Blame-by-praise Irony in the 
*Ecatommiti* of Giraldi Cinzio *

Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio or Cinthio (1504-1573) is commonly remembered for his heated polemic with G.B. Pigna over the poetic merits of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. To the English scholar, he is known mainly for his "Epitìa e Isabella" and the "Moro di Venezia," two short stories generally acknowledged as the respective sources of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*.  

Even less known remains his voluminous *Ecatommiti* or *Hecatommiti*, a collection of 113 short stories (comprising the two mentioned above) which enjoyed great popularity, both in Italy and abroad, throughout the sixteenth century.  

However, such popularity was short-lived, for as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century its critical fortunes began to dwindle. It was only at the turn of this century that it attracted the attention of several scholars who, like their predecessors, insisted on its prevailing moral tone.  

Recently, though, Guy Lebatteux has found in the *Ecatommiti* strong evidence of the author's intent to propagandize the political despotism of the Este, lords of Renaissance Ferrara. In his view, the collection is part of a larger "oeuvre presque exclusivement destinée à disculper et à célébrer une dynastie, selon un programme de propagande rigoureusement élaboré et structuré."

The critic formulates his judgment on the basis of the text's conspicuous praise of the Este, which the various storytellers express by means of laudatory statements as well as through narrated events exemplifying the rulers' princely qualities. Thus, Lebatteux's conclusion, arising primarily from a *prima facie* acceptance of the surface meaning of the text, assumes that the textual extollment of the Ferrarese lords reflects the author's actual intentions, and that the belief-world of the narratives' fictional speakers corresponds to the author's true convictions. In this paper, I intend to argue that such an assumption is inconsistent with the narra-
tive structure informing those stories in the *Ecatommiti* which deal with the Este and their Ferrara. The stories' structure hinges, in fact, on a distinct tension undermining the affinity which normally characterizes the roles of the reader and the narrative audience as well as the relationship between the narrator and his (implied) author. The resulting attrition alerts, in turn, to the incongruity emerging from the contrast between the narrated, fictionalized events and their historical referents. These inconsistencies eventually lead to the identification of an underlying, ironic tension between what is said in the text and what is actually meant or, as we shall see, between the literal meaning of the text (the narrators' belief-world) and the intended, covert message (the author's real intentions). Before proceeding to the discussion of these points, first a few words about the entire collection.

Modeled after Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Ecatommiti* features stories told by a group or *brigata* of ten men and ten women who, wishing to flee from the plague and, especially, from the 1527 plunder of Rome by the Imperial armies under the command of Georg von Frundsberg, set sail on a ten-day voyage to Marseille. On each day of the journey ten stories are narrated in accord with the theme chosen for that particular day, thus *Eca*(100)*tommiti* (fables, tales, stories). The similarity with the *Decameron*, however, ends here; for, whereas in Boccaccio each member of the *brigata* is elected to reign over the events of a given day, in Giraldi only Fabio is to rule for the entire (narrative) voyage. He is expressly selected for his "matura" and "grave età" which, significantly, embodies the wisdom and the rectitude that characterize the highly moral tone of the whole work. Indeed, far from the care-free, mundane spirit of the *Decameron*, the tone of the *Ecatommiti* is predominantly moralistic: religion, friars, monks, and nuns are seldom treated irreverently; women are not seen as the object of erotic fantasies and inspirations, but as mothers and wives; illicit love is constantly condemned, and themes with obscene overtones are only meant to show the many faces of evil.

Alongside the thematics of love, exemplifying the moral standards of man's spiritual life, the themes of *cortesia*, justice, prudence, valor, magnanimity, and liberality provide examples of princely virtues with which must be endowed the rulers of this ideal world. It is not altogether surprising that many of these noble qualities are exhibited by members of the House of Este, especially by Ercole I and by his son Alfonso I, for it was common practice among Renaissance writers to produce encomiastic litera-
ture in honor of patrons on whose favors depended their social and economic survival. Jane P. Tompkins writes that during the Renaissance, literature was often a "source of financial support, a form of social protection, a means of procuring a comfortable job, an instrument of socialization, to move in a complicated social game, or even a direct vehicle to courtship." The use of literature for these purposes was not entirely new for Giraldi who, among other works, wrote Ercole (1534) in honor of his patron Ercole II. Indeed, like Ariosto and Boiardo before him, Giraldi used literary encomia as a means of ingratiating himself with his Este benefactors, on whose graces and goodwill rested his rank of courtier and, for a time, his teaching position at the Studio of Ferrara.

In view of this form of intellectual vassalage, it becomes imperative to examine closely the Ecatommiti in order to determine whether its declared praise of the Este is a sincere encomium or simply a rhetorical device meant to draw attention to a covert criticism of those being praised. It should be noted here that the encomium is limited to only ten stories having as their main theme the praise of Ferrara, its Este, and their deeds. For instance, in V, 6, the narrator leaves out no superlatives in praise of the wisdom and the sense of justice shown by Alfonso I in punishing a corrupted prison official; in VI, 2, another narrator extolls the valor and cortesia exhibited by the Duke both in the battle of Ravenna and in the treatment of his prisoner Fabrizio Colonna. Also, Ercole I's sense of justice and compassion in refusing to sentence to death the conspirators against his rule is presented as a model of princely conduct (VI, 10). Other storytellers proclaim the Este dynasty the most ancient in the whole world (VI, 1), and Ferrara a city of great culture and splendor (III, 9).

Although each story focuses on the princely virtue(s) of an individual member of the Este family, all appear to follow the same narrative pattern: 1) character X is said by the narrator to be endowed with virtue(s) Y, 2) follows a narration of selected deeds of X, which illustrates virtue(s) Y, 3) the narrative audience, namely, the brigata to whom the story is told, comments or is said — by the author — to have commented on character X's virtue(s) and, often, on the narrator's presentation. Exemplary of this narrative structure is the story told in VI, 10, where Fabio, having praised Ercole I for his prudence, sense of justice, benignity, liberality, and cortesia, tells of a court officer's attempt to convince Ercole to sentence to death all the young Ferrarese who had joined Niccolo d'Este's conspiracy against the Duchy. He strengthens his argu-
ment by pointing to the large revenue the state stood to collect from the subsequent confiscation of the conspirators' wealth. The Duke rejects his adviser's evil suggestion, since its implementation — notes the storyteller — would have caused immense grief to many of his subjects. Hence, he throws in the open fire the booklet containing the names of the conspirators and orders that the subject be discussed never again. Having mentioned the jubilation of the pardoned conspirators, the storyteller concludes the narrative by judging Ercole's deed worthy of a most magnanimous lord, and by suggesting that it be engraved in golden letters on crowns and sceptres as a reminder to other rulers that to forgive is a princely virtue. Following the end of the story — the reader is told — the audience showered with "lodi" the Duke for his cortesia, and commended the narrator both for his storytelling ability and for a well chosen topic of narration.

The audience's endorsement of the narrated world proceeds from the narrator's ability to tell a story, that is, to predispose his listeners' sympathies and to mould their views according to his own wishes. At this, Fabio proves to be a real master, as he concentrates his narration on selected events which together with his highly laudatory introduction of Ercole converge to spotlight his belief-world: the greatness of the Este. Moreover, his choice of the conspiracy theme effectively structures the narrative on the antithesis good vs. bad, namely, the "great" Ercole against his rather "worthless" ("uomo da niente," p. 2066) nephew Niccolo, thus predisposing the audience's sympathies for the "good" duke. The same emotive function has the treatment of the prisoners, a clemency motif meant to underscore the Este's sense of justice and forgiving nature. In addition to these narrative choices, the storyteller employs meta-narrative interventions skilfully aimed at determining his audience's emotional reaction. For instance, in recounting Niccolo's hasty but bloody retreat before the overwhelming strength of the ducal forces under the command of Gismondo d'Este (Ercole's younger brother), the narrator breaks into the story with this parenthetical comment-celebration of the conspirators' defeat: "(come volle la divina giustizia, la quale con diritto occhio vede il torto, con che Niccolo moveva l'arme)," p. 2067. The desired effect of this aside is clearly to impress upon the audience that God is on Ercole's side. In another instance, after the Duke throws the infamous booklet into the fire, the storyteller erupts into the narrative with the exclamation: "O atto degno di grandissimo prencipe" (p. 2068). Here, again, the storyteller is ob-
viously bent upon inducing the listeners to share his emotional experience or, more precisely, his enthusiastic approval of the Este family.

Besides determining his listeners’ emotional reaction, the narrator manages to ensure their unreserved acceptance of his story by skillfully authenticating his views through the direct and/or indirect (discourse) testimony of characters inside the story-world. For example, Fabio’s express opinion that Ercole was a most just, most cortese, and most forgiving lord is corroborated by the Duke himself who, in the act of burning the booklet, is reported ready to forgive and forget the conspirators and their criminal undertaking: with the booklet and the names of the conspirators — he is quoted by the narrator as saying — “abbruciasi la memoria di tutto quello che contra di me hanno pensato, tentato e messo in opera.” It is Ercole again who alludes to his forgiving disposition when ordering his adviser to report only “cosa che sia per essere utile a’ miei cittadini, ed a somma lor contentezza” (p. 2067). Ercole’s princely fame is also attested to by the pardoned conspirators who are said to have become so attached to the Duke that they would gladly give their lives for him. And finally the storyteller reports the views of the subjects themselves, who are said to be most happy with Ercole’s rule, “conoscendosi essere retti da giustissimo e benignissimo signore” (p. 2066). These testimonies, whether in the form of Ercole’s direct discourse or mediated, such as the collective sentiment of the conspirators, and the subjects’ view expressed in the form of vox populi, tend to lend credibility to the narrator’s point of view, thus authenticating — in the minds of the listeners, of course — the story’s stated objective: the praise of the Duke.

The foreseeable effect upon the listeners of these rhetorical means of persuasion cautions against accepting uncritically the audience’s endorsement of the narrated world. Indeed, under the sway of a most effective argumentative strategy the listeners fail repeatedly to evaluate the narrator’s reliability or the consistency of his belief-world. For instance, in VI, 10, the audience, in sharing Fabio’s enthusiasm for Ercole, fails to register a significant discrepancy in the account of the narrated events. In fact, it is said that the courtier — actually a spy or, as the narrator notes, one of those known as the eyes and ears of their masters — brings to the Duke the names of 400 young Ferrarese nobles who took part in the plot to overthrow the regime. The rather sizeable number of conspirators, placed by the narrator at three fourths of the local
nobody, clearly weakens the narrator's contention that Ercole was reputed by his subjects both "giustissimo e benignissimo." In other words, the multitude of the accused young aristocrats, the execution of whom would have brought — by Ercole's own estimates — great sorrow to the "maggior parte" (p. 2067) of his people, causes one to wonder how can so many subjects be so malcontent as to conspire against their allegedly most just and most benign lord. This question is left begging by an audience that appears to have surrendered its judgment to the argumentative craft of the narrator.

The audience assumes the same attitude in VI, 2, where Lucio, following the established narrative pattern and exhibiting Fabio's argumentative skill, praises the valor and the cortesia displayed by Alfonso I at the battle of Ravenna. The occasion prompting the display of these noble virtues was the Duke's daring rescue of the Roman general Fabrizio Colonna from the hands of the fearful French soldiers. Here, too, the audience is uncritical of the contradictions which abound in the narrative. For example, the storyteller calls the French troops "barbarians" ("barbara gente," p. 2041); however, not only does he refer to Alfonso as their most faithful ally, he also calls him their most gracious host (VI, 4). The association of Alfonso with the French tends to undermine the storyteller's claim that the Este is a most noble and worthy prince. An alert audience would have undoubtedly wondered what this "illustrious" prince was doing in the company of "barbarians" such as the French. The narrator also insists that Alfonso is very fond of the "gente italiana" (p. 2041); nonetheless, he is reported fighting against the Romans and the Venetians and, worse yet, helping in the destruction of Ravenna and in the carnage of her "Italian" citizens. In the corroborating words of other narrators, the battle of Ravenna was a "terrible" armed conflict, resulting in the bloody victory of Alfonso and his French allies (V, 7; VI, 2). All these discrepancies reveal the audience's inability to discriminate (the listeners detect none of the contradictions mentioned) as well as the storyteller's prejudicial preference for the Este.

Both the listeners' lack of critical evaluation and the storyteller's partiality for the Este characterize another major story dealing with the Este (I, 8). Here, Virginia praises, in a manner peculiar to other narrators, the liberality and the forgiving nature with which Borso d'Este pardoned those who attempted to overthrow him. Having thus reminded the audience of the Duke's virtues, Virginia discloses — perhaps unwittingly — that the imprisoned con-
spirators were subjected to cruel punishment, for they revealed the name of their principal investigator (the king of Naples) "senza voler patire altri tormenti" (p. 1846). The mention of the use of torture not only is denounced elsewhere in the Ecatommiti, but also tends to contradict the narrator's express belief that Borso is "benigno." Another incongruity arises from the storytellers' divergent view of Borso. Virginia, for example, makes only a passing reference to the Duke's illegitimacy by casually including him among Niccolo's illegitimate sons. For Fabio, instead, the question of the Duke's birth is a "macchia" (I, 9) on the Duke's name and, by extension, on the entire House of Este. Indeed, the detail of the Este's illegitimacy is not so insignificant as Virginia appears to suggest, for other narrators, such as Giulia (VI, 1), and again Fabio (VI, 10), insist on pointing out that Borso is a "bastard" and that he "usurped" Ercole's right to succession.

Out of these incongruities emerges the realization that the reader, in his attempt to decipher the message entrusted to the stories in question, may not rely on the audience’s enthusiastic evaluation of the narrative nor on the storyteller’s rather subjective choice and version of the narrated events. The narrator is indeed unreliable, for the facts chosen to represent his world are inconsistent and clearly biased in favor of the Ferrarese lords. The listeners, too, are unreliable, since, in accepting without reservations the storyteller’s point of view, they reveal themselves to be a somewhat credulous audience. In view of this rather unresisting attitude, it is understandable why the reader may find it difficult to fictionalize himself by pretending to be a member of this rather naive audience. And it is by refusing to join the narrative audience in its uncritical acceptance of the narrator's world, that the experienced reader remains uninvolved.

It is indeed outside the storyteller's sphere of influence that the reader enjoys the vantage point of objectivity. From here, he is able to identify other important discrepancies which further undermine that world of fiction in which the Ferrarese lords are projected as great rulers. It does not escape the attention of the uninvolved reader, for instance, that two of the four major stories extolling the House of Este are about conspiracies. The connotation of this theme is clearly irreconcilable with its encomiastic function, for if, on one hand, it serves the narrator's purpose of exemplifying the magnanimity and the clemency exhibited by the Dukes when dealing with conspirators, it insinuates, on the other hand, that some elements of the Ferrarese population — contrary
to the narrator's contention — were not particularly satisfied with the rule of these seemingly illustrious princes. This incongruity may be otherwise illustrated by the question: if the Este were so magnanimous, why so many plots and so many conspirators (three-fourths of the local nobility) against their authority and/or their lives?

Characterized by similar contradictions is the theme of the bad adviser or ministro, used as an encomiastic motif by both Fabio and Porzia in VI, 10, and V, 6, respectively. In VI, 10, Fabio proceeds to demonstrate Ercole's noble qualities by making him react passionately — his dramatic gesture of throwing the booklet into the fire and the speech accompanying it — against the counselor's suggestion to execute all the conspirators and confiscate their wealth. For his evil advice the counselor is chastised by the Duke, and compared by the narrator to a vulture of insatiable greed. And in V, 6, Porzia illustrates the Este's fair sense of justice by telling of Alfonso's wrath against a state official ("podestà"), who had solicited a woman's favors in return for the life of her convicted husband. For this abuse of authority, the podestà is punished by the Duke and censured by the storyteller, who describes him as lascivious and libidinous. In both these instances, the unbiased reader will not fail to detect a serious thematic inconsistency, for, while the motif provides the narrator with ample opportunity to show the Este's exemplary virtues, it connotes, at the same time, the Dukes' want of foresight in selecting their official representatives. Such a shortcoming is of considerable importance when discussing a prince who, as Machiavelli points out in the Prince (XXII), may be judged in terms of the ability, or lack thereof, of the individuals he chooses as his "ministers."

Both the nature and the quantity of these incongruities — being internal to the story or inherent in presumably encomiastic motifs — damage severely the storyteller's credibility. In recognizing as unreliable — and, therefore, rejecting — the narrator's word, the uninvolved reader remains, as noted above, on the margin of the communication circuit, which in the fictional world of the story defines the relationship between the storyteller and his audience as well as their respective roles. Hence, in his search for the text's true message, the reader must establish a line of communication with the author and question, thereby, his real intentions. Accordingly, he must take on the role of what Peter J. Rabinowitz calls the authorial audience, namely, those for whom the author writes and whose opinion he intends to influence. In
this role, Rabinowitz observes, the reader comes to “share, in some measure” the beliefs, the assumptions, and the knowledge which, being common ground to both the author and his audience, guarantee the flow of meaningful communication between them, thus ensuring the proper delivery and reception of the textual message.

It should be pointed out here that, although the world of the Este’s greatness is fictional — being distinctly set off from reality by means of narrative framing (the brigata’s sea-voyage to Marseille) — it is related and points to a referent beyond its frame, in the actual world. For the textual message to be successfully understood, then, the author must presume an audience capable of determining the connection between fiction and reality. Hence, having taken on the role of the authorial audience, thus sharing their assumptions and beliefs, the reader will have little difficulty in recognizing in the Pio brothers’ plot (1469) against Borso the historical referent of Lucia’s story praising the Duke’s show of clemency towards the conspirators. The reflective reader will undoubt-edly note the clash between the text’s fictitious commendations and what actually happened (as both the author and his readers know) to the unfortunate plotters, including those simply suspected of conspiracy. Luciano Chiappini, echoing the chroniclers of the time, observes that Borso’s ruthless treatment of the prisoners constitutes a dark and infamous page in the history of Ferrara. The Este’s iniquity is especially evinced, continues Chiappini, by the fact that he probably knew that only two of the insurgents executed were actually guilty of treason, and by the indiscriminate and greedy confiscation of the suspects’ property. This merciless behavior makes a mockery of Fabio’s assertion that Borso “si mostrò sempre più atto a perdonare che a punire” (I, 9, p. 1847).

Similarly, Fabio’s narrative extolling the incorruptible sense of justice, the forgiving disposition and the liberality shown by Ercole towards the conspirators is easily recognized as a fictional version of the actual, ill-fated coup (1476), which Niccolo d’Este led against his uncle the Duke. Here again, the clash between the storyteller’s inflated account of events and the harsh historical referents to which they point will not elude the attention of the authorial reader. After all, it was hardly a secret that Ercole moved against the perpetrators with random executions, killing — estimates Chiappini — well over 500 people. Most horrifying, indeed, was the mutilation of Niccolo’s body, whose head had to be sewn back on for the state funeral befitting his name. Even
Werner Gundersheimer, for whom Ercole's atrocities were normal by the standards of the day, finds it appropriate to quote a chronicler as saying that the Duke's reprisals were "una crudel cosa da vedere." Obvious is also the contrast between the textual claim that Ercole was a most forgiving prince and the fact that only after 17 years (1493), notes Chiappini, did he manage to forgive those conspirators who, following the disastrous outcome of the plot, had gone into exile.

Another instance of the clash between textual invention and contextual reality involves Alfonso I, the other highly praised Este who is presented, in as many as three different narratives, as most valorous, most prudent, magnanimous, cortesissimo, etc. Such an unqualified commendation is bound to run against the reader's likely recollection of the Duke's questionable association with the Imperial army, especially with Georg von Frundsberg: ironically, the same Frundsberg whose sack of Rome caused our brigata to flee that city. Leaving little to chance, the author refreshes the reader's memory about Alfonso's implicit responsibility for the Imperial soldiers' atrocities, by noting — through a parenthetical aside — that Frundsberg came to Italy "(per istigazioni di alcuni . . . tocchi da maligni spiriti)" (Proemio, p. 1754). The "alcuni," here, must be taken to include the Duke, since he was a declared and a rather valuable ally of the Empire in the war against the Holy League. In fact, without Alfonso's prompt assistance, Frundsberg's troops — notes the German historian Gregorovius — would have been defeated at the river Po.

It must be emphasized that this incongruity, just like all the incongruities thus far discussed, cannot be attributed to the writer's lapse of memory or slip of the pen, as the collection would be a total failure either as a work of art or as a propaganda piece, were the author unaware of its numerous contradictions. Observes Wayne Booth: "if a speaker betrays ignorance or foolishness that is 'simply incredible,' the odds are comparatively high that the author, in contrast, knows what he is doing." Accordingly, textual inconsistencies must be considered as a series of clues through which the author "intends" and encourages the reader's rejection of the text's literal meaning and, implicitly, the reconstruction of the intended or covert message. The referents just discussed are such clues, since they contradict the storytellers' belief-world while, at the same time, propose an alternate point of view. This view, emerging from the historical context of the narrated facts themselves, is diametrically opposed to that which is presented in
the story-world. More specifically, whereas the narratives reflect and exemplify the princely virtues of the Este, the referents to which they point tend, instead, to negate this enthusiastic approval, by alluding to the violent reality of the actual events that characterized the Este rule of Ferrara. From this perspective, the historical context connotes the deconstruction or destruction of the narrators’ world, as it belittles the Dukes’ alleged greatness and recalls simultaneously a world pointedly antithetical to its fictional version: a world of abuse, of oppression and of bloodshed.

The mutual exclusion of these contrasting but concomitant points of view arouses suspicions of irony, since it articulates a strong ironic tension between what is communicated in the text and what is really intended. The structure giving rise to this tension is reflected mainly in the author’s strategy of putting forth a false view, pretending to endorse it. Indeed, the author appears to approve of the Este, by setting up narratives illustrating their noble deeds. At the same time, however, he proceeds to warn the reader — by leaving a trail of clues, such as the exorbitance of praise, the narrators’ unreliability or their narrative choices based on historical events remarkably incompatible with their encomiastic purposes — that the commendation of the Ferrarese lords is false, and that he actually disapproves of them. This rhetorical strategy may best be described as blame-through-praise irony, arising from the “expression” of virtue to signify vice.

The emergence of these coexisting but conflicting views — one commending and the other censuring the Este — may be visualized by the graphic representation of the two communicative processes peculiar to the frame story:

Author ⤤ [narrator ⤤ audience] ⤤ Reader

where the author communicates with his reader through the fictive communication circuit between the storyteller and his audience. However, departing from this rather linear structure, the reader of the stories under consideration refuses to accept the narrator’s inconsistent views as the author’s intended message. The host of narratorial incongruities leads him, instead, to question directly the author himself, thereby establishing a line of communication which by-passes the communicative instance narrator/audience. Thus, the author talks to his reader by means of textual and contextual clues, behind the back of his narrators:

Author  ⤥[narrator ⤥ audience]  ⤥ Reader

↓-----------------------------------------------------------↓
This conspiring act gives rise to an ironic tension between the fictive (narrator ↔ audience) and the actual (author ↔ reader) communicative circuits, for what is said in the first (the praise of the Este) is the opposite of what is implied in the second (the censure of the Este). Accordingly, the narrative is articulated by two distinct levels of discourse: the literal, through which the narrators sing to the audience the praise of the Este Dukes, and the covert, in which the author — in silent communication with the reader — exposes his narrators' enthusiasm for the Este as misguided, and their encomium as plain, fulsome flattery. It is then through this communicative structure that the reader, in his quest for congruence, succeeds in reconstructing the author's hidden message, a message which may be succinctly summarized as follows: the greatness of the Este is an invention and may thus exist only in a fictive world; it may only be sung by untrustworthy encomiasts, and given to believe only to gullible people.

In view of the arguments brought forth in the course of this discussion, the proposal whereby the Ecatommiti would reflect the author's intent to celebrate his patrons is hardly tenable. On the contrary, the collection offers a rather critical view of the Este and of their oppressive rule of Ferrara. The denunciation is stated subtly through blame-by-praise irony, a rhetorical figure most eloquently described by Henry Peachman:

The especiall use of this figure is to reprehend vice, and mock folly: for by expressing a vertue, and signifying a vice it striketh the mind of the offender [and of the reader, we may add] with the sharp edge of the contrarie comparison, whereby he is compelled to see the great difference betweene what he is, and what he ought to be, betweene what he hath done, and what he ought to have done.²⁶

Finally, the use of irony allows Giraldi to express tactily but effectively his censure of his Este patrons, without the risk of exposing himself to their foreseeable wrath and vengeance.

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NOTES

* A version of this article was read at the MLA Conference in Los Angeles, Cal., 1982.

2 Guido Perale, *Sul valore morale degli ‘Ecatommiti’ di G.B. Giraldi* (Prato: Alberghetti, 1907), pp. 25-26, marvels at the fact that the *Ecatommiti* “potessero avere nello spazio di poco più di quaran’tanni ben sette edizioni, oltre ad una versione francese dopo diciottannì della prima italiana, e a una spagnola dopo venticinque; e cadessero poi ciò non ostante in un oblio da cui soltanto la critica odierna, instancabile disseppelletrice di cadaveri, riuscì a richiamarli.”


5 In the ensuing discussion, I will follow the four steps of irony described by Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 10-12.

6 The collection actually contains 113 stories, as it features ten extra in the introduction and three more at the end of Days III (2) and V (1). On this subject and on the similarity between the *Ecatommiti* and the *Decameron* see Letterio Di Francia, *Storia dei generi*, pp. 69-72.

7 Giambattista Giraldi, *Gli Ecatommiti ovvero cento novelle di Gio. Battista Giraldi Cinthio nobile ferrarese*, in *Raccolta di novellieri italiani* (Firenze: Borghi e Compagni, 1832), pp. 1758, 1761. All other quotations will be from this edition.


10 After all, R. Romano, *Tra due crisi*, p. 126, reminds us that “molto spesso, il fondo di dignità, la capacità di protesta tacita, che si trovano in questi personaggi [writers] è nettamente superiore a tutto quanto una certa tradizione di studi vorrebbe far credere.”

11 The narratives that deal with the Este or with the Ferrara under their rule are: I, 8, 9; II, 7; III, 9; V, 6; VI, 1, 2, 3, 4, 10.

12 Another witness to Ercole’s princely virtues is his own enemy Pandorino who in VI, 1, finds in him “tanta cortesia e benignità.”
13 In II, 4, Ponzio inveighs against a “fiero podestà” who, by means of torture, forces Felice to confess to the killing of Ottavio, a young man still living abroad: “Qual sarebbe quegli che potesse bastare a non si lasciar vincere, per innocente che egli si fosse, da’ costoro tormenti, a cui simili non ha il demonio dello inferno? . . . Vorrei io costoro a tal termine ridotti, sotto l’arbitrio d’uomini simili a loro, per vedere se fosse in essi tanto di valore, che potessero, quantunque innocenti, star costanti a così fatte pene. Ma se i principi del mondo dessero a questi tali il castigo, di che sono degni . . . vedrebberesi certo, che non sarebbero così pronti a porre le mani nell’altrui vita.”


15 Walter J. Ong, S.J., “The Writer’s Audience is always a Fiction,” PMLA, 90, n. 1 (January, 1975), 16 discusses the fictional role of the reader in the frame story.

16 This particular aspect of the reader’s objectivity is treated by Tamar Yacobi, “Fictional Reliability as a Communication Problem,” Poetics Today, II, 2 (Winter, 1981), 124.

17 Ferrarese malcontent is the main theme of a collection of poems, whereby the anonymous author, writes Emilio Lovarini, Antichi testi di letteratura paiana, pubblicati da E. Lavorini (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1969; copied from the G. Romagnoli edition, Bologna, 1894), p. xxi, “di quando in quando. . . . [the poet] tocca una corda stridente e allora diventa fedele interprete dei sentimenti antichi e nuovi della plebe contadina del Ferrarese e del suo malcontento per i reggimenti, la giustizia, le tasse, i soldati e per il Duca stesso [Ercole].” The two sonnets here cited substantiate Emilio Lovarini’s view and reflect, at the same time, the general tone of the collection:

XIII.
— Alegrai-ve e fai festa, pelacan!
— Che ghè, compagno? — El ghè è benono vele;
che’l no vè per mancar(e) co st’ano pele,
che l’ è zà scortegà mile vilan.

[E.] se Diè ne ghe mete la soa man,
e’ ghe lassaremo anche le büele;
che stemo in l’acqua, com(o) fa le granele,
tut’ el di, da la sira a la doman;
e dormen senza casa e senza bètole,
al descovoerto, e, se qualche un s’imbusa,
i sta po più che (ne fa) gli altri inte-le pètole.
El ghè è che ne condana e che n’acusa,
e semo salassà da le sanguètole.
La fame ne combate, el sol(e) ne brusa;
(e se) volen far nostra scusa[?]
i ne dà del vilan e del poltron,
o che ne manda a star[e] in preson.

XIV.
— Ben, che ve par[e] de sto nostro duca?
— Che cri-tu che’l m’in para? el m’in par male;
che’l n’ha si toso e si mozo le ale,
che parem bei pigozi in una zuca.
Ne vi-tu che’l ne magna e si ne struca
e può n’amaza e si ne mete in sale?
L’è propriamente un demunio infernale;
e, s’te ne-i cri, domanda a barba Luca,
che l’altro dì si n’andò a lavoriero
Salvatore di Maria

E'l ghe disse: «Segniore, e' sen desfati per sta guera. E savi che l'è vero».
El ghe respose: «Non pianzi piú, o mati; aòìà paçiençia; non ve dai pensiero.
Come avi un bon recolto, e' sí refati; e ve farò tal pati,
che pori star a muodo bei segnuri.
Lavorà, via. Che ve végna i doluri!»

On the same subject see the thirty satirical sonnets against Ferrara which Ludovico Frati, Giornale storico della letteratura italiana, IX, fasc. 25-26 (1887), 215-37, discovered and attributed to Antonio Cammelli detto il Pistoia.

18 Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” Critical Inquiry, IV, n. 1 (Autumn, 1977), 126, describes in detail the characteristics and the functions of the actual, the authorial, and the narrative audiences.


22 Wayne Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony, p. 57. See also Tamar Yacobi, “Fictional Reliability,” Poetics Today, 123.

23 This type of strategy is discussed in detail by Wayne Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony, pp. 10 and 36.

24 Admittedly, the clues pointing to the presence of irony are rather few, but a good ironic text does not need too many clues, for, as Beda Alleman, “De l'ironie en tant que principe littéraire,” Poétique, VIII (1977), 393, points out, “le texte ironique idéal sera celui dont l'ironie peut être présupposée en l'absence complète de tout signal. Rien n'est plus nuisible,” continues the critic, “au style ironique que cette indication (si chiffrée qu'elle puisse être): attention je vais devenir ironique.”
