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The Comic Dynamic in Italian Renaissance Literature: Founding Texts of a Civilization and the Ethics of Exchange

Review of: Massimo Scalabrini, *Commedia e civiltà. Dinamiche anticonflittuali nella letteratura italiana del Cinquecento*, Ravenna, Longo Editore, 2022, 137 p., ISBN 9788893500944, €20,00.

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In three brilliant and dense essays Massimo Scalabrini explores the idea that the Classical civilization of the Italian Renaissance court is fundamentally or “genetically” comic. Departing from De Sanctis’s description of the comedic and ironic essence of Renaissance literature as the consequence of the ethical decadence of court culture, Scalabrini refocuses on the comedic habit of mind that favors conflict resolution and gratification through exchange. The scholar defines the rhetorical and ethical lessons of Classicism as moderation, discretion, reconciliation and mutual benefit, and the Italian Renaissance court is examined as a place where a civilization of mediation controlled potential violence. This ethos is probed in three major genres: treatises on conversation and conduct, the mock epic poetry of Ludovico Ariosto, and the *commedia erudita* of Ariosto, Bibbiena and Machiavelli.

The first essay, ‘Civiltà del comico’, focuses on Baldassare Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano*, Giovanni Della Casa *Galateo*, Giovanni Giovanni Pontano’s *De Sermone*, and Stefano Guazzo’s *Civil Conversazione*. Scalabrini shows how precepts of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian are nuanced by the prevailing ethics of use and exchange. Aristotle’s golden mean (*‘medietà’*), the habit that defends moral virtue, is married to a central precept of Cicero and Quintilian, *convenienza*, which in rhetoric refers to the ability to judge your audience and adapt speech or behavior; these become anthropological values of Ancien Régime civilization. A magnanimous tolerance is fundamental, and this attitude is bolstered by the ethics of exchange which allow the weaker party (or the wrong-doer) to redeem himself and the social fabric to be healed. Scalabrini quotes Erasmus who defines *civilitas* as ‘knowing when easily to pardon the errors of others’ (*‘nell’saper perdonare (ignoscere) facilmente gli sbagli degli altri’*, 44). The essay opens and closes with a discussion of the comic, *‘il discorso faceto’*, in the guidebooks of conversation and conduct. Demonstrating how, as a praxis, *‘il discorso faceto’* reduces conflict and promotes pleasure, Scalabrini argues that comic discourse is guided by the same principals as Renaissance civil discourse.

In the second essay, ‘Poesia e contraccambio’, the importance of exchange in Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* is examined. The poet conceives the work as a gift to a prince from a grateful courtier, and one of many acts of exchange which occur

throughout the poem. The governing concept of *convenienza* is reformulated here as *corrispondenza* or the appropriate response to an offering. Cardinal Ippolito, to whom Ariosto dedicated his poem as an expression of his debt, service and gratitude, is tainted by avarice and unable to show proper gratitude for the gift. While poetry is only *merce*, and there are courtier-poets who praise corrupt princes, Ariosto distinguishes the true poet as the one who can promise enduring fame. As the epic develops, the ethics of *corrispondenza* and gratitude are examined repeatedly with both positive and negative exempla. In the most shocking negative exemplum, Orlando sets out on a murderous rampage when he discovers that his love for Angelica is not reciprocated; he abandons the Christian cause in its moment of need, and fails to honour his debt to his lord. Only when Astolfo restores his wits does Orlando return to battle and save the Christendom.

The lesson of *corrispondenza* is fundamental to the narration of the coming-of-age of Orlando's cousin Rinaldo. A prudent young hero, Rinaldo is able to adjust his vision as his circumstances change. Freeing himself from an immature love for Angelica, he sets off on more honourable quests; he learns through adventures that include reflection and exemplary tales. In Rinaldo's education, 'moral absolutism' (69) and the adamant logic of the chivalric quest give way to the pragmatic logic of calculation, profit and loss according to the ethos of *corrispondenza* and a premise of gratitude that is inherent in the Aristotelian precept to remember the good received more than the abuse suffered, and the help accepted more than the assistance offered (*Retorica* I 13 [1374b 10-20]). The chorus of voices that characterizes the Renaissance books of conversation is present in the poem's diverse adventures, exemplary tales and authorial commentary like the invective against avarice in the opening stanzas of Canto 43; Rinaldo and the alert reader may take cognitive lessons for a complex world through the poem's dialectical analysis of each party and incident.

In the third essay, 'Scene di pacificazione', Scalabrini again focuses on the closed circuit that defines producer and consumer, and he pays particular attention to the mediating space of the stage, built and painted to mirror the city but set apart, a space of catharsis for the conflicts and passions that flare up and are concentrated in comic plots. Indeed, comic entertainment may be read as an exercise in civility (88, citing Womack). Quintilian underlines the essentially ethical character of the comedies of Menander and Terence, and comic dialog is guided by the same rules as civil discourse, imposing 'measure and moderation' (88). Much of the essay is devoted to the plots and verbal exchanges of the comedies of Ariosto, Bibbiena and Machiavelli. In Ariosto's earlier comedies, even when the harm done involves multiple parties as in *Negromante*, the calculation of profit and loss is carefully tallied to deliver a sense of satisfaction and pleasure to all the parties. In contrast, in the comedy *Lena* there is no achievable solution or exchange that includes the eponymous wife/mistress/prostitute/procuress, and Lena remains aggrieved at the end of the comedy. Writing of *Mandragola*, Scalabrini describes Lucrezia's abandonment of the inflexible regime of virtue to become the mistress of Callimaco, which is the desired outcome of a pyramid of compromising exchanges, as the comic reversal of the Roman Lucrezia's suicide recounted by Tito Livy. Machiavelli's *Clizia* is the best illustration of the essentially ethical character of comedy: following the nocturnal 'beffa' that humiliates the elderly Nicomaco and crushes his passion for the young Clizia, his wife Sofronia offers him civil redemption in exchange for his power as *pater familias*. Scalabrini presents her willingness to forgive Nicomaco, or more generally the posture of indulgence, as fundamentally conciliatory and restorative; it embodies the flexibility, specificity, moderation, discretion and social benefit which are the essence of Classicism's lesson of rhetoric and ethics.

This slim volume makes a valuable contribution to the study of Renaissance literature and civilization. Professor Scalabrini probes and synthesizes the most important literary and rhetorical texts of the first half of the sixteenth century in Italy, and he demonstrates textually the aspiration of an aristocratic civilization to adopt a more tolerant and generous ethics of exchange, which could turn tragedy to comedy.

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