Leone de’ Sommi and Jewish Theatre in Renaissance Mantua

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Summary: This is a study of a Renaissance artist and his patrons, but with an added complication, insofar as Leone de’ Sommi, the gifted academician and playwright in the employ of the dukes of Mantua in the second half of the sixteenth century, was Jewish and a lifelong promoter and protector of his community. The article deals with the complex relationship between the court and the Jewish “università” concerning the drama and the way in which dramatic performances also became part of the political, judicial and social negotiations between the two parties, as well as a study of Leone’s role as playwright and negotiator during a period that was arguably one of the best of times for the Jews of Mantua.

The study of politics pertains both to the acquisition and the exercising of authority, as well as to the organizational processes that affect the relationships between interest groups. The study of literature pertains to texts, their organizations and meanings. Except that the exercising of authority often passes through the medium of texts with all that such a medium implies by way of shaping messages, while the production of texts is also a gesture or a strategy in the expressions of authority or in the negotiations between interest groups. In Renaissance Italy the political dimensions of cultural production seem particularly self-evident because of the court patronage system. In the city states of northern Italy during the sixteenth century, rulers often pursued aggressive policies as patrons of the arts, linking the prowess of their families and the prestige of their states, not only with trade and military might, but with the magnificence of their cultural achievements. Artistic endeavours took place in a context of competition as rulers sought to increase the splendour of their courts, and as artists vied for recognition and favour. Implicit in such a production system is an economy of artistic supply and demand. Bearing such circumstances in mind, the scholar, in studying these productions, might not only suspect but assume that they would reflect in their
matter and biases the political pressures inherent in the production system itself.

Reading the relations of power between patrons and artists can be a complex process insofar as authors are inclined to belie the terms of productions in their dedications, and patrons are disinclined to record their rationales for the processes of cultural selection. In spite of these limiting circumstances culture may nevertheless be read, may be constructed, in accordance with what we know of political systems of power and exchange. They are perhaps the only working models apt for coming to terms with the politics of artistic production. But if the study of the politics of culture is made problematic by the indeterminacies of power and influence – where demands must appear absolute, yet measure themselves to the temperaments and realities of supply, talent, and resources – it becomes potentially more problematic where cultural production is carried out by members of a minority community, one that depends for its security and privileges entirely upon the prince who is also the commanding patron in cultural affairs. In such circumstances if it becomes difficult to separate the artistic patronage system from the relationships between those interest groups in all other negotiated areas: religious, judicial and social. That is to say, cultural production must also be perceived as an element of negotiation, in a far larger sphere of organizational processes. Such was the case in Mantua where members of the Jewish community participated in the cultural life of the city, not as independent artists, but as members of a Jewish performing organization called upon to furnish, at their own cost, theatrical performances for carnival and for court festivities — essentially as a form of taxation whereby the community was made to bear substantial portions of the costs demanded by the state in its pursuit of a policy tantamount to cultural imperialism.

Such a contribution to the Mantuan state, even when viewed as a form of taxation, nevertheless embodied a two-way organizational process whereby the Jews could also conduct the transaction as a means for reclaiming power – for through their dutiful “payment” in the form of dramatic performances they had expectations of reward and protection. That is to say, the plays carried the identity of the service group – these were plays by “the Hebrews” – and they were offered under constraint; it is precisely these features that gave this form of cultural participation contractual value, even if nothing of an immediately material nature was contingent upon the productions. That the Jews were under command did not cancel the fact that they also had the control over the creation of the spectacle. Such productions then could be constructed on the one hand by the Jews as free and generous gifts,
and on the other by the princes as service to be repaid in the form of privileges for the artists and protection for the Jewish community. The emerging hypothesis is that both forms of construction were implicit in the presentation of the annual play by the Jews, namely an unflaltering response to ducal command in keeping with an established tradition, and the protection of the Jewish community as an artistic resource. Hence, in coming to terms with this Mantuan institution as a relation of power and service, we must allow for symbiosis, in that while the dukes had the power to command, the Jews also contributed to a tradition they took to be in their own interests, one that allowed certain of their members to gain considerable prestige, and one that may have been perceived by the università, or Jewish governing body, to be a valuable component in their search for community development and autonomy.

The hypothesis proposed is that the performances of the Jewish players were linked in material ways to the entire set of negotiations that defined official Judeo-Christian relations in the city. Yet nowhere do contemporary documents specify directly that the plays were employed as a negotiating tool, or even that they were perceived to be a form of taxation. The thesis must be advanced largely through arguments of circumstance, juxtaposition of events, and probabilities of an intuitive kind. Could the dukes be expected to separate in their minds the pleasures of the theatre from the animosities produced by trade rivalries between Christian and Jewish merchants and the need for protective policies for the Jewish populace? Or could the Jews, in producing the annual carnival play, forget that the dukes alone had the power to protect them from anti-Semitic rioting and papal decrees for the implementation of regulations that would curtail their economic growth and limit their civil liberties? These associations create circumstantial evidence suggesting that a kind of contaminatio of thinking would have taken place on both sides, and that the theatrical productions, as contributions by a visible minority, would figure in the power negotiations between the two groups.

It is pertinent that the most outstanding Jewish playwright of the period, a man whose career was in fact a product of this unique Mantuan theatrical arrangement, in the dedication of his last and only surviving Italian play, The Three Sisters, constructs the relationship between the prince and the playwright largely in terms of the patronage system wherein he sees himself as a humble servant who, out of pure devotion, offers his work to the prince. Vincenzo Gonzaga, in 1588, was still in his first year as duke, while Leone de’ Sommi, then about 61 or 62 years old, was within three or four years of the end of his long and distinguished career as playwright, choreographer,
producer, academician, diplomat, and benefactor to his community. His purpose in the dedication was to wish the duke long life and happiness, and to remind him that a performance of the play was forthcoming, presumably for the carnival season of 1589. That performance would involve the "universal participation" of his nation, a nation, he goes on to say, whose "only desire [was] to live under the grace of your Most Serene Highness."¹ In essence, De' Sommi promotes the play and its eventual performance as an offering of his entire community. In the language of dedications, it was a gentle reminder of the importance of his cultural transaction to the entire Jewish community. His conventional tone of subservience may also bear echoes of apprehension, not only for the duke's future, but for his own at the outset of a new administration. Vincenzo was no stranger to Leone, for even during his years as prince Vincenzo had been much involved in the promotion of dramatic events, an involvement that, as duke, he would turn into a series of projects that would prove almost financially fatal to the state. Leone had every reason to be concerned for the role the Jews might be compelled to play in the pursuit of such a policy. Thus in wishing good health to the new duke, Leone implies his continued willingness to serve, while in subtle ways he hints at loyalties of his nation meriting rewards.

Jewish cultural empowerment and participation in Mantuan court life was itself the result of the creation of a particular "moment" in cultural history. This moment was the combined product of the secularization of civil life during the Renaissance, the resources created by the pursuit of aggressive economic policies, and the competition among princes in artistic matters. The Mantuan Jews had arrived at unprecedented levels of mobility and self-determination under Guglielmo Gonzaga. He had followed a policy that included a full recognition of the advantages for the state in strengthening Jewish commercial and banking interests. With this stimulation came opportunities for the growth of Jewish culture, along with a climate conducive to Jewish participation in the cultural life of the city and court. Such an arrangement with the Jews gave a competitive edge to Mantua's cultural and economic cultural and economic ambitions. Under Guglielmo a balance was achieved through accorded privileges, repression of anti-Semitic hostilities, and heavy taxation—a balance whereby the Jews were allowed to prosper even though their contribution to the state was substantial. This is one set of terms, at least, for constructing the Judeo-Christian contract that both permitted and necessitated the full flowering of the Jewish theatrical tradition.

Mantua's encouragement of Jewish banking and manufacturing throughout the sixteenth century brought about a population growth from
about 200 in 1500 to some 1600 ninety years later. In 1511 the Jews were given their first charter confirming their banking and trade privileges; this charter also defined the community as a "università" or a kind of guild-of-the-whole. In due course this governing body developed its various major and minor council and specialized committees. Among those to appear was the comedy committee, a group of three community members responsible for the production and financing of the annual carnival play. It was to remain for many years a part of the università, answering to the court demands for performances by the Jewish players.

If the Jews were to thrive for such purposes, they had to be protected from papal legislation, unfair commercial competition, and popular repressions. In exchange for protection they were heavily taxed, but for their contribution to the economic and cultural prosperity of the state they were also often rewarded with greater cultural, religious, and judicial autonomy. Theatre was but one of the channels of power exchange in the general contract. As for integration, there were reticences and barriers on both sides. Such Christian institutions as the Accademia degli Invaghitì, the Mantuan academy, with very few exceptions, remained entirely closed to Jews, while within the Jewish community there was resistance to the new liberalization of policy that might create temptations to abandon Hebrew culture and to assimilate into Italian society. Throughout the period there were constant philosophical speculations concerning the self-identity of both Christians and Jews in relation to each other. A further study of these issues here would lead away from the matter at hand, but they are a part of the general transaction involving Jewish participation in Christian culture and the Christian reception of that contribution. Through and around the examination of the two politeiai there emerged a generation of Jewish players and artists who allowed themselves to participate in the two worlds, predicated, it is to be expected, on the belief that the interests of the Jewish nation could be most effectively served through a full participation in the cultural life of the Christian state.

This "moment" for the Jewish community under Guglielmo was surely one of the best of times for them. Yet even during these years the Jews could never forget the lingering threat of religious intolerance and papal menace. In 1555 Pope Paul IV had issued the bull cum nimis absurdam that sought to control usury and to outlaw clandestine marriages, namely those not performed by a priest before three witnesses after the publishing of banns — measures that could be employed against the Jews. Such pressures caused extensive emigration from the Papal States from mid-century onward; many of those who fled swelled the populations of the northern Italian cities. For
many years Guglielmo defied papal regulations, although certain compromises came into effect in 1576 after the arrival of an emissary sent by Gregory XII to insist upon the publicizing of the laws even if they were not to be strictly enforced. The Mantuan Jews could not have been indifferent to the fact that by 1571 Cosimo I had already imposed the ghetto upon the Jews of Florence and Siena, or that neighbouring Ferrara had placed so much pressure on the Marranos living there in 1581 that most of them moved on to Venice. Such selected examples serve to illustrate the stress that must have been part of the general consciousness of the Mantuan community throughout the period.

In fact, stressful situations did not arise only in neighbouring states. There were also conflicts between Christians and Jews in Mantuan territory, most of them arising over commercial competition and trade disputes. Other tensions arose over religious territoriality. When the Jesuits settled in the church of San Salvatore in the heart of the Jewish quarter, the Jews were obliged, in 1584, to pay the sum of 3,300 gold scudi to have them relocated – a sum insufficient to cover the costs of 35 dramatic productions at court by the Jewish players. Simonsohn, on a different score, points out that despite the open and liberalized ambience in Mantua during this period, carnival remained a time of anti-semitic rioting, confirming the fundamental “difference” that separated the two communities. These were occasions upon which the dukes were proud to display iron policies against civil disturbances, often going so far as to impose the death penalty upon the rioters – measures that might merely have exacerbated the antagonism. Such a response had its basis not only in the need for law-and-order, but also in the need to place economic interests ahead of popular beliefs about the conduct of the Jews at the time of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. These confrontations give more immediate evidence of the political overtones potentially attributed to every gesture of the Jewish community.

It is difficult to assess the degree to which such corresponding events affected the production and reception of the Jewish performances, or how those performances affected the rapport between the two communities. That these comedies might have united audiences and palliated subversive energies is an attractive thesis, but whatever these plays achieved in terms of the affective or cathartic, they nevertheless take on political dimensions in light of the ethnic tensions that must have at least partially conditioned their reception.

Archival documentation, though incomplete, permits a degree of informed speculation about the origins of the Jewish players and their contribution to Mantuan culture. We can only surmise just how and when the idea
of the annual play became part of official court policy. The first performance on record by Jewish actors outside their own community took place in Pesaro in 1489. It was a Judith and Holofernes offered at the wedding of Maddalena Gonzaga and Duke Francisco Maria of Urbino.\textsuperscript{10} The fact of the performance by Jewish players already says much about their theatrical interests and capacities, although the inappropriateness of the subject may mean, equally, that it was merely a convenient adaptation of a work already in repertory for performance within the Jewish community. In 1520 the Jews were requested to play for another festive occasion, the accession of Marchese Federico Gonzaga. We may only presume that during the intervening 31 years the Jews had performed in unrecorded circumstances. A letter by the court secretary of Mantua written in 1525 not only confirms a performance by the Jews in that year, but also that the costs of the production were borne by the università.\textsuperscript{11} The letter does not say that this was the first time for such an arrangement, but it fixes a date after which the practice could become tradition. In much the same way that the expertise and proficiency in theatrical matters developed by the Jews created an exploitable resource in cultural terms, the play as a form of taxation became an exploitable resource for the dukes in financial terms. There were, of course, limitations on such demands determined by what the Jews could reasonably afford both in terms of manpower and in terms of resources. The productions for the court were particularly costly. An average play involved about 500 participants and cost 100 gold scudi. But costs often went higher. In 1598 De’ Sommi’s \textit{The Three Sisters} was performed under the direction of Abraham Sarfati with the aid of several assistants. The Jews had been assessed for the entire cost of the duke’s celebrations through a tax levied upon the community, including the equivalent of 250 gold scudi for the play. These taxes were clearly an added burden, but it was understood by the Gonzagas that such sums could not be supplied unless the commercial prosperity of the community was also maintained. There seems to have been a working formula by which cultural production was directly attached to commercial empowerment, and in this implicit formula we may have one of the most direct ties between cultural production and political negotiations. Theatre and financial opportunities were part of a continually renegotiated social and economic contract.

There were political overtones of a different nature in the groupings of the plays for performance during carnival as well as at court. Often plays were presented in pairs, which, for the Jews, meant staging their plays in juxtaposition to plays by the professional \textit{commedia dell’arte} as they travelled through the region. Because the approbation of the dukes was critical to the
well-being of the players, and, by extension, to the well-being of the entire Jewish community which they represented, they must have felt the competition to a special degree, simply because plays performed together automatically offer themselves for comparison and judgement. It should be stressed that the Jews were not singled out for participation in this kind of format, for the professional troupes were also pitted against each other. The earliest date to which this practice can be assigned, where the Jews were concerned, was 1549, when, for the wedding of Duke Francesco and Caterina, one play was provided by "gli Hebrei," and a second by the "recitanti." Fascinating insights would arise from a close parallel study of Jewish and commedia dell'arte productions in consideration of the way in which pairing which might have contributed to the artistic definition of each group, but the paucity of texts, scenarios and related documentation makes such comparisons impossible. Speculation suggests that these mirror performances might have brought in more contrasting styles – the Jewish troupe working essentially in the erudite tradition with written texts and formal conventions, the commedia dell'arte players concentrating on their masks, on their improvisatory acting style, and on their repertoire of lazzis. Yet such pairings might equally have produced sidelong glances leading to appropriations from each other in the area of acting styles, plot elements, practical jokes, language, and the use of the acting space. Both were vying for courtly favour and there can be little doubt that the dukes proposed just such tandem spectacles as an incentive to more exciting and polished performances.

The troupe of Alberto Ganassa played often in Mantua, and it should be mentioned that their performances were also paired with other dell'arte troupe plays, as they were for example in 1568. Vincenzo Gonzaga, before as well as after becoming duke, was greatly interesting in these players. The famous Gelosi were in Mantua as early as 1579 and in succeeding years played for the Mantuan carnival. Isabella Andreini so impressed Prince Vincenzo in 1586 that he accepted her daughter Livinia as his gold-child. If Leone de' Sommi's The Three Sisters was indeed performed for carnival during the 1589 season, it would have been in a dazzling context, for both the Confidenti and the Gelosi were in town, the former offering La Zingana, the latter La Pazzia; it was an occasion for comparing performances by the most renowned troupes of that era. The presence of these players was a very real part of the milieu in which the Jewish plays were performed.

In 1554 two leading members of the Jewish community, Jacob Sullam (or Sulani) and Samuel Shalit directed an elaborate spectacle featuring stage machines. For a state visit in 1563 the Jews performed the Suppositi of
Ariosto, in 1568 a play by Faroni, in 1582 a tragedy by Giraldi Cinzio, in 1583 the *Straccioni* of Annibale Caro with its complex triple plot.\(^{17}\) In fact, many more plays were presented, but the records are lacking whereby they can be identified.

Reading patterns of tradition in sequences of factual documentation is a familiar historical process; the next step is reading principles of cultural politics in those traditions, because we cannot imagine them coming into existence except through negotiation and relations of power between rival performing groups, between playwrights and their patrons, and between members of an ethnic minority and the state. This study, so far, has dealt with the probable circumstances leading to the rise of this Mantuan tradition of the Jewish theatrical troupe as a mutual arrangement between dukes seeking to expand the cultural life of the city and court, and the Jews seeking to remain in favour with those who could protect them as a minority threatened by popular unrest, commercial rivalry, and the Inquisition. The dukes seized upon an “idea” of performance as a form of taxation, while the Jews had seized upon opportunities allowed them by a unique set of cultural and political circumstances in developing their theatrical expertise. That such circumstances should also foster the appearance of an outstanding playwright, impresario, and director is also to be expected. It is what we know about this man’s professional career that allows us to come to our clearest sense of the political dimensions of the Jewish theatrical tradition.

In the mid 1560s Leone De’ Sommi wrote an academic treatise on theatrical production entitled *I quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni scheniche*, a work that offers the most complete account of theatrical practices and conventions from the period.\(^{18}\) He would have been nearing 40 when he wrote it, and clearly knew a great deal about the matter from first hand experience. At the beginning of the Third Dialogue, Massimiano, the interlocutor usually taken for Leone himself, states that he had “directed more plays than he had written”, which is to confirm that he had done both. Presumably De’ Sommi began his career as a director, and by degrees turned his attention to the need for new and appealing plays which he then began to supply in increasing numbers. Only one of Leone’s plays can be dated with assurance before 1565. It is his *Zahud bedihuta de-Qiddushim* (A Comedy of Betrothal) written in Hebrew, perhaps towards 1550, and intended for performance during Purim.\(^{19}\) Although the documentary evidence concerning plays in Hebrew is slight (this text is, in fact, the first complete theatrical work in Hebrew to survive from the Italian Renaissance), this play at least testifies to the existence of a parallel theatrical
tradition within the Jewish community. That tradition would allow a young Jewish writer like Leone to gain some training by first writing in his own language. Its early date allows us to outline a playwrighting career that covered at least forty active years from the 1550s down to his death in 1592 or 1593.

Fourteen plays may be assigned to Leone with confidence, although there are hints of several more, thereby encouraging us to think that he wrote up to one new play each year from about 1565 onward. The fourteen plays known by title were, until 1904, available in the 16 manuscript volumes of his works housed in the National Library in Turin. After the fire in that year that left the library in ruins, only two of Leone’s plays have been recovered from other sources, the Hebrew comedy, perhaps his first play, and *The Three Sisters*, which was among his last. Leone is mentioned throughout the period in letters, court records, receipt books, and related documents, but these references are often inexplicit with regard to dates, titles of plays, and the occasions for which they were presented. It is known that he wrote comedies, tragedies, pastoral plays and intermezzi, not only for carnival, but for the court and the academy. We cannot be certain that his plays were performed exclusively by the Jewish troupe, and, to be sure, there is no way to determine the degree to which his plays were designed to accommodate the strengths of the group. There is no documentation concerning the kinds of remuneration he might have received for his efforts. We do know that he enjoyed the favour of the court over many years, and that such favour must have been the result largely of his success as a playwright. We must hence assume that in Leone the Jewish players had found among their members a man of talent as writer and director who could help them achieve their goals in the service of the Mantuan state.

De’ Sommi’s elegiac pastoral *I doni* was performed in 1575 following the death of Don Cesare Gonzaga, and in that same year another of his plays was performed at court on the occasion of a state visit. His *La Drusilla*, a pastoral tragedy, was dedicated to Cesare Gonzaga and performed at the request of the Academy of the Invaghiti. Carol MacClintock suggests that De’ Sommi was commissioned for a play for the wedding of Vincenzo Gonzaga and Margherita Farneze in 1568 with music by Giaches de Wert. His *La fortunata* was staged for carnival in 1581, and in that same year his *Il giannizzerio* was played for Vincenzo’s birthday in August. Only a few more titles and dates can be assigned, but the profile emerging is of a man who was probably involved in most of the Mantuan court productions of the period, as well as in some of the major events in nearby Ferrara – a city where he spent
time during his student years and to which he returned to serve as choreographer in the 1584 production of *Il Pastor Fido*.22

There were two particular ambitions in Leone’s life, each with political overtones, that he was unable, or only partially able, to achieve. In 1562 the Accademia degli Invaghitì was founded under a charter initially issued by Pope Paul IV. Because of its religious affiliations, Jews were excluded from membership. Nevertheless, for a man of Leone’s scholarly bent of mind, an assembly of passionate amateurs interested in humanism, new thinking and experimentation in the arts and sciences offered an attractive context in which to pursue his own interests. It appears that the post of *scrittore* was created in due course especially for De’ Sommi, thereby allowing his participation through a circumvention of the regulations.23 Leone may have written his *Four Dialogues* in order to gain entry to the academy, and in 1564 he was paid by the academy for a *mascherata* performed “quasi al’improvviso” in honour of one of the members.24 Sixteen years later, there were no signs of waning favour, for in 1580 Ferrante Gonzaga of Guastalla, then the leader of the institution, interceded with Duke Guglielmo to have Leone excused from wearing the Jewish badge.25 De’ Sommi’s second ambition was, in 1567 or 1568, to open a public theatre in Mantua, an idea that might have led to a commercialization of the theatre similar to later developments in Madrid and London. But his prestige, combined with a pledge to use a portion of the proceeds to aid the poor of Mantua, was insufficient inducement to gain the approval he sought.26 His failure need not be attributed to racial discrimination; this was after all a period favourable to Jewish commercial enterprises. That commercial theatre did not develop generally in the Italian city states has rather more to do with the relationship between cultural production and courtly ambitions. The Gonzagas would have seen such a proposal as Leone’s as a threat to their monopoly over cultural production in the city, no matter who its originator might have been.

During his active years as playwright, choreographer, impresario, and director, De’ Sommi also served as a diplomat for his community. In 1577 he was a member of the Jewish delegation seeking greater jurisdiction for the Jewish courts “in matters of personal status, taking evidence, and certifying documents.”27 Success for this mission meant fuller control over the legal and financial affairs of members of the community and an important new measure of autonomy. These were significant goals for the *università*, and there can have been no doubt in their minds that a record of progress throughout that period was in no small part due to the gratitude of the court for the services they had corporately rendered. Such was the nature of their
“contract” with the state. By the logic implicit in this contract, the cultural contributions must have figured in the exchange of services for privileges. The same fact that Leone must have evinced to maintain favour as a playwright he appears to have exercised as a diplomat. Eleven years later, in 1588, he was described as a man frequently at court as the official bearer of his nation’s petitions. At the same time that his *Three Sisters* was dedicated to the duke, he was also negotiating a place for Jewish middlemen in the silk trade – a suit that was granted in 1590 against acrimonious complaints by the Christian guilds. The animosity that resulted from these trade rivalries throughout the period should not be minimized, and to separate these frictions from the tradition of anti-Jewish rioting during carnival would be naive. These are reminders of the pronounced differences that separated Gentiles from Jews, even in this period of relative liberalism and prosperity. The extent to which the negotiator for Jewish trade relations could function effectively as a playwright at the same time – perhaps create carnival comedies that might serve as measures of goodwill and of détente – invites speculation, although in the absence of interpretative documents we have only circumstantial inferences to guide us.

*The Three Sisters* becomes a key document because it is the only surviving carnival play by a Jewish playwright, and hence furnishes the only text that may be studied as a gesture of strategy in the negotiations between these two interest groups. Surprisingly, the play borrows much from two celebrated satirists, Aretino and Machiavelli, but principally in the areas of language and plot ideas – elements which Leone tempers to accord with the most standard of morals and the most neutral of political views. The play is full of spectacle and variety, and it makes novel use of the conventional character types. But there is no satire, whether of citizen mores or of courtly excesses. Leone appears to have placed none of his diplomatic intentions in jeopardy by spicing his plays with subtextualized messages or subversive overtones. In this almost negative way, a text secured against ambiguity was itself a political gesture, for it is in the nature of theatrical language to invite double meanings. De’ Sommi worked out his own style of intrigue comedy that honoured erudite conventions, exploited the potential for spectacle, and generated spectator interest in apparent deference to the codes of pleasure and power that circumscribed his creativity. The result was a new formula for theatre that concentrated upon artistic effects and innovative spectacle at the cost of a representational theatre based on social observation and commentary. Leone’s more mannerist forms of dramatization may have been the
indirect result of his position as playwright for the Jewish community and of his diplomatic roles on behalf of that community.

Leone seems to have expended considerable energy in cultivating Vincenzo Gonzaga's favour, even before his accession; Vincenzo's passion for the theatre, in fact, provided abundant opportunity for the expression of Leone's talents. He might have sensed that this was the closest way to the prince's heart — that to collaborate in the creation of grand theatrical spectacles was the best way to cultivate Vincenzo's receptivity to the needs of the Jewish community. There may, too, have been a growing sense of urgency to win such support through theatrical production because Vincenzo's accession to power, together with his ambitious plans for court splendour in the arts, coincided with the erosion of the commercial strength and autonomy of the Jews.\(^29\) A new moment was, in fact, in the making. Vincenzo had neither his father's sense of expediency in political matters, nor his parsimony in material matters. De' Sommi may have had his premonitions about Vincenzo's nature, standing to gain much from his lavish spending on court spectacles, but to lost much from his inability, or lack of desire, to hold counter-reformation policies at bay. The new climate brought back a theological culture that insisted upon the isolation of religious groups out of fear of mutual contamination. Friars such as Bartolomeo da Solution, active in Mantua just after the turn of the century, preached openly of the dangers of the Jewish presence.\(^30\) One by one the gains made by the Jews over the century were revoked until, by 1612, the Jews of Mantua were resettled into a ghetto. The annual play continued, and in consequence, the comedy committee of the Jews was not dissolved until 1650. But the efforts of the players appear to have lost all significance as an element in the negotiations for Jewish privileges. It is noteworthy that in 1635, when the Jewish play was cancelled, it was replaced by the payment of additional taxes.\(^31\) By that time the traditional play had become merely an obligation upon which a monetary value could be placed and collected in the event of default.

In 1588, however, Leone could still venture the presentation of his play as the gift of a maker to a patron. There was still room for a degree of rhetorical construction of the artifact as the cultural property of the creator and hence an object that could be traded in exchange for something deemed of equivalent worth. The most we may be able to conclude about De' Sommi is that he had talents as a playwright that brought rewards sufficient to make his theatrical commitment a lifelong one, and talents as a diplomat that earned for him the highest praise of his community as a benefactor at the time of his death.\(^32\) Documentation allows no closer association of these two talents — only that
they were the efforts of the same man. And yet, insofar as the differences that separated Jews and Christians were openly negotiated and hence politicized, it would appear unavoidable that such relations conditioned both the reception of the Jewish performances and Leone’s career as playwright and diplomat, so that the two activities of his professional life were, in essence, one.

The exchange of power and the interaction between Christians and Jews may have, in fact, been far more concentrated in the theatrical productions of the Jews than would at first appear probable. Vincenzo was culturally ambitious and he had a long-standing tradition of Jewish theatre to develop and to exploit. Naturally, the Jewish community would seek to read this contribution as a negotiable service that had political value for them. Leone de’ Sommi seems to have been at the centre of these negotiations for almost 40 years, in essence internalizing that exchange as the defining principle of his career. That he managed to maintain favour with court, academy, and Jewish community for so long a period testifies to his remarkable political and diplomatic expertise.

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Notes
8. Israel, p. 47.


22. D’Ancona, II, 540. Vincenzo married a Farnese in 1568 and Leanore de’ Medici in 1584. His sister Margherita, also an avid patron of the arts, was drawn away to Ferrara by marriage in 1579 and took many of Mantua’s artists with her. Vincenzo was in competition with Ferrara in an effort to attract artists back to Mantua (Fenlon, p. 126). The Jews also performed in 1584 for Vincenzo’s second wedding, offering Pino da Cagli’s *Gli ingiusti sdegni* with dances and intermedi by De’ Sommi (Fenlon, pp. 41–42). They withdrew their play for Carnival in 1587 for lack of rehearsal time (D’Ancona, II, p. 425).


27. Simonsohn, p. 355.


29. Simonsohn, p. 271.

