

A photograph of a grand, vaulted library interior, likely the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The image shows a long, narrow aisle with high, arched ceilings and rows of bookshelves on both sides. The lighting is warm and focused on the central aisle, creating a sense of depth and grandeur. The architecture is classical, with high vaulted ceilings and ornate details.

Ambra Moroncini &
Aaron M. Kahn, eds.

EARLY MODERN VOICES
IN CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE
AND ON SCREEN

**EARLY MODERN VOICES
IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE
AND ON SCREEN**

Edited by
Ambra Moroncini
and Aaron M. Kahn



Studi e ricerche

MMXXIV

QUODMANET

Holden, Mass.

Series: Studi e ricerche

Title: *Early Modern Voices in
Contemporary Literature and on Screen*

© 2024 A. Moroncini and A. M. Kahn

ISBN: 979-8-37-509263-8

LCCN: 2023901973



CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 LEGAL CODE
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs
4.0 International

QuodManet.com
Holden, Massachusetts

EDITORS

Ambra Moroncini, University of Sussex

Aaron M. Kahn, University of Sussex

EDITORIAL BOARD

Peter Boxall, University of Oxford

Brian Cummings, University of York

Luca Marcozzi, University of Roma Tre

Duncan Wheeler, University of Leeds

The articles contained in this volume were
evaluated by double-blind peer review.

Introduction i

PART I

ADAPTATIONS, ECHOES, AND INTERPRETATIONS OF DANTE,
BOCCACCIO, AND SHAKESPEARE IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

Edoardo Sanguineti's *Laborintus II* as a Dantean 21
Palimpsest

LUCA FIORENTINI AND ELEONORA LIMA

"E se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?": The 57
Tragic and Visual Art of Dante's *Commedia* in
Paolo Sorrentino's *È stata la mano di Dio*

KRISTINA M. OLSON

"L'inventare non è altro che un vero trovare". 77
Early Modern (and Modern) Echoes in Elena
Ferrante's Writing

AMBRA MORONCINI AND OLIVIA SANTOVETTI

Tutto e "niento". La *Trilogia degli Scarozzanti* di 113
Giovanni Testori come riscrittura queer di
Hamlet e Macbeth (e di *Edipo re*)

DAVIDE DALMAS

El Caudillo's Scottish Cousin: *Macbeth* under and 147
after Franco's Dictatorship

GARETH WOOD

"The face of the other": Shakespeare, Italian 187
Cinema, and Encounter Theory

MARK THORNTON BURNETT

PART II
LITERARY AND MEDIA ADAPTATIONS OF EARLY MODERN
HISTORICAL FIGURES AND WORKS

- Reading Aspects of the Italian Renaissance through Representations of the Borgia Family on the Small Screen 219
YUJIA (FLAVIA) JIN
- A Female Genealogy in the Margins: From Moderata Fonte to Carla Lonzi 249
CARLOTTA MORO
- Finding Agency in Modern Adaptations of *Cinderella* 277
ALENA GAŠPAROVIČOVÁ
- The Imitation of Nahua Rhetoric in the Fiction of Carmen Boullosa: The Florentine Codex and *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* (1992) 295
VICTORIA RÍOS CASTAÑO
- Picaresque Adventures and Quixotic Wanderings: *Carreteras secundarias* (1996) by Ignacio Martínez de Pisón 321
AARON M. KAHN
- Notes on Editors and Contributors 349

INTRODUCTION

We are surrounded by intangible powers, and not just those spiritual values explored by the world's great religions. [...] Among these powers I would include that of the literary tradition; that is to say, the power of that network of texts which humanity has produced and still produces not for practical ends [...] but, rather, for its own sake, for humanity's own enjoyment – and which are read for pleasure, spiritual edification, broadening of knowledge. Umberto Eco.¹

Lovers of literary studies are familiar with Eco's (and all authors') belief in the "intangible power" of literature, which allows us "to travel through a textual labyrinth (be it an entire encyclopaedia or the complete works of William Shakespeare) without necessarily 'unravelling' all the information it contains".² It is an "intangible power" that creates a sense of community within a "literary neighbourhood", George Edmondson, author of *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson*, would call it, arguing for the value of envisioning texts that write and rewrite shared narratives.³ Three years before the release of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) – undoubtedly one of the greatest novels (and then film) with an enormous net of intertextual references – Roland Barthes pointed out that a text is "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony", adding that "to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet al-

¹ Eco 2006, 1.

² Eco 2006, 11.

³ See Edmondson 2011.

ready read".⁴ This is why a work of literature, with its "several levels of reality at the same time", both "in its relation to the outside world in the age when it was created and the age when we received it [...] has never finished saying what it has to say", as observed by Italo Calvino, whose affinity with the literature of chivalric romance and with Ariosto's writing in particular has enchanted generations of readers.⁵ The concept that a Classic work of literature "has never finished saying what it has to say" is clearly identifiable in our age of interdisciplinarity, where the investigation of literature's verblativity through the lenses of cinematic and media perspectives has greatly benefitted from scholarly insights into dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony, and "historiophoty", opening new aural and visual windows of interpretation and knowledge.⁶

Leaving aside issues related to what defines postmodern literature and cinema, especially because the concept of postmodernism saturated the media and academia to such an extent that the term has resulted in being applied "to virtually anything that mixed modes in a knowing manner",⁷ our introductory thoughts serve to highlight the inherently intertextual and transmedia nature of literature across the ages. In any given period, therefore, in order to fully appreciate the study of literature and popular culture the works and eras should not be studied in isolation, but in re-interrogation of paradigms, concepts,

⁴ Barthes 1977, 160 (*sic*). See also Eco 1994 and Campbell 2017.

⁵ Calvino 1986, 101, 103, 128. For Ariosto's influence in Italo Calvino's writing, see Lucia Re's excellent chapter in Beecher *et al.* 2003, 211-34.

⁶ In the 1970s, Hayden White coined the term "historiophoty" to address cinema's ability to present history. See White 1988. For the pioneer study on heteroglossia see Bakhtin 1981. For expert scholarly insights into literature on screen, we recommend Wurth *et al.* 2012, Cartmell and Whelehan, 2007, Brito 2006.

⁷ Lewis 2011, 169. For studies on postmodern fiction and cinema, in addition to Lewis's, see Perloff 2012; Hill 2011; Nicol 2009; Degli Esposti 1998.

character types, criticisms, and social issues thoroughly explored by our cultural forebears. Indeed, “even dialogism, especially in its most obvious form of *citationism*” – as Umberto Eco points out – “is neither a postmodern vice nor virtue”, given Dante’s sublime use of intertextual quotation.⁸ Besides, since antiquity and throughout the early modern period there has been a vast array of writings on the theory and practice of imitation within the poetic process of invention, and with a variety of positions⁹:

Writers discuss imitation from so many different points of view: as a path to the sublime (“Longinus”), as a reinforcement of one’s natural inclinations (Poliziano) or a substitute for undesirable inclinations (Cortesi), as a method for enriching one’s writing with stylistic gems (Vida), as the surest or only way to learn Latin (Delminio), as providing the competitive stimulus necessary for achievement (Caccagnini), and as a means of “illustrating” a vulgar language (Du Bellay).¹⁰

Furthermore, if one considers that major literary works from Fielding’s *Joseph Andrew* (1742) to Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* (1869) and Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) have all widely acknowledged to have drawn inspiration from Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*,¹¹ or if we bear in mind the extraordinary transnational influence of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Ariosto, Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Shakespeare

⁸ Eco 2006, 213.

⁹ Bergmann and Friedmann 2016, 1445. With regard to the place of imitation in antiquity, see Sullivan 1989. For a comprehensive reappraisal of the multiple reuses of classical authorities in Renaissance Italy, see Morra 2019, particularly the chapters by Carlo Caruso, “Editing Vernacular Classics in the Early Sixteenth Century: Ancient Models and Modern Solutions”, Valentina Proserpi, “The Place of the Father: The Reception of Homer in the Renaissance Canon”, and Maddalena Signorini, “Boccaccio as Homer: A Recently Discovered Self-Portrait and the ‘Modern’ Canon”.

¹⁰ Pigman 1980, 3.

¹¹ Mancing 2006, 160-64, cited in Fisher 2015, 12.

throughout the centuries,¹² it is hard not to concede that literature has always been defined by intertextuality, interactivity and compatibility with other genres and forms of culture. In the 20th and 21st centuries this may clearly be evinced by what Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* can tell us about Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the *Vita Nova*, despite these works being written in different languages and genres, and, most importantly, in different historical and cultural contexts¹³; or by Pier Paolo Pasolini's "figurations and transfigurations" of Dante and Boccaccio¹⁴; not to mention the countless film adaptations of Shakespeare's works, or that the hippogriff in the *Harry Potter* saga by J. K. Rowling bears traces of Ariosto's mythical beast.¹⁵ Worthy of note is also Jane Smiley's American and contemporary literary adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with her *A Thousand Acres* (1991), winner of the Pulitzer Prize Fiction in 1992, and, above all, the popular appeal of Dan Brown's global bestsellers, the Robert Langdon book series – *Angels and Demons* (2000), *The Da Vinci*

¹² Being impossible to reference such a vast literature and scholarship, we limit ourselves to indicate that *Bibliotheca Dantesca* is an international peer-reviewed open-access journal dedicated to Dante studies (<https://repository.upenn.edu/bibdant>), and that significant examples of the universality of Dante's work in contemporary culture are included in the digital repository *Dante today* <https://dantetoday.krieger.jhu.edu>. See also the recent monographic issue by Fiorilla, Marozzi and Pegoretti 2022. With regard to Petrarch's influence in world literature, we recommend the international peer-review journal *Petrarchesca*, as well as Abu-Deeb 2016; Sturm-Maddox 2004; Corrigan 1973. For a comprehensive survey of "Ariosto from Classic to Pop", see Jossa 2018, as well as critical insights from Rivoletti 2022, and Beecher *et al.* 2003. Finally, with regard to studies concerning the many successful adaptations of Shakespeare's works, please consult the *Shakespeare and Adaptation Publishing Series* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/shakespeare-and-adaptation/>).

¹³ See Hartley 2019 and Rushworth 2015.

¹⁴ See La Torre 2011, as well as Patti 2016, Gragnolati 2013, Blandeau 2006.

¹⁵ Jossa 2018, 136.

Code (2003), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013), *Origin* (2017) – which has made original (and contentious) use of literary and artistic masterpieces such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Leonardo da Vinci’s work, as well as of the Bible, perceived in *The Da Vinci Code* as the ultimate best-seller of all time.¹⁶

With these considerations in mind, this book explores the enduring presence of some of the most ground-breaking early modern voices and works in our contemporary time. It embraces a rich diversity of literary genres (from poetry to storytelling, novels, fairy tales, and historical colonial chronicles, while also considering musical theatre compositions), and broadens the scope of research to the world of media, with cutting edge insights into contemporary films, TV series, and videogames. It presents innovative scholarly perspectives on how early modern works and themes are explored, remediated, and refashioned today to address cultural, political, and social issues germane to our global present. At a time when the concept of adaptation in contemporary studies is usually restricted to an Anglophone context, our volume expands the multilingualism and multiculturalism of a reworked cultural voice.

The eleven chapters of the volume are critically discussed into two main sections: *Adaptations, Echoes, and Interpretations of Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare in the 20th and 21st Centuries*, and *Literary and Media Adaptations of Early Modern Historical Figures and Works*.

¹⁶ Brown 2003, chapter 82 in particular. It is well known that Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and his Robert Langdon series have been condemned by the Church of Rome as “a sack full of lies against the Church and against the real history of Christianity”, though this contemporary open clash between Brown’s fictional writing and the Holy See “has foregrounded cultural debates about the historicization (and thus legitimation) of several of our most prominent Christian myths, and the means by which history has been recorded as fabric of literary texts encoded with cultural, political and ideological meaning”. Kinane 2018, 126-27.

The first section, *Adaptations, Echoes, and Interpretations of Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare in the 20th and 21st Centuries*, opens with “Edoardo Sanguineti’s *Laborintus II* as a Dantean Palimpsest”, by Luca Fiorentini and Eleonora Lima, who propose an analysis of the 1965 musical theatre composition *Laborintus II*, for which the composer Luciano Berio wrote the music, and the poet Edoardo Sanguineti the libretto. This work, which was commissioned by the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Dante’s birth, is a testament to Sanguineti’s and Berio’s long-standing predilection for blurring the lines between tradition and experimentation. By bringing together Fiorentini’s and Lima’s broad range of expertise – from Dantean philology and mediaeval literature, to contemporary literature and intermedial studies – this chapter sheds light on the strategies used by Sanguineti to remediate Dante through the Neo-Avantgarde. It is a rich scholarly analysis of *Laborintus II* as a Dantean palimpsest.

Next, Kristina M. Olson’s chapter, “E se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?": The Tragic and Visual Art of Dante’s *Commedia* in Paolo Sorrentino’s *È stata la mano di Dio*”, explores the role of Sorrentino’s occasional engagement with Dante’s *Commedia*. Motivated by the idea of tragedy, here informed not only by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but also by Raymond Williams, and his groundbreaking work, *Modern Tragedy*, Olson considers in *È stata la mano di Dio* aspects of negotiation of comedy and tragedy. Two questions in particular motivate her analysis. First, what is the role of literature, specifically that of the *Commedia*, in the main film character (Fabio Schisa)’s mediation of reality? Secondly, and broadly speaking, how does the Neapolitan director, writer and producer, Paolo Sorrentino, look to Neapolitan, Roman and Florentine cinematic and literary authorities in mediating reality along the lines of the tragic and the comic? By reflecting on the strategic appropriation of the *Commedia* first as the poetic language of tragedy in dialogue and then as the visual language of hell and purgatory in this coming-of-age tale, Olson’s chapter also sheds light on the dynamic between appropriating

high culture and established texts alongside local artistic figures and folkloric legends.

Afterwards, with their chapter “L’inventare non è altro che un vero trovare”. Early Modern (and Modern) Echoes in Elena Ferrante’s Writing”, Ambra Moroncini and Olivia Santovetti explore Giovanni Boccaccio’s (and Alessandro Manzoni’s) lesson of reconciling reality with fiction through the lenses of Elena Ferrante’s literary female subjectivity. An acclaimed author since 1992, when her first novel, *L’amore molesto* [*Troubling Love*], was shortlisted for the prestigious *Strega* literary prize award, and then adapted into a film (in 1995) by the Italian director Mario Martone, Elena Ferrante became a global phenomenon thanks to her Neapolitan Quartet of *L’amica geniale* [*My Brilliant Friend*] (2011-14), translated into English by Ann Goldstein for Europa Edition, and now also adapted into a TV series and theatre performance. Looking at thematic and narrative constructs shared with Boccaccio, rightly hailed as “the pioneer of socially conscious vernacular literary realism”,¹⁷ as well as with the 17th-century forgotten voice of Arcangela Tarabotti, and alongside modern echoes from Alessandro Manzoni, this chapter takes as a case-study the patriarchal tyranny in Italian literature and society and considers how Ferrante’s Lila may be perceived as the true genealogical ‘sister’ of Boccaccio’s Ghismonda.

With “Tutto e niente. La *Trilogia degli Scarozzanti* di Giovanni Testori come riscrittura queer di *Hamlet* e *Macbeth* (e di *Edipo re*)”, Davide Dalmas inaugurates the first of our three studies focussed on the everlasting voice of William Shakespeare, who remains one of the most influential voices of early modernity being continually re-adapted and refashioned. Dalmas discusses how Italian writer and playwright Giovanni Testori made use of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as starting points for two-thirds of his *Trilogy of the ‘Scarozzanti’* (the third is Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*), a true masterpiece of 20th-century Italian theatre, extreme in its language, and boundless in its search for ex-

¹⁷ Leavitt 2016, 136.

istential, social and political depth. Presented as plays staged by a shabby theatre company that is both very local (Lombard) and universal, in a world that is both Shakespearean and contemporary (of the 1970s), Testori's plays are not just mere adaptations, but ongoing reflections on forms and meaning of performance. They deal with love, blood and death, and mix comedy, tragedy, political satire and queer revision (in many senses) of the most important literary classics. They range from everything to nothing ("niento"), as his *Ambleto*, whose hero appropriates the words of Macbeth: "deso capisso che tu avevi rasòne; questo tutto è niente de àltero che un'ombra; forse è niente de àltero che el vero e proprio *niento*" [literally: "I now realise that you were right; this everything is nothing but a shadow; perhaps it is nothing but the real nothing"], a rewriting of the famous monologue: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.24-28)].

On the other hand, Gareth Woods' work, "El Caudillo's Scottish Cousin: *Macbeth* under and after Franco's Dictatorship", explores how writers in Spain harnessed Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a vehicle with which to critique the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco, both while he remained in power and as a riposte to the 'pacto del olvido' (pact of forgetting) that characterized the Transition to democracy (1975-82) following his death. Indeed *Macbeth* had a limited stage presence in Spain during the Franco years: prior to the 1966 laws that loosened the State's iron grip on cultural production, this Shakespeare play was staged no more than twice: at Madrid's Teatro Español in 1942 and again in Barcelona to mark the Bard's 400th anniversary in 1964. While acknowledging those productions, this chapter focuses attention on three selected works – *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño* (1954) by exiled Republican poet León Felipe; *La tragedia de Macbeth* (1966) by television director Pedro Amalio López; and, in the post-dictatorship context, on the intertextual dialogue with *Macbeth* established by the novelist Manuel Vázquez

Montalbán in his *El pianista* (1985) – to examine in depth three instances of Spanish engagement with *Macbeth*, both during the Franco regime and in its aftermath.

Thenceforth, “The Face of the Other: Shakespeare, Italian Cinema, and Encounter Theory”, by Mark Thornton Burnett, reflects on the theory and ethics of “true togetherness”, which in recent years has become a charged area of enquiry, and discusses two new cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare’s works: *Sud Side Stori*, by Roberta Torre (2000), and *Iago*, by Volfango di Biasi (2008). Burnett argues that in these two Shakespearian film adaptations we find placed on display a typically Dantesque relation with the “other”, rendered here as an encounter with non-Italian populations. At first sight, *Sud Side Stori* and *Iago* appear very different works of cinema. The former, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Palermo and centred on a conflict between recently arrived Nigerian sex-workers and the local citizenry, revolves around concepts of the Italian “south”; the latter, an adaptation of *Othello* unfolding in Venice among the privileged architecture students at the university (including Otello/Othello [Aurélien Gaya]), and highlighting the predicament of the socially dispossessed Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis), underscores an idea of the Italian “north”. Yet, as Burnett demonstrates, the driving force in each film is encounter as process, delineating ethical experiences that, bringing into play “face to face [...] togetherness”, touch on resonant contemporary discussions about demographic change and social mobility. Both films, in drawing on Shakespeare’s humanist emphases, take us back to the plays (*Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*) from which they take inspiration, asking us to look at them anew, making the corpus of Shakespeare himself/itself freshly legible and open to the world.

The second section, *Literary and Media Adaptations of Early Modern Historical Figures and Works*, starts with Yujia (Flavia) Jin’s chapter “Reading Aspects of the Italian Renaissance through Representations of the Borgia Family on the Small Screen”. Focusing on historical narratives of the Borgia family as represented in the television series

The Borgias (2011-13) and video games *Assassin's Creed II* (2009) and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), this essay analyses how television and video games represent, reshape, and recreate aspects of the Italian Renaissance on small screens from a transmedia perspective. Discussing how the 21st century is witnessing a new fashion for representing the early modern period through the screen depiction of Renaissance families that have become symbolic collective images, Jin analyses the interpretative methodologies by which television and video games represent, reshape, and recreate aspects of the Italian Renaissance on the small screen arguing that the emergence of new media has been instrumental in achieving a breadth of diversity of representation, encouraging interdisciplinary perspectives for the dissemination of history.

The contemporary research perspectives of our volume continue with literary insights, presenting Carlotta Moro's essay, "A Female Genealogy in the Margins: From Moderata Fonte to Carla Lonzi", which examines the reception of Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* [*The Worth of Women*] (1600), and of Lucrezia Marinella's *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* [*The Nobility and Excellence of Women*] (1600) among modern Italian feminists. Focusing on the overlooked recovery of Fonte's work by the feminist collective Rivolta Femminile in the 1970s, specifically on Anna Jaquinta and Carla Lonzi's works, Moro's case study aims to assess how modern feminist groups did negotiate a genealogy of thinkers from the past as literary and philosophical inspirations for their own ideas and activism.

Gender contemporary issues, but from a different literary and critical outlook, are also addressed by Alena Gašparovičová in her "Finding Agency in Modern Adaptations of *Cinderella*", which discusses the afterlives of the most successful fairy tale ever, or, at least, the best-known one, and probably also the best-liked one, popular among children and adults as a prototypical story of social mobility. Gašparovičová's analysis focuses on *Cinderella & The Glass Ceiling* by Laura Lane and Ellen Haun (2020), examining the parodic style of this contemporary fairy

tale adaptation in order to shed light on the differences of agency between the main protagonist of this story and the heroines in the oldest literary European versions of the tale, that is, Giambattista Basile's 1634 *La gatta Cenerentola* [*The Cinderella Cat*], and Charles Perrault's 1697 *Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper*. By cleverly subverting the obsession with traditional princesses, and addressing contemporary issues regarding gender and class mobility, this chapter reveals the 'feminist voice' Lane and Haun have managed to give to this Classic fairy tale in order to make it relatable to the 21st-century audience.

Next, Victoria Ríos Castaño's study, "The Imitation of Nahuatl Rhetoric in the Fiction of Carmen Boullosa: The Florentine Codex and *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* (1992)", considers contemporary Latin American literature, focusing on Mexican writer Carmen Boullosa's most celebrated historical novel. For this work, Boullosa drew on indigenous codices like Aubin and Ramírez; conquerors Hernán Cortés's letters and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*; chronicler Antonio de Solís's *Historia de la conquista de México*, and, most importantly, the Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún's encyclopaedia on the Nahuatl, according to the Florentine Codex (ca. 1577). In *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*, scholars have been keen to point out that Boullosa's use of intertextuality, together with metafiction and parody, aligns her novel with Seymour Menton's definition of the New Historical Novel subgenre. Castaño resumes this line of enquiry, providing more evidence on why Boullosa profusely acknowledges its authors. Her sentence, "junto con ellos escribí este libro", is adopted as a leading clue to develop the following argument: Boullosa wrote some passages of her novel by imitating the Nahuatl rhetorical style that appears in the 16th-century Spanish translation of the Florentine Codex that was written by Sahagún with the aid of his assistants. This study examines how historical fiction relies on historical sources and the writer's motives. This overview will lead to a discussion on how Boullosa composes her works in general and in connection with Seymour Menton's defini-

tion of the New Historical Novel. Castaño then analyses *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*, specifically focussing on heteroglossia or the writer's conscious incorporation of different kinds of speech.

Finally, Aaron M. Kahn's chapter, "Picaresque Adventures and Quixotic Wanderings: *Carreteras secundarias* (1996) by Ignacio Martínez de Pisón", presents the reader with an entertaining coming of age story, as 14-year-old Felipe and his widowed father incessantly move from place to place in an attempt to establish themselves. Due to a combination of bad luck, untrustworthy acquaintances, and a willingness to bend the law, Felipe and his father inadvertently spiral into more precarious situations. Along the way, Felipe reads Cervantes's famous novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Taking place in 1974 and 1975 against the backdrop of an ailing General Franco and a nation anxious of what may come when the Caudillo passes on, Kahn discusses how Martínez de Pisón employs the picaresque genre and the satirical (often critical) tone it contains, to comment not only on the state of Spain towards the end of the dictatorship, but also on his country's place in the coming 21st century. By reviving this traditional Picaresque Spanish genre, in conjunction with their Quixotic wanderings through life, Martínez de Pisón accentuates the notion that the great Spanish *Transición* to democracy continues.

We warmly thank our co-authors for contributing to our volume, along with the academic colleagues of our Scientific Committee (Prof. Peter Boxall, Prof. Brian Cummings, Prof. Luca Marcozzi, and Prof. Duncan Wheeler) for their valuable assistance and scholarly expertise throughout our research project and while preparing this book. The research theme of our volume is linked to a two-day International Conference, "'*Visibili Rifatti*'. Early Modern Voices in the Contemporary World", which was held at the University of Sussex on 29-30 June 2022, for which we gratefully acknowledge the generous financial and administrative support of the School of Media, Arts, and Humanities at the University of Sussex, with special thanks to Prof. Matthew Dimmock, Medeni Fordham, and

Philippa Murnaghan. We extend our gratitude to the UK Society for Renaissance Studies, the Italian Cultural Institute in London, the UK and Ireland Society for Italian Studies, and the Centre for Dante Studies in Ireland, for sponsoring our two-day international event. We are also very much thankful to all our Conference speakers, chairs, and attendees, who contributed with their papers and discussions to our intellectual discourses. Finally, we are sincerely in debt to Sam Nesbit, Bethany Logan and Sussex Open Access for munificently funding our Open Access publication venture, and to Michael Papio and Giovanni Spani for their cooperation.

We dedicate our book to our former and current undergraduate and post-graduate students.

Ambra Moroncini and Aaron M. Kahn

Works Cited

- Abu-Deeb, Kamul. 2016. "The Quest for the Sonnet: The Origins of the Sonnet in Arabic Poetry". *Critical Survey. Special Issue* 28.3: 133-57.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image-Music-Text*. Stephen Heath, tr. New York, The Noonday Press.
- Beecher, Don, Massimo Ciavolella and Roberto Fedi, eds. 2003. *Ariosto Today: Contemporary Perspectives*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Bergmann, Emilie L. and Edward H. Friedman. 2016. "Imitation and Adaptation: A Meeting of Minds". *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 93.7-8: 1445-67.
- Blandeau, Agnes, 2006. *Pasolini, Chaucer and Boccaccio: Two Medieval Texts and their Translation to Film*. Jefferson, McFarland & Co.
- Brito, João Batista de. 2006. *Literatura no cinema*. São Paulo: Unimarco.
- Brown, Dan. 2003. *The Da Vinci Code*. London, Corgi Books.
- Calvino, Italo. 1986. *The Uses of Literature*. Patrick Creagh, tr. Orlando, Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Campbell, Cary. 2007. "Exploring the Textual Woods: Umberto Eco's Growing Concept of Text". In *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen, eds. Bonton-Berlin, De Gruyter. 134-42.
- Cartmell, Deborah and Imelda Whelehan, eds. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Corrigan, Beatrice, 1973. "Petrarch in English". *Italica* 50.3: 400-07.
- Degli Esposti, Cristina, ed. 1998. *Postmodernism in the cinema*. New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books.
- Eco, Umberto. 2006. *On Literature*. Martin McLaughlin, tr. London, Vintage Books.
- . 1994. *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. William Weaker, tr. Milan, Minerva.

- Edmondson, George. 2011. *Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson*. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press.
- Fiorilla, Maurizio, Luca Marozzi and Anna Pegoretti eds. 2022. *Idee su Dante. Scrittori e critici*. Rome: L'Ellisse.
- Fisher, Tyler. 2015. "The Man of La Mancha in Miniature: *Don Quijote* in Twenty-First-Century Spanish Micro-fiction". *Connecting Past and Present: Exploring the Influence of the Spanish Golden Age in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Aaron M. Kahn ed. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 11-34.
- Gragnotati, Manuele. 2013. *Amor che move. Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante*. Milan, Il Saggiatore.
- Hartley, Julia. 2019. *Reading Dante and Proust by Analogy*. Oxford, Legenda, 2019.
- Heffernan, Teresa. 2008. *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Hill, Val. 2011. "Postmodernism and the Cinema". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Stuart Sim ed. London-New York, Routledge. 143-55.
- Jossa, Stefano, 2018. "Ariosto Redivivus in 2016: A Year of Centenary Celebration and Critical Reassessment of Orlando furioso". *The Italianist* 38: 134-49.
- Kinane, Ian. 2018. "Fact, Fiction, Fabrication: The Popular Appeal of Dan Brown's Global Bestsellers". In *Twenty-First Century-Popular Fiction*, Bernice M. Murphy and Stephen Matterson, eds. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. 125-35.
- La Torre, Antonia. 2011. "Il cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini come rilettura e mercificazione del patrimonio letterario italiano: figurazioni e trasfigurazioni di Dante e Boccaccio da *Mamma Roma* a *Salò*". In *Autori, lettori e mercato nella modernità letteraria*. 2 vols. Ilaria Crotti, Enza Del Tesesco, Ricciarda Ricorda and Alberto Zava, eds. Pisa, ETS. Vol. 2, 257-66.
- Leavitt IV, Charles. 2016. "Il realismo di un nuovissimo Medio Evo: Boccaccio in the Age of Neorealism". *Le tre Corone* 3: 135-56.

- Lewis, Barry. 2011. "Postmodernism and Fiction". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Stuart Sim ed. London-New York, Routledge. 169-81.
- Mancing, Howard. 2006. *Cervantes' Don Quixote: A Reference Guide*. Westport, Greenwood.
- Morra, Eloisa, ed. 2019. *Building the Canon through the Classics. Imitation and Variation in Renaissance Italy (1350-1580)*. Leiden-Boston, Brill.
- Nesteruk S. M., Verovkina O. Ye. 2019. "The analysis of the structure and the elements of Dan Brown's novel *Origin*". In *Advanced Trends of the Modern Development of Philology in European Countries*. Collective Monograph. Baia Mare, North University Centre of Baia Mare Faculty of Letters. 179-99.
- Nicol, Bran, ed. 2009. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernist Fiction*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Patti, Emanuela. 2016. *Pasolini after Dante. The 'Divine Mimesis' and the Politics of Representation*. Oxford, Legenda.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 2012. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Pigman III, George W. 1980. "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance". *Renaissance Quarterly* 33.1:
- Rivoletti, Christian ed. 2022. *L'Orlando Furioso oltre i cinquecento anni. Nuove prospettive di lettura*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Rushworth, Jennifer. 2015. "Salut, salutation et redemption: Suggestions pour une lecture croisée de la *Recherche du temps perdu* et de la *Vita Nuova* de Dante". In *Proust et les 'Moyen Ages'*. Sophie Duval and Miren Lacassagne, eds. Paris, Hermann. 247-59.
- Sturm-Maddox, Sara. 2004. "Francis Petrarch & the European Lyric Tradition". *Annali d'Italianistica* 22: 171-87.
- Sullivan, Dale L. 1989. "Attitudes toward imitation: Classical culture and the modern temper". *Rhetoric Review*, 8.1: 5-21.
- White, Hayden. 1988. "Historiography and Historiophoty". *The American Historical Review* 93.5: 1193-99

Wurth Kiene Brillenburg, Lazar Fleishman and Haun Saussy, eds. 2012. *Between Page and Screen: Remaking Literature Through Cinema and Cyberspace*. New York, Fordham University Press.

Part I

Adaptations, Echoes, and Interpretations of Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare in the 20th and 21st Centuries

EDOARDO SANGUINETI'S *LABORINTUS II* AS A DANTEAN PALIMPSEST

Luca Fiorentini and Eleonora Lima*

Introduction

At the time of writing, the celebrations for the 700th anniversary of the death of Dante have just concluded. Such an occasion has reignited interest among academics and lay audiences alike in a debate on the modernity of Dante's poetry, and on its place in Italian and world literature. In the past year, several tributes, adaptations, and reworkings of his opus – especially of his *Divine Comedy* – have bloomed, some more felicitous than others, with the intent of revitalising Dante's poetics by demonstrating its continuing unchanged relevance.¹ The desire of many artists and critics to engage anew with a pivotal author such as Dante is undeniably commendable. However, inherent in these kinds of celebratory reworkings is the risk, on one hand of freezing Dante into an image of distant perfection, while on the other of forcing an interpretation of

* In the context of joint and shared work, Eleonora Lima wrote the Introduction, sections 1.i, 1.iii, 2.ii, and the Conclusion; Luca Fiorentini wrote sections 1.ii, 2.i and 3.

¹ Many were the artistic reworkings of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to celebrate the 700th anniversary of his death. Some of the most ambitious and creative ones are *The Dante Project* at the Royal Opera House in London, created by the choreographer Wayne McGregor, and the poetry reading hosted by Oxford University in November 2021 during which the AI-powered robot Ai.Da recited and performed a reading of 'her' own verses composed in response to the *Divine Comedy*. See Crompton 2021 and Flood 2021.

his poetics in order to fit with contemporary society and its ethos. It is in response to this conundrum – how to creatively appropriate Dante’s lesson without erasing its specificity – that we propose the following analysis of the 1965 musical theatre composition *Laborintus II*, for which the composer Luciano Berio wrote the music, and the poet Edoardo Sanguineti the libretto.

Laborintus II was commissioned by François Wahl, one of the most prominent exponents of French Structuralism, for the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (ORTF) to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Dante’s birth.² It was first broadcasted on the radio in 1965 and later staged, first, at the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto in 1968, and a few years later at Piccola Scala in Milan in 1972 and 1973.³ This collaboration thus falls into the category of celebratory artistic reworkings of Dantean literature. Indeed, *Laborintus II* has been defined as a “Neo-avantgarde celebration of Dante”⁴ as its peculiar way of engaging with the work of the *Sommo Poeta* is a testament to Sanguineti’s and Berio’s long-standing predilection for working across artistic languages – poetry, music, visual arts –, and for blurring the lines between tradition and experimentation. Precisely the degree of originality and philological accuracy displayed in *Laborintus II* is what makes this work stand out, to this day, among the many modern attempts of appropriating Dante’s lesson.

The reason why *Laborintus II* so successfully engages with Dante’s poetics, as this study aims to demonstrate, derives from Sanguineti’s double perspective, as a Dantean scholar and as an experimental poet. More precisely, *Laborintus II* incorporates two constants in Sanguineti’s artistic and critical production. The first is the author’s desire for contamination between different media and genres and his penchant for artistic hybridity, which led

² See Hazmoune 2019, 111-12.

³ On the occasion of the performance at Piccola Scala, Sanguineti was the stage director and collaborated with the painter Mario Persico to design the set. For an analysis of the staging of *Laborintus II* in Milan, see Sanguineti 2012.

⁴ Suvini-Hand 1998.

him to collaborate often with Luciano Berio. Their artistic bond, of which we will say more diffusely in the next section, led to the production of six collaborative works over a period of thirty years, from 1961 to 1991.⁵ The second constant emerging from *Laborintus II* has to do with Sanguineti's life-long meditation on Dante's work, which resulted in a great number of critical contributions – the first of which is the poet's dissertation *Interpretazione di Malebolge*, written in 1955-56 under the supervision of the literary critic Giovanni Getto⁶ – as well as numerous works, in verse and in prose taking direct inspiration from Dante.⁷ This commitment to Dantean tradition, in turn, speaks to Sanguineti's keenness in opening up a dialogue between the Neo-Avantgarde and the Italian literary tradition at large, well beyond the Florentine poet.⁸

Berio and Dante are thus two of Sanguineti's main interlocutors to whom he constantly returned over the course of his life. At a first glance, they might seem like two poles in opposition. Berio, the pioneering composer of electronic music, embodied experimentalism and the rejection of all traditional conventions; Dante, at least in the eyes of a large number of readers and critics, represented the Canon, the crystallised and revered tradition of Italian literature. In *Laborintus II* Sanguineti, by virtue of his already mentioned double perspective on Dante, connected these two worlds that seemed irreconcilable and challenged the Manichean opposition between tradition and experimentation. It is crucial to point out that, in so doing, Sanguineti did not aim for a postmodern pastiche. His intent was not to offer a parodic rewriting of Dante, aimed at proving how he had been finally surpassed by the new course set in the 1960s by the Italian

⁵ For a complete list of their collaboration, see, in this chapter, section 1.i, more specifically, note 12.

⁶ See Sanguineti 1991, 110.

⁷ For a complete list of Sanguineti's critical and literary texts dealing with Dante's opus, see, in this chapter, section 2.1.

⁸ See Lummus 2013, 41. For a comprehensive analysis of the Italian Neo-Avantgarde and of its leading figure, see Picchione, 2004.

Neo-Avantgarde poets. It was not a clash between tradition and experimentation that Sanguineti was looking for, but rather a continuous line that connected Dante's poetics with the one the Neo-Avantgarde, and with his own in particular.

The investigation of how and why Sanguineti established this link in *Laborintus II* is precisely the goal of this study. In order to understand how Sanguineti remediated Dante through the Neo-Avantgarde, and the Neo-Avantgarde through Dante, this study answers two main inquiries: *which Dante* Sanguineti brought on stage, meaning which interpretation of his work did he propose in *Laborintus II*; and, consequently, *why Dante*, meaning why Sanguineti in *Laborintus II* made use of Dante's work to further clarify his own poetics and the one of the Neo-Avantgarde group. To tackle these issues, we first contextualise *Laborintus II* within Sanguineti's wider reflection on Dante's work, as well as within his many collaborations with Berio. Consequently, we dedicate one section to answer each of the above questions. Section 2 addresses the point *which Dante* and does so by reconstructing Sanguineti's anti-lyricist interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*, developed in contrast with the Idealist interpretation, famously supported by Benedetto Croce. It then connects Sanguineti's stance in regard to Dante's anti-lyricism to the experimental language and style of *Laborintus II*. Section 3 answers the question *why Dante* by focusing on Sanguineti's ideological interpretation of Dante's poetry in *Laborintus II*, specifically regarding the condemnation of usury in the *Divine Comedy*, which Sanguineti intended as a stance against capitalism. Closing the essay are some concluding remarks that aim at contextualising *Laborintus II* within Sanguineti's ever-evolving interpretation of Dante.

One last word on the specific angle proposed by this study. In recognising the centrality of Sanguineti's interpretation of Dante's poetics in *Laborintus II*, this study mostly focuses on the libretto and the literary aspects of this work. While of course considering the performative and multimedia aspects, as well as the artistic dialogue

between Sanguineti and Berio which crucially shape this theatre composition, the scope of this analysis is to explore *Laborintus II* as Sanguineti's own Dantean palimpsest.

1. Contextualising *Laborintus II*

1.i The collaboration between Sanguineti and Berio

le stanze che tu ci abiti, adesso (adesso, voglio dire, che ci abiti tu, lì tutto tanto solo, ormai), sono piene di musica: (di musica tua, voglio dire): (di te, che sei stato la musica, per me, per tutti, per anni e anni, qui)⁹

[the rooms that you live in here, now (now, I mean, that you live here, there all so alone, now), are full of music: (of your music, I mean): (full of you, for you were the music, for me, for everyone, for years and years, here)¹⁰]

With these verses, Sanguineti bid farewell in 2004 to his long-time friend and collaborator Luciano Berio, who had just passed away the year before. For the poet to say that the composer represented music itself was not an overstatement dictated by grief, but it rather aptly described their three-decade long collaboration.¹¹ Artistic experi-

⁹ From the poem “piccolo threnos”, vv. 1-3, in Sanguineti 2004, 319. This poem may also be found in Sanguineti 2010, 31. In this latter edition, one may also find other poems that Sanguineti dedicated to Berio, such as “Ovidio maggiore” and “Job, una stanza”.

¹⁰ Sanguineti 2013, 19. Translation slightly amended.

¹¹ The first collaboration between Sanguineti and Berio was for the musical theatre work *Passaggio* (1961-62), followed by *Esposizione* (1963), *Tracce* (1964), *Laborintus II* (1965), *A-Ronne* (1974-1975), and, years later *Canticum Novissimi Testamenti* (1989-91). However, the first time Berio incorporated Sanguineti's poetry in his work was in *Epifanie* (1960), when he included in the libretto passages from Sanguineti's *Triperuno*, along with quotations from Marcel Proust, Antonio Machado, James Joyce, Claude Simon and Bertolt Brecht. On Berio and

mentations across literature and music were not at all uncommon in the 1960s,¹² and Berio certainly was one of the most committed composers in contaminating the two artistic languages.¹³ However, what fuelled this particularly prolific partnership was a shared understanding of the role of experimental art, which for Sanguineti coincided with the experience of the Neo-Avantgarde, and for Berio with his pioneering work with electronic music at the *Studio di fonologia musicale Rai* in Milan.¹⁴ What they had in common was, firstly, a keen desire to explore the role of memory and tradition in modern experimental art, not to dismiss it, but rather to problematize it, and, secondly, a commitment towards anti-lyrical and anti-narrative forms, in literature and in the musical theatre genre.¹⁵

Laborintus II, which is the result of their third collaboration, reflected these shared intents, as the following analysis demonstrates, and came after a period of tension between the two artists. In 1964, a year before *Laborintus II*, Berio and Sanguineti were working on another musical theatre composition titled *Traces-Tracce*, but because Sanguineti did not approve of Berio's heavy revisions to

Sanguineti's many collaborations, see Osmond-Smith 2012; De Santis 2017; Lo Monaco 2019, 259-71.

¹² See Mellace 2012; Mussgnug 2021.

¹³ It suffices to mention, among many others, Berio's collaborations with Italo Calvino (*Allez-hop* 1952-59, *Un re in ascolto* 1981-83) and with Umberto Eco on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (*Thema -Omaggio a Joyce*, 1958).

¹⁴ See Scaldaferrri 1997, and Mussgnug 2008.

¹⁵ On Berio's rejection of narrative forms, see Oliva 2021. Berio summarised the reasons why he felt such a strong artistic kinship with Sanguineti with these words: "Lo amo [Sanguineti] perché la sua poesia non è poetica, non è traducibile e reca profondi segni (o le ferite) di una sacrosanta memoria individuale che è però collettiva" ("I love him [Sanguineti] because his poetry is not poetical, it cannot be translated, and bears the profound marks (scars even) of a sacrosanct memory which is individual and at the same time collective", Berio 2002, 20). English translation by Centro Studi Luciano Berio.

his libretto, the work was withdrawn before premiering in Wien as planned.¹⁶

The tensions between the two dissipated when they received the commission from the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française for an artistic homage to Dante in the occasion of the 700th centennial from his birth. The prospect of engaging with Dante's work promised to be exciting enough for them to put their disagreement aside, as Sanguineti wished in his letter to Berio dated October 27, 1964, only three days after their divergences over *Traces* had escalated:

Un “pastiche” dantesco, in ogni caso, è una cosa che può essere sublime, e farci davvero tornare ai bei tempi, perché permette di parlare “sotto il velame”, in un giuoco tutto strettamente contemporaneo.¹⁷

[Either way, a Dantean “pastiche” could be a truly sublime thing and take us back to the good old days, as it will allow us to play with strictly contemporary tropes, while hiding them “underneath the veil” of the tradition.¹⁸]

And so it happened: in the name of Dante, their collaboration enthusiastically resumed.

1.ii. *Laborintus II*: the libretto and its sources

The libretto written by Sanguineti is, for the most part, a reworking of Dantean texts: the main passages come from the *Vita nova* and the first cantica of the *Commedia*, the *Inferno*; the *Convivio* and an excerpt from the *Monarchia* (quoted directly in Latin) also appear in the second section of the work. These quotations are combined with passages taken from Isidore of Seville, T.S. Eliot, Ezra

¹⁶ The fiery letter dated October 24, 1964, in which Sanguineti withdrew his participation to the shared project is quoted in Felici 2018, 89. For the complex genealogy of *Traces/Tracce*, see De Benedictis 2016, 200-08.

¹⁷ Felici 2018, 90.

¹⁸ Our translation. Further translation of citations will also be ours when not specified.

Pound and the most relevant 14th-century interpreter of Dante's *Commedia*, Benvenuto da Imola, in addition to verses from Sanguineti's previous works (*Laborintus* and *Purgatorio de l'Inferno*), to which the author adds new passages, written specifically for the libretto. Below is a detailed list of the sources that feed the different parts of the text¹⁹:

Part 1: Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, I; II, 3-4.

Part 2: Isidore of Seville, *Etym.* XV, i, 2 and 5.

Part 3: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I, vv. 1-2 (reworked), 5, 49 and 96 (reworked); XXXIV, 10; Thomas S. Eliot, *East Coker*, II, vv. 89 and 90; V, v. 173.

Part 4: Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, XXIII, 1-4, 6, 9.

Part 5: Edoardo Sanguineti, *Laborintus*, n. 21, vv. 1 and 6; Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I, vv. 1-2 and 49; Thomas S. Eliot, *East Coker*, V, v. 173; II, vv. 90 and 89 (reworked).

Part 6: Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, XLII, 1-2; III, sonnet *A ciascun'alma presa*, vv. 8 and 9; III, 9, 3, 7, 6 (reworked), 5; XXIII, 4, 5; XXIII, canzone *Donna pietosa*, vv. 53, 54 and 61.

Part 7: Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, I, xiii, 11-12.

Part 8: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, III, vv. 1-3 and 9.

Part 9: Isidore of Seville, *Etym.* V, xxxix, 2-42; Edoardo Sanguineti, "tutto tutto tutto tutto ... alla polvere" (text written for the libretto); Edoardo Sanguineti, *Laborintus*, n. 10, vv. 25-33.

Part 10: Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, XXIII, 4; Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, III, vv. 25, 68-69; I, v. 1 (reworked); III,

¹⁹ Here and beyond, we quote the text of the libretto according to the edition published in 1983 in *Contrechamps* 1: 68-74. The division into fourteen parts is not the author's: it is a scheme we introduced to make the analysis easier. Suvini-Hand 2006, 246-55, published a version of the libretto accompanied by an English translation. See also Sanguineti 1993. A partial examination of the libretto's sources is in Felici 2018, 96.

vv. 1-2; IV, vv. 8 and 10; V, 28; III, vv. 131 and 133 (reworked); V, 35; III, 107.

Ezra Pound, *Canto XLV*, v. 1.

Part 11: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XI, vv. 99-100, 103-104 and 106-111; Ezra Pound, *Canto XLV*, vv. 1, 4-6, 10, 11-12 (reworked).

Part 12: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, VI, vv. 4, 7-8, 10, 8 (reworked), 10 (reworked), 11, 36; Ezra Pound, *Canto XLV*, v. 1 (translated); Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, VII, vv. 64-66; VIII, v. 73; IX, v. 118; Ezra Pound, *Canto XLV*, vv. 1, 13, 17 and 47.

Part 13: Edoardo Sanguineti, “tutto tutto tutto ... silenzio” (text written for the libretto and combined with quotations from *Laborintus*, nn. 1, 2 and 3); Benvenuto da Imola, *Comentum super Dantis Aldigherii Comediam*, gloss on *Purgatorio* I, 1-3, combined with quotations from Benvenuto’s commentaries on *Inferno*, V, vv. 28-29, and XXIV, v. 67; Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, I, iv, 1-3; Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, II, xiii, 23-24.

Part 14: Edoardo Sanguineti, *Purgatorio de l’Inferno*, n. 17, vv. 22-26.

In most cases, the sources are recombined by the author, and interwoven with each other; not reworked. The exceptions are few, as we shall see more thoroughly in the last part of this chapter.

1.iii. *Laborintus II*: music and mise-en-scène

Similarly to what Sanguineti did for the libretto in combining several literary sources by applying a cut-up technique, Berio did for the music. *Laborintus II*, not unlike many other Berio’s compositions, is a pastiche of different genres as it incorporates elements of jazz, electronic music, and madrigal in the style of Monteverdi. Such heterogeneity is further reinforced by the polyphonic quality of *Laborintus II*, which alternates instrumental music with

spoken and sung parts, some written, some improvised.²⁰ Indeed, the same idea of the catalogue mixing old and new genres and sources that informs Sanguineti's libretto also structures Berio's music composition. Clearly, what interested both artists was not the idea of the catalogue as an orderly structure nor a chronological progression, but rather as a chaotic enumeration. This is obvious when considering the title, which makes direct reference to Sanguineti's first book of poetry, *Laborintus* (1956),²¹ and evokes the image of an arduous journey through a maze-like space, akin to Dante's *Inferno*, which is of course the main archetype for the text. In these same years, Berio was also exploring the creative potentials offered by an experimentalist reworking of the catalogue genre, in music and in literature.²²

For Sanguineti, *citazionismo* [quotationism] and enumeration were two techniques to denounce the complete saturation of all meanings, and to contrast it by following a principle of disorder. The goal for him was to traverse the tradition and revitalise language, which was achievable only when rejecting lyricism and narrativism. Berio too, in *Laborintus II* and in many other musical theatre

²⁰ *Laborintus II* is composed of 3 sopranos, 1 narrator, 8-voice spoken choir, 1 flute, 3 clarinets, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 cellos, 1 double bass, 2 harps, 2 percussionists and stereo tape. For a detailed analysis of *Laborintus II*'s music score, see De Benedictis 2016, 214-27.

²¹ A brief comparison between Sanguineti's first book of poetry, *Laborintus* (1956) and the almost homonymous musical theatre composition is provided in the following sections.

²² De Benedictis traces a line connecting five of Berio's works of those years, *Passaggio* (1961-62), *Esposizione* (1962-63), *Traces* (1964), *Laborintus II* (1964-65), and *Opera* (1969-70), and identifies the composer's interest in the idea of the catalogue being the unifying element. She explains: "Berio experiments with 'polyphonic situations' within different genres and styles; at the base of each of these works is the idea of *catalogue*, considered by Berio in those years as 'the literary form (if one can use that word) [which] refuses any possible formalistic approach of the type that made the experience of opera possible'". De Benedictis 2016, 178.

productions of those years, used the catalogue genre and the pastiche technique to challenge the operatic tradition while also engaging with its heritage.²³ *Laborintus II*, Berio explained, is in a dialectical tension with the traditional operatic genre because adopts some of its formal aspects – e.g. it is performed in an opera theatre by actors and musicians, it alternates spoken and sang parts – but ultimately rejects it as anachronistic. Articulating his position, Berio declared:

Ma *Laborintus* non è un'opera non solo perché il tema e il materiale scelto non è rappresentabile, trasponibile e riducibile agli schemi formali dell'opera (non c'è infatti neanche una storia vera e propria, un 'plot') ma semplicemente perché l'opera, oggi, non mi interessa: scrivere un'opera oggi è falsificare la storia e il più delle volte si riduce a uno stratagemma privo di senso.²⁴

[But *Laborintus* is not an opera, and this is not just because its theme and material cannot be represented with, transposed by, and reduced to the formal aspects of the operatic genre (there is not even a real story, a plot). More plainly, this is because I am not interested in the opera genre: to write an opera today is to falsify history and, most times, it amounts to nothing more than a meaningless trick.]

The point Berio raised about falsifying history is extremely relevant when considering the convergences between his and Sanguineti's elaboration in *Laborintus II*. To adopt a dialectical approach meant for both artists not to revere tradition, but to engage with history in ideological terms. In turn, their ideological posture translated into anti-lyricism in poetry and in music, which indeed characterises the libretto and the music score of *Laborintus II*.

²³ In 1967 Berio, reflecting on modern musical theatre, wrote: "Un'opera moderna' [...] trova il suo senso innanzi tutto nella deformazione e nella libera coesistenza di modelli ed elementi operistici originali e nel confronto inevitabile tra questi". Quoted in De Benedictis 2016, 179.

²⁴ In De Benedictis 2016, 179.

That Dante's work was at the centre of this double statement of poetics that challenged monumental history and lyricism is not a coincidence due to the external circumstances of his anniversary. On the contrary, as the following sections demonstrate, Sanguineti's intent was to trace a genealogy connecting Dante's poetics to his own and, by extension, to the one of Berio.

2. Dante's Anti-Lyricism as a Model for *Laborintus II*

When comparing the clarity of the narrative structure in Dante's works such as *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy* with Sanguineti's highly chaotic text for the libretto of *Laborintus II*, it is hard to see the lesson imparted by the Medieval poet at work in the verses of his Neo-Avantgardist disciple. There is, however, a stringent causal link between Sanguineti's interpretation of Dante's poetics and his experimental style in *Laborintus II*. This has to do, more precisely, with the Florentine author's assumed anti-lyricism and with its ideological implications, both embraced by Sanguineti in the libretto, as well as in his wider literary production.

2.i. Sanguineti *contra* Croce

In 1956, the same year in which *Laborintus* was published, Sanguineti graduated with a thesis on Dante, published by Olschki in 1961, with the title *Interpretazione di Malebolge*. Other writings on Dante's oeuvre, later brought together in the volume *Tre studi danteschi*, had been published by Sanguineti in academic journals in 1956 and 1958. The traces of Sanguineti's interpretative work on Dante can be discerned right from his earliest poetic texts, as is well known: already in the 'twin' text of *Laborintus II*, the oft-quoted *Laborintus*, passages appear from the *Rime* (no. 2, v. 23), from the so-called *Epistola a Cangrande della Scala* (n. 5, vv. 5-6) and from the commentary on Dante's *Commedia* by Benvenuto da Imola (nn. 25 and 26), an author whose presence can be detected also

in the libretto of *Laborintus II*.²⁵ The year of the seventh centenary of Dante's birth engaged Sanguineti on both fronts, the hermeneutic and the poetic. Indeed, it was in 1965 that he wrote an essay, "Il realismo di Dante", in which the criticism of the premises of Benedetto Croce's interpretation, already evident in Sanguineti's early works on Dante, are arranged in a more organic and far-reaching design.²⁶

"Il realismo di Dante" and the contemporary *Laborintus II* libretto show several points of contact, to which we will return. Let us now focus on the essay. As the title declares, Sanguineti's interest is directed at the representation of reality in Dante's work; it is only when focusing on this aspect that one grasps, Sanguineti writes, the "attualità" of the poet.²⁷ The formula 'realism', as we know, is ambiguous in itself: what reality, in Dante's poem, is the object of representation? In the first instance, Sanguineti excludes that the *Commedia*'s realism is prevalently realised in the figuration of the perceptible world: "dire parole, in poesia, è dire cose"²⁸ - and this evidently applies to every word of the *Commedia*. From Dante's point of view, according to Sanguineti, the 'low' reality of the infernal world - comic in the strict sense, and so to speak in the traditional sense - is no more 'real' than the 'highest' reality of the realm in which the blessed souls reside. In this regard, Sanguineti explains: "Se di realismo linguistico vogliamo davvero parlare, diremo che ... è più realistico quel Bernardo in empireo che questo Caronte in

²⁵ See the rich analysis by Baccharini 2002, 126-40 and 190-201. The first investigations into the relationship between Sanguineti's philological activity and poetic work are due to Barberi Squarotti 1963, 80-82; Bo 1965, 192-99; Guglielminetti 1969, 291-328; then Dolfi 1986, 307-42. See also Tufano 2003, 69-72.

²⁶ Originally published in 1966 by Sansoni, "Il realismo di Dante" can now be read in Sanguineti 1992, 273-89.

²⁷ See Sanguineti 1992, 274.

²⁸ That is, "to say words, in poetry, is to say things" (Sanguineti 1992, 276).

averno”.²⁹ On the other hand, Sanguineti observes that the greatest achievements of Dante’s poetic language move above all ‘upwards’: “a voler affondare il coltello delle parole nella carne viva della realtà, con quel vero coraggio che il vero realismo richiede, non è detto che le lame plebee ... siano le sole che taglino”.³⁰ The very notion of reality, and consequently its modes of representation, cannot be isolated, in essence, from a given conception of the world, a conception that, in Dante’s case, is essentially theological: “Dante’s realism is inseparable from his theological thought”, Sanguineti writes.³¹ The words in Dante’s poem that describe reality in poetic terms are the same words that describe the ideological structure supporting this very poetic representation.

Sanguineti’s reading is obviously informed by that of Auerbach, who is directly cited in the first paragraphs of the essay.³² But Sanguineti’s main objective, as anticipated, is to refute the interpretative tradition that separates the poetic moment from the practical one, that is, the one that recognises the poetic ignition in the occasional detachment of words from the conceptual (theological, in this case) structure in which they are inserted. This is the tradition that looks at Croce’s capital book of 1921, *La poesia di Dante*. To be more precise: this exegetic tradition stems from an often distorted and misunderstood interpretation of Croce’s ideas. For Croce, the unity of the *Commedia* is in the synthesis of the distinct, of economic utility (the structure, the theological-political novel) and aesthetic intuition (the poetry). For Sanguineti, this distinction does not exist:

²⁹ “If we really want to speak of linguistic realism, we shall say that ... that Bernard in paradise is more realistic than this Charon in hell” (Sanguineti 1992, 277).

³⁰ “If you want to plunge the knife of words into the living flesh of reality, with the courage that true realism requires, it is not necessarily the case that plebeian blades ... are the only ones that cut” (Sanguineti 1992, 277).

³¹ “Il realismo di Dante fa corpo con la sua riduzione teologale” (Sanguineti 1992, 278).

³² See Sanguineti 1992, 273-74.

quantunque ciò suoni spiacevole all'ombra di Croce, la *Divina Commedia* è precisamente questo, un romanzo teologico-politico, il quale esige, proprio per essere compreso nel suo valore di poesia, non una lettura lirica, al modo appunto crociano, ma una lettura narrativa. E soltanto così, come romanzo, la *Divina Commedia* è restituibile al suo autentico significato espressivo e ideologico.³³

[however hard to stomach this might be for Croce's supporters, the *Divine Comedy* is precisely this: a theological-political novel. In order for its literary merits to be understood, one must read it as a narrative work and not, like Croce does, as a lyrical poem. Only then, when read as a novel, the real expressive and ideological meaning of the *Divine Comedy* can be restored.]

2.ii. *Laborintus II* against the 'museum': plurilingualism and estrangement technique

It is thus obvious that Sanguineti's reworking of Dante in *Laborintus II* must be read in conjunction with his critical contributions, more specifically with "Il realismo di Dante" that he wrote while working with Berio on their musical theatre pièce. The hermeneutical analysis and the creative work are then two intertwined aspects that allowed Sanguineti to celebrate a 'different' Dante from the more canonical one in the year of his seventh centennial. The intent, however, was not commemorative, but rather militant. Sanguineti believed that the new idea of poetry – anti-lyrical and ideologically charged – proposed by the Italian Neo-Avantgarde was in line with – if not derived from – Dante's poetics and thus could draw inspiration from it. More precisely, as David Lummus puts it, Sanguineti's "critical work on Dante and his evocation of Dante's poetry in his neo-avant-garde creative works coincide to create the foundation for a theory and practice of the anti-lyric".³⁴

³³ Sanguineti 1992, 282.

³⁴ Lummus 2013, 50.

In Sanguineti's materialist interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*, there is a stringent link between Dante's historical context, portrayed in the poem, and his plurilingualism. It is precisely this commitment to realism that does not exclude linguistic experimentalism, but rather relies on it, that allowed Sanguineti to draw a line connecting Dantean poetics to the one of the Neo-Avantgarde. While it would be incorrect to conflate the peculiar approaches proposed by the many members of the Neo-Avantgarde group, it is nonetheless accurate to identify a shared desire to create a new poetic language apt to express modernity, meaning the new industrialised and mass-mediated society of post-war Italy. Such communal effort was spelled out by Alfredo Giuliani in his famous introduction to the first anthology of Neo-avantgarde poets, published in 1961, which included texts from Sanguineti:

Senza dubbio, in ogni epoca la poesia non può essere "vera" se non è "contemporanea"; e se ci domandiamo "a che cosa?" la risposta è una sola: al nostro sentimento della realtà, ovvero alla lingua che la realtà parla in noi con i suoi segni inconciliabili.³⁵

[Undoubtedly, in every age poetry cannot be "true" unless it is "contemporary". To the question, then, of what it means to be contemporary, there can be only one answer: poetry has to be contemporary with our own perception of reality or, rather, with the language that reality speaks within us through its irreconcilable signs.³⁶]

Like in the *Divine Comedy* Dante expressed the complexity of his time through his chaotic plurilingualism, also the poets of the Neo-Avantgarde attempted to capture the *Zeitgeist* by means of linguistic disorder. Because "to say words is to say things" as Sanguineti maintained, in times of crisis, such as the ones lived by Dante and by the Neo-Avantgarde authors alike, the language of poetry – when it is 'real', 'contemporary' poetry – must convey the

³⁵ In Barilli 2013, 519.

³⁶ In Ballerini and Cavatorta 2017, 432.

chaos of reality.³⁷ Therefore, Dante's anti-lyricism for Sanguineti was not a model of style, but rather an epistemological approach that guided his poetics in general, and, in the specific case that we are considering, the composition of *Laborintus II*. In line with this interpretation, Sanguineti's extreme quotationism and his repeated use of chaotic enumeration in the libretto must be interpreted as a dutiful application – and a modern update – of Dante's lesson. The totality of the real that the *Divine Comedy* embraced is also expressed in *Laborintus II*, only under a more experimentalist façade that, ultimately, upholds the same principle of realism followed by Dante. To better understand Sanguineti's peculiar realism, let's consider an instance of chaotic enumeration in *Laborintus II*:

tutto tutto tutto tutto dalla biblioteca al babbuino:
 dal 1265 al 1321:
 dal cianuro di potassio alla cronaca cittadina:
 dalla cresima alla corte dei conti:
 dalla oscurità in cui è sempre immersa la nostra vita alla rendita del 4%:
 dalla carotide alla tibia:
 dall'elefante di mare, grande foca del Pacifico fornita di due lunghe zanne al 1965:
 dal fegato al frigorifero:
 dal francobollo al formaggio:
 dalla prova del nove al cavallo di Troia:
 dal lapsus linguae alla rivoluzione russa:
 dal piedistallo, che sa sostenere tutte le colonne alla folgorazione:
 atto e effetto del folgorare:
 alla pietra focaia:
 alla luna:

³⁷ The importance of Dante's model for the Neo-Avantgarde is identified by Sanguineti as follows: "At a time when all areas of literature were experiencing a return to order, the Novissimi, with their harsh 'stil novo', were moving in a different direction; theirs was a return to disorder. It was not arbitrary but rather a necessity, motivated by the realization that the old order of literature was no longer working and the new one was not yet functioning". Sanguineti 2017, 456.

al rame:
alla polvere³⁸

[all all all from the library to the baboon:
from the 1265 to 1321:
from potassium cyanide to the local news:
from confirmation to the Treasury Department:
from the darkness in which our lives are constantly immersed to
the 4% profit:
from the carotid to the tibia:
from the liver to the fridge:
from the stamp to the cheese:
from casting out nines to the Trojan horse:
from the slip of the tongue to the Russian Revolution:
from the hendecasyllable to the snuff:
from the pedestal that can hold up all the columns to the flash of
lightning:
the act and effect of flashing:
to the flint:
to the moon:
to copper:
to the dust³⁹]

There are two levels to consider when analysing the presence of Dante in a passage like the one above. Such a long and disorderly list – that was accompanied by Berio's music, also highly informed by contamination and experimentalism – was meant as an homage to Dante's plurilingualism, as already discussed, as well as being an updated depiction of his *Inferno*. Indeed, the archetype underlying the writing of *Laborintus II* – and of his 1956 poem *Laborintus*, which constitutes the most important precedent for the libretto – is that of the infernal descent. The underworld that Sanguinetti wanders, however, is not inhabited by the souls of the damned, as in Dante, but by the relics of western culture, represented by the citations, lists of objects, and cultural references. Instead of describing a hellish and labyrinthine space through images – that is to

³⁸ Sanguinetti (1965) 2018, 71.

³⁹ Suvini-Hand 2006, 251.

say, naturalistically – *Laborintus II* stages it through its style and syntax. The language of Sanguineti, not dissimilar from Dante’s one, must be understood “as an objective representation of a historical and social alienation (the pathological language is the counterpart of a pathological reality) relived from the inside, on the page”.⁴⁰ In the words of Sanguineti’s fellow Neo-Avantgardist Giuliani, the environment evoked in *Laborintus*, and, by extension, in *Laborintus II*, “is an ‘infernal’ space evoked syntactically rather than through an allegorical geography”.⁴¹

The ideological motive behind Sanguineti’s experimental style famously escaped another Italian poet of those years, Andrea Zanzotto. In criticising the excessive obscurity of Sanguineti’s *Laborintus*, the direct precedent for *Laborintus II*, Zanzotto described the book as a “sincera trascrizione di un esaurimento nervoso”.⁴² To which Sanguineti contested that “il cosiddetto ‘esaurimento nervoso’ che io tentavo di trascrivere sinceramente era poi un oggettivo esaurimento storico”.⁴³

There is yet another reason why the author of *Laborintus II* found Dante’s poetics to be congenial to his own experience within the Neo-Avantgarde and this is strictly connected to the issue of realism. Sanguineti believed that in the 1960s both contemporary poetry and Dante’s work suffered from the same problem: they were equally robbed of their communicative and subversive power because their ideological content was ignored or downplayed by critics and readers alike. His mission to restore the link between history and language via a materialist approach to literature – in his reading of Dante as well as in his own artistic practice – was thus an act of resistance against what he considered to be regressive forces out to

⁴⁰ Picchione 2004, 114.

⁴¹ Giuliani 2017, 576.

⁴² Quoted by Sanguineti in “Poesia informale?” (*Il Verrì*), now in Barilli and Guglielmi 2013, 541-545 (543): “an honest transcription of a nervous breakdown”.

⁴³ Barilli and Guglielmi 2013, 543: “the so-called ‘nervous breakdown’ that I tried to faithfully transcribe was in fact an objective historical breakdown”.

neutralise poetry's disruptive potential. To describe the dangerous process of disengaging poetry from its historical and ideological background, Sanguineti famously employed the image of the 'museum', intended as a purely aesthetic approach to literature – and to art more in general – that served the interests of the bourgeoisie. The Idealist tradition, expression of this bourgeoisie, aimed at relegating poetry to the 'museum' in order to defuse its ideological content. In an interview with the critic Fernando Camon, also dated 1965, Sanguineti explained:

neutralizing culture [is a] typical attitude of the bourgeois class. The culture is revered, but only if it is “disengaged”, inefficient, and, above all, inoffensive. [...] In this case, why does the “museum” evoke a negative image? Because it becomes the “museumification” that Adorno speaks about – that is, a disengaged contemplation, purely “aesthetic”, for which art has nothing to do with politics. [...] Rather I believe that all cultural activities have an immediate political meaning [...].⁴⁴

For Sanguineti the goal of the Neo-Avantgarde was precisely to liberate poetry from this process of “museumification”. The threat of being rendered inoffensive by a depoliticised interpretation, Sanguineti believed, was suffered even more by a canonical and revered author like Dante, always already at risk of being crystallised in a celebratory and anti-historical image, even more so during his centennial. The goal of *Laborintus II* was hence two-fold: to propose a new poetics, the one of the Neo-Avantgarde, and to free Dante from the “museum” where the dominant exegetical tradition had confined him. Analysing how Sanguineti accomplished this second objective in turn allows us to understand the ideological reason behind his highly experimental rewriting of Dante's work.

As shown in the previous section, most of the Dantean quotations in *Laborintus II* come from very famous passages of *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*. In many instances, Sanguineti even chose the most memorable

⁴⁴ Sanguineti and Camon (1965) 2017, 572.

verses that every Italian student would have learnt in school. This might come unexpected when considering Sanguineti's sophisticated knowledge of Dante. However, this was coherent with the goal of *Laborintus II*, namely, to revitalise Dantean tradition, to breathe a new life into it. Accordingly, Sanguineti decided to rework the passages that were most exhausted of meaning, worn out by repetition and critical exegesis. To restore the communicative power of Dante's language, in *Laborintus II* Sanguineti adopted what can be described as a sort of Brechtian estrangement effect, achieved by quoting Dante while adding several minor changes. Often Sanguineti changed the order of verses or of entire expressions, in other instances he erased some of the original words or repeated them to create an echo effect. At times, he even juxtaposed passages from different texts, like when he combined the *Divine Comedy* with *Vita Nuova*. Such alterations do not prevent the audience from immediately recognising the source for the libretto. Nonetheless these variations take the listeners by surprise and frustrate their expectations, as they cannot 'quote along' and are instead forced to ponder the meaning of these long-known words as if heard for the very first time.⁴⁵ To fully

⁴⁵ Federico Tiezzi, in analysing Sanguineti's 1989 adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* titled *Commedia dell'Inferno* (see Section 5), clearly identifies what is the author's intention whenever he quotes Dante's verses but slightly changes the quotation. Tiezzi writes: "Sanguineti aveva individuato il suo intervento, nella riscrittura, immediatamente sull'ufficio dell'endecasillabo: a cui avrebbe voluto togliere membri ritmici e di significato: specialmente nei brani più famosi e che ogni spettatore sa a memoria. Così, ad esempio, il verso di Francesca (V, 136) 'la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante' sarebbe vissuto, nel teatro, senza il *tutto*, sostituito da una pausa ritmica dell'attore. Il celebre endecasillabo avrebbe risuonato attivamente: lo spettatore-ascoltatore sarebbe stato scosso da quella pausa più che dalla presenza della parola" (Tiezzi 2010, 13-14). "Sanguineti decided to intervene by means of rewriting, focusing especially on the hendecasyllable: it would have tampered with its rhythm as well as with its meaning, especially when it came the most famous passages that every spectator knows by heart.

understand Sanguineti's poetic operation, we shall consider a passage from the libretto (left) in which this estrangement technique is fully at work, along with Dante's text (right):

e nel mezzo:
 e in una selva:
 oscura:
 selvaggia selva:
 e aspra:
 ed una lupa:
 ma:
 not only in the middle of the way:
 una lupa:
 in the middle:
 con paura:
 ma questa bestia uccide:
 uccide:
 Sanguineti, *Laborintus II*⁴⁶

[and in the middle:
 and in a wood:
 dark:
 savage wood:
 and harsh:
 and a she-wolf:
 but:
 not only in the
 middle of the way:
 a she-wolf
 in the middle:
 with fear:
 but this beast
 kills:
 it kills:
 Sanguineti, *Laborintus II*]

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
 mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
 che la diritta via era smarrita.
 Ah! quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
 esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
 che nel pensier rinova la paura:
 Dante, *Inferno* I.1-6⁴⁷

[In the middle of the journey of our life, I
 came to myself in a dark wood, for the
 straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a
 thing it is to say what that wood was, so
 savage and harsh and strong that the
 thought of it renews my fear!
 Dante, *Inferno* 1.1-6⁴⁸]

Here Sanguineti plays with one of the most quoted incipits of Western literature: the first six verses of Dante's

Hence, for instance, Francesca's verse (5.136) 'kissed my mouth all trembling' would have been recited on stage with the omission of the word all and the word would have been replaced by a rhythmic pause. As a consequence, the famous hendecasyllable would have ring anew: the spectator/listener would have been shaken by that rhythmic pause more than by the presence of the original word".

⁴⁶ Sanguineti (1965) 2018, 68.

⁴⁷ Alighieri 2021, 1:5.

⁴⁸ Alighieri 1996, 27.

Inferno. The most notable change to the original is the erasure of the word “cammino” [“journey”]: the poet is no longer in the midst of his life journey, but in the middle of the forest, as if here the dark wood were his final destination, instead of a place to be traversed. This is in line with Sanguineti’s broader reworking of Dante, which, at least in the first decade of his career, focused mostly on *Inferno*, in line with a pessimistic and anti-eschatological view.⁴⁹ The second major change appears in the fourth verse, where Sanguineti switches the order of “selva” and “selvaggia” [“wood” and “savage”] and, in doing so, draws new attention to the adjective and revitalises the now proverbial *figura etimologica* “selva selvaggia”. Moreover, there is no sign of Dante *agens* in this dark wood, and of the three beasts that he meets in the original text – a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf – only the last one remains. By eliminating most of the characters, Sanguineti draws attention to the figural meaning of these famous verses, while erasing its narrative content. Furthermore, he attributes a new and central role to the she-wolf, whose menacing presence dominates the passage. The centrality of this beast is crucial in understanding the political message of *Laborintus II* and its debt towards Dante’s ideology, which is addressed in the following section.

Not unlike the technique of the *objet trouvé* in Duchamp,⁵⁰ Sanguineti’s estrangement effect in *Laborintus II* urges us to consider Dante’s text anew. Differently from the Surrealist artist, however, the Neo-Avantgarde poet did not aim to displace the object of his artistic reworking – Dante’s poetry –, but rather to put it back where it belonged: out of the museum, in dialectic tension with history.

⁴⁹ For a brief note on how Sanguineti’s understanding of Dante’s *Inferno* and of its significance for his own poetry changed over time, see our conclusive remarks.

⁵⁰ See Kamien-Kazhdan 2018, 69-109.

3. Usury in Dante: *Laborintus II* against the ‘market’

The central message of *Laborintus II* is the decry of capitalism as an expression of the bourgeoisie and, more specifically, a condemnation of the commodification of art.⁵¹ Sanguineti, as we have seen, developed the concept of the ‘museum’ to indicate the cultural strategy employed by the bourgeoisie to neutralise the subversive power of poetry and of art more in general. Next to the ‘museum’, he identified the other equally dangerous menace in the ‘market’.⁵² Responsibility of the Neo-Avantgarde was to challenge these two conservative tendencies, and such was also the goal of *Laborintus II*. This double target ended up determining the style and the content of the libretto: in order to free Dante from the ‘museum’, Sanguineti adopted an experimental, anti-lyrical language; to denounce the dangers of capitalism and, especially, of commodification, he followed in Dante’s footsteps and embraced his condemnation of usury, intended as a symbol of the financial economy and thus of capitalism.

The *Commedia*, as already mentioned, is for Sanguineti a great theological-political novel. In his 1965 essay, he identifies the overtly militant cause of the poem as the matrix from which the most relevant aspects of representation are generated:

a fabbricare un realista del peso di Dante occorreva
... quell’eccesso di politica che, violento come riesce,
lo accompagnerà implacabilmente, per tutto un esilio

⁵¹ It is Berio who identifies the polemical target of *Laborintus II*: “Per esempio il tema dell’usura (per noi è la mercificazione dei contenuti e la riduzione dei valori a mercato) si sviluppa quasi innocentemente dalle etimologie, passando per Pound (Cantos XLV) e finendo in un vero e proprio catalogo (tipicamente neo-barocco e sanguinetiano) di cose e di oggetti” (in *De Benedictis* 2016, 213). [“For instance the theme of usury (which for us means the commodification of meanings and their reduction to their market values) develops almost naturally from the etymologies, it touches Pound (Cantos XLV) and it finishes with a true catalogue (exquisitely neo-Baroque and Sanguinetian) of things and objects”.]

⁵² See Sanguineti 2001, 58.

in terra e nell'oltretomba ... E l'irrealismo, squisitamente visionario, della *Vita nuova*, trapasserà di colpo al realismo, teologico-politico, della *Commedia*".⁵³

[To produce a realist writer of Dante's calibre an overabundance of political content was needed. An excess of politics which, as violent as it was, would always accompany him throughout his exile on earth and in the underworld ... And the exquisitely visionary unrealism of the *Vita nuova* will suddenly turn into the theological-political realism of the *Commedia*.]

As stated in the *Epistle to Cangrande* – Sanguineti adds in a 1985 essay – “the *Commedia* was not conceived for speculation, but for action”.⁵⁴ Moreover, Sanguineti is cognizant of the *Commedia*'s most urgent political motif: the violent condemnation of greed, the vice that Dante considers to be at the root of the worst possible crimes. Sanguineti's attention is attracted above all by the passages in which the poet dwells on which economic systems offer the best conditions for greed to prosper. We will return to this point shortly, which is of decisive importance in *Laborintus II*.

In Dante's poem greed is represented by the she-wolf. As we know, the she-wolf already enters the scene in the first canto (*Inferno* 1.49-60 and 88-111), but the poet returns explicitly to its symbolic significance at the beginning of canto 20 of *Purgatorio*, where he meets the sinners of avarice:

Maladetta sia tu, antica lupa,
che più che tutte l'altre bestie hai preda
per la tua fame senza fine cupa!
O ciel, nel cui girar par ch'e' si creda
le condizion' di qua giù trasmutarsi,

⁵³ Sanguineti 1992, 282.

⁵⁴ “la *Commedia* non è stata concepita per la speculazione, ma per l'operare”. Sanguineti 1992, 170 (and *Epistola a Cangrande*, §40: “Genus vero phylosophie sub quo hic in toto et parte proceditur, est morale negotium, sive ethica; quia non ad speculandum, sed ad opus inventum est totum et pars”).

quando verrà per cui questa disceda?⁵⁵ (vv. 10-15)

[A curse be on you, ancient she-wolf, that more than any other beast find prey for your endlessly hollow hunger!

O heavens, whose turning, we believe, changes conditions down here, when will he come who will drive her away?⁵⁶]

In *Laborintus II* as well, the she-wolf/greed appears almost immediately, as analysed in the previous section. With an inlay of quotations from the first canto of the *Inferno*, in the third part of the booklet – according to our subdivision – Sanguineti sketches the image a she-wolf that kills: “ed una lupa ... ma questa bestia uccide” [“and a she-wolf ... but this beast kills”]. The last quoted words echo *Inferno* 1.96: “but so much impedes him that she kills him” [“ma tanto lo ’mpedisce che l’uccide”]. This is not, however, a literal quotation, as is usually the case in the booklet: on the contrary, it is one of the few re-elaborations Sanguineti makes of his sources. The meaning of the image, in any case, is the same: the she-wolf is greed, and greed fuels socially destructive economic activities. Sanguineti essentially has only one type of economic activity in mind, as one learns when reading the remainder of the *Laborintus II* booklet, and in particular part 11:

natura lo suo corso prende da divino intelletto e da sua arte: l’arte vostra quella segue, come ’l maestro fa il discente: da queste due convene prender sua vita ed avanzar la gente: l’usuriere altra via tene: per sé natura e per la sua seguace dispregia.⁵⁷

[Nature takes its course from divine intellect and its art: your art follows nature as the pupil follows the master: by these two, mankind should gain its livelihood and advancement: the usurer takes a different

⁵⁵ Alighieri 2021, 2:167-68.

⁵⁶ Alighieri 2003, 327.

⁵⁷ Sanguineti (1965) 2018, 71.

route: he despises nature both in herself and in her follower.^{58]}

The entire passage, as already pointed out, comes from *Inferno* 11.99-100, 103-04 and 106-11. These are the verses that illustrate the reason why usury is a vice against nature: the usurer, Virgil explains, obtains his profit not from the spontaneous fertility of the earth or from that obtained through work, but from lending money. This constitutes a violent act against the natural order given by God to the world, and against human art as well, because, in Dante's thought, human art – i.e., human work – should always imitate the “course” of nature (vv. 97-104). From this descends that it is not only usurious activity that Dante condemns as a sin against nature, but the financial economy as a whole. Sanguineti lucidly grasps the political implications of these passages:

Ricordiamo ... che, nel cuore della spiegazione virgiliana dell'ordinamento infernale, uno ed uno solo è il punto che veramente attira e tormenta Dante: come l'usura – che è poi quanto a dire l'arte bancaria – offenda Dio, e sia appunto 'contra naturam'. Bestemmiatori, omosessuali e banchieri staranno in effetti sotto una medesima pioggia di fuoco, ma i banchieri, si capisce, più giù degli altri ... Né altro veltro si attende e si invoca ... se non quello che saprà ricacciare in inferno, come vera figlia del demonio, la moneta che partorisce moneta.⁵⁹

[Let us remember ... that, at the heart of Virgil's explanation of the infernal order, one and only one is the point that truly attracts and torments Dante: how usury – which is then as much as the art of banking – offends God and is 'contra naturam'. Blasphemers, homosexuals and bankers will indeed stand under the same rain of fire, but the bankers, one understands, lower than the others ... Nor is any other the 'veltro' expected and invoked than the one that will

⁵⁸ Suvini-Hand 2006, 251.

⁵⁹ Sanguineti 1992, 284.

per l'aere tenebroso :
 sopra lor vanità che par persona :

con usura :
 e tutto l'oro ch'è sotto la luna, e che già fu,
 di quest'anime stanche non potrebbe farne posare una :
 e il foco eterno :

e tra li avelli, fiamme :

[with usura,
 sin against nature:
 with usura the line grows thick:
 CONTRA NATURAM⁶²

new torments, new tormented:
 and eternal rain:
 and hailstones:

cursed rain, and cold:
 and filthy water, and heavy:
 and great

hailstones, and snow:
 through the dark air:
 on their emptiness that seems a human body:

with usury:
 and all the gold that is under the moon and that ever was,
 could not give rest to even one of these weary souls:
 and the eternal fire:
 and among the tombs, flames:
 with usury,

sin against nature:
 with usury the line grows thick:
 AGAINST NATURE]

The lines from “novi tormenti” to “vanità che par persona” are from *Inferno* 6 and refer to the gluttons. Sanguineti then adds the line “con usura”, which is not in Dante, to link the previous verses to the usurers. The following two lines are from *Inferno* 7 and refer to the avaricious souls. At the end, a quotation from Ezra Pound’s *Canto XLV* closes the passage and frames the excerpts from Dante’s *Inferno* within the main theme of usury.

⁶² Sanguineti (1965) 2018, 71-72.

A single sin – usury, “la moneta che partorisce moneta”⁶³ – becomes here a single destructive principle. Accordingly, it ends up representing other sins that are instead distinct in Dante’s otherworld, although connected – metaphorically or substantively – because they all depend on greed, which is the motive for usury. In Part 11 of the libretto, Pound’s *Canto XLV* also undergoes a partial rewriting, well consistent with another polemical motif of *Laborintus II* – the condemnation of capitalism as an expression of the bourgeoisie and, more specifically, a condemnation of the commodification of art. In *Canto XLV*, 11-13, Pound writes: “no picture is made to endure not to live with / but it is made to sell and sell quickly / with usura”. In *Laborintus II*, instead, we read: “no music is made to endure nor to live with but it is made to sell and sell quickly”.

Conclusion

In *Laborintus II* Sanguineti put into practice what he considered to be the inextricable tie between ideology and language that he learned from Dante. This involved two aspects of the libretto: at the level of style, he aimed for a renewal of the poetic language by following in Dante’s anti-lyricism, meaning by recurring to linguistic disorder, chaotic enumeration, quotationism, estrangement technique; at the level of content, he condemned capitalism and the commodification of art by quoting and recontextualising Dante’s treatment of usury. In other words, in *Laborintus II* Sanguineti looked up to Dante as a master of realism who, although reactionary in politics, opened the way to a literary practice based on historical materialism. This in turn meant for Sanguineti the rejection of naturalism and of Idealism, which he saw as the two cultural weapons at the service of the bourgeoisie and deployed to neutralise arts’ ideological content.

In 1989, *Laborintus II* was followed by another theatrical pièce by Sanguineti, *Commedia dell’Inferno*, that expanded on many aspects already present in the stage ad-

⁶³ “The money that gives birth to money” (Sanguineti 1992, 284).

aptation of Dante's work.⁶⁴ This second rewriting speaks to Sanguineti's core belief that the *Divine Comedy* is intrinsically theatrical for its "gestualità caotica" ["chaotic gestuality"].⁶⁵ The concept that chaos takes on in *Laborintus II* is indeed crucial to understand where this work stands in Sanguineti's life-long meditation on Dante. To this end, we find it appropriate to point out that in the 1956 poetry book *Laborintus*, Sanguineti's literary double is stuck in Dante's hell, or better yet in its modern counterpart. Chaos and disorder are signs of the irreversible crisis of Western culture after the horrors of the Second World War. Literature is nothing but a wasteland, to quote T.S. Eliot, another of Sanguineti's maestros,⁶⁶ where the relics of past tradition live. The labyrinth, evoked by the title, has no exit point.

A more hopeful message, instead, closes *Laborintus II* as, following again in Dante's steps, Sanguineti exits "a riveder le stelle". The libretto ends with some new verses that Sanguineti composed specifically for the occasion. They describe a group of joyous children who dreams and play in the sun, under the trees:

ma seguimi, ormai :

ma vedi il fango che ci sta alle spalle :

e il sole in mezzo agli alberi :

e i bambini

che dormono :

i bambini, che sognano :

che parlano, sognando :

ma i bambini :

li vedi, così inquieti :

dormendo, i bambini :sognando, adesso :

[but follow me, already :

but look at the mud behind us :

and the sun between the trees :

⁶⁴ See Lorenzini 2010.

⁶⁵ De Benedictis 2016, 177.

⁶⁶ See Bacigalupo 2012.

and the children
who sleep :
the children, who dream :
who talk, while dreaming :
but the children :
look at them, so restless :
while they sleep, the children :while they dream, now :^{67]}

This new attitude seems to be linked to the uplifting effect of music, which Sanguineti obviously came to appreciate via his collaboration with Berio, but it also stemmed from Dante's lesson. Indeed, the section of the libretto (part 13) leading to the concluding verses quoted above is a reworking of Dante's reflection on music in *Convivio* (II, xiii, 23-24). In this passage, the Medieval poet praises the positive effect of music on human soul, which inspires virtues in whoever listens to it:

La Musica trae a sé li spiriti umani / che sono quasi
principalmente vapori de cuore / sì che quasi cessano
da ogni operazione: / si e l'anima intera quando l'ode
/ e la virtù di tutti quasi corre a lo spirito sensibile /
che riceve lo suono.⁶⁸

Therefore, by revealing to Sanguineti the uplifting power of music, Berio and Dante seem to be both crucial in leading him out of the hellish labyrinth.⁶⁹ The two poles of experimentalism and tradition, once again, come together in *Laborintus II*.

⁶⁷ Sanguineti (1965) 2018, 74.

⁶⁸ Sanguineti (1965) 2018, 74: "Music attracts to itself the human spirits, which are almost mainly heart-vapours, so that they almost cease all other activity: this is how the whole soul is when hears music, and the virtue of them all runs, as it were, to the spirit of the sense which receives the sound". Suvini-Hand 2006, 253.

⁶⁹ It is important to mention that in 1964, the same year when he started working on *Laborintus II*, Sanguineti published the book of poetry *Purgatorio de l'Inferno*, a title that, in itself, marks the beginning of a new, less doomed vision.

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. 2021. *Commedia*. Giorgio Inglese ed. 3 vols. Firenze, Le Lettere-Società Dantesca Italiana.
- . 2003. *The Divine Comedy. Purgatorio*. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, eds. New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- . 1996. *The Divine Comedy. Inferno*. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez eds. New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Baccarini, Elisabetta. 2002. *La poesia nel labirinto. Razionalismo e istanza 'antiletteraria' nell'opera e nella cultura di Edoardo Sanguineti*. Bologna, il Mulino.
- Bacigalupo, Massimo. 2012. "Sanguineti fra Pound ed Eliot". In *Per Edoardo Sanguineti: lavori in corso*. Berisso, Marco and Erminio Risso eds. Firenze, Cesati. 381-92.
- Ballerini, Luigi and Beppe Cavatorta, eds. 2017. *Those Who from Afar Look Like Flies*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Bàrberi Squarotti, Giorgio. 1963. "Studi danteschi di Sanguineti". *Letteratura* 11: 80-82.
- Barilli, Renato and Angelo Guglielmi, eds. 2013. *Gruppo 63. Critica e Teoria*. Milano, Bompiani.
- Berio, Luciano. 2002. "Pagina di diario". In *Album Sanguineti*, Niva Lorenzini and Erminio Risso ed. Lecce, Manni. 20.
- Bo, Carlo. 1965. "Dante e la poesia italiana contemporanea". *Terzo programma* 4: 192-99.
- Centro Studi Luciano Berio. "Omaggio a Sanguineti". <http://www.lucianoberio.org/homage-edoardo-sanguineti-0>
- Crompton, Sarah. 2021. "The Dante Project review – bold, beautiful and utterly engaging". *The Guardian*. 24 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/24/the-dante-project-royal-ballet-review-wayne-mcgregor-thomas-ades-tacita-dean-edward-watson>
- De Benedictis, Angela Ida. 2016. "From *Esposizione* to *La borintus II*: transitions and mutations of 'a desire for

- theatre”. In *Le théâtre musical de Luciano Berio*, Giordano Ferrari, ed. Paris, L’Harmattan. 177-246.
- De Santis, Mila. 2017. “Luciano Berio e Edoardo Sanguineti: momenti di un percorso Amoroso”. *Ospite ingrato: periodico del Centro Studi Franco Fortini* 4: 167-77.
- Dolfi, Anna. 1986. “Dante e i poeti del Novecento”. *Studi danteschi* 58: 307-42
- Felici, Candida. 2018. “Dante nel labirinto: parole e musica in *Laborintus II* di Berio e Sanguineti”. In *Dante e la musica: riflessioni interdisciplinari*, Maria Teresa Arfini and Alberto Rizzuti eds., Turin, Università di Torino. 88-113.
- Flood, Alison. 2021. “Robot artist to perform AI generated poetry in response to Dante”. *The Guardian*. 26 November.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/26/robot-artist-to-perform-ai-generated-poetry-in-response-to-dante>
- Giuliani, Alfredo. 2017. “Laborintus”, Erika M. Nadir tr. In: *Those Who from Afar Look Like Flies*, Luigi Balerini and Beppe Cavatorta, eds. Toronto, University of Toronto. 575-80.
- . 1961. “Prefazione ai Novissimi”. In *I Novissimi. Poesie per gli anni '60*, Milano, Rusconi e Paolazzi. In Barilli et al. 2013, 518-33.
- Guglielminetti, Marziano. 1969. *Petrarca fra Abelardo ed Eloisa e altri saggi di Letteratura italiana*. Bari, Adriatica.
- Hazmoune, Mariem. 2019. “*Laborintus II* de Luciano Berio et Edoardo Sanguineti. Une hétérophonie dantesque”. In *Dantesque. Sur les traces du modèle*, Giuseppe Sangirardi and Jean-Marie Fritz, eds. Paris, Classiques Garnier. 111-29.
- Kamien-Kazhdan, Adina. 2018. *Remaking the Readymade: Duchamp, Man Ray, and the Conundrum of the Replica*. Routledge, New York.
- Lo Monaco, Giovanna. 2019. *Dal gesto alla scrittura: Il Gruppo 63 e il teatro*. Novate Milanese, Prospero Editore.

- Lorenzini, Niva. 2010. "Nota al testo seguita da un dialogo con l'autore". In Sanguineti, Edoardo. 2010. *Commedia dell'inferno. Un travestimento dantesco*. Roma, Carocci. 101-23.
- Lumms, David. 2013. "Edoardo Sanguineti's New Dante". In *Literature, Ideology and the Avant-garde*. John Picchione ed. London, Routledge. 40-55.
- Mellace, Raffaele. 2012. "Sanguineti e i 'suoi' musicisti. Una bussola per orientarsi". In *Per Edoardo Sanguineti: lavori in corso*, (Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Genova, 12-14 maggio 2011). Marco Berisso and Erminio Risso eds. Firenze, Cesati. 291-310.
- Musgnug, Florian. 2021. "Gli anni sessanta e le origini dell'intermedialità in Italia". *Moderna: semestrale di teoria e critica della letteratura* 23.1-2: 75-86.
- . 2008. "Writing Like Music: Luciano Berio, Umberto Eco and the New Avant-Garde". *Comparative Critical Studies* 5.1, February: 81-97.
- Oliva, Stefano. 2021. "Berio and Eco on the (Im)Possibility of Musical Narrativity". *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio*, December. <https://doi.org/10.4396/SFL2021A01>.
- Osmond-Smith, David. 2012. "Voicing the Labyrinth: The Collaborations of Edoardo Sanguineti and Luciano Berio". *Twentieth-Century Music* 9.1-2: 63-78.
- Picchione, John. 2004. *The New Avant-Garde in Italy. Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Sanguineti, Edoardo. 2018 (1st 1965). *Laborintus II*. In *Luciano Berio: Revue Contrechamps n. 1*, Philippe Albèra ed. Genève, Éditions Contrechamps. 68-74.
- . 2017. "The Treatment of Verbal Material in the Texts of the Neo-avant-garde: The "Novissimi" Experience". Erika M. Nadir tr. In *Those Who from Afar Look Like Flies*, Luigi Ballerini and Beppe Cavatorta, ed. Toronto, University of Toronto. 456-65.
- . 2012. *Quattro passaggi con Luciano*. In *Luciano Berio. Nuove Prospettive*, Angela Ida De Benedictis, ed. Firenze, Olschki, 49-60.

- . 2010. *Varie ed eventuali. Poesie 1995-2010*. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- . Sanguineti, Edoardo. 2010b. *Commedia dell'inferno. Un travestimento dantesco*. Roma, Carocci.
- . 2004. *Mikrokosmos. Poesie 1951-2004*, Milano, Feltrinelli. [English translation: Sanguineti, Edoardo. 2013. "Little Threnos". *The Musikblätter*, 5 (July-September): 19.]
- . 2001. *Ideologia e linguaggio*. Erminio Risso, ed. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- . 1993. *Per musica*. Milano-Modena, Ricordi-Mucchi.
- . 1992. *Dante reazionario*. Torino, Editori Riuniti.
- . 1961. "Poesia informale?", *Il Verri*. In Barilli et al. 2013, 541-45.
- Sanguineti, Edoardo and Fernando Camon. 1965. "Edoardo Sanguineti", *Il mestiere di poeta*, Milan, Lerici. [English translation: Sanguineti, Edoardo. "Interview with Edoardo Sanguineti". Erika M. Nadir, tr. In Ballerini et al. 2017, 557-74.]
- Sanguineti, Federico. 1991. "Edoardo Sanguineti dantista". In *Sanguineti: Ideologia e linguaggio* (Atti del Convegno internazionale di Salerno, 16-18 febbraio 1989). Salerno, Metafora. 109-16.
- Scaldaferri, Nicola. 1997. *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico. Lo studio di fonologia di Milano e la ricerca musicale negli anni Cinquanta*. Lucca, LIM.
- Suvini-Hand, Vivianne. 2006. *Sweet Thunder: Music and Libretti in 1960s Italy*. London, Legenda.
- . 1998. "Laborintus II: A Neo-avant-garde Celebration of Dante", *Italian Studies* 53.1: 122-49.
- Tiezzi, Federico. 2010. "Introduzione (teatrale) a commedia (cinematografica)". In Sanguineti 2010b, 11-22.
- Tufano, Ilaria. 2003. "Le lezioni di Sanguineti su Dante". *Italianistica* 32.1: 69-72

“E SE NON PIANGI, DI CHE PIANGER SUOLI?”:
THE TRAGIC AND VISUAL ART OF DANTE’S
COMMEDIA IN PAOLO SORRENTINO’S
È STATA LA MANO DI DIO

Kristina M. Olson

Loosely considered autobiographical, Paolo Sorrentino’s 2021 Oscar nominated film *È stata la mano di Dio* [*The Hand of God*] depicts the coming of age for protagonist Fabio Schisa, a teenager growing up in Naples during the 1980s. At the beginning of the film, Fabio is a lonely high school student, without a platonic or romantic companion. He is closely attached to his brother, Marchino, to his parents, Saverio and Maria, and hopelessly infatuated with his aunt, Patrizia, who struggles with an undefined form of psychosis that causes hallucinations and a distorted sense of reality. For the first half of the film, Fabio navigates the calm waters of his young adulthood, nurtured by his loving family, including the reliable, though invisible, presence of his sister, Daniela, who never seems to leave the bathroom.

His parents are comedians *per passione*: his mother, Maria, has a penchant for juggling and practical jokes, while his father, Saverio, brings his relatives to tears with lighthearted yet scathing commentary on all things, including his sister and her new fiancée. Fabio grows up in this almost-idyllic household until the accidental and tragic death of his two parents by carbon monoxide poisoning throws his tranquil life into disarray. From this point forward, Fabio must decide how to chart the now turbulent seas of orphanhood, and whether he will transform or succumb to the dark shadow that tragedy has cast

over his life. Only after a series of adventures with a cigarette-smuggler, his aristocratic neighbour, the Baronessa Focale, and the Neapolitan director, Antonio Capuano, is Fabio able to envision a future, one in which he trains to become a filmmaker in Rome. He will do so as an orphan, having gained an experience of tragedy that forces him to find his voice. And to find his voice, he will turn to his greatest cinematic father figure, Federico Fellini, to his Neapolitan father figure, Antonio Capuano, and to the national voice of literary authority, Dante. For Fabio to envision a positive trajectory for his life – to make it end like a “comedy”, as Aristotle defines it in his *Poetics* – he must find his voice against the landscape of these artistic influences. To do so, as I explore ahead, Sorrentino has Fabio and other characters quote from some of the gravest, most tragic dialogue of Dante’s *Commedia*: namely, the Ugolino episode of *Inferno* 33.

My idea of tragedy here is informed by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, as well as Dante’s corresponding definitions of tragedy and comedy in his Epistle to Cangrande della Scala (*Epistola* XIII). The interpretation of tragedy in this essay has been equally influenced by Raymond Williams’s conception of the genre in his groundbreaking work, *Modern Tragedy*. Motivated by what the critic calls the failure of literary scholarship to handle tragedy, Williams broadened the idea of tragedy beyond literary genre, arguing that tragedy not only refers to war and social revolution, but to individual experiences: “a mining disaster, a burned-out family, a broken career, a smash on the road”.¹ While tragedy is the categorical label for several works by Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Ibsen, Williams indicates the ways to frame the quotidian experiences of non-aristocratic characters as tragic; as he writes, “the experiences of ordinary people who live through blockages, through a deferment and corrosion of hope and desire”.² Fabio, the protagonist, must learn that reality is not only lousy [“scadente”], as it

¹ Williams 1966, 34.

² Williams 1966, 34.

is called twice in this film, but tragic. For Williams, tragedy comprises singular disastrous events, but also a sense of disappointment and disillusionment that accumulates over a swath of time.

In these pages I explore the role of Sorrentino's occasional engagement with Dante's *Commedia* in this film's negotiation of comedy and tragedy thus defined. Two questions motivate this analysis. First, what is the role of literature, specifically that of the *Commedia*, in Fabio's mediation of reality? Broadly speaking, how does the Neapolitan director, writer and producer, Paolo Sorrentino, look to Neapolitan, Roman and Florentine cinematic and literary authorities in mediating reality along the lines of the tragic and the comic? In this way, this analysis also sheds light on the dynamic between appropriating high culture and established texts alongside local artistic figures and folkloric legends.

1. Dante on the Screen: Quotation and Imagery

Before turning to *È stata la mano di Dio*, it is necessary to define the theoretical framework for analyzing the film's quotations of Dante's poem. Firstly, the film is not a wholesale adaptation that would warrant a comparison with the *Commedia*. Eric Rentschler's concept of "fidelity analysis", which originates in cinematic studies, is a term used to describe the process by which studies of adaptations of literary works inevitably arrive at conclusions that privilege the source text. Fidelity analyses regard "adaptation as betrayal".³ While studies of cinematic and multimedia adaptations of Dante were often dictated by a fidelity analysis, the field has since evolved. The first scholar to argue explicitly against fidelity analysis in Dante adaptations was Nancy Vickers, specifically in the context of cinematic adaptation. In her essay, "Dante and

³ The term "fidelity analysis" was coined by Rentschler (1986, 2). He follows the work of Christopher Orr and Dudley Andrew in their analyses of cinematic adaptations of literature. See Orr 1984, 72-76, and Andrew 1984, 154. See also Marcus 1983, 16-25, and Olson 2013, 143-50.

the Video Decade”, Vickers identifies the methodological limitations by David Wallace and Robert Koehler on *A TV Dante* by Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips (1990): “Both feel compelled to place the video artifact in a relationship of relative value to the verbal artifact. For Wallace, *A TV Dante* ‘diminishes’ the *Commedia*; for Koehler, it ‘enriches’ it”.⁴ For Vickers, this recourse to fidelity analysis is motivated by a tension between a culture dominated by the word to one dominated by the sound-word-image.

Since Vickers’s pivotal stance on the matter, many studies approach the afterlife of Dante’s poem in theoretical terms that place the source-text and the adaptation – whether verbal or visual – on an even playing field.⁵ Yet, the scholarship on Dante’s presence in film and television is more limited. Amilcare Iannucci’s edited volume, *Dante, Cinema and Television* (2004), and *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, edited by Antonella Braidà and Luisa Calé (2007), constituted the field’s unambiguous response to Vickers’s essential caveat: read Dante’s afterlife in visual media without the unfair demotion imposed by a fidelity analysis.⁶ The alternative would be to ignore the wide-reaching influence of Dante upon the careers of numerous directors, such as Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Peter Greenaway, Woody Allen, and David Lynch, and actors, including Vittorio Gassman, Giorgio Albertazzi, and Vittorio Sermonti. As Iannucci declares, the “appropriation of Dante has nourished both cinema and television from their inception down to the present day”.⁷ However, the identifi-

⁴ Vickers 1995, 265.

⁵ Havelly 2014, xiv-xv; Havelly and Katz 2021, 2-6; Gragnolati, Camilletti and Lampert 2013, esp.11-16; and Rossini 2017, 11-25. Havelly rightly observes the inadequacy of “reception” as a passive concept (Havelly 2014, xiv-n8).

⁶ Other studies of Dante’s presence in film and television include the analyses of Tim Burton’s *Beetlejuice* (1988), David Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995), and Ridley Scott’s *Hannibal* (2001), in Parker and Parker 2013, 140-48 and Rossini 2017, 103-09. Rossini also investigates other visual adaptations.

⁷ Iannucci 2004, x.

cation and analysis of Dante's appearance in visual media during the digital age is nowhere near complete, especially as regard the numerous quotations of the poem that are not explicit adaptations. The integration of Dante's works can be sustained throughout a film, or it can be "restricted to a mere reference made for dramatic or comedic intent".⁸ Martin Eisner demonstrates how the shared recitation from the *Vita nova* in Scott's *Hannibal* draws on the quotation of Dante's sonnet in Thomas Harris's eponymous novel (1999). Yet, this quotation animates much more than just one moment in the film:

Anne Carson picks on these metaphors of textual and gastronomic consumption when she asks, "What is a quote? A quote (cognate with quota) is a cut, a section, a slice of someone's orange. You suck the slice, toss the rind, skate away". The danger of such acts of quotation, however, is that tossing the rind and skating away may not prove so easy. The consumed work may take over, just as Harris's quotation of Dante's sonnet in his novel became the film's opera, manuscript, and recitation.⁹

In addition to such animating quotations of the *Commedia* in Sorrentino's *È stata la mano di Dio*, the film also turns on a visual language inspired by Dante's vision of afterlife. Victoria Kirkham has shown how Dante's life and works can be sublimated into the landscape of films, such as in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), set in Ravenna, the city of the poet's exile.¹⁰ In the following pages, I read the power of Dantean quotation and visual imagery in Sorrentino's film, considering how the director integrates Dante with the influence of Fellini and Capuano as he manages cinematic and literary authority to find his voice.

⁸ Iannucci 2004, x.

⁹ Eisner 2021, 45-9.

¹⁰ Kirkham 2004, 106-28.

2. "La realtà è scadente": From Fellini to Dante

That Sorrentino had Fellini in mind when making *È stata la mano di Dio* is clear on many levels. As an autobiographical account of the director's coming of age, Sorrentino undoubtedly meditated upon *Amarcord*, Fellini's artistic portrait of his youth in Rimini, in making his most recent film.¹¹ Two overt references at the beginning of the film clarify the centrality of Fellini to Sorrentino's work: first, to *La dolce vita* (1960), and then to *8½* (1963). *È stata la mano di Dio* begins with a 180 degree downwards point of view of the ocean from a helicopter arriving in the Bay of Naples. We hear the propellers whipping the air as the camera slowly lifts and zooms into the shoreline. The gaze slowly pans to the left from the Castel dell'Uovo with the neighborhood of Chiaia in the distance, to the Villa Comunale. The camera then zooms in closely to a black Rolls Royce with its red curtains closed as it drives along Via Francesco Caracciolo. The sound of weak breathing from the car's interior takes over the diegetic sound, drowning out the helicopter noise. The camera then zooms out to show us Posillipo and the rest of the shoreline westward, and the sound shifts to seagulls and children playing, as the frame eventually rests on the islands of Procida and Ischia.

È stata la mano di Dio thus begins with an explicit homage to *La dolce vita* (1960), as it opens with the arrival of Marcello Rubini and other journalists in a helicopter that carries a statue of Jesus from the aqueducts over the periphery of Rome, gliding over construction sites where the housing boom of the late 1950's is happening before our eyes. Here, in Naples, we will not have a flying statue of Jesus, but, as we learn, a Rolls Royce that carries a man pretending to be San Gennaro. And if Jesus is substituted by an impersonation of San Gennaro, then Rome is substituted by a postcard vision of Naples, the beauty of it seen by an outsider. With this opening, Sorrentino challenges the antiquity of Rome by offering a panorama of

¹¹ The influence of Dante on Fellini is wide-reaching. See Fink 2004, 166-76; Iannucci 1998, 1993, and 1989; and Well 1993.

ancient Naples and its surrounding islands, the “new city” [nea-polis] whose ancient Greek origins mix Vergil, myth, and ancient Rome and Greece together.

È stata la mano di Dio then moves from the aerial panorama of the Bay of Naples, inspired by *La dolce vita*, to nighttime on the streets of Naples, where traffic is at a standstill. In this scene, the influence remains that of Fellini, but here it is 8½, not *La dolce vita*. Fellini’s film begins with a dream sequence: Guido Anselmi, whose audibly labored breath is caused by the risk of asphyxiation in his car, is in a traffic jam inside a tunnel in Rome. In the first scene of Sorrentino’s film, we move from close-ups of drivers stuck in traffic to a long line of women waiting for the 412 bus. The same Rolls Royce car which the camera tracked earlier pulls out in front of the line. A man who says he is San Gennaro takes Patrizia for a ride to explain how to get pregnant. He takes her to an abandoned palace where a *munaciello* gives Patrizia money as she bends over and is grabbed by San Gennaro between the legs, after which he announces that now she can get pregnant. This fantasy bears all the signs of Fellini’s influence. Yet this influence is heavily mediated with the icons and legends of Neapolitan culture, namely the legendary *munaciello*, and the contingencies and characters of Fabio’s fictional life.

This Fellinian vision is determined by the perspective of Zia Patrizia, whose grief over her infertility causes her to experience hallucinations and disassociations. While Saverio, Maria and Fabio try to help calm Patrizia’s husband, who swears that she is prostituting herself, Fabio asks: but what if she truly saw *u’ munaciello*? Saverio’s response to Fabio is simple: if you continue to spout this kind of nonsense, you’ll fail high school. Father and son laugh together, lightening the moment, transforming the pathos into levity. But Fabio’s question was not rhetorical: once she is hospitalized, Fabio will tell Patrizia that he believed that she had truly seen the *munaciello*. At the beginning of the film, Fabio’s vision of reality – like the director’s – can accommodate even the fantasies of Patrizia, his proclaimed muse. But it is his father, Saverio, who re-

minds his son that his ability to see reality clearly is linked to his education.

The association of erudition and the mediation of reality continues during a family meal in Agerola to meet the fiancée of Saverio's sister, Luisella. In a scene filled with banter, compliments, and insults – both well-intentioned jabs and mean-spirited insults – Maria and Saverio run the show. Fabio's parents embody a comic mode with distinctive styles – Maria is a jongleur, juggling oranges and taunting Donna Gentile, the matriarch of the residence. Said to be the meanest woman of Naples, the laconic Donna Gentile wears a fur coat in the middle of the summer, either crassly eating fresh mozzarella like Lucifer in furs, or sunning herself on the terrace while holding a large ring of keys, the despondent empress of her realm. It is the first echo of Dante's infernal vision, though in a decisively comic vein: Donna Gentile, like Lucifer, is more of a disgruntled presence than a menacing threat. As she herself says to Fabio, ogling her exposed legs while she naps, "Non mi guardare. Non c'è niente da guardare" ["Don't look at me. There is nothing to see"]. Donna Gentile is the harbinger of the infernal tragedy that will come at the midpoint of the film.

Meanwhile, Fabio and his cousin, Antonio, both teenagers, vaunt their ability to make sophisticated puns, performing their classical education. Fabio, participating in the degrading conversation about his single aunt, announces: "*Lucean carriere zitellesche innanzi, diceva il sommo poeta*". The source for Fabio's fanciful *battuta* is not the "sommo poeta", Dante, but Cavaradossi's aria from *Tosca*, "*E lucevan le stelle*", which he sings while awaiting his execution in Act Three. Thus, Fabio's remark is too complex as a rejoinder and falls flat. Only his father, Saverio, laughs, proudly saying: "Il ragazzo fa il liceo classico, non so se mi spiego" ["The boy goes to classical high school, if you get what I'm saying"]. Fabio's cousin, Antonio, who is on the lookout for Luisilla and her fiancée, sees no one and yells: "è il deserto dei tartari" ["it is the desert of the Tartars"], a reference to the title of a Dino Buzzati novel. Saverio looks impressed, and asks Fabio,

“Ma Antonio fa il liceo classico?” [But does Antonio go to classical high school too?], to which Fabio nods. For Saverio, the *liceo classico* appears to arm the younger generation with an erudite comic ammunition, earning his approval. The father himself will perform his own erudition of Neapolitan, and local, literary authority when he recites “S’io sapessi dicere” by Eduardo di Filippo (1900 to 1984) to Maria: “Al nome del mio grande amato Eduardo che qui dimorò, reciterò alla mia grande amata Maria, ‘S’io sapessi dicere’” [“In honor of my great and beloved poet who lived right there (as Saverio gestures towards the cliff), I will recite to my great and beloved Maria, “If I knew how to say”]. It is a moment that Fabio eagerly spoils yet again to show off his knowledge of Italian. When his corpulent aunt Luisilla dives into the water, he yells “calossi, calossi” [“she fell, she fell”], a literary tense of the past remote “si calò” [“sank”]. Again, such performances of erudition are not widely appreciated. As his brother Marchino says, “Il tuo liceo classico ti sta rovinando” [“Your classical high school is ruining you”].

If Fabio likes to wear his erudition proudly, it is a tradition that will serve him well once tragedy does strike the household. Before the tragic turn of the film occurs, Sorrentino will bring Fellini himself into the narrative, as a character who appears off-screen. Marchino does a *provino* [audition] for Fellini and does not get the part: his face is “too conventional”, the great director says. Afterwards, Marchino shares with his brother that he overheard Fellini say that cinema is not good for anything, but it distracts you from reality: “cinema non serve a niente, ma ti distrae [...] dalla realtà. La realtà è scadente” [“cinema isn’t useful for anything, but it is a distraction [...] from reality. Reality is lousy”]. With this pronouncement, the film turns to tragedy; a phone call in the middle of the night leads to Fabio’s newfound knowledge of his father’s longstanding extramarital affair, and to a difficult night in the Schisa household. Even if Maria, reverting to a comic mode, tries to juggle oranges to elevate her mood, she cannot forget her grief. To the pleasure of all the Schisa men, Maradona is acquired by Naples, and there is

a momentary reprieve from a sense of disappointment and imperfection in the film. Yet the sense of an idyllic family existence is marred again when their cousin, Geppino Lettieri, is arrested during Maradona's last game for Argentina.

È stata la mano di Dio alludes explicitly to Fellini's *oeuvre* at its beginning to pay homage to his cinematic father figure, and even incorporates him as a character into the plot. These references to Fellini as a man and as a director are an important part of the narrative and visual fabric of Fabio's coming of age; with Fabio we see the world through the magical realistic lens of Fellini's cinematography vis-à-vis his aunt Patrizia, and then, alongside his brother, Fabio learns that cinema is a means of distraction from the banality of reality, a mediocrity that is marked on Marchino's face. By the midpoint of the film, in other words, Sorrentino exposes the imperfections in his cinematic father figure's approach to seeing life. As increasing disappointments in his home and family evince, tragedy cannot be averted through fantasy.

3. "Poscia, più che 'l dolor poté 'l digiuno": Reversals of the Ugolino Episode

This is Fabio's brutal realization when his parents die of carbon monoxide poisoning in Roccaraso. To mediate that singular tragedy, the film turns to quotations of Dante, namely the Ugolino episode in *Inferno* 33. Before spending their first and only night in their new country home, Maria interrupts Fabio while he studies, inviting him to join them. However, Napoli will play against Empoli, and Fabio cannot miss the game. Maria reminds him that there are gnocchi in the refrigerator. Fabio humorously responds: "Poscia, più che 'l dolor poté 'l digiuno" ["Then fasting had more power than grief"], the last line of Ugolino's monologue (*Inf.* 33.75). Maria responds: "Io certe volte non ti capisco a mamma" ["Sometimes I don't understand you"]. She is unwilling to entertain such sophisticated quotations of Dante. It is a comic moment, but these last words exchanged between mother and son, be-

fore the parents die of asphyxiation in their new home, achieve an important narrative function. In this first quotation of Dante, Fabio ventriloquizes Ugolino in a comic mode: he will die from hunger, he says to his mother, who tells him where the food is. Little does Fabio know that he has inadvertently inverted the parent-child relationship through this quotation: if he is Ugolino, his mother, who will not let him starve, is the one who will die.

Fabio further identifies with Ugolino when he is frozen in his grief at his parents' funeral, evoking the treacherous soul who has turned to stone. At the funeral, his aunt Luisina asks him, "Perché non piangi a zia? Piangi che ti fa bene" ["Why don't you cry? Crying will help you"]. To which Fabio responds, "E se non piangi di che pianger suoli?", another direct quotation from *Inferno* 33, yet this time from Ugolino's direct address to Dante the pilgrim: "Ben se' crudel, se tu già non ti duoli / pensando ciò che 'l mio cor s'annunziava; / e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?" ["You are cruel indeed, thinking what my heart / foretold, if you remain untouched by grief, / and if you weep not, what can make you weep?"] (*Inf.* 33.40-42).¹² Fabio ventriloquizes Ugolino's words a second time, yet he is not Ugolino; the words seem mockingly intended for himself, as a poetic rephrasing of his Aunt Luisina's words, since he is the one unable to weep at his parents' tragic funeral.

A third quotation of the *Commedia* arises in this funeral scene, though with a different *persona*: Donna Gentile. Hearing this quotation from the *Commedia*, Donna Gentile, our first parodic infernal figure in the film, is inspired to speak to Fabio and to share in this tragic language of grief. She proudly recites the inscription to the Gate of Hell: "Per me si va nella città dolente / per me si va ne l'eterno dolore / per me si va tra la perduta gente" ["Through me the way to the city of woe, / through me the way to everlasting pain, / through me the way among the lost"] (*Inf.* 3.1-3). She smiles modestly afterwards and walks away in silence. Donna Gentile – Lady "Kindness" –

¹² Alighieri 2000.

has joined in Fabio's performance of Dantean erudition. In another sense, however, having given voice to the first-person inscription on the Gate of Hell, she is the embodiment of hell itself.

This is the final quotation from the *Inferno*, though it is at the other end of the canticle from the Ugolino passage. In a narrative inversion, the film proceeds from the bottom of Hell to its entrance. Likewise, as the film evolves, Sorrentino will not let the narrative become a tragedy: from Fabio's first sexual encounter with the Baronessa Focale, to his escapades with a new friend, the smuggler Armando, in Naples, Capri and Stromboli, Fabio begins to look towards a future as an orphan. The trope of Ugolino does not leave the film, however. As Fabio attempts to articulate his loss to other characters he encounters, the presence of Dante shifts from the citation of verses from the *Inferno* to the visual evocation of infernal and purgatorial topography in the Neapolitan natural and urban landscapes shown by Sorrentino.

The film thus engages in a strategic appropriation of the *Commedia* first as the poetic language of tragedy in dialogue and then as the visual language of hell and purgatory. This is first evident in Fabio's excursion to Capri with Armando in the Grotta Azzurra, immersed in the ice-blue waters to his chin, where he declares: "Io sono orfano" ["I am an orphan"]. Mirroring Ugolino, frozen to his neck in the zone of Lake Cocytus, known as Antenora, Fabio declares his identity. Yet here, too, there is an inversion. If Ugolino was imprisoned with his children and grandchildren, in whose faces he saw his own reflection, then Fabio's tragedy is that of absence, his pain from not seeing his parents' disfigured faces after their death. As he yelled at the hospital in Roccaraso where his parents were taken: "Dovete farmeli vedere! Fatemeli vedere!" ["You have to let me see them! Let me see them!"]. He wants to see them, but he is denied the last viewing of his parents because of their disfiguration.

These textual inversions become visual inversions in the last scenes of the movie. Neapolitan filmmaker Antonio Capuano films a scene in the Galleria Vittorio Emma-

nuele, with a man suspended upside down inside the dome, a film which Fabio also watches in the theater. Like Lucifer, whose body is inverted in the center of Hell, this image evokes the depths of Dante's Hell, namely the ninth circle, and continues to be evoked in images and dialogue for the next several sequences. Fabio visits his friend Armando in prison, where he is, like Dante's Ugolino, with his next of kin, as both his mother and father are there, too. As an additional reminder that Fabio is not Armando, nor is he Ugolino, Armando reminds his friend that he is free: "Però sei libero. Libero! Non te lo scordare" ["You are free. Free! Don't forget it!"].

The final transformation of Fabio away from this tragedy occurs in his encounter with Neapolitan director Antonio Capuano. Fabio chases after Capuano as he takes off from a fatuous theatrical production of "Salome". Fabio tells Capuano that ever since his family has met with tragedy, that he doesn't like life, but wants another one, an imaginary one. Reality is lousy ["La realtà è scadente"]. Much to Capuano's visible disapproval, Fabio says that he wants to make films. They descend into an underground well at Marechiaro, a *pozzo infernale* only 2.5 kilometers away from the Parco Virgiliano. These are clear geographical and visual coordinates reminding us again of the ninth circle of Dante's hell and of the journey which the pilgrim undertakes with his guide, Vergil.

Capuano has questions for the would-be director: do you have pain? Do you have hope? All these ingredients are not enough, Capuano says, you must have fun to make films:

CAPUANO

Cosa mi hai raccontato? Un dolore?

No, tu non tieni nessuno dolore.

Tu tien' 'na speranza! Ma la speranza fa fare film consolatori.

La speranza è una trappola.

FABIETTO

Mi hanno lasciato solo, Capuano.

E questo si chiama dolore.

CAPUANO

Non basta, Schisa. C'hann' lasciat'
soli a tutt' quant'! Sei solo?
M'pass' p'o' cazz'! Perché non sei
originale. Sient' a me: dimenticati
il dolore e piènza a t'diverti.
Accussì hai fatto 'o cinema.¹³

[CAPUANO

What did you tell me? Your pain?
No, that's not pain. That's hope!
But hope only makes for comforting
films. Hope is a trap.

FABIETTO

They left me all alone, Capuano.
That's real pain.

CAPUANO

It's not enough, Schisa.
Everybody's been left all alone! So
you're alone? Well, bust my ass!
You're hardly unique. Listen to me,
kid: forget about your pain and
think about having fun. Then you'll
have done cinema.¹⁴]

Cinema is made after forgetting pain, Capuano says. Fabio claims that he will go to Rome, and Capuano is equally disapproving, gesturing towards the beauty of Naples with the rising sun:

CAPUANO

Però 'e tenè coccos' 'a ricère.
'A tien' coccos' a ricère, Schisa?
Perché la fantasia, la creatività,
sono falsi miti. Nùn servono a nu cazz'!

[*Fabietto, dalla spiaggia, balbetta.*]

¹³ Sorrentino 2020, 109.

¹⁴ Sorrentino 2020, Trans. Jewiss, 112.

FABIETTO

Non lo so se ho qualcosa da dire.
Come si fa a capire?

CAPUANO

Boh! Che cazz' 'n sacc'!
Io teng' quattro cose 'a ricère.
Solo quattro. Tu?

FABIETTO

Non lo so, pensavo di andare a Roma
a fare il cinema, così capisco se
ci sono tagliato.

CAPUANO

Roma? La fuga? So' palliativi 'ro
cazz'! Alla fine torni sempre a te,
Schisa. E torni qua! Torni al
fallimento. Perché è tutto un
fallimento. Tutto una cacata! 'E
capit'? Nessuno inganna il proprio
fallimento. E nessuno se ne va
veramente da 'sta città.

[Capuano si tuffa, fa un paio di bracciate. Riemerge e dice.]

CAPUANO (CONT'D)

A Roma? Gesù! C' cazz' ci vai a fa'
a Roma? Solo 'e strunz' vann' a
Roma, ma hai visto quanti cose 'a
raccuntà c'stanno int' a sta città?

[E con un gesto ampio del braccio gli suggerisce di guardarsi intorno. Fabetto segue il gesto della mano di Capuano e ora, da qui, può abbracciare, con uno sguardo solo, tutta la città. Sta spuntando l'alba e, adesso, Napoli è la città più bella del mondo. Capuano, per metà in acqua, lo fissa e gli urla.]

CAPUANO (CONT'D)

E' mai possibile che sta città nùn
t'fa venì in mente niente 'a
raccuntà?¹⁵

¹⁵ Sorrentino 2020, 110.

[CAPUANO

You have to have something to say.
You got anything to say, Schisa?
Because fantasy, creativity,
they're nothing but false myths.
They're not fucking good for anything!

[Fabietto, standing on the beach, stammers.]

FABIETTO

I don't know if I have anything to say.
How am I supposed to know?

CAPUANO

Uff! How the fuck do I know!
Me, I've got four things to say.
Only four. You?

FABIETTO

I don't know, I thought I'd go to
Rome, do some cinema, that way I'd
figure out if I'm cut out for it.

CAPUANO

Rome? The great escape? A fucking
stopgap! In the end you always come
back to yourself, Schisa.

You come back here. Back to your
failure. Because everything's
a failure.

It's all shit! Understand?

No one escapes his failure. And no
one ever really escapes this city.

*[Capuano dives in, takes a couple of strokes. He sur-
faces again and says.]*

CAPUANO (CONT'D)

Rome? Jesus! What the fuck are you
going to do in Rome? Only assholes
go to Rome, have you seen how many
things there are to tell in this city?

*[He gestures broadly, inviting Fabietto to look around.
Fabietto follows Capuano's sweeping gesture. Now,
standing here, he embraces the entire city with his eyes.]*

Dawn is breaking. In this moment, Naples is the most beautiful city in the world. Capuano, standing waist-deep in the water, looks at him and shouts.]

CAPUANO (CONT'D)

Is it really possible that this city doesn't offer you anything to say?¹⁶

When Capuano asks: "Is it possible that this city doesn't inspire you to say anything?", the camera moves with the gesture of Capuano, here identified as a sort of Fabio's Vergil, who indicates the sun, rising over Vesuvius, a new Mt. Purgatory. He admonishes Fabio, "Don't you have something to say?" Agitated, Fabio yells: "Quando sono morti, non me li hanno fatti vedere" ["When my parents died, they didn't let me see them"]. Capuano tells Fabio to hold himself together, not to go to Rome, but to make films with him in Naples. Then the director dives into the water and swims across the bay, seemingly towards Mt. Purgatory.

The art of Dantean citation thus ends. Naples wins the championship. His sister, Daniela, comes out of the bathroom. And Fabio leaves for Rome, passing by Mario, the Baroness, Zia Patrizia, who gives him a D battery for his Walkman. But not before he hears his parents' whistling, and sees the *munaciello* at the train station, who waves goodbye to him.

In conclusion, the language of Dante in Sorrentino's film is at once the language of tragedy and the language of comedy. As the Baronessa Focale says, humanity is horrible ["l'umanità è orrenda"]. Maria, in typical comic style, rejoins: "a me nessuno ha detto niente!" ["Nobody told me anything!"]. More seriously, Baronessa Focale squarely locates the film in Aristotle's definition of comedy, where humanity is shown with its flaws, but where the conclusion is not tragic. Sorrentino brings this together here with Dante's "comedic" vision, one which evokes the memories of tragedy and weaves them into its

¹⁶ Sorrentino 2020, English Script, 112-13.

dialogue. But if Sorrentino's protagonist cites Dante in moments of grief, it does not reflect his authentic voice. Only his crude, simple declaration – “they didn't let me see them” – is his real voice. Fabio's maturing self, that of the filmmaker, sees Hell, but also Purgatory, in this Neapolitan landscape, blending the Dantean worlds of the afterlife into the life of his city in a visual language. Just like the *munaciello* who waves to him from the train stop, Dante and Fellini are simply part of the landscape.

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. 2000. *Inferno* Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, trans. New York, NY, Doubleday.
- Andrew, Dudley. 1984. *Concepts in Film Theory*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Braida, Antonella and Luisa Calé. 2007. *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*. London, Ashgate.
- Eisner, Martin. 2021. *Dante's New Life of the Book: A Philology of World Literature*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Fink, Guido. 2004. "Non Senti Come Tutto Questo Ti Assomiglia?": Fellini's Infernal Circles". In Iannucci 2004, 166-75.
- Gragnotati, Manuele, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, eds. 2013. *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Berlin, Verlag Turia & Kant.
- Havely, Nick. 2014. *Dante's British Public: Readers and Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Havely, Nick and Jonathan Katz, eds. with Richard Cooper. 2021. *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*. Cambridge, Legenda.
- Iannucci, Amilcare A., ed. 2004. *Dante, Cinema and Television*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- _____. 1998. "From Dante's *Inferno* to *Dante's Peak*: The Influence of Dante on Film". *Forum Italicum* 32.1: 5-35.
- _____. 1993. "Dante Produces Television". *Lectura Dan-tis* 13: 32-46.
- _____. 1989. "Dante, Television and Education". *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 10: 1-33.
- Kirkham, Victoria. 2004. "The Off-Screen Landscape: Dante's Ravenna and Antonioni's *Red Desert*". In Iannucci 2004, 106-28.
- Marcus, Millicent. 1983. *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Mariani, Annachiara, ed. 2021. *Paolo Sorrentino's Cinema and Television*. Chicago, Intellect.
- Olson, Kristina M. 2013. "Dante's Urban American Vernacular: Sadow Birk's *Divine Comedy*". *Dante Studies* 131: 143-69.
- Orr, Christopher. 1984. "The Discourse on Adaptation". *Wide Angle* 6.2: 72-76.
- Rentschler, Eric, ed. 1986. *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*. New York-London, Routledge.
- Rossini, Antonio. 2017. *Palinsesti danteschi. Riscrivere la Commedia, da Garibaldi all'era del digitale*. Lanciano, Carabba, 2017.
- Sorrentino, Paolo. 2020. *È stata la mano di Dio*. Italian Screenplay. <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Hand-of-God-Italian-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>
- _____. 2020. *The Hand of God*. Trans. Virginia Jewiss. English Screenplay. <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Hand-of-God-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>
- _____. 2021. *È stata la mano di Dio*.
- Vickers, Nancy. 1995. "Dante in the Video Decade". In *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*. Theodore J. Cachey Jr, ed. Notre Dame and London, University of Notre Dame Press, 263-76.
- Welle, John. 1993. "Fellini's Use of Dante in *La dolce vita*". In *Perspectives on Federico Fellini*. Peter Bondanella and Cristina Degli-Esposti, eds. New York, G.K. Hall, 110-18.
- Williams, Raymond. 1966. *Modern Tragedy*. London, Vintage Books.

“L’INVENTARE NON È ALTRO CHE
UN VERO TROVARE”. EARLY MODERN
(AND MODERN) ECHOES IN ELENA
FERRANTE’S WRITING

Ambra Moroncini and Olivia Santovetti*

Italy is perhaps unique among the European nations in defining its origins culturally and artistically rather than politically. It is thus historically significant that, since such foundational works as Dante’s *Comedy* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Italian culture has displayed a close association with the characteristics of what we now call realism: namely, verisimilitude and the depiction of everyday life.¹

In *Realismo e letteratura* [*Realism and Literature*] (2007) Federico Bertoni reflects that if Roberto Rossellini defined the realism of Neorealism merely as “the artistic form of truth”, this is because under the multiple definitions of realism one can recognize, *à la* Jakobson, “a bottomless sack into which everything and anything could be conveniently hidden away”.² Because of such a magical power of receiving any idea of exploration and mimesis of the world, the truth represented in literature, as well as in film, may be enriched with original and hybrid perspectives. Yet, as Alessandro Manzoni famously pon-

* This is a co-authored chapter throughout. Moroncini and Santovetti wish to express undying gratitude to each other for the enriching intellectual challenge experimented during this process of collaborative writing.

¹ Hennessey *et al.* 2017, 281.

² Bertoni 2007, 363 and 27.

dered, is it right to entrust fictional writing with the task of telling the truth? At the same time, would it be possible, as 16th-century historian Francesco Guicciardini warned, that historians might let themselves be so deceived by “words”, which are drawn into the domain of appearance and deception, that they would lose knowledge of “things”?³ Is it therefore possible to apply to the field of literature Hayden White’s considerations on meta-historical narration, and recognise that literary realism may be “narrative as a form”?⁴ Following an early modern (and modern) approach, this chapter aims to explore the literary representation of truth through the lenses of the fictional writing pursued by the most successful contemporary Italian novelist, that is, Elena Ferrante, pen name of a writer whose identity is only known to ‘her’ publisher. A literary voice in Italy since 1992, when her first novel, *L’amore molesto* [*Troubling Love*], was shortlisted for the prestigious *Strega* literary prize award, and then adapted into a film (in 1995) by the Italian director Mario Martone, Elena Ferrante became a global phenomenon thanks to her Neapolitan Quartet of *L’amica geniale* [*My Brilliant Friend*] (2011-14), translated into English (2012-15) by Ann Goldstein for Europa Edition, and now adapted on screen and theatre performances.⁵ In a country like Italy, “where male-dominated journalism, publishing, and academia deny visibility to women writers, despite a long stream of extraordinary women of letters”,⁶ it is not of marginal sig-

³ See Manzoni 2000, and the following pages on this essay. For Francesco Guicciardini’s stance on historical judgement, see Tarsi 2022.

⁴ See White 1973, 1987 and 1999.

⁵ For an expert account of Ferrante’s literary and cultural significance today, see Milkova 2021. See also de Rogatis 2018, and the critical and interdisciplinary attention given to Ferrante’s works in the essays edited by Russo Bullaro and Love (2016), and by de Rogatis (2016). Pertinent insights may also be found in Geue 2017. For translation strategies when screen-shaping Ferrante’s storytelling for a wider audience, see Gambaro 2021; Cordisco and De Meo 2022, and De Francisci 2023.

⁶ de Rogatis 2016b.

nificance that Ferrante, whatever her real gender, has chosen to adopt the pen name of a woman. Looking at thematic and narrative constructs shared with Giovanni Boccaccio, rightly hailed as “the pioneer of socially conscious vernacular literary realism”,⁷ as well as with the 17th-century forgotten voice of Arcangela Tarabotti, and alongside modern echoes from Alessandro Manzoni, we intend to shed light on the literary truth released by Ferrante’s fictional female subjectivity through an emblematic case-study: the patriarchal tyranny in Italian literature.

1. Unmasking the truth by ‘translating’ historical reality into literary narration

“There is no mistaking the fact” – Eric Auerbach underlines – “that Dante’s work was the first to lay open the panorama of the common and multiplex world of human reality [...] and in a language which does justice both to the sensory aspect of phenomena and to their multiple and ordered interpretation”.⁸ Nonetheless, as is well known, the text that has had the greatest influence on the western storytelling tradition is Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1348-1353), variously described as a human comedy of the socio-political world of late medieval Italy, or a mercantile epic, and even “a repository of artful, erotic enterprises”.⁹ A human domain, the latter one, “centred on phenomena and emotions which Dante would not have deigned to touch”,¹⁰ though it is precisely Boccaccio’s concepts of reason, genius, and nature, within the same social literary engagement inaugurated by Dante’s *Commedia*, that locate him as a cultural mediator with the modern era. Most significantly, Boccaccio’s revolutionary *ars narrandi*, which makes use of a representation of reality that is “true to life and natural”,¹¹ paved the way to modern literary realism, so much so that Auerbach himself ac-

⁷ Leavitt 2016, 136.

⁸ Auerbach 2013, 220.

⁹ Armstrong *et al.*, 2015, 3.

¹⁰ Auerbach 2013, 220.

¹¹ Auerbach 2013, 206.

corded to the author of the *Decameron*, albeit with a biased discussion on the treatment of “the problematic or tragic”, a primary role in advancing literary mimesis in western literature.¹² Mostly set in Florence and Naples, but also in Venice, Palermo, and other surrounding regions, revealing Boccaccio’s own familiarity with those settings and their social worlds, some *novelle* also take the reader to Britain, Crete, Cyprus, Corfu, Portugal, Turkey, Paris, the Holy Land, and even as far as northern China. Yet, as Stephen Milner accurately points out, “despite such geographical range, what the *novelle* have in common is a shared concern with communicative practice and the dynamics of social interaction and verbal exchange within and between the various speech communities imagined”, making the *Decameron* a sort of “performative rather than a constative text, embedded in the verbal and communicative practices that characterized the oral and textual cultures of late medieval Italy”.¹³

¹² When Auerbach (2013, 231) states that Boccaccio’s realism, “which is free, rich, and assured in its mastery of phenomena, which is completely natural within the limits of the intermediate style, becomes weak and superficial as soon as the problematic or the tragic is touched upon”, one wonders where the German critic’s reasons rest for unduly ignoring the pathos of tales such as the ones of Ghismonda (4.1), or of Federigo Alberighi (5.9), but also of the very tragic story of the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, especially considering that Boccaccio’s lady Fiammetta has been rightly regarded as “an Emma Bovary *ante litteram*”. On this latter point, see Banella 2021, 257. On Boccaccio’s *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* as the first “psychological novel” in Italian literature see Giusti 2006. On the primary role accorded to Boccaccio in advancing literary mimesis in western literature, see De Sanctis 1958, 1:313-84, and De Sanctis 1968, 1:290-359; as well as Auerbach 2013, 206 and 216. See also Hennessey *et al.* 2017; Steinberg 2017; Forni 2016, 43-54; Forni 1996 and 1995; Olson 2009; Ascoli 1991-92. Among the many, and most recent worthy studies on Boccaccio’s work and thought, we recommend Kriesel 2019; Armstrong *et al.*, 2015; Olson 2014; Eisner 2013; Paasche Grudin 2012; Foster Gittes, 2008.

¹³ Milner 2015, 83-84.

Boccaccio's attention to the "realistic, even gritty details of everyday life, everyday characters, and everyday language",¹⁴ may be considered the wellspring of Alessandro Manzoni's concept of the novel, insofar as the mimetic dialogue of dramatic inspiration was regarded by the author of *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] (1840-42) as the best technique of narrative realism because it guaranteed the author's impersonality. Most importantly, Manzoni strove toward a realistic poetics with a *summa* of stylistic registers, seeking to use "those words and those sentences [...] that moved from speech to writing without seeming base, and from writing to speech without seeming contrived".¹⁵ As Carlo Emilio Gadda outlined, Manzoni's concern was to distinguish and express the true concerns of souls in the real words:

Volle poi che il suo dire fosse quello che veramente ognun dice, ogni nato della sua molteplice terra, e non la roca trombazza d'un idioma impossibile, che nessuno parla [...] Egli volle parlare da uomo agli uomini, come, a lor modo, parlano tutti quelli che ebbero qualche cosa di non cretino da raccontare [...] Quello stesso amore per cui disegnò la figura purissima di una ragazza del popolo, sia pure un po' timida e ombrosa, lo condusse a sceverare e ad esprimere le cose vere delle anime con le vere parole che la stirpe mescolata e bizzarra usa nei suoi sogni, nei sorrisi e dolori.¹⁶

[He also wanted to make sure that what he said was what is truly said by everybody, everyone born in his multifarious land, and not the hoarse blaring of an

¹⁴ Steinberg 2017, 18.

¹⁵ "[Q]uelle parole e quelle frasi [...] che sono passate dal discorso negli scritti senza parervi basse, dagli scritti nel discorso senza parervi affettate; e sono generalmente e indifferentemente adoperate all'uno e all'altro uso". Manzoni 1970, 1:29. See also Moroncini 2017b, 168-75 in particular, as well as Santovetti 2007, 29-68.

¹⁶ Gadda 1991, 679-80. Emphasis added. Further use of italics to emphasize specific concepts will also be our intervention, unless stated otherwise.

impossible idiom which nobody speaks [...] He wanted to talk to men as a man, like all those who, in their own way, had something not stupid to say [...] The same love out of which he conceived of the ultra-pure figure of a common girl, albeit a little shy and tetchy, led him to distinguish and express the true concerns of souls in the real words that the jumbled, bizarre populace uses in its dreams, in its smiles and sorrows.^{17]}

Yet, while Boccaccio felt the need to defend the tales of his *Decameron* and his plain and low style of writing as consistent with facts, Manzoni was instead concerned that the plot of his novel could be interpreted by the reader as true, thereby corrupting the truth of historical facts. To defend the truthfulness of the accounts in his *Decameron*, Boccaccio produced a narrative theory of realism by combining a legal and literary notion of verisimilitude which imitates a juridical and notary one¹⁸; he inserted it in the Introduction to the tales of Day 4:

*Quegli che queste cose così non essere state dicono, avrei molto caro che essi recassero gli originali: li quali se a quel che io scrivo discordanti fossero, giusta direi la lor riprensione e d'amendar me stesso m'ingegnerei; ma infino che altro che parole non apparisce, io gli lascerò con la loro opinione, seguendo la mia, di loro dicendo quello che essi di me dicono (§ 39).*¹⁹

[I should be very grateful if those who say these accounts are inaccurate would produce the originals; then, if any writings were found to be at fault, I would say my critics were right and would make every effort to correct my versions; but while they produce nothing but assertions, I shall leave them with their

¹⁷ Translations ours. Further translations of citations will also be ours unless stated otherwise.

¹⁸ Steinberg (2017) argues that Boccaccio's celebrated realism in the *Decameron* responds to the prominence of verisimilitude in legal contexts in his time.

¹⁹ Boccaccio 1980, 469.

opinion and myself with mine, and say of them what they say of me.²⁰

Manzoni, on the other hand, who in the introduction to his novel used what Umberto Eco defined as “artificial dialogism”,²¹ that is, informed the reader that he had used a (fictional) 17th-century manuscript and archival sources to substantiate the truth of his narrative prose, spent years reflecting on whether it was right to entrust a literary work resulting from invention with the task of telling a historical truth. At the same time, however, he painfully mulled over the issue of historical reality in historiography:

*Ma, potrà qui forse opporre qualcheduno, s’ottiene egli codesto [il vero positivo] dalla storia? Produce essa una serie d’assentimenti risoluti e ragionevoli? O non lascia spesso ingannati quelli che sono facili a credere, e dubbiosi quelli che sono inclinati a riflettere?*²²

[*But, it may be asked, can we actually get this positive truth out of history? Does history really create in its reader a succession of unproblematic and rational beliefs? Or does it not often leave the credulous deceived and the more reflective in doubt?*²³]

Even the 16th-century historiographer Francesco Guicciardini, as mentioned in our introduction, reflecting on “words” and “things” hinted at “the folly of historical judgement”, going so far as “to mock the fallaciousness of human reasoning in its claim to give definitive judgment upon uncertain things”.²⁴ It is literature, then – Manzoni eventually pondered – that offers the perfect artistic platform where the truth that transcends facts into words may be found, as he asserted in the dialogue *Dell’Invenzione* (1850), one of his last writings:

²⁰ Boccaccio 2008, 239-40.

²¹ Eco 2006, 213.

²² Manzoni 2000, 15.

²³ Manzoni 1984, 73.

²⁴ See Tarsi 2022, 107-08, and 101, where Guicciardini’s citation (from his *History of Italy*, Book 9.11) is quoted.

Intanto, abbiamo riconosciuta e messa in sicuro la verità, che serve al nostro assunto. *L'inventare non è altro che un vero trovare.*²⁵

[Meanwhile we have recognized and assured the truth, which supports our assertion. *By inventing the author does nothing but find the truth.*]

Manzoni's considerations call to mind what Hayden White would examine over a century later: "if we view narration and narrativity as the instruments with which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it".²⁶ Yet, he adds:

What would a non-narrative representation of historical reality look like? In answering this question, we do not necessarily arrive at a solution to the problem of the nature of narrative, but we do begin to catch a glimpse of the basis for the appeal of narrativity as a form for the representation of events constructed to be real rather than imaginary.²⁷

Manzoni's conclusive concept that literary fiction seems to be made purposely to always tell the truth, if relevant attention is given to the semiotics of the everyday, is at the heart of Elena Ferrante's novelistic writing. Across all her novels, though masterfully in her Neapolitan Quartet,²⁸ she exploits the rich semiotic potentials of both the Italian language and Neapolitan dialect as verbal choices of her characters to highlight the social and cul-

²⁵ Manzoni 2004, 207.

²⁶ White 1987, 4.

²⁷ White 1987, 4.

²⁸ Here, references to the four volumes of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet and to their English translation will be given with the following abbreviations: AG = *L'amica geniale* (2011); MBF = *My Brilliant Friend* (2012); SNC = *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2012); SNN = *Story of a New Name* (2013); SFR = *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2013); TLS = *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014); SBP = *Storia della bambina perduta* (2014); SLC = *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015).

tural conflicts that drive the realism of her narrative. As the author herself is keen to emphasize:

La finzione letteraria mi pare fatta apposta per dire sempre la verità [...] quando si scrive non bisogna mai mentire. Nella finzione letteraria è necessario essere sinceri fino all'insostenibile, pena la vacuità delle pagine. È probabile che separare nettamente ciò che siamo nella vita da ciò che siamo quando scriviamo aiuti a tenere a bada l'autocensura [...] La verità letteraria non è fondata su nessun patto autobiografico o giornalistico o giuridico. [...] La verità letteraria è la verità sprigionata esclusivamente dalla parola ben utilizzata. [...] Gli autori, in quanto autori, abitano dentro i loro libri. Li si mostrano con la massima verità. E i buoni lettori lo sanno da sempre.²⁹

[Literary fiction seems to me made purposely to always tell the truth [...] when one writes one must never lie. In literary fiction you have to be sincere to the point where it's unbearable, where you suffer the emptiness of the pages. It seems likely that making a clear separation between what we are when we write helps keep self-censorship at bay [...] Literary truth isn't founded on any autobiographical or journalistic or legal agreement [...] Literary truth is the truth released exclusively by words used well. [...] Authors, as authors, live in their books. It's where they appear most truthfully. And good readers have always known it.³⁰]

What is more, Ferrante asserts that the reason why a 'truthful' novel is never an autobiography is because "fiction, when it works, is more charged with truth":

I quattro volumi dell'*Amica geniale* sono la mia storia, certo, ma solo nel senso che sono stata io ad assegnarle la forma del romanzo e a usare le mie esperienze di vita per nutrire di verità l'invenzione letteraria. Se avessi voluto raccontare i fatti miei, avrei stabilito un altro tipo di patto col lettore, gli avrei segnalato che si trattava di un'autobiografia. Non ho

²⁹ Ferrante 2016, 70, 75, 252, 317. For a comprehensive study on Ferrante and metanarrative, see Santovetti 2018.

³⁰ Ferrante 2016b, 75, 80, 261, 327.

scelto la via autobiografica né la sceglierò in seguito, perché sono convinta che *la finzione se ben lavorata, è più carica di verità*.³¹

[The four volumes of the Neapolitan novels are my story, yes, but only in the sense that I am the one who has given it in the form of a novel and used my life experiences to inject truth into literary invention. If I had wanted to recount my own story, I would have established a different pact with the reader, I would have signalled that I was writing an autobiography. I have not chosen the path of autobiography, nor will I choose it in the future, *because I am convinced that fiction, when it works, is more charged with truth*.³²]

But let us now elaborate the shared truthful “things” that Boccaccio, Manzoni, and Ferrante put into “words” by exploring how Ferrante’s Lila may be perceived as the true genealogical ‘sister’ of Boccaccio’s Ghismonda.

2. The longstanding theme of patriarchal tyranny in Italian literature: Ghismonda, Gertrude, Lila³³

The unceasing scholarly debate on Boccaccio’s work before and after the *Decameron* – specifically with regard to the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (1343-44), the *Corbaccio* (1355 ca), and *De Mulieribus Claris* (1361-62) – as well as on the *Decameron*’s entire narrative framework and on its individual *novelle*, has offered valuable studies

³¹ Ferrante 2016a, 341.

³² Ferrante 2016b, 351.

³³ Although the resistance narrative of women in their daily struggle with the patriarchy has been a contemporary recurring theme in Italian feminist writing since Sibilla Aleramo’s *Una donna* [*A woman*] (1906), and notably exposed by the work of the feminist collective *Rivolta Femminile*, as well as by Elsa Morante, Oriana Fallaci, Goliarda Sapienza, Dacia Maraini, and, more recently, by Donatella di Pietrantonio, among others, we have limited our analysis to the discourse set by our title. For critical insights into *Rivolta Femminile*, see, in this volume, Carlotta Moro’s essay.

on Boccaccio's proto or pseudo-feminist stance.³⁴ This issue, however, may not be easily assessed, especially with regard to his masterpiece, given that in his 100 tales both men and women have a resilient voice and excel in virtue. Additionally, Boccaccio's *novelle* are often contradictory concerning the message they convey: it suffices to consider the proto-feminist tales of Ginevra (II. 9), Bartolomea (II.10), Giletta (III.9), and Philippa (VI. 7), compared to tales of domestic violence and psychological abuse we find in some *novelle* in Day 8, Day 9 and Day 10, Griselda's tale being the most enigmatic of all.³⁵

In the context of our discourse, the Boccaccio *novella* which draws our attention to the longstanding theme of patriarchal tyranny in Italian literature is a tale originally seen as an "aesthetically flawed" story, then as having "a distinctly incestuous cast", and, more recently, as a tale to be linked to Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, which is seen to supply "not only the emotional colour to Tancredi's wayward character but also the main contours of the peculiar father-child dynamic".³⁶ We are referring to the first *novella* of Day 4, which exposes the cruel conduct of Tancredi, Prince of Salerno, and the courageous stance of his only daughter, Ghismonda, supremely higher in moral status to her possessive father, though powerless to save her lover, a young page, from patriarchal rules and violence

³⁴ See Stillinger and Psaki 2006, and Migiel 2015. See also Psaki 2000; Barolini 2006; Franklin 2006; Olson 2011-12; Baxter 2017 and 2014; Richardson 2017; Moroncini 2017, 306-12.

³⁵ For expert critical insights on male authority and domestic violence in the *Decameron*, see Migiel 2003, 147-59, and Ferme 2015, 137-60.

³⁶ Gittes 2020, 28. See also Almansi 2020, 33-157, where Moravia's (1963) initial discussion on Tancredi's incestuous desire is developed at length. Helpful critical insights may also be found in Mazzotta 1986, 131-58, and Forni 1992, 111-17. For a fascinating reading on Boccaccio's humanist strategy used to highlight the virtues of his erotic tales by contrasting them to the tragic stories of the *Decameron*, see Kriesel 2016.

(which is denounced by Boccaccio also in the tragic tale of Lisetta da Messina in *Dec.* 4.5).³⁷

Leaving aside the aforementioned rich critical debate surrounding this tale, the one important point we would like to draw attention to is that, even though Tancredi's cruel and violent behaviour appears to be made plain "in his old age" (4.1.3), as a matter of fact, the Prince of Salerno had always manifested an underlying consistency of behaviour in his selfish, male-controlled love towards his daughter, so much so that Ghismonda herself would reproach him for his lack of concern regarding her feelings and desire to get married, along with being influenced more by vulgar prejudice than by believing that love can be harboured for someone of humble status. Having been condemned by her father for crossing the boundaries of patriarchy by desiring a lover, and, even worse, by choosing "a youth of the lowest status", Ghismonda bravely defends her conduct against the hypocrisy of her father:

Per che, non come dolente femina o ripresa del suo fallo, ma come *non curante e valorosa*, con asciutto viso e aperto e da niuna parte turbato così al padre disse: "Tancredi, né a negare né a pregare son disposta, per ciò che né l'un ni varrebbe né l'altro voglio che mi vaglia; e oltre a ciò in niuno atto intendo di rendermi benivola la tua mansuetudine e 'l tuo amore: *ma, il vero confessando, prima con vere ragioni difender la fama mia e poi con fatti fortissimamente seguire la grandezza dell'animo mio. Egli è vero che io ho amato e amo Guiscardo, e quanto io viverò, che sarà poco, l'amerò, e se appresso la morte s'ama, non mi rimarrò d'amarlo: ma a questo non m'indusse tanto la mia fragilità, quanto la tua poca sollecitudine del maritarmi e la virtù di lui.* Esser ti dove, Tancredi, manifesto, essendo tu di carne, aver generate figliuola di carne e non di pietra o di ferro; e ricordar ti dovevi e dei, quantunque tu ora sie vecchio, chenti e quali e con che forza vengano le leggi della giovinezza. [...] La virtù primieramente noi, che tutti nascemmo e

³⁷ For a recent and thoughtful study of this *novella*, see Olson 2020.

nasciamo uguali, ne distinse; e quelli che di lei maggior parte avevano e adoperavano nobili furon detti, e il rimanente rimase non nobile. [...] Raguarda tra tutti i tuoi nobili uomini e essamina la lor vita, i lor costumi e le loro maniere, e d'altra parte quelle di Guiscardo raguarda: se tu vorrai senza animosità giudicare, tu dirai lui nobilissimo e questi tuoi nobili tutti esser villani. [...] *Or via, va con le femine a spander le lagrime*, e in crudelendo, con un medesimo colpo, se così ti par che meritato abbiamo, uccidi” (IV.1.31-33; 40-41; 45, emphasis added).³⁸

[And so, not like a woman grieving for her fault, but *like one bravely indifferent*, dry-eyed and with her face serenely clear of any sign of distress, she answered her father: “Tancredi, I am not disposed either to deny what you say or to beg forgiveness, because the first would be in vain and I have no wish for the second; furthermore, I do not mean in any way to appeal to your mild temper or your affection for me. *To be quite plain, I intend first to advance good reasons in defence of my integrity, and then to act bravely in accordance with the greatness of my soul. It is true that I have loved Guiscardo, that I still love him, and that I shall love him as long as I live (though that may not be very long); and it is true that, if people go on loving after death, I shall go on loving him even then. However, it was not feminine weakness which led me to feel like this, but rather your lack of concern with arranging a marriage for me, and also his manly virtue.* You should be well aware, Tancredi, since you are made of flesh and blood yourself, that the daughter you fathered is also flesh and blood and not made of stone or steel; you should have remembered, and you should still remember now, the laws which govern youth and how strong they are. [...] It is sheer worth that first made distinctions between human beings, who were born and still are born equal, and those who had most worth and acted worthily were called nobles, while the rest remained ignoble. [...] Consider the lives, the customs and the manners of your nobles, and then consider Guiscardo: if you judge impartially, you will decide that is most noble

³⁸ Boccaccio 1980, 478 and 482.

and those nobles of yours are all ignoble. [...] *Now go away to weep amongst the women*, and if you think that we deserve it, be cruel, and kill us both with the one blow".^{39]}

Opting to address her father as "Tancredi", she immediately draws a line of detachment in the father-daughter relationship, and carefully ponders her words to point out that his demeanour represents the opposite of the aristocratic principles he is trying to protect. What is more, Ghismonda deliberately, and quite brutally, challenges her father "at the practical level of sexual and amorous potency", so as to deliver "the final clinching insult"⁴⁰: *Now go away to weep amongst the women*. As Federico Sanguineti put it, with this tale Boccaccio offers the reader a realistic picture "of the self-destructive and hetero-destructive split of a hypocritical patriarchal authoritarian personality".⁴¹ Ghismonda's resolute, plain voice in condemning her father's despotism may certainly be seen as the existential alienation champion of progressive thought in the repressive age of 14th-century Italy, and this terrific confrontation is "made possible only by reconciling reality with fiction, history with literature", a concept that Eugenio Giusti highlighted when discussing the ideological shift in matters of love that Boccaccio proposed in his *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*.⁴²

After Boccaccio, as is well known, literary psychological and social reflections on paternal authority were distressingly revisited in the first half of the 17th century by Arcangela Tarabotti's socio-political treatise *La semplicità ingannata* [*Paternal Tyranny*],⁴³ where the "depravity" of a male society that legitimatises the self-interest of fathers

³⁹ Boccaccio 2008, 245-47.

⁴⁰ Almansi 2020, 149.

⁴¹ "[D]ella scissione, autodistruttiva e eterodistruttiva, di un'ipocrita personalità autoritaria patriarcale". Sanguineti 2007, 12.

⁴² Giusti 2006, 82. See also Grundin and Grundin 2012, 55-65.

⁴³ Arcangela Tarabotti's first book, originally titled *La tirannia paterna*, appeared under the anagram Galerana Baratotti and posthumously, in 1654, as *La semplicità ingannata*. See Tarabotti 2004 and 2007, as well as Costa-Zalessow 2001.

who force their young daughters into convents in order to preserve their patrimony is condemned in very strong terms, as evinced by the following excerpt:

Non poteva la malizia degli uomini inventar la più enorme sceleratezza, che quella d'opponersi immediatamente alle determinazioni di Dio, che dovrebbero esser irrefragabili, e pur eglino, con azzioni interessate, non cessano giornalmente di violarle. Fra tali eccessi di colpe, tiene il primo luogo l'ardire di coloro che con pregiudizio del libero arbitrio da Sua Divina Maestà concesso tanto ai maschi quanto alle femine, con pretesti in apparenza santi, ma in realtà malvagi, chiudono con inganno forzatamente fra quattro mura d'un monastero le semplice donne, facendole in perpetuo abitatrici d'una prigione, benché ree non d'altra colpa che d'esser nate di sesso più delicato.⁴⁴

[Men's depravity could not have devised a more heinous crime than the wanton defiance of God's inviolable decrees. Yet day in and day out, men never cease defying them by deeds dictated by self-interest. Among their blameworthy excesses, pride of place must go to enclosing innocent women within convent walls under apparently holy (but really wicked) pretexts. Men dare to endanger free will, bestowed on men and women alike by the Divine Majesty, they force women to dwell in life-long prisons, although guilty of no fault other than being born the weaker sex.⁴⁵]

Tarabotti's firm criticism against those fathers responsible for inflicting violence to the wills of their own daughters is even more explicit when she quotes Dante's verses from *Paradiso* VIII (142-148) in support of her denunciation at such human wickedness:

Ma voi tiranni d'Averno, aborti di natura, cristiani di nome e diavoli d'operazioni, pretendete d'esser partecipi della divina volontà all'ora che vivamente l'offendete. [...] Ben l'intese Dante, che co' seguenti

⁴⁴ Tarabotti 2007, 178-79.

⁴⁵ Tarabotti 2004, 43.

versi sgridava la follia di quei padri che violentavano il genio de' figliuoli:

E se 'l mondo la giù ponesse mente
al fondamento che natura pone,
seguendo lui avria buona la gente;
ma voi torcete alla religione
tal, che fu nato a cingersi la spada,
e fate re di tal ch'è da sermone.
Onde la traccia vostra è fuor di strada.⁴⁶

[But you, you are tyrants from Hell, monster of nature, Christians in name, and devils in deeds. You presume to take part in executing God's will at the very moment you deeply offend it. [...] Dante understood this well, in the following verses he denounced the folly of fathers who abused the natural inclination of their sons:

But if the world below would set its mind
on the foundation Nature lays as base
to follow, it would have its people worthy.
But you twist to religion one whose birth
made him more fit to gird a sword, and make
a king of one more fit for something,
So that the track you take is off the road.^{47]}

We should now point out that echoes from Tarabotti's autobiographical writing, along with resonances from the real-life experience of Maria Virginia de Leyva,⁴⁸ inspired Alessandro Manzoni's fictional episode of Gertrude's *monacazione forzata* [forced claustration] in chapters IX and X of his *I promessi sposi*. Indeed, Gertrude's character seems to us the perfect narrative link between Boccaccio's Ghismonda and Ferrante's Lila within the truthful discourse of fictional female subjectivity we have undertaken, as we will show.

Manzoni describes Gertrude – whose condition had been settled by her father even before her birth, and who grew up with dolls clothed like nuns as the first toys that were put into her hands – as tormented with confused ideas of duties, and spending her days and months “in incessant vicissitude of feelings” in her attempts to resist her father's will to enter the cloister:

⁴⁶ Tarabotti 2007, 210-11.

⁴⁷ Tarabotti 2004, 58-59.

⁴⁸ See Marchi 1993 and Oriani 2003.

L'infelice, sopraffatta da terrori confusi, e compresa da una confusa idea di doveri, s'immaginava che la sua ripugnanza al chiostro, e la resistenza all'insinuazioni de' suoi maggiori, nella scelta dello stato, fossero una colpa; e prometteva in cuor suo d'espirla, chiudendosi volontariamente nel chiostro. [...] Con tutto ciò la supplica (al vicario delle monache) non era forse ancor giunta al suo destino, che Gertrude s'era già pentita d'averla sottoscritta. Si pentiva poi d'essersi pentita, passando così i giorni e i mesi in un'incessante vicenda di sentimenti contrari.⁴⁹

[The unhappy girl was tormented with superstitious dread, and, filled with a confused idea of duties, imagined her repugnance to the cloister to be a crime which could only be expiated by her voluntary dedication. [...] The petition however, had scarcely been sent to its destination, when Gertrude repented of having written it; she then repented of this repentance, passing months in incessant vicissitude of feelings.⁵⁰]

The reader also learns that Gertrude's attempt of crossing the boundaries imposed by her paternal authority made her feel guilty and unworthy:

I parenti eran seri, tristi, burberi con lei, senza mai dirne il perché. Si vedeva solamente che la riguardavano come una rea, come un'indegna: un anatema misterioso pareva che pesasse sopra di lei, e la segregasse dalla famiglia, lasciandovela soltanto unita quanto bisognava per farle sentire la sua suggezione.⁵¹

[Her parents and family, with the usual artful policy in such cases, maintained a perfect silence with regard to the subject of her meditations; they regarded her with looks of contemptuous pity, and appeared to avoid all conversations with her, as if she had rendered herself unworthy of it.⁵²]

In the end, however, fear of disobeying her father managed to deprive her defiance:

⁴⁹ Manzoni 2003, 158-60.

⁵⁰ Manzoni 1834, 110-11.

⁵¹ Manzoni 2003, 161.

⁵² Manzoni 1834, 112.

Il buon prete cominciò allora a interrogarla, nella forma prescritta dalle regole. “Sente lei in cuor suo una libera, spontanea risoluzione di farsi monaca? Non sono state adoperate minacce, o lusinghe? Non s'è fatto uso di nessuna autorità, per indurla a questo? Parli senza riguardi, e con sincerità, a un uomo il cui dovere è di conoscere la sua vera volontà, per impedire che non le venga usata violenza in nessun modo”. *La vera risposta a una tale domanda s'affacciò subito alla mente di Gertrude, con un'evidenza terribile*. Per dare quella risposta, bisognava venire a una spiegazione, dire di che era stata minacciata, raccontare una storia... L'infelice rifuggì spaventata da questa idea; *cercò in fretta un'altra risposta; ne trovò una sola che potesse liberarla presto e sicuramente da quel supplizio, la più contraria al vero*. “*Mi fo monaca*”, disse, nascondendo il suo turbamento, “*mi fo monaca, di mio genio, liberamente*”.⁵³

[The good priest then began to interrogate her in the form prescribed. “Do you feel in your heart a free spontaneous resolution to become a nun? Have menaces, or allurements, or authority been made use of? Speak without reserve to one whose duty it is to ascertain the true state of your feelings, and to prevent violence being done to them. *The true reply to such a question presented itself suddenly to the mind of Gertrude, with terrible reality*. But to come to an explanation, to say she was threatened, to relate the unfortunate story – from this her spirit shrank, and she brought herself to the resolution of saying, “*I become a nun, freely, from inclination*”.⁵⁴]

This feeling of disquiet, of grief and simultaneously of loss of self-control, experienced by women like Manzoni's Gertrude when trying to *smarginare*, that is, crossing the boundaries imposed by patriarchy, has been described by Elena Ferrante as *frantumaglia*. It is a Neapolitan word, Ferrante explains, used by her mother to designate a form of physical and mental condition when “she was racked

⁵³ Manzoni 2003, 180.

⁵⁴ Manzoni 1834, 123.

by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart”, just like Gertrude felt:

Mia madre mi ha lasciato un vocabolo del suo dialetto che usava per dire come si sentiva quando *era tirata di qua e di là da impressioni contraddittorie che la laceravano*. Diceva che aveva dentro una *frantumaglia*. La frantumaglia (lei pronunciava frantumaglia) la deprimeva. A volte le dava capogiri, le causava un sapore di ferro in bocca. Era la parola per un malessere non altrimenti definibile [...] La frantumaglia è l'effetto del senso di perdita, quando si ha la certezza che tutto ciò che ci sembra stabile, duraturo, un ancoraggio per la nostra vita, andrà a unirsi presto a quel paesaggio di detriti che ci pare di vedere.⁵⁵

[My mother left me a word in her dialect that she used to describe how she felt when *she was racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart*. She said that inside her she had a *frantumaglia*, a jumble of fragments. The frantumaglia (she pronounced it frantumaglia) depressed her. Sometimes it made her dizzy, sometimes it made her mouth taste like iron. It was the word for a disquiet not otherwise definable. [...] The frantumaglia is an effect of the sense of loss, when we are sure that everything that seems to us stable, lasting, an anchor for our life, will soon join that landscape of debris that we seem to see.^{56]}

It is a female malaise that contains “an entire feminine *psychical-corporeal-spatial* landscape”,⁵⁷ and that is at the heart of Ferrante’s female characters, particularly noticeable in Amalia (*Troubling Love*), and superbly rendered by Lila (*My Brilliant Friend*), as we shall see. It has been explained by Ferrante as a consequence of the feeling of guilt that women experience when failing to respect limits drawn around them by patriarchal cultures:

La storia delle donne negli ultimi cento anni è fondata sul *rischiosissimo* “*passare il limite*” imposto dalle culture patriarcali. I risultati sono straordinari

⁵⁵ Ferrante 2016, 94-95.

⁵⁶ Ferrante 2016b, 99-100.

⁵⁷ Milkova 2021, 4.

in tutti i campi. Ma la forza con cui ci vogliono riportare nelle vecchie frontiere non è meno straordinaria. [...] *Intorno alle donne si continuano a tracciare perimetri, e parlo delle donne in generale. Niente di male se si trattasse di una autoregolamentazione. Il problema è che non solo i limiti sono fissati da altri, ma noi stesse, se non li rispettiamo, ci sentiamo in colpa.* Lo sconfinamento maschile non comporta automaticamente un giudizio negativo, è in linea di massima segno di curiosità, di audacia. Lo sconfinamento femminile ancora oggi, specialmente se non si compie sotto la guida o il comando di uomini, disorienta: è [considerato] perdita di femminilità, è eccesso, è perversione, è malattia [...] *l'ho visto in mia madre, in me, in non poche amiche. Sperimentiamo troppi vincoli che strozzano desideri e ambizioni.* Il mondo contemporaneo ci sottopone a pressioni che a volte non riusciamo a sopportare.⁵⁸

[The history of women in the past hundred years is based on the *very dangerous* “crossing of the boundary” imposed by patriarchal cultures. The results have been extraordinary in all fields. But the force with which they want to carry us back inside the old borders is no less extraordinary. [...] *Limits are still drawn around women* – I’m talking about women in general. This isn’t a problem if one is dealing with self-regulation: it’s important to set limits for oneself. *The problem is that we live within limits set by others, and we feel guilty when we fail to respect them.* Male boundary-breaking does not automatically entail negative judgments; it’s a sign of curiosity and courage. Female boundary-breaking, especially when it is not undertaken under the guidance or supervision of men, is still disorienting it is [considered] loss of femininity, it is excess, perversion, disease [...] *I have seen it in my mother, in myself, in many women friends. We experience too many bonds that choke our desires and ambitions.* The modern world subjects us to pressures that at times we are unable to beat.⁵⁹]

⁵⁸ Ferrante 2016, 316 and 339-40

⁵⁹ Ferrante 2016b, 326; 349-50.

In Ferrante's *Troubling Love*, Delia, Amalia's daughter – who had left Naples for Rome to forget the violent and abusive environment of her childhood and returned to her native city only after the mysterious death of her mother – remembers that her good-looking mother had to walk the streets with her head down and passively receive obscenities shouted at her in Neapolitan language. Most upsettingly, however, she recalls that her violent father, a failed painter who “ruined her mother's life” and “never helped her to be happy”,⁶⁰ had always been jealous of Amalia, so much so that her mother used to wear shabby clothes, not necessarily because of poverty, but mainly out of the habit of not making herself attractive to appease [her] husband's jealousy.⁶¹ Amalia was not allowed to *smarginare*, not even with a laugh:

Mio padre non sopportava che ridesse. Considerava la risata di lei d'una sonorità d'occasione, visibilmente falsa. Tutte le volte che c'era qualche estraneo per casa (ad esempio, i figuri che comparivano a scadenze fisse per commissionargli scugnizzi, zingare, o vesuvi con pino), le raccomandava: “Non ridere”. Quella risata gli sembrava uno zucchero sparso ad arte per umiliarlo. In realtà Amalia cercava solo di dare suono alle donne d'apparenza felice fotografate o disegnate sui manifesti o sulle riviste degli anni Quaranta: bocca larga dipinta, tutte denti scintillanti, sguardo vivace. Era così che si immaginava di essere, e si era data la risata giusta. Le doveva esser stato difficile scegliersi il riso, le voci, i gesti che il marito potesse tollerare. Non si sapeva mai cosa andava bene e cosa no. [...] A mio padre niente di Amalia era mai sembrato innocente. Lui, così furibondo, così astioso e insieme così desideroso di piacere, così rissoso e così innamorato di sé, non sapeva accettare che lei intratte-

⁶⁰ Ferrante 1999, 145 and Ferrante 2006, 119

⁶¹ “Amalia, che si era sempre vestita di stracci per povertà ma anche per l'abitudine a non rendersi piacente, acquisita molti decenni prima per placare la gelosia di mio padre”. Ferrante 1999, 30-31 and Ferrante 2006, 28.

*nessa col mondo un rapporto amichevole, a volte gioioso.*⁶²

[*My father couldn't bear her laugh. He thought that her laugh had a recycled, patently false resonance. Whenever there was a stranger in the house (for example the men who appeared at certain intervals to commission street urchins, Gypsies, or the classic Vesuvio with pine tree), he warned her: "Don't laugh". That laugh seemed to him added on purpose to humiliate him. In reality Amalia was only trying to give voices to the happy-looking women photographed or drawn on the posters and in the magazines of the forties: wide painted mouth, sparkling teeth, lively gaze. She imagined herself like that, and had found the appropriate laugh [...] It must have been difficult for her to choose the laugh, the voice, the gestures that her husband could tolerate. You never knew what was all right. To my father nothing about Amalia seemed innocent. He, so furious, so bitter and yet so eager for pleasure, so irascible and so egotistical, couldn't bear that she had a friendly, at times even joyful, relationship with the world.*⁶³]

The reader learns that Amalia's attempts to resist her domestic subjugation by enjoying "a friendly relationship with the world" were constantly, either violently or abusively, suppressed by her husband, even after she left him. That Amalia was suffering from *frantumaglia* caused by her inability to *smarginare* is not difficult to discern, indeed she suffered from frequent headaches,⁶⁴ Mrs De Riso, Amalia's neighbour, reveals to Delia when they are both trying to figure out what caused her inexplicable death.

In *My Brilliant Friend*, although *smarginatura* is first experienced by Lenù upon losing her doll and going to see Don Achille, which was "prohibited",⁶⁵ it is however Lila, Lenù's soulmate but also her severest confidant, that, just

⁶² Ferrante 1999, 120-22.

⁶³ Ferrante 2006, 99-100.

⁶⁴ "Aveva sempre mal di testa". Ferrante 1999, 45, and Ferrante 2006, 39.

⁶⁵ *AG*: 23-27 and 60-63; *MBF* 27-31 and 64-67.

like Manzoni's Gertrude, experienced all her life a constant adjustment of her emotional state due to the overwhelming authority of her father (who even prohibited her to continue her adored studies), but also because of her controlling brother and of her possessive husband, along with the threatening presence of the Solara brothers, the gangsters of her Neapolitan neighbourhood. Lila's feeling of disquiet between absolute determination to act and terrifying moments in which her "features were crippled by anguish", is poignantly described by Lenù in the final novel of the Neapolitan Quartet:

Avevo paura, oh sì, ero spaventatissima. Ma con mia grande meraviglia non ero spaventata quanto Lila. [...] non assomigliava nemmeno un poco all'amica che pochi minuti prima avevo invidiato per come sapeva selezionare le parole ad arte, *non le assomigliava nemmeno nei lineamenti, che erano storpiati dall'angoscia.* [...] *Esclamò che aveva dovuto sempre faticare per convincersi che la vita aveva margini robusti perché sapeva fin da piccolo che non era così – non era assolutamente così*⁶⁶ – [...] Parlò a lungo. È stata la prima e l'ultima volta in cui ha cercato di chiarirmi il sentimento del mondo dentro cui si muoveva.⁶⁷

[I was afraid, yes, I was terrified. But to my great amazement I wasn't as frightened as Lila. [...] she bore almost no resemblance to the friend who a few minutes before I had envied for her ability to choose words deliberately; *there was no resemblance even in the features, disfigured by anguish.* [...]. *She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that – it was absolutely not like that* – [...] She spoke for a long time. It was the first and last time she tried to explain to me the feeling of the world she moved in.⁶⁸]

⁶⁶ *non era assolutamente così* appears in italics in the novel.

⁶⁷ SBP, 160, 162.

⁶⁸ SLC, 173-74, 176.

For a moment, the reader has the impression that Lila is similar to a postmodern heroine suffering from paranoia, that is, dreading “that someone else is patterning your life” and will “rob you of your autonomy of thought and action”⁶⁹ – a condition, in fact, that is not only post-modern, at least not for women, as we have seen. Yet, throughout the four novels of *My Brilliant Friend* Lila boasts the same emotional strength as Ghismonda did when she paid the price for exceeding the bounds placed on her by a male-authored system. Indeed, the aforementioned words *non curante* and *valorosa*, used by Boccaccio to describe her heroine’s proud stance against her cruel and hypocritical father, may be applied to Lila in many episodes, but particularly when, during her honeymoon, she realises that her husband Stefano, just like her brother and her father, is nothing but “a shit man”:

Non mi voglio calmare, gridò, *strunz*, riportami subito a casa mia, quello che hai detto adesso lo devi ripetere davanti a quegli altri due uomini di merda. E solo quando pronunciò quell’espressione in dialetto, *uommen’e mmerd*, si accorse di aver spezzato la barriera dei toni compassati di suo marito. Un attimo dopo Stefano la colpì in faccia con la mano robusta, *uno schiaffo violentissimo che le sembrò un’esplosione di verità*.[...] Tu non ti chiami più Cerullo. Tu sei la signora Carracci e devi fare quello che ti dico io. [...] Non è mai stato Stefano, le parve all’improvviso di scoprire, è sempre stato il figlio grande di don Achille.⁷⁰

[I don’t want to calm down, she shouted, *you piece of shit*, take me home right now, repeat what you just said in *front of those two other shit men*. And only when uttered that expression in dialect, *shit men*, *uommen’e mmerd*, did she notice that she had broken the barrier of her husband’s measured tones. A second afterward Stefano struck her in the face with his strong hand, *a violent slap that seemed to her an explosion of truth* [...] Your name is no longer Cerullo.

⁶⁹ Lewis 2011, 176.

⁷⁰ SNC, 33-34, 41.

You are Signora Carracci and you must do as I say.
 [...] He was never Stefano, she seemed to discover
 suddenly, he was always the oldest son of Don
 Achille.^{71]}

The *violent slap* that *seemed to Lila like an explosion of truth* captures magnifically Ferrante's belief that "literary truth is the truth released exclusively by words used well".⁷² Lila was beaten by her husband for telling the truth after being deceived by him and by her father and brother. Not dissimilarly to Ghismonda, though less tragically, she was punished for having crossed the border imposed on women by patriarchal culture. Additionally, and here lies Ferrante's fiercely feminist view on patriarchy, that same night Lila was also raped by her husband. Anna Koedt, Carla Lonzi, Kate Millet and Susan Brownmiller's considerations on sex as instrument of power – already *in nuce* in Boccaccio's representation of Tancredi's "incestuous" desire for Ghismonda⁷³ – could not be clearer.⁷⁴ Still, and once again like a 21st-century Ghismonda, Lila chooses to "erase herself" not to surrender to patriarchy: she mutilates the giant photograph of herself in her wedding dress, that same giant image that her husband, brother, and the Solara mobsters wanted to hang in their shoe shop at the heart of the elegant Neapolitan square. Why is this erasure liberating for Lila? It becomes clear when she confesses to her best friend Lenù her attempt to resist being a subsidiary emanation of her husband. Lila

⁷¹ SNN, 33-34, 41

⁷² Ferrante 2016, 252, and Ferrante 2016b, 261.

⁷³ David Wallace observes that the incestuous overtones of Tancredi's affection for his daughter should be read as a personal extension of the prince's political power: "The hints of incestuous motivation that run through this novella [...] issue from the collapsing of the political into the personal that obtains in despotic regimes: Tancredi cannot bear to see another man share his daughter's affections because she is his only heir; a man who shared his daughter would threaten to share the power of the principedom that Tancredi, at present, uniquely embodies". Boccaccio 1991, 54.

⁷⁴ See Orsi 2019, especially 249.

and Lenù, then, will both embark on a journey to resist the society of “men who fabricate women”, as clearly evinced in the third volume of the Neapolitan Quartet, where Carla Lonzi’s *Sputiamo su Hegel* is cited by Lila’s best friend as an encouragement to a feminist awakening:

Lessi per primo, incuriosita dal titolo, un testo intitolato *Sputiamo su Hegel*. [...] Mi colpì ogni frase, ogni parola, e soprattutto la sfrontata libertà di pensiero. Sottolineai tantissime frasi con forza, segnai punti esclamativi, freghi verticali. *Sputare su Hegel. Sputare sulla cultura degli uomini*, sputare su Marx, su Engels, su Lenin. E sul materialismo storico. E su Freud. E sulla psicoanalisi e l’invidia del pene. *E sul matrimonio, sulla famiglia*. [...] *E su tutte le manifestazioni della cultura patriarcale*. [...] Deculturalizzarsi. [...] Strapparsi dal cervello l’inferiorità. Restituirsi a se stessi. [...] Liberarsi dalla sottomissione, qui, ora, in questo presente. L’autrice di quelle pagine si chiamava Carla Lonzi. [...] *Scoprivo dappertutto automi di donna fabbricati da maschi*. Di nostro non c’era nulla, quel poco che insorgeva diventava subito materia per la loro manifattura. [...] *È un dispiacere questa solitudine femminile delle teste, mi dicevo, è uno sciupio questo tagliarsi via l’una dall’altra senza protocolli, senza tradizione.*⁷⁵

[First, intrigued by the title, I read an essay entitled *We Spit on Hegel*. [...] Every sentence struck me, every word, and above all the bold freedom of thought. I forcefully underlined many of the sentences, I made exclamation points, vertical strokes. *Spit on Hegel. Spit on the culture of men*, spit on Marx, on Engels, on Lenin. And on historical materialism. And on Freud. And on psychoanalysis and penis envy. *And on marriage, on family*. [...] *And on all the manifestations of patriarchal culture*. And on all its institutional forms. Resist the waste of female intelligence. Deculturate. [...] Rip inferiority from our brains. Restore women to themselves. [...] Free oneself from subjection here, now, in this present. The author of those pages was called Carla Lonzi. [...] I discovered everywhere fe-

⁷⁵ SFR, 254-55, 323.

male automatons created by men. There was nothing of ourselves, and the little there was that rose up in protest immediately became material for their manufacturing. [...] *The solitude of women's minds is regrettable, I said to myself, it's a waste to be separated from each other, without procedures, without tradition*."^{76]}

In the Neapolitan Quartet, we can daringly construe, not dissimilarly from Boccaccio's Salerno, Ferrante's Naples assimilates a sort of topography of identity of female subjectivity resisting patriarchy. Such an important anti-patriarchal meaning, however, seems to have been betrayed by the TV Series adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, insofar as the home city of the powerful intellectual Airola family (into which Elena Greco, i.e. Lenù, marries), has questionably been located in Turin, that is the city from where the mature (and successful) Elena begins her story, rather than in Genoa, as set in the novel. As Stilianova has observed

Stabilire Torino quale luogo di abitazione degli Airola – e dunque anche la sede del loro potere intellettuale – vuol dire (dis)perdere l'energia emancipante che la città ha per Elena nei romanzi. Il trasferimento di Elena a Torino (alla casa simbolica dei suoceri) significa il suo ritorno all'ambito maschile e patriarcale.⁷⁷

[To make Turin the home city of the powerful Airola Family diminishes the independent role that the city has for Elena. By moving Elena back to the city of her in-laws underlines a return and submission to patriarchal power.]

Conclusive remarks

In February 2015, Italian journalist and writer Roberto Saviano, whose 2006 *Gomorra* became a landmark of the

⁷⁶ TLS, 280 and 354. For a comprehensive study on the theme of "erasure" as a form of resistance in Elena Ferrante's work, see Santovetti 2019.

⁷⁷ Milkova 2020. See also Milkova 2021, 131-164, and Gambaro 2021, 221-22.

new (political) literary realism,⁷⁸ nominated Ferrante's final novel of the Neapolitan Quartet, *Storia della bambina perduta* [*The Story of the Lost Child*], to the Strega prize.⁷⁹ He knew that even if Ferrante were to win Italy's highest literary prize, she would never come forward to accept it. Indeed, Ferrante made it clear since her literary debut in 1992 with *L'amore molesto* [*Troubling Love*], this too, as already mentioned, shortlisted for the *Strega*, that she is an author not interested in promotional publishing tours or in television appearances. She wants her work to speak for itself:

I miei libri non sono anonimi, hanno tanto di firma in copertina e non hanno mai avuto bisogno dell'anonimato. È successo semplicemente che li ho scritti e poi, sottraendomi alla prassi editoriale comune, li ho messi alla prova senza alcun patrocinio. Se qualcuno ha vinto, hanno vinto loro. [...] Si sono guadagnati il diritto di essere apprezzati dai lettori proprio in quanto libri.⁸⁰

[My books aren't written anonymously; they have a name on the cover, and have never needed anonymity. It happened simply that I wrote them, and then, avoiding common editorial practice, I put them to the test (of readership) without any protection. If there is a winner, they are the winners. [...] They have won the right to be appreciated by readers just as books.⁸¹]

Yet, even if perceived as an 'absent' author due to her anonymity, Elena Ferrante has become such a global contemporary literary 'presence' in virtue of her *mimesis*, where historicity and society reconcile with fiction "to always tell the truth"⁸² when narrating context-specific though universally relatable stories. Two conditions, however, must be recognised when asserting the truth within a literary landscape. Firstly, literary truth works

⁷⁸ Hennessey et al. 2017, 282.

⁷⁹ Saviano 2015.

⁸⁰ Ferrante 2016, 235.

⁸¹ Ferrante 2016b, 244.

⁸² See p. 67.

well when arises “from a profound crisis of illusions”, showing signs of “first-hand knowledge of the terror”⁸³ – this may clearly be evinced by the pain experienced by Ghismonda, Gertrude, and Lila in the act of *smarginare*, that is, when crossing boundaries while resisting patriarchy. Secondly, narrative invention brings with itself a metanarrative awareness that it is fiction, though, as Ferrante reminds us, “authors, as authors, live in their books. It’s where they appear most truthfully”.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ferrante 2016b, 373.

⁸⁴ See p. 67.

Works Cited

- Almansi, Guido. 2020. *The Writer as a Liar. Narrative Technique in the Decameron*. London-Boston, Routledge.
- Armstrong, Guyda, Rhiannon Daniels and Steve Milner, eds. 2015. *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ascoli, Albert Russell. 1991-92. "Boccaccio's Auerbach: Holding the Mirror up to Mimesis". *Studi sul Boccaccio* 20: 377-97.
- Auerbach, Eric. 2013. *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Williard R. Trask, tr. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press.
- Banella, Laura. 2021. "Fiammetta and Héloïse: Boccaccio's Female Auctor and Women Intellectuals". *Mediaevalia* 42: 227-67.
- Barolini, Teodolinda. 2006. "Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron*". In *Dante and the Origin of Italian Literary Culture*. New York, Fordham University Press. 281-303.
- Baxter, Catherine. 2017. "'Niuna sì disonestà n'è, che, con onesti vocaboli dicendola, si disdica a alcuno': Turpilquium in Boccaccio's *Decameron*". *Heliotropia* 14: 181-201.
- _____. 2014. "'Galeotto fu la metafora': Language and sex in Boccaccio's *Decameron*". In *Sexualities, Textualities, Art and Music in Early Modern Italy: Playing with Boundaries*. Melanie L. Marshall, Linda L. Carrol and Katherine A. McIver, eds. London, Ashgate. 23-40.
- Bertoni, Federico. 2007. *Realismo e letteratura. Una storia possibile*. Torino, Einaudi.
- Boccaccio, Giovanni. 2008. *Decameron*. J. G. Nichols, tr. New York, Vintage.
- _____. 1991. *Decameron*. David Wallace, ed. and tr. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1980. *Decameron*. 2 vols. Vittore Branca, ed. Torino, Einaudi.
- Cordisco, Mikaela and Mariagrazia De Meo. 2022. "Subtling Neapolitan Dialect in *My Brilliant Friend*: Linguistic Choices and Sociocultural Implications in the

- Screen Adaptation of Elena Ferrante's Best-selling Novel". *Respectus Philologicus* 42.47: 125-40.
- Costa-Zalesow, Natalia, 2001. "Tarabotti's *La semplicità ingannata* and Its Twentieth-Century Interpreters, with Unpublished Documents Regarding Its Condemnation to the Index". *Italica* 78.3: 314-25.
- De Francisci, Enza. 2023. "Translating and Rewriting Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* at the National Theatre". *The Translator* 29.3: 281-96.
- de Rogatis, Tiziana. 2018. *Elena Ferrante. Parole chiave*. Rome, edizioni e/o.
- _____. ed. 2016. "Elena Ferrante. L'Amica geniale". *Allegoria* 73: 109-210.
- _____. 2016b. "Uncovering Elena Ferrante and the Importance of a Woman's Voice". *The Conversation*, October 5. <https://theconversation.com/uncovering-elen-a-ferrante-and-the-importance-of-a-womans-voice-66456>
- De Sanctis, Francesco. 1968. *History of Italian Literature*. Joan Redfern, tr. 2 vols. New York, Barnes & Noble.
- _____. 1958. *Storia della letteratura italiana*. 2 vols. Torino, Einaudi.
- Eco, Umberto. 2006. *On Literature*. Martin McLaughlin, tr. London, Vintage Books.
- Eisner, Martin. 2013. *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Ferme, Valerio. 2015. *Women, Enjoyment and the Defense of Virtue in Boccaccio's Decameron*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ferrante, Elena. 2016. *La frantumaglia. Nuova edizione ampliata*. Roma, edizioni e/o.
- _____. 2016b. *Frantumaglia. A Woman's Journey*. Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Edition.
- _____. 2015. *The Story of the Lost Child*. Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Edition.
- _____. 2014. *Storia della bambina perduta*. Roma, edizioni e/o.
- _____. 2014. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Edition.

- _____. 2013. *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*. Roma, edizioni e/o.
- _____. 2013. *Story of a New Name*. Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Edition.
- _____. 2012. *Storia del nuovo cognome*. Roma, edizioni e/o.
- _____. 2012. *My Brilliant Friend*. Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Edition.
- _____. 2011. *L'amica geniale*. Roma, edizioni e/o.
- _____. 2006. *Troubling Love*. Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Edition.
- _____. 1999. *L'amore molesto*. Roma, edizioni e/o.
- Forni, Pier Massimo. 1996. *Adventures in Speech: Rhetoric and Narration in Boccaccio's Decameron*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- _____. 1995. "Realtà/verità". In *Lessico critico decameriano*. Renzo Bragantini and Pier Massimo Forni, eds. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri. 300-19.
- _____. 1992. *Forme complesse nel Decameron*. Firenze, Leo S. Olschki.
- Foster Gittes, Tobias. 2020. "A questa tanto picciola vigilia de' vostri sensi": Senile Recidivism, Incest, and Egotism in *Decameron IV.I*". In *The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective*. Michael Sherberg, ed. Toronto-Buffalo-London, Toronto University Press. 22-44.
- _____. 2008. *Boccaccio's Naked Muse: Eros, Culture and the Mythopoeic Imagination*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Franklin, Margaret. 2006. *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*. Aldershot, Ashgate.
- Gadda, Carlo Emilio. 1991. "Apologia manzoniana". In *Saggi Giornali Favole e altri scritti*. Vol. 1. Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignoni and Dante Isella, eds. Milano, Garzanti. 679-87.
- Gambaro, Elisa. 2021. "The TV Series *My Brilliant Friend*: Screen-shaping Ferrante's Storytelling for a Wider Audience". *MLN* 136.1: 209-23.
- Geue, Tom. 2017. "Elena Ferrante as the Classics". *Amphora. Melbourne Historical Journal* 44.2: 1-32.

- Giusti, Eugenio. 2006. "Boccaccio's *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*: First Signs of an Ideological Shift". In Stillinger and Psaki 2006, 69-82.
- Hennessey, Brendan, Laurence E. Hooper and Charles L. Leavitt IV. 2017. "Realisms and Idealisms in Italian Culture, 1300-2017". *The Italianist* 37.3: 281-88.
- Kriesel, James C. 2019. *Boccaccio's Corpus. Allegory, Ethics, and Vernacularity*. Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press.
- _____. 2016. "Boccaccio and the Early Modern Reception of Tragedy". *Renaissance Quarterly* 69: 415-48.
- Leavitt IV, Charles. 2016. "Il realismo di un nuovissimo Medio Evo: Boccaccio in the Age of Neorealism". *Le tre Corone* 3: 135-56.
- Lewis, Barry. 2011. "Postmodernism and Fiction". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Stuart Sim, ed. London-New York, Routledge. 169-81.
- Manzoni, Alessandro. 2004. *Dell'invenzione e altri scritti filosofici*, Carlo Carena, fw.; Umberto Muratore, int.; Massimo Castaldi, ed. In *Edizione nazionale ed europea delle opere di Alessandro Manzoni*. Vol. 16. Milano, Centro nazionale studi manzoniani. 165-252.
- _____. 2003. *I promessi sposi*. Milano, Oscar Mondadori.
- _____. 2000. *Del romanzo storico, e in genere, de' componimenti misti di storia e d'invenzione*. Giovanni Macchia, fw.; Folco Portinari, int.; Silvia De Laude, ed. In *Edizione nazionale ed europea delle opere di Alessandro Manzoni*. Vol. 14.1. Milano, Centro nazionale studi manzoniani.
- _____. 1984. *On the Historical Novel*, Sandra Bermann, tr. Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press.
- _____. 1970. *Fermo e Lucia*. Cesare Federico Goffis, ed. 2 vols. Milano, Marzorati.
- _____. 1834. *The Betrothed. From the Italian of Alessandro Manzoni*. London, Richard Bentley.
- Marchi, Gian Paolo. 1993. *Per la Monaca di Monza e altre ricerche intorno a Manzoni*. Verona, Libreria editrice universitaria.
- Mazzotta, Giuseppe. 1986. *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

- Migiel, Marylin. 2015. "Boccaccio and Women". In Armstrong *et al.* 2015, 171-84.
- _____. 2003. *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*. Toronto-Buffalo-London, Toronto University Press.
- Milkova, Stiliana. 2020. "Non solo Napoli. Torino e il senso delle città nel ciclo de *L'Amica geniale* e oltre". *Stylo24*, 13 June, <https://www.stylo24.it/non-solo-napoli-torino-e-il-senso-delle-citta-nel-ciclo-de-lamica-geniale/>
- _____. 2021. *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*. New York-London, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Milner, Stephen. 2015. "Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the Semiotics of the Everyday". In Armstrong *et al.* 2015, 83-100.
- Moravia Alberto. 1963. *L'uomo come fine e altri saggi*. Milano, Bompiani. 65-87.
- Moroncini, Ambra. 2017. "Suggerzioni boccacciane ne *Gli Straccioni* di Annibal Caro". *Heliotropia* 14: 297-316.
- _____. 2017b. "From *The Count of Carmagnola* to *The Betrothed*: Alessandro Manzoni's pursuit of meta-historical realism". In *Staged Narratives / Narrative Stages*. Enrica Maria Ferrara and Cormac O'Cuilleánáin, eds. Firenze, Cesati. 157-79.
- Olson, Kristina. 2020. "The Tale of Lisabetta da Messina (IV.5)". In *The Decameron Fourth Day in Perspective*. Michael Sherberg, ed. Toronto-Buffalo-London, Toronto University Press. 86-106.
- _____. 2014. *Dante, Boccaccio and the Literature of History*. Toronto-Buffalo-London, University of Toronto Press.
- _____. 2011-12. "The Language of Women as Written by Men: Boccaccio, Dante and Gendered Histories of the Vernacular". *Heliotropia* 8-9: 51-78.
- _____. 2009. "Resurrecting Dante's Florence: Figural Realism in the *Decameron* and the *Esposizioni*". *MLN* 124.1: 45-65.
- Oriani, Mario. 2003. *Il convento dei delitti. La storia terribile e tragica della monaca di Monza tratta da Fermo e Lucia del Manzoni e dagli atti del processo a suor Virginia Maria De Leyva*. Milano, Orme Editore.

- Orsi, Marianna, 2019. "Femminismi nell'opera di Elena Ferrante". In *Femminismo e Femminismi nella letteratura italiana dall'Ottocento al XXI secolo*. Sandra Parmegiani and Michela Prevedello, eds. Firenze, Società Editrice Fiorentina. 245-66.
- Paasche Grudin, Michaela and Robert Grudin. 2012. *Boccaccio's Decameron and the Ciceronian Renaissance*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Psaki, Regina. 2000. "Women in the *Decameron*". In *Approaches to Teaching Boccaccio's Decameron*. James H. McGregor, ed. New York, Modern Language Association of America. 79-86.
- Richardson, Brian. 2017. "The *Corbaccio* and Boccaccio's Standing in Early Modern Europe". *Heliotropia* 14: 47-65.
- Russo Bullaro, Grace and Stephanie V. Love. eds. 2016. *The Works of Elena Ferrante. Reconfiguring the Margins*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanguineti, Federico. 2007. "Quarta giornata". *Heliotropia* 4: 1-19.
- Santovetti, Olivia. 2019. "Io non ci sto. Elena Ferrante, the Theme of Erasure and the *Smarginatura* as Poetics of Resistance". In *Resistance in Italian Culture from Dante to the 21st Century*. Ambra Moroncini, Darrow Schecter and Fabio Vighi, eds. Firenze, Cesati. 281-94.
- _____. 2018. "Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*". *Modern Language Review* 113.3: 527-45.
- _____. 2007. *Digression. A Narrative Strategy in the Italian Novel*, Bern, Peter Lang.
- Saviano, Roberto. 2015. "Cara Ferrante ti candido al premio Strega". *La Repubblica*, 21 February.
- Steinberg, Justin. 2017. "Mimesis on Trial: Legal and Literary Verisimilitude in Boccaccio's *Decameron*". *Representations* 139: 118-45.
- Stillinger, Thomas C. and Regina Psaki. 2006. *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*. Chapel Hill (NC), Annali d'Italianistica.
- Tarabotti, Aracangela. 2004. *Paternal Tyranny*. Letizia Pannizza, ed. Chicago-London, Chicago University Press.

- _____. 2007. *La semplicità ingannata*. Simona Bortot, ed., Daria Perocco, intro. Padova, Il Poligrafo.
- Tarsi, Maria Chiara. 2022. "On the Folly of Historical Judgement. Irony and Truth in *The History of Italy* by Francesco Guicciardini". In *Nudity and Folly in Italian Literature from Dante to Leopardi*. Simon Gilson and Ambra Moroncini, eds. Firenze, Cesati. 95-114.
- White, Hayden. 1999. *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- _____. 1987. *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- _____. 1973. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

TUTTO E “NIENTO”. LA *TRILOGIA DEGLI SCAROZZANTI* DI GIOVANNI TESTORI
COME RISCrittURA QUEER DI *HAMLET*
E *MACBETH* (E DI *EDIPO RE*)

Davide Dalmas

Giovanni Testori scrive il suo capolavoro, la *Trilogia degli Scarozzanti*, composta da *L'Ambletus* (1973), *Macbetho* (1974) e *Edipus* (1977),¹ partendo da testi di Shakespeare: *Hamlet* e *Macbeth* direttamente; altre opere in modo più nascosto, e attraverso un'attitudine *queer* all'arte dell'adattamento e dell'interpretazione.

È un testo massimalista, che si scatena vertiginosamente dal comico al tragico, dal basso corporeo allo spirituale; e che tocca tutti gli aspetti fondamentali – portati all'estremo – della vita umana: davvero ‘tutto’. Ma un tutto che è tanto più tale perché continuamente sfidato dal nulla, anzi dal “niento”, come scrive Lofelia nella sua straziante lettera a Ambleto, parzialmente riprendendo *Macbeth*:

Carissimo prenze,
la tua serva ha dezziduto de morire. T'ho amato in del troppo, Ambleto, e sempre senza nissuna corresponsione. T'ho amato 'me se ama el tutto che se vede, se tocca e che ce fa ingioire, senza neanca sàvere el perché. Anca se, 'desso, capisso che tu arevi rasòne; que-

¹ I tre testi separati sono stati tutti pubblicati da Rizzoli. L'edizione unitaria più recente è Testori 2021, da cui saranno tratte tutte le citazioni. Sulle rappresentazioni più recenti della *Trilogia*, cfr. Pernice 2021, 92-127. Cfr. anche Cascetta 1983, 94-118.

sto tutto è niente de àltero che un’ombria; forze è niente de àltero che el vero e proprio niento [...].²

Queste sono parole dette in un testo teatrale che si apre vicino alla bara di un padre: un testo che costruisce la propria straordinaria vitalità a partire da quella bara, da quella morte. Nello stesso periodo in cui elaborava gli Scarozzanti, facendo riferimento allo scomparto con la *Tentazione di sant’Antonio* del Polittico di Issenheim di Grünewald, Testori parlava dell’infimo che coincide “col superno, l’immondo con l’adamantino, la nefandezza con una perfezione e una lucentezza di forme quasi imperquisibile”, in modo tale da indicare non solo la grandezza irripetibile di Grünewald “ma altresì il deposito, lo scrigno, la caverna, il loculo, la bara di buio e di luce, d’affermatività e di negatività, che l’uomo nella sua storia è stato capace di costruirsi; un loculo, uno scrigno e una bara da cui non hanno ancora cessato di venirci appelli, inviti, paure, vertigini, grida e lacerazioni”. Si può già sentire qui il linguaggio delle antitesi e la necessità paolina dello scandalo, che rimanda ai contrasti espressionistici di estremi sperimentati nella *Trilogia*: “Una vergogna, insomma, che è come una gloria; una bestemmia che è come un trionfo: l’unica gloria, sembra dirci Grünewald, e l’unico trionfo che ci sono concessi”.³

Nella *Trilogia* Testori raggiunge una sorta di folle equilibrio che probabilmente non aveva mai raggiunto prima nella sua già lunga attività (sempre segnata, fin dalle origini, dalla presenza di Shakespeare), e che probabilmente rimarrà insuperato.⁴

² Testori 2021, 106. Per valutare le molteplici risonanze shakespeariane attivate da una frase come questa, cfr. Bigliazzi 2005, che considera *Macbeth* la tragedia con cui Shakespeare si spinge al limite estremo dell’esperienza del *nothing*.

³ Testori 1972, 10. Cfr. Taffon 1997, 52-54.

⁴ In seguito, molte delle sue opere – pur ritornando intorno ad alcune idee aspramente fondanti – avranno un carattere troppo unilaterale: “agisce ormai una spinta fideistica [...] a volte anche troppo didascalicamente e scopertamente dimostrata, pur con un flusso sotterraneo di contraddizioni”. Taffon 1997, 64.

1. In principio era Shakespeare

Shakespeare è probabilmente, tra le voci più influenti della prima modernità, quella più continuamente riscritta e riadattata.⁵ Negli anni degli *Scarozzanti*, ad esempio, Carmelo Bene⁶ gira e interpreta il film *Un Amleto di meno* (1973), dove Amleto non è particolarmente interessato alla sua parte e vorrebbe fuggire a Parigi con Kate, la prima attrice della compagnia dei teatranti arrivati a Elsinore.⁷ E l'anno prima Eugène Ionesco propone un *Macbett* che condivide con quello di Testori la convinzione che il teatro sia il luogo del "politico" per eccellenza e un certo sbilanciamento verso il grottesco ma con un rapporto col testo di partenza, con risultati e visione del teatro piuttosto diversi.⁸

Il teatro rimane la forma espressiva più importante per Testori, che pure ha attraversato tutti i generi, dal racconto al romanzo, dalla poesia al saggio⁹; e un ruolo di primo piano in questa primazia ha l'amore spesso dichiarato per *Amleto*, spinto fino ad affermare che la sua intera produzione teatrale ruota intorno al testo di Shakespeare.¹⁰ Anche dal punto di vista delle letture formative, "il primo è stato Shakespeare",¹¹ già intorno ai dodici anni, in modo non scolastico ma personale e appartato; e anche per quanto riguarda i tentativi di allestimenti teatrali, il primo risale al tempo

⁵ In particolare, per la parodia di *Amleto*, cfr. Manferlotti 2005.

⁶ Un decennio più tardi (1984) si ipotizzerà una collaborazione, non portata a termine, tra Bene e Testori per un *Adelchi*. Cfr. Mancini 2020, 168.

⁷ Cfr. Rimini 2002.

⁸ Cfr. Manferlotti 2013.

⁹ Cascetta 1995, 33.

¹⁰ Doninelli 2018, 90. È solo una delle tante dichiarazioni che si potrebbero richiamare. Ad esempio, in colloquio con Arbasino, "dopo un lungo errare, le preferenze tornano a essere quelle della giovinezza. Gli antichi; gli elisabettiani; Shakespeare, prima di tutto". Arbasino 2014, 470. Per una rassegna più esaustiva rimando a Rimini 2007, 9-17.

¹¹ Panzeri 2003, 23.

in cui, durante la guerra, eravamo sfollati in Valassina. Avevo già recitato qualche volta, ma il primo allestimento fu questo. Insieme con altri ragazzi che si trovavano lassù con me, formai una compagnia. Il programma era ambizioso: volevamo allestire l'*Amleto* di Shakespeare presso il santuario di Campoè, che si trova in mezzo ai boschi. La scena fu posta tra i due pilastri del cancello del santuario, con i fari di due automobili, dietro, che la illuminavano. Era piuttosto suggestivo, devo dire, nonostante la pochezza degli attori, soprattutto nella scena del funerale di Ofelia, che noi avevamo trasformato in una specie di processione. Con la resina degli alberi avevamo fatto delle torce, che demmo poi ai bambini della casa dei Martinitt lì vicina, a cui sarebbe andato l'incasso delle tre sere previste. Il cadavere di Ofelia veniva trasportato dal fondo della chiesa su una barella di fortuna, per cui gli spettatori videro avanzare questo corteo illuminato... Fu un successo.¹²

Si può dire che il percorso del "teatro di strada" degli *Scarozzanti*, influenzato anche dal carattere popolare delle processioni cristiane,¹³ inizia qui: dalla materna Valassina (il citato santuario di Campoè è una piccola chiesa che risale al Cinquecento, nel Triangolo lariano che è il cuore della geografia scarozzante) a Lomazzo, a sud di Como, dove trent'anni dopo (nel 1973) Testori li immagina,¹⁴ componendo tre drammi fortemente espressivi, in una lingua inventata per l'occasione, che scaturisce "da una sua peculiare visione, disancorata da ogni convenzione, formale e di significato, è una stratificazione o incastro o lotta tra lingua, anzi, lingue ufficiali [...] e dialetti, in particolare quelli lombardi, e più in specifico il brianzolo-milanese"¹⁵; o – come dice Raboni: una "lingua glo-

¹² Doninelli 1993, 43.

¹³ Bartalotta 2003, 191.

¹⁴ Il nome del paese richiama certamente anche il pittore e teorico seicentesco Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, anche poeta in 'facchinesco', la lingua dei facchini che arrivavano a Milano dalle valli ticinesi. Cfr. Lomazzo 1993.

¹⁵ Taffon 1997, 48-49.

riosamente e oscenamente viva, allestita con i resti di tutte le lingue morte o agonizzanti del mondo”.¹⁶

A differenza dei “tragedians of the city” (*Hamlet* 2.2) costretti a diventare itineranti dal cambiare delle mode, gli Scarozzanti sono sempre stati senza un soldo e fuori moda, lontano dallo scintillare della città:

La ditta de noi è povera; anzi povarissima, francese.
E te sei tombato in d’una compagnia de scarozzanti.
Anca in dei teatri delle parrocchie più piscine
hanno maggioretà de mezzi de noi.¹⁷

Così parla Lofelia, la versione scarozzante di Ophelia, un personaggio malinconico e elegiaco, sinceramente innamorata di Amleto e pronta ad aiutarlo nella sua inchiesta sui misteri delittuosi del potere, ma consapevole di non poter competere con il vero oggetto dell’amore del protagonista, appunto il Franzese. Questo personaggio che sostituisce, con importanza notevolmente maggiore, il personaggio di Horatius, è senza dubbio il più personale: poeta, angelo, amico-amante-figlio come si vedrà meglio in conclusione.¹⁸

¹⁶ Raboni 1996, xii. Cfr. D’Onghia 2017 per un approfondimento della lingua scarozzante, in particolare nei suoi debiti rispetto al modello di Ruzante, fondamentale per l’origine stessa della *Trilogia*. Nel racconto dello stesso Testori, infatti, tutto emerge ascoltando Franco Parenti: “Una sera lo vidi in teatro mentre recitava del Ruzante, e subito capii che aveva qualcosa in più. Ora, a me capita sempre, quando un attore mi conquista, una cosa strana: non sento più le parole che dice, ma comincio a sentirne altre – esattamente quelle che vorrei che dicesse. Tanti miei testi per il teatro nascono così, ossia da ciò che la voce e la consistenza di un attore suscitano in me. Così accadde mentre guardavo Parenti recitare il Ruzante. Mi dicevo: “Le sue parole *non sono quelle lì*, sono altre”. E di colpo cominciai a vederlo parlare in una lingua che, poi, sarebbe diventata quella dell’*Amleto*. Prima di uscire, andai da lui e gli dissi: “Franco, adesso so cosa devo scrivere per te”. Doninelli 1993, 63.

¹⁷ Testori 2021, 95-96.

¹⁸ Il personaggio è stato concepito per Alain Toubas (1938-2021), il “grande amore” di Testori, soggetto di molti suoi dipinti e

Amleto e *Macbetto* possono certamente essere considerati il punto più alto del rapporto di Testori con Shakespeare, anticipato di poco da una sceneggiatura per un film non realizzato su Amleto, per il quale Testori aveva già disegnato anche i costumi.¹⁹

Il dialogo con Shakespeare non finisce con la *Trilogia*, perché ancora nel 1983 Testori manda in scena un *Post-Hamlet*, dove Amleto non compare mai ma è continuamente evocato dal coro, da Orazio, dal Padre e dall'antagonista, un Totem-Re, emblema di un potere iper-razionale e tecnologico, anticorporeo e antireligioso.²⁰ Qui il rapporto padre-figlio è completamente ribaltato rispetto all'*Amleto* e il *Post-Amleto* finisce per identificarsi misticamente con Cristo messo in croce.

Più in generale, si può dire che la relazione di Testori con Shakespeare arrivi fino agli ultimi giorni di vita, nei quali dà ancora per l'ultima volta nuova voce a uno dei suoi personaggi: *Cleopatrà*, messa in scena tra l'altro da Sandro Lombardi, interprete anche di memorabili *Edipus* e *Amleto*.²¹ Questa estrema Cleopatra-(Giovanni) lamenta la perdita della vitalità; ricorda le feste natalizie, il panettone; il lago dove il suo amato Antonio faceva il surf; in breve, il suo intero regno d'Egitto che, in stile scaroz-

versi. Toubas ne è stato anche – con lo pseudonimo Alain Corot – il primo interprete, nella rappresentazione dell'*Amleto* del gennaio 1973 al Salone Pier Lombardo di Milano, con Franco Parenti nel ruolo del protagonista e con la regia di Andrée Ruth Shammah. Per il rapporto tra Amleto e il Francese si potrebbe rimandare a diverse altre opere di Testori, ad esempio a Eros e Lino dell'*Arialdà* (1960). Cfr. Doninelli 1993, 128: “cresce in me il bisogno di essere perdonato da un lato e, dall'altro, di trasformare questo stesso rapporto in un altro rapporto: di paternità, o, meglio, di paterna fraternità”.

¹⁹ Cfr. Testori 2002; un'analisi della sceneggiatura si può leggere in Rimini 2007, 19-49; per i costumi, cfr. anche Toubas 2003.

²⁰ Cfr. Taffon 1997, 126-28; Rimini 2007, 83-107.

²¹ Sull'*Amleto* (2001) di Federico Tiezzi e Sandro Lombardi, cfr. Pernice 2021, 92-107.

zante, si estende tra Como e Lecco. La prima rappresentazione fu nel 1994, quando Testori era già morto.²²

2. Macrotesto scarozzante

Quando scrive la *Trilogia degli scarozzanti* Testori è nei suoi cinquant'anni: ha già – tra le altre cose – concepito, scritto per cinque parti e poi abbandonato la serie narrativo-teatrale dei *Segreti di Milano*, una sorta di nuova *Comédie humaine* dell'Italia del Dopoguerra;²³ ha scritto intensamente sull'arte, in particolare sui suoi adorati pittori lombardi e piemontesi del Seicento, e ha già vissuto il successo e lo scandalo dell'*Arialda*, diretta da Luchino Visconti (che era stato ispirato dai *Segreti* di Testori per *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*), censurata nel 1960, con accuse di oscenità.²⁴

I tre testi vengono pubblicati come libri separatamente e messi in scena individualmente; ma ci sarà anche una rappresentazione unitaria, sempre al Salone Pier Lombardo, nella stagione 1977-78.²⁵A rigore, solo *L'Amleto*

²² Testori 1994. Sulla rappresentazione del 2015, per la regia di Mino Manni e con l'interpretazione di Marta Ossoli, cfr. Pernice 2021, 175-86.

²³ *Il ponte della Ghisolfia* (1958), *La Gilda del Mac Mahon* (1959), *La Maria Brasca* (1960), *L'Arialda* (1960), *Il Fabbricone* (1961); ora raccolti anche in Testori 2012.

²⁴ Cfr. Mazzocchi 2015. Sul ricco, complesso, affascinante rapporto con Visconti si può leggere ora la biografia critica che Testori gli dedica e poi ritira (ma non distrugge, come si pensava) nella ricchissima cura di Stefano Agosti, che mostra, tra l'altro, come il trattamento non favorevole subito da Alain Toubas sul set di *Ludwig* abbia provocato il creativo risentimento di Testori, “che non si limita solo alla mancata pubblicazione del ritratto di Visconti” ma porta anche alla scrittura, nella stessa “lingua dell'*Amleto*” (Testori 2022, 34-35) di testi ingiuriosi come una *Appendix oraziana* (abbiamo visto che il Franzese era il sostituto di Horatius) e un *Poema tafanario*. Cfr. anche Gallerani 2007, 71-79.

²⁵ Ricorda Testori: “nessuno ci voleva dare un teatro per fare questo primo testo della trilogia degli ‘Scarozzanti’, *L'Amleto*, e cercando tra i vecchi cinema in disuso, abbiamo trovato questo, in via Pier Lombardo. È nato così, tra contrasti occulti e

rappresenta pienamente il teatro degli scarozzanti, con tutta la dialettica tra l'attore che interpreta al tempo stesso il membro della compagnia (della “ditta dei dittanti”) e il personaggio di origine shakespeariana. Mentre *Edipus*, come vedremo, offre la grandiosa ed estrema celebrazione della fine di questo mondo, con l'ultimo rappresentante abbandonato dagli altri; e *Macbetto* va in una direzione un po' diversa, con l'aggiunta del coro e un diverso tipo di metateatralità, eppure è possibile leggerli insieme come un macrotesto. In questo caso si colgono davvero fino in fondo i confini del teatro: partendo da qualcosa che precede l'apertura stessa del sipario fino ad una chiusura che si offre come definitiva (“per sempris”):

E, 'desso, sarà sù el separtio, spireto del teatro. La tragedia è fenida; fenida è la triloghia; et anca la ditta dei dittanti.

Buonasira a tutti de me, l'unigo dei tanti che è rimasto. Pode dir incosi vuno che è dietro a crepare? Disaria de si se, cont la vose che ce resta, 'riva a specificare che la buonasira è per adesso et per sempris.²⁶

Anche coloristicamente, dal rosso scuro del sangue che la voce di *Ambleto* richiede prima di entrare in scena, si arriva al nero infernale della chiusa dell'*Edipus*. Passando attraverso il trascolorare di *Macbetto*, che inizia al tramonto: “Una luce livida e sinistra invade la scena”,²⁷ per poi trasformarsi sotto gli occhi del coro:

Intanto tutto, varda,
si fa viola,

palesi di tutta la cultura milanese. Allora non andava la libertà che ci prendevamo di uscire dalle istituzioni o di creare delle alternative alle istituzioni già consacrate; poi, siccome la vita è una forza, il Pier Lombardo prese, neanche tanto lentamente, la sua fisionomia”. Panzeri 2008, xxxii. Oltre a Testori, Parenti e Shammah, ci sono anche Dante Isella, garante della tradizione letteraria lombarda, lo scenografo Gianmaurizio Fercioni, e Fiorenzo Carpi, il compositore di riferimento del Piccolo Teatro di Strehler. Cfr. Bisicchia 1979.

²⁶ Testori 2021, 301.

²⁷ Testori 2021, 133.

porpora d'aquilegia,
 e come non aresse in sé
 nessuna luse, si scorpora,
 diventa griso, fiscoleto,
 negro.²⁸

Nel primo dramma abbiamo per prima cosa soltanto una voce, e poi il corpo dello scarozzante che si appresta a diventare Amleto – ma al tempo stesso già lo è – ed è anche regista, scenografo, direttore delle luci (non va dimenticato che anche Hamlet aveva attitudini da regista nella seconda scena del terzo atto); e poi presentatore (prologo): della tragedia, di sé stesso, della regina Gertruda e poi degli altri personaggi.

AMBLETO (*da fuori*) Più in dell'iscuro! Più in dell'iscuro! Rosso, sì. Ma rosso com'è rosso el sangue dei zinghiali e dei porchi quando ce spaccheno in de sù la gola!

Ha da esserci in dappertutto l'aria de un crotto! Ha da esserci l'aria d'un buso, d'una inferna! Più ingravate quelle nigore! Più ingravate e anca più inciostrate! No! Sulla crose, no! Sulla crose, lassatela in come è! Ultimi resti, frattaglie ultime et estreme della fede... (*Ambleto entra.*)

Inzipit Ambleti tragedia. Inzipit qui, a Elzinore. Inzipit a Elzinore o in n'importa che àltero paese. Mettiamo in del regno de Camerlata. Mettiamo in de quello de Lomazzo. O anca un po' più in de giù, squasi alle porte della illustrissima e magnificentissima Mediolanensis urbiz. Tanto fa l'istesso. Quando si è chiamati indidentro della cassa, cassa è e chivata resta per totos quantos e in totos quantos i loca locorum dell'univerzo mondo.²⁹

²⁸ Testori 2021, 139.

²⁹ Testori 2021, 21. Già nel suo primo atto unico, *La morte* (1942), Testori enfatizzava l'importanza della soglia del sipario, facendo iniziare le parole prima della sua apertura. Rimini (2007, 57) ricorda che “questo quadro ‘espressionista’ somiglia molto alla didascalia iniziale della sceneggiatura” per il film.

Solo dopo aver parlato, aver dato indicazioni su scenografia e luci, Amleto compare sul palcoscenico. Nella prima messa in scena, Franco Parenti sollevava

lui stesso, con le sue braccia, un sipario fatto di tela di sacco, come se fosse un'immensa invenzione di Alberto Burri. Per una volta il sipario non veniva elegantemente aperto come avviene ovunque, ma veniva letteralmente sollevato, con un gesto che ancora oggi, visto nelle foto, ricorda un venire al mondo, un vero inizio.³⁰

Amleto, a questo punto, rivolgendosi direttamente all'uditorio, inizia a parlare del padre, che deve arrivare, nella bara, ma poi si interrompe improvvisamente. È già andato troppo avanti, è già entrato troppo nella parte; si tratta ancora di introdurre l'opera e i suoi interpreti:

No. Càlmate, Ambleto. Càlmate. 'Desso è presto. 'Desso hai da pensare alla ditta e ai dittanti. Hai da fare il 'nunzio de loro e anca della tragedia. E 'lora, in dell'avanti, zitani dell'undergaund comazzino! Rullé, tamburi dell'amadissima e antiquissima Longobardia! Trombàte, trombette della regia guardia imperiale!³¹

Questo è l'inizio del dramma di un Amleto che – tra l'essere e il non essere – è letteralmente diviso a metà: è un Am- senza -bleto; ed esprime un 'anarchico' desiderio di abbattere la piramide del potere, fino a raggiungere una visione di resurrezione nel nulla su cui occorre tornare più avanti.

Il secondo testo, *Macbeth* (1974) ha una struttura diversa, esteriormente meno rivoluzionaria (i cinque atti nell'*Amleto* erano sostituiti da due grandi parti, qui rimangono, sia pure ridotti a tre, con numero sempre uguale di scene: quattro). Nelle prime parti, lo sviluppo della vicenda mostra in modo ancora riconoscibile – pur nella continua deformazione – le linee del plot di *Macbeth*. Come in Shakespeare, Ledi Macbet spinge il marito

³⁰ Frangi 2022.

³¹ Testori 2021, 22.

a uccidere re Duncano per prendere il potere; poi tocca a Banco; e si scatena la guerra contro chi vuole vendicare re Ducano. Cambia invece, radicalmente, tutto nel finale, che non presenta nessuna forma di ristabilimento dell'ordine, di ritorno degli eredi legittimi. Anzi Macbetto e la moglie vincono, prima di uccidersi a vicenda. Il desiderio utopico di Ambleto, quello di annullare alla radice il potere, fa ancora capolino, ma il finale è desolato e sconvolgente: tutto l'universo è ormai assimilato all'inferno.³²

Miglio è che si smorzino,
vuno a vuno, tutti i ciari
di modo che niente più se vardi e più se veda
di 'sto morbato mondo
di quel che sovra lui sta qui 'rivando,
niente della gran volta slacerata sù del cielo
che diseno sia eterna,
perché e mondo e cielo et universo intrego
son solo somiglianti
al buso senza luse e senza fine dell'inferna.³³

Queste parole terminali sono affidate al coro ma poco prima c'era ancora il tempo per una nuova, straordinaria, riscrittura del più famoso monologo di *Macbeth* (5.5), che come abbiamo visto Testori già aveva ripreso in parte per la lettera di Lofelia nell'*Ambleto*, da parte del morente Macbet:

Mò sì, mò, forse, sono un poco liberato.
E 'lora comencia a smorzerarti, su, comencia
o mia debola et istoriga candira.
La vita non è vita. È solo un vurlo,
un ciurlo;
o forse un uè-uè...
E poi? Nigora, demenza,
fabbreca de morte, sfantascienza...
Scrivano,
indove hai obliato
la tua e mia poasia?
Indove quel poco de pietà

³² Un utile inseguimento dei riferimenti infernali già presenti in *Macbeth* si può leggere in Manferlotti 2017, 39-48.

³³ Testori 2021, 235.

che ai vuomini fin qui
 evi solito 'fidà?
 Perché tutto 'sto orribilo,
 rossissimo velario?
 Perché tutto 'sto dessacratissimo calvario?
 Non c'è speranza più, più non c'è caso
 che dietro questo negrissimo e marcissimo
 de me e de te tramonto ovver occaso,
 respunti 'na qualunque luse o alba su 'sto mondo
 che è troppo, troppo fatto su incosì rotondo?
 [...]

Smoccola, sù, smoccola mia cira:
 è stracco lo scrivano
 e la giornata dimanda insolamente
 de 'rivare di pressa alla sua sira.³⁴

Come si vede anche da queste parole, in *Macbetto* l'aspetto metateatrale cambia: non c'è più la citata dialettica continua tra attore-scarozzante e personaggio, ma i personaggi sono consapevoli di essere opera di parola, di essere stati scritti e quindi possono rivolgersi direttamente alla proiezione dell'autore nel testo, appunto lo "Scrivano, / creatore di me e di questa lingua / porcellenta e falsatoria"³⁵: così Macbet fin dalla sua prima scena; ma anche la sua Ledi: "L'eternità? Cos'è mò 'desso / 'sta tua religiosa e speritual / filosofia? / Non te starai facendo tu far sù / da 'sto scrivano in preda sempro / d'astorichi e pseudocattolighi problemi!"³⁶ Fino al grande monologo di Macbet che conclude il secondo atto:

Amare, non se poderà proprio mai più?
 Lo chiedo a te, scrivano, che me trascini
 in 'sta viacrucis senza redenzione,
 anca di contra la mia poara intenzione.
 Lo chiedo a te, ombria quetta e sepolta
 de mia madre,
 e anca a te, altàro dove un tempo
 c'era il Dio nostro et il Gesù:
 amare qui, in 'sta terra, o anca solamente non
 acidere,

³⁴ Testori 2021, 232-33.

³⁵ Testori 2021, 143.

³⁶ Testori 2021, 181.

se poderà proprio mai più?³⁷

In *Edipus* (1977) è rimasto un unico, autonomastico Scarozzante, costretto ad assumere tutte le parti (sarà di volta in volta Laio, Giocasta e Edipo) per difendere ancora lo “spirito istesso del teatro”, che “tutti i miei compagni de scarozzamento han voruto tradire, stradare, cornefigare, ma che existe e rexisterà contra de tutti e de tutto infino alla finis delle finis”.³⁸ È ancora in scena ma gli altri se ne sono andati tutti: il primo attore (quello che interpretava Laio) “a far el travestitico in d’una compagnia, no de tragichi, ’me eramo noi, imbensì de revistaroli e de cabaret-tisti!”³⁹ e la prima attrice per sposarsi “con un mobiliere, zoppo in più de una gamba”.⁴⁰ Questa unicità attoriale replica drammaturgicamente uno dei punti centrali dell’opera: la fusione in unità indistinta, nella versione sociale e legalistica, statale-ecclesiastica di Laio e nella versione anarchica-dionisiaca di Edipo. Anche lo scarozzante, come *Ambleto*, inizia parlando da fuori e dando indicazioni di regia e scenografia: all’inizio interpreta Laio, che è re e insieme Pontifex maximum di Tebe. L’unione di trono e altare, di Regno e Giesa, più sfumata all’inizio della *Trilogia* (dove sia Gertruda sia Arlungo, che sostituisce lo shakespeariano Claudius, ipocritamente, espongono pubblicamente una visione del potere come servizio, addirittura come via crucis), è ora esplicita, inseparabile. Il “poteraz” di *Macbetto* è qui chiaramente unione di politico e religioso (“Unità la quale est mondaniga et, insieme, devina; politiga et, insieme, estraterrica; socialiga et, insieme, clericaliga; et anchis, in del suo più alto significarsi, metafisiga, patafisiga et metabolica”).⁴¹ La “piramida” del potere dell’*Ambleto* è iperbolicamente cresciuta fino a raggiungere le altezze delle maggiori cime del mondo:

³⁷ Testori 2021, 199.

³⁸ Testori 2021, 256.

³⁹ Testori 2021, 255-56.

⁴⁰ Testori 2021, 257.

⁴¹ Testori 2021, 241.

Sdervisciate il siparium! Sbarattate le porte della doratissima reggia, la reggia gioviddica, 'pollinea, vene-rea, cristiga, dorica et corinzia! Che el trono del Re mitrato et papante se spalanchi alla meraviglia e al stupore de tutti! Che si mostri 'me l'Eifel che esso è! Cosa diso l'Eifel? 'Me el rosatissimo Rosa, 'me el rododendrico e cervico Cervino, 'me l'aquilico e condorico Bianco, 'me l'istesso, immensissimo Iverest o l'istesso, immensissimo 'Malaia!⁴²

Dall'altra parte, come vedremo, si contrappone l'unità completamente diversa, dionisiaca, di Edipo: un'altra forma di tutto che porta al “niento”.

Le tre opere possono essere considerate separatamente, ma elementi macrotestuali incanalano la direzione del senso. Progressiva è la riduzione dei personaggi in scena⁴³ (per arrivare al singolo Scarozzante, i molti attori-personaggi dell'*Ambleto* sono parecchio ridotti in *Macbetto*, dove anche delle tre streghe dell'ipotesto è rimasta una sola). Anche lo spazio scenico si muove pro-

⁴² Testori 2021, 239.

⁴³ Nel suo principale saggio teorico, *Il ventre del teatro*, pubblicato pochi anni prima del lavoro sugli 'scarozzanti', Testori scriveva: “Mi sembra quasi certo che il punto di partenza del teatro (e, quindi, il suo punto di caduta e d'arrivo) sia il personaggio solo; il personaggio monologante. Il termine della tensione e condensazione tragica non è, di necessità, un secondo personaggio, ma proprio quella particolare qualità di carne e di moto (a strappi, a grida, a spurghi ed urli; una qualità forse impossibile, quasi certamente blasfema) interna alla parola teatrale. Un moto che, per la sua origine, risulta possibile solo quando l'interloquito non è un personaggio creato ma, comunque, una forza creante”. Testori 1968, 36. E poco più avanti: “Mi pare evidente che nella tragedia greca la staticità tenti continuamente di sprigionare da sé il massimo di moto (nei doppi sensi: dell'abisso e dell'altezza) e che, viceversa, nella tragedia elisabettiana la furia dei movimenti miri sempre a raggiungere la sua propria stasi; diciam pure, la pace e la fermitudine della bara”. Testori 1968, 40: proprio quella bara che si può vedere all'inizio di *Ambleto*.

gressivamente verso un teatro povero.⁴⁴ *L'Amleto* offre diversi luoghi, esterni ed interni (il cimitero, la sala del trono, la stanza del Franzese, il cortile, la stanza di Gertruda); e *Macbetto* costruisce fin dall'inizio uno spazio fortemente simbolico, segnato da una importante presenza religiosa ma devastata, decaduta, relegata a frammento, rimasuglio, rudere, resto del passato:

La scena rappresenta i ruderi dell'abside di un'antica chiesa, simile a quelle che si trovano sperdute sulle montagne o dentro le valli.

Addossato all'abside è un grande coro ligneo, al centro del quale un'apertura dà verso la sacrestia e verso la scala che conduce alla cripta.

Sul davanti, in forma di parallelepipedo, è posto un blocco di pietra, resto d'un altare.⁴⁵

Mentre in *Edipus* compare ormai soltanto un palcoscenico nudo: quando cigolando il sipario si apre mostra una scena “completamente vuota: solo un letto sta nel mezzo, orribilmente sfatto e traballante”.⁴⁶

Testori prende i personaggi e alcune delle linee narrative principali dai testi di partenza. In alcuni casi la vicinanza è piuttosto sensibile e si può parlare di traduzione-reinvenzione,⁴⁷ ma poi opera una serie di omissioni, deformazioni e aggiunte; a partire dall'anacronismo sistematico (o meglio: un'acronia teatrale che permette di unire in un tutto la Danimarca e la Scozia shakespeariane con il Cinquecento e il Seicento del teatro di Ruzante, dei sacri monti, delle processioni, e con gli anni Settanta del Novecento, tra movimenti di protesta politica e mondo dello spettacolo popolare).

⁴⁴ Per un'analisi di approdi comuni, forse quasi inconsapevoli, con le linee di ricerca del *Living Theatre*, di Grotowski, Brook e Artaud; cfr. Taffon 1997, 74-82.

⁴⁵ Testori 2021, 130.

⁴⁶ Testori 2021, 240.

⁴⁷ Fochi 2016, in ricca relazione con gli studi sulla traduzione parla di un “infinito e poliedrico inseguimento testoriano” di Amleto, che contamina anche poesia e pittura, considerandolo “come un modello paradigmatico della fluidità e inafferrabilità dei confini fra traduzione e scrittura”.

Shakespeare è perfetto come punto di partenza per il tutto che Testori vuole rappresentare e discutere: ne deriva una delle sue principali linee di azione, l'esagerazione di elementi già presenti nei testi di partenza,⁴⁸ come la moltiplicazione dell'incontro di comico e tragico, linguaggio nobile e turpiloquio, scatologico e sacro, portando alle estreme conseguenze il concetto cristiano di incarnazione. Alla lettera – in modo grottesco e basso-corporale – quando si esplicita ed esterna ciò che è travaglio interiore si può assistere all'uscita di un corpo da un altro corpo: Macbet per ottenere la profezia non deve incontrare le tre streghe ma deve espellerne una dal proprio corpo in una dolorosa unione di defecazione e parto. Per scoprire poi che:

Parte sono di te da sempro,
anca se esterna e separata
eternamente a te sarò ligata.⁴⁹

Oppure, non appena Amleto accusa tragicamente il padre di avergli piantato nella testa la coscienza (e il cristianesimo, con il battesimo) che lo tormenta, la madre subito riconduce tutte le sue stranezze a una caduta da bambino, in cui avrebbe battuto la testa sbattendo contro un gradino. Si tratta però del “basello” del trono; e si inizia quindi ad edificare la spietata metaforica delle scale,

⁴⁸ L'implicita interpretazione testoriana di Shakespeare probabilmente non è troppo distante da quella di Peter Brook, che enfatizza il contrasto non riconciliato tra Rozzo e Sacro; e le forti contraddizioni di Shakespeare: “In Shakespeare introspezione e metafisica non attenuano nulla. Al contrario. È mediante l'inconciliato contrasto tra Rozzo e Sacro, mediante lo stridio delle note assolutamente dissonanti, che riceviamo le urtanti e indimenticabili impressioni dei suoi drammi. È proprio perché le contraddizioni sono tanto forti, che ci accendono così profondamente”. Brook 1968, 104.

⁴⁹ Testori 2021, 144. Testori mostra qui “di far sua una delle interpretazioni maggiormente condivise dalla critica, che nel *Macbeth* del grande elisabettiano le streghe altro non siano che la proiezione esterna della coscienza del protagonista” (Manferlotti 2013); ma lo fa appunto portandola all'estremo prendendola alla lettera.

dei gradini, delle piramidi che chi brama il potere deve scalare schiacciando chiunque lo ostacoli.⁵⁰

Anche il modo dell'assassinio del padre di Amleto è trasformato comicamente (dal veleno versato nell'orecchio, per raggiungere il luogo nobile del capo, all'avvelenamento di una "formaggella" una sera di ritorno da Vergiate) ma poi si rovescia tragicamente (senza perdere i modi comici) sullo zio colpevole, al quale Amleto fa bere il veleno preparato per lui:

Bestia! Zinghiale concubinante e rognoso! El calice te lo bevarai te! [...] Derva 'sto buso del culo de una bocca! Dervalo, nazzista del Lomazzo! [...] El papà mio de me l'hai tutato cont la formaggella, me me vorevi tuare cont el nebbiolo, ma el gioco riesse 'na vorta, zinghiale, mai dua!⁵¹

Una metafora della vita molto 'scarozzante' riesce ad esprimere perfettamente questa continua interconnessione – più che transizione – di tragico e comico. È ancora la voce di Amleto che parla al suo amato:

È la giostra dei zitani, francese. 'Desso ha ripreso a girare. I cavallini bardati de bandiere vanno e vanno indetorno a 'sta pirlata d'un zentro. El disco della canzone non arà da desmettere per un pezzo et el refrenno parlerà sempre e inzolamente de dolore, de sangue, de pazzia e de morte. Varda. 'Desso se arza. Viene inverzo de noi. Sembra che plora e poi, tutto de un tratto, sembra che rida.⁵²

⁵⁰ Nella scena IV del primo atto, quando Malcolm viene nominato principe di Cumberland e erede al trono dal padre Duncan, Macbeth lo vede subito come un ostacolo sul suo cammino, parlandone proprio come un gradino: "The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, / For in my way it lies. Stars, hide you fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires. / The eye wink at the end; yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see". Shakespeare 2005.

⁵¹ Testori 2021, 121.

⁵² Testori 2021, 93-94.

3. Sesso e potere

Tutto e “niento”, quindi, nelle parole ‘macbettiane’ della lettera di Lofelia letta da Amleto. E, decontestualizzando una battuta dello stesso dramma, potremmo condensare l’insieme della trilogia con queste parole dette da Arlungo: “Siamo giunti all’istremo”. Nei tre drammi si può infatti vedere continuamente in azione una serie di estreme opposizioni-convergenze: vita e morte, alba e tramonto, sangue e merda, sesso e potere.

In particolare, il nesso di sesso e potere è portato all’istremo, esistenziale e corporeo. Testori ovviamente prende le mosse da *Hamlet*, rendendo più esplicito il suo discorso sulla sessualità e esasperando quello sul potere, esattamente “bernarda et potere” con le parole con cui, comicamente pensoso, si presenta Arlungo. In termini foucaultiani, l’importanza assunta dal sesso come oggetto di scontro politico si manifesta lungo due assi: “Da un lato partecipa delle discipline del corpo [...]. Dall’altro, partecipa della regolazione delle popolazioni attraverso tutti gli effetti globali che induce”.⁵³ Si veda, ad esempio, tutta la scena terza della prima parte, dove avviene una seduzione-perquisizione-inquisizione di Gertruda, nei confronti del Franzese, con Polonio e Arlungo nascosti; cercano di capire se nel legame con Amleto – come sostiene Arlungo – “la carnalità mascara el vero ‘coppiamento et el vero ligamento che è de marca politega e zovversiva!”.⁵⁴ Per il potere che ostenta ipocritamente una cristianità di facciata e che reprime ma tutto sommato può tollerare l’omosessualità nascosta, la congiunzione peggiore che si possa immaginare è quella che unisce la devianza sessuale a quella politica, unita a una fede sincera e intima. Infatti Arlungo commenta, concludendo così la scena:

El lampo me traversa ’me lo Spirito Santo! Tutto de un colpo capisso anca questo! No inzolamente è un ’narchico, ma, come zufficesse no, è vuno de quei ’narchi che credono anca in del Cristo! Siamo giunti

⁵³ Foucault 1978, 129.

⁵⁴ Testori 2021, 55.

all'istremo! Bello, amadore de vuomini e de donne,
zobillante e cont el Cristo, qui, in zul cuore! Ma in-
dove vuol 'rivare el mondo? Indove?⁵⁵

Anche sul piano scenografico, l'enigma dell'assassinio politico, che costituisce in prima istanza la domanda che arrovella Ambleto,⁵⁶ è connesso con i liquidi corporei legati alla possibilità della nascita. Come abbiamo visto, il sangue scuro è il colore dominante fin dall'inizio dell'*Ambleto*: un colore che ricorda – lo dice Ambleto subito dopo le parole d'apertura citate prima – la porpora, il vomito e il vino. Ma soprattutto vede carne e sangue che cola giù dovunque, come se tutta l'intera realtà avesse le mestruazioni:

Sera est. Anzi, crepuscolorum crepuscula diligent.
Dilagant in della porpora, in del vometo e in del vino.
Per de qui e per de là ci sono in del giro ammò dei
tochelli de neva e de brina. Totus est negher. Negher
e rododendoro e porpora e mortadella marcita. El
cielo rona. E a me, me pare de vedere in dappertutto
brindelli de carna e de sangua; carna e sangua in
della terra; carna e sangua in delle nigore; carna e
sangua in delle foreste, in dei pollàri, in delle stalle;
carna e sangua in delle cassine e anca indidetro del
lago; carna e sangua, marmelada, violame, confittura
e macellaria che iscolano giù, 'me fudesse che anca i
muri, le cassine, i làrezzi, i moròni e imperzino le
nigore aressero le loro robe.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Testori 2021, 55.

⁵⁶ Nel *Ventre del teatro* Testori scrive: “Si batte sempre la carne contro la carne per pervenire, non all'emissione d'una risposta, ma alla enucleazione d'una domanda (della 'domanda'). Deve esserci, sempre, l'irrespirabile senso della gloria e della cenere, dello splendore e del pus. Gli opposti, insomma, compresenti e fusi in un'unica imprecazione interrogante” (1968, 44).

⁵⁷ Testori 2021, 21-22. Sull'importanza del sangue nei testi shakespeariani, a partire proprio da *Macbeth* e *Hamlet*, cfr. Manferlotti 2017.

In questa scenografia (che ha ricordato l'opera di Francis Bacon, molto amato da Testori),⁵⁸ attraverso il dialogo muto con il padre morto, Amleto raggiunge il tema centrale della nascita: mistero, dolore, domanda inesauribile: perché esser nati? Quando i becchini portano in scena la bara del padre, Amleto lo interpella così:

Papà, rex, capo, dux, Benito, anca per te oremai è finida e finidissima. Ma, de farmi vegnire in la luce, chi te l'aveva dimandato? E'? Derva la bocca! Chi te l'aveva dimandato? Me, no! Me no, bestia! Per farmi incosi! Più pestato e impestato de un ecces homo, de quelli che porteno in del giro per i processionamenti, che quando ce se dise de piegare i brazzi, li piega e quando ce se dise de perdere sanguo, derva el costato et el sanguo viene in de giù 'me fudesse de un rubinetto.⁵⁹

Insomma, partendo sempre da *Hamlet* (“I’ll call thee Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane”),⁶⁰ Testori spalanca l’arco della sua acronia, che congiunge il tempo delle processioni e dei Sacri Monti con il “fascismo eterno” del potere.

L’ossessione di Testori per il sangue è costante, almeno a partire da uno dei suoi primi drammi, *Tentazione nel convento* (1949), ma qui l’importanza dell’arte è evidente: i primi richiami sono agli impressionanti insiemi di pitture e sculture dei sacri monti (Varallo) e al caravaggismo settentrionale, così a lungo studiato e amato da Testori (in un’occasione arrivò anche a dichiarare che Caravaggio “potrebbe anche essere lo Shakespeare della storia della pittura”).⁶¹

⁵⁸ Al “pittore fraterno” Bacon, Testori dedica anche due raccolte di poesie che rimangono inedite: *Suite per Francis Bacon I e II* (1965), in Testori 2008, 341-94.

⁵⁹ Testori 2021, 23.

⁶⁰ Shakespeare 2015, 101.

⁶¹ Cfr. i testi per la Mostra del manierismo piemontese e lombardo del Seicento: sessanta opere di Moncalvo, Cerano, Morrazzone, Procaccini, Tanzio, D. Crespi, Nuvoloni, Del Cairo curata a Torino nel 1955. Testori 1995, 201-18.

Ma è solo alla fine della prima parte (nella scena quinta) che il fantasma che compariva all'apertura di *Hamlet* fa la sua apparizione. Amleto, in dialogo col Franzese, compie un impressionante viaggio a ritroso, sentendosi rientrare nel grembo materno, riaggomitarsi in feto, sempre più piccolo, fino a diventare schizzo di sperma e rientrare nel pene del padre. Solo adesso lo spettro può parlare. Lo spettro del padre che per Amleto rappresenta ora colui che l'ha espulso dal corpo della madre: "È lui! Sei te! Te! Lo sborento vigliacco e porco che m'ha sgiacciato fuora della montagnetta!"⁶² (la "montagnetta de carna rossa" della madre in cui era appena rientrato e dove: "io per me ce starei indidentro anca in aeternum").⁶³ Soltanto ora il morto può parlare: è stato sì assassinato, non chiede però vendetta ma anzi la salvezza del regno, della corona. Il movimento profondo è quindi opposto a quello di *Hamlet*: è il figlio che cerca il padre, che quando appare non chiede vendetta; e la reazione di Amleto è tutto tranne che incerta. Decide di agire esattamente all'opposto della volontà del padre: e pianifica di far saltare tutto, con uno scatto anarchico-nichilista:

Questo regname, questo globamento de zellule e de atomi, ha da finire! Ha da finire in una brusata generale! Che el niente, el niente totalo e univerzalo, lui e inzolo lui poda finarmente ridere de noi e de tutto quello che ce siamo illusionati d'aèr fabbrecato!⁶⁴

E in effetti nel finale Amleto strangola anche la madre regina, che cerca inutilmente di impietosirlo per salvarsi la vita. Torna così un'ultima volta uno dei movimenti fondamentali dell'opera: contro l'uso strumentale e ipocrita della religione, operato dal potere, sono la bestemmia o la bassa volgarità a conservare la possibilità di annunciare una possibile presenza evangelica.⁶⁵ Quando la regina,

⁶² Testori 2021, 70.

⁶³ Testori 2021, 69.

⁶⁴ Testori 2021, 72.

⁶⁵ In un'intervista sull'*Amleto* concessa al *Corriere della Sera* il 9 gennaio 1973, Testori affermava tra l'altro che "c'è un momento nella vita di ogni uomo, o in quella di tutto il mondo, in

che fin dal grande discorso ufficiale della seconda scena della prima parte aveva fatto suo pienamente e consapevolmente il ruolo perverso del potere,⁶⁶ cerca di passare inopinatamente dal discorso della corona a quello della famiglia, della maternità (“Ambleto! Sono io me che te ’pello. Io me, Ambleto... Io me, la tua mama...”) è ormai troppo tardi per abbandonare un ruolo così fortemente e criminalmente voluto. Infatti Ambleto replica subito: “Desso sei domà [soltanto] la reina! Sei domà l’ispina dorzale de una piramida che ha da spetasciarsi, sfarinarsi e smerdarsi”).⁶⁷ E quindi procede all’ecuzione, facendo proprie – a modo suo – le più radicali parole di Cristo (Matteo 10:34): “Non sono vegniuto fuera d’in della figa de te per portare pase e perdono, ma ispade, sangue, rovinamenti e spetasciamenti”.⁶⁸

Ed essendo diventato re, cerca di abbattere la piramide del potere uccidendo sé stesso. Il suo unico atto da re prima di morire è quindi lasciare ai “pastori, paesani, servi, ischiavi, cortilanti e castellanti”⁶⁹ tutto quanto il potere reale si vanta di possedere:

Essendo, come sono, re vostro de voi, ordeno e comando che da questo istessissimo momento tutti gli averi che sono de ’pertenenza de questa corona, e cioè i castelli, le torri, i forti, le fortezze, gli ori, le pietre, le azzioni e i dinari che stanno chiavati indidentro de tutte le cazzeforti; i prati, le pratarie, i boschi, le boscarie; i armenti, le manze, le pegore, le vacche, le gaine, i conili; le case, le cassine e le cabane; tutto, integramente tutto, passi in delle vostre mani.⁷⁰

cui il solo modo per parlare con Dio è la bestemmia, soprattutto quando la vita in cui siamo gettati va come sta andando adesso”. In Santini 1996, 59.

⁶⁶ A differenza di *Hamlet*, nell’*Ambleto* è proprio la regina che prende la decisione di sposare l’ex cognato, quindi non a caso nel suo primo discorso ufficiale riecheggiano diversi frammenti di quello di Claudius.

⁶⁷ Testori 2021, 122.

⁶⁸ Testori 2021, 123.

⁶⁹ Testori 2021, 125.

⁷⁰ Testori 2021, 126.

Questo non perché diventino loro i potenti, ma solo perché possano così capire che la proprietà, “e inzolamente lei, è il vermeno maledetto che fa andare tutto in del pus e in del marcio”.⁷¹

Il testo successivo, *Macbetto*, sprofonda ancora di più, sempre più in fondo, nella merda e nell’inferno del potere; e ancora più fievoli sono i sussulti di speranza. E fa un altro passo verso l’estremo dei fondamenti: vita e morte, sesso e sangue; senza risparmiarsi nulla. Al centro torna l’unione di sesso e potere, in un modo contraddittorio e *queer*, che sarà presentato nell’ultimo paragrafo.

Anche Macbet, come Ambleto, accarezza un desiderio utopico di annullare alla radice il potere; cerca di liberarsene integralmente, dai simboli alla realtà fatta soprattutto di oppressione violenta, lasciandolo tutto alla Ledi, sperando – inutilmente – di conservare ancora un frammento di anima:

Tutto, sì tutto, ti sgiaccio lì, ai piè!
 Regno, bastone, tiara,
 globo de oro e stato!
 Basta che mi senta liberato
 [...]
 No! Non retorno!
 Li lasso a te e insolo a te
 i lager, le prisoni,
 le garrote, i forni!⁷²

Nell’ultimo lavoro della trilogia, invece, è un godimento dionisiaco che può abbattere il potere. Al padre che unisce oppressivamente Stato e Chiesa, rivendicando la rivelazione degli dei, Edipo contrappone un altro tutto, ispirato da un altro dio, Dioniso:

Anca a me, sì; anca a me et ego tutto è stato revelato;
 et anca a me et ego da quei Dei che te credevi o t’elludev
 d’aver redotti, radunati, bibbliotegati e schisciati
 tutti quanti dedentro la tua Giesa et el tuo Governo
 socialigo! Existe no domà la Sfingia a far i oraculi!
 Existe anca el Dioniso! Lui, el dio luciferico, el follo, el

⁷¹ Testori 2021, 126.

⁷² Testori 2021, 226.

'briaco, el baccante, l'inspiradore dei poeti, dei lunategghi, dei malinconighi, dei diseredati, dei deversifigati, dei reietti, dei degetti, dei oscurati de mente, dei maledetti dal Cristo e dal Marxo, dei fanatighi delle porchitudini solariche, incioè delle ciavate, delle leccate e delle sborate! El dio che protegge, envoca e dimanda no l'ordino imbensi 'la revolta, la rebelliona, la sovversività, la ruina e la destruzion d'ogni et qualsiasi legge, la 'narchia completa e universaliga; quello che fa passare de 'sta terra all'altra, e cioè al niente [...]'⁷³

Edipo è inviato da questo dio per vendicarsi non solo contro il padre ma contro tutto ciò che rappresenta, l'"unificazione": non viene solo ucciso ma anche evirato, portando nuovamente alle estreme conseguenze componenti potenzialmente, simbolicamente presenti nei testi di partenza. In contrasto con la visione della strega e di Ledi Macbet, qui il sesso è l'opposto del potere. L'incesto non è più un maledetto gioco del Fato ma vero amore e piacere tra Edipus e Iocasta; ed è anche il simbolo di una possibilità di libertà, di abbattimento della tirannia assolutista. Edipus può ora rivolgersi al popolo dei "Tebanichi" annunciando che il re e pontefice, che li teneva "ligati e straligati, no minga in della vita, ma in delle cadene della pagùra e della morte",⁷⁴ è stato assassinato e castrato dal figlio; e quindi possono ora ascoltare la voce della libertà, dello sfrenamento, del "Dionisus che ve parla per la lengua de l'Edipus". Possono, insomma, seguire l'esempio di Iocasta, che ora non è più regina, perché è riuscita a compiere quello che le regine precedenti (Gertruda e Ledi Macbet) avevano rifiutato di fare: ha abbandonato tutto, a partire sempre dai simboli e dai privilegi del potere:

Seguitate l'exempio della vostra Reina, anzi ex, ex reina, imperché essa ha sgeccato via tutto, titoli, onori, mitrie, tessare, croci, medaglie, onorificazioni, e s'è data tutta e intrega alla vita, ai basi, alle

⁷³ Testori 2021, 271.

⁷⁴ Testori 2021, 296.

danze bacchiche e ai organetti delle polche e delle mazzurche!⁷⁵

L'opera rimane comunque una tragedia; e in conclusione naturalmente anche Edipus deve morire, abbattuto da una scarica di mitra che arriva dalle quinte, perché la “felosofia dell'Unifigazione” ha corrotto anche il popolo, che non accetta la possibilità di essere liberato. Tuttavia, le ultime parole di Edipus sono ancora di speranza: l'“Unifigazione porca e 'sassina” non ha vinto per sempre e in conclusione ritorna, mutata completamente di segno, l'immagine di una salita gradino per gradino, finora sempre simbolo della natura coercitiva e della violenza intrinseca del regnare, ora segno invece di una testimonianza di libertà incancellabile:

La scala è longhissemma, ma là, in la cima, ce stiamo noi, no te; noi, quelli che han da perdere e crepare perché ce sia sempre quarcheduno che poda vencerti e destruggerti!⁷⁶

4. Instabili riscritture *queer*

Come in parte si è già potuto osservare, Testori opera nella *Trilogia* una riscrittura *queer* dei classici che affronta.⁷⁷ Anche da questo punto di vista, fa forza sui contrasti. Le sue reinvenzioni di Amleto, Macbeth e Edipo attraversano molti confini, come ha osservato acutamente Anna Fochi:

Attraverso il loro intimissimo rapporto, Testori e Amleto vivono entrambi sui margini, sui confini, e la loro sofferta simbiosi incarna addirittura l'essenza dell'ibrido. Testori, infatti, non solo porta Amleto (ed

⁷⁵ Testori 2021, 297.

⁷⁶ Testori 2021, 301.

⁷⁷ È interessante che su “queergeographies”, archivio digitale gestito da Gian Pietro Leonardi, dedicato alle pubblicazioni LGBTQIA* in Italia che mappano “i libri che raccontano le sessualità non normate nel nostro paese, ma anche quella di tenere traccia della risposta del mondo dell'editoria alle tematiche legate al mondo queer”, compaia, dal 3 settembre 2021, la voce dedicata alla *Trilogia* di Testori.

è a sua volta anche portato) a trasgredire e confondere i confini culturali, temporali e spaziali. Assieme all'artista lombardo, Amleto resiste alla traduzione e giunge a violare altre *barriere* non meno cristallizzate: dal genere (Amleto è omosessuale) al canone artistico (differenze fra generi letterari e codici semiotici), nonché lo stesso limite fra traduzione e scrittura creativa, fino a rendere vago il confine fra autore e personaggio.⁷⁸

Eppure allo stesso tempo Amleto, Macbetto e Edipus sono – per citare proprio Testori – “tutti tenuti, trattiene, fortissimamente limitati e ‘zonati’ (da zona, angolo di terra, regione) alla mia (alla nostra) Lombardia; lì, immersi, almeno si spera; non catapultati; forse dissotterrati...”.⁷⁹ L'identità di questi personaggi (soggetti eccentrici)⁸⁰ si forma in un continuo interscambio di generi che non sono identità fisse ma termini di una relazione costruita da contrasti, scivolamenti, salti.

Di certo, non c'è una concezione isolante e ‘minorizzante’ dell'omosessualità. Secondo la testimonianza di Doninelli, ovviamente partendo da una conoscenza degli anni conclusivi della vita, sappiamo che Testori non amava la parola *gay*: “Era fiero di vivere una condizione errabonda, dolorosa (“non ho mai capito di cosa si debba essere contenti”, diceva) e illegittima”.⁸¹ E senza dubbio la sua opera – che non mostra interesse alle definizioni di genere – inscena questioni che concernono chiunque e non presenta un mondo omosessuale “small, distinct, relatively fixed”.⁸²

⁷⁸ Fochi 2016, Conclusione. Homi Bhabha parla dell'ambivalenza del rapporto colonizzatore-colonizzato, sostenendo che la produzione culturale, nello scenario post-coloniale, si situa in uno spazio ibrido, di confine, di continua negoziazione dell'identità, con accenni che alla luce di quanto detto fin qui suonano molto ‘testoriani’: “if hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream”. Bhabha 1994, 324.

⁷⁹ Testori 2008, xxxi.

⁸⁰ Cfr. De Lauretis 1999.

⁸¹ Doninelli 2018, 84.

⁸² Kosofsky Sedgwick che lavora sull'opposizione tra vedere la definizione omo/eterosessuale: “as an issue of active im-

La trilogia di Testori sembra offrirsi spontaneamente come esemplificazione di tutti gli aspetti che trent'anni dopo Massimo Fusillo condenserà in un rapido consuntivo sulle categorie di 'queer' e 'camp' come parole chiave nell'ambito dell'estetica letteraria:

ulteriore riprova di come il lessico teatrale domini la teoria e la filosofia contemporanee, e di come la metafora barocca della vita come teatro abbia una lunghissima durata e un successo fecondo [...], è importante sottolineare qui come il *camp* e il *queer* abbiano prodotto un'estetica che privilegia travestitismo, nomadismo e polimorfismo, e che pratica l'ibridazione fra sublime e grottesco, nobile e *kitsch*, come pure fra le molteplici forme dell'immaginario contemporaneo.⁸³

L'esempio di più estremo travestitismo lo troviamo naturalmente in *Edipus* dove l'unico soggetto rimasto in scena scivola continuamente tra l'ultimo scarozzante fedele allo spirito del teatro e le incarnazioni mitiche di Madre, Figlio e Padre, tra castrazione, sodomia violenta e punitiva e incesto gioioso come armi di opposizione alla dittatura politico-religiosa.

Insomma, anche il fondamentale e inestricabile nodo di sesso e potere della *Trilogia* è profondamente ambivalente. Testori esagera tutto il gioco di maschile/femminile presente in *Hamlet*⁸⁴ e soprattutto in *Macbeth*. Ad esempio, il contenuto della famosa profezia che apparentemente avrebbe dovuto garantire Macbeth da ogni tipo di nemico, e ne segna invece la morte, è modificato da Testori in una direzione 'non-binaria': potrà essere ucciso

portance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority" e vederla "as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (1990, 1).

⁸³ Fusillo 2009, 159.

⁸⁴ Alan Sinfield nella sua introduzione a *Hamlet* ha notato che "the confusions in sexuality and gender are not specified in the play. Instead we are offered misogyny. What is rotten in the state of Denmark? The persistent answer is: female sexuality". Shakespeare 2015, 44.

non da chi non è “nato di donna” ma da chi non è né maschio né femmina:

Far fuori ti potrà
solo chi nato non sarà
né femmina, né maschio.⁸⁵

E nel finale si rivelerà che si tratta non, come in Shakespeare, di Macduff (che non è nato naturalmente dal corpo della madre, ma attraverso un parto cesareo; “maschile”), ma della moglie. Macbet pensa di potersi liberare definitivamente di lei pugnalandola, ma viene poi a sua volta pugnolato:

Macbet
Non evi morta 'lora?
Il né femmina, né maschio,
donca evi te?
Ledi Macbet
Me, sì, me! [...]
Ciappa evirato, ex maschio, cesarato,
spèssie de porco e culattone, [...].⁸⁶

E nella stessa direzione va uno dei passaggi di aperto anacronismo, dove sempre Ledi Macbet dice che Banco (la versione scarozzante, ma già verdiana, di Banquo) non desidera le donne e che se avesse potuto vivere nel presente (gli anni Settanta del Novecento) “arebbe amato, 'bracciato e poi aruto [...] i incerti, i senza sesso”⁸⁷; aggiungendo che anche durante l'amplesso con la moglie non pensava a lei, quindi a una femmina, ma “a un qualche casso / sul tipo del baritono Macchetto” e per questo l'ha uccisa. Per conseguenza, la moglie di Banco, morendo, avrebbe chiesto alla Ledi di compiere la vendetta “di quel culo! Anzo, di quella cula!”. E pertanto anche l'ordine che la Ledi dà al sicario di pugnalarlo Banco si configura come un atto di penetrazione sessuale violenta.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Testori 2021, 174.

⁸⁶ Testori 2021, 230.

⁸⁷ Testori 2021, 188.

⁸⁸ Testori 2021, 189.

Anche lasciando da parte momenti come questi, attraverso tutto il dramma lo scambio di identità sessuali e di genere (e i giudizi molto diversificati che vengono dati a questi scambi) è continuo.

In *Macbetto* chi possiede in prima istanza il “poteràz”, l’unione in un’unica parola di fallo e dominio: “il cazzo del potero e del dominamento”,⁸⁹ è la moglie, non il marito:

Il cazzo ce l’hai te,
sempre t’el dissì;
la figa arei doruto averla io!
E ’desso ariamo il cazzo in due,
anzo, con lei [la strega che Macbet ha “partorito” e
che ha profetizzato la conquista del trono], in tre!⁹⁰

Ledi Macbet è pienamente consapevole di questo e conferma che l’esercizio violento, sanguinario, soggiogatore del potere è più soddisfacente anche del piacere sessuale (sulla linea di quanto pensava l’altro usurpatore, Arlungo, nel suo primo, già ricordato, monologo nell’*Ambeto*: “Bernarda et potere, bernarda et potere, bernarda et potere... Ma, alla fine dei contamenti, tra bernarda et potere, potere. Sempre e inzolo potere. Anca senza bernarda”).⁹¹

Macbet, d’altra parte, è invece molto meno a suo agio con questo “poteràz” e giunge, come abbiamo già visto, a elaborare il desiderio di liberarsene. Fin dall’inizio, inoltre, deve in un certo senso farsi donna per poter generare la strega che gli profetizza il potere, nel modo più doloroso, allargando lo sfintere con un pugnale (“Slargar le gambe un maschio? / Per un maschio il forcipo impiegare? [...] / Ma io ho malo! / Mi sento farmi donna...”).⁹²

⁸⁹ Testori 2021, 144.

⁹⁰ Testori 2021, 144. Anche qui estremizzando Shakespeare, passi come quelli dove Lady Macbeth si rivolge agli spiriti del male “di scardinare dal suo essere tutto ciò che di buono e di onesto la legava al suo sesso” (Manferlotti 2017, 4): “Come, you spirits / that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / of direst cruelty! make thick my blood [...]” *Macbeth* 1.5.

⁹¹ Testori 2021, 29.

⁹² Testori 2021, 141.

D'altra parte, c'è anche una femminilità di Macbet che va nella direzione esattamente opposta: non partorire con dolore per ottenere il potere ma sognare di abbracciare volontariamente quel femminile al quale è spesso accostato in modo offensivo,⁹³ non più come una debolezza ma come una desiderata possibilità di pace, di sonno, di riposo nel ventre materno e nel nulla:

Se esser femmina signifiga la sira
slungasciarsi in sul letto
e, di poco in di poco, come in un ventre maternale,
insognarsi del niente e riposare...⁹⁴

Qui è Macbet che si avvicina al più famoso monologo di *Hamlet* (davvero dormire, sognare, non essere più), in un movimento opposto a quello visto in apertura con la lettera di Lofelia letta da Ambleto.

Si può quindi concludere tornando per l'ultima volta all'*Ambleto*, che esprime una visione molto simile pronunciando le sue parole estreme. Lo fa chiamando figlio – più come una madre potenziale che come un padre – l'amato Franzese, che rappresenta l'unione (unità positiva di fronte a tante unità negative) di amico, amante e figlio:

Filius falsus che imperò sei più vero de un filius che
fudesse istato veramente vero... Filius mai partorido
e che imperò ho amato e amatissimo...⁹⁵

E, abbracciandogli le gambe, pronuncia lo straordinario annuncio di una sorta di resurrezione nichilista, un sogno-desiderio di rivedersi e riabbracciarsi ancora, nella verità del “niento”, dove la complessità, la difficoltà, la bellezza e il dolore del “tutto” saranno pienamente compresi:

⁹³ Ad esempio, la strega lo incalza: “Sei re o invece signorina vanesia e tremebonda?” Testori 2021, 172; oppure: “Quest'eva de te insolamente / la parte tetterecccia e femminenta”. Testori 2021, 173.

⁹⁴ Testori 2021, 173.

⁹⁵ Testori 2021, 126.

Ecco, incosì, anema mia. Incosì. E quando seranno passati tanti e poi ancora tanti anni e anca tu arai fenido de fare quello che resta ancora de fare e sarai 'rivato alla fine, ce retroveremo. Ce retroveremo, mio 'fezzionatissimo angioro. Ce retroveremo, mio 'fezzionatissimo vendicatoro.

Allora, come in una grandissema nevicada, fabbricati domà de aria, vivaremo inzieme per sempro, como se tutto fudesse inzolamente la fantasia de noi. E, forse, tornati per sempro in del niente, reussiremo a capire quello che qui se chiamava vanamente la felicità, la giustizia e, indelsopradeltutto, la vita.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Testori 2021, 127.

Opere citate

- Arbasino, Alberto. 2014. *Ritratti italiani*. Milano, Adelphi.
- Bartalotta, Gianfranco. 2003. “Shakespeare e il ‘dialetto’ di Testori”. *Memoria di Shakespeare* 4: 191-206.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London, Routledge.
- Bigliuzzi, Silvia. 2005. *Nel prisma del nulla: L’esperienza del non-essere nella drammaturgia shakespeariana*. Napoli, Liguori.
- Bisicchia, Andrea. 1979. *Teatro a Milano 1968-1978. Il “Pier Lombardo” e altri spazi alternativi*. Milano, Mursia.
- Brook, Peter. 1968. *Il teatro e il suo spazio*. Raffaele Petrillo, tr. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Cascetta, Annamaria. 1983. *Invito alla lettura di Giovanni Testori*. Milano, Mursia.
- . 1995. *Invito alla lettura di Giovanni Testori. L’ultima stagione (1982-1993)*. Milano, Mursia.
- D’Onghia, Luca. 2017. “L’Amleto di Testori, ovvero Ruzante a Lomazzo: Schede storiche e Linguistiche”. *Quaderni veneti* 6.1: 169-84.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. 1999. *Soggetti eccentrici*. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Doninelli, Luca. 1993. *Conversazioni con Testori*. Parma, Guanda.
- . 2018. *Una gratitudine senza debiti: Giovanni Testori, un maestro*. Milano, La nave di Teseo.
- Fochi, Anna. 2016. “Fra traduzione e scrittura, senza confini semiotici o letterari: Giovanni Testori e ‘Amleto’”. *inTRAlinea. Online translation journal*. <https://www.intralinea.org/index.php/print/article/2201>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *La volontà di sapere*. Pasquale Pasquino and Giovanna Procacci, tr. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Frangi, Giuseppe. 2022. “Testori. Genio e baldanza: quando tre “Scarrozzanti” inventarono un teatro Nuovo”. *ilSussidiario.net*. 20 gennaio. <https://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/testori-genio-e-baldanza-quando-tre-scarrozzanti-inventarono-un-teatro-nuovo/2279975>
- Fusillo, Massimo. 2009. *Estetica della letteratura*. Bologna, Il Mulino.

- Gallerani, Paola. 2007. *Questo quaderno appartiene a Giovanni Testori: Inediti dall'archivio*. Milano, Officina Libreria-Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori.
- Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Lomazzo, Giovan Paolo. 1993. *Rabisch*. Dante Isella, ed. Torino, Einaudi.
- Mancini, Leonardo. 2020. *Carmelo Bene: fonti della poetica*. Milano-Udine, Mimesis.
- Manferlotti, Stefano. 2005. *Amleto in parodia*. Roma, Bulzoni.
- . 2013. "Tre corone per Macbeth: Shakespeare, Ionesco, Testori". *Rivista di letteratura teatrale* 6: 49-61.
- . 2017. *Rosso elisabettiano: Saggi su Shakespeare*. Napoli, Liguori. 127-45.
- Mazzocchi, Federica. 2015. *Giovanni Testori e Luchino Visconti: L'Arialdia 1960*. Milano, Scalpendi.
- Panzeri, Fulvio. 2003. *Vita di Testori*. Milano, Longanesi.
- . 2008. "Cronologia". In Testori 2008, xv-l.
- Pernice, Laura. 2021. *Giovanni Testori sulla scena contemporanea: Produzioni, regie, interviste (1993-2020)*. Bari, Edizioni di Pagina.
- Pizzo, Antonio. 2016. "Omofobia nell'Arialdia di Testori". *Mimesis Journal* 5.2: 55-65.
- Raboni, Giovanni. 1996. *Introduzione*. In Testori 2008, ii-xiv.
- Rimini, Stefania. 2002. "Un Amleto di meno: la tournée impossibile di Carmelo Bene". In "...un dono in forma di parole". *Studi dedicati a Giuseppe Savoca*. La Spezia, Agorà. 313-28.
- . 2007. *Rovine di Elsinore: Gli 'Amleti' di Giovanni Testori*. Acireale-Roma, Bonanno.
- Rinaldi, Rinaldo. 1980. "Testori: uno stile materialista". *Il lettore di provincia* 11.40: 21-37.
- Shakespeare, William. 2005. *Macbeth*. George Hunter, ed. Carol Chillington Rutter, intro. London, Penguin.
- . 2015. *Hamlet*. T. J. B. Spencer, ed. Alan Sinfield, intro. London, Penguin.
- Santini, Gilberto, ed. 1996. *Giovanni Testori: Nel ventre del teatro*. Urbino, Quattro Venti.

- Taffon, Giorgio. 1997. *Lo scrivano, gli scarrozzanti, i templi: Giovanni Testori e il teatro*. Roma, Bulzoni.
- Testori, Giovanni. 1968. *Il ventre del teatro*. In Santini 1996, 33-46.
- . 1972. “Grünewald, la bestemmia e il trionfo”. Pref. a *L'opera completa di Grünewald*. Milano, Rizzoli.
- . 1994. *Tre Lai. Cleopatràs, Erodiàs, Mater Strangosciàs*. Milano, Longanesi.
- . 1995. *La realtà della pittura: Scritti di storia e critica d'arte dal Quattrocento al Settecento*. Pietro C. Marani, ed. Milano, Longanesi.
- . 2002. *Amleto. Una storia per il cinema*, Fulvio Panzeri, ed. Torino, Aragno.
- . 2008. *Opere 1943-1961*. Fulvio Panzeri, ed. Giovanni Raboni intro. Milano, Bompiani.
- . 2012. *I segreti di Milano*. Fulvio Panzeri, ed. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- . 2021. *Trilogia degli scarozzanti: L'Amleto-Macbetto-Edipus*. Michele Masneri, pref. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- . 2022. *Luchino*, Giovanni Agosti, ed. Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Toubas, Alain, ed. 2003. *Giovanni Testori: I segreti di Milano*. Cinisello Balsamo, Silvana Editoriale.

EL CAUDILLO'S SCOTTISH COUSIN:
MACBETH UNDER AND AFTER
FRANCO'S DICTATORSHIP

Gareth Wood

Given events in Spain from 1936 onwards, it should not perhaps be a surprise that some Republican intellectuals latched onto William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a way of understanding the darkness that had descended over their homeland. Nor should it startle us to learn that those attempting to stage The Scottish Play during Francisco Franco's regime found it thick with politically, ideologically, and visually incendiary references. A tragedy about a respected military leader, beloved of his king, who seizes an opportunity to usurp power, rules as a tyrant, and consigns legions of his compatriots to exile must have had a familiar ring to Spaniards on whom Franco had imposed himself.¹ He was indeed a career soldier whose successes as a senior officer of the Spanish Legion in the early 1920s had seen him rise to national prominence and appointed *gentilhombre de cámara* [gentleman-in-waiting] to King Alfonso XIII, part of an exclusive group of courtiers to the Monarch.² In fact, when Franco married Carmen Polo in October 1923, Alfonso XIII was his official best man, albeit represented in absentia by the military

¹ Stephen Greenblatt observes of *Macbeth*: "For if Richard [III] prides himself on his indifference to moral obligations and ordinary human feelings [...] *Macbeth* is highly sensitive to them. He is a stalwart, trusted military leader, a loyal defender of King Duncan's regime". See Greenblatt 2018, 97.

² Preston 1993, 37.

governor of Oviedo, where the ceremony took place.³ The armed uprising he helped to launch in 1936 not only usurped power from the democratically elected *Frente Popular* [Popular Front] government, it also created a vast diaspora of exiled Spaniards across North Africa, Europe, the US, and Central and South America.⁴ His thirty-six years of pitiless dictatorship were characterized by a determination to leave open the wounds of Civil War, that they might fester and blight the lives of those he had defeated: reconciliation was for the weak.⁵ The purpose of this chapter is to examine in depth three instances of Spanish engagement with *Macbeth*, both during the Franco regime and in its aftermath. The first of those examples will be *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño* [*Macbeth or the murderer of sleep*] (1954), an abbreviated adaptation of Shakespeare's original by the poet León Felipe, which, I argue, reflects on Francoism from the distance of Felipe's exile in Mexico.⁶ The second is the (again) adapted but fuller presentation of the play on Spanish state television in September 1966. Pedro Amalio López produced his version of *La tragedia de Macbeth* for the then recently inaugurated and unashamedly ambitious series, *Estudio 1* [*Studio 1*], whose quality has since made it a byword in Spain for high-calibre television drama. Central to the ethos of *Estudio 1* was to offer its increasingly affluent and informed audience the best of Spanish and international theatre in a prime-time slot on Wednesday evenings; except, of course, if there was an important football international to bump it from the schedules.⁷ Amalio López and his collaborators were subject to shackles on cultural production that had – in theory at least – noticeably loosened earlier that year: Manuel Fraga's more benevolent *Ley de Prensa* [Press Law] had come into force

³ Preston 1993, 41.

⁴ Sánchez Cervelló 2012.

⁵ Carr 1982, 695-709; Cazorla Sánchez 2010, 17-56; Richards 2016, 183-85; Viñas 2019.

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of Felipe's career as a translator, see Serón Ordóñez 2018.

⁷ Rodríguez Merchán 2014, 275.

on 18th March. All the same, their subtle re-ordering of scenes from *Macbeth*, suppressions, and alterations to key speeches tell us much about the eggshells on which they walked when it came to beaming the representation of tyranny, social unrest, and state-sponsored violence directly into Spanish homes. Our third and final example is not an adaptation of Shakespeare's play, rather a novel, *El pianista* (1985), written by the long-term critic of both Franco and the recently "concluded" transition to democracy, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán.⁸ His narrative tells of Spain's troubled twentieth century across three substantial chapters which recede in time from 1984 (part one, presumably with a nod to that year's Orwellian and dystopian resonances) to 1946 (part two) and on to 1936 (part three). In its opening pages, the character through whom the narration is focalized (seemingly a jobbing translator) quotes – not once but twice – the opening lines of Thomas De Quincey's celebrated essay, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823). There, De Quincey describes his protracted efforts to understand the dramatic effect of the stark transition between scenes 2 and 3 of Act 2, from the murder of King Duncan to the Porter's drunken ramblings. De Quincey concluded that:

In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers and the murder must be insulated – cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs, locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested – laid asleep – tranced – racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is, that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is

⁸ Debates about when the transition to democracy concluded, or indeed if it has even ended, receive a thorough airing in Faber 2021.

heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.⁹

Given that Vázquez Montalbán twice invites us to consider the relevance of that reflection on *Macbeth* to the novel we have just begun reading, this chapter will take up that invitation in its final section.

1. Tyranny through the lenses of *Macbeth*

The analyses that follow were to some extent prompted by, and are in conversation with, Keith Gregor's 2018 article "*Macbeth* and Regimes of Reading in Francoist Spain", where the focus is squarely on the first of my examples, Felipe's *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño*.¹⁰ Where my argument diverges from his, it does so in a spirit of respectful disagreement and in hopes of establishing dialogue. As should be clear by now, this chapter seeks to widen the frame of observation of how *Macbeth* was treated under and after the Franco regime as an interpretative lens through which to view both the present and the recent past. Gregor likewise sets out to answer a series of penetrating questions about how Shakespeare can be read, staged, harnessed, and interpreted under conditions of tyranny:

If, as now seems clear, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a not unambiguous reflection on contemporary notions of tyranny and their relation to James's own conception of absolute rule, what might be its significance for subsequent tyrannies in other parts of the globe? Would it have the same impact? Could it be performed at all under such regimes?¹¹

⁹ De Quincey 2006, 6-7.

¹⁰ Gregor 2018.

¹¹ Gregor 2018, 143.

The examples I discuss offer possible answers to those questions but are also indicative rather than exhaustive. The Spanish poet and translator, José María Álvarez, born in 1942, when asked to sum up his reaction to the death of Franco in 1975 replied with a quotation from *Macbeth*:

La sensación más fuerte que experimenté fue una pregunta shakespeariana: “¿Quién es ese hombre cubierto de sangre?” [“What bloody man is that?” (*Macbeth*, 1.2.1)]. Él simbolizaba todo aquello que más detesto: la victoria de la intolerancia, de la incultura, de la mediocridad. Era la sordidez en el poder.¹²

[My strongest sensation was a Shakespearean question: ‘What bloody man is that?’. He symbolized all that I most loathe: the victory of intolerance, of philistinism, of mediocrity. He was sordidness in power.¹³]

He went on elsewhere to see *Macbeth* as a forewarning of the totalitarianism unleashed on the twentieth century: “Lo hemos visto en la historia europea de este siglo, lo hemos padecido en nuestra propia carne. Por eso somos nocturnos, como Macbeth. La noche en que se hunde la civilización. Somos los insomnes, como Macbeth, de esa madrugada helada”.¹⁴ If *Macbeth* is a play which explores power unchecked by morality or reason, its instrumentalization by those opposed to the Franco regime is not difficult to understand. When one considers how much Macbeth suffers psychologically for the crimes he commits and the power he obtains, it is tempting to wonder whether making Franco a Spanish stand-in for the Scottish usurper was a form of wish fulfilment for those who cast him in that role. The manner of Macbeth’s demise, at

¹² Álvarez 2018, 477-78.

¹³ Translation mine. Further translations of citations will also be mine unless stated otherwise.

¹⁴ “We’ve seen it in the history of Europe this century, we’ve suffered it in our own flesh. That’s why we’re nocturnal, like Macbeth. The night into which civilization is sinking. We are the insomniacs, like Macbeth, in that frozen dawn”. Álvarez 2005, 111. See also 107-08.

the hands of the avenging Macduff, would only reinforce that impression. But we might also ask if the fascination with Franco as Macbeth filled the persistent blank around what sort of man Franco really was. His most respected biographer sums up his unknowability as follows:

Despite fifty years of public prominence and a life lived well into the television age, Francisco Franco remains the least known of the great dictators of the twentieth century. That is partly because of the smoke screen created by hagiographers and propagandists. In his lifetime, he was compared with Archangel Gabriel, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, El Cid, Charles V, Philip II, Napoleon, and a host of other real and imaginary heroes. [...] That Franco revelled in the wild exaggerations of his propaganda seems at odds with the many eyewitness accounts of a man who was shy in private and inhibited and ill-at-ease on public occasions. Similarly, his cruelly repressive politics may seem to be contradicted by the personal timidity which led many who met him to comment just how little he coincided with their image of a dictator.¹⁵

Preston quotes one of Franco's longest-serving subordinates, who observed him at close quarters over many years: "Franco is a man who says things and unsays them, who draws near and slips away, he vanishes and trickles away; always vague and never clear or categorical".¹⁶ Historians of his regime agree that its longevity owed a great deal to his ability to co-opt – and play off against one another – the competing factions that made up his right-wing coalition: inscrutability and opacity of motive were central to his style of government. Astute as that *modus operandi* is, it brings with it unwelcome consequences, as Stephen Greenblatt observes: "As for Macbeth, he has already learned the tyrant's chief lesson: he can have no real friends. His apparently casual question – 'Ride you

¹⁵ Preston 1993, xvii-xviii.

¹⁶ Preston 1993, xix-xx.

this afternoon?’ (3.1.19) – is the prelude to a plot to arrange his friend’s murder”.¹⁷

That loneliness sits alongside another of Macbeth’s preoccupations – the matter of succession. His anxieties on that score take at least two forms: fear of sexual inadequacy and the vexing question of who will benefit from the break in the lineage of Scottish kings that he has engineered.¹⁸ Thus Lady Macbeth can provoke him into murderous action with jibes about his sexual prowess: “Art thou afeared / To be the same in thine own act and valour, / As thou art in desire?” (1.7.39-41); “When you durst do it, then you were a man” (1.7.49). Meanwhile, he torments himself with the idea that he has damned his soul to Hell, only for Banquo’s sons to reap the benefit:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, / And put
a barren sceptre in my gripe, / Thence to be wrench’d
with an unlineal hand, / No son of mine succeeding.
If ’t be so, / For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind; /
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder’d; / Put
rancours in the vessel of my peace / Only for them.
(3.1.60-67)

When translating these lines for his adaptation of the play, León Felipe removed any of the ambiguity around Macbeth’s childlessness that stems from his Lady’s reference to having breast-fed children (1.7.54): “Ahora esas brujas a mi frente han ceñido una corona estéril, y un cetro infecundo es esto que aquí agarro. No tengo descen-

¹⁷ Greenblatt 2018, 102.

¹⁸ Greenblatt on the link between sexuality and tyranny: “Lady Macbeth’s jibes about her husband’s manhood – his ability to be the same in act as he is in desire – bring up to the surface a recurrent implication in Shakespearean tyranny. The tyrant, *Macbeth* and other plays suggest, is driven by a range of sexual anxieties: a compulsive need to prove his manhood, dread of impotence, a nagging apprehension that he will not be found sufficiently attractive or powerful, a fear of failure. Hence the penchant for bullying, the vicious misogyny, and the explosive violence. Hence, too, the vulnerability to taunts, especially those bearing a latent or explicit sexual charge”. Greenblatt 2018, 99.

dencia, y cuando muera, una mano bastarda me lo arrancará de la mano".¹⁹ The none-too-subtle reference to the impotent phallic 'cetro' [sceptre] indicates, as we shall see shortly, that his version of the play implicitly taunts the Franco regime from afar for its illegitimacy and uncertain future. Adept as Franco was at keeping Carlists, Conservatives, Falangists, Monarchists, and Reformers sufficiently content enough of the time to maintain the status quo, refusing explicitly to endorse any blueprint for what the future might look like left the prospects for his regime no clearer. What Francoism would look like without Franco became a progressively more urgent issue, not least from the middle of the 1960s, when it became clear to those close to El Caudillo that he was suffering from Parkinson's disease. Alfonso XIII's third son, Juan de Borbón, having agitated for years in hopes of persuading Franco to restore him to the Spanish throne (his two elder brothers renounced their dynastic claim in the 1930s), eventually entered a Faustian pact with the dictator, surrendering to him the care of his eldest child, Juan Carlos, so that he could be groomed as a future successor. Juan Carlos was duly announced as such in 1969, having received a military education of the dictator's own devising. Franco's wife Carmen Polo, meanwhile, reportedly expressed her frustration that she and her husband had not produced a male heir; a cruel twist on Macbeth's instruction to his Lady – "Bring forth men-children only" (1.7.73).²⁰ And yet, as the regime entered its twilight years, Doña Carmen came to believe that she had secured its future through the familial bloodline after all. On 8th March 1972 her granddaughter, María del Carmen Martínez-Bordiú y Franco, married Alfonso de Borbón-Dampí, the grandson of Alfonso XIII and Juan Carlos's first cousin. Although the wedding invitations sent out to all European heads of state were in the main politely declined, the occasion was

¹⁹ Felipe 2021, 282: "Just now those witches placed a sterile crown upon my head, and a barren sceptre is all I have here in my grip. I have no offspring, and when I die, a bastard hand shall wrench it from my fist".

²⁰ Bayod 1981, 30.

filmed for the official NO-DO newsreels.²¹ On her granddaughter's return from honeymoon, Doña Carmen made great play of curtsying before her and encouraged other members of Franco's inner circle to treat her as if she were royalty.²² Where in the past Doña Carmen had remained very much in her husband's shadow, the latter's declining health emboldened his wife to hone her credentials as kingmaker in the Lady Macbeth vein. She manoeuvred behind the scenes in attempts to rescind Juan Carlos's nomination as heir-incumbent and to name her grandson-in-law in his place, albeit without success.²³

Once again, it is tempting to pursue the parallel between Doña Carmen and Lady Macbeth, not least because Shakespeare's play satisfies the audience's prurient desire to see what passes between the ruthlessly ambitious husband and wife when they are alone together.²⁴ As Paul Preston observes in one of his contributions to the documentary film, *Carmen Polo, la señora de Meirás* (2004), we have scant evidence that Doña Carmen ever sought to temper her husband's cruel exercise of power.²⁵ Instead, she acquired a reputation for hauteur, philistinism, and apparently inexhaustible greed – such that jewellers and antique dealers are said to have closed their premises prematurely on days when word reached them that Doña Carmen was in town: she never paid for any of the goods she plundered from their shops.²⁶ There is one crucial difference, however, between Lady Macbeth and Franco's consort. While guilt and shame drive the former to sui-

²¹ Wheeler 2020, 54-57.

²² Montero 2017, 170-73.

²³ Preston 2004, 404-07.

²⁴ Jesús Tronch-Pérez notes the parallels between Carmen Polo and Lady Macbeth in his analysis of a production of *Hamlet* broadcast on Televisión Española in 1970. See Tronch-Pérez 2010, 307.

²⁵ Two exceptions are Doña Carmen's intervention to avoid the execution of her cousin's friends during the Civil War (Preston 2004, 373-74) and her support for a social security scheme for domestic servants in the late 1950s (see Richmond 2003, 88-89).

²⁶ Preston 2004, 388.

cide, Doña Carmen appears to have experienced not the slightest shred of remorse, instead spending her final years complaining vocally from the grace-and-favour mansions she still occupied about the Spanish state's ingratitude towards her.²⁷

2. *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño*

Nonetheless, it is in the dialogue of Lady Macbeth that the reader of León Felipe's *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño* receives the first indications the backdrop to this drama is a version of medieval Scotland transposed onto Spanish soil.²⁸ As Gregor observes, Felipe's paraphrase of the text condenses the action but also retains much of its most memorable dialogue: "The set speeches are, as we might expect, maintained and even underscored by means of Felipe's distinctive and, as it turns out, remarkably faithful free verse".²⁹ That fidelity to Shakespeare's original makes more obvious those instances where the Spanish departs significantly from its source. This is precisely what occurs in one of Lady Macbeth's first speeches: "Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" (1.7.56-58) is rendered as "Tu carta me llevó más allá de este presente rústico / y me hizo gozar de un futuro imperial".³⁰ As if to reinforce the point, Felipe's version has her return to ideas of empire scarcely a dozen lines later, when Lady Macbeth's "and you shall put / This night's great business into my dispatch; / Which shall to all our nights and days to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom" (1.7.67-70) becomes "Después, / las noches y los días venideros darán testimonio de nuestro poder; / de nues-

²⁷ Preston 2004, 422-24.

²⁸ For an overview of the reception of León Felipe's dramatic works in Franco's Spain, see Muñoz Cáliz 2010.

²⁹ Gregor 2018, 152.

³⁰ Felipe 2021, 261: "Your letter took me beyond this rustic present / and made me revel in an imperial future".

tro mando y nuestra imperial soberanía".³¹ These deviations from the English text can hardly fail to evoke the Franco regime's obsessive fetishization of Spain's imperial past, the Golden Age, and the Catholic Monarchs who had done so much to make it possible.³² Indeed, it was Franco's determination to relive the imperial dream that soured relations with Nazi Germany in October 1940 when the dictator met Adolf Hitler in the French town of Hendaye. The Fuhrer regarded Franco's demands, for substantial swathes of Moroccan territory then under French control, as a ludicrously high price to pay for Spanish intervention on the side of the Axis powers. Although the two delegations signed an accord which made provision for Spain's entry into the war, neither side anticipated it happening on any meaningful scale.³³

A further telling amendment to Shakespeare's original occurs shortly after these exchanges. Felipe elects to reassign Banquo's short speech at the beginning of 1.6, on the "martlet" and the good omens it suggests, to King Duncan, such that we hear the soon-to-be-murdered monarch offer his complacent assessment of the hospitality he expects to receive as Macbeth's guest: "Mirad la viajera golondrina, / humilde huésped del verano, / construyendo tranquila / su morada y su lecho / en los aleros y cor-

³¹ Felipe 2021, 261: "Hereafter, / the nights and days to come will attest to our power / to our leadership and imperial sovereignty".

³² Carolyn Boyd analyses the changes to the Spanish 'Bachillerato' which were to reflect this shift of emphasis: "The national drama was a saga of triumph, betrayal, and eventual redemption; its centre of gravity lay in the centuries of imperial greatness, from the "formation of one Spain" under the Catholic Kings through the valiant defence of Catholic orthodoxy by Philip II. The exclusive subject of study during the last two courses was the history and significance of Spanish imperialism in its spiritual and territorial dimensions. The syllabi attributed the political and cultural achievements of the patria to quintessential embodiments of the racial virtues like the Cid, Cardinal Cisneros, and the duke of Alba". (Boyd 1997, 243. See also 232-72).

³³ Preston 1993, 394-400.

nisas".³⁴ Although the change may appear trivial at first sight, it has a logic in a Hispanic context on which Felipe may be drawing. Evidence from compilers of historical popular verse indicates age-old associations in Spanish culture between swallows and the alleviation of suffering: swallows are said to have been the birds which plucked the crown of thorns from Jesus' brow during the Crucifixion, as celebrated in any number of folk songs.³⁵ Given that Duncan is about to have his own crown plucked violently and unceremoniously from his head, the re-assignment of Banquo's speech about the martlet to King Duncan achieves two things. Firstly, it underscores the cruel irony of the King's misplaced trust and, secondly, it heightens the sense of grotesque betrayal in Macbeth's actions: where the King should feel most safe, he is instead most at risk.

Whereas the original refers to the 'temple-haunting martlet', Felipe's text sets out a more detailed landscape which has no equivalent in Shakespeare. Certainly, that landscape suggests key features of the Spanish countryside as much as that of Scotland:

He observado
que donde hace su habitación esta avecilla...
en los conventos, en las granjas,
en las casas antiguas,
el aire es puro
y la vida sencilla...³⁶

[I have observed
that where this little bird makes her nest...
in convents, on farms,
in old houses,
the air is pure
and life simple...]

³⁴ Felipe 2021, 262: "Behold the wandering swallow, / summer's humble lodger, / calmly building / her home and bed / among the eaves and cornices".

³⁵ Fraile Gil 1994.

³⁶ Felipe 2021, 262.

This growing impression that Felipe – consciously or not – is inviting comparison with the land he left for exile is only reinforced upon Lady Macbeth’s entry. Duncan’s “See, see, our honoured hostess” (1.6.10) becomes in Spanish “Pero aquí está la castellana que esta noche/su castillo hospitalario nos brinda”.³⁷ “Castellana” can of course refer to the female owner of a castle but carries the far more obvious and widely used meaning of a woman from Castile, Spain’s ancient heartland. An alternative – and a more direct translation of “hostess” – might have been “anfitriona”, which would also have avoided the inelegant and tautologous repetition of “castellana/Castillo”, unless, that is, the change itself carries weight as a key to Felipe’s rendering of the play as a reflection on Spain. By extension, this growing body of evidence calls into question Gregor’s claim that his version of *Macbeth* “is not strictly an appropriation, if by appropriation is meant the adaptation of a text for specifically political purposes”.³⁸ Gregor bases that interpretation in part on the “Nota preliminar” [Preliminary note] to *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño*, in which Felipe asserts:

Porque en este momento climatérico de la historia de Occidente, en que la jerarquía de los pueblos se va a organizar sobre virtudes esenciales, es más urgente colocar junto a la Inglaterra poética la España poética, que hacer un estudio comparativo entre Churchill y Franco, por ejemplo.³⁹

[For in this climactic moment in Western history, in which the hierarchy among peoples will be organized around essential virtues, it is more urgent to place poetic England alongside poetic Spain, than to produce a comparative study of Churchill and Franco, say.]

As Gregor observes, there is his further suggestion in an epigraph to the play that “Macbeth no es ni escocés ni medieval. Y más que un guerrero, es un poeta [...] Macbeth

³⁷ Felipe 2021, 262: “But here is the owner of this castle who tonight / throws open the welcoming castle to us”.

³⁸ Gregor 2018, 151.

³⁹ Felipe 2021, 234.

es Shakespeare mismo”.⁴⁰ And yet, in light of the counter-indications examined thus far, we might wonder whether his version of *Macbeth* is not closer to an example of the intercultural transfer he evokes in the final lines of his preliminary note:

Shakespeare y Cervantes y todos los grandes poetas se alzan sobre las cumbres más altas de su tierra para buscar otros poetas en el horizonte... Y los pueblos gritan por su boca para encontrar otros pueblos con quienes mezclarse y cruzar amorosamente las nobles semillas del hombre.⁴¹

[Shakespeare and Cervantes and all the great poets stand astride the tallest peaks of their land to seek other poets on the horizon... And the peoples of those countries call out from their mouths to find other peoples with whom to mingle and lovingly exchange man's noble seed.]

With that possibility in mind, it is to *Macbeth's* witches that we now turn, for they represent in Gregor's reading the lone clear reference to Spain in Felipe's text, albeit one pregnant with meaning for the Franco regime: “their names (Garduñona, Zurripenca, and Sapo-Viejo) suggesting a distinctly Spanish provenance – specifically the witch-obsessed region of Galicia, where the dictator happened to have been born”.⁴² To that interpretation we add the words of the witches' spell to summon Hecate (who remains unnamed in Felipe's version of the play):

⁴⁰ Felipe 2021, 241: “Macbeth is neither Scottish nor medieval. And more than a warrior, he is a poet [...] Macbeth is Shakespeare himself”.

⁴¹ Felipe 2021, 235.

⁴² Gregor 2018, 152. Juan J. Zaro argues that the witches in Felipe's text should have alerted us as early as the text's prologue to the fact that we were in Spain. He points out that the witches use the word “Volaverum”, an apparent variation on the title of Francisco de Goya's *Capricho* “Volavérunt”, which depicts a figure widely regarded as the Duquesa de Alba being borne aloft by three crone-like figures. See Kilman and Santos 2005, 105.

BRUJA 3ª. Raíz de la cicuta.

BRUJA 1ª. El hígado de un turco blasfemo.

BRUJA 2ª. El prepucio de un judío converso.

CALDERO. Aún no está espeso el caldo... aún no está espeso.

[3rd WITCH: Root of hemlock.

1st WITCH: The liver of a blasphemed Turk.

2nd WITCH: The foreskin of a converted Jew.

CAULDRON: The broth is not yet thickened... is not yet thickened.]

The original Shakespeare here reads: “Root of hemlock digg’d i’ the dark, / Liver of blaspheming Jew, / Gall of goat, and slips of yew / Silver’d in the moon’s eclipse, / Nose of Turk and Tartar’s lips” (4.1.25-29). Evidently, Felipe has condensed the language and shifted the attribution of the secretions and organs demanded for the diabolical potion. He has done so, moreover, in ways that once more evoke his homeland, particularly the phrase “judío converso”, evocative of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain enacted by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492, which prompted many thousands to renounce their faith and “embrace” Catholicism. Anxiety over the authenticity of Jews’ conversion to Christian belief became a cornerstone of efforts by the Spanish Inquisition to root out those who continued to practise their original faith in secret. In Felipe’s text, the word “converso” – not an obvious translation of “blaspheming” – draws on a deep history of anti-semitic association with duplicity and treachery. It may indeed gesture towards the divisions that had torn Spain apart during the Civil War, not least because, as the conflict raged, the Nationalist faction re-purposed the word to refer to Republicans as “conversos”, thereby uniting twin tropes of long-standing anti-Jewish propaganda with fears over the enemy within the body politic whose presence must be purged: all part of efforts on Franco’s behalf to characterize his campaign as nothing less than a religious crusade.⁴³ Historians have long been aware of the dictator’s idiosyncratic obsession with a Judeo-Masonic-

⁴³ Peñalba Sotorrió 2020, 390.

Communist conspiracy seeking to undermine his nation's historic destiny as a bastion of nationalistic Catholicism.⁴⁴

Felipe renders the witches' refrain – "Double, double toil and trouble;/Fire burn and cauldron bubble" (4.1.10-11, 20-21, 35-36) – as "Aún no está espeso el caldo", the latter being the archetypal word for stock or broth in Spain, the base for any number of national dishes. As their preparations near their climax, the BRUJA 1^a appears to dispel any final doubts that what Felipe has conjured in his version of *Macbeth* is a hellish re-enactment of the pact between malevolent forces and the Catholic Church:

BRUJA 1^a. Ahora con la sangre del mono, el espeso caldo *aspergemos*.

Hagamos los *signos malditos*. En la orina verde y corrosiva del diablo mojemos nuestros dedos, y *untémonos* con su bituminoso excremento. Santiguémonos según *el catecismo siniestro*. Invoquemos el espíritu protervo. (294-95, my italics)

[Now let us *anoint* the broth with monkey's blood. Let us make the *signs of the curse*. Let us dip our fingers in the devil's green, corrosive urine, and *smear* ourselves with his bituminous excrement. Let us cross ourselves according to the *evil catechism*.]

These lines have no obvious equivalent in the original scene and must be considered a provocative addition to the play, one that draws an equivalence between the summoning of a demon and Christian doctrine. The verbs "asperjar" and "untar" are both associated with the rituals of anointing in Christian worship and the use of the word "catecismo" could hardly be clearer in its implications. The hand-in-glove nature of the relationship between the Franco regime and the Catholic Church in Spain is indisputable.⁴⁵ Felipe himself had denounced that situation in 1939: "De Franco han sido y siguen

⁴⁴ Dickie 2020, 323-43; Domínguez Arribas, 2022, 330-31.

⁴⁵ Cueva Merino 2018; Lannon 1987, 198-223; Raguer 2001; Raguer 2012.

siendo los arzobispos, pero no los poetas".⁴⁶ If, as I have been arguing, Felipe wants his audience to visualize Macbeth as a stand-in for Spain's dictator, the climax of the play indicates how he wishes to frame the consequences for the usurper's crimes. An arresting image of Macbeth silhouetted between battlements as Macduff's sword runs him through is succeeded by an epilogue in which the witches drag his corpse over the side of a ravine, chanting: "Lo feo es bello... y lo bello es feo. / ¡Macbeth! ... ¡Macbeth! ... ¡Macbeth! ... / ¡¡Tenemos una cita contigo en el infierno!!".⁴⁷ The wish-fulfilment is complete.

Felipe wrote his Shakespeare paraphrase during a period of personal turmoil.⁴⁸ Advancing age and the isolation of exile conspired to leave him at a low ebb. Hopes among Franco's opponents of political change in Spain had suffered the twin blows of Allied refusal to intervene on the Iberian Peninsula after the fall of Hitler and the country's readmission to the fold of international diplomacy thanks to the generosity of the US Marshall Plans.⁴⁹ Felipe's community of exiled compatriots was itself fragmenting. In the same year that he published *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño*, his fellow exile, Max Aub, used the opportunity afforded by a dinner held in Felipe's honour to brandish their cultural and political irrelevance before the assembled audience.⁵⁰ While Aub, Felipe, and others had founded and championed the *Unión de Intelectuales Españoles en México* [Union of Spanish Intellectuals in Mexico], by 1956 its members resorted to publishing a *Boletín de Información* [Information Bulletin] to maintain a

⁴⁶ Felipe 2019, 270.

⁴⁷ Felipe 2021, 318: "Foul is fair... and fair is foul. / Macbeth! ... Macbeth! ... Macbeth! ... / We have an appointment with you in hell!"

⁴⁸ For an analysis of Spanish Republican exiles turning to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for literary inspiration, see Buffery 2012.

⁴⁹ Spain signed off its final agreement with the US administration to allow air bases and other military construction to take place on its national territory in exchange for financial assistance in September 1953.

⁵⁰ Faber 2002, 226-27.

sense of cohesion, national identity, and pride in their collective cultural endeavours.⁵¹ Two years later, Felipe would issue a rectification of one of his most famous poems, *Reparto*, in which he had addressed Franco directly, from the pages of a collection entitled *Español del éxodo y del llanto* [Spaniard of Exodus and Tears]:

Tuya es la hacienda, / la casa, / el caballo / y la pistola.
/ Mía es la voz antigua de la tierra. / Tú te quedas con
todo/ y me dejas desnudo y errante por el mundo... /
mas yo te dejo mudo... ¡Mudo! / ¿Y cómo vas a recoger
el trigo / y a alimentar el fuego / si yo me llevo la can-
ción?⁵²

[Yours is the country estate, / the home, / the horse /
and the handgun. / Mine is the ancient voice of the
land. / You are keeping everything / and you leave me
naked and wandering the earth / but I leave you
mute... Mute! / And how are you going to harvest the
wheat / and keep the hearth burning / if I'm taking the
song with me?]

By 1958 he would be forced to reconsider. Addressing the poem now to his "Hermano", he conceded that:

Yo no me llevé la canción... Vosotros os quedasteis
con todo: con la tierra y la canción... Al final todo se
hizo grito vano... Los mudos fuimos nosotros... De
este lado no brotó el poeta. Y ahora estamos aquí...
nosotros los españoles del éxodo... asombrados...
oyéndoos cantar...⁵³

[I didn't take the song... You kept hold of everything:
of the land and the song... In the end it was all a vain
cry... We were the mute ones... The poet didn't sprout
on this side. And now we are here... we Spaniards of
the exodus... astonished... listening to you all sing...]

His engagement with Shakespeare formed part of attempts to reinvigorate his work and reach new audi-

⁵¹ Faber 2002, 152-53.

⁵² Felipe 2019, 270.

⁵³ Figuera Aymerich 1958, 10-11

ences.⁵⁴ It should be said that he partially succeeded on both fronts: he called *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño* “el esfuerzo... que más estimo de toda mi obra poética” and no less a figure than Luis Buñuel expressed an interest in producing the play.⁵⁵ It was eventually performed without his participation in Mexico City in 1955.⁵⁶ However, the illustrious Spanish actor who had been Buñuel’s first choice to play Macbeth, Francisco Rabal, retained his fascination with Felipe’s work, writing to him as late as 1959 still hopeful of bringing the Shakespearean paraphrase to the national stage in Madrid.⁵⁷ As Berta Muñoz Cáliz makes clear, securing permission to perform plays by writers in exile was a tall order in Franco’s Spain and it seems almost impossible to believe his version of *Macbeth* would have fared any better.⁵⁸ The renowned foreign correspondent Miguel de la Quadra, who worked for the state-controlled broadcaster Televisión Española (TVE) for two decades under Franco, recalled that the only programme he ever had withdrawn by the censors prior to broadcast was a profile of none other than León Felipe.⁵⁹ Just how incendiary some aspects of *Macbeth* itself were for the regime can be discerned from the version of the play staged on TVE in 1966, to which this chapter now turns.⁶⁰

3. *La tragedia de Macbeth*

The series in which *La tragedia de Macbeth* was produced and broadcast, *Estudio 1*, had first appeared on television schedules the previous year. It was the latest iteration of

⁵⁴ Ascunce 2000, 221-24; Rius 2019, 309-12.

⁵⁵ Shakespeare 1983, 9: ‘the endeavour... that I hold most dear of all my poetic works’.

⁵⁶ Serón Ordóñez 2018, 130-31.

⁵⁷ Felipe 2017, 36.

⁵⁸ Muñoz Cáliz 2010, 207-29.

⁵⁹ Díaz 2006, 143.

⁶⁰ For an overview of how foreign dramatists fared at the hands of Francoist censorship, see O’Leary and Thompson 2023, 326-79.

TVE's efforts to bring televised drama to its growing audience. Among its predecessors were *Fila Cero*, *Gran Teatro*, and *Primera Fila*, which aired for the first time in 1958, 1960, and 1962 respectively. *Estudio 1* was a sign of both continuity and change in Spain's cultural landscape: continuity because producers and directors still needed to tread carefully where Francoist sensibilities were concerned; change because the plays it showcased were both noticeably more cinematic and more highbrow than had hitherto been the norm. The level of televisual ambition had been boosted by access to modern recording equipment, sound stages, and studio space with the inauguration in July 1964 of the Centro de Producción de Programas de Prado del Rey in western Madrid. In its first eighteen months on air, alongside two Shakespeare adaptations (*Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*), *Estudio 1* produced plays by Jacinto Benavente, Henrik Ibsen, Eugène Ionesco, Lope de Vega, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, and J. B. Priestley.⁶¹ As it happens and thanks in part to *Estudio 1*, 1966 turned out to be the pinnacle of a steady rise in the number of hours of annual programming – 515 in total – TVE dedicated to drama.⁶² Nor were the producers overestimating their audience's appetite for such fare: a survey undertaken in 1969 indicated that more than seven million people were tuning in for the weekly episodes.⁶³ Better access to education and leisure time had created the conditions necessary to generate such receptive viewers, as the regime shifted the narrative on its legitimacy from a purgative victory in the Civil War to a more optimistic vision of its own economic competence.⁶⁴ Although that increased confidence had prompted the easing of censorship measures in March 1966, in practice, those in charge of TVE were political appointees and, as Enrique Bustamante puts it, "en los medios audiovisuales, y muy especialmente en TVE, no puede advertirse el menor cam-

⁶¹ For a brief overview of *Estudio 1*'s Shakespearean output, see Casacajosa Virino 2007, 254.

⁶² Diego *et al.* 2018, 74.

⁶³ Palacio 2001, 70.

⁶⁴ Aguilar 2002, 25-26.

bio de situación en términos estructurales ni en los contenidos y sus controles".⁶⁵ Such scrutiny is indicative of a regime which both valued and feared the potential reach of the television sets that by 1966 took pride of place in nearly two million Spanish homes. The fact that Franco was himself an avid watcher of television doubtless also concentrated the minds of those commissioning the output of the national broadcaster.⁶⁶

Thanks to Gregor's diligence we have an excellent account of the first stage-production of *Macbeth* in Franco's Spain, at the Teatro Español in early 1942, and one we might usefully contrast with that filmed for *Estudio 1*.⁶⁷ With Cayetano Luca de Tena as director, the play formed part of a theatrical season showcasing mainly Golden Age drama, much in line with the regime's reification of the national past as it looked to build the future. Staging Shakespeare was an assertion of its credentials as a country re-born and eager to learn lessons from the established classics.⁶⁸ Such eagerness only extended so far, however, and the cuts to *Macbeth* are eloquent testimony to that fact. Out went the Porter's scene, the spectacle of Macbeth's head impaled on a spear, and key phrases from Malcolm's conciliatory final speech:

Coming just two years after the end of a civil war which had caused some 500,000 deaths and an indeterminate number of injuries, forced migrations, and exiles and which had introduced mechanisms of surveillance and restriction of freedom not seen since the days of the Inquisition, the references to "exil'd Friends," "watchfull Tyranny," "cruell Ministers" and "dead Butcher[s]" were presumably also considered too "dangerous" to translate. "Exil'd Friends" would seem innocuous enough, were it not for the fact that

⁶⁵ Bustamante 2013, 45: "in broadcast media, and particularly at TVE, not the least perceptible change of situation is felt in structural terms nor in content and controls on content".

⁶⁶ Preston 1993, 700, 706, 719, 735, 750, 758, 769.

⁶⁷ A second detailed description of Luca de Tena's *Macbeth* can be found in Baltés 2014, 46-54.

⁶⁸ Gregor 2018, 146-48.

exile (as well as execution) was generally the fate of Franco's enemies, and so the translator settled for the less offensive "nuestros soldados fugitivos" ["our fleeing soldiers"], preferring the hint of cowardice to an evocation of mass expatriation.⁶⁹

Gregor's account of staging emphasizes the medieval appearance of the furniture and Celtic iconography employed on the costumes, presumably to reinforce the notion that events on stage reflected another country many centuries ago, rather than more immediate realities.⁷⁰ If we were expecting the *Estudio 1* version of *Macbeth* to display a less jittery approach to the text, our hopes would be dashed. An early indicator of the insistence on cultural difference comes in the pronunciation of the word "Cawdor". Were the cast to follow ordinary rules of Spanish grammar, the accent would fall on the word's second syllable, as is the case with all those that end in 'r', except that in this case they pronounce it with the stress on the first syllable, to emphasize the otherness of the setting. Like its theatrical predecessor, the televised version removes the Porter's intervention altogether, the action jumping straight from 2.2 to Macduff's cries of treason midway through 2.3. Even before that, translator José María Rincón and adapter Amalio López display a curious aversion to Macbeth's signs of weakness: his nerves prior to the murder of Duncan and his expression of remorse in its aftermath. Their Macbeth (played by Francisco Piquer) is more decisive than Shakespeare's, thanks to the removal of both the former's "Is this a dagger..." speech (2.1.33-61) and the choppy back-and-forth dialogue between him and his Lady as he emerges from Duncan's bedchamber (2.2.16-19). Instead of Macbeth's obvious signs of disquiet, Piquer delivers an emphatic "¡Ya está!" ['It's done!'] to announce that the King is dead. As his words hang in the air, the camera pans to Irene Gutiérrez Caba in the role of Lady Macbeth whose face shows the sexual arousal triggered by her husband's display of viril-

⁶⁹ Gregor 2018, 149.

⁷⁰ Gregor 2018, 148.

ity and valour. The prizing of a hyper-masculine version of the usurper is not surprising in a cultural context as avowedly misogynistic as the Franco years. In the original Shakespeare, Macbeth's thoughts turn quickly to the fear that he has placed himself beyond God's blessing – "But wherefore could I not pronounce *Amen*?" (2.2.32) – yet Amalio López's adaptation excises the full exchange about the religious implications of his actions (2.2.20-35). As we shall see, the *Estudio 1* version wishes his moment of anagnorisis to resolve his and the play's understanding of faith.

The tendency to sanitize potentially incendiary material, observed in the 1942 production, remains in evidence nearly a quarter of a century later. Macbeth may betray his King and country, but he is less obviously a monster. While the murders of key characters – Banquo, Macduff's wife and children – all take place, they do so by implication only, and none is shown on screen. Banquo's is the only body displayed for the viewer, then only in a brief overhead shot. Queasiness at the depiction of what is effectively state-sponsored violence against the innocent and the blameless rings true of a Franco regime that preferred to execute its victims under cover of darkness and behind closed doors. And yet, omission of such details cannot but lessen the apparent impact of Macbeth's crimes and give him a more sympathetic aspect. The adaptation is also less political. Macduff's speeches on tyranny at 4.3.3ff, 4.3.37ff, 4.3.164ff are all absent. More subtly still, Macbeth's speeches to the Murderers, wherein he provides a motive for the crimes he is asking them to commit, have also been cut. He makes much of Banquo's role in ruining their opportunities for betterment: "Know, that it was he, in times past, / Which held you so under fortune" (3.1.76-77), none of which dialogue finds its way into the televised version. The excision seeks, in all likelihood, to avoid an unwelcome evocation of Spain's recent history. Given that Franco's coup unleashed politically motivated violence aimed by people at the bottom of the social ladder against those they held responsible for their millennial poverty – usually the local landowners and

clergy – the adapters of *Macbeth* presumably wished to remove the suggestion that such grievances could ever justify murder.⁷¹ In place of that social division, the televised version presents a nation reconciled, particularly in the amended lines of Malcolm's final speech, where the aberration of discord is laid squarely and solely at Macbeth's door: "Escocia ha estado enferma mucho tiempo y se ha desgarrado a sí misma, pero la fuente de donde manaba tanta sangre está aquí, seca y agotada. Que las campanas no doblen a muerte".⁷² "[E]xiled friends abroad" are instead invoked with "Que se pregone el perdón para los soldados fugitivos que quieran someterse. Y que, alzados sobre sus escudos los cuerpos de las víctimas, escoltados de luces, sean depositados en el túmulo".⁷³ Rather than a plea for exiled compatriots to return, his words re-assert the state's authority to define whom it considers a legitimate citizen. The official pardon for all "crimes" committed by Republican forces during the Civil War would not arrive in Spain until 1969. The reference to mass burial of the righteous cannot but evoke comparisons with the Valley of the Fallen, inaugurated a decade earlier amid much pomp, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Nationalist victory. Although the families of Republican casualties of the Civil War could apply to have their deceased relatives interred at the Valley, they had to prove the dead soldiers were practising Catholics before their request could be granted.⁷⁴

Before the televised version can gesture towards that guarded sense of reconciliation, it must first despatch the

⁷¹ Viñas 2012, 475-97.

⁷² "Scotland has been a long time sick and has torn itself apart, but the spring from which that blood was rising lies here, dried up and exhausted. May the death knells be silenced", see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-gUMuDT7_A

⁷³ "Let a general pardon be announced for those fleeing soldiers who wish to surrender. And may the bodies of the victims be raised up on their shields, escorted with torches, and laid to rest in the burial mound", see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-gUMuDT7_A

⁷⁴ Stockey 2013, 21-22.

tyrannical King. As James Shapiro observes, “[u]nlike most other tragic heroes in Shakespeare, Macbeth is denied a dying, self-revealing speech”.⁷⁵ And yet, that is not how we see the moribund usurper in *La tragedia de Macbeth*. There, rather, the adapters give him the “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” speech (5.5.18-27) to deliver with his dying breaths. If he has learnt too late that life “is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” he has experienced a moment of anagnorisis that puts him squarely in tune with one of the great moral preoccupations of Spain’s Golden Age – the fleeting nature of earthly happiness. A Macbeth who delivers those lines as he expires is a King who experiences “desengaño” [‘disillusionment’], a theme explored so richly by Miguel de Cervantes, Luis de Góngora, Francisco de Quevedo, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, the writers of Spain’s XVI and XVII centuries whose legacy the Francoist state had been so eager to champion. In 1969, Calderón became the showcase for the televisual highlight of the decade when his “auto sacramental”, *El gran teatro del mundo*, was filmed for *Estudio 1* in a ten-week super-production at no less a venue than the Valley of the Fallen.⁷⁶ Amalio López’s Macbeth has aimed too high and paid the price for his excess of ambition, but he has also importantly seen the error of his ways. While he may have slipped from the sin of pride into the sin of despair at the moment of death, his experience of “desengaño” wins him a classically Spanish aura of approbation.

In short, the adapters of *La tragedia de Macbeth* – like León Felipe before them – demonstrate through their excisions of the provocative rougher edges to Shakespeare’s Scottish Play that it reflects with devastating accuracy and clarity on Franco’s rise to prominence and his remorseless exercise of power. That view appears to have been shared by the prolific left-wing writer, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, although readers of his novel *El pianista* need

⁷⁵ Shapiro 2015, 215.

⁷⁶ Diego *et al.* 2018, 89-90, 92.

to listen carefully for the echoes of *Macbeth* to appreciate the full resonances of the play in its fictional world.

4. *El pianista*

As mentioned in the introduction, Vázquez Montalbán had been an important voice of opposition to the Franco regime since the early 1960s, even spending eighteen months in prison for attending a rally in support of a coalminers' strike in 1962. A decade later, he wrote *El pequeño libro pardo del general*, a myth-busting takedown of El Caudillo published anonymously by the Paris-based opposition press, Ruedo Ibérico.⁷⁷ Nor was Vázquez Montalbán enamoured of Spain's transition to democracy, which he saw as a missed opportunity to empower the working classes and drain the national swamp. He popularized the phrase "el Franquismo sociológico", first used by the Catalan politician Isidre Molas, to describe the deep undertow of fascistic values prevalent in a country governed autocratically for close to four decades.⁷⁸ A question he posed in the title of an article published in May 1978 has since become emblematic of the disenchantment shared by many at the failure to seize the opportunity presented by the demise of Franco's regime: "¿Contra Franco estábamos mejor?"⁷⁹ His novel, *El pianista*, takes the temperature of post-transition Spain and looks back on the damage that the transition had sought to repair. It has an unusual structure based around three lengthy sections which move backwards in time from 1984 to 1946 and on to 1936. In the first, we meet a group of friends on a night out in post-transition Barcelona. The narrative is focalized principally through the character named only as Ventura, though it moves seamlessly from first- to third-person perspective. Ventura is terminally ill, although what ails him is unclear, and in consequence a sombre tone pervades the action. He thinks about the

⁷⁷ *The General's Little Brown Book*.

⁷⁸ Faber 2021, 73: "sociological Francoism".

⁷⁹ Vázquez Montalbán 2011, 189-92: "Were we better off against Franco?" See also Faber 2021, 45-46, 111.

translation project he has been procrastinating to avoid for much of the day, the aforementioned essay by De Quincey, “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*”. If, as the famous essayist concluded, the hammering at the gate signals the return to the everyday world after descent into diabolical murder, the temptation arises to ask what hell Ventura and his companions are emerging from in 1980s Barcelona. There may well be more than one answer to that question but among them – and by far the most obvious – would of course be Francoism itself.

Once Ventura and his old friends reunite, we realize from their conversations that they came of age as the regime eked out its beleaguered final phase: references to radical political affiliations and to the milestones of the transition – including the death of Admiral Carrero Blanco – suggest a shared past of collective struggle. Equally clear during their boozy night out, almost a decade on from Franco’s death, is the divergence in their respective fortunes now that the common cause which brought them together has vanished. Ventura and his friend Schubert, an academic, share a bleak, mordant perspective, one that they unleash with increasing bile in digs at their companions as the alcohol flows during their tour of Barcelona’s El Raval district. To Ventura and Schubert, their more conspicuously successful one-time comrades are sell-outs, who changed political spots just in time to capitalize on the nepotism that still dominates national life, for all that Spain has allegedly embraced democracy and transparency. Their friend Joan sums up the situation as follows: “En el fondo, durante muchos años nos refugiamos en la coartada de lo colectivo, se triunfaba o se fracasaba colectivamente, y no es así. Los años te enseñan que no es así”.⁸⁰

The old friends reflect on the regime’s protracted death rattle, from the aforementioned assassination of the man entrusted with its political continuity – Carrero Blanco –

⁸⁰ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 145: “Basically, we took refuge for years behind the alibi of the collective, you succeed or fail collectively, but it’s just not like that. Time teaches you that that’s not the way things are”. Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 37.

to the mawkishness with which they pored over the updates on the dictator's physical decline. Their route through El Raval is explicitly a journey through both time and space, since it was on those same streets that they once marched in protest, dodged blows from riot police, and celebrated the long walk to freedom. It was there, too, that they noted some of the first signs of Francoism loosening the shackles on cultural life, among them toleration of the first drag clubs in Barcelona since the end of the Civil War:

Como una brecha en el pasado propio y en el del franquismo remoto, veían allí, al final de aquel pasaje, el rótulo del Casbah a caballo entre las dos décadas prodigadas, 1969 y 1970, con la propuesta del primer travestismo de la posguerra, como si el Régimen quisiera sondearse a sí mismo en un sorprendente flirteo con la moral de la ambigüedad.⁸¹

[Like a breach cleaved in their own past and in the remote dictatorship, they saw there, at the end of the passage, the sign of the Casbah astride the two prodigal decades, as represented by 1969 and 1970, with the first post-war proposition of transvestism, as though the Regime wanted to sound itself out in a surprising flirtation with the morals of ambiguity.⁸²]

As the narrator observes, Francoism had been until then “un poder que había hecho de la virilidad una de sus señas de identidad” and for it to countenance the public display of sexual ambiguity showed that winds of change were blowing.⁸³ The ever more fractious encounter between Ventura and his former comrades will culminate in the latest incarnation of the Casbah, now christened the Capablanca, but still featuring drag queens and trans performers as its main attraction. Moreover, drag is now all the rage, its stars household names, and the great and

⁸¹ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 151.

⁸² Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 41. Translation amended.

⁸³ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 152: “an authority which had made virility one of its identifying traits”. Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 42.

the good of Barcelona surround the club's tables. And yet, if the novel is making an explicit link between political change and drag as a phenomenon, what does Vázquez Montalbán wish his readers to gain from the comparison? The answer may well lie, once again, in *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare's play has much to say about sexual ambiguity. Banquo's first address to the Witches questions their apparent hermaphroditism: "you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45-47). Lady Macbeth asks to be unburdened of her femininity, the better to pursue the plot she and her husband have conceived: "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!" (1.5.40-43). She further rebukes her husband for his fear at the appearance of Banquo's ghost with "Are you a man?" (3.4.55) and "What? Quite unmanned in folly" (3.4.71). Macduff's wife describes her defenceless son as "Fathered he is, and yet he's fatherless" (4.2.27). There is also Macbeth's wider preoccupation with appearances: "And nothing is, but what is not" (1.3.144). This latter phrase appears to find an echo in Ventura's prediction about the imminent disintegration of the cordial atmosphere among his friends: "Está a punto de llegar ese momento en que nadie será quien es. Les falta una copa. Quizá dos".⁸⁴ In Shakespeare's play, these broken binaries are indicative of a set of relationships – of kinship, loyalty, duty, paternity – that fracture under the weight of ambition, fear, tyranny, and temptation. Insurrection against King Duncan throws more than simply the leadership of Scotland into doubt, it shakes the stable perception of reality itself. Vázquez Montalbán's novel appears to urge a similar inquiry: has the change of regime in Spain produced an equally fractured present?

Macbeth's language of gender ambiguity and insecurity bleeds into *El pianista*, not least in Ventura's encounter

⁸⁴ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 138: "The moment is almost here when nobody is who they are. Just one drink to go. Perhaps two". Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 32.

with the drag performers themselves. Following a particularly baleful exchange with one of his companions, he slopes off to the bar, where he strikes up a conversation with two of the drag queens who have completed their acts. One of them, Pilarín la Templarica, describes the sexual harassment that is – for her at least – an on-going occupational hazard. She recounts a recent incident with a would-be rapist who cornered her in the club's toilets. Yet her tale culminates in such a way as to indicate that she and her fellow performers are not as vulnerable as they might at first appear:

Y yo ya me vi un drama y quería gritar y no podía y cuando ya me lo tenía encima, que iba a darme, os lo juro, que iba a darme, aparece detrás del tío ésta, mira tú, me lo coge por las hombreras, lo empuja dentro del retrete, le coge la cabeza por los pelos de aquí detrás, lo que le quedaba porque era medio calvo, y empieza a darle golpes contra el canto del váter, uno, dos, tres y todo lleno de sangre y de dientes rotos, a mí que me daba el terele y venga a decirle a ésta, déjalo ya, déjalo ya, porque me daba pena la cara de cristo que se le estaba poniendo.⁸⁵

[And I could see a whole scene coming and I wanted to scream and I couldn't and when he was just about to start beating me up, I swear, he really was going to beat me up, this one here appears behind the guy and she grabs him for me by the shoulder pads, pushes him into the loo, grabs his head by the hairs at the back there, or what he had left because he was pretty bald, and she starts bashing his face against the edge of the loo bowl, one, two, three and everything all covered in blood and broken teeth, and I come over all dizzy and I start telling her that's enough, that's enough, leave him now, because I was starting to feel sorry for him, he wasn't a pretty sight, I can tell you.⁸⁶]

Some of the performers have evidently retained their strength and aggression to call upon when required. Pilarín's companion, Alejandra la Magna, clarifies that she

⁸⁵ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 192.

⁸⁶ Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 74. Translation amended.

is a believer in the true values of drag, which she defines as the performance of female sexuality by an artist who remains biologically male: “Operarse es vicio, le decía yo. El arte consiste precisamente en ser carne y pescado, ¿comprendéis? [...] Pero sugerir femineidad sin quitarse lo que una tiene entre las piernas, eso es lo que tiene mérito”.⁸⁷ If the drag artists can still inflict such devastating violence despite their apparent metamorphosis, what does that say about the transformation of the country with which they are implicitly associated? Has Spain moved on from the Franco regime but retained all the injustice and inequality that were its hallmarks? Is Spain merely *performing* democracy, as José Colmeiro suggests?⁸⁸ Certainly, the presence in the Capablanca of the novel’s key protagonists, who emerge gradually over the course of the first section, would indicate just that.

Those protagonists are the titular pianist, Alberto Rosell, and the composer Luis Doria. Ventura’s attention falls on the former as soon as he emerges onto the stage to accompany the drag performers on the piano. His shabby, defeated air puts Ventura immediately in sympathy with him: “Es un contrasentido materializado. Compáralo con la tiorra a la que va a acompañar”.⁸⁹ Their collective interest in him is piqued by the fact that, in an interval between acts, he plays a segment from Frederic Mompou’s *Música callada* (1951), a meditative composition for solo piano, based on the poems of San Juan de la Cruz. Luis Doria is by contrast a larger-than-life character, a world-famous composer who is self-consciously grandiloquent and feted by an entourage of sycophants. Vázquez-Montalbán has described how he found inspira-

⁸⁷ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 193-94: “It’s wrong to be operated. The art lies precisely in being fish and fowl at the same time, d’you see? [...] But to suggest femaleness without removing what you’ve got between your legs, that’s worthy of admiration”. Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 75.

⁸⁸ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 30.

⁸⁹ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 159: “There you have a living contradiction. Compare him to the big girl he’s going to accompany”. Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 46. Translation amended.

tion for Doria in his encounters with the artist Salvador Dalí: “Experiencias vividas en el hotel Meurice, ante el espectáculo impagable de un talento que se sucedía a sí mismo, una y otra vez, con evidentes pérdidas en cada trance sucesorio”.⁹⁰ Doria and Rosell cross paths briefly as the cabaret ends, the former’s only words to the latter – “Bravo, Alberto. Excelentes los silencios” – an at best double-edged compliment from one musician to another.⁹¹ Rosell does not deign to reply. While Ventura and his companions stagger towards the conclusion of their testy evening, our attention shifts to Rosell as we follow him home to a humble flat. Once there, he goes through caring routines – changing soiled dressings, washing, administering medicine – for a woman named Teresa who is paralysed, incontinent, and unable to communicate. On one wall of the flat is an array of newspaper clippings about the illustrious career of none other than Luis Doria. With that, the first part of the novel ends, its narrative drive now established, as Mari Paz Balibrea explains:

Así, el proyecto de la novela cobra sentido apoyándose necesariamente en la creencia de que la incógnita en el presente la produce el desconocimiento del pasado. En consecuencia, el pasado es convocado – al igual que en la novela policíaca – en función del presente, y para hacer éste comprensible.⁹²

[Thus, the novel’s project gains meaning by relying necessarily on the belief that mystery in the present derives from ignorance of the past. In consequence, the past is invoked – just as it is in the detective novel – in service of the present moment, and to make the latter comprehensible.]

⁹⁰ Vázquez Montalbán 2001, 171: “Experiences gained in the Hotel Meurice, faced with the priceless spectacle of a solipsistic talent that repeats itself again and again, in clearly diminishing returns with each iteration”.

⁹¹ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 205: “Congratulations, Alberto. Excellent silences”. Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 84.

⁹² Balibrea 1999, 136.

In part two, we will meet Rosell as he was nearly four decades previously, still in the same district of Barcelona but on a day in 1946 shortly after his release from a Francoist prison. Once more, De Quincey's interpretation of the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* – 'the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish' – gives a logic to the structure. Rosell emerges from incarceration onto the streets of his home city, but he is starting from nothing in a country where many are already struggling to find food. We follow him and a motley crew of impoverished youths in search of a piano on which the newly freed musician can play and thereby regain some sense of self. That search will end in a chance reunion with his old flame, Teresa, who is working as a cabaret-singer. Among the other protagonists is a newspaper seller, one of whose wares catches Rosell's eye. He sees an article about Doria, whereupon he carefully extracts the relevant page and stows it in his back pocket – perhaps the start of his obsessive charting of the composer's fame. The article welcomes Doria's return to Spain for the first time since the Civil War and shows him chameleonicly reinventing himself to suit Francoist ideology: "Ha asimilado lo mejor de la cultura musical universal, pero no reniega de esas raíces que salen de la tumba del Cid y que se convierten en ascéticos alamares que compiten con las estrellas".⁹³ Doria is playing to the Francoist gallery, endorsing its jingoistic infatuation with heroes long past. The artist on whom Doria is based, Dalí, infamously did much the same on his return to Spain in the late 1940s, instructing his fellow painters from the platform of the Ateneu in Barcelona:

Catholic mysticism, Dalí assured the Ateneu, was going to experience a flowering in the next fifty years, and Spanish painters must now produce religious

⁹³ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 265: "He has assimilated the best of universal musical culture, without however denying those roots originating from the tomb of the Cid to become aesthetic adornments competing with the stars". Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 126.

paintings. It was the duty of the Spain of Valdés Leal, Velázquez and Zurbarán to take the lead in order to achieve, once again, “the spiritual hegemony of our glorious imperialist tradition”.⁹⁴

With this in mind, we might wonder whether it was coincidental that Rosell should have chosen to play a fragment of Mompou's *Música callada* – a composition inspired by Spain's mystical tradition and in keeping with the regime's cultural politics – when Doria sat among his audience. Was it not a way of taunting Doria with his self-serving connivance with Francoism? Part three provides us with all the ammunition we would need to understand Rosell's resentment of Doria and the complicity he has displayed with the regime. We go back a further decade, to the early months of 1936, to find Rosell newly arrived in Paris on a hard-won scholarship to study at the Conservatoire. Already there, and noisily making a name for himself through obnoxious self-promotion, is Doria. As war breaks out across the Pyrenees, Rosell, Doria, and their compatriot Teresa (an aspiring singer) must choose between the safety of Paris or the danger of their homeland. Rosell and Teresa head back to Spain to defend the Republic. Doria stays in Paris, offering his former friends this send-off:

¡Hijos de puta! ¡Hijos de la gran puta! ¡Creéis que me dejáis aquí muerto de vergüenza, crucificado por vuestro ejemplo! ¡No estoy muerto! ¡Soy un cadáver exquisito, el cadáver de la razón, y vosotros sois mezzquinos esclavos de las emociones más baratas! *Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau!* No lo olvidéis, Albert. Ni tú, mala puta, vaca, gorda fracasada.⁹⁵

[Bastards! Fucking bastards! Do you think you're leaving me here dying with shame, tortured by your example? I'm not dead! I'm an exquisite corpse, the corpse of reason, and you are the mean slaves of the cheapest emotion. *Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nou-*

⁹⁴ Gibson 1997, 462.

⁹⁵ Vázquez Montalbán 2017, 462.

veau! Don't forget that, Albert. Nor you, useless
whore, cow, fat failure.^{96]}

As we have seen in the novel's first section, this is the kind of person who retains the status of national treasure in the brave new world of Spanish democracy. Again, as we have already seen, Rosell and Teresa who, in the novel's final pages, tear through France full of patriotism to reach the border and fight for their ideals, have a future of imprisonment, penury, and disability awaiting them. The novel's use of dramatic irony is as affecting as it is devastating. Although De Quincey's interpretation of *Macbeth* may haunt the novel with the suggestion that Spain's hellish interlude lies in the past, there is also a sense in which, for some at least, it remains ever-present.

⁹⁶ Vázquez Montalbán 1989, 274.

Works Cited

- Aguilar, Paloma. 2002. *Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy*. Oxford, Berghahn Books.
- Álvarez, José María. 2005. *Sobre Shakespeare*. Almería, El Gaviero.
- . 2018. *Los decorados del olvido*. Sevilla, Renacimiento.
- Ascunce, José Ángel. 2000. *León Felipe: trayectoria poética*. México D.F., Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Balibrea, Mari Paz. 1999. *En la tierra baldía: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán y la izquierda española en la postmodernidad*. Barcelona, El Viejo Topo.
- Baltés, Blanca. 2014. *Cayetano Luca de Tena: Itinerarios de un director de escena (1941-1991)*. Madrid: Asociación de Directores de Escena de España.
- Bayod, Ángel. 1981. *Franco visto por sus ministros*. Barcelona, Planeta.
- Boyd, Carolyn. 1997. *Historia patria: Politics, History, and National Identity in Spain, 1875-1975*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Buffery, Helena. 2012. "Spectres of Hamlet in Spanish Republican Exile Writing". In *The Hamlet Zone*. Ruth J. Owen, ed. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars. 45-59.
- Bustamante, Enrique. 2013. *Historia de la Televisión en España. Una asignatura pendiente de la democracia*. Barcelona, Gedisa.
- Carr, Raymond. 1982. *Spain 1808-1975*. Oxford, OUP.
- Casacajosa Virino, Concepción. 2007. "Macbeth catódico. Representaciones de la tragedia en televisión". *Comunicación* 5: 249-63.
- Cazorla Sánchez, Antonio. 2010. *Fear and Progress: Ordinary Lives in Franco's Spain, 1939-1975*. Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cueva Merino, Julio de la. 2018. "Religion". In *The History of Modern Spain: Chronologies, Themes, Individuals*. Adrian Shubert and José Álvarez Junco, eds. London, Bloomsbury. 276-91.
- De Quincey, Thomas. 2006. *On Murder*. Oxford: OUP.

- Díaz, Lorenzo. 2006. *50 años de TVE*. Madrid, Alianza.
- Dickie, John. 2020. *The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World*. London, Hodder & Stoughton.
- Diego, Patricia, Elvira Canós and Eduardo Rodríguez Merchán. 2018. “Los programas de ficción de producción propia: los inicios y el desarrollo hasta 1975”. In *Una televisión con dos cadenas: la programación en España (1956-1990)*. Julio Montero Díaz, ed. Madrid, Cátedra. 71-98.
- Domínguez Arribas, Javier. 2020. “Francoist Antisemitic Propaganda”. In *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust*. Sara J. Brenneis and Gina Herrmann, eds. Toronto, University of Toronto Press. 329-52.
- Espinosa, Francisco and José Luis Ledesma. 2012. “La violencia y sus mitos”. In *El combate por la historia. La República, La Guerra Civil, El Franquismo*. Ángel Viñas, ed. Barcelona, Pasado y Presente. 475-97.
- Faber, Sebastiaan. 2021. *Exhuming Franco: Spain's Second Transition*. Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press.
- . 2002. *Exile and Cultural Hegemony: Spanish Intellectuals in Mexico, 1939-1975*. Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press.
- Felipe, León. 2017. *Del éxodo y el viento. Los años de Cornell, primeras traducciones a cartas a Paul Rogers*. Gonzalo Santonja and Francisco Javier Expósito, eds. Palencia, Cálamo.
- . 2019. *Poesías completas*. José Paulino, ed. Madrid, Visor.
- . 2021. *Teatro completo*. J. G. S., ed. Madrid, Visor.
- Figuera Aymerich, Ángela. 1958. *Belleza cruel*. México D.F., Compañía General de Ediciones.
- Fraile Gil, José Manuel. 1994. “La golondrina en el cancionero tradicional madrileño”. *Revista de Folklore* 167: 166-70.
- Gibson, Ian. 1997. *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*. London, Faber & Faber.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2018. *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*. London, Bodley Head.
- Gregor, Keith. 2018. “*Macbeth* and Regimes of Reading in Francoist Spain”. *Comparative Drama* 52.1-2: 141-57.

- Lannon, Frances. 1987. *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain 1875-1975*. Oxford, OUP.
- Montero, Rosa. 2017. *Dictadoras. Las mujeres de los hombres más despiadados de la historia*. Barcelona, Debolsillo.
- Moradiellos, Enrique. 2022. «Franco ante la “Cuestión Judía”». In *El Holocausto y la España de Franco*. Moradiellos, Enrique and Santiago López Rodríguez, eds. Madrid, Turner. 87-144.
- Muñoz Cáliz, Berta. 2010. *Censura y teatro del exilio: incidencia de la censura en la obra de siete dramaturgos exiliados*. Murcia, Universidad de Murcia.
- O’Leary, Catherine and Michael Thompson. 2023. *Theatre Censorship in Spain, 1931-1985*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press.
- Palacio, Manuel. 2001. *Historia de la televisión en España*. Barcelona, Gedisa.
- Peñalba Sotorrío, Mercedes. 2020. “Tainted Visions of War: Antisemitic German Propaganda in Spain”. In *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust*. Sara J. Brenneis and Gina Herrmann, eds. Toronto, University of Toronto Press. 389-402
- Preston, Paul. 1993. *Franco: A Biography*. London, Harper Collins.
- . 2004. *Palomas de guerra*. Barcelona, Debolsillo.
- Raguer, Hilari. 2001. *La pólvora y el incienso. La Iglesia y la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939)*. Barcelona, Península.
- . 2012. «Nacionalcatolicismo». In *El combate por la historia. La República, La Guerra Civil, El Franquismo*. Ángel Viñas, ed. Barcelona, Pasado y Presente. 547-63.
- Richards, Michael. 2016. “Stories for After a War: Social Memory and the Making of Urban and Industrial Transition in 1960s Spain”. In *Interrogating Francoism: History and Dictatorship in Twentieth-Century Spain*. Helen Graham, ed. London, Bloomsbury. 181-201.

- Richmond, Kathleen. 2003. *Women and Spanish Fascism: The Women's Section of the Falange 1934-59*. London, Routledge.
- Rius, Luis. 2019. *León Felipe, poeta de barro (Biografía)*. Madrid, Instituto Cervantes.
- Rodríguez Merchán, Eduardo. 2014. "Antecedentes, orígenes y evolución de un programa mítico: *Estudio 1 de TVE*". *Estudios sobre Mensaje Periodístico* 20: 267-79.
- Sánchez Cervelló, Josep. 2012. "El exilio republicano de 1936 a 1977". In *El combate por la historia. La República, La Guerra Civil, El Franquismo*. Ángel Viñas, ed. Barcelona, Pasado y Presente. 499-514.
- Serón Ordóñez, Inmaculada. 2018. "León Felipe, traductor: Una perspectiva general". In *León Felipe. ¿Quién soy yo?* Alberto Martín Márquez, ed. Zamora. Fundación León Felipe. 110-37.
- Shakespeare, William. 1983. *Macbeth o el asesino del sueño*. Madrid, Júcar.
- Shapiro, James. 2015. *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*. London, Faber & Faber.
- Stockey, Gareth. 2013. *Valley of the Fallen: The(n)ever changing face of General Franco's monument*. Nottingham, Critical, Cultural and Communications Press.
- Tronch-Pérez, Jesús. 2010. "'Dangerous and Rebel Prince': A Television Adaptation of *Hamlet* in Late Francoist Spain". *Shakespeare Survey* 63: 301-15.
- Vázquez Montalbán, Manuel. 1989. *The Pianist*. London, Quartet Books.
- . 2001. *La literatura en la construcción de la ciudad democrática*. Barcelona, Mondadori.
- . 2011. *Obra periodística 1974-1986. Del humor al desencanto*. Barcelona, Debate.
- . 2017. *El pianista*. Madrid, Cátedra.
- Viñas, Ángel. 2019. *La otra cara del caudillo. Mitos y realidades en la biografía de Franco*. Barcelona, Crítica.
- Wheeler, Duncan. 2020. *Following Franco: Spanish culture and politics in transition, 1962-92*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Zaro, Juan J. 2005. "Translating from Exile: León Felipe's Shakespearean *Paraphrases*". In *Latin American*

Shakespeares. Bernice W. Kilman and Rick J. Santos, eds. Madison, NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 92-111.

“THE FACE OF THE OTHER”:
SHAKESPEARE, ITALIAN CINEMA
AND ENCOUNTER THEORY*

Mark Thornton Burnett

At the end of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante/the pilgrim experiences his God as “one sole sight” in an arrangement of “three circling spheres”:

da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige
[...]
veder voleva come si convenne
l’imago al cerchio e come vi s’indovina
[...]
ma già volgeva il mio disio e ’l velle,
sicome rota ch’igualmente è mossa,
l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.

(Par. 33.129-31, 137-38, 143-45)¹

[But when a while my eyes had looked this round,
deep in itself, it seemed – as painted now,
in those same hues – to show our human form
[...]

* A previous version of parts of the second section of this chapter was published as “Understanding *Iago*, an Italian Film Adaptation of *Othello*: Clientelism, Corruption, Politics”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 75 (2022), 1-14. I am grateful to the editor, Emma Smith, and Cambridge University Press for permission to repurpose some of that material for this publication. I would also like to thank the editors of this collection, Ambra Moroncini and Aaron M. Kahn, for their intellectual stimulus, support and manifold courtesies.

¹ Alighieri 1985, 882-83.

I willed myself to see what fit there was,
 image to circle, how this all in-where'd
 [...]
 But now my will and desire were turned,
 as wheels that move in equilibrium,
 by love that moves the sun and other stars.^{2]}

In this climactic realisation, Dante/the pilgrim, having uttered his prayers and reached his journey's end, meets God as a human face, and in such a way as to suggest the act of creation and a subscription to the sacredness of mortal and immortal life. This is, in fact, a recognition of reciprocity, of the need to work with "others" as an integral aspect of an ethical existence. As David F. Ford notes, such is the effect of this "ultimate transformation" in the poem, that "I find myself summoned to responsibility for the one who appeals to me" and made "answerable to the other".³ Via a recognition of the "Other", we are empowered to acknowledge and remake ourselves. Conjuring God as "other", the infinite "Other", Dante/the pilgrim describes a force both knowable and unknowable in its utter multiplicity. Such a reading is invited in the poem's final line, "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" ["by love that moves the sun and other stars"], in which God is celebrated in all his otherness and difference ("l'altre" being the key term).

As if in anticipation of its legacies, *The Divine Comedy* chimes in this moment with some of the most pressing philosophical debates of modernity. Central to recent reflections on ethics has been the concept of the "face". For Emmanuel Levinas, to be properly oriented "toward the Other" is to activate "generosity" and "conversation": the way in which "the other presents himself", he summarises, "exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face".⁴ Elaborating the argument, Levinas writes elsewhere that a "true togetherness" is not a "togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face".⁵ The idea is

² Alighieri 2012, 481-82.

³ Ford 1999, 37.

⁴ Levinas 1969, 50 (emphasis of the author).

⁵ Levinas 1985, 77.

that the individual subject goes beyond himself/herself in relating to the “other”, and is the richer for it. Simultaneously, although there is no “actual” face involved (rather, the argument centres on an attitude or state of mind), in later mobilisations of Levinas’ work, “real” faces – and bodies – are crucially constitutive. Hence, in her study of the material expression of post-coloniality, Sara Ahmed, building on Levinas’ example, writes: “we need to complicate the very notion of the face to face by discussing the temporal and spatial dislocations that are implicated in the very possibility of being faced by this other”.⁶ At its most extreme, and idealised, the concept of the “face” is less material than it is humanist, if we accept humanism, at least in its Renaissance instantiation, as a set of practices through which personal fulfilment can be attained and as an application of questions around education, morality, and ethics, which themselves are related to the transmission of culture and the utility of action in civic life.⁷

In fact, what Dante celebrates, and Levinas pursues, is a theory of encounter. In recent years, not least due to developments in interculturalism and peace and conflict studies, the encounter has become a charged area of enquiry. Katerina Standish defines “encounter theory” as “the relational space of interaction and the process of engaging with difference within that space non-violently – not the result of that process”.⁸ Above all, she maintains, the encounter is premised on a “*relational engagement leading to humanisation*”.⁹ Not surprisingly, the encounter, as it has been meditated upon, is inseparable from ethical concerns. Levinas sums up the connection with typical economy: the “ethical relation”, he writes, is “the face to face”.¹⁰ Recalibrating and extending the connection in the light of present-day realities around identity, citizenship and nationality, Sara Ahmed points up both

⁶ Ahmed 200, 144.

⁷ On the Levinas/humanism interface, see Franke 2007, 209-27.

⁸ Standish 2021, 7.

⁹ Standish 2021, 12 (emphasis of the author).

¹⁰ Levinas 1969, 202. See also Bloechl 1996, 1-17.

the necessity and the instrumentality of the encounter. “[E]ncounters with others ... shift the boundaries of the familiar ... [and] of what we assume we know ... the subject comes into existence ... only through encounters with others”, she comments with a sense of real-time urgency.¹¹

Inevitably, given its intersecting lineages, the encounter does not always function straightforwardly. In material operation, and philosophical articulation, the encounter can express itself in several directions at one and the same time. Sara Ahmed notes that, because of asymmetries of power, the “face to face meeting” carries with it an “antagonistic” freight, while Katerina Standish reminds us that “encounter” derives etymologically both from the Old French *encontre* (“fight”) and the Latin *contra* (“against”).¹² These reservations notwithstanding, the encounter (as it is practically theorised and as it plays itself out in some peace-and-conflict zones) is affirmatively inflected. “Connection, non-violent engagement, inter-relationship and humanisation”, for Katerina Standish, are the “four facets” of “Encounter Theory”, and she itemises them in the wake of several successful political resolution/*rapprochement* initiatives.¹³ Helen F. Wilson sophisticates, observing that it is precisely because the encounter can disturb that it is capable of “forging new forms of organisation and resonance” and “affective experiences”.¹⁴ In its most extreme – affective – form, the encounter, as in *The Divine Comedy*, allows for a relationship with the godhead or, at least, with the ineffable. Reading *The Divine Comedy* through Levinas, William Franke, for example, points up a “transcending and losing of [the subject] in relation to the Transcendent”, while Martin Buber, in some ways Levinas’ philosophical precursor, in his formative discussion of “I and Thou”, notes that the “world ... becomes fully present to him who approaches

¹¹ Ahmed 2000, 6.

¹² Ahmed 2000, 8; Standish 2021, 3.

¹³ Standish 2021, 2.

¹⁴ Wilson 2017, 608, 616.

the Face, and to the Being of beings he can in a single response say *Thou*".¹⁵

It might seem something of a leap to move from Dante to Shakespeare via the various permutations of encounter theory. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I want to argue that Shakespeare, indebted to Dante, is a profoundly humanist playwright, most obviously so in world cinema adaptations of his work. Indeed, the Shakespeare/Dante pairing is not necessarily an unusual one. Both were witness to the revolutionary energies of their respective medieval/early modern periods, and both have been imagined as artists (either by reflection or anticipation) who knew and profited from each other's creations, as the literary-historical fantasy by Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti, *Dante Di Shakespeare: Amor ch'a nullo amato* (2021), attests. In particular, I suggest in this chapter that, in two recent Italian film adaptations of Shakespeare, *Sud Side Stori* (dir. Roberta Torre, 2000) and *Iago* (dir. Volfango di Biasi, 2008), we find placed on display a typically Dantesque relation with the "other", rendered here as an encounter with non-Italian populations. At first sight, *Sud Side Stori* and *Iago* appear very different works of cinema. The first, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Palermo and centred on a conflict between recently arrived Nigerian sex-workers and the local citizenry, revolves around concepts of the Italian "south"; the second, an adaptation of *Othello* unfolding in Venice among the privileged architecture students at the university (including Otello/Othello [Aurélien Gaya]) and highlighting the predicament of the socially dispossessed Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis), underscores an idea of the Italian "north". Yet, as I demonstrate, the driving force in each film is encounter as process. So it is that *Sud Side Stori* and *Iago* delineate ethical experiences that, bringing into play "face to face ... togetherness", touch on resonant contemporary discussions about demographic change and social mobility. Crucially, these experiences, as the films discover, do not operate predictably: *Sud Side Stori* points up the failures of

¹⁵ Franke 2007, 223; Buber 1937, 108.

encounter, while *Iago* hints at its reformative possibilities.

"[E]ach encounter opens past encounters", writes Sara Ahmed, and in the representation of the "other" in *Sud Side Stori* and *Iago* is made manifest Italy's own encounter in recent times with its so-called *extracomunitari*.¹⁶ Evoking the brief period in which Italy operated as a colonial power, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an "influx of migration" to the country "from the former Eastern bloc and the developing world" rocked conservative sensibilities.¹⁷ According to Maria Elisa Montironi, as index of a hostile political response, Northern League leader Umberto Bossi "championed a referendum to abrogate the Turco-Napolitano immigration Act (1998) and promoted a populist campaign to establish tougher measures".¹⁸ Subsequently, an immigration law was passed in 2002, and, in 2008, as part of his electoral campaign, Silvio Berlusconi (Prime Minister of Italy in a series of four governments during 1994-95, 2001-06 and 2008-11) addressed issues around Roma and Sinti immigration in terms of national security. In 2009 the immigration law was reinstated and reinforced.¹⁹ We might go further and characterise this period as one of post-millennial Italian angst. Certainly, this was a period – sometimes known as the "Berlusconi era" – tied not only to anxieties about the "other" but also to accusations surrounding political figures, including collusion, conflict of interest, fraud and abuse of power.²⁰ These are among the contexts that shape and inform both films' construction of the "face of the other"; in addition, as I will suggest, *Sud Side Stori* and *Iago* mediate and replay these contexts in elaborating encounters that suggest new habitations for Shakespeare and the medieval/Renaissance humanist enterprise.

¹⁶ Ahmed 2000, 8.

¹⁷ O'Healy 2007, 38.

¹⁸ Montironi 2020, 269.

¹⁹ Sigona 2010, 150.

²⁰ Albertazzi and Rothenburg 2009, 2; Montironi 2020, 260.

1. *Sud Side Stori*, by Roberta Torre (2000)

Sud Side Stori opens in a version of heaven that resembles an art gallery. To a spacy score, an audience is presented with a series of throbbing portraits/vignettes, and, in one of them, St Rosalia, patron saint of Palermo, retrospectively informs us in a childish treble that unrest in the city was precipitated when the mayor attempted to inaugurate a new saint, “a Black saint, St Benedict the Moor”. In this localised reworking of the Shakespearean chorus, what is to become the primary encounter of *Sud Side Stori* is hinted at (although not developed). Indeed, in her subsequent brushing aside of narrative obligation, St Rosalia must stand accused of a general avoidance of institutional responsibility, an idea the film later underscores: “Now ... I’m going to let somebody down below tell the rest of the story”, she announces. Her part as prologue completed, St Rosalia dissolves from the frame, her voice taken over by that of Giuseppona, a “street cop” and organiser of neighbourhood events. Crucially, in its purposeful conflation of different points of view, *Sud Side Stori* highlights the difficulty of any kind of integration between Palermo’s populations, new and old: variously, we are privy to the perspectives of a sex-worker, *madame*, pimp, client, sea-captain, and police inspector, all implicated in the intercultural crisis. If, at first sight, antagonisms are accelerated by the mayor’s initiative (“That other saint has nothing to do with us”, declare the three aunts of Toni Giulietto [Roberto Rondeili]), then they come to a climax in the arrival of sex-workers who transform the Vicolo dell’Anello, in the Capo district, into a Sunday market. The faded sepia tones of the street are countered by the colourful accoutrements of the sex-workers, who, to the appalled reactions of their new neighbours, chant: “We’ve come here from Africa!”. The contrast in colours, and the camera movement between high and low (from street to upper windows and back again), serve only to emphasise the extent of “racial hatred”, the division between constituencies, and the intransigence of the *status quo*.

This much should indicate how, in its approach to *Romeo and Juliet*, *Sud Side Stori* flips convention and expect-

tation. For, in this adaptation, sex-worker Romea (Forstine Ehobor) is Juliet, while nightclub act singer Toni Giulietto is Romeo: the nomenclature purposefully mixes up the usual male/female identifiers, suggestive of wider kinds of upset. Similarly, later in the film, it is Romea/Juliet who is forced to flee Palermo, having been implicated in the death of Uncle Vincenzo/Tybalt, and it is she who then breaks her self-imposed exile. The development, in fact, takes its cue from *Romeo and Juliet* itself in which Romeo is branded supine by Friar Lawrence and Juliet is the more obviously proactive figure. But the most self-evident inversion inheres in the film's realisation of the archetypal balcony. Fully responsive to the architecture of the place of production, the *mise-en-scène* continually foregrounds the signature property, as when, at her first appearance, Romea/Juliet is glimpsed looking up from the street towards Toni on the balcony above. Here, the camera swoops downwards to alight on Romea/Juliet's face, suggesting, as Courtney Lehmann writes, the "metaphysics of the face as ... the precondition of ... love".²¹ Later, the spatial arrangement between the lovers on the balcony is repeated, this time with Romea/Juliet's face appearing in a circular inset that emphasises both her unattainability and the marginalising mechanisms to which she is subject. Finally, Toni/Romeo above and Romea/Juliet below, the lovers reach out in an unsuccessful attempt to join hands, this last iteration of the balcony illustrating the film's contextually steeped reading of the play's power dynamic and the workings of an encounter with the "face of the other" which is both asymmetric and empathetic.

Invoking the balcony thus, *Sud Side Stori* shows its intertextual indebtedness both to other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and to popular Italian films and television series. The film's very title, for instance, recalls the musical, *West Side Story* (dir. Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961), and in such a way as to advertise the encounter – the stand-off between two kinds of south (Africa and Si-

²¹ Lehmann 2015, 103.

cily) – at its core. Via a pop-heavy soundtrack, *Sud Side Stori* also echoes *William Shakespeare's 'Romeo + Juliet'* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996), highlighting the internal point that adapting Shakespeare is not the province of Hollywood alone. The idea is extended in passing shots of film/television posters featuring real-life Italian singers, Little Tony and Mario Merola, the effect of which is point up *Sud Side Stori's* own generic hybridity. More generally, the film's visuals are of a piece with its discombobulating point-of-view combinations: neon-lit heart icons and distorted angles alternate with wiped screens and documentary-style footage, characteristic cinematic manoeuvres that in this adaptation reach a logical extreme.

A distinctive deployment of competing perspectives is at its most sustained in cross-cut conversations between the sex-workers, Romea/Julia, Mercutio/Mercutio (Amaka Ejindu) and Baldassarra/Benvolio (Kemi Toyin), and the aunts. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the "ancient grudge" (Prologue, 3) finds expression in an abusive tit-for-tat that culminates in a street brawl: for example, epithets such as "coward" (1.1.675) and "villain" (1.1.72) keep company with "heartless hinds" (1.1.59). As adaptation, *Sud Side Stori* models the method, demonstrating how the aunts' invective ("cannibals") is paralleled in the sex-workers' projections ("monsters"). Furthermore, in strikingly contiguous episodes, both groups are driven to consult white and black witches (*maga bianca* and *maga nera*) in a bid to exorcise the romantic longings of their charges. Herein lies an irony: signifying a shared rivalry, the film juxtaposes comparable statements of alterity and prejudice, drawing attention in so doing to the play's realisation of "two households, both alike" (Prologue, 1). Need and anxiety, the film suggests, are a common denominator, yet, such is the unyielding nature of Palermo's parameters, no space for compromise is allowed. Crucially, in the camera's switching between two dingy domestic interiors, there is little "dignity" (Prologue, 1); instead, the dominant adaptive notes are parody and kitsch. For example, Toni/Romeo's bedroom comprises an altar to the US pop icons of previous decades, peopled, as it is,

by cardboard cut-outs of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley: as much as these indicate his heroes, they also suggest a desire to be "other" than he is and culturally elsewhere.

Celebrities of the past are thrown into relief, however, by icons of the present. At one point, Little Tony (complete with quiff and sequined suit), played by "himself", comes alive in Toni/Romeo's bedroom, singing snatches of his famous 1966 hit, *Riderà*. At another point, Toni/Romeo, climbing a *papier-mâché* volcano to locate the source of a ballad, comes face-to-face with the "King of the Volcano", Mario Merola, played by "himself", performing a particularly emotion-laden version of his 1963 hit, *So 'nnato Carcerato*. Typically, parody in *Sud Side Stori* serves a serious purpose. Immediately, Little Tony and Mario Merola poke fun at themselves, finding capital in cinematic resurrection at an end-of-career moment. Simultaneously, rendered in their songs is a further exploration of the film thematic. Hence, *Riderà* concerns an experience of suffering and the possibility of "change" (becoming a "different person") – concerns bearing directly on *Sud Side Stori*'s absorption in the "face of the other". (Incidentally, Little Tony is also integrated into the Shakespearean plot in that he serves as a type of Friar Laurence and brings the lovers together.) Similarly, the delivery of *So 'nnato Carcerato* both embeds us in the Sicilian locale (associated, as it is, with volcanoes such as Etna and Stromboli) and recalls the predicament of Toni/Romeo, agitating to escape his oppressive materteral circumstances: "I was born a prisoner ... Now I'm grown up and free", the lyrics sound. (At a further remove, the film's playful mobilisation of volcanoes echoes the seismic social encounters occasioned by demographic disruption.) And, even in the film's seemingly comic conjuration of a conflict between two styles of popular music – rock and roll and *sceneggiata* – we find shadowed other kinds of conflict and the tensions exacerbated by unwelcome encounters.

Of course, *Sud Side Stori* is, at one generic level, a musical: the inclusion of music numbers, then, is only to be expected. True to form, therefore, the film also includes specially written musical interludes in propulsions of the

plot. One item number, *Strada Dolce Casa* (either “Home Sweet Home” or “No Place like Home” in English), is strategically positioned towards the start. Featuring the dancing sex-workers with their suitcases, the song declares the threat but also the happy aspiration of the arriving “other”: “This is my home, too, wherever the street leads is my home”, they chorus. Writ large here are the dynamics of dispossession and possession that animate the adaptation, while the image on screen of “African” bodies filling the Vicolo dell’Anello intimates a spatial challenge. A later number is less jubilantly inflected. An audience is asked to wait for the signature number, *Sud Side Stori*, which is discovered as a set-piece: the sex-workers process in unison across a square, their moving forms refracting a flipped geography, the exploitative nexus that insists on their status as objects and an imprisoning circularity of exchange: “South Side Story ... Africa in Palermo ... Come and choose your Black girl, 30,000 lire, like Ring-a-Ring a Roses”. The depressive cast of the lyrics – solicitation masquerading as a cry for help – is confirmed by the blocking of the sex-workers, the camera tracking past alcoves and detailing sexual encounters in-the-making. Both notions of “home” and concepts of geography are concatenated in the film’s penultimate number, *Porta Me Lontano* (“Take me Quickly”), in which Romea/Juliet endeavours to escape Africa and return to Italy by train: “Hurry, train ... take me to my man ... I can hear an elephant ... a lion, it’s dangerous for me to stay”, she sings. Bearing all of the film’s hallmarks, the montage is purposefully anti-realist, silhouettes of animals darkening the windows of a mock-up train, but not to a diminishment of drama. Matching the escalating tempo of the play, the episode demonstrates a conflation of countries, a sense of gathering inimicality and the romantic projections of the “face of the other”. Even if stereotypically marked, via red-filtered lighting and a stress on the individual voice, the dangers of Romea/Juliet seeking the fulfilment of her encounter are abundantly in evidence.

Such moments approximate the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* (in this instance, the precipitous “misadventure”

[5.1.29] of Romeo's flight from Mantua back to Verona); they also serve to draw attention to those parts of *Sud Side Stori* that trade in Shakespearean language. Distinctively, the film mediates key passages at salient junctures, as when Romea/Juliet quotes Romeo's celebrated parting sentiment: "Love goes towards love ... But love from love, toward school with heavy looks" (2.1.201-02). Interestingly, to ease the incomprehension of the other sex-workers ("What's her problem?"), Romea/Juliet then glosses the line, vernacularising in a demonstration of textual authority: for her, Shakespeare is the resource through which her encounter can be expressed. Later, Toni/Romeo mediates a similarly well-known line, his sombre forebodings ("I have a woeful premonition ... dream always torments me ... who knows if I'll come back") mirroring Juliet's equally gloomy reflections ("I have an ill-divining soul! ... I see thee ... As one dead in the bottom of a tomb" [3.5.54-56]). In keeping with the film's inversive aspects, the dialogue in these passages conforms with other kinds of reassignment, Toni/Romeo and Romea/Juliet appropriating the language of their "other" Shakespearean counterparts in further demonstrations of overturnings and dislocations. More specifically, through such quotations/mediations, subjective insights are introduced, and this is reinforced in the ways in which, in distinctive compositions, the sex-workers speak to camera. Towards the close, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century contexts of mass migration are shadowed in a series of revelations: "I never want to call home because the police come and cause trouble for me", declares one sex-worker, while another discloses: "No passport, no residence permit: that's why I have to work on the streets". The "face to face" nature of these confessions – the speaker and the viewer are obliged to relate to each other – implicates us in other economies. Uncomfortably, we are invited to confront the worlds beyond the film – oppressive global systems that enable and perpetuate the "sex trade". Particularly unsettling is the fact that the sex-workers play themselves; that is, *Sud Side Stori* is premised on amateur performances that blur with, and take

meaning from, “real-life”. As elsewhere in *Sud Side Stori*, associated questions hang in the air here around the kinds of payment involved for participating and the extent of the director’s own responsibility.

Indeed, as the film progresses, the economic basis of all transactions in this semi-fictional Palermo/Verona comes to the fore. “Money is really good, I like money”, the black witch (*maga nera*) croons. The sentiment recurs in Giuseppona’s comment, “It’s just a question of money”, which references her mother, the white witch (*maga bianca*). Notably, neither community in the film is motivated selflessly to support, and each succumbs to material pressures. Even the sequence on the ghost train, which surrogates for the sexual consummation of act three, and which confirms romance in the accompanying score (Antonin Dvořák’s “Slavonic Dance” [Op. 72, No. 2]), is interrupted by a demon *madame* who threatens: “If you want your passport, you pay me 30 million lire”. Money, or its lack, consistently dictates larger movements, and, in the case of Toni/Romeo and Romea/Juliet, exacerbates inhibition and generates difficulty. So it is that their relationship is often thwarted, the result being that the lovers spend very little time in each other’s company: in sum, the encounter with the “face of the other” is always a matter of process. Part of the problem is the racism that negatively impacts on the possibility of closer connections; as Maurizio Calbi puts it in a discussion of *Sud Side Stori*, the “hospitality of love” in this construction of Palermo is singularly absent.²² At one and the same time, efforts to bridge the racist impasse are what propels the action. Where Romea/Juliet speaks in Shakespearean language to bond with her Italian “home”, Toni/Romeo aspires to a change of racial identification in a bid to quicken the encounter: “If only I was Black too ... And if only God was Black too”, he sings lustily. But, as *Sud Side Stori* suggests, such efforts are ill-fated. For example, Toni/Romeo’s Black pianist for this number doubles up as the unsympathetic pimp, which works against the sentiments of his en-

²² Calbi 2013, 93.

couragement ("It's not hard, brother ... Become Black"); simultaneously, an episode involving the sculptor creating a statue of St Benedict is intercut with the overlaid objections of the *cosa nostra*: "none of the ... gentlemen could stomach the Black saint because there were matters of money involved ... so it was goodbye to the statue", the voiceover reflects. Money matters at this point consort with stereotypical representations of Sicilian *mafioso* corruption, vitiating the power of any locally constituted "official" authority. Hence, the city's mayor, who, Escalus-like, enters the action from time to time, mostly (as in the play) in response to crisis, is emptied out of influence. From the start, this oligarchical figure, more DJ than councillor, is realised as having lost the trust of the citizenry, and his hopes for welcome ("stand up for ... refuge, tolerance and integration") unfold in dreamy episodes only.

In fact, any form of authority in *Sud Side Stori* is either complicated or demythologised. The idea is aurally registered in the extent to which the film realises the Shakespearean summing up of events. Escalus' concluding reprimand to the surviving Montague and Capulet families ("A glooming peace this morning with it brings" [5.3.304]) is rendered as it is in the play, but, because the speech in the film is split between the Palermo-accented television journalist and the voice of Giuseppona, the "street cop", an audience experiences again destabilising points of view. Comparably unhinging notes are reserved for the epilogue. Looping back to the start, *Sud Side Stori* at the close reverts to heaven and to St Rosalia: pictured again in her iconic surround, the saint states: "I forgot ... This Black saint finally arrived ... We're not all saints for nothing: this doesn't mean that we're all the same, all the same, all the same". The phrasing is disingenuous. There is no economy of sameness here; rather, St Benedict is seen bowing down to the child-like St Rosalia, while his conventional African garb and use of the flywhisk situate him even more firmly in subordinate praxes. The more the phrase "all the same" / "*tutti uguali*" is repeated, then, the more the film reifies continuing realities of difference.

Not only does this conclusion connect with other disquieting moments in the film itself (as when Toni/Romeo is invited to join a “harem” of robotic “odalisques”); it also hints both at historical legacies of slavery and at a continuing insensitivity to wider questions around race and “otherness”. As this cinematic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* understands it, there can be, it seems, no *rapprochement* between cultures or bridging of disparities.²³ In terms of encounter theory, we are left finally very much in the terrain of antagonism and failure. Patently, this is not an encounter with the “face of the other” that progresses to a relationship with the godhead. Instead, true to its spirit, divinity in *Sud Side Stori* is subjected to kitsch (reinforcing Giuseppona’s opening cynical assessment that “if there really is a god ... it’s best we just forget about it”), while Romea/Juliet and Toni/Romeo (one takes her own life; the other loses his life in an internecine “massacre”) remain *stranieri* or strangers to themselves and to each other.

2. *Iago*, by Volfango di Biasi (2008)

While *Iago* takes *Othello* as its source of stimulation, it reimagines the play in several respects. Distinctively, *Iago* offers us Iago’s backstory rather than Othello’s, envisioning the lieutenant “of exceeding honesty” (3.3.262) as the wronged hero of the piece. Specifically, Iago is discovered as the most brilliant – but impoverished and undervalued – University of Venice student in his (architecture) Faculty. Emphasising the interpretation, the film approves an aesthetic that makes much of appearances and possessions (costume credits reference Bulgari, Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana, and Gucci), with trappings of wealth and entitlement being spotlighted. Except for Iago, who, in an illustration of his downtrodden position and distance from *haute couture*, is shot in shabby dark jacket and trousers, most of the film’s players are photographed to show off in a manner akin to a *Vogue* editorial. Strikingly, Othello (Black and hailing from Paris) and Cassio (Fabio Ghidoni)

²³ See Minutella 2013, 204; Montironi 2022, 215.

in *Iago* are cousins: their relation underscores the praxes of nepotism that the film makes its partial subject (one leads, and the other is second assistant on, the team entering a Biennale competition event) and points up defining monetary accoutrements. While Cassio is arresting in his casually draped and costly long scarves, Otello – the most obvious instance in the film of the “other” who excites social antagonism – makes for a dominant impression with a gym-toned physique accentuated by tight-fitting cashmere top and polo shirts and accessorised by a pristine white handkerchief.

Kyle Grady writes that Iago’s lack of obvious motive allows Shakespeare to develop a “more mercurial and complicated villain”: “certitude” is replaced “with loose ends”.²⁴ In *Iago*, by contrast, the titular character, echoing his Shakespearean counterpart (“People ... care about ... what you seem to be”), is granted a backstory that makes sense of his motivations. At the start, Iago explains how his origins disenfranchise him and prevent advancement: tousle-haired, he recounts his abandonment by his “brick-layer” father, his lack of “luck” and his generally straitened circumstances. Akin to the struggling Renaissance scholar, Iago is labelled a “poor, starving bookworm” by fellow students. Understanding Iago in this fashion is contextually resonant. It suggests that, in a “debt-ridden” climate, and at a time of rising “unemployment” and “widening inequality” in Italy, the figure of a working-class student served as a readily recognisable trope.²⁵ To some extent, then, *Iago* executes a socially responsive operation, forming an alliance both with contemporaneous Italian theatre productions of Shakespeare in which “characters” serve as “metaphors for [the] ... unemployed and ... artists” and with Italian cinema’s predilection for exploring issues of class and privilege.²⁶

The fictive biography legitimises Iago’s idealist belief in egalitarianism. Against a backdrop of disadvantage, he

²⁴ Grady 2016, 68.

²⁵ Emmott 2012, 6, 17, 90.

²⁶ Montironi 2020, 268; Celli and Cottino-Jones 2007, 154-56.

expounds in the campus design studio his thesis of meritocracy, a thesis that runs counter to the realities of what Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri term Italy's "non-meritocratic system".²⁷ "I have a dream", Iago states, elaborating, "in a far-away kingdom ... is a happy ... fair and ordered world where people are free and flourish". The visual expression of his philosophy is the model city he has built, with its stairwell leading to the heavens (suggestive of disencumbered progress) and a spatial organisation that enables "desire" and "love". Later, again in the campus design studio, he is distinguished from Otello who has been parachuted into the university to lead on the Faculty entry to the Biennale competition event and who is only interested in market interests. Here, Otello executive alters the entry, privileging the "business district" as the only site of "progress". Subsequently, in a careworn square, Iago chafes at his position in relation to the "other": "He wants to build a gilded prison where all people do is work ... It's designed to ... turn them into slaves". Both the faded setting, and expression of discontent, mark Iago off from the directions and tendencies of his world.

Inside the film's representation of Iago as an inventive artist committed to epic and ethical ventures is its discovery of a system averse to mobility and change. In fact, in its anatomisation of an institution that protects its own interests, *Iago* gestures towards the practices for which the "Berlusconi era" has become known, including clientelism, a system of social relations which involves, as John Foot notes, "an exchange of resources between a patron and a client ... trust, the promise of a future 'recommendation', or even the banking of such resources for future use".²⁸ Clientelism and corruption are at the heart of one of the core scenes – the backroom deal between the Rector, Brabanzio (Gabriele Lavia), and Philippe Moreau (father of Otello and world-renowned architect). By a cosy fireside, Brabanzio, referencing "the contract to build the bridge", states: "just ... sign the consultation ... you're not

²⁷ Mammone and Veltri 2010, 2.

²⁸ Foot 2014, 188.

responsible ... there's a lot of politics". In reply, Moreau (Mamadou Dioume) accepts the "favour", including his son's Faculty admission, with discourses of unpalatable business establishing the two as equally enmeshed in shady networks of benefit only to those already in power.

Iago derives ideological impact not just from Iago's institutional marginalisation but also from the extent to which this is paralleled in a concomitant romantic disappointment. As several episodes make clear, the wronged hero's tribulations in love echo his frustrations at the profession: one is a microcosm of the other. As lover, Iago in the film takes on a romantic mantle in penning a love letter to Desdemona (Laura Chiatti), the Rector's daughter, casting her in a fairy-tale light and informing his friends that they are destined to be together. The disparity in the worlds Iago and Desdemona inhabit is self-evident. For instance, with no mother and obliged to live with his aunt, Iago is glimpsed making his way home to a mean apartment in Venice's backstreets: cinematography specifies his route into the "*sestiere de San Paulo*", while establishing shots concentrate on washing hanging between faded buildings. In contradistinction is Desdemona's domestic space. Always in a combination of silky white and sparkly gold, Desdemona lives in a lofty, colonnaded palazzo, upward-tilting camerawork indicating her distance from her would-be lover's plebeian circumstances. Adding to issues of inaccessibility, Desdemona does not respond immediately to Iago's admittedly hesitant approaches, and, when she subsequently falls for Otello's charms, the humiliated student is distraught: "I'll never love again ... I didn't think it would hurt this much ... I'm drowning", he states, using an appropriate watery metaphor.

It is because Desdemona and Otello belong to similarly elevated environments that, as the film realises it, they are drawn to each other. Notably, *Iago* lenses Otello as arrogant and overweening. "I've spent my life going between Paris, Tokyo and New York", he brags to Desdemona, adding, "I've studied design systems that even professors couldn't imagine". Revealingly, his boasts are delivered against a backdrop of the Rialto Bridge and the

Fondaco dei Turchi palazzo, constructs that symbolically affirm the speaker's membership of a modern, mercantile elite. Elsewhere, Otello appears at Roderigo's party as a gladiator (the film's approximation of "our noble and valiant general" [2.2.1-2]) and in a tailor-made suit sporting a key around his neck (the freedom of the city is his, it is suggested).

In fact, the party concatenates the thematic of an Iago who is overlooked and dispossessed. Taking place in a glittery white palazzo, the party, and its masked and costumed partygoers (devils, pirates, and emperors), recall Venice's cinematic association with carnival, with a playground of transformation and alternative identities. Yet, for Iago, there is no transformation from his lowly self, the soldierly formations of the dancers drawing attention to his experience of exclusion and loss. The military note is emphasised in the ribald remarks of the partygoers ("Bring us the spoils of the enemy") and in the spectacle of a cross-dressed, chain-mailed Roderigo (Lorenzo Gleijeses) standing in triumph over his male dancer conquest. At the same time, in passages where visuals overtake dialogue, the score approves the direction of travel away from Iago and towards the face-painted warrior Otello (here, the film places a heightened stress on the encounter with the "face of the other") as he seduces Desdemona in the library. Hence, the song of inferiority and supplication, *Beggin*, performed by Madcon, with its haunting complaint, "I'm on my knees when I'm begging", gives way to the more confidently forthright *Louxor J'Adore*, performed by Philippe Katerine, with its motifs of luxury and appeased desire. This is Otello's music, secured through his father's status, and all march to it. With the party, the process of Iago being pushed out, and the filling in of his backstory, is complete. Iago returns home and ascends the stairwell to his aunt's apartment, only to fall asleep, the muted colours of the scene gradually fading to black.

The shift away from backstory and towards the Shakespearean text is presented as an awakening as up-tempo plaintive strings and aggressive trumpets indicate the ar-

rival of the play proper. Shaken into consciousness by his aunt, Iago springs into life, suggesting a complement of motivation is now fully in place. Shortly afterwards, *sotto voce*, Iago announces the first strand of his plan to destroy Otello, his martial metaphors reinforcing the idea of a war between men: "Otello ... show me what you're worth on the battlefield". The implication is that Iago now realises that acting with honesty and integrity allows for little movement within a nepotistic network (a change in tactics is demanded). Both a similarity to the play's opening, and the Shakespearean Iago's confession that "I know my price ... Whip me such honest knaves" (1.1.11, 49), advertise the engagement with text even as they register the transition of the character into an alternative mode. In the light of the film's structuring of narrative and motive, we are sensitised with a particular urgency to the encounter processes through which Iago is newly established as dissembler.

Indeed, in the representation of Iago's intrigue, the film rehearses the key set-pieces of the play at breakneck speed, including the attempted rehabilitation of Cassio ("He's already caused enough trouble", a piqued Otello notes) and Otello's quizzing Desdemona about her conduct. These ensue in such rapid succession that Iago's grasp of the plot's entanglements seems unassailable. Yet, despite the increase in his manipulative stature, Iago remains during these scenes the unhappy outsider. For example, pausing on a romantic bridge that gives onto a Renaissance church's busy façade, Iago informs Desdemona, "Somebody like me has to work twice as hard to get results", his comment operating to prioritise the continuing realities of class and its excluding effects. Of course, the issue of who is excluded, and why, is central to *Othello*. Both the dark palette of the play phase of the film, and possibly Iago's apprehension that "people" in Otello's iteration of the city are akin to "slaves", invite us to think more about how *Iago* negotiates the play's racial subtexts. Ayanna Thompson reminds us that "race-making" takes on different forms at "different historical moments to create structural and material inequalities", and her com-

ment is useful in sensitising us to specific articulations of race in the Italy of the early twenty-first century.²⁹ Perhaps because Italy's modern imperial history was brief, debate about categories of Italian citizenship and nationhood have raged in recent decades, refracted in contemporary outbursts of xenophobia against *extracomunitari*. Even if it aims to dissociate itself from such developments, as suggested by the replacement of racist slurs with terms of social embarrassment, *Iago* finds it impossible to escape the pressure of its racist contexts entirely. Notably, both contemporaneous projections and colonial legacies find release in Cassio, Otello's cousin, his functioning as the site where the some of the most unpalatable aspects of the "Berlusconi era" meet. As well as homophobia, Cassio gives vent to frustrations that cluster around the Otello figure. "[Otello has] put me in a real mess ... My father made it quite clear: no Biennale, no masters in Tokyo ... No Tokyo, no Japanese girls ... Have you ever screwed a J*p? [It's] all thanks to that s****y n****r!", he rages. Delivered in his swanky apartment, Cassio's comments continue the narrative of privilege, linking a historical conviction of entitlement to sexualised assumptions about Asian women and toxic masculinity. Some of *Iago's* repurposing manoeuvres are underlined here – for *Iago* to be empathetic, Cassio must be objectionable. The worse the latter appears, the better the former is presented, *Iago* appearing through comparison as more future oriented and progressively attuned.

Yet discourses of toxicity are not easily dislodged. In the film, while the bloodbath of *Othello* is avoided and no deaths occur, aggressivity and upset remain as norms as an enraged Otello assaults a furious Cassio and then tears upstairs to the design studio to strike Desdemona and berate her for her presumed infidelities. In this way, the key moments of the intrigue are recalled in violent combinations: *Iago's* question ("The truth – is that what you want?") brings us back to his earlier renunciation of "honesty", while Cassio's realisation ("Can't you see he's play-

²⁹ Thompson 2021, 7.

ing us off against each other?") is the tipping-point that precipitates exposure. The spectacle of Othello wrecking the model, and dashing thereby the team's competition chances, is a climactic moment. Idealism dissolves as does the construct of a world in which "people" come together for a common purpose in a level environment. In this scenario, the destructive direction of *Othello* is reconceived, the central players crushed but remaining and the consequences of Iago's intrigue still to be fully played out.

In contradistinction to the play, the film delivers on the expectation that Iago will explain himself, reversing centuries of performative silence and concatenating the representation of a type whose behaviours have been contextualised from the start. Against the backdrop of the smashed-up studio, Iago makes his frustrations crystal-clear. Addressing Otello, he exclaims, "A name's not enough to give you talent!". Turning then to Brabantio, Iago excoriates the Rector for putting "friends and ... business" above all else and ignoring "merit". In reply, Brabantio, who has been called on to intervene in the affray, is incredulous, labelling the student a "terrorist". If the term situates the student wholly outside the system he has agitated against, Desdemona adds salt to the wound, slapping Iago and storming out of the studio, the suggestion being that he is now multiply rejected.

At each stage, as an index of his ostracization, *Iago* interpolates the wronged hero's bedroom. As the high point of an extended conclusion, however, the symbolisation is reversed: Desdemona, chastened, leaves her world to enter Iago's. She seeks him out in his own *sestiere*, her displacement rounding off the film's domestic trajectory. The emphasis on Iago's bedroom as the destination-point of the film recalls the ways in which, in *Othello*, "prurient descriptions" and "viewer gratification" consort in a form of early modern "pornography".³⁰ "You're arrogant and conceited ... Destroying everything around you ... You've destroyed my father ... destroyed my relationship ... destroyed Otello", Desdemona upbraids. Yet her condemna-

³⁰ Boose 2004, 26, 27, 35.

tion quickly gives way to invitation, as, sitting on the bed and revealing herself to be only partially dressed, she states: “I want to be with an important man ... Take me, you’ve won, promise me you’ll always love me like this”.

There is much that is unpalatable here, including the representation of Desdemona’s submissiveness and the sense of a defeat that amounts to sexual victory. But winning Desdemona means that Iago emerges triumphant, with the bedroom motif of a cross-class couple underscoring the future promise of the meritocratic city. The values to which Iago still subscribes, it is implied, will democratise the older order. As the consummation becomes the culmination of *Iago*’s story, the embracing pair is discreetly – theatrically – veiled. The film’s ultimate shot – a bright red superimposed curtain being draped over the spectacle of the lovers – self-consciously evokes Lodovico’s reference in *Othello* to the “loading of this bed” (5.2.373) and his demand that the curtains be drawn. At this climatic moment, however, the curtains fall not on tragedy but on a scene of sexual intimacy and romantic commitment which signals a new beginning.

The hopefulness of this ending continues in a series of inserts interspersed over the credits. The final one of these – in a playful nod – returns us to Shakespeare’s titular hero. Othello is discovered on a bench looking despairing – for the first time he is imagined as the archetypally rendered Othello defined by “fragmented ... orientations” who is “culturally adrift, alienated and alone”.³¹ The inset reminds us that clientelism, and its corruptive consequences, harm even those who benefit materially from it. “I’m a loser, a failure, a fake”, Othello moans, but his depressive introspection is immediately challenged by a passing Roderigo. “What do you mean?”, Roderigo asks him, “You’re a bright guy, full of talent ... You’re the best ... Would you like to come to my place for dinner?”. Catherine O’Rawe argues that some recent Italian films examining migration and encounters with the “other” represent “bonds of affection ... between male migrants and

³¹ LaPerle 2021, 89; Smith 2016, 112.

Italians" and "continue the homosocial thematic" for which "Italian cinema" is known.³² Certainly, as Otello eagerly responds to Roderigo's invitation, ideas of connectivity – if not hospitality and welcome – are foregrounded. The positives of such a discovery of the character never prioritised in *Iago* are reflected in the iconic image of Venice which is now introduced. As the camera switches to reveal Otello and Roderigo seated on the bench together, we move into a wide shot of the magnificent façade of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, with its breath-taking vista across the Grand Canal towards St Mark's Square. It is the picture-postcard view of Venice for which we have waited, affirming that, for the reformed Otello, Venice, available and authenticated, now properly opens its doors. Incorporating Shakespeare's tragic hero within a millennial generation defined by same-sex attraction, the film concludes with a fantasy of the possibilities of meritocracy in a contemporary, cosmopolitan, and youthful Venice, one that is alive to the prospect of fresh encounters presenting themselves and further stories evolving.

Conclusion

By contrast with *Sud Side Stori*, *Iago* culminates in a gesture of welcome. And the extending of hospitality is significant: to cite David Ford's ethically angled discussion of the end of *The Divine Comedy*, "fear of the other comes primarily from outside the home ... and in response I learn to give what I possess, to be a hospitable self".³³ Bucking the trend examined in *Sud Side Stori*, *Iago* winds up the narrative of social dispossession via a scenario that privileges proper integration, demonstrating how, to revert to Levinas, the "Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me".³⁴ As Roderigo looks to Otello, and Otello looks to Roderigo, there is a pleasure and promise in the spectacle with which this adaptation of *Othello* concludes: as Katerina Standish

³² O'Rawe 2011, 256.

³³ Ford 1999, 41.

³⁴ Levinas 1989, 83.

notes, although not in connection with the film, the “*being with*” of the encounter is an outcome, one which (given the Venice setting) endorses a “sort of global citizenry”.³⁵

This is, then, a scenario that, in making encounters visible – and valued – demonstrates through the arts of Italian cinematic adaptation what has been, what is, and what may still be. Commentators on encounter theory make similar observations. For example, even as she concerns herself with a postcolonial past, Sara Ahmed focuses on a post-postcolonial future: “the *here-ness* of [the] encounter might affect *where we might yet be going*”, she writes. *Iago* looks to such a future; at the same time, it invites us, along with *Sud Side Stori*, to reconsider the Shakespearean text.³⁶ Both films, in drawing on Shakespeare’s humanist emphases, take us back to the plays (*Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*) from which they take inspiration, asking us to look at them anew. In this encounter between “the reader and the text” (which embraces both plays and film adaptations), “certain possibilities” – of interpretation and knowledge – are generated.³⁷ The corpus of Shakespeare himself/itself becomes freshly legible in this process (and certainly not a stranger) – hospitable and open to the world.

For “an encounter” to give birth to “a world”, writes Louis Althusser, “it must be ... a lasting encounter, which then becomes the basis for all reality”.³⁸ With its dispiriting Palermitan ending, *Sud Side Stori* does not qualify for such a long-term state of affairs (the tragic deaths of Romea/Juliet and Toni/Romeo), but *Iago* contemplates the opposite prospect: forwards oriented, it countenances other relations developing (the encounter as affirmative, affective and reformative) and, importantly, situates this construction in a spiritual/divine context (the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute). Here, we might recall the fact that Levinas, notwithstanding his position of philosophical pragmatism, repeatedly turns in his ethical work to

³⁵ Standish 2021, 4; Ruiter 2014, 206.

³⁶ Ahmed 2000, 145.

³⁷ Ahmed 2000, 15.

³⁸ Althusser 2006, 169.

the idea of "infinity", which is "produced in the form of a relation with the face", arguing that herein "is, perhaps, the very presence of God".³⁹ We might also recall that, for Dante/the pilgrim (at the close of *The Divine Comedy*), it is God's infinity ("that moves the sun and *other* stars" [*my italics*]) that so staggeringly impresses. Like *Iago*, and in common with the hopes of *Sud Side Stori*, *The Divine Comedy* ends with the prospect of "wheels" moving in "equilibrium" and the composite, comprehensive integration of all "other" elements and dimensions.

³⁹ Levinas 1969, 196, 291.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London and New York, Routledge.
- Albertazzi, Daniele and Nina Rothenburg. 2009. "Introduction: This Tide is not for Turning". In *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001-06)*. Daniele Albertazzi, Clodagh Brook, Charlotte Ross and Nina Rothenburg, eds. New York and London, Continuum. 1-16.
- Alighieri, Dante. 1985. *La Divina Commedia*. In *Opere scelte*, Giuseppe Villaroel, Guido Davico Bonino and Carla Poma, eds., with an essay by Eugenio Montale. Milano, Mondadori. 1-883.
- . 2012. *The Divine Comedy*. Robin Kirkpatrick, ed. and tr. London and New York, Penguin Books.
- Althusser, Louis. 2006. *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*. G. M. Goshgarian, ed. London and New York, Verso.
- Bloechl, Jeffrey D. 1996. "How best to keep a secret? On love and respect in Levinas' 'Phenomenology of Eros'". *Man and World* 29: 1-17.
- Boose, Lynda E. 2004. "'Let it Be Hid': The Pornographic Aesthetic of Shakespeare's *Othello*". In *Othello: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Lena Cowen Orlin, ed. Basingstoke, Palgrave. 22-48.
- Buber, Martin. 1937. *I and Thou*. Ronald Gregor Smith, tr. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark.
- Burnett, Mark Thornton. 2022. "Understanding *Iago*, an Italian Film Adaptation of *Othello*: Clientelism, Corruption, Politics". *Shakespeare Survey* 75: 1-14.
- Calbi, Maurizio. 2013. *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century*. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave.
- Celli, Carlo and Marga Cottino-Jones. 2007. *A New Guide to Italian Cinema*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Emmott, Bill. 2012. *Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer Its Demons to Face the Future*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.
- Foot, John. 2014. *Modern Italy*. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

- Ford, David F. 1999. *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Franke, William. 2007. "The Ethical Vision of Dante's *Paradiso* in Light of Levinas". *Comparative Literature* 59.3: 209-27.
- Grady, Kyle. 2016. "Othello, Colin Powell, and Post-Racial Anachronisms". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.1: 68-83.
- LaPerle, Carol Mejia. 2021. "Race in Shakespeare's Tragedies". In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Ayanna Thompson, ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 77-92.
- Lehmann, Courtney. 2015. "Shakespearean Reverberations: from Religion to Responsibility in Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Stori*". In *Shakespearean Echoes*. Adam Hansen and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr, eds. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave. 97-107.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Extremity*. Alphonso Lingis, tr. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press.
- . 1985. *Ethics and Infinity*. Richard A. Cohen, tr. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press.
- . 1989. *The Levinas Reader*. Seán Hand, ed. Oxford and Malden, Blackwell.
- Mammone, Andrea and Giuseppe A. Veltri. 2010. "A 'sick-man' in Europe". In *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*. Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri, eds. London and New York, Routledge. 1-15.
- Minutella, Vincenza. 2013. *Reclaiming 'Romeo and Juliet': Italian Translations for Page, Stage and Screen*. Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi.
- Monaldi, Rita and Francesco Sorti. 2021. *Dante di Shakespeare: Amor ch'a nullo amato*. Milan: Solferino.
- Montironi, Maria Elisa. 2020. "Narrating and unravelling Italian crises through Shakespeare (2000-2016)". In *Shakespeare and Crisis: One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*. Silvia Bigliuzzi, ed. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins. 245-275.
- Montironi, Maria Elisa. 2022. "A Mediterranean Woman-Centred Rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet*: Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Stori*". *Skenè Studies* 1.3: 207-32.

- O’Healy, Áine. 2007. “Border Traffic: Reimagining the Voyage to Italy”. In *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*. Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre and Áine O’Healy, eds. New York, Palgrave Macmillan. 37-52.
- O’Rawe, Catherine. 2011. “Contemporary Cinema”. In *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*. Louis Bayman, ed. Bristol, Intellect. 255-56.
- Ruiter, David. 2014. “Coda: ‘And therefore as a stranger give it welcome’”. In *Shakespeare and Immigration*. Ruben Espinosa and David Ruiter, eds. Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate. 199-210.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, eds. New York, W. W. Norton.
- Sigona, Nando. 2010. “‘Gypsies out of Italy!’: Social exclusion and racial discrimination of Roma and Sinti in Italy”. In *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*. Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri, eds. London and New York, Routledge. 143-57.
- Smith, Ian. 2016. “We are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies”. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.1: 104-24.
- Standish, Katerina. 2021. “Encounter Theory”. *Peacebuilding* 9.1: 1-14.
- Thompson, Ayanna. 2021. “Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and His Contemporaries? An Introduction”. In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Ayanna Thompson, ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1-16.
- Wilson, Helen F. 2017. “On the Paradox of the ‘Organised’ Encounter”. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38.6: 606-620.

Part II

Literary and Media Adaptations of Early Modern Historical Figures and Works

READING ASPECTS OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BORGIA FAMILY ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Yujia (Flavia) Jin

The twenty-first century is witnessing a new fashion for representing the early modern period through the screen depiction of Renaissance families that have become symbolic collective images. Among the most prominent ones, the Florentine House of the Medici, and the Italian-Aragonese one of Borgia. The contemporary media representation of the latter one, which became prominent in ecclesiastical and political affairs in Italy in the 1400s and 1500s, albeit with their name becoming synonymous with nepotism, incest, and poisoning, is the focus of this study, though my analysis will also consider other prominent political and religious figures of the time, namely Girolamo Savonarola and Niccolò Machiavelli. By discussing historical narratives in the television series *The Borgias* (2011-13) and the video games *Assassin's Creed II* (2009) and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), I aim to highlight the interpretative methodologies by which television and video games represent, reshape, and recreate aspects of the Italian Renaissance on the small screen. In agreement with Jennifer Mara DeSilva, I will argue that the emergence of new media, alongside interpretative tools offered by heteroglossia and “historiophoty”,¹ has been instrumental in achieving a breadth of diversity of

¹ See the Introduction to this book, note 6.

representation, encouraging interdisciplinary perspectives for the dissemination of history.²

1. Reconstructing aspects of the Italian Renaissance on the small screen

The relationship between heteroglossia and dialogue is similar to a network and the nodes that weave it; following the nodes reveals the shape of the network. Television and video games are used as a multimedia heteroglossia of the Italian Renaissance, while heteroglossia gives helpful insights into this exceptional early modern period through contrasting and complementary dialogues.

In the opening credits of *The Borgias* television series, there is a cut scene of the painting *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (1545) by Agnolo Bronzino (National Gallery). The opening credits capture the part where Venus and Cupid are kissing to add a sense of controversy to the Borgia narrative. While a sixteenth century audience would have recognised Bronzino's painting as allegorical,³ for today's audiences, it creates a feeling of ambivalence, eroticism, and obscureness. Using this part of the painting to open the show helps present the Borgia family as incestuous and unconventional, mirroring the effect the painting has on its spectators. Bronzino's artwork is therefore used to convey the spirit of the show and embodies the core idea of heteroglossia.

Bronzino's *Allegory* was dedicated to Cosimo de' Medici as a product of his patronage, but it is here used as a good signpost of the Borgia family's decadence in televisual representations. The contradictions of *Allegory* can be read on two levels of morality. On the first level, the contradiction between the painting's playful eroticism and Cosimo's high moral code creates an intensive effect on the contradiction of pleasure and virtue. The second level lies in the ambiguity of its content. All characters in the

² De Silva 2020, 3. Useful insights on narrativity and historical research are offered by Yao, 2021. See also Gergen 2005.

³ For readings on the allegorical meaning of this Bronzino painting see Mulryan 1974, Cheney 1987, Barolsky and Ladis 1991.

painting can be ascribed multiple meanings through their actions; some are even ambiguous in identity. As Iris Cheney said, *Allegory* is a painting about unveiling, and the conception of allegorical personification here is synthetic, allusive, and unstable rather than concrete.⁴ The ambiguity in *Allegory* parallels the ambiguity of Borgia family narratives in television and video game representations.

The interaction between Venus and Cupid is the most eye-catching part of the painting. This incestuous scene reflects the implied incest of Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia in *The Borgias'* opening credits. This moral element makes a strong visual impact on the television audience. At the same time, pitting Virtue and Time against Lust symbolises a *psychomachia*, a battle between good and evil, purity and degeneration.⁵ The narrative universe of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Brotherhood* is a *psychomachia* where the Borgia family symbolise the evil force of the Templars, who are opposed to the Assassin's Order. This reading of *Allegory* can be extended not only to the painting's unique value during the Renaissance but also to how it hints at the moral concern of the Borgia family in the contemporary world, while allowing the latter to read the Italian Renaissance in a heteroglossic manner.

The nature of heteroglossia is explained perfectly in *Allegory*, as it is a painting with no centre on the content. Small-screen representations of the Italian Renaissance similarly involve multiple characters who are simultaneously disconnected and connected. Although the characters appear in the same frame, they have their own focus, and their interaction can only be fully understood by appreciating the whole picture as a single entity. With its multiple characters, symbols and actions, this painting becomes a perfect entry point into the navigation of the Renaissance world as a form of heteroglossia.

⁴ Cheney 1987, 16.

⁵ *Psychomachia* is originally a poem by the Late Antique Latin poet Prudentius.

2. “Historiophoty”: Rethinking history on screen

The discourse of Italian Renaissance history on the small screen refreshes the scholarly and public attention on history represented on screens as a general issue on its credibility and impact. It is a complex discourse that started with the first historical film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed by DW Griffith.⁶ This film demonstrated the cinematic arts’ potential in *doing history* and also how the representation of history can itself become a problematic and controversial discourse. This “visual turn” of history symbolises the postmodernist view of history as a signifier whose meaning is constructed by the semiotic process.⁷ This semiotic process is closely linked to the selection of historical events, which deconstruct the grand narratives into fragmented pieces that alter the way people understand history: history is seen as a text, and the comprehension of it is deemed to include subjective and interpretive elements.

Complex features of historical media add scale and breadth to the discussion of history on screen, distinguishing digital culture from other textual forms of history, such as literature. The representation of history in the twenty-first century is interdisciplinary in nature. One only needs to think of Hayden White’s definitions of “historiography” as representing history in verbal images and written discourse, and “historiophoty” as the representation of history in visual images and film discourse.⁸ Scholars such as Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White make observations on how filmic discourse uses its own rules to write history and compete with traditional historiography.⁹ White believes the production of a filmed representation is similar to written history, as both require processes of “condensation,” “displacement,” “symbolisation,” and “qualification” when dealing with historical materials, and “it is only the medium that differs, not the

⁶ See Lang 1994.

⁷ De Groot 2009, 1.

⁸ White 1988, 1193.

⁹ Rosenstone 2012. White 1988.

way in which messages are produced".¹⁰ This chapter moves beyond the territory of film to read the history constructed by television and video games.

The most significant distinction between television/video games and film is the former's different narrative pace, which is embedded in the serial format. The demand for narrative depth and scope can only be satisfied with a serial format.¹¹ Thus, television and video games are perfectly suited to be serial mediums for grand narratives such as *The Borgias*, *Assassin's Creed: II*, and *Brotherhood*, which reach across time and space.

The *family story* is a genre that is highly compatible with historical narratives. Jerome S. Bruner noted that the trouble with "great" histories is that it is hard to fit them into a narrative because of the canonicity (or legitimacy, as White termed it) that historians created.¹² The Borgia stories are testament to the popularity of historical family stories on the small screen and their broad influence in shaping historical reality. Because of their serial format, television and video games are capable of linking micro-history with macro-history; their stories evolve around more locations and incidents, and this allows space for characters to develop over time. Thus, spectators are emotionally bonded with history through the lives of the characters over the long viewing or playing experience. A story about families becomes the medium through which people connect with history; they smoothly integrate historical consciousness through an ontological perspective that explicitly dramatises and explores the personal nature of history, analysing the minutiae of the past so that history itself increasingly becomes a self-reflexive, interpretative and subjective experience.¹³

Serialisation strengthens viewers' engagement with characters and further blurs the boundary between reality and fiction. This is because only serial format provides viewers with a deeper level of participation and under-

¹⁰ White 1988, 1194.

¹¹ Ramsay 2015, 123.

¹² Bruner 2005, 30 and 39.

¹³ Creeber 2004, 14.

standing in characters' lives presented on screen due to its length and depth of the narrative. The universal appeal of family sagas stems from their emotional plausibility of realism. The emotional echoes created by family sagas manifest in the complex relationships between family members and create a continuous demand for content from contemporary audiences,¹⁴ who want to know whether and how the family sticks together or falls apart. The television series *The Borgias* is a perfect example of combining family history with national history.

On the other hand, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Brotherhood* take a different path to integrate plausibility of realism into its universe. Video games are even more persuasive due to their simulation and immersion mechanisms.¹⁵ By playing the game, the participant simultaneously becomes avatar, narrator, and audience.¹⁶ The line between the game world and the natural world disappears at a deep psychological level and further complicates the history because playing is an even more intimate experience than watching. As a result, the representation of history on small screens becomes a very problematic issue because television and video games alter the history they represent via their different media characteristics.

By casting this intense emotional realism upon its audience, the authenticity of history seriously wavers as it becomes harder to distinguish historical elements from imagined ones. Since ambiguity is inevitable in representation, questions arise about why they are generated and how they should be used to understand history better.

3. Heteroglossia and narrative ambiguity in serial television and video games

The reconstruction of the Renaissance in the contemporary world is a multi-aspect phenomenon whose existence can be seen as a polyphonic and heteroglossic text, a collage – “the juxtaposition of diverse and seemingly in-

¹⁴ Baldini 2020, 285.

¹⁵ Baudrillard 1994.

¹⁶ Jenkins 2004.

congruous elements"¹⁷ – or in Fredric Jameson's words, it naturally generates an ideological dynamism.¹⁸ Different ideologies, experiences, forms and content are combined in collage, and new meanings are invented through the narrative ambiguities heteroglossia brings.

The television series *The Borgias* and video games *Assassin's Creed: II* and *Brotherhood*, featuring the Borgia family and the Auditore family as their protagonists, present spectators with contrasting voices from overlapping historical and fictional worlds. TV and games using the main characters Cesare Borgia (a historical figure) and Ezio Auditore (a fictional figure) show two types of principality that both accord to the Machiavellian frame. Different political, religious, and moral ideas are voiced through characters' actions and interactions, and emotional bonds are formed with viewers and players through different levels of interactivity and historicity.

Television series and video games share similar traits to novels due to the breadth and depth of their narratives and their dialogic nature. Therefore, both TV drama series and video games may be understood in a textual manner, similar to literature. Heteroglossia, is used by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the internal composition of novels. Bakhtin believes a novel can contain many figures from many parts of society whose speech helps to define their characters; a novel can also include different kinds of narrators with different tonal qualities.¹⁹ The various voices united in a novel create rich interrelationships between kinds of speech and types of people. His view of language and ideology as the formative material of human consciousness makes his theories particularly applicable to the study of popular narratives.²⁰ By placing television and video games together, heteroglossia brings up vital dialogues between the past and present worlds of the Renaissance through historical evidence and overlapping events. At the same time, the

¹⁷ Harvey 1994, 338.

¹⁸ Jameson 1991.

¹⁹ Bakhtin 1981.

²⁰ Kijinski 1987, 69.

small screen of the television and video games forms the interaction between historical figures and their audience, inviting different ideologies into a highly intensified conversation in which all parties participate in the production of meanings.

Meanwhile, heteroglossia is both the *solution* and the *side-effect* of the process of deconstructing cultural artefacts. For Bakhtin, the novel is equipped to deal with heteroglossia because it is an open form, where the word is not bonded to a singular ideological meaning but contains enough ambiguity to encourage multiple readings. The multiplicity of heteroglossia makes the representation of history face the problem of *ambiguity* on textual and ideological levels through the dialogues it promotes.

Ambiguity is traditionally used as a concept in literary criticism. William Empson uses it in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) to analyse the rhetorical language of poetry, and it is an essential factor in the experience of textuality. It can also be productively applied to the close reading of television and video games and is particularly well suited to the corpus investigated here. The narrative complexity embedded through heteroglossia naturally creates ambiguity; however, it also strengthens the degree of realism of the story by adopting the viewpoint of multiple characters, deepening the relationship between a work and its consumers. For example, John Caughie suggests that this narrative complexity is what creates serial television's unique relationship with its audience.²¹ This interactive relationship between work and spectators impacts the contemporary understanding and experience of history presented on screen.

The audiovisual narratives of the Borgia family contribute to creating a complex and diversified image of the Renaissance. Being at the centre of these portrayals, the Borgia family lose their traditionally stereotypical unity of representation. Instead, they are portrayed as different individuals with their own struggles and arcs. Internal conflicts and divisions among family members are mir-

²¹ Caughie 2000, 205.

rored by the larger historical conflicts which affected the family as a whole.

The Borgias and *Assassin's Creed 2* series²² are linked through the Borgia family as they feature Cesare Borgia as their protagonist and the ultimate villain, respectively. Whereas Rodrigo, Cesare, and Lucrezia Borgia achieve self-growth in the television saga, their *Bildungsroman* stops in the *Assassin's Creed* universe. In general, *Bildungsroman* derives as a literary lexicon that is used to describe a genre of the novel focusing on the development of a young protagonist,²³ this term is applied here because *The Borgias* and *Assassin's Creed 2* series can both be seen as a *Bildungsroman* metaphorically as they both feature on the growth of their protagonists and link personal lives with the public sphere²⁴: the previous features on the development of the Borgia family with Cesare Borgia as its core character while the latter features on Ezio Auditore's saga with the Borgia family as his ultimate rival, both narratives are rooted in the Italian Renaissance as the background. The Borgia family members and other historical figures associated in different ways with them, such as Girolamo Savonarola and Niccolò Machiavelli, are involved in this heteroglossic dialogue as well across the boundary of television and game worlds.

4. The (historical) Borgias and the Renaissance

In order to read a historical period formed through complex narratives such as the Italian Renaissance, threads of deconstructing the scripts are required to understand the logic of characters and plots. One crucial concept in scriptwriting that has not received scholarly attention when discussing historical narratives is the *inciting inci-*

²² Here *Assassin's Creed 2* series includes three games that feature Ezio Auditore as the protagonist: *Assassin's Creed II*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*. This research targets the previous two games ranging from Ezio's youth to his middle age periods.

²³ See Bakhtin 1986.

²⁴ See Kontje 1992.

dent. The inciting incident is often the first significant event of the story; it sets in motion all that follows.²⁵ The choice of inciting incident determines the overall tone of the story and the character arcs. By choosing different inciting incidents, the television and video game narratives give their Renaissance characters different styles and emphasis, resulting in a heteroglossic representation of that period.

The inciting incident in the television show places the Borgia family at the centre of its Renaissance universe. *The Borgias* opens with Rodrigo Borgia's election as Pope Alexander VI, a choice that links the family story with the wider political and religious background of fifteenth century Rome, the heart of the Catholic Church. During the voting period, Rodrigo uses a dove to send Cesare the names of the Cardinals who need to be bribed. Neil Jordan's portrayal of Rodrigo as cunning and deceitful conformed to the historical archetype. However, this scene also serves to indirectly draw the audience's attention to Cesare Borgia. When Cesare receives his father's dove, he has this intriguing conversation with Lucrezia:

Lucrezia: Why the dove, Cesare?

Cesare: It has a dual purpose. Like many things in life, it serves as a symbol and a messenger.

Lucrezia: A symbol of what?

Cesare: Of the uncorrupted soul.

Lucrezia: And a messenger of what?

Cesare: Of corruption.

(Season 1, Episode 1, 00:16:15-00:17:16)

Thus from the very first scene viewers are presented with the dove as a metaphor for the Borgia family itself: outwardly pure but inwardly corrupt. Both in the video game and the TV series, the power surrounding the papacy engages the corruption of the Borgias and the College of Cardinals. By illustrating the religious environment of Italian Renaissance society, *The Borgias* shows how the Borgia family play their part in the turmoil of the vast political

²⁵ McKee 1997, 176.

and religious world. While the dove symbolises the complicated association of the Borgia family with Christianity, this dialogue between Cesare and Lucrezia narrates his own character allegorically, leading to a problematic situation of the Borgia family's position and role as a theoretical emblem.

Scholars acknowledge that the papacy of the Borgias was heavily politicised, not least through their extensive effort to make the papal see hereditary. Historically, nepotism has never left the Borgia family in their exercise of power: "A corruption so universal might sooner or later bring disastrous consequences on the Holy See, but they lay in the uncertain future. It was otherwise with nepotism, which threatened at one time to destroy the papacy altogether".²⁶ Contemporary historian Eulàlia Duran echoes Burckhardt's argument, suggesting that the Borgias were not the only ones seeking to guarantee loyalty, forge alliances and provide successors: "On the political front, the 15th-century popes had tried to turn the papal see into a sort of hereditary – or at any rate consolidated – monarchy: hence the practice of appointing relatives to the cardinalate".²⁷ The first Borgia pope, Calixtus III, adopted this practice, as did Rodrigo. He undisguisedly turned the papal see into some power gained by heredity as he wanted his son Cesare to inherit the Chair of St. Peter. Historians' views, in combination with the inciting incident of the show, form a logical ground for these two Renaissance narratives and show the value of a family-centered storyline in the TV series, as it reflects one of the key elements in the actual history of the dynasty. At the same time, it is crucial in defining Cesare's character. Cesare's action of helping Rodrigo win the election in the television show, presenting the inciting incident, testifies to the corruption of the College of Cardinals while speaking to the loyalty Cesare has for his father and his efforts to further the interests of the family (this is Cesare's logic as a character, which is rationalised by the inciting incident). Though he

²⁶ Burckhardt 1960, 43.

²⁷ Duran 2008, 71.

was a young man at this stage, this dialogue shows his ambition and desire in helping the family achieve a greater good, despite the means it takes; in this first appearance, Cesare is something of a Machiavellian figure, although Machiavelli will not appear until season two.

Brotherhood portrays Cesare as a much more dangerous figure than his father. In the last sequence of the game (Sequence 8), Rodrigo points out that Cesare has abused his power, and Rodrigo wants to poison him in order to consolidate his own reign. However, Rodrigo is killed by Cesare instead. As depicted by Ubisoft, both father and son regard “family” only as a pretense in their chase for power – they unite only to battle with the Assassin’s Order to take control of Italy. Cesare’s character in the game echoes the stereotyped ruthless Machiavellian Prince in traditional views. A direct contrast is presented to the audience and players of Cesare Borgia’s character, which forms one node of the heteroglossia and establishes an internal dynamic of the Borgia family in relation to the degeneration of Christianity during the High Renaissance.

5. Minor characters

The representations of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola and politician Niccolò Machiavelli demonstrate the contrasting voices from the external environment of the Borgia family on the small screen. Although they are minor characters in both television series and game, they were major religious and political figures in Renaissance Italy. Their historical socio-religious and political engagement give them indispensable value in popular narratives; as screen characters they possess more *dramaticity* for the narrative constructions and their audiences.

The reason for choosing these two figures as examples of minor roles for this analysis is not only that their representations signify the spiritual and secular worlds of Renaissance Italy; they are also *rivals* and *friends* of the protagonists, both in history and in fiction, while the latter portrays it with more straightforward and simplistic distinguishment for the purpose of script construction.

Savonarola seeks to restore the city of Florence as the *New Jerusalem*, as I will clarify later on, while Machiavelli puts effort into transforming the Italian Peninsula into a state without traditional Christian restraint on the rulers. Their ideas in history are their inciting incidents in *The Borgias* and the *Assassin's Creed II* and *Brotherhood* narratives. By taking different approaches to achieving their goals, the characters of Savonarola and Machiavelli offer crucial and exciting sidelines that stimulate the progress of the narratives and add more playful and thought-provoking experiences that help the audience to consider the Italian Renaissance from a wider perspective, yet, this generates ambiguities from different levels. From the perspective of the story design, Machiavelli and Savonarola's positions as minor characters vary between the television series and the video games, taking different protagonists as coordinates, and their shifting positions in representations are also the cause and products of the Renaissance heteroglossia.

The attitudes of the television show and video games toward shaping Savonarola and Machiavelli's figures on the small screen are generally consistent. Both these cultural products portray Machiavelli as having a positive role that stimulates the progress of the Renaissance. In contrast, Savonarola has a negative role that prevents the development of the Renaissance and the scheme of the Borgia family, partially satisfying historical stereotypes.

6. Salvation in the flames

Not much scholarly literature has contributed to Savonarola's *afterlife* in a modern (media) context. The religious reformer, who after the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1492) and the collapse of the Medici rule was entrusted by the Florentines with the reorganisation of the political and religious life of the city,²⁸ is not seen an entertaining figure for audiovisual productions, compared to other Renaissance characters, and only a few audiovisual works

²⁸ For comprehensive studies on Savonarola's life and religiousness, see Weinstein 2011 and Ceccuti 1995.

feature him. However, the Dominican Friar's provocative engagement makes him a valuable character in narratives.²⁹ Because of the bias left by the Burckhardtian tradition on his character, in which he is considered "too religious to be Renaissance",³⁰ it is worth examining which views of him are embedded in contemporary representations.

Historically, it is well known that Savonarola was a religious reformer aiming to restore the true Christian life against the corrupt conduct of the "harlot" Catholic Roman Church, and "strove to ensure that Florence was seen as the city chosen by God for the start of a new life of repentance and purification."³¹ His writings and preaching, that some scholars have labelled as "religious and prophetic imagination," did actually "set out his desire to return to apostolic simplicity and to base his teaching on the Scriptures".³² As Ambra Moroncini has observed, "by preaching without philosophy, and explaining Christianity in terms of its humanity, the Dominican friar's sermons put emphasis on the importance of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross",³³ and on the passionate belief that true Christian way of life "does not consist of ceremonies but in being internally well-orientated toward God and toward one's neighbour".³⁴ His "moral revolution" called not just for a new form of devotion, but also for a new form of living with a keen adversity to pagan philosophies, and this may explain how key figures of the Italian Renaissance, such as the philosopher Marsilio Ficino, initially attracted by Savonarola's appeal for a return to the true Christian life, later turned into one his greatest enemies. It was however the Church of Rome, as already mentioned, that remained the main target of the preacher's attacks, as from the famous *Sermone di Rinno-*

²⁹ Brown 2006, xv.

³⁰ Starn 1982, 303.

³¹ Moroncini 2017, 14.

³² Mazzotta 2006, xi.

³³ Moroncini 2017, 15.

³⁴ Savonarola's *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, cited in Moroncini 2017, 16.

vamento (Sermon of Renewal) on 13 January 1495, where Savonarola accused the papacy of having reduced the Roman Church to such “simony and wickedness” that “God will give His vineyard, that is, Rome and the Church, to others to cultivate, because in Rome there remains no charity at all, but only the devil”.³⁵ It is not difficult to see how his reformist voice may be considered as a crucial precursor to the Protestant Reformation.

If historically Savonarola’s stance against Church corruption, and his refusal to comply with the wishes of Pope Alessandro VI, made him a true adversary of the Borgias, the adaptation of his persona in TV series and the video games made him an ideal antagonist to the powerful Italian-Aragonese family. Indeed, Savonarola’s actions and desire of turning the city of Florence into a New Jerusalem are used to an extreme in building his character. Both television and the game shape him into a manic figure. Two main events related to Savonarola’s life and death are used in *The Borgias* and *Assassin’s Creed II*: the bonfire of the vanities and his execution in 1498. The television show and the game focus more on portraying his character through these two historical events, using his doctrine merely as an embellishment to the Borgia narrative. In *Assassin’s Creed II*, the friar is seen in “Memory Sequence 13: Bonfire of the Vanities”. The episode’s name accords with the historical event held in Florence during Carnival 1497, when Savonarola called for the destruction of pagan antics to symbolise the destruction of sin.³⁶ *The Borgias* describes this event in Season 2, Episode 6, “Day of Ashes”. Here, the once colorful and prosperous city of Florence has become a dark and dreary place under Savonarola’s influence. When Cardinal Sforza approaches Savonarola on behalf of Alexander VI, offering him the position of cardinal, Savonarola refuses. In order to stop his savage act and protect the Borgia name, Cesare is told to put the friar on trial by fire so that he can prove himself to be the prophet he claims to be. Savonarola does not

³⁵ Cited in Moroncini 2017, 16.

³⁶ See Weinstein 2011, 217-25.

pass this test and is put in prison. In the last episode, “The Confession,” Cesare offers him a deal while he is in prison: if he agrees to leave Florence, he may save his life. After dismissing the offer, Savonarola is forced to sign a confession and is eventually executed. This episode is full of drama and focuses on the friar’s resistance and strong belief in Florence’s potential to become the holy city under his Christian guidance. He is depicted as unwavering in his convictions. During the execution scene, Alexander VI asks Savonarola whether he wishes to confess his sins in order to be admitted into heaven. Savonarola spits blood in Rodrigo’s face. This confrontation between Savonarola and Alexander VI determines his brutal death and further establishes his religious standpoint. The audience is thus left with ambiguity: is he the antagonist who impedes Borgia’s ambition, or is he a Christian hero?

It is interesting to note that the video game deviates significantly from history in depicting the power dynamic between Savonarola and Florence. In *Brotherhood*, Savonarola is against the Borgia family not because he disagrees with the papal see for religious reasons but because of his own greed for power, using religion as a tool, where the supernatural power of the Apple of Eden aids his ambition.³⁷ The character of Savonarola is shown through the dialogue of the fictional Ezio and Niccolò Machiavelli, as Savonarola does not speak to Ezio until just before he is assassinated. Ezio traces the apple and aims to find it before the Borgias do. When he arrives in Florence, Machiavelli says to him:

Niccolò Machiavelli: The man everyone once reviled was suddenly the one they worshipped.

Ezio Auditore: Ah, the Apple?

Niccolò Machiavelli: Only in part. It’s not the city he’s enthralled, but its leaders: men possessed of influence and power. They, in turn, oppress the citizens and ensure their will is done.

³⁷ In the AC universe, the Apple of Eden is the cause of the everlasting war between the Templars and Assassins. It is a sacred artefact left by the Ones Who Came Before.

Ezio Auditore: The people act as if they have no say in the matter.

Niccolò Machiavelli: Rare is the man willing to oppose the status quo. And so it falls to us to help them see the truth. (*Assassin's Creed II*, Sequence 13)

The conversation focuses on the debate on Ezio's relationship with the city, the Borgias and Machiavelli. Donald Weinstein's work on Savonarola shows that the drama of the prophet and the city is not the story of Savonarola's 'conversion' of the Florentines, but the story of Florence's conquest of Savonarola.³⁸ In the game, Savonarola takes over the reign of the city from the hand of the Medici by exploiting the power of the golden apple. However, in contrast to Savonarola's extraordinary ability in preaching (in history and in television's depiction), *Assassin's Creed II* depicts him as an opportunist who is blinded while aided by a sacred artefact. For example, the bonfire of vanities becomes an act of bewilderment Savonarola conducts upon the Florence people that is not intended for restoring the pure Christian faith but a trick of the friar's mind control scheme, and he commits murder to consolidate his rule:

Ezio Auditore: Those bodies bear the emblem of the Borgia...

Niccolò Machiavelli: Yes. The Spaniard keeps sending his soldiers into Firenze, and Firenze keeps sending them back—usually in pieces.

Ezio Auditore: Then he knows the Apple is here as well... An unfortunate complication. (*Assassin's Creed II*, Sequence 13)

The contrast in these representations of Savonarola also produces ambiguity in categorising his role. In scriptwriting, there are three main categories of the minor role: "friend", "rival" and "symbol".³⁹ Savonarola is the *nemesis* under the category of "rival". The nemesis is not typically the villain in a story but someone with a similar goal to the protagonist and whose existence is built upon hatred

³⁸ Weinstein 2011.

³⁹ Schmidt 2001, 152.

of them. The justification for Savonarola's function as a character in the development of narratives is that both parties of the protagonist, the Borgia family (in the television series) and Ezio (in the video game), seek to achieve the goal of transforming the Italian Peninsula into their ideal state: the former by manipulation, and the latter by unification. Savonarola appears to have the same ambition as these protagonists but has his own path to achieve his goal, which does not speak to the Machiavellian frame.

The heteroglossic portrayals of Savonarola's standpoints in relation to Florence and the Borgia family testify to the different strategies used by the television series and the video game in forming their storylines. At the same time, the interweaving of different individual narratives links Savonarola with Machiavelli, where they, as minor characters, were historically aware of one another. To this end, it is worth pointing out that Machiavelli commented negatively on Savonarola in *The Prince* (1532):

Moisè, Ciro, Teseo e Romulo non arebbono possuto fare osservare loro lungamente le loro costituzioni, se fussino stati disarmati; come ne' nostri tempi intervenne a fra' Girolamo Savonerola; il quale ruinò ne' sua ordini nuovi, come la moltitudine cominciò a non crederli; e lui non aveva modo a tenere fermi quelli che avevano creduto, né a far credere e' discredenti.⁴⁰

If Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus had been unarmed they could not have enforced their constitutions for long – as happened in our time to Fra Girolamo Savonarola, who was ruined with his new order of things immediately the multitude believed in him no longer, and he had no means of keeping steadfast those who believed or of making the unbeliever to believe.⁴¹

Machiavelli's attitude accords with both the game and the TV show's design of Savonarola's fate. Savonarola cannot be understood alone, but only through dialogic interactions with others. By introducing the friar's character in

⁴⁰ Machiavelli 1972, 33.

⁴¹ Machiavelli 2005, 19.

the Renaissance screen narratives, Machiavelli, another crucial minor role, is also brought into view.

7. The Mastermind behind the Prince

As another minor character in these television and game representations, Niccolò Machiavelli is crucial in delivering messages of Renaissance political wisdom.⁴² It is intriguing, however, that both the television series and the game present him as a *mentor* figure, which is one typical genre of “friend”: he is an assassin’s mentor to Ezio in the game and a political mentor to Cesare in the television series. In character design, a mentor is similar to the protagonist regarding intellectuality who offers advice and participates in the protagonist’s affairs. Mentors see themselves in the protagonist and are happy to live their lives anew through the protagonist. To a mentor, the protagonist’s success equals their own success. In representations, Machiavelli has a significant function in the personal growth of Ezio and Cesare.

The fact that Machiavelli’s role is very different from that of Savonarola in terms of both history and narratives causes an interesting heteroglossic interaction between two very strong figures of the Renaissance Italy. The contrast between their representations is itself prophesied in *The Prince*, Chapter VI, where Machiavelli said, “Di qui nacque che tutt’i profeti armati vinsono, e li disarmati ruinorono”.⁴³ Although at one time Savonarola wielded immense power over the fortunes of Florence, he is cited by Machiavelli as a bad example. A literary connection between history and screen representations can be found through the metaphor in *The Prince*: in both television and game narratives, Savonarola is the unarmed prophet who builds his whole cause on spiritual power and fails,

⁴² For a comprehensive study on Machiavelli’s political doctrine, see Proserpi 2013.

⁴³ Machiavelli 1972, 32-33: “From this comes the fact that all armed prophets were victorious and the unarmed came to ruin”. Machiavelli 2005, 22.

whereas Machiavelli is the armed prophet who seeks the power of the secular and wins.

The screen representations of Machiavelli circulate around his pursuit of the ideal principality. He seeks redemption for the Italian State on a path different from Savonarola's. Both *The Borgias* and *Assassin's Creed 2* series portray him as a rather positive character. His characterisations on the small screen are closely linked with his real-life admiration of Cesare Borgia, as expressed in his most famous work, *The Prince*. As the central figure of this political treatise Cesare Borgia is often assumed to be the theoretical model for the whole work, or at least the closest model Machiavelli could find in modern princes. Many consider Borgia the inspiration behind the call for Italy's redeemer⁴⁴ He is highly praised in Chapter 7: "non può trovare e' più freschi esempi che le azioni di costui",⁴⁵ This makes Cesare a central character of the whole discussion: "the only one [...] with whom he establishes a dialogue".⁴⁶ Although in the narratives of the *Assassin's Creed 2* series Ezio is the new Prince for Machiavelli, the game preserves Machiavelli's admiration of Cesare.⁴⁷ This makes the game's value ambiguous as it tries to create a new Machiavellian prince (Ezio) through a war with the old Machiavellian prince (Cesare). When Ezio first arrives in Rome, Machiavelli explains the situation to him, mentioning that Cesare Borgia is a more dangerous man than his father:

Machiavelli: He is ambitious, ruthless and cruel beyond imagining...he murdered his own brother to gain power; he knows neither danger nor fatigue, those who do not fall by his sword clamour to join the clan...Cesare has set his sight on all of Italia, and at this rate, he would have it...

Ezio: Is that admiration I hear in your voice?

⁴⁴ Najemy 2013, 539.

⁴⁵ Machiavelli 1972, 41-42: "I would not know of any better precepts to give to a new prince than the example of his deeds". Machiavelli 2005, 25.

⁴⁶ Orwin 2016, 157.

⁴⁷ Bregni 2021, 36.

Machiavelli: He knows how to exercise his will, è una vera *virtù* in the world today. (*Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Sequence 2)

This dialogue perfectly actualises Machiavelli's evaluation of Cesare in his writing *Legazioni, Commissarie, Scritti di Governo*, where he praises Cesare's quality as a leader:

Questo Signore è molto splendido et magnifico; et nelle armi è tanto animoso che non è sì gran cosa che non li paia piccola; et per gloria et per acquistare stato mai si riposa, né cono sie faticha o pericolo...le quali cose lo fanno victorioso et formidabile, adgiunto con una perp tua fortuna.⁴⁸

[This lord is very splendid and magnificent; he is so bold in military operations that the greatest task is negligible to him; he never rests or acknowledges fatigue or danger in the pursuit of glory and achievement...All this makes him successful and awe-inspiring, in addition to *una perpetua fortuna*.⁴⁹]

The game script preserves similar keywords to restore the attitude Machiavelli holds toward Cesare, and by doing that, the sixteenth century Florentine historian speaks to the contemporary world in a reshaped manner. The game producers cannot change his political taste, because it defines Machiavelli as a historical figure, but they alter his standpoint in the AC universe so that his character can fulfil the game's Machiavellian matrix.

Political ambiguity appears in the game narratives. The dialogue between Ezio and Machiavelli enriches Cesare's game persona, making him not merely a shallow villain who exists solely for the protagonist to conquer: he also symbolises Machiavelli's political strategy, which even affects the creed of the assassins: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted," which is the motto in the game. By acknowledging that, the game further echoes another vital concept of Machiavelli: *virtù*, a fundamental idea of his political philosophy. *Virtù* is a concept he theorised by

⁴⁸ Machiavelli 2003, 2:125.

⁴⁹ English translation mine.

centering on the martial spirit and ability of a population or leader, but also encompassing a broader collection of traits necessary for the maintenance of the state and “the achievement of great things”. Crucially, Machiavelli’s virtue includes the existence of evil – it cannot suffice without the practice of vice. The controversy of *virtù* lies in Machiavelli’s philosophy of cruelty and the mantra of “the ends justify the means,” which can be seen as the original idea behind the motto of the assassins. This saying is a modern construction as Machiavelli did not directly use these words in *The Prince*. However, in Chapter XVIII, Machiavelli states that “A uno principe, adunque, non è necessario avere in fatto tutte le soprascritte qualità, ma è bene necessario parere di averle”⁵⁰ and “non partirsi dal bene, potendo, ma sapere intrare nel male, necessitato”.⁵¹ The game takes this controversy to an extreme as the Assassin Order (the righteous force), who are at war with the Templars (symbolised by the Borgia family as the ruling body), also kill to fulfil their goals. Eventually, both the Templars and the Assassins seek to unite the Italian State. Though the former act in the name of tyranny while the latter operate for the sake of equality, the ends and the means are not notably different. This ambiguity in the game’s morality can only happen under the context of using Machiavelli’s philosophy as the ideological framework and can be understood by deconstructing his representation.

While the television series portrays the author of *The Prince* as the mentor of Cesare Borgia in a traditional manner (he provides Cesare with political strategies, and he is the one Cesare consults when in trouble), an interesting comparison emerges between the game and the television show: it is not only Machiavelli’s identity that varies but how he interacts with his Prince as mentor.

⁵⁰ Machiavelli 1972, 82: “it is not necessary for a prince to possess all of the above-mentioned qualities, but it is very necessary for him to appear to possess them”. Machiavelli 2005, 61.

⁵¹ Machiavelli 1972, 82: “he (the prince) should not depart from the good if it is possible to do so, but he should know how to enter into evil when forced by necessity”. Machiavelli 2005, 61.

The relationship between Machiavelli and Ezio in the game is very similar to the one he has with Cesare in the TV series. He is not only a consultant but also a friend to them. In *Brotherhood*, Machiavelli points his finger at Ezio, saying that he and him diverge in their view of things. Being Ezio's mentor and a more experienced master assassin, Machiavelli's character is not a typical 'friend'; instead, he acts more like a commander who gives instructions, even though he is ten years younger than Ezio in the game's setting. In *The Borgias*, Machiavelli treats Cesare in a more friendly manner. The audience can see that he is open to Cesare as his counsellor and that Cesare is relaxed around him. The difference in the power dynamics is evident in their body language.

The contrasting character design of Machiavelli and Savonarola in the two productions weave a united view in general that shapes a twenty-first century attitude towards them but diverges in details that unmask the difference between television and game's value. Surrounding the Borgia family as a collective image, the major and minor characters in these Renaissance screen narratives speak the voice of this magnificent historical period in the vast twenty-first century media world, creating a heteroglossia that generate new understandings for contemporary audience.

To conclude, the development of a multi-media platform provides a stage for history to be performed with different narrative technics. Through the continuing dialogue among historical figures, historians, producers and spectators across time, space, and media, this study has tried to distinguish the ambiguities produced in dialogue from the characters of Cesare Borgia, Girolamo Savonarola and Niccolò Machiavelli. Though the dialogues analysed from the television series and video games are not difficult to comprehend from their textual meanings, the cultural connotations behind them are complicated and worthy of deep investigation because the opacities they contain affect the perception of Renaissance history. The transmedia narratives of the Borgia family in *The Borgias*, *Assassin's Creed: II* and *Brotherhood* together form a pan-

orama that the world of media intends to portray of the Italian Renaissance to the twenty-first century audience, highlighting its vital and enduring presence in contemporary culture through the landscape of heteroglossia, which breaks the boundary between the high and low, the elite and the popular.

Works Cited

- Assassin's Creed II*. 2009. Ubisoft.
- Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. 2010. Ubisoft.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1986. "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)". In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Vern W. McGee, tr. Emerson, Caryl and Michael Holquist, eds. Austin, University of Texas Press. 10-59.
- . 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Baldini, Alessio. 2020. "Finzioni che legano: la saga familiare come genere interartistico e intermediale". *Non poteva staccarsene senza lacerarsi": per una genealogia del romanzo familiare italiano*. Filippo Gobbo, Ilaria Muoio, and Gloria Scarfone, eds. Pisa, Pisa University Press. 265-92.
- Barolsky, Paul and Andrew Ladis. 1991. "The 'Pleasurable Deceits' of Bronzino's So-Called London 'Allegory'". *Notes in the History of Art* 10.3: 32-36.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. "The Precession of Simulacra". *Simulacra and Simulation*. Sheila Faria Glaser, tr. Michigan, Michigan University Press. 1-42.
- The Borgias*. See Jordan 2011-13.
- Bregni, Simone. 2021. "Unarmed Prophets Have Always Been Destroyed, Whereas Armed Prophets Have Succeeded: Machiavelli's Portrayal in The Assassins Creed Series". In *Machiavelli in Contemporary Media*. Andrea Polegato and Fabio Benincasa eds. London, Palgrave Macmillan. 29-52.
- Bronzino, Agnolo. *Venus, Cupid and Time*. The National Gallery. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/bronzino-an-allegory-with-venus-and-cupid>
- Brown, Alison. 2006. "Introduction". In *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press. XV-XXXV.
- Bruner, Jerome S. 2005. "Narrative, Moral Identity, and Historical Consciousness: A Social Constructionist Ac-

- count". In *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*. Jürgen Straub, ed. New York, Berghahn Books. 23-43.
- Burckhardt, Jacob. 1960. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. New York: New American Library.
- Caughie, John. 2000. *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Ceccuti, Cosimo. 1995. *Girolamo Savonarola Cavaliere di Cristo*. Florence, Contini.
- Chapman, Adam. 2016. *Digital Games as History*. New York, Routledge.
- Cheney, Iris. 1987. "Bronzino's London 'Allegory': Venus, Cupid, Virtue, and Time". *Notes in the History of Art* 6.2: 12-18.
- Cortés, Josepa. 2016. "La imatge dels Borja al cinema". *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians* 5: 1-25.
- Creeber, Glen. 2004. *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen*. London, The British Film Institute.
- De Grazia, Magreta. 2014. "The Finite Renaissance". *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14.2: 88-93.
- De Groot, Jerome. 2009. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. New York, Routledge.
- DeSilva, Jennifer Mara. 2020. "What Would Rome be Without a Good Plot? Telling Tales about the Borgias". In *The Borgia Family: Rumor and Representation*. Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed. New York, Routledge. 1-33.
- Duran, Eulàlia. 2008. "The Borja Family: Historiography, Legend and Literature". *Catalan Historical Review* 1: 63-79.
- Empson, William. 1949. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London, Chatto and Windus.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. 2005. "Narrative, Moral Identity, and Historical Consciousness: A Social Constructionist Account". In *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*. Jürgen Straub ed. New York, Berghahn Books. 99-119.

- Griffith, David Wark. 1915. *The Birth of a Nation*. United States, David W. Griffith Corp.
- Harvey, David. 1994. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Hillgarth, J. N. 1996. "The Image of Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 59: 119-29.
- Hugo, Victor. 1833. *Lucrece Borgia*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2004. "Games Design as Narrative Architecture". In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds. Cambridge, MIT Press. 118-30.
- Jordan, Neil. 2011-13. *The Borgias*. United States. Showtime, CBS Corporation.
- Kijinski, John L. 1987. "Bakhtin and Works of Mass Culture: Heteroglossia in *Stand By Me*". *Studies in Popular Culture* 10.2: 67-81.
- Kontje, Todd. 1992. *Private Lives in the Public Sphere: The German Bildungsroman as Metafiction*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Lang, Robert. 1994. *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith, Director*. New Jersey, Rutgers University Press.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1972. *Il Principe*. Luigi Firpo, ed. Torino, Einaudi.
- . 2003. *Legazioni, Commissarie, Scritti di governo*. Vol. 2 of 6. E. Cutinelli Rèndina and D. Fachard, eds. Roma, Salerno Editrice.
- . 2005. *The Prince*. Peter Bondanella, tr. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Mazzotta, Giuseppe. 2006. "Forward". In *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press. xi-xii.
- McKee, Robert. 1997. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York, Harper Collins.

- Moroncini, Ambra. 2017. "Religious culture and spirituality in early modern Italy". In *Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation*. London-New York, Routledge. 7-36.
- Mulryan, John. 1974. "Venus, Cupid and the Italian Mythographers". *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 23: 31-41.
- Najemy, John M. 2013. "Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia: A Reconsideration of Chapter 7 of *The Prince*". *The Review of Politics* 75: 539-56.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2009. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Judith Norman, tr. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Orwin, Clifford. 2016. "The Riddle of Cesare Borgia and the Legacy of Machiavelli's Prince". In *Machiavelli's Legacy: The Prince after Five Hundred Years*. Timothy Fuller, ed. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press. 156-70.
- Prosperi, Adriano. 2013. "*Il Principe e la cultura europea*". In Niccolò Machiavelli. *Il Principe. Saggi e commenti*. Roma, Treccani. 41-65.
- Ramsay, Debra. 2015. *American Media and the Memory of World War II*. New York and London, Routledge.
- Rosenstone, Robert. 2012. *History on Film/Film on History*. New York, Routledge.
- Savonarola, Girolamo. 1994. "*Infelix Ego*". In *Prison Meditations on Psalms 51 and 318*. John Patrick Donnelly, ed. and tr. Milwaukee, Marquette University Press.
- Schmidt, Victoria Lynn. 2001. *45 Master Characters*. Cincinnati, Writer's Digest Books.
- Starn, Randolph. 1982. *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Weinstein, Donald. 2011. *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet*. Yale, Yale University Press.
- White, Hayden. 1988. "Historiography and Historiography". *The American Historical Review* 93.5: 1193-99.

Yao, DaLi. 2021. "The Meaning of Story in Historical Research". *Beijing Daily*, 22 Feb. https://theory.gmw.cn/2021-02/22/content_34632355.htm.

A FEMALE GENEALOGY IN THE MARGINS:
FROM MODERATA FONTE
TO CARLA LONZI

Carlotta Moro

Lina, who in 1907 read everything written by Sibilla Aleramo, learned that despite the great distances between women thinking, we might still enter into intimate correspondence.

Selby Wynn Schwartz, *After Sappho*.¹

During the 16th century, the Renaissance encomiastic discourse on women's merits, of which *Il libro del Cortegiano* [*The Book of the Courtier*] (1528), by Baldassare Castiglione, and the third edition of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) gave exemplary evidence,² facilitated the rise of women "as a cultural group conscious of their own power".³ In the elite literary sphere, Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Gambara, Gaspara Stampa, Laura Battiferri Ammannati, and Tullia d'Aragona were some of the finest female authors enjoying publishing commissions. "In the visual culture too, women artists such as Properzia de' Rossi, Lavinia Fontana, Elisabetta Sirani, Sofonisba Anguissola, and Artemisia Gentileschi achieved

¹ Wynn Schwartz, 2022, 63.

² See Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, III: 34, and Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, XXXVII, 23.1-6. For the numerous pro-feminist texts of the Italian Renaissance, as well as for the debate about the excellence of women in Castiglione's and Ariosto's works, see Joseph Benson 1992, 33-155.

³ Moroncini 2017, 37.

a remarkable degree of public visibility”.⁴ Yet, it is with Moderata Fonte’s (1555-1592) *Il merito delle donne* [*The Worth of Women*], followed by Lucrezia Marinella’s (c. 1571-1653) *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne* [*The Nobility and Excellence of Women*], both published in Venice in 1600, that one may appreciate the first full-scale, female-authored literary works explicitly advocating for women’s dignity. In the following decades, Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652) joined her compatriots as a torch-bearer for female liberty, with incendiary writings such as *Tirannia Paterna* [*Paternal Tyranny*] (1654) and *L’inferno monacale* [*Convent Hell*] (c. 1643).⁵ As Virginia Cox has noted, contrary to previous “defenders of women”, Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti did not regard the challenge of achieving gender equality as a purely theoretical endeavour and instead considered the question of how women might break free from their subjugation.⁶ Although in early modernity Fonte’s dialogue and the treatises by Marinella and Tarabotti were read and debated, they subsequently fell out of print and sank into relative obscurity. Yet, the voices of Renaissance women resurfaced four hundred years later, when they played a key role in the resurgent Italian feminist movement of the 1970s. Focusing on the overlooked recovery of Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* by the feminist collective Rivolta Femminile in 1975, this chapter examines the afterlives of Renaissance female authors within modern Italian feminism. The reception of Fonte’s dialogue in the late 20th century serves as a case study to answer the following questions: How has the contemporary Italian feminist movement been shaped by Renaissance authors who championed women’s rights? And how have modern feminist groups negotiated a genealogy of early proto-femi-

⁴ Moroncini 2017, 37.

⁵ In the words of Letizia Panizza, “one has to wait until Sibilla Aleramo’s *Una donna* (1906) to hear such anger against family and society again”. Panizza, 2000, 76. For Arcangela Tarabotti’s efforts to resist patriarchy, and her influence on Italian literature, see, in this volume, Moroncini and Santovetti’s chapter.

⁶ Cox 1995, 515-16.

nist thinkers, drawing upon their works for political inspiration? I will argue that the rediscovery of Renaissance philogynous writers influenced 1970s Italian feminism in significant ways. In doing so, I will make the case for a more expansive and capacious understanding of the Italian feminist tradition, one that recognises its deep historical roots.

1. The birth of Italian proto-feminism: Lucrezia Marinella, Moderata Fonte and the case for women's dignity

By the early 17th century, Italian women's writing had a tradition that dated back generations. Numerous women of letters were highly regarded, and they had begun to explore new genres such as pastoral drama, the epic poem, and the treatise besides their traditional remit of lyric poetry. In the words of Virginia Cox, "the figure of the creative woman, the *virtuosa*, is one of the Italian Renaissance's most clearly documentable cultural novelties, and one of this period's most potent anticipations of modernity".⁷ In the same arc of time, gender norms were undergoing a revolution, as traditional theories of sexual difference came under strain and more affirmative conceptions of femininity emerged.⁸ Since the mid-1580s, the literary academies of the Veneto had witnessed a revival of the *querelle des femmes* – a heated intellectual debate on woman's nature and status.⁹ The controversy sparked by Giuseppe Passi's misogynistic treatise, *I donneschi difetti* [*The Defects of Women*] (1599), provided the impetus for the publication of Lucrezia Marinella's and Moderata Fonte's works. Marinella's polemic was commissioned by the Venetian press of Giambattista Ciotti as a rejoinder to Passi, whose high-profile attack on women also prompted Domenico Imberti to print Fonte's dialogue eight years af-

⁷ Cox 2016, 167.

⁸ For an overview of this phenomenon see Cox 2016, 167-192; Sanson 2016, 9-38.

⁹ Cox 2011, 237. On the *querelle des femmes*, see also Schnieders 2021, 5-53.

ter its completion (and its author's death).¹⁰ Marinella's *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* occupies a unique place in the Italian *querelle des femmes* landscape as the first female-authored academic treatise that systematically argues for women's superiority through theoretical reasoning, extensive citations from scholarly sources, and an array of examples.¹¹ This learned work presents several quotations from mostly male philosophers, historians, and poets, whose assumptions serve as a pedestal for the author's own ideas or, more often, are put forward only to be demolished.

Conversely, harnessing the dialogue genre, Moderata Fonte approaches the *querelle* in a creative and original manner: instead of articulating a formal and methodical disputation on the relationship between the sexes, *Il merito delle donne* takes the form of a fictional, witty conversation among seven Venetian ladies, who convene to discuss their persecution at the hands of fathers, brothers, and husbands over the course of two days. Two factions are created, one charged with defending women and celebrating their merits; the other with praising men and upholding patriarchal views. The ensuing exchange articulates a relentless critique of misogyny, putting forth an argument for the dignity and excellence of women. Although the sexes should be equal, Fonte observes that women are systematically infantilised, deprived of education, refused financial autonomy, and compelled into a condition of subalternity that exposes them to abuse. Cornelia, one of the speakers in the pro-woman camp, remarks:

Quelle donne che vanno poi a marito, o al martirio
(per meglio dire) [...] si trovano più soggette che mai;

¹⁰ Kolsky 2001. Lucrezia Marinella's *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* ran through three editions: in 1600 and 1601 (Venezia, Giovanni Battista Ciotti), and in 1621 (Venezia, Giovanni Battista Combi).

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the form, structure, and methodology of *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* see Panizza 1999, 2.

[...] confinate tra le mura, sottoposte [...] ad un odioso guardiano.¹²

[Women who are married – or martyred, more accurately – have endless sources of misery. [...] They [...] find themselves [...] constricted [...] within four walls and subjected to a hateful guardian.¹³]

The debate is marked by several disagreements, yet the seven friends reach one shared verdict: Venetian women inhabit a prohibitive geography, where they are unjustly othered, denied access to formal schooling and professions, and excluded from institutions. Fonte seemingly proposes that the historical dominance of men over women is neither predetermined by nature nor divinely ordained, but rather constructed over time through men's abuse of power. In Leonora's words:

Se siamo loro inferiori d'auttorità, ma non di merito, questo è un abuso che si è messo nel mondo, che poi a lungo andare si hanno fatto lecito ed ordinario; e tanto è posto in consueto, che vogliono e par loro, che sia lor di ragione quel che è di soperchiaria.¹⁴

[If we are their inferiors in status, but not in worth, this is an abuse that has been introduced into the world and that men have then, over time, gradually translated into law and custom; and it has become so entrenched that they claim (and even actually believe) that the status they have gained through their bullying is theirs by right.¹⁵]

This perspective opens the door to the possibility that patriarchal society may not be an immutable system but rather a human creation, and therefore that it may be subject to critical scrutiny and, potentially, to transformation. Accusing men of "abuso [...] tirannia e crudeltà" ["abuse [...] tyranny and cruelty"],¹⁶ *Il merito delle donne* develops the humanistic theoretical discourse on women into the

¹² Fonte 1988, 33.

¹³ Fonte 1997, 68.

¹⁴ Fonte 1988, 27.

¹⁵ Fonte 1997, 61.

¹⁶ Fonte 1988, 182.

questioning of societal structures that is central to modern feminism.

The polyphonic dialogical form encloses the conversation within a fictitious and playful dimension where the unspeakable can be communicated as well as contested, diluting the radicalism of Fonte's attack and allowing her to intervene in the male-dominated literary domain.¹⁷ *Il merito delle donne* tethers on a tension between the conciliatory desire to be accepted as an equal in patriarchal arenas of power, and the utopian urge to assert one's difference, creating an entirely separate society. As noted by Cox, in comparison to other writings in the *querelle des femmes* tradition, the dialogue's toying with the dream of a single, independent life for women may represent its most notable theoretical novelty.¹⁸ This revolutionary intention to establish an autonomous matriarchal community is clearly reflected in the gynocentric garden which serves as a setting to the conversation. Adorned with statues of beautiful women crowned with laurel, this *locus amoenus* was designed and bequeathed to one of the characters by a bold, unconventional aunt who chose to remain single, and who is evoked throughout the text as the emblem of female creativity and liberty. The final pages of *Il merito delle donne* praise the aunt's way of life and exhort women to abandon the masculine world:

Possibile che non si potrebbe un tratto metterli un poco da banda con tutti i loro scherni e foie che si fanno di noi, sì che non ci dessero più noia? Non potressimo noi star senza loro? Procacciarsi el viver e negoziar da per noi senza il loro aiuto? Deh, di grazia, svegliamoci un giorno e ricuperamo la nostra libertà, con l'onor e la dignità che tanto tempo ci tengono usurpate.¹⁹

[Wouldn't it be possible for us to just banish these men from our lives, and escape their carping and jeering once and for all? Couldn't we live without

¹⁷ Levarie Smarr 2005, 195.

¹⁸ Cox 1995.

¹⁹ Fonte 1988, 169.

them? Couldn't we earn our living and manage our affairs without help from them? Come on, let's wake up, and claim back our freedom, and the honour and dignity they have usurped from us for so long.^{20]}

The connection with the nonconformist female ancestor, coupled with this “call to arms”, the summoning of powerful women from the past, and the symbolism of the laurel crowns implies that one of Fonte's aims is the pursuit of a female genealogy that could serve as the foundation to a proto-feminist society.

Moderata Fonte's corpus of writings, which also includes the chivalric poem *Tredici canti del Floridoro* [*Thirteen Cantos of Floridoro*] (1581) and two religious poems on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ (1582; 1592) among other texts, is deserving of scholarly attention and wider fame on literary, social, and philosophical grounds. After her death in 1592, she was posthumously hailed as “the glory of Venice” in travel manuals,²¹ and her prowess as a writer was praised in several literary histories.²² Likewise, she was adduced as an exemplar of female erudition in a pamphlet advocating for the unprecedented conferment of a degree to the noblewoman Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (1646-1684).²³ What is more, excerpts from her texts featured in the first anthology of Italian female-authored poetry edited by a woman, Luisa Bergalli's *I Componimenti poetici delle più illustri Rimatrici d'ogni secolo* [*Poetic Compositions of the Most Famous Women Poets of All Ages*] (1726). Yet, gradually, most of Moderata Fonte's texts fell out of circulation until 1975,

²⁰ Fonte 1997, 237.

²¹ Cox 2008, 148.

²² For instance, in Pietro Paolo Ribera's *Le glorie immortali de' trionfi et heroiche imprese d'ottocento quarantacinque donne illustri antiche e moderne* (1609). On Fonte's fortunes and reception see Cox's ‘Introduction’ in Fonte 1997; Cox 2008, 144 and 200.

²³ Felice Rotondi, Ms. XXII-588 int. 07. Pro Doctoratu in Sacra Theologia Nob. et Doctissimae Virginis Elenae Corneliae Piscopiae Venetae (Padova, Pontificia Biblioteca Antoniana).

when Anna Jaquinta unearthed *Il merito delle donne* in the National Central Library of Florence.

2. Rivolta Femminile and Anna Jaquinta's recovery of *Il merito delle donne*

In 1975, Anna Jaquinta was a thirty-five-year-old teacher with an educational background in Comparative Literature and Law.²⁴ She was also an active member of the prominent feminist group Rivolta Femminile, which had been co-founded in 1970 by former art critic Carla Lonzi with artist Carla Accardi and journalist Elvira Banotti. In those years, the Italian movement was “the most strongly mass-based and internally most diverse among Western feminisms”.²⁵ Like many feminist collectives of the 1970s, Rivolta Femminile developed politics that took place outside institutions, rather than seeking equal participation in patriarchal culture and society. Among the most original and iconoclastic feminist thinkers in Italy, Rivolta's co-founder Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) argued that real change could not be induced by social reform, and that equality with men could not lead women to authenticity and freedom. To disrupt the dominant order and cut ties with male conditioning, Lonzi advocated for the practice of “deculturalisation”, the deconstruction of “given modes of identification, norms, categories, meanings, representations of what it means to be a woman as a creative autonomous subjectivity”.²⁶ To this end, she introduced and popularised in Italy *autocoscienza* (consciousness-

²⁴ The only biographical information available on Anna Jaquinta is a short note within a catalogue of upcoming publications by Scritti di Rivolta Femminile. It reads: “Anna Jaquinta was born in Arcidosso (Grosseto) on 5 November 1940. She earned a degree in Law from the University of Siena in 1963, and she subsequently studied comparative literature at the University of California, San Diego from 1968 to 1970. Having resided in the United States at different times, she now lives in Rome, where she teaches. She has been a member of Rivolta Femminile since 1971”. Archivio Carla Lonzi, Oggetto 45.

²⁵ Bracke 2014, 2.

²⁶ Bueti 2023, 20.

raising), which entailed gathering among women to discuss gender-specific issues, unhindered by androcentric paradigms. This practice was rooted in “self-narration and active listening, in a collective effort to withhold judgment and suspend conventional thinking, fostering a horizontal, non-hierarchical approach”.²⁷ *Autocoscienza* was “a process of [...] discovery and (re-)construction of the self, both the self of the individual woman and a collective sense of self”²⁸ with the purpose of learning from one another and facilitating alliances among women through conversation. Lonzi’s group owned *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*, a publishing house that issued the greatly popular “green books”, containing individual or collective reflections borne of consciousness-raising. Anna Jaquinta contributed to the *Scritti*’s endeavour with key texts, including the biography *Vita di Carla Lonzi* (1985), co-written with Marta Lonzi.

Jaquinta’s solitary journey amidst forgotten books,²⁹ which eventually led her to discovering Moderata Fonte, was prompted by a discussion within the Rivolta group in 1974, when they entertained the idea of establishing a publishing company named after *Compiuta Donzella*, the earliest Italian female poet. “A me sembrò che quel nome antico e femminile scivolasse armonioso fra noi, fresco come acqua sorgiva”,³⁰ Jaquinta recalls: “qui scattò l’idea di [...] guarda[re] la tela della tradizione al suo rovescio, cercando magari per via tortuose e marginali tracce scritte di donne del passato”.³¹ The chapter “Espressione di sé e cultura” [“Self-Expression and Culture”], in the vol-

²⁷ Zapperi 2019, 7.

²⁸ Bono and Kemp 1991, 9.

²⁹ “un viaggio solitario fra libri dimenticati”. Jaquinta 1977, 68.

³⁰ Jaquinta 1997, 67: “It seemed to me that this ancient, feminine name slipped harmoniously between us, fresh as spring water”. Translation mine. Further translation of citations will also be mine unless otherwise stated.

³¹ Jaquinta 1977, 77: “This sparked the idea of [...] looking at the canvas of tradition from its back, perhaps searching for written traces of women from the past via winding, marginal paths”.

ume *È già politica [It is already politics]* (1977), chronicles Jaquinta's research on Italian women's writing in an overwhelmingly patriarchal literary history. Her essay resonates with the personal necessity to free herself from her hopeful attachment to the androcentric cultural world.³² Jaquinta's conflicted attitude towards the possibility of attaining authentic subjectivity within male-dominated cultural institutions resonates with Carla Lonzi's "radical refusal to participate in those systems [...] that have been shaped by the historical exclusion of women".³³

Availing herself of archival materials and early modern anthologies, Jaquinta lists the women writers uncovered during her research, which include Compiuta Donzella (fl. ca. 1260s), Atalanta Senese,³⁴ Leonora della Genga (fl. 1360s), Lucrezia di Raimondo (fl. 1540s),³⁵ Laura Terracina (c. 1519-1577), Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547), Isabella Andreini (1562-1604), and Petronilla Paolini Massimi (1663-1726). In their literary creations, Jaquinta registers a recurring feeling of distress about the incomprehension that awaits their writing upon publication, alongside the persistence of a debilitating inferiority complex in relation to male intellectuals. This phenomenon has been designated as "female anxiety of authorship" by literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who ascribe it to "the loneliness of the female artist, her

³² "Liberarmi dal mio attaccamento [...] al mondo culturale, dalla mia stima di esso e dalla mia speranza di trovarvi una via per esprimermi". Jaquinta 1977, 75: "Free myself from my attachment [...] to the cultural world, my appreciation of it and my hope of finding a way to express myself in it".

³³ Ventrella and Zapperi 2021, 1.

³⁴ Not much is known about "Atalanta Senese". Anna Jaquinta encountered her poetry through Lodovico Domenichi's anthology *Rime diverse d'alcune nobilissime e virtuosissime donne* (1559). The author in question is probably Atalanta Donati, previously mentioned by Domenichi in his pro-woman treatise *La nobiltà delle donne* (1549).

³⁵ According to Luisa Bergalli, who included Lucrezia di Raimondo's verse in her collection of women's poetry, the author was active around 1540. Bergalli 1726, 264.

feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors, [...] her culturally-conditioned timidity about self-dramatisation, [...] her anxiety about the impropriety of art”.³⁶ Female authors, Jaquinta observes, encounter “una reiezione costante da parte dell’uomo”³⁷ when they try to participate in a culture that is hostile to their flourishing and antithetical to their creativity. In contrast to this continuous strain to adapt,³⁸ however, she also discovers surprising “tracce di femminismo in epoche impensate”.³⁹ In particular, Jaquinta marvels at Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti, who ignited the first sparks of Italian feminist awareness, establishing “un filone di femminismo a Venezia di cui restano tracce a partire dalla fine del 1500”.⁴⁰

The essay “Tentativi di Autocoscienza in un Gruppo del Cinquecento” [“Attempts to Practice *Autocoscienza* in a Sixteenth-Century Group”] published by Rivolta Femminile within the collection *La presenza dell’uomo nel femminismo* [*The Presence of Man in Feminism*], (1978), recounts Jaquinta’s electrifying first encounter with Moderata Fonte:

Quando per la prima volta lessi [...] questo dialogo [...] delle sette donne veneziane che [...] si ‘pigliavano il tempo’ di conversare ‘senza haver rispetto di huomini che le notassero o le impedissero’ - e che anzi di questo facevano un punto associando l’assenza fisica [...] con un senso di riposo e di libertà - e quando lessi che l’argomento di cui intendevano dibattere era il problema dei legami emotivi con l’uomo, feci un balzo sulla sedia [...]. Mi venivano in mente discussioni non lontane [...] discussioni animate con donne moderne, intelligenti, emancipate [...]. Ecco qui un gruppo! Vecchio di secoli. [...] Copiai alcune pagine

³⁶ Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 50.

³⁷ Jaquinta 1977, 82: “a constant rejection by man”.

³⁸ “Logorio continuo per adeguarsi”. Jaquinta 1977, 82.

³⁹ Jaquinta 1977, 86-87: “traces of feminism in unthought-of eras”.

⁴⁰ Jaquinta 1977, 86-87: “a strand of feminism in Venice of which traces remain from the end of the 16th century”.

per il desiderio di comunicarle subito alle amiche di Rivolta e la sera stessa [...] andai a trovare Carla. Così attorno a un tavolo di pietra, al centro un bicchiere colmo di fiori di campo, mi misi a leggere Moderata Fonte: e mi si incrinava la voce su vari passi.⁴¹

[When I first read [...] the dialogue [...] of the seven Venetian women who [...] were 'taking their time' to converse 'without having respect for men who only hindered them' - and indeed made a point of this by associating physical absence [...] with a sense of comfort and freedom - and when I read that the topic they intended to discuss was the problem of emotional ties with men, I jumped in my chair [...]. I was reminded of discussions not far away [...] animated discussions with modern, intelligent, emancipated women [...]. Here was a group! Centuries old. [...] I copied some pages out of a desire to communicate them immediately to my friends in Rivolta, and that same evening [...] I went to see Carla. So, around a stone table, in the centre a glass filled with wildflowers, I began to read Moderata Fonte, and my voice cracked on several passages.]

Jaquinta's emotive reaction bespeaks her astonishment at the contemporary relevance of Fonte's text, as well as her identification with the dialogue's subject matter:

Veramente io provo commozione per la fedeltà con cui questa donna ha riferito le vicende di un gruppo, [e] l'attenzione che ha prestato - dunque l'importanza che ha attribuito - a tutto quanto accadeva.⁴²

[I feel deeply moved by the faithfulness with which this woman reported the events of a group, [and] the attention she paid - thus the importance she attached - to everything that was happening.]

This first-person narrative yields a hybrid form which merges the diary with the academic essay and the political treatise: while chronicling her discovery of Fonte, Jaquinta also reflects upon Italian literature, politics, and

⁴¹ Jaquinta 1978, 53-54.

⁴² Jaquinta 1978, 67.

the reasons that drive her research. This intimate approach to *Il merito delle donne* produces an interpretation that verges on the autobiographical. Mirroring herself in Moderata Fonte, Jaquinta seemingly considers her an elective, although flawed and distant, “mother” – a fellow precursor on the feminist path. The act of guarding the legacy of prior feminist thinkers is borne of a personal claim and a vital need, writes Jaquinta.⁴³ Memorialising the Renaissance writer emerges as a way of understanding herself, of finding companionship and mentorship, and of untangling her ties with the cultural world.

Surprised by the timeliness of *Il merito delle donne*, Jaquinta is particularly anguished by ideas that presciently foreshadow the insights of Rivolta Femminile:

L'amore è un sogno desiderabile come una bella fioritura ma non è possibile né realizzabile se non [...] lasciandosi adorare a distanza [...] – il sesso è un dovere procreativo, il matrimonio è l'unica forma di sopravvivenza sociale [...] – questa è proprio una radiografia tragica di uno stato disastroso dei rapporti fra i sessi. [...] La cosa mi agita perché è vero anche oggi che i rapporti sono disastrosi, le differenze macroscopiche non intaccano la lontananza, l'incomprensione di fondo.⁴⁴

[Love is a desirable dream, like a beautiful bloom, but it is neither possible nor realisable unless [...] one allows herself to be adored at a distance [...] – sex is a procreative duty, marriage is the only form of social survival [...] – this is really a tragic x-ray of a disastrous state of relations between the sexes. [...] It upsets me because it is true even today that relations are disastrous, the macroscopic differences do not affect the distance, the basic incomprehension.]

Jaquinta even detects in the Renaissance dialogue a motto analogous to the modern feminist slogan “I am mine”: “Li-

⁴³ “Una necessità mia, personalissima e vitale, di superare equilibri apparenti e di chiarire nodi e temi”. Jaquinta 1978, 50: “A very personal and vital need of mine to overcome apparent equilibriums and to clarify certain knots and issues”.

⁴⁴ Jaquinta 1978, 55.

bero cor nel mio petto soggiorna, | Non servo alcun, né d'altri son che mia".⁴⁵ Four centuries after the composition of *Il merito delle donne*, she identifies in the text an ancient attempt to foster alternative modes of living and independent modes of expression among women, experimenting with the same principle of separatism that characterised Rivolta Femminile's political praxis:

Mi aveva colpito [...] lo spirito di "separatezza" di questo gruppo antico, quale confortante conferma storica di una contrastata "novità" che avevo vissuto e me ne attendevo grandi risultati.⁴⁶

[I had been struck [...] by the spirit of "separatism" of this ancient group as a comforting historical confirmation of a controversial "novelty" that I was experiencing, and from which I expected great results.]

In the circle of Venetian ladies, Jaquinta glimpses more and more an ancient reflection of the women of Rivolta Femminile: indeed, her appreciation of Moderata Fonte grows alongside her understanding of her peers in the feminist group.⁴⁷ The two share significant affinities. The garden setting of *Il merito delle donne* serves as a metaphor for Fonte's wish to create a proto-feminist society, mirroring Rivolta Femminile's symbolic construction of female spaces. In Fonte's text, marriage is singled out as the foremost tool of patriarchal oppression: a discussion of the humiliations that most wives endure from their husbands (including infidelity, reckless expenditure, vio-

⁴⁵ Fonte 1988, 18-19: "The heart that dwells within my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself".

⁴⁶ Jaquinta 1978, 58.

⁴⁷ "La comprensione di Moderata andava di pari passo con la comprensione di me e delle altre, in quanto prendevo coscienza del nostro modo di essere e dei nostri comportamenti potevo comprendere meglio lei, anche se così lontana nel tempo". Jaquinta 1978, 55: "My understanding of Moderata went hand in hand with my understanding of myself and the others. As I became aware of our ways of being and of our behaviours, I gradually came to better understand her, even though she was so far away in time".

lence, proprietorial surveillance, and domestic seclusion) runs throughout the dialogue. Similarly, the Rivolta Femminile *Manifesto* rejects marriage as the institution responsible for fettering women to their husbands.⁴⁸ Between the lines, Fonte suggests that freedom can only be achieved within an autonomous matriarchal community built upon separatism and female friendship, thus providing a prototype for Carla Lonzi's path towards liberation, which requires the abandonment of male culture to stay among women. Fonte's characters, like the collective's activists, voice a desire to communicate exclusively with each other, and to live peacefully in each other's company. And just as Fonte's seven friends resist their oppression through conversation, the members of Rivolta Femminile use *autocoscienza* to challenge the influence of patriarchal ideas on their lives. It is no surprise, then, that *Il merito delle donne* served as a platform for discussion, and as a springboard to reflect on the effectiveness of Rivolta Femminile's methods.

3. Carla Lonzi's contribution to the feminist reclamation of historical precedents

Fonte's dialogue provoked self-reflection and provided political guidance, warning Rivolta Femminile about the potential shortcomings of the practice of separatism: formal banishment of male authorities and a superficial withdrawal from patriarchal society are not sufficient to attain liberation.⁴⁹ In Fonte's case, Jaquinta believes that separatism is reduced to a falsely protective shell through

⁴⁸ "Riconosciamo nel matrimonio l'istituzione che ha subordinato la donna al destino maschile. Siamo contro il matrimonio". Lonzi 2010a, 6: "We recognise marriage as the institution that subordinated women to male destiny. We are against marriage".

⁴⁹ "L'assenza fisica non escludeva affatto una presenza sotto forma interiorizzata (cosa che del resto avevo già constatato nella mia esperienza)". Jaquinta 1978, 58-59: "Physical absence by no means excluded presence in an internalised form (something I had already observed in my experience)".

which resentment erupts without being accompanied by the authenticity of *autocoscienza*. None of the text's protagonists, she concludes, fully overcomes the oppressive ideal of woman painted by men. In the article "Altro che riflusso! Il tifone femminista soffia da secoli" ["Talk about an ebb! The feminist typhoon has been blowing for centuries"] Carla Lonzi similarly draws insights from *Il merito delle donne*, maintaining that feminist discourse has remained stuck on the same issues since the 16th century:

Il femminismo ha il così detto riflusso perché [...] dobbiamo prendere atto che la soluzione interna, solo fra donne, [...] è parziale [...]. Ecco dove il testo di Moderata Fonte [...] è stato per noi un'avvisaglia di tutti i punti morti che un gruppo incontra quando le premesse dell'autocoscienza non sono state portate fino in fondo [...]. Lì la baldanza di un gruppo di donne si sfalda di fronte alla constatazione che non esiste vittoria se il prezzo da pagare è la solitudine e la rinuncia a un tentativo di intesa affettiva con l'uomo. Su questo scoglio siamo inceppate e rientrate a più riprese per quattro secoli. Ora è il momento di affrontarlo [...]. Il punto di partenza è appena sfiorato.⁵⁰

[Feminism undergoes the so-called reflux because [...] we must take note that the internal solution, only among women, [...] is partial [...]. This is where the text of Moderata Fonte [...] was for us a warning of all the dead ends a group encounters when the premises of *autocoscienza* have not been completely carried through [...]. There, the boldness of a company of women crumbles in the face of the realisation that there is no victory if the price to be paid is loneliness and the renunciation of an attempt at affective understanding with man. On this rock we have stumbled and retreated on and off for four centuries. Now is the time to face it [...]. The starting point has been barely touched.]

⁵⁰ Excerpt from Carla Lonzi, "Altro che riflusso: il tifone femminista soffia da secoli", in *Quotidiano donna* (September 1979), cited in Lonzi and Jaquinta 1990, 63-64.

Since early modernity, Lonzi notes, all attempts to breathe life into women's communities have been colliding against the desire for genuine, loving, non-hierarchical relationships with men. It is imperative, she claims, to recover and revisit Fonte's conclusions, taking them as the starting point for developing new feminist practices that will break this impasse.

Between the 16th and the 17th centuries, a similar operation of historical reclamation and feminist counter-memory had been carried out by Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella: both *Il merito delle donne* and *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* condemned the exclusion of women from history, strove to rescue forgotten powerful ancestors, and attempted to nourish their ideas with the writings and example of precursors in the past. In Fonte's words, "son uomini quei che l'hanno scritta [la storia], i quali non dicono mai verità [...] per la invidia e mal voler loro verso di noi".⁵¹ Within the treatise *Essortationi alle donne et a gli altri, se a loro saranno a grado* [*Exhortations to Women and to Others if they Please*] (1645), Marinella asks:

Quanti libri di huomini antichi si sono conservati, e si conservano, e di Donne non ne veggiamo alcuno? [...] Da ciò conoscerete che gli huomini non vogliono favorire le vostre compositioni [...]. Non vogliono che la Donna gareggi seco, hanno acquistato la tirannide del Regno della gloria; onde tutte le opere vostre corrono nel grembo dell'oblivione.⁵²

[Why have many ancient books written by men been preserved, while none written by women have? [...] This proves that men do not want to favor your compositions, whether they are good or not. [...] They have gained power in the kingdom of glory, and therefore all your works are destined to oblivion.⁵³]

⁵¹ Fonte 1988, 41: "men wrote history, and they never tell the truth because of their envy and hatred towards us".

⁵² Marinella 1645, 60-61.

⁵³ Marinella, 2012, 57; 73-74.

In *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*, she accuses historians of ignoring women's noble deeds and virtues.⁵⁴ Yet, Marinella warns them: "in danno vi affaticate; perciocchè la verità, che risplende in queste mie [...] carte, le inalzerà a vostro malgrado fino al Cielo".⁵⁵ Like the Venetian authors, Jaquinta regards the past as a treasure that belongs exclusively to men:⁵⁶ leafing through library files, the prevalence of male names initially seems to confirm to her that thought and knowledge are solely male prerogatives.⁵⁷ For this reason, Jaquinta compares her research to adventuring on quicksand, or exploring a submerged Atlantis.⁵⁸ Her study of women's literature, she reveals, arose precisely from the urgent need to break a circle of loneliness that made her feel that she had a desert behind.⁵⁹ Until 1975, she observes, Fonte's voice had not been lost but rather *buried* in this desert.⁶⁰ In Jaquinta's eyes, the systematic silencing of female voices and stories causes, among other things, "periodici ritorni e naufragi di femminismo", which make impossible an authentic dialogue amongst women.⁶¹

⁵⁴ "Le nobili attioni e virtù delle donne". Marinella 1601, 81.

⁵⁵ Marinella 1601, 82: "your attempts will be fruitless, because the truth, shining forth from my [...] pages, will raise them to the skies in spite of you".

⁵⁶ "Una ricchezza appartenente tutta e solo all'uomo per suo uso e consumo." Jaquinta 1977, 77: "A wealth belonging all and only to man for his use and consumption".

⁵⁷ "Il pensiero e la conoscenza sono prerogativa maschile." Jaquinta 1977, 80.

⁵⁸ "Avventurarsi su sabbie mobili da un lato, dall'altro su un continente inesplorato, una sommersa Atlantide". Jaquinta 1977, 81.

⁵⁹ "Un cerchio di solitudine che mi aveva spesso fatto sentire con il deserto alle spalle". Jaquinta 1977, 77.

⁶⁰ "Sepolta in mezzo a una cultura nei confronti dei cui canoni e dei cui valori aveva ben poco di interessante da dire". Jaquinta 1978, 46: "Buried in the midst of a culture about whose standards and values she had little of interest to say".

⁶¹ Jaquinta 1978, 48: "periodic returns and shipwrecks of feminism".

Carla Lonzi concurred that the erasure of historical precedents hindered the evolution of the feminist movement. The Rivolta Femminile *Manifesto*, which she co-authored, opens with a quotation from the 18th-century playwright and feminist thinker Olympe des Gouges (1748-1793), hailing the resurgence of feminism after a long silence. The *Manifesto* urges women to resist their marginalisation by reclaiming their submerged past and illuminating their untold stories:

Unifichiamo le situazioni e gli episodi dell'esperienza storica femminista: in essa la donna si è manifestata interrompendo per la prima volta il monologo della civiltà patriarcale. [...] La donna ha avuto l'esperienza di vedere ogni giorno distrutto quello che faceva. Consideriamo incompleta una storia che si è costituita sulle tracce non deperibili. Nulla o male è stato tramandato della presenza della donna: sta a noi riscoprirla per sapere la verità.⁶²

[Let's join the events and episodes of the historical feminist experience: in it, woman manifested herself by interrupting for the first time the monologue of patriarchal civilisation. [...] Woman has witnessed the quotidian destruction of her work. We consider incomplete a history that was built on omissions. Nothing or too little has been handed down about the presence of woman: it is up to us to rediscover her in order to know the truth.]

In her diary, Lonzi expresses anguish at the prospect of being forgotten, much like her ancestors:

Non è vero che prima di me le donne erano più oppresse o più spaventate o meno coscienti, semplicemente non sono state registrate come esistenti: la loro vita, la loro voce si sono perse nel nulla come è destinata a perdersi la mia.⁶³

[It is not true that before me women were more oppressed or more frightened or less conscious, they simply were not registered as existing: their lives,

⁶² Lonzi 2010a, 8-9.

⁶³ Lonzi 2010b, 753.

their voices were lost in the void as mine is bound to be lost.]

In 1979, she articulated her belief in the transhistorical and cyclical nature of feminism, writing:

Ci vuole l'incoscienza di chi studia l'umanità secondo criteri maschili per affermare che il femminismo deriva dal Sessantotto o dalla Rivoluzione francese o chissà da dove. Il femminismo è presente in ogni documento lasciato da una donna che non avesse di mira l'inserimento nella cultura e nella società maschili, che non parlasse da un'identità gradita all'uomo per riconfermarlo. È presente negli occhi di chi è in grado di leggere quel documento e non lo trascura perché non rientra nei messaggi che l'uomo capisce.⁶⁴

[It takes the recklessness of those who study humanity according to masculine criteria to claim that feminism comes from 1968 or the French Revolution [...]. Feminism is present in every document left by a woman who did not aim to fit into male culture and society. It is present in the eyes of those who are able to read that document without overlooking it because it is not part of the messages that man understands.]

Until her death, Lonzi remained anchored to this conviction: the notes for her unfinished last book (posthumously published under the title *Armande sono io!* [*Armande, That's Me!*]) reveal an effort to reconstruct a bond with women from previous centuries who expressed affirmative conceptions of femininity and experimented with feminist lifestyles.

In the 1970s, the alienation felt by Rivolta Femminile vis-à-vis historiography and the literary canon brought about some pragmatic solutions. Closing the volume *È già politica* is an announcement from the feminist collective: they founded Casa Editrice Fantasma [Phantom Publishing House], a new publishing house with the aim of pro-

⁶⁴ Excerpt from Carla Lonzi, "Altro che riflusso: il tifone femminista soffia da secoli", in *Quotidiano donna* (September 1979), cited in Lonzi and Jaquinta 1990, 63-64.

moting forgotten books by women. As the women of Rivolta reveal in *È già politica*, they were reading Arcangela Tarabotti's *Antisatira* [*Antisatire*] (1644) when they came across a reference to a female-owned publishing house in 17th-century Venice which served as the impetus for their own venture.⁶⁵ However, in this case, the Rivolta group's impatience with deadlines, distribution mechanisms, contacts with power, and radical rejection of any compromise led to the spurning of traditional publishing companies in favour of an alternative mode of "publication".⁶⁶ In fact, Casa Editrice Fantasma did not publish any books. Instead, they only printed the title pages – the "ghosts" of the texts – within *È già politica*. Casa Editrice Fantasma's first "phantom" catalogue included the *Rime* [*Rhymes*] by Atalanta Donati and *Il merito delle donne* by Moderata Fonte.⁶⁷ One year later, a substantial section of Fonte's dialogue was published for the first time in the 20th century by Scritti di Rivolta Femminile within *La presenza dell'uomo nel femminismo* (1978).

Galvanised by the "green books" of Rivolta Femminile, numerous women throughout the Italian peninsula devoted themselves to similar projects of historical recovery. In the 1980s, Italian feminism moved from the grassroots collectives and protests in the streets to the world of cultural institutions, giving rise to several organisations.⁶⁸ Among these was the Associazione Moderata Fonte, founded in Mirano (Veneto) in 1989 with the aim of promoting women's culture through plays, public lectures, and conferences. The initiative, which selected the Venetian author as the symbol of women's exclusion from traditional history, supported numerous dramatic performances of *Il merito delle donne*, adapted for the theatre by writer and playwright Daria Martelli. According to Martelli, who first read Fonte's text in Anna Jaquinta's edition, the members of the association and the wider circle of people involved in their initiatives formed a relationship

⁶⁵ Chinese *et al.* 1977, 96.

⁶⁶ Subrizi 2023.

⁶⁷ See Chinese *et al.* 1997, 97-99.

⁶⁸ On this see Campanaro 2019.

of empathy with the Venetian author, who became an emblem for their feminist struggles. Through this symbolic mother, they sought to build a female genealogy for contemporary women.⁶⁹ In the late 1970s and early '80s, Moderata Fonte's dialogue made its way into the academy. In 1979, excerpts from Fonte's text were included in Ginevra Conti Odorisio's study of 17th-century women writers.⁷⁰ In 1988, the first complete edition of *Il merito delle donne* in Italian was published by Eidos, edited by Adriana Chemello.⁷¹ Nine years later, Virginia Cox produced an English translation of Fonte's dialogue with an extensive exegetic apparatus.

Despite the efforts of Carla Lonzi, Anna Jaquinta, Adriana Chemello, and countless others, Moderata Fonte is still omitted from the Italian canon alongside most of her female contemporaries. Cox documented the presence of approximately 200 published female writers in the peninsula between 1580 and 1630.⁷² Yet, in literature manuals for the *triennio* (Italian high school years three–five, ages 16 to 19), the representation of women is strikingly low, ranging from a mere 2.74% to 8.83%.⁷³ A survey of contemporary Italian literature degree programmes revealed that during the 2018/2019 academic year, in twenty-five universities male authors constituted 91% of the course offerings, while women accounted for only 9% on average.⁷⁴ Long before Italy existed as a unified state, the canon provided the peninsula with a shared identity, and this discourse of national belonging has always been dominated by men. This exclusionary narrative, marred by omissions and critical dismissals, attest that Italian

⁶⁹ This information is collected on the website of the Associazione Culturale Moderata Fonte and it has also been relayed to me by Martelli herself in an email exchange in May 2022. See also Martelli 2017.

⁷⁰ Conti Odorisio 1979.

⁷¹ The publishing house Eidos is owned by Vittoria Surian.

⁷² Cox 2016, 194.

⁷³ Orsi 2023, 23.

⁷⁴ Bazzoni 2021, 148.

women writers and feminist thinkers have often been – and still are – relegated to the margins of Italian culture.⁷⁵

The considerations raised in this chapter show that an important consequence of the loss of female voices in the Italian literary tradition is that an accurate genealogy of the long history of Italian feminism has not yet been constructed. Lea Melandri once aptly described the Italian movement as a “revolution without memory”.⁷⁶ Indeed, Italian feminists tend to locate the genesis of their tradition in a relatively recent past: some detect its inception in 18th-century England with Mary Wollstonecraft, others even later with Virginia Woolf.⁷⁷ However, Moderata Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* should be recognised as an important proto-feminist text that has inspired and influenced trailblazer Italian feminist thinkers and women’s collectives in the late 20th century. The dialogue allowed modern Italian feminists to incorporate a *longue durée* perspective on their activities, to vindicate and legitimise their theories, and to reflect critically on aspects of their work that required development. The 20th-century readers of Moderata Fonte forged a kinship with the Venetian author that bridged an immense temporal gap. Their collective efforts sought to reclaim a marginalised history of Italian women’s writing in order to find an antidote to what Elena Ferrante calls “the solitude of women’s minds”⁷⁸ and Lauren Berlant describes as a form of “aloneness”, which is the “affective experience of being collectively, structurally unprivileged”.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ See Brogi 2022.

⁷⁶ Melandri 1997.

⁷⁷ See Libreria delle Donne di Milano 1987; Bono and Kemp 1991; Cavarero and Restaino 2002.

⁷⁸ Ferrante 2014, 323. See, in this volume, Moroncini and Santovetti’s chapter.

⁷⁹ Berlant 2008, ix.

Works Cited

- Archivio Carla Lonzi. *Articoli, Saggi ed Appunti*. Roma, Galleria Nazionale.
- Ariosto, Ludovico. 2000. *Orlando furioso*. 2 vols. Marcello Turchi, ed., with an essay by Edoardo Sanguineti. Milano, Garzanti.
- Bazzoni, Alberica. 2021. "Canone letterario e studi femministi. Dati e prospettive su didattica, manuali e critica letteraria per una trasformazione dell'Italianistica". In *Le costanti e le varianti. Letteratura e lunga durata*. Guido Mazzoni, Simona Micali, Pierluigi Pellini, Niccolò Scaffai and Matteo Tasca, eds. Roma, Del Vecchio Editore. 139-62.
- Bergalli, Luisa. 1726. *I Componimenti poetici delle più illustri Rimatrici d'ogni secolo*. Venezia, Antonio Mora.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Bono, Paola and Sandra Kemp, eds. 1991. *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Bracke, Maud. 2014. *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy 1968-1983*. London, Routledge.
- Brogi, Daniela. 2022. *Lo spazio delle donne*. Torino, Einaudi.
- Bueti, Federica. 2023. *Critical Poetics of Feminist Refusals: Voicing Dissent Across Differences*. London, Routledge.
- Campanaro, Valeria. 2019. "Le madri di tutte noi": luoghi e pratiche del femminismo culturale in Italia negli anni Settanta e Ottanta". MA thesis. Università di Padova.
- Castiglione, Baldassare. 1972. *Il libro del Cortegiano*. Ettore Bonora and Paolo Zoccola, eds. Milano, Mursia.
- Cavarero, Adriana and Franco Restaino. 2002. *Le Filosofie Femministe*. Milano, Mondadori.
- Chinese, Maria Grazia, Carla Lonzi, Marta Lonzi and Anna Jaquinta. 1977. *È già politica*. Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile.

- Conti Odorisio, Ginevra. 1979. *Donna e Società nel Seicento: Lucrezia Marinella e Arcangela Tarabotti*. Roma, Bulzoni Editore.
- Cox, Virginia. 1995. "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice". *Renaissance Quarterly* 48.3: 513-81.
- . 2008. *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 2011. *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press.
- . 2016. *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*. London, IB Tauris.
- Curti, Lidia. 2015. "Uno spazio di differenze". In *Oltrecanone. Generi, genealogie, tradizioni*, Anna Maria Crispino, ed. Roma, Iacobelli Editore. 18-33.
- Domenichi, Ludovico. 1549. *La nobiltà delle donne*. Venezia, Giolito di Ferrari.
- . 1559. *Rime diverse d'alcune nobilissime et virtuosissime donne*. Lucca, Vincenzo Busdraghi.
- Ferrante, Elena. 2014. *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Ann Goldstein, tr. New York, Europa Editions.
- Fonte, Moderata. 1988. *Il merito delle donne: ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne e più perfette de gli huomini*. Adriana Chemello, ed. Mirano, Editrice Edios.
- . 1997. *The Worth of Women: Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*. Virginia Cox, tr. and ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, eds. 2000. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.
- Jaquinta, Anna. 1977. "Espressione di sé e cultura". In *Chiniese et al.* 1977, 67-94.
- . 1978. "Tentativi di Autocoscienza in un Gruppo del Cinquecento". In *La presenza dell'uomo nel femminismo*. Marta Lonzi, Anna Jaquinta and Carla Lonzi, eds. Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile. 45-78.

- Joseph Benson, Pamela. 1992. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press. 33-155.
- Kolsky, Stephen. 2001. "Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi: An Early Seventeenth-Century Feminist Controversy". *Modern Language Review* 96.4: 973-89.
- Levarie Smarr, Janet. 2005. *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.
- Libreria delle Donne di Milano. 1987. *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*. Milano, Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Lonzi, Carla. 1992. *Armande sono io!* Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile.
- . 2010a. *Sputiamo su Hegel*. Maria Luisa Boccia, Annarosa Buttarelli, Laura Iamurri, Laura Lepetit, Maria Palazzesi and Liliana Rampello, eds. Milano, Et al. Edizioni.
- . 2010b. *Taci, anzi parla: diario di una femminista*. Milano, Et al. Edizioni.
- Lonzi, Marta and Anna Jaquinta. 1990. *Vita di Carla Lonzi*. Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile.
- Marinella, Lucrezia. 1601. *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne, co' difetti et mancamenti de gli huomini. Discorso di Lucrezia Marinella in due parti diviso*. Venezia, Giovanni Battista Ciotti.
- . 1645. *Essortationi alle donne et agli altri, se a loro saranno a grado, parte prima*. Venezia, Francesco Valvasense.
- . 1999. *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*. Anne Dunhill, tr. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- . 2012. *Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please*. Laura Benedetti, ed. and tr. Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies.
- Martelli, Daria. 2017. *More Veneto*. Padova, CLEUP.

- Melandri, Lea. 1997. "Una rivoluzione senza memoria". *Liberazione*. 8 March.
- Moroncini, Ambra. 2017. "Vittoria Colonna. Matriarch of Italian Petrarchism and *Christi Ancilla* of the Italian Renaissance". In *Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation*. London-New York, Routledge. 37-57.
- Orsi, Marianna. 2023. "Fading Away: Women Disappearing from Literature Textbooks (How Italy Obliterates Female Intellectual Work)". In *Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy: Literature, Art and Intellectual History*. Sharon Hecker and Catherine Ramsey-Portolano, eds. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan. 19-36.
- . 2021. "Donne invisibili: come i manuali di letteratura ignorano il contributo femminile (prima parte)". In *Radici Digitali* <<https://radicidigitali.eu/2021/02/05/donne-invisibili-come-i-manuali-di-letteratura-ignorano-il-contributo-femminile-prima-parte/>>
- Panizza, Letizia. 2000. "Polemical Prose Writing, 1500-1650". In *A History of Women's Writings in Italy*. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 65-78.
- . 1999. "Introduction to the Translation". In *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*. Lucrezia Marinella. Anne Dunhill, ed. and tr. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Ribera, Pietro Paolo. 1609. *Le glorie immortali de' trionfi et heroiche imprese d'ottocento quarantacinque donne illustri antiche e moderne*. Rotondi, Felice. Ms. XXII-588 int. 07. *Pro Doctoratu in Sacra Theologia Nob. et Doctissimae Virginis Elenae Corneliae Piscopiae Venetae*. Padova, Pontificia Biblioteca Antoniana.
- Sanson, Helena. 2016. "Women and Conduct in the Italian Tradition, 1470-1900: An Overview". In *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy, 1470-1900: Prescribing and Describing Life*. Helena Sanson and Francesco Luciola, eds. Paris, Classiques Garnier. 9-38.
- Schnieders, Laura. 2021. "*La nobiltà ed eccellenza delle donne* di Lucrezia Marinella: Un esempio di polemica

- dei sessi nel contesto veneziano del Rinascimento". PhD Dissertation. Universität Augsburg.
- Subrizi, Carla. "Contradictions and the Re-Invention of One's Own Role: The Publishing House *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile* in the Life/Work of Carla Lonzi." In *Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy: Literature, Art and Intellectual History*. Sharon Hecker and Catherine Ramsey-Portolano, eds. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan. 247-262.
- Ventrella, Francesco and Giovanna Zapperi, eds. 2021. *Feminism and Art in Postwar Italy: The Legacy of Carla Lonzi*. London, Bloomsbury.
- Wynn Schwartz, Selby. 2022. *After Sappho*. Norwich, Galley Beggar Press.
- Zapperi, Giovanna. 2019. "We Communicate only with Women:" Italian Feminism, Women Artists and the Politics of Separatism". *Palinsesti* 8:1-18.

FINDING AGENCY IN MODERN ADAPTATIONS OF *CINDERELLA*

Alena Gašparovičová

Popular among children and adults, Cinderella is a prototypical story of social mobility that is itself remarkably mobile and mutable; its long history and universal appeal reflect a singular ability to travel through time and space, circulate between languages and cultures, and cut across boundaries of genre, form, and medium. *Cinderella Across Cultures*.¹

Fairy tale re-writings is a very popular and productive genre. As Julie Sanders notes, “there are particular bodies of texts and source material, such as myth, fairy tale, and folklore which by their very nature depend on a communality of understanding [...] and which are handed on, albeit in transmuted and translated forms, through the generations” by way of adaptation and appropriation.² Although there might be regional differences between specific versions of a story, the central plotlines and symbolism in fairy tales and other folk stories remain very similar across cultures. This may explain why these stories are favourite subjects for adaptations, given that they already possess a pool of potential audience members. Even many versions of fairy tales that are now considered traditional could be regarded as simply re-writings or variations of

¹ Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère *et al.* 2016, 1.

² Sanders 2006, 45.

earlier versions that the collectors adjusted to suit the requirements of their audience.³

The Cinderella story, the first version of which goes back to Giambattista Basile's *La gatta Cenerentola* (*The Cinderella Cat*), included in his *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*The Tale of Tales*) (1634-36),⁴ is "[by] all accounts [...] the best-known fairy tale, and probably also the best-liked".⁵ After Basile first penned his tale, there have been several adaptations of the beautiful young girl mistreated by her stepmother and step-sisters who eventually goes on to marry a prince.⁶ The most successful rewritings of the story are Charles Perrault's *Cinderella: or The Little Glass Slipper* (1697), and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Cinderella* (first written in 1812, with several editions published throughout the 19th century), with Perrault's version being the most recognised by mass audiences for the starry-eyed approach adopted when compared to Basile's and Grimms' renditions.⁷ Indeed, Ruth Bottigheimer directly links the popularity of Perrault's tales to his less scandalous story lines.⁸ As such, it is not difficult to comprehend why Perrault's version of the Cinderella story would also later serve as the basis for the well-known Disney movie (1950), which has been instrumental for the appeal of this fairy tale globally: "Cheap and popular American print versions describe its heroine just as Perrault created her: sleeping on straw, sitting among the cinders, but patient, meek, and obliging, she irons her haughty stepsisters' undergarments, neatens their ruffles, advises them about ball gowns, and combs their hair".⁹ On the other hand, it is also true that the 1973 film *Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella* (directed by Václav Vorlíček, screenplay by František

³ Some of the changes made by the collectors to the story of Cinderella will be mentioned later in relation to how these changes influence the perception of the target characters.

⁴ See Basile 2013, 124-39, and Basile 1999.

⁵ Bettelheim 1991, 236.

⁶ See Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère *et alia* 2016.

⁷ See Bottigheimer 2016 and Hoffmann 2016.

⁸ Bottigheimer 2009, 67.

⁹ Bottigheimer 2009, 67.

Havlíček, starring Libuše Šafránková and Pavel Trávniček), has been described as “a contentious film that challenges traditional assumptions about Cinderella as a poor helpless waif. She will wed out of love not out of necessity, and it is clear that she has come into her own”.¹⁰ Additionally, the 1988 film *Working Girl* (directed by Mike Nichols, screenplay by Kevin Wad, starring Melanie Griffith) has been seen as “one of the most elaborate and interesting reworkings of the Cinderella story to appear in recent years”.¹¹

After assessing gender roles and social status in the Classic textual versions of the Cinderella tale, this chapter focuses on the most recent adaptation of the story: *Cinderella & The Glass Ceiling* (2020), by American authors Laura Lane and Ellen Haun. I offer insights into how parody is used to address contemporary issues regarding gender and class mobility. By cleverly subverting the obsession with traditional princesses, Lane and Haun have managed to give to this tale a feminist voice and action relatable to the 21st-century audience.

1. Gender Roles and Marriage in Fairy Tales

A reason why fairy tales seem to be very popular is their role in children's education. This does not necessarily only entail school education; it can also refer to the traditions one becomes familiar with and expectations of the society the child comes from. It is a double-edged sword, though. As scholars have pointed out, these stories can also pass on negative values to their readers, such as stereotypes regarding gender roles. Marcia Lieberman, for instance, shows the ways in which fairy tales can be harmful to their female readers by drawing attention to the differences between how male and female protagonists attain their respective happy endings, pointing out that: “Girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky”.¹²

¹⁰ Zipes 2011, 184.

¹¹ de Graff 1996, 69.

¹² Lieberman 1972, 385.

The impact of fairy tales on their readers due to the gender disparity they convey is also openly questioned by Jack Zipes, who, with regard to the Cinderella story, observes:

Why is the stepmother shown to be wicked and not the father, who abandons and neglects his daughter? How difficult is it for a young girl to accept the role of stepdaughter or to accept a “new” stepmother? Conversely, how difficult is it for a stepmother to accept her new husband’s daughter when she has two daughters of her own? Why is Cinderella essentially passive? [...] Why do girls have to quarrel over a man? What are they really quarrelling about? How do children react to a Cinderella who is industrious, dutiful, virginal and passive? Are all men handsome? Is marriage the end goal of life? Is it important to many rich men? This small list of questions suggests that the ideological and psychological pattern and message of either Perrault’s or the Grimms’ “Cinderella” do nothing more than reinforce sexist values and a Puritan ethos that serves a society which fosters competition and achievement for survival.¹³

All these questions are very relevant when considering contemporary re-writings of the story, especially in the light of modern-day feminist research. Fairy-tale stories such as *Cinderella* may reinforce problematic gender stereotypes, since their female characters seem to have only two options: either they can be completely passive and wait to be rescued by a male character, or they will be considered evil. As Lieberman points out, women who are evil, are “generally shown as active, ambitious, strong-willed and, most often, ugly”,¹⁴ whilst the good ones are usually very beautiful but passive, and depend on others to succeed. In short, traditional fairy tales “glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine’s cardinal virtues”.¹⁵ With these considerations in mind, the issue concerning marriage and social status in fairy tales de-

¹³ Zipes 2002, 195.

¹⁴ Lieberman 1972, 392.

¹⁵ Rowe 1979, 239.

serves attention. Since women in the past derived their status from their husbands, it is hardly surprising that it was crucial for their future well-being to secure a husband with as high of a social standing as possible. This practice leads to what Lieberman labels “contests”¹⁶ among female characters in fairy tales, because there is only one highest “prize”¹⁷ – a Prince. Most importantly, as Bottigheimer writes, “poverty *through* magic leads to marriage *and then* money”.¹⁸ She traces in this literary genre the ever-present idea of improving one’s status by marrying up to the Venetian collector of fairy tales, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, whose *The Nights of Straparola* (published in the 1550s) predates even Basile. According to Bottigheimer, who highlights that “a union between a noble and a commoner [...] [was] *improbable* [or even] illegal”, Straparola made use of the genre of fairy tales to make something that was not an option in the real world possible in the story.¹⁹

The second issue connected to marriage in this genre is the portrayal of marriage itself. Fairy tales “make marriage not simply one ideal, but the only estate toward which women should aspire”.²⁰ The use of the formula “and they lived happily ever after” reaffirms the idea that it is the state of ultimate bliss and nobody can be content without getting married. An argument could be made with respect to the lack of other options women used to have in the past – and to a certain socio-religious degree even now. However, that should not overshadow the aspect that happiness in marriage and happiness in marriage in fairy tales can be two different things. Furthermore, with such a portrayal of marriage in fairy tales, there is very little to no courtship shown in the stories, and only a very small number of fairy tales actually go beyond the wedding.²¹ The female protagonists marry

¹⁶ Lieberman 1972, 385.

¹⁷ Lieberman 1972, 385.

¹⁸ Bottigheimer 2009, 21 [original emphasis].

¹⁹ Bottigheimer 2009, 21-22.

²⁰ Rowe 1979, 239.

²¹ Lieberman 1972, 394.

their saviours without having the opportunity to really get to know them, with the consequence that in spite of the aforementioned blissful formula, to what extent a fairy tale marriage may be deemed successful remains an open question.

Finally, another aspect that should not be underestimated when considering this literary genre, is the role of male characters in fairy tales, especially the parents of the protagonists. There is a recurring pattern of absent or disinterested fathers who turn a blind eye towards the abuse their children face. "They are, again by definition, powerful and good. They are never responsible or held accountable for the evil done by their wicked wives. Most of the time, they do not notice it".²² Fathers are never blamed for the struggles the main female protagonists go through, even though they are complicit by ignoring the mistreatment. This aspect of the fairy tale will be discussed in more detail below, as paternal ignorance is a rather important aspect of the traditional Cinderella stories. Andrea Dworkin comments on the role of the father in Cinderella stories as follows: "Cinderella's father saw her every day. He saw her picking lentils out of the ashes, dressed in rags, degraded, insulted. He was a good man".²³

2. Social Status in the Cinderella Tale

Cinderella is a somewhat tricky story when it comes to discussing social status, not only because there are several versions, but especially because "Cinderella's is *not* a story of rags to riches, but rather riches recovered; *not* poor girl into princess but rather rich girl (or princess) rescued from improper or wicked enslavement".²⁴ Indeed, in the oldest known European version of the story, Giambattista Basile's *The Cinderella Cat*, contrary to traditional expectations, Zezolla's (alias Cinderella) situation is an uneasy one, not because she was born into a poor family, in fact she is the daughter of an Italian Prince, but be-

²² Dworkin 1974, 44.

²³ Dworkin 1974, 45.

²⁴ Yolen 1977, 21.

cause her father has forsaken her in favour of her step-family. She is only forced by circumstances to lose the privileges that should be hers, yet, thanks to the Fairies of Sardinia who help her attend a feast hosted by the king, her life changes forever.

Another notable difference between *ZeZolla* and Perrault's and the Grimms' main female characters is the level of agency *ZeZolla* displays. Although this tale features a "typically dysfunctional fairy-tale family",²⁵ where *ZeZolla* is despised and mistreated by her stepmother, she does have a much-loved governess who has rather high ambitions. She suggests that *ZeZolla* should murder her stepmother and persuade the Prince, *ZeZolla*'s father, to marry the governess; this way *ZeZolla* will be the "apple of the [governess's] eye"²⁶. Unbeknownst to *ZeZolla*, the governess has six daughters, and not surprisingly, she breaks her promise. "Within a month, she is treating her stepdaughter worse than her predecessor did".²⁷ Thus, she is not simply a victim of circumstances, but she carries part of the blame for ending up with an even worse stepmother. Her father does nothing to stop her new stepmother's mistreatment as "his stepdaughters entered his heart at the same time that his own daughter left it".²⁸ The rest of the story, as anticipated above, is rather similar to the typical *Cinderella* plot.

The ending of the story, however, does not finish with an "and they lived happily ever after", but rather by focusing on the villainous stepsisters as they are returning to their mother, the former governess, "confessing in spite of themselves that those who oppose the stars are crazy".²⁹ Although it is not said explicitly, the context would suggest that opposing the stars means trying to prevent *ZeZolla* from marrying the King, or even that they hoped that one of them would marry him. As already mentioned, unlike other fairy tales, *Cinderella* is not

²⁵ Canepa 1999, 202.

²⁶ Basile 1999, 204.

²⁷ Warner 1988, 144.

²⁸ Basile 1999, 205.

²⁹ Basile 1999, 209.

about marrying up but rather about regaining, after a period of hardships, what is rightfully already hers. This is confirmed in the Grimms' story, though chronologically written after Perrault's version.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Cinderella* features a typical innocent persecuted heroine who is depicted as being the perfect woman – she is pious, she does as she is told and does not seem to have any aspirations of her own. She is described as being the daughter of a “rich man”³⁰, but no longer with royal blood. Although the protagonist is never explicitly mentioned as a member of the higher class, she is at times described by scholars as being a more suitable candidate because she “[internalises] aristocratic values”,³¹ hence, she may be perceived as a good candidate to marry a Prince, unlike her stepsisters. The latter, on the other hand, represent the bourgeoisie striving towards a higher position in society:

This is exactly what the sisters want: to substitute themselves for Cinderella and thereby to usurp a higher-class position. They acquire a foothold in Cinderella's home, but they are not satisfied. They proceed to demote and disguise Cinderella: they disrobe her, give her old clothes, set her to do the coarse and menial work of the class beneath them, and give her a generic name, a name that belies specialness.³²

The stepsisters' attempt to prevent Cinderella from marrying the Prince is seen as an “attempt to interfere in aristocratic marriage and kinship rituals”³³ and their behaviour is punished severely by having them lose their eyes. It may be argued that Cinderella's stepsisters are punished for aspiring to improve their standing in society.

Interestingly, even though the Grimms' protagonist can easily be seen as the “innocent persecuted heroine” archetype, aspirations towards a higher position in society masked under the guise of innocence may also be at play.

³⁰ Grimm and Grimm 2011, 81.

³¹ Panttaja 1993, 96.

³² Panttaja 1993, 94.

³³ Panttaja 1993, 94.

As Bacchilega notes: “magic and goodness in the Grimm tale serve a dual function: they make the Cinderella-mother team appealing as a narrative representation of gender and, at the same time, they camouflage class ambition and violence”.³⁴ Here, Cinderella’s dead mother, who is present in the form of a tree that grew up on her grave and which aids Cinderella in catching the attention of the Prince, manifests similar patterns of behaviour to the evil stepmother. However, in this story, Cinderella is characterised by her “praiseworthy passivity”,³⁵ and can be seen as a more likeable character.

Perrault’s version of the story, however, clearly sets the protagonist’s class background within the bourgeoisie. Cinderella “is no longer a true bride threatened by some coarse imposters, but a poor girl who triumphs over the glamorous and corrupt women of the monied class. Thus, the tale defends, not the right of the genteel-bourgeois to its separate social space, but the right of the petit-bourgeois to aspire and ascend”.³⁶ It is no longer important “whether one is vile or virtuous [...] the stepsisters are considerably more abusive of Cinderella”,³⁷ yet they remain unharmed. These elements make Perrault’s story the stepping stone where the notion of Cinderella as a rags-to-riches tale originated. She is not from a noble family, and so her improvement of status means going up the ranks of social class. She even makes sure that her stepsisters find good matches³⁸ after she marries the Prince, which gives her the image of a perfect character.³⁹ While in Basile’s story the stepsisters merely failed to achieve anything, and in the Grimms’ version they were punished for attempting to cross class boundaries, in Perrault’s version, they manage to ascend along with Cinderella.

³⁴ Bacchilega 1993, 8.

³⁵ Robbins 1998, 110-11.

³⁶ Panttaja 1993, 99.

³⁷ Bettelheim 1991, 252.

³⁸ Perrault 2015, 49.

³⁹ Joosen 2011, 266.

3. *Cinderella & The Glass Ceiling* (2020): Lane and Haun's Parodical Re-writing

Lane and Haun's rewriting differs greatly from the traditional versions, not least because since the very beginning of the story the reader is informed that

ONCE UPON A TIME... There lived a strong and resilient young woman named Cinderella, who lived with a mean, demanding, and frankly abusive stepmother and two bratty, dim-witted stepsisters [...]. The stepmother resented Cinderella for her empathy in the face of adversity and for being the only one in the family without a widow's peak⁴⁰.

This *incipit* sets the fairly sarcastic tone for the rest of the story. The shallowness of the stepmother character is somewhat baffling. In the traditional story, she clearly wants the best for her own two daughters, indeed "much of her cruelty comes from a place of love which she feels for her children".⁴¹ She wants to secure their futures by marrying at least one of them off to a Prince and improving their social standing, even if it comes at the expense of her stepdaughter. The motivation of Lane and Haun's stepmother character is much simpler. It is no longer her desire "that her own daughters make good marriages";⁴² she merely wants to be evil: "Acknowledging that it was a stepmother's job in fairy tales to be evil and jealous of her stepdaughter, she ripped Cinderella's dress in two".⁴³ She does not seem to be concerned about improving her daughters' social standing as much. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, it seems that she is quite well off because of her inheritance from Cinderella's father, which might be a possible explanation as to why she does not push her daughters to make advantageous marriages: "She kept the father's money to herself and paid Cinderella minimum wage to become a servant of the house".⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Lane and Haun 2020, 32.

⁴¹ Gašparovičová 2021, 168.

⁴² Dworkin 1974, 38.

⁴³ Lane and Haun 2020, 33.

⁴⁴ Lane and Haun 2020, 32.

The reference to a minimum wage distances this story from the fairy tale and brings it closer to the contemporary world. It allows the authors to make use of the fairy-tale setting while at the same time addressing problems that other women face nowadays, which makes the story easier for contemporary audiences to relate to.

While Lane and Haun's adaptation is still set in a fairy-tale land, this land resembles 21st-century America with all the struggles a woman from a poorer background would face there. The most obvious one is finding a well-paid position: "Cinderella would've loved to be a household manager or one of those well-paid butler types, but those roles always went to the men in the kingdom".⁴⁵ The hint to contemporary gender inequality is not difficult to perceive here. She is portrayed as being a menial worker in order to pay her stepmother for the accommodation, but is deprived of the work position she desires, and that would allow her to earn more money, on account of her womanhood. This is shown even more plainly in the scene where she discusses her situation with the Prince: "Look, Cindy', muttered the Prince. 'I'd hire you here at the castle, but the only job openings are for royal advisers. You know, important, high-level stuff. That a woman can't do'"⁴⁶

The 21st-century Cinderella is described as facing obstacles due to her gender, but also because of her class status. She no longer internalises the traits associated with an appropriate member of a higher class, indeed, she seems rather clueless when it comes to dressing appropriately for the ball as she wears the glass slippers which were meant to be a present for the King and the Queen, much to her fairy godmother's dismay. She is rather practical and down to earth. When she is confronted with the folly of her decision to wear glass slippers to the ball, she points out that it is not that different from wearing regular heels as those are also extremely uncomfortable:

⁴⁵ Lane and Haun 2020, 32.

⁴⁶ Lane and Haun 2020, 39.

“You know what?” she screamed. “Maybe I was stupid to put the glass slippers on my feet, but don’t tell me any of the heels in this room are any more comfortable! Are they? Are they?”
 “They’re not!” shouted a nearby brunette waving one of her flip-flops in the air.⁴⁷

At first glance, wearing heels might sound like a much more sensible option than wearing high-heel glass shoes, especially keeping them on after they break. However, high heels have been shown to have a variety of negative health effects on their wearers, for example, an increased “risk of injury”⁴⁸ or the development of “musculoskeletal disorders”.⁴⁹ Thus, the other women, who chose to wear heels to the ball, are not safe from injuries or long-term side effects either. Therefore, even if their shoes are in accordance with the local social decorum, it could be argued that the ridicule that Cinderella faces for her choice of footwear stems more from her ‘otherness’ rather than from what might be perceived as a foolish decision to the others – wearing slippers made of glass that hurt her.

Another obstacle Cinderella has to face is the ignorance of people in power, along with their unwillingness to help. It is evident that once the illusion that she is from a wealthy family shatters, the Prince is entirely clueless about how the lower classes live:

“I actually didn’t buy these glass slippers myself,” explained Cinderella. “They were a gift and it seemed rude not to wear them”.
 “When I think a gift is ugly I just throw it away,” said the Prince.
 “They were my only option,” said Cinderella. “I don’t own a pair of shoes”.
 “Not even boat shoes?” asked the Prince. “Or those ones with the red bottoms that ladies love?”

⁴⁷ Lane and Haun 2020, 38-39.

⁴⁸ Moore et al. 2015, 618.

⁴⁹ Esenyel et al. 2003, 32.

“I sleep in a fireplace,” she quipped. “How would I know anything about gender-normative footwear?”⁵⁰

It can be seen here that her dire socioeconomic situation is no longer romanticised, as it was in Perrault’s story, where the heroine’s virtues that flourish in spite of the circumstances added an element of attraction. Neither is she finally rescued to become the Princess she was always meant to be, or become as does the Grimms’ and Basile’s protagonist. She is a young woman in a desperate situation because her parents are dead, and she is merely a servant caught in a vicious circle – she cannot get a better position because she lacks qualifications, but she cannot get the qualifications she desperately needs because she cannot afford to pay for university education. It is interesting, however, that in spite of her lower social status, and despite the fact that it is not known what kind of educational path she received prior to the ball, she is capable of holding a conversation using academic jargon as can be seen in her use of the phrase “gender-normative footwear”.⁵¹

In Lane and Haun’s version, Cinderella is no longer the innocent fairy-tale protagonist who merely goes to the ball because of her godmother’s intervention. She is depicted as a pragmatic and resourceful young girl who wants to improve her social status. At first, she believes that marrying the Prince would be “an easy way out of [her] dreadful living situation”,⁵² but when the Prince turns out to be a generally unlikeable person and marrying him would be more trouble than it would be worth to her, she takes the matter into her own hands:

“I’ll go to school, I’ll get a job, rise the ranks, and call myself Chief Glass Disrupter on my business card because I’ll work at one of those cool companies where you make up your own title. You’ll see. All of you!” said Cinderella. “Oh, and by the way, ‘crudités’ is just a fancy word for regular vegetables”.

⁵⁰ Lane and Haun 2020, 36-37.

⁵¹ Lane and Haun 2020, 37.

⁵² Lane and Haun 2020, 36.

Cinderella left that night and did everything she said she would do. It wasn't easy, of course, but Cinderella persisted. She shattered the glass ceiling into as many pieces as she had shattered that stupid glass paper-weight.

And she always wore flats.

THE END⁵³

Realising that she cannot rely on others to succeed in life. The ending of the story suggests that Cinderella achieved the American dream by being able to rise through the ranks thanks to her own hard work.

Drawing back to Yolen's statement that Cinderella is not a rags-to-riches story⁵⁴ and, therefore, it should not be associated with the American dream, Lane and Haun's contemporary adaptation is an interesting one. Their Cinderella definitely stresses the idea of female empowerment. Yet, while the story does provide a more independent female protagonist, this choice also begs the question of whether it is possible for a Cinderella-like character to attain her happy ending in a narrative that does not feature the attainment of the American dream and if yes, why the authors opted for going with this narrative in spite of having other options. Another question that might stem from this is the question of the happy ending itself and whether a happy ending has to include a rise in the main character's social status. The story itself does not provide conclusive answers.

Finally, the characters of Cinderella's father and the one of the fairy godmother are worth some attention. Her father is mentioned only in a very brief remark in relation to his second marriage and subsequent death: "Cinderella's mother had tragically died, and her father quickly remarried after just a few dates before you really know who a person is. But soon after, Cinderella's father died, too".⁵⁵ As such, Lane and Haun practically absolve him from his responsibility for Cinderella's future suffer-

⁵³ Lane and Haun 2020, 40.

⁵⁴ See note 31.

⁵⁵ Lane and Haun 2020, 32.

ing. Unlike the traditional versions, where the fathers just stand by and let their daughters wither away while the stepchildren get everything they desire, here he dies soon after the marriage takes place. And while he might be blamed for the union, he cannot be blamed for not protecting his child later on in life. With regard to Cinderella's fairy godmother, she turns out to be rather incompetent in helping her. She is portrayed as a well-meaning, but ultimately useless character whose presence only stresses the obstacles Cinderella would have to face if she were to marry the Prince, such as learning the Royal protocol, etc.

To conclude, Lane and Haun's rewriting of Cinderella story, hailed as "a parody of classic fairy tales for the modern feminist" even before its release,⁵⁶ is an empowering tale that addresses distinctive categories such as birth rights and class rights as decisive yet not insurmountable for the heroine to achieve her gradual confidence-building.⁵⁷ Most importantly, a comparison with the other traditional adaptations of this classic tale will immediately underscore that here the heroine manages to achieve her happy ending without marring the Prince. It is solely on her merits that the 21st-century Cinderella manages to shatter the metaphorical glass ceiling, just as she promised she would do at the end of the ball: *And she always wore flats*, the end of this contemporary Cinderella story reminds us.

⁵⁶ Black Raven 2019.

⁵⁷ On this, see Barros-del Rio 2018.

Works Cited

- Bacchilega, Cristina. 1993. "An Introduction to the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale". *Western Folklore* 52.1: 1-12.
- Barros-del Rio, Maria A. 2018. "Emma Donoghue's and James Finn Garner's Rebellious Cinderellas: Feminism and Satire for Empowerment in Contemporary Fairy Tales". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 7.5: 239-46.
- Basile, Giambattista. 1999. "The Cinderella Cat". *Movels & Tales* 13.2: 201-10.
- . 2013. *Lo cunto de li cunti*. Michele Rank, ed. Milan, Garzanti.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. 1991. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London, Penguin Books.
- Black Raven. 2019. "A Parody of Classic Fairy Tales for the Modern Feminist". A review of *Cinderella and the Glass Ceiling: And Other Feminist Fairy Tales by Laura Lane and Ellen Haun*. *Cannonball Read*. 28 October. <https://cannonballread.com/2019/10/cinderella-and-the-glass-ceiling-and-other-feminist-fairy-tales-blackraven>
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. 2009. *Fairy Tales a New History*. Albany, State University of New York Press.
- . 2016. "Cinderella. The People's Princess". In *Henrietta de la Rochère et al.* 2016, 27-51.
- Canepa, Nancy L. 1999. "Translator's Introduction". In *Basile 1999*, 201-03.
- deGraff, Amy, 1996. "From Glass Slipper to Glass Ceiling: 'Cinderella' and the Endurance of a Fairy Tale". *Merveilles et Contes* 10.1: 69-85.
- Dworkin, Andrea. 1974. *Woman Hating*. New York, Plume.
- Esenyel, Meltem, Katlen Walsh, Judith Gail Walden and Andrew Gitter. "Kinetics of High-Heeled Gait". *Journal of the American Podiatric Medical Association* 93.1: 27-32.
- Gašparovičová, Alena. 2021. "Fairy-Tale Stereotypes and Modern Rewritings of Fairy Tales". In: *Filologické štúdie* 7. Mária Vajičková, Renáta Bojničanová and

- Simona Tomášková, eds. Nümbrecht, Kirsch-Verlag. 164-72.
- Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. 2011. *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales*. Margaret Hunt, trans. San Diego, Canterbury Classics.
- Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Martine, Gillian Lathey and Monika Woźniak, eds. 2016. *Cinderella Across Cultures: New Directions and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press.
- Hoffmann, Katryn A. 2016. "Perrault's 'Cendrillion' among the Glass Tales. Crystal Fantasies and Glass Works in Seventeenth-Century France and Italy". In Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère *et al.* 2016, 52-80.
- Joosen, Vanessa. 2011. *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue Between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press.
- Lane, Laura and Ellen Haun. 2020. *Cinderella and the Glass Ceiling: and Other Feminist Fairy Tales*. New York, Seal Press.
- Lieberman, Marcia R. 1972. "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale". *College English* 34.3: 383-95.
- Moore, Justin Xavier, Brice Lambert, Gabrielle P. Jenkins and Gerald McGwin Jr. 2015. "Epidemiology of High-Heel Shoe Injuries in U.S. Women: 2002 to 2012". 54: 615-19.
- Panttaja, Elisabeth. 1993. "Going up in the World: Class in 'Cinderella.'" *Western Folklore* 52.1: 85-104.
- Perrault, Charles. 2015. *Cinderella and Other Stories*. London, Collins Classics.
- Robbins, Alexandra. 1998. "The Fairy-Tale Facade: Cinderella's Anti-grotesque Dream". *The Journal of Popular Culture* 32.3: 101-15.
- Rowe, Karen E. 1979. "Feminism and Fairy Tales". *Women's Studies* 6.3: 237-57.
- Sanders, Julie. 2006. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London and New York, Routledge.
- Warner, Marina. 1988. "The Wronged Daughter: Aspects of Cinderella". *Grand Street* 7.3: 143-63.

- Williams, Christy. 2010. "The Shoe Still Fits: Ever After and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella". *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*. Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix, eds. Logan, UT, Utah State University Press. 99-115.
- Yolen, Jane. 1977. "America's Cinderella". *Children's Literature in Education* 8: 21-29.
- Zipes, Jack. 2002. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky.
- . 2011. *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*. New York, Routledge.

THE IMITATION OF NAHUA RHETORIC IN
THE FICTION OF CARMEN BOULLOSA:
THE FLORENTINE CODEX AND *LLANTO*.
NOVELAS IMPOSIBLES (1992)

Victoria Ríos Castaño

On the last page of her historical novel, *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* (1992), Mexican writer Carmen Boullosa brings to a close her acknowledgements with a suggestive statement: “junto con ellos escribí este libro” [“I wrote this book with them”].¹ Boullosa shares with her readers that she composed her text after consulting seminal works – Tzvetan Todorov’s *La conquista de América, la cuestión del otro* (1982) and J. M. G. Le Clézio’s *Le rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue* (1965) –, acknowledging also the support she received from Mexican colonial Latin American scholars – Alfredo López Austin, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, and José Luis Martínez –, with whom she conversed during the creation process.² Interestingly, Boullosa explains that she is indebted to all of them “en desorden”,³ randomly classified as if compared to her first acknowledgement, which unequivocally goes to “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún y los indios trilingües, autores con él de la extraordinaria *Historia general de las*

¹ Boullosa 1992, 122. Translations are mine unless otherwise stated. Boullosa’s novel tells the story of three women who stumble upon the last Nahua emperor, Moctezuma, in the Parque Hundido of Mexico City in 1989.

² Boullosa 1992, 122; Brian 2022, 267.

³ Boullosa 1992, 122: “In disorder”.

cosas de Nueva España".⁴ Boullosa recognizes her reading of this sixteenth-century encyclopaedic work on the world of the Nahuas, whose extant manuscript, the *Códice Florentino*,⁵ she also quotes in her novel, and highlights the input of the Nahuatl speakers,⁶ the indigenous aides, whose assistance was indispensable for Sahagún to produce the work that tends to be attributed to him as the sole author.⁷

Several academics have furnished their own interpretations of Boullosa's use of the Florentine Codex. Carrie E. Chorba posits that Boullosa writes her novel by "adopting the optic of Sahagún and his [trilingual] aides"; in the same way as they codify the cosmivision of the Nahuas by working with "symbolic, pictorial glyphs and narratives" in Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin, Boullosa pieces together different narratives, acting as her own "trilingual aides, transcribing, interpreting and creating at once".⁸ In other words, during the writing process Boullosa experi-

⁴ Boullosa 1992, 122: "Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and the trilingual Indians, who authored with him the extraordinary *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*".

⁵ Boullosa 1992, 74. The Florentine Codex, completed in around 1577, is a lavishly illustrated two-column work, with the original in classical Nahuatl on the right-hand side and the translation into Spanish on the left. For a translation into English of the Nahuatl text, see Sahagún in Anderson and Dibble 1952-82. For an edition of the text in the Spanish column, see Sahagún in López Austin and García Quintana 1988. A most recent study on the Florentine Codex is Peterson and Terraciano 2019.

⁶ Classical Nahuatl was the lingua franca of the Triple Alliance of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, popularly known these days as the Aztec empire.

⁷ In his second prologue of the Florentine Codex, Sahagún explains that his Nahua assistants, whom he had taught Latin at the Imperial College of Santa Cruz of Tlatelolco, were always present during the composition process. Among others, he names Martín Jacobita, Antonio Valeriano, Alonso Vegerano, Pedro de San Buenaventura, Bonifacio Maximiliano, and Mateo Severino; see Sahagún 1988, I, 79.

⁸ Chorba 1995, 309.

ences “the fragmentary nature of the narrative [...] explainable as a metaphor for the piecemeal work that chroniclers like Sahagún performed in the name of documentation”.⁹ Claire Taylor makes a similar reading of Boulosa’s acknowledgments. The surviving manuscript itself, the Florentine Codex, can be conceived of as a work in progress, written and over-written due to the continuous additions and deletions, and Boulosa transmits in her novel the same feeling that she or any other reader of the codex experiences:

Just as we question who is doing the writing behind these fictional lines that we read, so too we should question who is doing the writing behind the historical accounts we read [...]. The Florentine Codex reminds us constantly to question the source and authenticity of the various texts – both historical and fictional – that make up *Llanto*.¹⁰

Even in those cases in which Sahagún and his indigenous aides’ work contains revealing, in principle informative data, this is still not to be taken at face value. For instance, in chapter IX of her novel, Boulosa copies verbatim a passage found in chapter XIII, on reactions to Moctezuma’s corpse, of Book XII, on the conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.¹¹ Amber Brian interprets this citation as Boulosa’s attempt to enter a textual dialogue with the Florentine Codex, which eventually does not come to fruition. Neither the relevant passage of Book XII nor any other colonial source sheds any light on Moctezuma’s personal experiences and the thoughts occupying his mind at

⁹ Chorba 1995, 309.

¹⁰ Taylor 2012, 41, 48.

¹¹ “Y mientras se quemaba, impulsados únicamente por la cólera, ya no había muchos que lo llevaran en su corazón; otros le hacían reproches, decían: ‘¡Ese malvado! ¡Por todo el mundo sembraba el terror, por todo el mundo hacía reinar el espanto!’”, Boulosa 1992, 73: “And whilst [his corpse] was burning, some were driven only by their anger, as not many carried him in his heart any more. Others were reproaching him. They were saying: ‘This evil man! He used to spread terror all around, he made fright reign all around’”.

the time of the Spanish invasion. In the same manner as Boulosa and the narrators of her novel struggle to create a fictional account of Moctezuma, historiography is unable to reconstruct the story of an emperor who did not leave a legacy, a testimony of his own voice, about his experiences.¹²

In full agreement with Brian, Chorba and Taylor's explanations of Boulosa's imprint from the Florentine Codex, the intention of this article is to provide more evidence on why Boulosa profusely acknowledges its authors. Her aforementioned phrase, "junto con ellos escribí este libro", is adopted as a leading clue to develop the following argument: Boulosa wrote some passages of her novel by imitating the Nahua rhetorical style that appears in the sixteenth-century translation into Spanish of the Florentine Codex that was written by Sahagún with the aid of his assistants. In order to prove it, this study will first examine how historical fiction falls back upon historical sources and for what motives. This overview will lead to a discussion of Boulosa's composition of her works, in general, in connection with Seymour Menton's definition of the New Historical Novel, and of *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*, in particular, with one these New Historical Novel features: heteroglossia or the writer's conscious incorporation of different kinds of speech.

1. *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* as a New Historical Novel

Personal interpretation and fictionalization of history is at the origins of Latin American literature. The European cultural imaginary permeated through Christopher Columbus's logbook, *conquistador* Hernán Cortés's letters, and *relaciones* (descriptions) and *historias* (chronicles) on the conquest and colonization of the New World, to the extent of fusing, at times, reality with fiction. A salient example is conqueror Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (written ca. 1568), which was shaped by Díaz del Castillo's readings of

¹² Brian 2022, 267.

medieval chivalric romance.¹³ In contemporary historical novels, the situation has somehow reversed. Latin American writers composing historical novels set in the colonial period continue to blend reality and fiction, and they do so by drawing on the colonial archive. The 1980s and 1990s, years leading up to the Quincentennial of Columbus's first voyage, saw a striking increase in Latin American writers who fictionalized historical figures and underscored parallels between the colonial past and the present in order to interrogate cultural, national issues.¹⁴ For instance, Mexican Armando Ayala Anguiano drew on Díaz del Castillo's history and Cortés's letters for the writing of *Cómo conquisté a los aztecas* (1990), a recreation of the conquest that articulates an ongoing conversation on the origins and characteristics of Mexican identity. Likewise, conqueror Lope de Aguirre's letters and explorer Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's accounts, *Naufragios* (1542), were employed by Argentine novelist Abel Posse for the composition of his trilogy *Daimón* (1978), *Los perros del paraíso* (1982), and *El largo atardecer del caminante* (1992). Exploring connections between twentieth-century historical circumstances in modern-day Peru, the legend of Aguirre's rebellion, and Cabeza de Vaca's adventures from Southwestern United States to Paraguay, Posse revisited "tales from the chronicles to tell the story of Latin America's rediscovery of itself in a supposedly postcolonial, yet still neoimperial, age".¹⁵ On other occasions, writers resort to a combination of historical and scholarly sources to vindicate colonial figures. For example, Cortés's slave and interpreter Marina, *la malinche*, vilified by Mexican Octavio Paz as a sexually humiliated traitor, and later glorified by Chicana feminist writers like Gloria Anzaldúa as the mother of the mestizo race, has been portrayed in a myriad of literary texts as a heroic survivor,

¹³ Ortiz-Hernán Pupareli 2014.

¹⁴ Menton 1993, 29; Hernández 2006, 11-12.

¹⁵ Hernández 2016, 18. For a scholarly analysis of these and other historical novels on the colonial period, see Menton 1993, López 2002, and Hernández 2006.

such as in Mexican Laura Esquivel's romantic novel *Malinche* (2006).¹⁶

All aforementioned works are inscribed in what Seymour Menton termed as the Latin American New Historical Novel. Upon his analysis of empirical evidence – the reading of over 367 historical novels written between 1949 and 1992 –, Menton postulates that the New Historical Novel is a subgenre that has dominated Latin American fiction since 1979, and identifies several defining characteristics the historical novels hold in common. To begin with, the novels illustrate three philosophical premises: the impossibility of ascertaining the truth, the cyclical nature of history, and its unpredictability. These are followed by the distortion of history in the form of omissions, exaggerations, and anachronisms; the use of famous historical characters in principal roles, and the recourse to metafiction. Finally, Menton identifies Bakhtinian theoretical notions and concepts, such as intertextuality, the dialogic – two or more conflicting presentations of characters, worldviews, and events –, and heteroglossia – “the multiplicity of discourses, or the conscious use of different types of speech”.¹⁷

Major authors that have cultivated the New Historical Novel expand along four literary generations to include pre-Boom Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, Boom Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, and post-Boom writers like Guatemalan Arturo Arias and Argentine Martín Caparrós. In his search for an answer to this widespread phenomenon, Menton examines the paradigmatic novel that, he argues, initiated the trend: Carpentier's fictionalization of Columbus's life in *El arpa y la sombra* (1979). Focusing on historical novels on the conquest and colonization of Latin America, Menton contends that historical fiction might be an escapist subgenre in which writers and readers took refuge during the increasingly grim situation that Latin America experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus,

¹⁶ For a historiographical approach on studies and creative, fictional works on *La Malinche*, see Valdeón 2013.

¹⁷ Menton 1993, 22-25.

the New Historical Novel would be a distraction “from reality or [...] a search for national or continental ingredients that might offer a glimmer of hope in coping with the future”.¹⁸ Another possibility entertained by Menton is that the aforementioned celebrations and conferences of the Quincentennial, with their debates on the global role of Latin America after five centuries of contact with Western civilisation, operated as a stimulus behind this resurgence of the historical novel.¹⁹ Inspired by the founding pillars of their culture, based on centuries of traditional and historic information, writers wished to contribute to debates on discordant texts.²⁰ Since literature has the power to revisit history, in surpassing historiography with imagination, they seized a chance to “continue a history’s intertextual discourse”.²¹ In this sense, fiction is postulated to contribute to the “New Conquest History”,²² a re-articulation of historiography on the conquest that, contrary to the traditional tendency to centre on European narratives of triumphal military exploits by Spaniards only, reassesses history by looking at new sources in which the indigenous peoples play a protagonic role during and after the conquest.²³

Carmen Boulosa is a paradigmatic author of the New Historical Novel that sets in the colonial period. In the late 1990s, her historical, metafictional novels prompted readers to reflect on the events and figures that she was bring-

¹⁸ Menton 1993, 29-30. In opposition, the Traditional Historical Novel, which Menton dates in between 1826 and 1949, and is primarily identified with romanticism, *criollismo*, and even existentialism, contributed to the creation of a national consciousness. Readers were offered entertainment – “thrilling episodes [...], heroic and angelical protagonists, [...] diabolical figures” – and at the same time Liberal propaganda; they became familiarised with historical figures embodying conservative values of the colonial period; see Menton 1993, 17-18.

¹⁹ Menton 1993, 29.

²⁰ Chorba 1995, 302.

²¹ Chorba 1995, 302.

²² For further reference, see Restall 2012.

²³ Brian 2022, 234.

ing to the fore, and which earned her the title of “la novelista histórica por excelencia en México”.²⁴ Boullosa invested her work with a critical process of the colonial historical textualities on which she bases her fiction, and which opens doors to resignify events, in an attempt to answer contradictions and fill up the silences that she finds in her consulted sources.²⁵ Thus, for two of her historical novels, *Son vacas, somos puercos, filibusteros del Caribe* (1991) and *El médico de los piratas: bucaneros y filibusteros en el Caribe* (1992), Boullosa drew on a seventeenth-century account of piracy and slave trade, the memoirs of Alexander Olivier Exquemelin’s *De Americaensche Zee Roovers* (The Buccaneers of America) (1678), to recreate life at sea in the Caribbean of the “pirates” of the Brotherhood of the Coast.²⁶ Relishing her challenge, Boullosa even appeals to the intertextuality of her work, encouraging readers to delve into references used.²⁷ This fictional re-appropriation resumes with *Duerme* (1994), although this time stories on piracy are relocated to late sixteenth-century New Spain (colonial Mexico).²⁸

Mexico would continue to frame the setting of Boullosa’s later historical novels, in which she also interweaves past, present, and future.²⁹ Thus, in *Cielos de la tierra* (1997), she transports the life of an indigenous intellectual, Hernando de Ribas, one of Sahagún’s aides and outstanding pupils at the Imperial College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, to future scenarios. A fictional biographical chronicle written in Latin by Ribas, which is found and translated into Spanish by a translator in the late twentieth century, is rediscovered several centuries later in a post-apocalyptic world.³⁰ Preceding *Cielos de la tierra* in

²⁴ Pfeiffer 1995, 259; Taylor 2012, 37.

²⁵ Brian 2022, 234.

²⁶ For a most recent study of these novels, see Reid 2019.

²⁷ Chorba 1995, 303-04.

²⁸ Madrid Moctezuma 2004, 139.

²⁹ Brian 2022, 263.

³⁰ Studies on this novel include Ramond 2019, Hanaï 2019, and Sánchez Hernández 2019.

Boullosa's decision to turn to colonial Mexico, *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* (1992) merges excerpts from colonial sources and fictional events in the twentieth century. Thus, Boullosa reflects on the pitfalls of historiography and fictional narrative, engaging readers with the impossibility of writing a novel on Moctezuma and, at the same time, of ascertaining information about Moctezuma's death and the whereabouts of his corpse.

Llanto. Novelas imposibles has been the object of several studies that point out its alignment with Menton's New Historical Novel features, examining its omissions, exaggeration, anachronisms, and use of intertextuality, metafiction, and parody.³¹ By way of example, Chorba, Mato, Taylor, and more recently Brian, have highlighted the intertextuality of the novel. According to Mato, *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* roughly comprises four sections, which are intermingled together throughout the text: early modern quotes of historical accounts on the conquest of Mexico;³² the main plot revolving around the apparition of Moctezuma in the late twentieth-century Mexico City; Moctezuma's dreams, which function as a window to Nahua culture; and the unnamed writers' thoughts on their attempts to write fiction.³³ In a macro-level analysis of her novel, Taylor claims that Boullosa relies on the use of metafiction, blending "at once a travel narrative, a historical narrative [...] and a science fictional fantasy".³⁴ Thus, Boullosa's application of time-travel to her novel as a narrative thread is strategic, devised to interrogate "the established meanings of history and time" and to operate as "a shorthand of the postmod-

³¹ See Chorba 1995, Reid 2003, Madrid Moctezuma 2004, Mato 2007, Ferrero Cándenas 2008, Taylor 2012, and Brian 2022.

³² Cited quotes belong to indigenous codices like Aubin and Ramírez; conquerors Hernán Cortés's letters and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*; Sahagún's Florentine Codex; and chronicler Antonio de Solís's *Historia de la conquista de México*.

³³ Mato 2007, 118.

³⁴ Taylor 2012, 35.

ern condition".³⁵ In a micro-level analysis, Madrid Moctezuma has likewise considered paradigmatic examples of anachronism and parody.³⁶ Observing the indigenous nobility's mortuary ritual of depositing a jade stone in the mouth of their dead, Boullosa writes a thought-provoking scene. After sexual intercourse with Moctezuma, Laura, one of the three friends who had found him, notices the green stone "entre las dos mandíbulas [...] que no le dejaba cerrar la boca".³⁷ Anxious that it might choke him, Laura divests the ancient rite of its solemnity, removing the stone from Moctezuma's mouth "usando los dedos como pinzas".³⁸

Another passage that readers might find entertaining, for its shocking juxtaposition of ordinary situations and extraordinary elements, involves the incorporation into fiction of López Austin and Matos Moctezuma, the two Mexican scholars to whom Boullosa expresses her indebtedness in the acknowledgments of *Llanto. Novelas ejemplares*. The morning after encountering Moctezuma, the three friends are finishing their breakfast and one of them, Luisa, rings her former professor, "doctor López Austin", to tell him about their special guest. Having explained to Moctezuma that a telephone "podía servir para hablar a distancia a quien fuera",³⁹ which he comprehends as a divine power, Luisa continues her dialogue with López Austin: "Maestro, disculpe que lo moleste en domingo [...], le voy a poner al personaje al teléfono. Dice que es Moctezuma Xocoyotzin [...]. Y le prometo que no es una broma, es verdad [...]. [L]o encontramos [...] rodeado de mantas, sobre una piel, [...] con la cara pintada".⁴⁰ In-

³⁵ Taylor 2012, 35.

³⁶ Madrid Moctezuma 2004, 141.

³⁷ Boullosa 1992, 49: "[B]etween his jaws [...], which did not allow him to close his mouth".

³⁸ Boullosa 1992, 49: "[U]sing her fingers as tweezers".

³⁹ Boullosa 1992, 85: "[I]t could be used to speak with anyone in the distance".

⁴⁰ Boullosa 1992, 85-86: "Professor, apologies for bothering you on Sunday [...], I'm going to pass on the individual to you on the phone. He claims to be Moctezuma Xocoyotzin [...]. And I

trigued, López Austin even engages into a conversation with Moctezuma in classical Nahuatl, the contents of which are not revealed, but which prompt López Austin to request an immediate meeting with him and Matos Moctezuma.

Boullosa chooses not to translate or adapt their words from sixteenth-century Nahuatl into Spanish; nevertheless, she does so in other sections of the novel. For instance, in two of them, entitled “Otra voz” [Another voice],⁴¹ an unknown, first person narrator recounts what they did with Moctezuma’s corpse and addresses him in an elaborated speech. The second of these is highly reminiscent of classical Nahuatl discourses that were translated into Spanish by Sahagún with the help of his Nahua assistants. Thus, the following section of this study seeks to draw attention to how Boullosa consciously imitated the Nahuatl style of Book VI, on Nahua rhetoric, of the *Códice florentino*,⁴² cited as such in the body of *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*, and as *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* in her acknowledgements.

2. From the codification of Nahua rhetoric to the composition of *Llantos. Novelas imposibles*

Upon their arrival in New Spain in June 1524, the first group of Franciscan missionaries, known as the Twelve – in allusion to the apostles and to the zealous conversion endeavours that they were to emulate –, encountered a diversity of indigenous languages, including Nahuatl.⁴³ One of these first Franciscans, Fray Toribio de Benavente-Motolinía, attested to the paramount necessity of learning

promise you it’s not a joke, it’s true [...]. [W]e found him [...] surrounded by blankets, on top of a skin, [...] with his face painted”.

⁴¹ Boullosa 1992, 78-79, 92-93. These fragments by “other voices” have been also interpreted as Boullosa’s intent to offer “her-story”; her novel could be a revisionist gender perspective of Mexican culture and history, Ferrero Cándenas 2008, 109, 118.

⁴² Boullosa 1992, 74: Florentine Codex.

⁴³ Duverger 1987, 170.

the indigenous languages in order to “hablar, predicar, conversar, enseñar y administrar todos los sacramentos”.⁴⁴ In an incipient joint effort to attain a perfect command of Nahuatl, Motolinía, friar García de Cisneros, and Fray Juan de San Francisco composed doctrinal manuals and sermons, whilst Fray Francisco Jiménez and Fray Alonso Rengel began to codify Nahuatl in grammars and vocabularies. Later Franciscans resumed these linguistic and doctrinal activities, and subsequent dictionaries, grammars, and translations of sacred scriptures and sermons were written, with the help of indigenous aides, by friars like Fray Alonso de Molina, Fray Andrés de Olmos, and Sahagún.⁴⁵

Olmos and Sahagún, in particular, were pioneers in their contribution to this linguistic project for the evangelisation of the Nahuas. In 1547, Olmos completed the first Nahuatl grammar, *Arte de la lengua mexicana*, which appended a collection of Nahua speeches, known as *huehuetlahtolli*, literally meaning “word of the elders”. Likewise, Sahagún finished his *Libro de la rhetorica y philosophia moral y teología de la gente mexicana*, consisting of Nahua *huehuetlahtolli* together with sayings, conundrums, and metaphors.⁴⁶ This book was eventually incorporated into the Florentine Codex as Book VI. Upon her consultation of said text, Boulosa would have understood that these *huehuetlahtolli* comprise speeches, exhortations, prayers, and salutations in which traditional religious, moral, and social concepts were expressed in a beautiful and persuasive style. The expert orators – Nahua priests, noblemen and noblewomen, ambassadors and merchants – delivered them on both religious and secular ceremonial occasions, such as for the investiture

⁴⁴ Motolinía 1985, 232: “[S]peak, preach, talk, teach and administer all the sacraments”.

⁴⁵ Mendieta 1973, II, 118.

⁴⁶ Although the term *huehuetlahtolli* is widely used by scholars, it was neither mentioned by Olmos nor Sahagún to refer to these discourses. In fact, in his title to Book VI, Sahagún labels them as “tlatlauhtiliztlatolli”, which he translates into Spanish as sermons and prayers; Zimmermann 2016, 15-16.

of kings, in prayers to gods in times of drought and famine, or to urge their children to be respectful and prudent in life.⁴⁷

In order to codify oral Nahuatl rhetoric into a written format, Sahagún requested the presence of a group of Nahua elders, who pronounced the discourses, and of his Nahua assistants, who took notes. His belief in the importance of registering this information rested on concepts such as “idioma”, a Medieval Latin term of Greek origin that Alfonso X the Wise translated as “words and traditions”, linking culture and language.⁴⁸ In addition, Sahagún was familiar with St Augustine’s argument that language holds an evocative nature or capacity that facilitates human beings to discern right from wrong. The preacher, in uttering the precise, correct words, evoked ideas in his audience to persuade and instruct them, so that they could appreciate the path to follow towards Christianity. For Sahagún, this meant that writing down oral representations of Nahua moral eloquence was imperative for, once used in doctrinal works and sermons, these linguistic and cultural samples could unleash a mental process that would awaken in his congregation a sense of the belief in the evangelical message.⁴⁹ In other words, with this *Libro de la rhetorica*, he wished to supply a reference work in which his fellow missionaries would find classical Nahuatl in context, to be emulated for the appropriate composition of sermons and chants.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Sullivan 1974, 99.

⁴⁸ Bustamante García 1989, 697.

⁴⁹ Bustamante García 1989, 731-33.

⁵⁰ Since the early 1540s, when Sahagún and his Nahua aides must have been recording Nahua rhetoric, they applied this imitation strategy themselves, that is, the copy of phrases and stylistic features found in the *huehuetlahtolli*. For instance, in a collection of sermons attributed to Sahagún, *Sermonario* (ca. 1540-63), they inserted forms of address and expressions typical of Nahua speeches, such as the vocative “notlazopiltzine” (“my precious one”). They also repeated Nahuatl metaphors and parallelisms to embellish the text, such as the double phrase “techtlanextiliz techtlauliz” (“he emits light, he lights

In the early 1990s, when Boullosa must have been drafting *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* and consulting the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, a remarkable edition had just been put into circulation by her friend López Austin. In collaboration with Josefina García Quintana, he had transcribed, for the first time, the Spanish translation that occupies the left-hand column of the Florentine Codex.⁵¹ In search of a colonial source that reproduced the manner in which the Nahuas spoke in the sixteenth century, albeit in Spanish translation, Boullosa would have found this new edition of enormous value. She would have paid particular attention to Book VI (on Nahua rhetoric), as pronounced, according to Sahagún in his prologue, by “sabios retóricos, virtuosos y esforzados” Nahuas.⁵² Boullosa would have noticed that Sahagún defended the quality of the original text in classical Nahuatl. The speeches, metaphors, similes, and riddles contained in the book were not “ficciones y mentiras”, as stated by his detractors; rather, “lo que en este libro está escrito”, Sahagún is adamant to highlight, is a true copy of Nahua informants’ words, for “todos los indios entendidos, si fueren preguntados, afirmarán que este lenguaje es el propio de sus antepasados”.⁵³ Next, Boullosa would have found the collection of *huehuetlahtolli* that Sahagún had recorded and classified as follows.

In the first nine, known as “ritual hymns”, she would have read what the Mexicans thought about their gods; in ten to sixteen, the exhortations to their lords and rulers;

our way with a candle”). For further reference, see Klaus 1999, 108, 243. Burkhart’s (1989) ground-breaking study remains a key examination of how missionaries adopted indigenous rhetoric in their evangelizing works.

⁵¹ See Sahagún 1988. Former editions had printed a copy of this Spanish translation, as handwritten in Spain in the late sixteenth century, known as the Códice Tolosa.

⁵² Sahagún 1988, I, 305: “[W]ise on rhetoric, virtuous and diligent”.

⁵³ Sahagún 1988, I, 305-06: “[F]ictions and lies”, “what in this book is written”, “all the learned Indians, if they were asked, would confirm that it is the true language of their ancestors”.

in seventeen to twenty two, the admonitions that parents gave to their children; and on twenty three to forty, the speeches delivered during and after the birth of a child. Apart from obtaining an insight into main themes, Boullosa would have surmised some stylistic features. For instance, every *huehuetlahtolli* is made up of invocations by an authorized speaker, whether a priest, a parent, a governor or a midwife, who addresses a god, another priest or ruler, children and pregnant women (e.g. “O master, o our lord”). Gods and rulers are attributed divine powers or exceptional abilities, such as the possibility of eradicating a pestilence, and rulers indulge in self-deprecation (e.g. “I who am a commoner, unrighteous, evil”).⁵⁴ Of particular importance to capture the audience’s attention is the constant use of anaphoras, metaphors, and “difrasismos” or two-word phrases with a metaphoric meaning. Sahagún recognized the difficulty of mastering these metaphors and offered a list in the final chapter, XLIII, of Book VI.⁵⁵

After this general consultation of Book VI, Boullosa might have stopped at those speeches addressing kings, lords and rulers, and which could have been directed to emperor Moctezuma himself. In her reading of chapter X, “del lenguaje y afectos que usaban para hablar y avisar al señor recién electo”,⁵⁶ she would have encountered the aforementioned characteristics of the *huehuetlahtolli*. To

⁵⁴ Zimmermann 2016, 29-31. For a valuable study on Book VI and the *huehuetlahtolli*, see also Ruiz Bañuls 2009.

⁵⁵ Illustrative of these metaphors is “mixtitlan, aiauhitlan” (in the clouds, in the mist), which Sahagún translates as “de entre las nubes o de entre las nieblas o del cielo ha venido. Por metáfora se dice de alguna persona notable, que vino a algún lugar o reino que no le esperaba, y hace gran provecho a la república”. Sahagún 1952-82, VII, 244: “he came from the clouds, from the mist or from the sky. It is said, as a metaphor, of a noteworthy person who came to a place or a kingdom where he was not expected and was of great benefit for the republic”.

⁵⁶ Sahagún 1988, I, 336: “Of the language and feelings about which they used to speak and with which they warned their recently elected lord”.

begin with, this speech includes a large range of vocatives and epithets, such as the one initiating the discourse: “¡Oh señor nuestro humanísimo y piadosísimo, amantísimo!”, followed by many others like “¡Oh humanísimo señor nuestro!”, “¡Oh señor nuestro serenísimo, y muy precioso!”, “¡Oh señor y rey nuestro!”.⁵⁷ Boulosa would have also realized that passages with anaphoras are pervasive. This is the manner in which the speaker addresses the ruler’s responsibilities in chapter X:

Vos sois el que habéis de llevar la pesadumbre desta carga deste señorío o ciudad. Vos sois el que habéis de suceder a vuestros antepasados [...]. Vos señor habéis de poner vuestras espaldas debaxo de esta carga grande [...]. Vos por algunos años [n]os habéis de sustentar y regalar, como a niños que están en la cuna. Vos habéis de poner en vuestro regazo [...] a la gente popular.⁵⁸

[Thou have to carry the burdensome charge of this state or city. Thou are the one who has to succeed your ancestors [...]. Thou, our lord, have to put this large burden on your shoulders [...]. Thou, for some years, will have to sustain us and take care of us as children who are in their crib. Thou will have to place [...] the commoners in your lap.]

The use of anaphoras is likewise present to give the ruler pieces of advice, in the form of imperatives, as follows:

Mirad que [no os] pase ni por pensamiento decir ‘yo soy señor, y yo haré lo que quisiere’ [...]. Mirad que la dignidad que tenéis, y el poder que se os ha dado sobre vuestro reino [...] no os sea ocasión de ensoberbeceros [...]. Mirad, señor, que no durmáis a sueño suelto. Mirad que no os descuidéis con deleites y placeres corporales.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Sahagún 1988, I, 336-37: “O our very humanly, and most pious and most loving lord! O our very humanly lord, O our most poised and precious lord! O our lord and our King!”.

⁵⁸ Sahagún 1988, I, 336.

⁵⁹ Sahagún 1988, I, 339.

[Ensure that it does not cross your mind to say ‘I am the lord, I will do what I wish [...]’. Ensure that your dignity and the power that has been granted over your kingdom [...] is not an occasion for you to become arrogant [...]. Ensure, our lord, that you do not fall sound asleep [on your obligations]; ensure that you do not distract yourself with entertainment and body pleasures.⁶⁰]

Finally, Boullosa would have noticed that anaphoras appear in the form of questions, at times to warn of danger and to imply a degree of deprecation: “Por ventura por algún espacio de tiempo llevarás la carga a ti encomendada, o por ventura te atajará la muerte [...]. Por ventura serás infamado de alguna cosa fea y vergonzosa [...]. [P]or ventura te darán guerra otros reyes que te aborrecen, y serás vencido y aborrecido”.⁶¹

Metaphorical language, the other constitutive element of Nahua rhetoric in the *huehuetlahtolli*, is widespread in chapter X. Upon reading it, Boullosa would have identified the running metaphor of the ruler who, as a supreme figure, governs the lives of his commoners, who are portrayed as frail children in need of his guidance. Thus, the speaker entreats the ruler to “sustentar y regalar” his subjects “como a niños que están en la cuna”.⁶² Without the ruler’s support, they would suffer, they would be at the destiny of a god that laughs at them, who “hace lo que quiere [...]”; porque a todos nosotros nos tiene en el medio de su palma, y nos está remeciendo, y somos como bодоques redondos en su palma, que andamos rodando de una

⁶⁰ Sahagún 1988, I, 339.

⁶¹ Sahagún 1988, I, 338: “Will you by chance carry the burden with which you have been tasked for some time or will death cut it short? [...]. Will you by chance be vilified because of any ugly and shameful act? [...] Will you by chance be sent to war by other kings who abhor you and will be defeated and forsaken with disdain?”.

⁶² Sahagún 1988, I, 337: “Sustain [them] and please [them] as children who are in their crib”.

parte a otra”.⁶³ The righteous ruler himself must be careful. Were he to succumb to earthly pleasures, become haughty and presumptuous, he would irate their gods who: “en su querer y voluntad está el que te aniebles y desvanezcas”.⁶⁴ Consequently, destruction in the form of a pestilence and starvation would ensue and the ruler’s “resplendor se volviere en tinieblas”.⁶⁵

There is no doubt that Boullosa copied some defining characteristics of the *huehuetlahtolli* of Book VI, imbibing their tone, for the writing of some sections of *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*. Illustrative of this is the speech or discourse “Otra voz”, included in section X, after “Quinto fragmento de novela”, in which an unknown speaker entreats Moctezuma, the *Tlacatecuhtli* (Nahuatl term for the highest authority), on how to govern the *macehuales* (commoners).⁶⁶ In this speech Boullosa inserts the same rhetorical devices, that is, vocatives and anaphoras in the form of repeated imperatives and questions. Here are some examples:

“Oh grande, oh protector nuestro, oh hermano mayor”.⁶⁷

“Cuidate, cuida tus oídos, cuida tu voz y tus manos y tus pensamientos [...], cuidate porque en ti está la alegría de nuestros niños”.⁶⁸

“¿A quién que no seas tú podríamos obedecer y honrar si eres el señor de los señores, nuestro padre? ¿En

⁶³ Sahagún 1988, I, 339: “He does as he wishes [...]; because he has all of us on the palm [of his hand] and is making us wave. We are like balls of clay in his hand, as we are turning around from one place to another”.

⁶⁴ “It is in their intention that you will be overcast and vanish”, Sahagún 1988, I, 338.

⁶⁵ Sahagún 1988, I, 338: “[His] radiance would turn into darkness”.

⁶⁶ Boullosa 1992, 92-93: “Another Voice”, “Fifth fragment of the novel”.

⁶⁷ Boullosa 1992, 92: “O you big, o our protector, o our older brother!”.

⁶⁸ Boullosa 1992, 92. “Be careful, take care of your ears, your voice, and your hands and your thoughts [...], be careful because our children’s happiness rests on you”.

qué podríamos confiar, si no, en toda la faz de la tierra?”⁶⁹

Likewise, many of these metaphors and similes that appear in chapter X of Book VI find some occurrence in “Otra voz”. Boullosa’s speaker initiates their speech begging: “[n]o puedes fallarnos. Somos niños tiernos. Estamos en tus manos”,⁷⁰ and emphasizes their hopelessness by stating: “somos niños sin cuna si nos faltas tú”.⁷¹ It is only when they are in the ruler’s hand – and not in their gods’ –, that they can also lead their lives peacefully: “dejamos de rodar por la colina [...]”; otherwise “rodamos sin tocar fondo”.⁷² This metaphor of personal destruction or moral straying, equated to falling off a path and walking and turning down a hill, can be traced in several *huehuetlahtolli* of Book VI.⁷³ A passage in chapter X, for instance, reads:

Advierte, señor, el lugar en que estás, que es muy alto, y la caída dél muy peligrosa. Piensa, señor, que vas por una loma muy alta y de camino muy angosto [...]. No es posible salir del camino hacia una parte ni hacia otra sin caer en un profundo abismo.⁷⁴

[Pay notice, my lord, that the place in which you are is very high, and falling from it is very dangerous. Think, my lord, that you walk on a hill that is very high and has a very narrow path [...]. It is not possible to leave this path on one side or another without falling into a deep abyss.]

⁶⁹ Boullosa 1992, 93: “To whom could we obey and render homage to if it is not you, lord of lords, our father? Whom could we trust, otherwise, on the face of the earth?”.

⁷⁰ Boullosa 1992, 92: “You cannot fail us. We are young children. We are in your hands”.

⁷¹ Boullosa 1992, 92: “We are children without a crib in your absence”.

⁷² Boullosa 1992, 92: “We can stop turning down a hill”, “we turn around without touching the end”.

⁷³ It has been analysed as Nahua “torrent-and-precipice” tropes by Bukhart 1989, 61.

⁷⁴ Sahagún 1988, I, 341.

Interestingly, the image of the ruler guiding his people along the right path is also present in “Otra voz”:

nos guías y nos permites caminar con nuestros torsos erguidos mientras las serpientes se arrastran sin sentido por un camino inhóspito. Oh protector nuestro, no sabemos caminar sin ti, no sabemos estar sin ti, no sabemos.

[You guide us and allow us to walk, keeping our torsos upright whilst the snakes sweep along without orientation along an unhospitable path. O our protector, we cannot walk without you, we do not know how to live without you, we cannot.⁷⁵]

In the representation of the ruler as a protector, the speaker uses two metaphors; the hand, as aforementioned, and the wings: “no somos nada sin que tu sombra nos pise. Bajo tus alas nos guarecemos”.⁷⁶ These metaphors – the ruler’s protective wings and shadow, despite its oppressive presence – appear likewise in the huehuetlahtolli of chapter XI of Book VI, similarly addressed to rulers. In said speech, Boulló could have read: “tended vuestras alas [...] para que debaxo de ellas amparéis a vuestros súbditos [...]. ¡Oh señor! Entre vuestro pueblo [...] debaxo de vuestra sombra, porque sois como un árbol”.⁷⁷ In “Otra voz”, Boulló’s narrator conveys the same message. Were Moctezuma to fail in the performance of his duties, his subjects would be engulfed by darkness and be overcast. Without their ruler, the commoners are “perdidos en una neblina oscura”.⁷⁸ This is the reason why in the final paragraph of “Otra voz” the speaker warns Moctezuma not to doubt his obligations: “No dejes de pensar en nosotros”, they recite, “[q]ue las

⁷⁵ Boulló 1992, 93.

⁷⁶ Boulló 1992, 92: “We are nothing without your shadow stepping upon us. We take shelter under your wings”.

⁷⁷ Sahagún 1988, I, 345: “Extend your wings [...] so that under them you shelter your subjects [...]. O lord! May your people enter [...] under your shade, because you are like a tree”, Sahagún 1988, I, 345.

⁷⁸ Boulló 1992, 92: “Lost in a dark mist”.

nubes que crees ver cerca de ti se disuelvan en una noche menos oscura”.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The previous analysis of “Otra voz” has demonstrated how Boullosa appropriates the tone and style of 16th-century voices – a speech delivered orally, codified in a written format in Nahuatl, and eventually translated into Spanish – for contemporary and future readers of her novel. The intertwining of an ancient, rhetorical style with contemporary Spanish, which is found in many chapters – for instance, the telephone conversation between Luisa and López Austin –, constitutes another characteristic – the Bakhtinian idea of heteroglossia or Boullosa’s conscious incorporation of different kinds of speech – that connects *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* with the New Historical Novel subgenre. In an attempt to transmit the same feeling that the readers of the Florentine Codex experience, Boullosa not only resorts to intertextuality to remind us that the Florentine Codex, like her novel, is a work in progress,⁸⁰ but she also mimics the language style of the *huehuetlahtolli*, as translated into Spanish. As this chapter has shown, she writes sections of her work, like the fragment “Otra voz”, by recuperating pre-Hispanic similes, metaphors, manners of speech, and grammatical constructions. In this sense, Boullosa meets Sahagún’s intention to codify Nahuatl rhetoric so that it could be applied to the composition of other texts that would reproduce the language as faithfully and correctly as possible. She seems to have analysed the Nahuatl stylistics of the *huehuetlahtolli* of Book VI of the Florentine Codex and composed her text by inserting its main features. Her attempt to revive the classical Nahuatl tone and take readers back in time, to Moctezuma’s period, also finds resonance with Sahagún’s belief that, for the writing of doctri-

⁷⁹ Boullosa 1992, 93: “Do not stop thinking about us. May the clouds that you can see close to you dissolve in a less dark night”.

⁸⁰ Taylor 2012, 41, 48.

nal works, echoing the ancient style and tone of the Nahuas' speeches would awaken in the neophytes an understanding of Christian dogma. Sahagún and Boullosa's purposes are staggering at odds, and yet, Boullosa's imitation of Sahagún and his aides' work in *Llanto. Novelas imposibles* did contribute to bring back Nahuatl rhetoric to the readers.

Works Cited

- Boullosa, Carmen. 1992. *Llanto. Novelas imposibles*. Mexico City, Era.
- Brian, Amber. 2022. "Leer la conquista en las novelas de Carmen Boullosa". *eHumanista: Journal of Iberian Studies* 50: 263-72.
- Burkhart, Louise. 1989. *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Tucson, University of Arizona Press.
- Bustamante García, Jesús. 1989. *La obra etnográfica y lingüística de fray Bernardino de Sahagún*. Madrid, Universidad Complutense.
- Chorba, Carrie C. 1995. "The Actualization of a Distant Past: Carmen Boullosa's Historiographic Metafiction". *Revista de Literatura Hispánica* 42: 301-14.
- Duverger, Christian. 1987. *La conversion des Indiens de Nouvelle Espagne: avec le texte des Colloques des douze de Bernardino de Sahagún (1564)*. Paris, Le Seuil.
- Ferrero Cándenas, Inés. 2008. "Carmen Boullosa's *Llanto: novelas imposibles*: Narrating History and Herstory". *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies. Latin American Women's Writing, Then and Now*. Thea Pitman, ed. 14.2-3: 109-21.
- Hanaï, Marie-José. 2019. "Hibridez genérica en *Cielos de la tierra*". In Mohssine 2019, 47-71.
- Hernández, Mark A. 2006. *Figural Conquistadors: Rewriting the New World's Discovery and Conquest in Mexican and River Plate Novels of the 1980s and 1990s*. Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press.
- Klaus, Susanne. 1999. *Uprooted Christianity: The Preaching of the Christian Doctrine in Mexico*. Bonn, Bonner Amerikanistische Studien.
- López, Kimberle S. 2002. *Latin American Novels of the Conquest: Reinventing the New World*. Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press.
- Madrid Moctezuma, Paola. 2004. "Las narraciones históricas de Carmen Boullosa: El retorno de Moctezuma, un sueño virreinal y la utopía de futuro". *América Sin Nombre: Boletín de la Universidad de Investigación de La Universidad de Alicante* 5-6: 138-46.

- Mato, Shigeko. 2007. "Moctezuma in the City: Revisited Past in Carmen Boullosa's *Llanto: Novelas imposibles*". *Hispanic Journal* 28.1: 117-134.
- Mendieta, Fray Gerónimo de. 1973. *Historia eclesiástica indiana (1595)*. Francisco de Solano Pérez Lila, ed. 2 vols. Madrid, Atlas.
- Menton, Seymour. 1993. *Latin America's New Historical Novel*. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Mohssine, Assia, ed. 2019. *Pensar en activo: Carmen Boullosa, entre memoria e imaginación*. Monterrey-Nuevo León, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León.
- Motolinía (Toribio de Benavente). 1985. *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*. Georges Baudot, ed. Madrid, Historia 16.
- Ortiz-Hernán Pupareli, Elami. 2014. "La idea de ficción y realidad en el *Amadís de Gaula* y en la *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*". *Antropología. Revista Interdisciplinaria del INAH* 97: 24-34.
- Peterson, Jeanette Favrot and Kevin Terraciano, eds. 2019. *The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahuatl World in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Pfeiffer, Erna. 1995. *Exiliadas, emigrantes, viajeras: encuentros con diez escritoras latinoamericanas*. Frankfurt am Main, Iberoamericana Vervuert.
- Ramond, Michèle. 2019. "Carmen Boullosa supergenérica o ¿cómo pensar hoy en día lo femenino de una escritura? (Una lectura de *Cielos de la tierra*)". In Mohssine 2019, 33-46.
- Reid, Anna. 2003. "La re-escritura de la conquista de México en *Llanto, novelas imposibles* de Carmen Boullosa". *Espéculo. Revista de Estudios Literarios*, 24.
- . 2019. "Piratas del Caribe: transgresión, otredad y memoria". In Mohssine 2019, 95-110.
- Restall, Matthew. 2012. "The New Conquest History". *History Compass* 10.2: 151-60.
- Ruiz Bañuls, Mónica. 2009. *El Huehuetlahtolli como discurso sincrético en el proceso evangelizador novohispano del siglo XVI*. Roma, Bulzoni.

- Sahagún, Fray Bernardino de. 1952-82. *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, tr. and eds. 13 vols. Santa Fe, University of Utah.
- . 1988. *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. Josefina García Quintana and Alfredo López Austin, eds. 2 vols. Madrid, Alianza.
- Sánchez Hernández, Diana Sofía. 2019. “Narrar en los márgenes de la historia: la mirada femenina en *Cielos de la tierra*”. In Mohssine 2019, 72-94.
- Sullivan, Thelma D. 1974. “The Rhetorical Orations or huehuetlahtolli”. In *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*. Munro S. Edmunson, ed. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press. 79-109.
- Taylor, Claire. 2012. “Time Travel and History in Carmen Boullosa’s 1991 *Llanto, novelas imposibles*”. In *Latin American Science Fiction*. M. Elizabeth Ginway and J. Andrew Brown, eds. New York, Palgrave Macmillan. 35-59.
- Valdeón, Roberto A. 2013. “Doña Marina/La Malinche: A Historiographical Approach to the Interpreter/Traitor”. *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies* 25.2: 157-79.
- Zimmermann, Klaus. 2016. “Análisis de aspectos de la pragmática y la retórica en los *Huehuetlahtolli* (en lengua mexicana o náhuatl) de fray Andrés de Olmos y Bernardino de Sahagún”. In *El Colegio de Tlatelolco: Síntesis de historias, lenguas y culturas*. Esther Hernández and Pilar Máynez, eds. Mexico City, Editorial Grupo Destiempos. 150-73.

PICARESQUE ADVENTURES AND
QUIXOTIC WANDERINGS:
CARRETERAS SECUNDARIAS (1996)
BY IGNACIO MARTÍNEZ DE PISÓN*

Aaron M. Kahn

Carreteras secundarias [*Backroads*] (1996) by Ignacio Martínez de Pisón presents the reader with an entertaining coming-of-age story, as fourteen-year-old Felipe and his widower father incessantly move from place to place in an attempt to establish themselves. Due to a combination of bad luck, untrustworthy acquaintances, and a willingness to bend the law in their favour, Felipe and his father inadvertently spiral into more precarious situations as they come into contact with a variety of characters from all walks of life. Taking place in 1974 and 1975, and set against the backdrop of an ailing General Franco and a nation anxious of what might come when the Caudillo finally passes on, Martínez de Pisón creates a tale reminiscent of the early modern picaresque novel with the satirical, and often critical tone it contains, to comment not only on the state of Spain towards the end of the dictatorship, but also on his country's place at the end of the 20th century. By reviving this traditional Spanish genre and adapting it to our contemporary times, the author accentuates the notion that the great Spanish *Transición* to democracy continues; he also inserts references to Miguel de Cervantes's masterpiece, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*,

* A previous version of this study was presented at the seminar series of the Sub-Faculty of Spanish, University of Oxford, on 10 October 2010.

published in two parts in 1605 and 1615. At the same time, the novel presents a didactic story by creating characters such as Felipe and his father to whom most of us can relate.¹ Emphasizing aspects of society such as poverty, the hypocrisy of religion and the church, the importance of outward appearances as opposed to portraying one's genuine self, and the devastating effect of excessive pride on father and son, Felipe focuses on the importance of forming his own identity as the nation itself attempts to forge its own place in the modern, Western world.

1. Synopsis of *Carreteras secundarias*

Fourteen-year-old Felipe and his widower father have spent most of Felipe's life travelling with no apparent aim up and down the east coast of Spain in their only significant possession, a Citroën Tiburón. Their lives consist of constant movement, as reflected in the title, spending time with the father's various girlfriends in seaside holiday flats; however, they can only afford to live in these flats in the winter when the rent is cheap and no one else is around. We learn from the first pages of the novel, which opens in the autumn of 1974, that Felipe's father is willing to lie, steal and bend the law to the point of break-

¹ Social commentary appears in many works by Martínez de Pisón. They portray daily life for Spaniards in different parts of the country during times of upheaval or transition, or *Transición*. His *Dientes de leche* (2008), for example, tells the story of three generations of an Italian family, the patriarch of which travelled to Spain in 1937 to fight for Franco's Nationalists. Over fifty years, the book explores the ups and downs of family life during and after the dictatorship. In *El tiempo de las mujeres* (2003), the youngest of three sisters tries to cope with the death of the father of the family, a despondent mother, and a search for her own identity during the Spanish Transition to democracy. *Enterrar a los muertos* (2005) tells the story of the execution of José Robles Pasos, translator and close friend of American John Dos Passos, who despite working for the Republican government in Valencia was assassinated by Soviet forces in 1936. In 2009 he published an anthology of short stories about the Spanish Civil War entitled *Partes de guerra*.

ing it if he feels that he has been victimized by an individual, by society or indeed for their basic survival. In the opening scene, they hurriedly leave their rented accommodation before the landlords arrive for a proper check-out procedure because Felipe's father has sold all the furniture and pocketed the money.

On the move once again, father and son come into contact with a variety of characters, one of whom, Paquita, described by Felipe as a *hippy*, becomes romantically involved with his father and offers suggestions of quick, easy, and not entirely legal money, while at the same time swiping food for them from her aunt's shop; her justification of these slight breaches of the law is that stealing bread when you are hungry is not a crime. Felipe's father runs a *teléfono clandestino*, for example; he rents houses with a telephone line and charges people, mainly foreigners making long distance calls, to use the phone. As soon as the line gets cut for lack of payments, they move on to the next place with 100% profits.

As they move on from Paquita and continue their travels, Felipe scatters flash back scenes throughout his narration, and the reader learns about Felipe's father's chequered past, coming from a very wealthy family, the tragic death of Cecilia Felipe's mother, and his controversial abandonment of a promising career as a *médico forense*, a medical examiner or coroner. Felipe has never met his father's family and begins to question what he wants in life. As he celebrates his fifteenth birthday, he is becoming more worldly wise. He falls in love with the daughter of an American soldier stationed in Spain, has his first sexual experience (with the girl's sister), and realizes that his father's way of leading his life is more desperate than exciting. The lack of stability regarding home and school, the lack of a solid mother figure, and the father's increasing obsession with getting rich quickly serve as a wake-up call to the young man.

Soon the father's antics catch up with him, and he is arrested for the illegal sale of goods he acquired from the American soldiers as they leave Spain. As the father goes to prison, Felipe is taken in by the father's wealthy family

in Vitoria and experiences a way of life that differs immensely from their nomadic existence. There he comes into contact with order and stability, and value is placed on education and religion. Yet, he still finds no solace in this world, and in fact becomes more disillusioned with wealth and religious faith than when he lived a roaming life of poverty with his father. When his father is released from prison, Felipe opts to live with him instead of returning to live with his uncle, cousins and grandmother.

As they settle in a new town, Felipe gains legitimate employment and realizes the benefits of earning his own money and working hard. He has witnessed his father borrowing money from his mother's family under false pretences, only to lose it all gambling. He has seen him set up a calling service, along with a number of other legitimate and illegal business failures. Now out of prison and forced to sell the Tiburón, Felipe's father spirals downward into depression, knowing that he has wasted his life and that his fifteen-year-old son is supporting him financially. As the police once again knock on their door, Felipe's father, despite knowing he has done nothing wrong, panics and flees in what turns out to be his third failed attempt at suicide in the book. In the hospital afterward, Felipe informs his father that the knock on the door was in fact a notice that his grandmother had died and left them a substantial sum of money. Finally they were able to live on the seaside in the summer of 1975 and enjoy some luxuries in life.

2. Why the picaresque genre?

The categorization of a specific genre called the picaresque has prompted varying degrees of reception, and indeed acceptance. Daniel Eisenberg questions whether or not the picaresque novel really exists, presenting the notion that we cannot define a specific work as being of that genre because no single work contains all the noted characteristics commonly attributed to it, thus making it impossible to determine and making use of the term irrelevant at best and misleading at worst. He also warns

against exactly what I am doing here: “An attempt to study simultaneously the works of the Spanish Golden Age customarily called picaresque and the more recent novels sometimes labeled with the term is to invite further confusion”.² However, as Garrido Ardila confirms, “most critics within Spanish literary studies agree that a picaresque genre did indeed exist”³ and that the following list of characteristics comprise the category:

- 1) Formal realism and a “hence” structure, meaning that although the novels are episodic in nature, the action and themes of one are based on preceding episodes, as opposed to an “and then” structure in which the various episodes are disconnected and could be read in any order without affecting the plot.
- 2) It is narrated in the first person as a form of fictional autobiography.
- 3) The text is addressed directly to the reader.
- 4) The protagonist, or *pícaro*, tells his or her life story as an explanation for their precarious situation.
- 5) While humorous in nature, it is also very satirical and socially critical.
- 6) The general message of the narration and tone is ironic.
- 7) The narrator and protagonist is a *pícaro* who is
 - i. Born into a family of low birth, often converted (or new) Christians
 - ii. Experiences a “progressive psychological change”
 - iii. Comes from and lives at the social margins, living by his or her wits
 - iv. Is willing to break the law in order to survive
 - v. Is a “cunning trickster who deceives others”.⁴

While a precise list that appears in multiple works identified as picaresque is not entirely necessary, as literary genres evolve and mutate according to the needs of the

² Eisenberg 1979, 204.

³ Garrido Ardila, 2015, 14.

⁴ Garrido Ardila 2015, 14-15. While these are the common attributes of the picaresque novel, I have extrapolated and paraphrased this concise and very useful list from Garrido Ardila as the basis of my analysis.

author, one overarching field of shared characteristics emerges.⁵

This study is not intended to define such a genre. Of rather more importance here is the meaning of the genre in our present times, its apparent adaptation in *Carreteras secundarias* and the author's intent in presenting us with this story. Ignacio Martínez de Pisón's novel contains many of the characteristics that we associate with the picaresque genre: the protagonist is a young boy who experiences a series of episodes while constantly moving from place to place. He witnesses various hypocrisies in everyday life and in the Roman Catholic Church which make him disillusioned at the age of fourteen and fifteen. His father, another *pícaro* character in the story, perpetuates their problems as his successive business ventures, both the legal and illegal, fail miserably. While this occurs, Felipe recognizes the futility of emulating his father's ways and steers away from the typecast of *pícaro*, while as his father plunges further into it.

The most important question to consider is why the picaresque genre. Like its Early Modern predecessors, *Carreteras secundarias* serves the function of telling an entertaining story, while simultaneously criticizing certain institutions and societal norms by using humorous situations and satire, particularly in times of national crisis.⁶ In the 16th and 17th centuries, picaresque novels poked fun, so to speak, at religious matters (the Inquisition, the selling of indulgences, the obsession with *limpieza de sangre*),⁷ social status and class (the Escudero),

⁵ Ellis comments on the evolution of the picaresque as a literary genre and how "rather than having a constant set of principles to comply with, writers [of the picaresque] sought for their work to take a discontinuous and protean form, finding a careful balance between taking advantage of an array of antecedent sources and striving to offer its reader something new". Ellis 2022, 8.

⁶ See Ellis 2022, Chapter II: "The Picaresque in an Age of Corruption and Contradiction"; see also Cros 2001.

⁷ The *limpieza de sangre*, or cleanliness of blood, statutes dictated that only people of pure Christian blood, with no Jewish or

the state of affairs that create the *pícaro* (poverty, hunger), and the affairs of state that often occur in the background (empire, dictatorship, foreign wars). In *Carreteras secundarias*, the Spain of 1974 and 1975 when the story takes place, and in some regards the Spain of 1996 when the novel was written, address many of these same issues through the eyes of the young protagonist. By using as a point of analytical comparison the most well-known picaresque novel in the canon, the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), and secondarily *Don Quixote*, we can see numerous parallels in characters and characteristics that can aid us in an interpretation of *Carreteras secundarias*.⁸

3. Felipe, His Father and Man in Motion

As the traditional *pícaro* wanders from place to place, he finds his food and lodgings by serving an *amo*, or master, typically an adult male who incarnates the different characteristics and social types that are the subject of the work's satire. As Alexander Samson observes, "[Lazarillo] normalises the most grotesque abuses and casts the monstrous as quotidian normality".⁹ In Tratado III of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the protagonist comes into the service of a new *amo*, the *Escudero*.¹⁰ This unnamed *hidalgo*, represents

Muslim heritage, could hold certain offices or be considered 'true' Spaniards. Those with enough wealth to purchase this proof were proud to display this fact; the statutes were the target of much social criticism and contributed to corruption and perceptions of it.

⁸ The critical relationship between *Don Quixote* and the picaresque genre has been mixed, with some scholars identifying Cervantes's great novel as picaresque (either as an example or parody of it); others analyse picaresque aspects of the work and its characters while simultaneously asserting that the novel itself is not picaresque. This point is not the focus of this chapter, and there are too many works on this subject to list here; however, as a point of departure, see Close 2006, Graf 2015, Pérez de León 2023, Quint 2003 and Williamson 2012.

⁹ Samson 2015, 30.

¹⁰ According to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española, an *escudero* is "hombre que por su sangre o parentesco

the sin of pride, or false pride; the protagonist has been nearly starved to death serving a priest when he meets the Escudero, and the manner in which he carries himself and the fine clothing he wears instils hope in young Lázaro that he might be treated well and given food regularly. On the threshold of his house, the man insists on absolute cleanliness and care with his cloak.¹¹ However, as he enters the man's house for the first time, he realizes that he in fact has nothing. To survive, the Escudero relies on his image and society's impression of him, which he deems more important than actually making his way in the world.

While Felipe is the narrator and the story of the novel is told from his perspective, his father is perhaps the most intriguing character when it comes to a picaresque reading of *Carreteras secundarias*; in fact, his father displays more traits of the *pícaro* than Felipe and is arguably the true protagonist of the novel. His father not only provides parallels with the Escudero, but his trials and tribulations assist Felipe in the formation of his own identity. I argue that Felipe's father in fact combines the roles of the *pícaro* and the *amo* of the picaresque novel, further commenting on the importance that Spanish society places on honour

perteneía a un determinado estamento de la nobleza" ["man who by blood or parentage belonged to a certain class of the nobility"]. It is derived from *escudo*, or coat of arms. All translations from Spanish in this chapter have been done by the author.

¹¹ "Desque fuimos entrados, quita de sobra sí su capa, y, preguntando si tenía las manos limpias, la sacudimos y doblamos, y, muy limpiamente soplando un poyo que allí estaba, la puso en él". *Lazarillo de Tormes* 2021, 74: "Upon entering his house, he took off his cloak, and, asking if I had clean hands, we folded it and placed it cleanly on a wooden stool that was that, and he put the cloak on it". According to Rico, "la insistencia en la pulcritud por parte del escudero puede entenderse como una alusión irónica a toda una clase social obsesionada por la limpieza de sangre". *Lazarillo* 2021, 74-75, n. 14: "The insistence on tidiness by the *escudero* can be understood as an ironic allusion to a whole social class obsessed with *limpieza de sangre* [cleanliness of blood]".

and dignity over moral substance and physical sustenance. Like most boys at the age of fourteen, Felipe becomes easily annoyed, and at times embarrassed, by his father. Early in the novel he maintains that although he had a good relationship with him when he was younger, he felt that he was nothing like his father. He does not understand his father's behaviour, nor does he comprehend why his father cannot simply settle down with a job and place to live.¹²

Just as the Escudero in the 16th-century novel, Felipe's father has next to nothing. He is poverty stricken, as he is estranged from his wealthy family. He has no work and no permanent abode, but when he meets people for the first time their impression is similar to that of Lázaro when he sees his new *amo*. Felipe's father is always clean-shaven with well-groomed hair, he wears a suit and a silk tie, and they travel around in his most prized, and really his only, possession: a Citroen Tiburon, which adds to the image. The only way to get respect and attention is to appear rich, even if he does not have enough money to eat and feed his son. Felipe tells us that "Mi padre siempre había sido de esas personas que habrían rechazado por indigno cualquier trabajo manual".¹³ He would rather try to make money in an illegal manner, while still saving face, than to lose his pride by having people watch him doing manual work.

This characterisation of Felipe's father is indicative of a wider Spanish cultural importance placed on pride that came into conflict with Spain's aspirations of joining the modern world in the aftermath of military dictatorship, the last remaining authoritarian government in Western Europe. Felipe's father creates two distinct versions of himself in a desperate attempt to hide his misfortune, his lack of means, his itinerate lifestyle, the shame he brought

¹² Martínez de Pisón 1996, 14: "Éramos diferentes y nunca podríamos llegar a entendernos" ["We were different from each other and we would never be able to understand each other"].

¹³ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 84: "My father had always been one of those people who would reject any form of manual labour as undignified".

upon himself that expelled him from his profession and earned him the scorn of and estrangement from his conservative, upper middle-class family, and later his successive failures at both legitimate business ventures and criminal escapades. His son tells the reader directly that his father is a loser, but to everyone else, “[l]e gustaba dar la sensación de ser un hombre con recursos, alguien capaz de manejar todas las situaciones”.¹⁴

The picaresque genre and the character of the *Picaro* relied on this double manifestation of self as a survival mechanism. Lázaro regularly tells the reader that his actions, whether it be taking food from his master or begging for food from neighbours, are necessary to preserve his life. Frankly, he *must* be duplicitous to continue living; when we compare his exploits to the Escudero, for example, we see that the *amo* in this episode mirrors Felipe’s father in CS in that his rock-solid sense of pride prevents him from reaching his goals of success and riches. Acín states that:

[la] falsa dignidad sirve de excusa al padre en *Carreteras secundarias* [...] para justificar que su vida se reduzca a un simple vivir del cuento. Una dignidad, a veces, con la pátina de un orgullo de hojalata, que impide, incluso, la conexión con la familia, por más que esa ofuscación obligue a malvivir, como le sucede al padre de Felipe.¹⁵

[False dignity serves as an excuse for the father in *Carreteras secundarias* [...] to justify the fact that his life has been reduced to living off his wits. A sense of dignity, at times, with a thin veneer that even prevents any connection with his family, no matter how this obfuscation results in poor living, as happens to Felipe’s father.]

¹⁴ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 44: “He liked to give the impression that he was a man of means, someone capable of handling any situation that presented itself”.

¹⁵ Acín 2012, xxxii.

However, I suggest that the father's false pride, which, according to Penas, is represented by the Tiburón,¹⁶ the silk suit, the glossy exterior of a man of wealth and ambition, is a product of "[a] nation whose historic poverty had led it to build an entire value system around non-materialistic virtues – dignity, austerity and sobriety".¹⁷ In the case of Felipe's father, the moment that his dignity is in peril, the moment that his façade might be breached or that he is potentially in real legal trouble, they get back on the *carreteras secundarias* and escape.¹⁸

One of the principal characteristics of Felipe's life with his father is the constant movement, which might have appeared exciting to Felipe as a young boy, but as he narrates this year of his life, he emphasizes the profoundly negative effect that the lack of stability has on him. Felipe is never able to establish roots, to make friendships that could last a lifetime or to create family memories. He opens Chapter 4 with a telling indictment on his father's choices:

En eso consistía nuestra vida, en seguir. Seguíamos y seguíamos hacia adelante, casi sin detenernos, y con nosotros seguían nuestro coche y nuestro escaso equipaje. A mí a veces me daba la impresión de que no teníamos pasado, o de que lo teníamos pero no a nuestro lado sino detrás, siempre detrás.¹⁹

¹⁶ Penas 2009, 127.

¹⁷ Hooper 2006, 53.

¹⁸ In the opening scene of the book, as described in the synopsis, Felipe's father hastily vacates a rental property before the landlord realizes that he has sold all the furniture and kept the cash for himself. In *Lazarillo de Tormes*, when the Escudero is confronted to pay the debts he owes, Lázaro tells us: "Y él les dio muy buena respuesta; que saldría a la plaza a trocar una pieza de a dos y que a la tarde volviesen: mas su salida fue sin vuelta". *Lazarillo de Tormes* 2021, 106: ["And he gave them a very good answer: he would go out to the town square to get change for two bits and that they should return that afternoon: but his exit was without a return"].

¹⁹ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 147.

[That is what our life consisted of, in continuing on. We continued and we continued forward, almost without stopping, and with us came along our car and our meagre belongings. Sometimes I had the impression that we had no past, or that we had a past, but not next to us, rather behind us, always behind us.]

Addressing us, the readers, directly, he pre-empts any scoffs of laughter at this apparent hyperbole by asking us if we think it is nonsense to say that most people's past is next to them and not behind them. He dares us to lift our head and focus our gaze on the objects in our own living rooms, closets and attics; he asks us to pause and realise that we can identify the origin of every framed picture, every knick-knack, every article of clothing, every toy and every possession, prized and despised alike. This first paragraph of the second half of the novel gives us a real connection with Felipe while also challenging us to judge them. Everyone's identity is an amalgamation of what has come before them, taking many forms, but Felipe tries to make us understand that by having no permanence, no fixed home, no material possessions, no friends and no family, he also has no discernible identity, and thus no past.

In addition to any crisis of identity that such constant movement can ignite, there is also a natural sense of distrust from society on people who are "just passing through". It is precisely this lack of past, in both our contemporary times and in Early Modern Spain, that drew the suspicion of the more permanent residents. In the mid 16th century – when *Lazarillo* was emerging in print –

The most immediate historical context for understanding *Lazarillo*, in this sense as engaged literature, was the unprecedented growth of vagrancy, a European-wide problem of masterless men, women and children, unattached and unsituated, escaping the surveillance of the patriarchal household, a turn to the representation of low-life settings. This unprecedented social change led to significant changes in the way poverty was seen and understood. It bridges the crossroads that saw on the one hand the link between poverty and sin breaking down but equally on the

other hand an attack on the notion of poverty as dignifying, Christological. Poor laws and legislation swept Europe in the sixteenth century in response to urbanisation, population growth and inflationary pressures on wages.²⁰

As an adolescent, Lázaro receives some pity, particularly from women, for his destitute state in life, but Felipe's father goes to great lengths to conceal his poverty. In the capitalist, vehemently anti-communist ethos of Franco's Spain, a poor Spaniard is a failed Spaniard, particularly in the case of a man who squanders his opportunities because of his own pride. Felipe, who discovers in one of the many places in which they lay their heads a copy of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, finds kindred spirits in *the Knight of the Doleful Countenance* and his trusty squire:

También recorriamos España, también mi padre creía ser lo que no era, también él trataba de impresionar a una mujer.... Nuestra historia era la de un largo error, una torpeza, una historia tan antigua como la de don Quijote y Sancho. Y lo único que estaba claro era que estábamos solos, como esos dos hombres. Que habíamos empezado nuestro viaje solos y que probablemente así lo terminaríamos.²¹

[We also wandered around Spain, my father also believed himself to be something that he wasn't, he also tried to impress women.... Our story was one of one long error, a blunder, a story as old as that of Don Quixote and Sancho. And the only thing that was clear was that we were alone, like those two men. That we had begun our journey along and that we would probably end it alone.]

Far from the Christ-like vision of the poor travelling the country seeking charity, and perhaps even a form of absolution, Felipe emphasizes the pathetic truth of their situation. His father tries to blame society for the poor distribution of wealth, but Felipe puts the blame squarely on his father.

²⁰ Samson 2015, 28.

²¹ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 148.

The character of Felipe is labelled by Penas as a *Homo Viator*,²² wandering man or man as a wayfarer, and his search for identity is presented as a journey that is paralleled with his physical journey up and down the Mediterranean coast of Spain, and then eventually to Vitoria, and back to Zaragoza. However, as his father's journey becomes more and more aimless, Felipe's destination becomes increasingly clearer. Whereas his father suffers from an almost Quixotic venture in which his view of the world and his judgement become clouded, Felipe comes to the realization that he is more like his father than he had ever thought, or wanted to be; yet he can embark on his own path and does not need to emulate his father. He understands the difference between right and wrong, and he knows how to treat people and how not to treat people, but he has thus far been a victim of his father's pride.

4. Anticlericalism

The life-long journey that Felipe has undertaken with his father comes to sudden halt when his father is arrested. There is a sense of angst in Felipe, simultaneously exhibiting relief at being forced to stay in one place and resigning himself to his fate.²³ As his father is put behind bars, Felipe goes to stay with his father's wealthy family in Vitoria, and here he confronts his father's demons, while also enduring the presence of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church enjoys only a small presence in *Carrete-*

²² Penas 2009, 119; Penas makes no reference here to Gabriel Marcel's influential book *Homo viator: prolégomènes à une métaphysique de l'espérance* (1944) [*Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*], which espouses a philosophy concerning the problems that humans face urgently and that threaten our physical and spiritual existence. This chapter will not venture into this line of analysis.

²³ "En aquel momento tenía la sensación de haber llegado al final de un largo viaje y me parecía que todo eso estaba escrito en nuestro destino desde hacía mucho tiempo." Martínez de Pisón 1996, 193: ["In that moment I had the sensation of having arrived at the end of a long journey and it seemed that all of this had been written as part of our destiny for a long time"].

ras secundarias, indicative of the declining role of religion in everyday Spanish life, but representations of the Church that are satirical and at times brutally critical, emerge. A brief mention of Catholicism appears in reference to one of his father's girlfriends, Paquita, when Felipe describes her as a "special Catholic", meaning one with her own opinions. However, when Felipe is living with his Uncle Jorge he sees a very different presence of the religion.

In contrast to his view of religion through Paquita's questioning eyes, Felipe experiences the conservative orthodoxy of Catholicism, and immediately sees through the dogmatic veneer straight to vivid hypocrisy. Serving as a type of spiritual advisor to the family is Father Apellániz, who, according to Felipe, has attached himself to the family because the frequent meals he receives from them. He describes these relatives as "católicos de los de misa diaria y bendecir la mesa",²⁴ which apparently are archaic customs for the young man. At the table he witnesses the serving of dinner in a hierarchical manner, thus relating religious belief with the rigid social hierarchy of Spain, of which Felipe and his father have become the antithesis.

Felipe's feelings towards the priest and the artificial perception of faith is one of indignation. He immediately distrusts the priest and reveals a character within him that contributes to the negative portrayal of the church. Felipe has joined the church choir along with other boys and girls his age, and the star soloist was his cousin Zariquiegui. Felipe voices his thoughts on Apellániz:

La vida sería bella para él, que tenía la sopa asegurada en casa de mi abuela y estaba siempre rodeado de chicos y chicas que sonreían como él.

Al padre Apellániz le gustaba tocar a los chicos y a las chicas de su coro. Los cogía por los hombros y, mientras les preguntaba cosas sobre sus costumbres íntimas o su atracción por el otro sexo, no paraba de acariciarles el cuello. Lo hacía más con los chicos que con

²⁴ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 200: "The type of Catholics who go to mass every day and who bless the table before eating".

las chicas y más con Zariquiegui que con el resto de los chicos. Zariquiegui era el solista, el que mejor cantaba, y el padre Apellániz lo agarraba por los hombros y se lo llevaba a una esquina, y su mano subía y bajaba por el cuello de Zariquiegui, al principio suavemente, luego con más brío, y yo pensaba que ese cura era un cerdo y que ésa era su manera de pelársela: en vez de tocarse la polla le tocaba el cuello a Zariquiegui.

Creo haberos dicho que a mí los curas siempre me han dado un poco de miedo. Con sus sotanas negras hasta el suelo, con esas historias suyas sobre el infierno y el pecado, con ese aspecto que tienen de pervertidos y de pajeros. Sí, también yo era un pajero. Pero yo no era sacerdote. Yo no iba por ahí soltando sermones sobre la salvación del alma o la resurrección de los muertos. Yo tenía derecho a ser un guarro y un pajero y todo lo que quisiera, y el padre Apellániz no, ¿me explico?²⁵

[Life must be great for him, with his meals guaranteed at my grandmother's house and always being surrounded by boys and girls who smiled just like he did.

Father Apellániz liked to touch the boys and girls of his choir. He took them by the shoulders and, while he asked them intimate things about their personal lives or about their attraction to the opposite sex, he did not stop caressing their necks. He did it more with the boys than with the girls and more with Zariquiegui than with the rest of the boys. Zariquiegui was the soloist, the best singer, and Father Apellániz would grab him by the shoulders and lead him to a corner, and his hand would go up and down Zariquiegui's neck, slowly at first, then with more exuberance, and I thought that this priest was a pig and that that was his way of wanking; instead of touching Zariquiegui's cock he rubbed his neck.

I think I've told you that priests have always scared me a bit. With their black cassocks going all the way to the floor, with their stories of hell and sin, with that look they have of being perverts and wankers. Yes, I also have a wank. But I'm not a priest. I don't go

²⁵ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 205.

around spouting sermons about salvation of the soul or resurrection of the dead. I had a right to be dirty-minded and a wanker and anything that I wanted to be, and Father Apellániz did not. Have I explained myself clearly?]

Martínez de Pisón depicts a smug, smarmy character for the priest, projecting through the narrator the suspicion and distaste that many associate with the clergy. Father Apellániz displays a sexual appetite in the presence of children, as the novelist pounces upon the stereotypes of the predatory man of the cloth who takes advantage of his position of respect and authority. In addition, Felipe tells us that many of the facts of his father's life that he recounts to us were made known to him by Apellániz²⁶; while Felipe's father has his faults, there is nothing to indicate that he is anything other than the product of his environment. Surely, if he had wanted Felipe to know the secrets of his past, he would have disclosed them to his son himself. Fortunately, this does not sway Felipe against his father, but rather draws him closer to him.

In the picaresque genre, which according to Jones has its roots, in part, in the preoccupation of the *conversos* living in such an intolerant country, the anticlericalism present contributed to the creation of religious types: the fat priest who allows Lazarillo to starve, the seller of indulgences, which even anti-Lutheran Catholics had come to question, the Escudero and his pride. The picaresque genre was a response to the didactic ideals of the Counterreformation.²⁷ Erasmian humanists in Spain created a literature between 1530 and 1560 "that within a more or less realistic social framework satirized the moral and religious hypocrisy of the times. It is out of this climate of a social satire born of the urge to religious reform that *Lazarillo de Tormes* emerged in 1554"²⁸

In the 20th century, the Roman Catholic Church affiliated itself with the Franco regime, giving its open support

²⁶ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 205.

²⁷ Jones 1974, 192.

²⁸ Parker 1967, 20.

to the Nationalist side during the Civil War; the Vatican was the first nation to recognize the Franco government as legitimate, and then signed a Concordat with him in 1953, granting him the ancient monarchical right to nominate bishops within the Spanish Church. Franco's Spain was a Catholic nation, and the early success of the dictatorship is due in part to the Church's support. However, the Church was also instrumental in the move towards liberal democracy. The period of the pontificates of St John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul I, from 1958 to 1978, was perhaps the most liberal and progressive era in the institution's history. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) introduced the greatest change in Catholic doctrine since the Council of Trent (ironically in the period of time of the publication of *Lazrillo de Tormes*), and this alteration leaned towards bringing the Church out of the 16th century and into the 20th.

By the time of Vatican II dictatorial rule, at least in Western Europe, had become inconsistent with Church doctrine, and the Spanish bishops attending the council were ostracized. John XXIII had issued encyclicals "defending social justice, civil rights, and political pluralism, [which] represented a frontal attack upon the Francoist regime".²⁹ In the final years of Franco's life, there were factions in the Church that sought absolution for their collective historical sins:

In September 1971, a joint assembly of bishops and priests formally repudiated the old underpinnings of the crusade when it issued a historical letter preaching reconciliation and begging for the forgiveness of the Spanish people for its partisanship in the Civil War. Shortly afterwards, in January 1973, bishops voted three to one in favour of formal separation from the state and the surrender of all their political prerogatives.³⁰

The Church, or blocs within it, had confirmed its role as a centre of opposition to the regime. Within Spain, special

²⁹ Romero Salvadó 1999, 154; see also Butler 1981.

³⁰ Romero Salvadó 1999, 154.

prisons were established for priests who were caught campaigning against Franco's regime from the pulpit, and it was this type of mentality that spread to the people. Just as the Church and the Inquisition in the sixteenth century were associated with the empire, *limpieza de sangre* and stringent Counter-Reformationism, the Catholic establishment within Spain had contributed to keeping Spain in the darkness of the Franco dictatorship. When Franco died in 1975, he had become an international pariah in the democratic West.³¹

In *Carreteras secundarias*, the family of Felipe's uncle Jorge and his grandmother represent the old conservative institutions of capitalism and religion at the heart of the Franco regime. Felipe and his father's wayward motions and picaresque activity counteract the status quo and the struggle to maintain the old ways in the face of imminent social and political upheaval. Father Apellániz embodies the hypocrisy of the church that so many condemn for its complicity in the perpetuation of the brutal military government.³²

Unlike the typical *pícaro*, however, Felipe's father does not come from a shameful or humble background, as his family are quite wealthy, but Felipe and his father have no money. For most of the novel the wealthy extended family is an abstract concept that only appears in vague references from Felipe. Felipe's father claims that his actions are intended to improve their situation, but like the *pícaro* he often fails. He concocts various schemes in order to earn some money and strike it rich, but each venture falls short of his intended goal. A common phrase for

³¹ Tremlett reminds us that the only world leader who attended Franco's funeral was Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, who in the 1990s would successfully fight against an extradition attempt to Spain. Tremlett 2007, 73.

³² There is a wealth of academic studies on the role and position of the Catholic Church in Francisco Franco's dictatorship; while there are too many to provide an exhaustive list, the following sources provide a good basis for this line of study: Domínguez Arribas 2020, Faber 2021, Lannon 1987, Raguer 2001 and Raguer 2012.

Felipe to hear is “el año que viene viviremos en una gran ciudad”.³³ The only way in which Felipe and his father can stop moving is, ironically, when his father is arrested for illegally selling cars that he obtained from the American soldiers as they were departing Spain for their next assignment. We learn that Felipe and his father have both fallen victim to this concept of pride and social honour. The father’s apparent expulsion from his family because of his actions surrounding the death of Cecilia, Felipe’s mother, and Felipe having to live an unstable life, emphasize the emptiness of their pursuits. This forms part of the satire of the story, which in the same vein as the picaresque novel, reflects the larger context of Spain’s social and political state.

The years 1974 and 1975 represent an obviously significant alteration in Spain, and even in the novel the characters, who occasionally refer to the aged and infirmed Francisco Franco, recognize the historical importance of the moment. The anxiety that people felt about what would occur when the Caudillo dies – would there be a new dictator, would there be violence, would there be another Civil War – comes through. The social intolerance that has resulted in Felipe’s father’s isolation from his family is indicative of a mindset of the past and coincides with the onset of a new political and social future. Representing this new generation is Felipe himself, who realises the futility of his father’s feud with his family. For Felipe, pride, riches, and a good family name are not as important as being with the family he loves. When he visits his father in prison, he sees a broken man. He is a man who has sunk even lower than he had been before.

Felipe, on the other hand, has gained a new sense of self and of love for his father. He comments, “ahora era como si yo fuera el adulto y mi padre el niño”.³⁴ Here, towards the end of the novel, a more mature Felipe recog-

³³ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 73: “Next year we’ll live in a big city”.

³⁴ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 209: “Now it’s like I was the adult and my father the child”.

nizes that he is more like his father than he had ever imagined, or maybe even wanted to be:

Yo entonces me sentía muy fuerte. Estaba seguro de que superaría todos los obstáculos que se me presentaran y de que siempre saldría adelante. Había cambiado. No era el mismo que un año antes y lo sabía. También mi padre había cambiado, sólo que su cambio había sido opuesto al mío. Era como si mi padre hubiera ido dejando por el camino grandes trozos de sí mismo y como si yo los hubiera recogido e incorporado a mi vida y forma de ser.³⁵

[At that point I felt very strong. I was sure that I would overcome all the obstacles that presented themselves to me and that I would always come out a step ahead. I had changed. I was not the same as I was a year earlier, and I knew it. My father had also changed, only that his change had been the opposite to mine. It was as if my father had been leaving large chunks of himself behind on the road and as if I had been gathering them up and incorporating them in my life and my form of being.]

In addition, the novel was printed in 1996, which also represented another significant political moment in the history of Spanish democracy. After fourteen years in power, the Socialist government led by Felipe González was ousted in favour of the right-wing Partido Popular [People's Party], which was founded as the Alianza Popular [The People's Alliance] by Manuel Fraga, Minister for Information and Tourism under Franco between 1962 and 1969. Even though Franco had been dead for over twenty years, the brutal preservation of his regime while still alive very much lived on in collective memory; the attempted coup to overthrow the government on 23 February 1981 led by Civil Guard Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero, although failing, exacerbated people's anxiety. The democratic framework of the Constitution of 1978, ratified by popular referendum, survived the Transition and there was no return to the days of the Civil War in the

³⁵ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 244.

end; however, one can imagine the tension that a fifteen-year old boy might have felt in 1975, as well as what Spaniards might have felt watching the elections of 1996 unfold.³⁶ Another decade would pass until this retrospective and its emphasis on the recuperation of historical memory would achieve prominence in the public sphere, but speed with which the movement gained traction indicates that it was indeed bubbling just below the surface.

The Transition did not solve all problems in Spain – far from it. In fact, many of the political and social challenges that democracy is meant to resolve seemed to be swept under the carpet. One of the most prominent aspects of the Transition is the Amnesty Law of 1977; promulgated by students, trade unions and activists of all sorts as a means of liberating political prisoners, paving a way for the return of exiled compatriots and working towards the enfranchisement of the entire political spectrum, the law

³⁶ “Sleazy bureaucrats. Crooked bankers. Death squads run with connivance of the authorities. And sections of the intelligence service plotting against the government. Spain, by the middle of 1995, was starting to look alarmingly like one of the less stable Latin American republics”. Hooper 2006, 67. Alonso reminds us that “los novelistas que empiezan a publicar en la década de 1990 pertenecen por edad a la generación de españoles nacidos a partir de 1960 [the precise year of Martínez de Pisón’s birth]. Un dato importante es que son aún niños o adolescentes cuando muere Franco y sólo [sic] conocen la dictadura en sus postrimerías, de manera que cuando empiezan a escribir, y eso se nota en sus novelas, no soportan las presiones ideológicas de las generaciones anteriores y hacen un tipo de novela mucho más abierta a la fabulación, incluso cuando evocan su propia memoria”. Alonso 2003, 50: “the novelists who begin to publish in the decade of the 1990s belong, by their age, to the generation of Spaniards born from the year 1960 [the precise year of Martínez de Pisón’s birth]. On important fact is that they are still children or adolescents when Franco dies and they only know the dictatorship in its final days, so that when they begin to write, and this is seen in their novels, they do not put up with the ideological pressure of previous generations and they create a type of novel that is much more open to invention, including when they evoke their own memories”.

had unintended consequences. It also granted immunity for any institution or individual whose actions in support of the dictatorship or in propping up the Franco's brutal order of things could be deemed criminal. The legislation, colloquially referred to as the *pacto de olvido*, or pact of forgetting, outlawed any prosecution or legal proceedings against institutions or individuals for actions committed during the Civil War or the Franco regime. However, no statute or decree can regulate people's memories, and the decades following Franco's death and the miraculously swift conversion from autocracy to democracy were not without their challenges.³⁷

As *Carreteras secundarias* comes to a close, Felipe's father undergoes a reinvention of character, transitioning himself from picaro and neglectful father to a man who can enjoy some luxury in life. In the depths of his despair, he must sell the Tiburón. With the car out of the picture, there is no more false pride, and the *escudero* type that we saw earlier in the novel has transformed, and perhaps reverted, to his genuine self. His constant journey appears to have ended as in the final paragraph of the story Felipe and his father have finally been able to rent an apartment on the beach in the summer. Felipe's final thoughts portray a tranquil relief that things could turn out just fine: "Yo me aburrí mucho aquel verano pero puedo decir que al menos mi padre fue feliz. Bastante feliz".³⁸

Conclusion

In writing *Carreteras secundarias*, Ignacio Martínez de Pisón ventures into Spain's literary past and fashions a modern-day picaresque novel. Felipe offers us his perspectives on the vices and social issues of Spain, many of

³⁷ Rieff (2017) explores the validity of collective or historical memory, which he claims can be just as politicised as the historical atrocities that it is intended to confront. See particularly Chapter Three "What is Collective Memory Actually Good For" and Chapter Four "The Victory of Memory over History".

³⁸ Martínez de Pisón 1996, 255: "I was really bored that summer, but I can say that at least my father was happy. Pretty happy".

which were just as prevalent in the Spanish Golden Age, as he makes the transition from youth to maturity, as Spain is about to undergo its own drastic changes. By illustrating the hypocrisy of placing importance on external appearance, pride (and false pride), and social status, mainly through his depiction of his father, he demonstrates that he is aware of the emptiness and futility of adhering to these values. His father represents a type of person in society who, like the unnamed Escudero in *Lazarillo de Tormes*, satirizes the circumstances that might force someone into the itinerate way of life; interestingly, Felipe's father is the only character in the novel whose first name we never know. More importantly, just as with the *pícaros* of old, he displays the legal and social consequences one could face by engaging in picaresque activities. In addition, we see a depiction of the Roman Catholic Church, which although it played a role in the decline of dictatorial rule in Spain it has historically been affiliated with the perpetuation of oligarchy and repression. The domination of Father Apellániz over the children and then spiritually over the family of Felipe's grandmother represents the old church and the old conservative values of a Spain that is attempting to redefine its own identity while Felipe tries to establish his.

This new picaresque novel gives the reader a happy ending. While this seems to be an example of *Deus ex Machina*, as everything comes together neatly and happily in the end, perhaps Martínez de Pisón intended this to reflect the fact that Spain had indeed become a democracy, and that now the nation is attempting to deal with the forgetting that made the transition possible. In direct parallel with the picaresque novels of Early Modern Spain, *Carreteras secundarias* provides us with a commentary on Spanish society, politics and religion through the experiences of an adolescent boy whose journey through change parallel those of his country.

Works Cited

- Acín, Ramón. 1995. "Problemas de identidad, mentira, y crueldad en la narrativa de Igancio Martínez de Pisón". In *La novela española actual: autores y tendencias*. Alfonso de Toro and Dieter Ingenschay, eds. Kassel, Reichenberger. 125-53.
- . 2012. "De biografía y creación." In Ignacio Martínez de Pisón. *Carreteras secundarias*. R. Acín, ed. Zaragoza, Larumbe. ix-lxxvi.
- Alonso, Santos. 2003. *La novela española en el fin de siglo (1975-2000)*. Madrid, Marenostrum.
- Butler, Christopher. 1981. *The Theology of Vatican II*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Close, Anthony. 2006. "The Legacy of *Don Quijote* and the Picaresque Novel". In *The Cambridge Companion to the Spanish Novel from 1600 to the Present*. Harriet Turner and Adelaida López de Martínez, eds. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 15-30.
- Cros, Edmond. 2001. "La noción de la novela picaresca como género desde la perspectiva sociocrítica". *Edad de Oro* 20: 85-94.
- Domínguez Arribas, Javier. 2020. "Francoist Antisemitic Propaganda". In *Spain, the Second World War, and the Holocaust*. Sara J. Brenneis and Gina Herrmann, eds. Toronto, University of Toronto Press. 329-52.
- Eisenberg, Daniel. 1979. "Does the Picaresque Novel Exist?" *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 26: 203-19.
- Ellis, Sarah Louise, 2022. "From Text to Trait: The (Re-) Emergence of the Picaresque at Society's Crossroads. An Archival Approach to Spanish Crises Past and Present". MA by Research thesis. University of Leeds.
- Faber, Sebastiaan. 2021. *Exhuming Franco: Spain's Second Transition*. Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press.
- Garrido Ardila, J. 2015. "Origins and Definition of the Picaresque Genre." In *The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature: From the Sixteenth Century to the Neopicaresque*. J. Garrido Ardila, ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1-23.

- Graf, E. C. 2015. "The Economy of Asses in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*: Metalepsis, Miscegenation, and Commerce in Cervantes's Picaresque". *eHumanista/Cervantes* 4: 255-88.
- Hooper, John. 2006. *The New Spaniards*. London, Penguin.
- Jones, R. O. 1974. *Historia de la literatura española: Siglo de Oro: prosa y poesía*. Barcelona, Ariel.
- Lannon, Frances. 1987. *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain 1875-1975*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lazarillo de Tormes*. 2021. Francisco Rico, ed. Madrid, Cátedra.
- Martínez de Pisón, Ignacio. 1996. *Carreteras secundarias*. Barcelona, Anagrama.
- . 2003. *El tiempo de las mujeres*. Madrid, Espasa-Calpe.
- . 2005. *Enterrar a los muertos*. Barcelona, Seix Barral.
- . 2008. *Dientes de leche*. Barcelona, Seix Barral.
- . 2009. *Partes de guerra*. Madrid, RBA Libros.
- Parker, A. A. 1967. *Literature and the Delinquent: The Picaresque Novel in Spain and Europe (1599-1753)*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP.
- Penas, Ermitas. 2009. "La vigencia de la novela de aprendizaje: un análisis de *Carreteras secundarias*, de Martínez de Pisón y *El viento de la luna*, de Muñoz Molina". *Anales de literatura española* 21: 117-41.
- Pérez de León. 2023. "Miguel de Cervantes and the Picaresque". In *A Companion to the Spanish Picaresque Novel*. Edward H. Friedman, ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 103-116.
- Quint, David. 2003. *Cervantes Novel of Modern Times: a New Reading of Don Quijote*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Raguer, Hilari. 2001. *La pólvora y el incienso. La Iglesia y la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939)*. Barcelona, Península.
- . 2012. "Nacionalcatolicismo". In *El combate por la historia. La República, La Guerra Civil, El Franquismo*. Ángel Viñas, ed. Barcelona, Pasado y Presente. 547-63.

- Rico, Francisco. 2021. Introduction to *Lazarillo de Tormes*. In *Lazarillo de Tormes*. 2021. 13-139.
- Rieff, David. 2017. In *Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Romero Salvadó, Francisco J. 1999. *Twentieth-Century Spain: Politics and Society in Spain, 1898-1998*. London, Palgrave.
- Samson, A. 2015. "Lazarillo de Tormes and the Dream of a World Without Poverty." In *The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature: From the Sixteenth Century to the Neopicaresque*. J. Garrido Ardila, ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 24-39.
- Tremlett, Giles. 2007. *Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through a Country's Hidden Past*. London, Faber and Faber.
- Wheeler, Duncan. 2020. *Following Franco: Spanish culture and politics in transition, 1962-92*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Williamson, Edwin. 2012. "Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616): *Don Quixote*: Romance and Picaresque". In *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*. Michael Bell, ed. Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press. 17-35.

Notes on editors and contributors

MARK THORNTON BURNETT is Professor of Renaissance Studies at Queen's University Belfast. He is the author of *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience* (Macmillan, 1997), *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture* (Palgrave, 2002), *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace* (Palgrave, 2007; 2nd ed. 2012), *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and *'Hamlet' and World Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). He is also the co-editor of *Women and Indian Shakespeares* (Arden Shakespeare/Bloomsbury, 2022) and the series editor of *Shakespeare and Adaptation* (Arden Shakespeare/Bloomsbury).

DAVIDE DALMAS is Associate Professor in Italian Literature at the University of Turin, where he is also Coordinator of the Research Group on Work, Industry, Technology and the Humanities (GRILITS). His main fields of research are 20th-century intellectuals, essayists and critics, as well as the literary culture in Italy between the 15th and the 16th centuries (chivalric literature from Boiardo to Ariosto and the relations between Italian literature and the Reformation). His publications include three monographs: *Il saggio, il gusto e il cliché. Per un'interpretazione di Mario Praz* (:duepunti, 2012), *La protesta di Fortini* (Stylos, 2006), *Dante nella crisi religiosa del Cinquecento italiano* (Vecchiarelli, 2005); along with the edited volumes *Franco Fortini. Scrivere e leggere poesia* (Quodlibet, 2019) and *Leggere e rileggere Sciascia*, with Tiziano Toracca (Peter Lang, 2023).

LUCA FIORENTINI is Researcher (RtdB) at the University of Rome La Sapienza. He was Post-doctoral Fellow at the IISS in Naples, at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne, at the Collège de France and at the University of Toronto. In 2018, he was awarded the 'Antonio Feltrinelli Giovani' Prize for Art and Poetry Criticism by the Accademia dei Lincei. His scientific interests are mostly focused on the critical reception of Dante's *Commedia*: he dedicated to

this subject the monographs *Per Benvenuto da Imola* (il Mulino, 2016) and *Petrarch and Boccaccio in the First Commentaries on Dante's Commedia* (Routledge, 2020). He recently wrote the chapter 'Commentary' for *the Oxford Handbook of Dante*. With Carlo Ossola and Pasquale Porro, he curated the new commented edition of the *Commedia* (translation by Jacqueline Risset) for La Pléiade of Gallimard. He also writes about contemporary literature for *L'Indice dei libri del mese* and *Alias Domenica-il manifesto*.

ALENA GAŠPAROVIČOVÁ is a 4th-year PhD candidate at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. Her research focuses on the portrayal of female characters in contemporary rewritings of traditional fairy tales. She has presented her research at international conferences in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the UK and the US. Her article "Mirror, Mirror: Framing the Story of Snow White" came out in the *American and British Studies Annual Journal* in 2021. In 2021 and 2022 two of her conference papers appeared in the electronic journal *SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, published by the Slovak Association for the Study of English, and in *Filologické štúdie/Studia Philologica*, a publication of the Comenius University in Bratislava.

YUJIA (FLAVIA) JIN is a 3rd-year PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow. Her doctoral research is an interdisciplinary study on the representation of the Italian Renaissance in the twenty-first century, using the intermedial genre of the family saga as an interpretative framework to read the Borgia and Medici families' history on the small screen. She has presented at academic conferences in the UK and Europe. She has displayed her research concept of 'Heteroglossic Renaissance' in the format of collage as creative practices in a series of academic and art events, one of which is funded by SGSAAH as part of the 2023 Showcase Exhibition in Glasgow, Scotland.

AARON M. KAHN is Senior Lecturer in Spanish in the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex. His publications include: *The Oxford Handbook of Cervantes* (2021), the monograph *The Ambivalence of Imperial Discourse: Cervantes's Numancia within the 'Lost Generation' of Spanish Drama (1570-90)* (Peter Lang, 2008), two edited volumes (2011 and 2015) and various peer-reviewed articles on Cervantine and Early Modern Spanish studies. Most recently, Kahn collaborated on a project co-funded by Creative Europe of the European Commission exploring theatrical recreations of *Don Quixote* in Europe; he provided the Spanish translation of *The Comical History of Don Quixote* (1694) by Thomas D'Urfey (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2019). His original play, *Wandering through La Mancha: A Quixotic Tale*, was published and performed as part of the project.

ELEONORA LIMA is a Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Italian at Trinity College Dublin where she is currently working on the first comprehensive history of computing in Italian literature. She holds a PhD in Italian and Media Studies (UW-Madison, 2015) and was previously an EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at Trinity College Dublin (2018-2020), and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto (2017-2018). To the field of music and literature studies belongs her ongoing project with musicologist Dr Francesca Placanica (Maynooth University) on *Stripsody* (1966), a multimedia collaboration between Umberto Eco, the singer Cathy Berberian, and painter Eugenio Carmi. She has published on Italian cinema, visual arts, and on the interconnections between literature, science, and technology. Her monograph dedicated to the impact of information technology on Italo Calvino and Paolo Volponi came out in 2020 for Firenze University Press. Eleonora is the blog editor and website manager for the AHRC-funded project *Interdisciplinary Italy 1900-2020: Interart/Intermedia*.

CARLOTTA MORO is a 4th-year PhD candidate and Teaching Assistant in Italian at the University of St Andrews. Her thesis, titled *Gender and Faith: Feminism, Mysticism, and*

the Bible in the Works of Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella, considers the role of religion, the Scriptures, and a lineage of female saints in early modern women's writings and in the development of their feminist ideas. Her research is funded by a SGSAH AHRC Award and a St Leonard's European Doctoral Scholarship. Carlotta's work has been published or is forthcoming in the journals *Renaissance Quarterly*, *The Italianist*, *Romance Studies*, *Asymptote*, and *Reading in Translation*.

AMBRA MORONCINI is Senior Lecturer in Italian Studies in the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at the University of Sussex. Her main fields of research are on early modern culture; the concept of resistance in Italian culture; women's writing; viewing literature on screen: the art of adaptation as interpretation and remediation. She is the author of *Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of the Reformation* (Routledge, 2017), and has co-written the following academic volumes: *Nudity and Folly in Italian Literature from Dante to Leopardi* (Cesati 2022), co-edited with Simon Gilson; *Resistance in Italian Culture from Dante to the 21st Century* (Cesati, 2019), co-edited with Darrow Schecter and Fabio Vighi; *Satire, Paradox, and the Plurality of Discourses in Cinquecento Italy* (Renaissance and Reformation. Special Issue, 2017), co-edited with Stefano Jossa. She has also published several articles and book chapters in relation to her fields of research.

KRISTINA M. OLSON is Associate Professor of Italian in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at George Mason University. She is the author of *Courtesy Lost: Dante, Boccaccio and the Literature of History* (University of Toronto Press, 2014) and articles on Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, including the postmodern reception of Dante's *Commedia*. She has also co-edited three volumes, including *Approaches to Teaching Dante's Divine Comedy* (second edition) with the Modern Language Association (2020). She served as the President of the American Boccaccio Association (2020-2023), and as Vice President of the Dante Society of America (2016-18).

VICTORIA RÍOS CASTAÑO is Lecturer in Spanish at Coventry University. Her main fields of research are cultural translation in colonial Mexico and contemporary Latin American fiction. Aside from essays in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, *The Translator*, and *The Americas*, she has published a monograph (*Translation as Conquest: Sahagún's Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*; Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2014) and co-edited special issues in *Les Ateliers du Séminaire Amérique Latine* (Sorbonne Université, 2018). She is currently working on the *Relaciones geográficas de Indias* to understand the beginning of the Anthropocene and on Latin American women writers' activism.

OLIVIA SANTOVETTI is an Associate Professor of Italian at the University of Leeds. She works on the history and theory of the novel, metafiction and literary representation of reading from the nineteenth century to the digital age. She has written articles on Elena Ferrante, Italo Calvino, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Luigi Pirandello, Federico De Roberto, and others, as well as on the reception of Laurence Sterne in Italy. Among her publications: *Lettrici italiane tra arte e letteratura. Dall'Ottocento al modernismo* (2021, co-edited with Giovanna Capitelli), *Self-reflection in Italian Literature (The Italianist)*, 2015) and *Digression: A Narrative Strategy in the Italian Novel* (2007).

GARETH WOOD is Senior Lecturer in Post-1800 Peninsular Spanish literature at University College London, where he is also Programme Director for Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies. He has written several studies of the interaction between Early Modern British writers and contemporary Spanish thinkers and novelists. That work has focused in particular on Sir Thomas Browne and Shakespeare in the works of Javier Marías, Benito Pérez Galdós, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and Miguel de Unamuno.



Printed in March, 2024

In our contemporary era marked by intertextuality and interdisciplinarity, the enduring influence of literature is evident. Umberto Eco's concept of the "intangible power" of literature, allowing navigation through vast textual labyrinths without unraveling all information, resonates. Notably, the interplay of literature in film adaptations, exemplified by Shakespeare's works and the global popularity of Elena Ferrante's novels from page to stage and on screen, showcases the impact of literature.

This book delves into the persistent relevance of early modern voices and works, exploring diverse genres and extending the inquiry into the world of media, including films, TV series, and videogames. It offers innovative scholarly perspectives on the remediation and reinterpretation of early modern themes, addressing contemporary cultural, political, and social issues.