“Già mai non mi conforto”: A Reexamination

Marilyn Migiel

I

- Già mai non mi conforto
né mi voglio ralegrare.
Le navi son giute a porto
e [or] vogliono coltare.
5 Vassene lo piú gente
in terra d'oltramare
ed io, lassa dolente,
como degio fare?

II

- Vassene in altra contrata
10 e no lo mi manda a diri
ed io rimagno ingannata:
tanti sono li sospiri,
che mi fanno gran guerra
la notte co la dia,
15 né 'n celo ned in terra
non mi par ch'io sia.

III

- Santus, santus, [santus] Deo,
che 'n la Vergine venisti
salva e guarda l'amor meo,
20 poi da me lo dipartisti.
Oit alta potestade
temuta e dotata,
la mia dolze amistade
ti sia acomandata!

IV

- 25 La croce salva la gente
e me face disviare,
e non mi val Dio pregare.
Oi croce pellegrina,

- 30 perché m'ài sí distrutta?
Oimè, lassa tapina,
chi ardo e 'ncendo tut·t·a!

V

- Lo 'mperadore con pace
tut·t·o l[o] mondo mantene
35 ed a me[ve] guerra face,
ché m'à tolta la mia spene.
Oit alta potestate
temuta e dottata,
la mia dolze amistate
40 vi sia acomandata!

VI

- Quando la croce pigliao,
certo no lo mi pensai,
quelli che tanto m'amao
ed illu tanto amai,
45 chi [eo] ne fui bat·t·uta
e messa in pregionia
e in celata tenuta
per la vita mia!

VII

- Le navi sono collate,
50 in bonor possan andare
con elle la mia amistate
e la gente che v'à andare!
[Oi] padre criatore,
a porto le conduci,
55 ché vanno a servidore
de la santa cruci.

VIII

- Però ti prego, Duccetto,
[tu] che sai la pena mia,
che me ne faci un sonetto
60 e mandilo in Soria.
Ch'io non posso abentare
[la] notte né [la] dia:
in terra d'oltremare
sta la vita mia!¹

Rinaldo d'Aquino's *canzone* "Già mai non mi conforto," a lament of a woman at the departure of her beloved for the Holy Land, has long been championed as one of the examples of simple, direct poetry produced by the otherwise unbearably baroque

Sicilian School. Not surprisingly, it was a *canzone* close to the hearts of Romantic critics. Francesco De Sanctis, for example, has this to say of the poem and others like it:

L'amante che prega e chiede amore, l'innamorata che lamenta la lontananza dell'amato, o che teme di essere abbandonata, le punture e le gioie dell'amore, sono i temi semplici de' canti popolari, la prima effusione del cuore messo in agitazione dall'amore. E queste poesie, come le più semplici e spontanee, sono anche le più affettuose e le più sincere. Sono le prime impressioni, sentimenti giovani e nuovi, poetici per se stessi, non ancora analizzati e raffinati.²

With the intervention of historical criticism, the critical approach to the *canzone* has become somewhat more complicated. The attempts to date the *canzone* and the recognition of political themes in it have helped to undermine the tenacity with which critics have held to their view of the *canzone's* simplicity and spontaneity. Or perhaps it is just that the rather dry critics who tried to date the *canzone* as referring to the Crusade of 1228 or to that of 1242 were not want to speak of spontaneity and passion in quite the same tones. But this is not the problem. The problem is that readings of the *canzone* have not changed substantially in the last century. Why? Historical criticism, be its accomplishments ever so impressive, has not served to open up readings of the poem in ways that one might have expected and desired.

In what ways have readings of the *canzone* remained the same? It is curious that modern criticism tends to find in the political references the possible evidence of a tie between Rinaldo d'Aquino and the courtly mode of writing, and seems most concerned with showing, as Malagoli, "quanto fosse mediata e concettosa l'allusione della dolente."³ This flight to the other extreme is obviously part of the reaction against Romantic criticism; and for Malagoli in particular it is proof that he has escaped the snares of such an ideology, for he proudly claims, "siamo rimasti liberi da quel giu-dizio e capaci di liberamente leggere. . . ."⁴ True, perhaps, but the glitter of rationality in one's own critical instruments may well be a source of captive fascination; negation of popularism and sincerity is not enough. In fact, Malagoli's critical reading exposes only a mistake in the classification of the poem: the categories of "popular" versus "courtly" are still considered valid. The change in readings has not involved a change in the structure or categories on which such readings are based.

In the following passage, taken from Pasquini's literary history of the Sicilian School, we see yet another way in which criticism has "transformed" itself in order to avoid any significant changes.

Non c'è dubbio che questo canto disperato per la partenza dell'amato è apparso alla critica romantica superiore ai proprii meriti proprio per i tratti apparentemente ingenui e immediati della situazione "oggettiva," per i modi cantabili e facili della traduzione poetica, così lontani dalla rarefazione manieristica della vena aulica. Eppure è indiscutibile che Rinaldo coltiva i due opposti filoni, se non con piena coscienza della diversità dei generi, almeno con cura stilistica diversa, contenendo il tema popolare sul piano di un'espressività elementare di stile, di lessico e di ritmo. Vero è che anche qui gli difettano le doti originarie, che il suo riecheggiamento si piega troppo docilmente alla musica andante e trascurata dello sfogo, in modo che egli stesso rimane vittima e prigioniero di quella povertà inventiva e lessicale, invece di dominare e arricchire, nell'operazione mimetica, le candide suggestioni delle voci più modeste e sincere. . . .⁵

The terms *apparso* and *apparentemente* which are used to point out the limitations of Romantic criticism contrast starkly with the critic's emphasis on the truth value of his own statements. Pasquini points this out not once, but three times, at the beginning of each sentence: "Non c'è dubbio che," "Eppure è indiscutibile che," "Vero è che. . . ." Though this critic claims to distance himself from Romantic critics and affirms the solidity of his discourse, he leaves us with a Romantic reading of the poem. (In general, the strength of the reaction against Romantic criticism seems to have succeeded only in making it go underground.) While appearing to complement the poet, Pasquini manages to introduce a Romantic conception of poetic activity: Rinaldo d'Aquino may not have been entirely conscious of the theoretical principles behind his poetry (unlike the educated critic, Pasquini seems to imply), but fortunately he had an adequate practical knowledge of its complexities, its "doubleness," and so forth.

Pasquini opens fire on the poet with his own figurative language. He describes the poet as having to "contain" the admittedly popular theme, whereupon the reader begins to suspect that the controlling metaphor for poetic activity could be that of war. The poet has to oppress the poetic material lest it overpower him. The tables are suddenly turned, however, and the poet who kept his theme to "espressività elementare" finds that he suffers the fate of his *donna abbandonata*, for he is rendered "vittima e prigioniero" by the defects in his own language. Malagoli also

suggestively implies that the difficulties of poetic creation are a kind of sexual battle. One gets abandoned for not having met the demands of the linguistic and poetic medium, for not having spoken well enough. The sexual energy in the passage is then channeled into the field of economic gain. One has the impression that the author is left in poverty precisely because he was unable to dominate and enrich his original capital investment, i.e., his *doti originarie*.

On the whole, the critic stages the battle very nicely so as to trip up the poet. We would have half-expected from the presentation of arguments in his text that Rinaldo d'Aquino was supposed to dominate and enrich the "povertà inventiva e lessicale" mentioned previously, but the points of reference shift and the poet finds himself before "le candide suggestioni delle voci piú modeste e sincere." The subject matter is presented in a positive light and the suggestive (but ever modest, and sincere) voices which abandon the poet to his own darkness serve to convince us that the battle has been nothing if not fair. In the midst of the confusion between text and poet, the critic sneaks in his Romantic ideas and allows them to triumph.

My own aim in this study is to save the poet from the voices of modesty and sincerity, or perhaps to rescue the critic from his own self-deception — even at the risk of perpetrating another form of deception. I propose to revise the readings of "Già mai non mi conforto" by reexamining the historical context which it evokes.

The poem is typically read as a lament against the Crusades, in the genre of the Crusade song begun by the Provençal troubadour Marcabru.⁶ Critics, assuming this to be the case, have determined that 1228 is the most probable date of the *canzone*. But it is to be noted that Vincenzo De Bartholomaeis settles on the date of 1228 only because it appears to be a more logical choice than other suggested dates of 1240 (that suggested by Ernesto Monaci) or 1242 (the date suggested by Francesco Torraca).⁷ In doing so, De Bartholomaeis passes over several problems of great importance.

The first is that of the reference to the Emperor in vv. 33-36: "Lo 'mperadore con pace/ tut'to l[o] mondo mantene/ ed a me[ve] guerra face,/ ché m'à tolta la mia spene." De Bartholomaeis notes that such a statement could be written in 1228 only by someone whose perception of reality was rather distorted.⁸ His review of other proposed dates, however, leads him back to 1228 as the

only possibility and he does not allow this problem to arise in the discussion again.

The second difficulty is presented by the sixth strophe:

Quando la croce pigliao,
certo no lo mi pensai,
quelli che tanto m'amao
ed illu tanto amai,
chi [eo] ne fui bat^tuta
e messa in pregionia
e in celata tenuta
per la vita mia!

De Bartholomaeis says:

Chi ha battuto la infelice, chi l'ha messa in prigione e chi l'ha tenuta celata in casa? Un cotale ufficio la letteratura medievale lo ha costantemente assegnato al marito geloso, contro il quale han sempre protestato e poeti aulici e poeti popolari, in barba ai fulmini scagliati contro di loro dall'alto de' pulpiti. La situazione classica, insomma, della "malmari-tata."⁹

De Bartholomaeis thus simplifies what seems clearly to be a reference to a political problem — as would almost any reference to being cast into prison. He renders the problem purely literary, thereby domesticating the *canzone* and smoothing out possible rough spots. Does it not seem odd, that we should assign the responsibility for jailing the female speaker to an unmentioned jealous husband? (De Bartholomaeis slyly attempts to slip his interpretation past the reader by suggesting that the speaker was "tenuta celata in casa," but this appears nowhere in the text and *in celata* (v. 47) may well mean "in prison."¹⁰ One could suggest a calque with *celar*, thereby arriving at a secondary meaning of "kept hidden away," but there is still no reason to suggest that the speaker's imprisonment is of domestic origin.

Parts of the speaker's account of her suffering in love, particularly the cry, "ardo e 'ncendo tut^ta!," could lead us to believe that her grief has no source other than her separation from her beloved. The reader is forced to create a context which explains the use of the burning metaphor, and the most usual such context is that of passionate love. In fact, the phrase is a stock one which appears in other poems in which the narrators are lovesick and griefstricken. But I would like to suggest that the poem's power arises ultimately from the narrator's ability to straddle the line be-

tween two worlds: one populated by themes typical of the popularizing love lyric, and the other which is the world of thirteenth century political struggles.

Let us take seriously the political reference to the Emperor and interpret as political references the lines in which the female speaker makes explicit the brutal treatment to which she has been subjected. Admittedly, the poem is inward-turning. But what presents itself as the interiorization of a social and political problem — the suffering of those who really suffer in times of war, that is to say, the women in a given community — may also be an attempt to tone down the poem's political aggressiveness. The poem is successful in this sense, for the placement of the poet's words into the mouth of the female speaker gains for him the proper distance between himself and that speaker. He therefore extricates himself from certain sticky political difficulties which could have won for him that plight of his fictive speaker. The poet's strategy is based on the hope that the reader will be particularly condescending and will misunderstand the subtlety and the sensitivity of that woman — essentially that of an incisive politician — reaching the audience she wishes to reach, leaving others behind. The choice of the Crusade theme and the choice of a female speaker are motivated, I believe, by the desire to deflect attention away from the author's commentary on an internal political problem (Frederick's abuse of his political power) and on a problem of international importance in the early thirteenth century (the treatment of heretics). This context explains much better the difficulties presented by the poem and incorporates the figurative language used by the speaker into a specific thematic structure.

From the point of view of the *canzone's* speaker, nothing changes dramatically. The ships are still in the port, and their destination still the *terra d'oltremare*. It is the international political situation which is not the troubled one of 1228. If the Emperor was indeed keeping the whole world at peace, we are led to see the Kingdom of Jerusalem not as the place of possible strife between Christians and infidels, but as the camp for political subversives (heretics and rebels) into which it was turned by Frederick II and as the place where heretics and crusaders were not always on different sides of the battlefield.

Ernst Kantorowicz describes the Emperor's political excesses in the following manner:

The feudal nobility who had participated in the rebellion of 1229 were mercilessly banished with their families. As Frederick punished all relatives of heretics to the second generation "that they might know God to be a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children," so he turned out the relatives of the rebels whether clerics or laymen. The measures adopted toward the feudal nobility were, however, varied. Some of them were dispatched to join the imperial armies in Lombardy and some shipped off to the army in Palestine. Pope Gregory had already complained that Frederick was misusing his sacred kingdom of Jerusalem as a penal settlement for political criminals and suspects, and the process naturally did not now cease.¹¹

It seems also that the poem evokes the judicial system which dealt with heretics, those rebels against Frederick's State, when they were apprehended. This does not mean that the poem is about heresy, or that the speaker or her lover are heretics. It is well-known that the hunt for heretics caught up more than heretics in its trap. Anyone whose moral or ideological position was questionable — blasphemers, usurers, perjurers, sexual perverts, diviners, and anyone who questioned the authority of the Church of State — could be subject to the punishments for heresy.

And what were the punishments for heresy? Convicted heretics were burned alive at the stake. Heretics who recanted or persons who were merely suspect of heresy were sentenced to life imprisonment, flagellation, fines, confiscation of goods, wearing of crosses, or pilgrimages.

Returning to the poem, we see that the speaker is subject to a series of punishments which fall under those for heresy:

- 1) Burning ("chi ardo e 'ncendo tut'ta!," v. 32)
- 2) Flagellation ("chi [eo] ne fui bat'tuta," v. 45)
- 3) Imprisonment ("e messa in pregionia / e in celata tenuta / per la vita mia!," vv. 46-48)

In addition, the speaker's torment is focused on the cross and on the motif of voyage or wandering. In the fourth strophe, we read:

La croce salva la gente
e me face disviare,
la croce mi fa dolente
e non mi val Dio pregare.
Oì croce pellegrina,
perché m'ài sí distrutta?
Oimè, lassa tapina,
chi ardo e 'ncendo tut'ta!

The idea of the pilgrimage appears twice in these lines, first in the speaker's reference to her own "wandering" ("la croce . . . me face disviare") and then to that of the cross ("Oi croce pellegrina"). I would like to suggest that the context being evoked here is that of the so-called *poenae confusibiles*: the wearing of crosses and the undertaking of pilgrimages.

The wearing of crosses was first instituted as a punishment for heresy by St. Dominic in 1208, when he sentenced a heretic to wear a small yellow cross fixed to his clothing.¹² The first official mention of such a sign was made at the council of Toulouse in 1229. Penitent heretics were to wear two crosses on their breasts, at right and left, of a color different from that of their clothes. This was called the *crucesignatus*.¹³ This prescription was renewed by the council of Béziers in 1233, and by the council of Tarragone in 1242.¹⁴ The penance gained wide currency. It was one of Bernard Gui's most frequent sentences. The crosses condemned the wearer to perpetual infamy, so much so that those who wore them were sometimes given permission to remove the crosses because with them, they could not find work, support their families, or get married. The sense of the fourth strophe is similar to the idea expressed by a number of writers on the Inquisition, who note with curiosity that the very symbol of redemption and everlasting life should become a burdensome affliction.¹⁵

Pilgrimages were also a common penance, as so were Crusades. As H.C. Lea notes, "At the inception of the Inquisition the pilgrimage universally ordered for men was that to Palestine, as a crusader. . . . It seems to have been felt that the best use to which a heretic could be put, if he was to escape the fagot, was to make him aid in the defense of the Holy Land — a service of infinite hardship and peril."¹⁶ Within a decade, there came to be much alarm about whether the penitent heretics would corrupt good Christians in the Holy Land. In 1238, Pope Gregory IX announced that penitent heretics entering Jerusalem were to wear some distinguishing sign, but he does not specify what it was to be.¹⁷ According to Lea, by 1242 or 1243, the number of coopted and potentially dangerous Crusaders was so great that a papal decree forbade further use of such a penance.¹⁸ Later, however, when there was a need for more Crusaders, the commutation of the penance of wearing crosses into the penance of crusading became more common again.¹⁹

Having presented the evidence for a new reading of "Già mai non mi conforto," I believe that two tasks remain still: firstly, to

suggest the difficulties with the interpretation I have proposed; and secondly, to make explicit the larger implications of this proposal.

The main pitfall is this: we know relatively little about the way in which the Italian Inquisition was conducted in the years after its inception in the early 1230's. Most of the information we have on the Inquisition in the thirteenth century comes to us from the South of France. Were these penances used in the south of France also common in Italy in the 1230's and 1240's?²⁰

Since the information we have is so limited, it is probably wiser to take a more conservative position. Let us assume that the use of the *crucesignatus* was, in the first half of the thirteenth century, limited to the South of France.²¹ I would like to propose then that it was possible for a poet of the Sicilian school to have a broad, even international, perspective on political events. We seem to need to be reminded that Frederick's court was the most important court of the time, and that it was unlikely that it was characterized by a provincial atmosphere. Certainly there was enough contact with the Holy Land that some members of Frederick's court would have been aware of the presence of penitent heretics there.

Other critical trends in reading the poetry of this school often appear to reject such an assumption about the political and cultural awareness of the poets of the Sicilian school. This emerges in the way in which they pose the question of the relationship of social and historical context to the literary production of the Sicilian School. In contrast, I would like to suggest that these poems, which do not immediately reveal their ties to the political and cultural events of the years 1225-1250, may reveal such ties more readily upon examination of the themes and the imagery of the poetry.

Yale University

NOTES

- 1 This *canzone* can be found in the standard edition of the poetry of the Sicilian School, *Le rime della scuola siciliana*, ed. Bruno Panvini, 2 vols. (Firenze: Olschki, 1962-64).
- 2 Francesco De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, ed. Niccolò Gallo (1958; rpt. Torino: Einaudi, 1975), I, p. 11.
- 3 Luigi Malagoli, *Motivi e forme dello stile del Duecento*, 2nd ed. (Pisa: Libreria Goliardica Editrice, 1960), p. 189.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

- 5 Emilio Pasquini e Antonio Enzo Quaglio, *Le origini e la scuola siciliana*, Letteratura Italiana Laterza 1 (Bari: Laterza, n.d.), p. 214.
- 6 The poem referred to is Marcabru's "A la fontana del vergier." See the *Poésies complètes du troubadour Marcabru*, ed. J.-M.-L. Dejeanne (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1909).
- 7 Vincenzo De Bartholomaeis, "Ricerche intorno a Rinaldo e Jacopo d'Aquino," in *Studi Medievali*, n.s., 10 (1937), 130-67 and 12 (1939), 102-32. For the argument on the dating of the *canzone*, see especially vol. 10, 145 ff.
- 8 Ibid., vol. 10, 145-46.
- 9 Ibid., 144.
- 10 Thus, one translation reads, "I loved him so much that I was beaten for it and put into prison and kept in confinement — for life!" See *The Penguin Book of Italian Verse*, Introduced and Edited by George R. Kay (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 26.
- 11 Ernst Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second, 1194-1250*, Authorized English Version by E.O. Lorimer (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1931), pp. 481-82.
- 12 H.C. Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages. Its Organization and Operation* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1954), p. 164.
- 13 See Ulysses Robert, *Les Signes d'infamie au moyen age: juifs, sarrasins, hérétiques, lépreux, cagots et filles publiques* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1891), p. 117.
- 14 Ibid., p. 117.
- 15 See H.C. Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, p. 164: "It seems a contradiction that the emblem of redemption, so proudly worn by the crusader and the military orders, should be to the convert an infliction almost unbearable, but when it became the sign of his sin and disgrace there were few inflictions which might not more readily be borne."
- 16 Ibid., p. 162.
- 17 *Acta Honorii III (1216-1227) et Gregorii IX (1227-1241), e registris Vaticanis aliisque fontibus*, ed. Aloysius L. Tautu (Roma: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950), p. 313. Gregory's letter is dated March 9, 1238.
- 18 H.C. Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, p. 162.
- 19 Ibid., p. 163. See also Robert, *Les Signes d'infamie*, pp. 132-33.
- 20 Lea notes (ibid., p. 163) that "In Italy the crosses appeared to be of red cloth." His statement, however, is based on Florentine archival material dated October 13, 1327.
- 21 Here we are following the opinion of Robert, *Les Signes d'infamie*, p. 139: "Heureusement, pour l'honneur de l'humanité, ces signes paraissent avoir été localisés dans la région et seulement pendant le temps où sévit l'Inquisition."