superb dramatic performances and literary accomplishments; these include *Mirtilla* (1588), the first pastoral play to be written by a woman, which by 1620 had been reprinted nine times. Margherita Costa is ‘the most “Baroque” of seventeenth-century Italian women writers’ and among a few to include humour in her poetry (113). The early poetry of the self-educated Virginia Bazzani Cavazzoni is in the Baroque style and “compares favorably with that of most seventeenth-century Italian poets” (49); her later work was influenced by the Arcadian school, which abandoned Baroque excess in favour of a simpler style and an interest in nature. The devotional and autobiographical poetry of Isabella Farnese, convent founder, reformer, and spiritualist, was circulated in the salons of devout noblewomen and was “included in the libraries of most monastic orders” (146). Margherita Sarrocchi’s heroic epic *La Scanderbeide: Poema heroico*, which is modelled on Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* and was published presumably without Sarrocchi’s knowledge in 1606, is the earliest example of the genre by a woman writer. Recounting the exploits of the fifteenth-century Albanian prince Skanderberg against the Ottoman sultanate, the poem is notable for its realistic depictions of military combat and the important social and political roles played by women. Francesca Turini Bufalini was the first Italian poet to produce works informed by extensive and precise autobiographical detail, anticipating “the Romantic tendency of personal confession” in an age that was seeking “marvelous new techniques to be applied to impersonal subjects” (271).

The three Appendices provide valuable surveys of anti-Baroque and other literary and theatrical traditions of the period: 1) the mid-seventeenth century reaction in poetic theory against the perceived aesthetic corruptions of the Baroque style, a reaction that led to the founding in 1609 of the Roman “Arcadian Academy,” which promoted rational principles, “buon gusto” (“good taste”), and clarity of linguistic expression; 2) the wide-ranging influence on the literature and theatre of the age of music and musical theory, including courtly and commercial opera, the narrative-dramatic form of the oratorio, and local traditions and practices; and 3) the vitally important role of theatre and spectacle, which “permeated all aspects” of society (294).

The volume is an essential resource for anyone studying or working in seventeenth-century Italian literature and culture.

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After the recent edited collection of essays on Vincenzo Cerami published in 2004 (*Vincenzo Cerami: le récit et la scène*, Louvain, Presses universitaires de Louvain) Beatrice Barbalato returns to Cerami, with a thorough study on his theatrical production.
While Vincenzo Cerami is known to the non-experts for his literary debut novel *Un Borghese piccolo piccolo* (1976)—later adapted in the famous film by Monicelli starring Alberto Sordi—and for the fruitful collaboration with Roberto Benigni in the screenplay of *La vita è bella*, in this book Barbalato offers the first theoretical study of Cerami’s mostly unpublished theatrical works. *Sisifo felice*, an image taken from Albert Camus, embodies Cerami himself as a happy Sisyphus, obstinate against absurdity and heroic in his continued search for new artistic forms of expression: “Vincenzo Cerami, adotta prospettive e linguaggi diversi per interpretare e reinterpretare caparbiamente il mondo in cui viviamo.”(11)

The eight chapters are supported by a rich array of critical theory including authors like Starobinski, Panofsky, Benjamin, Propp, Deleuze, Foucault, and philosophers, ranging from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer.

Chapter one (“Il ruolo del faire valoir nella pièce *Il comico e la spalla*—la dialettica servo-padrone”) shows how Cerami subverts the master/servant relation, traditional in theatre, to free the “spalla” or sidekick from its subaltern position. While in Pirandello the mask is the imposition required by society to be in the *gioco delle parti*, Cerami: “si limita a registrare le manifestazioni fenomenologiche di uomini che per antonomasia sono delle maschere.”(20)

Chapter two (“Dal testo dell’*Hamlet* di Shakespeare a *L’assassinio di Gonzago* di Cerami”) and three (“Il teatro e la malinconia. Il gioco dei ruoli come terapia dell’ipocondria ne *L’amore delle tre melarance*, dal Cenzullo di Giambattista Basile al Principe di Vincenzo Cerami”) deal with Cerami’s adaptations of famous theatrical pieces. *L’assassinio di Gonzago* adapts and transforms the pantomime in Act III, Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *L’amore delle tre melarance*, revisits Basile and Carlo Gozzi and draws on the acting experience of nineteenth-century Neapolitan *capo-comico* actor/improviser Antonio Petito. Cerami does not precisely create a parody of Shakespeare but alternates a serious and facetious tone, where the actors are shown striving to overcome the duplicitous role of “essere e apparire” because “l’apparire è l’unica evidenza e strumento di comprensione possibile.”(50)

In Cerami’s pièce Hamlet is freed from his gloomy introverted side; the main story and the pantomime, being and appearing, are made one. In this way Cerami, similarly to Carmelo Bene, deconstructs the stereotypical nature of the character of Hamlet. In *L’amore delle tre melarance* taken from Gozzi’s eponymous theatrical fable, Cerami adopts the *teatro nel teatro* technique by including in the plot a theater company. Chapter four (“Dal cartesianesimo militante del romanzo di Sciascia, al film *Porte aperte*”) focuses on another form of adaptation, from novel to film. Cerami worked with Gianni Amelio in the screenplay of the film *Porte aperte* (1990), starring Gian Maria Volonté, based on Leonardo Sciascia’s eponymous novel (1987). The film shows the porosity of the justice system during fascist time, contrasted by the figure of the little judge. The “piccolo, grande giudice”—again a side figure like the “spalla” in the play *Il comico e la spalla*—takes up a key function in his pursuit of fair justice and truth against the tendency to “giustizia sommaria” of the fascist regime. Cerami stigmatizes the amoral, uncultured fascist society in contrast with culture as “unica possibilità che abbiamo per dare senso alla giustizia.” (107)
Chapter Five (“La maschera il volto, la fisiognomica”) discusses the topos of the double in short-stories from the collection *La Bella e la Bestia* (2002). These stories deal with the problem of physiognomics and identity. Barbalato considers these stories “racconti che negano totalmente la metamorfosi, la redenzione, tanto cara al pensiero occidentale.” (135) Chapter Six (“Lo scanzonato teatro di Cerami e la ritualizzazione della storia: dalle luci del varietà all’Oratorio”) accounts for the evolution in Cerami’s theatre from the style of the Neapolitan *varietà*, to the “azzeramento dell’intreccio” (157) and to the prevalence of music, in *Due cantate*, a piece that, following the lines of Stravinsky’s Oratorios, revisits the classical myths of Midas and Narcissus.

In Chapter Seven (“Lettere al metronomo: l’autobiografia come charade”), drawing on Lejeune and Starobinski, Barbalato examines *Lettere al metronomo* (2002) an unpublished monologue in letter form, where Cerami in first person poetry reflects on the autobiographical genre. For Barbalato this play is an “ironico omaggio a varie forme poetiche riconoscibili, in un libero e consapevole gioco di io multipli.”(180)

Chapter Eight (“La vita è bella. L’impero del desiderio: proiettare davanti a sé l’ideale”) discusses the award-winning film screenplayed by Cerami and Benigni, where Barbalato sees at play the law of desire as exploration of the dream that transcends the limits of reality. In this tragicomic film various genres intersect: theatre of the absurd, epic, fairy tale and Hoffmann short story. The vexed issue of *La vita è bella*’s negative reception among victims of the Shoah leads Barbalato to quote Cerami and Benigni themselves: “Nessun orrore può azzerare il desiderio di serenità e armonia” (211); and: “il film è una favola, nessun legame con la filologia del fascismo.” (215) Barbalato sees at play in *La vita è bella* the obvious and the obtuse in Roland Barthes’ terms. Quite central to the film is also the music of Nicola Piovani, who set to music other works by Cerami.

Throughout the book Barbalato accounts for Cerami’s acts of adaptation, transformation and contamination. The work of Cerami-Happy Sisyphus is an unrelenting effort to present always new communicative strategies for different genres and languages. *Sisifo felice* is rich and dense, at times elliptic, in its attempt to provide both basic information on the content of Cerami’s still unpublished pieces (synopsis of unpublished pieces and occasionally entire plays are included, as in the case of *L’assassinio di Gonzago*) and critical insight supported by theoretical and philosophical argumentation. Barbalato allows us to take a glance at the vast and varied dramatic production of a contemporary playwright and thinker who ranks among the most versatile in contemporary Italian culture.

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