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# Re-inventing Sicily in Italian-American Writing and Film

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## Re-inventing Sicily in Italian-American Writing and Film

“The history of Sicily is one of defeats: defeats of reason, defeats of reasonable men.... From that however comes skepticism, that is not, in effect, the acceptance of defeat, but a margin of security, of elasticity, through which the defeat, already expected, already rationalized, does not become definitive and mortal. Skepticism is healthy though. It is the best antidote to fanaticism” (6).

Leonardo Sciascia

*Sicily as a Metaphor*

Sicily, the setting for many famous myths such as those we know from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, has proven to be equally fertile soil for the mythology of Italian Americans. With a literary tradition that goes back more than a thousand years, it would only be a matter of time before emigrants from Sicily, the Italian region that sent more emigrants than any other to the United States, would affect American literature. The offspring of Sicilian immigrants has created an eruption of writing that testifies to the power that the island has on the artists it creates. Through contemporary Sicilian American historians, memoirists,

fiction writers, poets and culinary aesthetes, Sicily is insured of passing along more to American culture than the Mafia and St. Joseph tables. This look at the use of Sicily in the works of a few Italian American writers and filmmakers focuses on how Sicily serves as the source of non or even anti-American elements that help shape characters' identities. Sicily also serves as a source from which writers can create artistic antidotes to what they perceive as socio-cultural ills spawned in and by the United States. The dean of Sicilian American writers, Jerre Mangione, was an American-born son of Sicilian immigrants. Mangione grew up in a multi-ethnic neighborhood of Rochester, New York. His memoir, *Mount Allegro*, which has remained in print most of the years since its first appearance in 1943, is the first of four non-fictional books written by Mangione that deal with Sicilian and Sicilian/American culture. In each book Sicily represents an "old world" that affects his development, from Sicilian, to American, and eventually to Sicilian-American. The books are: *Mount Allegro* (1943); *Reunion in Sicily* (1950); *A Passion for Sicilians* and *An Ethnic At Large* (1978).

Mangione's life and writing, in many respects, are attempts to escape Sicilian notions of "destino." He tells us that his relatives' lives are governed by traditions and myths. Mangione writes that "destino," a barrier that keeps his relatives from becoming Americans, contained "strong elements of fatalism" that were "ingrained in the Sicilian soul by centuries of poverty and oppression.... In their minds, 'Destino,' the willingness to resign oneself to misfortune, was the key to survival; to refuse to believe that an almighty force predetermined the fate of all people was to court disaster" (*Ethnic* 32). Mangione can overcome this barrier only by leaving his relatives. Throughout *Mount Allegro* we get the sense that the narrator is documenting the decline of a people, the end of an era, an era that

becomes history the moment the narrator separates himself from his immigrant relatives. In fact, Mangione can only write this book after he has left his home. As Mangione tells us in *Contemporary Novelists*, “the experiences that became the substance of *Mount Allegro* accentuated for me the sharp contrast between the philosophical values of the old world and those of the new. It also succeeded in casting me in the role of outsider who, belonging to neither world, tries to create his own world by writing....” (571).

Mangione’s role of the outsider causes a submerging of the self in his non-fictional writings. This insertion of the narrator as an invisible protagonist/observer, according to Ben Morreale, is a typical characteristic of control practiced by many Sicilian writers:

Coming from an island that had been the crossroads of armies bent on world domination for centuries, having insecurities that some have translated into a psychological *paura storica*, or history of fear, the Sicilian has learned not to reveal himself. This reticence might be the core of Sicilian style in literature. (“Jerre Mangione” 41)

Morreale's observation is crucial to reading Mangione's use of Sicily in his fiction, memoirs and social histories. Morreale finds a similar style at work in the writers associated with the Sicilian school of Italian literature: Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Giuseppe di Lampedusa, Elio Vittorini and the contemporary Leonardo Sciascia. In all these writers the narrative self plays a subservient role to the voices of others; the self is rarely placed in a consistent dominating position over others. This narrative mask enables the true self to remain flexible and thus untraceable. It is also a politically safe position for the narrator

who must negotiate his way through a repressive political system. This becomes an important stance for Mangione to take, especially when he must deal with two very different political systems: Democracy in America and Fascism in Italy.

Morreale, equally enchanted by Sicily, explores the interaction of Sicilian and U.S. culture in nearly all of his works. From his first novel, *The Seventh Saracen* (1958) to his recent memoir *Sicily: The Hallowed Land* (2000), Morreale has used Sicily as a foil for the creation of his American identity. His second novel, *A Few Virtuous Men*, published in 1973, especially dramatizes this conflict. The protagonist is Giovanni Buffa, a priest who recounts his life among “mafiosi”. Nicknamed Juffa, after Giufá, the famous village idiot of Sicilian folklore, the priest decides that if he is to serve all God’s children he must befriend the “virtuous men” who control most of what goes on in Racalmora, a town near Palermo. Divided into three parts, the novel looks at the priest’s life before, during, and after he spent nearly a year in America.

Before the priest’s visit to the U.S. the town was *sistemato*, everything was in its place. It’s when he leaves Sicily in mid-life that he begins to see that system falling apart. On a trip to the U.S. he observes the immigrants leading lives they never would have tried in Sicily. In the U.S.A. children live on their own, away from parents; if they marry, it’s not likely to be in the Church; they throw away food and give their children names like Connie, which to him sounds like “cane,” Italian for “dog.” Fr. Juffa addresses them in a sermon:

“Your boyfriends are Irish, your doctor is a Jew, the people you work with are Africans. What kind of mixture is this! It’s good for no one, no matter what you tell yourselves. Because all have to give up what took them thousands of years to become,

when they come here. And to become what? You don't even know yourself. Doesn't it seem to you that it is very painful for your father to have to admit that to be Sicilian is not inferior....It's that being American is Better." And here he spiraled his hand upward in disgust. (131).

From these immigrants he receives donations to rebuild his church back in Sicily that has suffered the effects of the large emigration of his parishioners, which he plans to do as "a reflection of the Christian mind, of the people who have sprung from this place, left, but still have their roots here" (171). The church he builds becomes a monument to their absence and ends up looking like "a bit of Brooklyn-Irish-baroque transplanted to Sicily" (197). Sicily is ultimately changed by those who left, the very people who struggle to maintain a sense of Sicilian identity as they confront the challenges of life in the United States. In Morreale's most recent work, his earlier, more romantic notions of the land of his ancestors disappear as he explores the effect that Sicily has had on shaping his identity as an American.

In his memoir, *Sicily: the Hallowed Land*, Morreale presents two identities created from names: the one given to him at birth, Baldassare DeMarco Morreale, and the Americanized Benny Moreli given to him by a teacher who cannot pronounce the Italian name. In this dichotomy is the difference between Sicily and the United States. Once called "the hollow land" by a Greek geographer because of how fertile it was, Sicily becomes, in Morreale's hand, full of stories. He uses Sicily to measure not only the Americanization of his and his family, but also his growth from childhood into adulthood.

Sicily was fading, was not part of these impressionable years [his childhood]. Sicily remained behind in an age of innocence, a land without the disturbances of puberty and because of its innocence, it took on an aura of wholeness, the purity of a lost world. America became reality, reason, materialism. Sicily took on an importance which, as Sciascia was to remark later, “his parents never invested in it” (165).

The memoir closes with a dialogue between Bennie and Turiddu Sinatra who claims he is famous Frank’s cousin. Entitled “Ava Gardner’s Brother-in-Law,” this final section shifts from reportage to a more philosophic argument in the form of a Platonic dialogue. This debate of where one can find the better life, in Sicily or in the U.S., is really an argument within the author, who enriched by both cultures is unable to align himself with one more than the other.

There are many subtle references in Morreale’s work to what Americans have come to call the Mafia, and few in Mangione’s work. Neither saw the need to exploit the mystique of the Sicilian mafia in order to make their writings more appetizing to American audiences titillated by televised hearings on organized crime and t.v. dramatizations such as “The Untouchables”. Perhaps it was their Sicilian ancestry, and its effects on both the style and content of their writing, that kept them from temptation. Whatever the reason, it would be an Italian American whose family hails not from Sicily but from Naples who would write the great American novel that solidified the cultural connotation of Sicily as the birthplace of the U.S. Mafia. Morreale points to a reason why the Sicily he writes about has become something quite different: “Historians don't like to write about Mafia; they leave it to sociologists, newspaper people and guys who want to make a quick buck, like Puzo”

(Gardaphe “Morreale” 164). In 1969, Puzo’s novel became an unofficial “history” of the mafia and a distorted primer to Sicilian and Sicilian American culture. While anti- defamation groups denounced Puzo for creating a bad image of Italians in the United States; young Italian American boys formed "Godfather" clubs; and real "mafiosi" claimed Puzo knew what he was writing about. Mario Puzo had transformed Sicily into the land of the Mafia.

In *The Godfather*, Sicily becomes for Don Corleone what Krypton was to Superman: a legendary place of origins the experiences of which elevate him to the status of a hero, if not a god. This is exemplified best through the character of Michael Corleone, the one son who is closest to total assimilation into American life. Michael is sent to Sicily to hide out after avenging the attempted assassination of his father. He is also sent to Sicily to unlearn the American behavior that had lead him to do things like break the old country’s code of silence. During his sister’s wedding reception, Michael tells his girlfriend stories about the "more colorful wedding guests," like Luca Brasi. He explains what is going on at the meetings held inside his father's study and interprets the ambiguities that she, as an outsider, is incapable of reading. Later in the film, when his father is shot, Michael leaves Kay and returns to the family house, and “[f]or the first time since it had all started he felt a furious anger rising in him, a cold hatred for his father's enemies” (123). This fury drives Michael back into the family fold and leads him to revenge his father's shooting. Until Michael avenges his father's shooting, he has been sheltered and as innocent as the women in the Corleone clan. His murder of Sollozzo and the police captain takes place as though under the fated circumstances of an Orestes.

His ancestral culture's code demands vengeance for his father's blood and Michael acts



accordingly. After the murder, Michael flees to Sicily, that other-worldly ground of his being and his subconscious. There he meets the characters who embody the new condition of his soul, which is now marked physically by his disfigured face, the result of an earlier beating by the police captain. Through Dr. Taza, a local professor and historian, “He came to understand his father's character and his destiny...to understand men like Luca Brasi, the ruthless *caporegime* Clemenza, his mother's resignation and acceptance of her role. For in Sicily he saw what they would have been if they had chosen not to struggle against their fate” (324). The education Michael receives during his exile in Sicily enables him to take command of his father's kingdom and ruthlessly rule it in an Old-World manner. In the feudal-like system of Sicily and southern Italy, the peasant could not hope to aspire to a better life by challenging the forces that controlled him. The result of this would be that attention was focused on what could be controlled, the family unit. This is the reason so many emigrated to other lands. The world into which so many immigrants came was one built on the myth that through freedom each person could become whatever they wanted if they worked hard enough. This Puritanical work-ethic and the built-in reward system did not require that the family stick together and often led to the break-up of the nuclear family. Thus, the central conflict of this novel is how to keep the family together and “Sicilian” for its own good in a land that has lost its dependence on the family unit for survival.

The Sicily that serves as the antithesis to the United States in Puzo's *The Godfather* becomes an even stranger place in his novel *The Sicilian*. Puzo came to this novel shortly after writing the screenplays for *Superman* and *Superman II*, and it is obvious. The novel reads more like a screenplay than a work of narrative fiction. It is skimpy in the detail. It contains interesting, even bizarre characters who are brought to life and then left without

much to do on their own; they are more like puppets than people. The folktale feeling of this novel is the result of drawing on the true-life legend of Salvatore Giuliano. Set in a transitional period of Sicilian history, 1943-1950, *The Sicilian* tells the story of Giuliano's rise from the peasant to superhero who challenges the powers that be. Giuliano fights both the ancient traditions of the Mafia and the post World War II Italian democratic government.

Depending on who you talk to or read, the actual Salvatore Giuliano, who lived in Western Sicily from his birth in 1922 to his assassination in 1950, was smart or stupid; a savior, a scapegoat; an egotist, a servant of the people; a fool, a wise man; a mafioso, a cafone. While the sources debate what he might have been in real life, they do agree that was one of Sicily's most interesting personalities to emerge from the Post-World War II period. The story of Giuliano's life has become a modern legend that rivals as it revives the old English story of Robin Hood. While the truth of the Giuliano story will forever be debated, the story has become the fuel for a number of literary, musical and dramatic works of art. From Francesco Rosi's film of the 1960s to a contemporary musical, the Giuliano story has become a way of examining post-war Italy, just as the JFK assassination has become a way of reading Post-World War II America. In fact, as we will see, these two stories represent major paradigms for the post-war cultural development of these two countries.

The Sicily in Puzo's novel, an extension of the land of *The Godfather*, is not the Sicily that winds up in Michael Cimino's film. While Cimino's *The Sicilian* is based on the Puzo novel, Cimino does not, to his credit, follow through with the Puzo storyline. The plot that Cimino creates is almost as bizarre as Puzo's, but the character Giulinao, in the hands of Cimino becomes a spokesperson for the Italian American experience. Cimino, who at the

time *The Sicilian* was being made, was working his way out of an exile of sorts which resulted from his having created a box-office disaster with *Heaven's Gate* (1980). While his *Year of the Dragon* (1985) was not a total flop, it still didn't fulfill the promise of his amazing debut with *The Deer Hunter* (1978). In an effort to regain favorable standing in the industry he selected a project with more commercial potential, trying his hand with Puzo materials similar to that which brought success to his contemporary, Frances Ford Coppola, and like Coppola, Cimino uses the Puzo material as a way of retelling his own family's immigration story.

There was no need to try to recreate the Giuliano story because Francesco Rosi's film, *Salvatore Giuliano*, released in 1961, had already presented the story in a documentary approach. More to the point, the Salvatore Giuliano story, that is the elements that contributed to making Salvatore Giuliano a national name, had little or no relationship to American culture during the Ronald Regan Era that saw an end to the Cold War and the weakening of economic alternatives to capitalism. The true story of Salvatore Giuliano begins with the immigration of Sicilians to the United States. Giuliano's parents were two of those immigrants who had achieved a small level of success and were able to return to their hometown of Motelepre, Sicily, with enough money to buy a home. During World War II, the Italian fascist government severely repressed the local mafia forces which were formed earlier by the *gabbellotti*, or caretakers of the estates for absentee landlords. In 1943 the invasion of Sicily ousted the fascist rulers and the mafia power was restored. Thus, the powers that jointly affect the lives of all Sicilians are: the Mafia, the Church, and the Aristocracy/Government.

During the period from 1943 on, the Italian economy was suffering black market

conditions. Giuliano biographer Billy Jaynes Chandler notes, as much as “70 percent of the total [food distribution] in some urban centers” (6) was made available only through the black market. Giuliano finds himself caught up in this system and on September 2, 1943, he kills a *carabinieri* (a state policeman) who tried to arrest him. Giuliano then went into hiding; he killed another soldier when viewing his family rounded up a few months later. Because he acted as they might have acted, the community helped him.

Giuliano takes to the mountains and lives as a popular bandit. During this time period there was a growing political movement designed to separate Sicily from Italian control. In the Spring of 1945 Giuliano sided with those in support of an independent Sicily and becomes a Colonel in the movement’s army, shifting from bandit to rebel leader. Thus, we know that Giuliano was much more involved in Sicilian politics than either the novel or the film depicts. As Chandler notes: “Giuliano’s commitment to the separatist cause was genuine. He fought for it harder and longer, and with considerably more skill and success, than did anyone else” (53). Giuliano, “a republican of liberal leanings...favored [Sicily’s] annexation to the United States as its 49<sup>th</sup> state” (67). Thus, as pro American and anticommunist he ultimately became a pawn in the hands of local and national political forces, some even say international via the United States who worked to keep Italy from becoming communist.

Cimino’s use of Sicily bears resemblance to Puzo’s use, and more importantly revises the mother/son paradigm dominant in Sicilian culture into the father/son paradigm dominant in American culture. We can see this by comparing the reality of Giuliano’s life to the fiction created by Cimino. To understand the Giuliano story one needs familiarity with southern Italian family dynamics, especially those of the mother/son relationship. The

politicians harassed his mother, his sister, and his father in an attempt to get to the son. In response Giuliano sent missives out that were designed to remind bureaucrats of this dynamic. One of them stated:

If you yourselves love your mammas and your country, refuse to fight this fratricidal war...Do not be deceived by the propaganda of the press and your superiors, who call their war "a war against delinquency," because the war that they make against me should be called "a war against motherhood." Perhaps the reason for my success against this vast effort is due not only to my expertness but also to the Divine Hand whose aim is only one: To rein in those false prophets who want to destroy the greatest love that He defends for us, the most precious thing of our lives, our mammas" (Chandler 169).

Giuliano sees his persecution as a public siege upon the sacred mother/son relationship, a fundamental building block of Sicilian culture. This mother/son paradigm is one that fosters community instead of individuality. The emphasis in the United States on self-invention comes from a dominant father/son paradigm, a son rebelling against his father and possibly becoming reunited with the father as a prodigal son. In contrast, the dominant paradigm in Sicily stresses self-connection, a son protecting his mother. Gaetano Cipolla points to the centrality of the mother in Sicilian culture:

The mother's role, shaped by thousands of years of history, continues to our day almost unchanged. She nurtures physically and psychologically, she performs

social duties in observance of time-worn formulas, she sacrifices her whole life to her family, denying herself in the process and becoming a victim of her dedication to others. Her devotion to her family is so complete that as a Sicilian proverb has it “*La matri senti li guai di lu mutu*” (The Mother feels the troubles of the mute). Inevitably, however, in the battle between the children’s desire for freedom and the mother’s desire to maintain the status quo—for this reason Leonardo Sciascia considered Sicilian mothers a cause of the stagnation in Sicilian society—conflicts emerge and mothers begin to consider themselves victims, adopting what may be called a martyr’s syndrome. In a recent article...Angelo Costanzo suggested that Sicilian women everywhere eventually end up conforming with the image of the *matri addulurata*, that is, the sorrowful mother who grieves for the loss of her son. It is not a coincidence that in Sicily, out of all the possible scenes of the madonna’s life, the most pervasive is certainly that of the grieving mother.

(16)

This is how Giuliano was portrayed in local versions of his story. In the real life events, the Italian government basically held Giuliano’s home town, Montelepre, under siege, enforcing a virtual military occupation of the town through which they terrorized those citizens they hadn’t already locked up.

While Cimino’s earlier films had shown the effects of the oppression and exploitation of the American working class, he reaches for a more simplistic representation in *The Sicilian*. Critic Ben Lawton brought attention to the issues that underscore Cimino’s use of Sicily: “*The Sicilian* is no more about Sicily and the bandit Giuliano than *Heaven’s Gate*

was about the Johnson County war, and thus should not be evaluated as such. Cimino has said that this film, like all his films, is about the desire for America, the longing for the dream. For Cimino, America is both a dream in its natural state and in its potentiality, and a nightmare in the sociopolitical reality of the country” (417). Lawton concludes his argument by pointing to the liberating message behind Cimino’s use of Sicily. “In creating *The Sicilian*, Cimino has attempted to rewrite the mythological history of Italian Americans and thus free them from the bondage of an often confusing and contradictory heritage” (421). This is to say that the Italy that forced migration during the late nineteenth century is no longer there; it is no longer a third world country, where people must emigrate or starve. It has become a place where people can challenge, even if they don’t change, their world. By remaking Sicily into the United States, Cimino, unlike Mangione, Morreale and even Puzo, has reinvented it to fit his artistic and political requirements.

In the hand of other writers, Sicily is not rendered through memory or nostalgia, but rather by first-hand experience of life there. Nat Scammacca is a New York born Sicilian American who reversed his Sicilian family’s immigration story, and his writing becomes a moving testament to the trials and tribulations of relocating an American self in contemporary Sicily. The author of hundreds of poems, stories and articles, his most salient work in English is found in a collection of short stories *Bye Bye America: Memories of a Sicilian American*. It is in these stories that we gain a sense of Scammacca’s immigration to the land his ancestors left. His maternal grandparents had originally left Western Sicily in the early twentieth century because of the Mafia. "Grandmother, Giuseppina Lampasona, escaped from an old, ugly mafia boss in Santa Ninfa, who wanted her, notwithstanding the fact that she found him dangerous," says Scammacca. His grandfather, Saverio Catalano,

a blacksmith, “left the mountain of Eryn, sacred to Aphrodite, to escape the local mafia in Marsala, where he had set up his shop” (“*Bye Bye America, Hello Sicily*” 200).

For Scammacca, Sicily begins as a land of imagination and he attributes his own interest in story telling to his grandfather's tales. "Grandpa Saverio would always tell us stories about Sicily, describing the orange groves and blossoms and would take us children to listen to 'Piccolo Pete,' who would play Sicilian songs on his "friscalettu," and then stop and tell us wonderful myths about Sicily and its people. The strongest man in Brooklyn was a Sicilian giant who once picked up the end of a trolley, placing it back onto the trolley tracks. This story we liked best of all" (“*Bye Bye America, Hello Sicily*” 201). For Scammacca Sicily is full of myths that begin to shape his own creative thinking, but that thinking is checked by his treatment in U.S. schools as a child of Sicilian immigrants. “Our American school teachers did everything to make us ashamed of our Sicilian heritage, so there was an enormous void of any cultural background. We were taught to aspire only to an English heritage and not the rich Sicilian culture” (“*Bye Bye America, Hello Sicily*” 201). Ultimately, Scammacca returns to Sicily because: “Like Odysseus, I had to return to Sicily if life had any meaning at all” (*Bye Bye America, Hello Sicily* 201). Scammacca’s exploration of the meaning of Sicily becomes the basis for his life’s writings. He soon finds out that Sicily is more than the tales he’s heard and his writing becomes an important insight into the struggle of Sicilians to rebuild their lives after World War II. For Scammacca, Sicily becomes the place to which he must return to create, and in his return he faces the realities of Sicilian poverty and the people’s struggle to survive the difficulties created by the government and the mafia. Scammacca’s Sicily flies in direct opposition to the nostalgic and narrow depictions of Sicily as a simple land of wonder and beauty and



serves as an excellent complement to the work of younger writers.

One of the strongest writers who have used Sicily in a significant work is Tony Ardizzone whose writing has earned such prestigious awards as The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, the Pushcart Prize, and the Milkweed National Fiction Prize.

Unlike Scammacca, Tony Ardizzone has never been to Sicily. However, throughout his career he has been dipping into his Sicilian American background to produce such masterpieces as the short story "Nonna," which is widely anthologized. Ardizzone embraces Sicily in his latest novel, *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. The work, composed of twelve oral tales told by the children of Papa Santuzzu, presents Sicily as a land of magical realism where imaginative stories of the type told by Scammacca's grandfather are born. Papa Santuzzu knows that La Merica holds a fortune for his family, but he is reluctant, if not afraid, to leave the land where he was born, so he sends child after child, until he is left alone with his visions and his memories. His daughter Rosa, who opens the storytelling and serves as the guide through a couple of caesuras that thread the twelve tales, reminds her listeners that their family origins lie in Sicily: "The rope is la famigghia, see? Each of us is a thread, wound up in it. Before you were born, a rope connected me to you. One still does, *figghiu miu*" ( 22).

Throughout the other eleven stories, we learn of the trials of travelling across the ocean, of how the mafia came to be, of work in Sicily as a fisherman and in the U.S. as a baker, and how to survive selling newspapers in "the City that Works," especially when you must "grease the right wheels." Ardizzone's clever imagination rises above reality to create a sense of a super-reality, a magical experience with words. For him, Sicily becomes a land that was poor in material but rich in spirit. Ardizzone retells ancient origin myths and

creates original myths of his own. Proverbs, poetry, and song lyrics (many in Sicilian) are inserted here and there to give the work a community spirit and force the reader to confront the sounds of Sicilian. These stories dig deeper than pure folktales, by delving into the conflicts that arise between self and family, old country and new. The result is a new understanding of the impact immigration had on everyone involved. Ardizzone's use of the elements from the oral tradition and his retelling of ancient origin myths linguistically and historically bridges Sicilian and American cultures in ways that echo the work of veteran storyteller Gioia Timpanelli.

Timpanelli captures this sense of Sicily as the source of explanatory folktales in her *Sometimes the Soul: Two Novellas of Sicily*. With this book, Timpanelli has shifted from her familiar stance in front of live audiences to the lonely place behind the desk. For her first major book of fiction, she reaches back to her ancestral culture for the raw material from which to weave new fictions. A child of Sicilian immigrants, Timpanelli is known for beginning her Sicilian stories with the traditional words, "Si cantu e si ricantu" (It is sung, and resung). With these words she evokes a spirit of storytelling that stretches back centuries. The sub-title of her book signals her strong connection to Sicily and her wish to be identified as a Sicilian American.

In the first novella, "A Knot of Tears," Signora Costanza has locked herself up in a house for so long that she feels a "knot of tears" that she fears will unravel her if she touches it. On the advice of her servant, a window is opened, and for the first time in a long while she looks out onto the town. At that moment two gentleman catch a glimpse of her and decide that they must meet her. They bet who will be the first to meet her and the quest is on. And while this bet forms the basic plot of the novella, Timpanelli weaves a number of

other story lines into the action, including one of a sailor and his storytelling parrot. The Sicilian settings of this novella serves more than just a place for an old folktale to be retold. Timpanelli asserts the power of women in this land that has come to be known, especially through popular culture representations, as a tough, patriarchal culture. Her stories help to reverse those notions and display the power that women have maintained in this culture.

In “Rusina, Not Quite in Love,” Timpanelli retells “Beauty and the Beast” with a Sicilian slant. A man in debt sends his daughter to serve a rich man’s elderly aunt and uncle. Rusina is not hesitant, for leaving home means getting away from her abusive sisters. Rusina finds the service to the old couple a joy and a way to become educated into artistry and womanhood. What she imagines she receives, but what she sees also deceives her. Sebastiano, the master gardener, is a warm, helpful sort with a face so hideous it can’t be described. Nevertheless, Rusina befriends the gardener and learns much from him, but she can’t give in to his requests for her hand in marriage. When she falls in love with a handsome dancer at the ball, she learns to see things in a whole new light. Unlike contemporary cartoon versions of this classic folktale, “Rusina” displays the power a woman can wield in a society that attempts to restrict her movement and constrict her behavior.

Both of these novellas are rich with understanding about life, love, nature, writing and storytelling. Timpanelli is especially adept at bringing out the natural strengths of her female characters, something that separates her from other contemporary venues for such stories, such as the Disney machine, that never stop turning out the same old story of weak women depending on strong men. Each story, in its own way, presents the joy of sharing one’s story as the antidote to depression. The power of Timpanelli lies in her ability to take

the traditional Sicilian life and culture and rework it so that it speaks to contemporary needs. Timpanelli uses Sicily to enliven contemporary culture and to enlarge the American soul.

In the writing of Sicilian Americans and those Italian American writers who use Sicily in their work the Sicilian irrationality that Sciascia spoke of becomes a power in a land that is often constricted by the spiritless rationality of post-industrial capitalism. The same capitalism that sent thousands of Sicilians away from the island fostered the skepticism created centuries before by feudal economies. This skepticism is very much alive in the work of contemporary American writers of Sicilian ancestry. The explorations of Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum into Italian feminism and her own family history have taken her to Sicily where she has worked to connect movements for social justice and worship of madonnas to what she calls the “Dark Mother.” For Birnbaum, Sicily serves as a reference point for migrations from the original source of life on earth, the African continent. Sicily serves as a source of creative power for poets such as Diane di Prima, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Rose Romano, Leo Luke Marcello, Maria Fama, and Mary Jo Bona, for fiction writers such as Josephine Gattuso Hendin, Tony Ardizzone, and for memoirists such as Teresa Maggio, Susan Caperna Lloyd, Mary Frances Cusumano, Joseph Napoli and Sadie Penzato. Exploration of the reworking of Sicily as both real and imagined places that we find in these and many other writers will help us to better understand the plural possibilities that Sicily was, is, and perhaps always will be. It will also keep us from falling for stereotypical and monolithic representations that have too often dominated portrayals of this island that has been the source of seminal myths of the Mediterranean.

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