

Beyond Praxis: Leone de' Sommi's Apology of Theater and Judaism in His *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*

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Abstract: Leone de' Sommi's treatise *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* (Mantova, c. 1565) is known mainly as the earliest methodical treatment of the art of theater direction. I aim to shed light on another aspect of this text, which resides under the surface despite its centrality to the author's project. I propose that De' Sommi's *Dialoghi* constitute an apology of both secular theater and Jewish culture, aimed at two distinct reading audiences: his Christian and Jewish readers.

Keywords: Leone de' Sommi, Renaissance Theater, Mantua, Italy, theater direction, kabbalah, Renaissance Jewish culture.

Leone de' Sommi (c.1525-c.1592) is a relatively uncelebrated figure, although attention to his biography and oeuvre has seen development since the 1990s, as evidenced by a modestly growing collection of work (e.g. Barkin; Scola). Although De' Sommi was a prolific poet, playwright, and director at the Gonzaga court of Mantua for three decades, as well as a Hebrew poet, translator, and community leader, his limited fame is due mainly to the importance of his treatise, *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* (c. 1565), which constitutes "the first systematic account of the art of the director in western theatre" (Migliarisi, Renaissance 13), arguably establishing De' Sommi as "the founder of modern stage direction"¹ (Barkin 2).

As a result of the primacy of place accorded to De' Sommi's treatise as the first methodical treatment of the practice of theater direction, scholars have tended to focus their analyses on the practical aspects of the *Dialoghi*, at the expense of more subtle themes residing under the surface of the text. This is only logical, since, compared with other works on stagecraft published prior to and

contemporary with the *Dialoghi*, it is a stunningly pragmatic text, dedicating a good deal of space to the praxis of putting on a play (i.e. how stage sets should be designed; how the stage and theater should be lit; how actors should be chosen, and how they should speak and move on stage; etc.).² By emphasizing these functional aspects, scholars have followed De' Sommi's lead, taking him at his word when he writes in the introductory letter to his readers that he composed the *Dialoghi* "piú per [suo] particular comodo che per desiderio di laude," and that his "principale intento" was to compose a sort of director's notebook, "[per sé] stesso piú che [per] altri," containing a summary of "quei piú importanti precetti et quegli avvertimenti piú neccessarii – di che io ho bisogno servirmi moltissime volte", as a playwright, costume designer, and theater director at the Mantuan court (QD 5). Setting aside the rhetorical humility that De' Sommi adopts here, a careful examination of the text makes it clear that the *Dialoghi* consist of much more than a set of self-addressed director's notes. Along with the practical concerns mentioned above, our author also treats such theoretical considerations as the divine and ancient origin of comedy, the etymology of various terms, and other seemingly impractical issues, which he spends a great deal of space discussing. It may well be that De' Sommi did consider it necessary to keep these concepts in mind while writing and producing plays—the passion with which he expounds his ideas on these topics would seem to indicate that he did—however, theater historians have often passed over the more theoretical portions of the *Dialoghi* in their studies. So, although the praxis of stagecraft may be the *principale intento* of this text, the fact that there is a principal aim implies that there also exist *secondary aims*, and it is to these that I would like to turn our attention.

The elaborate form of the treatise – a Renaissance humanist dialogue, complete with narrative frame – immediately belies De' Sommi's humble claims by associating this text with the prestigious canon of philosophical dialogues stretching back to the classical tradition. A second indication of a deeper complexity is the frequent referencing throughout the *Dialoghi* of Jewish texts and ideas, at times explicit, at times implicit. Most studies ignore the complex structure and Jewish aspects of De' Sommi's text, mentioning them in passing when at all;³ however, these two clues lead us to what I believe to be De' Sommi's *intento secondario*. Along with the explicit aim of setting down practical advice and instructions for writing and mounting stage productions, De' Sommi sets for himself an implicit task of composing a double apology directed

at two distinct audiences: Christian readers and Jewish readers. In addressing his Christian audience, De' Sommi seeks to defend and ennoble Jewish culture – especially the culture of Ancient Israel as represented in the Hebrew Bible – by demonstrating that the wisdom, writings, and language of the Ancient Israelites are as essential to the foundations (moral as well as rhetorical) of the theater and of humanist culture in general, as those of the Ancient Greeks and Romans.⁴ In addressing his Jewish audience, on the other hand, he seeks to defend the secular theater, both classical and contemporary, by demonstrating its didactic value, its indispensable presence in the well-ordered city, and its fundamentally Jewish character. Vital to De' Sommi's double apology is the idea of theater itself, which acts as a medium through which his two audiences may be brought together, not in an operation of syncretism in which all differences are dismissed or erased, but rather in common appreciation of each other's dignity.

Before delving into the treatise itself, it is important to understand the cultural context in which its author lived. Leone de' Sommi's life coincided roughly with the halcyon days of the Mantuan Jewish community.⁵ A glance at the demographic figures can give us an idea of its health: at the dawn of the sixteenth century the city of Mantua counted between 150 and 200 Jews among its inhabitants (Simonsohn 192);⁶ whereas by 1610 that number had grown to 2,325 individuals, constituting roughly 7.5% of the total population of the city (Grendler 7). What had formerly been a small nucleus of households made up mostly of moneylenders and their families, had begun to expand and develop at the beginning of the sixteenth century, attracting merchants, as well as artisans, teachers, rabbis, and their families (Simonsohn 18). The dynamism of the Mantuan Jewish community becomes evident when one considers the biographies of its most illustrious members, including rabbis and scholars such as Abraham Portaleone (physician and scholar), Moses and David ben Abraham Provenzali (rabbis),⁷ Yehudah Aryeh Moscato (rabbi, poet, philosopher), Azariah de' Rossi (physician, scholar), Judah Messer Leon (physician, philosopher, rabbi), and Abraham Colorni (mathematician, engineer).⁸

Mantua also provided safe haven for well-known refugees of the Spanish and Portuguese expulsions, such as the Sephardic kabbalists Yehudah Hayyat and Yosef Yavets, and was home to several yeshivas, as well as one of the first Hebrew presses (founded in 1476 by Abraham and Stellina Conat), which would run almost without

interruption until the nineteenth century.⁹ Nor was De' Sommi the only Jew appreciated by the Gonzagas for his artistic abilities; other Jewish artists at the Mantuan court in this period included Simon Basilea (actor), Abraham and Abramino dell'Arpa (musicians), Isacco Massarani (singer, musician),¹⁰ Guglielmo da Pesaro (dancer), and Salomone de' Rossi (composer) (Simonsohn 669-77).

During the reign of Guglielmo Gonzaga (1550-1587) Mantua became a city of refuge for Jews;¹¹ and through a complicated system of accommodations, the Duchy protected the Jewish minority and benefited from its presence.¹² Among the special taxes the Jewish community was required to pay in exchange for ducal protection was the unique obligation to finance, organize and perform theatrical entertainments for the court.¹³ These productions usually occurred as part of the annual Carnival celebrations, but the Jews of Mantua were also called upon to mount spectacles for special occasions such as Gonzaga-family weddings and the visits of foreign dignitaries, so that Jewish performances became a nearly annual event, occasionally taking place more than once per year.¹⁴ The annual carnival celebrations only increased in splendor with the arrival on the throne of Guglielmo's son, Vincenzo, who reigned as duke from 1587 to 1612 (Buratelli 10), and whom Alessandro D'Ancona described as "avidissimo di spettacoli, gran dissipatore di denari per procurarseli nuovi e splendidi, mecenate larghissimo di musici e comici" (*Origini* 2: 426). Under the Gonzaga, Mantua became a leading center of theatrical spectacle in sixteenth-century Italy, second only to Ferrara.¹⁵ Notably, it was at Mantua that the first secular drama written in the vernacular-Angelo Poliziano's haunting and highly original *Fabula di Orfeo*-was performed, most likely at the Gonzaga court in 1480.¹⁶

Although there were strict prohibitions regulating the public life of its Jewish residents, Mantua was one of the most liberal Italian states with regard to Jews in this period, and received with relative coolness the Papacy's repeated solicitations for tougher treatment. Indeed, the institution of regular theatrical performances by Jews before Christian crowds flies in the face of the intentions of Pope Paul IV's bull *Cum nimis absurdum* (1555), which was intended to limit contact between Christians and Jews (Ruderman, *Early Modern* 62).¹⁷ In fact, the Jewish theater at Mantua marked both Mantua and its Jewish community as unique in Italy. For the Gonzaga, the Jewish spectacles not only allowed the Mantuan court to augment the spectacular display of their wealth and power at no

expense to the Duchy's coffers, but they also constituted a sign of the court's autonomy from the Holy See (Buratelli 167).

The earliest evidence of a Jewish spectacle in Mantua for which documentation survives dates to 1525 (Faccioli 2: 553),¹⁸ and regular performances continued until 1627 (Buratelli 167).¹⁹ It is not surprising then that a city with a sizable Jewish community of considerable intellectual vivacity, ruled by a relatively liberal court which fostered the theatrical arts, could produce a talent such as that of De' Sommi, especially considering the century-long obligation of providing for every aspect of play production-including costumes, actors, lighting, scripts,²⁰ stage direction, music, choreography, funding etc. – that the Jewish community was obligated to fulfill.

Leone de' Sommi (known within the Jewish community as Yehudah ben Yitz'ak Somo da Portaleone) was born in Mantua, probably in 1527,²¹ which is to say, two years after the first recorded performance of a Jewish-led spectacle. Precious few biographical details survive, but we do know that his position at court made of him an important intermediary between the Gonzaga and the Mantuan Jewish community. Extant letters point not only to his responsibilities as a playwright and organizer of court spectacles, but also to his role as a valued advocate both for the Jewish community as a whole, as well as for individual members who found themselves in need of assistance before the court (Pegna; D'Ancona, Origini 2: 406-08). Over the course of his career, De' Sommi wrote and directed over a dozen plays (mainly pastorals and comedies) in Italian and Hebrew. He was also a prolific poet and active as composer and director of marvelous *intermezzi* (*entr'acte* pieces).

De' Sommi composed his most enduring work, *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, as a dramatic dialogue between three speakers, Veridico, Massimiano and Santino. We understand from the opening lines of the dialogue that Massimiano and Santino are courtiers at the Gonzaga court, and that they are on their way to the home and workshop of Veridico, who is described as an embroiderer, playwright, and expert in all things theatrical. Over the course of the dialogues, Massimiano and Santino ask Veridico various questions about the theater and he answers them.

Veridico is quite explicitly De' Sommi's mouthpiece, while Massimiano and Santino act as his interlocutors, asking him questions and allowing him to expound upon his ideas regarding the theater. Veridico is never explicitly identified as Jewish; however,

several clues, which would have been more obvious to a contemporary reader, make this clear at the outset. As mentioned above, Veridico is described as an embroiderer, or *ricamatore*, placing him in the field of the cloth trade, one of the main areas of employment for Mantuan Jews in the sixteenth century (Simonsohn 254-57).²² The very word, *ricamatore*, conserves within itself a Semitic origin, deriving, as it does, from the Arabic word *raqama*, meaning *to embroider* or *to weave a material* (*DELI*).²³ Although we can safely assume that De' Sommi had no knowledge of Arabic, he surely knew the Hebrew cognate *raqam*, which appears in several derivations throughout the Hebrew Bible.²⁴ De' Sommi's masterful command of Hebrew is clearly attested to in his Italian translations of the Psalms, as well as in the Talmudic plot and refined language-replete with Biblical and Talmudic allusions-of his Hebrew-language comedy *Tsahut bedihuta deqiddushin*,²⁵ and in the skillful mingling of Italian and Hebrew in his 50-stanza dual-language poem in defense of women, "Magen nashim."²⁶ He is also clearly attuned to the derivation of words, and not averse to making creative use of etymology, as we shall see below. So, in addition to its more evident metaphorical meaning of embroiderer (Veridico, embroiderer of cloth becomes Veridico, embroiderer of plots in his work as playwright and theater director),²⁷ the term *ricamatore* accomplishes something that a similar word – *tessitore* (weaver) or *sarto* (tailor), for example-could not: it signals a Jewish subtext, a Jewish matrix.

Another subtle indicator pointing toward the Jewish subtext of the *Dialoghi* can be found in the very first word of the introductory preface, which begins:

Giudiciosamente certo da molti savii et antichi et moderni fu chiamata
scena mondana questa machina terrena, poiché adivieni propriamente
a gli uomini, mentre stanno al mondo, come avviene a gli istrioni su
per le scene [...] (QD 6).

While not etymologically related, there is strong assonance between the words *giudi[z]io* (judgment or wisdom) and *giudeo* (Jew), making *giudiciosamente* a striking word with which to begin the work.²⁸ We could take this phonic echo to be a coincidence if De' Sommi did not conspicuously repeat the term twice on the following page, for a total of three occurrences in the brief preface, followed by a fourth repetition on the following page (which is the first of the dialogue proper) when Massimiano ascribes the quality of *giudicio* directly to Veridico, saying to Santino, "Io vi fo sapere che il costui *giudicio* non è punto da sprezzare, et vale assai in molte cose, e

particolarmente nella poesia comica [...]” (QD 9. Emphasis mine.), as if to say that the director’s Judaism is not to be scorned, especially in regard to the theater. Furthermore, by emphasizing the term through repetition, De’ Sommi links the categories of *giudizio* and *giudeo*, thus ennobling the latter through association with an unambiguously positive term.

Returning to the opening of the preface, De’ Sommi utilizes the *theatrum mundi* topos to link the theater to the story of Creation. In so doing, he recalls the opening of one of the most famous texts of the Italian Renaissance, Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1487, first published in 1496), which begins, “Most venerable fathers, I have read in the records of the Arabian that Abdul the Saracen, on being asked what thing on, so to speak, the world’s stage, he viewed as most greatly worthy of wonder, answered that he viewed nothing more wonderful than man” (Pico della Mirandola 1). The allusion to the *Oratio* does not seem casual: not only does Pico also make an explicit link to a Semitic context by citing an Arab source, but the nod to Pico summons up another attempt to link Jewish sources to the roots of Christian and secular wisdom, and specifically foreshadows the use that De’ Sommi will make of kabbalistic theory, as we will see below.

Ultimately, what De’ Sommi will go on to say is that theater, when done right, is a divinely inspired creation, based on parameters laid out in the Hebrew Bible. In this way, he undermines the contempt with which a theater-loving Christian may have held Jewish culture, and the disdain a rigorously observant Jew may have exhibited toward the theater. De’ Sommi signals his heterogeneous audience by ending the opening sentence of his preface by saying that just as actors are judged by the audience at performance’s end according to how well they played their parts, each person receives divine reward or punishment at the end of life in accordance with how well he or she lived “nello stato e nella *profession* sua.” Already by the mid-14th century the term *professione* was used to indicate both an occupation and a religious declaration (*DELI*), so that De’ Sommi implicitly envisions a world in which inhabitants are not judged for having chosen the “correct” *professione*, but for conducting oneself well according to one’s own divinely assigned profession, of the many that exist.²⁹

After setting up the scene at the beginning of the first dialogue, Massiamiano asks Veridico to explain the nature and origin of comedy. This gives Veridico the chance to launch into the longest un-

interrupted speech in the *Dialoghi* – nearly 1,500 words in length – which he begins by restating the defense of comedy that had already been laid out in the preface, according to which,

[l]a comedia, secondo la sentenza de' piú 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 [...] (QD 12).

Though he begins by repeating a humanist commonplace about the didactic function of comedy,³⁰ Veridico quickly changes tack, veering into a highly idiosyncratic theory of the origins of theater, which sets him apart from other Renaissance commentators on the subject. He first attacks the ancient Greeks for having taken the credit and glory for inventing things that had already been created by others, and then goes on to demonstrate that theater did not first appear in Ancient Greece, but rather in Ancient Israel:

così a me pare di poter dire che quelli de 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 [...] (QD 13).³¹

De' Sommi presents the evidence for his claim, based on his own mixture of rabbinic scholarship, kabbalistic number theory, humanist anthropocentrism, and creative etymology. In brief, Veridico states that after having written the five books of the *Pentateuch*, Moses composed “la elegantissima et filosofica tragedia di Iobbe” (QD 14).³² And although he admits that the Book of Job was not written expressly for the purpose of performance, he states that it nonetheless became the model for “ogni poema atto a spettacolo scenico” (QD 14), since it was composed in the form of a discussion or conversation between various people.³³ Then, as further proof of the Jewish origin of the theater, he asserts that the Italian term *scena* (scene) derives not from the Greek *skené*, but rather from the Hebrew *shekhunah*, meaning neighborhood (QD 14).³⁴

Clearly, these considerations go beyond the practical necessities of mounting a play. Rather, here we can see our author pivoting quickly between his two apologies directed at his composite audience (Jewish and Christian), so that within a single speech, Veridico:

- 1) defends comedy as an “exemplary portrait of human life,” which has a moral function, has been approved by authority, and is derived from a divine model (the Book of Job); and

2) argues that Ancient Israel (not Ancient Greece) was the true birthplace of theater, having produced works fundamental not only for their theological content, but for their elegance, philosophy, and form. With this varied collection of moral, rhetorical, theological, historical, mystical, and etymological assertions, De' Sommi seeks to build a convincing argument in defense of both theater and Jewish culture by intertwining them: for, if the origin of theater is divine, it cannot be condemned on theological grounds, as some rabbis, including possibly De' Sommi's own teacher, Rabbi David Provenzali, attempted ; and if theater was born in Jerusalem rather than Athens, then the ancient culture of the Jews is deserving of at least as much intellectual respect as that of the Greeks and Romans.

Our author further intertwines theater and Jewish culture in the second dialogue, in which he returns to a notion he had nodded toward at the beginning of the first: the number 5. At the start of the second dialogue, Massimiano asks Veridico his opinion of the convention that characters should not exit the stage more than five times in a single scene. Veridico dismisses this custom as unfounded, but uses the opportunity to shift the conversation to the mystical significance of the quinary partition of plays, which, he notes, has never been adequately analyzed (QD 28). Before arriving at the main point, De' Sommi sets out to demonstrate, in his eclectic fashion, the perfection of the number 5 by offering mathematical and thaumaturgic evidence. He reiterates the conventional formula of comedy as a didactic imitation of civic life in order to bolster his assertion that it is a worthwhile endeavor, but then uses this commonplace to deftly shift to a humanist-kabbalistic argument, based on the divine design of the human body, its nature as a Virtruvian microcosm, and its perfection of form, according to a quinary system of composition: five senses; five extremities (the four limbs plus the head); five digits on the hands and feet; five principle parts of the head (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and brain); and five constituent parts of the body (bones, nerves, veins, cartilage, and flesh).

This enumeration of human anatomy leads directly to more esoteric kabbalistic considerations: the Pentateuch consists of 5,550 verses and is divided into five books, just as the Book of Psalms is traditionally divided into five sections (Midrash Tehillim 1.2); the essential vowels of the Hebrew Bible are five in number;³⁶ the di-

vine name of the Creator is composed of five Hebrew letters; and Moses employed five human interlocutors the Book of Job.³⁷ From this evidence Massimiano grasps Veridico's point:

MASSIMIANO – Noi caviamo dunque da questo nostro discorso che la comedia avrà da esser quasi che una imagine, ovvero un ritratto di un uomo perfetto.

VERIDICO – Così affermo [...] (QD 31).

With these calculations, De' Sommi seeks to associate the form of spectacle with that of the Scriptures and of the human form, both divine creations. In this way our author links the Vitruvian-humanist idea of the human form as a *parvus mundus* – a microcosmic model of the universe-and comedy as an imitation of civic life, to the Jewish notion of humankind created in the Divine image, so that, through a kind of mystical transitive property, theater comes to be a part of a divinely created and biblically sanctioned well-ordered world.

De' Sommi's use of kabbalistic number theory may be surprising in a treatise on the secular theater, but if we consider the social-historical context in which he wrote his work, it may become less so. In the decade preceding the *Dialoghi's* composition, Mantua had become not only a major center of kabbalistic learning, but also the site of a major effort to print and disseminate kabbalistic books (works which had previously been considered too esoteric and potentially dangerous to print, such as the *Zohar* [1558] and the *Sefer sha'arei orah* [1561]). This came about as a response to the increasing severity of post-Tridentine papal policies with regard to the Jews, including the public burning of the Talmud ordered by Pope Julius III in 1553. Faced with the threat of the erasure of their culture, many Jews sought to publish and circulate important works of law and mysticism in order to assure their continued survival and transmission, and Mantua became the leading center of kabbalistic publishing in Europe (Busi 54-56). In addition to his residence in a major center of kabbalistic learning and publishing, De' Sommi may have hoped to appeal to the intense curiosity of many Christians regarding Jewish mysticism, by framing his argument in kabbalistic terms. However, unlike many Christian Hebraists, who tended to empty out their kabbalistic sources of any Jewish specificity in order to demonstrate the veracity of Christian dogma, De' Sommi here uses elementary kabbalistic ideas to reinforce Jewish legitimacy. So, for instance, while the opening to

the dialogue recalls Pico della Mirandola's *Oration*, as discussed above, De' Sommi employs kabbalistic material to quite different ends than Pico: for, rather than combing the texts of Jewish mysticism to find evidence of the truth of Christian dogma,³⁸ our author uses kabbalistic theories as proof of Judaism's intrinsic worth.

Massimiano seems to throw a wrench into Veridico's reasoning when he asks about the perfection of spectacles divided into three parts instead of five (*QD* 33). To answer this question, Veridico embarks on a somewhat tortured explanation, according to which certain kinds of briefer spectacles may be divided in three, which is also perfect, in its own way conforming to the human form. It is clear from the profusion of negative terms and the circuitous syntax in this discussion that De' Sommi prefers quinary comedies to ternary farces and eclogues, but he seems at pains not to openly categorize the latter as inferior. If five is the number that proves theater's Jewish origin and divine sanction, it is difficult not to conceive of three as the number most closely associated with Christianity. By maintaining the superiority of the quinary-based system, without condemning outright a ternary construction, the author preserves the pride of place for Jewish culture, while not insulting Christians.

Throughout his *Dialoghi*, interspersed among the functional considerations of theater praxis, De' Sommi makes a case for the dignity of Jewish culture and of secular theater. This makes the *Dialoghi* a unique and significant Renaissance Italian text, not only as a valuable font of descriptions of the sixteenth-century Italian stage, or as a remarkable record of the practice of a modern theater director *avant le lettre*, but also as an impassioned and sophisticated plea for tolerance and openness, addressed both to Jews and Christians, born of a unique amalgam of humanist and rabbinic learning, a period of relative stability and safety, and the on-going intolerance toward Jews in Counter-Reformation Italy. De' Sommi's *Dialoghi* is a witness to Jewish-Christian relations in a particular time and place, mediated by an idiosyncratic conception of the theater, its dignity, and its divinely sanctioned role in improving the world.

NOTES

¹ Unfortunately, the full range of De' Sommi's production will likely never be discovered due to the tragic fact that the sixteen volumes containing the only known copies of almost all of De' Sommi's poems, plays,

and other writings were destroyed in the 1904 fire of the National University Library of Turin. For further details on the fire, see: Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino. The text of De' Sommi's *Dialoghi* was not published in its entirety until 1968, two years after the publication of the first complete English translation (Nicoll 252-278).

²For a comparison of the *Dialoghi* with three contemporary texts on stagecraft – Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio's *Discorsi intorno al comporre de i romanzi, delle commedie e delle tragedie*; Ludovico Castelvetro's *Poetica di Aristotele vulgarizzata et sposta*; and Alessandro Piccolomini's *Annotationi di M. Alessandro Piccolomini, nel libro della Poetica d'Aristotele* – see: chapter 2 of Scola. See also: "Introduction IV" to the 1968 edition of the *Quattro dialoghi*, edited by Ferruccio Marotti (lxi-lxx). For ease of reading, I will abbreviate references to De' Sommi's *Quattro dialoghi* as QD from this point forward.

³The one exception is Yonah David's article. Although my study touches upon some of the same themes as his, David's focus is on elucidating the rabbinic and kabbalistic sources of De' Sommi's affirmations. In the final paragraph of his article he briefly states that the *Dialoghi* have as their goals to demonstrate the role of the Ancient Israelites in the development of human civilization, and to create favorable conditions for the acceptance of his Hebrew-language plays within the Jewish community (127). However, David does not develop these points. In this article I modify these ideas and develop them, as well as expand their scope and place them in context.

⁴De' Sommi was not the only Italian Jew who attempted to synthesize the traditional Jewish canon and humanist thought and worldview. This impulse is perhaps best personified by a fellow Mantovano, Yehudah ben Yehiel Rofé (c. 1425-1498), better known as Judah Messer Leon: a rabbi, physician, teacher, and philosopher. Among his many writings is *Sefer nofet tsufim* (*The Book of Honeycomb's Flow*) published in Mantua in 1475, in which he seeks to show comprehensively that all the elegance and sophistication of classical rhetoric can already be found in the Hebrew Bible. Like De' Sommi, he seeks both to demonstrate the preeminence of Jewish culture in the terms of the classical Greco-Latin culture prized by non-Jews, and to make a case for the value of humanistic and secular studies by showing that they were, after all, born of Jewish sources. For more on Judah Messer Leon and other Early-Modern Jewish-Italian scholars who embarked on similar projects, see: Bonfil; Lesley; and Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought."

⁵This brief period of relative tranquility for the Jewish community of Mantua was soon followed by a worsening of conditions for Jews under the Gonzaga, and a series of disasters leading to the sacking of the Mantuan ghetto by invading German troops during the War of the Mantuan Succession (1630), and the subsequent banishment of all the surviving Jews from the city.

⁶These numbers reflect the Jews living within the city of Mantua, and

do not include the considerable number of Jews living in the smaller towns and villages throughout the Duchy of Mantua.

⁷ David Provenzali was a well regarded Mantuan rabbi, and was the teacher of our Leone de' Sommi. Although opposed to the theater on theological grounds, David Provenzali was just as much a man of his age as De' Sommi. Indeed, together with his son, Abraham, he formulated a bold plan in 1564 – never fully implemented – to establish a sort of Jewish university in Mantua, which would teach secular subjects alongside traditional Jewish studies. For an intriguing take on Provenzali's "Renaissance yeshiva," see: Miletto.

⁸ Although Colorni was primarily known for his expertise as an engineer and military expert, he was also involved in theater in the capacity of a "technical advisor in the theater of the Mantuan court" (Shulvass 248, 353).

⁹ For more on the Conat family press, see: Colorni.

¹⁰ Isacco Massarani (or Massarano) was also involved in stage productions in Mantua and Padua, as choreographer and dance director (Shulvass 248).

¹¹ Although Mantua in the mid- to late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries was a relatively secure place for Jews, the Jewish community did not live free of harassment. Anti-Jewish riots were not uncommon, and itinerant preachers occasionally fomented anti-Jewish sentiment in the populace leading to violence and murder, as was the case in 1602 following the incendiary sermons of Fra' Bartolomeo Cambi. See: Simonsohn 25-28; 31-39.

¹² "The Mantuan Jews had arrived at unprecedented levels of mobility and self-determination under Guglielmo Gonzaga. [...] Unger 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" (Beecher 8).

¹³ This theatrical obligation was highly peculiar: no other Italian-Jewish community had similar arrangements with its ruler. D'Ancona notes that the Jews of Venice put on plays, but only for a Jewish public, as Christians were prohibited by law from attending (*Origini* 2: 429n).

¹⁴ "La quantità delle recite effettuate dagli israeliti è imponente. [...] [Dal 1580 al 1630], tranne quando i duchi trascorrevano il carnevale lontano dalla capitale, l'Università non mancò alcuno degli abituali appuntamenti con la commedia. Generalmente era loro affidata proprio la 'commedia grande', lo spettacolo drammatico principale che veniva eseguito tra il giovedì. e il martedì. grasso [...]" (Buratelli 166).

¹⁵ "Se i primi accenni alla restaurazione del teatro antico si videro fra noi in Roma ai tempi di Paolo II e di Sisto IV [...] egli è pure bene assodato che la città ove esso veramente nacque dalle sue ceneri fu Ferrara, per opera di Ercole I. Ma immediatamente seconda a Ferrara deve porsi Mantova, dove

lo spettacolo scenico cominci. a fiorire sotto la protezione di Francesco Gonzaga ed Isabella d'Este sua moglie, e dove, per più favorevoli condizioni, la tradizione drammatica dur. più a lungo che non nella corte estense, con gloria e splendore singolarissimi" (D'Ancona, 1985, 1).

¹⁶ The exact dates and circumstances of composition and performance of Poliziano's *Orfeo* have been hotly debated for over a hundred years. For a succinct summary of the various theories, see: Orvieto 312-14. Rather than envisioning the *Orfeo* as constituting a radical break with the dramatic traditions of the Middle Ages, some scholars read Poliziano's *Fabula* as a development of the medieval sacred drama, finding within it a profoundly religious message despite its profane trappings. As Francesco Bausi states, "Nell'*Orfeo* ciò che soprattutto conta è il contenuto morale e religioso del testo e della vicenda in esso narrata" (Poliziano 33). Although this reading is contested, it dovetails nicely with De' Sommi's mystical-moral-religious understanding of secular comedy, as he details in his *Dialoghi* some seventy-five years after the *Orfeo*'s Mantuan debut. For the religious reading of the *Orfeo*, see, especially: Martelli.

¹⁷ See, for example, point seven of *Cum nimis absurdum*: "Nor should [the Jews] be so presumptuous as to entertain or dine with Christians or to develop close relations and friendships with them" (Stowe 296).

¹⁸ The reference to this performance is in a letter dated February 25, 1525 (D'Ancona, *Origini* 2: 398).

¹⁹ After returning from the expulsion of 1630, the Jewish community was active on stage again between 1644 and 1650, after which the Jews' obligation was transmuted to a monetary tax by Duke Carlo II.

²⁰ The Jews of Mantua staged both original works and plays by other playwrights. For instance, they performed Ariosto's *Suppositi* in December 1563, on occasion of the visit to Mantua of the Archdukes of Austria, Rudolf and Ernest (D'Ancona, 1891, 402). However, De' Sommi, in his *Dialoghi*, states his preference for performing original works (QD 38).

²¹ There is some uncertainty as to the exact years of De' Sommi's birth and death. Conflicting documents point to two possibilities: 1525-1590; and 1527-1592. For more on the documentation of De' Sommi's biography, see: Kaufmann.

²² "La diffusa attività di commercio di stoffe e straccerie e la concentrazione dei banchi dei pegni facevano del ghetto, a Mantova come altrove, il deposito ideale cui attingere, non di rado senza spesa, per il reperimento degli abiti e accessori richiesti dal teatro e dal carnevale. [...]" (Buratelli 146).

²³ Many thanks to Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal for help with the Arabic.

²⁴ Words derived from the root verb *raqam* appear in the account of the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus, in which the Israelites are commanded to "make a drape for the entrance of the tent, of sky-blue, dark red and crimson wool, and fine twined linen. It shall be embroidered work [literally, "an embroiderer's work": *ma'aseh roqem*]" (Ex. 26:36). Other deri-

ventions of *raqam* appear in Psalms, Ezekiel, Judges, and I Chronicles.

²⁵ Incidentally, De' Sommi attempts a similar apology for the secular theater and Jewish culture in the prologue to his Hebrew comedy, *Tsahut bedihuta deqiddushin* (*A Comedy of Betrothal*). A character named Hokhmah, or Wisdom, declares to the audience that the author's goals are to prove that Hebrew is better suited than all other languages for literary pursuits, and to counter the disdain in which the learned men of other lands hold the Jews, because of their supposed lack of literary skill. She also lays out a defense against those Jews who would object to using the Holy Tongue in a profane setting.

²⁶ For a study of De' Sommi's translation of the Psalms, see: Scola, chap. 1. See, also: Peyron 279-80. For texts and discussions of De' Sommi's Hebrew comedy and poem, see: De' Sommi, *Tsahut*; De' Sommi, *A Comedy*; Lipshitz; and Jaffe-Berg.

²⁷ The present-day figurative usage of *ricamare* to mean "to embellish a fact or story with fanciful invented details," only arose in the following century (first recorded usage: 1663) (*DELI*).

²⁸ There are three overlapping terms for *Jew* in Italian: *giudeo*; *ebreo*; *israelita*. At various points in history one term or another has been preferred. At Mantua in the 16th century, both *giudeo* and *ebreo* were commonly used. Both terms can be found, for instance, in letters cited by Alessandro D'Ancona in the appendix to his second volume on the origins of Italian theater: 1) "Domani si farà un'altra Comedia pur a casa delli figlioi del q.^m s.^r Zoanne, quale recitaràno li Judei per esser anche per loro composta: et cussi spassaremo questo poco Carnevale" (1525); 2) "L'interterimento pare che possa essere di un paro di Comedie [...] Di queste due, si è disegnato di farne recitare una a' nostri recitanti di Mantova, e l'altra a gli Hebrei. [...]" (1549) (D'Ancona, 1985: 398, 401).

²⁹ Incidentally, De' Sommi also makes an implicit analogy between the theater director and director of the Universe, as it were, which, aside from betraying a perhaps inflated sense of self-importance, expresses well the fundamental role in the theater that De' Sommi envisions for the director, which contradicts the assumption that the director as mastermind of a theatrical production did not come into existence until the nineteenth century.

³⁰ Here De' Sommi cites a theory of comedy commonly accepted by Renaissance theorists, based on the writings of Horace, Cicero and Aelius Donatus, which emphasized the moral and didactic aspects of comedy. It very closely resembles Donatus' concise formulation: "Comoedia est fabula diversa instituta continens affectuum civilium ac privatorum, quibus discitur quid sit in vita utile, quid contra evitandum" (Donatus 67).

³¹ In contesting the Greek claim to primacy in theater, De' Sommi is implicitly wading into the great debates on Aristotelian poetic theory that had been raging in Italy since the publication of Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of the *Poetics* (1498). Although, as mentioned above, De' Sommi's

text is notable for its unapologetic attention to pragmatic matters, his theories on the origin, purpose, and proper form of the tragic and comic genres, and certain of his pragmatic choices, enter onto the terrain of Aristotelian theory. Even if De' Sommi could not read Latin he would have had access to the *Poetics* in its 1549 translation into Italian by Bernardo Segni. If De' Sommi could read the Latin commentaries on the *Poetics*, he would have found company in his skeptical stance toward Aristotle's claims. Not only did some early commentators (such as Lombardi and Maggi [1550] and Giraldi [1554]) tend to retain the received Horatian theories of poetry, even going so far as to force Aristotle's text in order to make it conform to the *Ars poetica*, but they unabashedly challenged Aristotle's infallibility and applicability to modern practices. See: Weinberg 1: 476.

³² The attribution of the authorship of Job to Moses is a rabbinic idea, as attested to in the Babylonian Talmud, see: Bava batra 14b. For De' Sommi's proof texts on these points, see: David 120-21.

³³ "Onde da questa et da molte altre conietture, argomento io che antichissima debba essere l'invenzione della comedia, e più assai che da' scrittori greci non ci vien persuaso, sí che, per non uscir di proposito, torno a dire per mio parere che non credo ingannarmi affermando che dal poema di Iobbe da me alegato (piú antico senza dubbio che nessuno altro di cui si abbia notizia) debbano aver ritratto i primi poeti l'uso delle comedie [...]" (QD 15).

³⁴ The Italian term *scena*, as well as its English cognate *scene*, does in fact derive from the Greek *skéné*, meaning *tent*.

³⁵ For a discussion of Jewish opposition to classical theater in the Rabbinic period, and evidence of Jewish participation in the theater nonetheless, see: Feldman. Incidentally, Feldman also discusses Jewish attempts during the Hellenistic period to demonstrate that Greek philosophy stemmed from the Hebrew Bible, constituting a considerable precedence for De' Sommi's apologetical strategy, more than a millennium later.

³⁶ Kabbalists, such as Abraham Abulafia, attached mystical meaning to the five essential vowels of Biblical Hebrew. For more on this, see: Idel, especially chap. 1.

³⁷ For a discussion of De' Sommi's source texts on these points, see: David 123-27.

³⁸ "I come now to those things that I have dug up from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrew and have brought forward in order to confirm the holy and Catholic faith," (Pico della Mirandola 29). And again: "When I had procured myself these books [of kabbalah] at no small expense and had read them through with the greatest diligence and unwearied labor, I saw in them (God is my witness) a religion not so much Mosaic as Christian. [...]" (32). For a discussion of Christian Hebraists' treatment of the kabbalah and their interaction with Jewish scholars during the Renaissance, see: Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance" esp. 395-406.

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