

La Lena: Ariosto's Reflection on the Commodification of Human Experience

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The years between the end of 15<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century represent a very interesting political, social and economical juncture for the courts of Northern Italy which experienced a general consolidation of the power of their rulers, civic expansion, and renewed artistic interest. Princely courts like Milan, Mantua and Ferrara became cultural magnets where artists and *litterati* gathered around the prince in search for financial support and notoriety in exchange for allowing their talent to be used by the court to establish its international reputation of magnificence. In this respect, Ferrara represents a distinctive example, especially under the rule of Ercole I d'Este, who was duke of Ferrara from 1471 until 1505. His appreciation for the arts and architecture made him one of the finest and most innovative patrons of the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the relationship between his splendid court and the city of Ferrara was characterized by extreme contradictions and tensions due to the growing malcontent of the *Ferraresi*, whose already precarious financial conditions were burdened by heavy taxation, famine and epidemics. It was during this particular historical moment that the Ariosto family came to Ferrara and became an integral part of an administrative structure that saw the court and city strictly interconnected and interdependent.

Ludovico Ariosto, following in his father's steps, entered the Este court at a young age and his career as a *cortigiano* was characterized by the tension between his natural artistic desires and the diplomatic and administrative functions that were expected by the *signore*, who felt free to use his services as it best suited his interests.

Considering that one of the most important functions of the humanists employed by the Este was to exalt the Duke and his court, the controversial image of Ferrara

portrayed by Ariosto in his last comedy *La Lena*, offers a interesting opportunity to take a closer look at the city's socio-economic structure, to find a reasonable justification for the poet's harsh representation of the city ruled by his patron.

In this paper I will argue that in *La Lena*, the tension between the court and the city is represented on the theatrical stage and takes the form of a satirical condemnation of the complex social and political system that morally corrupted the city, its administration and the court. In Ariosto's play, the city of Ferrara is represented in its full gritty reality. The poet breaks away from the reassuring and composed image of the city, in which he had staged his previous comedies, to display his interest in the real world and a level of self-consciousness not seen before. Furthermore, in the *La Lena*'s two final added scenes, we find an unexpected rupture from the classic happy ending. Lena is brought back to the scene and, as suggested by Giuseppe Coluccia<sup>1</sup>, she is given an autonomous space, separated from the mechanism of the plot, to express her resentment towards her husband, who was ultimately responsible for their miserable condition.

Ariosto masterfully used her character to introduce his own reflections on the condition of the city and, on a deeper level, on his life spent in the service of the Este family. He, like Lena, had to succumb to the squalor of a wretched system that commodified the human experience. In 1529, when he wrote the second version of *La Lena*, Ariosto was at the apex of his career; he had made a name for himself and had finally obtained a rather stable role at court. Nevertheless with stability came the realization that his position was bought at a price and it is in this optic that we can understand the true meaning of *La Lena* that becomes an icon of the acute social

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Coluccia, *L'Esperienza Teatrale di Ludovico Ariosto* (Lecce: Manni, 2001), p. 225.

contradictions of 16th century Ferrara, as well as a of the poet's struggle to conciliate his loyalty to the Este family with his moral consciousness.

Ludovico Ariosto was born in 1474 in Reggio, where his father Niccolò was serving as *Capitano*<sup>2</sup> for the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole I d'Este. Ludovico was the first of ten children and this fact greatly impacted his life, especially after the death of his father in 1500, since he had to financially provide for his mother and sibling for many years. The Ariosto family moved to Ferrara in 1484 and in 1486 Niccolò was nominated *Giudice dei Dodici Savi*<sup>3</sup> by the Duke. The *Giudice dei Savi* was one of highest public offices in the city administration and was directly under the control of the Duke. Although the judge was at the head of the city administration (*Consiglio dei Savi*), he had no actual political autonomy. Although the office allowed him a certain prestige due to the closeness with the court, it was the direct control over the collection and management of city taxes that made this position a particularly lucrative business. Additionally the *Consiglio dei Savi* was mostly composed of members of the upper bourgeoisie that used their power to protect their interest, reducing their tax liability and creating a favorable environment for the expansion of their commerce at the expense of the populace. To make matter worst, the city had already been severely hurt by the war against Venice that ended in 1484, and its people were suffering due to famine and pestilence. Their condition was worsened by the increasing fiscal weight imposed by the duke for the construction of new palaces and churches in the city, used to increase the court's

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<sup>2</sup> The "*Capitano del Popolo*" was a political and administrative institution that served in small towns with functions similar to that of a Major.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of the sources sustain that Niccolo' most probably bought the office of *Giudice dei Dodici Savi* from Hercules as it was not unusual for the Duke to sell high civic offices in order to generate personal income.

splendor. Without real control from the duke, Niccolò gathered his fortune extorting money from the lower class citizens and peasants and quickly became known among the *Ferraresi* for his dishonesty and corruption. His less than honorable conduct stirred up bitter resentment which was expressed in satirical sonnets that were pinned all over the city walls to publicly denounce his dishonesty<sup>4</sup>. When he was finally demoted and sent by the Duke to Modena as a captain, a sonnet was written to celebrate his departure:

*“Modena se lamenta e dice oime’, io mi sento doler forte la testa perche’ Ferrara giubila e fa festa, della sua febbre che venire me dè”*<sup>5</sup>

Not only did the satirical content of the sonnets or *bischizi* against Niccolò openly denounce the corrupted character of the Giudice, but also indirectly pointed to the accomplice apparatus that sustained him.

The resentment voiced against Ariosto’s father was not an isolated case, but rather the expression of a more generalized popular malcontent. It often surfaced in response to the merciless fiscal pressure they suffered under the heavy hand of the city administrators that, quoting Jacob Burckhardt, “for years had been sucking the blood of the people”<sup>6</sup>. When Niccolò Ariosto was finally removed from his office, the duke’s intervention was celebrated by the people of Ferrara with bonfires and sonnets<sup>7</sup>, but little did they know that their next *Giudice dei Savi* would be Galeazzo Trotti, who was also known as “*Re di Denari*”. He accumulated his fortune thanks to usury and speculative commerce, and his family was part of the new emerging rich bourgeoisies whose interests were deeply interconnected to those of the duke, from whom they received protection and fiscal

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Cammelli (Il Pistoia) *Sonetti contro l’Ariosto, Giudice de Savi in Ferrara*. Ed. Carlo Rossi (Alessandra: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, Sonnet XXI, p.53.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

privileges in exchange for financial support<sup>8</sup>. For half a century the Trotti family dominated the court and oppressed the *cittadini* with such vehemence that in 1482, Giacomo Trotti, a civic magistrate, had to flee the city to escape from the rage of the people that would cry: “*crucifige, crucifige li Troti, morano li traditori Troti, daticeli ne li mani*”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in 1496 another *Capitano di Giustizia*, Gregorio Zampante, was killed in his sleep by “two students and a converted Jew”<sup>10</sup> in one of the most infamous moments during the rule of Ercole I. The citizens of Ferrara had come to hate Zampante for his blatant corruption, which was shamelessly left unpunished by the duke. On the contrary, Ercole I had knighted Zampante and after his murder, the duke buried him with great honors. As cited by Piromalli, the *Diario Ferrarese*<sup>11</sup> offers a vivid account of the bribery and extortion by which he administered the city’s justice.

The close resemblance in the grievances against the different public officials, found in the diary and the many *bischizi*, offers valid evidence of a generalized abuse perpetuated against the people by public administrators, with the tacit consent of the Este. Paradoxically Zampante, like Trotti and Ariosto’s father, was just an instrument used by the duke to rule over the city, and most importantly to cleverly deflect popular resentment away from his persona. Antonio Piromalli argues that the Este’s political strategy masterfully combined cruel intimidation of their subjects with dynastic prestige. With one hand they would viciously castigate all crimes of lese-majesty while with the other they would offer their people sumptuous manifestation of their splendor and chivalrous character through magnificent carnival festivities and other courtly rituals.

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<sup>8</sup> When Galeazzo Trotti became Giudice the duke owned him about 12,000 *ducati*.

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Piromalli, *La Cultura a Ferrara al Tempo di Ludovico Ariosto* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1975), p.53.

<sup>10</sup> Burckhardt, p 33.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Pardi, ed., *Diario Ferrarese dall’anno 1409 al 1502* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1928).

Although Ludovico was probably too young to fully understand the scope of the accusations against his father, it is very interesting to note that many decades later he decided to use for one of the *sbirri* in *La Lena* the same name that Antonio Cammelli had used in a satirical sonnets against his father. It is not a coincidence that in the XVIII sonnet against Niccolò, *Magagnino* is one of the two policemen that helps him extort a young lamb from a peasant that had gone to him looking for justice and only found more injustice and abuse.<sup>12</sup> Cammelli was probably referring to Girolamo Magnanino, who was the assistant of the *Giudice* at the time and whose name could easily be distorted to create a fictional character that would become representative of the depraved administration of justice. Furthermore the word *magagna*, from which the name could derive, means “flaw” and could stand for the lack of moral soundness that both Cammelli and Ariosto found in their society. The Magagnino that we encounter in the seventh scene of the *La Lena*’s fourth act is also a policeman stealing a coat from one of the surveyors sent to the house of Pacifico by his creditor. When confronted with his theft, he defended himself saying that he took it as part of his pay. While he was beaten by the other characters, his fellow policemen ironically asked: “Is this the way to treat officers of the duke?” Torbolo answered them by saying that the duke did not keep thieves at his service. Although this scene can be appreciated for its ironic tone, it also serves as a reminder of Ariosto’s obligation as a court artist, to revere the image of his patron. In this case, Magagnino becomes the scapegoat and takes the beating while the duke is once again morally absolved.

Ariosto did not follow his family to Modena but remained in Ferrara and attended the university for five years, encouraged by his father to pursue a law degree. In the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, Sonnet XVIII, p. 50.

meantime, his growing interest in theater found fertile ground at the court of Ercole I where we find his name on the list of people receiving a stipend in 1498<sup>13</sup>. After leaving his law studies, he continued his humanist studies under Gregorio da Spoleto and improved his literary skills by writing short poems in Latin and later in *volgare*, encouraged by his friendship with Pietro Bembo.

The death of his father in 1500 marked a significant change in Ariosto's life. Being the oldest son, he became responsible for the financial support of his family and had to find quickly a way to provide for their needs. Putting aside his literary aspiration, he took on the charge of *Capitano* of the Rocca di Canossa, where he stayed from 1501 until 1503. In the fall of 1503 another important phase of his life began as he entered the service of cardinal Ippolito d'Este, brother of the future Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso. He served the cardinal for almost fourteen years, and during those years he was heavily involved with diplomatic missions that took him away from his intellectual production. He often traveled to Rome, negotiating with Julius II on behalf of the duke or of Ippolito, during the tumultuous years of the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that saw Ferrara, Venice and the Papacy competing for territories in northern Italy. When Giovanni de Medici became Pope in 1513 as Leone X, Ariosto once again traveled to Rome to congratulate the new Pope, and with the hope to obtain from his friend (he had established a relationship with Giovanni during his visits to Florence) that would ameliorate his financial condition. Unfortunately he did not receive what he was hoping for and returned to Ferrara with just the promise of receiving the benefits of the parish of Sant'Agata sul

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<sup>13</sup> Giuseppe Coluccia, *L'Esperienza Teatrale di Ludovico Ariosto* (Lecce: Manni, 2001), p. 14.



Santerno at the death of Giovanni Fusai, which Ariosto did receive and eventually transferred to his son Virginio<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the many diplomatic distractions, Ariosto's fame as a poet was growing and between 1508 and 1510 he wrote three comedies: *La Cassaria*, *I Suppositi* and the first version of *Il Negromante*. These comedies represented an original interpretation of the classical Roman and Greek theater, and found the favor of the court; especially with the new duke of Ferrara Alfonso I, who, like his father, was a keen supporter of theater. Although his notoriety was growing, Ariosto continued to receive a sparse stipend and struggled to maintain his family.

The year 1517 was another crucial moment in the life of Ariosto. Cardinal Ippolito moved to Hungary and asked the poet to follow him and his court. Reluctant to leave Ferrara he refused to go, using his precarious health as a pretext. The outraged cardinal immediately stopped his court stipend and threatened to revoke his ecclesiastic benefits<sup>15</sup> such as a recently obtained revenue coming from the Archbishop of Milan. Probably thanks to his already established fame as a court poet, he was almost immediately admitted to the service of Alfonso I. Unfortunately his financial difficulties continued mostly due to the irregularity of his stipend, which was entirely suspended by the duke in 1522. It was most likely the need to continue to provide a living for his family (he also had an illegitimate son, Virginio) that forced Ariosto to once again put aside his literary aspiration and accept a position as commissioner (*Commissario*) in Garfagnana, a mountain region in the Tuscan Apennines that had just recently passed under the rule of the Este. He remained there until 1525 and unfortunately those were very difficult years

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<sup>14</sup> Giulio Ferroni, *Ariosto* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2008), p.22.

<sup>15</sup> He had recently started to receive small ecclesiastic revenue from the Archbishop of Milan.

for him. The region was socially unstable and difficult to govern. The populace was living in conditions of extreme poverty and their discontent took the shape of criminality and social resistance. Ariosto was caught in the middle of the unrest and while trying to fulfill his civic duties as *Commissario*, in his letters from Garfagnana he expressed his deep sorrow for the dire condition of the people of the area mixed with the frustration for the lack of support received from the duke in Ferrara and from the Elders in the Republic of Lucca in his attempt to keep the region safe:

*Ill. Et Exc. Signore mio. Se V. Exc. Non mi aiuta a difendere l'onor de l'officio, io per me non ho la forza di farlo; ché se bene io condanno e minaccio quelli che mi disubidiscano, e poi V. Exc. Li assolva o determini in modo che mostri di dar più lor ragione che a me, essa viene a dar aiuto a deprimere l'autorità del magistrato*<sup>16</sup>.

His appeal to the duke is almost paradoxical. Apparently Alfonso was supporting the cause of those that Ariosto is persecuting, nullifying his effort to bring the outlaws to justice and humiliating his authority. Ariosto denounced the perversion of the system and concluded his letter dated July 24, 1524 with a plea to be brought back to Ferrara in order to escape the shameful situation in which the duke himself had put him:

*Prego quella [V. Exc.] che mandi qui uno in mio luogo che abbia miglior stomaco di mea patire queste ingiurie, ché a me non basta la pazienza a tolerarle. [...] Ma dove importa tanto smaccamento che l'onor mio, io vò gridare e farne istanzia, e pregare e supplicare V. Exc. che più presto mi chiami a*

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<sup>16</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Opere Minori*, edited by Aldo Vallone (Milano: Rizzoli ed.,1964), p. 816

*Ferrara, che lasciarmi qui con vergogna: in buona grazia de la quale mi raccomando*<sup>17</sup>.

Ariosto was finally able to return to Ferrara in 1525 and there he remained until his death in 1533. His last years were extremely prolific in terms of his artistic production.

Interrupted only by a few diplomatic missions with the duke, Ariosto revamped Ferrara's theatrical scene with the mise-en scène of several performances, the editing of some of his previous comedies and the writing of his last comedy: *La Lena*.

During the same period, Macchiavelli identified the essence of comedy as the representation of human nature, derived from the study of daily life.<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, Ariosto's personal experience at the Estense Court is probably one of the most important influencing factors in his literary development. For most of his life, he was constrained by the rhythms and needs of the duke, who by "grace and favor"<sup>19</sup> would concede him a stipend. The poet had learnt from his father the pragmatic aptitude to exploit the system in order to meet his family's needs, nevertheless his experience with Cardinal Ippolito and later his trials in Garfagnana brought him to series of considerations on his status at court and in more general terms on the social condition in Ferrara.

A lot has been written on how his personal experience was translated into the thematic of the *Orlando Furioso*, especially in its later revisions. But what has rarely been done is to look at his return to the comedy, and in particular the writing of the *Lena*, as a crucial moment of self awareness, that was characterized by Ariosto's attempt to bring on the court stage his remonstrance for his servile condition, which he had already

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.817-818

<sup>18</sup> Mario Baratto, *La Commedia del 1500* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 1975), p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Warnke, *The Court Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.135.

presented in the *Satire*. In the *Satira III*, addressed in 1518 to his cousin Annibale Malagucio, Ariosto's discomfort can be felt in the disheartened tone used to describe his position at the service of Alfonso I.

*Ma poi che figliolo unico non fui,  
né mai fu troppo à miei Mercurio amico,  
e viver son sforzato a spese altrui;  
meglio è s'appresso al Duca mi nutrico,  
che andare a questo e a quel de l'umil volgo  
accattandomi il pan come mendico.  
So ben che dal parer dei più mi tolgo  
che 'l stare in corte stimano grandezza,  
ch'io pel contrario a servitù rivolgo.<sup>20</sup>*

His fate was marked by the lack of wealth<sup>21</sup> that forced him to find a way to support his family, at the expense of his own personal freedom. It is interesting to note his remark about the fact that the majority of his contemporaries considered being part of the court as a symbol of greatness, but for him it represented a form of servitude. He was a poet in one of the most celebrated Renaissance's centers, and yet he complained about the commercial nature of his relationship with the duke. His condemnation of the commercialization of the human nature, characterized by all sorts of compromises transpires in his *Satire* and in the *Lena*.

*Il servizio del Duca, da ogni parte  
Che ci sia buona, piu' mi piace in questa:*

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<sup>20</sup> Ariosto, *Ibid.*, p.746.

<sup>21</sup> Mercurio was considered the god of wealth and was never, as the poet said, a close friend of his family.

*che dal nido natio raro di parte.  
 Per questo i studi miei poco molesta,  
 nè mi toglie onde mai tutto partire  
 non posso, perchè il cor sempre ci resta*<sup>22</sup>

Shortly after being admitted to the service of Alfonso I, Ariosto welcomed his new position at court, especially for the fact that he did not have to leave Ferrara and therefore could focus more on his studies. But in the same *Satira* he also wrote: “*Mal può durare il rosignuolo in gabbia, più vi sta il gardelino, e più il fanello; la rondine in un dì vi mor di rabbia*”<sup>23</sup>.

Was he resigned or had he just accepted a compromise? Probably both. Ariosto felt like a caged nightingale. He was aware of the fact that his freedom to focus on his studies was strictly dependent on his status at court and on the favor of his patrons. Moreover this symbiotic relationship could be used as a key for an original interpretation of the evolution of the poet’s writings.

After a relatively quite period in Ferrara, Ariosto’s circumstances were complicated by his move to Garfagnana. In the *Satira IV* he expressed his profound pain in seeing such a degenerated society around him, and the frustration that came from his inability to correct the situation, made worse by a lack of support from the duke. He felt abandoned by the one who sent him there, and to the question of why he stayed there he answered once again with resignation:

*Tu dei saper che la mia voglia avara  
 Unqua non fu, che io solea star contento*

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p 747.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

*Di quel stipendio che traea a Ferrara;  
 ma non sai forse come uscì poi lento,  
 succedendo la guerra, e come volse  
 il Duca che restasse in tutto spento.  
 Fin che quella durò non me ne dolse;  
 mi dolse di veder che poi la mano  
 chiusa restò, ch'ogni timor si sciolse.<sup>24</sup>*

It was dire need and not the desire to gain more wealth that led him to accept the appointment in Garfagnana. Since the duke had suspended his stipend, Ariosto was forced to find *altra pastura*<sup>25</sup>, other means to meet his financial needs, putting aside his intellectual interests, and accepting a position that would eventually become the source of great sorrow.

Going back to Macchiavelli's definition of comedy, it is possible that, once the poet returned to Ferrara, he was compelled to represent on the stage the human condition that, in his personal experience, signified the commoditization of his own self, in a society dominated by the duke and characterized by the evident gap between the splendor of the court and the squalid life of the majority of his subjects. The theme of the commoditization of the human experience appears since the first scene of act one:

*Corbolo: " Con che modo volgere hai potuto la moglie di Pacifico, che ruffiana ti sia de la discepola?"*

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p 762.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p 763.

*Flavio: “ Disposta l’ho con quel mezzo medesimo, con che piu’ salde menti si dispongono a dar le rocche, le citta’, glie eserciti, e talor le persone de’ lor principi: con denari; da quel mezzo il piu’ facile non si potrebbe trovare”.<sup>26</sup>*

Flavio answered Corbolo’s question, about how he managed to convince Lena to facilitate his meeting with Licina, affirming that everything has a price, including people’s moral values. The conversation became even more animated when Corbolo judged Lena for betraying Fazio’s trust by “selling” his daughter to Flavio: *“Porca! Ch’ardere la possa il fuoco! Non ha coscienza, di chi si fida di lei, la figlia vendere!”<sup>27</sup>*. And Flavio concluded the exchange by vindicating Lena’s right to pay back Fazio with the same coin, since he was the one to blame for not paying off the debt of Lena’s husband as promised in exchange for her sexual favors. Consequently the moral tension in the first act is created by the immoral trade between Fazio and Lena, which finds its initial source in Fazio’s sexual impulse and that, because of his lack of integrity, ends up justifying a second exchange, this time between Lena and Flavio, and that finds its roots in greed and vengeance.

In the second scene of the same act, this tension is further developed in the dialogue between Fazio and Lena. Their animated discussion is dominated by Lena’s complaint of not being adequately compensated for the services that she rendered to Fazio:

*Lena: “ Non ho mai fatto altro per voi, ch’io meriti nove lire di piu’? In nome del diavolo, che se dodici volte l’anno dodici voi me ne dessi, non sarebbe premio*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p 504

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p 505

*sufficiente a compensare la infamia che voi mi date; che i vicini dicono pubblicamente ch'io son vostra femina”.*

The desire for profit as a fundamental structural element of comedy was already used in the classic Latin comedy, but in the *Lena* it becomes strictly intertwined with the moral compromises that become necessary for one's survival.

In the last two acts, added by Ariosto in 1529, *Lena* comes back on the scene, in an independent position. Once the plot of the comedy had been resolved with the marriage of Flavio and Licina, it was *Lena's* time to bring her personal drama on the stage. It was also Ariosto's chance to reveal his deepest reflections on the corrupted nature of the court social relationships, just as he had begun doing in his *Satire*.

Ariosto's relationship with the duke can be compared to the relationship between *Lena* and Fazio. Confronted with the need to support his family, Ariosto had to offer his services to the court of Ferrara and found, especially in Ippolito, little appreciation for his art demonstrated by the fact that often the cardinal would not fulfill his financial obligations towards the poet, who had to compromise his literary interest to carry on other assignments that distracted him from his studies and brought him away from his loved ones.

The time spent in Garfagnana had a lasting negative impact on Ariosto. It was in that region that he came in contact with the misery of the human existence, exacerbated by the actions of the prince that preferred to protect his interest rather than defend the cause of the weak with justice. His bitterness can be heard in *Lena's* words, but this time in the form of a more generalized consideration on the condition of a serf, whose lord does not keep the promises made:



*Poi ch'attener non ha voluto Fazio quel che per tante sue promesse è debito, farò come i famigli che 'l salario non ponno aver, che co i padroni avanzano, che li ingannano, rubano, assassinano*<sup>28</sup>

In this passage it almost seems like Ariosto wanted to absolve Lena, and the social degeneration of his time. His own father had been part of the same system, and maybe he was also a victim that needed to be pardoned in the poet's moral consciousness. The need to find a scapegoat pushed him in the direction of the court, dangerously close to the Duke. Ariosto made several allusions to the inefficiency and injustice of its administration: in the third scene of the second act, when Corbolo pridefully told how he managed to deceive the duke by purchasing some game that had been smuggled out of his private reserve by his own serfs, who were stealing from him to meet their needs.<sup>29</sup>

In the second scene of the third act there is an even more significant exchange between Corbolo and Ilario. Flavio's father is tricked into believing that his son had been ambushed by some thieves that stole his gown; He replied at Corbolo's suggestion to report the misdemeanor to the *podestà*, by arguing that doing so would add insult to injury:

*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, o 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 parte; e tutti rubano*<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p 518

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p 519.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.539.

This dialogue is a brilliant example of the distrust in the authorities that, as we have seen, characterized the people of Ferrara during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is indicative of a widely spread malaise that affected the lower layers of society, which were intimidated by such a cruel power structure and had no choice but to accept it or, in some cases, join in its misdeeds.

Finally in the eleventh scene of the fifth act, Lena's husband Pacifico is confronted with a key argument that seems to have been present in the background of the comedy all along:

*Pacifico: Or vedi, Lena, a qual che le tristizie e le puttannerie tue ti conducono!*

*Lena: Chi m'ha fatto puttana?*

*Pacifico: Così chiedere potresti a quei che tuttodi s'impiccano chi li fa ladri.*

*Imputane la propria tua volontade.*

*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 gaglioiffi fatta asina, saresti morto di fame. Or pel merito del bene ch'io t'ho fatto, mi riproveri, poltron, ch'io son puttana?<sup>31</sup>*

Lena bitterly affirmed that she was forced to prostitute herself by the need to pay for her husband debt. She shifted the fault on the one whose insatiable greed had led them to misery while Pacifico insisted on the personal responsibility for one's actions. This is a quite interesting passage that reveals Ariosto's profound moral conflict. Who is to be blamed for Ferrara's misery? Whose greed had pushed the citizens into such a desperate state that they had to resort to despicable measures in order to survive? Ariosto is not

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p 569-570.

offering an answer but he is challenging the public with something deep to be pondered on.

The merit of the poet is found in his ability to bring on the court's stage the darkest aspects of the city social reality that were traditionally avoided by the canonical aulic culture. He introduced to his court audience a theme that was typical of the popular culture: the satirical condemnation of the extreme corruption of Ferrara's socio-political structure. Furthermore, by portraying such a harsh picture of the city ruled by the Este, he stretched the boundaries of his role as a court artist, which required him to exalt the Este's magnificence with his art. The ending of the second version of the comedy seems to imply that in the mind of the poet there was no solution to such state of corruption and the invitation received by Lena to participate to the wedding of Flavio and Licina could represent the ultimate example of the poet's resignation. He like Lena, after having vented his anguish, had no other alternative but to do what pleased the duke, who ironically would often use extravagant carnival festivities to inebriate his subjects and promote a monarchic sentiment that conferred his persona an aura of splendor and respectability, eventually absolving him from every moral liability.

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