each man is tempted by his own weakness and cannot use the world/woods in the proper way until he come to terms with the false images displayed there and has reconciled them and received the grace of God.<sup>123</sup> Rinaldo “disinfests” the forest of its false images precisely because he has ultimately accepted his role as a Christian and he has undergone reconciliation and repentance.<sup>124</sup> As Thomas Roche states so aptly, “Only when belief comes into question do we torment convention, and Tasso is a believer, a believer who in his poem insists on the most incarnational aspects of Christianity.”<sup>125</sup>

### **Melancholy and the deformed imagination**

Tasso desperately wanted to please his patrons with a Christian epic poem, but he was also becoming increasingly worried about his own religious doubts and the freedom of thought

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<sup>120</sup> In the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Armida is known more as a magician [*maga*] rather than a witch.

<sup>121</sup> Raven Grimassi, *Hereditary Witchcraft: Secrets of the Old Religion*, (St. Paul, Llewellyn Publications, 2001), 164.

<sup>122</sup> Getto, *Nel Mondo della “Gerusalemme”*, 302.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas P. Roche, Jr., “Tasso’s Enchanted Woods”, *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present*, edited by Earl Miner, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 61.

<sup>124</sup> Infestation was one of the categories of demonic possession. Fortini, 154.

<sup>125</sup> Roche, 62.

that was ever so slowly disappearing during the Counter Reformation.<sup>126</sup> Tasso's fears about his epic work were not simply limited to literary form but stemmed from a greater crisis in belief, aggravated by his struggle with melancholy, a disease that affected him most of his life, and for which he desperately sought a cure.<sup>127</sup> As Julia Kristeva contends in her study *Black Sun*, "melancholia asserts itself in religious doubt".<sup>128</sup> Tasso believed himself to be a heretic, reporting himself three times to the Inquisition in 1576. He was consequently absolved in 1577, being judged simply as melancholic rather than heretical.<sup>129</sup> But the pressure to please his patrons and the weight of his father's legacy took an immense toll on his mental health. He rejected the absolution of the Inquisition and wanted instead to be cleared by the ultimate authority, the Inquisition in Rome. He continued to be plagued by suspicion of those around him, who deemed him a heretic and by servants who stole his works.<sup>130</sup>

Tasso was well read in medical and philosophical treatises regarding melancholy and his letters describe his symptoms in detail.<sup>131</sup> In this regard, Tasso's letters are very important to understand both the *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggero* because they are an autobiography and a guide to the poet's works.<sup>132</sup> His ideas regarding religion and the supernatural are deeply connected to his own anxieties and illness. Tasso's increasing concern led him to undergo two sessions of blood letting and purging in May of 1577, in an effort to

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<sup>126</sup> Tasso's personal problems with court life reflected a love/hate relationship with his patrons and their uncertain religious piety. Giampieri, 33;40.

<sup>127</sup> Tasso's illness caused aggressive behavior and the irrational fear that someone was "out to get him". He expressed his fears of persecution in numerous letters. Luigi Roncoroni, *Genio e Pazzia in Torquato Tasso*, (Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1896), 64.

<sup>128</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>129</sup> See Letter 98, *Ai Cardinali della Suprema Inquisizione*, in Torquato Tasso, *Lettere*, a cura di Cesare Guasti, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1853), 254. Tasso was fervently religious and faithful to the Catholic Church but he often feared himself to be somehow an 'unbeliever' [*miscredente*]. He suffered from a religious delirium that could have provoked some of his hallucinations. Roncoroni, 89-90.

<sup>130</sup> Solerti, I, 257.

<sup>131</sup> Alessandro Coppo, *All'Ombra di Malinconia*, (Torino: Le Lettere, 1997), 16-17.

<sup>132</sup> Basile, 8.

eradicate the melancholic humors from which he was suffering.<sup>133</sup> At the time, this was considered a common procedure to treat melancholy.<sup>134</sup> With tensions and jealousies at court rising, Tasso visited Lucrezia d'Este and his madness (*folia*) culminated in his attacking another courtier with a knife in front of the duchess. Tasso accused the courtier of being a spy, attempting to poison him and spreading rumors of heresy.<sup>135</sup> Tasso admits in his letters to having accused Alfonso of heresy and equates his actions with an insanity (*pazzia*) that needs treatment: “Perochè ben conosco che l’aver sospettato di Vostra Altezza, e l’aver de’ meri sospetti parlato pubblicamente, è pazzia degna di purga.” (*Lettera 101, 1577*). He often associates both his melancholy and his fears of heresy with purgation, because both were diseases that needed treatment.<sup>136</sup> In the same letter, he admits to being in the throes of melancholy and thanks Duke Alfonso for helping him to purge his demons: “Confesso d’esser degni di purge per lo mio umor melanconico, e ringrazio Vostra Altezza che mi fa purgare.” (*Lettera 101, 1577*)

After the knife incident, the poet spent time in treatment in the convent of San Francesco in Ferrara and eventually fled into a self-imposed exile, roaming from court to court before finally returning to Ferrara in March of 1579.<sup>137</sup> Upon his return, Tasso insulted Duke Alfonso

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<sup>133</sup> Tasso describes himself in the extremes of melancholy: “Estremità del mio umor melanconico”. See Letter 101 (1577). Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. I, 259. He later states: “è infinita la maninconia che mi tormenta” (*Lettera 122, 1579*). Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. II, 6. Regarding Tasso’s paranoid state, see Roncoroni, 106 and Bruno Basile, *Poeta melancholicus: tradizione classica e folia nell’ultimo Tasso*, (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 1984), 28.

<sup>134</sup> Leeches were also commonly used as a purgative method. Monica Calabritto, “Tasso’s Melancholy and Its Treatment: a patient’s uneasy relationship with medicine and physicians”, in *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*, edited by Yasmin Haskell, (Abingdon: Marston, 2011), 204.

<sup>135</sup> Solerti, I, 221.

<sup>136</sup> Stephens, “Tasso and the Witches”, 182.

<sup>137</sup> During his stay in the Ferrara, Tasso left the court numerous times and tried to gain patronage with other families, although he would always return to Ferrara. Giampieri describes Tasso’s relationship with his patron Alfonso d’Este as one of “transference” [*transfert*], using Freudian terminology. Tasso viewed Alfonso as a father figure and had a special bond with him, similar to a lovers’ relationship. For this reason, Tasso had difficulties leaving the court of Ferrara, and when he did so, he would consistently supplicate Alfonso to allow him to return. Giampieri, 39-40.

and his new bride Margherita Gonzaga. Given the Duke's already vulnerable position in the eyes of the Pope and Tasso's past declarations of heresy to the Inquisition (in which he also accused members of the Este court), Alfonso deemed it best to incarcerate Tasso in the hospital of Sant'Anna.<sup>138</sup> He was officially deemed unbalanced by the melancholic humors in his brain and labeled *pazzo furioso*. He spent the first month in Sant'Anna in shackles and would remain in the prison for the next seven years.<sup>139</sup>

In the Renaissance, Galenic doctors often considered melancholy as a delirium or derangement, which contributed to intense feelings of sorrow and fear in their victim. This was a chronic disease that was caused by an excess of black bile, whose vapors affected the brain.<sup>140</sup> Melancholic humors could also contribute to hallucinatory derangements because the disease primarily affected the imagination. In a healthy mind, these delusions could be squashed by reason but melancholics were unable to do this.

While melancholy could result as a naturally occurring condition, it was also possible that disturbances such as falling in love or being a witness to a traumatic event could also lead to an imbalance in the humors. Doctors cautioned against a reckless lifestyle, especially in regards to diet since properly undigested food could create vapors that affected the brain and caused

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Alessandro Coppo underlines Tasso's role as "peregrino errante" because he was constantly traveling and trying to flee his melancholy, an illness he also attributed to various outside factors. Coppo, 24.

<sup>138</sup> In regards to Tasso's absolution and comments he may have made about Alfonso d'Este to the Inquisition, see Letter 101, *Ad Alfonso Da Este, Duca di Ferrara (1577)*, in Tasso, *Lettere*, 257-260.

<sup>139</sup> A *furor* was a type of melancholy that caused frenzy and the burned humors in the body caused dehydration of the brain, leading to violent fits of rage, such as Tasso's outburst at the Duke and his new bride in 1579. In Roman legal terms, a *furiosus* was a person who needed to be supervised and had several legal restrictions upon him. Monica Calabritto, "A Case of Melancholic Humors and Dilucida Intervalla", *Intellectual History Review*, 18:1 (2008), 144.

A *furor* or frenzy was also associated with the 'melancholic genius' as a symptom common of learned men. Aristotle makes this connection in his *Problems*, as does Marsilio Ficino in *De triplici vita* and Tasso himself discusses the genius of melancholy men in *Il Messaggiere*.

<sup>140</sup> Angus Gowland, "Melancholy, Imagination and Dreaming in Renaissance Learning", in *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*, edited by Yasmin Haskell, (Abingdon: Marston, 2011), 56-59.

symptoms such as fear, sadness, and other disturbances in the soul.<sup>141</sup> According to Aristotle's *Problems*, XXX, melancholy was a disease that affected both body and soul (*Problems*, XXX.I.953a15-22).<sup>142</sup> Melancholics acted quickly, relying mainly on their imagination rather than reason, and they lacked self-control. They were also characterized by a vicious temperament as well as strong physical desires.<sup>143</sup> Aristotle also attributed certain melancholic behaviors to divine ecstasy (*Problems*, XXX.I. 954a34-40) that commonly appeared in poets and artists.<sup>144</sup> Melancholics were "pathological confessors" as is revealed in Tasso's persistent self-reporting to the Inquisition and his fervent insistence that their absolution of him was mistaken.<sup>145</sup>

Most likely, Tasso suffered from *melancholia hypochondriaca*, a specific type of melancholy that consisted in an accumulation of burned juices in the hypochondria, an area between the ribs and the intestines that also created an obstruction in the stomach. The fumes from these burned juices rose to the brain and created problems in the imagination. Melancholic humors could also cause hallucinations and delusions in the imagination and could even damage the faculty of reason. *Melancholia hypochondriaca* was a common disease of elite men in the late sixteenth century, to the point that some doctors considered it an epidemic.<sup>146</sup>

Tasso persistently wrote letters to numerous physicians in the years before as well as during his incarceration, including to the famous physician Girolamo Mercuriale about his

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<sup>141</sup> Calabritto, "Tasso's Melancholy and Its Treatment", 207. In his letters, Tasso admits to drinking too much wine and following a bad diet, see for example Letter 655 [*Ad Ascanio Moro*] in Tasso, *Lettere*, III, 57. See also Roncoroni, 42.

<sup>142</sup> Aristotle, *Problems*, volume II, translated by W. S. Hett, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 155.

<sup>143</sup> Angus Rowland, "The Ethics of Renaissance Melancholy", in *Intellectual History Review*, 18:1 (2008), 104-106.

<sup>144</sup> Aristotle, *Problems*, 163. Tasso discusses the connection between melancholy and genius in his dialogue, *Il Messaggero*, which I will discuss further ahead.

<sup>145</sup> Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches", 183.

<sup>146</sup> Calabritto, "Tasso's Melancholy and Its Treatment", 205.

condition.<sup>147</sup> As was common with sufferers of melancholy, Tasso feared he was in imminent danger.<sup>148</sup> His letters reveal that he had an obsessive fear of being poisoned and was convinced that his condition was partly due to demonic influences: “Nondimeno io ho certa opinione di essere stato ammalato” (*Lettera 244*).<sup>149</sup> In one letter, Tasso suggests that he needs an exorcist rather than a doctor.<sup>150</sup> His keen interest in and knowledge of supernatural forces’ effects on the imagination clearly contributed to this belief and is evidenced in his dialogue, *Il Messaggero*, which I will discuss ahead.<sup>151</sup>

In fact, Renaissance doctors naturally factored supernatural elements into the diagnosis of disease. Devils could enter into the imagination and affect those parts of the mind that were not already occupied by divine forces.<sup>152</sup> Demons had the power to simulate perceptions in the senses while also presenting the mind with images that seemed vivid and real. The devil could stir black bile in the body, in order to create a melancholic state.<sup>153</sup> Tasso’s belief that his

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<sup>147</sup> Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606) was a well-respected physician with whom Tasso regularly corresponded about his condition.

<sup>148</sup> Calabritto, “Tasso’s Melancholy and Its Treatment”, 204. Tasso stated that his food was being poisoned by the prior of the Sant’Anna hospital, Agostino Mosti, whom he believed was colluding with magicians and spirits. See also Letter 288, volume II, in Tasso, *Lettere*, 277.

<sup>149</sup> Letter 244. Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 237.

Tasso also felt that his melancholy was caused by his natural temperament as well as by a bad diet: “Ed io, che sono malinconico per natura e per accidente.” Letter 122 (1579). See also *Il Messaggero*, in Torquato Tasso, *Opere*, a cura di Ettore Mazzali, Tomo II, (Napoli: Fulvio Rossi, 1969), 431. Tasso states: “Comunque sia, color che non sono maniconici per infermità ma per natura, sono d’ingegno singolare, e io son per l’una e per l’altra cagione: laonde in parte vo consolando me stesso.” See also Letter XXI (1577) *Ai Cardinali delle Suprema Inquisizione*, in which Tasso states that he was poisoned. Tasso, *Lettere*, 89.

<sup>150</sup> “Vostra Signoria dee sapere ch’io fui ammalato, nè fui mai risanato; e forse ho maggior bisogno de l’essorcista che del medico . . .”, Letter 454 (1585) *a Maurizio Cataneo*, in Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 474.

<sup>151</sup> He was also deeply influenced by Ficino’s writings on the supernatural and magic, especially book three of *Three Books on Life [De triplici vita]*, entitled *De vita coelitus comparanda*, which describes various means of benefitting from the heavens.

<sup>152</sup> Donald Beecher, “Witches, The Possessed and the disease of the imagination”, in *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*, edited by Yasmin Haskell, (Abingdon: Marston, 2011), 109. Melancholy was an especially effective psychological means by which demons could access their victims’ souls. Giunta, 60.

The idea that hallucinations were connected to demons and demonic possessions harkens back to classical literature. See Basile, 27.

<sup>153</sup> In *Three Books on Life (De triplici vita)* (1489), Marsilio Ficino stated that if black bile becomes too heated, it can become vulnerable to demonic influence (Book One, Chapter IV). Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*,

melancholic state was somehow influenced by the demonic resulted from its affects on the imagination; in fact, many witches also suffered from melancholia creating havoc in their imaginations and therefore, they were self- deceived.<sup>154</sup> For Tasso, melancholy was a marvelous disease (*malattia meravigliosa*) that disrupted his imaginative faculty (*fantasmi*). It caused memory loss and hallucinations, both of which Tasso complained about in his letters.<sup>155</sup> But it was also a disease common to geniuses, which Tasso will later discuss in *Il Messaggiere*.<sup>156</sup>

It is often hard to separate Tasso's melancholy from his writing and the illness often becomes a guide to his major works.<sup>157</sup> Although many of his letters were rhetorical exercises and social in nature, they were also largely biographical, chronicling many personal details regarding the symptoms of his melancholy as well as his ideas regarding the objective reality of the supernatural.<sup>158</sup> In her book, Marion Wells examines this idea of the 'phantasmic' in Tasso's writings. The 'phantasm' can be the ghostly voice of a dead person as well as the error of the imagination.<sup>159</sup> At times, Tasso calls his own condition "*alienazione di mente*" (alienation of the mind); this condition prohibits the mind from distinguishing between true imitation and false representations.<sup>160</sup> Only reason can burn evil thoughts and rid man of corrupt phantasms.

Duplicity and division are the characteristics of the demonic, while the Catholic faith aims for a

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translated by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1989), 115. See also Giunta, 60.

<sup>154</sup> Beecher, 124.

<sup>155</sup> Coppo, 17-18. Tasso often complains about his memory loss. See especially Letter 182 (*A Curzio Ardizio*, 1581), Letter 190 (*A Maurizio Cataneo*, 1581) and Letter 351 (*A Lucrezia Este*, 1585).

<sup>156</sup> In 1587, Tasso writes that his melancholy has reached a state of furor, for which he desperately needs hellebore and purgation. See Letter 899, Volume III, in Tasso, *Lettere*, 263.

<sup>157</sup> Basile, 8.

<sup>158</sup> Basile, 29. See for example Letter 244, *A Girolamo Mercuriale*, in which Tasso writes in detail of his illness, in Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 237-238. Tasso constantly revised his letters and they were as much biographical as they were poetical. See also Coppo, 13-14.

<sup>159</sup> Marion A. Wells, *The Secret Wound, Love Melancholy and Early Modern Romance*, (Stanford: University of California Press, 2007), 40-41; 144.

<sup>160</sup> In the *Theologica platonica de immortalitate animarum*, Ficino considers melancholy as a state of self- alienation in which mind is separated from the body (Book One, Chapter III). Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, edited by James Hankins, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 37.

unity between imagination and reason.<sup>161</sup> For Tasso, melancholy was strongly connected to his own theories about heresy and the supernatural- both melancholy and the supernatural needed to be subject to reason in order not to affect the imagination in a negative way: “Ma perché due sogliono essere i fonti de la eresia, l’uno la natural ragione, l’altro la maligna interpretazion de la Scrittura.” (172, 1-3).<sup>162</sup>

As Angelo Solerti reports, Tasso consumed sedatives, sleeping pills and hellebore, which was recommended by Hippocrates as a purgative and treatment of mental disorders.<sup>163</sup> Records from the ducal pharmacy indicate that Tasso used opium between 1577-78 to treat his melancholy.<sup>164</sup> He, however, did not oppose philosophical and even magical means to treat his condition. He wrote several letters to a Capuchin friar, Father Marco of Modena, about his condition and its possible supernatural origin. Father Marco even visited Tasso in Sant’Anna.<sup>165</sup> Later in his incarceration, Tasso received the manna of St. Andrew from Scipione Gonzaga. The manna was an oily substance taken from the saint’s body that was supposed to procure miracles (*Lettera 256*). In 1588, Tasso also received a piece of unicorn horn from Don Angelo Grillo Spinola (*Lettera 960*) and in a letter to Dario Boccarini in 1591 (*Lettera 1326*), Tasso asked for a golden cross among other relics designed to protect him from evil spirits.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Maggi, *In the Company of Demons*, 60.

<sup>162</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Il Nifo ovvero del piacere*, in *Dialoghi*, a cura di Ezio Raimondi, (Firenze: Sansoni, 1958), 215-216.

On the importance of the imagination [*fantasmi*], Tasso states in Letter 94 (*A Orazio Ariosto*, 1577): “il poetare (se ben mi ricordo quell ch’udi un giorno a caso ne le nostre scuole, e forse da voi medesimo signor filosofo) non è operazione d’intelletto separato, né si può egli fare senza fantasmi: anzi, chi ha più bisogno de’ fantasmi, che ‘l poeta? o qual fu mai buon poeta, in cui la virtù imaginatrice non fosse gagliarda. E che altro è il furor poetico che raptò, che l’imaginazione fa di noi?” Tasso, *Lettere*, I, 244-45.

<sup>163</sup> Solerti, 265. Tasso specifically mentions hellebore because of Hippocrates’ use of this herb to treat Democritus. See Letter 1139, (*A Giovann’Antonio Pisano*, 1589) in Tasso, *Lettere*, IV, 212. See also Basile, 63.

<sup>164</sup> Common side effects of opium use are hallucinations. Calabritto, “Tasso’s Melancholy”, 215.

<sup>165</sup> See especially Letter 189, in which Tasso writes of the power of demons to enter into the minds of men. See Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. II, 160.

<sup>166</sup> See especially Letter 256 in Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. II, 244; Letter 960, in Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. IV, 39; Letter 1326 in Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. V, 45. For an interesting discussion of the different healing practices in Renaissance culture, see



While a devout Catholic, Tasso's philosophical nature also led him to express doubts regarding his religion in a letter to Scipione Gonzaga:

ma dubitava poi oltre modo, se tu avessi creato il mondo, e se tu fossi disceso a vestirti d'umanità, ; e dubitava di molte cose da questi fonti, quasi fiumi, derivavano. Perciò come poteva io fermamente credere ne i sacramenti, o ne l'autorità del tuo pontefice, o ne l'inferno, o nel purgatorio, se de l'incarnazion del tuo Figliuolo o de la immortalità de l'anima era dubbio? (*Lettera 123, 1579*)<sup>167</sup>

These doubts concerned the existence of the supernatural and thus consequently the existence of God and his accessibility to humans. The decline in Tasso's mental health becomes evident in his literary evolution. As his melancholy increased, his paranoia also grew and Tasso tried to assess whether the supernatural existed outside of his mind or if it was simply a product of his diseased imagination. While Tasso deals with the supernatural in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, it is only in his later dialogue, *Il Messaggero* that he attempts to prove that the supernatural is an ontological truism by giving these spirits real bodies (corporality) and arguing that they are not merely figments of the imagination, even though the spirits can enter the imagination and have negative affects on it.<sup>168</sup>

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Katharine Park, *Medicine and Magic: The Healing Arts, in Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, edited by Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, (New York: Longman, 1998), 129-149.

<sup>167</sup> Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. I, 307.

<sup>168</sup> B.T. Sozzi describes Tasso's madness [*la follia tassesea*] as turning from a subconscious state into practical superstition and an obsession with the magical and diabolical. See B.T. Sozzi, "Il magismo nel Tasso", *Studi Tassiani*, Anno III, 1953, 29.

## Il Messaggiere

*Il Messaggiere* can be considered a helpful tool in understanding Tasso's use of magic in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, but more importantly, the dialogue represents an important shift in Tasso's demonology by changing the role of spirits from "heavenly messengers" to "earthly ambassadors".<sup>169</sup> The dialogue, written in 1580 while Tasso was imprisoned in Sant'Anna, takes a philosophical approach to the role of spirits (daemons) and their relationship to humanity and God.<sup>170</sup> It is a synthesis of Neoplatonic, Aristotelian and the Christian theology of the time.

The dialogue is a conversation between Torquato and a spirit (neither good nor evil) and expounds on cosmology, the relationship between reality and dreams, and the purpose of angelic and daemonic beings in the universe.<sup>171</sup> In later editions, Tasso's adds a section regarding his own suffering from the disease of melancholy. Although the dialogue is mainly Neoplatonic in nature, it also attempts to explain the existence of demonic entities and the marvelous in line with Catholic dogma.<sup>172</sup> The dialogue is largely inspired by Plato's *Timaeus* as well as the Neoplatonic and occult philosophies of Proclus, Porfirius, Pselleus and Xenocrates, Olaf Magnus' *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), Jean Bodin's *Demonomanie des sorciers* (1580) and Pico della Mirandola's *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.<sup>173</sup> While

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<sup>169</sup> Patterson, 111.

<sup>170</sup> *Il Messaggiere* was originally written in 1580 and published against Tasso's will in 1582. Tasso revised the work in 1583 and again in 1587.

<sup>171</sup> Tasso also uses the dialogue to discuss human ambassadors and their role in the social and political realms of society.

<sup>172</sup> Guido Baldassari, "Fra Dialogo e Nocturnale Annotations: prolegomeni alla lettura del *Messaggiere*", *La Rassegna della letteratura italiana*, numero 2-3, anno 76 serie VII, 269-70.

<sup>173</sup> Tasso was familiar with the Neoplatonic and occult works of Proclus, Porphyry, Xenocrates, and Psellus through Marsilio Ficino's translations published in 1497. Tasso was certainly familiar with Ficino's translations of philosophical and occult works which he also mentions in his letters. Torquato Tasso, *Dialoghi*, a cura di Bruno Basile, (Milano, Mursia, 1991), 30. In addition, Tasso also wrote a dialogue entitled *Il Ficino over de l'arte* which was a culmination of ideas regarding love theory that Tasso studied earlier in his poetic career by way of Ficino's *Opera* (1491) as well as Ficino's translation of the occult work *Corpus Hermeticus*. Bruno Basile, "La cetra discorde di Torquato Tasso", *Lettere Italiane*, anno XXXVII, ottobre-dicembre 1985, 495. The *Corpus Hermeticus* was printed sixteen times between 1471 and 1500. Stephens, "Habeas corpus", 83.

the dialogue is rife with anecdotes regarding witches, spells, and supernatural beings, the occult aspect of the dialogue is also highlighted by letters that Tasso wrote which describe his real encounters with a spirit that visited him in Sant' Anna whom he called "il folletto".<sup>174</sup>

Although Christian demonology was a popular topic of the Renaissance, Tasso's platonic dialogue proposes the existence of good daemons, as advocated by natural philosophers such as Girolamo Cardano.<sup>175</sup> The appeal of the demonic was that it offered a rational link between human and divine.<sup>176</sup> Tasso is aware that platonic philosophy does not always coincide with theology, but he also wanted to elaborate on Platonic cosmogony as expounded by Ficino and how it could fit into Catholicism.<sup>177</sup> Tasso touches upon two schools of theological thought about demonology in *Il Messaggero*. The first is considered mystical and follows Neoplatonic philosophy that accepts intermediaries between God and man, and God and the cosmos. The second line of thought stems from a Christian belief that only Jesus, as the Son of God incarnate in a human body, can be the only mediator between man and God.<sup>178</sup> Both schools of thought coexisted in the Renaissance although Church Fathers could not all agree on the particulars of the roles of angels and demons.<sup>179</sup>

Tasso's view of the supernatural can be used as a guide to the monstrous in the *Gerusalemme Liberata* because it expounds more precisely on Tasso's own ideas and doubts about spiritual corporality. While there exists a clear distinction between the (good) angels and (evil) demons of the *Liberata* in terms of morality, the spirit that appears to Tasso in *Il*

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<sup>174</sup> Tasso, *Dialoghi*, a cura di Bruno Basile, 30. Tasso mentions "il folletto" as stealing his letters and money. See Letter 448 and 456 in Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 468; 478.

<sup>175</sup> Baldassari, "Fra Dialogo e nocturnales annotations", 272.

<sup>176</sup> Giunta, 68.

<sup>177</sup> Ettore Mazzali, *Cultura e poesia nell'opera di Torquato Tasso*, (Rocca San Casciano: Cappelli, 1957), 157.

<sup>178</sup> Jesus is identical to God in essence, partaking of the nature of God. He is God sent down to us in a human form.

<sup>179</sup> Mazzali, 157-158.

*Messaggero* is simply a manifestation of the nature of its being; he appears in a human body in order to convince Tasso not only of his existence, but also of his accessibility to humans, and by consequence, of God's accessibility.

The dialogue takes place in the twilight hours, between sleep and wakefulness, when the main character, Torquato, first hears a spirit speaking to him<sup>180</sup>. Torquato finds himself in an hazy mental state and this initial contact is therefore auditory and appears to happen through Tasso's imagination: "il mio stato era messo fra la vigilia e la quiete, si fece a l'orecchio quel gentile spirto che suole favellarmi ne le mie imaginazioni."<sup>181</sup> The mention of the imagination is crucial as melancholy affects the imagination and thus Tasso immediately questions the validity of his vision, as to whether it is real or a product of his illness (*fattura de la mia imaginazione*). In later letters from Sant'Anna, Tasso describes visions he has of devils and other spirits who steal or move various objects in his room. Tasso states that although demons can deceive the imagination, they have no strength against reason.<sup>182</sup> In the dialogue, Torquato describes the appearance of the spirit as possibly an act of his imagination, thus the situation at first seems ambiguous. Because he cannot see him, Torquato asks whether the spirit is benevolent or malign: "Ma se angelo non sei, né anima felice, che puoi essere? Demone o anima infelice non istimo che tu sii, né so se i notturni fantasmi siano alcuna cosa oltre queste."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> The moment between sleep and wakefulness is an important time when the faculty of reason [*ratio*] acts most clearly. During this moment, the soul is alert and can gain insight into the future. Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric, A Study of Renaissance Demonology*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 185-186.

<sup>181</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 419.

<sup>182</sup> Tasso attributes the belief that demons can alter the imagination directly to Ficino: "Laonde io non posso diffendere cosa alcuna da' nemici o dal diavolo, se non la volontà, con la quale non consentirei d'imparar cosa da lui o da suoi seguaci nè d'avere seco alcuna familiarità, o co' suoi maghi; i quali, come dice il Ficino, possono muover l'imaginazione, ma senza l'intelletto non hanno alcuna autorità o alcuna forza; perchè egli dipende da Iddio direttamente." See Letter 456, in Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 478.

<sup>183</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 419.

It is important to note the time when the spirit appears to Torquato. He finds himself in a state of semi-wakefulness, when he is transitioning from a sleeping state into being fully awake.<sup>184</sup> This mental state is called a hypnopompic state, which is often associated with hallucinations during which individuals can undergo sensory experiences such as sensing touch, hearing sounds and visual phenomena. The same can be said of the hypnogogic state, in which individuals pass from wakefulness into sleep during which they can often experience lucid dreams (“waking dreams”) and also hallucinations.<sup>185</sup> If we look back to the supernatural appearances in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, for example Gabriel’s appearance to Goffredo, Argillano’s dream of Rinaldo, and Hugh’s visit to Goffredo, as well as Ismeno’s appearance to Solimano in Canto X, we notice that all of these episodes take place during the hypnogogic or hypnopompic states during which hallucinations are possible.<sup>186</sup>

Torquato persists by asking the spirit why he does not show himself; surely he has a body since he is able to speak. Tasso’s religious doubts stem from the corporality of the supernatural and their accessibility to man. To convince Tasso of his earthly presence and consequently of his body, the spirit gives Tasso his hand to kiss, just as a prince would do to his subject, initially reassuring Torquato that he is not dreaming. The spirit explains that dreams cannot have any logical continuity and were Torquato in a state of sleep/imagination, he would experience neither the harmony nor the logic of their discourse: “niuna cosa nondimeno s’ode in loro simile al

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<sup>184</sup> This moment between sleep and waking can be an ecstatic moment of clarity and revelation. Maggi, *Satan’s Rhetoric*, 190-91; 211. Tasso is aware that the phenomenal world he is experiencing is not identical with his reality. See also Jennifer Michelle Windt and Thomas Metzinger, “The Philosophy of Dreaming and Self-Consciousness: What Happens to the Experiential Subject during the Dream State” in *The New Science of Dreaming*, volume 3, edited by Deirdre Barrett and Patrick McNamara, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 211.

<sup>185</sup> Aristotle discusses the state of wakefulness in his work *On Sleep and Waking*. These waking dreams are also known as lucid dreams and can bring revelations. See also Celia Green, *Lucid Dreaming: the paradox of consciousness during sleep*, (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>186</sup> The hypnogogic state is the onset of sleep while the hypnopompic state occurs during awakening. Both states use the root *hypn-*, from the Greek word “sleep”. Sanford Auerbach, “Dreams and Dreaming in Disorders of Sleep”, in *The New Science of Dreaming*, volume 3, edited by Deirdre Barrett and Patrick McNamara, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 228.

nostro ragionamento il quale avrà le sue parti composte con tanta proporzione che parrà che ‘l vero co ‘l vero faccia armonia.”<sup>187</sup>

Although Torquato hesitatingly accepts the words of the spirit, he is not yet truly convinced of its existence. In fact, Torquato must prove that he isn’t experiencing a hallucination, which is a common symptom of melancholy. The spirit reveals to Torquato that he has been living most of his life in a dream-like state, and that, in fact, the spirit is here to open his eyes to a higher contemplation and grant him insight:

Di sogno ti parrà che meriti il nome più convenevolmente gran parte de la tua vita passata: perciocché in lei nulla rimirasi di vero, nulla di sincero e di puro, nulla in somma di stabile e di costante; ma quelle che di mostarono a’ tuoi sensi, furono, per così dire, larve del vero e imagini di quelle che sono veramente essenze, le quali qua giù non si possono vedere da chi abbia gli occhi appannati dal velo de l’umanità . . .<sup>188</sup>

The spirit explains that he can manifest himself to Torquato as either a pure revelation (*luce*) or in a visible body. In order to be able to accept the revelation as “luce”, Torquato must change and be rid of the false images that obscure his mind’s eye and his understanding of the intelligible world. For the spirit to appear in a physical body, it is the spirit himself who changes by donning a visible and corporeal nature.<sup>189</sup> The spirit chooses to finally reveal himself as a beautiful, young man:

M’apparve un giovane ch’era ne’ confine de la fanciulezza e de la gioventù, il quale non avea le guance d’alcun pelo ricoperte. Egli era di corpo proporzionatissimo, bianco e

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<sup>187</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 422. Dreams were an important theme in Tasso’s works. The dream not only represented the double/reflection of reality but also signified both a spiritual and physical death. See Venturi, “Armida come un paesaggio”, 209.

<sup>188</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 422.

Torquato’s dream-like state closely follows the writings of the Neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus, who in *Enneads* IV.8.4.25-35 describes the soul as entangled in chains in the sensible world, until it is able to free itself, ascend and contemplate the intelligible world.

<sup>189</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 424.

biondo sì che l'avorio e l'oro sarebbero stati vinti dal color de le sue carni e de' capegli: aveva gli occhi azzurri simili a quelli che da' poeti sono lodati in Minerva. . . <sup>190</sup>

The spirit is young, blond, blue-eyed with ivory colored skin and well-proportioned limbs. His body is the utter embodiment of harmony and Renaissance ideals of beauty stemming from the Petrarchan tradition.

By finally appearing to Tasso in a 'body', the spirit attempts to convince Tasso that he is not merely a figment of his imagination, but the body that he dons is one familiar to Torquato ("mi pare di conoscere la tua voce a la sua soavità")<sup>191</sup> and so it partakes of yet another sense connected to the imagination: memory. The spirit shows himself to Tasso "vestito di corpo velocissimo e luminoso"<sup>192</sup>, in a body that is pure and light ("un corpo più puro e più lieve e sottile")<sup>193</sup>. According to the Neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus, it is this pure body that accompanies the human soul when it descends from the heavens and then manifests itself in a physical body. This body sparks Torquato's memory of the original nature of his soul before his incarnation in a human body.<sup>194</sup> The spirit's revelations are therefore an awakening to what the true soul already knows eternally and of that which we are not always conscious.<sup>195</sup> Our body depends on the soul for its existence and instead of the soul descending into the body, it must be the body that approaches the soul in order to obtain the knowledge, or higher contemplation, of

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<sup>190</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 426.

<sup>191</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 419.

<sup>192</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 426.

<sup>193</sup> "E io comincio a sodisfare in parte al tuo desiderio: e voglio che tu mi vegga vestito di corpo velocissimo e luminoso, al quale tu non vedesti mai alcun somigliante, ma è di natura assai simile a quello che l'anima tua portò seco dal cielo quando a cotesto corpo si congiunse." Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 426.

<sup>194</sup> The discourse regarding the descent of the soul into a physical, human body and the memory of that previous state in the intelligible world is found in Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.4-5.

<sup>195</sup> Knowledge can be described as a recollection of memories and desires that are already present in the soul but of which we remain unconscious. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.3.25.27-34. See also R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 80.

the intelligible realm: “percioché la luce altro non significa appresso lui che la cognizione la qual s’acquista con la contemplazione.”<sup>196</sup> By donning a beautiful body, adhering to harmonious ideals, but also by his harmonious and logical discourse, the spirit is acting out of love in order to help Torquato to transcend to that higher place of contemplation in which the soul dwells.

This is interesting because at the moment we are still unsure of whether the spirit is real or imagined. While appearing to Tasso in a body, it is still a fictive body because it is one created from Tasso’s memories. Memories are the primary source of imagination and Torquato’s disease of melancholy is a perversion of the imagination. The spirit could be taking advantage of a weakened imagination to enter the mind or could consequently be a figment of a diseased imagination (Tasso mentions this further in the dialogue).<sup>197</sup> According to Renaissance theory, melancholy acts as “the chaos of memory” and thus also affects the imagination, the majority of which is filled with remnants of past experiences.<sup>198</sup> When spirits appear to their human hosts, they intentionally chose a form that is familiar and that a human can readily identify. The spirit appears in specific and contrived form so that it can convey a message; after this, its fictive body no longer serves a purpose and disappears: <sup>199</sup>

Così con parole magnifiche diceva lo spirito; e io parendomi ch’egli a me non si volesse manifestare, benché avesse alcuna somiglianza di persona già veduta da me, gli dissi: Non istimo che tu sii angelo o demone, ma anima umana che per mia soddisfazione appaia nel suo corpo: percioché or anche la tua luce più non m’abbaglia, comincio a raffigurare il tuo aspetto, e parmi d’averlo molte volte veduto quando eri congiunto con le tue membra.  
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<sup>196</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 425. For the idea of body approaching soul, see *Enneads* IV.4-5. See also Dominic O’Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>197</sup> The idea that a demon can enter an imagination weakened by melancholy is also discussed in the *Malleus maleficarum*, Part II, Question 2, Chapter 2. See Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger *The Hammer of Witches*, translated by Christopher S. Mackay, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 420.

<sup>198</sup> Maggi, *Satan’s Rhetoric*, 140.

<sup>199</sup> Maggi, *In the Company of Demons*, ix-x.

<sup>200</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 427.



At stake is also the discussion regarding whether the spirit is evil or good. He is neither angel nor demon, in the traditional Christian sense, which would define him either as purely good or purely bad. This spirit is a daemon, an entity that acts as an intermediary between humans and the God. The idea of the daemon as intermediary comes from Plato's *Symposium*, during the conversation of Diotima and Socrates, who define Love as a spirit and an intermediary between God and man. In Neoplatonic theory, these spirits are not defined by their morality but rather by their function as interpreters and messengers between God and man, creating a universe that exists as an interconnected whole (*Symposium*, 202e-203a).<sup>201</sup> Since gods do not converse directly with humans, spirits are tasked with this job and can do so while humans are either awake or asleep.

In the *City of God*, St. Augustine expounds upon the writings of the Platonist Apuleius in regards to demons' position as mediators between man and gods. Demons occupy a middle position in the air, between man on earth and the gods in heaven. Although they partake of divine nature because of the immortality of their bodies, they are also subject to the passions (gluttony, lust, sloth, envy, pride, anger and greed) (*City of God*, Book VIII, 14).<sup>202</sup> “[demons] are tossed about on the stormy waters of their imaginations, subject, like men, to such agitation of the heart and turmoil in the mind. Body.” (*City of God*, Book IX, 6).<sup>203</sup> Demons are capable of reason, subject to passions and immortal in a body that is eternal. At the same time, Augustine also states that even though demons dwell in the air, and thus in a higher position than humans, they are ranked below humans because they despair for their irreparable condition (*City of God*,

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<sup>201</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by Christopher Gill, (New York: Penguin, 1999), 38-39.

<sup>202</sup> St. Augustine, 318.

<sup>203</sup> St. Augustine, 350.

Book, VIII, 15; Book VIII, 22).<sup>204</sup> According to Augustine, demons are solely malignant spirits (*City of God*, IX, 20).<sup>205</sup>

In medieval theology, angels and demons occupied the same corporeal level; the only real difference between them was moral since demons were fallen angels. St. Augustine distinguishes between the bodies of demons and angels, stating that all angelic bodies were subtle and spiritual but, that after the Fall, God gave the fallen angels a much grosser body so that they could suffer.<sup>206</sup> At various points in the *City of God*, St. Augustine states that demons' bodies are composed of thick, moist air whose presence can be felt, given the right conditions.<sup>207</sup> These bodies were not material in any way but consisted only of spiritual substances. Later, St. Thomas Aquinas defines the bodies of demons as corporeal because they encompassed both matter and form, even if it was not perceptible to humans. And so to be recognizable by humans, demons needed to create a fictive body. They did this by compressing air and vapors into a form that resembled a life-like body and by giving it motion so as to give the *illusion* of a living, breathing form.<sup>208</sup> This process was called inspissation.<sup>209</sup> The body was created and therefore in actuality a (false) representation, in order for it to be perceived by humans. Marsilio Ficino expounded the philosophical principle that daemons possess a visible body in his translations of *De operatione daemonum* [*The Demons' Activities*], a classification of demons originally written by Michael Psellus, a Byzantine monk active in the eleventh century. Psellus believed that daemons had

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<sup>204</sup> St. Augustine, 320; 331

<sup>205</sup> St. Augustine, 366.

<sup>206</sup> Stephens, "Habeas Corpus", 76.

<sup>207</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book IX, 8; Book IX, 12; Book XXI, 10.

<sup>208</sup> Stephens, "Habeas Corpus", 77-78.

In the *City of God*, St. Augustine also states that demons have a body composed of thick, moist air (Book XXI, Chapter 10). St. Augustine, 985.

<sup>209</sup> Stephens, "La demonologia nella poetica del Tasso", 417. See also Walter Stephens, "Streghe, Castrati, e Sacramenti: Lettura del *Malleus maleficarum*", in *La Rappresentazione dell'Altro nei testi del Rinascimento*, a cura di Sergio Zatti, (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, 1998), 47.

perceptible bodies that they used to interact with humans.<sup>210</sup> Tasso used this Neoplatonic conception to state the daemons did have a subtle body not just a fictive one.<sup>211</sup>

Tasso's desire to give the supernatural a "body" also stemmed from his need to form a comprehensive hierarchy for the divine that ultimately led to God. He was interested in knowing not only that God (and thus the supernatural, good and bad) existed but also that the divine world was accessible to man, rather than unattainable. This idea stems from a rediscovery of Plato's *Timaeus* in which the philosopher expresses the theory that the world is a cosmos with a continuum of beings that begin with simple natural forms and arrive at a god.<sup>212</sup> There exists a gradation between beings and the god, or demiurge, who imposes order over the cosmos [Timaeus, 30a3-7].<sup>213</sup>

This idea of one cosmos that consists of gradations of beings resurfaced in the Renaissance work of the Neoplatonic philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. His *Oratio de hominis dignitate (Oration on the dignity of man)* (1486) discusses man's role as a link (*nodo*) in a chain of being that places him between spirit and matter, animal and angel, body and soul.<sup>214</sup> And so Pico places man in the center of the universe [*copula mundi*], uniting not only the

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<sup>210</sup> Michael Psellus, *Dialogue on the operations of daemons*, translated by Marcus Collison, (Sydney: J. Tegg, 1843), 26-27 [accessed October 30, 2015 from Esoteric Archives :<http://www.esotericarchives.com/psellos/daemonibus.pdf>.] See also Steven Skinner, *Byzantine Magic. Michael Psellus On the Operation of Demons*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2010). Tasso was certainly familiar with these ideas through Ficino's translations of Psellus and with the hermetic tradition through Ficino's translations of the *Corpus Hermeticus*. Ardissino, *L'aspra tragedia*, 83. Ficino also documented various rituals he practiced in an effort to contact spirits directly in *Three Books on Life [De triplici vita]* (1489). Ficino proposed a spiritual, natural magic.

<sup>211</sup> Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches", 193.

<sup>212</sup> Tasso takes these ideas from Ficino's translations of the *Timaeus* and Psellus' *On the Operation of daemons*. See also Stephens, "Habeas corpus", 88.

<sup>213</sup> Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, translated by Robin Waterfield, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>214</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *La dignità dell'uomo*, (Bari, Ecumenica Editrice, 1987), 71. See also Walter Stephens, "De dignitate striges: La copula mundi nel pensiero dei due Pico e di Torquato Tasso", in *Giovanni e Gianfrancesco Pico. L'opera e la fortuna di due studenti ferraresi*, a cura di Patrizia Castelli, (Firenze: Olschki, 1998), 325.

spiritual and the human, but also the soul and body in man-himself.<sup>215</sup> Man has free choice and the power to elevate himself to the life of angels and God.<sup>216</sup> Tasso was certainly familiar with Pico's philosophy, but he also espoused Ficino's interpretation of the *copula mundi*.<sup>217</sup> In Book Three of *De triplici vita* and in the *Theologica platonica*, Ficino places daemonic bodies as the intermediaries between man and the supernatural that unite the universe.<sup>218</sup> While demons may possess a subtle, aerial body (divinity) and also be subject to the passions (man), it is their position between man and God that ultimately interests Tasso.<sup>219</sup> The *copula mundi* represents the chain that links men, demons, angels and God. In *Il Messaggiero*, the spirit continues this line of reasoning by giving demons the honorary position between human and divine natures.

In *Il Messaggiero*, the spirit describes the natural order of the universe in which both inferior and superior species are situated. One cannot pass from one extreme to another and so there must exist a species that partakes of both the inferior and superior realms in order to reach God. Man can partake in both the mortal and immortal natures; although his body is mortal, his

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<sup>215</sup> Pico della Mirandola, 67.

<sup>216</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Introduction", *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, selections in translation, edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall, Jr., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 218.

<sup>217</sup> Tasso mentions Pico in the dialogues *Il Malpiglio secondo overo del fuggir la moltitudine* and *Il Ficino over de l'arte* as well as in his letters. Tasso specifically mentions Pico's nephew, Giovan Francesco Pico della Mirandola in the dialogue *Il Gonzaga overo de il piacere onesto* and specifically references the younger Pico's dialogue *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum* [*Witch, or the deceptions of demons*]. The *Strix* was a small dialogue published in 1523, translated into Italian and had four editions by 1556. Peter Burke, "Witchcraft and Magic in Renaissance Italy" in *The Damned Art: Essays in the literature of Witchcraft*, edited by Sydney Anglo, (Boston) Routledge, 1977), 34.

<sup>218</sup> Ficino was also influenced by treatise *De radiis* written by Al Kindi that discusses natural magic that emanates into the world through rays. The theory of rays later inspired theories regarding Eros and spiritual love. Ficino uses this theory in his *Convito di Platone* (VI, 10) to discuss the harmony and attraction between celestial and elemental bodies that controls all things and is also defined as the *copula mundi*. Giunta, 19.

<sup>219</sup> Plotinus considered the daemon or 'guardian spirit' as an inner psychological principle, a higher level above the one on which we live consciously and so a principle that was not only found within us but was also transcendent (*Enneads* III. 4.3-6). Wallis, 71. Plotinus, did however, also believe in anthropomorphic daemons as evidenced in *Enneads* III.5.6; IV.3.18; IV.4.43.

soul is immortal.<sup>220</sup> But he is not an adequate enough stepping stone to God. Without an intermediary, the gap between man and God would be too great to overcome. And so, the ascent to the divine must be a gradual one, consisting of a step (*salita*) and not a leap (*salto*) as would be between man and God. And so, spirits as an intelligible form that partake of both man and divine, are the only beings that allow for this gradual ascent:

Ma se da l'uomo senza alcun mezzo si passasse a Dio, si salirebbe senza gradi, o non con tanti con quanti sin a liu è ito ascendendo da l'una a l'altra specie: e sarebbe questa non salita, ma salto: laonde è necessario che tra Iddio e l'uomo si ponga alcun mezzo, o più tosto molti, percioché, se tra Iddio e l'uomo fosse un solo mezzo, una sola sarebbe la specie intellegibile; ma sono molti [. . . ]<sup>221</sup>

Torquato is not fully convinced by the spirit's reasoning and argues for the position of man as intermediary between God and inferior creatures since man has an intellect comparable to spirits. But man's body is susceptible to passions and most importantly, the spirit says, man's body is not immortal as is the body of the daemons. And so, only daemons truly partake of both natures and thus can be an intermediary between both natures:

Ne seguita che si debba dare un copro che fra 'l celeste e que de' bruti sia con debita partecipazione interposto: e questo è quel de' demoni, il quale è acconcio a patire com'è il corpo de l'animale e de l'uomo, e incorruttibile come il corpo celeste, perché mai non muoiono i demoni [. . . ]<sup>222</sup>

For some Church fathers, however, there did exist a problem in placing daemons between men and God. St. Augustine stated that anyone who intercedes between God and man committed nothing short of heresy; only Jesus Christ can act as mediator between God and man

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<sup>220</sup> Tasso's uses Pico della Mirandola's term *nodo* to describe man's position in the universe. Tasso, *Il Messaggiero*, 446.

<sup>221</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggiero*, 447.

<sup>222</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggiero*, 448.

(*City of God*, IX, 17).<sup>223</sup> Augustine clarified that daemons did exist but when mentioned in the Bible, they were always malignant spirits (*City of God*, Book IX, 20).<sup>224</sup> Despite dwelling above humans in the air, daemons were morally lower than humans because humans possessed virtue and revered God, while demons lived in constant despair (*City of Good*, Book VIII, 16; 22). Thus, a daemon's eternal punishment was spiritual not corporeal.<sup>225</sup>

After the publication of the *Malleus maleficarum* at the end of the fifteenth century, the witch-hunt in Europe fell into full effect. Torquato Tasso's inquiry into the accessibility of God also questions the role of witches as witnesses to supernatural encounters. By copulating with demons, witches experienced a multi sensory act that provided sufficient evidence of the existence of demons and furnished the last link in the spiritual chain. In *Il Messaggero*, Tasso consistently uses the verb *congiungersi* in regards to the purely physical sexual relationship demons had with witches.<sup>226</sup> Although the witch hunt vilified these women and burned them at the stake, their testimony was essential to proving that demons and thus, God existed in all parts of the universe and most importantly, that He was accessible to man.<sup>227</sup> In fact, in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's dialogue *Strix*, one of the main characters, Fronimo, praises witches for their role and states that they should not be burned at the stake but studied and lauded as expert witnesses of the marvelous.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> St. Augustine, 364.

<sup>224</sup> St. Augustine, 366.

<sup>225</sup> St. Augustine, 320-321; 330. See also Elliott, 134-135.

<sup>226</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 463-464. See also Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches", 193.

<sup>227</sup> Giunta, 68.

<sup>228</sup> Although Fronimo accepts the witch's testimony as proof of the Devil's existence, the witch is ultimately punished for her crimes at the end of the dialogue.

Gianfrancesco Pico participated in the witch trials of Mirandola during 1522-23, in which at least ten witches were executed. Ida Li Vigni, "La Genesi della Strix tra realtà storica ed elaborazione letteraria", in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *La Strega, ovvero degli inganni dei demoni, Saggio introduttivo, traduzione e note*, a cura di Ida Li Vigni, (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), 29-31. Tasso specifically mentions *Strix* in his dialogue, *Il Gonzaga ovvero del piacere onesto* (1580). Torquato Tasso, *Il Gonzaga ovvero del piacere onesto*, in *I Dialoghi*, a cura di Cesare Guasti,

The spirit of *Il Messaggero* continues by explaining how witches can partake sexually of daemons. Spirits have bodies because they are subject to passions, just like humans, but the composition of those bodies is different. A daemon's body is much more subtle and airy than a human one and cannot physical copulate with a women. Thus, when spirits appear to humans, they assume the image of a beautiful body that then deceives the imagination. The effect is that of an artist molding a piece of clay to form a human body that he can assume.

The deception persists further when demons appear to women. Because sexual intercourse is impossible, demons steal human sperm and impregnate women in this way.<sup>229</sup> The fictive body of the demon deceives the witch's imagination by producing sensations that are so real and intense that the woman believes she has copulated with the demon:

Ma que' demoni malvagi sono detti di l'ufficio loro, con le donne in quella guise si congiungono che voi uomini solete; e perch'essi non potrebbero per sé generare, gittano il seme d'alcum uomo nel ventre de la donna, ch'è di quelle che streghe sono da voi domandate [ . . . ]<sup>230</sup>

However, the theory of deceiving witches through the imagination was a tricky one. Just as Torquato Tasso must convince himself that he is not experiencing a hallucination caused by his melancholy when he sees the spirit, the same danger applied to witches. Doctors commonly believed that witches suffered from melancholy that negatively altered their imagination. Many

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volume I, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1858), 57. Tasso was also familiar with popular works on demonology such as Jean Bodin's *Demonomanie des sorciers*, which was translated into Italian by Tasso's friend, Ercole Cato, in 1587. Basile, 15.

<sup>229</sup> St. Augustine also states that angels can appear to men as incubi with bodies that can be touched and seen, and they can have sex with women in whatever way they please. (Book XV, 23). St. Augustine, 638.

<sup>230</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 464.

witches also used ointments with hallucinatory properties, making their statements questionable if not completely unreliable.<sup>231</sup>

Interestingly, Tasso made revisions to *Il Messaggero* in both 1583 and 1587, adding a new section that discusses melancholy as a divine furor, a condition linked to genius and creativity. The melancholic poet was already a popular theme in the first half of the fifteenth century due to the popularity of Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*.<sup>232</sup> The addition of melancholy as a source of genius is important because it connects the dialogue to the letters Tasso writes during this period, partly attributing his illness to too much intellectual activity (the "Saturn" effect).<sup>233</sup> Thus, in Tasso's works we witness the theme of melancholy as both a physical illness that brings pain and loneliness, manifesting itself in madness, but also as a sign of creativity common to exceptional poets and heroes.<sup>234</sup>

Forse è soverchia maninconia, e i maninconici, come afferma Aristotele, sono stati di chiaro ingegno ne gli studi de la filosofia e nel governo de la repubblica e nel compor versi; ed Empedocle e Socrate e Platone furono maninconici; e Marato poeta ciciliano allora era più eccelente ch'egli era fuor di sé, anzi quasi lontano da se stesso.<sup>235</sup>

Consequently, both Tasso as an author and as his character "Torquato" suffer from the same symptoms and inner turmoil as many witches; Tasso is melancholic and has admitted to having hallucinations in his many letters.<sup>236</sup> But for witches to prove that they weren't

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<sup>231</sup> Stephens, "De dignitate striges", 340.

<sup>232</sup> Basile, 50.

<sup>233</sup> Coppo, 22. See also Erwin Panofsky, Raymond Klibansky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy, Studies in the history of natural philosophy, religion and art*, (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

<sup>234</sup> Coppo, 15-16.

<sup>235</sup> Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, 431.

<sup>236</sup> In fact, Tasso may have suffered from cacademonomania. See especially letters 190 (1581), 244 (1583) and 456 (1585) in which Tasso admits to seeing demonic visions and hearing voices. Tasso states: "Gli umani sono grida



hallucinating, they had to admit to sex with a demon. This was the most concrete way to establish that the demon actually existed because the witch became a witness to the marvelous (*meraviglie*) through first hand contact with a demon during a multi-sensory act.<sup>237</sup> In the same way, Torquato acts as a witness to the existence of the daemon; he is able to know and see him through more than one sense and be convinced through reason of his ontology. The dialogue must convince the reader that Torquato is not hallucinating due his melancholy but experiencing real contact with a spirit.<sup>238</sup> Torquato assumes a privileged but tenuous position for which he can either be praised or vilified. As an eyewitness to the existence of the supernatural, he also verges on the heretical. In a later letter from 1583, Tasso describes his visions:

ed in tutto ciò ch'io odo, vo, per così dire, fingendo con la fantasia alcuna voce umana, di maniera che mi pare assai spesso che parlino le cose inanimate, e la notte sono perturbato da vari sogni; e talora sono stato rapito da l'imaginazione in modo, che mi pare d'aver udito (se pur non voglio dire di aver udito certo) alcune cose, le quali io ho conferite co 'l padre fra Marco cappuccino aporator de la presente, e con altri padre e laici con i quali ho parlato del mio male. (*Lettera 244*, 1583)<sup>239</sup>

Finally, the spirit of the dialogue also conveys a specific message to Torquato regarding the role of the perfect ambassador on earth and his relationship with the prince. He explains to Torquato that an ambassador must be endowed with prudence and eloquence, and he must be able to negotiate with all sides using courtesy and wise words. An ambassador does not simply relay messages but uses his skills as mediator to unite.

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d'uomini, e particolarmente di donne e di fanciulli, e risa piene di scherni, e varie voci d'animali che da gli uomini per inquietudine mia sono agitati, e strepiti di cose inanimate che da le mani de gli uomini sono mosse. I diabolici sono incanti e malie; e come che de gl'incanti non sia assai certo, perciocchè i topi, de' quali è piena la camera, che a me paiono indemoniati . . ." (*Lettera 190*, 1581).

<sup>237</sup> Walter Stephens, "De dignitate striges", 337.

<sup>238</sup> Giunta, 67.

<sup>239</sup> Tasso, *Lettere*, vol. II, 167.

Ultimately, the spirit's reason for appearing to the author is to prove his existence. He dons a visible body in an effort to convince Tasso of his corporality. The poet gives a body to a being that does not actually have one by using anthropomorphism. In the dedication of the dialogue, Tasso claims to write as a philosopher but believe as a Christian (“uomo che scrive come filosofo e crede come cristiano”), but he undoubtedly delves into the ontology of the supernatural and its place on the scale between man and God. In a letter dating to 1585, Tasso claimed that he was forced to write *Il Messaggero* by his patron Vincenzo Gonzaga. He stated that his enemies took advantage of this dialogue to accuse Tasso, although he claims to never have had contact with any demons:

Ma parrà ad alcuno ch'io contradica a me stesso; il qual nel dialogo del Messaggero mostro di favellare con uno spirito: quel che non avrei voluto fare quantunque avessi potuto. Ma sappiate che quel dialogo fu da me fatto molti anni sono per ubbidire al cenno di un principe, il qual forse non aveva cattiva intenzione: nè io stimava gran fallo o pericolo trattar di questa materia quasi poeticamente. Ma da poi i miei nemici hanno voluto prendersi gioco di me, e m'hanno fatto esempio d'infelicità, facendo riuscir in parte vero quel ch'io aveva finto. . . Ma Iddio sa ch'io non fui mai nè mago nè luterano giamai; nè lessi libri eretici o di negromanzia, nè d'altra arte proibita. . . (*Lettera 456*, 1585).<sup>240</sup>

While *Il Messaggero* was published in 1582 against his will, Tasso did revise the dialogue two more times, specifically adding the discourse on melancholy. This addition makes it apparent that Tasso, increasingly sick with melancholy, was most likely attempting to rationalize some of the supernatural experiences he believed were the result of demonic influences on his imagination. Contrary to what he wrote about his dialogue in Letter 456 above, many of Tasso's letters mention a “folletto” that Tasso would often accuse of stealing his books

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<sup>240</sup> Tasso, *Lettere*, 478.

or money and ransacking his room.<sup>241</sup> Tasso's friend and biographer, Giovan Battista Manso, stated that he often heard Tasso conversing with an invisible spirit in his room.<sup>242</sup> In the same Letter 456, Tasso laments of various hallucinations, both visual and auditory: "spaventati notturni", "faville", "ombre dei topi", "strepiti spaventosi", "fischi" to name but a few. The list concludes with a vision of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus. Although he attributes these visions to frenzy and various medications (*confezioni*), he does not discount divine intervention: "e la qualità del male è così maravigliosa, che potrebbe facilmente ingannare i medici più diligenti; onde il la stime operazione di mago."<sup>243</sup>

## Conclusion

Sixteenth century culture believed in natural and demonic magic. Christian beliefs as well as occult philosophies influenced Tasso's works regarding the supernatural. His ideas of the marvelous are based on the real supernatural and he attempts to give these ideas a rational foundation, with which readers could identify.<sup>244</sup> In the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso uses the Christian marvelous to respond to a specific literary program, as espoused in his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*. The epic exalts the strength and ceremony of the Catholic Church, but at the same time attempts to respond to Tasso's personal need to access the divine and prove its

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<sup>241</sup> The 'folletto' was a character who often stole items and perpetrated pranks. He was a common figure in Renaissance folklore and magic. Tasso identifies him with a demon in his prison cell. Giunta, 55.

<sup>242</sup> In his biography of Tasso, *Vita di Torquato Tasso*, Giovanni Battista Manso, recounts witnessing Tasso conversing with a spirit in his room. Tasso also mentions the 'folletto' and 'il diavolo' in other letters. See Letter 437 (*A Enea Tasso*); Letter 448 (*A Scipione Gonzaga*); Letter 456 (*A Maurizio Cataneo*), in Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 460; 468; 479 Giovanni Battista Manso, *Vita di Torquato Tasso*, (Venezia: Tipografia di Alvisopoli, 1825), 119-120; Roncoroni, 48.

<sup>243</sup> Tasso, *Lettere*, II, 481.

<sup>244</sup> Mazzali, 120.

existence by giving it a visible body according to orthodox convention.<sup>245</sup> The presence of the supernatural in the poem is not fleeting or episodic but an important and central theme to the epic plot.<sup>246</sup>

The later dialogue, *Il Messaggiero*, is Tasso's philosophical attempt to rationalize the supernatural and man's accessibility of it. Influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, Tasso argues for the existence of demons, regardless of morality, as central links between man and God, and as facilitators in the contemplation of the intelligible realm as proposed by philosophers such as Plotinus. As opposed to the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the dialogue questions the function of the supernatural. The poet's religious doubts regarding the supernatural and his attempts to explain divinity through various means stem not only from a personal intellectual and spiritual desire, but are also characteristic of a general religious discontentment that affected the second half of the sixteenth century in response to systemic witch-hunts and movements such as the Inquisition and the Counter Reformation.<sup>247</sup>

Tasso's personal battle with melancholy and the visions he experiences in his prison cell at Sant' Anna are also closely linked to his dialogue, chronicled by his many letters which act not only as an autobiography but also as a guide to his works. While taking opposite approaches to supernatural corporality, both the *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Il Messaggiero* parallel Tasso's life and many of the poetic contradictions coincide with the poet's personal problems regarding orthodoxy and heresy.<sup>248</sup> He would continue his attempts to placate both the rational and marvelous aspects of the supernatural for the rest of his career.

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<sup>245</sup> Brand, 92; 96.

<sup>246</sup> Baldassari, *Inferno e cielo*, 43.

<sup>247</sup> Stephens, "Tasso and the Witches", 181.

<sup>248</sup> Giunta, 47.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have brought to the forefront representations of physical deformity and metamorphosis in Italian Renaissance literature. Contrary to the Neoplatonic movement, which defined love as a search for beauty and spiritual contemplation, there existed an equally important tide in the Renaissance that was fascinated with the earthly, physical body and its various metamorphoses, particularly in regards to disease, gender and the supernatural. Deformity and monstrosity were in direct opposition to the idealism so strongly advocated by Neoplatonic philosophy. This vein of opposition encompassed individuals judged on physical appearance, gender, nationality and who represented everything that was disgusting and vulgar. Gender, in particular, was strongly tied to monstrosity, as woman was by nature born a deformed male and more susceptible to lasciviousness. Her imagination was even capable of imprinting deformity on a fetus, and her body acted as a constant source of temptation to men. I conclude that sexual intercourse was often the main impetus for the many monstrosities discussed in this work.

Authors clearly identified the aesthetics of beauty in various treatises, describing in detail the proportions and harmony of body parts which artists then brought to life in paintings. But there existed no clear criteria of what defined a monstrous or deformed being. By tracing physical monstrosity through various texts and genres, I show that monstrosity encompassed a wide and often ambivalent domain that was not at all as clearly defined as the standard of love and beauty that it opposed. This domain included not only physical appearance but also political, social and moral criteria and was clearly anchored in the sensible world.

Monstrosity and the physical metamorphoses it could produce, included both deformity and ugliness, and defied the confines of nature. This transformation signaled a departure from the norm and elicited various emotions, such as fear, wonder and even pleasure. Those beings considered physically deformed constituted the other, an assault on the status quo or what was considered normalcy in the Renaissance. Society often interpreted these stigmas as punishment for individual or group sins. Disease and the various deformities it created beckoned for an explanation of such grotesque transformation, which were often linked monstrosity to morality, evil and the devil. Such physical metamorphoses also signaled a loss of identity.

When defining monstrosity, we generally think of excess or deficiency, for example missing or excessive limbs. Such states are deemed beyond what is considered normal. In the Renaissance, the term monstrosity covered a wide range of both physical and mental conditions. These included extremely beautiful women, labeled as monstrous given that they appeared rarely in nature and possessed an unparalleled ability to seduce men. Women played a unique role in the process of metamorphoses and monstrosity. Poets contrasted images of beautiful woman as outlined in the many treatises on beauty and love in the Renaissance with depictions of the ugly and non-conventional women described by comic-realistic poets and later, Francesco Berni. Berni's parodies showed earthly women full of sensuality and vulgar manners as an image of the anti-Laura. Authors also targeted the courtesans of the Renaissance period whose beauty and lasciviousness not only seduced men but whose participation in traditionally male literary circles threatened established boundaries. Poets publicly humiliated courtesans' bodies through descriptions of diseases such as syphilis as punishment not simply for their beauty (or even as revenge for rejection) but also for their daringness to enter into male realms. These micro-aggressions against women led to the propagation of misogynistic views in literature. Men

considered these courtesans haughty, corrupt, and extremely seductive, and they mirrored the women's moral deformity in physical monstrosity through violent vituperations. Male authors denied women ownership of their body by using those very bodies against them in attempt to control women. Courtesans such as Veronica Franco fought to reclaim their bodies through poetry.

The portrayal of the transgressive continued in the figure of the witch. Often old, ugly women were accused of witchcraft connecting the idea of evil with ugliness. Witches occupied an ambivalent space because of their purported contact with the devil. They represented an intermediary, a being who had physical contact with the devil usually through sexual intercourse (and posed the possibility of deformed offspring), and their testimony made them eye witnesses to the existence of the devil and demons. Further figures excluded from society such as heretics, foreigners, lepers, victims of plague and syphilis constituted the other not simply because of their physical appearance but also for their potential of spreading disease and moral depravity.

At the same time, such wonders of physical transformations (people and events that occur outside of what is considered conventional) could also show the power and mystery of God. As St. Augustine states, only God knows why he creates certain human beings, regardless of their appearance: "For God is the creator of all, and he himself knows where and when any creature should be created or should have been created".<sup>1</sup> In his *Generazione de' mostri*, Benedetto Varchi's described Michelangelo as a monster not because of his physical appearance, but rather his rare intellectual genius. In a grotesque self- portrait, Michelangelo, himself,

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson, (New York, Penguin, 1972), 662.

describes his own body as monstrous because of his deformed spine after painting the Sistine Chapel.<sup>2</sup>

Natural phenomena and marvels, regardless of whether they were good or bad, fascinated the Renaissance and the Baroque period after it. Natural philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino translated the texts of Plato and his followers, including works such as the hermetic corpus, and combined Neoplatonic philosophy with Christian Aristotelianism. Ficino placed emphasis not only on the physical body but also on the marvels of the human soul and spirits. Authors such as Torquato Tasso, who struggled most of his life with personal demons, examined the power of the imagination and the occult causes of such marvels. Many sought to challenge the traditional concepts of man and body, and expose their vulnerabilities.

Lastly, the supernatural and the bodies that spirits could assume to communicate with humans show a divide between prevalent Christian ideas of angels and demons and the still popular Neoplatonic theories that posit bodies as impediments to the intelligible world. The Renaissance marked the height of the witch-hunts and scholars debated not only the role of the witch as an intermediary, but also the existence of demons and their ability to communicate with humans. What was the purpose of angels and demons? Did they have a message to convey to us? What kind of body did they adopt when appearing to humans on earth? Through inspissation, spirits often assumed a familiar and beautiful shape when they descended to earth so that their message could be clearly understood. This metamorphosis signaled a crossing of boundaries between human and divine and we can say that such shape shifting violated nature. In Tasso's *Messaggero*, the daemon that appears to Torquato educates the author about the concrete role of spirits as ambassadors but more importantly, explains that the body can be a hindrance to the

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<sup>2</sup> See Michelangelo's sonnet, "I'ho già fatto un gozzo in questo stento".



soul, which resides in the intelligible world. The human bodies that spirits adopted when they appeared on earth were imperfect even if beautiful and always participated in the sensible world.

The Renaissance was a volatile period, characterized by anxiety regarding political instability, war, epidemics, religious upheavals, and foreign exploration. Society desperately desired to set limits in order to understand what is other and different, as well as what is 'normal' and familiar. The monstrous and the deformed encompassed the many transgressive figures that all fell outside of the traditional boundaries of beauty, harmony and proportions, but that simultaneously fascinated society by causing both positive and negative reactions.

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