The Shifting Role of Magic in Aристo’s *Il Negromante*

Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* embodies a Renaissance paradigm of human freedom, dignity, and power in the image of Protean man, endowed with a self-determining nature, able to choose his destiny and to impose his will upon the world around him. In earlier fifteenth-century Humanism, this ideal of self-creation has worldly connotations: the first Humanists advocated the formation of the individual’s identity through an educational program consisting of *studia humanitatis* (grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy) and emphasized the achievement of human virtues such as dignity, poise, eloquence, and rectitude. Theorists of philosophical occultism such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola carried the Humanist faith to an extreme by defending magic as the supreme manifestation of man’s divine nature. Magic provides Ficino and Pico both a proof and a symbol of man’s spiritual power: it is celebrated as the highest form of art, the epitome of the soul’s creative potential, through which man can perfect himself and nature. According to Ficino, the capacity to perform works of magic is the result of a process of spiritual elevation culminating in the reunion with God (2.224-41). Pico, who emphasizes the individual’s freedom to select his identity from a scale of possibilities ranging between bestiality and divinity, also envisions the acquisition of magic powers as a consequence of a contemplative ascent leading to the regeneration of the soul (104-13).¹

As Thomas Greene notes, both the early Humanists’ ideal of secular formation of the individual, and Pico’s concept of metaphysical transformation of the soul can be represented by the metaphor of the ladder, on which man is free to move vertically and elevate himself (248-49).² In its vertical perspective, this idealist, individualist discourse ignores the horizontal dimension of social reality, in which human destiny is to a large extent mapped by economic, political, and cultural forces along the coordinates of class and gender.

In the past, following Jacob Burckhardt’s nostalgic celebration of Renaissance individualism, and the influential work of idealists like Giovanni Gentile and Ernst Cassirer, who searched in Renaissance philosophy for the origins of their own neo-humanism, scholarship tended to privilege this idealized, totalizing image of the Renaissance man, which excludes variables of class and gender and transcends material conditions of economic interests and political power.³
As postmodern culture has begun to investigate and to question the ideologi-
cal implications of its Humanistic roots, scholars have become concerned with
reexamining Renaissance literature, in order to identify points of resistance to an
idealistic and monolithic understanding of the culture of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{4} Lud-
ovico Ariosto’s \textit{Orlando Furioso} has provided fertile ground for the enterprise of
contemporary critics seeking to “refigure” or “rewrite” the Renaissance in the
light of contemporary literary theory. Recent studies have challenged the tradi-
tional commonplace of Ariostean detached harmony and irony, which dates back
to the influential interpretations of Francesco De Sanctis and Benedetto Croce:
the view of the poem as a beautiful but frivolous \textit{favola} created by a distant,
God-like author has given way to the less solar, more problematic image of a text
which engages serious epistemological, cultural, and historical issues, putting
into question the optimistic ideals of Renaissance Humanism.\textsuperscript{5}

Ariosto’s comedies, however, have remained excluded from such a revival of
critical interest. I believe that \textit{Il Negromante}, in particular, offers an anchor for
this kind of critical inquiry. Focusing on the function that the figure of the magi-
cian performs in the comedy, I shall argue that in \textit{Il Negromante} Ariosto evokes
the idealistic conception of man’s creative power (epitomized by magic in the
discourse of philosophical occultism) only to play it against a conflicting, de-
bunking representation. By analyzing the roles that class and gender play in the
text, I shall also attempt to demonstrate that Ariosto’s discourse on magic raises
issues which are grounded in the social dimension of human existence: questions
of power relations, as well as concerns about the function of art vis-à-vis the
dominant hierarchy of cultural discourse.

The theme of human dignity is woven into the text, along with the interrelated
themes of power, corruption, and degradation. Ariosto’s comedy constructs a
chaotic reality where people have blurred the boundaries between the human and
the animal, either by a lack of control over their lives, or by a misuse of power:
power appears to be a knife that cuts both ways, corrupting those who wield it
and degrading their victims.

In the beginning, several clues point to the fact that the city conjured up on
the scene is anything but a model of well-ordered social establishment. The car-
nival, referred to in the prologue in order to account for the backdrop, may very
well provide a metaphor for the state of chaos in which the comedy’s world lies.\textsuperscript{6}
Moreover, the accent placed on transvestism, on the continuous exchange of
“foglie” (Prologo 19),\textsuperscript{7} foregrounds the problem of deceitful appearances, and
brings in the idea that identity is illusory and unstable. Two further symptoms of
disarray are hinted at in the prologue as allusions are made to political turmoil
and to the disruption of patriarchal authority: playing on the semantic ambiguity
of the word “becco,” which can signify “beak,” “mouth,” “billy goat,” or
“cuckold,” the narrator salaciously points out that the loafers gathering in the
public square “a battere / il becco” (Prologo 42-43) about international military
intrigues\textsuperscript{8} have lost control over their home affairs: “che fan le mogli, che fan
l’altra femine / di casa, [...] non san forse, e non si curano / di saper” (Prologo 41-44). The label “becco” reoccurs later in the play, patently referring to loss of male dignity (namely, man’s loss of monopoly over his woman) as an example of animalization: “Di molti, che si mutano / in becco, vo’ tacer” (1.3.388-89).\(^9\) As we shall see in the following pages, this pun is to be related to a leitmotif of animal imagery which underscores the thematic interrelation of power and degradation.

Other references to social, political, and moral disruption recur throughout the text: the general stupidity ruling Cremona’s citizenship (2.1.587); the corruption reigning in Rome (2.1.588) and among the clergy (3.1.562); and the political conflicts which had made the Italian peninsula a powerless prey to foreign invaders (5.3.1805-07).

In the foreground, one finds the predicaments which trouble the protagonists and which require the intervention of the necromancer. Cintio, unbeknown to his adoptive father, Massimo, has married Lavinia, a woman of inferior status. In so doing he has circumvented his father’s authority, but he has fallen short of open defiance for fear of being disinherit: in fact, he has subjected himself to an arranged marriage with Emilia and is now feigning impotence so as to avoid consummation of the marriage. Camillo wants to take advantage of Cintio’s presumed impotence to finally gain Emilia, whom he has been hopelessly courting. Massimo and Abondio, on their part, want the marriage between their respective son and daughter to be fruitfully consummated. Finally, Massimo has long been looking for his lost daughter, not knowing that she is the girl living next door, that same Lavinia whom Cintio has secretly married.

The necromancer, whose central role is announced by the comedy’s title, is introduced as the character invested with the authority and power to solve the predicament described in the protasis. However, his identity and the nature of his power are immediately questioned in the initial scenes. Confusion and ambiguity are in fact projected onto the necromancer’s fame before he enters the stage, as a whirl of opinions is voiced by other characters. Cintio and Fazio talk of a mysterious “astrologo o negromante” (1.2.299-300, 1.3.336-37), “uom di grande astuzia e di grande dottrina” (1.3.342).\(^{10}\) In particular, Cintio attributes a series of miraculous powers to the necromancer: the ability to make himself invisible, to transform people into animals, and to control natural phenomena such as light, darkness, and the movements of the earth. Thus the persona of a deus ex machina is delineated: an exceptional individual endowed with supernatural powers, and with the ability to determine the orderly denouement of the comedy’s initial complications. This image is challenged however by Temolo, Cintio’s servant, who will turn out to be something different from the stereotypical clever servant of traditional comedy.\(^{11}\) Temolo replies skeptically and mockingly to his master’s credulity: he suggests that the necromancer is actually a swindler, “una volpaccia vecchia” (1.3.337), whose real power consists in the ability to manipulate people’s minds with words:
... con parole semplici,
senza aver dimostrato pur un minimo
effetto, può cavar di mano a Massimo
quando danari e quando roba.

(1.3.395-99)

An absolute demystification of the necromancer is then effected by Nibbio,
the necromancer’s own servant, as he exposes the true nature of his master’s
deceitful art of “ciance e menzogne” (2.1.538), which thrives on people’s credulity.
A Jew without roots, always changing name, nationality, aspect, and language,
the necromancer, far from solving problems and restoring order, uses his power
to corrupt, and to exploit people like irrational animals. In this sense, he does
actually turn humans into beasts, performing a metaphorical reversal of the
Renaissance ideal of vertical transformation by elevation. Such a “metamorphic”
power is underscored by the recurrent use of animalistic imagery in reference to
Iachelino’s victims and to the act of victimizing. Let us consider the conversation
between Nibbio (appropriately named as a bird of prey) and his master, the nec-
romancer, where the latter enunciates his philosophy of human exploitation by
drawing an equation between animals and humans. Just as different kinds of
animals are to be used differently, people should be milked, flayed, shorn, or
eaten according to their condition:

Similmente ne gli uomini si truovano
gran differenzie. Alcuni, che per transito,
in nave o in ostaria tra i piè ti vengono,
che mai più a riveder non hai, tuo debito
è di spogliarli e di rubarli subito.
Son altri, come tavernieri, artefici,
che qualche carlin sempre e qualche iulio
hanno in borsa, ma mai non hanno in copia;
tor spesso e poco al tratto a questi, è un ottimo
consiglio, perché se così li scortico
a fatto, poco è il mio guadagno, e perdomi
quel che quasi ogni giorno può cavarsene.
Altri ne le cittadi son ricchissimi
di case, possessioni, e di gran traffichi:
questi devemo differire a mordere,
non che a mangiar, fin che da lor si succiano
or tre fiorini, or quattro, or dieci, or dodici;
ma quando vuoi mutar paese all’ultimo,
o che ti viene occasione insolita,
tosali alora fin sul vivo o scortica.

(2.2.655-74)
After collapsing the ontological distance between man and brute, the necromancer’s rhetoric negates the existence of any essential difference among men. The *exempla* portray a world where difference is not essential but circumstantial, and is marked merely by the position in the social chessboard — by the role in the power game of “taking” or “being taken.”

The metaphorical language in this passage contrasts with the rhetorical strategy that Iachelino adopts to delude and defraud his victims: a deceitful and hyperbolic rhetoric, a series of ornate lies (as Nibbio points out in 2.3.727), through which he persuades his victims that their desires will be realized. In the case of the frustrated lover Camillo Pocosal, for instance, Iachelino exploits the Petrarchan code to fit the lover’s own hyperbolically sentimental language. He thus persuades the duped Camillo that Emilia has been induced to fall madly in love with him by the power of a spell:

Cam. Ma che fa la mia bella e dolce Emilia?
Astr. Arde per amor vostro, tanto ch’io dubito, che s’io produco troppo in lungo a porvela in braccio, come nieve al sol vedremola, o come fa la cera al fuoco, struggere.
Nib. (Ciò ch’egli dice è bugia; ma sapragliela sì bene ornar, che gliela farà credere).

(2.3.721-27)

The evoked Petrarchan code is played against and exposed by the erotic code of the unsublimated passion attributed to Emilia. Nibbio’s coarse and trenchant asides, a comic counterpoint to the mellifluous duo, underscore the mystifying role played by rhetoric in the ruse. Compare his final comment over Camillo’s stupidity: “Cuius figurar? ben si può dir: simplicia” (2.3.823).

At a different level, Nibbio’s remarks also call attention to the situational and characterological codes of the intrigue comedy. The derision of the vain gulls who trust and enlist impostor magicians is a recurrent motif in Italian sixteenth-century plays. Italian dramatists found inspiration in the tradition of the novella and especially in real life. In fact, magic held a very important place in all the domains of contemporary Italian life, from the court to the market place: rulers, prelates, and even popes like Julius II and Leo X consulted their personal astrologers; the occult arts were the subject of philosophical speculation and part of the curriculum in universities; and people of all social extractions resorted to the “arts” of sorcerers and witches in matters of love, riches, health, and revenge (Radcliff-Umstead, “The Sorcerer” 77). This reality is clearly reflected in *Il Negromante*: the play directs a satirical attack against fraudulent practitioners of pretended magic and their foolish victims. But, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that the function of the figure of the con necromancer Iachelino is not limited to the representation of the contemporary vogue in magic.
As Antonella Ansani has noted, Mastro Iachelino turns out to be an impostor with no supernatural power, but also a sort of *figura poetae*,\textsuperscript{13} endowed with the rhetorical ability of manipulating the mind of his public.\textsuperscript{14} In the prologue, the narrator makes the first reference to the necromancer after evoking a myth which embodies the Humanist ideal of the civilizing function of art: the necromancer is associated with Orpheus, Amphion, and Apollo, the mythic poets who used their magic-artistic powers to overcome the original state of chaos and bestiality by laying the foundations of the human establishment, i.e., by organizing culture and social order within the nucleus of the city. Having seen Cremona transported to Ferrara, the narrator speculates, his spectators will no longer marvel when they hear that these poets’ songs tamed wild beasts and moved stones to build cities. He also predicts that, given the title of the play, the materialization of Cremona onto the scene will be interpreted by the public as a work of magic operated by the necromancer. The credibility of the myth is undercut by the comparison between the magic-artistic powers attributed to the mythic poets in Classical and Renaissance texts and the power of scenic illusion which the credulous audience will ascribe to the necromancer. By calling attention to, and establishing an analogy between, the deeds of the primal poets, the presumed magical powers of the necromancer, and the illusory fiction of the stage, Ariosto raises the issue of the artist’s ethical, social role, while exposing the mystifying power of art.

A similar move occurs in a passage of the sixth *Satira*, where reference to the mythic artists initially sets up a contrast between the degeneration of contemporary poets and the Humanist ideal of the constitutive civic function of art:

\begin{quote}
ma non fu tal già Febo, né Anfione,
né gli altri che trovaro i primi versi,
che col buon stile, e più con l’opre buone,
persuasero gli uomini a doversi
ridurre insieme, e abbandonar le giande
che per le selve li traean dispersi;
e fér che i più robusti, la cui grande
forza era usata alli minori tòrre
or mogli, or gregge et or miglior vivande,
si lasciaro alle leggi sottoporre
e cominciar, versando aratri e glebe,
del sudor lor più giusti frutti a-ccórre.
\end{quote}

(70-81)

The argument takes a significant turn in the verses that follow, as the “buon stile” and “opre buone” of the poets which founded civilization are replaced by the writers’ fictions of prodigies which deluded ignorant people:

\begin{quote}
Indi i scrittori féro all’indotta plebe
creder ch’al suon de le soavi cetre
\end{quote}
l’un Troia e l’altro edificasse Tebe;
e avesson fatto scendere le petre
dagli alti monti, et Orfeo tratto al canto
tigri e leoni da le spelonche tetr.

(82-87)

Here Ariosto broadens the range of his attack, moving from the satire against a specific group of writers — the corrupt Humanist poets of his time — to a denunciation of the mystifying practices of unspecified “scrittori” — writers in general. The passage clearly echoes Horace’s Ars Poetica (11.391-401), but it is not necessary to go far back in time to find referents for those “scrittori” who diffused the fable of the magician-artist. The Renaissance occultists, in particular Ficino with his celebration of Orpheus as artist and founder of the pagan magical religion, gave great prominence to the notion of the magician-artist, bringing the Humanist ideal of man’s creative power to its logical, supernatural extreme.\textsuperscript{15} Ariosto evokes and debunks this notion in Il Negromante: the Horatian myth assumes a grotesque, obscene guise as it is inscribed in the topsy-turvy carnivalesque atmosphere of the prologue, where the lustful stones mount one another to generate the city (D’Amico 312); and throughout the play the function of the artist is problematized, as the ideal evoked in the prologue clashes with the artistic praxis embodied in the necromancer — imposture, fraud, prevarication.\textsuperscript{16}

A series of clues point to the relationship between lachelino’s art on one side, and the widespread public corruption on the other. For instance, in the middle of a flowery speech by Camillo, there is an unexpected and telling association between the letter presumed to have been written by Emilia and the writings of rapacious lawyers, who abuse their rhetorical power to victimize the poor people on the public square:

\begin{quote}
O bene avventurosa carta, o lettera
beata, quanto è la tua sorte prospera!
Quanto t’hanno le carte a avere invidia,
de le quali si fan libelli. cedule,
inquisizioni, cotatorie, esamine,
strumenti, processi, e mille altre opere
de’ rapaci notari, con che i poveri
licenziosamente in piazza rubano!
\end{quote}

(2.3.774-81)\textsuperscript{17}

Through the contrastive comparison drawn by the deluded Camillo, one is led to recognize the actual affinity between the letter — a piece of forgery by lachelino — and the deceitful legal papers. This affinity points out the political stakes underwriting the text’s discourse on magic, a discourse in which the necromancer’s art, his linguistic power, unambiguously functions as a figure for the corruption of power.
In support of this interpretation, I will turn to two additional moments in the comedy, where the association between Iachelino’s (power of) corruption and the general corruption of power is displayed. In one instance, countering Cintio’s scruples about the destructive effects of the necromancer’s “magic” upon Emilia’s reputation, Iachelino argues for a warped ethic of ruthless self-interest, which he claims to be legitimized by its general rule:

E che noia vi dà pur che la lievino
di casa vostra, e che mai più non abbino
a rimandarla? Non guardate, Cintio,
mai di far danno altrui, se torna in utile
vostro. Siamo a un’età che son rarissimi
che non lo faccian, purché far lo possano;
e più lo fan, quanto più son grandi uomini;
né si pò dir che colui falli, ch’imita
la maggior parte.

(3.1.962-70)

In the other instance, an incisive social criticism is voiced by the servant Temolo, who belittles the necromancer’s celebrated power to turn people into animals by comparing this magic with a widespread type of metamorphosis operated by power:

Non vedete voi, che subito
un divien podestade, commissario,
provveditore, gabelliere, giudice,
otaio, pagator de lì stipendiis,
che li costumi umani lascia e prendeli
o di lupo o di volpe o di alcun nibbio?

(1.3.378-83)\(^{18}\)

Thus, the servant exposes the process by which humans become powerful predators or powerless prey.

Ironically, while the masters in the comedy often snap at their servants for their supposedly “bestial,” i.e., irrational, ignorant or ill-mannered remarks, the servants, throughout the play, appear to be more in control than their masters. In fact, as we have seen, they perform a fundamental function in exposing credulity, fraud, as well as the power relations and economic underpinnings which determine social life.\(^{19}\) The servants’ inferior status gives a sharp edge and a subversive twist to their humorous remarks, as any equation between rank and human dignity is put into question.

In the case of Fantesca, both a servant and a woman, the subversive move invests the domain of power relations between men and women: the servant’s rhetoric operates a role-reversal which brings to the foreground the workings of
sexual economy. Before turning to this episode, it should be noticed that throughout the text there are more or less implicit allusions to marriage and sexual relations as business-like transactions regulated by principles of economic interest. In fact, class and economic issues, as well as questions regarding patriarchal authority, are at the origin of the entangled situation which the necromancer is supposed to unravel. Lavinia is presumed to be an unsuitable bride because of her social status, which is initially believed to be inferior to Cintio’s. Thus the marriage remains secret, while Cintio complies with Massimo’s desire for him to marry Emilia out of concern for his inheritance. Also, this second marriage is set up as a contract between the two fathers and good friends Massimo and Abondio. Accordingly, in order to convince Abondio to take Emilia back, and to prevent his complaints about any suffered damages, Massimo argues that the “asset” is being returned with its intact market value, i.e., virginity. Finally, a cluster of economic or, rather, agricultural metaphors grows around the topic of Cintio’s impotence by the power of the necromancer’s rhetorical “magic”: in Iachelino’s wording of the situation, the groom cannot sink his “vomere” into the field; therefore Cintio’s father, who wants the sowing done, has hired the necromancer to straighten “il manico dell’aratro” (2.2.619-25). But the economic politics underlying sexual relations is exposed unequivocally only by Fantesca, as she argues with Emilia’s mother about the necessity to try any merchandise before purchase:

Fant.  In fé di Dio, che tór non si dovrebbono
      se non a prova li mariti.

Mad.   Ah bestia!

Fant.   Che bestia! Io dico il ver. Mai non si compera
cosa, che prima ben non si consideri
dentro e di fuori più volte. Sc in un semplice
fuso il vostro denaio avete a spendere,
dieci volte a guardarlo bene e volgere
per man tornate; et a barlume gli uomini
si tórran poi, che tanto ci bisognano?

(2.4.846-54)

Fantesca’s eloquence performs a reversal of sex roles parallel to the reversal of class roles taking place in the relationship between servants and masters. Here, it is the woman who, displacing a misogynist stock metaphor, treats men as objects traded on the market place, just as elsewhere a servant assumes a position of intellectual superiority over his master.

This eloquence is a conspicuous exception to the silence of the main female characters: women, aside from the brief appearances of the minor characters Margarita, Balia, Fantesca and Madonna, are absent from the scene. In the male characters’ discourse, they are evoked as images of fragility, devotion, and chastity: Lavinia, according to Temolo, dissolves in tears, faints, and almost dies
for fear of losing Cintio (4.3.1485-92); Emilia is described as “casta e pudicissima” by the necromancer (3.1.954). Several references are also made to the importance of women as potential causes of dishonor for the family’s name. It may seem fitting that Lavinia and Emilia, being at the same time appropriated by male imagination as angelic creatures, and treated in men’s interactions as pieces of property, should remain mere names on the tongues of male characters. But it must be also remembered that this role is in conformity with the conventions of the genre. In his comedies, Ariosto follows the classical custom by giving an active role only to old and déclassées women. Within the traditional configuration of gender roles, some female characters are granted speech to address the issue of women’s condition. In addition to Fantesca, one should remember Stamma, the old maid who laments the plight of the subordinate class and gender in La Cassaria. As a servant and a woman, and an old and ugly one at that, she is totally powerless in a society where worth is determined by rank and, for women, by beauty and youth:

Misera me! Quest’altra un di pur sperano,  
o mutando padrone o liberandosi,  
uscir di servitù di questo diavolo;  
e puon sperar, ch’alle belle e alle giovani  
non manca, o tosto o tardi, mai recapito:  
ma io, che nacqui brutta, et invecchiatami  
on oggimai, non spero, anco volendomi  
il patron darmi in dono, non che vendere,  
che mai si trovi chi voglia levarmigli.  
Che maladetta sia la mia disgrazia!

(3.4.1328-37)

One should also remember Lena — protagonist of the homonymous comedy — who brings a woman’s experience to center stage. A courtesan supporting her husband through her “trade,” Lena clearly exposes the value system of which she is a victim as she accepts it and tries to exploit it to her full advantage.

In the Orlando Furioso, Ariosto raises questions of gender through the subversion of sex roles in several episodes developed around the traditional figure of the maiden warrior (McLucas). In the comedies, instead, he foregrounds class and gender by enhancing the role of conventional comic characters — the servant and the courtesan. In Il Negromante, as I have shown, he builds upon the comic topos of the wily servant in order to expose power relations. On the basis of the preceding analysis, I would argue that the servants, just like the necromancer, turn out to play the role of author-figures. This role becomes more evident in the conclusion, with the downfall of the necromancer and a final striking role reversal which take place after the restoration of order in the families of Massimo and Abondio. The various complications built upon the initial equivocal situation are finally resolved not because of, but in spite of Iachelino’s art. In order to
worm money out of Massimo, Iachelino pretends to have a cure for Cintio’s impotence; in Cintio’s case, he obtains money by promising that a man will be materialized in Emilia’s bed so as to cause scandal and repudiation; finally, he exploits Camillo by pretending to charm Emilia into falling in love with the unfortunate suitor. If the necromancer’s three fraudulent plots were to come through, nobody but the necromancer himself would actually achieve what he wants. Temolo, instead, becomes the protagonist of a series of actions by which the tricks turn against their creator. He deceives Nibbio by pretending that Iachelino is dead, so that the magic casket containing Camillo is left unattended, and diverted to Lavinia’s home instead of being placed in Emilia’s bedroom. As a consequence, Camillo informs Abondio and Massimo about the secret marriage, and this revelation leads, in turn, to Massimo’s encounter with Lavinia, whom he discovers to be his lost daughter.

This denouement, with the conventional reconstitution of familial order, does not mark the conclusion of the play. In fact, the last three scenes, added in the revised version of 1528, shift the dramatic focus from the happy resolution of the entangled love plot to the downfall of the necromancer. The most spectacular reversal takes place in these new scenes, where the character who had been introduced as the *deus ex machina* is dethroned by the two ingenious servants. First, Temolo succeeds in taking Iachelino’s magic robe; thus, he literally exposes him as a greedy thief (“un ghiottone e un ladro” [5.4.2072]), leaving him in his underskirt (5.4.2065). By the same token, as soon as Temolo puts on the necromancer’s gown, he proclaims himself astrologer and is perceived by Iachelino as “uom da bene” (5.4.2067-69). Nibbio then completes Temolo’s work: as Iachelino is running away from his victims, his servant makes him believe that he will be following with the booty. Therefore, while Temolo appropriates the necromancer’s properties (his role as a magician and a demiurge), Nibbio appropriates his property.

The exchange between Temolo and Iachelino, in particular, echoing the initial caveat about deceitful appearances and interchangeable identities (Prologo 17-22), offers an important intimation as to the broad implications of the discourse on magic. In fact, this passage emphasizes the power inherent to the magic robe vis-à-vis the signification and the interpretation of social status: the robe, which indicates both the deceitfulness and the power of signs/appearances, signifies dignity and authority, regardless of the individual who wears it, just as the word “master” does, regardless of any actual referent. Thus, the foregrounding of the robe as a signifier of power and dignity intimates the link between the necromancer’s art and the symbolic order (in this case represented by clothing, elsewhere by language) which codifies class (and gender) differences.

In keeping with the carnivalesque setting, the role of magic shifts as the persona of the demiurge/artist changes face and function: the magician’s robe, one might say, is passed down from the mythic Orpheus, Amphion, and Apollo —
the founders of an ideal social order, to Iachelino — the swindler and corrupter of morals, to Temolo — the subversive voice of the subordinate class.

A comparison with the Orlando Furioso lends support to this reading. When the various characters who are endowed with magical powers, the disparate magical objects, and the different functions that they perform are considered, it becomes apparent that magic plays a shifting, ambivalent role. In the famous episode of Alcina’s island, for instance, three enchantresses are agents in Ruggiero’s experience of loss and recovery of the self: Alcina destroys his willpower trapping him in the deceitful “veil” of her beautiful, sensual fiction (7.9-55); Melissa uncovers the ugliness and the evil hidden beneath that beautiful surface, freeing Ruggiero from the degrading prison of the senses, and instructing him on his glorious destiny (7.56-79); and Logistilla imposes control upon human desire and redirects it away from the sensual domain towards the spiritual one (10.45-67). Significantly, the magic ring that Melissa uses here to reveal a hidden truth (to demystify Alcina’s spell) can also perform the opposite function of concealing reality, hiding from sight those who place it in their mouths. And elsewhere in the poem, a sorceress also named Melissa attempts to satisfy her illicit desire for a married man by uncovering an act of infidelity which she herself has caused through her incantations (43.20-39). In other words, magic, like art, can be used to educate and to gratify, to mystify and to demystify, to engage reality and to evade it in a merely sensual dimension (that of Alcina’s pleasurable fiction) or in a merely spiritual realm (that of Logistilla’s transcendent love, but also of Ficino’s and Pico’s metaphysical thought). Both in the poem and in the comedy, the multifaceted magician works as a figure of the artist to raise the issue of the problematic function of art.

Il Negromante ends with an explicit reference to the ethical function of art in Nibbio’s envoy addressed to the public:

... Or non curate se lo astrologo
restar vedete al fin de la comedia
poco contento; perché l’arte, ch’imita
la natura, non pate ch’abbian l’opere
d’un scellerato mai se non mal esito.

(5.6.2143-47)

Carlo Grabher has observed that this “moralistic” remark sounds a jarring note in the conclusion: “Questa notazione moralistica — messa per giunta in bocca al Nibbio — è l’unica cosa che, nel nuovo finale, appaia fuori tono, dato il carattere della commedia e dato che, anche in queste ultime scene, l’Ariosto si abbandona sia al gusto di una ben architettata beffa, sia al sottile gioco dell’ingegno” (108). Such a judgment stems from a critical approach that misses the deeper implications underlying the game of cleverness and practical jokes in the comedy. Actually, the final comment emphasizes an ethical concern that is present through-
out the text, and the tone of the conclusion is not dissonant with the ironic tone predominant in the rest of the comedy. In fact, Nibbio’s contribution introduces a note of ambiguity and irony into the resolution: although he is instrumental in punishing Iachelino for his dishonesty, he does so for his own benefit and in a dishonest way. Therefore, the conclusion does not move from the satirical, realistic perspective adopted in the text to a moralistic and idealistic one: there is no absolute catharsis in the end, only a solution that is against ambiguity and corruption, and at the same time, for it.

The necromancer, with his corrupted “magic,” at the center of an animalistic world, provides a satirical counterpart to the Humanist ideal of a God-like, free, self-transforming man, symbolized by Proteus in Pico’s oration “On the Dignity of Man.” In the context of the apology of man’s dignity, magic is an emblem of the individual’s power over reality. In Il Negromante, instead, it is a vehicle for social satire against corruption, as well as a metaphor for the ambivalent role of language/art in constituting and exposing power relations along lines of class and gender. The world constructed by Ariosto’s comedy seems to point to a gap between the Renaissance idealized notion of human dignity and the actual condition of the individual — a pawn moved by chance, victim of greed and stupidity, whose creative linguistic acts are also determined by economic forces of repression and exploitation. Such a reality, just as the necromancer’s evil art, is uncloaked by the voice of the subordinate class and sex: with the demystification of the necromancer, and with the role reversals enacted by the rhetorical “magic” of the three servants, the text invests language and art with the power of exposing the ideological foundation of value systems based on hierarchical distinctions.

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NOTES

1 On the role of magic in Ficino’s and Pico’s work, see Walker 3-59; and Yates 62-116. For a detailed study of Ficino’s and Pico’s thought, see also Garin; Kristeller; and Trinkaus 2. 461-529.
2 Taking Pico’s Oration as a point of departure, Greene examines how the ideal of the flexibility of the self extolled by Renaissance Humanism is taken up or challenged by different sixteenth-century texts. On the Renaissance notion of self-fashioning, see also Greenblatt.
3 On the crucial role played by Burckhardt’s work in the formation of the modern concept of the Renaissance, see Ferguson 179-252.
4 Migiel, for instance, has undertaken such a reexamination in her reading of Giovan Battista Gelli’s La Circe. Drawing attention to gender and class issues foregrounded in Gelli’s text, she points to the ideological foundation of certain views of the dignity of man. Other studies following this critical approach are collected in Migiel and Schiesari; Ferguson, Quilligan, and Vickers; Parker and Quint.
5 For an exhaustive overview of this shifting critical trend, see Ascoli 94-107 and passim. Ascoli’s notion of “bitter harmony” is itself a result of the present critical tendency to revise
the traditional view of Ariosto's harmony. The aim of this study is to show that Ariosto's harmonious "song," "a means of evading, domesticating, and/or dominating impending crises of the self, the city, and the temple," contains elements of dissonance which reveal "awareness of a poetic project doomed to the failure and to being swallowed by the madness and death it so yearns to transcend" (6). Ascoli focuses in particular on Ariosto's allusion to and subversion of the Renaissance concept of ideal self-hood and the related official ideologies of education.

6 The original version of the comedy (completed in 1520 especially for Vatican production) was never performed. The second version was performed at the ducal theater of Ferrara during the carnival of 1528, or in the following two years. (On the chronology of the play and the circumstances of its delayed production, see Catalano 1.588; Beame and Sbrocchi 157; Ferroni 132, n.55; Portner.) The backdrop represented Ferrara instead of Cremona, where the action is set, because it was the same scene used previously for the staging of another of Ariosto's comedies, La Lena. Ansani has discussed the carnivalesque setting as a metaphor of the initial state of disarray. D'Amico has identified a dynamic tension between the idealized image of civic order in the painted scene of the Renaissance city and the unfolding chaotic action of the comedy, which he relates to the dimension of the perspective ("the source of potentially disrupting forces and of unexpected harmonies"). According to D'Amico, the action dramatizes this tension by playing the hierarchical order of tradition ("the structures that obstruct desire" embodied by the old men) against the erotic spirit of carnival (the desires of the young lovers) (312-15).

7 All passages from Il Negromante follow the second version of the play as published in the Catalano edition (Ariosto, Le commedie 2.93-183). Quotes from other plays also refer to this edition.

8 See Prologo 36-38: "... ciò che in Vinexia e ciò che in Roma s'ordina; / se Francia o Spagna abbia condutti i Svizari, / o pur i Lanzichenech al suo stipendio."

9 A variation on this motif is the comparison of men and animals that seals Massimo's remarks about the crisis of patriarchal authority among the new generations. Complaining about the new customs of courting women in their homes at any time of the day, both in the presence and absence of husbands or fathers, Massimo declares himself surprised "che al presente gli uomini non sieno a fatto grassi come tortore," considering that they all seem to have "sì buon stomaco" (1.4.513-15). For the use of the term "becco" with the meaning of "cuckold" see also I Suppositii 3.2.951; La Lena 2.3.558, 5.3.1365, 5.11.1650.

10 As Ansani points out, in the first version of the play Ariosto uses both the terms "fisico" and "negromante"; in the second version, instead, Iachelino is prevalently referred to as "astrologo." The confusion surrounding Iachelino's qualifications clearly adds to the ambiguity of his identity. Ansani suggests that it also points to the contemporary debate on the good or evil nature of magic.

11 Other critics have noted this difference without, however, exploring its full extent and implications. See Grabher: "... alla... tradizionale furberia del servo l'Ariosto aggiunge la sua [di Temolo] superiore arguzia, il suo scanzonato scetticismo, la sua umana saggezza e perfino un certo suo atteggiamento satirico contro alcuni aspetti della società contemporanea" (84). See also Radcliff-Umstead: "Temolo, in his humble social position, does not share the stupid mistakes of the 'great.' He is not an Italian reworking of the clever slave of Roman comedy. His attitude is one of irony" (The Birth 93).

12 For a study of the fortune of the theme of magic in Cinquecento comedy, see Radcliff-Umstead, "The Sorcerer"; and Bond xxxi-xxxvii. The con magician can be considered as a variant of the character type of the trickster, which evolved in Renaissance comedy from the figure of the ruseful servant of the classical tradition. In his study on the characterological code of the trickster, Beecher notes that Il Negromante has a paradigmatic role
in the evolution of the character of theintriguer from ruseful servant to professional
swindler, as well as in the development of Renaissance drama from “romantic comedy of
love” to “comedy of the underworld” (60) and social comedy. Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*
antecedes Ariosto’s play in this change. In his cynicism and amorality, Iachello recalls the
parasite Ligurio. Both intriguers pretend to solve problems of impotence (real or feigned); and,
more importantly, they both seem to incarnate the flaws of society at large.
13 The notion of the “figure of the poet” has become a staple in criticism of the *Orlando Fus-
rioso*. In addition to the rhetorical narrator, whose role was first systematically analyzed by
Durling, various characters have been indicated as metaphorical projections of the author:
Astolfo and Orrilo (both highly marked with magical attributes), as well as the magi-
cians/prophets Merlin, Atlante, Logistilla, Alcina, and Cassandra. For a survey of the
criticism on this topic and for a discussion of the disparate figures of the author in the
poem, see Ascoli 37-39, and 258-393.
14 Ansani has analyzed the relation between magic and rhetoric in *Il Negromante*, comparing
Ariosto’s discourse to that of the Humanists and the Neoplatonists. Since she is primarily
concerned with the Renaissance notion of magic and rhetoric, and hence with the question
of the epistemological and persuasive power of language, Ansani does not address the
class and gender issues and the questions of power relations raised by the comedy, and she
considers Iachello as the only poet-figure in the play. Although she remarks that the
ambivalence surrounding the figure of the necromancer challenges the Humanist and
Neoplatonic view of the poet’s positive function, Ansani ultimately emphasizes the
constructive role of the necromancer as a cathartic agent, as the external force which alone
restores the lost order to the community. D’Amico also identifies Iachello as the
demiuric agent, mediator of the fruitful tension between traditional order and the playful,
youthful, erotic spirit of carnival: “the alter ego of the poet-dramatist,” who, “like the spirit
of carnival . . . accelerates confusion, propelling the citizens of Cremona through disorder
to the discovery of a new order” (314). As I shall argue, emphasis on the resolution of the
conflicts as public catharsis and as return to order misses the irony of the denouement. I
shall also take issue with the assumption that Iachello is the sole poet-figure in the
comedy. When one considers class and gender as coordinates in the universe of the
comedy, an exclusive focus on the necromancer appears to limit the view of the broad
implications of Ariosto’s discourse on magic in *Il Negromante*.
15 In the last book of *De Triplici Vita, De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*, Ficino recommends
music as a most effective means of capturing planetary or celestial influences through the
imitation of the musical harmony of the *spiritus mundi* (1.529-72). On Ficino’s concept of
the cosmic spirit and his theory of astrological music, see Walker 3-24. Walker stresses the
importance of words in Ficino’s music and argues that they were derived from Orphic
singing: “Ficino’s *lyra* was Orphic not only because it bore a picture of Orpheus [charming
the animals and rocks with his lyre], but also because it accompanied his singing of the
Orphic Hymns, and probably other Orphic fragments” (22).
16 On the Humanist tracts as ironic subtext of Renaissance comedy, see Rodini 202-04. In his
analysis of *I Suppositi*, Rodini observes that this text puts into question civil law as “a
means by which men attempt to sort out and come to understand in a ‘logical’ way what is
going on around them” (209). As we shall see, references to lawyers, law officers, and
government officials in *Il Negromante* offer further evidence of Ariosto’s ironic stance
toward the legal profession, as well as other forms of institutionalized power.
17 We can find a similar attack against the legal profession in *Orlando furioso* 14.84, where
personified Discord, with her retinue of notaries, attorneys, and lawyers, carries bundles of
“citatorie,” “libelli,” “esamine e . . . carte di procure,” which are qualified as instruments
of injustice “per cui le facoltà de’ poverelli / non sono mai ne le città sicure.” Early in his
life, Ariosto manifested his dislike for the legal profession as he foiled his father's desire for him to study law (Gardner 25-30).

18 The use of animal imagery to underscore the effects of power and to indicate lack of human dignity is a recurrent motive in Ariosto's work. See, for instance, Orlando furioso 34.78.3-4, 39.71; Satire 5.23-27.

19 One should notice that some additions introduced in the revised version of Il Negromante spotlight the incisive eloquence of the servants and reinforce the satirical thrust of the play: for instance, Nibbio's comments on the necromancer's rhetorical skills (2.3.726-27, 2.3.823), and the necromancer's apology of ruthless self-interest as the ruling code of conduct among prominent men (3.1.936-69).

20 In particular, see 4.5.1576-80, 4.5.1608-10, 4.5.1620-23, 5.2.1751-55, 5.3.1886-93.

21 On the evolution of the figure of the young heroine from classical comedy to the Italian commedia erudita, see Bond xxxix-xl. Bond argues that both classical and Italian custom "forbade the appearance of citizens' daughters in the streets," and hence in the public place represented by the scene. But while in Greek and Roman comedy only déclassées girls take part in the action, Italian dramatists grant speech to heroines in male disguise. Ariosto, however, "never resorts to the device: Eulalia and Corisca, who appear in La Cassaria, are in the same position as the Latin heroine; Polinesia opens I Suppositori by a conference with her nurse, but reverts indoors on the approach of the men, and appears no more save mutely at the end; in La Lena and Il Negromante no young heroine appears; in La Scolastica Ippolita speaks but a few words as she hurries across the stage, while the other heroine, Flamminia, makes no appearance" (xl).

22 See also La Lena 3.3.780-82, where the servant Cobolo compares his dexterity in lying to the poets' art.

23 Doglio notes that this structural change and the subverted order of events (with the wedding as initial complication rather than as happy solution) signal a break from the canons of classical comedy (430). She also points out another change in the second version, which moves the comedy away from the traditional model of Plutarch and Terence: by eliminating the division of the listed characters into age and class groups (vecchi, giovani, servi), Ariosto seems to refuse the exemplary function of the classical comedy that focuses on clearly defined conflicts and antinomies (431). This subversive move, I would suggest, appears to parallel and announce the role reversals staged in the text.

24 See Ariosto, Satire 3.265-313 for a more explicit polemical reference to clothing as a signifier of status that does not necessarily correspond to virtue.

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