LEONARDO’S PROFEZIA: MORAL WRITINGS OF A HYBRID KIND

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Summary. In the period 1490-99, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) wrote nearly three hundred literary writings that were later compiled by scholars into four primary collections: the Bestiario, Favole, Facezie, and Profezia. This article takes Leonardo's Profezia as its main subject in order to give due recognition to the generic nature of this collection. Specifically, it examines the texts in the Profezia as examples of mixed genre in an attempt to demonstrate how ethos, context, and generic convention yield to the greater moral statement made by Leonardo in the writings themselves. Unlike Leonardo’s other three literary collections, which subscribe to an easily identifiable literary genre, the Profezia texts are hybrid writings that enjoin its readers to consider instead why and how the mixture of forms might be a necessary means of expression to convey a truth and reality.

De’ metalli\(^1\). Uscirà delle oscure e tenebrose spelonche chi metterà tutta l’umana spezie in grandi affanni, pericoli e morte, a molti seguaci lor dopo molti affanni darà diletto, e chi non fia suo partigiano morrà con istento e calamità. Questo commetterà infiniti tradimenti, questo aumenterà e persuaderà li omimi tristi alli assassinamenti e latrocini e le servitii, questo terrà in sospetto i sua partigiani, questo torrà lo stato alle città libere, questo torrà la vita a molti, questo travaglierà li omimi infra lor co’ molte flalde, inganni e tradimenti. O animal mostruoso, quanto sare’ meglio per li omimi che tu ti tornassi nell’inferno! Per costui rimarran diserte le gran selve delle lor piante, per costui infiniti animali perdan la vita\(^2\).

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\(^1\) All solutions to Leonardo’s prophecies are indicated in italics.

\(^2\) Leonardo, Scritti, 118. All transcriptions in the present analysis are by Carlo Vecce. The following is an English translation of the above prophecy: “One will come from dark and gloomy caverns who will bring to the human race great troubles, dangers, and death. To many followers, after much trouble, he will give delight, and he who does not support him will die in poverty and disaster. He will be guilty of endless betrayals. He will increase the number of wicked men and induce them to be guilty of murder and robbery and enslavement. He will fill his supporters with misgivings. He will rob cities of their freedom, and men of their lives. He will cause trouble among men with many frauds, deceits, and betrayals. O monstrous being, how much better would it be for men if you were to go back to hell! Through him great forests will be stripped of their trees, and through him innumerable creatures will lose their lives. [Of metals.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 14).
Among the surviving manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci there lie fragmented and scattered writings such as the one cited above describing instances of foreboding terror, cruelty, injustice, and apocalyptic-like occurrences. These are Leonardo’s prophecies, which form part of his modest production of moral writings, and they comprise the formal collection known as the Profezia, titled as such not only for their obvious prophetic tone and imagery, but also, and perhaps more important, out of respect for Leonardo’s original designation for these writings. Leonardo wrote just over 170 prophecies, dating mostly from the period 1497 to 1499, during his final years under the patronage of the Duke of Milan.

3 Beginning with the earliest, the following is a list indicating the number and manuscript location of Leonardo’s prophecies: 41 are in manuscript I on four successive folios (63r-66v); 78, the largest group, are arranged in seven columns on the recto and verso of a single folio (370) in the codex Atlanticus and also include the fragment titled “Pronostico;” 12 longer prophecies are also found in the codex Atlanticus (f.393r) and appear adjacent to a plan outlining how these writings are to be organized; and a cluster of 15 are in the codex Arundel. As the above description shows, most of the Profezia were drafted in cohesive units. Those prophecies not included in the above-listed groups are found in the Forster II, K, L, W and Madrid I, II. Among others, these prophecies include reelaborations of earlier prophetic texts, the prophecy written in the form of a terzina, and two that Leonardo uses in his later codex on the flight of birds, Sul volo, to represent his flying machine.

4 The following writings comprise Leonardo’s literary production: the Bestiario, Favole, Facezie, Profezia, which are recognized as his main literary collections, and other short writings such as maxims, aphorisms, proverbs.

5 For over three centuries after his death in 1519, the greater part of Leonardo’s literary writings remained unpublished and neglected in the folios of his notebooks. It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that Jean Paul Richter, a pioneer scholar of Leonardo’s writings, undertook the monumental task of gathering the fragmented writings in the artist’s surviving manuscripts, organizing them according to subject matter, logical sequence and ideas, since he observed that Leonardo’s texts were distinct and defined enough “to construct a well-planned whole out of the scattered materials of [his] scientific system” (xv). Richter also translated these writings into English for the first time and published them alongside the Italian texts in his seminal two-volume work, The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci Compiled and Edited from the Original Manuscripts (1883). It was also Richter who originally divided the four literary collections into those known today as the Bestiario, Favole, Facezie, and Profezia.

6 The given title reflects a note written by Leonardo in his well-known codex Atlanticus: “Profezia di Lionardo da Vinci.” As such, the present study will refer to these writings as prophecies.
Ludovico Sforza, and with some also written in the years 1502-03, corresponding to his second period in Florence from 1500 to 1506. Similar to Leonardo’s other literary collections, namely, the Bestiario, Favole, and Facezie, the Profezia is believed to have been composed for court recitation and amusement.

Right at the outset, it is important to note that, despite their title, the texts comprising the Profezia are, in fact, indovinelli (“riddles”), for they describe a puzzling situation as a problem to be solved and are then followed or preceded by a solution (i.e., an explanation of the puzzle). The De’ metalli prophecy illustrates this point and so too does the following example: “Vedrassi forme e figure d’omini o d’animali che seguiranno essi animali e omni dovunche fugiranno: e tal fia il moto dell’un quant’è dell’altro, ma parrà cosa mirabile delle varie grandezze in che essi si trasmutano.”

To which the solution is man’s shadow: Dell’ombra che si move col l’omo. According to André Jolles, the riddle is “constituée par question et réponse.” From a formal standpoint, therefore, Leonardo’s Profezia are riddles due to their outward question-reply construction.

Few studies on the Profezia raise the issue of genre in regards to this collection. Leonardo scholars such as Carlo Vecce agree that it consists of texts structured as riddles: “[...] alcuni dei testi che Leonardo definì ‘profezie’: per la verità, sorta d’indovinelli.” Beyond this obvious recognition, however, little else is said about the Profezia’s genre status or the literary implications resulting from the unique form and content of these writings. There has even been reluctance to associate them, despite their outward riddle structure, with a specific literary tradition. This lacuna is heightened by the fact that Leonardo’s other literary collections, alongside which the prophecies are commonly analyzed, have been more productively considered as genres, and are nearly always connected to a literary precursor.

7 Leonardo worked primarily as an engineer at the duke’s court in Milan from 1482 to 1499. He left Milan in December 1499, when the city was under French siege, and returned to Florence for a short time.  
8 Leonardo, Scritti, 115. “Shapes and forms of men and animals will be seen, following those animals and men wherever they flee. And the movement of one will be like the movement of the other, but it will be marvellous how their size will change. [Of a man’s shadow which moves with him.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 10).  
9 In most of Leonardo’s prophecies, the solution is included, either immediately following the text or preceding it. In the above example, it precedes the text.  
10 André, Formes simples, 103.  
11 Leonardo, Scritti, 18.  
12 Beginning with the most recent, the following are some works that have con-
Reference to the ancient tradition of the *Physiologus* is commonplace in studies on Leonardo’s *Bestiario*, the Aesop fable, too, is referenced in works on his *Favole*; and Latin facetiae by Roman writers are accepted as the literary ancestors of his *Facezie*. With the *Profezia*, there seems to be an unspoken consensus to skirt the issue of genre altogether, a decision which has seen fewer scholarly contributions devoted to Leonardo’s collection of prophecies. Riddle scholars, too, are hesitant to call Leonardo’s prophecies proper riddles; in his comprehensive study on the early Italian riddle tradition, Michele De Filippis states that Leonardo “did not write any real riddles, but many of his ‘Prophecies’ possess true enigmatic qualities” (emphasis mine). More recently, Mark Bryant has observed that Leonardo simply wrote “enigmatic pronouncements.” Thus, while Leonardo’s prophecies are constructed as riddles and believed to possess enigmatic attributes typical of this literary genre, they are still deemed somewhat incomplete as riddles. Moreover, the *Profezia*’s generic ambiguity is compounded by the fact that Leonardo gave these texts the title “Profezia”—a telling decision—and that the texts themselves reveal recurrent elements typical of the tradition of prophecy: the use of verbs in the future tense (“vedrassi,” “sentirassi”); exclamations (“O quanti fien quelli che!,” “O quanti grandi edifizi fieno ruinati”); images of war and destruction (“ruine”); terrible sounds (“gran romori”); visions (e.g., the dream

13 The Greek *Physiologus* is a fundamental text in the history of the bestiary genre in Western culture and civilization. It is an allegorical description of animals, plants and precious stones.

14 Some noteworthy critical studies on Leonardo’s *Profezia* are Vecce’s “Leonardo e il gioco” (1993); Sara Benaim’s translation of Ernst Gombrich’s “Leonardo e i maghi: polemiche e rivalità” (1984); and Carlo Pedretti’s “Three Leonardo Riddles” (1977). Though insightful, these three studies do not sufficiently, if at all, treat the *Profezia*’s genre status.

15 De Filippis, “The Literary Riddle in Italy,” 4.

dle); and Biblical references (also the dream riddle). It would seem that

17 “Del sognare. Allì omini parrà vedere nel cielo nove ruine, parrà in quello levar-sì a volo e di quello fuggire con paura le flame che di lui discendano, sentiràn parlare lì animali di qualunche sorte il linguaggio umano, scorreranno immediate colla lor persona in diverse parte del mondo sanza moto, vedranno nelle tenebre grandissimi spendorì. O maraviglia delle umane spezie! Qual frenesia t’ha si condotto? Parlerai cogli animali di qualunche spezie, e quelli con teco, in linguaggio umano, vedrati cadere di grande alture sanza tuo danno, i torrenti t’ accompagnerranno e mister<n>t e col lor rapido corso, usera<i> car<nalm ente c>on madre e sorelle... <parl>erai colli a<nimali>... an di s<cienzia>... animi... le penne” (Leonardo, Scritti, 124). The last lines of this prophecy are detached from the regular text because only fragments of it are visible at either side of a tear in the manuscript folio. “It will seem to men that they see strange destruction in the sky. It will look as though flames fly up into the sky and flee in terror down from it. They will hear all kinds of creatures speaking in the language of men. In their bodies they will rush off into various parts of the world, without moving. They will see enormous splendours in the dark. O marvel of the human race, what delirium has brought you to this? You will talk with all kinds of creatures, and they will talk with you, in the language of men. You will see yourself falling from great heights without any harm, with torrents accompanying you in your fall. [Of dreaming]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 4). The fragmented line “You will have intercourse with your mother and your sisters” has been added and translated by Pedretti (Commentary, 279: 2).

18 A meaningful parallel could be drawn between Leonardo’s prophecy on dreaming, Del sognare, and the Biblical narrative about Daniel’s dream if, as Vecce has suggested, the item listed in the inventory of books as “Sogni di Daniello” is in fact E sogni di Daniel profeta and refers to the dream interpretation by Daniel in the Old Testament. Regrettably, Vecce does not elaborate upon his suggestion, other than to provide a possible book title. In his later work “Leonardo e il gioco,” in which he discusses the Profezia, he briefly mentions in a footnote that riddle dreams from the Bible are connected mostly to the tales of Joseph and Daniel (293). While Vecce draws attention to a very important influence on Leonardo’s prophecies (the Judaic tradition), he fails to connect his comment to a specific example from the Profezia. In the Book of Daniel, Daniel interprets the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as a foretelling of the destruction of all human kingdoms by divine means (2.1-49). According to the Biblical narrative, the Jewish prophet announces that the statue in the king’s dream represents the end of four empires on earth and the establishment of the kingdom of God. Daniel’s description of the fourth (and final) kingdom on earth is one of chaos, intermarriage, and instability; it is similar to the scenario described by Leonardo in his prophecy titled – perhaps not coincidentally – Del sognare (see above footnote). Similar to Daniel’s dream interpretation, Leonardo’s dream prophecy describes a humanity that has lost its sense of reason with beasts and
the ambiguity surrounding Leonardo’s prophecies disguised as riddles (or is it the other way around?) has led scholars to evade categorizing the Profezia according to genre. The Profezia, however, is a dynamic literary collection with a compelling moral message, and consideration of its generic nature may illuminate these qualities.

The absence of genre discussion around the Profezia can be explained by the simple fact that this collection does not fit neatly into a single genre category since it occupies a literary limbo of sorts or, to use a more eloquent phrase by Joseph Farrell, possesses a state of “generic indeterminacy.”19 The present study aims to open a discussion that begins to consider genre in regards to the Profezia, and, in doing so, to propose the Profezia as a collection of hybrid writings. At the same time, it will argue that the hybrid nature of this literary collection is, in fact, central to understanding its coherent and complex moral implications. So far, generic consideration has not been given to the Profezia, because, in truth, it cannot easily be done so. Although Leonardo’s prophecies possess a recognizable outward structure, their ethos gives rise to instances of contextual deviation and ideological splitting. The Profezia can and cannot be fixed to a rigid system of generic classification because its constituent parts—title, form, content, ideology, spatial and temporal attributes—are informed by and innately engaged with multiple circumstances.

Vecce’s suggestion that specific cultural and socio-political circumstances might have influenced Leonardo when he was writing his prophecies20 is a good starting point for a discussion on the generic nature of the Profezia, for it demonstrates that Leonardo’s application and conflation of generic elements are mandated by specific cultural-historical moments and purposes. In the Italian Renaissance court, there was an interest in riddles and similar word games. In his Libro del cortegiano (1528), Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) mentions that word puzzles were played at the

humans sharing a language (“sentiran parlare li animali di qualunche sorte il linguaggio umano”) and kin engaging in incestuous relations (“userai carnalmente con madre e sorelle”). Moreover, the destruction befalling the human race comes from an unseen source from above (a divine hand as Daniel foretold?). Though the inference may be tenuous, it could also be said that the mention of language and speech shared by both humans and animals recalls the famous tale of the Tower of Babel and thus calls to mind King Nebuchadnezzar from the Biblical account because he ruled the region of Babylon, of which Babel was a part. Could it be that Leonardo’s dream prophecy is a sort of paraphrase of the Biblical episode from the Old Testament?

court of Urbino, and, in chapter 9, Book 1, he relates an incident in which such diversion was enjoyed among members of the court. Nearly all scholars of Leonardo’s literary writings believe that the *Profezia* texts, too, were meant primarily for the enjoyment and laughter characterizing the late-Quattrocento and Cinquecento princely court. The following is a simple riddle that aptly demonstrates the entertainment value sought after at courts: “Felici fien quelli che presteranno orecchi le parole de’ morti. *Leggere le bone opere e osservarle.*” This prophecy is lighthearted and does not suggest condemnation, as many of Leonardo’s prophecies do. Moreover, the brief note immediately following the prophecy *Della fossa* reinforces the theory that Leonardo’s riddles were written primarily for oral recitation at the Duke’s court: “[D]illa in forma di frenesia o farnetico,

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21 In this example, the guests were presented with a riddling sonnet and asked to guess the meaning of the letter S on the pendant of the forehead of the signora Duchessa, the mistress of the court and one of the female interlocutors in the treatise. Examples of riddles are also found in the works of other well-known writers in the service of great Italian Renaissance princes: Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533) included some riddles in Canto 7 of the *Orlando furioso*; Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) inserted a riddle in the third day of his *Ragionamenti* (1534-36); and Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) is believed to have penned seven riddle couplets in 1507 for a specific occasion at the court in Urbino.

22 Leonardo, *Scritti*, 108. “Happy will they be who lend their ears to the words of the dead. [*Reading about their good works and noting them.*]” (Nichols, *Prophecies and Other Literary Writings*, 19).

23 “Saran molti occupati in esercizio a levar di quella cosa, che tanto cresce, quanto se ne leva, e quanto più vi se ne pone, più diminuisce” (Leonardo, *Scritti*, 113). “Many will be engaged in the business of taking away from that thing which grows as much as is taken from it. [*Of a ditch. Say it as though in a delirium or raving, as a madman.*]” (Nichols, *Prophecies and Other Literary Writings*, 9). This prophecy was already found in Luca Pacioli’s *De viribus quantitatis* (written between 1496 and 1508). Pacioli’s *De viribus quantitatis*, divided into three parts, contains a section titled “Documenti morali utilissimi comproverbi” in which he collects many Latin and vernacular riddles taken mostly from the popular tradition, but also from Antiquity (including the famous riddle of the Sphinx). The riddles in this part of Pacioli’s work might have intrigued Leonardo and inspired him to compose similar texts. Indeed, there is some overlapping in both collections. Leonardo and the Tuscan mathematician and friar Pacioli (1446/7-1517) were close friends and collaborators on many projects, especially in the years in which both men were employed in Milan and Pacioli began to write his treatise on mathematics and magic. Leonardo, therefore, would have been familiar with the content of Pacioli’s work.

24 Like Leonardo’s other literary writings, the *Favole* and *Facezie* were two collec-
This parenthetical instruction clearly refers to the delivery style of the text which mocks the frenzied and delirious manner in which these prophecies were most likely delivered in local piazzas; it also sheds some light on the title given to this collection. Traditionally, the Sforza family invited magicians and astrologers to participate in courtly activity with their fortunetelling games and premonitions. After the premature death of Ludovico’s wife Beatrice d’Este in 1497, an occurrence which darkened the mood at the duke’s court, there was even greater interest in the art of divination. The Profezia, thus, also responded to some
anxieties emanating from Ludovico’s court and its members.\textsuperscript{30}

Perhaps not coincidentally, the events and customs at Ludovico’s court coincided with an uncertain political future—brought upon by the 1494 invasion by the French King Charles VIII—for his Milanese dynasty, not to mention for the entire Italian peninsula. In fact, the dawn of the new century saw its share of prophets make apocalyptic predictions for the future because it looked so bleak.\textsuperscript{31} Because Leonardo’s prophecies were written mostly between 1497 and 1499, it could be said that they also reflected feelings of apprehension and political uncertainty regarding the future of both Milan and Italy. Much like the prophets of his own time, Leonardo might have been making some predictions of his own by giving the title \textit{Profezia} to his writings. This suggestion is further reinforced by the fact that Leonardo gives the heading “Pronostico” to a group of 78 prophecies.\textsuperscript{32} While the riddle provided a model for the structure of the \textit{Profezia} and was well adapted to courtly diversions and circumstances, the unstable

issues addressed in order of increasing significance and seriousness (“e riserva i gran casi inverso il fine, e deboli dal principio”). Unfortunately, Leonardo did not adhere to his proposed division. The English translation reads as follows: “How the prophecies can be divided. First things concerning rational creatures, second those concerning irrational creatures, third concerning plants, fourth ceremonies, fifth clothing, sixth circumstances or rather edicts or controversies, seventh circumstances which cannot occur in Nature, as for instance: ‘the more you take away from that thing, the more it grows’, placing the more important matters towards the end and the feeble ones at the beginning, and showing first the evils and then the punishments, eighth philosophical matters” (Nichols, \textit{Prophecies and Other Literary Writings}, 25).

\textsuperscript{30} Vecce, “Leonardo e il gioco,” 287.

\textsuperscript{31} Savonarola represented the highest expression of prophecy and prophetism in Italy during this time. See Donald Weinstein’s \textit{Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance} (1970); and Roberto Ridolfi’s \textit{Vita di Girolamo Savonarola} (1952). For an account of the Savonarolan movement: John Gagné’s translation of Stefano Dall’Aglio’s \textit{Savonarola and Savonarolism} (2010); and Lorenzo Polizzotto’s \textit{The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494-1545} (1994).

\textsuperscript{32} This is the heading Leonardo gives to a fragment written in the imperative as an editorial note to himself: “Metti per ordine e mesi e le cerimonie che s’usano, e così fa’ del giorno e della notte” (Leonardo, \textit{Scritti}, 111). “Put in order the months and the ceremonies which are observed, and so make day and night” (Nichols, \textit{Prophecies and Other Literary Writings}, 25). Anthologists of Leonardo’s literary writings have speculated that it is a note for a more elaborate plan to organize the rendering of the prophecies. However, the prophecies surrounding the note do not reflect the plan.
socio-political climate of Leonardo’s times creates the need for their apocalyptic, futuristic and prophetic tone and content. The above description of his immediate and peripheral contexts suggests that Leonardo indeed fused aspects from the riddle genre and the current tendency towards oral prophesying to actualize and energize unique and hybrid literary forms as deliberate responses to multiple situations.

A working definition of the riddle was first given by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: “the very idea of a riddle is to describe a given object by means of a string of absurdities, a thing that cannot of course be done by any combination of the proper terms, but can be done if you combine the corresponding metaphors” (22.1458a). The essence of the riddle eludes the listener to the extent that, whatever the riddle may be describing, is understood as being removed from an existing and perceived reality. Subsequent definitions for the riddle have not deviated greatly from Aristotle’s and have, in fact, retained the idea that the riddle is an expression of figurative language because it draws parallels between two entirely different objects (or concepts, when the riddle is more literary and abstract). Because it aims to perplex the listener (bewilderment is, in fact, a specific effect caused by enigmatic writings such as the riddle), it cannot use familiar and common words to describe its object; it must thus communicate metaphorically. The rhetorical tool of metaphor enables the riddler to distance the described object from a familiar reality and deceive the riddlee by exploiting the resemblance to another unrelated object. Eleanor Cook calls this a “closed or hidden simile”[33] wherein the riddle conceals a likeness between two different objects.[34] The mystery that is to be solved by the riddlee is the element that completes the riddle and provides the literal counterpart to this figurative component. Indeed, a riddle is no longer a riddle when there is no mystery to be solved. The interplay between riddle description and reply accounts for the riddle’s underlying dual structure. Though the riddle is shrouded in obscurity and ambiguity because it uses figurative language to describe its object, it is offset by clarity when the correct solution is offered: “they [riddles] are always associated with the transition from the state of obscurity to the state of enlightenment.”[35]

At the core of Leonardo’s prophecies there is no doubt an analogous effort to create perplexity through metaphoric language and the unlikely

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[34] This is in contrast to the simile which explicitly asserts the likeness between two differing objects.
associations between objects. There is simple metaphor in the prophecy in which Leonardo compares the opening of an oven to that of the human mouth: “E que’ che si imboccheranno per l’altrui mani fia lor tolto il cibo di bocca. Il forno.” The metaphor is not particularly difficult to understand given the rather obvious physical affinity between the opening of an oven and the human mouth; thus, the analogy here is somewhat elementary. The prophecy, “De’ libri che insegnano precetti,” might be seen as slightly more inventive and challenging for the solver: “I corpi sanz’anima ci daranno con lor sentenzie precetti utili al ben morire.” The subject matter here is more abstract—and thus more demanding for the riddlee—than the more concrete solution in the oven example. The subject of the sentence “i corpi sanz’anima” is a metaphor for the parchment from animals used to write on.

The variation in tone in the Profezia sometimes yields more unlikely metaphors from the ones identified above, with the resulting thought that Leonardo is responding to something more than demands for lighthearted courtly riddles. The tone is more dramatic and the metaphors become more elaborate and complex when, for example, Leonardo employs exaggeration in his riddles for rhetorical effect. Leonardo shocks his readers or listeners with outwardly alarming scenarios and menacing images only to surprise them with otherwise innocent and mundane solutions. The prophecy about the tedious chore of making a bed invokes alarm upon a first reading: “De’ battere il letto per rifarlo. Verranno li ominin in tanta ingratri tudine, che chi darà loro albergo sanza alcun prezzo, sarà carico di bastonate in modo che gran parte delle interiora si spiccheranno dal loco loro e s’andranno rivoltando pel suo corpo.” The shock derives from the fact that Leonardo gives the impression that ungrateful men will brutally

36 It should be noted, however, that this confused state is not relevant for the reader—as opposed to the listener—of the Profezia because almost all the solutions either immediately precede or follow the written texts. There is no element of suspense or obscurity when the texts are read in their entirety.
37 Leonardo, Scritti, 110. “And those who are fed by others’ hands will have the food taken out of their mouths. [Of an oven.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 21).
38 Leonardo, Scritti, 113. “Bodies without souls will, with their judgements, give us rules teaching us how to die well. [Of books which teach rules.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 8).
39 Leonardo, Scritti, 116. “Men will come to be so ungrateful that they will load with blows the one who houses them without charge, to such an extent that much of his inside will be displaced and will go twisting about throughout the body. [Of beating the bed to remake it.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 12).
beat those who have provided comfort (“chi darà loro albergo sanza alcun
prezzo, sarà carico di bastonate”), while, in truth, he tricks the solver with
the relative pronoun “chi” in order to humanize an inanimate object such
as a bed. In the following prophecy, Leonardo demonstrates quite well that
the scene in a riddle “often has suggestive connotations:” 40 “Sentirassi le
dolente grida, le alte strida, le rau<ch>e e infiocate voce di quel che fieno
con tormento ispogliati al fine lasciati ignudi e sanza moto: e questo fia
causa del motore che tutto volge.” 41 To which the solution is Il filatoio da
seta. Leonardo has personified the simple act of silk-spinning to express the
metaphor of torment and suffering. The following prophecy also evokes a
disturbing image: “Le lingue de’ porci e vitelle nelle budella. O cosa spurca,
che si vedrà l’uno animale aver la lingua in culo all’altro!” 42 Seen in this
light, sausages assume a different property from the one with which they
are normally associated in everyday life. Indeed, the common practice of
butchering animals for food is intentionally overstated, as is also done in
the following prophecy: “Delle cose che si mangiano, che prima s’uccidano.
Sarà morto da loro il lor nutritore, e fragellato con dispietata morte.” 43 And
another example: “Delle pecore, vacche, capre e simili. A innumerabili saran
tolti e loro piccoli figlioli, e quelli scannati e crudelissimamente squar-
tati.” 44 Not only do these prophecies revile human cruelty, but they dra-
matize human behaviour as immoral and bestial. Leonardo clearly expresses
his hostility to man’s ill-treatment and killing of animals.

The realm of simple metaphor has experienced a textual and philo-
sophical intrusion that has given way to the leitmotive of human paradox.
Leonardo has moved beyond superficial requisites to engage with another
set of conditions and impetuses that are clearly connected to personal con-
viction and observation. Not only does this accord more complexity and depth to the collection, but, as shall be shown below, it also gives rise to the generic intersection characterizing the Profezia. Leonardo sees paradox in religious rituals such as the adoration of paintings of saints: “Delle piture ne’ santi adorati. Parleranno li omini alli omini che non sentiranno; aran gli <occhi> aperti e non vedranno, parleranno a quelli e non fie lor risposto, chiederan grazie a chi arà orecchi e non ode, faran lume a chi è orbo, parlerai a’ sordi con gran <rom o>re.”45 Leonardo not only highlights the vain attempts to provide light for those who cannot see (“a chi è orbo”) and to speak to those who cannot hear (“a’ sordi”), but also the foolishness exhibited in ritualistic human behaviour in the name of religion. In general terms, the irony lies in the illogical nature of such an act; specifically, it speaks in opposition to the cult of idols. Leonardo also criticizes the sale of indulgences, a common practice in the Roman Catholic faith: “De’ frati che spendendo parole ricevano di gran ricchezze e danno il paradiso. Vedrassi grandissima turba, i quali acquisteran grandissime ricchezze con prezzo d’invisibile monete. L e invisibile monete faran trionfare molti spenditori di quelle.”46 The common belief was that the religious surrender wealth and take oaths of poverty, returning to the fundamental principles of Christianity, especially propounded by St. Francis. By way of irony, Leonardo reverses this to reveal the reality behind the appearance. Indeed, irony is the most persuasive rhetorical tool that enables Leonardo to represent multiple voices in the Profezia. Through irony, Leonardo deals with the hidden reality of deceiving appearances, and criticizes the contradictions and falsehood that he observed in his lifetime. In a similar vein, the following prophecy exhibits irony while underscoring the hypocrisy about the way of life of friars and about church and clergy customs in general: “Delle chiese e abitazion de’ frati. Assai saranno che lasceranno li esercizi e le fatiche, povertà di vita e di roba, e andranno abitare nelle ricchezze e tri-

45 Leonardo, Scritti, 115. “Men will speak to men who cannot hear them; their eyes will be open, but they will not see. They will speak to them and not be answered. They will beg favours of those who have ears but will not hear. They will put light in front of those who are blind. [Of pictures of venerated saints].” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 10).

46 Leonardo, Scritti, 121. “Invisible coins will lead to the triumph of many who spend them. [Of friars who, by spending words, receive great riches, and give Paradise].” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 17).

47 Other Leonardo scholars (Fumagalli, Caramello, and Vecce among others) have noted, in passing, the irony in the Profezia. The present analysis elaborates upon their observations.
onfanti edifizi, mostrando questo esser il mezzo di farsi amico a Dio.”

Under normal circumstances, such opinions would be polemical. Irony, however, affords Leonardo the occasion to be honest and controversial without implicating himself, all the while unveiling without revealing much about his own attitude: “[W]henever a reader is not sure what the author’s attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire.”

A climactic finale to the above prophecies and their messages is embodied in the prophecy Della crudeltà dell’omo, whose prediction of the future does not bode well for the human race. Not only cruelty towards other living beings, but also immoral behaviour will give rise to a tragic end for humankind:

Vedrassi animali sopra della terra, i quali sempre combatteranno infra loro e con danni grandissimi e spesso morte di ciascuna della parte. Questi non aran termine nelle lor malignità; per le fiere membra di questi verranno a terra gran parte delle alberi delle gran selve dell’universo; e poi ch’è saran pasciuti, il nutrimento de’ lor desideri sarà di dar morte e affanno e fatichè e paura e fuga a qualunche cosa animata. E per la loro ismisurata superbia questi si vorranno levare inverso il cielo, ma la soperchia gravezza delle lor membra gli terrà in basso. Nulla cosa resterà sopra la terra, o sotto la terra e l’acqua, che non sia perseguitata, rimossa e guasta; e quella dell’un paese rimossa nell’altro; e ‘l corpo di questi si farà sepoltura e transito di tutti i già da lor morti corpi animati. O mondo, come non t’apri, e precipita nell’alte fessure de’ tua gran baratri e spelonche, e non mostrare più al cielo si crudele e dispietato monstro!

48 Leonardo, Scritti, 119. “There will be many who will leave their duties and labours and their poverty of life and possessions, and will go to live in wealth and triumphant buildings, showing that this is the way to become a friend of God. [Of the churches and dwellings of friars.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 15). It is quite apparent that much of the disapproval expressed by Leonardo reflects that of many Italian church reformers, who began their attempt to reform the Catholic Church because of the above false practices criticized by the artist.

49 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 223.

50 Leonardo, Scritti, 120. “Creatures will be seen upon the earth who will always fight amongst themselves, with very great harm, and even death, on all sides. There will be no end to their wickedness. Through their violent actions many trees from great forests of the world will be stricken down. And since they must be fed, their desire for nourishment will bring death and trouble and toil and fear and flight to all living beings. Through their boundless pride they will want to raise themselves to heaven, but the extreme weight of their limbs will keep
Leonardo evokes an image that offers little hope for salvation, despite desperate efforts by humanity to save itself: “[...] questi si vorranno levare inverso il cielo, ma la soperchia gravezza delle lor membra gli terrà in basso.” Human materialism and immorality, conveyed in “la soperchia gravezza delle lor membra,” are impediments to moral and spiritual elevation (“gli terrà in basso”). The human race has condemned itself to an earthly inferno. Leonardo’s depiction describes human life on earth as immoral, ruthless, and cowardly, making it quite clear that the human race will receive a sentence commensurate with its moral corruption. There are other prophecies conveying a similar message. Vecce, in fact, identifies three others in addition to the one cited above—De’ metalli, Della dote delle fanciulle, and Del navigare—as being not only the longest among the them on the earth. There will be nothing on earth, or under earth or water, which will not be persecuted, removed, or ruined, or taken from its own land to another. And the bodies of these creatures will be a tomb and the way through which all the dead bodies of living beings must pass. O Earth, why do you not split open? And why do you not hurl into your huge gaping cavernous abysses, and hide from the light of the sky such cruel and merciless monsters? [Of man’s cruelty.”] (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 16).

51 The prophecy De’ metalli was cited on the first page of the present study; Della dote delle fanciulle. “E dove prima la gioventù femminina non si potea difendere dalla lussuria e rapina de’ maschi, né per guardie di parenti, né per fortezze di mura, verrà tempo che bisognerà che padri e parenti d’esse fanciulle paghin di gran prezzi chi voglia dormire con loro, ancora che esse sien ricche, nobili e bellissime. Certo e’ par qui che la natura voglia spegnere la umana spezie, come cosa inutile al mondo e guastatrice di tutte le cose create” (Leonardo, Scritti, 120). “And where previously young women could not be defended against the lust and plunder of men, either by the custody of relatives, or by walled fortresses, the time will come when the fathers and relatives of these girls will have to pay a great price to those who wish to sleep with them, even if the girls are rich, noble, and very beautiful. This certainly makes it seem that Nature wishes to extinguish the human race, because it serves no useful purpose in the world and spoils all created things. [Of girls’ dowries.”] (Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 16); Del navigare. “Vedrassi li alberi delle gran selve di Taurus e di Sinai, A pennino e Talas scorrere per l’aria da oriente a occidente, da aquilone a meridie, e portarne per l’aria gran moltitudine d’umini. O quanti voti, o quanti morti, o quanta separazion d’amici e di parenti, o quanti fien quelli che rivederanno più le lor provincie, né le lor patrie, e che morran sanza sepoltura, colle loro ossa sparse in diversi siti del mondo!” (ibidem). “Tress from the great forests of Taurus and Sinai, the Appennines and Talas will be seen to glide through the air from east to west, from north to south, and take with them through the air a great multitude of men. Oh how many vows, oh how many dead people, oh
Profezia but also as expressing the most acute criticism about the current human condition: “appaiono portatrici di messaggi diversi dalla pura e semplice parodia.”52

It is indeed difficult to ignore Leonardo's overstated metaphors as allusions to a greater and more complex statement, that is, to a message that moves well beyond the conventions and expectations of court divertissement to become a compelling collection of moral writings with a profound message. In connection to Vecce's above observation, Giovanni Ponte believes that the Profezia is a reflection of a more mature and cynical Leonardo,53 given that they chronologically follow the compilation of the Bestiario, Favole, and Facezie. Without doubt, Leonardo's cynicism, baring itself by way of irony, is a pervasive element in his prophecy texts. Leonardo might have selected the title “profezia” not only to parody the prophets of his time and to abide by codes for courtly entertainment, but also to present his own feelings about the hypocritical and hopelessly irreparable moral behaviour and socio-political situations he observed around him at that time.

The political turmoil that coloured the Italian peninsula in the final two decades of the Quattrocento was indeed taken by many (especially by prophets and preachers) as an occasion for a moral conversion.54 Almost all the prophetic themes from the end of the Quattrocento were in response to this socio-political context and, although prophets and preachers imagined the advent of a new age in different forms and manners, they all foretold of a new human destiny that would follow some catastrophic event (flood, war, fire).55 In this regard, Vecce believes that the title “profezia” is

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53 Ponte, Leonardo prosatore, 91.
54 Not only did this period in Italian history witness many people, the masses and intellectuals alike, anticipating a spiritually renewed era, which they hoped would bring greater harmony in human society, but also many prophets made the approaching rejuvenation the subject of their prophetic pronouncements: “L'esigenza che il mondo cristiano sia riscattato alla sua purezza originaria, che gli uomini vivano una nuova èra di Concordia e di pace, è certo il motivo più costante di tutte le profezie dotte e popolari” (Vasoli, Studi sulla cultura del Rinascimento, 181).
55 In 1489, for example, Savonarola preached that it was God's will to deliver destruction upon Italy before a moral reformation could occur on the peninsula: “innanzia a questa renovazione Dio darebbe un grande flagello a tutta la Italia” (Compendio di rivelazioni, 9).
Leonardo’s *Profezia*: Moral Writings of a Hybrid Kind

in the singular because each text was meant to be read consecutively in order to suggest a single great prophetic vision.\(^{56}\) Seen in this light, Leonardo’s prophecies, too, captured the fervour and anxiety caused by the onslaught of socio-political events. Vecce’s theory is reinforced by the fact that, for his prophecies, Leonardo devised a list of sub-divisions where the eighth item was the lofty subject matter of philosophy (“Ottava delle cose filosofiche”).\(^{57}\) Not only does this list suggest the first steps for an eventual literary publication, but it is also evidence that Leonardo wrote prophecies with deliberate themes to be illustrated and developed. It is thus quite possible that those prophecies dealing with “cose filosofiche” were intended to carry moral weight and reflection and were strongly motivated by personal ethos.

Vecce’s view follows on the heels of Ernst Gombrich’s interpretation of the correspondences he sees between the *Profezia*, Leonardo’s imaginary letter “Al Diodario di Soria” (written in 1508 in Leonardo’s codex *Atlanticus*), in which he addresses a fictional governor of Syria and describes the Taurus Mountains (“Monte Tauro”), and his series of flood writings known as “I diluvii” (composed in the period 1513-15 in the codex *Atlanticus* and in the manuscripts *A*, *G*, and *W*).\(^{58}\) According to Gombrich, “I diluvii,” the letter, and the *Profezia* can be linked for the following three reasons: 1) they describe ruinous effects inflicted on human beings; 2) their tone is unmistakably apocalyptic; and 3) their proximity in the same manuscript, the codex *Atlanticus*.\(^{59}\) The parallels between all three writings are such that Gombrich believes that they were meant to coexist in a single fictional work in which Leonardo prophesies an ominous future for the human race.\(^{60}\) As Gombrich demonstrates, the *Profezia* and letter

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57 See above footnote for the entire list. Leonardo probably intended to order his prophecies according to themes, with those bearing philosophical nuances reserved for the end.
58 The former is a fictionalized account of a mission assigned to Leonardo in Armenia wherein he describes “Monte Tauro,” a mountain in the Levant, and the disastrous effects of a recent flood on the community living at the base of the mountain, while the latter describes the devastation caused by heavy rainstorms and the despair of the people affected by the flood.
60 To begin, Gombrich sees two parallels between the *Profezia* and the letter. First, proximity in the manuscripts supports this theory: the recto of f.393 in the codex *Atlanticus* contains the group of twelve prophecies with the “Divisione della profezia,” while the verso includes the letter “Al Diodario di Soria” with the detailed description of the Taurus Mountains, and the unexpected turn of events
“Al Diodario di Soria” are comprised of parts that, once studied individually and then constructed with others to create a possible cohesive reality, point towards a greater goal to conceive a work containing a “prophecy” based on observed facts of nature’s effect on the human world and vice versa. The text titled “I diluvii” describes the tragedy awaiting humankind which, in varying degrees, is also manifest in the Profezia and letter “Al Diodario di Soria.” While the texts of the Profezia represent seemingly trivial human acts that can equally inform human fate, and the letter alludes

caused by the flood. Second, both the recto and verso of the folio include sketches of the Taurus Mountains, including, on the recto, a geographical map of the region. The writings and sketches found on both sides of the folio could indeed be parts of a larger whole—perhaps of a project comprising complementary fantastical and foreign elements (of the Orient) such as those described in the letter and prophecies. To further support his hypothesis, the letter is preceded by the “Divisione del libro” index which lists fifteen points that, presumably, are to be covered in a “book” about a natural disaster in the area where Leonardo has been assigned to work. It should be noted that the twelve prophecies, on the recto, were written alongside the “Divisione della profezia.” Among the fifteen points in the “Divisione del libro,” Leonardo develops only those concerned with the physical description of the Taurus Mountains and the damage caused by strong westerly winds, falling snow from atop the mountain, and a sudden surge of water that submerged the town. What is more, the three items not elaborated upon in any of the surviving Leonardo manuscripts would further reinforce an analogy with the Profezia. They read as follows: “Trovata del profeta,” “La profezia sua,” and “Come il novo profeta mostra di credere, questa ruina è fatta al suo proposito.” The only reference that Leonardo makes to these items can be found in a corresponding letter, believed to be the continuation of the one in question, on another folio (573v) in the codex Atlanticus. After the physical description of the Taurus Mountains, this part of the letter tells of the harm, injury and ruin brought on the community. There is disorder and fear among the people; the town is submerged in water, and there are uprooted trees, particles of sand and mud flying about, and pieces of plants and trees strewn throughout the air. The victims of this calamity are terrified and desperate and better off dead (“che avàm d’avere invidia a’ morti” Leonardo, Scritti, 171), according to Leonardo. This part of the letter, however, is a prelude to a greater and less merciful natural disaster. Indeed, Leonardo ends the passage with a forewarning that the destruction is minor in comparison to that which has already been foretold: “Ora vedi com’ ci troviamo, e <tu>tti questi mali son niente a comparazione di quelli che ’n breve tempo ci è promesso” (emphasis mine). This final sentence seems to refer to a previous prophecy about the ruin of the city by a natural disaster. Vecce seems to think so, for he inserts “dal profeta” at the end of “ci è promesso” to emphasize the idea of a pre-announced prophecy; Vecce can only speculate as to the identity of the prophet.
to a greater natural calamity, the flood writings depict a universal end culminating in a flood of Biblical proportions. In essence, the relationship between the three writings is constituted by their interdependence. They suggest a sequential narration of episodes leading to a single—and final—vision (i.e. the deadly flood). Thus, while it is possible to read and treat individual prophecies as simple puzzles to be solved, the Profezia assumes fuller meaning if it is interpreted as a holistic expression of Leonardo’s single vision of humankind. Even if Leonardo might never have intended to merge all three writings into a single work, he has left behind evidence demonstrating that he contemplated the present condition of his society and entertained ideas regarding the future of humanity, whether in a literary work or in a painting. The fact remains that “I diluvii” writings and the letter “Al Diodario di Soria” not only supplement the meaning emanating from the Profezia, but they also reinforce the moral message of this literary collection.

Those examples of prophecies that speak volumes about problematic human behaviour determine the overall serious tone of the texts in the Profezia and are the most rhetorically effective. The fact that Leonardo framed his moral commentary within a prophetic context is not only reflective of the circumstances under which he wrote his prophecies, but also of Leonardo’s ability to be flexible with generic conventions—be they...

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61 In particular, there are two parts in the category of the flood writings—titled “Descrizione del diluvio” (Leonardo, *Scritti*, 175) and “Diluvio e sua dimostrazione in pittura” (177)—that emphasize their interrelatedness. In the former, Leonardo delights in describing the threatening movements of water instigated by a storm while the latter depicts a frenzied scene of the people—dead and alive—aﬀected by this natural disaster. These two flood writings are infused with a sense of ﬁnality and could be seen as the culmination of what Leonardo alludes to in the Profezia and the letter “Al Diodario di Soria.” Indeed, he paints a merciless picture of a natural calamity that foretells the fate awaiting humankind and against which the victims (i.e., human beings) are helpless. The storm has submersed the entire community under water and ripped families apart, killed children and animals, and even led some to take their own lives. Despite the compassion that such a scene might arouse in the reader, Leonardo, in “Diluvio e sua dimostrazione in pittura,” seems to express an opposing sentiment: “Altri, non bastando loro il chiuder li occhi, ma colle propie mani pone<do> quelle l’una sopra dell’altra, piú se li coprivano, per non vedere il crudele strazio fatto della umana spezie dall’ira di Dio” (Leonardo, *Scritti*, 177-78). While the scene may seem cruel, the natural disaster has been inﬂicted upon the people by God as a just punishment for their actions. And because God is just, the agony and terror experienced by the victims is not without good reason.
literary or not—and exploit situations for his own means and messages. The context in which Leonardo relates his prophecies—presumably at the Milanese court—would have no doubt necessitated a mechanism to diffuse much of the seriousness and implicit accusations contained within the riddles. The application of the riddle structure to the underlying message facilitates this expression by Leonardo, for the function performed by the riddle safeguards the critique conveyed in the prophecies.

The nature of the riddle implies power over the solver because only the riddler knows the mystery concealed behind the riddle text. Motivated by cultural and socio-political contexts, as the substance of the *Profezia* is, Leonardo uses this enigmatic quality of the riddle to bestow upon himself the authority to predict an ominous future for human society and to identify which human behaviours would contribute to such an end. The *Profezia*’s riddle construction acts as the catalyst for the ultimate prophetic message in the collection. Much like a prophet himself, Leonardo is privy to a greater truth that, instead, many are incapable of seeing, and that enables him to see beyond the mundane and accepted customs in human society, and to know the immorality and consequences attached to certain human actions. He, in fact, displays many “symbolic” characteristics of an individual possessing the gift of prophecy: exhortation, the ability to predict the future based on the function of the present, a degree of authority, discernment, and perception. As the riddler, Leonardo holds an analogous privileged position, for he is able to impart deeper knowledge to those who, in his view, are blind to the consequences of their actions. Recalled earlier, Borystswaski’s insightful definition of the riddle as a “transition from the state of obscurity to the state of enlightenment” lays bare the formation and completion of the riddle process. Once the riddle is solved, the solver experiences a sense of enlightenment and is faced with a solution that has

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62 It is not certain that Leonardo himself recited these prophecies at court. Somebody else might have been designated to read them on his behalf.

63 Robert L. Thomas, “Literary Genre and Hermeneutics of the Apocalypse,” 82-4. It should be noted that, though Leonardo displays similar characteristics of the religious prophet, he probably did not take the prophecies of Savonarola or other prophets of his time too seriously, because he could not possibly have agreed with their method of reasoning, which usually entailed an interpretation of celestial signs or of hidden messages in the Scriptures that were only visible to the select few chosen as the supposed voice of God. He must have preferred instead a prognosis based on concrete evidence. In fact, the *Profezia* includes a prophecy that does not speak highly of the “science of prophecy”: “De profezia. Tutti li strolagi saran castrati. Cioè i galletti” (Leonardo, *Scritti*, 121).
revealed a notion in a different light. Because Leonardo's descriptions of the solutions—be they inanimate objects, animals, concepts, or human acts—are generally moral in nature, the process from obscurity to enlightenment is a hoped-for instant of reflection upon unexamined behaviour aimed at altering it for a better and morally-correct human society. Though Leonardo holds the key at the beginning, he metaphorically hands it to his audience, thus bestowing on posterity the power to avoid the future that, in his Profezia, he seems to be prophesying for the human race.

Kathleen Jamieson Hall and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell have rightly argued that “[t]he generic critic is constantly battling the inclination to minimize the idiosyncrasies and magnify the commonalities.” This sort of critical application and approach to genre would greatly diminish the Profezia's significance and complexity. A generic analysis of the Profezia reveals that composite conceptual blending gives this literary collection its distinctive flavour. The composition of the Profezia texts can be reduced to a battle between two alternate goals, one diversional, the other philosophical. That is, the Profezia is an expression of the tension between Leonardo's courtly duties and his moral responsibility as a human being. These opposing goals give rise to a collection in which Leonardo engages in two separate discourses; yet, in enabling them to come together, Leonardo offers a single truthful picture of the world in which he lived. He participates in the activity of writing riddles for the court members to solve and enjoy, while simultaneously assuming responsibility for a far greater ideological cause and quietly inviting his readers to do so as well.

A generic study of the Profezia demonstrates how the blending of genre can meet multiple needs. In her work on genre theory in the Renaissance, Rosalie Colie notes that some Renaissance theorists believed that “everything utterable has its genre, and that a complex, large, inclusive utterance may require mixture of the kinds” (emphasis mine) even when the imitation of Classical and more reliable and unified literary models was encouraged. A hybrid text can indeed enjoin a reader to focus on the necessity of mixture as a means through which a complex statement must be made. Leonardo is not constrained by (or perhaps even concerned with) generic boundaries, as he transfers and combines cultural, historical, social, moral and personal priorities in the generic terms that were the most appropriate for and reflective of his reality.

In the case of the Profezia, the message regarding the human condition is alarmingly clear. Not only are human beings cruel to one another, but, as

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64 Jamieson and Campbell, “Rhetorical Hybrids,” 156.
the above prophecies describing animal slaughtering indicate, they also mis-
treat other living creatures, showing an overall disrespect for and indifference
towards life and nature. They are also foolish in their pursuit of unattainable
desires: “Delli omni che, quanto più invecchiano, più si fanno avari, che aven-
doci a star poco doverebbon farsi liberali. Vedrassì a quelli che son giudicati di
più sperienzia e giudizio, quanto egli hanno men bisogno delle cose, con più
avidità cercarle e riservare.”66 Leonardo has dissected the society of his day
and depicted the sense of absurdity and immorality pervading it. He views
the human condition for what it is and he envisions appropriate retribution
for humanity. Especially in the prophecies in which Leonardo adopts the dis-
course of irony, he shows great awareness of the discrepancy between actions
and results, between appearance and reality. The rhetoric of irony, in fact,
heightens the effect of the harsher and more direct criticisms in the collec-
tion, but also inevitably leads to a moral discourse, for it expresses the cyni-
cism of an individual who is aware of the world’s complexities and ambigu-
ities. Irony in the Profezia also functions as a rhetorical attempt to give shape
to an “unidealized existence,”67 for the endeavour itself is driven by an aware-
ness that, a reality which is morally superior to the current one can exist and
be realized. Moreover, the prophecies described as exaggerated and some-
times macabre emphasize the moral climate of this collection:

Delli asini bastonati. O natura instaccurata, perché ti se’ fatta parziale,
facendoti ai tua figli d’alcuni pietosa e benigna madre, ad altri crudelissima e
dispietata matrigna? Io veggo i tua figlioli esser dati in altrui
servitù sanza mai benifizio alcuno, e in loco di remunerazione de’ fatti
benifizzi, esser pagati di grandissimi martiri, e spender sempre la lor vita
in benifizio del suo malefattore.68

Though the ass was very commonly used to facilitate physical labour,

66 Leonardo, Scritti, 113. “It will be seen that those who are reputed to be expe-
rienced and judicious, the less need they have of things, the more greedily they
try to get them and keep them. [Of men who, the older they grow, the more miser-
ly they become, when – having only a little while to stay – they should be generous:]”
(Nichols, Prophecies and Other Literary Writings, 8).
67 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 223.
68 Leonardo, Scritti, 125. “O negligent Nature, why are you so biased, acting like
a merciful and benign mother to some of your sons, and to others like a cruel
and pitiless stepmother? I see your children delivered into slavery, with no ben-
efit to them, and instead of remuneration for the benefits they confer, being
repaid with severe sufferings, and always spending their lives for the benefit of
those who ill-treat them. [Of donkeys being beaten.]” (Nichols, Prophecies and
Other Literary Writings, 6).
Leonardo opts to stress the cruel and unjust fate of this animal, exacerbated by Nature’s cruelty and indifference.69 His description creates a scene of moral intensity, in particular through his invocation to nature and comparison of nature to a cruel stepmother rather than a gentle mother (“O natura instaccurata, perché ti se' fatta parziale, facendoti ai tua figli d’alunci pietosa e benigna madre, ad altri crudelissima e dispietata matrigna?”). Leonardo expresses definite convictions regarding the ill-treatment of asses (which should be taken as his overall opinion towards animals) as his choice of words and phrases in this prophecy suggest: “servitù,” “esser pagati di grandissimi martiri,” and “in benefizio del suo malefattore.” Metaphorically, the prophecy may represent menial human labourers, who, like the ass, are often abused and shown much social injustice by those who employ them. In both possible cases, Leonardo seems to be asking nature why the same moral laws are not applied to all living creatures, in particular when the harsh treatment, like the one above, is so evidently undeserved. Leonardo is underscoring the moral ambiguity pervading certain human actions and decisions, for it is unclear why some creatures are treated so poorly.

Certainly, the prophecy analyzed above, as well as many others in the collection, present a moral dilemma in which Leonardo has—either directly or indirectly—assumed a moral stance. The sensitivity he displays in some of his prophecies is evidence that it is imperative to live according to moral laws, rather than in indifference and relativism in the face of ethics, and to measure human behaviour against inflexible moral standards that are universal in nature. Unlike Savonarola the prophet, Leonardo, is not motivated by politics and makes no such pretences, but simply seems driven to prophesy in order to condemn immoral behaviour on the grounds that it is his duty as a human being to show moral responsibility for the greater good of humanity. Indeed, the Profezia are very deeply evocative of Leonardo’s personal beliefs and sensitivities and are no doubt intimately connected with his moral sense of what is right and wrong.70

69 In his biography of Leonardo in Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti, Giorgio Vasari briefly describes Leonardo’s sensitivity towards animals: “E non avendo egli, si può dir, nulla e poco lavorando, del continuo tenne servitori e cavalli, de’ quali si dilettò, e particularmente di tutti gli altri animali, i quali con grandissimo amore e pazienza sopportava e governava. E mostrollo che spesso passando da i luoghi dove si vendevano uccelli, di sua mano cavandoli di gabbia e pagatogli a chi li vendeva il prezzo che n’era chiesto, li lasciava in aria e volo, restituendoli la perduta libertà” (Vasari, Le vite, 546-47). It is also believed that Leonardo was a vegetarian.

70 This is true also of his Bestiario, Favole, and Facezie collections.
It is tempting to conclude with a return to the above theory advanced by Gombrich that the *Profezia* might have been intended for a larger project including the “I diluvii” writings and the letter “Al Diodario di Soria.” Were these three separate bodies of texts combined to represent a single work, the sequential order of events described in each would culminate in a final vision reminiscent of an apocalyptic scene, a prognosis very much in the style of those of fifteenth-century prophecy and prophets. Moreover, the final catastrophic vision depicted in “I diluvii” would suggest that the human behaviour described in the single texts of the *Profezia* leads to such an end, and that Leonardo himself has envisioned misfortune as an appropriate sentence for the actions of human beings. If human beings warrant such a tragic end, Leonardo is measuring humanity against very high ethical standards.

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WORKS CITED


