MALOCCHIO IN NINO RICCI'S *LIVES OF THE SAINTS*

MICHELA BALDO

Summary: The evil eye or *malocchio* has appeared in the works of a number of Italian-Canadian writers but for most its role has been limited. In *Lives of the Saints*, however, the first volume of the trilogy of the same name by Nino Ricci, its role is fundamental to the novel's narrative construction. The central act of the novel, set in a village in southern Italy in the 1960s, is the snakebite received by the protagonist's mother, Cristina, while she is engaged in adulterous intercourse. She becomes pregnant as a result of this encounter and is ostracised by the villagers who interpret her condition as the consequence of the evil eye, *lu malocchiu*. The evil eye becomes a symbol of the pain and violence of the behavioural rules and boundaries imposed on women's flesh. Ricci, the most successful Italian-Canadian author of his generation, uses the concept of *malocchio* to unmask the implications of traditional patriotic and nostalgic narratives based on women's sexuality, and eventually to construct a complex narrative of the Italian-Canadian post-migrant experience.

Ricci's Lives of the Saints and the concept of malocchio

The evil eye or *malocchio* as it is known in Italian, is the belief that a person's eyes produce harmful emanations when he or she feels envy towards another.¹ *Malocchio* has appeared in the works of many Italian-Canadian writers including, for example, Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, Darlene Maddott's *Bottled Roses*,² Caterina Edwards' *Homeground*,³ Mary Melfi's *Infertility Rites*, Penny Petrone's *Breaking the Mould*,⁴ Carole David's *Impala*, Frank Paci's *Italian Shoes*, and Ivana Barbieri's short story "Messing with the Malocchio."⁵

¹ Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 1.

² Maddott's story "The Namesake," in her collection *Bottled Roses*, features *malocchio* even though it is not mentioned specifically. The narrative has the ingredients of an evil-eye story since the protagonist, Pina, with her dark eyes and crow-like appearance, resembles the devil and is suspected of being a witch.

³ In Caterina Edwards' *Homeground*, *malocchio* is linked with the anguish and loneliness of both the protagonist, Maria, and her fellow Italian emigrants in Canada.

⁴ In Penny Petrone's memoir *Breaking the Mould*, the author's childhood memories include *malocchio* as her Calabrese mother's "medieval" superstitious belief.

⁵ Barbieri, "Messing with Malocchio," connects *malocchio* with the headache of the protagonist attending a wedding and the attempts by her uncle to dispel it.

This paper will concentrate on an analysis of *malocchio* in Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, the first novel in the trilogy by the same name because, contrary to its role in other Italian-Canadian works, this belief is important in the emplotment of this narrative, and therefore its study has the potential to provide us with a deeper understanding both of the novel itself as well as the belief embodied within it.

Lives of the Saints begins Ricci's trilogy which includes *In a Glass House* and *Where She Has Gone*, and deals with the experiences of a southern-Italian family before and after emigration to Canada.⁶ Ricci was born in 1959 in Leamington, Ontario, to parents from the Molise region of Italy.⁷ His initial project was to write a single novel but, as he has described, the story was too big to fit into one volume and it became a trilogy.⁸ The novel itself won many awards, including in Canada the Governor General's Award for Fiction, and it remained on that country's best-seller list for several months.⁹ Unlike the other two novels in the trilogy, which depict life in Canada,¹⁰ *Lives of the Saints* is set in 1960 in a small village in southern Italy, called Valle del Sole, and focuses on the first seven years in the life of the young protagonist Vittorio, who lives in the village with his mother and grandfather. The concept of *malocchio* is thus inserted into a childhood memory, as is the case in works by other Italian-Canadian writers including Petrone and David.¹¹ Like other Italian-Canadian works, this novel can be considered a post-migrant narrative as it is written by a second-generation Italian Canadian and deals with the aftermath of migration.¹²

The central episode of *Lives of the Saints*, and that from which the narrative unfolds (as the narrator states in the novel's opening pages), is the snakebite that Vittorio's mother Cristina receives on her leg while she is in

⁶ Ricci, *Lives*; Ricci, *Glass House*; Ricci, *Where She Has Gone*.

⁷ Nino Ricci's family is from the province of Isernia in the Italian Region of Molise. His father is originally from the village of Poggio Sannita and his mother from Villa Canale.

⁸ This statement was made by Ricci in an interview with Kirman, "An Interview with Nino Ricci," 1.

⁹ Salvatore, *Ancient Memories, Modern Identities*, 152.

¹⁰ *In a Glass House* is set in a southern Ontario farming community after Vittorio's immigration to Canada to join his father who had emigrated before his family, while *Where She Has Gone* narrates Victor's adult life in Toronto and his return to Italy to rediscover his roots.

¹¹ Petrone, *Breaking the Mould*; David, *Impala*.

¹² Verdicchio, *Devils in Paradise*.

the stable of her father's house. According to the first lines of the novel: "If this story has a beginning, a moment in which a single gesture broke the surface of events like a stone thrown into the sea, the ripples cresting away endlessly, then that beginning occurred on a hot July day in the year 1960, in the village of Valle del Sole, when my mother was bitten by a snake."¹³

The reader later discovers that Cristina was engaged in a sexual encounter with a man in the stable when she was bitten by the snake. The two episodes will be linked subsequently in the narrative by the villagers of Valle del Sole who believe that the snake is the personification of evil and that Cristina has been struck by the evil eye (the *malocchio*) as a consequence of her adulterous sexual encounter. When it is revealed that Cristina is pregnant the villagers ostracize her in the belief that the evil eye has infected her and that it is a pernicious and contagious illness. The story ends with Cristina's death after giving birth on the ship that is taking her to Canada (apparently to rejoin her husband but more likely, as the narrator seems to imply, to meet her lover). The *malocchio*, the evil eye, is thus connected to Cristina's snakebite and it is at the very core of Ricci's novel: it constitutes its "mythical" foundation, as expressed by the narrator at the beginning of the novel and as this article will try to demonstrate.

Malocchio—rendered by Ricci as *lu malocchiu*, in its Molisan dialect form—is codeswitched in *Lives of the Saints*; that is, it appears in another language (in this case Italian or a southern-Italian dialect) as are other terms related to this concept, including words like *invidia* (envy) or *strega* (witch). In fact, these terms referring to the evil eye are codeswitched not only in *Lives of the Saints* but also in all the works by Italian-Canadian authors named above and in all of these works they are also rendered in italics. Given these premises and before analysing in detail the use of the evil eye belief in Ricci's novel it is necessary to clarify the role of codeswitching in relation to the belief itself, because it is a literary device which plays a pivotal role in Ricci's narrative construction.

Codeswitching, focalization and plot in Ricci's novel

Codeswitching is a term used to describe a phenomenon usually observed among speakers in bilingual communities in which two or more languages are in contact. It is defined in syntactic terms as "the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation."¹⁴

¹³ Ricci, *Lives*, 1.

¹⁴ Milroy and Muysken, "Introduction: Code-switching ...," 7-8.

¹⁴ Milroy and Muysken, "Introduction: Code-switching ...," 7-8.

Codeswitching, as discussed by Bandia, describes phenomena rooted in multilingual (bilingual, trilingual) contexts in which unequal power relations between languages are often present.¹⁵ Therefore, I argue, it is more suitable than multilingualism to describe a body of literature, such as Italian-Canadian writing, which deals with the difficulties of integration by Italians in Canada of the first and second generation into a linguistically and culturally different (and often hostile) Canadian environment experienced by Italians of the first and second generation in Canada.¹⁶

Following on this, written codeswitching can be understood as a tool used to imitate the ordinary language spoken by the migrants who feature as characters in literary narratives. However, codeswitching, as a fictional device, does more than simply mimic the speech of Italian emigrants or their descendants: it can also have rhetorical and stylistic effects.¹⁷ An author can employ codeswitching to produce changes in the style of the text or signal codeswitching through typographic conventions such as italics¹⁸ as seen in the use of the term *malocchio* (and related concepts) in Nino Ricci and in the other Italian-Canadian writers already listed: italics here is a convention always used to stress codeswitched words. The visual contrast created by italics, because it is also used as emphasis in otherwise monolingual texts, highlights the contrast between the two (or more) languages employed and leads the reader to focus attention on the language itself.¹⁹ The contrast established by codeswitching is clear if we link this linguistic concept to that of focalisation; that is, to the lens through which we see characters and events in narrative.²⁰ According to the notion of contextu-

¹⁵ Bandia, *Translation as Reparation*, 169.

¹⁶ Tuzi, *The Power of Allegiances*; Pivato, *Echo: Essays on other literatures*; and Verdicchio, *Devils in Paradise*.

¹⁷ Sobrero, *Introduzione all'italiano contemporaneo*.

¹⁸ Brugnolo and Orioles, *Eteroglossia e plurilinguismo letterario II. Plurilinguismo e letteratura*. The decision to use italics must be negotiated with and agreed by the publisher.

¹⁹ Camarca, "Code-switching and Textual Strategies ...," 103; Sarkonak and Hogdson, "Seeing in Depth ...," 10. Codeswitching occurs when the word to be used is the focus of attention. This phenomenon is known in oral codeswitching as flagging which is represented in written codeswitching by the use of italics; Poplack, Wheeler and Westwood "Distinguishing Language Contact ..."; Callahan, *Spanish-English Codeswitching*, 9.

²⁰ Genette, *Figures III*; Määttä, "Dialect and Point of view ..."; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*; Bal, *Narratology*.

²⁰ Genette, *Figures III*; Määttä, "Dialect and Point of view ..."; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*; Bal, *Narratology*.

alisation cues proposed by Gumperz, codeswitching can be used to juxtapose contrasting focalisations in order to deconstruct common, or in the case of Ricci's novel, stereotypical assumptions about (southern) Italian Canadians.²¹ The shifts in focalisation affect the construction of the plot since these shifts can foreground terms related to important episodes anchored to the story plot, or they can anticipate events or create suspense, through the 'prolepsis' technique.²²

Codeswitching, in other words, can influence how plots are constructed, that is how elements of the story are selected and placed in an order that infers causation.²³ The act of constructing plots involves more than selecting events either from memory or life and putting them in an appropriate order: rather "the events themselves need to be constituted in the light of the overall narrative" and they need to be structured "into evolving wholes."²⁴ This ability to construct and also interpret stories whereby the narrative parts and the whole are made to live together is called by Bruner "hermeneutic composability."²⁵ The idea, as is evident in this quote, is that narratives are coherent structures. For Abbott, bringing a collection of events into narrative coherence is the same as normalising these events. Normalisation renders the events plausible, allowing us to see how they all fit together, allowing us to make sense of what is happening around us.²⁶ A well-plotted and coherent story can be very seductive and can create the illusion that the narrative needs no further explanation. The ability to create very powerful plots, defined by Bruner as "narrative seduction," might be responsible for turning a plot into a masterplot.²⁷ Masterplots are those stories which "we tell over and over in a myriad of forms and which connect deeply to our deepest values, wishes and fears."²⁸ Abbott argues that much of the power of these masterplots lies in "their moral force," creating

²¹ Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies*.

²² Genette, *Figures III*.

²³ Somers and Gibson, "Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other' ..."; Currie, *Post-modern Narrative Theory*.

²⁴ Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 8; Poletta, "'It was like Fever ...'," 140.

²⁵ Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 8.

²⁶ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 40-41.

²⁷ Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 9.

²⁸ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 42.

²⁹ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 44-45.

as they do a world “in which good and evil are clearly identifiable, and in which blame can fall squarely on one party or another.”²⁹ As will be clear from the following discussion of its role in *Lives of the Saints*, the *malocchio* narrative I believe represents a masterplot. In addition, codeswitching and the use of italics are written devices which give the concept of *malocchio* an extra force and which are closely linked to the plot construction of *Lives of the Saints*. The next section will try to illustrate the subtle mechanisms of this construction.

Malocchio and related concepts in Lives of the Saints

In order to understand the concept of *malocchio* in Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* we need to make reference to the other concepts, above mentioned, which contribute to its formation and without which it would be impossible to understand the correlation (not only temporal) between the snakebite on Cristina's leg and her adulterous sexual encounter. The fact that *malocchio* and these other concepts are codeswitched in Italian or southern-Italian dialects, or are inserted in passages of discourse in which codeswitching is used, put them in correlation with the realm of beliefs of southern-Italian immigrants in Canada. The analysis of the references to *malocchio* in Ricci's novel will be supported by comparing it to the works of other Italian-Canadian writers who have included the belief in their writing (as noted above), to literary scholars who have analyzed Ricci's work,³⁰ and to psychologists and anthropologists who have studied the evil eye in general and in Italian culture, but mainly southern-Italian culture, in particular,³¹ and especially anthropologist Migliore, in his study of *malocchio* in the Sicilian-Canadian community of Hamilton (Ontario).³² Reference will be made also to scholars who have briefly mentioned the evil eye in their study of Italian communities in Toronto,³³ and occasionally also to scholars who have studied Italian-American communities.³⁴

³⁰ Dvorak, “Nino Ricci's Lives ...”; Tuzi, *The Power of Allegiances*; and Marchese, “Realismo e alienazione ...”

³¹ These scholars include Foster, “The Anatomy of Envy ...”; Likyardopopulos, “The Evil Eye ...”; Dundes, *The Evil Eye*; Aquaro, *Death by Envy*; and Niola and Moro, *Il libro*.

³² Migliore, *Mal'uocchiu*.

³³ This includes DeMaria Harney, *Eh paesan!* and Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*.

³⁴ The evil eye is also briefly mentioned by Jansen in his study of multiculturalism in Canada, *Italians in a Multicultural Canada* and Sturino, “Italians.” However, there are more studies which have analyzed the evil eye among Italian-

Human invidia: the myth of Paradise lost

It is useful to begin a discussion of *malocchio* from the analysis of the codeswitched and italicized term *invidia*, which is considered the ultimate cause of *malocchio*, not only in Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* but also in many accounts of the evil eye, both in the Christian and non-Christian tradition, as reported by many scholars.³⁵ It is interesting to observe that the link between *envy* (*invidia*) and the *evil eye* (*malocchio*) also is found in the root of both terms. Like *malocchio* which is formed by the terms *occhio* (look) and *mal* (bad), *invidia* comes from Latin, from the prefix *in* (against, badly) and the verb *video* (to watch, to look) and means "to look at something/someone in a bad or evil way"³⁶ In both the word *invidia* or *envy* and *malocchio* or *evil eye* then, we find the term "eye," and the notion of "gaze" or "look." The belief in the power of the look or gaze as a source of good or bad energy which is very common in many cultures is exemplified in the term "fascinum" (fascination but also a deadly magic spell caused by a stare), and testifies to a pervasive anxiety associated with vision.³⁷

In *Lives of the Saints* we are given an explanation of the significance of *invidia* in the system of beliefs of the villagers of Valle del Sole through the focalization of the narrator.

Invidia, envy, had been the root of all peasants' troubles according to my grandfather—the reason why brother did not get along with brother, son with father, neighbour with neighbour; why the lot of *contadini* now was such a hard one, their plot and land scattered piecemeal across the countryside, often miles from the village; why the soil offered up yearly only the same closed fist, though the farmers cursed and cajoled it the way they did a stubborn mule. Once, my grandfather had told me, long before the time of Christ, the land around Valle del Sole had been all flat, un-peopled jungle, rich and fertile, the trees a mile high and the river a mile wide. At last a giant named Gambelunghe had come down from the north and cleared the land with his two great oxen, then planted his crops But in the winter, when Gambelunghe was asleep, wolves came

American immigrants, such as Malpezzi and Clemens, *Italian-American Folklore*; Bonocore, *Raised Italian-American*; Riccio, *The Italian American experience*; and Di Stasi, *Mal occhio (evil eye)*.

³⁵ Foster, "The Anatomy of Envy ..."; Likyardopopulos, "The Evil Eye ..."; Dundes, *The Evil Eye*; Aquaro, *Death by Envy*; Niola and Moro, *Il libro*; Migliore, *Mal'uocchio*; and DeMaria Harney, *Eh paesan!*

³⁶ Schoeck cited in Dundes, *The Evil Eye*, 194; Niola and Moro, *Il libro*, 2.

³⁷ DiStasi, *Mal occhio (evil eye)*; Niola and Moro, *Il Libro*.

and broke into his stores, then fell finally on Gambelunghe himself and tore him apart ... the fingers on Gambelunghe's severed hands began to grow, those on the left growing into five women, those on the right into five men. When they were fully grown the men married the women and began to farm Gambelunghe's land, one couple for each field. But soon jealousy broke out among them ...³⁸

Here *invidia* is inserted into a narrative of a fall from a mythical origin of Valle del Sole, the village in which the novel is set. In such a mythical time the land around Valle del Sole had been a paradise-like land which became the territory of a giant named Gambelunghe. However, after the giant died, jealousy broke out among the farmers and led to continuous fights. The narration continues with the observation that after God decided to punish those men and women born of Gambelunghe's hands by making the soil "tired" and "weak,"³⁹ they decided to have a fair division of the land, trying to avoid *invidia*, for example, by always complaining about the meagerness of the harvest, or by refraining from boasting about their goods in front of each other. As suggested by a number of scholars, being sparing of commendation or avoiding praise in order not to stir up or incur the "evil eye" and so cause the infertility of evil eye, is a belief common in Italy (especially southern Italy), and in many other parts of the world.⁴⁰ The story of Gambelunghe can thus be read as the story of a myth, the myth of a paradise lost when of the intrusion of envy, *invidia*. This myth is also present in the Bible when, according to Aquaro for example, Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise because of their envy for the supremacy of God.⁴¹

The use of mythology is justified by Nino Ricci himself in an interview in which he explained that there is a mythology connected to the experience of immigration in general: "the emigrant needs a mythology that can connect him/her to the culture left behind, give meaning to his/her experience of immigration in the new land and enabling him/her to better confront the future."⁴² According to Ricci, the Italian emigrant starts dreaming of a paradisiacal world, a sort of grail, long before emigrating; however, reality does not match the myth and in the new world instead of a par-

³⁸ Ricci, *Lives*, 49-50.

³⁹ Ricci, *Lives*, 50.

⁴⁰ McCartey, cited in Dundes, *The Evil Eye*, p. 30; Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, pp. 7, 116; and Niola and Moro, *Il Libro*, 6.

⁴¹ Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 74.

⁴² Canton, "Recreating Paradise," p. 137; Dvorak, "Nino Ricci's Lives ...," 60.

adise the immigrant often finds hell.⁴³ He or she thus begins the slow process of turning the world left behind, the old country, into paradise. The immigrant is nostalgic for a world that is lost and that he or she cannot replace (or even place) anywhere.

The legend incorporating the notion of *invidia* becomes part of the foundational-immigrant narrative of a paradise lost and serves to give meaning to the immigrant's condition. This is a narrative which speaks of an ancestors' world of superstition, ignorance and corruption.⁴⁴ From the story of how *invidia* came to ruin the paradisiacal land inhabited by Gambelunghe, it appears that the true place of myth is therefore not the old world, the Italy left behind, but the new world, in this case Canada. Through the introduction of this legend Ricci forges an authenticating mythology that rejects the nostalgia for a lost country and points towards establishing Canada as home for Italian emigrants.⁴⁵

Invidia is thus an important term, not only because it correlates with the fundamental myth of a paradise lost but also because it is closely linked with *malocchio*. The legend of Gambelunghe and *invidia* continues as follows: "It was not simply the envy of one person towards another that the villagers feared; it was the tremendous forces which envy stirred up, forces age-old and sacred, ones that found their incarnation in the evil eye."⁴⁶

As presented here, *invidia* can thus refer both to the human, the envy felt by one person towards another, or to the non human, the envy that can stir up supernatural forces.

Invidia and malocchio: the human and the non-human

In the myth of Gambelunghe, *invidia* is narrated as falling within the realm of human emotions. This is the case also for the description of the organization of Valle del Sole's main festival (*festa della Madonna*) in which people have to avoid contributing unequal sums of money towards the festival's expenses to avoid stirring up *invidia* in each other.⁴⁷ The financial contribution to the *festa* is governed by unwritten rules; in a society with scarce economic resources, it is important that the population contributes collectively to the festival, but at the same time that citizens do not feel frustrated or

⁴³ Canton, "Recreating Paradise," 136-137.

⁴⁴ Dvorak, "Nino Ricci's Lives ...," 66.

⁴⁵ Mullen, "Neither Here Nor There ...," 33.

⁴⁶ Ricci, *Lives*, 51.

⁴⁷ Ricci, *Lives*, 80.

ashamed in comparing their social and economic status to that of others.⁴⁸ Peasant societies, according to Aquaro “seek to ‘level the playing field’ by preventing any one person from excelling beyond the average.”⁴⁹

If human *invidia* is responsible for attracting the evil eye, however, this phenomenon ultimately appears to be governed by fate. As the narrator in *Lives of the Saints* observes, the evil eye “can catch you by surprise, by a certain lack of vigilance, a small flouting of fate.”⁵⁰ The evil eye is thus not only connected to human *invidia* but also to misfortune, *disgrazia*, and curse, as shown in the passage cited below. In this instance *invidia* is associated with a curse by a woman at the hospital in *Rocca Secca* where Cristina is taken after being bitten by the snake. This old woman, dressed in black, starts shouting a moment after her daughter, who is ill, has vomited onto the floor of the hospital corridor. “‘*L’invidia!*’ she cried out. ‘A curse!’ She broke into a long funeral wail that echoed through the room and made people shift uncomfortably in their places, though it seemed to liven them up, too, as if they were glad of the distraction.”⁵¹

In this description we are presented with the restricted internal focalization of the young protagonist, Vittorio, who narrates no more than what he sees and hears. This is one of two types of focalisation, internal, while the other is external. According to Rimmon-Kenan, internal focalisation takes the form of a character- focaliser within the story, while external focalisation usually occurs when the narrator-focaliser knows more than the characters, or rather says more than what any of the characters in the story know.⁵² The relation between *invidia* and curse later is further investigated by the adult narrator and external focaliser, in line with the example quoted above, who says that *invidia* is connected to “tremendous natural forces” which cannot be controlled by human beings and that “found their incarnation in the evil eye.”⁵³

⁴⁸ Ricci, *Lives*, 73, 80. As explained by the narrator, a group of villagers, or *comitato*, who were in charge of asking for a monetary contribution towards the festival organization, made sure that “even the poorest families would reach into the pot or jug” and also that some villagers would not shame others “by giving an outrageously large sum” or call “envy upon their household by giving more than their neighbors.”

⁴⁹ Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 6.

⁵⁰ Ricci, *Lives*, 51.

⁵¹ Ricci, *Lives*, 21.

⁵² Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 74-75.

⁵³ Ricci, *Lives*, 51.

Malocchio therefore represents one of the potential misfortune-causing agents, triggered by supernatural forces, which nevertheless are connected to human agency: it is an evil power which emanates from the eyes of an individual in a highly emotional state and causes illness.⁵⁴ As stated by Migliore, in the case of *malocchio* “envy activates and directs the evil power so that it works outward to injure others.”⁵⁵ Envy can thus activate a person’s power or strength to make *malocchio* effective. When the strength-weakness balance is disrupted because of a physical disability, previous exposure to the phenomenon, or other factors, a person can easily become a victim of *malocchio*.

The relation between envy and *malocchio* is also present in other Italian-Canadian writers. In Ivana Barbieri’s short story, envy is considered “il più brutto dei peccati” (the worst of sins) and the protagonist’s grandmother believes in *jettadores*, those individuals (the best being blue-eyed) who can cast the *malocchio* on anyone they deem attractive and intelligent.⁵⁶ In Penny Petrone’s memoir *mal’occhio*, here spelled with an apostrophe, the condition is said to be caused by *affascino*, a spell that an envious person can cast upon his or her victims.⁵⁷ *Affascino* comes from the Latin noun *fascinum*, from the verb *fascinare*, which means to enchant or to charm. In Barbieri’s short story already cited, weddings are perfect occasions to *fascinare*, in other words to cast the *malocchio* on someone, because they are moments of encounter in which compliments are often showered and *invidia* activated.⁵⁸ This implies that the *fascinum*, the *malocchio*’s gaze, is charming and enchanting and at the same time the cause of misfortune.

Malocchio and the snake

Malocchio is not only connected to envy but also to snakes. In order to explain this association, it is useful to refer back to the foundational episode of the narrative of *Lives of the Saints* in which Vittorio’s mother Cristina was bitten by a snake while she was having sex with her lover in the stable. This episode is partially witnessed by her son Vittorio. However, the child’s focalisation of the scene is confused—Vittorio sees a snake slithering out of the stable and a man running away while Vittorio is crouched on the ground with his head half-covered—and the two scattered images

⁵⁴ Migliore, *Mal’uocchiu*, 34.

⁵⁵ Migliore, *Mal’uocchiu*, 35.

⁵⁶ Barbieri, “Messing with ...,” 113.

⁵⁷ Petrone, *Breaking the Mould*, 55.

⁵⁸ Barbieri, “Messing with ...,” 114.

of the snake and the man are simply placed in sequence, one after the other. It is only later in the story that we hear the voice of an adult narrator who claims a link between snakes and the evil eye: “There was a saying in Valle del Sole, ‘*Do l’orgoglio sta, la serpe se neva*,’—where pride is the snake goes—and there were few who doubted that snakes, whatever their other properties, were agents of the evil eye, which the villagers feared far more than any mere Christian deity or devil, and which they guarded themselves against scrupulously, by wearing amulets of garlic or wolves’ teeth and by posting goat horns above their doorways.”⁵⁹

This link between snakes and the evil eye is confirmed later by Fabrizio, Vittorio’s friend, while he explains to him the reason why villagers avoid his mother.

“It’s not because of you,” Fabrizio said, whispering now, our voices seeming suddenly loud with the fading of the procession’s song. “It’s because of your mother and the snake. *Lu malocchiu*.” He twisted his face into a scowl and brought two fingers up to his head as horns, to mimic the evil eye.⁶⁰

Once a person has been “touched” by the eye other people avoid him or her since the affliction “might spread by contagion.”⁶¹ This explains the behavior of the villagers in Valle del Sole who avoid meeting Cristina’s eyes when passing by her door and no longer visit her, worrying they might be infected by *malocchio*. Fabrizio’s declaration “It’s because of your mother and the snake. *Lu malocchiu*” stresses the connection between the two. The presentation of *malocchio* as “*lu malocchiu*”—a southern-Italian dialect term with the final –o of standard Italian transformed into –u as in many southern-Italian dialects—is a vivid image of *malocchio* as it might be seen through the eyes of a child.⁶² The evil eye assumes the features of a creature in between a snake and a devil; the complex concept described by the narrator earlier in the narrative is transformed into a caricature of the devil. The scene also is burlesque because the horns raised by Fabrizio signify a cuckold, in this case specifically Cristina’s betrayed husband, so that the link between snake and sex is even more confirmed. Thus, the representation of *malocchiu* in this example, although conveyed through the language

⁵⁹ Ricci, *Lives*, 5–6. It is worth noting here the wrong spelling of the two terms *ne va*, which are written together *neva* in the source texts but corrected in the Italian translation of the trilogy by Gabriella Iacobucci.

⁶⁰ Ricci, *Lives*, 87–88.

⁶¹ Ricci, *Lives*, 51.

⁶² Hastings, “Abruzzo e Molise,” 322.

of children, belongs also to popular iconographic tradition and encodes the villagers' beliefs.

Moreover, snakes also are connected to the myth of paradise lost, previously mentioned in the discussion of envy, because they evoke the biblical fall from the Garden of Eden.⁶³ According to Aquaro, the snake in the Garden of Eden was equated by some Church Fathers with envy itself, which is also connected to the devil and becomes the seducer by which Eve was overcome.⁶⁴

Snake, sex and women's punishment

The link between evil eye and snakes is elaborated further in the narrative of *Lives of the Saints* through the character Cristina. This link is subtly expressed in the conversation between Giuseppina and Maria, Cristina's neighbors, after their visit to Cristina's house.

"God will make his judgments," said Giuseppina. "It's not for nothing she was bitten by a snake."

"What does the snake have to do with it?"

"Beh, you're one to talk. The way you pulled your chair away from her this morning, you might as well have been half way across the road."⁶⁵

In this scene the two women imply, although covertly, that the snakebite represents a sort of punishment for Cristina—"it's not for nothing she was bitten by a snake"—and that the bite, in a sense, has spread a disease throughout her body which is contagious and has caused neighbours to stay away from her—"the way you pulled your chair away." The idea of a contagion, present in many accounts of *malocchio*,⁶⁶ is confirmed by a comment made by Cristina herself in response to her neighbors' avoidance: "Giuseppi, she said, 'why don't you come in and sit down? Whatever I have it's not contagious.'"⁶⁷ Here, as in the scene at the stable, we are presented with the focalisation of a child protagonist, who overhears the conversation of the two women at the village fountain and tries to make sense of their mysterious talk. The reader thus has to piece together the cryptic bits of information as perceived by the child in order to recon-

⁶³ Tuzi, *The Power of Allegiances*, 88-89.

⁶⁴ Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 74.

⁶⁵ Ricci, *Lives*, 47.

⁶⁶ Pitré cited in Dundes, *The Evil Eye*, 94.

⁶⁷ Ricci, *Lives*, 47.

struct the events. This technique is employed widely in the first book of the trilogy and mainly in relation to Cristina's illicit affair. The child does not know how to explain the changes around him in relation to his mother and so observes external facts including the villagers' failure to visit his home, his mother's silence, and the behaviour of his grandfather who spends more and more time away from home, at Di Lucci's bar. The child focalization can be defined in narratological terms as a "focalization from without." According to Rimmon-Kenan, an external focaliser may perceive an object from without when "only the outward manifestations of this object are presented," when for instance only the external actions of a character and not his or her feelings, are portrayed. By contrast, an external focaliser may present the focalised from within when he or she presents the focalised's thoughts and feelings. Similarly, an internal focaliser may perceive the object from within when focaliser and focalised are the same person, or from without when the focaliser's perceptions are "confined to the outward manifestations of the focalized."⁶⁸

The villagers' ostracism of Cristina, focalised mainly through Vittorio's eyes, is thus linked early on in the narrative to the belief that, since snakes represent the devil as explained in the last two passages cited above, Cristina has been touched by the evil eye through the snake, and this corresponds to a sort of punishment. But what punishment?

According to the narrator in *Lives of the Saints*, snakes are connected with the sin of pride, a biblical characteristic of the devil: 'where pride is the snake goes' (as seen in the second to last passage cited above).⁶⁹ It is also a characteristic attributed to Cristina "who is held in contempt by other women for her pride, her beauty and her refusal to conform to local standards."⁷⁰ Pride is also a feeling which is linked to envy, as shown in the example already cited which describes the attempt by the peasants of Valle del Sole to avoid boasting about their goods in order not to attract envy and therefore the evil eye.

Not only snakes are connected to pride, but they also "stand as an icon of fertility and sexuality."⁷¹ Green snakes might bring a good harvest,⁷² a

⁶⁸ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 75-76.

⁶⁹ Tuzi states that in Catholic hagiography monstrous snakes, which personify the devil, engage in deadly combat with the saints, *The Power of Allegiances*, 88.

⁷⁰ Zuccherro, "Migraton, Identity and Hybridity ...," 212.

⁷¹ Tuzi, *The Power of Allegiances*, 84.

⁷² Ricci, *Lives*, 14, 19.

belief which is confirmed in the exchange between Cristina and the village barman who questions her about the snakebite, implying that there is something sexual behind it.⁷³ Moreover, Cristina is focalised in another part of *Lives of the Saints* by the young narrator Vittorio who describes her as having a snake-like appearance: “she is standing above me for a moment utterly naked, smooth and slick as if she had just peeled back an old layer of skin before climbing into the water beside me,” a passage which presents Cristina, through reference to the image of the snake, as eroticized by her son.⁷⁴ And again, the snake is connected with the devil because this scene is situated in a cave with a hot spring and includes Cristina’s observation about the temperature of the water which, she says, is heated by the devil itself. The juxtaposition of conflicting images about his mother, as both resembling the figure of the Madonna and the devil (personified by the snake), is present in Vittorio’s mind since Cristina appears “both as a nurturing, protective figure and a reckless, self-absorbed, and neglectful parent.”⁷⁵

The snakebite, which might seem to be merely a random event that occurred while Cristina was having sex, slowly becomes entangled with the idea of a punishment by the devil for Cristina’s sexual freedom and pride.⁷⁶ Sex and her pride are thus the cause of the snake’s bite which in turn assumes the status of consequence. This operation can be explained using the concepts of “coherence by contemporaneity” and “historical causal entailment” as outlined by Bruner.⁷⁷ According to the first, the snake’s bite and Cristina’s pregnancy are connected since they happened at the same time, while according to the second the pregnancy becomes the consequence of the evil eye, of the devil’s punishment for Cristina’s illicit sex. Together with an idea based on scientific causality, we encounter here another and even more powerful thought which draws causality based on the association of symbols.⁷⁸

In this article I argue that throughout *Lives of the Saints* its narrator selects and plays with various elements constantly rewording them and building patterns of causal emplotment in which the sex and the snake become the causes of *malocchio* and *malocchio* becomes the cause of a big-

⁷³ Ricci, *Lives*, 127.

⁷⁴ Ricci, *Lives*, 28.

⁷⁵ Tuzi, *The Power of Allegiances*, 85.

⁷⁶ The link between *malocchio* and sex is also stressed in Melfi’s *Infertility Rites*, p. 11, in which the protagonist’s mother thought someone had given her daughter the *malocchio* because she caught the girl drawing pictures of male genitals.

⁷⁷ Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” 19.

⁷⁸ Niola and Moro, *Il libro*, 6.

ger misfortune than the snake's bite itself: Cristina's pregnancy, for which she will have to leave the paternal village because the villagers refuse to interact with her. The narrator rewords all these elements by constantly contrasting the child's naive focalisation of the villagers' growing hostility towards his mother with the adult narrator's comments on the evil eye, placing side by side different and evolving perspectives on the same events, and by doing so showing the mechanisms of their construction.

This way of narrating proves that *malocchio* is not a given reality but a slow and unpredictable social construct which depends on various contingent factors. It is an ambiguous concept which has to do with the unconscious. It can be forged in different ways by the villagers to convey their versions of events (the story plot). Specifically, *malocchio* is the language that the village women have at their disposal to express their distress and their envy⁷⁹ for the fact that Cristina has a freedom that they lack but of which she is proud. As expressed by an adult narrator focaliser in the novel, "it was the women of the village who had been harshest towards my mother, and who watched hawk-eyed from their stoops for the slow progress of her disease, as if they had taken it up upon themselves to keep the disease from spreading."⁸⁰ The reason for such envy must be sought in the lack of freedom experienced by the women in Valle del Sole.

Various studies on the conditions of women's lives in southern Italy in the 1960s focus specifically on two topics: sexual segregation and subordination. Franca Iacovetta, who has studied southern-Italian women and their emigration to Canada, argues that "the patriarchal organisation of the Southern Italian family and society and the cultural mores of the South did impose heavy restrictions on the choices and behaviours of women."⁸¹ Moreover, "the very concept of familial *onore* (honour), so valued by southern Italians, rested in large part upon the sexual purity of wives, daughters, and sisters and men's success in guarding the virtue of their women."⁸² In southern Italy there was an obsessive fear that women "could engage in pre- and extramarital sex and thereby bring shame to their entire family."⁸³ Keeping a close watch on wives and daughters and supervising their activities is therefore "a means of preserving family honour and respectability; fail-

⁷⁹ Marchese, "Realismo e alienazione ...," 52.

⁸⁰ Ricci, *Lives*, 144.

⁸¹ Iacovetta, *Such hardworking people*, 200; DeMaria Harney, *Eh paesan!*, 163.

⁸² Iacovetta, *Such hardworking people*, 200.

⁸³ Davinson in Dundes, *The Evil Eye*, 149; Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 1; Bonocore, *Raised Italian-American*, 78-79.

ure to do so is a disgrace.”⁸⁴ Moreover “losing face meant public humiliation and cast a doubt on the integrity of the entire family.” One of the more effective ways of attacking the honor of others is effected by eroding the characters of the females of the other’s line. The strongest of these insults pertain to the mother’s or sister’s illicit sexual behavior.⁸⁵ Sexual freedom is therefore denied to women in a society governed predominantly on rules made by men. Failure to comply with these unwritten rules might result in punishment, confinement to the family home, or general hostility. These beliefs relating to relationships and behaviors in southern Italy are confirmed by proverbs and sayings in *Lives of the Saints*, such as: “Guard your women like your chickens ... or they’ll make food for the neighbour’s table”; and “A woman is like a goat: she’ll eat anything she sees in front of her.”⁸⁶

Malocchio and its cure: the priest and la strega

Lu malocchiu in Ricci’s novel can be prevented by refusing to boast about one’s own good fortune, as mentioned in the myth of origin and *invidia*, or by using amulets like goat horns above doorways, which have phallic and thus sexual connotations, as the people of Valle del Sole do in order to prevent the evil eye from entering the household,⁸⁷ a tradition which is also mentioned with reference especially to southern-Italian immigrants in Toronto.⁸⁸ Other objects which can act as buffers against *malocchio* are salt, red underwear, garlic, and hot red peppers (which resemble the horns) as mentioned in Barbieri’s “Messing with the Malocchio.”⁸⁹ In Petrone’s *Breaking the Mould*, the protagonist remembers her mother showing her how to make a gesture of defence against *malocchio* by putting the thumb between the forefinger and the middle finger of the hand in a way to symbolise the female genitals.⁹⁰ This gesture is called “mani fica” (“fica” stands for the sexual female organ) and along with horns, which can be regarded as phallic symbols, supports the notion that *malocchio* is related to the realm of sexuality.

Malocchio can also be treated and cured with potions or ointments⁹¹

⁸⁴ Del Negro, *Looking into*, 79.

⁸⁵ Del Negro, *Looking into*, 20, 79.

⁸⁶ Ricci, *Lives*, 144.

⁸⁷ Ricci, *Lives*, 143.

⁸⁸ DeMaria Harney, *Eh paesan!*, p. 145; see also Migliore, *Mal’uocchiu*, 46.

⁸⁹ Barbieri, “Messing with ...,” 113-117.

⁹⁰ Petrone, *Breaking the Mould*, 55.

⁹¹ In Barbieri’s “Messing with the Malocchio” and in Edwards’ play *Homeground*, the authors describe the ritual of pouring three drops of oil into a bowl of water

and in *Lives of the Saints* this treatment is available from the *strega di Belmonte*, who possesses a powerful potion which can defeat the evil eye. In many southern-Italian regions, the person responsible for taking away the *malocchio* is the “magara,” a type of witch usually in the form of an old woman with special spiritual-psychological powers.⁹² However, the witch or *strega* has the power not only to heal the *malocchio* but also to cause it through an envious gaze.⁹³

La strega di Belmonte, in the description focalised by the young protagonist in *Lives of the Saints*, is indeed an old woman. She lives in the buildings of a ruined village near to Valle del Sole.

... *la strega*, ... wandered the countryside in summer and then holed up in one of Belmonte’s ruined buildings in the fall and winter. Once playing in the ruins there, I had caught a glimpse of her through the hollow of a window, an ancient woman with tough, darkened skin and long grey hair that hung in matted clumps down her back, though a grimace or grin she had flashed me before I had run had revealed two rows of brilliant white teeth.⁹⁴

As with *invidia*, while the adult narrator presents the *strega* in her symbolic role of a healer, the child narrator, as in this example, sees her simply as an old woman and focalises her only “from without,”⁹⁵ paying attention to her external characteristics. This juxtaposition of images and perceptions (as already discussed above) is employed systematically by the writer, through his narrators, as a way to undermine the fixity of concepts, treating beliefs ironically; in the case of the description of *la strega*, the unmasking comes from the double nature of this figure, defined both as “a decrepit old woman and a witch, a sorceress.”⁹⁶ A description of a witch living in a far-away and shabby place is also present in Carole David’s novel, *Impala*.

while making the sign of the cross and reciting prayers. In *Homeground*, 57-62, for example, the protagonist of the drama, Maria, grabs some salt and oil and a bowl of water and struggles to remember the use of these ingredients in the ritual cure against *malocchio*.

⁹² Migliore, *Mal’uocchiu*, 40.

⁹³ Davinson in Dundes, *The Evil Eye*, 149; Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 1; Bonocore, *Raised Italian-American*, 78-79.

⁹⁴ Ricci, *Lives*, 52.

⁹⁵ Rimmon-Kennan, *Narrative Fiction*, 75-76.

⁹⁶ Ricci, *Lives*, 168.

⁹⁶ Ricci, *Lives*, 168.

In this instance, the *strega* is an old woman who lives in a small dark bungalow in the north end of Montreal.⁹⁷

Besides the recourse to a *strega*, other treatments against *malocchio* in *Lives of the Saints* are suggested to Cristina by Giuseppina, her childhood friend. Giuseppina at first encourages Cristina to make a gesture towards the community:

You can't afford to walk around like a princess. It turns people against you. ... you have to make a gesture. You should make a confession. You should go and speak with Father Nicola.⁹⁸

When Cristina refuses to act on this advice Giuseppina advises her to perform a cure against the *malocchio*.

"Look, Cristi," she went on finally, dropping her voice low, "if you won't see the priest you should at least make a cure. ... It worked for my cousin in Rocca Secca," Giuseppina continued, her voice still low and eerie. "The old woman in Belmonte told her how to do it—you take the chicken or a goat and drain out the blood, then cut out the heart to put it in your soup later, to give you strength. You have to wash your hands in the blood and then pour it into the ground and say three times, 'This is my blood which comes out of me like a river to the sea.'" ... But my mother burst suddenly into laughter.

"Giuseppina you're not serious! A good God-fearing woman like you talking to me about these *stupidaggini*! I thought you had more sense than that."⁹⁹

Although the most common treatment against *malocchio*—pouring oil in a bowl of water—is not mentioned in *Lives of the Saints*, the repetition of gestures three times (in relation to drops of oil, sign of the cross, or a prayer as in Giuseppina's advice to Cristina) is found in other accounts of the evil eye as described in anthropological studies.¹⁰⁰

Cristina here dismisses Giuseppina's instructions to cure *malocchio* as *stupidaggini*, in other words, as silly or stupid beliefs. The codeswitched term *stupidaggini* could point to the focalisation of the scene by the character Cristina or could signal the focalization of the child narrator, who reports his mother's mockery of the superstitious beliefs of the villagers of Valle del Sole,

⁹⁷ David, *Impala*, 229.

⁹⁸ Ricci, *Lives*, 53.

⁹⁹ Ricci, *Lives*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ According to anthropologists, the repetition is explained by reference to the Christian Trinity. Migliore, *Mal'uocchiu*, 38, 62-65; Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 16; Riccio, *The Italian American Experience*, 208.

but who later will attempt the cure that his mother dismisses as a stupidity.

Cristina's behavior towards the villagers is considered disrespectful. As stated by Migliore, *malocchio* is linked to the notion of (dis)respect because it is related to the Mediterranean (and Roman Catholic) world's view which makes an explicit distinction between good and evil and correct and incorrect ways of doing things: doing the correct thing is considered respectful, while doing the wrong thing is considered disrespectful.¹⁰¹ In other parts of *Lives of the Saints*, Cristina was called *disgraziata*, that is disrespectful toward the community, because she had brought shame to her family through her adultery, and because she had ignored ritualized behavior expected from her by the villagers to contrast their envy including, for example, avoiding extramarital sex or accepting her neighbors' offer of sweets at Christmas when they had paid her visit for the first time after the beginning of her pregnancy.¹⁰² With such a visit the villagers intended a gesture of forgiveness towards Cristina who, by showing her pregnant belly in the church, was thought to have repented for her immorality. Cristina, however, who believes that her neighbors are simply fishing for gossip, refuses their gift and by doing so refuses to comply with community norms. As expressed by DeMaria Harney, gift giving is both a material and a symbolic act, a marker of social obligation to a community and a way of initiating a social interaction.¹⁰³ With her disrespectful behavior, Cristina had indirectly invoked *malocchio*.

I understand *malocchio* in the examples shown as a stratified concept which belongs, according to Migliore, both to the language of distress, since it can help people transform their feelings into culturally recognizable expressions of physical, emotional and psychological distress, and to the language of argument, because it can serve as a commentary on the moral character or moral transgressions of self and other, as a way of addressing or creating distance among individuals, or as an attempt to control their behavior and thereby neutralize what is perceived as a threat.¹⁰⁴ This is confirmed when envy associated with *malocchio* is understood not only as a feeling of discontent but a desire to harm and control another person.¹⁰⁵ Further, Niola and Moro also argue that the concept of *malocchio*, like

¹⁰¹ Migliore, *Mal'occhio*, 31.

¹⁰² Ricci, *Lives*, 145-146.

¹⁰³ De Maria Harney, *Eh paesan!*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Migliore, *Mal'occhio*, 68, 97.

¹⁰⁵ Aquaro, *Death by Envy*, 1.

other superstitions, serves paradoxically as a way of “rationalizing our anxieties, to control the uncontrollable, to put order in the chaos of life.”¹⁰⁶

Malocchio in Ricci's novel illustrates the functions described by Migliore in that it is used to express the psychological and physical distress of both Cristina and the female villagers, who envy her relative sexual freedom, and to verbalize the moral judgments of Cristina's transgressive behavior in order to control it.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that *malocchio* plays a fundamental part in the ideological construction of Ricci's narrative and its importance in the first volume of his trilogy is confirmed by the presence of the concept in other Italian-Canadian writers.

In Ricci, *malocchio* serves as an etiological term which the Valle del Sole women use to explain both their suffering and that of Cristina; to isolate her from them; and to establish a plan of action in order to cope with this suffering. By embedding moral commentaries within an illness narrative,¹⁰⁷ these villagers draw on the images of suffering to construct and convey a more convincing representation so that the language of distress frames the discourse to make it difficult for other people to ignore the implications of their moral commentary. This proves that the notion of *malocchio* is central for the novel's narrative which is a tale of seduction, as seductive as the gaze that causes the evil eye itself.¹⁰⁸

Through *malocchio* and related terms Ricci places Cristina's sexuality at the very core of his narrative. The snakebite on her leg, which symbolizes the violence of rules and borders imposed on women's flesh, becomes the foundation of his post-migrant narrative. According to Gopinath, “it is through women's bodies that the borders and boundaries of communal identities are formed”; indeed, “discourses of female sexuality are central to the mutual constitution of diaspora and nation.”¹⁰⁹

However, through the naïve focalisation of the child protagonist presented in opposition to the more informed voice of the adult narrator (which transforms a powerful symbol of suffering into a comic device), or through the focalisation of Cristina (who breaks behavioural rules) contrasted with that of the villagers, Ricci unmasks the violence against

¹⁰⁶ Niola and Moro, *Il libro*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Migliore, *Mal'uocchiu*.

¹⁰⁸ Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality,” 9.

¹⁰⁹ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 9-10.

women and resists a nostalgic and patriotic narrative of the Italian past which links causes of events to women's shame. Although the story of Cristina is set in southern Italy, the narrative is filtered through the eyes of a second-generation immigrant who revisits and re-interrogates women's sexuality and roles in a post-migrant context.

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