



## **Ariosto's Astute Arrogance: The Construction of the Comic City in La Lena**

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Résumé de l'article

Cet essai examine la poétique théâtrale de l'Arioste en retraçant le développement du sens de l'espace théâtral dans son oeuvre et la manière dont il est lié à son époque. L'Arioste s'approprie d'abord les modèles romains de décors de scène, pour ensuite en explorer les possibilités comiques par une appréciation plus nuancée de la représentation de la ville, qui dépasse le fond de scène. Ainsi, il inclut sa ville d'origine, Ferrare, dans la forme comique, ce qui en fait à la fois une antithèse subversive de la ville de cour et une source de possibilités pour la comédie. Cet aspect s'observe en particulier dans deux comédies: *Il Negromante* (1520 et 1528) et, davantage encore, dans *La Lena* (1528), dans lesquelles Ferrare (nommée ou non) prend une importance croissante dans la construction de la « cité comique ». Enfin, les transformations que fait subir l'Arioste à la tradition théâtrale s'observent dans sa mise en cause et sa satire des moeurs et des vices de Ferrare, ce qui donne le jour aux meilleures pièces de théâtre de la « comédie savante » italienne.

# Ariosto's Astute Arrogance: The Construction of the Comic City in *La Lena*

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*This essay interrogates Ludovico Ariosto's theatrical poetics by charting his developing sense of the theatrical space and his embrace of the contemporary. From an initial appropriation of Roman stage models to a more nuanced appreciation of the comic possibilities afforded through a modernizing use of the contemporary city as more than a mere backdrop, Ariosto inscribed his native Ferrara in comic form, at once a subversive antithesis to the idealized courtly city and a repository for comedic potentialities. This is most evident in two of his comedies: Il Negromante (1520; 1528) and, in particular, La Lena (1528), in which Ferrara (both named and unnamed) assumes an increasingly important role in the construction of the "comic city." Ultimately, Ariosto's transformation of theatrical tradition may be located in his interrogation and satirization of the vices and mores of Ferrara, resulting in the creation of one of the finest plays of the Italian Commedia erudita.*

*Cet essai examine la poétique théâtrale de l'Arioste en retraçant le développement du sens de l'espace théâtral dans son œuvre et la manière dont il est lié à son époque. L'Arioste s'approprie d'abord les modèles romains de décors de scène, pour ensuite en explorer les possibilités comiques par une appréciation plus nuancée de la représentation de la ville, qui dépasse le fond de scène. Ainsi, il inclut sa ville d'origine, Ferrare, dans la forme comique, ce qui en fait à la fois une antithèse subversive de la ville de cour et une source de possibilités pour la comédie. Cet aspect s'observe en particulier dans deux comédies: Il Negromante (1520 et 1528) et, davantage encore, dans La Lena (1528), dans lesquelles Ferrare (nommée ou non) prend une importance croissante dans la construction de la « cité comique ». Enfin, les transformations que fait subir l'Arioste à la tradition théâtrale s'observent dans sa mise en cause et sa satire des mœurs et des vices de Ferrare, ce qui donne le jour aux meilleures pièces de théâtre de la « comédie savante » italienne.*

Tuttavia, essendoci  
già radunati qui, stiamo un po' taciti  
a riguardarli. Non ci può materia,  
ogni modo, mancar oggi da ridere,  
che, se non rideremo de l'arguzia  
de la comedia, almen de l'arroganzia  
del suo compositor potremo ridere.  
(*La Lena*, lines 25–31, p. 116)

(Nonetheless, as we are gathered here, let us be quiet and watch. In any event, we'll not lack a subject for mirth, for if we don't laugh at the humor of the comedy, at least we'll be able to laugh at the presumption of its author.) (p. 161)<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Ludovico Ariosto concludes the prologue of the first version of *La Lena* (1528). Here, Ariosto encapsulates his entire comic intent; the invitation to the audience to be silent for the forthcoming play is followed by an ironic *captatio benevolentiae* which entreats them to decide between the *arguzia* of the play or the *arroganzia* of the author.<sup>2</sup> Today most critics agree that the play is successful in its *arguzia*, and for comic value we need not rely on the author's *arroganzia* to provide it for us. The comedy is one of the highlights of the Italian Cinquecento, and convinces us in its own right.<sup>3</sup> But it is exactly that *arroganzia* of Ariosto's which renders the work a masterpiece of the *Commedia erudita* and gives *La Lena* its *arguzia*. In short, one is a product of the other.

*Arroganzia* would hardly seem to be a prerequisite for successful and innovative comic writing, yet, although the word is laden with other meanings, it is an interesting point of departure by which we may come to an understanding of Ariosto's comic art. The *arroganzia* in question has the meaning of presumption and audacity, in the sense that the poet dared to adapt Roman comedy for the Ferrarese stage and thereby create a modern comedy. Not only did Ariosto borrow from the novelistic tradition, but he added the element of setting. The choice of setting may not initially strike us as being innovative or important, but in the theatre of Ariosto's day, setting aided the movement from the Roman stage to contemporary Italian theatre. Ludovico Zorzi writes that Ariosto

1. Ludovico Ariosto, *Commedie*, ed. Cesare Segre (Turin: Einaudi, 1976). Act, scene, and line numbers (where relevant) will appear in parentheses in the main text followed by a page reference to this edition. Translations from Ariosto's comedies, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Ludovico Ariosto, *The Comedies of Ariosto*, trans. and ed. Edmond M. Beame and Leonard G. Sbrocchi (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975). Translations from secondary sources are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2. The two key terms here have manifold meanings. I take this Latinate form *arguzia* to have the meaning of sharp, witty, and astute, whereas *arroganzia* denotes both arrogance and presumption.

3. See Giorgio Padoan, *L'avventura della commedia rinascimentale* (Padua: Piccin Nuova Libreria, 1996), 9–55.

tra i commediografi rinascimentali, è il primo a compiere il passo del trasferire nella realtà di un ambiente circostanziato e referibile l'indefinita astrattezza del luogo scenico latino.<sup>4</sup>

(of the writers of comedy in the Renaissance, is the first to transfer the ill-defined abstractness of the Latin scenic space into the reality of a circumscribed and recognizable setting.)

This essay will examine Ariosto's rapport with the city, limiting the discussion to *Il Negromante* and *La Lena*, as both reflect Ariosto's more mature and innovative approach to comedy, though some mention will be given to *La Cassaria* and *I Suppositi* in terms of their setting. The function of an urban setting is important for comedy, distinguishing it from other dramatic forms. With regard to Ariosto, the very urbanity of his comedies comes to play an increasingly important role on a thematic level. A playwright's choice and treatment of location form part of his strategy for guiding audience response; in Ariosto's case, it also contributes to our understanding of how he viewed contemporary life within the city. Ariosto's representation of Ferrara will be the focus here, for not only does Ferrara lend itself to Ariosto's comic art, it also becomes the main protagonist of it. Ferrara, then, is both nurturer and victim of Ariosto's *arroganzia*.

Ariosto's idea of the city may be synonymous with or even a metonym for mischief, stupidity, corruption, and overall vice, but this should not restrict the spectator to viewing these plays merely from the standpoint of social commentary or satire—in the form of a realistic mirror shown to a society that would rather conceal such dark, unsettling realities. Ariosto's concept, which is very far indeed from the idea of the *città ideale* (ideal city) of the court, should rather be considered as serving a dual purpose.<sup>5</sup> Ariosto's city is a *città ideale* insofar as it is not a real city but a comic construct, which allows him the freedom to heighten and, to a degree, exaggerate its portrayal to fit his comic ends. In this sense, it is a *città ideale* that represents a "comic society." The characters are the representatives of this proposed society. The intrigue that forms the basis of the plot pertains to this city. The secondary purpose of

4. Ludovico Zorzi, *Il teatro e la città: saggi sulla scena italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 31.

5. See the "Premessa" (prologue) to Gianni Carlo Sciolla, ed., *La città ideale nel Rinascimento* (Turin: UTET, 1975).

the city is to provide the playwright with a space that is ideological, and thus the stage is transformed into an authorial ideological construct. Furthermore, Ariosto's theatrical output marks a line of development that moves towards a darker articulation of reality; it began with the imitation of classical models and was finally realized through the action of *La Lena*. Reality is, however, often too tragic and painful to fulfill the requirements of comedy. One way of tackling the issue and rendering it comic is through the use of satire. The city, through the integration of both its idealized and satirized forms, is metamorphosed into the "comic city."

The comic city in Ariosto's comedies is undoubtedly Ferrara. Indeed, Ferrara played an essential role in the re-discovery, promotion, and patronage of comic theatre in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> Under the rule of Duke Ercole I, Ferrara emerged as the leading exponent and developer of comic theatre in Italy.<sup>7</sup> Although the Duke is remembered primarily in the *Orlando Furioso* as being the progenitor of Alfonso and Ippolito, his other more notable achievements do receive mention:

E quanto più aver obliigo si possa  
 a principe, sua terra avrà a costui;  
 non perché fia de le paludi mossa  
 tra campi fertilissimi da lui;  
 non perché la farà con muro e fossa  
 meglio capace a' cittadini sui,  
 e l'ornarà di templi e di palagi  
 di piazze, di teatri e di mille agi. (*Orlando Furioso*, 3.48)<sup>8</sup>

(As deep indebtedness as any State / Will feel towards its prince, Ferrara's  
 debt / Will ever be to him, not only that, / Removed from marsh and  
 bog, she will be set / In fertile plains, nor that he'll there create / More

6. See Werner L. Gundersheimer, *Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973) and Denis Looney and Deanna Shemek, eds., *Phaethon's Children: The Este Court and Its Culture in Early Modern Ferrara* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

7. See Thomas Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole d'Este (1471–1505) and the Invention of a Ducal Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 234–76.

8. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, ed. Marcello Turchi (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), 68.

amplitude within the new walls, nor yet / That temples, palaces to make  
her fair / He'll build, and theatres, and many a square.)<sup>9</sup>

The “teatri” in question were the productions of many Roman comedies from 1486 to the time of his death in 1504. In 1501, the *Mercator*, *Captivi*, and *Asinaria* were performed on three successive days. Ercole's determination to make Ferrara the leading theatrical city of Italy helped encourage translations of Latin texts for performance. As Radcliff-Umstead states: “Theatrical productions were thus affairs of the state.”<sup>10</sup> Giulio Ferroni offers an interesting interpretation of this court cultural movement, stating that

l'intera scena cortigiana cinquecentesca può essere definita come produzione di scena, sistema di rappresentazione che offre uno spettacolo che si riflette in se stesso, in quanto la corte ne è completamente produttrice e spettatrice.<sup>11</sup>

(the entire sixteenth-century theatre scene of the court can be defined as a staging of plays, a system of representation that offers a spectacle that reflects itself back to itself, inasmuch as the court is wholly both its producer and audience.)

Ariosto's first comedy, *La Cassaria*, was produced in 1508. It was written in prose and set in the ancient city of Metilino. The courtier Bernardino Proserpi wrote a letter to Isabella d'Este, the sister of Duke Alfonso, describing the occasion:

Luni sera, il Cardinale fece fare una comedia composta per m. Lud.o Ariosto suo familiare et traducta in forma de barzeleta o sia frotola, la quale dal principio al fine fo de tanta elegantia et de tanto piacere, quanto alcun altra che mai ne vedessi fare, e da ogni canto fo molto comendata. Lo

9. All translations from the *Furioso* are taken from Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso (The Frenzy of Orlando): A Romantic Epic by Ludovico Ariosto*, trans. and ed. Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1975), 170.

10. Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, *The Birth of Modern Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), 62.

11. Giulio Ferroni, *Il testo e la scena. Saggi sul teatro del Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), 9.

suggieto fu bellissimo. [...] Ma quello che è stato il meglio in tutte queste feste et rapresentationi, è stato tute le sene, dove si sono representate, quale ha facto uno M. o Peregrino (Pellegrino da Udine) depintore, che sta con il Sig.re; ch'è una contracta et prospettiva di una terra cum case, chiesie, torre, campanili et zardini, che la persona non si può satiare a guardarla per le diverse cose che ge sono, tute de inzegno et bene intese, quale non credo se guasti, ma che la salvarano per usarla de le altre fiate.

(On Monday night the Cardinal had one [a comedy] performed which was composed by Messer Ludovico Ariosto of his household, translated into the form of a *barzeleta* or *frottola*, which from start to finish was as elegant and pleasing as any I ever saw done, and was greatly commended. The story was a very good one. [...] The best part of all the plays and festivals has been the scenery in which they have been performed, which was by one master Peregrino [Pellegrino da Udine], a painter employed by his Lordship—there is a perspective view of part of a town with houses, churches, belfries and gardens. A person cannot tire of looking at it, for the variety of things depicted there, all cleverly and well planned, and I think that it will not be wasted but they will keep it to use on other occasions.)<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from the letter that the play was well received by the audience in the ducal palace. Emphasis, however, was given to the scenic backdrop painted by Pellegrino da Udine and his use of perspective. Andrews points out one discrepancy in the overall production of the play when he states that “the plot lagged behind the scenery in terms of recognizable relevance to the

12. Quoted in Vito Pandolfi, *Il teatro del rinascimento e la commedia dell'arte* (Rome: Lerici, 1969), 48. The English version has been supplied by Professor Richard Andrews with some modifications from his *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36–37. In addition, Andrews explains that Prospero, listening to the prose version of *La Cassaria* and not having seen the written text, was not in a position to work out which verse metre Ariosto used for the play—the assumption being that it had to have been written in verse, as no play had ever been performed in prose (except for the *Formicone*, composed and performed privately for Isabella in Mantua in 1502). Therefore, he made the assumption that the freewheeling nonsense which *giullari* used for stand-up comic harangues had no rules at all about line lengths or the position of rhymes; and those were called *frottole* or (in Prospero's understanding) *barzelette*. The letter is also reproduced in Michele Catalano, *Vita di Ludovico Ariosto ricostruita su nuovi documenti* (Geneve: Olschki, 1930), 138.

contemporary world.”<sup>13</sup> The use of a city from antiquity displays a desire on Ariosto's part to stick closely to the classical forerunners. Prosperi's mention of “case, chiese, campanili e zardini” (houses, churches, belfries, and gardens) does, however, suggest a more modernizing impulse to the comedy. The 1532 verse rendering of *La Cassaria* displays a marked change in setting: Ariosto substitutes the town of Metilino with that of Sibari. In fact, Aulo Greco believes that the city represented on the stage constitutes the first intimations of a contemporary Ferrara.<sup>14</sup>

In 1509 Ariosto staged his second play *I Suppositi*.<sup>15</sup> The setting on this occasion was contemporary Ferrara itself. In another letter to Isabella d'Este, Prosperi writes:

Marti sera il Rev.o Cardinale fece la sua (*I Suppositi*) composta per D. Ludovico Ariosto, comedia invero per moderna, tuta delectevole et piena di moralità et parole et gesti da riderne assai cum triplice fallacie o sia sottopositione. Lo argomento fo recitato per lo compositore, et è bellissimo et multo accomodato a li modi et costumi nostri, perché il caso accadete a Ferrara, secundo lui finge.<sup>16</sup>

(Tuesday evening the Cardinal staged the comedy (*I Suppositi*) by Ludovico Ariosto, a truly modern comedy, quite delightful, full of modern observations, and lots of hilarious words and actions with three cases of disguise or false identity. The topic is excellent and very close to our ways and customs, as the writer makes us believe that the action takes place in Ferrara.)

By using this contemporary city, Ariosto begins the process of bringing his comic art to a fully realized contemporary comedy, free from the repetitive themes and stock characters of the Roman stage. Although he still borrows heavily from his classical predecessors, he does give the play a contemporary

13. Andrews, 38.

14. Aulo Greco, *L'istituzione del teatro comico nel rinascimento* (Naples: Liguori, 1976), 55.

15. For an excellent introductory study of *I Suppositi*, with a translation of the comedy, see Donald Beecher, ed., *Renaissance Comedy: The Italian Masters*, 2 vols. (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 2:11–87.

16. Pandolfi, 48.



patina and atmosphere. References to Ferrara in *I Suppositi* also constitute some of the more comic and satiric moments in the comedy. For instance, Filogono criticizes the customs officials in the area when speaking to the gentleman of Ferrara:

il fastidio de gli importuni gabellieri che vi usano. Quante volte mi hanno aperto uno forziere che ho meco in nave e quella valigia, e rovistato e voltomi sozopra ciò che io vi ho dentro, e ne la tasca m'hanno voluto vedere e cercare nel seno! (4.3, p. 92)

(the trouble that customs officials give you. How many times did they open the coffer that I have on the boat and this valise; how many times did they search them and turn all the contents upside down. They wanted to look in my pocket and to search down to my bare chest!) (p. 76)

It is to Lico, however, that most of the play's comic lines are given: "Non mi piacque mai questo nome Ferrara: ma veggio ora che sono assai peggiori gli effetti, che non è la nominanza" (4.6, p. 96; "I never liked the name Ferrara; but now I see that the thing itself is worse than the name," p. 80). Lico specifically blames "gli ufiziali" ("the officials") for allowing such cheating in the city. When the Ferrarese gentleman retorts that they understood little of such matters, Lico responds:

Anzi credo che intendino pochissimo, e mal volentieri, dove guadagno non vedono. Doverebbero aprir li occhi, et aver le orecchie più patenti che non hanno le porte l'osterie. (4.6, pp. 96–97)

(On the contrary, I think they're aware of very little and they're not concerned where they don't see any profit. They should have their eyes and ears open wider than the doors of the taverns.) (p. 80)

It is a gentle form of satire and one that was obviously pleasing to the court. Andrews writes that the spectators "would be more struck by the simple identification of the experience than by any serious attempt at criticism

or satire.”<sup>17</sup> These moments, however, are essential ingredients to our understanding of the developing sense of modern drama in Ariosto, modern in the sense that what once bound him to his classical counterparts is slowly being relinquished and cast off in an effort to provide innovation and modernity through contemporary framing, references, and situations. Ariosto also has the servant Lico use a pun that goes some way in defining the city of Ferrara:

Patrone, non ti dissi io che eramo in Ferrara? Ecco la fé del tuo servo Dulippo, che nega conoscerti! Ha preso de' costumi di qua. (4.7, p. 98)

(Master, didn't I tell you we were in Ferrara? You see the faith of your servant Dulippo who denies knowing you! He's picked up the customs of this city.) (p. 81)

The ironic blurring and fusion of “Ferrara” and “fé rara” (“rare faith”) is an illuminating play on words which adds to the satirical element in the comedy. Ferroni adds that the “teatralizzazione della città” (theatricalization of the city) finds its most recognizable point in this play on words.<sup>18</sup> Another interesting passage from *I Suppositi*, which is pertinent to the present study, calls into question the very idea of the city within the limits of the stage. Again it is Lico who speaks:

Patrone, il mondo è grande. Non credi tu che vi sia più d'una Catania e più d'una Sicilia, e più d'uno Filogono e d'uno Erostrato, e più d'una Ferrara ancora? Questa non è forse la Ferrara dove sta il tuo figliuolo, che noi cerchiamo? (4.4, p. 95)

(Master, the world is large. Don't you think there's more than one Catania and more than one Sicily, more than one Filogono and more than one Erostrato, and even more than one Ferrara? Perhaps this isn't the Ferrara where your son, whom we're looking for, is staying.) (p. 79)

17. Andrews, 46.

18. Ferroni, 115.

The idea of two Ferraras suggests the twin aspects of dramatic representation and reality. The stage represents the city in microcosm, it mirrors the reality which the members of the audience know and experience each day. The stage Ferrara is, therefore, a duplicate of the city it imitates. The outcome is a movement from stage to reality, the stage becomes a heightened or exaggerated version of reality. Lico's lines also suggest a playful metatheatrical intent, at once defining and highlighting the limits of stage representation.

Ariosto's personal rapport with the city is at the very core of his theatrical poetics, and each of his plays announces this rapport. Each of his comedies is set in a city—Ferrara being both the implied and specifically-named city—and furthermore, each is set in a piazza, a place that not only lends itself to the unity of action but also facilitates a representation of city life in both its public and private spheres. Zorzi writes,

il teatro ribadisce il tramite tra l'illusione scenica e l'immagine della città: è la Ferrara che l'Ariosto precepisce come modello ideale, come dimensione municipale e tuttavia estensibile ai confini di una patria, come cifra politica accettabile a misura.<sup>19</sup>

(the theatre reiterates the path between scenic illusion and image of the city: it is this Ferrara that Ariosto perceives as an ideal model, as a municipal dimension and therefore may be extended to the limits of a homeland, as a politically acceptable figure made to the measure of man.)

The action of the play takes place in what he terms the “piazza reale-simbolica” (real-symbolic square); it is the locus of illusion and reality, where the integration of the two produces comedy. This emphasis on the centrality of setting is clearly articulated in the prologue to *Il Negromante*.<sup>20</sup>

The comedy marked the beginning of Ariosto's second great phase of theatrical activity. He began writing *Il Negromante* in 1509 and left it unfinished. At the request of Pope Leo X he completed the play in 1520 and later reworked the text with some minor alterations and additional scenes for *carnevale* in 1528. The action is nominally set in Cremona, yet most critics

19. Zorzi, 26–27.

20. I am using the text from the 1528 version of the comedy.

agree that Ferrara is again the focus of the playwright's attention. The prologue provides interesting comments about the setting and its appearance; it states that "qui troverete Cremona essere / oggi venuta intera col suo popolo" (lines 10–11; "[you shouldn't be surprised] to find the whole city of Cremona, with its entire population"). It then proceeds to explain any confusion that may arise from this fact: "So che alcuni diranno ch'ella è simile, / e forse ancora ch'ella è la medesima / che fu detta Ferrara, recitandosi / la *Lena*" (lines 14–17, p. 184; "I know that some of you will say that she looks quite like Ferrara and was actually called Ferrara when the *Lena* was performed," p. 101).

On a purely literal level Ariosto is referring to the staging of *La Lena* a few days previously, in which he must have used the same set and backdrop. The reference allows us to infer that Ariosto intended a comparison between the cities, and that the Cremona of the stage is the "medesima" (same) Ferrara. The prologue continues by adding more irony to the situation:

ma avvertite e ricordatevi / che gli è da carnival, che si travestono / le  
persone; e le foggie, ch'oggi portano / questi, fur ier di quegli altri, e  
darannole / domane ad altri, et essi alcun altro abito, / ch'oggi ha alcun  
altro, doman vestirannosi. (lines 17–22, p. 184)

(But you must remember that this is carnival time and people disguise themselves. The fashions that some wear today were worn by others yesterday and will be passed on to still others tomorrow.) (p. 101)

Beneath these layers of appearance lies an undressed city. The city is by necessity dressed up for its comic representation in such a way as to obscure and conceal its true identity. The city, therefore, becomes a comic mask. The mask's true purpose is concealment. This is, after all, *carnevale*, a time in which appearances are deliberately deceptive. Andrews states that Ariosto's choice of setting was also based on a desire to represent a city that was neutral and detached from his own, and thereby convince the audience "to see the play as an artistic generalization."<sup>21</sup> However, this view does not take into consideration the atmosphere of *carnevale* in which masking and concealing identity were the order of the day. The prologue of *Il Negromante* fits perfectly

21. Andrews, 83.

with the general atmosphere of *carnevale* and undoubtedly won the audience over at the comedy's outset. The prologue is also interesting in that it provides a useful interpretation for the setting of the action in a public sphere. The passage functions through its use of verbal scenography:

S'avete volontà pur d'informarvene, / sono in piazza alcun' banchi, alcuni  
fondachi, / alcune speziarie, che mi par ch'abbiano / poche faccende,  
dove si riducono / questi che cercan nuove, e solo intendono / ciò che in  
Vinegia e ciò che in Roma s'ordina; / se Francia o Spagna abbia condutti i  
Svizari, / pur i Lanzchenech al suo stipendio. / Questi san tutte le cose che  
occorrono/ di fuor; ma quelle che lor più appertengono, / che fan le mogli,  
che fan l'altre femine / di casa, mentre essi stan quivi a battere / il becco,  
non san forse, e non si curano / di saper. (lines 31–44, pp. 184–85)

(If you want more information you'll find some money exchanges, some drapery shops, and some grocery stores in the piazza, which don't seem very busy. Those who want to hear the news hang out there, where they learn of events in Venice and Rome and whether France or Spain has hired Swiss or German mercenaries. These people know all that happens abroad; but they probably don't know and don't care to know about those things that most directly affect them—what their wives and the other women in their households are doing while they stand there beating their gums.) (pp. 101–02)

The square is the domain of the men-folk of the community. Their ignorance of matters pertaining to their own domestic situation is what creates the plots of these comedies. In Ariosto's theatrical work, female characters are notably absent from the stage (Lena is the exception to this rule); apart from some minor characters and maidservants, the square remains a strict male preserve. The square, then, is the area in which men go about their business and commit their greatest follies.

Deception and stupidity are the unifying themes of *Il Negromante*; the plot is centred on the villainous Iachelino, the "Astrologo" (astrologer) of the play. Through his character, Ariosto seeks to expose and satirize the gullible nature of men who are all too willing to believe in secret potions and miracle cures. Temolo, Cintio's servant, is the only character who is not taken in by

the Astrologer's deceptions. Temolo is also Ariosto's most accomplished *servus*, and functions as a mouthpiece of the author. In act 1, scene 3, he wickedly reveals the truth about Iachelino to the deaf Cintio and Fazio. He pokes fun at their collective ignorance in an effort to restore reason, displaying great verbal tenacity and wit. When Cintio describes how Iachelino can change men and women into winged animals and other forms, Temolo replies:

Non vedete voi, che subito / un divien podestade, commissario, /  
 proveditore, gabelliere, giudice, / notaio, pagator de li stipendii, / che li  
 costumi umani lascia, e prendeli / o di lupo o di volpe o di alcun nibio?  
 (lines 378–83, p. 197)

(Haven't you noticed that as soon as someone becomes a podestà [chief magistrate], a commissariat, a provisioner, a tax collector, a judge, a notary, or a paymaster he puts off his human form completely and takes on that of a wolf or a fox or some bird of prey?) (p. 112)

Temolo continues:

E tosto ch'un d'ignobile / grado vien consigliere o secretario / e che di  
 comandar a gli altri ha ufficio, / non è vero anco che diventa un asino?  
 (lines 385–88, p. 197)

(And when someone of a lower rank becomes a councillor, a secretary, or obtains a position where he commands others, isn't it true that he also becomes an ass?) (p. 112)

The list ends with the most commonplace of human transformations in comedy: *il becco* (the cuckold). It is an interesting piece of satire, with a twin-target approach. On the one hand, it attacks ignorance and stupidity by using urbane logic, which discounts the miraculous nature of metamorphoses; on the other, it skillfully uses the situation to satirize officialdom within the court system.

This piece of social commentary highlights one of the earliest instances in Renaissance comedy of the rising power of money and the sort of ruling class it is building up. As Northrop Frye reminds us in a study of ironic comedy, "we must start with the theme of driving out the *pharmakos* [scapegoat, or

victim] from the point of view of society.”<sup>22</sup> The *pharmakos* of *Il Negromante* is Iachelino. Ariosto constructs the most comic scenes around his character. This multi-faceted figure in reality uses only “ciance” (“gossip”) and “menzogne” (“lies”) to achieve his goals and thereby “aggira et aviluppa il capo a gli uomini” (“he swindles people and confounds their minds”). Through his deception, we learn the central theme of the comedy: “aiutandoci / la sciocchezza, che al mondo è in abbondanza” (lines 540–41, p. 203; “with the help of folly, which abounds in the world,” p. 116). The *pharmakos* is more recognizable as a foreign or alien figure; the process by which he is unmasked is the aim of comedy, and thus the preservation and moral unity of the society are brought forth at the comedy’s resolution.

*Il Negromante* portrays a vibrant city in which stupidity and superstition block the society from any real notion of self-knowledge and truth. Cintio’s secret marriage to Lavinia is the first deceit which embroils all the characters in the plot. In an effort to keep up the deceit, more deceit must be added until such time as the truth is forced to emerge. The credulity of Massimo, Fazio, Cintio, and the lamentable Camillo allows the tranquillity of their society to be threatened by an evil outsider. Each acts out of self-interest in order to preserve appearances. Ariosto’s view of the comic society does not reach its fullest treatment in *Il Negromante*; the catastrophe displays too many traits of Roman comedy. There is, however, a marked emphasis on the role of the city within the work that not only fully contemporizes *Il Negromante* but actually points in the direction of *La Lena*. Ariosto’s Iachelino is one of the more fully developed villains of the *Commedia erudita*, and the actions of his victims clearly mirror the folly of contemporary society. The city in *Il Negromante* is emblematic of a society given to appearances and thus rendered vulnerable to deceit.

Ariosto’s final comedy, *La Lena*, first staged in 1528 and then re-staged the following year with a new prologue and additional scenes at the end, marks the highest point of Ariosto’s theatrical output. His developing sense of stage, performance, and authorial autonomy renders it one of the best examples of Italian Renaissance comedy. Through *La Lena*, Ariosto displays a thoroughly modern view of the comic possibilities engendered in stage performance and theatrical writing. In many respects, *La Lena* is the comedy in which Ariosto finally casts off the chains of Terence and Plautus. This casting-off process had

22. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 45.

its initial point of departure with *La Cassaria*, in which the author states his dramatic aim: “Nova comedia v’appresento, piena / di vari giochi, che né mai latine / né greche lingue recitarno in scena” (Prologue, lines 1–3, p. 6; “I bring you a new comedy filled with various witticisms that neither Greek nor Latin tongues ever recited on the stage,” p. 3)

In the later comedy, however, it may be considered also as an assault on the old forms of the genre. It is not a revolutionary assault, but rather an ironic breaking down the ramparts, a tongue-in-cheek act of comic subterfuge. On the surface, the themes of *La Lena* are not new and would initially suggest a lack of innovation, but it is Ariosto’s silencing—during the action of the play—of standard classical themes which displays his desire to take full control of the comic reins and bring comedy into a new and modern era. Assessing the functional aspects of Roman comedy and its influence, Frye asserts: “At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play’s society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers.” At the play’s close, the plot’s device that brings the heroine and hero together “causes a new society to emerge to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery, *anagnorisis* or *cognition*.”<sup>23</sup> With regard to *La Lena*, this formula barely holds. The love intrigue between Flavio and Licinia is given scant regard, with the character of Flavio significantly muted in the second half of the play. Lena herself can hardly be said to fit the role of the *leno*, for Ariosto creates one of his most ambiguous characters in her. Moreover, no “new society” emerges from the resolution of the love intrigue; rather, an *impasse* is reached and the characters revert to their previous roles at the plot’s beginning. The only change that occurs within the framework of the play is the integration of the young people into the pre-existing society and its perverted norms. Frye further comments that “the final society reached by the comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs.”<sup>24</sup> The picture of the society represented in *La Lena* is less than desirable, and it is this society which seems to be the main focus of attention for Ariosto. There is no movement from one type of society to another through the resolution at the play’s end. Instead, the

23. Frye, 163.

24. Frye, 164.



society that emerges is a society locked in stasis, locked into its own corrosive ideals to the detriment of the comic resolution.

Where Ariosto's rapport with the modern is at its fullest is the stage representation of the city, and there is no doubt which city he had in mind.<sup>25</sup> The focal point of the comedy (Ferrara) has a dual perspective: the functionaries of the Estense court in conjunction with the lives of the urban dwellers. Through the use of strong social satire, Ariosto is able to show to his audience an altogether different Ferrara from the ideal of the court, and one that opens up new comic possibilities. This satiric vein is introduced into the play in act 2, scene 3 when Corbolo returns from his mission for Flavio. He recounts a meeting with some of the Duke's fowlers. These "uccellator del duca" ("Duke's fowlers") are shown to be corrupt knaves, more interested in personal profit and the fulfillment of their bibulous desires. Corbolo's satiric conclusion defines a reality of the Este Court:

CORBOLO: E gli prometto la mia fede d'essere / secreto; ma mi vien voglia di ridere: / che 'l Signor fa con tanta diligenza / e con gride e con pene sì terribili / guardar la sua campagna; e li medesimi / che n'hanno cura, son quei che la rubano. (2.3.498–503, p. 134)

(I have given my word that I would keep it secret. But I felt like laughing. To think that the duke protects his forests with such care and decrees that carry such harsh penalties; yet those who take care of them are the very ones who steal from them.) (p. 171)

Corbolo's earlier reference to Borso d'Este ("Non è la statua / del duca Borso là di me più tacita" [lines 487–88; "I'll be as quiet as the statue of Duke Borso there"]), despite its obvious function of lending lively and contemporary colour to the play, may also suggest a desire on Ariosto's part for less corrupt times:

Vedi Leonello, e vedi il primo duce,  
fama de la sua età, l'inclito Borso,  
che siede in pace, e più trionfo adduce  
di quanti in altrui terre abbino corso.

25. Ludovico Ariosto, *La Lena*, ed. Guido Davico Bonino (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), xii.

[...]

Di questo signor splendido ogni intento  
sarà che 'l popul suo viva contento (*Orlando furioso*, 3.45.1–4, 7–8; p. 67)

(See Leonello, see the intrepid Prince / Borso, the pride and glory of his age. / Ensnared in peace, he greater triumph wins / Than all who in the feats of war engage; / [...] / This splendid lord's concern will solely be / His people's welfare and serenity.) (p. 169)

The charge of corruption does not end with the Duke's fowlers, who represent the lowest social order within the court rankings; rather it continues, and encompasses the upper echelons of the court structure. In act 3, after Corbolo has deceived Ilario about Flavio's situation, Ilario is forced to recognize the uselessness of his position, as a citizen, in trying to gain justice for his son's injury. The picture of Ferrara that emerges is one in which the chain of command lends itself more to excessive bureaucracy and that only functions if bribes have been offered to soften up officials. The claimant has no choice but to seek justice through personal means. The police and the "podestade" (magistrate) are just as corrupt as the thieves that purportedly attacked Falvio the night before. This social reality is brilliantly summed up by Ilario in scene 2:

Or sia ancor ch'io vada al duca, e contigli / il caso; che farà, se non rimettermi / al podestade? E 'l podestade subito / m'avrà gli occhi alle mani; e non vedendoci / l'offerta, mostrerà che da far abbia / maggior faccende: e se non avrò indizii, / e testimoni, mi terrà una bestia. / Appresso, chi vuoi tu pensar che siano / li malfattori, se non li medesimi. / che per pigliar li malfattor si pagano? / Col cavallier de i quali o contestabile, / il podestà fa a parte; e tutti rubano. (3.2.724–35, p. 143)

(Now, even if I go to the duke and tell him the situation, what will he do if not send me to the *podestà*? The *podestà* right off will look at my hands and, not finding a donation, will pretend that he has more important things to do; and, if I have no proof or witnesses, he'll take me for a fool. Besides, who do you think the criminals are, if not the very same ones who are paid to catch the wrongdoers? The *podestà* divides the spoils with their chief or with the leaders; and everybody steals.) (p. 176)

These real “malfattori” are further defined in scene 1 of act 4 during Cremonio’s soliloquy: “Ma dove van questi sbirri? Andar debbono / a dar mala ventura a qualche povero / cittadin. Mala razza! feccia d’uomini! (4.1, lines 964–66, p. 152; “But where are they going these policemen? They must be going to bother some poor citizen. What a breed! The dregs of mankind!” p. 182) Such aggressive satirical attacks on the oppressive and corrupt nature of court officials play an important part within the comedy. Ariosto’s satire is no longer a means of communicating a contemporary patina to a classical theme, but a means of expressing the plight of the ordinary citizen through representation on an utterly modern stage. While the roles of Cremonio, Torbido, Gemignano, Bartolo, Magagnino, Spagnuolo, and the various other *sbirri* (police) and *staffieri* (grooms) contribute very little to the plot’s initial focus, they do constitute an integral part of the comedy as Ariosto’s comic focus shifts from Flavio’s love intrigue to become an unsettling slice of contemporary life in Ferrara.

In scene after scene, these characters are introduced only to fade away after a short period of time. The result is an overloading of characters from various sectors of Ferrarese civic life. Their appearance and consequent disappearance add to the intensity of Ariosto’s comic aim. Their roles act as a type of chorus that sings only of corruption, inefficiency, and greed. The underlying intent, however, is clear: they represent—on stage through the art of comedy—a less than perfect picture of Ferrara. Cremonio’s satiric aside is more than backed up by Bartolo’s revelations about the trouble and expense of obtaining his due from the palace of justice. He recounts the proverbial “run-around” he is forced to endure at the hands of those who supposedly represent him:

Metti appresso intolerabile / fatica, e gravi spese de gli essamini, / del levar  
 ‘de’ processi e de sentenzie; / le berrette, che a questo e a quel traendomi, /  
 le scarpe, c’ho su pel palazzo logore / dietro a i procurator, che sempre  
 corrono. (4.2.979–84, p. 153)

(On top of this there was the intolerable bother and the heavy expenses of the examiners, the transcriptions of the processes, and the verdicts. The number of times that I’ve had to take off my hat to this one or that one, the shoes that I have worn out in the palace of justice following after solicitors who are always on the run.) (p. 182)

His exasperated cry, “Ve’ le ragion che in Ferrara si rendono!” (“See how justice is done in Ferrara!”), is directly aimed at the audience, as the Ferrara represented on stage comes to mirror more closely the real Ferrara inhabited by the audience. As *La Lena* progresses, the “comic society” proposed by Ariosto moves ever closer to a social reality. The plight of the citizen within this corrupt society is again highlighted during Corbolo’s exchange with Ilario in act 4, scene 5.

Ilario is driven to avenge himself on Pacifico for the contemptible way in which Flavio is being held against his will. Ilario’s desire to help his son is understandable, though the situation is rendered even more comic by the fact that Flavio is not in peril and that the whole story is Corbolo’s masterful concoction. Ilario’s ignorance of the truth, however, demands that he exacts his own justice on Pacifico. This situation affords Ariosto another occasion to represent a reality that impedes and frustrates the average citizen. Corbolo’s response to Ilario is significant; while on one level it gives him the possibility to manipulate Ilario, on the other it clearly defines the predicament of the disadvantaged citizen:

Non vogliate mettervi / a cotal prova, avendo altro rimedio: / che far le  
ragunanze è contra gli ordini/ del signor, e ci son pene arbitrarie: / et  
accader potrebbonvi omicidii. (5.3.1409–13, p. 169)

(Don’t get yourself involved in this, for you have another remedy. [As you know] organizing a gang is against the decrees of the duke, and the penalties are up to the judge; besides, someone may get killed.) (p. 192)

The impracticability inherent in Ilario’s impulsive reaction to the situation is identified by Corbolo in the remainder of the speech in which he puts Pacifico’s case to Ilario:

riducendosi / al podestà costui, come è da credere/ che sia per far, che ’l  
podestà procedure / non abbia contra a Flavio; e quali siano / nei statuti  
le pene de gli adulteri, / et oltre li statuti, quanto arbitrio / il podestade  
abbia potere accrescere, / secondo che de l’inquisiti vagliono / le facultà,  
non secondo che mertano / le pene i falli, pur vi dovrebbe essere / noto.  
(5.3.1418–28, pp. 169–70)

(and if he complains to the *podestà*, as I think he intends to, then you will not be able to prevent the *podestà* from proceeding against Flavio. You know very well what the penalties are, by law, for adultery; and you know that the *podestà* has the authority to increase the penalties according to the wealth of the accused and not according to the seriousness of the offense.) (p. 191)

The comments directed at the Duke's severe laws, against citizens taking laws into their own hands, have a double satirical element. On the one hand, such restrictions promote an undue reliance on the legal system for proper and correct representation in causes pertaining to property, adultery, and other domestic disputes. On the other, such a reliance may naturally lend itself to corruption if the powers that be are themselves above this law, or if they favour, for unjust reasons, the cause of one claimant over another. Ariosto also allows for some satiric caricature by having *sbirri* and *staffieri* populate his stage. In act 4, scene 7, Magagnino and Spagnuolo are accused of robbing Torbido's cloak. Their response to the charge is telling: "Gli official del signor così si trattano?" (line 1108; "Is this the way to treat officers of the duke?" p. 185). One is left wondering how ironic their response was intended to be. It is, however, a scene in which Ariosto calls into question the reliability and honesty of the Ferrarese police, thereby extending his gallery of corruption. The *staffieri* of act 5, scene 1 are similarly caricatured. Their salutation to Corbolo encompasses in one movement Ariosto's perception of them: "O Corbolo, / buon di e buon anno. Come la fai? Vuonne tu / dar bere? (lines 1266–68, 164; "Oh, Corbolo, good day and good year. How are things? Would you give us a drink?" p. 189) Their willingness to aid Corbolo in his schemes is based on a desire for personal gain that overextends their official role within the hierarchy of the court. It is a light piece of caricature that adds to the general amusement of these scenes. Sanese has rightly pointed out that the satire "non guizza nella *Lena* soltanto qua e là di fra il dialogo dei personaggi, ma dà occasione a intere scene episodiche ove essa acquista una prevalenza assoluta" (doesn't just dart here and there in *La Lena* in the dialogues between characters, but offers the occasion for entire episodic scenes in which it acquires an absolute prevalence).<sup>26</sup>

26. Ireneo Sanesi, *La commedia* (Milan: Villardi, 1954), 237.

Satire is but one element of the comedy as a whole. The contemporary Ferrara of *La Lena* is also defined by and through its main characters. While satire affords Ariosto the opportunity to explore and attack social vices, a keener understanding of situation and character allows the playwright to develop in greater depth the knock-on results of these vices. Ariosto achieves this through the characters of Lena, Pacifico, and Fazio. These characters form a triad of vice, rendering them not only more developed than their Roman counterparts, but also emblems of the vice and corruption rampant in the comedy. Walter Binni asserts that their corrupt bond is not judged moralistically by Ariosto, but rather is presented in the richness it affords to poetic directions.<sup>27</sup> The figure of Lena is wonderfully defined by Binni as “machiavellicamente risoluta nei suoi panni” (resolute in a Machiavellian way in her own issues).<sup>28</sup> Lena is not, however, solely a figure of vice; her nature has been fashioned by forces that have impinged upon her life. She has been prostituted by her husband in order to pay their way, and exploited by Fazio who uses his position of wealth to keep her in a position of abject misery and thereby ensure the continuance of his hold over her.

Ariosto's Lena is under no illusions; she is a hardened, cynical woman who puts her faith in deed and action rather than words and promises. Her guiding principle is that of money:

Saria mal cambio / tòr per danari la fede, che spendere / non si può; e  
questi, che i dazi riscuoteno, / fra le triste monete la sbandiscono.  
(1.2.217–20, p. 124)

(It would be poor exchange to take one's word instead of money, for you cannot spend it; the tax collectors place it in the class of worthless coins.)  
(p. 165)

Her joyless experience of life gives her a deeper insight into the desires and dreams of youth.

27. Walter Binni, *Metodo e poesia di Ludovico Ariosto* (Messina: D'Anna, 1947), 68.

28. Binni, 66.

Conosco io ben l'amor di questi giovani, / che dura solamente fin che  
bramano/ aver la cosa amata, e spenderebbono, / mentre che stanno in  
questo desiderio, / non che l'aver, ma il cuor. Fa che posseghino: / va  
l'amor come il fuoco, che spargendovi / de l'acqua sopra, suol subito  
spegnersi: / e mancato l'ardor, non ti darebbono / di mille l'uno, che già ti  
promesseno. (4.9.1176–84, p. 161)

(I know all about the love of these young men; it lasts only while they  
crave the object of their love. And while they're in the state of this desire  
they would give you, not only their fortunes, but their hearts. But once in  
possession their love is like a fire that has had water thrown upon it—it  
immediately is extinguished; and now that they lack passion they wouldn't  
give you a thousandth part of what they had promised.) (p. 187)

Her decision to prostitute Licinia certainly adds a negative patina to her already complex character; her reasons for striking out at Fazio are, though, quite understandable. Lena is an ambiguous figure, for though the audience views her as a villain, Ariosto places the accent on her difficult domestic situation. Not only does she pertain to the lowest, and thus most vulnerable, class of Ferrarese society, she is also a woman. In act 2, scene 2 she reveals herself to the audience: “Oh! fui ben una femina / da poco, che a sue ciancie lasciai volgermi / e a sue promesse” (lines 420–22, p. 131; “Oh, what a foolish woman I was to let myself be convinced by his stories and his promises!” p. 169). As a *femina* (woman) she is shuttled between Pacifico and Fazio, the former benefitting from her earnings, the latter from her body. Throughout the comedy, Lena seeks to assert her role as an individual and thereby shake off the mantle of object or possession. Her crime is that of using the same methods which rendered her an object. By prostituting Licinia she not only mirrors her own husband, but Fazio as well. Lena's blindness and bitterness towards these two male characters define her corrupt intentions:

Anch'io d'esser pagata mi delibero / per ogni via, sia lecita o non lecita: /  
né Dio né il mondo me ne può riprendere. / S'egli avesse moglier, tutto il  
mio studio / saria di farlo far quel che Pacifico / è da lui fatto; ma ciò non  
potendosi, / perché non l'ha, con la figliuola vogliolo / far esser quel ch'io  
non so com'io nomini. (lines 436–43, p. 132)

(I, too, am determined to be paid through any means, licit or illicit; and neither God nor the world will find fault with me. If he had a wife all my attention would be devoted to making him what he makes Pacifico; but, as this isn't possible, for he doesn't have any, by means of his daughter I'll make him become—I don't know what you call it.) (pp. 169–70)

Ironically, it is Lena herself who plays the role of Fazio's wife. She is his bed companion and teacher to his daughter. Lena is what both men seek from her; she is a split figure between the two. Her drive towards individuality can only succeed through the use of another female character, Licinia. The irony of this soliloquy is heightened if we consider that not only did Pacifico decide for himself the role of cuckold, but Fazio's crime against him was executed through the willing participation of the speaker. Lena's true attack is against both Pacifico and Fazio. She does not care for her complaisant husband's honour; rather, she seeks revenge for herself and in her own terms.

Baratto comments that Lena is

una figura che rovescia sulla città e sulle istituzioni le colpe della propria corruzione, rinviando a un contesto più vasto la responsabilità del proprio mestiere e della propria vita.<sup>29</sup>

(a figure who throws back at the city and its institutions the guilt of her corruption, rejecting in a wider context any responsibility for her profession or her life.)

This assessment is convincing and ultimately correct. The corruption, inefficiency, and greed running throughout the comedy play an important role in defining the character of Lena. There is the implication that corruption at the higher levels of society has the effect of breeding more corruption at the lowest levels. Citizens who have no recourse to honest financial gain and protection act out of a will to survive a given situation. They adapt and integrate with society according to that society's needs and expectations of them, and thereby reflect that society back through their actions. Lena as a character is no more despicable than Fazio or Pacifico; her actions clearly reflect her situation

29. Mario Baratto, *La commedia del Cinquecento: aspetti e problemi* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1977), 111.



and the general state of affairs of the Ferrara represented on the stage. She is “quasi una vittima, rassegnata, di un meccanismo sociale” (almost a resigned victim of a social mechanism).<sup>30</sup> As with *Il Negromante*, Ariosto recognized the importance of his primary villain and created two additional scenes that add to the development of her character. The so-called *Lena caudata* is richer in insight and more pleasing to the comic resolution.

Her husband, Pacifico, is an even more pathetic character. He lives off Lena's illicit gains to pay for his debts, while simultaneously accepting and encouraging his own role as cuckold. As his name suggests, he is passive, and Ariosto uses his character to poke fun at men of his ilk. He is made a fool of by Corbolo when he is asked to stand guard outside his house with a spear. His slowness and stupidity are perhaps his only redeeming qualities, whereas Beame and Sbrocchi state that “Sloth is at the root of Pacifico's corruption.”<sup>31</sup> Pacifico's passivity is called into question when Lena's plans have been foiled, in that he blames Lena's corrupt nature for their downfall and for making him a cuckold. It is an interesting piece of characterization by Ariosto, as Pacifico is no match for his formidable wife and he shrinks under the truth and weight of her words.

LENA: Anzi la tua insaziabile / golaccia, che ridotti ci ha in miseria; /  
che, se non fossi stata io che, per pascerti, / mi son di cento gaglioffi fatta  
asina, / saresti morto di fame. Or pel merito / del bene ch'io t'ho fatto, mi  
rimproveri, / poltron, ch'io sia puttana? (5.11.1642–48, p. 178)

(Rather to your insatiable greed, which has reduced us to this miserable state; if it weren't for the fact that, to provide food for you, I allowed myself to become a donkey with a hundred scoundrels you would have died of hunger. Now, as a reward for the good that I have done, do you reproach me, you poltroon, for being a whore?) (p. 197)

He haltingly offers that he is reproaching her because she should “far con più modestia” (“pursue your trade with more modesty”). Lena's response, although filled with sexual allusions, reveals that it was only through her restraint that

30. Baratto, 111.

31. Beame and Sbrocchi, xxxi.

she did not end up the most infamous prostitute of the whole of Ferrara. She does not refrain on this occasion from giving her husband his due epithet:

LENA: Ah, beccaccio, tu parli di modestia? / S'io avessi a tutti quelli, che  
propostomi / ogn'ora hai tu, voluto dar recapito, / io non so meretrice in  
mezzo al Gambaro / che fusse a questo dì di me più publica. / Né questo  
uscio dinanzi per riceverli / tutti bastar pareati, e consigliavimi / che quel  
di dietro anco ponessi in opera. (lines 1650–57, p. 178)

(Ah, cuckold, you speak of modesty? If I had accepted all those to whom  
you had recommended me I know of no prostitute at the Gambaro who  
would be more public than me; this front door hardly seemed wide  
enough for you to receive them all, and you even advised me to make use  
of the back door.) (p. 197)

However, it is with the character of Fazio that Ariosto displays his skill in drawing a figure completely lacking in scruples. Fazio wishes the best of both worlds. He is content with his role as a decent, respectable member of the professional classes and wishes his daughter be reared in the best possible way. Yet, he exploits and derives much pleasure from Pacifico and Lena's dire situation. He does not fit the role of the *senex*, for his miserliness is offset by his passion for Lena and his destitute system of values. This is demonstrated when he learns that Lena betrayed him by secretly meeting with Flavio. His reaction is excessive and clearly defines his desire for Lena:

FAZIO: Non posso, né possendo mai vo', Ilario, / patir, che dopo tanti  
benefizii / c'ha ricevuti, et era per ricevere/ da me questa gaglioffa, così  
m'abbia/ tradito. Son disposto vendicarmene. (lines 1550–1554, p. 174)

(I cannot bear it, Ilario, and, even if I could, I wouldn't stand having that  
bitch betray me after she has received and was about to receive so many  
benefits from me. I'm ready to avenge myself.) (p. 195)

Here, Fazio himself takes on the mantle of cuckold. The scene recalls Lena's soliloquy in act 2 where she wished to make him what he had made Pacifico. Both scenes demonstrate a switching of roles for the characters. In act 2, Lena

had played the role of his wife; here, Fazio imagines himself as her injured husband. Both scenes represent in part a wish or desire of the two characters. Lena wishes to avenge herself on Fazio as if he were her real husband; realizing the uselessness of the situation, she decides to achieve her ends through Licinia. Ironically, the scene is echoed in act 5: Fazio certainly feels the pain of her adultery as if he were her true husband, but he is forced to confront the truth of the situation in his role as father to Licinia. All Fazio had wanted to do was to teach Lena a lesson for stepping out of bounds with him.

We learn from his maidservant Menica that Fazio has forgiven Lena: “[...] e intende che non sol Licinia / e Falvio questa notte i sposi siano” (lines 1734–35, p. 181; “he doesn’t intend Licinia and Flavio to be the only honeymooners tonight” p. 198). This confirms any doubt as to Fazio’s true motivations. Neither character can do without the other: Fazio needs Lena to fulfill his sexual needs; Lena needs Fazio if she is to survive and keep a roof over her head. At the centre of the struggle is Pacifico, who has no real influence over either character. Whatever the outcome, he will continue to live off Lena.

At the play’s end, the “comic society” proposed by Ariosto returns to its starting point. No development has occurred; the unsettling picture of Ferrara remains the same. Ferrara, therefore, is symbolized by the uneasy and unhealthy relationship between Lena, Pacifico, and Fazio. Each character displays vice and corruption, which are mirrored by the minor characters of the plot. Yet the resumption and continuance of their relationship with one another is accepted. We may infer from this that the vice and corruption exhibited on the stage is equally accepted in the Ferrara of Ariosto’s first audience. Baratto comments that

più che una città ‘comica’ astratta, è una città precisa che l’Ariosto tende a suggerire e a delineare col prorio testo: la città ideale della commedia diventa un angolo di Ferrara, che soprattutto nella *Lena* invade gradualmente la scena.<sup>32</sup>

(more than an abstract ‘comic’ city, it is a precise city which Ariosto tends to suggest and delineate with his text: the ideal city of the comedy becomes

32. Baratto, 110.

a street corner of Ferrara, which above all in the *La Lena* gradually invades the stage.)

This “angolo di Ferrara” (street corner of Ferrara) expresses in microcosm the underlying reality of the whole city. Bonino writes: “Agli spettatori della corte estense Ariosto propone *l'altra* città, un universo antitetico a quello delimitato dai luoghi della gestione e della conservazione del potere” (Ariosto proposes the *other* city to the Este Court, an antithetical universe to the one delimited by the places dedicated to the management and conservation of power).<sup>33</sup> How the play was received during its performances in 1528 and 1529 is difficult to ascertain. The jocular atmosphere of *carnevale* would certainly have contributed to a favourable response and the court audience must have enjoyed and derived great amusement from Ariosto's satiric jibes. There is no reason to suggest otherwise. The audience of Ariosto's day would have been delighted with the satire much in the same way that today's politicians react to political satire. The true source of pleasure and involvement lay in the representation of a world familiar to them on the stage.

Ariosto's *La Lena* fits perfectly with Zorzi's idea of the “piazza reale-simbolica.” He writes that

dall'interno della lettura del teatro ariostesco, riprende corpo l'immagine della città polisensa, quale essa fu nell'ora della sua pienezza [...] dove passato e futuro si arrestano nella nozione di un tempo metafisico, [...] nello spazio ordinato della mente la vita è scena.<sup>34</sup>

(from a reading of Ariosto's theatre, the image of the polysemous city begins to take shape, as it was at the time of its fullness [...] in which past and future are frozen in the notion of metaphysical time [...] in the space ordered by the mind, life is a stage.)

Ariosto's contemporary Ferrara affords him the possibility to explore the developing sense of theatre. The city gives him not only the occasion but the life-blood of his comedy. Ferrara becomes a theatrical and ideological construct

33. Bonino, xii.

34. Zorzi, 31–32.

for the playwright, and thus becomes a synonym for mischief and corruption. Many of the references to local monuments, areas, and city problems may also be viewed as a strategy on Ariosto's part for guiding the audience response, but such is the force with which the city is characterized that the playwright's strategy overextends such a narrow definition.

The concentration on a single locality, which is prevalent with the *Commedia erudita*, enables Ariosto to transcend this notion by making his setting also his subject matter. The relationship between locale and dramatic structure adds to the comedy's sense of verisimilitude. Ferroni posits the notion that Ferrara is the theatrical space of a repetitive reality in which the crudeness of a "Machiavellian" morality operates at the level of the most quotidian and domestic settings. He further states that the ever-present "giunteria" (swindle / fraud) of comedy functions not only as a source of amusement for the audience but also as a vehicle to warn of a malaise that has subtly but substantially cracked the courtly optimism of the Ferrarese stage.<sup>35</sup> He continues:

la realtà domestica e cittadina non si presenta qui soltanto nella prospettiva di uno spettacolo capace di garantire un prestigio e una risonanza cortigiana, ma come apertura ad un tempo e ad uno spazio pieni di sottili veleni, che, nonostante la finale risoluzione familiare della pièce, si muovono attorno al personaggio di Lena con un effetto di allucinata rotazione.<sup>36</sup>

(the domestic and city reality does not present itself here solely in the perspective of a staging capable of guaranteeing prestige and courtly resonance, but as an opening to a time and to a space full of subtle poisons, which notwithstanding the familiar resolution of the play's finale, move around the character of Lena with the effect of a hallucinating rotation.)

The circular movement of the plot clearly demonstrates this. Theme and structure imitate each other in *La Lena*. The plot ends where it began, with little or no development to suggest growth or advancement on the part of the characters. The theme of corruption is repeated throughout the comedy; no

35. Ferroni, 145.

36. Ferroni, 145.

real change in values or morality takes place, only compromise is added, which implicates the characters even further. Lena's words of resignation to Menica at the play's end demonstrate this: "Io son per far quanto gli piace" (line 1736, p. 181; "I'm here to do whatever pleases him" p. 198). Bonino states that in the end, what triumphs in *La Lena* is not order but a type of pseudo-order founded wholly on the omnipotence of money, a sort of disorder transformed into institutional order.<sup>37</sup> This disorder, which is manifested in institutional order, impinges on the characters of the plot and to a certain degree influences the actions they take. Lena must compromise and stand down from her aggressive struggle if she is to maintain any sort of position within the society. *La Lena* represents Ariosto's fullest and most realized treatment of contemporary issues on the comic stage. The implicit image of *La Lena* is revealed throughout the play's action—Ferrara is a crumbling edifice which is rotten at the core. All levels of social rankings are implicated in this portrayal of sixteenth-century Ferrara.

Both *Il Negromante* and *La Lena* display unsettling pictures of Renaissance city life. Indeed, on the one hand, if in *Il Negromante* the "sciocchezza che al mondo è in abbondanza" (folly, which abounds in the word) is the overarching theme, in the *La Lena*, conversely, as Grabher suggests, this theme is human corruption.<sup>38</sup> Conversely, Ariosto's theatrical work reveals an altogether different, antithetical viewpoint from the Renaissance ideal.<sup>39</sup> The dramaturgical space occupied by his characters was not neutral but heavily determined by the contemporary city Ariosto chose to represent. The theatrical efficacy of his plays rests largely on their contemporary setting. Ariosto's *città polisensa* (polysemous city) mirrored the realities of sixteenth-century Ferrara. It contrasted with the *città ideale* where vice, corruption, greed, superstition, and gullibility stand together with beauty, symmetry, and virtue as equally valid facets of true Renaissance civil life.

At the end of *La Lena*, Lena turns to the audience and asks: "Or diteci, / voi spettatori, se grata e piacevole / o se noiosa è stata questa fabula (lines 1736–38,

37. Bonino, xiv.

38. Carlo Grabher, *Sul teatro dell'Ariosto* (Rome: Edizioni Italiane, 1946), 110.

39. Nino Borsellino and Roberto Mercuri, *Il teatro del Cinquecento* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1973), 11. See also Annalisa Izzo, "Lena o la trappola dell'Happy End," *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana* 32.2 (2003): 205–21.

p. 181; “Now, my audience, tell us, has this story been pleasant and agreeable or has it been boring?” p. 198). Perhaps none of these epithets is correct, for the play does not fit into the boundaries of simple spectacle. The audience’s response would rather be one of admiration for the novelty of the plot and the true representation of the setting. Ariosto’s “comic city” is the product of that *arroganza* he spoke of in the prologue. In conclusion, Ariosto’s comedies, from their strict imitation of classical models to their later polished and modernized forms, constitute a singular line of development that encapsulates the struggle for modern comedy. Thus, the representation of his comic city, this staged Ferrara, requires and demands both the *arguzia* and *arroganza* of *La Lena*’s prologue; indeed, the two are inseparable.