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Embodied Voice and the Body Politic: The *Dialoghi* of Leone de' Sommi

Ariane Helou

Decades before Shakespeare made his famous pronouncement that “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players,”¹ a playwright in Mantua observed: “tutto il mondo insieme altro non è che una scena od un teatro ove si fa continuo spettacolo delle nostre azioni” [“all the world together is nothing other than a stage or a theater where there is a continuous spectacle of our actions”].² With this statement, Leone de’ Sommi introduces his treatise on the art and science of stagecraft: *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* [“*Four Dialogues on Theatrical Performance*”]. The *Dialoghi* constitute the first handbook on theatrical directing in the West. It takes as its point of departure an understanding of drama as a mirror of human nature and society, whose form is patterned on the human body and, furthermore, whose meaning can only be fully conveyed through gesture and vocalization.

Leone composed the *Dialoghi* in the mid-1500s while he was working as a playwright and director in service to the Gonzaga court, but they were not printed during his lifetime. They have survived into the twenty first century through a series of accidents and narrow escapes. Leone’s collected manuscripts were moved from Mantua to Turin in the late 1620s; they were sold by Gonzaga heirs to the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I, in order to finance the War of Mantuan Succession.³ The manuscripts were still unpublished, and most of the originals were lost in a fire in 1904; a sole eighteenth-century copy of the *Dialoghi* survived. The work was cited by a few theater historians, but only came to widespread attention in the mid-to-late twentieth century.⁴ An English translation, the only one to date, was published by Allardyce Nicoll as an appendix to his book *The Development of the Theatre* in 1958.⁵ An Italian critical edition by Ferruccio Marotti appeared a decade later.⁶ Scholarship on Leone’s works includes two monographs in Italian and one essay anthology in English, in addition to a handful of articles, book chapters, and two doctoral theses in English, mostly produced within the last twenty years.⁷ His entry in *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature* is only three sentences.⁸ Yet the *Dialoghi*, in its theoretical scope and its relation to theatrical practice, deserves greater critical attention. Although it may have enjoyed only limited circulation during Leone’s lifetime, its

¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7. 138–39.

² Leone de’ Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, ed. Ferruccio Marotti (Milan: Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1968), 7. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ Cristina Dal Molin, “Recovery of some Unedited Manuscripts by Leone de’ Sommi at the National Library of Turin,” in *Leone de’ Sommi and the Performing Arts*, ed. Ahuva Belkin (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997), 102–03.

⁴ Ahuva Belkin, “Introduction,” in *Leone de’ Sommi and the Performing Arts* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997), 2–3.

⁵ Allardyce Nicoll, *The Development of the Theatre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 237–262.

⁶ See n. 2.

⁷ Perhaps the best-known in English is the anthology *Leone de’ Sommi and the Performing Arts*, ed. Ahuva Belkin (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997). Two more recent studies published in Italy include Ilaria Scola, *Interdiscorsività nell’opera di Leone de’ Sommi: tra giudaismo, classicismo e umanesimo* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2008) and Giorgio Pavesi, *Leone de’ Sommi Hebreo e il teatro della modernità* (Asola: Gilgamesh Edizioni, 2015).

⁸ Peter Hainsworth and David Robey, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 561.

status as the first handbook on modern theatrical directing establishes it as a significant document in the history of Western theater.

As the title indicates, the *Dialoghi* (Dialogues) are framed as a series of four conversations. Massimiano, a tailor, and his apprentice Santino are on their way to the workshop of Veridico, a Jewish embroiderer, to pick up a garment for a client. Veridico also happens to be a playwright, and so Massimiano and Santino ask Veridico to show them the play he is writing and to let them sit in on a rehearsal. Veridico replies that no rehearsal has been planned and that he cannot get the actors together on such short notice, but he agrees to talk to his visitors about theater's origins, structures, and practices. The first dialogue discusses the origins of theater; the second dialogue analyses the structure of the five-act drama; the third dialogue focuses on acting, costuming, and stagecraft (the province of the director); and the fourth describes scenery and lighting, as well as prologues and interludes.

Veridico, the playwright and director, is the stand-in for Leone; his name means "the one who speaks the truth." The interaction between the three interlocutors is probably representative of Christian-Jewish relations in Mantua in the mid-sixteenth century. The Mantuan textile industry, including ateliers of the kind Veridico runs, flourished under Jewish merchants.⁹ When Massimiano mentions Veridico's play, Santino asks, "È dunque sua farina la commedia che si aspetta vedere il martedì di carnevale?" ["Then is the comedy that is to be seen on the Tuesday of Carnival his work?"].¹⁰ The tailor and his apprentice thus identify themselves as Christians, and though they are not courtiers or aristocrats, they are still among those who will be entertained by the labors of the Jewish theater troupe, which performed at its own expense for the court and the public at the behest of the Gonzagas. On the one hand Massimiano and Veridico, the tailor and the embroiderer, are professional associates and peers, mutually dependent upon each other's skills in order to serve their customers. On the other hand, Veridico's deference to Massimiano in their exchange of pleasantries, though a sign of collegial respect and a performance of polite humility, may also be symptomatic of his status as a member of a marginalized minority.¹¹

Readers who encounter Leone today—especially those who are themselves theater practitioners—are likely to find some aspects of the *Dialoghi* astonishingly modern. Leone's ideas about theater anticipate some key aspects of the realism cultivated by Stanislavski and other practitioners in the modern period—for example, the idea that events onstage should unfold before the audience as if in real time; that a "fourth wall" may be imagined between the audience and the actors; that an actor should react to lines of dialogue as if hearing them for the first time; and that skilled performers can elevate an indifferent text, while even the greatest dramatic poetry wilts in the mouth of an inept actor.¹² In addition to instructing the actor on suitable

⁹ Ferruccio Marotti, "Introduzione," in De' Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi*, xxix.

¹⁰ De' Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi*, 9.

¹¹ In response to Veridico's demurrals, Massimiano says that he would be obliged to learn more about the theater from him. Veridico responds: "Obligo no, che è mio debito in tutto compiacervi, et poiché, pregandomi, questo mio comandate, eccomi disposto rispondere a quello solo che mi chiederete, quantunque io mi conosca al tutto inabile di poter satisfarvi intieramente." ["Not obliged, for it is my duty to make you happy, and since your wish is my command, here I am ready to respond to what you ask me, even though I know myself to be unable to satisfy you entirely."], 12.

¹² Constantin Stanislavski's several volumes on acting and directing naturally cover far more territory than Leone's *Dialoghi*, but despite the difference in historical and cultural context there are a number of intriguing parallels between the two bodies of work. Indeed, in what is arguably his most influential book (*An Actor Prepares* trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, New York: Routledge, 1989), Stanislavski chooses a form not dissimilar to the Renaissance dialogue: he narrates a series of work sessions within a theater company, framed as a dialogue between

approaches to text, voice, gesture, and character, Leone also guides would-be directors in casting and staging practices, and teaches designers of scenery, lighting, and costumes how to apply their arts toward efficacious storytelling and character development. At the same time, however, Leone's strikingly modern ideas about the practice of theater are rooted in the authority of antiquity and informed by his own status as a member of Mantua's minority Jewish community. In conversation with his Christian humanist contemporaries in Italy, Leone displaces the dominant Aristotelian conception of theater by citing Hebrew scripture as a higher and more ancient authority on drama.

This article considers two ways in which Leone's writings on stagecraft in the *Dialoghi* enact both the syncretism and the tension between his Jewish and Italian identities. The first is his theory of drama, which, while not entirely anti-Aristotelian, de-emphasizes the originality of Aristotle's contributions by identifying tragedy's origins in the Hebrew Bible. The second is through Leone's prescriptions for theatrical performance—in particular, the actor's use of body and voice—which dramatize (literally and figuratively) the politically and socially charged relationships of Mantua's Jewish artists and artisans to the Gonzaga court. Taken together, these aspects of Leone's theatrical treatise demonstrate the tensions between his Jewish and Italian identities: his otherness, and his determination to display the scope of his talents and ambitions in modes recognizable to the dominant Christian, courtly culture. Building on prior work on the history of Jewish theater in Mantua, I aim to show how Leone's writings on drama, as well as the theatrical practices they describe, reflect and perhaps even illuminate that historical reality.¹³

Leone and Mantua

Leone de' Sommi was born in or near Mantua, around the year 1525 or 1527; he died in Mantua in 1592. He was a poet and playwright, a theater director, producer, choreographer, and a theorist; in other words, a Renaissance man. Leone was a bilingual author, publishing works in both Italian and Hebrew. His literary output included poems, comedies and pastoral dramas in both verse and prose, and *intermezzi*, or musical interludes. His *Tsahoth B'dihutha D'Kiddushin* [*Comedy of Betrothal*], performed in Mantua in the 1550s, is the first full-length play written in Hebrew. He was also active in civic life as a *massaro*, an elected community representative;¹⁴ he

the director Tortsov (a stand-in for the author) and his actors. The more striking similarities to Leone's instructions for actors, however, are found in the content: for example, in emphasizing the importance of observation. Leone notes that actors must always be observers of the kinds of personalities and characters they perform on stage ("sempre imitando et osservando il naturale di quelle qualità di persone che si rappresentano," *Dialoghi*, 48). Stanislavski, too, famously observed that "An actor should be observant not only on the stage, but also in real life. [...] Otherwise his whole creative method will prove lopsided and bear no relation to life" (91). Both theorists also insist upon truthfulness in performance (Leone's third dialogue, especially 37–48; Chapter 8 of *An Actor Prepares*, 127–162). Finally, Leone's reference to the invisible wall comes in Dialogue Four, in a discussion on stage sets; Veridico comments on both the verisimilitude and the awkwardness of dressing a proscenium set as an indoor room when it lacks a "muro dinanzi," or front wall (68). (For Stanislavski's commentary on actors' use of the fourth wall, see *An Actor Prepares*, 90–91).

¹³ My work is indebted to previous studies of the history of Jewish theater in Mantua, particularly Erith Jaffe-Berg's "Performance as Exchange: Taxation and Jewish Theatre in Early Modern Italy," *Theatre Survey* 54/3 (September 2013): 389–417, which draws on Mantuan archival sources to establish the political and social context of Leone's theater activity under Gonzaga rule.

¹⁴ Beginning in 1511, a declaration from the Gonzaga rulers allowed Mantua's Jews to organize as a community under the rubric of *università*, similar to a guild or corporation; this also enabled the Gonzaga to tax them separately from the rest of the population. The *università* could then elect *massari* to represent the interests of the community in negotiations with the Gonzaga court and other civic entities. See Jaffe-Berg, "Performance as Exchange," 394–95.

is credited with founding a synagogue;¹⁵ and he sought to create a public theater in Mantua (a revolutionary idea at the time, predating the rise of other European public theaters by decades), though there is no concrete evidence that he succeeded in this.¹⁶ Leone was also associated with the Accademia degli Invaghiti (founded by Cesare I Gonzaga in 1562) and oversaw theatrical entertainments for the ducal court of Guglielmo Gonzaga (r. 1550–87).

Mantua's Jewish community grew to be one of the largest in Northern Italy: about 2,000 people at its height, on par with those of Venice and Rome. But much of this population growth took place over the course of Leone's lifetime. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Jewish population numbered only a few hundred—by the time Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga came to power in 1587, the community had grown to 1,591 (out of a total city population of 50,000).¹⁷ Mantuan Jews participated in the city's economic and social life but were separated from the larger civic body in significant ways, including being prohibited from buying property.¹⁸

Leone's theatrical worldview seems at first glance to embrace civic unity and the productivity of Jewish artists, artisans, and intellectuals working under the auspices of the Gonzaga court. But Leone's treatise on theater may also be read as an act of resistance against the dominant culture. Leone probably wrote the *Dialoghi* during the 1550s and 1560s, a period of intense Counter-Reformation activity that led to, among other pressures, the creation of a ghetto in Rome and the rise of ghettoization in cities throughout the Italian peninsula. I argue that through his writings on theater, Leone de' Sommi enacts a challenge to the structural and ideological confines of the ghetto, inviting its readers to consider an ensemble of performing bodies against the backdrop of a divided body politic.

The Counter-Reformation

Although the Jewish community in sixteenth-century Mantua enjoyed relatively more freedom than did their contemporaries in Venice and Rome, for example, they were still barred from participating fully in certain aspects of civic life. Through most of the 1500s, the Gonzaga dukes were more or less tolerant of the presence of Jews in their city; they employed them as bankers, doctors, artisans, and performing artists, but in modes that could be exploitative. And in Mantua, as in the rest of Europe, inter-religious tensions mounted as religious sanctions grew stricter during the Counter-Reformation. Although Mantua's ghetto was not built until 1612, ghettoization was a pervasive phenomenon in sixteenth-century Italy, beginning with the segregation of the Ghetto of Venice in 1516. The Roman Ghetto was established in 1555; it was the direct result of a papal bull issued by Paul IV in July of that year (*Cum nimis absurdum*), which enforced restrictions on Jews living in the Papal States, such as obeying a curfew, wearing a yellow badge, and being compelled to attend Christian sermons.

¹⁵ Shlomo Simonsohn, *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua* (Tel Aviv: Kiryath Sepher Ltd., 1977), 570; Nicoll, *Development of the Theatre*, 237. Simonsohn also notes Leone's other activities as *massaro* on behalf of Mantuan Jews, including petitions to the Duke on such diverse matters as acknowledging the jurisdiction of Jewish law courts in the city and regulating the price of kosher meat (*History of the Jews*, 349, 355).

¹⁶ Simonsohn, *History of the Jews*, 660.

¹⁷ Jaffe-Berg, "Performance as Exchange," 393.

¹⁸ Simonsohn, *History of the Jews*, 113–18. Simonsohn notes that this and other restrictions—for example, prohibitions against working on Christian holidays, or against Jewish doctors treating Christian patients without the Duke's permission—began to be enforced in March 1576, following a visit to Mantua by a Papal emissary from Gregory XIII.

The papal bull influenced policy in other Italian cities, and a wave of ghetto construction followed: Ancona in 1555; Bologna in 1566; Florence and Siena in 1571; Verona in 1600; and numerous other cities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The papal bull and the rise of the ghetto were, of course, not isolated incidents, but related to the larger context of the Counter-Reformation and to a wave of anti-Semitic activity during and after the Council of Trent (1545–63), such as the burning of the Talmud in Rome in 1553 (*History of the Jews*, 392). Even Mantua, known for its relative tolerance, saw an increase of violence against the local Jewish community following the accession of Guglielmo Gonzaga as Duke in 1556 (*History of the Jews*, 398). Moreover, the rapid growth of Mantua’s Jewish population over the course of the sixteenth century was due in large part to the city’s absorption of Jewish refugees from other parts of Italy and Europe.¹⁹

It was during this period of heightened tension of the 1550s and 1560s that Leone most likely composed the *Dialoghi*. The preface to the readers is dated 1556, but the dialogues must have been composed later, since they refer to political and cultural events of the 1560s, including the wedding of Guglielmo Gonzaga to Eleanora of Austria in 1561 (an event which, as Erith Jaffe-Berg notes, was marked by rioting in Mantua and attacks on Jewish homes).²⁰ Thus we can—and should—consider Leone’s writings in the context of the Counter-Reformation and the ghettoization of Italian cities. With that in mind, I want to turn to the first topic in which Leone puts Judaism and Italianness into conversation with one another: dramatic theory.

Dramatic Theory

It is a commonplace that Renaissance Italian humanism looked back toward classical Greece, citing Aristotle or Plato as authorities in questions of aesthetics. In the case of drama specifically, Aristotle’s *Poetics* was widely read in sixteenth-century Italy: a Latin translation by Alessandro Pazzi de’ Medici was published in 1536, and a Tuscan translation by Bernardo Segni soon followed.²¹ Italian humanists largely considered the *Poetics* to be the paradigm of all dramatic composition, in theory if not in practice. Leone, however, diverges from this notion in his first dialogue. He re-states the Aristotelian theory of the origin of drama in Athens, but then offers an alternative view “so as not to leave all the recognition to the lying Greeks, who are always accustomed to stealing glory from others.”²² Just as the Romans learned the arts of dramatic poetry from the Greeks, Leone argues, the Greeks learned it from the ancient Jews: “così a me pare di poter dire che quelli da gl’antichissimi e sacri scritti ebraici possino aver appreso il modo da introdur varie persone a ragionare insieme, imitato poi da Platone, et di onde la comedia ha poi rittratta la sua origine prima...” [“thus it seems possible to me to say that they could have learned from the very ancient and sacred Hebrew scriptures this method of introducing various

¹⁹ Simonsohn, *History of the Jews*, 28–30; Jaffe-Berg, “Performance as Exchange,” 393.

²⁰ On the dating of the manuscript, see Marotti, “Introduzione,” xx, and Nicoll, *The Development of the Theatre*, 238. On violence in Mantua in 1556 and 1561, see Jaffe-Berg, “Performance as Exchange,” 398, 412n50.

²¹ Hainsworth and Robey, *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, 547.

²² “dovendosi più tosto investigare chi prima fosse che con autorità e giudizio componesse cosa atta et degna da recitarsi, mi ricordo aver altre volte sopra questo soggetto esplicata una mia stravagante opinione (per non lasciar tutta la riputazione a i mendaci grechi, usi sempre d’usurparsi la gloria altrui)” [“[S]ince we ought rather to investigate who was the first man who, with authority and good judgment, composed things suitable and worthy of being performed, I remember having explained an exceptional opinion of mine on this subject at other times (so as not to leave all the recognition to the lying Greeks, who are always accustomed to stealing glory from others)”] (De’ Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi*, 13).

characters to converse together; it was later imitated by Plato, and from there drama later traced back its first origin”] (13).²³ Leone does, however, agree with the humanist conception of theater as a mirror of human nature and a tool for teaching ethics: “La comedia, secondo la sentenza de’ più savii, non è altro che una imitazione overo esemplar ritratto de la vita umana, dove si hanno a tassar i vizii per fuggirli, et ad approvar le virtù per imitarle” [“Drama, according to the opinion of the most learned men, is nothing other than an imitation or an exemplary portrait of human life, where vices are discredited in order to be avoided, and virtues approved in order to be imitated”] (12). This close imitative relationship of theater and human life becomes Leone’s basis for tracing the origins of drama in Hebrew scriptures. The earliest dramatic dialogue, he claims, is “the very elegant and philosophical tragedy of Job” contained within the scriptures that came directly to Moses “from the very mouth of God Almighty.”²⁴ Thus, theater’s origin is not human, but divine. With this declaration, Leone creates a synthesis of two distinct Renaissance literary tropes: the humanist conception of theater as a mirror of nature, and the authority of sacred scripture over the ancient secular (Greek and Roman) classics in Jewish intellectual life.

Leone further develops his theory of the divinely ordained drama in Dialogue Two, in which he rationalizes the five-act structure of a play. If drama is an imitation of human life, then, he posits, it follows that its structure is an imitation of the human form, and possesses a divine perfection since the human form was created in God’s image. Furthermore, Leone explicates the divine perfection of the number five, both in the human body—five senses, five capacities of the mind, five members (four limbs and the head), fingers and toes in fives, five sensory organs (eyes, ears, mouth, nose and brain), five components (bones, nerves, veins, tendons and flesh)—and in holy scriptures (five books of Moses, five letters in the name of God, and five human characters in the story of Job) (30–31).²⁵ What better source, asks Leone, could the ancient Greek and Roman poets have found than this fivefold division “in questo utilissimo poema della comedia introdotta a fine solo de insegnar altrui, ma con diletto, quello che seguir si deve et quello che si deve fuggire?” [“in this highly useful dramatic poem introduced with the sole purpose of teaching other people, but in a pleasing way, what ought to be sought after and what ought to be shunned?”] (13). In his exegesis of the five-act structure, by demonstrating that divine perfection is incorporated in both the human body and holy scripture, Leone unifies the bodily with the divine, embodying God’s authority in the quintuple perfection of the human form.

²³ I translate *comedia* as “play” or “drama” (as does Nicoll). Leone addresses multiple theatrical forms, including interludes and pastorals as well as comedy. The reference to the “tragedia di Iobbe” (“the tragedy of Job,” 14) within the discussion of *comedia*’s origins indicates that Leone uses *comedia* as a broad rubric for all dramatic forms, not only comedy.

²⁴ “[La comedia] ci fu data [...] primieramente dal sibrime ingegno del celeste legislatore Mosè, esperto duce de’ Giudei, il quale, dopo che egli ebbe scritto i suoi cinque libri della legge divina espostagli da l’oracolo, anzi dalla bocca stessa di Dio ottimo, in cinque mille cinquecento e cinquanta versi, scrisse poi, come appresso gli ebrei è manifesto, la elegantissima et filosofica tragedia di Iobbe, di cinque soli umani interlocutori” [“[Drama] was given to us [...] first of all by the sublime genius of the holy lawmaker Moses, expert leader of the Jews, who, after he had written his five books of divine law expounded to him by the oracle, indeed from the very mouth of God Almighty, in five thousand five hundred and fifty verses, then wrote, as later became manifest to the Hebrews, the most elegant and philosophical tragedy of Job, with only five human speakers”] (14).

²⁵ In his catalogue of perfect fifths, Leone omits the *musical* perfect fifth, considered an aesthetically ideal interval and used as the basis of the Pythagorean tuning system. Whether this is because he was not a musician or not interested in music, or preferred not to give primacy to a Greek musical system, is unknown. It is worth noting, however, that in the classical tradition the perfect fifth invoked a divine origin in the celestial harmonies and music of the spheres. Elsewhere in Dialogue Two, Leone’s attributions of male and female qualities to the numbers two and three is also drawn from Pythagorean numerology (28).

This understanding of divinity as inscribed upon the body thus imagines the human body itself as a kind of sacred text. Moreover, Leone attributes to this unification of the corporeal and the divine a didactic and ethical purpose: to offer exemplary lessons in emulating virtue and rejecting vice, through the vehicle of the drama. The ideal body of Leone's dramaturgy is whole, healthy, and well proportioned; it has nothing in excess and nothing lacking.

Body and Voice

This preoccupation with the body brings us to the second realm of Leone's identity negotiations: the disposition of the body and the voice it produces on the stage. Leone understands the body as the governing principle in the creation of drama; in other words, a blueprint for the structure of a play. In the execution of those plans, however, Leone considers voice and vocal character to carry more power than physical attributes, which can be artificially altered (40). When Leone describes what he looks for in a good actor, the most important trait, he claims, is *bona pronuncia* (good speaking ability). Physical appearance is of secondary importance, and even then only in silhouette: an actor playing a soldier must be *membruto* (muscular or strong-limbed), a parasite fat, a servant thin, and so on (39). Leone is unconcerned with an actor's features, which can be altered by make-up, wigs, or false beards, "potendosi agevolmente con l'arte suplire, ove manca la natura" ["as one can easily supplement with art where nature is lacking"] (39). There is one aspect of the actor's physicality, however, where nature has supremacy and art is impotent—in the voice: "Pongo poi anco gran cura alle voci di quelli, perch'io la trovo una de le grandi et principali importanze che vi siano; né darrei [...] la parte di un vecchio ad uno che avesse la voce fanciullesca, né una parte da donna (e da donzella maxime) ad uno che avesse la voce grossa" ["Then I also place great attention on their voices, because I find that this is something of great and primary importance; I would not give [...] the role of an old man to someone who had a childish voice, nor the role of a woman (especially a young girl) to someone who had a deep voice"] (39).²⁶

In each of these cases, the voice, like the actor's body, must already have the shape and quality of the character the actor will portray. Leone allows a single exception for a voice transformed by artifice: "Et se io, poniam caso, avessi a far recitare un'ombra in una tragedia, cercarei una voce squillante per natura, o almeno atta, con un falsetto tremante, far quello effetto che si richiede in tale rappresentazione" ["And if, for example, I had to have someone play a ghost in a tragedy, I would search for a voice that was shrill by nature, or at least suited, with a trembling falsetto, to create that effect that is required by such a scene"] (39–40). Where in the earlier descriptions Leone spoke of searching for *uno* ("a man"), here he drops any reference to the actor, body, or person, and speaks merely of searching for "a voice" (*cercarei una voce*). Only in the case of a ghost—a supernatural being whose presence on stage is obvious artifice—does Leone make an allowance for an artificially altered voice. It is worth noting, too, that in these passages Leone refers to audiences not as spectators but as auditors (*uditori*) or those who listen (*chiunque ascolta*). In this way Leone consistently privileges the aural/oral aspects of performance.

²⁶ This passage also tells us that the plays Leone wrote, directed, and/or produced used all-male casts. Although women were acting professionally in the *commedia dell'arte* by the mid-sixteenth century, the plays produced by Mantua's Jewish theater-makers, as well as by academies such as the Invaghiti (with which Leone was affiliated), would have been performed by men only.

Earlier in the *Dialoghi*, as we have seen, Leone draws on Hebrew scripture to support his arguments about dramatic theory. He misses an opportunity to do so here with his consideration of dramatic practice, for example by citing the powerful parable of voice and identity in the biblical story of Jacob and his twin brother Esau. Jacob disguises himself as his brother to steal a blessing from their blind father, Isaac. Since Isaac cannot see, Jacob performs the role of Esau by manipulating Isaac's other senses: taste, by bringing Isaac a dish he likes; smell, by wearing his brother's clothes; and touch, by putting animal hides over his arms to mimic his brother's rougher, hairier skin. However, when Isaac hears Jacob speak, he grows suspicious: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau," he says.²⁷ Hearing is the sense that is perhaps hardest to deceive, yet it does not seem to occur to Jacob to disguise his voice. Isaac, however, decides to trust his senses of touch and smell over his hearing, and so Jacob gets away with his trickery and succeeds in stealing Esau's blessing.

This episode has been read by philosopher Adriana Cavarero, among others, as a paradox of vocal performance: when his father calls him by his brother's name, Jacob responds, "Here I am," a self-identification that is correct in the language of the Bible, but ironic given his state as a costumed performer. In other words, voice is the ultimate marker of identity, but it may be at odds with the speech it utters. This is especially true in the context of the theater. (Indeed, this understanding may also invite readers to ask ourselves if we ever ought to be skeptical of Veridico, the "truth-speaker"; does he use the name ironically? Is he playing a role while dialoguing with his Christian neighbors?) Leone valorizes the actor's voice precisely because, as Cavarero observes, "la voce non inganna" ["the voice does not mask"].²⁸ Leone identifies voice as the one authentic element grounding a theatrical assemblage in which everything—set, costume design, makeup and wigs, moving scenery and visual effects, even music—is designed to create an illusion of another world even as it mirrors our own.

Leone states in the first two dialogues that the primary purpose of the drama is to instruct: to offer examples of virtue that the audience should emulate, and examples of vices that they should shun.²⁹ In his discussion of actors' voices in the third dialogue, he introduces another desired effect on the audience: emotional response. A skillful performance will move the audience to experience wonder or pleasure, creating an affective relationship between performer and audience. Leone challenges the Aristotelian view that the audience's emotional response is driven primarily by narrative structure, rhetoric, and poetry by attributing the play's affective success to the work of the actors rather than the dramatist.

The relationship of actor to audience brings us back to where we started: Leone's assertion that "all the world together is nothing other than [. . .] a spectacle of our actions." He describes humans as performers in the cosmic drama:

²⁷ "He [Jacob] went to his father and said, 'Father.' And he said, 'Yes, which of my sons are you?' Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing.' [...] Isaac said to Jacob, 'Come closer that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not.' So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.' He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him. He asked, 'Are you really my son Esau?' And when he said, 'I am,' he said, 'Serve me and let me eat of my son's game that I may give you my innermost blessing.'" Genesis 27:18–25 (*JPS Tanakh*, 2nd ed., Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

²⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.

²⁹ De' Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi*, 12.

...et, finita la favola, ogni uno si spoglia et torna nel suo stato di prima, onde raporta o laude or biasmo, secondo che meglio o peggio ha fatto la parte sua; così si vede essere gli uomini, nel loro nascimento, vestiti di abiti variati da chi regge l'Universo, ove ciascuno viene a rappresentarsi, operando o come sa o come vuole, tanto che la favola della vita giunga al suo fine. (6)

[...and once the play is finished, each one takes off his costume and returns to his original state, in which he receives either praise or blame, according to whether he has played his part well or badly; thus all men seem to be, at their birth, dressed in various costumes by the one who rules the Universe, and each one comes to perform, working either as he knows how or as he wishes, so that the play of life reaches its finale.]

In this vision of the world-as-stage, each of our individual performing bodies is also a microcosm of the civic body: we do not act truly autonomously, but are set in place and in motion by an omnipotent deity, and carry out our actions as part of a cosmic system. Each actor “operando o come sa o come vuole,” suggesting a degree of independence, yet is also subject to a cosmic judgment about the qualities of his performance as a member of the ensemble.

This tension between individual action and world stage is at the core of what Leone aims to reconcile in his theatrical work. Leone insists upon the sovereignty of the individual human, which is embodied in the perfection of their five-part structure and idiosyncratic voice. That sovereignty in turn is realized by means of theatrical performance, which, as Leone asserts, places the individual body and voice on display and invites spectators to marvel at how their gestures and utterances are uniquely suited to the narrative at hand. And this enactment of individuality, like all theatrical production, is both communal labor and a communal experience. For the human souls in Leone’s *theatrum mundi*, individual identity finds its expression on a universal stage.

But Leone himself could never achieve the social condition that he so powerfully imagined: the integration of his personal sovereignty into a unified civic body. In his public persona, Leone seems to have been able to move fluidly between the worlds of the Gonzaga court and the *università* of Mantuan Jews, and in his published poems and plays he demonstrates himself to be fluent in both humanist and Judaic discourses. In his literary performance as Veridico in the *Dialoghi*, Leone is continually code-switching between the two, citing textual authorities and etymological arguments from both traditions.³⁰ His achievements in theater and letters earned Leone the patronage of Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga, an affiliation with the Accademia degli Invaghiti, and, in 1580, a rare dispensation from wearing the yellow badge that was normally required of Mantua’s Jewish residents. And yet, as a Jew, Leone could not be granted the rank of *cavaliere* necessary to become a professional courtier or even, it seems, a full member of the Invaghiti. In the academy’s ledgers he is identified only as *scrittore accademico*, that is, academic writer or scribe.³¹

Finally, Leone’s very occupation posed an ideological problem. Members of Mantua’s Jewish community were more than just participants in the courtly theater culture: they sponsored

³⁰ In addition to Hebrew sources, Leone draws upon Aristotle, Plato, Vergil, Horace, and half a dozen other classical authors in his discussion of theater history, as well as Italian writers such as Boccaccio and Bibbiena.

³¹ Dunbar H. Ogden, “De’ Sommi in ’88: Dynamics of Theatrical Space,” in *Leone de’ Sommi and the Performing Arts*, ed. Ahuva Belkin (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997), 241.

productions at the command of the Gonzagas, as a kind of condition of their residence in the city, and levied a special tax among themselves to pay for the spectacles. Indeed, the performances themselves were a form of taxation, as Jaffe-Berg has argued.³² The theater in which Leone made his career was, on the one hand, a rich multimedia art form in which he was an important innovator; on the other hand, it can be understood as a form of indentured labor. Leone's exceptional achievements brought him into contact with two major institutions of Italian cultural production—the court and the academy—but at the margins, not the center.

Community

In the autumn of 2017, I had the pleasure of seeing a new play in Los Angeles by Tarell Alvin McCraney, best known as the Oscar-winning screenwriter of “Moonlight” (2016). The play, *Head of Passes*, tells of a tragedy, or rather a series of tragedies, that befalls the matriarch of an African American family; it takes its name from the Louisiana wetlands where the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico. As I was watching the play, I was struck by its resonances with Greek tragedy. It adheres to the classical unities of time, place, and action, with a single dramatic through-line presented in one location (the matriarch's house) within a twenty-four-hour period. But it also defies classical structure. Rather than occupying a heroic past, the time of the play is described as “The Distant Present,” tempering its mythologizing removal with a sense of immediacy. And rather than offering anything like Aristotelian catharsis, the end of the play leaves the spectator steeped in the raw anguish of its protagonist. At the audience talk-back following the play, I expected to hear a discussion of its Greek roots, but instead I learned that McCraney had conceived the play as a retelling of the biblical story of Job.

I was already at work on Leone de' Sommi's Mantuan dramaturgy when I saw McCraney's *Head of Passes*. And yet, sitting in the theater, it never occurred to me that this play might have biblical underpinnings instead of or in addition to classical ones. In a moment of metascholarly irony, I had apparently fallen into the same habits of thought as Leone's humanist interlocutors, failing to think beyond the classical paradigm. Yet much of what is compelling in Leone's view of theater is how it encompasses both the humanistic and the divine. His *Dialoghi* assert theater's religious origins while also invoking the secular authority of Aristotle and Horace; his life's work reveals a belief in theater as instructive, pleasurable, and most importantly, necessary for the building of community. In an interview about *Head of Passes*, McCraney expressed his commitment to theater practices that are similarly “both religious and community-necessary.”³³ I call attention to this not to frame McCraney's work as a parallel to Leone's, but rather to suggest that we scholars of early modernity might do well to think trans-historically about theater and community, and especially about the relationship of minority and marginalized communities to theater practices across eras.

Theater, after all, dwells in liminal spaces: in the in-between of reality and artifice, in the communicative exchanges between actor and audience, in the suspended temporality of the performance space. Theater can be said to reflect or extend the liminal and marginal spaces occupied by minority communities. In the early modern period in particular, theatrical

³² Jaffe-Berg, “Performance as Exchange,” 389–417. See also Belkin, “Introduction,” *Leone de' Sommi and the Performing Arts*, 7–8.

³³ Tre'vell Anderson, “Tarell Alvin McCraney on life after ‘Moonlight’ and his play in L.A., ‘Head of Passes,’” *The Los Angeles Times* 23 September 2017: <<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-tarell-alvin-mccraney-head-of-passes-20170913-htmlstory.html>> (accessed March 20, 2018).

performance, especially in courtly contexts, granted actors—who frequently occupied the margins of society—access to privileged spaces. However briefly and ephemerally, theatrical performance could serve as a public platform for marginalized voices, allowing them to speak into powerful ears. In assessing the dynamic between performer and patron it is crucial to consider the doubly vulnerable or marginal status of some of these voices: in the case of Leone and his fellow Mantuan theater-makers, on account of religion; in the case of the actresses of the *commedia dell'arte* who were beginning to rise to prominence at the same period, on account of gender.³⁴

A paradox of Mantuan theater is that it served, on the one hand, as a path toward professional and social advancement for certain members of the Jewish community and, on the other hand, as a reminder of the limitations to that advancement. It is perhaps the inverse of the paradox of the ghetto, which, by confining members of a community to a civic life that is separate and unequal, also potentially strengthens the sense of a unique cultural identity and contributions within that community. Leone's theatrical treatise reflects the anxieties inherent in living such a paradox, anxieties that may have been heightened by the wave of ghettoization that swept through northern Italy after 1555. It is hardly surprising then that he conceives of theater as a holistic art, derived from a divine unity and embodied wholeness, and leading to an almost utopian ideal of drama as a vehicle for moral teaching and civic togetherness. Leone's description of the five-part body as the blueprint for the five-act play encourages the reader to think about how the civic body ought to strive for the same functional perfection as its individual human counterparts. In the ideal civic body, the five senses, the head and limbs, and the components of bones, nerves, veins, tendons and flesh form an integrated whole. Leone's underlying argument in the *Dialoghi* is for the cultivation of a civic body whose discrete parts work in concert rather than in competition. By this logic, to confine or separate any part of the civic body, depriving it of rights and resources, is tantamount to the removal of a limb or a sensory organ, without which the whole body could hardly flourish.

³⁴ For a case study of the political significance of women performers in Italian court spectacle, see Ariane Helou, "Sibylline Voices: Prophecy and Power at the Medici Theater," forthcoming in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*.