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“Horror... is the sinews of the fable”: Giraldi Cinthio’s works and Elizabethan tragedy

Les œuvres de Giraldi Cinthio et la tragédie élisabéthaine

Mariangela Tempera



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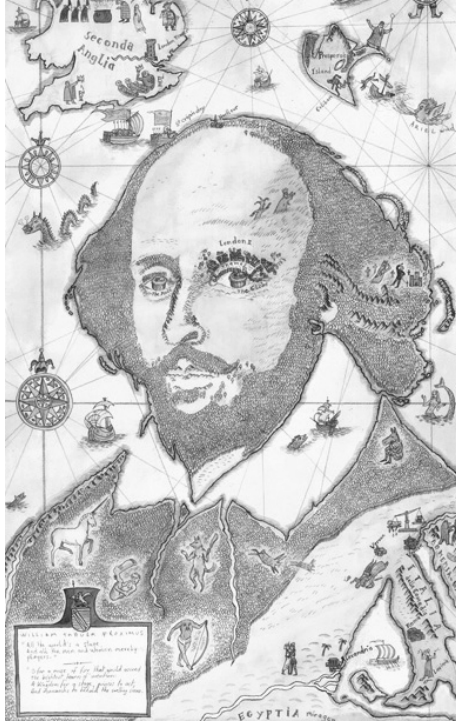
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Pierre KAPITANIAK

sous la direction de

Yves PEYRÉ

COMITÉ SCIENTIFIQUE :

Margaret Jones-Davis
Jean-Marie Maguin
Yves Peyré
Pierre Kapitaniak

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“HORROR... IS THE SINEWS OF THE FABLE”: GIRALDI CINTHIO’S WORKS AND ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

Mariangela TEMPERA

The paper examines the theoretical writings of G. B. Giraldi Cinthio and his most famous play, *Orbecche* (1541) in the light of Italian Senecanism. Cinthio’s account of the first performance of his tragedy shows that he was aware of the necessity of winning over the audience by catering to its tastes. He also saw the futility of strict, unthinking adherence to the rules supposedly laid down by Aristotle. The paper argues that his stage-oriented approach to theatrical writing and his exploration of the dramatic function of horror show that he has more in common with the Elizabethans than with his countrymen. A comparison of key moments in *Orbecche* with scenes from Elizabethan plays (*The Tragedie of Tancred and Gismund*, *Gorboduc*, *2 Henry vi*, *Titus Andronicus*) highlights similarities in the treatment of their common Senecan sources which are unexpected in 1540s Italy. *Orbecche* and the theoretical debate that it triggered in Italy contributed to shaping continental playwrighting in the second half of the 16th century. The process of cross-fertilization between the works of European dramatists and those of their Elizabethan counterparts is well worth further study. Within this framework, Giraldi certainly deserves more attention than he has commanded until now.

Les œuvres de Giraldi Cinthio et la tragédie élisabéthaine Cette communication examine les écrits théoriques de G. B. Giraldi Cinthio et sa pièce la plus célèbre, *Orbecche* (1541), à la lumière du « sénéquisme » italien. Le récit que Cinthio fait de la première représentation de sa tragédie montre qu’il était conscient de la nécessité de séduire le public en satisfaisant ses goûts. Il voyait également la futilité d’un respect strict et irréflichi aux règles fixées par Aristote. L’article soutient que l’intérêt de Cinthio pour la scène dans son écriture dramatique et son exploration de la fonction dramatique de l’horreur montrent qu’il a plus en commun avec les Élisabéthains qu’avec ses compatriotes. Une comparaison entre les moments clés dans *Orbecche* et les scènes des pièces élisabéthaines (*The Tragedie of Tancred and Gismund*, *Gorboduc*, *2 Henry vi*, *Titus Andronicus*) fait ressortir des similitudes dans le traitement de leurs sources sénéquiennes communes qui sont inattendues dans l’Italie des années 1540. *Orbecche* et le débat théorique que la pièce suscita en Italie contribuèrent à façonner l’écriture dramatique de la seconde moitié du XVI^e siècle. Le processus d’influence croisée entre les œuvres des dramaturges européens et de celles de leurs homologues élisabéthains appelle d’autres études. Dans ce cadre, Giraldi mérite certainement plus d’attention qu’il n’en reçoit jusqu’ici.

With a few notable exceptions, the dreary panorama of Italian 16th century tragedy is littered with plays that are not readable, let alone stageable. Comedy really fared a lot better than tragedy in the insouciant atmosphere of the pre-Counter-reformation days. As is often the case, the amount of critical thought focusing on the genre was in inverse proportion to the amount of quality playwrighting. The fact that the same people were usually engaged in both activities (theorizing about how plays should be written and writing them) did not help. The rediscovery of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a need to offer adequate exegeses of its most obscure passages, a yearning to return to the classics, unencumbered by bothersome reality

and contemporary themes, a growing familiarity with the works of Seneca – all this contributed to shifting the interest of many Italian scholars from comedy to tragedy. One of these was Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio.¹ He was very learned, capable of formulating a drama theory well ahead of his time and putting it to the test on a live audience.

Among Shakespeareans, his greatest claim to fame is that two of his *novelle* provided sources for *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*, but he was also exceptional for writing “tragedie a lieto fine” which predate Guarini’s tragicomedy. He contributed to the debate on the exegesis of Aristotle’s writings, most importantly with his *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie (Discourse on the Composition of Tragedies and Comedies)*,² published in 1554. When discussing tragedy, he draws most of his examples from one of his own plays, *Orbecche* (1541), which is worth pausing over because it was such a startling departure from the theatrical practice of his day.

At a time when plays were seldom reprinted and rarely staged more than once, if at all, *Orbecche* went through at least ten editions and was repeatedly performed in and outside Ferrara (even as far away as Paris, where it was seen by the King). It was violently attacked by Italian scholars and passionately defended by its author, in a verse address “To the Reader” appended to the printed edition of the play. To do so in the cultural climate of the 1540s, Giraldi had to walk an intellectual tightrope. While constantly referring to Aristotle, he was forced to proclaim the superiority of Seneca over the Greek tragedians. After all, he needed Seneca’s authority to justify the morbid tones of the Messenger’s speech, the scattered body parts, the white-heat anger that allows a daughter to hack her father to death without losing audience sympathy. One of his most ingenious manipulations of

¹ Giraldi was born in 1504 in Ferrara, an aristocrat from an influential local family. With typical Renaissance versatility, he practised medicine, held the Chair of Rhetoric at the University, as well as the high-powered position of secretary to Duke Hercules II. This at a time when the Este court was dominated by the intriguing presence of the Duchess, Renée de Valois, whose protestant entourage was to cause such severe friction between the Duke and the Pope. After his patron’s death, Giraldi left Ferrara for the University of Mondovì. There, he published a collection of *novelle*, the *Hecatommithi* (1565), which was translated into French by Gabriel Chappuis in 1583–84. Giraldi died in Ferrara in 1573. For his life and times, see Louis Berté de Besaucèle, *J.-B. Giraldi* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1969 [1920]) and P. R. Horne, *The Tragedies of Giambattista Cinthio Giraldi* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962).

² G. B. Giraldi Cinzio, *Scritti critici*. Ed. Camillo Guerrieri Crocetti (Milan: Marzorati, 1972), 171–224. All translations from this edition are mine.

Aristotle is his translation of “fōbos”. Not fear or terror, but almost always horror. And the Chair of Rhetoric at the University of Ferrara knew his Greek. He mistranslated through necessity: the Senecan horrors his predecessors (e.g. Trissino and Rucellai) had slipped into their tragedies to give a slight *frisson* to their readers were now offered to the morbid curiosity of a live audience as the climatic moments of the play. As Daniel Javitch has convincingly argued, the *Discorso* “recommends all the non-Aristotelian and comedic features of Giraldi’s own tragic composition. [...] By providing a set of thematic and formal norms apparently derived from Aristotle’s theory and from Seneca’s tragedies but actually a codification of his own procedures, Giraldi manages to place his modern practice in a ‘canonical’ tradition.”³

Both *Orbecche* and Giraldi’s theoretical writings were widely read in Europe (Sidney, for one, was certainly familiar with his theories on romance). What is particularly interesting for Shakespeareans is the way his works and those of his fellow Italian playwrights contributed to creating the cultural climate that facilitated the development of English tragedy. After all, as Gordon Braden reminds us, “Much of what we call Renaissance Senecanism is really Italian Senecanism: *Titus Andronicus* is more like a play of Giraldi’s or Dolce’s than a play of Seneca.”⁴ In transferring some elements of Seneca’s drama onto the Italian stage, Giraldi came up with solutions that would later be embraced by the Elizabethans. For all his learned commentary on Aristotle, the thought comes to mind that had he been born across the Channel, he would have enthusiastically embraced the English disregard of Continental rules. As for his scale of priorities between page and stage, one needs only refer to his 1543 epistle. He is indeed quite accommodating in view of future performances. The king’s counsellor’s speeches are deemed too long? By all means, cut them. The author will not complain. Purists insist that the tragedy should be performed without intermezzi? Let’s try it. The audience does not appreciate the change and wants pomp and entertainment back? I told you so! Back to the original format! It is the kind of pragmatism that would have been quite at home on the South Bank. A comparison of

³ Daniel Javitch, “Self-Justifying Norms in the Genre Theories of Italian Renaissance Poets,” *Philological Quarterly* 67 (1988), 203.

⁴ Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger’s Privilege* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 118.

key moments in *Orbecche* with similar scenes from Elizabethan plays will highlight similarities in the treatment of their common Senecan source which are unexpected in an Italian academic writing in the 1540s. I will not, however, make any claims for direct influence, because they would be unsubstantiated. Unlike his follower Ludovico Dolce, Giraldi did not leave any identifiable trail through Elizabethan play texts.

The plot of *Orbecche*⁵ is taken from one of Giraldi's novelle. The play owes as much to Seneca's *Thyestes* as to Boccaccio's Tancredi and Ghismonda story, and is shot through with references to Machiavelli's writing. It was first performed in Giraldi's house in the presence of the Duke and several courtiers. With the exception of the Messenger, the actors were gentlemen of the Este entourage. Such a complete homogeneity between actors, playwright and audience is not usually conducive to great theatrical evenings. And yet, according to the author, admittedly a biased source, emotions ran very high, with tears and fainting fits among spectators.

The prologue represents a fascinating example of how to engage the audience in the play. First of all, the speaker nails the spectators to their seats by exhorting them to leave, lest they should be overly distressed by the terrible events they are about to witness. Then, he acknowledges that they come from the real world of Ferrara. He could hardly do otherwise, given the presence of the Duke and the need to pay homage to his city and rule. By frequently repeating "here", he also draws discrete attention to the palazzo of the Giraldi family, whose proud owner also just happens to be both the playwright and host. At this point, he calls on the spectators both to become conscious of the magic of theatre and yield to it. A few lines of verse serve to whisk them from their familiar surroundings into the exotic world inhabited by the characters of the play. The motion is so fast that they may believe they have hardly moved, and yet Giraldi can assure them that they are not far from their destination. To an audience well accustomed to public recitations of Ariosto's cantos, this suspension of disbelief would have been no harder than for the Londoners of Shakespeare's *Henry v*.

The first scene is devoted to an apparition of Nemesis who summons the Furies to help her destroy Sulmone and Orbecche. They

⁵ G. B. Giraldi Cinzio, "Orbecche" in *Teatro del Cinquecento*, ed. Renzo Cremante (Milan-Bari: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1988), vol. 1, 287-448. All quotations are from this edition.

arrive in full mythological gear, complete with flaming torches, perhaps from under the stage. It is, as Marzia Pieri notes, a ballet number typical of the intermezzi, which becomes so popular that it will be repeatedly imitated on the Italian stage.⁶ A full description can be found in accounts of later plays. The ballet is quite similar to the *dumb show* in Act IV of Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc*, which introduces "three furies ... clad in black garments sprinkled with blood and flames, their bodies girt with snakes, their heads spread with serpents instead of hair, the one bearing in her hand a snake, the other a whip, and the third a burning firebrand..."⁷

In Giraldi's tragedy, Nemesis is followed by the shadow of Selina, who informs us that she has come to witness the ruin of her husband King Sulmone, and their daughter Orbecche, who as a child unwittingly told her father about Selina's affair with her son. The king murdered the guilty couple. From Selina we learn that Orbecche has secretly married Oronte, and has had two children by him. Outraged by her behaviour, her father will kill Oronte and the children, only to be in turn killed by his daughter, who will then commit suicide. Selina's speech leaves us in no doubts about future events, and thus we are free to concentrate on how things happen.

Audience response is Giraldi's northern star. And the only experience of audience response an Italian dramatist could have had in his time came from seeing comedies being performed. The structure (prologue, act division) abandons the classic tragedy format to follow the Terentian tradition. Having a woman in love as title character of the tragedy also flouts orthodoxy and helps establish continuity with the world of comedy. From the world of Ariosto's plays come the servants. Like any wronged father of comedy, Sulmone finds out about his daughter's betrayal from a "Giglietta cameriera". The maid who betrays her mistress's secret lives in half a verse of the King's tale and then is heard of no more, and with her there goes any chance of livening up the tragic stage with unguarded comments from downstairs. The King's accomplices, Tamule and Alloche, again names that evoke the world of comedy, are the predecessors of the countless

⁶ Marzia Pieri, "Mettere in scena la tragedia. Le prove del Giraldi." *Schifanoia* 12 (1991), 136.

⁷ Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, "Gorboduc" in *Minor Elizabethan Tragedies*, ed. T. W. Craik (London: J.M. Dent, 1974), 34.

amoral assassins who help their masters along the road to hell on the English stage. A playwright as interested in verisimilitude as Giraldi should not have allowed them to speak in the same register as the king, but such a departure from the conventions of written tragedies would have been unthinkable, and besides, registers have never mixed easily in Italian.

Barring the redoubtable Giglietta and the revenge-crazed Selina, women fare better in *Orbecche* than in most contemporary works. Giraldi does not believe in portraying tragic heroines as incapable of lofty thoughts. In his opinion, it is yet another principle that commentators wrongly attribute to Aristotle. In the presence of the formidable ladies of the Este court, he would indeed have been very unwise to follow it. Thus, Orbecche, her nurse, and the Chorus of Persian women are on a par with Oronte and Malecche (the learned adviser) when it comes to transforming their distress into *sententiae*. This does not make for livelier dialogues, but it does make the female parts as demanding as the male.

But *Orbecche*'s claim to international fame is mainly due to the author's handling of Senecan horror. Despite his reverence for Aristotle, it is quite clear to readers of both the play and the theoretical writings that Giraldi was more interested in the effect the horrific elements had on the spectators watching the play than on any lasting influence of the theatrical experience on their lives. Modelling his Messenger's tale on *Thyestes* was quite advantageous for Giraldi. First of all, he could count on audience recognition. Familiar with declamations of Seneca's tragedies, the courtiers and academics that crowded Giraldi's house knew what to expect as soon as the Messenger started bewailing his own unfortunate fate. Many among them would also have recognised Sebastiano da Montefalco, the star actor who had arrived in Ferrara just to deliver this bravura piece. Having no doubts as to what the Messenger was about to say, they could concentrate on how he said it. Secondly, the classical precedent provided Giraldi with a superb blueprint for the organization and phrasing of this all-important scene, which would otherwise have tested his talent for writing verse beyond its limit.

Unlike Seneca's, this Messenger is there to act and not recite his monologue. Giraldi tentatively included into the speech the kind of implicit stage directions that Shakespeare would use so effectively fifty

years later. The Messenger is in tears, he is pale and sad, his tale is told in a trembling voice, etc. In the theatre of the mind, the spectators can visualise every detail of the acts of brutal violence that have just taken place. With the freedom offered by the narrative, Giraldi creates a lively dialogue between Sulmone and his victim. Having chopped off Oronte's hands, Sulmone "prese in man le mani, / Le porse a Oronte, lui dicendo: Questo / E' lo scettro che t'offro." [took the hands in hand, offered them to Oronte and said 'This is the sceptre that I promised you.' (393)]. He then turns the proud hero into a quivering supplicant by bringing in the two sons who are destined to die before him. The tyrant's sarcasm and the victim's pleading for his children's lives are all the more effective for being interspersed with detailed descriptions of limb chopping and blood flowing. Oronte's head and hands and his children corpses, with the knives still stuck into them (bad mistake!) are then tastefully arranged on silver platters as presents for Orbecche. Little by little, what could never be portrayed on the Italian stage becomes very real. At the end of the tale, spellbound by Montefalco's voice, the spectators' response goes beyond horror to reach *maraviglia*, wonder. "Messer Giulio, I still have in my eyes the wonder I saw in the gentilefolks who watched him and listened to him as he portrayed the messenger in my *Orbecche*. I feel as if the earth is still trembling under my feet, as I thought I felt it tremble at the time, when his portrayal of that messenger inspired such horror in everyone that because of the horror and the pity provoked in the souls of the spectators all remained as if stunned." (*Discorso*, 220). And the effect is the result of both watching the actor's body on stage and listening to his voice, *i.e.* a truly theatrical experience, something that no act of reading the same scene aloud alone back home can possibly duplicate.

Giraldi trusts his classical model completely. His messenger takes no part in the action. He bears witness and posits himself in a sort of no man's land between the stage and the world the characters inhabit when they leave it. In his exchanges with the Chorus he reiterates that more is to come, that the women of Susa, and the spectators, should brace themselves for horrors that are worse than death. He brings no proof that his story is true, but familiarity with the conventions of classical tragedy ensures that the audience will trust his tale completely. Paradoxically, a greater involvement of the messenger into the action does not necessarily enhance his ability to scare the

spectators with a woeful tale. In *The Tragedie of Tancred and Gismund* (1591-92), the role of the Senecan messenger is fulfilled by Renugio, a captain in Tancred's guard whom we have seen escorting characters around the court in previous scenes. He informs the Chorus that he should have taken part in Guisard's assassination, but took pity on the Count and merely watched on as the servants strangled him. Having devoted some thirty lines to his own actions and words, he then proceeds with a tale which is modelled on *Thyestes* as closely as Giraldi's and, again, culminates not with the death of the victim but with the ripping out of his heart, an outrage "that hath the tyrant king / Withouten ruth commaunded vs to doe, / Onely to please his wrathfull heart withal."⁸ Like the hands in Giraldi's tragedy, here too, the body part that is going to play a role in the rest of the play resurfaces in several contexts in the language of the messenger. But words are not deemed sufficient. The messenger enters carrying a bloody cup, and the Chorus focuses the spectators' attention on it by specifically requesting to know its contents. Instead of answering, Ranugio launches into his tale. But the spectators know, and their attention is hopelessly divided between the words of the messenger and the prop. It is one case when engaging both the ear and the eye is less effective than engaging only the ear. When Ranugio shows the content of the cup, the Chorus is horrified, but the spectators have simply been in the know too long.

The shocking novelty of *Orbecche* on the Italian stage is kept for Act v. Unlike Seneca, Giraldi does not let the action culminate in the messenger's tale. If the spectators have listened carefully, they know that there is a lot more to come in the way of cruel, unnatural acts. What they are not prepared for is the level of realism Giraldi is going to introduce. The author distances himself from his totally uncanonical handling of the discovery scene by letting Sulmone take over its staging. When Alloche brings him the black-veiled silver platters, Sulmone's main concern is with displaying them to the best advantage. Why? Because the audience must have as good a view of them as Orbecche. With the help of his accomplice, turned into a willing stage-hand, the props are moved around:

⁸ *The Tragedie of Tancred and Gismund*, ed. W. W. Greg, The Malone Society Reprints. (Oxford: OUP, 1914), I. 1533-35.

AL. Ove volete ch'io mi ponga i piati?
 Qui forse?
 SUL. No, ponli un po' più discosti
 Da questo palco.
 AL. Qui?
 SUL. Sì: ma con ch'occhio
 Pensi tu che vedrà la figlia questo
 Dono che far le voglio?

[AL. *Where do you want me to place the platters? Here, perhaps?*
 SUL. *No, put them further away from this platform. AL. Here? SUL.*
Yes. But how do you think my daughter will look at my present? (410)]

And Alloche confirms the King's hope that the sight will be worse than a dagger through the heart for Orbecche. Sulmone's concern for his daughter's reaction echoes the author's for the audience's. It is a situation that frequently recurs in horror movies: we know something the protagonist is unaware of. We know what's behind the closed door or inside the gift-wrapped parcel. When the unwitting hero or, more frequently, heroine opens it we are ready to close our eyes (or keep them wide open, depending on our tastes) and Giraldi exploits such suspense to the full. Talmuche returns from Orbecche's chamber announcing her arrival. The King stages the next scene: "SUL. Or ritiriansi un po' tutti da canto, / Ch'al suo primo apparir qui non ne scorga." [SUL. Let's move aside, so that she won't see us as she enters. (410)].⁹ With the departure of the King and of his accomplices, the stage remains empty except for the ominous props. How long? Probably for as long as Orbecche and the Nurse, who are due to occupy it next, feel the tension held. When they come in, they keep to a different area of stage and go through some 230 lines of foreboding and *sententiae*. And they never so much as acknowledge the platters.

Then Sulmone enters and orders everybody away because he wants to talk to his daughter. He taunts her with hopes of forgiveness and then: "SUL. Or leva quel zendado et ivi sotto / Vedrai la mia allegrezza e 'l tuo contento." [SUL. Now remove that veil, and under it you'll find my joy, your content. (417)]. She hesitates, and then complies. Sulmone watches her, but Giraldi watches the audience. Gasps, sobs and tears galore. One spectator faints, another is overcome by emotion. In recording the episode for posterity in his *Discorso*,

⁹ For the staging of this scene, see Nicola Savarese, "Per un'analisi scenica dell'*Orbecche* di Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio." *Biblioteca teatrale* 2 (1971), 152.

Giraldi furnishes further details. The first casualty of the platters was Giulio Ponzoni's fiancée. He was the addressee of the *Discorso* and the interpreter of Oronte. She responded, says Giraldi, "as if she had seen [him] dead." (198). Given the national reputation of Ferrarese artisans for producing superb theatrical props, the lady may be excused on biographical grounds. But, he adds triumphantly, the other casualty was a young foreign gentleman, M.H., distressed by the situation and by the ability of Orbecche's interpreter to perform despair. We should not hold Giraldi's self-congratulatory prose against him. After all, four hundred years later the Royal Shakespeare Company would promote Olivier's *Titus Andronicus* pretty much in the same vein (how many spectators fainted, how many threw up in the aisles, etc.). Giraldi's recollections of the most exciting evening of his life are carefully coated in Aristotelian terms, but his heart is clearly elsewhere. He is interested in the here and now of theatrical performance. Although he is careful to constantly couple it with "compassion", one look at his distraught audience tells him that "horror [...] is the sinews of the fable." (*Discorso*, 212). Forget catharsis, he wants to scare his audience on the spot.

Why do the sophisticated Ferrarese courtiers find a few stage props so frightening? It is not as if they had never seen dismembered bodies on stage before. After all, the lives of the saints offered an unrivalled collection of horrors, which the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* vividly dramatized. But the torn-off limbs of the saints, their mangled internal organs, their eyes, hands, heads offered on platters in countless images have already undergone a metamorphosis into something rich and strange by the time they are exhibited in front of devout spectators. They are the stuff relics are made on. Because of their de-sacralisation, of their reduction to mere body parts, Oronte's remains become an object of horror. As Corinne Lucas notes:

Pour imposer le mal dans toute sa matérialité brutale, pour qu'il suscite des sensations fortes, il faut qu'il y ait altération du corps de la victime, que celle-ci soit défigurée, amputée, que le sang gicle, etc. Bref, Giraldi considère, à juste titre, que le spectacle du mal n'est pas la mort mais l'horreur.¹⁰

And fainting is an appropriate response when face to face with horror.

¹⁰ Corinne Lucas, *De l'horreur au "tieto fine"* (Rome: Bonacci, 1984), 90.

If Oronte's remains are a suitable vehicle for horror, the corpses of the children should trigger compassion. The punishment meted out on their father is not, after all, so cruel and unusual by Renaissance standards. And yet, at the climax of the play, they are practically ignored, their bodies reduced to mere sheathes for the all-important knives. Still stuck in their bodies, repeatedly referred to in the dialogue, they become the focus of the spectators' attention while shocked Orbecche, rants at her father. For him the tragedy is over. She can now make peace with him and remarry with his approval. She does not agree. He invites her back into the palace and sets off. She replies: "ORB. ...guari / Non andrà, traditor, che la vendetta / Farò io stessa de l'avuta ingiuria, / Se non mi vengon men questi coltelli." [ORB. Traitor, it will not be long before I have my own vendetta for the outrage I suffered – if these knives do not fail me. (420-21)]. And she does the deed. Where are they at this point? According to Mary Morrison, "The first blow of the dagger is probably delivered in the portico."¹¹ The rest of the action undoubtedly takes place just beyond the open portals of the palace. From the portal an attendant gives us a running commentary, validated and made more dramatic by Sulmone's cries for help.

Once the deed is done, Orbecche comes down stage carrying her father's head, his hands and a knife (presumably on another platter). Like a crazed Salomé, she now cradles her husband's head, and talks to it, bewailing its inability to reply. Shakespeare will go one up on this shocking scene in *2 Henry VI* (1592). After Suffolk's execution at the hands of the pirates, we are told that his body will be sent back to the king, a piece of information that does not quite prepare us for the stage direction that precedes the next court scene: *Enter the King [reading] a supplication, and the Queen with Suffolk's head, the Duke of Buckingham, and the Lord Say [with others]*¹². While the King and his courtiers get on with the affairs of state, Margaret cradles the gruesome remains of her lover, plans her revenge, and finally cries out: "Here may his head lie on my throbbing breast: / But where's the body that I

¹¹ Mary Morrison, *The Tragedies of G. B. Giraldi Cinthio* (Lewston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 71.

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Michael Hattaway. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), IV.iv.0sd.

should embrace?" (IV.iv.5-6). Even more poignantly, Orbecche misses her husband's voice more than his body.

She shows Oronte her father's head and hands to get approval for her act of perfect retribution. Requested to frighten and move to tears his audience while juggling two sets of heads and hands, Flaminio, the gentleman who so convincingly played the role of the heroine, would have fully sympathized with the boy actor who had to follow Titus Andronicus' weirdest command: "Come, brother, take a head, / And in this hand the other will I bear. / And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed: / Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth"¹³. The Elizabethans knew that laughter needs not undermine tragedy, but not the Italians. No acknowledgement of the grotesque aspects of the *tableau* could possibly be allowed to enter the language of the character, and through it the mind of the audience. Orbecche completes her lamentations over her husband and her children. The Chorus rushes forth because she looks suicidal. Before they can reach her, she stabs herself in full view of the audience. No equivocation, this time. No starting of a violent action on the threshold of the palace then decorously completing it indoors. Another flaunting of the rules? Yes and no, replies Giraldi to his critics with his usual cleverness. Aristotle is not really categorical on this point; only a small number of classical tragedies have survived, so we cannot know for sure what the Greeks did; Plutarch approves of death on stage provided it is tastefully and convincingly portrayed and his authority should carry a lot of weight. Once again, for Giraldi, the bottom line is stagecraft. Portraying death on stage is difficult, he implies: you need good playwrights and good actors. If you haven't got them, forget it. To make disregard for this particular rule worthwhile, you have to succeed so completely, that "although the deaths are pretended, they appear real, and those who do not know how to achieve this, should not blame those who do know." (*Discorso*, 187). Quite clearly, he places himself among those who do know. And his first audience's response to his heroine's death would appear to prove him right.

Giraldi's *Orbecche* is not a forgotten masterpiece. The characters show little or no development over the five acts. They are trapped in their roles (the cruel father, the wise statesman, the

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate, coll. The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1995), III.i.280-83.

oppressed daughter, the loyal nurse, etc.). The dialogue is often wooden, encumbered by far too many philosophical digressions. The rhythm of the verse is monotonous, at times excruciatingly so. It would be very difficult to isolate a single, memorable line. And yet, the play is well worth rediscovering, especially in combination with the author's theoretical writings. Under the orthodox surface, the Ferrarese scholar had planted the seeds of a revolutionary, stage oriented approach to the writing of modern tragedies. As early as 1541, he had seen the futility of strict, unthinking adherence to the rules supposedly laid down by Aristotle. He had seen the necessity of winning over the audience by capturing its interest and catering to its tastes. In Italy, the seeds did not take, and Giraldi's innovative tragedy did not steer playwrighting in a new direction. However, *Orbecche* and the theoretical debate that it had triggered in Italy contributed to shaping continental playwrighting in the second half of the 16th century. The process of cross-fertilization between the works of the European dramatists (who are almost completely forgotten) and those of their dazzling Elizabethan counterparts (who still attract vast audiences) is well worth further study. Within this framework, Giraldi certainly deserves more attention than he has commanded until now.

Mariangela TEMPERA
University of Ferrara