

Armando Maggi. *In the Company of Demons: Unnatural Beings, Love, and Identity in the Italian Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. vii + 232 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-50130-7; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-50131-4.

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Thinking with Spirits in the Italian Renaissance

Armando Maggi's latest study, *In the Company of Demons*, aims at configuring the ontological profile of spiritual beings and their ongoing interaction and dialogue with humankind. Central to Maggi's argument is the idea that, in Renaissance thought unlike in our modern mentality, evil was far from being an abstract entity. Conversely, in the early modern mindset, spiritual or, rather, demonic beings were considered to be an active presence, the activity of which affected human beings in both spirit and body. Maggi's purpose is, therefore, double. On the one hand, he investigates what spirits, that is, invisible entities, were thought to be according to Italian demonologists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; on the other hand, he is interested in analyzing how exactly these invisible beings could be perceived by humans and the character of these encounters.

Pointing out that his book is not a historical survey of different philosophical and theological Renaissance theories about demonic creatures, Maggi advances two original hypotheses about the spirits' nature and origin. First, Maggi underscores that spiritual beings lack bodies per se; nevertheless, to be perceived by humans they need to adopt visible bodies. One can recognize the crucial issue of demonic corporeality that dominated the medieval and early modern demonological treatises and that has been analyzed in full detail in recent studies, such as Walter Stephens's *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (2002) and Dyan Elliott's *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (1998).

Maggi goes one step further and interprets the concept of demonic corporeality in linguistic terms. The bodies that spiritual beings take are not real bodies but look like bodies. In other words, they are similes, a notion that Maggi uses interchangeably with that of metaphors. These fake bodies communicate something and, hence, need to be deciphered. Maggi also argues that the bodily form spirits take is not at all arbitrary but is to be understood both in close connection to a human being's particular desire, background, and memory, and to the fact that spirits want to communicate something to humans. Maggi's second hypothesis is connected to the cultural origin of the notion of spirits. For Renaissance literate people, devils are more than a menacing presence and an aerial and metaphorical appearance. To quote Maggi, devils are "walking quotations, lumps of bits and pieces of citations," and "cultural palimpsests (a cluster of disparate cultural references)," the origin of which can be traced back to both classical antiquity and to Christianity (pp. 7, 13-14).

These preliminary hypotheses, that spirits' bodies are similes and culturally connoted, generate several questions around which Maggi has organized the structure of his book. If spirits' bodies are sheer metaphors, how can such a metaphor be destroyed? What sort of visible bodies do spiritual beings acquire to be seen by humans? How can a human being interact with this kind of metaphor? How can human flesh, men or women, have sex with a metaphor? To provide the answers to these

questions, Maggi focuses his attention on the minute literary analysis of four little-known demonological texts written between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Italian scholars who had a significant humanist background: Giovan Francesco Pico della Mirandola's *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum* (*Witch, or the deceptions of demons*), Strozzi Cigogna's *Il palagio degli incanti e delle gran meraviglie degli spiriti e di tutta la natura* (*The palace of marvels and of the great enchantments of the spirits and of the entire nature*), Pompeo della Barba's *Spositione d'un sonetto platonico* (*Interpretation of a Platonic sonnet*) and *I due primi dialoghi* (*The first two dialogues*), and Ludovico Maria Sinistrari's *De daemonalitate* (*Demoniality*).

The first chapter, dedicated to the analysis of della Mirandola's treatise on witchcraft, *Strix*, published first in Latin in 1523 and then translated into Italian, offers a very erudite explanation of demonic bodies as "cultural palimpsests." Why did Maggi start his hermeneutical quest on the world of spiritual beings by examining the figure of the witch? *Strix*, or the witch, represents Satan's most visible metaphor. The sexual encounters between *striges* and the devil are nothing else but a means of proliferation of these malignant metaphors. Hence, Maggi argues that detecting and burning a witch would, in fact, be an act of interpretation. In other words, destroying a witch is the equivalent of deciphering a metaphor, a hermeneutical exercise meant to "read and interpret stories hiding in the plague of striges" (p. 26). What do these stories consist of? In his reading of della Mirandola's treatise, Maggi suggests that witches and their commerce with demons reenact a revival of classical myths. *Striges*, for example, which in the Renaissance were considered to be screech owls that sucked life out of babies at night, are related to Carna, a nymph and the Goddess of the Hinge in classical mythology, who is mentioned in the sixth book of Ovid's *Fasti*. Maggi reaches an original conclusion within the context of numerous contemporary studies dealing with the phenomenon of medieval and early modern witchcraft. For Maggi, witches are neither an underground society that menaces the Christian world, as Norman Cohn, for example, has argued in his influential *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (1975), nor a bookish scholastic construction meant to account for the devil's true existence, as such scholars as Alain Boureau in *Satan hérétique: naissance de la démonologie dans l'Occident médiéval, 1280-1330* (2004) or Stephens in *Demon Lovers* have shown. Conversely, without polemically or overtly mentioning any of these

previous witchcraft studies, Maggi emphasizes that the witches' world embodies in fact the values of Latin and Greek culture, and, thus, "burning a witch is like burning a library of classical books" (p. 17).

Once he establishes the cultural origin of spiritual beings, Maggi dedicates the remaining three chapters to elucidate the question of spirits' history and the different types of encounters between spirits and humans. The second chapter contains an extremely detailed analysis of Cigogna's *Palagio*, a work of Thomistic influence, which, Maggi argues, is to be regarded as the most original work within the field of demonology written in early modern Europe. *Palagio* proposes a complex and systematic taxonomy of evil spiritual presences according to their nature, powers, and purposes. With his close reading of Cigogna's demonological work, Maggi strengthens the hypotheses he has already expounded in chapter 1 about Renaissance spirits, in particular that fallen angels are avatars of classical culture: "Cigogna's *Theater* amplifies the Renaissance vision of the spiritual beings as hybrids, beings whose biographies are a patchwork of disparate references" (p. 91). At the same time, Cigogna's definition of fallen spirits as beings whose bodies are not real, but signs of their visibility, confirms Maggi's starting points about the ontological status of spirits. Maggi closely follows Cigogna's argument in relation to the spiritual beings' origin when he states that they existed and interacted with humanity before Christianity. Their role would have been to warn human beings about and to protect them from the potential dangers menacing them. After the Word's incarnation, however, spirits appear to humans only after their death to damn or to save them. In ontological terms, spiritual beings would be a form of recollection, a citation from the past.

This idea according to which spirits' biography and human beings' memory and existence are closely connected prepares the ground for the third chapter, which is an examination of a sonnet of Neoplatonic inspiration, *Spositione d'un sonetto platonico* by the Florentine doctor della Barba. Maggi's erudite study of della Barba's sonnet, which shows deep familiarity with both Neoplatonic philosophy and classical literature, offers a sophisticated answer to one of the central questions around which Maggi builds his argument: how can human beings have sexual encounters with spirits who are nothing else but patchworks of cultural references, memories, and visible metaphors? Central to Maggi's demonstration is the concept of "familiar spirit," which, in the Renaissance, was not to be confounded with the classical notion of *lares familiares* and with that of Penates, that

is, spirits that protected individuals and their households. Maggi points out that the familiar spirit or lares/larvae represented for Renaissance intellectuals, such as della Barba, the spirit of a dead lover who, still in love, leaves the tomb, takes up a fake aerial body, and has sexual encounters with his beloved. A familiar spirit is, therefore, a monstrous hybrid that, on the one hand, has a material form (namely, the corpse), and, on the other hand, represents “the materialization of a memory at once external to the corpse (the spirit looks like what we remember of the deceased person) and emanating from the corpse (a love obsession stronger than death itself)” (p. 21). Maggi goes with his interpretation of the notion of familiar spirit even further. Focusing especially on della Barba’s original understanding of key issues, such as body and soul, Maggi carries out his analysis of the spirits’ ontological status within the epistemological framework of Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophy. He underlines that della Barba reverses the canonical interpretation of soul and body relation. The latter is not the cage of the former but the other way round. Once being devastated by love, the lover starts to contemplate the splendor of the body. It is in this act of contemplation, Maggi underscores following della Barba’s argument, that the body appears to the mind’s eye as a body of metaphors; within the soul, the body exists through its “healing luminosity” (p. 137). Spiritual beings, whether they are good or bad, would then be like “flashes of light, sudden revelations of luminosity,” which accompany the body within the soul (p. 137). In the context of della Barba’s work, spiritual beings are bodies of metaphors that exist within the soul, that is, within us, the human beings. Such a detailed and sophisticated approach sheds lights on the problematic issue of (sexual) encounters between humans and spirits. The latter has more than the status of an incubus, a non-corporeal entity that takes a body and has sex with a human being. Conversely, spiritual beings lie within the human soul and, hence, react from within the human being.

The last chapter shows another facet and role that spiritual beings had according to Renaissance demonologists. Once again, Maggi uses literary analysis to examine *De daemonialitate* by the Franciscan demonologist Sinistrari. The treatise offers an explicit answer to Maggi’s question about the capacity of spirits to couple with humans and to sire children. Sinistrari labels incubi the spiritual beings that are capable to do so. These entities are in-between demons and humans, and their bodies are heavier than devils but lighter than humans. Although they are evil in nature, they have mortal bodies

that make them similar to humans. Maggi argues that the originality of Sinistrari’s argument consists in the role that the Franciscan demonologist assigns to incubi. Precisely because of their humanlike bodies, incubi will assist human beings in the process of redemption. Therefore, incubi’s bodies need to be regarded as the bodies that humans will acquire at the end of time. Achieving the body of our salvation, incubi, concludes Maggi, are, in fact, our familiar spirit.

Maggi’s dense, sophisticated, and erudite study brings several elements of novelty within the context of the already existing scholarship on medieval and Renaissance demons and on their encounters with humans. First, Maggi convincingly shows that Renaissance demonology was more than a field dominated by the tutelary figure of Satan. As the works of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian demonologists demonstrate, Renaissance intellectuals conceived spiritual beings as a wide array of angels, fallen angels, demons, familiar spirits, lares, Penates, larvae, witches, incubi, and succubi. Second, Maggi emphasizes that the role of these entities was not exclusively malignant. On the contrary, spiritual beings loved, warned, protected, and even became involved in humans’ salvific process. Finally, Maggi points out to what extent Renaissance Catholic demonologists used classical sources mentioning demons (whether good or bad) in their own understanding of demonic beings. Witchcraft, thus, appears to be more than a purely social or gender-related phenomenon. In stating that burning a witch is like destroying a library of classical works, Maggi opens up new perspectives in finding the intellectual origins of witchcraft. However, by the end of his book, Maggi fails to provide a more consistent definition of what spiritual beings really are. One can see the originality of interpreting spirits’ bodies in linguistic terms as similes or metaphors. Yet, such a working definition in which the notion of simile is used interchangeably with that of metaphor presents at least one serious drawback, because it prevents the reader from grasping the specific differences among angels, demons, witches, incubi, etc., which more often than not are used in Maggi’s analysis indistinctively under the larger umbrella of spiritual beings or familiar spirits. Moreover, in terms of methodology and use of sources, it is not convincing how Maggi makes general assertions about the character and status of Renaissance demonology focusing his attention only on a very limited number of demonological treatises. It would have been extremely interesting to see if this interpretation of witches as a patchwork of classical quotations can still be sustained when analyzing other

demonological treatises that were written in the same space and epoch as della Mirandola's *Strix*. Furthermore, even if Maggi overtly points out that his main focus is represented by Italian demonological treatises, a study, such as Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (1997), has shown that in late medieval and early modern Europe demonological works were written all over the continent. Given this state of affairs, it would have been worthwhile to pinpoint what distinct elements Italian authors bring in

their understanding of demonic creatures.

Maggi's *In the Company of Demons* is an innovative and erudite study that sheds light on a series of central issues, such as demons' existence, appearance, and contact with humans. Yet, after having read the book, readers may wonder why the author chooses to discuss four primary sources dealing with demonological topics instead of a much more generous output, which would have given them a more general perspective on Renaissance demonology.

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