Title
Little Heroes, Epic Transformations: Giulio Cesare Cortese's Neapolitan Mock Heroic

Journal
California Italian Studies, 3(1)

Author
Canepa, Nancy

Publication Date
2012

DOI
10.5070/C331012786

Little Heroes, Epic Transformations: Giulio Cesare Cortese's Neapolitan Mock Heroic

Nancy L. Canepa

Neapolitan dialect literature made its official entrance onto Mount Parnassus in 1621. In Giulio Cesare Cortese's *Viaggio di Parnaso* (Voyage to Parnassus), a narrative poem published that year, the autobiographical protagonist journeys to the home of Apollo and the Muses bearing news about the latest literary developments in Naples, which the god of poetry receives with the greatest enthusiasm.

The *Viaggio* came at a culminating moment in Cortese's own career as a founding father of the Neapolitan tradition, a career that showcased the innovative mock heroic poems *La Vaiasseide* (The Epic of the Servant Girls, 1612) and *Micco Passaro 'nnammorato* (Micco Passaro in Love, 1619), the subjects of this essay. Although the language in which these works were written—Neapolitan dialect—had been adopted by earlier authors, only in the seventeenth century did it establish itself as a rich literary idiom, primarily in the works of Cortese and his friend and colleague Giambattista Basile. These authors forged new linguistic territory but also experimented with fresh generic paradigms (the mock heroic and the fairy tale) and promoted a poetics dedicated to excavating and representing, with proto-anthropological curiosity and critical acumen, the Kingdom of Naples in its daily life and rituals, popular culture, and folklore. This attention to the themes and languages of the everyday and to alternative paradigms of heroism served almost immediately as a model for other forms of Neapolitan literature, such as the librettos of the first *opere buffe*, as well as resurfacing in full force in the work of Neapolitan authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Salvatore di Giacomo and Raffaele Viviani, for example), and even offering suggestive parallels to developments in the modern novel.

The *Viaggio di Parnaso* represented the first leg of the journey toward literary validation of this remarkable new tradition, and thus provides an illuminating preface to Cortese's project. Upon his arrival at the utopian Parnassus the narrator recounts a series of disillusionments in the real world of courts and academies that have left him "[s]enza vencere maie nulla partita, / Tristo dinto e peo fore de la corte" ("Never having won a hand, sad in the court and even worse outside of it " [1.3.4-5]), and convinced that "pe tutto nc'è travaglio" ("suffering is everywhere" [1.4.2]).[1] He is happy to find respite from his worldly woes on the happy mountain "'n miezo a lo munno" ("in the middle of the world"), which, like a cross between a happy island of romance and a Rabelaisian land of Cockaigne, enjoys a perfect climate, marvelous gardens, delightful entertainment, and constant feasting (1.6.1).[2] Yet Cortese's visit is not aimed merely at self-consolation. Upon arrival the traveler quickly gets to the main task at hand—promoting the Neapolitan tradition.[3]

Apollo and the Muses are well disposed—in fact, later in the poem they will hold

1 Giulio Cesare Cortese, *Opere poetiche*, ed. Enrico Malato (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1967). All citations from Cortese's works are from this edition, and all translations are mine.

2 See Giancarlo Mazzacurati, "La scelta eroicomica," (383-402) in Salvatore Battaglia and Giancarlo Mazzacurati, eds., *La letteratura italiana vol. 2, Rinascimento e Barocco* (Florence: Sansoni, 1974), 402.

3 Literary journeys to Parnassus were, in this period, a minor genre. Some of the better-known examples are Cesare Caporali's *Viaggio di Parnaso* (1582*)*, Miguel de Cervantes *Viaje del Parnaso* (1614), and Traiano Boccalini's *Ragguagli di Parnaso* (1612). The topos of the journey to the gods and muses served, as here, to reflect on current

extravagant festivities in honor of another pillar of seventeenth-century Neapolitan literature, Giambattista Basile—but not everyone on Parnassus is so welcoming. Shortly after his entrance, the narrator finds himself surrounded by Greek, Latin, Sicilian, Provençal, and Florentine men of letters who, disgruntled at his presence, protest "che tra lloro entre 'n dozzana / N'ommo de Puorto, è cosa troppo strana" ("that it is too strange that a man of Puorto is allowed to enter among them" [1.19.7-8]). And so the poet must explain to the gathering that the Muses do not gravitate to any one land or to speakers of any one language, but instead go where they find genius: "vanno dove so' chiammate" ("They go where they are called" [1.22.1]). Indeed, in the preface to the *Viaggio*, Cortese had stressed the special predilection that the Muses have for Naples:

> Che le manca a Napole che non pozza isso perzí stirarese la cauza, e dicere ca le Muse so' nasciute 'nzino ad isso? . . . sempe so' de buono retuorno a le belle foglia torzute de sto paiese, ch'è la vera casa lloro, pocca non c'è taverna che non aggia lo lauro, non c'è solachianiello o potecaro che non aggia la cetola, non c'è poteca de tentore che non aggia la fontana, non c'è cecato che non canta vierze, e le faccia 'nore" (252-253).
>
> (What is Naples lacking to be able to wear ironed socks [a sign of distinction] and say that the Muses were born there? . . . they're always happy to return to the lovely cabbage leaves of this land, which is their true home, since there is no tavern that does not sport a laurel wreath, no shoemaker or shopkeeper who lacks a lyre, no dyer without a fountain, no bard who sings verses without doing them honor).[4]

The poet then goes on to define his larger literary project, self-reflexively affirming the *difference* of its models of orality, both old and new, from what he considers the sclerotic formulas of canonical literary tradition:

> "Siano tutte li vuostre e *quinci* e *unquanco*
> E l'*Ostro* e l'*Astro* e *cotillo* e *cotella*,
> Ch'io pe me, tanto, non ne voglio manco,
> De tant'isce bellezze, na stizzella.
> Tanta patacche avesse ad ogne Banco
> Quanta aggio vuce a Napole mia bella:
> Vuce chiantute de la maglia vecchia,
> C'hanno gran forza, ed enchieno l'aurecchia." (1.24)

questions of poetics and the arts, in particular the changing contours of the literary canon, and, as in Boccalini's work, to offer satiric observations on contemporary politics and worldly affairs. See, for example, Luigi Firpo, "Allegoria e satira in Parnaso," *Belfagor* I (1946): 673-699, and Ferdinando Maurino, "Cervantes, Caporali, Cortese and Their Journeys to Parnassus," *Modern Language Quarterly* 19 (1958): 43-46.

4 The praise of Naples as privileged home to the Muses and fertile ground for the growth of arts and sciences was something of a local tradition, in particular during the period of the Aragonese court (in, for example, the works of Jacopo Sannazaro [1456-1530], Giovanni Pontano [1429-1503], and others).

("You can have your "hereabouts" and "nevermores," and "purpureal" and "astral," your "that one yonder" and "that other one thither." As for me, I don't want a drop of such beautified things. If banks only had as many shiny pieces as my beautiful Naples has words! Solid words of old coin, powerful words that fill the ears.")

The new aesthetic draws from the Neapolitan of tradition—Velardiniello and other poets of previous generations that Cortese and Basile frequently hold up as paragons of "la maglia vecchia"—but also from the idiom of contemporary urban Naples. "Io scrivo commo parlo" ("I write as I speak"), the narrator affirms. Adherence to the models of spoken language, valorization of the musicality of Neapolitan, and recognition of the alternative poetic potential of this language are all, as we shall see, key elements of Cortese's project: "Le parole de Napole 'mpastate / Non songo, frate mio, d'oro pommiento, / Ma de zuccaro e mele" ("The words of Naples are kneaded, my brother, not from fake gold, but from sugar and honey" [1.22.4-6]).[5]

In the last canto, when the narrator feels homesick and prepares to leave Parnassus for Naples, Apollo regales him with a magic tablecloth capable of producing unlimited food (virtually identical to the one that appears in the first tale of Basile's *Cunto de li cunti*, "Lo cunto de l'uerco"). The tablecloth is subsequently exchanged for a magic flask, and then the flask for a knife that becomes a marvelous castle when planted in the ground. The poet, however, cannot find a place for his knife: Lo cortiello aggio, e n'aggio che tagliare!" ("I've got a knife, and nothing to cut!" [7.34.8]). This is perhaps a reference to Cortese's own fruitless wanderings in search of proper employment and recognition (in 7.39 he complains of the empty promises made by the viceroy of Naples, the Count of Lemos), but also a possible allusion to the ongoing difficulties of laying the foundations for the edifice of Neapolitan literature. Notwithstanding Apollo's accolades, the Neapolitan tradition was still, in Cortese's view, a castle in the air.

Yet in some sense, literary Neapolitan had been a work in progress for almost 300 years, from Boccaccio's letters in Neapolitan to Jacopo Sannazaro's *gliommeri* to the poetry set to music (madrigals and villanellas), epic-like *canzune massicce*, and theatrical *farse cavaiole* of the 1500s, when Neapolitan began to be adopted in a more sustained "semi-literary" fashion.[6] Many of these works focused on description of life in Naples and the surrounding areas, from the celebration of people, places, and monuments to chronicles of real or invented events. In the half century preceding the experiments of Cortese and Basile, Neapolitan, as other Italian dialects,

5 Later in the poem, after intervening games, storytelling, and tours of gardens and picture galleries in honor of the newly arrived guest, Apollo's court gets word that Cortese's "dear brother" and fellow Neapolitan Giambattista Basile has acquired the title of "Conte e Cavaliere," and Parnassus erupts in celebration. The festivities include a literary banquet whose dishes include the excessively vinegary "'nzalata / De poesie moderne" ("salad of modern poetry"); an over-dry prosciutto cured by the epic poet Statius; but also finger-licking antipasti of eclogues, pastorals and farces—genres much frequented by Neapolitans, in both Tuscan and dialect—and a delicious *sciadone*—ricotta pie—of *frottole*, *mattinate*, and *villanelle*, popular poetic and musical forms in early modern Naples (5.13-19). The after-dinner entertainment is a comedy, and Pulcinella himself, in his literary debut, recites a "prolaco fatto a la moderna" ("modern-style prologue" [5.24.2]).

6 For Boccaccio's best-known Neapolitan letter, to Francesco de' Bardi, see Francesco Sabatini, *Lingue e letterature volgari in competizione,* in *Storia e civiltà della Campania. Il medioevo*, ed. G. Pugliese Caratelli (Naples: Electa, 1992): 401-43. For Sannazaro's *gliommeri* and an ample selection of other early Neapolitan works, see Enrico Malato, ed., *La poesia dialettale napoletana*, 2 vols. (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche italiane, 1960).

was frequently used in plurilinguistic contexts (alongside other dialects and languages) for its expressive, but especially comic potential, particularly in theater, both in the erudite comedy of the Renaissance and then, later, in the commedia dell'arte.[7]

But these still rather peripheral uses of Neapolitan dialect paled in comparison to its transformation, in the Seicento, into a full-fledged, alternative literary language used in works that both spanned the conventional genres and experimented with original genres—including the pastoral, novel, lyric, epic, satire, mock epic, fairy tale, and opera. Authors like Cortese and Basile employed Neapolitan not only to glorify local identities in a reaffirmation of long-standing municipal pride, forging an "illustrious vernacular" that could rival Tuscan. Nor was their main objective to exoticize unfamiliar speech and customs for a literate reading public hungry for the marvelous and the novel—both in and outside of Naples. Instead, through their innovative linguistic, stylistic, and generic experimentation they questioned the viability of past literary models and opened up the way for new ones.

The fruits of this Neapolitan community—whose authors were bound by affective or collegial but, as far as we know, rarely institutional ties—were some of the most original works of the Seicento. These included Basile's masterpiece, *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Tale of Tales, 1634-36), also known as the *Pentamerone*, a framed fairy tale collection that was the first of its type in Europe and a milestone for the future evolution of the genre of the literary fairy tale; Cortese's mock heroic poems; and Felippe de Scafato Sgruttendio's *La tiorba a taccone* (The Theorbo and Pick, 1646), a ten-part anti-Petrarchan lyric *canzoniere* starring the grotesque lady, Cecca. Alongside these *tre corone* of the Neapolitan tradition, other lesser-known figures, such as Vincenzo Braca and Silvio Fiorillo, contributed to the emerging corpus.[8] Moreover, this foundational moment of the Neapolitan tradition bred not only original literary texts, but also critical works, translations, linguistic treatises, and a copia of paratextual materials—dedications, prologues and prefaces, and textual commentaries. All of these served to situate and legitimize the alterity of this emerging tradition with respect to the official Tuscan production, and, of course, to test the expressive capacities and poetic compatibilities of a literary language in the making.[9]

What to make of this activity? Many critics have found it curious or even contradictory

7 For further discussion of the use of dialects in or against literary works in Italian at this crucial moment of linguistic standardization and shifts in poetic paradigms see, for example, Cesare Segre, "Polemica linguistica ed espressionismo dialettale nella letteratura italiana," in *Lingua, stile e societa. Studi sulla storia della prosa italiana* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963), and Ivano Paccagnella, *Il fasto delle lingue. Plurilinguismo letterario nel Cinquecento*. (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984). For a more general perspective, see Mario Sansone, "Relazioni fra la letteratura italiana e le letterature dialettali," in *Letterature comparate*, vol. 4 of *Problemi ed orientamenti critici di lingua e letteratura italiana*, ed. Attilio Momigliano (Milan: Marzorati, 1948), and Alfredo Stussi, *Lingua, dialetto e letteratura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993).

8 Braca (Salerno 1566-1614) reworked the popular *farse cavaiole* into more complex literary form in his *Farza de lo Mastro de scola* and *Farza de la Maestra*; Fiorillo (1560/70-1632?), the Capuan commedia dell'arte actor most famous for his role as Captain Matamoros, first gave Pulcinella a textual role in his comedy *Lucilla costante con le ridicolose disfide e prodezze di Policinella* (1632), and toyed with generic and linguistic conventions in his bilingual (Neapolitan and Tuscan) pastoral comedies *Amor giusto* (1605) and *La ghirlanda* (1611).

9 See Hermann Haller, *The Other Italy. The Literary Canon in Dialect* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), especially the Introduction. For a general discussion of dialect production in this period, see, for example, Ugo Vignuzzi Malgarini e Patrizia Bertini "L'alternativa regionale e dialettale," in Enrico Malato, gen. ed., *Storia della letteratura italiana* vol. 5, *La fine del Cinquecento e il Seicento* (Rome: Salerno, 1997). On the Neapolitan dialect tradition, see Benedetto Croce, *Saggi sulla letteratura italiana del Seicento* (Bari: Laterza, 1911); Maurizio Vitale, "Di alcune rivendicazioni secentesche della eccellenza dei dialetti," *La veneranda favella. Studi di storia della lingua italiana* (Naples: Morano, 1988); Michele Rak, *Napoli gentile. La letteratura in "lingua napoletana" nella cultura barocca (1596-1632)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994); and Giorgio Fulco, "La letteratura dialettale napoletana.

that the heyday of dialect literature, which found in Naples its undisputed capital, followed close on the heels of the partial resolution of the *questione della lingua* in the standardization, in the sixteenth century, of the Tuscan of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, and then in the elaboration of normative instruments like the *Vocabolario della Crusca* in the early seventeenth century. Was the relationship between Tuscan and regional vernaculars antagonistic or complementary? Benedetto Croce famously maintained that the position of dialect writers was not "the subversion or the substitution of national literature," but, on the other hand, "the integration of the same … as a model," a sort of cooperative competition.[10] Many after him, while not denying dialogic interaction, have placed more emphasis on the oppositional.[11] Dialects had been used in previous centuries not only for comic relief or to caricature those who used them (as in the *satira del villano*), but also to satirize the sacred cows of canonical tradition, and their use as a vehicle for linguistic and literary polemic continued strong. The seventeenth-century dialect authors in question, however, go beyond parody or satire in their exploration of forms and contents formerly absent from the literary panorama.

For the use of a language is "one of the means by which communities are constructed or reconstructed."[12] The representations of Naples by authors like Cortese and Basile documented and illuminated the city's evolving cultural identity, expanding the better-known, monumental descriptions of one of the most spectacular of baroque cities to include a different side—the underside, in many respects—that had previously lacked literary representation: its popular culture, folklore, and rituals and routines of everyday life, both urban and rural.[13] This newfound, proto-ethnographic interest in documenting and describing the outer limits of official culture—the "native" exotic of popular and everyday culture—ran parallel to the better known fascination with the exotic and strange of foreign realms, especially the New World, that was cultivated in the seventeenth century and that found expression in travel accounts and descriptions, curiosity cabinets, and richly illustrated publications documenting distant wonders. Likewise, the broadening of what was considered poetically possible and the attraction to striking juxtapositions, but perhaps above all to hybrid interminglings and rearrangements, such as those between "high" and "low" culture, was at the heart of baroque poetics.[14]

* * *

Giulio Cesare Cortese was born about 1570 in Naples to a middle-class family. He studied law,

---

Giulio Cesare Cortese e Giovan Battista Basile." Pompeo Sarnelli (chapter 9 in the Salerno *Storia*). For the history of Neapolitan, see Patricia Bianchi, Nicola de Blasi, and Rita Librandi, *Storia della lingua a Napoli e in Campania: I'te vurria parla'* (Naples: T. Pironti, 1993).

10 Benedetto Croce, "La letteratura dialettale riflessa, la sua origine nel Seicento e il suo ufficio storico," in *Uomini e cose della vecchia Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1927), 227.

11 See, for example, Michele Rak, *Napoli gentile*.

12 Peter Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 6.

13 Dialects were often perceived and propounded as more "natural" languages that could better describe the "palpitating flux of reality," and were thus used more broadly to "exalt the rights of contemporaneity against tradition, of innovation against imitation, or . . . nature against art" (Vitale, 313). Vitale also discusses the widespread interest in the *locutio parlata* in this period, including among the Tuscans.

14 See, for example, Peter Davidson's recent discussion of the baroque, which he defines as "a cultural system so much in love with the remote and exotic that it draws strangeness unto itself, it is eager to explore and coexist with extremes, at the same time as it is a daily, serviceable set of conventions for discussing and celebrating quotidian experience. Among the many features that distinguish baroque from classical art is the capacity to work in more than one artistic tradition at the same time—Baroque inevitably embraces hybridity." *The Universal Baroque* (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2007).

and spent some time in Florence at the court of the Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici, as well as in Spain at the court of King Philip III. He held a series of short-lived administrative posts in a number of cities in southern Italy but also, it seems, at various times in his life had to resort to moneylending to get by. Besides a few poems in Italian, Cortese's entire literary output is in Neapolitan. He probably died around 1626.[15]

In 1621 a Neapolitan bookseller made mention of 14 Neapolitan works by Cortese, many of which appear to engage with the mythical, literary, historical, and anthropological identities of Naples—*Lo calascione*, *Lo regno de la boscia*, *Posilepo roffiano*, *La Serena mpazzuta*, *Partenope sciaccata*, *La rota delli cauce*, *La reprubbeca de Cuccagna*, *Lo Molino a biento*, *La ciarantola*, *L'Arcadia sconquassata*, *Lo spitale de li pazze*, *Lo Cerriglio 'ncantato*, *Lo nore falluto,* and *Lo munno ammascarato*.[16] *Lo Cerriglio 'ncantato* (1628) is the only one of these of which traces remain; works not mentioned in this list, however, include the mock heroic poems *La Vaiasseide* (1612) and *Micco Passaro 'nnammorato* (1619), the *Viaggio de Parnaso* (1621), the Alexandrine-inspired novel *Li travvugliuse ammore de Ciullo e Perna* (1621), the pastoral drama *La Rosa* (1621), and a series of comic letters exchanged with Basile.

Cortese's most significant efforts are in the development of a particular breed of the mock heroic or epic genre, a form native to the seventeenth century that would prove to be an important transitional link between the older forms of epic and romance and the modern novel.[17] The mock epic emerged at a moment of cultural, social, and epistemic crisis and change, parodying past literary models and satirizing contemporary reality in the context of a general reorganization and innovation of genres.[18] It took its cue from the ongoing demise of the chivalric epic and the cultural ideals and aspirations that spawned it, deforming and demythologizing its conventions and relying for its effects on a jarring alternation between serious and comic modes, lofty and colloquial styles and subjects, and the pseudo-historical and the fantastic. Many mock heroic works adopted language suited to describe the most noble of pursuits, but for trivial subjects. For example, in the best-known Italian work of this genre, Alessandro Tassoni's *La secchia rapita* (The Rape of the Bucket, 1622), a war between the Ghibellines of Modena and the Guelphs of Bologna is declared when a wooden bucket disappears mysteriously from a well. Other mock epics treated illustrious narrative material in a low, comic style. Yet others

---

15 For biographical information on Cortese, see Salvatore S. Nigro's entry on Cortese in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960-), and Eduardo Lebano's entry in *Seventeenth Century Italian Poets and Dramatists*, gen. eds. Albert M. Mancini and Glen Palen Pierce (Detroit : Gale Cengage Learning, 2008).

16 Croce, *Saggi*, 34-35. Some critics have suggested that *Lo calascione* is an earlier and shorter version of *La tiorba a taccone*.

17 For the relation among epic, intermediate comic forms such as mock-epic and folkloric narratives, and novel see, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

18 Many have commented on how at this critical juncture in European cultural history "the ways in which people knew reality and connected with it were distorted …" and at how the "exploration of the limits and/or limitations of preexisting modes of representation," challenged the reader "to reflect on the arbitrariness of inherited forms of knowledge, social values, and structures." Fernando Ordonez, "Models of Subjectivity in the Spanish Baroque: Quevedo and Gracian," and David Castillo, "Horror (Vacui): The Baroque Condition," both in Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martin-Estudillo, eds., *Hispanic Baroques. Reading Cultures in Context* (Vanderbilt, TN: Vanderbilt UP, 2005), 72-86 and 87-104. In this context, Ordonez considers the *picaro* and the new genre that this character inhabits representative of such changes; the affinities between *picaros* and Cortese's anti-heroes are suggestive, especially in light of the fact that as a young man Cortese visited Spain several times (in 1594, 1597, and 1601-2).

manipulated and transformed epic conventions by "lowering the entire narration—words, characters, situations—into a representation of popular culture that generates a prevalently visual and descriptive comicity," portraying lower-class protagonists in realistic settings enmeshed in everyday, marginal, and sometimes ridiculous preoccupations.[19]

Cortese's *La Vaissseide* and *Micco Passaro 'nnammorato* belong to this last category. The first recounts a revolt of Neapolitan servant girls; the second the adventures of a Neapolitan *gradasso* sent to wage battle against bandits in the Abruzzi mountains. Both poems unfold against the backdrop of Naples, at this time a major European capital and important laboratory of baroque cultural production, but also the stage of dramatic social transformations: mass migration, rising unemployment, poverty, violence and disease, and political unrest. The focus on classical monuments and a picture-perfect natural setting that are generally highlighted in contemporary guides and descriptions of the city shifts, in these epics of the everyday, to choral scenes in the streets, squares, and taverns in and around an early modern metropolis distinguished by the bustle, the rites of domestic and communal life, and the desperate vitality of its unconventional, plebeian heroes and heroines.

La Vaiasseide, first published in 1612 but probably written earlier, is a poem in 5 canti, written in the classic epic *ottava rima*. It apparently enjoyed a widespread popularity; the annotator of the 1628 edition, Bartolomeo Zito, maintained that between 1604 and 1628 there were 16 editions. It is prefaced by the usual assortment of paratextual material, including a burlesque dedicatory letter by Basile, "A lo re de li viente," in which he parodies the customarily pompous and empty dedications, comments on the unstable professional lives of intellectuals and courtiers who eke out a living at the will of capricious patrons, and, most importantly, underlines how works like Cortese's, part of an entirely new and officially unrecognized tradition, can really have no other dedicatee but the wind.

In his dedication Basile refers to Cortese's work as "no poemma arroico." This would seem to be a tongue-in-cheek claim, if we consider the epic to be a mode of representing communal values and aspirations by means of those who most nobly embody them. Cortese's poem, even if it borrows many of the conventions, formulae, and rhetorical figures of the epic, features a cast of entirely anonymous heroines whose adventures, far from embodying societal ideals, consist primarily of day-to-day, microscopic struggles for survival on the streets of urban Naples, struggles that have no lasting effects on any larger course of events. Yet in a very real sense, the combat that these "everywomen" engage in on the battlefields of daily life is of epic proportions.

The poem centers on the attempts of a group of Neapolitan servants to marry, often against the wishes of their employers. Its basic plot mirrors, if anamorphically, the most common and simple of comic plots in which young lovers must overcome obstacles, often family-related, in order to realize their happiness, and is presented in the form of a series of vignettes. But in Cortese's poem the conflict is transferred from the family to society, transforming into a struggle based on economic considerations, since it is their employers who release the *vaiasse* to marriage, reluctantly giving up the girls' help and, as the text suggests in a number of allusions, easy access to in-house sex. In Canto 1, the servant Renza marries Menechiello, and in canto 2 gives birth to a child. Renza's experience inspires the other servant girls of the city to plan a revolt against their masters that, they hope, will allow them to marry their lovers. Two of the *vaiasse*, Preziosa and Carmosina, are left behind: Preziosa is not allowed out by her master, and Carmosina is captured as she flees with the others. In Canto 3, Preziosa is united with her lover,

19 Sansone, "Relazioni fra la letteratura italiana e le letterature dialettali," 299.

Cienzo, and they wed in a festive ceremony. In Canto 4, Ciullo and Carmosina get her master's consent to their marriage, but on their wedding night Ciullo discovers that he is impotent, the result of a prostitute's spell. In Canto 5, Ciullo goes to the prostitute's house, where he is confronted by her current protector, but a passing swashbuckler, Micco Passaro, ultimately makes peace between the two. The spell is lifted.

The mock heroic lowering of both language and content is presented in the *praepositio* of the first canto:

> Io canto commo belle e vertolose
> So' le vaiasse de chesta cetate,
> E quanto iocarelle e vroccolose,
> Massema quanno stanno 'nnammorate;
> Dirraggio po' l'autre isce belle cose
> Che fanno quanno songo nmaretate:
> Ma non faccio li vierze 'n toscanese
> Azzò me 'ntenga onnuno a sto paese. (1.1)

(I sing of the beauty and the virtue of the servant girls of this city, and of how playful and cuddly they are, especially when they're in love. I'll tell, too, of the other nice things they do when they're married. But I'm not writing my verses in Tuscan; that way everyone in this town can understand me.)

Not only is the subject of Cortese's epic the amorous vicissitudes of *vaiasse*, but the poet will also take us beyond the romantic ending point of marriage. And, he informs us, his verses will not be in *toscanese*, but in the spoken language of the city he is depicting. Finally, the poet invokes the Muse, promising her, for her services, "no pideto, no sauto e no stornuto" ("a fart, a jump, and a sneeze" [1.3.8]).

The action begins in *medias res*, in the middle of a domestic dispute in Naples, as we learn that although Renza has been seeing Menechiello for a year and a half, her employer will not permit her to marry him. Renza's mother intervenes, reminding the *patrone* that Renza began serving him when she was ten—"'Ca tu te la chiavaste sola sola / De dece anne a sta casa, la maressa, / Che pareva na lecora 'n gaiola / E mo de le vaiasse è la vavessa'" ("'You locked her away in this house when she was ten years old, poor thing, all alone like a bird in a cage, and now she's the grandmother of the servant girls'" [1.5.1-3])—and that, at forty, she's still wearing the same skirt she arrived in.[20] She manages to convince him, and he contributes a small sum toward the wedding. At the wedding feast the guests are entertained by a song spanning thirteen stanzas in honor of the attending *vaiasse*, sung by a shopkeeper. The song praises the *vaiasse*'s "irregular" physical appearance—in the consolidated tradition of the grotesque literary portrait—and goes on to celebrate their varied abilities. In the kitchen "'Lloro sapeno fare le frittate, / Maccarune e migliaccie da stupire, / Le nobele pignate mmaretate, / Zeppole ed autre cose da stordire'" ("'They know how to make stupendous omelets, macaroni, and stuffed cornbread, the most noble of marriage soups, fritters, and other astonishing things'" [1.15.3-6]). They are

20 The term *chiavare*, "to lock up" (from *chiave*), at this time already also carried the more vulgar meaning of "to screw" (the 1612 Crusca dictionary states, "Oggi il prendiamo in significanto d'usare il coito").

willing teachers of love, and if worse comes to worse, they are experts in folk remedies, such as an ointment to treat Mastro lo Franzese, or syphilis. They are, in conclusion, vastly superior to titled ladies: "'Ma de vostre tetelleca e tallune / Vale chiù chillo adore che ne vene / Che quanto musco ed acque sperfummate / Portano le Segnore tetolate!'" ("'But the odor that comes from your armpits and feet is worth more than all the musk and toilet water that titled ladies wear!'" [1.23.5-8])

After the festivities, the couple retires for their first night, and the next morning the requisite bloodied nightshirt is hung triumphantly at the window. The inevitable visit of the mothers-in-law leads to a series of recommendations for the offspring to come: how to manage pregnant longings and avoid birthmarks and defects, how to treat the newborn, and the like. The examples range from the superstitious—kiss a hare to avoid a harelip, don't allow a baby to be kissed by other babies, or he won't speak—to the more realistic—"'Chello che l'è 'mprommiso falle avere, / Se no sempre lo vide po' cadere'" ("'Make sure he gets what he's promised, or else you'll see him fall'" [1.31.7-8]). After the daylong interlude of his marriage, the groom is called back to his workplace, a tavern. It is evident that this is a happy-ever-after of reduced proportions.

In canto 2, the story of Menenchiello and Renza expands to include their domestic life after marriage, and that of the second "exemplary" couple, Cenzo and Preziosa, begins. Renza give birth to a child, another occasion for Cortese to elaborate on popular rituals related to midwifery and the treatment of the newborn and the mother.[21] The narration then shifts back to the other *vaiasse*, who are inspired by Renza's example to take their destinies into their own hands. They join in council—"onne vaiassa face concestoro" (2.17.5)—and plot to escape that evening from their near-indentured servitude, find their lovers, and meet up again the following day. One of the girls, Preziosa, is locked in the cellar by her master and misses the appointment, but calls to a passing student and commissions him to write a letter to her lover—"'Segno' Cenzullo mio caro bellisemo, / Cchiù saporito ca non so' li vruoccole'" ("'My dear, handsome mister Cenzullo, tastier than the best of broccoli'" [2.24.4-5])—in which she tells him that she will kill herself if he does not rescue her. In the meantime the masters of the other *vaiasse* have noticed their absence, and offer a city-wide reward for finding them. After Cenzo receives Preziosa's letter, he asks her master for her hand, which the master, afraid of what he has been hearing of the other girls' revolt, grants.

Only one of the escaped *vaiasse*, Carmosina, is found, and she is brought home and locked up. For the others, though, freedom is not what they had dreamed of, but, on the contrary, a path to a much more grim slavery, for the mirage of marriage evaporates in a grim progression of events that leads from prostitution to disease to death: "Pe farese vassalle a Re de Franza . . . pe lo primmo carnevale / Tutte iero a morire a lo 'spetale" ("because they became vassals of the King of France [another euphemism for syphilis] . . . by the next carnival they had all gone to die

21 Cortese may have been familiar with contemporary texts on midwifery and birthing such as Scipione Mercurio's *La comare o la ricoglitrice* (Venice: Giovanni Battista Ciotti, 1596). For more on early modern practices in this area see, for example, David Gentilcore, *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy: Social and Cultural Values in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998); Hilary Marland,, *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Claudia Pancino, *Il bambino e l'acqua sporca. Storia dell'assistenza al parto dalle mammane alle ostetriche (secoli XVI-XIX)* (Milan: F.F. Angeli, 1984).

at the hospital." [2.30.4, 7-8]). Those who attempt, especially through subversive means, to manage their own destinies can expect the worst; only actions sanctioned by the authority of masters or family have a chance of ending well.

By the end of this canto, a modest marriage like Menechiello and Renza's already proves to be an impossible ideal, and any illusion that the story of the *vaiasse* can become either an urban idyll of retreat into domestic bliss or an epic of little heroes who triumph over servitude, alienation, and solitude has dissipated. The random triumphs of a few of the *vaiasse* are offset by the defeated fate of the majority, putting into question, at least as far as this group is concerned, the viability of "heroic" acts of individual agency and, in general, exemplary models of behavior. As conventional happy endings continue to show their undersides, the serial nature of this narrative, which replicates similar plot episodes—the formula of single happy marriages disturbed by collective dramas, which are in turn redeemed only in minimal part by reversal or rescue—suggests the inevitability that marks both the individual and collective destinies of the heroes of this poem.

Preziosa and Cienzo's wedding is celebrated with an elaborate banquet and jousting "a la Chiazzetta," one of the same areas of ill repute to which the *vaiasse* had earlier dispersed. After the banquet, the men parade in their armor, in a surreal version of the catalogues of warriors of chivalric epic. The description of the groom, for example, resembles a cross between an Arcimboldo portrait and Don Quixote in his finest:

> S'avea fatta na giubba a la torchesca
> De carta straccia, ed era de colore
> De fogliamolla couta fresca fresca;
> E no tagliero avea de buono adore
> Pe parte de na taraca moresca,
> Co na cepolla penta, e po' na scritta:
> *"So forte cruda, ma so' doce fritta*." (3.19.2-8)

> (He had made himself a Turkish-style jacket, pieced together out of old paper the color of freshly picked swiss chard. And he had a pleasant-smelling baking pan in place of a Moorish shield, on which was painted an onion, with the motto: "I'm strong raw, but I'm sweet fried.")

Shortly after the start of the jousting, during which contenders on donkeys attempt to grab the greased neck of a goose whose body is buried in the earth, Carmosina's lover Ciullo realizes that she is not present, and in his desperation inserts a sharpened stick in the anus of his donkey in the hope that he'll be thrown off and killed. He ends up, still alive, in a ditch. The goose game ends triumphantly, but is soon after followed by general woe, since the crowd believes that Ciullo is dead. Ciullo, however, finds that he has fallen into the very cellar where Carmosina languishes.

In another comic citation of an epic commonplace, the descent to the underworld, at the start of canto 4 Ciullo suddenly finds himself in the dark underground, and, with Carmosina's screams echoing around him—she is hiding in the latrine—he is sure that he has died and gone to hell. By the time the equivocation is straightened out, guests from the wedding have appeared with ropes to pull Ciullo out. A scuffle ensues between the two lovers when Ciullo begins to climb up without giving a thought to Carmosina. She grabs hold of his feet, and they both fall

back into the cellar. When Carmosina's master appears, Ciullo recounts the story of their first meeting, which unfolded according to the dictates of courtly love: "'Io no iuorno venea da lo Mercato / E chiste uocchie co l'uocchie s'affrontaro / De sta cornuta, che m'ha 'ntommacato: / Da donne Ammore, che n'avea che fare, / Me voze co na frezza spertosare" ("'One day I was coming from the Mercato, when my eyes met those of this bitch here, who fixed me up good; at which Love, who had nothing else to do, from her eyes pierced me with an arrow" [4.13.4-8]).[22] Ciullo receives permission to marry Carmosina, and, the next day they quickly celebrate with "doie torza e no sciosciello" ("a bit of cabbage and a little omelette" [4.26.6]), which after the other girls' more opulent festivities doesn't sit well with Carmosina. In bed, the marriage is further soured when they discover that Ciullo is unable to perform sexually, as a result of a *fattura* cast on him by a resentful former lover, a prostitute.

In the final canto things risk turning violent. Ciullo goes to the prostitute's house to demand that she undo the spell. He exchanges insults with her current protector, but Micco Passaro—a legendary street figure of the time—passes by and, after a few threats, makes peace, after which they all head to the famous Cerriglio tavern for refreshments. There, Ciullo learns that the spell is broken, and races home to his wedding bed, where he and Carmosina "fatecaro / Che se sentijo doie miglia lo fracasso" ("labored so hard that you could hear the racket from two miles away" [5.35.5-6]). Carmosina becomes pregnant that same night. The poem ends; the cycle continues.

The *vaiasse* battle the constraints imposed on them and drive the plot forward with their desire for marriage. Yet the battles won are few, and individual, while the communal uprising ends in dismal failure. The men in the poem fare no better: in general clueless and powerless (Ciullo's impotence is clearly not only physical), they are able to mime the attitudes of warriors only in the ritualized, harmless jousting among themselves. The only figures who carry any weight are, in fact, the paternalistic masters of the *vaiasse*. In a situation of generalized social impotence, the expression of individual agency and communal self-determination is limited to the domestic, private sphere—in the everyday routines and rituals of sex, giving birth and taking care of the newborn, preparing food and remedies. And even there, for every *vaiassa* who manages to escape servitude, countless others end up as bedmates to Mastro lo Franzese. The one anti-hero, the picaresque swashbuckler Micco Passaro, attains his ends by threatening violence, the sole means possible for attaining justice for the *vaiasse* and their like.

But even if the ideal of exemplary heroism dies a comic death in Cortese's opus, a different sort of realistic, contingent heroism takes its place—an urban *arte di arrangiarsi*—in which unrealizable epic objectives give way to the smallest of triumphs, and the battlegrounds of the world become the streets and squares of Naples. The novelty of this project was evident to Cortese's earliest commentators. In 1628 a certain Bartolomeo Zito, a *commedia dell'arte* actor in the role of the pedant Doctor Graziano and apparently a friend of Cortese, published, in Neapolitan, an annotated edition of the *Vaiasseide* with an appended defense of this "Poema perfetto e di meraviglioso esempio conforme gl'insegnamenti d'Aristotile" ("Perfect Poem, being a Marvelous Example of Aristotelian Principles").[23] In the "Defennemiento de la

22 *Cornuto*, commonly used in the masculine to denote a cuckold, can also be used as a general term of insult for either gender.

23 Bartolomeo Zito, ed., *La Vajaisseide. Poema erocio di Giulio Cesare Croce. Arricchito di Annotazioni, e di Dichiarazioni a ciascun canto*, in *Opere di Giulio Cesare Cortese,* vol. 2 (Naples: Giuseppe Maria Porcelli, 1783), 204. Nigro suggests that Cortese, instead of the rather elusive Zito, may himself have been behind this academic defense of the literary legitimacy of the Vaisseide: "lo Zito era forse la 'maschera' teatrale e pedantesca ('Graziano,' per l'appunto) del Cortese?"

Vaiasseide contra la cenzura de L'Accademmece Scatenate" ("Defense of the Vaiasseide against the censure of the Scatenati Academicians"), Zito responds to a series of criticisms leveled at Cortese's poem by the members of a certain Accademia degli Scatenati: in particular of its language, subject, and organization, which deviates, in their view, from those of the canonical epic as defined by Aristotle and practiced by the great epic poets.[24]

First, Zito counters the Scatenati's objection that low-class *vaiasse* cannot be the subjects of epic poetry because they have no "dignità eroica" ("heroic dignity") and are the "schiuma del sesso feminile" ("scum of the female sex") by proposing that the humble protagonists of this epic of the everyday partake, in their own way, in the chivalric virtues of honor, pride, courage, and the desire for justice: "nce l'adddemostra d'anemo tremenno; nderezzate a cose granne; desederose de jostre; goliose de mprese, e d'abbattemiente; femmene, che se resentono de li tuorte che le so' fatte: sopra de li quale nce fanno conziglio, e cercano co ogne pericolo de farene vennetta" ("they are of fearsome strength of spirit; destined for great things; desirous of jousts; yearning for noble exploits and conquests; women who take offense at the wrongs done to them, who meet in council to discuss how to proceed, and who risk every danger to get their revenge" [187 and 204]).

Nor did the innovation of Cortese's naturalistic reformulation of "heroic" conventions to fit the new realities of lower-class metropolitan life go unnoticed:

> ll'eie abbastato de mostrarence le ccose da lo nnaturale … non potennoce descrivere na guerra, nè na Cetate accampata, isso nce fa vedere Napole tutta a rommore: nè chiazza, o pontone nc'è, che non siamo trommettejate, e scorzete da la Corte, e revotate da li Patrune. Po, lo conziglio de le Bajasse, eie autro, che no retratto de l'Assemblee, e de le Diete che fanno li personagge granne? La fuga che pigliano le Bajasse eie autro, che chillo spediente, che soleno pighiare li puopole maletrattate ntiempo che se vonno rebbellare da li Segnure lloro? Lo resentemiento che nne fanno li patrune, non eie na mmaggene de chello, che soleno provedere li Rri contro li rebbelle lloro? (207-8)
>
> (it was enough for him to show us things as they are, naturally … not being able to describe a war, or an encamped city, he showed us Naples in an uproar: there's not a square or corner of the city where there aren't trumpet calls, police roundups, and revolts against masters. What is the council of the servant girls if not a portrait of the assemblies and diets that great personages hold? What is the servant girls' escape if not that expedient to which mistreated people resort when they want to rebel against their lords? Isn't the masters' resentment the image of what kings feel for those who rebel against them?)

Moreover, the academicians' incensed comment on the lack of "unità della favola" in the *Vaiasseide* in favor of an excessive "varietà" of characters and plot lines (familiar topics in early modern discussions of epic) contains a thinly veiled ideological subtext. The Scatenati's anxiety bridges from the aesthetic distaste for the elements of "guazzabuglio, mescuglio … pappolata, appiastramento, e zibaldone" (217) that they detect in Cortese's poem to a more tangible fear.

[24] Zito treats the Scatenati's invective as a published work, but no trace of it remains.

Just as the multitude of voices and stories of the poem risk pushing a decorous form of *varietas* over the edge into chaos and formal disorder, so the reality depicted therein—servant girls who storm the city streets in search of justice—risks upturning the social order. It is clear that the mixing, hybridizing, and lowering of literary forms and contents evident in Cortese's poem is perceived as a potentially dangerous rearrangement of hierarchies and weakening of control on other fronts as well.

* * *

In his comments, Zito also discusses the Micco Passaro who appeared briefly at the end of the *Vaiasseide*. According to Zito, Micco was a familiar figure in the Naples of the time, "no cierto squarcione Napolitano, che beveva ntiempo de lo Poeta" ("a certain Neapolitan swashbuckler, who took his drink during the poet's lifetime"). Yet, as in certain commedia dell'arte masks—such as the Capitano—historical reality meets the stylizing impulse of art. Micco, Zito tells us, would so assiduously roam the city looking for brawls to break up, fully armed and wearing "torn, greasy gloves," that "la cosa era venuta nfarza: s spesse vote li giuvene fegnevano de fare scostiune, pe lo mettere mmiezo; e co scusa de cortellejarese ntra loro, le refonnevano quarche chiattonata: infine abbastava che l'avessero portato a la taverna … " (176) ("it had become a farce, and oftentimes boys would pretend to be fighting, in order to get him to intervene, and with the excuse that they were exchanging knife blows they would deal him a few slaps, too. At the end, they were satisfied if he took them to the tavern … " [exactly what happens in the *Vaiasseide*]).

Micco Passaro 'nnammorato, the poem in which Micco acquires a lead role, appears to embrace the mock heroic more explicitly. The title itself cites one of Italy's chivalric classics, Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, and the poem's stated theme is the series of exploits, in war and in love, of the picaresque mercenary Micco, "nato 'n miezo Puorto" (as Cortese himself was). As the poem opens, Micco and a ragtag band of recruits prepare to take part in an expedition to the Abruzzi organized by the viceregal government to deal with the rampant banditry there, an all too real problem of the time. But both before and after the men finally manage to leave Naples (only in the sixth of ten cantos), the main action of this poem, too, is amorous strategizing. As in the *Vaiasseide*, it is the women—the troops' girlfriends—who are the principal movers, while the men distinguish themselves above all for their rhetorical bluster and inaction. *Micco Passaro* is an epic of constant interruptions, where the military battlefield never quite materializes and the most memorable feats take place in streets, taverns, and bedrooms, with the arms of disguise, deception, and sexual suggestion.

In canto I, the viceroy announces the king's order for the expedition, and the troops assemble at the Cerriglio tavern for a pre-departure meal, excited just as much by the prospect of getting away from their *nnamorate* as by the promise of earnings and glory. In the meantime the warriors' girlfriends are furious about the departure, and among themselves recount the heroic adventures they have undergone to save their men's lives, in the form of bribes of money and sexual favors to officials, prison guards, executioners, and even Turkish pirates. Nora, who suffers unrequited love for Micco, reveals that the real reason for Micco's brave foray into the Abruzzi is to conquer the heart of a woman, Grannizia, and that she —Nora—intends to follow him there. A courier then arrives, and recounts the state of anarchy in the bandit-ridden area:

women raped, herds killed, men buried and roasted alive. The viceroy gives orders to the troops to depart immediately. Micco happens to pass by the congregation of women, and a general scuffle ensues as the women beat up Micco for his perceived role as ringleader of the departing soldiers.

The troops finally leave Naples for L'Aquila, as does Nora, dressed as a man. She and Micco both appear at Grannizia's house together, and Grannizia is immediately attracted to Nora, which sets the poem off in another comic direction, as Cortese recycles the convention of cross-dressing and its consequences. Nora enacts an elaborate, and successful, plan to disgrace Micco in Grannizia's household so that she, Nora, may have him to herself.

Micco returns to the military front, and releases all of his amorous frustration in furious combat. Nora follows the troops, but gets lost and is taken in by some noblemen who live in the countryside. When she invents for herself the persona of a once well-to-do but presently impoverished Neapolitan, their conversation turns to a discussion of virtue. For the noblemen, honor and inner integrity are more important than wealth—"'Ca le recchezze mo tanto prezzate / So' de lo core vipere arraggiate'" ("'For the riches that we prize so much squeeze our hearts like angry vipers'" [9.28.7-8])—and a poor but simple life is a shield against the deceptive and fleeting pleasures of the world.

> "Oh, quanto sott'a seta e tela d'oro
> E nfra museche, balle, e feste e iuoco
> Stace desgusto, arraggia e gran martoro,
> E ferite ha lo core, e l'arma fuoco!
> Che penzate che sia chillo tresoro
> E servetute avere ad ogne luoco
> Ed essere 'lustrissemo e famuso,
> E magnare no funcio 'ntossecuso?
>
> "No povero fa ricco no carrino,
> S'ha pane e caso magna rialato,
> No' le fa male l'acqua se n'ha bino
> E n'ha sospetto che sea 'ntossecato;
> S'esce la sera a notte o ben mattino
> Non ha paura d'essere arrobbato,
> Lo vierno cchiù che fleba l'è la frisa,
> E po' la 'state va scauzo e 'n cammisa." (9.29-30)

("Under the silks and golden cloths, amid the music, dancing, festivities and games, how much pain, rage, and great torment lie; how many wounds has the heart; and how the soul burns! What do you think any treasure amounts to, or having servants all around you, or being respected and famous, if at the same time you are eating poisonous mushrooms? A poor man is made rich by a mere coin; if he has bread and cheese he eats like a king; drinking water doesn't bother him, if he has no wine; and he never suspects that he's being poisoned. If he goes out at night or early in the morning, he has no fear of being robbed; in the winter his hemp cloth is as good as the finest felt, and in the summer he goes barefoot and

shirtless.")

Nora, however, is unmoved by this romantic vision, and offers a less idealizing take on what the simple life actually entails for those who don't have the means to reflect on it. Her alternative perspective neatly exemplifies the poetics of the everyday that is at the foundation of Cortese's clear-eyed mock heroic vision, in which the satirical and comic are rarely disjointed from a sympathetic realism:

"Ma lo povero sempre ha da pensare
Commo acchietta tornise a lo pesone,
Ca schitto no carrino c'ha da dare
Vace pe la saccocciola 'mpresone;
Quanno have carne e la vò cocenare
O non ha lardo e non have cravone,
'Nfine sempre le manca quarche cosa
E lo cuorpo e la mente maie reposa.

"Sarrà la casa soia no vascetiello
Che le serve pe casa e pe cantina,
L'aseno sta cod isso e lo porciello,
E lo cane e lo gatto e la gallina,
Pe lietto tenarà no sacconciello
Ed averance a capo la latrina,
E fommosa cossì la cemmenera
Che meglio le sarria stare 'n galera.

"S'have mogliere o figlie, o sfortunato!
Chella vede na robba a la commare
E dice: –Ecco, marito m'hanno dato
Che maie na strenga me pote accattare! –
Chille vanno pe 'ntuorno a lo pignato
E che sia cuotto non vonno aspettare,
Chella chiagne c'ha povero marito
E chille c'hanno ricco l'appetito.

"Canta lo gallo ed abbaia lo cane,
Gualia la gatta, lo sommiero arraglia,
Chiagne lo peccerillo ca vò pane
E se sente no miglio la vattaglia.
Po' quanno stracco e zitto ognuno stane
Miezo muorto se corca a chella paglia,
E quanno crede stare arreposato
Se sose, ca lo figlio l'ha cacato." (9.33-36).

("But the poor man always has to worry about how he's going to find the money to pay the rent, since if he owes one coin he'll end up in prison on account of his empty pockets. When he's got some meat and wants to cook it, he either doesn't have lard or he doesn't have coal. At the end, he's always lacking something, and his body and mind never rest. His house is likely a little windowless room that serves him as both house and cellar. The ass lives with him, as do the pig and dog and cat and chicken. He has a straw pallet for a bed, with a latrine at its head, and his chimney is so smoky that it would be better to live in jail. If he's got a wife or kids, what an unlucky man he is! The wife sees something one of her neighbors has, and says: 'There you have it, I was given a husband who can't even buy me a shoelace!' The kids circle around the pot on the stove, and don't want to wait until it's done cooking. The wife cries that she has a poor husband, the kids that they have a rich appetite. The rooster crows, the dog barks, the cat meows, the donkey brays, the baby cries that he wants some bread, and you can hear them battling it out a mile away. Then, when everyone is tired and quiet, the poor man lies down, half-dead, on his straw, and just when he's about to get some rest he has to get up, because his son has taken a shit on him.")

This conversation is interrupted by noises, and Nora finds Micco nearby, under attack by a bandit. With a perfect blow, Nora kills the bandit and brings Micco back to the noblemen's lodgings, where, still clothed as a man, she nurses him back to health. Micco confides in her his regret for his past treatment of Nora, and when she finally reveals herself the decision to marry is immediate. The noblemen offer the couple a sumptuous country wedding complete with singing, dancing, masquerades, and farces (including one starring Micco and Grannizia), and after yet another parade of participants and their dress and emblems, the couple retires.

* * *

Who read these works? And what would the future hold for a genre like the urban mock epic—and, more in general, for a literary tradition written in a non-standard language like Neapolitan?

At the start of his *Defennemiento* Zito offers a suggestive depiction of the early history of Cortese's *Vaiasseide*. The Scatenati, he tells us, was a kind of open-air academy that met by the Molo for literary discussion, debate of chosen topics, and reading of the members' own works. One day one of the Scatenati presented the *Vaiasseide*, and

cenzuranno, e ghiodecanno lo ditto Poemma, ne formaro na mmettiva; de la quale essennone jute paricchie copie attuorno, scasualememte ne capetaie una mmano de Messere Sarvatore Scarano (notato Lebbraro de chesta Cetate), pe mmano de lo quale essennome venuta mpotere mio, e a chesta avennonce data na lejetura, fortemente nne restaie ammisso. (185)

(after censuring and judging said poem, they wrote an invective. And since many

> copies of this invective were distributed, by chance mister Salvatore Scarano [a famous bookseller of this city] happened to get hold of a copy, and it was through him that I came to have one, and once I had read through it, I remained speechless.)

Although we may never know much more about the circumstances surrounding the reception of Cortese's first great success (or how much of what Zito recounts actually occurred), it is significant that a seventeenth-century literary debate centered on a Neapolitan poem about servant girls *could* seem realistic. Indeed, during this period an emerging urban professional class, comprised of lawyers, merchants, skilled artisans, and members of other professions, was cultivating new sorts of literary tastes. The dialect tradition in particular, which at the end of the sixteenth century had had a narrow public of aficionados, by the second decade of the seventeenth century could count on a larger audience and was well on its way to an alternative canonization. Contributing factors to this development included the "academization of exercises in dialect;"[25] the commitment to the publication and circulation of this new literature on the part of a group of Neapolitan printers (Scarano, mentioned above, was one of the foremost champions of Neapolitan literature); and, above all, the establishment of a robust foundation of a new canon of literary works in Neapolitan. What is, in fact, particularly striking in the scene at the Molo described above (again, whether it was a real or a fictional event is not so important) is its self-conscious *staging* of the genesis of a tradition.

For the creation, publication, and circulation of these texts were just the first steps in initiating a tradition. There had to be multiple editions (there were twenty-six of the *Vaiasseide* by 1628, according to Zito), accompanied by critical readings and annotations; the works needed to generate polemic and debate and become the stuff of subsequent notes of acknowledgment, prefaces, and other paratextual material—until a dense network of references, cross-references, and expressions of influence had been instituted. This is precisely what happened after the publication of the *Vaiasseide*: first, with Zito's annotation and defense; then with Cortese's own *Viaggio de Parnaso*, where his depiction of a Parnassus in celebration over the literary accomplishments of Basile obliquely nodded to his own contributions; and then later in the century, as Cortese and Basile were cited in preface after preface, as classics like the *Aeneid* and the *Gerusalemme liberata* were translated into Neapolitan, and as the first linguistic treatises on Neapolitan were penned (for example, Partenio Tosco's *L'eccellenza della lingua napoletana* [1662]).

Zito concludes his defense with a curious bit of evidence. Countering the Scatenati's claim that "la *Vaiasseide* resta pe dellettazione de potecare, tavernare, e similia" ("the Vaiasseide remains a work that delights only shopkeepers, innkeepers, and the like"), he tells us that even the Duke of Urbino is a fan: "e tanto delietto nne senteva, che quase ogne ghiuorno nne voleva sentire cantare quarch'ottava; e cchiù bote nne restaie mmaravegliato, e stoputo" ("he got so much pleasure from it, that nearly every day he wanted to hear a few octaves, and many times he remained amazed and in a state of marvel" [239]).[26] Here, Zito seems to be proposing that these everyday, plebeian epics might indeed replace traditional forms as the source of a new marvelous, and not only for a public of shop-keepers. Considering the subsequent rise of the

25 Fulco, "La letteratura dialettale napoletana. Giulio Cesare Cortese e Giovan Battista Basile. Pompeo Sarnelli," 842. Fulco mentions, in particular, the Accademica degli Incauti.

26 The court of the Duke of Urbino Francesco Maria II della Rovere (1549-1631), considered by some a "prince-philosopher" for his humanistic erudition and prudent governing style, attracted many men of letters.

modern European novel, with its characteristically unheroic protagonists, Zito's remarks appear suggestively prescient.

Cortese's literary endeavors put into question the relevance of past linguistic and literary models through the critical—and comical—investigation of the myths of heroism and exemplarity. But part and parcel with this deconstructive strategy is Cortese's project of refining the expressive instruments necessary to catalogue the rituals of local popular culture, plot the trials of everyday life, and in the process orchestrate a choral comedy starring the urban masses of seventeenth-century Naples. In fact, Cortese's poems (together with the other seminal works of the Neapolitan tradition) are both rich repositories for information on the customs and beliefs of early modern Naples *and* experiments with innovative forms (serial narration, realistic vignettes) that would find full development in later centuries. These comic epics have, in fact, a long line of descendants—direct and indirect—ahead of them, prefiguring the evolution of more modern artistic sensibilities and the "fluctuation of borders and recodification of literary categories typical of the eighteenth century, in which the rise of the novel has such importance."[27]

More locally, by the end of the century Cortese's influence on a new generation of Neapolitan authors of theatrical comedy was secured. [28] The dramatic production of the early eighteenth century both carried forward the legacy of Cortese and Basile in its realistic portrayal of the micro-institutions and everyday life of the lower social ranks of contemporary Naples, and further developed the stylized Neapolitan comic "types"—Pulcinella, et al.—of the commedia dell'arte. With their representation of Naples "in its misery and in its dreams . . . with its lurid streets, its dark warehouses and workshops, its votive altars to saints and Madonnas on the street corners, and its cops and robbers, thugs and conmen," these works, moreover, constituted an important link between the "fathers" of the Neapolitan tradition and nineteenth and twentieth-century literary treatments of Neapolitan popular culture. [29] At the same time as the dialect prose comedies were delighting audiences, the *commedia per musica*, which together with the *intermezzi* (short comic scenes performed between the acts of *opere serie*) later merged into the opera buffa, was also storming the stages. The libretti of these *commedie* were set in Naples, written in Neapolitan (often by the same authors as the prose comedies), and typically featured the same familiar characters and cityscapes, even if often in a decidedly "softened" manner that

---

27 Clotilde Bertoni, *Percorsi europei dell'eroicomico* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1997) 11. Experiments like these ultimately proved far more vital than the "classic" mock or heroic epic of the seventeenth and especially eighteenth centuries (Pope et al.), which depended so completely on its classical model that "the apocalyptic end that it trumpets is to some degree the end of mock-epic itself—the death of precisely the kind of classically influenced culture in which mock-heroic could seem an appropriate language to detail society's ills." Richard Terry, "Epic and Mock-Heroic," in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Christine Gerrard (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006): 367. Terry also wrote of the "mock-heroic asserting its relevance to a new literary form, the novel" (366).

28 Examples of the first generation of dialect comedy include *La Deana o lo Lavenaro* [Diana, or In the Lavinaro District] (1706) by Nicola Maresca (1677-1720?), in which the painstaking reproduction of the characteristic language and customs of the Lavinaro and Mercato neighborhoods figure as the true protagonists; *Lo curatore* [The Curator] (1726), *Li bbirbe* [The Rascals] (1728), and *La Zeza de Casoria* [Zeza from Casoria] (1770) by Gennaro Antonio Federico (end of seventeenth century-1743?), the second of which, for example, stars two spongers who frequent coffeehouses in search of gullible young women; and, most notably, the comedies of Pietro Trinchera (1702-55): *La monaca fauza o la forza de lo sango* [The False Nun, or Blood Runs Thick] (1726), *La gnoccolara overo li nnamurate scorchigliate* [The Flirt, or The Swindled Lovers] (1733), and *Notà Pettolone* [Notary Pettolone] (1748). In *La gnoccolara*, whose heroine is a forerunner of sorts to Carlo Goldoni's Mirandolina (of *La locandiera*), the charming Graziella is abandoned by her jealous husband and subsequently besieged by admirers whom she uses to her advantage but ultimately resists, causing her husband to rethink his unreasonable position and take her back.

29 Aldo Vallone, *Storia della letteratura meridionale* (Napoli: Cuen, 1996): 386.

tended to idealize or exoticize the urban lower classes and their culture.[30] If, as Gramsci famously maintained, opera substituted for the novel in Italy (he calls opera *il romanzo popolare musicato*), the earliest opera's everyday stories and language were intimately tied to one city—Naples—and to those authors who had first brought these stories and language to literary life.

The reform of comic theater that Carlo Goldoni (not by coincidence, also an author of buffa librettos) initiated in the later eighteenth century further advocated realistic representation of average human beings in their everyday domestic and social milieus, and dialect as a possible vehicle for that representation. Although the production of novels in eighteenth-century Italy did not parallel that of other European countries, in the context of the nineteenth century, when the Italian novel did come of age, these early Neapolitan experiments with language, genre and representation appear in a surprisingly modern light. In the first half of the nineteenth century the dialect question was necessarily tied up with the Risorgimento and renewed debates about the formation of a national culture and language; the reform of literary Italian by Alessandro Manzoni "transfers the character of spoken and familiar language from dialect to a common language . . . and takes from dialects the privilege of immediacy and spontaneity . . . invading and making treasure of the previously disparaged realms of dialect literature."[31] And yet, later in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the flourishing post-Unification dialect culture, as well as the narrative experiments that incorporated dialect for both naturalistic and expressionistic ends (from Giovanni Verga to Carlo Emilio Gadda), would draw on strategies of linguistic interanimation, generic deformation, and celebration of little heroes that would not have been unfamiliar to authors like Cortese and Basile.

Bibliography

Astarita, Tommaso. *Between Salt Water and Holy Water: A History of Southern Italy.* New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bertoni, Clotilde. *Percorsi europei dell'eroicomico*. Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1997.

Bianchi, Patricia, Nicola de Blasi, and Rita Librandi. *Storia della lingua a Napoli e in Campania: I'te vurria parla'*. Naples: T. Pironti, 1993.

Burke, Peter. *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Cortese, Giulio Cesare. *La Vaiasseide*. Naples: Tarquinio Longo, 1612.

_____. *La Vaiasseide* [enlarged edition, "A compiuta perfettione ridotta. Con gli Argomenti, et

[30] One of the landmark musical comedies was *Patrò Calienno de la Costa* [Master Calienno de la Costa] (1709), with music by Antonio Orefice and libretto by Agasippo Mercotellis, probably a pen name for the lawyer Niccolò Corvo. The above-mentioned Federico was the most acclaimed comic librettist from 1730-45, and had a central role in the transformation of the intermezzo into an autonomous form, as well as in the thematic shift from plebeian subjects to the representation of an emerging professional class, in, for example, *La Zita* [The Maiden] (1731, music by C. Ruberto), and, most famously, *Lo frate 'nnamurato* [The Monk in Love] (1732) and *La serva padrona* [The Maid Turned Mistress] (1733), both with music by Giovan Battista Pergolesi. For a discussion of these early comedies, their representation of urban Naples and the cultural politics involved therein see, for example, Barbara Ann Naddeo, "Urban Arcadia: Representation of the 'Dialect' of Naples in Linguistic Theory and Comic Theater, 1696-1780," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.1 (2001): 41-65.

[31] Sansone, "Relazioni fra la letteratura italiana e le letterature dialettali," 315.

alcune prose di Gian Alesio Abactutis. Dedicata al Potentiss. Re de' Venti"]. Naples: Tarquinio Longo, 1615.
_____. *Micco Passaro 'nnamorato*. Naples: Nicolò Longo, 1619.
_____. *Viaggio di Parnaso*. Venice: Nicolò Misserini, 1621.
_____. *Opere burlesche in lingua napoletana*. Naples: Domenico di Ferrante Maccarano, 1621.
_____. *Opere poetiche*. Ed. Enrico Malato. Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1967.
Croce, Benedetto. *Saggi sulla letteratura italiana del Seicento*. Bari: Laterza, 1911.
_____. "La letteratura dialettale riflessa, la sua origine nel Seicento e il suo ufficio storico." *Uomini e cose della vecchia Italia* vol. 1, 222-34. Bari: Laterza, 1927.
Davidson, Peter. *The Universal Baroque*. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2007.
Firpo, Luigi. "Allegoria e satira in Parnaso." *Belfagor* I (1946): 673-699.
Fulco, Giorgio. "La letteratura dialettale napoletana. Giulio Cesare Cortese e Giovan Battista Basile. Pompeo Sarnelli." In *Storia della letteratura italiana* vol. 5, *La fine del Cinquecento e il Seicento*, edited by Enrico Malato, 813-67. Rome: Salerno, 1997.
Gentilcore, David. *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy: Social and Cultural Values in Early Modern Europe*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998.
Haller, Hermann. *The Other Italy. The Literary Canon in Dialect*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
Lebano, Eduardo. "Giulio Cesare Cortese." *Seventeenth-Century Italian Poets and Dramatists*, edited by Albert M. Mancini and Glen Palen Pierce, 106-12. Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2008.
Malato, Enrico, ed. *La poesia dialettale napoletana*, 2 vols. Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1960.
Marland, Hilary. *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*. London: Routledge, 1993.
Marino, John A. *Becoming Neapolitan: Citizen Culture in Baroque Naples*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.
Maurino, Ferdinando. "Cervantes, Caporali, Cortese and Their Journeys to Parnassus." *Modern Language Quarterly* 19 (1958): 43-46.
Mazzacurati, Giancarlo."La scelta eroicomica." In *La letteratura italiana vol. 2, Rinascimento e Barocco*, edited by Salvatore Battaglia and Giancarlo Mazzacurati, 383-402. Florence: Sansoni, 1974.
Mercurio, Scipione. *La comare o la ricoglitrice*. Venice: Giovanni Battista Ciotti, 1596.
Naddeo, Barbara Ann. "Urban Arcadia: Representation of the 'Dialect' of Naples in Linguistic Theory and Comic Theater, 1696-1780." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.1 (2001): 41-65.
Nigro, Salvatore S. "Giulio Cesare Cortese." *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*. Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960-.
Paccagnella, Ivano. *Il fasto delle lingue. Plurilinguismo letterario nel Cinquecento*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1984.
Pancino, Claudia. *Il bambino e l'acqua sporca. Storia dell'assistenza al parto dalle mammane alle ostetriche (secoli XVI-XIX)*. Milan: F.F. Angeli, 1984.
Rak, Michele. *Napoli gentile. La letteratura in "lingua napoletana" nella cultura barocca (1596-1632)*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994.
Sabatini Francesco. "Lingue e letterature volgari in competizione." In *Storia e civiltà della Campania, Il medioevo*, edited by Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, 401-31. Naples: Electa, 1992.

Sansone, Mario. “Relazioni fra la letteratura italiana e le letterature dialettali.” In *Problemi ed orientamenti critici di lingua e letteratura italiana vol. 4, Letterature comparate*, edited by Attilio Momigliano, 261-327. Milan: Marzorati, 1948.

Segre, Cesare. “Polemica linguistica ed espressionismo dialettale nella letteratura italiana.” In *Lingua, stile e societa. Studi sulla storia della prosa italiana,* 383-412. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963.

Spadaccini, Nicholas and Luis Martin-Estudillo. *Hispanic Baroques. Reading Cultures in Context.* Vanderbilt, TN: Vanderbilt UP, 2005.

Stussi, Alfredo. *Lingua, dialetto e letteratura*. Turin: Einaudi, 1993.

Terry, Richard.“Epic and Mock-Heroic.” In *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, edited by Christine Gerrard, 356-68. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006.

Vallone, Aldo. *Storia della letteratura meridionale*. Napoli: Cuen, 1996.

Vignuzzi Malgarini, Ugo and Patrizia Bertini. “L’alternativa regionale e dialettale.” In *Storia della letteratura italiana* vol. 5, *La fine del Cinquecento e il Seicento*, edited by Enrico Malato, 771-812. Rome: Salerno, 1997.

Vitale, Maurizio.” Di alcune rivendicazioni secentesche della eccellenza dei dialetti.” *La veneranda favella. Studi di storia della lingua italiana,* 305-23. Naples: Morano, 1988.

Zito, Bartolomeo. *La Vaiasseida poema heroico di Giulio Cesare Cortese, nouamente arricchito di annotazioni, & di dichiarazioni a ciascun canto. Con una difesa, nella quale ... Contro la censura degli Accademici Scatenati.* Naples: Ottavio Beltrano, 1628.

_____. *La Vajaisseide. Poema eroico di Giulio Cesare Croce. Arricchito di Annotazioni, e di Dichiarazioni a ciascun canto*. *Con una difesa … Contro la censura degli Scatenati*. In *Opere di Giulio Cesare Cortese* vol. 2. Naples: Giuseppe Maria Porcelli, 1783.