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**Cinthio's Orbecche and the (Re)Interpretation of Aristotelian Poetics
and Machiavellian Politics in Italian Renaissance Tragedy**

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Italian dramatist and theorist Gianbattista Giraldi Cinthio interpreted (and re-interpreted) crucial precepts of Aristotelian poetics and Machiavellian politics through a study of his 1541 tragedy Orbecche. During the Italian Renaissance, scholars and artists were busy ‘rediscovering’ the works of the ancients; Aristotle’s Poetics was part of this process of (re)discovery, and translations of his work circulated throughout Europe and influenced both critical and artistic practices of the period. As both a working playwright and an active scholar, Cinthio interpreted and reworked Aristotelian precepts in theory –through his treatises on romances and dramaturgy—and in practice –through his own tragedies. But Cinthio was not only influenced by Greek (and Roman) models; as a playwright, he was also subject to the system of artistic patronage operating in Italy during much of the Renaissance. As was customary, Cinthio was dependent on the graces of his patron, Ercole II d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, at whose request Cinthio wrote Orbecche and oversaw its performance. How this relationship between patron and playwright may have affected the content of Cinthio’s plays, particularly his Orbecche, will be explored when we take a closer look at how Cinthio encodes and decodes Machiavellian politics within Orbecche, particularly relating to how rulers should behave (whether and when to be cruel or merciful, for instance). We will also look at how the codes of Renaissance patronage worked and how they may have influenced Cinthio’s choices in Orbecche.

Chapter I

Adapting Dramatic Practice to the Exigencies of Italian Audiences

As a playwright, a theorist, a novella writer, a professor, and the beneficiary of ducal patronage in sixteenth-century Ferrara, Gianbattista Giraldi Cinthio faced not only the usual pressures of trying to write and produce plays that would fulfill his artistic vision, but also of negotiating the conflicting expectations of his audience and his patron. As a member of the court of Duke Ercole II d'Este, Cinthio depended on the Duke's patronage for his livelihood. But the Duke was not only Cinthio's patron; he was also the ultimate authority in the principality of Ferrara. So running afoul of the Duke would not only endanger Cinthio's ability to work, it might also endanger his freedom and perhaps even his life, as the Duke had absolute control over his subjects. So in his writing, particularly in his dramatic output—written to be performed as court entertainments—Cinthio must walk a fine line between appealing to the audience of courtiers and fellow humanists, and pleasing (and perhaps even appeasing) his powerful lord and patron. In this chapter we will examine how Cinthio attempts this adaptation and accommodation, particularly through the appropriation and reinterpretation of classical models and theories of poetics. We will also see how these strategies form part of what scholar Annabel Patterson has termed a “hermeneutics of censorship” that allows writers to deal with transgressive and subversive issues while ostensibly complying with the rules and regulations—formal and informal—of the authorities.

How Cinthio (Re)Interprets Aristotelian Poetics in his Orbecche

Like many other working theorists and playwrights of the Cinquecento, Cinthio was interested in genre theory, particularly in commenting and applying the newly rediscovered

poetics of Aristotle. In fact, throughout his lifetime, Cinthio not only wrote tragedies and novellas; he also produced influential treatises on the nature and practice of romances, comedies, and tragedies. In his dual practice as a playwright and theorist, Cinthio is very much a man of his time, since, as critic Salvatore Di Maria explains, during the Italian Renaissance, playwrights, though fascinated by ancient culture... were not content merely to translate or imitate an art form that was not particularly relevant to their lives. Thus, with all due reverence to the genius of the past, they set out to give dramatic expression to their own culture and individual aspirations, inaugurating a revitalization process that brought the classical genre to life. (19)

In this part we will examine some of the ways in which Cinthio adapted Aristotelian precepts to suit his own dramatic practice, and how his play Orbecche, the first tragedy of the Italian Renaissance,¹ reflects Cinthio's beliefs as a working playwright and a genre critic. After all, as critic Stefano Jossa has written,

[c]on l'Orbecche il Giraldi si fa promotore dell'ambizioso progetto di recuperare la tragedia nella letteratura contemporanea, realizzando un'opera-manifesto, dal timbro di laboratorio, in cui la riflessione critica è portata sulla scena, in modo da verificare passo dopo passo la teoria nella prassi, la poetica nella poesia. (25)

Practical considerations and theoretical preoccupations intertwine in Cinthio's work. His critical and dramatic works inform each other.

While Cinthio shows deep respect—and sometimes even reverence—for Aristotle and the literary precepts he sets, he also believes that these poetic practices can and should be modified to keep up with the times. Strict adherence to tradition for tradition's sake is anathema to

¹ "Orbecche (1541) was the first Italian tragedy *regolare e rappresentata*, that is, the first Italian tragedy composed according to the neoclassical rules and produced on the stage" (Herrick 73).

Cinthio; he embraces innovation, and even believes that Aristotle would applaud deviations from his poetics to accommodate contemporary tastes and practices. In his "The Apology for Dido,"

Cinthio argues for this freedom to adapt ancient models:

if perhaps I have sometimes departed from the rules given by Aristotle in order to conform to the customs of our times, I have done so after the example of the ancients, for it may be seen that Euripides did not begin his stories as did Sophocles and that, as I just said, the Romans arranged their plots in yet another way than did the Greeks, and besides this Aristotle himself has conceded it to me. For he does not forbid at all, when it is demanded either by place or time or the quality of the matters dealt with, to depart somewhat from those arts which he reduced to the precepts that he gave us. (252)

Cinthio sees innovation even within the ancient models themselves, and claims for himself the same privilege of adapting genre norms to changing places, times, and matters. If the classical masters could innovate, then, Cinthio reasoned, so could he. Cinthio believed in

la possibilità di insirire l'autorità aristotelica in un discorso ancora umanistico, in cui la regola fosse un termine di riferimento è confronto più che una norma chiusa e immutabile. Aristotele si rivelava, così, disponibile a concessioni, aperture e integrazioni, inserito in una poetica più di stampo retorico, persuasiva e moralistica, che logica o tecnica. (Jossa 41)

Cinthio resolves the inevitable conflicts between the generic constraints of the Poetics and prevailing literary tradition, and the exigencies of real-life contemporary audiences and patrons by choosing to 'read' Aristotle as tacitly approving deviations from the Poetics when such modifications are 'necessary.' For Cinthio, then, the Poetics is not limiting; the precepts

espoused by Aristotle are important guidelines, but guidelines only, which must be examined in light of contemporary dramatic practice and adjusted to fit current (pragmatic) realities.

Scholar Daniel Javitch notes that Cinthio borrows Aristotle's authority by making frequent references to his Poetics in his own treatises, a practice which "requires modifying what the Greek philosopher actually said, since Giraldi's prescriptions reflect his generic transformations of ancient tragedy" ("Self-justifying Norms" 203). But Cinthio's adaptations may have another purpose beyond merely claiming the mantle of authority that Aristotle could provide. Perhaps Cinthio is using the conventions of particular literary genres and traditions as a way of protecting himself against attack from religious, political, or social authorities, including his own patron, Duke Ercole II. As Annabel Patterson has shown, it is partly to this fear of censorship "that we owe our very concept of 'literature,' as a kind of discourse with rules of its own, a concept that has for centuries been thought to be capable of protecting writers who have tried to abide by those rules" (4). In Patterson's analysis, it makes little difference if the censorship is overt or subtle, formalized through laws or implemented by social pressure; whatever form it takes, censorship spurs creators to find innovative strategies to communicate with their audience in meaningful ways. Cinthio, like other creators subject to social, political, and religious pressures, modifies his artistic output and adapts "a system of communication ('literature') in which ambiguity becomes a creative and necessary instrument, while at the same time the art (and the theory) of interpretation was reinvented, expanded, and honed" in a phenomenon Patterson terms "the hermeneutics of censorship" (18). Cinthio's appropriation and reinterpretation of classical models, and his adaptation of Aristotelian poetics, can be seen as part of "the rediscovery of a classical system of rhetorical ingenuity, the 'ancient freedoms'" (Patterson 19).

Cinthio's insistence on relying on Aristotle's authority means "he must misread Aristotle's pronouncements to validate his own unclassical norms of tragedy" (Javitch, "Self-justifying Norms" 203). And yet, Javitch recognizes, "Giraldi's theorizing of tragedy is the most innovative and extensive. While he appropriates Aristotle's principles and terminology, he transforms them to suit modern needs and especially to justify his own practice" ("Emergence" 149). An example of this type of adaptation is Cinthio's endorsement of invented plots and happy endings. While Cinthio "was fully aware that his tragedies departed from classical precedents and even advertised these innovations in the prologues to his tragedies... he also wished to secure his new writing by affiliating it to a past. He wanted simultaneously to be modern and vital and yet to anchor his practice in tradition" (Javitch, "Self-justifying Norms" 205). These competing desires and motivations inform his critical writings, where he tries to reconcile ancient models to contemporary dramatic practices, including his own experiences as a working tragedian.

Most of Cinthio's innovations to tragedy as a genre are in fact adaptations of dramatic practices used in classical comedies. According to Javitch, "Giraldi's basic mutation of tragedy was to endow it with a number of basic characteristics that had traditionally belonged to comedy" ("Self-justifying Norms" 202).² These changes to classical models of the tragedy include the use of prologues, the division of the play into separate acts, and the introduction of happy endings to the tragedy, all hallmarks of Cinthio's dramatic output (though *Orbecche* is a 'classic' tragedy in that there is no happy ending; indeed, most of the major players end up dead). While Cinthio's conception of tragedy as a genre is heavily influenced by Aristotle, he is also familiar with Roman playwrights and critics such as Horace and Seneca. From Seneca, Cinthio takes the practice of including a separate prologue and the division of the tragedy into

² See also Herrick 74.

five acts. Tragedy herself justifies the appropriateness of a separate prologue in “La tragedia a chi legge,” an explanatory speech appended to the printed editions of *Orbecche*: “Ne perch’io/ dagli atti porti il prologo diviso,/ debbo biasimo aver, però che i tempi/ ne’ quai son nata e la novità mia/ e qualche altro rispetto occulto, fammi/ meco portarlo” (lines 36-41).³ These ‘hidden considerations’ are never made explicit, but perhaps what Cinthio hints at so coyly is his own desire as a playwright to interact directly with his audience, “to speak to you contrary to the practice of tragedies and of the poets of antiquity” (8). As Peggy Osborn explains

[i]n all his plays Giraldi includes a separate prologue, unknown until that time except in comedy. Giraldi is clearly extremely proud of this innovation, offering as it did an invaluable opportunity for him to address his audience direct [sic] and to introduce his play to them, arousing their interest and curiosity for what is to follow and justifying any innovations it may contain. (“Dramatic Theory” 54)

Cinthio uses the prologue to address the expectations of his audience, perhaps even to “alert the reader [or spectator] to his special responsibilities” in interpreting the text (Patterson 56). The use of the prologue as a separate element follows the practice of Roman comedy, but it “completely goes against Aristotle, whose definition of the prologue was the first part of the tragedy before the *parode*, or initial entrance of the chorus, which thereafter remained on the stage until the end” (Morrison 7).⁴ Such a deviation from Aristotelian norms does not appear to have bothered Cinthio, who used separate prologues in all his plays for several important dramatic and didactic purposes.

The prologue, as character and vital part of the tragedy itself, “usually voiced the didactic scope of a play, and often called attention to the forces of good and evil informing the dramatic

³ “Nor must I be reproached because I separate the prologue from the acts. For the times in which I was born and my newness and some other hidden considerations compel me to carry the prologue with me” (116).

⁴ See also Herrick 76 and Armato 70-71.

action. He also exhorted the audience to learn from the tragic events that they were about to see represented” (Di Maria 26). In fact, in his tragedy *Selene*, Cinthio’s prologue explains just how the play was to influence the behavior and morals of the audience, and lead them to choose more virtuous lives:

Per insegnare adunque in un sol giorno/A migliaia di gente il vero modo/Di compir con
onor la vita frale,/In uso posti for teatri e scene/Perché, veggendo indi gli spettatori/Varie
sembianze d’uomini e di donne,/Di varii uffici e qualita diverse/E di varii costume e varie
leggi,/Sortir diversi fini e varie sorti,/Fatti acutti, sapesser da sé in tanta/Varieta di gente e
di costume/Seguir la loda et ischivare il biasmo/E veder che chiunque virtu segue/Giunge
a buon fine e chi ‘l mal segue a reo. (Lines 24-37)

However, the audience was not meant merely to accept the moral of the tragedy, but to actually engage in an examination of what it means to live a virtuous life. According to scholar Salvatore Di Maria, “[t]he didactic function of theatre, then, was not merely to teach the difference between right and wrong or show the effects of good and evil in absolute terms. Rather, it was to encourage the audience to reflect upon, define, or redefine the evolving values and ideological notions (moral, political, religious, social) underpinning their social institutions” (27).⁵ Tragedy could be a catalyst for moral growth by providing its audience the opportunity to debate the larger issues of right versus wrong, good versus evil, justice and injustice, fate or individual choice. But this debate can only exist if the writer is able to circumvent the social, religious, and political pressures brought to bear on his work by authorities such as patrons and rulers. That’s why Patterson argues that censorship, broadly interpreted, should be understood as “a tacit

⁵ “Cinthio was both an Aristotelian and a Horatian, but he emphasized the didactic function, which is only present in Aristotle by implication. Cinthio honestly believed, apparently, that tragedy was a powerful instrument for inculcating good morals; he believed with Trissino and other contemporaries that the function of tragedy, and indeed all good poetry, was to induce the reader or spectator to flee vice and follow virtue” (Herrick 81-82).

contract between writers and the authorities,” where the writers are free to express themselves as long as they follow certain conventions and forgo egregious statements.

But Cinthio is not only seeking to forestall censorship; he is also engaged in the process of reconfiguring dramatic practice for the modern age. He uses prologues, afterwords, and even tragedy itself as a way of transmitting these innovations. For example, Cinthio presents the character of ‘Tragedy’ to explain his dramatic practices to his audience, including why

Orbecche is divided into acts and scenes:

E che divisa in atti e ‘n scene io sia,/ non pur non deve essermi ascritto a vizio,/ ma mi deve mostrar via piú leggiadra,/ ché, com’un uom fia strano mostro al mondo,/ che non abbia distinte in sé le membra, / così ach’io istimo, che spiacevol for a/ vedermi in un tutta confuse. E bene/ Seneca vide e I Romani antichi,/ quanto vedesser torto I Greci in questo” (lines 51-59)⁶

Cinthio thus explicitly chooses to follow Roman dramatic practices, most notably those of Seneca, instead of the classical Greek models. In fact, he considers the Roman model, with its multi-act and scene divisions, to be superior to the Greek practice of one long, uninterrupted act. Cinthio further explains the usefulness of dividing tragedies into five acts in his treatise “On the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies”:

The Latins have held that a plot should be divided into five acts. In the first the argument should be contained. In the second the things contained in the argument begin to move toward their end. In the third come impediments and perturbations. In the fourth begins to appear a way to remedy what is causing trouble. In the fifth is given the expected end

⁶“That I am divided into acts and scenes must not be imputed to a vice in me, but should make me appear much more comely. For as a man who does not have all of his limbs (well) formed would be a strange monster to the world, so I think that it would be equally distasteful to see me in a complete confusion. Seneca well saw, as did the ancient Romans, how much the Greeks were wrong in this respect” (117).

with a fitting solution for all the argument. These reasons serve only for a comedy, but with proper changes can serve also for tragedy, and this division has been common to both tragedy and comedy. (260-261)

The five-act model thus provides as well a prescription for the development of the plot, which means that the playwright doesn't need to 'reinvent the wheel' with each new tragedy; instead, he can reach for the five-act model and know how the basic structure of his plot should flow.

The five-act tragedy also has other benefits related to the actual staging and performance aspects. As scholar Marvin Herrick explains, "[t]he use of five acts, as Cinthio conceived them, made it possible to clear the stage from time to time of ruffraff and so preserve the privacy and dignity proper to the great actions and grave deliberations of noble characters" (75). Thus, decorum was better served by following the Roman five-act arrangement than the Greek tradition of one long, uninterrupted performance. Herrick also points out a more pragmatic purpose for the division of tragedies into acts: the *intermezzi* between acts helped maintain audience interest and comfort. This was particularly important to Cinthio, who liked to note his audience's reception to his work; for example, in his Discorso he mentions the audience's reaction to the depiction of violence and horror in Orbecche. His preference seems to have been validated by experience; in his treatise, Cinthio complains about the audience's negative reaction to the second performance of his Orbecche, explaining how the stagers' decision to omit the play's original divisions in favor of a more 'classical' act-less presentation actually backfired.

Another aspect in which Cinthio deviates from Aristotelian precepts is in the use of invented or feigned plots that do not follow the classical or historically-based stories. In his dramatic practice, Cinthio clearly prefers the use of invented or feigned plots, which Aristotle does contemplate but doesn't advocate. As Herrick explains, "[c]ertainly Aristotle did not

condemn the feigned plot in tragedy, but he implied that the normal and approved procedure among the ancient Greeks was to take tragic arguments from the traditional stories, because historical events are regarded as possible and the possible is convincing" (85). In "La tragedia a chi legge",⁷ Cinthio has Tragedy explain that new names and new matter can legitimately give rise to tragedy: "Né mi déi men pregiar, perch'io sia nata/ da cosa nova e non da istoria antica,/ ché chi con occhio dritto il ver riguarda,/ vedrà che, senza alcun biasimo, lece/ che da nova material e novi nomi/ nasca nova tragedia" (lines 31-36)⁸. To justify his position in light of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Cinthio must resort to a kind of misreading of Aristotle, in which he once again attributes to the philosopher motives and beliefs not supported by the text of the *Poetics* itself. In "On the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies," Cinthio states that "the tragic plot can be feigned by the poet as well as the comic" because "Aristotle, judicious here as everywhere, conceded it in more than one passage of his *Poetics*" (253). Furthermore, Cinthio adds,

[r]eason is able to present the same truth to us with sufficient probability, because the power of moving tragic feelings depends only on imitation which does not depart from probability, and facts do not move the feelings without words fitly and poetically joined together. Therefore it seems to me that it is in the power of the poet to move at his wish the tragic feelings by means of a tragedy of which he feigns the plot, if that plot is in conformity with natural habits and not remote from what can happen and often does happen. And perhaps the feelings are moved to the adoption of good morals more in

⁷ "[L']epilogo si configura come una vera e propria dichiarazione di poetica, solo apparentemente difensiva (vv. 1-5), ma in realtà programmatica (vv. 183-192)" (Jossa 26).

⁸ "Nor must you esteem me less because I was born from something new and not from ancient history. For he who considers the truth with an honest eye will see that without any reproach it is possible that new tragedy may be born from new material and new names" (115-16).

proportion as by coming anew into the minds of the listeners the feigned plot gains for itself the greater attention. (253)

Thus it seems that for Cinthio, the end of tragedy is to encourage the audience towards good behavior, to the “adoption of good morals.” These morals are apparently more likely to develop when the audience’s attention is fully engaged in the spectacle before it on stage, which is why Cinthio privileges invented plots in his own dramatic practice. The element of surprise, of novelty, assures that the audience will be spellbound, and apparently more receptive to tragedy’s lessons. The use of invented plots also allowed the tragedian more flexibility in trying to reach or influence his audience; these new plots could reflect current tastes and preoccupations.

According to Di Maria, Cinthio and other playwrights in the Italian Renaissance “knew that a dramatic work had to be culturally relevant in order to delight and instruct the public. A tragedy had to draw the spectators both emotionally and intellectually into the events of the stage before they could appreciate its spectacle and ponder the ideological import of its poetic message” (35). Only then could true delight, instruction, and change occur. Furthermore,

[t]o facilitate this experience, the representation had to be so realistic as to engage the concerns (human, political, religious) of contemporary audiences, and appeal to their taste, and stir their emotions. More specifically, it had to suggest that what was happening on stage could happen in real life. True theatrical experience happens as the gap between the world of theater and the auditorium narrows to the point that the fiction of the stage evokes in the minds of the spectators their own reality. (35-36)

However, as Patterson has shown, the connection to real-life could not be too open or egregious; otherwise, the artist would be leaving himself vulnerable to attack by the authorities. That is why writers like Cinthio developed “highly sophisticated system[s] of oblique communication, of

unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers or audiences (among whom were the very same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation” and leading to the recognition of the theatre as “a privileged domain with laws of its own, and a useful safety valve or even a source of intelligence” (Patterson 56).

But even given the workings of the “hermeneutics of censorship,” and the need to please a demanding audience composed of courtiers, humanists, and royal patrons, Cinthio never loses sight of the ultimate purpose of tragedy. Like Horace, Cinthio believes tragedy should delight and educate the audience. As Cinthio discusses in his treatise “On the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies,”

[t]ragedy and comedy have their end in common because both endeavor to introduce good morals, but in this agreement there is the difference that comedy is without terror and without commiseration (because in it there are no deaths or other terrible chances, but instead it seeks to bring about its end with pleasure and with some pleasing saying), and tragedy, whether it has a happy conclusion or an unhappy one, by means of the pitiable and the terrible, purges the minds of the hearers from their vices and influences them to adopt good morals... (252)

For Cinthio, tragedy can have either happy or unhappy endings, something not contemplated by Aristotle, who only discusses tragedies with unhappy endings that properly inspire pity and fear in their audiences. However, Cinthio advocates—and practices, though not in *Orbecche*—the art of the tragedy with a happy ending, which will inspire the development of the tragicomedy as a genre.⁹ Cinthio promotes the creation of tragedies with happy endings not only because audiences like being “consoled” by the positive outcome, but also because having the villains get

⁹ See discussion in Herrick 86-90.

their comeuppance offers “greater satisfaction and better instruction of those who listen” (“On the Composition” 257). As scholar Mary Morrison explains,

Giraldi's *tragedie di lieto fine* really constitute a new genre. Although the action must provoke Aristotle's pity and terror, providing a salutatory moral catharsis, and though the atmosphere is uniformly somber and threatening, in the end the virtuous characters escape from the tragic fate that menaces them, while the evil characters receive the punishment they deserve at the hands of divine justice. Clearly this formula is contrary to the spirit of Greek tragedy, but it was in perfect conformity with the spirit of Counter-Reform prevalent in Ferrara at this time. (6)

Cinthio does incorporate the concept of pity and fear, the Aristotelian catharsis, into his conception of tragedy's ultimate purpose, but he sees it primarily as a way to rid the audience of negative emotions and make them more receptive to good emotions, which will in turn lead to ‘good morals’ and presumably, to good (Christian) behavior. Furthermore, “[t]he experience of tragedy, according to Giraldi, exerts on the viewer a didactic and cautionary effect quite remote from Aristotle's catharsis” (Javitch, “Emergence” 153). This effect might in fact be related to the prevailing religious mores of Counter-Reformation Italy. According to Morrison,

Giraldi often mentions the catharsis, defining it as a moral purgation for the audience by which the tragedy, “col miserabile e col terribile purga gli animi da vizi, e gl'induce a buoni costumi” (p. 176). He explains the catharsis, giving Aristotle's somewhat cryptic words a precise significance: to witness a tragedy is to receive a morally improving experience and a warning, which will teach the spectators to shun the errors committed by the protagonists and turn to virtue. “Perché lo spettatore con tacita conseguenza seco dice: se questi per errore commesso non volontariamente tanto male ha sofferto quanto

vedo io ora, che sarebbe di me se force volontariamente commettessi questo peccato? E questo pensiero il fa astenere dagli errori” (182). This is Giraldi’s own interpretation, which is in keeping with the moralizing tendency of his whole theatre and with the mood of the Counter-Reformation. (5)

In Cinthio’s opinion, in order for tragedy to fulfill its ultimate purpose, the audience should be able to identify with the characters and their plight. As Cinthio indicates, tragedy will have much more of an impact on its audience if they can put themselves in the protagonists’ place and realize that if such misfortune can befall a character who sins involuntarily, how much worse it will be for those who, like the audience members, voluntarily commit sins. In labeling the audience’s acts as ‘sins’ Cinthio is once again exhibiting the moralizing spirit that ushered in the Counter-Reformation and its concern with the salvation of the soul. In fact, Cinthio’s Orbecche, first performed in 1541, comes in the interstice just before the convocation of the Council of Trent.

Perhaps this Christian conception of sin is why *hamartia* does not feature in Cinthio’s conception of tragedy. For Cinthio, tragedy does not hinge on an error of judgment, as it does for Aristotle. As Rabell mentions in her commentary of the novella Orbecche (whose plot follows closely that of the eponymous tragedy), “Cinthio does not create Aristotelic tragic heroes who commit errors of judgment. Someone who commits an error of judgment is deemed innocent and does not deserve any punishment” (81). In Orbecche, Oronte’s punishment – amputation of the hands and decapitation – reflects the nature of his transgressions; he did, after all, marry the king’s daughter without permission, after the king had placed his trust in him. Oronte was in fact stealing from the king one of his most cherished possessions: a daughter who could be married off for political gain and who could bear legitimate heirs to continue King

Sulmone's dynasty. Theft was commonly punished by hand amputation. Beheading also has symbolic ramifications, since the man is head of the kingdom, and head of the family. Losing his head is akin to losing control of the kingdom, giving up authority over the family. But as Rabell points out, "Orbecche and Oronte, however, receive disproportionate punishment for their premeditated transgression of getting married without the consent of King Sulmone" (Ibid.). Besides having his hands amputated by King Sulmone, Oronte sees his children murdered in front of him before he himself is killed and then beheaded, the rest of his body thrown to the dogs. Orbecche must suffer the loss of her husband and children by her father's own hand, and not only that, she becomes aware of their deaths when her father the king presents her with her husband's head and hands and her children's corpses on silver platters, as a gruesome 'gift'. She then kills her father, amputates his hands and beheads his corpse before killing herself.

The horrifying nature of the punishments inflicted on the protagonists of Orbecche might serve to drive home the lessons of tragedy and enhance the cathartic and didactic effects on the audience. As Diane Owen Hughes notes, in a culture where "[t]he body served as a powerful metaphor for society, one that defies a search for social margins [, t]he concept of social marginality is based upon a textual image: a printed page surrounded by a margin, the contents of which are strictly subordinated to the text itself" (103). In the theatre, the stage itself becomes the 'page' where the body is inscribed. "Each body was thus a reductive representation of a universe that could be read through its signs" (Hughes 103).

In fact, as Rabell explains, "Cinthio follows a forensic interpretation of purgation, arguing that the audience of tragic plots will feel pity if something horrible happens to a basically good character because the spectator will judge that even though this character deserves some suffering, he does not deserve such misfortune" (81). Who the characters are in a tragedy is thus

an important element in achieving tragedy's purpose of delighting and educating the audience to follow the righteous path. While Cinthio considers the appropriateness of the characters vital to the tragic effect, he doesn't quite follow Aristotelian prescription regarding the middle/intermediate character. Aristotle "suggests a 'middling' protagonist, possessed of good reputation and good fortune until some error brings about his misfortune" and while Cinthio seems to agree with this precept, "his explanation of why one cannot show totally good men falling into misfortune already betrays a Christian and didactic conception of catharsis that is not to be found in the Greek text" (Javitch, "Emergence" 154). Seeing these misfortunes represented onstage in all their terrifying glory is an important part of fulfilling tragedy's moralizing purpose. As Jossa explains, "[v]edere è più efficace che sentire; più terribile e compassionevole, per dirla in termini aristotelici. Si spiega così l'importanza che il Giraldi assegna alla messa in scena, l'"apparato", la scenografia, elemento estraneo alla poetica in quanto arte della composizione, ma funzionale all'effetto visivo della rappresentazione" (38).

In Orbecche, Cinthio follows the Senecan practice of representing horror on stage, thus deviating from Aristotelian and Horatian precepts mandating that gruesome, horrifying, or violent acts happen offstage and be narrated onstage. In fact, Cinthio chooses to represent violence and its gruesome results using a variety of representational techniques: straight narration by a witness, just off-stage, and on-stage. Depicting death onstage is an important part of Cinthio's desire to represent life in a believable way. As Jossa explains:

Su questo sfondo antidottrinario si afferma la predominante esigenza di naturalità, fondata su una concezione realista della poesia, che si traduce, sul piano della mimesi, nella rappresentazione delle morti in scena, come realismo drammatico, sul piano del linguaggio poetico, nel rifiuto dell'artificio, come realismo espressivo: le "morti in

scena”, che saranno oggetto di una lunga polemica, fino ad un parziale ripensamento del Giraldi stesso, e il rifiuto del linguaggio “gonfio”, metaforico, sono i due aspetti complementari di una stessa poetica, fondata sullo spettacolo, sull’evidenza rappresentativa, sul realismo, su un rapporto “naturale” tra cose e parole. (26)

Offstage deaths, says Cinthio, “come about behind the scenes, because they are not introduced for commiseration but for the sake of justice” (“On the Composition” 257). It would be difficult to reconcile this statement with his practice in Orbecche, except Cinthio’s conception of justice probably requires that the deaths of Oronte and the children in Sulmone’s hands be explained in order to justify Orbecche’s subsequent parricide. They cannot be represented onstage because they are acts of brutality, but they still need to be conveyed to the audience so they can understand –and maybe even sympathize with--Orbecche’s actions.

According to Cinthio, a true reading of Horace’s intentions regarding his statements about onstage violence indicates that “he did not (as many think he did) intend to forbid the use of a suitable death on the stage when the nature of affairs demanded it” (Ibid.). Furthermore, says Cinthio, “Horace with his precept did not mean to forbid that appropriate deaths should be openly enacted but that those accompanied with cruelty should be avoided” (“On the Composition” 258). It’s necessary to present some deaths onstage, because “in truth (as Horace himself says) our spirits are less quickly moved by things that are heard than by those that are seen. Therefore the action that is narrated is less terrible and less compassionable than when it is seen” (Ibid.). Cinthio concludes that “happenings that are terrible and compassionable can be presented on the stage in order that they may be more effective on the minds of the spectators than when merely related” (Ibid.). In “La tragedia a chi legge” Cinthio adds:

Es s'avut'ha lo Stagirita [Aristotile] duce,/ che tanto vide e tanto seppe e scrisse,/ e di
 compor tragedie aperse l'arte,/ nel darsi aperta morte la reina,/ ond'ho il nome io, per por
 fine al suo male,/ meraviglia non è se da le leggi/ del Venusino [Orazio] in ciò partissi, e
 volle/ nel cospetto del popolo col ferro/ darsi con forte man la morte in scena. (lines 99-
 107) ¹⁰

Cinthio connects on-stage representations of death and mayhem to the idea of purgation and stresses the fact that represented acts have greater impact on the audience vis-à-vis narrated ones. In *Orbecche*, Cinthio chooses to present onstage the consequences of the King's anger and violence: the corpses of Orbecche's children, her dead husband's body parts, and even Orbecche's own suicide. All other gruesome acts are off-stage. However, Cinthio does retain the use of narration –if minutely detailed, excruciatingly gruesome narration—of King Sulmone's murder of his grandchildren and son-in-law. Di Maria remarks on the common practice of representing violent acts out of sight but within earshot of the audience, as Cinthio did with Orbecche's murder of her father King Sulmone. He explains that

[a]lthough the spectators cannot see the killing, they experience it in all its immediacy and brutality through other sensory perceptions as they hear Sulmone's agonizing cries for help and see his blood running out from within the palace. The scene is rendered more vivid as the horrified chorus, beholding Orbecche furiously swinging the ax at the dying king, describes and comments upon the gruesome killing. The technique thus reduced the need for the traditional messenger and the lengthy narratives normally associated with his or her role. It also had a great emotional impact on the spectators, who could not remain

¹⁰ "And if in giving herself open death in order to put an end to her misery, the Queen, from whom I have my name, had the Stagirite as a leader, who saw so much and knew and wrote so much and revealed the art of composing tragedies, it is no wonder that in this respect she departed from the rules of Horace and wanted to kill herself on stage in the presence of the people with a sword in firm hand" (116-17).

indifferent to the commotion of the action taking place beyond the scenic space or ignore the anxiety of the character(s) witnessing and describing it. (32)

But no matter how (or why) Cinthio chose to represent horror in Orbecche—through onstage depictions, straight narration, or just off the stage—the fact remains that the use of horrible, gruesome acts in Orbecche must have had a terrifying (if titillating) impact on its audiences.

Cinthio, according to Javitch, “[b]y providing a set of thematic and formal norms apparently derived from Aristotle’s theory and from Seneca’s tragedies but actually a codification of his own procedures... managed to place his modern practice in a ‘canonical’ tradition” (“Self-justifying Norms” 205). Theorists and playwrights like Cinthio and Tasso use their genre theories to confer legitimacy to their creative productions. “Their intent was not simply to anchor their writings to a tradition, but also to minimize the deviance and even the bastardry of these compositions by affiliating them to single, established generic families” (Javitch, “Self-justifying Norms” 213). But appropriations of classical models can also serve to create a space where “the institutionally unspeakable makes itself heard inferentially, in the space between what is written or acted and what the audience, knowing what they know, might expect to read or see” (Patterson 71). In Orbecche, we can see how Cinthio’s dramatic practice dovetails with his theoretical writings on the nature of tragedy as a genre. But Orbecche also shows how Christian values and Machiavellian political precepts come into conflict during the Italian Renaissance, and how Cinthio as a Court-supported artist adapts his dramatic practices to the exigencies of his patron Duke Ercole II and the Duke’s entourage. How Machiavellian politics are at play in Orbecche will be discussed in the next chapter, but first, let’s examine the intricacies of patronage in Renaissance Italy and how they may have impacted upon the creation of Orbecche.

Patronage, the Este Court, and the Politics of Representation in Renaissance Ferrara

We cannot forget that Cinthio, like many other artists in the Renaissance, had a patron who paid his expenses and generally made it possible for him to be a writer.¹¹ This special relationship must necessarily have had some practical effect on Cinthio's artistic and critical output. As Patterson explains,

the unstable but unavoidable relationship between writers and the holders of power was creative of a set of conventions that both sides partially understood and could partly articulate: conventions as to how far a writer could go in explicit address to the contentious issues of his day, and how, if he did not choose the confrontational approach, he could encode his opinions so that nobody would be required to make an example of him. (12)

To fully understand Cinthio's work, as well as the extent and success of his adaptations, appropriations, and reinterpretations of classical theories and models, it is important that we take a look at the context in which he wrote, that is, the court of Duke Ercole II d'Este in fifteenth-century Ferrara. We also need to understand how artists like Cinthio were dependent on the patronage of their powerful and wealthy lords for their livelihoods.

As we have seen, Cinthio was deeply drawn to the classic authors and genres, from Aristotle, Seneca, and Horace, to tragedy itself. He exhibited the same "passion for antiquity" that shaped Italian cultural production between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries (Quillen

¹¹ Cinthio did have a post at the University of Ferrara, but this wasn't an independent position. Rather, his continued employment was contingent on maintaining a good relationship with the Duke. This is made clear by what happened after Ercole II's death, when the new Duke, Alfonso II, would favor Cinthio's former protégé over Cinthio himself (Jossa 96).

37). But while Cinthio and his contemporaries worked feverishly to recover the classical traditions, they were aware of the profound differences between fifteenth-century Italy and ancient Greece and Rome. As Carol Quillen notes,

the ancient literary, philosophical, and artistic works to which Italians were drawn clearly had emerged in a world that, despite some similarities, differed markedly from their own and required effort to understand. This capacity to see both meaningful affinities and stark differences, combined with the desire to emulate ancient cultural standards, sets Italian Renaissance humanism apart from earlier classical revivals. (38)

It is this awareness of difference and dislocation that allows Cinthio to use classical models for modern purposes. For example, like many other Renaissance humanists, Cinthio turned to Seneca “for themes and examples that could inspire [citizens] to defend their liberties. Seneca’s plays focused on struggles within and between powerful families, on political tyranny and the gullibility of most men in the face of power, and on the fragility of human institutions” (Quillen 39). Using the model of Senecan tragedy helped Cinthio to circumvent possible repression by the authorities while still allowing him to deal with important and relevant issues such as the nature of kingship and the conflict between traditional Christian values and the new Machiavellian virtues.

Cinthio is a man of his time, and of his place. In fact, pride of place was an important part of Italian culture at this time, particularly a sense of belonging to—and being shaped by—the city of your (actual or symbolic) birth: “Each city embodied a civic identity, tradition, and historical memory whose distinctiveness was jealously safeguarded. Even small cities loomed large, both as sites of power and as ‘states of mind,’ or collective consciousness. Italians identified themselves as the children or artifacts of their cities” (Najemy, “Introduction” 4). But the

relationship between citizen and city was not a simple one, since “each city was a political battleground, a locus for the exercise and contestation of power, in which was at stake in the control of its government and economy, not only for its own inhabitants, but also for its hinterland (*contado*), than would have been the case had they been governed by a larger sovereign authority” (Ibid.). In Renaissance Italy the cities were locations of both stability and unrest, and their citizens –including Cinthio-- felt the conflicted nature of urban life. As Stefano Jossa explains, “[i]l progetto culturale del Giraldi è, comunque, un progetto primaditutto “ferrarese”. Esso si rivela, infatti, in piena sintonia con le richieste emergenti dalla politica estense; Ferrara è il luogo di una “rinascita”, di una modernità che s’identifica col tempo degli spettatori” (Jossa 46). If Cinthio’s project was unmistakably Ferraran, Ferrara in turn was the project of the Este family¹²:

The Este, who ruled Ferrara from 1240 to 1597 with papal patronage, owed their durability partly to the support of the local nobility whom they cultivated by granting fiefs in return for fealty. Although Este patronage and court service became the main sources of social advancement, an elite largely defined by lifestyle, behaviours, and reputation, not all of whom held their fiefs from the ruling family, were central figures in the political and social life of the Ferrarese state. (Kent 174)

Thus, in the city of Ferrara, life revolved around the Este, who wielded the power, the wealth, the influence. And so, the power struggles and the conflicts in Ferrara also revolved around the Este, who like other ruling families in Italy, faced constant challenges to their authority. As Dale Kent

¹² For a discussion of how the Este sought to reshape Ferrara into a showcase of their power and grandeur, see Gundersheimer. See also: Humfrey, Peter, and Lucco, Mauro. *Dosso Dossi: Court Painter in Renaissance Ferrara*. Ed. Andrea Bayer. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998; Tuohy, Thomas. *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole d’Este (1471-1505) and the Invention of a Ducal Capital*. Cambridge Studies in Italian History and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996; Dean, Trevor. *Land and Power in Late Medieval Ferrara: The Rule of the Este, 1350-1450*. 1988. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

explains, by 1550, “most elites were trying harder, in the face of domestic challenges and foreign threats, to settle their internal differences in the interests of survival; elites promoted ideas of concord and consensus even where factions endured... They competed to create a more civilized image through cultural patronage” (167-168). This then is Cinthio’s social and political context. His Orbecche, first performed in 1541, is part of this project. So is his conception of tragedy as a genre:

La tragedia, dunque, una specifica identità ferrarese, in sintonia con un programma di politica culturale che è tutto fondato sull’immagine e sullo spettacolo: l’artista ha il compito di elaborare le forme della rappresentazione del potere e di offrirle alla società ed al Signore, ma il potere esiste solo in quanto trova una rappresentazione; la committenza agisce, infatti, in modo duplice: da una parte essa è il destinatario, il fruitore naturale della produzione artistica; dall’altra ne è un fattore interno, in quanto l’arte ha il compito istituzionale di imitarla, di darne un’immagine, una rappresentazione. In questa prospettiva, maestà, decoro e verisimile non sono più criteri esterni di selezione delle forme e dei linguaggi o di valutazione morale, ma sono momenti costitutivi e valutativi intrinseci, criteri di giudizio letterari, non etici o sociali. (Jossa 46)

It is fitting then, that Cinthio mentions Ferrara in the Prologue to Orbecche, addressing the audience directly: “Perhaps you believe you are in Ferrara, a city filled with every virtue, a city as happy as any other that the sun warms or the sea bathes, thanks to the justice and worth, the mature judgment and prudence of its lord equal to all others in wisdom” (9). Is this mere flattery or a true assessment of the political climate in Ferrara, where this production is being staged? Or perhaps, as Patterson’s “hermeneutics of censorship” suggests, it’s a way to allow the playwright to please his patron while also allowing the audience to read the subtext. The Prologue contrasts

Ferrara, the actual setting of the production itself, with Susa, the setting of the play's action:

"This is the great royal city, this is the royal palace, indeed the refuge of deaths, and of iniquitous and loathsome feelings, of every villainy, where specters and horrible furies shortly will bring pitiful death and harsh destruction" (10). So Susa becomes the site of conflict, unrest, violence, and betrayal, while Ferrara remains seemingly untouched by such ugliness.

However, the audience of courtiers, humanists, and Este congregated in Cinthio's home for the premiere of *Orbecche*, must all have been aware of the resonances with real-life Ferrara and its actual rulers. At the beginning of the play, the ghost of Selina, King Sulmone's wife, appears to the audience and explains that Sulmone killed her and their eldest son for committing incest together. Reference to the incest and its consequences is made several times throughout the play, reminding the audience of it, even though the deaths occurred before the events chronicled in the play itself. This incident mirrors the history of the Este. In May 1424, the Duke of Ferrara, Niccolo d'Este, witnessed his first-born son Ugo having sex with his stepmother, Niccolo's wife Parisina. As Werner Gundersheimer recounts, the Duke's rage "was implacable, and the full sanction of the laws was brought to bear on his two most beloved people, despite pleas for clemency from his favorite advisers" (78-79). At the Duke's command, Ugo and Parisina were decapitated. Not only is this historical incident referenced by Selina's ghost, but the plot of the play itself allows certain parallels to be drawn between Este history and the actions and fates of the characters in *Orbecche*. King Sulmone has his son-in-law decapitated and is himself decapitated by his daughter; the initial transgression in the play is also sexual in nature, since it's the secret marriage between the king's daughter—his heir—and a commoner who was under the king's personal patronage. This type of patronage, under which Oronte was treated almost as a son by King Sulmone, was common in Italian cities, where

[t]he personal patronage extended by eminent men to others less wealthy and powerful became the chief means of mediating between private and public worlds; a great patron's associates in turn projected his power and identity beyond household and lineage into the larger sphere of the city and its government. The patriarchal state, modeled on the lineage, was exalted and even sanctified by its resemblance to the heavenly order, with God the father at its apex. (Kent 181)

Since King Sulmone extended personal patronage to Oronte, Oronte's fate can be seen as an oblique commentary on this practice, and perhaps a cautionary tale to those in Cinthio's audience who are also the beneficiaries of the Duke's munificence. But Oronte's story is not a straightforward one; he cannot be considered a totally innocent victim, even if his punishment far exceeds his crime. By marrying Orbecche in secret and without the King's consent, Oronte has not only transgressed against Sulmone's paternal rights, he has betrayed the loyalty that he owed his patron. Cinthio's audience would have understood the seriousness of this obligation:

While historians have judged patronage contrary to modern ideals of objectively just government, and Renaissance citizens also recognized that the fulfillment of obligation to bestow personal favors might on occasion interfere with justice and conflict with the common good, the acknowledgement of such obligations was a natural consequence of honoring the most sacred loyalties to family and to the divine order as manifested on earth. (Kent 181)

Here we see the ambiguity of Orbecche as a text—in this context, Oronte is violating one of the unspoken but fundamental rules of patronage --you owe your patron loyalty—and disrupting the social order. Patterson highlights such ambiguity as a key feature of writers' attempts to

circumvent possible censorship and repression, by building on the fact that both “texts and historical events are equally resistant to simple, settled meanings” (64).¹³

The ambiguity also allows for a wide range of interpretations by the audience, since “the vocabularies for representing power, whether rhetorical, iconographic, or ceremonial, [could exhibit] the traits of several coherent systems, full of cross-references and borrowings” (Muir 231). Depending on the vantage point of the individual audience member –and on his or her position at court-- the ambiguity could be resolved for or against the status quo. As Muir explains, perception is everything:

The power of perception was, therefore, twofold: on the one hand, the arts and rituals created images that brought the ruled under the influence and power of the rulers, and, on the other hand, they provided a pictorial representation of the obligations and duties of rulers, binding them to ideals of good government. (231)

Thus, Oronte’s transgression could be seen as deserving of punishment, for violating the covenant between subject and ruler/patron –the interpretation most likely taken by Cinthio’s patron himself. Other audience members, perhaps courtiers like Oronte, could plausibly interpret Oronte’s fate as the tragic consequence of a political and social system where the ruler has unilateral power. Both interpretations are possible, and in the possibilities, Cinthio’s ability to evade repression is secured.

Cinthio, and writers like him, could also capitalize on the fact that the rulers of Italian principalities recognized and employed spectacle as a tool for gaining and consolidating power. They “recognized that power must catch the eye” and that ‘the arts of power’ are “the ways in

¹³ Patterson’s interpretation of ambiguity as a tool writers could use to circumvent repression differs from Edward Muir’s contention that “The ambiguity of most representations of power allowed considerable room for creative interpretation and manipulation, usually to the benefit of the powerful” (228).

which works of art constituted personal and institutional power relationships in effect creating as well as representing political networks” (Muir 226). These rulers were also keen to appropriate classical models for themselves, as Kent explains:

Renaissance patricians’ perceptions of themselves as guardians of their communities were increasingly emphasized in civic rituals that expressed their aspirations and values and represented their authority. The fusion of secular and spiritual in public celebrations reinforced the power of the ruling elites with the suggestion that their governance both effected and was underwritten by the will of God. By the fifteenth century, the widespread employment of classical symbolism, evoking the admired rulers of antiquity and inviting a comparison with Renaissance elites, invoked yet another authority in the process of legitimation. (Kent 183)

The rulers’ desire to legitimize their claims to power through the use of spectacle perhaps made it easier for writers and artists to convince their patrons that their artistic output was undeniably and unambiguously favorable to the patrons’ agendas. But as we have seen, writers like Cinthio then exploited the ambiguity of their works to explore controversial or dangerous subjects.

Cinthio was very likely aware of the fine line he was walking, and of how the specter of censorship loomed over him. While he was at the Este court in Ferrara, the poet Clement Marot was banished from France because the authorities suspected he was a Lutheranist; Marot’s house was raided and his books seized. Marot sought refuge first in Navarre and then in Ferrara, where he was at court at the same time as Cinthio (Patterson 6). The court was small; Cinthio and Marot must have met. Perhaps Marot shared with Cinthio his experience of censorship and repression, including the poetics he developed after his banishment and which he published in 1532 as a poem titled “*Epistre au Roy, du temps de son exil a Ferrare*” (Ibid.). His poetics center

around two related ideas: “the right of the individual to privacy and the responsibility of poets to wade in dangerous waters; hence their special or privileged status in society, an immunity from censorship or laws designed for others” (Patterson 6). As Patterson points out, the irony of Marot’s poetics is that “the ideals of which he speaks could be restored only through the patronage system” (8).¹⁴ Marot and Cinthio both found patronage in Duke Ercole II’s court, and thus became part of the very system of power that had persecuted Marot in France.

As a court playwright, Cinthio had to develop an eye and an ear for what would please his powerful patron. He must have developed an understanding of how images, monuments, buildings, and performances shaped the perception of power both for the rulers and their challengers as well as for the subjects. Muir points out that these representations are the

product of a series of decisions by patrons, theological and humanist advisers, artists, and masters of ceremonies about how to depict religious or political power and create an image for those who held that power. These decisions were based upon an understanding of local history, scripture, hagiography, and classical mythology as encoded in narratives and iconography. Those who made these decisions became sophisticated and, in some cases, highly professional image makers, essential assistants to anyone who wished to acquire and retain power. (227)

Patterson considers the creation of artistic representations “a cultural bargain between writers and political leaders” which in turn represents “the equivocal and fragile relationship between writers in the early modern period and the holders of power, a relationship whose maintenance was crucial to all writers who aspired to have some influence, either on the shape of the national

¹⁴ Muir makes note of other ironies of the patronage system: “The sinews of the princely court consisted of aristocratic blood, which irrevocably set in the prince’s family and court apart from common subjects, and the prince’s word, which extended his authority beyond his ability to coerce obedience. It is no little irony, therefore, that courts were in reality places where the talented might find patronage and even social promotion no matter how common their social background and where the arts of dissimulation were most highly cultivated” (243).

culture or more directly on the course of events” (8).¹⁵ Also important to the process of representation is its reception; Cinthio’s audience of courtiers and humanists, part of the educated or political classes, were “keen connoisseurs of artistic representations and rituals” who could understand and decode complex and contradictory messages (Muir 227). Cinthio certainly gave them plenty to interpret with his Orbecche, as we will see in Chapter II.

¹⁵ Presumably, this relationship would hold for other creators (such as painters, sculptors, musicians, architects) as well.

Chapter II

What Makes a (Good) King?

Christian Values, Machiavellian Politics, and the Meaning of Kingship

While Cinthio's audiences are meant to get a moral message from Orbecche about sin and its consequences, they are also bombarded with messages about the consequences of breaking man's laws. Orbecche explores the boundaries of punishment for transgressions of the law and social order, and what happens when the ruler's power as judge, juror, and executioner goes unchecked. The tragedy also questions what happens when kings think themselves gods, and disregard the 'true' Christian God. Thus, by analyzing Orbecche, we can also examine the interplay of law, religion, and politics in Renaissance Italy, where medieval morality plays, rediscovered Greek philosophy, and contemporary political theory all influence civic and artistic life and discourse.

In Orbecche, Cinthio reflects the conflict between the medieval Christian values that a ruler should exhibit – qualities like mercy, compassion, even-temperedness, wisdom—to the thoroughly 'modern' virtues that Machiavelli espouses – strategic cruelty, manipulation, might, resolve, power, strength. These two sets of qualities are juxtaposed. The Christian values are the domain of Malecche the counselor, and to a certain extent, of Oronte, who's willing to believe that the vindictive King can be forgiving. Sulmone is definitely on the Machiavellian side, at least on the surface, but Machiavelli is not as clear-cut an advocate of deviousness as he is often portrayed. Sulmone, in fact, appears to come very close to the conventional interpretation of Machiavelli's views about kingship as espoused in The Prince. He acts ruthlessly and mercilessly, using deceit to lure his daughter and son-in-law into his trap and showing no

compunction about killing his grandchildren in cold blood. But Sulmone is actually not a Machiavellian-style ruler, since far from advocating simple ruthlessness and condoning wholesale cruelty, Machiavelli believes that the successful ruler should be ruthless or cruel only in those specific instances where it suits his purpose. The ruler's aim should always be to preserve the state, thus bringing himself glory. While ruthlessness, deceit, and cruelty are acceptable tools for the ruler, they should be used only in specific circumstances, for clearly defined purposes. These acceptable purposes do not include mere revenge or the soothing of a bruised ego.

In explaining what makes a successful ruler, Machiavelli emphasizes the fact that rulers should look to history for practical models of what works and what doesn't. He stresses the need to understand the past to be able to learn from it. Above all, Machiavelli is a pragmatist; he wants to examine the issue of power from a practical standpoint: what does it take to obtain political power? What does it take to remain in power once you have it? He uses real-life examples of rulers to support his arguments. Some are derived from his studies, particularly of ancient Roman history. The contemporary examples Machiavelli uses are not from books or histories; they're based on his own observations of actual rulers he met while on diplomatic duty for the city of Florence. According to him, the basic weakness of the rulers he had met was "a fatal inflexibility in the face of changing circumstances... What they all refused to recognize was that they would have been far more successful if they had sought to accommodate their personalities to the exigencies of the times, instead of trying to reshape their times in the mould of their personalities" (Skinner 17). Machiavelli believes that "there's such a difference between the way we really live and the way we ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation" (42). Machiavelli's philosophy is rooted

in the real, on what actually is, not what should be. And it hinges on “the specific, steadily changing circumstances of the situation in which he finds himself at the moment. It was of little relevance to consider man’s qualities abstractly and in isolation; the interaction of man and his surroundings was the sensitive point at which the potentialities of man for political action were revealed” (Gilbert 151).

Part of recognizing reality is admitting that men –most men, according to Machiavelli— are not good, and do not behave well. Thus, the ruler who limits himself to good behavior is placed at a disadvantage before these not-so-good adversaries who just want to take him down. As Machiavelli warns his reader, “[a]ny man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not so good” (42). This does not mean, however, that the ruler has *carte blanche* to act as badly as he likes. On the contrary, a good prince who wants to retain his power “must be shrewd enough to avoid the public disgrace of those vices that would lose him his state” (43). He also needs to be shrewd enough to read the political and social climate and act accordingly. But since circumstances keep changing, it is the ruler’s duty to conform himself and his behavior to those changing circumstances. Inflexibility means political death because “[n]o special human quality will guarantee success in politics; the qualities by which man can control events vary according to circumstances” (Gilbert 152). That is another thing that Sulmone doesn’t understand. Once he decides on a course of action, he’s hell-bent on following it, regardless of convenience, justice, even self-interest. The fact that his revenge will wipe out his daughter’s progeny, and by extension, his own line of succession, is no deterrent to Sulmone. A true Machiavellian prince would recognize the self-destructive nature of his plan and change course, either modifying his revenge or giving up the idea altogether. He would act rationally, not emotionally.

Cinthio begins the examination of the qualities of kingship early in the play. In the opening monologue of Orbecche, Nemesis explains the consequences of a ruler's hubris in believing himself above the law and considering himself godlike:

And now such a clear example of this will be given to everyone by this fierce tyrant who thought he was equal to God Almighty, and from his youth when he scorned God up till now, he has always done evil, that everyone will be able to see easily that whatever happiness he has received until now has been to his injury and to that of his family. For I have come here now for no other purpose than to give today to him and his people to whom his persistent errors have passed, the just guerdon of his evil deeds.¹⁶ (14)

According to Nemesis, the whole point of the play is to punish the tyrant. From that standpoint, Orbecche might well serve as a cautionary tale about what happens to rulers who follow (and even exceed) Machiavelli instead of exhibiting more Christian virtues. Nemesis's speech stresses the anti-Christian nature of the King's actions, and thus, the righteousness of his punishment. Nemesis clearly links the King's "evil" acts to his just rewards, making the connection seem unimpeachable; however, as we will see, this message of God's retribution is not as clear and simple as it first seems. As the play progresses, Cinthio confronts his audience with other possible reasons for the King's fate that are less religious and more political, less Christian and more Machiavellian. Perhaps this is another way that Cinthio is engaging his audience in a sly, subtextual conversation about the nature of kingship, which, according to Patterson, might not be safe to bring out into the open, given Cinthio's relationship to the Este court and to his patron the Duke. Cinthio's audience, composed mainly of royal subjects, would also be especially sensitive

¹⁶ "Ed or ne darà a ognun sì chiaro essemplio/questo fiero Tiran che si pensava/esser al par de la divina altezza,/e da letà sua prima Dio sprezzando,/insino ad or ha sempre oprato male:/ch'ognun potrà vedere agevolmente/che quanto egli insin or di bene ha avuto,/stato è a suo danno e de la sua famiglia./che per altro non sono or qui venuta/che per dare a lui oggi e a la sua gente,/a cui passato è 'l suo ostinato errore,/ il giusto guiderdon de le mal'opre" (91, l.1, lines 81-92)

to Nemesis's suggestion that the evil a ruler does is visited upon "his people." Thus, the stage is set from the start for an exploration of the nature of kingship.

While Nemesis frames the issue of the king's behavior and its punishment, the next character to bring up matters of kingship will cast a more pragmatic interpretation on the responsibilities inherent to the role of king. Nurse's monologue about kingship is the first extended consideration of the issue, though certainly not the last, in the play. It's voiced by a commoner and a female, who identifies kingship with its traditional symbols, before looking beyond regal appearance to the harsh realities of exercising power:

But what shall I say of those who wear crowns on their heads or have scepters in their hands who seem so happy and contented? Perhaps it seems to some that they are above human vicissitudes. However, so many torments, so many griefs, beneath these purple robes, so many disagreeable thoughts (alas, alack) and so many afflictions weigh upon those proud, high crowns that whoever looks deeply and perceives the truth recognizes that ruling is a sea of troubles.¹⁷ (29)

The head and the hands are the parts of the ruler's body that are connected to the physical symbols of kingship, the crown and the scepter. Head and hands, crown and scepter, will be invoked time and again throughout the play, functioning as a shorthand for kingship. The head and the hands are also the same body parts that King Sulmone will cut from his son-in-law's body, thus symbolically depriving him of his claim to the throne as the legitimate husband of the king's only surviving child. A headless body cannot sport a crown; a handless arm cannot grasp a scepter. With the image of the crown and the scepter, the head and the hand, the Nurse is

¹⁷ "Ma che dirò di quei che le corone/portano in capo et han gli scettri in mano,/che paion sì felici e sì contenti?/Pare forse ad alcun ch'essi sian fori/de le condizion mortai. Ma tanti/tormenti, tante angoscie sotto quelle/purpuree vesti son, tanti pensieri/spiacevoli, oimè lassa, e tante cure/premon quelle soperbe, alte corone,/che chi passa più dentro e l' vero scorge,/vede che è un mar di cure avere impero." (104, II.2, lines 60-69)

sensitizing the audience to the physicality of the king's power, as well as foreshadowing the acts of mutilation and death to come. The Nurse also shows a surprising degree of awareness about the plight of kings, the conflicts that hide under the mantle of authority. Kingship is not all power, authority, obedience, and satisfaction; there are drawbacks to being a king, and to exercising the power that comes with the crown and the scepter. It's ironic that the Nurse seems more aware of the inherently conflicted nature of kingship than the King himself, as demonstrated by his own speechifying in Act III of the play.

Act III is dominated by the conversation between King Sulmone and Melecche, the King's most trusted counselor¹⁸ and the man to whom Oronte decided to appeal for help. Their dialogue is an extended examination of kingship, of the qualities that make for a good king. As such, this part of the play can be read against Machiavellian precepts of good rulership, in particular, how virtue—in all its guises—is a necessary quality of a good prince. Melecche advocates restraint, mercy, and the rule of law; King Sulmone, in contrast, advocates the show of force to forestall any appearance of weakness.

Melecche knows his king, and fears his reaction to Orbecche and Oronte's betrayal of the king's prerogative to choose his daughter's husband and of the trust he has placed on Oronte as a decorated warrior and valued member of the king's court. Melecche has reservations about the consequences, now that King Sulmone has learned of Orbecche's four-year old marriage to Oronte, which has already produced two children, who are now second and third in line for Sulmone's throne: "I am certain that as he comprehends this affair he will be overcome entirely

¹⁸ The importance of Melecche's role as advisor to the King must also have resonated with the audience, who were aware that "signori, such as the Este of Ferrara... could no longer rely on force alone to secure and administer the territories they had inherited or conquered. They needed the support of powerful local families with a tradition of exercising authority and of serving as counselors or governing magistrates" (Kent 166). The audience must have been full of these types of advisors, since "[s]ignorial government almost everywhere rested with small handpicked groups of advisers consisting of nobles and jurists. Councillors served at the pleasure of the lord without any system of representation, fixed number, or formal terms of office" (Najemy, "Governments" 191).

by anger, violence, and fury. Already I seem to see his face burning, and to appease him will be difficult"¹⁹ (43). Malecche is aware that the difficulty in dealing with the King's anger is based both on the King's previous actions -- "he has already promised Orbecche to King Selino" -- and on the nature of kingship itself -- "most kings and lords have the vice impressed upon them that when they have rejected something just once, even though it may be good and useful and do them honor, and although they might have to lose their kingdom in order not to appear to have erred in the first place, they never want to decide to do it"²⁰ (Ibid.). In Malecche's experience, rulers reject changing course, even when it might prove objectively advantageous, because they fear losing face so much that they would rather sacrifice their kingdom. This kind of obstinacy would be anathema to Machiavelli, for whom the preservation of the kingdom --and by extension, of the king's rule over it--is paramount. Machiavelli does advise rulers to avoid the appearance of indecision: "What makes the prince contemptible is being considered changeable, trifling, effeminate, cowardly, or indecisive; he should avoid this as a pilot does a reef, and make sure that his actions bespeak greatness, courage, seriousness of purpose, and strength" (50). However, Machiavelli would never counsel sticking to a course that would put the kingdom itself at risk. Since Orbecche is the king's only surviving child she will succeed him to the throne; there is no other established line of succession in the Kingdom of Susa. Any action the King chooses which interferes with Orbecche or her children will thus endanger his own interests in having a clear, lawful claim to the kingdom for generations to come.

¹⁹ "ho per certo/che com'ei questa cosa intende, a l'ira,/a l'impeto, al furor si darà tutto./E già mi par veder arderli il volto,/et a placarlo fia difficil cosa" (117, III.1, lines 40-44).

²⁰ "Si perch'egli avea già promessa Orbecche/al Re Selin, sì perché i Re, i Signori/han, pel più, questo vizio in loro impresso,/che com'han recusato una sol volta/alcuna cosa, ancor che buona sia/e d'utile e d'onore a l'esser loro,/se bene andar poi vi devesse il regno,/per non parere avere errato prima,/non vogliono più mai ridursi a farla." (117, III.1, lines 45-53)

Malecche knows it's in the King's best interests to deal rationally with the situation at hand, particularly since the King had previously shown favor to Oronte, whom he had brought up in his own court, favored with his personal patronage, and given considerable responsibility in the battlefield: "I know that the King recognized Oronte to be worthy of his daughter and that he himself could not find a better husband for her. But obstinence has so prevailed that reason has been conquered and Sulmone has disprized every faithful counsel. Thus I fear that his wrath and disdain may still produce an unhappy effect"²¹ (43-44). Malecche recognizes that the true difficulty of the current situation is not the actual transgression committed by Orbecche and Oronte, but the King's reaction to it. It is the King's actions that might undermine the kingdom itself; Orbecche's secret marriage and her choice of husband, while disrespecting Sulmone's position as king and father, do not actually endanger the kingdom's—or the ruling family's—survival.

Malecche's worrying is interrupted by the appearance of a messenger, who is himself bothered by the king's behavior. The messenger tells Malecche that Sulmone appears troubled, which is most unseemly for a King: "it is not customary for a great king to allow wrath and disdain to affect him or to manifest so clearly what is in his heart"²² (46). Above all, kings should appear kingly; that is, they should always give the impression that the King is imperturbable and always in control. Appearance is important to a ruler, perhaps even more important than actions. While it is true that Machiavelli advises that "[t]he thing above all against which a prince must protect himself is being contemptible and hateful" (45), this advice is not

²¹ "Io so che 'l Re ben conosceva Oronte/degno de la sua figlia e ch'egli istesso/non le sapea trovar miglior marito;/ma l'ostinazion tanto ha potuto/che n'è rimasa vinta la ragione/et ha sprezzato ogni fedel consiglio./Cosi temo ch'ancor l'ira e lo sdegno/non faccia in ciò avenir sinistro effetto" (117, III.1, lines 54-61).

²² "Nol so, Signor, ma gran dolore il preme/e istimo che sia in corte la cagione/del suo dolore e che non sia da giuoco:/che non suol un gran Re per cosa lieve/lasciar che 'n esso possa ira né sdegno/o mostrar fuor così palese il core" (119, III.2, lines 17-22).

about actually acting well, but appearing to act well. For Machiavelli, the ruler's ability to avoid "being contemptible and hateful" hinges on his ability to appear to behave well, even when he doesn't actually do so. A good prince is thus also a good actor who can give the appearance of goodness while doing all that is necessary—good or bad, cruel or merciful, generous or greedy—to maintain his power. And if it is important to appear to behave well in front of his subjects, it's even more important to foster the impression of seemly behavior in one's servants. This Sulmone is already having trouble doing.

Sulmone finally takes the stage, demonstrating to the audience the same unseemly inability to behave in a kingly manner, as prescribed by Machiavelli. Sulmone tells Malecche: "You will know directly and you will see that today faith and piety are not found in the world and how poorly a King can recognize faith in any of his servants when his own children deceive him"²³ (46). Sulmone's pride as a father and a king has been damaged by his daughter's clandestine marriage to a man who Sulmone considers a mere servant. Furthermore, Sulmone has already arranged a marriage for Orbecche that would serve his own political purposes. As he puts it:

My daughter in whom alone I have placed all of my hope, all of my happiness, through whom alone I hoped to live my few remaining years in contentment, has shown me how foolish my thoughts have been and how distrustful and ungrateful all women are and that they always choose what is worse for them. She who could have had Selino, one of the great kings of the world, for her husband, has taken one born of humble blood and who was brought up in my court from childhood.²⁴ (Ibid.)

²³ "Il saperai ben tosto/e vedrai ch'oggi non si trova fede/né pietà al mondo; e quanto un Re può male/conoscer fede in familiare alcuno,/quand'i medesmi figli lor fan froda" (119, III.2, lines 24-28).

²⁴ "La mia figliuola, in cui sola avea posto/tutta la speme mia, tutto il mio bene,/per cui sola i' sperava questo poco/di viver che m'avanza esser contento,/mostrato m'ha quanto sia stato folle/il mio pensiero e quanto infide e

Sulmone considers Orbecche his one remaining ‘hope’ because she is his only surviving child. He killed his eldest son for committing incest with the Queen; his other sons were killed by Selino in battle. It’s ironic that Sulmone considers his sons’ killer –and an avowed enemy of his kingdom—to be a more suitable choice of son-in-law than a man who took command of his forces in the battlefield to avenge the king’s dead sons. Before he knew of Oronte’s secret relationship with Orbecche, Sulmone held Oronte in high regard, even giving him the task of persuading Orbecche to marry King Selino. In recognizing Oronte’s value, Sulmone was behaving in accordance with Machiavellian precepts. As Machiavelli says, “[a] prince ought also to show himself an admirer of talent [virtu], giving recognition to men of ability [uomini virtuosi] and honoring those who excel in a particular art... the prince should bestow prizes on the men who do these things, and on anyone else who takes pains to enrich the city or state in some special way” (63). But Sulmone chooses to set aside all of Oronte’s virtues and his record of exemplary service the moment he learned of Oronte and Orbecche’s marriage. Perhaps it’s the fact that he was deceived by someone he trusted that rankles Sulmone most; for four years both his daughter and his trusted courtier had been lying to him, to the extent of even hiding her two pregnancies and the children born of them. Perhaps at this point Cinthio’s audience also wondered how in control this King was, when he couldn’t even control his daughter’s body, which was, after all, considered part of his patrimony, another asset to barter for better connections, more power.

ingrate/siano le donne tutte e ch'al lor peggio/s'appiglian sempre. Costei che poteva/aver Selino, un de' gran Re del mondo,/per suo marito, ha preso un che di vile/sangue creato insin da' suoi primi anni/ne la mia corte s'è nodrito” (119-120, III.2, lines 31-42).

By choosing to enter a clandestine marriage, Orbecche has transgressed against the social and legal order.²⁵ By depriving her father of his right to approve her marriage, and perhaps even to arrange it for her, she has usurped his role in securing the continuation of the family line. As scholar Dale Kent argues, “[m]arriage alliances were vital to elite families, not only as a means of ensuring survival... they also offered an opportunity for the blood-group to acquire whatever it lacked, whether wealth or prestige or an abundance of relatives to assist it” (179). These alliances were masterminded and arranged by the father in his role as head of the family, a fundamental and inherently male function that underlay familial and social structure:

Within the *ius commune*'s repertoire of family-shaping institutions none was more consequential in Renaissance Italy than *patria potestas*: the indivisible, inalienable, and perpetual power exercised by the household's head of *paterfamilias* over his children and direct legitimate descendants traced through the male line—chiefly his sons and their children... (Kirshner 86)

In this legal and social scheme, the father exercised all the power within the family structure, much as a king rules over his kingdom. However, within the *paterfamilias* system, “[d]aughters were subject to paternal power, but not the married daughters' children, who were in the power of their own *paterfamilias*. Children of a legitimate marriage assumed their father's legal and civic status” (Kirshner 86). This could prove problematic to Sulmone, since it meant that his grandchildren, who were in direct line of succession to his throne, were essentially of the same class as their father, that is, commoners devoid of wealth, titles, influence. Perhaps this is why Sulmone might have thought it acceptable to destroy his grandchildren for the sake of avenging his bruised pride. He wanted his daughter to marry again, this time to a husband of his own

²⁵ Cinthio sets *Orbecche* in the distant kingdom of Susa in Persia. For discussion purposes, we will assume that marriage, kingship, and fatherhood operate within the play much as they do in Renaissance Italy, where the play was written and performed. That would also most likely be the interpretation given to the play by its original audience.

choosing, a king (albeit an enemy king), and to have children whose royal lineage would be well-established by the bloodlines on both sides. The fact that the children would take on their father's status also helps to explain why "[i]ntermarriage among families of roughly equal status was the norm," since "[c]hoice of a spouse was subordinated to the interests of one's immediate family and relatives," (Kirshner 92, 91). From that perspective, Sulmone's choice of a king as a husband for his daughter makes perfect sense. In making a marriage match, what matters most are the needs of the family and the kingdom, not of the prospective spouses, male or female, because "[a]lthough the jurists believed the state of marriage to be more advantageous to women than to men, there is little evidence to support the view that marriages were arranged for the benefit of women... [M]arriage... was conducted by men in the interests of family strategy, and not in the interests of individuals, male or female" (Dean and Lowe 7).

In marrying without her father's knowledge, much less his consent, Orbecche has placed the kingdom at risk, by jeopardizing the line of succession. She is her father's only surviving heir,²⁶ and by marrying clandestinely she is risking disinheritance:

Roman civil law and municipal statutes prohibited children in power from marrying against the *paterfamilia's* wishes. Children who married without parental approval could be, and were, punished with disinheritance. Although under canon law a couple was in principle free to marry without parental approval, marriages lacking in consent, or at least knowledge, of senior family members were stigmatized by canonists as well as civilian jurists as contrary to sound morals. In the upper classes, romantic attachments, premarital sexual relations, individual choice of a mate—preconditions of present-day marriages in the West—were taboo. (Kirshner 91)

²⁶ Proving, as Kirshner argues, how "daughters and female kin became heirs of last resort" (100).

Orbecche's disinheritance would also create a problem of succession, so from Sulmone's point of view, getting rid of his daughter's husband and their children would perhaps make a certain kind of perverse sense, by bringing her back fully into his power and thus allowing him to marry her off and attain the kind of grandchildren he wanted for his succession. After all, "[r]emarriage of widows was also fairly common, and typically arranged in the upper classes by kinsmen intent on forging new social and political alliances" (Kirshner 99). Most kinsmen, however, would probably have not been the ones responsible for making the prospective bride a widow.

The fact that Orbecche was already married might not be much of a deterrent in King Sulmone's eyes, for as a princess and a daughter she was still considered very much under her father's rule: "In contrast to canon law, marriage under Roman civil law did not release children from paternal power. Married sons and, in principle, married daughters, remained in the father's power as long as he lived or until they were legally emancipated" (Kirshner 87). But her father wasn't Orbecche's only "lord." As a married woman, Orbecche was under the dual tutelage of her husband and her father. However, "[u]pon her husband's predecease, the married daughter was again unreservedly subject to her father's power" (Kirshner 87). By decapitating his daughter's husband, Sulmone has his daughter's body back under his control. As Kirshner explains, "[t]he founding truth of marriage, derived from a conflation of Paul to the Ephesians 5:23, and Matthew 19:5-6, was that the husband is the head of the wife with whom he has joined as one flesh." (Kirshner 96). By killing Oronte, Sulmone also restores his own position as the sole male figure of authority in his daughter's life. Orbecche negates that authority when she kills her father, since "[p]atria potestas was extinguished with the death of the *paterfamilias*" (Kirshner 87). When Orbecche kills herself, she is under no man's authority, being both widowed and fatherless. It's ironic that she claims her body and her autonomy only to turn

around and take her own life. The end result of Sulmone's wrath is the destruction of his line, the worst possible consequence under Machiavelli's conception of rulership. But Sulmone could have avoided this catastrophic result had he heeded Malecche's advice.

While King Sulmone seems to want his counselor to understand him, and perhaps even approve of his reasoning, he is not willing to compromise. Machiavelli would not approve of Sulmone's approval-seeking behavior. A ruler, in Machiavelli's view, does what he considers right and in his best interests, regardless of public (or even private) opinion. Sulmone's thinking is not that of an enlightened prince, but more along the line of Hammurabi's eye for an eye philosophy. Indeed, in his desire for revenge, Sulmone is more like an Old Testament king than a Christian ruler. As Sulmone tells Malecche:

[Orbecche and Oronte] can both be sure that they will receive a reward from me worthy of their treachery. But before I resolve to take revenge, I wanted you to understand how much I have to grieve for from such a daughter and such a servant, and to consider with you the means by which I can have full revenge for such an outrage, for a great revenge cancels a serious injury. Therefore I wish to hear what you think I ought to do after receiving such a bitter offense (47).

Sulmone is fixated on the wrong done to him. He wants his honor to be restored, returned to what he believes is its full, pre-dishonor state. But whatever his desire, his intent is clear: revenge. This need for revenge inserts him firmly in familiar ground for Renaissance drama. As scholar A.J. Boyle explains, "[i]n Renaissance drama the Christian morality play tradition and the requirements of both monarchic pressure and the legal code often assert themselves at the end: the revenger is punished or killed" (183). But does he desire to return to the happy ignorance of a few hours back, when he was blissfully unaware of Orbecche's marriage? Or does

he want to go back to the time before Oronte and Orbecche married, some four years ago, when she was virginal and available to be married by arrangement, and he was a lowly but useful member of the royal court?

Malecche is a pragmatist; he wants the King to forget vengeance and unrealistic desires for restoration of his honor. Malecche instead advocates embracing the new status quo: Sulmone should not only forgive his daughter and son-in-law, he should welcome them. Such generosity of spirit becomes a ruler:

it will be much better that your Highness pardon them their failing and accept the one as a faithful son-in-law and the other as your daughter, both because it suffices that for a great fault, a father impose the least punishment upon his children and because to take revenge is characteristic of everyone but to pardon is becoming to a generous Lord.

Moreover, the greater a man's position the more he must have a placable anger.²⁷ (48)

As we can see, in Malecche's opinion, fathers should forgive, and so should rulers. The standard, Malecche implies, is different for rulers than for ordinary folk. Normal people are vengeful, but distinguished people, such as rulers and kings, should be more reasonable, less prone to give way to fits of anger. Besides, Orbecche and Oronte have committed no crime and no sin, merely "a failing," a mere mistake that should be readily forgiven by the magnanimous ruler he would like King Sulmone to be.

Sulmone is not persuaded. He cannot set aside his feelings and look at the big picture. Instead of looking at the situation from the point of view of a ruler, with detachment and rationality, he is fixated on the wrongs done to him. He is all wrapped up in his ego:

²⁷ "assai meglio fia che Vostra Altezza/perdoni loro il lor fallir e tenga/l'un per gener fedel, l'altra per figlia:/sì perché basta che menoma pena/imponga per gran fallo a i figli il padre,/sì perché 'l far vendetta è d'ognun proprio,/ma il perdonare è da Signor gentile./E quanto d'un uomo è maggior lo stato,/tant'esser dee di più placabil ira" {121, III.2, lines 93-101}.

Shall I have a daughter who does not regard me as a father and as faithful, one who deceives me? Indeed I would be more foolish than anyone if I permitted myself to be blind to this and did not show to one and the other how serious it is to have little respect for a king. The traitor shall see, my daughter shall see (if such a woman can be called a daughter) what scepters and crowns can do, and whether I shall know how to show them both (as I have shown many) to be a true king.²⁸ (48)

For the King, the symbols of kingship, the crown and the scepter, confer special authority and power, which is to be wielded over the royal subjects. Malecche disagrees: “Sire, neither scepters nor crowns nor taking vengeance for an outrage suffered ever proved anyone a King”²⁹ (49). Thus, Sulmone frames the problem differently from Malecche. The King sees Orbecche and Oronte’s actions as “treason,” the worst kind of transgression possible, punishable by death. Theirs is no unimportant mistake, but a serious breach.

For Sulmone “a true king” is one who smites his enemies, quickly, efficiently, ruthlessly. In his conception of kingship, mercy has no place. In The Prince, Machiavelli discusses cruelty and mercy, and whether it is better for a ruler to be loved or feared. He argues that “every prince should prefer to be considered merciful rather than cruel, yet he should be careful not to mismanage this clemency of his” (43). Mercy is a tool, just like cruelty, that must be wielded for the greater good, which for Machiavelli is the consolidation and maintenance of the ruler’s power. However, “no prince should mind being called cruel for what he does to keep his subjects united and loyal; he may make examples of a very few, but he will be more merciful in reality

²⁸ “Avrò per figlia una che me da padre/non tiene? e per fedele un che me 'nganna?/Semplice ben sarei più d'ogni sciocco/s'io mi lasciassi por questa su gli occhi/e non mostrassi a l'uno e a l'altro quanto/aver poco rispetto a un Re sia grave./Vedrà quel traditor, vedrà la figlia/(se figlia si dee dir femina tale)/ciò che possan gli scettri e le corone/e s'io saprò mostrare ad ambo loro/(com'a molti ho mostrato) esser Re vero” (121-122, III.2, lines 105-115).

²⁹ “Signor, gli scettri e le corone mai/o 'l far vendetta de gli oltraggi avuti/non mostraro alcun Re” (122, III.2, lines 116-118).

than those who, in their tenderheartedness, allow disorders to occur” (45). A ruler should also be careful about the quality of the information he receives, and should weigh his actions carefully: “a prince should be slow to believe rumors and to commit himself to action on the basis of them. He should not be afraid of his own thoughts; he ought to proceed cautiously, moderating his conduct with prudence and humanity, allowing neither overconfidence to make him careless, nor excess suspicion to make him intolerable” (46). Thus, a ruler should strive for balance. He should avoid imprudence and impulsivity, but once his mind is made up, he should pursue his course of action unwaveringly. By virtue of the nature of rulership itself, a prince is vulnerable to the negative feelings of his subjects. “Here the question arises: is it better to be loved than feared, or vice versa? I don’t doubt that every prince would like to be both; but since it is hard to accommodate these qualities, if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved. For it is a good general rule about men, and they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain” (46).

When he is forced to choose, a prince should choose being feared as a matter of expediency, since “[p]eople are less concerned with offending a man who makes himself feared: the reason is that love is a link of obligation which men, because they are rotten, will break any time they think doing so serves their advantage; but fear involves dread of punishment, from which they can never escape” (46). This presupposes public action on the part of the ruler. What happens when the unconscionable action is private, directed towards the king’s own family? But in a royal family, can there ever be a truly private act? After all, the king’s daughter is his heir, the future queen of the country. Moreover, a prince who chooses to be feared is treading a thin line: “a prince should make himself feared in such a way that, even if he gets no love, he gets no hate either... When he does have to shed blood, he should be sure to have a strong justification

and manifest cause” (46). In this case it is highly doubtful that killing Oronte and his children would be either justified (strongly or weakly) or inevitable. Machiavelli then adds that “since men love at their own inclination but can be made to fear at the inclination of the prince, a shrewd prince will lay his foundations on what is under his own control, not what is controlled by others. He should simply take pains not to be hated” (47). It’s hard to imagine that Sulmone’s subjects would not be horrified to learn how he has behaved; cold-blooded murder of a son-in-law and grandchildren, coupled with the display of their bodies (or body parts, in Oronte’s case) to his daughter the princess is likely to make Sulmone hated by his subjects and labeled a monster. In Machiavellian politics such a result would be untenable, therefore, the action of killing Oronte and the children is not expedient, let alone convenient.

Sulmone is not convinced by any of Malecche’s arguments and appeals to the king’s better nature, and questions his counselor’s wisdom, asking if rulers should make themselves targets of everyone’s “abominable injuries.”³⁰ Not at all, replies Malecche. What makes a man a king is the cultivation of such “regal qualities” as “a gentle spirit, an invincible heart, stable judgment, and a sound mind to control himself more than anyone”³¹ (49). Because, after all, “[h]ow can someone rule another and not know how to rule himself? The greatest indication that a man worthy of authority can manifest is not to permit himself to be overcome by fury, which frequently leads a man where he should not go”³² (Ibid). Malecche then offers this advice to Sulmone:

³⁰ “nefanda ingiuria” (122, III.2, line 120)

³¹ “un animo gentile, un core invito, una ferma prudenzia, un pensier saldo/di dominar, più di ciascun” (122, III.2, lines 122-124)

³² “Com’esser può ch’altri mai regga altrui/e regger sé non sappia? Il maggior segno/che mostrar possa un uom degno d’impero, è non lasciar sé vincere al furore,/che spesso l’uom conduce ov’ir non deve.” (122, III.2, lines 127-131).

if you want everyone to say that as much as you surpass by far every human being in power and wealth so much also do you surpass everyone in showing yourself to be a man, you must pardon your daughter and Oronte. And that the glory you will acquire in pardoning such a fault will increase your honor. For although you enjoy the highest praise for having participated in so many battles and having won so many, and having conquered many enemy nations and extended the boundaries of the empire indeed more than any King of Persia, still I do not think that we can compare this praise with the other. For there is no power so great in the world nor so great an abundance of armed people, nor towers so well fortified that they cannot be overcome completely by sword, by courage, and by power. But to conquer oneself and to temper anger and to give pardon to one who deserves punishment, and in anger itself, which is enemy to prudence and to the counsel of others, to show wisdom, courage, piety, and clemency, I judge to be not only an act of an invincible king but of a man who can resemble God. This alone, only this is a true victory in the world, and only for this victory above every other triumph must a king be praised. For in such a victory there is no part that belongs to soldiers or to fortune, but this glory belongs to the King alone.³³ (50-51)

³³ “se volete che da ognun si dica/che quanto voi di gran potenza e stato/di gran lunga avanzate ogni mortale,/così anco molto e molto il sovrastate/in mostrarv'uom, devete dar perdono/a la figliuola e a Oronte; e che la gloria/ch'acquistere in perdonar tal fallo/farà maggior qualunque vostr'onore./Ch'ancora che vi sia di somma loda/l'aver tante battaglie e tante vinte/e soperati i popoli nemici/et estesi i confini de l'impero/tanto quant'altro Re mai fosse in Persia,/pur non istimo ch'ugguagliar si possa/a questa quella loda, perch'al mondo/forza non è sì grande o sì gran copia/di genti armate o sì munite torri/ch'esser non possan superate in tutto/dal ferro, dal valor, da la potenza./Ma vincer sé medesimo e temprar l'ira/e dar perdono a chi merita pena/e ne l'ira medesima, ch'è nemica/a la prudenzia et al consiglio altrui,/mostrar senno, valor, pietà, clemenzia,/non pur opera istimo di Re invitto,/ma d'uom ch'assimigliar si possa a Dio./Questa sol è, sol questa è la vittoria/vera nel mondo, e sol di questa deve/sovra ogn'altro trionfo un Re lodarsi:/perché 'n vittoria tal non riman parte/ch'appartenga a' soldati o a la fortuna,/ma tutta del Re solo è questa gloria.” (123-124, III.2, lines 161-192).

Malecche advocates mercy, not fear, as a tool for wise rulership. He compares a merciful ruler to God, thus appealing to Sulmone's vanity and his desire to be all-powerful. Such a merciful ruler would also embody the Christian values of charity, temperance, and forgiveness.

After making an appeal based on the ethos of the ruler, Malecche goes on to argue the merits of the case. In this instance, he is arguing in defense of Oronte, so as to show why he should not be judged guilty: Oronte is not a traitor; he has not defiled Orbecche by taking her outside of marriage. What Oronte has committed is therefore not a treasonous act against his king (thus punishable by death), but merely a much less serious "error of love" that should be "pardoned by a magnanimous heart" or risk sending the wrong message to his subjects. If the King cannot be merciful to Oronte, who loves and honors his daughter, then, Melecche argues, his subjects will question Sulmone's ability to rule them --and judge them-- wisely. Malecche also makes an appeal based on more traditional (although only implicitly acknowledged) Christian values, raising the specter of penance as punishment for unthinking vengeance: "penitence follows vengeance taken without reason. And penitence being untimely and late brings to man only suffering and pain"³⁴ (53).

Malecche then goes on to argue that Orbecche's choice of Oronte is actually a wise one; he'll make a worthy son-in-law and heir: "Setting aside now the fact that we all are born of one same beginning and mother nature has produced us all equal if blind, false, and wicked fortune, which is always enemy to every gentle spirit, had had regard for virtue, which alone makes one noble, then Oronte was worthy of every great kingdom"³⁵ (Ibid.). Orbecche's choice, Malecche implies, is better than Sulmone's own choice of a husband for her: "She preferred a man of

³⁴ "sapendo che ne segue la vendetta/fatta senza ragion la penitenzia,/la quale, essendo intempestiva e tarda,/altro non porta a l'uom ch'affanno e doglia" (125, III.2, lines 245-248).

³⁵ "E lasciando or da parte che siam nati/da un medesimo principio tutti e uguali/n'abbia prodotti qui l'alma natura,/se la cieca, fallace e ria fortuna,/ch'a ogni spirto gentil sempre è nemica,/riguardo avesse avuto a la virtute,/ch'ecceder sola fa in nobiltà altrui,/degno era Oronte d'ogni grande impero" (125-126, III.2, lines 257-264).

humble origins but of regal soul, to a king of a great empire, but of common soul”³⁶ (Ibid.). The best option now, Malecche says, is for Sulmone to make Orbecche and Oronte his heirs. After all, Sulmone already killed his eldest son—and heir—for having an affair with his own mother; his other two sons are dead due to King Selino. Sulmone appears to give in: “I shall make [Oronte] a king indeed, but in such a way that he will regret ever having seen me” (54).

Apparently convinced of the King’s change of heart, Malecche now explicitly puts down Sulmone’s choice of husband for Orbecche: “in selecting a husband Orbecche has chosen far better than you and that it must be more useful, more peaceful, and more satisfactory to you that she has Oronte rather than King Selino”³⁷ (54-55). Malecche is treading on dangerous—but necessary—ground by confronting his ruler with unpalatable truths, so he must proceed cautiously, asking the King to allow him leave to argue his case a little more. Sulmone agrees. Malecche then compares the suitors:

You, lofty Sire, wanted to give your daughter as a wife to one whose progeny has always been dangerous to your kingdom, to one who not a year ago killed two sons and two brothers of yours and shed so much of your nation’s blood in battle that this city still groans and cries over it from one end to the other. And she has taken one who has completely removed death and fire a thousand times from your empire with his invincible courage.³⁸ (56)

³⁶ “abbia voluto un uom di basso stato/ma d'animo real, ch'un Re ch'avesse/imperio grande e cor d'un uom del vulgo” (126, III.2, lines 277-279).

³⁷ “che s'io non vi dimostro ch'assai meglio/di voi ha eletto in maritarsi Orbecche/e che di maggior utile e più requie/e più contento esser vi deve ch'ella/più tosto Oronte abbia che 'l Re Selino” (128, III.2, lines 333-337).

³⁸ “Voi, eccelso Sir, la figlia/dar volevate per mogliera ad uno/la cui progenie al vostro regno infesta/è stata sempre, ad un che non ha un anno/che due figliuoli e due fratei v'ha morti/e tanto sangue sparso a la campagna/del popol vostro che ne grida e geme/ancor questa città di parte in parte:/et ella ha tolto un che la morte e 'l fuoco/col suo invito valor ben mille volte/levato ha 'n tutto da l'impero vostro” (128, III.2, lines 333-337).

But Oronte's fitness as a military commander³⁹ is not a persuasive argument for Sulmone, who wanted to marry off his only daughter to his enemy. Malecche's audacity in directly criticizing one of the King's decisions doesn't help. So far he had only advised the King against taking future actions, but now he crosses the line into point-blank criticism. Malacche seems to have gained confidence from the King's seeming receptiveness to Malacche's previous arguments. And he doesn't appear to notice that his personal attack on the King's judgment is at best ill-advised. Orbecche was to be a tool of the King, in the best tradition of arranged royal marriages. Malecche thinks this was a bad idea, not only because Selino might be harboring secret thoughts of revenge, but also because 'the people,' Sulmone's own subjects, apparently hate the idea. Besides, Sulmone should not let his "reason to be so overcome by rage" that "with implacable mercilessness stain your wisdom and royal name"⁴⁰ (58). Sulmone again objects: "It is difficult, Malecche, for a man not to be overcome by wrath when those who should honor him and revere him and show themselves grateful for favors offend him through his own blood. Reason cannot, in such a case, bridle wrath"⁴¹ (Ibid). According to Machiavelli a ruler should never be overcome by any emotion, because he should always use calm, cold reason to analyze the situation, plan a strategy, and carry it out. Emotion only serves to get in the way of the ruler's purpose, which

³⁹ On the topic of military prowess Machiavelli advises: "A prince, therefore, should have no other object, no other thought, no other subject of study, than war, its rules and disciplines; this is the only art for a man who commands, and it is of such value [virtu] that it not only keeps born princes in place, but often raises men from private citizens to princely fortune" (40). This is precisely how Oronte's star was rising in the Persian kingdom before he got derailed by the revelation of his secret marriage to the King's daughter. Oronte was a successful, decorated military leader, whose prowess protected the King and his kingdom from invasion. Under Machiavelli's scheme of kingship, it also makes Sulmone vulnerable to Oronte. According to Machiavelli, princes are always vulnerable to dethronement from powerful, wily inferiors. It is ironic that the clandestine marriage between Sulmone's daughter and Oronte actually lessens Sulmone's vulnerability to an Oronte-led takeover; with the marriage, Oronte can become Sulmone's legitimate successor, without any need for backstabbing or confabulation. Plus, the new family link between Sulmone and Oronte is another way of ensuring Oronte's continuing fealty; Oronte's children are also legitimate heirs to the kingdom.

⁴⁰ "lasciate la ragion sì in preda a l'ira/... "con inesorabil impietade/voi ne macchiate la prudenza vostra/et il nome real pel fallir loro" (130, III.2, lines 414, 421-423)

⁴¹ "Dura cos'è, Malecche, che da l'ira/non sia vinto quell'uom che da coloro/che devriano onorarlo e riverirlo/e mostrarlisi grati de' piaceri,/nel proprio sangue vede farsi oltraggio./La ragion non può a l'ira in ciò por freno" (131, III.2, lines 435-441).

should be to consolidate and maintain his power. Perhaps the adviser wants his ruler to be better than he actually is, to show abilities and qualities beyond those of normal men, and thus, befitting the exalted state of rulership. But the King, while paying lip service to the transcendent qualities of kingship, is actually behaving quite basely, far worse than the commoner, Oronte.

Sulmone continues to argue that Oronte's behavior has left him embittered and unable to show mercy, while Malecche continues to extol the benefits of showing mercy to Oronte, who has proven himself a defender of the crown in battle, saving "you for the kingdom and the kingdom for you"⁴² (60). In fact, Oronte's bravery and military prowess saved Sulmone's kingdom from Selino's clutches, the same Selino to whom Sulmone now wants to marry his daughter. Therefore, Melecche advises, "if [Oronte] has saved you and them with his blood and with his life from servitude, from fire, and from death, you do not now destroy him and make cruelty the regard of such an illustrious and honored deed"⁴³ (61). Sulmone appears finally to capitulate:

It is a serious thing, Malecche, this that you ask me. It is like encouraging someone to do something still worse than that which was done. But for the reasons given and for your love and for my love for those grandchildren whom, by the power of your words, I have so imprinted in my heart that I yearn to see them more than the light, and for this distinguished act which you reminded me of just now [Oronte's military victory over Selino]... I am pleased to do all that you asked me. And as a token take this ring and give

⁴² "servò voi al regno e 'l regno a voi" (133, III.2, line 525).

⁴³ "s'egli ha voi servato e loro/col proprio sangue e co la propria vita/da servitù, dal fuoco e da la morte,/non vogliate ora voi distrugger lui/e far che crudeltà sia il guiderdone/di così illustre et onorata impresa" (133, III.2, lines 533-538).

it to Oronte in succession to the throne. Now make him come here, him and his wife and both the sons, so that I may enjoy them all at once.⁴⁴ (61)

Malecche is grateful, and impressed, by this expression of Sulmone's magnanimousness, which he links to God's own powers: "I extol you, almighty God, that in this heart which has always been harder than any stone, I have found mercy on this day. It is true that before the King of Heaven nothing is impossible"⁴⁵ (62). Malecche's words are soon proven ironic, however, when Sulmone's true intentions are revealed in the next scene. Again, this opens a space for ambiguity for the audience, who are indirectly asked to question why indeed did God not soften Sulmone's heart.

Act III scene 3 opens with a soliloquy, in which Sulmone explains his true feelings about Malecche's arguments, and about Oronte himself: "Does Malacche, in his foolish hoary age, think with his fictions and his idle talk that he has confounded me so that I ought not to show the enormity of this injury to the traitor?..."⁴⁶ (63) Thus, Sulmone reveals that his opinion is unchanged; he still considers Oronte a traitor, whose secret marriage to Orbecche is punishable by death. Only blood will satisfy Sulmone's thirst for revenge: "But [Oronte] can be sure that Sulmone will bathe his hands in his blood sufficiently to wash from them all the shame and this infamy"⁴⁷ (63). Sulmone's desire for revenge is so strong he experiences it as a physical craving

⁴⁴ "Grave cosa mi par, Malecche, questa/che tu mi chiedi e che sia un dar baldanza/di farmi peggio ancor di quel ch'è fatto./Ma per le ragion dette e per tuo amore/e per amor di quei nepoti i quail/m'hai col tuo dir così nel cor impressi/ch'io li bramo veder più che la luce,/e per questa illustre opera ch'adesso/m'hai raccordata, di cui la memoria/grata ancor mi si serba ne la mente,/son contento di far quanto m'hai chiesto./E per segno di ciò, te' questo anello/e dallo a Oronte in succession del regno/e fa' che di presente qui ne venga/la moglie et egli et ambo i figli insieme./acciò che tutti io li mi goda a un tratto" (133-134, III.2, lines 545-560).

⁴⁵ "Io ti lodo, alto Dio, che 'n questo core,/che sempre è stato dur più d'ogni pietra,/ho trovato pietade in questo giorno./è vero certo ch'appo il Re del cielo/impossibil non è cosa nessuna" (134, III.2, lines 576-580).

⁴⁶ "Malecche, in questa età canuta sciocco,/si pensa con sue favole e sue cianze/il cervello intorniato avermi in guisa/ch'io non debba mostrare al traditore/di che importanza questa ingiuria sia!" (135, III.3, lines 1-5).

⁴⁷ "ma stia certo/he sì nel sangue suo Sulmon le mani/si bagnerà, che ne sarà lavata/tutta questa vergogna e questa ingiuria" (135, III.3, lines 12-15).

for the blood of his perceived enemy; he even envisions dipping his hands in his victim's blood, a baptism by violence that he considers will wash the stain of dishonor from him.

However, Sulmone is not as carefree or unburdened by doubt as he would have the audience believe. He exclaims, "[w]hat do you fear, my soul? What are you afraid of?"⁴⁸ (63).

He continues:

Gather all your strength to the revenge and do something so uncommon and extraordinary that this age may abhor it and the next one, which must come, may hardly believe it. This day will give us sufficient evidence to demonstrate our power to the world. But let there be nothing to turn us away from the work begun, and let us try every sort of cruelty today.⁴⁹ (Ibid.)

Sulmone believes that a spectacular act of revenge will actually increase his prestige. The spectacle he plans would not be complete without the children's deaths: "Not just [Oronte] alone but his children also shall do penance for the paternal transgression. It is only proper that both his children and he should suffer the due punishment since he did great dishonor to me and to my daughter"⁵⁰ (63). He cares little for the innocence of the children, though he does acknowledge it: "The children are innocent, and let them be so; they are children of a traitor and they also shall be completely like the father, and although they may be different from their seed and be the best in the world, they are clear evidence of the offense I have received. Therefore, they too must die so that no part of the revenge may remain for me to do"⁵¹ (63-64). No possibility for mercy

⁴⁸ "Che temi, animo mio? che pur paventi?" (135, III.3, line 21).

⁴⁹ "Accogli ogni tua forza a la vendetta/e cosa fa' si inusitata e nova/che questa etade l'aborisca e l'altra/ch'avenir dee creder noi possa a pena./Questo giorno ci dà degna material/di dimostrare il poter nostro al mondo./Però cosa non sia che ne ritragga/da la incominciat'opra et ogni spezie/di crudeltà da noi oggi si tenti." (135, III.3, lines 22-30).

⁵⁰ "N'egli pur sol, ma i figli anco faranno/del paterno fallir la penitenzia./E giusto è ciò: perch'egli a me, a la figlia/ha fatto gran disnor, i figli et egli/ne debbono portar debita pena" (135, III.3, lines 16-20).

⁵¹ "Sono innocenti i figli, e siano: sono/ figli d'un traditore e al padre anch'essi/saranno in tutto simili e se bene/devesser tralignar dal seme loro/et essere i miglior del mondo, sono/del ricevuto oltraggio indizii certi./Però muoiano anch'essi, perché parte/nessuna di vendetta a far mi resti." (135-136, III.3, lines 31-39).

exists, because Sulmone is fixated on the perceived dishonor as father and king: “[Oronte] has sullied my blood and my honor and the royal crown”⁵² (63). Malecche’s attempts to dissuade him from vengeance and point him towards conciliation are doomed: “No, my injury is no joke, nor is this a disgrace which can be eradicated from my honor through little punishment”⁵³ (64).

Having determined that ‘justice’ Sulmone-style requires the blood of Oronte and his children, Sulmone now turns his attention towards his wayward daughter, considering what punishment would most befit her crime:

But what shall I do about my wicked daughter? Must I plunge my hands into my own blood? Yes! I should have to indeed, were I to consider her fault. But if I can have complete revenge without death, will it not be better? This will certainly be better! What greater and more suitable act of revenge can I take that to inflict cruel and intolerable grief with that from which she received the greatest pleasure? If I kill her I shall put an end to her pain, for death to the grief-stricken is not punishment but the end of punishment and anguish. However, if she remains alive and with both her eyes sees her children dead, as well as her husband, such will be her suffering that she will be envious of those who are buried. For an unhappy and wretched life is always more painful than any death.⁵⁴ (64)

For his rebellious daughter, Sulmone will thus reserve a punishment worse than death: a life of suffering. He will take away the family she built on her own, without his consent or even

⁵² “questi ha macchiato il mio sangue e l'onore/e la real corona” (135, III.3, lines 11-12).

⁵³ “Non è, non è la ingiuria mia da scherzo,/né scorno è questo che per poca pena/si possa cancellar da l'onor mio” (136, III.3, lines 39-41).

⁵⁴ “Ma che farò de la malvagia figlia?/debb'io le mani por nel proprio sangue?/si devrei ben, s'al suo fallir guardassi,/ma s'io ne posso far vendetta intiera/senza la morte, non fia meglio? Meglio/fia questo certo. E che pena maggiore/e più atta a la vendetta dar le posso/che con quello ond'avea sommo diletto/darle crudele e 'ntolerabil doglia?/Se l'uccido, fia fine al suo dolore:/che la morte a chi è miser non è pena,/ma fine de la pena e de l'angoscia./Però se viva ne riman costei/e co gli occhi ambe due i suoi figli vegga/morti e 'l marito, tal sarà l'affanno/che n'avrà invidia a que' che son sotterra:/che d'ogni morte è via più grave sempre/una infelice e miserabil vita” (136, III.3, lines 41-59).

knowledge, and he will destroy it in the most brutal way possible. Sulmone deliberately plans to make his brutality into a spectacle that will devastate his daughter, and perhaps, break her will and finally make her compliant, submissive to his will as father and king. And then, when she is totally debased, he plans to give her hand –and her fertile body—in marriage to an enemy king.

Sulmone needs revenge: “This I like, and to this be resolved now my soul, nor let anything deter you, for he who does not take revenge for one insult prepares himself to await another”⁵⁵ (64). Yet, he does give a quick thought to consequences: “Shall I be blamed for it?”⁵⁶ and articulates his conception of kingship:

What blame can a king receive for a thing he does? All of his actions are cloaked beneath his royal mantle. And as everyone of necessity must endure them, so everyone, compelled by great fear, must praise them whether he wants to or not. It is proper for kings to be praised by everyone for the wicked acts they commit. Others may have true praises indeed. These are ours, and powerful kings must always follow that which is most agreeable to them. If they do otherwise, they are slaves unworthy of the royal name and of empire.⁵⁷ (64-65)

Here Sulmone embraces Machiavelli’s idea of fear as an instrument of control over his subject, but without Machiavelli’s rationale, of using fear to secure people’s loyalty and therefore assure the stability and survival of the principality. For Sulmone, fear is what due to the King merely by virtue of his kingship, for no reason other than his identity as king. A king, in Sulmone’s conception, follows his whims for no reason other than it’s what he wants. Machiavelli would

⁵⁵ Questo mi piace, a questo omai disposti./animo mio, né ti distorni nulla:/che chi non fa vendetta d'uno oltraggio./ad aspettarne un altro s'apparecchia” (136, III.3, lines 60-63).

⁵⁶ “Biasmato ne sarò?” (136, III.3, line 64).

⁵⁷ “Che biasmo puote/avere un Re di cosa ch'egli faccia,;/e cui opere tutte sotto il manto/real stanno coperte? E come a forza/soffrir le dee ciascun, così lodarle,/o voglia o no, dal gran timore è astretto./Quest'è proprio de' Re, che l'opre ree/ch'essi si fan, siano da ognun lodate./Abbiansi gli altri pur le lodi vere,/queste son nostre e deono seguir sempre/quel ch'è più loro a grado i Re possenti;/e s'altrimenti fanno, essi son servi,/del real nome indegni e de l'impero” (136-137, III.3, lines 64-76).

probably see this philosophy as self-indulgent and destructive, because the purpose of the prince's actions should always be to further the interests of the principality, and therefore, secure his own position as head of state.

Meanwhile, Malecche and Oronte are rejoicing in Sulmone's apparent capitulation, but Orbecche is uneasy. Malecche rebukes her for her lack of faith in her father the king:

Faith, Queen, is proper in kings, as the soul is in our bodies. For, as we cannot keep this mortal body alive after the soul has departed from it, so if the promises of kings are devoid of faith there can be nothing in them which shows them to be kings. Jewelry and purple garments and the possession of much gold do not make a person a king if he lacks faith, which is more valuable than power and treasures. Therefore I want you to believe this truth: that your King would sooner lose his empire before he would want his faith to appear lost in him.⁵⁸ (68)

As bodies without souls are an abomination, so are kings who cannot be trusted to keep their word. Faith here evokes both trustworthiness—being true to one's word—and religious faith, the trust in God's goodness as well as the belief in the Christian virtues like mercy and forgiveness. Malecche believes that Sulmone would rather lose his empire than his faith, and of course, he is proven wrong. Sulmone loses everything, life and kingdom, head and hands, at the end of the play, after Sulmone does betray his word.

Orbecche and Oronte are grateful, naively trusting Malecche's judgment of Sulmone's trustworthiness. Ironically, Oronte, the one the king considers particularly treasonous and

⁵⁸ "La fé, Reina, è proprio/ne' Re, come ne' corpi nostri l'alma./che come non si può tenere in vita/questa caduca salma/dopo che s'è da lei l'alma partita,/così se restan vuote/le promesse de' Re di fé, non puote/esser più cosa in lor che Re gli mostri./Perché le gemme e gli ostri/o 'l posseder molt'oro/non fa Re altrui, se de la fede è privo,/che più val del poter, più del tesoro./Però vo' che crediate questo vero,/che ne potria lo impero/perder pria il nostro Re, che mai smarrita/volesse ch'apparisse in lui la fede" (139, III.4, lines 59-74).

disloyal, is the character who most faithfully believes in the goodness and honor of the king.

Oronte implores Sulmone, counting on his word, his faith:

I do not doubt, noble Sire, that your Highness will faithfully abide by that which your faithful counselor, Malecche, under the pledge of faith told me just before in its name. However, Sire, I ask you for a special boon: that after your great kindness has been so extended you do not impute my fault to disloyalty or outrage, but to love, which is much more powerful than I, and to youth much more subject to error than any other age. Your daughter and I ask your forgiveness for the error committed. And I with her and both children all together entrust to this hand a clear pledge as much of faith as of extraordinary strength... I proffer this life to you, always ready to risk it for you where you need it. Moreover, I shall always try to eradicate this error by good works, so that you will clearly recognize how great is my faith.⁵⁹ (69-70)

Here Oronte is pledging his loyalty, his own faith, which is an important and valuable asset in a royal subject, according to Machiavelli. Oronte is also pledging his life to his king, his father-in-law, declaring himself ready to give it in service to the king. Oronte has already risked his life for king and kingdom, successfully defending Susa from enemy attack. So his pledge carries weight. However, Sulmone is too blind to see that he already has full power over Oronte, and probably relishes the idea that he indeed is going to take the life that Oronte has so trustingly proffered.

The audience has been prepared for the tragedy to come from the beginning, ever since the ghost of Selina, Orbecche's mother who was murdered by King Sulmone in punishment for

⁵⁹ "Non dubito, alto Sir, che vostra altezza/non sia per attenermi con fé quello/che 'l suo fedele consiglier Malecche/sotto il pegno di fé dianzi m'ha detto/a nome d'essa. Sol vi cheggio, Sire,/di spezial grazia, che dopo che tanto/estesa s'è la gran bontade vostra,/che imputar non vogliate il mio fallire/a dislealtà o ad oltraggio, ma a l'amore/che puote troppo più che non poss'io,/a l'età giovanile, atta ad errare/via più d'ogn'altra. E de l'error commesso/ve ne cheggiàn perdon la figlia et io;/e me con ella et ambo i figli insieme/ commetto a questa man, non men di fede/che di rara fortezza espresso pegno./pur v'offro questa vita, sempre pronto/ad esporla per voi dove bisogni,/e sempre cercherò che questo errore/in tanto sia da le buone opre vinto,/che conoscer potrete agevolmente/quanta sia la mia fede" (140-141, III.4, lines 117-141).

committing incest with their son (whom he also killed), appears, delighting in the upcoming destruction of her husband, their daughter, and her family:

Sulmone, Sulmone, your royal palace of gold, your well-furnished and strong towers will be worthless to you, and having under you numberless people and in your protection distinguished men will avail you nothing. For your own daughter will take from your trunk your head unworthy of the crown and take from your arms those hands which were so quick to defile themselves so unworthily in my blood and in the blood of your first son.⁶⁰ (18-19)

Selina appears to taunt Sulmone, to no avail, since he remains, as far as the audience can tell, unaware of the dead Queen's intervention. Once more the hands and the head, the scepter and the crown, are referenced as symbols of kingship. The audience is encouraged to anticipate the upcoming horror, expect it, dread it. But the audience's knowledge of the plot, particularly of the King's mendacity and his brutality, allows the audience to read Sulmone's words against the grain, to know that when the King seems to acquiesce and promise mercy, he is actually lying. What message does this convey to the audience? Perhaps, that the ruler can (and does) lie, even to his advisors, to his family, to his loyal subjects. And there are advisors and royal subjects in Cinthio's audience, who would likely be receptive to this message. By telling the audience from the beginning the horrors that will unfold, Cinthio is also schooling the audience in hermeneutics, teaching them how to understand the play. The audience is being told – obliquely—to look for the subtext, for what is hidden or left unsaid.

⁶⁰ “Sulmon Sulmon non ti varranno i tetti/d'oro, né le munitè e forti torri,/né l'aver sotto te gente infinita,/né a tua custodia aver uomini eletti,/perché non t'abbia la tua figlia propria/con mano scelerata a tòr dal busto/la testa indegna di corona e quelle/man da le braccia che si pronte foro/a bruttarsi nel sangue mio e nel sangue/del tuo primo figliuol si indegnamente” (94-95, I.2, lines 64-73).

Selina's ghost introduces an atmosphere of doom that continues building up throughout the tragedy. Orbecche contributes to the aura of foreboding with her own long and vivid expressions of misgiving. She recounts how her father approached her about the marriage he has arranged for her, unaware that she has been secretly married for four years already: "I promised you to him, and by that love you have shown always to bear for me, and which always made your desire and mine to be one and the same I want you to be content with what I have done so that in this my extreme old age I may see the succession of my grandchildren"⁶¹ (24). The irony, of course, is that he does have grandchildren. The audience knows this, but Sulmone doesn't, not yet. Orbecche knows he won't take the news well, and tells Oronte: "It appears you do not know how harsh my wicked father is, and how little he esteems rank, empire, honor, children, and himself when he is resolved to take vengeance. Do you believe he will be less severe with us than he was with my brother and my mother, both of whom he cruelly killed together with one stroke?"⁶² (34). Once again Cinthio is reminding his audience of the real-life history of the Estes in Ferrara, inserting a connection, however obliquely, between his characters and his patron's family.

While Sulmone pretends to acquiesce to his counselor's advice, he is really plotting his revenge, completely unmoved by Melecche's humanist arguments. According to Di Maria, [t]he king's usual dismissal of his counselor's advice to forsake deception and violence and to govern instead with justice, prudence, and other princely qualities dramatizes Machiavelli's rejection of humanist notions of princship as too idealistic and

⁶¹ "io promessa a lui,/i' vo', per quell'amor che mi mostrasti/semprè portare e che mai sempre fece/che 'l tuo volere e 'l mio fosse uno istesso,/che di quanto fatt'ho resti contenta,/acciò che 'n questa mia vecchiezza estrema/vegga la succession de' miei nepoti" (100, II.1, lines 66-72).

⁶² "Par che voi non sapiate quant'è crudo/l'empio mio padre e quant'ei poco istimi/stato, imper od onor, figli e sé stesso,/quando disposto s'è di far vendetta./Pensate voi ch'ei fia più mite a noi/ch'al mio fratel sia stato e a la mia madre./quai lo spietato insieme a un colpo uccise?" (108, II.3, lines 79-85).

incompatible with factual reality. However, in the violent death of bloodthirsty stage tyrants, audiences recognized the rejection of Machiavellian amorality and the emergence of a political philosophy more in keeping with the prevailing moral and religious values of Counter Reformation Italy. (27)

Furthermore, as Rabell explains, “everyone’s unfortunate death is intended to represent a painful image before the eyes of the audience, so that they perceive the plot as a course of action to be avoided. Daughters, vassals, and kings who refuse to be bound by the law will turn the world upside down. *Orbecche* represents an imminent threat: the downfall of the commonwealth” (81).

Machiavelli wouldn’t have approved of Sulmone, if only because the outcome of Sulmone’s actions proves he acted against his own interests. He exacted revenge, yes, but by doing so he eliminated his own succession. This he knew would happen. But he also ended up causing his own death by pushing his daughter too far. Since Machiavelli is interested in results, in the ruler maintaining and consolidating his power and his ability to rule, this result is patently anti-Machiavellian. So, what would Machiavelli have done instead? Perhaps Machiavelli would have advocated magnanimousness, which would have ensured Sulmone’s succession and also indebted both Orbecche and Oronte to him. Machiavelli would have manipulated the situation to make it seem to his subjects as though the match had his full consent, now and always. After all, the lowly Oronte already had a privileged place in court, one that the King himself had given him. And lowly Oronte wasn’t quite so lowly – he reveals to the audience he is of royal blood, the illegitimate child of a queen.

Sulmone is an interesting character. He killed –or ordered killed, it’s not clear which— his wife and one of his sons for incest. He killed Oreste and his own grandchildren to avenge a wrong to his honor. And yet, he did nothing to avenge the deaths of his two brothers and two

sons at the hands of—or caused by—King Selino. Instead, he arranged to give his daughter to his enemy, ostensibly to make peace. But why wouldn't he want Selino's blood instead? Why is the offense caused by the Queen and his first-born son, and by Oreste, punishable by death, when his enemy's killing of his family isn't? How does Sulmone define honor and loyalty? Is it that Selino owed him no loyalty, so therefore he couldn't betray him, but his wife, his son, his vassal all owed him loyalty as their lord and they violated that oath, thus forfeiting their lives in his eyes?

These questions about Sulmone's character and about the nature of kingship are ultimately left unresolved, perhaps deliberately left for audience members to answer for themselves. Cinthio inhabits ambiguity. Orbecche is about what makes a good ruler, but it doesn't resolve the issue. It forces the audience to consider the ideas of revenge and forgiveness, trust and betrayal, Christian and Machiavellian virtues. Cinthio also shows the "hermeneutics of censorship" at work by using genre rules and classical models as a shield, and building enough ambiguity into the text to allow the audience to decode the ironies and lies in the speeches without running afoul of his patron. In that way, Cinthio, his patron, and his audience engage in a complex, delicate partnership of meaning-making and decoding representations of power. It is an enterprise we are still engaging in today.

Conclusion

Gianbattista Giraldi Cinthio is an important but little known –and little studied—figure in Italian Renaissance literature. He is worthy of study not only because of his contributions as a tragedian, a novelist, and a theorist, but also because by studying his artistic production we can better understand the social, historical, political, and religious context of the Italian Renaissance. Cinthio worked as a playwright in the Este court of Ferrara, under the patronage of Duke Ercole II, in the early and mid Cinquecento, during the interstice between the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent. He was skillful in navigating the social, political, and religious codes of the time, exploiting the ambiguities of language and genre to explore such controversial subjects as the nature of kingship and the limits of power. Cinthio wrote and staged the first tragedy of the Italian Renaissance written in the vernacular, the bloody revenge play Orbecche, which has been woefully neglected by scholars. In fact, Orbecche has never even been published in translation in English or Spanish.

In Orbecche, we can see how Cinthio's theoretical writings on the nature of tragedy as a genre complement his dramatic practice, by creating a set of conventions that serve to validate his authority as a playwright. By adapting Greek and Roman models, and relying on very idiosyncratic interpretations of Aristotelian poetics, Cinthio creates space where he can safely explore issues that might otherwise attract negative attention from ecclesiastical authorities, or even worse, from his own patron, on whom Cinthio depends for his livelihood. In this protected space of the theatre, Cinthio uses Orbecche to show how Christian values and Machiavellian political precepts come into conflict during the Italian Renaissance. Cinthio reflects the conflict between the medieval Christian values that a ruler should exhibit – qualities like mercy, compassion, even-temperedness, wisdom—to the thoroughly 'modern' virtues that Machiavelli

espouses – strategic cruelty, manipulation, might, resolve, power, strength. Orbecche also explores the boundaries of punishment for transgressions of the law and social order, and what happens when the ruler's power as judge, juror, and executioner goes unchecked. The tragedy questions what happens when kings think themselves gods, and disregard the 'true' Christian God. Thus, by analyzing Orbecche, we can also examine the interplay of law, religion, and politics in Renaissance Italy, where medieval morality plays, rediscovered Greek philosophy, and contemporary political theory all influenced civic and artistic life and discourse.

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