

## Episode 8: "In Defense of Women"

### Transcription

An actor reads from "In Defense of Women"

**Actor 1:**

Rise and Pay Attention!  
You wayward sleepy head, Awake, Awake!  
Song of Songs/Defender of Women  
For they are the reason for all that is  
Without them, humans would not exist.

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**Host Aaron Henne:** Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, Artistic Director of theatre dybbuk. During this episode, we'll be hearing excerpts from, and exploring issues connected to, a poem called "In Defense of Women," originally published in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Along the way, Dr. Erith Jaffe-Berg, Professor of Theatre at the Department of Theatre, Film and Digital Production at the University of California, Riverside, will give us insight into Leone de' Sommi, author of the poem we are discussing, and will illuminate some of the surrounding cultural considerations of his time.

This episode was first recorded live, as part of a collaboration with San Diego Rep's Lipinsky Family San Diego Jewish Arts Festival. As such, it may sound a little different than our episodes usually do.

You've already heard a section from the preface of the poem, "In Defense of Women". Actor Clay Steakley will also read selections from the poem itself throughout the episode. Readings from other texts and sources will be performed by actors Julie Lockhart, Diana Tanaka, and Jonathan CK Williams.

And now, episode eight: "In Defense of Women"

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**Actor 1:**

*Hear My Words,  
wise, decent, and beautiful women,  
for I will compose my riddle  
against those betraying hordes  
of old ones, who up to the stars,  
have defamed you  
and therefore, I defend you,  
I defend you in every way.*

**Dr. Erith Jaffe-Berg:** In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a member of the Jewish community emerged as a strong voice for theatrical activity among artists, including Jews and Christians - Leone de' Sommi Portaleone, known in Hebrew as —

**Actor 1:** *Jehuda Ben Isaac Sommo Portaleone.*

**Erith:** He was also known as Signore Leone de' Sommi Ebreo, or, Leone the Jew. Living from 1527 to 1592, De' Sommi was a key figure in the Jewish community, often representing his community as a leader to the dominant Christian society. He lived in Mantua and advocated on behalf of the community's ability to handle their own business independently. He was also a leading dramatist, writing at least 14 plays and musical interludes that were performed at a variety of venues. In addition, he authored the first treatise on directing, *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* —

**Actor 1:** *Four Dialogues On The Art of Representation.*

**Erith:** De' Sommi also wrote on behalf of the Jewish community and even served as a scribe, or *scrittore*, in the literary academy that was known as the *Accademia degli Invaghiti*, or The Academy of the Lovesick. He had the idea of creating a public theatre, and he asked for permission to do so.

**Actor 1:** *Leone the Jew supplicates and asks you something that will give pleasure to the city, because he would like to accommodate and provide a room that is well-prepared and in which gentlewomen and gentlemen can sit together and view the recitations of plays.*

**Erith:** The Duke denied his request. You sense here that this was a visionary man but one who was never allowed to forget his position as someone whose status was not quite the same as that of others in the city. For example, being given the title of scribe was in lieu of him being made a full member of the Academy. Now, one of the most amazing pieces of writing that De' Sommi left us with is "Magen Nashim," "In Defense of Women".

**Actor 1:**

*And you, my beautiful friend  
who called me to this task  
who woke my rhyme  
to defend women  
give me strength in the discord  
against deceitful words  
that made a break with God,  
and an infamy with the world.*

**Erith:** The poem is organized into 50 stanzas, each with 8 lines. In each stanza the first line is in Hebrew, the second in Italian, the third in Hebrew, the fourth and fifth in Italian, the sixth and seventh in Hebrew and the eighth in Italian.

**We hear Erith speak Hebrew and Italian intercut with the lines below.**

**Actor 1:**

*He labored in haste  
To blame now this woman, that woman  
and thought it was a good thing  
to slander women and maidens*

**We hear Erith speak Hebrew and Italian intercut with the lines below.**

**Actor 1:**

*He often wanted to  
disgrace and shame women  
which was a kind of mortal sin  
and an expression of his and others' folly*

**Erith:** The bilingualism is strategic, combining two languages, religions, cultures and points of view, and also reflecting on man and woman as mirror images of one another. On the page, when you read from left to right in Italian, and then from right to left in Hebrew, you are locked into the poem in a way that is unique to this type of bilingual expression. The reading experience of this and other bilingual poems may have appealed to intellectuals, such as De' Sommi, who lived in two different communities, offering them the opportunity for cultural exchange through their artwork.

Now, before we can discuss more of the poem, we should frame more fully this experience of living in two worlds. Italy is an interesting place for Jews in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Late in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were exiled from the Iberian peninsula, but on the Italian peninsula they were allowed into a number of regions. After all, there had been a community of Jews living in Rome for well over a thousand years and there were also Jews living in Northern Italy during the Middle Ages, going back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and prior. And so, Jews being welcomed in Italian society in the 16<sup>th</sup> century made sense given their deep cultural roots. Of course, this was also a fraught period for Jews in Italy. The Counter-Reformation was taking place, with the Catholic Church seeking to reinvigorate and connect with more of its followers as a reaction to the Protestant Reformation. In a way, the Jews get caught in the crossfire.

**Actor 2:** *Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," 1543: Be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogue, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously."*

**Actor 3:** *The Pope's Bull, "Cum Nimis Absurdum", 1555: Considering that the Church of Rome tolerates these very Jews - evidence of the true Christian faith - and to this end we declare: One - in the city as well as in other states, territories and domains of the Church of Rome itself, all Jews are to live in only one quarter to which there is only one entrance and from which there is but one exit.*

**Actor 2:** *Moreover, they are nothing but thieves and robbers who daily eat no morsel and wear no thread of clothing which they have not stolen and pilfered from us by means of their accursed usury.*

**Actor 3:** *Two - furthermore, in each and every state, territory and domain in which they are living, they will have only one synagogue in its customary location, and they will construct no other new ones, nor can they own buildings.*

**Actor 2:** *What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?*

**Actor 3:** *Three - moreover, concerning the matter that Jews should be recognizable everywhere, to this end, men must wear a hat; women, indeed, some other evident sign, yellow in color, that must not be concealed.*

**Actor 2:** *Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct now that we are aware of their*

*lying and reviling and blaspheming.*

**Actor 3:** *Declared at St. Mark's, Rome, in the one thousand five hundred fifty fifth year of the incarnation of Our Lord, one day prior to the Ides of July, in the first year of our papacy.*

**Erith:** Once the Pope issued such an order, many of the other states in Italy had to decide whether to follow and adapt it. But any deviation could potentially anger the Pope. Nonetheless, some parts of Northern Italy - and here I'm thinking of the Venetian Republic, the Lombard region, of Mantua and the Mantovano, and Ferrara, amongst other places - found it beneficial to take a different tact with the Jews. For this reason, Jews found a relative safe haven in those areas. For example, in Mantua, the place where De' Sommi lived and created, the Gonzaga dukes were less willing to implement the Pope's punitive Bull and actually used this as an opportunity to assert their independence from Rome. That is to say that life was not perfect for the Jews of Mantua, just that it was maybe a little more livable. They still had to wear the Jewish badge, and eventually, in 1612, relatively late, they were confined to a ghetto. The Duke relayed his intentions to —

**Actor 3:** — *Reduce the Jewish inhabitants in our city and in the various neighborhoods of the region to a restricted location, a determined ghetto, and I would like that with this, and in imitation of the Holy Church, we will tolerate them, and allow for them a site that will also make it possible for them to have their markets and businesses and their living, not only for their benefit but for the health of the public.*

**Erith:** Before that, Jews were also asked to pay a Jewish tax, imposed on them for their so-called right to live in others' lands, as we hear referred to in a letter from a Jewish mother to her son.

**Actor 2:** *You, my son, must tell me of your deeds, the tents be as they are, and all the foundations of the house and the fields go by their daily tasks. My soul also wants to know if our Lord and Pope has placed a tax of some sort on you, and if they placed requests from the Jewish community.*

**Erith:** One of the ways that the Jews paid the tax imposed on them was by producing plays. De' Sommi's own *Three Sisters* is a great example of just such a work.

**Actor 1:** *Act One, Scene One. We come upon Fulvio, the Young Lover, and Tansillo, his servant.*

**Actor 4 (as Fulvio):** *What they say is true, Tansillo. Wisdom won't help when fortune is against you. Look at these new obstacles fate has put in the way of my hopes and dreams. Is it not enough that Nardino Ottanio has inherited everything from his cousin Nardo, including his house? Now, he's plotting to inherit his wife as well – the woman I greatly desire.*

**Actor 2 (as Tansillo):** *But I thought you said you were going to try to delay all that?*

**Actor 4 (as Fulvio):** *I said that I arranged to steal the letters he thinks were sent to her in Rome. But that's not me. I don't want to keep having to take such dishonest actions.*

**Actor 2 (as Tansillo):** *Here's the same old crisis of conscience again. I say to you, Master Fulvio, the age of honesty is over. Goodness and loyalty won't get you anywhere anymore. With deception and crime live half the time, with cheating and falsehood the other.*

**Actor 4 (as Fulvio):** *Yeah, but one can never be certain that crime won't be its own punishment when all is said and done.*

**Erith:** As you can hear, while these plays may have explored some specific issues in their subtexts, they were not overtly Jewish in nature. Instead, they were inspired by, and in dialogue with, the larger theatrical tradition so prevalent in Italy. For example, Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, published some years before De' Sommi's work, also begins with a lover and his servant imparting some important exposition to set us up for that which is to come.

**Actor 3:** *Act One Scene One. We come upon Callimaco, the lover, and Siro, his servant.*

**Actor 4 (as Callimaco):** *Siro, hang on. I need you for a sec.*

**Actor 2 (as Siro):** *I'm here.*

**Actor 4 (as Callimaco):** *If I haven't already told you what I'm about to tell you, it's not because I don't trust you. It's because I don't think a man should talk about the things he doesn't want known unless he's forced to. That said, since I'm thinking I'll need your help, I'm going to tell you everything.*

**Actor 2 (as Siro):** *I am your servant, and servants should never ask anything of their masters, nor should they poke into their master's business. But when they are told of this business, they must serve faithfully. It is what I have done, and it is what I will do.*

**Actor 4 (as Callimaco):** *Of course, I know that. I think you've heard me say this a thousand times, but you can hear it a thousand and one. How I was 10 years old when I was sent by those who took care of me - my mother and father being dead - to Paris, where I have lived for twenty years.*

**Erith:** Connected to this theatrical activity in the 1550's - the period during which "In Defense of Women" was published - in the general population, more women - Christian, not Jews, of which we'll talk about a little bit later - were coming to the fore on the theatrical stages of Northern Italy, Rome, and Venice as actresses in the professional world of the commedia dell'arte. This new appearance of women on stage made possible proto-feminist performances, as evident in the pastoral play *La Mirtilla*, by Isabella Andreini. In this monologue, taken from Julie Campbell's English translation, a nymph named Filli addresses a satyr who has threatened her.

**Actor 2:**

*Now you have finally understood  
That I have been mocking you! What woman,  
Even if deformed and vile, could take pleasure  
In loving so monstrous and horrid a body?  
Now you see that I have caught you! Remain here,  
Mocked, as you should be, while I leave you.  
I would to heaven that you fall prey  
To rabid bears and hungry wolves  
So that I would never more have to see  
Your ugly face, which to me  
Is most odious and awful.*

**Erith:** In addition to roles such as this that demonstrate great lucidity, if not always kindness, it was also common for actresses to portray a kind of diva-esque madness, which Andreini herself often did. Scholar Roz Kerr describes the particular circumstances connected to one of these commedia dell'arte performances in this manner:

**Actor 2:** *Isabella finds herself deceived by Flavio, and, not knowing where to find a solution and remedy for the heartache he has caused her, she succumbs entirely to her sorrow, and, overwhelmed by her passion, grief and fury, she goes outside of herself, of her mind, in madness, running around the street and speaking in tongues to different people, and saying things like —*

**Actor 4:** *— I remember the year - I cannot remember - that a harpsichord sat beside a Spanish Pavane dancing with a gagliarda of Santin of Parma, after which the lasagna, the macaroni, and the polenta dressed in brown, but they could not stand one another because the stolen cat was the friend of the beautiful girl from Algeria. Even so, it pleased the caliph of Egypt to decide that the following morning both were to be put in the stocks.*

**Erith:** These antics on stage belied the reality that, off stage, women were very canny and business minded. For example, Doña Nasi and Doña Abravanel were very powerful leaders in their Jewish communities. Nasi even saved many *conversos*, or hidden Jews, from the Inquisition, through the development of an escape network. Samuel Usque, a Portuguese converso who settled in Italy, wrote about Nasi that she was —

**Actor 3:** *— The heart in the body of our people bringing forth into the light the fruit of the plants that lie buried in its darkness.*

**Erith:** Never mind all the women leaders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, from Queen Elizabeth —

**Actor 4:** *— I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.*

**Erith:** To Catherine de' Medici —

**Actor 2:** *— A false report, if believed during three days, may be of great service to a government.*

**Erith:** To the Marchesa of Mantua, Isabella d'Este —

**Actor 4:** *— Neither hope nor fear.*

**Erith:** Of course, this strong leadership existed in conversation with a long tradition of debate - among men - about women's worth and place in society. This was known as the *Querelle des femmes*. Are they bad or good? Worthy or not? Should they be educated or not? In 1541, the Frenchman Gratien du Pont wrote in his *Controverses des sexes masculine et femenin*:

**Actor 3:** *Woman is evil by nature and prone to vice.*

**Erith:** Juan Luis Vives, in his 1522 instructions for Henry VIII's daughter, the future Queen Mary of England, suggested that chastity and obedience, above all, should be taught to women, and —

**Actor 3:** *—when she is clearly taught about this, she is sufficiently instructed.*

**Erith:** More vituperative were writings that justified witch hunts and murders of women. Nicholas Remy, around 1595, issued the statement —

**Actor 3:** *— It is not unreasonable that this scum of humanity, witches, should be drawn chiefly from the feminine sex.*

**Erith:** And, of course, there is wide array of other statements made by a variety of figures about women's undue influences on men. De' Sommi throws his own opinion into the ring by writing something more positive. He expresses his admiration for a commedia dell'arte actress known as Flaminia Romana - Flaminia of Rome - also known as Barbara Flaminia.

**Actor 1:** *When she is on the stage, the audience gets the impression not of something contrived or faked, but rather of something real occurring in front of them. She so varies her gestures, voice, and tones, matching these to the events, so that those who hear her are moved to marvel and delight.*

**Erith:** Later, he wrote a beautiful long poem on the virtues of the actress Vicenza Armani. And finally, he composed "Magen Nashim," "In Defense of Women". In it, De' Sommi expresses a deep belief in the goodness of women, and also a respect for their strength, wisdom and abilities. He does so by, at times, aligning his praise with biblical allusions, and, in this way, he gives even greater power to his argument.

**Actor 1:**

*Of Jewish Women  
Who were already in ancient times,  
both benevolent and prophetic  
to recount I will not tire  
for, even if I lay a thousand praises  
they are but a seed of mustard  
in the sea, so shall I cease  
by lauding Rachel or Leah.*

**Erith:** As a man living at the intersection of multiple worlds, De' Sommi also understood the power of aligning his praise of women with other cultural reference points, including those outside of either Jewish or Christian theology.

**Actor 1:**

*From among the Greek women  
I see Hippo, chaste and beautiful  
Daughter of generals and philanthropists  
Who to escape infamy  
Was willing to suffer death, and so she  
Her body forfeited  
In the bitter water  
To evade being called wicked.*

**Erith:** De' Sommi doubles down on his praise by dedicating the poem to a specific woman, Hannah Rieti, who was the wife of a friend, Reuven Sullam. She was De' Sommi's patron and muse, the one who encouraged him to publish the piece. He writes:

**Actor 1:** *And here, one day a woman came before me, and she said:*

**Actor 2:** *I was told that in defense of women you sang a new song. Please I ask you to give it to me for a legacy.*

**Actor 1:**

*She, the poem, is a gift given*

*To you, renowned among women, Hannah  
And you, from your seat turn now  
And take my gift from my hands  
And to you and to your beloved, my friend  
I will spread a peaceful tabernacle  
And I will send up a prayer to He who resides in the Heavens  
That your days may end in goodness and your sleep in comfort.*

**Erith:** In this same dedication, De'Sommi explains that he was incited to write the work as a response, not just to the general sentiments about women we already experienced, but in particular to the derogatory, anonymously published poem "Davar be Ito," "A Thing In Its Time," published in 1556, which was especially vehement in its opposition to women.

**Actor 1:**

*I was told that an anonymous man has published his poem  
That he composed against women, to his shame  
And he has called it, "A Thing in its Time"  
So then I created against that a poem of 50 stanzas  
And I have called it, "In Defense of Women"  
He composed his poem in the language of Gentiles and Jews  
And therefore, I have done the same, in the holy tongue and that of the Gentiles  
But I said to myself I will keep it in my own hands for a time of malice and transgression.*

**Erith:** He goes on to discuss how women, while disempowered, are often given the responsibility for leading men astray.

**Actor 1:**

*And if the bad quality  
Of some total madman  
turns from the righteous path  
And he wants to throw away everything  
For a forbidden and adulterous bed  
He will squeal like a strained horse  
That it was a woman who led him astray*

**Erith:** He then writes that if a man gets a bad idea in his head, that it's his own fault and not that of a woman.

**Actor 1:**

*And if they were wise and smarter,  
For everyone causes his own demise,  
For women did not cause them to fail  
But he who has a bit of a brain  
Ah, to him women lend wings to fly to the sky  
And to the last day he will play  
He, who shares their company*

**Erith:** In other words, he is telling men to own up, and not just put the blame on women. Given all that we have discussed, we might expect that in De' Sommi's defense of women, he would extol the virtues of the actress in general and also, since he is writing to a Jewish audience, encourage Jewish women



to perform. That is not what happened. After all, in his *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni scheniche* —

**Actor 1:** — *Four Dialogues On The Art of Representation* —

**Erith:** — he makes it very clear there that especially unmarried women who are not aristocrats should not take to the stage.

**Actor 1:** *The ancients, therefore, did well in accepting the law that a virgin would not be permitted to appear in comedies lest, by such an example, citizens' daughters, who ought to be bashful and retiring, might be induced to gad abroad and engage in public gossip.*

**Erith:** His main objection is that he is concerned for their safety. He writes, in contrast, that a person of very high station is protected in concrete ways, by guards, and in more intangible ways, such as by her stature.

**Actor 1:** *On the other hand, a prince's daughter might be allowed to appear in public, for the reason that few would be so bold as to dare attack the honor of such a woman. Where there is no hope, love can clearly take no root.*

**Erith:** However we may feel about such sentiments, it is important to remember that theatrical undertakings, and the touring and the travel that they involved, required actors to put themselves in harm's way. It is, therefore, not surprising that De' Sommi would be especially reluctant about Jewish women's involvement. Even Isabella Andreini, that great performer we mentioned before, did not want her daughters to go into acting, preferring the nunnery to the stage. In her own sonnets, she gives vivid voice to the difficulties that she has experienced.

**Actor 4:**

*From every delight my face is turned away  
Alas, cruel destiny; Oh fate, my foe,  
Now you have done the worst within your power*

**Erith:** It is true that in this early modern period, we may wonder, as the scholar Joan Kelly once famously asked —

**Actor 2:** *Did women really have a Renaissance?*

**Erith:** They certainly did lack the unfettered freedoms of men. Well, not really unfettered when you consider the factors such as class, and religious, and occupational status. At the same time, the particular lack of freedom for women applies in unique ways to Jewish women. But first, we should understand a bit about their circumstances. Jewish women were a very heterogenous group. There were, of course, the *Italiani* Jews, those who traced their ancestry, as we have already discussed, to the Roman times in Italy. This was their home and had been for centuries.

**Actor 2:** *Padre Abraham, padre adorato, padre chi ha portato la luce a Israel*

**Erith:** There were Ashkenazi women from the Germanic waves of exile and migration, some of whom had lived in Italy for not quite as long as the *Italiani* but for a significant amount of time, and they held traditions, prayer rites, and foods that were distinctive from their *Italiani* neighbors, while speaking both Italian and Yiddish.

**Actor 4:** *Foter Avrum, balibter foter, foter vos hot tsu Yisroel likht gebrengr*

**Erith:** And finally, the Sephardic women came from the more recent waves of expulsion from the Iberian peninsula, many from merchant backgrounds and arriving with a fair amount of wealth and with somewhat more access to the larger society due to these riches. They often spoke, at least initially, in Ladino, which is a combination of Spanish and Hebrew.

*(Speaking in Ladino)* Avram avinu, padre cherido, padre bendicho lus de Israel.

Now, involvement in business, often considered off limits to women, was not uncommon among those within the poorer groups of Italiani and Ashkenazi Jews, especially those who were widowed and thus needed to take on certain responsibilities in order to survive. This was not the case among the more wealthy recent immigrants, the Sephardic, who could largely rely on their accumulated wealth if any deaths or losses of that sort occurred. While I did previously mention Doña Nasi and Doña Abravanel, Sephardic businesswomen, we are in part so familiar with them because they are the exceptions that prove the rule. All of that being said, no matter their affiliation or background, or their privilege or lack thereof, the women were, in general, expected to have their focus on the home and on the duties that go along with such a focus. And while men could study, and read, and write, and participate in congregational life, including being part of the requisite minyan, women could not. As such, when the Jewish community participated in theatre making and men like De' Sommi took on being writers and composers, choreographers, producers, and community leaders, women could not take on such overt roles.

**Actor 3:** *Fellow members of our Jewish community, I am proud to present to you a brief interaction from act two of our very own Leone de'Sommi's Three Sisters. This sequence features the character of Euronica, an old widow, played by one of our finest actors. Appearing in the scene is also Lisetta, her maidservant, played by none other than yours truly. Let us begin!*

**Actor 1 (As Euronica):** *What should I do in such a sorry state? What should I do!? I'm alone, widowed, depressed, and I've got no one to turn to.*

**Actor 3 (as Lisetta):** *Yes, you are right. There is nothing worse for us women than to be widowed and alone. When I told you to go after that doctor, the one whose servant was so perfect for me, I knew what I was talking about. We would have had the help and advice we need today.*

**Actor 1 (As Euronica):** *I married off Lucrezia to that ugly idiot Pacifico because he could take care of her. And now, to make certain that he has an heir, he is doing things I pray to God will not completely embarrass and ruin my daughter.*

**Actor 3 (as Lisetta):** *Well, if she's in the way now that I think she is, she's had her fun, and blessed is the one who is satisfied.*

**Erith:** However, in the same way that women were allowed to take on the businesses of their husbands when they were widowed, in the theatre, there were permissions for them to handle contractual responsibilities in making shoes, clothing, props, and stage settings, as well as in borrowing and lending these items. The costumes were the most expensive items for the actors, and clothing was extremely costly for people to keep, so women's skills were welcomed in order to serve these most pressing needs. In addition, Jews were involved in the cloth industry - the *strazzaria* - and so Jewish women would have had valuable know-how and also materials on hand that could be used in the performances within which

they could not otherwise participate. Now, even though they were not permitted to act, there were Jewish women concert performers, including Rachel the Singer, in Venice, and the famous sister of the Jewish composer, Salamone de' Rossi, who was known by her stage name of Madama Europa.

**Actor 3:** *She reached the middle of the stage, then in her capacity as a woman most understanding of music, she sang to the listeners' great delight and their greater wonder, in most delicate and sweet voice, the madrigal. While she sang, with the sweetest harmony, these tearful notes, the listeners were awakened.*

**Erith:** The reasons why singing may have been viewed positively, while other types of presentations by Jewish women were not allowed is multifaceted. One might assume that music's connections to religious devotion made it uniquely acceptable and that there was a prestige and thus, a kind of safety, that went along with concert performance and, most importantly, that the fictions that needed to be embodied in theatrical work were considered unseemly, especially since, as we've already heard hints of this, the work could contain overtly sexual expressions of desire. Once again, we return to Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, a play in which the character of Callimaco wants to have sex with Lucrezia, a married woman. As part of this elaborate plan, Callimaco dresses up as a doctor and talks to Nicio, Lucrezia's husband, about how he can help with his impotency problem by having Lucrezia eat the mandrake root and then sleep with someone else.

**Actor 3 (as Callimaco):** *I'll give you the potion tonight after dinner. Give her some to drink and then quickly put her to bed. That should be around 10 o'clock. Afterwards, we'll disguise ourselves - you, Ligurio, Siro, and I - and we'll go looking in the New Market, the Old Market, those kinds of neighborhoods; and the first shiftless scamp we find, we gag and blind him and, to the sounds of beating him, we'll lead him home and to your dark bedroom. Then we put him in the bed and tell him what he has to do. He surely won't find that difficult. In the morning, send him away before the sun rises, make your wife bathe, and then you'll be able to be with her at your pleasure and without a concern.*

**Erith:** In addition to the content of the plays themselves, theatre was often associated with the world of the courtesans. Involvement in it could make one appear to be, at best, approving of such activities, and, at worst, participating in them. Now, we could have a whole discussion about the hypocrisy present here. Prostitution, after all, was rife in the Jewish ghettos, which would mean that the very men who wouldn't want the women's reputations sullied might also be paying for sexual services. But that's a whole other conversation. De' Sommi, we have already heard, agreed with, and advocated for, the limitations on women's activity in the theatre. But, at the same time, in the poem, he did want to remind us that women served as influential wives, devoted daughters-in-law, mothers, lovers, prophetesses, and saviors.

**Actor 1:**  
*Blessed be you Judith to God  
Our righteous lord eternal  
Savior priestess  
Who with the death of Holofernes  
And with eternal valor  
With wisdom and grace  
Gave her life willingly, and her shame  
To bring us back to our kingdom.*

**Erith:** Given his own experiences of being both welcomed in and kept separate - remember, we talked already about the fact that although he was made a scribe by the academy, he could not be a full

member - he is sensitive to the dance between belonging and being an outsider, between being part of and apart from. In this section of the poem, he sees how it is important to acknowledge the power of those who have often been disempowered.

**Actor 1:**

*If I knew I would attend to  
The valor and beauty of these  
Followers of the laws of Moses,  
women and maidens alike  
blessed with beauty and goodness  
Smart – I see them  
Smart – I hear them  
To laud them in days gone by.*

**Erith:** Another example of De' Sommi's desire to laud women for their specific power is when he describes them as —

**Actor 1:**

*— a wet garden  
what makes her Godly*

**Erith:** It is beautiful that he extolls women's sexuality as divine. This is ahead of his time, especially in a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish and Christian context where women's bodies and minds are contained by so many rules and expectations. But, it's also reaching back in time, before his time, aligning with Jewish views as expressed in the Song of Songs, in which women's sexual desires are intertwined with metaphors about God's relationship to man. And, of course, while many of the lines in the Song of Songs are from a woman's perspective, they are most often attributed to a male writer.

**Actor 3:**

*Awake, north wind,  
and come, south wind!  
Blow on my garden,  
that its fragrance may spread everywhere.  
Let my beloved come into his garden  
and taste its choice fruits.*

**Erith:** Remember that, much as in the Biblical work, while women are primary subjects of "In Defense of Women," they are the objects of the male writer. De' Sommi has put us, as modern people, in the uncomfortable position of admiring his progressiveness while also recognizing that, not only does he stand for what we would call the status quo regarding some issues, he also presents women as creatures to be held above, which means that they cannot participate fully here below.

**Actor 1:**

*Beautiful is my companion  
she is my pure dove  
and will suffice to honor them all.*

**Erith:** But we cannot forget that De' Sommi, as both a prominent voice within the Jewish world and an ambassador to the dominant society, would have felt a responsibility to protect his people, while also trying to move them forward. He was pushing against boundaries while also wanting his community to

thrive firmly within them. And this tension isn't theoretical. He, much later in life, had to advocate for himself against the Inquisition. De' Sommi best reflects this complexity near the end of the poem, when he writes lines in honor of his own beloved, a woman who is both specific and therefore, fully human, and also, somehow untouchable. This is all framed, of course, within a reference to a beautiful learned Italian city.

**Actor 1:**

*She rests in the city  
which is the mother of all learning  
that is, Bologna, and there rests God  
when my beloved  
rests there in gentleness,  
in abundance,  
filled with generosity  
unequalled by any.*

**Erith:** In conclusion, in "Magen Nashim," De' Sommi defiantly praises women, insisting on the value of people who were, as we know, often derided. And yet, his own opinions were infused with the complicated morality of both the surrounding culture and his own Jewish background. "In Defense of Women" challenges us to question how our own praise and support of those who are oppressed can serve as both alliance and subjugation, as progress and a support of the status quo. It calls on us to ask, what can we see and what are we still blind to? What deeply held beliefs might we need to reexamine in order to move this world forward, as we claim we desire?

**Actor 1:**

*I tried but could not find  
A Woman who would have called out to her man  
And told him to heed her advice  
And thus attracted him to herself  
And if a woman loved a man,  
For every generous heart loves,  
She wouldn't call out loud to her beloved  
Brazen though she may be*

**Erith:** And yet, much like some in our own world, De' Sommi's vision does extend beyond the contours of his own time. But his body, words, and actions are bounded by historical and structural limitations, and, so, he has to constantly navigate how he and his community can live safely within their marginalized positions.



**Aaron:** Thank you for listening to this special episode of *The Dybbukast*, "In Defense of Women." This program featured actors Julie Lockhart, Clay Steakley, Diana Tanaka, and Jonathan CK Williams. Thank you to Dr. Erith Jaffe-Berg for collaborating on the creation of this piece by providing her scholarship and insights and her translations of "Magen Nashim" and other featured texts. Also, I'd like to acknowledge Lily Hart, who assisted on the episode, and Flori Schutzer, theatre dybbuk's producing director. Our theme music was composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam KS. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson. Thanks to Dylan Southard, who provided Italian translation assistance, and Miri Koral, Executive Director of the California Institute for Yiddish Culture and Language, for her assistance with

Yiddish translation and pronunciation. Thank you to the Covenant Foundation for supporting the launch of *The Dybbukast* and our development of related resources. Speaking of which, please visit us at [theatredybbuk.org/podcast](http://theatredybbuk.org/podcast), where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page.

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**Actor 1:**

Thousands and thousands  
of my days have I seen  
adulterous people  
wicked, unjust, and sad  
who think they are making grand conquests  
Falling on the heels of their shame  
To capture in their net  
Some decent and God-fearing woman.